The Last Speedster

by the_Pop_Culturist

Summary

Wally West escapes the Chrysalis only to find himself thrown into a future decimated by the Light and under the authoritarian protection of a new Justice League. To survive he must form an uneasy alliance with both heroes and villains to find a way to travel back to fix the future.
Prologue

Darkness

Pain
Excruciating. Agonizing. Unending. Every cell torn apart, every molecule deconstructed, their matter violently transfigured in unfathomable ways in favor of their new matrix.

Consciousness
Complete awareness and yet helpless to stop it. Perceiving all sensations as the body is torn and stretched in multiple dimensions.

Velocity
Time and space at a standstill. No longer able or allowed to live between the seconds. Crushing gravity preventing forward momentum. A body frozen in motion, all the while the mind races on.

Prayer
Unanswered pleas for absolution. Desperate appeals for forgiveness for whatever actions that had caused such punishment, such brutality.

Memories

- Congratulations it’s a boy
- Straight A’s! oh honey I’m so proud of you.
Your son has second and third degree burns over two thirds of his body. He’s very lucky to have survived the explosion.

Since the name Speedy’s already taken, what do you think about Kid Flash?

My real name is Dick. Dick Grayson.

We’re ready to do what you taught us, or why teach us at all?

Whatever Baywatch. I’m here to stay.

Find your own little spitfire, one who won’t let you get away with nothin'

The three of us started this team because the Justice League was keeping secrets from us.

Little hero, do you really think you have what it takes to survive Vandal Savage.

Happy New Year Justice League.

I should have done this a long time ago.

The cave is—was just a place! Worth sacrificing if it helps us stop the invasion. Look I’m sorry you lost all your souvenirs!

What could go wrong?

Hera, what have you done?

Ray this is madness, shut it down now!
• You'd destroy the time stream, you'd destroy us all.

• Don’t make me do this Bruce.

• You’ve got one chance to save her kid. Don’t blow it.

Hope

After what could be minutes, decades, or centuries, time leaps forward. Frozen images begin to blur. Light bends in a blinding spectrum of color. A body that was once frozen slowly becomes translucent. Inside, organs, skeletal structure, nervous systems all begin to glow. Becoming brighter with each heartbeat. Becoming lightning.

Escape

On June 20, 2016 Wally West raced into oblivion to save the world. On June 20, 2040 he shot out the other side at the speed of light to save it all over again.
Chapter 2

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Genesis 1:3 - And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

186,000 miles per second to be precise. The fabric of time and space tore open and haunting darkness was suddenly replaced by a blinding yellow orb surrounded by a deep azure sky. Fragmented images of snow covered glaciers briefly appeared behind him, replaced nanoseconds later by frozen oceans underneath and blurred landscapes ahead. The seas boiled beneath his feet when a blink of an eye later they were replaced by lacerated soil, cracked pavement, and downed trees left in his wake.

He's never moved so fast in his life, he was sure of it. In some ways it was like the first time on a bike, wobbling to and fro, fighting to maintain balance. Involuntarily he began to decelerate, his body adapting to its new environment and the cessation of gravity that had kept him motionless for so long easing. His eyes adjusted as the panoramas surrounding him slowly came into focus. Mountains, plains, deserts, forests, oceans all came into vivid living clarity. His body slowed to less than 500 mph when he finally felt some form of control return to him. Behind him the two story oceanic wake he’d created slowly dissipated, but he couldn't stop running until he hit landfall. Trying to break mid ocean would send him skipping like a stone, a lesson Barry Allen had learned the hard way and imparted to his nephew so he wouldn't suffer the same fate. Ahead he could make out the shoreline and sped passed it just as quickly, as he slammed on the brakes and decelerated. His legs gave out and he skidded across the countryside helplessly, thrashing and spinning hundreds of yards before finally coming to a stop.

He was exhausted, dizzy, nauseous, hungry, disoriented, but the agonizing pain that had imprisoned him for so long was gone. Rich oxygen flooded his burning lungs, and he struggled to catch his breath. A familiar darkness slowly crept over him, but this time he didn’t panic, instead giving into its calling and passing out face down in a field of fragrant wildflowers. Wally West was finally home.

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It’s no good Barry. Aw man Artemis is so going to kill me for this, and don’t get me started on mom and dad. Just tell them ok?

Kid!!!
under his uniform, but no remnants of the yellow and red or the Under Armor shorts and shirt he wore underneath could be found.

Wally rubbed his throbbing eyes, trying to piece together the trail that had led him to this place. When it became clear that he intended to sit up, the entire family rushed to his side to support him and keep him from falling off the table. The speedster quickly eyed a plate of biscuits resting across the room on the stove, and when the older woman noticed the target of his gaze, she received an affirmative nod from the doctor and handed them over to their starving guest. Wally gratefully devoured them at a relatively slow pace for him, and was handed a glass of milk afterwards to wash them down. Nothing had tasted so good in his life.

They spoke in French and he wished now he’d paid more attention when Artemis had been prepping for her foreign language finals last semester. It always came so easy to her.

He had to find her; he had to find them all. They must be worried sick. He placed an unsteady foot on the floor, attempting to stand, when his equilibrium and balance went haywire, and if not for the family assisting him, he’d have fallen face first onto the dusty wood floor. Wally took deep breaths waiting for the disorientation to pass while the doctor and the father discussed their visitor.

“Je ne peux pas stabiliser son rythme cardiaque. Il va aller dans un arrêt cardiaque bientôt si nous ne le recevons pas à l'hôpital pour être traitée correctement.” - (I can’t stabilize his heart rate. It’s something beyond arrhythmia. He’s going to go into cardiac arrest soon if we don’t get him to the hospital to be properly treated)

“Hôpital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière est le plus proche, mais je ne suis pas sûr qu'ils vont envoyer une ambulance sur cette mesure.” – (Hôpital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière is the closest, but I’m not sure they will send an ambulance out this far)

“He needs a specialist. I have a colleague at the American Hospital of Paris I can call. It's farther, but better suited for his condition as well as the language barrier)

“He’ll have to ride in the back of the truck”

“It’s not ideal but it will have to do”

The doctor leaned down, and in heavily accented broken English spoke. “You are very fortunate young man. Had the farmer not found you, you’d most likely be dead. I’ve done all I can do, but you need more extensive medical attention. They will take you into the city to a hospital and I will call ahead and let them know you’re coming.”
Wally’s eyes widened in shock. All things considered he felt fine, well better at least. The doctor’s tone and cryptic words made it sound as if he was dying. After thinking back to everything he’d gone through he started to worry maybe he was.

The kind physician reached back to an ear-ring sized device attached to his earlobe and began speaking into the air, apparently carrying on a conversation with someone on the other end. Wally raised his finger to ask a question when the doctor silenced him, taking the hand and placing two fingers on his wrist and counting silently. Next he placed his stethoscope again to Wally’s chest, and released the blood pressure cuff from the speedster’s free arm. A series of numbers were spoken aloud, and the doctor looked down in disbelief before touching the device on his ear again and directing the family to go. The speedster tried to replay the exchange in his mind, and the word cardiac was mentioned several times. If a doctor not familiar with his particular condition were to listen to his heart, his abnormally high metabolism could certainly account for the doctor’s concern. That gave the red head some sense of comfort, but not much.

Wally was helped onto the bed of a modern, yet dilapidated looking pick-up truck and moments later was jerking and jolting down a cobblestone road towards the city.

The father drove while the mother and her two daughters sat in the back, keeping blankets on the stranger, trying to keep him as comfortable as possible on this chilly French morning. The two girls wore similar devices to the doctor on their ears and talked to someone while staring intently at the speedster. Wally caught the elder girl’s eyes and she smiled, clearly concerned, but not frightened by his appearance.

The advanced cellular technology before him piqued his interest. It looked cutting edge, expensive, and while not meaning to come off as snobbish or elitist, he was curious how a family of rather poor looking farmers could afford such devices, Wally wondered if it was some kind of state of the art new European model or perhaps technology left behind by the Reach. At least he prayed they were gone. Their defeat was at hand before he raced to the Arctic to help his fellow speedsters. The world seemed in much the same way he left it, and a little optimism at a time like this couldn’t hurt.

The kind woman offered sandwiches for the long ride, ham and cheese he believed, and once again they tasted better and better with each bite. Finally the truck left the cobblestone road for a more contemporary highway and sped off towards the east, while Wally’s mind raced ahead.

There was no rational explanation for where he’d been, from where he’d come from. Even now he was unable to accurately put into words what he's experienced; a non-linear wormhole maybe, or a pocket dimension of some kind. The term to hell and back summed it up perfectly.

Wally could still feel the tingling in his back, presumably from where the electrical feedback from the Chrysalis had struck him. He remembered looking at his hand as his body slowly faded away, he remembered his uncle running beside him screaming his name, and then darkness. How he’d escaped, how he’d come to be here now? Those were answers that would have to wait for another day; all that mattered now was that he was home now, relatively speaking.

The speedster was grateful to have ended up in where he had. The United States of course would have been ideal, but he just as easily could have wound up in a much worse locale. Kind family, decent health care, miles from a metropolitan city of some hind; yeah he was definitely counting his blessings.

Once he’d made it to his destination and been properly checked out, hopefully someone would give him access to a phone or some communications terminal. After that he could find the closest Zeta Tube and be back to the States in no time. He had a lot of explaining to do and a lot of forgiveness
to ask, first and foremost to his girlfriend that he hadn’t even had the decency to say goodbye to before rushing off to save the word. By all accounts it appeared he’d been successful, not that it would matter or prevent her from giving him the ass chewing he deserved. God he missed her.

The combination of a full belly and the low hum of the highway relaxed the speedster and he leaned up against the back of the cab, closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep still holding on to his sandwich for comfort. Wally had no idea how long he’d been out when a gentle tap awoke him from his slumber. One of the girls pointed behind him and when Wally turned he saw it; a city in the distance, a towering monument watching over it, the Eifel Tower. Paris.

The speedster smiled, he knew exactly where he was. It seemed like only yesterday that he and his archer where standing under the Tower kissing, enjoying a fleeting moment together after having just destroyed the Reach device placed there. He knew exactly where the Zeta Station was, the corner of ….Rue de Nesle or something like that. It didn’t matter, he’d find it.

They reached the outskirts of the city when the traffic began to back up and the mass honking of horns began. Wally yawned and rubbed his eyes when the mother loudly spoke over the traffic.

“Nous y sommes presque.” – (We’re almost there.)

He smiled and nodded, understanding only a few of her words, but the meaning was clear. Overhead the sky darkened and a shadow cast over the truck for a moment, then again, and again. Wally dropped the remainder of his sandwich onto his lap as he stared upward to the sky slack jawed.

“How flying cars?” His skin began to prickle as an ominous feeling of dread washed over him. Something was wrong, very wrong.

The truck slowed and came to a stop near the courtyards and cafes surrounding the Tower waiting for a traffic light to change. Wally watched in amazement at the line of cars floating above, as if on some kind of invisible highway. All around crowds of people went about their day, eating, drinking, shopping, working, As if everything around and above were commonplace. In the back of the truck, the mother pointed her finger off in the distance and gestured towards an old brick building with modern marquee, a holographic Red Cross floating in the air around it. They’d reached their destination.

The speedster was speechless. France was a very progressive country, but technology like this was not mainstream yet, not even close. This was M’gann’s Bioship meets mass production; the world he’d left was nowhere near this kind of advancement. Society had most definitely changed since the Reach invasion, and Wally didn’t like where things were pointing to.

He rubbed his fingers through his hair in frustration, trying to remember the words for thank you before bolting. This family had been beyond kind, and he was deeply in their debt and yet hadn’t even had the courtesy to try and learn their names yet. He attempted to speak when everyone in the truck took notice of groups of people gathering around the base of the Tower, staring upward at one of the lighting arrays. Without his goggles he had no way of magnifying in on what they were looking at, but the sudden gasps of the masses let him know it wasn’t good. Commuters in gridlock got out of their vehicles and stared aghast at the image before them. A man hung for his life from the Tower lights, the maintenance platform he’d been using crashing to the ground hundreds of feet below him. A nearby worker desperately leaned over the railing, two more co-workers holding on to her, but she was still several feet from reaching him. He didn’t have long.

Wally gave up searching for words, instead kissing the mother’s cheek and jumping from the truck. He instinctively reached for his ring, but it was long gone, lost among the tattered remnants of his
uniform in some French field. He was nervous, and his body still weak, but he didn’t have time to think about it anymore. Wally closed his eyes and exploded into motion.

The key was tricking gravity into not acting upon a body in motion until it was too late, something that had taken him years to master. Hopefully in his weakened state, he could still pull it off. He had no choice, a life depended on it.

A bolt of lightning shot past the crowds, sending them flying backwards in his wake. The speedster reached one of the base legs and shot upward, using the laws of angular momentum to propel him skyward. His breathing was steady and his speed good. He could see the man up ahead, legs flailing helplessly begging for help. Wally shot as far to the left as he could so his parabolic arch and return trajectory would match, allowing him to grab the man and take him back down the tower in one smooth motion. He guessed the worker had about five to six seconds of strength left in him before he lost hold, Wally was there in four. Grasping the man around the waist, the speedster accelerated downwards, shifting gears as he reached the base of the tower and shooting forward to the courtyard, denying gravity its prize.

Wally ran circles around the monument to decelerate and spare his passenger the whiplash he’d most surely suffer if the speedster stopped on a dime. When he finally came to a halt he lowered the man gently to the grass and bent over, hands on his knees. His body buzzed and his lungs burned, but otherwise he was fine. He looked up to check on his passenger only to see the man staring back at him in pure terror.

“Hey you’re going to be ok,” Wally spoke calmly, reaching out to the traumatized maintenance man, just as he took off in a frantic sprint away from the hero.

The baffled speedster frowned in disbelief. Heroes didn’t accept gratuities, didn’t take curtain calls, but a thank you every now and then was always appreciated. Wally turned towards the gathered crowd only to see the same shocked and frightened expressions directed towards him.

This is insane he muttered

In a two second jog, Wally appeared back in front of the kind family who’d rescued him just to see the mother and father cowering in fear, their young daughters in tears. They were all squeezed in the front cab of truck, laying on their horn frantically to force the other terrified drivers to move on. They stared through the glass at the speedster like someone in Yellowstone would look at a bear scratching at their window. Suddenly the traffic pulled forward, and cars got out of line and squeezed side by side down the numerous Paris alleyways, leaving Wally standing confused, exasperated, and alone.

Below him a transparent filament sheet blew to his feet, dropped by one of the scurrying crowds. Wally reached down to pick it up when it suddenly flickered to life at his touch, Words, pictures, and headlines appeared across the sheet. Under the masthead of the Herlad De Paris was a touch tab for selecting different languages. He instinctively placed his thumb on the English tab and the paragraphs morphed into words he could finally understand. He’d barely made it past the banner headline when a series of numbers caught his eye and his heart sank.

June 1, 2040

“Oh God no!” he gasped
Author’s Note: My apologies for any lapses in language or science. Google can only do so much. Thank you for reading and reviews are always appreciated.
Chapter 3

Three hours and fifteen minutes. That was the time it took from the beaches of France to the northern tip of the United States. He’d made landfall near Rockland, Maine and then kicked it up a notch to a very respectable Mach 1.5. All things considered Wally had made decent time sprinting across the Atlantic, but he wasn’t Barry or Bart for that matter, he didn’t have their type speed, not even close.

“I didn't see that” Wally remembered saying, squinting off in the distance at Neutron

“You don't have the Allen family eyes,” Bart grinned.

“Don't make me hurt you.”

Bart said eyes, but what he meant was speed. The younger speedster hadn’t meant to insult him, but Wally knew he was right. Since the day Impulse arrived, Kid Flash had suddenly become the slow one, the outsider. Leaving the game and going off to college hadn’t helped his cause, but compared to the other speedsters, he was the weak link, the liability, and he’d paid the ultimate price for it on that late June day. As his lungs burned and spots began to fill his vision he was beginning to feel that same way again. Slow.

He'd only made a trip this long twice in his life, and both times had ended with him in a hospital being treated for dehydration and exhaustion. Before he’d left Paris he’d made a brazen trip through a local mall outside of Trocadero, grabbing shoes, clothes and as much food as he could carry. Now as he passed through New Hampshire and into Massachusetts he was running on pure adrenaline. There were no food stocks, none of uncle Barry’s power bars, all he had left was pure force of will to get him to his destination, and that was fading fast.

So many of the answerer’s he sought were little more than a few minutes run from his current location: The Hall of Justice in DC, secret bases in Gotham City and Blüdhaven, all logical places he could begin his investigation and find his friends and teammates, but right now he wasn’t feeling particularly logical. All he could think about, the place he had to start from was home. Right now nothing else mattered.

Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois were all little more than a blur as he blazed through them. He didn’t need a map, he made this trip so many times he could almost do it blindfolded. He began to decelerate as soon as he crossed the Missouri state line, his feet aching through the smoldering souls of his civilian shoes. He was less than a hundred miles out from Central and Keystone when he began to notice the signs in his peripheral vision. He made a mental note to double back and follow up on them once he made it home; be it - his parents or the Allen’s. Wally’s throat tightened at the thought of the heartache he’d caused his mom and dad, he wasn’t even remotely ready yet to consider the damage he’d done to his girlfriend.

Numbers ran through his head. His parents were in their early fifties, or at least they were. According to the French newspaper thirty years had gone by in a blink of an eye. That would put his mom and dad in their eighties, if they were even still alive.

“Stop thinking like that” he cursed himself.

Wally was less than twenty miles from the city limits when the concrete barricades began to
appear, stretched in a perimeter as far as the eye could see. Bile began to form in the speedster’s throat as maneuvered through the maze of barriers until he finally came face to face with the ten foot barbered wire fence, adorned with the horrifying tri-foil symbol for radiation. Beyond it Central City lay in waste.

Even from this distance he could feel the heat, the singe of radiation burning at his skin. Every few yards, sections of fences held signs stating different variations of the same words; Caution, Danger, Warning, Hazard, but ultimately they all meant the same thing…Death.

He fell to his knees in exhaustion, for the first time realizing the Missouri River Valley that stretched around the city was a barren wasteland as well, no vegetation, no animals or insects, no life. The sister city of Keystone, his city, less than fifteen miles on the other side of the Missouri River, had undoubtedly suffered the same fate.

Wally squinted through the shimmering heat distortion looking for building, bridges, landmarks…anything, but the only thing he could see was a smoking crater, one that had been burning for years, possibly decades.

The disoriented speedster stumbled backwards, tripping over one of the barricades and slamming the back of his head into the barren dirt. Despite his empty stomach, he still threw up; white foam erupting from his mouth and evaporating just as quickly on the scorched earth.

“This isn’t happening!” he screamed to the heavens, eyes filled with tears. He’d sacrificed everything to save mankind, and for what? The Reach had still succeeded after all.

His ears began to ring as he struggled to his feet, stumbling through the maze of barricades that led away from the perimeter security fence. The wind kicked up, blowing dirt and debris everywhere, like the sandstorms of the Bialya.

Wally shielded his eyes as the roar of the wind grew louder and more intense. He ducked behind one of the concrete barricades and covered his head with his forearms, hoping to wait out the storm. He was spent, nauseous, and exhausted. He had no juice left to run and nowhere to go if he could.

Through the howling roar he began to hear voices, figments of his imagination, the pleas and wails of millions of people long dead. The wind subsided but the voices continued to grow louder until they sounded as if they were directly behind him. A gloved hand reached down and ripped him to his feet, the smell of sweat and tobacco reeking from the man’s uniform.

“God Damnit kid! Are you fucking crazy?” The soldier yelled, tapping a button on his wrist and opening a channel to his superior officer.

“I…um..what…?” Wally stuttered.

“Colonel, this is Sentinel Three, we got another one out here. Male, mid-twenties, disoriented and showing signs of Stage One Radiation Poisoning, Request immediate evac.”

There was a brief pause of static until a grizzled voice on the other end replied, “Granted. Bring him in Sentinel Three. We’ll dispatch a secondary unit to continue perimeter check. Come out of the heat. Triage is prepped, get him back here. Freeman out.”

Wally shielded his eyes as the sun backlit the soldiers. “You’re damn lucky we found you. What are you, one of them thrill seeking Nuclear tourists? What is it with you guys? Didn’t get your fill of death and destruction the first time around?”
“Ease up Taylor,” the second soldier scolded. “Look at him. He’s out of it. He’s got no survival gear on; he’s got no cameras or recorders. He’s just another lost soul looking for answers. You ain’t gonna find ‘em here kid.”

The two soldiers dragged the speedster to their transport and moments later the aircraft lifted off and sped away from the hot zone. Wally watched as the full scope of the devastation came into view. Central City was a smoking wasteland, the Missouri River now a dry maze of cracks and jagged rocks, and on the other side Keystone City lay in ruins. This was no nightmare, no Martian induced simulation. This was his new reality. This was his future.

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Chesterfield, Missouri was once a sleepy little town, a quiet burg of under fifty thousand people tucked away between St Louis and Central City. A peaceful place where people quietly went about their lives, jobs, school, church and family. Where excitement stemmed from the simple things; high school football games, the yearly Fourth of July fireworks display, the openings of new chain restaurants. Life was simple, but life was good; until that November day, the day that changed everything.

Now it was just like a dozen or more towns in and around the Midwest, places that were forced to grow up way too soon. What was once a town of fifty thousand was now four times that; even ten years later, still struggling to shelter the mass influx of refugees from Central and Keystone. Single plot homes had become five story condo and apartment buildings; using whatever limited space they had available to accommodate thousands. Farm land had to remain farm land; the nation’s breadbasket had taken a big enough hit already. In a perfect world, growth of this scale should have taken decades, but it wasn’t a perfect world anymore, the clone had seen to that.

Wally remained silent as he was escorted off the military transport into the city township. With the upcoming anniversary of the event, transgressions into the hot zone had become more and more common. The National Guard stationed in that area had the unenviable task of remaining patient while still remaining vigilant. Anniversaries of tragic events brought out two types of people, mourners and nutjobs. After observing the shell shocked speedster during the flight back to base, both soldiers determined that the red head belonged in the former category. He was escorted to the long standing Red Cross station for an evaluation and given an appointment to meet with grief counselors and therapists the next day. This was nothing new to the volunteers who worked there, it was common place during this time of year for people to trickle in to pay their respects, to curse their God, or just mourn the dead, sometimes all three.

Wally followed the map to the shelter and was given a shower and fresh change of clothes, as well as a voucher for a free meal at the restaurant of his choice once he’d rested up. Midwesterners were nothing if not welcoming. He placed his few belongings at the foot of his cot and lay down on his bunk, remembering a similar setup when he and his dad would volunteer at the Room at the Inn project back at Keystone High. Helping the homeless was a civic duty Rudy West always told his son. In a million years Wally would never had thought he’s be on the receiving end of that kind of kindness.

Wally awoke later that evening in the converted high school gymnasium, with only a mother and her two young daughters as fellow residents. One quick glance at their faces told Wally all he
He showered again and took his voucher and wandered the town, trying to piece together some kind of plan. The rest had done him wonders and he was beginning to feel his energy return. One more day of three squares and another night’s rest and he’d be ready to move on. There was no point in asking for phones or whatever they were calling communication devices he’d seen everyone carrying. Any numbers he might have remembered would have been disconnected long ago. Wally had not spoken to anyone except for a few cursory please and thank yous. When he met with the grief counselors in the morning, hopefully he’d be able to fish out from them the details of the devastation he’d seen as well as more about the world he’d come back to. Sharing his identity or abilities would be a huge mistake; the residents of Paris had taught him that. If he even tried to explain where he’d come from, they’d have a straitjacket on him by halfway through his story.

He was lost in his thoughts when a familiar aroma paraded through the air attacking his senses. A smile flashed across his face, finally something he recognized, something he remembered. Big Belly Burger.

He walked in and once he produced the food voucher the Salvation Army had given him, the portly brunette waitress took one look and ordered for him. “Two specials with everything,” she yelled back to the cook. Wally smiled warmly at her kindness as she directed him to an empty booth.

“Shake?” she asked.

“Vanilla?” he hoped.

“Coming up sweetheart. You just grab a seat and we’ll take good care of you. I’m…sorry for what you’ve been through.”

Wally looked quizzically back at her before realizing that the food voucher as well as the long sleeve t-shirt he wore were dead giveaways. The We Are Central City shirt provided to him by the Red Cross was not just a beacon of loss, but one of hope as well.

“Thank you mam,” he replied, placing a straw in the giant glass and sipping in the familiar taste of his youth. For just a few moments he lost himself in that flavor, forgetting heroes, villains and aliens, and taking a moment to be thankful for the little things; one of them just being alive.

A few minutes later the waitress deposited in front of him two of the biggest burgers he’d ever seen. She returned moments later with the fries only to see one of the burgers nearly finished. Wally wiped his mouth, stifling a burp and sheepishly smiled. “Sorry, it’s been a while.”

“Honey if you’re still hungry after all of this you just let me know, we’ll take care of you,” she smiled.

Wally nodded gratefully and grabbed a handful of fries when an image on the TV screen above caught his eye.

Network theme music began to play; quickly showing cut scenes of action based news stories from across the globe. Wally wiped his mouth and sat back on the plush crimson booth just as the music ended and the network logo faded. An attractive blonde in her early sixties appeared on the screen.

“Good Evening. I’m Cat Grant and this is a special addition of World News Tonight. -America Ten Years Later - Are we any safer? Tonight my guests will be Former Presidential Chief of Staff Miles Edwards, Psychologist Dr. Willie Anderson. Later, author of the bestselling book “Of God
and Monsters” retired Colonel Richard “Rick” Flagg will be joining us. But first as the anniversary of the “Massacre of the Mid West’ approaches; let’s look back at the timeline of that warm fall day that reshaped the world as we know it.”

On the screen appeared a middle aged man African American man, the name Isaiah Dawson appearing briefly on the screen as the reporter began his segment, but all Wally could look at was the crater the newsman stood in front of. Away from the barricades and the fences, the speedster saw his first real unobstructed view, it was worse than he imagined.

“Behind me stands the remains of Central City, decimated by a series of nuclear missiles launched almost ten years ago, the first and only time a nuclear detonation has taken place on American soil. Experts say this region will remain radioactive for another 25,000 years. So what foreign country could have conceived let alone succeed in such an operation of this magnitude right under our governments nose? The answer is just as horrifying. Ours.”

The video transitioned to an old stock photo of a modern looking three story office building in what appeared to be a desert locale.

“Santé Fe, New Mexico March 14, 2030. A privately owned genetics research facility known as Cadmus Labs suffers a catastrophic power failure when a hydrogen generator overloads. No one is seriously hurt, but scientists and support staff are quickly evacuated. The media is quick to point out a similar incident back in July of 2011 involving a Cadmus facility that levels an entire city block in Washington D.C. nearly nineteen years earlier. New Mexicans live in fear even as the lab’s director stands next to the governor reassuring there is no cause for alarm; that the lab was only conducting cancer research studies, and nothing infectious our dangerous was ever released into the air or water. This response seems to ease public worries, but what the director didn’t say was what had not been released, not yet at least.”

“Underneath the facility, thirty stories down exists a branch of Cadmus which is not on the books, its staff not listed in any directory or database. This branch deals specifically with a special form of genetic research, a classified one involving alien hybrid DNA. It was called Project KR, the atomic symbol for the element Krypton.”

Wally mouth fell agape as the next video appeared and the voiceover began again.

“It was called ‘the Superboy’ a joint venture between a secret branch of the government and Cadmus Laboratories, codenamed Project KR, a program created to replace the hero Superman in the event of his death. Genetic material was obtained from the alien, allegedly without his consent, and a sophisticated cloning project was initiated. Declassified laboratory reports obtained exclusively by World News Tonight indicate that the labs first attempt at cloning the Man of Steel, ended in failure, but the second was a resounding success, or so it seemed. The duplicate was grown, educated and lived in a cloning chamber, bombarded with the same radiation that gave Superman his abilities. The Kryptonian/Human hybrid was placed in stasis and was never to be awoken unless the unthinkable happened. So when did this process take place you ask? The same year as the initial explosion and destruction of the Cadmus facility in Washington 2011. Coincidence?”

Wally stared in shock as spliced footage played across the screen of a man he knew just yesterday, his uniform different, now black with white insignia, but his face unmistakable.

“Conner?” Wally gasped, not just at the image, but what he was doing. The man he once knew was running rampant, devastating city blocks, destroying bridges and mass transit systems, engaging police and military personnel… killing….All with a demented smile on his face.
“The power failure at the Cadmus facility somehow awoke the clone, and soon after it forced itself free, instilled with a programming that till this days no one can explain.”

The speedster shook his head in utter disbelief. This couldn’t be true, none of it. How had his former teammate fallen back under the control of Cadmus? Conner had long been rid of his initial programing, confirmed by two telepaths, and verified the League itself. He had free will, he fought for justice; he was a true hero. Any bitterness or resentment he’d once held was long gone. What could have possibly happened to him? How could he have changed so dramatically? How had he fallen back into Cadmus custody?

The speedster had no answers, but he could see the direction the news story was taking, and it scared him.

“Its actions weren’t that of some kind of mindless monster, some uncontrollable force of nature, it was calculating, intelligent, and vicious. Soon after its escape, a series of well-crafted terrorist attacks begin across the globe, with no discernable pattern as to where or why. Gotham, Metropolis, San Francisco, Paris, London, Sydney, Berlin, all became victims of the clone’s barbaric rampage. Before long notorious criminals begin to align themselves with the clone, raining down even more bloody violence onto an already terrified populace. Once it was clear that the military could not stop them, the Justice League and other heroes were quickly called in, and the governments of the world rejoiced. That was their job, they protect people. They fight for those who can’t fight for themselves and they saved the day; every time. Good always triumphs over evil. That’s what we as a nation, we as a world have been taught to believe. God was always on the side of the righteous, but not this day.”

(Please note; the following video is extremely graphic in content. Some viewers may find the violent images disturbing. Viewer discretion is advised.)

On the screen, blurred amateur video footage caught site of two figures in fierce battle. The raw shaky camerawork slowly began to focus, and when it did it captured a terrifying image. The clone, standing on the flaming remains of several crumpled abandoned vehicles held a man caste in an emerald glow. The Superboy held the limp Green Lantern by the throat, hoisting him two feet in the air above him. The hero didn’t struggle, didn’t fight back. From the footage he appeared exhausted, beaten, the green protective force field flickering around his body. Wally stared in horror as the Kryptonian suddenly tore Hal Jordan’s head from his shoulders, tossing it aside like yesterday’s garbage. The speedster thought he was going to throw up.

“The superhero community was not ready for this new brand of evil; a creature as powerful as Superman with not only the ability, but the lust for killing. The Green Lantern was the first, but sadly not the last. Over a span of two months, the Superboy and the villains that had partnered with him slaughtered hundreds of thousands of innocent people, along with approximately a third of the superhero community. Earth’s heroes were not prepared to battle something like this, no one was.”

More scenes of wanton destruction flashed across the screen, thankfully now blurred by the network to spare its audience the horror. The speedster’s heart sank as he watched hero after hero die, some he knew, the majority he didn’t. All voice over and music fell silent as poignant brutal moments played. Seconds later he began to shake as two familiar images appeared on the screens, two men draped in scarlet and yellow sped across the scene in battle. Wally’s hands balled into fists and tears formed in his eyes as he watched the combined forces off the clone and his partners ambush and savagely murder the two speedsters, captured on video in all its gruesomeness. The red head turned away, knocking his plate and glass off the table in fury.
His uncle, his mentor. His cousin, his friend. Dead. Killed by a man, a monster he once called brother.

The waitress walked over, silently picking up the remains of his dinner of the tile floor. She placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, unsure of what to say, but not unfamiliar with the situation. The red head was not the first to breakdown in her diner, and sadly would not be the last. “Darlin’ you let it all out. If there’s anything I can do, you just let me know,” she spoke softly.

Wally nodded, wiping his eyes, turning back to the news story.

“What has now been called the Battle of Central City, found the clone and its partners for the first time attacking America’s heartland. Heroes from across the country rushed to the Midwest to join vigilantes already in fierce battle with the terrorists, all the while completely unaware what was transpiring at the highest levels of government.”

“President Hammons, under extreme pressure from almost every world government had to make a fateful decision. The terms handed down from the likes of NATO, the World Security Council, allies and enemies alike were clear, launch a strike on his own country to stop the attackers, or the world would be forced to. In the end he had no choice. Even as its residents frantically evacuated the surrounding cities, the order was given. Thirty minutes later the unthinkable happened. Two LGM-30 Minuteman, each with a nuclear weapons yield of fifty megatons, touched down on the Kansas/Missouri border. In less than a second, three million people were dead, including the Superboy hybrid, his terrorist partners, and all the remaining heroes that gathered to battle him; all gone in an instant.”

“In the end, two generals, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Acquisition and Technology, one senator, and several renown scientists were indicted, including the recently deceased industrialist and one time presidential candidate Lex Luthor, the director of Cadmus Labs Dr. Mark Desmond, and Under Secretary Amanda Waller. In the end the majority of convictions were overturned by the Supreme Court with the exception of the deceased Luthor, Desmond, who’d suspiciously disappeared ten years earlier, and Waller who died in prison late last year. At the Defense Subcommittee Senate Hearings, Waller took full responsibility for every step of the project, despite the fact she’d had no direct connection with the program or with Cadmus for almost twenty years. Scape goat? Good soldier? You be the judge”

The segment ended, and the image transitioned back to Cat Grant at the anchor desk. “Coming up next we’ll talk to our panel of experts and discuss the aftermath of the attacks, the Meta Human Registration Act, and the Justice Leagues current role in government. Is it time for them to step down as they promised? All this and more coming up on ‘America Ten Years Later - Are we any safer?’ And now the financial news minute with Alicia Sadler……”

Wally palmed both of his eyes in utter shock. It was literally yesterday that he was battling the last remnants of The Reach. They were in retreat, the last of the Magnetic Field Disruptors destroyed. The speedster died knowing his sacrifice had saved the world. In his last moments he found comfort in that, but the world hadn’t survived and his sacrifice in the end meant nothing. It wasn’t alien invaders who’d destroyed his world - mankind had. It didn’t matter if it was the government, or Cadmus, or the Light, or a handful of other shadow agencies, everything he knew and loved were gone. As that realization soaked in, his mind began to shut down, unable to process any kind of plan of what his next step should be, if anyone he once knew was still alive, and if they were how he’d find them. He was lost. Wally sat silently in the booth as the talking heads on the screen above him rattled on.

…The Dow Jones Industrial Average tumbled a hundred points today as energy stocks continued to
plunge. Benchmark energy prices hit their lowest cost of the year despite high global demand.....

Wally rose from the table, gathering his jacket. The sun was beginning to set and he was tired. Hopefully a good night rest would provide some kind of inspiration. He instinctively reached for his wallet before realizing that he didn’t have any money to begin with. Hopefully the kind waitress would understand when he didn’t leave a tip.

“In other news President and CEO Bruce Wayne made a rare appearance today, casting the deciding vote derailing another proposed Wayne Tech/Luthor Corp merger. It was the first time in over a year the reclusive billionaire has appeared at a shareholders meeting, and despite strong support from both sides, has ended another proposed venture between the two rival companies.”

“My God….Bruce!”

Suddenly a hurricane like wind erupted within Big Belly Burger. Lightning shot out the door and up the street, sending both patrons and residents fleeing. For the second time in so many days, Wally sped across the country, heading towards a hillside mansion in Gotham City, carrying with him a small sliver of hope.
Chapter 4

Wally arrived at 1007 Mountain Drive shortly after nine p.m. under a cloudy moonlit sky. The continual cross county pace was beginning to wear him down, and he’d been forced to stop in Indiana and Pennsylvania just to catch his breath, flex out a number of painful muscle cramps, and unfortunately once again borrow a few necessities from convenience stores along the way to complete his journey. The speedster still remembered the day when a seven year old Wally West stole a handful of bubble gum from the local 7/11, and an hour or so later coming back with his father in tow to return those same items. Of course back then he was more worried about the potential prison sentence he was facing for such a dastardly crime than any kind of grounding, but the shame and disappointment in his father eyes hurt even worse. He’d give anything now to have those same eyes staring at back at him again.

He skidded to stop a half mile from the estate grounds, stealthily maneuvering under the tall oak trees at the bend in the road until he reached the ten foot rod iron fence. Behind it on a hundred and fifty acres of sprawling countryside rested Wayne Manor. When he was kid, spending the night at Dick Grayson’s was like visiting another country. Keystone was plains and fields and boring, while Wayne Manor was acres and acres of wooded trees, streams, waterfalls, and most importantly…caves.

He walked the fence line for several hundred yards until he finally reached the main gate. When the full moon briefly escaped the blanket of clouds above, he got his first good look at the grounds and the mansion resting on top. The years had not been kind. The grounds themselves were unkempt and overgrown, not the manicured flower laden parkland he remembered. With the moonlight briefly casting upon it, the mansion itself looked worn down, old. Shingles were missing from the roof, several windows on the upper floors either broken or boarded up, not at all the pristine estate he remembered Alfred Pennyworth keeping; another name on a long list that Wally would never see again.

The gate in front of him was slightly bent at the top, showing signs of rust and padlocked from the inside. No soliciting and no trespassing signs hung all around. The metal facing on the intercom box protruding out from the stone pillar was cracked with old wiring escaping from inside it. The mansion itself appeared dark and abandoned, most likely evacuated years ago. Wally vaguely remembered Bruce Wayne having several residences; a few penthouses in downtown Gotham, a summer house in the Hamptons, a mountainside villa in Jackson Hole, and God knows how many in other countries, but as the moon ducked back behind the clouds, the speedster noticed a faint light emanating from a window on the first floor, what he remembered to be Thomas Wayne’s library. It was probably a wild goose chase, but he had to start somewhere. He tested the gate a few times just to make sure it wasn’t electrified, and moments later scaled over it, carefully avoiding the iron spears tips at the top. Instead of lighting up the long dark roadway with electric speed contrails, Wally walked slowly up the drive, looking for signs of cameras, security lights, or intrusion sensors. A few minutes later he reached the mansion, making his way quietly to the heavy oak front doors.
“Master Richard you have a visitor” Wally smiled, remembered Alfred’s formal announcement in his thick cockney accent every time the speedster arrived. The butler always was a firm believer in protocol, usually snarky towards the speedster and his appetite, and was undoubtedly one of the kindest, most genuine men Wally had ever known, but just in case he was still around, the speedster wiped his feet on the outside mat just to be safe.

Wally pushed the button to the doorbell expecting the same condition as the intercom, only to hear heavy chimes echoing throughout the interior of the manor. After what seemed like an eternity, the red head pushed the button again, leaning over the rails of the old stone stairs to peer into the library windows looking for any sign of movement. After minutes more of silence Wally sighed and prepared to walk away when the heavy sounds of dead bolts unlocking alerted him that someone indeed was there. When the door opened, a tall dark haired man emerged from inside, one that was most assuredly not Bruce Wayne.

“What part of no trespassing are you having trouble understanding? This is private property and you need to leave right now.”

The man before him was easily 6’1, early twenties, muscular. Putting aside logic just for a moment, Wally would have sworn he was face to face with Dick Grayson again, but like it always does, logic forced its way back in.

“Yeah look I’m really sorry about that, but I need to see Mr. Wayne like right now, it’s urgent, really urgent,” Wally pleaded.

“He’s out.” the brunette sternly replied.

“Where?” Wally asked desperately.

“Out,” the man replied again with a bit more venom, “and you’re still trespassing.”

“Yeah I got that part,” Wally groaned. “Look it’s kind of an emergency; I’m an old friend of his. We go way back, if you’d just call him…”

“I doubt that,” the raven haired man smirked.

“Who are you?” Wally asked, clearly annoyed.
“My name’s McGinnis. I'm Mr. Wayne assistant, and you’ve got about ten minutes before the police get here. If you want to see the old man, you need to contact the Social Secretary’s office over at Wayne Industries. They’re the ones who’ll arrange and schedule any meetings for him. Since you two are old pals, it shouldn’t be a problem at all.

Wally’s face grew into an irritated scowl. He didn’t appreciate the sarcasm, and what made matters worse was the other guy seemed to be enjoying it. It would take no effort to blow past this clown and search the mansion himself, but whoever this McGinnis guy was, he may or may not know Bruce’s past, and Wally wasn’t about to blow his cover, even if it was an ancient one.

“I’ll do that,” the speedster growled, “but in the meantime if you see him, tell him Wally West is back in town, and he’s got a few questions.”

“I’ll get right on that,” McGinnis chuckled. The brunette turned back to shut the door, when a freckled hand caught it.

“I’d move that if I were you,” McGinnis stated threateningly.

“I will as soon as you answer one quick question. Could you at least tell me where I could find Dick Grayson. He used to live here a long time ago.”

McGinnis’s smug look morphed into an angry scowl, as his cold blue eyes stared down the speedster. “Yeah, check down at Gotham Memorial Cemetery, he’s been hanging out down there for the past ten years. Now get the fuck out,” and he abruptly slammed the heavy wooden mansion doors shut.

The last remnants of light faded away, leaving the speedster alone in the darkness. Wally’s jaw jutted out in anger. “What a prick!” he cursed to himself, but the brunette’s reaction was the answer the speedster had feared. His last few weeks with his best friend had been strained, but both knew there’d be time for reconciliation once Artemis was safe and the Reach defeated. Now it was just another moment stolen from him, another person he’d never got the chance to say goodbye to. If Dick had gone down fighting, odds were that Artemis and his teammates would have been at his side; especially if they were forced to fight one of their own; the image of any them battling Conner made him nauseous, especially after seeing what he’d done to the Green Lantern.
Wally didn’t have time to mourn anymore. He needed answers. Gotham was only about twenty or so miles away, and that would be where he’d have to start. For one of the largest most tourist friendly cities in the world, surely there would still be a public library or some kind of news archive. Hopefully someone there would be able to help him navigate this new age’s technology. History had never been one of his favorite classes, but he was prepared to take a crash course in the subject and look deeper into the events that led up to the attacks. There he could search out names and addresses, anything that could point him in the direction towards the answers he desperately needed. Wally no longer hoped for miracles, but if they came his way he’d accept them all the same. Most importantly though he needed to find Bruce Wayne, Batman was the key. Wally doubted he could count on any help from his cocky assistant, but before he took off for Gotham, there was one last place he needed to check.

xxx

Terry closed the door, walking into the darkened study and glancing out the window as the red head slowly made his way down the driveway. The Dick Grayson comment was a low blow, even for him, more than likely made just to get a rise out of the old man. It was hard to believe they were ever teammates, let alone friends.

Once the speedster was out of sight, McGinnis walked over to the antique Steinway, entering in the key combination of D-E, D-E followed by the G-A notes. Moments later a hidden panel opened in the wall mounted bookshelf, leading to the secret staircase heading downwards. When he reached the main level of the darkened Batcave, the only illumination inside the vast chasm came from the series of seventy-two inch monitors mounted on the east wall, a solitary figure sitting alone behind them. On the monitors the frozen image of the speedster appeared on the center screen, as the elderly man quietly scowled at the picture.

The young Batman walked up behind his mentor, examining the image.

“The Martian?” Terry asked.

“Most likely,” Bruce Wayne answered in his deep baritone. “I’ve documented a total of nine cyber intrusions over the past six months, along with the two Wayne senior staff he impersonated, but this is the first time they’ve actually risked appearing on the grounds.”

“You think they’re starting to suspect?”

“Possibly. Just to be safe we’ll need to contact the others and put the operation on hold. We can’t risk being discovered this late in the game?”

Terry nodded in agreement. “They’re not going to like that.”
“It can’t be helped,” Wayne replied.

“So who was this guy?” he motioned towards the monitor. “An old college buddy of Grayson’s?”

“Not quite,” Bruce responded bitterly.

“He was pretty convincing. The Manhunter usually comes of a little stiff.”

Bruce continued staring at the image, adjusting the angels slightly to get a complete picture. The more he studied it, the more his brow’s furrowed, his demeanor becoming darker than normal. Something wasn’t right.

“Do you want me to follow him?”

“No,” Bruce answered. “He’ll see that coming. They tolerate your presence in Gotham, but let’s not push it with a direct confrontation. I’m meeting Diana for breakfast later this week. I’ll feel her out; ask why suddenly I’m being surveilled.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“She’s never lied to me before.”

“You two always had a history,” McGinnis chuckled, checking his watch and walking over to the dispensary to bring Wayne his meds.

Bruce ignored the playful jibe, and took the cocktail of vitamins, supplements, inhibitors, Anti-Alzheimer, blood pressure, and other heart related tablets and pills, washing them down with a probiotic soy smoothie. He hated being so reliant on modern medicine for daily survival, but a tad more so that he had to have someone watch over him like a mother hen. Alfred Pennyworth had spent his entire live devoted to the care of the Wayne’s only son, thankfully Terry would not be burdened with that same fate much longer.
Eventually Bruce changed the display from the red headed imposter to multiple video feeds coming in live from drones positioned across the city. Because he’d refused to join their ranks, Gotham was the one place the Batman was allowed to patrol, but regardless he would have still continued to protect it with or without League sanction. Terry McGinnis had less desire in joining the League than Bruce had back in the day. Back then his presence was necessary, but it was a brave new world now, free of the global threats that once plagued it, but Wayne knew the real truth, it was fear of the Justice League that kept people in line. The League looked out for the big fish, but it was the small ones that kept Wayne up at night.

“There’s been more activity around the harbor lately, reports of speedboats and hovercrafts making their rounds. It appears someone is casing the area.”

“The Jokers?” Terry questioned.

“That’s my guess,” Wayne responded. “I need you to….”

Before Wayne could continue his instructions, a proximity alarm was triggered and the monitors before him flashed the warning before displaying the live video feed at the point of intrusion; specifically the southwest corner of the property. Moments later the hidden cameras began focusing in on a figure standing near the cascading waterfall, the former entrance to the Batcave.

“Son of a bitch,” McGinnis cursed.

The mist thrown from the waterfall had soaked the speedster to the bone as he maneuvered around the slick rocks that surrounded the site. Wally hadn’t intended to get drenched when he first began his search, but there were no signs of the camouflaged pathways from where he stood. The speedster sighed in frustration and finally gave up, stepping fully into the frigid falling water, blindly feeling the stone wall underneath for some kind of opening. He did his best to ignore the glacial tempest pouring over him, until finally coming across something that didn’t feel like jagged rock. As he got closer, the full power of the waterfall pounded against him, and in the magnified moonlight he finally found the seams of mortar and concrete blocks, at least three stories tall and just as wide. The entrance he remembered closed off and sealed shut.

Wally just stared at it in frustrated disbelief, and leaned his head against the wall in defeat; another dead end in a world that seemed full of them.
“Perfect” he muttered through chattering teeth.

xxx

“What in the hell is he doing?” McGinnis cursed, finally having enough of the Martian’s blatant attempts and walking towards the vault to change into his Batsuit.

“I have no idea,” Wayne replied curiously, focusing the image in closer, interested in the expression of frustration that appeared on the intruder’s face. That particular emotion was not very Martian-like at all, not on the being he remembered at least. That’s when he began to notice something odd.

The elder Batman reached to the keyboard and entered in the new command, switching the scans from standard to infrared. Moments later the computer detected a high thermal signature, something not typically associated to the Manhunter’s physiology. Martian’s were cold blooded by nature, built to survive the freezing Martian landscape, but the person before him owned a unique heat signature, throwing off fields and fields of radiant energy.

Bruce quickly typed in the command for a bio-scan, but before he could initiate it, the intruder exploded into motion, a lightning bolt contrail chasing after him as sped off in the darkness in the general direction of Gotham City.

“My God,” Wayne gasped.

Terry ran back over, the top half of his uniform falling around his waist, searching the monitor for what Wayne had seen.

“What is it?”

Bruce ignored the question, instead replaying the video again, backing it up and then pushing it
forward several times as Terry watched in confusion.

Wayne spun his chair away from the screen, stroking his chin in disbelief. McGinnis rarely witnessed the old man suspired anymore, at his age he’d probably seen it all, but something was different, something was wrong

“Terry, Contact Barbara immediately, tell her to activate the beacon at GCPD.”

“Why?”

“Just do it,” Wayne demanded

“What do I tell her?”

“Tell her”… he paused, “tell her a Flash might still be alive, and if so, he’s heading her way.”

Wally was tired of going slow. He downshifted as soon as he crossed the city limits and planned on sneaking into the city shortly after unnoticed. Gotham was nicknamed the “city that never sleeps” and the speedster was counting on it. Back in his day, the Gotham Library never closed, and that would be where he’d start. He could act dumb with the best of them (a trait Dick Grayson found great pleasure in reminding him) and someone could hold his hand and show him how to use whatever technology was currently available. From what little he’d gathered so far, the Justice League was not the team he remembered, but he’d have to consider them a last resort if he couldn’t find the answers or the individuals he sought. Wally made a quick mental note, a roll call of sorts, heroes that were younger than him that might still be alive. Next he cross referenced them with the images of death and destruction he watched at the diner.

Two thirds of the superhero community dead, that was almost too impossible to fathom, but there had to be survivors, there had to be people he once knew still alive. The speedster slowed down as the cityscape blossomed into view. The buildings were as impressive as ever, even taller than he remembered. He could see roadways and skyways bumper to bumper, beams of light exploding in all directions. Wally could almost feel the heat, the energy coming from the people inside the
metropolis. He stopped a block away from the George Washington Bridge, looking around before making his way down the pedestrian side at normal speed, mixing in with the droves of people heading towards the interior of the city. Suddenly the crowds stooped, nearly causing him to run smack dab into the couple in front of him. As the crowd stared up at the curiosity, Wally stood in shock at the familiar image beamed into the night sky. The Bat-signal; the possible answer to his prayers.

Perhaps Tim Drake had survived after all; he would have been the next in line. Maybe someone else completely, but no matter who it was he couldn’t risk missing them, for a non Meta the Dark Knight always moved pretty fast.

The speedster remembered the reaction to his using his powers in France, but he had to risk it, he had no choice. Wally jumped the rail into oncoming traffic, and shot across the bridge towards downtown, hoping to blend in with the frenzy of cars, lights, and motion. He stayed to the streets, conforming to the traffic pattern best he could, hoping his velocity and the frenzied congestion of traffic would leave him somewhat unnoticed.

Up ahead he found the building the signal was originating from, quickly shifting off the main street to a connecting alley before changing gears and speeding up the concealed side of the structure away from prying eyes. The speedster increased his velocity every few stories to give him the push he needed and seconds later reached the top and skidded to a stop.

Wally scanned the rooftop searching for the costumed hero, but instead only finding an older woman standing alone next to the holographic projector. Her back was to him, her khaki trench coat flapping in the breeze; it seemed she was waiting for something as well. Whoever this woman was, she most likely was the one who’d sent the signal, who’d sent out the request for help. Hopefully she wouldn’t mind some company as long as Wally didn’t scare the shit out of her while doing so.

The speedster walked slowly towards her, dragging his feet through the gravel rooftop and clearing his voice, trying everything he could to make as much noise as possible to alert this person that she was not alone. The gray haired woman heard the approach and turned. Wally immediately threw up his hands, trying to appear as unthreatening as possible.

“Look lady, I’m not going to hurt you. I just need to find…you know …” his head gestured up at the Bat insignia. “I’ve got a ton of questions, and he’s the only one who’s got the answers.”

In the light of the projector he caught a gleam of something hanging from her belt, a badge of some kind.
“Duh, who else would be activating the Bat–signal”, he mentally face palmed himself.

She studied him cautiously, never speaking, but never backing away.

"Listen, I’m not a bad guy, I’m not up here trying to ambush anyone, I’m just like you. I just need some help. Ok?"

She nodded

“My name’s Wally,” he said pleasantly, extending his hand. Since the older woman was still a little dumbfounded, he glanced down to her badge, reading the name on it to save her the trouble.

Gordon

“Gordon?” he stated in shock, his mouth falling agape. For a moment he looked past the years, scanning her features, her mouth, her eyes.

“Barbara? Is that you?!”

He took a step closer, his heart racing. He’d finally found someone, and not just anyone, but Batgirl. He reached forward to embrace her, when his body jerked and 50,000 volts raced through it. Behind him, Terry McGinnis deactivated the cloak and held the Taser at his neck a few more seconds before the speedster crumpled to the ground.

“It’s Commissioner actually,” Terry chided as Barbara stood over the fallen speedster, waiting to see how long it would take for J’onn J’onzz to revert back to his natural form. After a few moments they began to feel confident they weren’t dealing with a shape shifter and Barbara knelt down next to the unconscious red head checking for a pulse. It was strong, fast; just like she remembered, but still they had to remain cautious. The plan was nearing a critical stage, and they couldn’t afford a misstep.

“We need to get him off the streets,” Barbara ordered. “Take him to the Clock Tower. I’ll meet you there in a few minutes.”
“Do you think it’s really him?” Terry asked as he picked up the limp speedster.

“I’m not sure, it’s been a long time, but I think so. Now we need to find out how. Just be careful with him ok? He’s evidently had a long journey, a really long one.”

Batman nodded and took off into the night sky carrying the speedster, heading for the rendezvous point, and hopefully some answers.
Chapter 5

The speedster’s head ached as if someone had shoved a dagger through his temple. His fingertips were still numb and his entire body felt as if it had been kicked by a mule into another even bigger more pissed off mule. He’d been tazed before, but never like this, and the after effects seemed to be lasting way too long. When he reached up to massage his aching neck he immediately knew why. The inhibitor collar placed there had slowed his metabolism to a crawl, disrupting his abilities, most importantly his advanced healing factor.

The room he found himself in was dark; sans the bright spotlight that shone down directly on top of him. His wrists were handcuffed and chained to the table, with just enough slack to reach his throbbing skull but not much else. Finding Barbara Gordon had given him hope, but Bruce Wayne was supposed to be his salvation, now for all he knew the Batman was possibly one of those culpable for this world’s misery.

As he sat prisoner in the dimly lit room, the speedster soon realized he’d made a huge mistake. In the distance he could hear the murmur of low voices talking, scheming. Without his speed he knew he was screwed, as much a prisoner now as he was inside the dimensional phenomenon that had once held him.

Other than a little trespassing he’d done nothing wrong, definitely nothing to warrant this kind of treatment, and that’s what the speedster found so puzzling. If he was going to be officially charged with a crime, why hadn’t he been turned over to the proper authorities, or perhaps even to the latest incarnation of the Justice League due to his meta-human abilities? Why wasn’t he in some kind of high security jail cell instead of this makeshift interrogation room? Why all the cloak and dagger? Whoever this was wanted something, and they wanted it done quietly and off the books. The only thing Wally could do now was wait to find out what it was. He didn’t wait long.

“Who are you?” a voice demanded from the darkness. It was modulated, robotic, intentionally frightening. Wally was not impressed.

“Take this collar off me and I’ll show you,” he replied angrily. “You know exactly who I am or you wouldn’t have put this damn thing on me to begin with.”

“I’ll ask again. Who are you?”

“Wally… West.” he replied with bitter emphasis.

“Not possible. Try again.”

“We’ll sorry, but I beg to differ,” he countered sarcastically, his tone and anger ratcheting up with each inane question.

“Explain it to me,” the voice demanded

The speedster blew out his breath in frustration. “I can’t ok? I don’t know how I got here. I’m not even sure where here is anymore. That’s the God's honest truth.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Wally stared into the darkness, searching for the true inquisitor. Whoever was pulling the strings seemed to know all the answers to begin with. There was no point in holding back. “Flash, Impulse, the vortex, the Reach device, and then……”
“Then what?” the voice asked.

After a moment’s pause he answered. “Pain. Lots and lots of pain. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. I was trapped,” the speedster replied angrily, his balled fists beginning to shake.

“How did you escape?”

“I don’t know. It’s nothing I did, it’s nothing I was trying to do, it just happened. Look I’m done answering these bullshit questions until you show yourself. I’m done talking to shadows.”

Out of the darkness stepped a sleek figure in black, covered from head to toe in some type of futuristic armor; hardened Kevlar plating over titanium-dipped tri-weave fiber, similar to the suit he once wore but way more advanced. The only remnants of its predecessor being the protrusions standing out from the helmet and the familiar insignia painted across his chest, probably as frightening to the criminals of this day as the original was in his. If his appearance was meant to be intimidating, then mission accomplished, but as astounding as this figure was, Wally continued to stare past this new Batman into the void, searching.

“You were saying,” the Dark Knight continued.

“I wasn’t talking to you, I was talking to him,” the speedster gestured with his eyes into the shadows.

After a few moments pause Bruce Wayne stepped out of the darkness. The air seemed to leave the room as the two men studied each other carefully. The elderly man held no sensors or scanners, no wires or electrodes for polygraphs or DNA analysis. His tools were more old school, simple and yet equally effective; a sharp and tireless mind, keen eyes and intellect, a lifetime of experience; unquantifiable and yet more reliable than most of today’s technology.

In the end perhaps Sir Arthur Canon Doyle said it best through his fictional character Sherlock Holmes. Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth. Shackled to the table and chair before him sat the improbable, staring back at him with a distinctive shade of green eyes Bruce thought he would never see again.

“Take the collar off of him,” Wayne ordered.

“You sure?” Terry asked.

“Yes,” the elderly man nodded, pulling up a chair next to the red head as the younger Dark Knight deactivated the collar. “It’s good to see you again Wally.”

“You too Bruce. It’s been a long time. Longer for you I’m guessing”

“Not quite the afterlife you were expecting?”

Wally chuckled, reaching his wrists upwards, allowing the Batman to unlock his restraints. The speedster flexed his hands into fists and back, feeling a familiar surge of energy returning to his body. The blinding lamp dimmed as normal lighting returned to the room. Barbara stepped forward, kneeling down in front of the speedster.

“My God, you look exactly the same,” she said in astonishment, her fingers ghosting his cheek. The new Batman reached down to the speedster, offering his hand to bring their new guest to his feet. The Dark Knight’s cowl pooled around his neck revealing his face, but Wally had guessed his identity long before that.
“I’m sorry about all that, but these days we have to take precautions,” Terry declared.

“Precautions?” Wally asked, looking over to Bruce, “precautions from what?”

“It’s a long story,” Barbara spoke up. “Why don’t we get settled in first? Are you hungry?”

“Are you kidding!” Wally replied with wide eyed excitement.

xxx

Terry watched in amazement as the speedster downed helping after helping of the tuna casserole Barbara had retrieved from the Clock Tower freezer. McGinnis looked back to Gordon and Wayne, noticing how unfazed they seemed by the spectacle, as if his voracious appetite all but confirmed his identity.

Between bites Wally scanned the room, impressed with all the enormous monitors and computers custom built to fit and blend in with the marble and wood décor of the old building. If they were turned off and powered down, he doubted anyone would even be able to tell they were even there at all, they were that well camouflaged. On each monitor played real time footage from presumably different parts of the city, some he thought he recognized, most he didn’t. The layout seemed to mimic that of the underground base under Wayne Manor, almost a miniature version of the Batcave. After his fifth helping the speedster wiped his mouth and pulled away from the table with twenty-five years’ worth of questions.

“Could someone please tell me how in the hell Conner could have done something like this? I just don’t understand. You guys got all that Cadmus programming out of him right? What happened? Was there some kind of failsafe we missed? And how did he become so powerful, the guy I remember…”

“It wasn’t Conner Kent,” Bruce interrupted.

“What? But all the videos….”

“What you saw was Cadmus’s first attempt at creating a Superman clone. It was codenamed Project Match, and it was constructed almost a year before Conner was created. At that time, the scientists in charge of the project struggled to successfully replicate the Kryptonian DNA necessary, and what they reproduced was flawed and unstable, so the project was put on hold. A year later they believed they’d solved the issue by using human DNA to fill in the genetic gaps, and that’s when the Superboy was born.

“A second clone….” Wally stated in disbelief.

“Technically the first, but that’s who you saw on the archival footage,” Terry added.

Bruce continued, “Connor discovered the clone on a return visit to the new Cadmus facility. Prior to that Lex Luthor had hinted to him of a second clone’s possible existence, and when Conner visited the facility the genomorphs all but confirmed it. Conner must have felt empathy for the creature and decided to release it like you all had with him, but the clone was unstable, almost feral, a by-product of the failed attempt at re-sequencing alien DNA. It attacked Conner and nearly destroyed the entire facility. If it wasn’t for Luthor’s help, the clone would have killed everyone and broken free.”

“Why didn’t he tell us?” Wally asked in shocked disbelief.

“Unfortunately that’s an answer he took to his grave. Perhaps he felt the clone invalidated his
existence; that not only was he a copy of someone else, but that he was a second attempt at that. Maybe he was concerned how you all would see him, not as the individual he was trying to be, but the weapon he once was. He told Superman and myself out of necessity, but even then he was very reluctant to do so.”

“He should have known better that that,” Wally sighed dejectedly.

“It had to be a very difficult decision for him, but he’d been given a lot to process in a very short window to do so. It was in preparing to fight the clone that Luthor first gave Conner the shields that allowed him suppress his human DNA to give him his full Kryptonian abilities. It was also the moment that Luthor decided to tell him who had provided the human DNA used in in creating him. Can you imagine how that must have affected him? Finding all that out mere moments before you were to have the fight of your life? Fortunately with Conner’s new abilities as well as the assistance of the Genomorph known as Dubbilex, together they successfully neutralized Match and placed him back in his cryogenic stasis.”

“Yeah I remember that guy,” Wally replied bitterly, thinking back to the blue skinned be-horned creature that had nearly replicated Robin, Aqualad, and himself.

“Dubbilex promised Conner the clone would be cared for but never released into the world. Other than the Genomorphs, no one was supposed to learn of its exact location, but someone eventually did and captured the clone, leaving Guardian crippled and most of the G-morph’s dead in the process.”

Wayne began to tire from his tale and Terry recognized the fatigue and assisted the billionaire from the table into a much more comfortable chair near the large bay window that where he could put his feet up.

“The League began an immediate search for the clone, senior members only, but that search was put on hold after the whereabouts and consequences of our 16 hours absence under Savage's control came to light. Once the Reach were finally defeated, despite our losses we resumed the search, but by then the trail had grown cold. At that point we weren’t certain if the culprits were any remaining factions of the Light, some unknown criminal organization, or even quite possibly the U.S. military, but what we did know was releasing information as alarming as this to an already terrified public would have caused mass panic.”

Wally rose from the table and walked to the window, staring out at the Gotham River lost for words. He remembered the moment before their final battle with the Light, when M’gaan, Artemis and Connor had all come clean, trusted their friends and finally unburdened themselves from the secrets they’d been holding onto for so long. Why wouldn’t he have told them then? Why hold back? So many questions that now could never be answered.

Barbara walked over and joined. “The world was just beginning to recover from the Invasion. People were scared, mistrustful of the government, of us, and they had good reason. Keeping the clone’s existence quiet was a judgement call. Good decision or bad is up for history to decide. We did the best we could with what we had. To this day we still don’t know for sure who recovered it, but whoever it was continued to experiment and augment its abilities up until months before its escape.”

“Or released,” Bruce added.

“Luthor,” Wally remarked bitterly.

“Quite possibly, but once again that’s another answer we’ll never know.”
“Why?” Wally spun around looking to the elderly billionaire.

“Lex was the first person that thing hunted down and murdered. It was premeditated, brutal,” McGinnis answered.

“Yeah, I’ve seen his handiwork,” Wally replied dejectedly.

“Not like this you haven’t,” Terry corrected. “Luthor was burned alive, slowly; set ablaze by that thing’s heat vision and then extinguished over and over. Lex was a scumbag, but even he didn’t deserve that kind of death.”

The speedster shuddered at the thought.

Bruce continued. “Alfred always said some people just like to watch the world burn, and with the added allure of killing superheroes, it didn’t take much convincing for our enemies to join its crusade. The ironic thing was they were being lead to their deaths the entire time; they were just blind to see it.”

Wally looked to see Wayne’s eyes hooded and heavy, the events of this evening having taken their toll. For a brief moment he finally saw how frail the old man had become. The speedster had spent his whole life seeing the Batman as an indestructible force of nature, as much forged from steel as his former teammate in the Justice League, but that man was gone now, in his place now stood a fragile and weary fallen hero, his eyes and mind still sharp but the flesh weak.

“It’s late,” Bruce asserted, stifling a groan as he struggled to his feet, powering through the arthritic pain attacked his body, but he’d fought worse. “I need to go. I have an important meeting in the morning, but Barbara will take you back to her place for the time being. We’ll meet again soon to try to figure out where to go from here.”

“Bruce now hold on a second, I’ve still got a ton of questions,” Wally pleaded. “What about the League? Why are people so afraid them? Why are you all meeting in an abandoned building instead of the Batcave? What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

“Soon Wally,” Bruce declared firmly through his yawn, taking his cane from Barbara while McGinnis called for the automated driver to bring the car around.

“Barbara I’ll call you later. Be careful.” Wally watched in irritated confusion as the duo made their way towards the old freight elevator.

“One word of advice kid,” Terry spun back to the speedster as the door opened to the lift. “Stay off the streets, there’s eyes everywhere. See ya Babs.”

Wally turned to Barbara as the creaky elevator made its way to the ground floor.

“Stay off the streets? What does that even mean?”

“One word of advice kid,” Terry spun back to the speedster as the door opened to the lift. “Stay off the streets, there’s eyes everywhere. See ya Babs.”

Down on street level, Terry eased the old man into the backseat of the car and deactivated the driver assist. Once Bruce was secured inside, McGinnis took one last look around and got behind the wheel and made their way out of the Narrows. He knew the old man’s paranoia was beginning to rub off on him, but they were too close to get sloppy now. A few blocks ahead the traffic light
turned red, and the limo came to a stop. While waiting for it to change, McGinnis turned back to
his boss.

“You didn’t tell him. You don’t trust him?”

“That’s not it,” Wayne replied.

“He was supposed to be some kind of genius right? Don’t you think he could help?”

Bruce paused for a moment. “I don’t want him involved. It’s for his own good. If something goes
wrong, if someone discovers what we’re doing, I don’t want he or Barbara anywhere near this. He
sacrificed everything to save this world once already, and look what we did with it? I won’t ask him
to do it again.”

“What if Barbara does?” Terry questioned.

“She won’t. She knows better.”

McGinnis chuckled. “It’s probably for the best. The odds of this plan of yours working are slim to
none anyway.”

“And you call me the cynic,” Bruce bemused.

McGinnis smiled and pulled forward through the stormy Gotham night.

xxx

On the top floor of Gotham Park West, Barbara Gordon entered the six digit security code into the
touch display hanging outside her door. The panel lit up in confirmation and she and the speedster
entered into the darkened apartment. She walked to the side table, turning on the lamp and taking
of her shoulder holster and trench coat, hanging them both of the coat rack. Wally stared around
the room impressed.

“Penthouse with a great view of the Gotham Central Park; pretty swanky Barbara. I guess police
commissioner pays pretty good these day.”

“Not quite,” she smiled sadly. “I was the executor of Dick’s estate. He left everything to me
including this place, definitely nicer than my place in the Commons.”

Wally’s heart sunk. “God I’m sorry. Were you two…?”

"Me and Dick?" the older hero chuckled, "No, Dick Grayson was never the marrying type. I loved
him and I know he loved me. We used to joke that if neither of us were engaged before we turned
forty, we’d fly off to Vegas and tie the knot, but that window closed a long time ago. Anyway can I
get you something to eat? Drink?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.”

“Well the guest room is the second door on the left. It has its own bathroom and towels are in the
counter under the sink. You can drop your stuff in there and I’ll grab some sheets.”

Wally walked down the sparse hallway, turning into the pristine room full of beautiful mahogany
furniture; Wally didn’t have to guess its previous owner, it was the same antique bedroom suit
Dick had in the mansion.
On the dresser sat a solitary picture frame. The speedster brought the frame closer, examining the image. His best friend, arm in arm with Barbara. Neither one of them could have been more than twenty-five, thirty at the most. He was smiling, happy, an expression Wally didn’t get to see very much of towards the end. Barbara walked in to see the red head sitting on the bed, staring blankly at the image, lost in time.

“He never got over your death,” she said sadly. “Jason's scarred him, but yours devastated him.”

Wally swallowed hard, locked on the picture of happier times. “Things were pretty bad between us towards the end. I was a real tool to him. He was barely keeping things together and I was riding him the entire way, questioning every move, criticizing every decision. After the Summit, things were moving so fast, but just for a second he and I just kind of locked eyes, and suddenly it was just like old times again. We knew there’d be time to talk, to work things out but…….”

“I know,” she whispered, placing a supportive hand on Wally’s shoulder.

Barbara cleared her voice, “Come on and help me make this up,” she said dropping the clean sheets on the bed. “I’ve got some coffee brewing and some cinnamon rolls in the oven.” “Nice,” Wally smiled gratefully.

Later that evening they duo sat around the tall table sipping their coffee, Wally having finished off the rolls in minutes. It was quiet, tranquil, and for just a few moments things felt surprisingly normal.

“How did it happen?” he asked

“Central City became our last stand. We’d been expecting another terrorist attack, but the powers that be had predicted it was going to be Metropolis or Gotham. The Midwest took us by surprise. It was also the first time Superboy Prime and his compatriots had all attacked in a single wave instead of the small isolated skirmishes they’d been doing for months. Barry and Bart sounded the alarm and held them off as long as they could while every hero you can think of waited all over the globe for the Zeta tubes to clear and the next transport to begin. Buildings were crumbling, civilians dying, but for the first time since that thing had begun its rampage, we had of his accomplices secured within a five to ten mile radius. That was huge. If we’d had maybe just another hour ,we’d have had them on the ropes, and the heavy hitters were only a few minutes away ready to take finally take Prime down, but the world governments weren’t going to wait that long. They were scared and saw this as their only chance. If our military hadn’t launched the nukes someone else’s would have. None of us knew what was going on at the time, but suddenly the Zeta’s went offline and the internet went dark. An hour or so later the news reports started coming in.”

“I don’t know the order of who arrived; in all honesty I don’t care anymore. All I know is Dick and Connor were one of the initial responders. What was relayed to us before the missiles struck was when Prime saw Connor it went insane: losing focus on everything else but trying to destroy Superboy. Conner was outmatched, he knew that, but he did all he could to distract that thing long enough for the others to arrive. It took its time killing Connor. That son of a bitch savored it, but by the time he was done almost half of the world’s heroes were on the scene. We had a chance, maybe our first real one. If we could have just had one more hour…” Barbara repeated bitterly, biting her lip and trailing off.

The speedster didn’t have to be a therapist to recognize survivor’s guilt. Barbara more than likely had been one of those heroes waiting to transport, waiting to join the fight, someone who was willing to risk it all to make a difference, someone who never got the chance.
“Would you like some more coffee?”

“No thanks,” he replied.

“Barbara what did McGinnis mean by there are eyes everywhere?”

She glanced down into her mug searching for the words, like the answer hid just below the liquidy brown surface.

“Wally this is a different world now. After the Reach Invasion, alliances began to fray and world governments became even more mistrustful than before, blaming each other for partnering up with the Reach and blaming us for allowing them to do so. We’d warned them it was an Invasion and not some benevolent race only interested in peaceful first contact, but they didn’t listen. They accused us of not acting quickly enough, completely oblivious of the Light, Nightwing and Aqualad’s plan, or even that half the Justice League was M.I.A. during most of it. When that information was presented at the World Council inquiries a year later, that’s when the real seeds of distrust were planted. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t I suppose.”

“It took years for the world to begin to heal, to trust again, and then out of nowhere a super powered clone declares war on the world, and everything world leaders and diplomats had worked so hard to mend tore open again as the global terrorist attacks began. Then with the bombing of Central City, the world was on the brink of war. That’s when the remaining members of the League intervened.”

“It was supposed to be a temporary seizing of power, an attempt to take control and restore order. It wasn’t a popular decision needless to say, but it did pull us from the brink of annihilation. The threat of mutually assured destruction ended and negotiations, real negotiations for peace began. On top of that it sent a good chunk of supervillains, terrorists, and crime lords into prison or scurrying underground. Not all, but a good amount. To be fair this was some of the safest times the world had known and the Leagues approval ratings sky rocketed. To appease governments, a registration act was proposed to identify meta-humans who might be considered a threat. The downside was that existing heroes who still wanted their anonymity had to give that up to join the League. If you didn’t your heroing days were over. Vigilantisms would not be tolerated. It became law eight years ago.”

“Whoa,” Wally replied in shock.

“Elected leaders were finally allowed back to take their rightful place, but the League has never officially stepped down. Their presence is felt in almost every global power. They choose when elections will be held, what energy sources can be tapped, what countries are allowed to trade with others, they’ve passed new crime bills without a casting a single vote. They even appointed themselves secretary general of the United Nations, Wonder Woman currently holds that title.”

Wally stroked his chin for a few moments before speaking up. “I hate to say this, but is this really a bad thing?” Wally asked hesitantly. “I mean the world’s safer than it’s ever been right?”

“In theory, but Wally dictating to governments to live by your rules or else, that’s not freedom, that’s fear.”

Barbara took her pad off the counter and typed in a few key words when a three dimensional object appeared, floating in mid-air between them. Wally didn’t recognize the building specifically but clearly understood the design.

“I don’t have to tell you what these are?” she asked.
“Prisons.” he replied gravelly.

“Yes, and they’re not just full of hardened criminals or supervillains, they also house people, normal innocent people that don’t want to blindly follow the Leagues rules; they want what this country, what half the world was founded on; freedom. And you know who else is in there? Heroes; people with gifts and abilities that just want to use them to help others, but don’t want to be dictated when, where and how by a League that’s lost its way. There are people I know and respect in there. Good people Wally, and the only reason that Bruce and a handful of others aren’t in there with them is we’re too old to make much of a difference anymore.”

“I don’t understand. What about McGinnis?” Wally began.

“Terry’s not one of them. They tolerate his presence out of respect to Bruce, but he’s not allowed to leave Gotham, not in costume anyway. If he doesn’t abide by that rule, he could be locked up too.”

“This is insane. What are you all doing about it?”

“Nothing. There’s nothing left we can do.”

“Barbara, these are you friends, your teammates. Surely Bruce can talk some sense into them.”

“Wally, he’s been talking to them for years, they won’t listen. They don’t want to.”

His hands were buzzing from caffeine and adrenaline, and he nearly jumped out of his skin when her phone suddenly began to ring. Barbara reached for it apologizing to her startled guest.

“Sorry, its work. I’ll be right back,” she acknowledged taking the call and walking out to her balcony to deal with whatever city emergency had come up.

Wally couldn’t be still much longer and began to pace. Why in the hell did I ask for coffee he cursed himself. Caffeine and a lightning fast metabolism had always been a bad mixture.

The last time he’d been to Barbara Gordon’s apartment, she was barely eighteen and was starting her first year at Gotham University. Back then her dorm room was filled with posters of pop stars, cheap furniture that barely held together, and a mountain of mementos and items from home that must have left Commissioners Gordon’s home bare. Her place now was sparse, industrial, cold; just the essentials and barely anything more.

He made his way out to the den where the gas fireplace was producing something you’d barely consider heat. On the mantle sat one solitary picture frame, larger than normal, but seemingly dark without any photos inside. Wally reached for it when at his touch it suddenly flickered to life and a series of images beginning to appear.

Images of her mother and father began to materialize; seconds later replaced by pictures of she and her brother. Next a nice family portrait that pulled at his heart strings, reminding him of his parents. Then familiar faces began to appear. A picture of Dick in his ridiculous Gotham Academy uniform, Alfred with his trademark scowl. A handsome picture of Bruce and Dick together at some society function. Wally was surprised to see himself next, clowning with Dick in some restaurant that probably didn’t exist anymore. Then his heart stopped at the next image.

He and Artemis holding the other in their arms, completely oblivious to the world around them.

The speedster felt his throat begin to close when Barbara walked back into the room. She came over next to him as Wally shook his head looking at the picture.
“You haven't asked about her.”

“I've been afraid to,” he said sadly, “I never even said goodbye.”

“I know how you feel,” Barbara replied, resting her head on Wally’s shoulder lost in the image.

“Needless to say she took your death pretty hard. Both she and Dick left the team not long after that and went solo. Artemis never wore the archer gear again. Eventually she transferred to Gotham University and got her degree, protected the city as Tigress, but things were never the same.”

“Somehow Zee convinced her to come back on a part time basis, and that worked out well for a while. She needed to be back with her friends, and we needed her. She spent the next year whipping all the new recruits into shape.”

Wally chuckled, imagining the hours and hours of rigorous training she must have put them through, the same training she drug Wally through even after leaving the team. The speedster almost felt sorry for them if the images of her busting Bart, Tim, and Jaime’s collective asses weren’t so entertaining.”

“She lived for that sort of thing, and she was damn good at it.”

“Yes she was,” Barbara kindly smiled, taking the frame from him and advancing the pictures.”

“During one of our missions in Bialya, she caught a round in the leg from a sniper. Nothing life threatening but she needed surgery fairly quickly. That’s when she met Chris Hunter. He was with the doctors without borders team in the Middle East dealing with the refugee crisis. He patched her up and made her check in with him weekly until she got back stateside. They kept in touch on and off after that, and when he came back to the U.S. they started dating.”

“It had been years after your death Wally, it’s not like she rushed into anything. They got married a year and a half later. He’s a good man Wally. You would have liked him.”

Wally nodded, biting his lip to keep his composure. They’d been together for over five years, five amazing years. The idea of marriage had been joked about several times, but as school was nearing the end, their discussions became a lot more serious, more real. He had intended to ask her at graduation, but then Dick came to their door, and the rest was history. Literally.

“Wally I'm sorry.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to keep his tears locked away. It hurt, but he knew any news of her was going to.

“No it's good. I glad she was happy. She deserved it.”

“She retired and they traveled for a while with his DWB team. I kind of lost track of her for a while when out of the blue we got a call that they were back in the States. She and Chris had bought a house in upstate New York, he’d started a practice, and she was pregnant. A few months later they had a girl, Isabella.”

Barbara flipped the pictures ahead a few frames to one that took Wally’s breath away. The long lost love of his life, more elegant than he ever remembered, holding her child in her arms.

“She’s beautiful,” he sighed.

“Which one?” Barbara smiled.

“Both,” he replied, wiping a tear from his eye. The child had Artemis’s eyes, her lips, she even carried traces of her Asian heritage. He’d never seen the archer look more beautiful, more happy.
“She came back when the call went out, everyone did. It must have been agonizing decision for their family, but she was still a hero, and she was needed. We lost so many that day Wally, I try not to think about it anymore,” Barbara said, pulling a handkerchief from her pocket and drying her eyes.

“After her death Chris took Izzy and left for somewhere in the Pacific Northwest, I lost track of them after that. He wanted no part of this life, I don’t blame him. Izzy would be about your age now.”

“Unreal,” Wally acknowledged dejectedly, handing the frame back to Barbara.

“She never forgot you.”

“Barbara you don’t have to….”

“Look at the picture, notice the neckless?”

She handed it back to him and he focused in on her neck, more specifically the pendant that hung from it; a small lightning bolt. That was the last straw and the speedster couldn’t hold back the swell of emotions anymore. Hot tears rolled down his cheeks, and Barbara wrapped her arms around him as he cried into her shoulder.

“This is so fucked up,” he sobbed, trying but failing to keep his composure.

“I know Wally. I know,” she replied stroking his hair. Barbara knew this moment was going to be tough for him, that it was not the happy ending he deserved, but she was prepared to hold on to him all night until the last tear fell.

xxx

“You look as handsome as ever,” the tall brunette smiled as she entered the executive dining room of Wayne Tower, escorted by the Director of Media Relations and the Chief of the Tower’s security team, like that was even necessary.

“Did Diana of Themyscira just tell her first lie?” the elderly Wayne laughed, standing up to greet his guest while waving off his staff. “Where’s that magic rope of yours when you need it?”

The room was famous for hosting dignitaries; heads of state, captains of industry, celebrities donating their time and talents to the Wayne Foundation, but this morning it was empty, except for a small intimate dining table stationed near the long glass window overlooking the city.

“How about you look dignified. Is that better?” she asked with a wry grin.

“Much,” he smiled, walking over and pulling out her chair for her.

“It’s been too long Bruce. We used to do this much more often. I’m so glad you called.”

“I’m just honored the Secretary General of the U.N. could work me into her busy schedule.

She took his hand into hers, stroking the frail thin skin gently. “For you, anytime.”

She was as stunning as the day they’d first met. There was not one wrinkle on her face, not one strand of gray hair in her raven locks. Amazons were not immortal, but they were damn close. Decades after his death, Bruce was certain she’d look the exact same.

The executive chef came out and from the kitchen to greet his guests, offering up suggestions for
the couple’s meal. After a long pause Diana eventually chose the Strawberry Mint Omelet while Bruce opted for the Ham and Gruyère Waffle Tartines. A waiter in a crisp white jacket came next, filling their glasses before stepping to the far corner of the room to offer them privacy.

“So what have you been up to?” Diana asked.

“Well I guess that is the question isn't it?” Bruce answered.

“I don't know what you mean?”

“Diana you’ve never lied to me before. Don't start now. Why is the League still spying on me?”

She paused hesitantly, searching for her words. It always amazed her that a mere mortal could have this kind of effect on her, but this was no ordinary man, she had discovered that long ago. Their relationship had always been special, built on truth and integrity. She loved Bruce Wayne like no other, she always would, and as usual he was correct that she’d be forthcoming.

“We're worried about you.”

“You mean Clark is.”

“No… yes,” she sighed. “Bruce it’s unhealthy for a man your age to continue a fight that ended long ago. You need to be out enjoying the retirement you’ve earned, not locked away in some empty mansion. Gotham is safe, and if you need a new challenge the offer still stands. You’re one of the most brilliant minds of our time. Why won't you join us to help shape this world?”

“Maybe I think the world doesn't need the Justice Lords to decide what shape it should be?”

“Don't call us that,” she said firmly.

“Diana you've....”

“We've kept the world from civil war. We’ve made it safe. We've protected it from invasions and its own short sightedness. We’ve given the people back their lives, their freedom.”

“I think you’re mistaking fear for freedom.”

“Then guide us like you did all those years ago. Be the voice of reason.”

“Superman doesn't like the sound of my voice anymore. Besides I know you feel the same as I do Diana. Clark and the others have lost their way.”

“Clark’s a good man Bruce.”

“That's not in question, but the path he's leading you down is wrong. I've told him that numerous times.”

“You compared him to Zod. He didn't appreciate that.”

Bruce let escape a sly smile in response.

“Why are we having this argument again?” the Amazon sighed.

“Because I want the Martian to back off. We've obeyed the mandate. Terry's stayed in Gotham.”

“He could join us still.”
“He knows that, and he also knows it’s ultimately his decision, not mine, but I don’t think his generation likes the direction you’re leading us anymore than I do.”

The princess had never been more grateful when their food arrived; momentarily ending the debate she’d had with this man time and time again.

“Oh my Gods, this heavenly,” she moaned taking a bite of her omelet. “The man is a genius,” she asserted to the smile of the chef.

“I’m glad you approve mademoiselle. Please enjoy your meal.” the French chef replied, nodding respectfully to the elder Wayne before going back to the kitchen. Diana savored the next bite before taking a sip of her water.

“Speaking of France, I guess you’ve heard about the Paris incident by now?”

“No. Enlighten me,” Wayne answered.

“A new meta is in play. Saved a construction worker from falling off the Eifel Tower and scared the hell out of the populace in the process. We need to find him.”

“Sounds like a job for Superman,” the older man said with a crooked smile.

“Bruce I’m serious. He has to register. It’s the law.”

“Your law maybe, it might not be his or hers.”

“You’re impossible sometimes,” she countered, taking a deep breath, asking Hera for patience.

“It's my superpower,” he deadpanned. “Regardless that seems to be a European problem.”

“It's a League problem,” she argued, pausing for a long moment trying to read a man who'd spent his life being unreadable.

“if you discover something would you please let me know? No one wants this to get out of hand.”

Wayne nodded. “I’ve never agreed with your registration act, but I do agree no one should be hurt. We've lost too many already.”

“Yes we have,” she replied sadly.

Diana rose from the table, placing her napkin next to her plate and walking around the table to the old man. “Thank you for breakfast Bruce; let’s not wait so long to do it again,” she said leaning down and kissing his cheek.

“My pleasure, I'll let you know if I hear anything,”

“Will you?” she asked, her words laced with doubt.

“I think you already know the answer to that.” Wayne responded.

“Yes, I think I do,’ she replied sternly, knowing she didn’t need her lasso to know the truth. She walked towards the elevator, stopping briefly and turning back to the table.

“You know one thing I find odd Bruce; you never once asked me what this meta’s abilities were. I thought as a detective you’d be at least a little curious.”
“Ok I’ll bite,” he chuckled.

“It was a speedster. Perhaps the last one.”

“That is interesting.”

“Isn’t it,” she answered oddly, turning back to the elevator and leaving the room.
Chapter 6

Three days. Three claustrophobic, mundane repetitious days. Barbara had abruptly taken time off from the precinct without so much as an explanation to ensure the speedster stayed under the radar. It hadn't taken long for him to find and begin tinkering with every electronic device in her apartment; taking them apart, seeing how they worked, what they were made of, what powered them, etc. To save them from imminent destruction, she sat the red head down and began introducing him one by one to today's modern technology. She'd only scratched the surface before Wally had mastered it, his speed of light mind still as sharp as ever.

They'd taken short strolls at night, pointing out places he might remember, places that urban growth and sprawl had not completely taken yet. She'd ordered in as much junk food as she could to placate the speedster, nearly putting both Big Belly Burger and Chicken Whizzies out of business, but soon they were both at wits end, and it was then and only then that she finally remembered how utterly annoying speedsters could be. Bruce's invitation couldn't have come soon enough.

xxx

Wally sat in the front seat, hands folded patiently as the commissioner drove through the busy Gotham rush hour traffic, obeying every traffic law, every stop, every yield, as well as the ever changing speed limits along the way. It took all the will power he could muster not to reach his foot over and press down on the accelerator or even possibly get out and push.

"God Barbara, you drive like an old woman," he groaned.

"I am an old woman smartass," she retorted to his amusement. Crossing over the bridge they left Gotham proper and headed south towards the New York countryside.

Wally smiled and sat back in his seat, closing his eyes and stretching his arms behind his back to find a position he could get comfortable. One of his favorite things about Barbara Gordon had always been her humor. The Batcave by nature had been a boys club; be it by League members or their protégés, but Barbara had fought her way in, both physically and mentally earning her place. Besides being an excellent detective in her own right, she'd kept up with two sanctimonious wise asses like he and Dick step for step. Dick Grayson was the closest thing Wally had to a sibling, and a byproduct of that relationship was Barbara became like a sister. If he squinted hard enough, through the blurry haze he could almost see that teenager again. It had been almost twenty-five years to her, but to the speedster it seemed like yesterday.
After a few minutes of silence Wally spoke up. "So what's the story with this McGinnis kid?" Wally asked.

"That kid is actually older than you are," Barbara chuckled, "but as far as his story, it's one you've probably heard before. Parents divorced when he was young, he begins lashing out at any and all authority figures, starts running with the wrong crowds, fights petty theft, does a couple of stints in juvey, you know the drill."

"Sounds like Jason," the speedster frowned, remembering the tragic life of the one-time Robin and Outlaw.

"Yes it does," she nodded. "Then it becomes even more convoluted. Terry's father is found murdered and not long after, McGinnis's discovers the hit was ordered by the CEO of Wayne-Powers."

"Oh God," Wally sighed despondently, hearing the same story he had heard too many times.

"Warren McGinnis was a research scientist in the R&D Department. Somehow he and another colleague discovered the company was making biological weapons and selling them off the books and on the black market. Terry found a disc his father had hidden, uncovered some pretty disturbing facts and tracked down Bruce for help. Of course the old man refused, telling him to take any evidence to my office. You have to understand, Bruce had been out of the game for a long time. Most of his family and friends were dead, and the one's still living he no longer spoke to. He had cardiac problems, degenerative disc and joint damage, and just about everything else you could think of that comes with all the punishment he'd put himself through over the years and they'd taken their toll. Anyway somehow Terry discovered the entrance to the cave and turns around and steals one of Bruce's high tech Bat-suits."

"Pretty ballsy," Wally replied impressed.

"Yeah I thought so," she grinned. "They eventually teamed up and caught his killer. After Derek Powers was arrested, Bruce took Terry on as a partner, I think it gave both of them a new sense of purpose. Terry's had to grow up fast. It's not like it was in the old days with teams of young heroes and the mentors to train them, it's been on the job training. All the while he's been taking care of a sick mother, raising a brother that's going off in a direction that Terry knows all too well, and trying to keep a girlfriend and the old man happy at the same time. He's carried the mantle well, but Terry's his own man, not some puppet that Bruce manipulates. He is the Batman. Just not the one you remember."
A few moments later they finally reached the gate leading up the long driveway to Wayne Manor. Barbara reached out to the broken speaker box, placing her thumb on the un-lit call button. Seconds later a slim red laser came to life from out of shadows, scanning her thumbprint and DNA.

"Didn't see that coming did you?"

Wally peered curiously at the box as the gate lumbered open. Not as broken down and decrepit as the speedster had first been led to believe. Dick always told him sometimes the best place to hide was in plain sight. Even at his age, Bruce Wayne could still be full of surprises, but an even bigger one waited inside.

xxx

"My God, You look great kid."

"Ollie?!" Wally said in utter astonishment, racing over and embracing the elderly archer.

"Whoa slow down kid," he laughed, "just had my rotator cuff replaced."

Wally released him gently, taking two steps back to look over the old man. Where the years had not been kind to Bruce, the same could not be said for the archer. He looked in amazing shape for someone his age. He was tanned, toned, and still wore his trademark goatee, only now a few shades whiter. From far away if you could look past the silver hair, you'd swear the Green Arrow hadn't changed a bit. Even now the guy still looked like he could kick somebody's ass.

"I can't believe this?"

"You can't? Imagine how I feel." Queen chuckled.

Wayne walked over next to them. "I thought it would be a nice transition if you could be around a few more familiar faces," Wayne declared in his low timber.

"Dinah sends her best. She can't wait to see you."
"Oh man I'm sooooo glad she's ok. These days I'm afraid to ask." Wally replied relieved.

"She's doing great, still hotter than hell and hasn't slowed down a bit. You'll see her soon enough, she's getting the guest house all set up for you."

Wally froze for a moment, looking back at the archer curiously. "Hold on a sec. What? Guest house? Where?"

"Star City," Ollie replied equally as confused, turning back to the detective. "You didn't tell him?"

Bruce stepped in. "We need you off the grid. The Paris incident is now on the League's radar, and unfortunately so am I. Out west at Oliver's estate you'll be away from prying eyes."

"It's for own good Wally," Barbara added. "You need some space and time to adjust; Gotham's just not the place to do it."

"But..."

"Look kid it's just temporary until we can get you back on your feet. Trust me you'll love it out there. Diana's still an amazing cook; the guest house's got all the latest gadgets, there's lots of property and a great view of the coast. Everything you'd want."

Wally nodded irritably; trying not to come off as ungrateful. He hated having decisions made for him, but begrudgingly had to admit it probably was a good idea. Gotham, with its smothering buildings, numerous security cameras, and masses and masses of people would make it nearly impossible to keep his speed under wraps long-term. Both Bruce and Barbara felt strongly about keeping his presence a secret from the League for now, and even though he didn't always agree with Batman, he knew Bruce was usually right.

"Ok," he sighed. "When do we do this?"

"Tomorrow morning, first train out." Wayne answered.
"Train?" Wally grumbled. "Really?"

Ollie chuckled. "They're a lot faster these days kid. Not your type speed, but it will do. Best way to travel to keep a low profile."

"You've got to be kidding me," Wally sighed, rubbing his hands through his hair irritably, before surrendering. "Fine."

A quiet chime rang from the dining room, as one of the temporary kitchen staff came out from the kitchen indicating dinner was ready.

They all rose and walked towards the formal dining room, leaving the speedster trailing behind. Barbara stayed back with him, trying to soothe Wally's unease.

"Wally it really is for the best. I know you're nervous you're going to be forgotten, but that's not going to happen. Once things settle down here, we'll all get back together and try to figure out a future for you, and don't worry you'll get some input in it this time. Until then I'll be in touch with you at least once a week, but you can still call me anytime you want, we can catch up with what you missed, or just to vent. Anything ok?"

Wally nodded. He appreciated the gesture, but regardless in all honesty what other choice did he have.

xxx

After dinner the group retired to the library, a roaring fire illumination the room, its glowing embers leaping and twirling in a mesmerizing dance. Oliver and Bruce sipped brandy reminiscing the old days while Barbara, Terry, and Wally sat to the side listening to their tales. Ollie was still a grade A bullshitter, but his stories were as entertaining as ever, albeit a tad exaggerated as everyone who knew the archer was already aware, but you never stopped the man when he was on a roll. It was one of the few times the speedster actually recalled seeing Wayne smile.

The stories skirted the edges of heroics, focusing more on old friends than the masks they wore. Friends they'd loved and lost; remembered just the way they'd want to be. An hour later, Terry yawned and rose from his plush leather chair, stretching and walking towards the old Steinway piano.
"Time to go to work," he stated, hitting the proper key sequence on the antique piano as the oak book shelf to the right of the fire slid open.

"Not tonight?" Wayne asserted

Terry looked back to his boss. "You sure?"

"I'll need you back here at o-four thirty sharp. The Amtrak to California leaves Gotham Station shortly after five."

"Understood. It'll be nice finally sleeping in my bed for more than two hours." McGinnis cracked. "Ollie it's always a pleasure, and West, I'll be seeing you bright and early."

Wally nodded. "I'll be ready."

Barbara yawned and rose to her feet as well. "Come on hero, I'll give you a ride to the city, you can bring my car back in the morning."

The police commissioner walked over the speedster, her palm ghosting his face. "Take care of yourself Wally, I'll be in touch." She kissed his cheek and wrapped her arms around him squeezing tightly. Wally hugged back but her phrasing troubled him. What she meant was until later, but why did her hug feel like goodbye?

"Good night all," Terry stated, sliding the bookcase closed, grabbing his backpack and following Barbara out the door.

The three men remained in the study for another hour. Ollie handed the speedster a glass as they sat and told stories of Barry and Hal, Dick and Roy; their friends, their sons. Wally could have done without the brandy, but the memories were priceless, listening to stories of men he'd never heard before, amusing tales of miscues and embarrassing moments that were sworn to secrecy but carrying statute of limitations that had run out a long time ago. You hadn't lived until you heard Bruce Wayne let out an uncontrollable belly laugh.

"Well kids this has been fun, but this old man's got to hit the bed," the archer remarked. "Don't forget to set your alarm kid, but don't worry I'll be up. Kind of an early riser. See you all in the morning."
As Queen left the room Wally turned to Wayne. "Do you think he's forgotten about the time change?"

"After all that brandy, I think he'll be lucky to remember where his room is," Bruce chuckled. "Speaking of which, Dick's is available if you want it."

The speedster shook his head, uncomfortable with the thought of trespassing on such sacred ground. "No I'm good, I'll probably stay up a little while longer and pass out on a couch somewhere."

"Suit yourself. Sleep well."

"You too."

Before Wayne exited the library, he turned back to the speedster,

"I know you're not happy about this, but you deserve more than I can give you. Oliver and Dinah will able to take much better care than I ever could, but know this, you are always welcome here."

"Thanks Bruce, I really do appreciate at it, but its fine. Speedsters always land on their feet, Flash fact."

Wayne nodded and trudged off towards the elevator to his second story bedroom.

xxx

Wally stretched out on the leather couch watching the hypnotic flames perform their dance. He glanced around the room with hooded eyes, watching the flickering light battle the shadows, until finally he felt the drowsiness of slumber fast approaching. The mansion carried a dank musty smell, every corner of the library covered in cobwebs, something that would not have been tolerated while Alfred Pennyworth was alive.
Bruce was right, he didn’t belong here. Gotham had been a safe haven from the storm, but now his voyage was now sailing in a new direction, and he honestly didn’t know how to feel about it. This city, this place reeked of death, and he’d been so overwhelmed by his return that he was just finally beginning to notice it.

Almost everyone he’d ever cared about had a direct connection to this place and with them gone it was time for him to say his goodbyes as well, but at the same token where was his headed? Green Arrow’s would just be another temporary stop, and then what? Spend the rest of his days hiding out from the Justice League? keeping his speed under wraps and move to some small town and start a new life under a new name? This was insane, a new existence full of unfathomable choices, a perfect example as to why he and Artemis had decided to leave the life in the first place.

*Artemis*

Just saying her name made his heart ache. What he wouldn’t give now to wake up on a table next to her, another one of Megan's mental simulations goes awry.

He hoped that she had forgiven him; forgiven him for not stopping to share his plan, to say goodbye, at least a kiss. Perhaps the pendant she still wore in the picture Barbara had shown him was his answer. He hoped the years following she’d found happiness. He hoped her husband had treated her like the precious gift she was. He hoped her daughter knew what an amazing woman her mother was, how far she’d come from the person her father had tried so hard to corrupt.

But most of all he wished he could have spent just a few more moments with her, tasted her lips one last time, tell her how much he loved her.

“God I miss you babe.” he sniffled, feeling his eyes beginning to burn with tears

He was on the verge of twilight when a small thump followed by a squeak caught his attention. He sat up from the couch and glanced around the room but saw nothing. He disregarded the noise, it was a very old house after all, but as he settled back down he heard the sound again, and then again.

Wally rubbed his eyes, turning on a lamp and searching for the source. Resting next to the book case sat a tall glass faced grandfather clock. Cornered in the back and slamming against the casing was a small gray bat, most likely trapped during one of Bruce or Terrys trips back and forth from the cave.
He’d be lying if he said he did it for humanitarian reasons, the truth was he’d never fall asleep if that thing didn’t get back to its home and stop thrashing around. And besides if he was saying goodbye to Gotham tonight, he should say one last goodbye to the Batcave as well.

Wally walked over to the piano, fumbling with the wrong keys twice before hitting the proper sequence. The bookshelf slowly slid open, freeing the bat in the process. The speedster glanced around the room cautiously before making his was down the spiral stone staircase. It felt wrong to do this, but he and Dick had snuck into the Batman’s secret headquarters so many times he’d lost count, one last time wouldn’t hurt.

Wally traversed the stairs downwards as a cold breeze blew through the chamber, much cooler than he remembered. When he reached the bottom he was surprised to see how much had changed. As he’d surmised the exit had been sealed shut, barely a whisper of the roaring waterfall behind it could be heard now. With the stories that had been conveyed to him about the League, he doubted it had been done by choice.

On one wall sat the uniforms and weapons vault, locked tight of course, on the other was the trophy room, the idea that first inspired the speedsters own desire for souvenirs.

The room housed so much history; the Giant Penny, Scarface's head, Joker’s playing card, one of the Riddler's giant hourglasses, and many more Wally didn’t recognize, but he’d missed so much history during his absence. He wondered if the new Batman collected them as well.

Wally wished he’d had more time to explore, but it was still good to see it all one last time. Directly in the center of the cave sat the Batcomputer, surrounded by enough hardware that it encompassed nearly a third of the cave. It seemed to be in sleep mode, and Wally was sorry he wouldn’t have the chance to see it in action just once, it had to be impressive.

He imagined holographic projectors, petaflop processing speed, algorithm engineering, artificial intelligence interfaces. The technology of this age was astounding, and Batman always had the best toys.

He was so distracted by the cutting edge tech all around that when he turned he nearly knocked over one of the cave’s examining tables, sending several prototype batarangs flying towards the floor. Wally slid to his knees in a blink of any eye, catching each and every one before they could impact and send a thundering metallic thud throughout the cave. He prayed none were the exploding type.
As he gathered them together, something caught his eye. Seven long cylindrical items tucked away directly under the table, items someone didn’t want found. He placed the weapons back on top and knelt back down to discover five transparent filaments placed carefully underneath, secured by two Velcro straps and away from prying eyes.

Despite his better judgement, Wally loosened the straps, and took one of the transparent documents, unrolling it carefully to examine what someone had tried so hard to hide. Suddenly it flickered to life at his touch, just like the newspaper in France he’d found, but what appeared on this sheet was nothing close to what he had read on the Herlad De Paris.

Wally sped through the document multiple times, placing it down and then examining the others at a blurred pace. Inside were theoretical four dimensional constructs, metallurgy analysis, GPS coordinates, formulas for quantum manipulation, quantum tunneling, zeta beam and tachyon radiation readings, but what caught his eye most was the schematics, laid out in multiple angles and displays. He’d recognize the diagram anywhere; Bart Allen’s time ship.

On each document he flipped through, the same six words appeared at the bottom. Dr. Raymond Palmer PhD Ivey University.

‘Un-fucking believable” he whispered

xxx

The next morning Barbara’s steel Mercedes Vison II rolled up the long cobblestone driveway to the manor parking next to Wayne’s town car in front of the once functioning ornate French fountain. Outside on the stoop stood Wayne in his bathrobe and pajamas, drinking coffee and waiting for his partner’s return.

“Any problems?”

“Nope,” Terry replied. “He was pretty quiet the whole trip in, but it’s not like he and I have been chatty anyway. I don’t think West likes me very much,” he shrugged.

“You saw him get on the train?”

“Yes Bruce,” McGinnis answered annoyed. “He’s gone ok? Put a tracer on his bag and everything,
just like you asked.”

Terry raised his arm and hit the display on his wrist. “GPS says he’s halfway through Ohio at this exact moment. You need to chill Bruce, he’s safe.”

“I’ll chill when this is all over with and we can proceed to stage three. Are we all set for tonight?”

“Everyone’s sent their coded confirmations, and we’ll be pulling out right after sunset. Rental car issued under a false I.D., just to be safe.”

“Good. If everything goes well, you know what’s next. Are you ready?”

“Yes, and I still will be the next fifty times you ask. Bruce you’re not talking me into this, I volunteered. I’m ready; we’re going to fix this. We’re going to fix all of it. Now stop talking about it because you’re starting to freak me out,” the younger Batman smiled.

“Fine. Let’s get some breakfast and do some acclimating and survival training. You’re about to enter a very different world.”

xxx

Ray Palmer looked at his watch, noted the time and continued typing. His midterm grades weren’t going to enter themselves, and he had an important meeting scheduled later that evening that he couldn’t be late for, possibly the most important one of his life.

His junior professor Ryan Choi had offered to do the grades for him, even drive him to the rendezvous, but Palmer had declined his every offer. Choi had done enough already, placing his life and freedom on the line if the League discovered what they’d been researching.

Ryan was loyal to a fault, and had taken the mantel of the Atom and done it proud, replacing Ray once he retired. When the League mandate came down, like many young heroes, Choi held little interest in joining a group who’d basically taken over world governments across the globe. By now the League had returned most of that power as crises were averted, but their continued presence alone made any offer to be a part of that them hypocritical.
Do as I say, not as I do.

Over a million people, including his parents and sisters had died in the terrorist attack in Hong Kong, and he’s watched helpless as Superboy Prime and his compatriots had destroyed a vast majority of his homeland, but when he’d accidently discovered Ray’s initial research in a top secret project, he wanted in. Ray had kept him at arm’s length the best he could, but Choi was determined to be a part of the solution, the League or its mandates be damned.

A stack of paper reports sat stacked neatly on Palmer’s desk. Despite being a Nobel Prize winning physicist with an eye always looking to the future, Ray Palmer was old school, and he didn’t care how hard or how much trouble it was for his students to prepare paper reports. Hard work built character, and he hated using filaments. At his age, it was tough enough to keep his hands from shaking to navigate them easily, let alone trying to grade and make corrections on them.

A loud rumble echoed throughout his lab, and in the distance he could see storm clouds forming to the east. It would make his commute a little longer, which meant he had to get his grades entered faster, which meant he’d need to leave early and not be late again.

*Hurry Hurry Hurry,* That’s all life was about these days, and he was sick of it. If he didn’t love science so much, he would have retired long ago. God knows he’d threatened to enough times. If their plan was successful, he wondered how different his life might become, but no matter what happened, Palmer was sure his love of science would still follow him, some version of him at least.

Ray stiffly stood and walked to the window, closing the screen from the upcoming storm when a burst of air shot through the lab sending every report he had so tediously examined flying to the floor.

“For the love of God!” he cursed, seeing hours and hours over work thrown across the floor like a jigsaw puzzle. His aching knees creaked and popped as he knelt down on all fours, beginning the journey of reconstructing his labor. His glasses fell from his nose just as another burst shout through the lab. When he reached to pick up the fallen bifocals, suddenly the reports were gone, stacked neatly back on his desk, while a ghost suddenly appeared before him, fading remnants of lightning racing across his body.

“Hello Ray.”
Michael Holt hated caves, he always had. Batman had a cave, Arrow had a cave, and now this place. The former Mr. Terrific just never understood the fascination. Why couldn’t grown-men have secret penthouses or secret cabins somewhere? Why did everything always have to be underground?

Holt knew his issues stemmed from an incident at Mammoth Cave as a child. What in the world were his parents thinking when they took a claustrophobic eight year old into one of the world’s largest, darkest caves, only to have their tour guide shut off the power to let them know what real darkness felt like. While his siblings loved the experiences, he knew that day he’d never become a Speleologist.

Worst family trip ever he smiled at the memory, but that smile faded when he thought back to all he’d lost. What he wouldn’t give to take his own family on one last road trip, but Superboy Prime had taken that all away from him and millions more.

Tonight’s meeting would determine if the result of Ray’s latest simulations had been successful. There had been many near misses over the last year, but if the last reports were any indications, it appeared Choi and Palmer had indeed reached a breakthrough, and now it was time to put those results into practical applications.

Their group was small, but distinguished; the aforementioned Michael Holt, Doctors Palmer and Choi, Christina McGee for Mercury Labs, and Silas Stone from S.T.A.R. Only Holt and Palmer were present this night, the remainder staying away as well as a handful of others as a security precaution. It wasn't safe to have the entire brain trust in one place until the trials were ready to begin. The rest of the team consisted of Barbara Gordon, Renee Montoya the Question, Oliver Queen and Dinah Lance, Bruce Wayne and Terry McGinnis, and a few silent partners Bruce chose not to share but vouched for with his life. Holt doubted any of this would be possible had it not been for the late Dr. Martin Stein, whose work deciphering the technology of the time ship had given them a theoretical bedrock on which to build on. How Bruce Wayne had acquired those reports from the League he’d never know. Youth was no longer on their side, but what they lacked in it, they gained in experience. At least that’s what they told themselves when morale was low.

Tonight only a small contingent were present, and across the table, Oliver Queen was getting antsy. “He’s not coming. Somethings happened.”

“He’ll be here,” Bruce assured.

“What if the League got to Choi? What if he spilled everything?”
Wayne asserted. “Calm yourself Oliver, it’s probably the weather.”

“Then why the hell doesn’t he answer his phone,” Queen countered.

“Maybe he can’t find a place to park,” Terry wisecracked trying to break the tension, but Palmer’s tardiness had the younger Batman on edge too, but showing it wouldn’t help anyone. “Or maybe it’s just off just like yours is,” McGinnis added, reaching down to Queen’s phone and pressing the power switch on.

“Shit,” Ollie cursed, tapping the display and waiting for a signal.

A flood of texts poured in, but before Ollie had a chance to check them, the sound of a security code being entered chimed in through the cave’s makeshift intercom system. The computer confirmed the identity belonging to Ray Palmer and everyone began to breathe a little easier.

“Answer your phone next time grandpa,” Ollie griped to the approaching scientist as he looked through text after text from his wife. Evidently she’d been trying to reach him for hours, and there was going to be hell to pay. Tonight’s results could be game changers, and in his anticipation for the meeting he’d completely forgotten about the package he’d sent her.

The footsteps got louder as Ray Palmer stepped from the shadows, a forlorn expression draped across his face. Seconds later Green Arrow knew exactly why as he read his wife’s last urgent message.

“HE’S NOT HERE!!!!!”

Behind Ray, Wally West calmly stepped from of the shadows.

“Someone’s got a hell of a lot of explaining to do. Who wants to start?”

xxx
McGinnis stood to the side, feeling oddly out of place as he listened to the scolding and arguments erupting from their uninvited guest. Despite only knowing most of these men little over a year, they’d bonded as their plan began to come closer to its fruition, but he’d forgotten most of these men had known the speedster for most of his life, suddenly making Terry feel the odd man out.

The Batman was the key to their plan, and it took every ounce of strength and resolve Terry had to keep his nerve. What they were attempting had only been accomplished once before. It had a slim chance for success, but something had to be done, they owed it to their world, and sacrifice is what true heroes sign up for the day they put on the mask. Now a literal stranger had arrived and was in the process of derailing all they had worked so hard to accomplish.

The speedster’s chastising echoed throughout the cave. “Are you all insane?! Did you not listen to one single thing I told you? What you’re suggesting is ripping a hole in the universe and expecting it to take you down some metaphorical time stream and then just drop you off wherever you want? What’s waiting for you inside is not what you think it is. It’s not a journey; it’s a static, motionless prison, a single moment frozen in time and space. This is beyond reckless; its suicide, no scratch that, it's worse.”

“Then how do you explain your arrival here?” Palmer asked.

“I have no fucking clue Ray. It could have been a multitude of things, some kind of wormhole, a crack in the universe caused by Cosmic Strings, maybe even a faster than light event Bart and Barry created trying to shut down the Reach device. There’s no way of knowing, but I’m not arguing that time travels possible; it’s what happens inside once you open that door that scares the shit out of me. How do you even expect to create an event like that in the first place?”

All gathered eyed each other cautiously. This was highly classified information, information they were willing to take to their graves to protect. Only a handful of men and women knew a plan like this and the ability to pull it off even existed. Their group had been small for a reason and the speedster represented a wild card, one that could easily destroy all they’d worked for with one single slip. To the group he was still a stranger, a very dangerous one. What if he disagreed with the plan so vehemently that he intentionally allowed himself to be discovered, or even worse contacted the Justice League outright?

It should have been a group decision to share as much as they had in the first place, but Ray had known this man since he was a teen; they’d shared a bond, a friendship not just from their work behind the mask, but outside it as well. Wally was a prodigy; Ray had discovered that the first time Barry had brought him to his lab. He absorbed theories and concepts like a sponge. Years later Palmer would advise and guide the speedster through his years at Stanford: steer him when he was lost, encourage him when things seemed darkest, keep him focused when his understanding began to exceed those of his instructors, but most all Ray knew what Barry had known all along, he was a hero, willing to make the ultimate sacrifice if necessary, like he’d already done once before. That
had earned him the Atom’s trust.

“We believe it’s possible to create a stable wormhole using the quantum tunneling technology inside the time ship in conjunction with the Zeta Tubes, to open a pathway to the past.

“Possible,” Wally chuckled bitterly. “Not probable, not doable, but possible.”

“Yes, and both your presence here as well as Bart’s arrival in the past prove the theory is sound. It’s no coincidence that Bart’s ship arrived at a location that had an active Zeta conduit located inside. We believe once he entered in the time stream, he was able to lock onto to a Zeta signature and used it to guide himself to his destination, both physical and chronological.”

Wally stared at the group cynically. “And Bart’s ship?”

Mr. Terrific answered. “Theoretically it should protect the passenger inside from the forces within the time stream. It did for your cousin. That may be why your journey differed so much from Bart’s account.”

“Theoretically,” Wally sighed, “and who exactly is this passenger going to be?”

“I am,” Terry stepped forward.

“Oh my God!” Wally groaned in frustrated disbelief, shaking his head and walking away.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Terry replied.

“McGinnis you have no idea what their sending you into. What do you all even hope to accomplish?”

“Bart Allen had the right concept,” Bruce began, “but not a thorough enough historical understanding. To put it simply, he didn’t go back far enough. He focused so much on saving the Flash’s life that he missed the events that led to his world’s fate, and ours.”
“And what was that exactly?”

“A deadly combination of magic, immortals, clones, alien technology, invasions; plans that were put into place long before the formation of the League. Savage has been playing this game for centuries, pitting country after country against each other in world wars, unleashing plagues and catastrophes, all in the hopes of ending humanity as we know it and forcing an evolution of the species that would meet his standards. When that failed he waited patiently for the right allies and technology to available to finally create his master plan, but the endgame was not what he predicted. Savage expected the Reach to simply wipe out humanity, not enslave it. Their plans ran counter to his, and by the time we drove the Reach from out world and began rounding up members of the Light, Savage must have known his ultimate defeat was at hand. Everything he had ever worked for was about to be lost. Unleashing the Superboy Prime clone was his final card.”

“How do you know any of this?” Wally asked incensed.

“Savage said as much at his trial, right before he was banished into the Phantom Zone,” Ollie answered. “Along with a handful of other powerhouse’s the League deemed too dangerous to remain on planet. It’s one of the few times I’ve agreed with one of their moves, but it still doesn’t make it right.”

“You told me you didn’t know who released it,” Wally snarled directly to Bruce.

“I told you what you needed to know at the time. We didn’t expect for you to discover any of this until it was over.”

“Wally, Bart’s own trip through time is quite possibly what doomed his future and ours. What we’re proposing is finishing the job he started, correctly this time” Ray plead.

“By wiping out our existence?” You said it Bruce, the world is at peace for the first time in decades. And now you want to destroy all of that? Erase all of this, all of us?

Oliver jumped into the argument. “Look Kid, I'm an old lefty. I’ve always believed the government must do for people what the people can't do for themselves. The people sure as hell can't protect themselves from the likes of us. The League has appointed themselves judge, jury, and in some cases executioner, but eventually folks will wake up and realize this isn’t freedom their being force-fed. It all comes around full circle. Societies oppressed, disinters imprisoned, freedoms ripped away. You don’t have to be a history scholar to know what happens next. War, death, just what Savage hoped for. This is what future generations have to look forward to, and I’ll be damned if I’m just going to sit back at watch it happen. That’s not I signed up for, and it sure as hell isn’t
the legacy I want to leave. Not when I’ve got a chance to do something about it.”

Wally reached back, rubbing the back of his aching neck, an unconscious habit he’d had since his teens. “Ok, let’s just say for a minute this little back to the future gig is successful. What then? Are you just going to have this new Batman march up to the watchtower and lay out the entire future?”

Bruce shook his head. “No, it’s the League’s inaction that brought us here to begin with. It’s going to have to be done covertly. The League, my League can never know. Ray, Clark, Michael, J’onn, myself, and other scientific minded people will determine that Terry’s existence could severely impact the future. They’ll confiscate my suit, the ship, isolate Terry from polluting an already changing time line, and quite possibly make matters even worse. We were different men back then Wally, and I’m not willing to take the chance of this mission ending in failure, and God forbid someone from the Light discovers his existence. No, this has to be done subtly.”

“And what the hell are you going to do if this Justice League finds out?” the speedster inquired.

“By the time they do, it will be too late for them to do anything about it.” Wayne assured. “If all goes as planned…..”

“And that’s a big if,” Wally interrupted to Bruce’s annoyance.

“If all goes as planned we’ll be targeting a specific moment in time where all these critical events first met at a crossroads. At that point Terry will begin to make minute alterations.”

“And when is that exactly?” Wally asked.

“The formation of your team, specifically the night you broke Superboy out of Cadmus”.

“What? This is somehow our fault?”

“No,” Bruce replied, “but it is roughly the time period when the Light first put their plan into motion. All the events surrounding that period eventually led to Savage’s mind control over us and our off-world absence. That’s what drew the Reach to Earth to begin with.”
Wally pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to ward off the beginnings of a migraine. He plopped down in the closest chair and closed his eyes. It was all so overwhelming. Wally thought after all he’d been through things couldn’t possibly get any more confusing, but he was wrong. Paradoxes, Butterfly effects, even the subtlest of changes that could alter the course of history. These men, the heroes had come up a stratagem to fix the past, one that had the most miniscule chances of succeeding and an even greater chance at making things worse.

However Wally knew he hadn’t lived this life, or watched helplessly as millions of innocent people died, friends and loved one giving their lives against a stacked deck. These were incredibly intelligent men and women, true heroes in every sense of the word. They weren’t delusional; they weren’t doing this to better their own lives. It was about generations both past and future. It was about making things right. He’d posed a similar question to himself earlier of what his future was going to be and had come up empty. Perhaps something like this had been what he’d been searching for all along.

“I want in,” he asserted, rising from his chair.

“No way Kid, we don’t want any of you anywhere near this in the event it goes tits up.” Ollie charged. “We know the risks. We’re all old men, if the League does find out, there’s not a hell of a lot left that they can do to us that father time hasn’t done already.”

“Well that’s tough shit Ollie. You and I both know I can’t be still; eventually they’re going to find me. I’ve got nowhere to go and all day to get there. Besides I’m the fastest man alive now, they’d have to catch me first.”

“He does have first-hand knowledge of what we’re facing and a familiarly with Bart’s ship.”

Bruce glanced around the room finding affirming faces. “Fine, but when this is finally about to go down, in the event were discovered I want you and Barbara as far away from this as possible. I need your word.”

“Wally nodded. “You’ve got it.”

Mr. Terrific looked over at Palmer. “We’ll now that that’s settled, why don’t you show us what you’ve got Ray?”

The former Atom nodded, walking back to the conference table and activating the virtual
blackboard to begin his dissertation. If his numbers were right it would soon be time to gather the remaining scientists and move on to the next phase.

As the group walked back, Wally took Bruce by the arm, pulling him aside for a moment. “So you’ve been having clandestine meetings under the rubble of our old base and no one even noticed?”

“That was the plan.”

“Dick said this place was completely leveled.”

Bruce shook his head no. “The water way, a few maintenance areas, a computer core and a back-up Zeta tube still survived the blast. And I’ve done a little excavating over the years, just in the event we needed some privacy.”

“Hide in plain sight, classic Dick Grayson.”

Wayne smiled. “Who do you think taught him?”

“You know if this plan of yours works, you’ll crash the time stream.”

Bruce nodded. “I’m counting on it.”
Chapter 7

22,236 miles above the Earth, the Watchtower floated peacefully in geostationary orbit with the planet. A half century earlier, as a direct result of their current base of operations being compromised, the Justice League covertly established the orbital base, carved from an asteroid and donated by the Green Lantern Corps, its existence kept secret from the general public, leaving their established headquarters, the Hall of Justice, nothing more than a tourist front.

A weary Man of Steel materialized on the Zeta platform and proceeded to make his way towards the monitor womb, it had been a long week. Once again Beijing had disrupted shipping and navigation around the Subi Reef, the man-made islands the Chinese government had constructed in the South China Sea in a blatant attempt at annexing long standing international boundaries, thus hampering the freedom of navigation act in international waters. Their government had been warned on several occasions that such acts would not be tolerated, and yet they still pressed on. Three days ago, those same uninhabited islands were obliterated, erased from the planet by the Justice League.

He hated that the League had been forced to such extremes, but peaceful cohabitation in that area was non-negotiable, and China's actions only fueled a flame that could not be allowed to burn. If Beijing wanted the proposed free elections, they'd have to prove they were ready. Their latest actions clearly proved they were not.

Mozart echoed throughout the white cathedral-esque rooms of the Watchtower as he entered into the satellite's monitoring center. Stationed in front of multiple displays sat the young blonde Atlantean, cycling through numerous live feeds being beamed directly to the facility. Monitor duty was not a task most Leaguers looked forward to, but Aquagirl was never one to complain. The solitude of the satellite was sometimes a much needed break from the chaos below.

"Mareena how is our world tonight?"

"Quiet," she smiled. "A 767 out of Glasgow suffered engine failure shortly after takeoff, but Warhawk was dispatched and assisted in a landing at Heathrow, no injuries were reported. Green Lantern is still off planet, Micron is aiding flood victims in Venezuela, and J'onn is monitoring protests at Cal - Berkeley by the Mankind Liberation Front, all without incident. So all things considered, pretty uneventful thankfully."

Then she added one more item. "Oh and an escape attempt at Arkham Asylum, but it was resolved without incident."

"Batman," Kal-El half smiled.

"No actually Terry…I mean Batman never showed."

Superman chuckled to himself at the slight increase in body temperature he sensed when Aquagirl spoke his name. She and Kai-Ro were so young; it would have been so beneficial to them both if another hero their age could have joined their ranks. Terry McGinnis made perfect sense, until his mentor was factored into the equation. Batman and Aquagirl had had formed a strong bond it the short time they were together, and she still had a great fondness for him, despite being on opposite sides of the League's direction, one Clark knew she still felt uneasy over despite her commitment to the team.

'We'll that's a bit odd, but I suppose even Batman deserves a night off." he shrugged. "Well your
relief is here, time to log off and enjoy your weekend. Any plans?"

"I was actually thinking about visiting my mother. Atlantis is very nice this time of year, and since
she and I haven't spoken in months, I thought it would be good to pay her a visit. And if things
don't go well, the whale migration to always amazing to watch."

"Well tell Mera I said hello."

"I...uh will," the Atlantean responded uncomfortably, reminding Superman that perhaps
mentioning his well wishes would not be the best idea. Like many current and former heroes, the
Queen of Atlantis did not hold the alien in high regard any longer, not only for his role in the death
of her husband, but the direction he had taken the League after which. It was his order that had sent
Aquaman to Central City that fateful day, and like many widowed families, Mera had never
forgiven him for it, or for asking their daughter to take Arthur's place."

"You know...on second thought," he said wearily.

Mareena smiled kindly. "I know."

Clark sighed, moving past the memories, sadness and guilt of his fallen friend. "Anyway I've got
this, go start your weekend."

"Just one second and the womb is yours," she replied, typing a few more commands into the master
computer. "I'm just following up on this odd reading that appeared approximately 26 hours ago.
The sensors still don't seem to know what to make of it."

"Let me see," Clark asked, moving next to the young women.

She typed in a few keystrokes, and the world map left the monitor just as holographic projectors
came to live, generating a topographic image of the northern hemisphere between them.

"Computer, playback image from time stamp 02:30."

The system complied, and the map focused in on the North American continent, seconds later
more specifically the north eastern tip of the United States. As the recording began to progress, a
small flash of light appeared beside a landmark no more than a few hundred yards off the coast.

"What is that?" Superman asked curiously, rewinding and playing back the sequence.

"The computer is reading it as a minute radiation surge, but on-board sensors are calling it a
tachyon pulse. It's weird," she answered.

"Where's it located?"

"A landmass on the outskirts of Rhode Island. When you plug the coordinates into the GPS, it
comes back as Benson Mountain."

Superman's brows furrowed at her discovery.

"What is it Kal?"

The Kryptonian adjusted the settings, and zoomed in on the land mass. It was no longer any kind
of mountain, barely a hill even, just acres and acres shattered rock and rubble. He continued staring
at the image, stroking his chin deep in thought.

"An internet search says it was an old Air Force facility, the Mt. Benson Bombing and Gunnery
"Range," Mareena read.

"I remember it as something else entirely," he countered.

"What?"

"Mt. Justice."

"Oh wow," she replied, mouth agape.

The legend of Mt. Justice was well known among the new Leaguers, its location not secret as much as private. Originally it was the covert base of operations during the early days of the Justice League; years later serving the same function for a young and talented group of protégés ready to escape the shadows of their mentors, until its destruction at the hands of one of their own. It was the beginning days of the Reach Invasion, and its destruction and aftermath one of the darkest periods of the League's history.

"According to government records, the drilling rights were sold to a private equity firm about three years ago. I guess there could be pockets of crude oil or methane somewhere down below," the Atlantean suggested. "Maybe the drilling equipment disturbed some of that debris, releasing small traces of radiation trapped under the rubble."

Clark's brows furrowed. "I don't remember reading anything like that in any of the initial geological surveys. It was a long time ago though. The explosive device that was used was of alien origin, it carried the same destructive power of a cobalt bomb with hardly any of the radiation fallout, but it still left that area very unstable. It seems like an odd area to mine."

"I agree. You'd think that all that devastation there wouldn't be any natural resources left to drill for."

"Who purchased it?" he asked

"All it shows is a bill of sale to a firm called Napier LLC."

"Napier?" Superman whispered to himself; that name like a splinter in his mind's eye. Something seemed familiar, but he just couldn't put his finger on it.

"Let's see what we can find out about this company."

xxx

A long brown timber rattler slid across the warm desert floor in search of its nightly meal as the Sierra Aguilada Mountains slumbered quietly under a cloudy southwestern sky. Tucked away at the base of that range stood a large abandoned structure, once home to some of the most advanced aircraft ever manufactured.

Ferris Air was now another company fallen victim to the post 2030 financial collapse, an unforeseen ripple effect of the worldwide terrorist attacks years earlier. When CEO Carol Ferris was unable to resurrect her company from the ashes, she pulled up stakes and closed shop, joining a long list of aerospace companies that had left empty facilities scattered across the western United States. Military air crafts were big business, but now that market had been cut significantly. There was no need to prepare for war when war wasn't allowed. The Justice League had seen to that.

Inside the thousand square foot hangar five scientists, some of the most brilliant men and women in their field had finally come together in the same room, after almost three years since the initial
idea had been first proposed. There had been several small clandestine meetings throughout the years, two or three scientists gathering by chance in the same science conference, circumstantial encounters that would not garner suspicion from up high, but tonight caution was thrown to the wind, it was finally time for the entire collective to convene. The simulations had been a success, and after comparing notes and triple checking each other's formulas, they were finally ready to begin phase three, that was until an unexpected visitor from the past had brought along news that none of the gathered scientists had remotely expected.

On the left side of the large conference table, Dr. Tina McGee could not stop staring at the speedster. It was the first time she'd laid eyes on him in person since his return, and the doctor was still trying to wrap her head around his presence here. When Ray first sent her the news, she initially thought it was a joke, one in very poor taste.

Even though it had been decades, she distinctly remembered the first day Barry Allen had brought the young red head to her lab. Wally had barely been out of the hospital a week since the explosion in his basement, and was already beginning to manifest his abilities. Tina had been a confidant and adviser to Barry for much of his career, but she wasn't exactly what you'd call and a people person, and she most definitely was not kid friendly.

Over the next few weeks and months, she battled constantly with the young speedster; to stay still for the numerous examinations, to quit clowning and take the tests seriously, to pay attention and focus, but it was like herding cats, super powered cats with the attention span of a flea. That was the day Tina decided that motherhood was not something she planned to add to her resume.

But throughout the following years, the two grew closer. When Wally's childlike curiosity of science became an obsession; that was when they finally made their connection. Years later she would find herself sitting in the crowds with the West and Allen's at Wally's graduation. Being a Stanford graduate herself, she was the first to write a letter of recommendation to the prestigious university on his behalf, but there was never any doubt of his acceptance. He was a wunderkind and everyone knew it.

The news of his death had been devastating, and for a woman that kept most everyone at bay, a little piece of her died that day as well. Now he was standing here in front of her, exactly the way she remembered him, and sadly with the news he brought, a part of her wished he wasn't.

"Are you certain Wally?" she asked

The speedster nodded grimly, taking out the small tachometer from his pocket, one of the few surviving pieces of technology from his uniform. "Barry and I both had these sensors built into our suits to monitor output and velocity. I was at almost three times the speed of sound, maybe even a tad faster by drafting off of Barry and Bart; they were probably twice that…at least."

"I remember being lapped by them, I remember the feedback that kept hitting me, watching my body fade away, and the next thing I know I'm slamming into some kind of invisible brick wall. It felt like it was covered in glue. I didn't decelerate; I didn't bounce. I just… stopped… dead … frozen, completely motionless. That was probably the edge of the time stream, and let me tell you, the gravity inside that thing was crushing. And that's it. That's the last thing I remember before I arrived here."

"But the quantum tunneling effect….." Mr. Terrific questioned.

"If his measurements are correct it won't be enough," Dr. Stone spoke dejectedly. "We've assumed entering through the Zeta transit system would bypass the need for breaking through the event horizon, but it seems that is no longer the case."
Ray rubbed at his eyes bleakly. "Theoretically the specs on Bart Allen's time ship indicate it can match and exceed the speed necessary, but not until the ship reaches the time stream and the tachyon emitters begin to forge a path. We expected severe gravitational fluxes, but not to this extent."

"If we can't punch through that barrier there's no telling how or where the ship might enter back into normal space time, and what does that force do to the pilot inside?" McGee added before turning to the speedster "Wally, how do you think you survived?"

"I really don't know Doc. Maybe my body's more equipped to handle gravity due to my abilities, maybe my physiology different, maybe it was just dumb luck."

Choi stepped in. "From what we've gathered from Wally's experience, it's not likely the ship could survive the initial impact, and if it did, it's doubtful it would have enough velocity to even reach the stream,"

Dr. Stone agreed. "Using the Zeta tube to open a hole in the space time continuum is only the first step, and even in doing so it appears there's no way the ship can reach the needed velocity in such a short window, let alone navigate inside it."

"Then we're screwed," Palmer replied in disgust, throwing his research to the floor. "It's pointless"

Wally remained silent as he looked around the table at the dejected faces. These were some of the smartest people he'd ever known, and it was unbelievable, bordering on sardonic, that a device as simple as a speedometer had trumped some of the most advanced theories and technologies ever imagined. This science was beyond him, he accepted that and didn't once doubt its validity, but the bottom line was he'd been there; he'd experienced the events inside that were just theories and variables to the gathered scientists and physicists. He'd been where they were trying to go, the only person he knew of that had reached that plane, and it was a road to nowhere.

"We can't just give up, maybe were looking at it wrong." Mr. Terrific interjected, trying to mask the fact he was as disheartened as they were. 'We need to think more outside the box."

"Michael, this whole project has been nothing but outside the box. You can turn and shape it anyway you like, but we're still going to come up with the same conclusions," the elder Atom sighed.

"I need some air," the disillusioned physicist added, walking out the hangar doors into the dry desert night, passing by Bruce and Terry as they arrived without even stopping.

"What's wrong?" Wayne asked.

"Nothing a Saturn Five rocket wouldn't fix," Choi replied as he passed by, heading out to calm his mentor.

Holt walked over and to join the duo. "We've discovered some… unexpected variables we hadn't accounted for. We're going to have to go back and reevaluate large segments of our initial data and calculations."

"How far back?"

Holt frowned. "Honestly…all the way to square one."

Over the course of the next few hours the collective explained to both Batmen what had transpired; the unforeseen dynamics of new gravitational data provided by Wally's experience inside the time
stream versus their current models and theories, and how with these new abstracts, the chances of the Zeta alone piercing the event horizon dropped to less than twelve percent, the likelihood of the survival of the passenger even less. That left the collective with the doleful reality that years of painstaking research and planning now suddenly meant nothing.

Choi argued, "Time travel is a reality, be it through quantum mechanics or Einstein-Rosen bridges, there still exists a technology inside Allen's ship that made it possible, we're just going to have to dig deeper into those unknown components. It's just going to take time...no pun intended."

Wayne looked around at the frustrated and disillusioned faces of the scientists. Four years ago it was a few friends and colleagues sitting around and reminiscing about the past, commiserating on what they could have done differently, the road not taken, Just a catch of a phrase, nothing more. Then an off-handed remark became an idea, and shortly after an idea became science fiction, two years later it was science fact. Roberts Frost's tale of a life changing decision became a plan to reset the future and correct the mistakes of the past, while saving millions of lives in the process, including those of the ones they loved.

It was a grandiose plan shrouded in a moral quandary, which seemed absurd at the time, but now with a real chance before them, and faced with a dystopian future governed by the Justice League, those moral issues were tossed aside. It had been their driving force. Save the future, save themselves. For a group of men and women with not many years left on this world, it was to become their legacy, their last selfless act. Now weary and exhausted eyes stared back at him. Begrudgingly he knew what had to be done.

"Doctors, it's time to walk away."

"Bruce…" Holt argued

"We've reached the end of the line Michael. It just wasn't meant to be. Tomorrow's not promised to any of us, we need to accept that and move forward. This is the world we live in; it's just not the one we hoped for."

Dr. Stone nodded sadly. "Perhaps he's right."

"We can't just give up. There are still other avenues out there to investigate," Mr. Terrific pleaded. "We're close. I know we are. We just need a little more time."

"That's the problem Michael," Palmer replied. "Time is something we don't have the luxury of anymore. Look at us. We're old. How much time do we have left? I've poured everything I have into this project. I don't give up lightly, but going back to the absolute beginning and starting over? I… just can't do that. Bruce is right; it's time to accept where we are and move on."

Choi looked to Palmer, unbelieving the words escaping his mentor. "I can't believe you're saying this. The proof," he gestured toward the speedster, "is standing right in front of us. We're scientists. We don't just give up because the numbers don't match, we work the problem. We consider the alternatives. We don't just walk away when it gets too hard."

"I agree," Tina added.

"Ryan, don't lecture me. This was a pipe dream to begin with, deep down we all knew it. This project gave us purpose, it gave us hope. Everyone here has lost someone important, someone special. We dreamed we could go back and change that, saving lives in the process. It was a noble idea, but not a realistic one. It's time we face facts."
"Years of research, and you're willing to just throw it all away." Dr. McGee said in disgust.

"No one's throwing anything away, you're welcome to continue on Tina, but I for one don't want to spend my few remaining years obsessing over something I can't hope to change. That's not how my son would have wanted me to live."

Mr. Terrific looked sternly at the old scientist, "You never truly believed in this project did you? This was all just a way to deal with grief of Victor's death."

"How dare lecture me about grief!"

The arguing among the five scientists continued on until Wayne had had enough, and a piercing whistle broke though the bickering.

"That's enough. I appreciate and admire everyone's dedication, and I know that each of you were one hundred percent committed, no one gave up. You all are some of the most brilliant persons I've ever known, but the science is just not on our side. We won't throw it all away; we'll save and protect the work you've done, hopeful that one day the next generation can find a way to put it to use, or perhaps by then there won't be a need to. Regardless the League watches my movements constantly, and it's time for me to stop putting you all at risk. It's time to move on."

The room grew deathly quiet at the assertion. Bruce had been the project's biggest proponent, a lighthouse in a tempest of doubt and despair. Seeing him preparing to walk away sent a finality that none had expected. Soon cooler heads prevailed, handshakes and hugs were handed out, the promises of staying in touch, and final farewells were given. A half hour later the gathered elderly scientists made their way to their vehicles, scattering back across the country, lamenting painfully how close they had come, leaving Terry, Bruce, and Wally alone in the cavernous structure.

Wally and Bruce remained silent as Terry walked away to the electrical room, shutting everything down and securing the facility. Days from now, all utilities would be shut off, and the dummy corporation leasing the facility would close the account and disappear.

Outside, the speedster walked the elderly man towards his car, occasional stealing glimpses of the constellations above. Bruce Wayne was an expert and hiding his emotions, but still the speedster thought he saw a flicker of regret across his grim features.

"You don't believe a word you said to them do you?"

Wayne never turned. "I told them what they needed to hear. Ray was correct; it did give them a sense of purpose. I could see it in their eyes. It gave them an outlet, a way to push past the pain and loss they'd suffered, for the hope of a brighter future. They were close, and sometimes that's has to be enough."

Bruce rubbed his weary eyes. "But in the end, the dead have to remain dead I suppose."

Terry pulled the hangar doors closed and joined them. "All powers been severed from the grid, and the computers and pads have been wiped clean. All the data left is on this thumb drive."

"Good, it's time to go." Wayne confirmed.

"So what now?" Wally asked troubled. Defeat was not something he was used to Bruce Wayne succumbing to, let alone accepting.

"Now you start thinking about your future. I'll give you any assistance you may need. You can go anywhere you like, do anything. We'll give you a new identity; a new home. Or you can take your
chances and alert the Justice League to your presence. It's your choice. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep our activities to yourself and off the record. A lot of people would suffer for my poor judgement. I prefer not to have that burden on my conscience."

"Of course," Wally agreed.

McGinnis eased the elderly man into the back seat to begin their journey to the private airstrip and then back to Gotham. He looked to the speedster. "You coming?"

"I don't think so." Wally lamented. "Ollie got me a room at this flea bag motel outside of Roswell. I think I'm just going to lay low tonight and head back to Star City in the morning. I'll come out your way in a few days if that's ok, I want to see Barbara one more time before I head off to… wherever."

"Suit yourself Kid," McGinnis smiled. "You know where we'll be."

Wally chuckled to himself. *Kid, What a smart ass.*

The speedster watched the taillights of the limo disappear over the horizon, and then he was alone, perhaps really alone for the first time. There was a small part of him that was actually relieved that this delusion was over.

Changing the past, altering the future

The temporal paradoxes alone were logistical nightmares. Scientifically speaking Terry actually had been a good choice to go back, but for all the wrong reasons. He was the only one that wouldn't exist back then, the only one that wouldn't risk running into a past version of himself, but still he would be a fish out of water, all alone. History books could only teach so much, and one misstep could make things worse. A million times worse.

And yet…if he'd succeeded…..

xxx

Two days later Wally sat on the veranda of Oliver Queen's guest house, watching the sunset over the Pacific. Dinah had made another amazing meal; packing him leftovers for days that she knew wouldn't survive the night. Being around them felt good, it felt right. The gloominess of Bruce Wayne could wear on a person, and disillusioned scientists who looked at you as the cause of their failure didn't help much either

Despite the years Ollie and Dinah were exactly the couple he remembered. Two sides of the same coin; a fun-loving, wisecracking, caring duo that could turn strangers into family within minutes. Being with them made him feel loved, safe. It's probably the same feeling a young troubled girl felt after being pulled off the streets and given a chance she didn't ask for. They were as much her parents as Paula and Lawrence ever were, and she was the daughter they had always wanted. Cinderella stories never pan out, but for the longest time this one did. The mere memory of that girl made his heart ache, but the new thoughts and ideas that ran rampant through his brain made it worse.

