Cranes

by catchandelier

Summary

In one world, one we're more familiar with, Jonathan Crane has died. In what amounts to a cosmic filing problem, the former supervillain is offered a deal: He can be reborn and become a hero, or he can die.

Well, it was considerate of the Powers That Be to make the choice simple, in any case.

He accepts, and in another time and another place, Johnny Crane is taken in by his previously unknown great uncle on his mother's side: one Alfred Pennyworth. In another time and another place, Johnny Crane moonlights as a vigilante known as Scarecrow on the streets of Gotham, and the team known as Young Justice is a very different group.

(Somehow, though, everything important has stayed exactly the same.)

(A story about what happens when the strings of narrative causality get tangled, people die when they shouldn't, and life goes on anyway. A story about growing up, second chances, families, love, and the general strangeness of the world in which we -they- live. A story about truth and- and this is stupid just read it.

Please, please- just read it. So I'm not the only one who knows.)
readfile: This is the end.

If you're looking in this database, I am dead.

I'm so so sorry that you have to deal with my failures and mistakes - I'm sorry that I couldn't...
I'm sorry. I'm sorry that so much of my work was corrupted - and I'm sorry that what isn't is in
fragments. I wasn't able to save everything - what you get is what there is.

For that, I am sorry.

I don'ttttttttttt have much time left here. so i'll try to be clear: this is real. It isn't a job. They're
real people, with real liveras. Try to to to respect that.

Once again, I am so sorry.

Oh god.

end of file.
There are many ways to Tell a Story

This story is a story about the man who mastered all fear, and did inflict it upon others in the name of Justice.

It's not always a nice story, and the Hero of this story is not always that heroic, but... This is the story.

“Dorothy: Weren't you frightened?

Wizard of Oz: Frightened? Child, you're talking to a man who's laughed in the face of death, sneered at doom, and chuckled at catastrophe... I was petrified. ”-The Wizard of Oz”

This is how this story starts:

(Wake up, Jonathan Crane. S’ time to start over.)

Wake up. Wake up, Johnny-boy. Put your feet on the ground. We need to leave, right now.

‘What time’s it, then?’

‘It is three in the morning. ’

You have ‘bout five minutes to do this, so hurry it up. Reach under our brick-pillow-thing and grab the togs we made out of that reject pile of shirts no one wanted. Hasn’t that always been our life Johnny-boy?

‘Now’s not the time for insults, ‘Crow.’

Sorry. But hurry it the fuck up, Johnny-boy, we have to go.

‘I agree. The standard of living here is sub-par, at best, and not at all conducive for growing into a healthy, somewhat well-adjusted young man. Therefore, it is only in our best interest to remove ourselves from the vicinity with all due haste.”

What the geek said.

‘Both of you be quiet. I’m at the window now, Scarecrow, so d’you want take over here?’

Thought you’d never ask, Johnny-boy. Let’s get the fuck outta here.

This is why the story starts:

Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth is twelve years old. He has black hair, blue eyes, and a three
way split personality. And you thought you had problems. When he was eight, his maternal grandmother died of sheer meanness. His mother, who never wanted a child to begin with, left him with her mother, his grandmother. This was her second worst idea concerning her son. The worst was not providing a suitable guardian for her son in the (likely) event of her mother’s death. His great-uncle (on his grandfather’s side), one Alfred Thaddeus Crane Pennyworth, would have been happy to take the boy in.

When his grandmother died, Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth was sent to the London City Orphanage, where, in another place and time, he was bullied mercilessly by his peers, and threw himself with wild abandon into a life of villainy and crime. He would have been Dr. Jonathan Crane; The Scarecrow, the master of Fear. In this world, that would not happen. It could not happen.

Dr. Jonathan Crane had died. He wasn’t supposed to; he was supposed to become a hilariously old man, and die surrounded by his… “children” and their “children”. But, he died: his soul flopped out of his body, squelched onto the ethereal plane.

Yeah.

When his soul severed itself from his broken body, the strain of a dismal life filled with failures snapped the thin bonds between Jonathan Crane, Dr. Crane, and Scarecrow. However, since all three souls are, technically speaking, the same soul, a filing conundrum was created.

The soul of Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth was, well... a bit grimy, to be honest. Small, and kind of broken, but still good. The soul of Dr. Crane was also a bit grimy, but that’s to be expected from a doctor. Doctors have to do grimy things in the name of service to others. Scarecrow on the other hand… Scarecrow wasn’t all the way bad, but he certainly wasn’t a good soul. There is a cruelty inside the Scarecrow, a certain lack of empathy that shows inside his yellow eyes.

However, all this is moot. They’re the same person; they have to be treated as the same person. Which lead to the conundrum of existential filing: Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth required another chance to make good on his potential; Scarecrow needed to get himself a few helpings of whoop-ass; Dr. Crane needed some empathy. Thus, the deal:

“Become what you always coulda been. The world always needs some kinda hero, Johnny-boy; so you’re gonna be a hero. The thing about heroes is, is they don’t kill. So if you take this deal, and kill another in cold blood, you’ll die. Refuse this deal, and you’ll be torn asunder, shattered into your component pieces and flung from yourself, never to return as you are now. So, that’s essentially dying, then. You will die, forever, and be remade into someone, something, entirely different. Make your choice, guv.”

“I- Where will I go?”

“Choose, and find out.”

“Who will I be?”

“You’ll be who you’ve always been, only this time ‘round you’ll strive to better yourself.”

“Will it hurt?”
“Sometimes it’ll hurt very badly, but not this part. You’ll wake ‘s’if from a dream, and soon forget the life you’ve had.”

“If I kill someone-”

“If you kill someone and mean it, if you feel no remorse, the deal is null and void. We understand shit happens, after all.”

“Will I remember… this?”

“You’ll remember the deal, your name, a few little things from the past. No more than you need to.”

“Will I die?”

“Everyone dies, Johnny-boy. But an argument could be made that you were already dead to begin with. Come with me if you want to live, and all that.”

“And them? Are they coming too?”

“You can’t leave yourself behind, Johnny-boy. Sorry.”

"And my skills?"

You’ll have to relearn some things, but mostly... mostly you'll have all the skills you have now.

“I- Where will I go?”

“Choose, and find out.”

He chose.

He found out.

And he forgot.

This is how this story really started:

Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth is twelve years old. He is near five feet tall, and is only going to get taller. He is in Year Seven of his mandatory education, which in America means he’s a sixth-grader. When he is angry, he speaks with a very thick cockney accent. He has black hair, blue eyes, and a three way split personality. And you thought you had problems. When he was eight, his maternal grandmother died of sheer meanness. His mother, who never wanted a child to begin with, left him with her mother, his grandmother. His grandmother hated him because he was illegitimate, and was merciless in her hatred.

(His great-uncle (on his grandfather’s side), one Alfred Thaddeus Crane Pennyworth, would have been happy to take the boy in.)

When his grandmother died, Jonathan Crane was sent to the London City Orphanage, where, in another place and time, he was bullied mercilessly by his peers, and threw himself with wild abandon into a life of villainy and crime. He would have been Dr. Jonathan Crane; the villainous The
Scarecrow, the Master of Fear. In this world, that would not happen. It could not happen, because when he was ten, Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth, who goes by Johnny Crane, jimmed the fourth floor window open, and clambered down the drain pipe. When his feet touched the ground outside, the quiet crunch of sticks did not wake up Daisy, the matrons Jack-Russell terrier, who did not wake up her mistress. In another world, Daisy woke her mistress. Bad things happened to Johnny as a result. Not in this world, though.

Johnny had been preparing his escape for weeks. He had nicked a pair of wire cutters, and a greying beach towel. "We shouldn’t steal…" We'll mail them back. He had hidden them in a bush near the cyclone fence that separated the orphans from the rest of the world’s scrutiny. Johnny C. hadn’t gotten this far, in a different world.

Scarecrow had nixed the idea of simply climbing the fence as Too noisy, innit? and Doc was insistent that they leave ASAP. Thus, the Plan: Camouflage self with beach towel, cut hole in fence, escape, then????....

It wasn’t the best plan, but for him, it would have to do.

Johnny would eventually get booked by the police after he loitered for a few days too many near a fountain across town. He (that is to say, Johnny and Doc, who outvoted Scarecrow,) would give the cops his real name, his full name. His full name, in turn, would be registered into the system, and a few flags would fly. And one Alfred Thaddeus Crane Pennyworth would get a call from an old friend about his great-nephew, “-and could you please come get him?”

“Certainly, when would be best?” Alfred’s voice is smooth, cultured. It does not betray his shock- ‘e ‘as a mother’s pearly gate nephew ’oo was ’omeless for Bo-le Of Glue Donkey’s Ears and nah wahn told ‘im wahn bloody- ahem, keep it together, guv...

“Yesterday would have been perfect, but tomorrow will have to do.” The voice on the other end is not quite frantic, but a clear edge of hysteria is coming through.

At supper that night, Alfred tells his employer, one Bruce Wayne, that “-A personal matter has come to my attention. I must go to London, tonight, to remedy the problem. I apologize for the inconvenience.”

His voice is, as always, unflinchingly calm. (Of course, the tone of that voice is the kind of tone that has EXTREME PANIC writ large over it, but I digress…)

Alfred would spend three days in London, meeting his great-nephew. He would eventually pose the question “-So, would you like to come home, to Gotham, and live with me?” He can’t quite hide the notes of hope in his voice; his face is closed enough to put off the average pre-teen.

Johnny is not the average pre-teen. Johnny can read people like books. "We can now, anyway.” He wasn't always able to, but Jonathan Crane spent his (previously villainous) life figuring out how people work. It’s one of the not-very-many things he still knows how to do; it’s not a conscious thing anymore, but Johnny can- and does- still do it. Instinctive, like.

“Yeah. I would like that.” Johnny’s voice is soft, sort of hopeful, hesitant and shy.

They go.
(This part of the story is about how Alfred T. C. Pennyworth and Jonathan N. C. Pennyworth are related:

Alfred married Johnny’s grandmother’s sister, Margot, but never had any children with her. When the Great War happened, Alfred joined the RAF, and flew planes for England. He was never allowed to tell his wife about what he did in the war, exactly. After all, spy-planes weren’t flying then… Right?

Right. An easier way to explain the above statement would be:

The Isle of Man is part of the British Isles but not governed by the British Prime Minister; though it is not part of the United Kingdom it is subject to the Queen of England.

I’ll let you figure out what that means.)

The plane ride was almost delayed when Johnny didn’t have a passport, nor the proper visas for admittance to America. Alfred took care of it with a few phone calls. They flew second class; twelve hours spent in mostly silence, with the occasional awkward, hesitating, and very short, conversation thrown in. Johnny had the beach towel he had stolen from the orphanage (still), a few things he had picked out of the dumpsters around London, and a few little things that the police had given him, packed into an extremely cheap, extremely ugly, black sack backpack. Alfred had nothing except his wallet, keys, and phone.

They landed at JFK in Southport, the New Jersey to Gotham's NYC; rode the number seven train into Gotham; took the limousine to the Wayne estate. Johnny sat next to his great-uncle, in the front of the car, his bag at his feet. Neither male spoke.

It was… Awkward. To overuse the word, anyway.
and There are many different kinds of Truth.

This part of the story is about Wayne Manor and parts of why Gotham is the way it is:

Wayne Manor is an old building. It was built just after Gotham was founded, and approximately twenty miles away from Arkham Manor. Gotham was built in a swamp, by a madman. Although... that explanation for Gotham's geo-spiritual structure is a little too simple for this story.

The natives of the far-North Eastern part of North America, who were mostly killed by mumps in 1765, had a name for the land that would one day be Gotham City: Chick'a gami. Archibald Jensen Arkham, aged twenty-eight, was a failed entrepreneur, lord, and all around wastrel. He brought his wife and children over from Europe, and bought the land called Chick’a gami for approximately three dollars and fifty cents worth of mumps infected blankets in 1764.

He ignored the local’s dire warnings about the land he had bought, that it was cursed; ignored the legend about the land, that a demon had been trapped there, long ago; ignored the way the land seemed to ooze under his feet, the sky seemed to look at him with baleful malevolence; ignored the number of times the foundations of the house sunk into the swampy ground; ignored the way no animal, large, small, or in-between would go near the place; ignored the extremely bad luck that coated the construction of the house, the sicknesses that plagued the workers, the strange madnesses that came upon them all... The house would take forty years to build, and begin the long fall into ruin seconds after the foundations were laid.

Due to the long build time, a small village encompassing a harbor, farmland, and roads, would grow, and then flourish around the manor. This village would eventually grow into the city of Gotham.

Archibald Jensen Arkham died during the eighth year of construction, when he accidentally-on-purposefully slit his own throat with a pearl-handled straight razor. Both razor and house would change hands within the family many times, and both would finally come to rest in the hands of one Amadeus Arkham.

The original name of Arkham Asylum was Arkham Hospital. The house’s dark history as a mental health facility began in the early 1900s when the last living Arkham's mother, Elizabeth, who had suffered from mental illness for most of her life, committed suicide. It was later discovered that her son, Amadeus Arkham, had a psychotic break and murdered her, then repressed the memory of doing so.

Dr. Amadeus Arkham, the last by-blood still-living Arkham, decided that as the sole heir to the Arkham estate, he would remodel his family home in order to properly treat the mentally ill, so that others might not suffer as his mother had. Prior to the first period of the hospital's many, many remodels, Dr. Arkham had treated patients at the Kansas State Psychiatric Hospital in Metropolis, where he, his wife Constance, and their daughter, Harriet, had been living for quite some time prior to his mother’s death.

When he told his family of his plans, they all moved back to his ancestral family home to oversee the
remodeling. While there, Arkham received a call from the police notifying him that serial killer Martin "Mad Dog" Hawkins — referred to Dr. Arkham by Metropolis Penitentiary while at Kansas State Psychiatric Hospital — had escaped from prison, and sought Dr. Arkham’s considered opinion on the murderer's state of mind. Shortly afterward, Arkham returned to his home to find his front door wide open. Inside, he discovered the raped, mutilated, and dead bodies of his daughter and wife in an upstairs room, with Hawkins' nickname carved on Harriet's limp, dirtied body.

The shock of the murders brought back the repressed memory of killing his mother. For many years, Elizabeth had suffered from delusions where she had been tormented by a supernatural creatures, and had called on her son to protect her from them. He was skeptical of the veracity of her visions, but, one day he finally saw what his mother had been seeing - a great swarm of bats, a spectre of death. Taking the pearl-handled straight razor from his pocket, which had proven to be an accursed family heirloom, he cut his mother's throat to end her suffering. He then blocked out the memory, and attributed her death to suicide.

Horribly re-traumatized, Amadeus put on his mother's wedding dress, another accursed family heirloom, and took out the pearl-handled razor he had carried every day since the day he had killed his mother. He knelt in the blood of his family, and he vowed to bind the evil spirit of "The Bats", which he believed inhabited the house, through ritual and sorcery. “Mad Dog” Hawkins was captured, and admitted to Arkham Hospital. Amadeus “treated” Hawkins for months until he finally, fatally, electrocuted him in a shock therapy session. This incident was treated as an accident by the authorities, but soon after this event, Arkham spiraled down into madness.

He continued his mission even after he was incarcerated in the re-named Asylum; he scratched the words of the binding spells and cantrips into the walls and floor of his cell with his fingernails, and painted them on with his blood, until the day he died. With his death, the rituals he had been performing would bind the curse of the Arkham family to the Asylum. This curse would eventually drive all who entered into the asylum, for any reason (please excuse the pun), batshit-insane. Thus creating a third, and final, accursed family heirloom.

In another world, in another time, Jonathan Crane would intern, work, go crazy, and die in Arkham Asylum. Not this world though.

Probably.

Wayne manor was built on a low incline, approximately twenty miles away from the accursed Arkham site. It sits above massive limestone caverns, which sit over massive-er ancient lava flows. The place is cool beans.

Wayne Manor began as the simple home of railroad financier Jerome K. Van Derm in 1855. Soon after, Van Derm had to sell the property to the Wayne brothers, Solomon and Zebediah, in 1858. Solomon, a judge, worked hard to preserve equality in Gotham, saying that the city should be a "fortress against vice and iniquity". Solomon expanded Wayne Manor to its current size, acting as the first Wayne to turn it into a manor. Both brothers emigrated from Europe.

Traditionally, the manor house was the dwelling of a feudal lord of a manor, which he occupied only on occasional visits if he held many manors. As such it was the place in
which sessions of his manor court were held. Sometimes a steward or seneschal was appointed by the lord to oversee and manage his different manorial properties. The day-to-day administration was delegated to an official, who in England was called a bailiff, or reeve. In the present time, Alfred holds both of these roles, but in the past, his paternal ancestors served the Wayne family.

The Wayne family started in Russia, and members would immigrate to Romania, and then England throughout the years.

Kievan Rus', the first united East Slavic state, was founded by Oleg of Novgorod in 882. The state adopted Christianity from the Byzantine Empire in 988, beginning the synthesis of Byzantine and Slavic cultures that would define Russian culture for the next millennium. Kievan Rus' ultimately disintegrated as a state because of the Mongol invasion of Rus' in 1237–1240. This was when the Waynes first came into being.

During that time a number of regional magnates, in particular Novgorod and Pskov, fought to inherit the cultural and political legacy of Kievan Rus'. After the 13th century, Moscow came to dominate the former cultural center. By the 18th century, the Grand Duchy of Moscow had become the huge Russian Empire, stretching from the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth eastward to the Pacific Ocean. During this time, the Waynes made a name for themselves, as champions of Justice, Law, and Order. Expansion in the western direction sharpened Russia's awareness of its separation from much of the rest of Europe and shattered the isolation in which the initial stages of expansion had occurred.

Successive regimes of the 19th century responded to such pressures with a combination of halfhearted reform and repression. During this time, the weaker branches of the Wayne family were subtly encouraged towards warmer, more enlightened climes. Russian serfdom was abolished in 1861, but its abolition was achieved on terms unfavorable to the peasants and served to increase revolutionary pressures. Between the abolition of serfdom and the beginning of World War I in 1914, the Stolypin reforms, the constitution of 1906, and State Duma introduced notable changes to the economy and politics of Russia; however, the tsars were not willing to relinquish autocratic rule, or share their power.

Although not typically built with strong fortifications like castles were, many manor-houses were partly fortified: they were enclosed within walls or ditches that often included the supporting farm buildings as well. Arranged for defense against robbers and thieves, it was often surrounded by a moat with a drawbridge, and equipped with small gatehouses and watchtowers; but was not provided with a keep or with large towers or lofty curtain walls to withstand a siege. The primary feature of the manor-house was its great hall, to which subsidiary apartments were added as the lessening of feudal warfare permitted more peaceful domestic life.

Zebediah explored, charted, mapped, and finished the many limestone caverns beneath the manor, and excavated a set of tunnels into Gotham proper, and around the city. Both brothers would later use the manor as part of the Underground Railroad, sheltering escaped slaves who fled north to Canada. According to the Gotham county records, there have been six generations of Waynes in the manor. Also according to the Gotham county records, Wayne manor has burned to the ground four times. What is not on record is the way those manors burned; “illicit activities” and all that jazz.

Incidentally, Alfred has a small (loft apartment sized) room behind the butler’s pantry. Johnny will
also have a small room (apartment), that was originally the maid’s quarters.
Therefore, it is the job of the Librarian

This part of the story is about how Alfred, Bruce, Johnny and Dick came to live with each other:

The limousine drove through the city, then out the other side, up into the Gotham hills. The car drove past a massive, slightly ostentatious manor, turned a curve, and drove up the back road to the house. The limousine was carefully parked in the carport/garage behind the house, and both males exited. Alfred gestured at Johnny, to “follow me.”

Johnny followed Alfred, feet crunching through thick frost. It is December, but Johnny is only wearing a windbreaker. He is clean-ish; his eyes are clear, his skin has enough elasticity to not seem old, and his hair looks like a black, sooty haystack. His glasses are navy surplus, so he can’t really see. His shoes are sandals, because he has size sixteen feet. He is thin, the kind of too thin that can only happen through the lack of food, for long, long weeks. He is gaunt, cadaver-like, walks with a certain stoop to his shoulders. Above all, he is open in his face, open in a way that Jonathan Crane never would have been.

Johnny Crane dares to hope.

The males walked up a slow incline, scraped their feet on the mat in front of the service entrance. Alfred reached into his coat pocket, pulled out his keys, picked out the key to the service door. The door is actually a double door, nestled underneath an exquisite Gothic arch. The key went into the lock, gently scraping, twisting, unlocking. Heat from inside the house wafted out around them.

Alfred and Johnny stepped into the mud room, and the three boys- Johnny, Scarecrow, and Doc- smelled the house. Scarecrow carefully picked out and identified the smells. Doc identified what each smell meant, and quickly relayed the information to Johnny. Johnny would decide what to do with the information.

Flour, butter, eggs, bacon, meat, blood, soaps, sour milk, soot, Gas- from an oven, a big oven, carpets, dusty, empty space- too much empty space, expensive perfumes, colognes, dirty laundry, different kinds of hair gel with masculine scents, hair wax, silver polish, Tung oil, sawdust, water that’s underground, bat guano, ammonia, medicines, sterilization, strong solvents.

“This is a big house, but almost no one lives here. There are, at most, two people that live here. They are all men. Women sometimes come here, but they don’t stay. One of the men knows how to cook well enough, but one of the others cannot cook at all. Some one who lives here is very wealthy, and doesn’t mind showing it. There are old antiques here that are kept in very good repair. There is a massive cave system beneath the house; bats live in the caves. They have to clean a lot.”

‘Bruce Wayne and Great-uncle Alfred live here. They’re hiding something, but now I live here too. I just hope that I-’

“This way, Johnny. Your room is over here.” Alfred interrupts Johnny’s train of thought, his voice hushed in the soft mid-afternoon light. It is mid-winter, so the sun sets around five in the afternoon, but Johnny is approximately two hours ahead of the time in Gotham, and is a little more tired than he should be, jet lag being what it is. The soft winter light falls gently into the former maid’s quarters, illuminating a rather bare room. Well, I should say, bare of any personal touches; the room obviously hadn’t been re-furnished since 1906, when the maid was still in residence.
The walls were a soft, neutral shade of pink, inasmuch as a shade of pink can truly be called neutral. The curtains are fine, thin lace, flowers picked out in dark rose on the valance, the fabric gently draping to about three inches above the baseboard. There are shelves of some dark wood, on the same wall that the door opens onto.

Johnny steps into the room, the light from the slowly setting sun catching on a previously hidden tiffany-style lamp, sitting on a low table next to the bed; it's purple, green, and pink glass glemming in the soft light. The bed is a twin, and almost six feet long. Johnny looks at his great-uncle, asking him with his eyes “May I? Is this-?”

“We can certainly change anything you don’t like in here, but I think that this room will suit you, Johnny. Do you like it?” Alfred's voice is gently questioning; Johnny can hear that he cares.

Johnny has walked into the center of the room, his face curiously blank. He had set his bag at the foot of his bed, toed off his sandals at the doorway of his room. At his great-uncle's words, he turned, and practically flew into the older man, his long, boney arms wrapping around the older man. Johnny presses his face into Alfred, overcome with emotion.

To his credit, Alfred only hesitates a moment before hugging his great-nephew back.

This part of the story is about Haley’s Circus, and how Dick came to be the ward of Bruce:

C.C. Haly and Norton Bros. Circus, more commonly known as Haley's Circus, is a small travelling Circus that tours throughout the United States. Haley's main show under the big top includes various acrobats, clowns, trained animals, trapeze acts, tightrope walkers, jugglers, and other stunt-oriented artists. Haley's also has a rather extensive midway where various amusement rides, food vendors, merchandise vendors, games of chance and skill, as well as a place where sideshow curiosities can be found. Johnny had been living with his great-uncle for two years, and when the circus came into town, Johnny found himself asking Alfred to take him.

Mr. Wayne was informed of their plans, and decided, as he sometimes did, that he needed to “be Seen in the light of day.” So, they went together, as... Well, not as a group, as Mr. Wayne took, not one, but two women with him as dates, and not-so-subtly informed the Mr. s’ Pennyworth that they need not attend him. But. They went, not-together, as it were.

Johnny ambled through the circus; in the two years he had been living with his great-uncle and part-time employer, he had grown upwards like a jungle-plant in the sun, but not out of his crippling shyness; as he walked, people would sometimes stop him and ask if he was a part of the circus. Johnny would always mumble “I’m s-s-sorry, but no, I-I’m n-n-not.” He played some games on the midway, looked at the sideshow- had himself a grand old time. Then the barkers started barking the circus goers into the big tent, “-The show’s about to start!” Johnny found his great-uncle, and they walked into the big tent, showed their tickets, took their seats.

Haly’s was perhaps best known for being the former home of The Flying Graysons, an acrobatic troupe of performers consisting of Jonathan, Mary, and Richard "Dick" Grayson, their son. The troupe was most famous for performing without a net, making their acrobatic act more dangerous. Jonathan and Mary were famous for performing a series of triple flips in succession; Dick was the only one in the western hemisphere that could do a series of quadruple flips. The family was the star attraction of the circus, and was considered one of the finest examples of acrobatics living, sane,
not a cheerleader.

However, Anthony "Fats" Zucco, a low-level thug, and Edward Skeevers, a minor mob family head would both attempt to take over Haley's Circus in order to use the circus's trucks for drug trafficking. These two men would change the Grayson’s lives forever. To show the circus owner his seriousness, Zucco's crew sabotages the star attractions' ropes. When they went to perform, John and Mary Grayson fell to their deaths, leaving their son an orphan. Johnny was there; he saw the two performers fall, saw their son rush out from behind the clowns- **Clowns only come out like that when something’s gone wrong, Johnny, Doc, right?** 'They just… fell. How-’’ ‘Something stinks at the circus, and it isn’t elephant shite.’

The three four boys- Johnny, Scarecrow, Doc, and Dick- saw John and Mary fall. Scarecrow smelt the dust of the ring, heard how it puffed up, saw it flutter down onto sequins and spandex. Doc saw their faces, saw the shock, saw that there was no time for fear, no time to worry- just down, and out, and gone. Johnny is the one who notices how Mr. Wayne is reacting to this- notices him noticing the newly orphaned Dick Grayson. They see the disbelief turn to anguish on Dick's face- see the tears begin to fall. None of the trio noticed how the deaths were affecting them.

Tears are running down his face, water dripping down a blank mask. He will lie in his bed later, shut off the lights, close the door. He will scream, and rant, and cry into his pillow- but that would be later.

“Johnny, are you-?” It is Alfred, his stalwart uncle, trying to comfort him.

“I-I'm fine, Uncle A. I-I-it’s just… I- t-t-they-” Johnny’s voice is wobbly, horrified, disbelieving.

Johnny, for all his reserve, is still instinctively empathetic; he can sympathize with what he sees in Dick’s face. He is still crying when his uncle wraps an arm around him, still crying when they go to get the limousine, still crying when Mr. Wayne and the young Mr. Grayson get in the car; he cries all the way home. It is not the kind of crying that makes the face, the body, the soul hot and oozy; it’s the kind of crying that looks, at first glance, completely fake. Just tears running down a blank face, a few tiny puckers and folds in the cheeks, a miniscule quirk of the eyebrow.

He cries.

They end up taking Dick home with them, ignoring a Mr. Skeevers’ increasingly impassioned pleas for them to “leave the boy with him, they’re relatives yanno?” No, Mr. Skeevers’, they didn’t know, but, more importantly, they didn’t care. Skeevers would eventually be arrested by the IRS for tax fraud, leaving his daughter, Maureen Conner, with social services. Zucco would not be arrested.

Johnny had figured out just who he lived with, just who Batman is when he isn’t Batman (although, to be fair, Batman is always Batman) after a few weeks. He had kept his peace; he didn’t want to rock the boat, and be tipped out and away. He quietly began training; he would have the occasional half-remembered dream about “violent dancing”, dreamt of potions and powders that would drive men mad, dreamt-remembered how good he was could be with a slung-shot,- He wants those skills, either way. His great-uncle sees what he's doing, and subtly steers him towards teachers; gives him a foundation to build on.

Bruce… Bruce starts teaching him detective work. It’s one of the things Jonathan Crane never really knew. Johnny is more than happy to learn the skill, even informally. Johnny also takes care to never really point out the giant pink elephant in the room. But, when Dick finds out the secret- That Bruce
Wayne, his guardian, is also Batman, the Caped Crusader- and asks Bruce to teach him, train him, take him on as a sidekick partner, Johnny asks nearly the same thing.

What Johnny asks is "May I be your associate?"
Johnny knows enough to know, -or is it remember?- that it would be a bit too improper to ask his part time employer to train him as a protégé. Accordingly, Johnny asked to be merely associated with Batman, not an actual member of the team. Then again, Johnny didn’t really ask anyone’s permission to become a superhero; he didn’t ask his great-uncle exactly, he sort of- well, it went like this:

“Uncle Alfred?” Johnny’s voice is quiet in the kitchen, almost hesitant. In the months he had been living with his great-uncle, he had mostly left behind his fears; mostly left behind his shyness. He still stuttered horribly, though.

“Yes Johnny? What is it?” Alfred’s voice is just as quiet, but not any real emotion, other than patient curiosity.

“I was wondering- N-not that I have to, o-or anything, b-but would you be t-t-terribly o-opposed to me…” He paused here, as if searching for a way to word it without giving anything important away. (Doc is the one who decided that they needed to tell someone about their plans. Scarecrow suggested Alfred.)

“Would y-you mind t-t-t-terribly if I-I-I became a s-superhero?” His voice sounds so hopeful, so solemn-

“Not at all, Johnny. Not at all.” Alfred says these words without the slightest hesitation, as if he was merely telling Johnny what to add to a recipe to make it better. Johnny, who had only just turned thirteen, put down his dishes, walked over to his great-uncle, and gave him a hug.

That was how Johnny decided to become a hero. He would have done it, even without the permission of his great-uncle, but, well, he still wanted to ask- anyway.

Scarecrow is the one who decided how to phrase the question, Doc is the one who picked the tone; Johnny sold the line. Even though he isn't really, in his mind, a part of the family, he doesn't want to be left out. Thus the request- ”May I be an associate?”

In the end, Bruce Wayne adopted young Dick Grayson as his ward, and eventually took him on as his sidekick, Robin. They would succeed in revealing Zucco's complicity in the murders of John and Mary Grayson, but he supposedly died of a heart attack before his arrest.

Skeevess was paroled in 2004, and killed by Permafrost during the Columbus Day Massacre. Although “Massacre” is a bit of a misnomer; Permafrost was under the effects of mind control when she flash froze thirty people, including Skeevers, her father. It is unclear whether or not Permafrost meant to kill Skeevers.

Incidentally, Maureen Conner has a rather spectacular crush on Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth.

(Johnny fancies Maureen right back, but them both being shrinking violets, Dick would be thirteen before they started openly flirting with each other in civilian settings, which is a very intimate thing for superheroes in like to do.)

This part of the story is about Scarecrow, Permafrost, and how they both became heroes:
Scarecrow, while he lived in Gotham, patrolled the Narrows. Robin stayed with Batman, and helped him fight the good fight; Robin had to stay with Batman, seeing as Robin is Batman’s partner. Scarecrow does not have the same relationship with Batman- Scarecrow is an associate of Batman’s. Thus, Scarecrow will get advice from Batman, the occasional training from Batman; the only person Scarecrow answers to is Scarecrow. And anyway, the Narrows are just a little too dangerous for Robin, or Batman, to be out in every night. All three boys resolutely ignore how the Narrows are a little too dangerous for them to be out in every night, too.

The Narrows is an island in the middle of the Gotham River, situated between Midtown and Downtown Gotham City. It is home to the decaying and dilapidated neighborhood in which Arkham Asylum is located; the island carries the Arkham curse. The Narrows was the original village of Gotham, and is one of the few places in the city that the tunnels dug by Zebediah do not go- swampy land like that, especially accursed\(^*\) swampy land, does not allow tunnels to be dug underneath it. Batman generally cannot spend all his nights in the Narrows; Gotham is too big, too dangerous a city for that. Scarecrow, on the other hand, is too young, too green to unleash on all Gotham proper, and while the Narrows is a tough neighborhood, Scarecrow, Johnny and Doc are tough too. Or so they like to proclaim.

A short note about the Arkham curse:

The curse is bound to the old Arkham estate, and all its holdings, which means the entire Narrows. The curse will drive anyone who sets foot on the Arkham lands absolutely insane, but Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth (see file:GOTHAM) is already insane. You can’t have three distinct people in one singular body without going a little crazy; think annoying roommates up to eleven.

It was January, and Scarecrow had been out patrolling. Because of his hero duties, Scarecrow is a little late checking in with Batman. Suddenly, he is attacked- trapped beneath a thick layer of ice. Just after he melts through it with one of his chemical heat bombs, he is attacked by a homeless girl that bombards him with giant spikes of ice. He struggles to ward off the attacks, but ultimately drives her away with a well-timed flashbomb.

Doc had spent months playing around with chemical formulas. Some worked, some didn’t; some were for heat, some were for explosives, some were for sedatives or poisons or- well, he tried really hard not to hurt themselves with any of them. He did anyway, but it’s the thought that counts. He also put antidotes into tiny, antique perfume bottles that Scarecrow liked to collect. (Each of the boys has their own, singular hobby- Johnny likes to read period romance novels; Doc watches (cusses out) C-Span; Scarecrow collects and sometimes refinishes antiques; Dick likes to troll people on the internet (and is getting Alfred to teach him how to cook). To each their own, and all that.)

A few days later, Scarecrow is out patrolling the Narrows when he sees the girl again. He notices frost coating the street near him, and follows it; finds and watches as the same girl from before admires an ice sculpture of an angel. Something about the ice angel freaks her out, and she begins to trash the street with ice and snow. Scarecrow intervenes, and is nearly killed by a pillar of ice. He narrowly escapes with his life, but in doing so, becomes trapped in ice again. *Fuckin' hell*...

In a nearby liquor store, the girl sees a younger child, whose mother is clutching him protectively. This causes her to flash memories from her own past, and she breaks down in tears, leaving the
scene. By the time Scarecrow frees himself, she is gone.

For all of his skill with human emotion, Jonathan Crane had almost no understanding of how women work. It's understandable; Jonathan Crane was a man, and no man, no matter how smart, knows how a woman’s mind works.

Johnny Crane is no better with women; he has a history of foot-in-mouth syndrome, especially with women he likes. (Things are about to get… messy.)

At a nearby parochial community center where Johnny, now seventeen, and Dick, now twelve, volunteer to make up their community service hours (long story), Scarecrow and Robin are covertly investigating the Ice Girl. Doc had noticed that the girl appeared to be homeless- Johnny, Scarecrow, and Doc were out on the street for two years; they know a bag girl when they see one. Scarecrow decided to ask Reverend Anderson if he knew the Ice Girl, or a girl who looks like the Ice Girl.

In fact, the reverend does know a girl who matches the description; “Oh, you mean Maureen Conner. Yeah, she was taken by social services when her father, Edward Skeevers, got booked. She was taken to Gotham West orphanage, but left the orphanage on her own soon after; she comes around every now and again, gets checked out at the clinic, has a few warm meals, takes or returns something from the charity clothes chest, and leaves again.” The reverend’s voice is tired; the reverend is one of the only ones the parish has. “Maureen’s one of the few protectors of the many homeless children in the Narrows. I think she’s a hero. Besides, Scarecrow, Batman, Robin; They can’t be everywhere at once.”

Robin and Scarecrow patrol the Narrows, but after five hours of nothing but the normal Narrows crime, Scarecrow takes Robin back to the cave. Robin is not too young, too green, to stay out all night long on the hunt, but this is Scarecrow’s case, and Doc doesn’t like exposing Robin to the Narrows for longer than they absolutely have to.

Scarecrow asked Batman for Robin’s help; Johnny had noticed that the girl was markedly less violent around small children. Robin is small for his twelve years, especially considering his training, but acrobats are small. Besides, they're going to college soon; they want to spend a little more time with the person they privately think of as a little brother.

(Johnny, Scarecrow and Doc can’t just go off to college: they have responsibilities. But they can’t not go to college; they have responsibilities. Thus, the dilemma- should they stay, and miss out on opportunities, or should they go, and leave their territory undefended? Then, like a miracle, like a gift of the angels- A girl with powers! A girl who protects the same place he does! Just one problem: She’s kind of… well…)

Scarecrow eventually meets the Ice Girl a few weeks later, and manages to stop her long enough to say:

“Hel-lo, pretty lady.” Scarecrow is the one who talks when they go out hero-ing. Johnny stutters, and Doc is sesquipedalianly loquacious. The girl can be forgiven for her… antagonistic reaction.
She loses her composure, blasts him away with her powers, then flees, easily running on the still frozen streets. She buries Scarecrow in snow when he tries to follow her.

Eventually, they dig themselves out. Doc traces the girl's last movements to a building filled with homeless people, near the Midtown side of the Narrows. Scarecrow got close enough to smell the girl- *That's her natural scent? Roses, Rubbing Alcohol and Baby Powder? She smells- "Like some rareified perfume. I wonder if bottled *Hyacinthus orientalis albulus* scent would please her..."

He finds her room; it is a fairytale confection of a room, the kind of room a little girl would dream of when she heard the words “Princesses Bedroom”.

There was a small single cot, not much longer than five feet, completely encased in ice: The bed had been changed to a French romantic style of bed, its thin posts filigreed with frost. The walls were painted white; the single bare bulb in the room was surrounded by sharp, crinkled pieces of ice, throwing the feeble light in dazzling rainbows which danced across the walls. Tiny ice crystals everywhere, set sparkling and glinting, crazed with movement by the amber glow of Scarecrow’s perfume-bottle light.

The only other thing in the room is a small *vintage vanity, old style*, with a few small makeup things, and a photograph with one side torn out of it. The remaining portion shows a little girl with her mom. The little girl bears a striking resemblance to the Ice girl. He looked through the drawers, but doesn’t find anything else of interest, so Scarecrow took the picture. Johnny objects, strenuously, but is overruled by Scarecrow and Doc.

Scarecrow leaves with many questions still unanswered, but the next time they meet, it's her that seeks him out, demanding her picture back. She is irate, and screams at him “YOU STOLE HER!! GIVE HER BAAAAACK!!!” Her voice is high, breaks at the edges. He dodges her attacks and leads her upwards, desperately seeking the least amount of collateral damage possible. When Scarecrow tries talking to her she only throws more ice shards at him. She only starts to calm down when Johnny tries to talk to her.

He offers her his help, and talks to her, eventually gaining her trust by giving her an angel shaped perfume bottle, and her torn photo. (He accidentally, or maybe not (who can tell?), gives her one of his bottles of all-purpose antidote. The stuff in that little angel will negate the effects of everything he has on him, including his “Scarecrow Special”. It also smells like love, hope, and peace had a beautiful baby together, and the stuff in that little bottle is that baby.)

She finally introduces herself as Permafrost, and confesses to the boys that she has almost no idea how to be a superhero. Maureen and Johnny sit down on a high ledge, together, and just start talking. Johnny tells Permafrost about himself, about what he does as a superhero; tells her about his arrangement with Batman. In turn, she tells him about herself, and asks him some questions.

“So… You just work for Batman? Like… Does he pay you, or anything?” He voice is soft from all the screaming she had been doing. Her soft blue skin and fluffy white hair gently flutter in the night; moonlight catches on her frost covered cheeks, making them sparkle.

All three boys are working very hard not to lose the thread of conversation; they’re failing miserably. They had been staring at her mouth, watching the delicate play of sparkles around her eyes, across her cheeks, down her throat- They had stopped making little listening sounds sometime earlier-
Permafrost quirks her brow a little, and looks at Scarecrow carefully. “Am I… Boring you, or something?” she sounded so hurt…

“N-no! N-not at all. I-i-it’s just… You’re so fuckin’ beautiful, I want t-to go out wiv you and- I’m being fuckin’ w-w-weird, sorry, sorry… N-never m-mind.” All three boys have forgotten that they have commlinks; all three boys have forgotten that they left their commlinks on. Batman, Robin, and Alfred have been listening to the entire conversation. Johnny, Scarecrow, and Doc haven’t exactly told anyone what they’re trying to do with Permafrost; Then again, it’s Batman, Robin and Alfred: they know already.

In the end, Bruce manages to save Scarecrow from making a complete ass of themselves.

“Johnny, do you want to invite this girl to dinner?” His voice is slightly amused; it’s quite something, listening to a son try to get the girl.

“Yes sir, I do.” His voice is clipped, professional.

“Do you think that she can handle the Narrows?” Batman is asking now, curious.

“No sir, I do not.” Still clipped.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Something like the old arrangement, but tailored to fit, as it were.”

“…That’s doable.” Batman- Bruce- both men agree to his not-request; both men agree to make Permafrost their associate; both men agree to informally train her, subtly teach her the ways of being a hero. (Both men agreed to a request from a beloved, but distant child.)

“Scarecrow, who were you talking to?” She is curious; she shyly asks the question, almost too quiet to hear.

“Batman.” His voice is very matter of fact; his body is as close to RELIVED as a body can get fully clothed.

The boys hear a haunting, jittery cackle in their ears- Robin.

“So… Do I have an older sister now?” His voice isn’t exactly mocking; his tone isn’t exactly hopeful. Close, though.

Scarecrow sighs, then mutters under his breath, “Shut up, bird-boy wonder. Don’t you have case-files to go over?”

Scarecrow gets a raspberry for his trouble.

Alfred, their uncle, is the one who manages to ask the million dollar question, like the boss he is.
“Why her, Nephew?”

“Why not her, Uncle? She is a human being, just as I am. Just as anyone in the Narrows is. Any help or understanding must be given uniquely, specifically.”

“And can she be trusted with the Narrows?”

“Robin is too young for the Narrows, and Batman is too busy. Neither of them have ever really been here, have the time to really be here. They both focus too much on what was, or will be. The Narrows demand ones full attention - They will kill, -have killed- those who give anything less. I can’t let that happen.”

"Yes, but why her?"

"Because she can. Because she has. Because she is beautiful, inside, outside, with her actions, with her words."

“You honestly think she can handle it?”

“I don’t think she can handle it. I know she can.”

Permafrost hears the sincerity in Scarecrow’s voice, the depth of his emotions. In talking with his uncle, he had never once faltered in his regard for her. She blushed. The boys faint, and fall off the building.

It will take a long time for the boys to live that one down...
Johnny, Scarecrow and Doc were sitting quietly on the couch.

Restated, the boys were sitting on the couch trying to listen to “the Talk” as given by their part-time employer/father figure, Bruce Wayne.

Stated a third time, Doc had stopped gibbering in terror around thirty minutes ago; Scarecrow still hadn’t stopped cussing. Johnny had long since moved past the fabled Embarrassment threshold, that place where a person ceases to be embarrassed by anything anymore. The boys had finally mostly stopped full body blushing- Now whenever Bruce would say something the boys considered completely pervy, only patches of exposed skin would turn red, rather than all the way down to the nail beds.

Considering that all three boys are total prudes, the evening has been an impressive shade of red.

“So, after you’ve done that you’ll want to try-”

It’s going to be a long night; Bruce is apparently only half-way through his prepared notes.

Later, in the safety of their own room, the boys will find a pair of books: one entitled “Our Bodies, Our Selves; A book by Women, For Women” and the other entitled “My Body, Myself; a book for boys”. The books are stacked on his sidetable-desk, with a note from his great-uncle Alfred: “You might find these more useful, Johnny. It is important to know both sides of the situation, after all.”

The boys will eventually share both of those books with their younger brother Dick when it is his turn to sit on the couch and be mortified by his father’s attempted explanations about the fairer sex. Dick would, in turn, share it with his younger siblings when it was their turn to be mortified by their father. The copy of “Our Bodies, Ourselves” would turn out to be especially handy.

Each generation will add their own specific annotations, comments, and reminders to the books.

And no one told Bruce that his “the Talk” was horrific, a crime against god, humanity, and the teenage sex drive.

Bruce would later thank Alfred for his help in teaching his impressionable children about the other sex; subtly dissuading teenage libidoes is hard work in a house full of semi-sociopathic profiling superheroes.

(“How do you stand being right all the time, Alfred?”

“At times the responsibility is simply exhausting, sir.”)
This part of the story is about Roy, Kaldur, The Boys, Star City, Atlantis, and how Scarecrow, Speedy, Red Arrow, and Aqualad became friends:

The boys went to college near Star City, which is on the western coast of America. Batman hadn’t really said much about the local heroes; Johnny had surmised that Batman didn’t exactly think repeatable things about the local heroes. Alfred was strangely evasive on the subject (something about a “Manhunter” being stupidly heroic; or was it heroically stupid?), and with Robin all into some guy from Central City he had met through a Mathletes competition, Doc had to do research on Star City himself.

According to several published accounts, Star City was incorporated as a city under its current name over 200 years ago, making it of comparable age to Gotham. Star City's location moved many times due to various disasters, just like Metropolis, Gotham, Central, and other cities. The city sits on a low coastal plain, allowing few skyscrapers to be constructed. Star City is in northern California, specifically near the coastal regions north of the San Andreas Fault.

The earliest map of the city was published in 1805, and has been modified and redrawn many times throughout the city’s life. The layout of the city resembles the geography of metropolitan Gotham, subtly reversed. This is not surprising; one of the main city planners of Star City had a running rivalry with one of the city planners of Gotham.

The city of Platinum Flats, home of the world famous Birds of Prey cheerleading/rollerderby squad, is approximately half an hour away. It is more closely patterned on the north-eastern city of Blüdhaven, but, again, with a subtly reversed layout. The boys don’t actually live in Star City; they live in Platinum Flats, in a remodeled textile mill with two roommates. All three young men go to the same college in Star City.

The boys take the E bus down to the Orchid Bay stop; walk four blocks north to the J train- watch the city go by. Notable landmarks on their route include: The Star Bridge, a suspension bridge, and one of the city’s primary visual landmarks. It’s known for giant star sculptures atop each tower in the span of the bridge, and connects Star City's various regions. It is nicknamed the Milky Way, supposedly because of the high rates of milk trucks crashing and exploding on the bridge. (Or maybe because the walking bridge under the Star Bridge was the easiest place to solicit an illicit woman of negotiable pleasure.); The Star Grell Arts Museum, named after Mike Grell, who contributed greatly to Star City’s cultural awareness in the 1980’s. Nicknamed the Groaner, possibly because there hadn’t been any good art in the Museum since 1994; and Star Papp Stadium, named after George Papp. Papp was one of the original co-creators of the current Star City policy regarding Superheroes, left over from the G.I. bills of the 1940s post-war America. No one called the Papp anything other than the Papp; it is said that the Papp carries the ghost of George Papp within its very concrete foundations, and punished those foolish enough to mock it.

It takes about fifteen minutes to get to Adam Heights, and then it’s a short walk to Star City University campus. (The boys had noted the startling lack of creativity in the names of things in Star City. It was always, Star this, Star that, this Star that… Give him a good old-fashioned ambiguous building name any day.)

The boys see one of their friends, and roommates, Roy Harper. “Hey, AngRoy, Wassup?”
“…Shut up, J.C.” Roy says this with a poorly hidden smile. The two young men have been friends since the week after freshman orientation; they met when they both had objections to their History 101 professor’s statement, something about “the sudden degradation in the standards of living since the rise of the common super-hero; or should I say, super-zero.”

Roy Harper started the argument with a bang. “Sudden degradation in the standards of living? Sudden degradation? Sir, the standards of living had been degrading since long before the rise of the Superhero. If anything, the Superhero has helped to mitigate the decaying effects of societal upheaval.

For example, during The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, commonly known as the Cultural Revolution, one of the first groups of superheroes was recorded. For those of you who don’t know, the Cultural Revolution was a socio-political movement that took place in the People's Republic of China from 1966 through 1976. Set into motion by Mao Zedong, then Chairman of the Communist Party of China, the revolutions stated goal was to enforce socialism in the country by removing capitalist, traditional and cultural elements from Chinese society, and to impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party. This was carried out by the Red Guard, youth groups who were often the most militant parts of Mao Zedong’s personality cult.

This era was also the first recorded instance of Ānjìng de túshū guān, literally The Quiet Librarians; a group of people who, for whatever reason, refused to follow the personality cult of Mao Zedong and destroy their cultural history.

The Quiet Librarians were one of the first recorded clandestine groups in the world dedicated specifically to preserving pre-Revolution, free-speech era information. Millions of people were persecuted in the violent factional struggles that ensued across the country, and suffered a wide range of abuses including torture, rape, imprisonment, sustained harassment, and seizure of property. A large segment of the population was forcibly, often fatally, displaced, most notably the transfer of urban youth to rural regions during the Down to the Countryside Movement. Many historical relics and artifacts were destroyed. Few cultural and religious sites were not ransacked.

The Quiet Librarians were originally dedicated towards the salvage and protection of cultural, religious, and capitalist influences; however, during the Down to the Countryside Movement, the Librarians were able to save over five-hundred thousand people from a fatal march. Millions of people died, sir, and over a million people continued to be transferred every year until 1978.

Mao officially declared the Cultural Revolution to have ended in 1969, but its active phase lasted until the death of the military leader Lin Biao in 1971. The political instability between 1971 and the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976 is now also widely regarded as part of the Revolution. After Mao's death in 1976, reformers led by Deng Xiaoping gained prominence. Most of the Maoist reforms associated with the Cultural Revolution were abandoned by 1978. The Cultural Revolution has been treated officially as a negative phenomenon ever since.

The Quiet Librarians are now considered a myth.”

Roy has steadily been growing more incensed, and more lyrical in his tone as he goes on. His words flow from his mouth like speedy red arrows from a bow; calculated to strike, to hit, to anger and enrage. He has also leapt to his feet, crossed his arms; hands fisted in rage unspent.

Johnny had decided (and was backed up by Doc) to keep a low profile in school. No one needed
more of a reason to look at him; Johnny Crane stands at just under seven feet tall. Scarecrow stands at just over seven feet tall; platformed boots are the best for that sort of thing. Doc sits at four feet high, and tries really hard not to stand up. Hearing this impassioned speech, their gameplan of going under the radar gets thrown out the proverbial window, crashes painfully onto the street below, and gets beaten up by the local indigent population.

The boys stand, and quietly, menacingly back him up with, “H-h-historically speaking, sir, the s-s-superhero has appeared in every r-r-recorded civilization on Earth. A colloquial Ur example w-would be Jesus of Nazareth, r-r-recorded to have healed the sick and the lame, calmed a stormy sea, w-w-walk on w-w-water, and to have risen from the d-d-dead. These are not the actions of an everyday hero; these moments were of such rarity and fuckin’ specialness that they can easily be considered the actions of the supernatural; that is to say, the "Superheroic" actions of a s-s-s-single man. And, correct me if I’m wrong, sir, but wasn’t the first recorded Mayor to ever try to p-p-p-publicly lower the crime rate Thomas "Steelclaw" Bolt? Didn’t he adopt an undercover persona as a costumed criminal as part of his efforts to bring l-l-l-local crime under control? Didn’t he d-die in office from that attempt?”

They both get kicked out of the class; Roy for “Violently disrupting a class”, Johnny for “Threatening a teacher”. That’s how they became friends- In the campus jail.

Yeah.

“Roy Harper.”

“J-j-jonathan Nathaniel C-c-crane Pennyworth- but I g-go by Johnny Crane.”

“… Any particular reason you decided to help me out back there?”

“…F-few will h-have the greatness to b-bend history itself; but each of us c-c-can work to change a small p-p-p-portion of events and in the total; of all those acts will be written the h-h-his-s-story of this g-g-generation. Robert Kennedy s-s-said that. And anyway, that t-t-teacher is a fuckin’ jackeen.”

“S-so… where d-do you live?”

Roy snorts. “I live with my idiot father, right here in Adam Heights.”

“S-so… do you l-like it, l-living in Adam H-heights?”

“… not anymore.” Roy says this so quietly, so sadly…

“You n-n-know, I live in a r-remodeled textile mill in Platinum Flatts; i-i-it was built in the 1800’s, s-so it’s right by a river. I’ve been able to p-p-pay rent on the building, but having a roommate would make th-that easier.”

That was how Johnny and Roy became roomates.
and Tell us all about it.

Atlantis, actually a series of inter-connected islands in all the world’s oceans, was the center of early human civilization. In its early days, its first recorded king, Orin, ordered the construction of a protective dome over the city as a defence against barbarian tribes, but shortly after a meteor crashed into the earth and destroyed most of the upper world, the Atlantean empire, (and the continent of Atlantis) sank to the bottom of the ocean. King Orin the First’s brother, Shalako, departed with a number of followers through underground tunnels in order to reclaim another sunken city of their empire, Tritonis, whose inhabitants had not survived.

After a few years of being confined to the city's dome, Poseidonian scientists developed a serum that would permanently let their people breathe underwater; as a consequence of the magic used by Shalako in the settling of Tritonis, the Tritonians were further mutated to have fish-tails instead of legs. Some descendants of Shalako’s son Dardanus also inherited his telepathy, which is marked by blonde hair, an extremely rare phenotypic expression among Atlanteans. Dardanus's son Kordax further had the ability to telepathically command sea creatures. In Atlantean society, this ability was considered a great taboo against nature. After he led sea creatures alongside the Tritonians in a failed-revolution against King Orin the First, he was exiled, and children born with blonde hair (the “mark of Kordax”) were generally viewed as aberrations and abandoned to die soon after birth.

Soon after this civil war, the empire collapsed into many warring city states; the one Kaldur’ahm is from is the city-state of Shayeris. Shayeris shared a good trading relationship with Tritonis, even after the sinking. A set of visible gills is a trait not shared by most Atlanteans from Poseidonis due to the general animosity between Tritonians and Poseidonians. The trait is common among the residents of Shayeris, due to Tritonian intermarriage. It is almost unheard of in surface dwelling humans. No claims have been made about humans who live in caves.

Shayeris was a small farming village when Atlantis sank. In time, it would grow into a great city state known for its many golden haired people, and its vast farms. Farms, as a rule, require as many hands as possible to work them. As a result, the stigma against those bearing the mark of Kordax was almost nonexistent in Shayeris. During the Great Unification of Atlantis, Shayeris became reincorporated into the greater Kingdom of Atlantis.

(Interestingly, the gene for magical ability present in humans originated on the lost continent of Atlantis. The continent was a focal point for unharnessed magical energies, and the local Homo sapiens evolved into Homo sapiens magi as a result of their exposure to these energies. Upon the fall of Atlantis, people who carried the predisposition for magic were scattered to the four winds. Today, every human being capable of casting spells in any way is partially descended from the Atlantica homo magi who were outside the Atlantean empire when the continent sank.)

Johnny had stopped by Roy’s father’s mansion to help Roy move out. It was a long, involved process; Roy’s blond billionaire father, Oliver Queen, was doing everything in his power to convince Roy that they could work out the conflict, “-Whatever it is, we can work it out, Sp-Roy!”

“…No. We can’t. The fact that you won’t acknowledge what's wrong here is proof that I need to leave.”

“But Roy-”
“No. I’m leaving, and you can’t stop me.”

Wisely, the boys stayed out of it. The boys had also borrowed a cargo van from their flakey neighbor, Helena Bertinelli. (The explanations for her sometimes heavy brusing never really worked for the boys; apparently, she’s into roller-derby, and is an accountant by day. Somehow, the boys don’t believe her. At all.)

The boys had also called ahead; they brought boxes, bags, and another friend to help move stuff. That friend’s name is Kaldur’ahm.

They had met Kaldur’ahm at the co-op where they went grocery shopping. They had started a conversation (argument) about the merits of vitamin B12, and after running into each other all over town, they finally just exchanged names and numbers and called it a day.

It would take the addition of Kaldur as a roommate, and multiple structural problems in the textile mill, for the boys to trust Roy and Kaldur, and for Roy and Kaldur to trust each other.

Scarecrow had been hunting a meth-dealer for days; the dealer’s supplier had abducted the small child of their serf-chemist as collateral. The chemist had been making noise about getting out of the drug dealing business; he had been silenced by the loss of the child. Scarecrow had been contacted—His neighbor, Ms. Bertinelli, knew what had happened, but couldn’t find enough information to help the man. She also sorta-kinda-don’t-tell-Batman knew about his double life. He knew about her double life too; Huntress wanted to know who had the child so she could… take care of the problem.

The boys don’t mind that at all. Batman taught them not to kill; but the boys cannot be responsible for the actions of others. Huntress knows just how good Scarecrow’s “Investigative” skills are; after all, when the Riddler kidnapped Robin, Scarecrow found the Riddler, and then found Robin.

(And when the Riddler got out of the hospital, he limped for the rest of his life. Legs should never bend like that.

Scarecrow is not a nice guy. Johnny is not a nice guy. Doc could be a nice guy, but mostly he isn’t. (The boys are kind, not nice.)

And besides, Helena is a friend, and a good neighbor.)

He had followed his lead to the docks. He heard the sounds of splashing water; the muffled sound of fists hitting flesh. He rounds the final corner of an alley, and finds Aqualad beating the -holy shit- out of a group of thugs, (and his lead!) inside a warehouse window. This is annoying; he needs that particular lead conscious to get the information he needs for Ms. Bertinelli.

So, he does a dynamic entry; he drops through the warehouse’s skylight, directly onto the largest thug. A quick fight later, some impromptu teamwork, and all the thugs are out cold, or screaming, writhing in fear; except, of course, the lead.

Scarecrow walks out of the yellow smoke and eerie green flames.

Batman had told Aquaman about Scarecrow, “-and if he involves himself in anything you’re
“doing,-”

“Yes, you’ve told me. He’ll only get involved if he has priority, and will leave if asked.”

“Not if-”

“But not if he needs evidence from the scene, yes, I know. You are very protective of your son, Batman.”

“…”

Shayeris and Tritonis are on the West coast of America; Poseidonis, the capital is on the East coast. Kaldur knows more about surfing than he does about lobsters; knows more about avoiding sharks than he does about inviting whales. He’s a local to the reef areas off the coast from Platinum Flatts; people of Shayeris are generally more lax about going to the surface than the other peoples of Atlantis; the only people more at ease with surface dwellers would be the people of Thir Na Oge, off the coast of Ireland.

Aquaman had told his protégé, Aqualad, about Scarecrow.

Scarecrow walked out of yellow smoke and eerie green flames. (The smoke came from repurposed Easter eggs filled with Fear Toxin and Smog; the flames were the remains of some of his newer flash bombs.)

Aquaman couldn’t have possibly explained the sight that is Scarecrow with words alone. And Batman doesn’t allow pictures.

Scarecrow’s steps thumped across the concrete. The boys can walk silently; Scarecrow is the best at moving in an inhuman way; Doc can drive a man insane with a few words; Johnny doesn’t even need to be in the same room to scare another person. They walk loudly for effect.

It is effective.

He leaned over the man; the light from the flames reflected on his bulbous yellow goggles; his face is the face of a monster, massive gas-mask cylinders protruding from blackened burlap, crude stitches in between the cylinders create the image of too many, too sharp teeth in his mouth; his blackened tunic lending his face shadows that, in a rational world, do not exist.

“He~llo, Mister Mackenna. I have a few questions for you, if you don’t mind.”

“P-please. P-p-please don’t kill me.”

“Kill you? Why, Mister Mackenna, so long as you answer all my questions truthfully, I won’t do more than leave you a bruise on your face. But… You lie to me, you lie to me even once… I’ll beat you until you can’t ever walk again.”

Scarecrow’s voice is cordiality condensed into vocal form; the man nearly wets himself anyway.

The lead tells Scarecrow everything; there was never any doubt about it. Huntress will be… Pleased.

“-and that’s everything I know.”
“Everything?”

“I skim off the top sometimes, but that’s everything, I swear.”

“A pleasure talking to you, Mister Mackenna.”

Aqualad is both intrigued and terrified by Scarecrow. It’s not surprising; Scarecrow is physically imposing, and this is one of the first times Aqualad has met another hero without his mentor there. Then again, Aqualad has been afraid before- but he’s done his best to never let that stop him.

Aqualad was actually on a completely different case: people had been smuggling art; his mother’s backyard is directly under the route they used to smuggle. Add in the fact that the smugglers where running their trade at the dogs-end of the night, when his mother was asleep… Well, most young men love their mothers. Kaldur loves his mother. Kaldur also still lives with his mother. There might have been nagging.

The two young men talk; Scarecrow and Aqualad recognize each other from all the times they’ve run into each other around town. They call the cops; the cops come and secure the scene, and the two young men leave, pull a quick change, and end up in a coffee shop. They talk.

“S-s-s-so, you still l-l-live w-w-with your m-m-mother?”

“Yes. Property is very hard to get where I live... But it is hard living with my mother.”

“…I-I-I live in an old t-t-textile mill; it has r-r-river access. T-there’s more than e-enough r-r-room, if you wanted to m-m-move in…”

“…What would rent be like?”

“W-w-well, when i-i-it w-was just m-m-me, it was three hundred a month, utilities included; with you and the other roommate, it wouldn’t be more than-”

“Before we make any kind of agreements, you should make sure it is alright with your roommate that I move in.”

“…G-g-good idea.”

They talk more.

“…Why do you wear women’s tunics?” Aqualad asked, his tone not exactly mocking.

Johnny, his voice not quite defensive, but close, replied “Th-they w-w-were on cl-cl-clearance in the boy’s s-s-section!”

“That is a trick women use to hide clothing they want to buy from other women.” Aqualad is one of the few people in the world who can apologetically smirk; he’s definitely mocking the boys now.

"...Damn." ‘Shit.’ **Fuckin’ ‘ell.**

“W-well… I can’t fuckin’ r-return it, now can I?” grumpily sigh the boys, now resigned to their fate of being a dork.
Roy turns out to be almost not okay with another roommate; Johnny, Scarecrow, and Doc have a hell of a time explaining why exactly they trust this Kaldur guy. Eventually, the boys just introduce the two of them, and leave for the day to go do... Stuff. Or whatever. When they get back, Kaldur and Roy are making out on the couch. All three boys decide to stay out for the night, and not disturb the two on the couch. (They also take pictures.)

In the morning, when the boys get back from six o’clock mass, Roy and Kaldur are quietly eating breakfast in the kitchen. Johnny uses his key, silently walks in, and asks

“S-s-so… How w-w-was it?”

The effect is electric. Roy jumps approximately four feet in the air, causing cereal to fly everywhere. Kaldur chokes on his tea.

“What? W-w-was it something I-I-I said?”

It was at this point that the roof decided to crash inwards; apparently, it hadn’t been replaced in about two hundred years. All three young men hid and listened to the roof crashing down; heard the creaking of beams breaking; the crunch of plaster cracking off in great sheets; the sad sad tinkle of broken lights. The three young men slowly leaned out of the kitchen; Johnny leaned slightly backwards, into the great room; Roy had reflexively ducked under the counter and was now poking his head over it; Kaldur leaned out from the other side of the counter.

