Summary

With school really kicking in for the rest of YJ Superboy is left feeling alone and increasingly isolated. After a mission gone wrong, feeling worthless he runs off and ends up being taken in by Flash's Rogues.

Notes

Story comes from the YJ_anon_memes prompt: "Superboy is going through some serious issues of inadequacy, and it's deeper than anyone imagined. The constant rejections from Superman, as well being left all alone on Mount Justice (he thinks no one wants him! and idk Megan actually stays with John most of the time), make him super depressed and doubt his self worth as a person. Add in the fact that he's culturally stunted and not the most intelligent of the group (judging by his stats on CN), Supey is close to some sort of break down.

One day, when Young Justice shows up to help the Justice League during a situation, Superboy makes a mistake and Superman (out of frustration, exhaustion, whatever) says something insensitive and mean. It wasn't something horrible, though, because everyone kind of cringes and goes "awww poor kid" so they're really surprised when Superboy has a mini breakdown.

Take it from there anon! Do the other heroes step in and defend Superboy? Does he run off and join a criminal organization? Does he get adopted by some anti hero that dislikes Superman too? I just really want an emotionally broken Superboy who WON'T forgive
Superman anymore."

I went with option two, specifically Flash's Rogues, with liberal age/timeline modifications for Earth-16: Captain Cold, Heatwave, Captain Boomerang and Mirror Master (Sam Scudder) are the adult Rogues. But since everyone in Earth-16 has sidekicks there are junior Rogues too: Piper, Trickster (James Jesse) and Mirror Apprentice (Evan McCulloch), plus Boomerang's kid Owen showed up early... as a toddler.

This story is AU from around Season 1, Episode 9: aka before Superboy starts school and gets named in Earth-16 and before Cold has more than the cameo appearance from the first episode.
Downward Spiral

It was a Monday morning. Superboy opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of his room for a long time. He considered getting up, but it was a Monday morning. All of the other members of his team were busy at school, living their real lives, because they were real people, unlike him. Around ten he got up. He spent several hours wandering around the uncompleted passages that extend into the Mountain proper. The base was still, empty and deserted, except for him. He felt like a ghost, like the last forgotten soul left behind on a dead world. He knew he should train but the gym felt even more empty than the rest of the base, it echoed with the lack of his friends and he hated going in there alone.

Tuesday Red Tornado dropped by around lunch. Because he asked what Superboy had been eating Superboy pulled some things out of the refrigerator and put them between two slices of bread. He wasn't sure what he was eating and he didn't care. Everything tasted like cardboard. He missed M'Gann's burnt cookies, they tasted like someone cared about him. But M'Gann had entered a new phase in her telepathic training and her uncle was keeping her close by so he could over see her development. She didn't have much time for the team, for him, anymore. Red Tornado brought home-school assignments with him. Superboy hated them. He either knew the material perfectly, because the Gegnomes put it in his head, or he couldn't figure out where to start, because it wasn't something the Gegnomes thought he needed to know about.

Wednesday Superboy got around to working on his assignments. He scribbled out the answers he knew then spent four hours staring blankly at the paper wondering what he should do about the part that wasn't in his head. Black Canary dropped by to train him and he wanted to hug her, because she was alive and real and thought he was worth spending time with. Training didn't go well, he couldn't concentrate. Canary finally canceled it and made him dinner instead. As bad as he felt about screwing up, he was as happy as he'd been all week for the three hours Canary spent with him. She suggested that he should get out of the base occasionally.

Thursday Superboy went into town, because Canary told him to. He watched other people near his age as they interacted. He didn't know how to introduce himself. It wasn't like he could punch them and make friends the way he had done with his team. He sat on a hillside over looking Happy Harbor High all day, listening to other teenagers talk about things he didn't understand and didn't know how to relate to. It reminded him that he wasn't human and never would be. Shortly after school let out, one of the Green Lanterns, the youngest one, landed near him. He reminded Superboy of Superman in that he wouldn't make eye contact. "You weren't on the base, people were worried," he said after an uncomfortable period of silence. "I'm not doing anything wrong!" Superboy snapped. "I'm not a prisoner!" The Lantern twitched and chewed on his lower lip unhappily, "Just let someone know where you're going before you leave. So we won't worry." Superboy was certain they were worried about what he might do, not worried about him. Excluding the mentors who worked directly with Young Justice the League took their lead from Superman when it came to him.

Friday Superboy watched the clock. Robin and Artemis arrived first, one on top of the other. They chattered and snarked at each other about school things and Gotham. They hadn't quite made the transition from school to hero yet. Superboy felt like he was intruding but the sound of their voices in the same room with him brought the base back to life.

Wally arrived next, with his powers he was at Mount Justice only moments after his school let out. Superboy had figured out that Kid Flash had to live somewhere in the mid-west because classes had been out for an hour ago on the East Coast by the time Wally arrived. He chattered animatedly and Superboy didn't really know how to respond but his presence broke Robin and Artemis out of the
Gotham Academy mode and he was part of the group again even if he was only nodding occasionally when a comment was directed toward him.

M'Gann checked in maybe twenty minutes after Wally. She was also living in the Midwest, like Wally, but it took her longer to get home from school and to the Zeta-beam platform. M'Gann was smiles and blushes and "How was your week, Superboy?" He lied and told her it was fine. Mental shielding was one of the first things he had wanted to learn, so he couldn't be controlled like a puppet again. Back in the summer it hadn't occurred to him that he'd need it mostly to keep M'Gann from sensing the aching emptiness he felt when the rest of the team left on Sunday nights. But Sunday night was roughly fifty-four hours in the future and he wasn't going to think about it now.

Kaldur came last that week. His arrival was less predictable than the others, whatever his responsibilities at the Atlantean Consulate were they didn't have the same rigid time structure that the others' schools seemed to love. Kaldur was calm and steady, his presence grounded Superboy and he didn't feel like a ghost any more. With his team around him he felt solid and like he belonged.

They trained and had dinner then they watched movies. It was a little overwhelming after a week of silence and emptiness but Superboy would never admit it. He was happy, and they were with him and that was all that mattered, even if it would be easier if he could ease back into being around people more gradually. Or better yet if he didn't have to be alone for so much of the time. But that wasn't an option, the others had mentors and non-costume lives that they'd have to give up to spend more time with him. He'd tried to get his own mentor, he'd approached Superman maybe a half dozen times, but Superman didn't have time for him. He'd asked Batman dozens of times more if maybe Superman had been just a little pleased with how he'd performed on the team, lately Batman would just grit his teeth and look away when Superboy asked. He couldn't go to school with normal people because they couldn't explain the gaps Cadmus had left in his education. Superboy thinks that he probably couldn't go anyway because there was something wrong with how his mind was put together. He didn't process things like the others, He didn't figure things out, the Gegnomes either put it in him or they didn't. He was getting better at the way Canary wanted him to analyze things in battle situations but the others probably took to that more naturally than he did too, without all the extra time she spent working with him. Besides being able to learn how to analyze a fight wasn't something that was going to help him blend in with real people.

Saturday the call comes in. The JLA was in the middle of a large scale brawl with the Injustice Society, in Miami of all places. Miami didn't have a local superhero and the police weren't used to handling crowd control the way they were in Gotham, Metropolis or Central. Young Justice was the closest back-up, and Batman wanted them to deal with protecting and clearing the gawkers and other non-combatants.

It was a big sprawling battle. Over a half dozen separate fights were going on across the city center between more than twenty combatants. Both the Justice League and Injustice Society were responding smoothly to counter the ebb and flow of the battle. The battle has been raging for some time, and didn't show any signs of coming to a conclusion.

For Superboy it was physically stunning after a week of silence and stillness. The explosions made him jump. He couldn't keep track of the flow of the battle. Things: energy blasts, thrown cars, thrown bodies, seemed to come out of no where. Superboy knew his interception rate sucked in comparison to the rest of his team, he wasn't anticipating, just reacting.

He heard the buzz on his comm-link that indicated a private channel had been activated. "You're distracted," Batman said. "Go back to base, we'll talk later." Superboy flinched. He couldn't do anything right, they were going to send him away. He turned and started to trudge away from the battle field. He thought about just disappearing but he knew he at least owned it to Batman to let the
man tell him how worthless he was.

An energy blast flashed overhead and struck a building in front of Superboy. He watched, frozen by indecision as it toppled toward a bystander Kid Flash hadn't cleared yet. The girl was seven or eight, lost and scared, staring up at the falling masonry, as frozen as Superboy was. He couldn't think: Should he try to catch the falling building or at least try to knock it in another direction? Should he move the girl? What if there were people in the building? At the last moment he simply dove at the girl, crouched over her and pulled her in close to his body as several tons of concrete and steel came down on top of them.

Superman pulled up sharply as the boy who wore his crest vanished under a fallen building. He was too far away to do anything but watch and even then he could only spare a second from his own battle to note where the boy was buried before Solomon Grundy was on him again. He exchanged punches with the shambling monstrosity for several minutes before he was able to land solid enough blow to knock Grundy back. In the moment's reprieve, Superman scanned the rubble with his X-Ray vision. Both Superboy and the girl he'd been protecting were still alive, but the mass above them was unsteady, supported mostly by Superboy's shoulders. Superboy wouldn't be able to dig himself out and keep sheltering the girl at the same time. But he seemed to realize that and wasn't trying.

Several blocks over Hawkgirl plummeted toward the earth after taking a stunning blow from Star Sapphire. 'Superboy's situation was stable,' Superman decided, flying to his teammate's aid. He angled his approach to stay clear of Green Lantern and Metallo's fight, knowing he'd only handicap himself if he got too close to Metallo's Kryptonite heart. After that Superman was drawn into a battle with Parasite that lasted for several minutes. Once Parasite went down, Superman surveyed the battle to find where he was most urgently needed. His eyes widened as he realized that Green Lantern and Metallo's battle was shifting closer to the rubble where Superboy was buried. "J'onn, help GL," he ordered urgently. "Keep Metallo away from that building, Superboy's under it!"

He scanned the rubble again only to find his X-Ray vision obscured by a tangle of lead pipes. Worried and angry, Superman started tossing girders and chunks of concrete to the side, digging down to where he'd last seen Superboy and the girl.

The battle was beginning to slow, the less dedicated bulk of Luthor's recruits had fled, but the hardliners, the ones with a vendetta to pursue were still fighting around him. Superman had to break off his efforts for several minutes when Cheetah and Wonder Woman's battle careered through the area. "Damn it! Keep this area clear!" he shouted. Superboy and the girl had been breathing easily when he'd first checked on them, but he hadn't though about the on-going fighting and the possibility of the rubble shifting to cut off their air. 'What the hell was I thinking?' In a moment his frustration and worry channeled into another direction. 'What was he thinking? Careless. Thoughtless. If he'd been thinking, he would have had plenty of time to get the girl and get clear. Batman only brought the kids in so that we wouldn't have to worry so much about collateral damage, then Superboy goes and becomes someone else we need to rescue.'

A dozen more feet of rubble cleared and Superman spotted his clone's torn black tee-shirt. The boy's head was tucked down and there was an ugly welt across his shoulders where a beam had crashed down on him. Anyone with less strength would have been crushed. Hesitantly Superboy stood, reluctant to unwrap himself from the girl, wary of something else falling on them. Superman lifted the girl out of the rubble. Then he turned on Superboy. "You'd be more help to us if you weren't here at all."

Superboy felt sick. His chest was tight and he couldn't breath. His eyes ached strangely and seemed to be leaking. He wasn't sure what was happening to him, but for some reason he didn't want
Superman to see. So he ran, bounding away from Superman and the battle. Superman was only confirming what Batman had already said, but he felt like the world was coming apart around him. He was worthless, useless, everyone else would be better off without him. That was why they always left him alone. Batman had suggested as much and Superman said it outright: "You'd be more help to us if you weren't here at all."

Superboy wasn't sure where he was going. Anywhere away was better than here. He could barely see through the water leaking out of his eyes and running did nothing to help the tight feeling in his chest. Blindly he stumbled on a group of fleeing villains. It was debatable which of them were more surprised by Superboy's sudden appearance. For a long moment they just stared at each other blankly.

The battle was finally over. The police were collecting the captured villains while a portion of the Justice League hunted down fleeing stragglers. Black Canary grabbed Superman's elbow and determinedly steered him away from the police and general public. "Where the hell do you get off talking to Superboy like that?" she snapped.

"His head wasn't in the fight. He was a danger to himself and a distraction to the rest of us," Superman stated. "I sent him back to his base."

"I heard exactly what you said to him." Canary replied. "First off, you wouldn't have dressed down anyone else like that, let alone a kid. Second, you've made it painstakingly clear that you are not that boy's mentor. You don't want to help him improve? You lose the right to correct him. It's not your place. You treat him like you would any of the other kids. You don't yell at him, if you have a problem with his performance, you pass it on to his mentors, that would be Batman, myself and Tornado, and let us deal with him."

"Then deal with him," Superman said unapologetically. "From what I saw today he's not competent to be out here."

"I already had. Long before your involvement I ordered him back to the base," Batman stated, materializing silently. "A situation came up before he could withdraw and he responded, although poorly. This is why all criticism goes through channels. It's counterproductive, particularly with teenagers, to allow circumstances where everyone seems to be against them. Now I not only have to find the cause of his initial distraction, I have to dig it out from the emotional mess of him thinking he's being ganged up on."

"Superboy isn't at our re-grouping site," M'Gann's agitated voice filled the general comm channel.

"He was sent back to the base ahead of you," Batman answered.

"Is he hurt?" Robin asked.

Batman glanced at Superman questioningly. "Not badly," Superman replied.

Batman cut off the contact then stalked toward his plane. "Deal with things here. I have a teenager to sort out."

Superboy wasn't at Mount Justice when Batman arrived, nor was the tracer in his comm-unit functioning. Batman flew back to Miami, following Superboy's most probable route. When that turned up nothing he circled the battle-site until he spotted the characteristic impact craters left behind by Superboy's method of rapid transit. The trail vanished abruptly several miles outside of the city. Batman circled back and landed his plane.
The ground showed indication that Superboy had crossed paths with a mostly unknown group, although Batman did pick out the distinctive prints left by Mister Freeze's cold-suit. There was no sign of battle but two fewer sets of tracks left the area than had entered it, and one set of missing footprints belonged to Superboy.

"Batman to JLA. Priority One," he snapped. "Superboy is missing. There is a high probability that he was captured. Atom, report to my position. Potential crime scene, you're looking for evidence of teleportation or disintegration. I want a list of criminals currently unaccounted for from this afternoon's incident. The rest of you, look for him."
Hitting Bottom

Atom scanned the small clearing for unusual energy signatures. "The readings are more consistent with teleportation than a weapon's discharge. How certain are we that Superboy didn't go with them willingly?" he asked.

"I am certain I brought you in for data analysis, not speculation," Batman growled. He was checking the physical data at the site against a list of suspects but Freeze had been the only one who'd left distinguishing evidence.

"Fact, Superman doesn't trust the kid," Atom argued. "What do we really know about his loyalties?"

"He is loyal to his team. He is vehemently against Cadmus and the people who misused him there," Batman stated. "If he has no loyalty to the League, it's because the League's done nothing to earn it. As for Superman, his distrust is rooted in his utter refusal to interact with the boy, his opinion is worthless."

"So what do you think we're dealing with?" Atom asked.

"An emotionally distraught teenager who wasn't watching his back," Batman stated. "Which means, that yes, there is a danger of him being talked into doing something stupid. He's immature and upset, not a mole. We will deal with him accordingly."

'So the whole Young Justice team falls under the classification of 'yours' now?' Atom wanted to ask but didn't have the nerve.

"Barry?" Iris' voice over the comm-link sounded tense. "Could you come home? Now? We have company."

Iris' tone had Barry ready to race home right that instant, but he was already searching for a missing kid. "Company?"

"Len Snart and Evan McCulloch stopped by. They say they need to speak with you," Iris explained as if expecting to have the phone snatched away at any moment.

Flash was halfway home before Iris finished speaking. In just a few seconds he was walking through his front door.

Captain Cold shrugged apologetically. "Didn't know how else to contact ya, Flasher," he said. "Well, short of committing a crime, but I didn't figure that was conducive to talking."

"So talk," Barry said, not happy about having two Rogues in his home.

Cold glared irritably at the teen standing beside him. "Mirror Apprentice here had to learn the hard way that no matter how much Lex Luthor offers to pay, it's never worth the trouble he brings."

"You were involved this afternoon," Flash frowned at the teen. Evan was only a few months older than Roy Harper. "What were you thinking Evan!" Flash exclaimed. "Not only were you working for Luthor, who will be planning to stab you in the back the moment it's to his advantage. You were working with the Joker! Evan! The Joker! He's psychotic, do you know how many people he's killed? And I'm not talking about innocent bystanders, police or heroes right now, I'm talking about his own henchmen! You don't work with the Joker, Evan! Ever! You're not even twenty yet, the last
thing I want to do is identify your remains." Naturally Barry didn't approve of the Rogues either, but at least they'd watch the kid's back.

"Sorry," Evan said sulkily, prompted by a slap to the back of the head from Cold.

"Don't know what Scudder wants with an apprentice," Cold commented, "nothing but headaches. Anyway, after the moron here wises up and cuts his losses he bumps into something of yours. Tell him."

Mirror Apprentice watched as Luthor's plan went south, turning into nothing more than an all out brawl with the Justice League. "Hell with this," he muttered and turned his back on the conflict. On his way out he fell in with several other erstwhile members of the Injustice Society.

They'd all but made good on their escape when a teenager wearing Superman's emblem dropped into the middle of them. For a moment they all just stared at each other. The teen looked considerably worse for wear, he was dirty, his clothes were torn and he was covered in a healthy assortment of bruises and scrapes. Even more telling were the tear tracks cutting through the filth on the boy's cheeks and his hitching breath. The kid wasn't looking for a fight.

They looked at him. He looked at them. They looked at each other. Then something seemed to shift in Superboy's eyes. "Kill me," he said quietly. If they hadn't known what to make of the battered teen hero before, now they were utterly flabbergasted. "KILL ME!" he shouted.

Freeze shrugged, "Easy enough."

"I grabbed 'im and split right through the reflection in Freeze's shiny dome," Evan finished. "Rogue's Rules ya' know: Killing capes is asking for trouble. Killing kids just ain't kosher. Figured killing a kid-cape was a double bad even if he was asking for it."

"Thank you," Flash said sincerely. "Where is he now?"

Cold rolled his eyes. "He brought Superkid straight back to our hideout. Teenagers, not a thought in their heads when it comes to security. No common sense either. That's were I come in.

"I'm saying we're Rogues, not babysitters!" Captain Cold declared unhappily as he eyed the blond two-year-old clinging to Captain Boomerang's leg.

"Come on mate, he's a good kid. Not nearly as much trouble as Trickster and Piper." Boomerang argued.

"I maintain a small hope of those two pulling their weight," Cold said. "Is that one even out of diapers?"

The reflection of the two Rogues vanished from the large mirror hanging on the wall. Their images were replaced by a panicky eighteen-year-old in green and orange with a slightly younger and larger boy in tow. A moment later the pair tumbled out of the mirror into the Rogue's lair.

"What the hell?" Cold exclaimed.

"Where ya been kid?" Boomerang asked. "Mirror Master's been looking for you for days. And who's your mate?" Boomerang's eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he caught sight of the S-Shield on the new kid's chest.

The boy with the S-Shield pulled his knees into his chest, wrapped his arms around them and buried his face against his knees. He rocked himself as his shoulders shook.
"I don't know what's wrong with him!" Evan exclaimed. "Here we are escaping from Luthor's fiasco, Superkid drops in the middle of it and 'stead of fighting he tells us kill 'im!"

Cold frowned at the younger Rogue. "How many times have we told ya? Luthor's bad business. Only thing he gets you is a stint in jail while he buys himself outta trouble."

The little blond abandoned his father's legs and hesitantly approached the miserable ball of teenager collapsed on the floor. "There, there, it's okay," he said as he stretched up to wrap his arms around the older boy's neck.

The proffered comfort started Superboy sobbing openly. He clung to the toddler like he was a teddy bear.

"Hey now!" Digger protested. "Be gentle with him."

Superboy relaxed his grip but didn't release the toddler nor did he stop sobbing. After several minutes Digger went over to him and uncomfortably patted him on top of his head. "Come on, it can't be as bad as all that?"

"He doesn't want me," Superboy mumbled, not raising his head. "He'd be happier if I were dead."

Cold glanced up from his conversation with Evan, hearing the echo of "I'd be better off if you'd never been born," a phrase he'd heard all too often growing up. "What'd ya know, bastard cops like my old man and capes ain't so different." He crouched down in front of Superboy. "So that's what's what: Your pop tells you things'd be all around better if you weren't about and you try to give him what he wants huh?"

He leaned forward until he and Superboy were nose-to-nose. "Kid, you listen here. Ain't no one deserves that. Superman don't want you? Screw him."

"I called over the rest of the Rogues for a conference. We decided, among other things, that it'd save everyone a lot of grief just to tell you where he's at. Before too many rocks get kicked over by your lot. When I left Scudder and Digger were trying to make sure Superkid doesn't smush the rugrat hugging him."

"I'll come take him off your hands," Flash said.

"Naw, don't think so," Cold replied. "First thing, I ain't bringing you back to the hideout, Flasher. Second thing even if I did, I don't think you've got the where-with-all to get Superkid to move. Finally, what the hell are your lot doing to that kid? From what I heard before I left, the kid spends more time in solitary than I did during my last stint with that sadist Wolfe."

Barry froze.

"Against the law, you know," Cold continued. "They say it messes up a guy's brain to be isolated too much. Superkid seems happy enough to stay where he's at... Well at least he don't look like he's got any intention of moving. Just crying his eyes out, but that's on your bunch, not us. I give him back to you the next thing I know he's out and about looking for someone to bump him off again and the next lot he falls in with might be more ready to oblige him. Then you all come down on us like a ton of bricks and everyone's in a bind. We'll be keeping the kid."

"Len, you know I can't just take your word for it that Superboy's all right," Barry said in a reasonable tone. "I might know that you wouldn't hurt a kid, but the rest of the League doesn't know you and they aren't going to be satisfied with that."
Cold sighed. "You swear you won't raid us and I'll have Trickster take KF around to check on him after school Monday. Piper too, assuming he isn't cutting classes again. And for gods sake, the next time Piper cuts, don't bother me! The kid's got parents ya know!"

"Flash to JLA, subset YJ advisors. I have news on Superboy. He's okay," Barry reported after Captain Cold and Mirror Apprentice had left.

"Where is he?" Batman demanded.

"Here in Central," Barry replied evasively. "From what I was told he's pretty upset, but he's being looked after and the situation is stable."

"Stable?" Batman was skeptical. "His last known whereabouts indicate he was taken by someone involved in Luthor's Injustice Society. Flash, what aren't you telling me?"

Barry sighed. "One of my Rogues ran into Superboy after Superman managed to convince him that no one wants him. Mirror Apprentice took Superboy home with him because he wasn't in a fit state to be left on his own." Barry explained.

"You left him with a gang of criminals?" Batman growled. "Have you lost your mind?"

"From what I was told, and it tallies with what you found, if not for Evan's intervention we'd be dealing with a body right now. The Rogues are crooked but they aren't killers. We're working out the conditions of Superboy's return," Barry temporized. Then he asked, "How much time does Superboy spend alone? Now that school's in full swing I know, that as much as KF looks forward to doing things with Young Justice, he doesn't have the band-width to get out to Mount Justice except on weekends. I assume it's the same with most of the other kids?"

"Conditions?" Batman said dangerously.

"Superboy wanting to go home, among others," Barry replied. "Seriously, how much does he get to socialize?"

"In short your Rogues are accusing us of mistreating him," Batman stated flatly.

"Are we?" Barry asked.

"Robin and Artemis have similar demands on their time: school, individual training, Robin still patrols with me during the week." Batman paused then reluctantly added, "J'onn did mention that M'Gann's training would be taking more of her time for a few months. I'm uncertain as to Aqualad's other responsibilities."

"Superboy is alone whenever I find time to work in some individual training with him," Black Canary broke in. "For the last couple of weeks I've been trying to stop by more. But I've got the League. I'm working with Artemis on hand-to-hand; Ollie feels awkward about sparring with her. Plus we're both trying to keep tabs on Roy and he is not making that easy. Then there's my day job. I'd noticed that Superboy has been distracted during training lately and I don't think he's eating right. Honestly I'm not entirely sure he knows how to cook. I made sure the kitchen was stocked with frozen dinners, but I really haven't had time to do much more than that."

"What does he do during the week?" Barry asked with a sinking feeling that Captain Cold had a valid point about them isolating Superboy.

"He has home schooling," Red Tornado said. "I have been trying to give him more time to complete
his assignments. Some of his work is exceptional, but the rest is simply incomplete. I have been unable to get a proper assessment of his educational level."

"Why not enroll him in public school?" Barry asked.

"His temper, his powers, his lack of social skills," Batman listed. "I've consider it, but there is no possible way he could maintain a cover identity. Odds are it would take less than a day for it to come out that he was Superboy then his school becomes a target. That's unacceptable. Additionally, it is difficult for Robin not to give away his training during conflicts at school. Assuming Superboy does manage to keep his temper the first idiot who hauls off and hits him is going home with a broken hand. That is the best case scenario. A body bag is more likely.

"So we keep him in solitary confinement for nearly seventy percent of the time on an average week and he may be left with no human contact for days on end," Barry summarized. "Captain Cold's right, those are conditions I'd have issues with at Iron Heights."

Cold came back to find Owen building a blanket fort around Superboy. Scudder and Digger had eased off once it became clear that Superboy was paying attention to what Owen wanted, releasing the toddler when he squirmed and allowing himself to be talked into moving the furniture for Owen's convenience.

"Flash's chewing on what I told him," Cold reported. "He won't bug us until he's straightened up his own house. Kid say anything more?"

"Same theme: worthless, can't do anything right, no one wants him... Oh and he's a clone or something, not actually Superman's kid." Digger shrugged. "And I thought Owen getting dragged back here from the future during that mess with Zoom was strange... Still sort of wish I knew who his mom was."

Cold walked over to peer over the side of the blanket Owen had draped over the back of two chairs. "Kid, hate to point this out, but you're a mess. Shower's in back. You can toss the jeans in the wash, laundry's in the closet across from the bathroom. The shirt's a rag. Give me your sizes and Evan can go steal something clean for you."

"What? Why do I have to," Mirror Apprentice complained.

"Because you brought him home and you heard Flasher on how stupid you've been. You're doing scut work until I say otherwise." Cold informed him. "And while your out, bring back enough take out for all of us. You're flush right... Oh yeah, Luthor didn't actually pay you, that pesky little 'plan didn't work, must be your fault because it couldn't possibly be my plan because I'm smarter than everyone else' clause of his."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." Evan rolled his eyes. "Give me some money and I'll get the food. Oh, and Piper's crashing here again."

"What? Didn't his parents just ransom him back last week?" Cold asked.

"Then they tried fixing him up with a nice society girl again," Evan shrugged. "He'll be here."

"Can't complain about the steady income," Scudder remarked. "How many times have we 'kidnapped' Piper now?"

"I lost count," Cold admitted. "Let's face it, we're cheaper than lawyers. Long as they keep paying ransom they can keep claiming he's 'acting under duress'. Now, you-" he pointed at Evan, "steal
clothes. You-" Superboy, "shower."

Superboy nodded and carefully climbed through Owen's blankets.

"When you're done, holler. A few of those scrapes might need a stitch or so," Cold added.

"Doesn't work," Superboy said. "Needles break."

"Boy of Steel, right," Cold shook his head. "Eh, I got butterfly bandages too. We'll figure something out. By the way, what do we call you?"

"Superboy."

"No," Cold stated flatly. "Superman's had nothing to do with you, he doesn't deserve credit for you."

"Cadmus called me Project Kr, or the weapon," Superboy said.

"Fuck them too. Either you come up with a name of your own, or we'll do it for you," Cold informed him. "Think about it while you shower."
Sunday morning Superboy woke-up to find Owen had crawled up on top of him and was tapping his nose. "See Big Bird!" he demanded as soon as Superboy's eyes opened. Owen grabbed his hand and tugged until Superboy got up.

Superboy grabbed his jeans and one of the shirts Evan had gotten, stolen, for him. He flushed at the shirt's version of what FBI stood for, but pulled it on anyway because Owen was not waiting patiently.

Out in the main room Digger was fiddling with the ancient VCR attached to the Rogue's old TV and cussing. Cold was drinking a cup of coffee that he kept adding ice cubes to, looking about half awake and frowning at the world in general. The other teenager who'd shown up late the night before, preemptively cursed everyone out and then withdrawn into a corner to tinker with an odd-looking recorder was still there, having apparently spent the whole night working on his instrument.

"Had to come over this early," Digger was explaining. "Telly's busted at my place and the anklebiter's been on about wanting his show since 5:30 this morning. If it's not that, then it's been when can he seen Superkid again. Thinks the kid's 'is new plushy or something."

Superboy felt a warm glow that Owen had been asking for him. The day before, after Superman, he'd felt numb, like he'd been frozen solid and shattered. Then when the shock had worn off he'd cried himself hollow. Owen wanting him replaced a little piece of the emptiness with something warm.

Owen tugged him over to the couch then made himself comfortable in Superboy's lap.

The other teen glanced up from his tinkering at the cheery sound of Sesame Street's opening theme.

"Anyone want to knock over a Cotillion Ball with me?" he asked.

"What's the take, Piper?" Cold replied.

"It's not always about the money," Piper protested.

"If it's personal and there's money involved talk to me. If it's just personal..."

"Rich people all dressed up trying to out snob each other," Piper began putting his case together. "Lots of jewelry out on display."

"You've got access to the guest list. Hell, you're on it," Cold said. "Do your homework, find out who's likely to be wearing what. Get me some dollars amounts, then we'll talk."

"But it's Friday!" Piper protested.

"Then you'd best get hopping," Cold stated. "If it's not worth robbing you can always send in your rats, make a mess and get off with nothing worse than a disapproving talking-to from Flasher."

"Thanks, but no, I've already heard the 'Wasting your talents' and the 'There are legal ways of telling your parent they suck' variations," Piper remarked.

Around Superboy the hide-out hummed with life and people living together. By breakfast most of the Rogues had assembled.
"I'll cook," Heatwave volunteered evoking an impassioned chorus of "NO!"s that left Superboy a bit bewildered. In the end Superboy got tasked with frying sausage while a blonde teen named Trickster was put in charge of scrambling eggs. The rest drew lots for clean-up duty, except for Mirror Master and Apprentice who'd arrived with donuts and thus were exempt.

"I like Angus," Evan declared, picking up the debate from the previous night without a misstep.

Piper grabbed an orange from the bowl Cold was putting on the table and threw it at the older boy. "Too old-fashion, way too Scottish. He's an outer-space alien, not an illegal alien like you."

Superboy smiled minutely. His name had been the major topic of debate among the Rogues since the previous night's dinner. Everyone had an opinion, but there hadn't been any ground gained in getting a consensus.

"Now the way I see it, he doesn't need a josser name, just something that doesn't reference the deadbeat," Trickster stated with a certain amount of relish. That was another difference, no one here told Superboy to be patient and wait. That Superman was a good man and he'd come around eventually... and in the mean time Superboy just had to make do without. "I say we give him a name like Atlas or Titan, something cool like that."

Yesterday had been the worst day of his life. Yesterday he'd just wanted to end himself, solve everyone's problem and be done with it. Today little bits and pieces were fitting themselves back together in a slightly different shape and maybe it wasn't because of him that everything had gone wrong.

Of course it was Sunday. Sundays were never terrible. Except for the part where everyone else left, they weren't terrible. But then Saturdays had always been pretty good too, until yesterday. Still it was turning into an okay Sunday, even without his friends. And he was curious about what the Rogues would decide to name him.

He wondered if anyone back at Mount Justice cared that he was gone.

Robin paced in front of the closed doors to Mount Justice's command center.

"Batman is still inside?" Kaldur asked.

"All night he's been monopolizing the computer," Robin complained. "And when I volunteer to help he says the best thing I can do for Superboy is get a good night's rest and be ready to act. Secretive, no fair..."

"I too am concerned," Kaldur said. As he spoke frustration built up in his voice. "First we are told Superboy has preceded us to the base, but he is not here. Then we are told he has been taken by our enemies, possibly killed. Hours later the search is ended but he is still NOT HERE and we are told NOTHING!"

"And now we're running silent," Robin said. "Our advisors and mentors know something, but they're keeping it from the rest of the JLA as well as us."

"Additionally Canary, Red Tornado and Flash have been questioning all of us about Superboy," Kaldur said.

"I know, I compared notes with Wally, they're either looking for signs of depression or mind control," Robin said.
"He has been more withdrawn than normal lately," Kaldur worried.

"Something happened on the mission," Robin said. "Something went really wrong and now Superboy's not here and no one will tell us what's going on. I can't even hack the damn computer—because Batman is using it!"

"Superman was the last one who spoke to him," Kaldur said darkly. "He was the one who reported that Superboy was not injured badly."

"And we all know how well Superboy's attempts at talking to him normally go." Robin's teeth ground together. "Superman's supposed to be the best of us, the ideal! Why can't he just try? I know Superboy isn't really his and he doesn't owe him anything, but he's supposed to be better than that! Why can't he just look at Supey and see how badly he needs someone?"

"I don't know," Batman stated as he stepped out of the control room. "At this point it is most likely irrelevant."

Robin grabbed his mentor's arm and stared up at him fearfully. "He's not dead? You'd tell me if you thought..."

Batman sighed. "No, he's alive. I only meant that I don't believe it likely that he would accept Superman as a mentor any longer, even if Superman were willing. Too much time and too much damage has been done, and not all of it Superman's fault." His mouth thinned, "Directly."

"What happened? Where is he?" Robin pleaded.

"We are trying to determine that," Batman said. "And what needs to be changed in the future with regards to Superboy. I will let you know as soon as we've decided on a course of action for getting him back."

"Superboy is our teammate. If he is in trouble it is not right to shut us out." Kaldur argued respectfully.

"Recent events have brought to light that his living situation was not appropriate," Batman stated. "This concern is outside of your team's purview. I have been assured his current situation is... acceptable. Extracting him may prove... delicate and pointless if the existing problems have not addressed. This team was established to allow you greater autonomy, but you can't fix the lack of a stable adult presence in Superboy's life. We are trying to find a solution, be patient a little longer."

After Batman left, Kaldur looked at Robin. "Translation?" he asked.

"First Batman was using his 'against my better judgment' voice when he said he was okay with where Supey is now." Robin said as he made his way to the computer. "Second, I think, maybe, Supey living here was supposed to be a short-term thing. Superman was supposed to step in and take over. He didn't, everyone else just kept waiting and now it's a big mess. Superman's out as Supey's mentor, he's not even an option any more. I'm guessing they're probably trying to figure out who the second choice is. I'd go with Wonder Woman for similar powers but, ya' know, Amazon culture and guys... Probably not anyone who already has an apprentice, or Reddy since he and his wife just adopted that little girl from Bialya."

While Robin talked his hands flew across the keyboard. "Batman's been accessing the base's internal security logs from the last month. Makes sense, Canary and Reddy ask us if we observed anything, Batman wanted to see for himself. Don't know how Flash ties in."

"There are internal security cameras in the base?" Kaldur asked. "Enough for Batman to observe
"Well, duh," Robin said. "This is good news: Batman sent the logs to Agent A for review. It doesn't tell us where Supey is now, but whatever's wrong it'll get fixed."

Kaldur looked dubious.

"Dude, Batman asked Agent A for advise," Robin said. "That should say everything there is to say about Agent A. He'll know what's wrong and he'll know how to fix it."

"As you said: We still do not know where Superboy is now," Kaldur replied, leaving the subject of Batman's mysterious ally.

"Yeah, I'm going to start hacking the security cams in Miami, see what they saw," Robin said. "It sucks that we had to spread out to cover the perimeter."

"Guys!" Wally exclaimed agitatedly as he raced into the room. "Whatever they said to M'Gann when they talked to her, it made her cry!"

Robin and Kaldur exchanged a look then followed Wally to the living quarters where they found Artemis outside of M'Gann's closed door. "What happened?" Kaldur asked.

Artemis scowled at him, "They asked a telepath why she didn't notice the guy that she totally crushes on was depressed before he did something drastic. You tell me why she's upset."

Robin hacked the lock on M'Gann's door. "It's not your fault," he stated with assurance. "Come on, I'm in the middle of verifying who's fault it is that Superboy didn't come home."

Sniffling and wiping at reddened eyes, M'Gann followed as Robin led the group back to the commuter center. After a few minutes he had them all skimming through the security camera footage from the fight.

"Damn!" Wally exclaimed as he saw the building toppling on Superboy. "I got something here."

Robin picked out a few related cameras to get complementary angles and they watched through events until Superman dug Superboy out from the rubble and Superboy subsequently fled.

"I don't get it," M'Gann said. "The way Superman kept trying to get back to Superboy and when he yelled at Wonder Woman, you could see he was worried about Superboy. Why did everything go wrong?"

"Rob, play the part where they're talking again," Wally said. "One of my best out-of-costume friends was born deaf, he taught me a little about lip-reading." After about five rewatchings, Wally cringed, "Okay, that was harsh. He told Supey we'd be better off without him."

"But he was worried about Superboy," M'Gann protested. "Why would he say something so awful?"

"Because he was worried and he didn't like being scared," Robin stated. "Trust me on this. Batman isn't exactly a people-person, the first year we worked together he showed concern by saying some pretty hurtful things. Only this isn't the same: I'm with Batman practically every day, so I know how he reacts in all sorts of situations. Beyond that he was the one who was there for me on the absolutely worst day ever, the only one who understood what I was going through. The first time he said something like that it really hurt, felt worse than Two-Face wailing on me had, but Al- someone explained to me that he only reacted like that because it scared him when I got hurt. There was a
mountain of evidence to back up him caring about me, and trust me, I needed to have it laid out for me before I could believe that Batman didn't mean exactly what he'd said. Supey doesn't have that. He just has Superman ignoring him and then saying that. Supey took it at face value, it's the only way he could take it."

Kaldur frowned. "Superman told Superboy we'd be better of without him and so he left. They shouldn't be withholding Superboy's location from us. He needs to be told that we don't feel that way."

M'Gann, Artemis and Wally nodded. Robin hesitated, "There's something funny about where he is right now. Batman doesn't like it. There might be a reason for keeping the information on a need to know basis. Or we might not be able to talk to him right now."

"Kid Flash, report to the conference room," Batman said over the intercom.

"What now! They already grilled me," Wally objected.

"Maybe they're going to finally tell you something," Robin said eagerly.

"Wouldn't they summon us all?" Kaldur asked.

"Not Batman, not if there's some reason he thinks only Wally needs to know," Robin smiled winningly at his best friend. "But you know that no matter what Batman says, we all need to know, right?"

"You're trying to convince me to go behind your mentor's back?" Wally asked.

"Of course I am. This is about our friend. We're all involved in getting him back, 100%, whether or not our mentors want us to be," Robin stated firmly.