"Aw babe…" he sighed. "*What am I doing?*

He walked back in and sat down at the desk, reactivating the pad he'd been using and entering in a few more equations. He'd already done the math in his head, but seeing it now on screen made it somehow more real.
A flicker of an idea had flashed in his mind while inside that hangar in New Mexico listening to the gathered scientist argue. An incomplete thought that he struggled to put into words. It was far-fetched, almost unfeasible in the logistics, but something that might actually be the unknown variable everyone was searching for.

Him.

The moment Bruce Wayne walked away, Wally decided to let that idea walk with him, and yet it still haunted the speedster,

At twenty three, he still had his whole life ahead of him, but much like elder Batman had said days earlier, it wasn't the life he hoped for.

You can go anywhere you like, do anything. Those were Bruce's exact words. It was at that moment Wally decided he would take him up on that.

xxx

Terry McGinnis sat in the spacious study, looking over the junior college application he had filled out weeks earlier. Up until a few days ago, there really wasn't going to be much of a need for a full load of classes, he wouldn't even exist by the time the semester began. He'd promised his mother if she'd let him take a year off, that he'd work the entire time to earn money for college. That's what his dad would have wanted.

You're brilliant son, you just don't apply yourself. The world doesn't owe you a thing, you have to go out and earn it.

If Terry had heard that once, he heard it a thousand times. How he wished he'd taken that advice to heart sooner. His dad was right, he usually was. Terry hoped that wherever his father was that he was proud of him. Bruce Wayne might have been the reason he was a hero, but Warren McGinnis was the one who taught him to be a man. He missed his dad, he always would.

On his phone he had three unread messages from Dana. He hadn't seen her in days. She'd long accepted that the old man came first, and in all honesty Terry wouldn't be that surprised if she'd already put the pieces together and knew exactly who he was and what he was doing. She was sharp and it would account as to why she'd put up with him as for as long as she had. It reminded him a bit of the dynamic of Barbara and Jim Gordon all those years ago, neither accusing or denying her alter ego as Batgirl. Terry knew Dana wouldn't wait forever, and up until a few days ago he had no idea what he was going to tell her or how to say goodbye, thankfully now he didn't have to.

Maybe it was that feeling of guilt that kept the old man from marrying. It wasn't like he didn't have plenty of female suitors. Talia, Selina, Vicky, Diana, Barbara: the list could go on forever. Maybe the fear of hurting them, or never having to say goodbye was the reason for his bachelordom, that and being emotionally incapable of any kind of affection or intimacy Terry bemused, but he knew that wasn't true, Bruce Wayne was probably the most caring man he'd ever known.

Once he heard Wayne begin to snore, he knew it was time to start his night job. He silently made his way down the main staircase, stopping briefly at the kitchen to make a few sandwiches before heading to the library and the cave below. By the time he reached the bottom step, one of the sandwiches was already gone. By the time he suited up the next one most likely would be as well.

The cave was faintly lit as usual as he walked over to the main console and entered his code into the master computer, bringing the unit to life. Off to the right, the uniform vault hissed open and
heavy hydraulic doors slowly came to life and began to open.

Tonight would be short night. A few laps around the Narrows, Riverfront Center, and Blackgate Penitentiary, just to make his presence felt. He might even have Barbara activate the Bat signal for good measure. Nights like these Terry was usually itching for a fight, but this evening if things remained quiet and uneventful, he'd be perfectly content.

He had pulled on the top of his uniform when he first detected the sound of light breathing coming from the darkness behind him. By the time he pulled his sleeves down, his gloved hand had already activated the batarangs release mechanism and the Taser tips began to charge. Seconds later he let the weapons fly in the general direction of the source only to hear them clang loudly against the cold stone wall. The burst of wind and the lightning contrails that appeared before him were the dead giveaway.

"Why'd you volunteer?"

"God Damnit West! Are you trying to get yourself killed?" McGinnis cursed, deactivating the weapons systems of the Batsuit. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry. I um…just needed someone to talk to."

"And you chose me, I'm flattered," he said drolly, pulling up the bottom half off the uniform, loading his armaments into their designated pouches.

"Why'd you do it, volunteer I mean? You've got a good thing going here. Family, girlfriend, job…" he said gesturing towards the suit. "How do you give it all up for a plan that had no chance of succeeding?" How do you walk away from all this? From him?"

"Doesn't really matter anymore I guess." McGinnis replied, his voice masked with a trace of disappointment or relief, leaving the speedster unsure as to which.

"Yeah, but you were still willing to. Giving up any chance of a future for people, heroes you didn't even know. Why?"

Terry looked away, pondering the question. It was one he'd asked himself several times, The speedster was correct, he'd be giving up literally everything, making a sacrifice that had very little chance of succeeding. To an outsider, his answer wouldn't mean much, but to someone like Wally, someone whose entire existence in this time was a byproduct of a similar sacrifice, the answer would be clear.

"Because the old man would have."

"West I was a bad kid, I mean really bad. Even before my parents split I was running with a rough crowd doing stupid shit just for the rush, you know just trying to fit in. I wasn't a genius, I wasn't a jock, I wasn't anything. I was just angry and I didn't know why."

"I'm sure Barbara's already spilled all the heartbreaking details," he said sarcastically "Things were good for a while, I got a girlfriend that for some reason put up with me, found a solid group of friends, my grades even got better. Things were starting to look up, and then everything turned to shit. My dad gets murdered, I find out it was his boss who did it, I met the old man, we catch the scumbag, and the next thing I know I'm freaking Batman."

"Welcome to my world," Terry remembered Bruce's' words vividly.

"I felt like a fraud at first, but then I started to get used to the idea of helping people, saving people,
and I didn't want another seventeen year old kid to go through what I had. That's when I really started to see what it's like to be a hero. Bruce said he saw something in me, just like he did with Dick, Barbara, Jason, Tim. That's a pretty impressive list; I wanted to be on that list."

"And you were willing to give all that up?"

"Isn't that what being a hero is all about?" McGinnis asked sincerely.

"Look Wally, You've known Bruce longer than I have. He's always been wary of the League, of how powerful it was. It was all about checks and balances with him. Don't get me wrong, he wanted to be a member of it. They were his closest friends, they did great work together, but I think he was always worried about what it might become if they weren't careful. He felt it was his obligation to stay on to make sure it didn't."

Wally closed his eyes, rubbing his fingers deep into his temples. "I just don't get it; these are people I've looked up to my whole life. My uncle was a member; I wanted to be a member. How could things have turned so bad so fast?"

"Don't get me wrong West, they aren't the Injustice League or the Crime Syndicate. They're heroes, they're good people and I don't doubt for a second they'd give up everything if it meant saving lives. I just think that after a while of plugging leaks, they decided it was time to fix the plumbing, Death and loss will do that to you, I get that. And the sad truth is, the world probably is safer now. There's no wars, no tyrants, no criminal masterminds, but there's no freedom either."

"They found a way to fix all that, but the cost is just way too high. They keep criminals locked away without anything remotely resembling a trial, all in the guise of keeping people safe, but they do the same thing to heroes if they don't fall in line to their way of thinking. The world is scared of them, and they have every right to be. That's why the League initiated the Meta-Human Registration Act, it was supposed to calm everyone's fears, but all its done is intimidate or incarcerate people who half the time didn't ask for these powers or abilities in the first place. And guess what? Society is still just as scared of them as they ever were. That's why Bruce and Ollie call them the Justice Lords, it's like they're gods that rule on high. They've forgotten what they were supposed to be fighting for."

"Now meta-humans are afraid to come out in the open. They don't know if registering with the League keeps them safe, or makes them a target. And what about their families?. You don't think I worry about that anytime I step a little too far out of Gotham? The League only sees things in black and white, there are no shades of gray. I've heard Clark and the old man argue about it time and time again. He'll say if they'd been this strict, this diligent back in the day, none of this would have ever happened, then Bruce comes back with, if they'd been smarter and more careful they wouldn't have had to."

"Look the old man has made plenty of mistakes; he'd be the first to admit it, but this plan wasn't one of them. The idea of it scared the shit out of me, it still does. I don't want to leave my family or my friends, I sure as hell don't have some kind of death wish, but it's the risk you take when you put on the mask right? It's what heroes do, it's what you did isn't it?"

Wally nodded solemnly.

Terry sighed. "Look it doesn't' matter anymore, it ain't happening. I've made my peace with it, it'll take the others a lot longer, but eventually they'll come around. We just gotta play the cards were dealt, it sucks but it's true."

He sat down into the chair next to the speedster, staring at him curiously. "But something tells me
you didn't run all the way cross country to ask me that."

Wally paused, for a moment, struggling to say the words. "I can do it."

"Do what?" McGinnis asked confused.

"Go back. I can finish the plan?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I think I've figured out a way to do it. I need Bruce to get everyone back together."

"How?" Wayne asked from the darkness, startling the two young heroes, proving once he still had a few tricks up his sleeve.

"The Treadmill." Wally replied confidently, as their elder walked from the shadows to join them.

Bruce's eyes went wide. "The Treadmill," he repeated astonished

Wally nodded.

"Treadmill?" Terry asked in hopeless confusion.

xxx

A weary Barbara Gordon entered the cave shortly after one a.m. It had been a long night. A hostage situation outside the law office of Braford and Cummings in the heart of the financial district, some nut job associate having not made partner or something. It had taken a few hours, but eventually she'd talked him down, but it would have taken considerably less time if she'd had her back-up. She was not happy.

"Could have used your help tonight," she grumbled, "Isn't that why we keep that god damn spotlight on the roof? And why am I being summoned, I was the only one out working tonight and I'm tired. So unless you've got a hot bath and a bottle of Pinot hiding somewhere I'd appreciate….

Terry gestured his head towards the large monitor screen resting over the main computer console. On it displayed the images of five disheveled scientists in all manners of disarray. Evidently they'd been awoken in the middle of the night as well, but upon examination none look tired or worn, if anything Barbara would describe them as…excited? It took her a few moments to notice the red head standing next to the seated Wayne.

"The Treadmill," Palmer laughed at the simplicity. "It just might work."

"It will," Wally replied. "I've done the math. If the Zeta Tube can open a singularity, the Treadmill can help me reach the speed to pierce to pierce the event horizon. The tachyon emitters will do the rest; we won't even need the ship."

"How did you ever think of it Mr. West?" Dr. Stone asked curiously.

"It was the Saturn Five quip Dr. Choi said at the hangar. It was always about the velocity. You wouldn't need miles of runway to build up speed with the treadmill."

"How will you survive the stream?" Choi asked.

"Your tachyon emitters can plow the way. My physiology kept me alive, but the emitters will carve a path. Then all I'll have to worry about is breaking, and trust me that's not going to be easy."
"We have a plan in place for that, but first things first."

"We need to find the treadmill." Wally asserted.

"The original was inside the Flash Museum when Central City was destroyed," Bruce countered.

"The specs are probably still on the STAR Labs mainframe somewhere. Michael do you still have access?" Palmer asked.

"Yeah," Mr. Terrific replied, "I'll have to call in a few favors, but it shouldn't be too hard."

"I can produce most of the materials with the 3D printer at Mercury Labs, but I'll need help with the assembly and software." McGee added.

The scientists continued talking logistics, as Terry took Barbara by the arm and walked her away from the conversation. "What in the hell are they talking about? What's this treadmill they're talking about anyway?"

"Wow those are words I never thought I'd hear again," she said in amazement. "It was sometime in the early two thousands I think, Barry Allen, Dr. McGee and Wally designed and built a high velocity magnetic reinforced machine for monitoring their speed, rehabbing injuries, measuring increases or decreases in their velocity, things like that. Wally joked around and called it the Cosmic Treadmill and it stuck."

The speedster walked over to join the two. "I wanted to call it a TARDIS, but no one got the Dr. Who reference."

Terry and Barbara stared blankly at the speedster.

"Aw come on! Are you telling me no one knows who Dr. Who is anymore? God your time sucks." he groaned.

"Anyway," he sighed. "Barry and I just threw around the idea that if we could move fast enough that maybe the potential kinetic energy could kick open a door to another dimension. It would be too dangerous to try outside of a laboratory setting, and there weren't a whole lot of tracks long enough to allow us to get up to that kind of speed anyway, so voilà…the Cosmic Treadmill. There was no way I was ever going to be fast enough, but Barry might have. Once Bart appeared, it started to seem more of a reality than a fantasy. I guess they never got around to trying it."

"And you think this Treadmill thing is really going to work?" McGinnis asked. "What happens if you're not…you know…fast enough?"

"Bug on a windshield?" Barbara guessed.

"Thanks Babs," Wally frowned, "but yeah pretty much. The trick is I really don't have to be. The Zeta and tachyon emitters do half the work; all I have to do is maintain a constant speed."

"And what's that supposed to be?" Terry asked."

"Let's just say…faster than I've gone before, but I'm gonna try and stay positive."

"Now who's insane West?"

"Look you were right, Bruce would have done this if he could, and I know you would too, but this isn't my time, I don't belong here. There's no future for me here; hiding from the Justice League,
watching the few remaining people I care about growing old and dying before my eyes. I've seen enough death to last a lifetime. If there's even a chance I can fix all this, I'm willing to give it a shot. It's what being a hero is all about, your words."

Bruce waved them over to join the gathered scientists at the view screen.

A concerned Tina McGee speaks first. "Wally are you sure about this? Do you feel we've pressured you in some way? There's a lot of things that could still go wrong."

Wally nodded, trying to forget the fading memories of the torture of being trapped inside the event, but he was undeterred. He would be prepared this time; he now had an understanding of where he was going and the technology to help him get there. His mind was set.

"No Doc, I'm good I Promise. Like I told McGinnis, I don't belong here. If there's a chance to go back and fix all this and save millions of lives in the process. I've got to take it"

"You know you can't go back to your old life Wally, There will be a version of you already there living it. You'll have to alter the events covertly, no one can ever know your there. If you're discovered there's a strong chance you'll make things worse." Palmer asserted.

"I knew that before I volunteered Ray, but it's not about me, I know that, it's about them, all of them. I can live with that, but being stranded here, that's no future at all. Besides if this works out, maybe I can pull a Back to the Future thing, get rich betting on games I already know the winner of. Guys got to eat," he smiled.

"So what now?" Terry asked.

"We assign tasks, and reconvene in three weeks. Minimal contact during that time, and only if it's absolutely necessary. Remember always on a scrambled and secured channel. Once the pieces are in place I'll handle the transportation and shipping of all hardware to the facility. After that we'll have a very short window so we'll have to move fast. All hands on deck."

They all agreed, and moments later the re-exhilarated scientists all logged of, preparing for something they'd previously only dreamed about. It was really happening now; they were going to save the world.

"And what about me?" Wally asked

"You… genius," Terry chuckled, putting his arm on the speedster's shoulder, "you get to go to history class."

"Great," Wally laughed. "Not exactly my best subject,"

"It will be by the time Barbara and Bruce get done with you. Trust me."

Barbara yawned. "I'm going home, if I have to start playing schoolmarm, I'm going to need my sleep. I'll see you all in the morning. And Wally….I'm going to need Stanford West, not class clown high school West. Understand?"

Maybe it was the silver hair, or the piercing green eyes, but something in her tone and appearance reminded the speedster of his old English teacher at Keystone Elementary Mrs. Griffith. He hated Mrs. Griffith and was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. His old teacher wasn't afraid to smack his knuckles with rulers when his mind would wander. His new one carried a gun and a Taser, and Wally was pretty sure she wasn't afraid to use either of them. He took her warning in stride, assuring her he'd be on his best behavior.
"Let's get some sleep gentlemen," Wayne offered, "we have some very long days ahead. We're going to need it."

They all made their way to the staircase when Wally turned to older hero. "By the way, where exactly is this facility you're talking about?"

"Where it all started," Bruce said slyly.

xxx

Three days later, under a stormy Gotham sky, the vintage 2010 Mercedes Benz slowly pulled into the Gotham Memorial Cemetery, traversing the twisted path between the grave markers before parking at the crest of a lone hill, another visitor already present, paying his respects.

Bruce Wayne gingerly stepped out of the car, as Terry McGinnis made his way around the vehicle, opening the large black umbrella and escorting his boss to the top of the hill. The sky opened up and a torrential rain began to fall, but the tempest didn't faze Wayne in the slightest, nor the man he met next to the series of graves markers that rested together.

The names on the headstones were familiar to both, all with a long intertwined history both men would like to forget.

Grayson, Cain, Drake, Brown, Todd, Wayne, al Ghul

Ra's knelt down to his daughter's grave, wiping of the fall leaves and debris that covered the tombstone as Terry and Bruce stood respectfully over the site. This was not the first time these two men had met to mourn the dead and pay their respects, but if all went as planned, it would be the last.

"Detective"

"Ra's"

"I understand there's a new player in the field."

"Yes," Wayne confirmed.

"Another piece to the puzzle?" his adversary asked.

"The missing one I hope."

"May I ask who?" Ra's asked.

"It's better if you not know."

"Fine," al Ghul replied, trusting in the Dark Knight's wisdom. "Then I assume we are ready for the final pawns to be into put in place."

"Yes," Wayne confirmed, "but the timetable needs to be moved up."

"How soon?"

"Within the week. We don't have much time. I believe the League is starting to suspect."

"A leak?" his adversary asked.
"No, but I'm aware they've begun to examine my finances. We knew eventually this might happen. It won't take them long to discover the shell companies we created and trace them back to me. Regardless are you confident on your end?" Wayne inquired

"My operative inside will escort the package out and will be waiting at the rendezvous point."

Wayne nodded, staring down at the graves of the only family he'd ever known; his children, as well as the woman he could have loved in another life. "This may well be the last time we'll meet."

Ra's nodded mournfully. Despite their history and agendas, their battles and struggles, the two men cared and respected the other.

"Do not go gentle into that good night Detective."

Wayne smiled at the reference, continuing the poem. "Old age should burn and rave at the close of day."

"Rage - rage against the dying of the light," al Gul concluded.

"An odd bit of irony don't you think?" Wayne smirked, "the story of an old man who's nearing the end of his life as quoted by an immortal."

Ra's smiled, enjoying the last verbal chess match with the only man who was ever his equal. "I always imagined Thomas as referring to the Earth having grown senile and plummeting towards its death, despite the good intension of its new Gods and masters. That was the reason the League of Shadows were brought into existence, to restore balance. We are all that is left detective."

"Then we'll have to be enough." Wayne replied.

Both men stood reverently over the final resting places of their loved ones, imaging a day when these markers would cease to exist, a day when those wrongfully taken would be returned.

"To a brave new world." Ra's announced, extending his hand to the elderly man.

Bruce gripped it firmly. "A brave new world," he answered in kind.

The rain began to let up as Bruce began his journey back to the car. Halfway down the hill, he heard his name called.

"Detective, I regret all our wasted years pitted against one another, but if this is successful you do realize were bound to repeat history again."

"If this succeeds, I can live with that," Wayne smiled
Chapter 8

The Man of Steel stood solemnly at the large observation port of the Watchtower, staring down at the magnificent blue world rotating below. The sheer beauty of Earth could be overwhelming at times, seeing it without borders, without differences in race, color or creed. If people could see the world as he did, they would have a completely different perspective, they would understand the choices he’d made. Earth was a fragile flower growing in an endless desert, ready either to bloom or wither away. He’d already lost one world, one home; he wasn’t going to lose another.

In the reflection, he could see the weariness in his eyes, his slightly greying temples. The last months had worn on him. The Chinese Government in particular had continued to push back against the League, repeating their demands for sovereignty and a return to democracy. Superman respected and appreciated their desire, but the simple truth of the matter was they still weren’t ready; their continued aggression in the South China Sea and the countries that bordered them proved it all too well.

It had been close to a decade that the world was finally rid of war, terrorism, and poverty. Why would they want to give that up? Why would anyone want that kind of chaos back in their lives? Wasn’t Central City enough?

In that same reflection he could see his expressionless teammate standing behind him. Whereas Clark was beginning to feel the years, a little more grey here and there, a pound or so heavier, a stiffness in his bones from time to time, J’onn J’onzz looked exactly as he had the day they’d first met, not bad for a being almost two hundred years old.

But that’s not to say he hadn’t changed over the years. Much like his Martian home, he’d grown cold. The characteristics he found so appealing about this race he once cared for now a distant memory. He’d seen the worst humanity had to offer, and no longer felt the urge to emulate them anymore. He still pledged to protect and serve, much like a shepherd would his sheep, but no longer was it out of love, but obligation.

“Do you remember that first day when we finally moved into the Watchtower? Me, You, Diana, Hal, Barry…Bruce. We were so proud. I remember finally feeling like a team, no longer just an affiliation of heroes, but a true partnership; a league. Together nothing seemed impossible.”

“Simpler times,” the Martian replied stoically

“I miss those times.” Superman added.
J’onn remained silent. It was that word *friends* that had brought them to this specific juncture. It was the word that haunted Clark when he looked down at all they’d accomplished, realizing it could disappear in an instant.

Of all his teammates, Bruce Wayne had been both his closest friend and his greatest adversary. It was a unique relationship that at times could balance either way, but still brought the best out of both men. He missed that friendship, but it had now withered away like the proverbial flower he was trying to nurture and protect. It was gone the same way Central City was gone.

He sighed and turned to the Martian. “Make the call.”

xxx

The previous role of the Secretary General of the United Nations was equal parts diplomat and advocate, civil servant and CEO. It was a symbol of the U.N. and its ideals, tasked with standing for the interests of the underrepresented while balancing the demands of the Security Council with those of General Assembly. What differed now was there was no Security Council, there was only the Justice League, and the role Wonder Woman played within that framework was to mediate the wants and needs of the people when necessary versus the mandates laid out by League, all in the name of peace.

In theory it seemed like the perfect role for her, work with the countries of the world, teach them how to cohabitate with the others, ensure their safety from threats both foreign and domestic, and to finally learn to live in peace. Many times Diana found herself at odds with former friends and teammates when that peace was put at risk, and she found no satisfaction when they were forced to place those individuals into custody to protect the League’s overall mission; *peace in our time*. The same could not be said for the criminals they’d sentenced to life without possibility of parole; they deserved far worse. They were the infection, the League was the cure, and that contagion could spend the rest of their miserable days rotting away for all she cared.

Diana was reading through a proposal by the British parliament, formally requesting the empire finally be able to place a Queen back in power. It was largely ceremonial, she would have no actually authority, but many would consider it a first step towards allowing the country to once again self-rule, once they were finally deemed ready of course. Granting such a request would be an olive branch of sorts while at the same time improving the Leagues approval ratings, no that such numbers bothered them that much; freedom was a small price to pay for peace.
Outside Diana’s office, in the finely decorated alabaster lobby, Lauren Brady sorted through a mountain of voicemails; General Assembly members, government officials, world leaders, all hoping for a moment of the General’s time. It could be taxing at times, and deciding which calls to put through versus those who could wait could be quite challenging. Despite her pleasant demeanor, you did not want to get on Wonder Woman’s bad side.

The administrative assistant was finishing up her call-back log when the phone rang once again. She sighed, leaving one final slot open on the list if she deemed it urgent enough. In the most pleasant voice and she could muster, she answered the call.

“Good morning, Secretary General’s office, Lauren speaking, how can I help you?”

Moments later the intercom buzzed in Diana’s office

“Madam Secretary, I’m sorry to bother you, but I have a John Jones on the line. He was most insistent.”

Diana smiled. “It’s fine Lauren, go ahead and send it back.”

Moments later the Amazon picked the call up on the first ring. “Hello J’onn, for what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Diana, we need to talk.”

Beneath Wayne Manor, Wally sat at the rectangular conference table, a low hanging halogen light providing barely enough illumination in the otherwise dimly lit underground cave. His feet rested on its cold metallic surface as he scrolled through the documents, trying to memorize page after page of locations, events, instructions, and contingency plans; a map to fixing the future.

But for every page he finished, every mission he completed, every event he corrected, more and more doubts and fears crept in about the likelihood of actually being able to get the chance. Would he be fast enough, would the Zeta Tube be able to open the event horizon long enough, would the
tachyon emitters be able to plow the way. If he did successfully enter the time stream, how was he going to brake at the correct moment in time in order to escape?

All legitimate questions that truthfully had no definitive answers, but of all the worries racing through his mind, one particular one stood out most. What if he ended up the way he started?

Frozen, suffocating, motionless. Lost in time forever.

The speedster pinched the bridge of his nose, pressing gently into his eyes, trying to massage away his tension headache. In the distance the faint screeching of bats echoed through the cavern, as his finger slid continually upward on the tablet, with no end in sight.

After a few more minutes he’d had enough, placing the tablet down of the table and leaning back in the chair palming his eyes.

“Un-fucking believable,” he groaned, leaning back and closing his eyes, wondering what the hell he’d signed up for.

“I know, right?” Terry affirmed as he arrived from the kitchen, sitting down beside the speedster and handing him a cold Amstel Light. “Why don’t you take a break West.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, sitting up and taking a long swig. He’d earned it.

“How far have you gotten?”

“Just after the Reds attacked Mt. Justice. I tell you, this stuff is just unbelievable. I mean we uncovered a lot of it; the genetic and biochemical engineering, the nano-robotics, techno-sorcery, sleeper agents, etc…but then you read on and find out about the abductions, the assassinations, mind control, the Runaways, the alliances with not one but two freaking alien species. I mean Jesus Christ…” he sighed. “and……” Wally hesitated.

“And all of this happened right under the League’s nose, it’s ok to say it. The old man’s the first to
admit it. They missed a lot of stuff back then, and ultimately he’s responsibility for it. He was the detective, it all falls on him.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Wally objected.

“Of course it’s not. It’s not simple and it’s not fair either. It’s like blaming God for a hurricane or an earthquake, but you know Bruce, you know how he is. He drags around the ghosts of everyone he couldn’t save, everyone who’s ever died on his watch; just like his parents, just like Dick, Jason, Tim, and millions of others. The list is endless. It doesn’t matter if it’s his fault or not, he carries that burden, and he will till the day he dies.”

“They couldn’t have possibly known what they were up against, and even if they did it can’t all fall on one person’s shoulders. They were a team.”

“And now they don’t have a Batman. So you can see why the League’s so paranoid. If they couldn’t see all of this with Bruce on their side, how are they supposed to keep the people safe without him?”

Wally sighed. “God it would be so easy if I could just tell him.”

McGinnis tilted back his bottle back and finished it off. “But since you can’t risk changing the timeline any more than you have to, all you can do is make the changes where you can, and leave a big enough trail of bed crumbs for the League to follow, hoping they’ll figure some of it out on their own. Sounds easy enough on paper, not so much in reality.”

“I don’t envy you West. I’ve been training for this mission for over a year and a half and I still don’t feel like I have it all down. I don’t know how in the hell the old man expects you to learn it all in a week, but from what everyone says you’re some kind of genius. I hope they’re right.”

“Gee thanks,” Wally laughed, finishing off his own bottle and placing it on the table. He could really have used another drink, or seven, but there was something troubling him, a question that had been gnawing at him from the moment he first started skimming through the documents. Parts of his future were missing.
The speedster turned the tablet so that the text was facing the younger Batman. “There’s nothing listed in here after January 1st, 2012. Why is that?”

“Because if you haven’t made the appropriate changes before then, it will be too late,” Wayne announced stepping into the light. “Come with me, Terry if you’ll excuse us.”

The brunette nodded, gathering the two empty bottles and heading up towards the kitchen. He knew what was to be coming next.

“Have you finished the dossier yet?”

“Not yet,” Wally replied, “but I have a couple questions. According to your notes, the Light put these plans into motion less than a year after the League was even formed, but the only things you’ve highlighted in here are all events that took place after we started our team. Wouldn’t it make more sense for me to go back to the beginning?”

“The players were already in place by then, but not the technology. The Light felt they had every contingency in place to keep themselves hidden and the League distracted, but they never counted on you all. While we dealt with the obvious threats, your team kept uncovering layer after layer of their true plans, and when it became time for them to merge all of the stolen technologies together, they were too late in the game to turn back. The Light underestimated your team which ultimately lead to their initial defeat, but they still had pieces left to play, and now we’re going to take those pieces off the board. That why the 2011 - 2012 timeframe is so critical. Even though it would still take years to come to its fruition, that’s the timeframe when the Light initiated their endgame. These events are what led us to the world we now live, and by altering history, we’re going to make sure none of them ever take place.”

A few hundred years away they reached their destination, and Wally immediately recognized the structure; the uniforms vault. The two men entered into the large room, where hanging on one side rested several versions of the current Batsuit, on the other older versions of his Bruce’s’ previous uniforms throughout the years, but it was the ones tucked away in the corner that caused Wally’s heart to sink; a red and black costume, a dark emblem on the left breast, a gold letter R resting within.

Robin.

Wally’s lips pursed thinking of Dick Grayson; his youthful exuberance, his joyful cackle, his
humor, how he could hold his own against any enemy, but most of all because he was his best
friend. The months before his death their relationship had become strained and toxic. Wally had
wanted a life outside the uniform, and had somehow convinced his girlfriend to do the same. They
were happy, and of all people, Artemis deserved a happily ever after. Their years together at
Stanford were the best times of his life. Then one day Dick Grayson came knocking on their door
and everything changed.

The two retired heroes had been completely unaware of what Dick and Kaldur had uncovered. The
second phase of the Light’s plan was now in motion, and with one of his best friends now in deep
cover, and the other barely keeping it concealed from their team, the strain had become
unbearable. Dick had to reach out to the only two people he could trust, and when Artemis walked
on to that sub, things were never the same.

At the Summit, with the Light finally defeated, they exchanged relieved glances, smiles so
reminiscent of the two teenagers that would constantly joke and prank the other. They were due a
long talk, a reconciliation, forgiveness, but when the Reach let loose a series of Magnetic Field
Disruptors scattered around the world, that chance faded away with just like the speedster’s last
moments in the Arctic.

“Back here,” Wayne directed, sliding the suits out of the way. A computer monitor with technical
schematics hung on the wall, labeling what utility belt and armaments went with what armor.

“Put you palm on it and leave it there.”

Wally cocked an eyebrow curiously, wondering where this was leading, finally reaching out, and
flattening his hand against the diagram. The image of the schematic slowly faded away, replaced
by a simple numeric keypad.

“The touch screen is thermal, not biometric. Leave you palm flat against it for ten seconds to
activate it.”

Wally looked at the keypad, turning to ask what he was supposed to do when Bruce spoke.

“91939. Then press the pound sign three times. This is an emergency bypass method in the event
of dismemberment or serious injury and it can only be used once.
The speedster shuddered at the thought, but went ahead and entered in the numbers. moments later the monitor began to rise, exposing an enclosure hidden behind it.

“Open it.”

The red head frowned, not appreciating the cloak and dagger. He reached forward, turning the handle and opened the small steel vault, stepping back in shock at his discovery.

The emerald jewel inside could have been any kind of gemstone or mineral, there were over fifty different substances that carried similar characteristics, but the glowing green hue was the dead giveaway; Kryptonite.

Despite it all, he still had to ask. “Is that….?”

“Yes. One of the few deposits left on the planet that the Justice League hasn’t disposed of. When you go back, this will be in the exact same place with the exact same safeguards.”

“But Dick always said you had it under strict lock and key, he said it would be easier to break into Fort Knox.”

“I did with the larger stone,” Bruce replied, “but I needed a back-up. One I could reach if time was of the essence.”

Wally had seen the substance before; he knew Robin carried one in his utility belt at all times, but he’d never been this close. Dick wouldn’t let him. It was one of the few rules that Dick refused to break, it wasn’t a toy, it was a weapon, only to be used in the direst of circumstances. Wally suddenly didn’t like where this was leading.

“Why are you showing me this?” the speedster asked.

“I need you to know where it is, how to access it.”
“Why?” he asked again angrily. “I’m not using this against Superman.”

“It’s not for him.”

That’s when he realized its true purpose. It wasn’t meant for the Man of Steel, it was for his clone.

“What am I supposed to...”

“You are going to drive that right through that thing’s heart.”

The speedster’s blood ran cold. “Now wait a minute. There’s nothing in that dossier that says anything about killing.”

“Yes there is, you just haven’t gotten there yet.” Wayne replied with deep timber.

“Bruce its murder.”

“Yes it is, for a creature that never should have been born in the first place. That thing murdered millions of innocent people; millions. It wasn’t like Connor; it didn’t have a conscience, a moral center. It was an animal, and it has to be put down. That’s not negotiable. Wally I’ve spent my entire life protecting the sanctity of life. I don’t take something like this easily or lightly, but there is no...other... way. If you don’t do it, if you won’t do it, then this entire mission is pointless. There are a dozen or so critical events that have to be altered, but this one, this is the flashpoint. If the clone doesn’t die, you’re sentencing all of those innocent people to death....again.”

Bruce let those words soak in. Heroes don’t kill. That was the most important lesson imparted into the young protégés. The moment you crossed that line, you became the villain. It was a temptation the Dark Knight knew better than most, one that if he had prescribed to long ago, then Jason Todd might have still been alive today.

In the fury of battle accidents happen, but if someone’s survival is at risk, there are times it can’t be helped. But to do it on purpose, premediated, that went against everything the speedster had ever been taught, against everything the lightning bolt insignia he once wore stood for.
Wally wouldn’t look at the elderly man, instead choosing to stare straight ahead at the meteorite’s hypnotic glow. His mind flashed to the burning wasteland of Central City; his family, his friends, teammates. Artemis. The chances of success of this mission were so low to begin with, and if by some miracle he survived the temporal vortex and made it back, millions would still die because of his inactions, because of a misplaced code of conduct. He saw the pain in Bruce’s eyes when he gave the order, and sadly Wally knew he was right.

“All right, so how do I go about it? For starters how do I get the Kryptonite out of the cave? Why not just give me that piece to take back.”

“Because we have no way of knowing if it will survive the trip.”

“You mean if I will.” Wally smirked.

“Yes,” Bruce answered soberly, “and chances are if this plan is going to work, I’m going to need it. Besides getting it out the cave won’t be your biggest problem, it’s getting you in we have to worry about,” he smirked.

Suddenly Wally’s headache got a whole lot worse.

xxx

Onboard the satellite, Wonder Woman sat silently at the conference table as the Martian finished his presentation, leaving the images frozen on the monitor, hoping Diana could visualize the same pattern they had.

To her side the Kryptonian sat silently, waiting patiently for her reaction, like some vulture awaiting its turn at the carcass. His apathetic demeanor agitated her, but not as much as what they were proposing.

“Over the last two and a half years, in each of the locations you see highlighted on the screen before you, Watchtower sensors have detected small but prolonged bursts of electromagnetic radiation. Not that uncommon in of itself considering that this particular form of radiation can be naturally occurring. Watchtower EMF sensors routinely detect and record events like these, but unless the levels reach a certain frequency or spectrum, they are largely ignored and logged away. Going back and researching these events I discovered a troubling pattern. Each event, stretched out across the continental United States, grew not only in size but signal strength from one occurrence
to the next, but still just slightly under the threshold that would trigger an alert in our systems, as if someone knew just how far to push the envelope.”

The Manhunter entered a series of new commands into the computer and the map before them faded away, replaced by a series of stock photo images. “Each of these events has occurred in and around large scale manufacturing facilities, at the time recently purchased through a series of shell and holding companies, and sold off just as quickly.”

Diana sighed. “Gentlemen, this is not exactly what I would consider a pressing matter. I have a UN briefing in an hour that I need to prepare for. If you have a point, I’d suggest you make it.”

Clark stood from the table making his way towards the monitor as J’onn removed the images, replacing them with a topographical map of the eastern seaboard.

“Three days ago Aquagirl detected another radiation surge less than a mile off the coast of Rhode Island. Except this time the burst was more powerful, strong enough to trigger a Watchtower sensor alert. The readings indicated the surge was no longer just electromagnetic in nature; the sensors detected the presence of Tachyon particles.”

“Which are not naturally occurring,” the Martian added.

Clark could see Diana’s mind beginning to grasp the situation.

“Where? Where off the coast?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

Superman frowned. “Happy Harbor.”

“Each of these electromagnetic events was detected near facilities owned by the Napier LLC Holding company.”

“Napier?” she repeated curiously.
J’onn nodded.

“The mining rights to Mt. Justice were purchased from the Air Force a little over six months ago. Records indicate the title has been transferred three times and now belongs to Napier, but there’s no company profile, no website, not corporate headquarters. Evidently creating small shell companies to hide and move money to avoid taxation is quite common, and the FCC began cracking down on the practice years ago, the most well-known company sanctioned being Powers Technology. After that, their stock price crashed and the company was acquired by a rival conglomerate, one of the largest in the United States. Do you want to take a guess who owns that company?”

Diana could see where she was being steered towards.

*Napier, one of the pseudonyms used by his greatest enemy; the Joker.*

*Derek Powers, the man implicated in the death of Warren McGinnis.*

*One of the largest conglomerates in North America; Wayne Enterprises.*

Superman stood respectfully next to the Amazon, reminding her of a law she knew by heart, one she herself helped write. “The generation of tachyon particles is outlawed by the United Nation’s Cadmus Accords. They have no practical applications other than their ability to be weaponized. Being party to the creation of weapon of mass destruction is a capital offense.”

After minutes of consideration she finally she spoke. “We’ll I’ll admit its concerning.”

“It’s damning Diana,” Clark disputed.

“It’s circumstantial at best.” she countered.

“He’s preparing to move against us.”

Diana looked to the Martian, shaking her head in disbelief. “J’onn you’re being paranoid.”
“And you’re being naïve,” he argued coldly.

“My Gods J’onn, He’s one of us.”

“Was one of us,” Clark inserted. “He left by choice, with a warning.”

“We pushed him out,” she corrected. “All of us, when we stopped listening.”

“Diana look at where we are now, where we were back then. The world is safe for the first time in my lifetime. There is no more mutually assured destruction; there are no stockpiles of nuclear weapons waiting to be unleashed. There will never be another Central City. Yes we’ve had to make some hard choices, unpopular ones, but people can finally live in peace and criminals live in constant fear. Now suddenly one of our own is trying to undermine all that, and for what? A freedom that the world isn’t ready for, a vendetta for those we’ve had to incarcerate, or maybe it’s more personal. Either way we can’t allow it.”

“I don’t disagree with anything you’re saying. I’m just telling you I don’t think Bruce is preparing some kind of coup. The man is seventy years old for Hera’s sake; he’s not leading an uprising at his age, and who is left to join him if he was? Terry? or a collection of our elderly ex-teammates? Let’s be realistic. Is he secretive…yes. Does he agree with our methods…absolutely not, but he does believe in peace. I do now that.”

“And what of the radiation surges?” the Manhunter asked.

“I…I don’t know” she hesitated, “but I’ll find out…alone.”

“How?” the Martian questioned.

“I’ll ask…nicely,” she answered through gritted teeth. “He’s never lied to me before, but if it eases your mind J’onn, I’ll have my lasso with me for safe measure,” she smirked, clearly irritated with the Manhunter’s sudden distrust of her.
“Perhaps you two should spend more time focusing on this new French meta-human and less time worrying about the chances of some geriatric rebellion. I’ll take care of Bruce.”

“I hope your fondness for him isn’t blinding your judgement,” The Martian stated emotionlessly.

Clark immediately could sense the sudden spike in her body temperature, her body language, the flexing of her powerful fists. Despite their friendship, Superman could see this easily getting out of hand. He rose faster than a speeding bullet, immediately placing himself between the emotional Amazon and the emotionless Martian.

“Easy Diana, all he meant was….”

“I know what he meant,” she growled, pausing to regain her composure despite her desire to throttle the arrogant Martian. “I’ll speak with him and get to the bottom of this.”

She rose from the table and began to walk towards the Zeta Tube as Clark called out to her.

“And if you discover he’s been breaking the law?”

She stopped, never turning to face them. “Then he’ll be dealt with accordingly.”

As she activated the Zeta Tube and entered in the destination, she turned to the Martian. “And J’onn, the next time you question my allegiance or my judgment, you best be ready to have defend your argument and quite possible yourself, because Clark’s not always going to be around to have your back. Good day gentlemen.”

The Amazon disappeared in the blinding light of the transporter, leaving the two aliens alone on the promenade.

Clark frowned turning to the Martian “You shouldn’t have antagonized her.”
“I said what needed to be said. She is blinded by the man he used to be, not who he is now.”

“She loves him,” Clark replied simply. “This isn’t easy for her.”

“Yes, and that’s exactly what concerns me.”

The medical wing of Blackgate Penitentiary smelled of rotting flesh and despair, broken men sitting around in their cells waiting for their turn to die.

It didn’t seem that long ago that he was housed in a state of the art facility, manned by merciless guards, surrounded by some of the most dangerous men in the world. That was a prison, a real gladiator academy. Back then if he took a shit, he’d have ten ex-special forces guys escorting him to the bathroom. He’d broken more bones in that place than he’d had hot meals. The hole was his second home. Back then he was feared and respected, a dangerous man who lived up to his reputation.

Now he was lucky if he had one overweight incompetent guard escorting him back and forth to the infirmary. Now he was mocked and pitied, but what did he expect; he was dying. Sportsmaster, once one of the most feared and deadly assassins the world had ever known, taken down emphysema and prostate cancer. It was almost comical in its irony. He’d been transferred out Supermax and left to die, no longer a viable threat to society and the rules put into place by the mighty Justice League, but that was all about to change.

Lawrence Crock leaned back on his bunk, staring at the busty pinup girl hanging from the wall, cursing the medicine that that had not only taken away his sex drive, but the equipment to do anything about it. Above him, as usual, were the ramblings of a madman.

Professor David Clinton; anxiety disorder, schizophrenic, early stage Alzheimers. All symptoms directly tied to a work related illness. Traveling through time could be hell on the human psyche. He was once known as Chronos, not the most stable man in the world on a good day, now broken in pieces like his cellmate.

A psychopath and a psychotic; what a team.
Time is the non-spacial continuum in which events occur linearly usually in the direction of increased entropy. Be home by the stroke of midnight, but we all arrived at the stroke of two, didn’t we Enid?”

Crock had learned to tune out his batshit ramblings long ago, showing an amazing amount of patience and restraint when dealing with the annoying little nutjob. The guards started to actually believe that maybe the warden actually did know what he was doing when he placed the two men together six months ago.

Echoing down the hall, Crock recognized the squeaky wheels of the library cart making its way down the cell block. The books were shit, most likely donated by the public library once everything had gone digital, but without access to any video content of any kind, it was better than nothing.

The trustee stopped in front of Crock’s cell, the guard escorting him around engrossed by the play by play of the Gotham Knights game blaring through his ear piece, any distraction to make his nine to five go by faster.

Sportsmaster looked up at the man in the orange jumpsuit, the designation numbers displayed on his breast pocket fairly new. He was young, too young to be in a facility like this, definitely out of place, not that the keystone cops that ran this joke of a prison would even care about.

“Book?” he asked.

“Yeah yeah, I don’t suppose you got any girly mags in there do you?” Crock laughed.

The trustee stared emotionless at the assassin, handing him a worn leather bound book.

“The Bible? Really? Do I look like some fuckin’ guy who’d be interested in this kind of voodoo bullshit?”

“It’s not just any bible Mr. Crock. It’s the King James Version. I’d highly recommend the book of Exodus. Chapter Nine verse one; it’s one of my personal favorites.”
The guard walked up next to the trustee, laughing at his choice of material. “You’re wasting your time kid, there aint now saving this guy. He’s got a one way ticket waiting for him for the express elevator to Hell, don’t you Crock?”

Crusher smiled widely. “Yeah Washburn, and it might have room for one more, maybe I’ll take you with me. Give me the damn book kid.”

“Enjoy,” the trustee replied, moving the cart on down the line.

When the guard passed, Crock laid back down in the bunk, opening the book to the exact page the young man had recommended.

- 

Then the Lord said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, and tell him, Thus saith the Lord, God of the Hebrews, let my people go.

A piece of paper rested within the pages, folded perfectly to blend in. Crock looked up and down the hallway before unfolding it.

You’re salvation is at hand. The great one awaits you on the other side.

The elderly man smiled, tearing the note into pieces and pacing them into his mouth, standing up eye level while his cellmate continued his incoherent dissertation.

You shouldn’t travel into the past, roaming through the nuances as if they can change. You shouldn’t bookmark the pages you’ve already read, isn’t that right dear?

“Doc, snap out of it. We got shit to do.”

Chronos continued on and on until finally a large wrinkled hand smacked him across the face.

“Goodness gracious, the old man jumped. “ I was doing it again wasn’t I?”
“Yeah Doc, but don’t worry about it. It’s all good."

“Thank you Lawrence, that’s very understanding of you.

“Doc…it’s time”

The elderly professor’s eyes grew wide, his skin paling a bit.

“Do you understanding what I’m sayin’?” the assassin asked.

Chronos swallowed hard, nodding nervously. “Is it going to hurt?” he asked meekly.

Sportmaster smiled broadly, lacing his hands together and cracking his knuckles.

“Oh yeah.”

The sounds of loud crashing and the cheering inmates brought all the guards rushing towards Cell Block C.

Inside the rusted iron cell, Lawrence Crock was throwing around the elderly professor like a rag doll, knocking over books and shelves, tearing pictures and posters from the wall, bunk beds screeching across the cement floor to match the high pith squeal of his victim.

“He’s lost it,” Officer Sharp cursed, igniting his tazer and preparing his team to open the gate and enter. As the cell door slid open and the guards rushed in, that was the moment when all hell broke loose. Crusher Crock couldn’t be happier.

xxx

High above the skyscrapers of Metropolis, Superman flew across the city, his hearing and vision focused downward towards the congested honking of traffic; another fender bender on the
Metropolis Bridge causing havoc on the morning commute. Not exactly a job for Superman, but he had the time. Plus a little goodwill goes a long way; the League could definitely use it.

The incident between he, Diana and J’onn still troubled him, but not as much as her silence. The princess had promised to look into Bruce’s dealings, but so far showed no progress, Either she hadn’t discovered anything, or she wasn’t sharing, not as of yet anyway. Going around her would only further ignite an already combustible situation.

At first, didn’t want to believe J’onn’s findings either, but Bruce Wayne was not the man he once knew. He was shortsighted now, unpredictable, dangerous. As a courtesy the League had left Gotham to his purview, but now if he’d stepped out of that city to incite others, he’d have to be dealt with, former friendships be dammed.

He was beginning his decent into the city when the alarm on his communicator went off.

“This is Superman, go ahead,” he answered.

Dispensing pleasantries the Martian went straight to the point. “There’s been a series of bombings in Nepal, Bhutan, and India. Trucks loaded with explosives drove directly into several government buildings. It appears to be a coordinated attack.”

“Casualties?”

“At last count forty-six wounded, but no fatalities as of yet.”

“Well that’s a blessing.” Superman said somewhat relived.

“I’ve dispatched Warhawk and Green Lantern. I’d like for you and Diana to join them on the ground as soon as possible.”

“Could it be the Chinese?”
“No,” J’onn answered firmly. “According to state run television, a group alleging ties to the League of Shadows have claimed responsibility.”

“Al Guhl? You’re kidding me?” the Man of Steel replied in astonishment. “We haven’t heard anything from that man in decades. I assumed he was dead.”

“Their statement suggests otherwise. The proclamation states the attacks were the result of the government’s complacency with the League to subjugate its citizens, but Ra’s Al Guhl does not appear in the video. At this point there’s no way to know if he’s actually behind the attacks or other faction within the Shadows,” the Martian added.

“Either way he has to be dealt with, permanently. We should have done something about his organization a long ago,” Clark fumed.

“They’ve remained dormant for so long, there’s no way we could have known.”

“That’s not good enough J’onn. I want all League resources dedicated to finding him and any of his followers; whatever it takes. Is there anything else?”

“Oddly enough there is. There was a riot last night at Blackgate Penitentiary. Ten guards were injured and two inmates escaped.

“I assume the Gotham Police are conducting a manhunt for them right now?”

“They are, so far no leads, but Commissioner Gordon stated she would keep us updated.”

Superman hesitated for a moment, floating motionless above the city, unsure of how to ask or even if he should. He sighed, “Perhaps we should reach out to Batman. This is Bruce and Terry’s backyard after all, it could also deflect the fact that he’s currently being watched if we ask for his assistance.”

“I already did,” the Martian replied, “but he’s not answering my calls. According to police logs, the Batsignal was never even activated.”
“Barbara must feel like she has the situation under control.” Clark added.

“Perhaps, but it’s the escapees I find most concerning.”

“Who?”

“Lawrence Crock and David Clinton.”

The Man of Steel’s brow furrowed as he searched his mind trying to place the names. Finally he remembered. “Sportmaster and Chronos? That’s an odd partnership. They must be in their late seventies by now?”

“And both are in ill health. They were housed in the medical wing, placed together approximately six months ago.”

Something itched in the back of the Kryptonian’s mind. So many odd things happening recently, seemingly unrelated, but it was the timing troubled him most. Perhaps he was becoming as paranoid as his former friend.

The Martian spoke up again. “I’m receiving a message from Diana. She is on the phone with the Indian Prime Minster, but will be on-site shortly.”

“Understood. I’m on my way. I’ll contact you once I’m on scene.”

“I’ll stay aboard to coordinate the relief efforts.

“Good,” he replied, pausing for a moment before bursting into supersonic speed across the Atlantic.
“J’onn, I want you to keep Micron off this mission.”

“As you wish. May I ask why?”

Superman sighed. “I ….I want him assigned to shadow Bruce. Anything he discovers even remotely out of the ordinary I want to be notified.”

“Understood, I’ll contact him immediately.”

“And J’onn, keep this between the three of us for now.”

xxx

“So that’s it huh? Wally asked, studying the object in front of him curiously.

Dr. Stone nodded. “Not what you were expecting?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was imagining something… bigger.”

Silas opened the glass door, pulling out the silver armor and handing it to the speedster.

“Wow, it’s lighter than it looks.”
“It’s similar to the Kevlar bi-weave most of you wore back in the day. This is a high-entropy alloy. Tri-weaved fibers, extremely high specific strength and stiffness-to-weight ratio, composed of carbon, magnesium and ceramic nanoparticles, dipped in the melted down alloy of Bart Allen’s time ship.

The speedster nodded his head, barely following what Stone was trying to explain. Any other time Wally would have loved to get down to the basics; the different compounds, the bonding process, the stabilization of the nanoparticles in molten metals, but right now he just needed to know it worked.

“Think of it as a small spacecraft. It’s designed to protect you while inside the time stream just like it would during space travel. The science is all the same. This metal made it through Bart’s journey without a scratch on it. The armor should do the exact same thing for you…in theory.”

“In theory,” Wally chuckled.

Standing on the other side of the speedster, Ray Palmer chimed in. “Despite its’ weight, it’s heavily armored, while still giving you maximum flexibility to achieve and maintain the proper speed.”

Wally could see what he meant. Between the light armor plating, there were open areas at the flex points of his body: knees, hips, elbows, and shoulders. Areas that must remain free to allow him the full range of movement he needed. While the silver armor shimmered in the dimly lit cave lightning, the helmet when looking at it in a certain angle, almost resembled Barry Allen’s mask and cowl.

Choi walked up beside them, carrying a thick chest piece, bringing it up to Wally’s torso to make sure the measurements were correct. “This is the power module. It’s a calcium/lithium hybrid. It should provide the time suit all the juice you’ll need. It can last for weeks if need be. Hopefully your trip won’t take that long.”


Tina walked over with a cylindrical object in her hand, attaching it to the chest piece. When she stepped away, Wally looked down at the object and smiled proudly. A familiar lightning bolt
rested directly in the center.

“Who says you can’t put a little style into it?” she grinned.

Stone reached over and tapped on the chest piece. “This is the tachyon emitter. This is the key component Wally. It’s what will plow the way for you against the stream. The device will supercharge everything in your path briefly, allowing you to pass through it unencumbered; your velocity will do the rest. When it comes time to slow down, the emitter will have to fire precise bursts of anti-particles in a very specific series. It’s a complex formula, and if it’s not programmed precisely to the decimal point, you could overshoot your target by years, decades even.”

“O…K…” Wally hesitated. “So which one of you guys is the Tachyon expert?”

Wally began to notice their bodies tense. “We have someone coming in to do just that.”

Before Wally could reply, Bruce’s voice echoed. “He’s here.”

The gathered scientist turned to see the frail professor standing nervously at the center of the cave, but it was the man beside him thought that caught Wally’s attention, and ire. Even through the ravages of time, the speedster would know those features anywhere. A second later his skin began to spark.

“West don’t!” Terry screamed being the first to react but it was pointless as a lightning bolt shot across the cave, the speedster grabbing the assassin by the throat and slamming him into the jagged cave wall, smashing his skull against the stone embankment. Crock slid helplessly to his ground, grasping the back of his head in pain.

This was the man who’d spent a lifetime tormenting the only daughter who’d cared enough to stay with him once his wife was imprisoned. This was the man who caused Artemis to wake up screaming at night covered in a cold sweat, the man who kept the archer constantly looking over
her shoulder. This was the man that made Artemis fear everything she had the speedster had built could all come crumbling down around them. He’d made her life hell, and now several decades later the speedster was about to return the favor.

“You son of a bitch,” Wally hissed.

“Good to see you too kid,” he grimaced, though broken gasps.

Before Wally could strike again, Terry, Oliver and Choi, grabbed the speedster, wrapping their arms around him and pulling him away.

“Get off!” Wally demanded, but the three men held him tightly until his adrenaline rush waned.

“Still the same hothead huh?” Crock chuckled, pulling his hand from the back of his head coated in blood. He’d been through worse.

“West calm down,” Terry yelled, grabbing the red head by the shoulders. “He’s the one that sprung Chronos, he’s on our side.”

“You are fucking kidding me.” Wally spit in disgust, turning to look at the broken down assassin. “He’s part of the Light, you know the guys that started all this shit.”

“His affiliation with the Light ended decades ago,” Wayne confirmed. “He was one of the few that turned against his former partners once Superboy Prime had been released. He single handedly stopped over a dozen of the clone’s co-conspirators before law enforcement caught up with him.”

“He’s no hero; he did it so save his own ass.”

“We all can’t be saints’ kid.”

Wally turned to Palmer and Stone, pointing at the bewildered professor shaking like a leaf. “And he’s your expert?”
“No one’s logged more time in the time stream than him,” Wayne declared.

“Why not send his ass back then. Let him do all your damn dirty work!” he growled at the gathered.

Chronos shrugged his shoulders, oblivious to all the drama concerning him, picking up a loose stone from the cave floor and examining it.

“You know, yesterday I was thinking about the fact that I only have a week to go, but the math doesn’t add up. Isn’t it odd that nostalgia isn’t what it used to be, because there’s no present like the future, isn’t that right dear?”

“That’s why,” Oliver frowned. “Absolute batshit fucking crazy these days.”

“He’s your expert that’s going to make sure the suit stops in the right time period?” Wally laughed bitterly.

“He has his lucid moments. We’ll get what we need out of him. Don’t worry.”

“Worry? Worry?! Why would I worry? All you’ve done is put my life…no scratch that… you’ve put the fate of this entire mission in the hands of some Arkham reject and a guy who partnered up with the guys that put you all here in the first place.”

Wally threw his hands up and walked to the staircase towards the mansion proper, before turning and pointing directly at Crock.

“If any part of this mission hinges on that piece of shit, then were all screwed.”

xxx

In the kitchen the red head stormed over to the refrigerator, nearly ripping the doors of the hinges, grabbing two beers and popping off the caps. The speedster wasn’t much of a drinker, and knew
good and well that it would take at least a keg or more before he’d even be able to feel the effects, but right now seemed as good a time to try. It was all he could do not to send the bottles flying against the wall.

Moments later, Dinah Lance made her way up to the kitchen to check on him, wincing slightly from the climb. While still in great shape for someone her age, years of martial arts and crime fighting had taken its toll.

“Did you know?” Wally fumed.

After a few moments pause she answered. “Not until a few days ago. Bruce has kept several aspects of this operation compartmentalized for security reasons.”

“He should have told me,” turning angrily to the silver haired woman. “You should have told me.”

“What good would it have done?”

He pursed his lips, shaking his head. “Even after all these years he still does this shit. I don’t know why I expected anything different. It was things exactly like this that made Dick finally leave.”

“Are you ok?” she asked.

That was the straw that broke. “No Dinah! I’m not ok. I’m fucking pissed. You know what that miserable piece of shit did to her, the things he made her do. He made her life miserable! And now one of the League’s mortal enemies, one of the god damn partners of the Light suddenly gets a pass? Who’s next Ra’s Al Guhl himself?” he laughed bitterly, turning to Canary only to see face grow tense.

“Oh come on. You are fucking kidding?” the speedster replied mouth agape

“Wally I’m not up here to defend either of them. Bruce has had to make some hard choices. There’s not many of us left, on either side. I don’t condone in any form or fashion what he’s done or who he’s affiliated himself with, but at this point, to have any chance at success, we don’t have much choice.”
“Jesus Dinah, he tried to kill her.”

“And he saved her life on Manta’s sub and saved her mission as well?”

“And that’s supposed to make it right?”

“No it’ll never make it right,” she affirmed. “I don’t like him here, I don’t trust him, and if there were any other options he’d still be rotting in a cell somewhere, but the bottom line is he risked his life to get Chronos to us safely. He could have run. He could have climbed in some hole and disappeared, but instead he came here. Ra’s got him here. Everyone’s lost someone, those two men are no different, but this is their world too, and as much as I hate it, we need them. If you want to walk away, now’s the time. No one’s forcing you to do this, and if you decide you need to go, everyone will understand.”

Wally looked at to the ground and chuckled, before looking up at Dinah with a wry smile. “No they won’t.”

She returned the grin “No they won’t.”

Dinah walked over and took the speedster’s hands. They felt frail, tired, and Wally could almost feel a slight tremor to them. When he looked at her again, he no longer saw the vibrant warrior that repeatedly beat him to a pulp so no one else could, or the woman who continually sat him down and forced him to talk about his feelings so they wouldn’t consume him, instead he saw an old woman prepared to give everything she had left to make yesterday a better tomorrow, even if it meant her own life. That truth hit hard.

If he were to succeed, if he could actually make it back to change the events that lead them here, everyone down in that cave, everyone on this entire planet would cease to exist. They were facing the same fear, making the same sacrifices he was. And if failed, those left behind would be hunted down, punished…or worse.”

“Wally they’re not good men, either of them. They never will be, but they’ve both lost daughters,
people they cared about even if they treated them terribly. To them this isn’t some kind of redemption, its justice.”

“It’s revenge,” he added.

“Call it what you want, but in this case I think the ends justifies the means.”

Wally nodded, reaching his arms around her and squeezing gently “Still counseling me after all these years huh?”

“One of the first ones you ever actually shared anything of substance with me, and I didn’t even need a couch,” she smiled.

“All right, let’s head back down, but on one condition. You better tell the others to keep Crock the hell away from me. I’m not afraid to whip an old man’s ass.”

She laughed. “Neither am I, just ask Ollie.”

xxx

Downstairs in the cave Batman continued with his deliberation, catching Canary’s eyes and acknowledging her slight nod. Wally walked up behind the group, keeping his distance, but listening to Bruce’s plan.

“Over the next few days the final components will be delivered to the Mt. Justice worksite. One of my companies has a team studying ocean dissolved gasses in that area for potential drilling sites; they will bring the payload on shore. Ryan and Ray will be responsible for getting it to the cave. Silas and Michael will take Chronos to a secured facility upstate to recover and map out his temporal theories, Crock you will be responsible for keeping him focused and cooperative. And Oliver… you’ll be responsible for Crock.”
“Wonderful,” the archer rolled his eyes.

“Back at ya Arrow,” Sportmaster replied with gravelly voice.

Bruce concluded, “Gentlemen, Dinah, Dr. McGee, I can’t stress to you enough how critical the next seventy two hours will be. Assume you’re being watched; assume your phones and computers are tapped. Only make contact through secured channels and only if it’s absolutely necessary. Remember it’s not a matter of if were discovered, it’s when. Once the Zeta Tube is activated, Watchower sensors will be triggered and we can count on their incursion shortly after.”

“And how the hell are a bunch of old men supposed to fight off the whole god damn Justice League?” Crock argued.

“Countermeasures have been put into place. They won’t last long, but they should provide us with the time we need. In the meantime, I’ve scheduled several high profiles meetings at Wayne Towers and Terry will be patrolling Gotham in plain sight, keeping us directly on their radar. That should allow the rest of you to remain safe and unnoticed. We’ll reconvene in Rhode Island in three days.”

As the group dispersed, Wally walked up next to Bruce. “I guess I’m just supposed to stay down here, study the mission dossiers and law low.”

“Exactly,” Wayne replied. “Just relax and try to get some rest. You’re going to need it.”

xxx

Two days later Bruce Wayne sat alone in the darkness of the Batcave, listening to the babbling brook that flowed down the east wall descending into the reaches under the property. It was a rare moment of tranquility, one he wished he’d taken advantage of long ago. If things went according to plan, this might very well be the last time he sat in that chair, listening to those sounds. He’d made his peace with it long ago, ready to say goodbye to this place, this life, if it meant righting an unimaginable wrong.

At this exact moment, Terry McGinnis would be making a very public showing of the Batman on patrol, making the Dark Knight’s presence felt by all, comforting some, placing fear in others. Gotham as whole still called Batman their hero, an icon that stood against the perceived tyranny of the Justice League. He wasn’t one of those heroes the ruled from on high, he was one of them, he
was Gotham.

In ninety minutes, Ra’s Al Gul would detonate two now-uninhabited apartment complexes near the Warf. Barbara Gordon would ignite the Batsignal, and the Dark Knight would approach, his ebony suit cutting a swath through the neon city lights, rushing into the flames and looking for residents in need of rescue. Fire and Police would be called to the scene, and in the panic, smoke and fire, would quietly exit the other side into the camouflaged Batmobile and then back to the mansion for her one last journey; back to where it all began.

Bruce closed his eyes, listening to the quiet screeching of bats in the distance, wondering what his new tomorrow might bring, when his phone went off. He tapped at his earlobe and a holographic caller ID floated a few feet away, displaying a name and a face. He’d been expecting it.

“Hello?” he answered

“Bruce its Diana.”

“A little late for a social call isn’t Princess?” he chuckled.

“We need to talk.”

“I’m all ears.”

“In person.” she said shortly.

“All right, I can pencil you in on Thursday I suppose.”


“Ok,” he replied curiously. “Why don’t we make it earlier? 9:00 Wayne Tower, I’ll have Jacques prepare those Strawberry Mint Omelets you liked so much.”
“Fine,” she replied curtly.

“Can I ask what this is about?”

“I think you and I both know don’t we Bruce.”

“I guess it depends on what we’re talking about,” he replied vaguely.

“Bruce…” she asked hesitantly, before breaking off into silence.

“What is it Diana?”

A few more moments of silence followed before she abruptly ended the conversation. “I’ll see you in the morning,”

“I’ll be early,” he answered.

“So will I,” she replied and promptly ended the call.

Bruce took the earpiece from his head, laying it down gently on the tale before him, knowing full well he’d never make that appointment. Sadly he wished he could see her one last time, but hopefully he would one day again…somewhere.

xxx

Wally lay wide awake in Dick Grayson’s childhood bed, tossing an autographed Gotham Knights baseball into the air and catching it in his best friend’s old glove. The speedster wasn’t much of a baseball fan, always finding the speed of the game much to slow for his taste, but that didn’t mean he didn’t enjoy it. He appreciated the science behind it; the geometry, the statistics, but most of all
he loved the hot dogs they served at the ballpark; slow cooked all day, loaded with every condiment known to man, and the ones at the Knights’ games were some of the best in his humble opinion. Dick would drag him to a game, bypassing Bruce’s box seats in favor of the stands in the outfield. Dick liked to just feel normal sometimes, and there was no better place to do it then enjoying America’s pastime at the ballpark.

The speedster had no idea who the player was who’d signed the ball, but the act of throwing it up towards the vaulted ceiling, watching for that key moment when gravity made its claim, and then catching it right in the soft spot of the worn leather felt oddly comforting.

It was storming again, the rolls of thunder echoing throughout this hills and valleys that surrounded the estate. Through the panes of glass, burst of light broke through, casting the room in its unearthly glow.

The room still had that old musty smell he remembered teasing Robin about, but aside from the large Victorian bedroom set, Dick’s room was sparse, only a few picture frames remaining behind. His parents, he and Bruce, Barbara Gordon, and of course one of two young boys; a brunette and redhead enjoying their first Knight’s game together. Very apropos.

Wally felt surprisingly at peace. He’d accepted the risks, factored in the possible variables and knew the likely outcome. He’d powered his way through the seven stages of grief in record time, and was currently sitting at acceptance and hope. At this point he was ready to just get it over with.

This wasn't his world, and he didn’t want to live the rest of his life looking over his shoulder like Artemis had. Wally knew what he was about to do was for the millions who’d lost their lives, for the innocent people who’d been caught in a super powered crossfire they had no business being drawn into, but in a small part in the back of his mind a knew he did it for himself too, or a younger version of himself. It seemed oddly selfish and self-serving, but if it ended up being the byproduct of saving millions of lives, he could live with it.

Maybe that Wally would finally end up with the girl of his dreams. Maybe they would go away to college and live a normal life for once. Maybe she’d become an Olympian, he a physicist. Maybe they’d put on the yellow and green again, maybe they wouldn’t. Maybe they’d decide that retirement was one of the best decisions they’d ever made. Maybe he’d buy her a ring. Maybe they’d get married, have kids one day. Maybe Dick Grayson would be his best man, Zatanna Zatarra hers. The wedding party their teammates. Maybe he could give that Wally the happily ever after he himself never would.

Thinking back to those days brought up memories of his mentor. Barry was more than that, more than an uncle, he was his friend, one of the only ones who understood the joys and frustrations of living between the seconds. An odd thought gnawed at him when thinking of the scarlet speedster.
Wally wondered if Barry had lived, if he’d watched those he loved die and a world nearly tear itself apart, would he now be sitting aboard a satellite in space, or rotting away in a prison cell. Would he have joined the League’s crusade or fought against it. Would he support Wally’s decision or try to stop him. Part of him didn’t want to know the answer. It was at that moment when Wally heard the old man clearing his throat.

“It’s time.”

“Ok,” Wally replied sourly, rising from the bed.

“Did you get any sleep” Wayne asked.

“No not really.”

“Are you ready?

“As much as I’ll ever be I guess.”

Wally grabbed his bag, waiting for the old man to escort him from the room when Wayne turned and blocked his exit.

“I need to hear you say it.”

The speedster paused, looking away, knowing exactly what the older hero had to hear spoken aloud.

Wally sighed. “Get in, get out and stay out of history’s way. No contact with anyone. I know Bruce.”

“The temptation is going to be impossibly strong, to just reach out one time, to talk to him again, to hold her, but any unnecessary tampering with the timeline could have catastrophic effects.”
“I know. I knew it before I ever volunteered.”

“I’ve left you detailed instructions how to access my accounts, how to create a new identity for yourself. If you’re successful you can live a very comfortable life, just somewhere far away. It has to be this way. Wally this will be the hardest thing you’ve ever done, and I wish I could take this burden away from you. If there was any way we could change places, I would. I hope you know that.”

“I do Bruce, I do,” he replied, placing his hand on his elder shoulders. “I won’t let you down. I won’t let any of them down.”

“I know son. “

Bruce fought the temptation to mention the speedster’s best friend, the girl he loved, the mentor he worshipped, how they would be proud of him for what he was attempting, but saying those words aloud would only tear away at an un-healing wound, and the logical side of the elder Batman also painfully wondered if any of them actually would.

Suddenly the house began to rumble as the whine of powerful engines shook the foundation. A streak of lightning shot across the mansion’s grounds, briefly illuminating the cloaked Batmobile.

Bruce looked out the window. “He’s here. It’s time to go.”

xxx

Superman sat in the darkness of his quarters onboard the watchtower, a small holo-projection disc in his hand with an image hovering above it. In the stillness of his room he stared intently at the moment captured forever in time; a man and woman, a beautiful English garden, the warmth of friends and family, a wedding.

He still remembered that day vividly. Not a cape or cowl in sight as those gathered celebrated the union under the cloudless blue sky of a billionaire’s veranda. On that day and that day only, the Earth was left to fend for herself; this was their day to celebrate with those they loved. To the immediate left of the couple stood a man dressed in black, smiling happily, a best man. Bruce Wayne.
It was one of those rare times Bruce allowed the Batman to stay locked in the cave. It was a day when missions, and criminals, and crises were never to be discussed. Just for one day, one happy joyful day. Even Wayne himself couldn’t help but smile.

Bruce Wayne, his closest friend, his brother, his conscience; now as dead to him is the raven haired woman he’d sworn his heart to that spring day.

It’s impossible to quantitate loss, it’s too personal, but the same evil that had taken his wife, had also taken Bruce’s children as well. He’d felt the same anger, the same pain. He felt the helplessness, the burning vengeance. Now, after years and years of meaningless victories, the League had finally found a better way. Something that would ensure the safety of billions, one that would keep a small child from watching his parents brutally murdered in front of eyes. Freedom was a small price to pay. Why could Bruce not see that? Why would he ever want someone to go through the hell he had?

It had been a pointless argument, a moot point. The decisions had been made without him, and the world was now a better place because of it. He took no joy in what was about come. He wished there was another way. He wished he could go back to that veranda and kiss his wife again and have a drink with his friend. He wished there’d never been a Light, or a Reach, or a clone, or a hundred other monsters. He wished Bruce Wayne would just die peacefully in his sleep so Clark Kent could look back on him with fond memories of a happier time.

You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain. Those were Bruce’s words. Clark wondered when alone with his thoughts which side Bruce really considered himself on.

The small chime awoke him from his reverie as Clark looked up at the door, wondering how long the Martian had been standing there, wondering if he felt the same regret, wondering if the Martian felt anything at all anymore.

“Micron signaled. He's on the move. It’s time.”

Clark nodded, standing from his chair and placing the holo-disc back on the shelf, locking away another memory.
“Has everyone been notified?”

“Yes,” J’onn replied. “They are waiting at the rendezvous point.”

“And Diana?”

“Yes.”

The Man of Steel sighed. “Let’s get this over with.”

As the two men stepped into the blinding tunnel of the Zeta Tube, a priority alert was triggered inside the Monitor Womb. Automated responses were activated and on the holographic monitor, multiple images of the event materialized in mid-air.

A second bombing in Nepal, hostages taken in a Tibetan temple, and offer of negotiations; a distraction.

Thirty five minutes later a second alert was generated. A small radiation bloom, Northeastern United States, tachyon particles detected, but both warnings remained unanswered, the alert light blinking endlessly aboard an empty satellite 22,236 miles above the Earth, with no one left aboard to answer it.
Dust and rubble blew in all directions as the Batmobile’s turbines powered down and the craft landed softly on the far side of the island. It was a cold damp night, brought on by a strong arctic breeze coming in from the North Atlantic. A thick fog had rolled in, hiding the lights of Happy Harbor behind its curtain.

Wally stepped out of the craft onto the jagged surface and immediately lost his breath. He’d seen the satellite images before, the surveillance photos, but nothing could have prepared him for witnessing it up close and in person. The utter devastation of a place he once called home, wiped off the map just like Central City.

_The cave is-was just a place! Worth sacrificing if it helps us stop the invasion. Look I'm sorry you lost all your souvenirs!_

Those words still haunted the speedster. He could still hear Dick’s inflections, his weariness, his doubts. It was at that moment, sitting alone with him at the Hall of Justice that Wally realized just how out of control the situation had become, how deep they’d truly gotten, and how he may never see Artemis or Kaldur alive again.

Standing here now, the feeling of deja vu was overwhelming. Except this time he was the one getting on that submarine, possibly never seeing the light of day again.

The shoreline was completely covered in rubble, the once towering peaks now barely five stories tall of compressed and shifting rock. Even from this distance he could hear the movement, the crumbling and sliding sounds of stone against stone, as if at any moment what little was left of Mt. Justice could collapse in on itself.

In the distance the speedster could begin see just the faintest trace of a walking trail winding upward, wondering to himself how Bruce could ever hope to make it up such treacherous terrain, when suddenly the blast of a pulse rifle struck barely three feet in front of them. Shrapnel of rock and dust scattered in all directions, sending Terry and Wally ducking for cover behind the closest boulders. All the while Wayne stood motionless, looking out into the abyss.

“Bruce get down!” Terry demanded, pulling down his cowl, preparing to activate the mask’s infrared sensors to seek out their antagonist when Wayne yelled out into the darkness.

“Have you ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight?” his words echoing into the distance.

Terry and Wally stared at each other in confusion, trying to formulate some kind of plan when from behind a large boulder fifty yards away, a small raven haired girl popped her head up.

“Wayne is that you?”
“Stand down Helena, I’m here with friends.”

The two confused heroes stood up from their rocky enclosures, catching up with Wayne as he made his way up the path while the young teen scurried down the rubble to meet them halfway.

“You were supposed to ask for the password before you shot,” Wayne bemused.

“Yeah and you were supposed to be here an hour ago.”

“Touché,” the older man smirked, turning to his compatriots. “Gentleman this is our lookout for the evening.”

Terry frowned, angered at his boss for keeping this part of the plan private.

“You brought the kid into this? Come on Bruce,” he said disgusted.

“Screw you man,” she snarled back. “You’re lucky I didn’t blow your damn head off.”

“Calm down Helena. Are they here?”

“Yeah. Got here a couple of hours ago, the old skinny dude they brought with him is really jumpy. Where’d you dig him up anyway?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Wayne turned to the speedster. “This is Helena Bertinelli, Huntresses’ granddaughter.”

Wally hadn’t heard that name in ages. Once there we two; one a villain - retired, handicapped, reformed. The other a hero in the loosest sense of the word. Known for her hair trigger temper and deadly skill with a crossbow, balancing the fine line between justice and revenge.

He always found it odd that a hero would take up the moniker of a retired assassin, and even though the two women never met, Paula Crock found peace that that title was finally used for something good.
“Granddaughter. Wow,” the speedster replied softly.

“Who the hell’s this guy?” she demanded.

“None of your business pipsqueak. You just pay attention, and try not to shoot yourself in the foot ok?” McGinnis ordered.

“Whatever, I don’t take orders from you, and If you don’t get out of my face Bats, I might accidently shoot off something else.”

“Cute,” McGinnis sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Helena,” Bruce spoke, directing her attention back to him, “I need you to secure the tunnel behind us. If anyone lands on this island, sound the alarm and lay low. Do not engage. If we’re not back in three hours, take the Batmobile to Gotham, someone will be in contact with you after that.”

“Driving the Batmobile,” she grinned proudly. “Sweet.”

“Just down fall asleep ok little girl?” McGinnis groaned.

She extended her middle finger to Terry’s amusement, as he and Wally made their way up the mountain’s shattered ravines. Bruce stayed behind for moment, staring down at the tiny girl.

*So much like Barbara, so much like all of them.*

Another lost sheep that he’d shepherded, but too little too late. Little did this girl know that hours from now she may no longer exist, wiped away into oblivion. Bruce hoped if this mission succeeded, that perhaps another version of her would get the life she didn’t, the life that was stolen from her. It was moments like these, when he looked down at the eyes of the innocent, that doubts and fears would creep in and take the place of determination. He wasn’t God, what gave him the right to do this? To make this choice for the world. Often he’d look in the mirror at night and ask himself the same question. His journey was nearing an end, but for a girl like Helena, her life, for what is it was, was just beginning, and he was about to take it all away.
Wayne walked over to her, kneeling down painfully to eye level, every muscle, cartilage and bone screaming out to him. He took her tiny hands in his.

“Be careful Helena.”

“You too Wayne, I hope whatever it is you’re doing down there works out.”

“Me too. Remember what I said. Three hours. Not a minute longer.”

“I understand.”

From the rock face above them, Wally looked down at the two. It was odd seeing Wayne’s gentler side. The speedster knew he was a deeply compassionate man, but in all his years he’d never seen Bruce embrace Dick once, neither Jason, not till the very end.

Barry hugged him all the time, joked with him, laughed with him, was a soundboard for all the young speedster’s troubles. He felt bad for Dick and the other’s that they never had that, but there’s always moments that go on behind the scenes, maybe it was those times Dick kept private, at least Wally hoped so.

He turned to McGinnis “She's kind of young for something like this isn't she?” What is she seven, eight?”

Terry nodded. “You knew the grandma right? Not exactly one of the Leagues’ favorites to begin with. Well after the dust settled from the attacks, and the League laid their mandates down, she and her partner the Question refused to sign the accords. They’d been semi-retired already, but I guess they saw where all of this was heading before everyone else did. Question was supposedly an A-1 nutjob from what I hear, but Bruce said he had a nose for things like this. They continued doing things their way, crossed the League one to many times and ended up in prison, leaving a young daughter behind.”

“How long did they get?” Wally asked.

Terry looked at him stone-faced. “Life West. When you go into one of their prisons, you never leave.”

“Oh...”

“Yeah,” Terry chuckled bitterly. “So anyway, years later their daughter Rose, raising a kid on her own, finally graduated law school and became an attorney, a pretty good one from what I hear.
Eventually she starts filing motion after motion to get her mom and dad released. Citing every constitutional violation she could think of; due process, trial by jury, right to counsel, you name it. Rose Bertinelli was the first person to take the League to court; it was all over the news. She was about to get the case fast tracked to the Supreme Court when the League suspended the constitution and disbanded the courts. Bruce warned that was just the beginning, and he was right.”

“When her mom got sick, Rose threw herself on the mercy of the League, begging for some kind of compassionate release, but it was all denied. So she got stupid, called in a bunch of favors from people who owed Huntress and Question, and tried to break them out. You can figure the rest.

“So with was no father to speak of, Helena back there, got sent off to foster care, which lasted all of about …three weeks and has been living on the streets ever sense. Grandma dies and facilities like Supermax don’t allow visitors, so she can’t see her mom either. It’s like she’s dead too. It’s royally messed up West”

“Helena won’t let anyone to take her in, doesn’t want or ask for help, and has friends just like her that watch out for each other, but Bruce and I still look out for the kid. He wants to make sure she doesn’t make the same mistakes her mom did, so he throws her some work from time to time to keep an eye on her. She’s a pain the ass, but a great shot. Probably would have been a damn good hero if someone had given her the chance, but after seeing what the League did to her family, she wants no part of them.”

“She kinda reminds me of Barbara.”

“That’s funny, that’s what the old man says too.”

Wayne finally made his way up to them and they continued the climb, following him along on the barely beaten path until finally the hit a dead end. Before Wally could ask, Bruce reached into his pocket, taking out a small device and activating it. Seconds later a sophisticated shroud of digital camouflage faded away, uncovering a freshly excavated set of dimly lit roughly cut stairs descending into the darkness.

On their way down Bruce reactivated the cloak, casting them all in shadows for their long march downward. The speedster estimated they’d traversed at least six stories below when they finally reached the bottom. Ahead a narrow hallway, fortified by steel and iron walls cut a path through the rocky carnage of bedrock and earth. Wally placed his hands on the walls as they passed through, seeing once molten metal now infused in cold stone, shuddering at the thought of the raw power and scorching heat of the explosives that had leveled Mt. Justice. Explosives Kaldur had planted, that Artemis had detonated; the beginning of the end.
A hundred yards ahead the walkway dead ended with a heavy steel door now standing in their path. Bruce walked ahead, entering a code into the key pad and moments later the door slowly hissed open, and narrow hallways gave way to a large open cavern, at least fifty feet in height and three times as wide. Even surrounded by the decimation, something about this chamber felt oddly familiar to the speedster until he noticed the remnants of a once large holographic computer clinging to the ceiling; that was the dead giveaway. He was in the Mission Room of the cave.

Wrapped around the chamber, railed iron beams and transparent aluminum walls held back the boulders and rubble of Mt. Justice, while echoes of dripping water and shifting rock resonated in all directions. Computer terminals and sensors arrays lined the room, seamlessly incorporated into the ridged cave walls. On the far side of the cavern stood a series of consoles, holographic monitors, portable generators, laser emitters, a depowered Zeta Tube …and one treadmill; the most rudimentary piece of hardware in the room, and the key to it all.

“I’ve had an excavation crew in here working for the past three years,” Wayne spoke. “Until recently I wasn’t sure we’d ever need it,

He walked up beside the astonished speedster, pointing off in different directions. “The lower floors of the cave were completely destroyed, but back in its creation, Superman and Green Lantern fortified this base to survive the blast of a twenty megaton detonation. Of course back then we never considered the blast would come from inside the mountain, but each compartment was individually reinforced in the same way. The lower floors basically collapsed in on themselves, but by luck or chance, the Mission Room and Medbay survived relatively intact. On the far side of the room, the south passageway is sealed and completely flooded. Any areas past that, even if you could reach them, are unstable and could collapse at any moment.”

The rumbling of movement overhead caught the speedster’s attention, as he nervously glanced around the cavern.

Bruce attempted to calm his fears, “Despite the shifting sounds you hear, these two rooms are structurally sound, don’t worry.”

“Me? Worry? Please.” Wally chuckled dismissively. An avalanche right now was the least of his fears compared to what was coming up. He quickly changed the subject, trying not to think so much about it. “So how in the hell did you get all this in here?”
Ryan Choi walked up to the group and smiled. “Trade secret.”

The elder Batman interrupted. “Gentlemen time is of the essence now. Ray sitrep?”

Palmer cleared his throat. “Michael and I deciphered the tachyon calculations from what Chronos was able to provide. We went through it three times with him and the numbers never changed. Ryan’s been running simulations all day, and all indications are they’re good. Tina and Silas are down in the Medbay right now programming them into the suit. Wally you should probably head down there.”

“Go it,” he nodded as Choi directed him towards the reinforced hallway to the next chamber.

When the speedster was out of sight, Bruce stepped closer. "Where do we stand with the countermeasures?"

Ray lifted up his tablet, calling up schematics of the chamber. “The traps are set and placed in every possible point of incursion. The emitters are scattered across the cavern every fifty feet or so, all with redundant backups built in if they try and cut the power. It should be enough to confuse them, but it won’t last long.”

"Hopefully long enough." Wayne replied. “The rest?”

"All unpacked and charged. Where’d you dig all that stuff up anyway?"

"Souveniers,” he smiled. "Where’s the package?"

"It’s in a lead lined case in the electrical junction closet in the southwest corner. I don’t have to tell you how much I hope you don’t have to use it. As far as the treadmill goes, once Wally steps foot on it, a force field will activate and the surrounding walls will be electrified. Nothing’s getting in or out of there without bringing the whole cave down around us.” Palmer paused uncomfortably before asking, “Are you sure you still…”

Wayne nodded grimly before changing the subject “Where’s Chronos?”
“Dinah has him sedated on a cot in the Medbay. We’ve got everything we need from him, and when this all goes down, he’ll just get in the way.

“Agreed, and Crock?”

“He and Ollie are adjusting the rest of the counter measures. Bruce he’s itching for a fight. I hope you know what you’re doing,” Atom responded.

“Me too.”

“As soon as we get the green light from Silas, we’re ready.”

Wayne nodded, pausing for a moment to absorb the enormity of the moment. This was zero hour. From this moment forward their lives would never be the same, in way or another. What had once been a throwaway line from a heartbroken physicist, a flight of fancy, a remark based in science fiction was about to become science fact. Every one of them was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice; he just hoped it was enough.

“Gentlemen the time for speeches are long past. We all know what we signed up for, and we know the consequences. It’s a selfish and self-righteous decision, but I believe it’s the right one. This isn’t just for all of those we’ve lost; it’s for the generations still to come who deserve better than the mess we’ve left behind. Make no mistakes; we’re outlaws here, terrorists. When the League comes, and they will come, don’t expect mercy. All we can hope for is a better tomorrow and it starts now. If you want to pray to a higher power, now’s the time.”

“Great pep talk asshole,” Sportmaster laughed from the corner, wheezing and coughing as he triple checked the power settings of the ancient weapon he’d been assigned. “Let’s just get this shit started.”

The Dark Knight looked to the Atom. “Ray power up the generators, we’re now on the clock.”

xxx
Outside, leaning against the rock face, Helena shivered. She’d spent plenty a night braving the frigid Gotham weather, but the breeze coming in off the Atlantic chilled her to the bone. It troubled her, those last moments with Wayne, seeing this vulnerable side of him, the weary look in his eyes, almost like he was telling her goodbye without actually saying the words. Despite their philosophical differences, her grandmother always spoke highly of him in her letters. Huntress and Batman may have come at things from opposite sides of the spectrum, but in the end they both only cared about one thing: justice.

Helena’s mother had spent what seemed a lifetime being drug around by two crazed vigilantes on their endless missions, and she wanted no part of that life for herself or her daughter. But fate was a bitch, and it was a cruel irony that the woman who only wanted a normal life for her family, the woman who never wanted to have anything to do with the lives of capes and cowls, suffered the same fate as her vigilante mother. Helena missed her mom, and laid her loss like everyone else had at the feet of the Justice League. For a world supposedly at peace, without conflict, they still destroyed everting they touched.

She took out her night vision goggles and surveyed the beach, still not sure exactly what she was looking for; a flicker of emerald light? the spark of a Thanagarian mace? the glow of an Amazonian lasso? All she knew was if anything even slightly appeared out of the ordinary, she'd hit the panic button and hope to God whatever Bruce and the others were up to down there was ready. She had one mission and one mission only, and she wasn’t about to screw it up.

After another look through the goggles, she placed them on the ground and reached for her hot chocolate filled thermos when her mind began to tingle.

“Oh no!” she cried, immediately fumbling in her pocket for the panic button before her body went limp and fell to the ground, a sudden green glowing mattress forming and catching her before impact.

From the shadows J’onn Jones stepped out from the rock face and became solid. He kneeled down to the limp young girl, eyes glowing Martian red as he placed his fingers on her temples.

Green Lantern, Superman, Wonder Woman descended from the starless sky, landing softly beside them.

“Is she ok?” Diana asked
“She'll be fine.” the Martian confirmed.

“What did you find out?” the Kryptonian asked.

“She doesn’t know. She was intentionally kept out of the loop, but there are several others down there with him.”

“Who?” Diana demanded.

J’onn released his hold and laid her head down against the rocky surface. “Aside from Terry McGinnis, she doesn’t know them. I can go deeper if you’d wish, but it could damage her, if that even matters.”

“Of course it matters,” Diana snapped. “She’s a child.”

“She’s a conspirator.”

“J’onn leave her alone,” the princess demanded. “We don’t need to lobotomize a young girl to get the answers we need, they’re right below us.”

“As you wish,” the Martian responded emotionlessly, the child’s well-being of no concern of his one way or the other, she’d meet her fate soon enough. He rose to his full seven foot frame and awaited his instructions.

“Let’s go.” Clark spoke grimly, as the members of the League prepared for entry, leaving behind the unconscious body of the Huntresses granddaughter, her finger pushing squarely of the panic button’s silent trigger.

xxx

Wally stood next to Silas and Tina staring at the fully rendered suit in front of them, a smile
creeping across his lips.

“Now you’re just showing off,” he smiled, looking at the time suit, its once silver alloy now shaded in a different hue. Scarlet.

Visually, the suit now resembled a wildly futuristic version of Barry Allen’s original Flash’s uniform: armored, slightly bulky in some places, leaner in others, but still instantly recognizable in any era. The Scarlet Speedster, the last of his kind.

Silas handed him a small USB drive. “It was a little difficult finding something this archaic, but this data storage unit will be easily accessible where you’re going and won’t leave a trace of itself on any hard drive. It’s coded only to you. All the files and mission dossiers are stored on it. Whatever you do Wally, don’t lose it.”

Tina walked over to him, handing him a tall steel cup. “Drink this. You need to hydrate and I’ve specially formulated it for your metabolism. Maintaining a proper electrolyte balance is important in keeping a body’s strong electrical charge, doubly for yours. We have no idea the stress and strains this trip will put on you.”

Wally took a long sip as his lips puckered. ‘Oh my god, Tina that’s terrible.”

Dr. McGee frowned. “It’s not about the taste Mr. West,” she said sternly with a smirk, “it’s what it does for you. Now stop complaining and finish it.”

Next Tina reached down and dug deep in her bag; searching for the other items she’d prepared. “I have a few protein bars to go with it. Damn, I must have left them in one of the storage crates. I’ll be right back.”

“If they taste anything like this, I’ll pass,” he mumbled to himself.

“I heard that,” Tina yelled back as she left the room.

Wally smiled, the good Doctor McGee, still as stern as a catholic nun on her first day of grammar school, age hadn’t mellowed her a bit. He leaned forward, making sure she was gone and the two men were alone, when he turned to Silas.
“Dr. Stone, did you do it?”

Silas nodded grimly, entering in a command into his tablet and turning it towards the speedster as a detailed schematic of the time suit appeared on screen, several areas along the armor highlighted and blinking.

Stone tapped each one of them individually “Here, here, here, and here. They’re squib explosives, designed to detonate if your body remains motionless for over an hour. It has an internal atomic timer that should not be affected by the time stream.”

Silas put his hand on the younger man’s shoulders. “If time slows around you and you become trapped, these explosives will activate, but depending on the distortion, it could take anywhere from minutes to months or…years, but it will detonate, I promise you that.”

Wally took a breath and shot a halfhearted smile to the doctor. Silas didn’t like keeping the deadly additions a secret from the rest of the team, but he knew if the mission failed, the speedster had no desire of spending eternity trapped motionless. Silas and the others could relate to that notion more than the Wally could possibly know. Something’s were worse than death.

“Thanks doc.”

“I think we’re ready. If you’ll start putting on the suit, I’ll tell the others.”

“10-4.” the speedster answered.

Once he was alone, Wally exhaled deeply. He’d kept it together the best he could in front of Bruce and the others, but alone, just he and the suit, he was terrified.

With less than an hour before his journey, his heart was already pounding like a jack hammer, threatening to burst through his chest and run for its life. He’d worked hard to suppress the memories of being trapped in the time stream; the pain, the darkness, the despair, but now those feelings and fears came rushing toward him like a freight train. Even if everything went right, there was still so much that could go wrong. That treadmill might as well be a coffin.
He wondered if this was how Bart felt right before his journey, when he left his future to fix the past. From where Wally stood, it seemed like it hadn’t turned out too well, and now he was about to attempt the same thing. Speedsters were nothing if not persistent.

He’d barely gotten to know his cousin during their brief months together, but after getting over his own insecurity, and yes a tad bit of jealousy over the attention Barry Allen gave the young speedster, Wally actually found himself quite fond of the teen. In another time he could see them becoming close friends, partners even, like he and Barry. Maybe they would again someday.

Ironically it was Wally himself that warned his cousin not to reveal too much about the future, but when the two were alone, power eating Chicken Whizzies in the cave, Bart would still let slip brief and painful memories of his horror of a future, and Wally’s own innate curiosity would get the better of his judgment and he’d listen, and never once had Bart spoken of a Justice League. Was his own soon-to-be journey the cause? Was he really fixing the past or setting in motion the events that brought Bart Allen back in the first place. The dichotomy of time travel was maddening.

Wally looked down to see his hand trembling, reaching over with his other to hold it still. He was starting to lose it; and it was little comfort knowing that if things went south, thanks to Dr. Stone, the end would follow soon enough.

“Breathe babe, I need you to breathe for me.”

Blurry eyes look up to see her kneeling by the bed, long blonde hair splayed in all directions, hands holding his firmly. They’re in their apartment in Palo Alto the night before she’s to leave for Cape Canaveral.

Her hand ghosts his cheek, grey eyes meeting green. “It’s going to be ok Wally. It's just a dream.”

He nods weakly, skin clammy, heart racing.
She's dead, lying sprawled out on an apartment floor in Blüdhaven. He and his best friend leaning over her frantically; checking for a pulse, compressing her chest, blowing air into her lungs. It's supposed to be a test run, to ensure the cocktail of drugs she’s ingested will actually create the illusion of death, fool her friends, break their hearts, but something goes wrong, terribly wrong.

Artemis gently places her delicate fingers under his chin, lifting his eyes to meet hers.

“I love you Wally, it’s going to be ok. I promise.”

Artemis stands up and kisses his forehead, cradling it in her chest one last time. His breathing slows, his nerves calm.

“I love you too babe,” he answers.

And in the early morning dawn, she smirks that special smile, that snarky grin that has so much sweetness and feeling hidden behind it. Her smile is his favorite souvenir.

“What could go wrong?” she teases.

Lost in those memories he never heard the man enter the room behind him.

“You know she got hitched right?” Sportmaster declared, interrupting Wally’s moment of solitude. Crock walked up beside him, admiring the suit. “Had a kid and everything. Not that I ever got to see her anyway.”

Wally’s jaw tightened.
“At least Jade brought her little brat around from time to time, but oh no, not Artemis. Baby girl wanted nothing to do with her old man after you kicked the bucket. I could have saved her life a dozen times to Sunday, but it wouldn't have mattered. She blamed me for all this shit, including you.”

Crock walked away stretching, cracking every joint, socket, and vertebra that still had any flexibility left.

“All because I backed the wrong horse. I got played, it happens in my line of work, but it was a just job for Christ sake, and it paid well. I never bought into Savage’s world domination bullshit. I knew your little Boy Scout troupe would eventually catch on and put an end to it, but like I said, it was a job. That’s what guys like me do.”

Wally spun around to face the assassin. “What do you want Crock? Forgiveness? A best friend medal? I’m not your priest; I don’t give a shit why you did it?”

Wally stepped face to face to the old assassin, his eyes literally sparking with fury. “You... made... her... life... a living hell!” he growled. “You and your fucking reputation. She stayed with you when everyone else left, and how’d you pay her back for that, you made her life miserable... just... like... you. Part of me prays that I miss that target date by years, cause if I run into you, you won’t have to worry about what your next job is. I don’t give a shit about changing any timeline if I can save her from you.”

Lawrence Crock, laughed out loud, patting the speedster roughly on the shoulder. “It’s funny to hear you say that hero-boy, so let’s be real for a second. Man to man. Me and you.”

“Go for it,” Wally taunted

“I don’t like you West. I never did. I don’t know how either of my girls ended up with idiots like you and Harper, maybe they knew it would tick me off, maybe they just have shitty taste in men like their mother did, who the hell knows. But I’ll tell you this; they could have been the best, they had all the tools, all the skill, but instead of being Shadows, they decided to be saints. How fucked up is that?”

“Why are we even talking?”
“Because even though those two were constant thorns in my ass, even if they took everything I ever taught ’em and pissed it away, I still loved them, and those assholes that played me like a chump took my girls, my…little… girls,” he snarled

“Crock…”

“You know I never met the guy Artemis ended up with. I really didn’t care to honest to God. I’m sure he was some bleeding heart liberal dumbass, but she was happy, and that’s all that matters. But whatever life she had left wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for you. I respect that; what you did back then and what you’re doing now. So listen up, I know you’ve got a ton of shit on your plate, but you’ve got to promise me something.”

“What!” Wally growled.

“That you’ll do whatever it takes to keep them alive.”

Wally gritted his teeth, tired of hearing this maniac’s confessional pep talk. He turned back to the time suit when Crock reached out and grabbed his arm roughly, jerking him back around. The speedster’s eyes grew narrow, threatening, as he looked at the assassin’s hand, following up the old man’s still muscular arms to his face, where he was met with something he’d never seem on Crock before. Regret.

“Whatever it takes,” he repeated stronger. “Even if it means offing me, do you understand? Don’t think twice about it. You’ve got one chance to save her kid. Don’t blow it, especially on a piece of shit like me.”

Wally was about to reply when the lights above began to flicker, followed by two breathless doctors rushing back into the Medbay.
“They’re here!” Silas gasped. “We’ve got to move. Now!”

He coughed for a few moments, attempted to catch his breath while reaching for the pieces of the time suit and handing them to the speedster.

Crock smiled, cracking his knuckles and cocking his weapon. It was payback time.

“Remember what I said kid. Good luck, don’t fuck it up.”

xxx

The cave began to jolt just as the proximity alarm went off. Bruce knew Al Gul’s second incursion would amount to little more than a distraction to the League, but if it gave them a few extra hours it was with a shot. The entire team understood that once the Zeta Tube generators came online, the cat was out of the bag. All was on schedule.

At his command, holographic emitters sprang to life, shadowing the Zeta Tube and its nearby components in a cloak while small electromagnetic generators and radon tanks released trace amounts of radiation throughout the cavern, masking the Zeta signature even more.

“Places,” Bruce ordered as the gathered heroes stationed themselves throughout the cavern. This was the moment they’d all been planning for, they moment they dread.

The iron door at the end of entrance way began to glow and melt, bubbling and pooling across the bedrock floor as the Kryptonian glowing red eyes shifted back to blue. Superman slowly entered the darkened cavern, the entire chamber shrouded in darkness except for a single halogen light that hung from the ceiling in the center of the room, swaying back and forth ever so slowly, casting a multitude of shadows off the man who stood underneath.
For the first time in years the Man of Steel and the Dark Knight stood face to face.

“You've been busy,” Clark spoke out.

“I've had some time on my hands.”

“I agree. Conspiring with known terrorists, harboring fugitives, and whatever this is,” Superman gestured around the room.

“Everyone needs a hobby,” Bruce smirked

Clark eyes grew tight, as alien X-Rays shot out from them across the cavern; searching, penetrating, hunting, but to no avail, He looked back at the old man in annoyance.

“You flooded the room with lead particles. Smart. Haven't lost a step have you?”

“I've lost my share.”

“So have I,” Clark growled back, understanding Bruce’s true meaning.

The two men stood silently for minutes; judging, scrutinizing the other, when from out of the darkness behind the Man of Steel, the distinct metallic chime of chain metal rubbing against itself grew louder as heavy armored boots and gleaming bronze breastplate stepped into the light. Wonder Woman paused, scowling at the old man with piercing blue eyes.

“I guess we won’t be having that breakfast after all,” Wayne bemused.
“I suppose not,” she replied, staring him down with a mixture of anger and sadness. “You lied to me.”

“I exaggerated.”

“Don't be coy Bruce.”

“We all lie Diana, even Amazon princesses.”

“I’ve never lied to you.” she argued.

“I’m not talking about me. I’m talking about everyone else. You and your Justice Lords holding the world hostage under the guise of peace, promising its citizens something you never intend on giving back. This world doesn’t belong to you, it belongs to them.”

Clark shook his head in disgust. “Even after all these years, you’re still so blind. Do you think we ever wanted this burden? Do you think any of us wouldn’t want it to be like it was? But it can’t and you know it. Without our intervention this world would be a cinder. There would be death, disease, starvation, war. Do you ever remember what that was like?”

“This perfect world of yours Clark is an illusion, a police state. You’re providing protection through fear and intimidation. You’re trying to bring order to chaos and it can’t last. You know that.”

“Do you honestly want another Central City on your conscious?” Wonder Woman asked. “Do you really want another war?”

“It’s the cost of freedom Diana; it’s always been. That’s what we used to fight for; people like you are who we fought against. Now you’re all just Vandal Savage, except with better costumes.”

“What is it you’re doing here Bruce, building some kind of weapon, promoting some kind of movement? Something you can use to destroy everything we’ve built?”
“Something like that.” Wayne countered mockingly

“Don’t make it worse Bruce,” Diana pleaded

“You think you all have eliminated evil from this word? Think again. You’ve only driven them deeper, made them more dangerous, like a volcano waiting to erupt. The idea is to be smarter, more vigilant, staying three steps ahead instead of patting yourself on the back for what you’ve accomplished. That’s what you’re doing now. It can’t just be a handful of heroes sitting up on Mt. Olympus dictating from on high; it has to be everyone, united.”

“At least we stood up to answer the call,” Clark argued. “We all lost people. Friends, loved ones, but while the rest of you crawled back to your caves to lick your wounds, someone had to take charge.”

“And you’ve done a bang up job Clark. You’ve become what you despised. And if you’re looking for those heroes that didn’t answer the call, you’ll find them in your prisons and gulags, and their only crime is disagreeing with you. Is that what being a hero is to you now? John and Martha would be so proud.”

Superman’s clinched his fists with enough power to turn coal into diamonds as Diana stepped forward to calm, but the Man of Steel stood firm. “

“Enough! This ends now.” Clark turned to the darkness, glancing around the cave as he shouted into the shadows. “I can hear you all breathing, your heartbeats, your fear. If you hope to receive any kind of leniency you'd best come out now. I know what he does to you, how he manipulates you. He's been doing it for decades. You’re not his friends; you’re pawns, on some idealistic crusade that he's convinced you to take part in. He's made his failure yours, but you still have a chance, you might even be allowed to go back to your normal lives if you come out unarmed, and end whatever this is now!”

Superman and Wonder Woman waited, for a word, a sign, anything, hoping against hope that they could avoid a confrontation and end this peacefully. They were tired of the battles and wars, but all they got in return for their generous offer was the sounds of silence, the dripping of water, the shifting of stone: no replies.

These people hidden in the shadows were once their friends, their teammates, and now with their silence had become enemies of the state. The Justice League would take no satisfaction in their apprehension and pending imprisonment, but these conspirators had unknowingly forfeited their freedom the moment they signed on with Bruce Wayne, and for what?
Clark sighed, wishing there had been another way, but Bruce and his friends had made their choice. It was now time to cast out the darkness and bring in the light. “Under the powers and provisions of the Hero Registration Act, I find you all in violation of the Limited Powers accord, and guilty of conspiracy, the transport and harboring of fugitives, inciting violence, possession of weapons of mass destruction, and acts of terrorism against the state.”

Superman walked to the center of the room, staring at the defiant old man, an odd smirk on grizzled face. Clark shook his head in disdain. “You brought this on yourself,” he said as he reached out to grab the old man, only to see his hand pass through Bruce Wayne, a hologram.

Clark exhaled in frustration. He should have known it wouldn’t be this easy. This was Batman after all. Superman turned to Diana to speak, only to see the Amazon looking back to his chest in alarm, a small red laser site dancing directly on the S of his uniform. Superman glanced down; eyes narrowed as he frowned in annoyance, but before he could give the order, a bright crimson burst erupted from the shadows, striking him squarely in the chest, sending him flying into the darkness.

“Kal!” Wonder Woman screamed, sprinting towards the sound of groaning just as the second blast landed; then a third and a fourth, striking the fallen Kryptonian again and again. Diana grabbed him, dragging him to the side and swiftly turned just in time to see the red glow of the weapon firing again from a different location, but now she had time to react, standing in front of her fallen teammate, magic bracelets crossed, deflecting it.

She watched the beam race back to its source, saw the spark, heard the implosion of the weapon, and the cursing of its owner. It was now disabled or destroyed, but how many more might there be?

Diana dropped to her knees, scanning the room for the next attack while she searched Superman’s body for injuries.

“Some…kind…of…Red Sun generator,” he gasped, trying to catch his breath, “draining my strength.”

She didn’t reply, she didn’t have to. They both understood what they were facing. Batman had spent a lifetime gathering and documenting intel on his enemies; their strengths, their weaknesses, and now it appeared he’d done the same for his former partners, his friends. But they weren’t friends anymore, they were adversaries, and he was dangerous.

This weapon, this attack had been specifically tailored for Superman, and that made Diana wary. Bruce hand been expecting this, and taking down Superman was just the first step. The next one to come would be just as personal, just as dangerous. She reached for her earpiece and gave the order.
“Now!”

With those words, the Justice League burst on to the scene. The Martian having waited patiently in position, shifted his density and ghosting himself through the cavern floor while an emerald drill opened the a small hole in bedrock of eastern edge, carefully avoiding the iron wall supports and allowing the Green Lantern and Warhawk entrance. From the south, a powerful wave broke through the sealed door of the sunken passageway, carrying the young Atlantean with it.

The Tibetan Green Lantern landed feet away, quickly forming a protective sphere over the Amazon and Kryptonian, as the remainder of his teammates searched the darkness.

“How is he?” Kai-Ro asked urgently, kneeling down next to their fallen

"He took several rounds from a weapon designed to depower him." Diana explained. "Its going to take some time for him to regain his strength."

“It appears they were expecting us,” Lantern replied in his calm Buddhist demeanor.

“Yes,” Wonder Woman with an icy growl, more wounded then she wanted to admit at Wayne’s betrayal.

“I will stay with him until he recovers, perhaps you should assist in the search for the perpetrators.”

Wonder Woman nodded, always impressed with Kai-Ro’s calm center and wisdom that belied his young age, it was no wonder the Guardians had chosen him. They League needed someone calm now, because her Amazonian fury was about to get the best of her.

In the heat of battle she stood conflicted, hesitant to leave Superman behind, but equally so in leaving her younger teammates unprotected. They were a strong unit, a talented one that had subdued countless cartels, terror cells, rouge governments, criminal masterminds and super-villains, but never tested by someone as cunning and dangerous as the Dark Knight, a man who knew them inside and out. It should never have come to this. Before she had a chance to make her decision, she saw Superman stir, crawling into a seated position, still breathing heavily. He looked up at her with determined eyes. “Go!” he demanded as the Amazon nodded and rushed towards the darkness.
Wonder Woman had barely made it a few feet when the room began to glow a brilliant white. Light particles and photons began to bend the physical structure of the cavern, and darkness was replaced by blinding phosphorus bursts flashing in circular motions around the chamber, burning after-images forming in their eyes.

The holographic effect was instantaneous, forcing the young monk to close his eyes in order to concentrate and keep the sphere intact. That’s when the nausea and vertigo struck. He collapsed on the floor next to the Man of Steel, trying to keep the bile in his throat from forcing its way upwards, but he wasn’t the only one suffering the illusion. In the distance Warhawk plummeted from above, dropping like a stone and crashing hard onto the ground. He struggled to his knees when a concentrated blast of modified liquid nitrogen covered him from the neck down in a thick prison of ice.

Having spent a majority of her life in the depths of the oceans, the vertigo and the illusions causing it had little effect on Aquagirl as she rushed to Warhawk’s side, only to dive for cover seconds later as a strong burst of excited plasma shot forth barely missing her, burning everything in its path and driving her away from her fallen teammate. J’onn flew to her aid, when a second burst of flame drove him from the sky as well.

The room was in chaos, everything was happening too fast. Diana stumbled toward her teammates, cursing to the Gods for allowing things to get this far. How many times had she sat across from Bruce enjoying a meal, a quiet moment, a pleasant conversation? How many times had he looked into her eyes, her soul, and bold faced lied?

She’d only loved two men in her life. Steve Trevor was the first man she’d ever met after leaving the island sanctuary of Themyscira. He was a good man, a kind man, and the bond they had formed together during that time a powerful one. Queen Hippolyta had warned her of the fragility of mortals, and the risks she took in forging a relationship with one, but like any daughter, Diana felt she knew more, and ignored her mother’s words, only to suffer heartbreak after his death after World War II.

The other was the man she faced now. Bruce Wayne was driven, a cold and distant enigma of a man, but perhaps the noblest being she’d ever met. He had no powers, no meta-human abilities, but he was still a fearless and brilliant warrior, who never gave in to tyranny, never made excuses, and never gave up. In a way they were kindred spirits, but after years fighting beside the Batman, she finally came to know the man behind the mask. A kind and compassionate one, who rarely gave someone an intimate look into his heart. They’d danced around the attraction and desire for years, knowing that no good would every come from, but despite never exchanging the words, she loved him, and he her. In his declining years they both wished they could have those years back.
But now she discarded those thoughts. She was an Amazon, a warrior born and bred, and Diana was determined not to let this man made illusions subdue her any longer. Warhawk was yards away when the weapon struck, concentrated photons lashed out at her, driving her father from her fallen teammate, but she would not be deterred. Once again her magic bracelets deflected the blasts, causing them to ricochet and bounce across the chamber, making the weapon as dangerous to her assailants as it was to her.

She finally reached the Thanagarian when from behind she heard Aquagirl scream. Diana turned to see her holding the Martian in her arms, now surrounded by a cage of liquid flame. The heat was searing, and Mareena quickly moved to the center of the structure, dragging the Manhunter with her, the flaming bars coming no closer, but neither farther either, effectively sapping both their strength; the perfect trap sewn by a Machiavellian tailor.

Distracted by the havoc in all directions, Diana barely noticed the metallic clink of the tiny orbs that rolled to her feet. The Amazon glanced down to see the sickening clown’s face embroidered on the small spheres staring back at her, when she heard the subtle click and the venomous gas that poured from it. Joker toxin.

Instinctively she held her breath, knowing it to be a pointless exercise, the vapor could just as easily be absorbed through her pores or any open wounds.

Rage flowed through her that Bruce could go to such lengths to use such a weapon. He was a fool if he thought she couldn’t make the connection. Mr. Freeze, Dr. Light, Heatwave, Joker. A rouges gallery of contraband weapons he’d secretly collected over the years, but how many more did he have in his arsenal?

Before she could even move, an emerald construct formed to the left of her, and the simple form of a vacuum cleaner appeared. Diana followed the beam to its source as the pale perspiring young Lantern, sucked the poison out of the air, a long hose extending up through the hole he’d blown open when first entering the cave. With all of the toxin dispersed, Kai-Ro fell to his knees, still trying to suppress disorientation caused by spinning of the room. Diana’s eyes finally adjusted, reaching Warhawk and chiseling away the ice that imprisoned him with her bare hands. For the conspirators, there would soon be hell to pay.

xxx

Hidden in an alcove on the far side of the cavern, Ray Palmer and Michael Holt continued entering commands into the master computer creating the disorienting holograms and triggering the traps, while above Green Arrow, Black Canary, and Sportmaster maintained the strafing attacks from on high. Ryan Choi stood miniaturized in the middle of the fray, specialized goggles dampening the holographic effects so he could provide real time reports on the fallen Leaguers. All was going as
planned...for now.

Bruce Wane stood behind them watching the different monitors. Reading the telemetry, he knew Ollie and Diana had nearly exhausted their weapons, but still had many more at their disposal. Bruce was surprised that Crock had lasted this long before disposing of the weapons and bringing out some of his own. Through thermal imaging, Wayne could see the heated glow of his javelin perched on the rafters behind him. His orders had been simple, subdue and disable, but do not kill. Crock had given his word, but Bruce had heard similar pledges over the years from a one Jason Todd that did not go as promised, but for now unfortunately it was a risk he had to take, because he wasn’t sure the League would take a similar stance when pushed to the edge. God knows he’d been tempted.

Sportsmaster was there for two reason and two reasons only; he owed a debt to Ra's al Ghul, and despite his criminality there still seemed to be honor among thieves. The second one was completely out of character; hope.

Perhaps selfishly for himself and the promise of a new life, or maybe the innocent millions of victims caught in the crossfire, most important being two young women whose lives had ended too soon. Their blood was on his hands, and now he had a chance to take that red out of his ledger and to accomplish this he needed Wayne as much as Wayne needed him.

Their current success would not last long, it wasn’t supposed to. It was just another illusion, a distraction to allow the final puzzle to fit into place.

Wayne looked to his watch, ignoring the tremors in his hand and frowned. They should have signaled by now. He opened the channel and after a few seconds an out of breath Silas Stone hurriedly answered.

“Doctors, we can’t hold out much longer. It’s time to send him in.”

After a few moments, Wayne received the reply he been dreading. “We can’t!” Stone yelled back through the channel. “The tachyon emitter is not activating!”

Across from the physicist, Wally stood in the time suit as he and Tina struggled with the chest piece, removing the power source and fitting it back into place time after time, waiting for it to activate and glow to no avail.

“What wrong with it?” Bruce demanded, a sliver of worry escaping his words. There were so close.

“I don’t know damn it. It was working a half hour ago. We’re changing the power coupling now, but we need at last ten minutes!”

“You have five Doctor, make it work,” Wayne order and closed the channel.

He turned back to see the worried expressions of partners. “Gentlemen were going to have to step it up a bit. Begin Phase Two.”

xxx

Batman landed on the rafters next to Green Arrow, as the archer continued firing plasma bursts from Dr. Light’s weapon.
“Somethings gone wrong.” Terry divulged.

“No shit,” Ollie chuckled bitterly.

“They need another ten minutes. Bruce has ordered we go to Phase Two.”

Oliver nodded grimly, but he knew something like this was bound to happen, it usually did.

“Signal the others, things are about to get weird.” And with those words the young Batman activated the cloak and made his way towards the ground.

xxx

“Rex are you ok? Say something,” the Amazon pleaded, slapping him gently but firmly in the face, attempting to bring him back to consciousness. On the third strike, an armored glove caught her wrist.

“Ok, I’m awake Princess, you can cut that shit out.”

“How do you feel?”

“Cold. Pissed!” Warhawk snapped, shielding his eyes against the spinning strobes when suddenly the blinding bursts stopped and the cave went dark, the glowing illumination of the cell still holding Aquargirl and the Martian burning in the distance.

A loud whirling hum shot forth, followed by the mechanical sounds of heavy machinery locking together into place.

“That’s not good,” Stewart said anxiously, searching the cave floor blindly for his mace, the lone surviving legacy from his mother Shayera.

The room seemed to blink in and out for a moment, as holographic generators spun to life, and then out of the darkness crawled another nightmare.
A maze of walls formed all around them. Fluorescent lights flickered from above, with the flaming cell of Aquagirl disappearing behind a dripping wall of dilapidated masonry, her pleas for rescue now masked by the desperate wails and moans of its occupants. A place where the broken go to die.

The Thanagarian and Amazon now found themselves in the treatment wing of Arkham Asylum locked inside a holding cell, looking out from behind rusted iron bars at streaks of lighting shooting between electrodes, super charging treatment chairs.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Diana hissed as she pulled the dazed Warhawk to his feet. “We’ve got to find Mareena and J’onn, they won’t last trapped like that.”

Rex nodded, searching his memory for the last direction he saw Aquagirl. He activated his wings and flew straight for the holographic wall when he made contact and bounced back across the cell.

Diana stood in shock. Holograms didn’t have substance; they were light constructs only, computerized illusions. She walked up next to the brick wall, placing her palms carefully on the structure. When she pushed through the illusion, she felt something odd, a sticky substance that seemed to stretch as the pushed through it. The hairs on her forearms began to tingle and raise, the bracelets around her wrist buzzing and beginning to heat. Only electromagnetic waves could cause such an effect while also providing substance to these illusions. Now that she knew exactly what she was facing, she also had the solution.

Without permission she reached down and grasped Warhawk’s mace. It felt alien to her as it should, heavy but well balanced, pulling at her heart strings at the memory of the woman who used to carry it. It sparked when she gripped the handle, and with a warriors cry, Wonder Woman struck the wall with a powerful swing. The construct cracked and disappeared, only to be replaced seconds later with a different illusion, a different room and angle. Another deception, another lie, created and weaved by Bruce Wayne. This was going to take time, time she wasn’t sure she had.

Blood lust consumed her, her friends, her teammates were out there somewhere hurt, possibly dying, and the man responsible was hiding in the shadows like a damn coward. He would pay for his insolence, his old age be damned.

“Is this some kind of game to you?” she screamed of the over the howls of Arkham.

Through the clanks, thuds, and buzzes of heavy machinery whirling all around, she received her answer as the deep timber of Bruce Wayne spoke through the PA system.
“It’s a helpless feeling when someone takes your freedom away isn’t it Diana? It makes you angry, resentful. It makes you desperate for what you used to have, doesn’t it?”

“Go to hell!” she hissed, striking the wall again and again, forcing her way slowly through the holographic maze, hoping to Hera she found the old man on the way before anyone else did.

xxx

Entering in a new algorithm into the program, Palmer looked over his shoulder at Wayne.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to antagonize her?”

Wayne watched the second hand of his watch tick on. Stone’s ten minutes were nearly up.

“Diana’s highly intelligent, but when her anger gets the best of her, she loses the ability for three dimensional thinking. She becomes fixated and focused on the task at hand; and right now that’s finding her teammates. Let’s continue to make effort as difficult as possible.”

“Ryan should be sending us an update soon,” Palmer replied.

“In exactly one minute and thirty seconds to be precise,” Wayne corrected. He wasn’t the Clock King, but he still kept pretty good time.

xxx

“Impressive,” Green Lantern said in astonishment, finding himself and Superman now lying in the secured courtyard compound of Arkham. “It appears to be accelerated photon created constructs, beamed on to an electromagnetic skeletons. Quite ingenious.”

Clark’s weakened body trembled, barely able to crawl, and the young Lantern’s appreciation of the trap they found themselves in now wasn’t helping.

“Kai-Ro I need you to focus,” Clark demanded. “Can your ring punch those constructs?”
“Most definitely, but I believe for everyone one we shatter, another one will form in its place. We’d be better suited searching for the generators and emitters creating them.”

“Any ideas?”

“If I were the one controlling this, I would have installed each emitter randomly throughout the cavern. They would be independently charged, so destroying any generator powering them would have little effect in the short term. Eventually those power reserves will fail, but I don’t think we want to wait that long.”

“We need to find them.”

Above them, thick storm clouds passed overhead, obscuring the pinholes of the night sky, but off to the east something caught Superman’s eye, something that was not part of this illusion

“What is that? he gestured upwards.

The Lantern squinted, unable to make it out. He focused inwards, suddenly creating an oversized magnifying glass to look through. “It appears to be the opening I drilled through to gain entrance to the cave. The holographic framework does not seem to be able to cloak it. “

But Clark wasn’t as interested in what it was what as much as what was coming up behind it.

“Lantern, find the others, tell them to search for the emitters and destroy them. All of this, it’s just a diversion. It’s a stall; Bruce has something bigger going on behind the scenes, I can feel it. We’ve got to end this before he can put in into play.”

“But your powers…..”

“I’ll be fine, but you’ve got to go now!”

The Tibetan nodded, coating his body in an emerald shield and flying towards the entrance to the Asylum, hoping to trick the emitters into responding in kind, adjusting the illusion to follow along the pathways already established and not creating any others until it was too late.
Watching as the Lantern disappeared deep inside the hologram, Superman dropped back to his knees, crawling slowly towards the opening in the ceiling, searching past the illusion of the night sky for something familiar, something personal. Just over the horizon of the Atlantic he could sense it coming. Praying a sliver of dawn might cast itself into the cave, passing through the magnetic waves and excited photons onto him. Never in a million years would he have predicted this kind of betrayal, even less so that he'd be in his knees in front of this man, staring into the jaws of defeat. Bruce Wayne was once his friend, never again.

xxx

“God Damnit! Come on Doc! Get this fucking this working,” Wally hissed, standing topless in the Medbay, pacing back and forth in a blur while Tina and Silas frantically worked on the power coupling, reaching deep into the armor with delicate instruments; one cleaning off the terminals the other checking the wiring carriage. They were running out of time. Every instinct told him he should be out there joining the battle, helping his former mentors, but the moment he set foot in that cave, the jig would be up.

xxx

Flying through the maze of hallways, Green Lantern could hear the Amazonian battle cry in the distance. After a few minutes of twist and turns, while flying past a holographic nurse’s station, he noticed the far east wall beginning to blur and the sounds of Diana’s fury growing louder. He landed a few feet away, staring curiously at the event, observing that with each strike on the construct, it blinked for a barely a moment, a nanosecond phase shift. Then Kai-Ro decided to create a construct of his own. Backing up a few yards from his target, he scanned his mind for just the right object when suddenly an image from his youth formed in front of him. Simple, classic, powerful; a classic Y shaped old fashioned slingshot, complete with green bolder forming between its rubbery sling.

He counted the seconds between Wonder Woman’s strikes, the Amazon keeping a fairly steady rhythm. When Kai-Ro felt he had synchronized the two, he let the boulder fly just as on the other side of the holographic wall, Diana swung fiercely, barely missing the rocky projectile as it punched its way through.

“Hera!” she cursed diving to the ground on top of Warhawk, knocking the wind out of him again in the process as the giant boulder flew past her shoulder, barely an inch away. When she looked up the wall was gone, replaced by the calm quizzical look of the diminutive bald teen on the other
“Well done,” he smiled, looking up and seeing the emitter. Diana’s eyes followed his just as a concentrated burst of emerald energy shot upwards, striking the holographic emitter. The device sparked for a moment before several sections of the asylum evaporated into thin air, replaced by the iron supports and stone walls of the cave.

The Lantern looked back to her with a satisfied smile preparing to share his plan, when a barrage of supersonic sound waves slammed down upon him. He mentally ordered his ring to form a shield around his body, but within seconds had shattered and crumbled at the high pitched onslaught, disrupting his ability to concentrate or form a thought. He writhed in pain as the shrieking vibrations continued to assault him.

Diana ran to his side, attempting to grab the youth and pull him away from the sonic onslaught. She knew the source well, had even been victim to it once or twice in the day, but that was when they were sparring, when they were teammates, friends. This was no longer the case. She was less than a foot away from the young Lantern, scanning the darkness looking for Black Canary when an invisible force hit her like truck, sending her slamming into steel reinforced walls, the rocks and boulders behind it shifting dangerously.

Terry McGinnis turned off the Batsuits cloak, drawing her eyes away from the ceiling, arming every weapon system in his arsenal. It wouldn’t be nearly enough, but the trick was it didn’t have to be. It was just a distraction, a way to bide time for West and the others to begin the final phase of the plan. And when it came to irritating and distracting someone, that was one of McGinnis’s superpowers.

“You need to stand down Terry. I don’t want to have to hurt you.” Wonder Woman demanded.

“Me either,” Batman chuckled as he released an array of batarangs in her direction, all bouncing off magic bracelets with no effect. She rushed towards him at blinding speed, but the thrusters in the Batsuit were just a second faster, missing him by inches. Safely above, he shot electric pulse after pulse from his gauntlets, trying to slow the princess down, drawing her away from her fallen teammates and towards him back into the maze of illusions.

Inside his the mask he opened a channel. “Uh... how much longer guys? I have a really pissed off Amazon trying to tear my head off.”

His earpiece crackled as Ray Palmer voice answered. “A little while longer, there’s been a complication. They’re fixing it now, so stay sharp, she’s dangerous.”

“No shit!” he replied.
Across the cave trapped in the flaming cell, J’onn was mumbling words in a language Mareena didn’t understand. Oddly his body was cold, not hot, perhaps in a Martian version of shock she considered, but at the moment she had to focus more on herself. Her skin was just beginning to blister, she was weak, disoriented, struggling to stay conscious. She tried to imagine she was in one of Micron’s ever challenging training sessions, counting down the minutes until she could leave the simulator and soothe herself in the restorative saltwater pools of the Watchtower.

How could Terry have been a part of something like this? He was one of them, or at least would have been had Bruce Wayne just kept to the shadows and let Terry live his own life, make his own choices.

She wasn't enamored with the direction the League had taken either, but it was the first time in history that Atlantis actually believed the surface world to be at peace. That was something her father would have supported.

Atlantis was a kingdom not democracy, and because of that had enjoyed more than a half century peace. There were many things she loved about the surface world; terrorism, famine and war were not among them. If Terry had been allowed to join them, he would have had a voice; a perspective just like his mentor would have if he'd been a little more open minded. Arthur Curry had told his daughter what a great leader Bruce Wayne was, but for all she had seen the only place he had lead her father to was his grave.

That’s when she sensed it, hiding behind holographic illusions, she could feel the slow trickle of sea water, ebbing slowing from the cave walls. She was weak, exhausted, but she still had her will. Aquagirl reached out mentally, not to the vast ocean sea life, but the water itself, cells and organisms she could bend to her will, obey her commands. The small seepage would be no match against the flaming cell, having little effect other than sizzling and evaporating in seconds. Instead she sent the small trickle towards the sunken passageways to the south, the one she had broken through hours earlier, hoping to have it meet up with the millions of gallons just out of reach.

She screamed and pushed forward, demanding the water to obey, when suddenly wave after wave came crashing through the collapsed entrance, extinguishing the flames, and the flooding the gas line from reigniting. Aquagirl submerged herself in the healing waters while keeping the Martian floating above. With limited understanding of Martian physiology, she couldn’t abandon him like this; all she could do was wait. When she finally faced Terry, she still wouldn’t be seeking revenge, she’d seek answers.
Ryan Choi watched with no satisfaction as the latest illusions took hold, observing through thermal goggles the heat signatures of the Leaguers moving in opposite directions, unable to find one another.

What was taking so wrong? The longer it took the more chance the League would adapt and learn to maneuver through the simulations, and no amount of digital camouflage would be able to block out the blinding radiance and deafening roar of the transit system once the Zeta Tube was finally activated.

He tried to focus back at the task at hand. Choi was to stay in contact every five minutes, and that time was now, but before he could send his latest report, a heavy fist stuck him from behind, knocking the middle aged scientist to the ground with a sickening thud.

xxx

Ray Palmer typed furiously on the keyboard, entering command after command to stay ahead of the League’s progress when the monitor began to blink amber and the alert flashed across the screen

“They’ve disabled emitter number five, rerouting image matrix, but if they take out two more, we’re taking serious image degradation. They’ll find the Zeta….and us.”

Wayne frowned. “Cycle through the programs, change visual environment every ninety seconds. It will make it more difficult to focus on their search and buy us a little more time.”

“Understood.”

Wayne looked at his watch concerned. Choi was late with his report. He touched his earpiece, opening the secured channel. “Ryan, what is the status on Superman?” only to be met by silence.

Ryan Choi was their eyes and ears on the ground, and nearly undetectable at his near-quantum size and unaffected by the holographic projections. He was also over a minute late, and when dealing with one hero as fast as a speeding bullet and the other as swift as the god Hermes, a minute could turn into seconds quickly. Without those real time reports they were in trouble.

Wayne turned back to Ray, seeing what program he’d chosen to initiate, when the monitor
suddenly went black. Seconds later the console began to spark, electrical discharges flashing brightly enough that both Palmer and Holt pushed themselves away from the computer for fear of electrocution.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Palmer exclaimed urgently, pulling out his portable sensor unit, and scanning the computer. What he found filled him with dread. “There’s something’s in there!”

“A virus?” Holt asked urgently, grabbing a similar sensor and looking for himself.

“No! I mean something’s in there!”

“Choi?” Mr. Terrific questioned, unsure as to why their teammate would have chosen to place himself in one of the most critical pieces of technology key to the success of the mission, unless he’d been turned. But Wayne new differently, cursing himself for not having noticed the missing Leaguer sooner.

“Not Choi,” he said grimly, just as the simulation ended abruptly, emergency lighting now filtering into the cavern. “Micron.”

Instinctively, Ray reached down to the white dwarf device on his belt, preparing to alter his body mass to sub atomic levels and find cover. He hated leaving Batman and Mr. Terrific behind, however he knew he was no good to the rest of the team as a prisoner and that there might be a chance he could still help the others, but when his finger searched his waist for the trigger, it was gone.

“Looking for something?” the tiny voice said from below, before expanding back to the hero’s full size, plus some, towering of Holt, Palmer and Wayne, crushing the Atom’s device in his hands.

In the close and cramped quarters, Bruce lurched forward as fast as his body would allow, reaching for his utility belt that lay just off to the side of the computer terminal, when the powerful hero easily swatted the old man aside, knocking him forcibly to the ground.

“It’s over,” Micron said menacingly.

And at that moment, Wayne began to believe he was right.
The younger Batman’s head swiveled in all directions when the simulation ended abruptly. All around him holographic grids began to flicker and fade, and the labyrinths of Arkham slowly vanished, replaced with damp stone floors and iron support walls.

Whatever had gone wrong with the time suit must have been catastrophic, and McGinnis knew he was now in for the fight of his life, teamed with men and women three times his age, facing the most powerful heroes on the planet, and outnumbered to boot.

But with a little over half of the massive cavern still shrouded in darkness, and Dinah, Oliver, and Crock still hidden on the scaffolding above, firing powerful albeit antiquated weapons, maybe they still had a chance, a small one, but still a chance, but when Wayne, Palmer and Holt suddenly appeared from the darkness, marched from the shadows into the light like prisoners of war, that hope quickly faded.

“Aw shit,” he sighed.

Distracted by their sudden appearance, Batman never saw the Warhawk descending from on high, slamming into him and viciously, driving him straight into the stone floor.

“Stay down kid. Don’t make this worse.”

Batman sat up slowly, his right hand grabbing at the side of his head, wincing in pain. “Good to see you Rex,” he said sarcastically, his fingers reaching inside the back of his cowl searching for the dampness of blood.

“You too McGinnis,” Stewart replied regretfully. “You know I wish it didn’t have to go down like this.”

“Yeah, me too,” Terry sighed, still working past the spots in his vision.

Micron marched the trio to the well-lit center of the room, shoving Wayne and the others into the
light, as Wonder Woman walked over to meet them there. She eyed Palmer and Holt coldly, but her real venom was directed solely at Wayne.

The two former lovers stood silently in front of the other, Diana struggling to conceal her anger, Bruce as always impassive.

“I don’t know what you were hoping to accomplish, but you’re little rebellion here is over.”

“So it appears,” Wayne replied spiritless.

“Don’t expect an ounce of leniency. Each one of you will spend the rest of your days rotting in a cell until you finally pass away, you’re golden years wasted, all because of this man.”

“I am aware.”

With Wayne’s aloofness grating on her last nerve, she snapped at the Dark Knight. “Why are you here? What was your plan?”

Bruce dismissed the inquiry. “If you’re going to arrest us Princess, let’s get it over with.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

From his perch on high, cloaked in shadow, Lawrence Crock looked down on the scene in disgust. Across the cavern from him, Green Arrow had already ceased his attack, accepting defeat, giving up without a fight.

“Fucking amateurs,” he cursed to himself.

Wayne and the others, they’d had their chance, he thought to himself. The alien and the fish girl where were as good as dead, the boy scout couldn’t have taken many more shots from that Red Sun cannon. If Wayne had really wanted his cockamamie bullshit plan to work, they would have finished the job when they had the chance. It’s not like they all weren’t dead already.
But if West didn’t end up killing himself, there was still a chance; and even if the rest of those pussies weren’t willing to pull the trigger, he was. Like an old friend once told him…

*Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I’m an agent of chaos. Oh, and you know the thing about chaos? It's fair!*

Crock pulled out his javelin, silently locking it into place, activating the small thermal charge at the edge of the tip. Even at his advanced age, he was still a dead shot, and with Wonder Woman’s back to him, so preoccupied with Wayne, she’d never see it coming.

He counted down to himself. *Three...two...one...* and let it fly. The spear flew swift and true, and even if she reacted in time, the explosive would take her down anyway, along with anyone else standing close by, friend or foe. Collateral damage, the price of war.

The javelin impacted, a blinding blast and deafening explosion rocked the cave, dust and debris shaking loose from the cavern ceiling, but when the dust settled, all he could see was the crest of a black and white $S$, the Man of Steel standing unharmed, and failure.

Seconds later, an emerald beam of concentrated energy shot forth, slicing into the scaffolding and sending the three plummeting to ground. At the last possible moment, Green Lantern formed a makeshift cushion to break their fall, thick enough to save their lives, but thin enough that they’d feel the full brunt of the impact, jarring both breath and bones.

Clark walked over to them, shaking his head in pity. “What a waste.”

He turned back to Bruce, still not nearly at full strength, but more than enough for the job at hand. “Let’s try this again. What are you all doing here?”

Bruce stood firm, standing across from him with an unreadable expression across his face. “There’s no point in discussing it. You stopped listening to me a long time ago.”

“I could say the same thing to you. When we needed you the most, you took your toys and went home like a petulant child, all because you didn’t get your way.”

“Your mind was made up long before I left. No one gave you the right....”
“We gave ourselves the right!” Superman demanded, losing his composure, “How many more have to die Bruce before you see the old ways just don’t work! We made the call, and it was the right one. Is there a cost? Of course there is, but the end more than justifies the means. My only regret is that we didn’t see it sooner!”

“Spoken like a true Justice Lord.” Wayne replied coldly.

Clark took a deep breath, calming himself. There was no point talking to this man anymore. Wayne and the others had made their choice, now it was time to pay the price.

“Interesting,” Green Lantern interrupted, drawing everyone’s attention for the moment as he walked towards the reinforced support wall, boulders and debris weighing heavily against it. Kai Ro stared curiously at the structure, glancing down at the ring’s readings and looking back to the iron support system. That’s when he finally noticed it; a tiny flicker, barely noticeable from a distance, almost imperceivable unless you were standing right next to it.

He closed one eye, lifting his arm and grasping his ring hand with the other, lining up his shot. A thin burst of energy shot forth slicing through the hologram and destroying the final emitter, exposing what lay behind it.

“What the hell is that?” Warhawk asked, walking over next to the Tibetan teen.

“I do not know,” Lantern replied curiously, sending a mental command to the ring when suddenly the form of a large emerald magnifying glass appeared, complex sensor readings appearing on the surface of the lens.

“This device seems to be the source of the Tachyon radiation the Watchtower sensor’s detected. It appears to be a modified Zeta Tube, one not networked with any of our systems.”

Wonder Woman walked over to the device, stopping just short of the machine that rested in front of it. “Is that a…treadmill?”

Lantern ignored the query, focusing instead on the readings he was receiving and the machinery the Zeta Tube was wired into. The magnifying glass disappeared, replaced with a large holographic monitor, with more sophisticated designs and schematics appearing on the green screen.
“Oh my!” Kai Ro replied distressed.

“What is it?” Superman demanded.

“I believe what we are seeing is an Einstein-Rosen Bridge; a device that could theoretically create a wormhole, connecting two separate points in space-time.”

“Excuse me?” Warhawk interrupted, placing his mace down and walking over to the device for a closer look.


Diana looked back at Bruce, mouth agape. “Hera, what you have done?”

“I do not believe the device is active,” Lantern added. “I would be detecting at least 37 billion Bq disintegrations per second of quantum flux; this unit is barely releasing a million.”

Superman turned back to Wayne in shock. “Time travel? Are you insane? Do you have any idea the damage you could do? The harm you could cause?”

As soon as the words left his mouth Clark stopped, finally realizing the Dark Knight’s intention. “That was your plan all along.”

“And they say I’m the detective,” Wayne smirked.

“I take it back Bruce, you’re not insane, you’re a psychopath. The only thing you’re lacking is clown makeup.”

Wayne’s eyes narrowed, but the same bemused expression remained on his face. Perhaps Clark was right he considered, in the end it would be left to history to decide.
“Shut it down Ray!” Wonder Woman growled towards the physicist. Wayne may be the ring leader, but Ray Palmer was the brains.

“I can’t,” he lied. “There is no off switch; it’s on an internal timer. If it remains inactive it will eventually go into sleep mode, but if you try to force a shutdown it could activate and open up a singularly right here inside the cave. I don’t think you want to risk that.”

Palmer kept his breathing slow, hiding behind veiled eyes. It was a stall, probably the last one they had left before Bruce would be forced to set his final contingency into play; his endgame.

“What’s the treadmill for? Aquagirl inquired, examining the device from afar, wary to touch it. “Is to launch something?” she asked curiously.

“An exothermic device of some kind? a bomb perhaps?” Lantern suggested turning to the two scientists, looking at them in utter bewilderment. “You’d destroy the time stream, you’d destroy us all. You were willing to go that far?”

Superman looked over to J’onn, the Martian nodding in acknowledgement, walking over and coming face to face with the two scientists. Ray Palmer and Michael Holt stood anxiously in front of the alien, looking into his cold emotionless eyes as they began glow. The Manhunter began his search, reaching towards their psyche, willing to go as deep as necessary to find the answers he sought, before suddenly stumbling back, placing his hand to his temple in pain.

“There is a psychic interference emanating within the cave, some form of subsonic carrier wave that’s disrupting my abilities to concentrate at the needed level.”

Clark shook his head and chuckled to himself. “You really did think of everything, didn’t you?”

“Just everything you’d think of.”

“Perhaps this calls for a different incentive” the Martian said calmly, reaching down and grabbing Crock by the throat and dragging him to the front of the prisoners.

“Dr. Palmer, please tell us how to shut off the device,” the Martian asked with an eerie politeness. The two physicists remained silent, worriedly glancing over at Sportsmaster as he dangled in his grasp.
“Don’t tell him shit,” Crock gasped as J’onn grip tightened.

“I will not ask again.”

“Fuck you,” Crock laughed, spitting into the alien’s face.

After a few moments of silence, J’onn lowered the assassin to the ground, while Holt and Palmer collectively blew out the breath in relief. The Martian looked quizzically at Crock, studying him intently with an unearthly gaze, right before his hands became translucent and forcibly entered into Crock’s chest cavity. The assassin’s face wrenched in pain, his body seizing while the alien dug deeper, rearranging vital organs that were never supposed to be moved in that fashion.

“Crock!” Ollie screamed, rushing towards them when suddenly Micron’s mass began to expand, his body growing five times his normal size, grabbing both Black Canary and the young Batman in his massive grip, squeezing just enough to prevent Dinah from catching a proper breath, or Terry being able to access the Batsuit’s weapons.

“I wouldn’t do it Arrow.” the giant’s voice echoed from above, causing Ollie to freeze in his tracks, while Aquagirl rushed over the Martian. “J’onn you’re killing him!” she yelled.

“That’s enough.” Superman demanded, staring down the Martian until he removed his hands and the limp form of Sportsmaster slid on to the floor. Aquagirl rushed to the fallen villain, checking for a pulse.

“He’s in cardiac arrest! He’s dying!” she exclaimed, looking to her teammates for reaction, support…anything.