Plaster dust was slowly swirling in the air; the sun had risen only an hour ago. Light was swirling into the gigantic space of the great room. Long strips of plywood hung down from the ceiling; longer strips of tarpaper hung down to the floor. Light fell onto the floor in a spotlight; the couch was almost completely ruined.

Johnny looks over at Roy and Kaldur. Johnny looks back at the now non-existent ceiling. The boys start to laugh, and only stop when Kaldur puts a large piece of ice down the back of their shirt. Roy is too involved in cursing at the world in general to bother.
The Librarian's life is one filled with Dangers

The boys are very hard on property. For example, during the years they lived with their great-uncle Alfred, they managed to: break parts of the ceiling and roof, blow up their toilet, throw themselves through three different windows from the inside (one of which was the transom window above the shower; no one, including the boys, knows exactly how they managed it), accidentally catch their bookshelves on fire, freeze their toilet, break the door to their room in two places, melt their laptop, catch their toilet on fire, throw their squishy pumpkin plushy through a window when it was boarded up, and break an antique rocking chair.

(Scarecrow was most upset about the chair, because, hello, antiques; Doc was most upset about the books that didn’t make it through inexplicable fire number one; Johnny was most upset about the pumpkin plushy. On further reflection, all the boys were most upset about the plushy; it was something their baby brother had given them on their birthday. They found it eventually, but it’s the principle of the thing that matters.)

The boys are renting-to-own the textile mill they, Roy, and now Kaldur, live in from their great-uncle. However, they’re almost full owners of the space now, so all necessary repairs fall on them to make.

“…W-w-we’re going t-t-to hee-hee-have to f-f-fix th-th-ha-that.” The boys have managed to stop laughing at Roy and Kaldur long enough to take in the situation.

Roy is an angry person; he’s the proverbial rebel without a cause. (Well, he does have a cause, he just doesn’t quite have enough oomph to make a difference yet.) He’s the one who asks, voice a stormy glare, “Isn’t the landlord legally obligated to take care of it?” Johnny explains the contract between himself and the landlord, his great-uncle Alfred.

Kaldur is a calm person; if he had a motto, it would be “Intolerance betrays want of faith in ones cause.” (That said, there are some things he will not tolerate.) He’s the one who asks, his voice a gentle breeze, “How shall we fix it?”

“…We’re going to have to do some DIY work, guys.”

A note about the boys and their stutter: When the boys were homeless, they never, ever stuttered. Ever. When they went to live with their great-uncle, they started to stutter. The more afraid the boys are, the less they stutter. The more relaxed they are, the more they stutter. There was a time in his life where Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth did not talk at all because of how badly he stuttered.

The guys (Johnny, Kaldur, and Roy) go over to Ms. Bertinelli’s house to borrow tools to fix the massive hole in their roof. Ms. Bertinelli (“Call me Helena,”) was having breakfast when they came over. Johnny told her about the roof falling in. Helena said, through a mouthful of omlette,

“D’ya’ll have toolf for fixin’ yur roof?” Helena swallows onion, egg, and cheese quickly.
“N-no. W-w-we were h-h-hoping that y-y-y-you would, Ms. B-b-b-bertinelli.”

“Di’nt I tell you to call me Helena, Jon-jon? Ms. Bertinelli was my mother; and anyway, I don’t have the right tools for you to fix that roof with. I do have a tarp, a ladder, and some ropes you can borrow, for a while at least. I’ll make some calls to my Birds of Prey friends, and see what I can get for you.”

“…Do you know of a reliable contractor, Ms. Bertinelli?” Roy is the one who asks- he has calmed down a great deal, but is still rather irritated. Roy generally wakes up mildly irritated; in the time Johnny has known Roy, he has only heard him laugh once, when a goose flew into the face of the Mayor of Star City, Oliver Queen. Even then, it was only more of a chuckle.

“Actually, Johnny’s the best guy I know for contractor-type work. Sorry, Roy-boy.”

He sighs. “…We’re going to have to get permits. I hate getting permits.”

Platinum Flatts is not actually a city in its own right.

Platinum Flatts is a suburb of Star City; all building permits, through some strange quirk of the law, must be procured at Star City Hall. Through a different quirk of the law, the Mayor of Star City must approve all permits. The current Mayor of Star City is Oliver Queen. Roy’s irritation level just flew past “Midly Annoyed; like I had a rough night, but it’s nothing I can’t handle” to “…!#@%$^ GOD#!@$#@$ MOTHER!#$%!& PIECE OF @!$@Q! ARGGH RRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGGGGEEEEEEEE”. Kaldur isn’t there to say anything; buildings in Shayeris do have roofs, but they tend to break their moorings, or their pylons rot out, and they drift away. Most roofs do not fall in; if they do fall in, one only need “roll it up” for removal. Replacing the roof takes only as long as one needs to weave a new one. This is not Shayeris; this is Platinum Flatts. He asked Johnny “Would it be a good idea to clean out this room, so we have space to work?”

“Y-y-yeah, Kaldur, that w-w-would actually b-b-be really h-helpful. Th-th-there’s a d-d-dumpster behind th-th-the mill y-y-you can p-p-put the b-b-broken s-s-stuff in.”

“I will do so, in that case.”

As it will turn out, clearing out a room full of fallen plaster and beams is remarkably similar to “rolling up” the seaweed roof of one of his mother’s barns; the work is just as hard, the plaster is just as unwieldy, silt- no, on the surface, it is called dust- dust gets everywhere, and, of course, the work needs to be done.

Truth be told, the work is… well- enjoyable. He has done work like it all his life, but cleaning out a space simply because he lives there, and not because anyone told him to do so is somehow… more fulfilling. Moving the furniture is not as easy, but by the time Roy and Johnny get back with preliminary supplies, Kaldur has moved everything except the carpet into the back courtyard.
This part of the story is about Permafrost, The Birds of Prey, Scarecrow, Red Arrow, and Young Justice:

The guys replaced the roof. There were mishaps, of course: the boys fell off the roof twice; Roy electrocuted himself putting in the new lights; Kaldur drove a nail through the largest webbing in his left hand; Helena’s car got firebombed (again); the boys got arrested for jaywalking; Roy caught the flu, and was nursed by Kaldur; Kaldur caught Roy’s flu, and was nursed by Roy; the boys broke their nose, sprained their wrist, and sung horribly off key trying to Skype with Maureen; Helena got arrested for jaywalking (again); Roy got beat up by a biker gang; Scarecrow and Aqualad beat up a biker gang; the guys had to get a new fridge because someone stole theirs when they moved it onto the sidewalk (they had decided to just go ahead and remodel the kitchen too); the boys got food poisoning; Finals happened for everyone, even Ms. Bertinelli (she actually is an accountant; her finals happen during tax season); and their washing machine caught on fire. Twice.

(“Roy, you have to completely empty your pockets when you put your hero-pants into the wash. Explosives, like C-4, explode.”)

“Sorry, Johnny.”

“Kaldur, if it doesn’t turn on, you have to check that it’s plugged in, and that it’s turned on. Shocking it, while cathartic, is Not. Helpful.”

“… I will keep that in mind.”)

The guys manage to replace the roof, though. Somehow. They also became friends; the boys got teased by Roy and Kaldur about their thing with Maureen; the guys drank lots of beer together and just talked, often about nothing; Johnny taught Kaldur and Roy how to use public transportation; Roy learned to prepare traditional Atlantean food- lots of fish, few spices, as raw and fresh as you can get it- and Kaldur learned to cook northern California surface dweller food; Helena makes all three of them into honorary members of The Birds of Prey, which is actually a clandestine superhero group. (All female, but Helena did say that they needed to fill out the rosters somehow.)

Robin isn’t sure how he should feel about Permafrost. On one hand, she’s really super-nice once you get to know her, just like his brother, Scarecrow; on the other hand, she isn’t Scarecrow, his brother.

Oh, sure, she won’t let him patrol the Narrows without her (just like his brother); she doesn’t approve of his dating habits (just like his brother); and she thinks that his stupidity quotient goes up thirty points when he’s with Wally (just like his brother).

Then again, she’ll let him take on a biker gang single handedly if he says that he can beat them (and lets him take a few hits before she intervenes. He’s been learning a lot about how to fight when outnumbered, and she always intervenes when he gets in over his head; but those bruises hurt); she’ll help cover with Batman when he wants to party with Kid Flash in Central (who always finds out anyway); and she taught him how to hotwire vehicles (Johnny would only teach him how to pick locks and pockets.) But she isn’t his brother. Dick misses his brother.
Dick misses his dorky older brother, who collects and sometimes refinishes antiques, sings off key in the shower, cusses out C-SPAN, reads and will let him borrow really schmoopy romance novels, and has a crush of the approximate size of Australia on Maureen Conner; the guy who blew up a microwave oven at an extremely boring party to entertain his younger brother. (Bruce was actually quite impressed by that; the party was almost over, and the hole in the yard wasn't that deep. Besides, it was a moment of brotherly bonding.

“…Master Bruce, please refrain from encouraging your sons into more dangerous endeavors than mere pyrotechnics. Young Master Richard wants to zip-line from the roof now; my Johnny is working out a relatively safe way to oblige him.”
and Dangers most foul

Kaldur’s mother, Sha’laina, had discovered that her son is gay when he was six years old. By eight, she had also discovered just how dense her baby boy is about his own emotions; never the emotions of other people, other creatures. At ten, she saw how polite and kind-hearted her son is. At twelve, when his mandated two years of Service to the Kingdom came up, Sha’laina wondered what- when, if- her son would return.

The Kingdom of Atlantis, like Switzerland, conscripts its population at an early age into the Atlantean Armed Forces (AAF). The members of AAF are conscripted at age twelve, and get their first year of leave after basic training, which is typically over at age fourteen. After the first year of leave, the new AAF members are tested for aptitudes, and given assignments based on the results of those tests. Kaldur was tested early, (because he has blond hair; don’t think that discrimination is only a human failing) and got sent to the Conservatory of Sorcery in Poseidonis. He was fourteen at the time; mages in Atlantis are often concentrated in the Atlantic, and the south-western Pacific Oceans. Poseidonis and Thir Na Oge are known for their magi; Shayeris is known for its farms.

Thir Na Oge has one of the highest rates of surface-dweller to Atlantean intermarriage, and visa-versa. The most common hair-color is red-brown; it is known for its seal by-products. Tula is from Thir Na Oge. Poseidonis is the capitol of Atlantis; it has some of the highest concentrations of magi in the world. The most common hair-color is black; it is known for its artisans. Garth is from Poseidonis.

Kaldur figures out that he is gay when he realizes that he wants to give a romantic shell-collection to his best friend, Garth, not his best friend Tula. He already knows that Garth and Tula are into each other; he bows out, quietly. He also keeps the shells that he had gathered for Garth. (He will later give them to Roy; the boys will explain their import, and help him collect a reciprocal shell-collection.)

Atlantis has such high rates of magi in its population that it has all but regulated its magical education. No magi are allowed into civilian settings until they have learned to control whatever power they might have. The more power a person has, the harder that power is to control; Kaldur is a very powerful magi. It takes him a year to learn to control his power- most magi from Shayeris need only a few weeks, and magi from Thir Na Oge and Poseidonis spend most of their lives learning to control themselves. (Becoming Aqualad does not help.)

Kaldur would return to his mother’s farm in Shayeris when he was fifteen, and live with her for a year. After that, he would move into a remodeled textile mill, fall into friends-with-benefits (love), and do great things. But first, he has to move back home, to his mother’s seaweed farm.

After his first three years in the AAF, Kaldur swam through the Anacapa Reef near Shayeris, dove
down through a hidden grotto; the main gates of Shayeris. He swam down half remembered pathways; swam through almost recognized neighborhoods; swam through vast fields of undulating seaweed- how had he forgotten playing in them when he was young?-; swam towards his mother’s house, with its black lava-stone walls and it’s heavy green seaweed roof. He swims faster now; breathes great gushes of water in and out of his gill-lungs. Then- ah, then- he sees his mother for the first time in three years.

Sha’laina has golden hair, just like his; creamy pale skin, dotted with freckles; gills, frilly, lacey confections of flesh, gently swaying to the bottom of her orange spotted, black striped tail. She is tending, pruning the coral gardens his father had helped her plant, before he died. Kaldur darts forwards, stops just outside his mother’s reach. She turns, and sees this strange young man in her garden- then she looks at him; sees the young man her son has grown into, without her.

Mother and son embrace for the first time in three years; it is the first time in three years that Kaldur has allowed himself to cry. Now he cries without shame, held safely in his mother’s arms. He cries because the Poseidonian adage he learned at the Conservatory is more true than he could have ever imagined: “Once a person leaves their home, they can never return to it. The person who left the home is not the same as the person who will return to it; the home the person will return to is not the same home as the person left.”

Artemis Crock was ten years old when she decided to run away. It was because of her deadly dilemma, you see: on the one side, if she leaves, she will break her mother’s heart; she’s the last of her mother’s children that her mother knows, for certain, is still alive. Flipside, if she stays, her father’s crazy-ass kung-fool training will kill her. So, being the pragmatic little girl she is, Artemis makes a plan, follows her plan, and leaves when she is twelve years old.

Artemis, and her older sister Jade, have been trained to be “super” assasins. They were both trained by their father; Jade excelled at the whole “sneaking in and killing people” thing; Artemis showed exquisite talent at the “mysterious disappearance” thing. Artemis’ plan is simple enough; it would just take a long time to work. She wasn’t sure she would live long enough to see it through, but she had to try.

Her plan has three parts: Set Up; Distract; Vanish.

To start the Set Up part of her plan, she started taking over her sister’s side of the room. It’s little things at first- leaving her stuff on Jade’s side of the room-, but it soon becomes clear that No, Arty, J-J really isn’t coming back for your worthless hide, and soon, little things become big things. (Which leads directly to part two, Distract, where she hides her real plan with a fake hobby/coping mechanism. What is that coping mechanism? Thrifting.)

The Gotham Clothing Exchange has sold clothing at a fixed price of $1.30/lb since 1936. Artemis would spend $30 there at one time during the summer between year one and year two of her plan. The large selection of clothes she could now practice with was worth the shin splints carrying the fabric up to her mother’s fifth floor walk-up; worth the blisters on her insteps; worth the $60 dollar charge for the cargo van to move it all to her mother’s apartment; worth her father’s snide remarks.

She planned to be gone before May. Another part of the Distract portion of her plan called for her to
amass ludicrous amounts of stage jewelry, make-up expertise, wigs, and other disguise sundries. (Her actual running-the-hell-away plan was more along the lines of “So overt, it’s covert.” She wouldn’t wear a wig to run; she wouldn’t try to… disguise herself, exactly. The actual hair-dye she used was bought with cash at school. Easier said than done; but she has two years to plan this out. She plans.)

Her transformation into someone unrecognizable is as easy and quick as a distinctive hair-cut, some dye, a few tacky accessories, and a frilly black dress.

She goes west; the Light is stronger further west, but Shadows are what Artemis Crock is running from.

Dana Tan is new to Platinum Flatts. She had to leave her hometown of Gotham City, and she tries hard not to think about the family left behind. She needs a place to live; somewhere she can defend, if need be.

Helena Bertinelli has lived two houses down from an old textile for most of her life. She has never been outside of Platinum Flatts; she sometimes entertains thoughts of going sightseeing in Gotham, but that’s all they are: thoughts. Her house in Platinum Flatts has two bedrooms, three baths, an open-concept kitchen, a remodeled attic with a skylight window that opens from the inside, an extremely deep, extremely narrow backyard, and a garage.

Helena had been looking for a boarder for her spare bedroom; she doesn’t have neighbors, and gets lonely. When her ad in the paper is answered by a “Dana Tan”, she asks to meet her potential boarder in one of her favorite coffee shops. (Not the one with the cute guys in it, the one run by her Bird of Prey friend, Vixen.)

The two women meet at Wild Thing café; Helena recognized Dana by her description of her hair, “I’ll be the only woman in the room bold enough to mix a pink base with blue highlights.” Dana is sitting at one of Helena’s favorite booths in the café: it is blocked on the front-window side by a thick-backed book shelf; the table is easy enough to flip for cover and more than thick enough to stop bullets; there are beautifully clear lines of sight from every seat at that booth to every part of the café. Tellingly, Ms. Tan is sitting in the back corner, her back to a perpendicular wall.

Helena would let Dana Tan move into her attic; Dana would leave Helena’s house, taking only a few small things of hers and a long indigo bag, about a week before the boys moved into the old mill down the street.

(“So… What’re you runnin’ from, Kiddo?”

“…Shadows.”)

Dana Tan would return to Helena’s house two weeks after the guys (Johnny, Kaldur, and Roy) would finish fixing the roof of the mill, the first of May.

(“Why’d you leave, Kiddo?”

“Too many Shadows following me; didn’t want them to hurt you too. It’s fine now.”
“…Why’sat? What happened t’the Shadows following you?”

“They died.”

Dana Tan says she is from Gotham; she’s lying. (Real Gothamites loathe Star City. The streets are all the wrong way around. To be fair, people from Star City hate Gotham too, for the exact same reason. It’s a little less pronounced with Platinum Flatts and Bludhaven, but god help you if you’re from the old parts of either town.)

Dana Tan says she is sixteen; she is lying. Dana Tan is fourteen. (Dana Tan is really Artemis Crock in disguise, but- Shhh, don’t tell anyone, okay?)

In another place and time, Artemis Crock would have been a Speedy fan-girl. She would say that she admired Green Arrow; she really admired Speedy’s biceps. (And if she wanted biceps like his, well, who was to know? Betcha no one hurt a person with biceps like that!)

In that world, Artemis Crock’s father would leave her sister and her mother and her when she was eight. Jade would leave later the same year. Her father would return when she was nine. She would live in that same apartment with both her parents, but only her mother. Her father left again when she was fourteen; she would become a heroine soon after. (She would endure her father’s teacher’s training for three years, and when he left again, she would be unyielding. When she would meet Kid Flash, something in her would shatter—sharply cutting into them both.)

(“Wart! Hey Wart, wake up!”

“Mmmng… Jade?”

“What do you wanna be when you grow up?”

“Whuh?”

“Like, I’m going to be a ‘sassin, like Daddy- So what do you wanna be?”

“Ummmm… I ma be Dangerous, like Mommy… can I goes back to sleep?”

“Yeah, goes ‘head.”)

In this world, Artemis Crock left her mother’s house when she was twelve years old. Her sister and father had both left when she was eight; her father returned a few months later in the same year. Her sister did not. (She made herself endure for four years; perhaps this Artemis is smarter than the other one; perhaps she made such a radical decision because of her youth, not despite it.) She ran away from the East, and Shadows. She hid herself in plain sight; changed her name, and her style, and her words—voice—thoughts—feelings—; every time the Shadows would find Artemis (and they always found Artemis), she would leave again.

(Shadows hunted for Artemis Crock; whenever the Shadows found Artemis Crock, the Shadows would end up dead. As Artemis went further West, the Shadows became smarter, stronger, more dangerous.

So did Artemis, until she couldn’t be Artemis anymore. That was when she… became Dana Tan.)
Dana Tan would become the sidekick of Huntress; she would call herself Artemis. "It’s so I won’t-forget." (Huntress knows that her sidekick is not sixteen, not from Gotham, and not named Dana Tan. She just doesn’t make a big deal out of it; when this Artemis meets Kid Flash, there is a great deal more reciprocal sexual tension.)

Dick had figured out that he was bi when he was twelve. I’m thirteen now, gotta remember that and he realized that he had a crush on his computer lab partner, Barbra Gordon, and his best-friend-who-is-also-a-super-hero, Kid Flash (Wally West). They’re both smart, funny (to him), and kind. (They both also have red hair and freckles, but Dick is smart enough to know when he has a type.) The only problem with chasing down Wally and ripping off all his clothing with his teeth is that Wally is straight. Not straight with a little bend in there, straight as in totally into women- the guy would flirt with a dead woman. (The guy had flirted with a (currently) dead woman. There was time-travel involved.)

Dick is also under-age; he might be thirteen, but he’s short, and scrawny looking and he always looks like a total dork with his hair slicked back. (And with Wally being so damn straight, Dick decides that it’s better to not even try.) So, he decides to practice his flirting on the girls at school. His older brother Johnny doesn’t approve of this; Johnny thinks Dick is a year too young to try to get a date, and that he’s setting himself up for disaster later. (Johnny doesn’t know that Dick is Bi, or that he has a crush on two different people with whom he is good friends with- but if he had, he would probably have the same opinion on the matter.)

His brother’s not-quite girlfriend, Maureen, also disapproves of him flirting (stringing girls along). Her reason is different: “Patterns are hard to break, Watch your left! Robin. Once you get used to flirting Hit him harder, and make sure he stays down!, but never actually doing anything, it will be very You call that a front-flip!? hard for you to change your ways. You’re a Twirl that weighted cape, you snarkgler! stubborn person.”

Dick ignores his brother’s advice about his love life; ignores his brother’s not-girlfriend’s advice (about his love life, not about fighting in a crowd.) He continues to flirt with (string along) girls; when he actually goes after his DreamGirl™, she wants absolutely nothing to do with him. (He’ll never quite tell his brother the whole sorry mess; his brother will figure it out anyway. There will be hugs, and cookies, and a rather impressive highscore on Call of Duty dual-play.)

Wally West doesn’t believe in magic. It’s not a big deal really, but it does mean that he doesn’t believe in love. (Or miracles, or heaven, or nirvana. Wally lives a very… stifled life.) He resolutely ignores the signals he’s getting from his best bro, Robin. (1, the guy is like, ten and 2, Wally is really really very seriously not gay. No, really.) He also has a rather major crush on Linda Park, a student reporter from his school. His friends-with-benefits thing with Artemis is just… a thing he has with Artemis. Shut up, Robin!

Dana Tan does not believe in love; something to do with her mother’s love not saving her from her father. She reserves her judgment on magic; there’s this one guy she keeps meaning to kill, but ends up just throwing back into jail- Cameron Mahkent; he’s stupid, and chauvinistic, and he has very pretty eyes and –Fucking shit-hell! Mẹ nợ ngàn câu lời thề rạng rỡ, rằng không có con trai con hoằng uất moet con điềm câu ơi!* Je vais tuer ce fils de pute!* It must be magic that has stayed her hand so many times. When Artemis fell into friends-with-benefits (not love) with Kid Flash, she thinks long and hard about how she can do the same with Icicle Jr. Without, you know, the whole
dying from exposure thing. (She plans out how exactly she’s going to kill *that man*, Sportsmaster. It won’t be easy- but her sister probably won’t stop her. Probably.)

M’gann M’orzz is from Mars. She is a Martian; she takes special care not to say which kind of Martian she is. People tend to assume that she’s a Green Martian; she takes care not to disabuse them of that thought.
and fraught with Perils indescribable.

As a race of shapeshifters, physical appearance has little meaning for all Martians. The underlying psychological differences are what originally separated the philosophizing Green Martians from the war-like White Martians. In later centuries, tradition and social stigma would be what separated the two sibling races. (The arty Yellow Martians would all but die out due to genetic disease. The three races were not psychologically compatible; the Whites did not understand why they should help, and the Greens couldn’t make a decision to help or not help in time. Eventually the Yellows were absorbed into the Greens, but there is still an echo-layer of residual resentment for both parties in all Green Martians with Yellow Martian blood.)

White Martians learn to configure their physiology to reflect their war-philosophy at a young age, becoming, in effect, beasts- a separate race entirely from the Green Martians. The WhiteMartians preferred form is that of an angular, hairless humanoid with chalky white skin; the skin often forms bony ridges or plates, giving the White the appearance of being armored. They have sometimes been seen to have a gaping mouth on their abdomen, and (or) a horn on the same level on each side. It was eventually discovered that the White Martians did not evolve alongside the Green Martians as was previously believed. In reality the Green and White Martians were part of the same race, known as "The Burning". The Burning used fire to reproduce asexually and were belligerent to all. The Guardians of the Universe, fearing the ruthlessly and violently powerful Martians, genetically split the Martian race into two distinct species, white and green, preventing the asexual reproduction. They also gave these two new races an instinctive fear of fire to prevent either group from ever accessing their full potential. The timeframe for this genetic tampering was around 20,000 years ago, contemporary with the early life of Vandal Savage on Earth.

While the Green Martians were peaceful philosophers, the White Martians were savage warriors. A lengthy civil war between the two races ended when the few surviving adult White Martians were rounded up and exiled to the extra-dimensional Still Zone which is distinct from Superman's Phantom Zone.

M’gann grew up during the last years of the Civil War- she went from having her friends with her in the academy, and all her teachers, and her neighbors- to walking outside her family’s house one day, and finding all her comrades from the academy gone, and all her neighbors gone, and all her teachers gone. When she got home, she found that her parents, and her sisters, and her brothers were gone too. Her cousins were gone as well. M’gann stayed the night in her family’s empty (too empty) house- ate a cold dinner of splex and masi*. (Adult Martians are self-sustaining; Juveniles are not.) She curled up in her little bed; bid herself goodnight; cried a little bit. She was picked up by the Greens the next day.

They took her away from her home- took her away from her family’s little house with the just so pattern of stones in the front- took her away in a cage like she was dangerous. She was chronologically twelve. (She was six. Her favorite earth TV-show was My Little Ponies: Friendship is Magic.) When she was forty-eight, (sixteen; Hello, Meghan!), she stowed away on a ship headed for Earth- she reasoned that I can just be me on Earth- What’s one more Earth girl in a crowd?

The ship she stowed away on was J'onn J'onnz's. When he found her on his ship, she lied. Not a big lie, exactly- she isn’t one of his nieces- she was taken in by one of his nieces. Her last name isn’t M’orzz- she doesn’t remember what it was. It was too long ago. She does (did) have twelve sisters
and seventeen brothers and 300+ cousins.

She wasn’t exactly planning on being his protégé, but y’know… it seemed like a good idea at the time. Or something.
It is the Greatest of Honors

In another time and place, Superboy would have been discovered and rescued by Aqualad, Kid Flash, and Robin. In this world, he was discovered and rescued by Kid Flash, Robin, and Artemis.

It was the Fourth of July. Ice villains had been causing problems all through the country; today is the day when Kid Flash, Robin, Aqualad, Red Arrow, and Artemis would be allowed access to the Hall of Justice. (Huntress is a member of the Justice League; she is also a member of The Birds of Prey. No one ever said that the two groups are mutually exclusive; other members of both groups include Vixen, Black Canary, Big Barda, Crazy Jane, Dolphin, Danny the Street, and many, many others. Roy’s membership in the Birds of Prey had done a lot to bolster his argument, that he did deserve to be recognized as a fully-fledged hero in his own right.)

Robin was helping Permafrost fight Mister Freeze- she actually did need his help in the fight. Although her powers are ice-based, she has an annoying tendency towards extreme collateral damage. She had gotten much better than from when she had started; half the city no longer had to shut down because of icy conditions when she fights a major villain. Permafrost is also indispensable when fighting Poison Ivy. (Most plants don’t like to be flash-frozen; Ivy’s pollens don’t really work on a person who flash freezes all the air they inhale.)

Mister Freeze is different; while Permafrost can fight him ice-to-ice, it wouldn’t really help anything. There isn’t a safe way for her to test her outer limits, short of going to another planet entirely; Maureen isn’t willing to disappoint Johnny fail her Duty towards her little slice of Gotham, the Narrows. Although she could easily take Freeze down with her hand-to-hand skills, his life support armor gets in the way. Thus the team-up with Robin, that sunny Fourth of July in Gotham;

“Oh? Somehow I was expecting the Bat, not the Boy Wonder and Little Miss Snowflake.”

“…If the opposite of Disturbed is Turbed. That guy is not ‘turbed, not turbed at all.” Robin muttered.

Permafrost dodged another ice-spear, and blocked an ice blast- taunting Freeze with “So, the big bad Mis-tah Freezy poopsicle can’t even catch a witte-bittly Snowfreak? What is the world coming to?” Her voice is soft, almost lilting in its gentleness- which only makes her words worse for Freeze to hear. He bellows with rage, and blasts her with a ray of ice- just like she wanted him to. Freeze became so focused on Permafrost that he didn’t notice Robin creeping up behind him; didn’t know what happened when he was knocked out by a concussive bird-arang.

“Was the banter really necessary, Permzy?”

Permafrost smiled the kind of smile that would have had Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth on his knees, begging for her hand in marriage, had he but been there to see it. “Don’t be hatin’ baby-bird. Besides, isn’t today important, or something?”

Aqualad was with his mentor, Aquaman. They were fighting Killer Frost; Today is the day. Aqualad had not drifted so far from his mentor, his king; he had no reason to. Although Aqualad is powerful in his own right, he lacks that most integral of traits found in famous heroes the world over- ambition. Truth be told, Kaldur’ahm of Shayeris truly wanted nothing more than to do this hero… thing for a while, then- he would return to Shayeris, and farm his family's lands like his ancestors had in years.
before, and future generations would in years to come. That was- is- his dream; now with the addition of Roy, his dream included strawberry blondes to work the farm; strawberry blondes who have Roy’s blue eyes.

(It is a fact of Atlantean physiology that in same sex couples, one of the two would change, enabling more of the species to be created. It is a fact of Atlantean culture that everyone is at the very least, open to possibility.)

His mother approved of Roy; Aquaman approved of Roy; Garth and Tula approved of Roy. All this, oddly (to him), did not make Kaldur feel better- What if Roy- his beautiful Roy, with the blue, blue eyes- what if he did not wish to have children with him? What if- please no, but- what if Roy wanted more than Kaldur could give him? (He had not told anyone this fear of his- especially not Roy- and how would he explain it? "I don't think my boyfriend wants to be domestic with me?")

Heavy stuff for a Fourth of July afternoon, especially when one is fighting a very psychotic supervillianess. Aquaman, despite his sometimes negative media portrayal, is very observant.

"Is something troubling you, Kaldur'ahm?"

"Not at all my king. Although... I am a bit- nervous, about today."

Red Arrow, Artemis, Huntress, and Green Arrow were fighting Icicle Jr. It might have been overkill, but they were in the middle of Star Bridge, so it was really more of a free for all. Huntress was the only one with her head in the game- Roy and Oliver were too busy arguing; Cameron and Dana were too busy flirting. Oh- no, tell a lie- Artemis just knocked out Icicle Jr.

Red Arrow was arguing with Green Arrow about the merits of adoption. Roy had been thinking about it for a while- and no, he did not think he was moving too quickly. Superheroing is dangerous- he’d like to have a life with Kaldur as soon as possible.

Artemis still can’t quite bring herself to kill Cameron Icicle Jr. He drives her crazy- but he likes all the things she does; He’ll even eat the old-style French cooking she likes to do. He’s also a bit of an idiot; he said this during their fight:

“We should get married, Artemis.”

“You’re still a supervillain, Cam. And anyway, I’ve been hearing noise about something called The Light. You involved in that?”

"N-no, but I heard Shakespeare didn't write the Great Gatsby until he was almost ninety!"

"...Cameron, almost every word in that sentence was wrong."

At which point she knocked him out. Cameron isn’t good at being bad; Artemis is frighteningly good at being bad. Meaning, Cameron can’t lie worth a damn. Artemis is not amused when her- gah, what can she even call this thing she has with Cameron without it coming out weird?- Cameron lies to her.
Kid Flash is fighting Captain Cold in Central City with his uncle, The Flash. (Flash! Aaah-Aaah, Savior of the Universe!) Wally does not have a mild case of hero-worship for his uncle- Wally has a rather major case of hero-worship for his uncle. He has since he was six years old, and figured out that, no, Sparks the Turtle (The Fastest Turtle in the World!) is not going to wake up; his not-yet-uncle took him out for supportive ice cream, which, as any woman can tell you, is way better than break-up ice cream.

Central City is a city located across the Missouri River from Keystone City, in Kansas. Central City and its sister-city, Keystone City, are known as the "Twin Cities" due to their proximity to each other; separated only by a river that runs between them. Citizens are fond of describing the city as; "Gotham may never sleep, but Central is always on the run."

The city was originally founded in the 19th century and became an important stop for cattle drives. It began to see tremendous growth after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, becoming the first major hub west of Chicago. A second period of growth occurred after World War I, and has burgeoned to the present day.

The city is perhaps most famous for being protected by the Flash (Barry Allen), and for being assailed by the various colorful members of The Rogues. (Wally knew all of this because he had done a history assignment on it- apparently, Central City has one of the highest rates of flood-damage in the tri-state area. Who knew?)

Wally is actually from Keystone City- but moved to Central when he was twelve. His mother had just finalized the divorce, and he wasn’t too sure about his step-father, Rudy. His aunt Iris was also getting married to this Barry guy; everything was changing. Eventually, he got used to his new dad, Rudy; got used to his new uncle, Barry- and then he figured out that his uncle Barry is actually the Flash.

Only Wallace Matthias West would have created the non-Newtonian Newtonian fluid and a triangle with three right angles in it (because somebody had to). Only Wallace Matthias West could have twisted common matter through dimensions it was not supposed to enter, all in the name of science. And only Wallace Matthias West could have given himself superspeed like Flash’s by accident. (In another world, he gave himself superspeed on purpose; in another world, his name was Wallace Rudolph West.)

Robin had called his older brother earlier in the week; he wanted to know what the Hall of Justice is like on the inside. Johnny had to explain to his younger brother that he isn’t actually a member of the Justice League; Scarecrow is a member of the Birds of Prey. Scarecrow has never been inside the Hall of Justice as anything other than a tourist. (Doc might have told his baby brother to do some, ah, research on the Hall. He had noticed something screwy with the records of it on the Bat-computer, but he was too busy with college applications to investigate it at the time; when he did have time, there was no visible trace of whatever he had seen. The boys are psychologists, chemists, and mathematicians, not hackers. Dick is a hacker.)

As the five sidekicks and one junior hero went inside the Hall, Robin was thinking long and hard about the information he had hacked into on the Bat-computer. The gathered members of the League gave them the run-down of what they were allowed access to in the Hall. Robin was not quite furious- he was more… Disappointed. ‘The Justice League has a secret base IN SPACE WHAT
Roy is a little- irritated. Normally, he would leave it at that, but Ollie has managed to press all his buttons today, what with the questioning of his life choices and all. Now they only want to bring him in enough togive him access to little more than a gizmo’ed out gym, a free Laundromat, and a library? Well, actually, the free laundry is pretty damn sweet- ‘BUT I WILL NOT BE SWAYED BY FUZZY SOFTNESS! NO!! I HAVE INTEGRITY, DAMN IT! RAAAAAAGEEEEE!!!!’

“Thanks- but no thanks. The Birds of Prey might not have the funds, but they trust me much more than any of you do. I’m out.” Roy says all this in a slightly derisive tone- like he does actually have a better place to be. (He doesn’t; he’s just proud like that.)

Kaldur hadn’t really been paying any attention to what had been going on- ‘Oh, we get access to a library now? Swee- Wait a second-’ He had been gathering his courage. He hadn’t become Aqualad because he was a coward; he could not keep his fear from Roy- they were together. If this is what would eventually break them apart, he would like to know now, rather than when they had already killed the rabbit. Kaldur looked at his king; Kaldur looked at the door his Roy was rapidly disappearing through; Aqualad gave a little shrug of apology to Aquaman, then Kaldur followed Roy out the door. Aquaman smiled at his young protégé indulgently. (Flash looked at him oddly. “Young love is a beautiful thing,” Aquaman murmurs quietly, and smiles again. Flash looks confused; understanding breaks over his face like an egg on carpeted floor.)

The League gets a heads-up from the fire department- but they also get a call about a magical villain blocking out the sun. The League leaves- the magic villain blocking out the sun mission is more important than the CADMUS Labs fire; Artemis can’t really be bothered to care about either- they aren’t allowed to go. A few of the most uncomfortable minutes in her life pass; none of them came for a play-date; the two guys know each other, but she doesn’t know them.

Somewhere in California, the boy’s big brother/ little-brother-in-mortal-peril senses were tingling. And then his phone rang- not his cellphone, his phone, the one that only rang when there was major trouble.

Justice League-style trouble.

Robin had managed to send a garbled message to the boys. “We’re at Cadmus--- Hel---”. The boys have a copy of the bat-computer on their laptop- no, they aren’t sure how it works either, but it’s very useful. They look up Cadmus on their Batpedia- ‘FUNDED BY LEX LUTHOR!?!?’The boys’ danger sense was outright screaming; they stood up from their computer; the last time they had ignored their danger-sense regarding their baby brother, he had gotten abducted by the Riddler. The last time his danger sense had been screaming this loudly, his baby brother had gotten into his creatively nasty chemicals.

(To be fair, he had expressly told his then ten year old brother not to touch his stuff- he had just forgotten to mention why.

Doc had bottled his nastiest versions of Fear Toxin in the smallest of Scarecrow’s antique perfume bottles- the smallest of which was no bigger than the nail on his pinkie toe. He destroyed the larger amounts of the Toxin, and all three boys encoded the notes for creating each version of the Toxin. The largest of the bottles could be marketed as perfumes without too much of a problem- the smallest of the bottles could drive a full grown man insane within twelve minutes.
Dick accidentally broke one of the smallest bottles— not the smallest bottle, but one of the smaller, more vicious varieties; thankfully, it was almost empty. Not so thankfully, it took the boys nearly five minutes to figure out what the hell was wrong.

He/they stalked down the hallway towards Roy and Kaldur’s shared rooms— they had just gotten back from D.C. The had spent the afternoon talking, and now were in the middle of— well, anyway, the boys threw open the fire-door style barn doors. Scarecrow is the one who spoke, his voice sepulchral and craven in the soft light of evening, “The kids are in danger. Get dressed— we all need to go to D.C. Now.” They obey— Johnny or Doc usually interact with Roy and Kaldur. When Scarecrow speaks, it is always serious— but cordial. For him to lose that civility, the situation must truly be dire. (The mood is ruined anyway.)

The guys get to D.C. within the hour— Scarecrow stalks into the Hall of Justice. He has his game face on— no one dares to stop him. Scarecrow looked up the Hall of Justice on the Batpedia; he walks with a purpose— and stops inside the security room. Batman was one of the designers when the Hall was remodeled— the security room shows it. A wall of screens rises before him— Scarecrow glares at the screens. A small keyboard pops out— Aqualad and Red Arrow stand at his back. It takes Scarecrow a few precious moments to find the relevant vid-file, recorded somewhere around mid-afternoon:

Artemis finally can’t take it. She breaks the silence with a huff, and grumbles, “Well… This is some bullshit, right here. Did you guys have the sudden thought that we shoulda bailed like Red Arrow’n’Aqualad? Or was that just me?”

Robin huffs. “They don’t trust us. The Justice League has a secret space-base.”

“…What?” Kid Flash’s eyes spark emerald at that information. In another world, he would be very short-tempered; in this world, he is much slower to anger.

“Yeah. They’re treating us like— like… sidekicks.” Robin says sidekicks like a four-letter word; the other two show much less restraint in their anger.

“…Fuck me sideways. They still think we’re just kids, don’t they?” Artemis is most upset by the revelation; then again, she is not in the habit of being a hypocrite.

Kid Flash is the one who suggests it. “So, were all in agreement that we are not Sidekicks anymore, right?”

Robin answers for both of them. “No fucking shit.”

Kid Flash smiles an angry, sardonic smile, something that would get him smacked by his mother— “We aren’t allowed on the blocking out the sun mission. No one said anything about putting out a fire.”

Robin smiles a sneaky, devious smile. “Let’s check the Batcomputer, see why there would be fuss about a fire at CADMUS.”

In the security room, Scarecrow glares at his younger brother. Somewhere under D.C., Robin,
currently trying (failing) to pick his cuffs, feels the cold touch of death run down his spine. ‘Oh, good, some of my message got through to Johnny…’
There is no Greater Honor

Artemis, Kid Flash, and Robin had definitely been through this part of CADMUS. Red Arrow was examining the blue arrows embedded into the walls; *These are fire suppression- hard to use without a line of sight; makes sense to use two- the angle says she was on the street when she shot them. Heavy poundage on that bow of hers…*

Aqualad was searching for the source of the reported fire; *This… isn’t right. There should be some trail of how this fire started- but no point(s) of origin. It is almost- magical… but there is no magic here…*

Scarecrow finds an express elevator. “**Guys, you need to see this.”**

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Artemis, Kid Flash, and Robin had gotten to CADMUS minutes after the League left for the blocking-out-the-sun mission. Artemis had been carried by Kid Flash to CADMUS.

(“Need a ride, Beautiful?”)

“You offering, Cowboy?”)

Robin rode his motorcycle. (He had to go back to the Batcave for it, but it was worth the trip. Alfred did see him swipe the motorcycle, but only said "There are times when I, too, disagree with Master Bruce’s decisions. And when that happens, there's something I do that never fails to lift my spirits: I disobey him.”)

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Project: Cadmus was originally formed by Dr. Dabney Donovan, before Lex Luthor bought it from him and turned it into a lucrative genetics lab. Donovan was a mad scientist who was ultimately fired from the Project because he felt there should never be limits in understanding the potential of the genetic code. He tested those limits with some of the cruelest, most inhumane experimentation ever conceived.

Donovan is largely accredited for the non-sapient creations of the Project, referred to as "G-Nomes" (beings which have been cloned and genetically altered to discover supernatural potentials; also giving them a more alien- inhuman- appearance.) G-Nomes can look like anything one could imagine- G-Nomes can do almost anything one could desire, with the proper genetic coding.

After Donovan was removed from CADMUS, the lab was run by the Newsboy Legion (or Newsboy Army.) The Newsboy Legion was a group of orphans, living on the streets of Suicide Slum (in Metropolis, D.C.), so named because they sold newspapers to make a living. They were also frequently in trouble with the law, although local policeman Jim Harper (the original Guardian, great-cousin of Roy Harper) had a soft spot for them. The Newsboy Legion consisted of Tommy Tompkins (the leader); Big Words (the team genius); Gabby (an excitable kid who never stopped talking); and Scrapper (the tough guy).

When Project: CADMUS became property of Lex Luthor, The (new) Legionnaires were the said to be the (identical) sons of the originals, who were now working at a government genetics project. A
new addition to the team was Walter "Flipper Dipper" Johnson Jr., an African-American. He was obsessed with and very capable of underwater maneuvers. He was also the son of another member of the Project, Dr. Jana Dublix. His nickname was later shortened to "Flip".

The original Legion never had identical sons. It was eventually discovered that the (new) Newsboy Legion were clones, created by the same technology that recreated the Guardian, as part of a Luthor plot gone (horribly) right. Like the Guardian clone, they shared their "fathers'" memories, at least up to their current age, meaning that they were sometimes unfamiliar with the modern world (for example, the new Flip's memories dated from the fifties, rather than the forties.) The clones were always getting into trouble, such as when they hid the existence of a large monster that ate furniture.

The (cloned) Newsboys also used real, respectable names: Big Words was Anthony Rodriguez; Gabby was Johnny Gabrielli and Scrapper was Patrick MacGuire. They were briefly joined by the Guardian's niece "Famous" Bobbi Harper, but she subsequently went to stay with another relative; she would eventually have a son named Roy.

Both versions of the Legion would deal with adversaries such as the insane scientist Dabney Donovan. The Cadmus project entire would deal with attacks and manipulation from Lex Luthor's forces.

Two years before that fateful Independence Day, significant changes in Project Cadmus meant the Newsboys left the Project. It was assumed that the clones were investigating what was really behind the changes, but this was proven false when their dead bodies were dragged out of the Potomac River. Forensics declared a death from “drowning”; obviously the round holes in their skulls had nothing to do with their deaths.

During WWII, the Metropolis Guardian newspaper had a citywide network of volunteer reporters called the "Newsboy Army". Super-anthropologists would eventually discover that the Newsboy Army was one of the first active superhero groups in America during the forties in an area of Metropolis (D.C.) called Nowhere Street. Nowhere Street would eventually burn down, and be replaced with Suicide Slum.

Southside, also known as The Simon Projects, and most notably, Suicide Slum, has been at various times the stomping ground of several superheroes, including the Guardian (who protected the Newsboy Legion) and Black Lightning. The district's real name is Hobb's Bay; Project: CADMUS is in Hobb’s bay. Suicide Slum is also the site of The Ace O' Clubs, a bar owned by Superman supporter Bibbo Bibbowski.

Clark Kent wrote a column about 'The Simon Project' for The Daily Planet, early on in his career as Superman. Known as 'Southside' and 'Suicide Slum', the area is believed by many to be beyond help, even Superman's. When a child, Lateesha Johnson, witnessed a local gang murder a group of local kids who were playing basketball for no apparent reason, she became a target. The criminals feared she would tell the police of what she saw.

Clark Kent learned that the residents believed Superman didn't care about them. As Superman, he targeted every known criminal and destroyed every gun, hoping to also protect Lateesha from the gang members she saw.
However, an unnamed arms dealer, who worked for a "Mr. L.,” (surprise, surprise) supplied more
unregistered guns to the neighborhood’s criminals. Lateesha was injured and Clark, not caring that he
was risking his secret identity, got her to help.

He felt the overwhelming fear, helplessness and outrage of the citizenry... and as Clark Kent, his
column garnered enough attention that Lateesha's family was able to move and more officers were
assigned to patrol the Project. Superman himself also stepped up his patrolling of the area.

The new (Lex Luthor appointed) project head is Dominic "the Mechanic" Desmond, a former
Suicide Slum resident with a reputation for being able to "fix" anything, a car or a country. The new
head of genetics is Dr. Serling Roquette, a teenaged genius with a crush on the (cloned) Guardian.

Once the trio got to CADMUS, Robin and Kid Flash were the first into the fray, leaving Artemis on
the street below. Artemis barely has time to stagger to her feet before the two boys are in the
building, and almost loses her cool right then and there. (We’re supposed to be a team on a mission,
guys!) She has been trained by Huntress; she learned to work in a team-style with both the Arrows.
Red Arrow and Green Arrow will always show up when a fight is bigger than a block- sometimes
they’ll show up just to say “Hi”. -They’re both dorks; well-meaning dorks, but dorks-

There is no time to dwell on the advisability of teaming up with people she just met- they’re on a
mission now. Artemis aimed a pair of arrows; drew the bowstring taught, then released. The two
blue arrows flew through the air, arcing inside the burning room and thwacking into the far wall.
They exploded, dousing Kid Flash, Robin, and two scientists who were trapped there – Dr.
Rosencrantz, and Dr. Guildenstern- in flame suppressing chemicals.

Robin quickly helped the two scientists to the window, and helped them out; they fell to safety, a pair
of white-coated suits bumping onto a red and white canvas cloth bullseye. After Artemis made sure
that the scientists were unharmed, she shot another arrow, and ziplined up the building, flipping into
the smoky room above her. Her orange and purple tipped hair shines in the light of the mid-afternoon
sun. (Dana Tan changes her hair color every week- every six months she washes her hair back to
blond. Artemis Crock needs to just be herself sometimes.)

Artemis, who stood in front of the window, was in the exact perfect place to see- what? Something…
Strange. Inhuman- She dashes forwards, stumbles to a halt in front of closed elevator doors. She
stares at them, “There’s something weird about that elevator- what though?”

The boys follow her; Robin clears up her confusion. “What is an express elevator doing in a two
story building?”

Kid Flash is actually the most adventurous of all three of them; he says, with a quiet sort of glee,
“Let’s find out.”

Scarecrow was examining the dented express elevator doors. Aqualad and Red Arrow quickly came,
and stood next to him. “Kid Flash kicked these in- then Artemis and Robin shoved them open.” He
reached out and grasped a hanging zipline. “This is… Robins.”

The guys are about to slide down the line when the lower floor of the building rumbles. Scarecrow
hears his baby brother’s signature cackle echoing up the stairs, and runs down them almost faster than Red Arrow and Aqualad can keep pace with.

The trio were on (sub) level 52 of CADMUS.

(“CADMUS’s basement is creepier than yours, Rob.”

“Dude. Nothing is creepier than my basement.”

Artemis just rolled her eyes.)

They- all three of them- are staring up at a trio of tubes.
Interlude 2
Love strikes swift and sure- sometimes, it even strikes twice!

What might have been, had the world been a more humorous, and sexually free, place:

“Okay, so, say you have a choice between two different ice creams. One is very sweet- the other is really, really good looking.”

“You mean good tasting?” M’gann asks curiously.

“No, ‘cause, see, that would be cheating on the super-sweet ice cream. I mean, you’ve been gearing yourself up to have just this one flavor for a while; the others just won’t cut it. But only one part of you really enjoys the super-sweet ice cream. Then one day, outta nowhere, you see this- I mean, of course your faithful to your super-sweet ice cream, but this new one- and it looks so good, so you have a little taste, and now you want more-”

“So… There’s a problem?”

“YES!! Because the new ice cream only works for half of you; the other half only wants the super-sweet stuff. And, y’know, the super-sweet ice cream is bad for your health, and the good-looking ice cream is unreliable-”

“In Flavor?”

“Y-yeah, of course, But you can’t just ignore them both, that would be… wrong.”

“We’re still talking about ice cream, right?”

“We… never stopped talking about Ice Cream, Megan…”

“…Nowhere is it written you can’t have both flavors, Artemis. I would make sure you have them together at least once- the best kinds of flavors are often mixed. And, anyway, it would be wrong to show more attention to one ice cream than the other. Miscommunication is how feelings get hurt, you know.”

“We’re still talking about ice cream, Megan.”

“I know.”

And that was how Miss Martian counseled Artemis in her (ice cream dating ICE CREAM) dilemma. Artemis (Dana Tan Crock) would eventually pursue a relationship with Red X (Terrence “Terry” McGiniss) and with Icicle Jr. (Cameron Mahkent) - both men would eventually become her husbands. (They got married in Utah- don’t judge.) Both men would eventually become friends with
each other- and all of their children would become some of the most badass people in the world.
which further strengthens the Honor and Glory of Lexcorp,

The tubes are above them, lit from some unseen source- in each tube, a person rests, almost as if asleep- but people do not sleep standing up.

In the center tube there is a young, sturdy looking black-haired man. He wears a white suit leaving his upper shoulders and head exposed; his hair is cut in a scruffy, short style- he looks like a young tough; on his chest is imprinted a bright red pentagonal shield with a stylized “s” inside- it is the mark of Superman. A trio of G-nomes- small, and gargoyle like on their ledge- sit above him, their horns glowing red.

To the center tube’s left, there is another; this one is filled with some strangely viscous liquid; it moves the wrong way to be water- but that is not all that moves within the tube. There is a young red-haired boy, floating in the not-water. He wears a black suit that comes up under his chin; his hair is cut in the bowl style; he bears a stylized yellow marking on his chest- the mark of Batman. Around him swim three pale G-nome fish, each bearing a pair of long pseudopods, protruding from their heads, gently glowing red.

To the center tube’s right, there is only one more; it has within it a tall, blonde young woman. She is not wearing a suit- she is wearing a blue skirt-like pair of shorts and a blue halter top that closes in a collar-like manner just above her clavicles. A thick belt separates the two articles of clothing- the buckle is a pair of elongated “w’s”, golden in the light; on each wrist rests a dark grey bracer- she is wearing small black ballet flats, long ribbons winding up her legs- a thin, silvery rope is coiled at her waist. (Wonder Woman.) A trio of G-nomes sit above her on a ledge, their horns glowing red.

All three are unconscious- all three are behind thick curves of glass, upright and alone. There is a console in front of all three tubes- it can be assumed that the console connects to the environment inside each tube.

(“K-K-KF?”

“Y-yeah?”

“You were right- CADMUS’s basement is way creepier than mine.”

“T-told you, dude.”)

Artemis speaks for the first time in hours- “Robin. Can you get them out of there?”

“Absolutely.”

Robin hacks into the console- it is the second time tonight he has done so; the system flips open like a book for him. He begins to read the highlights of the pertinent files out loud; he has to fill the awful, pulsating space with some other noise- if he does not, I’ll go crazy…


“Is that all?” Artemis; she sounds... hopeful.

“No... There’s one more. Project: Batman Beyond. Codename: Red Hood. Currently in... year three of projected twenty. O-o-oh god.”

Robin has had enough- he turns around and says, quietly- “We’re in over our heads. We should call the League now.”

Artemis and Kid Flash quickly nod. Kid Flash taps the lightning bolt on his chest, “Kid Flash to Flash, come in. Kid Flash to Flash, come in.” He only hears static. Robin has finished inputting the commands for releasing the three in the tubes- pods, they call them pods- pods; he taps into a rarely used network in his communicator- His big brother, Scarecrow’s number.

(“I-if yer need anyfink- just ter talk, even- call me; okay baby bird?”)

“Scarecrow- It’s Robin. We’re at CADMUS Labs, in Metropolis, D.C. I’m in over my head here; Artemis and KF are too. Help.”

The last thing he remembers seeing before waking in a pod himself is an angry roar, then a large fist rushing towards his face.

Kid Flash is the most adventuresome superhero one could ever hope to meet. Wallace Mathias West is one of the most fervently scientific people in the world. These two aspects of the same young man usually don’t conflict-

Wally watches as the pods begin to open. The liquid in the second pod slowly drains- the piscine G-nomorphs swirl closer to the boy; two quickly wrap around him, their long fins coiling together into a harness shape; the pseudo pods and the long, boney tails wrap together into a strong ropey leash- a living, breathing, child safety-harness. The third piscine G-nome twirls and wriggles- as the last of the fluid drains away, the little boy pushes himself to his knees, and picks up the now bunny rabbit shaped G-nomorph. (Wally isn’t sure if the little G-nome is cooing at the boy or not- either way, the scene is ridiculously cute.) The little boy’s red hair is golden yellow at the tips- his eyes are the most stunning shade of blue.

His eyes catch on the third pod- the girl stands like a statue, her shoulders squared, body raised tall and filled with tension. As the pod opens, her shoulders relax, droop into a submissive state. She opens her eyes- they glance around curiously, snap towards them. A quick flash of fury crosses her face- then she sees the little boy. Her fury changes to fear; she darts over to the boy, and places herself into a protective stance in front of him. Her blue eyes flash; her long blonde hair shines in the light.

Wally barely has time to react- the center pod has opened, and the black haired young man has dashed forward. Kid Flash moves- he manages to pull Robin away fast enough to keep him from outright dying- not fast enough to save him from a concussive knock out. The battle is over almost before it started- Artemis is electrocuted by the young woman’s silvery lasso; Robin is unconscious-

Then Kid Flash crashes into the young man’s fist; he awakens in a pod. To his right is Robin,
carefully trying to pick his overhead handcuffs- to his left, Artemis, her eyes cracked open in a slit. Below them are all three of the pod people; the young woman is balancing the little boy on her hip, her face impassive in the red light- the little boy is asleep- the young man is glaring up at them.

“Hi. I’m Kid Flash- who’re all of you?”

The young man speaks first, his voice an irritated growl, “I am the Superboy- created by CADMUS to replace the Superman should he fall; to destroy him should he turn from the Light.”

Artemis interrupts then, her voice raw and subdued, “Superboy- you’re honestly saying that Superman follows the Light?”

Superboy nods sharply; Artemis growls with irritation. Like my life wasn’t dangerous enough…

The young woman speaks next, her voice an organically mechanical monotone in the pulsating red cavern, “I am the Wonder Girl- created by CADMUS to replace Wonder Woman should she fall; to entice her towards the Light. He is the Red Hood- created by CADMUS to replace Batman should he age; to destroy him, should he overstep his bounds.”

Her voice has… softened, talking about Red Hood- she cares about him.

Kid Flash speaks then, his voice soft and inoffensive; I don’t know if this will work- but I have to try… “Do you- any of you- know anything about the outside world?”

Superboy speaks- he sounds… confused. “I can read; I can write; I know many languages- the G-nomes taught me- all of us- to recognize things from pictures, like the sun, flowers…”

Robin speaks for the first time, his words slightly slurred from the concussion; “But… halve you ever sheen them? With your own eyes? Halve any of you actually sheen the shun?”

Superboy looks more confused. “I… no- none of us have.”

Dr. Desmond walks out of a shadowed hallway. “And you never will, without orders. Weapons, get back in your pods!” His voice is sharp and arrogant- cruel. Bad.

He sets the pods containing the trio to take their genetic material, download their memories, and destroy the originals when those two processes are complete.

Robin is still trying (failing) to pick his cuffs when- shreeekkkk-zaaaappppp. He has been pierced by hypodermic needles; they stab into his costume, go into his skin, muscles, touching bone. They begin to shock him; he screams.

Kid Flash is next; because of his powers, he holds a special enmity for needles within his heart. They stab him anyway; he shrieks, then moans with pain.

Artemis is in her pod. Electricity is arcing out, striking the exposed flesh through the rips in her costume. She knows that she has never been a very motivational speaker; the situation is dire. She
begins to speak; her voice quiet and strained from suppressing her screams, echoing in the red gloom of the underground CADMUS lab.

“To successfully make a shot, you gotta follow and master basic steps. Your stance’s the foundation: where you dra-a-aw your strength. Nock the arrow and grip it; realize you are wielding a weapon. Mindset: Focus solely on your g-goal, regardless of your surroundings- Be in the now. Set up and draw; inhale and prepare for what you are about to do. Anchor and hold- There is no going back. Aim: all that remains is you and your target. Release and follow through. Master those and you hit every time.”

She paused here, throat sore from suppressed screams; she wasn’t entirely sure where she was going with this… thing. Sure, all of that was important- but wait, no, she almost forgot to mention the most important part. (It was something she had learned by being Huntresses sidekick- Huntress is a very lassize-faire mentor; that doesn’t mean she lets her sidekick get away with anything. All of Artemis’ actions are scrutinized; everything Artemis does must be thought through later, the reasoning discovered. As Huntress had explained it, “Every action has a cause. What’s the cause of your actions, Little Huntress?”) She continued.

“One last step: f-feedback. Basically...take responsibility for the outcome. For every shot…

I can’t tell you, any of you, what to do or who to be, but I can tell you this: at the end of the day, when those Cadmus POG’s let you loose, it won’t be them taking the blame for whatever actions any of you do. It won’t be them killing civilians, or destroying lives; it won’t be them “Just following o-orders.” It'll be you.”

Artemis falters, and gasps with pain; the electric needles have stabbed deeper into her muscles.

“Superboy, Wonder Girl, Red Hood… I believe that all of you deserve a choice about your lives, and about your actions. Do you?”
Superboy stops; he heard every word she said. More importantly, he listened. Wonder Girl is carrying a sleeping Red Hood just ahead of Superboy; she looks back at Superboy, and then nods quietly. When Artemis began to speak, the G-nomes connected all three of them- the sleeping Red Hood heard Artemis’s words, and understood enough of them to agree; Wonder Girl has been trying to articulate her words -wantneedFearbadwrongplacenoone'sthereRAGEnomoredon'twanttohurt...- for the parts of her life she can remember. (She knows who she is, knows who- what- she is not - I am not a weapon! I am a girl!)

Superboy knocks his G-nome to the ground- Wonder Girl sets hers onto a nearby ledge, and gently detaches Red Hood from the (unsurprisingly docile) bunny rabbit shaped G-nome- she is not able to get the child restraint G-nomes to release him. She sighs quietly, and makes a blank-faced puppy-dog pout at them. They reluctantly let go; Wonder Girl unties the ribbons from around her calves and uses them to tie Red Hood to her body. Red Hood begins to snuggle against her instead; he hasn’t woken up at all. (He was barely awake when his pod was drained- he hadn’t really been aware of what was going on for the past few hours; the choice came to him as naturally as breathing- Red Hood knows exactly who he is, in the manner of all three year olds- I am myself, not you. I want more than is here.)

Then the pod-people go to save the trio.

The clones rush into the red cavern; Wonder Girl quickly taps at the console one handedly, her other arm wrapped around Red Hood; the electricity stops- the needles retract- the pods open. Superboy stalks forwards, and stops just below the trio, glaring up at them.

“You came back to shave ush?”

“Well, since I don’t seem to have heat vision, saving you will have to do.”

Wonder Girl just smiles and nods- Red Hood continues to sleep.

The five teens and toddler run up long hallways- turning left and right, dodging claws and tails and teeth- Superboy slams his fist into a massive G-troll blocking their way. They eventually make it to an air vent; all the children dive into the narrowly defined space. The G-nomes follow them.

Robin was not having a good day. It started out pretty freaking sweet; then he got punched in the face and now the world won’t stop swirling around, and he felt off balance, and CADMUS’s basement is creepier than his- does that mean his basement is only a cave, now?

(“I halcked the moshun shenshorsh. Hee.”)

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: Excerpt from the contract of Mar Dumax

She stops speaking then, overcome with pain; Robin is still trying (failing) to pick the cuffs on his wrists despite the searing electricity; Kid Flash has passed out, the needles too much on top of his hunger. (Kid Flash has a serious metabolism- his last snack was an hour ago; too long.)
“Robin…Are you okay?”

“Shuper-Dooper! Although… it would be nishe if the world would shtop shwirling around me. It getsh annoying, yanno?”

“…Crap.”

Artemis has been having a crappy day- although she figured that she would; yesterday was when she realized that her favorite hair color had been discontinued. No! I love Acidic Reflexive Greenout!

Kid Flash’s day has been pretty damn good, actually- he just wishes that he had more to eat than a hi-energy bar. There might be sandwiches back at the Hall…

(Superboy’s day has been confusing- but his life has been like that for a while now.

Wonder Girl wants to punch stuff.

Red Hood has a stomachache; he has been jostled, jounced, and wobbled for hours. Hurts. Feel Icky.)

The guys get to the bottom of the stairwell, and run out into CADMUS’s Atrium; they run into a battlefield. Scarecrow sees a grey humanoid creature rearing back- he sees a girl in blue leaping for the grey thing- the girl isn’t going to make it. His brother is cradling something, but he should be moving, why isn't he moving? NO! NO! NO! (The boys have been working themselves into a state of emotion far beyond worried; they are very near their breaking point- and they have a head cold; alone, these two details would be meaningless- together, they make what happened next… inevitable.)

Dr. Desmond followed the children up into the Atrium of CADMUS; he drank a strange, purple brew from within a glass phial- and he changed. Where once stood a slimy excuse of a man now stood a hulking grey beastlike humanoid- and it looked angry.

Wonder Girl knows exactly what just happened. Her voice echoes in the darkened room; “He drank Project: Blockbuster; Blockbuster was designed to destroy Wonder Woman. Someone come and hold the baby.” She sounded so authoritative- Robin wobbles over to her and gently cradles the small red-headed toddler in his arms; Wonder Girl takes the now loose blue ribbons and wraps them around her hands- silken knuckle dusters, wound tight to her fists.