"For the dozenth time: I told you everything I know!" Wally exclaimed as he glared at his teammates, Robin in particular. "Just because he's not Batman that doesn't mean Uncle Barry can't be close-mouthed! Somehow, after Superman chased him away Supey ended up going home from the fight with Mirror Apprentice and now he's staying with the Rogues. I'm supposed to go over and make sure he knows he's still on the team, that we want him to come home and that Batman and Canary really, really want to talk to him. That's it, that's all, beyond that I'm in the dark."

"I'm missing the part where Superboy is with your supervillains and it's okay," Robin stated.

"They're not supervillains, that's creeps like Zoom or your freaks in Gotham, they're the Rogues," Wally corrected. "It's different. They don't want to rule the world, they'll even throw in a little if someone's trying to destroy it and it's not out of their way. They don't want to see blood running in the streets, they're just... Well, Uncle Barry says there's something broken in them and they deal with it in bad ways, so we have to stop them, but they're not evil."

Not seeing any agreement from his teammates Wally sighed. "Look, not even a month after I became Kid Flash, I got mugged while I was in civies. I froze. All I could think about was how if I did anything I'd blow the whole secret identity thing, I couldn't even give him my wallet. So he stabbed me."

"I remember lying on the ground bleeding and seeing this weird beam shoot over me and freeze the fire escape above me solid. The mugger ran. Captain Cold changed something on his gun and he froze my injury, it stopped the bleeding and most of the pain. Then he called an ambulance. And he waited with me. He called me a dozen different kinds of stupid and he told me that I was more
important than any secret. He knew the whole time who I was."

"The next time I saw Cold, he was robbing a bank and I was in colors. I went home with third
degree frostbite." Wally shrugged. "That's the Rogues for you, they're not good people, but they
have their rules that they live by and when they decide to help they mean it."

"Okay, we don't need to rescue Supey right now. But we're coming too on Monday," Robin said
and the rest of the team nodded. "You know how important Superman's opinion is to him. It's going
to take the whole team to convince him that what Superman said was a bunch of crap as far as we're
concerned."

"Okay, you're right," Wally said. "Show up at the baseball diamond behind my school soon as
classes let out on Monday. If we can talk Trickster and Piper into it, you can come. Wear civvies.
Colors are for fighting and we're not going to fight."
"I wonder what they'll be like," M'Gann said worriedly. "I've never seen a villain out of costume before."

"They're pretty much like us out of costume," Artemis said. "You are what you are, but you put 'normal' on over it."

"It still seems really weird to me," Robin said. "Going to school with your villains and everything."

While they were talking Wally and two other boys left the school and started walking toward them. Robin evaluated the pair then blinked a few times. It was a trio actually, because Wally's body language said they were all friends. The blond was almost as tall as Wally and dressed in worn, mismatched clothes. The other boy was better dressed, in a dark green shirt that set off his auburn hair and had an instrument case tucked under his arm.

"Guys, Trickster and Piper," Wally said. "Don't worry, the instrument is just Hartley's band flute, no special powers."

Piper elbowed Wally, "We said no names. If they don't want to tell, we don't either."

"It's on our arrest records," Trickster said with a shrug. "What do I care?"

"It's the principle," Piper argued.

"Yeah, yeah," Wally said. He smiled nervously. Introducing his school friends, who happened to be two of his rogue's gallery to his hero friends was more than slightly awkward in Wally's opinion. "Okay, guys this is Young Justice: Aqualad, our leader, the lovely Miss Martian, Robin who needs no introduction… and Artemis, Speedy's replacement."

"So, you two have to deal with this idiot all week?" Artemis said. "No wonder you turned to crime."

Trickster grinned. "I think I like her, smart and hot."

"And totally capable of kicking your ass," Artemis added. "I see you went to the same school of flirting as KF."

Trickster turned to Wally, "You know Cold's going to have a fit. He said you could come, he wasn't exactly handing out ducats for tours of our secret hideout." Robin started and took a second, closer look at Trickster.

"Superboy is our friend, We are concerned about him," Aqualad said.

"Funny way you got of showing it," Piper said.

M'Gann's eyes watered. "But we… There wasn't anything wrong Friday. Superboy said everything was fine. Then there was the fight and he didn't come back and we didn't know what to think and no one tells us anything! Then they keep asking us how he acted, felt, if we knew anything was wrong. And, and I didn't read his mind because he doesn't like it! I'm supposed to respect everyone's privacy, except when I'm not! But by the time I know I'm not it's too late. And he'd hate me if I did."
Both Piper and Trickster squirmed at the thought of having made the girl cry.

"We want to tell him in person that Superman doesn't speak for everyone," Robin stated. "Or actually, for anyone who's bothered to get to know Supey."

"Okay, fine, whatever!" Trickster exclaimed. "Jal orderly."

As they walked Robin angled Trickster slightly off to one side. "James Jesse, right, of the Flying Jesses?" he asked.

"I could do the same, but I'm being nice," James replied. "You might have scrubbed all the parlari out of your vocabulary, but you wear your parents' colors and you fly. Do you think any trouper looks at your face when you're tumbling about?"

Robin looked worried.

"Eh, no one's going give you up," Trickster said. "Damn glad you put that Zucco away. That sort of thing sets a bad precedent and my family still flies. They might be a bunch of prigs but I'd never want to see them hurt."

"Er... You might want to blindfold us or something when we get close, or call Mirror Apprentice and have him take us through the looking-glass," Wally suggested with an apologetic look at Robin. "I know Flash promised not to raid the place, but Batman's going to grill us after we get back and the less we know..."

"KF! Who's side are you on!" Robin demanded.

"Look, we have a deal," Wally exclaimed. "And you don't live in Central. When the Rogues give Flash their word, it's good, and vise-versa. And we're barely a block from school!"

"What's that mean?" Artemis asked.

Trickster shrugged. "Out here in colors, it's Rogues vs. Flash and Kid Flash." He jerked a thumb back toward the school, "In there it's James, Hartley and Wally vs. jocks, cheerleaders and other assorted bastards."

Wally gave his friends an embarrassed look, "It's pretty much true." He pointed to himself, "Science nerd, total incompetent at sports."

"But you're not," M'Gann said.

"I think run and I'm at freeway speeds," Wally explained. "Not so great for civilian identity PE class." He gestured to Trickster, "Science nerd, ex-juvie hall inmate... at least this month, he's out."

"A lot longer than that," Trickster replied smugly. "Flasher thinks Hart and I can be corrupted. As long as our attendance and grades are half-way decent he argues to keep us in school, thinks Juvie'll only harden us. I ain't gonna argue with him."

"On that subject, your room's still set up at Barry's," Wally hinted. "He feels like crap about the mess with your family."

"It's not his fault my parents didn't want me back after I got arrested," Trickster shrugged. "And I know. I crashed with him and Ms. Iris the last time Rory burned down our apartment."

"Burned down?" M'Gann asked with a small shiver.
"Heatwave is a real, true, dyed-in-the-wool pryo," Trickster explained.

"So what makes you a social outcast at school?" Robin asked Piper when Wally seemed reluctant to continue with his explanation.

"I'm gay," Hartley replied bluntly. "I don't know about where you're from, but around here I'd get less of a reaction if I said I had leprosy. That's why these two feel the need to flirt with everything female, they've got to prove that it's not contagious even if they do hang out with me."

"So there is an explanation for Wally," Artemis remarked with a glance at the red-head to see if he'd noticed her scoring points off him.

"Come on, lets find a nice, shiny surface for Mirror Apprentice," Trickster said, "Something big, I know he can pop us through a compact, but the idea of it weirds me out."

They ended up meeting Mirror Apprentice at a large department store window. They stepped through the reflective surface and stepped out into the Rogue's hide-out a moment later.

"Sunny days, chasing the clouds away!" Chimed merrily from a beat-up TV. Superboy sat on an equally battered couch across from the TV. His S-Shield tee-shirt had been replaced with one that read "I'd tell you to go to Hell, but I work there and I don't want to see you every day." A toddler in footie-pajama decorated with little boomerangs sat in his lap.

"Hey, First of May! Company," Trickster called.

"He's still one of us," Robin snapped. "He's not yours."

The toddler stood up and scowled at both Trickster, Robin and everyone else for good measure over Superboy's shoulder. "My Con-Con! Not yours, not yours, MINE!"

Wally put his hand on Superboy's shoulder. "Hey, Supey. How are you doing? The only thing anyone's been telling us since the battle was that you weren't hurt bad. What happened?"

"Don't talk during Owen's show," Superboy said not looking at Wally.

The members of Young Justice held a quick conference in looks and gestures.

"All right," Aqualad said. He sat down beside Superboy on the couch. M'Gann quickly claimed the other spot near him.

"As long as we're waiting?" James suggested as he pulled his chemistry text out of his bag. Wally hesitated for several moments then pulled the kitchen table over so it was closer to Superboy and the group on the couch and dug out his own text. "Nerds," Hartley declared with a roll of his eyes. He headed for his collection of instruments/weapons.

"What math text do you use?" Artemis demanded.

"It's green with a bunch of 3D shapes," Wally said and Artemis snatched his book bag.

"Excellent," she said as she dug it out and swiped a few sheets of paper. "It's a long assignment tonight."

Evan took Hartley's Iphone and threw himself down on another couch.

After several moments of indecisive wavering between the various groupings, Robin perched on the back of the couch, joining the Sesame Street contingent.
About fifteen minutes later Captain Cold came in from one of the back rooms and stared around his hideout in dismay. "What the hell!" he exclaimed. "Flash-kid, I said you could come see that we're not torturing Conner or holding him prisoner."

"You guys named Superboy?" Wally asked. "That's kinda cool."

"He's just lucky that he didn't get stuck with 'Elmo'," Piper remarked.

"All of us had favorites," Trickster explained. "Con wouldn't cast the deciding vote, so we put the names in a hat and he drew." The blond shrugged, "Owen insisted on being included."

Cold cleared his throat loudly. "I did not say the lot of you could turn the place into some sort of after-school hang-out!"

"Owen's show is on," Evan said. "Remember the unholy racket he put up the last time he didn't get to watch uninterrupted?"

Cold cringed. "Fine. But I'm not feeding anyone who doesn't belong here." He pointed at Wally. "You especially, you're anti-income."

After Sesame Street ended Superboy continued ignoring his friends while Owen glared at them and clung possessively to Superboy.

After several minutes Kaldur moved to stand directly in front of Superboy. "We were worried for you. I am relieved to see you are unharmed."

"Superman doesn't speak for us," Robin stated bluntly. "You're our friend and our teammate and he doesn't enter into the equation at all."

"What we mean is: Please come home?" M'Gann asked.

Superboy pulled away from them. "Home? You want me in that dead place?" he shouted angrily and he hugged Owen tightly against him. "I'm not going back there! Ever!"

"Supey- Conner?" Wally began uncertainly.

"I hate it there! I spend half the week thinking I'm going deaf because there's nothing to hear. It's just a bigger pod to keep me in. I hate it!" Superboy continued to rant.

"Then we will come here to visit you," Kaldur decided, defusing Superboy's temper. He turned to Cold, "If we are allowed?"

Cold crossed his arms and frowned. "I'm one of the bad guys, remember?"

"Awe, come on, pretty-please?" Wally started in with puppy dog eyes. "We won't cause any trouble."

"Oh fer pete's sake!" Cold exclaimed and threw up his hands. "One hour after school. Evan can play taxi until he's not in my bad books. In fact, Evan! Take 'em home now. Figure out bus stops for tomorrow... Baby heroes all over my lair, gonna have to decontaminate the place," he grumbled.

Robin blinked at him innocently and slipped his last bug back into his pocket.

Wally zipped across the room and pressed a letter into Superboy's hand. "It's from Bats, Canary and Reddy. And -um- even if you stay, we're still friends okay?"
After Mirror Apprentice had taken off with the out-of-towners Wally walked outside with Hartley and James. When they were about three blocks from the hide-out he stopped and they took off the blindfold. "At school you told me he was okay." Wally accused. "You said he was upset Saturday, but he was okay. I thought it was just a little worse than the other times he tried to talk to Superman."

"We weren't supposed to take you by 'til after school," James said. "If we'd told you everything you would have gone and searched the whole town door by door."

"Like you ever do what you're told," Wally snapped.

"Cold told Conner you were coming after school," Hartley said. "That's when he was prepared to see you. You might have noticed how he's not exactly in a rush to get back to staying with you guys."

"We didn't really lie," James said. "Not like it'd be anything new if we did."

"At school?" Wally asked pointedly. The other two boys looked away.

"Like Trickster said: We didn't really lie, just... understated. He was upset Saturday, today he's miles better." Hartley said. "He's real quiet, mostly just lets Owen use him for a jungle gym and does what he's told, but it's nothing like Saturday. I mean we're all pretty sure that the thing with Mr. Freeze was a fluke."

"What thing?" Wally asked.

"Cold told Flash," James obfuscated. "They really didn't tell you?"

"What thing?" Wally demanded.

"Evan says he asked Freeze to kill him," Hartley said quickly.

Wally spun around and grabbed Hartley at superspeeds. He stared into the other boy's face, looking, hoping for some sign he was being lied to.

"Like I said, a fluke," Hartley repeated soothingly. "He stumbled across a bunch of villains types when he was feeling really low and acted on a stupid impulse. Since he's been with us he hasn't done anything else like that."

"Cold says we should just not bring up the suicide thing," James said. "Treat it like it didn't happen unless he does something else. We keep him occupied and in the middle of things and don't leave him by himself much and Cold thinks he'll be fine. Once he's figured out he ought to be angry with Superman for treating him like garbage we were thinking maybe we'd take a road trip to Metropolis."

Hartley grinned evilly. "I can teach him all about making parents aware when they're being insensitive jerks... or just making them wish the earth would swallow them up."

"Uncle Barry says you've really got to stop that, 'ways of communicating with parents that don't involve breaking laws', etc," Wally said automatically. "Also, maybe don't? We're not telling anyone who doesn't like Supey where he's staying. I think it might be... bad if Superman or the JLA had reasons to think Supey was going dark. They already act all suspicious of him just for being a clone and having Superman's stolen DNA. It's not like he had any control over how he was born!"

"We'll let Cold know that," Hartley promised. "But we weren't supposed to say anything about Saturday to you, so could you not let Conner know you know? Your Aqualad's pretty sharp. You guys just keep coming over and acting normal, that's probably best all around."
Chapter End Notes

Circus Slang:

Ducats - Tickets

Jal orderly - Go quickly

Parlari - Circus slang

Trouper - experienced performer

First of May - someone new to the circus
Monday started like Sunday, waking up with Owen crouched over him demanding company while watching Sesame Street.

"Cereal's on the bottom shelf in the pantry," Cold told Superboy when he came in the kitchen. There were maps, notes and gear spread across the table and the Rogues were balancing their bowls of cereal in their hands, looking over the spread as they ate.

Owen picked out a brightly colored box and Superboy poured two bowls.

"If you find the toy, it's mine," Trickster declared.

"Kid Flash is coming over after he gets out of school," Cold remarked. "Gotta check and see that you aren't being held prisoner or nothing."

"Why would he think that?" Superboy asked.

"You do know we're the Rogues?" Cold replied. Superboy stared at them in surprise. "Don't worry about it," Cold told him. "We aren't out to rule the world or nothing ape-shit like that. We rob banks and such. We get into pissing contests with Flasher, but everyone goes home at the end of the day. Don't need the sort of heat killing capes or cops brings down on a body. Speaking of robbing things, you mind watching Owen for an hour or so? Trickster and Piper have a conflicting mid-term so I'm already down two Rogues, can't really spare another for babysitting."

"Stealing's wrong," Superboy pointed out seriously. To the amusement of everyone else.

"So's vigilantism if you want to be technical," Cold said. "So you gonna watch the brat or not."

"I like Owen," Superboy agreed.

"Great, I'll just teach you how to run the VCR," Digger said. "There's a dozen or so 'Sesame Street' tapes in the box under the TV. His sippy cup's over the sink. He gets orange juice and crackers about mid-morning. Watch that he doesn't get into the crap under the sink or anywhere near Trickster's work-room. Nothing that looks like a toy in there is anything remotely close to safe."

Then the Rogues left to catch their armored car while James and Hartley headed for school.

Superboy looked down at Owen. "So you want to watch your show?" he asked.

Owen shook his head. He grabbed one of the kitchen chairs and awkwardly started dragging it behind him. Superboy picked up the chair. Owen smiled he grabbed Superboy's pant-leg and led the older boy to a clutter corner of the lounge, near Piper's work-bench. Then they got another chair. Once all the kitchen chairs had been piled up to Owen's satisfaction he pointed to them authoritatively and declared "Fort Knox!"

"Okay?" Superboy agreed uncertainly.

"We l-liber… get gold," Owen said as he waved a nerf boomerang around. " 'Sloding boomerangs!" He grinned broadly. "Mean old Treasury Dragon."

"Dragon? What dragon?" Superboy asked.

"Treasy Dragon!" Owen pointed to the empty space on top of the pile of chairs. "Keeps all the gold
for his-self."

"Okay?" Superboy checked with his infrared vision just in case there really was an invisible monster in the room. There wasn't, but Owen seemed happily entertained so he didn't disagree.

With surprising dexterity, given his age, Owen threw his boomerang at the chairs. Then he jumped up and down and yelled "BOOM! Guards all fall down!" He retrieved the boomerang. "BOOM! Doors go bye-bye!" The next time Owen handed the Boomerang to Superboy. "You 'slode safe." He ordered.

Superboy gingerly took the spongy boomerang and tossed it lightly at the chairs. It didn't spin the way it did when Owen threw it but it didn't knock the precarious pile over either so Superboy counted it a success. "BOOM!" Owen shouted. "We fight dragon, take gold."

It occurred to Superboy that Batman probably wouldn't approve of stealing gold from Fort Knox, so when Owen wanted to play again, Superboy went and found a stuffed bunny; carefully selected from Owen's stock of toys, not Trickster's more dangerously modified ones; which he stuck inside the cage of chairs so they could rescue Bun-Bun instead of gold.

They were in round four or five and Owen was demanding more elaborate piles of furniture to use as a fortress to assault when the Rogues tumbled out of the large mirror that dominated the north wall of the lounge. They looked wind-blown, grouchy and somewhat worse for wear. Superboy didn't notice any loot.

"Flash says 'Hey and hope you're feeling better'," Cold relayed.

Mirror Apprentice gave Superboy a quick grin. "Flasher made a right mess of our plans but then he got distracted asking after you and we escaped." He turned to Cold, "Taking him home wasn't so bad, even when he doesn't do anything, he's got Flash distracted from us."

When Piper and Trickster came back it was with all of Young Justice, not just Wally. No one mentioned what he'd done wrong Saturday and they kept acting like they did want him even though Superman had made it clear that they didn't. It was nice until M'Gann talked about him going back to Mount Justice. The thought of spending another week alone and surrounded by silence infuriated him and suddenly he found himself yelling at M'Gann. After that Cold sent them home, but they promised to come back.

Tuesday, while Cold and Superboy washed the breakfast dishes, Cold asked. "So what do you do anyway?"

"I can't fly," Superboy answered promptly. "And no-"

"I didn't ask what you couldn't do," Cold snapped. "What do you do?"

Superboy hesitated for a moment. "I'm strong, about a fourth as strong as Superman."

"Your idiot old man isn't here," Cold growled. "I don't give a damn about how you compare."

"He- I'm- I'm his clone. Except I'm broken. I can't do the things he can."

Abruptly Cold grabbed Superboy by the shoulders and marched him into the living area. He stopped in front of the large mirror that Sam and Evan tended to use as an entrance. Superboy watched the older man in the mirror, puzzled and not really wanting to look at himself anyway. Cold was a few inches taller than he was, his already heavy build made to look even stouter by the heavy parka he wore most of the time. He had harsh, blunt features and blue eyes so light they were nearly colorless.
"You are a half-grown brat of a teenager," Cold informed him. "Now I don't remember any hoo-ha 'round Metropolis about a flying teenager fifteen years ago or so. Means he probably didn't have all those powers back when he was your age either. And even if ya never get them, you aren't broken! You don't need 'em. We're gonna be sparring later, if you want to join in, I need a basic idea of what you can handle so we've got a starting point."

"You say you're a fourth as strong as him, means squat to me," Cold continued. "He ain't here, I never met him and I don't give a damn about him. How much can you lift? A car?"

"A bus, practically," Superboy said. "Um, I'm bullet proof, they sting and bruise if they're high caliber, but I've never been shot with anything that hasn't bounced. I can see into the infrared if I think about it. I'm pretty much impervious to heat and cold."

"Now that's a statement that's gonna get tested," Cold informed him. "Cold is my weapon of choice. Heat is Heatwave's. The Mirrors use hard light, illusions and they travel through reflective surfaces. You ever spar with normals before? Enough to know how hard you can hit without breaking us?"

"Black Canary used to train with me, sometimes Batman. Artemis and Robin too but I'm supposed to be really careful of them, in case they make a mistake," Superboy confirmed.

"The Bats are normals? Who'd of thought," Cold shook his head.

The Rogues' living quarters consisted of a small office section: kitchen, lounge and a few rooms, which looked out over a looming and abandoned warehouse, full of crates and rusted hulks of old machinery. The Rogues used the warehouse as a training ground.

"We're doing teams today," Cold declared. "Heatwave and I against, Mirror, Mirror jr. and the new kid. Digger, keep the brat out from under foot. Kid, since you're new, your choice: You guys Rogues or heroes today?"

"Uh, heroes?" Superboy said uncertainly. "I, um, I'm not sure what you're supposed to do on the other side."

Heatwave laughed. "Our side's easy: The goal is to grab the loot and get away. You three get in the way. Actually for the game it's capture the flag with armaments."

"What?" Superboy looked confused.

"They're gonna try to grab the backpack," Mirror Master explained. "Evan'll show you wear it's at. We try to stop them before they make it to the door. Don't do anything that'll require medical attention but everything short of that is allowable."

Heatwave and Cold retreated to the warehouse door, then at Digger's signal began advancing across the warehouse, quickly losing themselves in the endless isles of abandoned crates. At first Superboy held back, watching the others. The Mirrors immediately faded into their looking-glass world and started sniping the other pair from a multitude of small reflective surfaces they'd seeded the warehouse with. While Heatwave continued to advance, Cold used the Mirrors' firing patterns to locate their mirrors which he promptly frosted over, leaving them with a dull, mat finish.

After several minutes Superboy decided to get into the mix. He leapt up on top of the crates, concentrating on Canary's lessons in landing softly so that he didn't simply send the stacks crashing to the ground. From the higher perspective he was able to pick out Cold and Heatwave and started making his way toward them. Heatwave smirked at the teen who was making way too much of a target of himself and sent a jet of, relatively speaking, cool red flame at him. Superboy waded straight
"Con, down!" Mirror Apprentice shouted, then promptly knocked Superboy off balance with a bit of friendly fire when Superboy failed to respond quickly enough to his new name. Over the course of the game Cold and Heatwave gradually increased the severity of temperature extremes and Conner learned to answer to his name without hesitation. Neither Heatwave nor Cold moved with the studied grace Conner had learned to associate with highly trained fighters like Canary, Batman or Robin and that made him extremely tentative about how much force he used, mostly he just tried to grab them and hold on. That tactic quickly taught him that Heatwave wouldn't hesitate at setting fires extremely close to himself or anyone else, for example setting Conner's jeans on fire when the boy was holding him captive.

Up above, Digger held Owen up so he could look through the lounge window and cheer Conner, Owen's clear favorite, on.

After about twenty minutes Cold had the backpack while Heatwave was wandering through an illusionary maze, maintained by the combined efforts of the two Mirrors. Conner confronted Cold. Cold looked Conner over. "Kid, at some point you need to get clothes that stand up to fight conditions," he observed.

Conner glanced down at the tattered remains of his jeans and tee-shirt. The various fires had taken out both legs of his jeans, the tee-shirt had shattered after the second round of being frozen, leaving it little more than the collar hanging around his neck. While Conner took surprised stock of how little of his clothing remained Cold froze him.

Sometime later, once Conner had been thawed, moved to the couch and wrapped in blankets with Owen cuddling up to him to provided additional warmth, mostly because Owen simply adored cuddling his new playmate, Cold ruffled his hair. "Pretty decent kid. Gotta work on tactics thought, can't just rush into everything even if you are ungodly tough," Conner smiled shyly, enjoying the Rogue's roughly affectionate gesture even more than the praise. Cold shoved a cup of hot chocolate at him, embarrassed. Several minutes later when Cold noticed Conner sharing sips with Owen, he mumbled, "Might not want to do that, I added a splash of rum to help warm you back up."

"Oh," Conner said. He looked at the cup warily but took another sip.

Conner's teammates from Young Justice arrived at the Rogues' base late in the afternoon, shortly after Wally and M'Gann's classes let out for the day. Robin handed Conner a pile of books, "Well, it might not be the most welcome of presents but Red Tornado said to give you your homework. And hey, that means we've all got the miserable stuff to commiserate over."

"Not Evan," James remarked. "He's a lazy drop-out."

"And damn proud of it," Evan remarked. "I know I had more fun tangling with Flash Monday than you had sitting in class proving you know how ta be a socially responsible person… even if you've got no plans of ever being any such thing."

James shrugged. "More fun breaking the law if I know all the ins and outs of it before hand."

"No, it's about learning the intent, which, some of the time, is actually good," Hartley argued. "So you have a defense when you break the actual law which fails to achieve its greater intent."

M'Gann looked at them, horrified. Kaldur looked pained. Robin looked curious, like he was a moment or two from jumping in with his own opinions on the subject. Wally and Artemis looked bored. Conner simply glared at the text books that belonged to him as if he were wishing his heat-
vision would suddenly kick in and incinerate the lot of them.

Still when everyone except Evan, who took over amusing Owen, settled around the kitchen table with their books spread out, Conner did the same. He started with math, quickly scribbling out the answers to the problems then; when he reached the story-problem section; he set his pencil down and went back to glaring at the book angrily. After a few minutes Robin and James noticed, they leaned over Conner's shoulders to see what the problem was. "You know how to do these," James stated. He pointed to some of Conner's earlier work. "See, you did pretty much the same problem here, you didn't even do the work, you just wrote down the answer..." He puzzled over it for a few minutes. "The right one, no less." Robin nodded in agreement as he also finished working through the math in his head.

"No it's not the same!" Conner snapped. "There aren't any symbols, it's all words."

Robin tilted his head to the side and studied Conner for several seconds then said, "The gegnomes taught you math, the formula and tables and stuff, but they never said anything about how it's applied did they?"

Conner stared at him blankly. Both Robin and James took that as a yes.

"So, okay, story problems," James said. "The idea is to show you what math is actually good for. So here's how you sort the math out from the words..."

By the time Young Justice went home Conner had actually completed one of his math assignments for the first time rather than leaving it half done after getting frustrated by the things the Gegnomes hadn't taught him to do.

Wednesday, while he was watching Sesame Street with Owen, Conner decided to look at his science book again and see if chemistry was like math story problems since he remembered a lot of numbers mixed in with the words. He leaned his chemistry text against the arm of the couch so he could read it without disturbing Owen's perch in his favorite location: Conner's lap. He scowled fiercely at the book trying to see how it might relate to anything, anything at all that the Gegnomes had programmed him with. They'd never taught him to take information from one place and apply it elsewhere, something his friends seemed to do very naturally.

Heatwave glanced over Conner's shoulder and his eyes lit up with an unholy gleam as he caught sight of the word 'Combustion' in the chapter heading. "You're studying fire?" Heatwave asked. "I could help. Practical application is a much better way to learn than just reading the books. 'Course I read plenty of the books too but I can tell you everything you'd ever want to know about how things burn." He plucked the book out of Conner's hand and scanned the contents quickly. "Okay, Flame tests, melting points, flash points… Even given the name, flash points are great. That's the temperature you need for fire-balls. Gimme a couple of minutes to round up some things and I'll show you what the book's talking about." Before Conner could say anything Heatwave was off, whistling happily to himself.

"Pay attention," Cold remarked. "He knows more about that crap than any high school text book. Also keep an eye out for him getting ideas. If he wants to burn down the base or, I don't know, the city- Don't let him." Conner nodded seriously.

As promised, Heatwave returned in full gear dragging a crate along behind him. Conner hoisted the crate up easily and balanced it on his shoulder. "Go out back, the parking lot's a good place for fires," Cold remarked, "far away from me."

"Yeah, yeah, you can have him when he's got a chapter on absolute zero," Heatwave said with a
gleeful grin.

He led Conner outside then proceeded to burn about a dozen different samples to show Conner how the materials could be identified by the color of the flames they produced. "Of course color can indicate temperature too." He adjusted his flamethrower, producing flames from red to blue as he adjusted the oxygen feed and demonstrated how quickly or slowly the various flames burned through a 2x4.

"Melting points are pretty important too, especially the melting points of metals they make safes out of," Heatwave continued. He reduced a chunk of iron to a molten puddle. "So how hot was that?" he asked.

Conner thought back to the recent conversation of color vs. temp with regard to Heatwave's flamethrower. "Um… around 1600oC?" he asked.

Heatwave patted him on the head and smiled proudly. "Good job, melting point of Iron is 1536oC. But that's just iron. You add some carbon and get steel and it's a whole 'nother story." Heatwave quickly burned a phase diagram for Carbon Steel into the pavement and started explaining.

Conner felt his head begin to spin. The next thing he knew the asphalt was catching fire as Heatwave demonstrated the varying melting points of different steels. To Conner's alarm, Heatwave was standing in the middle of the conflagration gleefully continuing his lecture while flames leapt up around him.

Panicking, Conner tried to imagine he was blowing out a giant candle and suddenly the temperature dropped, frost formed across the parking lot. Conner sagged in relief and exhaustion as the fire died. Heatwave grimaced distastefully as he shook the ice off his suit. He looked around at the localized winter-wonderland. "You killed my fire," he said sulkily.

"You were in the middle of it!" Conner protested.

Heatwave sniffed and stomped inside.

Conner trailed after him. "You were going to burn! I didn't know I had freeze breath, I was just trying to keep you from getting hurt!"

Cold glanced up. He walked over to the window and looked out over the aftermath of Heatwave's lesson. He grinned, "Cool."

When Young Justice showed up that afternoon Robin had a large casserole dish with him that smelled incredibly good, especially compared with the Rogue's diet which consisted largely of take-out and Hamburger Helper. Cold glanced around the room at his team and resigned himself to being out-voted. "You can stay for dinner," he informed the young heroes.

"Conner, what's up with you and Rory?" Wally asked as he passed the serving bowl. "He's all sulky."

"He was on fire," Conner whispered back. "Turns out I do have freeze breath when I'm really motivated."

"Really? Wow!" Wally asked. "Just like that?"

"Yeah. I didn't even realize what it was until the parking lot out back was frozen," Conner explained.

"I know you will not like the sound of this," Kaldur said hesitantly. "But perhaps you should attempt
to speak with Superman again. I have noticed that he tends to avoid using powers other than his
strength and flight except as a measure of last resort. There may be hidden dangers you should be
made aware of."

"He doesn't use them because he scares himself," Cold stated dismissively. "Probably the core of his
problem with Con anyway. He's scared of what he can do, so he's even more scared of what
someone who ain't him might do with his powers. You're not telling him that Con's getting stronger,
there's no reason to go making him even more afraid of the kid."

"But..." Kaldur protested.

"There's nothing about cold that I can't teach Conner and I'm not scare of him," Cold insisted.

Thursday Cold got started on his promise bright and early. "This ain't like yesterday's lesson. This
isn't about something you might use in the future, or something a person ought to know to be
considered educated. This isn't about school work. This is about a weapon that's a part of you. Rory
or I, we got the option of putting down the gun and walking away... Well at least we've got as much
ability as an alcoholic's got when it comes to putting down a glass. Your powers are part of you,
getting rid of them would be the equivalent of taking a body-part, at the least. So you are going to
learn to control them," he lectured.

Conner paid grim attention.

"Cold's a versatile tool, I can use it to kill fast or kill slow, or to simply restrain. But you leave a
person wrapped in ice for more than a little, hypothermia sets in and they die. I don't have a hero's
ethics about killing. If I think a person needs it, or if they tick me off too much, I'll kill 'em. I won't
give a damn if you decide someone needs to die but if anyone dies by your hand, it sure as hell better
be because you wanted them dead. I ain't got no patience with carelessness or morons who don't
understand what it is that they do."

"I'm not going to kill," Conner stated.

Cold nodded, "Your choice. But you need to know what can kill, because not meaning to doesn't
matter a whole lot when it comes to things you can't take back. First thing you need to know is on
and off."

It took them the whole morning before Conner could summon up his freeze breath when ever he
wanted. "Good," Cold declared. "Now, there's a hell of a lot more you can do if you can control
how cold that gets or how broad or narrow a field you make. A broad field of near absolute zero'll
slow down a speedster or stop a bullet cold. You get things cold enough and the molecules in the
air'll stop, turns 'em into a weak shield. Anything going through's got to give up the energy to get
them moving again. Speedsters have got that kind of energy, for them it's like moving through a gel.
Most things don't, the cold'll steal all the energy they've got in a heartbeat and leave them with none."

Conner fidgeted uncomfortably at the reminder of who Cold normally fought. He was happy when
they started working again and he could put it out of his head. By the time the other teens arrived
from school Conner hadn't made any progress in learning to consciously control the degree of freeze-
breath that he produced but the fact that the temperature of his breath did vary measurably convinced
Cold that it was possible, with a lot more work.

During Thursday afternoon's study session Conner put off doing his own work by watching the
show Wally was putting on. The speedster had a laptop, a book and a small yellow pamphlet spread
out on his corner of the table. He would flip through the book, then the pamphlet at super-human
speeds then pause to peck out a few sentences on his laptop then repeat the whole cycle again.
"You know, if you actually read the book you'd retain the information for more than a few minutes," Hartley remarked.

"If the laptop didn't fall apart when I speed-type I could finish the whole thing and HAPPILY forget everything in the stupid book," Wally whined.

"Don't let A catch you defaming the Bard," Robin remarked. "He was a Shakespearean actor when he was much younger."

"Can he help with my homework?" Wally asked hopefully.

"Are you crazy!" Robin exclaimed. "A's a thousand times more demanding than ANY high school teacher, and he LOVES Shakespeare. If he gets involved he won't be satisfied until you've turned out a thesis-worthy paper."

"Even if I did it's not like it's going to help," Wally despaired letting his head fall on the keyboard. "My teacher grades on how much she likes a student anyway. I hate English, it's all so fuzzy. Science, the answer is right or wrong, English it's all subjective."

"You haven't learned to say what they want to hear yet?" Artemis cackled.

"She's right," James remarked, "it's all about reading your audience. Actually it's pretty decent practice for running cons. I get straight 'A's in English."

"Red Tornado keeps writing: 'Your interpretation isn't a common one. Support your arguments with more evidence.' on my book reports," Conner added, feeling oddly happy to be able to take part in the bitching about homework.

"That's what Cliff-notes are for," Artemis said. "They'll tell you what everyone else thinks about the story. The faster you realize teachers don't care what we think the sooner your grades will improve. It's all about regurgitation."

"That's awful," M'Gann protested.

Hartley nodded in agreement, "I'd rather say what I think than suck up to get a good grade."

"My instructors in Atlantis would never accept such half-measures," Kaldur said from the couch where he was acting as the night's designated Owen-amuser.

"I just want to get it over with," Wally whined, his face still pressed against the keys of his laptop.

Conner patted Wally's head sympathetically. 'It was nice, being part of their real lives,' he thought to himself.

Friday morning Conner and Rory drew dish-duty together. It made it very obvious that Rory was still not speaking to him over the fire being put out and Conner coating him in frost during his efforts at firefighting.

"I promise I'll never put you out if you're on fire again," Conner offered a bit desperately, "unless you're screaming or something."

Rory sighed and reached out and ruffled Conner's hair. "As long as I'm wearing the suit there's pretty much nothing on Earth hot enough to bother me. No reason to worry yourself 'bout that. Guess I was just a little disappointed. I mean you were interested in my thing, then it turns out you're a natural when it comes to the opposing force."
"You could still teach me," Conner requested. "I mean I've still got science and, um, my heat vision could kick in any day now, you know. Still sort of hoping the flying will happen."

Cold scowled.

"Not 'cause of him," Conner insisted quickly. "It's just, well, it's flying! How can anyone not want to fly?"

Trickster looked thoughtful at that but didn't say anything.

"Come on, kid, we're taking Owen to the park." Digger informed Conner. "Wanna see if you get as many dirty looks as I do. Thought kids were supposed to be good for picking up sheilas," he muttered.

That earned a few snickers, "I really wish we knew who Owen's mom was," Hartley remarked. "I mean we've all seen dozens of women who are quick to make it known that they aren't interested in Digger, I'd like to meet the one who was."

At the park Digger and Conner sat off to the side while Owen scrambled off to play with the other children on the brightly colored play-ground equipment. As Digger had predicted most of the other parents there were glaring at Digger. Conner's inhuman hearing picked up a number of conversations about the TV coverage of Digger's latest arrest and how people like him shouldn't be allowed to be around children. After a few minutes Conner was returning the glares with interest.

Then Owen returned dragging another child along behind him. "My Con-Con!" he declared proudly patting Conner on the leg. The other child looked Conner over, looked suitably impressed and was allowed to return to their play. The third or forth child Owen brought over looked up at Conner curiously. "Big brother?" he asked. "I gotta big sister, she doesn't play." Owen thought about it for several moments. "Yep! Big brother. Con plays good." Conner smiled, it was sort of neat, belonging to someone, even if he didn't really.

That afternoon, Wally turned up alone after school. "It's Friday," he reminded Conner. "We're all going to Mount Justice like normal. There's a zeta-platform at Uncle Barry's you could use to get back and forth."

Conner shook his head. Everyone told him he was still on the team but he wasn't sure he believed it. He wasn't sure what worried him more, going and having Batman or Canary tell him he wasn't wanted anymore, or going and having them tell him he had to choose between them and the Rogues.

"You haven't read the letter from Batman, Canary and Reddy yet have you," Wally concluded. Conner grimaced and looked away. "Read it," Wally said.

"Later, maybe," Conner replied.

Wally sighed. "Well, maybe next weekend?" he asked.

"Maybe," Conner allowed. And Wally left.
After dinner Piper left in full costume to go to his dance. Fifteen minutes later Cold waved Conner over. "You ready for trouble?" he asked.

"I'm good to go, but I though you said Piper's Cotillion Ball was a waste of effort?" Conner loved living with the Rogue but he still was far from sure about the notion of helping them commit crimes.

"Someone's got to watch the brat's back." Cold shrugged, "His parents aren't all bad, I suppose. They've always bought him out of trouble and they've never hit him, still never can be certain that this won't be the time they get fed up. 'Sides there's always over-eager cops looking to take down a Rogue and Piper ain't bullet proof."

Conner nodded. He didn't like the idea of Piper doing things that would make the police shoot at him but the thought of Piper getting shot was worse. He considered just going and grabbing Piper and sitting on him until the Ball was over.

"If it's Flasher we just watch," Cold said. "The brat wants to get in trouble for personal business and no profit, he can deal with it on his own. If it looks like it's gone sour we pull him out." This time Conner's nod was less reluctant.