Ollie watched on in horror as Crock skin grew pale and his breathing stopped, but before he could do anything he heard the muffled screams of his wife.

“Let her go you son of a bitch!” the archer demanded, as Micron’s grip tightened once again.

“Then answer the question,” the giant replied.

“I don’t fucking know you asshole!” Queen screamed upward, “Do I look like some kind of god damn scientist?!”
With no answers forthcoming, the Martian walked past the uncomfortable glances of Superman and Wonder Woman, finally making his way in front of Mr. Terrific, the elderly African American staring back at him defiantly.

“Dr. Holt please tell us how to shut off the device,” he repeated again politely.

“It’s Michael. Say it! Don’t act like you don’t know me.” Mr. Terrific swallowed nervously. “You do what you have to do, I know you won’t feel a thing; you stopped doing that a long time ago didn’t you J’onn?”

For a brief second, Holt’s words took the Martian aback, sparking a memory to a time when these two men were close friends, when Mr. Terrific and the Martian Manhunter stood side by side aboard the Watchtower, guiding teams on away missions, playing challenging games of chess, discussing the complexities of the universe. Then those memories went dark, and his blood grew cold.

“I’ll ask again. Dr. Holt please tell us how to shut off the device.”

Mr. Terrific closed his eyes and prepared himself for the inevitable

xxx

Inside the Medbay, Wally watched the monitor in horror as the Manhunter dropped Lawrence Crock to the ground, the assassin’s eyes rolling up into his skull, his arm clutching at his chest.

“My God!” he gasped.

McGinnis had warned him. Life West. When you go into one of their prisons, you never leave. But murder? Is that what they’d come to?
Wally looked over at the two scientists still working diligently on the power coupling of the suit, refusing to give up. He imagined in his mind what would happen when they were finally discovered, when it was their turn in front of the Martian. He wasn’t about to let that happen, not to them. The mission was a failure, and trying to fight the League definitely wasn’t the answer, he wouldn’t stand a chance, but he might still be able to save the doctor’s lives; to live to fight another day, but if he was going to do it, he had to do it now.

“Silas Tina, it’s over. We gotta move. Once I start running, gravity lessens on objects I’m carrying. I can get both of you to the cave entrance before they have time to react. The Batmobile is parked at the far end of the mountain. Grab the Bertinelli girl, get in it and don’t look back. I’ll try to save as many of the others as I can….”

“Wally….”

“Dr. Stone, is there any other weapons in here, something I can use as a diversion…”

“Wally!” Tina exclaimed, trying her best to keep her voice down. “We're not going anywhere, we never were.”

“What do you mean?”

He turned to Silas to see him nodding. “You weren't the only one with a fail-safe,” he said with a sad smile, placing his arm on the speedster’s shoulder. “This entire island is lined with Pentaerythritol Tetranitrate. Once Bruce triggers the detonators, it will cause a chain reaction and bring the rest of the mountain down on top of us.”

“Why…why didn’t he tell me?” Wally asked in despair.

“He was hoping he wouldn’t have to, that you’d be long gone before now, but they’re here and there’s nothing more we can do. Save yourself while you can, because very shortly he’ll be taking as many of them down with us as he can.”

“But….
Tina took his hand. “We knew the risks when he signed up. We're not going to die in some prison; it'll be on our terms, our choice, but Wally if there’s any possible way, try to take Terry with you. This was always going to be our fate; it doesn’t have to be his.”

Suddenly the room grew bright; and all gathered wheeled around to see the glowing power coupling activating without warning.

“Holy Shit!”

“It's working!” McGee gasped.

Before she could answer, Wally’s body was a blur, putting on the rest of the armor, waving urgently for the final piece.

“Put it in!” he yelled, as Silas opened the chest plate, placing the power core into the receptor and twisting. They stepped away as the lightning insignia on Wally’s chest began to glow brightly. Tina ran to the computer, activating the few remaining sensor arrays in the cave.

“The Zeta Tube is still reading active. We can do this, but you need to hurry. Remember just like we talked about. The moment you reach 500 m.p.h. the portal will activate, but you’ll have to be at ten times that speed before you can enter the time stream safely.”

Silas grabbed the speedster’s shoulders. “Wally look at me! When you step foot on that treadmill, a force field will activate and cover that part of the chamber. It’s on a separate power grid. It would take them a half hour to even reach the generator to disable it, but when Bruce activates the detonators, you won’t have long. When you start running, no matter what you see, do not stop, do not look back. This was always to be a one-way mission, but if you don’t make it, it’s all for nothing.”

“You can do it Wally” Tina added urgently. “You have the power, the speed. You are the fastest man alive.”

Wally took a deep breath. “All right,” he breathed, “Let’s do it.”
“You’ll need a distraction.” Silas stated and before Wally could argue, the elderly scientist was out the door.

xxx

Michael Holt screamed in agony as the Martian’s fingers began to penetrate his chest. The others raged and pleaded while Bruce’s eyes stared helplessly at the utility closet in the corner of the cave, less than thirty feet away. That’s where their salvation lay.

It was supposed to be Crock’s job to reach the detonators inside, and the elderly man cursed himself for placing the fate of the mission in anyone’s hands but his. He was supposed to be the perfect distraction; and with the League’s eyes all focused on their renegade former teammate, Crock could have reached them easily, if his lust for vengeance hadn’t gotten the best of him. Wayne had to find a way to reach it, but for someone his age, in his condition, thirty feet might as well be a mile.

Wayne hoped that Wally had the good sense to get himself and the others to safety as quickly as he could. This was always to be their fight, not his.

Before the Martian could probe any deeper, Silas Stone stepped out from the shadows. “Stop!” he demanded. “I’ll tell you what you want, but you have to let him go.”

Bruce stepped forward, about to try and dissuade the doctor when Diana’s fist landed hard in the old man’s gut, driving him to the cold stone floor, gasping for breath.

“Don’t…say…a…word,” she growled.

The Manhunter ignored Stone’s plea and continued delving deeper into the helpless hero, when Superman suddenly appeared next to him, gripping the Martian’s forearm.

“That’s enough J’onn.”

The Martian turned, sending the Kryptonian an emotionless glare when the Man of Steel gripped it a bit harder.

“I said… that’s enough.”
The Martian complied as Clark turned to the elderly physicist.

“Silas,” he shook his head sadly, “for the love of God, I thought you were smarter than this. How could you let this madman talk you into something this reckless?”

“He told me…” Silas paused, his eyes beginning to water, “He told me if we stopped you, my son wouldn’t have died in vain.”

“He played you Silas, he played all of you.”

The elderly scientist looked at Wayne in anger nodding. “Yes he did, and I hope he’s ready for what’s about to happen.”

Kneeling on the ground, holding what was most likely a set of broken ribs, the old man smiled, message received.

“Tell us how to shut it down, before anyone else has to get hurt.”

To further his point, Micron tightened his grip around Black Canary and Batman, muffled cries of pain barely escaping his massive fingers.

“Please Silas, don’t make me ask twice.”

Suddenly the cavern began resonate with an odd hum, the sharp scent of ozone filling the air. Superman and the others looked down to see the hair on the arms beginning to tingle and rise.

Then came the lightning

A blinding streak of kinetic energy shot out across the cave, making an impossible stop and turn, picking up the discarded Thangarian weapon and rushing towards his helpless target. Seconds later the cold sparking Nth metal mace made contact with the giant’s chin, sending Micron tumbling helplessly into the iron support beams of the cave, his body shifting into normal proportions and
unconsciousness, immediately freeing his prisoners.

They room stared in collective shock as his blurred features slowed, quickly coming into clear view; scarlet armor, lighting bolt insignia, sparks of electricity dancing across his skin. Appearing next to the treadmill stood the Flash, the fastest man alive, the last speedster.

“What the hell?” Warhawk cursed.

“The meta-human that appeared in Paris I presume.” the Lantern stated succinctly.

Superman raised his hands slowly, trying not to startle the new arrival. “I don’t know what lies this man may have told you, but we are not your enemy. You have nothing to be afraid of. This can still end peacefully if you stand down and step away from the device. No one will be hurt, you have my word.”

The crimson figure paused, considering the Kryptonian’s words for a moment. Slowly he reached up, his fingers finding the locking mechanism and releasing it. The speedster removed the helmet, holding it off to his side as the room stood in stunned silence.

“I don’t think I believe you….Clark.”

“Hera!” Diana gasped.

“My God….Wally… is that really you?”

“Who?” Rex Stewart asked.

“I believe he is referring to the hero formally known as Kid Flash. The first one if I’m not mistaken” Kai Ro asserted.

Superman continued staring unbelievingly. “How…how did you get here? How is this even possible?”
“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Wonder Woman slowly came forward, standing next to her fellow teammate. “Wally listen to me carefully. We are not the enemy despite whatever Bruce may have told you. We’ve had to make certain decisions, difficult decisions to ensure humanity’s survival.”

“How? By locking up anyone that doesn’t fall in line with your brave new world? By not giving criminals or heroes any kind of due process? When was judge, jury and executioner added to the Justice League by-laws?

“You don’t understand…..”

“Diana I’ve seen the footage, I’ve been to Central City, I know about the clone. I know all the mistakes that were made, and I know you feel as guilty about it as Bruce does, but this is not the way, and if the others were still alive they’d tell you the same thing.”

“And somehow you think that going back in time is going to fix all that. Do you realize the damage you could do?”

Wally nodded. “Yeah I do, I really do. I’ve thought about nothing else. But I could save millions of lives too, and I could make sure no one ever ends up living in a world like this.”

“We saved this world. We’ve protected it.”

“You rule it Clark. You can call it anything you want, but this is a dictatorship. This is the kind of thing the Justice League fought against. We stand up for those who can’t stand up for themselves. Those were your words Clark. So who’s standing up for them now?”

“Bruce has poisoned you? He’s tricked you into doing his dirty work.”

“Dirty work? Like murder? Like what you did to Sportsmaster?”

“He was a criminal!” Superman replied angrily.
“He was a person!” Wally replied in kind. “And what about Mr. Terrific? Was he a criminal too?”

The Amazon shot a heated stare to the Martian standing impassively next to Mr. Terrific as he agonizingly crawled across the cold stone floor away from his assailant.

“This was unfortunate accident, but it’s not the way we do things. Let us show you all the good we’ve done, everything we’ve accomplished. There’s a lot more at stake than you realize.” Diana pleaded. “Then you be the judge, don’t just go on the word of a madman.”

“And end up in one of your prisons. I’ll pass.”

Superman’s jaw tightened, his patience running thin. “Wally come down here and let’s end this. You still have a future here, by our side. Don’t throw that all away for some antiquated belief. Worlds change, people change. You have to accept that.”

“And if I don’t?”

The cave grew silent at the question before Superman answered. “Then you’ll suffer the consequences, just like them.” Superman replied coldly. “No quarter given. This world doesn’t need saving, not anymore. We’ve seen to that.”

That’s when Wally finally realized what Bruce had been saying all along. The League wouldn’t listen, they couldn’t. With every fiber in their being, they believed what they were doing was right. No amount of words would ever change that. To go against them now was suicide, but he’d died once already, and to save not only this world, but his as well, he was ready to do it again.

“I’m sorry guys, I really am.”

After a troubled pause Diana looked at the speedster in disgust. “Barry would be ashamed.”

Wally took those words to heart for a moment, then looked back to the League and shrugged.
“Maybe so, but I do know this…he wouldn’t have been one of you.”

And with those words, he was gone in flash.

“There will always be a world to save” he remembered Artemis telling him as he carried her through the streets of Paris upside down, firing wildly at the drones protecting the Reach device, the final time he held her in his arms.

He thought back to that moment, back to her words, and her wisdom fueled his drive.

“You were right about that babe.”

The speedster quickly stepped onto the treadmill, briefly testing the flywheel and rollers, feeling the tightness of the belt just as a strange buzzing sound surrounded him. He glanced around to see a shimmering wave of distortion begin to form around the enclave, isolating him and the device from the rest of the chamber.

When he took his fist step the display flashed to life; incline, distance, pace, pulse, and most importantly speed, readouts and outputs that once read zero now increasing exponentially.

And his feet began to blur, and Wally ran….

xxx

Twin beams of crimson thermal energy, shot out from the Kryptonian’s eyes, bouncing futilely off the newly formed force field.
How many tricks did this man have? Superman raged, nodding to the Manhunter as J’onn made his way towards the invisible barrier. Once again his body became intangible, his ghostly silhouette placing its hands upon the shimmering boundary, beginning to phase through the force field when he released an unearthly cry, electrical feedback sending him hurdling away from the barrier.

Clark rushed to his side while J’onn’s body gyrated wildly across the cold cave floor. Superman turned back to the Dark Knight in fury only to see the elder Wayne’s wry smile disappearing behind the blinding burst of a flashbang and the smoke screen that followed.

That image froze in his mind, the smug taunting smile of someone he once consider a brother, a friend. How long had Bruce waited for this moment, how long had he planned, hoped, dreamed of it? His vain arrogance would be his downfall Clark swore to himself.

But before Superman could pursue the macabre ringmaster, he fell to his knees, clawing helplessly at both sides of his skull. The remaining Leaguers rushed to their fallen teammates, Diana’s picking up the massive form of Martian, while Kai-Ro scanned the Man of Steel. Adjusting his scan to X-ray, Green Lantern soon found the culprit. Inside Superman’s ear canal, a tiny figure pounded away at his vestibular and cochlear nerves, driving the Man of Steel into agony. Ryan Choi swung viciously at the membranes and bones surrounding him, the deafening howls of his host the roadmap to his success.

Ryan hoped Ray and his team where finding cover, because his wouldn’t last much longer. As if on cue, a tiny green set of green forceps maneuvered their way through the twists and turns of the Kryptonian’s auditory canal, before grasping the tiny scientist by the waist and pulling him free. Lantern formed a small bubble around the miniature hero, removing his air and waiting for him to fall into unconsciousness, when the sonic onslaught began again. Canary’s high pitched scream again drove him to the ground, but this time he was more prepared, forming a set of sound dampening headphones around his ears, blocking out some but not all of her attack.

Warhawk wheeled around, looking for his mace to join the fray, only to see it held firmly in the grasp of a figure in black, the red bat adorned on his chest glowing from the sparks of the Nth metal mace.

“Shit!” he growled, closing his eyes, realizing what was coming next.

“Payback’s a bitch Rex,” Batman smiled, swinging wildly and sending the winged hero, smashing into the force field and bouncing back into his Tibetan teammate.
And all the while, Wally ran

Away from the battle, Aquagirl held the fallen Sportmaster as he took his last breath, distraught that both sides had offered no assistance or cared so little about this man. This was not what she’d signed on for. This was not the League her father had allied himself with all those years ago. If she survived this battle, the Atlantean knew her days with this group were numbered. Surface dwellers were savages, they always had been, and unfortunately that truth was now fitting for her teammates as well.

“J’onn! Are you all right?” the Amazon screamed, trying to jolt him back to conciseness to no avail. Moments later, with a guttural groan the alien sat up slowly, his hands folded in front of him as he willed the pain away.

“I am fine. Assist the others while I will search for the generator that powers the forcefield. Shutting down that device is our top priority. Anything or anyone that gets in our way must be dealt with accordingly. There is no room for compassion Diana. Do you understand now?”

Diana nodded grimly. The Manhunter had been right all along, and she was a fool for not seeing it sooner. Diana quickly glanced across the battlefield, prioritizing her targets, the most important being Black Canary and her assault on Green Lantern. Even with his added defenses, his shields were failing, his concentration waning.

Diana rushed towards her target when an invisible force grabbed her midflight, driving her to the stalagmite covered ceiling. Batman’s arm became visible as it wrapped around her neck from behind, trying to position itself against her carotid artery for a choke hold. She’d held back the last time he’s touched her, maybe in some kind of misplaced loyalty to the man that had mentored him, but not again. Never again.

Diana grasped that arm as the miniature hydraulics of the Batsuit fought futilely against her savage Amazonian strength. A sickening crack followed and McGinnis cried out, as every thruster at his command tried to pull away from her. Wonder Woman grabbed the top of his head, right between the horn-like projections of his cowl, holding him in place as a vicious blow stuck him squarely, sending him flying more than a hundred feet downwards to the hard stone below. Seconds before
impact an oceanic wave erupted and caught his unconscious form, scaling down to slow flowing river and floating him away from the fight to the far side of the cave.

Wonder Woman glared down at the young Atlantean in anger. If they survived this battle, she would impart to her, one way or another, a painful lesson she wished she’d learned decades earlier; loving a Batman was an exercise in weakness and betrayal.

Diana turned back towards her initial target when a small black orb struck from behind, followed by another, and another. On the ground Mt. Terrific willed his T-Spheres to swarm the Amazon, slamming into her from all directions. Holt knew his spheres wouldn’t have a chance of bringing her down, but they could still provide enough distraction for Wally to reach the proper velocity… hopefully

And all the while, Wally ran...

From across the cave, Green Arrow watched the mechanical hoard attack Wonder Woman from all sides, and for each one she destroyed, anther took its place. Mr. Terrific’s reserves wouldn’t hold out much longer. Oliver prayed they wouldn’t have to. On the other side of the cavern Superman was still on his knees, trying to recover from the shock and nausea of Choi’s attack as well as the lasting effects of the Red Sun Generator.

What Ollie wouldn’t do you have that weapon back. They couldn't keep this up for much longer; they were out matched and outgunned. Somehow Bruce had brought the battle down to their level, but everyone involved knew it couldn’t last; they were the Justice League for Christ sakes.

Through the shimmering force field, Ollie watched as Wally’s body became nothing more than a blur, lightning contrails trailing off of him, the Zeta Tube glowing brighter and brighter. And that’s when he caught site of the Manhunter, the Martian’s gaze locked solely on to his wife. Green Arrow’s eyes searched the cave for Wayne, hoping the old man had one more distraction left in him. After several seconds of searching and prayer, Ollie knew what had to be done.

Time slowed as he reached into his quiver, finding just the right tip to attach to the shaft. In all his years fighting crime, from thieves to batterer’s, rapists to robbers, criminal masterminds to cold blooded killers, Oliver Queen had never intentionally taken a life, never even seriously considered it, not until now. There’d always been another way, and just like some cops on the force for thrifty years that had never had to fire their weapon, Ollie hoped he’d caught a break and wouldn’t have to either. At this moment he knew differently.

He notched his arrow, aiming and arming it, his target site following the Martian as the alien flew
towards the heroine, his heroine. “Don’t do it J’onn,” he cried as the Manhunter continued on unabated to his wife. Oliver closed his eyes and let the arrow fly.

The projectile was barely a few feet away when the Manhunter caught site of it, changing his density at the last second to allow it to easily pass through him, never noticing the miniature warhead opening up as it passed though his ghostly figure, dispersing a small cloud of smoky particles.

The Martian looked over at the archer in annoyance to see Oliver’s hand shake, his eyes water. When the alien turned back towards his wife, Green Arrow pressed the plunger.

“I’m so sorry J’onn,” he whispered.

The Martian dropped from the sky, landing heavily of the cold cave floor in agony; flame escaping his eyes, ears, nose and throat, even through the pores of his alien skin as he burned from the inside.

“No!!” the chamber shook as Superman deafening screams echoed throughout the cavern. Green Arrow turned sharply to see the Kryptonian’s glowing red eyes focused on him. The world slowed as Queen began to notice the smell of burning flesh, his flesh. Then the fury of pain struck as his body was cleaved in two.

Oliver writhed on the ground, his lower torso twitching and jerking across from him, unaware it was no longer part of a whole, while a few yards away the Martian howled in an unearthly cry, burning alive. The cave froze in horror, the battle paused as an unfathomable line was crossed. Diana rushed to the Martian’s side grasping his hand helplessly as the alien’s body morphed into a myriad of figures, trying futilely to find a form that could ease his suffering to no avail, while Dinah rested her husband’s head in her lap, tears flowing freely down her cheeks, rubbing strands of sweat soaked curls out of his eyes while Oliver alternated between whimpering and laughing.

Clark stood aghast; all around was a waking nightmare. In the stunned silence of the moment, in that instant there were no sides, no adversaries, no enemies, only the Justice league, allies friends. Now one lay dying and the other not far behind. The shroud of horrifying nostalgia was suddenly ripped away when the reality of the situation came crashing back. Behind the invisible force field the speedster body glowed brightly and with each step the world as they knew it teetered on the edge of extinction.

Over the years Clark had learned one frustrating unavering truth about a speedster; there was no amount of reasoning you could use once a Flash's mind was made up, there was no turning back when a decision was made. Superman would have to mourn both enemy and ally later, right know he had to find a way to stop the fastest man alive before the speedster could destroy their present and humanity's future Superman willed his body from the ground, defying gravity and preparing to pierce the shield surrounding the speedster with every ounce of his strength when something
caught his cape, ripping him from the sky and back towards his new aggressor. Clarks eyes grew wide as before him stood a seven foot tall, heavily armored ebony behemoth, and even if the twin horns of the helmet and glowing red bat emblem across the chest plate weren't the dead giveaway, the modulated voice that spoke out from it could only belong to one man. “You were right Clark, this does end tonight.”

Superman sighed. “It was always going to come down to something like this wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You know I can’t let you do this.”

“I know you’ll try.” Batman replied.

And with those words Superman rushed at him striking first, driving the armor brutally into one of the iron support beams with the force of a locomotive. Behind Batman, reinforced steel supports walls whined upon impact, rocking the cave and shifting the boulders and rubble behind them. Immediately following, an alarm went off within the suit, the external temperature reaching 1200° degrees Fahrenheit and rising. Through optic lenses, Batman saw the Kryptonian’s eyes glowing. Once the heat reached 2500°, the armor would begin to melt. Inside the suit fragile skin began to blister and burn.

Thrusters ignited from the back of the suit, dislodging the clunky armor from its iron prison, but seconds after its escape, a brutal over hand blow drove the Dark Knight down again, crushing the escape valves of the thrusters and leaving them inoperative. Superman reached down, grabbing the armored figure by the throat as Wayne’s legs dangled helplessly. Slamming him into a new section of the cave repeatedly, trying to render it occupant unconscious.

Across the cave, Terry struggled to stand, his broken arm hanging powerless behind him. The old man was going to die, right here, right now. He had to do something. Bruce Wayne had given him everything: a second chance, a purpose, a new family. He couldn’t stand idly by while this man continued to absorb that much punishment, paying for all their sins. He looked to Wally, still moving with all his might, his features literally glowing, but still in the same position, still not yet at the proper speed. Terry began to think it was unreachable.

All I have to do is maintain a constant speed.
And what’s that supposed to be?

Let’s just say faster than I’ve gone before….

McGinnis soon began to realize, not fast enough. The cave was still intact, another part of this masterplan that had gone to shit. He stumbled forward, reaching down to his belt to see what weapons he still had left, when Wonder Woman grabbed him and bent his bad arm behind him, yanking him away from the battle. McGinnis cried out in pain, as Diana threw him to the floor between the dying archer and alien. “Don’t you think you’ve done enough!” she screamed.

“Look at them! Look at them!!” she demanded. “This is all because of you. You call yourself a hero. You could have stopped Bruce at any time. You could have prevented all this if you’d just had the courage to stand up to him like Dick and Tim and Jason did. They were the other side of the coin, they were his conscious. They righted the ship when he went off course, but all you did was enable him and his insane plans because you were afraid if you didn’t he’d take away his toys and wouldn’t let you play hero. You’re not Batman; you’re a fraud wearing a uniform you didn’t earn."

Terry grimaced, trying to catch his breath through the agony of his injury. “You’re right I could have,” he gasped holding his broken arm barely into place. “I could have stopped him. I could have told him how fucking crazy he was to even consider it. Maybe I might have even turned him into you all, but then I think about all the people you’ve imprisoned, all the friends and family waiting for their turn to die. If you’re willing to do that to your oldest friends, what’s going to happen to the scared kid who wakes up one day with powers they can’t control? Or the one bad choice someone good makes because they don’t see a way out. There are no shades of gray with you all anymore, just black and white. This is a world I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy and I’ll do anything I can to make sure no one else has to. Even if it means listening to some crazy bitch with a god complex lecture me about what it takes to be a hero while watching her two best friends fight to the death… or this.”

Suddenly a batarang extended from his glove and launched from his hand before Diana could stop it, flying tried and true towards its target. The projectile impacted directly in front of the Kryptonian’s eyes, releasing its phosphorous package.

A blinding flashbang exploded between the two men, causing Superman to cover his eyes in
agony, while computerized optic lenses filtered out the blinding light. Now it was Bruce’s’ turn,

Batman struck back as the Man of Steel was knocked to the far side of the cave, slamming fiercely into a stone embankment, his armored fist slicing into his Superman’s jaw and opening a gaping wound across his cheek. Clark’s hand rushed to his face, easing it back away to see the crimson liquid dripping from his palm. Moments later the nausea and panic set in.

Kryptonite.

And all the while, Wally ran. Sensing the time stream calling out to him.

The Dark Knight wrestled the Man of Steel to the ground, his heart racing as Clark crossed his arms, trying to deflect the blows of gauntlets laden with shards of a green meteor, digging deeper into the Kryptonian’s skin. More crimson fluid flowed from the Superman’s body. Clark reached up through the fray, using what strength he had left, grabbing at the armored helmet, tearing it away to see the man inside. If he was going to die tonight, Bruce Wayne would have to look at him in the eyes to do it, but with the helmet discarded what Clark saw was horrifying. There was no trace left of the noble man he’d fought beside, the partner he’d teamed up with to save the world several times over, all he saw was decades of anger, hatred, and resentment. He saw the blood lust and demented smile of a man who had sold his soul for this moment. That’s when the battle ended for Superman, He lowered his arms, refusing to fight, refusing to defend himself.

“Fight me you son of a bitch!” Bruce demanded, hearing his own heart beating loudly in his ears, his chest aching, his breath shortening, but Clark refused.

“I’m done fighting you,” Clark rasped, spitting globs of blood from crushed ribs. “It seems that’s all we’ve ever done.

“Shut up and fight!” the old man snarled, striking over and over, traces of tears forming in the corner of his eyes.

“You’re going to destroy this world, and all those innocent people you swore to protect.” Superman coughed, blood oozing from his lips. “That’s your legacy Bruce, that’s what you’ll take to your grave.”
“That fine, but I’m taking you with me.”

xxx

Outside the cave, seismic tremors shook what was left of the mountain with every blow. Towers of boulders and stones began to fall, small trails of avalanches rushing towards the beach, while larger boulders broke away from their foundations and tumbled downward. At the bottom of the trail head, a large stone rested on top of the lifeless body of Helena Bertinelli, her bloody leg extended out from underneath. Next to her black combat boot lay a small metallic box, a red light blinking on its outer casing. When the next tremor struck, a boulder as large as a tractor dislodged from on high, rushing to escape its stoney confines. It rolled down the cliff-side, flattening everything in its path, including the small metal box on its trek. Seconds later it was obliterated behind a blinding glow, and Mt. Justice began to die.

xxx

The ceiling began to collapse as the series of explosives began their chain reaction. Green Lantern rushed to the dying heroes, forming a barrier above them when iron support beams began to give way. Aquagirl screamed a warning as a bedrock slab collapsed above, burying Warhawk in its fury. Mareena and Terry rushed to his side, trying to shift the large boulders off of him to no avail when suddenly another slab collapsed. Kai-Ro growled as he extended his shields farther, trying to protect the two while they frantically drug through the rubble trying to reach Rex Stewart. The Tibetan attempted to clear his mind and center his breathing, blocking out all unneeded emotions, but when he turned Green Arrow and Black Canary were gone as well. Moments later so was his shield. Terry reached over and held Mareena in his arms as their world began to end.

Despite the carnage, Batman remained unabated, frenzied even as he placed both hands around Superman’s throat squeezing with all his might. As long as there was life left in Clark Kent’s body, he would not stop. There was no more keen intellect, no more conscious thought, just rage, pure unbridled hate. Revenge for every person he could not save, no matter who the cause.

Superman’s eyes began to haze under Batman’s grip, his skin turning an ashy grey from the exposure to the Kryptonite. Sudden panic raced through Bruce’s body, but yet he still did not stop. The task wasn’t complete yet. He barely heard her words, as she wrapped a powerful arm around his neck from behind.

“Don’t make me do this Bruce.” Diana pleaded, but her words fell on deaf hears, she knew they
would. There was no more Bruce Wayne left in him, only Batman.

With a sharp twist, tears running down her cheeks, she broke his neck.

Wally pushed harder when the treadmill began to shake. Above him sand and stone collapsed down upon the shimmering barrier, the force field sparking and straining under the massive weight. He looked back and time began to slow. All around him was death and destruction. New and old friends, mentors and teammates, all in the final moments of their lives.

He watched helplessly as Green Lantern’s last ounce of will escaped and the bodies he so bravely protected were crushed. He looked to Terry McGinnis holding Aquagirl in his arms, disappearing behind a shower of fallen earth. He saw the lifeless body of Lawrence Crock shaking with each wave of rock landed all around him, but when he caught Wonder Woman’s eyes, time actually stopped.

It was if his spirit had left his body when he glanced into her piercing blue eyes. So much pain, so much sorrow and regret. She held the lifeless body of Bruce Wayne in one arm, and shielding the dying one of Clark Kent with the other.

She stared at Wally, not so much at him as through him. Watching the hypnotic glimmer of the Zeta Tube in the background, imagining what lay behind it. The days of the Justice League were at an end, and with their absence, in time the world would revert back to the way it was, and perhaps that wasn’t a bad thing. It harkened back memories of when they were humanity’s guardians, not their rulers. When people looked up to the sky in hope, not fear.

She wasn’t afraid of death, to be hero you had to put that fear to rest for the greater good. What she feared was a world that she could not protect, she could not cherish. There would always be powerful forces both on Earth and beyond, silently waiting for their chance to strike. Without people willing to stand up, what chance did any of them really have?

Perhaps Bruce was right; they had lost their way, but there was more than enough blame to go around, not that it mattered now. But humanity still had a flicker of hope, and it rested at the feet of someone who’d died once already to save it. It would fall on him to do it again.

Through the deafening explosions, crumbling earth, and the tears in her eyes, she whispered one final word with her last breath. She looked to Wally West and simply said. "Run."
Wally tuned back towards the portal with new found strength, what little speed he’d lost observing their final moment he gained back as reserves of energy he never knew he had sprang to life. He watched the odometer closely, seeing his speed rise by the second. Above him, the force field was about to give way, but he kept going. He dug deep, cursing every word that came to mind as his chest ached and his legs screamed. The Zeta Tube in front of him now burned brightly, as a new universe formed on the other side, almost within reach. He closed his eyes and willed himself to that final gear. Suddenly the odometer began to blink and sirens blared. A nanosecond later the treadmill shut down and the belt locked, propelling the speedster into the void.

For the second time in his life Wally West ceased, falling down the rabbit hole, hoping Alice was waiting for him on the other side.

Chapter End Notes

First off congrats to all YJ fans out there. We did it, and places like these and the stories that have been told are a big reason why.

I hope I conveyed that the Justice League are not the bad guys here, that their ideology differs from Batman, but ultimately they still have the same goal, to protect the world and keep it safe, but after decades of disagreements they all knew there would be no compromise. In the end all of them have become heroes and villains at the same time. Now to see how Wally can fix it. Things are about to get....strange.

I'll be going back through and searching for typos along the way, and if you're digging the story, stop and drop me a comment or review. Motivating and appreciated. Hope you enjoy.
Mid-louge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mid-louge

Tranquility

Gently floating through an ocean of stars, a symphony of light and energy, extending out into forever.

Harmony

No longer fearful of success, of failure, of dying. At peace with his place in the universe.

Freedom

Complete contrast to the previous journey to this realm. Immunity to gravity and its burdens. A latitude of movement. Weightless in thoughts and fears.

Desire


Destination


xxx

Gentle waves guided him as he sailed towards the vast construct, his velocity accelerating ever so slightly, the savageness of Bruce Wayne's demise and all the others light years behind him and growing farther by the second. In this endless dreamscape, he thought back to his life: friends, family, a better tomorrow, the perfect moment. He was meters away from the singularly, staring directly into the glowing tunnel forming inside, stretching out to infinity, the scientist inside him
curious yet uncaring of concepts of gravity, momentum, climate, survival. A leap of faith. His momentum continued forward, and as the smallest molecule of his mass barely grazed the event horizon, tranquility was replaced by chaos. Blinding images, deafening sounds sped past on him from all sides. Visions of future's past, memories of a former life blazed through this his mind's eye. Moments he'd lived, other's he hadn't.....yet.

It’s no good Barry, oh Artemis is so going to kill me.
Wally, you're in denial.
Well, I remembered, too. I got you your favorite food. Everything.
Who are you? What have you done with him?
Wally's fast enough when he wants to be. We're suddenly out of ice cream
So not that desperate, not yet.
Uh, pretty sure it's after midnight, but we can show you the moon
Five years? We were together five years?
Hello Megan!
Something was stolen from the Batcave; something very specific.
Who are you kidding? It only gets more dangerous from here.
Okay. And Wally, It sounded fine out loud.
I was thinking maybe...maybe we should move in together.
It's called regicide.
You knew. You knew from the beginning why we were really here.
How are we supposed to be a team if he doesn't trust us with his secrets?
Stay out of my business Baywatch! Stay out of my life!
If the big guns are fighting plants, who do you think we'll be fighting?
What were you thinking? How could you let him put on the helmet.
He’s asking for M’gann.
I left you behind because you know my back story. I didn't want my best pal questioning my objectivity.
Step away from her...now!
I love you Wally.
Traveling down this path, legs and feet maintained a blinding pace despite the fact nothing physically existed for them to make contact with. The chronometer on the armored glove continued its countdown while the glowing tachyon emitter grew brighter and brighter, the destination nearing.

In the distance a shining star floated in a mosaic of multi colored clouds. Rotating ever so slowly, observing, watching, guarding. As the speedster grew closer, the object began to come into focus. A brilliant radiance gleamed off its golden surface when more moments began to wash over him, much different than before; familiar, defined, profound. A specific moment in time.

More like "Doctor Fake." Guy knows a little advanced science and "Dumbledores" it up to scare the bad guys and impress the babes.

I'm just an old coot Fate used to put on. Until my wife Inza convinced me there was more to life. Ah, she was a real pistol, that Inza. Anywho, Klarion's after the helmet. If he gets his sticky little mitts on it, he'll turn the planet into his own personal playground of pandemonium.

This battle is pointless. You sought to take the helmet before it gained a host. But you are too late.

We both know that creature is no cat, Witch Boy.

Chaos must not be allowed to reign.

Bully. Killjoy Geezer

Without your familiar, you have no anchor to this reality.

We're out of here!

Have faith in what you can't explain. Believe in what you can no longer deny.

Find your own little spitfire, one who won't let you get away with nothin'

The object before him began to take form, blockading the center of the metaphysical tunnel the traveler sped, unwilling or unable to move from his path. As the speedster approached, the golden object spun around, becoming solid, becoming distinct. The eyes of Fate glowed brightly inside the helmet casting down upon him, while inside it an elderly man bargained with the Lord of Order to free his prisoner and accept his companionship for eternity. Suddenly Dr. Fate began to shake violently. Waves of temporal energy crashed within the astral plane, driving them all to the ground, while the agonizing screams of three beings echoed throughout the Tower and finally into silence. The speedster watched helpless as his soul was ripped away from his body, drug inside the helmet while an empty set of tachyon armor sped away towards oblivion.
On the helipad of Boston Memorial Hospital, Dr. Robert Green stepped out to the Skyport, met immediately with cold swirling northeastern winds and the loud whine of turbines as the Life-Flight Helicopter touched down.

A triage team stood at his side, as the bay doors opened, and paramedics rushed the gurney down the ramp. Quietly following behind, a dark skinned teenager disembarked, standing off to the periphery.

The doctor and his team rushed to the patient’s side.

“Ok people talk to me. What do we have?”

As they rolled him into the emergency room, paramedics began their report. “The patient is a male sixteen year old meta-human, Justice League affiliation. Increased metabolism enhanced thermal homeostasis. He was in some kind of accident up in Salem. Patient is non-responsive with possible mid to severe neurological trauma. Blood pressure is 80 over 50, pulse 48 and dropping.”

“Ok. So we’re dealing with speedster. I’ll need three CC’s of fludrocortisone. Let’s get him stable first, then we’ll need MRI and CT scans. Also we should check…”

“He’s crashing!” one the nurse interrupted urgently.

The trauma team rushed in, stripping the teen of his button down and long sleeve shirt, lifting him over to the examination table. A respirator was placed over his mouth as the defibrillator panels charged.

“Clear!” the doctor ordered as a thousand volts of electric current shot through the teen’s chest.

The ER staff looked to the EEG as their patient’s heart rate flat-lined. “Give me five CC’s of adrenaline stat.” Green ordered as the defibrillator’s paddle charged again. A nurse injected the compound into the I.V. stepping back as the doctor shocked him again. A few moments later the monitor finally began to beep to the room’s collective relief, as the teen’s heart began to beat on its own.

It was one of the longest five minutes of their lives as they watched his vitals finally stabilize.
“Call downstairs to the neuro labs, have them clear their schedules. I want these scans done within the hour, and someone contact Dr. Leslie Thompkins over at Gotham General. She’s the Justice League’s go-to specialist for everything meta-human.”

Lying there on the table, oblivious of monitors and machines, doctors and specialists, all Wally West could do was sleep, per chance to dream……

Chapter End Notes

Just for the die-hards, I aged everyone up a year to better fit the story. Also I think I’ve created the term midlouge. Anyway, enjoy and review if you have the time. This was just a short chapter to set the stage and match the prologue. Longer ones are on the horizon and still the norm.
Chapter 12

Wally West stood at the mirror of his cramped hospital room, staring intently at the person staring back at him. The teen in the reflection was skinny, awkward, perpetual wind swept hair, face covered in a patchwork of freckles, forehead showing the faintest traces of acne, and teeth in desperate need of their retainer. It felt like he was living in someone else’s skin. This was definitely not part of the plan.

He'd already had his panic attack days earlier when he awoke in an unfamiliar room, the languishing scent of disinfectant and latex draped throughout, surrounded by doctors and nurses he didn't know prodding at him like some kind of test animal. The attending physician must have thought he was crazy when Wally demanded the date, but those ramblings were somewhat expected for someone who'd been in a coma for almost two months.

"Two months," he sighed, still in disbelief. "How did this happen?"

The tachyon emitter should have slowed his descent through the wormhole. He should have exited the time stream and arrived somewhere in the late 2010's, early 2011's at the latest. He should be a twenty-two year old man opening a flash drive in a French cafe somewhere, reading through a very detailed dossier on how to change the timeline subtly, from the outside, avoiding all contact with any and everyone he'd ever known. But when he looked into the reflection, none of that was going to happen now. He was sixteen again, and there was not a damn thing he can do about it.

He had so many questions besides the obvious one. What in the hell was Dr. Fate doing in the time stream in the first place? One minute Wally was watching history in reverse, and the next there was a literal giant gold helmet floating in the middle of a wormhole. At first he thought it was mirage, then some kind of illusion, then possibly a fear induced hallucination; that was about the time he felt the pull.

It was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. He'd heard stories of out of body experiences before; people looking down at themselves on an operating table as doctors worked desperately to bring them back to life. It felt like that, but also like falling asleep in a dream. The next thing Wally knew he was watching his lifeless body flying down the time stream without him.

Not lifeless; soulless. It felt like being sucked into the helmet all over again.
Could the Lord of Order really have transferred his consciousness from one body to another? Was he really *that* powerful? And if so *why*? Did Fate sense him coming? Was he there to stop him, or help him? Had he known from that first day in the Tower what would happen in the future? And of course the biggest question on Wally's mind; what in the world was he going to do now?

Maybe Fate had been in the time stream all along, battling the witch boy in a number of realities and dimensions including time, but right now figuring out how he’d gotten there was not nearly as important as where he was going.

So many questions, so little answers, unless of course he wanted to go find the helmet and ask the good doctor himself.

*Fat chance.*

He supposed he was lucky not to still be trapped inside that damn thing to begin with. Wally vividly remembered being stuck inside the helmet like it was yesterday, and in a strange way it was; fighting Klarion, powerless to help, Kent Nelson's soul standing by his side, bargaining for his freedom. Wally didn't use to believe in things like, magic, souls, and astral planes, but after that experience; after watching Nelson die and then having a conversation with him inside a mystical helmet twenty minutes later, well that kind of changes things.

This was not the mission he'd prepared for. He was supposed to do this from the outside looking in; avoiding the team and the League at all costs. That's what he'd studied, that's what he'd rehearsed.

*Boy, Fate had really screwed him over.* It sounded funny putting it like that, so at least he still had his sense of humor, because that's all he had now. No armor, no flash drive, no dossiers, no codes to the Batcave; no chance. Winging it had not been part of the plan, but it was now.

His last memories before entering the Zeta Tube were horrifying; the thing nightmares were made of. He'd watched helplessly as people he'd loved and respected destroyed each other in unspeakable ways. Men and woman he'd looked up to since childhood harboring so much hate and vile, throwing aside everything they'd ever stood for, becoming what they'd sworn to fight.

A part of him wanted to come clean, find Batman and the others and just tell them everything that was going to happen; try and minimize the damage and with their help make sure that future would never happen. But then he thought back to the doctors; Palmer, Stone, McGee, Holt, and Choi, all brilliant men and women who’d come to the same conclusions way before they ever realistically considered proposing the mission.
Butterfly effects, chaos theory, recurrence. All scientific concepts that state that even the smallest causes can have large effects.

Get in; get out, stay of history’s way, great advice except for the part where he was now smack dab in the middle of it. The scientist in Wally knew they were right, but if he was going to succeed, if he was going to change history and save all those lives, he'd have to do it from the inside now while still trying to stay as close to the path they’d laid out as possible. To start he needed to find out what part of that path he was actually on.

It wasn't going to be a easy, but honestly what choice did he have? He'd seen how this story ended once already, and it was time to write a new chapter.

Thanks to being brain blasted by the good doctor along with his two month cat nap, his best estimates put him about a month late into his mission. He’d definitely missed Bialya and Psimon as well as the Terror Twins and Belle Reve, along with a handful of other side missions not of much consequence, but when it came to time travel, who the hell knows if they were or not.

On the notebook he’d hidden under his mattress, he'd tried to piece together the best he could the parameters Batman had laid out, but there were pieces missing, big pieces, and he had no chance of figuring out what they were trapped in here.

Behind him he heard the rap on the door as Dr. Thompkins walked in right on schedule, every four hours on the dot. No wonder Batman liked her so much; she was as anal as he was. Along with her was that damn nurse that had to poke him at least three times to hit a vain, accelerated healing or not it still hurt and it was beginning to wear on his last nerve.

“Good morning B-03.” she smiled, “how did you sleep?”

Wally chuckled at the name she’d given him; at least he wasn’t John Doe anymore. Secret identities where important, not just for him, but his family and the hospital staff as well. Thompkins was more than aware of his identity, along with half of the Justice League's, but the nurse shadowing her didn’t. All he was to her was a series of charts, readings, biometrics, and veins that to the life of her she could not find.

“And slept like a rock Doc, so good I think I’m ready to go home, what do you say?” he grinned, hoping this time that the patented Wally West charm would win her over, despite that fact that it had never worked on anyone…ever.
“Let’s see what your blood work has to say, and then we can talk about it.”

“That’s what you said yesterday,” he groaned.

“And if you don’t stay in bed and get some rest, it’s probably what I’ll be saying tomorrow too.”

“Yes mam,” he sighed, walking back towards the bed, rolling his eyes as the nurse placed the cuff on his arm.

“Fingers crossed,” she smiled nervously, running her finger up the crook of his elbow.

“Ow… Shit!” he winced, as true to form, nurse Ratchet once again missed the mark.

“Language!” the elderly doctor scolded.

“Jeez,” the young nurse said exasperated. “I am sooo sorry.”

“This is a teaching hospital B-03, I’m sure when you first started your crime fighting career you fell flat on your face a couple of times too.”

“Yes mam,” he groaned once again, assured his history of clumsiness was legend amongst the League and their doctor.

“Got it!” the young nurse smiled proudly, taking off the cuff and filling up her vials.

Thompkins then placed her stethoscope to his chest, checked to see that his eyes dilated properly, and then sent the nurse off to the lab. When she was safely out of ear shot, the doctor sat down on the bed next to the speedster.

“So Mr. West, how are you really feeling?”
Wally dropped his shoulders. “Tired, achy, pissed. Doc I just want to go home.”

“I know you do Wally, and as soon as all your levels are back to where they should be, we can discuss it, but what’s happened to you is unprecedented. As far as we know, only two people have ever worn the helmet; that’s you and Kent Nelson, and with his death we need to be extra vigilant so that whatever happened to him doesn’t happen to you. You can see why we’re being overly cautious.”

Wally nodded sadly, almost forgetting that Kent Nelson died trying to protect him; another death on a list that was becoming much too long, even if technically they hadn’t happened yet.

Thompkins tried to lighten the mood. “You know how fond I am of you, so don’t be offended when I tell you that we are as sick of you as you are of us. The kitchen staff asked me to remind you once again that Chicken Whizzies are not on the menu, so stop asking.”

A broad grin broke out on the speedster face.

“But I do have some good news; you have a visitor who’d like to drop in and say hi.”

“Really?” he replied surprised. “Yeah that’d be great!”

“I’ll send them in then. Ten minutes tops, then you’ll need to rest.”

“Go it,” he said excitedly, but when she walked out Wally became nervous, unsure who it could be and what he should do. If it had been his parents, surely she would have said so. The most logical answer would be Barry Allen, who else would just appear in a Massachusetts hospital out of the blue. The other choice had to be Dick Grayson, because he knew if their roles were reversed, he would have stayed as long as it took to make sure his best pal was ok. But no matter which one it was, he had to stay calm and act normal, hoping the rivers of time would flow as normal as they could, but when the young raven haired teen entered the room, that hope was quickly dashed.

“Hi,” she said pleasantly. “I’m Zatanna. Giovanni Zatrara’s my dad. The doctors here called him in to consult on your case, since it was…you know…magical and all that. So how are you feeling?”
Oh shit… was how he was feeling. He wasn’t supposed to meet Zatanna Zatara for months, not until Giovanni brought her to the cave to meet the other young heroes, not until they were to go on the hunt for Red Tornado in Yellowstone. So now what? Another time ripple he’d caused? Another paradox? How many more things had he screwed up?

Thoughts rushed through his mind at light speed. What if Zatara had figured out he wasn’t who he was supposed to be. But he was him, just not the him people remembered. What was he supposed to say? Something dumb he supposed but not too dumb because he…his thoughts raced on and on as the girl beside him continued to stare at him curiously.

“Uh…are you ok?”

“Yeah,” he swallowed anxiously, “Sorry. I’m Wally. Wally West.”

“Really? Wally?”

“Yeah I know,” he groaned. “It’s a family name.”

“No it’s fine. I’ve just…never met a Wally before. Not exactly a common name, unless you were born in the 1940’s.” As soon as she heard the words out loud she immediately winced. “Ooo sorry that was kind of rude. I didn’t mean it like that…I’m kind of nervous.”

“Nervous? Why?”

“I’ve just never met someone like you before.”

“What, a speedster?”

“No”, she laughed, “a teenager. You know with powers. I don’t get to meet a lot of people. My dad doesn’t even let me go to high school, I’m home schooled. Talk about boring. He keeps telling me that the League has a team of young heroes that he’d introduce me to sometime, I just didn’t think it would be like this.”

“Me either,” he chuckled. “So um…you’re a magician?”
“Well actually I prefer the term sorceress,” and with that she spoke the words to back up her claim. “Srewolf raeppa.”

Suddenly on the table to Wally’s right, a vase and flowers appeared, complete with a note attached to the base. *Get well soon, Zatanna*

Wally laughed out loud. “Ok that’s really cool.”

“Thanks. I’m still learning, I’m nowhere close to my dad’s skill set …yet.” she grinned devilishly, “but I’m getting there. I was working on this spell to show your friends the next time they came around.”

“Friends? What from the team? You met them?” he asked anxiously.

“Yeah a couple of them. Let’s see there was …Robin, Aqualad, Miss Martian…um Superboy and…Artemis I think?”

“Yeah,” Wally sighed, “that’s about all of em.”

"Great," he groaned. *Time stream officially crashed.*

“Even some guy name Speedy, but he got kind of mad when I called him that. No offense but that guy's kind of a tool.”

“Yeah, that’s him all right.”

“They’re really worried about you.”

“They’re my friends, what can I say.”

“You’re lucky. They seemed really nice.”
“I’m sure they thought the same about you.”

Zatanna smiled. “Thanks, you’re sweet. I really hope so. It would be nice to have some friends my age, instead of the stodgy old guys my dad hangs out with. Anyway he said he might take me to the cave in a couple of weeks to officially meet everyone and take a tour. Is it really a cave? Or is that like some kind of secret lair nickname.”

“Nope,” he shrugged, “it’s really a cave”

“Yuck.”

“No it’s cool inside. Not like bats and stalagmites and creepy stuff. It’s like the Hall of Justice… just underground.”

“Well that does sound a bit better. I’m excited. We’ll look, I better get out of here before Dr. Thompkins chases me out. It was really nice meeting you Wally, I hope I see you again soon.”

Oh you will...

“Yeah me too. Thanks for dropping by.”

“Anytime. Take care Wally.”

“Yeah, you too.”

When the door shut behind the sorceress, Wally’s head fell to his hands.

“Not good,” he moaned. “Not good at all. Awake all of three days and already screwing up the future.”

Yep it was official, instead of carefully wading into the time stream, he’d done a cannonball.
Three weeks later, a red Toyota Camry slowly pulled up beside the abandoned Admiral’s Row Warehouse district near the Central City Marine Yards, built just on the edge of the Mississippi River. Across the Gateway Bridge, Wally could see the lights of Keystone shining brightly. This wasn’t the best part of town to be in, but that was usually why League built their Zeta Tubes there, to be away from prying eyes and nosey residents.

Rudy West put the car in park and turned off the headlights. He turned to his son and sighed. “I’m not happy about this.”

Wally nodded. “I know dad, it’s just a visit I promise. Uncle Barry said he’d pick me up here as soon as I was done…by car I assume,” the red head said with a smile, but his dad wasn’t buying in.

“I don’t know how you talked your mother into this.”

“Dad relax. It’s just a visit, that’s it. I’ve caught up with two months of school work, done all my chores without even being asked, and not used my speed once.”

“Wally…” Rudy frowned.

“Ok, a little bit on my homework, but that’s it I swear.”

His father’s frown grew sterner.

“And some of my chores, but you have to admit, I’ve been a model prisoner.”

Finally Rudy cracked a smile. “Yeah yeah, but Wally this is just a furlough, not a full pardon. Your mom and I haven’t decided yet if we’re going to let you go back full time or not.”

“I know Dad, but can we not do this right now please? I just want to be normal for a while and hang with my friends. No missions, no saving the world, just pizza and a movie.”
“Fine, just be careful. I want you home by midnight ok? No excuses.”

“You got it.” Wally smiled

“Don’t be late Wally, I’m serious.” His father added as Wally exited the car. Rudy West rolled up his window and drove off into the night.

With the headlights disappearing into the distance, Wally took a deep breath and started down the alleyway. It had been a long three weeks. He’d talked to Dick on and off, catching up the best he could without being too obvious. Justice League protocols prevented discussing previous or current missions on open channels, like that was a big worry right now. He was pretty sure traveling through and altering time was a far stiffer infraction.

It was surreal taking to Dick again, not quite like old times, but close enough. His voice was higher, full of energy, like he didn’t have a care in the world. The Dick Grayson he’d left behind was nothing like this anymore, and that made him sad. Everyone grows up, everyone goes their own way, but if he was being honest with himself, things between them had changed years before there was ever a Reach.

It started the day he told Robin that he and Artemis were leaving the team and going to Stanford. Dick played the excited best friend, giving them the “I’m so happy for you guys” spiel, but deep down he could hear the hurt, he could feel it. Wally always wondered if it was because he didn’t want them to go, or maybe because maybe he wanted to come with them. Dick Grayson deserved a normal life more than any of them, but being in the Batfamily was like being in a street gang sometimes; once you’re in, you never leave.

The last few months had been rough between them, fighting, arguing, resenting each other. Looking back Wally realized how selfish he’d been, not caring how much rested on Nightwing’s shoulders, or all the stress, strain, and sleepless nights it may have caused. All the speedster cared about was getting his girlfriend back no matter the cost. Wally had been a shitty friend, but now fate (no pun intended) had given him a chance to make things right. He just wished he didn’t have to lie to him to achieve it.

Wally hated lying; lying to his parents, to his uncle, to his best friend. Ok, sure he lied about magic once, but that was only to get the girl, and all he had to do was look in the mirror to see how well that had worked out for him.
Other than protecting his identity and those around him, keeping secrets was just not one of his superpowers. How in the hell did Bruce Wayne keep so many of them without it eating him up inside?

He’d always been close with his parents, and they’d been more than understanding about his extra-curricular activities. He’d put them through hell and back on too many occasions be it blowing himself up and almost burning the house down when he was thirteen, or ceasing to exist five years from now. That latter was one moment he planned on not repeating. After this latest stunt of being in a coma, they deserved better, they deserved honesty, and he just couldn't give it to them. Seconds from death, they were the last people on his mind; his girlfriend being the first.

Artemis

He’d tried so hard to avoid the subject, to not obsess about her and stay focused, but of course he’d failed miserably at it. How many nights had he just stared at his phone, hoping it would ring, hoping for a text? How many times had he stepped out his front door and fought the urge to race towards Gotham? He couldn't avoid these feelings forever and he couldn't avoid her. Artemis was once the love of his life, maybe one day she would be again, but the mission had to be his top priority. Everything else, including her would have to come second. Anytime his thoughts strayed from that objective, all he had to do was remember the smoking crater that was once Central City, the final brutal moments of Bruce Wayne, Oliver Queen, J’onn J’onzz and Terry McGinnis. Those memories were what kept things in perspective

Wally felt fairly sure he was on target about the missions he’d missed, but the only way to be certain would be to access the Justice League mainframe back at the cave. No one would be overly suspicious of the speedster scanning through old files, catching up on all that he’d missed; the bad guys, the objectives, the briefings, but he had to be careful. There was no flash drive anymore, and every search, every keystroke would be tracked and logged.

Tonight had to be the night. It was all over the news; the 6.9-magnitude earthquake off of the coast of Japan's Kyushu Island. Tsunami waves bringing back traumatic memories and fears of the devastation of the Fukushima disaster.

Robin had cut their conversation short when the alert came in. All hands on deck. The odd thing was Wally had no memory of such an event. Maybe the League had handled it without them last time, or maybe there was no earthquake. Butterfly effect strikes again he feared. Regardless the cave would be empty tonight, and this was his chance.

Halfway down the dilapidated alleyway, he found the broken down telephone booth off to the side. He was never a huge fan of Zeta Tubes to begin with, always preferring to stretch his legs than have his molecules scrambled, and the last two times he’d used them had been…disasters.
Wally took a deep breath and closed his eyes, shutting the door behind him. “Now or never I guess.” Seconds later alien radiation consumed him and swept him away.

xxx

_Recognize Kid Flash B-03_

Wally stepped out of the blinding tunnel, hands frantically searching himself, making sure everything was where it was supposed to be. Satisfied he stepped down from the platform. Surreal didn’t begin to even cover it. Everything was just how he remembered…the first time, not so much the second.

The cave still reeked of burnt cookies surprisingly enough, an amusing memory soon to be replaced by far worse ones. Where the kitchen stood Micron had nearly crushed Terry McGinnis and Dinah Lance to death. By the training ring was where Bruce Wayne took his last breath, where Wonder Woman spoke her last word to him. He shook those thought from his mind and made his way through the base.

In the media room, he sat down on the couch, finding the remote and searching the channels for CNN. On the screen appeared a single reporter decked out in heavy rain gear as she began describing the scene.

“The earthquake began around 9:30 PST, approximately thirty miles off the coast. Aftershocks soon rocked this small island and have been felt as far north as Tokyo. However the greater threat that still exists is the devastating wave trains radiating out in all directions, including towards Kyushu Island. Thankfully the Justice League arrived just in time.”

The reporter standing near the town square was replaced by scenes of cracked streets and burning buildings, the camera changing viewpoints to see Superman and Wonder Woman flying handfuls of residents to higher ground, while the Batplane hovered in the distance, dropping first-aid supplies to Red Cross workers below.

A meteorologist then appeared on screen, explaining the science behind the phenomenon directing the cameraman to pan out towards the shoreline where off in the distance the audience could see Green Lantern and the Flash working together to form a barrier to absorb wave after wave of the ocean’s fury.

“The Red Cross has set up temporary housing near the capital and so far all reports coming in have been primarily minor injuries and property damage. The swift evacuations by the Justice League
have most likely prevented major loss of life, but the search for survivors will continue on through
the night. Reporting from Kyushu Island; Chad Myers CNN.”

The speedster began to notice the smell of burnt rubber, looking down to see his right foot tapping
in a blur, puffs of smoke coming off the soles, a nervous habit made worse by the site of the
rescuing heroes who were just literally weeks ago killing each other. There’d been no mention of
the Team, but none of the other Leaguers either, the most likely explanation being the work done
behind the scenes. He left the television blaring for further updates and threw the remote to the
couch. Now was as good a time as any to begin his search, thinking back to remember the
username and password he hadn’t used in ages. As he walked towards the master computer, he felt
his stomach rumble. Quickly he decided that he’d work better on a full stomach.

Wally walked to the pantry, searching the cabinets. It had been a long time since he stepped foot in
the place, but if memory served Megan’s infamous snickerdoodles were always readily available.
He pulled milk from the refrigerator along with a piece or three of someone’s leftover pizza, and
had just begun stuffing his mouth with pepperoni when felt the room begin to shake and the sound
of hangar doors opening. Moments later Wally nervously turned to face his old team, a team of
ghosts.

“Guy goes on vacation for two months and the first thing he does when he gets back to work is eat
everyone else’s dinner, classic KF.” Robin cackled, walking over and high fiving his best friend.

“It is good to see you awake my friend, you have been missed.” Kaldur said kindly, walking up and
placing a firm hand on Wally’s shoulders.

They were so young; it was like looking through an old photo album, but by the time the Reach
Invasion nears its end, they will all look so worn and tired, much too old for people in their mid-
twenties. Wally suddenly couldn’t recall a time when Aqualad wasn’t wearing heavy black armor,
or when Robin was still this short. It amazed the speedster how much Dick will change in the
oncoming years, when he will be taller than the speedster, more muscular, more commanding, and
he and his best friend will nearly come to blows near the end.

The speedster was just about to try and speak through a mouth full of pizza dough when green
arms wrapped around him, squeezing tight.

“Wally! You’re back!” the excited Martian exclaimed.

“And eating my dinner…” Superboy deadpanned, patting Wally on the arm. “Glad to have you
back. Stay out of my food,” he smiled.
Despite the fact that she was a shape-shifter, despite the fact she aged differently than humans, M’gann still looked so young, so new. Maybe it was her child like enthusiasm, maybe it’s the gleam in her eyes, the genuineness of her love. Wally remembered how much she changed after Marie Logan’s death, even more so after she and Connor broke up months later. After that she seemed to wear an invisible veil of sadness. The speedster then realized he never saw her this happy again.

Conner was hard to even look at. “It’s not him” Wally repeated to himself, but the resemblance to the man that tore Green Lantern’s head from his shoulders, to the creature that wore that psychopathic smile as he rampaged through cities, leaving a trail of death and destruction in his path, was unnerving. Wally found it difficult not to think of him in another other way other than the weapon of mass destruction he was conceived to be. He wasn’t created to replace Superman, he was created to conquer him.

The speedster pushed those thoughts down deep as he nodded sheepishly, holding his finger in the air while he tried to swallow. “Hey guys,” he said through stuffed cheeks, "long time no see."

Then a familiar snark echoed out from behind the crowd, a husky unmistakable voice “Wall--man huh? Eating things that don’t belong to him, will wonders never cease?”

His breath hitched, his heart raced as he turned towards her. It’s the moment he’d both dreamed and dread. As the archer maneuvered her way through a sea of teammates, it was all he can do to stifle a gulp and not choke on his food.

His last memory of her, the last good one at least was carrying her through the streets of Paris, ignoring com chatter and kissing her endlessly under the Eiffel tower, talking of future hopes and dreams that were never meant to be. He never regretted racing through that Zeta Tube towards the Artic any more than he did right now.

She was just as he remembered, a dangerous combination of beauty and grace, chock full of attitude and the skills to back it up. Her hair was little longer, her body a bit smaller, but her eyes were still that mysterious shade of grey and as always she remained tauntingly beautiful despite never recognizing it, but to him she was perfect. No matter how infatuated he once was with a certain Martian, back then Wally West was already in love with the archer, he just didn’t know it yet.

Artemis walked up in front of the speedster. “Still have those tickets to the magic show?” she teased.

“Very funny,” he groaned, trying not to let his eyes linger too long.
“It’s really good seeing you guys again.”

“You should have told us you were coming?” Dick spoke from his right, handing the speedster his glass of milk so he would wash everything done properly.

“I know, but you all were on a mission and I didn't want to bug you. Besides you had bigger things to worry about. Speaking of which; why are you all even back yet?”

“We were halfway across the Pacific when Batman called it off. I guess they thought they had it under control. And to think we were this close to having the first Justice League/Team team-up. At least you didn't miss it; I would have hated to hear you whine about it for the next month.”

Robin then paused uncomfortably. “You are coming back… right?”

“I'm working on it,” Wally smiled when his stomach growled again to his embarrassment. The Martian quickly took notice.

“You're hungry. I can warm up some pot roast if you like?”

The speedster smiled. “Megs that would be awesome.”

xxx

Later that evening, as they sat around the kitchen counter, Robin and Aqualad caught him up to speed on their latest adventures.

"...and then it turned into a full blown prison riot. I mean seriously, can you imagine being surrounded by Mammoth and Blockbuster and all those ice villains with no back up? I still don’t know how Superboy and Miss M kept it together.”

“Conner and M’gann were most fortunate to come out relatively unscathed,” Kaldur added.

“I wouldn't call being frozen in a block of ice by Killer Frost exactly unscathed,” the Martian corrected, placing a third helping on Wally’s plate.
“Thankfully Superboy was there to break you free before you suffered any permanent damage.”

“Yeah,” she replied a bit detached, her eyes glancing over at the media room quickly before shape-shifting back to her chipper self.

Wally’s brows furrowed a bit, momentarily tuning out Robin’s story as he watched Megan play it off as if nothing troubled her. The speedster’s eyes darted around the room, searching the cave when he found Connor sitting alone on the couch in front of the television.

Noticing the Martian’s brief wistful expression, that’s when he remembered. It would be months from now when the speedster would overhear Megan sharing the story with the girls of when she and Conner finally admitted their feelings for each other, when they shared their first kiss. It had all happened in Belle Reve, that’s where they fell in love. It sounded as if the mission had gone pretty much as he remembered, so why were things so different now?

He continued to stare over at Connor as he sat unmoving, lost in the static of the big screen when Artemis walked into the den, her hair still damp from the shower. The archer gracefully sat down next to the Kryptonian, taking the remote from his hand and changing the channel, before placing her head on his shoulder and curling up next to him. That’s when Wally’s heart dropped.

Voices became mindless buzzing around him as the speedster focused in on the girl he loved, snuggled up to the hulking teen. For just a moment there was no mission, there was no world to save, there was no Superboy Prime; there was just heartbreak.

Finally the buzzing subsided as Robin’s voice broke through. “Earth to KF, come in KF.”

Wally blinked his eyes, shaking himself back into the moment.

“Dude, you look like someone kicked your dog.”

“What?” he replied confused, still trying to orient himself.

Dick followed his eyes as the speedster watched the duo across the room. After a few minutes, finally bored of the show they were watching, Artemis rose to her feet, turning towards Connor and
pulling him up. Moments later they disappeared down the hall towards the living quarters, hands entwined.

"Oh yeah, and there’s that.” Robin chuckled, gesturing his head to where the couple sat moments ago.

“Uh…when did that happen?” Wally asked stunned.

“Hmm, couple of week ago I guess?” Robin confirmed. “See what happens when you miss staff meetings?” he grinned.

Kaldur nodded. “Interpersonal relationships are perhaps not the wisest choice in our line of work, but sometimes they are…unavoidable.”

“Says the guy pining away for a girl in Atlantis.” Dick chuckled.

“Touche,” Aqualad replied smoothly.

Wally didn’t realize long he’d been sitting in stunned silence when Megan walked over to him. “Are you ok? You haven’t touched your food. You want me to make you something else?”

“Oh…um…no.” he replied distracted, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry, I think I blanked out there for a second. Megan it was great, thank you so much. I’m just a little worn out that’s all. I better be heading back. My dad gave me a curfew. Can you believe that?”

“You’re kidding,” Robin laughed “So you’re allowed to go to Santa Prisca for the night, but can’t stay in Rhode Island past ten.”

“I know right?” the speedster smiled, “but baby steps.”

“It was great seeing you Wally.”

“You too Megan, thanks a lot for dinner. It was great.”
“Let us walk you out,” Kaldur gestured towards the Zeta Tube as he and Dick rose from the counter. Dick paused at the control board, entering in the destination code.

"Get well soon my friend."

“Yeah quit milking this and come on back. I think even Miss M misses your obnoxious flirting.”

“Will do. Don’t go saving the world till I get back ok?”

“Agreed,” Kaldur replied.

Dick pressed the transport key and the Zeta Tube came to life.

*Recognize Kid Flash B-03*

“Call me later this week. I’ll be up in Gotham all weekend, Maybe we could hang.”

Wally nodded. “Sounds good.”

Seconds later his molecules were broken down by alien radiation and beamed across the country.

In a deserted alleyway, blinding radiance burned inside a dilapidated phone booth, as the speedster stepped out of the light into Central City. It was quiet, peaceful even, just the faintest sounds of foghorns coming off the harbor.

Wally stood in the darkness, trying to quell the hurt inside. His goal tonight was only to access the League database for past mission briefings, but he ended up with much more than he bargained for. He should have been focusing on the mission, the next course of action, the next flashpoint, but all he could do was think of *her*.

Suddenly he was back at Barbara’s Gordon’s apartment, lost in a picture of an older Artemis Crock
holding her daughter in her arms, the road not taken. Watching her, the way she laughed, the way she smiled, the way she looked at him, just tore his heart in pieces.

Temporal paradoxes, logical contradictions, causality loops, dumb luck.

Bruce warned him, and Wally honestly thought he was ready, but not like this, not so soon. When the original mission was complete he knew he’d have to walk away and start a new life somewhere else, but just because he was living this life now had changed nothing. It wouldn’t have mattered if he was sixteen or twenty-two; it would still hurt just the same. Science could be cold, and fate unforgiving, and maybe this was what supposed to happen all along. Maybe he was never supposed to get the girl. This may not have been exactly what he’d signed up for, but it was still his mission, and he had miles left to run.

He didn’t realize how long he’d stood there lost in his thoughts when his cell phone rang. He looked at the caller I.D. and then to his watch and cursed.

“Hey mom. Yeah I know what time it is,” he groaned. “Yeah I know how mad dad is. I’m sorry; I’ll be home in like five minutes. Time just got away from me.”

Boy… had it, he sighed, disappearing off into the distance, contrails of lightning chasing after him.

xxx

“God damnit!” Wally cursed, ripping his hand away from the generator access panel, having sliced a two inch gash into his forefinger. It wasn't a deep cut, nothing that would require stitches, but it still hurt like a son of a bitch, throbbing like it had been shut it in a car door…and then hit with a hammer for good measure.

It’s not like the flop sweat wasn’t making things hard enough already, but now along with clammy hands he had a finger gushing blood all over the lab. Preferably for something as complicated as this, he would have preferred all ten of them be in perfect working order, but time was not on his side.

He had now been officially back with team less than two weeks and already Kaldur had scheduled training sessions all morning long. Wally vividly remembered how excited he was back then when his fall break had finally arrived; rushing to the cave to spend some downtime with his friends, and
of course crush on his favorite Martian, only to find himself immediately thrown into the training ring against Conner. He’d never been more pissed that Gotham Academy didn’t share the same break.

But despite the exact dates and times lost to him, the sequence of events were moving in more or less the same general direction as he remembered, which meant history was repeating itself, and he didn’t have much time.

There were small differences however. Because he was still recovering, he’d been excused from the combat portion of the training, but still required to watch Kaldur, Conner, Megan spar for over three hours. That would have been time well spent elsewhere, but asking to be excused would have drawn unneeded attention. Dick and Artemis would not be scheduled to report until later that afternoon, which meant “they” would be arriving very soon.

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Down below at the seaport, Conner Kent growled, nearly bending the socket wrench in half. It was one thing to be pre-programmed by the Genomorphs with engineering aptitude, it was quite another to actually try to put it to use. He carefully placed the socket on the stripped out bolt, twisting just slightly to catch the groove when once again it slipped off the hex nut, spilling out onto the ground.

The Kryptonian roared, sending the entire wrench set flying into the bay, only to see it stopped mid-flight and slowly float back over to the stone edge where the motorcycle rested. Megan telekinetically placed the tools gently on the ground, walking over to join her frustrated teammate.

“Conner? Are you ok?” the Martian asked hesitantly.

Superboy frowned clearly embarrassed. “It shouldn’t be this hard. It’s stripped out and I’m only making it worse. I can see what to do in my mind so clearly, but when I try, everything I touch just falls apart.”

“You just need a little practice.” she smiled cheerfully. “It doesn’t matter if it’s been programmed into you or not, you’re not supposed to be good at everything the first time you try.”

“Clearly,” he grumbled.
“I thought Wally was going to help you.”

“I did too. He said he would this morning, but I've texted him like three times and I can’t find him anywhere. Whatever,” he huffed.

“I'm sure he just got side tracked. He's probably still a little overwhelmed being back.”

“Yeah I guess.”

“So were you going for a ride?”

“I was,” he sighed, still irritated.

“Where do you want to go? I could take you in the Bioship.

Conner paused uncomfortably for a moment. “I um... promised Artemis when she got out of school that we'd ride up the coast, get some dinner and watch the sun go down over near Provincetown.”

“Oh… ok,” she replied with a forced smile. “Well that sounds um....romantic. I'm sure you two will have fun.”

He sighed, “Well it's probably not going to happen now, with my bike down and all.”

Megan chuckled. “Conner there are plenty of other bikes around, just borrow Kaldur's or Robin's. I'm sure they won't mind.”

“I don’t know...maybe we should just do it some other time. It's getting late.”

The Martian laughed. “It’s 4:30 silly. You still have plenty of time.”

She didn't need to be a telepath to sense his discomfort, something was bothering him. He wasn’t
the most open person on a good day, but it didn’t hurt to be a friend and ask. If he didn’t want to talk about it, he wouldn’t. She’d seen that first hand enough times.

“Conner what's wrong? Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, not really.”

“No problem,” she said amiably, moving past the subject as quick as she could, feigning interest in the repairs.

Conner appreciated the gesture, but unlike having the mechanical knowledge for working on an engine, when it came to people he wasn’t always sure what to say or do, especially with M’gann. There was just something about the Martian that put him at ease, though he could never tell her. Maybe it was because they were both aliens, not quite at home here, but wanting more than anything to find a place to belong. Or maybe it was because she was so nonjudgmental, overlooking moments like this when he lost his cool when others might not. Technically he’d not been alive for that long, but for the short period of time he had, she was probably the nicest person he’d ever met. Warm and welcoming when common sense told her and everyone else to keep their distance.

Conner sighed. “Have you ever thought…”

Before he could finish the question, Sphere rushed in, spinning and whirling wildly, making alarming alien sounds that no one could remotely understand. Seconds later he understood why, as all hell broke loose

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Up in the Medbay, Wally wrapped gauze around his gushing hand, quickly turning back to the task before his m just as the intruder alerts sounded. It was on now, and he wasn’t remotely ready. He could sense Megan reaching out to warn the team, but her pleas ended just as quickly and the speedster already knew why.
The Reds had arrived.

Crouched down by the unit, he triple checked his handiwork.

- Vacuum tube pulled - check
- Microwave conversion reprogrammed from X-rays to EMP’s - check
- Cascading energy vector directed outward - check
- Unit tied into the cave main generator - definitely not checked and not happening

Between being stuck watching the others train all morning, and then Megan and Conner locked in conversation for the last half hour, Wally never had the chance to reach the main generator’s power coupling located right above the seaport; which meant no juice - no luck

The only solution left was wiring the X-ray unit directly into the Medbay’s main fuse box, not remotely safe and definitely not his forte. The speedster was used to riding the lightning, not rewiring it. Something like this was more up Dick’s alley. Robin had done it originally in no time flat, but Wally doubted he’d be given the same opportunity. The first time around it had been a suicide mission, a one in a million shot. Robin and Artemis had nearly died trying to pull this stunt off, and the speedster wasn't about to count on the ripples of time allowing them to do it again. Besides stopping the Reds wasn't his primary goal, stopping Tornado was.

The androids came in through the sea, their ambush taking less than fifteen minutes to take out the entire team. If Wally was successful he’d do it in five.

He glanced out the glass window, watching Megan soaring above the intruders, barely avoiding fireball after fireball of Red Inferno’s ambush. Kaldur rushed to her side, arming his water bearers when the tidal wave struck them both from behind, catching them completely off guard and slamming them into the unforgiving stone wall. Kaldur gathered his wits, reaching out to control the waves when suddenly a blazing cage formed all around them, the temperature inside increasing by six hundred degrees.

Red Torpedo rose from the sea, firing off a second wave even more powerful than the first, striking Sphere viciously, and lodging the extraterrestrial machine helplessly into the sea-port wall. With three of the team’s members down, the two androids focused their attention on the fourth.
From above, Wally could hear Superboy’s screams of fury as he lashed out at the attackers, trying to rescue his fallen teammates as millions of gallons of sea water knocked him senselessly back and forth. Blasts of super heated plasma lashed out his skin, and under the right circumstances, even steel could melt.

The speedster was out of time. The Reds wouldn’t give up until every member of the team was captured and accounted for, including him. Back then, they never figured out what the androids had intended to do with them once caught, and he sure as hell didn’t want to find out this time either.

Wally rushed to the fuse box, tearing away at the electric power distributor, removing all the circuit breakers till all that remained were the main lugs. He’d seen his dad do this a million times in their garage, but this was going to be a little bit more complicated with six hundred volts waiting for him on the other side of the power conduits. The speedster grabbed the unit’s power cables, splicing them into two main coils, discarding the ground wire. What he was about to do was going to blow every circuit in the lab any way.

He counted to three and stuck the wires inside.

*This was going to hurt.*

In the abandoned alleyway of the old Gotham warehouse district, Artemis Crock nearly jumped out of her skin at the younger teen’s sudden appearance.

“How random that you're in Gotham City, instead of Star City where your uncle, Green Arrow lives?”

“I'm... uh, here to see my cousin. She was in the state spelling bee. Here... in Gotham... City.”
“C-O-O-L. Did she W-I-N?”

“N-O,” the archer frowned.

“D-R-A-G.”

“Yeah let’s just go to the cave.”

“Ladies first,” the acrobat bowed.

“Your town, you go.” she demanded.

Robin shrugged his shoulders, stepping into the phone booth and disappearing into a beam of light.

Artemis blew out her breath. Being trolled by Robin was not how she had wanted her weekend to start. And how in the hell did he know she was going to be here at this exact moment. The archer begrudgingly stepped into the booth, hoping Conner was still willing to head up the coast tonight, because she was ready to leave her troubles behind; for a while at least.

Recognize Artemis B-07

xxx

She materialized into darkness, a thick smoke waffling through the air. Up ahead she caught site of Robin’s flashlight as he rushed forward, casting unearthly shadows off the thick fog. Quickly the archer reached into her bag, grabbing a phosphorous arrow and igniting it. The chamber exploded into light from the arrow’s glow, as she chased after the Boy Wonder not knowing where he was going or why.
“The powers out!” she exclaimed.

“Duh!” Robin replied, rushing towards the reddish illumination flickering up ahead in the hallway.

“Well how in the hell did the Zeta Tubes still work!?”

“I don’t know!” he snapped, “we must have started transport before whatever did this happened.”

They stopped a few feet away from the corridor, their back’s against the wall when they heard the sound of heavy footsteps coming their way. The two looked at each as Robin nodded, pulling out two batarangs from his utility belt and activating their charges. In turn Artemis notched a concussion arrow, tip down, ready to strike at his command. He mouthed a countdown to her.

“Three, two, one…” and they rushed into the hallway, seconds away from launching their weapons when Robin’s light shined directly on the red lettering of Conner’s torn t-shirt.

“Get that light out of my face,” Superboy growled as he emerged from the chamber below, his body and those of his teammates silhouetted by the still burning flames coming from the hangar bay behind them. In his arms, Conner cradled the limp body of Miss Martian in his arms, with Kaldur’s arm wrapped around his shoulder for support.

“They need help. Now!”

---

Sitting in the infirmary, phosphorus emergency lights lit up the room as Artemis changed the saline bags, pushing more fluid into her severely dehydrated teammates, while Robin continued his line of questioning.

“..and these things just came out of the ocean and started attacking. No warning, no nothing?”

“I think Sphere must have sensed it. He came rolling over right before the attack trying to tell us something.”
Aqualad sat up slowly, leaning back gingery against the headboard. “The intruders did not trigger any of the sensors arrays in the sea bed, as if they knew where they were located.”

“That’s not good,” Robin frowned.

“And why do they look like Tornado?” Artemis questioned. “They have to be related somehow right?”

“I agree,” Kaldur replied. “Their design and abilities are not coincidence.”

“So what then?” Robin continued.

“Like I said, this wave of energy just shot out from nowhere, and the next thing I know these things crashed to the ground, and that fire cage that held Kaldur and M’gann just vanished.”

“And now every piece of technology in the place won’t turn on. Weird. Do you think they damaged the generators?” the archer asked.

Their conversation died as the Martian finally began to stir from her blackout. Her auburn eyes blinked a few times at her strange surroundings when suddenly she jerked out of bed, nearly tearing the IV out, only to have Conner gently catch her shoulders and ease back down on the gurney.

“Easy M’gann,” he said softly, “everything’s ok.”

She took a deep breath, still dazed when her hand reached up and ghosted the clone’s cheek. “You saved me,” she smiled. “Thank you.”

The archer’s brow furrowed slightly at the Martian’s touch, but between the heat of the moment, and her relief that Megan was all right, any possessive thoughts she. Ugh this have held quickly passed.

“You’re welcome, but I didn’t do it.”
“We are not exactly sure what did.” Kadur added.

Robin finished entering a few more calculations when he quickly closed his wrist computer, rising to his feet “I do. Has anyone seen Wally?” he asked urgently.

“Oh my God!” M’gann gasped, looking over hurriedly as Kaldur’s eyes grew wide in horror. “I completely forgot he was here.”

The Atlantean reached for his IV, about to pull it free from his arm when Robin ran off into the darkness. “Conner keep them here. I’ve got this.”

Artemis jumped to her feet in hot pursuit.

“Where are we going!?” she demanded.

The Boy Wonder raced down the darkened corridors. “There’s only one thing that could have knocked out every electrical circuit in the cave; an electromagnetic pulse, and there’s only one place in here you could create one.”


The light on his utility belt outlined the maze of hallways ahead until they finally reached their destination, screeching to a stop. Standing outside the lab door, Robin pulled his batarangs again just to be safe, their sparks arching in the shadows. He counted to himself then spun around, kicking open the door.

Inside was scorched mess; consoles and monitors shattered and smoking, shelves blown off the stone wall, medical equipment thrown haphazardly all across the lab. In the corner, covered in metal panels and ceiling tiles laid the speedster, upside down, feet in the air, flannel shirt still smoking.

Wally groaned, looking upside down at the amused expressions of the two young heroes as they knelt down next to him. “Did it work?” he asked dumbly.
Robin and Artemis couldn’t help but laugh.

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Down at the hangar bay, the speedster stood over the fallen androids.

“So I’d crashed in my room for a while when I realized I was supposed to be helping Conner with his bike, and when I got down here I saw those things attacking them. They looked just like Tornado so I figured they were androids too, and the way they were kicking everyone’s asses, I knew I wasn’t going to be much help. And that’s when it hit me….”

“An EMP,” Robin chuckled, still impressed.

Wally smiled. “Pretty ingenious if I don’t say, but I didn’t have a lot of time, and needless to say my electrical work left a lot to be desired…… *obviously*, but it did the trick.”

Wally knelt down, his hands tracing the male androids breastplate when he found the latch. Pushing down then pulling slightly, an opening appeared right in the center of the machine’s chest.

“KF, what are you doing?” Robin asked curiously.

“I’m taking out this thing’s CPU and power supply. I don’t want them waking up and starting all this crap again.”

Wally moved over to the female one, grimacing as he hesitated uncomfortably above her chest, before pushing between the android’s breasts and repeating the same action.

He quickly removed the needed components, only to turn and see Dick, Artemis, and Kaldur snickering. He shot a quick pointed finger at the three of them. “Don’t!”

The archer just couldn’t help herself. “Baywatch finally got to second base with someone. Good for you.”
The speedster groaned, rolling his eyes just as the power grid came back on, filling the chamber with light.

Shortly after, Batman, Superman, and Red Tornado arrived.

“We received your distress call.” Tornado announced.

“Distress call? Robin asked. ‘We didn’t…..”

“I did,” Wally raised his hand. “I figured I’d better send something out in case the EMP didn’t work.”

“What happened?” Batman asked in his low calm timber.

xxx

Later, Wally walked the hallways of Mt, Justice alone with his thoughts. They’d been lucky; things could have turned out much worse, but the same could be said for the first time this happened as well he supposed.

Today wasn’t a major victory by any means, but it was progress, a first step. By dismantling the androids before the power came back on, it kept them from passing off the data package that turned Tornado against the team. And by having him still in play, the entire League would be able to focus their attention purely on who might be responsible for the androids and the attack, instead of searching for the rouge Red Tornado.

The logical deduction would lead them to Professor Ivo over in Belle Reve, which would ultimately lead to T.O. Morrow. The League would then be fully aware of Morrow’s lab in Yellowstone and would arrive months before his latest creation Red Volcano would even be activated. And if by some chance he was, the full force of the League would have no problem taking the monstrous android down.
The speedster chuckled to himself. When he first read this section of the mission briefing back at the mansion, he thought the clues seemed very vague, and it sounded incredibly far-fetched that the League would be able to make such broad deductions with the little information at hand, but when he questioned Bruce Wayne on why he thought it would work, the old man’s answer was simple.

_Because it’s what I would have done._

How Bruce had figured out this intricate puzzle was beyond him, but he _was and always would be_ the world’s greatest detective. If there was any silver lining to his current predicament, at least this mission was a whole lot simpler to do from the inside than out.

There were still plenty of pieces left to put into place, but this was a good start, like knocking down the first domino. He doubted everything would end so smoothly, but there was nothing wrong with a little good old fashioned luck, along with some hope thrown in on the side.

Up ahead towards the living quarters he noticed an odd sound, quiet yet familiar. He crept silently down the hall as the sound become clearer. He didn’t have to look up at the name plate; he knew exactly where he was, squarely in front of the archer’s door.

But it wasn’t just one voice he heard, it was two, and when muted laughter turned into soft moans, he quickly moved on. It didn’t take a detective know who was in there with her.

Wally bit his lip, ignoring the ache in his chest and walked away.

“Great…” he sighed.

Whoever said time heals all wounds never traveled backwards in it.
Author’s Note – Ok, you have to be as stunned by the news of Season 3 as much as I am. There are plenty of great cancelled shows out there that people campaign to get back on the air, but never succeed. Well pat yourself on the back binge watchers, you made it happen. Let’s also give fan fiction its proper due, stoking and keeping everybody’s interest. This is a great fandom, and it’s about to reignite all over again.

So….Spitfire yes or no? Will they bring Wally back? I remember reading a Q & A where the creators clearly said there was no speed force in this universe. Are they going to do it? And if so how are they going to do it. Will it only be flashbacks? I have a few ideas, but I’d love to hear yours. Thanks for reading, please drop a review if you have the time.
Mt. Justice was a flurry of activity as members of the League made major repairs and renovations inside the cave. New communications systems were retrofitted; encompassing encrypted satellite, cellular and land line connections. New power generators and redundant backups were installed, but most importantly a completely revamped security system was put into place, now wired directly into the Watchtower main systems.

"Synchronizing key security protocols with Watchtower mainframe," the computer announced as the link was made to the orbital satellite.

The attack by the two androids had shown gaping holes in the cave's antiquated security protocol, but in all honestly the cave had not been used by the League as a base of operations in almost a decade. It was in need for massive upgrades even before Batman had assigned it to the team as their headquarters. That error had nearly cost their protégés their lives. It would not happen again.

Dick Grayson stood off to the side as Green Lantern hoisted the new generator into place, while Captain Atom fused the main electrical system power couplings into the wiring harness. The Boy Wonder considered himself to be a master hacker. There had been few systems on the planet he couldn't get access in to, but instead of salivating at the idea of tackling these new systems, his entire focus seemed directed across the cave at the two lone individuals talking privately in the corner.

Seated next to him, Wally West was in his own world, tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on the small electronic device in his lap, oblivious to the distraught ramblings of his best friend.

"What do you think they're talking about?" Dick questioned, watching the young Atlantean lean in closer to the Dark Knight, keeping their conversation out of earshot.

Wally reached to the table, grabbing the small sauter gun, placing the superheated tip on the circuit board.

"I mean, yeah sure Kal's the leader and all, but if it involves the team, especially after last night, shouldn't they be talking to all of us?"
"Mm-hmm," Wally replied, clearly not uninterested.

"He never once said anything about having a private meeting with Batman, it's just weird don't you think?"

"Mm-hmm."

Dick scowled, looking down at the distracted speedster. "Dude, are you even listening to me?"

When he received no reply, Dick reached down, snatching the dismantled batarang out from Wally's grasp. "And I told you to leave those alone," he huffed.

Wally sighed, placing the sauter gun back on the table. "Why are you so bothered that Bats and Aqualad are having a private conversation anyway?"

"I'm not bothered," he replied annoyed, looking around and lowering his voice. "It's just...I spent all morning with Bruce. Why didn't he say anything?" If it has to do with the team don't we deserve to know?"

"Or do you mean don't I deserve to know? Rob that's why they call them private. I think you're more bothered by the fact that you weren't invited than anything else, Just chill, it's probably not even about the team. Maybe it's about the new equipment, or Aquaman, or a dozen other things that Robin the Boy Nosey doesn't need to stick his beak into."

"Ok, that was a pretty good one," he chuckled dryly "and what are you doing to my batarang anyway? Those things are expensive."

"Yeah lecture me about money," Wally smirked, "but since you asked, I'm changing the polarity output."

"Why?"
"I'm turning it into a power disrupter. Kinda like a mini EMP."

"Once again...why?" Robin scowled.

"Well after the whole Tornado twins thing, I thought it might be a good idea to have one in case we run into something like that again, unless of course you've got one tucked away in the old utility belt."

"Fresh out, but it is kind of a good idea, which I have to say you've had a lot of lately. Maybe Fate's little power nap did you some good."

"Yeah," Wally chuckled bitterly, "next time you take one and see how much good it does."

"Pass," Dick grinned, turning his attention back to the two men; watching for any kind of perceptible inflection or body language, any kind of reaction at all. Seconds later he got more than he bargained for as Superboy screamed from across the cave, rushing towards Aqualad.

"You knew!" Conner bellowed.

"Still think it's nothing?" Robin quipped as he grabbed the engrossed speedster, dragging him towards the oncoming bull rush.

"Those two androids nearly killed M'gann!"

M'gann and Artemis quickly rushed in, the archer grabbing Superboy's arms, pulling him away from the Atantean.

"Conner stop!" the archer yelled.

"What are you doing?" Megan asked urgently.

"Kaldur knew we had a traitor among us and said nothing!"
"You knew?" Robin repeated, "and you didn't tell us?"

"It was merely speculation at the time, but I only sought to protect the team from..."

"Protect us from what?" Artemis snapped. "Knowledge that might have saved our lives?"

"You almost died!" Conner growled," turning to the Martian.

"Enough!" Batman demanded. "In light of the attack, the team will now be overseen by rotating supervisors. Captain Marvel has volunteered to take the first shift. In the meantime I have another assignment."

The screen above began displaying several newspaper clippings of Gotham Mayor Hamilton Hill's recent safari expedition as well and other accounts of similar attacks in India. The team stared intently at the monitor, then back to Batman as he discussed the events and mission parameters, but the speedster's attention was elsewhere. He'd heard this whole thing play out before.

xxx

Over the North Atlantic, the BioShip flew in cramped silence, the team aboard quiet and mistrustful. Captain Marvel sat uncomfortably at the rear. He knew the silence was damming, but also that it wasn't his place to get involved, not yet at least. The wisdom of Solomon.

Kaldur piloted the ship, while the rest of the team sat silently behind, the scent of betrayal hanging thick in the air. Every so often Aqualad would share the briefest of orders, weather conditions, landing coordinates, team assignments, but his words mostly fell on deaf ears. Two hours into the fight, Robin had had enough.

"How could he have kept something this important from us?" he murmured to his best friend, staring blankly out the window. "Something happened during that Tai Pei mission with Red Arrow, and now with the attack on the cave? He's treating us just like the League did. This is bullshit."

"I'm not so sure."
Dick's brow furrowed at the comment. "Come on Wally, tell me you're not agreeing with him."

"Think about it for a second. What was he supposed to do? Tell everyone there might be a traitor on this team, and then giving that person a heads up we're looking for them? And what if it's total bullshit and the attack last night was completely unrelated? Then he's got a team full of super powered - super paranoid teenagers so busy looking over their shoulders that they end up screwing up the mission. It's the classic no win situation."

"Wally we've known each other for years."

"Not all of us," the speedster corrected.

"What? So now you think there's a mole too?" he scoffed.

Wally kept his eyes from straying across the cabin. "No I don't," he said strongly. "Look I'm not happy about it either, but I understand why he did it, and I think you do to."

Dick turned away, pausing to look up at the young Atantean piloting the ship. "Because it's what Batman would have done," he sighed.

Wally shot a quick glance around, lowering his voice barely above a whisper. "Dick, one day that's going to be you up there, and sooner or later you're gonna find yourself in a situation just like this. When that happens you're going to have to choose between what Robin would do or what the team leader should do. And you know what sucks? No matter which one you chose, you're going to be right and wrong at the same time."

"Just like Kaldur," Robin frowned.

"Mm-hmm, burdens of leadership."

Over the intercom Aqualad announced emotionlessly, "ETA twenty minutes. Be ready."
"Just something to think about," Wally smiled, patting his partner on the shoulder as he rose from his seat.

The speedster walked back to the galley to pack the cupboards of his uniform with protein and energy bars leaving the Boy Wonder alone with his thoughts. Dick sat silently imagining himself up in that seat; balancing his options, weighing his choices. He never wanted to be the Batman, but if he ever wanted to be their leader, he might have to become more like Dark Knight than he bargained for. Little did he know what the years ahead would bring.

Wally sat back down as the ship rolled and began its descent, looking to the eyes of his teammates as they prepared to disembark; suspicions distrustful ones. The irony of the moment was not last on him. Sportsmaster's had been right all along; there was a mole on the team, and it was him.

xxx

...as the battle neared its end, the Brain begrudging realized their defeat was at hand, but he still had one more card left to play. An array of mechanical appendages and apparatus extended from his robot body, as his primate bodyguard Monsieur Mallah formed a perimeter around his master, allowing the villain time to formulate their escape. Wally had seen this all play out before, but this was the moment where history was about to change. The speedster made his move.

"No Mallah, this will not be our Waterloo," the creature spoke through thick French accent.

Wally rushed the Brain, moving at a speed just slow enough that the primate bodyguard would be able to recognize his intent and react. The gorilla did just that, reaching out and catching the oncoming speedster by the throat, his legs dangling helplessly in the air. But Wally never intended to save the day, he intended to be the distraction.

"Au revoir, mes..."

"Now!" Wally screamed through M'gann's mind link, but Robin was already two moves ahead, his batarang flying unobstructed where Mullah once stood, the razor tipped edge landing directly on target, cracking the glass casing that protected the villain's cerebellum.

The lights of the facility began to flicker when just as quickly they returned to full power, the screams of the Brain now echoing throughout the chamber. Magnetic waves cascaded throughout his steel casing and seconds later his mechanical arms went dead; falling loosely from his disabled
robotic body, completely powerless thanks to the modified power disruptor Wally had constructed.

The gorilla turned in horror to see his master fall, and a primal fury erupted within him as his grip on the speedster tightened, becoming deadly. The primate bared his teeth, a vicious snarl escaping his lips when from behind a voice cleared his throat.

"Would you like to do the honors?" Captain Marvel smiled to his young teammate.

"Love to," Superboy growled, cracking his knuckles. "I hate monkeys."

Moments later, the unconscious gorilla landed face first next to his fallen master.

xxx

Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman soon arrived on the scene, assisting Indian authorities with transporting the villain and his bodyguard to Mumbai. The Indian Intelligence Bureau would get first crack at him, but with the bevy of international warrants out for the fugitive, countries all over the world would be eagerly awaiting their turn.

"The CIA, Interpol, DGSE and FSB just to name a few have been trying to apprehend the Brain and Mullah for almost a decade. He will likely spend the next eight years in trials and legal proceedings alone. Superman and I will escort the prisoners to their holding cells and be back at Mt. Justice for a debrief at nineteen hundred hours. Your work today was...exemplary, well done."

Batman turned away to coordinate with the Indian authorities as Wonder Woman smiled at the protégés and followed suit. Superman stood away from the team, but a respectful nod directed at Conner made his message clear. He was proud of him, all of them.

Walking up the gantry of the Bioship, Robin approached the Atlantean.

"Look I need to know, why did you keep the mole intel a secret?"

Aqualad turned to see the team formed behind him.
"The source of the tip was Sportsmaster."

"What?! You can't trust him," Artemis exclaimed desperately.

"I'd do not. It seemed possible, even likely he was attempting to divide the team with false information."

"And given how this mission went he nearly succeeded," Robin added, "but you had to consider it might be true."

"Yes as leader, I did. In which case, I did not wish to alert the traitor."

"Hate to say it, but Wally was right, it makes sense."

All gathered turned to the unlikely voice of reason, watching as the speedster's painfully swallowed down a mouthful of energy bar, balancing the fine line between sore throat or full stomach. He shrugged sheepishly.

"I am still prepared to step down."

Everyone turned to each other, smiling at their unspoken decision when Megan spoke up. "All in favor of Kaldur remaining leader..."

The hands were unanimous.

Across the Atlantic all was quiet, a good kind of quiet this time. Distrustful glares were now replaced with satisfied smiles; the sins of the early morning hours washed away in the glow of a job well done. With each successful mission, the team was proving their worth, not just to the League, but to themselves as well.

Wally's throat hurt like a son of a bitch, the gorilla's grip was definitely going to leave its mark. His mom and dad were not going to be thrilled about that, but it was a small price to pay all things
considered.

Today had been a good day, one that filled the speedster with a sense of hope. Without Bruce's playbook he had still scored a big win tonight. The Brain was in custody, and a powerful member of the Light taken off the board. One setback was not going to dissuade the Light, but several? That could be a game changer.

Despite the jubilant mood of his teammates, Wally remained guarded. There was still much needed prep work for the next mission, and it only got harder from here. He rested his head against the view-port, the warm hum of alien engines an alluring lullaby. Off to the horizon he could see the faint glow of the sun setting in the western sky; it was definitely time for some shut eye, he'd earned it. His body eased as he stretched out in the soft plushy chair, ready to nod off when he felt someone nudge him on the shoulder. Yawning, he looked up to see the archer standing over him.

Through the dim cabin lighting he could see an odd smirk on her face "You forgot something Walman."

"What?" he replied curiously, still a bit hazy.

She tossed the object in his lap, continuing on to the front cabin to join Conner and the others. Wally held the item to the light; a piece of red fabric that when stretched took the form of a beret, Monsieur Mullah's to be exact.

"Souvenir," he smiled, leaning back in his chair to examine the beret. How could he have forgotten? He'd started the collection as a gag, a one time token of a successful mission, but it had continued to grow into an obsession, on day to be placed on the Watchtower once they'd all been made official members of the Justice League. He'd heard others had kept up the tradition long after he left, and felt pretty honored by it, but as he watched Artemis sit down and lean into Conner that enthusiasm faded.

"Souvenir," he sighed, just not the one he wanted.

xxx

The speedster sat alone at the kitchen counter, nervously eating his second bowl of Frosted Flakes. In light of the break-in at the cave, as well as the quick turnaround mission to India, all trainings had been cancelled for the day, now replaced with mandatory counseling sessions with Black Canary. Back in the day, other than getting to stare at Ms. Lance for an hour and fantasizing every pervish cougar fantasy he could imagine, Wally got very little out of them. Now he saw things a bit differently.
They were all just teenagers, growing up way too fast while living two separate lives, one inside the mask and the other out. Each one of them came from different worlds, blessed and burdened with unimaginable power and abilities, risking their lives day in and day out. Terms like PTSD, bi-polar, depression, and other personality disorders were just words, things they'd read about but didn't completely understand let alone realize they could suffer from.

That's why Canary's counseling sessions were so important. Being a hero was hell on the human psyche, a teenaged hero even more so, but Dinah Lance didn't treat them like that, she treated them as normal, because they were normal. Powers and gifts didn't change who they were on the inside. There were no proteges or mentors in these meetings, they were all equals and as such these sessions allowed them the chance to blow off steam without fear of repercussions, especially if the name Batman and asshole ended up in the same sentence. And despite being attacked by killer androids the night before, the focus of today's sessions could vary from school to social life, family to friendships. Anything that started a dialogue and kept them talking. Canary was good that way.

Wally poured himself a third bowl, staring intently in the direction of Dinah's office when the archer finally emerged. In the living room Conner rose from the couch to meet her, waiting for his turn in the gallows. He tried not to be obvious as he observed them together; the way he looked at her, the way she smiled back, the way they both just seemed to fit. It was all a bit difficult to watch.

It was a given she'd been attracted to Conner from day one; she'd pretty much announced it to the entire team on that first mission. And honestly who could blame her.

He was ridiculously good looking; six foot two, thick black hair, deep blue eyes, chiseled jaw, made entirely of solid muscle. He was basically a younger version of one of the greatest heroes that had ever lived.

And Wally was... Wally. Five foot ten, awkward red hair, gangly arms and legs, covered from head to toe in freckles. Not exactly the leading man type when standing next to the boy of steel.

The next few years would see Wally finally grow into that frame; taller, broader, packed with lean muscle that accentuated his runner's build. His eyes would become greener, and the ocean of freckles would fade into the distant horizon, just as handsome in his own right. But as much as Wally would continue to change over time, Conner would always remain exactly the same, the perfect specimen. The gift and curse of being a clone.

Even after they were a couple, Artemis would still tease Wally about her initial attraction to Conner, getting devilish enjoyment from watching her speedster boyfriend fume, but it was all in good fun. She loved Wally because he was Wally; passionate and opinionated, dangerously smart.
and yet wonderfully naive. He was everything she never knew she wanted...or needed.

Breaking through her stony facade was only half the battle, staying inside was the victory, and she loved him for that. Wally had won her heart and was as much her spitfire as she was his.

Seeing Conner and Artemis together now suddenly cast doubts on those feelings.

Maybe those two had been kindred spirits all along, more similar than either had realized. Perhaps what they shared in common was what brought them together; both outsiders, both with daddy issues, both just trying to find a place to fit in. In Wally's absence and without their constant bickering, maybe it granted her the opportunity to explore new feelings.

Or maybe it was because fate was a bitch, holding a grudge with no regard of time, space, or intent.

_Save the world or get the girl_, one or the other, but not both. As much as it crushed him, there could be only one choice. Wally just wished karma didn't have to constantly rub his face in it.

And what about Megan? Wally could see the sadness in her eyes, the pain in her heart. As much as Artemis was his soulmate, Conner was hers. They were supposed to have a long life together and now that had changed too, all in flap of a butterfly's wings. Wally had angered the gods and he'd accepted his fate, but Megan had done nothing wrong and was forced to feel their wraith too. Where was the fairness in that?

Artemis squeezed Conner's hand encouragingly as he turned to enter Canary's lair, leaving the hungry archer free to head to the kitchen for some much needed refueling. She rummaged through the refrigerator for the leftover stir-fry she'd brought from home while Wally sat silently eating his cereal. It struck him that this was actually the first time they'd been alone to together, and he had absolutely no idea what so to say.

She retrieved the bowl and sat at the far end of the counter, her mind seemingly a millions miles away. Taking a bite of the Asian vegetables, she groaned in satisfaction, sending an uncomfortable shiver up his spine.

Her hair was impossibly long, platinum locks (that didn't remotely belong on someone with her heredity) tied in a tight ponytail. She still had that one stray stand that no matter how long or short her hair was, still slipped out from behind her ear. It took all his strength not to reach over and slide it back in place.
After a few minutes of silence, she could sense his eyes upon her. She put her fork down in a huff and glared over at the speedster.

"How about closing your mouth when you chew? It's annoying."

"Sorry. I stress eat when I'm nervous. I'm not looking forward to going in there."

"It's wasn't too bad," she replied. "We actually just sat around and talked about the new Stieg Larsson book most of the time."

"Really?"

"No dork. It was the usual psycho analysis mumbo jumbo. Why so nervous? Has the whiz kid done something he shouldn't have?" she asked with an accusing smile.

*If only you knew.*

"No," he frowned. "I just have things to do."

"We all have things to do Wally. What makes you so special?"

"Nothing I guess," he shrugged, staring back into his half empty bowl.

The archer rolled her eyes, pulling out her phone and scrolling through a dozen group texts, amusing herself with the mindless distraction that was the students of Gotham Academy.

After a few more moments of silence, against his better judgment, Wally broached the subject.

"So um...you and Conner huh?"
"Yeah what about it?" she replied, her eyes never leaving her phone.

"Nothing. It's just...I don't know. I guess I never saw you two as a couple."

"Well you learn something new every day don't you?" she replied snidely.

"Yeah I guess."

Artemis chuckled, replying to a few of the more amusing texts, before laying down the device on the counter, her smile fading as she looked over at her dining companion.

"Why? Do you have a problem with it?" she glowered.

"No!" he replied defensively. "I was just asking... geez."

"Well don't. Its none of yours, or anyone else's business. Got it?"

"Yeah," he pouted, "got it."

They continued on with their meals unencumbered by conversation when Wally finally realized he'd lost his appetite. The archer had all but dared him to stick his nose again where it didn't belong, and he just wasn't in the mood for a few rounds of verbal sparring, it didn't hold the same allure it once had. He rose from the table, placing his bowl in the sink and wandered off, vanishing into the bowels of Mt. Justice.

He walked mindlessly from room to room, through halls and passageways, hoping to find a dark corner to get lost in and just disappear for a while, before suddenly realizing exactly where he'd arrived. Wally paused outside the entryway, wondering if it was by accident or by purpose he'd ended up here. Perhaps on a subconscious level a bit of both. He approached the trophy case, scanning over the collection, souvenirs he hadn't seen in years, imagining the ones yet to come, when he abruptly came across one he didn't remotely expect.

The speedster swallowed hard through his panic as he came face to face with the gleaming golden helmet of Fate.
His eyes narrowed, cautiously examining the helmet, as if at any moment it might reach out and consume him. Time and space literally slowed to a standstill, and he could feel the burning glare of Nabu staring back at him. At that moment all he wanted to do was take that damn thing out of the mountain, find a shallow grave somewhere and bury it. Let it become an artifact for another generation to dig out of the sand, then Dr. Fate could live again, any time but right now.

Sadly, Wally knew Fate might very well be his safety net. If things went so wrong, so out of whack that he had nowhere else to turn, he might find himself back in that helmet, trying to untangle the temporal mess he'd made. And just like the Justice Lords prisons, once he was in it, it was forever. The thought alone made his skin crawl. Hopefully things wouldn't get that desperate, not yet at least.

Out in the darkened hallway, Dick Grayson cleared his voice before entering, watching the speedster staring intently at the object that had stolen two months of his life, lucky that it wasn't more.

Wally never turned, grateful for Robin's intrusion, trying his best to hide his panic.

"What the hell is that thing doing here?"

"We probably should have warned you."

"Uh...you think?" the speedster growled.

"Yeah I'm really sorry about that. Batman said it started acting kind of...weird once they got it off of you and took it up to the Watchtower. Zatarra thinks maybe it had something to do with needing an earthy anchor, or something along those lines; to be honest I was a little lost."

"In his daughter eyes maybe?"

A guilty grin appeared under Robin's sunglasses. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Anyway... once they brought it back to Earth, whatever it was doing stopped. So the League decided to keep it here temporarily until the could find it a permanent home. Needless to say no one's going to be stupid enough to fool around with it."
Wally looked directly into the empty eyes of the helmet, almost hearing the voices of Kent Nelson and Nabu calling out to him.

"I don't like it being here, it creeps me out."

"I bet. I can talk to Batman, maybe they could move it to the Hall of Justice or something."

"What about the Batcave?"

"Hell no, I don't want that thing down there. Batcave's crowded enough as it is."

"Well wherever it goes, people better be careful. Cause the next person who's dumb enough to put it on ain't getting it off. I wouldn't wish that kind of shit on my worst enemy."

It wasn't exactly a lie, but not entirely the truth either. Wally knew if the moment arose, and Nabu joined with a new human host, the jig would be up, and he had no desire to find out what a Lord of Order might do to someone for breaking the laws of temporal dynamics. He was pretty sure it wouldn't just be a ticket.

Conner walked past the trophy room, stopping suddenly and turning back, looking directly to the speedster.

"Canary says you're up."

Wally sighed, the moment of truth finally at hand. "How was it?"

"How is it always?" Conner shrugged.

"Yeah," the speedster frowned. "Figured."

"Hey, have either of you seen Artemis?"
"Not since breakfast, what about you KF?"

Wally bit his tongue and walked out, heading for a counseling session that would be full of nothing but lies and necessary deceit, answering the clone with a cold clear."No."

xxx

The evening air rustled the tall cat tails in its breeze, as the speedster laid camouflaged amongst them, uniform soaked to the bone in the warm muddy marsh. He'd painstakingly removed any signs or insignias from the blackened suit, everything that made it it instantly recognizable, everything that made him a Flash. Through infrared goggles, invisible radiant energy lit up the night, casting the distant structure in its glow. This was the most scared, scratch that, the most terrified he'd been since he'd stepped foot off that treadmill, racing into oblivion.

The last two missions were about not getting caught, this one was about not getting killed. He was about to take on the Injustice League, all by himself.

Something of this nature should have been a full time covert mission with a team of highly trained operatives, not a seventeen year old kid with homework, chores, and a curfew. He'd been doing recon on this location for over two and a half weeks now, a neat trick in of itself considering he was ditching 8th period French Literature and running seven hundred miles one way on school nights. He doubted Mrs. Saucier would give him any extra credit for visiting the French speaking parishes of Louisiana anyway.

Bayou Bartholomew was bigger than he remembered, so much so that even the locals were at risk of getting lost if they weren't careful. It had taken three days at his top speed, three tedious sweltering days, searching countless miles of swamp land until dusk, every step his boots sinking into the muddy wet ground, feeling as if gravity had doubled when he'd try to dislodge them, water flooding back into the footprint just as quickly, erasing any trace of human existence.

The evening wind swept through the hollowed out trees, leaving the crude sounds of wind chimes in its wake. And those moments when the breeze died down, an invading army of mosquitos would take its place, attacking without mercy. A truly terrible place to live, and the perfect location for a secret criminal base of operations.

By luck or by chance, on the third day he'd finally found it; the Central Control System, and now seeing the massive structure glowing in the distance, he kind of wished he hadn't. By its unfinished condition, he was about a month or so early from its completion, from when he and the team last stood here fighting the Injustice League while the rest of world suffered attack. Fortified with
rounded walls of twelve inch steel, the base of the structure seemed complete, but the dome itself, as well as it's vast array of computers and components were still in varying stages of construction. The botanical hybrid growing inside it was not nearly to its maturation. Maybe the Kobra Venom had not been infused in the creature yet, not that it mattered much now.

The facility itself definitely kept a punctual work schedule. Private contractors, the types that didn't ask questions, were flown in every morning. The fabrication of the complex only took place in the daylight hours, the bright spotlights needed for night construction much to risky for fear of discovery. The sensor array around the complex glowed like a Roman candle from under his goggles, with the normal gaps and openings you'd expect from a construction project still in progress.

About an hour before sunset, the contractors and their team would be flown out, leaving the usual suspects behind to guard the facility, most likely due to their skill set and not some kind of Injustice League hierarchy. Everyday the players would change slightly, each coming in to share their specific expertise. He'd seen variations of the Joker, Wotan, Black Adam, and Count Vertigo on site during the day, but at night the personnel were always the same; the Ultra-Humanite, Atomic Skull, and Poison Ivey.

When the worldwide attacks would begin, this would be ground zero, this would be the launching point. And tonight Wally West was going to burn it to the ground, if the Injustice League didn't kill him first.

It had taken some begging, borrowing, and yes a little stealing to gather all the materials necessary, and large scale purchases of these items would have triggered every law enforcement agency in the state, so he had to hit dozens of hardware and feed stores across the south to gather all the components. It's time like these when a utility belt full of explosives would sure have come in handy.

In theory, building a bomb is easy. All you need is an engine, a detonator, and fuel combined in just the right proportions, in this case ammonium nitrate. So much of this was textbook chemistry, albeit AP level, a class in which he excelled obviously. The detonator causes a small explosion, energy from that blast creates a wave, the ammonium nitrate in the fertilizer vaporizes and becomes a gas. The gas molecules break down, and a large amount of oxygen vapor is formed. The gas released from the decomposing fertilizer becomes fuel, and...boom.

The fire is scorching and relentless, but the real damage comes from the escaping pressure waves. But it wasn't just about lighting a match and running like hell, there were weather conditions to consider, potential energy, detonation waves, expansion speed. It was not nearly as complex as say...mimicking Barry Allen's accident and giving yourself super speed, but it was still pretty damn tricky.
Wally adjusted the lenses of his goggles from infrared to thermal, focusing inside the dome. Poison Ivey rested on one of the limbs of the massive hybrid vine, stroking it as if it were some kind of weird domesticated house cat, while Atomic Skull stood close by, generating waves of thermal energy directly to the plant, simulating photosynthesis on a cellular level as well as keeping the temperature inside the unfinished dome optimal for growth. Outside, the albino primate organized large sections of clear solar panels into place for the morning crew to hoist into place. The large rifle he kept on his back indicated he was also the night watchman of sorts. For the past two weeks this had been their nightly routine, rarely deviating from it except for the occasional bickering and disagreements. They were a team for hire, not by choice.

Wally vaguely recalled Ivey being able to see through Ms. Martian's camouflage as they battled, almost as if the plant life all around were actually warning the villainess where the alien was. His biggest fear early on was worrying if those same plants might be doing something similar to him, but after two weeks of no abnormal activity or changes in routine, he figured if they could, he'd be captured by now, or worse.

He was as ready as he'd ever be. Everything was in place; the timers and triggers were armed, power sources were charged, and materials were hidden and ready for transport. All he needed was an opening.

Ivey snuggled into the mutated vegetation, wrapping herself in its vine-like embrace, thankful for the silence. She looked over at the radioactive villain, annoyed by his constant need for dialogue and discussion, even more so by his constant presence. Somehow in this strange and awkward arrangement, he'd considered them partners, while she considered him for what he was; food.

She closed her eyes and slowly drifted, minutes away from precious slumber, only to be jarred awake by the sudden sound of loud music echoing off in the distance. The silent Humanite's eyes grew wide in alert, climbing up the dome and landing bedside her, weapon locked and ready. Off to the south, a faint flickering of light escaped the foliage, while distant waves of far-off laughter intertwined between the abhorrent melody.

The primate snarled at the intrusion as Ivey gracefully slid from the vine, her delicate fingers soothing the plant as she exited.

"It's probably just local kids," Skull declared, "if you go spook them you'll end up doing more harm than good."

"They have a bonfire burning in an ecosystem that has barely enough water to sustain it. And they're burning living creatures...in my kingdom."
"Kingdom?" Skull questioned with furrowed brow. "Lady it's a god damn swamp. They're miles away, just blowing of steam and being stupid. They ain't coming around here in the middle of the night. Just leave 'em be, they'll be gone soon enough."

From the outskirts the distinct chime of breaking glass could be heard, and Ivey's fists grew tight as her fury burned.

"Animals," she spit in disgust.

The primate gave her an odd look at the comment, but understood the simpleminded meaning behind it. She nodded back at him as they both began to exit the control center. The Skull sighed, letting loose the electrodes he held and made his way towards the exit to join them.

"When Vertigo gets here in the morning, you're gonna be the one to tell him why we're behind schedule, not me."

Ivey wheeled around and stopped him in his tracks. "Stay here. Watch after my baby and keep her warm, you'll only get in the way."

"If you kill them, eventually someone's gonna come looking for them."

She shook her head in disgust. "I'm not going to kill them you idiot, the ape and I are just going to persuade them not to come around this way again."

The primate snarled a disgusted look at the villainess's ignorant comment. He possessed one of the most advanced human minds and had basically created his own species to house it in. He was as much an ape as she was a speck of grass, but once again...simple minds.

"Go back inside and take care of her," Ivey demanded.

"Lady I don't work for you," he growled, but one look from the albino primate convinced him that this wasn't a battle worth fighting.
The duo trudged into the blackness of the swamp, leaving their bitter compatriot behind. If this job wasn't paying so well, he might have just decided to hell with it, frying that bitch and her fucking house plant in the process, but at times, money talks. He headed back towards the dome, when crunch of a twig cracked behind him.

"Changed your mind huh?" he chided, turning around just in time to see the thick black edge of the sledgehammer...and then darkness.

A mile away, Ivey and the primate finally reached the source. Standing hidden behind the cloak of woods and trees, they both studied the scene; the raging bonfire sending sparks floating into the sky like dancing fireflies, the loud loathsome rhythms of southern rock beating into their chests, intermittent laughter and loud voices intertwined with the music, but nowhere to be seen where perpetrators, the people. Finally the two criminals emerged from the woods, standing ready to strike, expecting at any moment screams of fear and terror.

Ivey gestured to the Humanite as he began circling the fire, disappearing behind its pyre for moments before emerging with a large square wireless speaker. They both examined the oddity, when suddenly another round of conversation and laughter escaped it. The primate crushed it in his powerful grip and everything went silent. There were no trespassers, no intruders or invaders, there was just them.

It took barely a second for both to realize the truth, but by then it was a second too late.

All around them trees began to shake, ripples of swamp water become splashes. Deafening thunder erupted outward as a huge ball of varicolored fire belched skyward, lighting up the night, as if the gods themselves had torn open the gates of hell. Even from this distance they could feel the scalding heat.

"My babies!" Ivey shrieked, falling to the ground in horror as a thousand tiny voices called out to her in agony.

Humanite rushed towards the source, when the wave hit sending him forcefully to the ground.

The smell of the toxic chemicals spread throughout the marsh burning their eyes. The primate struggled to his feet, lifting the sobbing Ivey over his shoulder and rushing through the burning flames towards the control center...or what was left it.
The dome was lost, super heated steel oozed and hissed as it reached wet marshy deposits. Every solar panel had dissolved, the crystalline silicon cells inside now a toxic powder spread out into the ecosystem, leaving behind a gruesome carbon footprint. And in the center of the inferno, the botanic hybrid screamed in agony, withering away into dust and cast into the wind.

Ivey shivered in shock, emerald tears streaking her cheeks. She'd reluctantly signed on to this asinine plan as an opportunity for a geopolitical statement on ecological extinction and environmentalism, not for some misplaced loyalty to the Light. Now she'd become the very thing she'd fought against.

Luthor and his group were fools, and she was done being one of the Light's puppets. The Justice League would undoubtedly at some point put an end to Savage's plans, and she had no desire to be there when it happened, or to join them as they rotted away in some meta-human prison.

A few hundred yards away, the two villains heard the moans. Walking through the debris field they soon discovered the source. Beneath a charred aluminum panel lay the Atomic Skull in relative safety, uninjured and covered from head to toe in layers and layers of duct tape, completely immobile and helpless.

How he'd survived the blast she frankly didn't care, but someone had been watching, waiting for just the right moment to strike. This wasn't the League, they weren't this reckless or covert. The three of them would already be in custody by now if it were. However it wouldn't be long before they'd come to investigate, it was time to leave. The mission was failure, and someone had to pay. Seeing Skull lying there, trapped and helpless, ignited an already simmering fire inside her. He'd had one job, protect the hybrid, and his incompetence had led to her babies death.

The Humanite shook his had in disgust, bending down, tearing a piece of the adhesive away from his mouth.

"Get me out of this!" he demanded, the tape still hot, burning his skin trapped beneath it.

"Who did this?!" she hissed.

"I don't know! I never saw anyone!" he pleaded. "Get me out of this god damn thing, I can't breathe!"

The primate growled, bending down to begin tearing away the layers, when delicate but
determined fingers gripped his arm.

"Leave him."

The ever silent primate looked at her quizzically, sending lines of dialogue with just a glance.

"I don't care what the others will say," she replied.

Humanite raised his brow.

"Someone has to take the blame for this, and it's not going to be me," Ivey asserted. "Is it going to be you?"

The primate contemplated her words for a moment before reaching back down and securing the adhesive back across the prone Skull's mouth. The duo walked away in different directions, leaving their former teammate helpless and alone. The two villains navigated through the burning pyres, disgusted by all that had transpired, praying their paths wound not cross again, and what they would do if they did.

xxx

"Mom, Dad I'm home!" Wally yelled as he sped through the back screen door of his modest Keystone home, rushing up the stairs to his room and a much needed shower. Adrenaline still raced through his body, and despite his exhaustion, he doubted he'd be falling asleep any time soon.

He'd done it, one of the most dangerous parts of Bruce's mission, and he'd done it.

The League would no doubt investigate the wreckage, possibly find the Atomic Skull still prisoner of enough duct tape to shrink wrap a building, and under Batman's intense interrogation methods, would discover the Injustice League's connection to, as well as the existence of an organization known as the Light.

Ok, all of that would be a little far fetched, but it would definitely alert them that someone or
something was working behind the scenes and get the ball rolling. Something powerful enough to bring together teams of super-villains that despised each other to work towards a common goal. The discovery of that goal could be the kind of thing that saves the future. Tonight was an important victory, but there was still plenty of battles left to fight.

Wally exited the shower and put on a pair of sweats and his favorite tee shirt, ravenously heading to the kitchen to dig out whatever leftovers he could find in the fridge. When he reached the bottom step, he glanced over to see his parents in the den, engrossed in some program on the television.

Wally entered the kitchen removing a Flintstone sized turkey leg and a glass of milk to join them. He'd hardly spent anytime with his parents since he'd come out of Fate's coma, instead focusing on his mission, homework, and the utter confusion of his new life. His mom and dad were huge parts of that life, and in slow moments like this he realized how blessed he was to have them. No matter what happened from the point on, whatever future he would make for himself, he could count on his loving and patient parents to be a part of it.

"Watch ya watching?" the speedster asked through a mouthful of white meat, expecting one of the cheesy crime dramas his parents had always been addicted to, but at the bottom of the screen he noticed the red CNN logo, and realized this was no episode, this was a live report.

"There's been some kind of accident in Louisiana," his dad shushed him, trying to listen to the report.

"Once again, our top story tonight, Louisiana is in flames, as hundreds of thousands of acres burn uncontrollably towards local townships and municipalities across the drought ridden region. Rescue workers are struggling to evacuate residents, while firefighters from across the state are battling to keep the wildfires contained. The National Guard and Red Cross have been called into assist in the rescue efforts, and reports are coming in that the Justice League may be in route. From the Baton Rouge desk, Monique Gabriel has the report..."

Wally felt like he was about to vomit.

"How...how does a forest fire break out in freaking swamp?" he asked desperately. "The whole place is surrounded by water!"

His throat was so tight he could barely breathe. He was beginning to sweat, his hands trembling as he held his glass, small splashes of the alabaster liquid dripping onto the carpet.
"You ok pal?" Rudy worriedly asked his son, as Mary brought her hand to his forehead.

"Honey you're burning up, I mean even more than normal. Are you feeling alright?"

He swallowed hard through his panic, unable to even speak when his phone rang. On the display showed the image of a young brunette teen in sunglasses. He pressed answer as Dick Grayson spoke on the other end.

"You watching the news?"

Wally cleared his tightened throat. "Yeah."

Knowing full well not to speak freely on an unsecured channel, Robin said simply. "B needs us to come in, be at the cave in thirty. I know it's a school night, but this is pretty big."

"Oh...ok," Wally replied shaken.

"Dude you ok?"

"Yeah I'm fine, I gotta pack. I'll see you there."

Wally hung up and looked to his parents, his face ashen.

"I gotta go," he said reluctantly.

"Honey are you sure that's a good idea? You don't look well."

"I'm fine mom. It's important."

"Let him go Mary. Text us as soon as you get down there and before you leave ok?"
"I will dad, I promise."

"Please be careful dear."

Wally kissed his mom on the cheek before rushing to his room to retrieve his uniform.

He yanked at the bottom dresser drawer where his uniform lay, the one that always stuck, rocking the cabinet so hard that it sent his science trophies resting atop crashing to the floor. The speedster slowed down, taking a deep breath to calm himself, and knelt down, retrieving the closest one first, staring at the engraving on the name plate.

Keystone High School Newton Award
Recognizing Excellence in Science.
Wallace R. West - Class of 2011

He'd received the award his freshman year, and every subsequent one after. His science teacher Mr. Gordon had even affectionately made him a tee shirt celebrating his success. I Like Ike

Isaac Newton, the author and creator of the Third Law of Motion - For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

He placed the trophy back atop his dresser, pausing in front of the mirror briefly, staring at the sunken bloodshot eyes in the reflection.

Equal and opposite reactions. The ancient physicist probably never factored in temporal mechanics into his first equation, but that law never held as much truth as it did right now.

With the flap of a butterfly's wings Wally had averted one disaster and unknowingly caused another.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction
The proof of that theory playing out on CNN at that exact moment, raging across Louisiana, destroying everything in its path, caused by him.

Mary West had sandwiches prepared as Wally raced to the door grabbing four of them at once. Rudy rose from his chair, straitening his son's cowl as he opened the door "Good luck sport," his father spoke. "Your mom and I are proud of you."

Those haunting words were like a knife to the heart. Though he appreciated the intent, he doubted his father would feel the same if he knew the truth.

xxx

The BioShip touched down outside of the town of Haile, depositing the speedster, archer, and detective respectfully before taking back off towards the next closest town.

The small municipality was gone, the center of town nothing but smoking cinders, blocks of shops and family restaurants reduced to searing concrete slabs and broken dreams.

The local townsfolk trudged through the ash like the refuges in a war zone, carrying what few items they could rescue before fleeing for their lives.

Wally stood speechless as the world slowed around him. What should have been a cool September day felt like the sweltering summer heat of Biyala, perspiration soaking him through his Kevlar reinforced uniform. A brief rain shower had quelled the flames momentarily, but the strong western winds that continued to blow threatened to ignite them all over again.

In the distance, Green Arrow could be seen, assisting an elderly couple to the evacuation busses, catching the wife as she stumbled through the heat. Dick, Artemis and Wally walked up and joined him. Ollie took off his cap and wiped is damp brow.

"What a fucking mess," he sighed, pounding on the side of the bus, alerting the driver they were loaded and ready to go.

"What happened?" Artemis asked in shocked disbelief, never before seeing this kind of devastation.

Ollie reached into his pocket, pulling out the half-drunk bottle of water one of the Red Cross workers had given him. He looked exhausted.
"Something sparked a pipeline deep in bayou. These pipes run through about eight towns on their way to Corpus Christi. Western Petroleum was able to shut down all their pumping stations just north of here, but everything south is still burning. It's about sixty percent contained from last reports.

"What sparked it?" Robin questioned.

Arrow walked the three away from the temporary evacuee shelters and earshot.

"The official story is a lightning strike. Despite this place being surrounded by freaking swampland, this area is as dry as a bone. Unofficially the League and local authorities have Atomic Skull in custody. Watchtower sensors initially detected the presence of some kind of nerve agent, but we can't find any traces of it, so for now we're keeping it quiet, no use in terrifying an already terrified populace. These folks have been through enough already, they don't need to worry about super-villain's sneaking around in their back yards. Batman and Captain Atom are at the blast sight, we'll know more in a couple hours."

"What do you need us to do?" the young detective asked.

"I need you and Artemis around the town square, make sure we got everybody out. There's a lot of folks that are unwilling to leave, but we've got high winds kicking back up and a lot of hot coals just waiting for the chance. Kid gloves ok? These people have been through hell."

"Wally, I need you circling the outskirts, help Fire and Rescue search for survivors. It's still pretty hairy out there, you need to be careful. If things get too hot, you get those F and R boys out of there pronto. Understood?"

The trio nodded, with Artemis and Robin heading into town, while the speedster sped towards outlying districts.

Wally had been running for hours, cupboards and food stocks long since empty, zig zagging across the countryside, trying to help where he could. The strong western winds had miraculously brought rain clouds with them this time, a steady downpour now extinguishing what was left of the city of Haile. Through com chatter he'd discovered the worst was over and Superman had sealed the rupture, but the property loss and environmental impact where immeasurable.
Up ahead off of Highway 31, he found a group of firemen frantically digging through the rubble and ash of small shack backing up to Cooks Creek. A mother's manic pleas for help could be heard coming from the cellar beneath.

Wally moved the rescue team away, his friction proof suit adding an extra level of protection for what he was about to attempt. This was going to be tricky. His body began to blur as he methodically tossed searing timber and aluminum, removing as much mass as he could from the weakened wooden floor. One of the firemen tossed him his crowbar and the speedster dug deep between the seams, tearing away sections of flooring till the soot covered eyes of the mother escaped the darkness below.

Fire teams rushed in, extracting the screaming mother as she begged for them to take her daughters first. One of the rescue team quickly crawled down in the gap, turning his head lamp on when he came across the gruesome site.

"We need LifeFlight here...Now!" he yelled from beneath.

The speedster stood back, allowing the trained paramedics room to operate, lowering two stretchers into the gap, and after what seemed like an eternity, carefully pulling them back out. When the stretchers finally reached the light, Wally nearly wretched.

Two young sisters, twins possibly, their flesh literally melted off their bodies. Pulses were quickly found, and oxygen masks pulled carefully around their mouth and nose as they struggled to breath. Paramedics wrapped sterile blankets around the shivering children, and in his confused stupor, Wally found it odd how they could possibly be cold. Nothing made sense anymore, everything around just become so much muted background noise. He imagined he could hear the beating of their hearts, that everything was fine, and they would soon step off those gurneys to run and play.

A half hour later LifeFlight arrived, placing the two children, their stretchers, and a handful of paramedics inside its cramped cabin. The young mother begged for them to take her as well, but there was no room and time was short. She heartbreakingly watched her girls, possibly for the last time, flown away into the setting sun.

She collapsed into the arms of the fire chief, sobbing inconsolably, both heart and soul torn to pieces.

Wally meekly walked up, trembling at the woman's pain, pain he'd caused.
"Ma'am, I can take you there."

"What?" she asked in a daze, not even realizing who or what she was talking to.

"The hospital, I can probably beat the helicopter there if we hurry. Where did they take them?"

"Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center in Baton Rouge," the fireman replied. "About forty miles due south."

"Get me the address" he demanded. The speedster took off his goggles and gently placed them over the young mother's eyes. "I'm going to have to carry you. It's gonna get a little loud, but we'll be there before they do. I promise."

Then Wally looked into the woman's eyes, and lied through his teeth. "Everything's going to be ok."

It was a hollow empty statement, a worthless deceitful attempt at comfort, possibly as much for him as it was for her.

They arrived fifteen minutes before the helicopter had even crossed into the city limits, Wally running as hard as he ever had, protecting the fragile woman he cradled in his arms. Bypassing any and all hospital protocol; the speedster raced to the to the roof, the young mother standing by his side as the copter approached the helipad. A team of doctors waited to greet them, immediately rushing them into surgery, preparing skin grafts and other life saving measures.

With tears running down her cheeks the hysterical mother rushed inside to join them, suddenly stopping in front of the sliding doors and turning back to the speedster, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing as tight as she could.

"Thank you," she cried, her damp cheeks resting in the crook of his neck. Wally held on to her for as long as she'd let him, an eternity if need be. She kissed him on the cheek and ran inside.

On the helipad, one of the doctors stood by the craft, collecting the vitals the paramedics had taken during the flight. The speedster walked next to him, waiting for him to notice the obnoxious soot covered yellow and red uniform. The doctor finally turned to him.
"Are they going to be ok?" the speedster asked hopeful.

"We won't know for a couple of hours."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Just pray son," the doctor replied, placing his hand on the young man's shoulder. "Just pray."

xxx

Wally returned by mid-morning the next day, his parents already having notified the guidance office at Keystone of his illness. He sat down at the dining table and told them the stories, the devastation, the smell, the heat, but skipping past the two young girls. He wasn't ready, he doubted he'd ever be.

As usual his mother had made a delicious dinner, and they sat and made small talk throughout, but they could tell their son was hurting. Being around that kind of suffering and devastation would be tough on anyone, but especially for a sixteen year old boy who should be out going to high school football games, movies with his friends, dates with that special girl; not sifting through the ashes of a war zone looking for survivors. Wally was growing up way too fast for their liking, and sometimes there were just no words of comfort they could give. They hated leaning on their brother in law so much during times like these, but honestly Barry Allen was about the only person who could understand what their son was going through.

Wally helped clean the table then sat with his dad for awhile watching Thursday Night Football before calling it a night and turning in early. Mary and Rudy exchanged relieved glances when Wally finally headed off to bed, hopeful a healthy meal and a good nights rest would do him some good. They'd call Iris in the morning to see if Barry would drop by sometime soon.

It's was 2:00 a.m. and Wally sat crouched on his bedroom floor, squeezed between his dresser and his open closet door.

He was haunted by the vision of those two girls, who if they even survived, would continue to need skin graphs, surgery, and rehabilitation while still facing a lifetime of agony. Innocent people had lost everything; homes, jobs, items so special and personal, things that could never be replaced by a donation from the Wayne Foundation. Everything was his fault, every god damn bit of it...and they thanked him. They actually thanked him. How fucked up was that?
He was no hero, he was the villain.

Bruce Wayne's dossier was probably very clear and exact on what to do for this mission; the materials, the risks, the precautions, but all that information was trapped in the time stream racing towards infinity, and he was trapped here alone; blind, reckless, and stupid. He couldn't use that as an excuse anymore.

*He should never have come back.*

What good was it trying to save the lives of tomorrow if you destroyed the ones here today.

In the darkness, he wiped the tears from his eyes, absently holding the trophy in his hand, his thumb sliding back and forth across the name plate.

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Keystone High School Newton Award

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Wallace R. West - Class of 2011

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*For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.*

The trophy flew from his hands, smashing into pieces against his bedroom wall.

"Fuck you Newton!" he spit, leaning his head back and staring at his beside clock. Dawn couldn't come soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note – Sorry for the delay, work and life keeping getting in the way. I've had a lot of comments regarding the pairing of Conner and Artemis. I hope after reading this chapter you might understand the rationale. That's all I can say right now. If you have the time, please leave a review and thanks for reading.
“Omega…”

“Omega…come in?”

A few moments later a patient but exasperated sigh came across the radio once again. “Omega respond please.”

From across the spacious rooftop, Artemis Crock pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration; not as much at the tedium of this mission as with her distracted teammate. She desired her privacy as much, if not more than the next person, but using radios instead of Martian mind links, at a certain speedster request no less, was not only slowing down this pointless shadow job, but wearing on her very last nerve as well.

“Wally!” she hissed as silently as possible.

As soon as he heard his name he jolted, turning towards her position on the north side of the warehouse, a look of annoyance bordering on contempt directed his way as she gestured angrily to her ear and then back to him.

Shit

“Sector five clear,” he sighed, frowning as the archer rolled her eyes and resumed her search of the north side of the docks.

“Thank you Omega,” Robin replied over the channel with a sarcastic sigh.

The speedster rubbed his tired eyes. It had been a long two weeks. The images of the Louisiana girls still haunted him, and three late nights stuck on this rooftop doing nothing but lookout and reconnaissance had worn him to the bone. It also didn’t help that his current partner didn’t appreciate being paired with him anymore than he wanted to be up there in the first place.

Wally adjusted his goggles, making a thermal sweep of the abandoned warehouses on the wharf, before lifting them off his tired eyes and taking a short break. He walked over towards the archer
across the roof, her eyes keenly focused though the binoculars on the two subjects; just not the ones they were supposed to be searching for.

“Sorry,” he sighed.

“Whatever,” she replied dismissively, adjusting the lenses and bringing the images of Conner Kent and Megan Morse into clearer view. “Just get back in position and get you head out of your ass ok?”

She was in a mood. He’d seen it a thousand times before; the narrowing of her eyes, the tightening her jaw, the cold distant silence. The smartest thing to do when she was like was to step back and give her her space, but sometimes it's the smartest people who make the dumbest mistakes, but to his defense he knew it wasn't him she was irritated with.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She frowned, ignoring him and changing the angle, resuming the search of the entrances and alleyways of Gotham Harbor, any darkened corner an alleged drug smuggler might be hiding.

“You might feel better if you got it off your chest.”

Her grip tightened on the binoculars, “There’s nothing to talk about, get back to your position,” she replied with perhaps a little more venom then she intended.

“It bothers you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Wally rolled his eyes. Why he was getting involved in this particular issue he had no idea. In another life he had loved her, he probably always would, but even though that life might be gone, no matter what their relationship was now, he still cared about her; he still wanted her to be happy. She deserved that more than most.

“Just talk to Kaldur.”
“About what?” she answered dismissively.

“About why he’s not pairing you and Conner together on missions. It’s probably just an oversight. Don’t read too much into it.”

Her teeth clenched. “I’m not reading anything into anything, and for the last time, go…back…to your position.”

“I was just trying to give you some friendly advice,” he sighed wearily.

“Well don’t ok?” she snapped. “We’re not friends; we’re just teammates. That’s it. I don’t get into your business so don’t get into mine.”

Wally was already on edge, and after all they’d been though, after all he’d lost, being told they weren’t even friends? That stung…a lot. The more he was around her, the harder it was getting.

It was different back in the day, when their sparring actually had some feelings hiding behind it. He resented her and she resented him for resenting her. She just wanted a chance; he just wanted his friend on the Team.

Team’s needed a real archer.

It was a long and treacherous road through arguments and battles, jealously and heartbreak, life and near death, but finally they found each other; the person that wouldn’t let the other get away with nothing - their spitfires. They fell in love and made a life together; one they both hoped would be forever, but sometimes there aren’t enough days in forever. His had run out on a cold day in June, but standing next to her right now, it felt even colder.

“Fine,” he replied, walking off in silence. She could be so damn infuriating. Wherever these idiot smugglers were, they’d better come out soon, because if he had to be stuck up here much longer he was going to lose it.

After what seemed like an eternity, a quiet husky voice broke the silence.
“Ok, it bothers me a little.”

Wally’s ears perked up. “Excuse me? Did you say something?” he taunted playfully.

“Don’t push it West.”

He walked back to her, the archer no longer trying to hide her surveilled gaze.

“You know they’re just friends right? You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Who said I was worried,” she replied, trying to mask her dismay.

Wally sighed. “We can play games up here all night if you want to, God knows we have the time, but if it bothers you that much, you need to talk to him.”

She shook her head. “And what? Make him think I’m even more batshit crazy than he already does? No thank you.”

“Artemis,” he paused, scratching the back of his neck. God he hated this. “Look if you like him and you want this to work, you have to be honest with him. You can’t freak out over what you think he’ll think. It’s normal to be insecure about….”

“I’m insecure?” she snapped, her temper beginning to heat up.

“Artemis chill ok? We’re all insecure. We’re teenagers, we’re supposed to be.”

“And I suppose you’re the exception huh?” she argued, irked by his accusation.

“Hello?” he chuckled, gesturing to himself. “Red hair and freckles, table for one please. Of course I’m insecure. My middle name is Rudolph. Who in the hell names their kid that? I was doomed from the start.”
For the first time that night her shoulders eased and she actually smiled, and for a brief second he saw that girl again, the girl he remembered. No matter how brief, it was still nice.

“You are kind of pathetic,” she teased.

“Gee thanks.”

“Hey, your words not mine….Rudolph.” the archer grinned.

“Yeah yeah,” he sighed. “So how about instead of making fun of my idiotic middle name, why don’t you tell me what’s really bothering you.”

She took a deep breath, still hesitant to share, but trying none the less.

“We just don’t get a lot of time together. Between school and missions there’s just not a lot of it to go around, and when there is, he and Megan are usually hanging out. I mean they practically live together; they go to the same school, do homework, eat dinner, and somehow still get paired together on all these missions. It would just be nice if he could…you know…make the effort too sometimes.”

Wally considered her words for a moment. Artemis was never the jealous type, not really, but she had valid points. However she was ignoring the biggest, yet smallest one of all.