( None of the teens know enough about Wonder Girl to know when she’s afraid; they can’t read her well enough to discern when she feels outmatched. Scarecrow could have done it, but Scarecrow wasn’t there.)
Wonder Girl’s fist catches Blockbuster under his chin, a textbook uppercut. She follows that up with a side-kick to the kidney- but it doesn’t matter. Blockbuster was designed to fight someone of Wonder Woman’s proportionate strength and skill; Wonder Girl, for all her skills, is not enough to stop him. He flings her aside, smashing her into the concrete walls of the Atrium like a doll from the hands of an angry child onto the floor. As Blockbuster is flinging Wonder Girl away, Superboy is rushing up to defend Robin and Red Hood- but it doesn’t matter; Superboy doesn’t know how to defend someone. Blockbuster tears through Superboy’s defense like so much wet tissue paper. Blockbuster charges forwards, arm cocked back to deliver a killing blow when-

Scarebeast is not Scarecrow. Scarebeast is not Doc. Scarebeast is not Johnny. Scarebeast is the complete totality of all the things that made Jonathan Crane -Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth-Johnny Crane, himself; Scarebeast is one of the few remnants of his past, villainous, life that remains in him. Scarebeast can only be called forth when the situation is truly dire; Scarebeast is for when the sky is falling down; the dire sword is about to cleave innocent flesh; all the important biology notes that needed to be turned in tomorrow just caught on fire (again).

When Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth saw Blockbuster about to hurt his baby brother, something in him, something that had been hidden for most of his life, roared a challenge. That bonded part of him, that something tied tightly into his flesh and blood and soul stretched wide, and snapped tight; the pressure of this one moment, where he could lose- could lose his only- that’s his baby brother right there!- The boy’s heard screaming as if from far away- felt a strange buzzing sensation in their body- and then the world went strange.

If the teens hadn’t been deafened by Scarecrows increasingly agonized scream of primal rage, they would have heard the thousand tiny crackles of bones snapping, the squelch of flesh rearranging, the slurping of spines and spikes and jaws; seen teeth emerging like crocuses from beneath the snow, seen brown fur mold fungally over taut muscles, seen hands turn into claws, the teeth and tongue of a man become the teeth of a beast, the forked tongue of a serpent.

They saw, instead.

If they hadn’t been nauseated by the quick time transformation, hadn’t been shoving away their own issues- had they been able to look, they would have seen, firsthand, the Scarebeast.

What they saw was a monster- a terrifying, dragon-like monster- smash into Blockbuster. They saw Scarebeast slam Blockbuster into the ground- heard it Roar.

Massive teeth slid off a thick, grey neck- Scarebeast wanted blood from Blockbuster; the boys wanted the person who would dare hurt their baby brother to f-fuckin’ die, y- yer rat fink b-barstard!

Wonder Girl staggers to her feet- Robin, carrying Red Hood, has wobbled over towards -No, behind-Artemis, who is providing long distance assistance from behind a solid slab of concrete- a bench in daylight hours. Wonder Girl quickly darts into the fray, the ball of her arched foot landing squarely in Blockbusters left eye. Blockbuster screams, low and gravelly in the gloom-
Superboy punches him in the kneecap; Blockbuster screams again, but higher, and throws Scarebeast off. Scarebeast lands in a crouch, and lets Wonder Girl and Superboy get in a few licks, before rejoining the fight.

Kid Flash was building up speed-pressure in his legs- he has to be careful, or he’ll rip his thigh muscles, again, and walk funny for a week or so- and then he slams himself forwards, into what he calls a “Jumping Corkscrew Roundhouse Kick.” It connects with a grey chin, and Blockbuster kisses the floor, very hard.

(When he first became Kid Flash, Wally, very briefly, fought his opponents by running very quickly towards them and flinging himself into them like a cannon ball. His friend, Dick, proved just how monumentally stupid this approach to crime fighting was by breaking both of Wally’s collarbones in three places.

Ten days of semi-nonstop B-C-D kung-fu movies (and Noir films, but that led to something else entirely-) later, and Wally had a few... ideas about how he should fight as Kid Flash; it helped that he was figuring out how to control his speed with free running- adding kicks like the 540 or Double Leg was not a big deal. The fact that his new approach worked very well was... just a minor detail, really. The fact that it’s cool looking was much more important.)

Kid Flash, Wonder Girl, Superboy, and Scarebeast start to lay a beating on Blockbuster- Artemis shoots one of her nastier concussive arrows- it connects, but it doesn’t matter; she’s run out arrows to shoot. Then Red Arrow is next to her, placing his shots where she would have put hers- Aqualad is fighting Blockbuster as well; Artemis allows herself to hope. We might not die today. That would be really nice, actually...

Why am I always so useless?

Aqualad and Red Arrow have shaken off their confusion- Scarecrow’s always been a little weird, but now is not the time to puzzle out this new facet of their friends character- not in the middle of a battlefield, at least; there are more important things to place one’s attention on.

Red Arrow dashes over to Artemis and Robin; Aqualad flings himself forwards, into the melee.

“Who’s the kid?” Red Arrow asks, his voice a quiet mutter in the roar of battle.

“Red Arrow, meet Red Hood- He’sh shupposhed to be Batman’sh replasheiment in a few years.”

“Robin...Are you concussed?”

“That’sh a dishtinct possibility, yesh...” Robin’s voice has been wandering in tone, giving him a distinctly lackadaisical aura, very different from his normal mischievous demeanor. His slight weaving from side to side only furthers his intense off-ness.
(Robin has been concussed before- Aqualad, Red Arrow, and Scarecrow know the signs of a concussion in him, and know what he can reasonably be expected to do; this is why Red Arrow felt comfortable asking him the question he did.)

“Any ideas on what to do here, or should we just pound it flat?”

“I think bringing the roof down would do it, but it might be hard to coordinate everyone correctly…”

Artemis perks up at that point *Yes! I can do something!*; and mumbles throatily into her comm-link, “Hey, Toaster- did you hear what Robin said?”

“You know I always listen to you, Babeanape. I’ll tell the others.” Kid Flash’s grimly cheerful voice is a smirk in her ear; a ghostly touch down her spine.

The fight is brutal; it rages across the entire atrium floor, gouging deep craters into the linoleum floors- and then Kid Flash is whirling around all the heroic combatants, relaying the plan to them.

Robin passes Red Hood to Artemis; he darts forwards, into the melee. One of his bird-arangs seems to fly wide; another one seems to be thrown short- then it flashes, and bangs, launching Blockbuster backwards. The others have dashed around placing bombs, and as Blockbuster was being maneuvered into position, they have gathered around Artemis and Red Hood, Robin being grabbed by Kid Flash at the last second before- and then the ceiling fell down, crashing onto Blockbuster like the fist of an angry god.

Scarebeast would have liked to turn Blockbuster into a greasy smear on the ground- but the sky is falling, and his little brother(s) are in danger. Thousands of pounds of shattered concrete slam onto too wide forearms, a monstrous frame bends, bows to the weight of a shattered building, curves to protect the ones below him. He yelps- it hurts to be in this form for so long.

It takes a long moment for the crashing to stop, and Scarebeast almost falters- but then he is being supported by Wonder Girl and Superboy and Aqualad and Kid Flash and Red Arrow and Artemis and Robin- and then the building stops falling. Scarebeast shrugs off the heavy concrete like an overcoat of stone, and then with a sickening crackly pop, Scarecrow is crouched on the heavy slab-bench, panting. His black and grey suit is shredded around his shoulders, hips, and skull; his facemask is only holding on by dint of his own considerable force of will; his goggles are cracked.

Robin’s hair is sticking out in every direction; the black parts of his uniform have gathered a fine coating of white drywall dust; there is a rip on the upper left part of his chest.

Artemis’ hair is a dusty off white color; her lip is split; there is a massive rip in the bottom of her tunic length hoodie; her quiver is empty- her bow is cracked- her bowstring snapped.

Superboy’s suit is ripped at the chest; his knuckles are starting to bruise.

Wonder Girl has a rather spectacular case of bed-head, which is remarkable, considering that she has
never slept in a bed in her life.

Aqualad’s shirt has a small tear at the arm; he is almost out of water.

Red Arrow has lost his boots. Somehow.

Red Hood, defying all probabilities, is still asleep; he is completely unharmed.

“So… Does someone want to explain why they thought it would be a good idea to go to CADMUS without telling anyone?” Scarecrow asks this in the most mild tone of voice in existence; Artemis almost forgets how to breathe. The slight quiver in his voice does nothing to ease her fear- she just saw him change into a true monster, and back.

Robin answers. “Evil comesh in many formsh, whether it’sh a genetically altered clone createth for nefariouslyh purpousesh, or the inshidioush creepl of apalapalathy in the common man. You musht shtay aware of the dangersh; you clan’t let the package hide the pudding! Evil ish jusht plain bad! You don’t clotton on to it. You gotta shmackl evil in the noshe with the rolled-up newshpaper of goodnessh! Bad dog! Bad dog! Nobishcuitsh!” Robin had stood, and was weaving in an unsteady circle as he spoke; his finger randomly pointing up, down, sideways- he narrowly missed jabbing Wally’s left eye; plaster dust gently swished off of him.

“…Who concussed my baby brother?” Scarecrow has calmed down a great deal- punching something seemed to help- but he is very upset that he hadn’t noticed his little brother’s injury. Before Superboy can gather the courage to answer, the League arrives.
"This is one of the biggest lies I was ever told;

All the teens would have gotten yelled at, right then and there, for their misconduct, but Wonder Woman put her foot down. “There is a very small, sleeping child present. Although I understand that you wish to reprimand your subordinates, now is not the time, and this is not the place. I humbly suggest that we move this… discussion to the Hall of Justice.”

Plastic Man stayed behind, along with a few others from the League; the majority went to the Hall- this was the biggest upset in recent memory, of course everyone wanted to be there. (The Big Three had clones? The Little Three’s kids were there too? They had an entire set of children who corresponded six out of The Big Seven? REALLY?)

“So… When’s the wedding?”

Roy has to stop himself from punching Green Arrow, right then and there; his lack of shoes would just give him rug burn on his feet, which is annoying. “What. Do. You. Mean. ?”

“Well… You’ve made it very clear that you don’t care what I think, about you and Kal being together, I mean. So, I want to know- when are you going to, ah, stop living in sin with your boyfriend, and make an honest man out of him? I’ve decided I want grandkids- what’s the wait time on that?”

Roy is quietly, grumpily grateful- Ollie isn’t going to grouch at him about going to save his friends collective bacon; they needed to… talk about him and Kaldur anyway.

Kaldur was having a different conversation with his mentor- his King- Aquaman. “Aqualad, stand down.”

“Apologies, my King, but no. Tonight, we forged something powerful. I cannot just abandon my friends, old and new, when they need me.” They are both speaking in Atlantean; the fact that almost everyone listening understands Atlantean escapes them completely.

Artemis is hugging Huntress. Tomorrow, when there is light everywhere, and the soft rushing of the nearby river quiets her mind, when she is in her own bed, under her soft sheets, when the light from the sun is soft on her face, when she can smell flowers from her window box, and bacon from breakfast, and the stench of blood and fear and death and antiseptic and the color red- since when has the color red had a smell; why can’t she forget it whywhywhyWHY- and she doesn’t shake anymore with fear about what almost (didn’t) but almost happened, she will deny that she needs comfort from another person, deny that she loves her mentor as an older sister favored aunt; tonight, she will not do that.

Tonight, Artemis (Dana Artemis) needs a hug.
Wonder Girl and Wonder Woman are examining each other with their eyes, using bodies for words.

_Hmmm… You don’t seem too bad._

_I could say the same about you._

_Ha. Funny, girl of mine._

Superboy and Superman are staring at each other. Superboy looks just exactly like Superman, when he was that age- but not. Clark Kent never stands like he’s ten feet tall, and can punch out the sky if he were so inclined; Clark Kent does not walk like he’s made of steel and diamonds, doesn’t glare like he can burn you up with a thought- but Superman does. Superman can do all of that; and Superman, not Clark Kent, but Superman, stands, and moves, and **glares** just exactly like that when he’s afraid of someone.

Superman stares at his clone. Clark Kent smiles a small, hesitant half-smile.

Superboy (who will soon be Conner Kent) smiles back.

Flash was more upset that his nephew hadn’t **called him dammit, they already had this conversation**-

Kid Flash is trying to explain about the non-reception in the creepy-CADMUS basement-o-doom, eat a large peanut and banana sandwich, and drink a protein shake at the same time.

They aren’t getting very far.

Robin, Scarecrow, and Red Hood were standing to the far left. Robin was still swaying left to right, and the exposed portions of Scarecrow’s skin were starting to bruise. Red Hood was awake; he was blinking owlishly in Scarecrow’s arms, his rounded face soft with sleepiness. Batman was glaring at both (all three) of his sons- “-I know I taught you better, Scarecrow.”

“Sir.”

“You should have left a message about where you were going, and who you were with.”

“Sir.”

“Robin. I am especially disappointed with you.”

“Shir.”

“You **know better** than to just… go off on your own, with untried teammates.”

“Shir.”
“…Neither of you have been listening to a word I’ve said, have you.”

“No sir.”
“No shir.”

The two young men say this in perfect stereo; nearby, Flash has to stifle a giggle.

Batman sighs. “…How long have you been concussed, Robin?”

“A few hours, shir. I mishcalalalculated the shpeed of Shuperboy’sh fishtsh.”

It was at this point in time that Red Hood’s stomach decided that it was mad as hell, and wasn’t going to take any more of this shite. Red Hood urped- mucusy, milky pale slime arced through the air, and landed with a soft splash… directly onto Batman. Red Hood himself started to quietly cry; Don’t LIKE throwing up!

Flash and Kid Flash were quietly laughing at this point- nothing quite like vomit to destroy someone’s aura of menace. Then Batman, Scarecrow, Robin, and Red Hood turned, and as one person, glared at both Flashes. They both stopped laughing.

And that was What Happened That Summer. Well- Mostly.

Later, much later, after silent disappointment and quiet arguments that went nowhere, half shouted arguments where harsh words are almost exchanged- there is a reason the boys went to the West Coast for college; Johnny knows that it isn’t healthy to deny the real reason (He could have gotten just as good an education on the East Coast- better actually-), but Scarecrow is too… honorable to let anything off the hook, not even themselves- and then Robin is interrupting the two arguing men.

(Alfred had settled Red Hood –Jason Todd- in Bruce’s old nursery. The toddler fell asleep almost as soon as he was laid in his new crib- He had not made any sounds.

Alfred now quietly, unobtrusively, waited for his idiot son to figure out that his grandson and nephew were growing up, and needed some space.

Permafrost was sitting on a divan next to him, watching the proceedings like a particularly exciting tennis match.)

“It doesn’t matter wether or not you alalalallow ush to clonfronont evril on our own, Brushe; We will anywanyay. If you didn’t thlink we clould halandle it, why bother training ush?”

“… I’ll admit you both lived up to my expectations, but those others-”

“Hah. “T-t-those others-s-s” are my f-f-fuckin’ friends, Mr. Wayne. Our teamwork was not up to your g-g-gilded standards because you never let us out of fuckin’ Gotham, and y-you sure as hell don’t l-l-let anyone else in.” The boy’s voice is quiet, softly angry- the boys almost never loose their temper; they know what they could do, could say. They refuse to be that hateful, vile, lonely person. (Again.)
“He’sh right, Brushe.” Dick is quiet, subdued, in the small hours before dawn. He won’t be able to sleep for quite a while. Concussions will fuck your day up in all kinds of ways.

“I suppose you two will be doing this again, with or without my consent?” Bruce- Batman-Their father- sounds... resigned.

“No shit.”
“Yesh, I will.”

“Well. I suppose something can be arranged…”

(Alfred stifled an indecorous snort. It's not like Master Bruce has been setting aside funds to refurbish a certain mountain stronghold, or anything...

Permafrost is under no such compulsions.)
There is no Honor is serving Lexcorp

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fawcett City is an Eastern-Midwest city (sort of), and the home of Justice League member Captain Marvel. Its current name first appeared in 1874, on one of the few surviving maps of the era. The history of cartography of the United States began in the 18th century, after the declared independence of the Thirteen original colonies on July 4, 1776, during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). Later, Marcus Edward Tethys Batson published a map of the US in 1867. The National Program for Topographic Mapping was initiated in 1884 by the United States Geological Survey. The great fire of 1919 decimated the majority of the collected cartographical studies.

Fawcett City’s name is derived from the original founder of Fawcett city, Ceallach Fawcett. It is also home to the somewhat minor heroes Bulletman and Bulletgirl, Spy Smasher, Ibis the Invincible, Mister Scarlet and Pinky the Whiz Kid and Minute-Man.

Features of Fawcett City include radio station WHIZ, which will employ Captain Marvel's teenaged alter ego Billy Batson as an on-air and field reporter. Streets in Fawcett City have been named in honor of citizens who worked towards the betterment of Fawcett; Otto Binder (Binder Boulevard) and Bill Parker (Parker Square) being examples.

Ceallach Fawcett was the youngest of fourteen, and had a bit of an inferiority complex. This meant that she would found the exact same city no fewer than five times, each in a completely different state. The one that stayed Fawcett is, of course, Fawcett. The others are Gotham, Metropolis, Central, and Keystone. Of course, that would lead to it’s own set of problems which will be explained soon enough…

The city is distinguished by its old-fashioned look and feel. Despite existing in the modern world, with current technologies and events, Fawcett seems old fashioned, as if stuck in the 1940s or 1950s. This timeless feel is the result of a spell cast over the city in 1955 by Ibis the Invincible. The spell was requested by the wizard Shazam, and was said to have protected Fawcett from the influences of outside evils and slowed the passage of time. For the next forty years within the Earth-16, the city existed as a time-warp of sorts to the 1950s. The spell was shown to be removed in the late 1990’s, and Fawcett began to slowly become a more modern city, although most of its Art Deco style buildings and generally old-fashioned values remain intact.

"Once upon a time, there was a wizard named Shazam. The wizard Shazam fought for the side of Good in the great struggle, but found that for all his power and skill, he was unable to make headway in the fight.

One day, Shazam granted a fraction of his power to Teth-Adam; Teth-Adam would fight the fight-and die. The power of Shazam corrupted Teth-Adam, and he committed great Evils with his god-like powers. When Teth-Adam realized what he had done whilst so empowered, he took his own life. The attempt to combine wisdom and power has only rarely been successful and then only for a short while.
Many centuries would pass, and one day, Shazam would find a new person to grant a piece of his power to- a new champion to fight for Good.

That person is William “Billy” Batson- a homeless ten year-old boy.”

In general, homeless children consistently exhibit more health problems than housed poor children. Environmental factors contribute to homeless children’s poor health, and homeless children are at high risk for infectious disease. Homeless children are at greater risk for asthma and lead poisoning, often with more severe symptoms than housed children. Poor nutrition also contributes to homeless children’s poor health, causing increased rates of stunted growth and anemia. Despite these widespread health problems, homeless children generally lack access to consistent health care, and this lack of care can increase severity of illness.

Billy Batson lives in Fawcett City, at the end of Bleaker Street, near the Old Molasses Factory. He lives in Apartment # 14, on the third floor; He tries not to think about the gaping holes in the floor- it’s really not that bad; I can get more plywood somewhere. He is a fifth-grader at Grant Ranch (inner-city), and has good grades- not too good, but good enough to be ignored by the teachers, who have bigger problems to deal with than the quiet polite boy who sits in the back of the class. He doesn’t disrupt the classroom; he answers when called on. They overlook him easily- he makes it easy for them.

His school day starts at four in the morning- he has just enough time to wash up, find and eat breakfast, and catch the first of three buses, hopefully leaving himself enough time to make the quarter mile walk to school- take the Blue line to Avery, Red to Binder, Switch to the Number Four, get off at Parker Square and start walking- and it ends at four in the afternoon, when he is done with his homework.

He can generally find enough to eat- you would be amazed to learn what people throw away. He eats lots of vegetables- The ones the grocery throws out are usually just ugly, not bad- if I hurry, I can get some of the fruit! and very little meat- It’s okay though, I can eat beans and tofu instead, and I can buy vitamins too!

He has had a cough for a while, it’s just a cold, nothing I can’t handle. (It’s pneumonia; he’s going to die if he doesn’t get real medical attention soon.)

When Billy Batson is not Billy Batson, he’s Captain Marvel, Earth’s Mightiest Mortal. Captain Marvel is a member of the Justice League; Batman asks Captain Marvel to be a “den-mother” for a little team he’s setting up.

“Sure, Batman! I’d love to help!” Hide how sick you are Billy; that cough of yours still hasn’t gone away.

This is an explanation of M’gann M’orzz, who she was made to be, and who she is today:

Children, young children- for the sake of the story, we’ll assume that Martian children and Human children are much the same in development, just… stretched out over a longer period of time, say, double the amount or so- rely on their parents for their sense of self. It is difficult to say when,
exactly, a “child” develops into a person- though it would be wrong to ever assume that a child is anything other than a person in remarkably powerless situation due to lack of respect, experience, and size.

*All the birds of the *air*

*M’gann! Pay attention! There will be a test on your ability to-

It is true to say that children raise adults- but that is also a mistake, to assume that an innocent child is in any way responsible for the actions of an adult, who, by rights, should know better.

**fell a-sighing and a-sobbing,**

- Surely they won’t resort to **bombs**-

Once upon a time, there was a girl who was raised to be a soldier- a spy, to be precise. She was born in a time of war. She grew as the thorn grows- sharp, and small, and, yes, deadly. Still, underneath the thick war-paint, she was still a little girl, if a bit odd; she never really liked playing outside, as her skin held few pigments, and burned easily- she liked to read books and put puzzles together, especially the strangely shaped ones- and she liked to play “Pretend”.

Martian Pretend is not Human Pretend. *M’gann* was very good at Pretend- she never really stopped playing Pretend. Not after her fifth birthday, when the War went into its dénouement, and all of her **Comrades**… stopped. That was when she stopped being a child; put away her childish things, and **focused** on Pretending. (Put a smile on your face, and close your eyes tight/ Who’s to say you’re not in Heaven tonight?) When the Greens came for her, the last free White left, they captured her, and took her away in a cage, like she was dangerous. (*M’gann M’orzz* is dangerous.)

**when they heard the bell toll**

-really think that will work?*

‘I’m sure it will, *M’gann*; for your sake, it will have to. Now, it’s time young girls were in b-’

---

By the age of two, children normally begin to display the fundamental behaviors of empathy by displaying an emotional response that corresponds with another person. Even earlier, at one year of age, infants have some rudiments of empathy, in the sense that they understand that, just like their own actions, other people’s actions have goals. Sometimes, toddlers will comfort others or show concern for them at as early an age as two. Also during the second year, toddlers will play games of falsehood or “pretend” in an effort to fool others, and this requires that the child know what others believe before he or she can manipulate those beliefs.

When the girl was six- which was, in some other world, when she was four, but in this world she
was six- she had started the life long journey of discovery; that is to say, she had started to use the word “I”, not only in her public thoughts, but in her private thoughts as well. When the Greens came for her, she decided to… Pretend. The Greens knew that she was a “spy”, but they were unaware-Refused to acknowledge- what that means, exactly in the context of wartime societies, especially on the “Losing” side.

M’gann is a child soldier- a spy. She was trained to manipulate others, trained to hold her shape for months at a time, to hide her real thoughts under a pleasant façade- but one should never forget that M’gann is a soldier. She has always been a soldier- she was trained as a soldier, to do dark deeds in the moonless night, hide her bloody hands behind her back, wrap bombs in cakes and put poisons in soups and sneak messages in flowers, or patterns, or words- like a poem, or a nursery rhyme- and above all. Above all, she was trained to Smile.

And she considers her “childhood”, in the household of a Yellow-descendant Green (daughter of the sister of the famous J’onn J’onnz) as time spent as a “Prisoner of War.” The face she shows the world is sweet, and shy, and kind, and sad. (This is not a lie- but it is not the whole truth.) The face she only shows herself is sour, and bold, and cruel, and angry. (This, too, is no lie- but not the whole truth.) The face she can’t show, even to herself, is small, and scared, like -Who am I, to feel this way? I, who have not fought, nor bled, nor died for my people?

Who am I to pretend this shape? To distort the world around me in this way?

Who am I?

For poor C’k R’oban.

Red Hood is also a child soldier. He was not raised in a time of war- but he was bred for war. He was bred for war.

His emotions run hot, run to extremes found in the berserker. He was bred for war.

He is smart. Red Hood can read. He can write. He can do advanced Trigonometry. He understands most philosophical discussions. He was bred for war.

The one thing he can’t do is speak. At CADMUS, all conversations (orders) were held via telepathy. He was never spoken to- he never spoke. (It’s simple, really- why would you make a weapon that could express an opinion? Swords do not speak; it might have an opinion about the neck it’s severing, but will it express that opinion? No.)

They bred him- took tens of thousands of genetic samples, combined them hundreds of thousands of times, all to make a man who would fight, and bleed, and die for a city (and could be controlled)- for war.

CADMUS science was able to place within him a wall between his voice and his thoughts- but he has both. He can laugh- though it is a quiet, dried out thing, a soft wheezing cough. (All living beings have opinions- to remove them from the being removes all drive for life. Why should a tool get tired? Why should a tool get hungry? Why should a tool obey orders? It’s a tool. It doesn’t care.)
He will grow into an angry, driven young man—easily one of the most dangerous in the world.

And he will die twice.

Jason Todd always dies twice— in every world that there is a Jason Todd, taken in by a Bruce Wayne—always.

(No one said that he had to literally die, however.)

Chapter End Notes

C’k R’oban – White philosopher, revolutionary, and artist. KIA during the First Battle of Cave 171, AKA the Kend’raiac Encroachment.

*Allusion to White Martians sympathetic to the R’oban Cause; Called for Integration of White and Green- became the M’orzz Cause after R’oban’s death in 2364 A.B. See "Brief History of Mars", "Compendium of Martian Songs, Tales, and Falsities", "Ma’aleca’andran Politics"; for further study, "Ma'aleca'andran Geneology and the Race Question: an unbiased examination of Red, Green, Yellow, and White"
There is no Glory in that service.

A conversation in which folks of an unsavory nature make their preliminary moves, and adjust years of plotting for newly developed obstacles:

A screen, somewhere far- or near, seeing as no one still alive (killing your architect is a traditional way of keeping certain information secret) knows where the building this room is in is, or where the building is, or the dimensions of the room, or even how many screens are in the room, exactly- away zaps on. Snow, the electrical kind, shimmers across the screen; the snow changes to a scene from the CADMUS facilities- Scarecrow, Red Arrow, Aqualad, Artemis, Robin, Kid Flash, Wonder Girl, Superboy, Red Hood are running down a hallway- the scene changes to Wonder Girl upper-cutting Blockbuster- Scarebeast slamming Blockbuster to the ground-

The screen changes to a silhouette of a man. It is a non-descript silhouette; he could be anyone. (He isn’t, but this wouldn’t be much of a story without some dramatic suspense.) He speaks then, his voice an oily snake in the still, dry, recycled air.

“So. We’ve all seen the recordings. Apparently, the Justice League-”

A crinkly, irrational female voice interrupts him; an angry dame cat spitting in the wind. “-foul, wretched, slimy, disgusting FREA-”

The woman is cut off by a tired young man’s voice; a cat yowling in the night- “Yes, ma, We know already, would’ya pipe down-”

The first man speaks over them both. “-have their protégé’s doing Black-Ops work.”

“Now there’s a funny thought.” This voice is a man’s; he sounds mildly cultured- and very deranged.

“Do these- revelations- change any of our plans?” This voice is deep- and carries an echo from far away, almost as if the speaker is underwater.

“No. These… developments are… Irrelevant. They-” This rasping voice is another man’s- but he is cut off almost immediately by a different woman.

“They should not be underestimated. Especially the Scarecrow.” This voice is a younger woman, accustomed to a certain standard of living; she cannot quite disguise her pain in speaking with such passion.

“Missing your liver, Suzy Q?” The same deranged man’s voice from before- mocking the woman’s moment of weakness.

“Go eat a bullet, fucking Sad Clown.” The woman has a stinging wasp for a tongue; the madman snarls a raspberry in response.

“You freaks had better BEHAVE or I’ll find you both and KILL YOU DEA-”

“MA! Not the Time!” Her son sounds harassed.
“Oh, why did the Gods see fit to grace me with such a useless whelp of a son? Was I unfaithful, oh Mighty Ones? I should have DROWNED YOU AT BIRTH, YOU WORTHLESS BRA-”

“MAAAAAAAAAAAA!” He sounds even more harassed- and under his breath one could hear, if they strained- “mustn’t kill her yet, she’s needed for the plan, mustn’t kill her yet, but soon Teekl, oh yes, soon-”. (Somebody has Mommy Issues.)

The rasping man speaks over them all. “Although our… circumstances might have changed… The Light will reveal… all truths… in time.”

There is a small smattering of laughter- the rasping man has made a joke. Slowly, the screens switch off, each silhouette vanishing into blackness. Finally, only two silhouettes remain- the rasping man, and the oily snake.

Rasping man speaks first. “Do they… suspect?”

Oily Snake answers. “I doubt it. They were never involved in my areas of the plan- I doubt they understand the danger we've found ourselves in.”

“You… are not… telling me something… What is it?”

“Red Hood.”

“Ah… You worry that his training will… reveal our presence… prematurely?”

“I would be much happier if he were- taken out of the equation. Permanently.”

“Mmm… Red X, Cheshire, and…Sportsmaster… should be able to… handle things… adequately.”

The oily man lets out a bark of dark laughter. The room hushed itself- only the soft hum of electrical wiring sounds out.

The last two screens flicker off, and the unknown room is plunged into darkness.

Jade Nguyen has a problem. She’s eighteen now, but back when she was just barely sixteen, she had wild-monkey sex with a cutie from Star City- which got her pregnant. (Now where have I heard this story before…) That’s not her problem.

When her babies (fraternal twins) were born, she kept the girl, but let the boy go. It made a certain kind of sense- she is a girl (technically); her daughter looked like her. (I don’t have to tell anyone who the father is… I should be able to keep her safe…) That’s not her problem.

CADMUS Labs have, historically, been run by some of the sneakiest, most conniving bastards who ever lived. A member of the Harper family has always worked for CADMUS- always. (So what if it’s been, technically speaking, the same guy for five generations?) That’s her problem.

Jade didn’t know it then, but the Roy she slept with (the first Roy) had been bred for war- that is to say, his parents had been modified by CADMUS so that they would have an exquisitely well rounded child- one that would be a fantastic soldier. However, as he grew, his own nature asserted
itself; Roy (Roy Harper 1) is one of the most peaceful guys in the world.

They wanted a *sword*; so they stole Roy, and made a "copy" and left behind the copied Roy. (Jade had never met this Roy; this Roy was bi, and in a loving relationship.) But that’s not really her problem.

Her problem is this: her next target for assassination is *her own three year old son.*
There is only Pain.

Chapter Summary

Interlude 4
A moment of sweet sweet romance. Remember this day, for there will not be one like it again for a long time.

Roy was running late.

Never mind that he had been frantically trying to get some time away from his job; he was running late.

Never mind that he’d been planning this night out more ferociously than any of his forays into the world of superheroic endeavor; *he was running late.*

(And Kaldur had- changed a few weeks ago; he’s still *Kaldur* just… female. And horny. (And scary hormonal.))

*I’m so late, there won’t be enough time, fuckfuckfuckityfuckshidamnfuckfuckFUCK-

And then- he’s there. Roy looks around, sees no evidence of his love- or his roommate, but no, Johnny had told them that he would be in Gotham for a while; something about “not being a coward” or something.

Roy had *prepared* for this day, okay; he had gotten *flowers* and planned a *dinner* for Kaldur and bought the *expensive* kind of sushi- and if he hurries, right, he can maybe set up everything for his big momen-

Roy walks into the kitchen… and sees Kaldur (beautiful, wonderful, magnificent, amazing-) sitting on a kitchen stool, steadily working his way through the large tray of sushi Roy bought for today; (Wha-) He’s staring fixedly at a small, turquoise blue egg timer on the counter. A row of four little pink boxes sat near the timer; (Oh…) Kaldur’s leg bounced to some fast internal rhythm. The timer went off; brown, webbed hands shot out, and stopped short of each little box.

Roy walks forwards, his steps loud in the quiet kitchen. “I'll look.”

Kaldur almost levitates, trying to turn around to see Roy walking into the open kitchen, warm afternoon light burnishing his sharply cut red hair a shade of warm bronze; Kaldur can feel his heart trying to beat itself to death inside his ribcage- he can feel a small, strange fluttering lower down, beneath his stomach. *(The fear I feel is irrational- OHGOD WHAT IF HE DOESN’T WANT ME ANYMORE, WHAT IF HE CHANGES HIS MIND ABOUT HAVING CHILDREN WITH ME, AHGAHD WAT IF HE DUN LUV ME NO MOAR AAAAAAAALAAAAAAAALAAAAAA- f-f-f- fucking hormones- WAT IF HE DON WANT ME NO MORE AAAAAAAALAAAAAAALAAAAA-)*

Some of his inner turmoil shows on his face; they’ve been going through this same hormonal song
and dance for weeks; Roy knows what to do by now. “Hormones being weird?”

Kaldur starts to cry. “… Mnhmmm.” Sniff.

“Come here.” Roy wraps a strong arm around Kaldur’s shoulders, and reaches with his other hand to look at the four little boxes. Each one shows a pair of red lines- Test Positive.

Roy sighs. “I had hoped I would have been brave enough to do this before I knocked you up, but… here.” Roy’s had reaches out, opens a drawer- What? None of us keep anything in that drawer, it’s too small- and pulls out a wide, flat, red velvet box.

“I would have gotten you a ring, but this seemed more appropriate…”

It is a broad Atlantean collar- the traditional gift to confer betrothal. All such collars are handmade; this one is no exception. It is mainly in soft shades of blue- thousands of little beads strung in curves, loops, and spirals- all for the sea the colors for where in the sea I am from; at the edges- green and white, the colors of Shayeris; red and blue, the colors of my family…; where his jugular is, the symbol of the betrothed- Red and Yellow chevrons in a column, pointing up…; the traditional gaps for his gills-Oh, Roy….

“…H-how long did it t-take y-you to make this?” Kaldur is crying harder, now.

“I’ve been working on it since April, after you introduced me to your mother.”

Roy’s hands have gently lifted the ceremonial jewelry; he holds it in front of Kaldur, doesn’t dare to look him in the eye. His arms are wrapped around Kaldur, his chest pressed against his back. His voice rumbles into Kaldur, deep, warm, hesitant- “Would you like to… t-try it on?” The ceremonial words; Roy really went all out for this one.

“…Y-yes, Roy… I-I-” Kaldur chokes back tears of joy, “I would l-love to.” Roy’s callused fingers trace up Kaldur’s clavicles, gently stroke along his overly-sensitive gills; the minute clasps at the ends of the broad, intricately weaved collar clicking shut at the nape of Kaldur’s neck.

Roy presses a kiss into Kaldur’s cheek; Kaldur leans back against Roy’s warm chest. “Do…Do you want to… f-feel… it?”

“Y-yeah.”

A large, callused hand gently presses into a warm almost-curve; a tiny fluttering is felt. There is a kiss- searing, warm, cooling, refreshing; fears and self-doubts and weeks of worry washing away- and when the two break apart, their love has expanded, strengthened, once more.

(Later, they will find a gift-wrapped packet from the boys- inside will be the deed to the mill, the boys’ keys, and a note. The note would say only this:

Love is patient, Love is kind,
It does not envy, it does not boast,
It is not proud, it is not rude,
It is not self-seeking,
It is not easily angered,
It keeps no record of wrongs.
Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Lover never fails.

(Corinthians 13:4-8)

All my best wishes, you guys.

Johnny)
When Jade gave away her son, (Who she named Jason- Somebody in this family should have a choice about who they want to be-) CADMUS snapped him up almost before the ink on his birth certificate had dried. They took him, a newborn, and gave him to Dubbilex to raise with the other two, and trained him- made him think in tactical ways, gave him ideals that could never be reached- and Dubbilex… (Who was a mother, once, so long ago- she doesn’t remember her name; Mary, Margot, Mama- maybe her name was Mama- but she remembers her sons- beautiful boys, Terrence and Matthew. She was a scientist- and she was good at what she did- but when she objected to some of the more… morally incorrect experiments, CADMUS made her disappear. Waste not, Want not; they stripped away at what made her, her and made her be something else but she is smarter than they think- and she remembers being a mother. She still is a mother- not a very good mother, because good mothers can protect their children, but she is a mother still.)

Dubbilex knew exactly whose child Project: Red Hood really was. (Dubbilex is a powerful telepath, and mildly precognitive- it wasn’t very hard for her to… add a few extra programs into Red Hood’s mind. A language or two; some skills he might find useful- nothing drastic, or noticed easily; things he would have had if his mother had raised him- it was easy enough for her to do. Her precognition helped her choose what to give him- and then, when she found out what her jailors superiors had planned for him, she added some other things to his mind- things they didn’t know she knew, things that would get her killed if they even suspected that she knew what she knew. She hid those things inside his mind, under layer after layer of not-there-nothing-to-see, go away- and then she got him out of there because she was a mother once, so long ago, and she knew what they wanted him for and she is a mother now and she couldn’t let them she couldn’t…

Dubbilex started the CADMUS fire that day; she had other reasons too- Cassandra, and Conner- her precognition allowed her to know some few little things about people she met, but the future is wibbly-wobbly: it changes at the slightest provocation. Her precognition let her know where she could find people, some little things about her world- nothing big except- if those three stay here, everybody dies. Everybody- the world is consumed by endless war, the sky is burned in eldritch fire- I can’t let that happen. I can’t can’tCAN’T-

So, Dubbilex got them out; CADMUS learned what she knew- she tried as hard as she could, tried with everything she had, but they ripped the knowledge from her bleeding mind; I was a mother once; When you stole my sons from me, those three became mine; I refused to allow you to harm them further; I refuse now. I did what I did out of love- I would do it again in a heartbeat. Do what you will with me- they are forever beyond your reach.

They killed her; "lost" the body-

“We have spares. Get rid of it.”

“Yes sir.”)

So, now that Dubbilex has done what she’s done, Red Hood is in possession of some of the most secret, most fought over information in the world- eventually (if he lives long enough) he will have access to the information Dubbilex hid inside his head. This is a problem for the owners of that information; they would much rather that no one knew that information, much less a hero-brat.
Jade Nguyen has a problem; it’s the kind of problem that will kill her, if given the time. (She’s a mother, now; she can’t make herself kill her son. Red X will not force her to kill her son- he helped her give birth to her twins, he helped her raise her daughter, he will not force me to kill my only son, he won’t-) but Sportsmaster will. Sportsmaster has no such compunctions or reservations- he doesn’t know that the target is his grandson, but if he did, he still would go through with his mission- he lost his soul when his wife, Paula, lost her legs.

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Terry McGinnis is worried confused. He’s been a Shadow for as long as he can remember- he tries not to think about gloomy cold place, barely even remembered if not for the warm it must have been a sweater, but sweaters don’t speak- and he just wishes he could remember what that voice from so long ago had said. His friend, Jade, was terrified. She was going to have to choose between herself, and her mission- chances are, she would choose the mission. Jade has made too large of a name for herself to just… vanish like her sister did four years ago, and Shadows don’t allow failure. (Or she would commit suicide- He knew who they were going to go kill- he was the midwife at the birth; She named me fucking godfather goddamn it, I don’t want to do this, I don’t- I can’t-)

(His little brother, Matt, is…not very happy. He’s an excellent poisoner, for sure; he always completes his missions, every time, but…He’s never liked doing them. Matt is much happier making Terry new tricks- and to be honest, (which is rare, for a Shadow-) Terry is much happier when Matt isn’t out killing people.)

Terry is also relieved that he’s only the inside man on this mission- his job is to get Cheshire and Sportsmaster into position, and be the lookout; nothing more, nothing less. If he can help it (and he can) he’s not going to kill his godson. He’s not going to be that guy.

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Wonder Girl-no, my name is Cassandra, Cassandra loves Themyscira. She loves the fields along the western shore, and the massive pines near the caldera; she loves the salle, loves the sparkly shine of clean swords, loves the smell of oil soap, the feel of the hard-packed sand beneath her feet when she spars with- even if you don’t like her, her name is Donna; she loves the sound of the ocean, the color-the exact and specific color, I don’t ever want to forget it, not ever- of the sky just after sunrise, reflected off the sea; she loves her new clothing- awkward as she feels in it, it is better than what she wore before- so much better.

Above all, she loves Wonder Woman-no, her name is Diana. She loves Diana like she loves Themyscira- like they’ll vanish if she looks away for too long. She loves Diana with a quiet desperation- follows her like a duckling; mimics her every move. (Hippolyta, Diana’s mother, is…unsympathetic.

“Now you know what it’s like, daughter of mine.”

“…Surely I was-”

“You and your sister were worse. Now, go teach your daughter how to swim.”

A soft sigh of acceptance. “Yes, mother.”)

Donna doesn’t like Cassandra. Oh, sure, she’ll pretend for her sister- but something about Cassandra rubs her the wrong way. The worst part is that there is no real reason for her to feel this way. She
hopes—hopes to the gods—that it isn’t petty jealousy; she should be better than that; she shouldn’t be jealous of some half-breed not-even Amazonian girl-child. (She isn’t. She swears to the gods, she isn’t.) Honestly, the girl has been in residence for weeks; she should be over this by now.

Donna just doesn’t get it—didn’t get why Cassandra was so weird; couldn’t she see how boring Themyscira is? Surely she had seen many things in Man’s World—Gods, I would love to see Man’s World at least once, before I’m too old and set in my ways... things more amazing and fantastic than the stupid, boring fields, and the ugly, old, training ring, and Gods, she must think us so... Plebian!!

All these emotions finally came to a head when, in a moment of frustration, Donna broke Cassandra’s nose with a well-timed punch.

Around the year 1200 B.C., a small group of female Olympian gods desired to create a nation of warrior women that would help to spread their ideals to the world. Met with disinterest or opposition by most of their male counterparts, the goddesses Hestia, Aphrodite, Demeter, Athena and Artemis convened in the land of the Underworld.

There, in the Cavern of Souls, were kept the spirits of all women who had unjustly died at the hands of a man. The five goddesses combined their powers to grant life to all of the souls—-with the exception of three, whom they decided would have special future purposes.

Through their magics, the goddesses formed thousands of super-humanly strong, adult female bodies from the clay bed of a lake in Greece, and imbued them with the spirits from the Well of Souls. The first such creature to emerge from the lake was dubbed Hippolyta by the goddesses, and she was crowned queen of these women, to be henceforth known as Amazons. The second woman to emerge from the lake was called Antiope, and according to the goddesses she was to rule as second in command.

The Amazons were to serve the Olympian gods in proselytical manner, spreading their principles and devotion to a largely barbarian world. They were given a city-state in Greece (the land adjacent to the lake of their birth), and they called it Themyscira. There they thrived for many years before they were attacked by the forces of Hercules, and were saved only through the intervention of the goddesses.

With their home destroyed and prospects for success in their worldly mission dashed, Antiope led a portion of the Amazons away from her sister and the influence of the gods, to travel the world in search of a new purpose. They eventually settled in Ancient Egypt, becoming known as the The Amazons of Bana Migdhall. This contingent would eventually be wiped out when Teth-Adam turned against Shazam; a heart-broken Shazam would eventually reincarnate Antiope in the body of a girl named Mary.

Most Amazons, however, stayed with Hippolyta. To repay the women for their service, the remaining Amazons were sent far away from their home in Greece to a mystical, paradisiacal island in uncharted oceans. There the Amazons took up a new gods-given
purpose -- to guard the Earth from a terrible evil buried beneath the island.

For thousands of years the Amazons of Themyscira stayed isolated from humanity, until about 1943, when Diana Trevor, an American airplane pilot, crash-landed off-shore. Diana Trevor became friends with the inhabitants of Themyscira and taught them of the changes in the world beyond their protected shores. Shortly thereafter the demons locked beneath the island almost escaped, but through the bravery and ultimate sacrifice of Trevor, the threat was averted. She was given an Amazon's burial and hailed as one of the greatest of all Amazon warriors.

The gods of Olympus were greatly disturbed by Trevor's entrance through the mystical barriers that guarded Themyscira, and recognized it as a sign of their weakening powers. When Hippolyta soon followed her mounting desire to ask the gods to grant her children, they easily agreed, and took it as an opportunity to create a super-warrior who would champion their causes as the Amazons had originally been intended to. Telling Hippolyta to sculpt a baby out of clay, the gods that created the Amazons brought life to the earthen baby, and the first child of Themyscira was born. She was named Diana, in honor of Trevor, and her soul was one of the last remaining spirits from the Well of Souls. When Diana was four, Hippolyta was commanded to sculpt another child; this one was named Danae; since Diana couldn’t actually say Danae when she was four, she called her little sister “Donna”- the nickname stuck. When she grew to adulthood, Princess Diana left Themyscira and became known to the world as Wonder Woman. Princess Danae- Donna- was left behind.

The fight had been going for hours. At first, the trainers on duty had been predisposed to breaking it up when Donna hooked Cassandra’s ankle, and almost slammed her into the dirt; Hippolyta, who was passing by, stayed their hands.

("They need to work this out for themselves. Let them."

“…Yes ma’am.”)

Cassandra retaliated with a short elbow strike to the ribs; it connected, and drove Donna back- but the follow-up kick to the head was dodged at the last second. Donna shifted her weight from side to side - Forward-to-side pattern coming up - and threw herself behind a punch that started somewhere below her feet; Cassandra had seen it coming, and sidestepped the nasty punch, catching Donna’s wrist and tugging her further off-balance. Oh no you don’t- Donna threw her foot between Cassandra’s knees, and yanked her thigh to her chest, throwing both of them to the ground.

The two girls began to grapple; they both thought, in perfect stereo, Grappling sucks, but you’re winning-

Cassandra pinned Donna back-first to the ground; enough is enough. “What’s your damage?” Cassandra’s low, mellow voice has risen to a near-murderous shriek- Donna has been… less than kind almost since Cassandra came to Themyscira, and right now, right this very second, I can’t take any more of your shit- what in Hades did I do to you?

Donna screams back “I hate your attitude!” (Oh, hypocrisy, I know thee well.) Donna’s feet catch Cassandra in the sternum- she goes flying backwards; Donna leaps to her feet, rushes forwards to catch Cassandra’s stomach with a fist- but no, Cassandra has flipped in mid-air, lifted her arms to guard- so, Donna improvises. Her fist rises through the air, and smashes into Cassandras face; a quiet
crunch is heard by both combatants. *Oh, that is it.*

(Cassandra has a few nasty triggers- Martian Manhunter was able to remove the worst of them, but two of the triggers are so ingrained in her psyche that even adjusting them would have radical repercussions on her personality. One of those triggers is getting her nose broken.)

Cassandra’s face has completely blanked out; the only expression on her face (if it can be called an expression) is the tears of pain dripping from her eyes.

*I... probably shouldn’t have done that…*

The fight becomes serious now- and finally ends when Donna puts Cassandra into a painful hold; the struggling only twists her arms more. The pain snaps her out of the *fightfightfightfightFIGHT- wha-* and finally- finally, after weeks of the wrong conclusions, and snark and cutting remarks- finally the two girls are in a place where they can talk to each other.

"Why don’t you like me? What did I do?"

"I told you- I hate the way you… You’re just so- enamored with this place, and I’ve lived here all my life and I can’t stand it here; Man’s World must be more- more something than here- What do you see in this place? How can this place make you so overjoyed every day when I can’t even…"

"…This place is everything I ever wanted when I was growing up. I don’t… I’ve never seen the things in Man’s World you seem to think are so amazing; until I came here, I had never seen the fields, or the sun, or the sky- never swam in the ocean, nor sparred with another, nor mended a net… The things you find mundane- Donna, until a few weeks ago, I had no idea those things existed.”

Donna is staring at Cassandra. *Oh. That explains a lot.*

"What was all that crap with the dirty looks, then?"

Cassandra looks sheepish. "You kind of started it, and then I wasn't sure how to stop- could we just start over?"

"...Sure. Hello, my name is Donna. I am of Themyscira."

"Hello, my name is Cassandra. I am of Themyscira."

The two girls smile at each other for the first time- and then they realize that they have an audience.

("Must you always be right, Mother?"

"Yes.")
The boys were back in Gotham, after giving the two love-birds a house- it wasn’t very hard to transfer from SU to Gotham Tech, (well, it wasn’t impossible), and they had… business to attend to. Besides, it’s been a long few months since his shadow has been seen in the Narrows- Settle down, Narrows. Daddy’s back. Shut the fuck up, Scare-creep. Make me, Dork! ‘If you both don’t shut the fuckin’ hell up, I’ll come in there and make you.’ Sorry, Johnny. Sorry, Johnny.

In another world, Jonathan Crane was a coward. It’s completely understandable- he was bullied for most of his life; whenever he tried to do anything, he was always (forcefully) shut down. In this world, Johnny Crane is still a coward, but he’s also admitted that he’s a coward- and he’s trying to do something about it. Meaning, he’s going to at least try to have a healthy relationship with Bruce Mr. Wayne, and do something about the crush he’s had since he was fourteen. (He still doesn’t know what that something is, exactly, but he does know that he’ll have to actually be in Gotham for anything to work. Skype doesn’t like him very much, yanno?)

Of course, it being Gotham, nothing really goes his way.

The boys pack their things up in Platinum Flatts- they didn’t actually bring all that much with them from Gotham, only the essentials; it only takes four banker’s boxes and a duffel-bag to be completely moved out. A quick jaunt to the nearby Zeta-tube keyed for Gotham, and he’s back home. His boxes take no more than fifteen minutes to carry up the back stairs of the manor; the duffel gets sorted into dirty laundry piles, and then he’s back in his room, lying on his bed- and he has no idea what he’s going to do next. It’s eleven-thirty which is early, for Gotham’s hero set- Let’s go patrolling, then.

He soon discovers the real reason Gothamites hate Star City- ‘We were only gone for two years, how can I not know where anything is?’ Sounds like a personal problem. Shut up, ‘Crow. Gotham and Star City are almost exact reversed replicas of each other; it’s that almost that’s giving the boys trouble. They’ve lived for the past two years in a city where they got lost almost every day- and that’s not counting inside the grocery store. (Oh yes, when the architects of the two city’s decided to feud, they didn’t pull any punches.) Now that they’re back home, they can’t even walk down the street without getting turned around. (Of course, that might have something to do with the magic that Ceallach Fawcett used in the founding of the city- all the inhabitants of the cities Ceallach founded have… issues with each other, but the magic she used recognizes Starmies as usurpers, and tends to do nasty things to them; the feud between the two cities wouldn’t be anywhere near as bad otherwise.)

The boys are roof-hopping aimlessly- three muggings, an attempted rape he’s not going to be doing that any time soon and a robbery foiled- not too shabby- and then there is an explosion. The police scanner in his ear was ominously silent- and no sirens sounded out. Narrows. Has to be. Crimes in the Narrows almost never get reported- most cops don’t care about Upper Gotham, much less Lower Gotham- and the Narrows is the worst part of Lower Gotham.

A howling wind pushes him back- it’s July, the only way the wind could be this cold is if- Permafrost. He’s en route within seconds. When he gets there, half a building is destroyed. It’s one
of the many half abandoned apartments in the Narrows- but that’s not what makes him scared-  *Permafrost prefers to wear that shade of blue… Ohgod-‘Maureen!’*

The apartment’s water-main had broken in the explosion; a half-destroyed wall had collapsed over a thick orb of ice. Scarecrow quickly levered the wall off the ice; inside the small ovoid was a half-naked young woman- Permafrost. Her uniform is shredded- ‘*What were you doing, Maureen?’*

‘She’s not *breathing* guys-’ Johnny, if you panic, we can’t help her- *Less talky, more do-ey; the longer we wait, the more water freezes inside her lungs; the worse the freezing gets-*

Johnny rips the remains of her face-masking tube scarf off- her goggles are cracked, but that’s not important, he needs to get the water out of her lungs and stop her from freezing further *now*. The mask attached to her dress at the neck- her dress is so shredded, it doesn’t matter if he rips her cowl off; he can’t really make it worse. His hand reaches into his belt- grasps a liquid chemical heater and sucks in a mouthful; he doesn’t swallow it- that’s not what it’s for. *No time for nerves*- His lips press down into hers; the heater in his mouth lets him touch her without freezing his skin. The heater is one of Doc’s specials- it will turn into a fine mist when it comes into contact with anything below 0 degrees Celsius. It’s already melting the ice sealing Maureen’s mouth shut; warmed her jaw enough for his tongue to tease her lips open. He exhales into her throat- the chemical mixture seeps through her trachea, wisps into her lungs- her chest softens enough for him to attempt resuscitation.

He kneels above her, his knees at her hips; his large hands press down sharply on her small chest; water gushes out of her opened mouth. He breathes into her again, filling her lungs with air- nothing happens for a moment. Then, like a fish out of water, Permafrost thrashes for a moment, vomits up water and smoggy sludge. Her skin changes from its heroic icy pallor to a soft, touchable peachy-cream; her hair warms from snow-frost white to sunny blonde; she is coughing and shivering with adrenaline- and it is at that very moment that the boys realize that they are kneeling above the half-naked form of their crush.

She was wearing a luxuriant blue bra under her dress- ‘*Oh my dear fuckin’ god, it’s a La Perla’*- and the water gushing out of the broken pipes had stuck the thin scraps of blue fabric to her shaking body. As the water sprayed, her pear-shaped frame heaved with exertion; the shredded remains of her dark grey-blue figure-skater’s dress slowly sloughed off of her wet body- **Welcome back to Gotham, Johnny-boy.** Shut up, ‘Crow.

The boys are many things- chivalrous is one of them. Almost before their eyes have time to register Maureen’s half-naked form, their arms have taken off the armored over tunic *which will be massive on her, but*- They hold it out to her- and the costume underneath that hooded tunic (reminiscent of Red Arrow’s) is one that shows enough skin for their extremely red blush to be visible. (This isn’t hard- when the boys blush, it tends to be a full body affair.)

Small blue gloved hands gently tug the tunic away from Scarecrow- his eyes are shut tight behind the reflective yellow lenses of his cowl; a soft rustling can be faintly heard in the night-darkened alley. When the boys open their eyes, Maureen is *‘wearing our tunic, oh my sweet dear god, I can’t handle all these-’* Woah!She’s very, ah, aesthetically pleasing, isn’t she?

She is blushing too- her heart-shaped face has gone bright red in the gloom. The tunic dwarfs her frame- she is five foot six; the boys are six foot ten, with the broad chest of a man- his tunic hangs on Maureen like she is a very small child. The boys are very carefully not looking directly at Maureen, but out of the corner of his eye he can see the soft curve of a clavicle, the sweetly shy expression of embarrassment on her face; if anything, her crush on him has gotten worse, not better- she can’t even
bring herself to speak at the moment. Sadly, the sentiment is mutual- the boys have to write out a note to even attempt to render her aid.

(Would you like a ride back?) They toss the note in her general direction.

The small scrap of paper hits him in the head- (Yes.)

(Okay. I’ll call my bike.)

He taps a hidden button on his armguard- and a frighteningly souped up motorcycle revs inside the Batcave, roars out into the night.

(It’s called the Ghoul-ride- Johnny named it when he was fifteen; ‘Crow and Doc had no objections. Dick definitely had objections, but soon dropped them when the boys saved him from the Joker with a timely (Dynamic) intervention.

“Not one fuckin' word owt of yer. I've taken enough grief, right, for callin' me fuckin' 'cycle the fuckin' Ghoul-ride. I'm the fuckin' Scarecrow and I can call me fuckin' 'cycle wotever the fuckin' hell I want ter fuckin' call it, right. Do yer fuckin' understand?”

Thankfully, the Joker is not a fool. He nods, quietly, and then says, almost fearfully- “I… assume you’ll be wanting him back now?”

“Wot was yer first clue?” The wall of the warehouse is non-existent; it was never built to withstand ten-thousand rpms of force concentrated in a saw-blade mounted where a headlight should be.)

The Ghoul-ride arrives with a screeching wail; the boys waste no time in hemming and hawing- they lift Maureen up onto the seat in front of them, and then mount up themselves; with a dying-cat’s wail, the Ghoul-ride screams off into the night. It is worth noting that the two young people haven’t actually said anything to each other; the last time they tried talking to each other, it was for an inter-school project for their psychology classes- and neither of them could form coherent sentences on Skype, much less in person. (They eventually resorted to sending each other descriptive e-mails, after Johnny broke his nose; somehow, it was less personal writing each other letters over the internet. They passed the course with an A+, and kept up the correspondence.)

(Funnily enough, there is, in fact, a word for what Maureen and the boys are for each other. That word is “mamihlapinatapai”, which translates as: “Two people who are both at a loss as to what to do about the other.” This word doesn’t necessarily mean something romantic- but in this case, it definitely does. This word is also only in effect when the two people mentioned above are in physical proximity with each other.)
This part of the story is about Young Justice, and its role in the world of Superheroics:

A covert operation is an operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor. It is intended to create a political effect which can have implications in the military, intelligence or law enforcement arenas. Covert operations aim to fulfill their mission objectives without any parties knowing who sponsored or carried out the operation. It is normally financed by government revenues but in this age of super-empowered individuals and corporations they could become a common tool of power beyond traditional war and diplomacy.

Under United States law, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) must lead covert operations unless the president finds that another agency should do so and properly informs the congress. Normally, the CIA is the US Government agency legally allowed to carry out covert action. The CIA’s authority to conduct covert action comes from the National Security Act of 1947. President Ronald Reagan issued Executive Order 12333 titled in 1984. This order defined covert action as "special activities", both political and military, that the US Government could legally deny. The CIA was also designated as the sole authority under the 1991 Intelligence Authorization Act and in Title 50 of the United States Code Section 413(e). The CIA must have a "Presidential Finding" issued by the President of the United States in order to conduct these activities under the Hughes-Ryan amendment to the 1991 Intelligence Authorization Act. These findings are then monitored by the oversight committees in both the US Senate and the House of Representatives.

As a result of this framework, the CIA “receives more oversight from the Congress than any other agency in the federal government”. The Special Activities Division (SAD) is a division of the CIA’s National Clandestine Service, responsible for Covert Action and "Special Activities". These special activities include covert political influence and paramilitary operations. The division is overseen by the United States Secretary of State.

In a covert operation, the identity of the sponsor is concealed, while in a clandestine operation the operation itself is concealed. Put differently, clandestine means "hidden," while covert means "deniable." The term stealth refers both to a broad set of tactics aimed at providing and preserving the element of surprise and reducing enemy resistance and to a set of technologies (stealth technology) to aid in those tactics. While secrecy and stealthiness are often desired in clandestine and covert operations, the terms secret and stealthy are not used to formally describe types of missions- not with the military.

The Justice League takes great pains to not be the military.

The Justice League is considered its own country. This doesn’t come up very often- except when, on occasion, tiny little things happen- like a little war in some backwoods country that is governed by a Supervillian; if the Justice League had a governing body (which officially, it doesn’t, but if it did) Batman would be the Head of the Intelligence Division in the Justice League- if such a thing existed in the JL, which it doesn’t.

Going on from that thought, if there were a part of the JL devoted to quietly taking care of business-
which there isn’t, but if there were- there would be a team of… Heroes (and Heroines) dedicated to Quietly Taking Care of Business. They would be led by Batman- if they exist, which they don’t- and be given the most politically dangerous missions, missions that, for reasons of diplomacy and stealth, cannot be undertaken by anyone other than the Team- which doesn’t exist, so don’t get any ideas.

(As for that little dust-up in some country in the Middle East- maybe Qurac, maybe Biyalia- well, getting part of your liver cut out is generally a good deterrent from being overly meddlesome in the affairs of someone else’s State. Incidentally, Scarecrow has a price on his head in Biyalia- apparently he managed to royally piss off Queen Bee…)

The Yeoman Observational Undercover and National Ghost-operators, aka, Y. O. U. N. G. Justice Team is a selection of covertly operational heroes specifically picked for their skills and talents. That would be the official line from Batman, when he was asked about them.

And that would be true.

The Y. O. U. N. G. Justice Team is a collection of greenhorn heroes and grizzled veterans (oddly, most veterans are from the Birds of Prey, not the League), dedicated to Quietly Taking Care of Business- and never letting on that there even was Business to Take Care Of. At the time of its inception, the roster would include:

Captain Marvel- Earth’s mightiest mortal; Superboy- a walking weirdness magnet; Kid Flash- Fastest boy alive; Artemis- Hunter of Hunters; Robin- the Boy Wonder; Permafrost- the Snow Queen.

The SIC would be The Scarecrow- Master of Fear, Scourge of the Middle East, Terror of the Triad, etcetera; the Team would be Co-lead by The Wonder Twins- Wonder Girl Red, a volatile heavy and Wonder Girl Blue, an overly-cautious heavy.

The first few months of the team’s existence would be turbulent, and their missions would add many teammates, allies, and comrades to the YOUNG Justice team- along with enemies, both powerful and mundane.

Their first mission is notable for one reason: it was where the chain of command was established, certain operational procedures were created, and…

Well, that was the mission where Wayne Manor caught on fire again.

M’gann doesn’t like Earth like she thought she would. Oh, sure, she isn’t stared at like on Mars- but Earth is so… Quiet.

(There’s nothing wrong with quiet,

it’s like Before like Before Like BEFORE THERE IS NONETHERENOBODY

Earth is nicer than Mars, to be honest-

too Quiet Where are they Coming from me Going to take me to the Still Place don’t wanna Go to the Still Place-

NO ONE COMES BACK FROM THE STILL PLACE
and my Uncle is kind-

TRAITOR! VILLAIN! FEIND!-

I hope I can make Earth-friends here-

(They won’t like you, M’gann- they didn’t want you on Mars, why would they want you on Earth?)

… I think- I might have made a mistake…

No. I will find a way to be happy here.)

M’gann M’orzz took her first kill when she was 12 Earth-years old; the War ended when she was 16. She’s 48, now- she has nightmares about the war, on occasion. She remembers the face of her first kill- he was a few years older than her; not even in his first growth- he didn’t, he wouldn’t stop attacking, and she was just a scout for the militia, and he wouldn’t stop hurting her, and she’s a scout, just a scout- there are rules- WHY WON’T HE STOP and she didn’t want to die, she didn’t and he wouldn’t stop STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP!

and his heart just... Stopped.