They trailed Piper to a stately old mansion. The front doors were thrown open and light and the sound of music spilled out into the night. Conner caught sight of people in long dresses, tuxes and glittering jewelry. Piper stopped at the front gates and raised his recorder to his lips and began playing. Conner heard something under the music that made his skin itch. In a few moments there were a few hundred rats swarming around Piper's feet. When he started walking toward the open doors the rats swirled around him and preceded him like a living carpet. Almost instantly the sound of music and conversation was replaced with the sound of panicky screams. A few of the guests braved the rats to escape through the doors but from what Conner could see most were simply climbing on chairs and tables, shrieking and beating at the rodents that had begun clawing their way up the girl's long sweeping dresses.

The security guards at the Ball started shooting into the mass of rats and Cold directed Conner toward one concentration of guards while he took another. When one of Conner's guards took aim at Piper instead of the rats Conner grabbed the gun and pointed it toward the ceiling. "Please don't shoot at my friend," he requested politely. Since Piper shouldn't have been doing the thing with the rats he didn't want to be too mean about it. Then, in case his point hadn't been made, Conner squeezed down on the barrel of the gun until it crumpled.

Meanwhile the Flash had arrived. Piper directed his rat-army to swarm the speedster. He tried to slow Flash down by turning the floor around him into a living sea of rodents. Flash spun in place creating a whirlwind that tossed the rates hither and yon. Before Piper's forces could rally Flash snatched the recorder out of Piper's hands.

Cold waved Conner back. Conner noticed a few of the guards on Cold's side of the room had their gun-hands encased in blocks of ice.

As he and Cold retreated to the shadows Conner heard Flash talking quietly to Piper. "The next time your parents set you up with a date for one of these things could you please just find a guy, put him in a tux and attend instead of pulling this nonsense?"

"You think it's any easier for me to get a date than it is for KF and Trickster?" Piper complained.
Flash shook his head and sighed with frustration. He marched Piper over to his parents. "Shall we regroup at your house to discuss this, again?" he asked.

"Come on, show's going on the road," Cold informed Conner.

Cold had to park outside of the Rathaway Estate. He and Conner made their way over the walls and onto the grounds. By the time they were in eves-dropping range Piper and his parents were screaming at each other while Flash tried futilely to mediate.

"Why can't you just be normal?" Hartley's father demanded angrily.

"Are you talking about the rats or me being gay?" Hartley asked flippantly.

"Both!" His father exclaimed. His gesture took in all of Piper's get-up and the recorder tucked under Flash's arm. "All of it: Hanging out with criminals, running away, your insane instruments, battles with superheroes. Your mother and I are practically ashamed to leave the house."

Hartley's chin came up and his expression hardened. "You missed one, why don't you go for broke? Me being born deaf. You fixed that, now you think you can fix everything else about me that you don't like. I DON'T NEED TO BE FIXED! THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH ME!"

"Why do you have to be like this?" his mother asked in a pained voice. "Why do you always have to be so difficult?"

Hartley turned to Flash. "I don't have to listen to this," he said. "Fight's over, you won, but hell if I'm staying here."

Flash walked him to the door. "You don't make it easier with these stunts," he said quietly. "Until you called in the rats, you were in the right. They were wrong. But now? Introducing elements like a hundred rats terrorizing a society event and a meta-human battle, it only muddies the water." He nodded toward Cold and Conner, "And unless I miss my guess, you came pretty close to getting shot tonight, if not for your friends. There are better ways."

"Tell them to try adopting next time, maybe that way they can get the kid they want," Piper said as he walked over to Conner and Cold. Conner gave him an empathetic look and squeezed his shoulder. "Come on, lets go home," Piper said as he turned his back on his parents' house.

"It's just like ice-skating... Only a dozen times harder and you've got a lot further to fall," Trickster encouraged early Saturday morning.

"I've never tried ice-skating," Conner protested.

"You wanted to fly," Trickster reminded him.

Piper leaned against a nearby tree, yawning, but unwilling to miss out on the spectacle. Conner did look very much like a first-time ice-skater: his knees locked, his stance wide, teetering, off balance and clinging to Trickster's hands like a life-line as the two boys hovered several feet in the air, each of them wearing a pair of Trickster's flying shoes.

By mid-afternoon Conner had graduated from clinging to Trickster to lurching unsteadily from tree branch to tree branch and being deeply thankful that his invulnerability made falls of seven or eight feet trivial to him. Owen came out, he cheered and held out his arms to be picked up. Conner didn't dare, but Trickster swept him up and did a few aerial somersaults before returning him to the ground. The different Rogues came and went and mostly heckled. Conner gradually began to pick up the
knack of giving as good as he got.

After around his hundredth fall Conner lay on his back and looked up at Trickster. "This is great, but there's no way you fight on these."

"I robbed four planes in mid-air before Flasher figured out how to ground me. All it takes is practice, skill and talent," Trickster declared as he showed off with a series of flips and tumbles which demonstrated that he was as agile in air as any meta-human flier. "Of course, it probably didn't hurt that my parents started preparing me for high wire work in the same year that I learned to walk," he admitted.

"Piper!" Digger shouted from the base. "Clean up you work-bench! Don't leave sharp crap out for Owen to get into!"

"Later!" Piper shouted back.

"Now!" Digger corrected.

"Actually all of you get in here," Cold added. "The lair's a pig-sty and most of it's teenager-related."

Conner followed Piper and Trickster's lead, whining and complaining while they worked. Still, even being included in chores helped cement the feeling of belonging that he'd begun to recognize the night before when Piper had said they were going home and 'home' felt like the right word.

After they were finished he decided that whatever his former mentors at Mount Justice had to say it wouldn't hurt too much, so he read his letter.

Cold found Conner sitting in the kitchen, the letter laying on the table in front of him. He was staring at it, fixated.

"What'd they have to say for themselves?" Cold asked.

"They say they're sorry," Conner said quietly. "They said after Cadmus they promised to look after me and they're sorry they didn't do a better job of it. They say if I come back things will be different," Conner paused. He looked at Cold. "Things are already different. I'm here. I like you and Owen and Piper and Trickster and everyone."

"You want to stay," Cold said.

Conner nodded. He glanced down at his hands then up at Cold shyly. "I know I don't contribute much..."

"You babysit, practically worth your weight in gold," Cold informed him with a grin. "Won't lie, I've thought about it. You've got more raw power than any of us. After the way your freeze breath developed, it's all but certain the only reason you haven't got all of the bastard's powers is you ain't grown into 'em yet. I've thought about what this group could do with you in it. But I'm not going to ever ask you to cross that line. If you do, it's gotta be because it's your choice. And even then I'd probably argue with it. My little sister is still on the right side of the law and I'm glad of it."

Conner released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"But you stay here? Even if you never join in on a job, you're gonna end up grey. We're not the good guys. You stay, you're going to end up wanting to come to the rescue when you should leave us to our fates. You're going to have to deal with us being in and out of jail, 'cause Flash ain't exactly a slouch at what he does. We might have an out-of-costume truce but he doesn't have any choice
when we're in the act."

Conner bit his lip. He wanted to say he wouldn't ever let anyone take them away. But they broke laws and stole and he was supposed to be against that. And Wally's uncle had come to Mount Justice from time to time and he liked Barry. But what if it were Digger and Owen was left without his dad? What if Cold wasn't here when he came home?

"Living here with us won't impress many of your hero-types. Flash makes allowances for us, accepts us as something other than your lunatic super-villain types. But Flash is a reformer working out of a city that's home to the most draconian prison in the country," Cold absently rubbed his arm as he spoke, as if remembering old injuries. "That affects things. You can't count on the others being so open-minded. For a lot of them you being here'll be taken as proof that Superman was right to mistrust you."

Conner's expression hardened. "Let him, them, think what they want, I don't give a damn. He doesn't want me. Why should I try to impress him? Why should I care what he thinks of me? You don't look at me and see a clone, a thing! He can go to hell for all I care! I want to stay here," Conner glanced away, chewing on his lower lip. "As long as you'll have me?"

Cold squeezed his shoulder. "You'll always be welcome among the Rogues," he promised.
Rogue Rescue

"This is the scene, live from Bend, Oregon, where a battle between several well-known JLA sidekick and the villainous Females Furies has spilled out into the streets. The young heroes appear badly out numbered and are getting the worst of it. Let's hope their mentors are nearby."

"Evan?" Superboy asked pleadingly.

"Yeah, I'm looking," Mirror Apprentice said as he peered at the buildings behind the reporter. "The place 'll feel sort of empty come Monday if they're all laid up during study hour... There, got something."

"KF owing us a rescue?" Trickster remarked. "We can hold it over his head forever."

"Count me in," Piper agreed. "Someone better leave a note or they won't save any pizza for us."

Mirror Apprentice shrugged, "Just leave the telly on, I think they'll figure it out. Ready?"

Aqualad stumbled when the largest of their opponents stomped her foot and created an earthquake. The skeletal, knife-wielding brunette he'd been fighting took advantage of his misstep and plunged her knife in his side. Aqualad screamed as he felt flames scorching him from the inside out.

Kid Flash faced off against a female speedster. He was faster, more experienced and just better, but every time he tried to close with her the sword-handed blond or several of their archer teammates' cyber-hounds would fall on him.

Another part of the pack of cyber-hounds harassed Robin as he tried to battle a woman who wore a costume of leather straps and wielded twin whips.

M'Gann was on her knees, hands pressed against her temples from a brief brush against a yellow-skinned, mad-woman's mind. Artemis tried to protect her from further attacks from the mad-woman while trading shots with the other team's archer. Artemis misjudged Mad Harriot's intent, or possibly the Fury simply changed her mind mid-attack. Her claws slashed through Artemis' bow, reducing it to splinters.

With Aqualad down hard Stompa turned her attention on Robin while Bernadeth took a moment to finish the Atlantean boy off. Superboy leapt out of the town square's reflecting pool and tackled Bernadeth, knocking her away from Aqualad.

Piper withdrew to a sheltered corner and began playing his recorder. Before long the Cyber-hounds were being pulled down by a horde of rats.

Trickster launched himself into the air. He tossed a small ball at Mad Harriet and it exploded into an ensnaring mass of silly sting.

As soon as he'd dropped the others off, Mirror Apprentice stepped back into the reflecting pool. A moment later he appeared in a department store window behind the Fury's archer and cracked her over the head with the butt of his weapon.

In the reprieve caused by the Rogues' arrival Young Justice rallied. Robin caught one of Lashina's whips and tossed her into Stompa. Artemis grabbed Aqualad and dragged him over to M'Gann so she could guard both of them.
"I call the speedster!" Trickster shouted.

"Her or me?" Kid Flash asked.

Trickster grinned. "Today we're saving your ass, KF." He beckoned to Speed Queen, "Come on chava, let's see if you're half as good as he is."

"Be a joy, tearing you limb from limb blondie," Speed Queen replied with a nasty smile.

"Nice of him to leave me with the looker," KF said to Gilotina.

"Let me take you into my arms, handsome." Gilotina smiled enticingly as she sliced through a concrete block with her bare hands.

KF gulped. "I'm voting for a long distance relationship."

Mad Harriet clawed her way free of Trickster's silly string. "You can't be any crazier than Joker," Robin said as he squared off against her.

Stompa and Lashina disentangled themselves and started looking for a fight. Mirror Apprentice sent a bevy of hard-light holograms at them. Stompa sneered. She grabbed the nearest and used it to bludgeon the others into non-existence. Then she paused. She looked around herself as if confused then struck out at Lashina. Mirror Apprentice stepped back with a nod to Piper who simply kept playing, his eyes never leaving Stompa.

Superboy and Bernadeth circled each other warily. "You hurt my friend," Conner snarled.

"If you'd given me another minute or two and I would have filleted and grilled the fish-boy," Bernadeth gloated.

Conner lunged at her, teeth bared in a snarl. Then he drew back in surprise as her knife cut nicked his arm. Smoke rose from the cut.

Lashina, upon escaping her hypnotized teammate, had gone for the wounded. Artemis fended off the Fury's whips with the broken pieces of her bow.

M'Gann put her hand on Artemis' back. "Thank you, I'm feeling better now." She gestured and bits of broken masonry rose up and pelted Lashina. The Fury shielded herself with her whips, but M'Gann had no shortage of ammo lying around given the extended battle that had already been fought. She increased the speed and density of her attack with a thought.

Robin tumbled and dodged around Mad Harriot's attacks. Batrang in hand he looked for an opening.

Trickster shook his head as Speed Queen tugged futilely at her gummed up feet. "You'd never make it in Central," he declared. He used another silly string bomb to make sure she stayed put.

"Piper! Heads up!" Kid Flash shouted as he lured Gilotina near Stompa. Still under Piper's spell the larger woman clothes-lined her teammate.

Kid Flash noticed that Piper was looking a little winded. "Got a tiger by the tail?" he asked once Gilotina had been firmly restrained. Piper, unable to stop playing without losing control over the Fury's power-house, only rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Twenty seconds," Kid Flash said and took off running. At nine seconds he made a U-Turn in southern Nevada, at twelve seconds a sonic boom marked his passage and he kept accelerating. At nineteen and three quarters of a second he jumped in the air. At twenty seconds he plowed, feet-first, into Stompa with a boat load of momentum behind
him. She went down like a pole-axed steer.

Robin flipped backward to evade Mad Harriot's talons. She was as agile as Catwoman and as unpredictable as Joker. He was feeling good about how long he'd held his own, but he wasn't seeing a way to end the fight. Then Artemis dropped out of a tree with an arrow in her hand. An electrical discharge surrounded Mad Harriot. After she went down. Artemis kicked her a few times for good measure. When Robin gave her a look she scowled. "She broke my bow," Artemis explained with a final kick. "I really liked that bow." Warily Robin tied up the unconscious Fury and led Artemis away.

Bernadeth fainted at Conner. He twisted away, letting her knife slide past him then blew a stream of super-cooled air on her extended arm, encasing both knife and hand in ice.

"You weren't supposed to be able to do that!" the Fury screeched angrily.

Conner grinned unpleasantly. "Learning new tricks everyday," he growled then punched her. When she didn't go down like a human would have he shrugged and hit her again harder.

He glanced around the battle field and saw his friends securing the other Furies for the police. The battle was over, they'd won.

One of the JLA's javelins landed in a nearby parking lot while the teens were clustered around Kaldur, trying to determine how badly he'd been injured. "It's not too serious," Kaldur was insisting shakily. "Knife cauterized it." The rest of them looked dubious and Conner didn't take Kaldur's protest to mean he should be allowed to sit on his own without support.

Batman, Black Canary and Red Tornado exited the Javelin. Robin ran over to update his mentor on the situation.

"Conner! No, do not carry me!" Kaldur protested as the other boy picked him up bridal-style.

"He's hurt," Conner said handing the still protesting Kaldur over to Red Tornado. Then Conner backed off, quickly retreating toward his new friends.

While Red Tornado took Kaldur back to the javelin, Batman traded a glance with Robin. The boy wonder fell in, waiting for Batman's after-action review. The rest of Young Justice, including Conner followed suit. The three Rogues clumped together uncertainly off to one side.

With Kaldur down, Robin quickly and professionally summarized the mission. When he reached the point where the battle had erupted into the city, Batman halted him. "You failed to recognize a trap before springing it," Batman began. "But then I did the same. The entire operation here was a facade designed to lure you in. You did well, holding out against a superior and prepared force until help could arrive."

Batman turned to Conner and the three Rogue. "Your assistance was timely. Tornado, Canary and I would not have arrived soon enough to prevent casualties. You have an aptitude for teamwork that is impressive and, frankly, unexpected."

Piper and Trickster flushed at the thoroughly unanticipated praise. Older and more jaded, Mirror Apprentice didn't visibly react. Behind Batman Wally gave his Rogues a huge smile and a thumbs-up.

Batman tossed something toward Conner who caught it automatically. He opened his hand and saw a new comm-link. "Try not to break or lose it for at least a month," Batman said. "You will be contacted when the team has a mission or group training. You can bring your new friends if they're
interested."

"Does it pay?" Mirror Apprentice asked.

Black Canary looked outraged, but Batman held up a hand before she could say anything. "Not for training. I'll consider it missions with the rate dependent on the nature of the mission and your ability to contribute to the team."

Conner glanced worriedly in the direction where Red Tornado had taken Kaldur. "You could come back to base with us," Robin offered. "See how he's doing."

When that only increased Conner's nervous wariness toward them Batman tried a different tactic. "Aqualad won't be well enough to travel Monday. You could hold your study hall at Mount Justice instead of the Rogue's hide-out to avoid aggravating his injuries," he suggested. "Robin will alter the security protocols to allow limited access for these three specifically."

"I don't have to stay?" Conner verified.

"You were always free to come and go," Batman said.

"I didn't feel like it," Conner said.

"You were. The JLA's monitoring notwithstanding, no one had the right to restrict your freedom of movement," Batman said. "You were never meant to feel like our prisoner."

Conner glanced toward the Rogues. Trickster shrugged and Piper nodded. "We'll come," he said. "Monday, after school, for an hour."
"The Meta-human battle in Bend between the Female Furies and well-known JLA side-kicks: Kid Flash, Aqualad and Robin continues raise speculations. Particularly about the teenagers' allies," the commentator introduced her story.

"First: this is what we've been able to learn about the two young women who were fighting along side the JLA side-kicks. The Martian girl has been identified as M'Gann M'Orzz, niece of founding JLA member J'Onn J'Onzz who also serves as Mars' special envoy to the planet Earth. The identity of the other girl, a young female archer, remains a mystery. But her presence in the group certainly raises questions about the disappearance of long-time Green Arrow protégé, Speedy."

"Speedy has not been spotted in Star City since early July, when he and Green Arrow battled Icicle. JLA representatives have assured us that Speedy is alive and well but has parted ways with Green Arrow. The appearance of a young, new, solo hero, 'Red Arrow', seems to confirm the split. The JLA has stated that Speedy is over 18 and legally an adult."

"Possibly even more curious are the identities of the ‘cavalry’ who came to the rescue of the five side-kicks. Late in the battle, after Ms. M'Orzz and Aqualad were injured, four additional teenagers came to their aid. The four have since been identified as Central City’s junior Rogues: James Jesse aka the Trickster, Mirror Apprentice, who has yet to be apprehended due to the nature of his powers, and repeat kidnap victim and supposedly unwilling Rogue, Hartley Rathaway aka the Pied Piper. The fourth member of the group has tentatively been identified as the elusive young Superboy who has been spotted around Metropolis, in the company of Superman a handful of times since mid-summer."

"If so, his costume certainly indicates a change of attitude," a second commentator remarked. "From Superman's S-Shield to..." A frozen image from the battle appeared on screen. Practically every word on Conner's tee-shirt that was large enough to be legible had been blurred out by the censors. "...Well, the details might be a bit fuzzy, but the overall message comes through loud and clear."

In Gotham Bruce Wayne sent a quick email to his ward. "Tell Conner he can change his costume if he likes, but no more profanity or lewd suggestions. If the Rogues won't provide him with appropriate attire take him shopping. At the earliest opportunity."

At the Daily Planet Perry White pointed to the 24hr news channel dramatically. "Superboy! And we got scooped. Not only did we get scooped by a television news station, we got scooped on a Superman story by a station in the middle of Nowhere's Ville, Oregon!"

"SuperBOY," Clark corrected quietly. "And Bend is actually a fairly sizable city."

"He wears, or at least WORE the 'S' that makes him Metropolis news!" Perry shouted. "Five months, four sightings, two lousy pictures of the kid, not one SINGLE interview or even a comment from Superman and some Television Person in Oregon gets fifteen minutes of footage and him showing up with the Flash's Rogues!"

Clark frowned, he stood taller and his hand rose to his tie. For a moment he looked much more formidable than was Clark Kent's want. He'd been doing his best to ignore the coverage and really hadn't caught the part about the company Superboy was keeping previously.
"By tomorrow's edition we will have something on that kid. Origins, Superman's opinion, I don't care what, but it will be something NO ONE else has. Now get out there and get that story!"

"I'll go jump out a window right away Chief," Lois said sarcastically.

"Er... maybe not jump," Perry temporized. "But if you happen to fall... Be sure to ask about that kid!"

Clark followed Lois out of the bullpen. "Where are you starting?" he asked, just in case she wasn't joking about jumping out a window.

Lois sighed. "I was heading up to the roof. I figure if I stay up there and shout long enough he's bound to get curious." She shook her head. "The commentator said he's been seen in Superman's company, but from what I've been able to pry out of the witnesses that's overstating things. From what I hear the kid hasn't managed to set foot in Metropolis without getting reamed or, at the very least, brushed off." Lois shrugged, "I'd like to hear from Superman what the problem is. It's pretty obvious he can't stand the sight of the kid."

"Can't stand?" Clark asked fiddling with his glasses. "Isn't that putting it a little harshly? Especially based on second hand information?"

"I was actually in the crowd for appearance number three," Lois corrected to Clark's surprise. He hadn't realized dealing with Superboy distracted him enough to not notice Lois' presence. "Right before the thing with Toyman and the giant rocking-horse with the kryptonite bomb in it. Superman looked like he was happy to see Toyman since it gave him an excuse to send the kid packing."

'Not happy, per say,' Clark thought, 'but Toyman's all in a normal day.'

"Now from what's been said, the kid's only ever tried to help out, but for Superman to react so negatively toward him... Well you have to wonder what's wrong with the kid."

Clark had been planning to ignore Lois until she got bored with sitting on the roof, but now he felt like he ought to set the record straight.

"Ms. Lane, you seem to have something on your mind," Superman said as he descended from the sky.

"What are your thoughts on Superboy and his current situation?" Lois asked, going into full reporter-mode. "Hell, even the basics would be nice. Where does he come from?"

"Superboy is a clone," Superman explained. "He was created illegally by Cadmus Labs. In early July he was discovered and rescued through the combined efforts of Robin, Aqualad and Kid Flash. After his escape from Cadmus he chose to continue working with the boys."

"He chose?" Lois asked. "So he has free will? Pretty much a normal kid despite the weird start, well as normal as any of you?"

"He was able to over-come Cadmus' brainwashing," Superman said. "To be frank, he played a large roll in his own rescue. The four of them worked together to escape Cadmus safely. After his escape the JLA took responsibility for him."

"But not you personally?" Lois asked. "When he's been in Metropolis observers have mentioned a certain tension between the two of you?"
"I'm not comfortable with his existence," Superman said bluntly. "He was created for the expressed purpose of replacing me." Remembering the increasingly frequent arguments with Bruce over the clone, Superman frowned. "I am NOT his father. He was created from stolen DNA without my knowledge or consent. While Superboy bares no responsibility for the circumstances of his creation, neither do I. I have nothing against him personally, nor do I feel any connection to him. As I said, I am not comfortable with him. He is under the care of individuals I trust and respect."

"He makes you uncomfortable, so you alternately ignore him and yell at him until he goes off and joins a bunch of villains?" Lois asked in disbelief. "That's your plan for dealing with a teenager who has your level of power?"

"I left him under the care of the Justice League," Superman protested, suddenly feeling more like Clark than Superman. "I don't know what to do with a teenager. His team's advisers all have experience dealing with their own side… younger partners. Well not Red Tornado, but he volunteered. And Superboy doesn't have all my powers, just strength. Batman said about a quarter of mine. He also sees into the infrared."

"And freeze breath," Lois added. When Superman looked surprised she said, "You haven't seen the video from yesterday's battle have you? He used freeze breath to neutralize Bernadeth's fahren-knife, pretty clever actually. But the basic point still stands: Superboy wouldn't have kept coming around if he weren't trying to get your attention. Whatever the other League members were doing it wasn't enough, he was still looking to you for guidance. At least he was up until yesterday when he turns up with Central City's Rogues. What do you think of his current choice of associates?"

"I… I don't know the circumstances," Superman said uncertainly. "Maybe it was just coincidence they showed up at the same time. If something were really wrong Batman would have contacted me." Under his breath Clark added, "He's had more than enough to say on the subject so far."

"Maybe he got tired of wasting his breath," Lois said, "because from what I'm hearing that's what he was doing."

"You think he wouldn't?" Clark asked.

"If you've repeatedly refused to help with the kid before, I wouldn't keep calling you," Lois said.

"Superboy was really with the Rogues?"

"Arrived at the battle via Mirror Apprentice's trick of stepping out of reflections," Lois confirmed. "Left with them too, after talking with Batman for several minutes."

"Could you excuse me for a moment?" Clark asked. "I need to verify a few things."

"Be my guest," Lois said. "It sounds like this is a long overdue conversation."

Clark flew several dozen feet up into the air, until the city lay spread out beneath him like a model. Then he activated his comm-link. "Batman, we need to talk, about Superboy."

"You were correct," Bruce replied. "You are not his father. He's of no concern to you."

"He's with Flash's Rogues!" Clark exclaimed.

"Leave it alone, the situation is being dealt with," Bruce said. "In fact, I'd say there are fifty-fifty odds of him convincing the two fifteen-year-old Rogues to switch sides permanently within six months of his rejoining Young Justice."
"And in the meantime you're allowing someone with my powers to associate with criminals?" Clark demanded.

"Yes," Bruce stated. "His course work is improving. He's finally receiving adequate individual training in the use of his powers. He's beginning to regain the weight he lost due to depression. Most importantly, he hasn't tried to kill himself since the last time he spoke to you."

Shock caused Superman to lose control of his flight, for a few seconds he simply plummeted.

Bruce continued blandly, "I am monitoring the situation, Robin has done an excellent job of planting bugs. It is unconventional, but we harmed him through our neglect. He's getting better now. You have repeatedly refused to take responsibility for him. If you had taken him, we wouldn't be in this situation, but you didn't and now it's too late for you to be part of the solution. As you've repeatedly said you're not his parent. This is none of your business... I'm receiving another call."

"Batman! Bruce, don't hang up on me!" Clark exclaimed. He tried reconnecting several times before getting through.

When he did get a response Batman's voice was grim. "You're influencing of the League against Superboy has just gone critical."

"I don't.\" Clark started to say then stopped. Lois was one of the most independent minded individuals he knew and she had reserved judgement on the clone simply because he hadn't embraced him.

"Call a general assembly. 1400hrs, that should give me time to stabilize the immediate situation. This mess is getting hashed out once and for all."

---

**Fifteen Minutes Earlier**

"Hawkgirl, Captain Atom, I've located Superboy.\" the youngest Green Lantern said softly.

"Hold position GL,\" Hawkgirl said. "We'll be there shortly. Do not approach without back-up."

"He's in a park off Keystone Way and 5th,\" Green Lantern reported. "No sign of the Rogues. We may be able to extract him without a fight."

"Don't count on it,\" Hawkgirl said. "He's Superman's clone, he can put up plenty of fight on his own."

"Four years ago, before your time, a robot designed to mimic Superman's powers went rogue,\" Captain Atom warned. "We lost two members of the League before it was put down."

"We've still got to try talking to the kid,\" Green Lantern said.

"Of course," Hawkgirl agreed as she joined him. "We have to try to get him to be reasonable." She glanced at their surroundings. "Lots of kids around. If this goes badly the first priority has to be to move the fight. Your powers are best suited for that. I also want you to make initial contact. You know him right?"

"I've spoken to him once or twice," Green Lantern protested.

"That's more than I can say," Hawkgirl shrugged.
"I'm in position," Captain Atom reported.

"Show-time kid," Hawkgirl said as she gave Green Lantern a light shove toward the park.

Green Lantern nodded. He walked across the street, approaching the park bench where Conner was sitting. "Superboy, you need to return with us to League Headquarters, immediately."

Conner glared at him angrily. "Don't call me that! And don't tell me what to do!" he snarled.

"I'm not asking you," Green Lantern stated. "I'm giving you a chance to do this the easy way."

Conner scowled. "The only thing I have to do is watch Owen. I don't owe you anything. Get lost."

"We gave you a chance," Green Lantern said and used his power to grab Conner and fling him toward the city's warehouse district. Hawkgirl, Captain Atom and Green Lantern flew after him.

Owen saw Conner torn away from him and started to scream.

Conner stood up in the center of the crater made by his landing and punched Captain Atom, the first of the three to reach him. "I don't have to go anywhere with you! Batman says!"

Green Lantern wrapped his powers around Conner like chains.

"The more you fight the harder you make this on yourself," Hawkgirl said.

"LEAVE! ME! ALONE!" Conner shouted. He could hear Owen crying. Green Lanterns' chains snapped. He grabbed Hawkgirl and threw her at the Lantern.

Captain Atom caught Conner from behind, pinning his arms to his sides. Conner dropped to one knee and threw the older man over his head.

Hawkgirl flew at him with her mace at ready. Conner used his freeze breath to coat her wings with ice. She smashed painfully into the ground.

Then Green Lantern's powers were wrapping around him, restraining him again. Conner surprised the Lantern by leaping right at him. His shoulder crashed into Green Lantern's stomach and they fell to the earth together. Green Lantern's arm made a sickening crack as they landed in a tangle. He cried out in pain.

Hawkgirl and Captain Atom exchanged a grim look. As Conner shoved Green Lantern away and stood Hawkgirl slammed her mace into his stomach. Then Captain Atom bit him with a blast of red-sun energy.

Conner screamed in outrage. He could still hear Owen crying for him back in the park. His fighting became less disciplined and more violent. He leapt on Captain Atom and pounded him relentlessly.

Hawkgirl brought her mace down on his back forcefully. His enraged bellow covered the sound of his ribs breaking. Conner twisted around and kicked the side of her knee, snapping the joint.

Captain Atom grabbed Conner's head and brought their foreheads together with all the force he could muster. Conner responded by blowing freeze breath into Captain Atom's face. Seeing her teammate's head encased in ice, Hawkgirl smashed her mace into the side of Conner's skull. It discharged a massive surge of energy.

Conner tumbled head-over-heels until he smashed up against a fire hydrant. He stood shakily and looked around as if confused. "Owen?" he turned toward the sound of Owens voice and crouched to
leap away. Hawkgirl brought the mace down on his shoulder, knocking to his knees.

Green Lantern, his arm supported by a power-ring cast, imprisoned Conner once again.

---

Flash slid under a jet of flames and into a large, polished sheet of ice that was proving a little too conveniently placed given the Mirrors' abilities.

"Why aren't you in school?" he asked Trickster as he snatched something, he wasn't even sure what it was supposed to do, out of the boy's hand before he could trigger it and tossed it away.

"Free period," Trickster yelled back. "Aren't I supposed to use that to prepare for my future career?"

Flash scooped up a handful of pebbles and threw them at bullet-speeds toward a boomerang that was making a return trip with loot.

"Should I be expecting Piper as well?" Flash asked.

"Jazz Band, like he'd ever skip that," Trickster replied but Flash wasn't listening. There was a police broadcast coming in.

Flash zig-zagged across the blasted street in front of jewelry store and grabbed Cold's wrist, forcing his gun up for a moment. "Conner's in a fight down in the warehouse district. Call a truce?" He released Cold and backed away.

"Hold!" Cold ordered the Rogues. "What's this about Con?"

"He's in a fight with three member of the JLA. We can continue here or I can break that up," Flash said.

"We'll hang back, let you try to end it," Cold said. "If they don't want to listen, Rogues take care of their own."

Flash nodded then vanished in a blur of speed.

Conner struggled weakly against Green Lantern's hold, his vision blurring. He was staying conscious only through sheer determination.

"What the hell is going on here?" Flash demanded angrily as he skidded to halt beside Conner.

"Owen?" Conner whimpered, his concussed brain almost unaware of the people he'd been fighting as he struggled blindly to get back to the crying child.

"We're taking him back to the League," Hawkgirl declared. She beat her wings a few times to shake off the ice, then hovered a slightly off the ground to avoid putting weight on her damaged knee. While still keeping Conner restrained Green Lantern went over to check on Captain Atom, who's head was still frozen.

Flash ignored them. "Conner, where is Owen?" he asked.

"Owen, gotta protect Owen."

"Conner! Listen to me. Where is Owen?" Flash demanded.

"Park with fountains. Owen's crying," Conner rambled.
Flash vanished and reappeared a moment later with the blonde toddler in his arms. Flash glared darkly at Green Lantern. "Let him go. Now!" he snapped. Batman and Martian Manhunter arrived as Green Lantern complied.

Once freed Conner took step toward Owen then crashed dizzily to his knees. Flash nudged him to sit on the ground then put the screaming, terrified toddler in his lap. While Conner soothed Owen, Flash grabbed a handful of dirt and rubbed the ice encasing Captain Atom's head, using friction to melt it away. "You'll be fine," he told Captain Atom coldly. Then he turned his back on the three JLA'ers and went to check Conner's injuries. Batman and J'Onn pointedly placed themselves between Conner and the other three.

"We saw the news report," Green Lantern protested to the three senior JLA members. "Superboy was going dark."

"Go back to headquarters," Batman ordered flatly. "We'll deal with you later."

Conner ignored all of them, even Flash who was tilting his head back to watch his eyes dilate, unevenly, as his face was turned toward the sun. Conner only cuddled Owen closer. At being placed in familiar arms the toddler had gone from screaming bloody murder to quietly sniffling and trying to burrow into Conner's chest.

"We had a justified concern. He refused to co-operate," Hawkgirl exclaimed.

"Hell," Flash swore softly as his fingers encountered the damage left by Hawkgirl's mace. "Depressed skull fracture," he reported.

"Get out of my sight," Batman told the trio, his voice a dangerous rumble. Conner made a small, pained sound and a baterang appeared in Batman's hand, his eyes narrowed. Hawkgirl, Green Lantern and Captain Atom retreated quickly.

"Mount Justice," J'Onn suggested. "We can treat him there."

Batman grimaced "Assuming he lets us. He only reluctantly agreed to visit Aqualad at Mount Justice with several of the Rogues as back-up. And that was before this. We take him anywhere and he'll think we're with those idiots."

Flash looked up. "We need an adult he trusts."

"I don't see any way around it," Batman said unhappily. "Can you contact any of them?"

"Actually, not an issue," Cold stated as the Rogues stepped out of the shadows. Batman and J'Onn tensed at the number of weapons trained on them. After a moment's reluctance Cold pointed his gun toward the sky, the others warily followed suit.

"I was in the middle of stopping a robbery when I heard," Flash said. "We all agreed, this took priority."

Cold crossed the lines and knelt beside Conner. He put his hand on the boy's arm. "You did good. Owen's safe. Now what say you give him to his old man and let us take care of you?"

With a nervous look at Batman and Martian Manhunter, Boomerang slipped his weapon back into his belt and went to reclaim Owen. For several moments Conner blinked at him in confusion then Owen stretched up his hands to his father. "Papa! My Con-Con has owies," he cried. "Bad people hurt him!"
"Yeah," Boomerang said gruffly. He started to give Conner a small pat on the head then thought better of it as he saw blood running down the side of the teenager's face. He picked Owen up and shifted him into the crook of his arm, freeing his dominant hand. "We're gonna see your Con-Con gets better," he promised Owen.

"Conner," J'Onn said gently. "I am going to use my powers to move you. We need to get you medical attention."

As he felt J'Onn's telekinesis wrap around him, Conner started to struggle. "Easy now," Cold said, taking Conner's hand. He glared at Batman challengingly. "Nobody's gonna hurt you. No worries, you let us look out for you."

Chapter End Notes

Logic behind my choice of the three JLAers who got to play the bad guys: The Hawks and Captain Atom both lean strongly toward hit first think later in runs I'm familiar with. I'm most familiar with Kyle from Grant Morrison's run on JLA where he ended up in the role of team rookie, so he's more strongly influenced than most by his older teammates' opinions.
Factions

The general milling around and speculation about why a meeting of the entire League had been called stopped dead when Batman and Flash entered the room. Even Batman didn't normally get that fast of a reaction, but with the normally easy going Flash at his shoulder looking equally grim everyone was silenced instantly.

With a flick of his wrist Batman covered the conference table in a flood of pictures and medical images.

Captain Marvel picked one of the pictures up. His eyes darkened dangerously. "The Rogues did that to him?"


"It's not as if he didn't do his share of damage!" Hawkgirl protested, drawing attention to her and Kyle Rayner's casts as well as Captain Atom's scuffed and dented appearance.

Batman glared at them coldly. "You three ordered a minor, whom you have no authority over and whom you barely know to come with you. When he refused you attacked him to force his compliance. As a side-effect, your actions placed a two-year-old in deadly peril."

"We didn't know about the kid," Kyle protested as Captain Atom stated. "We took measures to protect the children from being caught in the cross-fire."

"You left a two-year-old unattended within twenty feet of a well-trafficked road and a fountain with a pool," Flash pointed out angrily. "Do you honestly need me to explain how lucky it is that little boy isn't dead right now?"

"Superboy joined a group of super-villains!" Hawkgirl exclaimed. "How were we supposed to know he'd be babysitting?"

"Observation? Listening to him? You shouldn't have even been there in the first place," Batman growled. "Your actions were no better than a kidnapper's. You got hurt when your victim resisted. You got less than what you deserved."

Wonder Woman looked up from studying one of the pictures spread across the table. "There is no swelling associated with the bruising around the eyes," she observed worriedly.

"What does that mean?" Captain Marvel asked.

"It means it's not a black eye. It's a symptom of intracranial bleeding," Batman stated. He turned toward Hawkgirl, his eyes narrowed, "The result of being hit in the head with a mace."

"He's Superman's clone," Hawkgirl defended herself. "It shouldn't have hurt him that badly!"

"He's sixteen. He's a head shorter than Superman and roughly fifty pounds lighter. An idiot would notice that he can't fly. He doesn't have heat vision or X-Ray vision. Neither SuperBOY's body nor his powers have fully matured. Forgetting all that, Captain Atom hit him with red-light energy, weakening him. You might have taken that into account before trying to cave in his skull," Batman growled. "Martian Manhunter and Red Tornado are not here because they're currently monitoring Superboy's condition, if the bleeding doesn't stop soon they're going to have to drill a hole in his skull to relieve the build up of pressure."
Captain Marvel and several others looked sickened.

"Okay!" Kyle exclaimed. "We were out of line. We should have known about the little kid. We shouldn't have let the fight get that out of control."

"Which only happened because Superboy broke Kyle's arm," Hawkgirl interrupted. "We got a little rough after Kyle got hurt, but until then we'd just been trying to contain him. He wouldn't quit fighting."

"A little rough?" Batman demanded angrily. "Three broken ribs, a cracked clavicle, a grade II concussion and a basilar skull fracture leading to intracranial bleeding? If that's a little rough, I'm practically gentle with the Joker. Captain Atom's red-sun energy attack weakened him, but every serious injury he has traces back to your mace."

"The last time we fought something like him Liberty Belle died!" Hawkgirl cried.

"You lost control after Kyle got hurt, because of what happened with the robot," Flash said. "Has it occurred to you that the entire time you were fighting, he was listening to Owen scream?"

"We were wrong," Kyle stated loudly. "But still, you can't stand there and say it's not a problem that someone with Superman's power is switching sides!"

"Superboy was created to be a weapon. He can not be allowed to fall into our enemies' hands," Captain Atom agreed.

"Since when do we detain people for who they associate with or what they might do?" Green Arrow demanded. "Didn't think we lived in a police state here."