“You know he’s like… barely one right?”

Her brow furrowed into a frown.

“You know what I’m saying. I doubt those creepy little Geomorphs taught him much about dating. Talk to him. Let him know how you feel. Connor’s a good dude, a little rough around the edges sometimes but then again so are you.”

A faint smile returned as she playfully hit him in the arm. “You’re probably only telling me this so
you can get a shot at Megan again,” the archer chuckled.

Wally waved his hands. “No way” he chuckled, that ship has sailed. I’m warding off girls for a while.”

“Hold on!” Artemis interrupted, her head suddenly jerking in all directions. “Did you hear that? It sounded like… every woman on the planet just let out a collective sigh of relief. That is so weird.” she said with a grin.

“Very funny,” he rolled his eyes. ”Last time I try to cheer you up.”

“Ok...ok. I’m sorry,” she chuckled. “You’re right. I should to talk to him.”

“Don’t let it fester Artemis. Life’s too short. You don’t want to turn around five years from now and wonder what might have been. Trust me on that.”

She looked at him oddly, her grey eyes piercing so deeply it almost hurt. It was all he could not to get lost in them again like so many times before.

“Fate really did a number on you didn’t he?” she smirked.

"You have no idea."

Just then. their earpieces began to crackle as a familiar voice came over the channel “Robin to all teams, it’s a bust. They’re not here. Pack up and rendezvous back at the Bioship in ten.”

“Copy that” Artemis replied looking over to the speedster. “I guess that’s it.”

“Thank God,” he groaned.

Artemis walked back to her vantage point, carefully collecting her specialty arrows while breaking down her compound bow, removing the string and pulleys for long-term storage. The weapon was sacred to her, and she took immaculate care of it.
Watching her, Wally wished he felt good about what he’d said, but at least he was honest, a rarity for him lately. He tucked his goggles into his pockets and bent down to pick up his trash when her voice rang out from behind.

“Wally?” Artemis spoke as he turned.

“Yeah?”

An appreciative smile stretched across her lips. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” he replied, closing his wrist cabinets and walking over to the fire escape, allowing her to go first.

“Really... don’t,” he sighed to himself.

xxx

Despite its ridiculous sounding name, Happy Harbor was one of the hidden gems of New England. A small seaside community hidden within rolling lush green hills, stretching out into forever before disappearing into warm beaches and tranquil waters. Not nearly as touristy as cities like Providence, Happy Harbor kept its small town appeal and sensibilities. The townsfolk were warm and welcoming, the area enjoyed all four seasons, the local architecture was in keeping with its 18th century charm, and there was never a lack of things to do or see. From sailing and seafood to hiking and surfing, Happy Harbor had it all, especially for one land-locked midwestern kid, more used to flat farmland than wooded hills and endless seas.

Wally loved looking out into the ocean, staring endlessly at its vast lonely landscape. It always left him feeling so small and insignificant while still full of hope and promise, as if a new life was awaiting him on the other side.

xxx

Inside the vast caverns of Mt. Justice, the speedster stretched out on the coach, cycling through pages and pages of missions briefings and summaries on his tablet, stopping every few paragraphs
for clarity from his agitated and antsy best friend.

“So you guys have no idea where Sphere came from or how it got here?”

“It’s alien Wally, if could be from anywhere.”

“And what about Psimon? Did he say anything to Megan? Anything that might hint at who he was working for?”

"I was there when Batman debriefed her and she never mentioned anything about it. M'gann was probably too busy, I don't know.....trying to stay alive then conduct some mental interrogation.”

Wally rolled his eyes, not in the mood for the young detective's sarcasm.

"What about those Biyalan rent- a-cops? You know Psimon didn't hire them? Surely Bats must have found out something right?"

"Their minds were wiped clean. Batman did detailed record checks on all of them. These guys were all decorated soldiers, no criminal ties whatsoever. Psimon covered his tracks well."

"So no suspicions? Nothing?"

Robin sighed. "Wally everything we have is in those reports. If you can't find it, then it doesn't exist."

“Ok fine,’ he frowned, scrolling down the tablet, “How about Belle Reve? It says here Mr. Freeze petitioned the court to be held legally sane and Icicle Junior sued the penal system to be tried as an adult. Come on! Really? Who filed the paperwork, who prepared the documents? I mean Freeze is pretty smart, maybe he could have probably figured it out on his own, but Mahkent’s kind of moron. He had to have some kind of attorney right? Who was he? Who paid for him?”

Dick let loose a long and frustrated sigh. “Batman and the League are still looking into it, there's just a ton of paperwork to go through. Their on it, trust me, but if you have and doubts go ask him, I'm sure he'd be happy to go into the finer details of his investigation with you, Scooby and Thelma.
since all of a sudden you've a detective.”

Wally shot an annoyed pout at the brunette. "Hilarious."

"Look KF, as proud as I am of you trying to crack the big case, we're kind of on the clock here dude. Everybody's waiting on us."

"By everyone, you mean Zatanna."

"I choose to invoke my Fifth Amendment rights," Dick chuckled. "The sun's going down soon. I can't believe you're actually risking a chance to see Ms. M in a bikini for some non-ordered League homework. Come on, shut that thing off and let's go have some fun."

"You go ahead, I'll catch up."

Dick shrugged. "You're loss. I'll try to save you a couple dogs."

"Appreciate it," Wally replied dismissively, eyes already back to the tablet.

"Whatever," Dick sighed, leaving the common area and heading for the secret mountain exit. He pushed open the heavy stone door looking back one last time, hoping the speedster was hot on his trail. After a few moments he closed it and began the trek done to the dunes to join his friends.

Dick was frustrated. He could usually read his best friend like a book, but not lately, not since he'd come back. Wally was the kind of guy who wore his heart on his sleeve, if anything he was usually guilty of over-sharing. But something had changed, and every effort Dick made to try to bring the old Wally back was met with the same kind of resistance and deflection as tonight.

_Maybe_ the speedster was genuinely worried about his place on the team. He'd been absent for a pretty long time, maybe he felt the need to prove his worth, prove his dedication. Joining the League had always been the goal, and Wally had always been a planner.

_Maybe_ they weren't as close as they once were. Since his return they hadn't hung out as much, the speedster more absent than before, spending more time at home these days then the cave. He
wasn't returning calls and texts until the next day instead of thirty minutes or less which had been the norm. A small insecure part inside Dick wondered if maybe Wally had outgrown him. After all he was a few years older, and graduation was on the horizon. Wally hadn't really shared his plans for after high school, but for someone as insanely smart as the speedster, continuing his education was a no brainer, and once again Wally had always been a planner.

*Maybe* Fate was still haunting him. Kaldur had said it best; *Wally used his understanding of science to control what he couldn't understand.* How terrifying it must have been to be taken hostage by a force like that, something not only he didn't believe in, but had no one clue how to escape from. In some ways it was like a part of him hadn't come back, still stuck inside the helmet somewhere. Wally had been encouraged several times to go meet with Zatarra, talk to him about his experience. Being the only other magic wielder in the League, Zatarra might have offered a unique perspective others couldn't, but par for the course, the speedster had declined.

*Or maybe* he was just being paranoid. His best friend had been through something pretty traumatic, something no one had ever been through before outside of Kent Nelson, who unfortunately wasn't available for a sit down anymore. Maybe Wally just needed time to find himself, to get comfortable back in his skin again. Canary would eventually be coming around the mountain for her bi-weekly counseling sessions. Maybe it would be a good time to have a little chat. Dinah was always good at getting to the heart of the matter, and hopefully she could tell him he was acting crazy, or if Wally was.

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With Dick gone, Wally rubbed his eyes and went back to work. After dismantling the two androids that had attacked Mt. Justice, the League had soon discovered T.O. Morrow's base under Yellowstone, the inactivated Red Inferno, as well as its comatose elderly creator.

Wally realized now by not following the original timeline, they'd missed out on the chance to interrogate Professor Ivo, which could have been the first big clue to a connection to the Light.

And now with Zatanna down at the beach; laughing, chatting, and bonding with people she wasn't supposed to meet for months, he realized he might have *really* screwed up.

What other ripples might he have caused? What other paradoxes or anomalies had he created? Scrolling through these reports, he wasn't finding anything near what he'd hoped for, but there had to be more.
There was no mention anywhere in these documents about what the League had discovered in Louisiana, and Wally knew for certain that Batman and Captain Atom had been at the blast site and had interrogated Atomic Skull thoroughly.

The League must have had more detailed reports stored on a database somewhere else, and the chances of Wally getting access to them were slim to none.

His mom always said you can lead a camel to water, but you can't make him drink. How was he supposed to point the League in the right direction if he didn’t know which way they were looking? No matter how successful Bruce's plan might be, Wally knew he needed the League's help. Ultimately he wasn't going to save the world, they were.

He took a step back to look at the bigger picture. Sure he was worried about paradoxes or anomalies, but in reality this whole mission was about nothing but creating anomalies. The goal was to disrupt the Light's plans where he could, and making their existence known to the League. After that it was up to them, it always had been.

The key of course was Bruce. The Batman of any era was infamous for keeping things close to the vest, perhaps that's what the elder Wayne was counting on.

Changing history was a lot like playing chess Bruce had told him. It wasn't just about capturing the king or clearing the board. It was about arranging the pieces. It was about strategy. Knowing your opponent was key, staying one step ahead the challenge. That was Batman in a nutshell.

When playing someone of equal skill, you had to be subtle and inconspicuous yet bold and deliberate, determining their moves before they determined yours. This mission was designed by the ultimate chess master to play against his greatest adversary. Created by Batman for Batman.

Wally no longer had access to all those intricate maneuvers, meticulously crafted to capture the attention of the world’s greatest detective. Hours after waking up in that Massachusetts hospital, once he'd gathered his wits and realized his dilemma, he'd scribbled furiously on every napkin, notebook paper, and medical chart he could find. Writing everything he could possibly remember before that knowledge faded away.

Bruce Wayne had designed this game to set himself, the younger version of himself, on a very specific path of discovery, but still one entirely of his own choosing. These moves would light the path, but it was still up to him to decide to follow or not. Somehow Wally had to mimic that plan to connect each mission to something bigger, while fully factoring in all the variables. Conceivable on paper, nearly freaking impossible in real life.

Despite Dick Grayson’s patient instruction, Wally had never been very good at chess, much too slow for his liking, but in this case maybe slow was the key. Remember to look three steps ahead before you leap. Wally knew the broader strokes, it was the little ones in between he had to color...
The goal of chess was to put the king in a position where he cannot escape. Wally had just placed the Light on the board, and he desperately needed checkmate in as few moves as possible.

xxx

Another restless night, another early morning. Wally leaned against the headboard of his bed, pausing for a moment to rub the crusts of sleep from his eyes. His alarm was set to go off in less than hour but he'd been up since two o'clock, staring out at the posters haphazardly arranged across his room like some deranged Arkham patient.

Each one of these posters when placed linearly represented two distinct timelines; one he remembered and the other he hoped to change. Events circled in red were target dates in need of altering, ones in green had no real bearing on the mission, and the ones in blue were wild cards, the unknowns. Missions and events that could be crucial but the specifics now lost forever to time and space. The sheer enormity of it was overwhelming.

Thanks a lot Fate.

What in the hell had he been thinking? He was no detective, no trained CSI, he was a college student who’d been out of the game for years and it showed. While people like Dick, Artemis and Roy had trained their entire lives to master a skill, and not just excel in it but become the best, he was fast, that’s it, that’s all. It wasn’t a skill; it wasn’t something he worked to perfect. It was ability, a response, like breathing.

He was a one trick pony. He was a joke, and he was only going to fuck everything up worse than it already was.

Wally wiped the tears from his eyes, banging his head against the headboard over and over. He’d finally hit the wall. Exhaustion and despair had sunk their claws into him and they weren’t letting go.

He was the wrong person for this mission. Hell if Bart had been around years earlier he probably
wouldn’t have even made the Team.

*Barry Allen’s poor little nephew, wanting so badly to be special, to run by his idol’s side, but instead constantly left in the dust.*

In truth they weren’t even really related.

The only reason Bruce had allowed him to take part in this mission was because he had no choice. If Tina, Ray and Silas had been able to make Bart’s time ship work again, they would have politely asked Wally to go sit in the corner, to be quiet, and stay out of everyone’s way.

He was so lost.

Across the room, the moonlight shined off his collection of trophies, making them almost glow in the darkness.

Keystone High School Newton Award

Recognizing Excellence in Science.

Wallace R. West

There were four of them on his dresser, one for each year, surrounded by numerous smaller ones and other awards. Then it struck. There was something he’d been training for his entire life.

He was a scientist, or hoped to be one day. Recreating a dangerous experiment to give himself super speed, while impressive was not exactly something you could put on a resume, but it pointed to a gift, a skill.

His mind didn't work like Bruce's, but Bruce’s didn’t work like his either. He was a child of science; investigating phenomenons, acquiring new knowledge, correcting and integrating previous observations into the problem. Things that came naturally to him, things he’d learned before he ever opened a textbook. Those were his skills, that was his power.

He had to treat each mission just like solving a problem. Measurements and experiments, formulations and modifications, predictions and yes….guesses. The Scientific Method in a
No detail was too small now, every event, every change had to be deliberate, everything had to be precise. There would be mistakes, there would always be mistakes. Some of life's greatest discoveries had been by accident or error. He just needed to do his best to minimize those the best he could. He couldn't have another Louisiana.

He wiped his weary eyes and got back to the task at hand. Feeling sorry for himself wasn’t going to accomplish anything.

Wally still had the framework of Bruce's plan, but now it was up to him to fill in the gaps and it was going to take time, something he didn't have as much of as he'd like. Being one of the fastest men alive carried more weight now than ever had.

So far he'd been lucky. The Brain was off the board, an actual member of Light in custody. That was big. Wally would bet all the money he had that Batman had gotten Atomic Skull to spill everything he knew, Bruce’s interrogation methods were known to be…persuasive.

Skull was a bit player, a minor leaguer. His goal was to protect the facility and provide energy for Ivey’s pet. He’d spill everything he knew about the Injustice League, but probably was never let in on who funded them. Ultimately he answered to Count Vertigo, and Vertigo was an ally of Vandal Savage. That was the connection that needed to be made, that was what Bruce had to find.

Following the posters around the room, the key to several of these missions was to win them before they even started. Others to allow them to follow the course they were supposed to travel, and a select few to lose. Those losses might end up being more important than victories if it meant becoming a blip on the Dark Knight's radar. The trick was figuring out which ones.

Wally hopped up from his bed and began scribbling on each individual poster. Formulas, percentages, variables; parts of the plans he remembered and others he'd have to hypothesize, which in the end was just a fancy way to say guess. Hypothesis sounded smart, guess sounded desperate.

He would treat each mission like a math problem, like an experiment. Determine the norms, factor in the variables, and find the solutions.

Wally highlighted what he knew and remembered, factored in as many variables as he could think
of, and tried to connect them in a way that someone might be able to follow. It wasn’t perfect by any means, there was still plenty of room for error, but all of life's great mysteries rarely had an answer key attached.

One of the biggest variables to jump off the page was the most obvious. Because of the speedster's intervention in Louisiana, Dr. Fate had not been needed to save the day, and because of that Wally's true identity had remained safe. How long could that last was an unknown, so Wally needed to do everything in his power to make sure the Helmet never left the souvenir shelf. Easier said than done.

If changing history was really like playing Chess, Wally knew he was screwed. He couldn't make up for every single move Bruce Wayne had hoped play, but he still had some ideas of his own.

In the end he wasn't a superhero, he wasn't Batman, he was Wally West and that would have to be enough.

Believe in the impossible. Barry used to say it, Kent Nelson lived it, and Wally West was going to achieve it, but first he had to pass his A.P. History and French Lit test two hours from now, and he hadn't even opened the book.

High School still sucked as much the second time as it did the first. God he was tired.

xxx

Wally arrived just as the first bell rung, joining in the zombiefied conga line of exhausted teenagers making their way to first period. If it wasn't so surreal it would probably have felt more humiliating, squeezing through the cramped hallways of Keystone shoulder to shoulder where just months ago he and his girlfriend were enjoying the wide open courtyards and quads of Stanford.

Youth is wasted on the young Barry always said, but he never had to be seventeen twice and repeating twelfth grade. The teachers were more burned out than he remembered, the food twice as bad, and almost all of the girls still looked at him like he had the plague; the joys of being a ginger.

Once, just once, he would have loved to have sped into a pep rally, pulled down the cowl and showed the world he was something other than that science geek from Chemistry class that got his ass handed to him in P.E. all the time. He was a superhero after all, junior partner to Central City's
greatest hero, and it still royally sucked that every day he was out protecting the city while the quarterbacks and cheerleaders of the world stepped all over him like some midwestern tumbleweed. He didn't become a superhero to get the girl, but it still would have been a nice bonus every now and then.

His friends were pretty much the way he remembered; shy quiet brainy kids, funny and personable in their own nerdy way, trying their best to stay off the radar and finish high school as quick as possible, heading off to fine colleges in parts unknown, and getting the hell out of Missouri as fast as possible. Wally remembered the feeling well.

Unfortunately college was the last thing he was worried about at the moment. He knew he wasn't putting the hours in, and his grades were showing it. It was understandable all things considered. Besides it was hard to worry about things like honor roll and principals list when you carried around the burden of saving the world.

As lunch approached, Wally made his way to his locker to retrieve what scrumptious meal his mom had been so kind to pack. He opened his lunchbox, peeling open the Tupperware to catch the mouthwatering aroma of...tuna casserole.

"Oh man," he whined, shoulders dropping and stomach souring at the sight and smell of his least favorite meal. He pulled out his wallet, hoping to find some cash he could use to fly through the lunch line to get a burger and fries before class when he heard the raucous.

Up ahead, standing in the middle of the hallway like some conquering hero returning from war stood Earl Mumford, aka Big Earl, six foot two, 225 pounds of solid douchebaggary.

His notable accolades included; starting middle linebacker of one of the worst football teams Keystone had ever fielded, voted wittiest by the senior class because basically that was the last superlative left, and generally being an all-around asshole. He wasn't a bully in the traditional sense, he was more interested in humiliation and soul crushing than actually mixing it up, but from time to time he was more than happy to remind people why he had that moronic nickname.

He'd made Wally's first two years of high school miserable, zeroing in on the insecure freckled redhead like a Minutemen missile before moving on to another sect of Keystone High's non-ruling class. By the time Wally was about to graduate, Earl was preparing to repeat his senior year, or as he called it red shirting. How Wally wished his speed had come on just a bit sooner.
The last thing he'd heard, in his timeline anyway, was Earl was selling cars for his old man and regaling the crowds with stories of faded high school glory, very similar to what he was doing presently. The speedster rolled his eyes and continued on through the sea of rubberneckers. He didn't have time for this, desperately needing to catch Mrs. Sharp before Trigonometry and beg for the chance for some extra credit to bring up his grade.

As he passed through the crowd, lying on the ground, his books scattered out across the hallway floor was a freshman on all fours, trying but failing to pick up his books that kept being kicked away from him. Wally recognized the kid, unsure of his name but he'd recently joined the Physics Club a few weeks ago. Nice kid, quiet kid, the exact type victim bullies preyed upon. Towering over the terrified freshman stood Earl and his jackass entourage, taunting and teasing the hapless teen.

Big Earl most likely wouldn't physically hurt him, morosely enjoying the psychological trauma much more. It was a fucked up right of passage that many shy and brainy kids had endured before, including the speedster. The kid would be fine; he'd pick himself up and move on, learning to avoid the routes and roads Earl and his friends traveled.

Wally was halfway to class when he stopped, closing his eyes in frustration. The kid would be fine. Earl would move on in a couple of weeks and the freshman would be no worse for wear. It was just high school, and Wally had the weight of the world on his shoulders. Then he remembered those seven little words. The definition of what it was to be a hero.

*We help those that can't help themselves.*

Wally sighed, walked back and squeezing his way through the cheering crowd as he reached the freshman, picking up his books along the way.

"Come on Earl, give the kid a break," he pleaded, bending down to hand the teen his books, when Earl knocked the them out of his hands, sending them flying to the floor once again.

"Fuck off West, this doesn't concern you."

"Dude just let him go. He's sacred shitless, mission accomplished. Just give him a break ok?"

Big Earl smiled, taking a step closer as Wally stood back up. That's when Wally remembered just how big he was. Without super powers he might have given Conner a run for his money. He
towered over the speedster, and obscene smile spreading across his lips.

"You want to take his place? You want to be a hero West?" he laughed, placing his massive hand on Wally's chest sending his flying across the hall towards the opposite lockers.

_Ooohs and aahs_ echoed down the hallway as Wally pulled himself back up, an odd smile appearing on his face.

"You shouldn't have done that."

---

Rudy West pulled up in front of the school, parking his beat up Camry in front of the office and walking towards the main doors. This couldn't have come at a more inconvenient time. Vendors from all over city were coming to make presentations at the Keystone Tax Assessor's office, showcasing new software programs, and as officer manager it would probably have been appreciated if he'd been there. This date had been on the books for months, and the timing couldn't have been worse, something Wally excelled in from time to time.

As he entered the office, two large figures were making their way out. Rudy recognized Bill Mumford from his tacky car commercials on television, and had to assume the hulking teen following behind to be so son. Both men looked at him with contempt when Rudy noticed the blood soaked wads of toilet paper shoved up the teen's nose and his raccoon colored eyes that had recently been dotted.

Walking through the doorway he discovered Wally seated in the small lobby, looking no worse for wear, displaying a bored and annoyed expression that disappeared quickly upon seeing his father. Before he could speak to his son, Robert Swope stepped out of his office, a sympathetic look cast across the principal's face.

Rudy and Bob had a long history, both members of the same church, both Freemasons, Rudy even did Bob's taxes on the side. The last thing either one ever expected was to be meeting in his office like this.

Rudy sat down in the plushy leather couch across from him, massaging his aching temples.
"Sorry to bring you in like this Rudy."

"No no, it's ok. I'm sorry to put you in the position in the first place. So tell me what happened?"

"Well..." Swope sighed. "Wally had... an altercation with Bill Mumford's kid."

"Altercation?"

"Well to put it bluntly, Wally beat the hell out him. It took two teachers to pull him off."

Rudy shook his head in disbelief. "Bob, I...I don't know what to say. That's just not like him."

"I couldn't agree more. Wally's always been one of our best students. He's never had any write-ups or detentions, always the first to volunteer in class to help his teachers. I know boys will be boys, but unfortunately this was pretty visible, half the student body was watching, I can't excuse it."

"Bob I completely understand."

"Rudy, you and I have been friends for a long time. Off the record, Earl's had something like this coming for a while, and I'm actually pretty impressed that Wally was the one to do it. I doubt he'll be doing anything like this again any time soon and I know Wally won't, so I'm just going to give them both a one day in-school suspension. It's the least punitive thing I can do. Does that sound fair?"

"More than fair," Rudy replied. "And once again I'm really sorry to have put you in this position."

"Don't. It's my job. All I want is what's best for these guys. When they succeed, we all succeed."

Rudy extended his hand to the principal. "Thanks Bob. I really appreciate it."

Swope gripped it firmly in return, hesitating and looking still a bit uncontrollable.
"Rudy...there's something else."

The elder West sighed, sitting back down, preparing for the worse.

Outside in the parking lot, Wally climbed into the passenger seat, his father already seated, eyes locked straight ahead, knuckles gripping the wheel tightly. The silence was deafening. They both sat quietly for minutes until Rudy finally turned to his son

"What in the hell is wrong with you?"

"Dad..."

"Don't!" Rudy barked, "don't talk, just listen."

He paused just for a moment to gather his thoughts before he tore in.

"I don't even know who you are anymore. Ever since your experience with that Dr. Fate character, you haven't been the same. I don't know what to do anymore. You're our son, we are the ones responsible for raising you, not the Justice League, not your uncle Barry...us! We've been as patient as we can with your extra-curriculars, but damnit Wally you can't run around in tights for the rest of your life. You have to think about the future."

"I promise you dad, that's I'll I've been thinking of."

"It sure doesn't seem like it. You have a gift son, and I don't mean your abilities. You're brilliant and even though it sounds cliché, you honestly can do anything you want to. You've wanted to be a scientist your whole life, and what you've accomplished is incredible, but now you have a chance to go to one of the finest colleges in the country to learn from the best, and you're pissing it all away."
Wally's eyes grew wide as his dad continued his tirade.

"Oh, you didn't think we'd find out about your grades? Of course Bob showed me. Three C's and a D. You haven't had a D since you were six, and that was in art."

"I'm pretty sure there were some A's scattered in there somewhere," Wally replied dryly.

"If you're trying to be funny, don't. There's nothing funny about it. You are throwing away your chance at Stanford, and for what?"

"Dad, I got a 35 on my ACT's. I've already been accepted, I have scholarships..."

"Which won't mean a thing if you don't keep a 3.7 or above. Wally you're not even at a 3 right now. And it's not just about admissions and you know it. Your mother and I can't afford to send you out there. It's always been about scholarships, and you're going to lose everything if you don't get your shit together."

"You know how proud your mom and I are of what you do. I can't even begin to imagine what it must be like to be a superhero, but you have no idea what it's like to be a parent. Staying up all night watching the news, praying you won't get yourself killed, or worse... like a coma. Having your son raised by the Justice League instead of your parents. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is to have to lean on Barry all the time because we can't connect with you, because we're not superheroes? It wasn't Barry who stayed by your side, praying, pleading, and begging the Lord to bring you back, it was your mother and I, and for what? To lose you all over again?"

"Dad you're not losing me."

"Are you sure? Because the Wally I know and love doesn't get in fights at school, he doesn't hide his grades from us. He sits at our dinner table telling us about his day, how excited he is about his future, not locked in his room until he gets called out for a mission."

"Dad, Earl was beating up a freshman. No one would do anything, what was I supposed to do?"

"You get a teacher, you get the principal, and no matter what you don't knock his block off in front
of the whole school. I know you fight bad guys all the time, but that idiot kid is not Captain Cold, he's not the Trickster, and that's not how you keep a secret identity secret. It's reckless and stupid, and you're smarter than that, or at least I thought you were."

His dad let out a heavy sigh. "Wally there's going to come a time, and it will be here sooner than you think, when you're going to have to choose between being a student or being a hero, because I don't think you can do both, not unless you want to stay home and go to Community College, studying science from some guy who doesn't know half as much as you do. Stanford is going to be more challenging than anything you've ever done before. Up till now it's been easy for you, but if you really want to pursue physics as a major, it's only going to get tougher. Is any of this hitting home?"

Wally's head remained downcast. "Yes sir."

This was unreal, just fucking unreal. Here he was, desperately trying to save the future, while not getting himself caught or killed in the process. He had no help, no back up, no one to confide in, and no one to lean on.

His days were spent lying to his friends and family, and his nights trying to map out the next mission without fucking up the timeline any more than he already had. And instead of working on strategy and tactics against guys like Vandal Savage and Lex Luthor, he was sitting in a car with his dad, suspended from school, getting yelled at about his grades. Everything was turning to shit faster than he could clean it up. Homework and test scores seemed insignificant in comparison to what he had hanging over him.

But his dad was right. Someday, somehow this insane mission would end one way or another, and when it was did, and the future was set, he'd have to figure out his own path. It was just another weight he'd have to carry.

His parents loved him, they'd always been his biggest supporters, always been in his corner. He rarely thought about how helpless they must have felt when he was out saving the world. Not until he watched Artemis get on that submarine, not until he watched the love of his life disappear under that orange and black mask. Things like that put it all in perspective. When it was over, there would be no going back to his old life. The game may have changed, but the rules remained the same.

"I'm sorry dad, I really am. I'll get it together, I promise."

"Prove it. Show it."
"Yes sir."

"In the meantime, get comfortable with idea of staying home, because you're not going anywhere anytime soon. Justice League or not.

"Yes sir."

Nothing else was said the rest of the car ride home.

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"Yes mam."

"Yes mam."

"Yes mam. I understand."

"Good night to you too Mrs. West."

Robin sighed as he hung up his phone, turning back from the dimly lit hallway and joining his teammates in the common area.

"Go ahead and start the movie, he's not coming."

"Is everything alright?" Kaldur asked.

Dick grabbed the popcorn bowl off the counter and sat down next to Zatanna, trying not to be too obvious.
"He um...." Robin chuckled, "he's grounded?" he said in a tone that was more question than statement.

"Grounded? Megan repeated.

"What's grounded?"

Artemis stared over at her clueless boyfriend in annoyance. "Confided to quarters, locked in a pod, whatever. Any idea what he did?" the archer asked curiously.

Dick rolled his eyes in disbelief. "He got in a fight at school."

"You're kidding."

"Is that normal? Zatanna asked.

"No," Dick sighed, "No...it...is...not."

xxx

It had been a slow uneventful two weeks. Taking his dad's words to heart, Wally spent more time on his homework, and every free moment studying his mission plans. It's not like he had much choice, fastest teen alive or not, he was still grounded. Time moved on like it always did, and the speedster had remained so focused on school and family, that Batman's call had taken him by surprise.

The message was brief and to the point. It was a simple training exercise, no field work involved, the entire drill would be confined to the recesses of the cave, lasting no longer than a day.

That's when Wally remembered, and there was nothing simple about it. Reluctantly Wally's parents gave him permission to go. He wished deep down that they hadn't.
The computer announced Wally's arrival to an empty room. He was early, hours before his teammates would report. Even Kaldur was still asleep and he rose with the sun.

Wally appreciated the silence; he wasn't in much of a chatty mood anyway. He was tired; he was always tired these days. He'd barely slept the night before, and who could blame him?

Today, he and everyone he loved were going to die.

Stepping off the Zeta platform, despite not being hungry in the slightest, a rarity for him, he headed towards the kitchen, it was going to be a long day. Turning the corner, he froze in his tracks.

Sitting at the counter, two steaming cups of coffee in their hands stood the Man of Steel and the Dark Knight, chatting, talking, not killing each other.

The last memory Wally had of those two were what nightmares were made of, one he wished he could forget. Bruce Wayne in shattered black armor, savagely attacking the helpless Kryptonian, refusing to fight back in a gruesome battle to the death.

He didn't realize how long he'd been staring when Superman turned to him. "Wally are you ok?"

He nodded wide eyed, unable to find or form words.

"You're early," Batman announced, as always emotionless and to the point.

Yeah, I um....didn't expect anyone to be here yet. So uh...you both are leading this exercise?"

"No, I'm on my way to Metropolis, I just had a few thing to discuss with Batman first."

"Uh...ok," the speedster replied dumbly, forgetting a time when Clark and Bruce were close friends
and not adversities.

He just stood there, like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, confidant both men could see right through his disguise, that at any moment he they'd turn on him, demand to know who he really was. When it came to poker faces, Wally was terrible.

"Is there something you need?" Batman asked impatiently, seemingly irritated with the speedster's sudden appearance.

"Uh...no. Just super excited about this exercise, whatever it is I mean. Well I um....I'm just going to see if anyone else is up. I....um…yeah."

He was babbling, he knew it and they knew it. Instead of making things worse he ran off, that's all he knew.

The two men eyed his after-image curiously as he sped away.

"Well that was weird," Clark said plainly, taking another sip of the rich Colombian blend. "Do you think he knows what's in store for him?"

"Doubtful, I haven't even told Robin."

"I hope they fare better than we did," Clark replied. "I wasn't much of a fan when J'onn did this exercise with us."

"It's because you don't believe in the no win scenario," Bruce replied in his deep rich timber.

"You know me too well Bruce," Superman chucked.

"I have to, that's the job."
The tables were cold, sterile, like the one he was on when he woke up in that Massachusetts hospital, except this time he knew where he was and where he was going.

The Manhunter instructed them to clear their minds, find a peaceful place, and cast out all thoughts and doubts of what they might see and experience. Failure to do so would corrupt the experiment, making the lesson pointless. So with that knowledge in mind, Wally did the opposite. He held on to everything. He may have had to go through with the mission; he just didn't have to believe it.

Glancing around the room, the Team seemed relaxed and excited. That wouldn't last for long. Wally was glad Zatanna wasn't here, she wasn't ready for this. None of them were.

The room began to get hazy as reality blinked, and suddenly they were standing in uniform, gathered around the cave’s main monitor, just in time to watch the Green Lanterns die. It had stated.

Much Like last time, Wolf was the first to die, and similarly Conner showed barely any emotion or remorse. Wally couldn't help but wonder if that was somehow programmed into his DNA by Cadmus, because it seemed Superboy Prime had dispatched his victims in a similar way, the same causal disregard.

Wally shook his head and focused. *It wasn't Conner* he kept repeating to himself about the creature that killed Hal Jordan. *It wasn't Conner*, his friend, his brother.

The weapon turret was torn away, and by the time the second wave appeared in the distance, Megan was already merging the captured weapon with the Bioship. It was happening, just as it had before. It wouldn't be long now.

Wally's stomach churned, feeling eerily detached, as if this was some kind of movie and he was sitting alone in a front row seat. He stood frozen, helpless, fully aware none of it was real, but sickened at the events to come.

This mission had no bearing on his, it was just a *train for failure* exercise, a painful and cruel no win scenario designed to test the team limits, initiate them into the cold hard reality of loss and defeat. Observing and suffering their friends’ deaths while still battling on. Never surrendering, not
up until the bitter end.

It was stupid and reckless, and Megan should never have been put in that position by Batman or her uncle. Even then Wally felt it served no purpose, doubly so now. He just wanted it to be over, power his way to the mothership and die a quick and violent death. Wake up and move on. There was nothing about this mission that needed to be changed or altered, it just needed to be over.

The two alien ships began their death plunge as Artemis cocked her arrow.

“Got you covered, get inside, I'm almost there.”

As always here aim was true.

The first ship crashed into the ground, exploding in a fiery blaze, but the second was knocked from the sky, landing roughly on the ice and sliding to a stop. Wally closed his eyes, unable to breath. It was about to happen.

“Artemis behind you!” Megan cried as the archer ran desperately for cover, seconds from death

It wasn't real, none of it was real he swore to himself. In a few hours they would all awaken in the cave, shaken but alive. Wally watched her run, her feet sliding helplessly on the ice, her lungs burning, her mind in survival mode.

Did she knew she was about to die? Would it hurt? Did she suffer? Those thoughts ran through his mind at light speed until he made the decision. He couldn't watch her die, not again.

Fuck this

His feet were already a blur when he heard the whine of the alien weapon. He imagined he could feel the heat racing behind him, chasing him down like some prehistoric predator. All it took was a gentle push to the small of her back to send her flying helplessly into the snowbank fifty yards ahead.

His body slowed, his heart full. He hadn't saved her, not really. The exercise would still end in fiery
death for all of them, but at least he wouldn't be around to witness it. He closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

“Wally!!!” he heard the Martian shriek

And then silence, and peace

xxx

It was tranquil, silent. His body seemed to float, all his cares and fears washed away. He wasn't racing inside the chrysalis. Kinetic feedback was not attacking him. Bart was no longer lapping him. Barry was not screaming desperately at him. And his body wasn't fading before his eyes. He was just simply gone, his light simply switched to darkness

There were no visions of past or future, just blessed blackness and satisfaction. He'd saved her, that's all that mattered. He could stay like this forever. Waves of dopamine were released from his brain as he drifted in peace, dreaming of beaches, blue skies, and golden blonde hair.

“Wally,” Captain Marvel spoke softly, gently shaking the young speedster. He ignored the summons, clawing desperately to stay in his tranquil reality

“Wally,” the voice repeated, resonating with more force, his shaking becoming so strong it couldn't be ignored. The speedster opened his eyes to see members of the League wakening his team from their tables, all struggling to come to terms with what had just happened.

The Manhunter began to explain it was all an exercise. That they were all aware of it going in, and something unforeseen had happened.

“.....but all of that changed when Wally died.”

J’onn began to explain what he had witnessed. The mission continued on much like it had before, but this time Robin had died in the Hall of Justice, and Artemis and Kaldur were the ones that made it to the end, only to die a tragic death as Megan watched helplessly.
This mission, in the grand scheme of things served no purpose, not in Wally's mind anyway. Six teens were needlessly traumatized, fingers were pointed, distrust was sown, and secrets remained hidden and buried. Back then it was Artemis, Conner and M'gann that were guilty of it, but even combined they were dwarfed by what Wally was keeping.

He was so God damned sick of secrets.

xxx

The speedster rested his head against the cool porcelain, the steaming hot shower feeling oddly cold against his unnaturally warm skin. His body ached, it was purely psychosomatic, but when the brain believes you're dead, it acts accordingly.

Stepping out, the cool cave air did nothing to chase the chill from his body. He just wanted to get to his quarters, get in his bed, and forget the day had ever happened. With the towel wrapped firmly around his waist, his flip flopped squished down the hall, stopping as the door to Robin's quarters opened.

Dick stepped outside heading for the showers, sunglasses hiding his tired and worn blue eyes. Wally knew that look, it wasn't just exhaustion, it was guilt. Robin should have been there at the end, it should have been him sacrificing himself aboard the mothership, not Kaldur and Artemis. Despite his youth he'd been a hero the longest of any them. He was ready to make that sacrifice, it should never have been left to anyone else. That was the Batman in him.

"Good shower?" he asked, trying to make small talk with someone who wanted to be alone as much as he did.

"No, not really."

"Are you ok?" Dick asked.

"Yeah, you?"

"I don't know, I guess."
"I know what you mean," Wally replied.

Before the conversation could continue, it was interrupted by the sound of loud voices coming from down the hall and drawing closer.

"Artemis!" Conner pleaded as the angry archer stomped down the hall, pulling away from his grasp. "Artemis just stop for a second and talk to me," he repeated angrily.

"What!" she snapped, turning quickly on her heels to face him.

"I just wanted to make sure you're alright."

"Of course you did, that's why you've been fawning all over M'gann since we all came to."

"It's not like that and you know it," he yelled back, his anger beginning to rise to the meet hers.

"Oh so now you're a mind reader too? Those guys at Cadmus really thought of everything."

"Fine. I'm out of here. When and if you cool down, I'll be around," he huffed.

"Oh I know where you'll be!" she scolded as he turned his back and walked away, another in a long line of people who had left her behind.

The archer’s hands shook, and emotions she was barely keeping inside were clawing their way out. Artemis turned back to her room, seeing the speedster and the boy wonder staring from down the hall, watching her; judging her.

"What are you looking at?!!" she snarled, entering her room and slamming the door behind her.

"Wow," Robin whistled. "I'm glad I'm not him. He's lucky he's bulletproof."
"Yeah," Wally said impassively. He'd been on that end before, and more often than not had been the cause.

"I'll catch ya later," Dick replied, turning and heading to the shower.

When the hallway was empty, Wally quietly made his way to Artemis's door. He hovered there for moments, his knuckles fighting the urge to knock.

Inside, barely above a whisper, he heard a light sob, and it tore at his heart. He wanted so badly to say something, to find a way to comfort her in some way, but it wasn't his place, she wasn't his, and if history held true, she never would be.

Wally turned, and went back to his room, closing the door, turning on the fan, and turning off the light. In the blackness, the low hum of the fan was soothing, an electric lullaby that he couldn't sleep without.

He was so lost

*Oh God thy sea is so great and my boat is so small.*

This Old Breton prayer was inscribed on a block of wood on the desk of President John F. Kennedy, something Admiral Rickover would give to new submarine captains before heading to sea. Wally had just studied that in A.P. U.S. History. That phrase summed up exactly how he felt; the challenge, the exhaustion, the despair.

He had two choices; stop and feel sorry for himself or keep moving forward. In the end he knew Flashes were meant to be in motion.

xxx

The knock on his door jolted him from a restless sleep. Wally looked to his clock to see 2:42. If it was some kind of emergency mission he was going to lose his shit.
He stumbled to the door, stubbing his toe on a variety of objects he'd lazily left strewn on the floor. He fumbled with lock, finally opening it to see a cascade of golden hair and a face shrouded in shadow.

The speedster and the archer stood face to face silently, neither speaking or knowing what to say. Finally Artemis broke the silence.

"Why? Why'd you do it?"

The question was vague, but Wally knew what she asked, and the answer was more complicated and complex that she could possibly understand. What was he supposed say? That she was his first and only love, that she invaded his thoughts and haunted his dreams? That he had given up everything to save her...twice, and he would do it all again in a heartbeat.

In the end, he gave the simplest and most honest answer he could.

"Because you're my friend, and I couldn't let you die."

Artemis paused at that answer, neither reacting nor replying. After moments of awkward since, she turned to make her way back to her room.

"Good night Wally," she said quietly and closed his door.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Well another one is in the books. Hopefully I can get the next chapter out a bit sooner. In case you're interested in some incredible spitfire drama, if you haven't found her yet, head over to Parenthesis by Knotted Blonde, honestly her Young Justice stories are probably the best I've ever read, you'll be glad you did. I'm just a huge fan, and she couldn't be nicer. Tell her I said hi. As always thanks for reading, hope you're enjoying the story, please pardon the typos, and please leave a review if you have the time. Thanks.
“Have those plants always been in here?”

“Excuse me?”

“The plants,” he gestured to either side of the room. “They look new.”

“They’ve been in here for months; now let’s get back to….”

“I swear I’ve never seen these before in my life. How do you guys get them to grow so well down here? I mean the light is terrible. My mom has plants at home. She has them by the front window and they don’t look half as good. Peperomia I think… or philodendron. I get the two confused.”

“Wally…..”

“She had hanging plants when I was a kid. You know the type you put out on the porch, some kind of ferns. I swear those things lasted about two week before all the leaves fell off. God she was so mad.”

“I know what you’re doing.”

“What?” he smiled innocently, flipping another piece of popcorn in his mouth. “We’re talking about plants.”

“No,” Dinah replied patiently. “We we’re talking about what was going through your mind… right before you died.”

“No,” he corrected, playfully wagging his finger at the blonde like some old school teacher. “You were talking about that, I was talking about plants.”
"Alright then. Do you think there's a connection?"

Wally's head dropped against the back of the chair with a groan. Canary was good. Of course there was no grand connection. She was trying to trap him in the absurdity of the suggestion, to either make him steer himself out of troubled waters or drown. All he wanted to do was get out of the damn boat.

"BC, why does it matter? None of it was real."

"But you didn't know it at the time."

Wally sighed. She wasn't going to let this go.

"Fine, I was thinking...I wished I'd eaten that morning. That those alien ships reminded me of the ones from that old War of Worlds movie. I remembered I had an English project due Monday and that I'd never finish it. Sorry BC, there was no deep final thoughts or regrets ok? It was all just stupid stuff."

"It's not stupid Wally. People cope in different ways. Perhaps it was your brain's way of telling you that everything was going to be ok and you'd make it out alive."

"Yeah we both know that wasn't going to happen. Look can we just move on? I mean Conner stormed out of here in less than five minutes. How is that fair?"

"Conner processes things his own way."

"Well I'd like to process my way back to the kitchen and get a sandwich," he smiled. "I'm starving. Besides I think we've made some real progress today."

"Wally," she sighed. "You're in denial."
"I'm comfortable with that." he replied confidently.

The speedster distinctly remembered a similar exchange years ago; the same disbelieving gaze, the sensation of nearly choking on burned popcorn, the self-awareness that he was lying his ass off.

- So you want me to believe that after everything you went through, including your own death from fiery explosion, you're peachy -

The truth was he wasn’t in denial at all, he knew exactly what he was. It was her, it had always been her. He’d discovered it weeks before, these strange uncomfortable feelings that would wash over him when the archer entered the room. And like some bad rash, he hoped they would go away on their own just as quickly and without the need for medical attention.

The symptoms were textbook; the reddening of ears, the flushing of cheeks, sudden vision problems. Shortly after, at the oddest of moments, he’d realize just how pretty she actually was… and then she’d open her mouth and reality would come crashing back to earth.

God almighty was she annoying. Arrogant, belligerent, bitchy, boastful, bossy, and he hadn’t even reached the C’s yet, let alone the rest of the alphabet. Megan was the safer choice. She was sweet and friendly and actual spoke to him without irritation or annoyance. She could bake, she could laugh, she smelled nice, and she’d given him mouth to mouth once.

But every time he tried to convince himself Megan was the one, the ghost of Kent Nelson would whisper in his ear, and suddenly all the things he couldn’t stand about the archer became endearing. This biggest hurdle he faced, the one that assured him that Artemis wasn’t the one, was he was positive there was no way she could feel the same.

And then the stroke of twelve chimed, a metallic voiced ushered in the new year…and they kissed. It was all downhill from there.

Sitting in the office now with Canary, Wally knew he couldn’t get caught up in those feelings again. He knew the direction Dinah was heading, and he had his game face on and was ready,
when suddenly the conversation took an unseen turn.

“What did you mean by *that wasn't going happen*?” she asked calmly.

“Huh?”

“What did you mean?”

“About what?” he replied genuinely confused.

“When I said your brain was telling you everything would be ok, you said we both know that wasn't going to happen.”


“You were referring to your speed right?”

Wally’s mind raced for a hundred different ways to answer the question, but there was no denying that had been a fear back then, and now.

“I guess….”
“Are you’re worried that you won’t be as fast as your uncle?”

“No,” he replied honestly. “I know I won’t.”

“Wally you don’t know what the future holds.”

If only……

“Ms. Lance, I know I’m never going to be as fast as Barry. I accepted that a long time ago. What happened to him was the real deal; mine was just a cheap knock off.”

“Is that how you see yourself?” she asked.

“No…yes…I don’t know,” he sighed. “Look I don’t regret the experiment I did for a minute, other than the hell I put my folks through. It’s just if Barry had been out there; he could have saved the Team and never broke a sweat. I could barely save one.”

“But you risked it anyway, for Artemis.”

Shit. There it was. How does she do that?
“I would have done it for anyone,” the speedster staggered back on the defensive.

“I don’t doubt that. Have you two talked since then?”

“No,” he shrugged, “not really.”

“Do you think you should?”

Wally looked down to his naked wrist, adjusting the watch that didn’t exist. “Wow would you look at the time. We’ll that was fun, we need to do this more often,” he joked, standing up and stretching. She’d hit a nerve and they both knew it. Canary rose as well, accepting that this was as far he would let her in…for now. But Dinah was nothing if not patient. She’d been on the other side of the couch before, and while not appreciating it at the time, was eventually thankful that someone had cared enough to put her there in the first place. Sometime in the future, she hoped they’d all feel the same.

“Wally, you’ve had a very traumatic last few months. Between Dr. Fate and now this, you’ve experienced more adversity than most people twice your age. It’s ok to be confused and yes...a little scared. You don’t just wake up one day and everything’s fine. It takes time. I know you don’t like talking about your feelings, but it’s important to get it all out. You may not believe it now, but if you stick with me I promise we can make it through this together. I’m not giving up on you.”

The redhead turned back to the blonde and smiled. Dinah had always been there through the toughest parts of his life. She didn’t have to be, it wasn’t League mandated. She did it because she cared. Because the Team were her children and she would nurture and protect them like any mom would. One day, in his previous future, he’d come to tell her that. Hopefully he would again.

“I’m not giving up on you either BC.”
“I’m proud of you Wally; you've really grown up a lot.”

“And just so you know,” he replied, shooting her a lop-sided smile, “if that whole thing with Green Arrow doesn’t work out, you know where to find me.” Sometimes it was fun to be that stupid seventeen year old kid again.

Dinah rolled her eyes with a smile. “And he's back,” she chuckled. “I want to see you here in two weeks. No excuses.”

“Yes mam.”

“Oh and Wally, coming from someone who inherited the mantle from her mother, it’s natural to feel insecure about not living up to your mentor. I’m nowhere close to the hero my mom was, but I keep trying. Sometimes it’s more about heart than powers.”

Wally smiled warmly. ”Yeah.”

She put her arm on his shoulder. “You know one day that might be you out there in that red uniform. And it’s not going to matter how fast or slow you are. It’s going to be about who you are on the inside. You just never know what the future will bring. One day you might be the only Flash left in the League: the last speedster.”

Wally nodded, keeping his face as neutral as possible as he nearly chewed through his lip. Sometimes Dinah seemed almost clairvoyant. A sonic scream might not be her only super power.

“God I hope not,” he sighed.

As he left the room, Wally stretched stiffly, rolling up the sleeves of his flannel shirt, closing the door softly behind him. This was now his second session with Canary, he might be able to fool her once, maybe twice, but sooner than later she'd figure out something was off about him.

Probably not *that a twenty two year old man had traveled back in time and somehow got trapped in*
his seventeen year old body while trying to change the future off, but something.

He could have really used a nap right now, but late homework to turn in and a next mission to prepare for had nixed that idea.

As he stepped out, sitting alone on the couch was the archer, an untouched bowl of noodles in her lap. Wally could tell her mind was a million miles away, probably wishing her body was there as well. His mind scrambled for the words, something to take her mind of her problems, something to ease her trauma, something to make her laugh....just something damnit. He had barely taken a step in her direction when Dinah stepped out of the office.

“Wally?”

He turned to see the statuesque blonde holding his empty popcorn bow. “I’m your therapist not your maid,” she smiled.

“Yes mam,” he replied sheepishly, but when he turned back to the couch, Artemis was gone.

Great

xxx

The second hand seemed frozen, mocking her, keeping her prisoner in this smothering prison cell. She didn't know nor care how long she'd been sitting in silence, and her blonde warden across the room seemed more than content to wait until hell froze over for the young archer to finally speak.

Dinah Lance's patience was infuriating, and Artemis was sure she must have had a secret remote hidden up here sleeve that controlled the round metallic clock that ticked ever so slowly on the wall, manipulating it to run at half speed or slower if she wished.
The archer's eyes drifted from her nails, to the tacky green furniture, the frozen clock and back; never once locking on to the blonde interrogator sitting comfortably across from her. Finally, in the face of assured defeat, she raised the white flag and surrendered. If she didn't answer Canary's questions this might go on forever.

"Look I appreciate all the concern, but none it was real. No trauma, no need for the shrink wrap. I'm fine."

“You're too tough?” Dinah suggested.


“Or maybe too tough to admit you need help?”

The archer stiffened in her chair, indignant at the suggestion. Up until now these sessions had been fairly tame; reviewing previous missions, what she'd done right, what she'd done wrong. Basic small talk that never led to anywhere important, but just because she'd adopted the identity of Oliver Queen's niece didn't grant Canary the rights to traverse into areas she didn't belong. Talking about feelings was a waste of time; a lesson her father had taught her the hard way.

“Artemis it's not a sign of weakness to open up, this was a very traumatic experience.”

“Trust me, I've been through worse.”

“I'm sure you have, but no matter how difficult your childhood was, I doubt anything could have
prepared you for what you experienced; alien invasions, watching your friends die one by one, and then your own death from fiery explosion.”

Artemis rolled her eyes, counting the seconds. "Once again...not real."

"You know you can talk to me? You don't have to go through this alone,"

"I know that," she replied through gritted teeth.

Dinah recognized a dead end when she saw one, so she changed gears and went in another direction.

"Perhaps we could talk about your reaction to Conner's death."

The archer's eyes narrowed as her grip on the armchairs tightened. Canary knew immediately she'd hit a sensitive spot.

"What about it?" Artemis replied matter of factly, daring her interrogator to step over the trip wire.

"He died a very heroic death, creating the distraction necessary to allow you and Aqualad access to the mothership. Yet Kaldur tells me you barely reacted."
Artemis paused, a daring smile forming on her lips.

"Kaldur shouldn't talk about things he doesn't understand. He has no idea how I react. It was a mission, lives were at stake. What was I supposed to do? Beg him not to do it? Fall to the ground and sob uncontrollably? Look that's just life. Conner made his decision and I made mine. It's that simple."

"Do you think he should have talked to you first before he made that choice?"

The archer let out a heavy annoyed sigh. "It was a life or death situation, there wasn't time. He did what he thought was right and I respect that. Look there's really nothing left to say. Can we move on from this now please?"

"So you're not mad."

"Why should I be? He gave his life to save others. Isn't that what wearing these ridiculous uniforms are all about?"

"Among other things yes," Canary affirmed.

"People have been leaving me my whole life, why should this be any different?"

There it was. The opening Canary had been waiting for. "Artemis it's ok to be sad or angry. It had to have hurt."
Up till now, the teen had kept it together by a thin thread under Canary's constant bombardment. The archer remained annoyed as to why it was so important to this woman to know her inner workings. The only thing anyone needed to know was it was no one's damn business what made her tick. What was Canary hoping to accomplish? There wasn't going to be some huge breakthrough stemming from all of this. There wasn't going to be tears or hugs or some fucking Dr. Phil moment. Artemis knew exactly where she was being lead, and she didn't appreciate it one God damned bit.

"Fine!" she snarled. "You got me! Of course it hurt, but what was I supposed to do? He'd already made the freaking decision without me. Do I wish I'd said something to change his mind, or at least a goodbye? Sure. I wish I'd said a lot of things, but that's not us. We don't talk about our feelings. That's how it works. I like how it works. And you're not fooling anyone with load of bull. I know what this is really about! You don't think I feel shitty enough already about what happened? Then I come to find Kaldur's coming in here and blaming me for all this?"

"I don't think I'm following." Dinah questioned calmly.

"Yes you do. I can see it in your eyes. The new girl screwed up and triggered M'gann's Martian panic attack."

"Artemis...."

"I already know!" she spit. "I can see it on everyone’s faces. A real archer would have brought both those ships down, a real archer wouldn’t have been out of position, a real archer wouldn’t have let...."

Artemis paused as her eyes began to burn.
"Let?" Dinah asked. "Let what? Artemis what are you talking about? No one’s blaming you for anything."

"Sure they are, I can almost hear what they're saying. If Roy were here, none of this would have happened. If Roy was here, Megan would have kept her shit together and Wally wouldn't have...."

The room went silent as Dinah finally put the pieces together.

"You think it was your fault Wally died"

"Of course it was!" the archer snapped, angrily wiping a tear from her eye

"It was a train for fail exercise Artemis, everyone was going to die. The point was to see how you all would react in the face of death."

"Yeah, well if I hadn't screwed up, Kid Idiot wouldn't have had to come save me, and then maybe he would have been the one around at the end to take a shot at all that alien tech. He's the science guy! I was useless, worthless."

"Well evidently he didn't feel the same way."

For some odd reason, Artemis found those words comforting. She didn't believe them for a second, but they were nice to hear none the less. From the day they first met, the red head had come across as some kind of super powered hyperactive jerk, more worried about impressing Megan than the mission. Sure he was smart, funny, handsome in some kind of weird gingery way, but he was
selfish, self-absorbed and shallow. And she really...really didn't like him.

But that guy, they one she just a soon punch in the face than hear one more cheesy pick up line thrown the Martian's way, that guy hadn't come back to the Team after the whole Dr. Fate fiasco, and it wasn't until now that she finally realized it.

After the exercise, she’d been so irritated, so hurt by the choices Conner had made, and then to see him rushing to Megan's side instead of hers, that was the last straw. So the archer did what she did best; she left for higher ground, notched her arrows, and dared anyone to trespass.

When she finally approached Wally’s room later that night, it wasn’t to thank him; it was to belittle him, to blame him. But when that small sliver of light from the hallway invaded his darkened bedroom, she saw eyes as traumatized as hers, maybe even more so. That’s when both courage and courtesy sprinted away, and she shut his door without even a thank you.

None of it was real, the exercise nothing but a cruel illusion, but his intent wasn’t. That was real. She could feel it.

Palming her eyes, she chuckled. "Like I said, he's an idiot."

Canary smiled. "He has his moments."

“Yeah, he does,” the archer replied softly.

Just then, Canary's watch chimed as she looked down to confirm the time. “I think that's a good place to stop. Let’s meet back in about two weeks, I’ll send an email to confirm a time ok?”
Dinah rose from her chair, her body stiff from sitting through multiple sessions. It wasn’t the norm for her to schedule so many appointments in such a short period of time, but nothing about the previous days had been normal. Even seasoned veterans would have needed someone to talk after an event like this, and it was hard sometimes to remember she was dealing with teenagers and not full-fledged, full time heroes.

Her next session wasn’t scheduled until later that evening, and in the meantime she was teetering between the ideas of a good workout or laying poolside at Ollie’s, soaking up the sun with a nice bottle of Pinot, but when she looked down to her client, Artemis remained seated, and it didn’t take a seasoned therapist to recognize when an opening had presented itself. Canary slowly sat back down, trying not to spook her prey.

Dinah spoke quietly, “I don’t have another session scheduled until seven; we could keep going… if you like.”

After a long pause where Canary was convinced the archer would be sprinting towards the door at any second, Artemis sat back in her seat and sighed. “Yeah…yeah I’d like that.”

Richard Grayson was a complex puzzle wrapped in an enigma. A child indoctrinated into a dangerous lifestyle at much too young an age, raised by one of the most generous yet distant and driven individuals she’d ever met.

Initially Dinah expected a textbook troubled teen; guarded, quiet, full of angst and anger, resentful of the cards life had dealt him, and he had every reason to be. Orphaned, torn away from the only home and life he’d ever known. Now isolated in a lonely mansion on top of a hill with a man so full of secrets that even Sherlock Holmes would be at a lost to unravel. Dick was a therapist’s wildest dream and worse nightmare all rolled up into one. The only problem with that assumption was there was nothing remotely textbook about him.

Robin, the Boy Wonder, a well-deserved epithet for a young man so full of joy and laughter when
by all accounts he shouldn’t be. He was smart, funny, grounded, a teen with an infectious laugh, and devious grin. Villains from across Gotham had consistently underestimated him at their own peril, and had paid the price on numerous occasions.

Batman and Robin, the Dynamic Duo, Partners, Family.

He was the other side to the Dark Knight’s coin, as driven and dedicated as the other, but going about that life in a much different direction.

For the youngest member of the Team, Dinah was constantly impressed by Robin’s maturity and openness. For many, these sessions were literally like pulling teeth, but for someone like Dick, who actually understood the benefits of therapy; it was a rare chance to assist someone so eager to receive the help, address their issues, and find the answerers together. Those attributes were exactly what made him such a fine detective, because he was capable of approaching a problem from all sides.

Today that cackling handsome teenager was nowhere to be found.

“Hurting?” try traumatized. And that’s not even the worst of it,” Dick spoke softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "You can't tell Batman.”

“Nothing leaves this room.”

He took a deep sigh. “I always wanted, expected to grow up and become him, and the hero bit, I'm still all in, but that thing inside him, the thing that drives him to sacrifice everything, for the sake of his mission. That's not me. I don't want to be the Batman…anymore.”

“It’s been a recurring theme in many of these sessions and its completely understandable. You all watched your mentor’s die, and then were cast in their roles without any kind of warning or notice. It’s a daunting task on a good day, but in a situation like this? There’s no way to prepare for it. That’s what this exercise was all about.”
“I never expected the weight, the gravity.”

“You never do, none of us do. All we can do is carry it the best you can and keep moving forward. Dick you all are so skilled, so talented, much more than members of the League would have been at your age, but a by-product of that is you’ve been required to grow up a lot faster than everyone else, especially you.”

“Kids your age should be out dating, running wild, getting into trouble, not forced to save the world and sacrificing their lives in the process. I understand the value of exercises like this, but you all are too young. That's why I recommended against it, but I was overruled.”

“I don't have to guess by who,” Robin said bitterly.

“Do you feel like you let him down?”

The question took Dick by surprise, so much so that his glasses actually slipped from his brow, revealing the troubled blue eyes underneath. He nodded, his eyes cast downward.

“Why do you think that?”

“Ms. Lance, I am a survivor. I know that sounds arrogant and I don’t mean it to, but it’s something Bruce has drilled into me since day one. I know I wasn’t team leader, and it’s not like I thought I should be, but I know I should have been there at the end. It may not have made a difference, but I still feel like I failed.”

“Failed who?”

Dick chuckled. "Who do you think?”
“You do realize Batman was one of the first to die.”

“Ironic I know. Look I don’t regret for a second giving Kaldur and the others time to get out of the Hall before it blew, there’s just a part of me that knows I should have done something more. I know it sounds stupid, and if people with honest to god superpowers couldn’t beat them, what chance would I have had.”

“I don’t have to remind you that Batman doesn’t have powers either, and he’s easily one of the most powerful members of the League. This was a no win scenario, and no matter how much you might disagree, Bruce wouldn’t have been able to do anything more than you all did. All you can do at this point is take away the things you did right and acknowledge any mistakes you might have made and what you would do differently next time. It’s highly unlikely you’ll ever be faced with some kind of devastating alien invasion again, but you never really know what the future will bring, I told Wally the exact same thing.”

“Well at least he talks to you.”

Dinah found the reply curious. “I take it this has nothing to do with the exercise?”

Dick looked away, shrugging his shoulders, the only evasive response she’d given him this evening.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Sure I guess,” he responded hesitantly.
“So what’s going on between you two?”

Robin stroked his chin as he searched for the words. “I don’t know, he’s just…. not the same guy. I don’t know how to explain it. It’s like…he’s mad at me for something I haven’t even done yet, and for the life of me I can’t figure out what it is. I used to be able to read him like a book, but something’s different. I know it’s just dumb teenager stuff, but after Fate’s helmet, I really thought we’d lost him, and now he’s back and everything should be great, but it’s like…”

“…a part of him didn’t come back?” Dinah suggested.

“Exactly.”

“Dick anything that you share in here is privileged information, and on the same token I can’t tell you anything anyone else does either, but I will tell you this. Wally’s faced death too many times for someone his age. Between the experiment that gave him his powers, to Dr. Fate, to this exercise, he been through a lot. Things like this change a person. He needs time, that’s all I can say. Encourage him to keep coming to these sessions. He can be a tough nut to crack, but so was Bruce and a few others.”

Dick eyes grew wide in astonishment. “Bruce? Bruce has been in here?”

Dinah smiled. “Broke my own rule didn’t I. See everybody needs help every now and again.”

“Wow, I did not see that coming.” Dick laughed, shaking his head.

“We’ll get through this, all of this. Together. I promise.”
“I’m going to hold you to that,” he smiled

xxx

This was taking too long Wally thought as he paced around the cave, checking and rechecking his. He had a long night and an even longer trip ahead, and despite knowing this, he still agreed to go to this damn Halloween party. He was twenty-two for god sakes, or at least he was. Perhaps deep down he just hoped tonight would be a little different.

He’d not been invited to the meeting taking place in Dinah’s office between Batman, Kaldur, Roy, and Robin, not this time nor last. Perhaps he'd been considered too immature, too undisciplined, that his expertise was science not investigation, or perhaps they simply didn't want him there.

Now, inside that office, those four men were reconsidering the possible existence of mole, a traitor. Red Arrow more than likely vehemently making his case against Conner, Megan, or Artemis. In retrospect there had never been a more perfect example of irony.

Wally looked ridiculous, he felt ridiculous. The last thing he wanted to do right now was to go to some high school party. He already felt creepy enough as it was pretending to be sixteen year again, but unlike so many graduates that can't give up the glory days, Wally couldn't wait to leave that phase of life behind him.

However when he'd been called out by Megan and the others about his recent absences and anti-social behavior, he knew he didn't need to call any more attention to it than he already had and reluctantly agreed to go. The speedster was really questioning that decision right about now.

It's was just, tonight had the potential to really damage the team dynamic, which in reality was just a fancy way of saying someone was about to get their feelings hurt, someone who rarely opened that part of herself up to allow it. Of all the stressors currently in his life, it was stupid to be so fixated on this, but she was special, she was the exception.

“Guys come on; we're going to be late.”
“Wally the party doesn’t even start for another hour,” Megan replied cheerfully.

Wally sighed and continued to pace. At first glance it would be considered innocent and harmless; one friend helping another with a stupid Halloween costume. That was it. Megan had done the same for him less than thirty minutes ago, but in life, timing is everything.

“Conner, stand still,” she giggled, wrapping him in role after role of gauze.

It wasn't exactly like before. There was no Captain Marvel in zombie makeup hanging around to trick or treat. Sphere was hovering on the periphery, curious as to this pagan ritual instead of Wolf, which Wally only remembered due to his unimpressed scrutiny of the speedster's werewolf costume previously. Maybe with the adjustments and alterations he'd made to this timeline, perhaps a barely perceptible ripple had cascaded into this moment, and tonight’s events might turn out a little differently. At least that's what he hoped, otherwise with his improving use of percentages and variables to predict cause and effect; he could see this train wreck barreling down the tracks a mile away.

It could be broken down to the simplest of formulas; when person A, who on more than one occasion had shared with person B that spending so much time with person C was really begin to bother her...well it didn't take a genius to see how bad this looked.

And contrary to all his empirical knowledge on said subject, Wally hoped for once, just once, Artemis would be late to something. But as the Zeta generators spun to life he knew there was some things time couldn't change. Timing is everything.

Recognize Artemis B07

Recognize Zatanna A03

"Oh hey Zatanna, you look great," the archer smiled.
"Oh thanks, you do too."

The archer and the sorceress made their way to the common area, laughing and making pleasant conversation along the way. Their costumes looked great, almost perfectly tailored to their unique personalities, and you could see it in their eyes that they were genuinely looking forward to the night’s festivities, until Artemis stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of two giggling friends helping one another into their costumes. It was innocent and harmless, and so very damning.

Timing is everything.

Without a word, the archer spun on her heals, barely keeping inside the fury that burned within.

*They'd talked about, he understood it. He recognized he was doing it and told her he'd work on it. He lied; maybe he'd lied about everything.*

Artemis was barely out of the room when with a burst of wind the speedster suddenly appeared at her side.

“Hey where you going?” he asked innocently, trying to nudge her back.

“Leave me alone Wally.”

He reached out, taking her arm, not even sure what to say.

Artemis looked down at his grip, following it back to his face, giving him a look so cold he actually could feel goosebumps forming on his naturally warm skin.

“I'd move that before you lose it,” she snarled.

“It's not what it looks like,”
“I don’t care,” she replied maneuvering past him with no particular destination in mind, besides back.

“Come on Artemis, don’t be like this. Come back and let’s all go to this stupid thing.”

“Not in the mood. Of course sitting home with my mom doesn't sound any more appealing.”

“Well there is another option,” Zatanna grinned, interrupting the conversation that was heading south quickly. “Egnahc sehtolc otni ruo smrofinu!”

Artemis looked down in surprise to see her costume magically transform into a more modest version of her uniform. She turned to the sorceress with a devilish grin as Zatanna smiled back. "Girls night out."

"Don't wait up," Zatanna chuckled, patting the speedster on the back as she and her partner in crime headed back towards the Zeta Tubes.

"Just be careful ok?" he yelled after them.

"Where's the fun in that?" Artemis replied, loud enough for everyone to hear, _everyone_. Seconds later the two vanished into the blinding light of the transporter.

Wally sighed, rubbing the dull pain forming in the back of his neck. He remembered the stories of that night; Manhattan, the sword of Beowulf, Harm, Secret, the grave.....the ghost. They'd barely survived the first time, who knows if they would again.

He should have gone last time, too oblivious with his own infatuation to recognize a teammate in need, a friend in need.

What if something happened to them and he just let it? What if this was one of those moments where the changes he’d made had transformed another? Thoughts and visions ran rampant through his mind, and he reached out to the control pad, keying in the same destination code to follow them. He needed to be there…just in case.
Wally’s finger was mere inches away from activating the transport sequence when he took a breath and stepped back.

This was their moment; this was where a true and close friendship began, one that would last for the rest of their lives. The archer and the sorceress were a formidable duo. They’d survived once and they would again. He had to have faith, and besides he had his own mission worry about.

It sucked, everything about this night sucked.

xxx

Hypnotic lights swirled around the room, creating dizzying arrays of Technicolor patterns perfectly synched with the DJ’s bass heavy catalogue, while all around a myriad of meta-humans and crime fighters mingled and maneuvered their way around the dance floor.

Despite his dour mood, the speedster had to admit it was a pretty impressive display. Happy Harbor had put a lot of time and money into this night and it showed. Megan had every right to be proud of her and Conner's school.

The costume de jour this night was very superhero friendly, and Wally dug the motif even though he was a bit disappointed that there wasn’t a larger contingent of Flash fans here; not a Kid Flash uniform in the whole damn place. It must have been a Midwestern thing he considered. His first time around he'd been so busy trying to get Megan's attention he’d barely even noticed

“Wally these are my friends Wendy and Marvin.”

“Hey,” he shrugged sheepishly, vaguely remembering the introduction years before.
Everyone seemed on equal footing at the school, and it was a refreshing change of pace to be able to mingle without fear of the ruling class swooping in and reminding you of your place. This must have been what it was like to go to Bizarro's high school he considered.

As he'd expected, Megan was a real social butterfly. Friendly and funny, hanging out with cheerleaders and other friends that didn't seem the least bit stuck up. Even Conner appeared to have friends here who somehow tolerated his sullen and standoffish personality. That girl Wendy seemed pretty in to him; Wendy, Megan, Artemis. Jesus, being around him could be so emasculating sometimes.

It was surreal to see Karen Beecher and Mal Duncan so young. The soon to be Guardian and Bumblebee were another couple that just seemed to fit, soulmates long before he and Artemis could even tolerate each other. Wally hoped that they'd had the happily ever after they deserved, however long that was. Bruce had never mentioned what had become of them, and Wally decided he'd rather remember them just as they were right now...happy.

Wally had blended in well enough, getting a few compliments here and there from the hipster crowd about his retro costume. After a few minutes of making small talk, he made his way over to the punch bowl, hoping someone might have put something a little stiffer into it to help speed along the night. As usual Conner stood alone surveilling the scene, watching Megan laugh and smile with her girlfriends. The speedster poured two glasses, handing one off to the Teen of Steel.

“Your school’s pretty cool!” Wally spoke out above the thumping beat, frowning at his unintended rhyme.

“Yeah I guess,” Conner replied, as usual a man of few words. In the years to come he'd lighten up considerably, bordering on actually being warm from time to time, but for now he was still the quintessential stick in the mud. Wally tried to think of something to strike up a conversation with, but after several failed attempts, he gave up and drank his punch.

When the song finished, a few faculty members made their way to the stage, handing out thank you’s and such, and Conner took the moment to finally converse without having to yell. His mood was cheerless but what else was new.
“I don't know what Artemis's problem is. She's been talking about this night for weeks, and then just storms off without a word. I don't get it. And she call me anti-social,” he grumbled.

Wally's eyes narrowed at the comment. He'd be the first to admit he held a lot of pent up resentment against Conner for numerous reasons, some irrational and some justified, but that comment or some reason pushed him a bit over the edge.

Wally turned, the anger on his face masked by the ridiculous werewolf attire. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

“Dude you know it bothers her when you and Megan hang out all the time. How do you think she felt when she and Zee arrived and you and Megs were laughing it up and playing dress up?”

“We're just friends. How many damn times do I have to say it,” Conner growled.

“I know you are, but Con she's your girlfriend. When she walks in the room you have to drop everything and make her feel like the center of your world. She's special dude, and you're pissing it all away.”

“Like you know anything about dating… or her,” Conner scoffed. “She needs to get past this, and you need to butt the hell out of my business.”

Their voices were sharp, heated like two brothers would be, but it was probably the first time Wally ever seriously considered decking him, and of course the speedster knew exactly how that would end. Getting his ass kicked at a high school party wearing a Halloween costume was nowhere to be found on Bruce’s lost mission dossiers, he was certain of that. Instead, he slammed down his cup, shaking his head in disgust.

“I swear to God Conner, sometimes I can't figure out if you're just fucking clueless or an asshole. Tell Megan thanks for the invite. I'm gone.”

Wendy walked over as the exchange ended, watching the red head make his way towards the gym exit.
“What’s up with your friend?” she asked, pouring a cup for herself.

Conner frowned, taking a pull off his punch. “I have no idea.”

--

Outside Wally checked his watch. He’d intended to stay a few more hours if need be, but the argument with Conner had given him the perfect out. God how he wished he could just Zeta to his next destination, those molecular blenders were pretty handy sometimes. It was going to be a long ass trip, but he knew he couldn’t take the chance of being discovered. It was time to stretch his legs.

In the parking lot, huddled to the side of the building, Wally saw Megan’s classmate Marvin, laughing and typing feverishly on his iPhone, no doubt conferring with some geeky mastermind on the other end, ready to perpetrate their hoax.

Looking for the best way to leave the school property undiscovered, Wally passed by the surprised teen as he made his way towards the football field. “Dude what are you doing?”

“Nothing man” Marvin replied nervously, quickly closing his phone, the yellow of his spine glowing through his shirt.

“Ok,” Wally shrugged, walking away, “but Conner says if you try to pull any kind of alien invasion crap, he’s going to beat the shit out of you.”

As he walked away, Wally smiled, unsure which fell faster, Marvin’s phone or his jaw.

xxx
The crowded sidewalks of the Old Quarter were covered in trash and rotting fruit, and the pouring down rain hadn’t dispersed the congestion of people one single bit. It was definitely not one of the safer spots of Hanoi, but it was isolated from the more touristy areas of the city and away from cameras and prying eyes.

It was an odd smell that traveled through this part of the city, a combination of raw fish, sautéed garlic, fragrant soups, and gasoline. Motorcycles filled the streets, and despite the lateness of the hour, the traffic was constant and unrelenting.

The speedster kept the collar of his trench coat high and his ball cap low. Not many Americans frequented these parts, and the less attention he could draw to himself the better.

He’d been to Vietnam once; a funeral for Artemis’s grandmother. They weren’t close, but the archer felt it proper to pay her respects. No one hated Lawrence Crock more than Bian Nguyen and she could barely hide her discomfort at how much Artemis favored her father. The blonde hair definitely didn’t help. Lawrence Crock had stolen her daughter from her. Taken her to the States and made her a killer. Paula had been no saint, but the older woman was convinced Sportsmaster had made her a sinner, and her crippling was her penance.

By then, Wally and Artemis had lived together going on three years, but the sound of her speaking so fluently in a language so alien impressed him to no end. In truth everything about her impressed him. She was special, one of a kind, and the time they’d had together precious. Regret wasn’t a strong enough word sometimes.

After the service and time spent with extended family, she’d shown him the sites. It was more beautiful then he’d ever imagined; lush fields of a shade of a brilliant green he never knew existed stretched on forever, breathtaking mountains, and sunsets that filled him with an awe he would never forget. Why Paula chose to stay in a place like Gotham when she had a home here was beyond him.

The streets he now walked reminded him of that city, the worst parts. Wally tried to be subtle, hiding the map under his jacket, and he knew better then to use his phone or any GPS apps. There could be no digital trace left behind of his trip here.

After a few minutes of walking in circles, he saw an elderly woman on the street corner up ahead; selling something that smelled enticing but looked quite the opposite. It was finally time to put his Vietnamese Lit skills to work.
“Mam, tôi muốn một số thực phẩm internet?” – (Mam, I would like some internet food)

She cocked her head and stared at him oddly, so Wally tried again

“Ông có thể cho tôi thực phẩm internet?” – (Could you show me internet food?)

The old woman frowned, and Wally’s look of consternation matched. He scratched the back of his neck, flipping through page after page of translations. Internet should have been the dead giveaway, and either she was too old to know what the internet was, or she was fucking with him. He sighed and tried one last time.

“Là có một nơi quanh đây tôi có thể sử dụng máy tính?” – (Is there a place I could use a computer?)

The old woman nodded, flashing a toothless grin, and turned to point to the building they were both standing in front of

“Aw man,” he groaned. He turned to the old woman

“Cảm ơn bạn,” – (Thank you)

“You’re welcome,” she replied in perfect English.
Yep, definitely fucking with him.

Wally entered the café, handing the man at the desk several dongs, probably more than it cost, but he needed to get in and get out as soon as quickly as possible. It was a very - very - very long run home, and every time he’d crossed an ocean on foot had usually ended with at best - severe dehydration and nausea, and worse, a hospital stay. That wasn’t an option this time. He glanced around the café for cameras and began typing.

It seemed silly, but the honest to god web address was www.hallofjustice.com. It was used by tourists for directions and visiting hours, schedules of tours, or a brief bio of their favorite superhero. Soon Wally found the tab he was looking for. He ran the cursor over the contact us button and clicked.

This tab was mainly used by kids to email their favorite hero, requesting a visit to their schools or help with a local bully, but nine times out of ten, the result was an autographed picture being sent to their home and that made them happy. The downside of the tab was the ease of access for crackpots and kooks to send derogatory or threatening messages that the League’s Artificial Intelligence would filter through and evaluate as a real threat or benign.

But there were a few words, when used in a certain order, that would be flagged immediately for further review, and Wally was going to use all of them. He cracked his knuckles and began typing.

My name’s not important, but suffice to say I was a colleague of Dr. Mark Desmond at Cadmus Labs. What I’m about to tell you is top secret and critical. You’d best take it seriously. They are dangerous, and they going to kill you and everyone they come in contact with....”

Wally smirked and continued typing. It was a little dramatic he’d admit, but he’d used just the right target words to get someone’s attention. Names, phrases, events: information that only people with direct knowledge of the inner workings of Cadmus would know - or someone who’d been captured and held prisoner there at least.

One or two of these words the Justice League might ignore, but once the A.I. had processed and evaluated all of them and a threat level had been assigned, someone would have to take notice. They only questions were who and how soon. Wally had a pretty good idea of the who, but didn’t want to stick around once the email trace had begun to find out how soon. If everything went as he’d hoped, he’d be a quarter of the way across the Pacific before anyone could be notified.
Once sent, the speedster stepped outside the café, the old woman still standing in front peddling her wares. Wally carefully searched through her cart, hoping to God what he was choosing was beef, and not snake meat...or worse.

It would be a 7000 mile trip just back to the States, close to another 2000 from California to Missouri. It was going to rough, very rough. If Barry was here he'd do it in half the time, but he wasn't Barry and never would be. Zeta Tubes were out of the question, the game would be over before it began if he used one. The best he could hope for was getting home around four a.m. and convincing his mom he had the flu, because if she made him get up and go to church that morning, he’d pass out before the second reading. No one said being a hero was easy, and Wally was finding saving the world nearly impossible.

xxx

The two heroines sat on the sidewalk, blended in with the crowd of locals as they watched Engine Company 23 and the rest of the New York Fire Department extinguish the last of the blaze they’d caused. It was a fairly modern apartment, much - much nicer than her mom’s, and the archer hoped the residents had been smart enough to take out renter’s insurance. It was New York after all.

She felt bad about the damage, but would have felt even worse if Harm had gotten away. There was no telling how many more would have died by that stupid antique sword, and hopefully within the next few hours he’d be booked and halfway to Blackagte awaiting trial, but her thoughts weren’t on him as much as the sister he’d left behind.

“A ghost,” Artemis shrugged in disbelief, looking at the picture her belt camera had caught of the apparition, “and actual ghost. I still can’t believe it.”

The outfits Zatanna had changed them into were a bit more casual, but the archer had kept the
camera and the picture separate. It was a souvenir a certain teammate was not going to believe. They walked away, heading down the streets for a bite to eat before a Zeta ride back to the cave, neither one looking forward to explaining to Batman what had happened to their motorcycles.

“Fun night right?” the sorceress said with a quirky grin.

“The best,” the archer smiled, “but maybe next time we just look for muggers and bank robbers instead of the undead.”

“Party pooper,” the brunette teased as they found an open pizza shop, grabbing a slice and sitting out on the curb.

“So you finally want to talk about it?” Zee asked.

Artemis sighed, taking a big bite of her double pepperoni. When Zatanna waited patiently for her to swallow, she gave up and shared.

“When I was in Canary’s office, she asked me if I liked dating Conner, or if maybe I just liked the idea of dating Conner.”

“And….”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “I know I’m not the most open of people sometimes.”

“Newsflash,” the sorceress chided.

“Shut-up. I mean he’s a great guy, gorgeous, an amazing kisser…”
Zatanna’s ears perked up, awaiting the sordid details.

“But he’s a little distant, even for me. I’ve been there before; road the rides, bought the t-shirt. Not a fan. We just don’t…I don’t know…connect I guess.”

“And he and Megan do,” the brunette added.

“Yeah,” Artemis shrugged despondently. “I know they’re just friends. Megan’s too good a person to cheat, and honestly so is Conner, but they connect in a way that just we don’t. I don’t know if I’m supposed to be jealous, or mad, or both, but I know it’s not working. Maybe it wasn’t supposed to.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“I could always use a spell; turn him into a toad or something fun.”

“Don’t tempt me,” the blonde grinned. Artemis looked off into the skyline, admiring how the moon blended effortlessly into the skyscrapers. This dark and dangerous city could be so beautiful sometimes, especially when its resident weren’t out there trying to kill you. She had a big decision to make; one that she wasn’t sure had already been made for her.
“It was a mistake dating someone on the team.”

“Uh duh,” Zatnana scolded. “I could have told you that, and I’ve only been with you guys a few weeks.”

“So that means you and Robin are a no go right?” the archer teased.

“Umm….”

“Right” the archer scoffed as the sorceress ears reddened.

Zatanna took a long sip of her coke as Artemis continued looking at the picture, still astonished at what they’d witnessed this night.

“What are you going to do with that?”

Artemis laughed. “I’m going to give it to Mr. Everything can be explained by science and watch him squirm and try to science his way out of it.”

“I don’t know, after the whole Dr. Fate thing, he might be a little more of a believer than he lets on.”

An hour later the two stood before the hidden Zeta portal, ready to head back to Happy Harbor and
put the night behind them. Artemis wasn’t ready to talk to Conner yet, and she’d bet good money he wasn’t either, but that train was coming quickly, and she needed to figure out soon if she was going to hop on or let it pass.

“Ready?” the brunette asked.

“Born that way” the blonde answered.

The cave was quiet when they arrived. Most of the lights dimmed, except for the one in the pantry and the glow of the television where Dick Grayson lay on the couch, watching a few episodes of Game of Thrones he’d led left on the DVR.

“You guys have fun burning down Gotham?” he chuckled.

Their mouths collectively dropped. “How…

“I’m a detective remember. Plus it was the top story on the local news, so I can’t take all the credit.”

“Where is everyone?”

Dick sat up, swinging his legs over chivalrously, hoping a certain magician might take the hint.
‘Well Megan’s spending the night with some girl from her school, Kaldur and Roy went out to get some dinner, Wally went home, and Conner’s crashed in his room.”

Artemis fiddled with her phone, dying to show Robin the picture and the story behind it, but Wally deserved the first crack at it. Maybe through their upcoming debate and denial, she might be able to find the opening she needed to talk about the exercise, and finally thank him for saving her life. Admittedly she wasn’t the most open person, but with a small push to her back into a snow bank, the speedster had made her feel more special, more worthy than Conner had in months of dating.

“Did we miss anything exciting?” Zee asked.

“Not that I know of,” Robin shrugged, “except for Conner and Wally nearly getting into a fight.”

“A fight?” Artemis asked in astonishment. “About what?”

He turned back to the screen, unpausing his show and said simply and without explanation.

“You.”

xxx
Hours later, on the opposite side of the country, a figured crawled from the water, dry heaving his way through the sand. His legs had given out shortly after going under the Golden Gate, but his momentum had pushed him past Alcatraz Island, skipping him like a stone across the choppy Pacific until he could see the light of Fisherman’s Warf ahead.

When he reached the shore he was freezing; his lips blue, skin pale, and his stomach digesting itself. Wally stripped out of his sea soaked uniform, leaving it balled up under a garbage can. If some homeless guy happened to stumble upon it, he could keep as far as the speedster was concerned. All Wally cared about at the moment was not starving to death, which at the moment was a real possibility. His metabolism, free of protein and carbohydrates, had begun eating away at bone and muscle. He’d been expecting it, but that didn’t ease the pain one bit.

Across Jefferson St. he’d caught site of his destination. An In-N-Out Burger, the only twenty four hour one in all of San Francisco. He dug through his wallet, discarding the Vietnamese currency and finding Andrew Hamilton’s face on a twenty. Wally could probably spend twice that amount and not get full, but this would be enough to get him back to Missouri.

It was a waiting game now. It could be hours, days, or weeks, but sooner or later the League would have to move on the message he’d sent. Wally had covered his tracks, and all he could do now was sit back, catch his breath, and see how smart the world’s greatest detective actually was.

xxx

The aroma of pot roast waffled through the house as Rudy West made his way slowly up the stairs; his bad knee giving him fits. Life had slowed for just a moment and he looked forward to a quiet Friday night with his family, sitting at the dinner table like they used to, he and his son watching the big game later. Actually feeling like a normal family for once. That was until the device in his son’s backpack began to chime.

He made it to the top step and caught his breath, the vibrating metallic communicator in his hand unrelenting in its need for attention. Up ahead, Wally's door was barely cracked and Rudy pushed it open gently to find the red head asleep on his deck, his head resting between the pages of his advanced chemistry book, little trails of drool spilling out on to his paper.
Things and not been easy on any of them since he'd recovered from the coma, and the fight at school and his grades had been a bit of a shock. Wally assured his parents he could fix it, and there was very little the speedster couldn’t accomplish when he put his mind to it, but he was beginning to stretch himself out too thin, everyone could see it, and that damn device sounding off in his hand was the culprit. Wally had to learn sooner or later that that it wasn’t always his responsibility to save the world.

Against his better judgement, Rudy put his hand on his sons shoulders, nudging him gently.

“Hey pal, dinner’s ready.”

“Ok,” he yawned weakly, “just turn of the alarm, I’ll be right down in a minute.”

“It’s not your alarm son,” his father frowned, placing the communicator on his desk.

Wally rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, picking it up and reading the coded message.

“Aw man,” he whined, placing it down and going to his closet to retrieve his uniform.

Rudy blow out his breath in frustration. “I’ll get mom to pack up your dinner.”

xxx
Wally stood at the broken down phone booth, finishing the last bite of his mother’s always tasty roast. He could have used an extra helping or three, but this would have to last him. He to a deep breath, and stepped inside the booth

- Time to put the game face on -

Recognize Kid Flash –B03

Wally wasn’t sure what he expected, Batman’s messages were always so cryptic. *Report immediately to the cave* could mean anything from some kind of world ending disaster to someone left dishes in the sink and didn’t wash them. You could never tell with him, but the last thing the speedster expected as he stepped down from the transporter was to come face to face with the League, the entire League.

*Oh fuck…*

“Kid Flash step off the platform and come over here immediately.” Batman ordered.

Wally nodded, trying to hide his terror, calculating in his mind how fast he could program the Zeta to send him back…*anywhere.*
What had he missed? What kind of trace had he left behind? He’d been so meticulous, or at least as meticulous as he could be, but he was playing chess with the Batman, and it was starting to look like staying three moves ahead was not enough.

He could feel beads of sweat dripping down his back, and genuine panic swirling in his gut. He was barely halfway through his mission and already it was over. Before he could figure his next move, Robin wiggled his way between Superman and Captain Atom.

“Dude what part of immediately don’t you understand. Hurry!”

Wally nodded, swallowing hard as he walked towards the Boy Wonder, waiting at any moment for someone to slap an inhibitor collar around his neck.

“What’s going on?” he asked as innocently as his guilty face could muster. Green Lantern and Aquaman moved protectively in front of the two, all eyes focused straight ahead on the Zeta Tube.

“It’s a long story, I’ll tell you later, just be ready,” Robin whispered in a room so quiet you could hear a pin drop.


The answer came moments later.

Recognition Green Arrow 08
The two archers stepped off the pad, continuing a conversation started a thousand miles ago, stopping just as abruptly as Wally had upon arrival.

“Ollie? What the shit?” Roy groaned just as the transporter sounded again.

Conner froze in his tracks, as Kaldur looked back to his dining companion in remorse. “I am sorry my friend.”

“Sorry for what?” Conner asked angrily, eyeing the room, pausing momentarily on the large red S whose owner had finally found the courage to look him in the face. Walking up beside the clone him, Roy’s anger easily matched his.

“What in the hell is this all about?” Harper demanded

“I’ll tell you,” Batman calmly responded, stepping away from the crowd towards the two confused heroes. Wally could feel the tension, almost sensing every muscle and sinew within the cave tightening and preparing for the worst, and unlike the two bewildered youths before him, the speedster knew exactly what this was about.
Batman stood directly in front of Conner and Roy, an unreadable expression hidden beneath his cowl, as he spoke the two key phrases. Six syllables and four words that were about to change everything.


In front of the Dark Knight, the two young heroes stood motionless, wearing the frozen blank stares of a puppet whose strings had just been cut.

Batman reached out, staring into their lifeless eyes, snapping his fingers in front of them, waiting for a reaction that would never come.

“I believe we've found our moles.”

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes - Sorry for the delay, works been a mother lately and finding the time to write has been a challenge. I'm sure I will be going back in and editing out the typos, but I needed to get this out while I had the chance. Thanks for reading and reviews always appreciated. Enjoy
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Wally West was seven years old, he told his father he wanted to be an astronaut, Rudy smiled warmly, telling his son as all fathers do, that he could be anything he wanted to be if he was willing to work for it.

When Wally West turned thirteen he told his father he wanted to be a superhero. Once again Rudy smiled, patting his son on the head and telling him if he put his mind to it anything was possible.

Little would Rudy have guessed that three and a half years later, his only son would be both.

22, 236 miles above the Earth, three heroes stood before the large monitor of the Watchtower's observation deck, the images displayed on it split evenly between two separate examination rooms. On the left side of the screen, Roy Harper sat dejectedly in a cold steel chair, arms crossed and head down, surrounded by Green Arrow, Aqualad, Black Canary, and Ms. Martian. On the right, Conner Kent struck a similar pose, enveloped by the Martian Manhunter, Captain Marvel, and of course Artemis.

Both telepaths had been carefully sorting through the minds of the two unwitting sleeper agents, subconsciously activated by the trigger words Batman had spoken hours earlier inside Mt. Justice, but that revelation had been dwarfed by the secondary discovery of the Watchtower's bio-genetic scanners.

"A second clone," Wonder Women exclaimed in utter disbelief. "How could this have happened?"

"Which begs the next question, who's behind it?" Superman added.

Batman remained silent, engrossed in deep thought at the images projected before him. Superman and Wonder Woman had known the man for years, but had rarely if ever seen him at a loss for words. Finally he turned back to face them.

"Make no mistake; we are under attack. Whoever is behind this move more than likely has knowledge of our access codes, passwords, Zeta Tubes locations, possibly even our civilian
identities."

"Hera," Diana gasped.

"We must begin genetic testing on both the League and the Team immediately, starting with the three of us."

"Agreed," Superman confirmed, "And then we need to take a second look at Cadmus for obvious reasons."

"After the incident in July, three quarters of their staff were either terminated or resigned. We need to get access to Cadmus employment records and find their top geneticist's current locations and employers, and we need to do it quietly."

"And what about our unknown informant?" Wonder Woman asked. "What more have you found out about them or the information that was sent to the Hall?"

"Not much unfortunately. The email was traced back to an I.P. address in Asia, a small town just outside of Hanoi. I have Robin going through surveillance footage from traffic cameras and security systems in the area, but there's hours of videos to sort through. This will take time. Whoever sent it was smart enough to cover their tracks."

"So we have an ally?"

"Or they have a competitor, whoever they are?" Clark concluded.

"After the incident in Louisiana, J'onn thoroughly interrogated Atomic Skull and from what he gathered, none of Skull's conspirators; neither Poison Ivey, Joker, Black Adam, Wotan or Vertigo seem to possess the skills and abilities needed for an operation of this magnitude. We have to assume there is another organization behind all of this, and whoever they are, they've kept things very compartmentalized."

"Meaning the left side doesn't know what the right is doing," the Amazon added.
"Precisely, but I'm willing to bet at least one of them acts as liaison in some form."

"What about the Brain?"

Batman shook his head. "His physiology precludes J'onn from reaching into his mind, but there has to be a connection."

"I know there's no proper time for this," Diana interrupted, "but we need to discuss the elephant in the room. What's happened to the real Roy Harper?"

It was surreal to say the least being back aboard the Watchtower Wally thought. I was still just as exciting and awe inspiring as that first day, until he remembered fighting for his life against the world's most powerful heroes, all under the mind control of Vandal Savage, trying to kill him. That seemed to take a little of the awe out of it. And yet despite the crisis and the danger, as well as the risk of humanity becoming slaves to the Light, what he remembered most about that day was kissing a girl at midnight. After that, being a superhero, an astronaut, or even saving the world kind of paled in comparison.

From a safe distance Wally stood silently, watching and listening as the brain trust of the JLA formulated their plan. It was hard to decipher all the details, but from what he'd gathered so far, it seemed that Bruce had finally made the connection, or at least had shared it publicly. A brain like Batman's never stopped, and Bruce Wayne was never one to share suspicions or assumptions until he had more of the facts at hand. Wally had served it up to him on a silver platter, or an electronic mail if he was being specific; however their continued search for additional moles troubled him, terrified being the more accurate word.

He'd be the first to admit he was no expert on the subject, but after hours of lectures courtesy of Ray Palmer, as well as years of being around Conner and learning of his origins, the speedster had a fairly strong grasp of the mechanics. Cloning was not the perfect match everyone believed it to be. The genetic material may be identical but the mitochondria inside the cell tended to develop differently than its host material. In layman terms there were still viable tests that could discern the difference.

A genetic test he could pass with flying colors, but a Martian mind scan? No amount of cramming could mask what he had going on upstairs. At this point Wally was sure nothing was off the table as far as the League was concerned, and once they were certain the mentors were free and clear, the sidekicks would be next.
Unless of course some Earth shattering event was about to take place, which if Wally's calculations were correct, was just on the horizon. With the hydraulic hiss of a heavy steel door opening, the speedster's eyes quickly found the elder Martian as he exited the booth, joining his fellow Leaguer's on the observation deck.

"What have you found?" Batman questioned.

"There appears to be a series of very complex instructions implanted in each of them. Superboy's appear to be incomplete, as if whoever implanted the programming was unable to complete the sequence."

"Robin, Kid Flash, and Aqualad did release Conner earlier then he was intended. Perhaps Dr. Desmond and his staff never finished the job," Wonder Woman asserted.

"I tend to agree. I believe the trigger phrase was created to disable him in the event of an escape or for retrieval. However Red Arrow's is much more drastic."

"What do you mean?" Superman questioned.

"Besides a similar disabling mechanism, M'gann and I have discovered something far more sinister. False memories have been infused into his subconscious, dating back several years, possibly more. Unlike Superboy, he has no knowledge of his origins, and at the moment I don't believe it wise to inform him of it. In addition we have discovered a pre-programmed post-hypnotic suggestion; an unyielding drive to join the Justice League at all costs. I believe this may be attributed to his anger over any and all delays to his possible admission."

"And why he refused to join the Team," Batman inserted.

"I believe so," J'onn confirmed. "This is a very sophisticated level of mind control. It is not just providing a narrative to the brain cells charged with encoding memories; these specific cells have been manipulated on a psychic level to create a whole new memory of events that never happened. There are only a handful of telepaths that we are aware of that would be capable of such a thing."

"Like who?"

"Grod, Psimon, and Queen Bee come to mind."
"Batman?" Ray Palmer announced from across the room, pausing the conversation. "Sorry to interrupt, but Silas Stone from STAR Labs is on the line. He said you were expecting his call?"

"Yes of course. Excuse me," Wayne said politely, leaving the discussion and walking across the deck to the open monitor. Slowly Wally eased over, barely within earshot.

"Dr. Stone," Batman nodded.

"I wanted to let you know that the package from Atlantis just arrived. It has been perfectly preserved. We will begin testing on it immediately."

"Preliminary thoughts?"

On the monitor, Dr. Stone scratched at his scalp. "Well it's definitely alien, at least a thousand years old if not more. Parasitic in nature, and appears to be part of a much larger host, but we'll know more in a few days."

"Keep me updated."

"I will."

"Oh and Doctor…."

"Yes?"

"I would double the security around the facility until we know more of about what we're dealing with."

"Very well. STAR Labs out."

The speedster watched out of the corner of his eye as the call concluded and Bruce walked back to the group. Wally turned away, scratching at the back of his neck. Silas Stone looked so young; barely a touch of grey in his hair, so vastly different from the man Wally had left behind to die in Mt. Justice.
Doing the math in his head, he realized Stone's son would be beginning his freshman year in the fall, a burgeoning high school football career ahead with college scholarships on the horizon, until that moment in Silas's lab when everything he'd worked so hard for would be ripped away in a violent explosion. Wally had achieved his greatest dream in makeshift laboratory, and Victor Stone had lost everything in another.

Cyborg would one day become one of the League's most powerful members, and years later Silas Stone would again have to watch helplessly as his son's life was cut short. Reasons like this were why Wally had come back, but still it seemed so selfish, bordering on evil not to be able to warn the man about his son. The resulting paradoxes from such a discussion could cause even more damage than the speedster could hope to fix. Victor Stone had once said how he felt like a monster, at that exact moment Wally could relate.

But for now, the Starro sample had been delivered as it should have, and soon the Light would be making their move to retrieve it, but before they did, Wally would have to make his.

As the members of the League continued their discussions, Kaldur emerged from Red Arrow's examination room, a dour expression across his face. The speedster crossed the deck to meet him.

"How is he?" Wally asked.

"Not good I am afraid," Aqualad replied.

"Does he know?"

"That he is a clone? No," Kaldur shook his head, "but it will not take him long to make the correlation. He appears to be an unwitting pawn in all of this. But what of out here? Has there been any discussions for beginning the search for the real Roy Harper?"

"Not yet," Wally replied. "I've heard bits and pieces about doing some genetic testing on the League and us to see if they're any more doppelgängers running around."

"A wise decision."
"What about in there?" the speedster gestured towards the other room occupied by Conner and the others.

"I do not know. I feel guilty for my betrayal in distracting him while the League arrived. I am most likely the last person who needs to enter that room. Hopefully Artemis is making more headway."

"Yeah," Wally said despondently. "Hopefully."

Wally looked down at his watch. There was nothing more he could do here. Roy had Kaldur to lean on, Conner had Artemis, and both Martians had their hands full. The speedster was the odd man out and doubted his absence would even be noticed. At the moment maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

As much as he hated to bail on his team in a time of need, right now the best thing he could do was get home, eat a good dinner and get some sleep, because tomorrow he had a man to find and a promise to keep. That is if he lived long enough to do it.

Inside the examination room, Conner sat subdued at a complete loss for words. Captain Marvel squeezed into the corner, trying to give Superboy and the archer as much privacy as his massive frame would allow, but he couldn't leave for obvious reasons. The last thing the League needed was for an out of control Kryptonian clone to start tearing apart the Watchtower, but throughout it all, Conner had remained surprisingly calm.

"I was the mole," he whispered, still in utter disbelief. So much had happened in so short a time.

_I am the Superboy, a geno-morph. A clone created from the DNA of the Superman. Created to replace him should he parish, or destroy him should he turn away from the Light._

Those were the words he'd spoken to Robin, Kaldur and Wally the night they'd first met. He was considered a weapon by his creators, a friend and ally to his liberators, and soon after was given the sweet taste of freedom he never knew existed. It had been almost six months since he'd been set free, a half year of thinking he'd put Cadmus behind him, only to discover he was still their puppet.

"I was the mole," he repeated to himself.

"Conner this wasn't your fault," Artemis pleaded.

"How can you say that?" he snapped, causing Captain Marvel to tense. "I'm nothing but a weapon,
a monster!"

"I say it because I know you. We all know you. The people that did this, they're the real monsters, and guess what? This time they didn't win. What happened to you, what they did to you, it could have happened to any of us. You are not a weapon, you are you. And nothing and no one can change that."

Conner let her words sink in, still trying to comprehend all that had transpired in his brief freedom from Cadmus. He didn't ask to be born; he didn't ask to be like this. He wasn't sure if he believed in God, or if he even had a soul, but he always considered being rescued from Cadmus a blessing, a part of a much bigger plan some higher power might have in store for him. Now he knew exactly whose plan it was.

He looked at the archer with pained eyes. Intimate relationships were a concept still so literally alien to him. Cadmus had only programmed him with the most rudimentary of homogeneity: gender identification, mating cycles, life expectancies, but not how those felt, what it meant to love. He had only recently begun to understand the fundamentals of basic friendship and teamwork, but dating, being intimate, both physically and emotionally had been such a challenge. Just when you thought you knew what you were doing, things could change in an instant, and it was becoming harder and harder to keep up.

Artemis had made the first move. She was blunt, aggressive, and made clear from the beginning what she wanted. But not once had the word love ever escaped her lips, which was quite a relief to him because honestly he wasn't sure he was even capable of it. At times he wondered if the archer might have felt the same about herself.

When they were being physical; it was fun, it felt good, she looked good, but afterwards, when things slowed down and the world became quiet again, he realized they didn't have much to say. Conner assumed that was normal until he discovered how at ease he felt when he was with M'gann.

It wasn't complicated, it wasn't full of dangerous turns and awkward moments, it was as if Megan understood him like no one else could. She knew exactly what to do or say in certain situations; an understanding ear when he actually felt like talking, giving him the necessary space when he didn't, calling him out when he was being absurd, or kindly correcting him when he was wrong. They were two aliens, both on the same journey, trying to understand and fit in with humanity. And if he'd learned anything from that journey, he knew that despite her steely facade, Artemis had deep feelings, and he'd trampled all over them without even trying to.

"Artemis…I'm sorry…you know…for everything. I didn't mean to…"

"Conner stop. You don't have anything to be sorry about. The most important thing right now is getting you right and finding out who did this. Megan can help you in ways that I can't. Who knows, maybe that's what brought you two together. You were reaching out and I didn't even notice."
Artemis took his hand, squeezing it warmly. "If this thing between us, if it's meant to be, don't worry, I'll be around. But the last thing you need to worry about right now is a girlfriend. I think you know that too."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I'm a big girl Conner, I'll be fine. Right now all I care about is making sure you're ok and finding the assholes who did this."

"Me too."

The archer knelt down and kissed him, tasting his lips on hers for what she knew in her heart would be the last time. "I know Megan's been waiting to see you, I'm going to go find her ok?"

Conner nodded. "You're one of kind, you know that right?"

Artemis stopped at the door and smiled proudly. "Hell yeah I am."

And with those words she stepped out and closed the door behind her.

The archer walked confidently down the gantry, passing by a few heroes she'd only seen on the internet, oozing confidence and determination; the image of someone who belonged there, but when she turned back to watch those same heroes disappear down the corridor, she stopped abruptly, closing her eyes and resting her forehead against the transparent aluminum of the view port.

She took slow deep breaths, calming the insecure and heartbroken girl that hid inside. If her father ever saw her like this, he would have beaten her within an inch of her life, taken her out and sparred and trained so hard that she'd have forgotten what heartache felt like; pain had that effect on people sometimes.

_Crocks are forged from steel. We don't bend, we don't break, and we don't hurt. Don't you ever fucking forget that baby girl._
She wiped at the burning of her eyes, shaking off any thoughts of that man and the life she left behind, focusing solely on the majesty of the moment. She was standing in outer space, honest to god space. This moment was beyond incredible, and nothing any of the astronomy classes she'd taken at Gotham Academy had remotely prepared her for.

The archer was not reading out of some text book, or watching some grainy video shot out of the back of a NASA shuttle, she was physically looking down at a view of the planet only a handful of people had ever seen or appreciated, so close it seemed like she could almost reach out and touch it. Artemis stood memorized by the brilliant shades of blues and whites and greens that rotated ever so slowly beneath her, when just six months ago her life was nothing but varying shades of grey.

Six months ago she was a vigilante in the loosest of terms, doing it more for the rush and rebellion than actually any kind of cause. She was angry, and instead of lashing out at some broken down assassin that was once her mother, she took to the streets, imagining every crime she stopped, every jaw she broke belonged to a hulking muscular man with blond hair and similar eyes hidden behind the grey of a hockey mask, but after few weeks into that life, things began to change.

She was no longer fighting her father, fighting her sister. She was fighting for those who couldn't fight for themselves. Suddenly she was no longer covered in filth and wretchedness; she wasn't the spawn of Huntress and Sportsmaster, an assassin in waiting. She was Artemis, and she was more than the weapon her father had made her to be. The connection to Conner was obvious, but that was over now. Another in long line of people that had left her behind, and despite how much she'd try to lie to herself, it still hurt just as much each and every time.

When Artemis came around the corridor she found the young Martian sitting quietly against the cold steel bulkhead, away from the windows, the crowds and the noise. Being in space was old hand to her, being alone not as much.

Ever since that night at the Halloween party, Artemis had taken notice of the respectful distance Megan had given them, and as much as she appreciated it, the unspoken issue that existed between them had hardly been put to bed. Missions were awkward, dinners were awkward, and girl's night's nonexistent. Conner had become more of her property than her boyfriend, and growing up poor, Artemis had always been possessive of the few things she had.

And now despite all that, the archer was about to ask her rival, her mortal enemy, the girl that had despicably welcomed and befriended her within seconds of their first meeting, the girl that had committed no wrongs against her other than having the audacity to be warm and welcoming to another lonely soul. The girl whose greatest sin was just being nice and wanting to be friends with everyone on the Team.
"God I'm a terrible person," Artemis sighed.

Quietly she walked up next to the alien. "Hey."

"Oh hey," Megan replied back. Artemis could feel the fatigue in the voice.

"Are you ok?"

Megan nodded. "I'm just tired, going so deep into someone minds can take a lot out of you. You just have to be so careful while you're in there. One wrong step and…" the Martian paused, "well let's just say it can be pretty bad."

"I can't even begin to imagine. How's Ro…I mean Red Arrow?"

"I don't know" Megan sighed "He's hurt and so lost. There's just a lot of anger in him."

"Even more than before?" the blonde said with a sly smile, trying to lighten the mood in such a dark time.

Megan chuckled dryly in response, but soon the air turned back to slightly tense, which in all honesty was an improvement. The archer took a deep breath and just let go.

"Look M'gann, I know things have been a little… awkward between us, and I'm sorry for that. It's my fault. I just have trouble trusting people. Where I come from there was always an angle, always a cost. And this whole Team thing…I'm still trying to get used to it, but you've been nothing but nice to me and I've been a real bitch."

"No Artemis…"

"It' ok. It's something I'm just going to have to work on. I've always been taught that asking for help was a sign of weakness and to just do things on my own. Another stellar lesson from my childhood, but anyway, I um…the thing is I really do need your help."

"Go be with Conner, Take care of him."

"But…"

"It's ok Megan. He needs you, and I need you to be with him."

"Artemis…."

"You two connect on a level I can never hope to. I know you'll take care of him. Just do this for him please. For me…ok?"

Megan stood up, fighting the urge to hug her earthly sister, but she could tell the archer had shared as much emotionally as she intended to.

"I will. I promise."

As Megan left the room, Artemis took the Martian's seat against the bulkhead. Leaning against the smooth metal, she could hear the hum of the generators; she could feel the vibrations and slight shudders as the satellite traveled through space. The existence of this base was supposed to be a secret, but she and her friends had been deemed worthy of the trust, they'd earned it.

Teammates and friends didn't keep secrets from each other, that's not the way it was supposed to work, but being honest and open was as alien to her as the young Martian who'd just left the room. If the Team ever found out who she really was or who her family was, they'd never trust her again, let alone want her on the Team.

You tried baby girl. You can fight Jade, you can fight me, but you can’t fight who you are.

The voice of Lawrence Crock echoed tauntingly in her head, and as tired as she was, she needed to go find something to punch, something to break. Walking over to the glowing kiosk she saw there was a workout facility two decks up. That would have to do, it's not like she could catch a ride anywhere at the moment.

As Artemis drug her weary body towards the elevator, she felt so alone, like so many nights
huddled around the lone source of light and heat in that whole stinking apartment, eating her dime store noodles, and watching the portrayal of people she could never be or understand on the television. Paula was in prison, Jade was in the wind, and Lawrence was out at his favorite bar, getting drunk and coming up with the latest torture to test his youngest daughter's will, to see if she was truly ready to join the family business.

Artemis entered the lift, pressing the floor and leaning back against the wall. Once, just once, she wished someone else could understand what it was like to have to carry around so many secrets.

Xxx

On the north shore of Gotham Harbor, tucked between the abandoned cannery and the old Acme chemical plant, in an area re-gentrification was too afraid to touch, stood one of the last seedy bars in Gotham. Not seedy as in Webster's definition of the word as somewhat disreputable or sordid, but as in the I'm going to blow your fucking head off your shoulders if you look at me that way again kind of way.

It wasn't to be found on any google search or yahoo map. It didn't even have a name other than BAR. It was the type of place that the GCPD would only be called out to if it was burning to the ground, and if the fire hadn't totally consumed the building by then, they could wait. It was located at the proverbial line that the boys in blue, and anyone else with any common sense would not cross, let alone drink at.

Inside, the cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air like the thick Gotham fog that rolled into the harbor. The ogreish tattooed barkeep knew all the regulars; nicknames only of course, and their preferred choice of poison. All the while the owner of the joint sat by the broken jukebox in the corner, polishing his 357, and telling war stories that even the most grizzled of vets would cringe at. It was a dangerous place for dangerous people.

In the corner, a tall muscular man held his glass to the light, spinning the contents into a caramel colored whirlpool. He loved the smell of whiskey, always had. The mellow smokiness, the salty brine, the way it burned, the way it numbed. Macallan would always be his preferred brand of choice, but a shit joint like this could only stock Jack or Jim, and right now that suited Lawrence Crock just fine. After this next job he'd have plenty of money for the good stuff.

You could call him a Shadow or an Assassin, he'd been in plenty of Leagues so names and affiliations didn't mean very much. In the end he was a gun for hire, and he was one of the best.

He'd been recommended to the organization by Ra's al Ghul himself, not just because of their prior affiliation as both enemies and allies, but because he could keep his mouth shut and he got results. He wasn't cheap, but you always got you paid for.
For a man of his skill, this upcoming job was remarkably simple, a glorified smash and grab. Crock would provide the distraction and muscle if necessary, while his partner grabbed the item. STAR Labs was a joke when it came to security, and if things went south, he'd have no trouble putting down any security personnel or GCPD that got in his way.

All he knew about the item in question was it was the remains of some dead alien. There were so many of them out there these days he didn't really care about the what's or who's, it all paid the same.

Crock wasn't interested in the Light's long term plans either, a little anarchy never hurt anybody. All he cared about was the check and the reputation that would come with it. If things went as planned there would be a lot more jobs like these on the horizon. Better him then some hack like Deathstroke.

The courier would arrive in the morning, bringing with him his partner's identity, day and time. That's how the worked. Nothing more nothing less. Crock admired the professionalism.

He ordered one more drink, before cashing out and paying his respects to the owner. The colonel, as he referred to himself, was one crazy fucker, probably half of the garbage he spewed out was total bullshit, but Crock still loved the stories. When he stepped outside, he was met by torrential rains and a merciless breeze.

"Fuckin Gotham," he cursed, briefly considering for a moment going back inside and waiting out the storm, but in this city the storms never seemed to end. The smart thing to do was fight the rain, head back to the motel, and get a good night sleep if by chance the Light decided to move their timetable up.

He zipped up his jacket and headed out into the monsoon, nearly tripping over the homeless man passed out face first in the alleyway.

"Better you than me pal,' he chuckled, making no effort to avoid the puddles that sent more water splashing towards the helpless vagabond. Crock was halfway down the alley when another burst of wind lashed out, except this time striking him from behind, followed by a sudden sharp pain. The last thing he remembered was the feeling of cold steel prongs on the bare of his neck, and then blackness.

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Sportsmaster's head ached like a son of bitch when he finally came to, and it took mere seconds to analyze his situation. He'd let his guard down and he'd gotten sloppy. A cardinal sin in his line of work.
Looking around at his new surroundings, Lawrence realized he'd been drug inside one of the abandoned warehouses nearby, now seated and bound, wrapped from neck to ankles in some kind of thick electrical cord. However the bigger question at the moment was by who?

Across the room he found his assailant, the same vagrant he'd carelessly passed over outside the bar, a clichéd dark black ski mask and matching outfit covering his frame. Sizing him up, Crock figured the man to be about 5'10 - 5'11, buck seventy-five soaking wet, and very - very nervous.

"You aint done nothing like this before have you?" Crock asked, trying to elicit a response from his abductor to no avail.

"You got balls, I'll give you that, but you know how this is going to end right?"

The figure in black said nothing in response, instead opening up his bag and pulling out a number of items just out of the assassin's view.

Crock chuckled at the reaction. If the guy was trying to play head games with the likes of Sportsmaster, he was in way over his head. Sizing up the guy's body language Crock could tell he was hesitant, unsure of his next move, like some fisherman who had just hauled in the biggest catch of his life, but too afraid to remove the hook.

Crock wasn't in fear for his life, far from it actually. The only thing that concerned him was the inconvenience of missing a few hours sleep. If this guy took too long to make his move and the mercenary ended up missing the Light's courier, whoever he was, he’d wish he'd never been born.

On the far side of the room, Crock found his tools of the trade; the series of blades, throwing stars and brass knuckles now organized neatly by the far window, still definitely within reach. Another telltale sign he was dealing with an amateur. Those weapons should have been at the bottom of the Gotham River instead of a few yards away from one of the most dangerous men in the world. He was going to have fun torturing this guy once he got free.

His abductor had done a fairly thorough search, but hadn't bothered to feel about his palms. No one did. Crock had already begun digging into the flesh above his wrist, tearing away at the tissue with his ring finger to retrieve the small razor blade he kept embedded under his skin for situations just like this. It was just a matter of time.
Across the room, Wally West remained silent. He'd thought about a moment like this for years, dreamed about it. Finally confronting the man who'd made the girl he'd loved life a living hell. Artemis rarely shared the gruesome details of her youth, perhaps unwilling to allow them escape from the prison she'd locked them away in, or possibly to protect her well-meaning but hot tempered boyfriend from going after one of the world's most dangerous men. It wouldn't end well for him and they both knew it.

But there were the occasions, moments triggered by the oddest of things that would cause her to break down and let a little of that truth slip out, and when it did it was not pretty. She'd spent her entire life building up a wall around herself, and brick by brick Wally had torn it down, but despite his insistence, sometimes things were better left buried.

The details were frightening and appalling, and Artemis would share them as if they were just an everyday trip to the park or a day at the beach, as if the horrible things that her father had put her through were the norm.

Wally swore to himself that one day Lawrence Crock would pay for his sins, and that day had arrived, and now standing face to face with the devil himself, the speedster had absolutely no idea what to do.

*Promise me that you'll do whatever it takes to keep them alive. Even if it means offing me. Do you understand? Don't think twice about it. You got one chance to save her kid. Don't blow it, especially on a piece of shit like me.*

The elder Crock's words still resonated in his mind, as if a lifetime of sins could be washed away with the slash of a blade or the pull of a trigger. It would be so easy to go down that road, to save Artemis, Paula, and even Jade from the years of torment that were still to come. He'd never have a better chance.

The speedster pulled out the tools from his father's workshop. Rudy would be appalled to know these item had been used for something like this, but in all honesty he'd be appalled at just about everything Wally had done to this point.

Saws, sledge hammers, tire irons, power drills; a ridiculous collection of items meant to cause injury or death that could just as easily been responsible for building the West's back porch or Wally's treehouse, spread out across the floor like some scene out Goodfellas or some other gangster movie. Despite his hatred of the man, Wally wasn't a sadist. He had no intention of torturing the man; he just needed to be put down like you would a rabid dog.
The old mercenary had given his blessing; he'd practically begged Wally to do it. Crock had seen what had become of his life, and he'd grappled with the guilt and responsibility of what he'd ultimately caused. Sportmaster didn't kill his daughters, but he had essentially handed the gun to the guys who did. With him out of the picture, the Light would lose a powerful ally.

The numbers worked, the premise cruel yet logical, and every bullshit formula the speedster could possibly formulate would all point to the same conclusion. Lawrence Crock must die.

Wally stepped back, searching the assortment of devices for the one that would extinguish the evil that was Sportmaster. Cowardly, he couldn't do it with him conscious. He couldn't listen to the taunts, the bargaining, the screaming. He couldn't kill a defenseless man in cold blood with eyes so similar to Artemis' staring back at him. A few more bursts from the Taser would solve that issue and allow Wally to just get this fucking thing over with.

The speedster checked the voltage on the display, confirming the Taser fully charged before knelling down to pick up what would be the instrument of Crock's death.

Standing now in front of the smirking villain, Crock reminded Wally of one of those gruesome monsters sitting in an electric chair, surrounded by the families of the victims they'd brutally murdered, waiting for their time to come.

There would be no begging forthcoming, no request for forgiveness, no pleading for mercy, just an insulting grin that would haunt those poor people for the rest of their days, like they'd just looked into the eyes of the devil himself.

"I'm going to make you bleed," Crock sneered. "I will make every last agonizing second of your life pure agony. You're going to be begging me to kill you."

Wally nodded, uttering his first words of the evening. "I know."

The red head laid the heavy sledgehammer at the mercenary's feet, fighting the temptation to reveal his identity or sharing that his desire for revenge was not only to save the world, but because of all he had done to his daughter. In a few seconds it wouldn't matter anymore.

*Artemis.*

Flashes of images rushed through his mind; her relief upon finally confessing the identity of her family, the satisfaction she'd received upon her father's defeat at Santa Prisca, the peace and hope
that sprung forth once that weight had been lifted, and memories of two lovers walking hand in hand on a college campus, having left the life behind and starting a new one.

Wally sighed. He couldn't do it.

If not for any other reason than Artemis would be ashamed of him. She'd come so far from the deadly tool her father had forged of her, she'd be heartbroken that someone she loved and admired, someone who grew up with loving and committed parents would ever consider taking the easy way out. There was always another way.

Wally glanced around the room. There were still yards and yards of unused cable he could apply to his existing wrap. Perhaps he'd even sprint to the closest hardware store and secure Crock with some steel chains just to be safe. Leave him trapped and abandoned until after the event. Missing a big job like this wouldn't bode well for his reputation. The Light might never employ someone as unreliable as him again. It wouldn't be comfortable. He'd likely suffer dehydration and malnutrition during that period of time, but it was better than being dead.

Crock had plenty of warrants out for him stateside and abroad, and after the mission Wally could promptly contact the authorities and reveal to them Sportmaster's whereabouts. It was the best the speedster could come up with in such a short notice, and honestly more than Crock deserved. Wally already had one looming death hanging over his conscience, he didn't need two.

He knelt down eye level with the assassin. "Looks like it's your lucky day."

Crock chuckled. "Can't say the same for you."

A massive fist tore free of the binding, smashing the speedster directly on the bridge of his nose, sending him reeling backwards. Crock freed his other arm, his legs still bound tightly and began a furious army crawl towards the weapons cache the speedster had removed from him, while at the same time Wally tried desperately to clear his vision. He was no match physically for the man, not at seventeen or twenty-two, and the confined space made his speed useless. Through blurry eyes he saw the assassin's massive form mere yards away from his knives and blades.

Wally wiped through the blood and tears, frantically searching the room for the discarded Taser without success. With no other options, he dove across the room, landing solidly on top of the villain, striking the back of his skull in frenzied rapid fire. As his vision cleared Wally found the Taser, several feet behind where Crock had first been tied. It was the only option at his disposal. Sportmaster's elbows wailed against the speedster's skull as he grabbed at the mercenary's legs, attempting to drag his body away from his weapons that were now less than a foot away. If he
could pull him back just a little more, Wally could rush to the Taser and disable Crock before he had a chance to use them to free himself…or worse.

Lightning flashed in the distance as the roaring thunderstorm burst through the broken windows of the warehouse, sending waves of rain and glass flying across room. Wally braced himself on the now wet surface, preparing to pull with all his might, when Crock's fingertips grazed his bowie knife.

Outside of being doused in searing chemicals and electrical burns, Wally had never experienced such pain. He looked down to his thigh to see the knife, embedded deeply into his femur, blood, muscles and tissue erupting beneath.

With adrenaline rushing through his veins, Wally kicked at Crock with his good leg, sending him flying. The assassin already had another knife in his hand, carving away at the remaining stands around his legs as Wally propelled himself backwards. Now free of the restraints, Crock dove for speedster, grabbing at his legs and pushing the knife in deeper, basking in the young teen's cries.

"I warned you - you dumb motherfucker!" he spit, pulling Wally further away from the Taser. "I told you you'd bleed. This is just the beginning."

That was it; he was good dead, Wally knew it, Crock new it. Sportsmaster would spend the next hours to days torturing him, for no other reason than his own personal enjoyment. Wally would be broken and confess his tale of time travel for Crock's amusement, and once he'd discovered the speedster's true identity, he would send his remains in several unmarked boxes to a certain headquarters in Washington D.C, addressed as to whom it may concern.

In a last ditch effort, Wally rolled to his side, grasping at the heavy oak pillar of the warehouse, keeping Crock momentarily from his prize, but between the pain, blood loss and superior strength of the older man, it was only a matter of time.

Crock viciously drug him back across the room, and Wally watched helplessly as the Taser fall away from his grasp, just as heavy object jarred into his shoulder while being pulled across the room. In the darkness he could barely see it, but guessed Crock hadn't either. It was his only chance, and in his weakened state was unsure if he could even wield it, but he had no choice.

Wally grasped the sledgehammer, wrapping both hands around it tightly, willing every ounce of strength and speed he had left and struck Crock right in the back, the iron head landing directly on the villain's spine with a sickening crunch.
Crock immediately collapsed to the ground, like a puppet who’s strings had been cut, his limbs tingling for a moment before all sensation ebbed away from his extremities. Both men knew instantly what had happened.

"You motherfucker!" Crock screamed. "YOU MOTHERFUCKER!"

The speedster painfully inched his way across the room, finding the closest wall and gingerly leaning his back against it as Crock continued to wail motionless on the floor. He was no doctor, but he'd learned a thing or two about traumatic spinal injuries from Paula Crock, and the way Crock now lay on the floor, the area of the neck the hammer had landed, and the gruesome crunch that followed, Wally knew right away he’d done.

This wasn't some ruptured disk, spinal contusion or pinched nerve. This was the real deal. Wally had crushed the vertebrae, possibly several of them, the fragile nerves inside sliced and torn. There would be no walking away from this. Crock would never be able hold a javelin or a mace, or any other kind of weapon. He'd never walk again, he'd never kill again.

Wally hadn't meant to, he'd actually talked himself out of it, but Sportsmaster had forced his hand. Perhaps that was what fate had intended all along. The elder Crock had made his plea, and Wally inadvertently had honored it.

Lawrence Crock wouldn't spend his remaining years rotting a way in some prison, he'd spend them as a prisoner of his own body fed through a feeding tube. And for a man like him, something like that was worse than death.

Wally pulled off his mask, wadding it up and placing it in his mouth. He counted to three and ripped the knife out, his anguished cries mirroring Crock's. He didn't need to look to know it was bad, and for his advanced healing factor to have any success, the wound would have to be sterilized and sown. There could be no hospitals, and regrettably it looked like the triage skills Artemis had taught him where about to be put to good use.

Wally tore off the sleeve of his shirt, wrapping it tightly around the wound to stop the bleeding, before struggling to his feet. If he thought it hurt lying down, it was three times as bad standing up.

He hobbled to the bag, collecting his belongings and leaving no trace behind other than his blood, which was quickly being washed away by the downpour that had been blowing through the building. A few feet away, Crock remained face down, his head locked to the side, unable to move, barely able to breathe. For such an arrogant and proud criminal, one who took such pleasure in the misery and death of others, it was almost pathetic to see him lying there helpless, but in life you
reap what you sow, and despite knowing he should, Wally felt very little sympathy or guilt for what he’d done.

Once he'd safely reached the city, he'd make an anonymous call to the docks, and police and paramedics would arrive shortly after, bringing with them an army of men to apprehend the infamous Sportsmaster, when in truth all they’d need was two EMT’s and a stretcher.

"Rot in hell you son of a bitch!" Crock gasped as Wally hobbled to the door.

He turned back to the fallen assassin before stepping out into the grey tempest. "You first."

xxx

Two days later Wally sat alone at his dining room table lost in thought. The house was quiet, empty, save for the television over the fireplace, out of focus and locked on to the two empty anchor chairs of the local news station.

He'd known it was coming. He was expecting it, but it was still unnerving just the same, watching helplessly as he parents faded out of existence, along with every other adult in the entire world. He'd been dreading this moment, because this particular mission was not going to be following any plan Bruce had remotely conceived. This was all him. Fate had seen to that.

The first time around, Billy Batson and Captain Marvel, both acting as conduits between their respective worlds, had passed back and forth the necessary information to defeat Klarion and the other mystics in his hire. It was also the moment that Nabu had taken Zatanna prisoner, refusing to release her until her father offered to take her place. Wally could relate to the dilemma, himself being trapped inside the helmet not once, but twice.

At this moment, the Helmet of Fate was still considered off limits by both the Team and the League, but once the mystic connection was discovered and the source of the disappearances revealed, all bets were off. There was only entity powerful enough to defeat a Lord of Chaos; a Lord of Order.

So just how desperate are we? I mean, this thing could definitely come in handy.

Yes, but we both know anyone dons the helmet and allows Nabu to possess him, may never be released from being Dr. Fate

So not that desperate.

Not yet.
He remembered the exchange with Kaldur word for word, both having been under Nabu's control, both barely escaping with their freedom and their lives. This time around he'd spared Kaldur that fate, but Wally knew the moment someone else put that helmet on, the speedster and his mission would be over.

Wally had no idea how Dr. Fate would react to what he'd done, and he was going to do everything in his power to make sure Nabu would never get the chance. Eliminating Sportsmaster from the equation had been a big step, and as potentially deadly as that had been, it paled in comparison to the risks he faced now.

Wally winced as he put pressure on the wound Crock had delivered. It was healing, but not as fast as he'd hoped, and if the speedster thought he wasn't fast enough to begin with, running on a bad wheel was only going to make things worse.

Lying flat on the kitchen table, he spun his communicator like a top, watching it spiral, teetering on its edge and back, waiting for the call. He didn't wait long as the device began to chime.

"You ok?" Robin asked urgently.

"Yeah, you?"

"Trying to stay whelmed."

"Looks like every adult in the city has just vanished," Wally replied.

"Same here, Zatanna says social media is blowing up all over the world saying the same thing. When you coming in?"

"Kids in town are posting something about refugee centers they've set up in local high schools. Let me make a few laps around Central and Keystone and then I'll be there."

"Sounds good."

"Rob, do we have any idea who's behind this?"
"Not yet, but Zee's working on it"

Wally paused, considering his options. Events were unfolding very similar to the last time. He wasn't sure if that was in his favor or not, but at least he had a vague idea where things were heading and he had to be ready.

"All right, I'll see you in thirty." 

"Be careful."

"Yeah, you too," the speedster replied, shutting off his com and rising from the table. Immediately he felt a jolt of pain shoot through his thigh, streaking downward towards his calf. He'd have to wrap the wound tightly, apply some more liquid bandages to the incision, and hope for the best. At this point super glue wasn't out of the question.

"Fucking Crock," he hissed as he hobbled up the stairs to retrieve his uniform, any regret or remorse he'd once held disappearing in the air with each step, just like his parents.

xxx

On another plane of existence, while the adults of Earth were left panic stricken over the disappearances of the children and other young loved ones, a lone figure navigated the halls of STAR Labs. Outside the facility, crowds of worried parents gathered demanding answers, while inside the lonely wanderer searched the building for a very specific item. 

At this moment, his partner would be camouflaged within the crowd, inciting decent and disorder, creating a riot that would bring the lab security forces outside to patrol the exterior. He just found it irritating that his partner hadn't bothered to check in with him first.

Compartmentalizing and restricting all but the most basic of information seemed to be the preferred method of his new employers. It was a smart move on their part, but still a tad irritating when all you had to go on was a rendezvous location, an ETA, make and model of the getaway car, and a vague description of a man that was rarely seen outside of a hockey mask. That's all he had to go on. He didn't even know anything about the item he what he was searching for. Just that it was important to the Light, and that he couldn't fail. Luckily, Edward Nigma excelled at puzzles such as this.
Up ahead he heard the rushed footsteps of a crowd of security men heading his way, quickly ducking into a storage closet close by until they had passed. Slowly the Riddler stuck his head out peering down both sides of the hallway until he was sure he was alone.

Nigma wiped his brow and rechecked his map. The vault was only three rooms down. He glanced down at his watch and confirmed he was right on time…naturally.

Quickly gaining access to the lab, the vault was just where it should be. The electronic pick was placed on the casing as the computer inside began cycling through a series of six digit codes. All at once the numbers locked and the sound of the tumblers releasing let Nigma know immediately he'd been successful.

"I am not steel and I am not iron, but without me there is nothing to keep the foundation together. What am I?" he whispered to himself as he reached in and grabbed the object. His answer came as a series of red lasers sites danced around the vault, making their way from his chest to his head.

The Riddler slowly turned see half a dozen police personnel with their weapons trained directly on him

Working his way through the SWAT Team, Commissioner James Gordon approached the villain, a heavy set of handcuffs dangling from his hand

"The answer you were looking for is, you… are… screwed," Gordon smiled.

xxx

As the Bioship flew above the Shenandoah National Forest, Wally fought the urge to reach under Kaldur's seat, and toss the Helmet of Fate out the closest airlock. No matter what happened tonight, no one could be allowed to use it. He had a plan, a truly dumb idea as Robin was so found of stating, and for it to work Wally would have to live up to that reputation.

The sequence of events had thankfully played out as before; Billy Batson had suddenly appeared in the cave, sharing his knowledge of the existence of two dimensions as well as his ability to travel between them, Zatanna then used her father's spell to pinpoint the mystic epicenter of the event, a global message of hope was been sent out to the children of the world, and now the Team was just a few miles out from confronting the deadliest practitioner of dark magic the world had ever known, armed only with a teenage sorceress in way of over her head and a golden helmet hidden
away in a black knapsack. If somehow they survived this night it would be a miracle.

The gem of Ambre-Jaune Perdu was the key, the conduit that had kept two worlds apart that were meant to be one. Somehow the Team needed to get access to it without Fate's intervention. To do that, Wally would have to use a little magic of his own. Misdirection was any amateur magician's best friend, but honest to god sorcerers wouldn't be fooled by it for very long, but it might be just enough.

Wally glanced around the cabin, gauging the fear, the excitement, the rush that went hand in hand whenever they were about to face the unknown. It amazed the speedster how far they'd come in just a few months, from most of them being relative strangers to now a team, a family.

Even after he and Artemis had left, they both would still reminisce fondly about the old days, and on those rare times when they went back to celebrate birthdays, holidays, births, and sometimes deaths, that kinship, that feeling of belonging never wavered. Except one time, the last time.

The moment his girlfriend, the center of his universe, disembarked on a submarine and sank into the depths of a cold dark ocean, sent there by his closest friend and brother of all people. That was the moment kinship turned into betrayal. That memory and the many subsequent others that followed had shrouded every fond retrospection he'd once held dear.

He looked to the archer, and those pangs of regret he held for her, the longing that ached inside him still hadn't dissipated once since his return. If Bruce Wayne's mission had gone according to plan, if a twenty two year old college student had emerged from the time stream, armor and flash drive in hand ready to save the world, at least that man would have felt the satisfaction of knowing a younger version of himself might have still found his soulmate, that - that teen would still have had a chance to share a life with her, but it seemed like that life was never in the cards for any version of himself.

When he looked at Robin, his oldest friend, his best friend, he didn't see the charismatic and energetic young teen; he didn't see the guy that stood by him no matter how bad the speedster had screwed up or acted. He didn't see the good times, the laughter, the tears, the funerals. He saw the man who'd knocked on his door in Palo Alto and changed his life forever. The resentment he held deep inside for Dick Grayson was still so strong, a betrayal that he thought he'd long put to rest.

In a future that no longer existed, Wally had snuck out of the mansion, taking advantage of the elderly Wayne's need for rest and Terry McGinnis's patrol schedule, speeding under the cover of darkness and the torrential Gotham storms to stand over Richard John Grayson's gravesite, alternating between tears of remorse, fits of laughter, and unsettled rage. On that day the speedster made his peace, forgiving Dick of any wrongs and hoping in the afterlife that his best friend would do the same. Wally had given up his life to save the world, and looking down at the marble slab below him; he knew unequivocally and without hesitation that Dick Grayson would have traded places with him in a second.
Nightwing had hated the fact that Kid Flash and Artemis had left the Team, but Dick Grayson was beyond joyful that his best friend and the girl he loved had walked away and made a life together. The guilt Dick must have felt that spring day when he arrived at his apartment Wally had never considered, not until he stood at the graveyard grieving for a man he would give anything to have one more moment with.

And now, given that chance, for some shameful reason the speedster couldn't bring himself to let go of that resentment and blame he held against a young teenager who'd done nothing to him but be his friend, as guiltless and innocent as Conner Kent.

The world Wally had come back to, the circumstances and alterations were no more Robin's fault than his own, but the memory of the moment in the Hall of Justice, when two bothers nearly came to blows and said things that they both wished they could take back, refused to go away. Not being able reconcile with that man was poisoning the friendship he had with the teen now. The dichotomy was maddening, and Wally wished he could have just one session with Canary where he could actually tell the truth.

"We will be arriving shortly," Kaldur announced over the intercom. "Once we touch down, Captain Marvel will coordinate our plan for attack with the other world. Until then, stand ready."

Each member nodded solemnly at Aqualad's directive, preparing themselves to step out into the unknown and save the world. Wally stared down at his feet, the tiniest glimpse of gold escaping the knapsack when he suddenly caught sight of the trail of red forming on the pants legs of his uniform, a minuscule stream of crimson contrasting with the yellow of his uniform.

Oh no…

In the blink of an eye, his fingers were at his chest piece, activating the cloak of his uniform. Red and yellow morphing to grey and black.

Hummingbird like eyes darted around the cabin, praying no one had noticed. Everyone's attention was still directed straight ahead as Kaldur gave the order to descend, all with the possible exception of one, whose head tilted ever so slightly with eyes hidden beneath his domino mask.

"Prepare for landing." Megan announced as the Bioshp was mere seconds from touchdown. Everything Wally had worked for, everything he'd accomplished rested now on a razors edge, completely dependent on what the next half hour would bring.
Off in the distance, Wally could see the red translucent magical dome constructed literally at the crossroads of what was once the Lost Roanoke Colony. Safely inside, the Witch Boy stood on the glowing pentagram, continuing a chant that would soon separate the two dimensions permanently, and in the center of it all rested the gem.

Wally remembered the Team's futile efforts to penetrate the force field to gain entry inside. Klarion had easily defended it, sending magical charges and monster cats to defend his position. This time around the speedster would be trying a slightly different approach.

He didn't have much time. In the other dimension Batman, Tornado, and Zatarra would be fighting the four remaining sorcerers on that world, the gem acting as the conduit between both. At any moment now, Billy Batson would return with instructions from Batman on their next course of action.

Minutes later, behind the Bioship, Kaldur gave his orders.

"The key to this mission is a coordinated simultaneous attack. Strike fast, disrupt the chant, and hope the two dimensions merge naturally into one. We need to test the shield, find a way to penetrate it. Superboy, I need you on the south road, distract Klarion long enough for Robin and Kid to…"

Kaldur stopped suddenly, searching the crowd for his missing teammate. "Where is Wally?"

"Kaldur!" Zatanna yelled urgently. "The helmet...it's gone!"

Aqualad looked out towards the dome, watching the contrail of lightning chasing after the speedster, a black bag hanging from his wrist.

"Kid," he cried out, "what have you done?"

The chant Klarion repeated over and over was in German Wally thought, or maybe Russian. Dialects were not exactly his expertise. Ordering Japanese food once at a Thai restaurant had more than made his point. It wouldn't take long for the Lord of Chaos to sense his presence and more importantly what he carried with him, but he was in kind of a hurry.
"Hey! Bitch Boy," Wally yelled. "How about you drop the phony magic act and bring the adults back, my dad has my allowance."

"Well if it isn't the dumb kid, Fate actually released you huh? Even a geezer like him most know a lost cause when he possesses one."

"Ah...you've got it wrong there junior, Fate's not the one possessing me anymore, it's the other way around." Wally smiled evilly, opening the bag just enough that the glow of the pentagram shined off the golden surface.

"Well I guess you're not as stupid as you look. How about we make a deal? You give me the helmet and I won't burn this world to a cinder?"

"Or maybe I'll just slip it on and kick your ass again," Wally countered, "and bring the adults back myself."

Klarion sneered at the response, stepping closer to the edge of the bubble before the mewling of his feline partner grabbed his attention.

"Yes Teekl, I know he's baiting me. I'm not a child!" the witch boy growled.

Their mystic conversation continued until Wally finally threw up his hands. "Fine! If you don't want this stupid thing, I'll find someone man enough who does. You're like a dog chasing his tail. You wouldn't know what to do with it if you got that chance. This is real magic in here junior, not that baby chaos crap."

Any number of those worlds might have been the ones to push the Lord of Chaos over the edge, but when the sorcerer spit out a river of fire, Wally knew he'd said the right ones. The speedster side stepped the flames in the blink of any eye.

"Come on dude, I whiz faster than that. Where's Abra Kadabra, I bet he'd know what to do with this thing."

And with those taunts, a demonic scream echoed out across the dead forest surrounding them and Klarion emerged. It was time for phase two of his truly dumb idea.
For some odd reason, Wally thought back to a something his dad once told tell him after a particularly challenging day in third grade. The young red head had won the class spelling bee, being awarded a trip to the teachers treasure box and retrieving the biggest ring pop he'd ever seen, only to have it promptly taken after class by the school bully. When Wally stood up for himself to recover it, he was quickly knocked on his ass to the amusement of his classmates.