He had a strange look on his face, when he fell soft thump on the ground, all strain from the body gone and what was his name, everyone who’s real has a name, but he didn’t so he isn’t real, and unreal things don’t die and I can’t kill unreal things I can’t- I can’t- Oh Gods-, and M’gann- M’gann is a soldier now, she’s not a little girl anymore, she’s a soldier- she’s an adult in every way that matters and it’s time to put away childish things, and so what if he didn’t have a name, he was the enemy, and don’t think about cousin M’randa who didn’t check in (-Espions don’t not check in-) and how your older sister, her mother, cried for days after- don’t think about if he had a mother or not- only real people have families and only real people can be killed and He wasn’t Real, because if he was real then that means- I made someones mother cry like R’vaan cried when M’randa didn’t check in and- NO! He wasn’t Real, he didn’t have family, he wasn’t real-

M’gann M’orzz isn’t ready to be a hero yet.

-Too many demons dancing in your head-

This is the first mission the YOUNG Justice team undertook, and the repercussions it had on the world around them:

Now:

The first sign things had well and truly gone pear-shaped was when the X-shuriken smashed through the window and exploded into clouds of red smog- the second sign was when the window crashed inwards thirty seconds later, disgorging a trio of assassins.
Three years ago:

Gotham North School is one of the only K-12 schools in Gotham. It has existed in one form or another since before there was a Gotham; back when the place was called Chikagami, the area that became Gotham North was the place where the children of the local clans came to be educated in aspects of magic, warfare, and inter-clan relations- Gotham has always been a center of trade, despite the very real demon underneath it.

Artemis never really explained to Helena why, exactly, she left Gotham. The catalyst was a pamphlet, from the nurses office at Gotham North- she was in because she was bleeding down there, which had never happened before, and she had never heard of it happening before and JJ wasn’t there to ask, not anymore, and Mom wasn’t talking again -She used to play those Vietnamese songs so loudly the neighbors would bang on the ceiling; songs so loud and sad you could hear it from six blocks away; it was wailing in a language I barely understood- She’d play that music whenever that man upset her which was way too often, and mom wouldn’t speak for days and days after- and she was waiting in the nurses office for her panties to dry out, and she would just wear her gym-shorts home, no big deal; she had grabbed a handful of pamphlets from the waiting room so she wouldn’t be too bored- and one (just that one) stuck out to her young eyes.

-Neglect is the most common type of abuse. Some research claims children are more likely to be neglected if they're poor because parents are preoccupied with survival – but wealthy families definitely can and do neglect their kids. Neglect occurs when parents or guardians don't provide food, shelter, safety, supervision, clothes, education, attention, or medical treatment – often it's about what they don't do, more than it is about what they do.-

She read the whole thing, stretched it flat and hid it inside her locker, under the false bottom she had made when she was in Study Hall last semester and the school got held hostage by Firefly; four hours of nothing to do but wait for the cops, or the Bat-clan, to do something, and you'll never have a better chance, Warthog- a quick stop in the Art rooms for some modifications and the only way you could tell that it wasn’t the real bottom is if you reached out and touched it; she memorized the 11 Warning Signs of Emotional Abuse:

1. Constant phone calls, text-messages, e-mails, IMs, etc. to “check up on you” (harrassment).
2. Extreme jealousy when you talk to or spend time with other people.
3. Name-calling or putting you down, either when you're alone or with other people.
4. Their behavior that you have to apologize or make excuses for.
5. Statements like, "I can't live without you. If you leave me, I'll kill myself."
6. You feel depressed, anxious, and unhappy in your relationship.
7. You're scared to upset or make your partner angry.
8. You've seen your partner hurt or talk down to other people.
9. You're down on yourself, or even hate yourself, especially when you're together.
10. You lie about the bruises or cuts you have.
11. You don't spend as much time with your friends, and you feel isolated.

And god help her, but all of that was so familiar-

She watched herself- watched her mother- watched that man- and it was All. There. Every bit of it-
even the stuff she wouldn’t have expected; she doesn’t have friends, but her sister is gone, and she hasn’t spoken to Matt or Terry in so long- she can’t even remember what happy felt like, but whatever it is, what she has right now is not it, and she’s always been scared of the that man - how long, exactly, has she felt like a worthless reject, because that wasn’t always there, was it; replace the word “partner” with “father” and… I’ve got to get out of here… I think- I think I understand why you left, JJ… I just wish you had taken me with you- but I don’t blame you for going… not anymore…

That was when she started to solidify the idea that she -need to fucking leave, okay, mom loves you, but she can’t save you, so you need to save yourself, and JJ isn’t coming back for you, so you need to leave on your own like she did- It might have taken three years to work, but god as her witness, it worked and she got enough of a head start to get far enough away for some of her “survival training” to wear off - I’ll never be that fucking hungry and cold again, so help me god- long enough to get clothing she’s comfortable in- stuff that fits her, and disguises her; weapons she can use without hurting herself- weapons she’s good with- knives, a compound bow with a quiver full of trick arrows, small-scale explosives- none of it fancy, but all things her fa that man wouldn’t let her use; and enough bloody-mindedness to kill off everyone who would dare make her return to that fucking place-

That said, she had never… never forgotten what her sister looked like when she fought; never forgotten her sometimes babysitter/trainer/sparring partner/friend/older brother, Terry, or his little brother (her sometimes playmate) Matt; Nothing on this green Earth would ever allow her to forget what that man sounds like when he speaks.

Now:

Sportsmaster says something to the effect of “Let’s do this-” and Artemis flips her shit. One second timed just right- a blue arrow slices through the air, stabbing itself into Sportsmaster’s left eye-

Thirty Seconds ago:

< Artemis, fall back! We are not cleared to engage with hostiles; this is a Guarding mission only! >

< Fuck That Shit! Those are Shadows- I know that one! Shadows only exist to kill people- and who are you trying to kid, Blue? This is mission went FUBAR days ago, and you know it, so don’t you tell me that this is no fucking stupid guarding mission- I am going to engage those hostiles, and just you try to stop me, Blue- >

< Calm your tits, Artemis. Stay in the servant’s hallway, and for the love of all that is holy, DO NOT ENGAGE WITHOUT BACKUP, m’kay? We don’t know all of whom we’re dealing with- better safe than dead. >
Now:

On reflection, she hadn’t meant to use one of her lock-removal arrows- she had meant to use one of the regular sharp-points, but… Shit Happens. (She refused to think about how meaningless the death of that man was; she had expected to feel… Joy, or Sorrow, or even Rage- but all that is there is… nothing. Relief, maybe; he’s dead now- it’s over. You can’t relax just yet- but this demon can die now; it’s okay to… move on. Maybe- maybe call your mother sometime… maybe.)

The acid inside the arrow was meant to melt through thick, heavy locks; make holes in doors- but it melts through Sportsmaster’s grey-matter and skull just as easily. Sploogage slimes out of his mouth and ears- the man is dead.

(For now. After all, the man is a valuable employee of a group with access to Lazarus Pits- and the fact that the majority of his brain was just disintegrated is… just a bonus really. )

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Lazarus Pits are composed of a unique unknown chemical blend that bubbles up somewhere within the Earth's crust to the surface at key points on Earth, typically at the junction of ley lines. The substance possesses the ability to rejuvenate the sick and injured, and even resurrect the dead. The pits also decrease the age of the user depending on how long they stay submerged in the pit. If a healthy person goes into the pits, they will be killed in most instances.

Though Lazarus Pits are undeniably powerful and useful, they come with side effects, both of which happen immediately after the user emerges. The user becomes temporarily insane and gains increased strength for a brief period.

Did you know that one of the less- insanity/murder-killy side-effects of the Pits is the whitening of hair?

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Cheshire doesn’t pause for Sportsmaster’s demise- the thing that made that man her father died long ago; for the first time in close to seven years, the sisters Crock stand before each other on the battle field.

(Red X, standing slightly to one side, feels a sudden moment of deja-vu; where have I seen hair that blonde before? Not that fucker, but someone else…

Triple X ignores all goings on- Alice is directing him from outside; she got the plans for Wayne manor a few days ago- she swiped the ones from 1855 to the present day, made notations about what is there, and what isn’t there; planned the best way to get to the target; went through them with him- he needs to go through the door Artemis just came through, it’s the fastest way to-)

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Seven Years Ago (thereabouts, if you squint):
Fighting arts in the Malay Archipelago arose out of hunting methods and military training by the region's native inhabitants. The descendants of former headhunters still perform ancient war-dances which are considered the precursor of the freestyle form in silat. While these aborigines retained their tribal way of life, the Indo-Malay diaspora instead based their culture on China and India. By adopting the Indian faiths of Hinduism and Buddhism, their social structure became more organized. Evidence shows that silat was influenced by both Chinese and Indian martial arts. Many of the region's medicinal practices and weapons originated in either India or China, and silat's thigh-slapping actions are reminiscent of Hindu wrestling. The Chinese community also practiced their own localized martial arts known askuntao, which both influenced and borrowed from silat.

Although numerous myths attempt to explain the institutionalization of silat, most of them concern only a specific style. The earliest evidence of silat taught in its present form is found in Sumatra where, according to local legend, a woman based her combat system on the movements of animals that she had seen fighting. Masters still believe that the first styles of silat were created by observing animals, and these styles were probably derived from animal-based Indian martial arts. In the fifth or 6th century, pre-determined sets are said to have been introduced by the Buddhist monk Bodhidharma who came from India to Southeast Asia via the Sumatra-based kingdom of Srivijaya in Palembang. Through this connection, silat is also used as a method of spiritual training in addition to self-defense.

Silat was eventually used by the defence forces of Langkasuka, Champa, Srivijaya, Beruas, Melaka, Makasar, Aceh, Majapahit, Gangga Negara, Pattani and other kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Except for generals and royalty, Indonesia-Malay warriors wore minimal armor, if any at all. A rattan shield, or a breastplate at most, was the only protective gear available to the average soldier. This may have been one of the reasons why the older styles relied more on agility than they do today. Despite the Hindu caste system which held sway in ancient times, silat was never confined to any particular social class or gender but was practiced by all without restrictions. Even today, it is often taught in families who have inherited cultural traditions such as woodcarving, dance, herbalism or the playing of musical instruments.

“Ow!”

“Again. With feeling.”

“M-mom? I- I know that Silat is- is the fight, and the strike and defending yourself- but what is Pencak? Why do I even need it? This is so hard and I can’t even-”

“Jade...” A sigh. “Come here, my darling. I will tell you a secret. Pencak is- it is the show. I know you do not like to hear this, but you need to understand; there is no Silat without Pencak. It is the flash of the sharpened blade, it is the color of the samping and the cindai, it is, it is the music we dance to- inside our hearts. You remember what I told you, about the music?”

“You told me... that when I had mastered these skills, I would dance and fight to music only I could hear- that I would become unbeatable, in that moment.”

“The only way to hear that music is with Pencak, my darling... Now, try again. This time, hold your
For what it’s worth (read: not much), Jade Nguyen loves pencak silat- it’s a good way to spend time with mom away from dad, and when she does it right she looks so pretty and mom looks so… happy, like she’s forgotten about dad, and work, and… life, for just a second. And it’s fun, and she’s good at it too; she’s not so good at the moon lute, but… she likes the sounds.

She’s very good at the potions- picking the flowers and the nuts and the seeds, putting them together just so- it all makes her very happy. Although sometimes… sometimes she gets this feeling that the stuff she’s learning with the Herbs- it was never meant for what she’s doing with it. (There is a reason her children are named Lian and Jason.)

“Ooogh- Jade, this is impossible!”

“No, it isn’t. Again.”

“…You said to me once- you said that I would be able to hear the music, when I fought.”

“What of it?”

“…What if they- What if they hear the music too? Jade- what if- what if I’m… not good enough?”

Jade smiled a small, grim toothed-smile- there was no happiness or love in it; it was the smile of an assassin, not a sister. “Little Sister, if they hear the music too, then you must make your music different from theirs- faster, stronger, more dangerous- if they hear music too, you must find your own rhythm, and make the dance your own. Now- Again. This time- with feeling.”

Artemis Crock hates pencak silat- the only one to teach her is her older sister who is not a good teacher, and she never gets it right like Jade wants her to, and neither of them can ever forget about the man and she’s never good enough and- although the stuff with the scarves is kind of cool, and the jewelry is really pretty and, okay, so she’s kinda good at the forms- All right, all right- she loves it, okay? She’s not as good at it as her sister, but she loves it; and she can do things with the samping and cindai that her sister can only dream about, and the kerambits are so cool- and… sometimes she can almost hear mom when Jade tells her to do something- which is crazy… Right? (She just wishes that Jade didn’t punch her so hard- it freaking hurts!)

Three Days Ago:

Jason doesn’t talk. He seems happy to see Superboy and Wonder Girl Red- but he doesn’t talk, and it’s freaking Artemis the hell out. Before her trip to the West, one of her many schemes to get money was babysitting- she knows how small children should act and this isn’t it.

There’s something wrong with this child- something horribly, fatally wrong; Scarecrow, Robin and Batman don’t know how small children are supposed to be- how would they know? But Agent A seems like he’s been around the block a few times- doesn’t he get how wrong this is?

She asks him about it, quietly, on the second day of their mission.
“Ah. Red Hood is… Damaged, I suppose. The troubling thing is that the effects have become so severe, the actual… extent of the damage is unclear.”

“The most dangerous thing in the world is a damaged person- they know they can survive.”

“A pithy quote, Miss Artemis.”

“Yeah. Experience usually is.”

Four Days Ago:

“There have been rumors that Red Hood, who was taken from CADMUS a few weeks ago, possesses knowledge the criminal underground would prefer be buried six feet under. Robin, Scarecrow, and I have verified these rumors; unfortunately, Red Hood is on the League of Shadows Top Hits List. Therefore, YOUNG Justices mission, should you choose to accept it, is to watch over Red Hood, and guard him from harm.” Batman’s gravelly voice echoed in the cavernous space within Mt. Justice- Scarecrow and Robin stood at his side.

Artemis was the first forwards- “I’m in.”

Wonder Girl Red looked at them like they had lost what little mind they had, and sauntered forward- “You know I’m in.” Wonder Girl Blue looked apprehensive, but stepped forwards as well- “I’ll go.”

Superboy nodded in lieu of actually saying anything- he’s still working on his “inside voice.”

Kid Flash sighed with resignation, and then grinned like a fiend. “I’m game.”

Captain Marvel looked at them all quietly, then said in a strange tone of voice- “I’m… unable to leave Fawcett City undefended at this time. I’m sorry.”

Permafrost sighed, then spoke, her voice a silvery wind-chime in the gloom. “I’m going to have to sit this one out- Gotham needs someone on the streets at all times. I’m not so sure I would be… tactically sound on this mission; I’m pretty sure Bruce Wayne doesn’t want an iceberg for a mansion.”

(He actually wouldn't mind all that much- Bruce Wayne has sacrificed a lot to be Batman- what's a house among friends?)

Two Weeks Ago:

“There is… a new name on our… special… list of prizes… I am sending the following operatives to… collect… The following operatives… will…. report for orders: Cheshire… Alice… Red X… Triple X… Sportsmaster…”

Five shadows detach themselves from the walls: a tallish woman in a green robe with long sleeves and a short skirt, a sword on her back- her face is covered by a painted mask, black hair jutting out like a mane, sharply white grin maniacal in the half-light; a small child in a sleeveless blue robe with a long skirt, a large pouch-bag in the crook of one arm- her face is covered by a painted mask as well, auburn hair smooth and glowing with health, headphones covering her ears, small rounded
spots of pink high on the cheeks of her mask; a large teenage man in a black suit, a bright red x slashed onto his chest- a long tattered cape swirls behind him, his helm a skull with another red x slashed over his right eye; a young man in a black suit, a trio of silvery-grey x’s scratched into his chest- a short cape with a moth-eaten appearance, his helm a skull with another trio of silver-grey x’s over his brow; a tall, bulky blonde man, no color other than various shades of black-grey and his blue, blue eyes- very obviously a soldier or mercenary, somebody who’s life has been reduced to killing people.

“Cheshire… for this mission you will be… Principal.” They know. Those bas shit-licking spit-fuckers knowfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckyouFUCKFUCKFUCKFU-

“Red X… for this mission you will be… First Assistant.” Well, shit.

“Alice… this will be your… First mission… You are to offer tactical support… oversee communications… and observe your superiors… Do not fail.” This… is going to be a very bad day...

“Triple X… for this mission you will be… Second Assistant.” Ah… Crap.

“Sportsmaster… this will be your last mission... You are to observe the lower assassins… take note of their skills- perhaps… one might be ready for… advancement... also… you are to lead this mission to a… satisfactory conclusion.” Whoop-de-friggen-do.

“You have three hours to… collect your mission equipment… the objective is… The Head of the one called… Red Hood.”

Five Shadows Vanish from the room in the time it takes for the sound of the words “Red Hood” to echo off of the walls.

Now:

Artemis dropped down underneath Cheshire’s arm- Clothesline- Classic, and rolled over Red X’s sweeping kick. Now she is in between the two assassins- the body in front of the window is still twitching violently; spasms and jerks wrack the body. A horrible grunting sound, like the hull of a boat scraping on the bottom of a canal, comes from his throat. Artemis’ bow is next to useless in this situation- but a bluff is not. She draws an arrow from her hip-quiver -It’s more practical to have at my hip; it’s much easier to flip and swim with a quiver that has a lid-, nocks her bow, half draws it; the poundage on her bow will shoot harder than a bullet from a gun. The two assassins can tell how bad it would be to get shot by her from the bulging of her arms and the tension in the bowstring- the sound of dripping grey matter fills the small office space in the mansion. (This entire moment took six seconds.)

It’s when the last dying rasp of a very bad man fades away into nothing- that’s when Cheshire’s fist enters Artemis’ personal face-space. She steps to the side, leans back away from Red X’s snappy punch; she un-nocks her bow, whirs around- hooks Cheshire's sword by the hilt and yanks. The sword flips around- Artemis’ hand finds the hilt of her sister’s sword- and suddenly, the fight becomes real. Artemis darts forwards, opens a line of red in Red X’s side- she knows her sister prefers contact poisons- and is vindicated when he starts writhing on the ground in very real agony. (Two seconds.)

Now it’s just Artemis and Chesire- and seven years ago, the fight would have ended then and there.
Drop, spin, kick Cheshire away and drop into another roll, find some distance –Just enough to draw another arrow, because she’s taken her sword back- and then a short little snippet of banter, smaller and more vicious than Artemis‘ mentor would consider apropos for the situation.

“Bet you run out of arrows before I run out of sword.”

“Bet you run out of kneecaps before I run out of arrows.”

It wasn’t like the silly fights you see in the movies, or read in comics. Those fights can last for half the episode, or half the comic- they’re often full of witty banter, flashy moves, and impossible moments (like an entire paradigm shift in four little moments inside a fight- that’s not how emotional development works.) In contrast, a Real fight lasts approximately three seconds per combatant multiplied by the average of the skill level of the combatants- there were three combatants of equal strength, so the fight should have lasted nine seconds. However, in a superheroic conflict, even the most serious, eleven seconds are added for the purposes of witty banter and exposition. (In this world, unlike in some, the characters believe they are real people; we, the readers know that they are not real- except that they are real and- oh dear, I’ve gone cross-eyed.)

Five seconds later, and Cheshire was re-evaluating the threat level of her not-so-little sister, Artemis. Apparently, seven years on her own made her grow up fast- she ducked a beheading strike without flinching, threw herself forwards inside her guard; an elbow to the throat and Cheshire was down for the count.

The whole fight took no more than twenty seconds- but for an assassin of Shadow caliber, twenty seconds is more than enough time to sneak in, kill your target, erase your presence, and leave again. -FUCK IT WAS A DISTRACTION FUCKFUCKFUC-

< RED! Red, it was a distraction- there’s a poisoner stealth specialist coming your way; be extremely careful. I have to stay here and watch the Shadow’s I’ve K.O.’ed; watch your back. >

< Acknowledged, Artemis. >
< Acknowledged, Artemis. >

< …Who- >

< “I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think. Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is 'Who in the world am I?' Ah, that's the great puzzle!” >

FUCK! FIVE SHADOWS?!!? -FUCK!

-When logic, and proportion, have fallen softly dead/ and the White Queen is talking backwards, and the Red Queen’s off with her head/ remember what the Doormouse said/ feed your head... Feed your head... -
I would have NEVER chosen this life for myself.

In Fawcett City, there is an establishment called House of Secrets; Fawcett City’s magical population (which is actually one of the largest in the world) and, hilariously, it’s theatrical population know it to be a reputable, middle class, mercantile establishment. Billy Batson knows it as a good place to get patching for his cloth items- there are always weirdly sized scraps of just about everything imaginable lying on the ground, and who really notices a little boy cleaning up- sneaking little scraps of whatever into his pockets? The silk had been steadily collected and woven together to create a warm blanket for all weather- as his sweaters became too small and unraveled, he knitted them together into a larger blanket that went on the bed around the third week of September- strips of leather combined with four broomsticks and some cinderblocks made for a wonderful bed- fur padded out his shoes, made his mittens thicker, made his hats warmer- and there were always things to be picked out of the trash: sequined dresses with too many brightly colored dots gone to be resold that got cut and stitched into shirts, velvety pants that had been eaten by moths that were hemmed so that they could fit, many a singular shoe without it’s mate (he always found it slightly odd that he could always find flats in his size- but then again, he has small feet, so maybe it isn’t so odd- he just wishes they weren’t always in neon colors). He thought that the mismatched clothing would make him look girly- but when it was taken in all together he looked nuttier than squirrel poop.

(A thousand praises be sung to the creator of the library; ten thousand praises be sung for the books within.)

Well, he does his thing for a few weeks, and then the owner, Durante “Dudley” Zatara offers him a part time job, after school: “You do what you’ve been doing for the past few weeks, run the register when I need you to, and you’ll get fifteen bucks an hour. So long as your grades are good, a’course.”

“…No problem, Mr. Zatara.”

“Call me Dudley, kid; Mr. Zatara is my father. And my brother, come to think of it…”

So that was how Billy Batson got a steady income (which he used to get medicines that the library-books said he needed), bought multi-vitamins and probiotics, and met Secret while he was manning the old-fashioned register at House of Secrets one rainy afternoon.

Secret is actually named William Hayes; he was wearing black track-suit pants and a grey hoodie when Billy met him. He doesn’t have a pulse- or another option about what to wear every day.

And he has unfinished business.

Margot Hayes had two children; William, and Greta. William showed great promise in the magical arts- as did Greta. William didn’t want to be a powerful magic user; Greta did. Margot got sick, and William swore that he would care for his younger sister until she got better. Margot died; William swore that he would care for his younger sister until she could take care of herself. (He promised- and he is an older brother. He will protect his little sister; even from herself.)
Billy would always remember the day he met Secret- it was raining cats, dogs, small fish, and frogs at the time (small fish and frogs actually happens quite regularly in Fawcett- magic does weird things to weather patterns); and Secret wasn’t wet, or picking small ichthyians or amphibians out of his long black hair.

A small bell set over the door of House of Secrets rang quietly- Billy looked up from his potions textbook. (Dudley is not visibly powerful magic user, but he can sense it being used. Billy stinks of old, potent, powerful magic; and Dudley, though not obvious about it, trained in Atlantis. There are rules about young magic users he has to follow or else; the fact that one as powerful as Billy is still alive without much training beyond meditation and survival is much more remarkable than the fact that he’s homeless.) There was a young man, standing in the doorway- tall, broad shouldered, his grey hoodie covering his eyes.

He slowly, hesitantly, walks forwards; his trainers clunk unnaturally on the black painted floor. He stops in front of the register; Billy picks up a bookmark and places it in his textbook. The young man flips back his hood- and grey-blue eyes look out from a hawkish face, drawn pale and tight with worry. Billy looks at him with quiet interest, his forearms crossed at the wrist; there is a smell of lightning in the air.

“Secret.”

“With what?”

“Secret.”

“Wouldn’t my other half be more-”

“Secret.”

“Are you sure? I don’t know very much battle magic, you know.”

“Secret.”

“Why?”

“Secret.”

“Okay; if that’s what you need, then that’s what you need. Let me leave a note for my employer so he doesn’t worry, then we’ll go stop your sister-”

“Secret.”

“Harm. Right.”

(That’s what the conversation sounded like in material space. This is what the conversation sounded like in real space, which is as different from material space as fine artesian cheddar is from American non-milk cheese product.)

“I need your help.”

“With what?”
“My sister, Greta. She’s gone mad with power- she was always good at magic, y’know? But she wasn’t happy with the way her powers were progressing, and decided to… speed things up. She needs to be stopped before she can use the full powers of the Sword of Beowulf- otherwise, there will be no help for her possible.”

“Wouldn’t my other half be more-”

“No, Captain Marvel would just make her more desperate, more reckless. And, to be honest, if I wanted the help of Captain Marvel, I would have asked him for help. I need the help of Billy Batson.”

“Are you sure? I don’t know very much battle magic, you know.”

“If I wanted a battle mage, I would have asked your employers- Shazam or Mr. Zatara. What I need is something both simpler, and more difficult- I need a witness. There is a spell my sister performed; without it active, she cannot wield the Sword of Beowulf.”

“Why?”

“…The Sword of Beowulf is a weapon created for the pure of heart; when drawn, it amplifies the wielder's magical strength by a factor of eight. The spell she used- for her sake, I must break it; the counter-spell requires a witness who is also pure of heart. You were the first person I could find who would fit the bill; I need... I need a person to go with me, not a hero.”

“Okay; if that’s what you need, then that’s what you need. Let me leave a note for my employer so he doesn’t worry, then we’ll go stop your sister-”

“Harm. She’s calling herself Harm, now.”

“Harm. Right.”

They wander all over the city- Billy gets soaked through almost instantly- small fish and frogs smack into his head and shoulders semi-constantly; he almost gets killed by Harm many times; they finally end up across the street from where they started. That’s when Billy finds out why exactly Secret needed a witness.

“It has defiled Harm’s holy place. It will die for its insult.”

And that’s when Secret steps out onto the material plane. His hooded face stares into Harm’s- and she looks… ‘turbed. Crazed blue eyes stare into fathomless grey-blue holes; she knows what she did.

Secret saunters forwards, gently shouldering Billy aside; Harm raises the Sword of Beowulf- but her older brother is already dead, and her talents do not lie with matters of the immaterial and timeless. She swings the sword at him anyway- and it passes through him without harming him. The Sword is a weapon of the material world- Secret is a being of the real world. It cannot harm him.

Secret steps forwards, ignoring Harm’s increasingly frantic attempts to ward him away with the Sword, then with her magic, and finally with her feet, kicking at something she cannot touch. He moves forwards, implacable, cold- his duty calls to him.
Harm stumbles backwards- and that’s when the first twinges of guilt whisper in her heart.

The Sword of Beowulf demands its wielder’s heart be pure.

Pins and needles and fire shoot through her hands- the sword clatters to the ground, it’s sheath scrabbling over to and around it, single red eye rolling. Secret grips his younger sister’s shoulder with his right hand; cups her heart with his left- it is small and warm and scared and fluttering too fast like a bird caught underneath the bookshelf. His fingers reach into her real heart- gently grip and pull and tug away something that never was hers to keep for always; feel for something that should be there but only finds ashes and dust. In the material world, a yellow-grey scarf is being pulled out of Harm’s chest- for her, it is pure agony. As Secret removes what was never hers, Harm’s crazed expression of external loathing changes, softens to Greta’s face; she hates what she has become. As the scarf is removed, she crumples with anguish.

She knows what she did.

Secret takes his hand off of Harm’s shoulder, pulls away from her. He holds the scarf in both of his hands- stretches it loose and wide; lifts it high and snaps it down sharp like a sheet to be hung on the line. A cloud of… Dust (as good a word as any) puffs up and off and away into nothing.

The scarf is black now, black and silver and sharpness- very visibly not something that ever belonged to Harm. (Harm is Harm, and Greta is Greta- and Harm is Greta too. Greta wears pastels and fuzzy soft things; so does Harm, because Harm was Greta.) The scarf (which isn’t a scarf, but there are no words for what it really is… Essence, perhaps) settles around Secret’s neck and throat and underneath his skin like sunbeam cats or the gentle, shy caress of a lover, warm and soft and utterly his.

Harm has fallen to her knees- her body curling in on itself, writhing with the agony of suppressed emotions.

She knows what she did.

“Secret.”

Billy’s eyes widen; Harm’s eyes close. She slumps down and forwards, boneless, empty- alone.

“I swore to my dying mother that I would protect my little sister, Greta, for as long as she needed to be protected.

My sister is dead; she can never come back. I can’t protect her anymore.”

Secret steps around the shell of his sister; ignores Harm, moaning on the ground.

She understands what she did.
Secret looks back over his shoulder; jerks his head. Billy starts, nods; stoops down and lifts the Sword of Beowulf onto his back; follows Secret out of the large backyard. He passes the cairn of stones overgrown with flowering vines; the massive oak tree shielding them from the rain; the emotionally overwrought blonde, not much older than him, screaming like she’s dying- sobbing into the cold, uncaring, muddy earth. He joins Secret on the sidewalk across from House of Secrets- a small frog lands on the bridge of his nose; it sticks to his face, then leaps away.

“What are you going to do now?”

Secret glances at Billy; winter’s grey bore into summer skies- then his eyes soften, and he smiles, tension leaving him for that one perfect moment. Billy feels a sudden rush of joy inside his chest, and smiles back; shy and sweet and gentle and very very young- twelve is a little too young, but Secret was only sixteen himself.

“Secret.”

Billy blushes, looks away too fast to be cool- a fish lands on his head, flails around in his hair. Cool fingers touch his scalp- gently disentangle a small silvery minnow from his hair; Secret draws away from Billy, large hands cradling the small fish. He crouches down, presses his hands under the water rushing through the storm drain; the fish swims against the current for a few moments, then allows itself to be swept away. (Fawcett City has some of the most beautiful parks in the state- and some of the most harsh punishments for dumping chemicals in the street. It’s a felony within city limits and carries a five year jail sentence- at minimum. It is also considered the worst kind of luck to eat any of the creatures that fall from the sky- many a happy marriage has resulted from a young woman or man following their intuition and kissing a frog or toad or fish.)

There is a long moment of silence, where Secret remains crouched down by the stream, and Billy remains frozen in the clutches of a first crush. A small twinge in his shoulder and he remembers the other reason Secret needed his help;

“What should I do with this?”

Secret looks back over his shoulder at Billy; shrugs; “Secret.”

“Hmph. You’re no help-”

He must have blinked. That’s the only reason he can think of for Secret to leave so abruptly. And he still doesn’t know what to do with the Sword. He sighs, looks both ways to cross the street, (safety first) and spies an orange and black cat, spying on him. The cat is promptly hit in the head with a vividly colored toad. It yowls, turns, and runs away, dodging the occasional fish.

That explains that- as for the sword...

And that was how Dudley Zatara called in a few “favors” from his old school buddies and got the Sword of Beowulf hidden in a garrison's armory somewhere in Atlantis.
If I could choose again, however,

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A short note about the nature of parallel universes, and how they pertain to this story:

The multiverse (or meta-universe) is the hypothetical set of multiple possible universes (including the historical universe we consistently experience) that together comprise everything that exists and can exist: the entirety of space, time, matter, and energy as well as the physical laws and constants that describe them. The term was coined in 1895 by the American philosopher and psychologist William James. The various universes within the multiverse are sometimes called parallel universes.

The structure of the multiverse, the nature of each universe within it and the relationship between the various constituent universes, depend on the specific multiverse hypothesis considered. Multiple universes have been hypothesized in cosmology, physics, astronomy, religion, philosophy, transpersonal psychology and fiction.

But for this story, you really only need to know one.

There is a legend from some hot and burnt-flat land- the legend goes that the world is inside a bag carried on the back of a man who was there when the world went into the bag (and the man himself is in the bag.) And, if you were to find that man, and empty his bag out you would find small pieces of everything- shells and stones and feathers and leaves and sticks and scraps of hide and cloth and string and bones, all of them covered in dust and ash and bits of eggshell that had shattered, the remains of dried out fruit- and these would be the pieces that make the world.

The multiverse is an innumerable amount of these men with their bags, wandering the land (which is time, of course.) What happened to Jonathan Crane- Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth- Johnny Crane- The Boys- is simple.

A man wandered throughout the burnt lands, where all men wander- and heard a cracking sound inside the bag on his back. He drew it forwards over his shoulder and looked at what was inside- picked out a small bleak-black bundle, gently unwound its star-studded night-black wrapper; a long piece of straw had splintered- the straw was in a state of neither living nor dying- stuck. A different man came upon the first- he is younger, his bag… smaller. The first man is older- but not by much.

The young man looks at the splintered piece of straw- pulls his own bag over his shoulder. He pulls out a small white bowl, filled with threads- the older man’s eyes light on the red thread, small and thin as though it is.

The younger man nods. The older man picks up the thin piece of thread, and examines the little piece of straw- “Become what you always could’a been. The world always needs some kinda hero, Johnny-boy; so you’re gonna be a hero. The thing about heroes is: they don’t kill. So if you take this deal, and kill another in cold blood, you’ll die. Refuse this deal, and you’ll be torn asunder, shattered into your component pieces and flung from yourself, never to return as you are now. You will die, forever, and be remade into someone, something, entirely different. Make your choice, guv.”
“Will I remember... this?”

“You’ll remember what you agreed to do, your name, a few little things from the past. No more than you need to.”

“Will I die?”

“Everyone dies, Johnny-boy- but an argument could be made that you were already dead to begin with.”

“And them? Are they coming too?”

“You can’t leave yourself behind, Johnny-boy. Sorry.”

“I- Where will I go?”

“Choose, and find out.”

He chose; the man’s fingers gripped the thread tightly, and began to wrap the little piece of straw. The straw has broken itself into three pieces only held together by the barest of threads; as the man weaves the red thread through the straw, a tiny feather and a drop of sweat from his brow fall onto the thread- get spun into the straw. It is smaller, now, too small to be put back in the older man’s bag- but small enough to go into the younger’s.

The younger man carefully takes the little piece of straw (which is more than just straw now); puts it in his bag- there isn’t a spot for it in his little night-dark bundle; but he can put it in a tea-pot… so he does.

(There is one tiny detail other than three little pieces of straw and a feather woven together with red thread being added to the bag that holds the world- and that would be the dust and crud of one bag diffusing into another. Dust doesn’t seem like all that much- but when you remember to account for scale…

Well.

Certain things take on a wholly different meaning, don’t they?)

Now:

The thing most people forget about the boys is that they were trained by Batman- everyone remembers that Robin is the closest thing to a ninja they’ll ever see outside of Japan, but what most people don’t realize is that Scarecrow knew how to move unseen long before he ever went to America- he wasn’t just homeless; he was a runaway, and a thief. The only thing Batman did was refine what was already there- add a few fighting routines, a little weapons training…

So when Triple X crept into the room where Red Hood was curled up, sleeping, he assumed that the room was empty; he’s asleep on a cot inside a broom cupboard, there shouldn’t be room for anyone else. Of course, he neglects to look up… and to the side…
A skull with three silvery x’s looms over the sleeping form of a small boy- a gaff slowly sneaks around behind him, small hooked blade pressing forwards like a spear.

In fishing, a gaff is a pole with a sharp hook on the end that is used to stab a large fish and then lift the fish into the boat or onto shore; ideally, the hook is placed under the backbone. Gaffs are used when the weight of the fish exceeds the breaking point of the fishing line or the fishing pole. A gaff cannot be used if it is intended to release the fish unharmed after capture, unless the fish is skillfully gaffed in the lip, jaw, or lower gill using a thin gaff hook.

A "flying gaff" is a specialized type of gaff used for securing and controlling very large fish. The hook part of the gaff (the head) detaches when sufficient force is used, somewhat like a harpoon's dart. The head is secured to the boat with a length of heavy rope or cable.

For about two years, the boys grew taller without gaining noticeable muscle mass- enough to carry their own weight, but not enough to be a threat. This is a problem for the teenaged crime fighter- the boys wanted to use a scythe as an equalizing measure but that was a bit too… extreme. So they switched to the gaff- but they couldn’t subdue people like they wanted to. A compromise was created- a hooked blade where the regular hook should be, a little zipline-gun action in the base of the pole and hey-presto; a weapon that was hard to kill people with, but looked threatening from a distance- and up close, but whatever…

Triple X’s fingers gleam in a mildly iridescent way- then gently glide across Red Hood’s face, one finger poking in-between his eyebrows, and two on either side of the top of his forehead.

Five Days Ago:

Dana Tan is at her job- she works at a little stationery giftstore, just on the west side of Platinum Flatts- quietly restocking the shelves. The owner, Ms. Fyers- “Call me Shado, alright?” looks up from her magazine. She is sitting behind the register, and is in a perfect position to see the little… quirks, that the new customer and her employee share.

The customer is a woman- on the tall side of average, long black hair pulled back in a French twist, oval face; she hasn’t lost all the post-baby weight. Dana has seen her through the mirrored back of the shelves- and she looks pissed. Shado has always known more than she’ll let on about Ms. Tan- and there was an intriguing rumor she heard a few months ago about the two daughters of one of her old colleagues…

She’s retired; she’s allowed to be an… what was the phrase little Terry used? “Interfering old b-oot?” Yes. Well.
“I am on break Dana- mind the register while I am out.” Shado Fyers works very hard not to cackle or smirk at the betrayed expression on her newest employee’s face- or the almost-know you expression on the customers face… who looks like a grown up Jade Nguyen, on closer inspection. Which means that Dana Tan is… No wonder she was so familiar. *Ah… a little sisterly bonding will do you good, Artemis.*

“…Dana?”

“It’s better than Cheese.”

Jade smiles- it is a wry, older sisterly smile; Artemis almost smiles back, but Dana is not this woman’s sister. Jade catches the abortive facial movement- and her own smile fades.

“Dana… I need your help.”

Brown eyes narrow; an orange and pink striped eyebrow raises with intense scrutiny- “What kind of help?”

“…Remember that postcard I sent you? The birth announcement?”

“…Do you need me to take care of my niece?”

“…No… I need your help to save your nephews life.”

“What.”

“Yeah- I… I lied. On the card. I- I had twins, not just the one girl… I gave him away because you know how- you know what they would have done to him, b-but- and they- they want me to-”

Artemis knows her sister. She knows what makes her tick- she knows what makes her squirm. To actually make her cry… and she isn’t faking it. (If she wanted to fake it, she’d be wearing makeup; but she’s in a hoodie, no makeup, no weapons except the usual; this is her sister asking for help- and it’s actually a very direct question.)

Artemis sighs. She might have cut all formal ties with her family, but-“My shift ends in an hour. Meet me at Wild Thing Café; we can talk there safely, do some catching up. Okay?”

Jade’s head nods rapidly; her watery brown-black eyes fill with hope- or tears. (Same difference.)

An hour and fifteen minutes later, and they’re at Wild Thing Café, sitting at the same table Dana (Artemis- no. No more running. I am who I am- and right now, my sister needs a hero. My name as a hero is Artemis- my name as her sister is Artemis-) sat at, two and a half years ago- Artemis is sixteen now; Jade is twenty. (Dana is eighteen now; Jade is twenty-two.) They sit in the booth; both sisters are drinking jasmine tea, eating crunchy sugar cookies-

*It’s been a long time since we played tea-party, J.J.*

*It’s been a long time since we played tea-party, Wart.*

“So… why exactly is my nephew on the top list?”
“…Remember Terry and Matt’s mom?”

“Mrs. McGinnis? Yeah, what about her?”

“Remember how she died?”

“Yeah-”

“She didn’t die.”

“What.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said when I found out. You know those creepy squints that used to hang around their house?” Artemis nods. “Apparently, Mrs. McGinnis was one of the top geneticists in the country; those squints got her into some bad stuff without her realizing it. Well, when she objected to what she was doing for them, they made her disappear.”

“Oh! So that’s when… Okay, but the point-?”

“Is that they used her research to make her… behave. However, the old lady had some fight left in her- she collected information on them for years, on the sly. The kind of stuff they used to make you go get-”

“The kind that would get her killed if they knew she even suspected it existed?”

“Oh-huh. Here’s where things get personal for us- apparently, the squints she had been working for also swiped my infant son from the hospital I left him at. I’m not sure that she knew who’s kid it was- but then again, Mrs. McGinnis was always smarter than she seemed.”

Both women take sips of their tea.

“So-”

“So. She was researching ways to create secure filing systems- chemical based, almost untraceable-when they, y’know-”

“Eighty-sixed her?”

“Right. Well, they made her into one of her own experiments, but here’s the kicker- it actually worked. Her theories were correct.”

“The point, J.J.”

Jade sighs. “…She took the information she had gathered and hid it inside my son’s DNA, then she helped him, and two others, escape from their prison.”

“Ah. So, now the owners of said information want him dead?”

“Yeah- apparently Mrs. McGinnis hid the information in such a way that even if his body gets reduced to ash, the information would still be there.”
“I’m assuming you have a plan for how to fix that?”

“Yeah- My daughter was able to retrieve the pertinent information on the chemical file inside his body; my friend created a neutralizing agent- I just need to get it into him. They know that he’s a ginger haired boy who doesn’t talk- the reason he’s that way is because of the chemical file-”

“And they just let your friend make a whole new poison specifically for my nephew?”

“Actually, baby girl got… creative… with the information she stole. Apparently she was able to shift it around so that the chemical marker inside his DNA looked like a serious poison immunity-”

“Which is why your friend was allowed to invent a “poison” for only one target-”

“No, no- it really is a poison; it also happens to be a chemically neutralizing agent for that specific file.”

Artemis groans the long-suffering sigh of the little sister, and takes another sip of her tea. “Location, Effects and Timeline?”

Jade hums, finishes her cookie- “Insertion point is between the eyebrows, and at the top of the forehead; dermal contact only. The immediate effects are a sharp lowering of internal filters, the ones that stop you from blurring all your thoughts out loud, followed by darkening of the hair and nails; longer, and the nerves start to liquefy- which is characterized by convulsions and blood from the major orifices. After the victim starts bleeding from the eyes, they only have twenty seconds before the damage becomes irreversible, and only thirty before the poison reaches the heart. K.O. happens within five minutes of application.”

“That’s…”

“Yeah.”

Both women sit silently at the table, eyes downcast. Artemis perks up-“Do you have a sample?”

Jade nods-“Here.” She hands Artemis a vaguely iridescent vial; Artemis eyes it, then places it in a hidden pocket of her purse.

“I’ll see what I can do, J.J.”

“Thanks, Warthog.”

(Artemis tells Huntress what her sister told her- only she worded it in such a way that Huntress wouldn’t doubt the information. She also gave Scarecrow the little vial of death- he was able to make a neutralizer for the neutralizer in short order. She also told him about the… side-effects of the poison, and hoped that he would come to the same conclusion she did.

If she “helped” him along in understanding about the sheer tenacity of Shadows- told him about having to fake her own death to get some measure of peace, and still having to kill the occasional fool- Well.
The thing she forgot- the major lesson she learned on the mission Batman would give them- is the world on the inside of her head did not necessarily match up with the world on the outside of her head, i.e. the internal world does reflect the external world, but the external world does not have to reflect the internal world. Like a square is a rectangle, but a rectangle is not necessarily a square. She also learned that it’s always better to actually tell your mission leaders everything that you know is about to go on; secrets are secrets, but on a mission, they just make things… complicated.)

Now:

Red Hood’s hair had started to darken- his eyes fluttered open, blue shining darkly. Triple X had been tied up, and was being kneeled on by Robin. There was a thin line of blood dripping down onto the floor from Triple X’s neck- a minor flesh wound. (The boys got a mite… twitchy.)

Scarecrow had stalked forwards- he reached into a hip pouch, pulled out a small atomizer filled with an oily black liquid. He crouched in front of the small boy; he needs to wait exactly three minutes, otherwise there would be no point to allowing Jason to be poisoned.

(This is not Batman’s plan- this is Scarecrow’s plan. Batman doesn’t like this plan; he’ll go along with it- but…)

Jason is bleeding from his ears, blood steadily dripping from his nose, oozing from between his lips- a soft pliplip onto his pillow. His blue eyes are screwed tight with pain- his hair has darkened to a deep red-tinged black, his skin has lost most of its freckles- a small noise of pain escapes his throat. His arms squeeze a fluffy rabbit plushy with all his might- this hurts so badly but- he agreed to the plan. Is a good plan- but hurts.

Scarecrow’s finger flexes on the small atomizer- and sprays the oily liquid into Jason’s eyes; instantly, they tear up, overflowing with pinkish saline. Pushing the edge there, Johnny-boy. Well, it’s not like we had a timer- ‘We still should have been faster.’

Jason had been breathing heavily- now, as Doc’s viscous solution seeped into his body, the tenseness of his body eased; the oily black cure vanquished the iridescent death within him. His teary eyes slowly look up at the boys- a pair of stubby stubborn arms push Jason’s body up. The boys kneel down closer; and that’s when faulty wiring, or perhaps sabotage, makes the boy’s choice about what to do about their secret moot.

Prejudice is a preconceived opinion that might not be based on any real facts or personal experience, but can be formed from conclusions based on a faulty foundation. For example, growing up in a prejudiced environment and hearing expressions like: "you can’t trust those people," or "you know how they are" etc…

Discrimination, on the other hand, is the act of recognizing, seeing, and distinguishing differences and choosing to show prejudice and bias. Discrimination can also be based on simple hatred of a race, gender or a certain group, either because of personal experience or simple stereotyping. Discrimination can be in the form of repeated
mistreatment, verbal abuse, threats, humiliation, or intimidating behavior or conduct.

Ethnic prejudice, for example, is hostility or hatred based on flawed and rigid generalization of a certain ethnicity; discrimination is the act of denying individuals or groups the equal treatment that they deserve and may desire. (Like meta-humans.)

Discrimination can make a working place a living hell. It festers in a culture of silence, intimidation, and fear. The perpetrators depend on targets keeping quiet about the abusive behavior.

Furthermore, active discrimination includes a range of behaviors ranging from avoidance, to hatred, to physical attack and extermination or even genocide. Though both prejudice and discrimination are carried out on various levels by individuals or groups, discrimination is considered to be more damaging. (There aren’t very many meta-humans in Eastern, or Western, Europe- look up some recent history to understand why that is.*)

Discrimination can be felt or perceived in different scenarios such as being followed by a store security guard, getting poor service in a restaurant or being accused of doing something wrong in school or at the workplace. (Star City has a much more… relaxed stance on meta-humans and their place in society. Certain local variations on “normal” are… more acceptable than others; selkies and their ilk are much more common there than even in Ireland.)

The most common forms of discrimination are racial remarks, slurs, being called insulting names, and being the butt of hurtful jokes. Studies have found that discrimination, racism and harassment may have significant mental and physical health consequences such as frustration, stress, anxiety, depression, possible nervous breakdown, or high blood pressure that can cause heart attacks. (A common name for a meta-human in Gotham is a “Deader-than”. The reason for that is very simple- Batman hates meta-humans in his city -He made that very clear a long time ago- and make no mistake; it is his city.)

It isn’t something that’s discussed in polite company, but the big five cities- even Fawcett, to some extent-do not approve of their extra-human denizens. This can lead to all kinds of problems, which can be somewhat akin to the acute problems facing a GLBT person in an intolerant environment.

There is one tiny problem with the above information- it is true information, but not in this world. In this world, frankly, there are bigger, more important things to worry about. (But the boys don’t know that…)

Scarebeast lives in the center of the boys- she is the complete totality of everything that makes the boys the boys. She is also their balance; if the boys’ body was an apartment, Johnny, Scarecrow, and Doc would live in it- they’d be roommates from college, new to the big city. Scarebeast would be their across the hall neighbor- an old friend from back home; she has her own life and agenda, but she looks out for the three idiots living in her apartment building too.

Johnny is the one who interacts with people the most; he knows the most about how to behave
within the social norms of the society he lives in- he is the Johnny Crane of this world. Doc is the one who learns; he’s the one who actually remembers the rules and guidelines of the world, spoken and unspoken- he’s also the one who helps them figure out where exactly those rules can be bent or broken (he’s the scientist the boys always were). Scarecrow is the one with the heroic instincts (sort of); he is what remains of the villain, Jonathan Crane. Scarebeast is the one who emotes; she is who the boys would have been if they had two X chromosomes- she is who the boys are when they allow themselves to feel. (The boys are not gay- they just have a very active feminine side; the reason they like nice things like fitted suits and fluffy bedding is because on some internal level, Scarebeast is soothed and comforted by such things.

In other words, the boys have a super-powered inner beast- who also happens to be a girl. Yes- they have a super-powerful inner girly girl. And Scarebeast is a very girly girl. )

Scarebeast is the one who hears the fire exploding in the mansion- the boys have enough presence of mind to tell Kid Flash to save the others, but there isn’t enough time to think about the repercussions of their actions- their father employer can only disown fire them if they’re still alive. “Our brothers need us. We can panic about our lives later, boys.” Woah! Scarebeast, since when do you talk? “Since always, Dork.” ‘Well, that’s interesting.’ Quite; I had no idea the manifestation of our emotions was so… feminine.

When asked about it later, Dick would gloss over the sensation of being lifted bodily by something much bigger and stronger than him; ignore the fact that he was picked up by his older brother- who was emphatically not person-shaped at the time- and carried away from danger. (He would try not to think about how many times before that day that had happened- his older brother hadn’t been lying to him all these years… right?)

Jason will not gloss over anything. Jason is Jason, and Dick is Dick- and Jason will not ignore the truth in front of him, not even if it would make life easy (He’s four- tact won’t come until he’s a teenager)**. Jason will go over every single uncomfortable detail- with excruciating precision.

Robin is the one who asks his older brother the question- “Scarecrow, are you a meta-human?” He is aware of tensing in the body he’s curled up against- a slight tightening of the arm around him. (Scarecrow’s other arm is around Re- Jason; Jason is hugging the stuffing out of his stuffed rabbit with both arms, his face buried in the boys’ side.) All three brothers are lying in a skid in the earth; Scarebeast slid along her back through the ground- she had thrown them clear of the explosion just the slightest bit too hard.

He sighs. “Yeah. I am.” His voice is low, soft in the night- the three brothers are lying in the leaf-litter and ferns underneath the trees- they are resting on the grounds of Wayne Manor, watching the light flicker from the burning east wing of aforementioned manor. Well, the boys are watching the lights flicker- Dick and Jason are cuddled up underneath their long arms; Jason was snuggled up on their left, his body shaking from both fear and exhaustion- Dick is on their right, head pressed into a broad chest. (Dick is short; the boys are tall- the top of his head just barely reaches the bottom of the boys’ ribcage- and he will always be short.) The boy’s head is on top of a rather fluffy asparagus fern- apparently, Scarebeast flung them all into the forest, and then passed out.

As the brothers lay quietly, watching part of the manor burn, the smog filled sky darkens to near black- big, flat flakes of snow gently drift down, followed by big fat drops of rain Nice timing, Permzy; somewhere beneath the manor, an automated switch flips, and the gas-line for the eastern wing is shut off; the fire begins to wane- wood dampens from the rain.
“Why- why didn’t you tell me?” Dick is asking this, not Robin- he’s curled up against his older brother’s side, his shoulders shaking with emotion.

“I wasn’t- I didn’t always live at the manor, baby-bird. I didn’t want to- I d-d-didn’t want to b-b-both-both-bother a-a-anyone ab-b-out it.” Robin lifts his head off of Scarecrow’s chest and glares at him- and on some level (Scarebeast and Doc), the boys know how flimsy the argument they have for not telling their family about their special talents, and flinch away from his angry gaze. The movement makes Jason start- he squeaks in protest. Scarecrow’s hand gently rubs between Jason’s shoulder-blades- the little boy relaxes and goes back to sleep.

The softest of rustling in the bushes; Cheshire steps out of the gloomy forest, her long black hair gone curly from heat- and in that moment, Scarebeast raises her head from within the boys’ body. The air goes still with tension- the crackle and snap of burning wood grows quiet and remote; Cheshire’s voice creaks out into the rain-damp night- her voice grave in the darkness.

“The one I was sent to kill- he has ginger-red hair and pale freckled skin; he is four years old, and a little broad in the limbs. The only boy I see that could possibly fit that description has auburn-black hair, and is golden skinned, not pale and freckly. Obviously, the boy in question is not here- it is very possible that he was never here, or that he’s already dead. Personally, I am of the opinion that he never existed, and it would better serve us all if that were taken to be the truth.”

The boys are the best at reading the subtext in complicated situations involving people- and, even though they shouldn’t be angry at her, (she is trapped in her life, and doesn’t possess the fortitude to escape it) they are. They very muchly are. “Hmm. Did you know that kittens stay with the mother-cat for twelve weeks, on average? Well, that’s the recommended timeline, of course, and that is of course barring all... accidents. Of particular note is a phenomenon that happens, on occasion.

Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, something will go... wrong, and the mother cat will eat her kittens. Often, there is something wrong with kitten- a genetic defect, or an illness, or even an infestation of some parasitic being- but sometimes... not. Sometimes, there is a problem with the mother- she is genetically incapable of caring for her kittens, and will kill them all, healthy or not. And sometimes... sometimes, there is something wrong with where the cat lives. Perhaps she lives in a world of hawks and giant fish and poisonous lies- too dangerous for her to protect her kittens without getting herself killed, and then where would her kittens be? So, she gives up on them- gives up on raising them herself, on teaching them how to behave; she can’t keep them safe the way she needs to and she can’t let them go off on their own because they’re too young; but she’s not a very good cat is she?

A good cat would have killed her kittens the very second she realized that they wouldn’t live to adulthood- the moment she understood she couldn’t protect them. But this cat wouldn’t do that- this cat couldn’t make herself do that; what she did instead was very simple... She gave her kittens away. Well, she gave one of her kittens away- the other, she kept for a little longer; perhaps she thought that it would be easier to raise up one than two... Sadly, she was wrong, wasn’t she?”

Cheshire has gone still and stiff- she doesn’t nod; her voice is small and wobbly in the night. “H-how do you know this?”
Scarecrow ignores her. “I assume that cat would leave her remaining kitten with someone she trusts—perhaps a littermate; someone who lives in a place distinctly less dangerous than where she lives—a barn-cat, possibly; someone who’s devoted their life to catching and killing… rats. I’m sure that the kitten would be much happier there, and much more likely to live to be a cat.”

Cheshire swallows nervously; Scarebeast hears the slide of saliva down her throat—“…What—The other kitten… What happens to it? Should it know about its si—Sibling?”

The boys contemplate what they can say— but he is a hero, not a villain; more than that, she needs to be reassured—she needs to know that her children will be okay with them. ("She needs to know that this was the right thing to do." 'I got this.') “I’m quite certain that, with the fullness of time, the kitten will seek out its sibling; it doesn’t really matter which kitten does the searching. The world is full of secrets—searching out the truth is one of life’s great pleasures.”

Robin has remained quiet throughout the entire conversation—he doesn’t understand what they’re “talking” about— and one of the first things Batman taught him (right after “Always have your utility belt with you”) is that if you don’t understand the conversation, listen to it, commit it to memory, and ask about it later. Do not interject—it could get someone killed.

Red Hood is not quite asleep. He’s asleep enough that he doesn’t want to move—he doesn’t want to get out of the warm-safe spot he’s in, doesn’t want to turn his body over to look at the person trying to kill him; he doesn’t want to open his eyes, or move his limbs— but he… he knows that woman’s voice—he knows it from somewhere. He remembers it—So, while he does not outwardly react to the conversation, inwardly, he is committing it to memory, and—Well. He’s spent most of his short life looking out for himself—Dubbilex and Wondergirl Red couldn’t always be there to protect him, and this… this is something he’ll need, eventually; he takes the memory of this conversation, and he hides it in a little pocket of the dark black place in the back of his head—Dubbilex made it for him, and put lots and lots of secrets inside it; she taught him how to make his own pockets inside it, hide his own secrets in the dark black place inside the back of his head. Later, when he’s ready… when he’s ready to be strong and brave, he’ll pull this conversation out and ask someone about it.

Later. When he’s ready.

A softer rustling—Cheshire creeps backwards into the brush; her body vanishes into the shadows, eyes glinting in the half-light from the blaze; she faded back farther, until the manic grin on her mask is the only thing that remains visible; then that manic grin vanishes too, and the three brothers are alone in the night once more. Then the team rustles up around them— and the mission is at an end.

“As current mission leader, I am calling for a Blowout— you know the procedures. We will meet in Barmargh, Quarac— timeline is four months. Alice, with me— we’ll go east. Red X, Triple X; you go west.”

“What about the body?”
“What about it?”

And that was how the destroyed body of Sportsmaster got thrown into the nearby Gotham Harbour; what’s one more body in the “Sea of the Dead”? (SeaShadows would find it, and return it to the high mountains of the Roof of the World- and it would be thrown into the pit of Re-life.

But that is later.)

Two weeks after the mission, Dana Tan is back at her job, restocking the shelves again- and her sister and niece walk in the door. Her sister looks travel worn- but she’s also in disguise; she’s in sensible shoes, an ugly shade of puke grey; her long black hair is in a low bun, wound tight to the nape of her neck; she’s wearing a nondescript set of medical scrubs, a pale, ugly faded shade of green, a lanyard around her neck (and Artemis knows for a fact that it will pass even a hands on test- Cheshire could have been an OB/GYN if their family had been different); a large red and black duffel bag over one shoulder- but her eyes…

The little girl is small, and just as travel worn- she’s in a blue fluffy ruffled dress; her hair is in a pair of ponytails, cute little character bobbles tying them up (Artemis recognizes a pair of handmade “invisible” flash drives- that’s Shadow training at work; Dana recognizes MLP:FiM characters); a small blue Lucite suitcase covered in stickers is sitting next to her, oblong and obviously heavy- she looks so scared…

“Hey, J.J.”

“Hey, Wart. This is my daughter, Lian.”

Dana crouches down, putting her eyes level with Lian’s- “Hi, Lian. It’s nice to meet you.”

Lian looks at her aunt’s hair and face- her hair is a soft faded grey with maroon highlights; her eyes are ringed with pink eyeshadow- Lian’s eyes are wide with shock. “…hi aunt D…”

Dana smiles a small, sad smile, then gently- so gently- asks her niece “Can you go over there, with my employer, Mrs. Fyers? I need to talk with your mom one on one, okay?”

Lian nods; her small hand closes around the handle of her little blue suitcase- she wheels it over to Shado, who heard everything (she always does)- Shado looks up from her romance novel (fantasy), reaches down next to her stool-height bench. She hands Lian a coloring book and a box of crayons- Lian looks at the book with curiosity; she’s never seen one before. Shado sighs, puts a bookmark in her book, and gently waves the little girl around to her side. Lian carefully walks around the counter, and stops at Shado’s side- her suitcase rattles to a stop. Shado looks at Lian for a long moment, then her arms (archer’s arms) reach down and scoop Lian up onto the bench next to her.

Dana watches her niece walk away; straitens up, tugs the skirt of her dress down- turns and stares at her sister; raises an eyebrow. Jade starts- fights off a shudder; her voice is quiet in the side of the store, between the racks of ribbon and tissue paper; “Someone pointed out to me- I can’t take care of my daughter the way she needs to be taken care of. You can.”

Dana’s voice is a whispery shriek of shocked horror. “WHAT! WHY-”
Jade shushes Dana- “I can’t keep her safe, Dana. I can’t- I don’t have time for her, not like she needs, and she’s so much more than I ever was- and you remember. Don’t even try to say that you don’t, because you were there, and I know-” She gasps softly, her eyes focused somewhere far inside herself, staring at something far too horrible to ignore; “-I know that I’m, I’m cruel, and, and, selfish”

“Jade, no-” Artemis is instantly contrite- her sister is many things, but cruel isn’t one of them-

“Yes I am! I am, I am, and I left you there- Wart, I left you there, and I would have left her behind and I know that I screwed up raising you when mom was in jail-”

“No, no; Jade-”

“I did- I did, I know I did and I am so, so sorry-” Artemis has known her sister all her life- just like a fortnight ago, her sister really feels this way, and- I let all of this go when I left that house… I think that when I left, I had taken the time to… to come to terms with it, I guess- I don’t think she ever got a chance to do the same… Jade, how long have you been carrying this around?

“I screwed you over when I left you with him, and you’re so much stronger than me, so, so you have to take her, you have to do what I can’t, and I can’t raise her like she should be- but you can, because you’re better than me, and, and I’m, I’m cruel, and I’m selfish, and I’m a coward. I am. I-” Jade stops dead; her little sister has given up trying to stem the panicked flow of self-directed vitriol and wrapped her arms around her shaking body. A long strong arm hooks around her waist, another loops up between her shoulders; tucks her older sisters head into the curve of her neck- her older sister remains frozen for just a second, and then her arms- long lean arms, swordsman’s arms- wrap around her little sister. They hold each other for a long moment- and then Cheshire shoves away. Artemis catches her older sister by the elbows; catches her eyes with the stare of the loving- holds them tightly.

“I am so honored- so honored- that my older sister trusts me enough to raise her daughter for her; I am proud to be your sister, Jade. I forgave you for all that mess a long time ago, so do you think… do you think that maybe you could- you could forgive yourself? Eventually?”

Jades eyes grow big- and fill with an awful kind of pride; When did you become the older sister, Artemis?“I’ll try, Wart. Thank you- for looking after her and for forgiving me even though-”

“J.J, stop- forgiveness is something freely given, not earned. Now- I assume that you want her to take my last name?”

“I- Yeah. Yeah that would be- that would be the safest thing.”

“It’s no problem, J.J. Now, have you said your farewells?”

“…I wasn’t kidding about being a coward, Wart…”

“J.J.- The worst part, the absolute worst part, about you leaving was the fact that I didn’t know why you left- you didn’t leave a note, or send anything back so that we would know you were okay, and you didn’t tell me anything about what you were going to do. You know- you know, I would have kept it a secret for you; I know now that you were just following your own plan of escape- I know that you didn’t know I would keep your secret a secret- I know why you left, even, because… because our reasons were probably the same.
You need to give your daughter what you didn’t give me, J.J. Our situations are different- there is a very good chance that she will not be as understanding as I am, when she grows up. I know it’s hard and scary to do this- but when have our lives been anything else?”

Jade stares at her little sister; Artemis- when did you become an adult woman? Jade nods quietly; turns towards her daughter, sitting behind the hip high store counter, coloring away.

She walks forwards on cat feet- Lian hears her anyway, looks up at her mother. Jade smiles sadly and gently shrugs her duffle bag off; Shado has returned to reading her book, and is now listening to music. Jade carefully walks around the opening of the counter- gently, slowly crouches by her daughter. “Lian, Lian honey-”

“Mommy?”

“Lian- you know… you know I love you very much, right?”

“I love you too, Mommy.”

“Lian… I need you to s-stay with your aunt, okay?”

“Mommy?”

“You- I need you to do that for me, okay?”

Lian starts to cry, soft and quiet. “…you don’t w-want me with you anymore?”