"I don't see why there's all this fuss about the clone," Hawkman said. "It's not as if we're talking about a real person here."

The next thing he knew he was flat on his back, with Canary's heel pressing down on his wind-pipe. "Mind repeating that?" she snarled. "I don't think I heard you right."

John Steward used his power-ring to separate the two. Canary stalked over to Batman and Flash's end of room. Green Arrow followed her while Hawkman went to stand behind Hawkgirl. He put his hands on her shoulders protectively and glared at Batman.

"He's too dangerous," the Atom stated then joined group forming around Hawkgirl.

"We've fought highly dangerous enemies before, we will again," Zatara said. "If Superboy becomes one of them we will deal with it, when it happens." He stayed seated. Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel and John Steward nodded in agreement.

"I do not consider it wise to leave him with the Rogues," Aquaman said. "But trying to force him away from them only worsens the situation. Beyond that, I know my Kaldur'ahm well enough to know that he will not stand by while you attack his friend for what he may, someday become." His gaze dropped to the pictures scattered across the table and his expression darkened dangerously. "Any of you who raises their hand against Kaldur may consider all of Atlantis your enemy."

After Batman and Flash left the Rogue, minus Cold who had been allowed in the Infirmary to keep Conner calm, clustered uncomfortably in the kitchen at Mount Justice. Batman told them he'd deactivated security in the kitchen, lounge and associated bathrooms and to stay out of everywhere else if they valued an intact skin. No one was quite ready to test his warning. No one wanted to start
a fight when it would possibly pull the people treating Conner's injuries away from him.

Trickster pulled out his cell phone.

"So how'd the job go?" Piper asked as soon as he answered. "Get anything neat from the safety deposit boxes?"

"Job's old news," Trickster said. "Couple of JLA mingers hurt Con pretty bad."

"Fuck."

"Flasher put a stop to it. He's still our Flash. The other mentors ain't so bad either. Even the Batman, scary dude but he made the three that done it scarper, glad I ain't in their shoes. We're all at Wally's club house, even Owen. The Martian and the robot are patchin' Con up," Trickster explained.

"I'll get Wally to bring me by, be there soon." Piper said. He thought for a moment then forged his way through the crowded halls and made it to Wally's class just before the bell rang.

Piper grabbed Wally by the arm and dragged him out into the hall. "Dude! Mr. Kilm is going to mark me tardy even though he SAW you force me out the door!" Wally complained.

"Playing normal's out. Your almighty heroes in the JLA hurt Conner," Piper stated.

"WHAT!" Wally exclaimed.

"I didn't get the details, but your uncle stopped the fight. He and Batman took Conner back to your base to get fixed up, took the Rogues along. I need a ride," Piper explained.

"There's a zeta-beam platform at Uncle Barry's, but I've got to tell Robin," Wally said even as he started texting his friend. /SB hurt. JLA, IDK who./

/AYS?/ Robin texted back a moment later.

"Talk and walk," Piper complained. "It's faster."

"As soon as my hands are free I'm carrying you. That's faster," Wally snapped. /SRSLY. OMY to MJ. Rs there./

/SYT w/Art. Tell MsM. Out/

Wally tried to call M'Gann but couldn't get an answer. "Let's go," he said to Piper. They arrived at Mount Justice a few minutes later, Wally looking more than slightly winded from the effort of carrying Piper.

M'Gann arrived a few minutes after they did. "Kaldur told me," she said. "Uncle J'Onn's treating Conner. It's... Kaldur's about sick with worry. How could they hurt him like that!" she exclaimed angrily. "How could they! They're supposed to be heroes! Uncle J'Onn wouldn't tell me who did it. But I think it was Hawkgirl, Kyle Rayner and Captain Atom, he's too mad at them to hide it."

"Good to know who the enemy is," Piper said as they headed toward the sounds of other people.

"Yeah, it's getting hard to tell every day," Wally replied bitterly.

They turned the corner and found Heatwave piling flammable in the hall. "Rory, not the time or place," Piper said rolling his eyes.
"Oh it is," Heatwave replied. "That's the main entrance. Anyone I don't like comes in, this hall's gonna give 'em a preview of the fiery depths of hell itself."

"How's Conner?" Wally asked.

Heatwave grimaced. "Nobody's saying. Got his bell rung, hard. The mace-girl with wings," he reported. "Last we were told they're hoping the pressure in his brain goes down for they've gotta do something drastic."

"I'll go see if I can get anything more out of them seeing as I've got heroes to back me," Piper said

"Maybe I'd better stay here," Wally said. "Help Rory with friend-foe recognition, you know... And keep the base from being burned down around our ears."

"I'll stay," M'Gann volunteered with a dark look in her eyes. "Like you said, it's getting harder to tell who the bad guys are. But I'm a mind-reader. No one who wants to hurt Conner gets past me."

"Okay..." Wally said, backing away nervously. He wasn't sure how to deal with an angry M'Gann. He led Piper to the Infirmary and stuck his head in the door. Wally squinted at the brightness of the room and realized a number of full-spectrum lamps had been set up to mimic the sun and strengthen Conner. To maximize exposure, most of Conner's clothes had been removed. Wally cringed at the sight of him, the entire left side of Conner's back and the opposing shoulder were a deep angry purple shot through with lines of black. Cold sat beside Conner, carefully sponging blood out of his hair. Kaldur stood at the other side of Conner's bed his hand resting over Conner's while Red Tornado monitored his vital signs. J'Onn sat cross-legged on the far side of the room, his eyes closed in concentration.

"How is he?" Wally asked.

"Please, not now Wally," J'Onn said without opening his eyes. "I need to concentrate to block out his pain."

Wally nodded and began his retreated.

"Wait. Tell the others that the pressure has stabilized," Red Tornado said. "The bleeding has most likely stopped."

Wally sighed in relief and gave Reddy a quick thumbs up. As he and Piper headed for the kitchen to spread the news they saw Evan moving mirrors and other reflective surfaces to strategic points around the base. "MA, good news," Piper said. "Con's on the mend according to the android."

A quick smiled flashed across Evan's face, "Hell, took long enough for those powers of his to kick in," he said.

In the kitchen, Digger was trying to feed Owen his supper but after the day he'd had the little boy was fussy. As Piper and Wally came in, Owen shoved his bowl on the floor. "Oh come on now!" Digger complained. "That's the second one to go that way."

"Where's my Con?" Owen whined. "I want him."

"Now I told you, we're still fixing Con's owies, 'member?" Digger sighed.

"Fix now!" Owen cried.

"I wish we could kiddo," Artemis said as she joined them.
"Reddy said he's doing better," Wally relaid as he patted Owen on the head and mopped up the milk and cereal. "Where's Robin?" he asked Artemis.

"Computer room, he saw what Heatwave was doing and said he had a better idea," Artemis replied.

Scudder paused in the middle of positioning a gleaming sheet of metal opposite of the Zeta-beam platform to look over the shoulder of the masked boy who was typing furiously on the main computer. On screen was a list of JLA members, broken up by a number of blank spots.

"What are you up to?" Scudder asked.

"Fixing security around here," Robin explained as he erased Superman's name from the list of people authorized to enter Mount Justice. After he finished deleting names he started working on a new program.

"And that's?" Scudder asked.

"Before I was locking the door against anyone I don't know that I can trust," Robin said. "This is electrifying it against anyone I know can't be trusted near Conner."

Scudder's eyes widened as he realized what Robin's program would do if any of the three who'd attacked Conner tried to beam into Mount Justice. "Not bad kid."

Robin smiled at him, showing teeth. "I'm a Bat, we're not known for being nice."

Clark looked around him with horror, the League was tearing itself apart before his eyes. Splitting into hostile factions.

"Superman? You agree with us right?" Kyle asked. "I know it's not fair that Superboy can't be treated like everyone else, but he's just too powerful for us to ignore how unstable he is."

Clark dearly wanted to join the neutral party and say the clone wasn't any concern of his. That he'd fight Superboy if he became a threat but until that happened couldn't he just ignore Superboy's entire existence?

"He's not unstable, he's angry. Who wouldn't be?" Canary snapped. "He went from being locked in a glass case and treated as nothing more than a weapon to being rejected and isolated by us to the point where he practically stopped wanting to be alive. We created this problem. All of the other kids under our care have a parent or mentor, someone who's specifically looking out for their well-being. Superboy got treated like an after-thought. The obvious person to be his mentor didn't want the job, no one else stepped up. Every one of us just sat around and waited for Superman to get over himself and deal with the kid. You can't just put a kid's needs on hold while the adults get their acts together. But that's exactly what we did. Superboy's damn well justified in seeking out people who'll care more about him than we did."

'And that was why I can't be neutral,' Clark thought, 'According to them my being neutral is the root of the problem.'

"He's not some innocent victim!" Hawkman growled, angry and defensive on behalf of his lover. "It'll be months before Shiera can stand on that leg again."

"Poor her," Green Arrow mocked, always ready with a sarcastic word, always contentious. "Maybe next time she'll think twice before attacking someone for sitting in a park."
John sighed and readied his ring again as Green Arrow and Hawkman glared at each other.

"He was out of control!" There was fear underlying the anger in Hawkgirl's voice. Clark knew she was reliving the death of her best friend at the hands of something that had been given his powers.

"Only out of your control." Batman stated flatly. "We punished him for existing. Now we punish him for our mistakes. Then we demand that he gives us unquestioning loyalty and obedience in return? He has no reason to believe in us."

'Us.' Clark noticed the mentors tended to stress that word. They might hold him ultimately responsible for the situation with Superboy, but they weren't exactly happy with their own actions either. They were determined to make amends and maybe too willing to give Superboy his own way because of that. Clark couldn't believe that the Rogues were as good for the clone as Batman claimed.

Even the mentors who weren't actively feeling guilty about Superboy were still on edge. Clark could see Barry's criminologist training in the pictures he'd taken documenting Superboy's injuries. Seeing one of their kids' friends as the subject of a police report was upsetting the other mentors on a visceral level. Clark wondered if it had been Batman's idea for Barry to take the pictures. It would be like him to know the reaction they'd spark and to use it.

Clark wondered if there was something wrong with him. Oh, if he'd been there he certainly would have stopped the fight. Hopefully before Shiera or Kyle were hurt as well as Superboy. But he wasn't reacting to the pictures the way the others were. If the boy in them had been a complete stranger Clark knew they would have hit him harder. But all he could see when he looked at Superboy was a twisted reflection. Put a picture of himself at sixteen beside one of Superboy and the only difference would be the hair style and the anger in the clone's expression. No child matched their parent that perfectly. Bruce had called the clone his son, but all Clark could see was doppelganger, an ill omen. Look what he'd brought them to: The League was splintering, breaking over a boy who never should have existed in the first place. His fault too, because he could have handled it differently. Should never have let it get to this point. 'I hope you know what you're doing, Bruce.' he whispered, the sound lost under the increasingly strident voices of the other League members. Then Superman stood up, everyone's attention locked on to him.

"Several months ago a teenaged boy showed up out of no where expecting me to be his father," Clark said. "I didn't know how to handle it, how to react to him. I still don't. All it means is that I'm human and fallible. It doesn't make him less than human."

Seeing the wind taken out of Superboy's most adamant detractors sails, Flash stepped in for the kill. "I've never been the territorial type," he said plainly. "But a lot of us are, and the League's always respected that. So I'm saying it: Stay out of the Twin Cities. It's not just about Superboy, I have two bonefide Rogues who also happen to be fifteen-year-old boys who are more mischief than malice. They've also got a LOT more intelligence than they have common sense, I hold out hope that they'll eventually out grow that stage. At the absolute least, I intend to see that they have the chance to out grow it. After today, I don't trust you to deal with children. Not my Wally, not Superboy and not Piper or Trickster either. Stay out of my city and stay the hell away from the kids under my protection."

Batman turned to Wonder Woman and the others who'd opted to stay neutral. "If you need us, we'll be available," he said. "But we'll be basing out of Mount Justice for the foreseeable future. Call before you drop in, if I know Robin you've been uninvited, emphatically."

Within a few days of the fight Conner was declared healthy enough to leave, he immediately
retreated to Central City and the Rogues' hide out. Batman, Black Canary, Flash, Martian
Manhunter, Red Tornado and Green Arrow shifted their JLA base of operations back to Mount
Justice. Having their mentors working out of the same base, Young Justice quickly determined that
they'd rather hang-out at the Rogues' hide-out when they weren't on missions. The constant stream of
'Baby heroes' dropping in was a source of endless complaints from Cold, but he never quite forbade
them from coming over... even if the Rogues did have to switch to planning their operations around
Captain Boomerang's kitchen table instead of at the base.

Time passed. Conner continued living with the Rogues and went back to going on missions with
Young Justice, sometimes with Trickster or Piper in tow and Batman made a deal with Mirror
Apprentice where he was paid a retainer to keep an eye on particularly risky missions and be
available to provide a quick avenue of retreat if need be.

Conner went through a dozen different code-names in twice as many weeks. Then more or less
settled on just being Conner for awhile, at least until he'd really had a chance to establish who he was
before he tried coming up with an ulterior persona.

With time Conner gradually stopped acting skittish around Young Justice's adult advisors and the
Flash. But even after six months he still looked at the rest of the Justice League as if he expected
them to attack him or lock him away at any moment. It didn't help that a not insignificant portion of
the League continued to watch Conner like they'd watch a rabid wolf. But Conner rarely left Central
City unless it was on Young Justice business and all they really saw was that he was gaining skill
and experience and that he liked using his freeze breath a lot more than Superman ever had. Nothing
to justify their continued wariness.

A crisis or two happened and everyone was forced to pull together. Gradually the tension eased
between the two broken halves of the Justice League. Old habits and friendships began to reassert
themselves. Clark Kent and Bruce Wayne went back to meeting in an obscure dinner for pie and
coffee every few weeks.

During the seventh such meeting Clark got up the nerve to bring up the subject. "He's still living with
the Rogues."

"What did you expect?" Bruce asked. "After what happened I'm surprised that he didn't cut ties with
us all together. If things had of gone a little bit worse than they did..."

"I looked into the Rogues' backgrounds, they're not harmless, or particularly nice," Clark said.

"They're pragmatic enough to place limits on how far they'll go, not to play their game with Flash for
keeps because they might not want to be a part of society but they do understand how far they can
push before their existence becomes intolerable. They're clannish, Conner's like them in that, needing
to belong to something but not able to belong with the world around him. He doesn't have to be
normal to fit in with them."

Bruce paused to finish his coffee then asked, "At this point your reasons won't change much, it's just
my curiosity talking: But why do you fight so hard against having a relationship with Conner? I hate
saying it because of the circumstances that brought it about, but having Dick in my life is one of the
best things that ever happened to me."

"I hope I'm wrong," Clark said after a long silence that he spent playing with the remnants of his pie.
"But my powers with his background? It's not going to turn out well. I think it was too late for him
before we ever found him. I can't remember a time when I wasn't being constantly reminded of how
frail the world was in comparison to myself. He was 'born' sixteen and programmed to see himself as
a weapon."
"'Be careful. Be gentle'?" Bruce asked. "You were a child Clark, it's what you say when a small child picks up anything more breakable than they are. I've still got the Rogues bugged. I hear that refrain every time Owen gets his hands on one of Hartley's rats... Or James' DS for that matter. It's normal for little kids to need to be reminded to be careful of delicate things, the only difference with you was the percentage of the world that was breakable in your hands."

"I home-schooled until Junior High," Clark said. "Recess just presented too much potential for disaster, too much excitement, too much temptation to forget myself. My parents let me got to Junior High, but they told the school I had asthma and couldn't participate in PE. I was strictly forbidden from playing sports of any kind. I was thirteen. I broke the rules. I also broke my best friend's arm, compound fracture, the bones ripped right through the skin. Because I wanted to be normal and forgot how different I was for all of five minutes. All my life my parents told me to be careful, but it took seeing Pete's bones sticking out of his arm for it to sink in. Conner's a lot stronger than I was at thirteen and he's still getting more powerful. He sees himself as a weapon."

"He does," Bruce said. "You were told to be careful. He was told that he was a weapon, a force of destruction. In the end it worked out the same. As long as he's in his right mind I worry more about his tendency to over-estimate himself than about him forgetting how much danger he can represent."

"How can you say that?" Clark demanded.

"I don't think you have the slightest understand of what it means that Conner sees himself as a weapon," Bruce sighed. "You think it makes him more likely to go out and kill people? It doesn't, it just makes him painfully afraid that's all he's good for. If any thing he's more aware of his powers than you are."

Seeing Clark still looked doubtful Bruce sighed. "Forget the cause, look at the effects. You worry about him being careless with his powers, hurting someone because you think he's less aware than you are of how frail human life can be. But Conner spends hours everyday being used as a combination jungle-gym and teddy bear by a toddler... and most of Owen's friends at the park take their lead from Owen in climbing all over him. Conner's never so much as bruised any of them."

"I still don't like that he lives with criminals," Clark said.

"You should have figured out that you care who he lives with while you still had some say in the matter," Bruce said unsympathetically.
Conner watched curiously as Evan leaned over the side of the couch, clutching desperately at the sides of the conveniently placed trash can and lost what little breakfast he'd been able to choke down. "Trickster told me 'War of the Worlds' is a bunch of crap," Conner stated conversationally. "Human germs can't affect me. Since there aren't any Kryptonian bugs on the planet I'm never going to get sick."

Evan freed one hand to flip Conner off then went back to hurling. "And we hate you," Piper groaned from the other couch that had been hauled into the back bedroom which had officially been designated the 'plague carrier' sector of the base.

"Since I'm immune Len told me to tell you that you're both still under quarantine, job or no job," Conner passed on cheerfully. "He says you can't come because you'll ralph on the loot."

"Sucks," Piper complained. "First Metropolis target Cold says is worth it and a virus takes me out before the job even starts."

Conner made his way deeper in the room, balancing steaming bowls of soup on a tray. He set one down by Piper. "Sam says to feed you lots of liquids. It's bad to throw up on an empty stomach."

"You sure you want to stay here and play nursemaid?" Piper checked. "It is Metropolis after all, you could go embarrass you-know-who."

"Naw, I used to spend all my time chasing after him, trying to impress him or just wishing for him to care about me," Conner said. "What a total waste. Ticking him off isn't worth the bother; it'd just be giving him more of me."

Piper made a face, "Go and be mature about it, spoil all our fun."

"I'll help with your next plan to tick off your parents," Conner offered. "I mean that's different, you guys still care about each other even if they're jerks."

"You mind coming as my date to a big family dinner?" Piper asked hopefully.

"Sure," Conner replied without a second thought.

"Really?" Piper exclaimed sitting up and forgetting he was sick. Both he and Evan managed to find the strength to stare at Conner in shock for several seconds.

Conner looked at them oddly for a moment. "Oh yeah, I forgot, the Gennomes told me dating your own gender was the less typical option with humans." He rolled his eyes. "The Gennomes thought humans were really silly about the whole thing. They're much more sensible, they just don't have genders." Piper and Evan looked equally disturbed at how Conner apparently didn't think being gender-less was at all strange, but really it wasn't weird enough to actually distract them from being sick for more than a few moments, much to their disappointment.

As he left the room, Conner blew a shield of super-cooled air ahead of him then stepped into it. After a few seconds, long enough to freeze any germs that might have gotten on him, he shook off the ice. Everyone who'd gotten the flu seemed so miserable, he really didn't want to get near Owen with any germs on him.

"I told them," he yelled to the rest of the crew, who were in the middle of gearing up. "Actually I
don't think they'd have made it out the door even if you'd wanted them to come."

Trickster nodded in agreement. "It's a miserable one, just glad I'm shut of it."

"Okay, everyone ready?" Cold asked.

"I think I'm contractually obliged to remind you that stealing's wrong," Conner pointed out with a grin. Everyone grabbed the first thing handy and threw it at him.

Boomerang handed over Owen. "Do not give him pixie sticks again," he warned. "I don't care if he begs or uses puppy eyes or whatever other tricks he's got up his sleeve. He doesn't need that much sugar, I swear it's almost like he's a speedster when he's that hyper, damned disturbing."

"Wally on pixie-sticks is worse," Conner argued. "That's why I let Owen help me eat them. We had to do something to keep Wally from getting them."

"No pixie sticks!"

"I promise," Conner sighed. "How about you?" he asked Owen.

"Candy yum!" Owen declared.

"Er, we're promising NOT to eat candy," Conner corrected.

"No candy?" Owen's eyes welled up with tears.

Conner looked over at Boomerang. "Maybe one piece?" he asked.

Boomerang shook his head and sighed. "It's your funeral," he said. "We're not going to be back before morning."

"Let's go, we're on the clock," Mirror Master reminded.

"See ya kid," Cold said as Mirror Master opened the way.

"Yeah... Be careful," Conner said uncertainly. He didn't want to admit it, but the fact that they weren't going up against the Flash made him a little nervous. Flash understood the game, Conner wasn't sure Superman had any notion of how to be anything other than sanctimonious and officious. He'd certainly never seen any other aspect of the man.

Superman froze for a moment when he saw who was hitting the STAR Lab convoy. He was struck by the duel realization that this was an opportunity to remove the bad influences from Superboy's life and that he wouldn't get any kind of thanks for this... especially not from Conner.

'It's about doing what's right, not what's popular,' Superman reminded himself. 'They were criminals attacking an armored vehicle in his city and that couldn't be allowed to pass. They were amoral. Someone with Superboy's powers shouldn't be allowed to live with people like them, it was asking for trouble.

Superman tilted his head to the side, listening closely to pin-point the different Rogues' locations. Trickster was in the air, scouting for him most likely. Cold had derailed the convoy truck with a patch of black ice on the road. With the truck on it's side and immobile, Heatwave was melting his way in, incidentally causing the guards inside to drop from heat-exhaustion before they could even get a shot in. It took Superman several minutes to pick out Mirror Master and Boomerang lurking on the outskirts of the battleground. No matter how closely he listened he couldn't pick up any trace of
Mirror Apprentice or the Pied Piper. Clark had to admit a certain amount of relief not to find any sign of Superboy either, apparently the Rogues hadn't completely corrupted him yet.

Trickster was the obvious first target. Take out their point-man and air-support quickly then he'd have the advantage fighting the remainder of the Rogues. But Mirror Master was their avenue of retreat, as long as he was free there was a good chance that some or most of the Rogues would escape. That wasn't an acceptable outcome.

Superman landed several blocks away from the crime scene and approached on foot. It was more Batman's style, taking his opponents out one by one through stealth, but if he confronted them and they ran they'd still have Superboy.

Once Superman was in the building where Mirror Master was lurking he used his X-Ray vision to locate the Rogue then blasted straight through a wall with his heat vision to melt the strange looking gun in Mirror Master's hand. Before the orange and green clad criminal could pull another weapon Superman had wrapped a length of steel tightly around him, pinning his arms to his sides and securing him to one of the building's support columns.

With Mirror Master out of the equation Superman confronted the rest of the Rogues openly. He flew up and grabbed Trickster by the collar of his cape. "You should have stayed in Central," he said. "Unlike Flash I don't make excuses for crooks."

Out of the corner of his eye Superman saw a boomerang spinning toward him. He moved aside but misjudged it's curving path. The boomerang struck him in the back and exploded. Superman’s body shielded Trickster from the blast and the teen used the distraction to release the clasp on his cape. As it came free a jolt of electricity changed the fabric causing it to wrap around Superman and cling. "You're right, you're nothing like Flasher," Trickster said as he tumbled free. "Flash cares more about people than about keeping up appearances. You couldn't stand Conner 'cause of how it looked huh? But now that he's with us you care, 'cause that looks worse yet?"

Several more boomerangs exploded near Superman, not doing much harm but it was disorienting. As Superman ripped free of Trickster's booby-trapped cape it occurred to him that if he hadn't taken Mirror Master out first he'd be caught in an unforgiving cross-fire. Trickster hadn't been a look-out, he'd been bait. Fighting a speedster the Rogues favored tactics that lured Flash into making attacks they could predict, so they could aim where they planned for him to be rather than where he was.

"Mirror Master's not responding," Cold shouted. "Heatwave, my turn on the truck. Go find out what's with Scudder."

Free of the cape Superman found himself harassed by Trickster's exploding yo-yos. Like Captain Boomerang's weapon of choice, the yo-yos unpredictable paths made them hard to dodge or counter. The teen also had an annoying habit of targeting his face.

Superman could sense the fight beginning to escalate. He decided he needed to get Trickster out of it. He didn't want to risk a repeat of what had happened to Superboy with the teenaged Rogue.

The next time Trickster attacked with one of his yo-yo's Superman ignored the explosion and grabbed the string. He used it to yank Trickster into reach. Then he pulled off Trickster's air-walks and tossed them away. Finding himself high in the sky and suddenly without the means to fly Trickster's fear of heights took hold with a vengeance and he latched on to the nearest solid object with all his strength.

Boomerang caught himself mid-throw. He couldn't risk an explosion with Trickster clinging to
Superman like a monkey.

Superman landed on the tip-top of a building. He carefully pried Trickster off him, so as not to accidentally break the boy’s fingers forcing them open, and transferred him to the antenna that capped the building. "Don't leave me up here! Get me down you bastard!" Trickster begged, his heart thudding wildly as his phobia took hold.

"I'll be back for you when the fight's over," Superman promised.

Trickster hugged the antenna tighter and started cursing arrogant assholes who made premature assumptions about who was going to win the fight.

"You know, this'd be easier if you wore flame-retardant gear like a sensible person," Heatwave commented to Mirror Master as he adjusted his flame-thrower to serve as a cutting torch.

"Rory, you are NOT a sensible person," Mirror Master sighed. He squirmed as far to one side as his bonds allowed and gritted his teeth in anticipation. Then his eyes widened. "Behind you!" he exclaimed.

Heatwave spun around and cut loose. The narrow band of blue-white flame cut through Superman's costume and left a thin welt on his arm, as if he'd brushed up against a stove.

"Damn," Heatwave cursed as he realized he’d already maxed out his weapon's thermal output to cut through the steel bar holding Mirror Master captive. And Superman had only taken a slight burn. In a few seconds Heatwave's flame-thrower had been ripped off his back and tossed out of the building while another length of steel had been used to bind him to a support pillar a few yards from where Mirror Master was imprisoned.

As Superman flew out the hole in the side of the building yet another exploding boomerang hit him. This one was strong enough to knock him back through the wall. Superman suddenly realized what Batman had meant when he said the Rogues didn't play for keeps: They weren't going all out, they were still holding back and attuning their attacks to his defensive capabilities. He couldn't remember the last time, outside of friendly spars within the JLA, where he'd fought someone who gave a damn if he survived the fight, and most were actively trying to kill him.

"Just because you hate heights doesn't mean you aren't high-wire trained," Trickster told himself through gritted teeth. It had been four years since he'd worked without the personal safety net of his air-walks and the intervening time had only intensified his acrophobia. He hooked his knees around a support beam then let himself fall back. "Perfectly secure. Now just open your damned eyes." Seeing the ground twenty stories beneath him Trickster's stomach churned at the vertigo inducing view. He reached up into his bag of tricks, taking several obnoxiously pink capsules out. Then he paused to watch the flow of the fight.

Boomerang was using his explosions to rattle Superman and force him down into Cold's firing range. No one else seemed to be left standing. Trickster timed his throw to coordinate with Boomerang and Cold and let fly. The pink capsule struck Superman in the back of the head and exploded into a mass of goo that engulfed most of his upper-body. It was already half-hardened by the time Cold's next blast encased the superhero in ice.

Superman fell over a dozen feet before the ice and goo shattered, exploding outward, unable to contain either his strength or his heat vision. His cape hung in tattered ruins as the better part of it was ripped off along with the ice while a healthy amount of Trickster's pink goo remained, particularly
where it had adhered to Superman's hair like gum. "I think we may have ticked him off mates," Boomerang commented, noting the way Superman's eyes continued to glow with the potential for destruction.

"Then we're approaching even," Trickster declared unrepentantly as he readied another capsule.

Superman swooped down on Boomerang's position. He grabbed the man by his collar and hauled him up high above the city. "You wouldn't drop me?" Boomerang asked a bit nervously.

"I wouldn't struggle too much if I were you," Superman suggested darkly.

"Right-o," Boomerang agreed. He agreed even more emphatically when Superman left him hanging from a flag pole well above the streets of Metropolis. Struggling was the last thing he was planning to do.

As Superman returned to confront Cold he tried to stay out of Trickster's range. The teen was securely captive but still finding ways to be irritating. Clark wondered briefly if peanut-butter would work on the pink goo hardening in his hair. 'Probably not.'

"You're the only one left," he told Cold. "You're not going to escape. Why make this harder on yourself than it has to be?"

"Well, first because we got a nice advance payment to keep you on this side of the city and the second installment goes up for every minute you don't show over there," Cold replied. "But mostly because I don't like you."

Superman hesitated, he glanced across the city.

"Well, aren't you going to fly off and see what we were paid so very well to distract you from?" Cold asked.

"And leave you with Superboy?"

"Conner," Cold corrected icily. "And since when do you care if he's alive or dead?"

"I never wanted him to kill himself!" Clark snapped.

"You just wish he'd never been born," Cold stated. "Odd, how the vast distinction wasn't clear to him."

"You're criminals!" Superman exclaimed.

"Oh, I'm sure there are better people out there he could have latched on to," Cold admitted. "But you're not one of them. You've just been waiting for him to screw up. Just waiting for something, anything, so you can say you were right not to trust him. You've never done him anything but harm."

"What's it going to be hero?" Cold asked when Superman simply continued to glare at him. "Hurt the kid one more time or go find out about whatever it is that we've been keeping you from?"

"You're NOT good for him," Superman declared.

"How the hell would you know?" Cold asked, setting himself to fight.
"Ick!" Owen declared wrinkling his nose at the hot cereal Conner had put in front of him. "Want candy!"

"You ate all the candy last night," Conner lied without remorse. "Then you jumped on your bed when you were supposed to be sleeping."

Owen grinned unrepentantly.

"And there's no candy left," Conner finished.


Owen looked at the oatmeal doubtfully. It looked boring, nothing at all like the brightly colored and wonderfully appealing stuff known as candy.

A knock at the inner door summoned Conner. "Yummy cereal!" he repeated before going to answer it.

When Conner found Barry Allen standing on the landing the only thing he could think of was the violation of the unspoken rule where Flash and the other mentors pretended not to know where their younger partners had been hanging out for the last six months.

"Conner, I'm sorry," Barry said.

Conner shook his head in denial. Behind him Evan appeared leaning unsteadily on the doorjam to the sickroom. "Who got nabbed?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm sorry," Barry repeated. "They were all arrested."

Conner sat down hard, his head spinning.

"Fuck," Evan swore. He staggered over to Conner and leaned on his shoulder. "This happens. Not everyone at once ever before and that really sucks, but jail happens. We'll deal, they'll deal. Come on Con, we'll deal 'til they figure a way out."

Conner remembered Len telling him that he'd have to cope with the Rogues being in jail sometimes if he stayed and made a visible effort to pull himself back together.

"I want to see them," Conner stated.

"Conner, they were apprehended in the middle of robbing an armored car. You can't break them out of jail," Flash said.

"I- I've got to talk to L- Digger," Conner insisted. "I'm in charge of Owen. It was only supposed to be overnight."

Barry winced. "I hadn't even thought of Owen." He looked at Evan, "Do you know who his mother is?"
“Digger doesn’t know who Owen’s mother is,” Evan said dryly. “Time travel thing. He’s tangling with Zoom and vanishes. Two months later he’s back with a kid who calls him ‘Papa’ and no clue where he’s been or where the kid came from.”

“I have to talk to them!” Conner exclaimed agitatedly.

“Alright,” Barry sighed. “I’m on my way to Metropolis already. I have to remind people that Trickster isn’t a meta-human and try to get him tried as a normal juvenile.”

Conner forced himself to loosen his hold on Owen as the guard directed him to a booth about half way down the row of semi-private boxes. Picking up on Conner’s tension Owen buried his face against the older boy’s shoulder and twisted his little fist in Conner’s shirt.

Len waited for them on the other side of the plexiglass barrier. Conner swallowed and picked up the hand-set.

“Sorry kid,” Len said. He grimaced, “I miscalculated, counted on Superman putting his city over anything relating to you.”

Conner let the hand-set drop before it could shatter. He forced himself not to grab Owen. After several moments of not knowing what to do with his hands he pressed them up against the barrier. In moments it began to deform under the pressure he was exerting. Len gestured sharply for Conner to stop. He pointed toward the hand-set. After a moment Conner picked it up. "Cut that out!” Len ordered. "You nearly got your brains scrambled the last time the League of Busybodies decided to get ticked off. Don't give them an excuse!"

"He wants to take you away from me,” Conner ground out.

"To be fair, he thinks he's doing the right thing." Len grinned oddly. "Us Rogues, we're criminals if you haven't heard. Goes with the whole breaking law and stealing stuff that you keep mentioning."

A brief, watery laugh escaped Conner.

"Doesn't matter anyway," Len continued. "We got offered a deal. And they've got to be pretty desperate to be offering practically before we've been formally charged. So I pushed and the hardass government bitch gave: We do one mission for the government and we get a pardon. I get a notion the bitch thinks most of us won't make it back but she doesn't know us very well."

"I'll go with you," Conner volunteered instantly.

"No you won’t." Len stated. He paused, trying to think of a reason that wouldn't be too alarming and his gaze settled on Owen. "Who are you gonna leave the brat with? Heroes'd corrupt him. Piper? Mirror Apprentice?" He shook his head. "We have to remind Piper to feed himself when he really gets into his music. And you know Evan doesn't have the patience, tell him to get the brat dressed or fed and Owen's screaming bloody murder in five minutes."

Looking defeated Conner nodded.

"Hold out for a few months,” Len said. "We'll be back." He forced a wry grin. "Just ask Flasher: we’re bad pennies every last one of us. Always turning up again just when you think you're quit of us."

"You better," Conner said thickly.
"Alright then. Now you stay. They'll send Digger out to talk to the squirt as soon as I'm secured." Cold smirked. "These Metropolis pigs are afraid of what might happen if any two of us are out of a cell at once."

Conner nodded. He blinked back tears as he watched Len being led away.

Ten minutes later Digger took his place.

Sitting on the other side of the barrier, looking at his son curled up unhappily in Conner's lap, Digger looked ashamed. "We really came a gutser this time," he sighed.

Conner nudged Owen to get the toddler to uncurl enough to see his father. Owen immediately reached out to be picked up. Then he noticed the barrier and turned to stare up at Conner, confused as to why he was being kept from his papa. Conner helped Owen hold the phone so they could at least talk.

"Hey, kiddo," Digger said unhappily.

"Want you," Owen protested the existence of the barrier.

Digger looked away. "We've got to head out beyond the Black Stump, do a little job 'fore we can come back," he explained. "I'll make it as quick as I can. You can stay with your Con for a bit longer right?"

"Papa going away?" Owen asked, tears trickling down his face. "Mama went away. No more Mama."

"Just for a little. I will come back," Digger promised. "I need to tell Conner a few things."

Conner took the phone back. "Hell kid, I know this is a mess and you're just a kid too, but I don't know who else to ask," Digger said.

"I'll take care of him," Conner promised seriously.

"Gonna give you a couple account numbers, that'll deal with the practicals," Digger said. "You let Flash and Ms. Iris help you, alright? If he gets sick or anything you take him right to them, you don't waste time trying to fix it yourself."

Conner nodded. After Digger finished giving Conner all the advise he could think of Conner gave the phone back to Owen.

"You be good for Conner okay? It's just for a bit," Digger promised again. Then more quietly he added. "Owen, you remember: I'm coming back… I love you."

Conner didn't want Owen to watch Digger being taken away so they left first.

Barry met them as they crossed the waiting room. "Can you get Owen back to Central on your own?" he asked, his expression filled with worry.

Conner nodded but looked suspicious. "Why?"

"The federal government is claiming jurisdiction," Barry explained.

"Len and Digger talked about making a deal with government people to get home sooner." Conner reported.
Flash shook his head. "I don't like this. They're too eager to get involved, and too focused on James."

"You're going to make sure it's okay?" Conner asked, pled.

Barry smiled wryly. "I'll make sure the Rogues are the most crooked part of the deal," he offered. "Now get on home. Stop by Jay and Joan's, I asked her to make up some of her chicken soup to help get Hartley and Evan back on their feet."

Superman saw Conner leaping across the city and without thinking flew to intercept him. The next time Conner hit ground, Clark landed in front of him.

The first thing Clark noticed was the toddler with tear stained face in Conner's arms. For a moment Clark found himself on a tangent, wondering about the odd way Conner was holding Owen. The older boy had one arm supporting the toddler while his other forearm rested along the toddler's back and that hand supported the back of Owen's head and neck. Then it hit Clark that Conner was protecting Owen from being jostled by the violent jolts caused by his leaps. It was a shock to see proof that Conner was not only trying to be gentle with the toddler, he was demonstrating considerable forethought by having taken measures against causing indirect harm.

Clark opened his mouth to say something and it occurred to him that he hadn't seen Superboy in person since the battle against the Injustice Society in Miami over half a year ago. It seemed incredibly strange. It felt like it had been just a few days since Superboy had been turning up in Metropolis at awkward moments wanting attention from him, leaving him feeling out of his depth and eager to get away. Superboy looked different. The S-Shield tee-shirt was gone, as were the inappropriate shirts he'd been wearing after he first moved in with the Rogues, instead he was wearing a black shirt with stylized electric-blue icicles. He looked older, or maybe he just held himself differently.

One moment Clark was distracting himself from the fact that he didn't have a clue as to what he wanted to say to Superboy. The next he was on the ground with a sore jaw and the knuckles on Conner's hand were split and bleeding. "I hate you," Conner stated with firm conviction. "Stay the hell away from me." Clark stared up at his clone in shock. Conner turned and leapt away without another word.

It was several minutes more before Clark climbed back to his feet. He activated his comm-link. "Batman?" he asked.

Clark could hear background noises and knew the channel was open, "Are you in a situation where you can't talk or are you just not speaking to me?" The sound of wind whistling around Gotham's convoluted architecture and the distant sound of cars told Clark that Batman was probably watching his city from the rooftops. In other words it was the later option.

"What else was I supposed to do? They were committing a crime."

"I'm not questioning your actions," Batman stated. "Your motives however... Then there's the issue of their judgement in picking a fight with you. Just when I think this mess is settled it gets stirred up again. Still," unexpectedly his voice switched from Batman's baritone to Bruce Wayne's tenor, "a member of my other set broke his back skiing awhile back. Lucky thing: While the doctors were patching him up they noticed he had kidney cancer. Saved his life, even if he'll never ski again." His pitch dropped back to the Bat's, "We may have had that kind of luck."

"Something I can help with?" Superman asked.
"Not right now. What did you want?"

"You said you've had the Rogues bugged. Could I borrow the tapes? Maybe the tapes from Mount Justice while Superboy was still there too?" Superman asked. "It was pointed out to me today that I don't know anything about him. I've got a feeling talking to him isn't the way to go at this point." He rubbed his jaw, he didn't think it was broken, but it was certainly going to bruise.