"What do you think David would have done if he'd come face to face with Goliath and his slingshot broke?"

Even at that age, the young red head knew a lesson coming when he heard one.

"Stand up to the bully and not be afraid," the young freckled-faced boy said proudly to impress his father.

"No," Rudy laughed, tussling his son's hair, "he'd run like hell."

And that's what Wally did.

He felt like the carrot to Klarion's stallion as the Witch Boy burst out of the shield and began pursuit. The little demon kid was a lot than faster than Wally had remembered, and dodging his blasts of fire and the mystic lighting that kept erupting every few yards was getting more difficult with each passing lap. Wally carried the helmet tucked under his arm like a running back, and it would almost be funny playing keep-away from the little son of a bitch if the fate of the world wasn't at stake.

The speedster's leg was throbbing, and with every violent maneuver, every twist and turn he was performing at blinding speed, he could feel his body beginning to slow. He could really use some adults beaming back into this world about now.

In mid sprint he sensed his brain beginning to tingle when Megan's concerned voice came over the mind link

"Wally what are you doing!?" she asked desperately

"What does it look like I'm doing!" he snapped back. "Get the damn jewel before he figures it out!"

It wasn't the best plan in the world, but it was better than the alternative. Out of the corner of his eye, Wally saw Aqualad and Robin emerging from opposite sides of blackened tree lines, stealthy
It was actually working. Artemis and Zatanna continued running interference, sending flashbang arrows and blinding spells into the air at the perusing sorcerer, and Dick and Kaldur were seconds away from grabbing the gem. After that, in theory at least, the pentagram would fade and the League would be waiting on the other side to stop Klarion from...you know...killing him.

Everything was falling into place until the large boulder Conner had lifted and sent hurtling towards Witch Boy's had been knocked off course and landed right in the speedster's path.

Oh crap

Wally performed a fairly impressive series of spin moves to avoid the rock the best he could, but it wasn't enough as the edge of the stone caught the speedster's shoulder, sending the helmet flying from his grasp and landing at Zatanna's feet.

It was as if the world had frozen, every head, every pair of eyes stopped to watch the Helmet of Fate roll to the edge of the young sorcerer's boots. A wide grin spread across the demon's face as he halted his pursuit of the speedster and turned towards the teen.

Wally's head spun on a swivel searching for his closest teammates. The gem of Ambre-Jaune Perdu was in Kaldur's hand, but he'd still not left the pentagram, which meant the spell was still active. Zatanna looked lost as Klarion's bore down on her, unsure if to run or something much more drastic.

"Nabu you are finally mine!" the Witch Boy hissed.

Wally was terrified, desperate; Klarion was thirty yards away from the helmet and closing fast. Either Zatanna was going to save the day or Klarion was going to end it. Either way the speedster was screwed. That's when he came up with his last dumb idea, and it was going to suck.

He shot forth, his feet scorching the earth as he headed directly towards the Lord of Chaos. Klarion snickered at the sight, preparing to enjoy the last seconds of the speedster's life when Wally made an impossible turn towards the familiar. Teekl never had a chance.

The creature recognized his fate and had begun its transformation to defend itself when the fastest
teen alive slammed into it going over eight hundred miles an hour, smashing it through every blackened tree of the dead forest till they both came to an abrupt stop courtesy of the largest towering oak in the forest.

Wally had tried to ease up before impact, but his aching and exhausted legs had not been able to downshift in time and upon hitting the cat, Klarion's familiar exploded in a mass of blood, tissue and intestines, splattered across the tree, the field, and the speedster himself.

Kalrion was ten yards away from his prize when he froze in horror.

"Teekl!" he bellowed in a blood curding scream at the sudden loss of his familiar, forgetting the Helmet of Fate and rushing towards what was once his mystic partner. The demon floated about its remains in utter and complete horror, before turning his ire towards the unconscious speedster.

"You maggot, you pathetic excuse of a life form. I will destroy you. I will turn you inside and out, tear you apart limb by limb and then put you back together and start all over. I will rip out your heart and feed …"

But his threats began to fade as did the Witch Boys body, which no longer tethered to his familiar began to vanish back to his otherworldly dimension of Witch World.

"NO NO No No no…!" And with his final words, he was gone.

Kaldur stepped out of the pentagram as it began to fade and the world around them blurred into sharp focus. Seconds later Batman, Red Tornado, the adult Captain Marvel, and Zatarra appeared out of thin air and with all the speed the elder sorcerer could muster, Giovanni rushed to his daughter's side, slowly removing the helmet from her trembling hands. She'd been seconds away from donning it and nearly fainted when it was finally removed from her grasp. The crisis was over.

The Team took a collective sigh of relief with the realization that their world had been united once again, until the archer took off running towards their woods and their fallen comrade.

"Wally!" she gasped, rushing through the path of broken trees to find the speedster flat on his back, his dark uniform and naked face covered in crimson. Artemis dropped to her knees, grabbing his wrist and searching for a pulse. "Wake up, come on Kid, wake up…please."
"Let go," he winced with a croak as eyes slowly fluttered open slowly, his voice week. "I think it's broken."

The rest of the Team rushed in, stopping short at the gruesome sight.

"I think it's that cat's blood not his." the archer confirmed relieved.

Robin reached down to his good arm, while Conner gently lifted his shoulders, easing him into a semi-sitting position. Wally eyes grimaced in pain, taking slow breath until he finally found a somewhat comfortable angle to rest in.

Artemis took careful hold of his limb, as Robin tore off a piece of his cape she could use to make a makeshift sling.

"Ow ow ow ow," the speedster grimaced as Artemis carefully moved the bone into place.

"Quit being such a baby and hold still," she said with a smile before tying the knot around his neck. Wally knew from first-hand experience that her first aid skills were top notch; it was her bedside manner that sucked.

"Is he gone?"

Kaldur nodded. "Incapacitating the cat seems to have dislodged him from this plane."

"Incapacitating," Robin chuckled, "more like disintegrate. Dude that was harsh, the ASPCA is going to have a field day with you."

Artemis smacked the detective in the back of the head. "Play nice."

"I tried to slow down I swear, I couldn't get any traction. Is Zatanna?....."
"I'm ok," she replied, still shaken.

Wally slowly stood up, taking a few cautious steps before his leg gave out, Conner quickly catching him. "I got you."

Batman soon approached. "Without Klarion, the other mystics won't be a threat. The rest of the League is in route to secure the other sorcerers until the meta-human response team can arrive. Load up and return to the cave. We will debrief at 1700 hours."

As Batman walked away, Conner grumbled towards the Dark Knight. "You're welcome."

Megan kept staring at the speedster hesitantly before motioning to her own cheek. "Uh Wally…"

The red head stared back at her in confusion until he brought his hand up to the same part of his face as Megan was directing and felt something there. When he pulled the object away from his cowl, he soon recognized it to be part of the cat's intestine.

He spent the next five minutes throwing up.

xxx

"Reckless, thoughtless, irresponsible, incautious, negligent..."

The list went on and on as Wally bit his tongue while Zatarra continued to reprimand him. Granted it wasn't the smartest thing he'd ever done, but it had the required effect. And as Dinah placed his aching arm in the soft cast while his leg continued to throb, the speedster had had just about all he could take.

"What were you thinking? Did you once consider the ramifications? Do you know the damage he could have done with Nabu under his control? Do you understand how dangerous he would have become? No you did not, because if you had perhaps…"

"I get it!" Wally yelled back to everyone's shock. "It wasn't my idea to bring the damn thing along in the first place! It was supposed to be a distraction and it was working? Was it a little reckless, yeah it was, but I kept that thing off your daughter's head didn't I! You haven't been in there before, I have! Nabu… he's insane! He would never have let her go or you if you'd tried to take her place.
So how about cutting me a little damn slack…"

"Robin," Kaldur urgently interjected, but the young detective was already making his way over.

"Come on KF," Robin exclaimed, putting his arm around his best friend's shoulder. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Zatarra's face lit bright red at the young speedster's insolence. He angrily turned to Black Canary fuming. "Is this what you are teaching them here? Arrogance and disrespect? I would never allow my daughter to speak to any of you that way."

"Dad…" Zatanna whined in embarrassment.

"Zatarra," Kaldur began. "That is not the way we have been instructed to address our elders I assure you, and it is completely out of character for Kid Flash to have done so. I make no excuses for his behavior, but I must point out he did save you daughter from a most terrible fate. I have no doubt that if Wally had no other options, he would have put the helmet on himself before anyone else could, including Klarion. No one is more aware of the consequences than he. It has been a stressful mission, and as team leader I apologize for his actions, but respectfully, the next time you choose to publicly criticize one of my team, I ask you to address me solely. I am the Team leader, and I alone am responsible for their actions."

After a few moment of angry consideration, Zatarra began to cool and nodded in agreement. Noble Atlantean reasoning tended to end most arguments relatively quickly.

"The helmet should be taken out of here." Zatarra demanded

"The helmet is safe here Giovanni." Batman countered. "It has not shown any of the strange behavior that it did on the Watchtower. After today, the Team is even more aware of the consequences surrounding it."

The sorcerer turned to the Dark Knight with contempt. "It may well be safe here but I'm not sure I fell my daughter is. Come Zatanna, we're leaving."

xxx

Inside the steaming shower stall, Wally rested his head against the cold porcelain, trying to put into perspective what the last two days had accomplished. He knew Zatarra was right, it was reckless,
but what other option did he have?

Of course he would have put on the helmet if there had been no other choice. Wally wasn't about to let Zatanna or anyone else pay for his sins, but thankfully tonight it hadn't been necessary. Despite a broken arm, and a fairly decent concussion, he'd gotten lucky, real lucky, and right now he'd take any victory he could get.

The plastic cast was only temporary, he'd have to go to an orthopedist to have it set properly, and he'd have to do it fairly quickly, otherwise with his metabolism the bone would start setting itself in the wrong direction. His parents were going to be thrilled.

He thought he'd dodged that bullet by not having to face the Injustice League and being slammed against a tree by Black Adam, but karma and time travel were both bitches.

He could still taste the copper of Teekl's blood. It was in his mouth, in his hair, in his pores. And no matter how scalding the water was or how hard he scrubbed, he still felt like he couldn't get it all off. He'd had a lot of blood on his hands lately.

It was hard to celebrate what he'd done to Lawrence Crock. It didn't matter if it was accidental or not, his actions had consequences, and just because Sportsmaster was now out of the picture it still didn't make it right. Two innocent girls from Louisiana could attest to that.

Klarion was gone too, and despite the circumstances, that was a huge win. While inside the helmet, Kent Nelson had explained how hard it was for any Lord to find a familiar to bond with. That was why Nabu used the helmet combined with a human host. It would take decades, possibly centuries for the Witch Boy to be able to conjure another creature capable of leading him back to the earthly plane. Hopefully by then Wally would be long gone; the growing old way, not the getting killed while trying to fix the future way.

Without Sportmaster's protection, it was highly unlikely that the Riddler would have been successful in getting the alien parasite out of STAR Labs, and even if he did, without Klarion there would be no way for the Light to create the mind control device to use against the Justice League, or at least he hoped so.

His mission was slowly nearing its end; the Brain, the Witch Boy, Sportsmaster: one chess move at a time he'd begun dismantling the core of the Light. The goal was never for the speedster to eliminate them, but to set the stage for the League to discover them, their true purpose, and do it
With this defeat, Luthor, Savage and the others had to be getting nervous, but they still had one wild card left to play, a very dangerous one. That was Wally's final goal. That was the endgame. Checkmate.

Over the roar of the shower, the speedster heard the familiar creak of the locker room door opening as Dick Grayson spoke up.

'It's a good thing Mt Justice has an Olympic pool size water heater. You can come out now, Zatarra and Batman are gone."

Wally sighed. "How much trouble am I in?"

"Oh, about the usual. Kaldur ran interference for you, but I'm sure he's going to want to have a word sooner or later."

"I'm hoping on later."

"I bet." Robin chuckled.

"I shouldn't have said those things to Zatarra." Wally confessed.

"No, probably not. He was tearing you a new one pretty good, but you did save Zee. I think I'd have called it even, but you know how the League is."

"Yeah," Wally frowned. *Almost too well.*

"Look, you rolled the dice and won. They do it all the time, they just don't want us to know about it. Don't stress it dude, it's going to be fine. In the meantime, maybe lay off the helmet for a while."

"No shit," Wally laughed bitterly.
"You know you're supposed to be putting ice on all your boo boo's, not heat."

"Who are you, Robin the Boy Doctor?"

"Maybe you should have that funny bone checked out too?"

Wally snickered at the jibe. "Good one." However, that smile quickly faded upon the young detective's next question.

"So how's the leg?"

Wally nearly dropped the soap. "You mean arm right?"

"Nope," Dick said plainly. "I saw your leg bleeding on the Bioship on the way to Virginia. What'd you do to it?"

It was officially panic time inside the steaming prison. Dick Grayson was like human lie detector, and Wally was thankful to be hidden behind the patrician so Robin couldn't see his pathetic poker face. Quickly he came up with his worse lie yet.

"Oh that. Yeah. So there was pile up the other day on the Gateway. It was storming and a couple of cars hydroplaned and slammed into each other. Nothing bad, but I was on my way back from school when the call went out. Flash was busy so I just ran over to check it out. This old lady was trying to crawl out through her window, and when I bent down to help, I kneeled right on top of broken glass. It was stupid. I must have busted one on my stitches on the way to the Mountain."

"You want me to take a look at it?"

"Not without buying me dinner first sailor." Wally joked, trying to keep things light and normal. The speedster held his breath, waiting to see if his best pal had bought it or not. Seconds seemed like hours.
"All right, well hurry up, Gotham's playing Metropolis tonight on ESPN. Megan's making snacks."

"Oh dude, I am so there. I'll finish up soon, save me a seat."

"You got it."

Wally listened carefully for the locker room door to close, and then an extra minute or two to make sure Dick was gone before peering his head out. When he was sure he was alone, he let out a relieved sigh. Wally wasn't sure if Dick had bought the lie or not, but why did it matter? There was no way Rob could tie the injury into anything bigger. The best thing he could do now was act normal and let it go. All his mouth would do was get him into more trouble.

xxx

An hour and a half later, Wally stood inside his quarters, looking at himself in the mirror. He looked old, he felt old, not in a vibrant twenty something way, but a broken down teen teetering on the edge of sanity kind of way. His skin was pale; his eyes were sunken with dark circles surrounding what had once been animated apple green iris's. He was exhausted.

There was only so much more he could take, and yet he had to endure, because if he had to hear the words of Bruce Wayne echoing in his mind one more time that the fate of the world hung on his shoulders, he was going to speed into the closest concrete wall head first at Mach 2. Then saving the world could be someone else's problem.

At his feet rested the package, zipped up and ready for transport in his old Keystone High gym bag. Once again no Zeta Tube log could be allowed to trace his movements, so he'd have to transport back to Central City before turning around again and heading back out on foot. It wasn't going to be like crossing the Pacific, but with his bum leg and broken arm it sure was going to feel like it.

As he left his room, up ahead he could hear the cheers and laughter of his friends echoing from the common area. Wally walked in to see the Team huddled around the large screen TV, the waning minutes of the Gotham University vs. Metropolis State game ticking away.

The ball was on the ten, and all Gotham had to do was kick a field goal and the game would essentially be over. Metropolis quickly called a timeout to stop the clock and everyone in the cave took a deep breath, digging into the snacks that covered the coffee table while the string of commercial came on.
"Dude where've you been?" Robin excitedly blurt out. "Metropolis jumped out to a 28 point lead, but Gotham powered back and took over...as usual. This field goal seals it. You need to sit down and watch the last minute."

The speedster rolled his eyes. Dick loved to crow about his hometown teams, especially when they beat the teams and cities of his fellow teammates and mentors. Gotham routinely kicked Central City's ass in just about everything, and while Conner had no connection to Metropolis per se, he was as sick of Dick's bragging as Wally was when it came to Gotham's sports dominance.

Wally turned to see Artemis on the far end of the couch with what appeared to be a contented smile on her face. He knew the archer couldn't have given less of a damn about the game. She hated football with a passion, that was until she stepped foot into the Stanford Cardinals Stadium, after that she was hooked, and unless the world was coming to an end, she and Wally never missed a game together. He wondered how long that tradition held true after he'd...gone.

The blonde shuffled in her seat, creating what looked to be a small opening for the speedster to join her. "Come on Baywatch, these snacks aren't going to eat themselves," she said playfully.

Oh man....

"I can't," he sighed. "I've got homework."

Boos and paper napkins came flying his way from all directions.

"Dude, come on? At least stay for the end."

"No can do mi amigo," Wally smirked, programming in the destination code for Central City. He paused, never turning back to his friend. He'd seen this game play out before and he just couldn't help himself.

"Ten bucks says Metropolis blocks the field goal and runs it back for a score."

"You're crazy." Dick laughed. "I think you may have broken more than your arm."
"Wanna put money on it?"

"Let's make it twenty," the young detective smiled.

"Done," Wally smiled as he walked into the blinding radiation of the transporter.

*Recognize Kid Flash – B03*

Seconds later, the linebacker timed the snap count just right, leapt over the center and blocked the attempt. The ball landed cleanly in the cornerback's hands and ninety yards later, Metropolis had secured the upset.

"Son of a bitch!" Robin screamed, throwing his empty soda can to the floor.

Sweat poured from the young man's brow as his shovel continued to tear into the earth. His leg and arm screamed in defiance with every push of the steel, and despite the scalding unending shower he'd taken, he could still feel the blood of the witch boy's cat upon him.

Wally took a moment, resting against the shovel and catching his breath as he looked around for the umpteenth time. There was nothing spookier than standing in a Salem Massachusetts graveyard after midnight, and almost every horror movie he'd ever watched had begun or ended this way.

This was knee jerk reaction, he was fully aware of it, but he was so close to completing his mission that he couldn't risk the chance of discovery. Of course if the item he'd placed back on the trophy shelf of the cave was fully examined, he'd be equally screwed. What did he except from a comic store replica? But still it bought him so time; the other choice was instant discovery of its absence and failure. Wally wasn't a gambler by nature, but he had to roll the dice on this one.

He could see his breath as he went back to work. Cold weather had never bothered him before, Midwestern snow storms were the stuff of legend, but standing in this haunted cemetery under a cloudy sky that kept the moonlight prisoner, he was chilled him to the bone.
Bone, he shivered, why did he have to think about that now

After a few minutes he heard the metallic clank as his shovel reached its target, echoing off the tombstones, markers and beyond. He immediately dove to the ground; hiding behind this specific marker like some soldier would a foxhole. His eyes slowly crept back out, surveying the area, imagining the hidden Tower of Fate standing in the distance, watching him in angered disgust. The feeling was mutual.

When he was sure he was alone, he rose to his feet and looked down.

Kent Nelson
Beloved Husband and Son
1904-2010

Next to his was the grave marker of Inza Cramer Nelson, beloved wife and daughter. God almighty what was he doing? If he wasn't going to hell already, this was the proverbial nail in the coffin. Judgment day was going to suck.

Wally cleared away the dirt with his hands until the casket itself was visible. He'd been here before, not in the middle of the night like poor sap from a Friday the 13th flick, but on a warm spring day in a future that no longer existed, placing flowers on both graves. Thanking the man for his sacrifice, advice and encouragement.

Find your own little spitfire, one who won't let you get away with nothing.

Wally had taken his advice to heart, the proof being the beautiful blonde woman at his side, paying her respects as well to a man she’d barely known, but had changed her life forever as well. Spitfire's worked both ways. It was such a simpler time, when uniforms were packed away in favor of backpacks and California skies.

It was moments of weakness like this when the speedster's heart would ache all over again. When the temptation to grab the girl he could never have and whisk her away to some far off land would get the better of him, never letting her leave his side again, alien invasion be damned.

Wally let go of those thoughts and slowly pried open the steel casket. He didn't know what to expect, in reality it had only been a few month's since Kent Nelson's death, but the speedster had
prepared himself for some horror-esque mummified remains. Instead he found what looked like the slumbering form of the man he remembered.

The speedster remained frozen; every muscle tensed and locked as if at any second Nelson's eyes would open, lurching from the grave, hands wrapped around Wally's throat in fury.

He needed to make this quick.

On the ground in the gym bag, Wally reached over retrieving the object inside. At that moment, the clouds seemed to open, and a beam of moonlight shot forth, surrounding the speedster and the gravesite in its glow. Wally held the object in his hands, the moon cascading off the golden helmet in all directions, before placing it in the casket with the body of the late Kent Nelson, the late Dr. Fate.

Never once in Bruce Wayne instructions to fix the future had Dr. Fate been mentioned, but his presence, his ghost had haunted Wally every step of the way. Nabu, the Lord of Order, a being allegedly over ten billion years old, now shoved in a gym bag and hidden away in a Salem graveyard with his former earthly familiar. When Nabu would finally be paired with a new human host one day, Wally would be lucky if hell was his final destination.

"Take care of each other guys; believe it or not I'm only trying to help."

Wally took once last look and closed the casket, quickly covering it back with dirt. In the distance he heard a wolf's howl, and if that wasn't a message from beyond the grave, nothing was.

xxx

The Batcave sat in complete darkness as the mansion elevator noisily touched down on the ground floor, sending all forms of creatures and cave dwellers scurrying into the safety of eternal shade. Moments later a very perturbed Englishman stepped out of the booth, searching the cave for abandoned dishes and cutlery, half-finished meals, and of course the occasional bulleted riddled Batsuit in need of mending, but what the elderly steward did not expect was to find the Dark Knight's partner, sitting alone in the dark in front of the computer.

"Master Richard, you startled me."

"Sorry Alfred," Dick replied troubled.
"Is everything all right sir?"

"Yeah," Dick paused. "It's all good. I just needed a quiet place to think."

"Sir the entire mansion is empty."

"I know, but Bruce does his best work in the dark when he's looking for answers. I was kind of hoping for a little of that same inspiration."

"Have you found any?" the kindly butler asked.

"No to both," Dick chuckled. "Just more questions."

"Well need I remind you it is a school night? Come now, it's time for dinner."

"What are we having?"

"Chicken Parmesan. My mother's recipe," the Englishman stated proudly, until he caught sight of the boy wonder's grimace.

"Wonderful," Dick said dryly. "My favorite."

"You're sarcasm is neither recognized nor appreciated. I'm sorry Master Richard, but it cannot always be pizza and hamburgers," he frowned in disgust. "Now come along, it's time to wash up."

Dick smiled; he loved bantering with the old man, who was as much a father to him as Bruce was.

"I'll be right up, just give me a minute."
"Very well sir." Pennyworth replied, gathering the last of the plates and heading back to the elevator.

Once Alfred had left, Dick turned back to the darkened screen; switching on the monitor he'd hurriedly shut off at the butler's impending arrival. On the screen, a traffic cam view of a modern looking suspension bridge came into focus, just not one that belonged in Gotham.

"Computer, display archival footage from November 4th and 5th time stamp sixteen hundred to twenty two hundred hours, two times speed."

The computer chimed in response when on the massive monitor, footage of cars, trucks, busses, and trains flew across the bridge and at a jerky awkward pace, like some 1940's car chase scene.

The images changed contrast as the sun went down and the bridge lights came to life, but nothing else out of the ordinary stood out; just the normal traffic patterns with little to no congestion of consequence. A night like this rarely happened in Gotham, where drivers were becoming more aggressive and cars and trucks only getting faster, but this video did not belong to Gotham, instead to the Gateway Bridge, connecting the sister cities of Keystone and Central.

"Computer, access Keystone and Central City Police dispatch records. Search November 4th and 5th for any traffic accidents or reports associated with the Gateway Bridge."

After a few moments of consideration, the computer responded. "No matches found."

Dick massaged his aching temples and began again. "Computer, weather report, same location and time stamp.

"Partly cloudy skies, with highs in the mid 80's and the lows on the mid 40's."

"Precipitation?" the young detective asked

"Zero percent."

Dick sat back in the plush chair, clearing the search and powering down the computer. He
scratched the back of his head, whispering in the darkness to no one.

"Wally, why are you lying to me?"

Chapter End Notes

Author’s notes: And another one’s in the books. It’s about twice as long as some of my chapter’s so let’s call it two chapters and call us even for the delay.

It's always been my intent to follow along with the original episodes as closely as possible. When reading these chapters there is some jumping between scenes, flash forwards and back of memories and moments etc…The hope being that the reader has a familiar understanding of the episode of which each chapter is based. Some of the paragraphs are filler scenes and others represent new realities that Wally has created. If you don't know the episode well, it might seem a bit jumpy at first, but I've watched them all as I've constructed this story and I believe they follow and fit as best as I can write – which depending on your opinion of my writing could go either way I’m sure ;).

Thanks to everyone who has been following the story, your reviews are really motivating and constructive, I can't tell you all how many ideas I’ve pulled from some of them that have helped steer the story. I really have enjoyed connecting with you all and I love the enthusiasm, but I’m writing this as fast as I can I promise. I know some of you are a little impatient, don’t worry I’m the same way with the writers and their stories I follow, but don’t worry I’m tackling little parts of this every day, unfortunately job, family, and travel gets the best of me sometimes. I don’t mind questions regarding posting schedules, and I’ll always be honest of when I think I can get it out. Those of you that review as guest, I can’t chat back to you unfortunately, that’s just the way the website works. I would if I could I promise. Thanks for reading, leave a review if you have the time so I can steal more of your brilliant ideas, and I’ll see you in a few weeks.
The alarm on his bedside began blaring at 4:45 a.m, and after close to an hour of dueling with the snooze bar, the speedster reluctantly surrendered and rose from the bed.

It had been another restless night, filled with visions of burning cities, dying heroes, and his own demise.

Barry Allen was always fond of saying everyday was a gift, and even though he didn't always agree with his uncle, truer words had never been spoken. Despite his fatigue or the gravity of his current situation, every morning he was able to get out of bed on his own was a good one.

His floor was cold, and it seemed as if overnight the days of fall had been whisked away by the unpredictable mid-western winds. His alarm had been set early in order to complete his trigonometry homework, starting it being the more accurate word. Despite having aced this class in his former life, he was finding himself more and more behind with each passing day, as was true with most of his courses. And even though he'd made assurances to his father that his grades would improve, so far they had not taken the upswing he'd promised. Saving the world was hell on a GPA.

In lieu of trigonometry, he'd spent most of the last month studying a different subject all together; Speleology, the scientific study of the geological structure and physical properties of caves, or more importantly in this case, the creatures that resided within, specifically the one in Gotham.

Truth be told, Wally was never much of a fan of Gotham City. Sure it was exciting, full of bright lights, towering buildings, constant motion and energy; rightly giving New York City a run for its money as the city that never sleeps, but Wally saw it as something much less idealistic. It was cesspool.

It seemed to rain constantly, as if Mother Nature was continually trying to wash the filth from the city and streets to no avail. The rich and powerful rarely earned that title legally; stealing, scamming, and defrauding the hard working middle class of their 401k's and retirement funds, all the while hedge fund managers and CEO's padded their golden parachutes, preparing at any moment to make their getaway to some Caribbean island while their devastated clients were left behind to pick up the pieces. And those were just the ones that didn't wear masks.
Gotham was a magnet for monsters; home to an unending parade of supervillians, meta-humans, mobsters, crime bosses, and gang leaders. Anyone unfortunate enough to come stumbling into their cross hairs usually paid for it with their livelihood, and sometimes with their lives. If you didn't live in Penthouses or Mansions, life in Gotham usually sucked.

Of course all of that was just one speedster's biased opinion, and he swore to himself long ago that if it wasn't for Dick Grayson, Artemis Crock, her mother and a handful of others, he'd never voluntarily step foot in this town again, but for the past month and a half, that was exactly what he'd done.

Hiding in the shadows of rolling hillsides and wooded lanes, Wally had spent countless hours trying to discern patterns, timetables, and schedules of the three men that resided in the mansion atop 1007 Mountain Drive. It was tedious, time consuming, maddening work that in the end was a complex theorem he could not solve. Batman simply didn't have set work hours.

Sometimes the Bat Signal would shine in the dark Gotham sky and he'd be nowhere to be found, other times police radios would be silent and the Batmobile would come roaring out of the cave for no apparent reason. Alfred very rarely left the grounds other to do weekly shopping, and Dick seemed to share time equally and unpredictably between the Manor, the City, Gotham Academy, and Mt. Justice.

So much of Wally's next mission hinged on a period of time when all three of its occupants would temporarily vacate the premises, and through all his observations so far that seemed like a scenario that was not likely to happen, and that was a problem.

Wally stretched with a yawn as he rose from the bed. Across the room on his mirror his acceptance letter from Stanford hung proudly. It seemed so stupid to be worrying about something as trivial as college right now, not with all the weight and responsibility he carried, but hopefully one day soon this mission would end, and if successful then what?

He couldn't stay Kid Flash forever nor would he want to, especially after everything he'd been through. Life, death, and life again had a tendency to change a person's perspective.

Realistically how could he spend the next five years lying to his friends and family? How could he stand idly by and watch people suffer and die if he had the ability and foresight to prevent it?

Could he really stand next to Dick and Kaldur and offer his condolences as they lay to rest a
brother, a love? Could he look Tula, Jason Todd, and Ted Kord in the eyes; people he would one day share a memorial with and stay silent, knowing he could have saved each and every one of them?

On the flip side how long could he continue tampering with something as delicate as time? How could he risk a fragile and uncertain future by continuing to play God? Who gave him that right? Every action has a consequence, an equal and opposite reaction, and there was just no way humanly possible to see them all. He was barely holding it all together as it was.

His reasons for walking away from the game this time would be much different than before God willing, but regardless the further he got away from the mantle of Kid Flash the better.

The speedster opened his closet, pulling out his clothes for the day, when he caught site of the frosty decoration that adorned the outside of his window. It was snow. That's when it hit him.

Oh hell...

The Ice Fortresses, Perdita...his birthday.

Wally stood in disbelief. It was his birthday. How could he have forgotten? With all that was going on it would be easy to let slip the little things, but a national holiday like his birthday, that was unthinkable. Undoubtedly right now his mother was making a special birthday breakfast while his dad would once again try to coax him into finally getting his driver's license, but all of that paled in comparison to what he might be doing this afternoon, he'd be saving a Queen. Nothing was certain anymore, but if events played out as before, he had a long day ahead.

His first time turning seventeen had begun as a day of disappointments. He'd discovered the girl he liked was already spoken for, been forced to miss the first Justice League/Team team-up, his surprise birthday party had been cancelled, and he'd been sent speeding across country like some glorified delivery boy.

Looking back now, this may have been one of the most important moments of his life. In a matter of 2,852.2 miles he'd been forced to grow up a lot, moving pass his own selfishness and desires, and realizing the true blessing of being a hero wasn't the action or the glory, but that every single life mattered. Putting on the yellow and red wasn't just about fighting against supervillains, it was about fighting for everyone, and if he could make a difference in just one life, there was no mission out there too big or too small.
It didn't much matter that this particular mission held little purpose towards his overall goal, a country's monarchy hung in the balance, and a little girl who would one day grow to become a wise and compassionate leader needed saving. There were worse ways to spend a birthday.

Technically Count Vertigo wasn't part of the Light, and more than likely would have been just as satisfied ruling Vlatava with an iron fist as opposed to getting into bed with Savage and Luthor, but taking him out of the equation was still the smartest move. Sending his ass to Belle Reve, not once but twice, would be the icing on his proverbial birthday cake.

"Morning pal," his dad spoke through the crack in the door. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks dad," the red head smiled.

"How does it feel to be seventeen?"

_A lot like twenty-two he wanted to say._

"So far so good I guess?"

"Well hustle up. Breakfast's just about ready. You're mom's made enough to feed an army."

"Let me hop in the shower and I'll be right down."

"I'll try to leave you some," Rudy teased. Big appetites regardless of hyper accelerated metabolisms were hereditary in the West household; his father's waist line was proof of that.

Wally's muscles eased as he stood in the hot rinse of the shower. It had been two weeks since the global event with Klarion, and during that brief break, his leg had finally healed and his arm hopefully soon to follow. With the amount of accumulation on his front lawn, he didn't even have to turn on the television to know that school had been cancelled. It would have actually been kind of fun to sneak into the news station his aunt Iris worked for and watch the bewildered weatherman try to figure out as to why. Flying ice fortresses were probably not something they covered in their meteorology classes.
When Wally finally entered the kitchen he realized his dad hadn't been exaggerating. Layers of pancakes filled two plates, sausage, scrambled eggs, cinnamon toast...the works. It had taken a little financial restructuring to adjust to their son's hyperactive metabolism and constant need for high caloric intake. In layman terms, he was eating them out of house and home, but the Wests had always been smart with their money, and if tightening their belt a little here and there kept their superhero son fueled up to save the world, it was a small price to pay.

Mary West laid out the first round of pancakes on Wally's plate. "You just missed it dear; your Aunt Iris wished you happy birthday on Good Morning Central City."

"Oh that's sooo cool."

"You know what else might be cool is if you let me take you down to the DMV and finally get your license. One of these days it might come in handy for things like…I don't know…say Homecoming or Prom."

Wally rolled his eyes. There it was again. School dances had been something of a sore subject in the past. Despite his status as the fastest teen alive, Wally wasn't exactly what you'd call…popular. Sure he was involved with just about any and every academic club offered at Keystone High, but when it came to a social life, whatever free time he had left was dedicated to his uncle or a certain Team in the northeast. All his parents ever wanted was just once for him to have a normal high school experience besides academics. Education was important, but ten years from now they wanted Wally to have some fond memories to look back on.

The first time around in this timeline, he'd actually convinced his reluctant archer girlfriend to go to Prom; only to see the night abruptly cancelled by a mission to South America. To a family where money was tight, losing out on his tuxedo deposit had not gone over well.

"The Park girl down the street seems nice, maybe you could ask her?"

Wally sighed and took a huge bite of his syrup drowned pancakes. The Parks had moved into the neighborhood just a few months ago and as always the Wests had been the first on the street to welcome them. Their daughter Linda was shy, painfully so at times, and on the occasions where the two teens would meet on the street, at neighborhood block parties, or just bumping into each other between classes, the quiet but sweet girl and the constantly distracted speedster rarely had anything to say. Nothing would make his mother happier than to see her son actually go out with someone normal, and maybe if things were a little different he might have, but right now girls and school dances were this last things he needed to worry about.
"Well it would be nice to have at least one dance picture for the mantle. Some of our friends are beginning to think our son is some kind of weird recluse."

"Mom I have literally been around the world three times," he deadpanned.

"I'll make sure I mention that at the next cookout," Rudy chuckled as he gathered the collection of plates, making his way to the dishwasher.

"Guys, me and dances just don't mix. Let's be real, red hair and freckles? Girls are not exactly kicking down my door."

"Honey you're very handsome, don't think that. There's someone out there for you."

There once was he sighed. Bringing up my grades, find a date to homecoming, and save the world. No pressure.

After breakfast, as with all of Wally's birthdays, tradition brought out baby pictures and photo albums. Years later the speedster would finally scan them all in and put them in the cloud, but regardless these specific albums were special, taken out at different milestones of their young son's life. It crushed Wally to think of his parents turning those pages and crying after his funeral, lamenting over a life too short. Never getting to see their son graduate college, or find his dream job, get married and have kids one day, or just grow old and be happy like them.

It was then he realized what a blessing it was to have his parents back, no longer devastated at the thought of their violent deaths after Central and Keystone were turned to a cinder. Of all his teammates he was the only one who had a normal family, and by proxy became a surrogate one to Dick, Conner, and even Artemis. They loved the archer and she loved them. They knew Wally had struck gold when he found her, and hoped one day she'd become family. Unfortunately this time around it just wasn't in the cards.

Later that morning Wally sat in his dad's recliner with belly full and eyes hooded. The mission to Seattle was still a few hours away, and besides Batman would send out a call when it was time to gather the team, until then he was just going to slowly drift away and let the world solve its own problems for a few. Of course that reprieve didn't last long.

"Honey your uncle Barry's on the phone, he's wondering when you're coming to the cave for the thing? What does he mean?"
Oh crap

"I gotta run. Thanks for breakfast mom, it was delicious."

"Is everything ok dear?"

"I'm late for my surprise party!"

Rudy smiled. "Next time you're in class, maybe ask your teacher the definition of surprise."

Wally skidded to a stop in front of the old warehouse district of Central City. The snow was really beginning to pile up and his uniform and friction resistant boots with the good traction where currently hanging in his room at the cave, until then it would be slip slide city.

The surprise party had been his idea, practically making out a wish list months earlier to give the team plenty of time to prepare; which included his favorite ice cream, at least two cakes, iTunes gift cards, and of course a kiss from Ms. Martian was heavily implied. Wally winced at the memory of his desperation, and actually smiled at the satisfaction Artemis took at bursting his bubble. In the years that followed it became a running joke as well as a tradition that on every birthday Megan would grant that kiss, just the platonic kind, and then Wally would spend the rest of the day dodging Conner when he offered his.

"Ok, just act normal," he said to himself, taking a calming breath as he approached the scanner.

Recognize Kid Flash B0-3

He closed his eyes in anticipation of the blinding light of the transport system, when the computer voice abruptly declined the request.

Zeta Tube network off-line due to extreme atmospheric conditions.
Standing there alone, snow melting of his body like hot butter, insulated uniform hundreds of miles away, the speedster looked to the sky, to God, to the unseen ice fortresses, or just the random birds flying above and shook his head.

*You are shitting me*

**xxx**

It was nearly a total whiteout by the time the speedster arrived in Rhode Island, his sneakers nearly in pieces. Needless to say he hadn't dressed for the occasion, and between the superheating of the soles of his shoes during the run and the ice and snow they traveled across, it had been a miracle they'd survived this long.

Despite having witnessed it once before, the electric bursts of atmospheric fire bolts reflecting off the crystalline structures of the thunder snowstorm was really a sight to behold. It was eerie how similar it was to his last moments on earth before his molecules were swept away in a wave of kinetic energy. The mere memory of it sent chills up his spine.

He skidded to a stop on the shores of Mt Justice, almost in the exact location where he, Bruce and Terry had begun this journey, right before a young Helena Bertinelli had sent them ducking for cover under a barrage of rifle fire. Looking back, or forward he supposed, it all seemed like a dream, his imagination running wild in the middle of the night as he slept.

It was beyond surreal watching heroes he'd known and worshiped his entire life, chatting and joking in a place that years from now they'd be fighting to the death in, or sitting in a room with a young and vibrant Dinah Lance when his last memories of her were as an elderly woman being crushed to death in Micron's grip.

In just a few short years from now Terry McGinnis would soon be brought into this world kicking and screaming, completely oblivious that one day he would grow up to inherit the mantle of the Dark Knight. Would any of that hold true now with all the alterations Wally had shaped? Would there still be a Terry McGinnis. Would Jason Todd or Tim Drake now inherit that role? Would there even be a Bart Allen?

It was moments like these when the magnitude and scope of this mission threatened to overwhelm him. It seemed as if no matter which way he turned, someone's future would be irrevocably changed forever, it didn't matter if that was the point of it or not.
As selfish as it sounded, the millions of lives that hung in the balance had no face, no connection to him; it was the people he'd known and loved that affected him the most right now. They were the ones at times that made him doubt his every move.

It wouldn't matter if he was seventeen or twenty-two, no one should have to carry this kind of burden alone, especially some rusty retired hero who'd left the life behind for a more normal one.

"Normal," he chuckled to himself. He'd given up normal the moment he'd decided to bathe himself in a mixture of electrified chemical compounds, but no matter the situation he now found himself in, it was still better than having no life at all.

As he approached the heavy iron ice coated emergency door his thigh throbbed. His leg had fully healed, the muscles inside weaved together, his skin barely showing a scar, but he could still feel Sportsmaster's blade piercing the bone, he could still see the blood exploding from the wound. He could feel every mile he'd logged, and now having run halfway across county to reach this place, he was about turn around and do it all again, plus some.

Entering into the cave Wally found the lounge empty, party supplies and streamers hanging from the ceiling, the number seventeen draped across the far wall. On the kitchen table sat a collection of brightly wrapped presents and two cakes, white with strawberry frosting, his favorite.

"God bless you Megs," he sighed, running his finger through the frosting and licking it off.

Down the hall he could hear Batman's deep baritone reverberating from the mission room, announcing to the Team their upcoming assignments. It was to be the first official Justice League/Team team-up, the two units finally fighting side by side. He clearly recalled the excitement, the energy flowing through the room, so thick you could cut it with a knife. He remembered the rush of adrenaline for the moment they'd all been dreaming of, then the crushing disappointment of finding out he wasn't invited to this particular party.

As he stepped in the doorway, the Team was already dressed in their polar stealth, watching the view screen as Batman handed out there assignments and mission parameters.

Robin turned upon his approach, a sly smirk etched across his face. Under his breath he murmured "Only you would be late to your own surprise birthday."

"Don't get me started," Wally grumbled.
"Pack your gear," the Dark Knight concluded. "Departure in ten minutes." Batman paused for a moment, catching sight of the tardy speedster. "Kid Flash a moment."

And there it was.

Wally walked up to the view screen, the towering image of Batman staring down upon him.

"A young girl in Seattle is in desperate need of a heart transplant. With all conventional air traffic grounded by the storm, you'll need to pick up the donor heart in Boston and run it three thousand miles across country."

Wally nodded, showing neither surprise nor discouragement, only determination. One life at a time. That was the mission.

"Ok," he sighed, "packing up now."

"Good luck. Batman out."

"Yeah you too," Wally frowned once the screen went dark, hiding his disappointment. There had still been a fleeting hope inside him that perhaps the streams of time had been altered enough to spare him this trip, but the thought of a defenseless young girl fighting for her life quickly dashed that desire. He reached down, pushing his palm into his thigh, massaging away the soreness.

"Time to go Wall-man." he sighed to himself.

In the locker room the team gathered their gear; extra armaments, first aid kits, and emergency supplies, as Wally stood at his, packing his pantries with energy bars and electrolyte fluid replacement pouches.

Robin walked to his side. "Dude I'm sorry."

"Hey," Wally shrugged, "it is what it is."
"Kind of a lousy birthday party," Dick frowned.

Wally chuckled. "No worries, I'll just plan a better one next year. Now quit worrying about it and stay focused. This is going to be epic."

"I know, I'm just bummed you're not going to be there."

"Who knows? If I make good time maybe we'll still be able to hook up."

"It is time," Aqualad's voice echoed out from the intercom.

"You guys be careful up there ok?"

"Yeah, you too." Robin replied, latching up his utility belt and leaving the room.

Wally sighed, grabbing the rest of his food stocks when he felt a hand rest on his shoulder.

"I'm uh…sorry about your birthday," the archer said sadly.

"Don't worry about it; I'll be seventeen all year. Just do me a favor and don't fall off the damn thing ok? I hear the first steps a doozy."

"You're such a dork."

"So I've heard," Wally smiled in reply.

"I gotta go. Stay safe Wally."

"Right," he laughed. "What could go wrong?"
The speedster arrived at Boston General ten minutes later, packing up the heart and locking in the coordinates of the hospital in Seattle into his GPS.

"Now listen, this pack is heavily insulated for shock absorption, but that doesn't mean the organ within needs any extraneous jostling."

Wally's brow furrowed in annoyance. "No kidding."

"You have four hours to deliver the heart before it's no longer viable. Is that clear?"

"As crystal," he replied, sparing the Indian doctor the rest of his cheesy pick-up line this time around, turning towards the open streets and vanishing in a contrail of lightning and snow. Even with his insulated boots, his feet still felt the cold creeping in, but he'd have to suck it up, he had a long road ahead of him.

In retrospect, Wally thought it kind of wasteful for the Light to go to so much trouble and effort to appease just one monarch in waiting. Perhaps they'd always had bigger plans for Vlatava than Vertigo could have considered. He might have ended up King, but that didn't mean he would rule. What was the saying? No honor among thieves.

To accomplish all this, they'd had to coordinate with Hugo Strange for the release and re-admittance of five ice villains without anyone noticing. Each fortress had to cost along the lines of a billion dollars, and then to watch that investment come crashing out of the sky, that was some serious cash to light on fire just to slow down a speedster. Morosely it would have been cheaper and ultimately more successful to just hire a hit squad to rush the hospital and take Perdita out, but for Vertigo to ascend to the throne it would have to look like an accident or natural causes. Wally's was determined it was going to be neither.

He was past the piles ups and abandoned cars outside Chicago an hour later, with nothing but slick highways and wide open spaces ahead.

Staying on this course, Chicago to Seattle was easily thirty hours at conventional speeds; he had to make it within three. Law enforcement from across the country had been clearing the route, but he was about to make a slight detour, and that's where things were about to get tricky.
"Rapid City Highway Patrol's Office, Corporal Bennington speaking, how can I assist you?"

The young officer sat behind her desk, her finger mindlessly twisting her curly blonde hair, inanely bored. Rapid City was a pit stop for travelers, a place nowhere special on the way to everywhere special. The city was shut down in a blanket of snow, and their office had been flooded all night with calls ranging from cable outages to lost pets. What she would give for just a moment of excitement, something truly out of the ordinary.

Across the room, Sargent Eller sat with his feet on the desk, newspaper draped across his knees as he ate his Super Sonic Cheeseburger with everything, cursing as a little dab of ketchup dripped down onto his khaki uniform shirt. He was still five hours from end of watch and angrily waiting for someone to dare call in sick. He'd already pulled a double when the snowstorm hit, and he'd be damned if he was going to pull another.

The young officer stuck a finger in her opposite ear, trying to make out the caller's voice from the violent background noises radiating on other end of the line. It sounded like someone calling from inside a jet engine.

"Sir I can barely hear you?" she repeated. "Can you close your window or maybe step inside somewhere?"

"Sir?"

"Kid who?"

Eller grumbled, putting down his paper and wiping his grease covered hands on his napkin, storming over to the younger officer's desk and trying to figure out what was so god-damn hard to understand.

"Damnit Bennington, what the hell's going on?"

"Sir I can barely hear this guy, but I swear he said he was… Kid Flash and he was…"
Eller angrily snatched the phone from the rookie officer's grasp. "Jesus, how green are you?" he snapped.

There was five feet of snow outside, and kids were trapped inside and bored. How was she ever going to be responsible enough to have her own patrol car if she was that damn gullible to fall for an obvious prank call.

"This is staff Sargent Donald Eller, what is your emergency?!" he demanded sharply.

His eyes sent daggers through his subordinate as he shook his head in disgust, jerking his hand in a very obscene and unappreciated manner as the caller continued his charade.

"Now you listen here you little punk…"

Suddenly the office began to shake.

"…calling in a false reports is a misdemeanor, punishable by eleven months and twenty days days in jail!…"

The shaking within the room grew stronger, and outside it sounded as if a freight train was coming down Main Street. Bennington slowly stepped away from her raging boss, kneeling down and tucking herself under one of the empty desks across from hers.

"Yeah I'm looking at the number right now; you damn well better believe I'll trace the call. Just because it's says Justice….What the hell do you mean duck?!

Pictures and frames suddenly came crashing down from the wall as lightning shot through the center of town, blowing out windows as waves of wet snow came crashing in, sending the older man diving for cover.

As the shaking subsided, both officers rushed outside to see the speedster blazing out of town towards the on-ramp to I-90 and vanishing just as quickly into the frozen horizon.

The younger officer looked over at her snow covered superior shaking her head in amusement.
"I'm going to go ahead and radio up north to the units on Highway 12 and tell them to cancel the BOLO. Then I'm going to lunch."

As she walked back inside he heard her murmur, "Green my ass."

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Standing atop of the Beaver Creek Bridge, looking out over Highway 87, Vandal Savage was vexed. In the distance he could see the red light of the State Troopers cars go dim as they drove away, no longer required to remain at their posts.

For the last four hours, three officers had cordoned of the area, directing oncoming traffic towards the designated detours, waiting for the impending arrival of a certain hero on an errand of mercy. Savage had been notified once this speedster had left Chicago, stationing himself on the most direct route to the west. Any other course towards Washington State would require navigating streets and highways, time consuming detours when time was of the essence. The logic behind the change of travel route made no sense, unless the speedster had been tipped off somehow.

Savage took out his pocket watch, checking the time as his mind raced ahead. A number of the Light and their operatives had been apprehended under questionable circumstances; Sportmaster and the Riddler being the latest. With Klarion and the Brain no longer available to him, Savage had to consider that perhaps he too had a mole within his organization. Perhaps someone wasn't satisfied with the direction he was leading them, but he couldn't make his concerns known, not yet at least. For now he would wait and see which direction the proverbial wind blew. He'd waited centuries for this plan to come to fruition, a little more wouldn't hurt.

Vandal took out his phone, dialing a burner phone whose owner most likely had been anxiously awaiting his call. He would not be happy.

"There's been a change of plans…"

xxx

Kid Flash slid to a stop in front of the main entrance of the Seattle Medical Center, completely out of breath but with fist's clenched, ready to strike. Waiting there was a man wearing hospital scrubs pacing back and forth anxiously in front of the sliding glass doors, just like last time.
Wally had no intention of getting duped again, reaching out and grabbing the man roughly by the collar, spinning him around with fists raised to discover it was not the person he'd been expecting.

Dr. Pieter Cross, the chief cardiac surgeon's eyes grew wide as red gloves grabbed his I.D. badge comparing names and faces.

"What in the..." he stammered

'Sorry Doc," Wally replied, straightening the man's collar, "can't be too careful. Precious cargo you know."

"Absolutely. You've arrived much earlier than we expected."

"Well it's not every day you get to save a Queen."

Cross looked at him curiously. "How did you know who this was for? HIPPA regulations clearly state..."

"Doc," Wally interrupted, "this is Batman we're taking about. He probably knows her height, weight, blood type, and favorite ice cream. How about we skip this part and fast forward to you heading upstairs and tinkering with her ticker."

"Yes, of course. My team will take it up pre-op immediately. You look exhausted. Why don't you come inside and I'll have someone..."

"I think I want to deliver this one personally if you don't mind doc. I just ran three thousand miles; a couple extra steps won't kill me."

"As you wish, but we must hurry."

Wally smiled. "Hurry is practically my middle name."

xxx
With the package safely in the hands of the transplant team, the speedster finally took a breath and sat down. This mission wasn't over, not by a long shot. The Queen's security detail was good, but he was better. By now Count Vertigo's henchmen surely had discovered he'd already arrived, and they just be preparing their next move. The speedster needed to do the same.

By pushing himself a little harder as well as taking a few strategic back roads, cornfields, and skirting the edge of Yellowstone National Park, he'd shaved off about forty-five minutes. His cupboards were empty, but a few dozen doughnuts from the nurse's lounge had done the trick. Eventually he'd need something with a little more substance, but it was better than fighting on an empty stomach.

Wally gingerly rose from the couch, his body stiff and his feet and legs aching. In a darkened hallway he reached out to the logo on his chest, activating its stealth mode. Bright yellow had an annoying tendency to stand out and ruin the element of surprise, and right now he needed to blend. In his weakened state he'd need all the help he could get. Ahead he could see the main elevators as well as the emergency stairs. The moment someone stepped out of them without the proper credentials, he was going to slam into them like a freight train. He'd come too far to let the Count fuck it all up now.

Two hours into the surgery, Wally's eyes began to get heavy. The adrenaline and sugar long since burned off, and he desperately needed some protein to balance out, but the moment he left his post would be the moment Vertigo would make his move, he could feel it.

Down the hall, the Queen's security detail stood at the ready, while her personal bodyguards waited inside, feet away from the operating room doors. They'd even stopped him and demanded his I.D. and Wally doubted a learner's permit from Keystone City, Kansas would do the trick, but the surgeons had vouched for him and the guards had finally allowed him to pass.

From a distance Perdita had looked so pale, so weak, but not scared. She was probably one of the bravest girls he'd ever met, and even years after the surgery the two had kept in touch. It was kind of cool to have a Queen on speed dial. Wally fought to keep his eyes open as the doctors passed hour number nine of the transplant, and so far everything seemed to be going well. Nurses would come out from time to time and give updates to the extended family collectively pacing the hallways, and after these meetings everyone seemed to be in good spirits, so that was promising.

The speedster wasn't a coffee drinker by nature, he and caffeine didn't always get along, but he needed something soon. The miles and the hours had finally caught up with him.

Wally considered for a moment that perhaps Vertigo had decided to abort his plans. The State Department had kept the surgery, as was as the Queen's arrival in the States, very hush hush, but with the suits that came by every few hours talking with the Queen's staff, the Count had to have
known there were extra eyes all around.

Speaking of eyes, Wally set his timer and decided to close his for a few. The speedster didn't believe in power naps, but it would have to do for now, because he was either going to sleep for a couple of minutes or throw up. His uniform had become a bit gamey, with slick sweat forming in places he'd rather they not. Fashion didn't exactly matter at this point, but a yellow cowl and hospital scrubs wasn't a good look on anybody. Secret identities could be such a pain in the ass sometimes. He finally lay down on the uncomfortable hospital bench and let the sandman do his thing.

His watch continued to vibrate as his eyes suddenly jerked open, frantically looking at his wrist to see the digital display reading 4:37. He'd been asleep for over an hour.

*Shit!*

He quickly jumped from the couch, his dehydration and the subsequent dizziness giving him fits. He should have asked for an IV, but the thought of a needle didn't sit well. He'd seen enough of his blood as it was.

Peeking around the corner, the main hallway was quiet and still, too quiet actually. He rounded the corner to find several of the royal staff sprawled out in the lobby. Not alarming in of itself, until he saw the security staff in the same condition.

*Fuck! Vertigo had made his move.*

He could hear screaming coming through the lobby as he burst into motion, praying to God he wasn't too late.

On the other side of the pre-op doors, the Queen's four personal body guards were on their knees, hands above their heads, muzzles of assault rifles resting at their temples. Panicked nurses and doctors ran through the hallways as gunman fired in the air indiscriminately, dispersing the terrified hospital staff. All the while Vertigo remained unseen. Wally gritted his teeth and sprang into action.

The henchman standing over the Queen's bodyguards watched helplessly as their rifles were quickly dissembled, several sets of fingers breaking in the process. At this speed Wally didn't have the time or inclination to be gentle.
Punches were thrown at the speed of sound, jaws were broken and teeth dislodged, all within the span of about ten seconds. By the time the forward gunman heard the cries behind, the speedster was already pin-balling down the hallway in their direction.

Wally immediately recognized the leader; the same man he'd foolishly handed the heart off to the all those years ago. He'd never forgotten the face of the man who'd pantsed him so royally the first time.

"Remember me scumbag?" Wally bellowed as he plowed into him, sending the three gunmen spiraling in all directions. Of course the answer was no, in this timeline the henchman had never faced the speedster until now, but Wally was going to make sure he made a good first impression.

Kid Flash held onto the man like a rabid dog, throwing punches wildly trying to knock Vertigo's goon unconscious. In the cramped hallway, his speed wasn't doing him much good, so he needed to end this as quickly as possible for the safety of the hospital staff as well as his own. The other two gunmen struggled to their feet just as a bevy of black suited bodyguards collapsed on them like a team of NFL linebackers. Wally turned back to see a fist coming in his direction that he had no chance of dodging, knocking the hero sideways, but there'd be no escape for any of them as the Queen's security team quickly subdued them.

The hulking head of the detail reached down, carefully pulling the speedster to his feet.

"Are you all right?"

"Forget about me! How's the Queen?" Wally exclaimed desperately.

"Her majesty is fine; she's resting peacefully in the recovery room. The terrorists never made it any further than this."

Wally let loose a long deep breath. Events had escalated much differently than the last time, and this had been a little too close for comfort. Flashes of the twins from Louisiana raced through his mind, and he couldn't have another innocent life weighing on his conscious.

"Can I stay with her, just to be safe."
The bodyguard looked down at him hesitantly for a few moments before finally nodding. It wasn't often he could add a superhero to his detail. The speedster had risked his life to protect the Queen, and the guard could tell by looking into his eyes he would do so again if need be.

"Come, we both will."

xxx

At approximately 6:39 Pacific Standard Time, Queen Perdita of Vlatava awoke as doctors and family members rushed to her side. She was groggy, weak, but smiling, thankful. She was quickly caught up to speed on the surgery, the attempt on her life, and her country, all the while her green eyes drifted around the room before locking onto another set as vibrant as hers sitting across from her.

Wally rose to feet, unsure if he should shake her hand, bow or curtsey; whatever the hell you were supposed to do in the presence of royalty.

"I understand I have you to thank."

"Naaah," Wally said sheepishly. "The donor's family and the doctors are the real heroes; I'm just the delivery boy."

"I've never met a superhero before." she smiled

"I've never met a Queen," he grinned in return.

There was just something about her he instantly liked. Maybe it was her grace, her humor, or the fact she looked so much like a younger version of a woman he'd once loved, but today, on the day of his birth, the best present he could have ever hoped for was the gift of seeing that little girl smile.

Wally glanced around the room; looking for the medical container he'd transported the heart in across country. There was no way he was going to leave without it; it was still the perfect souvenir for the perfect mission. Time still flowed in the direction it was supposed to, and for once a sense of optimism filled his heart. Maybe, just maybe, he could do this. He could actually fix the future. It was probably one of the happiest moments he'd had since returning.
When he looked back to Perdita, her expression suddenly changed from happiness to utter horror. Wally began to panic, fearing the worst. He called out for the doctors when suddenly he felt a slight twinge in his lower back followed seconds later by one in his front. The speedster looked down to see the blade of a sword sticking out his abdomen.

His knees give out as he sunk to the floor; doctor's and staff rushing in from all corners of the ward. The world seemed to slow as the room around him spun into a lethargic frenzy. Fragments of sounds and images floated past him in slow motion.

A gunshot.

Men in black rushing past him.

A white haired man taken to the ground bleeding

A queen crying.

Angels in white masks standing over him.

His body falling.

Wally looked down at the blood covered steel sticking out of him and for some odd reason began to laugh.

"Figures," he chuckled, as the darkness finally took him.

One of the biggest downsides of being a great detective oddly enough was an attribute most would consider a strength; you were always on.

A good investigator's mind has no off switch, no sleep mode, no time clock. Even when the day is over and the mission complete, the inquisitive mind races on.
All around him, the festivities continued in the cave as the Team celebrated the success of the mission. The five ice fortresses that had plagued North American had been disabled and the arctic weather front they'd created slowly beginning to dissipate.

Not all of them, but most of the team had spent years working side by side with their mentors; studying their craft, honing their skills, learning when to follow their mentor's lead, and when to follow their own gut. It takes patience, commitment, unselfishness, but most importantly it takes time.

The Team had barely been together five months. They were still raw in some areas, still trying to figure each other out let alone working within a bigger unit, but today they'd performed almost flawlessly. Even Batman had stated as much and he was never one to hand out platitudes without merit. Today had been a good day.

However instead of basking in the moment of a job well done, Dick's mind drifted back to his absent friend. Something was different, something just didn't feel right, and it hadn't for some time now. You could call it a gut feeling, a hunch, an intuition, but regardless of the label it troubled the young detective so much so that he'd already formulated several theories on the subject.

*The first* was the little things; the odd behavior, the lying about minor injuries, not returning calls or texts, seemingly avoiding all social situations. Months ago he and Wally were inseparable; spending hours locked in grueling and savage combat...on the PlayStation, or all night Netflix binges, but all of that came to a halt on a crisp day in Salem. Of all his dodginess, no subject had been more taboo than that of Dr. Fate.

Robin had tried just about every way possible to get Wally to open up about his time in the helmet. The jovial and carefree teen that had gone in had never come back out. Dick was no expert, but Wally displayed all the classic signs of PTSD, and even though Canary would never share anything about their therapy sessions, Robin got the distinct feeling she was a frustrated as he.

Dick tried to imagine himself in that situation, trapped inside that small golden prison until the day his body gave out and new host would be needed, discarded like an old coat, just like Kent Nelson.

For someone who needed to be in constant motion, that feeling of claustrophobia must have been suffocating, like landing on Mars and then having your helmet torn off. Facing your own mortally could irrevocably change a person, perhaps it already had.

*The second* was about the issue of his powers, his speed. He had not excelled in the velocity department as much as he and Flash had hoped. It wasn't as if breaking the speed of sound wasn't
impressive, but his acceleration had more or less plateaued, instead of increasing as he grew. At the pace he was on, he'd never come close to touching Barry's speed, and that had been a real blow to him. Despite his outgoing, and at times cocky nature, deep down Wally was very insecure, hiding behind the mask more to disguise his pain than his identity. With the recent discovery of one of his oldest friends being not only a mole, but a clone as well, maybe that had placed even more fear and doubts inside his already fragile psyche.

The third and final was perhaps the least conspiratorial but surprisingly the theory that troubled Dick the most. They were growing up and drifting apart.

As the saying goes, age was just a number; it always seemed so inconsequential when it came to fighting crime. He was Robin the Boy Wonder, emphasis on boy, but Batman had never made him feel anything less than his equal, his partner. Of his teammates Megan was nearly forty eight earth years old, Conner barely four months, with the rest of the team scattered in between. Specifically between he and Wally there was only two years difference, but those two years never seemed as distant as they did now, and Dick had long suspected why. Wally was leaving soon.

It's not to say that being a superhero was just some kind of phase, when it came to heroics the speedster was as brave as they came, it's just that's not all he wanted to be. Wally West was smart, insanely smart. Once Dick had even heard Bruce use the term genius level intellect. There were a lot of "geniuses" within the League, but none as young as Wally or with nearly the potential. He may have plateaued when it came to his powers, but with his I.Q. the sky was the limit. The speedster had been vague about his college plans, keeping things close to the vest, joking about auto diesel school and the like, but it hadn't taken much digging for Dick to discover the full ride to Stanford. That had been another secret his best pal hadn't shared.

Given the distance, the work load, the evasiveness, Robin could see the writing on the wall. He wanted to confront his best friend about it, but realized it wouldn't do any good anyway. It's not like the young detective wanted the speedster to give up his dreams, he just wished he could have been privy to them. The Team would go on without Kid Flash on the roster, but that didn't mean Wally West didn't have a place on the team. They were friends, family, and you didn't have to go on missions to be a hero.

Standing off to the side, watching both Team and League members talking and mingling, Robin barely noticed the young green skinned girl as she walked up next to him, handing off a piece of birthday cake.

"Wally's going to be so disappointed."

"Yeah," Dick said regretfully. "It was pretty awesome."
"Has anyone heard from him yet? Artemis asked, inserting herself into the conversation.

"Not that I know of. Knowing him, he's probably passed out on some couch somewhere with enough chicken whizzies stuffed in him to feed a third world county."

"Or striking out with some nurse," the archer replied with a devilish glint in her eye.

"I wouldn't put it past him," Dick chuckled. "The Zeta Tube's back online; he'll probably be here anytime now, waiting for us to all yell surprise again."

Suddenly the Martian palmed her forehead. "Oh no! The cake! Hello Megan. I better save him some!"

"I'd hurry," Robin laughed. "I think Captain Marvel's on his fifth piece."

"Captain!" the Martian exclaimed running off to snatch his plate.

Off to the side Barry Allen took in the proceedings with a smile. Outside of Wally and Dick, he really hadn't spent much time with the younger heroes. It wasn't personal, it was geographic. Central City was his home; it was where he lived, where he worked. On the occasions he was called out on town on business, the jewel of the mid-west was never far from his mind. It wasn't Gotham, but it had its own unique charm, its own rouges gallery, and he was as obsessed with protecting his city as the Dark Knight was his.

Barry was an everyman; personable, outgoing, honest. Instantly likable to his friends and colleagues, loved intently by his family, including a devoted and patient wife who remained astounded to this day, not by the fact her husband was superhero, but how the fastest man alive always ended up so late to just about every occasion.

When not on a mission with the League, Barry preferred to work alone. For a man who lived between the seconds, teaming up with an associate or taking on a partner just wasn't practical; it only slowed him down...literally. Unfortunately no one told that fact to Iris Allen's young nephew, and one electrically charged experiment later, the rest as they say, was history.
Wally's mind already worked at light speed even before he stole Barry's notes and recreated the accident. He was funny, cocky, sarcastic, and kept the elder speedster constantly on his toes, but most importantly he was family. Legacy was as important a factor to being a Flash as speed was, and suddenly for a man who never wanted the responsibility of a partner, he honestly couldn't imagine his life without one. That's how much Wally meant to him.

Barry was already on his way Ice Fortress Four when the news of the transplant came over the coms. Any other time that might have been his mission, but Wally was closer to Boston, and Batman played no favorites. He knew how disappointed his nephew was going to be missing out on the mission, but being a hero wasn't always action and adventure, sometimes it was a simple as one single life.

Barry would find a way to make it up to him, starting with the small device Flash had gift wrapped on the table, something Wally had been infatuated with since day one; a Flash ring. It wouldn't fit his more heavily insulated suits, but for just patrolling around Central and Keystone, it would be perfect.

As techy as the young speedster was, he was going to love this; that is if he would hurry and show up to his belated birthday party. The Zeta Tubes were back online, he should have been back by now.

"God Iris is right," Barry bemused. "We really are always late."

Getting back to the Team, the elder speedster had been nothing but impressed. Surprisingly, working with the younger heroes hadn't made him feel old; it had quite the opposite effect. He remembered the excitement of teaming up with his fellow heroes, the thrill and the rush. Of course they were all much older by then, but that didn't stop him from talking Iris's ear off when he got home, like some teenage girl after meeting her first crush.

These young men and women had been trained by the best, and if this was what the next generation of heroes had to offer, the future was in good hands. You couldn't be a hero forever.

The speedster walked over to the Dark Knight, nodding towards the team. "You remember feeling like that?"

"Quite honestly no," Batman replied, busying himself with the numerous news feeds coming in from across the country.
Barry sighed, why did he even ask? "Bruce you really are an old stick in the mud aren't you?"

Wayne just smiled in reply.

"So what's next?"

"Superman and the Lanterns will be returning to Earth shortly, after which they'll gather the remains of the ice fortresses and take them to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton for a joint investigation."

"Want some help?" Cut your time in half."

Bruce stroked his chin. "I might take you up on that, that is if you don't mind hanging out with an old stick in the mud," he said with a wry smile.

Barry laughed when the phone in his pocket began to buzz. He walked away from the celebratory commotion, looking at the caller i.d.

Washington State?

He had a great aunt Sue in Tacoma, but he hadn't talked to her in years; kind of odd timing for her to be reaching out now. He touched the answer key anyway.

"Hello?"

"May I speak to Mr. Allen?"

"Speaking."

"Mr. Allen, my name is Dr. Pieter Cross at Seattle Medical Center, your name has been listed as an emergency contact for a ..." he cleared his voice…"John Doe."
Barry looked at his phone oddly. "Sorry doc, I think you got the wrong guy."

Uncomfortably Cross began again. "Mr. Allen we take privacy regulations very seriously, but this John Doe asked for you specifically. He arrived at the hospital several hours ago on an...errand of mercy..."

"Look doc..."

"...carrying a harvested heart for transplant."

"Oh God." That's when it hit.

"What's happened?" Flash asked urgently. For Kid Flash to give out his uncle's civilian number, it had to be bad.

"This John Doe has suffered severe trauma to his lower back and abdomen. He's being prepped for exploratory surgery, but he's a minor and has listed you as his guardian. We'll need your verbal consent to operate."

Barry's mind shifted into overdrive, but the who's what's and how's would have to wait till later

"It's extremely urgent Mr. Allen, he's lost a great deal of blood."

"Do it! I'll be there as soon as I can."

"We'll begin immediately."

Barry hung up the phone, and in a blink of an eye was standing at the Zeta Tube entering in the transport code for Seattle, a burst of wind blowing through the room in his wake.

"Flash?" Batman questioned, but his words fell on deaf ears as nanoseconds later the speedster vanished inside a tunnel of light.
Barry Allen arrived at the hospital in less than five minutes, the slowest part of his journey being waiting for his molecules to solidify.

Dashing to the door, he quickly stowed away his uniform into his ring, entering into the building in his civilian attire.

Barry quickly reached the second floor pre-op lobby, swiftly heading for the door when a team of dark suited security personnel descended upon him like locust.

There were five of them, heavily armed under their black blazers, sporting a scowl on their faces that meant business. Barry could have easily brushed by them, sending the group flying in all directions, but not without risking his secret identity.

*Since when did hospitals start using Special Forces security teams,* he asked himself.

Barry turned to what appeared to be the man in charge.

"Excuse me, but I've got to get through there. My..."

"The Queen has ordered no one is to disturb the doctors while the patient is at risk."

"Queen? What are you talking about? My nephew's in there."

"This floor has been cleared by her majesty's decree, all except the patient; your nephew must be somewhere else in the hospital."

"Look!" Barry began to fume, barely keeping the lightning inside from bursting through his skin, "I don't give a damn who your queen is or whatever the hell she's decreed, Dr. Cross called me and..."
Suddenly breaking through the crowd of security, a tall African American doctor made his way to the front.

"This is the patient's legal guardian; he needs to be allowed back."

"My apologies," the hulking blonde guard replied. "I will escort him back."

"That's really not necessary..."

"I will escort him back," he repeated politely but firmly. "It is not a request."

The doctor nodded, taking Barry by the arm and leading him through the double doors as the chief of security fell quickly behind.

The speedster gritted his teeth as they made their way down the labyrinth of hallways, every few feet more men in black standing at the ready.

"That's a lot of security for just one Queen." Barry inserted in vexation.

"Oh these men aren't for her; she's ordered them to stand guard over the patient. She's very protective of the man that saved her life."

It was then that Barry realized exactly who the patient was.

Pushing into the operating room, Wally lay on the table, his blood soaked uniform discarded in the corner. Two nurses ran to the blonde man's side, placing a mask around his face and sterile gloves on his hands to prevent infection.

The doctor turned to the elder speedster. "I assure you his identity is safe. He's only used his first name, and the Vlatavan security forces have made it clear that it is not to be repeated. Very clear. We're about to put him under, but he wanted to speak with you first. I can give you a minute, nothing more."
"Understood," Barry replied as the surgical team stood to the side allowing uncle and nephew a moment alone. The speedster reached down, placing his hand on sweat soaked red hair as Wally looked up.

"He kid."

"Hey Uncle B," he said weakly. "I really screwed the pooch this time."

"It's going to be all right, you're in good hands. I'll call your folks and..."

"No!" Wally yelled, loud enough to catch the room's attention. "Barry you can't," he said quieter.

"Wally..."

"Barry they can't know. You got to promise me. Doc says it's not as bad as it looks, but you can't tell them. When I get out I will. I promise."

"Kid..." Barry replied hesitantly.

"You keep things from Aunt Iris all the time so she won't worry; I need you to keep this one for me. Promise me Barry."

Dr. Cross came forward. "It's time."

"Promise me Barry," Wally demanded as the sedatives began to kick in and his eyes began to flutter.

Beneath the surgical mask Barry nodded, for the first time regretting that Wally had ever discovered his notes, that he'd become Kid Flash, that he's become his partner. Life was too precious, especially his nephew's.
Back in the cave, the team had finally cleaned up after the party, the guest of honor regretfully deciding not to show. The adrenaline rush had finally ebbed away, and the young heroes were beginning to feel the aster. Bumps and bruises that they'd ignored in the heat of battle had begun to ache, and the siren song of the sandman was calling them to bed.

Robin was frustrated; Artemis and the others could see it in his eyes despite being hidden behind the Oakley's. It was just another event that Wally had bailed on, a party he'd practically thrown for himself. It wasn't just Dick who'd noticed the separation, Artemis had too. She knew something was wrong, that the two once inseparable friends had suddenly grown apart, and by the look on her teammate's face, she knew it wasn't his choice.

Wally West had become something of a puzzle to her. He looked different, he acted different. Something had happened to him inside that helmet, and as selfish and shallow as it was to say out loud, she liked who'd come back out. But still as someone hiding as many secrets inside as she did, the archer couldn't shake the feeling that maybe he was too.

"Team report to the briefing room immediately," Batman's man voice echoed from the intercom.

"You've got to be kidding me," Conner grumbled, rubbing away at weary eyes.

The Team trudged into the conference room, praying to the heavens that there wasn't another mission; they'd not even recovered from the last one, but no one ever said being a hero was easy.

"Sit down."

The young heroes turned to each other in bewilderment, Batman never said sit down. Somberly the Dark Knight approached the table.

"There's been an incident in Seattle."

"Isn't there where Wally is?" M'gann interrupted.

"During Kid Flash's mission for the Queen..."
"Wait what? Queen? What are you talking about?" Robin asked perturbed.

"The transplant patient was Queen Perdita of Vlatava. During the course of her surgery an attempt was made on her life."

"Is she all right?" Kaldur asked.

"The Queen is alert and resting comfortably..."

Artemis's heart began to sink; she could see where this was heading. "What about Wally?"

Batman took a breath. "He was injured while protecting the Queen from an attempted murder plot by a member of the Vlatavan Royal family, namely Count Vertigo."

"Vertigo is her uncle?" Zatanna questioned.

"What about Wally?!" Artemis repeated with venom.

"He suffered trauma to his lower back and abdomen."

"Trauma?"

"Impaled by the Count's sword during the struggle. Flash just notified me he's out surgery. The surgeons are telling him the operation went well and his prognosis is good. They believe he'll make a full recovery."

The Team stood in stunned silence until Conner growled "Where's Vertigo?"

"He and his men are currently in custody, but proving Regicide in a court of law will be difficult, and as of now his diplomatic immunity is preventing him from being formally charged in the States."
"You're freaking kidding me?" Artemis growled. "He nearly kills Wally and he just gets to walk?"

"Flash is getting assurances from the Royal Family that Vertigo will be taken care of when they return to Vlatava. For now the State Department has put a lid on this so it doesn't become an international incident."

"Then we should go to provide support." Kaldur asserted to nods around the room, as the Team began to rise from the table.

"No."

Robin, along with the rest of the gathered looked to the Dark Knight in confusion. "What do you mean no?"

"Kid Flash is in stable condition, but Flash has asked for privacy during this time and we will honor his request. The Queen's security team has locked down the ward and not allowing visitors, including State Department personnel, which is not going over well. For such a young queen, Perdita carries a lot of power and influence. Green Arrow and Black Canary are on their way to covertly provide backup to law enforcement as they transfer custody of Vertigo and his men to Vlatavan security. The last thing that's needed is to add more timber to an already combustible situation."

Dick raised his arms in frustration. "It's not like we're going to storm the place in uniform. He's our friend, he shouldn't be sitting alone is some hospital room while we're…"

"The answer is no. Consider it an order. As soon as I have more information I will let you know."

"Batman…"

The Dark Knight sighed, sympathetic to their concerns. "It's not ideal I understand. The League is as concerned as you are, but Flash is with him and he's in good hands. Let's allow him a night's rest and revisit it in the morning. I'll contact Flash then and see if some kind of visitation can be set up, but until then…sit…tight."
Batman left the conference room, followed behind by the disheartened young heroes.

"Sit tight," Kaldur replied disgusted, "while our friend fights for his life."

Zatanna grimaced a little, hating to be cast in the role of the voice of reason. "He did say Wally was out of the woods. Maybe he's right and we should give everything a night to cool off."

"That's not the point." Artemis snapped at her friend. "If it was one of us you know he'd be there."

Robin stood silently away from the debate, carefully weighing all the information. Of course Bruce was right; the Team wasn't exactly famous for its subtlety. The League had learned that the very first day when four teens stood in the rubble of what was just hours earlier Cadmus Labs.

In addition he really didn't feel like getting into the semantics of the speedster's physiology with everyone, but with the Wally's accelerated healing ability, he would be recuperating faster than most, and rest would speed along the process.

"Look Zee's right. The doctors make it sound like he's gonna be fine and if Flash says he needs rest, he's there and we're not. We'll know more in the morning, and as lame as it sounds we do have school tomorrow. I'll get a hold of Flash myself and text you all whatever I hear ok?"

He was met with tired eyes and yawns as they all reluctantly agreed and gathered their gear, some heading to bed, other's to the Zeta and their respective cities.

The archer was the last to leave, staring blankly at the transport panel before turning back to the Boy Wonder.

"Anything. If you hear anything at all…"

"You'll be the first to know."

Artemis nodded, punching in the code for Gotham, waiting for the computer to verify her identity.
"If I didn't know better, I'd think you might be a little fond of the guy."

The archer turned back to him with a frown. "Don't be an idiot."

Once the transport sequence was complete, Dick and Kaldur were finally alone. As the room grew silent, Kadlur looked down, smirking at his young friend.

"You are going I assume?"

"Well duh," Dick grinned

xxx

Cloudless moonlight crept into dark cramped hospital room as Barry Allen silently stepped out, assured that his nephew was finally asleep.

He walked down the sterile smelling hallway towards the coffee machine, receiving respectful nods from the numerous teams of Vlatavan security that swept the floor every few minutes.

Earlier that evening, he and his nephew had caught an unfortunate case of the church giggles at the thought of the young red head, decked out in some overly theatrical version of his uniform, kneeling down to receive some kind of knighthood from the Queen.

"Sir Kid of Flash?" Barry suggested.

"Oh no," Wally shook his head. "Sir Wallace of West definitely."

The red head grimaced, holding his belly as he and his uncle shared a laugh, but the mood was much darker now as Barry stepped outside to prepare his lie. The State Department and SMC staff and kept things quiet as promised, and no word of a queen, a count, or a speedster had been leaked to the press. For such a young girl, Queen Perdita carried a lot of clout.

In celebration of his birthday and a job well done, Barry would be calling Iris and Mary, telling them the two heroes would be staying the night and taking in a Mariner's double header the next
day.

"Since when are you two baseball fans?"

Barry could already hear his wife accusatory tone, but he could play dumb with the best of them when he needed to. He despised lying, but a promise was a promise, and Wally was right, he'd told a few whoopers of his own to spare his wife the worry. Wally should be awarded the same courtesy.

It wouldn't have even been an option if the surgery hadn't gone as well as it had, but the bleeding had stopped hours ago, and the incision was already looking like it was several days old.

In the end, the young speedster had lost a small section of his intestines along with his appendix. It sounded horrifying when said out loud, but all things considered he was very lucky. Once the situation calmed down and the time was right he'd make sure Wally told his parents. or his days as partners might be at risk. Blackmail worked both ways.

In the darkness of his room, Wally barely stirred, not quite asleep but somewhere in the blissful state of twilight between. It had taken nearly four times the pain meds to keep him sedated before the doctors finally found the right mix to counter his accelerated metabolism.

His eyes were heavy, his mind drifting in a slow moving dreamscape, as memories of a different time took him on a blissful journey.

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The foursome slowly made their way up the steep outside stairs of the two story craftsman, as the red head fumbled with his keys before dramatically opening the door.

"And here it is," Wally said proudly, allowing his guests entrance into he and Artemis's apartment."

"Nice huh?"
"Cozy," Dick chuckled, a veiled dig at its tight quarters.

"It's perfect," Zatanna smiled, smacking Dick across the back of the head.

"Ok I know it's a little small, but the rent's dirt cheap and its only four blocks from campus."

"And for some reason that I cannot fathom Mrs. Nelson our land lady loves him."

"What can I say? But I still liked the one I found on Russell St."

"Zee can you do me a favor and look out the window," Artemis asked. "See if the money tree has bloomed yet? Because for someone evidently so good at math, the concept of a budget alludes him."

"I understand the core principles just fine babe, I just don't subscribe to them. A little extra leg room was all I asked."

"Maybe if you hadn't brought ever single item you owned from Keystone with you, we'd have plenty."

"Geez," Dick interrupted, "I'd tell you to two to get a room but…"

"Speaking of rooms, Zee let the show you the bedroom, it's got plenty of space since Wally will now be sleeping on the couch."

The speedster walked beside the blonde, that goofy grin that always melted her heart brighter than ever. "You know what would go great in here? A dog."

"God you're an idiot," she sighed breaking into a smile and kissing him on the lips. "But you're my idiot. Come on Zee it's this way."

"I would never have guessed," the sorceress giggled. There were only two rooms in the entire place.
"Don't you start..."

As the girls left the den, Wally walked to the fridge, taking out two Michelob Ultras, handing one off to his friend.

"You know if Bruce finds out you're serving alcohol to a minor. He's gonna revoke your membership."

"Too late," Wally smiled.

"It's never too late; you and Artemis always have a place with us. You know that."

"I know, and who knows what the future will bring? But for now it's been nice getting away from the game. You know, just being normal."

"I gotta admit, I get kinda of jealous sometimes."

"Dude, Tim's doing a great a job. Gotham can survive without Nightwing for a while. Come out west and enjoy the weather."

"You know, I was actually thinking about finding a place up in Blüdhaven. Spreading my wings."

"Blüdhaven? Jesus Dick, why not just move up to Canada. That place is as cold as hell. It makes Gotham look like Miami."

"I don't know. There's just something about it that kind of appeals to me."

"You're a glutton for punishment my friend," Wally laughed.

In the distance the two men could hear their girlfriends laughing in the background, probably at some joke at their expense.
"So she's the one huh?"

"Like there was ever any doubt," Wally grinned.

"You ever gonna make an honest woman of her?"

"Well we've been living together for two months and haven't killed each other yet, so that's promising." Wally laughed. "You never know what the future will bring, but...yeah I'd like to someday. You'd be my best man of course."

"Well of course," Dick smiled, taking a hit off his beer.

The apartment grew quiet and the mood serious for just for a moment. "In all seriousness, I'm really happy for you two."

"Thanks man. I know I'm going to regret saying this," he chuckled, "but if you every need anything, you know we're only a phone call away. But how about saving that for things like alien invasions or earth shattering events, I think you guys can handle the rest."

"We'll try to get by," Dick said wryly.

The speedster raised his bottle. "Cheer's dude,

Dick raised his to meet his friends. "Cheers Wally."

"Wally," a voice said quietly

"The other nurse already gave me my meds," he groaned, fighting to get back to that happy moment.

"Dude, don't drag me into you perverted little fantasy," Robin chuckled.
"Dick?" Wally said weakly, his eyes slowly fluttering open and searching for a face in the darkness.

"Yeah it's me. You know if you wanted to get out of work, there are easier ways."

Wally chuckled, trying to sit up before wincing and gingerly lying back down.

"Does it hurt?"

"Only when I do anything," he grimaced. "Is everyone all right?"

"Yeah, mission accomplished."

Wally released a deep sigh. "Barry wouldn't tell me anything. I was worried about you guys."

"Worried about us? Dude your laying in a freaking hospital bed. Just worry about getting better."

"Yeah. Remind me to never plan another surprise party again."

"I'm real sorry about your birthday, but on the bright side I managed to hide a couple of pieces of cake from everyone down in your room."

"My hero," he smiled, his eyes getting heavy again.

"We can get into the particulars later, but I hear you saved in entire country. Major kudos."

"What can I say," he grimaced, his forearm guarding his incision, "I'm the man."

"And as humble as always," Robin laughed.
Wally smiled as his eyes began to close.

"Get some sleep. I'll give you a call in the morning."

"Already on my way," he yawned, "And Dick, I really appreciate you coming out."

"Hey what are best pals for?" Robin replied, walking over to the window to make his escape. He paused for a moment, standing hesitantly at the glass, trying to find a way to reach out to someone who'd been there for him so many times before. Hoping that things could go back to the way they once were.

"Wally, you know you can talk to me...about stuff right?"


And with those final words, Robin stepped on the ledge, closing the window softly behind him, disappearing into the night.

xxx

"Yes Mom."

"Yes Mom."

Tôi nghe bạn lần đầu tiên. Tôi đã nói tôi sẽ làm điều đó sao! (I heard you the first time. I said I'd do it ok!) the archer snapped, slamming the door behind her a little harder than she'd intended.

Artemis knew her mom meant well, she really did, but the older woman's constant micro managing of the archer's life was getting real old real fast. Artemis had spent the last few years basically raising herself and then abruptly to have an absentee mother walk back into her life and try to make up for years of abandonment, at the hands of a psychopath no less, was a bit galling.

Inside her room, the archer stood before the mirror adjusting the collar of her sweater. The elbows
were worn and frayed, as were a number of her clothes outside her Gotham Academy uniform.

*Her clothes. Jade's clothes.*

Not as much hand me downs as opposed to items she'd abandoned, items she'd left behind, just like her sister.

Artemis needed some new ones desperately, not something high end or trendy, just something that fit and didn't have holes in it. That wasn't too much to ask was it?

But money was tight as usual, and her mom had basically forbid her from looking for any kind of part time job, saying her schooling should take precedence above all else, however Paula didn't have to step foot on to that snobby campus day in and day out to be judged by a bunch of trust fund kids murmuring to each other, looking at her like she was some kind of leper.

*The poor scholarship girl, the Wayne Foundation charity case, trying to act like she belongs here.*

What Artemis would have given for one of those snobby society bitches to actually have the courage to say it to her face.

As far as jobs went, she wasn't too proud to take anything available. There was a grocery store and a coffee shop down the street, two fast food joints a bus ride away.

It was aggravating to say the least to be seeking the permission of an ex-con, someone who had screwed up her life so royally in search of the quick buck, the chance to earn a living legally.

If she could keep a good GPA while still playing superhero on the side, she could bag groceries in her sleep.

When she hung out in the cave, she was rarely out of uniform, but when she did it was usually just the same two outfits. Sooner or later Oliver and Dinah were going to take notice and try to take her shopping, but that was where the line had to be drawn. She wasn't some charity case. He'd given her a bow, a uniform, training, a chance to join the Team, she wasn't going to take anything else from the man that had given her more than she deserved in the first place.
The archer pulled her ponytail out from beneath the sweater arranging a few stray hairs back into place when suddenly a voice called out from the corner of the bedroom.

"I think you might need the next size up," the brunette assassin asserted from beneath the smiling oriental mask.

Within seconds the archer had her bow cocked and aimed directly at her sister's chest.

"What do you want Jade?" the archer hissed.

"Can't a sister just drop by to congratulate a job well done?"

"What are talking about?" the blonde sneered.

"Don't play dumb Artemis, it's beneath you."

"What in the hell are you taking about?" she repeated.

"Well our father of course," Jade replied with an amused tone.

Artemis lowered her bow, placing it securely back on the wall, walking away in disgust. "What has he done now?"

Jade's head cocked curiously, removing the Cheshire mask and sitting down gracefully on her old twin bed, gazing into the eyes of her estranged sister, eyes so similar to her own, searching for the truth.

"You don't know do you?"

Artemis froze in her tracks. "Is he...dead?"
"No such luck," Cheshire smiled, "but he probably wishes he was."

"What happened?"

Jade patted at the mattress. "This is so uncomfortable, how did I sleep on the thing for so long?"

"Jade..."

"Relax dear sister. I don't know all the details just yet, but evidently the police found him at some abandoned warehouse near the docks, in pretty bad shape from what I hear."

"What do you mean pretty bad?"

"The kind where you're paralyzed from the neck down. Someone left him there to do die."

Despite herself, Artemis gasped. "Who?"

"Well up till a few moments ago I assumed it was you."

"Me?" the archer replied defensively.

"It not like you didn't want to," Jade countered.

"Of course I'd want to, but do you honestly think I would?"

"That's why I'm here."

"How do I know you didn't do it?" the archer volleyed back.
"Because if I'd done it, he'd be dead."

Artemis stood at the window in stunned disbelief. There were no words to describe what was racing through her mind. For as long as she could remember he'd been a monster; the berating's, the beatings, the trainings, the death. He'd disappear for stretches at a time, missions or jail sentences, she never knew which. Those where the happiest memories of her life, when it was just her mother and sister, but eventually he'd return to yank their family away from any semblance of a normalcy and move them all over the world in search of the next job, the next score. She never lived under any illusions that her mother was a saint, but Artemis knew without a doubt that Lawrence Crock was the devil.

The archer had lost count of how many blows she'd absorbed over the years, all in the name of training and discipline. How many drunken nights had the archer watched as he'd belittled and mocked her mother after her injury, laying into her for her carelessness, how she'd broken up a talented and dangerous team by being distracted, worrying about two small children left at home instead of being focused on the job.

"You got sloppy and you paid the price. Now you think I'm going to sit here and babysit you for the rest of your life. Feed you? Change your bedpan? You're fucking insane."

Insanity. Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Paula never argued back. She'd made her bed.

And now the boogeyman was gone, the dragon slain. There'd be no more looking over her shoulder, no more sleeping with a knife under her pillow. It just didn't seem real.

It wasn't real. Just another one of his little tests.

"You're lying."

"See for yourself. He's in Gotham General; under twenty four hour guard by half of the GCPD, but he's there. You and your little team are close to the Bat right? Ask him."

"I will," the archer argued back. "Now you need to leave."

Jade paused, staring at the old Alice in Wonderland poster that hung above her old bed, and for just
one second Artemis thought she'd seen something on her sister's face she'd hadn't seen in years. Regret.

"Please... please don't go!"

"Sorry sis. Mom's not getting out of prison anytime soon. And I refuse to live in this house with just Dad."

Jade had left her only sister behind, a defenseless little girl, left in his hands. Abandoning someone she loved because of someone she hate, only to find herself reluctantly paired with him again years later, pitted against that same girl for her father's amusement time and again.

"Fine," Cheshire exclaimed, "but if you could be a dear and find out if any of this fairy tale is true, it would be greatly appreciated."

"Why? So you can run away and hide again without worrying he'll come drag you back?"

"Bạn không phải là người duy nhất thuốc cửa cha thông qua địa ngực!" (You're not the only one dad drug through hell!) the assassin snapped.

Jade walked to the fire escape while the archer held tight, trying not to let her heart betray her. She loved her sister, missed her, but her father had turned them against each other one too many times, irrevocably damaging a relationship that had once been so close.

Cheshire stood outside on the balcony, her face intentionally looking away from her sister, hiding the lost and desperate girl that hid behind the feline mask. After a moment of silence she spoke out to the cityscape.

"I'm so tired of this," Jade lamented.

Artemis knew how she felt, always being on opposite sides, matched against each other, all for a father's approval that neither would ever receive.

"I am too," Artemis replied quietly.
"Mom knows how to get a hold of me. Don't say anything to her, not until you know for sure."

Artemis understood as to why. Cheshire didn't want her mother to take one unguarded breath; she didn't want to accidentally break a woman who'd been broken too many times before. If the devil had really been cast back to hell, for just one wasteful and irrational moment the Cheshire cat wondered if this was ever a home she could one day return to, or was she was destined to continue down the rabbit hole in pursuit of Alice.

"Take care of yourself Jade."

"Don't I always," she smiled, leaping from the fire escape into the darkness.

Artemis shut the window and locked it, when she heard her mother yell from the next room.

"Artemis who are you talking to?"

"No one mom!" she bellowed back.

No one.

---

Artemis sat on the rooftop of her mother's apartment building, her legs dangling off the edge of the rent controlled low rise, wrestling with the emotional gut punch her sister had delivered hours earlier.

So many conflicting emotions raced through her mind; relief, regret, anger, joy. She'd lived her whole life in fear of that man, watching helplessly as he'd abused and destroyed their family, witnessed time and again that reputation meant more to him then blood.

Jade had been convincing, but lying and deceit had always been her tricks of the trade, not that the archer had much room to talk these days.
Until she could lay eyes on the man, none of it would be real; not some doctor's chart, not an X-ray, not even a one on one with the Dark Knight himself. Artemis needed to be at his side, watching him lay there helpless and weak. To look him in the eyes once and for all to let him know that he hadn't won. She wasn't his pawn; she wasn't the assassin he'd trained her to be, she was hero, and his days as a villain were over.

Gotham General was only twelve blocks away, but if Jade was right about the amount of police presence surrounding him, it might as well have been a thousand.

Artemis was scheduled to meet with Canary early next week for their counseling session. Somehow she'd have to find the courage to speak up and ask, easier said than done when it came to affairs of the heart, her heart.

Her mother's apartment had become stifling, claustrophobic, and Zatanna's text couldn't have come at a more opportune time. A sequel to their Gotham adventure would be just what the doctor ordered to get her mind off her troubles. She needed to hit something, to find someone like her father and punish him. She needed to make sure this all wasn't a dream.

But a half hour later when she got around to reading the entire body of the text she realized that entree was not in the menu.

With the arrival of their new teammate Raquel Ervin, the sorceress had taken it upon herself to play hostess and provide her a proper welcome and introduction.

Artemis had nothing against the girl; she'd seemed nice enough at their initial meeting, and to be honest the Team needed more of a female presence, but right now she would have preferred just some alone time with the sorceress to vent and rage, but in all fairness Rocket deserved a warmer welcome then the one she'd received.

"I'm Artemis, your new teammate."

"Kid Flash, never heard of you."

Looking back at the ridiculousness of that situation, Artemis could finally smile. As far as introductions went, even though it wasn't the best she'd ever received, at the very least it was the most memorable; smiling tauntingly at the obnoxious red head, nose smeared with sun screen,
wearing the tackiest bathing suit she'd ever seen, lying flat on his face in front of God and everybody. She wasn't the archer he'd been hoping for, and he wasn't the smiling carefree guy she'd watched on the news over the years.

How things had changed. It seemed like only yesterday the two could barely stand to be in the same room without being at each other's throats, but after the incident at Fate's tower, it was like he'd become a completely different person entirely. In a weird way she kind of missed the verbal sparring, he was easily her equal in the snarky and sarcastic department, but instead of a person who would argue with her about basically anything with his last dying breath, she'd gained a friend, kind of a good one if she was being honest.

It still didn't matter if it had all been an illusion or not; he'd given his life to save hers. Sacrificed everything to make sure she'd survived the initial invasion. Why would he have done such a thing? Especially for someone like her, someone he barely knew.

_The assassin's daughter, the Shadow in training, the liar._

Months later, she still didn't have the answer. Where she'd come from, it was every girl for herself. Jade had made that crystal clear. Would Wally have still done something so brave, so unselfish had he known all her secrets? Known what a fraud she was?

It terrified her for the day she would have to stand before all of them and confess her sins. Maybe now she wouldn't have to. Batman, Arrow, and Canary knew her secrets, surely that was enough.

xxx

_Recognize Artemis B-05_

In a blinding flash of alien radiation, the archer materialized on the Zeta platform to an empty room.

The cave was quiet this night, not the usual bustle of activity it normally was. Artemis was surprised not find at least a teammate or two sprawled out on the couch or sitting in the kitchen, dining on Megan's latest batch of treats. At the very least she expected to see Red Tornado lurking around the mission room, or back and forth from his private quarters upstairs, instead all she found was silence.

She checked her phone again hoping Zatanna had finally returned her text, but so far none had
come through. Artemis had understandably taken her time accepting Zee's invitation, it's not every day you find out your villainous father may never leave a hospital bed ever again, and perhaps that delay had been enough for Zee to consider she wasn't interested. It didn't help that the archer had a poor track record of standing people up when it came to awkward social situations.

Artemis glanced around the room for a note of some kind, hoping the sorceress had left some information or clue as to where they'd went, but after a few minutes or searching she finally gave up, accepting the fact that she'd been stood up.

Turning around and going back home wasn't option. She needed space, somewhere to decompress and think, and a cramped apartment in south Gotham gave neither. It was fitting that this would be the night the normally reclusive archer would actually have wanted someone to talk to, but karma only cemented its reputation for being a bitch.

Across the room on the ottoman, Artemis recognized Conner's back pack lying on the cushion. No matter how much she lied to herself, she really did miss Conner. She'd not joined the Team in search of any kind of relationship; honestly she didn't think she'd stick around long enough in the first place. However to stumble upon someone who felt as broken and angry as she, seemed like a gift from the gods.

The archer had believed in some ways they were kindred spirits, both at war with the rage inside themselves, unsatisfied and unwilling to become what others had predestined them to be. The two didn't share their feelings as often as they should, communication wasn't exactly one of his super powers but who was she to talk? Sometimes so much could be said with a glance, but in the end it wasn't enough.

She missed his presence, she missed how he made her feel safe, protected, cared for, but a relationships had to be more than that. Canary was probably right; Artemis had been infatuated with the idea of him perhaps more than the actual person. As far as break ups went, this was definitely one of the oddest ones she'd ever been through. Dating within the unit had been a mistake, and they'd both realized it the hard way. They'd moved on amicably, it would be interesting over the upcoming months to see if it would actually stay that way.

Taking a deep sigh she climbed on the couch in search of a movie, some kind of distraction, but after a few minutes of channel surfing she'd found nothing she liked. Suddenly the archer remembered the copy of The Fault In Our Stars hidden inside her bedside table, a guilty pleasure absolutely no one could find out about. It was a pretty desperate option for a Friday night, but god knows she'd done worse.

She rounded the corner towards the hallway of the living quarters when she caught site of the light coming from one of the rooms, a certain speedster's to be exact.
The door was cracked and she cautiously peered in, seeing the red head at his desk, piles of books and graph paper scattered all around, tongue stuck between his lips in deep concentration as he scribbled formula after formula on multiple worksheets while music blasted from his ear buds.

School work on a Friday night? *Lame* she thought, until she considered her own situation. The speedster was rumored to be some kind wunderkind, and maybe nights like this were the reason.

Wally took a last sip of his coke, crushing the can in his hand and spinning to launch it into the garbage can across the room when he caught site of her, nearly falling out of his chair as his aluminum projectile missed by a mile.

"Jesus!" he spit, clutching at his chest. "You scared the crap out of me."

"Nice shot," she chuckled as they both looked to see the can at least four feet away from its target.

"You spooked me, that didn't count."

"Whatever. What are you even doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing." he replied discreetly covering up his work.

"You first." she teased.

He rubbed at the back of his neck. "I was supposed to be going on this mission to Bialya, but Batman scratched me last second because of the whole Vertigo stabby thing. I told him I was fine, but he made me stay so Kaldur took my place."

"What's going on?"

"Oh I'm fine by the way," he retorted in annoyance. "Thanks for asking."
"You're really milking this aren't you?" she smiled.

"Your sympathy is whelming blondie. Anyway it was something about the reunification of Bialya and Quarac. Batman seems to think Queen Bee is somehow behind it, so he sent Robin, Superboy, Miss M, and now Kaldur out there to investigate."

"And poor little Flash boy got left behind."

"Yeah yeah, story of my life. So what about you?"

She sighed. "Well I was going to meet Zatanna and Raquel here for dinner, but it looks like I got ditched."

"They left about a half hour ago I think. I could check the transport logs and see where they went, or you could just...I don't know...call them."

"Thanks genius, I would never have thought of that." "Always glad to be of service," he smiled.

"So what do you think of her?"

"Raquel? She seems nice enough I guess," he shrugged. "Haven't really talked to her much yet. You?"

"The same. I was hoping to tonight, but it looks like that isn't happening. So why are you still here?" she asked, leaning down and picking up a few books off his desk.

"Hey…"

"Quantum Mechanics, Temporal Theories, Principals of Relativity," she thumbed through. "Good God, Einstein much?"
The speedster snatched them out of her hands, stacking the books on the far side of his desk, tucking his work sheets underneath them.

"Give me those. You're gonna lose my bookmarks."

"Is that really homework? I thought you went to public school," she scoffed.

"It's just AP stuff. I'm uh...still doing a lot of catch up work. My folks aren't exactly what you'd call happy with me right now. My grades have kind of slipped, and it seems every other week I'm coming home with something broken or bruised. They weren't a big fan of this whole superhero gig to begin with, and every time I come home with some new bruise or scar it just sends them on the war path. They don't even know about what happened in Seattle, so the farther away I am the better."

"You have had kind of a bad run of it lately. Seriously, how are you feeling?"

"Fine I guess. I'm just hoping that the next time I go in for a physical, my doctor doesn't realize I don't have an appendix any more, cause that will really freak the shit out of my parents."

"I bet."

Artemis's eyes drifted around the room, making no effort to leave or stay, just kind of stuck in limbo. Wally had known her too long not to recognize signs. Something was wrong.

"You ok?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. Just...family stuff."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No, not really," she replied. "I just needed a change of scenery. It's probably a good thing I missed Zee, I wasn't exactly feeling social to begin with. I'm probably just going to find a quiet place to
"read and veg out."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Get back to your books science boy, I'll catch you later."

"Ok," he shrugged, putting his ear buds back in as she shut the door behind her. Wally waited a good ten seconds before letting out a relieved breath, grabbing his work, and hiding it underneath his dresser.

He should never have let his guard down. He'd stayed back at the cave because everyone was on a mission; not needing his parents snooping in on what was most definitely not his homework. The formulas scribbled all over his graph paper wouldn't make much sense to the untrained eye, but Artemis was a lot smarter in the science department than she let on, and on top of that she could smell bullshit a mile away. He had to be more careful, he was too close now for mistakes.

In her room, the archer snuggled up in her bed, pulling the weathered Afghan over her legs and opening her book, searching for where she'd left off. She and the speedster were quite the pair, hiding from their parents, locked away in a cold dark cave while normal teenagers their age were out having fun and getting in trouble. But there wasn't anything remotely normal about any of their lives.

She worked with two aliens, a guy from Atlantis, someone who could break the sound barrier in his sneakers, and probably the most famous sidekick ever to wear a cape. How she'd gotten here she'd never understand. Artemis was about ten pages in when a light knock caught her attention. The speedster cracked open the door peeking in.

"Creep much?" she chided.

"Don't flatter yourself babe. Look I was going to head into town and get some pizza. I was wondering if you um...might want to go? Hang out and not be two losers stuck inside on a Friday night sort of deal."

She sighed, trying to find the proper words to turn him down, when he added. "My treat?"

Artemis considered the offer. "It would be a nice break from left over stir fry. Sure, what the hell,
but we go dutch. Got it?"

"Well that wasn't the offer, but suit yourself," he replied.

"Give me ten minutes and I'll meet you at the door."

---

Each year when fall arrives and the air gets crisp, fairs and festivals begin to pop up all over New England, and Happy Harbor was no exception. All around town booths were set up on almost every block; showcasing the best of local artists, fudge making, traditional crafts, and musicians. The beaches were scattered with bonfires, and the boardwalk full of kids and parents as the last days of rides and games came to a close with the approaching winter.

Sitting at the window of Fellini Pizzeria, Wally and Artemis had full view of the festivities. The town was abuzz with activity with the streets full of local residents enjoying what was most likely the last warm days off the season. Artemis wondered if maybe this was where Zatanna and Raquel had run off to. Why Zeta to the city when they had all this basically at their doorstep.

Wally had eaten more or less like a human, still ordering the extra-large pepperoni and sausage, but surprisingly including two types of olives and spinach. It was odd to find someone else with such unique tastes, almost as if he knew they were her favorites. Artemis took a sip of her Dr. Pepper, watching Wally cover his slice with enough Parmesan to choke a horse.

"So do you think they've crossed into Biyalan air space yet?" she asked.

Wally looked to his watch. "They should have touched down…two hours ago. Did Conner not call you?"

"No, but I wasn't really expecting him to."

"Is everything ok with you two?"

"We uh..." she sighed not really wanting to go down that path, but Wally was her friend, and a good listener to boot. "We broke up about two weeks ago."
"Oh god Artemis I'm so sorry. I had no idea," he said in shock. "You two just seemed so normal."

"I can't believe Zatanna didn't blab it to everyone by now," she huffed.

Wally groaned, tilting his head back in chagrin. "I'm always the last to know about these things."

"Look it's no big deal," she shrugged.

"It's a very big deal."

"With all that's happened lately, he has a lot on his plate and honestly between school, home and here, I do too. Besides dating on the team was a bad idea."

"Well I could have told you that," he smirked.

"Says the guy who puppy dogged Megan for months."

"Hence why I'm not doing it anymore."

"Yeah that's why," she chuckled.

"You have a real mean streak in there don't ya?" he smiled.

"It runs in the family," she replied.

Outside the window a loud blast echoed in the distance, followed by another and another as the sky lit up in a cascade of lights.

"Oh man I love fireworks. Let's finish up and hit the boardwalk. They have some of those carny games out there and I'm feeling lucky."Eyeing the lone remaining slice of pizza, his green eyes shot desperately to hers. "Uh...you gonna eat that?"
"Be my gue..."

The slice was gone before she even finished her thought.

---

Walking among the crowds, the smell of cotton candy and funnel cakes wafting through the air, Wally felt more relaxed and at peace then he had since his return. For just one night he'd decided to put the weight of the world aside and enjoy the moment, to enjoy just being seventeen again, being with her again. It was small moments like that that he missed the most, when the uniforms were stowed away and their civilian identities became their only identities.

They'd all had to grow up so fast, some by choice, some by tragedy. Times like these were important, when for brief moments they could temporarily slow down the second hand of the clock and for one evening two teenagers could just feel normal, be normal. It reminded him of why he and the archer had left the Team in the first place. To be more than just the masks.

The conversations flowed easily, the banter familiar and fun, and just for a few hours there were no caves or Watchtowers, no BioShips or mentors, there was just Wally West and Artemis Crock, and no matter what happened after this, he'd gotten to share one night with the girl he'd once loved, and that would have to be enough.

Walking towards the ocean mindlessly debating about anything and everything under the sun, a barker called out to the red head. "Win something for your little lady?"

Wally turned to see the tall skinny tattooed man standing next to the classic game of skill; the BB gun shoot. Above him hung an assortment of prizes including the usual over-stuffed pink bear and the always popular Man of Steel.

"I'm not his little…"

"Absolutely," he laughed, interrupting the huffy archer. "How much?"

"A buck," the carny replied.
"Oh man I am so good at these," the speedster crowed.

He slapped the dollar on the counter as the man handed him his weapon. Moments later a parade of mechanical targets began their speedy trek across the far wall as the speedster cocked his weapon, placing the plastic butt of the gun against his shoulder, aiming carefully down the site, taking a deep breath, and missing every target by an embarrassingly wide margin.

"Doing great Baywatch," the archer snickered.

Wally tightened his grip, taking into account wind speed and atmospheric conditions, things that had absolutely no bearing on what a terrible shot he was. Finally after scores of ammo, he hit the edge of one metallic duck as it sped by.

"Nailed it!" he cheered. Artemis sighed, taking the weapon from his hand, aiming it long armed, one eye closed, and hitting every target.

She tossed the exhausted rifle back to the impressed carny. "He'll take the pink bear."

Looking over at the embarrassed ginger as he was handed her prize she smirked, "Super speed, just not super skill."

Wally shook his head in defeat, hoisting the over sized animal over his shoulder.

"Come on, let me go buy my little man some cotton candy, and you can show me what other games you've mastered."

"No one likes a show off Smartamis."

xxx

As the heavy stone door of Mt. Justice closed behind them, Wally tossed the bear on the couch, trying to find it a home.
"I guess we could give it to Megan, this sort of stuff is kind of up her alley with the pink and everything," he suggested.

"Or..." the archer said with a devilish grin, "you could put it in Robin's bunk and take out the lights in his room. Can you imagine how much he'd jump if he hopped in bed with a giant bear waiting for him."

Wally smiled broadly. "I like the way you think."

They sat at the kitchen counter or the next hour, talking about missions, making fun of teammates and each other. Just like old times. God he'd missed her so much. What he wouldn't give to just reach over, brush the stay hairs from her face, and touch her lips with his. It was moments like this he'd dreamed of…and dread.

Get in, get out. Stay out of history's way.

Wally remembered Bruce words, wondering if Wayne could have done the same thing if he'd found himself in the shadows of Crime Alley, just as a mugger slowly walked up to a defenseless family of three leaving a theater. Could he have really stood back at let nature takes its course? Could he have watched Jason Todd go out on his last patrol, or the numerous others they all had lost over the year and remain silent? Could he really have put the mission first above all else? At the end of the day Wally knew the answer was still yes.

If history had its way, Artemis would one day marry a kind and dedicated doctor, have a beautiful child, and hopefully get the happy ever after she deserved, but none of that would be possible if Wally didn't stop dwelling on the past and focus on the future. His happiness would just have to come from her happiness. It broke his heart all over again, but it's what he'd signed up for.

That's what Bruce would have done, that's was what Terry was going to do, and that was what he had to do. Being a hero just sometimes plain sucked.

Wally yawned, dejectedly looking down at his watch, wishing this specific night would never end. "I guess I better get going," he sighed.

"Yeah," she replied as her smile faded. "Me too."
It had been a fun night, a relaxing one, a nice distraction from her troubles. It wasn't cracking skulls with Zatanna, but in a way was much better. Every criminal she took down, every thug she left unconscious, all of them wore Lawrence Crock's taunting face. It was a battle that would never end. Instead tonight, she'd spent the evening as a normal sixteen year old girl: roaming the town, laughing and joking, eating sweets and not caring about anything but the now. And the shadow of Sportsmaster had been nowhere in sight.

These were moments that she'd never have if her father had - had his way, but just by walking down the boardwalk and gazing up at the fireworks with a lightness she rarely allowed herself to feel, in a way she'd already beat him.

*You can fight Jade, you can fight me, but you can't fight who you are.*

**Wrong again dad.**

"Uh Wally..." she called out hesitantly as he stood on the Zeta pad waiting for transport authorization.

"Yeah?"

"I uh...had a lot of fun tonight."

He smiled broadly. "Yeah me too."

"I'll see ya around." she smiled softly.

"Yeah...and for what it's worth, I'm really sorry about Conner."

"Yeah me too, but thanks. It wasn't meant to be I guess. I'm just not exactly what you call *dateable,*" she chuckled.

As the light began to glow, Wally looked into her eyes with a seriousness she'd rarely seen on him before.
"Artemis, if anyone ever makes you feel less than perfect, they're fucking insane."

And in a sudden burst of light he was gone, leaving her standing alone in the dark in stunned silence.

xxx

The black Mercedes CLS550 pulled into the driveway of the three story Greystone shortly after midnight, as the heavy iron gate slowly swung closed behind the vehicle. The hulking blonde chauffeur stepped out from the driver's seat, glancing around the perimeter, receiving nods from the security team that patrolled the grounds.

After a few moments, the former German special forces commander stepped to the back of the vehicle and opened the rear passenger door as its occupant slowly stepped out.

Dr. Hugo Strange stood stiffly, reaching back into the car to retrieve his briefcase before making his way to the front door.

"With there be anything else herr doktor?"

"No Frederick, thank you."

The bodyguard nodded respectfully, taking his leave and joining his team to continue patrolling the perimeter while Strange made his way inside. It had been a long day.

His colleagues had scratched their collective heads when the renown psychiatrist closed his practice and announced he'd taken the position as warden at the Belle Reve Correctional Facility, but Strange had convinced them that the rehabilitation he could provide behind the gates rivaled anything he could contribute in some ostentatious office to the wealthy, suffering from self-imposed depression or mild ADHD. His decision would be a force for good and the greatest challenge of his career. Little did they know his true motivation.

His ties to the underworld had long been suspected within the hero community, but his current affiliation with the Light was beyond the simplicity of mob bosses and low level criminals. The
Light had promised him a seat at the table, a voice when it came to the direction of Savage's plans for the evolution of humankind. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity for scientific discovery without the limitations of government over-reach, and it was all his for the taking if he followed their directives without question. However for some reason those directives had stopped coming.

Strange wasn't foolish enough to reach out to Luthor directly, but the rumors running rampant through the corrections community were troubling to say the least. According to his sources within the GCPD, Lawrence Crock was now in custody, with a somewhat dire prognosis. The circumstances surrounding his arrest were vague, but with his alleged injuries, he must have fought to the death to avoid capture.

How had this happened? Crock was not a man prone to mistakes, but as the saying goes, sometimes a blind squirrel finds an acorn, and many times high profile arrests such as his were simply a spin of the roulette's wheel.

There was no fear of him speaking of the existence of the Light, he was far too professional for that, but Sportsmaster was supposed to be an important tool for the further missions ahead, and a reliable replacement would be hard to find. Perhaps Slade Wilson would be interested? With Strange's connections, he knew of several men who had hired the mercenary in the past, and to bring aboard a man such as he would only cement his position within the Light and prove his value, but they had to contact him before he'd ever consider such a move, and it had been weeks since he'd received any messages. Though he wasn't a man prone to such things, Strange was beginning to get a tad nervous.

He stepped to the butler's pantry and poured himself a snifter of Brandy while Mozart's Voi Che Sapete played in the background, allowing the soothing opera to ease his troubled mind. He walked to the plush leather couch, about to sit when he noticed a piece of paper taped to his television screen. The doctor grumbled as he took the note, tiring of his maid's tiresome requests for a raise. She'd already made two formal requests, and now to stoop to an act such as this was very unprofessional. He'd be letting her go in the morning he quickly decided.

He unfolded the note, taking a sip of his Cognac when suddenly the glass slipped from his grip, shattering across the hardwood floor. Strange stumbled to the lamp, illuminating the previously dimmed study to confirm what he thought he'd read.

_We got to Sportsmaster, and you're next. End this foolish alliance while you still have your head._

Strange's jaw dropped. Whoever they were, they knew everything. They'd most likely been responsible for Sportsmaster, bypassed one of the most secure homes in Gotham, and essentially informed him he was their next target. Perhaps this was why he'd the Light had remained silent, and worse yet what if they now considered the doctor a liability? Hugo rushed to the panic room,
closing the heavy steel door and activated the alarm. He was taking no chances. The Light had an enemy, a very dangerous one, and for the first time since he'd joined Savage's crusade, he feared for his own life more than some role in a new world order.

Outside the Greystone, sirens rang and emergency lights flashed, as teams of security personnel rushed into the residence. Down the street, walking under the darkness of the tall Magnolias that draped the sidewalk, the red head turned to observe the activity in amusement. Bruce knew an intrusion into the Doctor's inner sanctum would cause concern, but from where he stood it appeared the doctor was having a full on panic attack. For a man who dealt regularly with some of the vilest and most vicious men on the planet, he was surprisingly skittish. What was it that Bruce always told he and Dick when they were kids?

_Criminals are a superstitious cowardly lot._

Wally thought back to a term his old psyche professor used to use in his class back in college. _The fight-or-flight_ response he vaguely remembered it being called. The speedster wondered which one a renowned psychiatrist like Hugo Strange would subscribe to. The fact that he was currently cowering inside some safe room with a team of armed guards rushing to his side pretty much answered the speedster's question. Another pawn taken off the board.

xxx

Week later, as the last remnants of light faded from the transporter, Wally West stepped off the Zeta platform into the darkness of Mt. Justice.

"Helllooo?" the speedster shouted into the black, listening as his words echoed off the stone and boulder walls reflecting back at him.

"Anyone here?"

Off in the distance he could see the dim lighting of the kitchen glowing ever so slightly in the north east corner of the cave. Wally sighed and began his march to the source. He wasn’t much in the mood for surprises.

"Guys, birthday was like two weeks ago. No need for the redo ok?" he bellowed.
His birthday had royally sucked; no *ifs ands or buts* about it. Spending what was supposed to be his mostly self-planned surprise party in the comfort of a Seattle hospital bed was not exactly how he'd imagined it to go all those years ago. At least back then he'd arrived safely to Happy Harbor with the satisfaction of having saved a monarchy, and while this time around the Queen had still survived, a sword through the gut had taken a little of the shine off the moment.

But what was really bothering him at the moment had nothing to do with parties or presents or royalty, it had to do with Dick Grayson. The speedster had been texting the young detective for the last three days with no response.

It had taken a great deal of soul searching for Wally to finally realize there was more at stake than just fixing the future, he had a chance to make things right with his best friend. So many things had happened so fast in his final days, and as his molecules tore apart from the influx of kinetic energy, his parents and his girlfriend had raced through his mind at the end, but along with all that heartache was the unspoken regret that he hadn't made things right with his best friend.

Sitting in the Bio-Ship cabin on their way to Roanoke, Wally had had his epiphany. It was beyond selfish and immature to hold something against his best friend for wrongs he'd not even done yet. Even more so to consider them wrongs in the first place.

Wally had created his perfect little life; the girl of his dreams, the college of his choice, a home, a dog, domestic bliss. He'd left the life behind and taken with him a girl that may have done it more to make him happy than because she actually wanted to. All those dreams came crashing down the day Dick Grayson had arrived on his doorstep.

Never once had Wally considered the bigger picture. Never once had he thought what it would have been like had their roles been reversed, not until now, when he carried the same weight of the world on his shoulders as Nightwing had.

Dick was out of options. He'd kept the mission with Kaldur a secret as long as he could, but they were both in way over their heads and needed the help of the only people they could trust, and that trust was met with animosity and anger. Dick Grayson would never have done that to him. All his life Wally had wanted to be a hero, and it wasn't until the endgame when he'd rediscovered that desire. The speedster had more than made up for his selfishness with his final act, but he'd carried so many regrets with him to the great beyond.

Standing in the future at Dick's grave site, he'd pleaded with God for a second chance. He had it now and was failing miserably with it. It was time to stop pretending to be his best friend and actually be it, except that person had suddenly gone on radio silence and the speedster didn't know as to why.
Wally arrived in the kitchen to find it clean and spotless, a feat rarely accomplished with as many people who lived and visited the cave. He walked to the refrigerator, finding and opening a coke, when red eyes began to glow from behind him.

Wally turned to see Red Tornado emerging from the darkness, his soda nearly coming out his nose in statement.

"Jesus!" Wally exclaimed as he coughed through the now burning beverage setting his throat on fire.

"I did not mean to startle you."

"Holy crap Tornado, you scared the hell out of me."

"I am sorry that was not my intention. Your appearance was unexpected as well. I was in sleep mode when you arrived, I should have illuminated the cave and made my presence known before now."

"No worries," Wally sighed. "Where is everyone?"

"I am unaware of Zatanna's or Rocket's current location, however Aqualad is on a mission with Aquaman somewhere within the Bermuda Triangle, and Robin, Artemis, Superboy, and Miss Martian are….on leave."

"On leave. All of them," Wally deadpanned.

"I do not inquire as to the specific plans of team members when they have requested time off, but to answer your question yes."

"So you don't know where any of them are?"

"I did not say that," Tornado replied. "I simply said they are not here."
Wally wondered if being kind of a dick was something programmed into Tornado's artificial intelligence matrix or just something he'd picked up over the years.

"So not on a mission?"

"Not that I am aware of. The Zeta Tube log indicates they transported to the station in East Berlin, from there I have no knowledge. Perhaps they are simply on a… vacation."

It wasn't a vacation; Wally now knew exactly where they were.

xxx

Dan Danger walked alone down the snowy alleyway of Bruges, stopping and examining each playbill and marquee of both past and present circuses plastered across the train cars as they remained parked on the tracks across from the big top. Each one brought back long buried memories, some people he knew by reputation, others he knew much more personally.

Dick Grayson felt slightly ridiculous wearing the small strip of fabric across his eyes, but after all these years, he felt naked without the mask. He was exhausted, fighting some flu bug running rampant through the members of the traveling show, and being cooped up in the small sleep car as Roy, Conner and the others threw out accusations towards a man who'd been like a father to him only left him bitter.

Another weapons plant had been hit, this time in Cologne, the same night the circus had last been in town, and all of it pointed to members of Jack Haly's troupe, possibly even the ringmaster himself.

None of it made any sense. The circus was his family, and he treated everyone with love and respect. Haly did thorough background checks on all his performers after the death of John and Mary Grayson, never wanting to fall prey to the likes of Tony Zucco and his protection racket ever again. To this day, Jack had never forgiven himself for not paying the money to the man ultimately responsible for Dick's parent's death.

Being a part of an international arms ring was ridiculous. He was a kind and honest old man who wanted nothing more than to bring the charm and joy of the circus to the masses. Sanctioned mission or not, Dick was going to prove his innocence if it was the last thing he did, but if he didn't shake the flu bug sooner as opposed to later, it might just be. Lost in his thoughts he was startled by the sudden chime of the earpiece com unit, even though he'd been expecting this specific call for some time now.
"Uh yeah?"

"Dude, where are you?" Wally asked.

"Confidential mission…from Batman."

"Wow! You know what I'm doing? Making a baloney sandwich, kinda like you just did. I talked to Tornado. You guys aren't on a mission, not an official one anyway."

Robin sighed, he never been very good at lying, especially to the speedster. "A friend, Jack Haly."

"The circus guy? From you old flying Grayson days?"

"Yeah. He's implicated in this global crime spree. Someone in the show is dirty, but I need to prove old Jack's clean or he might lose the circus."

"Then why not bring me along. I know your back story. I know what that circus means to you. It's where you grew up. It's where you lost your…"

"I left you behind because you know my back story. I didn't want my best pal questioning my objectivity."

"Dude, that's what a best pal's for."

Wally hated playing dumb and following the same script, knowing the genuine pain that this particular mission had caused. He hadn't appreciated being left off this mission previously, even more so this time around. He wanted to be there for his friend, especially now, but unfortunately his skill set, among other reasons made him ill-suited for the circus life. It was one thing to race up the side of a building and defy gravity, but it was another entirely to walk a tightrope in the dark as the spotlights swirled, or swinging on a trapeze a hundred feet in the air blindfolded. Super speed as cool as it was, just couldn't compare with that.
"So what's your plan?"

Over the next few minutes Robin detailed his course of action, the formation of the Daring Dangers, the inclusion of Red Arrow, the suspects, the motives, that arrival of Interpol. All the while Wally chewed silently, trying to determine if there was some way he could assist, something he could manipulate to ensure their success.

With every alteration he'd made, events and moment had changed to keep up. With the flap of the butterfly wings, even the smallest manipulation of one state of deterministic nonlinear systems could result in a much larger one later down the line. At times it could be overwhelming when he slowed down long enough to consider every step, but given the circumstances, it was the best he could do. However losing a friend in the process was not an option.

The Parasite was the true culprit, but he couldn't just out and out say it. Wally's mind raced as he ciphered through thousands of computations and scenarios in his head that might lead them to an earlier conclusion when something in the media room caught his eye.

"Hey…hang on just a second," he abruptly interrupted, putting the com on mute as he reached for the remote to turn up the volume of the television.

"And in financial news, the world's largest industrial conglomerates made their appearance at the third day of the talks at the G8 Summit in London. The owners of such companies as China National Petroleum, Samsung, Lex Corp, Exxon Mobil, and Wayne Enterprises all took turns laying out their vision for a new global market to the group of eight."

On the screen, clips of owners and CEO's making their way into the talks were weaved together seamlessly, but the one that caught his eye most was the stately dark haired man, waving to the crowds as he entered the building.

_Holy shit_

Dick Grayson was in Belgium. Bruce Wayne was in England. Given the opportunity to return to his homeland, Alfred Pennyworth would surely be at Wayne's side, which meant….the cave was empty.

_There'd be no better chance. It might be his only chance._
He stared dumbly at the screen until the chirp in his ear reminded him Robin was still on hold. He quickly flipped back.

"Dude I'm sorry."

"Everything ok there? Dick asked. "Some kind of mission?"

"Nope, just a quick bathroom break."

"We'll thanks for muting it."

"My pleasure. Look I gotta run."

"Yeah me too."

"Dick," Wally paused for a moment, searching. "Just be careful ok?"

"Aren't I always?" Robin laughed through his obvious fatigue.

Fighting every urge to tell his best friend and his team what they faced, just like he had when Artemis and Zatanna struck out on their own, Wally bit his tongue and hoped he wouldn't live to regret it.

"I'll see you when you get back."

"Take care Wally."

The call ended and within seconds Wally was out the door, gym bag quickly packed with the appropriate attire. He'd be in Gotham in thirty minutes, less if he really pushed it, and then he'd be faced with the most complex and dangerous part of the mission to date. He was going cave diving.
Author's Notes: Another one in the books. Unfortunately the delays are what they are and can't be helped. On the bright side I'm essentially posting about three chapters worth in length, so you gotta give me some credit. We're nearing the end of this story and shit's about to get real. Thanks to everyone following along. Typos and boo boo's will be edited out later, but I needed to post this while I had the chance. Hope you enjoy and leave a review if you get a chance. Thanks.

P.S. - My apologies to any South Dakotan's out there. I've actually been through your state and loved it.
The burgeoning young scientist crouched down into the soft damp moss, hands on his knees, examining the aperture in front of him in careful critical detail. Even at fifteen, his thirst for knowledge was unquenchable, his drive for exploration unyielding. He’d already put his own life on the line once to discover the mysteries of electrochemical engineering, and it seemed as if there was no path Kid Flash wasn’t willing to take in the name of scientific discovery…until now.

“Nope.”

“Wally…”

“Uh-uh.”

“Dude…”

“No way man.”

Dick Grayson and Wally West stood at the bottom of the wooded ravine just off the far west edge of the estate, staring down into the small opening at the base of the bedrock. A trickle of water flowed slowly down the hillside, pudding up at their feet as they shined their flashlights into the abyss. Robin reached his hand into the small chasm, feeling the warm current of air escaping.

“You can feel the heat right? This has to be the exhaust vent for the mainframe’s server farm.”

Wally shook his head. “Dude I don’t care if it’s the secret entrance to the playboy mansion, I’m not going in there.”

“You’re telling me you’re not even slightly curious to see where this goes? What if we’ve found an undiscovered back door to the Batcave?”
“Hey great! Good job! Congrats,” the ginger clapped sarcastically. “Now can we please go back inside? Why are you so obsessed with trying to sneak into that place? You literally have a key to it on your belt.”

“I don’t know,” Dick shrugged. “The challenge maybe?”

“Yeah, well have fun with that.”

“Suit yourself,” the acrobat smiled, dropping to his knees and beginning an army crawl into the crevasse, headlamp strapped on and burning bright.

“You go ahead! I’m going back and finishing off all Alfred’s brownies….maybe the ice cream too.” Wally yelled into the tunnel, trying to coax his friend back out.

“Have at it,” the boy wonder’s voice echoed out from the darkness, getting quieter with each passing minute as the sounds of grunting and cackling faded into the distance.

“I’m going to be sitting in your favorite chair, pirating the Spice channel, texting all the girls in your contact list how much you love them, while your ass is stuck down here all night. Do you hear me?”

Wally’s veiled threats found no response as he became even more agitated with his best friend. It wasn’t like the speedster was scared of small dark confined spaces, he was terrified of them. Flashes were meant to be in motion, the sun at their back, wide open spaces ahead, not is some stalagmite covered sarcophagus.

The speedster hated just about everything subterranean related, odd for someone who would one day call a cave inside a mountain a home away from home. At least Mt. Justice was spacious and open, you felt like you could actually breathe. This tunnel of terror was the exact opposite.

As far as enclosed tight spaces, cramped closets were good for getting frisky, dark underground passages were where people were left to die.

Pulling out his phone, he’d read to Dick that almost eighty two people had died due to caving accidents, important information until Dick pointed out it was over a twenty eight year study (roughly three a year), regardless his best friend’s mind was made up.
After a few minutes of pacing, Wally was at wits end. “Fine. Get yourself killed. No problem. Enjoy your trip up the planet’s sphincter, just don’t come whining to me when no one can find your body. Well that doesn’t make any sense, but you get my point.”

Wally started climbing the hillside, grabbing small tree after tree slowing pulling himself upwards, fuming every step of the way.

“Maybe Bruce will just adopt me. Maybe I can live in a big damn mansion and go to school were the books weren’t published in the 1980’s.”

Wally gritted his teeth as his calves began to burn from the steep climb. In tight wooded trails, speed wasn’t much help unless you got a running start.

“The first thing I’ll do is have a huge pool party. Band, buffet… the works. Invite all the rich girls from Gotham Academy too, bathing suits optional. Hey what ever happened to that Dick Grayson guy? Oh him? Yeah he didn’t listen to his best pal’s advice and the earth ATE him.”

Wally paused, wiping his damp brow, trying to figure out which direction the main house was, barley any sun breaking through the wooded blanket of shade.

“Batman and Kid Flash – doesn’t’ exactly roll off the tongue, but I’m not married to the name. But a black suit with a red lightning bolt on it, now that would be cool.”

Wally took a few more steps up the trail before stopping, throwing his head back and admitting defeat.

"Shit!“

“Shit shit shit shit shit!” his words echoed throughout the hollow as he bellyached all the way back to the bottom. Standing at the opening, Wally shined his light inside, squinting into the darkness, hoping against hope that his best friend would be emerging from the fissure, ready to receive a king size serving of "I told you so."
After a few more minutes of dead silence, Wally dropped to his knees, grumbling all the way in.

“I swear to God Dick, if you pull the ninja thing on me in here I will end you.”

xxx

Wally stood now at the same fissure, despite the gravity of the situation, smiling at that memory. Because it was so vital to the service and functionality of the Batcomputer's mainframe, the tunnel had remained accessible, but now camouflaged with a holographic generator that blended the aperture perfectly into its rock and mossy surroundings; meaning if you didn't know what you were looking for you'd never find it. Then again they used to say the same thing about the Death Star.

Breaking into the cave was Bruce's idea from the start. Who better to know how to breach one of the most secure facilities ever built than the man who'd designed it.

Despite all the danger he'd faced, all he'd accomplished in his brief return, this was by far the most critical part of Wayne's plan. Without it, the Light would still have access to their most dangerous weapon.

There was no room for deviation, no shortcuts, no hidden seconds to spare. The only variable Bruce had no control over was when exactly all three residents of 1007 Mountain Drive would be gone. No one could be expected to remember exact dates and times so many decades later.

This specific part of the mission was the one Bruce had worked so hard with him on, repeated and practiced over and over; what server to disable, what device to use, what to wear, what to avoid, all the way to the brand of batteries to use.

The only slight alteration to this perfectly crafted and painstakingly practiced plan, the only tiny
hiccup that had not been accounted for in all of the Wayne’s simulations was instead of sending in a twenty something adult furnished with cutting edge futuristic time armor, access codes, virtual thumbprints and next gen hardware able to enter undetected through the camouflaged entrance under the waterfall; instead now he now had a seventeen year old kid with a flashlight, a change of clothes, dragging behind a homemade electromagnet; climbing thorough a tunnel no bigger than a sewer pipe Not exactly a contingency either one of them had remotely planned for.

Wally’s mind drifted back to one of his all-time favorite movies, but the Batcave was no Shawshank and he was no Andy Dufresne.

He crouched down; staring once more into the abyss, imagining the snakes, rats, spiders, and bats that eagerly awaited him on the other side.

“God this sucks,” he gritted his teeth as he dropped to the ground, knees and elbows sloshing through the mud. With the device in his cinch sack tied to his ankle and dragging heavily behind him, begrudgingly Wally began his journey.

As he passed thought the opening, this was probably the only time he’d been thankful to be back in his seventeen year old body. It was a tight fit at fifteen, seventeen was going to be no picnic, and at twenty-two he would have been royally screwed.

No matter if the futuristic technology had been available to him; all it would have been able to do was open the access doors to the cave. Bypassing security protocols outside the system would still have been impossible. Wayne had made several futile attempts to explain why, but it all when straight over the speedster’s head. When it came to systems and hacking, that was Dick’s forte, not his.

Up ahead the tunnel began to narrow as he squeezed his way through the small gap, turning awkwardly sideways as the shaft began its decent. Dick called this part Bubblegum Alley, because of the way the mud floor grabbed at you. It was like walking through a series of glue traps and he was the mouse. For somehow as claustrophobic as the speedster, how he’d avoided a full blown panic attack by this point was a freaking miracle, and the worst was yet to come.

Finally passing through the mud pit, the jagged contours of the ceiling began to dig into his back, forcing him from his hands and knees to his stomach, wiggling like some kind of worm through the bowels of the hell. The channel continued to narrow, as he rolled on his side to meet the contour of the passage. Seconds later he couldn’t move forward any further; he was stuck.
He frantically reached forward to push against the walls to back out, but the slickness of the rock made it impossible to gain any traction, and with nothing to press against, he began to panic; the air around him becoming dangerously thin. Wally broke out into a cold sweat as his flashlight slipped helplessly from his damp hands, rolling inches away, but in his current situation it might as well have been miles. It was then he realized just how much he’d grown from fifteen to seventeen.

Dick had always been about a foot shorter until his massive growth spurt in his late teens, and even back then, parts of this journey had been tight for him. Wally began to realize how passengers onboard some doomed airline flight must feel seconds before their plane crashed. It was like being back in the chrysalis all over again, in that dark space in-between life and death.

Trying to use a technique that he'd never been even close to mastering, vibrating his molecules would do him no good. Most likely propelling him deeper into the earth’s crust, while he prayed to god that he wouldn’t lose focus and end up solidifying in the hillside.

He was going to die here, and everything he'd worked for would be for nothing. He began to hyperventilate, gestating wildly to no avail. Then he heard her voice.

_Breathe babe, I need you to breath._

_Suddenly he was back in his apartment in Palo, the archer easing him back to his pillow, calming him from the nightmare, the one where the drugs she’d ingested failed to work as planned, and she lay dying on the ground at Cape Canaveral for real this time._

_Everything’s going to be ok. Just breathe._

Wally closed his eyes, allowing the memory of the archer to calm his mind. His heart rate returned to almost normal as he exhaled a deep breath, and with that action his body shifted slightly. That was the moment he felt the pressure from the roof of the tunnel lessen. Taking slow shallow breaths he stretched his arms out in front of him, as compact and straight as he could, slowly jerking forward after every exhale.

Inch by inch he continued forward at a snail’s pace, and for one of the fastest men alive, the key to his survival would be to move slow, fighting every urge that being a speedster was all about. It
would take time, but for once, time was something he had plenty of. Bruce, Dick, and Alfred were
thousands of miles away, and at a minimum it would take days before their return. All he could do
at this point was to stay calm and keep moving forward.

After what felt like an eternity, the tunnel seemed to widen slightly and a warm breeze rushed over
him. Wally wasn't sure if he was imagining it or if it was actually widening out, but he began to
move more freely as up ahead he could hear a low hum resonating through the tunnel, growing
stronger as he pressed further into the abyss.

After one last forty-five degree turn, he saw the air vent up ahead, the bright red lights of the
chamber behind it cascading through the mesh, illuminating the walls of tunnel before it as if the
fiery gates of hell waited just on the other side. But Wally knew better. He’d made it.

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The vent came crashing down to the floor below followed by the speedster as he landed
awkwardly, catching the device tied to his leg, rolling towards the far wall and back-crawling the
rest of the way until he felt the stone on his back.

“Jesus,” he sighed heavily, wiping at his sweat soaked forehead, not caring about the dark shade of
mud he’d probably spread across it.

After a few moments of catching his breath, Wally reached down to untie the synch sack secured to
his leg and got to work. The strings had dug into his calf, cutting off all circulation from his ankle
down; fairly normal when dragging something behind him the size of a car battery. He flexed his
toes as the sensation of a million pin pricks finally woke up his slumbering appendage.

Surrounded by the chattering of the towering computer servers, Wally carefully stood up and
began to get undressed. Stripping down to his boxers inside the Batcave felt like some poorly
thought out fraternity prank, but for him to blend into the shadows he had to become one.

He draped himself in the tight black outfit, placing his goggles over his eyes before pulling the
black hood over his head. An ancient sword would have really topped off the ensemble, but the
local Wal-Mart had been fresh out.

It had been a pretty clever idea for Bruce to use this portion of the cave to naturally vent the server
farm. The coolness of the tunnel offset its thermal footprint as it escaped out to the hillside, making it nearly invisible to satellites in orbit and boots on the ground, but that ventilation did nothing for him right now as he began to get a bit toasty underneath the thick layers of black.

Wally removed the device from the sack and walked down the server farm until he found tower number five, locking the heavy device magnetically to its metal casing. Normally in this advanced type of system, magnets would have little to no effect, but this was no ordinary magnet. It was a N52 neodymium disc magnet, capable of a pull force of approximately 450 lbs. If someone wasn’t careful and got their hand clamped between it and a piece of magnetic metal, they could literally lose it. Wally liked his hand just the way it was, he did some of his best work with it.

The electromagnet would be set nowhere near full power, but it would still be strong enough to disable the system, causing the memory to be dumped and the hard drive forced into an emergency shutdown to protect itself. In theory this action would disable the Batcave’s security systems for a short period time, a very short one. While the system rebooted, motion sensors, alarms, and security cameras would be offline briefly, and that was his window, his only window. When the systems came back online, they would not be happy, like maximum overdrive type unhappy. Alarms would go off inside the mansion, possibly even the Watchtower, but by the time the signal reached Wayne in Europe, there would be nothing he could do about it. Abruptly ending a business meeting and all the attention it would cause while finding the closest Zeta Tube would take time, and if Wally’s estimates were right Dick would be nowhere near one either.

Breaking into a fortress more secure than the Pentagon was never going to go unnoticed, but if he followed the elder Wayne's plan to a T, the culprits and blame would soon be shifted to a more likely perpetrator. This night he would be unofficially joining the League of Shadows.

Wally tugged at the device on the center server making sure it was secure, held his breath, said a prayer and pushed the power button activating the device. In a blink of an eye he was on the other side of the room, preparing to make his entrance into the main chamber of the cave…when nothing happened.

*Come on!*

All systems continued as they should. There was no power interruption, no alarms, no emergency lighting. Nothing.
Wally scratched at the back of his neck. He’d gotten all the right components, tested the battery multiple times, checked all the cables. It didn’t make sense. Perhaps something had become dislodged on his way in. It hadn’t exactly been the smoothest of rides. He bent down eye level with the device, seeing the power indicator light blinking as it should. There was just no reason why it shouldn’t be working.

“God” he growled, smacking the side of the server when suddenly the room flashed and everything went dark.

He shrugged his shoulders at his sudden fortune, reached up and turned on his goggles. In a heartbeat was out the door. Despite his expertise, sometimes it was better to be lucky than smart.

The Batcave was like the Smithsonian of crime fighting. A multilevel structure furnished with the latest state of the art crime labs, DNA sequencers, electron microscopes, spectrographs, weapons vaults, 3D printers, super computers, and just about every type vehicle you could think of. If you were a burgeoning superhero on the rise, this place was a real panty dropper. But Wally’s favorite part of it undoubtedly had to be the Trophy Room.