Jade starts to cry too; “Baby, I want you to be safe and happy more than I want you with me. I can’t keep you safe with me- but you will be safe with your aunt, and, and you’ll be happy-”

Lian has lunged forwards, her short, stubby arms wrapping around Jade’s chest; her face presses into her mother’s chest, near her heart. Her tears start to drip onto her mother’s breast- “…I don’t want you to go. I don’t want to be away from you.”

“I know baby. I know you don’t, but… but you have to. I can’t… I can’t keep you safe with me. I’m your mother- I’m supposed to keep you safe, but I can’t do that if you’re with me and, and I love you too much to be selfish, but I want… I want so badly- I want, more than anything, to be the kind of mother you deserve, but I can’t be the mother you need, and keep you as safe as you should be kept at the same time. My sister, your aunt- she can do that; she will do that.”

“…why- why would she want to do that?”

“She would want to do that because she loves you, and she loves me- and that’s what families do for each other; families will protect each other, and, and love each other- I love you so much, and your aunt does too, and I can’t bear… I can’t bear the thought of you being h-hurt or, or k-killed because you g-got mixed up in something that has no business being near a little girl. I couldn’t live with myself if that happened.”

Lian shudders; her little head presses even harder into her mother’s chest. Jade holds her daughter close- breathes her special daughter smell, all warm and sweet and fresh- feels the small rounded body, strong with muscle- Oh, my darling- oh, my nhè nhàng sen… This will be the last time we ever see each other, my dear…
Jade left the little stationery/gift store about half an hour later; in her bag was a colored in drawing of a cat- she tries not to think about the fact that her baby colored the calico cat green, and gave the kitty a white face with red slashy stripes down its cheeks; signed it in wobbly Vietnamese, “Cho mẹ yêu thương của tôi”- and if her heart felt like it was too big for her chest… if she felt like she was choking when she breathed, and that her eyes were burning in their sockets whenever she thought about it- well. She’s allowed to love her daughter, isn’t she?

Chapter End Notes

* See "Hitler's Propaganda concerning Meta-humans", "The Echeleons of Silence", and "What happened to the Freaks?: a study of genetics". For further reading, see "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: a History of Nazi Germany".

**Tact being something akin to "not punching someone in the crotch and then kicking them in the face to say Hi".
I would not.

This part of the story is about a Queen, a Squire, a King, and an Assassin— but not necessarily the way you would think:

In military science, maintaining one's supply lines while disrupting those of the enemy is a crucial—some would say the most crucial—element of military strategy, since an armed force without resources and transportation is defenseless. The defeat of the British in the American War of Independence and the defeat of the Axis in the African theater of World War II are attributed to logistical failure. The historical leaders Hannibal Barca, Alexander the Great, and the Duke of Wellington are considered to have been logistical geniuses.

Supercriminal Organizations have a significant need for logistics solutions, and so have developed advanced implementations. Integrated Logistics Support (ILS) is a discipline used in military industries and in villainous enterprises to ensure an easily supportable system with a robust “customer” service (logistic) concept at the lowest cost and in line with (often high) reliability, availability, maintainability and other requirements as defined for the project.

In military logistics, logistics officers manage how and when to move resources to the places they are needed. In Supercriminal Organizations (like the Board of Light, or the Rogues of Central/Keystone), this position is either held by the head villain, or by an appointed person(s) of interest that has been chosen for loyalty to the cause, vetted for effectiveness, and trusted by the leader with access to the combined resources of the group. In the Board of Light, this position is held by Lex Luthor; in the Rogues of Central/Keystone, this position is jointly held by Captain Cold and Pied Piper. Yes, Really— and no, it doesn’t matter that Piper isn’t in either city for eight months out of the year, or that he’s a sophomore in highschool.

Supply chain management in military logistics often deals with a number of variables in predicting cost, deterioration, consumption, and future demand. The US Military’s categorical supply classification was developed in such a way that categories of supply with similar consumption variables are grouped together for planning purposes. For instance, peacetime consumption of ammunition and fuel will be considerably less than wartime consumption of these items, whereas other classes of supply such as subsistence and clothing have a relatively consistent consumption rate regardless of war or peace. Troops will always require uniforms and food. More troops will require more uniforms and food.

Supercriminal Organizations often have much more radically changing rates of consumption; a good generalization for the Rogues would be “normal” activity during the year, and “high” activity during the summer— especially considering that three of the Rogues are not yet of age, still go to school, and one of them doesn’t even live in either of the cities.

Some classes of supply have a linear demand relationship—as more troops are added more supply items are needed—as more equipment is used more fuel and ammunition is consumed. Other classes of supply must consider a third variable besides usage and quantity: time. As equipment ages more and more repair parts are needed over time, even when usage and quantity stays consistent. By recording and analyzing these trends over time and applying to future scenarios, items can be supplied as necessary at the precise moment they are needed. History has shown that good logistical planning creates a lean and efficient fighting force. Lack thereof can lead to a clunky, slow, and ill-equipped force with too much or too little supply. This is why most Supercriminal Organizations only last for one operation, at most.
Queen Bernice Camilla Edwardine Georgette Maria Danielle Perdita Vertigo knows a lot about logistics; she actually runs her country; her advisors are just that: advisors. So, yes, she knows exactly how much wheat, or iron, or electricity, or rubber her country is consuming, producing, importing, and exporting at any given moment (she commissioned an app for her smart phone specifically so she would remain current in her knowledge of those kinds of things). Queen Perdita also knows a lot about logistics for a very different reason- she was born with a heart murmur; she knows exactly how far she can push herself before she passes out- exactly how fast she can run for an exact amount of time before the shakes start; she knows where all the shortcuts through the palace are, and where all the servants doors are- and, while her robes of state are voluminous, she is the Queen; she will dress however she f*cking wants to, thank you very much. Although- she is not such a rebellious pre-teen that she will completely abandon all the trappings of her station- just the ludicrous ones her mother tended to insist on.

Castle Vertigo is on the very peak of a high, steep mountain; it was hewn out of the eastern face, and is lit by the rising sun every day. A spring fed river from within the keep rushes down into one of the most treacherous watercourses in the world; the castle almost always looks like it’s floating in a bank of furling, roiling mist- although, during the summer, it is covered in cascading rainbows. The formal dress of the Queen reflects this aesthetic- it’s very… sparkly. And floofy. Not fluffy, as that would imply fur, but floofy, which, as any little girl will tell you, means feathers, not fur. And it’s covered in scattered gemstones- diamonds, usually.

Perdita loved wearing it… when she was six. Perdita is twelve; she hates it. She hates it with a passion usually reserved for affairs of state- which is when she has to wear it, of course. Her mother designed it before… before the fever that weakened her, and the birth (her birth) that killed her. She shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but… Servants talk. Everyone agrees that her mother was a beautiful, vivacious creature, possessed by the glow of life; the servants all agree that her head was as empty and ultimately as worthless as a diamond- certainly, there are facets and scratches, but… you can’t eat a diamond, or pay rent with one- and no-one ever even considered her to be a choice in the succession. Perdita thinks that this might be why no one except her Uncle Warner really objected to her changing the design of her official robes of office- Only the late Queen Sophia would think a ballgown appropriate for an advisory meeting- and she shut him up real quick with a simple statement; “It is the Our prerogative to determine what is and is not appropriate for everywhere we are- and a ballgown, while… expansive, is not appropriate for a discussion about whether or not the current taxes on the wheat crops are too low. It is also Our sacred duty to do so- as We are the highest authority in the land, Our decisions on Our mode of dress influence the rest of the country. It is an unfortunate thing, Count Vertigo, but not every woman was cut out for a ballgown.”

The redesign was a set of pantdresses- a sharply A-line skirt, still slightly floofy, but more flowy and sleek than had been seen in centuries- not since the heathen warrior days, when Castle Vertigo was a mountain fortress fending off Russian Waynes; a blousy top portion with feathery designs on it, sparkling rhinestone embellishments around the collar, like wings; long sleek sleeves, the cuffs gently curling over the tips of her fingers- and hidden pockets inside those cuffs- a silvery, cloud-like wrap floats around her arms, picked out in thin silken threads; the royal seal of office, which wasn’t usually worn as a necklace, but add a few inches and beads to the chain holding that seal, and suddenly...

Her Queenly crown finished the image- and it was the traditional circlet of silver with curving strands of diamonds spraying high into the air. All together, the ensemble should have evoked a roaring twenties feel with a vague seventies vibe- a visual image of decadence, glamor, and wealth coupled
with a gradual lessening of societal strictures; the fact that the entire outfit was executed in varying shades of grey, ivory, and green with sudden flashes of silver helped to imply that the wearer, while stylin’, also means serious business. (She’s actually a little too short and untested for the respect her new threads demand- but a pair of wedge heels, and her own formidable, "not taking your f*cking sh!t no more" attitude took care of any naysayers… and as she grows, she’ll only become taller and more suited to her role in the world.)

A natural offshoot of logistical expertise is an interest in Mathematics- for Perdita, Quantum Mechanics have a particular appeal; the fact that Perdita happens to be rather good at it is… a bonus. And if she uses that skill to augment her Queenly duties and enrich her country more effectively-why not? It worked for predicting the economy of her country, and what would work best- she had finally managed to write down how she had figured out how that works, and got it read by scientists who didn’t care about her station, edited by people who could speak better than her- at least from a scientific perspective, and published in a small Vlatvian scientific journal when she was ten. Fast-forward two years, and she was now a regular guest at the World Scientist Symposium held in Central City, Ohio; her expertise in the world of theoretical physics and advanced logistics would probably explain the crazier things that happened to her, that strange night. (Or a certain interfering Lord of Chaos.)

The twin cities of Central and Keystone are examples of the phrase “Through a glass, darkly.” The idea is, a dark mirror will reflect only what is actually there, but it is a warped, twisted reflection; the thing to remember is that a mirror, even a dark mirror, will only reflect what is there- things that are not there cannot be reflected. However, as any vampire will tell you, just because something cannot be reflected doesn’t mean it isn’t there. To clarify a convoluted chunk of exposition, Central and Keystone are reflections of each other; Central is the shining star, light and clean and smooth-Keystone is the working stiff, heavy and gritty and harsh; together, they compose one of the largest magical nexuses of the real world, and one of the lowest instances of actual magical practitioners in the material world. Dervish is where they all go- and Dervish is in the real world.

In the real world, a city can be any shape that will actually fit- for the Central/Keystone nexus (Known as Dervish), that shape is a whirlwind twenty thousand feet high and four miles wide. Dervish is home to many real people; Klarion Le Garçon aux Sorcières, son of Morgana Le Fey, is one of Dervish’s many residents. He is also one of its royals- he is a Prince, The Prince; his mother is the Queen; his friend (who agrees with his subversive views), Teekl Le Chat, is a Marquis, and Dervish is ruled by his father, King Mordru Le Infâme.

Klarion hates his family. Yes, they raised him and taught him and blah blah blah- Short sharp screams- a little brown-haired girl, naked, running, screaming “Help me! Please, please help me!”; he had just gotten up for something to drink. It’s three in the morning in the real world- three in the afternoon in the material world. She can’t be much older than him- he’s nine, and tall, like his father, skinny because he’s going through his first growth-spurt; she is small and rounded and soaked in blood. (It’s her blood, oh Gods, oh Almighty Ones-)

As she moves, he can see her muscles moving where the skin should be- her hands like pale gloves, but those are her hands and those are her feet, all pale, blood pooling so wet and red over golden sandal shaped tan; footsteps dark red with her own blood and HOW is she still standing-

His Father stalks in after her, fist snapping out snake-fast; she crashes into the ground, pained yelp shrieking up into the air: “Go to bed, Boy.” “Yes sir.”
In the relative safety of his own room, Klarion will be violently ill, vomiting into a cauldron set aside for waste products— he had stepped into the blood, wiped it on a piece of parchment; made a little cantrip to find the rest of the girl, wound it inside a bracelet made of horse hair and beads— and found her.

The same day.

At the breakfast table.

**In the food they want him to eat.**

He started finding other places to be in the mornings, after that. Teekl was kind enough to suffer his company— she’s cool like that. (Klarion is of the Real world. He knows what Heroes are; he knows what they do. Heroes destroy evil— his family is evil. He will destroy them.

Every year, there is a soiree that is held in Dervish— this soiree is one of the only times of the year the three city’s come into contact with each other; unlike Fawcett or Gotham, Central and Keystone have separated from their magical convergences; Ceallach redid the spell she used to bless the five cities she founded many times— Central and Keystone’s magical blessings are in close enough contact to change the original intent for the two cities; together, the spells shifted all the Atlantean descendant people in both cities into the third city, Dervish— which is why most magical people can’t find either city. Dervish was the product of a sneeze during a dust-storm; she was praying for her safety, and the sneeze imbued the prayer with magical power— enough to found a city. The dust-storm yanked the magic far into the atmosphere; spun it round; imbued it with just enough order to balance out the chaos inherent in the prayer. A city grew from that accidental blessing; a swirling, flowing morass of people governed by an equal group of Chaos Lords and Order Lords.

The Dervish Soiree is where the residents of the three sibling Cities make peace with each other, and dignitaries from other areas of the real world visit each other on technically neutral ground— the soiree happens on Midsummer’s Night, better known as the summer solstice, when the day is long in the material world and the night is long in the real world. It’s a dance that happens once a year— and this year, Kid Flash will have to go with his Uncle, Flash, and his teammate, Captain Marvel; he doesn’t know it yet, but he’ll also have to protect Queen Bernice Camilla Edwardine Georgette Maria Danielle Perdita Vertigo from certain death, uncertain intentions, unknown dangers, and wardrobe malfunctions. He will manage all but the last one.

In a pair of windswept cities that are painted with the gentle brush of grey, one teenage hero searches out the answers to life’s persistent questions— like “Will she go out with me?” and “Are my friends from Junior High villains?” and “Oh god, am I really about to die?”; Wally West is Kid Flash— the Fastest Boy Alive; Central is his city.

Wally doesn’t know how to tell Linda how he feels about her. Yes, she probably won’t really care either way— she’s a career driven girl, she doesn’t really have the time to waste on a shmuck like him… but he likes her, and he wants to go out with her. His friends, James, Hartley, and Mark, think he’s being a chicken-shit— Robin agrees.

Kid Flash is rather pissed off at his uncle— Firstly, I have better things to do than spend an entire day of my short weekend dancing with people I don’t know and will probably never see again; Secondly, I don’t have the clothing for it; Thirdly, I don’t know how to dance, why did you THINK I didn’t go to Junior Prom?; Fourthly, I don’t have a date… (“Team. There have been multiple attempts
on Perdita Vertigo’s life; as you know, she is one of the world’s top Physicists- her future discoveries will almost certainly revolutionize the world as we know it.”

Permafrost interjects. “She also happens to be the Queen of Vlatvia-”

Scarecrow finishes her sentence; his voice squeaks in an unmanly way on the last few words as he realizes what he’s done. “-and she is twelve years old.”

Batman sighs on the inside- Johnny really needs to do something about his crush on Maureen; “Your mission, should you choose to accept it-” At that moment, all the lights go out in the cave.

Batman’s eyes narrow. “Team, there are now two missions to accept or decline. The first mission is to protect the young Queen from further assassination attempts until after the World Scientist Symposium in Central.” Kid Flash feels the sudden strike of opportunity rushing towards him. He leaps forwards, voice raised, body flickering with excitement.

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it, I can handle it, please let me handle it!”

“Kid Flash- you’re sure you can handle this mission on your own?”

“Absolutely!”

“Very well. This leaves the rest of the team free to participate in the second mission. Team- there have been multiple power outages as seen just now. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to investigate the cause of these outages.”

Everyone accepts the mission- except Captain Marvel, Superboy, and Scarecrow. Captain Marvel’s reason is connected to the Dervish Soiree- “I have a previous engagement that I must prepare for. However, if you have need of my skills, this communicator can be used to contact me.”

Superboy is a teenage boy; “I have a date that I can’t break- I promised; what kind of hero can I be if I break my promises?”

Scarecrow is trying to deal with his problems. “I need to talk with my father- I can’t put it off any more.”

(They’ll be fighting Amazo- and Wally won’t care one bit. Stopping an assassin, dancing with a pretty girl, and making a new friend will do that.

Scarecrow will wonder if he could have helped at all; since he saved his brother’s from certain crispification, he’s had some trouble figuring out where his edges are. It’s… it’s been hard, re-learning where the four of them fit together, and where they don’t.

Superboy- Conner will wonder if he might… possibly… get another date. He had a really good time-even if he discovered a previously unknown weakness to magic. He’s also pretty sure that if he had fought Amazo, he would have made things worse.

Captain Marvel- Billy will be horribly guilty, but the Dervish Soiree is very important to the fate of the world; he needed to be there. And Captain Marvel knows he would have made things worse.)

Hartley Rathaway is very… upset. It’s two things really- one, his (now ex) boyfriend, H. Z., doesn’t want to- in fact, refuses to- of course, it’s crazy to expect him to be as committed to the relationship
as he is at this stage… but it isn’t an unreasonable request for his boyfriend to go to a party with him, right? That shouldn’t be a big deal. Two is that the recent power-outages fried his tuxedo which was being cleaned. Thankfully, he has a fall back. Not so thankfully, his friend Jimmy picked it out for him and Jimmy is… Sp’cial.

(Hartley Rathaway lives in Metropolis- he comes to visit his “family” in Central every summer, then goes back to live with his guardian cousin, Lois. He learned of his (ex) boyfriend’s decision four hours before his flight to Central- and promptly lost his fucking shit; he had a moment where his mind, his body, and his emotions were not talking to each other- which is how he found himself being cuddled, big warm hand running up and down his back in a soothing way -That feels… that feels really nice; Hunter never did that for me…- by Mr. Kent’s much younger brother, Conner. Conner was also telling him “… Hartley, calm down! If it really means that much for you to have a date, I’ll take you, okay?”

Hartley’s grey-green eyes slowly peek out from tear-spiked copper lashes; a handkerchief wipes at his snotty nose; a slip of red tongue licks across soft pink lips; “R-really? You’d really take me to Summer Prom, Conner?”

“…Yeah, Hartley. I’d be happy to.”

A quick conversation with Mr. Kent, some explaining to Miss Lane, and Conner had a three-day bag on his shoulder, a ticket to Central in his hand, and five hundred dollars in his wallet.

Hartley is ecstatic.)

James Jesse is on his meds- so he’s actually pretty good at the moment. Certainly, it’s a little weird to be all the way there and not following shiny things that are only in his head, but that also means he finally has time to write that paper about the physics behind his “air-walkers”. That was when he was fourteen- he’s sixteen now, still on his meds which really helps when he needs to pull off a scheme without giving too much of the game away. (It’s also really fun to act like a crazy person- it helps that no one really takes him seriously.) This year he’s going to go to the World Scientist Symposium as a speaker- apparently, someone finally read his paper.

He’ll also get to talk to meet his internet friend, <PurdyNumerous> for the first time; they met while playing BABAS, an online timewasting game. He made some inane comment about the “feasibility of flying cars using the forces of magnetism”, she said something about “necessary electrical flux in a capacitorial function” and they started… talking. Hopefully, the person he’s about to meet is as cool IRL as they are In Chat.

Mark Mardon is a little twitchy- it’s his first year going to the annual Soiree held in Dervish, and he doesn’t want to mess things up. His family’s been one of the only ones to escape the notice of the Enforcement wards, meaning he’s one of the only magi he knows of who also has easy access to the material world. (That’s actually really important.) Honestly, he’s okay with no one he knows understanding what he means when he talks- mutters, really- about the “inherent properties of lightning, and how they can be stabilized with proper applications of runes”… he just- sometimes he wishes that there was someone he knew who he could bounce ideas off of.

(No, of course he didn’t set things on fire with his experimentation in the flux patterns of occidental
rune layouts. Yes, his eyebrows grew back. No, the mice didn’t die. He’ll tell you how the mice actually are… when they revert to solid from their current gaseous state. It should wear off soon, gosh!

Three parties on one day night Day? What could possibly go wrong?
I have many regrets, but

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

In the end, Wally- Kid Flash- still had to go to the Dervish Soiree; he can’t get out of his obligations that easily. (No, really; Magic A is Magic A, and if Magic A demands Person B be at Place C, then Person B will be at Place C. No matter what.)

Perdita doesn’t know what to wear to her speaking event- it isn’t like giving a speech to the Vlatvian public; these people will not take her word at face value. She knows that she can’t just BS her speech- not that she has before, but here, it really isn’t an option. She also isn’t sure what she should wear- something pretty, of course, but it should also be… functional. The invitation said that the Symposium would be a “formal occasion”- did they mean Formal or… Formal Casual? Hmm… Actually, now that I think about it, Nanny was probably right- “Better to overdress than underdress.” So- the green silk dress with the circle cut skirt and beaded embroidery in the shape of clouds at the neck- translucent sleeves, it is hot over there; it’s always windy in Central, so a heavy cape of fine Vlatvian wool (REPRESENT’N YO!) with the sea-foam green damask lining and the high collar.

Stockings? (Ye-es… the thicker ones though-) weather report says that it will be in the eighties, and they might want me to speak outside, so a larger lace pattern should work nicely for ventilation; flat messenger bag for my notes and computer, with the bullet-proof plates in the sides.

In my clutch purse… My medicines, of course- emergency inhaler, blood-thinner, band aids, my small canister of pressurized blood-clotting agent… (Tampons? There is always someone who is unprepared;) handkerchiefs- they should be on the plainer side, I think- (they’re primarily snot-rags, why should they be embroidered?) Make Up? (Am I wearing any?) Yes- lipgloss should be more than enough, I am only twelve. Perhaps some loose powder in case of shine… my phone, of course- the mini-battery charger as well; money, as I am travelling abroad…

(I should look into getting ceramic Firearms created for myself- it’s annoying getting them checked at the border.) Firearms are, of course, in their concealed places. (Should I take my knives?) Yes, but only the ceramics- better not to alarm anyone. A slungshot in my purse, just in case…

Only the paste jewelry this time- it would be better to not tempt anyone… Ack. My crown- they will almost certainly insist I wear one; perhaps a small selection- the Oriental, and the Georgian, and maybe the Fracie… I don’t know, there are so many to choose fro- Ah! I’ll take four- two formal and two informal; and of course they’ll all co-ordinate with my outfit so it won’t matter which I wear (None of my mother’s crowns, too ostentatious)…

Shoes… they should be good for walking, and go with the ensemble- I’ll have Madame King make something up for me; there is just enough time to break them in before my scheduled flight. The lace bottom fingerless gloves should work nicely- Her phone blips- She glances at it; confirms her suspicions.Oh. The Justice League has assigned me a bodyguard- Kid Flash, apparently. I wonder if I can convince him to take me around Central- most functions like this are very… Boring. (Perhaps I will be able to get an interesting souvenir?)

I wonder if I’ll have a good time at the Symposium; wait, what am I saying- of course I won’t; (someone will probably try to kill me again, something to look forward to) Oh! < RiskyBiz > is
going to be there- I hope that they’re okay with me being twelve... (Glad Count Vertigo isn’t coming- he might be my uncle, but the man’s a creeper!)

There is one interesting thing about Perdita Vertigo- Queen Perdita that explains her expertise in the field of Quantum Mechanics: a strange quirk of her brain allows her to calculate information on a quantum level. What does that mean?

An example: You are in a maze. (This is your brain faced with a problem.) You can only go in one direction at a time through the maze to find the solution, and escape. (This is linear thinking, solving that problem.) Perdita doesn’t think in one direction at a time- she thinks in every direction possible at once. (This is quantum thinking, solving that problem.) So, while it might take you five hours to figure out a solution to the maze, it would only take Perdita fifty seconds to do the same thing. However- once you found that solution, physically speaking, you would escape that maze in fifteen minutes. Perdita would need fifteen hours to do the same- heart murmurs are not fun.

This makes running a country relatively easy- and boredom hard to stave off. (She can’t do most of the physical pursuits open to royalty- she has to stay inside. She’s never thrown a snowball, or ridden a bicycle- not even a stationary bicycle; she’ll never ride a horse, or fly a kite- her doctors have said that those things are “too strenuous for her heart.”)

The Swing era (sometimes referred to as the "Big Band Era") was the period of time (1935–1946) when big band swing music was the most popular music in the United States. Though swing music was most popular during this period, the music had actually been around since the late 1920s and early 1930s, being played by black bands led by such artists as Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford, Benny Moten, Cab Calloway, and Fletcher Henderson. After 1932 most historians believe that the Swing Era started with Benny Goodman's performance at the Palomar Ballroom on August 21, 1935, bringing the music to the rest of the country.

Music experimentation has always been popular in America. The many avenues of black, white, Latin, American, and European music influences merged when Swing arrived. In 1932, early in the Jazz and the Sweet music styles of the American music scene – the musicians of the era worked on new, often unheard of musical arrangements that were emphasized toward a more polished song with a bounce. Recordings by Isham Jones, the popular jazz/blues bandleader, and his orchestra which sometimes included Benny Goodman recorded for RCA Victor. The swing era also was precipitated by spicing up familiar commercial, popular material with a Harlem oriented flavor and selling it via a white band for a white musical/commercial audience.

The Jazz/Blues era brought to swing music Louis Armstrong, Billy Holiday, and by 1938 Ella Fitzgerald. Other musicians who rose during this time include Jimmy Dorsey, his brother Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Goodman's future rival Artie Shaw, and Woody Herman who departed the Isham Jones band in 1936 to start his own band.

Several factors led to the demise of the swing era: the recording ban from August 1942 to November 1944 (The union that most jazz musicians belong to told its members not to record until the record companies agreed to pay them each time their music was played on the radio), the earlier ban of ASCAP songs from radio stations, World War II which made it harder for bands to travel around as well as the "cabaret tax", which was as high as 20%, the change in music taste, and the rise of bebop. Though Ellington and Basie were able to keep their bands together (the latter did briefly downsize his band;
from 1950–1952), by the end of 1946, most of their competitors were forced to disband, bringing the swing era to a close.

Swing is still the music of choice in Central- in Keystone, Bebop takes that prize. Dervish likes both, but... Funk will get you farther. In Gotham, it’s the Blues and hardcore Jazz- Fawcett prefers a sort of psychedelic pop; Star wants that devil-music, some good Rock’n’Roll.

Conner’s fingers were clenching in fear- digging into the underside of the rental car’s seat. Hartley learned to drive from his cousin, Lois- and it shows. Central is known for its fast drivers; Hartley takes it to a whole new level. The screech of tires on asphalt wails out over the roar of Conner’s thundering heart- Hartley’s laughter winds around Conner’s shoulders like censer smoke through golden cathedral air.

The red convertible slid into a parking space in front of their hotel, The Lampert- also the place where the Symposium is to be held tomorrow. Hartley bounded out of the car, his eyes flashing green in the midafternoon light; Conner wobbled out of the car, his face an unhealthful shade of greenish grey. Both young men composed themselves, grabbed their luggage; Hartley checks them into a double, leaves his keys at the front desk; they ride the elevator up to their room.

Mark feels like vomiting. Going to Dervish from Keystone or Central is always a hassle- thankfully there is a dedicated shuttle between the three places. Not so thankfully, the shuttle happens to be a wind-cat, which sounds better than it is.

A wind-cat is a cat made out of wind; it can be cat-shaped and imbued with the power of the wind, like the lion mount of Dhurga or the tiger mount of Lon Po or the Cat-bus of Konagei-ku. It can also be wind-shaped and imbued with the power of a cat... Like the Dervish Shuttle. Hence Mark’s upset stomach- the shuttle is clear, and firm in the way only wind could be; it shifts and wriggles like only a cat could. Mark is spat out in the Keystone Square; he sways a moment, then throws himself over the nearby trash-barrel. His backpack almost overbalances him, nearly flips him into his own slimy vomit. The rest of his day gets better from there- the Inchworm Inn has a room for him; his clothing survived the jump, and so did his things; his Aunt, Kismet, is happy to show him around town the day before the day before the Soiree. (She has her own reasons for being there- and she can take some time off of her job to show her favorite nephew around one of her favorite cities.)

Kid Flash is bored. He’s enjoying the Symposium- Wally’s enjoying the Symposium, and Perdita Vertigo knows her stuff... But Kid Flash is bored. They both are at Queen Perdita’s table- Perdita doesn’t really want to dance, and Kid Flash still doesn’t know how. Thankfully, Perdita’s online friend is just as cool IRL; but he doesn’t really dance either. Perdita invites him to sit at the table- and Wally recognizes his friend, James. However, he can’t talk to his friend because he’s on duty. (James marks Wally too, but his family taught him better than to break someone else’s suspension of disbelief. People like to believe the world is what they think it is, not what it really is- if you let them convince themselves that the world is the way they think it should be, your life becomes much easier.) All three young people are bored- but that changes when a strange sensation grips them and yanks them into another dimension- there is still a party going on though. (Thankfully, it was after their speaking events- and Perdita had her purse and her bag with her at the time. It was also a much more interesting party.)
Hartley is having a very good time—Conner really knows how to dance, and... yes, it is a little weird to be wearing a dress, but Jimmy Olsen really knows how to pick women’s clothing; it might be kinda short, and very green, but he looks damn fine in it especially paired with his smoky green tights and the shoes MY GOD, and Conner is looking fresh to death in his suit (and his mother that woman looks like she’s about to vomit, but fuck her, he can go to the Dibny Ball if he wants.) Conner spins Hartley around again- and suddenly they are in a different ballroom, at a different party. Hartley almost- almost- misses a beat; but Conner looks unperturbed (he isn’t), like he’s had weirder happen to him (he has); and Hartley decides to just... go with it. Wha-Mark? How- I thought he had to go to his aunt’s house for a few days... Hey, and that’s James, he really does turn up in the strangest places- WALLY? WHA-

Mark is dancing with the Marquis of Dervish- her name is Teekl. He met Teekl yesterday, when he was wandering around Dervish with his aunt. As it turns out, Teekl knows a lot about runes, and is happy to talk shop with him- they get into a friendly discussion about them, and then her friend Klarion showed up, and he was a cool dude too; his aunt was totally cool (not exactly) with him meeting the two of them, although they were (strangely) a little scared (terrified) of his aunt, Kismet. Anyway, Klarion wasn’t too shabby in the runes department himself- Mark let slip the fact that he’s going to the Dervish Soiree; “Are you really?” Klarion is startled- he likes this guy, but he doesn’t seem like the back-stabby type. Why would he be going to-

Mark nods, swallows his bite of sesame seed/goolom fruit bun- one of the many specialties of Dervish; “Yeah, it’s the first time I’ve ever gone. I’m the heir of my clan now, so-”

Teekl interjects then, her voice soft and sweet. Her black hair glows orange in the warm light of the afternoon- her eyes gleam redly, but not meanly; they are lit from within with warm curiosity. “You were not before?”

Mark shakes his head. Some tiny detail in his face, in his posture- this is not a happy subject; he doesn’t want to be what his family wants him to be. “No, I wasn’t. I became the heir after... After my brother died.”

Klarion’s eyes widen. “You’re... a Mardon?” (Everyone knows about the eldest son of the Mardon clan, and how he committed suicide- the stress of Dervish politics became too much for him- the pressure of his family squeezed him too tightly; an overdose of stimulants stopped his heart.)

“...Yeah, I am.” Mark looks resigned to his fate; his eyes are pinned down to the warm wood of the table, fingers winding in and out of each other like eels in the light. He doesn’t know it, but he’s started to shiver and cry. (His aunt had her own things to do today- she left him to his own devices. She wants him to move to Dervish and stay with her, but she can’t really do anything for him other than offer him a place to stay. A place that is out- away from his too quiet house now that Clyde’s gone. She isn’t really his aunt, otherwise- and it would be improper to use her power to force it... So. She offers her “nephew” a safe haven from his mother’s sorrow and rage; an place to test out his “frivolous pursuits” (they aren’t; runes, cantrips, and charms might be some of the most basic of magical workings, but basics are basics for a reason) where they can be easily reversed should something go wrong- gives him a place to be when the memories get to be too much; for when his father... Well. She is not allowed do what she wants to do to that man- thatthing- but if she could... if only she could...) Mark’s magic is connected to the weather- even when not in contact with his focus, he can still control the ambient atmosphere to some extent. The thick mist that has surrounded...
them is actually quite helpful for what they’re about to do, which is why neither of the Dervishers disperse the moisture in the air.

(Dervishers are generally antagonistic towards the members of the Mardon clan- wouldn’t you dislike someone who’s allowed to go somewhere you’ve only heard of? (Worthless, feckless, unworthy-) Someone who’s family has been allowed to go to that somewhere for almost two hundred years? (What did they do to be so- Obviously, someone paid someone else- Yes, but with money, or with se-) And you will never, never ever get to go there, not from Dervish? And the other cities won’t let you in? (You know how those Mardon's are-))

Teekl reaches out- the tips of her fingers gently touch the backs of Mark’s hands, soft hands intertwine with his, fingers winding around his, stilling his nervous motions; Klarion’s long arm hooks over his shoulders. Teekl speaks. “I am so sorry for your loss, Mark.” (Dervishers are naturally more publically affectionate than Keystoners or Centralists- a natural side effect of having an entire culture of magi in one place; Magi, once they get strong enough, can generally sense the aura of another magi. Klarion and Teekl, as members of one of the most back-stabbing, duplicitous courts in the world, can sense more than just auras- they can sense emotions through auras- which is helpful when making a decision about a person’s credibility. Mark is very close to suicidal- and Klarion and Teekl are very compassionate people (which is not so great), empathetic in a way that would get them smacked by their parents for unseemly behavior.)

Klarion leans his side into Mark’s, gently tugs him closer; “Did you… did you ever-” Mark smiles a bitter smile.

“I never wanted to be the heir. I shouldn’t say this out loud, but- the King and Queen; there is something wrong with the way they rule; I do not wish to put myself under their control. They- they scare me.”

Klarion and Teekl look at each other- Teekl’s position is much less politically charged than Klarion’s; if she’s caught- at most, the very worst they could legally do is banish her, not Destroy her. “We know. Do you want us to help you with it?”

Mark looks at them both with a careful stare- then he nods.

Klarion takes the thread of the conversation. “We will both be at the Soiree- if you want, I can name you as my Guest, and Teekl-”

“Can name you as Favored Dance Partner-”

“And we’ll- we’ll both of us- do our best to help you stay alive.”

Mark looks at them so gratefully- “Thank you.”

So now, Mark is dancing with Teekl- and he can see his friend Hartley- in a dress- dancing with some guy in the crowd around him. Dude. What the hell? The song ends; Mark glances into Teekl’s eyes; she nods almost imperceptibly. Mark crooks his arm to guide her- and together, they glide over to Hartley. “I thought you were going to the Dibney Ball with Hunter?”

“So did I. Good to see another friendly face, Mark.”

“Another?”
“Oh yeah. Look at your eleven- tell me what you see.”

“…James. Somehow, I’m not surprised.”

Teekl raises an eyebrow at Mark’s side, pinches the thin skin of his inner elbow- “Oh! Forgive my rudeness, My Lord- Hartley, this is the Marquis of Dervish, Teekl Le Chat. Lord Dervish, this is Hartley Rathaway, a very dear friend of mine.”

“ ’Tis an honor to meet you, Mr. Rathaway. And your charming date is…”

“Conner Kent, Your Lordship.” His voice is a warm baritone rumble from somewhere near his knees- quiet in the warm candle lit ballroom.

Hartley looks at Mark very carefully, raises an eyebrow almost too quickly to be seen. Mark makes a tiny little movement with his mouth; Hartley barely nods. (They’ve been friends for a long time.) Hartley speaks- he’s been going to events like this for almost longer than he can remember. “Your Lordship, can we possibly entice you to join us for the evening’s drinks?”

Teekl coughs, her vibrantly orange and black beaded dress shimmering with her suppressed laughter- she’s forgotten how much fun it is to do the dance with someone who’s in it for fun. “I would be delighted to join you… so long as my friend may join us as well.”

Hartley glances at Mark, who blinks. “We would be honored to enjoy the company of your friend, Your Lordship.”

Teekl smiles, beckons to someone out of Hartley’s line of sight- a young man in very elegant suit saunters over; the suit fits him perfectly, sliding up and down his frame like warm sunbeams over gently moving water; his thick hair shines a warm, rich brown in the light, his widow’s peak accentuating his heart-shaped face- Hartley likes what he sees.

The five young people meander through the crowd- Conner snags a pair of hours ’devours from a passing waiter, hands one to Hartley (“Thank you, Conner.” “Of course, Hartley.” I like his moves…)- they descend on the round table where James, Perdita, and Kid Flash (Wally) are sitting like locusts on the golden wheat.

“James!”

He looks up from his interesting conversation about SCIENCE! with Perdita, sees his friends bearing down on him. “Hartley, Mark! Wazzup!”

“Do excuse us, but may we join you for the evening’s pick-me-ups?” Teekl addresses Perdita; she is very nervous. (You can tell by her formal speech patterns.) She also, correctly, picks the smartest and most politically powerful person at the table. “You certainly may, miss…”

“Teekl Le Chat, Marquis of Dervish, miss…”

“Perdita Vertigo, Scientist. A pleasure to meet you, Lord Dervish.”

The eight people end up at Queen Perdita’s table- and suddenly, her night is much more interesting. (A Prince, a Marquis- shouldn’t she be a Marchioness? Different countries have different
standards, I suppose…), a Transvestite, a Wizard, a Squire, her Online Friend, Herself, and her Bodyguard at the same table? This just got interesting.)

Around half an hour later, a completely unrelated set of events came to fruition- and the Dervish King, and His Queen, fell over dead, off white foam swirling out of their mouths. (No really- it had absolutely nothing to do with any of the young people we’ve been following like stalkers, and everything to do with the King of Turn, Nabu. (Yes, that Nabu.)) The next in line for succession to the throne of Dervish is Klarion, as he is the Prince. Unfortunately, the laws of succession state that the King must be sworn in by a Queen.

No, no- not The Queen; A Queen.

(Magic A is Magic A- and cities tend to have their own specific character. Dervish is much more self-aware than any material city- she’s a Real city, and she knows what’s best for her, thank-you. She might have shifted things around to better suit her, her people, and her needs-wants-haves, but if she hadn’t- well. It could have been very, very bad.

Apokaliptic, in fact.)

Perdita is a tad… miffed. She was hoping an assassin would attempt to kill her- she wanted to get some use out of her new throwing knives, darn it! (Oh, Prince Klarion isn’t as upset as he should be- trouble at home, perhaps?) “…Oh, that isn’t good.”

“Kid Flash? What do you mean?”

“Well, for one thing, a King and Queen being killed like that is never good- for another, the laws of Dervish require the current prince of the realm to take the throne at the behest of a queen.”

“…What do the laws actually say?”

“Um… I’m not sure-”

“Could you find out for me, please?”

Kid Flash looks at her, sees the resolve in her gleaming blue eyes. He nods quickly- he doesn’t really want to know what she looks like angry.

Klarion comes around to her side, and kneels. “Kid Flash tells me that you are a Queen?”

“I am.”

“You can appoint me?”

“If I know what the protocols for your country are, then certainly.”

Klarion winces. “The law is that a King of Dervish must be appointed by a Queen- nothing is said about how that should work.”
Perdita reads a lot of books- it isn’t that she has lots of free time; she just… has a lot of free time- it's four hours to the rest of Europe from her castle any way you slice it, then it's another ten hours to America, followed by a two hour layover in Philadelphia- then another four hours to Central… Being a Queen takes much too much time, in her opinion. She can't work during that time... so she reads. “So… I can appoint you in whatever way I wish?”

Klarion bites his lip. “Yes, you may appoint me in whatever way you feel is apropos to the situation.”

“Hmm… Prince Klarion, in return for your appointment, I would like a boon.”

“What would that be?”

“Fix my material heart, and I’ll make you a King, Prince Klarion.”

“It will be as you say, Queen Perdita.”

(What neither of them know is that Perdita’s prodigal mind comes from a latent meta-gene; it’s been mitigating the effects of her heart murmur and certain poisons for her entire life. By fixing her heart, that same meta-gene will eradicate all traces of her illness, and make it impossible for her to be poisoned.

It will also give her the worst attention-span problem of her life, which will be fixed when she figures out her new power: the power of multiplicative functioning. What is multiplicative functioning? It is the ability to create multiples of one’s self.

For example: Billy Numerous (who doesn’t exist in this world, so pipe down) possesses the power to duplicate himself, hence the name Billy "Numerous". This power is dangerous because of its... side-effects. If Billy were to clone about 10,000 or more duplicates, it would drive him insane. Somewhere around 1000 dupes is his limit. However, there is also another important element to Billy’s powers and that is this: when he has reabsorbed clones that have been sent out for long periods of time, it fractures his psyche.

Perdita’s powers will differ in three distinct ways: Firstly, her dupes will not be identical clones of herself- they will be herself. That is to say, instead of calling another self into being, she will extend herself into another body; she will not make a new self, but an extra self… like suddenly having a third arm that you know exactly how to use.

Secondly, her only limit will be the limit of her concentration- that is to say, the number of thoughts she can hold in motion inside her head at one time. Her current limit is 700. Her future limit will be somewhere beyond infinite- quantum is like that.

Thirdly, because her clones aren’t really clones, she can’t fracture her psyche with them; they are herself. Because she is herself, if one of her knows something, all of her knows something. That said, since every clone is herself, any damage to one of them is the same as damage to herself, so… if one of her gets shin-splints and reabsorbs herself, she’ll get the memory of those shin-splints. If one of her gets a sugar high and disperses herself, she’ll get the memory sugar high. If one of her gets shot and dies, the original won’t… but she’ll remember it happening.)

For Klarion, granting Queen Perdita’s boon is a simple matter- after the girl with the blood (Oh gods) he devoted a large portion of his studies towards learning how to heal with his magic. A twist from within, and Queen Perdita’s heart is perfect- and her meta-gene is no longer working to keep her
heart beating. (The poisons will be worked out of her systems by the next morning; her powers will start to activate within the week.)

“I, Queen Bernice Camilla Edwardine Georgette Maria Danielle Perdita Vertigo, ask King Klarion to rise, and take his throne.” Klarion’s red eyes gleam in the soft golden candle light; he rises with some undefinable power swirling around him. He stands tall and strong- Teekl inhales, her voice caught in her throat; he looks like his father. Gods, that’s hot. (Horny teenagers are everywhere.)

King Klarion bows to Queen Perdita; “Will you dance with me Your Majesty?”

Queen Perdita rises, her circle cut skirt flaring around her legs. “I would be delighted to do so, Your Majesty.” Klarion gently takes Perdita’s hand in his- draws her out to the dance floor. The band (Caravan Palace, a Dervish favorite) starts to play a hoppin’ beat; they dance with a rather spectacularly manic happiness.

(“Captain, check your seven. Is that Queen Perdita dancing with Klarion the Witch-boy?”

“I believe so, Flash; and Klarion is the current King of Dervish. I think your nephew and his friends are here too. At seven-thirty and twelve.”

“Ah… Yeah, that’s my Kid- along with Trickster, Pied Piper, and Weather Wizard. It’s good that he can spend time with his friends. Don’t recognize the girl though-”

“Teekl Le Chat, Marquis of Dervish.”

“Shouldn’t she be a marichoness?”

“Yeah, I don’t get that either. Dervish is weird.”

It should be noted that Captain Marvel and Flash get along like a house on fire- you know, screams, trauma, structural damage; it would make the Big Three very happy to never pair them in a team. Failing that, they would like to limit their exposure to each other. Together it’s like- Flash is like one little boy, a little troublesome, but not too bad on his own; Captain Marvel is like another little boy, a little shy, but not too bad on his own. When you put the two together, you get a pair of little boys who would happily play together… by bungee-jumping off the roof. With yarn.

Yeah.)

Wally will forever remember the aftermath of that party- his friend James gained a standing invitation to the Vlatvian Palace, and learned many new ways to cuss someone out; Wally thought Queens didn’t curse, but… - Teekl gave him her phone number, and told him “I would be happy to… teach you how to dance, Kid Flash.”- Mark got a knighthood from the King of Dervish, Klarion- He got Klarion’s email, and an entreaty to “Stay in touch, eh?”- Perdita gave him a hug and told him that “This was the best party I’ve ever been to! We should… um… “hang out?” again!” “I’d be delighted to, Queen Perdita.”- and Robin told him all about the FUBAR mission the team had just returned from, and showed off his finger-cast.

All things considered, the parties were complete successes.
*See "Musical themes and Magical collusions in Occidental and Westron Magical Occurences", "Singing the Gotham Blues: an Opera in Fragments", "The Ballad of the Fallen and Forgotten: notes from the disenfranchized Hero-youth of the '20's, '30's, and '40's". For further reading, see "Distressing Damsels and Disturbing Dames- the rise of the modern Feminine"
because I made the Correct Decision.

This part of the story is about a street-gang of “orphans” who live in a box (a refrigerator box, honestly, some people don’t have standards) on a roof somewhere on the streets of Gotham:

-“If there are gods, they do not help, and justice belongs to the strong; but know that all things done before the naked stars are remembered.”-

(If you’re prepared for hardship- if you are inventive and sneaky and above all smart the streets of Gotham are the place for you; if you’re prepared to run like hell and hold your breath and never, never use your real name, the streets of Gotham are the place for you.)

A soft whimper from a baby’s mouth- and Carrie is up, out of her little nest of blankets; the small hot-plate Black tugged out of the trash was a little funky, but Oracle was able to clean it for them with some bleach, so it was all good. Stephanie- no, no real names where outsiders can hear- very late at night or very early afternoon if they’re at Home is okay, but it’s just past dawn, so they have to use safe-names; so it’s Spoiler’s turn to feed RR.

“Spoiler- Spoiler, wakem, yeah?”

“Mmmnngh- whatchu-wan’ do Kitten?”

“S’yur turn ta feed RR, innit?”

“…Ha, s’right; m’kay.” Spoiler- Stephanie shifts up and out of her little nest of blankets; reaches into the corner of one of the wide chimneys that block the wind off of the Sea of the Dead, grabs a new can of condensed milk, the open jug of infant water and the infant formula; Ca- Kitten has turned the hotplate on, put their baby food cook-pot on it (it’s small, and tall, and has a little spout on one side, made of copper- Kitten swiped it off the back of a truck)- Spoiler pours three ounces of water into the pan; Kitten has carefully used one of their knives to open the condensed milk. Spoiler measures out two careful scoops of formula, added a count of five count to five while you pour then stop pour of condensed milk- a pair of disposable chopsticks get used to stir the brew; Kitten takes over stirring it. Spoiler gently tugs Red out of his “crib”, a milk crate lined with sofa cushions and warm fleecy blankets- the rim of a bicycle is over it, a make-shift mobile strung with colorful folded paper animals and tiny flowery beads Tim outgrew his bassinet months ago- god, he grows so fast-; sits him on her lap, gently tucks one arm under his body- Kitten hands her a new bottle, just warm enough to be good.

Spoiler cradles Red- gently tucks his black hair behind his ear as he suckles from his bottle, blue eyes half closed in contentment. He sucks it all down- makes a funny little face; Kitten hands Spoiler the changing bag. Spoiler sighs, but it is her turn… “Black back fr’m Or’cle’s yet?”

“Nah. Be back soonish yeah?”

A soft clatter- a small collection of cans tied to a string- and Black (Cassandra) climbs back into the small fort. She has a small black sack backpack hooked over one shoulder; she’s wearing a jumpsuit in various shades of black, navy blue, dark grey and brown; she’s splotched like a calico cat. A beanie with cat ears covers her head below her ears; a black and white bandana covers her face to the bridge of her nose; her eyes are covered by a pair of (black) Jackie O sunglasses with yellow lenses.

Gotham Clothing Exchange is run by people who don’t really care who you are or what you want to
buy- so long as your cash is legal tender you can have whatever you want. This is why no one really noticed when a little honey-blond girl bought five dollars’ worth of baby/infant cloth items and some old Halloween costumes; and the GCE sells more than just clothing- they’ll take just about anything really.

Which is how a little sandy-blond haired girl was able to fill a soda shipping crate with all the other little things a baby would need and a few other things- baby bottles, infant formula, cloth diapers, blankets, soft squishy toys that wouldn’t have parts pop off- rope that is hard to tangle, grappling hooks, fingerless leather gloves, sewing kits, Deuce Bandages, party supplies; all together, the contents of the crate only cost her fifty cents. The GCE sells clothing, not stuff- they aren’t Bargain Mart. (Bargain Mart, Bargain Mart, for all your shopping needs.)

Which is how a little girl (who didn’t talk) with black hair was able to fill a banker’s box with beanies and vinyl gloves and knives and brass knuckles and dog-chains and old keys and hammers and nails and sheets and bubble wrap... They do sell super-cheap laundry soap though; there are in store washing machines- so long as you buy more than a dollar’s worth of clothing, they’re yours to use (provided you have the quarters to run the machines.)

(If you’re willing to hide and sneak- curl up inside the shadows and hide under-inside-behind-around the wall; wrap yourself in the coat of lies that gets re-woven every night- the streets of Gotham are the place for you. If you’re willing to lie and cheat and steal- destroy someone utterly, make your own path, walk on the wild side, learn to fly without wings or lines or upward lift… If you are willing to be eaten alive, get spat back out, lick your wounds and carry on, the streets of Gotham are the place for you.)

Stephanie Brown; Spoiler is a vigilante. She went to the library and looked it up- and that’s what a person who operates outside of the law to bring criminals to justice is. (She met the Oracle there too- veritable font of know-age, that one. She didn’t mind that they weren’t exactly… respectable; she wanted in on the- the thing they had going. Stephanie was… impressed with her resolve; Carrie, less so. Cassandra, true to form, doesn’t comment. She does knit Oracle- Barbara, a bright yellow cat-eared beanie with long braided ties down the sides and bouncy pom-poms that hang just above the shoulders; apparently, she approves of having a stable source of information.) That’s what she is. She might not be a hero yet, but a vigilante she is. She left home when she was six- packed up her little Choco lunchbox with medical supplies; folded up androgynous clothing into a purple knap-sack- got her dad to teach her how to pack for camping. (Sneak and hide, hide and sneak.) Mom was high again, and Dad is not there often enough to matter.

Caroline Fischer is a thief. She left her house because her parents didn’t care what she did; didn’t care if she ate, or slept, or had clean things to wear- didn’t care if she was sick, or her grades were good, or if she had friends. (A bloody nose, another fight with those girls and if mom or dad would just notice me- a trip to the Nurses office at Gotham North. A pamphlet -Neglect is the most common type of abuse. Some research claims children are more likely to be neglected if they're poor because parents are preoccupied with survival – but wealthy families definitely can and do neglect their kids. Neglect occurs when parents or guardians don't provide food, shelter, safety, supervision, clothes, education, attention, or medical treatment – often it's about what they don't do, more than it is about what they do.-) She was gone within two weeks- and if she didn’t think that through, hey… Whatever.

Cassandra Cain is an assassin. She was on her very first mission (three years old, the same age as Jason); and she went through with it, then (I… he was so scared and I killed him, I made him stop- I don’t- I don’t want to do that again); she ran hard and fast… ended up in Gotham, where no one
cares. Her duffle bag full of weapons is the only thing she had- food, clothing, shelter, language- all of that will come later, when she meets Carrie and Stephanie. Happiness will be found only when she begins to care for Tim- well, care for is a bit strong; more like… protect, defend- look after.

(They’re only a year apart- Tim was a two-year old when they found him; he was dressed as a small child.)

They meet each other within a week of being on the streets, in late May; hit it off within seconds. Both blond girls are nine years old- Carrie is bureaucracy savvy; she’s the one who figures out how to get a P.O. Box and a correspondence-style education- Stephanie is street smart; she’s the one who finds places to get food, clothing, and shelter. Cassie comes later, after they get driven out of a place Stephanie found for them, again. Stephanie is headstrong- she takes the wrong tack. “EY! Wha’s the big idea wif-”

The man is much bigger than her; his eyes gleam in the night. (He’s going to kill her.) Stephanie sees him rear back, sees his fist rise into the air- a dark blur rockets down from the sky (the fire escape). “Urk.” The man falls over, knocked out cold- having a ninety pound girl land on your head tends to do that. The girl in black stands tall, her black-brown eyes gleaming in the night- and all she sees from the ones she… happiness, and gratefulness; They- they don’t mind that I didn’t… Maybe I’ll stay with them for a while: I hope they’ll let me… (They did. Of course they did; they are kind, and she is strong- and Stephanie, for all her weak fighting skills, is a very good judge of character (when she's slept enough). Carrie likes to think she’s better at it- she’s better at judging the character of scumbags, not regular people.)

Alone, they could have survived- together, they thrived.

Then- then, Carrie rescues a baby from his Dead kidnappers; the gang’f brigands zigged when they shoulda zagged, and got shot by rivals, or maybe there were too many thieves in the den; Bang-Bang, and all the ugly biggerz’re on the ground, a little bassinet clattering- the high, reedy cry of a- baby. What the fucking hell? Carrie was sneaking along behind one of the dumpsters, groceries, natch; she had frozen up when the shootout started- held herself quietly behind the thick steel of the dumpster; when the shooting stopped, and the baby’s cries started, Carrie made herself creep out from the relative safety of behind the dumpster.

(Legally speaking, Carrie Fischer is actually Caroline Kelly- her grandmother, who died three months before she left the people who were supposed to be her parents, was Mariah Fischer- the person who was supposed to be her father is named Jared Kelly. (The person who was supposed to be her mother is named Ravinia Fischer Kelly.) Mariah Fischer was an accountant for the mob in her later life- it doesn’t matter which mob, not really. Mariah Fischer- who Carrie called Grammy- was the one who cared for Carrie more often than not. Grammy was the one who taught Carrie how to pick locks, and pockets, hack a computer; how to hot-wire cars, and make IED’s and shoot all manner of guns- Grammy was the one who taught Carrie how to read, speak, and understand legalese, negotiate a contract, read a will; how to out-think a civil servant, lie to the police, out run debtors- Grammy was the one who read to her at night, and taught her how to read, and write, patched her boo-boo’s…

It was Grammy Fischer- not Jared Kelly, nor Ravinia Fischer Kelly, but Mariah Donnelly Fischer- who freely gave the gift of love to her granddaughter, Carrie.

Out of a sense of respect, and love, and devotion for the dearly departed, Carrie calls herself Fischer- and, to be honest, Fischer suits her better in this world; in another world, she would have been a
Kelly.)

Carrie is in a loose shadowy grey and black jumpsuit, striped and spotted like some bizarre variety of cat; a thin, angled domino mask over her eyes like a cat’s face; small bag on her back, cinched tight to her, like a second skin. (Striped and spotted cat-eared beanie that matches her jumpsuit; Cass really likes to knit.) Kitten skitters forwards- looks down into the bassinet; into the crying face of a boy, no more than two years old. Her small hands gently tug off her outer leather fingerless gloves- thin inner vinyl gloves warm from her breath exhaled sharply over large palms; she gently picks up the little baby- she had volunteered at Gotham North’s daycare before, so she knew how to pick him up, and he’s a little big for a little baby, heavy in that weird way small fragile things are- too large for the way he’s dressed.

As she gently begins to pat the baby on his back, his shrill screams quiet into nothing. There is a large-ish diaper bag filled with baby things- Kitten pulls out a long baby wrap from the bag, loops it around herself and the little boy; puts the bag over one shoulder, cinches it tight; a quick little running leap onto a nearby fire escape, rebound off the bounce-net, and she’s up on the Skyway, en route to Home.

Gotham, architecturally speaking, is one of the craziest cities you will never want to live in. Never mind the crime rates- when your gas-line, your electrics, your water, and your ventilation all look the same, general matinence becomes very hard to do. That’s not even getting into the rent prices; there is a reason The Narrows have always been lived in- a reason the actual island of Gotham has always had a standing population of over ten-thousand people. It’s cheaper to live near the people paying you- and it just makes sense to have the fields where you grow your food outside an accursed swamp…

That said, the Gotham Skyway is one of the most amazing examples of urban landscape in the world. However- it isn’t very… how should I put it… User-friendly? After Stephanie nearly twisted her ankle (broke her neck, splattered her brains out on the cold streets) going Home, Carrie put her foot down. “’S past time to make some safeties, Spoi. We can’t- if you get hurt, we won’t-”

“’M Fine, Kit-”
“You almost weren’t Spoi-”
“I can handle myself out there and-”
“I can’t handle if you were to-”

Cassandra, who doesn’t talk with words (right now, she couldn’t if she wanted to; three months with the girls will make it so that she could if she were so inclined- not that she will be, but she can which is more than can be said for another world. She is only six years old- a little late for learning languages, but Cass is smart, and she is young- and Stephanie and Carrie talk a lot.), tugs one of the looped coils of bungee cord out of its crate- starts to tie knots and loops; weaves a net of circular proportions with fluid motions of her arms and torso. Carrie and Stephanie stop whisper-yelling at each other when Cassandra throws the newly woven net at their midsections. It catches them both just over the ribs- they let out a perfectly unified grunt; Cassandra has already pulled out another coil of cord- the next net she weaves is rectangular, and made out of finely spun cotton yarn; it’ll end up as a part of Home’s rafters. The first net goes on the corner of 87th and Le’rous, pulled tightly between where Stephanie fell before, and where she was trying to reach- a little safety net, hidden just the right way for it to not be noticed.

Home grew out of necessity- at first, it was whatever the three girls could carry on their backs, in their bags, or remember where they hid. Then Carrie, on one of her scouting runs, found a little alcove between two massive chimney stacks; fell through an old piece of scaffolding, caught herself
on crumbling brickwork- scraped her hands nearly raw. The place she had nearly fallen through was almost three stories down- and five feet wide. She was on an errand at the time- Oracle wanted access to the CCTV cameras around town, so Carrie was helping her get it… But. She came back-brought Steph and Cass to the place she found; Stephanie liked the fact that the little niche was in the center of the city- Cassandra liked the fact that there were almost fifty points of exit… but only five points of access. Carrie liked the fact that it was very… quiet- secluded from the city.

It was easy enough to clean the place out- build quality scaffolding, rig the entire place with traps (Safety first…) add a room for each of them, build storage and training and surveillance- a map of the city on one wall, pinned with POI’s- a register of places that are good to rob, places to stay away from, Cats-to-be… It eventually stopped being “the place” and became “Home”- the place you go back to, the place your family is; the place your heart is.

They became a small family- three sisters and their baby brother- and if one of them had to be at home at all times so that Tim didn’t have to wake up alone, then that’s what had to be. If they needed to eat more fruits and vegetables, take vitamins, bathe regularly- Stephanie likes to garden, Carrie is a damn fine pickpocket, and Cass had been wanting to branch out into other areas of design for a while.

They made it work.

(If you’re willing to live, the streets of Gotham are the place for you; If you’re willing to die, the streets of Gotham are the place for you.)

The reason Batman (and Sons and Daughter) didn’t notice a street gang of vigilantes showing up in Gotham was ultimately very simple: they were too busy; finding a set of clones created for ostensibly nefarious purposes- taking responsibility for your third son, helping your first son work through some rather spectacular image issues, and dealing with the fallout from your second son’s crazy party tendencies will suck the time out of your life like you wouldn’t believe. By the time he realized a new, rather worrying gang of “thieves” calling themselves “Stray Cats” has shown up out of, seemingly nowhere, there doesn’t appear to be a connection to Catwoman, but it’s only a matter of time before it shows up… it was far too late to do anything about it. (The reason the gang of “thieves” is worrying is not because of what they take or whom they steal from- the gang of “thieves” is worrying because of how they’re doing their work- they steal from places that are too well guarded for any but the best of thieves to gain entrance; places who’s points of access are too small for any adult and too cracked injudiciously dangerous for any sane person to dare. Basically, they’re either a gang of midgets who don’t care if they live or die- or they’re a gang of children who don’t know better.

Half right ain’t bad.)

Annoyingly, something gets done about it within a week of him being really aware of it- and by his second youngest son. (That would be Jason; Dick was busy negotiating with the King of Dervish for his help- Klarion is more than amenable to their cause, but he is a King- he has to look after the needs of his people, before he can look to the world’s welfare, (Do not attempt to govern your lands if your house is not secure- Klarion is still cleaning his house; it will be three weeks after Robin and Logistica have gone to Dervish before he will be able to give them the help they requested without fear of reprisals, assassinations, or sabotage.)

Johnny was with him at the time- apparently, with all the children gone, he felt it safe enough to break out new and exciting variations of his old standbys. You don’t need to be in fighting shape to fire a rocket launcher.
Permafrost was at the Watchtower- the boys (Johnny, Dick, and Jason) might not be allowed up there, but she gets special dispensation by virtue of the fact that she’s much harder to kill. (No, really- it’s very hard to scare someone with the threat of the Void when their internal temperature reaches below absolute zero at times, they can create ice on a molecular level, and they can hold their breath indefinitely. Of course, she was also busy with running the damn place- it’s kinda hard to do when you only have twenty techies and very little engineering knowledge- but then Logistica was able to help her out with some extra personnel and an uplink to some girl called “Oracle” for technical support.)

Apparently, he is now the proud father of- not one, not two, not three- but four sons, and four daughters.

Castle Vertigo:

James Jesse is not having a good time. He went back to Vlatvia with Perdita; it’s his summer vacation, he can do what he wants, peeps. <PerdyNumerous> invited <RiskyBiz> over to visit months and months ago, so… James took Perdita up on it- and that was when he learned that his new friend, Perdita, is actually Queen Bernice Georgette Camilla- Queen Georgette Edwardine Bernice- fuck it; Perdita Vertigo is actually the Queen of Vlatvia… along with being one of the top physicists in the world. Palace life is pretty freaking sweet, and even though he wants to milk it for all its worth, Len Snart “raised him better.” So.

Oddly- or maybe not- she’s one of the most organized people he’s ever met. Like, when every person over the age of eighteen vanishes, she doesn’t visibly panic. She goes to her office- her real office, not the show-piece that gets photographed- and unlocks a massive wardrobe- inside is a stack of folders. She rustles through the folders, tugs out one- James’ Cyrillic is a little rusty, but he can make out “No-Adults Action Plan”; “Perdita… did you make a plan for if every available adult person is suddenly gone?”

“…yes…”

“…You are amazing.”

She blushes cutely; shakes her head a little, blond waves flashing in the light. “James- W-wait, this is very important- you told me that you take… not ravim… not meditsiin… Ah! Medicine- medicine for a… üle põnev… over excitement condition?”

“You mean my ADD/ADHD drugs?”

“Yes- how much of the meditsiin- Medicine do you have with you?”

“I have about… ah… three days left.”