"Educate yourself," Batman stated. "Don't show any more initiative, please! I used to worry about the Rogues guilting him into helping them commit crimes. It wouldn't be hard, he does want to contribute to the group. Which is why I've been paying him a stipend for living expenses since he started working with Young Justice again but we aren't providing him with room and board anymore. Now I'm more concerned that if you keep pushing him, he'll go over completely for the sole purpose of ticking you off."

"Yeah," Clark sighed. "That might be a justified concern."

Conner shifted Owen nervously in his arms as he stood on the Garricks' doorstep and knocked. After a few moments a grandmotherly woman opened the door. She smiled warmly at them.

"Hi, um, Flash, Barry-Flash, not your Flash, he said…" Conner stammered.

"Yes, of course dear," Joan Garrick replied. "Just come in for a moment and I'll put the soup in a thermos so it stays warm. Nothing better for sick bodies than a hearty home-made chicken soup."

"Really?" Conner asked. "I- It was only supposed to be for the night. Sam said lots of liquids, but everyone was supposed to be back and now…"

"Now you have two sick friends and this little one to worry about and you're not sure who you can fall back on," Joan said quietly.

Conner nodded.

"How about if I come along and deliver the soup personally?" she suggested. "Take a quick look-see that those other two are on the mend while I'm there?"

Conner looked grateful.

"Just one moment while I round up a thermometer and a few other essentials." In short order Joan had the three of them loaded in her car along with the thermos of soup and a basket of OTC remedies.

When they got to the hide-out Conner pointed Joan to the sickroom then he tried to put Owen down in his playpen. Owen clung to Conner and began sobbing bitterly. "It's okay, it's okay," Conner cooed as he rubbed Owen's back.

Joan frowned. "Mr. Harkness really should have rethought his occupation given his status as a single parent," she muttered.

Conner looked torn between agreeing and defending Digger.

Joan sighed. "Stay, I won't need any help checking on the other two." She put the soup in the kitchen then headed back.

The air in the sick-room was stale and unpleasant. Joan briskly cracked open a window and moved
the trashcan out to the drive-way then replaced it with bowls from the kitchen. "Have either of you been to the doctor?" she asked.

"Outstanding warrants," Evan answered while Hartley exclaimed "You know my mom!"

Joan turned to Hartley first. "Yes and she'd be worried sick."

"It's just the flu," Hartley protested. "James got better after a day or so. Mom would have me in the hospital. She'd call in specialists from out of state when the doctors told her it was nothing. It's embarrassing!"

Joan shook her head and popped a thermometer in Hartley's open mouth.

"'Sides, 'm still mad," Hartley continued around the thermometer.

"Shh dear, or the reading won't be accurate," Joan turned to Evan. "You don't have any warrants against your civilian identity," she reminded him and Evan flushed. "Now, how long has this been going on and are you keeping anything down?"

"Hart's on day three, he and James brought the damn thing home from school," Evan complained. "I've only been puking since yesterday. And, yeah, it's been pretty much everything coming back up."

"But you are still trying?" Joan asked worriedly.

"Not like Sam and Con have been giving us much of a choice," he grumbled.

"Good for them," Joan replied tartly.

The thermometer beeped. "It's not too terribly high," Joan declared hesitantly.

Hartley stared up at her with big hazel eyes. "Please don't call Mom," he begged.

Joan shook her head. "I'll go sterilize this and if Evan's no worse off, I'll give it another day before I have the both of you hauled into the doctor's office. But! I will be staying to keep an eye on you."

"Yes ma'am," the boys mumbled.

Out in the main room, Owen had cried himself to sleep but his fists were still tangled in Conner's shirt, keeping the older boy holding him. Joan started some water heating. "It might be a good idea if you'd bring Owen over in the afternoons along with some homework. He could get to know Jay and I with you there. Then you'd have someone to babysit while you're with your team," Joan suggested.

"You wouldn't mind?" Conner asked.

"Of course not." Joan smiled to herself, "I need to brush up on my grandma-skills. Wally was already six when Barry started dating Iris."

Conner looked confused for a few minutes then his expression turned mulish. "You can't say anything bad about his dad," he demanded sternly. "I promised I wouldn't let any heroes turn him against the Rogues."

"Alright dear," Joan agreed.
The Show Must Go On

Trickster fought the urge to pull his knees into his chest as he sat in the grey little interrogation cell. It was one thing when he was actively trying to look young and vulnerable, but something else entirely when he really just did want to curl up and make himself small.

It had been five days since his arrest and he had yet to see a familiar face. He hadn't even seen a crappy state provided lawyer and the regular police weren't dealing with him anymore. When the woman from the government came with her deal, he'd told her to get him a lawyer, that he'd take his chances with a jury. James knew he cleaned up well and when he tried he could generally get people on his side. The woman told him to reconsider then had him tossed back in his cell.

After that, things got weird. They moved him to another building, one that was probably not a police station and incarcerated him there. The woman's flunkies would drag him out of his cell at odd hours, waking him up then sometimes leaving him standing in halls waiting to be interrogated for hours on end only to end up sending him back to his cell without him having talking to anyone. Other times they'd take turns questioning him. They'd go on and on about whatever they could think of: About old crimes, ones he'd already been tried for, others where charges had been dismissed or where he'd gotten off with community service. Sometimes they questioned him about things he knew nothing about. Some of them things he couldn't possibly have done. He was almost convinced they were trying to pin some of the Joker's crimes on him. He hadn't been allowed to sleep more than an hour or two at a stretch since he'd been brought here. And every now and then he'd catch sight of the woman while he was being moved form one room to another and she'd look at him and he'd remember her deal. It had only been a week but James was starting to feel very scared about what might happen to him if he didn't take the deal. This was nothing like Central.

James remembered the first time he'd been arrested and that had definitely been the worst until now. Then he hadn't had a clue as to what was going to happen, he'd never believed anyone could be good enough to catch him. But Flash had been clever enough to figure out how to ground a flier without being able to fly himself.

"He's tiny," the police officer handcuffing him complained when the cuffs wouldn't tighten down enough to secure his wrists. James was watching his family look away, refusing to acknowledge him. "Some sort of circus midget I guess," another office hypothesized doubtfully. But when the mask came off there was no more room for denial: Central's newest costume crook wasn't just small he was a fresh-faced, blue-eyed eleven-year-old with slightly curly golden hair. The Flash couldn't stop staring in dismay at the child he'd just apprehended.

At the police station there had been more arguments, they couldn't possibly put him in the holding cell with the drunks and what-not who were awaiting charges, he wasn't even in middle school yet! In the end they'd left him in an interrogation cell while they got ready to press-charges for multiple counts of robbing planes in mid-air.

Somewhat later tall, heavy set officer with a craggy face stepped into the room looking awkward. He shoved a cup of hot chocolate at James. "Officer Chyre," he introduced himself brusquely. "It's going to be a while longer," he said uncomfortably. "We can't question a minor without a legal guardian present." A part of James knew what was coming, he'd seen the way his family had turned away from him earlier but he still stared up at the man, his feet swinging several inches of the floor as he sat, his eyes large and hopeful. Hoping Chyre wouldn't say it. Maybe they needed to finish the show, or they'd come once the pull down was done. "We talked to your parents," Chyre said, with the look of someone who'd drawn the short straw. "They say they you're not their kid. Sorry. We're
looking up procedures, don't rightly know how to go from here."

That arrest had been bad. Remembering a stranger coming to tell him that his parents were so ashamed of him that they weren't even going to see him to tell him he'd been disowned. That had been the worst moment of his life, but James had a bad feeling that was going to change very soon. And as bad as it had been, it hadn't lasted. About fifteen minutes after Chyre had left him with that news a friendly-looking man had walked into the room holding one of Trickster's confiscated air-walks.

"Hi, I'm Barry Allen, from the crime lab," the man introduced himself as he pulled out a chair on James' side of the table. He held up the air-walk, "You made this yourself?"

Cautiously James nodded.

"They're pretty amazing. You've got some miniaturized propulsion jets in them right?"

"Yeah, two in each, I couldn't balance with just one jet in the shoe."

For a long time they just talked technical details and theory. James practically forgot about the arrests and his family. He'd never had anyone who was interested in what he did before. "Why are you wasting your time on this rubbish?" his father had demanded just days before the first of the robberies. "You cut every challenging part of your routine again! If you have so little confidence in your abilities why do you not practice instead of fooling around with nonsense? Even your younger sister doesn't freeze up at the mere thought of working without a net."

"Where'd you get the idea for them?" Barry asked once they'd exhausted all talk about the science behind the air-walks.

James blushed. "I'm afraid of heights," he mumbled. "Made 'em so I didn't have to be when I was doing my act."

Barry laughed. "That's incredible. Most people aren't that creative. You know they'd be really useful for fireman or rescue workers."

"You mean instead of for robbing planes?"

"Well, yeah. Robbing planes isn't working out so well now is it? You could do so much better than this."

The detective on the case had returned then along with an attorney. "We're ready to proceed," he'd said.

Barry watched James' expression for a moment then he said, "You mind if I stay?"

"Whatever suits you Allen, just stay quiet," the detective ordered. James was glad he did, just having someone in the room who thought he was worthwhile made it less frightening while they questioned him about the planes and the money and what else had he done?

After they'd charged him, they put him in the section reserved for costumed criminals, which technically he was, but mostly because everyone there was kept in individual cells while they waited trial. The Juvenile facilities were afraid they couldn't hold him and no one liked the idea of allowing an eleven year old to mix with adult prisoners.

As he was escorted to his cell, James noticed a man with a severe widow's peak in the cell across from the one they were unlocking for him. The man grinned weirdly at the guards. "Got a light?" he
asked and laughed when the guards shuddered and backed away from him.

After they'd gone he turned his attention on James. "Aren't you a little young for this joint?"

"I robbed planes... In mid-air, just like a modern day version of my namesake Jesse James," James stated with a showman's certainty.

"How'd you manage that kid?"

"Flying shoes."

"Sweet. They call me Heatwave, what's your handle kid."

James thought for a moment then grinned. "Trickster suits me."

"Good enough, I got some friends I'll introduce you to when we're both out."

Of course James had been back out much sooner and more legally than Heatwave. He was in grade school, his crime was non-violent and by the time he was done with the jury they all thought he was cute. A smart, bored kid playing a kid's prank, just trying to see what he could do and he'd gotten a little bit carried away... it was even pretty much the truth. He spent two months in Juvie. And when they'd let him out Barry had been waiting in the lobby with his circus trunk.

Barry gave him guilty look that had puzzled James back then. "Your parents left with the circus. We sent word that you were being released. They're booked just a couple of states over, I can give you a ride."

James stared at the trunk, "Where'd you find my stuff?"

"The lot after the circus left town," Barry said. "I saw your name on it."

"Thanks, I'm not surprised they left it," James said. "Just a lot of dead weight I made 'em carry around." He cracked open the lid revealing a stack of science magazines, several battered chemistry and physics texts and a collection of mechanical bits and pieces. "They've been wanting to get rid of it for ages." He smiled brittlely. "Thanks for the offer, but it'd just be a waste of gas. They don't want me back."

Barry remembered the trunk just left abandoned in an empty lot and a tiny little boy sitting alone in a police interrogation room because his parents wouldn't come. "There's a spare room at my place. I'm sure my wife wouldn't mind if you stayed until something more permanent can be arranged."

Three months later Heatwave broke out of jail and kept his promise to introduce Trickster to the Rogues. The guy in the parka stared down at Trickster in dismay. "Kid, there's ice cream in the freezer and a TV in the kitchen. Don't touch anything else." he ordered as he grabbed Heatwave by the arm and dragged him off.

Trickster dished himself some ice cream, turned on the TV to reassure them then carefully worked his way into eves-dropping range while eating his treat.

"Rory, in case it somehow escaped your notice, that's not a prospective Rogue, that's practically a baby."

"Come on Len. I met the kid in jail. I looked a few things up, his take on those first three planes, before Flasher stuck his nose in, it was pretty damn impressive. The kid ain't no innocent little lamb,
“He's good.”

“This ain’t no kiddie game,” Len snapped. “And I don’t want responsibility for no grade-schooler getting himself offed!”

“You feel better about it if he’s out on his own and he buys it?” Rory asked.

“You're a dirty, lousy cheat of an arguer.”

“Just saying what I saw. The kid's got serous talent and he got a thrill out of it. You could see it plain as day when he talked about his heists: One taste isn’t gonna be enough.”

“Alright kid. You can stop snooping,” Len raised his voice marginally. “You're on the team, on a trial basis at least. You got a place to stay?”

“Er, he's sort of staying with a cop-type,” Rory admitted.

“A cop?” Len demanded. “For the love of...”

“Barry’s okay,” Trickster said quickly. “It's not like anyone else was jumping to open their door to me.”

“Rogues living with cops!” Len exclaimed throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation. “What next? I ask ya, what next!”

“Maybe you better start crashing with us. At least part time,” Rory suggested. “Can't take loot home to a cop, least not a nice one.”

Two week after that the Rogues plus their latest addition ran into scarlet speedster trouble while robbing bank.

“James? This is who you moved in with?” Flash demanded in shocked disapproval.

“B-Barry?” Trickster exclaimed, suddenly more child caught in the cookie jar than Rogue. “Er...Hi?” he tried walking ground-ward until he stood in front of Flash, slightly below Barry’s eye level but still a few inches off the ground.

“You bring us a kid living with a cape,” Cold complained to Heatwave.

“How was I supposed to know?” Heatwave demanded.

Boomerang and Mirror Master traded a look and quietly got while the getting was good.

“Young man, you're coming home with me right now,” Flash ordered sternly.

Suddenly Captain Cold’s look turned dangerous. “Kid's not going anywhere.”

“Len, chill!” James exclaimed. “He’s not going to hurt me.”

For a long time Flash and Cold just stared at each other in disbelief. After that there was a lot of shouting. And a general resolution that if anything bad ever happened to James it could only be the other's fault and if anything happened things would turn very unfriendly in the Twin Cities as a consequence.

James went home with the Rogues and Barry was left wishing there'd been more time to establish a bond with the boy. Wishing that social services hadn’t been so eager to wash their hands of the boy,
but when he'd talked to them about James, they'd said legally his parents should be tracked down and if they wouldn't take James back then the process could be started to move him into foster care and of course abandonment charges would be pressed against his parents. But for that reason, if no other, his parents would take him back, and if he were abandoned again a few cities down the road, chances were no one would notice or care unless James himself reported it.

Two months later, at three in the morning, James stood outside of the Allen's darkened house with a knapsack slung over one shoulder. "Be rude to wake 'em up," James decided as he let himself in via the sliding door looking out over the backyard. "I'll explain in the morning."

He toed off his shoes, lined them up by the door and padded silently through the sleeping house to the room that had been his for several months. James let himself fall backward onto the bed with a tired groan. The bed yelped, bolted upright and a moment later James was in the middle of a brawl.

And a second after that the lights were on and James found himself and a similarly aged red-headed boy being held at arm's length by a sleepy-looking Barry Allen.

"Sorry, didn't know you had company," James said as Barry released them.

"Wally, meet James. James, my nephew Wally," Barry said. "James, did something happen?"

"Something. Sort of," James equivocated. "See Digger's still in jail. Sam's busy with that weird kid hiding in his mirror. And," James' face twisted with the disgust only a small boy can express when confronted with romance. "Len and Rory are fighting over a girl."

"Why'd anyone fight over a GIRL?" Wally asked. "Girls have cooties."

"This one's probably got the clap too," James observed frankly. "I am NOT sitting through another round of either of them bad-mouthing the other over that chava!"

"James, language," Barry objected. "For tonight the two of you can share the bed. We'll work out something better in the morning. Now it's late, I'm tired, let's everyone go back to bed."

Left alone Wally and James stared at each other. "You know the Rogues?" Wally finally asked, wide-eyed. His obsession with Flash had left him very well-versed on his adversaries and Len, Rory, Sam, Digger, jail and mirrors could only mean the Rogues. "And Uncle Barry lets you stay here?"

"Know 'em? I am a Rogue!" James bragged.

"No way!" Wally exclaimed. "Isn't there an age limit or something? Like for driving?"

James rolled back on the bed laughing. "A license for being a criminal? That'd be great!"

After a moment Wally was grinning too. "Yeah, yeah. Still think about a Super-villain exam."

"We are NOT super-villains," James declared. "Anybody who calls themselves a super-villain is completely NUTS! Us Rogues, we're just a little touched. And I totally can: Cool Costume? Check. Neat gimmick? Check. Intimidating alias..."

"What's your alias? Not that I believe you or anything. You're just a kid like me."

"I'm Trickster when I'm working. And I am not too young," James protested. "That Robin kid in Gotham is way younger and he's a vigilante. If capes can start that young, criminals certainly can."
“Trickster is not an intimidating name,” Wally argued.

“Only because you don’t know me,” James replied with a wicked grin. “Ready to go to sleep?”

“How about you first.”

“If you’re not tired I know some really great horror stories.”

James smiled a little as he focused his thoughts on Central. His parents might have thrown him out, but he’d never had to worry about starving or sleeping on the streets in Central. Or being alone. He had the Rogues and Flash looking out for him. He had his friendship with Wally and later with Hartley and Evan. Now there was Conner and Owen too.

He really missed being in Central, where things were safe and made sense, Metropolis was a horrible place. There had only been one time when James had felt like he was working without a net in Central.

“Wally... You know I can’t think of many things that would simultaneously really tick off both Captain Cold and the Flash, but helping you break into an abandoned police lab, I think that might just do it,” James commented.

“Then you should be all for it,” Wally declared. "I mean are you the Trickster or not?"

"Of course I am!” James hissed. "But-"

"I help you," Wally pushed.

"You do NOT," James argued. "You figure out counters for my stuff!"

“Yeah, and who was it that needed a dissolving agent for your new superglue bomb after Uncle Barry used a whirl-wind so it ended up hitting you instead of him?” Wally countered.

"Why do you want to come here anyway?” James changed the subject.

"This is where Uncle Barry got his powers," Wally said, his eyes glowing with determination.

"You couldn't just ask Flash to show it to you?" James asked.

Wally grinned mysteriously. "I don't want to just see it. So are you going to help or not? You already came this far."

Trickster studied the building. "What happened to the place anyway?"

"It got struck by lightening," Wally replied with studied casualness.

"Made a nice hole," Trickster observed. "This'll be way easy. I'll just air-walk up, pry off a few boards and lower a rope for you."

"Couldn't you just fly me up?" Wally asked.

"No way!" James exclaimed. "You weight almost the same as I do! You move at ALL when I'm carrying you and it'll throw off my balance and we'll both fall. Huh-uh! No way! Terrible idea!"

"Fine, whatever. We'll do it your way," Wally sighed.

"Right!" Trickster declared. "I'm the expert criminal here." With that he walked up to the second-
story window as if ascending an invisible staircase.

Wally shimmied up the knotted rope Trickster lowered for him and in a few minutes the two boy were standing in the darkened, blasted lab where Barry Allen had become the Flash.

Trickster played his flashlight over the heavily scorched wall. Wally righted an over-turned shelf then started pulling jars and bottles out of his over-sized backpack. He consulted a printout then began arranging them on the shelf.

“What are you doing?” Trickster asked.

“The great thing about Uncle Barry's lab is they're really, incredibly anal about a place for everything and everything in its place. From looking at his lab now I know what was stored on this shelf. From hacking the department's restocking records I've got a pretty good idea of how full each container was when the accident happened.”

"Wait! Wait! Wait!” Trickster exclaimed. "You're trying to recreate your uncle's accident? Cold's gonna kill me! Worse yet he's going to kick me out of the Rogues! Wally you can't make me an accessory to creating another speedster!"

While Trickster ranted Wally went on unpacking his bag. After he finished restocking the shelf he piled a few books on the floor so that he'd be approximately his Uncle's height when he stood on them. Then he rooted around in his bag until he found an extension cord and a screwdriver. "You know, it was really lucky they left the electricity on for the security guys," Wally said. "I don't know how we could have lugged a portable generator up here."

"A what!” James broke off his rant and stared at Wally. "What do you need a generator for?"

"The lightening of course," Wally answered. As he stepped on top of his stack of books with the cord and screwdriver in hand.

For a moment James' mind simply failed to compute. What Wally was implying was so insane that he couldn't believe he was for real.

While James tried to make two and two equal something other than four Wally jammed the screwdriver into the outlet. The resultant jolt hurtled him back into the shelf. Wally's body was still sparking with electricity as the shelf over-turned, dumping over a dozen chemicals on his head. There was one last surge of sparks then the fuse blew leaving the room stinking of chemicals and burnt flesh.

"Wally?” James called nervously. Hesitantly he reached out and shook Wally's shoulder. Wally was unresponsive. "Oh god, don't be dead,” James begged, his fingers sliding along Wally's neck, searching for a pulse. He sobbed with relief when he found a heartbeat. James dialed 911 on his cell. "My friend shocked himself. We're at the old police lab. He's breathing, he has a pulse, but he won't wake up.”

Several long minutes later James was huddled in the corner of an ambulance trying to stay out of the way while the EMT's worked on Wally. As they sped toward the hospital the back door of the ambulance opened for a heartbeat and the Flash was there too. He stared down at his nephew, his face turning pale under his cowl.

At the hospital Barry paced back and forth across the waiting room very deliberately holding himself back from super-speed. The way he held himself with such intense reserve, as if he didn't dare let himself go, even a little, scared James.
After a time Cold came, he slumped in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs beside James. Then he crossed his arms over his chest and scowled.

"What were you thinking!" Barry demanded standing over James. "Taking Wally with you breaking and entering. Letting him dump chemicals all over himself? Electrocute himself? What the HELL were you thinking James?"

"What? The other brat doesn't have a mind of his own?" Cold asked flatly.

"I'd be yelling at Wally too, if he weren't unconscious! Maybe dying!" Barry shouted.

James hugged his knees to his chest and stared at the doors to the emergency room. His eyes shown wetly but he refused to let himself cry.

Barry sighed. He put a hand on James' shoulder. "I know it was Wally's plan. I know you could have ran when it blew-up in his face. You're a good friend. Even if neither of you has the common sense of a chihuahua."

James let his memories flow over him, casually leaned his head back against the concrete wall of the cell, told himself the rickety aluminum chair was comfortable and tried to will himself to sleep. He'd just about made it when the door was thrown violently open. James startled at the noise and ended up on the floor staring up at the heavy-set, hard-looking woman who'd started this whole nightmare. She sneered disdainfully down at him.

James stayed on the floor. He crossed his legs underneath him and leaned back against the wall as if the floor were the most comfortable seat in the room. It wasn't much of a stretch either. "First, I want water. I've been in this lousy room for hours. Then I want a lawyer. I know my rights you miserable cow."

The woman smiled condescendingly down at him. "This isn't about your ridiculous little robberies anymore," she said. "This is about National Security. I can do damn near anything to you to get what I want."
Deals

Chapter Notes

My version of Amanda Waller is very heavily influenced by the JLU depiction of the character, much more so than her comicbook counterpart.

A half-day earlier

"Superman didn't find him," Batman reported before Flash could ask. "Now we check any buildings with an excess of lead. I'm cross-referencing with property deeds to get a list of more probable places to check first."

"Give me the damn list," Flash snapped. "I'll have them all checked before you can finish reading up on them. We've got to find Trickster before Waller has them off the planet for her kamikaze mission."

Batman watched the blur of red as Flash sped off and considered again how desperate Waller had to be to pull this stunt here in Metropolis where Superman was bound to take it personally when someone he'd apprehended disappeared from police custody. Not to mention pulling this with a teenager the Flash had known since the boy was in grade school. Still, Waller and her associates had never had much sense when it came to not ticking super-heroes off.

He went back to hacking her records just in case there were any details he'd missed the first time through.

Present

"This is about National Security. I can do damn near anything to you to get what I want." Waller waited for Trickster to look appropriately threatened but he was staring past her at the green glow leaking through the cracks around the doorframe. A moment later the door crumpled.

"You might want to refresh your memory of the law Ms. Waller," the dark-skinned Lantern stated coldly. Batman loomed beside him while Flash simply appeared across the room crouched next to Trickster.

Flash helped James to his feet and even after he was standing kept his hands protectively on James' shoulders. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

James tried very hard not to lean into Flash's support. "Bitch thought she could scare me by keeping me up past my bedtime," he said lightly.

The three heroes exchanged dark looks. "Coercing children Amanda?" Batman asked. "And I thought my opinion of you couldn't get any lower."

"This isn't a game where we go out and play dress-up," Waller sneered. "It's the fate of the world. Do you seriously think anyone will care if some itinerant circus brat doesn't get due process?"

Batman didn't move, his expression didn't alter but the Lantern edged cautiously away from him and
Waller's complexion took on a grey undertone. Still she smiled gamely. "Oh, don't take it personally. You wouldn't even have yours if anyone else had been willing to open their home to a gypsy boy and a traumatized one at that. Or did you think social services is normally comfortable placing an eight year old with a bachelor who makes a point of looking irresponsible?"

"And this one?" Waller continued. "No one out side of your little game of costumed warfare cares. His parents abandoned him, the system's given up and just waiting for him to turn 18 so he can be locked up for real. For once in his life he's going to do something constructive or so help me, he's never walking out of this building."

"I'd like to see you stop us," Flash muttered angrily, his hands tightening on James' shoulders.

"The rest of them? They were just gravy: A team he's accustom to working with to keep him alive long enough to play his part. He's the key, so of course, he's the stubborn one." Waller stared directly at Trickster and smiled. "The rest of your 'Rogues' couldn't snap up my offer fast enough. You on the other hand... Of course, they don't stand a chance in hell without you. But I'll send them anyway. A deal's a deal, after all."

James wavered. If the Rogues needed him...

"What's so special about the kid anyway?" the Lantern asked with a frown. "He's just a kid with an annoying gimmick. He doesn't even have powers."

Waller shook her head and laughed bitterly. "A practically self-educated eleven-year-old builds flying shoes out of things he scrounges. He weaponizes toys using theories from almost every branch of science in existence and he does it well enough to hold his own against a meta-human, without ever compromising his 'annoying gimmick'. And you can't see how he might be useful?"

"I have an alien warship the size of Saturn headed toward this system," she said. "There aren't enough arms on the planet to fight that thing. But he'll turn their own tech against them. It doesn't matter that it's alien technology, lack of training and education hasn't stopped him yet."

"Okay, you need a saboteur who can work with materials at hand, the Rogues have my back. If I do this we all get pardons and if I don't it's 'War of the Worlds' without the convenient virus," Trickster said. "You could have said that in the first place."

"She also could have mentioned the part where her plan has no exit strategy," Batman stated and Waller glared at him angrily. "Your task is to take out Warworld's engines with the Rogues to keep you alive long enough to get that done. Then you have your pardon, Waller's done with you and you're still on Warworld."

"Are you guys gonna rescue the other Rogues too?" James asked.

"I represent the US government," Waller stated. "You can't just walk in here and set criminals loose!"

"Of course not," Green Lantern said. "But as a representative of an Earth-bound government your jurisdiction does not extend beyond this planet's atmosphere. You want an interstellar pre-emptive action in my sector of space, you will work with me."

"The US Government does not recognize the authority-"

"Be careful Ms. Waller. Or the Guardians of Oa may not continue recognizing your authority either."

"You are correct about the seriousness of the threat," Batman admitted. "You should have brought
your information to the JLA from the start. As you have said: You have a deal with the Rogues. If they still want it once full disclosure has been made, you will keep it. However, the JLA will not countenance the strong-arming of minors into risking their lives."

"I told you, without him it's pointless," Waller said. "Do you think I've got enough on Luthor to force him into cooperating?"

"I will be taking Trickster's place," Batman said calmly.

"You may design your tech, but you have the resources of an entire company at your disposal," Waller argued. Batman ignored her.

"If the Rogues are willing, we will deal with one of Warworld's two engine-complexes. A second JLA team will support Atom in disabling the second engine-complex. The Lanterns will provide transportation to, and from, the planet. They will also haul it to a compatible star-system once it's been immobilized."

Flash took over, "Due to Trickster's age, his 'community service' will be done on Earth, working with our younger heroes under appropriate supervision."

"What makes you think I'm going to agree to this?" Waller asked.

"Your other choice is to tell your sponsors that you were unable find means to deal with the approaching threat and that the information was turned over to the JLA for them to handle," Batman replied. "The Rogues will, of course, be returned to police custody. You are in Metropolis, neither Superman nor Lex Luthor is going to quietly stand by while a precedent is set for the government simply making people like the Rogues disappear."

"The threat is real," Green Lantern reminded. "You want it dealt with. The Rogues were a Hail-Mary pass and you know it. True, the Rogues are, surprisingly, a strong, functional team. But two teams with support have a much better chance of accomplishing your goals."

"If you get more than a hundred feet from your handler the bracelet will alarm. Deal off, we haul you back here indefinitely." Waller's subordinate stopped. Trickster was slumped in his chair leaning sideways against the Flash, fast asleep. The officer frowned and reached out to shake him awake.

"Let him sleep," Flash said with a warning look. "The ankle bracelet is ridiculous anyway. First he'll be working primarily with a recognizance team, wearing something that gives off a traceable signal would endanger him, his team and their missions. Second treating something like that as a serious control on Trickster is an insult. He'll circumvent it as soon as he's awake just to prove he can. Why bother with the charade? So, unless you actually have something worthwhile to impart, I'll be taking James and that written copy of our agreement home. Now, if you please." Flash hesitated for a brief moment. He knew Trickster would vigorously protest what he was contemplating, but the teenager looked so terribly run down. Barry really didn't want to wake him up just so he could walk out of Waller's little dictatorship under his own power. Barry gave a mental shrug, what James didn't know couldn't hurt his pride. He scooped up the sleeping teen and carried him out.

Barry made it from the Metropolis Zeta platform to the one hidden in the shed in his backyard without James stirring once. Getting the door open without waking him took a bit of doing, but he managed it.

Iris and a pretty, petite blond were sitting in the kitchen talking when Barry edged through the door carrying James. They both jumped to their feet with worried expressions. "Shh," Barry whispered.
"He's exhausted." Still looking concerned, Iris got the door to the spare bedroom for Barry. The blonde trailed behind while James' shoes were pulled off and he was put to bed.

"What the hell happened to the brat?" the blonde demanded as soon as the door was shut.

Barry's expression hardened, "Our government's taking pages out of the KGB manual on how to elicit cooperation. Don't worry, we pulled James before any real harm could be done and the JLA has control over the mission your brother agreed to."

"And I'm supposed to be assured by that?" the young woman exclaimed. "You're okay, but some of that lot are pretty vicious about going after 'evil doers'." She nodded toward the bedroom. "How many of your friends really get the difference between Trickster and Joker? And how many of them just see black and white?"

"Batman will be on the ground with the Rogues," Barry said. "The JLA can't abandon the Rogues without leaving him as well. Satisfied about our intentions Lisa?"

"I suppose I have to be," Lisa sighed. "Len told me they were going to be gone for awhile, asked that I keep the kids from tearing the base down while he was gone. He was keeping things from me, I hate when he does that."

"I should call the boys," Iris said. "Conner's been stopping by a couple times a day looking for updates. Evan and Hartley have been nearly as bad since Joan gave the okay for them to be up and about."

"Conner's the new kid Len mentioned?" Lisa asked curiously. "I didn't think my brother'd ever take on an apprentice given the way he's always complaining about the other three juvenile delinquents. Plus he was always so against me tagging along with his friends. Though, I gotta admit not having a record's sort of good since I am going to make the Olympics this time around… damn tenth of a point, judges just have no appreciation of style. So the kid's got an ice theme going? Did he build his own tech or is Len teaching him?"

Barry and Iris traded a look. "Conner's a meta," Barry half-explained. "Freeze breath, sort of like Superman. And he's not committing crimes, Conner's actually one of the junior heroes, like my nephew. Except Captain Cold is his mentor instead of a JLA'er."

"Only in Central," Lisa shook her head.

"The rest of them need a better class of enemies," Barry said. "I can't image having to deal with psychopaths like Zoom and Murmur every single time out."

A short while later Iris was inviting Conner, Owen, Hartley and Evan in and telling them to make themselves comfortable.

As soon as he saw Lisa Evan's eyes widened. "Man! You didn't tell me Beautiful was here!" Evan accused Barry. "I would have cleaned up better." He smiled besottedly at Lisa. "Hey Lisa, I got a real good fake ID now. I could take you out to a bar or anywhere you wanted to go."

Lisa laughed and ruffled Evan's hair. "You're still cute... and I still date older men."

Barry cleared his throat and held out his hand. Evan looked at him innocently. "Fake ID," Barry requested.

"Come on! You're a superhero, you can't bust me for normal teenager crap!" Evan protested.
Barry frowned. Evan grumbled but turned over the ID.

"What's Evan need a fake ID for?" Conner asked Hartley. "He's got a secret identity."

"He's also still two years too young to buy beer," Hartley explained. "And we're not allowed to rob liquor stores. Everyone over 21 has their own favorite that's off-limits in case we put them out of business. No liquor store without a Rogue patron survives in Central."

Lisa's gaze fell on Owen. "No way!" she exclaimed. "That's Owen! No way did Digger Harkness make a kid that cute! How old are you sweetie?" she asked reaching out for Owen. Conner hesitated to hand Owen over to this strange woman even if the Rogues seemed to know her.

"Birthday!" Owen told her excitedly as he held up three fingers. "Get prezzies!"

"And you must be my new nephew, Conner," Lisa said. "I'm Lisa Snart, Len's little sister and figure skater extraordinaire."

"I'm not- Len's not- he just," Conner stammered, flushing brightly.

"The Rogues have always been family and you're wearing Len's colors, that's good enough for me," Lisa stated firmly.

Conner smiled luminously. 'You'd better get everyone home safe, Bruce,' Barry thought. 'I know Robin can't handle losing you. And I don't think Conner'll be able to handle anything happening to his family now that he's finally found one.'

James wandered out of the bedroom and groggily shoved Hartley over so that he could have a spot on the sofa in the middle of his friends. "You telling everyone 'bout what a Jonah I am?" he asked.

Barry rubbed the bridge of his nose and added another to the list of kids who won't be able to handle losing another family. "James, it's not your fault. Waller put the whole thing into motion and the Rogues are adults who were fully informed of the risks and rewards before they agreed… The second time they agreed anyway. It's not the end of the world either. Waller's problem was that she doesn't have the resources to support an interstellar mission. It's different with the JLA in the loop. Not a month goes by without one of us being asked to help with an extra-solar situation. We know what we're doing. The Rogues will be done with the job and back before you know it."

Once Barry was done outlining the situation for Lisa and the younger Rogues everyone looked grim. Conner looked around at his friends, his expression turned determined. "They're smart and they're tough and so's Batman. It's only a part of the JLA who are complete assholes. They'll be okay," he declared. "What's the reparation thing mean for James?"

"It means for the next year he's obligated to take missions at the JLA's discretion. The plan is for him to be working with Young Justice, primarily. Same missions as you guys, I won't send him anywhere I wouldn't send Wally." Barry stared at James until he made eye-contact, "The deal will be revoked if you get caught committing felonies and Waller is vindictive enough to continue taking a personal interest in you so please don't be stupid. The banks will still be there next year if you're still of a mind to rob them."

"That's all well and good," Evan said. "But Con's the only one of his team who's worked with Trickster enough to know how to watch his back right."

"It's okay," Hartley said. "I can tag-along right? I don't mind hypnotizing people to stop crimes once and a while, it's a change of pace."
"I'm certainly not going to get in the way of you doing good deeds," Barry said.

Evan threw up his hands. "By the time the guys get back I'm going to be the only one with anything hanging over my head. And I'm the oldest. Cold'd have my head if I let these three idiot run off and play hero without anyone watching out that they don't go ending up martyrs. You think you can swing Trickster's deal to cover me too?"

Barry tried not to look too eager. "I know a few people in Central who wouldn't be opposed," then he hesitated. "They will want you to turn yourself in," he said. "That means your ID goes out."

"Well that sucks," Evan said.

Barry looked down at the fake ID in his hand for one Everett Collins, age 21. "Is this just for getting past bouncers or will it stand up to scrutiny?" he asked.

"It's good," Evan said. "Should come up faster than my student visa which got cancelled ages ago... and it was fake too."

"We're all going to be together," Conner said happily.

"It better not be boring, that's all I gotta say," James mumbled.
...Happy birthday dear Owen. Happy birthday to you!"

Conner held the birthday boy on his lap and mumbled along, hoping no one would notice that he didn't know the words to the apparently universally known song. Even M'Gann and Kaldur seemed to be familiar with it.

Owen's eyes were fixed on the cake and he bounced excitedly as Joan set it in front of him and lit the candles.

James, Hartley and Evan looked melancholy when the lighting of the candles was completed without the appearance of a single flamethrower or any shouting matches about the use of said flamethrower.

"Member your thirteenth? When Rory burned down half the base lighting the candles and Len froze the other half putting out the cake?" James asked Hartley.

"Not to mention the kitchen table and the ceiling," Hartley replied. "But I managed to save Sam's present. I know an instrument case when I see one."

"Your band flute," James remembered. "He stole it back for you after your dad sold it when he wanted you to quit 'wasting time' on music. You turned Rogue later that week."

"With the flute and your nutty idea of making my poor rats chew their way into that jewelry store."

"Make a wish and blow out the candles," Lisa instructed. She crouched down beside Owen to help with the blowing out if needed.

Owen closed his eyes for a moment then took a deep breath and blew. When the last candle went out he stared expectantly at the door for several minutes before his shoulders slumped in disappointment. Conner glowered angrily at some point in the distance. Joan cut the cake and Iris dished ice cream. They hurried to get the cake in front of Owen, hoping to distract him from the wish that hadn't come true.

After the cake, birthday presents were piled up on the table. Evan and James shared a satisfied smirk as they produced the results of several days spent searching the base and the Rogue's apartments. They'd managed to search out everything the older Rogues had been planning on giving Owen.

Owen's face lit up when he got to the box that held a stuffed koala dressed in his father's costume that Robin had managed to dig up from the days when Captain Boomerang had been the mascot of a toy company rather than a costumed criminal.

Later, when Owen began to lose interest in his new toys, Jay taught him to play patty-cake. Once Owen got the idea Jay increased the tempo slightly, Owen giggled in delight and matched him. Not long after conversation died throughout the room as everyone gradually turned to stare with jaw-dropping shock. Jay was moving fast enough that his hands were a blur to the non-speedsters... and Owen was matching him. Once the game ended Jay shook his head. "I'm pretty sure I don't have any nieces or cousins in the right age group," he remarked.

Barry remembered recent conversations about the possibility that his and Wally's accidents may have
altered them on a genetic level, about the possibility that they might pass on their powers to their children. He remembered Evan telling him that Owen had arrived in Central via time-travel. He groaned and covered his face. "Dear God, my daughter's five months short of being born and I already know Digger Harkness is going to get her pregnant. I may have to reconsider my stance on no killing."

"Iris! You're having a baby!" Dinah exclaimed.

"Twins," Iris confirmed.

Dinah slapped the back of Barry's head. "And you didn't tell us!"

"You know, it could be your granddaughter," James pointed out.

"James, don't help," Barry requested.

"Killing him now wouldn't solve anything," Jay reminded. "It's already happened from Digger's perspective."