Bruce Wayne was a collector; fine art, wines, sports cars, antiques. The mansion and his many subsequent homes around the world were chock-full of them. It only made sense that his alter ego would have the same idiosyncrasies.

Batman’s trophy room was a museum dedicated to a lifetime of crime fighting. The items displayed were iconic to say the least; the Giant Penny, Joker's playing card, Scarface’s dummy head, Riddler’s hourglass, Killer Croc's sharpest tooth, and so many numerous others. Through the lenses of his goggles, Wally knew the infrared and electromagnetic spectrum could never truly do this place justice.

The speedster swore one day he’d have a souvenir room of his own, and the collection inside Mt. Justice was fairly impressive in its own right. He just always assumed by the time he’d reached Bruce’s age, his might have rivaled this one. Perhaps one day there’d even be some kind of museum he could place them in, but of course he’d never gotten the chance.

Robin was always more than happy to play tour guide, never tiring of telling the stories behind the collection, but one item he’d never shown, never shared, was a vault buried deep into the cave, housing one single solitary item; a green meteor from another world.

In the darkness, Wally scaled the cave walls, mentally checking off where each security camera was mounted. There was no way to avoid them all, but that was what the black get-up was for.
Even though all the cameras should be down, the speedster wasn’t taking any chances.

If he had weeks, months even, there would still be no way for him to find the main vault, let alone break into it. For reasons he kept to himself, the elder Wayne still never shared the exact location of it. Maybe it was out of habit, maybe it was on purpose, but regardless knowing Batman, even Superman’s x-ray vision would have had a hard time finding it. Luckily that was not a task the speedster had to worry about, he knew exactly where he was going.

The uniforms vault was open just like Bruce said it would be. In a facility as secure as this, there was little reason to close it. Wally stepped in, looking to his left and right at the myriad versions of the Batsuit and Robin’s uniform; attire for every occasion. Just as before, he slid the suits out of the way, finding the computer monitor just where it should be, the technical schematics labeling the armaments matched with those its screen.

He removed his black gloves, hesitantly placing a hand on the cold glass surface. How this was supposed to work with every security system and electrical device inside the cave powered down, he had no idea, but he trusted Bruce and did as he was instructed. Once again the image of the schematic faded away and the numeric keypad appeared.

“Here goes nothing,” he sighed, typing in the same sequence Batman had directed. 91939 and the pound sign pressed three times.

Seconds later the monitor rose and the hidden enclosure behind it revealed. Wally turned the handle and the vault opened; the small sliver of radioactive rock glowing inside momentarily blinding him through the night enhanced vision settings. It was about the size of a large magic marker, leaving Wally wondering how big the main stone must be, but at the moment size wasn’t the issue. It was still just as deadly.

Carefully he reached in and took the rock, holding it delicately in his hind as if at any moment it might explode. Dick Grayson was his best friend, they shared literally everything, but never once had Dick shared this. The small sliver of Kryptonite Robin kept in his utility belt had only been used once that Wally knew off, and just as quickly placed back inside. It was one of the few of Bruce’s unbreakable rules Dick followed to the letter. The meteor was one of the most powerful weapons in Batman’s arsenal, not a trinket to be passed around for show and tell. Despite knowing the answer, Wally still had asked to see it several times, and each time Robin ignored the request and quickly changed the subject.

The speedster took no satisfaction in holding it now, no level of curiosity piqued. It was dangerous, like holding a silver bullet in the company of werewolves, capable of bringing one of the most powerful beings in the universe to his knees. He couldn’t get it out of his hands fast enough, but knowing its final resting place was even more stressful and a bridge he wasn’t remotely ready to
There wasn’t much time left, he could weigh the morality of the next part of the mission some other time, right now he needed to get out of the cave as quickly as possible, which meant climbing back out the way he came. Wally placed the black glove back on his hand, wiping the handle thoroughly of fingerprints, closing the safe and doing the same to the monitor as it slid back down into place. If he left so much as an eyelash behind, Dick or Bruce would surely find it.

Wally stepped out of the vault, stumbling slightly over the lip of the hydraulic doors when he saw the beam of light cast mere feet away from his opaque form, as well as the sound of a hammer of a gun locking into place.

“Who goes there?” the figure behind the flashlight demanded. His thick cockney accent gave away his identity.

Oh shit

That wasn’t Alfred Pennyworth on the news feed he saw. The stately Englishman wasn’t in Europe, he wasn’t in London. He was fifteen yards away with a flashlight in one hand and a gun in the other, pointed blindly into the darkness and directly at the speedster’s chest.

The Batcave’s security systems were moments away from rebooting, his trespass discovered and his identity soon to follow. There was only one thing left to do, and Wally hated himself for what would come next.

xxx

Standing on the wharf, just on the outskirts of Hamburg, Dick Grayson remained in the shadows of the alley, waiting for the drunken couple getting in on by the dumpster to finish and move on. It had been a long two weeks, but satisfying ones. He and his team had restored Jack Haly’s good name, the Parasite had been apprehended, and he’d gotten a chance to revisit a life lost to him so many years ago.
Even after Artemis, Roy, Megan and Conner had left back for the States, Dick had remained behind with old Jack; sitting in his office wide eyed listening to stories of the old days, sharing fond remembrances of old performers they once knew. Jack even shared a few tales about his family he’d never heard before. But without a doubt the best thing, the one he'd remember for the rest of his life, was standing on that platform, hundreds of feet above the earth one more time, the last of the Flying Grayson's making his final appearance. Magical sounded corny, but that’s exactly what it had been. It had really been something special stepping back into that life, not being Robin the Boy Wonder just for a little while.

It may not have been a League sanctioned mission, but his teammates had treated it as such, sacrificing their time and putting their lives on the line for a complete stranger, but that’s what heroes did, that’s what friends were for.

Admittedly it had been a strange dynamic; two archers, two aliens, two clones both with anger management issues, teammates that didn’t trust each other very much. In some ways it would have been so much easier with just Wally and Kaldur joining he and Roy just like the old days; four old friends working together to step out of the shadows of their mentors, hungry for the day they would be members of the Justice League.

In the end though it was better that they’d stayed behind. Trying to relive the old days was only going to remind Roy of who he was not. They'd all done the math, Roy was the one they'd grown up with, fought and trained beside. He was the only Roy the three had ever known, but that wasn't good enough for Red Arrow, and it would never be until he found the person he'd replaced and those responsible. That was the kind of mission Robin was ready to sign up for.

But something unexpected had happened along the way. Conner and Roy had seemed to put to rest some of their mutual animosity, realizing that perhaps they were more alike than they’d thought; being clones notwithstanding. Roy needed to be around people he was familiar with. He had a long journey ahead of him coming to grips with what he was, and Conner was perhaps the only person on Earth who could relate. Despite his usual arrogant behavior, Dick could sense the elder archer was grateful to be there instead of stuck at the Queen Estate, watched over by Ollie and Dinah like some pitiful charity case.

Megan seemed lighter than usual, as if a dark cloud that had been hanging over her had recently been lifted. Despite her outgoing and bubbly demeanor, Dick could sense there was still something she was holding back, something private that she wasn't quite ready to share. He could literally see it hanging off the tip of her tongue. Maybe it was an alien thing, maybe it was a girl thing, honestly he wasn't the most experienced with either, but she would share it when she was ready. All of them kept secrets of some kind, even him.
Despite their break up, Conner and Artemis had continued to work well together, showing no signs of the bitterness and resentment that most would expect. Canary’s training had held true and except for a few minor bumps in the road, their teamwork and execution had been flawless.

But it didn't take a detective to sense there was still something bubbling just under the surface. People just don’t just break up one day and remain friends the next, not in the real world anyway. What Dick might have been sensing was either lingering feelings they both weren't quite ready to let go of yet, or some simmering deep suited animosity threatening to erupt at any time if this mission lasted much longer. At least they were being professional about it. Either way he's wasn't about to be stupid enough to ask.

After a few more minutes of drunken thrusts and sloppy kisses, the German couple finally moved on, allowing Dick to step into the dilapidated old phone booth and prepare to go home.

*Recognize Robin - B01. Destination?*

"Batcave," he replied.

*Acknowledged.*

The booth began to glow, lighting up the alley like a Chinese fireworks display, sending rats and the feral cats that hunted them scurrying for the cover of darkness. After two weeks abroad, Dick was ready to be home.

Less than a minute later, the Zeta Tube announced his arrival, reforming his molecules deep inside the cavernous space carved into the hillside upon which Wayne Manor stood. All Dick wanted was a long hot shower, and whatever leftovers Alfred had hopefully stowed away in the fridge. He had a pretty sophisticated pallet for a fourteen year old, but after a few weeks in Germany, he was ready for some good old fashioned American cuisine; junk food.

Looking to his watch, it was around 0200 E.S.T. when he stepped off the Zeta Platform. Bruce would likely be out on patrol, and Alfred long since asleep. Jet lag would mostly likely haunt him for the next few days, but for the moment he was wide awake and starving for something that didn't start with *sauer* or ended with *kraut*.

For the next few hours at least, the mansion would be his to sprawl out, catch up on Instagram and
Snapchat, and just generally chill...or so he thought until he caught sight of the Amazon and Krytonian standing watch over the cave, casting concerned glances in his direction, while stepping out of the uniform vault was very grim looking Dark Knight.

_Uh oh_

"I guess this isn't a social call," Dick smiled nervously.

"We need to talk, Batman scowled.

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Dick rushed up the stairs, finding the old Englishman sitting in the kitchen, a cup of warm tea between his hands.

"Alfred, are you ok?" the teen asked urgently.

"I'm fine Master Richard. I have already told Master Wayne once not to make such a fuss."

"A fuss? A fuss?! It's not a fuss! You could have been killed!"

“I hardly call a bump on the head a mortal wound,” the old man smiled.

Alfred had seen this before, the same scared and vulnerable look Dick had worn the first few weeks after moving into the mansion, after laying his family to rest and having nowhere to go but into the hands of strangers. It had taken Alfred months to make the boy feel welcome, to feel at home. He’d been as much a father to him as Bruce Wayne, if not more so, and now someone had broken into the mansion and threatened to take it all away from him again.

Casting aside all pretense of formality, the old Englishman placed his palm to the youth’s cheek, attempting to calm him.
“I’m all right sir. Now run along now and get cleaned up, you smell dreadful. I’ll begin preparations for breakfast. I believe we are all up for the day.”

Dick nodded, leaving the kitchen but instead of heading up the master staircase to his room, he went decidedly down, demanding answers. When the elevator opened to the main floor of the cave, Bruce Wayne was alone.

“How did this happen?”

“I’m not sure,” Wayne replied. “I was just finishing dinner inside the House of Commons when I received the alert the mainframe had been compromised. It took me ten minutes to leave and another fifteen to taxi to the Zeta Tube in Hackney before I arrived.”

‘Where did you find him?’ Dick asked, looking around the uniform vault and the surrounding areas for signs of struggle.

Wayne scratched at it his five o’clock shadow. “That’s where it gets a bit odd.”

xxx

Batman stood silently at the head of the conference table aboard the Watchtower, allowing a few moments for the gravity of the situation to sink in amongst his fellow Leaguers. Needless to say emergency meetings at any hour were not something to look forward to; but ones scheduled at the crack of dawn, mere hours after long nights of patrolling their cities had ended and day jobs were set to begin were not appreciated whatsoever, especially to one hot tempered and sleep deprived test pilot, unsure if he was clearly hearing the report Batman had just shared.

Hal Jordan’s eyes narrowed at the detective, making no attempt at masking his contempt. “So let me get this straight. Someone broke into the Batcave, bypassed what you say is one of the most sophisticated security systems on the planet, found a second piece of Kryptonite that supposedly no one knew about including us, knocked out your butler, and then disappeared without a trace. Am I missing anything?” he growled.

Bruce remained emotionless behind the mask, refusing to feed into Green Lanterns anger. “No, that about sums it up.”
“Damnit!” Jordan pounded his fist on the table in fury. “This is exactly why the stone should have been secured up here. How many times did we tell you that?”

Despite being made aware of its existence years ago, no one had felt entirely comfortable with one man being in sole possession of the mineral, but if anyone had to be placed in charge of Superman’s only weakness, there weren’t many individuals more qualified or trusted than the Dark Knight…until tonight.

“Technically it was just a sliver of the larger stone, kept separate in the event of incursion,” Diana calmly corrected.

“How’d that work out for you?” Jordan snidely replied.

“Bruce made Clark and I aware if its existence. I think you’re missing the bigger picture.”

“Oh I’m not missing anything princess,” Jordan sneered. “Someone kicked down Bat’s door while he was off playboying around Europe, and now they have the key to knocking out one of our biggest guns.”

“Hal,” Barry Allen rose, taking his friend calmly by the arm and easing his back down to his chair. “How’s Alfred?”

“He’s fine. Just a mild contusion to his head.”

The Flash looked over at the detective curiously, the CSI in him already playing out several different scenarios, piecing together the crime scene. “Whoever did this could have easily killed him and taken what they wanted, but instead they took him back to his room, and not just any random room in the mansion, but his actual bedroom. Provided him with food, water, access to a phone, and medical attention. This isn’t some random thief Bruce; this is someone who knows him…and you.”

A gloved hand reached out to the display. “You'll see the figures here, here and here. Whoever these perpetrators were, they knew the exact locations of the surveillance cameras as well as how long the mainframe reboot would take.”
“How many?” Hawkwoman asked.

“At team of at least three,” Batman confirmed. “All dressed head to toe in black, no discernible markings or insignias.”

“I thought you said the security systems were down. How did you get these pictures of them?” Flash asked.

“I have three cameras that run independently of the main system, recorded directly to digital tape, automatically erased and restarted every twelve hours. These still images were all Robin and I were able recover after the power went down.”

“Was there any damage to mainframe?” J’onn questioned.

“No. The device used was fairly rudimentary, but it did the trick. Once the Batcomputer detected the electromagnetic pulse, it immediately shut down and dumped its memory.

Barry walked to the monitor, examining it carefully, methodically putting all the pieces together.

*Multiple figures in black, experienced in stealth and breaking into secured facilities, a familiarity with the Manor and the cave, as well as the men who resided there. With the pieces in place, the perpetrators were obvious*

“Shadows,” the Flash said grimly.

“That’s the working theory,” the Dark Knight confirmed.

“How’d they get in?”
Batman turned to his partner, allowing Robin to take over the meeting “There’s a small shaft on the far edge of the property. It’s a natural ventilation duct for the computer core and server farm.”

“How small?” Clark asked?

“Two feet by three feet maybe? It’s pretty tight in some spaces and winds back nearly four hundred yards before it reaches the computer core.”

“It does release a small thermal signature that theoretically could be seen by satellite, but someone would have to know where to look to begin with. Someone familiar with both Gotham and the Mansion,” Batman added.

“Ra’s al Ghul.” Diana asserted firmly.

Bruce nodded. “Ra’s has known my identity for some time now, but he’s never been this brazen before.”

Their battles had always been more intellectual than physical. Out of some twisted form of respect to his formidable adversary, Ra’s had always referred to Batman only as Detective. He’d sought to make the Dark Knight his successor. It seemed that goal had now changed and signaled a drastic change in strategy.

“And if he knows who you are, he probably knows the rest of us as well,” Jordan said in disgust.
“That’s highly unlikely,”

“Sure! Just like breaking into the freaking Batcave was.”

"Why the smaller stone?" J'onn asked, changing the subject. "Surely the larger one would bring more money on the open market."

"Presuming that’s what it’s to be used for." Batman replied.

"Well you wouldn't have to worry about the highest bidder if you had just listened for one god damn time in your life and left it up here," Hal yelled, the last vestige of patience worn thin.

He stood up from his chair, ring glowing brightly, rapidly approaching the Dark Knight when Clark quickly stepped in between, trying to calm the hot tempered pilot and keep the situation from escalating any further.

“What’s done is done. Right now we need to determine if the stone is still in the States before it, and whoever took it, disappears into the wind.”

“Easier said than done,” Flash frowned.

“Perhaps not,” Batman replied cryptically.
As the League continued its debate, Kaldur remained silent. This was a discussion way above his virtual pay grade, subjects and information considered above top secret. The young Atlantean had been partners with Aquaman for years and was keenly aware of his King’s surface name, but realistically Arthur Curry had no identity to protect. The same could not be said for his fellow Leaguers.

With the exception of Robin, identities were shared freely within the cave. Kaldur assumed that to be true within the Justice League as well, but to his knowledge the civilian identities of its members had never been shared with their protégés other than their own. However Aqualad had always suspected that due to their friendship, Wally and Robin most likely were aware of more than they led on. The idea of someone outside of this close-knit community knowing the League’s secrets, particularly Batman’s, was beyond troubling.

It was the subject of identities that had brought him onboard the Watchtower at such a late hour. He was the Team leader, and as such, deserved the right to be present at this specific meeting when issues arose around those he led. Needless to say the news regarding one of his own had been quite a shock, but even more so, the accusations and possible ramifications that came along with it.

Kaldur glanced over to Robin as he stood alone in the corner of the conference room, his expression unreadable behind the mask. It wasn’t surprising to see his inclusion in this meeting either. The break-in at the Batcave had potentially put his identity at risk as well.

When they’d first arrived on the satellite, Aqualad watched closely at Robin’s reaction (or lack thereof) when the news of their teammate had been communicated. Kaldur quickly came to the conclusion that the Boy Wonder must have discovered that key bit of information on his own long ago. He was a detective after all.

The discussions remained heated but still below the boiling point, quickly coming to a halt as soon as Green Arrow and Black Canary arrived with the archer in tow. Artemis’s grey eyes grew wide, as suddenly the entire rooms fell on her. Ollie and Dinah had been oddly cryptic when they came to her so early in her quarters, completely out of character for the warm and comforting duo. Suddenly she began to realize why.

“Shut the door,” Batman ordered, as Green Arrow walked back and pulled the hatch closed, cutting of her only escape route. It suddenly became hard to breathe trapped in the vacuum of space as that reality sank in.
“Sit down.”

The young teen complied, eyes narrowed as she pulled out the chair, dragging the legs intentionally loud across the cold steel floor. The day she had feared and dread had finally arrived.

“We need to talk to you about your family.”

Her eyes shot to Diana and Ollie in betrayal. “You told them? All of them?!” she hissed, her voice beginning to break, staring back at the Dark Knight with the same venom. “You said it would stay between us!”

“Circumstances have called for it to be brought to the League’s attention. When was the last time you saw your sister?”

“Who?” she said angrily, “Cheshire?” as if using that name would cause shock or revulsion to all gathered in its revelation.

“About two weeks ago. When she told me my dad Sportsmaster,” once again snarled in defiance, “had been crippled. But you knew that already didn’t you?”

“Why do you think she came to you?” Dinah asked.

“Because she thought maybe I did it,” the archer replied coldly, the Crock in her starting to come out. It seemed like her dad may have been right all along.
And what if they learn the truth about those family ties you’ve worked so hard to hide baby girl? Would they ever trust you again?

“Did you?” Wonder Woman asked sternly.

“Would it matter?” Artemis hissed back at the Amazon. "He got what he deserved. If you want to think it was me, knock yourselves out."

Batman stepped forward. “No one is accusing you of anything. We simply need to find your sister.”

“Yeah good luck with that,” she scoffed. “Why?”

“Because something very specific was stolen from the Batcave last night and we have reason to suspect she might know something about it.”

“And what? You think she did it? Or maybe you think I helped? That I’m some kind of mole too huh?”

“Honey,” Ollie interrupted, leaning down and placing his hand on the young girl’s shoulder. “No one thinks you’re a mole.”
Without so much as a glance, Artemis grabbed his wrist and threw it off. “I’m not your honey; I’m not even your niece. I’m just some piece of trash you picked up off the sidewalk. I didn’t ask to be here. I didn’t ask to join your precious little pep squad. You came to me remember?” she bellowed, struggling to keep you composure.

“Artemis,” Dinah said calmly. “We just need to know if you have any way of contacting Cheshire. Did she act strangely when she came to you? Did she say anything that might be relevant? I want to be clear; no one is accusing you of anything.”

“Oh really? Is that why the whole League was invited to this little pow wow? You couldn’t have just asked me without making it into some kind of Spanish inquisition? I thought everything we talked about was confidential she put in air quotes. “What else did you tell them? What other deep dark secrets did you divvy out that I was stupid enough to share?”

Artemis looked to her two teammates in shame, wondering what they must be thinking.

*Was every battle she had with Cheshire just an act?*

*Did every mission end with a call to her father?*

*Had she been the mole Roy accused her being of all along.*

“All right that’s enough?” Batman thundered. “You are not on trial and your loyalty is not in question. We simply need to know exactly what Cheshire said to you word for word. Time is of the essence. Now start again at the beginning.”

xxx
The cross-examination lasted for another hour before Artemis was finally allowed to leave, rushing out of the conference room, biting back tears, refusing to give them the satisfaction.

Did they believe her? Did they trust her? In the end she just didn’t care anymore. Daddy dearest had been right all along.

Her eyes raged as she rushed towards the Zeta Tube on the promenade, Kaldur following close behind, trying to reach her before she could transport back to Earth. This ambush style barrage would have never been a tactic he’d employee. Against an adversary it would be unreliable, and to an ally unthinkable. The Atlantean was feet away when the archer wheeled around and snarled, her finger pointing at him like a dagger.

“Don’t!”

“Artemis, I just want to talk.”

“Go to hell Kal!” she yelled back, slamming the destination code into the nava-computer and storming into the blinding light.

Kaldur’ahm reluctantly allowed her to leave; deciding pursuit was not the most prudent course of action at the moment. She needed space, she needed time. Despite the shocking discovery, Aqualad had never lost faith in his friend. As Batman had stated earlier, her loyalty was not in question. Kaldur just wished she had felt comfortable enough, trusted them enough to share her secret. He felt assured he’d never given her any pause to consider otherwise, but could only imagine the scars a life like that must have left.

What if tomorrow he discovered his true father was a villain; an Ocean Master, a Dead King, a Black Manta? How would he carry that burden? How would his friends react? How could he prove that even though he shared their bloodline, that his destiny was of his own choosing? He didn’t have an answer and suspected Artemis might not have one either.
Free from prying eyes, tears trailed down her cheeks as she materialized on the platform and immediately charged out to the frigid beach with no clear destination in mind other than out. She needed open spaces, she needed freedom. It had always been only a matter of time before the connection was made, and the shameful identity of her family revealed.

The League could go fuck themselves for all she cared. She always knew deep down that Ollie and Batman couldn’t be trusted with something so personal, so painful. But Canary? That stung the most.

Against all better judgement she’d allowed herself to be naked in those sessions; vulnerable, honest, unguarded. Just for one hour a week she’d take off her armor and try to imagine a life without assassins, or Shadows or death; and just like every other time she’d thought she’d finally escaped the stigma of her heritage, once again she’d been brutally disappointed. At least this time it hadn’t ended without a beating at the hands of her father, so there was one bright spot in another predictably shitty day.

But what hurt the most was when the time finally came, she’d wanted to be the one to tell her friends, her team. She wanted them to know and understand why she’d kept it from them. It wasn’t out of deceit, it was out of shame. The two may have hid it well, but she recognized the looks on Kaldur and Robin’s faces.

Doubt, suspicion, mistrust.

It was over; she’d never be one of them. Maybe she never was. All the archer had ever wanted was a chance to help people. To distance herself from her father and sister, and show the world that there was an ounce of good in her family, but just like every time before she’d failed. Being a Crock was a curse that could never be exorcised.

You can fight Jade. You can fight me, but you can’t fight who you are.

Artemis had always been a realist, but somehow she’d lied even to herself to believe she might actually be able to become more than her father had intended. Even from a hospital bed, paralyzed from the neck down, he’d still beaten her. He’d still won.
As her pace quickened, she continued down the beach, with absolutely no idea where she was going, wondering what the walking distance between Rhode Island to Gotham might be, because there was no turning back now, figuratively or literally.

With the mountain shrinking behind her, the archer continued down the shore line, following the beach as it wrapped around the bluffs, until suddenly she caught sight of a figure sitting alone up ahead, perched on the rocks, staring out into a desert of oceans, the waves of the Atlantic crashing in as the eastern sun slowly rose.

Wally West looked out to the distance, watching the blazing sphere slowly rising from the edge of the world, turning the horizon into a glorious sea of fire. It had been a long night, and he needed the ocean breeze to wash away the stench of the few hours prior.

So much would change after today. Not just for him, but with the world around him. Part of him never thought he'd make it this far, part of him hoped he wouldn't.

Waking up in that hospital room from Fate’s coma all those months ago, never once had he seriously considered that he’d reach this point; that the end of this insane mission might actually be at hand. It was textbook denial, like some terminal disease that had finally become inoperable. You could hope all you want that that day would never come, but it didn’t stop the hands of time from slowly moving ever forward.

It had seemed like for so long he’d been lost in that same ocean before him; frantically reaching out to any life preserver thrown his way, floating there helplessly until the next one came by, whisking him off further from shore.

The Kryptonite was in his possession, the theft shifted to a faceless enemy that would take months to track down. There was only one thing left to do, one last move to make, and to do that he’d have to break Batman’s one unbreakable rule; intentionally take a life, one single life to save millions. It should never have been in question, but with day coming soon, he found himself struggling with it and didn’t know why. He’d done the math hundreds of time, it was a no brainer.

Bitterly Wally wondered if seconds after Diana had snapped his neck, as the last vestige of his consciousness slipped into oblivion, had Bruce Wayne found peace, grateful that the burden, the *promise* he’d made to himself and passed on to the subsequent generations, was no longer his cross
to bear, that he’d face the next life with hands clean and conscious clear.

Wally had come so close with Crock, oddly relieved when Sportmaster had turned the tables. It was one thing to defend your life; it was another matter entirely to take one. The speedster just wanted to close his eyes and allow the ocean to take him off to a distant land with no villains to fight and no people to save. To just be…

Without warning a fragile voice called out over the roar of the waves.

“Wally?”

“Artemis?” he sat up in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I uh…I honestly don’t know.”

“Is everything ok?”

“No,” she chuckled, dabbing at her eyes. “Is it ever?”

“Come on sit down” he said, brushing off the loose sand form the rock he’d perched himself on.

“No,” she sighed, “I was just…um…,” she paused, shaking her head as her voice trailed off, lost in the majesty of the sunrise, feeling as if her throat was closing and her heart torn slowly from her chest.

“Artemis?” Wally quickly stood, reaching out to her, only to see her step away before he could reach her. "What's wrong?"

“I gotta go,” she spoke through quivering lips. “Sorry I bothe…I’m sorry for everything.”

Turning quickly away from the speedster, keeping Mt. Justice firmly behind her, she began to walk away when suddenly Wally appeared in front of her, a fine mist of sand flying in his wake. She should have known she wouldn’t get far.
“Talk to me.”

“Wally please just….”

Before she could finish, his hands had taken hers, refusing to let go.

“Let go!” she demanded.

“Talk to me Artemis,” he repeated with a soothing kindness in his voice that she knew she didn’t deserve.

“I can’t Wally,” she sniffled, her mind racing out of control, her heart on the verge of breaking.

“Fine,” he said calmly. “Just sit with me then ok? We don’t have to talk about anything. Just…sit.”

She swallowed hard; trying to find a thousand reasons not to, but in the end knew that this might well be the last conversation they’d have, the last real moment with him before the truth would come crashing down around them. And it was with that realization that Artemis eased herself down to the rocks, brushing away the sand the speedster had scattered.

“Beautiful huh?” Wally nodded towards the sunrise.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “It really is.”

“This is where I go to think sometimes.”

“You think?” she chuckled, her heart easing at his smile.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the wit and wisdom of Artemis. Put your hands together.” he smiled as he began his sarcastic golf clap.
She couldn’t help but laugh, lightly punching him in the arm like she used to; and for one brief moment allowed the heartbreak of the last few hours to fade into in the early morning light.

They both turned to the horizon, as the wind and mist caressed their skin, the silence between them not awkward but comforting. The normally inquisitive speedster stayed true to his word, and they both watched the ocean release the sun, the lights of the city fading in the distance. Artemis wanted nothing more than for this moment to just last a little longer.

Wally looked down to see the goose flesh forming on her arms, shuffling closer and taking off his flannel shirt, draping it around her shoulders. After a long stretch of pleasant solitude, she finally began to speak.

“Have you ever wanted to be…. someone different, someone new? Like a different version of yourself.”

“Yes,” Wally chuckled. “All the time.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Every now and then I wonder what it would have been like if I’d never found my uncle’s notes, if I’d never gotten my speed. I wonder how different things might have been if I’d tried not to be such a nerd my whole life, putting a target on my chest every time I raised my hand in class just to show everyone how smart I was. Sometimes I wonder if that stupid mask I wear is really to protect my identity or just hide behind so no one knows the real me.”

The archer nodded in understanding. “When I wear the mask, I want to forget the person underneath? There’s times I wish I never had to take it off.”
“We’re quite the pair aren’t we?” he smiled, green eyes glowing in the dawn.

Her face tightened as a single tear ran down her cheek. She had no idea how comforting he could be; how sincere he actually was. They both wore masks for different reason, but in the end all they wanted was to be accepted, to feel normal; it was just that normal had different meanings for each one.

Artemis didn’t have much time left. Sooner or later someone was going to find him, call him, tell him, and then this moment would be gone forever.

She swallowed hard, and turned toward him, nothing left to lose.

“Wally I need to tell you something,” her voice shook, the fluttering in her stomach nauseating. “I’m not who you think I am.”

She paused as her throat narrowed. Closing her eyes she finally let the horrible truth come out. “My dad is…..

Before the rest of the words could leave her mouth, he interrupted. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You don’t understand…”

“Artemis, it doesn’t matter who they are or who you were; the only thing that matters is who you want to be.”

*He knows, oh God he knows*

She began to get sick to her stomach when suddenly his arm wrapped around her, drawing her close, pointing up to the starless sky. “Did you know there’s a small planet, an asteroid, a lunar crater; and a comet all named after you?”
“What are you talking about?” she asked bewildered, still trying to keep up. Unsure if she should be relieved or angry, betrayed or overjoyed; instead he continued on as if nothing had happened, as if nothing was wrong.

“Astronomers call it the Artemis Chasma or the Artemis Corona. How cool is that? There aren’t any planet Wallys or Rudolphs out there, but there’s like five Artemis’s in the night sky or would it be Artemi?”

“Wally…"

“Artemis, you are the only you I know. Nothing’s going to change that.” He said it so firmly she almost believed him.

Wally rose to his feet, pulling the archer up with him. “Look I’m starving. Let’s go get breakfast. Your treat, my wallet’s back at the cave.”

The archer smirked. “Well that’s very convenient.”

“Well you did get a free astronomy lesson out of it didn’t you?”

“One that I didn’t ask for,” she chided playfully.

“Well the more you know….”
“You did not just get all public servicey on me did you?”

“Hey, it might come in handy someday.”

“Have I told you lately what a dork you are?”

Wally looked to his watch? “Nope, not today.”

“Consider yourself told.”

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And just like that night at the fall festival, their conversations remained light and easy, never touching on the subject they both knew lay in wait.

What would it have been like if they’d met under different circumstances? Just a girl from New York and a boy from Missouri, bumping into each other on a subway instead of a far off desert. What if she hadn’t been some assassin’s daughter and he wasn’t some hero’s nephew. What if they were just two people, no baggage, no hang ups, no costumes.

*What if*…the story of her life.

Looking down at her watch, she’d lost track of time; the norm lately when being around the
distracting speedster. Having a conversation with Wally was a lot like riding a roller-coaster; quick twists and turns, tiring climbs but thrilling descents, but most of all never boring. She was going to miss him.

They exited the doors of the Pancake Pantry as the sun above shone brightly, chasing away the chill of the frigid morning. In the distance she could hear the bells and horns of the docks calling out while closer into town sidewalks and shops were packed with locals and tourists going about their normal Saturday morning routines. It was nothing like Gotham, but as much as Artemis craved the energy of the big city, she was going to miss the slower pace of this small harbor town.

It’s not like she couldn’t come visit, but it just would never be the same; stuck within the city limits while a half mile down the coast the world’s greatest heroes gathered and strategized, went on missions, saved the world, while she would remain the girl from Gotham- the almost hero.

The archer supposed the League probably wouldn’t mandate the Team cut ties with her all together, but they’d surely be strongly encouraged to. Who could blame them?

Artemis knew she was being overly dramatic in her feeling sorry for herself downward spiral. It was just…she’d been so close to being a part of something special, like waiting on the launch pad as they scrubbed the mission of a lifetime. But she’d survive, she always did.

As she prepared her final goodbye the two teens rounded the corner only to find the alleyway up ahead blocked by a group of familiar faces. She stopped dead in her tracks as her teammates slowly approached.

Dick and Kaldur stepped to the forefront as her body began to tense, the contentment of the last few hours with Wally torn away. She ground her teeth as several seconds of silence passed until she just couldn’t stand it anymore

“How long?” she asked defiantly, barely disguising the disgrace in her voice.

“How long enough to know you’re not your family,” Robin replied firmly.

“Artemis, did we really seem so shallow that you could not have come forward and shared your truth with us? We have trusted you with our lives and will continue to do so if you will give us that opportunity.”
Conner stepped forward, awkwardly placing his hand on her shoulder. Sharing his feelings would never be his strong suit, but today he’d make an exception, she deserved it. “You’ve earned your place on this team. We’re not giving up on you, don’t give up on us.”

She turned to Wally, her eyes burning again but now for a completely different reason. “Team needs a real archer,” he shrugged, “Just don’t tell Roy I said that.”

“I ..I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything,” Zatanna smiled. “Just get your butt back to the cave.”

The sorceress drew closer, whispering into the archer’s ear. “And the next time we’re on a mission and I catch you lying to me, I’m going to turn you into a frog.”

Artemis laughed off the threat, but still wondering if the sorceress might actually have the power to do it as finally Megan approached; a kind and understanding smile on her face. She never spoke a word, instead wrapping her arms tightly around the archer, her embrace worth a thousand words as tears dampened both their shoulders.

As if it was ever in doubt, Artemis sighed softly and simply said. “Ok.”

Falling behind the group as they made their way towards the beach, Wally smiled. It wasn’t quite like the last time. Conner, Megan and Artemis hadn’t confessed their sins moments before leaving for Santa Prisca, but it would have to do.

Superboy still had no idea of his parentage, maybe in some ways it was better that he didn’t, but time wasn’t that forgiving. Eventually he would discover the truth, but after seeing his friends’ reactions to the archer’s revelation, Wally doubted Conner would have any reservations that he wouldn’t receive the same level understanding. The speedster hoped the future he remembered would still hold true for the Boy of Steel; being adopted by the Kent’s, gaining a father mother and brother, leading the next generation of heroes. He would never be the Superman, but he might just end up being something better.
Wally was surprised M’gann hadn’t taken this opportunity to rid herself of her greatest secret and fear. Honestly it seemed there wouldn’t have been a better time, but it was her story to tell and she would do it when she was ready. Seeing the relief on the archer’s face would be a huge step in the right direction. All Wally ever wanted was for Megan to find the peace and understanding she deserved.

Once again though if time held true, the next few years would not be kind to the Martian; finding herself meddling in minds and thoughts not her own, good intentions that over time spiral out of control. Carrying this secret any farther into that future would only cause it fester and become more toxic. Secrets had that kind of power, he could attest to that.

Finally there was Artemis. The relief and acceptance she would gain would change her life forever. She’d be able to laugh more, love more, trust more. It wouldn’t happen all at once, it would be a gradual process with all the bumps and bruises you’d expect, but she would come out the other side a changed person, a whole person, no longer burdened with name and the stigma that came with it. She was a great partner; she would have been an even better wife. She still would, just not for him. Sadly their paths would take them in different directions. Those were the rules.

As with the last time, this would be a memory he would always cherish, and for the rest of the day he’d find it hard to take his eyes off her smile, unknowing that this entire time another set would not leave him.

xxx

A brisk wind blew across the Potomac as the speedster stood on the sandy shoreline gazing out across the river. The Washington Monument lit up the night sky, standing vigilant as always off in the distance. All around the speedster, he was surrounded by history; memorials and museums, cemeteries and monuments. Structures erected to honor the past, while his thoughts stayed focused keenly to the future.

Thanksgiving Day had come and gone, and while families gathered together to spend time, watch football, and eat leftovers, Wally stood alone on the bank of East Potomac Park, watching over a building that was neither historic nor awe-inspiring, but a corrupt cathedral where men played God.

Through his infrared goggles, Wally watched over the grounds of Cadmus Labs; monitoring patrols, observing staff coming and going, counting the numbers of empty offices. Since the rebuild, the outer structure of facility looked very different, but below it fifty two subterranean levels remained the same. God how he hated being underground.
Lex Luthor may have divested himself from the company, but Wally knew his fingerprints were still all over the building. How could they not? It housed both his greatest weapon and greatest failure.

On its freshly written mission statement, Cadmus Labs was a cutting edge medical research facility, its goal - to identify and eradicate rare genetic diseases.

*What a crock*

Jim Harper was now its director, and had assured all of those who’d had dealings with the *prior administration* that Cadmus was now a strict and legitimate medical exploration and analysis company. Something like that sounded great on a business plan sent out to lure venture capitalists, unless they discovered that half of the staff was the exact creatures they’d been banned from creating in the first place. Harper was a good man, but the odds had been stacked against him from the start.

While Guardian painted a very pretty picture of the re-born facility, Wally knew from Bruce Wayne’s detailed dossier that all was not well within its walls.

Geomorphs were disappearing from the facility at an alarming rate; either kidnapped or escaping on their own while their remaining brothers became disgruntled oddities staffed openly throughout the building, growing tired and irritable at the menial tasks assigned to them daily. They hated where they lived, hated their jobs, and were just miserable creatures in general.

*Welcome to the human race*

In short Cadmus was as much a mess as it ever was, and Wally hoped that disorganization would be to his favor.

Tonight was not to be *the* night, tonight was just about reconnaissance. On their very first mission together, he Robin and Aqualad had basically stumbled head first into the facility, spending most of their time on the run before being captured, leaving very little opportunity for sightseeing. Once the building came crashing down around them, access to those underground levels had been lost. Afterwards, the League had done a thorough investigation, but many of the remaining levels had become unreachable, and of course no one knew of the weapon hidden in its depths.
The one thing Wally knew for sure was the pod holding the clone would be in the deepest levels of the facility. Tonight he would search for passageways, secret elevators, security cameras and detection systems. Taking snapshots along the way to compare them to specs found in his public records searches. Sometime it was amazing what you could find on the internet besides porn.

The vault where they kept the pod would be the most difficult hurdle to overcome; Wally was under no misconceptions otherwise.

As fortified as the Batcave had been, Bruce had still basically given him the map to the place; this would be much different, bad different

He was as much a hacker as he was an OBGYN. He understood them both in theory, but when actually coming face to face with the subject, he’d be as lost as last year’s Easter egg.

That’s where Robin would come in. Wally had lost count of how many times Dick had offered to teach him the basics; Hacking 101 as it were, and Robin always loved to talk shop. The speedster preferred to stay in his lane, leaving software, hardware and magic to the sweaties and true believers. If someone wanted to understand string theory, he was their man. If they wanted to break into Area 51, call the Boy Wonder

Dick Grayson was a focused and thorough detective, but two things could always throw him off his game - girls and breaking and entering – cyber style.

All Wally would have to do was go through a list of Robin’s greatest hits, and Cadmus would surely be near the top. Dick would be so distracted and enamored by the tales of his exploits that he’d never think twice as to why his best friend’s sudden interest. Besides, it’s not like he was asking to break into the Batcave

*Been there, done that. Too afraid to wear the t-shirt*
A few lessons and simulations later and maybe the speedster might actually have a chance. *Wishful thinking* for sure, but at a time like this, a little optimism goes a long way.

He technically had the time. Pursuing the Shadows would be a dead end but would keep the League busy for months. Through their investigation into Ra’s, who knows? Maybe they’d find the connection to Savage and Luthor.

Wally’s mission hadn’t just been about taking away the Light’s toys; it was also about leaving bread crumbs for Batman and the League to follow on their own. However he couldn’t wait too long, with the real possibility that the past months events would cause the Light to move up their timetable.

He sat down on the grassy bank, opening his bag and pulling out his shadowed outerwear. He was already in his stealth suit, sans wing tips and lightning insignia, but the jet black fatigues over it would ensure he remained completely unrecognizable, playing hell on sensors and cameras at the speed he’d be traveling.

The belt around his waist housed two Tasers and a handful of small smoke grenades, items borrowed from a discarded utility belt that hopefully Robin would never miss. He didn't foresee trouble but liked to be prepared none the less.

Then there was the kryptonite, packed safely in cupboards on his forearms, not exactly the energy bars he kept in supply, but still just as vital. Outside of the cave, the item never left his possession. It was way too valuable at the point to chance being misplaced. It's not like he expected to run into the insane killing machine sitting in the break room, shooting the shit with all the other evil clones, bitching about how the man was keeping them down.

*Boy that would be convenient.*

Wally chuckled as much as you could when talking about cold blooded murder, still keeping the rock at arm’s reach would remain the norm. He took a breath and burst into motion.

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Inside the main hall, two man securities teams made their sweeps at the top, middle, and bottom of the hour like clockwork, occasionally taking a step outside for smoke breaks, fresh air, or just a
few moments reprieve from their jackass partners. Wally thought a few looked ex-military; the others retired cops who knew how to handle themselves, and neither particularly pleased with the paring. Probably Guardians idea, putting polar opposites together in hopes they’d learn a thing or two from each other. It worked for the Justice League; ask Guy Gardner, just don’t ask Hal Jordan.

The heavyset Hispanic man took a long drawl from his cigar, checking his watch only to see the second hand having barely moved. His gung-ho partner stood yards away, sweeping the grounds with his infrared binoculars, praying for someone to scale the walls and try to break in.

“Lazano hurry it up you fat piece of shit,” his reluctant partner cursed. Jimmy Waggoner was a decorated veteran, how he’d been paired up with this overweight washed up rent-a-cop he’d never now. God hated him; that had to be it.

“Listen bendejo, I get a ten minute smoke break every three hours, and I’m going to use every damn second of it. Be all you can be army boy, just do it over there. Your Rambo bullshit makes my head hurt.”

“Lazy spic,” Waggoner grumbled, walking away in the other direction, trying to figure out how to approach Guardian tomorrow and ask for a transfer.

It was chilly evening for D.C. with temperatures hovering right above freezing, but with the wind blowing off the Potomac it felt like winter’s colder cousin. Waggoner was from Tallassee, the sunshine state; Lazano from Gotham, a place the sun never shined. Nights like this never fazed the old veteran, but for his Caucasian counterpart, Lazano suspected Captain America over there probably hadn’t spent many nights without a barracks or warm shower nearby. The army wasn’t what it used to be.

A powerful rush of arctic air blew through courtyard, taking the half burnt cigar from the old cop’s mouth. These burst had been happening all night, and the younger guard was more than ready to head back inside.

“God damnit!”

“That’s it old man, times up.” Waggoner smiled in satisfaction as another burst blew through, both men raising their jackets over their ears.
“I said let’s go.”

“That was my last Mayorga. I’m not going anywhere till I find it.”

“Jesus Lazona, Just quit already,” Waggoner whined. “You’re old, fat and out of shape. You’re a fucking disgrace. Out here every night smoking your cheap ass cigars, telling your stupid stories of your nights in Gotham. Give it up already; you’re a walking disaster, you’d probably lose your dick if it wasn’t connected.”

Suddenly the strongest burst yet shot through the courtyard nearly knocking both men over in its wake.

“Mierda!”

“What’s wrong? Something blow your sombrero off?”

“Racist and stupid. You’re going to go far kid,” Lazano smiled, finding the butt of his cigar, putting it out and placing it in his pocket.

When he looked up, his partner was in complete panic mode, frantically patting himself down from head to toe.

“What is it?”

“My access card! It’s gone!”
“Those things are like gold my friend. Guardians *no van a ser felices* with you,” the old man chuckled, thickening up his accent just to further irritate his partner

“He’ll fire me! Lazano you got to help me.” Waggoner pleaded

“I’d be happy to my friend, but my eyes are old and I get very sleepy without my sombrero,” he smiled

Waggoner cursed, pulling out his flashlight and storming off into the darkness, prepared to search every inch of the courtyard if he had to.

Lazano just chuckled and relit his cigar

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Dick would be proud, Wally smiled as he swiped the stolen access card into the reader and entered the building. It was eerily quiet as he entered the hallway. Pulling on his goggles, he immediately began searching for heat signatures. Body temperature would standout like a Christmas tree, but with a little adjusting he'd be able to see electrical signatures running up the walls, more than likely connected to security cameras. So far so good.

The facility was of course closed for the evening; receptionist, doctors and support staff long gone, enjoying their belated thanksgiving meals with family or friends. In theory that just left the security patrols guarding the facility, and if the two he passed in the courtyard were any indication, maybe tonight wouldn't be as challenging as he first thought. Wally had no doubt he could incapacitate any team he came across, but that would only alert the laboratory of someone's presence, causing additional security measures to be put into place in the coming days. No one knew he was coming and he needed it to stay that way.

Reaching the end of the hallway he found an elevator shaft alone and unguarded, but when the speedster pressed the call button, a clear ring surrounding the button began to glow green, as did the retinal scanner on the wall he had failed to notice before; the first item to be added to a potentially long list of things Wally hadn't expected. That might be a problem.
"Great," he sighed. "Stairs it is."

Speeding down the darkened hallway, he hurriedly searched every corridor, tested every door before finding the only one on the floor with a card reader attached. He took a deep breath and swiped the stolen access card, second later hearing the click of a lock releasing.

He wiped his damp brow and stepped inside, looking down at a site he remembered well; countless flights of stairs that stretched downwards into the bowls of hell. 52 to be exact. The lighting was dim but not dark, and his stealthy appearance wouldn't fool anyone up close, but in motion he might have a chance.

So he began his journey, flying down the stairs in the blink of an eye, faster when he saw a security camera mounted up ahead, slower when thermal signatures appeared below showing the guards making their sweeps. When he came across a team in the stairwell, he'd quickly duck into the corresponding entrance way, closing the door behind them as they passed, seeking cover when they entered the floor to begin their search. On every level he'd entered, there had been just enough shadow to hide behind, most of the guards making only the most cursory of searches with their flashlights and portable motion sensors, devices that would never detect someone as fast as him.

This went on for about a half hour, almost like a game; two steps forwards one step back, continuing his descent until he reached level 40. A camera glowed in his goggles one floor down with a security team coming up from behind it, while above he heard a door open and another team began their decent, leaving him stuck in the middle. Wally reached to the corresponding door on the floor he was on, only to discover it locked.

Oh shit

The two man teams were moving slowly, but they were definitely minutes from meeting in the middle, and he was trapped in between. Wally wasn't scared of being apprehended, these rent a cops would scatter like the leaves of fall as he raced up the building, but his attempted incursion would be discovered and that would be worse, much worse.

With no choice left, he took a deep breath, preparing to explode up the stairway when suddenly the door in front of him opened and two small trolls walked out, making their way down the stairwell, chatting in a language he couldn't comprehend, and completely oblivious to his shadowy presence.
Wally quickly but quietly caught the door before it closed, stepping in while one flight down he heard the security guards stopping and scolding the two creatures.

"Hey Bilbo, Frodo," the lead sentry snapped. "Get your asses back up those stairs. You know you can't be down here after hours."

The two creatures stopped, frowning at the security team, responding in a heated gibberish both guards didn't understand, or care to.

"You know Dubbilex really doesn't like it when you call them that," his partner urged.

"Like I give a fuck."

"What are they saying anyway?"

"Who the hell knows? Send a message to Dr. Frankenstein and tell him we caught some more of his goblins trying to sneak out after curfew."

The two genomorphs trudged back up the stairs, grumbling in an incoherent language as they made their way back to Level 40, pulling on the steel door only to find it locked. Both creatures threw up their arms, arguing venomously with the other, casting blame in a language only they could speak, before plodding up the stairs to Level 39, hoping to gain entrance there, only to come face to face with the descending security team.

"Kang. Kodos! What the hell are you two doing in here?"

Two diminutive sets of shoulders dropped, narrow inhuman eyes staring at each other in disgust. They hated this place.
Wally stood in small shadowed corner of the cavernous entranceway of Level 40, stepping out of the proverbial fire pan and into the fire. It was like a scene out of Men in Black; G-Gnomes, G-Sprites, G-Elves, G-Trolls, almost any incarnation of the genetically grown creatures you could think of moving about the spacious cavern. An entire race forced to live in one solitary level of Cadmus. No wonder they were so damn angry.

It wouldn't take long for him to be noticed, and given the choice of facing a poorly trained security team or vicious little mutants with sharp teeth and claws, Wally chose the former; opening the door and preparing to leave the complex post haste.

Stepping out onto the stairwell, a quick thermal scan indicated both teams had met above him, leaving the descending levels unguarded and within reach. With no heat coming signatures below, the speedster took off down the stairs, corkscrewing off walls to avoid the glowing security cameras until seconds later he reached the bottom. The final and only door stood in front of him. Level 52. Wally almost hoped it would be locked, just to have an excuse to leave middle earth. Pulling on the handle the door easily opened.

**Damn**

Stepping into the corridor was like the Fourth of July all over again. The crimson walls seemed to ooze and breathe, a strong smell of Formaldehyde waffled through the vented air. It truly felt like being in the belly of the beast. He clearly remembered the feeling of hopelessness trapped in the depth of Cadmus, locked inside that pod, genetic material being sucked out of him. It was on that day, being a super hero stopped being fun and games, and bad guys stopped taking it easy on them because they were just sidekicks.

Looking back, he really thought they were going to die that day, and now less than five months later, he was back. Times like these he redefined the term masochist.

Wiping his damp brow, Wally decided his missions was accomplished. Level 52 still existed and it was relatively easy to access. He'd determined the size of the security forces, the location of the cameras, and even what floor they held the geomorphs on. All that was left was a quick trip down the corridor, find the vault that stored the clone, take a couple of pictures, and Dick would unknowingly do the rest.
It was starting to get extremely warm under all his layers, and the walls had already started closing in about a half hour ago. It was time to move.

Wally adjusted the sensor output of his goggles, shifting the mode to X-ray, searching the walls for a hidden enclave, something about the size of a Wells Fargo safe door. It had to be down here, there were no levels left.

Finally up ahead, a structure began to glow in his lenses, thoroughly camouflaged behind slimy alluvium walls. His stomach curled a bit as he dug his hands into the warm flesh like surface, tearing away at the membrane until he finally found the huge steel door.

Even through his gloves, the tissue felt warm and alive, sticking to his clothes like Vaseline. Wiping his hand feverishly, he reached up to turn on the video setting of his goggles, preparing to record every display, scanner, screenshot, and serial number he could find when suddenly the door began to hum, then vibrate...then open.

In retrospect it would be hard to determine who was more startled, the speedster or the blue skinned, goat horned mutant scientist emerging from the other side.

Dubbilex stood in shock, mouth agape before finally coming to his senses. His horns began to glow and Wally's mind began to tingle, like the warm embrace of M'gann's telepathy mixed with the sharpest nails on a chalkboard, stretching every downward.

"Slee....." the creature reached out just as the twin steel tips of the Taser pierced his thick blue hide.

The genomorph scientist fell flat on his face, his horns dimming and returning to normal. Sweat poured off the speedster as he knelt down cautiously to the creature, checking for a pulse at where his carotid artery should be. It was faint, but it was there.

Wally dropped to the ground, taking off the mask and his cowl, wiping massive amounts of perspiration from his eyes. This wasn't supposed to happen like this. Not yet. This was purely a reconnaissance mission; mapping the complex, testing defenses, recording response times; not coming face to face with the psychopathic clone's creator.

Mark Desmond and Lex Luthor may have been in charge of the facility, but Dubbilex was the brains of the operation. He remained an enigma; capturing his fellow sidekicks and nearly deleting...
their source material one minute, and then allowing Superboy and his new found friends to escape with their lives.

Wally had serious doubts when the creature finally awoke, he'd be so generous this time around.

His momentum had carried the two inside the cavernous vault and immediately the speedster felt a cold shiver run through his body as his sweat soaked uniform met the icy temperature inside the enclosure. All along the massive room, stacks of small clear pods lined the walls, filled with either slumbering or dead G-Gnomes; most likely the final destination of the many missing, but the pod Wally was most concerned about stood in the center, covered in a thin layer of ice, the words Project Match stamped across the bottom.

He swallowed hard as he approached the case, gently wiping away at the frost covered surface, almost hoping the creature inside might not be there, but as the surface cleared the image Conner Kent slept on the other side.

_Not Conner_, he nervously corrected himself.

The moment he’d dread for so long had finally arrived, and there was absolutely no backing out now.

Premeditation is a tricky thing. At one point or another, all people consider the horrible things they’d like to inflict on one another, but when it comes down to brass tact’s, common sense almost always wins out.

No matter what the news leads everyone to believe, people just don't kill other people. It's a very small minority of the populace that participates in this heinous act, a very small fraction of the world who kill without conscience, and tonight Wally was about to join that number.

The speedster was under no misconceptions of what he was here for, not just at this facility but at this moment in time. This was ultimately what Bruce Wayne’s entire mission rested on; kill the creature that would become Superboy Prime. Kill the monster that would be responsible for so much death, so much suffering.

Wally had seen _it_ in action on the newsfeed, watching helplessly at that restaurant in Chesterfield, in a future that never existed, as that..._thing_ tore Hal Jordan's head from his shoulders.
Everyone that Wally held dear; his best friend, his mentor, his parents, his family, his teammates, the love of his life - one way or another had died at this creature’s hands. Tonight he could change all that.

There was no time left for arguments about morality, ethics or principal; he’d already broken so many laws of nature just to get here in the first place, honestly what was one more.

This thing was beyond rehabilitation. It didn't differentiate, it didn't discriminate, it was a savage mindless killing machine. It tolerated those stupid enough to join in its crusade, but in the end Wally knew it would kill each and every one of them, including the Light

From the videos he’d seen, the speedster could sense the enjoyment and satisfaction it took, and his only regret was that now Lex Luthor and the others wouldn't get the chance to come face to face with the monster they'd created.

And then it happened. Wally had been waiting for it; the angel on his left shoulder appearing, trying to counteract the one on his right. Reminding him of every lesson his parent’s had ever taught him, every commandment he’d learned in bible school. Every rule his mentor had laid out to him.

Four words, four simple words. Thou shalt not kill

Wally closed his eyes, taking a deep breath and silencing his mind. He was standing at the precipice of a decision that would haunt him for the rest of his life and it was time to make a choice…..

As if the answer was ever truly in question. This mother fucker had to die, and he had to die tonight.

Recognizing the eye scanner on the pod, the speedster hoisted the lifeless body of the genomorph up to it, separating Dubbilex’s eye lids just as the low-energy burst of infrared light shot into its retina. After a pause, the chamber slowly opened, exposing the body with in within.
He could do this.

_Not Conner - Not Conner_

Behind him a small chunk of ice fell from the ceiling, stealing his concentration for less than a moment. When his eyes turned back, the soulless black eyes of the clone stared back at him.

Faster than a speeding bullet, Match’s hands were around Wally’s throat, crushing the life out of him. He’d never felt such rage before in his life. For just an instant, he wondered if this was how Hal must have felt seconds before his death.

The creature snarled as it stepped out of the pod, Wally’s body dangling helplessly in the air above it. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t swallow…he couldn’t think. Match carried the speedster to the far wall, slamming him repeatedly into it, the glass pods above shattering with every strike.

His vision was beginning to dim, as the world around him turned to red, every capillary and blood vessel in his eyes beginning to rupture.

Wally slapped helplessly at his wrists, trying to pry open the door to his cupboards, but every ounce of strength he one owned was escaping him second by second. Finally the strikes stopped, and through bloodshot eyes, he could see the creature’s eyes race from him to the open vault door, to freedom.

The clone’s grip tightened, preparing to dispose of the young speedster in the most gruesome of ways, when with one last swing, Wally’s fingertips caught the latch on his wrists. The cupboards sprang open and released the small item inside. The sliver of Kryptonite came crashing down onto the cold stone floor, followed seconds later by the clone.

The speedster gasped in agony, crawling on all fours, coughing and retching all the way as rich oxygen began to drag its way back into his lungs. The clone writhed on the ground beside him like a wounded animal as Wally inched his way towards the meteor. Stealing every last vestige of strength he could muster, Wally took the sliver in his grip and plunged it into the creature’s heart.

Match’s body began to seize violently, its howls of agony inhuman. Wally had morosely imagined
this day, but never like this. The clone’s skin began to grey as toxic alien radiation began to destroy cell after cell, rampaging through its body like a tsunami. Wally scooted away, resting his battered body against the shattered pod, waiting for this dance of death to finally end. Every breath was agony, both for him and the dying creature at his feet. It could have been moments, minutes or seconds, but finally with one last gasp, the clone closed its empty black eyes and died, taking Project Match and the Light with it.

Time stopped as Wally continued to stare at the lifeless creature, the mindless animal that once so closely resembled his friend, lying in the shattered remains of the only home it had ever known. It hadn’t asked to be born, in some ways as much a victim as the countless number it killed, Wally found no satisfaction in that, instead cursing the men that had dared to play God. There was no feeling of relief, no weight lifted off his shoulders. He did what needed to be done; no more no less.

His epiphany didn’t last long as the blue skinned creature to his left slowly regained consciousness.

“Monster!” Dubbilex bellowed, stumbling to the clone’s side, searching, praying for a sign of life. He turned back to the speedster with eyes full of pure hate, his horns growing brighter by the second, but by that time all that was left in the vault with the scientist was an ebony afterimage. Wally scooped up the sliver of Kryptonite from the clones corpse and sped out of the cavern as fast as he’d ever run.

Dubbilex’s frantic order awoke every creature in Cadmus, sending them rushing to each elevator, stairwell and exit within the building, not that it mattered. The speedster literally mushroomed up the stairwell, reaching Mach One within the confines of the building in seconds, sending security teams and every species of Geomorphs scattered in his wake like a dandelion in a hurricane.

His sonic boom shattered every inch of glass in the main entryway before Wally ever stepped foot in the hall, his black outerwear leaving nothing behind other that a shadowy contrail chasing after him. At the speed he was moving, if any camera was fortunate enough to catch an image, it would only record a shadowed apparition disappearing into the night, an angel of death. How fitting.

The speedster hit the Potomac at almost 600 mph, easing down below Mach One, before skidding across a river of glass. Hitting the shoreline much too fast, his momentum sent him shattering through the art sculptures of the park and digging deep into the tenth fairway before finally coming to a halt, ending his journey where it began.
He’d done it, permanently ended Project Match. The genetic material left behind was corrupted and unusable, and the Light’s greatest weapon had been taken off the board. Check and Mate.

He celebrated his victory by rolling onto all fours and throwing up. His neck and throat were killing him, muscles and ligament strained, possible torn. It would definitely leave a mark but he was alive and the clone was not, that’s all that mattered. Hey was lucky, Match not so much.

Off in the distance he could hear the whine of sirens; first responders rushing to the scene of a massive explosion, unaware that it was the result of the breaking of the sound barrier inside the complex and not some generator overload or gas leak. Spotlights shined across the complex as medical attention was rushed to the guards closest to the boom while other teams rushed down below to secure the geomorphs from leaving their floor as authorities arrived.

Rolling over and staring up at the stars he wondered if an elderly Bruce Wayne was now sitting in his garden, Dick Grayson and Barbara Gordon by his side, watching their children play, fondly remembering the old days.

Was Jason Todd, Tim Drake or Terry McGinnis now living out the Batman’s legacy? Would Clark Kent and Diana of Themyscira be meeting Wayne for dinner later that evening, planning out the direction the new Justice League would soon take. Would Artemis and her husband be holding their child in their arms, living the happily ever after she deserved.

Or was all of that erased now, a future flickering out existence like a dying star, washed away in a wave of temporal energy, replaced by something new altogether?

It was an endless and pointless question, an unending causality loop. Cause and effect. Chicken or the egg. Even an Einstein or a Hawking would be left scratching their heads.

It didn’t matter, he’d done his part. He had to trust that Bruce Wayne, Ray Palmer, and the collection of brilliant scientists in their employ knew what they were doing. The most important thing was it was over. Just a few loose ends left to tie up. No more risky incursions, nor more dangerous altercations, and no more death
The ramifications of this mission to Cadmus and their Board of Directors was the classic catch twenty-two. No one would ever report a break in, no one would report a murder. The victim of this brutal crime never existed. A Kryptonian John Doe that would never see the inside of a morgue.

Wally’s identity was intact and one of the greatest threats the world had ever known eliminated. He’d saved the world, and had never felt less like a hero in his life.

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Wally returned home and hour later, speeding through the door like a Midwestern tornado racing up the stairs to his room, papers and pictures rattling in his wake.

His dad, still drunk on turkey and dressing slowly made his way to the stairs, yelling up to his absent son.

‘Everything ok?’

The speedster eased out of his room, voice rough as razorblades. “All good dad,”

“You ok? You sound terrible.”

“I’m good, just coming down with something I guess.”

“Mission?”
Wally paused, chucking bitterly to himself. “Yeah kind of.”

“Well go shower up, your aunt and uncle are on their way over to watch the game. Iris is bringing her homemade turtle pie.”

He still felt nauseous; the taste of bile stuck in his throat, threatening to never leave, but at this point what was one more lie.

“Awesome. I can’t wait. I’ll be down in a few.”

“Sounds good pal. Love ya buddy.”

“Love you too dad.”

Later that night as everyone slept soundly in their beds, the speedster would find himself standing by the large oak tree in his back yard, burying the sliver of kryptonite next to the grave of his first dog Trouble, hoping the spirit of his best pal ever would guard over it until the day Wally could find a permanent resting place for it. Until then it was time to sleep, perchance to dream.

xxx
Time moved on as it was prone to do, just not towards a future Wally vaguely remembered. It had been a little over three weeks since that fateful night at Cadmus, and already history was rewriting itself. Missions had been sporadic at best; a four alarm fire in National City, earthquake relief in San Francisco, a handful of B-level criminals escaping from Iron Heights. There would be no plane crash in Asheville, no showdown in Santa Prisca. Those events now irrevocably erased from the timeline.

Only a scattering of Team members had been called to participate, usually paired with their mentor or another Leaguer, while all during this time the Dynamic Duo remained noticeably absent.

Honesty the down time had been good for the speedster, a needed separation to guide him to the next phase of his life. As the holidays approached Wally would soon announce he’d be leaving the Team at the start of the New Year, focusing on school and a future without capes and cowls. It wouldn’t be easy; being a superhero had always been his dream, but he clearly remembered how good it felt to pack away his uniform and instead of being Kid Flash - superhero, he became Wally West - college student. Of course what made it so special was the woman who’d joined him, placing her bow and quiver in a closet next to his, but that was another life, one he had to let go of.

Get in get out, stay out of history’s way

It hadn’t quite worked out as Bruce had hoped, but riding off into the sunset of the west coast would just have to do. That is if he could finally focus on the grades he’d been neglecting.

Keeping in contact with Dick had become less and less frequent with each passing day. For two friends who would spend hours texting at night over the stupidest of things, it stung to watch a good friendship slip away, but in all honestly Wally had brought that on himself, bringing an unnecessary amount of animosity back with him from the future.

Wally would be forever standing over Dick’s grave in that future Gotham wondering what if? One of the few gifts granted to him by this journey was the opportunity to make things right with Dick Grayson, and like so many things he’d let it slip away.

What would be even harder was saying his final goodbye to the archer. She had been his first love, someone he’d hoped to build a future with. Five years had sped by in an instant, and as his molecules scattered into the wind inside the alien chrysalis that day, he kept wishing for just one more.
Time had granted that wish, just not the way he’d hoped. In the end he knew he hadn’t traveled back in time to be with her, he’d traveled back to save her, and that would have to be enough.

Conner, Kaldur, Zatanna, M’gann, Raquel; the closest friends and only brothers and sisters he’d ever known, he’d carry their friendship with him in his heart wherever he ended up; both the moments they’d shared now as well as a future lost to the rivers of time. Remaining around them would be too difficult, too tempting; knowing bits and pieces of a future that he could never share.

Even if those moments never came to fruition Wally couldn’t sit idly buy and wait for them to happen. He needed separation, he needed a new beginning. Actions have consequences and he could no longer be the harbinger of change, he’d done enough damage already.

Sprawled out on the couch in the media room of the cave, Wally flipped mindlessly through the channels looking for distraction. In all his years residing and visiting Mt. Justice, he could never remember a time when it had been so empty.

Sitting behind a school desk in Keystone, he’d literally count down the seconds for the final bell to ring so he could rush to the cave and spend time with his friends, but lately it seemed as abandoned and empty as it was before Batman had first brought them there.

At least now it would hopefully remain standing, no longer a victim of the Light and their alien partners. Bruce’s dossiers never mentioned what would happen in the coming years, if it was hypothesized that one day the Reach would still come to Earth. Surely he’d contemplated the chances, otherwise the speedster’s missions would have continued. But the plan Wayne had tasked with him ended with the death of the clone, and Wally was more than fine with that.

On the TV, CNN had announced that a Grand Jury had been formed to begin an investigation in LexCorp and their holdings; an interesting development considering Wally had had nothing to do with it. If this was due to evidence Batman had uncovered or something completely unrelated, the inquiries might last for months, years possibly. It would be hard to run a secret criminal organization if Luthor was fighting charges of corruption, tax evasion, and sharing government secrets with a rogue nation.

That left Ra’s and Savage, and with Batman and Robin’s absence of late, they were probably deep in their search for the leader of the League of Shadows.
Savage would be more difficult, and unfortunately time was on his side. Immortals could be pesky that way, but a threat to the distant future would be someone else’s job.

With his stomach grumbling, the speedster sped to the kitchen, throwing in a frozen pizza and setting the timer when the Zeta Tube came to life.

*Recognize Artemis B-07*

The archer stepped off the platform, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed, marching towards her room when she noticed the speedster in the kitchen. Their eyes locked before seconds later Wally burst into laughter.

“Oh my God!” he held his belly. “What happened to you?”

“Shut it West, I’m not in the mood,” she snarled.

Standing in the middle of the room, the archer glowered at him, every strand of her long blond mane, standing straight on end, stretched out a foot away from her head in all directions. It was if she’d taken a trip to a science museum and left her hands on a Van de Graaff generator too long.

“Oh god! Where’s my phone?” Wally laughed, searching the kitchen, den and couch for a much needed snap chat post.

“Wally don’t you dare!” she growled.

“Ok Ok.” he surrendered, trying to fight the giggles. “Just tell me what happened.”

“Ollie and I were on patrol, an alarm came through for the STAR City National Bank, and when we got there, Livewire was robbing the damn place. You can guess the rest.”

“Oh shit Artemis I am so sorry,” he replied, palming his eyes, battling the fits of laughter trying to escape.”
“It’s not funny!” she stomped.

“I know. I’m sorry” he cleared his voice, slowing his breathing for a moment, before busting out again.

“That’s it. I’m out of here.

“Whoa whoa, where you going.” he pleaded

“I’m taking a shower idiot; it will take me hours to untangle this mess.”

“Ok. I’m sorry. Take a load off for a few minutes. You look beat.” Let me get you something to drink. What do you want?”

“Tea,” she huffed, flopping down on the coach, grabbing the remote. He was right, she was pretty worn out, and the upcoming adventure with her shampoo and conditioner seemed too daunting at the moment; the curse of owning long luxurious hair.

Minutes later Wally joined her on the couch, placing the steaming blend on the coffee table as the archer removed her mask, combing through her thick thatch of blond locks with her fingers.

“Thanks,” she grumbled, taking the cup and blowing on the liquid when suddenly her eyes lit up.

“It’s Jasmine,” she exclaimed excitedly, raising the cup to her lips and taking a long slow satisfying sip.

“Good?”

“It’s perfect. This is like my favorite tea ever. How’d you know?”

“Lucky guess,” he shrugged, lost in her beauty. This was a mistake, he needed to find another couch, another room, another cave, but still he couldn’t pull away.
Her muscles eased as the tension slowly washed away, a serene calm taking its place. “Where is everybody?”

“Don’t know. I texted Robin, Megan, even you, but no one replied. Thanks by the way.”

“I didn’t get text from you,” she frowned, searching all her pockets only to find them empty. “Dang it!” she whined, smacking her head. “I think I left my damn phone at Ollie’s.”

“Do you need to go back?”

“Nah, I’ll get it tomorrow. It’s not like I’d be missing out on anything important other than a grocery list from my mom.”

“I kinda hoped for a minute maybe you guys were throwing me another surprise party, but tis not turned out to be true,” he replied with a thick English accent.

“Someone’s studying Shakespeare in school aren’t they?” she smirked.

“Why yes m’lady. How did thee know?” he lowered his head, tipping his imaginary cap.

“A good guess m’lord,” she replied with a smile. “Hath no fear, though heavy is my heart, another birthday waits in the future.”

“Wow!” Wally chuckled impressed. “You guys have a lot better English teachers at Gotham Academy then we do.”

“You did all right Baywatch.”

“You haven’t called me that in a long time.”
She smiled. “I’ve decided to give idiot a break for a while.”

“Much appreciated,” he chuckled.

Maybe it was the lightning, maybe her exhaustion, but when she looked at the ginger she had to ask herself if he’d always been this handsome?

Things had changed that day on the beach; she knew it and was pretty sure he did too. He understood her; better than Conner ever would, maybe more than anybody could. Wally had been by her side this whole time, protecting her, guarding her, being there for her. Why hadn’t she seen it before?

What she’d told Batman was true; she hadn’t asked to join this team. She was fine being a solo act, it was smarter, safer. She didn’t do it to fight super villains; she did it to protect the streets of Gotham from people like her father.

Then one fateful day she stumbled across a battle royal, as a trio of young heroes fought against a killer android in some rich prep school gymnasium, and just as a certain speedster was seconds away from being broken in half, from the shadows she let that arrow fly and everything changed.

She wasn’t fighting muggers and thieves, carjackers or robbers anymore. She wasn’t protecting the citizens of Gotham, she was protecting honest to God superheroes; she was protecting him. They’d been connected from the start and it hadn’t dawned on her till now.

She liked him, she’d always liked him. From the moment he’d face-planted in front of her, to the way he comforted her that day on a frigid beach, and all the moments’ in between. Canary was right; she had liked the idea of Conner, but Wally? There was just something special about him. He looked past her flaws to find the best in her; not just who she was now, but who she might be one day. Almost as if he’d known the person inside her all along.

Romantic entanglements within the team were just a mistake waiting to happen. She hadn’t joined looking for one, but when someone like Superboy falls in your lap, well it’s hard not to open that door. It had started out with animal attraction, a physical reaction to his looks and attitude, one that so much matched hers, but now sitting here with the speedster, the feelings in her heart ran so
much deeper.

Relationships within the team were a terrible idea, and at the moment she couldn’t care less.

“I um…never thanked you for…you know for that time on the beach.”

“What the astronomy lesson? Pfft no big.”

“Not the astronomy lesson dork, you know… my dad, my sister. I should have told you all from the beginning.”

“You would have when you were ready. I’m just sorry you got shanghaied by the League…oh shit! That came off kind of racist didn’t it?”

“Representing all girls from the Far East, I will forgive you this one time,” she smiled.

“Far of east of Gotham maybe,” he scoffed.

“I’m half Vietnamese idiot.”

“There’s that word again.”

“I can’t help it. You bring out the worst in me sometimes,” she lied.

The room seemed to be getting hotter as she reached for the remote, searching for a distraction before she did something stupid. Unfortunately that was moment he made the same decision.

“Hey gimme!” he demanded, both playing tug of war with the remote, fingers becoming entwined. The pulling stopped as both looked down to see their fingers, neither proceeding nor withdrawing. She could feel the blush forming on her cheeks, looking up to see him swallowing nervously, his breaths quickening.
Suddenly she felt herself slowly leaning in, powerless to stop it, eyes locked on his lips; wondering what they would feel like, what they would taste like, knowing full well the mistake she was making, and not caring one damn bit.

Across the couch, Wally did the same, his mind screaming to stop while his heart told him to ignore it. This was a moment he’d dare not dream about, something he’d desired from the moment he’d returned to the cave from his Nabu inspired absence. Past, present, and future held no meaning anymore.

When they were mere inches away, the timer on the stove began to chime, and in a burst of wind Wally was in the kitchen, eyes closed, in front of the stove, furious and thankful for the reprieve.

“You hungry?” he asked, his voice nearly cracking.

Artemis straightened, taking a deep breath, calming the burning inside. “Yeah sure. What kind is it?”

“Peperoni sausage.”

“Perfect,” she smiled. "I’m gonna go change real quick. When I get back…you want to watch a movie or something?”

“Yeah,” he nodded stupidly “That’d be great.”

Artemis stood up, causally walking towards the corridor to her quarters. When the speedster was safely out of sight, she took off in a dead sprint, her heart racing, burning urges forming in places they shouldn’t. This was one of the stupidest ideas she’d ever had, but if you were going to screw up, at least do it spectacularly. Sometimes it was important to just live in the moment, and suffer the consequences later.
Reaching her room, she opened the door to darkness, feeling the wall for the light switch, flipping it several times to no avail.

“Perfect,” she grumbled, fumbling blindly across the room in search of her desk lamp. Preferably she would have opted for a shower to calm down her fried hair, but that would be a process, and quite frankly she didn’t want to ruin the moment. Finally she came to her desk, clicking the lamp only to find it out of order as well. The archer cursed, dropping her quiver to the floor in search of the halogen lamp inside when suddenly powerful arms emerged from the darkness, wrapping around her and holding tightly. A gloved hand reached out and covered her mouth, as she struggled, squaring her footing in preparation of the karate back flip she was about to perform when out of nowhere a small flashlight appeared in the darkness, pointing directly to the invaders face, a familiar domino mask coming into view.

A gloved finger covered his lips as Robin spoke softly “Don’t… make… a… sound.”

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Wally watched as the archer’s vanished down the hallway, forming a fist and banging his forehead repeatedly

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he snarled at himself.

What was he doing? This couldn’t happen. He wasn’t even supposed to be here. Bruce had warned him of the temptation, but that was when he was supposed be a visitor to this world, not a resident of it. He wasn’t some twenty-two year old hiding in the shadows altering the timeline from afar; he was here, right freaking here all along.

*Get in get out, stay of history’s way*

Could Bruce have really done the same, watching helplessly as Jason Todd died at the hands of the Joker. For that matter what if he’d overshot his target, arriving moment before a young boy watched in horror as his parents were brutally murdered outside the Monarch Theater. Actions had consequences yes, but Wally had sacrificed so much, given up his life and risked it all to correct a mistake that was never his to begin with.
It would have been one thing to send Terry McGinnis to this world, to have him do all of Wayne’s dirty work. McGinnis had no connection here, nothing to lose. He could follow Bruce’s plan to the letter, oblivious to the people who’d be hurt in his wake, but surrounded by his closest friends, the people he loved, could Wayne truly have been this impartial? this dispassionate? this cold?

All Wally had wanted was just one last moment with her, one last kiss, one proper goodbye. Would that really be so god damn much to ask? Would the Earth really spin of its axis? Would cities crumble in the future? Would it really crash some fucking mode? Was it really that wrong to ask after all he’d done, all he’d sacrificed. Just one fucking moment?

“Fuck!” he slammed his fist as tears burned at his eyes, pacing around the kitchen ready to explode as powerful as Neutron did in Central City that day.

Get in get out, stay of history’s way

“God Damn you Bruce,” he whimpered, taking a seat at the counter, squeezing is eyes closed, wiping his tears away. After a few moments, he finally composed himself, cutting the pizza and putting it on two plates. Trying to find a way to leave that wouldn’t hurt the archer’s feeling. He couldn’t stay, this he knew for certain.

He walked back to the den, placing the two slices on the table, searching the couch for the remote when he heard the roar coming from behind. Suddenly savage waves of ocean water slammed into the speedster from all sides, smashing him against the cave wall repeatedly. Wally stumbled to his feet, instinctively searching for his speed when bolts of powerful electricity struck him, a mighty battle cry echoing throughout the cave, driving him to the ground.

The room was spinning, his ears ringing. Every muscle in his body ached. Who was attacking him, and why? Was it the Red’s again? Was Artemis safe?

Careening to his feet, Wally finally found the engines inside him, seconds away from exploding into motion when a blue sphere formed all around him. The speedster rushed at it, only to be bounced back at twice his thrust. That’s when he recognized the source; the force field, the water constructs, the bio-electric charge. All of it.

Rocket and Kaldur emerged from the shadows, followed by Conner, M’gann, and Zatanna, All keeping a safe distance, as a smaller figure stepped forward, stopping inches away from bubble.
Robin stared coldly into the eyes of the speedster.

“Who are you?”

Chapter End Notes

Authors Notes. First – yes it’s a cliff hanger and yes I suck. I want to save you all the scolding. This was the best break I could find. Please be gentle.

I’m sure there are plenty of typos, I’ll be going back and correcting them soon, I know its distracting, but I really wanted to get this chapter out. I’ve never had beta- so sue me lol.

I want to go ahead an issue a mea culpa about the part of the story where Artemis is forced to tell the team of her lineage. I rewrote it three times and none of them did it the proper justice. Something like that, if done right should have been a chapter in its own right, but I had to push through to move the plot along. Ultimately this is Wally’s story, but I just want you all to know if you read that part and didn’t like it, I didn’t much either.

That being said we are nearing the end. Just be prepared, there are consequences ahead for everybody that will last for years to come.

Once again thanks for reading, I hope I’ve thanked everybody individually by now, if not I will be reaching out shortly. I’ve been doing this for a few years now, but have never had this kind of response. It’s humbling and I thank you. It’s a privilege to write for you all. The next chapter is in progress. This one was a doozy to write, so it will be a few weeks until the next.

Marko I’m really sorry I couldn’t get this out before your birthday. Sorry about the girl
Mark in Orlando. HOTM will see the light of day again I promise. I'm going to clean it up and get it back out before too long. As soon as this is over I'm finishing up two quick one shots in progress and I'll start working on it.

Embleer, Mangaluva, Mercury, Batbloddlou, Harbinger, Valor - you guys are awesome. Thanks for all the support
Chapter 19

Ten hours earlier.

Bruce Wayne held the small computer tablet in his left palm triple checking the last of his inventory, marking off every item on the manifest: climbing gear, insulated outdoor wear, base camp supplies, portable generators, satellite phones, stealth and heavy combat suits, anything and everything necessary to hunt down one of the most elusive men in the world in one of its harshest environments.

He'd received a message from a contact of Katana's just outside of Nanda Parbat. Two days ago, high ranking members of the League of Shadows had been seen gathering near a suspected safe house just outside of the city; the first real clue to the immortal's presence within the region, and the only solid lead they'd had in weeks.

Artemis had reached out to her sister as ordered, but news travels fast and Cheshire had smartly retreated underground. When word on the street is the Batman was looking for you, your name quickly become either toxic or solid gold. No one wants to work with you or everyone wants to find you. You couldn’t put a price on being owed a favor by the Dark Knight himself.

“Alfred, I have an interview scheduled on the 12th with Vicky Vale for Gotham Tonight that will need to be rescheduled and we'll also need to postpone the Board of Directors meeting to the first of next month.”

“The shareholders will be thrilled, what excuse shall I give them this time sir?”

“I’ll leave it to your discretion,” Wayne smiled. ”Kidnapping the Bolshoi Ballet for another Mediterranean cruise maybe?”

“Perhaps something a tad more believable sir,” the Englishman said wryly, ”possibly some form of venereal disease.”

"Run it through the PR department first," Wayne replied in kind. A little levity at a time like this was a much a needed distraction; war clouds were gathering. Ra's had desecrated his innermost sanctum, broken an unwritten code both men had subscribed to for years, The Dark Knight supposed this duel with the Demon’s Head had always been inevitable.
“Also tell Lucius I need him to look at the right rear stabilizer. There’s a rattle in it when I reach cruising altitude. We’ll be well over the max weight limit, so he’ll need to tighten that up before take-off.”

Across the cave Dick Grayson remained silent, sitting in front of the main computer screen, continuing his tireless voyage through an ocean of faces. He’d been at it for weeks.

The video footage from outside of Hanoi had been analyzed by the most sophisticated Wayne Tech facial recognition software on the market. Hours and hours of traffic, dash, and security cameras feeds thoroughly scrutinized only to find a few low level Asian crime bosses and little else

“Dick you should probably get some shut-eye. We’ll be taking off at zero dark thirty.”

Robin remained silent, typing in a scattering of commands, changing the orientation of the video feed, painstakingly searching the same series of images over and over.

“Dick? Are you listening?”

Batman walked over to his junior partner engrossed at the screen, moving the video backwards and forwards frame by frame.

"Dick....?"

"The answer is here right in front of us," Robin growled in frustration. "Whoever sent that email to the Hall didn't just disappear, they're right here....somewhere."

"I admire your tenacity Dick, I really do, but it's time to move on. Katana's contacts have been very reliable in the past. Catching a meeting like this is extremely rare and we only have a small envelope to act on it before we risk the Shadows going back into hiding. We'll revisit this once we return."

"Why the Kryptonite?" Dick interjected abruptly. "It's not for the money, and it's not like it's the only deposit available on the planet. Besides Ra's isn't a collector of items, he's a collector of favors."

“Perhaps he owes someone.”

“Maybe,” Robin nodded. “Why else?”
Wayne sighed, they’d been down this road several times already, and for some reason Grayson still questioned the detective’s conclusion. Yes it was purely hypothetical; without apprehending and interrogating the perpetrators who’d broken into the cave, what else could it be? But it was still sound, it was still logical and for some odd reason Robin didn’t believe a word of it.

“To prove he can. To show he can strike at any time anywhere. That no place is safe or off limits anymore.”

“To make it personal then.” Robin confirmed.

“Sure. Everything is a chess match to him. He’s just waiting for me to make the next move,”

“Let’s say just for a minute that that’s his reasoning. That he’s trying to force your hand. If he’s trying to draw you out, why not just take Alfred instead? He had the opportunity. If he’s trying to make it personal, taking the meteor doesn’t make sense. Taking someone close to you does.”

“Your point?”

Dick typed another command into the computer, leaving half the screen continuing its search through Hanoi, while the other half pulled up images from the night of the break in. The three perpetrators appeared on the screen, their images enhanced as much as possible, but in the dim lighting still grainy.

Dick stood up, walking to the screen, stretching the image with his touch. “Look at their heads. Look at the gap in their masks. What do you see?”

Wayne walked over, focusing on the picture. “There’s a slight reflection from the lighting array inside the uniforms vault shining off a surface. Some sort of night vision I assume.”

“When have the Shadows ever used night vision? That’s not how they’re trained? That’s not how they trained you.”

“It’s a different world now,” Wayne countered. “Tactics evolve with times.”
“Ok fine, but don’t you find it kind of sloppy that they allowed themselves to be caught on camera not once, not twice, but three times?”

“I assume it was to make a point.”

“Yeah, but that was weeks ago,” Dick replied. “Ra’s may be a master strategist, but he’s also a full tilt diva. He’d want you to know by now. He’d be dying to tell you.”

Bruce stroked his chin as he considered Dick’s theory, walking back to the storage bins while the Boy Wonder returned the screen to its full view. Wayne concluded the final count, securing the bins with an encrypted password in the event any of the suits or weapons fell into the wrong hands, set to self-destruct if anyone tried to force them open.

“All we have left is to pack up the food stocks. You’ll need to pick out what you want, but remember space is limited and it will have to last for at least two weeks. We can restock at Kathmandu if necessary, but you’ll need something a little more nutritious than pop tarts.” Wayne joked trying to pull a smile or chuckle from his partner.

Bruce was worried about Dick. He’d been oddly quiet the last few weeks. Perhaps it was the fear of losing Alfred, losing another member of his family. If he was being honest, the break in had rattled him as well, leaving him feeling surprisingly vulnerable, an emotion the Batman wasn’t allowed to carry. As much as he would have preferred Dick to stay behind and focus on school and patrolling Gotham, the search for Ra’s al Ghul and the League of Shadows was a two man job, and there was no one better suited to assist him, not in the Justice League or Batman’s questionable list of associates more than Dick Grayson, the person that would one day inherit the mantle.

Bruce tested the weight of the storage bins, finding them much too heavy for one man to carry. They needed to be loaded onto the Batplane as quickly as possible. Both men had a long flight ahead of them and needed a few hours rest.

“Can you give me a hand loading these?” Wayne asked, double checking the locks one more time. “We can set the recognition software to repeat the search while we’re gone, but I doubt you’re going to find anything new besides the locals and a few street merchants. The Old Quarter is not exactly known as a safe place for tourists after dark.”

“Shit! That’s it!” Dick exclaimed, clearing the screen and entering a new set of root commands.

“What are you talking about?” Bruce asked, walking back to his partner.
“God I’m an idiot,” Dick slapped his forehead. “I missed an entire category to search through.”

Feverishly he reinitiated the recognition software to begin its search through an entirely new set of images that soon rushed across the screen.

“Facebook, Vine, Instagram, Snapchat, Kik. I never thought about looking through social media. Locals, tourists, whoever; someone is always posting selfies. The email was sent a little after one a.m. I can set up the software to search through any social media postings from that night an hour either way, and I can expand it to a ten block radius around the café.”

“That’s smart, and not very legal,” Wayne smiled.

“Yeah well I’m a minor, what are they gonna do?” Dick shrugged.

On the screen, virtual wire grids formed over the faces of the thousands of persons that sped across the monitor, analyzing eyes, nose, bone structure, skin color. It would take time. The initial searches of the video feeds from the Old Quarter had taken days to complete, but at least now there was a different avenue to pursue. If the search came up empty after that Dick would have to live with it.

With the Boy Wonder satiated, Wayne went back to the gantry to finishing loading the jet when the alert chimed. He spun around to find Robin standing rigidly in front of the monitor, his chin dropped, despondently shaking his head.

“Don’t tell me you have a hit already,” Wayne questioned curious to see what the software could have possible come up with in such a short period of time.

Robin’s hand covered his mouth, a grave expression cast forth through haunted eyes.

"What is it?"

Grayson sighed dolefully. “It wasn’t three Shadows in the cave that night, it was just one: one really fast one.”

Batman walked back to the monitor, perplexed by the young detective assertion when he saw the image; three young Asian girls, smiles and excitement stretched broadly across their faces, behind them blues of motorcycles and street light shining brightly, but what drew his attention was the figure off to the side, just barely in the frame; trench coat pulled up to his chin, ball cap pulled down around his eyes. A cartoon image was sewn onto the crest of the hat; a six sided hexagon
bolt, surrounded by two washers, all drawn with cartoonish arms and legs; a classic minor league baseball mascot.

The Keystone Lug Nuts.

But what was more disturbing was the green eyes and strands of red hair that escaped from underneath its shadow. The virtual framework highlighted his missing features, but both men had already recognized the man before the computer could finish building his image.

“My God,” Wayne exclaimed,

All Dick could do was nod, a small part of him knowing all along.

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An hour later, Batman sat in front of the main computer, accessing the Justice League database. Displayed on the screen were the results of the last DNA tests performed after the discovery of Superboy and Red Arrow’s true lineage, but those results had now been called into question.

“It’s been Wally all along. Jesus how could I not see it? The injuries, the absences, the lies. Ever since he came out of that coma, something’s been off. I could feel it in my gut and I just freaking ignored it.”

“Dick this isn’t you fault. Barry should have been the first to notice, not you.”

Robin leaned his head back against his head. “It’s been in front of me the whole time; all of the questions about your investigations, how he knew exactly how to disable the Reds, how he practically stole Fate’s helmet out from under Kaldur during the Klarion mission. He knew exactly when I was out of the country…God Bruce, I was the one who showed him the tunnel to the Batcave…..I showed him everything.”

“Dick you need to stop beating yourself up and focus. We don’t know what we’re dealing with yet. He passed the DNA test the League performed with flying colors. He’s either the most sophisticated clone we’ve ever discovered…..”

“…or he’s been turned.” Robin replied bitterly.

“For the moment let’s assume he’s a duplicate. The kind of technology needed to accomplish something like this is light years ahead of Cadmus, or frankly anything I’ve ever seen before for that matter. When was he created? How long has he been among us? If he’s been replaced, it had
to have happened somewhere near the time of Roy Harper’s disappearance. What doesn’t add up is why leave Harper so obviously flawed on a cellular level while at the same time producing a clone of Kid Flash undetectable from the original. It’s one thing to be able plant false memories; it’s an entirely different matter to be able to reproduce his powers.”

“Bruce he knows our identities, he knows all of them, the entire League.”

“Then we have to assume whomever planted him knows as well. We need to search the Zeta logs for his transport destinations. See what stands out. Anything that was not mission or team related.”

Dick just stood, shaking his head. “Something must have happened when he put on the Helmet of Fate.”

“Perhaps Nabu detected Kid Flash’s true intent and tried to stop him anyway he could.” Wayne replied

“The coma…”

“It’s just a theory for now. What doesn’t make sense is why alert the League? Why communicate that there might be traitors in or midst if he is one?”

“Classic misdirection? I can’t be that simple. Someone went to a lot of trouble to plant the clones within the Team. Giving up their identity to protect his own just doesn’t make sense.

“Unless they have more than one master.” Wayne suggested.

The young detective fell back into the plush chair next to the computer, resting his head against the cushion, still in utter disbelief. “What about the second option?”

“That he’s a traitor? That he voluntarily turned against us?” Wayne looked off distantly, numerous scenarios rushing through his analytical mind. In the end he came up as empty as Dick had. “I honestly don’t know. Regardless, he’s dangerous and needs to be contained as quickly as possible. Where is he right now?”

Dick tapped the interface on his glove, a small holographic sphere forming in the air above.
“According to the GPS on his phone and com-unit, he’s at his house in Keystone.”

“It’s much too risky to confront him there. Too many places he can hide, too much space for him to run. We need to get him in a secure and enclosed location.”

“Like the cave,” Dick nodded.

“Exactly.”

“We can’t risk contacting him in at this point. He can’t suspect anything is up.”

“Set an alert on the Zeta computer. We need to be notified the moment he steps onto a platform. I’ll contact the League and…”

“He’s moving!” Robin interrupted, transferring the image onto the main screen of the computer, bringing a satellite image of the twin cities into focus. On it, a flashing red dot moved leisurely down the street map. “He’s headed towards Central City, and he’s not doing it very fast.”

“He could be heading for the Zeta Station there,” Batman replied. “Enter in a subcommand to the Tubes. Stall any transportation sequences for a few minutes. Make it appear that there are too many users online at the moment. I’ll contact the cave and have it evacuated immediately. There won’t be a better chance. Once he’s apprehended, then we can start figuring out who’s responsible”.

“What are you going to the Team?” Robin asked.

“The truth.”

xxx

Wally West rubbed at the back of his aching skull, his extremities still tingling from Aqualad’s bioelectric blast, staring out through the azure hue of Rocket’s force field to the unreadable face of his best friend. The day he’d feared had finally come to pass, and the only weapons left in his arsenal were more lies and deceit that had lost their lethality long ago, yet still that was all he had left.
“What the hell Rob!?” he winced, searching the back of his head for the knot forming under his scalp.

“I’ll ask again.”

“This isn’t funny.”

“No shit,” Robin replied bitterly.

“Have you lost your freaking mind?”

“Funny, I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“Dick what in the hell are you talking about?” Wally demanded, throwing caution and secrets to the wind.

The young detective recognized at the tactic. “Using my name to throw me off, to form a connection. Smart.”

“I’m not throwing anything at anybody. Do you even hear yourself?”

Robin glared emotionlessly though the force field, his mind boring holes through the captured speedster lies and his indignity. Wally’s eyes searched through the blueish glow of the dome to the faces of his teammates, hoping someone would recognize the absurdity of the situation and put an end to it, but all her found was contemptuous gazes, staring back at him like a stranger, a traitor. Despite it all he continued on, looking past Robin to address the team.

“Look, I have no idea what he’s told you, but……”

“How was your trip to Hanoi?” Dick interrupted. “I hear it’s nice this time of year.”

Wally face went blank, his feigns of innocence ceasing. Dick knew. They all knew.
The cave went silent as Robin approached the bubble standing inches away from his best friend: face to face, eye to eye, only a thin beam of shimmering hyper-accelerated particles separating them. “You’re the only one I ever told about the tunnel to the cave. You’re the only person I’ve ever even taken down there.”

The speedster’s chin dropped, no longer willing or able to look his friend in the eye.

“Just tell me why.”

Wally measured his words carefully. Any response to Dick’s question would just open another door; grant another avenue for the detective to peruse.

“There’s nothing to tell,” he said gravely.

“Megan?” Robin called out as the young Martian slowly approached his side. She glanced at the speedster with a mix of sadness and confusion. They were friends, or at least she thought they were. She was no stranger to secrets, but this was different. This was outright betrayal.

Wally started to sweat as the young Martian’s eyes began to burn a bright neon, carefully reaching into the outskirts of his mind. Rocket’s force field seemed to close in around him, the air inside thick and suffocating. He felt like he was drowning, but still he pressed on, remembering the future Wayne’s instructions should he be presented with a situation such as this. He felt his brain begin to tingle as his mind shifted into overdrive.

It’s been hypothesized by many in the scientific community that the speed of thought travels faster than light, and for a speedster’s brain, the number is unquantifiable. The moment Megan’s stepped inside Wally’s mind, it was like being thrown into a roller-coaster mid ride, rushing straight down the tracks at a breathless pace with no end in sight.

Megan stumbled backwards unsteady on her feet, unable adjust to the tumultuous velocity that was Wally's thoughts. Conner rushed up from behind, catching her before she could fall to the ground.

“Ohh” she moaned, grasping the sides of her head as Superboy held tight.
“M’gann!”

“I’m all right,” she replied, taking a slow breath. “I just didn’t expect it to be so…fast.”

“What did you see?” Kaldur questioned.

Megan rubbed at her temples, calming her mind. “Formulas, equations, mathematics; all moving backwards and forwards in a blur. Someone's trained him how to fend off a telepath. I’m…I’m not sure I can do it. This is more on my uncle’s level.”

Batman joined the group in front of the force field. “It’s fine. J’onn has been notified. He and the Lanterns were on their way to Rann, but have changed course and are heading back. They should arrive within the next forty eight hours.”

Robin noticed something on the speedster’s face when the Manhunter’s name was mentioned; a barely perceptible tremble. Fear.

J’onn J’onzz had always been a bit of an anomaly to the speedster; genial and outwardly warm in an alienish kind of way, but still terrifying when he had to be; transforming into a myriad of nightmarish shapes and forms during battle. Watching him interacting with his friends, with his niece, his addiction to Oreos humanized him in a way, but that’s not how Wally thought of him now. He'd seen first-hand the cold emotionless being the Martian would someday become; someone with no regard for life or mercy.

The Manhunter barely blinked an eye when his hands phased through Lawrence Crock’s chest stopping his heart. He brutally tortured Michael Holt for information, one of his oldest friends without any regard to their shared past. Scorched into Wally’s memory was not the hero he once knew, but a monster capable of horrible torturous things. That J’onn J’onzz didn’t care about humanity; he barely tolerated it.

At the back of the cavern, Artemis stood alone, the dim lighting cascaded off her golden hair while her features remained in shadow. Wally didn’t have to see her face to know what she was feeling, what she was thinking. And it was all his fault.
She was in shock, stunned, sick. Beating herself up because she’d been stupid enough to grant someone access to her heart, only to have those rarely shared feelings trampled upon

She’d hate him forever and honestly he couldn’t blame her, but as disgusted as he felt, her feelings had to come second to his survival and that of all their fates. Every second he remained a prisoner, time was changing all of their futures in ways no one could predict, and when the entire League finally arrived, everything he and Bruce Wayne had worked for would be lost.

Dick looked into his eyes, no sign of his best friend present anywhere on his face. “I don't know if you’re a clone, if you’ve been brainwashed or if you’re a traitor, but one way or another we’re going to find out.”

“Don't do this Dick.”

“You did it to yourself. Just come clean and tell us who else involved before it’s too late”

“I can’t,” the speedster replied dejectedly.

“Can’t or won’t?”

The speedster gave no reply; there was nothing left to say.

"Fine. Just so we’re real clear; if you're a copy, and anything has happened to the real Wally West, you’re going to wish you’d never crawled out of whatever test tube you came from. And if you’re not……”

The speedster’s turned away, studying his surroundings. Was this how Bart Allen had felt when he arrived from his dystopian future? Trapped, cornered?
Cemented by the lies he’d rehearsed and practiced, did the young Allen fully realize the weight those words carried? To live every day knowing the damage one slip of the tongue could do?

_Oops spoilers!_

It had never been lost on Wally the similarities between the two speedster’s missions; going back in time to correct someone else’s wrongs, risking everything because they were the only ones who could, saving countless lives by risking their own. Did Bart realize the implications of what his presence would ultimately do? Was he brave or just selfish?

In the brief time Wally had known him, Bart Allen had remained purposefully vague about with the details of his former life, but from the little he had inadvertently shared, Wally could put the pieces together enough to know the picture wasn't pretty. Bart's arrival might well have been the harbinger of his own demise.

Did Impulse know that already? Was Wally now someone else's?

He took a deep defeated breath; he had no plan, no chance, no choice, and yet he couldn’t just sit there and wait for the League to arrive.

That’s when it struck him.

_Breath_

Even after all these years, the speedster still didn’t fully grasp the science behind Raquel's abilities. The physicist in him had sat down with her several times to learn the extent of her powers, but had walked away frustrated every time, much the same way others had when trying to comprehend how some kid from Missouri could break the sound barrier in his sneakers.

He's mantra had been and would always be that _everything could be explained by science_. It had taken a tongue lashing from his girlfriend to finally let it go and just accept the things he couldn't explain; he'd done it with magic after all.

But trapped here now, he quickly realized if the particles generated around him weren’t permeable in some form or fashion he would have suffocated long before now. That meant molecules of
In a lifetime full of some truly dumb ideas, this next one was surely to rank near the top. He gritted his teeth and put his plan into motion. Literally.

Inside the bubble, his body began to blur, altering his form.

“What's he doing?” Conner yelled.

Dick stared aghast at the obscure apparition transmuting inside the sphere. "He’s trying to vibrate his way out. Raquel…”

“Don’t worry I got this,” she replied, bearing down, mentally closing the gaps inside her construct knowing when he finally burned though the oxygen trapped inside he’d be out cold in minutes, but as she tightened her focus, immediately she noticed something didn’t feel right.

Raquel had fought her fair share of super-villains before ever joining the Team. Inside her force fields, the more the imprisoned struggled, the stronger her construct would become. She’d even successfully trapped Icon on numerous occasions during their training sessions, and if she could hold someone as powerful as he, she considered her chances of doing the same against powerhouses like Superman and Wonder Woman pretty good, but she’d never faced a speedster before.

Wally wasn’t pushing against the bubble, he wasn’t championing Newton's third law of motion, he was standing directly in the center, his body beginning to somehow glow and fade at the same time. Waves of pressure began to form in the young hero’s mind, a slight headache that was quickly ratcheting past migraine into something stronger

She dropped to her knees, one hand bracing itself on the floor while the other reached out towards the construct. Her body began to glow a brilliant shade of violet while small trails of crimson began to trickle from her ears, pooling on the floor beneath her.

“Rocket!” Kaldur screamed, as a high pitch whine began echo within the cave, decibels increasing by the second.
“I…got…this,” she growled, brow soaked in sweat, digging deeper within herself; willing… *demanding* more and more energy outward to fortify the force-field.

Inside the bubble, blood gushed form the speedster’s nose and mouth. Capillaries were breaking by the second, life giving fluid drenching his face and chest, but still he continued on. Wally reached out to the barrier, testing it gently to see if his hand could pass through, but he wasn’t there yet, he still wasn’t fast enough, but that’s when he discovered something odd, a byproduct he hadn’t considered; relativistic mechanics.

\[ m \text{ traveling at a speed } v = \frac{1}{2}mv^2; \text{ equal to the product of the mass and the square of the speed.} \]

In layman terms; the waves of kinetic energy flowing from the speedster’s body had begun to transform into a form that could break down the excited particles of Raquel’s force field, and the more she fought to reinforce it, the more feedback was sent rushing back to her. Essentially fighting herself, her powers now reversed.

Wally realized he’d never be able to vibrate his way out of Rocket’s force-field, but he could create an environment inside where she couldn’t sustain it. It was just a matter of who would pass out first. Raquel was a great girl, a strong girl, but he was desperate, and sometimes it’s that fear that makes you superhuman. In the end she never had a chance.

The young heroine screamed in agony, crumbling to the floor. The moment her eyes fluttered shut, the dome disappeared and the speedster was a memory. Wally paused for a moment, no more than a few seconds at most, watching his former teammates rushing to Raquel’s side in slow motion. As the world around him began to idle to a crawl, he could still see her chest rise and fall ever so shallowly, he could see her eyes slowly react to the pin light shined upon them, but he also saw the blood, flowing from places it shouldn’t. He prayed Raquel would be all right, but it seemed everything he touched now withered and died, why would Rocket be any different?

In a blink of an eye Wally was out of the lounge and standing on the Zeta Pad, frantically punching in destination codes. At this point it didn’t matter where, just as long as he was miles away from Mt. Justice with open roads ahead. He had no plan, no strategy, nowhere to go and very little time to get there.

He’d been so close, so very very close. In the seconds it took for the Zeta Tubes to come online, he racked his brain for where things had gone wrong, what mistakes he’d made, what he’d overlooked. In all honesty he’d been flying blind the majority of the time; he knew that. He’d been running around with torn out chapters of Bruce Wayne’s master plan when what he needed was the entire novel to make sense of it. If Wally was searching for where things had begun to fly off the rails he didn’t have to look much further than a swamp in Louisiana or the hospital rooms of two young sisters that would spend the rest of their lives trying to piece back together the youth that had
been stolen from them.

In truth the answer he was searching for was him trying to save a world that would always be broken. The Earth was and would always be unremittingly diseased, perpetually minutes away from annihilation on the doomsday clock. And if it wasn’t some cosmic entity trying to conquer humanity, it was humanity itself trying to kill each other; an unending, unyielding perfect circle.

It was at that moment Wally realized it didn’t matter how many lives he gave, how many sacrifices he’d made or wrongs righted, in the end it hadn’t changed a thing.

The tomorrow he’d hoped to rescue was now crumbling to pieces; waves upon waves of temporal energy slamming into destiny, rewriting the history of the future. The millions of lives he’d come back to save now possibly never even being born.

He shook his head, forcing himself out of his philosophical pity party as the transport computer finally accepted his destination code; somewhere in the Pacific Northwest was all he saw on the monitor as the Tubes began to roll.

_Reognize Kid Flash B0…._

“Wayne Tech Override RT-4!” suddenly echoed across the intercom, and with Robin’s verbal command the transporter shut down and went offline.

Honestly Wally was surprised it had taken this long.

_Intruder Alert…Intruder Alert_

The mechanical voice of the main computer repeated the ominous warning incessantly, and Wally knew exactly what was happening behind those metallic words. Every door, bulkhead, computer terminal, and keyless entry system within Mt. Justice was now being locked and sealed.

The cave might not be collapsing around him like its last moments of the future he’d escaped from, but he was trapped inside just the same.

His fist pounded at the side of his head. “Think damnit! Think!”
He had to move.

The mountain was a maze of hallways, rooms, chambers, crawl ways, and labs; an intricate labyrinth that could afford him a few hours reprieve, possibly a day at the most. He could spiral down within its bowels all he wanted, but in the end there would be nowhere left for him to run, nowhere left to hide.

There were five main exits to the Cave; the primary entryway at the base of the mountain leading into the forest outside the city, the rear passageway to the Rhode Island coast, the hangar bay doors, the waterway out to the Atlantic, and of course the Zeta Tube, but much like the Batcave there had to be scattering of access tunnels, ventilation shafts, and hatches weaved throughout the complex, and some of those undoubtedly lead to the surface. If he had a few days and his best friend by his side, Wally had no doubt in his mind he and Dick would be able to discover them and pull off a Houdini type escape, instead he had less than an hour tops, and his best friend wouldn't be helping, he'd be hunting.

Even if he was lucky enough to stumble across one, with the security protocols now in effect, they'd be sealed shut along with the rest of the complex. The hangar bay would undoubtedly be locked down tight, and the seaport would assuredly be open, but there would be no way for him to survive the swim; succumbing to either the temperature, the pressure, or the lack of that annoying little molecule called oxygen.

The base he once called home would soon be his prison, just like the gulags of the future, filled with innocent heroes who’d defied Justice League mandates in an attempt to just make a difference.

It was over, he had to accept it. There’d be no escaping Mt. Justice….not unless it wanted him out.

That was it. Mt. Justice was designed to be a fortress, but it could also be a prison when it had to be. Regardless, its main function was to protect and shield those that resided within, and that included its prisoners.

If its occupants were in danger, if something within its core was about to go critical and cause harm, every security system in the base would be immediately overridden to ensure its resident’s safety.

Wally wasn’t even in the same stratosphere when it came to Dick’s digital expertise, but if he did it right he wouldn't have to be. There was a number of ways to dupe the mountain without going cyber. The cave was equipped with sensors of every type; fire, smoke, seismic, thermal: carefully
monitored and maintained, programed with numerous contingencies for any event that might befall the mountain. Once single event wouldn’t overload the system, but what if there were more than one? All the same time? If Mt. Justice believed any of these events within the cave were about to go critical, every hatch, seal, window and door would open automatically. That was the hope at least.

In this specific scenario hardware would trump software. Tripping just the right amount of fuses and rewiring the correct relays might just be enough to convince the mountain it was about to blow itself to kingdom come. It wouldn’t be easy, time was short and he was on the run, but it was the best he could come up with all things considered.

The first thing he had to do was reach the Brain, the nickname they’d given the engineering room of the cave, the nerve center for the entire complex. This state of the art mechanical room was powered by the Titan, the most advanced supercomputer Wayne Tech currently had on the market, retrofitted to control the less than cutting edge technology still used within the old abandoned base. This virtual computer regulated all power, environmental, and water systems; allowing each one to be tied directly into the older existing utilities; motion sensors, generators, boiler rooms, HVAC, etc. The Justice League never anticipated using the base again and never considered upgrades feasible or necessary.

With a majority of bulkheads within the base now sealed shut, Wally sped down the few open hallways, abruptly skidding to a stop on worn out sneakers halfway down past the science wing when he discovered the wiring harnesses overhead. At this point he had no choice but to use the ventilation shafts, climbing up within the tight confined aluminum tunnels and following the heaviest strands of cables and conduits. For just a moment he was back inside that narrow shaft to the Batcave, not his fondest of memories.

Moving through the ventilation ducts at such a high rate speed sent booming echoes of thunder throughout the cave. It wouldn’t take long for the Team to triangulate the source and track him, but by the time they figured out which direction he was heading, it would be too late.

After minutes of twist and turns Wally finally found the proper junction box all the conduits led to, quickly opening the vent from within and lowering himself to the floor.

This was the one room within Mt. Justice that matched the pristine modern technology of the Watchtower, Almost cathedral like in its elegance and sophistication, all systems within working in perfect harmony, regulating and controlling an underground city in perfect synchronicity, and urban planner’s wet dream.
It took less than ten seconds for Wally to trash the shit out of it.

Lights flickered and alarms sounded as every terminal, router UTP, CAT, Fiberoptic and wireless connection where shredded, cutting off all access to the main servers deep below. This sudden catastrophic failure immediately activated the older redundant back-up systems, each conveniently located at their specific worksites, basically in every corner of the cave in all directions. At least for the moment it would keep the team guessing which path or system he would take.

If Dick was smart, and he usually was, the most logical destination for the speedster to head would be the power grid. Robin would assume his plan would be to overload the generators and wait for the backups to drain, leaving the cave lifeless. With its last act before the power cells could run dry, the mountain would force open the main emergency exit located not far from the electrical room, giving the trapped occupants inside their chance at freedom, but on the downside cornering anyone else who might try to escape through that route.

It was a smart plan, a logical plan, but it wasn’t Wally’s plan. For all the hidden hatches, bulkheads and exterior doors to open, Mt. Justice would have to believe there was something more seriously wrong with it than a dead battery. His next stop would be the steam plant.

The entire complex was powered by geothermal energy; clean, natural, and unlimited, created by the blazing heat within the Earth core to superheat the overabundance of ocean water surrounding Mt. Justice, then producing steam to turn the large turbines within, thus creating electricity.

Limitless, safe and smart; but not for long if Wally had anything to do about it.

Sliding down the empty access tunnel, The speedster landed on the scaffolding above the cavernous enclosure. The room was a jigsaw of cast iron pipes, water tanks, turbines and other heating and steam-generating related equipment. Outdated machines to be sure, but still fully fictional, living up to the old adage if it aint broke don’t fix it.

Wally stood next to the monstrous generator, roughly the size of a Winnebago, with four more just like it spread behind in a row. Each turbine was equipped with enough redundant backups, that there was little to no chance some catastrophic event could cause any real damage to the complex.
But never say never, because if Wally could build an EMP out of random pieces of an MRI and CT machine to defeat psycho killer androids, he would have a field day with something like this.

The speedster pulled open the hinged access panel, finding the Edison sockets, RCD’s, breakers and fuses beneath. Next to the fuse box was the turbine control system, hardwired directly into the Wayne Tech Titan computer system. With it now disabled, the turbines would have to rely on the nerve centers redundant backups.

His plan was idiotically simple in its approach. Remove the circuit breakers designed to protect the systems from the electrical overload Wally was about to initiate, prohibiting them from interrupting the flow to the generators. Wait a few minutes for the circuit box to overheat, and then…. boom.

Electrical engineering 101. Not taught by some fancy professor at Stanford, but by his dad in their basement rewiring the house.

Wally pried open the TCS aces panel, exposing the circuit boards and its multitudes of industrial sized relays. This was where his speed really came in handy, replacing and rewiring these relays before the current could arc. He might not be as fast as Barry, but in a situation like this he was fast enough.

Stripping and exposing the numerous wires with his Boy Scout knife, Wally plugged strands of copper and zinc into places they weren’t meant for. Placing cable into circuits not designed to carry that kind of amperage, crocheting the entire electrical system into one giant mistake waiting to happen. The circuit breakers were removed in a blur, and all that was left to do was activate the turbine and run like hell.

The resulting pressure buildup in theory would trigger every thermal and sonic sensor still online, and with them no longer networked with the Titan, the main computer wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between a meltdown or an explosion. Mt Justice would believe the resulting detonation to be a bomb of some kind, and open its doors like Friday dismissal at Keystone High.

That’s not to say there weren’t risks. There would still be a detonation of sorts. Iron and steel would superheat and expand, eventually bursting with enough force to blow a hole through even the thickest of granite, followed by a raging influx of thousands of gallons of scalding water and steam. The entire complex would jump in temperature by at least twenty degrees, making tracking Wally’s heat signature nearly impossible. If all went as planned, by the time anyone figured out
exactly what had happened, he’d be long gone.

Or at least he would have if a translucent jade colored figure hadn’t chosen this exact moment to phase through the wall in search of her prey.

*Shit!*

Wally slammed the box closed, activating the turbine. Of all people, Megan could not be in here when the turbine and adjacent tanks exploded. Her physiology wasn’t meant for these extremes. He had to lead her away.

On her best day, she was still no match for his speed, and even with her ability to phase through solid matter, which still pissed him off to no end that he couldn’t master, the speedster would still be able to remain several steps ahead. That was until he felt his feet along with the rest of his body levitate off the ground. His legs and arms where a blur, but without a surface to provide traction he was helpless.

“You’re not going anywhere,” she snarled, twisting her wrist as the speedster’s body rotated with it, forcing him to face her.

On her face was an expression of unbridled fury. Wally had wounded her deeply by hurting the only true friends she’d ever known. Gone was the cheerful and friendly demeanor she normally carried, replaced with an almost animalistic fury for what he’d done; to Raquel, to all of them. He’d betrayed his friends, he’d betrayed her.

Wally knew in her rage it wouldn’t matter if he was a clone, a sinner, or a saint; when it came to protecting the one’s she loved, all he was to her right now was a target.

The speedster had seen this side of her before. Unlike her cold and emotionless uncle, Megan was prone to fits of fury when pushed to the limit. Psimon had discovered that first hand on several occasions.

Now floating stranded in the air, Wally’s options were limited. The only choices available to him could result in serious injury to his friend or himself, but every moment he remained immobilized, the future he’d came back to save was being altered in unknown ways. And on top of all that, the boiler room and its turbines were about to explode.

“Megan we have to get out of here!”
“Oh you’re not going anywhere,” she snapped in anger

“You don’t understand! This whole place is about to explode!”

“Stop lying!”

“I’m not,” he spit through gritted teeth. “You have to trust me on this.”

“Trust you? I don’t even know you!” she growled. “But I’m about to find out!”

“Megan no!!” he screamed as her eyes began to glow and his mind began to ache.

Immediately Wally put up his defenses, once again, composing equations and complex formals, sending them streaming through his consciousness backwards and forwards at blinding speeds. But this time she was prepared for his defenses, and she was no longer pulling her punches. When Wally had sent Raquel screaming to the floor, he’d lost all rights for mercy. Megan wasn’t going to be gentle; she wasn’t going to be careful, she was going to find the answers.

Digging into someone’s mind is as violent as it sounds. Her eyes began to glow brighter and brighter with each layer she penetrated, and there was nothing Wally could do to stop it.

He could feel her sorting through his memories, like someone would search through a file cabinet, and with each private moment she pulled from his hippocampus, the more painful it became for both of them. They were connected in an intimate personal way; that was the only way it worked. She delved deeper and deeper, digging through his brain with reckless abandon, seeing random memories at the velocity in which the speedster remembered them. It was as if they were both standing at a window, watching as Wally’s life passed before them at the speed of light.

Her search was surprisingly random; she wasn’t used to forcing herself upon someone in this way, that stage would come much later when she’d begin to tamper with Conner’s mind, removing memories an moments where she’d hurt him, betraying his trust and love.
Wally’s memories began to move faster and faster, blurring into a collage of color and light. She’d opened up something inside of him neither could control, and the emotions and feelings behind those moments became too much for either one to bear alone.

They both began to scream as those thoughts and memories slammed into the Martian like a runaway locomotive, a tidal wave of brutal honesty. Megan was barely hanging on, when she tightened her focus, trying to slow down the train so she could make sense of blur that was flashing before her eyes. None of it made sense. It was as if the person before her had lived two separate lives, running opposite of each other with the young telepath standing directly between the tracks.

Standing inside Wally’s mind she reached out to the fury of images, trying to pull the memories from him like someone would remove pictures from a wall. When she looked at these blurred portraits of a life lived, they began to chill her to the bone.

Her metaphysical fingers bled as she grazed the rushing images, scraping into the boundaries of Wally’s mind. When he screamed, she screamed, but she refused to break the connection, she was too close to the answers she sought.

She reached further into the speeding train of recollections, pulling out a random memory that she formed into a virtual portrait. Holding it up to some imaginary lamp she’d created in their minds, the image she discovered sent her careening to the floor.

_A being. A creature. Eight feet tall at least. Long limbs that dragged the ground, exposed muscles and sinew, large peaked skull, rows upon rows of razor sharp teeth; a nightmare, a monster, a white Martian._

M’gann wasn’t remotely prepared for what she’d discovered, seeing her true from another’s eyes, human eyes. Her mouth fell agape and the strength and energy it had taken to sort through the blinding barrage of memories faded away. Her glowing eyes dimmed, rolling up into her skull as the mental grip that had held the speedster aloft ceased, sending them both plunging to the floor. Wally landed first, rushing across the metal floor plating, sliding to his knees to catch Megan before she crashed to the cold unforgiving floor.

The jagged shards of memories she’d stolen had been too overwhelming. Wally had been carrying this weight for months, he’d accepted this burden, but the raw emotions that had come along with them had been too much for the young telepath to bear, more powerful than the training exercise she’d inadvertently high-jacked all those months ago. Megan had been blindsided by the sheer power, the naked honesty, and the haunting hopelessness that followed along with the meaningless images that had cascaded within her. Wally could only hope the jumbled memories she’d discovered would make no sense, that she’d be unable to sew together anything close to linear.
All he knew for sure was through his eyes, they’d seen who she really was, and the cognizance of what one day she might do, of who she’d become. If now, that part of her future had changed, so be it, but he had bigger worries and the clock was ticking.

Wally took the alien in his arms and rushed for cover at the far end of the boiler room, preparing for the thundering moment the turbine would explode, sending superheated water across the chamber. The speedster placed the Martian high enough on the scaffolding to damper its impact, but the heat coming off the water would be debilitating until it cooled. She’d hurt, but she’d survive. Wally wished he was that confident about his own fate.

The deafening whine of the pipes began to scream, like a million teapots all reaching their boiling point at the same time, seconds later the turbine finally burst and the pipes exploded. Superheated water and steam spilled out across the chamber in all directions. Wally took Megan’s unconscious form and shielded her with his body, his back blistering in the process, but leaving her relatively unscathed.

“Fuck!” he screamed as the scalding vapor washed across his back. It felt so similar to the road burn he was prone to in his early days when speed and balance didn’t mix particularly well. His healing factor couldn’t kick in soon enough.

Granted, he’d felt worse, but not by much.

Megan drifted in and out of consciousness in her fragile state, struggling to make sense of her world.

“Wa…Wally?” she mumbled weakly just as his fist made contact with her jaw, sending her reeling back into numbed slumber

“I’m so sorry Megs,” he swallowed hard, easing her back down.

Wally flinched as he took off his flannel outer shirt, wincing from the pain as he whipped it in the air until it cooled. Next he lifted her head, sliding the garment underneath, trying to make her as comfortable as possible. It most likely would do no good, but it was the least he could do. No matter what become of his fate, she was and always would be his friend; in his mind at least.
“I promise you I’m only trying to help,” he whispered through the anguished lump in his throat. Was he speaking to her or was he trying to convince himself. In all honestly he didn’t know anymore.

After moments of flickering, the lights finally dimmed, and the red emergency beacons activated overhead, casting the room in its red glow. Wally pulled the goggles that had been hanging around his neck over his eyes, placing them in night vision mode. The speedster looked down one last time at his fallen comrade and a second later he was gone, scurrying back up the access tunnel and hoping the security systems within Mt, Justice would soon be having a meltdown of its own.

xxx

Halfway down the long steel corridor, under a dropped down ceiling, a single fiberglass tile fell to the floor. After a moment’s pause, a head peeked out of the aperture, looking down the hallway both ways before silently dropping to the floor.

The red emergency light at the end of the passageway glowed like the sun through Wally's infrared goggles. His back still throbbed from the scalding burn he'd suffered, but with each passing moment it was getting easier to move and breathe.

He was directly between the propulsion lab and the library archive, both equally tempting destinations. The library of course had several secret passages hidden behind its vast array of bookshelves that would keep him of the grid and buy more time, but the lab offered a more enticing option.

To his knowledge, no one had entered this room during their tenure at the cave, other than on some introductory tour. Why should they? The team’s main mode of transportation was a Martian spacecraft and a New Genesis flying cycle. The lab was most likely installed back in the days before Zeta Tubes, before Watchtowers, when the League was solely responsible for creating, building, and testing their own interplanetary vehicles.

With no state of the art aircraft to test now, the team pretty much steered clear of the lab, and that was precisely what Wally was counting on.

Any preliminary testing of these proposed ships back in the day would require propulsion compounds...fuel. And if there was fuel, there would have to be ventilation. If he could find the ductwork, it might just lead directly to the surface
With his hand gripping the handle of the door, Wally checked up and down the hallway one last time before pulling firmly on it, confident that this would be the last place the Team would search. That of course was his first mistake.

The heavy steel hatch began to shake, exploding from its hinges from within, sending it and Wally hurdlng down the hallway, landing face first against the metal support walls.

The speedster’s recently clotted nose and mouth began to bleed again, and a small crack began to form in the top corner of his right google lens. Wiping the crimson fluid on his forearm, the speedster looked up to see Kaldur'ahm emerging from inside the lab, sparks of electricity arcing from his hard-water constructs.

More than impressed at the accuracy of Aqualad’s deduction, there wasn't much time formulate a plan as bio electric water bearers lashed out, missing the speedster’s chest by inches. Despite the potency of the assault, Wally could tell Kaldur was holding back.

“I do not want to hurt you.”

“I don’t want you to hurt me either,” Wally chuckled sadly.

“I do not know why you have chosen this path. If it was design or by choice, but if you surrender now, you will not be harmed. You have my word. Either way it ends here.”

Kaldur’s word was his bond, after years of working side by side with the noble Atlantean, Wally could attest to that, but he also knew his offer came with an expiration date. If the speedster didn't agree to his terms, and soon, all bets were off.

Of all his teammates, Kaldur would have been the one most likely to recognize and understand the dilemma Wally had been placed in; calmly and rationally coming up with a solution. However temporal mechanics was a fickle creature, and Aqualad could no more solve this problem than Wally could learn to breathe underwater.

Reluctantly the speedster replied. “You know I can't do that.”
The Atlantean sighed, “I had to ask.”

A primal scream erupted from his lungs, and a glowing stream of concentrated water lashed out at the fallen speedster, but this time Wally was ready. He leapt from the ground, running in tight concentric circles from floor to ceiling, creating a powerful backdraft that drove the Atlantean backwards. Wally sped away down the darkened corridor only to make an impossible turn and barreling back towards his former teammate, on the ceiling no less. He spiraled down mid sprint, slamming into Kaldur like a cannonball. Wally growled as his shoulder popped out and back into place from the force of the impact, and by the way the way Aqualad staggered, the speedster knew he’d felt it too. He didn't have much time before his friend recovered and continued the fight.

He dropped an elbow into the Atlantean’s gut, knocking the wind from him before unleashing a blurred barrage of punches to Kaldur’s head like a boxer would a speed bag. Blow after blow rocked Aqualad’s skull, Wally hoping the next would be the one to leave his friend incapacitated on the floor. A minute into his rapid-fire attack, Wally’s arms began to tire as suddenly a dark skinned hand caught his fist.

*Uh oh*

Kaldur’s legs shot forth, wrapping around the speedster’s neck, flipping him over and sending him flying forward down the corridor. Wally rolled with the impact, summersaulting back to his feet and tearing down the hallway like a bat out of hell, dipping his shoulder as he slammed the Atlantean viciously into the closest bulkhead, but still Kaldur refused to submit.

In such a confined space, Wally was unable to access the full extent of his powers, and with Kaldur built to survive the crushing depths of the ocean, the speedster’s punches and strikes were having little to no effect. With few options left, he tilted back and shot forwards, head-butting Aqualad between the eyes, stunning himself more than his intended target, giving Kaldur the opening he needed. He grabbed Wally by the throat, swinging him around and pinning him against the cold metal wall.

“Yield!” Kaldur demanded, breathing as heavily as his prisoner.

“I… can’t,” Wally choked out through Kaldur’s powerful grip.

“It is over. You have lost.”
“Have I?” the red-head gasped.

Kaldur looked at him curiously.

“M’gann,” Wally wheezed.

“What? What does that mean?” the Atlantean growled.

“When was the last time you heard from her?” Wally asked, struggling with every word through Kaldur’s powerful grasp. “I know she must have reached out when she found me, but have you heard from her since?”

“What have you done?” he demanded, tightening his grip.

“You felt the cave shake. That was just one small C4 charge placed on a steam plant turbine. There are four more just like it rigged to blow in the next fifteen minutes. Megan’s lying next to one. She’s alive, but won’t be for long when those things go off.”

“You are bluffing.”

“Am I? The mind link is down, the communication systems are offline, and you can’t use a cell phone this deep in the mountain. Are you really willing to take the chance?”

Aqulalad stared at him coldly.

“You can either capture me or you can save her, but you can’t do both. It’s your choice Kal.”
Aqualad snarled, tightening his grasp, raising the speedster off his feet. “If you have injured her in any way, there will be no place on this planet you will be able to hide.” He brought Wally back down to eye level, their faces mere inches away. “I guarantee it.”

“You’re on the clock Kaldur,” the speedster gasped.

The Atlantean tossed him aside like a rag doll, sprinting down the hallway towards the fire escape, praying to Poseidon he wasn’t too late. Wally struggled to his feet soon after, his throat on fire, unable to swallow, barely able to breathe. If Kaldur had squeezed any tighter he would have crushed his windpipe.

It was the performance of a lifetime, another convoluted series of lies that were coming easier and easier with each passing day. Of course there were no timers, no bombs, and Megan was only unconscious, induced by a mind meld gone terribly wrong. Even so Wally still worried for her safety, but even more so by what she may have discovered.

xxx

What the hell am I doing here?

Zatanna had made a huge mistake, a ginormous colossal gargantuan error in judgement, and no it wasn’t falling for the dapper young detective she’d been playing tonsil hockey with over the last month, it was joining his idiotic team in the first place.

What was she thinking? Six months ago she was attending a ritzy upstate boarding school; surrounded by eclectic teachers, tolerable roommates, and the cutest boys this side of Connecticut, but noooo….she just had to follow in her father’s footsteps, harassing him incessantly for the opportunity to be hero and a sorcerer just like him.

Her father had tried to dissuade her every way he knew how.

• Get a good education Zatanna

• See the world Zatanna

• Stop worrying about the family business and enjoy your life Zatanna.
Now she had experience; a few missions under her belt, defeating a handful of low level crime bosses, C-list supervillains, and one detached sociopath and his ghost sister that she and Artemis had stumbled upon on a girl’s night. All W’s in the win column. She was one of them now, she was a hero. She was ready…and then tonight happened, and suddenly she was that timid little girl who got tongue-tied every time she spoke backwards.

Finally she felt she was ready, arriving at Mt. Justice and taking part in her first mission as a member of the Team, and promptly falling flat on her face. But being a part of a family means having more hands to pick you back up and dust you off. That’s what friends were for.

Zatara had told his daughter she was a natural, that she had an affinity for the arts like no other he’d ever seen, that it was just a matter of time before her skills trumped his. Was it loving supportive bullshit or was it true? She decided not to ask.

But did she listen? Hell no. She couldn’t put on the top hat or the bow tie fast enough. Pyrokinesis, Cryokinesis, Electrokinesis, Hydrokinesis, Aerokinesis, she wanted to learn them all. Then the real training began, and suddenly magic wasn’t nearly as easy as fun as she’d once thought. The young teen began to doubt herself; struggling at times, failing at others, but never once did she give up.

This wasn’t the Blue Flu Gang or the Lucky Hand Triad, this wasn’t the Ventriloquist or Kite-man, this person was powerful, dangerous, and worst of all a friend.

Since that first day when she visited Wally in a Massachusetts hospital, she’d liked him. Zatanna had a knack for reading people, and every vibe she got from him said he was a good guy, a standup guy. He had an old soul, she could sense it, nothing close to the obnoxious arrogant teenager Artemis had first described, but even now she knew the archer had been rethinking that opinion.

How had this happened? One minute she was sitting on the couch in her pajamas watching a movie, and the next thing she knew Kaldur was rushing her and the rest of the team out of the cave. Someone very - very dangerous was about to strike, and that person was Wally West. Even now it still didn’t seem real.

But Robin, well Dick evidently since he’d never bothered to share that little tidbit with her, was convinced, and after what the speedster had done to Rocket, she knew immediately he was right. Thankfully Raquel was conscious, but wouldn’t be creating force fields any time soon. The speedster had really scrambled her yokes.

“Do not engage, if you see Kid Flash call out immediately. M’gann will keep the mind link open
throughout, but I repeat. Do not engage.”

She nodded dumbly at Batman’s order, much too nervous to call into question the logic behind it. She was just a rookie, he was the Dark Knight, and you did not question his judgment. It was just…splitting up seemed like a terrible idea. Sure the cave was huge, and searching in pairs would have taken longer, but this was Kid Flash they were dealing with, the fastest teen alive. If one person actually did stumble across him, what could they actually do alone?

It didn’t matter anymore, she had her orders. So now while the rest of the team took off to the most vulnerable locations around the cave, she was left guarding the kitchen and the lounge, the exact place he’d just escaped from. The sorceresses just shook her head; when this was over, she reeeaally needed to rethink this whole hero thing.

The lights had gone out about twenty minutes ago which thrilled her to no end, and the small tactical flashlight she’d pulled from the cabinets probably hadn’t had its batteries checked since before she’d even joined the team.

It really pissed her off when people didn’t take the time to do the little things; change batteries, wash dishes, take out garbage, determine if one of your closest friends and most powerful teammates is a traitor. Was it really too much for a girl to ask?

Her blatant sarcasm was just a front, a failed attempt to hide her fear. Kid Flash was dangerous, and after seeing what he’d done to Raquel, Zatanna had every right to be afraid.

Inside her mind, she practiced her best spells, the ones she was confidant she could cast without a hitch. Any hesitation on her might be the difference between life and death, she prayed to God in wouldn’t get that far.

As the sorceress paced the room, she wondered…hoped that maybe the rest of the team had already captured the speedster. No news had come over her communicator, and Megan’s mind link had gone silent, but honestly she hadn’t been with the Team long enough to know if that was a bad thing or not. Maybe that’s the way it was supposed to work. Maybe when the show was over, you just turned off the TV and went home.

Zatanna jumped when she heard the sound of something rustling above in the distance, most likely a bat or some other nasty cave dweller that had snuck inside. It wasn’t that uncommon, but still just as creepy.
How does Robin live like this? she asked herself.

Cautiously the sorceress walked towards the sound, shining the light to the ceiling. If she could just catch a glimpse of beady little eyes staring back down at her she’d feel much better. It made no sense, but right now she didn’t give a shit.

Halfway across the media room, the flashlight flickered one last time and gave out, leaving her stranded in the darkness like some helpless chick in a low budget horror movie.

Are you freaking kidding me?

Focusing her mind, she cast her spell. “Thgil pu eht moor.”

As night suddenly turned to day, her eyes began to adjust to the newfound brightness, just in time to see a tall figure inches in front of her; freckles, goggles, red hair, and….

Seconds later she found herself prone on the couch, hands, feet, and mouth wrapped and secured; one of the most powerful sorcerers in the world, felled by a three dollar roll of duct tape.

xxx

The speedster was in pure survival mode, adrenaline pushing him past his limits, running through every scenario he could conjure, trying to make the right decisions based on logic and not panic.

He’d been so close, so damn close; crossing off pivotal moments and events from some imaginary ledger he forged, actions that would cripple the organization he was sent back to destroy.

But to succeed in that noble task, he’d done unthinkable things, immoral things, things he thought he could live with if it meant achieving that goal, but the list had now become so long he’d long since stopped count.

Lies, deceit, theft, wonton destruction; terrible but forgivable offenses unto themselves….until you added maim and murder to the list.
• The Louisiana twins who would only know a lifetime of pain and misery.

• A man, an assassin, but still a father. Someone who’d discovered the errors of his ways too late in life, seeking redemption by any means necessary, trapped now for the rest of his days in a dying paralyzed husk.

• A clone that despite its nefarious existence had never been asked to be born, to be evil. One missing gene sequence and that could have been Conner.

A life was still a life, how villains could do this without concern of conscience Wally would never understand. And those were only the temporal repercussions he was aware of. The future was literally changing before his eyes and he was powerless to stop it. The butterfly effect run amok.

Raquel had been a fluke, Megan a mystery, Kaldur a bluff, and Zatanna a lucky shot. This couldn't go on forever. For every pawn he took off the board, more powerful ones lay in wait. He was fast, one of the fastest men alive, but even he couldn't run forever.

Wally would never see his mother or father again, spending the rest of his days perpetually on the run while his parents would be saddled with, not only the loss of their son, but the label of traitor he would always be remembered for; the Flash’s legacy irrevocably tarnished too. Barry was his hero his friend, and Wally would be forever his disgrace.

The League would never stop looking, but others had vanished from their radar before, maybe he’d get lucky.

The irony was not lost on him that this was slowly becoming the exact world he’d left, it’s terrifying last moments forever seared in his mind, and now inadvertently or not, he was the one sowing the seeds of discord that would one day spawn it; brother fighting brother, friends turned to foes, lovers….all fighting to the death for what they believed in.

The ramifications now, if the truth were ever discovered, would change the fate of all involved forever, splintering the League with the knowledge of what one day they might become.

Wally realized now that perhaps that had always been part of some cosmic plan; discovering the agonizing truth that no matter how hard you fought for the betterment of mankind, good doesn't actually triumph over evil. Maybe the Justice Lords had been right all along.

It wasn't Wally's life that now hung in the balance, but the countless others that would get caught
up in the temporal winds of change, and every second he remained here only fed that storm.

Shaking him out of the philosophical spiral, he drove everything from his mind but escape. He'd worry about the rest later. He couldn't be distracted by temporal anomalies or butterfly effects, he couldn't worry about friends and family, he just had get out of Mt. Justice with his freedom. He could deal with everything he else in due course.

Cast in the red glow of the emergency beacons, Wally sprinted down the corridor into the residential wing, skidding to a stop in front of his quarters. Placing an ear to the cold metal door, he listened for any activity on the other side. It wasn’t beyond the realm of possibilities that his former best friend or his mentor could be lying in wait inside. Feeling naked and exposed standing alone in the corridor, he held his breath and took the plunge.

After a brief and frantic search, he took a deep relieved sigh and began gathering supplies. The batteries in his goggles were running low, reading less than twenty percent. He switched them off, sliding them down around neck, using the dim light of his desk lamp to guide the way.

As expected his uniform hung neatly on a hanger inside his closet, along with two flannel shirts and a hoodie he’d eventually need…hopefully.

Grabbing his backpack from the floor, he stuffed the clothing inside, along with every gift card, energy bar, and loose change he could find scattered across his desk, leaving his suit stretched out across his bed.

This uniform would be his last souvenir; something that was once a symbol of hope and justice, now and forever tainted in betrayal. He reached down to the yellow garment, touching the lightning bolt insignia, testing to make sure its stealth mode was working properly. Satisfied, he made one last search of his desk, rummaging through drawers and shelves, hoping to come across any extra batteries for his goggles, other than the emergency ones sewn into the small pouch behind the wrist cupboards of his uniform, but his search was in vain.

*Fuck it*

He grabbed his uniform and cautiously stepped outside, looking down the corridor both ways. Laying his pack on the floor, he held his uniform aloft in the dim red emergency lighting, searching for the hidden zipper when a projectile escaped from the darkness behind him, ripping the garment from his hands, slicing across his bicep in the process. A second one soon followed, pinning his backpack to the far wall.
His assailant had been waiting patiently, perfectly timing the moment that the speedster would step out and be vulnerable.

The carbon fiber shaft skid to a stop in the darkness ahead, rattling off the floor until there was nothing left but dead silence. And even though unknown assailant remained hidden in shadow, Wally had long since deduced their identity

“Really!” he yelled in rage, immediately cupping his wound with his palm, crimson dampness forming underneath. It was a warning shot; it would be the only one.

“Let me see your hands!” Artemis demeaned, slowing stepping into the light. “Now!”

Without a word, Wally slowly, painfully raised his arms above his head, his back facing her. From her volume, she was about between twenty to thirty feet behind, with an arrow most likely pointed center mass.

“Get on the floor!”

“It’s a little fucking difficult right now thank you very much,” he growled, wincing at the searing pain.

“I said get on the god damn floor!!” she screamed, “or I swear to God I’ll put an arrow through your spine.”

“You won't do that,” he replied calmly, slowly turning to face her, arms still held aloft, taking imperceptibly small steps backwards to gain space. “That isn’t you.”

Her hair was tied in a rushed ponytail, shoulders tense and muscles tight as she nocked her arrow. With one eye closed staring down the shaft, the archer’s fingers slid lightly across the bow string, searching for the sweet spot, ready at any moment to let another one fly.

Cold hatred was strewn across her asian features, and as their eyes met briefly, there was no trace
of the girl he’d nearly kissed thirty minutes before, no trace of the woman he once loved. Seeing all that hatred directed at him was soul crushing

“You have no fucking idea what I’ll do,” she snarled.

At this range, in this confined a space, the speedster knew the odds were about 70/30 that he could pluck another of her arrows out of the air if she let one fly, and a few extra feet would greatly increase his odds. But it wasn’t one arrow he’d be attempting to catch; it would most likely be all of them. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and he’d done a hell of a lot more than just scorn her. He’d broken her heart, and quite honestly his in the process.

“You played me,” she hissed.

“I didn’t play you. I meant each and every word I’ve ever said to you.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“Artemis, I wish to God I could tell you what’s going on, but I can’t. All I can say is it’s not what it looks like. I’m not the bad guy here.”

“Tell that to Raquel?”

“That was an accident, and I’m really really sorry. I didn’t want to hurt any of you, but I have to get out of here.”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“Look I know how you must feel.”
“Shut up. You don’t know anything about me.”

“Artemis…I know *everything* about you.”

The five years they’d shared together were easily some of the most special and important of his brief life. Enemies to frenemies to lovers; a silly television trope unless you were there, unless you lived it.

Each day, each assignment, they grew closer; watching out for one another more during missions, playful arguments started to disguise blatant flirting, believing in one another despite hardships and setbacks, their efforts rewarded seconds before the stroke of midnight. That was the first kiss of many, but in the end not near enough.