“Nikkuma! Okay, zo- do you know the amounts needed… like their, um, what is the word- not suhe… r-ratio? Of erguti-”

“Stimulants? Yeah, it’s labled on the bottles- Perdita, you need to breath slower, or you’ll pass out. If you panic, I won’t know what to… You just have to stay- stay calm. Just breathe, okay? We’ll figure this out together Perdita, it’ll be okay-” James’ hazel eyes have flared a cool, calming blue; his straw blond hair has fluffed out around his head like feathers on a chick- his breath huffs out of him when a
girl- a Perdita- wraps her arms around him, squeezing his ribs almost painfully. “Aitäh, James. Aitäh aitäh aitäh aitäh aitäh-” James doesn’t even hesitate- yes, there are suddenly five Perdita’s in the room, but this one is hugging him, so- he hugs her back; hooks his chin over her head, smells her- Lavender, Rosemary, soap- she’s really… sweet. Until she turns- fifteen in Vlatvia? No, be safe… in Keystone it’s seventeen- Until Seventeen, sweet is the only thing she can be. Dammit morals. Ah no! Nononononononono- bad hormones bad hormones- quick, think about dead puppies, argh argh argh-

Gotham:

They’re at breakfast when it happens- Johnny is munching on a slice of bacon, occasionally reaching out to grip the back of Dick’s pajama shirt and tug him away from a face full of oatmeal; Dick is half asleep, nearly drowned in his oatmeal, as usual- he doesn’t always eat oatmeal, of course… Sometimes, he eats cold cereal. Jason is, quietly, carefully, placing the small circles of his Oatie’s cereal on the spiked hairs of Bruce’s snoring head- there is one rather impressive stack of fifteen; Bruce’s chainsaw like snores rattle the cutlery, trouble the various drinks, and make all three boys very glad they have their own earplugs. Alfred is working very hard to not laugh at the antics of his family at breakfast. (Evidently, Johnny and Jason are morning people- Dick and Bruce are very muchly not.)

Dick only realizes something’s wrong- not, y’know, Dad Bruce woke up and is not amused with Jason wrong, but wrong- when he can’t hear the obnoxiously loud chewing from his older brother at breakfast. He’s been hearing that sound, which is actually very comforting for him, since he was around nine and a half; ten really, but he felt nine and a half… For it to suddenly be gone- not “he’s just swallowing” but gone- is enough for him to fully open his eyes before nine-fifteen A.M. for the first time in three years; just in time to hear Jason’s first fully articulated words. (In what will be mentioned in Batclan lore as indicative of his character, one word is a rather foul curse in at least three languages.) “Vâng, fuck.”

Sadly, the exact word(s) the boys said when his two younger brothers vanished will be lost to the annals of history- however, it is known that it made both of Alfred’s eyebrows go up, and Bruce was stunned into wakefulness by the sheer vehemence of the phrases uttered by his eldest child. The fact that it was all uttered in a perfect cockney accent, however, is very much known. After all, he repeated them, with much greater desperation, when he learned that his not-quite paramour Permafrost was also missing.

Watchtower:

Permafrost is worried I’m not panicking, just… I’m not sure how we’re going to get through this. Shit, I can feel it, I’m panicking.- you could tell by the steady huffs of mist coming from her nose and mouth. You could also tell by the steadily dropping temperature. (The ambient temperature of the Watchtower is always- always- seventy-two degrees Ferinhiet. (That’s twenty-two point two degrees Celsius.) Normally, an “on” Permafrost will lower the area around herself about two degrees, generally making the rooms she’s in at the Watchtower a chilly seventy degrees. Right then, she was dropping the temperature almost ten degrees- from seventy-two to sixty-two.)

It’s one thing for Bats to trust her enough to allow her into the Watchtower- to trust her self-control enough to not freak and hurt someone- it’s quite another to assign her monitor duty. Yes, she turns eighteen in a few months, and yes, the age limit for the League is eighteen but… she’s not sure she’s
ready. Then all of the people over eighteen vanished, and she was left with twenty people who had lied about their ages, four babies, a girl named Ace in a stasis pod, a shy teenage girl named M’gann, various plants and animals, and a massive logistical nightmare on her hands.

(Here’s how it breaks down. If all the children of the world were to vanish, at most, there would be a depression, warfare, and serious civilization collapse. If all the adults were to vanish from the world at once, the worst that could happen would be… Nuclear Apocalypse. That’s not even getting into food problems, electrics, medical-

There are lots of sick, and small, and shy children- not every child in the world is a Johnny or a Cass; a Jason or a Carrie; a Maureen or a M’gann- point of fact, most children aren’t. (Be grateful that they aren’t.))

Platinum Flatts:

Kaldur is mad- although, the term is really sexually frustrated, but he feels angry. Okay, so- his wonderful fiancée, Roy, was ah… tending to his garden and then, right when he was about to… erm… (screw it) right when he was about to bring him to completion, Roy vanished, right? Right, so, Kaldur isn’t so far along that his magic has become affected- he can feel the massively powerful spell washing over him, dragging his fiancée away. So.

After he realizes that, no, his wonderful Roy is not going to be giving him that sweet sweet release, he lies there, panting. Then he makes his quivering stomach muscles tug him up and forward, leans on his weakened knees- and proceeds to curse the makers of the spell out with all the pent-up frustration of a teenage (girl) boy denied an orgasm. After that, Kaldur staggers out of bed, takes a shower- makes him (her) self walk, calmly, gracefully, over to the closet.

Atlantean uniforms, particularly for the armed forces, are often unisex- or at the very least, extremely adjustable. Kaldur’s Aqualad uniform is not an exception; in Atlantean law, his position is Champion to the King. Kaldur’s Aqualad uniform is actually an update of centuries of Atlantean livery; the exact color, shape, and placement of every mark on that set of clothing is set. The way it fits him, however, is not. For example, the chest area is able to expand and contract via a set of buttons, ties, and cleverly disguised catches; the pants expand and contract in various ways- but that’s clothing. Atlantean weaponry on the other hand, is very muchly not unisex. It’s not about gender- it’s about the way a person’s magical strength flows through their body; in males, it flows one way- in females, another. As Kaldur is now female...

All Atlanteans have a basic amount of magical ability- the ones who can show others pictures in the silt-clouds, or see the future in the seaweed, or can make their favorite shells light up in rainbow colors- those children are trained to be sorcerers. (Kaldur did none of that. What Kaldur did is both more and less worrying- he talked to fish, and anemones, and they talked back… he made the seaweed grow out of season, and got the living corals to grow in shapes- these things mark a very powerful sorcerer; they also mark a descendant of Kordax. Where Kaldur lived- where he was born, and grew up… these things were common. However- a little twist of fate got him sent to Basic Training in Poseidonis, where he was tested early for magical ability, and his testers were… stunned. While Poseidonis might produce more sorcerers, they usually do not possess great magical power- too much inbreeding.) Kaldur, by virtue of who he is, was sent to Poseidonis- where his magical strength was tested, and he was trained; where he made his first friends, and got his first crush; where he learned the two styles of fighting.

The Change, as it is called in Shayeris, is where the icthyian adjustments to Atlantean genetic code
show themselves. There has been enough intermixing of the two strains of Atlantean genetics- the original *Homo atlanis* and the modified *Homo icthyia* - for the Change to be rather common in society, and very well studied. Which means that Kaldur goes to an adult-less Shayeris in uniform, but unarmored; while it might be too dangerous for him to use his swords, that isn’t all he knows how to use- his mother’s harpoons should work for him *just fine* thank you. He’ll probably grab a net or two, some potions, a snack (he’s really been craving his mother’s oyster creams spread over spicy red coral rounds; normally repulsive, but currently delicious)- make sure that all the children of Shayeris are okay without him.

Then he’s going to stab the fuck out of the stupid witches who cockblocked him. Yes indeedy-do.

Fawcett:

Secret is worried. Not because all the adults vanished- that imbalance should right itself within three weeks- but because he can’t get Zatanna to lift the spell holding Billy down. Apparently, he’s stolen her diary sometime in the past few days. Zatanna’s father, John Zatara, had sent her over by train a few days ago; just before Captain Marvel was at the Dervish Soiree, Kent Nelson died. This meant that Nabu was free to run a few little… “errands”. He’d been meaning to do something about the current rulers of Dervish for some time, however, he couldn’t do anything while he was still bound to the material plane- when the late Mr. Nelson died, that bond was shattered.

Unfortunately, his duties are in the material world, not the real world; his former host had died, and Death is a woman of duty- that duty is to bring, and then release. She can’t do returns. (All sales are final; no refunds.) He searches out suitable hosts- Abel’s House of Secrets- although the Abel’s was dropped, that’s still the place- and… damn. Durante “Dudley” Zatara would have been perfect- except he’s working for Shazam, who has much more power to use in his pursuits; where there is an Abel, there is a Cain; the girl Zatanna is too young, but her father-

Nabu explains his duties to John Zatara; John asks Nabu for a little time to set his former life in order- “Please, Lord Nabu- I must see to my daughters welfare-”

“I know. A duty is a duty- yours is to your daughter. I’m sure her uncle, Durante, will take care of her.”

A quick phone call later, a mildly powerful trance spell- and Zatanna is packed, dressed, and on a train to her uncle’s house. She’s leaving her attic bedroom above the House of Mysteries (Cain’s)- leaving to live with the uncle she’s only met once in her life when she was six. She’s twelve thirteen now, and she barely remembers her Uncle D- and she does not like Billy Batson. Which is cool- Batson doesn’t like her either.

Flash forwards to now, and Zatanna has pinned Billy to the floor of the stockroom of House of Secrets, and is jumping on him.

(Interestingly, Secret and Zatanna get along just fine.)

(What Nabu doesn’t know is that his actions in the real world are about to throw the material world out of balance- by killing the King and Queen of Dervish, he allowed a power vacuum to be created. That vacuum will cease to exist three weeks after Logistica and Robin go to Dervish- you can’t really effect the material world if you’re dead.)
Gotham:

Robin remembers the one and only time he ever asked his brother about what he does in his role as Batman’s associate. His brother, to his knowledge, will not lie about his actions- his past, his mind, his body, his feelings are all fair game- but not his actions. Not to him. So, when his older brother replied glibly that he got “Banned from Biyalia on Batman’s say-so” Robin asks for some clarification.

(This is right before the “Getting a small child almost nearly dead” mission- and this is where Robin, and the Team, got acquainted with Scarecrow’s more frightening side. This is also where they all become very thankful that Scarecrow is the Second, not the Commander.)

“’Crow, why aren’t you allowed in Biyalia?”

“Hmm? Oh that… I cut out Queen Bee’s liver a few years ago- she really should learn to let stuff like that go…”

Robin stares at Scarecrow. So does the rest of the Team.

“…What? I didn’t cut out so much that she would die, just enough to make her really uncomfortable. Anyway, I sent it back to her a square inch at a time; I really don’t know what her problem with me is…”

Robin swallows very carefully, then asks his… astonishingly scary older brother- “…May I ask why?”

“…There are similarities between absolute power and absolute faith: a demand for absolute obedience, a readiness to attempt the impossible, a bias for simple solutions to cut the knot rather than unravel it, the viewing of compromise as surrender... Both absolute power and absolute faith are instruments of dehumanization. Hence, absolute faith corrupts as absolutely as absolute power. Queen Bee believed in the absolute power of her mind-altering pheromones; she had absolute faith in the quality of her skills- I disabused her of those notions, and then I… Made a point.”

Artemis is the one who asks it quietly, in the sudden silence of the Cave- “Was the point... necessary?”

“Sadly, yes. I- it might be hard to believe, but I really don’t like hurting people. Queen Bee, for all her faults, is a person, not a monster.” (It is hard to believe; the team has just gone through what Robin had come to know intimately- getting beaten like a drum by his older brother.

Nine times out of ten, the boy’s will win in a fight against Robin. That tenth time is when they have to use weapons- since Robin is so much smaller, when he uses his escrima sticks he can move much faster; one of the only times Robin’s physical fighting skills best Scarecrow’s. Robin is also a better acrobat, and can exert more physical force in his punches… Scarecrow just has longer reach, more experience, and has stopped growing.

If you saw the boys walking down the street, you’d think that he’s the quintessential skinny geek- he’s six ten, looks like he weighs around a hundred and fifty pounds, thick coke bottle glasses, long face, narrow blue eyes, scruffy unkempt wavy black hair, snaggly teeth, and a nose like the prow
of a ship. And you’d be right- the boys are one of the geekiest people on the planet. They are also one of the most dangerous.

They weigh one hundred and ninety pounds dead even- and almost none of that is body fat. They can eat their entire weight in food in under fifty minutes- then do it again three hours later. They can lift almost twice their weight, and can put more force behind a blow than looks like should be possible. Robin and Batman are visibly strong- Scarecrow isn’t. Scarecrow relies more on intimidation and psychology to frighten people- but if he needs to beat someone down, he can. Easily. His reach is somewhere around three and a half feet- add to that the six feet of his gaffe, and the four feet from his slungshot… Well. There’s a reason the majority of Gotham’s criminal underbelly knows better than to go to Narrows to conduct their business; Batman and Robin will beat the hell out of you- Scarecrow and Permafrost will end you.

But the team didn’t know that.)

That was the day Robin realized that, while his older brother might be the geekiest, goofiest, dorkiest excuse for a guy in the world- while his older brother might make waffles at midnight, and give quite possibly the best hugs in the world, and read the most raunchily romantic drivel in existence- while he might have had a crush on the same girl since he was fourteen- he’s also kinda… crazy. (And just the tiniest bit overprotective, but he's known that since Riddler tried to kidnap him.)

Dick feels the slightest twinge of fear for whoever cast the spell; finishes putting his uniform on, puts Red Hood into a red hoodie, makes sure his shoes are on tightly; answers his phone and has a conversation with his best friend (the crush has withered away at this point- yes, Wally is astonishingly cute, and funny, and kind… but he’s also Wally; it would be too… weird to go for anything with him.)- “…Wally, pretend I don’t speak physicist.”

“But you do speak-”

“Wally. Pretend.”

“Ugh, fine- somebody used “magic” to vanish all the adults in the world.”

“Vanish?”

“Until there is conclusive proof otherwise, yes. Vanish- not destroy, not kill- vanish.”

“…Okay.”

Robin is hoping that Scarecrow will leave enough of them for him to get a few punches in.

Platinum Flatts:

Helena is worried. She’s also at the Birds of Prey HQ, and… well, if Black Orchid makes one more crack about her protégée, somebody’s getting shot. No, she is not eighteen- and how any of you thought she was…

Artemis is… concerned. Lian is curled up next to her, still asleep; she’s been up all hours with nightmares for a while; she’s taken to sleeping in the same bed as her “Aunt D” Artemis. Artemis doesn’t mind- she remembers being six, and scared, and how she wished that Jade or Mom would let
her sleep in the bed with them more often because there *totally were* things under the bed, and she’s *scared*. Artemis’ arm is wrapped around Lian- her soft breaths huff out of her body in steady waves; the thick afghan over them both is woven in shades of orange, yellow, and red.

Right about now, Huntress should be moving around downstairs- just getting back from patrol, putting her things away, showering, and going to bed- maybe a snack. The sounds aren’t there. It’s… not good, that the sounds aren’t there. For one thing, she would be getting a call from another Bird if Helena had bitten off more than she could chew and ended up in the hospital again; if Huntress had needed Artemis’ skills- but that would have been a call on her comm. and Helena agreed that Artemis needed to get Lian settled in before she could go around heroing in the night… So. Artemis is… worried. Not worried enough to get up at seven in the morning- but worried.

The soft strains of extremely loud cursing help her realize that, no, Helena not checking in is not an isolated thing- Judging from the dulcet tones of the Atlantean floating through the air… apparently, Roy vanished right when he was about to get Kaldur off for the third time that morning. (Artemis particularly likes the one that translates to “I will cut off their genitals and fuck their faces with them.” She never knew Atlantean cursing was so… vicious.) That’s enough for her to get out of bed- carefully slide Lian’s head off of her stomach, gently tuck her into the soft pale blue sheets, under the burning bright afghan, move her octo-arms around a squishy pillow- takes her bag of superhero stuff with her to the shower. She looks through her many colors of hair dye- picks the dark navy blue, the heavy black- bathes. Dyes her hair to match her uniform; puts it on- skinny jeans in a dark wash, stretchy where they need to be- black socks, heavy duty boots, sleek in their silhouette; cap-sleeved undershirt/bra combo (as seen on TV), in a pale shade of creamy grey- underwear that she knows for a fact will not chafe, ride around, or creep upwards for eight days; overshirt in dark navy, spider-silk and flexi-armor, stylized up-arrow on the chest; gauntlets with feel-through undergloves, heavy padding in her first two fingers, bracing up to the middle of her bicep; a dark blue mask/tiara/thing- internal computer, disguise, comms…

Lian’s pattering feet stop just outside of the door- she knocks. “It’s open.”

Lian opens the door- sees her aunt in her blues; her aunt hasn’t put the mask on yet, nor put her arrow belt on; Lian knows- she remembers what this clothing means. “…I’m coming too.”

Artemis raises an eyebrow- “You sure?”

Lian nods, dark auburn hair fluttering in the air- “I don’t wanna be alone- and you could prolly use sum technic’l support.”

“Alright. Suit up- your new togs are under your bed.”

“’Kay.” Lian toddles to her bed- which is behind a screen in the same room as Artemis’; reaches under it, tugs out a flatish square box- opens it. Inside is a new mask (her old one covered her entire face) one that covers her face just like Aunt D’s, only more… rounded; thick tights, good for sliding on, running in; a dress, skirt to just below her kneecaps, cap sleeves; gloves- thick fingerless outer gloves, thin inner gloves; a new pack- inside is everything that should be there; boots that are sleek looking, and stop just above her ankles; an oblong inside a case- she opens the case to reveal a compound bow- three kinds of drawstring; a little wonky on the grip- Oh! She didn’t… that’s- I’ve never gotten to wrap the grip on my own bow- I’d just outgrow it, but… Aw, Aunt D…; “The arrows are in this side portion of your pack, See?”

Lian wraps her arms around Artemis- it’s the first time, ever, that she’s initiated a hug between them. “Thank you, Auntie…” Her voice is muffled, buried in Artemis’ soft chest; “You’re welcome Sweet
Bun—now, check your stuff, make sure everything fits—”

Lian nods, collects herself—“Yes, Auntie.” (Everything is in a fetching shade of bluegrey— if you were to look at the two colors Artemis and Speedy wear side by side… Artemis’ would be more Vibrant, while Speedy’s is more Muted. They’re the same color—just different shades.

And, yes, when they go out in the night, Speedy follows Artemis like a duckling; Helena will be very sorry she missed it.)

Vlatvia:

Count Vertigo is terrified of screwing up his niece’s country; yes, his niece’s country, because this is not the Vlatvia of his youth, and he is obscenely grateful that he was never picked to rule. He’s not entirely sure how his niece does all of this—yes, her “Ruling the Country” journal, notes, and directives are very helpful… he still doesn’t know how she does it. I think I’ll leave her to the throne— if this is what it’s like every day… I can’t imagine why I ever wanted to be a king, this is horrible—

Perdita is getting dressed. After she composed herself— got her breathing under control, set the Five to work organizing her country into some semblance of order, put James— No. When he’s on the job, his name is Trickster— Trickster on housesitting (making sure all the utilities- the artisan wells, and the hydro-electrics stay in working order) /babysitting (making sure all the children of the servants are okay- the younger ones are well fed, entertained ect.; the older ones doing the duties their parents would normally be doing) /Queensitting (making sure her Five ate, slept, bathed, and rested) duty.

The first week after the Dervish Soiree, and the receivement of her boon, Perdita had to figure out the hard way how all her powers work— she still is, for some of the subtler ones. What was clear the very first time she… Duplicated, is that even when she is apart, she is connected— what one of her knows, all of her knows. She feels no guilt in leaving the Five of her regular self’s behind— someone needs to stay and run her country, and they are her, so… The second week after the Boon, she had a super-suit made; Queen Bee might be a total nutbar, but she always looks good, and her powers help her run (tyrannize) her country- I am thinking I will use my powers in a more benign way...

Perdita tugs on an undersuit of Spi-lar and flex-armor (will stop bullets, knives, and blunt force trauma or your money back)- drops the light weight, hunter’s green dress over her head, ties the utility belt around her waist; leaves the loose “collar” of the dress down for the moment— she still has a few things she needs to do around the palace that require her face before she goes. (Like having her mid-afternoon snack; yes, her health might be astronomically better… but taking a rest mid-afternoon isn’t a bad practice, and she hasn’t eaten lunch yet- she knows how to cook for lots of people, so…)

She got a call from Kid Flash earlier— “and I know you have to be busy, but—”

“I will send Logistical Support immediately. Expect assistance in… four hours, or so.”

“Wait, don’t you need help too—”

“That will not be necessary; I will speak with you soon."
Perdita carefully pins her hair in two high pigtails—she doesn’t have enough hair for a ponytail, and everyone knows the Queen likes to wear her hair down and back—carefully snaps hunter’s green bun-covers embroidered with black fractal patterns over each one, to make it look like she might possibly have more hair. She adds bobby pins to the base of each ‘tail—can’t be too careful—opens a special case that just came from Verita, a subsidiary of Wayne Tech. (For ancient legal reasons, Wayne Tech proper isn’t actually allowed on Vlatvian soil—neither is the CEO, Bruce Wayne. Damn those Russian Waynes.) It is a visor, like the one worn by her favorite anime character, Maiden Hermes—however the visor is both narrower, as she is not a deformed caricature, and more sharply angled to complement her features; it is in a pale shade of green, with hooks and straps—these loop over my ears, and the strap goes behind my head like that and… oh yes, that works quite nicely. The computer that she made, the one that went with her to America, which will now be permanently uplinked with her visor is softly humming on her desk (it automatically records however many Duplicates—dups for short are in existence; it also computes information in the same way Perdita does) is shut, and slid into a specially made case; the case goes over her shoulder, and Perdita Vertigo—Queen Bernice Camilla Edwardine Georgette Maria Danielle Perdita Vertigo—Logistica is ready to face the world.

(When James sees her in her full uniform, which is very oddly Nazi-ish—(Vlatvia was never a Nazi-occupied country; it was, however, a Communist state) in the same way a very well-turned out man always looks a bit…androgynous—he realizes that yeah, he really is a stand-up kind of guy. Fuck His Life, Goddamn.

(He has a thing for powerful women in uniform—he’d probably hit on Amanda Waller, if they ever met.))

Gotham:

Red Hood doesn’t like being left at the computer. Yes, he knows that it’s important to tell Robin where stuff is happening—but he wants to be out there…and it’s scary in the cave. Which is why, when a girl introduces herself as “Oracle, Natch” he engages in conversation—what, like he wouldn’t.

“…Hiya. Wha- How can I help you, Miss Oracle?”

“You could start by introducing yourself, Mr.-”

“Red Hood. How may I help you, Miss Oracle?”

Somewhere across town, Barbara Gordon smiles into her headset—the Girls called her earlier, and told her the news; she usually took herself to school on the bus, and actually didn’t see her dad until dinner unless something was wrong—today is Sunday, the day her dad usually sleeps in. She wouldn’t have noticed anything amiss until dinner, when her dad didn’t show up—the Girls called her at three in the morning—“Oracle we’ve got a major malfunction on our hands.”

“Guh? S-spoiler? ’Sfour inthemorninguh-”

“Yeah! I know! So, Me an Kit-”

“Kit and I-”

“Right, we’re on the job-”

“Thieving-”

“Natch, an’ all the biggers up an gone, Oracle, gone like a channel switch.”
“So… wait, how’d y’know the bigger’s were gone?”

“Well, they was shootin’ at us—”
“Spoiler! Did y’even use my comp-prog?”
“Oi, the prog you gave us worked a dream- but dog’s hain’ compy’s yeah?”

“Shit. There were dogs?”

“Yeah- Black Cat said that the dogs were new additions- unregistered, ‘cuz they was fighting dogs—”
“Ah.”
“Yeah. So- all the adults are gone? You’re sure?”

“Fa- check the comms ifn’ you dun believe me, Oracle.”

She had- no one was there; she checked the CCTV cameras- empty streets; Reminds me of an episode of Specialist What- the one where everyone melts into clouds of Gases…

Fast-forward to this afternoon- Hello, what’s this? A signal- it’s pretty nicely encrypted, but…- and this conversation is happening.

“Mr. Red Hood, you can help me by sending your boy over to Jekyll and fiftieth- there’s a group of fifteen year-olds about to go joyriding…”

Robin showed Red Hood how to look around the city with the Bat-linked cameras- “I see ‘em; I’m sending Robin now. Stay on the line with me, Ms. Oracle? I’m very alone over here, and your voice is rather nice to listen to…”

A soft giggle of feminine laughter- “I’m happy to, Mr. Red Hood… Your voice isn’t so bad either.”

(The thing is, both children are speaking through Vocal Encoding Devices; Oracle sounds like a little old woman with only a passing acquaintance with sanity- Red Hood sounds like a six foot tall eighties porn-star.)

__Belle Reeve:

The thing most people never really keep in mind about Joar Mahkent or his son, Cameron, is that both are members of the League of Shadows. (Oh yes, they are.) They aren’t ranking members- Cameron, especially isn’t- but they are members. So- no, Icicle Sr. isn’t worried about his son. He can handle himself. (His son doesn’t know that his father trusts him to handle himself in all situations- his father doesn’t know that his son doesn’t know he is trusted; when Captain Marvel “fixes” the communication issues between the two worlds a few hours after the splitting, that becomes abundantly clear.

Only a son seeking his father’s approval- only a man unsure of who he is and where he stands- only Cameron “Fucking Dumbass” Mahkent would be crazy enough to take on Ravager- yes, the Ravager (but not the one you might be thinking of), Unarmed. Injured. And Depowered.

(Only Cameron “Fucking Dumbass” Mahkent would win.)
And, yes, it was one of the coolest things on TV at the time- the other channels were just as good, but this was the “Homefront” station, as it were.

The Mississippi Federal Penitentiary (MFP, also known as Belle Reeve, and nicknamed the "Hell of the South" and "The Freakshow") is a prison farm in Mississippi operated by the Federal Metahuman Bureau of Defense. It is the largest official maximum security prison in the United States dedicated to the detainment of metahuman's in the country with 500 offenders and 1,800 staff. It is located on an 18,000 acre (73 km²) property that was previously the Belle Reeve plantation owned by Ishmael Arkham (no, he didn’t escape the curse either) in unincorporated West Daniel Parish, directly adjacent to the state line. The prison is located at the end of Federal Highway 66, around 22 miles (35 km) southwest of St. Baconsville and 20 miles (32 km) southeast of Dellville, Mississippi. Belle Reeve is bordered on all sides by the vilest, most evil, and vermin infested swampland in the world- no clean water or shade for thirty miles in any direction; if you manage to get out of Belle Reeve, you’ll very likely die of starvation, typhus, heatstroke, or be consumed by wild-demon alligators. (No- that’s entirely serious.) As of four years ago, Amanda Waller is the warden. The State of Mississippi's death row for men and the state execution chamber are there. In the State of Mississippi, the names "Mississippi Federal Penitentiary" and "Belle Reeve," the name of the post office that serves the prison, are used interchangeably.

Cameron Mahkent is… a little worried. No, it isn’t about the fact that all the adults are gone- that’ll probably work itself out soon enough. And, no, it isn’t the fact that his roomie, Len, has vanished- he’s a nice enough guy, but… a little pedantic. His across-the-hall roommate, Thomas Tferore, is panicking; that doesn’t really change when the Shadow leaps off of the ceiling and decides to try to kill him. (That’s not what’s worrying him.)

He’s actually been expecting the Shadows to come after him for a while- he’s one of the only people still In who openly associates with Artemis- the old Alice. He’s one of the only people still findable who knows who Alice “is”; knows where to find her, knows how to put a Leverage on her. Of course they want to kill him. Honestly, he’s been expecting this for months…

Of course, he never dreamed that he rates getting The Ravager sent after him, but- whatever. He’s not worried about that either- he stays on his cot, long legs stretched out orange in front of him, when the plastic explosives blast a hole in the door of his cell. He leaves his arms under his head, only opens his eyes half-way-

“What the hell is he doing?”

Joar’s voice rumbles out into the hushed yard. “Wait, and see.”

-rolls toward the woman in the orange and black suit, the woman who just almost plunged a knife
where his upper ribcage was. Lands on his elbows- scrunches his knees up under him, uses his arm to slam Ravager’s knee sideways, scuttles out of the cell. Rolls out in front of Thomas’ cell (he’s gone very quiet), rolls to the side, dodging knives coming through the jagged hole where his cell door used to be; one embeds itself almost all the way through the plexi-steel that makes the door of Thomas’ cell-

“Okay, who the hell is that?”

“That’s The Ravager- it’s one of the titles in… an organization I know of; in a regular corporation, The Ravager would be… The Hatchet Man, I think. The former Ravager, the one you see onscreen, was a she, and somewhere between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. Her preferred method of… ending a contract was with a precision strike to the heart, generally from the front. She used extremely sharp throwing knives as a distance weapon, a vicious style of fighting for close quarters, and extreme intimidation to further her employer’s agenda.”

“…Why are you speaking in the past tense?”

Joar Mahkent smiles. “Watch.”

-Cameron dodges backwards, jumps a sweeping kick- brings his knees down on Ravager’s hooked knee. He misses, rolls to one side- not before she opens a line of red on his upper arm; his hand snakes around her wrist, grips it tightly; jerks her forwards and down slashing cut on her upper shoulder. Twist back, the knife is on the floor now, and his arm is really starting to hurt- she punches him in the face once he punches back- shifts her wrist in his grip squeeze down as hard as he can, her wrist shatters in his grip she screams-

“What did he just-”

“Wrist breaking move, now watch the damn TV.”

-doge her other arm, she’s not happy about that wrist break, thought this would be easy (He’s played with the Alice most of his life, he’s no free shot); frog kick to the ribs coming up, lower shoulder bend waist let her foot fly over his head; his hand on that knife on the floor lift and flashes out into the side of her thigh; artery sliced-

“Wha-”

“Femoral Artery. She’ll be dead in a minute, at her size.”

“But-”

“Shh!”
-and she’s normal pale unconscious in thirty seconds because her internal pressure dropped, and she’s paler dead in another thirty, she’s smaller than Artemis. (Artemis isn’t actually all that tall—maybe four foot five on her tallest days; the adult body has somewhere between seven and twelve pints of blood. A person can lose around two and one fourth pints of blood before they die. The smaller you are, the less you have.) Cameron slowly falls backwards, warm pale peachy wetness on his side-

“What the hell is that?”
Joar’s eyebrows have quirked. “…Looks like a stomach wound; when’d he get it though…”

-Cameron is in terrible pain. His voice is a raggedy exhalation- “Fuck. ‘ve pulled m’stitches.” Thomas- Tommy hears his whisper, growls out “Fuck, Cam- You pulled your stitches, didn’t you? Fuck! FU- Okay, so; if you can pick your dumbshit ass up off the floor and get me out of this cell, I’ll stitch you up again just- Fuck, Cameron. FUCK.”

“Yeah yeah yeah-”
“Don’t you ‘yeah yeah yeah’ me, you stupid sack of shit-”

-“Are they gay?”
“No.”

-Cameron shoves himself up onto his feet, unties the satchel on the dead body’s back; takes the clay-white explosive compound out of the bag, smears it over the plexi-steel door, attaches thin wires and a timer to the mixture; sets it. Staggers over to the body-

“He’s not gonna-”
“Yep.”

-flops ungracefully over it, grips it in his arms, rolls over. (The explosion whites out the screen for about twelve seconds. Nobody in the yard moves- not even the guards. This is some quality television.) Sound is the first thing to return- the clatter of Tommy, stepping through the blasted carcass of his cell door, stocky legs kicking larger pieces of broken door out of his way; the thump and rustle of ruined lump of flesh shifting around- the camera sees Cameron’s shock of white-blond hair poking woozily over the simple cover-
“Damn.”

“Uh-huh.”

-Tommy’s less than pleased expression. “That was some stupid shit, right there.”

“Mmmmmnn.”

“Can you stand?”

“Neh.”

Tommy sighs. “Hang on, then.” He toes the half melted body off of Cameron, who has gone grey with pain, scoops his arm side body up- starts walking. “You’re a fucking dumbass, you know that?”

“Guh.”-

“Twenty bucks says he eats it after the commercial break.”

“You’re on.”

-“You’re a fucking dumbass, you know that Cam?”

“A-”

“No. First, you don’t tell me about the Shadows trying to kill you-”

“A-”

“Then, you fight, and kill The Ravager, which is very stupid politically speaking-” (“Was very cool, actually-” “Shut it, bro.”)

“A-”

“Then, whilst you fight one of the most lethal assassins in the world, you rip out the stitches holding the remains of your intestines in your body out-”

“A-”

“AND THEN, to top it off, you lie to me about it. Have I missed anything?”

Cameron sighs. “I missed you too, A.”-

“So- the girl with the blue hair is…”

“His girl.”

“The pale blond?”
“His friend’s sister.”

“The tan blond?”

“His girl’s friend.”

“Ah.”

-Aqualad is quietly making the acquaintance of the “Terror Twins”- Tommy, the younger, is quite nice; Tuppence, the elder, is rather crazy. He likes them both.

“A- not that it’s not good to see you, but what the hell are you doing here?”

“Busting you three out, duh.”

Cameron’s head tips to one side.

“Don’t look at me like that. The adults won’t be back for three weeks, Cam. This Pen’s only got enough energy for two more days.”

Cameron blinks at her.

“Oh, yeah- and since you killed Ravager, Shiv’s going to be after you. He’ll be here in… about four hours.”

“When can we leave?”

“Now.”

-“Who is Shiv?”

“Ravager’s man. My boy killed her- he’ll be wanting his pound of flesh. Very hard to kill.”

Gotham:

Batman is pathetically grateful that his eldest, Scarecrow, is still with him- his second might be… might not be there, but once the shock wore off, Johnny proved to be a capable young man. (Bruce thinks the screaming demon-skull mouth on the “rocket firing” part of the rocket launcher was a nice touch.) Alfred is recording all the channels- he seemed to have a particular liking for the Trifecta (Central/Keystone/Dervish); he’s been following the Dervish goings on for “months”. (Oddly, a month in Dervish time is a few hours in Gotham time- something to do with mystical convergences or something like that. Good television, regardless.)

Robin is ducking a blow from some punk kid when a blue punching-arrow comes out of nowhere, and knocks his opponent down and out. A flurry of icicles later, and suddenly, Icicle Jr, Artemis, and two others are in the fight with him. The fight itself is over in moments.
Robin asks it- yes, he knows who the others are, but Artemis is the one in charge. “Artemis, why are you in Gotham?”

“I’m not allowed in Central-” Icicle Jr. glances at her sideways- How did you manage that one, A? “- and KF needs your help.”

Robin’s mask has quirked. “What does he need my help for?”

“He told me to tell you that the place he has to go once a year won’t let him in more than once a year.” Artemis is repeating verbatim what Kid Flash told her to tell Robin- does she understand what she’s telling him? Nope.

Robin understands what he was just told. “…One second.” Robin fiddles with his glove-computer; in Central, Kid Flash answers his satellite connected earbud- “…Ye-llo?”

“KF, why is Artemis telling me about the need for me to go to the place you can only go once a year? Instead of you?”

“Because I’m currently watching all of my cousins, my little brother, my city, trying to figure out why all the adults in the world vanished, and am only allowed through that cities gates once per year?”

“And you think I’m not?”

“…I can’t send over my preferred second, because she’s babysitting my peeps, but there is someone else I can send in my stead if you won’t go-”

“Who?”

“Tangent.”

“NO.”

“Dude, come on, she’s a really good heroine and she can do it-”

“I really don’t think that’s a good plan, bro…” Robin heaves a long-suffering sigh. “Send her to me, I’ll have her babysit my bro; I’ll go.”

“But Rob, you hate her and anyway I can keep her here even though she’s starting to really piss Peek-a-boo off, and I need her to not be pissed off and-”

“Dude. It’s fine. Send her here- I’ll... I’ll deal.”

“Thank you! She’ll be there in a few seconds. Sorry, Bro.”

“Great.” Robin’s face had taken on a pallor of extreme distaste- Tangent, while a competent heroine is also… obnoxious. There is a flicker of a girl shape next to him- Robin straightens up, begins to type something on his holo-screen. The shape solidifies into a girl in a shirt-skirt combo modeled off of a cheerleader’s outfit; there is a sunburst on her chest, and her curly strawberry blond hair is up in a messy ponytail. She didn’t stop talking when she left Central, and she was still going when she got to Gotham; “-and did you know that Cats are extremely sensitive to vibrations so cats are said to detect earthquake tremors 10 or 15 minutes before humans can or that Richard Cadbury produced the
first box of chocolates for Valentine’s Day in the late 1800s or how about the fact that because it’s
classified as a G2 dwarf due to its size, heat, and chemical makeup, the sun is a medium-sized star
and a G star is cool i.e. between 5,000-6,000 on the Kelvin temperature scale and has a complex
chemistry, which means its makeup includes chemicals heavier than helium.” He flashes the typed
out co-ordinates in front of her; she nods, and then there is another flicker of girl shaped light, and
she’s gone.

Artemis’ eyes have bulged, froglike, from her head- “Who. Was. That. ?” Cameron is biting his
knuckles as hard as he dares- the Terror Twins have fallen over, laughing.

Robin answers, grudgingly. “That was Tangent.”

Cameron pushes down his laughter long enough to ask- “Does that happen often?”

Robin almost, almost says something nasty. “That’s just the way she rolls.”

The Terror Twins have almost gotten back to their feet- Robin’s pronouncement sends them back
into paroxysms of near hysterical laughter.

Across town, Cass- Black Cat is having a major crisis of morals- on the one hand, she should just
leave the four people who are sleeping alone. Her sisters worked hard for barely nothing, and the
two boys are sick- it wouldn’t be sporting to take embarrassing pictures. On the other hand, she’s
never played fair in her life, so why should she start now?

Which is how a set of negatives portraying Carrie Fischer and Damian Alexander al Ghul (Wayne)
and Stephanie not!Brown and Damian Marcus Kyle (Wayne) cuddled up around each other,
sleeping in a large bed of flower petals, went into Cass’ special reserve of blackmail material; yes,
they were all half-naked, and no, she’ll probably never use any of them. But she has them, if she
needs them. (Tim- Red Robin, the sneaky bastard, got video of them, and refused to share.)

How did this awe-inspiringly strange (adorable) moment in time come to be? Well, there are a few
things you need to know to understand the situation- how the half-brothers Damian and Damian
came to be; how comprehensive the traps protecting the Stray Cats Home are; how sweet natured
Carrie and Stephanie are- and, oddly, certain details about one of the building codes in Gotham.

Firstly, the Damian’s. Damian Marcus Kyle (Wayne) is the product of a fling from ten years ago,
when Selina Kyle was living in Cairo and Bruce Wayne was learning certain survival skills; he was
in the city to learn how to vanish in a crowd of people who looked nothing like him; Selina was
stealing a set of cats-eye emeralds from a museum, escaping through a shop he was passing by- she
needed to lose her pursuers, and slipped herself under his arm, pretended to be his girlfriend. Co-
incidentally, this allowed Bruce to slip his handlers- they were on the look-out for a single foreign
man, not a foreign couple on holiday. Of course, when Selina tried to bail on Bruce, she found that
his hand was gripping her belt, skirt, and panties- skip ahead a few hours, and Selina is languid next
to Bruce, long limbs limply coiling with his. (He was nineteen- she was too.) Five wonderful days
later, and Selina needed to move on, she’s already stayed longer than she meant to- and Bruce’s
trainers have found him again. Damn- I wish I had caught her name.

Selina would be in St. Petersburg when she realized that she was five months pregnant, and- Hmm.
There was only one guy five months ago. I wish I had caught his name. She didn’t get an abortion
because she, simply put, didn’t have the time for it; it eventually got too unwieldy to slip in and out
of places in her… sensitive state, so she turned her hand to electronic theft- not as fun for her, but just as lucrative. Five years later, and she’s very glad she chose to have that baby- her son- it’s very nice, having a kid around her house… yes, she had to tone down the theft and general larceny, but she also got to raise her baby boy, which is very nice. (Her parents never took the time with her- she swore she would do better- she hopes to god that she did better.) And, when he turns seven, he’s finally trained enough to start going out with her, and that’s even better. By ten years old, she’s okay with him going out on jobs all by his lonesome- which is how he fell through the trap door in Home into the icy waters below.

Damian Alexander al Ghul (Wayne) is the product of a test tube and his mother’s injured pride. (He doesn’t know that- he thinks it’s a failed relationship that produced him; technically, he’s correct.) Bruce, after he finished his training in Cairo (four days after his “moment” with Selina), went to Baghdad for a little rest and relaxation; Talia al Ghul was there too, trying to… “recruit” people into her father’s employ. The young Wayne fit her profile for people who would be into a shadowy realm of endeavor. There was a fight- a house was completely destroyed. Bruce Wayne’s blood got spattered all over the place- less than a pint all together, but. But. That’s more than enough to make a baby with- and Talia is a proud woman. (He said no. He very clearly said no. Talia doesn’t take no for an answer.)

Skip ahead ten years, and Damian Alexander al Ghul is one of the most comprehensively trained Shadows in the world; he’s been on his own for four of those years- his “mother” doesn’t really… His mother isn’t really the mothering type, he knows that, he understands, he does. He just wishes that- he just wants his mother to be… be proud of him. Is that so wrong, to want his mother’s approval, or even her to notice him? (No, that isn’t a wrong thing to want. He won’t get it, not in this world or any other- in his heart, he knows it. (In his heart, he knows he’s been lied to- in his heart, he knows his mother doesn’t care. Cats and kittens and something went wrong, so very wrong.) He has a father too- he knows where his father can be found. Perhaps, perhaps- perhaps he can maybe possibly make his father proud of him. Maybe.) His business in Gotham was to track down, capture, and/or destroy the one called Cassandra Cain -I don’t really want to do this, mother doesn’t care what I do, doesn’t care if I live or die and I’m good but not good enough to take on Cassandra Cain, not if she’s been on her own since she was two and they’ve never gotten her back, no I can’t take her on or out and live, maybe it’s because- oh, god, it’s because I slipped I slipped and she they someone who works for her saw and they told her and she sent me to find the girl and fight and die for nothing, I am expendable god DAMN you mother care you nothing for your only son, your flesh your blood had you asked me to die I would have cast myself into the fires of hell for you but this for this you will not control me again you will not lie to me like this again- he had tracked her to a small area in the “Mid-Town” area, and was doing reconnaissance on an old Ice Cream factory when he fell through a well hidden trap door in the wall, down a chute, and into the coldest water he’s ever had the misfortune to be dropped into. (Interestingly, the half-brothers were born only three days apart.)

Secondly, the comprehensive traps protecting the Stray Cats Home. The Home of the Stray Cats started out as a small niche between two massive smokestacks- and then, Stephanie began to wonder just what those smokestacks connected to. So, after letting her sibs know where she was going, she went spelunking (spelunking- the act of exploring a cave). What she found made her very, very excited. “Guys! Y’gata come’n see this, y’gata com’n see!”

Carrie calls down the flume “Spoi! Wat’chu find?”

“Found sommin’ good! Y’gata see this!” Spoiler’s voice echoes up the sooty flume- she’s found a gigantic factory. When Black Cat, Kitten, and Red Robin carefully make their way down into the gloomy, cold (stunningly cold) factory floor, they both have to take a moment to admire the massive
Whether it's being made in a kitchen with a hand crank, at a local homemade ice cream shop with a stand-alone ice cream maker, or in a factory that cranks out thousands of gallons of ice cream every day, the process of making ice cream is basically the same. The only difference is the scale of the operation.

First, you need ice cream mix. You can buy commercially made ice cream mix that is set to a certain milk fat content. Ice cream factories usually make their own mix by combining milk, cream, and sugar in a 3,000 gallon vat, with the proportions and mixing controlled by computers. The Factory - which would become known as the Underspace - went out of business in the mid-eighties; there are a set of massive computer banks in a room overlooking gigantic barrel-like vessels with smooth insides on even larger hinges, like in a steel-mill; massive ropes of cabling running to panels connected to eldritch machinery that rises above the gigantic curving bowls, mechanized arms lowering down into the curving base of those massive vats. (Cass will never admit it, but she really likes the old-fashioned swashbuckling adventure of “Doma the Barbarous” - what, a girl can’t like a sword carrying hero fighting off all manner of ghoul, beast, and vicious monster lusting for the flesh of the innocent? - when she shyly tells the boys this, they introduce her to the “Gilma, Warrior Queen” series, which she also adores, but for very different reasons - women kicking the same abominable ass, looking good, and taking all comers in a socio-political arena known for its backstabby ways? My god, she loves it.)

The mix is then pasteurized, or heated, to kill any harmful bacteria. If you were to make your own mix at home, you could pasteurize it by cooking it in a double boiler, or use an egg substitute or pasteurized egg product. This step is important, because otherwise people who eat your homemade ice cream could get sick due to salmonella contamination. According to the Centers for Disease Control, those most at risk include the elderly, very young children, and people with compromised immune systems. In the Underspace, there are massive coils of electrical heating elements under gigantic trenches which are connected to the vats by way of prodigiously huge sluices with gates - Stephanie got into the Underspace through an open part of the venting system from the original heating source, a gigantic furnace, now defunct.

The next step in production is adding flavor to the mix. There are thousands of varieties of ice cream, so just about any combination of flavors is possible. From vanilla to cinnamon, chocolate to triple chocolate fudge brownie, it all gets blended into the ice cream mix. In a factory, this step takes place in vats that hold hundreds of gallons of ice cream, while giant steel paddles do the mixing. In your kitchen, a large bowl and a food mixer will work, or even a wooden spoon and muscle power if you want some exercise. Solid chunks such as pieces of fruit, chocolate chunks, marshmallows, and candy are added later. A massive bank of cases, several stories high, mechanized scoops gleaming like chompy birds mouths over the lidless tops - the cases have clear sides, and are very obviously empty, but somehow, the smell of candies and crushed nuts permeates the strange space, below Home.

This is where an ice cream making machine comes into play. The mix has to be simultaneously frozen and whipped. In a factory, this happens in a giant tube surrounded by pipes. The pipes contain chemicals such as ammonia that freeze the tube,
but the ammonia never comes into contact with the ice cream. The ice cream mix is pumped through the tube, where it gets cold very quickly. A dasher, or blade, turns inside the tube. This whips the mixture, introducing the air bubbles that help give ice cream its structure. The dasher also scrapes the sides of the tube, clearing off ice crystals that form there. This prevents large ice crystals from ruining the flavor and texture of the ice cream. All the elements of this process are carefully monitored and controlled by computers. Most homemade ice cream shops use a batch freezer for this step, where the same process happens on a smaller scale. This step can be accomplished at home with a rock salt/ice mixture for freezing and a hand or electric cranked dasher to mix and scrape off the ice crystals. There are pipes covered over with frost and icicles in the Underspace- pipes the size of ancient tree trunks gone filmy, rimed with ice and coldness; it is from these massive pipes the room gains its general air of frigidity.

Once the ice cream has come out of the ice cream maker, the process isn't finished. At this point, the mixture is frozen, but still soft. Large chunks of candy and other goodies are now added. Then the ice cream is placed into containers. Factory machines pour it straight into cartons or buckets, or it can be extruded into shapes that have wooden sticks placed into them for individual treats. (You really need to ask? Of course all this was there. Cass would refit certain machines to blow a thick, sludgy mist- in every color except white.)

Now the ice cream needs to be reduced to a very low temperature, zero degrees Fahrenheit or below. Factories make it even colder since they need the ice cream to stay frozen while it is packaged and loaded onto trucks. It needs to be very cold to freeze the ice cream quickly and prevent the formation of large ice crystals. This process is known as hardening. "Soft-serve" is often simply ice cream that has not gone through this process. There is a gigantic blast freezer- the biggest, coldest space inside Underspace.

(What is the Underspace, exactly? The Underspace is one part protective measure, one part training space, one part murderous death trap, one part villainous lair. Mix with maniacal laughter for perverse effect. Limit one per Home.)

What does the process of making ice cream have to do with the protective measures protecting Home for the Stray Cats? Well, you can’t make a three-thousand gallon sub-zero dunk tank without having some way of cooling all that water- the humongous vats, with their smooth, smooth interiors, are the perfect starting point. A little TLC, a metric fuck-ton of elbow grease, and a rather spectacular amount of engineering later, and Cass has developed a system by which intruders attempting to enter Home will be dropped into an ice topped tank of viciously cold water, drown, catch hypothermia, and die. Which brings us to the two Damian’s attempting to sneak into Home- Catboy (Damian Marcus Kyle (Wayne)) wanted to find the source of one of the only electrical signals still working in the area; Kid Shiva (Damian Alexander al Ghul (Wayne)) was searching for Cassandra Cain, to beg her help in escaping the Shadows. Both young men fell into the icy waters of the Home Defense Dunk-tank- both young men were fished out of the tanks by Spoiler and Kitten.

Thirdly, the sweet natures of Stephanie not!Brown and Caroline Fischer Kelly. Stephanie is a girl who would be happiest in a small town, raised by people like John and Martha Kent- but she wasn’t, she isn’t. She was born in Gotham- a home birth, because her parents refused to shell out the money on a hospital visit. Did her mother care about her when she was born? She must have, she must have, she wouldn’t be there if her mother hadn’t… but why- why did she stop?

Well, and so her father made it clear that he didn’t care and her mother had stopped caring –found
something else to care about in a syringe, at the bottom of a bottle on the floor drooling in her own vomit stinky stench foul- and she’s got to look out for herself if they won’t, and they won’t. She got a Tim Woods brand purple hoodie, jeans, and t-shirt for her birthday, her final straw; she asked for a Maiden Aphrodite bicycle helmet. She got Tim Woods brand clothing, which doesn’t come in children’s sizes, it only comes in adult sizes and they got her purple, which makes her look like a cadaver, and everything is in size five times too big, she’ll never fit those clothes while they’re in style, and she got shoes that were the right size but for a boy and she knew they don’t care, they don’t care- she still has them, it’s still a damn fine set of clothing to hero in- it’s also very nice to “go to work” (steal) in. (Cass took a few things in for her, added some belts and ties and hidden buttons, hemmed sleeves and pants and added stitching for where she could let things back out fuller for when she grew up out around- Carrie taught her how to hide things in her many many many pockets all over her body.) She left her- that place and those people behind and no she’s never going back, not if she can help it.

She might not be in that place anymore- but she’s not in that place anymore, which means… If she’s not in that place anymore, then she’ll have to help people more than just if they’re being mugged or nearly raped or almost murdered- so, when the boy falls into Vat # 4 with a blood-curdling shriek, she makes herself grab the scoop-hook, and forces herself into a run up the stairs onto the overlooking catwalk (heh), fishes out a boy about her age. She’s a tad perturbed- he’s not armored, not even a little bit, I’m armored on the sides of my legs at least- does he really not fight at all? Either way, his jumpsuit is way too thin- he needs to get out of these wet clothes immediately, or he’ll die of hypothermia- While her fertile mind has raced through a diagnosis of the Mystery Boy, her body has helpfully staggered them both over to the interior elevator, yanked the pull, and was quickly feeling out the pulls and tags on his bodysuit and undoing them- Carrie joined her with her own unconscious Mystery Boy; together, they rode the elevator back up to Home.

Carrie Fischer would never have fit in in a small town; she has always belonged to the city- heart, soul, body, mind- the city calls to her like nothing else. She could have had better parents, but who couldn’t? She tries not to dwell on it- she’s been looking out for just herself for the longest time, and then she met her sisters (and baby brother, but they’re pretty sure he counts as a girl too) and she started to- god help her, she started to care. So, when the heavily armored boy falls through Chute # 9 into Vat # 7, she doesn’t run like Spoiler does- she carefully walks over to the catchy-hook-pole-thing rack, picks the heavy gauge one that’s used for when the paddles fall into the vats- hey, it happened often enough for there to be a hooked pole for it (it’s actually a padded gaffe)- slips up the stairs to the catwalk (shut up, Stephanie, it isn’t that funny), fishes out the heavy boy- God, you really fight a lot don’t you? Jeeze, what, a sword, a breast-plate, chain-mail; fuck, this stuff should have drowned you- but you’re still breathing, so I’ll take you Upstairs on the Elevator and fix you up I guess-

The Elevator, for those who would inquire, (like Stephanie and Carrie) is the Elevator that Cass- who else, really- refitted. That elevator used to be a bucket elevator.

(An elevator is a type of vertical transport equipment that efficiently moves people or goods between floors of a building or other structures. Elevators are generally powered by electric motors that either drive traction cables, counterweight systems like a hoist, or pump hydraulic fluid to raise a cylindrical piston like a jack. In agriculture and manufacturing, an elevator is any type of conveyor device used to lift materials in a continuous stream into bins or silos. Several types exist, such as the chain-and-bucket bucket elevator, grain auger screw conveyor (using the principle of Archimedes’ screw), or the chain and paddles/forks of hay elevators. Languages other than English may have loanwords based on either elevator or lift. Because of wheelchair access laws, elevators are often a legal requirement in new multistory buildings, especially where wheelchair ramps would be impractical.)
This means that, while the Elevator connecting Underspace to Home might be one of the fastest in the world- it’s also one of the most dangerous. But that’s a different anecdote that will be discussed in great detail later. Right now, the two girls are dragging the two boys into the mudroom of their Home- a tiled space done in soothing blue-green, with a big farm sink to one side, massive washer, dryer, and big fold-up tables leaning on the wall; shelving that came from an abandoned library, filled with clothing and sheets, long ladder leading up to the glass topped ceiling, far, far above them. This is where the four make their first stop- the girls divest the boys of their clothing, quickly rub them down with warm, fluffy towels. Lift them up, carry them upstairs again- this time up a long ladder, strongly bolted to the ground. The girls pass the weight room on the ground floor- no, not a room full of dumb-bells and the like, but a room full of bricks, lead weights, and canisters of dense material. (Cass.) They start to climb up, passing a bathroom, a kitchen, a library/computer lab, a sewing room, and finally make it to the top, and the bedrooms.

The boys are cool to the touch- not just their hands and feet, but on their bellies and chests as well, waxy pale cold too damn cold. Red Robin- Tim, tells them what to do. “Ho’kay. So- y’needta take off yur clothin’ and cuddle up- focus on der middles, not the edges.” The girls look at him weirdly- Tim sighs, and says “Der too cold fer hot stuff otter’den persons- and ya clothing is all wet and shiv’ry too. Y’all saved em from th’waters- so now you gotta save em from th’cold.”

Carrie looks over at Stephanie- Stephanie just shrugs. Cass, ever helpful, has rolled back the thick blankets on the large central bed (for when the nightmares are too much) and yanked the flower petal patterned sheets back; they smell like vanilla and soap- the girls smell like sweat and grunge and dried blood and gardenias (Stephanie’s soaps don’t stop smelling good just because the body that used them to wash got all gunky and weird)- Stephanie flops the cold limp still-breathing body of Damian Kyle (Wayne) onto one side, and starts to yank her Tim Woods clothing off, piles it on the floor; she’s been wearing it for two days straight, she needed to change anyway, and she hasn’t slept right in like, a week, not since she called Oracle the first time.

Carrie rips the Velcro of her neck strap open, draws the zipper of her stripy spotty jumpsuit down (She designed one for every day of the week, a set for all terrains and all weathers- she hasn’t slept right either; the city is too damn quiet for her. Too still.) shoves the cold breathing body of Damian al Ghul (Wayne) onto the other side of the bed, wiggles the rest of the jumpsuit off, peels out of her boots and gloves- Stephanie, on the other side is doing the same; both girls climb into the bed with the boys, cuddle up to them. Cass, who’s still being suspiciously helpful, had vanished downstairs for some short moment- popped her head back into the Bedrooms level of Home, plopped hot water bottles wrapped with tea towels and chemical heaters in tube socks all around them both; the sweet, soothing scents of coconut and lavender barely there in the warm pouches nestled all around them- sweet green apple smell gently diffusing from a candle somewhere- “Thanks Black.” “Thanks Black.”

“Night.”

(All this took place around three days before Robin went to Dervish.)

Fourthly, a building code in Gotham- which won’t matter until a little later, so we’ll skip ahead some, to when Robin left for the Trifecta- by the time he gets back to Gotham, the building code will be relevant to the story. (I’ll explain it then, so don’t worry, okay?)

Central:
Kid Flash didn’t call Perdita until the fourth day of the second week- he had things to do, okay, and she did too, obviously… and he honestly thought that all the adults would be back before then. What, like he’s the only quantum physics/chemistry geek in the world with a vested interest in the restoration of the natural order to the world? No, he isn’t- he’s just the only one in either world with enough time to work out what to do, and the only one with enough straight up know-how to get things the fuck done. Factor this, if you will- in the Adult World, all the children have vanished. Some of them are missed- some of them aren’t; all the adults are watching the World of Children… Captain Marvel brought a little doohickey over that Zatanna made with Secret’s help- a little mystical mojo connected the two worlds; it also- accidentally- sucked away all the attention of most adults who could help with the problem. (Oops.)

In the World of Children, the people who could possibly help with the mystical/dimensional problem are ensorcelled (Zatanna), pregnant and currently the head of state (Aqualad), off planet (M’gann, Permafrost, both the Green Lanterns, and Blue Beetle), in the wrong dimension and don’t have the power or permission to leave (Raven, Weather Wizard (he really just doesn’t have permission- he’s had the power, but not the control, for a month now), Secret), can’t get off their island because they can’t find the stinking invisible plane or open the vault for their weapons (Both Wondergirls), are busy fighting off giant mutated laundry monsters and schizo-tech refrigerators that eat people instead of food (Superboy, Pied Piper, and Alexander Luthor- oddly, young Mister Luthor wants nothing to do with his father; he wants to be a musician, and is actually quite good; he’s also turning out to be an oddly heroic young man, in a punk-rock, DIY kind of way), is too freaking young (Red Hood, Speedy (who is being watched by one of the Terror Twins and Tangent- together, she and Red Hood have almost completely destroyed them both), Red Robin), and babysitting (Kid Flash, Peek-a-boo, Trickster, and Tangent. Although, Tangent is also completely obnoxious –like to the point of making most people walk away from her in a cursing huff– and Trickster isn’t that good at figuring out things involving Quantum.)

After Kid Flash sent Tangent to Gotham -thank god- just as proposed, Logistical Support (apparently, Perdita Vertigo believes in hands on solutions) arrived within four hours- so did Robin; apparently, Artemis had showed up around mid-morning with some of her friends, and was now watching over Gotham. Aqualad and the AAF had Star and the oceans well in hand; Pied Piper, Alex Luthor and Superboy were handling Metropolis, and no one had heard from the Wondergirls (but a letter in a bottle had been retrieved by the AAF- Can’t get off the island due to technical difficulty. Sorry. Red & Blue.)- so, Logistica and Robin came to Central, where they were (had been for the past four hours) trying to get into Dervish. Operative word being “Trying”; Kid Flash finally just called Teekl- who is actually very nice, when you know her better- and asked her “Can you get my friends into Dervish, Teekl? We have a little problem-”

“Getting in the City? Hmm… Let me send Weather Wizard, he can bring the Shuttle over.”

“Won’t that be too much for him?”

“Not for only three people- he’s actually gotten much stronger since he gained his Knighthood. Control might be more of an issue, but, I have faith in him.”

Mark had been training in his spellwork with Kismet, learning to harness the power of a Knight of Dervish, (that title- those powers- cannot be removed from him, not ever, not even in death). His aunt, who is much more powerful than he thought- apparently, in Dervish, she is known as “Vishco
Zena, She who is the One and All”, which came as a very big shock to him- had been training him.
He had just finished his cantrip (a little somthin-somthin’ that was good for clearing soot from the
walls, nothing major, but it had been going wrong in spectacular ways lately) and was waiting for his
aunt’s opinion when she… she yelped, and wobbled -shimmered shrank stretched slid into two
places and the older one vanished, but the younger one is still standing, no tell a lie she’s passed out
on the ground- “Aunt Kismet!” Mark has dropped to his knees, grabbed Kismet in his arms- shakes
her as hard as he dares. She flops like a dead fish- she’s still breathing, but- Okay, breathe- your
powers might be going whack-a-jam-bang kerfluey, but you can’t, your Aunt Kismet needs you, she
needs you right now. The phone rings- Mark almost doesn’t answer it, almost doesn’t, but as a
Knight of the Realm, he has to- he has to- “HE-Hello?”

“Sir Mardon?”

“Yes, this is he.”

“One moment… Write this down; then prepare for Contact.”

A knight is a person granted an honorary title of knighthood by a monarch or other
political leader for service to the monarch or country, especially in a military capacity.
Historically, in Europe, knighthood has been conferred upon mounted warriors. During
the High Middle Ages, knighthood was considered a class of lower nobility, but by the
Late Middle Ages, the rank had become associated with the ideals of chivalry. Since the
Early Modern period, the title of knight is purely honorific, usually bestowed by a
monarch, as in the British honors system, often for non-military service to the country.
Mark gained his Knighthood by being himself- he helped consolidate Klarion’s personal
feeling that he needed to wrest power from his parents, and gave the new King much
approval from his people; Mark Mardon and his Aunt Kismet gave Klarion the push he
needed to wrest control of Dervish from his parents- and he would have done it… in
around eight Central/Keystone days, or four months of Dervish time. Then his parents
were assassinated by… well, he could figure that out, or he could pick up the pieces of
his Kingdom, which has gone to pot in the hands of his parents- a lavish court is all well
and good, but not, in Klarion’s opinion, at the cost of the peasantry’s lives. The
peasantry is where the country gains and loses its strength- the country grows strong on
the bounty and the bust of the people, not the “beauty or wealth or splendor” of the
courts- Gods be praised that you both are dead and gone, because you’ve nearly killed
my country. So- yes, I will bury you both with all the pomp and ceremony deserved of
your status, both in the country and as my parents- and then I will move on, because I
have better things to do than find the killers of two monsters, and I mean that in the
Real sense of the word, such as you, oh parents of mine… You didn’t even know her,
their, names.

Historically, the ideals of chivalry were popularized in medieval literature, especially
the Matter of Britainand Matter of France, the former based on Geoffrey of
Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae ("History of the Kings of Britain"), written in
the 1130s. Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d'Arthur ("The Death of Arthur"), written in
1485, was important in defining the ideal of chivalry which is essential to the modern
concept of the knight as an elite warrior sworn to uphold the values of faith, loyalty,
courage, and honor.