"Barry?" James asked. "I'll promise to be good, for the whole year, spirit as well as letter of the deal, if you'll promise me one thing: I want to be there, with a video recorder, when we tell Digger that the two of you are in-laws… And we should do it in front of everyone else for maximum reaction potential," Trickster trailed off, his eyes glowing with mischief as he considered how could get the most out this unexpected development.

Barry and Iris looked like they were going to be sick.

"Well, it could be worse," Hartley consoled. "You could be related to Zoom... Actually *Owen* could be related to Zoom. That would really suck. If we're going to have a Speedster-Rogue we'd much rather he be related to you."

Wally was still considering the notion of cousins or whatever Owen was. He'd never had as many problems sharing Barry as certain other people, Robin, had when it came to their mentors but there was a limit to how much he wanted to see Barry's attention divided. And yet... "I'm not the youngest speedster anymore!" Wally realized. "Cold and Heatwave can't call me 'Baby Flash' anymore. YES! And I'm not a side-kick any more, I'm going to HAVE side-kicks."

"Owen's more mine than yours," Conner declared grumpily.

During the clean-up phase of the party, Artemis found herself in charge of watching Owen. "So did you get what you wanted squirt?" she asked.

"No Papa," Owen told her, disappointed.

Artemis thwacked her forehead for tactlessness. The chair Conner had been folding crumpled like a tin can. "He'll have to be a late birthday present," Lisa said as she walked past with a stack of dirty dishes. "Don't worry, he'll get here eventually."

On a ship, lightyears distant from Earth, the Rogue watched in bemused silence as Digger smashed bulk head repeated while cursing a blue streak.

"Problem?" Batman asked as he walked in.

"Only that I'm a fucking moron," Digger snarled. "Do you know what day today is?"
"June 4," Batman stated.

"My son's birthday," Digger corrected. "Fucking hell, kid's the only good thing that ever happened in my life and I'm screwing it up."

That night, after all the company had gone home and Owen was put to bed, James found Conner glaring furiously at his own ghostly reflection in a darkened window. "Problem?" James asked.

Hartley and Evan glanced up from their respective amusements at his tone.

"I hate him," Conner snarled. "It's his fault Digger and the others weren't here for Owen's birthday and I hate him. I hate that he's anything to do with me. I hate looking like him." Conner put his fist through the window, through the reflection.

The other three boys traded worried glances then Trickster offered Conner a slightly maniac grin. "Oh no, looking like him has all sorts of potential." He grabbed up a pencil and paper and started sketching with quick, assured movements. "I mean when it comes to superheroes, who is a more straight-laced, stick-in-the-mud? And this totally wouldn't annoying the living hell out of him... except you do look like him, exactly like a younger version of him."

Piper and Mirror Apprentice draw closer, eager to see what Trickster has up his sleeve. Trickster finished his sketch with a flourish and turned it toward Conner. "That will really bug him?" Conner asked.

Trickster let the other two see his brilliant idea. Mirror Apprentice laughed. Piper cringed. "It'll work," he said, allowing that some sacrifices had to be made in the name of ticking off lousy genetic donors.

"I don't think these will work," Mirror Apprentice said. "I mean, literally, I don't think that'll work."

"It'll work," Trickster said confidently. "You just have to give me more than fifty seconds to work out all the details of how it will work and what we need to accomplish it."

Conner grimaced in distaste as he pulled on one of his old tee-shirts.

Trickster clapped him on the shoulder. "I know, but it's for the plan. Can't expect super-geniuses to go for the obvious unless you rub their nose in it a little."

Conner covered up the S-shield with a jacket. Trickster dropped a brightly shining pendant over Conner's head. "Jal orderly! Operation Trojan Horse is a go!" he shouted to the other boys.

Conner arrived in Metropolis inconspicuously by train and walked into the building across the street from the LexCorp Tower. He went up to the roof, peeled off the jacket and took a running leap at the towering structure across the street. Conner smashed through a plate glass window on the sixty-third floor of Lex Luthor's corporate headquarters. Fourteen floors short of his final destination.

The key now was moving fast. Conner leapt straight up, smashing through three more floors before the reinforced concrete won out against his momentum and no one had time to do more than blink at him in shock.

On the sixty-eight floor he was met by a hail of bullets. Conner put his hand over the pendant and crashed through another ceiling. They were up to firing bazookas at him by the time Conner busted into Lex Luthor's throne-room like office. The two female bodyguards who confronted him there
didn't have heavy ordinance aimed at him but they held themselves with a much greater confidence than the dozens of gun-wielding flunkies he'd left scattered behind him on his way up.

"Did you really believe that there wouldn't be consequence for such arrogance, for bearding the lion in his den, Super... boy?" Lex Luthor demanded as he withdrew a lead box from his desk and flipped open the lid.

Conner swayed dizzily as the green glow from the Kryptonite illuminated the room.

Trickster, Piper and Mirror Apprentice appeared from within the pendant. Piper put his flute to his lips and played. Lex's two guards reeled drunkenly as Piper's tune played havoc with their inner-ears.

Trickster swaggered brazenly across the room and snatched the lead box out of Luther's hand, snapping it closed in a smooth movement. "We'll be taking this."

"Consider it partial reimbursement for that job you never paid me for," Mirror Apprentice remarked. He sprayed the room with a quick burst of hardlight, shattering dozens of priceless articles. "Goddamn welsher," he added as he slid a shoulder under Conner's arm. The four boys left via the gleaming, polished surface of Luthor's desk.

"So? What now?" Conner asked.

"A good performer knows when to build suspense," Trickster declared. "Now we take our time. We'll grab Owen and some supplies to get started then lay low at Mount Justice. It's pretty far down on the list of places where people go looking for us. And you-know-who is pretty high on Boy Wonder's list of people getting unpleasant surprises if they try dropping by."

Lex Luthor stood on top of his building, scanning the skies. When he saw a red-caped figure hovering about the city's skyline he took out a revolver and carefully lined up his shot.

Two bangs and several seconds later Superman dropped the crumpled bullets in front of Lex while he hovered several feet above the roof and glowered down at the billionaire, his fists planted on his hips. "Since they're lead I assume you were simply trying to get my attention?"

"A bit more dignified than shouting," Lex said with a shrug. Then he glared back. "Reign you brat in!"

At Superman's perplexed look Lex rolled his eyes. "About this high. Wears an 'S' on his chest. Looks exactly like you. Ringing any bells here?"

"He hasn't worn the S-shield in months," Superman said, mostly to himself.

"Completely without provocation, he and his misbegotten friends smashed through over a dozen floors of my building, destroyed my office and stole a small Kryptonite sample from me," Lex ranted. "At the least teach him to fly. It'd cut down on the property damage."

"Kryptonite?" Superman asked with alarm.

Lex stopped. For several moments he just stared. Then he began chuckling with dark amusement. "If he'd informed me it was for you, I would have happily given it to him," Lex said. "Even if he fails, just knowing that your offspring wants to hurt you truly makes my day."

Still laughing, Lex turned and walked back inside.
"It's a shame to wreck Trickster's game," Flash said when Superman finished explaining his presence in Central. "He's played you so well. But I'd better, you have a history of reacting poorly to anything dealing with Conner."

"Played me?"

"The kryptonite isn't for you." Barry shrugged. "At least not the way you're thinking."

Superman looked at him, totally puzzled now. "What other use does Kryptonite serve?"

"Conner wants to pierce his ear... Or maybe his tongue. Wally wasn't entirely clear on which body-part he was planning on putting holes in," Barry explained. "That's what they needed the Kryptonite for."

"He wants to do what?" Clark exclaimed. "Why?"

"To look less like you," Barry said flatly. "To do something you would disapprove of. Try to look appropriately horrified the next time you see Conner. James has been wonderfully creative coming up with a harmless outlet for how hurt and angry he is right now. You took away his family. Try to play along, you owe him the satisfaction at the very least."

Black Canary's eyes widened. She looked Conner up and down. It took several hard blinks for the whole of it to sink in.

Conner's hair had been bleached, twisted into spikes then dyed a multitude of shades never intended by nature to exist. There were several metal bars bisecting his right eyebrow, a small chain running between the ring in his nose to one of a multitude of rings decorating his ears. From the incessant click of metal on enamel Canary guessed that his tongue was pierced as well.

There was a bandage around Conner's upper arm. His tee-shirt looked like it had already gone through a battle, only the tears were too deliberately spaced to be collateral damage.

Conner's fists were clenched and from his expression Canary figured he was making a conscious effort to prevent himself from picking at the unfamiliar bits of metal studding his face.

Of his cohorts, Piper looked pained, Mirror Apprentice looked bored with the whole thing, and Trickster was watching Conner with the pride of an artist unveiling his master piece. On the Young Justice side M'Gann looked like she'd just swallowed a mouthful of salt-water. Kaldur looked confused. Artemis looked considering. Robin and Wally were watching Canary, eagerly awaiting her reaction.

"Moderation not your strong suit?" Canary asked Trickster mildly. He grinned widely and took a bow, flourishing his cape as he did so.

"It'll take some getting used to," Artemis commented.

"You're telling me," Conner muttered.

Canary used the brief reprieve to decide what actually required addressing. "Why are you bleeding black and blue?" she asked.

Conner looked down at the stained bandage on his arm and scowled. "Tattoos suck. They hurt and they don't last very long."
"As soon as we put the green-K away his skin started rejecting the ink," Mirror Apprentice explained.

"Thank goodness," M'Gann muttered under her breath.

Canary prowled around Conner examining the effect from multiple angles. Then her hand darted out and caught the chain attached to his nose. Conner found himself suddenly possessed by a strong impulse to follow wherever she might lead.

"Get rid of anything that might get torn out during a fight," Canary ordered.

Conner started to nod then thought better of it. "Yes ma'am," he said.

Canary released him and grinned. "But before you do, why don't you visit the Daily Planet in Metropolis? Talk to Lane and Kent... oh and make sure to let Jimmy Olsen see you. Words do not do that ensemble justice.

Conner smiled slyly. "That bad?" he asked.


Conner glared at the receptionist in the Daily Planet's front lobby. "Black Canary called ahead to say I was coming."

The receptionist looked him over coolly. "She said Superboy was coming."

Conner sighed. He was wearing the S-Shield. "Today, you want it recognized that you're connected to him. And they're going to need all the help they can get," Trickster had said. Apparently the S-Shield wasn't enough. His gaze settled on the receptionist's coffee cup then he blew a thin stream of super-cooled air at it. In a second the steaming, dark liquid was a cube of ice.

The receptionist stared at the frozen coffee, she stared at Conner. "You're really? Seriously?"

"The other guy running around with freeze breath is about twice my age," Conner pointed out.

The receptionist hit the intercom button. "Jimmy!" she yelled. "Photo op! This'll totally blow that Superboy footage from Oregon out of the water!"

A few moments later an out of breath red-head with a camera clenched in his fist burst out of the stairwell. "What? Where?" he panted.

The receptionist grinned and gestured to Conner. "Jimmy, Superboy. Superboy, Jimmy Olsen. You don't mind if he takes your picture do you?"

"No," Conner said. "But I don't call myself Superboy anymore."

The elevator opened. Reporters were nothing if not curious and the receptionist's call had most of the paper's staff making their way to the front desk with varying degrees of urgency.

Standing toward the back of the elevator, coffee cup in hand, Clark waited for the people in front of him to clear out. Standing beside him Lois glowered threateningly at the crowd that was obscuring their view of the excitement. When Clark to get his first look at Conner the coffee mug shattered in his hand, sending the scalding liquid over his hand, some of it splashed onto Lois' arm. "OUCH! Clark! Careful!" she exclaimed drawing Conner's attention but not Clark's. 'Barry said tongue OR ear,' Clark found himself thinking numbly. 'Not AND and PLUS and, my god, what was he thinking
"when he did that to himself?"

"So, um, why don't you come over by the window," Jimmy said. "Or actually, why don't we go up to the roof, get the Metropolis sky-line as a backdrop."

Conner shrugged. Jimmy led the way. Everyone else trailed along.

"You're not going by Superboy anymore?" Jimmy asked as he clicked off a number of photos. "Why? ...And what do we call you?"

"I've got a real-person name now," Conner said. "But that's supposed to be secret, right? I haven't come up with a new costumed name yet."

"But WHY?" Jimmy asked with a trace of anguish in his voice. He couldn't imagine anyone wanting to distance themselves from his idol.

"Because I'm not his, Superman's successor," Conner stated flatly. "I never really was."

"But!" Jimmy protested inarticulately and he was far from the only one.

"Cadmus cloned me from Superman. They told me the world needed Superman, so they needed me as a back-up if he should fall," Conner explained. "There was probably more to it than that. Because Cadmus is evil. But that's what was dinned into my head. I think more for myself now. I've had more real experience. I'm not a back-up or a copy of a real person. Being a clone doesn't make me not real." Suddenly and unexpectedly Conner grinned. "One of my friends says it's like being a much-delayed twin. I'm a real person. My own person. And Superman had made it very clear that he doesn't want a successor, or at least that he doesn't want me."

Clark studied his shoes guiltily. He still maintained that he was within his rights to not want responsibility for the results of Cadmus' experiments. But he was sorry that the kid got caught in the middle of things and got hurt.

"I'm not calling myself Superboy anymore and, after today, I'm not going to wear the S-Shield anymore," Conner declared. "I only wore it here so you'd know who I was. It's pathetic to want his attention so much when he clearly can't stand me."

"That's very mature," Lois said, pushing through the crowd. "And, to be blunt, sounds a little prepared. This," she gestured to Conner, "looks pretty angry. If not the look itself, then the effort you're going to to make sure Superman sees it."

"Trickster called it a non-verbal 'fuck you'," Conner supplied frankly. "Canary said I should be honest and I should try to be fair, especially when it comes to talking to you guys. But yeah, I'm mad. When I woke-up he was everything to me. Thanks to Cadmus everything I know about me was defined by what Superman was. And then I met him and he couldn't even look at me!" Clark glanced up, startled at hearing Conner's side of their non-relationship for the first time. "I got over it."

"Obviously not the end of the story," Lois prompted.

"The whole time I was the League's problem, he ignored me," Conner continued, his voice growing tense. "When I finally find people who actually want me around he takes them away from me."

"Central City's Rogues?" Lois clarified.

"Yeah."
"You do know that they're costumed criminals? And that Superman apprehended them in the middle of an armored car heist?"

"I know!" Conner snapped. "How am I supposed to feel? To Superman and the League I'm a dangerous, unnatural thing at worst. At best, I'm a burden they didn't ask for and don't have time for. The Rogues like me. They don't make me feel like I need to apologize for being alive."

To his alarm, Clark realized Conner was so tense he was shaking. He was on the verge of losing control and that was the one thing someone with their powers could never allow themselves.

"I'm trying," Conner said, his breath coming in ragged gasps. "I'm trying to be a hero, to do the right things. I know the Rogues steal stuff, okay? I know. But they're not really bad, they don't set out to hurt people. Not like some heroes. With them I feel like, maybe, there's a chance I can be something good. 'Cause they don't treat me like a weapon that's gotta be locked away from real people."

"It's okay," Clark said soothingly. He put his hand on Conner's shoulder. "Easy now. No one's attacking you. We just want to hear your side. Alright now?"

Conner stared at Clark for several moments. Then his gaze dropped to Clark's unburnt hand where he'd spilled his coffee. Conner looked back to Clark's face. In his eyes Clark saw dawning realization.

Conner threw himself away from Clark, he almost went over the side of the railing in the process. He glared furiously at Clark. "NO! You don't get to change your mind now!" he exclaimed.

Clark backed off quickly, afraid for his secret, tired and frustrated by the way that everything he did turned out wrong around this boy.

"This was a stupid idea," Conner declared. And this time there was nothing accidental about it when he threw himself off the roof.

"Half a second later he was gone, just a couple of inch deep footprints in the asphalt left behind," Clark heard Lois' voice drifting up from Perry's office window.

"Olsen, at least tell me you got a decent picture of the kid?" Perry demanded stridently.

"Got 'em Chief."

Clark tuned out the conversation going on below as Black Canary stepped out of the Javelin. She'd landed on a neighboring building, one with a less obstructed roof than that of the Planet. Clark briefly took to the air, his cape fluttering behind him. He'd searched the city for Conner, taken off just as soon as Clark could make his excuses to his co-workers, without success.

"What were you thinking? Sending him here?" Clark demanded.

"I was thinking it's all public anyway: Conner's connections with the Rogues. You apprehending them. The rather unsubtle message he and Trickster composed in reply. I sent him here so you could do some spin control," Canary growled. "I sent him here so you'd talk to him in your real, fully-functional persona, instead of as the image. I was thinking maybe you'd finally remember what your heart is for."

"He recognized me," Clark snapped. "The glasses might be enough with most people but he sees my face every time he looks in a mirror! He recognized me and I'm the last person he wants to talk to now."
"Who's fault is that?" Canary asked tartly, hands on her hips.

"There was never anything real between us," Clark stated. "I might have been the one to tear down his imaginary castles, but he's the one salting the earth."

"Doesn't feel so great does it? Being the one reaching out and getting his hand slapped?" Canary asked. Then she sighed. "Give him some time. Like, maybe 'til the older Rogues are home safe. And on that subject: Resign yourself to the Rogues being a part of his life. Barry says Conner's smile could have lit the city when Cold's little sister insisted on calling herself his aunt."

Mirror Master grimaced and took a swallow from his canteen to wash away the taste of ration bars for dinner.

"Small and smokeless," Cold reminded Heatwave when he noticed the other Rogue staring at their campfire, enthralled.

"Spoilsport," Heatwave muttered.

Digger sat a little bit away from the camp, far enough to keep his night vision sharp as he took the first watch.

They'd set down in the wilds of Warworld, far from any structures, where the likelihood of being noticed was minimal. For the last week they'd been making their way to the planet's western engine complex on foot.

The wilds were undeveloped but far from uninhabited. Those who lived in there were less the standing army found in Warworld's complexes, more roving packs of predators sharpening their fangs on one another in anticipation of the day when they'd be unleashed on an unsuspecting planet. It had been simple enough to slip in and blend among them. Still their plan made for a long and tiring march. And even though the inhabitants hadn't recognized them as anything other than another marauding band they had yet to manage fifteen miles without a fight.

"What's Evan's story?" Batman asked Mirror Master with mild curiosity, the better to get an answer, as they settled in for the night.

"Don't rightly know," Scudder admitted. "Kid was never one to talk about the past much." He leaned back against a smooth outcropping of rock. "Here I am on a job one day and this crazy, skinny, little fifteen-year-old jumps through the reflection behind me. At first I was just gonna catch 'im and chuck 'im back out. But he's a slippery thing. He'd been on the streets for a month or two 'less I seriously miss my guess and he knew how to run and hide."

"Eventually I start thinking there's no food our bodies can use on the other side of the glass and the last thing I want is a corpse tucked in some inaccessible crevice stinking up the joint. So I start putting out food and water for him. It was a bit like taming a feral cat."

"Eventually the kid starts liking me. Starts watching my back when I'm working, he takes to tossing crap through the mirrors at Flash when he'd get a little too close to catching me. All told it takes me damn near a year 'fore I manage to coax him back to the real world. By then I've gotten used to having him around. But he never says a word about what had him on the streets in the first place. Or how a kid with a Scot's accent you can't cut with a knife until he's had his morning coffee came to be knocking around in the States."

Scudder paused to take another drink. "What about you? How'd you end up being the first hero-type to turn up with a side-kick?"
"I wasn't able to prevent Robin's parents from being murdered," Batman said shortly. "Knew what he was going through. Knew what helped. Age aside, he was more than capable, so when he wanted to keep on I had no reason to stop him."

"Empathy'll get you every time. It's why we took to Conner so fast and why Piper and Trickster'll always have a place... Even the morning after all of Central City woke up with hot pink hair because Trickster was bored," Scudder remarked. "Quite a few of us older ones know a little too well what it's like not to be wanted."

"Grandma Joan, I need to borrow Owen," Wally asked as he skidded to a stop in the Garricks' kitchen. "Conner's upset, but I figure he'll come out for the squirt."

Owen hopped off the couch and held up his arms for Wally to pick him up. "Go fast 'kay?" he asked.

Wally grinned. "Like there's any other way to go."

Wally zipped Owen over to Metropolis and had him call for Conner at various points around the city. He noted that Owen didn't get disoriented by being carried around at speeds well in excess of the speed of sound the way normal people did. It was sort of cool having a kid-speedster around Wally concluded. Now if they could just find Conner.

After several more unsuccessful rounds, Wally had a brainstorm. He raced back to Central and the Rogue's lair. Conner was sitting on the floor in the corner of Cold's work room.

"Hey," Wally said, putting Owen down so he could climb in Conner's lap. "I heard today sort of sucked."

"Yeah," Conner sighed. "The Rogues are the greatest. Still it's not much fun spelling out for a bunch of reporters that having a criminal record is basically a prerequisite for an adult who doesn't think I'm a time-bomb waiting to go off."

Wally slid down the wall to sit beside Conner. "It's not that bad. My family likes you. So do the other mentors."

Without acknowledging Wally, Conner continued on, "And Superman, I saw him today in his civilian identity. He's probably freaked that I recognized him. I mean if there's anyone he didn't want to know who he really is it's me. But anyway, he tried being NICE to me. Now. Why doesn't he get it! I don't want him. I want Len back. I don't want someone who's only trying because he thinks I'm going evil and he doesn't want anyone to say it's his fault 'cause he's sucky parent."

"They'll get back," Wally promised.

Chapter End Notes

In DC continuity, Owen Mercer is the son of Digger Harkness and the 31st century character, Meloni Thawne. He's Bart Allen's half-brother and a decedent of Zoom who is descended from Malcome Thawne who is Barry Allen's evil, separated at birth twin brother. I'm planning on reducing the number of generation considerably so for this story he's descended from Barry's evil twin, and the number of generation is few enough
that if they did a blood test it would show a relationship between Barry and Owen.

My take on Perry White (and the rest of the Daily Bugle staff) is comes mostly from the old "Adventures of Lois and Clark" TV show.
"You've been up here a long time," Diana remarked.

Clark stood up from the chair in the Watchtower's monitor room. "I thought I'd stay until we knew Conner was all right." He sighed, "I stopped looking for him when it occurred to me that I'm the one he's hiding from."

Diana put her hand to her mouth, "No one called you? Wally found Conner hours ago. It seems he went home after the incident. Er, to Captain Cold's place, I mean."

Clark decided not to address the issue of no one thinking he'd care about Superboy going missing. "Well, I finally found the time to go through all of Bruce's surveillance footage while I was waiting," he said. "Turns out he's a good big brother. In general, Conner's very people-oriented." Clark smiled oddly: amused, proud and a little sad. "Did you know, just a few days after the boys rescued him from Cadmus they introduced him to movies… a disaster flick. They practically had to tackle him to keep him from going off to rescue the characters. He hates to see anyone in pain." Then Clark grimaced, "Conner understands property crimes conceptually, but they don't have much resonance with him. I suppose it makes sense that someone who's never had anything wouldn't feel too strongly about theft. He's been around for a year now and as far as I can tell he's never owned anything beyond the clothes he wears."

"You've started to think of him as a person, a real person, not just a problem to be dealt with," Diana said. "So what are you going to do about him?"

"It's easier to see him as a person rather than a clone of me now that he's finally stopped being so obsessed with being me. Too bad it took him getting to the point where he hated me before that happened," Clark added with a touch of bitterness.

Diana gave him a slightly exasperated look. "He's not as old as he looks… although I understand he's embraced the concept of teenage rebellion with a vengeance lately... Didn't you want to be your father when you were little? I know there was no one I looked up to more than my mother when I was a young girl."

"It was unnatural, he was as bad as those cultists in Metropolis who insist on worshiping Superman as a god," Clark insisted. Diana looked unconvinced.

"I've been trying to look at recent events from his perspective," Clark admitted. "Trying to figure out what I can do that won't blow-up in my face. All I could come up with was to think how I might have reacted if, say, my birth-parents hadn't of died. If they'd sent me away, been wrong about the Krypton's fate and had come to Earth when I was a teenager and tried to take me back from Ma and Pa. I can see that scenario turning very ugly very quickly. And I think that's what I've been doing to Conner: First ignoring him then trying to get him away from the Rogues."

Diana nodded in unhappy agreement.

Clark threw up his hands in frustration. "But they're still criminals! How can I leave him with them?"

"What is it that the advanced races like to call Earth?" Diana asked rhetorically. "'That primitive, little mud-ball'? From what I understand, Krypton was quite advanced. I imagine your people might have felt fairly horrified at the thought of one of their children growing up here."

"I could tell them I grew-up with good, moral people who always loved me," Clark said.
"And that last is what we are asking Conner to give up," Diana replied. "There is no going back and erasing that we have not always loved him. That, in truth, we have so little regard for him as a person that we failed to even provide him with a name. Is it odd that he can't understand our need to rescue him from the Rogues when they had to rescue him from us?"

An older gentleman in an old fashion suit and waistcoat followed Robin to the Rogue's hide-out. He wore a black domino mask with an air of resignation. When Robin would have simply let them in by means of picking the lock, the older man gave the boy a scolding look, then rang the bell and waited patiently to be let in.

Lisa Snart opened the door. She glanced from Robin to their distinguished visitor. "He's okay," Robin said. "We wanted to ask the guys for a little help in Gotham."

"Well come on in," Lisa said as she led the way across the warehouse floor and up the stairs to the Rogue's living area. "Don't mind the mess. Yesterday's paintball tournament spilled over into the base proper. So today we're having a painting day."

"That sounds most reasonable," the older gentleman remarked.

Lisa snorted. "Wait 'til you see the results."

Each of the four older boys had been assigned a wall in the lounge area as well as their personal rooms to repaint.

There was a can of white paint sitting forlornly in front of Evan's wall. He'd meticulously scraped all of the paintball splatters off the mirror then swiped James' DS for a break that had lasted the better part of the morning.

James had eschewed the white paint for colors of his own choosing. His wall was a garish mish-mash of vivid blues and glowing oranges. He was standing back from the wall with a paint-brush in hand, surveying his work for any final touches needed to enhance the eye-sore.

Above a height of roughly three feet Conner's wall was white and neatly painted. Below three feet Owen had gotten hold of some of James' paint and proceeded to use Conner's freshly painted wall as a canvas for finger-painting.

In the week since his make-over Conner's appearance had undergone some further modification: The chain and several of the larger ear-rings had been sacrificed in accord with Canary's warning about not wearing anything that could be used against him in a fight. The tongue and lip-piercings had ended up being incapable of withstanding the temperatures generated by Conner's freeze-breath. While Conner didn't think the eye-brow piercings were big enough that anyone could really latch onto them in a fight it didn't stop Owen from making attempts, Conner had gotten tired of being poked in the eye when Owen tried and failed in his grabs for the shiny things. Finally it was just too much bother, in Conner's opinion, to gel his hair into spikes every morning so he tended to leave it looking like a tie-died mop more often than not.

Hartley's wall looked strikingly normal, white with green trim. But he was eyeing James' wall thoughtfully and playing with his remaining green paint in a way that spoke of mischief to come.

"Evan," Lisa said in a honey-dripping voice as she leaned over the couch and covered the DS screen with her delicate fingers. Evan stared at her with adoration. "Know what would really impress me?" Her tone changed to something considerably harder, "If you did what I told you to. Finish your damn wall."
"Hey guys," Robin called.

"Hey. What's with the gaffer?" James asked.

"This is Agent A," Robin stated. "We, well..."

"With Batman occupied elsewhere we find ourselves short-handed in Gotham," Alfred took over. He glanced toward Conner and shuddered minutely. "As you seem to lack for amusements, I thought I would ask if you would consider lending your assistance."

"You want us to help Robin patrol?" Conner asked hopefully.

"I also had several projects I would hope you might consider of interest," Alfred said.

"Since Batman's helping the Rogues out of the jam I got 'em in, it's only fair," James agreed.

"Not your fault," Lisa reminded him sharply.

Alfred nodded gravely. "No, you were not to blame for what occurred. However, your assistance would still be appreciated."

"We're game," Evan said.

"Master James," Alfred began as he produced a padded sleeve containing a number of vials. "I believe this might provide you with an interesting challenge. These are six recent variants on Joker Venom. While we have specific remedies for each, Batman has determined that all six share a number of similar characteristics."

"So you think there ought to be a way to make a universal antidote, something that'll work not just on those but on the next thing he comes out with too," James realized accepting the vials.

"Quite, Robin is a computer expert, Batman is by inclination a mechanical engineer who has been forced by circumstances to learn toxicology. You have a talent for chemistry," Alfred said.

"Screw with the Joker? Force him to scrape his favorite toy and go back to square one?" James grinned. "Hell, I bet I can even make this crap do something funny, just to show the sadistic freak the meaning of the word."

Next Alfred handed an old fashion top-hat to Hartley with a card in the hat-band that read 10/6.

"Okay..." Hartley said, confused then the turned the hat over and looked inside. "Mad Hatter tech?"

"Precisely," Alfred said. "While the hat remains in contact with his victim's head the Mad Hatter is able to control their minds."

"Right, he's the guy who's always kidnapping little girls and dressing them up as Alice in Wonderland," Lisa said with an expression of disgust.

"Since my style of hypnosis doesn't need physical contact, you think I ought to be able to use it to counter the signal from Tetch's tech without having to get the hat off his victim," Hartley said. "I've never tried un-hypnotizing people, but theoretically..."

"What, Come on, Hatter should definitely be mine," Evan protested. "'Through the Looking Glass' and all."

"Master Evan, I believe the Wonderland Gang is currently active again," Alfred remarked. "If you
would be so kind as to scout out their base of operations?"

"Aren't they with Hatter?" Evan asked puzzled.

"Not if he can help it," Alfred replied. "Just scout, do not engage them," his look encompassed all of
the teens, particularly Robin. "None of you are to engage in solo actions. When it is time to confront
our adversaries, we will act as a team."

The Rogues nodded agreeably, they rarely worked alone. Seeing he was out-numbered Robin sighed
and promised as well.

"Now, on that note. Master Conner, I would like you and Master Robin to organize regular patrol
routes suited to the group's various abilities. You will want to maximize coverage without
compromising your ability to support one another should trouble be encountered."

Conner nodded seriously. Alfred smiled, thinking that the boy's protective impulses toward his
friends should nicely balance Robin's leanings toward over-confidence.

Alfred was generally pleased with what he'd found. Not bad children at all. With just a bit of
encouragement they seemed eager enough to turn their energies and aptitudes toward nobler ends
than robbing banks.

Several nights later, with the Wonderland Gang in custody and a substantial portion of their loot
having gone missing during their apprehension, Alfred considered having another chat with the
young Rogues to, perhaps, clarify the purpose of vigilantism.

While Alfred was considering the best method of approaching the matter a report came in. "Guys,
got some sort of major panic attack near Moench Row," Piper called in. "Can't tell what they're
running from. Everyone's going in different directions."

"Scarecrow," Robin hypothesized before Alfred could. "You carry a gas mask?"

"I use a woodwind for my tricks," Piper replied. "Can't play through a mask."

"Pull back," Alfred ordered.

"Panic's looking pretty bad," Piper disagreed. "I'm going to try a lullaby, see if I can settle things
down a bit before someone gets hurt."

"Stay up wind at least," Robin said. "Fear gas is nasty stuff. Everyone, meet up with me, I've got
extra masks."

"Be there in a sec," Conner said.

"I'm good," Trickster replied. "Got some stink-bombs in my bag of tricks. Scarecrow's the guy who
goes around with a burlap bag over his head? Doesn't really have an agenda beyond terrorizing
people?"

"Yeah, that's him," Robin confirmed.

"I'll scout by air," Trickster said. "Ought to be able to spot an epicenter or something."

"I've got a theater going nuts," Mirror Apprentice reported. "Not enough exits. Gonna open up some
looking-glass doors, see if I can keep 'em from trampling each other. Where should I dump 'em out?"
"There is a medical clinic on Park Row," Alfred suggested. "If you can deliver them there Dr. Thompkins stocks the antidote to Scarecrow's Fear Gas."

"Long as they've got mirrors in the loos I'm good," Mirror Apprentice declared.

"Robin, got a couple of smoke machines up on the roofs," Trickster announced. "Corner of Moench and 7th, plus one five blocks up. You take one, I'll get the other?"

"Sounds good," Robin agreed. "Conner, split the difference. Scarecrow likes to see the damage he does."

"Got it," Conner replied. "Piper's music is working, most of the crowd's sleep-walking away. There's a building with a viewing deck, good vantage point for watching everyone go nuts. I'm gonna check it out."

Piper's music turned discordant then cut off abruptly.

"Mirror Apprentice," Alfred spoke quickly. "Get to Piper, now. I believe he's been affected by the gas."

"On it."

"I'm going too," Conner announced.

"Stay on target," Robin countermanded. "MA has Piper. The quicker we take out Scarecrow the quicker everyone'll be safe."

Several moments later, over the open com channels Alfred heard Scarecrow's high, thin voice. "Are you supposed to be intimidating? Where is the Batman?" But Alfred couldn't spare any attention for Conner's response. Mirror Apprentice and a hard-light duplicate were dragging Piper through the glass they'd set up in the satellite Cave.

Mirror Apprentice and his double had Piper's arms twisted behind him. Piper's hood was thrown back and the red-head was screaming "Bring it back!" over and over. Evan looked shaken. "Thinks he's deaf again. Keeps trying to claw at his hearing-aid things. Scarecrow can't really do that, can he?"

"No, but his gas can make a person believe nearly anything," Alfred explained as he administered the antidote. "It takes a moment," he added as he requested music from the cave's computer.

Mirror Apprentice sat Piper down in front of a speaker as the sounds of a classic concerto filled the air. After moment Hartley curled up around the speaker as if it were a teddy bear.

"He'll be alright," Alfred promised. "Best get back to the others now."

Before long the four boys returned. Conner and James went to check on Hartley while Robin went to Alfred. "You got him the antidote?"

"Of course," Alfred replied, implying mild insult that Robin had even felt the need to ask. "You know the effects linger."

"Yeah," Robin grimaced. "Well, at least he won't be the only one having nightmares. I think Scarecrow's developed a case of chromophobia courtesy of Conner and Trickster and Trickster's dye-job."
Meanwhile Hartley had half-way abandoned the speaker for Conner. "First Owen, now Piper, you must be naturally cuddly or something," Trickster teased gently as crouched beside them.

'They still required scolding about the reallocation of stolen goods,' Alfred thought. 'But it would certainly wait until after Piper was feeling better. And praise for their handling of the Scarecrow and the incipient riot also took priority.'
Wally climbed up to the top row of bleachers and slid into the spot saved between his two friends just in time to catch Hartley protesting. "I do not need a nightlight!"

"But the rest of us do," James replied easily. "I turn your Ipod back on after you go to sleep and no screaming wakes anyone up all night long."

Hartley's face flushed brightly. Wally felt a moment's solidarity with the other red-head, it sucked to blush so easily. In the background the principal was presenting the seniors with awards and scholarships they'd earned, talking about how they'd be graduating in just a few days. Very few freshmen were paying any attention, so Wally didn't worry about being singled out for talking during the presentation. "Robin says Fear Gas is like that, even Batman gets nightmares from that crap," he told Hartley, it was what Robin had told him when he'd been freaked out after seeing the lingering effects on the other boy during a team-up that ended in a sleep-over.

"Don't patronize me," Hartley grumbled.

"Then don't be a doof," James replied. "If having music on helps you sleep it helps you sleep, no big deal. Worrying about what other people think is for flatties."

"If my dad knew…"

James and Wally groaned. Wally made as if to bang his head against the wall behind them.

"Remember: Your parents are morons," James said in a lecturing tone. "Everything they say is automatically wrong."

Wally remembered the first time he'd met Hartley and couldn't disagree.

"Mary, could I borrow Wally for an afternoon?" Aunt Iris asked. "I've been helping Joan Garrick with this charity she volunteers for, Joan and Jay are practically Barry's second family."

"And you want to make a good impression for your new boyfriend," Mary said knowingly. Then she added frankly, "But I don't see how bringing Wally to something like is going to be anything short of a disaster. You know he can't sit still for more than a minute at a time. His first grade teacher was practically in tears when she called about his classroom behavior the other day."

"Little kids are supposed to run around," Iris declared with conviction. "The charity's sponsor, Rachel Rathaway, always brings her son along with her. Watching Hartley sit off in the corner like a little wind-up doll with a broken spring is just sad. I was thinking maybe with another kid around he'd perk up a bit."

"Well, I won't stop you," Mary replied. "To be honest an afternoon to take care of house work without Wally messing the place up faster than I can clean sounds wonderful to me."

And so a few days later Iris handed Wally a small box of cookies then gave him a nudge toward the other red-haired boy sitting in the corner of the meeting room, head bowed over a picture book. "Remember to share," Iris instructed.

Wally nodded and ran across the room, dodging between slower moving adults. "Hi!" he said brightly. When the other boy failed to respond Wally shrugged and tapped him on the shoulder. The boy startled violently. "Good book? Is it funny? I only get that into video games," Wally said.
The other boy stared back, still looking like a deer caught in the head-lights.

"Hi, I'm Wally," Wally tried again.

"Hartley," the other boy replied with a smile and a wave.

Wally plopped down beside him and held out the box of cookies. "Want some?" he asked.

"Thank you," Hartley replied very precisely.

For a few minutes the boys were absorbed in consuming cookies, but the moment the box was empty Wally asked. "Wanna play tag?"

"What?" Hartley asked, he put a hand on Wally's shoulder so the other boy would look at him while he talked.

Wally swallowed the last mouth-full of cookies, wiped his mouth then repeated. "Do you want to play tag? I saw a big lawn behind the building."

Hartley grinned and nodded. He followed Wally outside and in a short while they were happily chasing each other around.

Inside Rachel Rathaway glanced up and noticed her son's abandoned book. She paled, looking around the room worriedly.

"The boys are just outside on the back lawn," Joan said.

"Hartley's outside?" Rachel asked nervously. "What if he wanders off?"

"There's a fence to keep them off the road," Iris assured her.

"But-" Rachel's voice wavered. "Hartley won't hear if I call for him."

"Hartley's deaf?" Iris asked. She frowned thoughtfully for a few minutes then led Rachel out to where the boys were playing. "Wally?" she called and a moment later Wally ran over practically towing his new friend along with him. Iris gave Rachel a reassuring look then told Wally, "Tag's good, but no hide-and-seek. If Mrs. Rathaway calls you bring Hartley in right smart. Okay?"

"Sure, fine," Wally said impatient with adults interrupting their game for something so trivial. "You're it, Hart!" he exclaimed and dashed off with Hartley hot on his heels.

Iris smiled at Rachel, "There, all taken care of," she said. "It's not as if they'll get too far with the fence anyway. Let them be kids."

"All that running around; it's normal? And safe?" Rachel asked.

"Perfectly," Iris assured her. Rachel smiled tentatively and allowed herself to be reassured.

When they'd worn themselves out, the two boys sat on the back steps. Wally chattered animatedly about anything that came to mind. After several minutes Hartley gave a frustrated huff. He reached out and grabbed Wally's chin and turned the other boy's face toward him. "Look when you talk," he ordered. "And- and less words." Wally's rambling was much harder to follow than his tutors' concise instructions.