Wally had no concept of what love meant before her. She’d taught him so much and he liked to think he’d done the same for her. Their hearts now beat in time, their life now a partnership. It wasn't perfect, but it was pretty damn close. She was no longer Crusher Crock’s little girl, she was a beautiful and powerful young woman, no longer stained by her past, but solely in charge of her own future, and she wanted Wally by her side on that journey.

After watching friends and teammates die, standing at their gravesites as their loved ones grieved, imagining each other standing in their place, the archer and speedster soon came to the same conclusion, the same realization. It was time to leave the life.

They'd forged something special; something so precious neither one could bear losing. Days later they announced their intentions to the Team, and their journey west soon followed.

With new heroes appearing almost every day, they'd barely be missed, and with Nightwing leading them, the future was in good hands.

It was the smart decision; it was the right decision. Neither sure if it was for now or forever, neither ready to cross that bridge yet.

Artemis may have left the life, but she never let go of the skills that brought her there. Three times a week she'd could be found at any number of dojos scattered across San Francisco, practicing aikido, judo, jujitsu, taekwondo, krav maga, plus a few Wally couldn't even pronounce, taught by experts nowhere close to her skill level, but still it was better that sitting at home watching those techniques fade. Looking back that should have been his first sign.
Over the coming years, despite sensing his girlfriend’s growing restlessness, Wally still hoped for the latter, until that fateful day Dick Grayson showed up on their doorstep. And then everything changed.

She couldn't put the green on fast enough. Kent Nelson once told him to find his own spitfire, and that was the day he lost her.

Now if by some miracle he’d come back to this time period as planned, as a twenty two year old man, maybe he would have been able to grant the younger version of himself a lasting future with the girl of his dreams, but fate had taken him down another path. None of that mattered anymore, that life was now lost. All he could do was focus on all the other ones that still hung in the balance.

The day he saw her in full Tigress mode, when Dick finally showed him the videos of her in action by Kaldur’s side, it was like he was looking at a total stranger.

He didn't know her anymore, fearful of what she had become. Perhaps this had been the real Artemis all along; the college student being her mask. Wally was fearful that the girl he'd said goodbye to on the docks in Bludhaven would never return, never once considering that their roles would be reversed a few months later.

After she left, he’d lay awake at night, imagining that menacing voice set an octave lower, her beautiful features hidden behind orange Kevlar, wondering what it would be like if they ever faced each other, what she would've done to keep her cover. Instead of joining the cause, he stayed away in immature protest, while his girlfriend fought for her life.

She’d held back so much of that side of herself, and Wally immediately knew why. She did it because she loved him, and it had been selfish to take away something that meant so much to her, something that had washed away the sins of her family.

Being a hero made her whole, and once school was over, he knew right then they'd return. He'd make sure of it. Perhaps coming back as something more than just partners, something more permanent, but of course he’d never gotten the chance to ask.

But this wasn't Tigress he faced now; she hadn't reached that level yet. This Artemis still had her tells. Like how she'd started her attack with two razor sharp steel tipped arrows, basically to show she meant business, hoping the third wouldn’t be necessary.
Knowing the archer was keenly aware of his speed, Artemis would assume the next one she launched would either be dodged or more likely plucked from the air, playing right into her hands, because this arrow wouldn’t be meant to cut, it would be meant to blind; a flashbang.

Next up, high density polyurethane foam; a relatively new addition to her arsenal. Created by Green Arrow, mastered by Red. The perfect weapon against a speedster in tight quarters. The flashbangs would stun, the foam would stop. But just to be on the safe side, she’d have a backup plan...or just backup

In the dim lighting, Wally saw her gaze shift, for no more than a second, but for a guy that lived between seconds, it was more than enough.

He was trying to be silent, but Conner Kent was not stealthy. At 6'4 and 220 lbs. - there was only so quiet a guy that size could be. The Team had been together for nearly six months, and Canary had trained them all well, especially Conner. Wally knew he’d remain in the shadows until the moment was right. That’s what Wally was counting on.

“You don’t know shit about me,” she spit, “and this is your last warning. Get on the ground. I won’t ask again.”

“I’m sorry beautiful,” he said sincerely, “but I can’t do that. I wish there was another way, I really do. Believe it or not, I’m only trying to help. Do what you have to Artemis, because if you don’t, I will.”

Her fingers trembled slightly as his hands dropped to his sides. She didn’t want to do this either. He’d saved her life not once, but twice. He’d been by her side during some of her toughest moments. He'd been her friend.

But in the end it had all been a lie, a cruel act to gain her trust, and she was tired of this play. It didn’t matter now if this person was the Wally West or not; he'd betrayed them all, and he had to be stopped. She activated the timer on the flash bang and let her arrow fly.

Wally stood in the middle of the corridor, watching it approach straight and true. Behind it he could see the second arrow notched and ready. He waited to the last possible second to make his move, making no attempt at the stopping the arrow, instead diving straight into the open door of his quarters, the flash bang streaking past him and headed down the hallway, soon followed by
another.

“Oh shit,” she gasped, watching helplessly as both arrows flew directly on target; a target that wasn't there anymore.

“Son of a….” Conner cursed as the flashbang erupted before his eyes, followed by the polyurethane arrow impacting center mass. A thick cloud of foam erupted from the tip, spreading across the Boy of Steel like a swarm of angry bees.

In a maneuver she was completely unprepared for, Wally burst out of his room, spiraling across the ceiling and floor in a blur, passing over the archer before dropping to the floor behind her and mule kicking her in the back. Artemis stumbled forward, desperately trying to regain her balance when her momentum took her into her cemented teammate.

She found herself stuck; sinking into the foam, pulling her closer in until she and Conner were mere inches away, and both not happy about the predicament. Behind her she could hear the distinct sound of arrows being dumped from her quiver and their shafts broken in two. And then silence. Wally was gone.

Through the growing foam slowly threatening to cover his mouth, with his last words Conner growled sarcastically to his ex-girlfriend. “Nice shot.”

She looked at him straight in the eyes, unwilling or unable to hide her contempt for the situation as well.

“I hate you.”

xxx

In the muted darkness, Wally sped through the labyrinth that was Mt. Justice, passing the seaport on his left as he shot through the complex. With his goggles at less than 15% power, he'd shut them down, running on pure instinct, which turned out to be a terrible idea.

Taking a hard right turn, he rushed down the corridor passing the seaport again now on his right, before skidding to a stop. He was lost.
Despite the propulsion lab now being compromised, the realization of the need for ventilation had sparked several more possible destinations. Chemical, aquatic, biological; any laboratory that would have need for fresh oxygenated air could provide another avenue for escape. That is if he could find one of the damn rooms.

Mt. Justice was almost a decade and a half old, built to serve a rotating and ever increasing clientele and their complex list of needs, intended to be a home away from home; or more specifically a base away from base.

Bruce Wayne needed a crime lab, Oliver Queen needed room for weapons manufacturing, Barry Allen needed rehab and recovery services; the list went on and on and the cave was tailored to meet those needs. By the time the League transitioned from the mountain to the Watchtower those facilities were no longer needed and their technology outdated.

Years later when Mt. Justice was reestablished as the Team’s new base of operations, less than a third of the facility was deemed necessary for habitation, while the rest remained in mothballs so to speak. The long and short of it was, the cave was a huge complex and aside from voluntary explorations and scavenger hunts, there were large chunks of the facility the Team was just not familiar with, a lesson the speedster was learning the hard way. His head spun on a swivel searching for a familiar landmark or corridor…something.

In the dark everything looked the same, and immediately he began to think that shutting down the power grid might have been a huge mistake.

He retraced his steps the best he could, following a Captain D’s like kids meal map he’d drawn in his mind. The Seaport was near the Grotto. The Grotto was down from the Souvenir room. The Souvenir room was across from the Library.

_The knee bone's connected to the thigh bone_…

He was screwed. Five years is a long time, and for a place that even full time residents could get turned around in, with the lights on no less, the chances of Wally finding his way out were getting slimmer by the minute.

In the dim crimson lighting, he took the eyewear dangling from his neck, and placed his pointer finger on the touchscreen to the side of the lens, looking again at the power meter.

_12%. Twelve freaking percent!_
Wally could only remember one time in his life his goggles had gone out on him, and to this day Barry had never let him live it down. With the only remaining backups sewn into the uniform now hanging from an arrow in a far off hallway, he was out of options. He’d have to use the goggles until they ran dry, hoping that before then he’d discover a way out before they discovered him.

He pulled the eyewear back down around his eyes, activating its night vision mode. The world around him began to glow in an eerie greenish hue, fading in and out like a TV with no signal, much like the static Conner found so comforting. Rolling the dice, he shot out towards the closest corridor.

Navigating its myriad of twists and turns, towards the end of the hallway things began appear familiar and Wally started to find his bearings, until the familiar turned back into the unknown and his goggles went dead, his world cast back into darkness.

“Twelve percent? Are you kidding? Who taught you math?” he cursed at the lenses, nearly heaving them into the stone wall ahead.

It seemed for every step forward, he took two steps back in return. He was no longer treading water, he was drowning. It was foolish to think that the League hadn't been called in by now, and that at the next turn or door, Barry Allen wouldn’t be standing there waiting; not to help him up but to put him down.

By now his teammates, ex-teammates were surely starting to recover, and anyone with an iota of engineering prowess would soon discover a way to reroute power and bring the cave back to life. Then he’d trapped like the proverbial rat. Time was no longer on his side, but honestly when had it ever been?

He continued down the hallway, hoping that a conference room would soon appear on his left or a locker room on his right, landmarks he could at least work with to narrow down his exact location. Speeding ahead, he was nearly halfway down the narrow corridor when suddenly he felt a slight tugging at his feet, followed by a muffled click…..and then bedlam

Aw crap

The hallway erupted in blinding fury. Phosphorus charges lining the walls of the corridor began flashing in an unholy sequence while sonic disruptors blared from all sides. In his haste Wally had run through something, a thin cable stretched from one side of the hallway to the other.
A tripwire. A trap.

Driven to his knees, he saw the glimmer of tiny metallic spheres bouncing down the corridor landing at the his feet, discharging thick billowing clouds of grey smoke that only added another element for the chaotic spectrum to reflect off of.

Then the barrage began.

Vicious punches and powerful kicks struck at the speedster from all directions. Wally did his best to deflect and defend what he could, but with his vision littered in glowing blotches and his hearing ringing as if someone had just fired off a cannon inches from his eardrums, he was losing ground fast.

The blinded speedster continued to bob and weave like some out of shape boxer begging for the bell to end the round, but in this instance he was clearly out his weight class.

A few blows were returned, one that felt as if it had landed on someone’s jaw, but his assailant never staggered let alone made a sound. At least the he didn’t have to guess who he was fighting anymore.

If Wally hadn’t already felt defeated enough, the least Bruce Wayne could do was groan or grunt. Whatever small victory he might have felt quickly faded as a powerful Kevlar covered glove struck directly on the speedster’s chin, rattling his jaw. A thrusting knee appeared from nowhere, landing directly in the ginger’s gut, knocking the wind from him and driving him back to the ground.

Wally had barely enough time to recover before powerful hands slid underneath his arms, locking behind his neck, and driving him face first into the cold stone wall ahead in an unbreakable half-nelson.

Batman dipped his shoulder into the center of the speedster’s back; taking Wally’s left arm and wrestling it behind his back, the metallic click of a hand cuff sounding off from behind.

He wrestled futilely with the Dark Knight, trying to free his arm from the detective’s unbreakable grasp when he felt cold steel clasp tightly around his wrist.
One down, one to go.

On the wall in front of him, he could see the blood drawn silhouette of his face, sanguine fluid now flowing freely from who knows where anymore. Fatigue was weighing heavily, his will waning, while Batman didn't even seem to be breaking a sweat.

“If you keep struggling I'll break it,” Wayne threatened in his deepest baritone, jerking Wally’s arm higher behind his back, lighting up every nerve cluster from finger to elbow. With his forearm planted firmly on the speedster’s neck, pinning him deeper into the bulkhead, Batman reached for the other wrist to cuff them together and quickly end this charade of a fight.

With Wayne threatening to tear his arm from its socket, and his other wrist seconds away from being locked, Wally was out options.

Looking down to his tattered Nikes, he had one last desperate thought, an idea that hinged entirely on if he could get one last burst of traction out of the tattered souls of his shoes before they completely dissolved.

Wally hoped that what he’d lost in muscle mass now as a seventeen year old kid, he’d gained back in flexibility, because he was going to need it now.

With very little room to maneuver, and a plan more likely to fail then succeed; Wally pushed back against the support beams, gaining a few inches of space before Batman could recover. Next, placing the souls of his shoes on the base of the wall, his feet began to blur as he raced up the wall and ceiling, suddenly on top and behind the Dark Knight, the momentum of the risky maneuver sending the detective hurdling down the corridor.

Wally reached for his wrist, but there was no escaping the steel clasp or its mate dangling beneath. Handcuffs used to be a lot more exciting when they were used *in the fun way.*

With Wayne spinning off in one direction, the speedster leapt to his feet and took off in the other; racing as far as he could go until the corridor ended, open hallways both left and right.

For no rhyme or reason he chose left, speeding into the darkness with only the blinking crimson emergency light overhead as his guide. Under its dim burgundy glow he caught sight of the sealed bulkhead seconds before impact, sliding to a stop as his shoes finally fell apart.
With only one way left, he took of gingerly in the opposite direction, hoping the opposite tunnel would lead to an opening deeper into the cave, or at least farther away from the caped crusader. Seconds later he found the second corridor as secured as the first.

You’re fucking kidding me!

There was no way left but the way he came, and Batman would be there waiting for him. For all Wally knew, that was probably Bruce’s plan all along. Wayne could be a dick like that sometimes.

Retuning to main corridor, the way out bathed in darkness, the remaining emergency lights suddenly disabled, Batman was now comfortably in his own element. Wally couldn’t see him, but he knew he was there.

Bruce Wayne was just a man; no meta-human abilities, no heat vison, no power ring. Just an ordinary guy with a belt full of parlor tricks. A human trained to fight other ordinary humans.

Wally knew he didn’t stand a chance against the man.

Down the hallway a voice echoed out. “Rudimentary fighting skills, a fair replication of super speed; your craftsmanship is remarkable, but it's clear you don't know what to do with that power.”

“Rudimentary?” Wally smirked. “At the very least I’d say adequate. And as far as the speed goes, do you really want to test that theory?”

“The real Kid Flash would never be so foolish to get himself trapped in a position like this.”

Oh you’d be surprised.

“So you really think I’m a clone huh?”
“At this point it doesn’t matter.” Batman replied.

Wally sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

“Whatever the plan was, whoever sent you, on this fool’s errand, they set you up.”

“Yeah no shit,” the speedster replied bitterly, his anger beginning to build. He’d been set up all right, and the man to blame was standing thirty yards away in nightfall.

A loud metallic clank echoed from the distance, and Wally recognized immediately that Bruce had pulled the final hatch door closed, trapping them both inside the cramped corridor.

“If you want out, here it is,” Batman taunted, stating the obvious.

A familiar whistle shot from the blackness as two batarangs flew swiftly down the corridor, prompting the speedster to dive out of the way; a warning shot or the next move from the chess master? That’s when it struck. He was a pawn, he’d always been one.

A broken old man, no longer physically or mentally able to play the game at the level he once had, taking advantage of the naiveté of a man out of time, clouding his mind with images of a life he’d lost, deceiving him into going back to change a future the old man had brought on himself.

Even the slightest alteration would alter the course of the broken down hero’s life, allowing Bruce Wayne another road out of his miserable existence. This had never been about the tyranny of a future Justice League, or the lives that had been lost, this was about him. This was about Bruce Wayne.

The speedster’s blood began to boil, his judgement irrational, tainted by fear and fury. And the man whose asinine plan had brought him here was hiding in the darkness, waiting for Wally to make his next foolish move so he could take him off the board.

Checkmate.
The speedster had given up his life once already, risked it more times than he could count. He’d lost his girl, his best friend, teammates that were like family. He’d murdered, maimed, and changed the course of history, and for what?

Get in, get out, stay of history’s way.

Bullshit. Bruce Wayne wanted Wally to fuck it up as much as possible; each accident or alteration changing the course of a bitter broken down old hero’s life so he wouldn’t have to live out his few remaining years in misery.

“It’s over,” Wayne stated from the darkness

“You’re god damn right it is,” the speedster snarled.

Wally hands began to spin in slow tight circles, their velocity increasing by the second. A tight vortex soon formed, powerful tornadic winds tightly focused and sent racing down the darkened shaft. Over the roar Wally thought he might have heard the thud of a body slam against the bulkhead, and then again, and again.

Through the howling winds, a cry might have called out, but soon silenced as the air pressure increased, crushing life giving oxygen from its victim’s lungs. Kevlar lined or not, any protection Batman’s armor might have given would be no help against 250 m.p.h. gale force winds.

Wally arms burned and ached, but he could do this forever if it meant ending the stupid fucking game Bruce Wayne had started twenty five years from now.

At the end of the corridor, pinned against the bulkhead like a fly to paper, Batman was suffocating, his ribs beginning to break, his eye balls preparing to burst. He’d fought some of the most deadly beings on the planet, endured more pain and suffering then heroes three times more powerful, but nothing before could have prepared him for this

His backup should have arrived by now, but in a few more moments it wasn’t going to matter.
In the files he’d once kept hidden on a secret drive in his cave, Batman had created detailed plans on how to defeat various members of the Justice League, the Flash being one of the more difficult, but never once had he seriously considered how the Flash might defeat him, not till now.

As darkness closed in, suddenly the storm stopped and the Dark Knight slid from the bulkhead to the floor, wheezing and coughing as he struggled to take his first breath.

He’d taken exactly two when a heavy weight landed on his broken chest. With his limbs still numb and no way to raise them, a hand reached out, ripping off his cowl, exposing the billionaire beneath. Then the lightning struck.

“This…is…all…your…fucking…fault!!” Wally screamed; each word punctuated with a viscous strike. The future was changing all around him, but right now he couldn’t care less.

Blood flowed freely from Wayne’s mouth, and Wally fists landed as much on the stone floor as they did Batman’s face, but he barely felt the impact; adrenaline, fury, and super speed being a terrible mix.

Wally paused, the lightning dancing across his body lighting up the narrow corridor.

Lying there beaten and broken, Wally didn’t see the virile brilliant detective anymore, he saw the elderly Wayne bleeding and lifeless moments after the princess of Themyscira had broken his neck.

“My god,” the speedster whispered, rising and stumbling away from the detective in horror. “What have I done?”

“Do it,” Wayne wheezed, spitting out clumps of blood.

“Bruce…I,” he stuttered reaching down just as 50,000 volts arched through his body, sending him smashing into the bulkhead next to the fallen detective. The speedster painfully realized Wayne hadn’t been talking to him at all.

A few yards away stood Robin, the Boy Wonder, his oldest friend, his best friend; locked in a fighting stance, two glowing Escrima sticks in his hands.
Rising to his knees, Wally held his breath, waiting for the pain to pass. He unsteadily reached up for the door handle, shaky and uncertain, searching for leverage when suddenly darkness was replaced with light as the mains came back online, lights flickering down the corridor and throughout the cave.

On a positive note, with the power back on, the cave became thankfully familiar again and Wally soon found his bearings. He still had a chance, but to do so, he’d have to go through Dick.

“Those are new,” Wally groaned, struggling to his feet.

“Just something I’ve been playing around with.”

“Good choice,” the speedster grimaced as he stood to full height, slowly flexing both hands, waiting for sensation and feeling to return.

“Step away from him,” Robin demanded glancing down at his fallen mentor.

“He needs a doctor.”

“He’ll get one,” Robin replied, sticks sparking, his body staying in constant motion around the speedster. “It doesn’t have to go down this.”

The speedster knew it was a lie; it was always going to go like this. “Great, just open the door and I’ll be on my way.”

“You probably won’t like what’s waiting for you.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Wally replied.

“You know I can’t let you do that.”
“I’ll know you’ll try.”

Dick shook his head and frowned. “Just tell me why? What could someone have possibly offered that would make you want to do something like this?”

Wally looked to his watch, ignoring the question. “You’re stalling.”

“Just answer the damn question.”

“Maybe it’s just my programming.” the speedster shrugged.

“Bullshit. You’re not a clone.”

“How would you know?”

“I just know,” Dick answered.

Wally sighed, this was going nowhere. “How much time do I have?”

Dick frowned sternly. “Not enough.”

“Then I guess we need to get this show on the road.”

‘Yeah,” Dick frowned, spinning his Escrima sticks into a blur, their sparking Taser tips leaving blue glowing after images in the air. “I guess we do.”

For a fraction of a second, Wally mind drifted back.
The cave is- was just a place. Worth sacrificing if it helps stop the invasion.

That moment in the Hall of Justice had been the lowest point of their friendship; two sidekicks that had saved the world, two best friends who’d stood by each other through the good and the bad, two pallbearers laying to rest friends and family - two brothers at each other’s throats because of the decisions one of them had been forced to make, just like now.

All things being equal, Wally was no match for Robin in a fair fight, he knew that; at seventeen or twenty two. Dick was trained in six different forms of martial arts, had an array of cutting edge weaponry at his disposal, was in peak physical condition, and much like his mentor was always three moves ahead.

But all things weren’t equal. Wally was the fastest teen alive, and even though he wasn’t trained to be a fighter, he’d loved and lived with one for almost five years. Some of it had to have rubbed off.

Time was not on his side, both of them knew it. Realizing now where he stood, he was about two hundred yards away from the main exit. With the power restored, all security protocols and Zeta Tubes would be in reboot mode for just a few minutes, maybe less. He had to make his move.

Once again, if it ain’t broke don’t fix it. Wally began the same attack as he did with before. Powerful funnels of compressed air shot forth, driving Robin out of the corridor, giving the speedster room to move. Plowing through the young detective was not the answer; Dick would be expecting it, and those Taser tipped Escrima sticks would be problem.

A few years from now, Dick would be able to take down a small army with them, but for now he would likely be fairly raw with the new hardware.

Of course the sticks weren’t the only weapons at Robin’s disposal, and Wally was almost certain there would be a few countermeasures set in and around where he wanted to be, but he’d have to worry about that later. Right now neutralizing his best friend would have to be his top priority.

Neutralize

The words felt bitter on his tongue; a phrase to be used by despots like the Reach or the Light, not directed at his best friend.
Wally emerged for the corridor into the open chamber, with no sign of the young acrobat anywhere.

“I hate it when he does that,” the speedster groaned.

The speedster scanned the room, searching out every dark corner, enclosure, or closet the acrobat might be hiding. Not finding him anywhere near, Wally was seconds from speeding off towards the exit when he heard something buzzing above him, side stepping a sparking fighting stick at the last second, barely missing his head.

_Shit!_

Miniature flashbangs where hurled to the ground, blinding the speedster as a steel tip boot kicked him in the ribs. Smoke pellets exploded in all directions, quickly blown away by the fuming speedster. Every breath he took hurt like hell. Robin wasn’t pulling his punches; neither could he.

Through the glowing sunspots of his vision, he saw Robin flying in from above for another strike, and Wally had had enough.

The speedster grabbed the acrobat by the cape, still one of the most impractical fashion choices for any modern day hero, and spun his body wildly like the Gravitron ride at an amusement park, sending Dick spiraling out of control at a velocity he’d never traveled before, smashing into of all places…the souvenir room. Robin landed with a sickening thud as the book cases all around splintered; sending mementos crashing down across the stone floor as well as the young detective.

_**Look I’m sorry you lost all your souvenirs...**_

Robotic eyes and hands, arrows, masks, tracers; carefully thought out and collected souvenirs shattered as they hit the ground and heavy oak shelves landed on top of them, an irony not lost on the speedster.

Dick climbed out from under the wreckage slowly, and by his awkward careen Wally knew it had hurt. Robin shot off a batarang wildly, missing the speedster by at least fifteen feet. For Dick to miss by that much, he had to have some serious double vision forming, possibly a concussion. That was his cue.

This might very well be the last moment he would ever see his best friend again, any of them if he was lucky. Wally had no plan but out, spending the rest of his days looking over his shoulder, a fugitive.
He wouldn’t be remembered for anything other than being a traitor, a villain; a particularly hard pill for Wally to swallow after all the sacrifices he’d made.

Sometimes being a hero royally sucked.

He had his opening, he had to move. Dick stood yards away, still dazed and unsteady, but still willing to continue the fight even if his body couldn’t. Wally should have ended it in the blink of an eye, but what was the point.

“I’m sorry Dick, I really am.”

“Me too.”

Kind of an odd reply to give, but Dick was always the king of the cryptic double entendres. The speedster turned to leave and soon realized why. The errant batarang Robin had thrown moments earlier came screaming back in his direction; taking every ounce of speed Wally had left to avoid it. The projectile skimmed by the speedster face, missing it by less than an inch, but where it ended up was a tragic surprise.

The batarang caught Robin directly in the chest, flinging him over on his stomach just as his body began to convulse. An electrical current discharged, causing his best friend’s body to shudder and shake.

Wally stood wide eyed. One inch closer and it would have been lights out Mildred. He took no satisfaction in watching his best pal writhe on the ground, but sometimes paybacks a bitch.

Wally looked down to his bare feet as the bled, but at this point there really wasn’t a part of him that hadn’t gushed blood at one time or another. If Dick’s boots had been two inches bigger he would have torn them from his unconscious body in a heartbeat, but soon enough he’d be speeding through the Happy Harbor shopping district. Open or closed he’d find his size.

The cavern was empty, but it wouldn’t be for much longer. Wally burst into motion towards the unguarded exit, turning briefly to see if Dick had struggled to his back yet, only to see the young detective lying awkwardly face first.
Wally shook his head and continued on. He didn’t envy the hangover Robin would have when he woke up. 50,000 volts was no joke, and even for a guy who’d been hit by a self-created bolt of lightning, something of that magnitude was hard to walk away from.

He tested the door, finding the security protocols still inactive. The exit was still unlocked and his freedom waited just on the other side. Wally dipped his shoulder into its surface, pushing the heavy steel emergency door open with all his might. He could taste the sweet air of freedom, and willed his body into motion… before idling back down and looking back to his friend’s unmoving body.

Every second that ticked by seemed like an eternity as he waited for Dick’s shoulder to rise, a finger to twitch, a breath to be taken…and still nothing

Shit!

It was a freaking Taser; grandmas carried them around in their purses for god’s sake. Sure the charge may have been amped up some, but the young detective had every intention of that thing landing in the small of his back, sending the speedster into a painful electricity induced slumber.

He was just out cold; really cold. Bruce was just down the corridor, and probably half the Team was zeroing in on his location by now. Dick would be fine and Wally’s time was up. The speedster stepped through the doorway, the chill of the New England air brushing past him.

Dick was fine. He’d be pissed, but no worse for wear.

But what if he wasn’t

“God Damnit!” Wally cursed, speeding back to his best friend’s side.

He slid to a stop, skidding on his knees till he reached his best friend’s lifeless body, grabbing Dick’s wrist and pulling off a black armored glove to search for a pulse. Wally’s own body was buzzing, adrenaline pumping so fast through his veins, his fingers and hands shook, making his quest for a heartbeat impossible.

“Dude don’t do this!” he yelled, eyes darting up and down the corridor for a wall mounted
Wally leapt to his feet, exploding down the few open corridors, searching for a portable ICD to no avail. In a blink of an eye he was back at his friend’s side.

“Ok Plan B.”

Wally tilted Robin’s head, remembering every lesson he learned from Resusci Annie, clearing his airways, no longer willing to wait for a pulse while his best pal slowly turned into a vegetable. The speedster slowed his own breathing, placing both hands two inches to the right of Dick’s heart and began three quick chest compressions. Wally paused, waiting for a sign of life before moving on down the checklist. He really wasn’t looking forward to this next part.

Wally brought his mouth down towards Dick’s lips, pinching the detective’s nose, cringing as leaned in… just as series of sharp pains erupted from his chest, burning every artery and vein in his body. The speedster looked down in horror to see six syringes sticking through his shirt directly into his heart.

Robin was up and off the ground, eyes awake and alert before the speedster even had a chance to react. It didn’t take a doctor to know what he’d been injected with.

“Dude? Jellyfish toxin? Really?” Wally gasped, clenching at his chest, pulling out the now empty syringes. “Uncool.”

He’d been played; not by the ultimate chess master, but a very talented performer.

You can take the boy out of the circus, but not the circus out of the boy.

Wally struggled to his feet while Robin made no effort to stop him, and why would he? The speedster had just been pumped full of enough tranquilizers to stop a herd of elephants. That’s what he got for being a good friend.

The cave began to spin, his vision blurred and grew dim. Even in his delirious state, Wally was still blindingly fast, but with every burst of speed, the compound rushed deeper into his blood stream shutting down systems he can’t afford to lose. His mind was beyond hazy when he stumbled to the door, double vision so strong he was about to throw up.
Stumbling up of the railing to the emergency exit like some passenger on a capsizing boat, Wally fell to his knees grabbing hold of the door handle, holding on to it for dear life when suddenly it swung open from the other side.

The last thing the speedster would remember was a glowing breastplate, a giant red S, and then… darkness.

xxx

*Recognize Black Canary 08*

*Recognize Green Arrow 13*

As the alien generators slowed to a halt, Oliver Queen and Dinah Lance rushed from the Zeta Tube, sprinting down the dimly lit hallways towards the Mission Room, and hopefully some answers.

Batman’s cryptic warning sent out hours prior had sent them racing to the closest transporter in Star City, only to find their desired destination offline and unavailable; a victim of some catastrophic systems failure within Mt. Justice.

Wayne's vague all clear hours later did little to calm their fears; his insistent need for secrecy infuriating.

All they had let to go on was the Zeta Tubes were back online, the team was safe, but a member of the Team had been compromised. In a million years neither would have believed that member would be Wally West.

Entering into the briefing room, Aqualad stood alone at the large monitor, watching intently at the events unfolding before him. A solitary figure appeared on the screen before him; bloodied and bruised, hands and feet shackled to the table and floor, three separate inhibitor colors draped around his arms and neck. For Oliver and it was déjà vu all over again; discovering someone he’d known and loved outed as an imposter, a traitor.

Dinah approached young Atlantean, placing a supportive hand on his burdened shoulder.
“Kaldur?”

“Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“We would have been here sooner.” Ollie added.

“Yes of course. The reboot of the Zeta Network took longer than expected, but it is now fully functional.”

“Is it true?” Oliver asked, still in disbelief

“I am afraid so?”

“Tell us what happened?”

Kaldur sighed. “It is a long story.”

Over the next half hour Aqualad told the tale; the warning from Batman, evacuating the cave, the arrival of Wally; the ambush, the sabotage, the battle. All the while Black Canary and Green Arrow listened in stunned silence.

“I um…damn…I don’t even know what to say,” Ollie muttered in utter disbelief.

“Has he said anything?” Dinah inquired.

“Very little.”

“Are we sure he’s another clone?” Ollie asked.

“At this point, we are not sure of anything. Wall….Kid Flash has passed the second round of DNA testing, but Batman still has his doubts and has sent the sample to a colleague at STAR Labs for further analysis.”
“Do we know how long that will take?”

“Hopefully within the next few hours,” Kaldur stated, “but until then there are still other avenues to consider.”

“Like what? Some kind of brainwashing?”

“Perhaps. M’gann attempted a mind scan during their altercation, but was quickly struck down by some kind of… mental feedback. She is not sure of the cause, but is reluctant try again. J’onn is scheduled to return tomorrow afternoon, until then, for M’gann’s safety, we must wait.”

“What’s the other one?” Green Arrow asked despite already knowing the answer.

Kaldur paused, despising the words soon to follow. “Accepting that fact that he might actually be a traitor.”

Ollie walked up close to the screen, staring curiously at the image of the captured speedster. “Why hasn’t Diana just put her magic thingamabob on him and made him spill everything he knows?”

“She has,” Aqualad replied, “but while the lasso can compel the truth, it cannot control the manner in which it is given. His confession was delivered at such a velocity that not even the Watchtower mainframes can decipher. They are about to make their second attempt shortly.”

“Where’s the Team?”

“Resting and receiving medical attention. For the time being, we have been ordered to remain in the residential wing.”

“How’d you get out?” Ollie smiled, always the renegade.

“I am the team leader, his betrayal falls upon me.”
“Was anyone seriously hurt?” Dinah urgently inquired.

“M’gann and Raquel suffered minor injuries, but otherwise they are fine. Batman was not as fortunate.”

Arrow and Canary walked closer to the screen. Typing in a new command, the camera panned in closer, showcasing the Dark Knight noticeable limp, but with his mask currently off, his battered face clearly told the tale.

“What in the hell?” Ollie gasped, soon joined by his partner.

“Injuries suffered during his altercation with Wal….forgive me, Kid Flash.”

Green Arrow shook his head in disbelief. “The kid did that? You’re kidding? Bruce looks like he got run over by a Mack truck.”

“Along with the lacerations you see on his face, he has two broken ribs, a neck sprain, severe bruising to his spinal column, and a grade three concussion. He should be hospitalized, but has refused all requests of medical attention.”

“Yep, that sounds about right,” Ollie chuckled. “You guys were lucky.”

Aqualad nodded, but something about his expression prompted Canary to peruse further.

“Kaldur, what is it?”

“It is nothing.”

“Kaldur….” Dinah scolded.
“It is just….Kid Flash….”

Ollie put his hand on Kaldur’s shoulders, “How bout for now we just call him Wally.”

“As you wish,” Aqualad replied. “For some reason, Wally went to great lengths not to injure anyone. When I found M’gann unconscious she was carefully placed away from danger, later Raquel was discovered resting in the infirmary, Zatanna was secured on the couch with cushions positioned underneath in the event she fell, and when it appeared that Robin had suffered a cardiac event, instead of fleeing to safety he came back to resuscitate him. Which begs the question why? If his true identity was compromised, if his mission or purpose was ultimately to destroy the Team and the League, why insure our safety?”

“Bats doesn’t look particularly safe and sound does he?” Ollie countered.

Kaldur nodded in agreement. “In his debrief, Batman stated that despite its ferocity, after the attack Wally seemed genuinely shocked and remorseful of his actions.”

Dinah scratched her head, watching intently as Wayne moved gingly about, wincing slightly as he pulled the cowl back over his bruised and swollen face.

“Doesn’t really seem like the actions of a cold blooded criminal mastermind now does it?” she asked.

“It sounds like someone in over his head,” Arrow answered. “Blackmail maybe?”

“I don’t know Ollie,” Canary replied with furrowed brow, “but something doesn’t add up.”

Dinah looked to Kaldur staring blankly at the video of his former friend, chained and tethered like some kind of wild animal, his own pale green eyes a bottomless pool of self-blame and doubt. He looked exhausted, in desperate need of rest but would likely refuse all suggestions of it. It was so easy to forget how young they were, fighting alongside and often times surpassing their mentors. An experience like this would be devastating to heroes twice their age.
Canary walked in front of the monitor, temporarily blocking his view. “Kal are you ok?”

“I am….troubled Ms. Lance. It appears Sportsmaster had been truthful all along. There was a mole on the team, and I disregarded his warning. When the truth of Superboy and Red Arrow came to light, I assumed the crisis was over. I let my guard down, and my team suffered because of my negligence.”

“Kaldur, there is no way you could have known.”

Aqualad’s jaw tightened. “I have known Kid…..” he paused, no longer willing to pretend the young man on the screen was a stranger, “I have known Wally for many years. He is my friend, and I missed each and every sign that would call into question his identity or true motives. It concerns me as to what else I may have ignored.”

“Kaldur, we all missed this. Sometimes it's impossible not to.”

“I realize that, it is just…they are my responsibility, they are my friends and I nearly got them killed in my careless disregard of my duties. I have no place as team leader.”

“Look pal, I know exactly how you feel. I’ve got a guy out there somewhere who counted on me to be his partner and watch out for him, and I royally fucked that up. I’ve gotta find him - I’m going to find him, and I think that kid in there has some of the answers I’m looking for. What say you and I quit beating ourselves up and get to the bottom of this.”

Kaldur bowed his head in agreement. “I agree…and thank you.”

Dinah laced her arm around his, guiding him away from the monitor. “Why don't you take me to the Team, and we can….talk along the way. Ollie?”

“Yeah I'll hang out here. If anything happens I'll come get you.”

“Thank you. Thank you both.”

Arrow watched the duo vanish into the recesses of the cave. Talk; Dinah’s code name for session. Sometimes she was as much a therapist as she was a den mother, and right now the team needed her to be both.
Green Arrow turned back to the monitor as the three heroes prepared to reenter the speedster’s cell. Ollie’s well trained eye caught sight of something Superman held behind his back, something he didn’t want seen, something that shined.

The archer stroked his chin curiously.

“What the hell is that?

xxx

Batman pulled the heavy steel chair out from under the table, the subsequent screech of metal dragging across the stone floor, shaking the speedster from his restless slumber. The massive dose jellyfish toxin had finally begun to wear off, leaving behind chills, aches, and a splitting headache. Wally knew as bad as he felt now, it was only going to get a whole lot worse.

The Dark Knight sat down directly across from him while his compatriots remained standing, flanking him on either side. Superman bent down momentarily, placing something on the floor out of the speedster’s field of vision.

“Shall we begin again?”

Wally looked up at him with exhausted eyes. “Bruce I’m so sorry….”

Wayne ignored his concern and continued on. “Let’s go back to the night you broke into the Batcave. Who provided you the access codes to the uniforms vault?”

Wally rubbed his tired eyes as the lies began again, not even attempting to be believable anymore. “I guessed,” he sighed.

“The object you took, where was it delivered to?”

“What object?”
Diana stepped forward, slamming her fist on the table, leaving a fist size dent atop its steel plating, inches away from speedster’s chained wrists.

“Where is the Kryptonite!?” she demanded.

Wally cleared his throat, her message clearly received, but continued on with the charade. “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

The Amazon reached forward, grabbing the speedster by his bloodied collar, yanking him to his feet and beyond until the chains halted his rise.

Wally dangled helplessly as she brought his face to hers. “So help me Hera, if you don’t tell me who you’re working for ….”

“Diana!” Clark exclaimed, gently placing his hand on her mighty forearm, easing her grip on the speedster.

“What!” she snapped back. “He clearly knows the answers. My lasso may compel him to tell the truth, but I can make him talk. This coddling is leading us nowhere. Give me a moment alone and I’ll have your answers.”

“Diana,” Clark repeated calmly, “Let’s take a walk, give you a chance to cool down.”

“I don’t need to cool down, I want ANSWERS!”

Superman took the Amazon by the arm, walking her towards the door when Wonder Woman stopped abruptly, throwing the Kyptonian’s arm off and turning back to the speedster.

“This isn’t over,” she snarled, walking out and slamming the heavy cell door closed.
After a moment’s pause, Batman turned back to his prisoner, barely missing a beat. “Let’s continue.”

Outside the cell, Wonder Woman stormed off in fury, slamming her fist into the cave wall as she walked through the access tunnel, the resulting crack shaking the chamber as it echoed off until forever.

When she turned the corridor, she came upon Green Arrow, still watching the interrogation on the screen, joined by Superman moments later.

Ollie looked over at the princess and smiled. “The old good cop/bad cop routine.”

Diana smirked, breaking character. “It was Bruce’s idea. He thought it might have a different effect if we switched roles”

“Hell it scared the shit out of me,” the archer chuckled, “but I think it had the desired effect. The kid looks rattled.”

“I hope so, I can tell he’s nervous, but Wally’s resilient, he always has been.”

“You called him Wally,” Arrow stated curiously. “So you don’t think he’s a clone?”

“Ollie, every fiber in my being is telling me that’s really him. I can’t explain it, and in some ways I almost wish he wasn’t; it would make all of this so much easier.”

“How so?”

The princess looked to the archer with mournful eyes. “Because it would make him an imposter instead of a traitor.”

“Has he said anything to Barry yet?” Ollie asked as Superman abruptly cleared his throat, interrupting the conversation.

“Now’s the real test,” he gestured towards the screen. “If this doesn’t shake him, nothing will.”

xxx
At the Amazon’s exit, Wally fell back in his chair taking a desperate breath, wide eyed and sweating. He’d never seen Wonder Woman like that before; such anger, such fury.

What if this was been the moment that changed the way she thought of her role as hero. What if his betrayal had made her realize there had to be a better way to ensure justice and freedom? What if he had just sown the seeds of discontent that would one day splinter the League; the proverbial apple in the Garden of Eden, handed off by him?

*Get in, get out, stay out of history’s way. God he’d fucked things up so bad.*

“You shouldn’t have angered her,” Wayne deadpanned. “History proves Amazons have very little tolerance for traitors.”

The speedster nodded, wiping his brow.

“You do realize it's only a matter of time.”

Time, Wally chuckled bitterly to himself. When had it not?

He’d lost it when he lashed out at Batman. Exhaustion, despair and paranoia had latched their tempestuous claws into him, making him as suspicious and desperate as he’d been the day he’d confronted Nightwing in the Hall of Justice all those years from now, convinced that Kaldur had duped them all; now a triple agent for the Light.

Bruce Wayne of any era symbolized what it was to be a hero, and Wally knew without any doubt that if there had been any other way, Wayne would have taken this burden from him in a heartbeat, sparing the speedster of that duty. Bruce would have done so because that’s what true heroes do. In Wally’s desperation he’d forgotten that lesson in sacrifice. Now it was time to make up for it with one of his own.

“Look if you want a confession, I'll give you one. I'm a traitor. No one put me up to it, no one brainwashed me. I broke into the Batcave and took the meteor because it was worth something; it's worth a lot somethings. I'm so sick and tired of watching guys like you live the high life while people like my folks struggle and scrape just to get by. My dad's worked for the tax accessor’s
office for over thirty years, *thirty*...*years*, and what does he have to show for it? A lousy pen and a plaque. You, Dick, Ollie, you’ll never understand what that’s like, giving half your life away…and for what?”

“It was all just handed to you guys. How is that fair? Because your parents got killed? Bruce, people’s parents die all the time and their families are left with nothing but pictures and a handful of memories. No one hands them multibillion dollar companies, just to see them passed off for someone else to run while you all play masked vigilante adrenaline junky every night. Why shouldn’t someone like my dad have that chance?”

“If I’d had time to find a buyer, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now; I’d be in the wind. You want the truth, there it is. I’ll tell you where the kryptonite is on one condition; you find me the deepest hole Supermax has to offer and throw away the key, because if you don’t I’m going full-blown Snowden on your ass and share every dirty little secret the League has ever kept, starting with secret I.D.’s, *starting with yours*. I’m guilty ok? That’s it, end of story.”

After a few moments pause, Batman stood, stepping away from the chair, straightening his cape. “I’m thirsty. Would you like some coffee?”

Wally laid his head in his hands exasperated, shaking his head no.

“Suit yourself. I’ll be back in a few minutes. In the meantime if you wouldn’t mind, could you watch over this for me?”

With those words Batman reached down beneath him and placed the golden object on the table in front of him, turning the helmet so its empty eye holes faced the speedster.

Wally’s head dropped to the table in defeat.

Standing at the door, Bruce turned. “Don’t worry, this isn’t the real helmet. This is just some comic store replica. You can tell by the weight and the chipped paint on the side. But you already knew that didn’t you. I suppose this was another item you were planning on putting up for auction. When I get return, we’ll discuss what you did with the real Helmet of Fate.”

The door shut and Wally sat alone in silence, staring at the empty shell before him. It had been a desperate and stupid move stealing and switching the helmet, but what in the hell was he supposed to do? Just hope some unforeseeable emergency wouldn’t present itself and force some poor soul to don the helmet and derail everything he’d worked for. Nothing in this timeline seemed
It had crossed his mind once or twice that this might eventually be his endgame, his final move. In the face of defeat, opening Kent Nelson’s casket again and putting on the helmet one final time. As much as he would have loved to believe otherwise, he always knew he had no real future here anyway.

Unlike being trapped inside the chrysalis, at least this time around forever would have an expiration date. Kent Nelson had died in his early one hundreds, still a pretty old age but not as old as forever. Nabu could control his host all he wanted, but he couldn’t control the ravages of time. Wally wondered exactly how many hosts Nabu had gone through. He wondered if he’d meet any of them.

At least this time around it would be his choice, not some alien mechanism threatening to destroy the world.

He’d been down this road once already, he knew full well the risks of putting on the helmet. At least this time he wouldn’t have to watch again in horror as his body broke apart; atoms and molecules fading into the ether.

Maybe a small part of Nabu would look past his temporal transgressions and be grateful to have a human host once again, despite the fact that he was a child of science instead of sorcery. Beggars can’t be choosers sometimes. Besides what had being a child of science done for him ultimately?

This was the one move he had left, his only move. When the League found the helmet, and they would, Wally would have to convince them the answers they sought would only come if the helmet was placed back on his head. They’d have no fear of the speedster taking control; no one could control a Lord of Order. Fate was never going to grant his next host their freedom anyway. Supermax would be a relative day at the beach when compared to.

He released a deep reflective sigh, shaking his head in surrender, finally accepting the outcome of every formula he’d authored. No matter how many ways he crunched the numbers, no matter how many events he'd altered, the conclusion was always going to be the same.

History repeats itself.

There was no point in denying that truth anymore. It had been incredible scientific feat just to have
been able to travel back in the first place, but in the end Aristotle was right.

*Horror vacui - Nature abhors a vacuum*

He’d violated the laws of nature and physics, and it was time to pay the piper. At least he’d have the comfort of knowing it wouldn’t have mattered who Bruce Wayne had sent back. Eventually the flow of time would correct itself. Once upon a time he was a twenty two year old college student with his whole life ahead of him. Now once again that life was over.

History repeats itself. Boy does it ever.

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Joining the others at the monitor, Batman carefully removed his mask, giving the bruises and lacerations beneath a chance to breathe.

Diana shook her head in frustration. “Obviously he’s lying. He’s covering for someone; you can read it on his face.”

“He didn’t seem very surprised did he?” Clark surmised.

“Only that it had taken us so long to discover it,” Bruce added, “but there’s something else there. He’s scared, and it’s not just about being caught, but of the helmet itself, of what it represents.”

“He was the last one to have any real interaction with it.”

“Well if there was any lingering doubt he was the one responsible for the theft of the Kryptonite, it’s gone now.” Diana sighed.

No longer able or willing to hold his tongue, an exasperated Oliver Queen finally lost his shit.

“Hold on a god damn second,” Ollie snapped. “The Helmet’s was taken too? And you didn't say anything? You…are… shitting me! How long have you known?”

“It was a recent discovery.” Batman replied.
“How recent?” Arrow demanded.

“Ollie that’s not important now,” Diana replied, “what is - is finding it. There’s two very powerful, very dangerous items out on the streets right now, we need to find them before anyone else does.”

“We should go back through the Zeta logs, look for any frequent destinations he’s visited over the last few months,” Superman suggested.

“Agreed. I think we should also…..”

“You haven’t told anyone else have you?”

The room fell silent as all eyes cast back to the archer, their awkward expressions his answer.

“Ollie it’s not that simple.”

“Bullshit princess. That’s why Barry isn’t here. He has no idea you all have his nephew locked up in a god damn holding cell. No one does.”

“Oliver,” Batman replied calmly. “We have no idea how far this goes. We can’t risk anyone finding out until…”

“Anyone? What you mean to say is anyone not handpicked by you! I’m betting the only reason Dinah and I are here is because you needed her help with the kids, and you knew you’d be stuck with me because of it.”

“There’s a bigger picture to consider.”

“Do you remember a couple years back when al Ghul stole your secret plans,” Ollie motioned with sarcastic air quotes, “to neutralize the League in the event they went rouge? How’d that work out for you? You kept it to yourself and nearly got everyone killed.”

Arrow tuned angrily to Superman and Wonder Woman. “Do you two remember? Cause I clearly recall something about red kryptonite and nanites knocking you both on your asses.”
“Ollie this is different.”

“Is it Clark? Because the last time I checked the League was a democracy, not a dictatorship. Who in the hell gave you all the right to keep something like this from the rest of us? Not to be asshole, but if that kryptonite actually is on the streets, that’s your problem, not mine pal. Green space rocks don’t do shit to me, but the most powerful magical artifact ever created just floating around out there? Well that affects us all.”

“Which is why we’re keeping the circle small for now. We still haven’t verified Kid Flash’s true identity or motive. We don’t know if he’s working alone or with someone else. Superboy notwithstanding, there has already been one member of the Team abducted and replaced right under our noses….”

“Listen asshole, I don’t like what your insinuating.”

“Oliver,” Wayne sighed, “All I’m saying is if they could replace one of us, how many more could be out there?”

“Fine, let’s follow that logic for a minute. If you’re so worried about other traitors or moles within the League, why tell them?” the archer cast an accusing finger towards Superman and Wonder Woman. “What if they’re actually one of them? Arguably the two most powerful members we have and now they know we’re on the hunt. They could just off us right now and be done with it.”

“Ollie…” Diana rolled her eyes.

Arrow stared directly at the Dark Knight. “Hell, how do we know you’re not one of them?”

“You don’t,” Wayne answered coldly.

“Ollie, this kind of paranoia is exactly why we don’t want to alert the rest of the League until we know more, and the answers start in there,” Superman pointed to monitor.

“God almighty,” Arrow grumbled, walking away from the others in disgust. His head hurt, his stomach burned, and despite his sudden gastrointestinal distress, he needed a large stiff drink; lots of them.
The other alternative was finding something to punch; but picking a fight with those three would be a painful lesson in futility. Right now he needed backup, not to start a brawl, but to save his sanity. Arguing with Bruce Wayne when his mind was made up was like arguing with a rock.


“What about him?”

“He’s a minor princess, he has rights. I don’t know how it works on Themyscira, but we don’t lock up and interrogate children here on planet Earth,” he said snidely.

“I know you guys see him as some dangerous traitor, and who the hell knows, maybe he is, but when I look at him I see a kid barely keeping his head above water. And that confession was the biggest load of horseshit I’ve ever heard. He wants you to lock him away, and I want to know why. Why don’t you give Dinah a shot at him, they’re close, maybe she…..”

Suddenly the Zeta Tube came to life, spinning up and preparing for the arrival of its traveler.

_Recognize Zatara -11_

Stepping out of the glowing tunnel, the sorcerer regained his bearings and slowly approached the gathered, carrying with him a small black velvet box.

“Oh good, someone else you bothered to tell?” Ollie said sarcastically

Standing now in front of them, Zatara turned the latch and lifted the lid, a brilliant glow escaping from within. When their eyes adjusted, they immediately recognized the object inside.

“Where’d you find it?”

“Salem,” Zatar replied. “After we spoke, I conjured a spell searching for mystic energy similar to what Nabu practices. The trail directed me towards Massachusetts, but I assumed I’d only tapped into the Tower of Fate. It was as good a place as any to start, but when I arrived, the spell took me off in a different direction.
“Where?”

“A cemetery. Four blocks from the Tower. I discovered the helmet lying in…”

“Kent Nelson’s grave,” Batman interrupted

“Yes,” Giovanni nodded.

“Hera,” Diana gasped.

“Aww that’s messed up,” Ollie cringed.

“I agree, but in an odd way it makes perfect sense. Who better to watch over the helmet, that it’s previous owner.”

“Even a dead one?” Clark said hesitantly.

“Think about it; Fate, Kid Flash, Kent Nelson. It’s not a coincidence, it’s a connection. I need to speak with him immediately,” the sorcerer asserted.

“Whoa whoa… hold on. I’m not denying the kid looks guilty as hell. All I’m saying he needs someone in there with him on his side. Some kind of counsel. He needs Barry.”

Zatara nodded in agreement. “I agree. Whatever this is, it goes far beyond cloning or petty theft. Nabu was deliberately hidden away someplace where he would remain safe. From talking to my daughter, I understand you found all of Kid Flash’s victims in much the same manner. Friend, foe or otherwise, this now has mystical elements attached to it that can’t be ignored. I believe Oliver is
correct and the League should be immediately notified.”

“At this point all it will do is hamper the investigation.”

Ollie looked Bruce straight in the eye. “We weren’t asking.”

xxx

Hours later, stepping out of the conference room while his fellow leaguers continued to argue and bicker, Giovanni Zatara now wished he’d sided with Batman.

The emergency meeting had descended into chaos just as Bruce had predicted. Heated conversations soon turned to accusations and arguments, with opinions and sides changing rapidly by the minute. His fellow Leaguers had every right to be irate. How could they not be angry about being left out in the cold? Zatara would have felt much the same had he been kept in the dark, but truth be told being suddenly dragged into the inner circle had been no picnic either.

This was an attack of an unprecedented scale. Imposters, abductions, burglary, theft; and at the center of it all…Wally West.

In Green Arrow’s defense, there wouldn’t be a “right time.” That moment had long since passed, but now they needed to move past their animosity to focus on the matter at hand; an attack on the Justice League by one of their own.

J’onn J’onzz would arrive sometime tomorrow to conduct mind scans on all parties as well as their captive; a blatant invasion of privacy suggested by perhaps the most private man of them all. Sometimes Bruce hypocrisy was maddening.

Barry Allen was the most impassioned of them all and rightfully so. This went way past the need for secrecy, this was family, this was personal.

“My god Bruce, we would have never done something like this to you. If Dick was the one sitting in that cell, you would have been the first to know.”
“What in the hell happened to innocent until proven guilty huh? There’s got to be a reason, and I don’t give a damn about your investigation. I want to talk to him and I want to do it now. Don’t make me ask twice.”

Things had become so heated at one point; the genial mild mannered police scientist had nearly come to blows with the Dark Knight before their teammates wisely separated the two, which was fortunate for Bruce Wayne. He’d already taken enough of a beating from a speedster to last a lifetime.

Barry had made a valid point, and Zatara’s stomach burned at the thought of his young daughter taking the speedster’s place inside that cell and no one bothering to tell him let alone speak with her.

Truth be told, the sorcerer was never quite the fan of the young speedster even before this current situation. Kid Flash was brash, reckless, and immature; nothing remotely similar to his thoughtful and dedicated mentor.

After their last interaction, Zatara could now add disrespectful and disobedient to the list, but he couldn’t ignore the fact that Wally had saved his daughter’s life; risked his own to ensure that not only Klarion would never don the helmet, but Zatanna wouldn’t as well.

Briefly stepping from his role as father to that of amateur detective, he continued to ponder why Wally had gone to such great lengths to make sure his daughter wasn’t harmed, other than the momentary discomfort of pulling tape from her thick raven hair.

There were so many questions still unanswered. With the helmet and the meteor now in his possession, what reason did Wally have to continue to frequent the cave? To gather more intel? To learn more secrets? From the outside looking in, it would appear the speedster had everything he needed. So why continue the ruse? Why take such unnecessary risks?

Zatara continued down the hallway, far enough from the fray that their bickering had lullled itself into a dull roar. Despite the current level of animosity, he knew his teammates had the best of intentions, but intentions weren’t enough, right now he needed answers.

Finally he found himself alone in the silence of the briefing room, the image of the bound speedster flickering overhead on the large hanging monitor.
After spending the last few hours seated at the conference table, stuck listening to the endless circular debate, his legs were in desperate need of stretching. Lately he’d been feeling every day of his fifty three years on this planet. Playing superhero was a young man’s game, and being a member of the League, a working stage magician, and a single father had begun to take their toll. But with Dr. Fate missing in action the last few decades, the role of sorcerer supreme fell directly on his shoulders; an honorable role but yet a terrible privilege.

On the screen, he watched the speedster rub at his weary eyes, never once taking them off the helmet. What was running though his head right about now? What was he thinking?

The speedster’s confession had been a poorly worded lie, and despite neither affirming nor deny his alleged crime; stealing the Helmet of Fate was never about financial gain. It represented power, and the only creature with enough strength and skill to master it had been banished to an otherworldly dimension when Kid Flash destroyed Klarion’s earthly anchor. That was no accident.

Anyone who donned it now would never receive the power or abilities they might have sought, instead finding themselves now Nabu’s earthly anchor, completely under the Lord of Order’s command and control. The only reasonable explanation was it was taken in hopes it would never be used. The Helmet was sacred, and its abductor had gone to great lengths to make sure it was placed somewhere just as sacred.

With all the pieces of the puzzle scattered across the board, refusing to interlock, it was at that moment he made his decision.

The Helmet was the key, it always had been, and its connection to Wally West the proverbial smoking gun. Nothing would prevent the magician from walking into that holding cell and casting a spell that would force the speedster to confess. It was an incantation so simple even his daughter could cast it, but ultimately that wouldn’t be enough. Zatara needed to understand, not just from Wally’s perspective…but Fate’s as well. He needed to perceive it at a level no mere human was capable of. This was bigger than him, bigger than all of them, and he was willing to make the sacrifice necessary to find out why.

Across the room rested the velvet box, the key. With the box in his hand, he proceeded down into the depths of Mt. Justice to find the door in which it would fit.

Minutes later he’s arrived at the unguarded holding cell, its occupant chained and shackled, inhibited and powerless; every monitor in the complex tied into the cell while the League continued their pointless debate upstairs in the conference room.
He didn’t have long. The moment he opened that door, every siren and klaxon in the facility would begin to blare. It was now or never.

Giovanni paused for a moment, his mind drifting back to his only child. He’d raised Zatanna alone since she was three, the last of the Zatara bloodline. She barely remembered her mother, and he hated that of all the memories they’d formed and shared together over the years, this might well be the one she remembered most.

His actions would have consequences, not just for him, but for her as well. If Nabu chose not to release him, the solitary role of sorcerer would fall directly on her one day. That was a burden she had not asked for nor was she ready for, but it was the same circumstance he’d found himself in decades earlier during one of Dr. Fate’s first sabbaticals.

Zatanna had begged him for the opportunity to join the Team. Told him over and over that she was ready for the responsibility and sacrifice that role would bring. Now would be her chance to prove it. He hoped one day she would understand.

He was the only parent she’d ever known, but if the fates were kind, he would be so again.

Zatara took the golden artifact out of the box and proceeded to the cell door. The steel handle felt cold in his hand, and a brief chill shot up his spine as he pulled it open.

As expected, Zatara’s actions set off every alarm in the mountain, causing the speedster to jolt from his exhaustive stupor.

Wally was fuzzy, wiping his bleary eyes, trying to decide if the sorcerer presence was real, or the last of the jellyfish toxin leaving his body, a poison induced hallucination.

Over the loud speaker, Batman’s voice trumpeted out. “Giovanni! What are you doing?”

The magician looked up to where he knew a camera would be positioned, and through mournful eyes declared. “Take care of my daughter.”

“Zatara don’t!” but Bruce Wayne’s pleas came too late. The sorcerer removed his top hat, discarding it to the side and placed the golden helmet above his head.
“Zatanna, forgive me.”

The cell erupted in a blinding golden light, burning out every light bulb and surveillance camera in the room. The speedster ducked his eyes in the crook of his arm, gritting his teeth as the brilliant radiance burned though the minuscule slit of his eyes lids. Finally the brightness faded, casting the room into the dull glow of the emergency lights shining from the cavern behind. When Wally’s eyes adjusted, the gleam of the helmet, the real helmet, was the only thing he saw.

Aw shit!

Wally jerked from the desk, frantically pulling his chains to their limits. He closed his eyes, desperately searching for the speed inside him, picturing himself vibrating his molecules through something…anything just this once. But the inhibitor collars did their job, and no amount of dreaming was going to change the fact that he was now trapped inside the cell with the one man he wasn’t remotely prepared to face.

It was one thing to imagine himself becoming the Lord of Order, an entirely different matter now standing in front of him.

The sparks of the shattered cameras flckered overhead like fireflies falling from the ceiling, casting tiny bursts of light against the golden surface. The room grew silent and time seemed to slow as Fate cocked his head curiously at the speedster, the sorcerer’s eyes an eerie crimson glow. Wally’s heart beat so fast it became a constant hum, his breath a frantic pant, futilely trying to pull away as the Lord of Order slowly approached.

There were no words, no lies, nothing left to say. He’d faced Fate before when the sorcerer had possessed Kaldur, Zatanna, even Zatara, but never like this.

Suddenly and unintelligible incantation was spoken from behind the helmet, and all at once Wally’s restraints tightened, a golden glow canvassing the existing chains, doubling in size, dragging the speedster into a seated position at the table.

A large hieroglyphic Ankh appeared in the air above both men, Wally’s eyes involuntarily drawn to it. The speedster struggled to look away, but Fate refused to yield his hold. Golden gloves reached out from the shadows, placing both hands at Wally’s temples. In the background, he thought he heard Barry’s voice followed by Bruce’s, and soon a symphony of others, but a burst of
light quickly erupted through the room silencing the sounds.

Fate’s eyes began to glow a brilliant shade of yellow, and suddenly Wally felt a fluttering in his chest, not painful as much as odd, as if his soul was being torn from his body. He held his breath trying to will it away as Fate’s eyes grew brighter and brighter. And then...nothing.

Everything stopped.

The Lord of Order suddenly rose from his chair, a slight unsteadiness in his stance. The weight of the chains lessened and returned to normal, and Wally slumped forward, his extremities tingling and weak.

The speedster struggled to raise his head when through the blurred haziness of his vision, he saw the Lord of Order at the door, turning to look at him once last time before exiting. Wally watched the door shut, catching sight of his weary reflection in the mirrored walls of the interrogation room. Moments later his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he passed out across the steel table.

When Fate emerged from the cell, the League stood outside in hushed silence. This was the first time they’d seen the sorcerer in the flesh, so to speak, in years. Everyone was aware of the body he inhabited, but it was the being that controlled it that was the most disconcerting. The last time the helmet had been placed on someone, it had ended terribly, and all gathered held their collective breath hoping it wasn’t about to happen again and be forced to hear the screams of Giovanni Zatara echo throughout Mt. Justice.

Finally Batman approached, addressing the mystic.

“Fate?”

“Yes. It is I”.

“Is Zatara...?”

“He is well; his strong affinity to the mystic arts will serve me well.”

Bruce knew better than to argue for his friend’s release at the moment, instead needing to know what the sorcerer had discovered.
“What did you see?”

The Lord paused, weighing his words carefully before deciding the time wasn’t quite right yet.

“I must sequester myself to meditate and compile an appropriate response. There are forces at work that stretch the dimensions of time and space. Until I return, you must limit your contact with Wally West. Provide sustenance and all basic necessities, but nothing more. I will return tomorrow with answers and hopefully a course of action. Until then farewell.”

Fate’s body began to glow when Batman quickly reached out and took hold.

“That’s not an answer,” Batman replied harshly. “There has to be something you can tell us.’

Nabu looked down at the black armored glove on his forearm, then back to the Dark Knight as Wayne’s hold lessened and released.

“Suffice it to say, this boy is not your enemy, he might very well be your savior. Heed my warning; avoid all unnecessary contact with him at all costs.”

“Just tell me why,” Wayne demanded, his noted composure beginning to unravel. “Give me a reason. At the least tell us who sent him!”

Fate turned away in thought, remaining motionless as he considering the request. Finally he turned back to the Dark Knight and gave the vaguest yet most honest answer he could.

“You did.”

And in a brilliant flash, he was gone.

xxx
M’gann laid in her bunk wide awake, staring at the textured ceiling, still in utter disbelief at what the last twenty-four hours had brought. Her head ached, and she still felt dehydrated from the day’s events, but Dinah had assured her a good night sleep would cure all her ills.

*If only…*

She’d tried everything; meditation, a relaxing bath, even warm milk, but nothing seemed to calm her mind. Even in the dead silence of her room, there was still just so much noise.

It had taken her months of laborious work and discipline to break the natural habit of reaching into someone's mind whenever she wanted to talk or share. That was the norm on Mars, but a personal violation here on Earth when not expressly invited. Even the mind-link she frequently used during missions made the others uncomfortable from time to time, but tonight she wasn’t trying to reach in, she was trying to block out.

The flood of emotions broadcasting from her teammates was becoming nearly impossible to ignore. Anger, betrayal, sadness, fear, confusion: emotions she was still trying to process herself, made infinitely more difficult when those same feelings were radiating off everyone else.

Normally in situations like this, the answer was to leave the cave and get some distance to calm her mind; a nice walk, a leisurely trip up the coast, a quiet beach, but in all honestly there had never been a situation like this before.

Batman and the others had made a brief but curt appearance earlier that day, inexplicably escorting Zatanna away before informing the rest of the team that they were to remain confined to quarters until the following morning when someone would arrive to escort them back to their collective homes; like picking up kids from some disaster laden summer camp experience. Those that actually resided within the cave would find sanctuary with their mentors until secondary housing could be established. Conner was understandably thrilled at the news.

“This is bullshit!” he cursed, storming off.

Megan couldn't have agreed more. Suddenly they were sidekicks again, banished from their playhouse while the adults decided their fates, offering no justification for their course of actions nor explanation as to of why one of their own had betrayed them; only that under no circumstances were they to attempt to make contact with the prisoner. It wasn't a suggestion, it was an order.

*Prisoner. Is that really what they were calling him now?*

So much of her last interaction with Wally was a blur. She’d screamed, he’d screamed. Her last
memory was of falling, and then waking up on a cold metal grate, Kaldur standing over her in a panic, and a flannel shirt resting underneath her head to keep her as comfortable and safe as possible. Wally’s shirt.

But of course what was the most troubling were the images she’d seen in his mind, one standing out above the rest.

Somehow he’d discovered her secret, and not from word of mouth or some grainy video taken without her consent, he’d seen her with his own eyes, in person, face to face. How?

There were only two people she was aware of that had witnessed her true white Martian form in person; J’onn Jonzz and the telepath Psimon.

Of course J’onn had easily discovered it when he found her stowed away on his ship on a return trip from Mars, and Psimon during her last mission to Bialya where she’d met Mary and Garfield Logan. Wally of course hadn’t been present at either one.

Psimon had brutally stripped her of her façade, forcing her to revert to her true form during their battle. He’d taunted her, violated her, and when Kaldur, Robin and Conner were seconds away from coming to her aid, Megan had stopped them dead in their tracks to protect her secret.

She’d been gentle with them, Psimon not so much. The Martian wouldn't be surprised if the evil telepath wasn’t still drooling in some foreign hospital bed after nearly being lobotomized by her.

Queen Bee was an entirely different matter. She’d threatened Gar’s life, stating he’d been implanted with orders to hurt himself or his mother if any harm would come to her. The queen had video of M’gann’s confrontation with the vile telepath, and had warned Megan if she didn't do as she was told, all of the Martian’s secrets would be revealed to all.

In the end, the Dictator of Bialya had no idea who she was facing.

Megan sought no permission when invading the Queen’s mind and taking back what didn’t belong to her. It was relatively easy, finding the proper engrams that held the image and knowledge of true lineage, discarding them into the wind like yesterday’s trash. The evil dictator had brought this upon herself, not only by the threats she’d made to Megan personally, but the sum of all the evil acts she’d perpetrated decades prior. The video was soon erased and her secret safe.
The Queen was a villain, she was evil, and she had to be stopped before she could hurt anyone else. It’s not like the Martian would ever do something like this to a friend, to a loved one. That’s what she told herself at least.

But despite the meticulous care she’d taken, and all the tracks she’d covered, somehow the speedster knew. How was that even possible?

Giving up on the sandman’s arrival, Megan rose from her bed, willing her pajama pants and t-shirt to form into her day clothes, shifting her density and slowly phasing out of her bedroom. She needed a distraction, something to take her mind off things.

Cooking had always been a relaxing endeavor, and if by chance someone was still awake at this hour suffering from the same affliction she was, perhaps some freshly baked cookies or such would do them all some good.

But as she floated down the hallway she stopped midway, distracted by the nagging voice inside her head; things were not as they seemed.

In the brief moments she’d spent inside Wally’s mind, she’d sensed no vile programming, no ill intent, just waves of desperation, turmoil and fear. How much of these feelings were actually his or just hers masquerading as such she wasn’t sure, but whatever this was, it was bigger than her or any secrets she was holding on to.

If Wally had wanted to hurt them, to really hurt them, he could have…in a literal heartbeat. So much so that she’d doubted anyone of them would have even seen it coming.

So why didn't he? With his freedom at stake, why double back to save Robin? Why protect her from the scalding heat? Raquel, Kaldur, Zatanna, Artemis, Conner….why? Despite her age, Megan knew she was still pretty new to the whole hero game, but from her experiences to date, this was not how bad guys were supposed to act.

All the injuries they’d suffered had been relatively minor, all but Batman’s. The beating he’d taken at the speedster’s hand had been violent, personal. What had made his so different?

She was no detective, but the questions still haunted her none the less, and before she even realized it, she was suddenly standing outside the detention wing; completely oblivious to where her subconscious had led her, one thick iron door separating her from the truth.
Hello Megan, this is a terrible idea.

She quickly realized the error of her ways, turning around and preparing to phase back through the walls towards her room before anyone noticed. Yet she didn't, she couldn't. The answer to all her questions, the answer to everything was less than a hundred yards away.

If she'd been strong enough the first time, good enough; if she'd been the powerful telepath her uncle had praised her to be, they'd have had their answers by now instead of waiting for the J’onn’s impending arrival and after that…the truth. Megan had been too afraid to delve any deeper, she wasn't anymore.

There was an old Martian proverb that read; believe what you see, trust what you feel. Something didn't feel right, and she was going to find out why.

*She was going to be in so much trouble.*

Passing through ten inches of compressed iron, Megan phased through the door, keeping her body invisible and translucent as she came out the other side.

Down the darkened corridor, she quietly floated past the closed conference room where inside a heated debate continued on. She tried her best to filter out the mental noise, but inside emotions ran high, and she soon became aware that perhaps the League was not quite the unified front they'd presented when they’d addressed the team earlier that day.

She'd never heard/felt the Flash so angry before. Peering briefly through the glass portal of the conference room door, there was no League inside; no costumes, no uniforms or masks, just men and women torn apart by Wally's actions…and each other's.

It was like seeing everyone naked; never considering that behind the crimson cowl was blue eyes and blond hair. She'd never seen Green Lantern without his glowing visor, Hawkwoman without her helmet, and never in million years would she have suspected that the person behind the dark mask and deep baritone was one of the richest men in the world. Everyone inside the room standing unmasked looked like normal everyday people, but you'd have to have been living under a rock for the past decade not to recognize or at least know who Bruce Wayne was.
Another domino soon fell. Wally had called Robin dick, which evidently wasn’t a euphemism. He was Richard Grayson, Wayne's adopted son and the only member of the team to keep their identity secret, but Wally knew. *Of course he did.*

Continuing on, she passed through three more heavily fortified bulkheads before finally reaching her destination, and unfortunately discovering that she wasn't alone.

Sitting outside the transparent aluminum cellblock Captain Marvel stood guard…of sorts; lounging in a plush office chair, eating a carton of something that left trails of chocolate around the edges of his mouth. Not exactly the guards of Buckingham Palace, nor how Batman had intended.

After their battle against Klarion, they had all discovered the powerful and wise hero was actually a ten years old boy inside. A lot of things about him suddenly made a lot more sense, but age was just a number after all, she was nearly forty-eight, chronologically speaking and about as green as they came no pun intended.

Marvel’s childlike enthusiasm and naïveté were genuine, and in an odd way was now being treated as much like a sidekick as they were, but right now the League required the strength of Hercules, not the wisdom of Solomon.

Yet despite his intimidating and powerful stature, Megan could easily see how troubled he was by the current situation. Wally was his friend; he'd been all of their friends.

Past him she saw the speedster lying on his bunk, still wearing the same blood soaked clothes from earlier, shackled with enough chains and inhibitor collars to de-power half the League. They weren’t taking any chances.

His eyes were closed, but she could sense he wasn't truly asleep, just trapped in a restless slumber, his mind racing forward but with no room to run.

The Captain had just stuffed three large chocolate chips cookies in his mouth when he looked up to see Megan’s translucent form hovering above him. He immediately jumped to his feet.

“Megan you’re not supposed to be here. Dr. Fate doesn’t want anyo……”
Inside his mind he suddenly felt it; a thought, a suggestion, a compulsion. A word formed in his head, one he found powerless to stop from escaping his lips.

“Shazam?”

The room shook with a powerful bolt, and when the blinding flash was gone, a stunned and confused Billy Batson emerged. His eyelids blinked, trying to figure out exactly what had happened when she saw the Martian standing in front of him.

“Megan?…..”

“Shhhhhh,” she whispered, gently touching his mind, as his eyes became heavy and closed. She gently levitated him back to his chair, tucking him in for a short nap. He may have the powers of a demi-god, but Billy was still fundamentally human, and all the stamina of Atlas couldn’t prevent a little post hypnotic suggestion.

When Billy awoke, perhaps he'd consider it all some milk chocolate induced dream. It's was a stupid hope, but everything she was doing to this point fell right in line with that foolish rationale.

Bypassing the need for a retina scan, she phased through the outer cell wall, her skin pricking as she passed through the electrical current flowing through the glass, finally solidifying on the other side.

Wait a minute…

Billy had said Fate doesn't want…? What did Dr. Fate have to do with any of this? Doesn't want what?

She’d never even met the man other than being greeted by an apparition of Kent Nelson created to protect the Tower of Fate, that was until Wally lied his ass of about being a true believer and the Team had been cast into the burning bowls of hell.
By the time she’d recovered from Abra Kadabra’s surprise attack, Nelson was dead and Wally was in a coma. Did this have something to do with that?

Megan barely knew anything about the Lord of Order other than a few stories her uncle had shared and old J.S.A. news footage, but what she did know was how dangerous donning the Helmet of Fate could be.

The helmet was supposed to be a source of unlimited mystical power, secured surprisingly in the trophy room of Mt. Justice instead of some Fort Knox like vault aboard the Watchtower. For Fate to have passed on a message of any kind meant someone must have put it on. Remembering the inconsolable reaction on Zatanna’s face after Black Canary had pulled her aside, it wasn’t hard to figure out who that person was.

She quietly approached the speedster lying on his side, his body jerking and damp, struggling to reach R.E.M. sleep. Was this really some criminal mastermind set out to shatter and cripple the League? He looked so ordinary, so…Wally.

She supposed at some point in his life even Lex Luthor was just a normal teenager before he became a son of a bitch hell bent on world domination.

The first time she tried to enter Wally’s mind she’d been overwhelmed by the sheer speed of thought, the second time by the startling vision of herself seen through his eyes. This time would be different. This time she’d be ready.

M’gann had lied when she said a situation such as this was more on her uncle’s level. Skilled yes. Powerful? Not by a long shot.

J’onn had not been exaggerating when he said she was the most powerful telepath he’d ever known, but power and experience don’t always run hand in hand. J’onn was a hundred and forty years old; he’d had over a century to master his abilities, Megan considerably less, but still more than capable. The trick was being more of a scalpel and less like a dull knife. Brain tissue was finicky like that

Megan calmed her mind, preparing for entry, when without warning Wally jerked from the bed; his nightmare peaking, steel chains catching and pulling him back. His clothes were drenched with sweat, perspiration dripping from his brow. He took slow unsteady breaths, rubbing at his eyes, trying to will the horrific nightmares away…and then he saw her.

The air stilled around them; Wally too stunned to speak, too afraid to breathe - Megan too nervous to ask, too afraid to wait. This was the moment when everything would change, just for different reasons.
After seconds of their eyes locked silently upon another, the Martian’s began to glow, her consciousness drifting forward.

“Megan wait!” Wally pleaded, feeling the heaviness of her presence invading his mind. He grasped her hand. “Please… don’t do this.”

But by the time his final words had escaped his lips, it was already too late. And then all hell broke loose.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: Ok, I am soooo sorry this chapter took so long. On top of work, family and travel; it was very very hard to write, with too many false starts and revisions. Each member of the Team had to have their own genuine moments, and it had to be authentic. I hope I did it justice.

I’ve really been struggling with the editing, so any typos or punctuation errors I’ll have to go back and fix later, but I really needed to get this out while I had the chance.

Just a quick FYI; due to all the alterations Wally has made, Megan's future has begun to change, rewriting her interaction with Queen Bee and beyond. Remember Sportsmaster and several other members off the Light are now off the board, Artemis has come clean, Cheshire’s in the wind, and Conner’s never acquired his shields. It only makes sense that Santa Prisca won’t happen either.

As far as the Logan’s, I have no plans to peruse what happened on the mission to Biyala with Kaldur taking Wally’s place. So I’ll leave it to your imagination if Gar still becomes Beast Boy or not. I like the character, I just don’t have room for him in this story.

There is only one chapter left, two tops. A lot of work is done on it, so hopefully it won’t take too long.

A special shout out to my friend and the only beta I’ve ever used Embleer_Frith0323. I wish we’d met sooner

For AO3 readers, the format is a little wonky, but I’ve grown tired of wrestling with it on this site. Hope it’s not too distracting

Hope you enjoy, and if you like what you read, give me a shout. If you didn’t, your input is still welcomed and appreciated.

And to my favorite reviewer out there who checks in almost daily, I hope it was worth the wait :)

Take care.
Megan winced, immediately shielding her eyes as she stepped into a blinding kaleidoscope of chaos.

A deafening roar of blurred images sped past her like a bullet train; the Martian barely sidestepping the dizzying maelstrom just before it could strike.

Organic strands of bio-electricity danced across the ground at her feet, arching from neurons to synapses like lightning streaking across an opaque sky. All the while scientific formulas and theorems raced above her like clouds, powerful winds tearing them to shreds, raining down upon her like snowflakes. It was utter pandemonium, just as the speedster intended.

For an instant, she found safety in the eye of the cerebral hurricane, a momentary oasis in an otherwise raging tempest inside the speedsters mind. Wally was fighting her with every ounce of will he had left, but he was exhausted and she was unwavering. Yet still the storm raged on.

Focusing inwards she fought back, willing the metaphysical environment around her to transform, altering the chaos into something her consciousness could better perceive and control.

With great effort she tamed the storm, transforming the violent squall into a tranquil ocean, gentle tides of organic memories washing at her feet.

Reshaping a mental landscape was not all that difficult, it was an ability she’d mastered by the time she was five, and quite commonplace on her world; allowing a lonely ostracized teen fixated on Mars’ sister planet, to turn a cold dry world into the paradise she dreamed Earth to be.

However Megan wasn’t struggling with the mental transformation; the difficulty was slowing down Wally’s mind.

After a few moments of measured breathing, gone were thunder and lighting, the raging memories, the chaos; replaced now with a golden sun and warm gentle breezes, a calm reality she could maintain and control, an environment more fitting to delve into and explore the depths of Wally’s consciousness.
She closed her eyes as the warm rays caressed her emerald cheeks, the sounds of seagulls flying overhead. Dipping her naked toe into the pool of memories, she began her journey, going back to the day it all began.

*Welcome aboard. I’m Kid Flash. That’s Robin, Aqualad, its cool if you forget their names.*

M’gann remembered that day clearly, her first introduction to the group only days after their exploits at Cadmus Labs. These were people she’d read about on the internet, watched on the nightly news and YouTube. They were who she aspired one day to become.

Robin was instantly friendly and outgoing, Kaldur quiet and dignified, Conner insanely handsome and broody, and then there was Wally…

Flirtatious, incessant, immature, oblivious. He was like a puppy that kept climbing on the furniture despite getting swatted and scolded every time. How he’d failed to notice her obvious attraction to Conner and lack thereof with him was beyond her. Megan knew eventually she’d have to come clean and let him down gently to preserve a burgeoning friendship, but shortly thereafter the flirting stopped. Everything stopped. Fate had seen to that.

The boy that had slipped into that coma was nothing like the one that returned. Zatanna had used the term old soul to describe the teen she’d met in the hospital when her father had been called into consult. That was definitely not the Kid Flash Megan remembered.

*He* was the person who’d landed flat on his face the day a certain archer first arrived; *he* was the one who embarrassed himself regularly over the mind link with terrible puns and even worse flirting. The Wally she’d come to know was someone constantly owned in the training ring by Black Canary when he’d try to hit on teacher as Robin so eloquently put it, but most of all *he* was the one who’d lied about his belief in sorcery as excuse just to hit on her, nearly get them all killed in the process.

*That* was the Wally West she remembered, but that was not the Wally West who’d returned.

*Just give him time* Canary had urged them, throwing out terms and labels describing his condition and prognosis. What was discussed and shared inside their sessions was of course private, but the team had high hopes she was making progress and that the old Wally would soon return, of course he never did. She knew that now.
Megan wished Conner was there by her side. She was nervous, and though they’d only been together a short time, he’d become her rock. She needed his strength on this journey, and the trust that he’d still be there when it was over; knowing full well after what she’d pulled, her days with the Team were numbered.

Within the illusion of a crystal blue ocean before her, she reached down to the water, pulling liquid memories from the sea and levitating them in the air around her, like a maestro conducting some unearthly orchestra.

Sorting through someone’s awareness was not like reading a book. They may share similarities of a beginning, middle and end, but rarely shared in that order. Reading a mind was more like putting together a puzzle; something effortless and beautiful when shared between two Martian minds, complex and confusing with human ones. Megan ventured as far back as she dared to go, seeking out some of his earliest memories.

Through his eyes she could see and feel moments of peace and contentment, as real and vivid as if they were her own.

The simple happiness of a child surrounded by love and affection, the excitement and drive to unlock the secrets of the universe, the infatuation and admiration for a hero in scarlet, a purposeful accident, and the immense satisfaction with its results.

Warm beautiful memories that immediately filled the Martian’s heart with dread.

They were real; no brain cell manipulation, no remnants of mind control or telepathy, no false narratives, just memories and experiences of a life lived.

When she was first inside Conner and Roy’s mind, she immediately sensed the mechanicalness and sterility of manufactured memories. They were well crafted, but stood out like a sore thumbs to someone of her skill.

Wally’s were different. They had an energy to them, a personal connection that could not be reproduced no matter how skilled a master. The mind she stood inside of was Wally West; not a clone or a duplicate, but a friend, a teammate, a traitor; planted within the Team to learn their identities, their protocols, and their secrets.
Megan rubbed at her weary eyes, as that stark realization set in. Feelings of sadness, anger and betrayal washed over her, but nothing compared to how Robin and Kaldur would soon feel once they discovered the truth. The three were lifelong friends; that friendship now a lie.

She needed more; a reason, an answer.

The four of them; Roy, Kaldur, Robin and Wally, they were all in line for membership within the Justice League long before the crisis at Cadmus. With their new role as covert operatives for the League, being assigned to sanctioned missions and reporting directly to Batman, why would Roy Harper shun that offer? If Red Arrow’s original programming was to infiltrate the League, why not join up with his fellow sidekicks to maintain his cover and retain access to the League and its members from within? Instead, against all rhyme and reason, he’d chosen another route and Megan couldn’t explain as to why.

After the League’s shocking discovery of his true nature, perhaps his creator’s had made him almost a too perfect a copy of the real Roy Harper, and his stubborn streak and willfulness had overridden his programming. But what if it was something else?

What if the real reason he’d chosen another route was because someone on the ground with real time knowledge of the situation was actually manipulating his actions, pulling his strings. What if that someone was Wally?

Instead of peeking through the keyholes, it was time to open the doors. Standing on the sandy beach, she peered through the translucent tear drop of memories, pulling out the unimportant aspects and moments, discarding those engrams and letting them rain down to the azure ocean below. Returning her focus to what remained, she closely examined the moment from all angles, putting it into a linear pattern the Martian could better understand.

After minutes of examination, it was just as her uncle had related about that night at Cadmus; nothing duplicitous, nothing sinister, just three young heroes fighting for their lives to free not only themselves, but a new friend as well.

Megan scratched her head, letting the remaining memories dissolve into the gentle waves below. She stepped away from the water’s edge, taking a moment to clear her mind and rest her psyche. The strain of slowing down Wally’s consciousness was beginning to wear on her, and though his pace had decelerated somewhat, every minute she spent inside felt like a marathon.

She took a breath and began again, levitating the next memory from the sea of Wally’s thoughts. This was going to take time; time she wasn’t sure she had.
As memory after memory was lifted from the pool, all it brought forth were more questions. Floating in front of her, all was as it should be. Mr. Twister, Kobra, Amazo, the League of Shadows. Villains and missions intertwined with a normal home life, good friends, and the thrill and pride of being a hero. Sorting through these moments, she found no disillusionment, no hidden agendas or nefarious intent.

For Wally to accomplish something of this scale, he had to have help; a handler, a courier, a partner of some sort, but still to this point she’d found no clandestine meetings or mysterious strangers. Just a normal happy life centered around friends and family.

It didn’t make sense. You don’t just wake up one day, flip a switch and become a traitor. There were seeds that needed to be planted, a trigger of some sort. Yet of all these questions, selfishly what weighed the heaviest on her was still how the speedster had discovered her true nature.

As one memory seeped to the ocean below, another rose from the water to take its place, and as the new image formed inside the floating pool, Megan knew immediately if there was an answer forthcoming, it might very well be found here.

Inside this liquid orb stood the Tower of Fate.

There months. That’s what Wally had lost. There months of his life spent in that coma. There was no way of knowing the damage and trauma melding with a mystic mind might have caused, and of course the only person that could possibly make sense of it all was the one who’d caused it in the first place. That's why the Helmet of Fate had remained secured and off limits.

As the memory began to unfold, she needed to be careful. She was just a passenger on this journey, navigating through the chaos of sorcery inside a mind of someone in denial of its very existence was dangerous. Her belief and acceptance in magic would have no bearing on Wally’s, or the shock and trauma the helmet may have caused. His pain and fear would be hers as well. She needed to be ready.

Megan winced as the screaming began, the fear and confusion all consuming. Wally’s mind was awash with pain, slowly building like the pressure inside the chamber of a gun seconds before it was fired. She bore down, preparing for the worst, when suddenly everything grew quiet, the rolling tide at her feet becoming still and silent. She looked out to the ocean of thought only to find it calm and tranquil. Almost like glass.
The images and contents inside the liquid memory were blurred by the metaphysical sun that slowly set behind it. The Martian’s closed her eyes, centering herself, and delved into its aqueous contents.

- *Standing at the heavy oak doors of the Tower of Fate; gaining entrance, meeting an apparition, cast out, separated and attacked, Wally and Nelson fighting to retrieve the helmet....*

Megan’s eyes jerked open. Immediately she knew something was different, something was wrong.

This memory was unlike the others, unlike anything she’d ever experienced before. It had a strange duality to it, one that ran counterclockwise within itself. Inside the tear drop of thought contained an inexplicable content of cognition, much too complex for a single moment. Perhaps it was a byproduct of the damage Fate had caused, like some sort of psychic scarring, or possibly something else entirely.

She stepped closer to the floating pool, her head cocked curiously before its contents. Her arms reached upwards, her fingers ghosting its nebulous membrane, ripples forming across its surface pooling inwards. Too much activity was happening inside for just one single moment. She’d barely considered the repercussions before her hands thrust inside the liquid, forcing them deep into its core, literally pulling the memory in half.

That’s when she saw them, two distinct events flowing side by side.

What in the.....

The Martian slowly pulled them apart, dumbfounded as she discovered two individual moments playing out through Wally’s eyes.

On one side…


On the other…

- *An elderly man dying, pale freckled arms holding him. The last flicker of life slowly leaving his*
“Have faith in what you can't explain. Believe in what you can no longer deny.”

That man was Kent Nelson, and that wasn’t remotely how it happened.

Wally had not seen Kent die, of that she was sure. When the team found the duo atop the Tower, the speedster was unconscious and seizing while Nelson struggled to take his last breath, speaking in a tongue none could understand, the helmet of Fate lying lifeless between them.

Focusing back to the unfamiliar vision, she watched Wally struggling to carry Kent out of the Tower, refusing all offers for help or assistance while a strong sense of guilt weighed heavily upon him.

What is this?

Placing the two liquid memories side by side, she examined them both closely. In each were visions of Kent Nelson driven to the ground, powerful bolts of mystic energy lashing out at him, but that’s where the similarities ended.

- A dying Kent Nelson offering one final instruction, a brief moment of stillness replaced by blinding psychedelic flashes of light and pain, a battle, the sensation of flying, explosions of voices echoing in an odd order, a very much alive Kent Nelson standing at his the speedster’s side, the old man arguing with someone, not with Wally but the helmet itself.

The other…


Megan screamed, stumbling backwards towards the beach, feeling as if someone had driven a blazing hot knife through her mind’s eye. In the distance she could hear the remnants of Wally’s cries echoing hers. What he felt, she felt; and she’d definitely felt that.
What was that? Some kind of psychic backlash from joining with the Lord of Order? A small taste of the mystic energy that ran through the helmet? Either way it hurt like hell, and she’d only touched on that moment for a second, Wally had been there a lot longer.

And the visions? The second set of memories? They couldn’t be real. Perhaps what she’d seen didn’t belong to Wally at all; phantom remnants of memories transferred from the helmet by any number of Fate’s previous hosts, and considering how old Nabu was, there could have been quite a few.

Or maybe the moment Wally put on the helmet, it had literally overpowered him, shattering his mind and splitting it in two, a kind of mystic mental illness caused by the meld. At least one of those scenarios made some kind of sense. Regardless, if they were looking for a trigger, she doubted they’d find a bigger one.

Gingerly, she rose from the surf, dusting away the grains of sand from her body, taking a deep breath, and willing the pain away. Whatever that memory was, it was completely and utterly overwhelming, physic energy in its rawest form and yet through Wally’s perspective it all seemed so real.

It had a life to it, an intimacy and understanding that made no sense. Both memories had an authenticity to them, each feeling as real as the other.

The dual memories of that day, they were disjointed, not falling into any kind of linear sequence that’s she’d strived for. Middles were endings, beginning scattered throughout, like puzzle pieces jarred into a places they was not supposed to fit.

Megan needed more time, but those memories were quickly passing her by while an ocean of others waited ahead, and if they were anything like these, she needed to be ready.

As the last drops of that day dissolved to the water below, all she knew for certain was there were two distinct recollections alive inside that moment; one where Wally walked away from the Tower, and one where he didn’t.

As she continued on, she refrained from arranging the events into any specific order, hoping to avoid the mental backlash as before. She was the passenger, Wally was the driver. To have any hope of making this work, she’d have to observe the memories in his mind the way he saw them, making sense of them in her own mind afterwards. She pulled the next set from the ocean of Wally’s consciousness, and rather than reaching in, she allowed them to wash over her instead.
To her amazement, they were just like that last. Each engram contained two separate memories, two alternate realities flowing side by side along the same chain of events more or less, some with subtle differences, some much more drastic.

- Two scarlet androids attacking the cave. Molten metal, a cage of fire. In one memory Wally is the hero; in the other Artemis saves the day.

- Battling the Brain in North India, freeing mind controlled animals, rescuing Captain Marvel. In one recollection the Brain escapes, the other he does not.


“Wait. What?”

She turned quickly to the corresponding memory before it could pass her by.

- Attacks around the world. A swamp, a secret base, a mutant plant, poison spores. Supervillains. Seven in all. The deadliest the Justice League has ever faced, but the League isn’t there, only the Team. The Team is fighting for their lives. An explosion, a deception. Kaldur dons a mask - Not a mask, a helmet. The League arrives, nerve gas is released. Dr. Fate saves the day. Victory.

“What the...”

That didn’t happen. None of that happened. The Team didn’t fight some kind of Injustice League. They’d rescued people from their burning homes, they’d set up temporary shelters, they’d coordinated with the Red Cross and FEMA. Kid Flash had even escorted two burn victims to a New Orleans hospital for emergency surgery.

Victims of a disaster he was responsible for.

This didn’t make sense. Why would Wally do something like that? Cause all that suffering and devastation? Looking deeper into his mind she could see he wasn’t alone.
- A woman in green, a creature in white.

It had to be Poison Ivey and the Ultra Humanite? Were they his partners? Allies? Handlers? And yet the villain she’d seen unconscious before him, it was the Atomic Skull, she was almost positive. If they were allies, why had Wally turned on him?

Desperate for answers, she quickly moved on.


Once again, despite seeing herself in Wally’s vision, that event never happened. The Team was never sent on a mission to Wyoming or any other national park. Evidently part of Wally remembered it differently.

Megan’s head spun to the opposite memory, prepared for some equally earth shattering event, only to see a pointless mission on a warehouse rooftop and a high school fight against a deserving bully.

She was becoming Alice, and each set of Wally’s memories were dragging her farther down the rabbit hole.

Wally’s next recollections began to converge, and once the Martian realized where they were headed, she wished she could move past them just as quickly.


Megan’s hand covered her gaping mouth at the vision, ignoring the memory that played opposite it. She’d lived that moment so many times she could narrate it in her sleep, but this one was different. Wally hadn’t died in this exercise, Artemis had. And her death had sent the speedster into a tailspin of foolhardiness and desperation. Ultimately they all still died, only with a different cast of characters making their way to the end.
Each memory was as real to him as the other, as if he had lived two separate lives. This was beyond anything she’d ever seen before, and despite her first-hand knowledge and experience of the events in question, Megan found herself struggling to determine which was real and which was not.

She felt her control begin to ebb ever so slightly, and immediately Wally’s memories increased their pace. Days turned into minutes as she scoured through moments of school and home, missions and monotony.

The counseling sessions were still there, the Halloween dance too, Artemis and Zatanna returning from an event in Gotham the same as before, but in one memory after the dance Wally went home, and in the other somewhere much farther.

- Dark dingy streets, crowded sidewalks, rich fragrances. A strange familiarity as if he’d been there before. A cramped café, rows of computer monitors, an email sent. The longest run of his life, but not. A far reaching bridge, a city by the bay. Hamburgers, and miles and miles of road ahead.

This made absolutely no sense; each memory more confusing than the last. She could clearly see in one moment Wally at his kitchen table, a mountain of ice cream in front of him; his mom scolding him as he pours too much chocolate syrup all over it. At the same time, street signs, the writing on them foreign, most likely Korean or Vietnamese. She can see an ocean that stretches on seemingly forever. Next the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, and then home.

Both events happening at the exact same time. How was that even possible?


Megan fell to the sand, clutching her leg as jolts of radiant pain shot up from her thigh, igniting nearly ever nerve cell in her body before slowly easing away. She looked down in relief to find her leg whole and unharmed. Something like that was what she’d been afraid of. Real or not, what he felt, she felt. And if Wally had suffered some kind of psychosis or breakdown, there was a chance she might too. Add sorcery into the mix and anything was possible she worried. The last thing anyone needed was a telepath whose mind was running amok. Taking a calming breath, she wiped the perspiration from her brow, and continued on.

The man on that warehouse floor, the one that had driven the blade into the speedster’s leg, it had to be Sportsmaster; another of several interactions and clandestine meetings Wally and had with known criminals, people that would benefit greatly from his knowledge of the League and their
identities, criminals that would pay or do just about anything for those secrets, and each and every one of them Wally had turned on.

For someone trying so hard to be a traitor, why was he acting more and more like a hero? In countless missions he’d saved lives, including hers. After being compromised, seconds away from escape, he’d turned back to save his friend. It would never excuse his actions, but it definitely called into question his motives.

As time leapt forward, moments and memories came at her faster than before. A dull ache formed in the back of her skull, dizziness and nausea splitting time evenly inside her. Trying to slow Wally’s mind was beginning to take its toll, and the more time she spent inside, the more it was becoming difficult to differentiate between which memories were real and which were not.

So much of his life had been lived in secrets, moments as foreign to her as the ones that played opposite them. As time leapt forward as she began to ask herself; what if they were both? Ahead, more memories approached.

On one side…


The other…

- Despite Wally and Kaldur’s warnings, Zatanna puts on the helmet. Dr. Fate saves the day. Nabu refuses to release his host, and like all father’s do, Zatara saves her life by giving up his own.

Grey skies began to form overhead, a dull roar of thunder calling out form the horizon, the surf at her feet becoming choppy. She was losing control of the environment she’d created.


Next…


This didn’t make sense. It just wasn’t possible. How could he have seen the events of the mission in such clarity? A mission he hadn’t even taken part in? His injuries had caused Batman to send Kaldur in his place, an unpopular decision with both teens considering the Atlantean’s last experience in the Biyalian desert, and yet in this memory Kaldur isn’t even there, Wally was.

The was no way the speedster could have known of the threats Psimon and the Queen had made, nothing in this memory that revealed her true form, and yet the vision of her true self she’d discovered in his mind during their initial battle said otherwise. How?

His memories began to swarm, lifting up from the ocean on their own accord, charging at her like wild boars. She was losing control, no longer able to slow their surge.


A mission a crippled Sportmaster could not have possibly taken part in.

- Left behind while she and the others participate in a private mission in a Munich Circus; One recollection where he goes home and mopes, the other where he crawls into a crevice at the foot of a wooded hillside. Suffocation. Claustrophobia. Darkness. A hidden safe. A green meteor.


“Oh my God.”

The memory played out, but Megan never watched the rest, frozen instead on the moment, transfixed by the image of an alien, of her through Wally’s eyes. Never seeing the acceptance of her teammates, never witnessing Conner taking her hands in his. Focusing only on the shock on her friend’s faces, their fear, her shame.
A tear rolled down her cheek before realizing the moment gone, another taking it place. 


“Conner?” she whispered perplexed.

Megan stood in stunned silence at the image, barely able to process the memory when suddenly Wally removed an emerald dagger from his wrist and stabbed Conner Kent directly in the heart.

“NO!!!!!”

Seconds later, chaos reigned.

xxx

In was quiet throughout the living quarters as Dick Grayson sat alone at the kitchen counter, the bowl of cereal in his hands long gone soggy. There were just no words.

Tonight reminded him a lot of the night his parents died; the same disbelief, the same shock and denial. Wally West was more than his best friend, he was his brother, and he’d betrayed them all; and for what?

The League would soon have their answers, of that he was sure, but that didn’t mean they’d be sharing them with him or the rest of his Team anytime soon.

It didn’t matter that he was the one responsible for discovering the truth. It didn’t even matter that ultimately he was the one who’d captured the speedster; in the end he was still just a sidekick and was treated as such. Tonight was a perfect example; he and his friends banished to the playhouse while the adults had dinner and drinks in the other room.
Wally West was their teammate, their friend, and they deserved more than anyone to know the truth. But to do so, he’d have to go against Batman’s explicit orders to stay out of the investigation, an order he clearly had no intention of following.

Taking his bowl to the sink, he dumped its contents in the disposal, rinsing it out as he constructed the framework for his plan, barely noticing the archer as she entered the room.

“You ok?” Artemis asked.

“Yeah. You?”

She shrugged her shoulders and dryly chuckled. “Peachy.”

“Is everyone asleep?” Robin asked.

“I don’t think anyone’s asleep, not after tonight. I still can’t believe this is happening. I mean…” she hesitated, lost for words.

“I know,” Dick replied.

Have you heard anything?”

“No, but if Batman has his way I probably won’t. Not for a while at least. He’ll say something like I’m too close to the subject or my emotions are clouding my judgment. The same old bullshit they always say.”

“I’m really sorry Rob, I know you all went way back.” she sighed.

“It’s Dick. My name’s Dick Grayson,” he freely admitted.

“Uh duh!” the archer replied sarcastically.
“Wait, what? How?”

“Look,” Artemis smirked. “I’m not an idiot. You don’t think I noticed some creepy little sophomore stalking me around the halls of Gotham Academy? News flash; a pair of sunglasses isn’t exactly a stellar disguise.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know, I figured with my baggage, I was the last person who needed to stick their nose into someone else’s business. Everyone deserves their privacy, their secrets.”

Dick shook his head. “Not me…not anymore.”

Artemis nodded. She knew exactly how he felt. Letting go of her past and letting that truth out in the open had been more freeing and satisfying than she’d ever thought possible. No more secrets, no more lies. She was finally starting to not only feel welcome, but maybe a little deserving too. Wally had been a big part of that, and she’d be lying if now all those all doubts and fears weren’t bubbling back to the surface. Like it was all an act.

‘Dick,” she hesitated, a tad uncomfortable using his real name. “Why do you think he did it?”

Sitting at the counter, his chin resting in his hand, Robin shook his head. “I honestly have no idea. It just doesn’t make sense. I’ve known him since….“

Suddenly a loud rumble shot through the cave, a tremor following behind it strong enough to shake the cave, as small amount of rock and debris began falling from the ceiling.

“What the hell was that?” Artemis yelled as the young detective jumped to his feet.

“I don’t know!” he yelled back over the roar, “but we better suit up. I’ll get the oth…..”

The shockwave hit Robin first, a cascading blast of mental energy knocking him off his feet. Artemis barely had time to scream before the wave struck, driving her to the ground as it continued expanding outward. Both teens writhed on the cold stone floor, grasping their heads in agony. They
wouldn’t be the last.

xxx

Batman sat sternly silent at the head of the conference table as chaos raged all around, Fate’s final words haunting him.

*Just tell me why. Give me a reason. At the least tell us who sent him!*”

“You did.”

What did that mean, *you did*? He’d given Wally no orders, no secret mission. In truth his interaction with the young speedster had been sporadic at best over the years, even before the formation of the Team.

It wasn’t personal or intentional; it was just that Kid Flash had his own mentor, one that Bruce highly respected. They operated in different cities; each with their own rouges, villains, and agendas. The Flash was the one responsible for his training; he was the person pledged to impart wisdom and guidance. It was common practice for the League not to involve themselves with their fellow hero’s protégés, and the Flash and Kid Flash were no exception.

It wasn’t until weeks after the incident at Cadmus that the League finally took the lead in organizing and training the young heroes as a unit; and even then it was a shared responsibility.

Fate wasn’t prone to riddles or hyperbole; his words were always careful and measured. Bruce knew for certain no such directives had come from him, but what if another version of him had. With an unknown organization working in the shadows, could another version of him exist out there? Another clone. What if he was that clone, that traitor? Would he even know if he was? Would Fate?

“Bruce?... Bruce!” Diana snapped, dragging the detective back to the present. “What do we do?”

“What do you mean?”
“Hera,” she growled at his disconnect. “Bruce I need you present. We’ve lost Zatara, Dr. Fate has disappeared, the League is in freefall, and we have a teenager locked up in the brig that Fate is calling a savior. What…do…we…do?”

A savior? Savior from what? From him? From someone else? From something else?

Wayne had to do something. People were counting on him, people were doubting him. The League was tearing apart at the seams, and he was just standing there watching it, letting it happen. It was time to take command.

“We split up into teams,” he began. “One group goes to the Salem; reach out and try to make contact with Fate. Barry I’ll need you at the West’s home to search for clues. Take someone with you. Diana, you and Clark….

The conference room suddenly erupted in thunder, tremors rocking and shaking the mountain. Distorted waves of raw psychic power rippled from the epicenter below, driving the League to their knees, surge after surge striking down even the most powerful among them. Bruce’s eyes tinted with crimson before slowly drifting closed in response, the pain in his skull overwhelming. If this was the end, he hoped an answer to this mystery waited him on the other side.

xxx

Gone were the pristine beaches, the calm warm water, the clear blue sky, all that was left was anarchy.

Conner Kent was dead. The man she loved brutally murdered by someone she once called friend, and yet he wasn’t. Conner was alive and well, she could still feel him; his mind, his heart, his love.

At the same time she could feel Wally’s heartbreak, his sadness, his crushing guilt. He’d murdered a friend, a brother…a monster.

Monster?

She was surrounded by a maelstrom of blinding lights, flashing like strobos, memories and moments hiding in between. Time held no meaning, the world a blur of color and emotion. Images spun past her in a blazing kaleidoscope, the duality she sensed now a part of the past.
Two lives, three realities, all merging into one; one blindingly fast one. She’d lost her control over
him as the both screamed unison. Months turned into seconds as a life not lived suddenly appeared
before her.

midnight.

- Golden hair, grey eyes. A new life together.

- Excitement and adventure replaced by tenderness and love. The days of costumes and capes
nearing its end.


Atlantean girl making the ultimate sacrifice.

- A beach. A flaming coffin, submerging into the depths below. An army of Atlantean’s taking a
sister home. A burning anger. A one true love forever lost.

- A new generation of heroes, a sense of pride as they embark on their new journey. Sidekicks to no
one.


- A Helmet

Time slowed for a moment as the golden image of the Helmet of Fate hovered afloat in an ocean of stars above her. Megan had never been this deep before. She was losing her identity, losing herself in him. Wally’s memories were becoming her own. She couldn’t take much more. She had to break the link.

On the surface of the helmet she could see images, feel moments. This was where the duality began. This was where a second life started; a new beginning; a new history. Through Wally’s eyes she watched armored gloves extending towards the glowing object, unsure if they were reaching out or trying to push away.

For a brief instant everything paused; a moment teetering on the edge like a rollercoaster seconds before the fall. It was now or never. Megan concentrated as hard as she could to separate their minds, emerald eyes burning bright, every ounce of her willpower focused on pulling herself free. She was so close… then the fall had arrived.

- A thrilling descent, feverish excitement, sheer terror, drowning and suffocation, racing towards oblivion, a blinding light. Two individuals screaming as one

Megan jolted awake; gasping for breath like it was the first one she’d taken in days. Her mind slowed as the blur of vague and dreamlike images slowly faded from her consciousness, giving way to the familiar setting of the cave. Her body was covered in sweat, her heart racing, a sharp pain still throbbing in her temples. How long had she been in here? Hours, minutes, seconds?

A fuzzy halo of light surrounded the room, waves of déjà vu and dissociation still coursing through her mind. The depersonalization of her journey had left her detached and shaken, almost doubting her own existence in this reality she now found herself in. Was she real? Was any of it real?

Slowly the sensation began to pass and the buzzing in her mind faded; a fleeting sense of peace gradually creeping back in. Her mind automatically reached out, like a cell phone searching for a signal, in this case the minds and thoughts of her friends, not to invade their privacy, but to confirm their existence as well as her own. After a few moments, Megan took a relived breath. She could feel them, they were there, and she was back. The nightmare was over.
except it wasn’t a nightmare; it was real, it was a life, it was…

“Wally!” she screamed, frantically searching the cell, finding the speedster in the corner, holding his head, his breathing shallow, staring off into space. Matted red hair hung over his bloodshot hooded eyes, his clothes soaked to the bone. The mental feedback she'd experienced prior to their separation had nearly torn her mind apart. Looking over at Wally, she feared the worst. She rushed to his side, searching for signs of life as he stared lifelessly through her, as if she was invisible; as if she didn’t exist.

“Wally,” she sobbed, “it’s Megan. I’m here. We’re both here. Follow my voice. You’ve got to come back. Please… don’t leave me.”

For moments there was nothing. No movement, no response, just an empty shell lost.

Then a blink, a series of blinks. Life slowly crept back into his eyes, an awareness of who he was, where he was, and what had just happened. The speedster looked up to see the Martian hovering above him.

With tears in his eyes he whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

Then he finally broke, sobbing into her arms as she held him tight, the realization of who he truly was both easing her mind and breaking her heart in the process.

xxx

Inside the conference room, the League slowly rose to their feet, still reeling from the attack. It was unlike anything any of them had ever experienced before; wave after wave of raw psychic power crashing into them like a tsunami. It was an assault like no other; both mental and physical, each strike more powerful than the one before, but still the most troubling was what each blow left behind; an image, a feeling, a vision.

As the League gathered their wits, it took mere seconds for Batman to pinpoint the epicenter of the attack. Moments later they began their descent into the bowels of Mt. Justice ready to face the culprit, while haunting images ran amok in their minds.

Who could be responsible? Only a handful of individuals possessed that kind of ability; Dr. Destiny, Psimon, Grodd, Despero, but none of them had ever possessed the power necessary to reach such magnitude. It would seem that may have now changed.

Or perhaps it was some new villain all together; the person or persons responsible for the spy now sitting in their holding cell, conceivably coming to collect their operative before their endgame could begin. They had to be ready for anything.
But the last thing they expected to find was the detention cell wide open, a young demi god in jeans and a ball cap helping remove the chains and inhibitor collars that held their prisoner, all the while a Martian cried, holding a broken speedster in her arms.

xxx

There were no words.

In all of his years, Bruce Wayne had thought he’s seen it all; until today. He’d faced aliens, clowns, psychopaths, sorcerers, ghosts, the undead.

But this…..

The conference room, just hours earlier a clamorous mix of hostility, confusion, and resentment, was now as silent as the midnight adoration of a Catholic church; not somber or respectful, but an experience beyond comprehension. A moment so shocking, so horrific, that words could not possibly describe.

*Have faith in what you can't explain. Believe in what you can no longer deny.*

A phrase used by Fate numerous times in the past when advising the newly formed Justice League, most often directed towards a skeptical young detective wary of working within a team structure or accepting anything that could not be explained by science. Oh how things had changed.

It was like stumbling through a daydream as wave after wave of prophetic images had escaped the Martian’s mind, forcing their way into theirs. Each moment told a story, weaved together through a series of confusing visions and overpowering emotions; their worst fears playing out in a twisted cinema within their minds, and what made it even more nightmarish was each and every one of them knew it to be true.

What they’d witnessed, what they’d felt; it was beyond words, beyond reason. Fragments of a future passing through each of them at the speed of thought; a world they’d sworn to protect thrown into chaos, an army led by a psychopathic clone of their greatest hero destroying everything in its path, friends and teammates massacred, millions of innocent lives snuffed out in an instant.

As the League peered through this fog of war, instead of discovering those who’d survived coming
together in their darkest hour, they’d split apart when the world had needed them most, casting aside everything they once stood for. Unbreakable rules discarded into the wind, a union of beliefs and ideals torn apart in the name of peace, and their last moments on this earth spent with their hands at each other’s throats.

Around the table, each member eyed the others with disbelief and distrust. Everything they’d stood for was a lie, their alliance a sham; each person sitting across the table now possibly becoming what they swore to stand against, while the luckiest among them were the ones who died before any of this future could come to pass. How were they supposed to recover from that?

And at the center of it all; past, present and future, was Wally West. Not the version they once knew, but the person he would someday become, trapped in the body of a teenager. Through his eyes they’d seen the world as it once was, as it was now, and what it eventually becomes. Divergent timelines bound together like some temporal double helix, all the while the speedster trying to tie them back together and erase the sins of his past and their future. He’d died once trying to save the world he loved, and nearly did it again to save theirs.

And his reward for this sacrifice? He’d become pariah, a symbol of their failures; all because he had the gall to give up his life to save humanity. Not once, but twice.

After minutes of damming silence, Batman rose to address a wary League. “Obviously what we’ve witnessed is incredibly disturbing, moments perhaps we were never meant to see, but we also need to leave room that perhaps the visions are not entirely accurate.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Hal Jordan questioned.

Wayne cleared his throat. “Perhaps what we’ve witnessed is some form of psychosis or schizophrenia resulting from his merging with the Helmet of Fate. We should at least consider the theory that Kid Flash may not have actually traveled back in time in the first place.”

“But Dr. Fate said…..”

“All Fate said was he was not our enemy,” Batman interrupted. “There’s nothing conclusive in that statement.”

“What about the part where he said there were forces at work that stretch the dimensions of time and space,” Barry Allen snapped. “That sure as hell doesn’t sound like mental illness to me.”
“All I meant was…”

“I think what you meant to say is you may have sent the kid on a suicide mission and now you want to cover your own ass and make us believe he’s crazy,” Jordan replied with venom.

“Hal,” Diana said calmly. “I think all Bruce is trying to say is we need to leave room for any possible explanation and not jump to conclusions.”

“Why? Because you hope there’s a future out the where you don’t snap Bruce’s neck,” Ollie added in disgust.

“That’s not what I…”

“Let’s all calm down and take a moment….”

“Sure why not Dinah, it’s not like that’s your nephew’s still locked downstairs in a holding like a criminal.”

“It’s for his protection,” Batman replied.

“His or yours?” Flash replied.

“Barry, try to calm down.”

“Oh I’m calm princess. You’ll know when I’m not.”

“Guys, this isn’t helping,” Canary interceded.

“Flash,” Wayne said calmly, trying to keep things from escalating further. “If Wally is mentally ill, then he’s a threat to everyone and himself.”
“And if he’s not?”

Bruce sighed. “If everything we’ve see is true and accurate, with his knowledge of the future he could be dangerous. Each step creates a paradox. His presence here might actually be the cause of the visions we’ve seen.”

“Well isn’t that convenient,” Oliver laughed bitterly, “blame it all on him. Let’s not, even for a moment, consider that maybe this is all our fault.”

“Ollie, right now nothing’s off the table,” Wonder Woman replied

At the end of the table, J’onn Jonzz slowly rose. “Ladies, Gentlemen, please calm yourselves,” he spoke softly. “Megan is young, inexperienced. If Wally has indeed suffered a breakdown, the trauma could have affected her as well on a sub-conscious level, calling into question everything she may have broadcasted. Give me an opportunity to validate her visions and see…”

“Oh hell now,” Hal heatedly responded. “I don’t think the kid needs your hand phased through his chest.”

“I assure you that would never happen.”

“Really? Cause it sure as hell looks like you knew what you were doing when you did it to Sportsmaster and Mr. Terrific?”

“You’re not going anywhere near him J’onn. Do you understand me?” Barry growled.

“Barry, Hal. Calm down. No one’s doing anything to Wally. J’onn was just making a suggestion. All we want is what’s best for him,” the Amazon pleaded.

“And who decides that princess?”

“Enough!!” the Kryponian’s voice echoed throughout the chamber, shaking the room. Superman had remained silent throughout these proceedings, but no longer. All eyes quickly turned to him.
“This is getting us nowhere. You’re scared, I get it. I am too. We’ve never faced anything like this before. We’ve never seen the consequences of what our actions or inactions could do, not on a scale like this. I don’t want to believe that this is what our future holds, but I know I’ve felt it before; that same resentment, that same level of frustration that no matter how many times we sew the world back together, it continues to tear apart at the seams. Do you know how many times I’ve wondered what would happen if I just took that one extra step, something drastic that could ensure humanities survival even if they don’t want it? Well now we know don’t we.”

“That thing in those visions, that abomination, that’s a part of me. I’m responsible for his existence as much as I am Conner’s. I’m responsible for all that he’s done…or will do.”

Clark looked over to the Dark Knight, Wayne’s expression unreadable. “You can put any spin on it you want, you can theorize it a thousand different ways, but no matter the outcome we have to face the facts. We failed; failed the world, and failed each other. We can try to place the blame on Dr. Fate or Wally, or some shadow agency behind the scenes, but ultimately this is on us. I know what I saw. I believe what I saw, and it sickens me. How could we do this to each other?”

“Clark,” Diana pleaded, only to be brushed off as the Man of Steel stood from the table holding a finger to his ear, listening intently to something plying in his ear.

“There’s an emergency in Metropolis. I have to go,” and without another word, Superman was gone, off to save the day.

The room remained silent as the Amazon hung her head in defeat. Perhaps her mother had been right all along, that mankind was a disease plaguing the world, something not worth saving. Diana had left Themyscira all those years ago not just to fight against tyranny, but to be an ambassador of hope; to show the world a better way. If even one of those visions were true, she knew she’d failed miserably, ultimately succumbing to the same bloodlust that infected mankind like a virus.

She thought the Justice League would be different, that it could be special. This diverse group of individuals had become her friends, her family, and even though they had their differences from time to time, she always believed in the good that they could do for this world together. In the end all they’d done was make things worse.

Diana had watched helplessly as visions of a man she loved and respected, had cast off everything that made him a hero simply for a chance at revenge. His intentions may have be pure at one point; sending Wally back as his herald to save a world from itself, but watching the hunger in his eyes as he tore into the helpless Kryptonian; he’d become what he’d spent a lifetime opposing. And to stop him, so had she.
“There was no emergency was there” she sighed.

“No,” Wayne confirmed.

Batman sat stoically, trying to ignore the eyes cast upon him. This was a crossroads, a time to pull together or fall apart; and if one of the greatest of them had had walked away without a fight, what chance did the rest of them have?

“What do we do now?” Canary asked, looking over to see her partner as lost as he was, “wait for Dr. Fate to return?”

“And how long will that be?” Aquaman replied, “Fate has been known to go on sabbaticals for months. If this was important to him, he would be here.”

“We need to be patient.” Batman answered, “and not do anything rash.”

Unfortunately it was at that exact moment that Barry Allen decided to do just that.

“Ok that’s it. We’re done.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m taking him home.”

“Barry you can’t. Not yet. Give Fate more time.” Bruce replied, rising from the table to peruse, just as Hal Jordan stepped in his path, his emerald ring glowing brighter by the second.

“We weren’t asking. The kid’s coming with us.”

Flash turned sharply to the Batman “You give Fate all the time you want Bruce, but until then Wally’s done playing your games.”
The rest of the League jumped to their feet as the Scarlet Speedster and the Dark Knight faced off, only feet away from something that perhaps neither one would be able to walk away from; not in the physical sense, but something deeper, something personal.

Wayne halted his approach, reflecting on the moment. Was this how it begins? Was this the moment when a crack becomes a fracture? Was history repeating itself in reverse? Not through Wally’s memories, but right in front of their faces. Right here, right now? After several tense seconds, Batman stepped back as Lantern lowered his ring, the blinding green slowly growing dim.

“Good call,” he smirked, placing his hand of Barry’s shoulder and walking him out towards the detention wing. Before the duo disappeared into the shadows, Barry Allen turned back to the detective with a warning.

“If Fate returns, you know where to find us. Until then…stay the hell away from nephew.”

xxx


Dick shook his head, still trying to make sense of it all. The visions he’d witnessed were fast and fleeting, like trying to hold onto handfuls of sand watching helplessly as the grains slipped away.

When Megan linked their minds during missions, they were all connected in a way beyond words. It was uncomfortable at first, six strangers bonded together; trying to balance their own private thoughts versus the ones they freely shared, discerning whose voices were whose, whose thoughts were whose. It took time. It took trust. It took willingness.

There was nothing willing about what had just happened to them.

Wave after wave of memories and emotions had forced their way into their minds; each image, each vision more confusing than the next, all telling a different yet similar story.

Some, impossible tales of the past, others accepted events of the presents, and some that just didn’t
make sense.

A future spanning decades with large portions missing from the center, almost as if it had never existed.

Dick had witnessed missions that never happened, others that ended differently, friends and mentors aging before his eyes, heroes and villains he’d never seen nor met, and a future none would ever have thought possible.

Even in his eighties he’d recognize Bruce Wayne anywhere; Ollie, Canary and a few more much the same. Others looked exactly as they were today, Superman and Wonder Woman seemingly not ageing a day. In the end none of it mattered as they battled to the death. And at the center of it all was the speedster. Megan had been the antenna, but Wally was the source.

Dick had seen brief glimpses of a man in his twenties: the same red windswept hair, the same green eyes, freckles long since faded. There was a college campus, an apartment, a girl; and not just any girl.

Time seemed to shift in reverse, then leaping forward and back again without warning. Baffling visions of mission’s gone wrong, covert operations under a shroud of secrecy, new recruits as young as the day is long, a secret assembly of villains, unimaginable weapons, and an earth shattering endgame.


After that, the memories get hazy and disjointed; cities in ruin, death and destruction, oppression and prisons, a new Batman, and old Bruce Wayne, all capped off with a daring escape, and a plan reset the past that ultimately ends in failure.

Dick rubbed his eyes, trying to make sense of it all. Even now the images were fading, his mind grasping on to the memories they left behind. Even if he hadn’t believed his eyes, he believed his gut. Wally was no traitor; he was the hero Dick always knew him to be. His best friend had raced into oblivion to save the world, and a lifetime later he’d done it all over again.

“It is unbelievable.”Kaldur stated, processing his version of the events, coming to much the same
conclusion. “He is from both the past and the future. Those visions are remnants of another life.”

“He’s actually traveled through time,” Dick shook his head. “I’m still trying to wrap my mind around it?”

“How is that even possible” Raquel asked, her arm still tender from the IV Wally had carefully placed when depositing her in the med bay after their skirmish.

Megan sighed “I don’t understand it and I can’t explain it, but all I know is its true. It happened. Everything was the way it was supposed to be until that day at the Tower of Fate, then after that there are these dual memories running side by side; each one as real as the other, circling back around to where we are right now.”

“Two lives.” Kaldur inserted, “the one he is living now, and the one he lived before.”

“And Dr. Fate is at the center of all of it.” Zatanna added bitterly.

“He’s not the only one,” Dick sighed, preparing to break one of Batman’s unbreakable rules. “That elderly man in those visions, that’s Bruce Wayne. That’s Batman.”

It was like all the air had suddenly been sucked from the room. Bruce Wayne, one of the richest most powerful people in the world, a man who dined with world leaders and dated supermodels. Wayne was s shrewd businessman and professional playboy, often gracing the covers of news magazines and supermarket tabloids. He was the Dark Knight.

“Holy shit.” Conner said astonished. “That’s the doucheb… that’s the guy that’s been giving us orders for the last six months. He’s the Batman. You are freaking kidding me.”

“Perhaps we should stay on point.” Kaldur suggested. “If that is indeed Bruce Wayne, then it is likely that he is somehow connected to Wally’s presence in the future as well as his return to the past.”

“In the visions I saw, it looked like there had been some kind of war? An army supervillains slaughtering everything in its path, led by…. Raquel hesitated, trying not to look her Kryptonian teammate in the eye.
“Me. I was the one leading the charge,” Superboy replied uneasily. “That’s why I saw Wally shoving that kryptonite dagger through my chest. He came back to kill me,” Conner sighed, rubbing his hand over his eyes. “Not like I didn’t deserve it” he sighed defeated.

“Conner, that wasn’t you,” Megan spoke, taking his hand in hers. “Wally knew the difference. I know the difference.”

Dick agreed. “Cadmus must have created another clone, that’s who we saw and that’s who Wally came back to stop. It has to be.”

“There was more to it than just that,” Megan added. “Wally went after a lot of people.”

“Why?” Raquel questioned.

“Because he knows what’s going to happen,” Dick groaned, face palming himself. “God I’m so stupid. That’s why Bruce sent him back. To fix all the mistakes, everything that caused the future we saw. That has to be it.”

“Well if your boss is trying to make things right, then why in the hell were the League trying to kill each other?” Raquel frowned.

“And there is the question of how Wally arrives in the future to begin with?” Kaldur added.

“Guys,” Zatanna said hesitantly. “Did you see that storm he was running through? All that lightning? It was chasing him. I could almost feel his pain. He was terrified.”

“And then it all stopped.” Dick said blankly, seeing the path the sorceress was leading them.

“I uh…I think he might have died?” Zee replied hesitantly.

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As the debate continued, Artemis sat silently across the room, her knees drawn to her chest, rewinding the same series of memories over and over.
“I said get on the god damn floor! or I swear to God I'll put an arrow through your spine!”

“You won't do that. That isn’t you.”

“You have no fucking idea what I'll do. You don’t know anything about me.”

“Artemis…I know everything about you.”

The stroke of midnight on the Watchtower, the college campus, the apartment, the warehouse, the submarine…the girl; that was her.

They were together, they were a couple, and somehow Artemis sensed they’d been that way for a long time.

Ever since he’d come out of that coma, he’d been different. Gone were the days of the non-stop bickering and arguing, the constant competition, the need to one up the other, blaming each other for every failure, refusing to acknowledge the other's success.

She felt sick to her stomach, remembering she was almost…glad when he was gone; that his constant need to impress Megan at all costs had finally bitten him in the ass. That somehow he deserved what Dr. Fate to him. Never once did she actually consider he wouldn’t survive, that it wouldn’t be long until he returned, not just to the cave, but back to his irritating judgmental ways. The League had some of its best minds working on his case, they’d fix whatever had happened and soon enough he’d be back to his annoying normal self, but in the meantime she didn’t mind the silence and peace his absence brought.

Looking back now she felt disgusted with herself.

From the moment Wally had returned, he’d looked at her with different eyes, and now she knew why.

Artemis, if anyone ever makes you feel less than perfect, they're fucking insane.
In another world, the world in which he’d come from, they were together, they were happy. There were no masks, no more secrets and lies; there was just them. He loved her, and with one glance at herself through his eyes, she knew she felt the same.

Her heart was not something she gave freely. Years of abuse and neglect had hardened it, emptied it. To survive she’d built a suit of armor around it, around her. Nothing could get in, and nothing could hurt her. That’s the way it had to be. That’s what it meant to be a Crock. Against her better judgement, she’d let her guard down ever so briefly with Conner, only to watch him walk away like so many other had before. It was a stupid mistake, and she could almost hear her father’s taunting laughter echoing in her ears.

Some old story baby girl. When are you going to finally learn?

But Wally’s memories told a different tale. Even as brief and tumultuous as the moments were, she knew they’d had something special, something permanent and lasting. She’d taken the risk; gone all in and bet the house, and for once in her life it had paid off, for a time at least. But in that version Wally hadn’t walked away from her, he’d been taken.

Artemis stroked her chin, lost in her thoughts, unsure if any of this was even true. It could all just be a figment of his imagination, or maybe hers. She didn’t believe in fate, but she did believe in loyalty, she believed in her friends.

“Maybe the storm somehow transporte…..

“We have to break him out,” the archer abruptly interrupted the young detective, no longer caring the how’s and why’s, but what they were all going to do about it.

“Agreed,” Kaldur inserted.

Conner arched his brow. “And then what? Stuff him into a gym bag and walk him out the front door? The entire damn League is watching him like a hawk, and us for that matter. How are supposed to pull that off?”

“I don’t know Conner,” she growled, “but we can’t just leave him there.”

“We’ll need a distraction,” Zatanna suggested.
Robin snapped his fingers “*Or a replacement.* Zee you remember that trick you said you used when you needed to sneak out of the house. What if we…."

Suddenly the wheel on the heavy steel hatch began to spin and the bulkhead door slowly opened. Seconds later Black Canary emerged from the other side.

“Are you all ok?”

Robin was the first to stand. “BC, what’s going on? We’ve been stuck up here for hours? What happened?”

“Look guys, I know you have questions, and quite honestly we don’t have any answerers, not yet at least.”

“Where’s Wally?” Artemis demanded.

“Is he ok?” the Martian asked.

“We would like to see him.” Kaldur added not so pleasantly. “Now.”

“I know you would, but he’s not here,” Canary lamented.

“What?” Zatanna replied.

“He left with the Flash about a half hour ago.”

“Where?” Dick asked.

“I don’t know, but Flash made it very clear that he didn’t want anyone near Wally for the time being. That includes you all I’m afraid.”
“Let me guess, the League agreed?” Artemis frowned.

Dinah sighed, “To be honest, I don’t know if there is a League anymore. The scope of all this…it’s beyond me. We’re talking about time travel. I mean seriously? Two days ago Ollie and I were tracking down drug dealers operating out of the Star City Harbor, and now less than an hour ago I just witnessed a future version of myself fighting my closest friends to the death. I just watched the man I love die sitting across from the man who killed him. What do you say to that person? What can you say?”

“We’re in crisis guys, all of us, and I know Wally’s just as scared and confused as the rest of us. I can’t tell you what to do anymore, and I can’t stop any of you from reaching out to him, but I promise you this, if you ignore Flash’s warnings you’re only going to make things worse. Wally needs time, we all do.”

“What are we supposed to do then?” the archer asked.

“You gather your stuff and get ready to go.” Canary answered.

“Go? Go where?” Conner asked angrily.

“Home,” Dinah replied.

“What?”

“We’re shutting down the mountain. All systems are being locked down and taken offline. After today none of you will have access to the cave, so I’d take what you need while you can.”

“Why? We didn’t do anything wrong?”

“Guys if the League can’t even trust each other; we have no business trying to guide any of you. This is uncharted territory for us, and I’m sorry, but this is one thing we all did agree on.”
“For now or for good?” Aqualad asked.

“Honestly Kaldur I don’t know.”

“Excuse me, Black Canary?” the Martian cleared her throat, “but Conner and I live here. We go to school here. Where are we supposed to go?”

“Talk to your mentors, see what they suggest. Just know you’re always welcome at our place, Ollie and I have plenty of room.”

“So that’s it. It’s just over. All of it,” Dick frowned.

Canary sighed. “I guess that’s up to you. You’re on the clock, better get moving.”

As the bewildered teens reluctantly began to make their way towards their respective quarters, Ms. Martian spoke up before they could exit the room.

“Wait!”

Everyone turned to M’gann; her eyes cast downward, unwilling to meet their gaze. She rubbed her hands together nervously, searching for the right words, any words.

How do you tell the ones you love everything they think they know about you is a lie? That the person they’d come to know, the person she so desperately wanted to be, was nothing but a poorly written character from an old eighties television show. Megan Wheeler was completely fabricated for the masses and yet so real to a lost and lonely alien girl.

Is this how Wally had felt?

Faced with this terrifying moment of truth, she was so tempted to step back from the edge and laugh off the moment with a nervous quip. Say something upbeat and genial like the cheerleader she tried so hard to be and move on, but it wouldn’t be real; just another lie in a long line of them. As a white Martian, she’d faced rejection her entire life. Why would now be any different?
Maybe it wouldn’t, maybe it would be the same as it was on Mars, and her appearance and lineage would scare and disgust everyone she cared for, but she had to take that risk? Why?
Because Wally had.

He’d sacrificed everything to save a world that didn’t even know it needed saving. He could have given up at any time, but he never did, somehow finding the strength to carry on no matter the personal cost, and he did it all for them. To continue with this charade was a complete slap in the face to all he had risked.

Megan took a deep breath; the time for lies was over. “There’s something I need to tell you…to show you.”

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Hours later Wonder Woman stood off to the side of the Zeta Tubes surveying the scene. She’d lived amongst mankind for thousands of years; fought in their wars, seen first-hand their cruelty and savageness but despite it all she’d always held on to hope for humanity to finally come together to create a better future…until now. She’d seen the future; she’d witnessed her role in it, passing judgment like the ancient Gods before her.

She could almost feel the snap of his neck. She could hear her screams as another man she loved died in her arms. She was no ambassador of hope, no beacon of light. She was a curse. She was the cause. They all were.

Diana had no apprentice, no young Amazon under her wing to guide and train, and she’d never been more thankful about that fact then right now. Standing away, she watched the uncomfortable dynamic as mentors gathered their protégés and prepared to leave.

Rocket and Icon were the first to go, disappearing into the blinding light of the Zeta back to Dakota City without as much as a word. Raquel was the last to join and now the first to leave.

Kaldur and his king conversed quietly in a foreign tongue until it was their turn to take their leave. Much like Diana, they felt unsure of their place on the surface, or if they should have a place in it at all. From the visions they’d both witnessed, neither had survived the attack, leading them to wonder what had become of their homeland. Had the slaughter of millions included Atlantis? Had there been anyone left to protect it? Even before the attacks, human negligence had been slowly
destroying the planet. It appeared in their absence that mankind had finally finished the job.

Megan had embraced each one of them one last time before joining her uncle at the Zeta Tube, an odd mix of guilt and relief racing through her mind. After her confession she’d never felt so free. She’d shared her true nature with her friends, and in return she’d discovered theirs as well. Shock and confusion had given way to love and acceptance. It was easily the best moment of her life, and yet their forced exodus was because of her, because of her selfish fear of being discovered for who she truly. She hadn’t taken the journey in speedster’s mind to solve some mystery; she did it to protect herself and her secrets.

It had been both a blessing and a curse. No one would have known of Wally’s great sacrifice, no one would understand the risks he’d put himself through to save humanities’ future, and no one within the League would ever believe the depths they would descend to one day unless they saw it with their own eyes; all in the name of peace.

Despite her revelation and the relief that came with it, she found herself walking away from the only real family she’d ever known to stay with a being she could no longer understand. She’d seen a future where J’onn had lost his way, his entire purpose for even being on this world a sham. That J’onn Jonzz didn’t care for humanity, he could barely tolerate it. As they stood at the precipice of the Zeta Tube, she quickly realized she was as weary to be with the Manhunter as he was her.

Despite Ollie and Dinah’s pleas, Artemis left the team just as she’d joined it; a stranger, a loner. She hadn’t asked for this, more than satisfied with waging her only little private war against her father. Considering recent events, it now appeared she’d won, but there was still much work left to do. She didn’t need a team or a mentor to be a hero. Before stepping on to the transporter pad, she took one last look at the cave, her teammates, her friends; wondering if she would ever see any of them again. Wondering if she’d ever see him again. Before the computer could announce her departure, she jumped down from the platform to grab the quiver she’s discarded. She’d earned the right to keep it.

Zatanna stood alone on the pad with tears in her eyes. As angry and hurt as her teammates were about leaving, at least they had someone to go home to. All she had left was an empty house and fading memories. No mother, no father, and only a handful of boarding school friends that she barely tolerated on good days. If she had just listened to her father none of this would have ever happened. No cave, no team, no Fate…no shit.

If there was a silver lining to any of this, it was the moment Diana watched Conner and Clark finally faced each other, accepting a connection they could no longer be ignore. They were brothers, bound together by chance or by curse, both carrying a lineage neither could truly understand, but perhaps together they could fill in the gaps. In Wally’s memories they’d seen the creature at the center of it all, a twisted version of both of them; Clark horrified at what someone had created from him, Conner horrified of what he might have become.
“We should…we should finally talk.” Clark spoke kindly.

“Yeah. I guess so.” Conner replied dourly. “I’ve got nowhere else to go.”

Superman walked to the Zeta pad, entering in his access and destination code before turning back to the young Kryptonian.

“Well have you ever been to Smallville?” he smirked

Finally all that was left were the two detectives. Bruce eyed Dick carefully as the young hero watched his friends one by one disappear into a blinding burst of alien radiation. The Team meant everything to Dick, his friends meant everything. In some ways it was like losing his family all over again. It’s not as if they wouldn’t still be able to see each other, but it would never be the same again. After everything that had transpired over the last forty-eight hours, Bruce could relate.

And then there was Wally.

Dick Grayson and Wally West had been best friends from the day they first met. Two sidekicks playing in an adult sandbox, accepted by their mentor’s peers, but more as a novelty than an ally. Despite their differences in age and backgrounds, the two had an instant rapport. They both understood the difficulties of the job, dealing with over-bearing larger than life mentors, hiding their alter ego’s in shadow while their classmates and peers got their chance to shine, but most importantly just having someone normal to talk to and hang out with, well as normal as being teenage superheroes could be.

In a far off distant future had Bruce manipulated Wally, used his relationship with Dick as leverage to send him back to save his friend, to save all of them.

The entire League had watched Wally’s final moments as he gave up his life to save the world. Somehow he’d convinced the speedster to do it all over again. Was this older version of himself really capable of that kind of treachery? Sadly Bruce already knew the answer. Ultimately he’d failed the speedster, he’d failed them all.

Wayne had stopped trying to make sense of it all, finally accepting the visions he and the others had seen to be true. Years from now, he’d make a decision that would alter the course of history. Who gave him that right?
As of now, there was a secret organization hiding somewhere out there in the shadows, a co-opted network of operatives, placing individuals in key positions to accelerate human evolution and place the planet under their control.

The name of this faceless organization was no longer important, but the players were; and one by one he’d watched random supervillains and criminal masterminds taken of the board like chess pieces, forming a connection even a blind man could follow, all courtesy of a man out if time, a man he’d sent back to correct his own failures.

And to do so, all Bruce had had to do was throw away everything he stood for, everything it meant to be a hero. Saving humanity may have been the ultimate goal, but through the kaleidoscope of memories Megan had uncovered, Bruce saw it for what it really was.

*Revenge.*

Revenge against desperate friends, forced to make the hard choices necessary to change the destructive course the League’s failures had placed the world on. Revenge against former teammates who’d dared disagree with the mighty Batman.

Wally’s memories were incomplete, with no real insight into the decisions and actions that had brought them all to the brink, only its outcome. Had there been another way? Could the surviving members of the League have put aside the differences to form a better tomorrow? No one would ever be able to answer that now. In a strange way Bruce was thankful for that.

His decisions back then had sealed their fates, and now that choice had traveled back from the future and was doing the same damage all over again.

That was never more evident then when he looked over to his adopted son watching as his world was ripped away person by person, friend by friend.

Through Wally’s perspective, Dick had to have seen the blood lust in his eyes as the elderly Batman smashed his Kryptonite laced fists into one of his closest friend’s skull, knowing that everything Bruce had ever preached to him could be so easily thrown away when he felt the situation warranted it.

*Thou show not kill; the fourth commandment, Batman’s one unbreakable rule, now all a lie.*
The shame and guilt Bruce felt was immeasurable. What do you say to someone who’s seen you in your darkest hour? Watching you become what you swore to defend. Another mindless thug hiding in the shadows of Crime Alley.

Bruce had no answer to that, maybe he never would. From this day forward, every order he would give, every lesson he would impart to Dick and anyone else foolish enough to follow him, they would have to decide on their own to accept or disregard it. Maybe in the long run that would be a good thing. Only time would tell.

The Dark Knight walked to the Boy Wonder, still staring at the darkened Zeta Tube, his mind a million miles away.

“You ready?”

Dick nodded silently. There was nothing left to say.

*Recognize Batman – 02*

*Recognize Robin - B-01*

As the light turned back to darkness, Diana stood alone. Mt. Justice had been the League’s first headquarters, a place where strangers became friends, teammates became family. This was the place that had convinced her that this special group of people might actually be able to change the world. That truth and justice were not just words, but actually meant something. This place held her proudest moments of being a hero, now her saddest.

“Computer, begin evacuation sequence. Initiate lockdown protocols and dump then destroy all memory and backups.

Seconds later, the computer responded. *Imitating evacuation sequence. T minus thirty minutes and counting. Awaiting authorization code.*

Diana sighed; watching as the countdown appeared on the screen above, awaiting her response to begin.
“Authorization - Wonder Woman – Tango Echo November – 02- Confirm.”