Knighthood in the Middle Ages (which Dervish’s courts never really grew out of) was
closely linked with horsemanship, especially the joust, from its origins in the 12th
century until its final flowering as a fashion among the high nobility in the Duchy of Burgundy in the 15th century. This linkage is reflected in the etymology of chivalry, cavalier and related terms. The special prestige given to mounted warriors finds a parallel in the furusiyya in the Muslim world, the Greek hippeus, the Roman eques of classical antiquity, the Atlantean rank of Hippocampus, the Fawcett civil title of Tres-deuce (which is an innocuous title in Fawcett- not so much everywhere else), and the title of Knight of the Realm in Dervish. Being a Knight of the Realm in Dervish means that you can ride a creature of the Elements- or have a creature of the elements do your bidding. (A storm, for example. (In the real world, almost anything that would be a natural phenomenon is person-shaped- but that’s where the similarity stops. A sunbeam is not a person; a cloud is not a person; an avalanche is not a person; a tsunami is not a person. These things are not now, have never been, could never be, people.))

Mark Mardon- Sir Mark Mardon- “The one who is a gift from Mars, the God of War, as a way to replenish the strength of our arms; the one who is the keeper of the Valley with the Still pool within, from which all wæther flows outwards”- Weather Wizard is a Knight of the Realm; his duties are to replenish the Still Lakes of the far Dervish hills (he’s really more of a shepherd, his herd just happens to be moisture density levels and hi/low pressure areas held in atmospheric suspension) the places where all the mystical creatures of the outer city and near country come. So- when he gets a phone call from Uptown telling him to write something down, he does it (it’s usually his marching orders, of course he does). This time, it’s a coffee shop in shared Keystone/Central- he should know, it’s one of the places he goes during the school year to study with his friends. He doesn’t have time to ponder about why he’s about to be sent to a café in Keystral, as it’s locally known (it’s the sphere of city that sits right in-between Central and Keystone; Keystral is the material equivalent of Dervish… and is only four blocks square around)- Contact means that either King Klarion le Garçon aux Sorcières or Lord Teekl le Chat are about to make a personal request of him themselves. (Mark doesn’t answer to Klarion- Mark answers to Teekl. No, he doesn’t particularly want to know why that is- he has enough trouble keeping the Wally/Kid Flash division straight, he doesn’t need to know how the powers of Dervish State are divided between the King and his Familiar.)

So. “Ma-ark?”

“My Lord Teekl?”

“You are a Knight of this Realm- so long as His Majesty, my Master, is King of this Realm, you have leave to take a mount from the Royal Stable; so long as you are a Knight of the Realm, you are free to go to the places you need to go.”

“…Thank you, my Lord.” He’s genuinely grateful- he’s also a little… freaked out. (Remember the Wind-cat thing he had to deal with just to get to Dervish for the Soiree? Turns out, he’s magically allergic to Wind-cats- he’s actually magically allergic to most creatures of the Sky. Sadly, the only creatures that can make the journey between the Realms of the Real and the Material are creatures of the Sky. (Yay.)

What is a creature of the Sky? It’s everything that lives in, or gains power from, the air, like the Albastor, the murderous succubus/incubus spirit of an unbaptized infant. Or the Ittan Momen, a magical scarf-creature that has an annoying tendency towards strangling it’s friends. Or, how about a Slyphid Dragon, better known as the Western dragon, all barrel-shaped chest, spindly wings and flame breath. Ooo! What about the Magnificent Hurakan, a snake-bird-eel-thing, said to be the Father of All Storms? Or the forbidden Perytons of Atlantis, swarms of carnivorous, blue-feathered, eagle winged deer. How about… sweet natured Sprites, from which fireflies are descended from...
Basically, everything that flies in the magical world of the Real is a creature of the sky- Pegasus, Thesstral, Gryphon, Hippogryph, Roc, Steelwing, Sergei (and his mother and siblings), Firebird, Harpy, Sirens (although that is debated, even among the Sirens themselves), Wolf- anything you’ve ever heard of that can fly, has flown, will fly again. Anything.

A magical allergy is a lot like a regular allergy, only it tends to do one of two things- a magical allergy will either reduce the power of a mystic, like with Zatanna, who is magically allergic to Mindspells: she’s very susceptible to their influence, however her magic will eventually eat away at any Mindspell cast on her; while her magic works at freeing her, all her spells will be very weak until her magic breaks the spell on her. Or- and this is a very important or- it will make a mystic’s magic ever so slightly… unstable. The last time Mark came into contact with a Sky creature- a swarm of Ittan Momen’s, who, as a species, adore Mark to the point of strangulation- he accidentally shattered every mirror in the local mirror store with an “accidental” sonic boom.) There is only one creature Mark would ever take to either world- and that is the good old fashioned Windcat. It’s the one creature he’s the least likely to be killed violently by, and destabilizes his magic the least while he’s in contact with it. (The worst that has ever happened to him while riding one is getting covered in his own vomit, and that washed off.) Sadly, there are only three sizes of a Windcat- Single Seated, Five Seated, and Thirty Seated. He can ride a Single and a Five- thankfully, he only needs to get two people- he’s never met those people, but he has orders from the top of his chain of command, so. He goes.

One stomach churning moment later, and Weather Wizard is in Keystral, at the Weirmigo Coffee House- standing outside it is Wally Kid Flash, a short blond girl in a green dress, and… Robin. Wow, this really is serious; that guy doesn’t leave Gotham for much.

Robin and Logistica- “Logistica?” Seriously, you decided to feminize logistics and use it as a superhero name? Seriously?

“Yes.” What of it, Boy Wonder? You wanna make something of it?

“…Okay, fine.” No need to get snippy, jeeze. - walk forward, eyes screwed shut from the dust thrown up from the Windcat’s arrival- “All Aboard, one Roundtrip to Dervish!” Kid Flash’s eyes narrow-

“…How long have you been wanting to say that, Wiz?”

Mark grunts. “Shut it, KF.” The two heroes jump onto the Windcat’s back- and they’re off to Dervish.

They’ll be back by the last day of the third week- Saturday night. (This is when Robin will discover just how simply Jason tends to plan things out- and this is also when he will make the executive decision that Lian Tan and Jason Wayne should probably have very little contact with each other while they grow up, not because they don’t get along, but because they do. It’s one thing to get along- it’s quite another to bind and gag your babysitters and invite a whole bunch of people over to party. Yes, that’s right; Jason Wayne and Lian Tan started throwing wild parties when they were three years old.)

Metropolis:

Milo James “Jimmy” Olsen is having a wonderful day. No, really- he’s taken some perfexcellent
pictures so far, and his new friend Sandy is actually a pretty chill dude. Jimmy Olsen is a
photography superstringer for most of the Metropolis newspapers- the Daily Planet gets first pick-
he’s also just turned seventeen. (Eighteen next July.) The pictures he’s been taking might possibly
get him a lot of money- Jimmy needs some new Kammy Chu’s. (Kammy Chu is an extremely
expensive shoe designer- in another world, Kammy would have been a Jimmy, and Milo James
would have been a Mia Janet.)

In journalism, a stringer is a type of freelance journalist or photographer who contributes reports or
photos to a news organization on an ongoing basis but is paid individually for each piece of
published or broadcast work.

As freelancers, stringers do not receive a regular salary and the amount and type of work is typically
voluntary. However, stringers often have an ongoing relationship with one or more news
organizations, to which they provide content on particular topics or locations when the opportunities
arise.

The term is typically confined to news industry jargon, and in print or in broadcast terms, stringers
are sometimes referred to as correspondents or contributors. At other times, they may not receive any
public recognition for the work they have contributed.

A reporter or photographer can "string" for a news organization in a number of different capacities
and with varying degrees of regularity, so that the relationship between the organization and the
stringer is typically very loose. When it is difficult for a staff reporter or photographer to reach a
location quickly for breaking news stories, larger news organizations often rely on local stringers to
provide rapid scene descriptions, quotations or photos. In this capacity, stringers are used heavily by
most television news organizations and some print publications for video footage, photos, and
interviews.

A superstringer is a long-term freelance journalist. He or she is usually a contract worker for one or
more news organizations. Traditionally, stringers freelance for a period of time and then become
employed full-time by a news organization, but with the collapse of the traditional newspaper
advertising model and the emergence of the Internet, many stringers are becoming superstringers.

Jimmy Olsen is a superstringer- he will sell his pictures to everyone from the reputable and well-
paying Daily Planet to the disreputable and highly sleazy (but still well paying) Daily Star. He’ll also
sell out of state, but that’s only on special occasions, and he always feels a little… unsettled doing
that. (He sometimes wonders if his mother knows he’s just a photographer- he has this feeling that
some of what he does is very… not quite right from the outside. He’ll be head-hunted by the CIA,
the FBI, Interpol, Intergang, the Royal Flush Gang, and Perry White when he’s eighteen.) He’s
gotten some pure beauties these past two and a half weeks- Superboy uppercutting a giant dragon-
esque laundry-monster? That’s twenty bucks right there- forty to the right buyer- Pied Piper using the
power of ROCK! on an electric guitar to dismantle a rampaging mini-fridge? I can probably sell that
for- Oooo! The mini-fridge was full of those new Choco Pudding Cups, that’s at least fifty- Hah,
make that a hundred, he’s eating one, product placement for the win- (Understand, Jimmy is pricing
in the thousands, not the hundreds. Oh yes- the boy had saved more than enough money to pay his
college tuition by sixteen; now he just does it because it’s his passion.) Sandy was writing things
down- apparently, he moonlights as a reporter; Jimmy actually reads his blog.Never turn down a
chance for black-mail; this picture might look nice in the Yearbook anyway… Uber-shy Cat Grant-
in a burning pink jumpsuit and gigantic hot pink rhinestone-studded glasses, no less- pouring a
boiling cauldron of soapy water onto a flying pterydaclt-ish monster that seemed to be the spawn of a
dirty laundry pile and a blast freezer… Wait, what? (Jimmy has a pretty spectacular crush on
Catherine Jane Honoria Grant; Cat doesn’t know he exists… but that’s because she’s not the most… self-aware, shall we say. Look, when a hetero-sexual male photography dude you’ve known since second grade knows more about fashion and dating than you do, you have issues. Cat is… well… painfully shy. Headgear braces, fish-bowl glasses, hair like a rat-infested haystack, fugly cardigan sweater-skirt sets, giant no color sweaters, saddle shoes- none of her wardrobe or makeup flatters her features; she owns nothing that makes her look pretty… She was always pretty people-unfriendly, but after her parents divorced and she moved with her mother to L.A. …

Well. When she came back, she was… shyer, if that’s possible. More closed off- more alone inside her skin. L.A. did not do her any favors- although she does keep in touch with a girl from there, someone named Brenda… Anyway, after she came back, she seemed to almost… almost actively go into hiding.

That said, she’s a much better home-maker than he is- and she looks really good in that pink jumpsuit. Wow. The glasses would probably look tacky on anyone else, though. He reads her blog too- how else would he have learned proper wig care?)

When Superheroes first appeared in mainstream America in 1938, Honor-Him-Faithfully Kent worked for a newspaper named the Daily Star, under the editor George Taylor. Two years later, the Daily Star would be known as the Daily Planet.

The original owner, Joe Shuster, named the Daily Star after the Toronto Daily Star newspaper in Toronto, Ontario, which had been the newspaper that Shuster's parents received and for which Shuster had worked as a newsboy. He emigrated from Canada when he was fourteen, 1889- snuck over the border, more like. Though he would grab some land in America- ended up in Metropolis, Kansas. He started his paper near the Potomac River- back in those days, river front property was just a step up from the gutter. (In this world, the Potomac runs from mid-Kansas to the Atlantic; No, I don’t know why. Alternate universe stuff, I guess.) During the course of choosing a name for the newspaper, a combination of The National Globe and Mail and the Daily Star was considered before finally settling on the Daily Star.

When the Daily Star newspaper started covering the doings and escapades of the costumed vigilante, the newspaper’s name was permanently changed to the Daily Planet to avoid a name conflict with rival newspapers (tabloids). In the summer of 1940, the publisher of the Daily Planet was shown to be Burt Mason, a man who was determined to print the truth even when corrupt politician Alex Everett Luthor (father of Lionel Luthor) threatened him.

In 1971, the Daily Planet was purchased by Morgan Edge, president of the Galaxy Broadcasting System. Edge proceeded to integrate Metropolis television station WGBS-TV’s studios into the Daily Planet building, and named Lana Lang as the head anchor, a shocking move then. Twenty years before Clark Kent or Lois Lane began working for the paper (something like five years after Lana Lang became the head anchor), Egmont Luthor (Lionel’s uncle, and an all-around jerk), through a chain of deals and outright trickery, owned the Daily Planet. When Luthor decided to sell the paper and began taking bids for the Planet, Perry White convinced a national conglomerate, TransNational (subsidiary of Wayne Enterprises), to buy the paper. They agreed to this venture with only one stipulation: that White would become Editor-in-Chief. White has served as the Planet editor-in-chief ever since, barring the few times he was absent.
During those times people such as Sam Foswell and Clark Kent have looked after the paper. Franklin Stern, an old friend of White's, became the Daily Planet's publisher.

The Planet has seen its share of rough times during White's tenure. It has had violent worker strikes- the building itself, along with most of the city, was destroyed during the "Great Quake of '94"; it is only much later that it is restored by the efforts of various citizens of Metropolis.

After the quake, Franklin Stern lost heart and decided to put the paper up for sale. Lionel Luthor, disliking the heavy criticism of himself and his company that the Planet became noted for, purchased the Daily Planet and subsequently closed the paper down. Luthor fired every employee of the newspaper save for four people: Simone D'Neige, Dirk Armstrong, Jameson Olsen (Jimmy’s father), and Lana Lang. As a final insult, Luthor saw to it that the Planet globe was unceremoniously dumped in the Metropolis landfill. In the Planet's place emerged "LexCom," a news-oriented corporation that primarily catered to Luthor's views of "quality journalism."

After Lana Lang made a deal with Luthor where, in exchange for him returning the Planet to Perry, she would kill one story of his choosing with no questions asked, Luthor sold the Daily Planet to Perry White for the token sum of one dollar. The paper was quickly reinstated, rehiring its entire old staff. Sometime later, ownership of the Planet fell into the personal ownership of Bruce Wayne, where it has remained ever since.

In the current era, the Daily Planet is presented as a thoroughly modern news operation, including operating an Internet web site like most large newspapers. The Planet's reporters also have access to the best modern equipment to aid their work, though Perry White has often been seen to still favor his manual typewriter.

Clark Kent's first contact with the Daily Planet came when reporter (and future editor) Perry White came to Smallville to write a story about Superboy (I), and wound up getting an interview where the Boy of Steel first revealed his extraterrestrial origins. The story resulted in Perry earning a Pulitzer Prize. During Clark Kent's years in college, Perry White was promoted to editor-in-chief upon the retirement of the Daily Planet's previous editor, George Taylor.

After graduating from Metropolis University with a degree in journalism, Clark Kent went to work at the Planet, and quickly met Lois Lane (who had been working there for some time already). Sometime after Clark was hired, Jimmy Olsen (then fifteen) made a name for himself as a freelance photographer- a stringer of rare talent, skill, and sheer balls-out insanity. It takes a very sp'cial kind of nuthar to dress up as a woman- a very attractive woman, mind you- specifically to get pictures of a local mobster and a powerful politician exchanging money for services, get those pictures, and then send copies to the police, and sell them to the newspapers. In full costume, and in character. Multiple times. Jimmy also does detective work for O’Day and Simeon Detective Agency- Metropolis branch, natch. (Incidentally, Clark uses a typewriter as well due to his powers causing minor interference in regular desktop computers.)

Connor Kent, after he got settled in with his “older brother” at his apartment in Metropolis, and got enrolled in Metropolis General Highschool, started interning at the Daily Planet- which is how he met Jimmy Olsen, then sixteen. Jimmy, who turned seventeen July thirty-first, goes to school with Hartley Rathaway Lane (who is a very interesting dude to shop with), Alexander Luthor (who no
one really knows that well-sins of the father and all that jazz), and Connor Kent (who is just plain weird), who are all in Band- Hartley is a flautist, Sandy is a tubist, Con is a pianist; Cat Grant (who is crazy shy), who is on the school newspaper, is one of his oldest friends, (who he can’t stop noticing in new and exciting ways) and is also a stringer, but she strings a “Dear Abby” style column… which actually has nothing to do with relationships, and everything to do with decorating, gardening, and cooking.

So- all said, Jimmy has taken a bunch of magnifesome pictures, has been spending a lot of time with his friends, old and new, and has a whole new reason to like Cat. Good two-and-a-half-weeks so far, Yeah? (Sandy asked them for help explaining to his father why, exactly, the five of them are friends-and Hartley said to his father “We are in a band.” By the end of those three weeks, it’s actually true-the five of them really do play music together; it isn’t particularly good music, but still.)
I know I've made mistakes,

Vlatvia:

James Jesse (who is actually named Giovanni Zatara Giuseppe) was never supposed to be an acrobat. He wasn’t. He’s naturally terrified of heights- he has a very poor sense of balance. James Jesse was meant to be an older brother… but that didn’t happen either.

His magic compensated for his fear, and his physicality- but there is only so much his magic could do for him.

Firstly, to understand anything, “James Jesse” is not James Jesse- the “real” James Jesse was a premature boy named Giovanni Giuseppe, who died soon after he was born. James Jesse is actually Giovanni Zatara; there was a mix up at the hospital (there wasn’t)- which explains a lot about some of his more… bizarre skills. However, that’s a story for a different time in this story- suffice to say, Zatanna is the youngest of her family, not the only.

(Why is he blond? Magic did it- no really, when his “parents” stole him from the hospital, his magic turned his as of then ungrown hair blond- as a signal that he did not belong with them. Unfortunately, this also made it very clear to his “father” that James- Giovanni wasn’t his son.

It also made it impossible for his real parents to find him- his father, John, lost his only son that day. Three years later, he would lose his wife and gain a daughter.)

A clan is a group of people united by actual or perceived kinship and descent. Even if lineage details are unknown, clan members may be organized around a founding member or apical ancestor. The kinship-based bonds may be symbolical, whereby the clan shares a "stipulated" common ancestor that is a symbol of the clan's unity. When this ancestor is not human, it is referred to as an animalian totem. Clans can be most easily described as tribes or sub-groups of tribes. The word clan is derived from 'clann' meaning 'family' in the Irish and Scottish Gaelic languages. The word was taken into English about 1425 as a label for the tribal nature of Irish and Scottish Gaelic society. The Gaelic term for clan is fine (pronounced finn). Clans preceded more centralized forms of community organization and government; they are located in every country. Members may identify with a coat of arms or other symbol to show they are an independent clan.

In different cultures and situations, a clan may mean the same thing as other kin-based groups, such as tribes, castes, and bands. Often, the distinguishing factor is that a clan is a smaller part of a larger society such as a tribe, a chiefdom, or a state. Examples include Irish, Scottish, Chinese, Japanese clans, Rajput clans, Nair Clan or Malayala Kshatriya Clan in India and Pakistan, which exist as kin groups within their respective nations.
Note, however, that tribes and bands can also be components of larger societies. However, the early Norse clans, the ætter, cannot be translated with tribe or band, and consequently they are often translated as house or line. The 12 Biblical tribes of Israel composed one people. Arab clans are small groups within Arab society. Ojibwa bands are smaller parts of the Ojibwa tribe or people in North America, as one example of the many Native American peoples distinguished by language and culture, most having clans and bands as the basic kinship organizations. In some cases more than one tribe recognized each other's clans; for instance, both the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes had fox and bear clans whose membership could supersede the tribe.

Apart from these different historical traditions of kinship, conceptual confusion arises from colloquial usages of the term. In post-Soviet countries, for example, it is quite common to speak of "clans" in reference to informal networks within the economic and political sphere. This usage reflects the assumption that their members act towards each other in a particularly close and mutually supportive way approximating the solidarity among kinsmen. Polish clans differ from most others as they are a collection of families who bear the same coat of arms, as opposed to claiming a common descent. (Go look up the topic of Polish Heraldry if you want to know more.) Clans in indigenous societies are likely to be exogamous, meaning that their members cannot marry one another. In some societies, clans may have an official leader such as a chieftain or patriarch; in others, leadership positions may have to be achieved, or people may say that 'elders' make decisions. There are multiple closely related clans in the Indian sub-continent, especially south India.

The Giuseppe's and the Grayson's belonged to the same clan- and the way clans work… So. Say there are two branches of the same clan, Branch A, and Branch B. Branch A is very prosperous, but has no children; Branch B is very poor, but has lots of children. What should happen is that branch B will send their children to branch A to be loved (and they will be loved), thus freeing up some money to make Branch B more wealthy.

What almost happened is that Giovanni almost -almost- got sent to live with the Grayson's; if he had, he would have been a stage magician in Las Vegas by age seventeen; he would have been very famous, very wealthy, astonishingly accomplished in his field- and stunningly alone.

That actually did happen in one world- but that world doesn’t have superheroes.
What is true of every Giovanni- of every James- Zatara, Giuseppe, Jesse, or otherwise- is that he’s an inventor.

In this world, James Jesse- Giovanni Zatara Giuseppe- Trickster is a Rogue who invented a portable type of Zero Gravity; this is how he was entertaining the majority of the children currently in the castle. He had made a series of ballrooms into “Zero G” environments by using leftover solar panels from renovations done to the castle two years ago to power a scaled up version of his Air-walkers; the sounds of happy, floating children filled the air. (He had padded the walls and floor first, gosh.)

Of course, right about when the sun was going down Sunday of the third week- that's when all the adults returned. How could he tell? Well… Count Vertigo was floating in the air in the Gold Ballroom- he also had a noose around his neck, which was tied to the base of the chandelier, and there was a stool quietly on the ground- kicked away, fallen, arrested movement- “Okay. So. Being a King was not your thing.” James has carefully sauntered up to Count Vertigo- one of the younger children came to get him from the kitchen, where he was helping Perd Logistica make dinner for everyone; little feet pattered in, skidded to a stop- “Härra Keerutaja! Härra Keerutaja!”

“Jah?”

“On kummiline mees ujuvad kullas tantsusaal!”

“Kas tõesti? Võtan seda kontrollida for you then…”

“Thank you, Mister Trickster!”

James had quickly followed the child into the Gold Ballroom- and found Count Vertigo floating in a noose; shooed all the children out into the Blue Ballroom- carefully unhooked the dead body of Warner Vertigo from the chandelier.

What is true about this James Jesse (Giovanni Zatara Giuseppe) is that he is a kind person- he might not know who he is, or what he wants, but he is kind. So- he stays for four more weeks, and helps his friend Perdita plan the funeral for her uncle. Gives her lots of hugs- teaches her how to turn a cartwheel. Holds her when she cries. Stands by her side- makes her eat. (Listens to her; understands.)

If he goes back to Keystone a little older, a little wiser- well. Wouldn’t you?

--------------------------------------------

Themyscira:

22. You might be a redneck if… you clean your fingernails with a stick.

Donna isn’t sure how she noticed it, but Cassie likes to be clean- this isn’t a big deal. What is a big deal is that she’ll clean under her fingernails with whatever she happens to have on her- anything from a dead animal’s tooth, to a fish boning-knife, to a stick of straw. (She doesn’t realize that she does it too.)

Cassie isn’t sure why everyone on Themyscira uses things other than a pair of nail-clippers to keep their hands neat and pretty, but… When in Rome, and all that. Although- she does think that her Mother’s habit of cleaning her ears out with the tip of a stiletto-dagger can’t be anything other than unsafe.
(What is Themysciran safety? It’s countryside safety- both girls rub sulfur from the Caldera on their legs up to their knees before they go out into the fields; chiggers are vile no-see-um bitey creatures- both girls always take a long stick (cudgel) with them when they go out, to kill snakes; Themyscira has the regular Grecian varieties, and the mythical Grecian varieties, and the Grecian hatred of snakes and serpents (the cudgels are really for beating off the occasional Star Bear. Themyscira is a nice, paradisiacal island- full of warrior women.)- neither girl will ever go fishing on their own, will just let the pole go if the fish pulls too hard, would rather the mermaid take the damn net, no really, we can weave another horse without the Horsemaster there, never ever; Safety first.)

35. You might be a redneck if… you’ve ever bathed with flea and tick soap, and prefer that your soap peel a layer of skin off, just to be sure that you’re clean.

Cassie isn’t sure where all the mini-demons are coming from, but the soap seems to be working- she’s never heard screams so pained. Donna isn’t sure why they have so much soap, but she’s very thankful that they do- but she also knows that she’ll have to make more from the recipe. Both girls hate making soap- it’s right next to knitting sweaters on their “Worst Themyscira Jobs” list.

They work hard at their assigned jobs- every woman on Themyscira works hard to keep the island safe and well appointed- Cassie’s favorite thing to do as her job is, oddly, the meticulous and exact work of laying nets underneath the olive trees; Donna is kinda bored with everything, but… archiving is actually sort of neat- there is always something new to write down, and the logs from the fisherwomen are never the same twice.

That said, finding all the supplies for a new, large, batch of “No Blood-Sucker’s Soap” will not be fun- but there are some things in life that need to be done, regardless of perceived fun levels.

63. You might be a redneck if… directions to your house include “Turn off the paved road” and “go into the woods”.

Donna is very thankful that their chosen house is on top of Yperaspísimi cliff- picking off Harpies is very easy from their point of elevation; Cassie is thankful that the banshee bushes alerted her to the demons trying to flank their position- their screaming helped her ready the deadfall spear traps in time, which worked perfectly. She’s not sure how she’s going to reset them, but it’s almost sundown on the twenty first day, and they’re out of time, out of time- right when the sun hit the waves, right when the monsters almost almost won, the Women return; Donna and Cassie are so damn happy to see their family (mother sister grandmother) they almost, almost forget the past twenty-one days. Almost, as in, Cassie only has to stop herself twice from stabbing her mom in the stomach when she’s touched from behind; she won’t let go of it for much longer, eventually wraps the base in thin lengths of leather, ties it to her neck just so- Donna takes a lot longer to undo the habit of sleeping with a stone-sharpened practice javelin in her arms and a loaded sling at her side; she never does lose the skill of killing a flying menace with a single well-aimed piece of nature, thrown with her arm and eye and cold sharp purpose. And from then- from those twenty-one days, to the very last day of her life- she always carries a sling. Always.

When the Goddesses made Themyscira, they poured love and purity into a pit in the floor of the world, raised up a mountain of fire from the depths of the sea. The island cooled in the thrashing of the wine-dark waves, jagged rocks like teeth making a ring of death around the island, biting into that wine dripping sea; slow rising island in waves of earth and fire, stars dancing overhead in their
dances that slowly changed as the time and tides changed and when the Goddesses were done, the island was as a high and rocky place, same as any other Greek island.

The two girls aren’t allowed to use real weapons. This doesn’t seem like a big deal- until you realize that the two were left on an island, alone. This still doesn’t seem all that bad- but there is one, very important, thing you must understand about Paradise Island- it was, indeed, made as a refuge for the Amazons. It was, indeed, made by the Goddesses who gifted the Amazons their powers. But… What kind of Paradise lets you get soft and stupid? So- when all the adult Women of Themyscira vanished, the two Girls were alone on an island full of very dangerous creatures. Like, oh, Star Bears- the ones the constellations are named after, you know, them- and Cockatrices- which are snakes hatched from frogspawn under hens- and Harpies, and Sirens, and adders, and the occasional Greater Landshark- all these and more. These creatures- these very murder-killy creatures, who really actually actively hunt for people to kill (well, not the adder, and if you aren’t a man, the Sirens will pretty much leave you alone- there’s one who doesn’t sing that was there when every Woman vanished; she helped them out with some of the medium sized nets, and seemed to answer to the name Delfíni, so that’s something)- were all on the island with the Girls. The Girls had only practice weapons and whatever they could scrounge up.

This meant that Cassie had to use some very odd CADMUS knowledge- like how to knap stones, and remembered images of Neolithic tools- to make a hand axe, to chop wood, to sharpen javelins into spear-sharp points- to chop down a branch of true strong wood to make a bow that could push an arrow through a turkey- or a Harpie’s- breast. She did all these things, and Donna... Donna helped in her own way- bound wounds, and figured out when the Women (if the women) would return, prayed to the Goddesses, gave Cassie hugs when she needed them… Threw javelins from on high, figured out how to kill the demons fastest…

If Cassie proved that, yes, indeed, she is an Amazon- if Donna grew up a bit more than her sister and mother would have wanted for her; then that’s what happened.

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**Hey Cat,**

*My mother has a set of antique lace tablecloths that I know she would love to have on the table this Thanksgiving. Unfortunately, the fabrics are really old, and I’m not sure how to clean them. Any ideas on what I should do?*

*Thanks, Clean King*

---

**Hey CK,**

*Antique lace is both beautiful and delicate and should be treated as a fragile item. Before attempting to clean antique lace yourself, inspect it thoroughly to ensure that it can tolerate being cleaned. If it’s strong and in good condition, it should be able to withstand the cleaning process; if it’s frail and tears easily, either leave it as is or have it professionally cleaned. To test your lace piece, see if you can discretely remove a piece and try out the method below; if it disintegrates, you need to get it professionally cleaned.*

*To do it at Home, You Will Need:*
Large bin or sink (large enough that the lace can be submerged in water)

Biz (a cleaner that can be gotten at the convenience store; the BluBiz is too strong for lace)

Water (tap will work fine)

Soft towels (the higher the thread-count the better)

A Weekend

Note: This method is for cleaning WHITE lace- if the lace is meant to be colored and needs to be cleaned, please refer to my “Quilt Cleaning” article from 11.08.99, which can also be found at my website.

To Clean Antique Lace Yourself:

Fill the container/sink with warm water and mix in the Biz. The amount of Biz used will depend on the amount of water in the container/sink. Carefully place the lace in the water and allow it to soak. Wet lace is more fragile than dry lace, so remember that agitating or swishing it around in the water may cause tears and damage. If some movement is needed, gently pat it down in the water. Allow it to soak until the water cools.

When the water has cooled, remove the lace and drain the water. Refill with warm water and repeat the steps above. Continue replacing water and allowing the lace to soak for 24 hours. The temperature of the water can be increased as the lace soaks, but use caution because lace can shrink in hot water. If you choose to use hot water, add the hot water slowly to the warm water to raise the temperature slowly, then allow it all to cool again to cold. Continue replacing the water/Biz and soaking the lace until you achieve the desired whiteness.

When the lace is as white as you’d like, rinse it by placing it in a clean container of water. Remove it from the water and lay it on a towel. Roll the towel up, with the lace inside, and gently press out the water. Do not wring out the lace as this can cause it to stretch and tear. Unroll the towel and transfer the lace to a dry towel. Lay it flat so that it can dry correctly; if the lace is extra-delicate, be sure to dry it on a flat surface, so that the lace is supported. Placing it in the sun to dry will help to whiten it further as the sun has natural bleaching effects. Remember to not use bleach with lace- it’ll weaken the fabric, and shorten the life of the piece overall.

Best of luck, Cat.

Hey Cat,

My uncle committed suicide last week and I’m the only one left in my family now- what should I do?

Thanks, Perfectly Valiant

Hey PV,
First- I offer my sincerest condolences for your loss. Second- I know you’ve read all my previous articles about planning funerals, dealing with grief, and mortuary practices, which is all archived on my website, under “Funerals”- because you were one of my first subscribers- but I know that’s not what you’re asking here. What you want to know, I assume, is how long it’s appropriate to mourn, and… and what to do with your emotions. I understand your confusion- Suicide, especially in your family, is hard to deal with, not just because the person you love is gone, but because you got left behind.

I can’t tell you what to do, but… I can tell you what I did. When I experienced a loss much like yours, I wanted to hide myself away, inside- I wore black all the time, and I cried a lot, and I didn’t let anyone in. It’s okay if you want to do this, but it isn’t something I recommend. If you want to wear black, then wear black. If you want to cry, then cry. But, for your sake, I hope that you have friends that you trust and can let in- it might be hard to do right now, but I think it’s something you have to do if you want to be… if you want to be okay, eventually.

I recommend you find things to do that make you happy, and find a way to do those things outside. Sunlight will help your spirits- if that means taking your textbooks outside to study, do it! If that means just sitting and staring, well, you can do that on a bench at the park, right? If you can’t handle speaking to anyone, try watching them instead. If you can’t handle being around people, try watching nature. Stargaze; drink some milk; eat chocolate; read a romance novel; write letters; smell flowers. Do things that are basically meaningless, like swimming in a fountain, or blowing soap bubbles- life shouldn’t be all about purpose and mourning and sorrow.

I don’t think your Uncle wanted that for you. I don’t want that for you.

When- not if, but when- you feel like you want to do more than just mourn, go for it! It’s important to live with and remember what’s past- it’s also important to live with what’s happening right now. It’s alright to not want to wear black all the time, and it’s alright to want to move on- try to ease yourself into it, if you can. Remember, there isn’t a right or wrong way to mourn your uncle- and there isn’t a right or wrong way to move on.

All my love, Cat.

Hey Cat,

I just moved to Metropolis from a small town- I’ve outgrown everything I brought with me, and all the style options in the big city are way too overwhelming after hand-me downs. Do you have any recommendations for where to go to get reasonably stylish clothing on a small budget? I don’t mind buying secondhand or consigned- but if I do have to do that, do you know of a good tailor?

Thanks, Cool Kale

Hey CK,

Before you go shopping, find someone whose fashion sense you trust, and get them to help you write out a shopping list. It’s very important to know what you’re shopping for before you go out. Do some research on what the two of you hash out that you need- make sure that your budget can
accommodate everything on the list. Remember that you can always go back to the store- there is no reason to spend all of your money at once. Remember to buy basic clothing- things that you can build an outfit around, like trousers, shirts, and various undergarments; don’t worry about being fashionable just yet. You can add style with accessories like a hat, a pair of glasses, socks, ties, shoes, or jewelry- remember to not limit yourself to printed shirts and colored pants.

That said, there are a few stores, both in and out of state, that I’ve always found to have good deals, with good service- check out Seigel’s on Eleventh and Downes, they’re one of the best consignment stores in the city, but try to get there early in the week so you can get the best of the deals; Shuster’s on Parkside and Sothebes, is an amazing tailor, but be careful when you go there, as that part of the city is not the safest place to be; if you can manage a bus-ticket to Gotham, the Gotham Clothing Exchange is open all hours, and sells at a fixed price, just make sure that you don’t spend too much money or you won’t be able to carry your purchases out.

No matter which store you go to, be sure to try on things before you buy them- it’s very important to make sure that things fit when you put them on. A little too much width between your back and your pants can be fixed by a good tailor- the wrong color on those same pants cannot. Most importantly is that your clothing makes you feel good; it doesn’t matter how it fits, or what color it is- if you don’t feel good in it, you won’t wear it, and frankly, buying things you won’t wear is a waste of money.

Happy Hunting, Cat

Hey Cat,

There’s a girl I like. I’ve been friends with her for forever, but I don’t think she realizes that I want to be more than friends- we’ve gone out on dates, but I don’t think she understood that we were on a date, or that I’m interested in her that way. How do I let her know that I’m interested in starting a relationship with her on a more-than platonic level?

Thanks, Mostly Overblown

Hey MO,

Have you tried asking her out on a very obvious date? It might be that the way you’ve been trying to get her attention has been too subtle, or that the girl you like hasn’t had someone interested in her before- if you can make your interest very obvious to her, you will definitely get her attention.

Have you considered a classic date, like a dinner/movie date, or a concert? The old standby clichés are that way because they work, not because they’re bad. See if you can find a movie you would both be interested in- one that might appeal to you, and to her. If you’ve been friends for as long as you say, then you should know her better than anyone else, right? Think about what she likes to do, and try to find ways to involve that in your dates; see if she shares some of your interests, or try to introduce her to them.

I’m not sure about how you should go about it, but something spontaneous and romantic will get her attention. If a dinner/movie date doesn’t work for her or you, try a picnic in the park, or a trip to the museum- find a way to make the time you spend together special. It’s really less about the quantity of
the time, and more about the quality- if you only have fifteen minutes during lunch to spend together, try to meet up; even a little time together is better than none at all.

If being subtle doesn’t work, just tell her flat-out how you feel about her. If she’s really as dense as you seem to be implying, it might be the only thing that works. You’ll have to come up with your own way of doing it- I’m a fan of the all-out blurt myself.

Best of Luck, Cat

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Watchtower:

M’gann really likes Ace. It’s not something she’ll ever act on- even though Ace is not that much younger than her, not in the way that matters- because she’s never had a real relationship with anyone, not that she can remember clearly.

Permafrost wishes the day would just end already, so that the adults could deal with their own fucking messes, okay? She had taken care of the generators, right, when the stupid Gravitation Wells started to go out- and no, none of the techies could do anything because none of them had the clearance to mess around with the ambient gravity of the Watchtower, and Ace had been a big help in keeping everyone in the Watchtower connected- Apparently, the League has access to some bitchin’ good comms- and M’gann was much more powerful than she first seemed- and the Logistica’s were very helpful in keeping everything up and running, and keeping her informed of the situation on Earth, but. But Permafrost hasn’t been off the Watchtower for three weeks- she’s very tired of sleeping in an assigned bunk, in a satellite in space. She wants to go home.

Logistica #253 is a little pissed off because she can feel her limit coming up- there is only so long that one dupe can be in existence before it must return to the source. This is really interesting- I was really enjoying myself. Oh well; back to Vlatvia, I suppose.

Ace is quietly eating a sandwich when it happens- with a faint susurration, all the adults reappear, as do their thoughts. However, three weeks in the company of an extremely powerful, extremely controlled telepath when you yourself are a telepath will do some interesting things- meaning the thoughts of the others around her were less of an out and out roar from the inside of a screaming throat, and more like a street-side buzz which could be safely ignored. (The reason she was in stasis was not so much to do with her health as it was her control: there was a weak point in her brain, steadily made worse by overusage of her psychic abilities. When M’gann taught her control, Ace’s health problem became much smaller- although it would take the combined efforts of The Atom and Dr. Mid-nite to fix it completely. That part of the story is quite a ways off, however- and you won’t like it when it happens.)

(The people who were left behind got used to a stressed-out Permafrost leaving icy patches behind her- in her footprints, where she’s stood or sat or leaned against the wall- little pebbles of ice scattered in corners, a strange sheen on her face sometimes; The League, however, is not. Superman, in particular, is very… concerned. When a young woman you know to be completely self-contained, and to make a bad pun, chilly, runs up to you and gives you a hug, you know something’s gone very wrong.

She’s horribly embarrassed that she hugged Superman, of all people but- it’s been a long three weeks.)
Belle Reeve:

**“I never thought that the ability to painlessly disarm a person would be a useful babysitting skill, but it came up once.”** Tuppence Tferore’s head is squished into the soft ground, muck and ooze slurming down her shirt.

**“Yes, sis- I know. I was there, remember?”** Thomas Tferore looks like he’s asleep, uncomfortably mashed into the side of a tree- he’s not, he just doesn’t want people to know that he’s talking to his sister. They both are being sat on by a little girl in soft grey-blue; she is quietly checking her arrows for flaws as her elders speak in front of the Belle Reeve gates- the soft peeping of frogs and the screeching roar of the demonic alligators fills the air of the Tuesday morning in a strangely pacific way.

**“Glad you taught me.”**

**“Glad you taught me how to be tied up.”**

**“Hah. Yeah, those were good times… It’s gonna be interesting to see this girl all grown up, yeah?”**

**“Yea-uh! Think she knows that Red Hood is a relation?”**

**“Doubt it. That Tangent girl was nice.”**

**“Mm. How long do you give her?”**

**“How long do you think it’s been happening?”**

**“My guess? All her life.”**

**“In that case… I give her until she’s fourteen before she finally makes a statement.”**

**“Five years? Really?”**

**“Took me that long to stand up to Her, didn’t it?”**

**“Hah. True that.”**

Artemis and Cameron are talking quietly; the sun is just coming up, light just breaking into the muggy air- it will be another boiling day. “Cameron… Do you really not understand why I haven’t agreed to marry you?”

“No. I really don’t, A.”

“…Do you know what Marriage is?”

“…ummm-”
“Okay, so- Marriage, also called matrimony or wedlock, is a social union or legal contract between people, called spouses, that creates kinship. The definition of marriage varies according to different cultures, but it is usually an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual, are acknowledged. Such a union is often formalized via a wedding ceremony; in terms of legal recognition, most sovereign states and other jurisdictions limit marriage to two persons of opposite sex or gender in the gender binary, and some of these allow polygynous marriage. In the 21st century, several countries and some other jurisdictions have legalized same-sex marriage. In some cultures, marriage is recommended or compulsory before pursuing any sexual activity.”

“But I want to do that with you, A.”

“You… want to marry me?”

“I want to have sex with you.”

“Cameron. We don’t need to be married to do that.”

“We don’t?”

“No. We don’t. Marriage is for when we want to have kids. Are you ready to have kids with me?”

He tilts his head. “Uh… Yes?”

“Cameron- our children, should we have any, would be worse than Red Robin, Red Hood, and Speedy combined because of who we are. Those genes are hereditary. Are you sure?”

“Oh. No, no, I’m not ready for that.”

“Yeah. I didn’t think so.”

“Can we still-”

“Yes, Cameron, when you’re out of jail, you have a house, and are gainfully employed, we can try dating.”

“But what about-”

“Rookies don’t get Cookies, Cam. Like I said before, you currently don’t meet my prerequisites for having sex on the regular.”

“But if I get out of jail, get a house, get a job, and become a productive member of society, we can start-”

“Dating, yes.”

“Sex?”

“If I like the look of you then, I don’t see why not.”

“So- at some point in the future, after I’ve cleaned up my act, I might possibly have a chance at having sex with you?”
“Yep.”

He stares into the swampland around Belle Reeve for a long few moments—“… I’ll see you in five years then.”

Artemis stares at him for a long moment. “…Cameron, you’re only in for a year.”

“Yeah. That’s why I said five.”

Artemis tries very hard not to smile- Speedy just rolls her eyes. *Ew!*

If Tuppence and Thomas Tferore hadn’t started quietly whimpering on hearing the names “Red Robin”, “Red Hood”, and “Speedy”, the fact that Cameron and Artemis weren’t ready to have children wouldn’t have surprised anyone. The fact that they’ve been tied up and are being sat on by Speedy as Icicle Jr. and Artemis talk doesn’t really sink in for anyone except Amanda Waller, who will quietly snicker about it for the rest of her life.
How did it come to This?

Gotham:

There is a building code that you need to be aware of to understand the next part of this story, as well as a little history.

In 1964, there was a magical plague in Gotham- it caused severe hallucinations, extreme aqua and tyranophobia, narcolepsy, and death. The cure, as it was discovered, was non-existent; the plague moved too fast for there to be enough time for anyone to figure out an applicable clinical trial. In other words, once you were sick, you stayed that way- some people didn’t die, some people did, and everybody, absolutely everybody, was scared out of their minds. (It was really a small amount- a tiny amount, so small as to be invisible- of one of the most deadly poisons in the world, swirling through the water.)

That said, a man by the name of Hector Nygma figured out a way to keep a person from getting the plague. It involved treating the city’s water supply with a rather impressive amount of electricity, followed by immediate distilling. His experiments were done on his son, Edward, who never forgot the explanation his father gave him- *I’m trying to figure out a riddle, boyo. Now, drink/eat/sniff/llick/touch this.* (Hmmm.)

What does this have to do with building codes, you might ask? Well- Hector’s findings were published, and tested by many a skeptical scientist; at first, he was treated as a nutbar, a crazy man with crazier theories… then he turned out to be right. By chance, he had stumbled upon the only way to neutralize the poison in the water- which was both magical and not in origin. (What had really happened was that an old, abandoned, Lazarus Pit had sprung a leak somewhere- that oily black iridescent water-like sludge had worked its way into the Gotham Water Reservoir, which explains the entire “Everybody is getting sick and dying” thing. It had diluted enough so that people weren’t getting dead immediately- just sick.)

Once his findings were proven correct, a great building project went into effect- and that’s where the codes come in. These codes are for two things- electricity, and water; they explain one part of why what’s about to happen happened (Happens? Timey-wimey. Bleargh.). If, in Gotham, the city ever becomes as empty as it was those twenty-one days, a curious mechanism within the hydro-electric outrigging goes into effect; meaning, as fewer and fewer people use the electricity, more and more gets shunted towards the tesla coils inside the Gotham Water Purification Plant- so. Around two days after Robin left for Dervish, Gotham started experiencing rolling blackouts, except in places which registered as “occupied”- certain Wards in Hospitals, Grocery stores, the occasional Apartment Building (not the one the Gordon’s live in), and Wayne Manor. Day three, and most of the city was dark- and that’s when the building codes become important.

Ammonia (NH3) is one of the most commonly produced industrial chemicals in the United States. It is used in industry and commerce, and also exists naturally in humans and in the environment. Ammonia is essential for many biological processes and serves as a precursor for amino acid and nucleotide synthesis. In the environment, ammonia is part of the nitrogen cycle and is produced in soil from bacterial processes. Ammonia is also produced naturally from decomposition of organic matter, including plants, animals and animal wastes. At room temperature, ammonia is a colorless, highly irritating gas with a pungent, suffocating odor. In pure form, it is known as anhydrous ammonia and
is hygroscopic (readily absorbs moisture). Ammonia has alkaline properties and is corrosive. Ammonia gas dissolves easily in water to form ammonium hydroxide, a caustic solution and weak base. Ammonia gas is easily compressed and forms a clear liquid under pressure. Ammonia is usually shipped as a compressed liquid in steel containers. Ammonia is not highly flammable, but containers of ammonia may explode when exposed to high heat.

That last one is very important- because the Ice Cream Factory that the Stray Cats live in is, in fact, abandoned; the majority of the upgrades Cass made to the place are completely mechanical in nature, and do not rely on electricity to work. The amount of electricity used by Home is not enough to register the place as Occupied- which is both good and bad. I won’t bore you with all the details- although there was a rather nasty explosion, and a truly foul smell; the shattering of an ancient heating coil, a spark, a bang… The rushing of flames up and out; the smell had driven the Cats away long before that point, but it had also made it impossible for them to return anytime soon- So. That was how the Stray Cats became truly Stray Cats- their Home burned down to the ground in a freak Ammonia/Hydrogen Explosion.

Across town, Oracle was able to get Red Hood to agree to letting them- that is, the Stray Cats- stay at his place; she had hacked the city’s central phone system ages ago with the help of Kitten- Carrie; it was easy enough for her to get in touch with the Cats and let them know where their new place of residence is…

Which was how the Stray Cats ended up walking through the Gotham Tunnels, and into an ante-chamber of the Batcave; a short pinky swear later (sacrosanct among children- and yes, Catboy even knew the shake and spit and shake again maneuver, a highly ceremonial thing, used for moments of great import- Kitten was the one who added the stamp and kick at the end- Spoiler said the rhyming words- Black Cat officiated… and, oddly, in that time and place, the solemn vow was truly and fully correct and legal; Kid Shiva though they were all nuts, but he added a small finger jab blood drop down with needle movement at the beginning, which would become a real and powerful thing later) and the Stray Cats are in residence at Wayne Manor. This was Sunday of the second week- by Sunday of the third week, the Stray Cats were almost completely at home in Wayne Manor… which will lead to some interesting places.

Selina Kyle is very worried for her son, Damian. She’s worried enough to break into the Batcave- what, there’s only one place in Gotham it could be, the geography of Gotham being what it is.

For some reason, she’s not sure what (Demonic Interference), everyone forgets that most geographical features of the area are a matter of public record- and the few things that aren’t can be found easily enough by a person with her skill-set. (What most people never seem to understand about Catwoman is that most of her “theft” skills are nothing more than an extremely powerful and focused set of researching skills. Every building that was built legally has to have a set of permits filed, by law; Catwoman steals from major museums, art galleries, and action houses- the most reputable of places. For Catwoman… or, for Selina Kyle, Librarian, it’s relatively easy to find what she wants to know about anywhere or anything.) So- she’s known for some time, factoring in response time and all, that Batman is a local… meaning that the area under Wayne Manor is the only place in the city where there would be access to a large enough system of caves- as well as to the Gotham tunnels; you can’t always go above ground to get where you need to be, not in this city.

Unfortunately, her worry blinded her to one simple fact- she’s breaking into the Batcave. The place
where Batman lives. The place where Batman lives. He catches her- Sunday morning of the third week. (He catches her the same way he caught her last time- it ends the same way too.) They figure out who the other is, not in the bedroom, but at the breakfast table- Selina is a morning person; Bruce is not.

She decides to stay for breakfast- it’s one thing to have a one night stand; it’s quite another thing to have a one night stand with a guy you met ten years ago in another country and have a son by. She’s been wondering for quite some time just who her baby’s daddy is- today, she’s going to find out. The snores that start up around four AM drive her from the luscious bed- the rushing water of her showering doesn’t wake him. She quietly creeps out of the bedroom- into a mansion. Holy Shit.

Selina, after getting thoroughly lost in the Wayne Manor and being retrieved by the kind butler, Alfred, is sitting at the dining room table, quietly eating an omelet of spinach and feta cheese, reading a morning paper, and sipping her coffee- Johnny quietly sets out a platter of various food stuffs. She raises an eyebrow- he winks. Thoroughly intrigued now, she patiently waits for what will surely be a very interesting breakfast. She is not disappointed- the next to sit down at the table, a few chairs down to her right, is Dick Grayson who is the ward of… Nah, that couldn’t be- but there was only ever one guy who could bend his shoulders like that- Oh. Oh!- who is fluffy haired in a very interesting way; his eyes were only open enough for him not to walk into a wall- they close now, his face more asleep than anything else- his arms flop onto the table, reach forward, pluck a bowl from the lazy-Susan on the table, sets it down in front of himself; gently skrishes a portion of cereal into the bowl, pours milk into it. This is all done on auto-pilot; he hasn’t actually opened his eyes this whole time, which is how he missed Selina sitting at one end of the table.

Next to appear is a boy who looks, at first glance, like her son- but it’s not her son… even so, he looks like he could use a hug. She coughs softly- her eyes gently catch his, tugs him over. Her voice is barely loud enough to be heard- “What’s your name?”

“…Kid Shiva.”

She mmm-hmmms; “What’s your name?”

“Damian Alexander al Ghul.”

“Damian Alexander, جنت هنا.”

He walks over to her, face slowly taking on a fearful cast- it changes to shock when he is tugged close to her heart, wrapped up in the warm soft smell of clean sweetness; mother smell, coiling around him so warm and gentle. He doesn’t quite realize he’s started to cry- sob really- into her breast; she pulls him into the seat next to her, gently pulls him close enough to hold him while he cries- oddly, Dick hasn’t opened his eyes at all. Johnny has poked his head in, his eyebrows quirked, but his face settles when he sees Selina comforting the crying boy… who isn’t his brother. Damian al Ghul quietly falls asleep leaning against Selina’s side- it’s been a long few weeks, and this is the initial release of some pent up emotions that have been festering for most of his life.

The next person to enter is her son- he sees what she’s doing and looks… relieved. He quietly pads over to his mother, gives her a kiss on the side of her mouth; she inhales her sons smell, a warm sort of boy smell- feels her heart’s worry ease; yes, she might be in her civvies, at Bruce Wayne who is also Batman and the father of my son, holy fucking hell ’s dining table- yes, she might be completely out of her league, but her son is on her left, a sweet boy who will be her son by next week if she has
anything to say about it is on her right, and she’s eating her favorite breakfast. So.

The next people in for breakfast are actually five small children- one child is wearing a massive shapeless sweater in a warm shade of golden-grey, yellow cat-eared beanie with long ties hanging down pulled firmly over head- behind that child is a shuffling girl in a purple tank-top and shorts, blond locks escaping from underneath a purple cat-eared beanie- behind her is another girl in a dark grey T-shirt, tiger-striped shorts just peeking out from under its hem, her beanie is covered in lynx spots and has larger ears, a yawn breaking her face in half- a little girl carrying three phone books, in a black nightie with tiny white polka-dots scattered all over, sleek black beanie over short black hair- a little… boy, although he is rocking that flyoey blue and red nightie and sparkly red Venetian cat mask; the bird-beak on the nose is a little odd, but it works on him. He is carrying one phone book. They sit across from Dick, the small girl in black sitting on top of one phone book- she helps the little boy onto the stack of three phone books, carefully settles him in- next to Damian Marcus- I’ll be calling my boys Marcus and Alexander from now on, but whatever-; she looks up at Selina, nods once and reaches for some bacon- then jerks her head around to stare at Selina- “Miss Catwoman? What are you doing here?”

“Mmm- I found a friend in a low place and… things got a little… exciting.”

“…ew…”

Selina snickers- “You asked, Black Cat.”

The next in to breakfast is a small auburn haired boy, followed by a silent blond girl. The tall, lean girl, a runner, quietly takes one spot on the table, away from everyone- she looks very sad… like she got her feelings badly hurt. She is young, blonde- freckly and sweet looking. And Sad- very sad. She’s actually sitting next to Alexander; Selina reaches her right hand out, puts her fingers over the little girl- the little girl starts, and then smiles a thin, grim smile. (Tangent- Lia Hélène West-Allen- pretends that she doesn’t know that most people don’t like her- her parents love her, and so do her siblings, and her cousins… but that doesn’t mean they like her. So, no- it didn’t come as too big a surprise that the Bat-brat’s didn’t like her either; the tying her up was a little extreme, but the ball-gag was perfectly apropos- she got out of the ties within moments, let poor Miss and Mister Tferore out too; what hurt her is that… they didn’t need her there- that her older cousin, who she looks up to, didn’t think she had anything to offer. No, she isn’t the most scientific of people- but she could have babysat her cousins! She could’ve run errands! Sometime she wonders if her family even knows how fast she is- she’s never shown them, but she’s also never gotten a chance to show them. Maybe they don’t think she can do what she knows she can do?)

The auburn haired boy –his hair shines red in the light, but darkens to black when he passes through the shadows- with golden skin settles one seat over from Dick- Johnny quietly settles in between them, carefully tugs Dick out of his cereal; Maureen, hair up in curlers, quietly settles across from Dick, spoons out some oatmeal for herself, carefully ignores the boys (in the same way the moon ignores the sun, and the stars ignore each other, which is to say that Maureen is so aware of the exact and specific location of the boys that it is hard for her to eat her breakfast; to be fair, he’s doing the exact same thing)- right about then is when Bruce Wayne staggers in.

Damian Marcus Kyle is a morning person; Damian Alexander al Ghul is not. Jason Wayne is a morning person; Dick Grayson is not. Cass is a morning person; Stephanie and Carrie are not. Barbara isn’t exactly a morning person- but she’s nowhere near as bad as Dick or Cass; Lia is a morning person, but she’s still on Central time, so it’s really more like three in the morning for her; Maureen Conners is not a morning person; the boys are morning people- Selina Kyle is a morning
person… Bruce Wayne is not.

Subsequently, there are more children eating breakfast in various states of dress and wakefulness than has been seen at the Wayne table since before the Korean War, when Bruce manages to stagger out to his seat… across from Selina. He sits at his normal spot, quietly places his food on his plate- his eyes slowly open, widen almost comically Maureen, Tangent, boy-he-doesn’t-know, Catwoman, another-boy-he-doesn’t-know, small girl in black, small boy in blue and red night-dress and red sparkly mask, girl in tiger striped hat, girl in purple hat, child-shape in yellow hat, Dick, Johnny, and Jason. I could deal with this now… I should deal with this now. I’ll deal with this later. Bruce grunts like a caveman, eats a large portion of bacon, and goes back the hell to sleep. (He’s been awake for three weeks, running on less than three hours of sleep per night- this problem will resolve itself, or wait for him to resolve it.)

On any other day, he’d be right. (I suppose I should go into the way Bruce Wayne got four sons and four daughters- Jason’s solution to the whole “Stray Cats” thing was… to politely ask them to stop, or tell them what they’re going to do first so that they can be prepared. He also invited them to live there for a while; Bruce and Batman didn’t have the heart to send the four four children away.

Tim counts as a son and a daughter, by the way- he won’t make his distinction clear for quite a while… Although Batman and Bruce choose to count him as a son.

Selina thinks that Jason’s breakfast antics are adorably cute.)

This is how the boys died: they- there’s no need to get upset, you know. This isn’t one of those awful tales where the hero dies at the end in a blaze of glory; so depressing, really, for the great heroic tale to end with the one you love in pieces on the floor, fleshy bits and bobs all floating around in a pool of blood and ashes- absolutely stomach churning. I, personally, don’t believe in stories like that- if you’re crazy enough to make your hero work for their eventual happiness, you should let them keep it- it’s not right to drag it out over years and years, through bloodshed and war, famine, plague, insanity...

In the end, the boys will die as they should have died- after attaining a great, and in many ways, immeasurable age (approximately two-hundred and thirty eight, give or take a decade), they would die- quietly slipping into the dark, into the curled hand of a gentle (The first, the last) woman and the long, gentle sleep; he laid back in his body, all of them together, let themself go… let it all go. They were following the moon- their ever-frozen February moon- into the darkness of the stars; into the quiet at the end of the book, where the pages are ever blank and empty; the place after “The End”, when the story is still ringing inside your head- that odd place where you want so very desperately for there to be more to the tale, but know in your heart that there is, in fact, not...

Well. I should tell you this- he died, as a very old man, in his bed, surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren- his nieces and nephews, his many godchildren, and their children- for the one and only time in any universe, Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth died as he had always been meant to- surrounded by his family. (The thing to remember about a story, any story, where the character you love is, in that world, a living, breathing, person- the story that stars a living person will always end the same way; they died. Perhaps your story is about a ghost- in that case, the phrase would be: they left. The point is, all stories about people end when they die- since this story is about the life of one Jonathan Nathaniel Crane Pennyworth, when he dies, the story will be over… well, his personal story will be over; this story will end when- well. You’ll see.)
The ocean is old. How old is impossible to say; the earth has shifted and changed its skin so many times- the sea has changed with it, it’s wet body ebbing and flowing with each moment in time. There are things left behind; creatures and beings from long ago that never got the pinkslip of extinction- beings that never learned that they were no longer needed on the planet. There are things at the bottom of the sea that will make your stomach churn and your blood run cold; the ocean is large, and old and teeming; a vast expanse of water from which life sprung- from which life still springs.

The above paragraph had nothing to do with this story- except for one very important thing, which we’ll get to… in a little bit.

The city-state of Sihir Kota was founded by Bapak Jeli Lautan, one of King Orin’s finest mages- and probably his son. When the Great Sinking occurred, he was on a “Diplomatic” mission in Shambhala; he didn’t learn of the sinking of Atlantis until long after the fact- almost a hundred years after the fact. He knew that it would cause too many problems for the people if he were to return; he was not exactly prominent in Orin’s court- but he had no wish to return, and there were rumors through what remained of his network that Atlantis was undergoing certain… growing pains.

So. To understand the city-state of Sihir Kota- one of the Big Seven- you must understand who Bapak Jeli Lautan was. To do that… well… There are many stories about him, about how he came to be in that place, at that time- there is only one about how the city came to be. The stories about who he is… go something like this:

The beautiful prince of a far-off Kingdom desperately fled to the South-Eastern Sea after being struck by black magic. The black magic was cast by a witch under the order of a jealous rival in the palace, and caused the beautiful prince to suffer a disgusting skin disease. He jumped into the violent waves of the Ocean where he was finally cured and regained his beauty, and the spirits and demons crowned the boy as the legendary Spirit-King of the South Sea.

Another version of the story above says that the king (at the time), had no children eligible for the throne- his former queen had died, childless; the king was weary of the throne, and a very old man. The only one who could legally take the throne was the King’s half-brother, a much younger man, and beautiful besides; at the time, only those of pure and noble blood could reign. The king took a new wife, and she got pregnant, but jealously forced the king to choose between his wife’s unborn child and his half-brother. There was an ultimatum: If he chose his brother, then his wife would leave the palace and the throne would be given to what would later become the king- which was illegal, and would lead the country into civil war. If the wife was chosen, the brother would be banned from the palace and the new, yet to be born, child would be king. The king solved this by ordering a witch to make his brother suffer a deforming skin disease. The brother- who is now unrecognizable- was banned from the palace; after many months of wandering, he heard a voice that told him to go to the South Sea at Midnight to cure the disease. He did and was taken up by a huge wave to disappear into the Ocean forever.

The true story is both more and less- Bapak Jeli Lautan (which isn't actually his name) was indeed a prince. He was not a legitimate prince- his father and his mother never acknowledged him as theirs (considering the fact that it was an incestuous affair that produced him, acknowledgement would have resulted in a great deal of trouble); his lack of legitimacy barred him from the palace’s life of intrigue- his own physical features barred him from the life of a commoner. Except… He was too
obviously a member of the Royal house to be killed- and too secret a thing to be kept quiet. (Servants talk.)

So. He was made into a sneak- a spy; a diplomat. He was sent many places in the hopes that he would die; he did not die. He returned, always, to his home, with news from the rest of the world; he was always sent away with the hope that he would die. One day, this all became too much for him- he had always known, you see. He had always had a slight inkling about just who his parents had made him; he had always known that they didn't want him, that they didn't care, but he had always hoped that one day… one day he might make himself useful to them. (A dream is a dream- no matter how tragic, impossible, or flat out insane.) Eventually, he couldn’t keep lying to himself and stay sane- They didn’t want him. He knew of many places in which to hide- many places where he would never be found. He disguised himself, and left, never to return.

The city-state of Sihir Kota was founded on a dare- the details of which will be discussed at some other point in this story. The important things to know about Sihir Kota are:

1. There is only one small garrison in Sihir Kota, and that is the Palace Garrison, in the center of the city.

2. Sihir Kota has more weapons inside it than most cities have people- and those are just the city defenses.

3. The people of Sihir Kota are always a little… off.

4. Durante Zatara trained in Sihir Kota as a young sorcerer- he got his heart broken there too.

5. The city-state of Sihir Kota is -technically- inside a sturgeon.

That fifth one is just a bit of trivia- the other four are important.

Remember how the ocean brings forth new life on occasion? Well- that’s… technically (and really) true. But for this, we need to talk about the technical aspect.

In Vietnam, somewhere in Hanoi, there is a girl by the name of Gabrielle Soulet; she is not real in more ways than one. (But that won’t be important for quite a while.) She is a virtual identity created by a man named Milo Garret- if you know that name, you know entirely too many secrets; she is a physical person who has almost no connection with her online persona- she is also not real (and that will probably never be important… although Oracle is a nosey child). Anyway, one of the Gabrielle Soulet’s contracted with a person by the name of Hila to steal a certain something from the smallest garrison of Sihir Kota; Hila sent hir three best thieves out for the something… and wondered to himself, quietly, Why would Shadows pay this much for the Sword of Beowulf to be stolen when they could just steal it themselves?…

The thieves were creatures that could be created within two hours- could be sent on their mission within the day, and be done with their mission within a week. What were those creatures? They were Le’ak. Three, to be precise- all male- and their mission was logged as complete. Interestingly, only one of them came back- with the Sword- and he died shortly afterwards.
What is a Le’ak, exactly? It’s a- well, it’s an ordinary Atlantean who practices black magic and who needs to consume entrails or embryo blood in order to sustain themselves and make magic. Hila had three male Le’ak under her control- they were all brothers, and all around the age of eleven. A Le’ak is a shapeshifter, and very dangerous; they smell like blood and mold, and turn wax pale in the full light of the sun.