"Why?" Wally asked.
"Rude," Hartley said shortly. Wally made a face at that and Hartley made a face back. "So I can understand," he elaborated.

"You don't get what I'm saying if I don't look at you?" Wally asked puzzled. Hartley shook his head. "That's weird."

"Last word?" Hartley asked.

"Weird?"

"Ee-r-d means?" the unfamiliar word came out a mangled collection of syllables.

Wally shrugged uncomfortably, his face colored. "Er, strange? Different."

Hartley's posture collapsed in on itself. "That's me," he said looking at the ground.

Wally chewed on his lower lip for several moments then reached out and shook Hartley's shoulder until he looked up again. "Weird's not bad," he stated. "It's not like my teacher saying that I'm 'a very difficult child'."

Hartley couldn't help but smile a tiny bit at the smug look on Wally's face as he declared himself to be difficult. But his smile slipped away as he explained. "Have to pretend to be normal."

"Why?" Wally asked, confused.

"Father says."

James had known Wally for the better part of a summer before meeting Hartley for the first time. When school had started up in the fall, they discovered they were attending the same middle school. James, having always home-schooled before, quickly gravitated to the one person at the overflowing middle school who he knew. Two weeks after school started, James noticed Wally heading off in a direction that didn't correspond to his parents' house, the Garricks' or the Allens' after school, so he'd immediately invited himself along.

"Wow, posh digs," James commented as he and Wally entered their fifth minute of walking up the drive to the stately old house.

Wally wrinkled his nose. "It's like a museum or something, Hartley's room is the only part of the house I've seen that looks lived in at all. I'm scare to death I'm gonna break something priceless every time I come over. Don't case the place okay? Hartley's a friend of mine."

"Rogues don't do home invasions," James replied. "Although three or four of any other home I've ever seen could fit in this place, and that's just the house. The yard's like it's own neighborhood."

Wally looked around then nodded in agreement. "Hartley just got out of the hospital, they're trying to fix his ears," he said, hoping to incline James toward his best behavior.

"What's wrong with 'em?" James asked curiously.

"Those little bones inside your ear? Hartley doesn't have those," Wally explained. "If you're weirded out don't come."

"I grew up with a bearded lady two trailers over. Trust me, nobody's strange to a circus kid," James promised. "Although rich people are kind of pushing it."

"Hartley's okay, his parents are a bit off," Wally said. James shrugged and took Wally's word for it.
When they made it up to the front door a maid escorted them into the drawing room. "Hi Mrs. Rathaway," Wally said politely. "Can I visit Hartley?"

"Oh Walter, it's so nice of you to come," Hartley's mother replied. "Hartley's in his room."

"Thanks, I remember the way," Wally said.

Once they were out of ear shot James asked "Walter?" in a dubious tone.

"Not really, Wally's too informal for her so she started calling me Walter," Wally replied with a shrug. "Like I said, a little off. My real full name isn't much better so I don't bother correcting her anymore."

James tilted his head to the side as he started hearing, more feeling, a stereo with the base turned way, way up. He figured the walls must have some sort of excellent sound proofing to block out everything except the base-vibrations. Wally stopped in front of the door that probably concealed the source of the vibrations and flipped a switch beside the door he'd led James to.

The boy who opened the door was smaller and slighter than Wally, with hazel eyes and barely-there auburn stubble covering his scalp but doing nothing to hide the thick black lines of stitches behind his ears. He smiled at Wally tiredly, barely seemed to notice James then retreated back into his room. He curled up in a window seat leaning back against one of his stereo's large speakers.

Since he was being ignored, James took the time to look around the room. There were several cages connected by elaborate habit-trails for a number of rats, a rack of musical instruments half-hidden behind a baby-grand piano, a stereo and a huge collection of CD's and, most interesting to James, a strange looking conglomeration of wires, a monitor, speakers, microphones, a computer and a helmet.

"How'd it go?" Wally asked dropping to the floor in front of the window so he was looking up at his friend.

"Woke up thinking there were red-hot needles in my brain, screamed until they knocked me back out and undid it," Hartley replied. "Cross-talk with my nerves: the new hardware had my brain interpreting sound as pain."

Wally grimaced sympathetically. "Want us to come back later? If you're too miserable."

"Hey what's this thing?" James called as he peered at the odd machine.

"Hartley, that's James," Wally said. "He's asking about your sound translator. He's as much of a tech-geek as I am."

Hartley got up, he flipped on a few switches, stuck a CD in the machine then jammed the helmet on James' head.

"GAH!" James exclaimed a moment later. "It's talking in my head."

"Directly stimulates audio-centers," Hartley explained. "My second oldest hearing aid. He turned James toward the screen, where a woman clearly enunciated a vocabulary list. "Teaches me to lip-read. Too big to carry, but I listen to music here. Generally. Today my brain has road-rash."

"What was your oldest hearing aid?" James asked curiously.
"Long gone. Burnt the nerves," Hartley said. "Worked just long enough to show my brain didn't. Then they made that one, helped my brain develop audio-centers."

"Show him the thing with the rats," Wally encouraged.

James looked curious and Hartley grinned a bit as he warmed up to showing off. He took down a recorder, then opened a door to the rats' cage and put his hand inside and tapped his fingers against the plastic habit trail. After a few moments three of the rats worked their way through fellows and climbed onto Hartley's arm. He spent a few minutes petting and cuddling them. Then Hartley sat cross-legged on the floor and started to play. The sound was odd, atonal, sometimes James couldn't really hear it, it was just an itch beneath his skin. In response to Hartley's playing the rats scrabbled over to an elaborate puzzle box and started working it together. In a few minutes the box had been opened.

James thought about safes and rats crawling through the walls to operate them while Hartley praised and treated his pets. "How do you do that?" James asked.

"Mostly I'm just telling them what to do," Hartley explained. "These guys know me, listen to me. Wilds ones I can call, make them do simple, natural stuff for rats, but it's more hypnosis."

"That is totally cool," James declared.

It didn't take long for James to realize he was half of all the friends Hartley had ever had, unless one counted the rats. Being friends with Hartley, James quickly learned to classify the days the way he did. Where most kids their age had school days, weekends and vacations. Hartley had surgery days, post-operative phases and pre-operative phases. Everything had to be planned around how close he was to an operation. Immediately before he couldn't afford to get sick, immediately after there was no telling what sort of shape he'd be in.

When one of the operations actually worked, more than worked if the way Hartley reacted to footsteps on a hardwood floor as if it were gunfire were any indication, no one said anything. They all just held their breath. When a month passed and the implants hadn't been rejected or malfunctioned they tentatively celebrated success. When the next term started, Wally and James were shocked to find Hartley standing in front of their school, staring at the hordes of students flooding through the doors with trepidation.

"Hart, what are you doing here?" Wally asked.

"Yeah, don't you have tutors and what-all?" James added.

"Father says they shouldn't coddle me anymore since I'm not disabled anymore," Hartley explained. "Mother was having a nervous breakdown when the chauffeur dropped me off."

"We're all going to school together?" Wally asked. "That is so great!"

"Has anyone ever been trampled in there?" Hartley asked seriously. He was certain he'd never seen so many people in the same place, ever before in his life. Wally and James traded a look behind his back then they each grabbed an elbow and waded into the ocean of students.

When several weeks passed and Hartley was still flinching away from noises and looking ready to hide behind Wally or James at the slightest provocation, James wondered if introducing him to the Rogues might help toughen him up a bit. To James' shock it turned out Hartley didn't need any help in that area, just motivation.

Wally and Hartley were talking at Wally's locker when one of the school's more obnoxious bullies
snatched Hartley's flute case out from under his arm and tossed it to a friend.

"That's delicate!" Hartley protested.

"It's girly, we're doing you a favor," the bully replied as the instrument was tossed back over Hartley's head. Wally quietly worked his way toward ass #2 in hopes of intercepting the case on the next pass. It never got that far, the first bully missed his catch and the flute spilled out on the floor. Hartley stared at his flute in horror.

James had heard the fuss from the next hall over, when he heard Hartley shout he'd started pushing through the press of students gathered to watch the show.

"Klutz!" someone laughed.

"I meant to do that," the bully insisted. To prove it he stomped on a section of the flute.

Hartley snatched up the scattered pieces. "Gonna cry now?" the bully asked with mock sympathy as Hartley inspected the damage. He assembled the flute, tested the bent keys then he put everything but the mouth-piece up. He tilted his head to the side and marched up to his tormentor. "There's something I'd like you to hear," Hartley stated, his eyes flashing, his voice flat and emotionless.

"Cover your ears," Wally warned James quietly as Hartley put the mouth-piece to his lips.

Hartley moderated the pitch with a hand over the open end of his mouthpiece and within three notes the bully was doubled over, vomiting. Many people in the crowd looked dizzy or nauseous, even with his ears plugged James felt a twinge of vertigo and the floor seemed to heave beneath him. And James remembered the rats and considered entirely different reasons for introducing Hartley to the Rogues.

Wally didn't start seventh grade with Hartley and James. Officially he was out with mono but in reality he was getting a crash course in controlling super-speed.

"That-that BASTARD gave away my instruments!" Hartley ranted as James walked along on the top of the handrail as casually as if he were walking on a sidewalk. "He called the councilor and had me pulled out of band. He put me in an economics class! Economics!"

"We ought to trade parents," James remarked. "Your parents wouldn't throw a fit if they caught you with a physics book. Mine would have just apprenticed me to someone in the band if I'd been into music."

"You're still a born showman," Hartley replied. "And I'd be afraid for my rats' lives around the lions at a circus."

"So, what are you doing about your old man's latest effort to normalize you?" James asked.

Hartley presented a cheap harmonica with a flourish. "It's not much but it still carries a tune," he said. "At least well enough for me to invite a couple dozen wild rats and mice into the house and to convince them that anything that smells like my father is the best thing ever for chewing on."

James grinned. "That's a start. You know, I could teach you to pick locks and crack safes then you could teach the rats. That'd really piss off your parents. Trust me, it got rid of mine for good."

"You're taking advantage of Wally's unfortunate illness to be a bad influence," Hartley protested theatrically.
James smiled and took a bow. "It's weird, you being flattie and all. It needs changing. I mean I go from circus folk to Rogues and capes and it's the same old game: Me and my kind putting on a show for all the dumb-struck normals. Being friends with a normal, I'm not used to that."

"Oh come on, Wally's way less of a freak than me and you've know him longer," Hartley argued.

James thought of the last time he'd seen Wally, about watching the other boy blur into super-speed whenever his concentration slipped. He remembered a month earlier and Wally shoving a screwdriver into an electrical outlet in a bid to not be normal anymore with a shiver. And even before that Wally had been an insider, had known about his uncle's other identity. James hated liking someone who wasn't of the life and who consequently had to be deceived. That was for marks and Hartley wasn't a mark so he ought to be in.

Hartley smiled slyly back at James. "I'll think about your offer. If being rat-bait doesn't get my father to relent. Well, maybe I will let you teach me how to steal my stuff back!"

Only a few months later there'd been a new Rogue. But Hartley's parents weren't James'. Where James' parents had walked away and never looked back, never cared what became of their son. For Hartley and his parents costumed robberies and arrests had just become one more thing to fight over, just another move in game that turned loving each other into torture.
"So, um, you'd really be my date tonight?" Hartley asked Conner uncertainly.

"It's tonight?" Conner asked, surprised.

Hartley flushed brilliantly. "I should have mentioned that, I know. But I thought if I brought it up too often you'd change your mind. But the dinner's in three hours, so really can't procrastinate anymore. So, um, will you?"

"Sure," Conner agreed. He glanced upward, peering at the rainbow-colored bangs falling across his forehead and into his eyes. "Do I, well, what James did to my hair?"

"Yes! No!" Hartley exclaimed. "I mean yes that would get a totally unbelievable reaction out of my terribly conventional and stuck-up family. But, um, you're pretty cool and well, maybe if we just went and were ourselves and didn't do anything solely for the purpose of upsetting people, well maybe my parents might actually notice that you're great and that would be... nice."

"Okay, so what do I do?" Conner asked.

Twenty minutes later Young Justice dropped by. "What's going on?" Wally asked James when Hartley suddenly grabbed him and dragged him over to stand beside a bemused looking Conner.

"Hartley's gone crazy," James supplied cheerfully.

"You're no help!" Hartley yelled at Wally, noting Conner's much broader build.

"More dress-up Con-Con," Owen contributed.

"To meet Hart's high muckity-muck, society family," Evan elaborated with a roll of his eyes. "Ya know, the ones he runs away from every other week."

"Meet his parents?" M'Gann smiled, bright and brittle. "You- You're dating. Since when are you dating? That- that's nice for you."

"They're WHAT!" Wally exclaimed.

"And you want Con to look nice," Artemis said in a take charge tone. "But his entire wardrobe consists of jeans and tee-shirts. Simple solution: She pointed to Robin and Hartley. "You two take him shopping. You know what guys are supposed to wear for that sort of fancy crap." She pointed to Wally. "You, go search out an industrial strength laser."

"What for?" Wally asked.

Artemis grabbed a strand of Conner's hair and pointed to the dark roots that were beginning to grow back. "We're going to fix this mess."

"Hey!" Trickster protested.

"Your style required maintenance," Artemis stated. "Our Con doesn't do maintenance, hence: mess. Now you've got your assignments. Get!"
An hour later they reassembled. Hartley and Robin with a garment bag and Wally with a laser.

Artemis shoved Conner into the kitchen and sat him down. "I know how to cut hair," she assured him. "But I've never done it with a laser before."

After several minutes of studying she had Conner thread his fingers through his hair then she burned off everything more than a finger's width from his scalp. "Ta-da!" Artemis exclaimed, holding up a mirror.

Conner examined the results. It was apparent that his hair was naturally black again but the ends were still tipped with bleach. It looked like frost dusting his hair Conner decided. "I like it," he said.

Artemis gave Trickster a smug look.

Trickster shrugged. "Olsen's still going to be a rich man, selling that picture to every news agency in the country so they can have it for their stock-photo of Superboy-no-more. Con, you really need to come up with a new codename sometime."

Hartley removed a few ear-rings from Conner's left ear to balance the ones he'd lost from the right. He stepped back and grinned at Conner's much less radically altered appearance. "Oh shit!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I forgot about my clothes. They're still at my parents!"

"We came in my bioship," M'Gann volunteered. "I could give you a lift."

"Thanks," Hartley said.

Hartley spent the flight over fidgeting nervously. "Maybe I should go in through the window." he announced out of the blue. "Avoid my parents until the party."

"Why?" M'Gann asked absently.

"I'm, well, I'm going to try Flash's way. Stick to the high ground," Hartley declared. "We'll go, be ourselves, be good, and if they don't like us it's their problem. Fighting with my parents an hour before hand, probably not getting things off on the right foot. If I don't see them the odds of us not fighting get a lot better."

"Oh," M'Gann replied distractedly.

Once they reached the house Hartley scrambled in and out through his bedroom window. Clothes acquired and confrontation with parents delayed, Hartley relaxed enough to notice M'Gann had something on her mind. "Is everything okay with you?" he asked. "You're not? Well- do you have a problem with?"

M'Gann gave him a terribly unconvincing smile. "The thing is, I like Conner. So I want him to be happy. I also like Conner and I'd rather he was happy with me. If you make him unhappy, I will make you sorry."

"Oh!" Hartley said his eyes going wide. "Um, well, um, to be honest I'm not entirely sure this is really a date. I mean it would be really great if it were, but, um, Conner might have just agreed to help me make a point to my parents. 'Cause them keeping on trying to set me up with girls? Sort of says they aren't really listening when I tell them I'm gay. I wasn't going to ask Conner if it was a favor or a date until after the dinner," Hartley admitted. "Nice to pretend for a little bit even if it turns out he's not really interested."

M'Gann thought for a moment, then gave a little huff. "I sort of want to hate you and you're not
making it easy. I haven't actually told Conner I like him yet either, I've been trying to hint and hoping he'd get the idea and well, ask me out. That's how it's done with humans right? The boy asks? But I'm not sure Conner knows that. But I guess you're both boys so you can ask him instead and well... That's just not fair!"

M'Gann broke off to watch Hartley bang his forehead against a console. After a moment, without looking up at her, he started talking in a low hurried voice. "M'Gann, nice girls being all passive when it comes to relationships? That's a really incredibly stupid gender-stereotype. Watch better TV okay? It's not really like that. And given Conner's, like, not even two really, it's not fair to him to expect him to know about social conventions that he's better off without anyway. God, I totally flunk villain school! Guy I like, who I might actually have a shot with and I'm helping the competition!"

Hartley looked so miserable M'Gann couldn't keep herself from trying to cheer him up at least a little. "You get to ask him first," she pointed out. "I won't have time before your date."

Hartley rang the bell outside his parents' house then waited. Conner stood at his shoulder, fidgeting as Hartley's nervousness spread.

After a few moments the door was opened by an older woman in a maid's uniform. She looked Hartley up and down critically, spending a few extra moments checking the ground at his feet for signs of his rats. Then she stepped back, granting them access. "You look very handsome tonight Master Hartley," she said. "I trust there will be no horrible vermin making an appearance? It wouldn't be appropriate, causing a scene at your grandparents' fiftieth anniversary celebration."

"No ma'am. I left the rats at home, promise," Hartley replied. "I just brought a date. Millicent," he took a deep breath. "This is Conner."

Conner squirmed a bit when it was his turn to be appraised. "Well now, he most certainly is NOT a horrid creature," Millicent declared with a hint of humor. "Unfortunately, as lovely as your young man is, this does fall under the category of causing a scene. Well, I suppose we could just introduce him as a friend..."

"No," Hartley stated firmly. "Conner's my date and that's final."

Millicent grimaced. "It's better than sending you off and having you turn up later with the costume and the vermin," she said as a declaration of surrender.

"Always nice to feel so welcome in my own parents' home," Hartley remarked as he led Conner past Millicent.

Millicent frowned. "Master Hartley, you know very well that, normally, your parents would be overjoyed to find you on the door-step without the police or the Flash being somehow involved. But today is your grandparents' big event, not the time or place for one of your scenes."

"And I'm not making a scene," Hartley pointed out through gritted teeth. "I just came with a date, like everyone else who's old enough to be dating."

As they made their way inside Conner stared with amazement. He leaned over and whispered. "You're really related to all these people?"

Hartley glanced around and sighed. "In some way, shape or form," he said. "When there's money to be inherited families tend to stay in touch. Although, to be completely fair, it is my grandparents. They were close to their siblings and cousins. That was back when the family business was really something most of the family was involved in day-to-day. So everyone here probably is descended
from someone who actually wants to be here or would have wanted to be here."

"And none of them have costumed identities?" Conner asked. He noticed a large number of older people. "Ever?"

"Nope."

"What do they all do?" Conner asked. "What do we talk about if they don't have powers or gimmicks or get into super-hero fights?"

"Never been around this many normals before?" Hartley asked wryly. "Don't worry about it. James has never really gotten used to associating with regular people either, he just fakes it when he has to. I promise I'll stick close, wouldn't want to throw you to the wolves. You just follow my lead. It'll be fine."

Hartley steered them to one of the older couples. "Grandmother, Grandfather, congratulations on spending fifty years together," he said with a small bow.

The woman had been scanning the floor nervously ever since she'd noticed Hartley approaching. She took one last look for rats then turned her attention to Hartley. "GOOD... OF... YOU... TO... SAY," she said, speaking very loudly and slowly.

Hartley gave her a strained smile. "I've been able to hear for three years now Grandmother. And yelling never helped when I was stone deaf," he said. "I'd like you to meet my date, Conner."

"Er, congratulations?" Conner said uncertainly. Whatever this 'anniversary' thing was it fell outside of the range of human interactions Cadmus had felt he needed to know about.

Hartley's grandmother looked off to the side. Conner recognized her expression from his interactions with the Justice League. It was a 'maybe if we don't acknowledge it, it will cease to exist' look.

Hartley's grandfather scowled at him. "You have a family name young man? Kids today, no respect for their elders."

From the sudden increase in Hartley's level of tension Conner guessed that "No" was the wrong answer even if it was true. Then he remembered Lisa telling him that the Rogues were family. "It's Conner Snart," he said with a look that dared anyone to disagree.

"Hmph. Don't know anyone of that name. Not much of a surprise I supposed," the old man replied dismissively. He gave Hartley a disapproving look. "Not too many aberrations associated with our set."

Conner scowled and Hartley quickly dragged him off. "Don't mind them, or anyone really. Most of my family finds it very hard to open their mouths without a snub coming out," he whispered, taking advantage of Conner's beyond human hearing to speak privately. "Well, lets go talk to my parents then we should mingle."

It didn't take long for Conner to figure out the pattern. Strained politeness with the occasional oblique insult thrown in between Hartley and whoever he was speaking with, whispers from the people weren't so discreet. "Do they know you can hear them?" Conner asked also dropping his voice below normal human hearing. He'd noticed Hartley reacting to sounds no one else heard often enough to realize that when the other boy's hearing had been fixed it had been made much more sensitive than was normal for a human.

"Half of them rarely remember I'm not deaf anymore," Hartley replied with a shrug. "And I don't
exactly advertise everything I'm capable of."

"... dangerous life-style, that criminal thing. Too bad nothing's happened yet." Conner spun around at that particular snippet, teeth bared.

Hartley grabbed his arm. "Well, it's a good thing you don't have heat-vision yet, or they'd have gotten a nasty shock. Don't do anything, I knocked over his bank last month and I think I'll just have to do it again next month. I can defend myself."

A girl across the room waved then her hands flashed through a fluid series of signs. Hartley grinned. "Chastity says he wet his pants during the robbery. Damn, I miss all the GOOD family gossip." He smirked and took a bow. "Come on, you've got to meet the ONE person in my family who bothered to learn ASL."

After that the party got better in Conner's opinion as he spent most of it learning Hartley and Chastity's secret language, so he could join in as they privately made fun of everyone around them.

As the celebration wore on, Hartley and Conner gradually drifted out to the largely deserted back patio. "Thanks for letting me subject you to my family," Hartley said. "I hate facing them on my own. Now that we've talked and we've eaten we can make our escape."

"Learning your language and making fun of everyone with Chastity was okay," Conner said. Then, with a look that spoke of mayhem and violence he added, "Are you sure I can't shake hands with..."

"Second cousin Theobard," Hartley supplied. "And trust me, he's not important. It would be nice to have some acceptance from my family. But people who get totally bent out of shape because we share a couple drops of blood and a last name are pathetic."

"Still... I'm almost positive I know how hard I can squeeze and still not break bones," Conner argued. "...Maybe just crack a few."

Hartley laughed. "I really don't need defending, but you say the sweetest things." He slipped his hand into Conner's. "Almost like this was a real date? Okay, the suckiest first date ever. Because my family? Blech!"

"I bet they'd get along with Superman," Conner replied. "But how isn't this real?"

"If you want it to be a real date, it's definitely real," Hartley said emphatically.

"What's the difference?" Conner asked

Hartley turned to face Conner, he could feel his heart racing a mile a minute. "I only get to do this if it's a real date." He put his hands on Conner's shoulders and when the other boy didn't pull away stretched up and kissed him chastely but allowed the moment of contact to linger.

"Oh god! You're really!" the moment was broken by Osgood Rathaway's shocked exclamation. "It's not just one more thing to embarrass your mother and I?"

Conner fell into a defensive stance at Hartley's shoulder.

"No," Hartley declared irritably. "I do things to embarrass you when you stick your fingers in your ears and go la-la-la about the fact that I am gay. I guess you missed this earlier, so let me try again: Hi Dad. Let me introduce you to my date. This is Conner, in case you missed it, he's a guy. There is a slight, subtle hint about my sexuality in there."
"It's got to be a phase. Just another of your ridiculous phases, like that music thing. Just one more foolish notion you've gotten stuck in your head," Osgood insisted.

Hartley started laughing. Both Conner as Osgood cringed, his laughter sounded like broken things tumbling down a crevasse. "Is there even one thing about me that you wouldn't change if you could?"

"Hartley?" Osgood asked nervously.

"Okay, okay. You've never complained about how I look. I mean I've got to give you that. You don't want to change everything about me, you just want to gut me." Hartley's voice was still full of that broken laughter.

Conner stepped closer to him, an impulse away from grabbing Hartley and dragging him away from this hurtful place.

Hartley put a restraining hand on Conner's arm. "No. I want to hear this." He turned back to his father. "Is there anything about who I am that you don't hate? You keep asking me back and honestly, I can't think why anymore."

"Hartley, you're being melodramatic," Osgood said.

"Then why is it so damn hard for you to answer me?" Hartley asked.

"You're our son," Osgood protested.

"I'm also gay, obsessed with music and a world-class hypnotist," Hartley pointed out. "Coming here, being a son you're not ashamed of. It would be like cutting off my body to save an arm. I tried today. I really tried. I was polite. I was appropriate. I didn't tell anyone off or get my flute. I've been doing hero stuff for almost a month now. If this isn't enough for you... Well, it's all your getting. Take it or leave it. This is me."

"Officially, I'm confused," James declared. "Your standing all close but you two look miserable. So was it a good date or a bad date?"

"I never want to see my family again," Hartley declared and James recognized Conner's body-language as protective hovering.

"I've got some really violent video games," he offered. "We could pretend the victims are your relatives."

"How about something totally mindless," Hartley asked as he slumped on the couch. Conner sat beside him and after a moment Hartley leaned into him.

"Okay, Mario Kart it is," James declared. "I'll go get the game and Evan. But we gotta be quiet. Lisa says she's taking her skates to the next person who wakes Owen up. He was a brat about Conner going someplace without him all night."

"He worries I won't come back either," Conner defended Owen. "It's Superman's fault."

"Still our ears suffering when he throws a tantrum that lasts for hours," James replied as he went to get the game from his room.

While Hartley and Conner were waiting for James to get back several of Hartley's rats ventured out
to see what was making their person smell so unhappy. Conner leaned down and helped them up onto the couch. Evan wandered in and glared at the rats taking up the free half of the couch. They quickly joined their brethren in find spots to cuddle with Hartley or perch on Conner since he was close, cooperative and made a convenient Piper-watching station.

James set up the game then handed out the controllers. For several rounds they played in near silence.

"The Rogues are the only family we've got. The only family we need," Evan declared harshly. "Whoever said blood's thicker than water was an idiot. Don't fool yourself into thinking it means anything. Blood's just a lottery chance. They didn't pick you, you didn't pick them. Expecting blood to hold when you need it, it's just setting yourself up to get hurt."

Hartley laughed bitterly then sang, "They disappoint, they disappear, they die but they don't... We disappoint in turn, I fear. Forgive, though, we won't."

The Atom crawled out of a cooling vent in Warworld's Eastern Engine Complex, growing to his full size as he jumped to the floor. "That's another cooling system redundancy that's set to fail. According to my initial scouting that's the last one. Time to get clear and set it off."

"I will contact Martian Manhunter and Captain Atom to inform them that their diversion has served it's purpose," Red Tornado said.

"And no word from the other unit," Kyle Rayner declared. "I knew the Rogues weren't going to be any help, even with Batman directing them."


"You're sure?" Kyle asked. Tornado just looked at him.

"Damn," Atom swore. "I was counting on us being first. We've got to move. I've ensured that they can't power down this system. We've got to overload it NOW or the unbalanced stress will tear the planet apart. I've triggered the overload. We've got five minutes before the whole place goes up."

"I have relayed the urgency," Tornado reported. "We have a rendezvous with the others in 3.8 minutes. We won't be out of the blast radius, Kyle you will have to shield us, but first prepare for rapid transit."

Kyle nodded Atom shrunk down to hitch a ride on the young Green Lantern. Kyle wrapped them both in a sphere as Red Tornado unleashed his powers in the confined passage way of the complex. The vortexes swept the three of them along like flotsam shooting through rapids. They whipped around a corner and were on J'onn and Captain Atom almost before they knew it. Kyle extended his shield to protect all five of them. Moments later the Complex began to tear itself apart.

J'onn pulled his cape closer around himself and gritted his teeth as fire surrounded them for as far as the eye could see in all directions. Kyle didn't try to stand his ground, he simply allowed the blast to toss their little bubble of safety hither and yon. Eventually they were blown clear of the complex and Kyle lifted them further into the sky, flying them away to an isolated spot.

After they touched down the five began unpacking parts and assembling a one-shot zeta-platform to get them off the planet and back to their ship.

"Your plan required our complex to be destroyed first and you did not inform Batman's unit?" J'onn
"Come on, I'd have bet on us getting the job done first," Kyle objected. "Heck, I would have bet on the Rogues abandoning Batman the first time they ran into trouble. That's why I argued for splitting them between the units. Plus it's the five of us in a race against a team of normal humans with gadgets, it was totally unbalanced."

"Evidence doesn't not prove out your assumptions," Red Tornado pointed out dispassionately.

"Batman overruled your objections during our mission planning," J'Onn stated. "It was his opinion that the Rogues effectiveness as a unit was an asset worth preserving and that he was best capable of filling their skill gap without disruption of their dynamics. Now please stop defending your friend's misjudgements."

"Everyone knows villain team-ups don't work," Atom said. "They're too selfish and untrusting to cooperate."

J'Onn and Red Tornado exchanged a pained look. "Did it not occur to you that these Rogues have been working together for over six years now?" J'Onn asked. "Their selfish interests are their in-group's interests. Not humanity's best interests, true, but not their individual interests either. Did you pay no attention to Flash's briefing? He assured us that they were capable of operating under terms of enlightened self-interest. At current, the Rogue's interests are to complete this mission and thus obtain the freedom to return to the children they've taken in, as well as ensuring that the Earth survives as it is their base of operations and the more vulnerable half of their in-group remains on planet."

"What's done is done," Captain Atom said. "We had to push our time table and take a few more risks because we incorrectly assumed the Rogues were screw-ups. As both teams still successfully completed their tasks, it is a moot point."

"You know, we're never going to live this down," Kyle said as they finished assembling the platform. "Eighty percent villains and no powers and they beat us to the punch."

"By five minutes!" Atom protested as the beam took them.

A moment later they were back on the League's ship. All conversation stopped dead at the sight of Batman. His cape was missing. A tattered and torn cape simply meant a hard fought battle for them, but all too frequently a cape that had been removed implied the need for an impromptu shroud.

Chapter End Notes

The lyric Hartley quotes is a slightly mangled line from "No More" in the musical "Into the Woods"

Piper/Conner: In the comics, particularly early on breasts were practically as big of a weakness for SB as Kryptonite, particularly when it came to shutting down higher brain functions. In YJ, not so much so. In "Infiltrator" Artemis' 'Mmm, that boy,' seems to go right over his head. In "Downtime" M'Gann's having a moment and Superboy is standing there looking blank. In "Bereft" there's about a half second were he's on the same page with M'Gann about having a moment... then he gets distracted by the puppy, I mean alien artifact, that wants to follow them home. In the cartoon I'm not convinced that he's figured out attraction yet, he seems very good at failing to notice girls being
attracted to him.
Memories

Chapter Notes

Things get a bit song-ficcy for a chapter, mostly because there are a number of musically inclined people in my family (not me, I play the radio very well, thank you), but anyway, ceremonial things tend to be tied to music in my head. The lyrics are from The Highwaymen's "Jim, I wore a Tie Today": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtxNOAit5fo

"Recognize: Batman, A-02," the computer at Mount Justice announced and Robin was up and running. "Recognize: Captain Cold, C-01. Recog-" The younger Rogues and Conner didn't hesitate as they leapt after Robin.

"Your dad's home," Conner told Owen.

Batman and the Rogues stood just in front of the Mount Justice's teleportation platform. The trip back to Earth hadn't been enough time to erase the worn, strained look from their six weeks on Warworld.

When Owen saw his father he blurred across the room in a short burst of super-speed. "Papa! Papa!"

Digger picked Owen up and held him close. "When'd that happen?" he asked as Owen hugged him. Digger smiled crookedly. "Missed you like hell, kid."

Robin followed Owen's example with only a hair more concern for teenage dignity. "Hey," He said giving his guardian a one armed hug. "We made sure Gotham is still standing for you."

"I never had any doubts," Batman replied, letting his arm curl around Robin's shoulders.

"Where's Sam?" Evan asked, his voice cracked fearfully.

Digger and Rory looked to Len apologetically. "We lost him, Evan," Len answered quietly. "He took an energy blast to the chest, killed him instantly."

Evan shook his head in denial. He made several abortive attempts at responding. Then he turned and walked away, holding himself as if he might shatter at any moment.

Len took a step after him and stumbled. The uncertainty that had held Conner back broke and he slipped a shoulder under Len's arm, offering him support.

"I'll go after Evan," Rory sighed. "You're not supposed to be on that leg anyway."

Len nodded, he let Conner help him over to the lounge. Hartley, James and Digger, still carrying Owen, followed them.

Robin glanced up at his mentor questioningly. "Later," Batman replied. "Once it's had time to sink in. Then you can offer support."

In the lounge area, Conner started to withdraw as soon as he'd helped Len to a chair. Len didn't let him. The others found their own spots close by. In the distance Conner could hear Evan's harsh sobs.
even though they were muffled by a closed door. He could also hear Rory's voice, slightly raised, reminding Evan that he wasn't alone.

"Sam was the first of the Rogues," Len said as the silence grew heavier. "Back when it was just him and me disturbing the peace in Central, he's the one who put it together that we could do more as a team than on our own. Pretty soon we stumble across Digger and Rory. Next thing I know it seems off to be pulling a job solo. Then you lot of brats start crawling out of the wood-work and suddenly I'm discussing who ought to be going Parent-Teacher conferences with our arch-nemesis during the middle of a battle.

Team-ups on our side of the law aren't supposed to work, but ours does. The rest of 'em get so caught up in worrying about how big their share of the take is going to be, they forget if you stab your partner in the back, who the hell are you going to play poker with next Tuesday?"

"Reason why so many jail breaks happen on Mondays," Digger interjected.

"The Rogues never forget, whatever else we are, we're family first," Len declared. "Sam started that when he broke the rules for villains and offered to be a friend 'stead of just an enemy of an enemy. Never looked back, never regretted it."

"James, I didn't expect to see you until the funeral," Barry said worriedly when the blond turned up at his door.

"My suit's here," James explained.

Barry hesitated awkwardly. "The League's always worn their colors for funerals, we assumed the Rogues would as well."

"We've never had a funeral before," James said with a touch of bitterness. "And we know what the League does, seen it on TV. That's sort of why we're not going in costume."

"Do the Rogues not want the League involved in Sam's funeral?" Barry asked. "Sam died on a League mission, saving the world, we want to recognize that. We thought this would be the right way to handle it, but it really is up to the Rogues."

"We're glad that they're showing respect for what Sam did, we really are," James began. "But..." he stopped for a moment. "It's not you, Barry. You've been a better parent to me than my real parents, you and Len." James gave Barry a brief, twisted grin. "I mean ever since I started this Rogue thing you and Len have been acting like this is some joint custody thing only you skipped the marriage stage and went right to the messy divorce. Well, except maybe Len likes you a little better now than he did back when I first turned up. Back then he pretty much thought all cops were vicious bastards like his dad."

"And back then I'd never bothered to look at how the can system fail people. It was a shock when I realized Captain Cold was honestly afraid of what might happen to you if he left you with me," Barry admitted. "It forced me to look at him as a person."

"So yeah, so if it were just you as Flash at Sam's funeral it wouldn't be a big deal for us to set ourselves apart from you," James said veering back to the original topic. "And it is good to have them recognize that Sam could be Mirror Master and still be someone who'd die saving the world, someone who stood with his team to the end. But for the League this show of respect is only about how Sam died. He was our friend."
Jim, Jim, I wore a tie today
The first one that I ever wore
And you'd have said I looked like a dummy
Out of the dry goods store

"Lisa? How's this damn thing go again?" Len shouted across the base as he glared at his tie.

"Gimme a second!" Lisa shouted back. "I'm almost done sorting out the mess Digger made of his. Digger, if I hadn't watched you attempting to tie this with my own eyes I would have sworn you let Owen help you!" She finished tightening the tie then gave Digger a stern look. "There! Now don't fiddle with it, don't even touch it. At least Hartley and James can dress themselves and Hartley's taking care of getting Conner and Owen ready."

Rory tugged at the sleeves of his jacket, trying to get it to settle. "I don't even wear these things for court appearances anymore," he fussed.

"I don't know why you guys are putting yourselves through this," Lisa remarked. "I barely recognize you all cleaned up."

"I can't figure Sam for being too comfortable about getting buried as a hero," Len said. "So seems like we could show a little solidarity and be uncomfortable along with him."

"The graveside's just us," Evan said quietly, from where he sat stiffly in the corner of the room. He'd been ready for some time. "That's the real funeral. This is just about making all them heroes stand there and admit it was Sam that paid the price for keeping this world safe not any of them this time."

Batman watched his fellow heroes arriving for Mirror Master's funeral and mused aloud. "Rendering half of them mute would drastically improve the odds of getting through this without a fight."

"Be as it may, sir, it could give credence to the rumors that you are paranoid, manipulative and controlling," Alfred replied blandly. Then he frowned, "Does Master Hartley look peaked? We have seen after effects from Fear Gas before. That dreadful quarrel with his father and then this could certainly provide fodder to trigger a relapse. I should have insisted he retreat immediately when told us he couldn't work with a gas mask on."

"All the Rogues are sort of shocky, I don't think Hartley doing notably worse," Robin said sadly. He turned to Batman. "I don't think they'll react to thoughtless asides, the League's opinion of them just doesn't mean that much to the Rogues. Kaldur has the team running interference too. We'll keep the ones who chronically put the 'mal' in apropos from trying to offer sympathies."

Batman nodded, he noticed that both Flashes, Iris and Wally's parents were also positioning themselves to act as buffers between the Rogues and the League, while Joan was making her way right through the Rogues, her worried gaze fixed on Evan.

Superman and Wonder Woman came in together. Clearly Clark being there was Diane's idea rather than his own. He balked at the door and after a quick and quiet dispute the two of them found seats as far from Conner as was possible within the confines of the building. Bruce felt a measure of relief at another potential conflict averted. It looked like Clark was finally putting some thought into his interactions with Conner instead of assuming whatever knee-jerk reaction he might have was a proper course of action.

Oh Jim, Jim, the Preacher said a lot of things
But I didn't hear a word he said
"Damned if it ain't working," Cold marveled as he watched Flash race off after a hologram.

"Prepare to be impressed," Cold said. He adjusted the setting on his gun then dripped water into the narrow gap around the safe's door. "It'll be nice once I get the tech up-graded enough to hit temperatures where steel shatters like glass but for now this works." True to his words within a few repetitions the expanding ice had buckled the hinges on the safe.

"We did it!" Mirror Master exclaimed as they filled a bag with gems. "We actually pulled it off!"

Cold and Heatwave glared at each other sulkily across the hall dividing their cells. "This is all you fault!" was written clearly across both their faces.

An odd whirring sound startled them out of their funk as well as catching the guard's attention. The next thing they knew the guard was on the ground, unconscious with a boomerang laying beside him.

"You got any idea what's going on?" Heatwave asked.

"Not a one," Cold replied.