_Confirmed_ the computer replied, beginning the countdown.

The Amazon shook her head. Was this really how it was supposed to end?

xxx

It had been weeks since that day at the mountain, and yet the pain still felt so fresh, so real.

The street lights crept by, no longer the frozen streaks of fluorescence he was used to, but now a slow tortuous ticking of a clock. The hum of the tires speeding along the interstate made his eyes heavy, and no matter what the calendar might say, everyday felt like a Monday.

Nothing prohibited him from waking up five minutes before class and speeding to school, but running now just felt…wrong. If he really was walking away from the game, if he truly wanted to leave the life behind, he needed to start acting the part.

However it was moments like this that he really wished he’d gone to the trouble of getting his driver’s license. Being dropped off at school by your dad, as a senior no less, was a little humiliating. But still it was better than the bus he supposed.

The soothing rhythms of _Comfortably Numb_ blared though his earbuds as his mind drifted towards anywhere besides Keystone High, when suddenly they were ripped from his ears and a frowning father looked over at him in irritation.

“Wally, are you even listening to me?”

“Yeah Dad. Jeez.”

“What did I say then?” Rudy asked.

“You said…You um…wanted me to…” the speedster chin dropped. “Ok I wasn’t listening, sorry.”
His father sighed. “Wally, while I really enjoy our morning commutes together, I might as well be riding alone if you’re just going to tune me out the whole way.”

“I know. I just have a lot on my plate right now.”

“That’s what I was asking about. Did you send off the other two scholarship applications your mother found? They may not seem like much, but every little bit helps. Stanford dining plans aren’t cheap, especially for someone with your appetite.”

Wally just shook his head, continuing his watch of the street lamps.

Rudy took a deep breath. “Son, I wish you would just talk to me. I’m really sorry the League disbanded your Team, I know that meant a lot to you, but honestly with the course load you’ll have in the fall, you really wouldn’t have much time for the whole cape and cowl scene anyway.”

“I know,” he repeated, eyes drifting off to the horizon.

“You realize you only have about six weeks left of school right? Six weeks and then you start a new chapter in your life. You have to be kind of excited about that right?”

“Yeah I guess.”

“Then why do you look like someone just at your last power bar. This is what you’ve been working for since you got your very first chemistry set. You made it pal, your futures so bright you gotta wear shades.”

*Future, yeah right.*

“Now look you don’t have a lot of time left, and you need to make the most of it. You’ve worked really hard, and your mom and I couldn’t be more proud, but would it kill you to spend your last few weeks of high school actually being a high schooler. Have friends over, go to a few graduation parties, ask that special someone out on a date.”
“I’ve been kind of busy Dad,” the red head groaned.

“I know, but you’ve made time for every science and math club Keystone has to offer. You’re going to look back one day and really regret it.”

Here it comes

“You know in your four years at this school, you’ve gone to a grand total of...wait for it...zero dances. How does that even happen?”

Wally rolled his eyes...this again.

“Prom’s right around the corner. I could bust out the old tux, show you some of my dance moves....”

“Dad...”

“A buddy of mine down at the Elks Lodge has a brother in the limo business, we could rent one for the night, invite some friends.”

“Dad...”

“Maybe you could finally ask out t Dan Park’s daughter. She’s a sweat girl Wally; your mom just loves her to death. You have to admit, you two would make a real cute couple. We could get your mom to talk to Grace and find out if anyone’s has asked Linda yet.”

That was it. That was all he could take

“Will you just let it go!” Wally shouted. “I don’t want to go to the God Damn prom!” he snapped. “I just want finish school and get the hell out of fucking Missouri! Do I really have to spell it out for you, or do I need to dumb it down a little more for you to finally understand?”

Rudy’s mouth feel agape as he turned to the sudden stranger sitting in the passenger seat, his eyes
still wide with shock and disbelief.

After several moments of stunned silence, Rudy finally erupted

“How dare you talk to me like that? I swear to God Wally, sometimes I don’t even know who you are anymore. You’re definitely not the son I raised. I don’t care if you’re the fastest kid alive or the dumbest, you were raised better that that.”

Rudy’s hand white knuckled the steering wheel, trying to calm himself. “Your mother and I have bent over backwards five ways to Sunday for you, and have asked very little in return. I don’t know what’s wrong with you, and you refuse to talk to me about whatever it us. So what am I supposed to do? No really, explain it to me, because I sure as hell don’t have the answer.”

“Wally I’m your biggest fan, and I want nothing but great things for you, but I’m also your father and you better learn some respect and do it fast.”

Wally bit his lip, turning back to the window. As soon as he’d said it, he’d regretted it. What the hell was he doing?

Despite the person who looked back at him in the mirror, he was nearly twenty three years old. He’d left that bullshit teenage angst phase behind long ago. His father was right; his parents had always been his biggest fans, his biggest supporters. His dad had helped build his first chemistry lab in their basement. His mom had helped make his first uniform, trying as hard as she could to make it look like his idols.

Moments before his death, the last thing Wally thought about besides Artemis was his mom and dad. Twenty four years later upon his arrival in the future, the first thing he sought out was home. When he saw the smoking crater that was once Central City, it had felt like a part of him had died in that blast. His mom and dad weren’t just his parents, they were his team; Team Flash. He wouldn’t be the person he was today without them…and this was how he repaid them.

Wally sighed mournfully. “Look dad….”

“We’re here,” Rudy said sharply as he pulled into the school parking lot. His father put the car in park, never tuning back to his son. “You better go, don’t want to be late.”
Wally nodded, remaining silent as he pulled the door handle to exit his dad’s beat up maroon Camry.

Lashing out was the last thing he wanted to do. Dick, Conner, even Artemis, none of them had what he had; a family that loved him, that supported him. Wally knew how lucky he was to have that, and his father needed to know it too, but sitting in front of the academic building while his fellow troglodytes plodded into first period before first bell was just not gonna cut it.

His dad deserved the truth; not the truth, but some version of it. Like how he was ready to pack away the yellow and red for the Stanford cardinal and white. Like how he was ready to change the world without wearing a costume, and most of all how much he loved both of them, and he had to do it today. It didn’t matter if every bank in Central City was about to robbed at the same time, when he got home that was first thing he was going to do. That was his priority.

“I’ll see you this afternoon,” Rudy said calmly, not wanting to let this thing between he and his son get any worse. “Have a good day”

“Yeah, you too.”

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Rudy sat in the parking lot, watching his only son disappear into the masses. He pinched the bridge of his nose wearily; the disconnect was growing and it had been for some time now. He was losing his son.

Ever since the incident with Dr. Fate, everything had changed. For years Rudy had been as understanding and supportive as he could with his son’s mercurial hobby. He and Mary were genuinely happy when Wally announced the creation of the Team. He needed friends, people he could connect with, people who could understand him, but watching time and time again as he returned home limping with new cuts and bruises was becoming more than he or his wife could bear.

Rudy lied when he told his son he was sorry his team had disbanded, in truth he couldn’t have been happier.

Pulling back out on to the highway, Rudy looked at his watch. He was late, a West family trait. He saw no reason to bring his wife into this; it would only cause more worry and strife. He’d give his son space, let him cool down and hope that the Wally West he raised would eventually come back to him. Sit and share his problems and dreams like he used to. There was no harm in hoping.

But if not, they only had a few months left with their son before he moved on to the next phase of
his life, perhaps it was time he started getting used to the idea that perhaps Wally had already left, maybe not in body, but in spirit.

Rudy reached down to the travel mug full of coffee when the rush hour traffic ahead came to a sudden halt. His foot slammed on the brakes, coffee spilling all over his suit as his car slid to a stop inches away from the minivan in front of him.

“Jesus,” he cursed, glancing down at his stained white shirt, knowing he had no time to make it home to change. This morning was quickly turning into a disaster.

“Could be worse,” he shrugged, putting his car back into gear, while waiting for the van ahead to move. When he glanced into his review mirror his heart stopped, watching helplessly as SUV behind him barreled down the road with no signs of stopping. The last thing Rudy West would ever see were the startled eyes of the teen driving it, looking up from her phone at the last second in sheer panic.

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History repeats itself, and sometimes that’s not always a bad thing Wally mused as Coach Sharp handed back his AP US History test. A- just like the last time around, or the first time depending on your point of view. Not too bad for skipping out on almost seven months of studying and homework. The statewide exam was still a month away, but if all went as planned he’d add another college credit to his already impressive transcript.

High School, despite its tedium, was almost comforting in its structure compared to the maze of danger and indecision he’d been navigating the past few months. Despite his immature outburst with his father, he had shared one nugget of truth; it was time for him to move on. He needed away from Keystone, he needed away from Missouri, he needed away from his old life.

Despite the familiar destination, Stanford could be still a whole new world for him; a new place to live, new friends, a new field of study, with no ties holding him back to the Midwest or the East coast.

Barry could keep the uniform; from this point on he was just going to be Wally West – struggling college student. He’d leave the heroics to the experts, if such things even existed anymore. Barry had remained tight lipped about the fate of the League, but whatever he had said to them had struck a chord. Since being back Wally had seen not one cape, costume or cowl, not even Hal Jordan, as well as no calls, texts and emails. It was better this way, but he’d be lying if he said it didn’t hurt a little.
The Flash and Kid Flash, speedsters, partners, family; now paddling through the uncharted rivers of denial; ignoring the visions of the future to focus on the events of present, but despite how hard he tried to hide it, Wally could see it in his mentor’s face. Fear.

Everything Wally had done, even something as simple as handing back his costume had altered the course of history in ways no one could yet understand. That’s how paradoxes were born. Wally was smarter than that; he should have known better; Bruce should have known better. Neither one of them had the right to play God. Being a hero means being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, and in this case Wally’s should have been to remain hidden in the future and learn to live with the past. It was a thankless job, but it was what he signed up for the day he put on the mask. Instead of being the hero that had returned against all odds to save the day, Wally was now the living embodiment of the League’s hubris and failures.

The League, the Team, everyone had seen brief glimpses of a future, tragic moments sown together into the tapestry of time. Each one of them had taken something different away from the experience, but no matter how they pieced it tighter, none would ever understand the complete story, not unless they’d lived it. If the fates were kind, which they rarely were, hopefully none of them would ever have to.

As Coach Sharp droned on about colonial America, Wally’s eyes grew heavier by the second. At least he had P.E. to look forward to next period. Getting pummeled in a game of dodge ball still had to be better than this.

The sudden crackle of the intercom jolted him and a few others awake as the principal interrupted class to make his announcement. “Coach Sharp, would you please send Wally West to the office.”

“You heard the man West. Get moving.”

Wally rose from his desk, gathering his backpack, wondering what the hell he’d done now.

“Oooh you’re gonna get it now West,” Big Earl grinned as Wally made his way towards the exit.

“Fuck off Mumford,” Wally murmured as he left the room and made his way down the empty hallway. To the left and right above the lockers hung long paper banners reminding students about the upcoming prom, the theme, as well as the last days to vote of the king and queen. God he was so ready to graduate.
Rounding the corner, through the glass he caught sight of a familiar figure standing uncomfortably at the attendance desk.

“Oh god,” Wally groaned, shaking his head in displeasure at the sight of his uncle waiting for him in the principal’s office. The last few weeks he’d caught sight of his mom and dad, even his aunt Iris on occasion, in or around campus, keeping tabs on him and making sure he was where he was supposed to be. After his previous dip in grades, as well as his brief skirmish with Big Earl, it had become a concerted West/Allen tag team effort to keep the speedster engaged and not lose out on his scholarship. Now it seemed his uncle had been drug into the mix.

Barry Allen was the fastest man alive; surely he could have just done a quick perimeter sweep to ensure Wally’s butt was firmly in his seat, saving him the long embarrassing trip down to Principal Swope’s office. But when Wally walked into the room and caught sight of his uncle’s eyes he knew something was different, something was wrong.

“Barry?”

His uncle walked over, putting his arm on his shoulder, as the office staff moved away, giving the two men privacy.

“Barry?” Wally repeated nervously, feeling a knot growing in the pit of his stomach.

“Wally…You’re dad…he’s been in an accident.”

“What?” What kind of accident?” the speedster replied urgently.

“He’s at St. Thomas Mid Town, you need to…”

His uncle’s words fell on deaf ears as all that was left of his nephew was a fading afterimage followed by contrails of lightning. Barry’s eyes frantically searched the room, thankful no one had seen Wally’s abrupt exit. With the coast still clear, the fastest man alive exploded into motion.

Tears burned at Wally’s eyes as he tore down I-70 towards midtown Central City. He didn’t need to wait around for Barry’s news; the look on his face had said it all. Wally’s angry exchange with
his father hours earlier replayed in his mind over and over as the city scape appeared over the horizon.

He passed through the main entrance like a bolt of lightning, searching the emergency room without a care for secret identities or discovery, but his father was nowhere to be found.

Rushing to the information desk, his foot tapped into a blur as he waited in line for his turn to speak to the receptionist, until he caught site of his mother in the waiting room, sobbing into her sister in law’s arms as Iris did the same. He was too late.

His world collapsed around him as he stumbled towards his mother in a daze. With one look at her bloodshot eyes Wally knew. He was the fastest teen alive, but there are just some things you can’t outrace.

History repeats itself, until the one time it doesn’t.

xxx

Robert Rudolph West was baptized within the hallowed walls of St George’s Episcopal Church in November of 1965. Decades later he and Emmaline “Mary” Brady married in that same house of God. It only made sense he would be laid to rest there as well. The circle of life.

It was a beautiful service, a rich celebration of life not death. Father Steiner was upbeat yet respectful. The choir sounded like a chorus of angels. Iris and Barry Allen took turns reading passages from the book of John. Rudy’s best friend Al Freeman gave the homily, sharing heartfelt and humorous remembrances while trying to fit it all into God’s great plan. Even Rudy’s estranged brother Daniel and his son made an appearance. It was a wonderful memorial for a man beloved by all.

Wally never heard a word of it.

The red head sat quietly in a car full of strangers, squished between his mother and his aunt as the funeral procession made its long pilgrimage towards to Rudy’s final resting place in Blue Valley. Two generations of Wests were buried there. In another reality Wally probably had been as well. If it were up to him, he still would be. At the end of that journey, a crowd of people gathered around while eight men carried his father’s casket to the gravesite.
Wally never watched.

Back at his house, friends and neighbors had brought enough food to feed an army. Elk Club members and coworkers laughed and smiled as they watched videos of their friend clowning around for the camera, just being the Rudy West they all knew and loved. Iris knelt by Mary’s side, while she smiled pleasantly and listened patiently to guest after guest as they paid their respects. In between condolences, Mary whispered something into Iris’s ear and moments later she stood and joined her husband by the punch bowl.

“Barry, will you go check on Wally. He hasn’t come out of his room since we got back.”

Barry nodded somberly, finishing his punch and making his way towards the stairs. At the top, standing outside Wally’s door he paused, knuckles just inches away from the wood paneled door.

He was still haunted by the visions of Wally’s final moments. Seeing himself reaching out to the young speedster, seconds away from dissolving into oblivion.

“Just tell them, ok?”

“Kid!!!”

What would he say? What could he say? Despite his nephew’s outward appearance, Wally was no kid anymore; he was an adult. Someone who’d made an impossible journey to unimaginable places. Seeing things no one else should see, making choices no one should have to make.

Barry couldn’t out right ask, and Wally would never tell, but in the cascade of memories he’d been witness too, it seemed his nephew had walked away from the game. He’d gone to college, made a new life for himself, had a girlfriend, had a plan for his future, and all of that was ripped away from him inside some destructive alien vortex.

What would he have done if he’d been in Wally’s place? If he’d died and had been given a second chance. Thrown into a dystopian future where countless had died and even more had suffered, and the people he respected and idolized had were the ones responsible. Barry knew it wasn’t that simple’ it rarely ever is.

Would he have walked off into the safety of the night or stepped out into the light? One would
assure his own survival, the other possibly millions of unfamiliar faces; neither one a certainty, each carrying its own risks.

The weeks since their mutual departure from Mt. Justice had changed Barry Allan’s opinion somewhat on his nephew’s actions. Wally did what he thought was right, he did what a hero would do. He’d made the ultimate sacrifice, again. He’d suffered, and lost along this journey, and now this.

Barry took a deep breath, his heart heavier than before, and brushed his knuckles against the door.

“Hey kid? You in there?”

Barry’s question was met only with silence.

“I know you just want to be alone, I don’t blame you, but your mom really wants you to come down. You haven’t eaten all day and there’s a ton of food down there. What do you say pal?”

After more silence, Barry frowned and turned the door knob, entering respectfully into his room… only to find it empty.

“Aw damnit,” Barry sighed.

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As dusk approached, Wally stood at the gravesite alone, looking down at the newly tilled dirt, running through his last moments with his father over and over again.

*I don’t even know who you are anymore.*

In truth, Wally didn’t either.

Time travel, butterfly effects, predestination paradoxes, causality loops, temporal physics; theories and concepts, incalculable probabilities, formulas on a white board, a desperate daydream. Science
had lied, yet he’d lied to himself more, thinking he ever had a chance in hell at success. What a joke.

_God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change._

_The courage to change the things I can_

_And wisdom to know the difference._

The simplest of prayers. Serenity has its time and place; courage has its time and place; and wisdom is the ability to know whether it’s a time and place for serenity or a time and place for courage. He had gotten everyone of those concepts wrong. He’d tried to play the hero, but in the end he’d become the villain.

All his life he’d lived between the seconds; landscapes and cityscapes passing by in a dazzling array of color and motion. He was a Flash and his very existence was to be in a state of motion. Until now. There was nowhere left to run. There was no escaping the truth. His father was dead, and it was all his fault.

_God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change._

Why hadn’t he listened? If Dick or Conner or Kaldur had come to him with this plan, he would have immediately talked them out of it.

“Too dangerous, too many variables, too many things that could go wrong,” he’d say.

And yet in the end, they were part of the reasoning as to why he’d said yes. If he succeeded, the girl he loved so desperately would still be alive, his friends would be alive to continue the good fight, and millions of innocent lives would be spared. His father was supposed to be in that number.

Wally had given up searching for moments he’d missed; the path he should have taken. In the end the answer was all of them. Actions have consequences. Two young twins from Louisiana had been the first to learn that horrible lesson. How many more were yet pay for what he’d done?
God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

He should never have come back.

For some reason Wally knelt down, taking a handful of that fresh dirt and rolling it in his hand. He had no idea what he was supposed to feel, what he was supposed to say. Would his dad hear him? Would he care?

Science and religion were often counter intuitive; one always trying to explain away the other, but Wally had room for both in his mind. He believed in God, but he believed in the first law of thermodynamics too.

- Energy can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only be changed from one form to another.

He took a tiny bit of comfort in that notion, more than he deserved probably. Maybe it made things feel less final; maybe it made him feel a little less guilty. For all he knew maybe serial killers felt the exact same damn way. It didn’t matter anymore.

As the sun began to set, he dusted off his hands and stood up, rehearsing his lame excuse for leaving his heart broken mother, when he heard someone clear their voice from behind.

He spun around to find Dick Grayson standing behind him, dressed in a tailored dark black suit, as always his sunglasses firmly in place. He should have known he’d come.

After a moments pause, Wally smiled weakly at his friend. “Nice suit.”

“This old thing?” Dick chuckled.

“You know you’re probably going to get in a lot of trouble for this”

“I don’t care,” Dick replied.

The young detective stood respectfully next to his friend as the both looked down at the grave
“I’m sorry for your loss; your dad was a great guy.”

Wally nodded. “He liked you a lot.”

After a few moments of respectful silence, the speedster turned to his friend. “Dick there’s so much I wish I could tell you, and even if I could I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“It’s not important right now.”

“It is to me. Everything I did was to try and make things right, and nothing went down the way it was supposed to. I was so sick of lying to you all, but I couldn’t risk it. You don’t know how bad I wanted to tell you, to ask for your help. In the end none of it even mattered, all I did was make everything worse. Like....” Wally gestured to the marker, eyes filling with tears,

“Where you came from, when you came from,” Dick clarified, “your Dad didn’t die, did he?”

Wally swallowed hard through the lump in his throat. “No.”

Wally palmed through the tears in his eyes. “I did this, it’s my fault; trying to fix something that maybe wasn’t even broken to begin with. Maybe it was just the way it had to be. I don’t even know anymore.”

“It wasn’t just you. I saw who was there, I saw what happened. Everybody did,” Dick replied, trying to ease his best friend’s burden some.

Suddenly the wind kicked up as storm clouds began to roll in from the west, thunder rumbling off in the distance. A strong gust shot through the cemetery, the funeral wreath next to Rudy’s grave neatly toppling, before in the blink of an eye, Wally caught it.

Placing the stand firmly in the ground, Wally turned to look out at the oncoming tempest. “Do you think the dead judge us?”
Dick paused at the remark, “I don’t know. I used to ask myself that same question, wondering what my parents would think of the choices I’ve made. The things that people do to each, sometimes, I wonder if they’d even recognize this world, if they’d recognize me.”

“My Dad would have been terrified,” Wally answered. “He was always a worrier. I’d given him every right to be. He never wanted this life for me.”

“Yeah, but he was really proud of you too. You know that.”

“I don’t think he’d be very proud of me now. My dad wasn’t a science guy, but even he would have seen this stupid plan for what it was; a dumpster fire just ready to happen. I can’t tell you how many times he told me to look before I leap. I didn’t listen to him when I recreated Barry’s experiment, and I probably wouldn’t have listened to him now. If I had, on either one of them, he’d still be here.”

Dick stayed silent, not because he agreed with his friend, but because he’d been on that side of the road before, knowing full well that everyone’s kind words, while well intentioned, were just that: words.

The truth would do Wally no good right now; telling him the hard days were just beginning, that eventually he’d have to look at old pictures to remember his father’s face, that every birthday and holiday would fell a little bit emptier.

Dick wondered that in a far of future, if Wally had indeed died like Zatanna believed, would he have been standing right here, in the exact same spot, watching the speedster’s father mourn for his son as Wally did now for his father. Funerals often ask the darkest questions.

The rain began to fall, but neither one made any effort to seek shelter, instead watching the newly tiled earth turn into mud.

“I have to get out of here; stay as far away from everyone as I can. I’ve done enough damage already.”

“Running isn’t the answer Wally.”
“It’s not running Dick, its stopping. I left this life behind once already. If I’d stuck to my guns, none of this would have happened, not this version of it all least.”

“You don’t know that for sure. I’m no time traveler, but I can’t see a future where you don’t suit up when people are in need. You can take the hero out of the uniform all you want, but you can’t take the uniform out of the hero, but I don’t have to tell you that. We wouldn’t be talking if you had.”

“You’re wrong Dick,” Wally sighed. “I’m the villain in this story, and I’m not going to lose anyone else pretending to be a hero. You guys need to stay as far away from as you can. I’m toxic, and the League knows it.”

Dick let it lie, knowing any argument he might counter with would be pointless. Wally was in a tailspin; he was hurt, he was angry, and humanity was famous for making some of its worse decisions in this state. He needed time.

Wally looked over at the young detective, flashing ahead decades in the future, standing at Richard Grayson’s grave, wishing for one more moment with him, and now he had it.

“I’m glad you came. Dick. I really appreciate it.”

“That’s what best pals are for. You would have done the same.”

Wally smiled. “Yeah, I would have. Is everyone...ok?”

“We’ve just texted mainly, but everyone seems fine. They’re just worried about you. They don’t know about your dad yet, if they did they’d be here. Screw the League.”

“Don’t tell them ok? It will just make it harder. I’ve got to figure out what I’m supposed to do with my life. All I know is it can’t stay here.”

“I won’t tell them, but you don’t have to do it alone. Just remember that ok?”

Wally nodded. “Do you um... wanna come back to my house, dry off and get so dinner? We have enough food to float a battleship. I know my mom would love to see you.”
“I appreciate it, but I’ve got to get back to Gotham. I bypassed the transport chips on the Zeta in the Batcave. Bruce doesn’t know I even left. The perks of living in a mansion,” Dick grinned.

“Poor you,” Wally chuckled.

Dick walked over and embraced him. “I know there’s no talking you out of things when your minds made up, but when you finally get settled and figure out where you’re heading, you better call?”

“Count on it.”

Dick began his hike down the wet hillside, trying his best to avoid getting his Fendi’s even more trashed than they already were. This wasn’t goodbye, of that he was certain, but still there was no telling when or where their paths might cross again. He hoped it wouldn’t be long, but deep down he was prepared for it. Wally was afraid of the future, but the detective hoped he wouldn’t forget his past, or his friends.

Friends. It was that last word that had troubled Dick since that day at Mt. Justice, and he had know

Robin had seen the memories inside the Hall of Justice, he’d seen a version of himself in black, fighting with the speedster over girlfriends or souvenirs, things that made no sense out of context, but still powerful enough that it remained a moment the speedster had held on to.

“Wally,” he yelled back as the storm grew stronger. “I know you probably can’t answer this, but I have to ask. In the future....were you and I... still friends.”

The question caught Wally off guard, regretting that Dick had seen the moments when they were at their worst. If this was the last time he’d see his friend for a while, he wasn’t about sour it.

“Best friends,” he yelled back as Dick nodded with a smile before putting on his motorcycle helmet. With a wave, he was gone, and as Wally watched his headlights fade into the mist, he vowed right then and there that- that would be the last lie he ever told.

Wally laced up his shoes, preparing to burst into motion. He took one last look at the grave marker.

Rudy West
Beloved Father, Husband and Friend
Wally wiped the tears from his eyes. “I love you dad.”

And with those words, he was a memory.

xxx

The speedster had lost track of time; standing just feet away from Kent and Inza’s Nelson’s tombstone as he continued picking up random pieces of rock and gravel, heaving them with all his might into the open grassy courtyard beyond. He’d been at it for hours.

At the velocity he was throwing, they should have traveled at least a few hundred yards, but instead each rock stopped in midair, slamming into a structure that could not possibly exist in that space.

Clawing deeper into the earth, finding rocks and knocking off the loose dirt, he continued his fast pitch game of ding dong ditch. Wally didn’t have a key; in truth he didn’t want one. He never wanted to step foot in the Tower of Fate again, all he wanted was the owner’s attention.

It had been two weeks since his dad had passed, two weeks of watching his mom walk around the house like a zombie, cleaning, making meals, setting three place mats at the table instead of two. All the while the one responsible for his father’s death sat across from her, his guilt eating away at his soul, his anger smoldering just under the surface.

_I must sequester myself to meditate and compile an appropriate response._

Those were Fate’s final words as he transported away from Mt. Justice. Nabu was supposed to come back with answers. He was Lord of Order for pete’s sake. What the hell was waiting for?

_Hey, dumb kid. You put that on; you may never get it off!_

Fate owed him god damnit. Wally had stepped up, risking it all battling the Lord of Chaos. If Klarion had recovered the helmet, humanity would have been doomed. Without Kent Nelson, Nabu was powerless without a host. Was this honestly how he repaid him?
Wally dusted off his hands, marching to the center of the courtyard. “Motherfucker I know you can hear me! You knew this was going to happen! I know you did! And you just let it!”

With no reaction, the speedster exploded. “I screwed up! OK? I know I did, but what the hell was I supposed to do?! Just hide out in some corner and watch your friends, Your Friends, kill each other? Is that what you would have done?!”

“Where were you? Huh? Where was the mighty Nabu? Where were you during the invasion? Where were you when the Light was operating right under the League’s noses? Where were you when millions of people died during the attacks? You’re supposed to see all, where the hell were you?”

“If you’re not willing to protect this world, why put a tower on it? Why not just spend all your damn time hiding in the astral plane. I was trying to save lives, what were you doing?! Not a god damn thing!”

He was wasting his breath; Fate didn’t care about some lowly mortal. Kent Nelson may have only been the host, but he was also the conscience. Nabu had existed for millions of years; he watched civilizations throughout history rise and fall, why should this one be any different?

Wally walked away in disgust when suddenly the courtyard began to glow. Thirty years ahead, floating right above Kent Nelson’s grave marker, the golden hieroglyphic appeared. Moments later Dr. Fate stepped out of the ankh. As awe inspiring as the entrance was, Wally was not impressed. The speedster approached the mystic, stopping mere feet away from the gleaming golden helmet.

“You should not have come.” Fate pronounced bluntly.

“How long was I supposed to wait? How long was I just supposed to sit around hoping no one else would die huh?” Wally replied bitterly.

“What is it you desire of me?”

“Well how about bringing my dad back for starters. If time, or fate, or any of that bullshit wants to punish someone, punish me. He’s innocent, he didn’t do anything wrong, It was me.”

Fate cocked his head curiously. “You think I am the reason for your loss, that I am somehow
time’s swift sword. You were the one who altered the course of history, not I.”

“What do you think yanking me out of the time stream did huh?” Wally yelled. “You don’t think you hold some responsibly for that? I’m not the only person who’s ever traveled back in time. Did you do the same shit to them you did to me? If you’d just left me alone, all of this would have gone down differently.”

“Would it?” Fate replied, leaving the question hanging in the air. “Yes, others have traveled through the rivers of time, but most did not survive the journey. Those that succeeded did so for petty gain, and in the end did not return the person that left. But you, you came back to alter events you had no right to. Your existence here is an abomination.”

“No shit!” the speedster snarled. “Do you think I wanted this? When I went to the arctic, when I knew it was over, I was ready to die. I didn’t ask for any of this?”

“Nature abhors a vacuum,” Nabu replied. “Balance is what it strives for. You tilted that balance when you left one time for another to coexist with yourself. Wallace you are a child of science and by being so you subscribe to a certain set of rules and values you intellectually believe to be infallible, but yet your kind leave so much to chance. You have seen first-hand the paradoxes that were created by your arrival. They have a ripple effect that none can predict, not even I. The lives you came back to save may now no longer exist.”

“Well that’s just great!” Wally fumed.

“If the plan Bruce Wayne had put into motion had been successful, no matter how careful you could possibly have adhered to it, there was still a high probability of you meeting a version of yourself. If your paths had crossed, even for nanosecond, the paradoxes that meeting would generate would have ramifications throughout the multiverse.”

“Our meeting in the time stream was no accident. While I was preoccupied with the Witch Boy, greater powers were at work to set our paths to cross. That is why you were prohibited from entering this world as you were.”

“By who then?” Wally demanded.

“Even a Lord of Order is subject to a higher power.”
Wally slumped down to the ground, leaning back against Kent Nelson’s tombstone.

“What am I supposed to do now?” Wally asked defeated.

“I do not have the answers you seek. Your future is unknown, even to me.”

“So that’s it. Spend the rest of my life walking on pins and needles, hoping to god I don’t set off a land mine that kills someone else. How is that fair?”

“Fairness is not a concept time and space subscribe to. Years from now this host will die, and I will once again become useless and isolated for decades at a time, if not more. It is the way of things, yet hardly fair.”

“Is that what happened to you? Is that why you weren’t there for that future?”

“Kent Nelson was a young man when we first merged. I sense Zatara will not have that same longevity. While I cannot see my future any more than yours, that is still the most likely outcome. He is a suitable host for the present, but his body will not last in the grand scheme.”

“So, we’re both screwed huh?”

“Wallace, our journey is our own. I can only be an observer, not counsel. We will always share a connection in two realities, but I cannot help you on this quest any more than you can help me on mine.”

“Just great,” Wally sighed.

“When it is time, you will know what to do. That is the way of things. I must take my leave now. I wish you good fortune Wallace West, may the fates be kind. If you are ever in need of my assistance, you will know where to find me.”

Once again the cemetery began to glow as the floating hieroglyph appeared in the air. Moments later Dr. Fate was gone.
Wally shook his head in defeat. He didn’t know what he really expected of Nabu. The Lord of Order wasn’t going to wave a magic wand and bring his father back. Wally was an optimist, but also a realist. Fate was right about one thing, this journey was his own, and if he followed his gut like he had for the last few months, he was royally fucked.

The speedster glanced down one final time at Kent Nelson’s grave marker. After a lifetime of service and sacrifice he finally was finally at peace. Nelson had set him on a path, one that had brought him so much joy and love. No one would better understand the sacrifices Wally had made than Kent. The speedster wished he was here with him now, to help guide him on a new path, but Nelson had paid his dues, he deserved his happy ever after with his beloved. Wally wished he deserved the same.

*Have faith in what you can't explain. Believe in what you can no longer deny.*

“Sorry Mr. Nelson, not this time.”

xxx

Wally sat at his desk, staring at the small golden object in the palm of his hand. Turning it slightly, the light on his desk caught the ring just perfectly, making the lightning bolt on its face seemingly glow. He remembered the exact day and time Barry gave it to him, the feeling of pride that coursed through his veins. It was one of his most treasured possessions; he was going to miss it.

From the kitchen, his mother’s voice echoed up the stairs.

“Honey, can you take the dog out?”

“Yeah, I’ll be down in a minute.”

Wally sighed, rising from his desk and opening the top drawer, placing the ring inside. He’d drop it off at Barry’s later this week, picking a time when he knew his aunt and uncle wouldn’t be home. Of course no one had asked him to relinquish it, and Barry would surely fight him on it as a matter of principal, but the bottom line was his heroing days were over. It was a decision he’d made once already; before the Light, the Reach, or the future. It was also one less thing the League could try to take from him.
The lives you came back to save may now no longer exist.

Fate’s words troubled him so. Which was worse? Millions of lives dying horrible agonizing deaths, or not being born at all? Who gave him the right to play God?

Wally knew Bruce’s intentions were good; they gave his friends a purpose, a task to keep on going in the face of a bleak pointless future. Ray, Michael, Oliver, Dinah, Silas, Tina, Terry: they all said they knew the risks and accepted them. Was nonexistence really something they’d considered?

How terrible it must have been to choose between a slow agonizing death or a quick painless one. The guilt they must have felt choosing that path, not just for themselves, not just for the League, but humanity itself. They were all heroes; they’d placed other’s lives ahead of theirs for decades; maybe they felt this was no different.

Or perhaps they thought they were all dead already, watching the clock slowly count down the last hours of their lives, each morning a painful reminder of the countess lives that had perished on their watch.

Bruce believed the world was on the path to war, rising up against its oppressors; even if those oppressors were a Justice League trying desperately to save humanity from itself. Wally would never fully understand either of their rationales, but he definitely understood the guilt behind those choices, and it was suffocating.

The bible speaks that the path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. There were no more righteous men and women than those of the Justice League. If at the end of the day all their combined strength and power only accounted for the saving of one single life, was it not still worth it?

The future he left behind had been guarded for the most part by the righteous, only their methods had differed. That Justice League was no more good or evil than Bruce or his team. They all wanted the same things, but went about it in drastically different ways.

Maybe in the end some lives had be saved; some futures intact. If there was even the slightest chance he could spare someone their suffering, wasn’t it worth the shot? If Nabu didn’t know the answer, he sure as hell wouldn’t either.
It is the way of things. Sage words or just a cop out? Probably a bit of both he figured.

Putting aside his survivor’s guilt, Wally knew he had to stop dwelling on the past, and think about his own future, even if that past was his future. Causality loops just sucked.

There was no way to know if any of the events of his previous life would unfold the same way in this future, and that uncertainty was paralyzing at time. What could another wrong step do, what if he’d already taken one and didn’t even know it?

Even though science very rarely dealt in absolutes, Wally was still faced with several of his own right now; he was seventeen again, he still had a life to live, and if he didn’t get off his ass, his dog was going to pee all over the place. At least there was one problem he could solve without screwing up the future.

Despite the arrival of spring, there was still a chill in the air, and he must have looked ridiculous walking the dog in slides and shorts while neighbors still had their winter garb at the ready.

What in the hell were they thinking? Wally pondered, referring to his parent’s adoption of the young white put bull. Maybe it was because their son would be leaving for college soon, maybe it was to help guard a now seemingly empty house, or maybe it was because Rudy West could never say no when they walked past a Petsmart. That’s why Mary avoided them at all costs, but her husband had always been an animal lover, and maybe she hoped it would fill the void of Wally’s upcoming absence. Little would either of them have guesses that it would be the other way around.

The young pup playfully attacked the leash, before catching a scent and pulling the speedster off in all directions. With his luck he was sure the dog was about to stumble across a nest of skunks. Wally knew when this thing got older, he was going to be a handful for his mom, but in the end that’s what sons were for

A block away, the dog finally found the lone fire hydrant on the street, opening the floodgates and letting lose, leaving the speedster amazed at how something so small could have such a large bladder.

Looking up he realized he was standing in front of the Park’s house. They had brought over so much food and kindness after the funeral. Rudy had really liked Dan, his mom loved Grace, and they both just adored their daughter.
Wally looked to their house, seeing Linda through the window of her room, studying of course. She was striking, just a really pretty girl. How had he missed that?

The answer was pretty obvious, but despite being head over heels for the archer, Wally still wished he’d gotten to know Linda better. She was smart, funny, driven, and was easily his equal in all the classes they shared.

Wally thought he remembered his folks telling him she’d received a full ride to Vanderbilt. He’d never been to Nashville, wasn’t a country music fan in any sense of the word, and knew the summers in the south were humid as hell, but it was a very prestigious college located in a very it city.

Good things happen to good people, and Wally wished nothing but the best for someone who had always been so nice, especially to a nerd like him. He kind of regretted not asking her to prom right now; somewhere in the great unknown his dad was probably giving him a hereafter I told you so.

He was lost in those thoughts when he looked down to see the young puppy taking a colossal shit on the Park’s lawn, and quickly reeling in horror that he’d left his only plastic bag at home.

Oh for the love of….

His head spun in all directions, searching for something to pick up the little brown trespasser, when he caught sight of Linda laughing at his distress.

She opened up her window, chuckling at her neighbors chagrin.

“Hey Wally.”

The speedster grimaced in embarrassment as he looked up at the young girl. “I am soooo sorry. I didn’t know this little guy was pumped and primed. I’ll run home get a bag asap.”

“Don’t worry about it, she smiled. “He’s cute.”

“He’s a pain the ass,” Wally smiled back.
“What’s his name?”

“Dog,” the speedster shrugged. “We really haven’t gotten around to a name yet.”

“Don’t you think you should?”

Wally smiled. “It’s on my to-do list.”

“How did you end up on the A-push exam?” she asked.

“I got a four. You?”

“Five,” she replied proudly. “I guess were both officially college freshman huh?”

“I guess so,” he smiled. “Thank your mom again for the cake. It was great”

“Uh…how about you thank me. I was the one who made it,” she teased.

“No way,” he replied impressed

“Way,” she beamed.

The both stood awkwardly for a few moments, like two kids at their very first boy/girl dance before finally Wally found the courage to speak.

“Well thanks, it was awesome.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”
“Well I guess I better go. I’ll come get this little chocolate treasure before I go to bed.”

“Gross,” she chuckled, her nose crinkling in amusement. “Good night Wally.”

“Good night,” he smiled.

Moments late the speedster was on his way back, dragging the dog home as it continued alternating between bighting at his leash and smelling every square inch of the street side.

“Jesus,” he whined. “Come on mutt, let’s go.”

Finally Wally had had enough, scooping up the pup and carrying him the rest of the way home. Once inside, he lowered the dog to the floor, giving him a treat and sending him on his way. Like clockwork, the speedster’s stomach began to grumble. So he made his way to the kitchen, searching for a pre-midnight snack.

Dishes sat unwashed in the sink and the refrigerator void of leftovers or snacks, things normally unheard of in the West household, but the days of normal were long gone.

Mary was no doubt in bed by now, waiting for her Ambien to kick in. Since Rudy’s death, she hadn’t been sleeping well, the bed now too big, too cold, too empty. His mom and dad had been married for over twenty years. Twenty years of sharing a room, a bed, a life. She hadn’t worked outside the home in a decade, now searching for a job with little to offer but skills that had long eroded since graduating college. For now, they were all right financially. Rudy had always planned well, but sooner or later they would have to make a decision about the house. Wally would be heading to California in a few months, and Mary would be left alone in a house much too big for one person.

In his previous life, which had become the easiest way to think of it, this had been one of the most exciting times of his life. Everything was going right. He was a hero, a scholar, dating a girl way out of his league, and about to take said girl and start a life together in a new land. Sure it sounded a little dramatic, and the archer constantly teased him for it, but it was a new adventure, and oh how the speedster loved adventures.

There had been nothing adventurous about his last few months, just desperate.
He found a lone hot pocket hidden in the back of the freezer, covered with enough freezer burn that the abominable snowman would have pitched it, but desperate times called for desperate methods and with no peanut butter and jelly in the pantry, this chunk of frozen chicken parm would have to do. Hyper-active metabolisms just sucked sometimes.

The microwave chimed and he took out the hot pocket and headed to the porch, the dog soon in hot pursuit. He sat down in his dad’s favorite rocking chair, blowing his snack cool, looking out into the backward. Images of his father raced through his mind; his dad pushing him on the tire swing, teaching him how to mow grass, the two becoming amateur contractors and building the back deck.

Great memories but just that…memories. There wouldn’t be any new ones to create.

The hot pocket tasted as bad as it sounded, and at his feet the dog sat whining and begging. Wally sighed, tearing off half of it and tossing it to his new best friend.

“God, you’re annoying,” he chuckled

He rocked back in his chair yawning. It was a Friday night; he should have been out with his friends, except for the fact that he really didn’t have any anymore. Sure he had a number of acquaintances at school; you couldn’t help not to when you belonged to as many academic clubs as he did, but his real friends, the ones usually waiting for him near a small Rhode Island town, they were now scattered who knows where; unwilling or unable to reach out.

Communication works both ways, but what in the world was he supposed to say?

*Sorry about the lying and that whole time traveling thing. My bad.*

Wally closed his eyes, listening to the sounds of crickets and wind chimes, slowly drifting off, only to be jolted awake by the buzzing of his phone. He looked down at the display; unknown caller flashing across the small screen. There were worse people to talk to besides telemarketers he supposed.

“Hello?”

The caller on the other end remained silent.
“Hello?” he repeated, quickly becoming annoyed. When he still received no answer he was just about to end the call when he heard a soft voice on the other end call out.

“Wally?”

“Artemis?”

“Hey.”

“Hey?” he replied hesitantly “Is everything ok?” he asked nervously, worried something might have happened, another shoe had dropped.

“Everything's fine I guess. I uh…just wanted to tell you I’m sorry about your dad. From what everyone says he seemed like a good guy.”

“Thanks, and yeah….he was.”

“I would have gone to the funeral but….you know.”

“It’s ok. Are you um…going to get in trouble for doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Reaching out. I figured Batman’s ordered all of you to stay away from me like the plague.”

“No one’s ordered anything except for your mentor. It was his idea, not ours.”

“Flash though it was a good idea.”
“Well I think you got some bad advice.” she answered shortly.

“How is everyone?” he asked.

“Confused, concerned…you know just the usual stuff you’d be when you find out someone you care about is…”

“…is not actually the person you cared about,” he interrupted.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Look its fine. I’d probably feel the same way. If it makes you feel any better, I’m not really sure who I am anymore either.”

“That doesn't make me feel better at all,” she said sharply. “Why would you say something like that?”

“I don't know,” he sighed.

The line went quiet, the silence awkward, but probably more comfortable than any small talk either would have come up with. She had so much to ask, he had so much to say, but both knew that was a conversation they couldn’t have. Finally she said screw it and asked anyway.

“How long?”

“How long what?”

“Don’t play dumb Wally.”

“Artemis….”
“Just answer the question. You know I’ve seen it, just... help me understand it.”

Wally sighed, unsure of what to say, how to begin, or if he even should. He’d seen her future; her child, her husband, her life. That future could be years away, or thanks to him now never exist, but regardless after seeing the happiness in her eyes as she held her daughter, when she kissed her husband, how could he take that chance from her?

He and the archer were just kids; high school sweethearts that carried that romance into college, but relationships like that rarely last. Sure they talked about the future, but nothing serious had ever come of it; no ring, no dates. Maybe that would have come later, maybe it wouldn’t. Tomorrow never knows.

Unfortunately for him, he’d seen it; Artemis’s happily ever. And from the moment he stepped on to that treadmill, he knew it wouldn’t be with him. She would always be the one that got away, but if she was alive, he could live with it.

But it was just a question, and it deserved an answer. He was so sick of lies. He’d told enough of them to last two lifetimes. It ended now.

“Five years.”

After a long pause she began to ask, “Where we…?

“Look Artemis, the less you know the better. Suffice it to say we didn’t make it. I’ve made my peace with it, you will too.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you have an amazing future ahead of you, I’m just not supposed to be in it.”

“Wally…”

“Artemis I’m serious. This is going to sound really shitty, but I didn’t come back for you. I didn’t come back for us. It was bigger than that. I knew what I was signing up for, and I guess there was a
small part of me that hoped I could have a tiny part of my old life back, but that’s not how it’s supposed to work, and my dad paid the price for it. Where I came from, when I came from, he didn’t die. I did that, and there’s nothing anyone can say that will make me feel otherwise.”

“Actions have consequences,” he continued. “I knew it then and I know it now. I’m a walking paradox, a time bomb; and you guys need to stay as far away from me as possible. If something happens to any of you because of what I’ve done, or what I might do…I just can’t live with that on my conscience. I won’t”

He could still read her like a book, practically feeling her her eyes rolling through the phone. Five years gave him that power.

“So what your saying is, if you see me about to get hit by a car, or Dick about to be shot in the back, you’re going to just sit back and let it happen because afraid you’re going to screw up the future?”

“It’s not that simple…”

“It’s stupid Wally. Do you even hear yourself? Why did become Kid Flash in the first place? Just to see how fast you could go? Come on. You did it because you wanted to be like your hero, you wanted to be a hero. Heroes’ save people, that’s what we do.”

“Whatever happened in your future, I’m betting you weren’t standing on the sidelines watching it all happen, you were probably right in the middle of it, because once again genius, that’s what we do.”

Those words were a gut punch; hurting more than she could ever know. With all that was at stake, with Dick, Kaldur, and her risking their lives, with the League on trial on some alien world, with the future of humanities survival literally at stake…what did he do?”

He stayed on the sidelines and pouted; angry with Dick for breaking apart his perfect little life, angry at Artemis for saying yes to his desperate plan, angry at Kaldur for taking her…for needing her. He hadn’t been part of the solution; he’d been part of the problem.

What would have happened if he’d come on board from the beginning? What if he’d demanded for a bigger role, what if he’d supported Dick more? What if he hadn’t waited till the end to finally join them? What would have happened in that future?
Once again, tomorrow would never know.

“Artemis I made so many mistakes even before any of this ever happened. And now with everything I know? How am I supposed to live like this? For every kid I keep from running out in the street, am I gonna turn around one day and find out he becomes the next Ra's al Ghul or the next Joker? I’m not supposed to be here in the first place, I have to start living like that.”

“Wally,” she sighed. “Fate, karma, bad luck; whatever the hell you want to call it, it didn’t send you back so you could just ditch your friends. If you want out of the game? Fine. We’ll throw you a party, but if you’re leaving because you’re afraid something might happen to one if us if you stay? Well did you stop to think that maybe sticking around is what actually might save one of us? I don’t want to shit all over your proposed martyrdom, but if things went to hell in your future when you left, imagine what might actually happen if you stay. Compute those numbers Einstein.”

He really had no answer to that, a statement wrought with so many variables and unknowns. He was so sick of the unknown.

After a few moments of silent contemplation, the archer became impatient, her olive branch thrown aside as she assumed it would be.

“Look I’ll let you go. I’m really sorry about your father. From everything I’ve heard it sounds like he was a great dad. I would’ve given anything just to have an average one. It beyond sucks what’s happened, but just try to remember how lucky you were to have him in the first place.”

Wally held the phone away, resting it on his forehead, knowing full well what he wanted to tell her only fortified the argument that with his knowledge of the future, he just couldn’t be trusted.

Did Artemis know he was the one who’d ended Sportsmaster’s reign of terror? In the barrage of visions Megan had broadcasted, did Artemis see him swing that sledgehammer into her father’s spine? Did she recognize it was Lawrence Crock’s writhing on the ground, or was it just another blurred memory that had rushed past her at the speed of light? In the end would it matter?

So many memories had been revealed that day, so many secrets stolen and exposed. Thanks to Megan, the League, the team; they’d seen his greatest hits package, hopefully a few of the deeper cuts had gone by unheard.
Maybe it was because he knew how lucky he was to have had his dad, or the guilt for what he’d done to hers, in the end a bit of both he supposed. Either way she deserved to know.

“Look… I um… I know I shouldn’t be telling you this, and it may not matter that much to you anyway, but um… I wouldn’t have made it back without your dad.”

On the other end of the line, the archer went deadly silent. The speedster could only imagine her reaction.

“I can’t give you details, but despite everything he did in the past, your dad was one of the good guys at the end. I just thought you should know.”

The phone remained hushed, Wally already kicking himself when a soft voice finally spoke out from the other end of the line.

“Well would you look at that?”

“What?” he asked.

“You opened up and the world didn’t end. How about that?”

“Just give it time,” he sighed. “Take care of yourself Artemis.”

And with those parting words, he hung up the phone hopefully for the last time. She would always be the one that got away, but if that meant she stayed alive, he could live with that.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: I can’t begin to apologize for how long this hiatus has taken. A killer work schedule and crippling writer’s block were the main culprits. On a happier note, the last chapter is just about finished and ready to go. I hope to have it out by next week or so. I want to be done as much as you do.

This was incredibly hard to write, and quite honestly I’m not sure how well it came off. Trying to sum up almost two years of chapters was needless to say really difficult.
I looked back for plot holes and such, I’m not sure I caught then all, but there’s no going back now.

For everyone who reviewed and left messages, I’m sorry I didn’t return them, I promise I’ve been working on this as steadily as I could, but I just didn’t want to disappoint with answers I just didn’t have. Thanks for asking though; I’m glad this story still had your interest.

This is long, almost 25,000 thousand words worth, so kind of consider it two chapters if that ok. It will make me feel better and less of tool for taking so long.

I hope you enjoy, I hope it was worth the wait and the quality was up to par. I’ll probably be going over this the next few days for grammar errors and such, but I wanted to get this out while I had the chance. Once again, the next chapter and its epilogues are about 85% written; it will be weeks not months. Fingers crossed. Thanks and enjoy.
“Ladies and Gentleman may I present the Keystone High salutatorian for the class of 2011; Mr. Wallace West.”

Polite applause washed across the auditorium as the teen approached the podium, shaking the hands of the academic dean, principal and vice principal. Mr. Swope placed the orange ribbon around his neck, the gleaming salutatorian medal hanging heavy around it. Wally smiled, paused for his picture with the faculty members present before heading back to his seat to join the rest of his class.

Salutatorian. Second place. He vaguely remembered when things like that mattered.

“And finally, Ladies and Gentleman may I present the Keystone High valedictorian for the class of 2011; Ms. Linda Park.”

Once again a spattering of applause echoed out as the young girl shyly approached the podium, nervously clearing her throat before beginning her speech.

“Good evening, everyone. The past four years here at Keystone High have been very interesting to say the least. To give you an idea of what it was like, I’m going to take this time to tell you all a bit about what my Keystone City experience was like and the people who were a part of it. I would like to start off by thanking my mom, my dad.....

Wally’s mind began to drift as Linda made her opening remarks. He was sure it was going to be a great speech, she was gifted that way, but with all due respect to her and everything she’d accomplished, all he wanted was for her to finish and this day to be over.

It wasn’t jealousy or resentment; Linda had worked hard and committed herself and he hadn’t. You don’t get extra credit for trying to save the future only to fail miserably. It just doesn’t work that way.

Yet still, the feeling of déjà vu was unsettling. He’d relived so many moments of his life up to this
point, why was this one so different? Sure it was strange being on *this side* of the podium as opposed to the last, or first, depending on which temporal theory you subscribed to.

In the end it was probably the emptiness that this day brought, a strange finality to this chapter of his life. His father had been so proud. *His son: the valedictorian.* He probably crowed to his friends and coworkers about that for weeks. Flashy costumes and snappy monikers never impressed Rudy much, but letters at the ends of names; BA, MA & PhD, those made his heart swell with pride.

Wally still remembered his valedictorian speech all too well; full of stammers, jokes that fell flat, and fighting off fits of giggles as his best friend, girlfriend, and the others made faces at him trying to make him break, but despite it all, it still had enough heart to get him a resounding standing ovation, complete with piercing whistles from Hal Jordan and embarrassing *attaboys* from his uncle Barry.

He remembered the energy and excitement that day had brought; the start of a new beginning. How in a few short weeks, he’d be saying goodbye to the hot flat farm land of small town Missouri and hello to cool summers, steep rolling hills, and eclectic culture that was San Francisco. Sure Palo Alto wasn’t technically part of the city, but it was less than thirty miles away; a literal hop, skip and jump for someone like him.

From the moment he first stepped foot on the campus of Stanford University, he knew within seconds this was where he was supposed to be. It felt like home. Soon he’d be in one of the top science programs in the country, dating the girl of his dreams, finally living on his own with his whole life ahead of him; happily oblivious to the fact that in three short years it would all be over. Like the light of a distant star flickering into nothingness.

And now he had a second chance. Why didn’t it feel that way?

Later that afternoon, Wally’s mom, the Allens and the Garricks, all gathered together at the local Chile’s to celebrate the momentous occasion. Several other families were there as well, and Wally and groups of acquaintances smiled for the camera; people who barely spoke to him during his four years at Keystone now suddenly acting like lifelong friends, pitying him like he was some kind of make a wish foundation kid since his dad died. God he hated this place.
When they finally returned to the West house, Wally was greeted with a graduation cake nearly as big as the table. Ice cream was handed out, and they all sat around the table sharing their favorite Wally moments, carefully avoiding the elephant in the room.

Afterwards Iris and Mary cleaned the table while the men retired to the living room; belly’s full and turned on the game. Wally sat in his father’s chair, sorting through a bevy of graduation cards sent from aunts, uncles, cousins and friends when he came across one that caught his eye.

The envelope was big, heavy, embolden with a large W resting on a coat of arms; the Wayne family crest. Wally held it in his hands, staring at it like it was some kind of Rosetta Stone, trying to decipher it meaning.

A kind gesture? An olive branch. Pity?

He tore it into pieces, discarding it to the side as he moved on to the next envelope. Dick would never send something so gaudy or stark. In the end there was nothing inside that envelope that would ever make things right. Wally had no interest in being someone’s charity case, and if his dad was still alive he would have agreed with him.

Get in, get out stay of history’s way

He’d failed miserably at it the first time, but it wasn’t too late to start anew. That’s what California represented. His days as a hero were over; he’d made his peace with that. Whatever disasters or calamities that may happen from this point on would be someone else’s job.

He still remembered that feeling of excitement the day they all met up at the Hall of Justice; four sidekicks frothing at the bit to step out of the shadows of their mentors and join the mighty Justice League; that same League that may now no longer exist.

Not my circus, not my monkey his dad used to say. They had their road to take, and he had his.
Wally wished them nothing but the best, he really did, but maybe they’d been on that path all along and just never realized it. No matter how many victories they achieved or how many lives they saved, maybe one day they would still end up at each other’s throats. Who knows.

All he’d done was show them where that path ended; what they did with that knowledge was their choice. Maybe the League needed their own California, their own new beginning. Maybe the world didn’t need leagues or heroes anymore. Once again, who knows? Regardless his days as one were over.

For Wally, as the saying goes, *it was time get busy living or get busy dying*, and he’d died enough already for two lifetimes.

*Not my circus, not my monkey*

“You’re damn right Dad.”

xxx

*Going out for a run, be back later.*

It had enough truth in it not to be a lie. If his mom really pressed the issue, he could always say he was just practicing the run to and from Stanford in the event she ever needed something.

A light she couldn’t reach, a chore she couldn’t do. Something his dad would have taken care of in no time flat. He couldn’t disappoint the man any more than he already had. He was leaving in four weeks, and it’s not like he had access to a car or a Zeta Tube. All Wally had was his speed, and that would have to be enough.
However he hadn’t exactly taken the most direct route, more like a slight detour. There was no harm in that. Right?

After an eighteen hundred mile run from Missouri to California, it would only make sense that once he’d reached his destination, the hard part would be miles behind him, but in the end it was the remaining 5.4 that Wally found so challenging.

It was a strenuous climb up to the top of Nevada Falls; two thousand foot elevation, slick moss covered boulders, steep granite steps, rocky switchbacks, wet marshy trails, hikers of all shapes and sizes above and below. Even if he’d been alone, super speed could only do so much on terrain like this, but he was in no hurry. This was his happy place.

Yosemite had been one of the best family trips the Wests had ever taken; back before the days of super speed, costumes and chemistry. Just a mom, a dad and one precocious red head.

Are we there yet?

If Wally had asked once, he’d asked at least fifty times, and while the thunderous waterfalls along the way were cool and their mist a much needed relief, the real show was waiting for them on the top floor.

He’d never seen anything more beautiful, a lush green and grey landscape that seemed to stretch on to forever. The Merced River rushed down the cliff side, cascading over the edge towards the Yosemite Valley below, while all around them hikers rested upon the flat stone landscape above, almost like God had paved it himself. It was the first time Rudy and Mary had ever seen their son so still; in complete and utter awe of the beauty of nature. It also didn’t hurt that the couple had literally handcuffed their son to their side.

They sat on top of the falls for hours that day, aching feet soaking in pools of cold refreshing water, eating sackfulls of peanut butter sandwiches Mary had packed for the climb, all the while
people watching as hundreds of travelers reached the top, wearing the exact same expressions they had once they saw view. Wally had never seen his dad so happy, so content.

When the speedster arrived at the top once again, the view hadn’t changed one iota. A cool breeze washed over him as he stood at the top of the world, the roar of waterfalls echoing below, the majesty of Half Dome and El Capitan standing off in the distance, and all around him on the hundreds of yards of flat rock were families just like his own, with fathers just like his.

Watching as a dad lifted his small child on his shoulders making their way towards the pools of cold mountain water, Wally’s throat began to tighten just a bit. God he missed his dad.

The speedster stretched out across the warm flat rock, taking off his boots and dipping his aching feet in the cold rushing river, the sun smiling down upon him while all around, as far as the eye could see, were miles and miles of mountains, forests, and ice blue water cascading off into the distance.

Even standing on the promenade of the Watchtower, looking down upon the spinning blue marble from 22,000 miles above couldn’t hold a candle to this

Tears burned at the corners of his eyes as he looked all around to see the families that made it to the top together; high fiving and posing for pictures and selfies.

His dad should have been there with him, but actions have consequences. There was no dying planet in a far off galaxy to blame, no robber hiding in a darkened alleyway of a Gotham theater: his father was dead and it was all his fault.

Would it have mattered if he’d done things differently; switched the order of the events he would alter? Maybe spent less time masquerading as a hero instead of a son. If only he'd idolized his dad more and Barry less. If he'd just stayed in future…

Regardless, his return had now changed the course of his father’s life as well as the countless others who loved him. Wally would never know the exact moment that’s had caused it, but the math was inescapable. Cause and effect. Simple physics.
The wind blew at the tears on his face sun baked face, and for the first time he really felt that feeling of permanency, more so now than standing over his father's grave.

But something had drawn him here, a kind of connection he couldn't put into words. Was it because his dad had loved this place so much? Or a lasting memory of one of the most special times of his life? Or maybe because he thought if he climbed high enough he could reach the heavens and hug his dad one final time.

As the cool mountain breeze whipped at his skin, his moment of peaceful reverie was abruptly interrupted by the panicked screams of a woman several yards away. Wally spun around, not sure what to expect when he saw a crowd of people running towards the river; a frantic mother and father watching helplessly as their child tumbled into the water, a victim of poor footing and slick shoes.

It only took nanoseconds to assess the situation as groups of hikers rushed to the water’s edge in a furious panic, trying to reach the child as he slid down the rushing water slide towards the cliffs edge.

The young boy was still a good distance from the drop, just helplessly sliding down the stream in slow motion, and directly towards the speedster still sitting with his feet in the stream.

Wally effortlessly snatched the traumatized boy by the arm, grabbing and swinging him from the rushing water safely to his side.

Wally’s body never once exploded into motion, not a single spark of electricity danced across his skin. On a Superman scale of 1 to 10, it was a soft three; the easiest save of his life; but to that family the number was unquantifiable.

The child’s parents frantically scaled down the rocks as Wally lifted the boy up, carrying him to his sobbing mom and dad.
“Oh my god! Peter!” his father cried, taking the boy from Wally and wrapping the shivering child in his arms, holding on to him for dear life.

“Thank you so much!” his mother sobbed, “thank you!” She wrapped her arms around the speedster, nearly falling into him, overwhelmed with grief and relief. Wally held tight as she cried before turning back to her son. His father eased his hold, passing him off to his wife as he grabbed Wally’s hand.

“I don’t know what to say. There’s just no words. We can never repay you for this,” the father’s voice cracked, still gripping Wally’s hand like it was some kind of life line.

The speedster was about to play it off, throw out his typical “no big” response, but it was a big deal; to his parents, to the boy, and to himself.

“I’m glad I could help. Right place at the right time.”

As groups of hikers gathered round, Wally knelt down next to the shaking child. “You ok little man?”

The child nodded silently, white as a ghost, still in shock from the event.

“Same thing almost happened to me when I was your age. You’re gonna be fine buddy, just watch that last step, it’s a doozie.”

The father and mother hugged the speedster one last time, as they held onto their son in a death grip, before beginning their descent down the John Muir trail, having had more than enough excitement for one day.
Numerous hikers surrounded the speedster; shaking his hand, patting him on the back and praising his good deed before following suit back down the mountain.

He returned to his perch, looking back out to the majesty of the Yosemite Valley. In truth the child was never in any danger. Time moves differently for a speedster. Wally could’ve unpacked, eaten his lunch, put his shoes back on and reached the kid before he got anywhere near the edge.

But what struck Wally as odd was never once did he consider the ramifications of his actions. He never once thought nor cared what would happen if he’d just saved the life of the next Slade Wilson or Eobard Thawne. He didn’t worry about things like fate, predestination, or karma. He saw heartbreaking fear on two parents’ faces, and paralyzing terror in an innocent child’s eyes. He saw a cry for help.

Wally saved him because he needed saving. If he hadn’t reached out, someone else might have, perhaps with tragic consequences for both. Wally saved him because that’s what heroes do; average Joes or Men of Steel, wearing a *Life is Good* T-shirt or a bright red S plastered across a chest.

With or without knowledge of the future, Wally couldn’t stand idly by; it just wasn’t in his DNA. Maybe that’s what Artemis had been trying to tell him. There was nothing wrong with moving on to the next stage of life, giving up costumes for school books, as long as he didn’t forget who he was deep down. He was a hero, and no matter how fast he was, he could never run away from that fact.

Actions have consequences, but he couldn’t become slave to them. The future he came back to save may or may not exist anymore, but hiding in the shadows watching it play out wasn’t the answer.

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.*

*The courage to change the things I can.*
Wisdom would come with age; courage had never been a problem, but acceptance.....that would always be the tricky part.

His dad always said, “Worry about making a better today; tomorrow would take care of itself.”

Sage advice for speedsters, time travelers, and sons. Actions have consequences, but so do inactions. It was time to embrace that.

As he rose to his feet, the sun shined down, and for the first time in a long time, he felt his dad would be proud of him.

——

It was a little after eight when the speedster arrived home. His mom was not going to be too happy about the hour, but running had always been his best therapy; she’d understand. She always did.

Stepping inside, he caught the screen door before it could slam, catching a sudden whiff of his mom’s pot roast in the air. Needless to say after the day he’d had, he was starving. Wally followed the scent to the microwave where three servings awaited him. He took the plate, and held it to his nose, his mouth watering.

“Mom I’m ho....”
He quickly lowered his voice when he caught sight of his mother curled up asleep in Rudy’s favorite, albeit broken down chair; dark circles under her eyes; for the first time really showing her years.

Looking around the room, the house was spotless as usual, something Wally had always taken for granted.

Soon his mother would begin her new job, and cooking and housework would be just another burden she’d have to carry alone. It was unrealistic for him to run home from California every single week, even speedsters had their limits but he’d help when he could.

His mom would always be the real victim in this temporal shit storm, and sadly no matter what reality she lived in, she still lost one of the most important men in her life. Where was the fairness in that?

“Mom,” he nudged her gently.

“Wally?” she answered a bit disoriented. “What time is it?”

“A little after eight,” he replied.

“That was some run,” she smiled groggily. “I left you some dinner in the microwave.”

“It smells great.”
“Let me put on some coffee and I’ll sit with you while you eat.”

“Mom, you’re beat. Let’s get you in bed.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t, but you need your sleep.”

“You sound like your father.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he smiled softly.

His mother rose slowly from the chair. “It still smells like him,” she said with a yawn.

“I know,” Wally said sadly, walking her to her bedroom.

Tucking her in, he kissed her cheek. “I love you mom.”

“I love you too,” she replied, pulling Rudy’s pillow close to her. She was sound asleep minutes later.
Wally lay awake that night, staring up at the glowing constellation of plastic stars he and his dad had placed over his bed years ago; Orion he believed, or maybe Canis Major. Wally always got the two confused.

The house was quiet, eerily so, and it finally struck him that he’d never hear his father’s boisterous laugh again, or his obnoxious screaming when the Chiefs would score a touchdown, or just sitting by the speedster’s bedside asking him about his day and his latest adventures.

God he missed him.

Across the room, his acceptance letter taped to his mirror shook in the breeze of the ceiling fan; like the tall sail of a ship heading out to the promise land. He got out of bed, walking over to the paper. If he’d read it once, he’d read it a thousand times.

Dear Wally,

It gives me great pleasure to invite you into the Stanford family as a member of the Class of 2014. The Admission Committee and the entire admission staff join me in sending congratulations. You have set yourself apart and we are impressed and inspired by your passion, determination, and accomplishments. We acknowledge and celebrate all you have worked for with the good news this letter brings. At Stanford you join a diverse, joyful, and collaborative campus with a shared determination....
Wally smiled proudly; he had the entire letter memorized verbatim. A few weeks from now he’d be setting up his dorm room, meeting some guy from the northeast whose personality profile had matched his when they applied for housing. That next morning he’d be first in-line at the cafeteria, eating his weight in pancakes, waiting for his first class of the day to begin; Chemical Engineering 101. The calendar couldn’t turn fast enough.

He traced the ridges of the letterhead, the thickness of the paper it was typed on. With all his scholarships, it wouldn’t cost his family a dime, he’d worked his ass off to ensure that; time travel and failing missions not withstanding.

Wally remembered how he’d felt the day the letter arrived all those years ago; the feeling of adventure that went along with it.

Adventure was not something he sought anymore; not after the waking nightmare he’d lived for the last few months. College was going to be his bridge to a new life, one he hadn’t had the chance to cross the last time around thanks to the Reach.

This time he’d finish school, find an internship somewhere, work on his masters and doctorate, and one day hopefully get a job at some cutting edge lab somewhere. That would be his future; dealing with Lights and Reaches would be someone else’s job. Hopefully though, no one would have to.

It was going to be different making this journey alone. Not bad different, just strange different. The life he shared with Artemis made the experience even more special, but despite his new outlook on life, he knew their futures were best served apart.

Colombia had been her first choice; and without a speedster to entice her to go west it would probably remain her destination.

Reconnecting with Dick Grayson was a gift, and despite the awkwardness of knowing the Boy Wonder’s possible future, it still felt like old times. Better than old times in some ways.
Dick had seen glimpses of what he might become one day, but never once seemed freaked out or prisoner to it; openly at least. When the time came, he’d make his own decisions despite the future he’d witnessed; and knowing Dick they’d be the right ones.

Holding the letter in his hands he could hear the roar of the crowds as the Cardinals took the field, he could smell the scrumptious fragrances of Chinatown, he could feel the breeze of the ocean as he and his girlfriend traveled north on the Pacific Coast Highway to the wineries of Sonoma (her idea) or south to the boardwalk amusement park of Santa Cruz (his).

Some of those experiences might still await him one day, others forever lost in the streams of time. That was the price he had to pay, but if anything he had done to change the future had actually saved lives, than it was worth every penny.

His mom had a good support system around her. She’d be fine. Barry, Iris, Jay and Joan would see to it. Maybe he could find a part time job in Palo and send some money home to help make ends meet.

“Go West young man,” Rudy smiled as he closed the trunk of the car, packed to the brim with Wally’s belongings, ready to start their long drive to California. Just a father and a son embarking on their last adventure together.

“I’m proud of you son,”

“Thanks dad.”

He took one last look at the letter. Stanford was their goal; mission accomplished. They’d made it. It was every parents dream for their children to one day surpass them, and in Rudy’s mind Wally already had. College would take his boy even farther. His son the scholar.

Wally smiled at the memory, and then tore the letter into pieces. No matter how proud his dad had
been of him that day, he’d be more proud now. His mom needed him. Family first. The life he once led was over, it was time to start a new one, and it started with this.

The University of Missouri at Central City was a good school. His aunt had gone there. She’d met Barry Allen there. The science program wasn’t anything to write home about, but it could still be a launching pad into graduate school and beyond one day. Who knows, maybe instead of being a physicist, he’d become a police scientist. It had worked out for his uncle pretty well after all.

If this was his future so be it, there were more important things in life than school. For now he’d be able to take care of his mom and that’s all that mattered, but the hero in him knew if he was going to stay around here, there were still a few loose ends that needed to be tied up.

History repeats itself, but it doesn’t have to.

xxx

The Batmobile sped quietly down the darkened stretch of I-17, practically empty at this time of night, and for the few random travelers making their way out of Gotham this evening, most would barely notice the stealthy vehicle passing by, and for the those that did, they would more than likely treat it like a UFO; they knew they’d seen something, but had no idea what it was.

The DNA samples Batman had recovered from the crime scene would no doubt match those of the arsonist that had been terrorizing the lower east side over the past few months, and the longer it took to find him the more embolden he’d become.

It was the work of an amateur, of this Wayne was certain. High profile arsonists like Firebug and Heatwave were currently incarcerated and accounted for, but that didn’t make whoever this was any less dangerous. With the backlog of tests waiting to be run at the GCPD crime labs, it could be months before they would be able to properly analyze the samples. So the Dark Knight had decided to take matters into his own hands. He doubted Jim Gordon would mind.

But despite his genuine obsession with the case, he knew it was still only a distraction from the
bigger issue at hand. In all his years under the cowl he’d never felt so helpless.

He was no expert in the field by and any stretch of the imagination, but according to those that were, time travel was theoretically possible. Physicists from Einstein to Hawking had proven it…on paper.

From there, one had to move onto theories such as Einstein-Rosen Bridges, gravitational influxes, time dilation; high concepts for brilliant men and women to hypothesize, crunch numbers and formulate theories.

In the end their conclusions were all the same, barely achievable; highly improbable.

Even a villain like Chronos; a paranoid schizophrenic with major credibility issues could never actually prove his claims of moving through time or provide any tangible evidence of his exploits; more than likely finding a way to bend light to cover his tracks as opposed to opening some sort of pocket dimension and traveling through it. History books across the globe made no mention of him by name or someone like them, making him just another brilliant but mentally unstable con-artist.

In Batman’s opinion, time travel was nothing more than a literary fantasy, something created by authors from Mark Twain to H.G. Wells to sell novels.

And then there was Wally West, and that argument quickly fell apart.

The speedster had told no tales, made no claims, and was willing to sacrifice his own future to take that secret to his grave if need be; until Ms. Martian broke into his mind and opened Pandora’s Box.

The visions that had escaped not only appeared real, but felt real; a tidal wave of disturbing revelations and powerful emotions that had rocked the League to its core. The memories Megan had stolen were the things nightmares were made of; cities destroyed, villains slaughtering the innocent as well as the heroes sworn to protect them, a ruthless Kryptonian clone unleashing levels of savagery never seen before, and in the center of it, a fractured and broken Justice League…battling each other to the death. Men and women who’d sworn to protect humanity and fight injustice, tossing those values into the wind.
Despite a desperate hope that it was all some sort of hallucination or delusion created by a troubled young man’s mind; in the end not one of them doubted its authenticity; all except one. Wayne tried to remain the lone skeptic, it lasted barely the day.

The League was now in turmoil, the Team disbanded, leaving its members - their protégés, distraught and adrift.

Kid Flash, their friend; no longer a traitor, but something much more dangerous.

Dr. Fate had given them no course of action of what to do with him, West’s uncle had taken custody of him and hid him away, and the rest of the League now looked upon each other with fear and distrust. And to only make matters worse, those responsible for it all were still out there operating in shadows, and quite frankly Batman had no clue what to do about it; a first for him.

Up a head the familiar warning signs and barricades rested off to the side of the road, blocking the off-ramp to the interstate exit the New York Department of Transportation had long since abandoned.

Batman reached down to the control console, pressing the remote that drooped the barricade flat to the ground, and right back up again as his vehicle passed over it. After that it was nothing but backroads, farmland, and forests; property owned by an eccentric billionaire who lived atop the hillside.

Nearing the final stretch, Wayne picked up speed, throttling up the vector-controlled jet engines, preparing to make the jump through the cascading waterfall when out of nowhere he saw a figure up ahead blocking his path. The Dark Knight slammed on the brakes, shutting down the turbines and fishtailing to a stop barely three yards away from the trespasser. Every alarm within the Tumbler blared as Batman quickly reached down to silence them. Soon after, the canopy opened allowing the detective to exit the vehicle. The Dark Knight slowly approached the man that stood in his path; yellow suit, crimsons gloves, and a red lightning bolt spread across his chest.

Bruce’s muscles tensed at his appearance. Their last moment alone had not gone well for the
detective. Wally West gave Wayne plenty of space, hoping his body language portrayed the appearance of a man who wanted to talk, not fight. The speedster was alone, evidently disregarding the Flash’s demands for privacy, leaving Batman curious as to why.

“We need to talk.”

“Is that a wise?” Bruce asked.

“Probably not, but it needs to be done.”

“Fine.”

“Not here,” Wally shook his head.

“Where then?”

“Where it all started.”

xxx

Recognize Batman -02

Recognize Kid Flash B-03
The cave was dim; just a few background systems awake and functioning. Wally walked over to the main computer, waiting rather impatiently, as was the norm, as Batman sat down and entered in his access codes to unlock the main frame.

The Dark Knight rose, leaving the chair vacant as Wally took his place, fingers becoming a blur as he typed furiously, opening several League databases and beginning his search. A separate holographic screen activated to the side as the speedster drug images and bios onto it.

Wayne walked over to the monitor, watching as a familiar list began to appear.

Vandal Savage, Ra's al Ghul, Lex Luthor, Queen Bee, the Brain, Klarion, Black Manta.

Underneath, a second group soon followed; known associates to each of the aforementioned.

Sportmaster, Count Vertigo, Hugo Strange, Blockbuster, Psimon, Professor Ivo, Icicle. This list was by no means complete, but for all intents and purposes named the major players.

Wally paused, hesitant for the last addition. One keystroke later Superboy appeared, joining the rouges gallery.

Of course the teen known as Conner Kent was no longer an agent of the Light, but without any true images of the real secret weapon that organization had kept hidden, this image was the best he could come up with.

Wally pushed back, giving Bruce full access to the screen.

“We’re only going to talk about this once. Understand?”

Wayne nodded as Wally stood to join him.

“They’re called the Light; formed a few years after the League first started. They’ve been working behind the scenes ever since, gaining power and influence along the way, waiting for just the right
moment to strike. They’re the ones responsible for this whole freaking mess.”

“What did they hope to achieve?”

“Who the hell knows,” Wally shrugged. “Rule the world, destroy the League, enslave humanity; just the usual bullshit. But they were patient, played the long game, and did it right under the League’s noses. You all were close several times, but they were always one move ahead.”

Wally reached forward, typing in another command. On the screen, large X’s began to appear across certain members and agents, leaving very few left unmarked.

“Incapacitated, hospitalized, imprisoned, banished, under investigation, or on the run,” Batman stated to silence.

Finally an X appeared above the image of Superboy. Wayne knew what it stood for, everyone present that day at the mountain had witnessed Wally’s memory of a crazed version of Conner Kent tearing Hal Jordan’s head from his body, as well as the clone’s own demise at the hands of the speedster. Yet despite this knowledge, as a skilled detective Batman still had to ask. “Not Conner?”

“Not Conner,” Wally replied emotionlessly.

“Should I ask?”

“No,” Wally replied stoically. “Suffice to say he’s no longer a threat, and let’s leave it at that. This was their endgame, it always had been.”

“You did this all by yourself?” Wayne asked.
“We did,” Wally replied. “The remaining players may have scattered in the wind, but they’re still a threat and you’ll need to find them. For the first time you’re ahead of the game, make the most of it.”

Wally walked over to the monitor, focusing in on the members of the Light still at large, racking his brain to remember the places the elder Wayne considered as possible sanctuaries for each when a certain image sparked his memory.

“Have you ever read the Serenity prayer?” Wally asked.

Bruce nodded.

“Accept the things I cannot change; well that’s me. I can’t go back. I’m not really sure what back is anymore. The future, the past, the present; they’re all the same now. They’re all a part of me.”

“Who knows what the future has in store. Things could move exactly the same, or take a completely different turn. Where....when I came from, my father didn’t die, at least not now. I’ve been racking my brain trying to figure out what I did that might have caused it, and I just can’t find the answer. Things have changed, for better or for worse; we’ll just have to wait and see I guess. It was arrogant to think we could get away with trying to play God, but considering where that world was heading, you all did what you felt was right; the League and you. I only lived there a couple of weeks, for you all it was a lifetime, so I really don’t have the right to judge.”

“Before I came back, you told me once the mission was over, to stay out of history’s way. I’m still going to honor that promise the best I can, but I’m not going to sit around and watch people suffer and die just because the history books say it’s so.”

“That could be dangerous, you realize that,” Wayne replied.
“Yeah,” Wally agreed, “but sometimes it’s better than the alternative. Fate said everything we did could be for nothing, I’m going to prove him wrong.”

“So where do you go from here?” Bruce asked.

“Home,” Wally answered simply. “It’s where I belong. I walked away from the game once before, hopefully this time around it will stick.”

He turned back to Bruce, a smile on his freckled face, “but don’t worry, I’ll be watching. I’m not afraid of the future anymore.”

The speedster reached down to the keyboard, clearing the search, as one by one villains disappeared from the screen. Closing the browser, Wally made his way to the transporter, entering in the code for Central City; waiting for wheels of the Zeta Tube to begin to spin.

Moments later blinding alien radiation began to form deep inside the mechanism. He paused before walking in, turning back to the detective.

“Bruce, I need you to do something for me.”

“What is it?”

Wally smiled. “Meet Clark at a diner somewhere and grab some desert. Don’t talk about cases or missions, talk about vacation plans and old girlfriends. Take Diana out on a date. Throw Ollie and Dinah an engagement party even if he hasn’t asked her yet. Come to Central City and work on a case with Barry; not as the Batman but as his friend. Invite J’onn over to watch Old Yeller with some milk and cookies. Go take a test flight with Hal.”

The speedster paused for a moment, swallowing hard. “Tell Dick you love him and you’re proud of him. Be Bruce Wayne, put the cape and cowl away for a while.”
Wayne turned away, unsure of how to respond.

“...You’re all not just coworkers, you’re friends; you’re a family. A really screwed up one for sure, with lots of weird uncles that only come over during the holidays or global emergencies, but a family all the same. If the League is done, then it’s done, but the relationships you formed don’t have to be. Open up to them Bruce, stop wearing masks all the time. Take a chance; what do you have to lose?”

“I’m no expert on how things fell apart all those years from now. I wasn’t there for the how’s and why’s, just the aftermath. Trust me; none of you ever want to go through that again.”

The speedster stepped inside the transporter, his molecules beginning to disassemble. Before he vanished, Wally offered one last word of advice.

“We make our own future Bruce. Don’t ever forget that.”

In a flash he was gone, leaving Wayne alone in the darkness with only his thoughts. The Batman was an immovable object, bulletproof, a force of nature, but Bruce Wayne was just a man, and in some ways could be as much a mask as the dark cowl he wore on the streets. The real person inside was a mixture of both, constantly at battle with the other for dominance, but underneath it all was still a lonely boy standing over his parents grave, tears in his eyes, his world forever shattered.

“And why do we fall, Bruce?”
The young boy remained silent in his father’s arms as Thomas Wayne carried his son back into the mansion from his spill down the well.

“So we can learn to pick ourselves up.”

Batman worked alone. It was easier that way. He preferred it that way. Wayne relished his role as a part timer, an outsider; someone brought in only to consult but ultimately to take the lead.

But over the years he’d discovered the League had given his life a new purpose, It wasn’t just about the protection of Gotham and its residents, it was about everyone; and who better to accomplish those lofty goals with than the most powerful heroes world the world has ever known. Individuals that could break sound barriers, create constructs with sheer force of will, move faster than a speeding bullet, and fight like no warrior he’d ever seen; all joined together for the same goal. Justice.

These men and women inspired him, and perhaps it was finally time to tell them that; to open up and be vulnerable. To take a chance.

For the League to continue, for it even to survive, there had to be changes, and they started with him. He had quite the task ahead, and for events that hadn’t even happened yet, wounds still ran deep. Each member had seen the seeds of descent flourishing in the years to come, seeds that had already been planted. It was time tear up the earth and begin again. All he needed was something to bring them together, a catalyst, a chance.

Bruce walked back to the console. Preparing to enter in his credentials and shut down the mountain when he saw the envelope resting on the side of the keyboard, one he was positive wasn’t there when they arrived. He took it in his hands, tearing gently at the corners before pulling out the note.
Bruce,

Fate said something to me that I just can’t shake. *Nature abhors a vacuum*. I thought at first he was talking about me and everything I’d screwed up, but later I realized he might actually be talking about his himself; his own mortality. Weird right? An immortal fearing death.

But it’s not his death he worries about, it’s his hosts, or more specifically what becomes of him after they pass on. Kind of self-centered of him in my opinion; he’s not exactly what you call a people person to begin with. But he is immortal after all, and without someone to bond with he becomes like an ancient museum piece; something for people to look at and admire, and then quickly move on to the next.

No one could tell me what happened to Dr. Fate in that future. He might have fought the good fight, or maybe never got the chance. Zatara’s not exactly a young man. Maybe he lived that long, maybe he didn’t. Regardless it’s a shitty privilege to be the one stuck in that helmet, standing around in a golden prison watching your life pass you by. Trust me.

If only there was someone he could be paired with that would live as long as Nabu does; someone deserving of a lifetime of imprisonment and rehabilitation. Wouldn’t that be something?

44.4280° N, 110.5885° W.

No one else should have to lose a father.

Wally

---

Bruce immediately recognized the numbers as coordinates. Quickly entering them into the computer, a location was displayed, and the rest of Wally’s note soon made sense.
North America

Northwestern United States

Wyoming

Yellowstone Park

-

An underground lair. An immortal on the run.

The base belonging to the late T.O. Morrow still remained intact; thoroughly investigated by the League after the incursion into Mt. Justice. All androids had been dismantled, all scientific equipment confiscated, all traces of Morrow erased. The perfect place to hide; right in plain sight.

Wally had pointed the way; now it was time for Bruce to take the others down the path. If anyone asked how he’d discovered it, he’d just smile and say. “I’m a detective.” It was still the truth.

No one else should have to lose a father,

If Fate wanted a new host, he’d never find a better choice. It was time to go to work, to rescue a friend, to rebuild bridges.

xxx

Vandal Savage sat behind the stark metal desk underneath the park, stroking his beard, staring at the images displayed on his tablet. One by one they’d been systematically targeted and taken out of the field of play. Some had been imprisoned, others scurrying like rats off a sinking ship.
Ra's al Ghul had gone undergoing; a difficult man to find on a good day. He was an immortal in name only, and without his Lazarus Pit just a glorified warlord and petty thief. Savage doubted their paths would cross again, but if they did, the Demon’s Head had better be ready.

Black Manta has disappeared into the ocean depths, most likely putting his time and effort back into plotting against Atlantis. A powerful ally, but one with such small vision.

Savage had ignored Luthor’s numerous communiques. They reeked of desperation. The billionaire had always been more interested in power as opposed to evolution. Now he had neither. Quite fitting, but it was Savage’s on fault for aligning himself with such weakness.

The others were of no consequence; pawns on a chessboard. Their loss would barely be noticed, and nothing they could share under interrogation could ever lead back to him. Vandal Savage was a myth, a ghost story. A man who’d lived countless lives, never leaving a trace of his existence in any of them. Today would be no different.

There would be other partners out there to find, more in line with his plan for bringing evolution to the world than the weaklings and fools he’d paired himself with. New criminal masterminds, new alien species seemed to be turn up every other year, perhaps when they did he would reach out, or maybe he would spend the next few centuries coming up with a new plan. Time had no meaning for a man like him.

He placed the tablet on the desk; rubbing his weary eyes when he heard the almost imperceptible rustle behind him. Over the millenniums, he’d honed his senses to survive, but the truth of the matter was the intruder had made no real effort to be stealthy.

“I assume you didn’t come alone.” Savage asked out to the darkness.
“What do you think?” the Dark Knight replied, emerging from the shadows.

The immortal make no attempt to rise. “Which one of my compatriots decided to cut a deal?”

Batman ignored the question.

“Very well then, we’ll play the game. I have to say I’m impressed. You’re every bit the detective al guhl said you were.”

“I’ll make sure to pass on the compliment,” Wayne replied dryly.

Wonder Woman soon entered the room, followed by the Man of Steel and finally the rest of the League.

“Well the gangs all here aren’t they. So what do we do now?” Savage smiled, raising his wrists in the air, “come along quietly?”

“I hope not,” Diana replied coldly, tauntingly.

Savage sighed “And to think I had such hopes for you all. It was truly going to be wondrous new era. Perhaps next time.”
“There won’t be a next time,” Hal Jordan declared.

Vandal rolled his eyes. “Pathetic mortal. Do you know how many Green Lanterns have come on gone since my birth? I’ve witnessed the planet freeze and thaw, seen entire species wither away and die; watched kingdoms rise and fall. I’ve seen the world at war twice, and will so again inevitably. Dear boy I have nothing but time.”

“Big talk mutton chops,” Oliver chuckled. “So why don’t you do us all a favor and shut your fat ass up.”

Savage sighed, such insolence. “Let’s move on shall we. I believe the next course of action is for someone to read me my rights and then I’ll ask for my attorney. And once this goes before you’re pathetic version of a judicial system, I’ll be vindicated. You have nothing on me and you know it. Anything you believe you have is purely circumstantial. I’ve broken no laws; I have no direct ties to anything or anyone. I don’t even exist,” he said with a smile.

“You can create your tribunals, call your alleged witnesses, and drag this on for years, decades even, but when it’s all said and done I’ll be acquitted. And if not, it’s of no consequence. Time is nothing but a number. I’ll still be here, standing over your graves long after you're dead and gone. It all has happened before, it will happen again. It’s the way of things.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” Batman countered. “Either way if all goes as expected, you won’t have to worry about seeing the inside of a courtroom.”

“Oh so now you’re judge, jury and executioner. Splendid. Perhaps humanities evolution has already begun. Survival of the fittest. I like that.”

“I think you’ve misunderstood my colleague,” Superman interjected. “There’s not going to be any kind of trial let alone execution. When were done, you’ll be walking out of here on your own like the rest of us. Exactly like the rest of us.”
Savage was clearly unimpressed with their assertions and threats. Had it not been the entirety of the League, he might have considered an escape, but as he was clearly outnumbered by a superior force, he’d bide his time and wait for another opportunity elsewhere; he hadn’t reached such lofty heights by being reckless or stupid. Yet something about the Kryptonian’s reply gave him pause.

*Exactly like the rest of us.* An odd turn of a phrase by a man rarely misspoken.

“What are you blabbering about?” the immortal demanded.

His inquiries were met with silence as moments later the League parted sides like the proverbial Red Sea, leaving an opening for an unseen compatriot to finally make his appearances. The muted florescent lighting shone of the helmet, the haunting red eyes of Nabu glowing underneath its golden dome. Fate approached the villain, cocking his head curiously; gauging him, judging him. It was the first time since the dawn of man the two immortals had ever stood face to face.

After minutes of silent observation, Fate stepped back, turning to Batman and nodding.

“He will be acceptable.”

Savage suddenly realized where this was leading, quickly rising to his feet just as the powerful grip of Superman and Wonder Woman thrust him back down, followed seconds later by glowing emerald chains that secured him to his chair.

“Congratulations Savage, you've been chosen.” Diana proclaimed.

Vandal sneered. “You all are fools. The moment you place that helmet on my head, I will be more powerful than you could possibly imagine. I will destroy each and every one of you where you stand. I will find and torture your families, I will…mmmph”
“Shut up,” Lantern rolled his eyes, creating a secondary construct in the form of a roll of duct tape, covering it over the villain’s mouth in mid rant. Jordan turned to the detective. “You sure about this Bats?”

“Fate likes the challenge.” Wayne smirked, turning back to the mystic figure, standing as still as a statue behind them “I’ve lived up to my end of the bargain, now it’s time for you to live up to yours.”

Fate remained silent; transfixed on the immortal before him. In all his eons, he’d never been prone to bargaining with humans. They were impulsive, reckless, foolish; never clearly seeing the bigger picture or the consequences of their actions; Wally West being the most recent example, but in this specific case the logic of the opportunity was inescapable. Even Kent Nelson would approve.

Without uttering a word, Fate reached up and slowly lifted the shining helmet from his shoulders. In a blinding display of light, the azure robes and golden cape faded away, replaced by a worn black tuxedo. Giovani Zatara stumbled forward, the Flash catching him before he could hit the ground.

Diana ran to his side. “Giovanni?”

Dark sunken eyes looked back at the Amazon, parched lips speaking out two raspy words.

“My daughter?”

“She’s fine. She’s missed you. Let’s get you back to the satellite and we’ll contact her immediately.”

Zatara nodded weakly when suddenly his eyes opened wide in panic. “Kid Flash! He’s no traitor. He’s….”

“We know Giovani, we know. Everything’s going to be ok.”
Oliver and Dinah came to the magician’s side, Canary wrapping her arm around his waist to steady him, escorting him out of the base to the awaiting Javelin.

“We’re going to take Zatara back to the Watchtower and get him checked out. If you need anything, just call.”

Before they left, Zatara turned back to look at Savage; not with satisfaction of his downfall or animosity, but instead with a swell of pity. The villain’s life as he knew it was now over, trapped for all eternity.

The air left the room as Superman placed the discarded helmet on the immortal’s shoulder, stepping back as the room began to glow. The League tensed, preparing themselves for the fight of their lives if all did not go as planned. Moments later, stepping out of the blinding Ankh hieroglyph, Dr. Fate emerged; bigger, stronger than moments before.

The Lord of Order turned to the League. “This vessel will serve me well. Our transaction is now complete. Never again will I be rendered useless and isolated for decades at a time. Chaos will not be allowed to reign.”

He nodded respectfully to Dark Knight and disappeared in a blinding flash of light.

As the room grew dim, Hal Jordan shot forth an annoyed frown. “You’re welcome.”

With Ollie, Dinah and Zatara on their way to the Watchtower, the five heroes left behind stood in awkward silence. None were entirely comfortable with their course of action this evening. They’d essentially traded one life for another; sending a man, without due process, to a life of eternal servitude; a life in prison without the hope of parole.

The counter to that argument was they’d incarcerated a man who’d ruled hundreds of civilizations with a brutal iron fist, murdering an untold number along the way. He’d allied himself with dictators and serial killers; he’d started wars and made attempts on world leader’s lives. He was a psychopath with no hope of redemption; until now. There was no telling what the rehabilitation of
a few millennia with the Lord of Order could do.

Only Batman knew of his latest endeavor with the Light, but while the League might have their suspicions, Wayne would take that knowledge to his grave, just as he’s sworn to Wally he would. All that mattered now was a powerful player had been taken off the board.

But the true elephant in the room was not the fate of one of their most deadly enemies, but the fate of the Justice League itself. They’d been privy to visions of a horrifying future, their future. Contrary and conflicting ideas of how to best save humanity; one by ruling, the other by rebelling. Everything they’d ever stood for cast away, replaced by abhorrent desires for retribution and revenge. Though some had not survived to take part in that final battle, they’d all at one time or another felt similar feelings of discontent and distrust along the way, but never once considered it possible to reach such brutal extremes. Possible future or not; it was now part of them, and the damage done.

“So...” Flash began.

“Yeah,” Lantern added, unsure what to add.

Bruce looked around the room, casting a glance at everyone before continuing the conversation.

“This affiliation, this League is important. It stands for something, something bigger than me, than all of us I’m not ready to give up on that yet.”

Wayne took off the cowl. “I’ve been a pessimist most of my life. I’m guilty of only looking for the worst in people at times, not the best. That approach has jaded my relationships with all of you... and I apologize. I have nothing but respect and admiration for you all, and I plan on using Wally’s memories as something positive; a reminder that that’s not who I am in those visions; that’s not who I want to be. I refuse to let that be my fate and I’ll hang up the uniform and walk before I ever consider going down that path.”
“I’ve remained a part timer for far too long. I’d like to change that now and I hope you will continue this journey with me.”

The room remained silent until Superman cleared his throat and approached the detective, extending his hand. “It would be my honor,” he replied, shaking Bruce’s hand firmly.

“Mine too,” Diana smiled.

Hal chuckled. “Hell of a speech Bats, count me in.”

All eyes turned to Barry, often considered the heart of the team. “Yeah” he smiled. “Count me in. And as for Wally…”

“He lives his life,” Wayne answered, “without any interference by us. He has a good head on his shoulders. I trust he’ll do the right thing.”

“If anyone deserves a second chance at life, it’s him,” Diana added, “and Barry, we’ll be there if he needs us…for anything.”

“I’ll let him know,” Flash nodded. “In the meantime folks, I gotta run. I have a wife waiting impatiently for me to bring home some Thai take out. Staff meeting in a week or so?”

“Sounds good,” Clark replied.


The remaining trio watched the two heroes vanish into the night. Pondering their future and embracing the hope that now traveled with it, when suddenly Batman did something totally unexpected.

“Clark, Diana, would you like to go to dinner? My treat. There’s a great little Italian place in Jackson Hole I highly recommend.”
Diana and Clark looked at each other in amused surprise before turning back to the detective.

“Is it any good?” Diana smiled.

“Well I own if that means anything.” Wayne replied.

“That’s good enough for me,” Clark added, “and Bruce…thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

Wayne meant every word.

xxx

It was late September in Central City; the leaves were beginning to turn their brilliant fall colors while the cool breeze of autumn had slowly escorted the mugginess of summer away.

Wally leaned against the trunk of the pink Dogwood, reading over his thermal-dynamics paper and searching for typos. He didn’t have class for another two hours, and after finding the paper error free, he propped his back pack up and stretched out, allowing the sun to warm his face.

This row of trees just outside of Peck Hall was quickly becoming one of his favorite locales on campus. Sure it wasn’t quite as cool as the hanging garden just outside of the Stanford Law School building, but it had its own charms.

It had been an adjustment staying in Missouri. Some of the best moments of his life had been at Stanford; good friends, great professors, San Francisco…his girlfriend, but he’d embraced this new
life and future. And though the best science schools still remained on the east and west coast respectively, the University of Chicago and Northwestern were both impressive in their own rights and under three hundred miles from home, about a thirty minute commute at his best speed. They’d be his top choices for graduate school if he stayed in physics, but tomorrow never knows.

His mom had adjusted well to her new job, and with Wally staying at home, they’d created a successful synchronicity; she cooked, he cleaned. Kind of unfair in truth, but it worked.

Next year she’d force him to move into the dorms, making sure he got a true college experience, but for now there was something nice about being home. He was now the man of the house, and anything he did to make his mom’s life easier felt better than anything he ever did as Kid Flash; except for maybe saving the world. That was cool too.

He’d even gone and gotten his driver’s license, though he doubted he’d ever use it, but in the event he met up with friends to do something fun or take a short road trip somewhere, it would be kind of hard to explain why he always showed up on foot.

He and Dick talked on a regular basis, keeping track of his adventures in Gotham; not just on the streets but in the halls of the Gotham Academy as well. The young detective still had two more years of high school to go, but he still talked to Wally about possibly getting an apartment off campus and going to school at UMCC.

Like Dick Grayson, son of billionaire Bruce Wayne, would ever go to a public school in Missouri?

Wally scoffed at the idea, but still he humored his best friend despite knowing an Ivy League school probably awaited. After his visions of Wally’s future, Dick had decided there was more to life than just being a vigilante. He could still be Robin the Boy Wonder while also being Dick Grayson - college student. Wally had done it after all…for a time at least.

On the web, Wally had seen random team-ups of his old friends, battling villains side by side, helping those in need; no longer the covert operatives they once were. It probably wouldn’t be long before they were called upon to join the Justice League. He remembered that burning desire he once held, but fate had taken him in another direction. Still…good for them.

Noticeably absent had been the archer, and Wally would be lying if he said he wasn’t a bit curious about her new locale. He’d avoided the subject with Dick, but knew full well Robin knew everyone’s whereabouts at all times. He was a detective after all.
He doubted that she’d stayed in Gotham, and who knows, maybe she’d taken the trek out west after all. She loved California, never missing the dreary cold of New York one bit.

Wally wished her well, and still cherished the life they once had. She was his everything, and you never forget first loves, but he was slowly making peace with it. The speedster would always love her, but she would have to remain the one that got away. That was how new lives were supposed to work.

“Siri, set an alarm for one hour.”

“Setting the alarm,” she responded.

Wally laid down, propping his head on his backpack and putting in his earbuds. He caught whiff of whatever they were cooking at the Smith Dining Hall, and decided as soon as he got out of class, that would be his first destination.

His eyes drifted closed, the sounds of the Foo Fighter’s *Times Like These* blaring in his ears when suddenly something jarred his feet. He opened his eyes to see a tall silhouette standing over him, long golden hair highlighted by the sun.

Wally rose, stunned at the girl’s sudden appearance. Confused and fuzzy, he began to speak when a strong callused hand reached and grabbed his, shaking it violently.

“Hi, I’m Artemis Crock, I’m a student here,” she said sharply, still shaking his hand so hard Wally feared his arm was going to come out of its socket.

“Art….” he began to speak when she cut him off

“What’s your name?”
“Artemis what are you doing?”

“What’s…your…name? You speak english right?”


“Ridiculous sounding name. Well listen up Wally. I decide my own fate, nobody else gets to. Predestination, karma, kismet; it’s all a bunch of bullshit as far as I’m concerned.”

“Look…”

“Shut-up,” she interrupted again. “Let’s be clear. You didn’t come back to save me, I didn’t come here to save you. I just happen to like the school; it has a good business program. That’s it, that’s all. Got it?”

Wally smiled. “Got it.”

“Im gonna be late for class, but I just wanted you to know all that in case we bump into each other again,” she replied, walking off towards the red brick building ahead.

“Ok,” he smiled, “and by the way, the business school is other way.”
“I know that,” she snapped, spinning on her heels and getting her bearings. “See ya around Wally West.”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “See ya around.”

Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it; and sometimes that’s not a bad thing

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Well folks, that’s it. Thanks for taking this journey with me. I hope it was a satisfying conclusion. I have a few fun epilogues to throw in; but don’t worry they’re already written. I’ll post them in a week or so. Thanks to everyone who read and all the kind people who reviewed. It really kept me going.

I’ll finish To Where I Once Belonged someday, but my days of multi chapters are at an end. It’s been a blast, but I’ve told all the stores I want to tell. I have a few one shots lying around that maybe I’ll put out someday.

Here’s hoping that Season 3 is everything we hope it will be and that it will spark the amateur writer’s in all of us to tell new stories. You all have been a pleasure to write for. Thanks again.
Clouds of thick billowing grey smoke engulfed the refractory as mercenaries from across the monastery rushed in to protect their prize.

A continuous barrage of arrows pierced through the fog, hammering soldier after soldier, but reinforcements kept arriving, leaving the lone archer severely outnumbered and outgunned.

Then lightning struck.

Contrails of electricity shot through the fog with a blinding charge, spinning the thick grey vapor in a myriad of confusing directions, all the while the commando squad trapped inside the cloud were leveled by a human freight train.

When the flashbangs ceased and the smoke cleared, Kid Flash stood alone in the corridor, an army of mercenaries unconscious at his feet.

"Clear!" the speedster yelled down the corridor

"You think?" Red Arrow snarked, sheathing his remaining arrows and walking over to join him.

Wally just rolled his eyes, but Roy's ill mood was understandable. He was scared; scared of accepting the truth, scared of coming face to face with the life he stole. He was as much a victim as the one they sought, yet the guilt, no matter how misplaced, was still just as devastating.

"Are you sure this is the place?"

Wally hesitated, adjusting his goggles to their thermal setting.

"I um…I think so. I never actually came here in person you know, but this matches the description
“That’s what you said about the last five monasteries,” Harper frowned.

“Yeah, well how many of them had an army of mercs guarding them.” Wally snapped back.

“Fair point.”

“Look Roy…”

“Don’t’ call ne that.”

“Whatever,” Wally sighed. “Like I said before, I don't know for certain when they actually brought him here, but these guys wouldn't be here unless they were guarding something important.”

Scanning the room in all directions, the speedster finally found the heavy steel door hidden behind a row of thick red draperies.

“There,” the speedster pointed.

Roy pulled out his arrow, activating the explosive charge. He looked to the speedster, receiving a nod as Wally covered his ears. Seconds later he let the arrow fly.

The steel doors shredded like papier-mâché, imploding inwards, spilling out volumes of frozen vapor into the air that immediately dropped the room temperature by at least twenty degrees. When the dust finally settled, the archer and the speedster entered the hidden lab.

In the center of the room stood a lone steel cylinder, its glass viewport covered in a thick frost. Harper approached, reaching out to the glass when his hand hesitated.

He stood frozen, unable to move. It wasn’t any kind of dormant programming being activated; it
was that on the other side of the glass was the living proof that his entire life had been a lie. That every thought and memory he’d ever owned had been programmed into him. He had no family, no friends, no purpose, other than to do the bidding of the Light and to destroy the Justice League.

Seconds from now his life would change forever, but it was still the right thing to do. It’s what heroes did. The real Roy Harper deserved his life back.

Arrow swallowed hard, reaching for the glass when a red glove reached out and took his wrist. The archer scowled jerking his hand from the speedster

“West, what the hell?”

Two sets of green eyes locked upon the other.

“You need to listen and listen good. You’re the guy I trained beside, fought beside. You’re the only you I know. That guy in there, he’s a stranger to me, and yeah he deserves his life back, but you deserve yours just as much.”

Wally put his arm on the archer’s shoulder. “You feel this is somehow your fault. I’m betting Ollie feels the same. Well newsflash; it’s not. You guys are as much victims as he is.”

“If thisl Roy is anything like you, you know he’s gonna be pissed. You’re just going to have to sit back and let him for a while. It’ll be hard waking up to a world that’s passed him by, believe me I can relate, but Ollie and Dinah will be there for him. In the meantime, you need people in your corner too. Trust Rob and Kaldur. They’re not just your friends’ man, they’re you brothers. You being a clone doesn’t change that one bit.”

“What about you?”

Wally chuckled. “Dude, I wouldn’t be standing here freezing my ass off if I didn’t care.”

The speedster reached into his bag, pulling out a burner phone and handing it to the archer. “Call it in.”
“What do I say?”

“Say whatever you want; you got a tip, you were following a lead. Hell, tell them you pried it out of Cheshire; that wouldn’t be a stretch.”

“Hey! what in the does that mean?” Harper replied.

“Whatsoever dude,” Wally said with an accusing smile, “but no matter what, you have to keep my name out of it. I was never here. That’s the way it’s gotta be.”

Roy nodded. He knew Wally was taking a big risk, but that’s what friends do for each other. The speedster was right; it would take a while to believe it, to believe he actually deserved it, but tonight would be a good start.

Wally slid his goggles off his head and onto his eyes. “All right, you got this. I’m in the wind. Remember I was...”

“Never here, yeah I got it, and Wally....”

The speedster nodded. “That’s what friends are for dude. Get used to it.”

And with those words, Kid Flash was a ghost.

Red Arrow reached back to the glass, scarping off the ice until he could see the face inside.

*Hey Roy*

Chapter End Notes
Authors Note: Screw it. I have a couple of these done already, there’s no reason to drag this on. Just a few short little one shots to tie everything up and fill in gaps. Enjoy.
“Look…I um…I know I shouldn’t be telling you this, and it may not matter that much to you anyway, but um…I wouldn’t have made it back without your dad. I can’t give you details, but despite everything he did in the past, your dad was one of the good guys at the end. I just thought you should know.”

Wally’s words, from the night she’d come to his house still haunted her. Why would he say something like that? There had to be some mistake, there was no way on God’s green earth he was talking about Lawrence Crock.

“Good guys,” she scoffed, scaling the walls of Gotham General, cursing herself every step of the climb.

Despite his condition, Sportsmaster was still under 24 hour guard by the GCPD, and would remain that way until they officially transferred him to the med unit at Blackgate Penitentiary. He’d had his preliminary hearing weeks ago, set up via Skype from his hospital room. Of course he’d plead not guilty to ever single charge; they always do.

In the end the outcome wouldn’t matter that much. He was never going to walk again, or hold a javelin or a flail. And even if by some miracle he was granted a compassionate release buy some gullible parole board; his future would still remain the same. His body was his prison now, one he’d never escape from. All his release would accomplish was giving him a slightly better view.

*You reap what you sow there dad. Couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.*

He was her father in name only, absentee a majority of the time; still fondly remembered as some
of the best times of her young life, when it was just the three Crock women together on their own. Because when he came home, all hell broke loose. Then it officially became all about the job, and nothing else.

While the other kids at school would jabber on about their weekend sleepovers and movie nights, Artemis would remain silent, unable and unwilling to share how her weekend consisted of playing lookout for her mom and dad while the pulled off their latest heists; bank jobs, high tech labs, gold depositories, and of course the hits, how she could forget the hits.

Sportsmaster and Huntress where assassins by trade, and by the seasoned age of seven Artemis had seen more blood than most homicide cops do in a lifetime.

“She got sloppy, she paid the price,” is all Lawrence would tell his daughters after their mother’s accident, not exactly words of comfort for two young girls still traumatized after watching their mother hauled off to prison in a wheelchair.

Ironic’s a bitch.

It only got worse from there. Night after night of constant abuse, or training as her father so lovingly called it; often pitting the two sisters against each other all to meet daddy’s approval. Artemis had been a fast learner, but never quite fast enough.

Jade was smart, she’d gotten out just in time, but all her emancipation had done for Artemis was make her the solitary target of her father’s wraith and fury. If she’d seen the back of his hand once, she’d seen it a hundred times; and those were the good days. So she began her life of crime. She was good, she had potential; never enough for his liking, but still better than being beaten and locked away in a dark room when she failed one of his little tests. That all changed the day her mother retuned home and her father left again, but by then the damage had been done.

Teenage rebellion takes many forms; for some it’s slamming doors, rolling eyes, refusing to wear clothes bought for them, for other its smoking, drinking, drugs and sex, but for Artemis it became a quest to try new things, to explore a new identity, to become the good black sheep of the family.
When her mom would fall asleep at night, the archer would be out running the streets, protecting those that couldn’t protect themselves, being everything her father wasn’t. She could say it was just for the thrill or the rush, but it felt good, it felt like redemption.

She was careful, hiding the bruises, staying out of sight and off everyone’s radar, except for the Dark Knight and the Emerald Archer of course. They day they showed up at her door was perhaps one of the best days of her life. The rest was history. She no longer had to be the assassin’s daughter; she could be so much more. The ghost of Sportsmaster had finally been exorcised.

Yet in some sick twisted way, Lawrence Crock was responsible for the women she was today. Every perp she chased down, every thief she pinned to a wall, every monster she fought, human or otherwise; the all wore hockey masks, they all had blonde hair. They all had his face.

So why in the hell was she even here? To celebrate? To mock? To leave no doubt in his mind that she had won?

*Your dad was one of the good guys at the end*

“God Damnit Wally, what the hell did that even mean?” she cursed.

That at some point, in some distant future he stopped being such an arrogant prick? That he found God, Jesus or whoever the hell people find when faced with their own mortality?

*Time travel - What a fucking absurd concept*
It didn’t take a detective to figure out that more than likely Wally was the one responsible for her father’s condition. And if he actually was, she was more than sure he had good reason. People don’t travel back in time just to settle old scores. Not people like Wally.

*Your dad was one of the good guys at the end.*

What a crock of shit.

Never once in any of Wally’s disjointed thoughts had she seen images of her father, but everyone at the cave that day had seen so many different moments and memories; some very personal, and maybe because of that, none of them felt entirely comfortable comparing notes.

Maybe the speedster said it out of guilt, a well-intentioned lie to ease his conscience for what he’d done. Maybe it was because he didn’t want the archer to hate him if one day she ever found out the truth...or maybe in a world gone mad, Lawrence Crock had actually had an epiphany.

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On the 18th floor of Gotham General, Artemis paused outside his window. It still wasn’t too late to back out. She’d never find what she was looking for, in reality it hadn’t happened yet and perhaps never would. This was going to end up as an exercise in futility.

“God I’m such an idiot,” she groined, sliding the razor thin arrow tip under the window frame and unlocking it.
The solitary guard outside in the hallway was probably asleep in his chair at this hour. What did he have to worry about? Crock wasn’t going anywhere.

With cat like grace she slid inside, leaving the window behind her slightly cracked in case she needed to make a swift escape. It was quiet, dark in most places with small patches of light cascading from the patient monitor, casting the room in an eerie glow.

Artemis silently made her way to the screen, looking at the readings on the glowing display; heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen levels, opioid drips: numbers that didn’t mean anything to her, except for the rise and fall of the wavy line of the EKG. All she knew was he was still alive at least.

Damn

Through the darkness she could see silhouette of his body laying supine towards the ceiling. His breathing was weak, haggard; most likely due to the tracheostomy tube or something. If there was one silver lining to her mother’s injury, it was that Paula had only lost her legs, not everything from the neck down like the patient before her.

Lawrence Crock was a proud man, an arrogant and dangerous one for sure, but seeing him like this, helpless, powerless; for just a second the she actually felt a small swell of pity form inside her. It didn’t last.

“Come here to gloat or finish the job baby girl?” he wheezed, startling the archer.

“Good to see you too Dad,” she replied, trying to hide her nervousness.
“I don’t suppose you ever found the motherfucker that did this to me?” he chuckled dryly.

“Never really went looking,” the archer answered.

“Probably someone Jade sent,” he replied in disgust. “I’m disappointed little girl didn’t have the balls to do it herself.”

“Dad, if Jade wanted you dead, she would have done it herself. Trust me.”

“Why are you even here?” Lawrence asked hoarsely, eyes staring at the same spot on the ceiling tiles he’d been looking at for weeks.

“To be honest I have no idea,” Artemis responded, walking around the bed, following the tubes and wires attached to him, like some kind of science experiment.

“If you’re expecting me to sit there and tell you how sorry I am for being such a shitty father, you came in the wrong window baby girl.”

“Don’t worry dad, I wasn’t expecting one,” she hissed.

Artemis began to feel her blood boil, realizing this had been a mistake. What had she been expecting? This wasn’t remotely the man Wally had described; he was the same narcissistic piece of shit he’d always been. He deserved everything that had happened to him plus more. He was no
father; he was just some sperm donor that should have left her mom high and dry the first time Paula talked about having kids

*Goodnight, good luck, go fuck yourself;* not the most eloquent parting words, but they had a cadence she really liked, she’d been practicing them since she left her mom’s apartment earlier that evening.

“You know I’m having that surgery in a couple weeks, some kind of experimental stem cell bullshit. If it works, the doc says I might regain some feeling in my hands. I doubt it though; fucking eggheads never get this shit right. Who knows, maybe I’ll buy it on the table, solve all our problems.”

“God spare me the drama dad,” she sighed. “You’re not my problem; you’re not mom or Jade’s problem. *You* are your problem; you and your damn ego.”

“Aw this ought to be good,” he sneered, “keep going Dr. Freud. Tell me how all my problems come from my momma not breastfeeding me long enough.”

“You wish,” she chuckled, “your problems were that nothing was ever *enough* for you. I can understand… hell I can respect wanting that next big score, god knows you drug Jade and I on enough of them, but instead of actually enjoying the money you *earned*, it became all about your fucking reputation. How many times did you sell all of us on that bullshit sailboat you were gonna buy, and how we’d all sail around and see world. I still have my lifejacket hanging in my closet.”

“And when mom got hurt, you had to show the world what a badass you were. That you could leave Huntress rotting away in prison and never miss a step. That now you had the next generation of Crock assassins ready to join the family business. You wanted a seat at the big boy table. You wanted to be with the Lex Luthors and the Maxwell Lords of the world. Well you know where there are now don’t you? Probably trying real hard not to drop the soap.”
“When did you go so damn soft?” he scoffed.

“I don’t know dad, when did you get so sloppy? Getting your ass kicked outside a bar probably wasn’t very good for your rep.”

“Touché pussycat,” he chuckled.

God the man was impossible.

“So why are you really here?” he asked, once again peeling the layers and years away, stripping her back down to the vulnerable scared little girl who cried for weeks when the police drug her mommy away.

“I came here because you’re an asshole,” she snapped, barley keeping her voice to a whisper. “You’re an embarrassment to your craft, and this giant shit sandwich you’re forced to eat is all your damn fault….”

It took all she could do not to reach down and rip out his IV line and choke him to death with it. It’s not like he didn’t deserve it, she’d actually be doing him a favor. She’d make it quick.

Artemis stepped back from the brink, taking a deep cleansing breath and calming herself, dreading what came next. It was time to do what she came here for. Neither of them was going to like it.

*Your dad was one of the good guys at the end.*
Fucking Wally

“I came here because….you’re my dad, and no matter how shitty a father you were….you could have been much worse. And I probably wouldn’t be alive and standing here if it wasn’t for you.”

The room stayed silent for what seemed like hours, only the chime of the monitor and Crock’s horse breathing filling that gap when finally he spoke.

“Is that it?”

“Yep, that’s it.”

After an even longer pause, he replied “Ok then.”

And with those simple words, Artemis knew he understood. She could hate the man; hate him with every fiber of her being… and still care about him. Families were fucked up that way.

“Well don’t get all mushy on me dad, it’s embarrassing,” she chided amicably.

Crock smiled. “Well since were having such a touching father daughter moment, I don’t suppose you want to help your old man get of here would you? You know, for old time’s sake.”
“Not a chance,” she smiled, pulling up a chair and pulling out a book.

“What is that?” he asked.

“The Art of War. It’s one of your favorites right? Shift change’s probably not for another hour or so. I could read some it if you want.”

“Knock yourself out baby girl.”

She dropped her bag quietly to the floor, pulling out the small pin light and attaching it to the book, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

“And not that bullshit chump change English version, read it in Chinese.”

Artemis rolled her eyes. *Give him a foot, he takes a mile.* Just like the old days.

“I’m a little rusty, but here goes. *Dì yī zhāng*…

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes: Like I said before, I have a few of these little epilogues ideas lying around; tying up a few loose ends here and there. I’m going to sprinkle them in here and there when I can. If you like them, maybe I’ll write more. I guess I’m just not
ready to let this story go yet.

Thanks to everyone who reviewed. I plan on thanking each you individually asap. Two answer two quick questions for folks I can’t reply to, on the previous epilogue, Roy and Jade are just in the beginning stages dating, hooking up- whatever you want to call it. I’m not sure they know either) so there’s is no Lian yet. And Mark in Orlando, I’m really sorry but The Long Road to Redemption got trashed and rewritten as To Where I Once Belonged (which I will finish I swear.) It was the first thing I ever wrote and it was pretty raw. After I had a few stories under my belt, I knew I could do better. Sorry man.

Last note for WW fans out there. At the end of this month DC is releasing a miniseries called the Flash War. Barry vs. Wally. If any of you still read comics, check it out.
Lauren and Leeann Myers sat alone in the corner of Our Lady of the Lakes cafeteria, eating the sack lunch their mother had prepared. While the smell of savory pizza wafted through the air, the two girls dined quietly on their peanut butter and banana sandwiches. Even though tuition to the prestigious school had been bought and paid for, a meal ticket was still far too expensive for their family to afford.

The room was filled with the boisterous exchanges and laughter of children, but neither included the twins; the *special children* as the faculty and staff referred to them as. It was meant to be kind, but just further alienated the two young girls in a place neither wanted to be. This wasn’t their school, these weren’t their teachers, and the students there were most definitely not their friends.

The pipeline disaster a few months back had left the bayou and its surrounding areas devastated; including the girl’s home and school. Family and neighbors were displaced, and friends shuttled around the adjoining counties in search of a school system that could fit them in to their already overcrowded classrooms. All the while FEMA and government bureaucrats argued endlessly about funding and rebuild costs.

Through an outpouring of charity, money had been raised to cover a portion of the girls medical expenses, while a private school one county over had graciously offered the girls free tuition; something neither had wished for.

The Myers girls just wanted to be back with their friends and neighbors; people who had known them before the accident, known them the way they used to be.

They’d been welcomed to the school with open arms, but once the notoriety and spotlight wore off, they soon found themselves outcasts; the burn victims, the matchstick girls, the freaks.
Kids could be so cruel.

They two girls had lost count of how many reconstruction surgeries and skin grafts they’d had over the last few months; with even more ahead thanks to a generous philanthropist from Gotham City. The procedures were excruciating, and in the end never seemed do make much of a difference to their appearance; leaving the girls looking at themselves in the mirror with tears in their eyes asking their mother *why us?* Despite their parents and doctors encouraging words, they’d never be who they once were. They’d never be normal.

Leeann reached into the bag, opening the juice box for her sister, whose tender hands were still wrapped in fresh rolls of gauze, when a sudden hush fell across the cafeteria. Both girls ignored the reaction, assuming it to be just another entitled pretty-pretty princess showing off their latest iPhone or Samsung, when someone standing behind them cleared his voice.

“Do you mind if I sit?” the tall figure in yellow and red asked, taking their stunned silence as a yes.

“You don’t remember me do you?” the speedster smiled, placing his tray down between them.

The twins stared in wide eyed silence, not even sure what the question had been.

“So which one of you is Leeann?”

The twin on the left raised her hand nervously.

Wally turned to the other. “So that would make you Lauren. Well it’s good to see you guys again. I’m um...Kid Flash, we met a while back.”

Both girls nodded star struck. Since coming out of the hospital, they’d met their favorite weatherman, local celebrities, and had even spent a few minutes with the governor; but never a real bonafide superhero.
“I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to get down here and check up on you guys. I’ve just been kind of busy, but that’s no excuse. So um…how are you all doing?”

“Uh…ok I guess,” Leeann answered awkwardly.

Wally looked around, seeing a sea of young faces staring in their direction, troubled as to why the twins were sitting alone.

“New school huh?” Wally asked.

“Yeah,” Lauren said sourly.

“Everyone treats you different? Stares at you all the time? Talks about you behind your back?”

The girls nodded.

“Boy,” Wally chuckled, “Been there done that. Back when I was in grade school, I was shoved in a locker about once a week.”

“You? Why?” the girls asked. “You’re a superhero.”

“I wasn’t always,” Wally smiled. “Back before I got my speed, there was this bully who really had it out for me. Even to this day I have no idea why. I was just this skinny red headed kid and he was like some gigantic WWE wrestler. I never had a chance. I wasn’t popular or a jock; I just liked to learn and I liked making good grades, and for some reason kids made fun of me because I was
smart. I know it’s nothing compared to what you guys put up with, but I do know how it feels to have your feelings hurt.”

“It’s no big deal,” Leeann sighed. “They’re just kind of jerks sometimes.”

“Well I think it’s a big deal,” Wally replied sadly. “You’ve been through things no one will ever understand. You guys have had to grow up a lot faster than you were supposed to, and you shouldn’t have to put up with kids treating you differently. But you guys are different, you know that right?”

The girls looked aghast at the speedster, wondering how he could be so nice one minute and yet say something so mean the next.”

“What do you mean?”

“You guys are superheroes,” he answered plainly.

“Superheroes?” Leeann said bewildered.

“We’re not superheroes?” Lauren added with a curious look, “We don’t have any powers.”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret.” Wally whispered. “Most of the good ones don’t. Batman doesn’t have any powers.”

“Really?” the girls asked in unison.

“Scouts honor,” Wally smiled. “But he has something even better. He’s smart, he works hard, and he’s really really brave. Just like you two. You guys are my heroes, and you’re about the two bravest people I’ve ever known, and trust me, I know some good ones.”

Suddenly, a voice spoke out from behind, rudely interrupting their private conversation. From the looks on the twin’s faces, Wally knew this was someone they weren’t very fond of. When the
speedster turned, he came face to face with Tim Trushel, resident popular kid and smartass.

“You’re not the real Kid Flash,” they boy smirked, lunch tray in one hand, slice of pizza in the other “You don’t even look like him. He’s taller. You’re just some high school guy in a Halloween costume they sent over to cheer up the charity cases.”

Wally turned back to the girls, mouthing the words “halloween costume?” in sarcastic horror. This was going to be fun.

“What’s your name kid?” the speedster asked.

“It’s Tim,” he replied with attitude. Wally loved attitude.

“Listen Jim, I don’t know why you decided to come over and interrupt me and my friends…”

“It’s Tim…”

“Whatever,” Wally replied, purposefully getting his name wrong. “Look I didn’t run all the way down here from Central City to do magic tricks for a putz like you, but this one time I’m willing to make an exception. …”

In the blink of an eye, the slice of pizza disappeared from Trushel’s hand, followed by his chips, chocolate milk, slice of cake, and eventually the tray they laid on; all except for a glob of mashed potatoes that floated in midair less than a second before dropping to the ground all over the kid’s new Jordans.
Trushel looked down in horror when just as suddenly a mop appeared in his right hand, along with a bucket and blue apron borrowed from the kitchen staff.

“You wanna guess where their gong next time?” the speedster said with a sly grin. “Better get moving kid, the floor isn’t going to mop itself.”

Raucous laughter broke out across the cafeteria with kids snorting and pointing at the young smartass’s misfortune.

Wally stood up, looking around the cafeteria sternly as the laugher died down.

“I got a question,” he yelled out to the crowd. “You’re all not the kind of folks that would make fun of someone just because they were different right? You know… call them names behind their back, judge them by the way the look instead of the way there are inside? I’m just curious, because that would be kinda bad…”

And with steel eyed look he stared to the masses. “…and I’m the kind of guy that fights bad guys.”

A sudden hush washed over the room, so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m having lunch with my friends.”

Wally sat back down between the girls. “You know…” he said with his mouth full, “pizzas not too bad here, not great, but not bad. I’ll tell you though, there’s this awesome place in Gotham City were the slices are as big as your head. I mean they’re huge. Maybe next time I come back I’ll bring a couple with me, you know… if you think it would be ok if I visit you guys every now and then?”

The twins broad smiles were his answer, and it was days like this that reminded Wally why he wanted to be a hero in the first place.

After that day, the girls never sat alone, except when Kid Flash came to visit.
Chapter End Notes

More to come...
Three years later

The young teen lay sprawled out on the warehouse floor, blood pouring freely from his battered and broken body. At least three ribs had been fractured; one piercing his right lung, the other quickly filling with blood. His mask had been torn from his face, one eye swollen shut, but the need for secrecy had passed, his identity discovered long ago.

His assailant stood across the room, carefully taping packages of C4 across pillars, walls, and gas lines that ran throughout the complex; all the while a terrifying smile stretched across his lips. He’d waited years for this moment, and even if it wasn’t the protégé he’d hoped for, the message would remain the same.

The Clown Prince carefully placed the detonator flat on the rickety wooden floor, leaving plenty of space between the plunger and his attaché case of horror, before walking back to his battered victim in a pouty huff. Honestly he was a bit vexed the youth hadn’t begged for his life by now, but despite having tracked the teen for weeks, he obviously didn’t know Jason Todd very well.

The Joker’s heart filled with uncontrollable elation at the thought of the pain and anguish he was about to bestow, not to the young Robin, but to his master.

“This is going to hurt you a lot more than it’s going to hurt me,” the Joker howled, his thin ruby lips becoming a hideous smile.

Dramatically, the clown bent and stretched, knuckles and spine cracking, straightening his coat and tie before beginning his coup de grâce to the Dark Knight. He knew he needed to be careful; there had to be enough of the teen left to identify when his body was drug from the rubble; otherwise it was just another pointless death in a city famous for them. Where was the fun in that?

“Fuck you,” Todd hissed in his delirium, gobs of congealed blood escaping with every struggling syllable. Even moments away from death, the teen would never give the clown the satisfaction of begging.
An inhuman cackle began to bubble up from deep within, a grotesque smile stretching across his face as he swung the crowbar back, preparing to beat the last breath from the Boy Wonder, when suddenly the iron implement slipped from his grip.

“Your lucky day kid,” the Joker laughed manically, turning to look for the makeshift weapon that had slipped from his fingers. Searching around the room, it suddenly struck him he’d not heard it land.

The last thing the clown prince of crime saw before the iron bar smashed into his face was spiky red hair and a brilliant flash of lightning.

Wally West stood over the fallen villain, gently swinging the iron shaft into his hand. He knelt down next to the clown writhing on the floor, leaning over him as the Joker chuckled.

“You were right about one thing,” the speedster whispered into his pale colored ear. “This is going to hurt.”

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“Mr. Wayne! Mr. Wayne!!”

The sea of paparazzi rushed the billionaire as he hurriedly entered Gotham Memorial, his security team quickly catching up and holding the swarm of reporters at bay.

“Is it true your son has been missing for over a week?”

“Mr. Wayne! Was there any kind of ransom note?”

“Sir, were the police involved with his rescue?”
“Mr. Wayne, is there any truth that the Joker was responsible for his abduction?”

Wayne ignored all inquiries, rushing to the front desk when suddenly Dr. Leslie Thompkins emerged from the examination room, meeting the billionaire halfway and swiftly escorting him away from the intrusive reporters.

“Leslie…”

“He was conscious when he arrived, but not very lucid. He has a grade three concussion, a fractured knee and tibia, several broken ribs, a collapsed lung, and number of deep lacerations.”

“My God,” Wayne replied with a cautious sigh. “Can I…see him?”

Thompkins nodded no. “He’s still in surgery. They have him on a ventilator while the doctors’ work on his lungs. The orthopedist will come in next and set the knee. It will be a few more hours before he’s out, and I want to be clear; he’s not out of the woods yet, but the MRI shows no major brain or nerve damage. The fact he was awake when he arrived is a good sign. It’s still early, but the doctors believe his prognosis is good. It’s just going to take time.”

Bruce nodded, swallowing hard through the lump in his throat. A moment like this had always been his greatest fear. All things considered Dick and Barbara had been very lucky; too lucky. Perhaps it was finally time for the Batman to consider working alone again. It was one thing to put his own life at risk; something completely different when it involved someone else’s; someone he cared about.

Wayne wrapped his arms around his old friend and squeezed tight. “Thank you Leslie.”

“You can thank the ER staff, I’m just here as a concerned observer. Can I get you anything?”

“No thank you. I’m going to go back out to the waiting room. I shouldn’t be given privileges other patients or their families don’t receive. Just please let me know when I can go back.”
“Bruce don’t you worry, I’ll bring you back here as soon as I can, even if I have dress you in scrubs and sneak you in myself. God knows it’s not the first costume you’ve ever worn,” she said with a wry smile.

Wayne nodded, turning back towards the waiting room before stopping and calling back to his longtime friend.

“Leslie, how did he get here?”

“Just some good samaritan off the street,” she shrugged. “Said he found him near the warehouse district, and didn’t think he should wait for an ambulance. He brought him in himself, probably saved his life.”

“Is he still here?”

“No. The nurse up at registration said he waited around long enough for the doctors to wheel Jason back, and took off right after.”

Wayne’s brow furrowed. “Did they get name?”

Leslie pulled out Jason’s chart, scanning through the admission notes from the nurse on call. “It doesn’t appear so. It was pretty hectic around here this afternoon.”

“Did they at least get a description?”

Thompkins flipped back to the first page of intake notes. “It says here – white male, early twenties, around six feet tall, red hair...” she smirked at the nurse’s next note, “lots of freckles. That’s kind of an odd thing to put in there,” the doctor chuckled. “Whoever he was, he’s a real guardian angel.”

Wayne sighed, nodding with a knowing smile. “He certainly is.”

“I need to get back. I’ll let you know something as soon as I can.”
Moments later Dick Grayson burst through the door, a similar intrusive line of questions chasing behind him from the frenzied paparazzi.

“Fucking animals,” Dick cursed, rushing to Bruce’s side. “How is he?”

Wayne put a firm supportive hand on his partner’s shoulder. “They think he’s going to be fine.”

“It was the Joker, wasn’t it?” Dick growled.

Wayne nodded grimly.

“That son of a bitch!” Dick cursed, lowering his voice as the staff around him looked up. “I’m going out there. He’s mine Bruce, I swear to God…”

“Dick, calm down….”

Seeing the young detective’s arrival through the glass, Dr. Thompkins walked back out to the duo, giving Grayson a much needed hug, as well as sharing an odd bit of news.

“I just want to let you two know things are about to get a little… _busy_. I just got word we’re about to receive a flood of patients from Gotham General. Evidently the GCPD has put the entire hospital on lockdown. They’re shipping everyone out to St Thomas, Mt. Sinai, and us except the most critical cases.”

“What’s happened? A bomb threat?”

“Not exactly, she replied curiously, “but a colleague of mine is saying someone brought the Joker in about an hour ago. From what she overheard, he’s in critical but stable condition. Supposedly someone beat the holy hell out of him? I assume it wasn’t one of you two huh?”

A smirk formed on Wayne’s face, looking over at his curious partner.
“No, but I have a pretty good idea who.”

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“Recognize Kid Flash B-03”

Wally West stepped out of the faux phone booth, waiting as the blinding glow of the Zeta Tube faded behind him. It had been quite a day.

In the distance he heard the low deep foghorn of a barge making its way down the swath of the Mississippi River that split the sister cities. Peering down the docks to make sure he was alone, he turned back to the broken down booth, forcing its door closed the best he could, grateful that even after all these years Barry Allen had somehow managed to keep his transport privileges active. He’d done enough long distance running to last a lifetime.

Wally’s head ached, his jaw throbbed. He should have known the Joker wouldn’t go down without a fight, and the element of surprise could only last so long.

_Hell of a way to start his twentieth birthday._

Looking down at his watch, it was shortly after midnight. He had a chemical engineering paper due by 9:00 a.m. and of course he’d barely started it. It was going to be another one of those nights, but he’d suffered worse.

Both Dick and Bruce would no doubt have their suspicions about Jason’s daring rescue, but by now they knew better than to ask. Some things were better left unsaid.
As he made his way towards the riverfront, a chill ran down his spine; not from the frigid breeze blowing off the water, but the memory of every solid blow he’d landed being met with a blood spewing chuckle or cackle. It hadn’t been easy; he’d caught a crowbar or two across the chin himself, and of course that fucking joy buzzer.

But in the end, the Joker just wasn’t prepared to fight someone with speed, and even when the clown was clearly down, the speedster didn’t let up until he was sure. Wally clearly remembered reading over the autopsy report all those years ago. He knew exactly what the clown had put Todd through, and there was no way he was giving the Joker a second chance, not with Jason, not with anybody.

He was about two miles from his shitty one room apartment off campus; a five second jaunt at best, but despite the pressing need to start his paper, the walk would do him some good, giving him time to come down from the rush and clear his head.

Twenty

His life was so much different from the last time he’d reached this milestone. Artemis had surprised him with (what else?) a surprise party at that steak place in Sausalito. His parents, the Allen’s and Garrick’s had all made the journey as families always do, and Wally still laughed at what his mother’s reaction must have been when Barry coaxed her into the Zeta Tube.

Dick and the other’s showed up after dinner, and they all gathered around the bar to sing the goofy birthday song and watch the sun set behind the Golden Gate. It was one of his fondest memories, now nothing more than a dream. It never happened, it never would.

This was the third birthday without his father, and despite the years it really hadn’t gotten much easier. *Time heals all wounds*, unless you traveled backwards in it.

As Wally turned the corner towards the main thoroughfare, he caught sight of the marquee shining
brightly over the Central City Performing Arts Center.

Coming Soon

One Night Only

The world famous Zataras

Visionary Illusionists and Spellbinders.

Tickets on sale now

The image of father and daughter on the playbill made Wally smile. The two sorcerers had walked away from the game and never looked back. Life’s too short; family too precious. If it ever came down to saving the world, the speedster had no doubt they’d be one of the first to step up. But until that day (one that would hopefully never come) they deserved a normal life as much as he did; and a worldwide tour had always been pretty much the norm for their family.

Dick had kept him updated on the League’s pursuit of the Light. Lex Luthor had exhausted all his appeals and was finally awaiting sentencing, and for all things…racketeering.

Wally still chuckled at the thought. A man responsible for nearly conquering the world, felled by something as simple as the RICO act; it was just beyond karmic.

Of course it was still better than what had befallen Vandal Savage. An eternity stuck inside the helmet with Nabu made a potential thirty to forty year jail sentence seem like a vacation to the islands. As far as the speedster was concerned, it couldn’t have happened to two more deserving men.

This seemed to be a constant theme for all of their associates.

The recently deposed Queen Bee was rotting away in a Bialyan prison cell, awaiting a trial that would never come. Sometimes being a cruel oppressive dictator could really come back to bite you in the ass.

The Brain was sitting in what was essentially an oversized Mason jar in the science wing of
Supermax. Klarion was still banished to his home dimension, now with an immortal Dr. Fate patiently awaiting his return. Only Ra's al Ghul and Black Manta remained at large, but Nightwing had assured the speedster their days were numbered.

And to top it all off, the Reach were squarely on the Green Lantern’s Corps radar, just waiting for them to break the ageless treaty they’d signed with the Guardians. Needless to say they would not be getting an invitation to Earth.

With the major players off the board, there would be no need for Tula’s brave sacrifice, and no unearthed demon for her to fight. Choosing between Kaldur and Garth was a battle for another day.

*All of this due to one college physics student from Central City. Not too shabby*

Twenty minutes later, he arrived at his apartment yawning as he inserted his key into the lock, quietly opening the squeaky door as to not to wake his fellow neighbors though the paper thin walls of the duplex. It wasn’t anywhere near as nice as the place he’d had in Palo Alto, but it would do.

He sat down at the table of his small cramped kitchen, opening his laptop and preparing to run the gauntlet between life science and applied mathematics, when he caught site of the object sitting on his counter.

One single cupcake; yellow cake, chocolate frosting, a waxen candle in the shape of the number twenty resting atop it. A Mary West special delivery.

Wally walked over to it, dipping his finder into the deep rich frosting.

God it was good
Breaking all laws of god and man, the speedster placed the cupcake in the refrigerator to save it for later. Stifling a yawn, he surrendered and closed his laptop, deciding a few hours’ sleep wouldn’t kill anyone. It was just one report, it’s not like it was the end of the world.

He stripped off his clothes, grabbing a pair of shorts from the hamper, brushed his teeth and sat down on the edge of his bed.

A little over two years from now, in a future that no longer existed, he was taking his last breath, watching his hand fade into nothingness, regret and sadness filling his heart in its final moments. And then it would all start over again.

*Darkness, Pain, Consciousness, Velocity, Prayers, Memories, Hope, Escape.*

Was that now a life long since passed or one yet to live? Tomorrow never knows

*There will always be a world to save.* Artemis once told him. No truer words had ever spoken. If or when that time ever came, he’d face it head on, ready to stand with his friends if they needed him, ready to save the world one more time if need be, but until it was time to stop worrying about tomorrow and live for today.

Wally pulled up the covers, fluffed his pillow, and laid his exhausted body under the blankets for a few short hours respite. His eyes drifted closed, the sandman literally knocking at the door when the warm body lying next to him rolled over, a bare arm flopping over and wrapping around his torso.

“You ok?” the archer asked, her husky voice bathed in drowsiness.
“I’m fine babe, just a long day. Go back to sleep.”

Artemis pulled him in closer, her human heating pad finally home and knocking the chill out of the cold apartment.

“It’s after midnight, Happy Birthday babe,” she yawned, kissing the back of his neck as she slowly drifted away. He knew the celebrations would begin tomorrow, but right now his biggest gift was lying in the bed next to him. Frankly, he couldn’t ask for a more.

“Thanks babe,” he smiled, his heavy eyes closing, contentment filling his soul. In the morning they’d read about Todd’s dramatic rescue and the Joker’s apprehension together; Artemis careful not to ask, Wally careful not to tell.

*Tomorrow never knows.*

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note. This was undoubtedly one of my favorite chapters to write. My apologies in advance to any Batman or Red Hood diehards out there. My facts may be a little off, and a very popular character temporarily postponed from entering the Batfamily lore, but let’s all assume things work out under less gruesome circumstances.

I have one, maybe two epilogues left to write. If you’re digging them, maybe I’ll do more. Tomorrow never knows :)}
Thanks!!!

Just a quick shout out and gratitude to Mattt for informing me I won a YJ Fanfiction Award. I had no idea such a thing existed. I had a lot of fun writing this, but chatting and interacting with everyone was the real reward.

So many thanks to everyone who read my drabble and double thanks for anyone who voted. I’ve been sitting on my last unfinished epilogue for awhile now, I’ll get off my ass and get it out. I think it will tie it all up nicely. Once again thanks, you guys rock.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!