"So? You two ready to shake hands and make nice?" Mirror Master asked. He sauntered around the corner with an unknown: A man with curly, brown hair wearing a bright blue garrison cap and a scarf decorated with boomerangs. Sam gave them a mock-stern look. "Or do my new friend and I call off the jail break?"

"You wouldn't have happened to have hung on to any of the loot while you were running for the hills?" Heatwave asked hopefully.

Mirror Master grinned slyly.

"Well, I couldn't have cracked that vault door without the added thermal shock from your heating it," Cold allowed. He leaned through the bars and offered Heatwave his hand.

"I should have remembered your patch of slip-n-slide was there seeing as how it tripped up Flasher before me," Heatwave admitted and did the same.

"There now, that wasn't so hard was it?" Sam asked patronizingly as he lifted the keys from the guard’s belt.

"Mates? Am I in or what?" Boomerang asked hopefully.

**Riding herd through sun and the rain**  
**Panning for gold on the cuff**  
**We've did everything in the book I guess**  
**And a lot that they never thought up**
Five Years Before

"No loot. No chips, cause a certain Aussie took it into his head that they were good for chucking at people. What the hell do we play for?" Len demanded as he scowled at the other three men crowded around the poker table.

"Don't recall all this bellyaching when Flasher was raiding our former bolt-hole," Digger huffed.

"We got Oreos and Fig Newtons," Rory offered.

"Fifty for an Oreo, hundred for a Newton?" Sam suggested.

"What kind of dip-shit thinks a Newton's worth more than an Oreo?" Rory demanded.

"Kinda gotta go with the pyro here," Digger contributed.

"Think I've got something we can all agree on," Len said. "Five thousand for a beer."

"Who's gonna hang onto to a beer long enough to bet it?" Rory wondered

"I'd bet we can hold onto a beer just about as long as we ever manage to hold onto cash," Sam said. "Speaking of which, I think we've got just enough left for one last liquor run before the game gets underway. So while I'm picking up the beer, should I get sugar cookies or ginger snaps for tens?"

Four Years Before

"Well kid. I ain't moving," Sam stated loudly as he sat down on a doorstep beneath a sign with reversed lettering. Several feet away from where he sat there was a Burger King take-out bag full of hamburgers and fries. "If you want that food you're going to have to stop running."

After maybe twenty minutes a boy with overly long, greasy brown hair cautiously edged out of an alley across the street. He eyed the bag hungrily.

Sam leaned back and locked his hands casually behind his head. "Now why you want to go holing up in a back-assward place like this I do not know."

The boy ignored Sam and wolfed down the hamburger at such a rate that it was a surprise he didn't choke.

"You let me and I'll show you the way out," Sam offered.

"Like this here," the kid stated before launching into the fries. "Nay real."

"Kid, you're a little touched ain't you?" Sam asked. "Well, I suppose you're not too much trouble. Not so boring as a house plant and I don't gotta walk you neither."

That remark earned Sam a quick flash of white teeth, contrasting with the ground in grime coating
the boy's face. "Wouldn't be too sure o' that. Been marking the place right proper... Ain't no one wants a mirror where y' can see the pisher."

Sam chuckled. "Still got some humor in ya? You might make it though okay after all."

Batman caught Hawkgirl watching Conner and Owen with a guilty expression. Her first defensive reaction had passed and from what Batman had heard since his return Conner's make-over stunt had softened the League's attitude toward him. It had been such a ridiculous, adolescent way of expressing his anger with Clark, it eased their fear of him and gotten them to see him as a teenager rather than a weapon.

In fact a good part of the League was shooting uncomfortable looks toward the Rogues. After a few minutes observation Batman decided that the Rogues' choice to wear civilian attire had been inspired. It was hard to see a group of villains today, especially not with Lisa, Owen, Iris, Joan and the Wests mixing easily with the Rogues. Out of costume the junior Rogues were just high schoolers, the Rogues just people. Without the costumes it was not difficult to see Scudder's loss was hurting them.

It reinforced the puzzle Batman had been working on since deciding to take the Warworld mission with the Rogues. They weren't like the majority of his enemies, hurting people didn't hold any intrinsic appeal for them. Maybe they were a bit like Selina, craving an adrenaline rush that she couldn't find in legitimate employment, but not quite. As far as he could tell, the older Rogues actually committed crimes for the purpose of making money more often than not. It was not something Batman was accustom to. The Joker wouldn't pass up an open cash register... unless, of course, he had to chose between the money and horrifically mangling the clerk. For the Rogues being criminals was less about what they wanted than it was about what they didn't want. The Rogues didn't want to be a part of a society which it seemed had failed them. They'd slipped through the cracks and survived and they didn't want to go back. There had to be a way to work around that.

Oh Jim, Jim, so you're ridin' on ahead
Well if that's how it's going to be
When you reach those streets paved with gold
Jim, stake a claim out for me

"Len?" Conner whispered uncertainly as people were slowly getting up to file past the casket. "I don't understand. They keep saying Sam's gone? The Gegnomes taught me that death's when an organic unit ceases to function. Is that wrong? Did he go somewhere? Can we see him again, not just looking at his body in that box? Is there something more to us than organic units?"

"Kid, you've got no fucking idea how far out my depth that's getting," Len sighed. "But I'll give it my best shot: You're a clone, if there was nothing more to us than genetics you'd be exactly like the boy scout. But he's a self-righteous busy-body and you're our Con. So there's got to be something more to us than what can be quantified. Most people call it a soul or a spirit. That's what their talking about when they say Sam's gone on."

Conner nodded.

"What happens to that soul after your flesh is done with... Well there's more speculation about that than anything else in the universe. What it comes down to is no one knows. We got hard proof of demons and more than a few sorts of gods and we still just don't know what happens the part of you that ain't physical when the body dies."

Len hesitated then decided Conner needed to be warned. "A lot of people believe after we die we get split up into deserving and undeserving, into good people and bad people. There's a lot of
disagreement about how the dividing gets done but somehow you get judged. You'll probably hear more than you ever want to hear about that, what with you hanging out with us. I don't buy it. Two sorts of people? That's simplifying your model 'til it breaks, 'til it's got nothing to do with the real world. 'Course I'm not exactly unbiased." Len shrugged. "If it is that simple, I'm not good. I don't believe I'm evil, but I know better than to think I'd classify as good by anyone's lights."

Conner looked ready to object.

"That's why I don't buy it. The Rogues, we got dealt crap hands when we were born. It doesn't make believing in some just, kind higher power real appealing. Things were what they were and we eventually figured out a way to make it work out for us well enough. Whatever happens after we die, we'll deal with that too. Or maybe your Gegnomes are right and this is all there is. I don't know. If there is something more, I suppose Sam'll scout it out for the rest of us."

But when we got here you were gone Jim
And there wasn't anything anybody could do
And they dressed you up in a fancy suit and a necktie
So today, we wore one too

"Bats? Help me make sure everyone realizes it's time to go home?" Barry asked as soon as the service ended. "As Len put it: Most of them never even fought Sam, let alone talked to him. They've dispensed their obligation and need to get the hell out."

"You may just over-take my reputation for territorial behavior," Batman replied noting that Barry appeared quite eager to see his fellow heroes out of Central.

"Your reputation may be obliged to suffer a blow in that area," Alfred remarked. "The younger Rogues still have a considerable period of time before they've fulfilled the terms of their pardons. And they have a healthy disdain for the psychotics who make up such an unfortunately large segment of Gotham's criminal class."

Barry tilted his head to one side, "I heard Piper set a new record for dealing with the Mad Hatter."

"He never left the satellite cave I've been basing their operations out of," Alfred confirmed. "Robin hacked the city's emergency broadcast system, Piper played his new composition, I believe he called it 'Doff Your Hat', and the police apprehended Jervis Tetch without difficulty as he lost control of all his pawns. Sir, I have some food to drop off, then shall I wait or return to Gotham?"

"Go on ahead."

Some twenty minutes later Batman activated his comm, "That's the last of them," he reported. "Aqualad, collect your team and meet me at the Allens'."

"There'll be a wake in a few hours," Len stated gruffly, breaking into the transmission. "You and the brats can stick around if you want. We would have had to leave him on Warworld without your help. The brats have been underfoot long enough they've got their own memories. The speedster can chaperon."
Paint it Black

The funeral services were done, the ceremonies completed and it left the Rogues feeling lost. The forms had been observed, the proscribed steps carried out, but they weren't ready to move on yet. The Rogues, Flash, Batman and Young Justice regrouped at the Rogues' hideout holding off the resumption of day to day life.

After a time the teenagers relocated to the warehouse-proper. They found a section that had been left reasonably undamaged by the Rogues' practice battles and settled in a loose circle. No one was quite certain what was appropriate to talk about so very little was said. When he couldn't stand the stilted attempts at small talk anymore Evan headed back upstairs and liberated a case of beer from the refrigerator.

Barry glared significantly at the older Rogues until they took note. "Hey!" Digger protested. "That's mine."

"Yeah, it's the strongest," Evan agreed.

Barry sighed, "Evan, you don't really want to get drunk."

"Wanna bet?"

Len frowned. "It won't change anything, just leave you with a headache in the morning."

"Don't see that stopping you."

"True," Len admitted. "Now put back at least three quarters of that or share with the other brats. Alcohol poisoning really won't help anything."

"Wait a minute!" Barry protested.

"Right, you can't give away MY beer," Digger added.

Barry looked to Batman for support. The dark knight shrugged. "Robin knows better and if the others don't, they will by the end of tomorrow's drill session."

"I will blame it on you if I have to bring Wally home drunk," Barry said without specifying exactly who 'you' was.

Evan headed back downstairs. He plunked the case down in the middle of the group of teens then withdrew to the outer edge of the circle after securing several bottles for himself. James, Hartley and Artemis all reached for a bottle.

"You're going to be sorry," Robin sing-songed.

Wally looked torn.

"Speedy introduced me to this beverage," Kaldur said with a grimace. "I do not find it to my liking."

Hartley took a drink, his face screwed up at the strong, bitter taste. After a moment spent choking it down he took a second drink.

"Someday you'll acquire a taste for it," James said in a superior tone. Hartley had never considered touching alcohol until his second year with the Rogues.
Conner watched the play of expressions across Hartley's face with fascination. "Want some?" Hartley asked offering his bottle to Conner.

"I've heard about this," M'Gann said. "This is peer pressure right?"

"Nope, peer pressure is what Evan does when I don't drink," Hartley replied. "I'm not sure how you count Digger, but before Owen turned up he was even worse about it. Now he's all responsible. Well, not counting giving Owen little sips."

Conner accepted the bottle.

"Conner wai-" Kaldur began then sighed as Conner took a drink anyway.

"This is terrible," Conner declared forcefully.

"Digger's stuff isn't exactly what I'd recommend for a first try," James said. "Still, I've never gotten what the big deal about alcohol is. Way back when, my parents used to have a glass of wine with dinner, they'd give us kids a small glass. Sure you didn't drink anything before taking a walk on a wire, but it's just not that huge."

"We don't know that for Conner or M'Gann," Kaldur argued. "They are not human and they have to be careful, things can affect them differently. Wally should be cautious as well, on account of his altered metabolism. That didn't occur to Roy or I until my king was lecturing us on what could have gone wrong."

"It's okay," Robin said. "I mean we're all okay to metabolize alcohol, it's in your files. The real issue is getting dragged out of bed well before the crack of dawn by Batman for hell-drills. And Conner, don't think living here will prevent him from making you miserable too, he's the Batman. James, Hartley, Evan: you won't catch a break either, you do go on missions with us."

Evan finished his second bottle and immediately started on a third without bothering to respond.

"I don't think I want any," M'Gann decided primly.

"So why aren't you getting all uptight on us?" James asked Artemis as she took another sip of the beer she'd appropriated.

"My old, pre-scholarship, school was in a bad part of Gotham," Artemis said with a shrug. "The teachers adored students who weren't into anything worse than under-aged drinking."

Conner tentatively tried a second swallow as if he couldn't believe it was actually as foul as his first impression indicated. He gagged and handed the bottle back to Hartley.

"It can't be that bad," Wally declared. He swiped Artemis' drink. "Gah!" he spat out a mouthful and scrubbed at his tongue with the back of his hand.

"If you can't appreciate it, don't waste it," Artemis declared taking the bottle back.

"You can have it!" Wally declared.

Long after Evan had gone, Barry continued giving everyone else, particularly Batman disapproving looks.

Rory finally gave in, "You know Sam didn't like it when Evan drank like that," he pointed out. For Barry and Batman he explained, "Evan has some bad anniversaries or something, days when he does..."
crap like this. Sam tried to stop him."

Len huffed grumpily but got up and headed downstairs. Barry, Rory and Batman followed him. Lisa had gone to bed earlier and Digger was out restocking his lost beer after putting Owen to bed for the night. They found a number of abandoned, partially empty bottles, plus Conner and Hartley asleep on a pile of tarps they'd been using as a beanbag.

Cold grimaced. "What are the odds those Gene-things at Cadmus covered..."

Barry snickered when he realized what Cold was worried about.

"Don't get smug, you're having kids," Cold snapped. "Just because Trickster already knew and Piper figured it out for himself, don't think you're getting out of this."

"Don't remind me," Barry replied as he began mentally reworking the version his daughter was getting as soon as she was marginally old enough to understand. It heavily featured a certain specific individual she was not to ever, even consider getting involved with, no matter what.

"Maybe I can get Lisa to take care of the whole 'birds, bees and whatever', she's got more experience in liking guys," Len considered.

"What do birds and bees have to do with anything?" Conner asked sleepily. "The Gegnomes told me about intercourse but there wasn't anything about that."

"Thank god!" Len exclaimed. "They, um covered, well, with Piper?"

"Not specifically," Conner replied. "But they were curious about why people have intercourse which has no potential of serving it's biological purpose or doing it while taking measures specifically to thwart it's purpose. They thought I might be able to figure it out since my species is designed for sexual reproduction even if I'd never been out of my pod back then. So, do you know why people like having sex so much? And what to birds and bees have to do with anything?"

"Er, 'birds and bees' is a figure of speech, doesn't really have anything to do with anything," Len explained while his audience enjoyed his discomfort. "And if you haven't figured out the other yet, I'm definitely telling Piper he's moving too fast! Where are the rest of the miscreants, anyway?" Len changed the subject. "Whole reason for coming down here after all."

"Evan said something about a Viking funeral?" Conner said.

"Damn, why didn't I think of that?" Rory muttered.

"Yeah, Evan was going to raid your place for supplies," Conner admitted. "James and Artemis thought it was a good idea, Wally and Robin thought it might be cool, M'Gann was curious about it and Kaldur thought they ought to be stopped but he got outvoted so he went along to be the responsible one. Hartley said he wasn't moving," Conner glanced fondly down at the other boy curled up cozily around him and it was apparent why he hadn't gone.

"Pyromania shouldn't be contagious," Len muttered with a dark look at Rory.

"We need to figure out what they intend to burn," Barry stated.

"Simple enough," Batman stated. "Robin has a tracker on him." As did the rest of the teens, but no one needed to know that. He took out a small device. "Wilson St and 23rd," he reported, heading outside.
"Great fireworks store, lots of..." Rory trailed off as he remembered the company he was in. "It really is the best place in Central," he told Barry.

"Floor to rafters with illegal stuff," Barry sighed. "Wally's dad loves the place."

"Robin's signal just cut out," Batman said with a frown. "They're traveling via mirrors."

"They wouldn't..." Len began. "Hell, it's the obvious thing. We'd better get one of Sam's spares. They're going to torch the Mirror Dimension. Evan has got to be drunk."

"Consequences?" Batman demanded shortly.

"We've tossed bombs inside and blown out every reflective surface in a hundred yards," Len explained as they headed for Sam's workshop. "If they're dumb enough they could manage to trap themselves inside."

"Alcohol exacerbates that sort of stupidity," Barry pointed out reprovingly.

"Says the one who didn't keep them from going up against Luthor stone-sober," Len shot back.

"Luthor's still gleefully harassing Superman about how his 'son' hates him," Barry said. "I don't think he's likely to take action against the boys for giving him ammo like that."

Len picked up one of Sam's spare guns and examined it for a moment. "This one looks like it's ready for use." He pointed it at the narrow mirror gracing the back Sam's door and fired. The surface of the mirror rippled like water. "Good to go."

They stepped through. "They're within range," Batman reported. "Two clicks southeast of our current position."

Barry took off.

"Speedsters," Len shook his head. "The rest of us can make up some time traveling as the crow flies. I can ice-bridge the gaps between the stronger reflections rather than following paths."

"Okay, so we start with the fireworks," James declared. "Sparks and explosions and bright colors going off behind people's mirrors to make 'em sit up and take notice. Then, once it's built up we start the bonfire and send Sam's world after him."

"I don't see why we can't wire all the fuses together and light everything off at once," Wally argued. "That'd be huge."

"Because it's not safe," Kaldur replied sensibly.

"You don't know the first thing about showmanship," James stated shaking his head at Wally.

"I don't fucking care," Evan growled. "But by tomorrow morning every mirror within a hundred miles is going to be black."

Robin and Artemis continued unloading bags of fireworks. M'Gann edged nervously away from Evan's massive and still growing pile of combustibles.

Wally's eyes widened, he eeped in dismay and hid the rocket he was holding behind his back. A fraction of a second later Barry skidded to a stop in front of them. For a long time he just examined them, "Evan, are you sure you want to do this? You've got a lot of memories of Sam here."
"I want the whole damn city in mourning," Evan growled.

"What you want is soot," Rory said as the rest of the adults caught up with Barry. "This stuff'll burn too clean, too hot." He glanced around, "Why don't the rest of you head on home?"

When the others hesitated Rory sighed. "If he thinks it'll help, maybe it will. Won't do any permanent damage. You know this place is just a reflection of the real world. Given time what's on the other side of the mirror'll supersede anything we do here."

"You can keep it under control?" Len checked.

"I'll take care of him," Rory promised. "The fire won't distract me."

A few hours later Evan sat and watched as dozens of columns of thick, black smoke billowed up to darken the sky and drifted across the reflected city coating everything it encountered. Slowly a tear trickled down Evan's cheek as the once brilliant and glittering city-scape turned dingy and grey. He watched as smoldering fires spread turning the mirror world into a reflection of the devastation he felt.

Rory sat down heavily beside him. "I miss Sam too," he said.

"Why'd he have to die?" Evan asked.

"You'd have to be a lot smarter than I am to figure that out," Rory said. "It ain't right and it ain't fair."

Evan's shoulders started to shake and Rory pulled him close. "But you still got us kid, we're not gonna let you fall."

To Len's surprise, while Barry saw the various teens home Batman opted to stand vigil with him. They watched as the large mirror in the Rogue's main room was gradually painted black.

"He'll be alright," Len said, mostly to reassure himself, after a long period of silence. "It's what we do, survive crap."

"Robbing banks is just incidental," Batman kept his voice deliberately non-judgmental.

Len shrugged. "It's a living."

"How much do you actually make?" Batman asked.

"Thinking about switching sides?"

"No. My crusade is sponsored by Bruce Wayne, money isn't an issue."

"Must be nice."

"Mostly, I ask because I'm curious," Batman continued. "The costumes in Gotham aren't looking for money, even the ones who think they are. The Penguin comes the closest and he wants respect more than money."

"Hate to tell you this, but your lot in Gotham? They're crazy." Len pointed out.

"I'm aware," Batman replied. "They're what I'm used to, it makes figuring you out difficult. Even Rory with his pyromania, I can see he fights to control it, lets the rest of you help him keep it in check. The ones I fight, they've long since surrendered to their madness and allowed it to consume
them until there is very little else left to them. You're not... obsessed. I can see why Barry looks for another option and actually prefers it when you escape at the end of a battle."

Len waited to see where this was going.

"I did some estimations," Batman continued. "Deducting the expense involved in maintaining bleeding edge tech, which I know is not trivial, your yearly take can't be more than, say a branch security manager at Wayne Enterprises would make."

"Yeah, but someone gives me crap they end up in a block of ice," Len's toothy grin made it clear how much he enjoyed retaliation.

"You can't enjoy the jail time that much."

"That would be the reason behind escapes," Len replied dryly. "We aren't looking to go straight."

"You aren't looking for society's acceptance," Batman disagreed.

"To put it very mildly," Len admitted. "It does limit career opportunities."

"I mentioned that Batman's activities are funded by Bruce Wayne..."

The next day Cold glanced around the living room at the assembled Rogues. Then he summed up the situation, "The deal is we get a retainer to be available to do the hero thing. We're not obligated to stop general law-breaking, just world in peril stuff. We would be obligated to NOT be in jail when something comes up. Meaning we'd have to give up the sort of stuff that gets a body arrested."

"Bruce Wayne funds Batman?" Trickster looked puzzled. "But Robin's... I thought... Well, I guess that makes sense too. More sense actually."

Digger looked around, uncertain of the reaction he was going to elicit. "We were gone for a month and a half. Owen gained two inches and super-powers. I don't want to get arrested again. I don't want to miss my kid growing up."

"I -um- don't mind the heroing," Piper admitted. "The guys we've fought against with Young Justice and when we were helping Robin with Gotham? They're cruel, sick bastards who need to be stopped. Anyone who could come up with something like that Fear Gas of Scarecrow's should be locked up."

"It's not going to be any fun in a few months anyway," Trickster stated. "Barry's going to have twin babies. Dragging him away from his kids just to deal with us..." James shrugged. "It's going to take all the fun out of it. Plus you said Wayne would set up a lab in Central and let us use it to keep our gear in top shape? No more raiding the crummy community college labs for supplies? That is fucking cool!"

"I think Wayne's got no clue what he's unleashed, taking away the need for you to spend half your energy on scavenging materials," Len remarked. "But it sounds like we're decided?"

There were nods all around.

"Okay, no harm in trying it I suppose."
Clark hovered outside of Mount Justice and waited to be noticed. He knew it was Conner's week for monitor duty.

"What?" Conner asked over the intercom.

"Could we talk?" Clark asked.

After several minutes the door opened. Conner had recently undergone a growth-spurt, leaving him nearly as tall as Clark. His dark, close-cropped hair was still frosted and he still wore something that looked like jeans and a tee-shirt for a costume, but there was a sheen to the material suggesting something more exotic. Also there was the fact that, these days, Conner generally finished battles with his clothes intact, indicating that they weren't made of anything found in a department store. For the last few months the tee-shirt had been a very dark blue with a jagged pattern of lighter blues that gave the impression of cracks in ice.

Conner let the door slide shut behind him. He waited silently for whatever Clark had to say to him.

"I heard that you developed heat-vision," Clark said. "Do you need any help with that?"

"No." Conner stated. "Heatwave's got it covered."

"Conner, I wish you'd reconsider," Clark sighed. "Heat vision is the most dangerous of our powers if it's not controlled. And it's more than just setting things on fire."

Conner scowled, taking insult on Rory's behalf. "Heatwave's doing fine. We worked out 'on' and 'off'. I've promised everyone who matters that I won't use it in a fight until they're all satisfied with my level of control."

He paused for a moment then added. "I've been going by Jotunn* while in costume for several months now. I'd rather you use that. You never wanted me to know your civilian name, I'd rather you not use mine." Conner turned and headed back toward the base.

"Wait!" Clark called. Conner stopped but didn't turn around. "Do you still blame me for Mirror Master's death?" Clark asked.

"No." Conner admitted after a moment. "You couldn't have predicted the chain of events that got him killed. I don't even believe you apprehended them for the sole purpose of hurting me anymore. It wasn't that you ever hated me, you just don't really care about me at all." Conner smiled bitterly. "You're only here today because you feel obligated."

"I don't-" Clark began.

Conner rolled his eyes. "Kara can't talk enough about you. How welcome you make her feel. How you drive her crazy being over protective. I had to ask the others not to vote her off the team. They were worried it would hurt me, hearing about how you are around someone you actually see as family. I reminded them I have my own family now." He turned back and glared at Clark. "I don't
"Alright. I feel obligated," Clark said, his voice hardening. "I should feel obligated to teach you. I have experience with the powers you're developing. Powers that have the potential to pose a serious threat to the people around you. You should feel obligated to accept any help you can get."

"Rory's been looking forward to this for ages," Conner said. "Besides I told you we already sorted out 'on' and 'off'. If your use of Freeze-Breathe is anything to go by, there's nothing left that you could teach me anyway. Goodbye, Superman."

---

July 4, 2015

"Happy, Happy Conner-Day! Happy Conner-Day to you!" sang two chipmunk-like voices trailing after a pair of small blurs which left marker streaked walls in their wakes.

"Dawn! Don! You give me those markers right now!" a larger blur demanded. The larger blur over took one of the smaller ones and resolved into Wally with one of his three-year-old cousins tucked under his arm. "What would your mom say if you drew on her walls?" Wally scolded the little girl.

Dawn giggled as her brother launched a surprise attack. Don leapt on Wally's back allowing Dawn to squirm free and resume her rampage.

"Mom! If you're going to draw on the walls you really ought to use more colors," A blonde six year old informed Dawn with all seriousness.

"Owen! Fer pete's sake, stop calling Dawnie that!" Digger shouted turning beet red. "She's not your mother! We got the blood test and everything! You're some sort of cousins at most!"

Owen snickered and patted Dawn on the head. "Don't worry Mom, I still love you."

"You're weird," Dawn informed Owen smiling broadly. Then she darted behind Rory as Wally gained control of Don and lunged for her. "Missed me!"

Wally gave a pretty, dark haired young woman a pleading look. She held out her arms. "I'll keep hold of Thing One while you hunt down Thing Two," she offered.

"Thanks Linda." Wally took a moment to give his girlfriend a quick kiss before handing off his cousin into her keeping.

James let himself, Dick, Artemis and M'Gann in. "Thanks for the assist," Dick was saying. "We totally blew the kids in my gymnastics class away with that demonstration."

"Hey, you know I like flying," James replied.

"Just so long as you've got your boots on," Artemis added.

"I though you were both spectacular," M'Gann said, but she only had eyes for Dick.

Meanwhile Dawn dove under the table. Wally paused for a heartbeat to decide between around or under. Just as he started around, Evan casually pushed his chair into Wally's path. Dawn grinned triumphantly as she climbed into Len's lap and started making faces at her cousin, confident that he'd protect her from any retaliation. "It's my house you're drawing on," Len observed mildly.

"It's okay right?" Dawn asked with her best cute look.
"Your cousin knows how to paint," Len observed.

"Why me?" Wally demanded.

"Who's supposed to be keeping the twin terrors under control?" Len asked.

"So where's the birthday boy?" Artemis asked.

"On the phone with Kaldur," Evan said. "Diplomat Lad never gets a day off."

"At least he managed to call," M'Gann said as she absently used her telekinesis to block Dawn's spirit for the door.

"Thanks M'Gann," Wally said and he collected the little girl. "At least someone's on my side," he glared pointedly at several innocent looking Rogues.

"Kaldur says hi," Conner informed the others as he left his room while pocketing his cell phone. "And he'll try to make it next month when James and Wally get recognized for their patents at Wayne Enterprises."

"Sure, that's what he says," Artemis replied. "But you know in another month there's just going to be some other dumb-shit cutting corners in an off-shore drilling operation or violating agreements around fishing practices or something that has Atlantis up in arms against 'surface dwellers'."

"I'm glad it's not me dealing with corporate criminals," Robin replied. "Give me someone I can punch any day. We should probably visit him instead. I can't remember the last time we saw Kaldur without it being a fate of the planet thing."

"Out of the way! Cake coming through!" Lisa exclaimed, holding a Cold Stone's box over her head. Instantly three little speedsters were sitting at the table looking angelic. While Owen couldn't run with Don and Dawn, his short bursts were still enough to get him across a room on an equal time scale and even un-gimmicked boomerangs could take out a wall when thrown at super-speed.

"Gimme the candles! I know how to count, let me put 'em on!" Owen demanded. He waited impatiently while everyone else found their places around the table. Then, watching Conner with eyes alight with mischief and adoration Owen carefully counted "One... Two... Three... Four!" as he placed the candles. "Four candles! I had six last month, that's two more than four!" He stood up on his chair and stretched up to pat Conner on the head. "My little brother," he declared gleefully.

James elbowed Hartley. "Guess that makes you a cradle robber."

"But Officer, he didn't look like any four-year-old I've ever seen," Hartley laughed.

"You're no fun," James pouted. "Digger gets way more bent out of shape."

"I must have a better sense of humor," Hartley replied. He leaned over and kissed Conner. "Or maybe I'm just getting some."

"See how funny it is after a couple dozen castration threats," Digger muttered. "And she's not even his mom!"

"Icky! Kissing! Ugh!" Owen shouted. "Can't you guys just hide in the closet like James and Artie?" For a moment there was dead silence. Artemis groaned and hid her face, James blanched and glared at Owen. "You promised that was our secret!"
"Oopsie?" Owen replied unrepentantly.

"Why didn't you tell us!" Wally exclaimed enthusiastically.

"And here they go," Artemis huffed.

"Right, how are we supposed to have a betting pool if you don't tell us these things?" Evan asked.

"Standard first bet: Ollie or Roy for the 'treat her right or else' speech?" Robin asked. "And bows or no bows involved?"

"I swear Roy only does it because he hates me," Artemis muttered.

"Bows, definitely bows," Wally said.

Conner looked thoughtful. "Artie's other boyfriends were normals. Tricks won't be so easy to crack."

"You're betting they team up?" Robin nodded. "Okay, we can add that."

"Just kill me now," James groaned. "Before they get the pleasure."

"Who'd've thought Ollie would be the crazy, over-protective mentor about dating, well Artemis dating anyway," Wally shook his head. "I mean Uncle Barry had his little hang-up about Dawn and Digger, but Ollie! Man-o-man, he freaks about every guy who looks twice at Artemis."

"The cake's melting," Rory observed. "Lets get those candles lit."

Iris, Joan and Lisa all glared darkly at Rory. "You so much as look at a flame thrower and I will drug you and mail you to the south pole in your birthday suit." Lisa declared. "I swear I will!"

"Not me," Rory grinned. "Con, you've been working on precision right? Let's put it to the test."

"If you want," Conner replied. His eyes changed from sapphire blue to smoldering red. Half the people in the room hit the floor. There was a sharp sizzling sound. "No faith," Conner shook his head with mock sadness as his friends emerged from their duck-and-cover to see the candles burning cheerfully and only half vaporized.

"Not bad kid." Rory judged. He kicked Wally lightly. "It's safe to get up now."

"Come on Rory, you are his teacher for that stuff," Wally pointed out. "And I know you CAN do practically anything with fire, but that doesn't mean you don't confuse birthday cakes and with a bonfire two or three times a year."

Barry blurred in. "Daddy's late! Daddy's late!" Don and Dawn chimed as they swarmed their father.

"And in costume," Iris observed worriedly.

Barry gave his kids a quick hug then glanced around the room. "I'm just down from the Watchtower. There's something building out past Pluto. The Lanterns are doing recon. Expect a general assembly within the hour."

"Enough time for cake at least," Joan decided with the pragmatism that came from living life around super-hero crises for decades.

While the cake was cut and passed around members of the little gathering vanished and returned in costume.
"Like the cloak," Conner remarked, using said article to reel Piper in for a kiss. Then he spent a few moments using straightening it back out as an excuse to stay in contact. "Be careful okay?"

"You too," Piper replied. "You never get to stick with us for big things. I hate it when we can't watch your back."

Iris sat between the twins while Joan lifted Owen into her lap, keeping the little ones corralled as the more tech-oriented began prepping their gear.

"That's gonna be us when we're big," Owen told the twins.

There was a general start as everyone's comms went off simultaneously. "Looks like you called it Mrs. Garrick," Cold said. "Just enough time for the cake."

---

Batman strode over to the latest arrivals. "Extra-Universal invasion on course for the Sol system. A hive mind and a large army of foot soldiers to get past before we can hit the nerve center."

"How big an army?" Cold asked. "And what'd they want?"

"We'd be calling you in even if you hadn't reformed," Batman replied. "They're after organic matter, basically a space-going locust horde, planets in their wake are left stripped bare of all life. Mirror Master, look for a back door to the hive. Once you've got the Rogues in try to bring it's defenses down from within."

"Gotcha," Evan replied. "Gonna need a breadcrumb trail thought, not enough reflections in space."

"The recon team has orders to seed the intervening distance with mirrors. With Cold's ice bridges it should be enough for a path," Batman said. "Jotunn, join the heavy hitters. Frontal assault, keep them focused on you, batter down the doors for the rest of us if you can manage it. Superman has point for your team."

Conner's expression indicated how much he didn't love playing second string to Superman but he only nodded at his assignment.

"Miss Martian, go with your Uncle and the Lanterns. You'll form the first line of defense. We're making a stand at Saturn's orbit." Batman continued. "Nightwing, you and Batgirl are our best hackers. I need one of you with the Rogues and the other with the insertion team to follow in the heavy hitter's wake. Your first goal is to disable their defenses. Second get out any info you can. We'll have an analysis team at the Watchtower to make use of it."

"You guys keep an eye on Batgirl?" Nightwing asked the Rogues. "This'll be her first mission out of Gotham." He turned to Batman. "I hope you brought Robin. He's going to be a real joy to live with if Batgirl got to come and he didn't."

Batman disdain to respond. "Kid Flash, you're also with the insertion team. Artemis you'll join the reserves. I'll be dispatching further missions as we gather more data."

"I'll see you at the compliment," Trickster said as they broke to head for their various assignments.

"At the victory lap," Artemis agreed.

Across the room Conner spotted a blond head and dark head bent conspiratorially close together and headed in that direction. "Kara! Donna! Ready to go smash things?" he greeted the girls.
"You know it!" Kara exclaimed

"Always," Donna said. "By the way, we've been talking. Do you know any other younger heroes? I mean our age, not practically ancient like you and your friends."

Kara smiled. "Yeah, it's not that we don't like teaming up with you guys, but it's not really that different from working with our mentors. We were thinking if we had a few more people we could break off and have our own team."

Conner thought for a moment. "There's Batgirl and the new Robin in Gotham, Nightwing thinks they're ready for a longer leash. And Green Arrow has a son who's in the game."

"Sooo-" Kara began. "About Robin and the Arrow kid? Are they cute?"

Conner gently rapped her on the forehead. "Kara Zor-El, that is NOT the first thing you ask about a prospective teammate!"

"Yeah well, I'm sure anyone trained by Batman's good," Donna began. Then got side-tracked. "Isn't Captain Cold trying to recruit that new crook in Central, um Weather Wizard wasn't it? For the grey hats? I saw him on TV, I'd definitely team up with him."

"Donna thinks he's hot," Kara giggled.

"Save me from boy-crazy teenage girls," Conner groaned.

"Putting on airs, just because you've been twenty for all of fifteen minutes!" Kara huffed. "By the way, happy birthday cuz."

"Thanks," Conner replied, "and I was never a teenage girl, or boy-crazy for that matter."

The girls giggled. "Right, there was just your one and only," Donna said. "You guys are so cute."

"My little brother has been known to kick the shins of people who call him cute," Conner remarked.

"We're up," Superman said as he and Wonder Woman joined them. "We'll Zeta-beam to the platform on Calypso, rendezvous with the insertion team there and gear up." He turned to Kara, "This time I don't want you worrying about holding back. What we're fighting are the drones of a hive mind, as individuals they aren't sentient. The recon team reports they are highly dangerous. I don't want you taking chances." He turned to Conner and Donna. "You either."

"Rogue here," Conner stated. "I have strict orders against playing martyr."

Superman grimaced. "Let's go."

On Calypso the Javelin carrying the insertion team was waiting for them. As soon as they'd donned oxygen tanks and scuba regulators they leapt into the air, taking positions around the ship. As they cleared Neptune's orbit they got their first glimpse of the enemy: miles upon miles of glitter metallic creatures roughly twice the size of a typical fighter jet swarming like gnats around a massive dreadnought.

"Girls," Wonder Woman said, her voice slurred slightly from speaking around her breathing apparatus. "We're smashing right through. I want the two of you to flank Superman. Let him set the pace and break their formation. You're to keep them off his back. Jotunn and I will be protecting the ship. We'll also be watching to make sure you aren't in over your heads."
Conner heard Kara mutter, "Treating us like children." He smiled to himself, remembering when that had been his team's favorite refrain and how it differently it felt now that they were the ones with younger kids to worry about. He was glad Kara had never known what it felt like when no one older cared enough to worry.

In spite of the grumbling Supergirl and Wonder Girl fell into position. From the window of the ship, Conner caught sight of Robin and Kid Flash giving him a thumbs up, he waved to them.

Once the battle had been joined Conner quickly realized what the danger was: The drones were too tough to be taken down with a punch, or even a blast or two, and if they stopped moving shear numbers would crush them.

"These things are flying tanks!" Wonder Girl exclaimed.

"The LexCorp, military contract, super advanced, can't possibly imagine how it fell into the wrong hands, type-tanks," Supergirl agreed.

"Tanks are just armored cars with a bad attitude," Conner replied, quoting Captain Cold. "And if there's one thing a Rogue should never get stumped by..."

About five minutes later he announced, "Heat, chill, hit. About six inches to the left of center along the lower chest plate seam." Superman turned to watch. Conner had spit out his regulator. In quick succession he had a small patch on the enemy fighter glowing red hot, coated in frost then he drove his fist through the weakened patch of armor and deep into the drone's body. Conner took out two more drones before taking a quick breath from his regulator while trying to shake off some of the ichor coating his arm to the shoulder. Then he went back to destroying the drones with stoic efficiency.

Superman tried mimicking Conner's tactics with less impact. "Hotter hot, colder cold, tighter focus," Conner instructed. "They're bred for deep space, thermal shock isn't easy, but they're not ready for localized temp extremes."

"How?" Superman asked.

For several moments Conner didn't answer. Finally he sighed. "I practiced, with feedback. I don't know how to explain the mechanism."

"Jotunn, take point." Superman ordered. "We can't stall."

Conner nodded sharply. As the push forward stretched on his awareness funneled down to himself and the next obstacle. It was almost a surprise when he found himself at the hive's outer bay doors. Kara helped him force them open and the Javelin followed them in with Superman and Wonder Woman providing rear guard. After they were all in the two of them forced the doors together and Superman welded them shut.

Conner looked around the hanger dizzily then slumped against the Javelin's landing gear. "Might have over done it a little," he admitted as the others clustered around him.

"You did good," Superman told him.

"Supergirl, Wonder Girl," Wonder Woman said. "You two and Jotunn will be staying with the Javelin. Take care of him."

After everything was over Clark headed for the Watchtower infirmary. He didn't go any further than
the entryway where he watched Conner's friends and family clustered around him, finishing their birthday celebration, alternately praising him for his efforts and scolding him for getting hurt.

"You once said you'd be happy to be proven wrong about him," Batman remarked coming up behind him.

"I did, I am," Clark replied. "I'm trying not to make the same mistakes with Kara. If I completely alienate her, at the least it'll be for something new. The Rogues weren't as bad for him as I thought either."

"They were willing to change to be the people their children needed them to be."

Chapter End Notes

Jotunn is another name for the Frost Giants of Norse myth. It's not great but it's the best code name I could think of for Conner... But then naming Barry's twins Dawn and Don Allen is worse and that's cannon.

Works inspired by this one

Father's Day Exploits by Just_Will

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!