Aqualad would be informed sometime during the second week that a trio of Le’ak had attempted to kill the majority of the people of Sihir Kota; he would stop what he was doing, turn, and stare at the messenger for a long moment. “That’s what the message says, sir.”

“…Do they require assistance?”

“They have asked for more bandages… and… a large quantity of shaved brown kelp.”

Aqualad smirks. His mother is from Shayeris- his father is from Sihir Kota. Let it be said that his childhood was a very strange and interesting one- his mother training him in the traditional Shayerian pursuits of farming… his father teaching him how to skin a demon with a chipped piece of shell and where all the choicest cuts of meat on one were- happier days. “Send them the requested items, and my congratulations.”

“Yes sir!”

This is a true and honest recounting of the second Mission (well, sort of) that Y.O.U.N.G. Justice undertook, and it’s repercussions in the world around them:

A dark room, a dark place, a dark gathering of people- but we’ve heard all this before. What really matters is what the people are talking about- a collection of screens showing the events of the past twenty-one days; The Wondergirl’s fighting an impossible battle and winning; Scarecrow cackling as he fires a rocket launcher; seventy identical girls in green dresses, all over the world at the same time; an abandoned factory exploding; Aqualad quietly filling out reports- seeing to the technical aspects of running a kingdom; three tendrilly creatures sliming through a small opening in the wall of a palace; a blond man, hanging from a noose; a black haired girl in a tuxedo, chanting spells; speedy in a blue dress, drinking a smoothie.

A cultured woman’s voice- Queen Bee. “Was it truly necessary?”

A slimy, smirking voice- Lex Luthor. “What do you mean?”

“Was it truly necessary to…”

“Was it truly… necessary to… remove all the adults to… another location? Perhaps not… But consider this- our goal was… impossible… with them here; without them, it became merely… improbable.” The raspy man- Ra’s al Ghul.

A disturbing cackle- Joker. “Ha- don’t worry Queenie! You’re Vlatvian beau won’t be dead forever! After all, you seemed to bring him back to life often enough-”

Queen Bee again- she has taken offence. “Shut your filthy mouth you un-funny frea-”

“WHAT DID YOU JUST CALL M-”
“YOU HEARD ME YOU-”

“Enough.” A voice from underneath the waves, deep and reverberant; slightly different from before, yet some indelible property remains, marking- the word echoes with power; the arguing man and woman silence themselves. “We have escaped notice thus far, and while we have lost allies, we have also solidified our position. It is irrational and counter-productive to fight amongst ourselves when there is a common enemy without. While it might not have been necessary to-”

“…Remove the Vlatvian… from play…”

“-before, it became necessary when he showed his general incompetence.”

“He lacked… faith… If a pawn- and make… no mistake, the Vlatvian… was a pawn- proves itself unworthy of play, you must… endeavor to… remove it from play.”

A sharp inhalation of breath- then Queen Bee speaks again. “I do not pretend to understand where this plan is going- but understand this. There are very few things in this world which are precious to me; that man was one of those few. While I am, of course, a servant to our cause, I must also…”

Lex Luthor helps her out. “You must also see to your household, and to your own needs. It is an honorable, and indeed, completely understandable way to be, Madam- However. The fact remains; Count Vertigo was no longer our man, so we removed him from the situation. What else could have been done?”

She sighs, then quietly murmurs-“Our enemies come nearer the truth of us in the opinions they form than we do in our opinion of ourselves.”- her screen blackens out to nothing; her words are barely audible.

There is a pause- then Joker speaks. “Y’know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say Miss Queenie is havin’ second thoughts. Heh. Talk to y’all later- I have to see a Crocodile about a Stray Cat.” With a haunting cackle, his screen blackens to empty stillness.

Four screens remain- one person has not spoken at all. They speak now, their voice a grave, rumbling affair- like the slamming of a tombs door; like the roar of a forge; like the screams of the dying, war-torn countryside- “I don’t think they understand the depth of their complicity- I seek nothing less than the domination of this world. I have no patience for those who will not further my aims.” The screen blackens- only three now.

The echoing voice from underneath the waves speaks next- “We cannot afford to lose too many more allies- and his support is paramount to our success; I was able to retrieve the Sword without too many problems… Will she be able to influence the right people?” A soft hum in the back of their throat. “She’ll have to- otherwise, we’ll undoubtedly take care of her, like the Vlatvian and the Keystoner a few years ago…” The voice trails off- and the screen fades to dark black, a quiet hiss undulating into the air; the screen blackens completely.

Ra’s al Ghul and Lex Luthor quietly glance at each other; two silhouettes quietly regarding each other. “We have contingencies in place, correct?”

“Of… course; it is imprudent to let a few minor setbacks such as these… dictate the flow of our… acquisitions.”
“Agreed. Shall I move into Stage Two?”

“Mm. I’ll start the Merry-go-round. How will they handle this… interesting turn of events, I wonder?”

Soft laughter- then darkness. (Oh dear.)

A warning before we continue— this is not a story for children. The main hero of this story is Scarecrow, a man who, in another life, would make three people kill themselves with only his voice and his observations; a man who chants nursery rhymes in a terrifying way (now they’re study aides, but they’re still torturous things to hear); a man who turns into a giant monster with slavering teeth and a pair of slash-mark acid yellow eyes when he’s backed into a corner AHHHHHHHHHHHHHH- a story with a hero like that has somenasty things in store.

This next bit is part of that horror. Because, to be fair, Scarecrow is a hero of the Horrific type; that is to say, the things Scarecrow deals with on a normal basis will make your hair curl, then catch on fire.

I’m sorry to tell you this, but if you’re one of those people who prefer to skip the scary bits of the story- I’m not sure this story will make sense without them, and there are quite a few to come. It might become too much for you… It might scare you away from this story entirely- for that, I am sorry. If you are brave enough to go on, I can tell you this- I will always be with you. I will not let things get too far out of hand. However, there is only so much I can do to interrupt the flow of narrative; I will do my best to keep the story within the bounds of relative truth.

These things are necessary, but more importantly, this is a story about Superheroes. In this kind of story, the Good Guys will always win… Or, no, maybe it was that the Bad Guys will never win in these kinds of stories...

(There are monsters and ghosts in the world; they are inside us. Sometimes they win; sometimes they don’t. In the next chapters, monsters and ghosts will show their faces. Do not be afraid- be brave.)

(In other words, things are about to get very, very bad. Remember though- this is a kind of place where the good guys always win- or was it that the bad guys always lose? Either way, there will be a satisfactory resolution. I hope.)

-If you pretend to feel a certain way, the feeling can become genuine all by accident.-

Mt. Justice, two weeks after “The Separation”:

“Team. I have two missions for you- Team One will consist of: Wonder Girl Blue and Permafrost- team two will consist of: Wonder Girl Red, Kid Flash, Robin, and Superboy. I will brief team two. Captain Marvel will brief team one. Scarecrow and Artemis will be attending to previous engagements for the duration of this mission.”

Captain Marvel is standing to one side of the cave- with a jerk of his head, he beckons the two young women over to an alcove within the cave, taps at a holo-keyboard. The two girls quietly walk over to him, stand shoulder to shoulder, watch him type.
They stand silently.

“Team two- your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to find the Drake’s.”

“Sir?” Wonder Girl Red- quiet, cautious- “The Drake’s are in Africa on a vacation; why would-”

“I have reason to believe that the information regarding the where-abouts of the Drake’s is false. Your mission is to find, and if possible, retrieve the Drake’s- you will start in Cairo, the last place they both were seen alive. You have one week to complete your mission. Do you accept?”

Robin has quietly glanced at Superboy and Kid Flash; they both nod- Wonder Girl Red looks at Robin, who nods- “We do. Are we to arrange our own transportation?”

“Wonder Woman is providing you transportation. You are to meet her at Vietti Field, in West Happy Harbor; you have a little time to pack whatever you might need for the mission- although I would recommend you pack for incognito Summer Desert conditions, and medium levels of fighting. There is no great rush to begin.”

Team Two nods, and then Batman speaks again. “Dismissed.” Team Two leaves the main hall, walks down a hallway- splits off into their respective groups, boys one way, girl another- Wonder Girl Red quickly walks into her assigned room, walks through the automatic door, into her space- softly lit with warm yellow light from above. She quickly swipes a red duffle bag, and scoops a large selection of light-weight clothing into her bag, along with a set of warm sweaters that Donna made for her My thanks sis. Mom’s picking me up, so she’ll probably let me borrow some of the more interesting stuff- I should pack my own things though...

Kid Flash carefully picked out a selection of smoke-bombs, and flash-bombs (heh)- It’s best I be prepared- but should I take the... Nah, that’s a little much for medium fighting; then again, I’ve yet to go out with the team and not have things get out of hand… better take them anyway-

Robin quickly grabbed a pre-packed yellow pack from beside his never been slept in bed; Batman doesn’t raise you to be unprepared. I am so glad you taught me staff fighting, big bro.

Superboy is a little nervous- but it’s his second mission, so there shouldn’t be too much that can go wrong. (Oh dear.)

Thirty minutes later, Team Two is en-route to Cairo- Wonder Girl Red is allowed to borrow a pair of fingerless gloves, and a short blade; it’s only as long as the palm of her hand- barely even a knife by Themysciran standards.

Team One is waiting patiently- Captain Marvel doesn’t make them wait long. He quickly pulls up a file on the flickering wall, glances back at the two young women, and sighs. “Right. So- before you accept this mission, tell me everything you know about women’s shelters.”

Permafrost speaks first, her voice a silvery chime in the air, breath coming out in soft white puffs. “A women’s shelter is a place of temporary refuge and support for women escaping violent or abusive situations, such as rape and domestic violence. Having the ability to leave a situation of violence is valuable for those who are under attack- such situations frequently involve an imbalance of power that limits the victim's financial options. The most dangerous time for a domestic violence sufferer is
on the point of exit. A person in a domestic violence situation should create an exit safety plan, to leave the situation in a safe manner. Initially a response to violence against women, a women’s shelter may also serve as a place for women to organize for equality, which is an important distinction from standard government-funded service-based approaches to domestic violence. Many states and cities have domestic violence coalitions supporting women's shelters. In the U.S., the National Network to End Domestic Violence provides a national voice, supporting shelters for victims of domestic violence as well as other resources. I know that in Gotham, the easiest one to get into is in the Narrows- it’s the… The Miller House on Twelfth. Not the safest neighborhood, but it is a safe place.”

Captain Marvel nods quietly. “Wonder Girl Blue?”

Wonder Girl Blue’s eyebrows quirk- “Hmm… Women's shelters were created to house women, who have often been abused in some way, and that are seeking refuge from their abuser. Shelters for abused women, sadly, are not a new concept. In feudal Japan, some Buddhist temples were known as kakekomi dera, runaway temples where abused women could take shelter before filing for divorce. In the West, crisis accommodation has been available for women for some time. In 1964, Haven House, the first "modern" women's shelter in the world, opened in California. Chiswick Women's Aid, the first widely known shelter for battered women was opened in London, in 1971 by Erin Pizzey. Later others opened in places such as Sydney with similar ideals in mind. The first homeless shelter in America opened specifically for women, Hunkel's Place in Fawcett, was founded in 1944 by Abigail Mathilda “Ma” Hunkel. In the United Kingdom, more places have been opened to house male victims of domestic violence, or to house families barred from other shelters, such as women with older male children. I know that Paradise Island will harbor any woman with her children who steps on shore- no matter what they are running from. Why?"

“There is a charity called Network- they fund shelters all over the world. A friend of a friend, Zatanna, volunteers at the Fawcett Refuge, one of those shelters that gets funded- she went on a trip to Network’s Europe headquarters… and vanished about two days ago.”

“Why is this a mission for us, sir? Shouldn’t the police-” Permafrost asks quietly- Captain Marvel sighs, and nods.

“Yes, the police should’ve been all over this- however, they were not… They were not informed. As far as the police, and the people running the Network trip are concerned, Ms. Zatanna is exactly where she should be. I don’t agree.”

“Neither do I, sir. What’s the mission?” Wonder Girl Blue, her voice unnaturally sharp.

Captain Marvel smirks. “Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to find Zatanna Zatara, and see what the Network is doing that has so arrested their attention that they would ignore the disappearance of a twelve year old girl.”
I think I'm forgetting to do in this case, reality is more important.

Fawcett, one week ago:

“Uncle D, can I still go?” Zatanna, her voice sweetly hopeful, looking sidelong into the face of her Uncle Durante.

“…Sure, Zatanna. Just be sure to check in every day.” A pleased, and yet worried, grumble- his niece isn’t quite right in the head… but she should be okay.

“Thanks, Uncle D!”

(Oh dear.)

Zatanna had been looking forwards to this trip since the beginning of the summer; Network doesn’t pick just anyone to go to their Europe HQ Only special girls get to go! (Oh dear. Fuek. Oh dear.)

A two hour flight to Gotham International Airport, a check of her passport When did I get a passport; wha This is so exciting! and she’s on the eight hour flight to Europe. She ends up sitting with the other unaccompanied minors on the flight- Inara Quen and Allison “Allie” Langford, who both are going to Network Europe’s HQ- they’re on the same trip she is. Eight hours is a long time- all three girls end up friends by the end of the flight.

Zatanna Zatara is a girl who doesn’t consider herself interesting- she’s just below average female height, has mid-length black hair, shining blue eyes, a warm smile- and magic. Her magic would normally warn her when she’s in danger, who can be trusted, help her find things- basically a pumped up women’s intuition. There is a spell that her father used on her to get her to go to her uncle Durante with a minimum of fuss- this spell also dampened her natural intuition. It made her stupid- not I.Q. stupid, street stupid. She used to live in Bludhaven with her father; she’s actually very street-smart. Usually. (Her father meant it for the best.)

One week of blurry activity later- apparently, it’s more of a Network training trip than anything else- and the next to last day comes. There’s something weird about this place- where did all the food come from? Why are the Speakers so good? The beds are very comfortable, even though we’re in an inexpensive hotel- and the “Observers” or whatever are really sending my creep factor over the edge- I really don’t like it here. Something’s wrong… I’m glad I made new friends though- Allie’s really nice, and Inara is so funny; I’m glad that they’re my roomates.

The next to last day is the day when the “End of Trip Party” is scheduled; Zatanna is very happy to wear her new dress, a vintage 50’s party dress in black, grey, white, and red- circle skirt, embroidered lace designs, glitter, glam (the works, oh dear) a slim clutch- Allie is wearing a short 60’s dress- two circles cut through, a small one over her chest just as big as the palm of her hand, a large one in the back from the bottom of her shoulders to the middle of her back, bright yellow gleaming, short skirt to mid-thigh, a wide pouch and chunky plastic jewelry- Inara is wearing a cocktail dress; black, wide band at the bottom, loose at the top, cute bows on her shoulders, gleaming white buttons down the back, fingerless gloves- all three girls are dressed to the nines.

Before we get to the nasty bits, things should be known about Allison Langford and Inara Quen.
Allison Langford—Allie, is a Chicana from Dakota, VA. She has extremely sharp green eyes, super fine brown hair that sits on her head like the shaggy mane of a lion; wide lips, snubbed nose, sharply determined eyebrows—she’s a frighteningly good Thai-kickboxer, well versed in architecture, and will turn thirteen in November. She is also a meta-human; a Bang Baby of the Late-Boomer variety—it will take the full onset of puberty, or a truly traumatic event, for her full complement of powers to reveal themselves. Right now, her only powers are increased physical density, and wiry hair.

Inara Quen is also from Dakota, VA—a pale, wiry Asian/Russian girl; curly black hair kept in a perfect thirties bob, ever-smirking mouth, sharp black eyes, cute nose—she’s an exquisite ballerina, a political activist, and will turn fourteen in May. She is a meta-human as well, a Bang Baby—her powerset makes her nearly invulnerable.

Dakota, located in the western part of Virginia, is home to several chemical companies, such as Alva Industries (subsidiary of WayneEnterprises) and Promethian Creations. It is also a city of social unrest and tensions, which have escalated twice, first in the infamous riots of ’94 (which killed many people) and later with the Big Bang. The latter event gave the city countless meta-humans, which caused crime rates to spike, and threw the question of meta-human/normal human relations into sharp relief.

Several years after the city's most devastating gang war, dubbed the Dakota Riots, tensions were rising in Dakota again; all the major crews were involved, but especially Francis "F-Stop" Stone’s Firebugs, and Ebon Quen’s Breed. The many groups converged at the docks, near Gate 10. The riot went on for hours, and seemed to be winding down; when the police showed up with helicopters and squad cars, the gangbangers had a new target for their aggression. One of the rioters shot at one of the choppers, shooting out its searchlight. In retaliation, police fired a tear gas grenade at the riot. It hit a vat of bio hazardous material that was stored on the lot in abundance. The vat exploded, caused a chain reaction with the other vats, and filled the entire dock with purple smoke.

All those at the scene were affected by the smoke, which spread well beyond the lot's borders. For example, Maureen Conners was in an alley adjacent to the lot with her mother, hiding under her mother’s unconscious body—her mother had been shot in the spine, was disabled for life, bled to unconsciousness—after that, she never did get better, was never well and whole and healthy again; Inara Quen was looking for her older brother for their mother—she wasn’t supposed to be there; Allie Langford was taking a shortcut to get across town, she was late for her appointment at the gym; Virgil Hawkins was trying to deal with a bullying problem; there were many others, of course.

Following the explosion, the hospitals were flooded with victims. Without a cure or effective painkillers, many of the victims lay in agony as their bodies underwent a dramatic transformation. Others escaped with no physical damage only to mutate later. On some occasions, affected people managed to hold off the mutation under heavy pressure, but transformed once weakened, enraged or distracted. "Second-hand smoke" Bang Baby’s, such as Richard Foley, Lashawn Marie Hawkins-Baez, and Alicia Roquette, developed their powers from being around people who had been exposed to the Big Bang proper.

Politically, Mayor Quen stalled investigation. The illegally stored bio-hazardous material at the docks was owned by a good friend of hers; her children were involved in the explosion.

Because there was no cure, finding one became a major concern for Dakota's state governor. Funding was provided by the State, businesses such as Promethian Creations, CADMUS, and from billionaire-playboy Bruce Wayne. Several Bang Babies gave themselves up for research—D-Struct, Talon, and Tantrum are the most prominent. Only after several tests were performed on Tantrum was
Promethian Creations scientist Donald Todd able to find a cure.)

All three girls count as meta-humans; all three girls work to hide their powers. This means that when the time comes to use them, they won’t know how. (Oh god.)

An explanation about just what kind of person Shiv is: There is a prison that is run by Shadows- a pit in the ground in some primitive country; does it matter where?

There was a boy, a boy with purple hair- he liked cutting things apart, like it was a game, and nevermind the blood of the creatures that had been shredded; he was at the Big Bang; he was one of the few at the event who got exactly what they wanted. He was there with his handler- he killed him, cut him open cut him up and moved things around inside him played with his organs and laughed laughed laughed; the Shadows found him, and took him away to the Prison, threw him down down down and he laughed as he fell, and when he clawed his way out (he had gotten exactly what he wanted) it was because there was no one left down there for him to play with.

The blood never washed off the walls; the screams and laughter never quite faded.

As he grew, he found another- just the one other- who laughed at the same things he did, and knew how to play the game with him, and liked it so much that she would stay by his side even when he played roughly with her she didn’t care she loved him and now she was dead.

He’s already got a plan- he knows who killed her; he’s got a plan… now he just needs to know where the body is so he can have his favorite playmate back. There’s a girl he can ask- not his girl because his girl’s dead but she can find her, she can say the right backwards words and find his girl. She’s in Europe- Paris.

He goes. (His name is Shiv. And he’s a very bad man.)

Paris:

Zatanna had gotten separated from Allie and Inara somehow- Allie had gone for a phone call and didn’t come back, Inara went to the bathroom- Zatanna got hungry and went for a snack, but neither of her friends showed up Where are they? WHERE ARE THEY? Oh god oh god something’s wrong I love this song! (Oh No.) so she started to dance, got tired and stopped, started walking towards the edges of the crowded party; some unseen hand pressed a slim cool tapering glass of some fizzy amber-gold liquid But no, I should be able to see that, why can’t I see- I shouldn’t drink this Ooh, a drink; I was getting thirsty- I’m a little young for this, but what Uncle D doesn’t know won’t hurt me- (Her father meant it for the best. Oh god.) She took a sip, then another, and by the third her head felt all strange and stuffed full of cotton and wires sparking sparking sparking and why am I so dizzy; she woozed and wobbled away, farther away from the party, away from the too bright lights and the world kept spinning spinning and her head was sparking and then she was falling to the earth, falling down down a hole in the floor of the world down down (Ohgod.) and then when her head was clear, she was chained to a wall- still in her pretty dress, but it was too drafty ohgodsomeonewokeupmypantiesoff and she was cold, so cold and the room smelled of mold and blood and fear and it was so dank so dark- a purple light from far of, getting closer closer thump went feet stepping closer unhurried. (Her father meant it for the best. Oh God. Oh God.)
A man, long oval face, purple Mohawk gently falling to one side, strange gleam in his eyes (ohgod) the tips of his fingers glowing purple and sharpening sharpening into claws that are gleaming purple sharp Oh GOD- he smiles, he has a snaggly tooth his teeth push into his mouth, like a carnivorous fish and then he speaks… and consider this. If you have ever heard the Joker speak, you know what this man sounds like- a madman; a monster. “Hello. I’m Shiv. We need to talk.”

“Wha-”

“You know how to find something that I want- you’re going to help me get it.”

“Bu-”

“You’re going to tell me. Because if you don’t, you’ll die. And so’ll they.” His claws gently caress the soft flesh of her neck, his breath close in on her face ginger, cardamom, too close to unbearable close his eyes gripping hers then cutting left sharply- and there are her friends; Allie and Inara. Allie is chained up like her- Inara is strapped to a table. His glowing claws slice into her neck- not deep- Ah! he smiles again; his head tilts to the left.

“You won’t tell me?”

“I don’t-”

“No? Well, I guess if that’s the way you want to play, that’s the way we’ll play. No worries- we’ll have lots of fun together. It’ll be great!” His other hand quickly presses into her side- a sharp wrench of white hot pain, a slice, and a sizzling- she starts to sob. “Do you like my hands? I won’t bore you with all the details- but I can make them burn at 200 degrees Celsius; you won’t feel too much… At that temperature, the nerves fry, and the flesh cauterizes instantly- you won’t ever bleed out from my kind of play. You’ll scar though- don’t look like that, I won’t make you… ugly or nuthin’- that would be wrong, to CARVE” she whimpers “your pretty pretty face up- that would be… Wrong. But them-” The other two have started to quietly cry- “they aren’t so pretty. But I’ll fix that right up… yeah, I’ll fix that right up.” He laughs with a jittery, haunting giggle, his mouth a curve of too sharp teeth flashing brightly sharp flashing.

One of his fingers changes into an icepick- he stabs it into the side of her straight back into the wall; she screams, and cries harder, her friends cry harder; he keeps staring into her face, his eyes dancing with glee. Laughs laughs laughs.

(Her father meant it for the best. Oh God. The road to hell- Oh God.)

Africa:

Robin’s decided that its official- he fucking hates Cairo. It’s too hot, sand gets everywhere, and he somehow doesn’t quite speak the language… Superboy, on the other hand, is enjoying himself immensely- apparently, CADMUS saw fit to give him a mastery of languages- the scorpions just walk out of his boots if he asks nicely. They actually gesture menacingly at him- and all he does is lightly tap his shoes on the ground; the little bastards hold on to his soles. Kid Flash and Wonder Girl Red sleep in their shoes, so they don’t have the same arachnid/human dynamic. He also admits, to himself, that it’s actually quite hilarious that he’s getting into a fight with a lobster-shaped creature that fits comfortably in his size seven sneakers. (He’s resolutely ignoring the inherent danger of antagonizing a scorpion of that size.)
The Drake family has been a family of philanthropists, archaeologists and globe-trotters for almost as long as the Old World has existed. The family began in Cumbria sometime in the third century—gained a reputation for being generous with their gold in the many wars with the damned Scots, learned of their inborn love of archaeology which was religion and magic at the time, became renowned for their maps and packhorses—by the middle of the nineteenth century, they were the first people Queen Victoria called for knowledge about China.

In the present day, the Drake family is only two people—it was three for a little bit, but—But.

If the Ocean is where all life sprang from, Africa is where it grew up. Africa is Big, and Hot, and parts of it are burnt flat, and parts of it are green and rolling and there are mountains and valleys and there are many rivers and jungles and some of those rivers are full of fish and crocodiles and plants and there are rivers flowing through the green and rolling land that turns it into a glad filled lake wet marsh place. Africa is old. Not as old as the ocean nor the bottom of the sea or the monsters in the deepest darkest places of the sea, no, not that old; Africa is visibly old, was old from the very beginning—Mother Africa was old when she was born, old and stubborn and full of jagged grinding rage— and laughter; Africa… She can be summed up very simply.

In Africa you will do three things: You will be too hot—You will be in terrible danger—You will laugh. You doubt it?

An interesting view of Africa, from when Richard Hawkins was a younger man; it has rather important pieces of background information, so pay attention:

“You know those big minivans? Five seaters, right? In Africa, they would put five people in the back, or maybe six, and three people in the front passenger, and maybe two in the driver (if the child can be still) and another five where the luggage would go—all your stuff gets tied onto the top of the car, yes?”

“So—what happens if your stuff flies off?” Virgil asking; he’s heard the story before, but he likes to ask—Sharon, visiting from college, has heard all of them before, but this one segues into one of her favorites; Lashawn is still dealing with a little weirdness in her body Ever since cousin Virg’ came back from that fight on the docks, weird stuff’s been happening—and not just with him… I could’f sworn that car was about to hit me— but when I opened my eyes again, I was on the sidewalk… , and is slightly desperate for a distraction.

“Tough luck, Virgil. So, this one time I’m riding from Dolo Odo to Nazareth, and we’re— that is to say, me, and a big family of farmers— are in an old beat up five seater. Right, so, we’re riding, and we’re riding, and it’s almost six hours straight before we make our first stop. So, we all get out, and stretch, go to the bathroom, what have you— and my legs feel like all the blood got squeezed out. I make myself stand up anyway, and I’m trying really hard to not scream from the pain—so I’m white knuckled, gripping the side of the car, and so is everyone else, right? So, we’re all standing there, white knuckled, staring at each other— and I don’t know who, but someone started laughing, and then we were all laughing.”

“Why?” Lashawn—she’s actually interested.
“Well, it was either laugh at the pain, or give in and start sobbing from it- you saw them that started sobbing from the pain of living, in Africa; never have I ever seen people so broken and beaten by life- not even at the shelter.” He stops, looks very pensive for a moment- “Now, where was I?”

Sharon answers- it’s the first time she’s ever heard why her father laughed at the pain in that story; she’d never really thought to ask. “You were white knuckled from the pain, on the first stop from your trip to Nazareth from Dolo Odo.”

“Ah, yes. So, we managed to calm ourselves down, and all piled back in- the driver switched out, and we were off again. Second stop was more of the same, only at night- Oh, let me tell you about the night in Africa. During the day, Africa has this sunlight that you won’t see anywhere else- it beats down out of the sky, and I do mean beat. During the day, just a few hours after the sun rises, if you’ve been in somewhere cold, like in a cave or a fancy hotel or inside a rather nice car, and go outside suddenly, the heat can be like a punch- like an actual person is squeezing you, crushing you. At night, the heat will linger ‘till close to midnight, pressing down on everything- but out in the country, like where I was, the stars shine so brightly, you could almost read by them. The moon was out too, that trip- so the country was lit by a pale reflection of sunlight- everything was painted silvery-grey… Truly beautiful.” He sighs, remembering a place he had been, when he was a younger man.

“So… then what happened?” Virgil- this is new information for him; he’s getting the feeling that his father really toned the stories down- now that they’re older, and his mother isn’t… Well, he’s getting the feeling that his father’s going to be more frank about what he saw and where he was than he has ever been before.

“Ah, well, the next morning, we were at the edge of the Great Rift Valley- it’s an incredible place, amazingly green- that’s where I got a different ride. I actually made the trip in two portions- I had to stay in Awasa for a few weeks… Well, I suppose you’re all old enough to know about this. When I was about your age, Sharon, I became a superhero. I was a superhero for the entire time I was in Africa- It was a legacy, passed down from ages long past.”

Virgil asks- his voice stunned… and proud. “How did you become a hero? Who were you?”
Lashawn, curled up on one side of the couch next to him, leans forwards and asks, “What were your powers?”

“Ah, well- I was in the right place at the right time; I was found worthy, and… I impressed the old holder of the title; I was Anansi the Spider. My powers were the skills and strengths of all spiders- so, I could stick to almost any surface, spin webs; I was super strong, superfast- and I had the power of illusions.”

Sharon jerks forwards. “Wait. You weren’t- you weren’t that Anansi… Right?”

“Yes, I was. And, before you ask, Sharon- Yes, to prove my worth, I had to catch the Four. I stopped being Anansi when I fell in love with your mother; you all know that we met in Cairo… When I met her, she wasn’t… well, she wasn’t human. I fell in love with her anyway- and I courted her, gained her love…”

“What was she before?” Lashawn- she does love romance.
“The Four… what?” Virgil- he’s not as well read as his sister, or father.
Sharon is quietly listening, legs tucked under her body, sitting in the chair and a half. It is after dinner in the Hawkins house- story time, in the living room.
“Well, in order- your mother was a Djinn- a member of the Marid clan. She gave up a lot to marry me- and I gave up being Anansi the Spider to marry her. Compromise and sacrifice are a part of love, and my happiness hinged on hers; it made her happy to be with me, and it made her happy when I was happy… We couldn’t be together as we were, so we changed ourselves- I tested another, found someone who could carry the weight- who was worthy of being Anansi; she drank a bowl of holy water mixed with blood from a cow- became a mortal, human woman. We married later, but we changed ourselves to be together.

The Four are the Four creatures of legend- Onini the Python, Osebo the Leopard, the Mmaboro Hornets, and Mmoatia the dwarf. Onini was a strangler, when I fought him- he was killing young children in the outskirts of Banjul, mostly boys; I snuck up on him while he slept, and tied him up with his own garrotes. The Mmaboro Hornets, when I fought them, were a group of deranged women who used poisoned knives to stab whomever they came across to death- I found them by following the bodies, the most recent of which was, at the time, a family of six; I tricked them into, and trapped them inside a magical calabash. Mmoatia was my second most dangerous fight- I had to use my power of being able to stick to things almost exclusively, as none of the webs I knew how to weave would be sticky enough; she almost beat me to death. I eventually got her to stick to herself with a bit of honey-robin that had heated in the sun, which was pure luck. It took almost three months for me to recover from that fight, and I still have trouble with my left shoulder… But, my most dangerous fight was with Osebo. It wasn’t because he was physically stronger than me- and he was- it was because he was a Somalian Warlord, and I had to find him before I could deal with him. I eventually found and managed to work my way up in his army, and got into his inner circle- it took me five months, and a lot of fortitude, but I managed it- and trapped him in one of his own… Well. It’s better if you don’t know.”

The three young people are very quiet- Sharon is not exactly surprised that her father was a total badass back in the day. She can still remember her father having a very quiet, very tense chat with some strange, well-dressed people back before Virgil was born- she remembers the people because there was a little boy with them, a little boy with a small orange and black cat curled up in his pocket; he let her hold the little cat so soft and warm orange and black and kind red eyes, told her that the cat’s name was Teekl, played go fish and chess and a funky clapping game he taught her, fell asleep on the couch next to her curled up next to her soft and warm and breath that smelled of flower and fruit puffing onto her neck, and she remembers that his name was Klarion- Klarion with the sharp hair point in front and the almond shaped eyes; she never saw him again, never saw the people again- she remembers the well-dressed people, a red-haired woman with a sneering mouth, and a black-haired man with a hooked nose; she remembers them because that was the first time she ever got to see white people up close, and Klarion was the first white boy her age she ever met, and got to play with, and talked to (became friends with); she remembers how they talked down to their son, and how his mother’s hand pressed so sharply into his shoulder almost dragged him away- remembers the expression on her dads face, how he looked so dangerous as he watched them walk away, vanish around a corner. She never saw another white person- not a Chicana, not a Kimchee, but pasty-bread, butter-crust, white person- until she was in middle school.

Virgil was born six years after she was- Lashawn was born a year after Virgil. Virgil is fourteen; Sharon is twenty.

“Anyway. On the second leg of my journey to Nazareth, the car broke down on… maybe the third stop? Anyway, I had to get to Nazareth pretty desperately- The Sky King had given me a task and I had to get to Nazareth at an appointed time- so I started walking. I ran out of water sometime on the third day- it’s five days on foot from where I was to Nazareth- I started having these crazy waking dreams; I don’t remember most of them, but one does stand out quite brightly… I think it’s because it wasn’t a dream. I think that was the first time I ever met your mother- well, so, I was walking along,
and I hear laughter in the wind; I followed it, and found these two young women stomping on this massive cobra, and laughing with everything they had. I don’t know how or why, but I ended up stomping that snake into little pieces with them. I’ve never laughed that hard again- not because I didn’t want to, but because I’ve never been that hysterical again.”

Virgil and Sharon are sitting quietly, shocked- stunned that a funny anecdote from their father’s youth would turn out to be so… So.

Lashawn asks a pair of questions that will shape many things to come- “Who’s The Sky King?”

“The Sky King is the king of the sky- when I was Anansi the Spider, The Sky King was named Mordru, I think (he wasn’t; he was named Nabu)- it’s probably changed by now (it hasn’t); Sky Country is not a safe place to have power (very true).”

“So… how did you choose the person who would take up the mantle of Anansi the Spider?”

“Well, I looked for a good story-teller; a smart person, with a kind heart, and a good sense of humor- someone who can laugh at themselves as well as others. I looked for someone on the rangy side, tall, good-looking, neither poor nor wealthy- someone you’d be happy to be friends with, possibly the life of the party, but also… not exactly memorable. When I was the Spider, there was no costume that went with being the hero- I did my work in my plain clothing, changed my appearance with accessories and bearing more than anything else.”

Sharon was the only person in the room who realized that she fit all those requirements- although she would probably have made a costume if she became the hero. (heroine Hero. And she will- become the hero, that is.)

In every generation, there are monsters- although the name might have changed; villains, they’re called, now. In every generation, there are the ones who fight monsters; heroes, they’re called.

Whenever the King of Turn finds a new host, depending on how long it takes him- well, there are four ancient forces of evil held at bay by the power of The Sky King. If He is not there, those forces are able to escape into the material world, and cause great harm. For example, the Mmboro Hornets have changed their shape many times- they were Hornets first, of course, and all other hornets are mere reflections of the Hornets; now the Mmboro Hornets are… a plague, I suppose you would call it. An ancient African Plague- that Team Two is going to have to fight.

John and Janet Drake were killed by strangulation around three days after their son was kidnapped. (By who?) Their bodies were re-animated mere hours later by a strange, buzzing wind- and no one has actually seen the Drake’s in person for years. The Drake’s make rather spectacular donations to charities around the world- one of them is Network. Another is called Afterglow- a charity for research into sustainable energy; Shade’s Retreat, a charity that helps recover the bodies of soldiers from warzones- and if you think that’s all they do, I have a lovely bridge in California you can buy…
Lia Hélène West-Allen is not as smart as the rest of her family. She just isn’t- at least, that’s what she thinks. What is true is that she is just as smart as the rest of her family- just not in the sciences. No, Lia’s genius lies in the Arts; it lies in the place where Truth and Love meet and, at times, conflict- she is eight years old, and during the two weeks where her older cousin is in Africa and before school starts, she will find something that might not be uniquely hers, but it is something only she can do- in her family, that is. She will also be in the Central of the 1950's for five years, but…

Lia Hélène West is not the same- her family is a family of speedsters. Lia isn’t a speedster. She is connected to the Speedforce- but she is not a speedster. No, her powers are based more on the “blinding flash” aspects of lightning, rather than the “unimaginable speed”; if she learns to have confidence in her skills, (because she relies more on others to define what the thing that is herself is and is not) if she can learn to define herself from within, she will be magnificent.

To understand the difference between Lia and the rest of her family, you need to understand the difference between a sprinter, and runner.

A sprinter is buff. They are buff, long limbed- they can suck down long deep drinks of air, move their feet, and have fast, twitchy muscles. They can tear out of somewhere, move so fast and fancy free, fly down the way with all the wild abandon of a golden haired dog; body movin’.

A runner, by contrast, is lean- they can go over any kind of ground you can think of, leap and bound, but… they aren’t meant to tear out of a starting block like a god, aren’t meant to waste their time getting ahead at the start- their race comes at the end; leapin’ lizards.

Barry Allen is a sprinter- a rather amazing one. So is Wally West. So is Bartholomew West-Apressar. So is Isadora Apressar. So is Isabella Apressar. So is Doan West-Allen. So is Dawn West-Allen.

Lia Hélène West-Allen is not a sprinter- she’s a runner. Stand her next to her cousins, or her father, or any of her younger siblings, and she will look slight, weak, almost emaciated by comparison. This is not true- but that’s what it looks like.

In a straight foot-race, she will not beat her family for speed. In fact, she almost can’t- that isn’t how her powers work. Lia was built for endurance, not speed- she was meant to run until she gets there, not as fast as possible. So, yes, her entire super-heroic family can go from zero to holy fuck in the time it takes you to think of the words, can outrun the stars and wind, can run so fast the world stops existing- jumps out of their way.

Lia is the only one of her family that will ever be able to use the Speedforce itself as a road, use it and the emotions inside her heart to find her family; the only one who will ever completely disregard the laws of quantum mechanics to get from one galaxy to another without ever going through the matter in-betwixt the two- while her family might be able to almost outrun light itself, Lia is the only one who will ever be able to move at lightspeed. (Without injuring herself; she does it all the time now, in small, unnoticeable ways.)

What does any of this matter to the story at hand? (Haven’t you ever heard of a B plot?) This matters because Scarecrow’s story doesn’t exist in a vacuum- it exists as a tangled thread in a massive pile of other tangled threads, all of which are tangled spun tied intertwined together in a bizarre pile in the pocket of the trousers of time, along with some lint, a few forgotten- and the trousers are balled up inside the bag on the back of an ageless man, wandering through some burnt-flat land… That metaphor was better in my head. Anyway, the point of it was- Scarecrow’s story will not have
meaning, will not have form or style or power- without the examination of the surroundings, Johnny Crane’s life will be a nebulous thing, half formed; unfinished. To understand his life, you must understand the lives of the ones around him- and the lives of the ones around them, and on and on and on…

(Answered again- I will say this: I feel like I am cheating the characters themselves, all of the ones who are both known and Un, by not exploring their backgrounds; there can be no character development without establishing the character. In my opinion, the easiest and most engaging way to develop a character is to show them as they are, and then place them into situations as they develop, so that they can be seen to grow- rather than just outright telling you how they will behave, I want you to see it, and understand.

I want them to be real- I want them to be real people, not just ancient archetypes and flickering pixels and impossible ideals; This story is about real people, with real lives and foibles. This story, truth be told, is about people you might know or recognize- people who could’ve been you, under different circumstances. I want them to be real, so that you will become more real by listening to their stories, and possibly find solace; Not all stories have happy endings. In fact, most stories don’t.

I’m not sure if this one will. I mean, I know that Scarecrow gets his happy ending- but I don’t know what it will cost him to get there. I don’t know who’s going to be lost along the way. Truth be told, I’m frightened to find out.

If I am completely honest… I’m glad you’re here with me. I couldn’t watch relate this story to you if I didn’t know that someone other than me was there to see it. This is scary, heavy, real stuff. I’m not sure I can handle it on my own- which means that I am very happy that I am not on my own.

From the depths of my heart- I thank you, for staying with me.)

Allie is scared. Allie is terrified. She was in her new dress- bright yellow, pleather, but -I got it for two dollars at the PennyCloset downtown, if I had had time I would have spent five bucks on a train ticket to Gotham and gone to the GCE, made a day trip- Ohgodohgod, why am I thinking about this when he’s going to- he’s already hurt Zat, and he’s going after Inara- she wishes she were in something less… revealing, and she has very adult proportions for a fourteen year old girl, so the dress fit her perfectly, and the body of the dress is made of golden sunshine yellow pleather- the circular cuts in the chest and back are carefully backed with a soft, sheer yellow fabric, almost but not quite clear, the skirt a mini-skirt, hugging her young curves and she will never wear a dress like this again, no, never never never…

Translucent is the word; the sleeves are long, fall down to her wrists, are made out of that same sheer, filmy cloth, wide- her arms are twisted up behind her, her sleeves shredded near the shoulders; she had fought when he grabbed her, held her breath his hand cloth too sweet smelling over her mouth and nose and she fought kicked and jerked her arms every way to be turned loose shri-p-shrip- her sleeve so pretty ripped half away, big white beads scattered across the floor because he grabbed her necklace to make her obey her hair was too short I’m so glad I got that haircut, even if- oh god, he’s coming back, Zat’s passed out, and Inara- what is he doing to her, what- Ohgodohgodohgod, he’s going to- he’s cut off her clothing and Inara screams and screams screams screams screams and Shiv laughs- he’s cut into her legs and belly, fused two of his fingers together purple glowing metal gleaming glowing and pushed them into her stretched her open, blood- ink dark black oozing- running down her hips down her sides down her thighs dripping off the table plip-plip-
plip onto the cobblestone floor she bucks and wiggles and **SCREAMS** Shiv keeps his hand in her belly, his other with the five full fingers pressing under her breast in-between her ribs and stabbing he climbs onto the table she starts to cry sob wail as she **SCREAMS** and it is then that Allie notices that Shiv… he’s not wearing… *Oh god… please, please… Protect her, All Mighty-*

Allie makes herself watch- not because she wants to, but because she volunteers at Haven; she knows a scum-licking fucktard; knows what she might have to be able to do... Haven is a women’s services center in Oldtown Dakota- right across the street from the Themysciran consulate (which is also a rec center and an enclosed park space- very safe place, very peaceful); no matter how nice or liberal the city, the most extreme feminists can always be found in such places. Allie’s been volunteering at Haven for four years- she’s grown up on a steady stream of FEMME POWAH and EXPRESS YOUR RIGHTS; she takes Thai Kickboxing at the Theem- very nice ladies, very… Assertive. All this to say, the reason she makes herself watch is so that, if Inara can’t make herself accuse her rapist, not only will Allie be a witness, she will be more than happy to do so on her behalf. (She’s ignoring the probable- she doesn’t think that she’s going to be making it out of this alive, but... For Inara’s sake, she will. She has to.)

It ends- Shiv sighs, and smiles, rakes his claws down Inara’s abdomen scraping thin lines of burning down her body; laughs laughs laughs- saunters out, still laughing- glances at Allie who has all but dislocated her shoulders trying failing to get free and help her friend; laughs harder- booted feet thumping on the ground. He walks out of Allie’s sight- out of her hearing. Laughs laughs laughs. Inara’s eyes have gone a dull shade of flat black; her purple black dress is a ruined mass of tattered cloth and buttons, tears and sobs and whimpers *Oh Inara oh Inara you haven’t stopped crying since this started oh god Inara Inara I am so sorry*-When she was taken, she managed to stomp on one of his feet, even though not a damn bit of good was done, not a damn bit- she couldn’t get enough driving force with her lifted heels, couldn’t stomp like she wanted to but she mule kicked him near the ‘nads because That- that Bastard! I hope you try that with me- oh, Inara- you’ll see just how hard I can kick! Come over here and unchain my legs, we’ll see who laughs… Inara, oh Inara; *Fuck!*

Team One gets to Paris within the day of their assignment- and decide to split up long before they get to the airport.

Permafrost powers down, adds a little padding in certain places, makes herself look like an older, more worn Zatara female- possibly Zatanna’s mother or sister or older female cousin- changes her natural Gotham accent, which is a clipped sharp elegant style of speaking, into the more breathy flowery gentle tones of a Fawcett girl, adds a little height, a frumpy, ill-fitting set of clothing; Changes herself into someone else. She’ll be investigating Network- she’s the better detective. (She’s a Bat.) A rounded overnight bag in a soft dove gray and festooned with flowery patterns completes her look- a little frizzing to her hair, a little stumble in her sandals (which will never be worn in Gotham, it’s too cold), and Permzy is on her way to Paris, under the pseudonym Xania Zatara- and she means to find out why, exactly, a twelve year old girl went missing without anyone noticing.

Wonder Girl Blue changes into a dress Cassie made for her, adds a pair of smoky tights and bright red boots; ties her sling around her waist like a belt, puts her mid back dark black hair up in a loose bun stuck through with interesting pins (they aren’t), taps her wrist-guard’s innate magic and disguises them as bangles; a simple pale cream and pink piped messenger bag, and she looks like an artist. She’ll be searching out the missing Zatanna- she’s the better hunter. (She’s from Paradise.)
(One thing that is important to know is that both Wonder Girls- and Wonder Woman- and Queen Hippolyta, for that matter, are considered by Themysciran Law as physical embodiments of Truth, Justice, and Freedom. There are rules all four women must follow or else- Rules they must follow as Royals of Themyscira; Rules that they must follow as Wonder Woman and Wonder Girl; Rules they must follow as Women of Paradise Island; Rules they must follow as Amazons.

Allison Langford is considered a Girl of Paradise Island- as a Girl, she may ask for justice- that is to say, Justice- from the highest law of the land…

In layman’s terms, the justice system of Themyscira is a Feudal one- and if you know anything about Feudal Justice, you know the basics of what is going to happen when Wonder Girl Blue finds the girls…)

Gotham:

The boys are cowards- but this is important. He- they- can’t keep hiding, and they can’t function normally, and they couldn’t tell them if it wasn’t a consensus, and Scarebeast wanted to tell from the very beginning but Doc was too scared and Johnny would always protect Doc and Scarecrow sided with Scarebeast after a bit, and then both of them convinced Johnny to get Doc to agree- and he did he did, but they’re all still scared, still so scared… They might not like us any more- ‘We have to tell them’ We can trust them. “They don’t mind some of our weirder habits- and even if they don’t… don’t love us anymore, we’ll still love them. It will have to be enough.” He’s been avoiding this since he got back to Gotham a month ago- and then “The Separation” happened, and… Finally, they have time, and they’ve screwed their courage to the sticking point, and, and-

“Johnny- Please, just tell me- tell me why you never mentioned this.”

“But-”

“Johnny, we’re your family- we love you, even if you… We will always love you.” Alfred speaking, voice so gentle and calm- even if he’s anything but calm.

“Okay- I.” They sigh. “Okay. Just- just save all your questions until the end, alright?” Bruce and Alfred nod; they’re all sitting in a small parlor off the main dining room, together in an intimate space- Selina’s apartment flooded, so she’s moved into the Manor until further notice, as have the Stray Cats; all of them took rooms in the newly rebuilt East wing of the Manor; Bruce Wayne has been seen with the extremely reclusive heiress to the Kyle fortune, along with a pair of very interesting looking boys (there will be an article about that eventually), but for this- for this, they are in a small room, just the three (six) men. The boys sigh again. “Okay. Okay. So- I should explain about... about before. Before I came to the manor- before I lived in America. Before you came and, and saved me… Before you saved me, Uncle.

I was the first boy born into a f-f-formerly very wealthy house’old in ‘undreds and ‘undreds of years; we lived in a massive ‘ouse- a mansion, really- in a little ‘amlet near Chichester in Sussex- but that’s not why…” A big, deep exhalation. “So. Wright- I-I-I-I was born il-l-l-legitimately to my mother when she was sixteen- she had me at her ancestral home, and my grandmother and great-grandmother served as midwives f’rough the birth. I was… I was four, I think- strange that I r-r-r-remember something so clearly, from so long ago- when I snuck out of my bed and listened to them
talking…” as he spoke, his voice grew slower and quieter.

“I wanted to hear what the adults w-was saying- my mother left when I was three, she left me b-b-behind- and I… I w-w-wanted to hear what they were talking about- but… they- they were talking about me. My great-grandmother was saying to my grandmother that I was a ‘bad investment all-round’, that they should have just gotten rid of me at birth by…” he swallows. “She said that I should have been drowned at birth. Like a worthless colt, she said. Well, after that, I decided to just go back to bed, ignore what I had heard- but I think… I think they knew that I had heard. After that, they stopped… they stopped pretending. And I- well. I c-c-certainly never forgot.” The boys have very quietly curled their arms around their stomach, their eyes half closed in remembrance, face quietly crumpled in sorrowful fear. He sighs again, long and deep.

“Right- so. Around two years later- that’s when I started hearing…” He stops. Swallows- he won’t look anyone in the eye. “I would learn later, at s-sc-school, and li-li-libraries, and c-c-c-c-college that-” He swallows again. “I was s-s-s-six when I really began to understand what the voice was saying. Well- voices and I know that- I know, that it isn’t normal to have voices in your head, but…”

He sighs, stifles a sob. “I would l-l-l-l-learn that my existence wasn’t… wasn’t normal; that I- I-I-I wasn’t… Well, I was very young, s-s-s-s-s-six I think, and- I wanted someone to… I w-w-wanted someone to love me.” Unspoken, but still there, is Because they didn’t love me… they didn’t love me, but I loved them- and I wanted someone to love me back. “But- the thing is, I was always… I was always pretty sure that the voice I heard was not, had never been- never been a part of myself. I don’t- I’m not- it… it would be easier to explain if I could just-”

“Johnny, Johnny- It’s okay; we will still love you.”

Johnny shudders- he’s so upset, he doesn’t even realize that it’s Bruce who’s spoken- Bruce, who doesn’t speak of emotions- he doesn’t notice that Alfred has wrapped an arm around him, is quietly holding him; then… Then his body language changes. Before, he was closed off, not confident, not looking at anyone- now he… (Is it truly he?) is. It isn’t Johnny who speaks next- it’s Scarecrow. His voice is darker, blacker- deep, warm, echoing up from the burning depths of the earth- Johnny speaks lightly, moves quietly; Scarecrow doesn’t. “I might not be able to say it flat out, but I can- I share this body with three other people, and I do mean people, with their own wants, needs, and ideas about morality. The person you just spoke with is named Johnny, and he’s… he’s the nicest out of all of us- he’ll leave things out to spare your feelings. I will not. Any questions you have- arsk them now, if you please. There’s only so long I can speak t’people wif-out scaring the piss out’f’em.”

Bruce- Batman, asks the first question- “Who are the others in the body?”

“Well, there’s me- I’m Scarecrow, by the way; then there’s Johnny, who’s actually a really sweet kid; Doc, who’s a bit… skeezy, to be honest- too much science- still, he’s the kindest of us all; and Scarebeast- she’s actually quite nice. Bit intense, when you first meet her, but really quite nice.”

“So- who does what, if I might ask?” Alfred- he’s suspected that his nephew is a little… different, but there are a few things he’d like to clarify.

“Well- I’m the person who does the most physical things; I’m best at fighting and all that. Johnny is our people person- he’s the one who can behave in a way that isn’t repugnant to
society or some shit. Doc’s the one who does the majority of the sciencey bits- he’s a little
creepy, but then again, he’s basically a mad scientist- and he’s the one who fell for Maureen
first… Anyway, Scarebeast is the one who handles the majority of our emotions- she’s why we
usually can stay so calm all the time. She’s also the one who’s in control when… When were in
our Powered-up mode.”

Batman raises an eyebrow- “How long have you had a… Powered Up Mode?”

Scarecrow looks away. When he looks back, Doc is in control- and his demeanor is almost
completely non-existent. He does his very best to not care about anything- in many ways, he took the
most damage from- well. “I- that is to say, We- have most likely always had the potential for our…
Powers; the first time any of us remember using them, however, is when we lived on the streets of
London. It is very likely that we unconsciously used them to frighten others before hand- but that’s
where we learned how to really work together. You might say that our lives have been a team effort
from the beginning- we had to work together, you know, so that we could survive our…” He, They,
swallow, and can’t quite make themselves continue.

Alfred asks it quietly- “Why would you have needed to work as a team? What did you need to
survive?”What happened, my little one?

The boys hold very still for a very long moment- and then, Johnny is back, and he speaks in a way
that lets his family know that he’s trying with everything he has to explain his actions- trying
so hard-

“Although nepenthe- ‘th-th-that is, forgetting my past’- has in many ways calmed me, I have always
known, always, that I am an outsider; a stranger, in this century, in this world, and among those who
are s-s-s-still m-m-m-men. Th-th-this I have known ever since I stretched out my fingers to
the abomination” Scarebeast takes over, because they need to understand “- because no normal
child had three imaginary friends who shared a body, and we tried, we tried so hard, and they
never- anything would have been better than those… those women- So yes, we tried to make friends
with something that we knew had never been real- I, We, reached out to the space within that great
gilded frame in my ancestral home, in that room that we had hidden in so many times before, f-f-f-f-
f-f-f-f-rom them, and they hated us; stretched out my, our, fingers and touched a cold and
unyielding surface of polished glass. In that moment we knew- while we might never have intended
it to be so, we were irrevocably changed…” Scarecrow, because he’s the worst of impulses given
life and form and thought- “We might not have done what I had wanted to do- we might not
have ever killed those… w-women- but I wanted to, I wanted to so badly and I knew how, I
knew how to do it- but we didn’t, we didn’t ever, because we didn’t have to-” Doc, Cold, clinical,
almost uncaring- the tears running down his face give him away… because the boys loved
their grandmother and their great-grandmother; it isn’t in small children (normal ones) to hate- and all
four of them were normal small children. (Even Scarecrow- and Doc was the sweetest of them all.)

“No. No, we didn’t have to. Great-grandmother was eighty-six when she died; old age, and a hard
life before. Grandmother died of asphyxiation, where the body doesn’t get enough oxygen- she
choked on her own spittle and tarry gum mid-tirade, oh, what was it about, it was one of her
favorites-”

Johnny, so scared of two women long dead and gone, and so safe where he is now- “i-i-i-it was about
our g-g-g-general worthlessness, and h-h-how much b-b-better her life would ha-ha-have be-be-
been if w-w-we had n-n-n-n-n-never b-b-b-b-been b-bbb-bbb-born-” Doc again- “Right, thank you
Johnny, so she was screaming about that at us, right, and the smoke from her nasty cigars- Vile habit,
smoking- too right, and I- that is, Scarebeast, because the rest of us, myself included, have absolutely awful eyesight- could see her gum, nasty stuff- she would chew it while she smoked, which is absolutely foul- a-a-a-a-and she n-n-n-n-nnn-never g-g-ggg-gave us a p-p-p-p-ppp-p-p-ppp-piece- Would you have taken a piece of gum from that hell-bitch? No, I wouldn’t, but the point being, she gasped in to yell at us some more- Do y’even remember what we had done to get yelled at? I seem to recall our Johnny eating the summer’s pick of strawberries and more than half the jar of clotted cream- O-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-
Africa:

Wonder Girl Red is the one who figures out that they might be dealing with something bigger than they’ve prepared for- as the bite-marks on her boots can attest, when the dead become unquiet, things have managed to do a running jump over pear-shaped and gone directly to kaboom. It’s one thing to try and find people you’re getting the feeling are dead; it’s quite another to be attacked by rotting zombies in the catacombs of the Drake Museum.

Wonder Girl Red has a quiet talk with her team- the boys have their own skills and ideas to bring to the table, and she knows what she wants to do- even though it’s outside the mission’s parameters, it needs to be done.

It’s after the third fight, back in the hotel room- Cassie is in the bathroom, in her red pantaloons with the silver white stars running up her legs, black belt, black-red top with silvery stylized winged W stretching across her chest, her knife underneath her shirt, settled between her breasts, quietly drying her hair, seashell pink toes glinting in the dying light of the sun- through the open door, she can see Kid Flash carefully wrapping Robin’s ribs with a pale creamy bandage, her orange bruise salve vanishing with each pass; Superboy making marks on a map, and referring to a thick notebook recovered from the scene- Well, boys, this might be it- I know what I’m going to be doing… I hope… I hope you’ll come with. “So. Who here thinks that there’s more to this story?”

Superboy looks up, stares at Wonder Girl Red. “Red? What are you thinking?”

“Well, it’s like this- Bats sends us to Africa to find the Drake’s; we start with where they were last seen, which was in Ghana- we go there, and it’s a tiny five house village, and a massive library. Problem is, when we get there it’s empty, both of them- and the strange thing is, all the animals are gone, like they just… up and left. The chickens left their eggs to rot, the dogs beat themselves bloody trying to get out of the houses, and the cows…” She pauses a moment, in remembrance of the emaciated remains of the kindest, gentlest creatures she knew- back home, caring for the cattle was her favorite kind of work, next to tending the olive trees- “So. We go into the Library, which is the only building still intact, and find a manifest detailing the movements of the Drake’s. You, KF, noticed the smell of rotting fruit from below, but we didn’t have the time to check it out, seeing as Bats only gave us a week to work. Robin hacked us a transport using the Zeta Beams and got us to the first destination after that empty little Ghananian village- a small town in Chad, just as empty- only this time, we found a body in the middle of the street.” She stops, her hands clenching around the tails of the towel; her blue eyes stare quietly off into the farthest distance- thousands of miles away.

Kid Flash winces- sometimes, he really hates the heroing gig. He interjects into the conversation- “That was a very strange body too- no internal organs, not even a brain, what looked like stab wounds, but no blood- and going the wrong way… like something stabbed itself out instead of in; there was noticeable jaggedness of the iris, and extreme discoloration of the sclera; the skin was rendered to the texture of paper, onion-skin; when I pushed back the lips to try and ascertain time of death, they shattered, and the entire body crumbled into dust- the only thing that remained was the skeleton, which showed signs of being gnawed on. The body also smelt of rotting fruit- there was no smell associated with dead bodies, no smell of embalming fluids…”

Wonder Girl Red comes back to herself, blinks out of her stupor, and nods. “Right. And, we
checked the small town too- no Drake’s. No townies either- just an empty church, and an almost cloying smell of rotting fruit permeating the entire village. This was the third day in Africa- we only got a week to work, so we couldn’t investigate like we probably needed to; third jump, and we’re here, in Egypt- at the Drake Museum, which is, was, a nice museum in a large small town outside of Cairo, which was their last stop. They never got to Cairo; said something about looking around Africa, seeing the sights… that was four years ago.”

Robin takes over, his voice hiding a slight wince of pain- it hurts to breathe, at the moment. “We went in, and it was the same MO- no people, no animals, five bodies showing the same pathology as before, only this time we had to investigate- and we found…”

We found zombies.”

Wonder Girl Red nods quietly, her voice a splash of blood on the thick hot air. “Indeed we did. Now, there are two things we can do; we can log the mission as failed, and report our findings to Batman, who will undoubtedly send someone more experienced to deal with the… Zombies, and return to the Mountain; or we can log the mission as incomplete, send our findings, and continue with our investigation. What say you, gentlemen?”

Superboy says quietly “I want to know why there are people dying in Africa; I want to know why the dead are not staying dead. Count me in.”

Kid Flash is next. “Well… what the hell. This is too interesting to just let go- and I’ve got about four more days before I have to be anywhere.” Wally West doesn’t start school for another week- he’s already bought school supplies. He doesn’t want to worry his parents, or his Aunt and Uncle, and so long as he gets back before then, he won’t.

Robin is last; school starts in four days for Dick Grayson- he needs to set something up… “I’m in. I’ll need to call my older brother, but I am definitely doing this.”

Wonder Girl Red smiles quietly.

Team Two tracked the Drake’s, and the spread of the zombies, to Maraka, which is in sub-Saharan Africa. Specifically, it’s a province in the Congo- er, that is, the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (French: République démocratique du Congo), commonly referred to as DR Congo, Congo-Kinshasa or the DRC, is a country located in central Africa. It is the second largest country in Africa by area and the eleventh largest in the world. With a population of over 71 million, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is the nineteenth most populous nation in the world, the fourth most populous nation in Africa, as well as the most populous officially Francophone country. The real City of Turn is located there, as well as the ancestral home of Anansi the Spider.

It borders the Central African Republic and South Sudan to the north; Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi in the east; Zambia and Angola to the south; the Republic of the Congo, the Angolan exclave of Cabinda, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west; and is separated from Tanzania by Lake Tanganyika in the east. The country has access to the ocean through a 40-kilometre (25 mi) stretch of Atlantic coastline at Muanda and the roughly 9 km wide mouth of the Congo River which opens into the Gulf of Guinea.
The Second Congo War, beginning in 1998, devastated the country and is sometimes referred to as the "African world war" because it involved nine African nations and some twenty armed groups. Despite the signing of peace accords in 2003, fighting continues in the east of the country. In eastern Congo, the prevalence of rape and other sexual violence is described as the worst in the world. The war is the world's deadliest conflict since World War II, killing 5.4 million people since 1998. The vast majority died from conditions of malaria, diarrhea, pneumonia and malnutrition.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo was formerly, in chronological order, the Congo Free State, Belgian Congo, Congo-Léopoldville, Congo-Kinshasa, and Zaire (Zaïre in French).[1] These former names are sometimes referred to as unofficial names, with the exception of Mobutu's discredited Zaire, along with various abbreviations such as DR Congo and DRC. Though it is located in the Central African UN subregion, the nation is also economically and regionally affiliated with Southern Africa as a member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The Congo is situated at the heart of sub-Saharan Africa and is bounded by (clockwise from the southwest) Angola, the South Atlantic Ocean, the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania across Lake Tanganyika, and Zambia. The country lies between latitudes 6°N and 14°S, and longitudes 12° and 32°E. It straddles the Equator, with one-third to the North and two-thirds to the South. The size of Congo, 2,345,408 square kilometres (905,567 sq mi), is slightly greater than the combined areas of Spain, France, Germany, Sweden, and Norway.

As a result of its equatorial location, the Congo experiences high precipitation and has the highest frequency of thunderstorms in the world. The annual rainfall can total upwards of 80 inches (2,000 mm) in some places, and the area sustains the Congo Rainforest, the second largest rain forest in the world (after that of the Amazon). This massive expanse of lush jungle covers most of the vast, low-lying central basin of the river, which slopes toward the Atlantic Ocean in the west. This area is surrounded by plateaus merging into savannas in the south and southwest, by mountainous terraces in the west, and dense grasslands extending beyond the Congo River in the north. High, glaciated mountains are found in the extreme eastern region (Rwenzori Mountains).

The tropical climate has also produced the Congo River system which dominates the region topographically along with the rainforest it flows through, though they are not mutually exclusive. The name for the Congo state is derived in part from the river. The river basin (meaning the Congo River and all of its myriad tributaries) occupies nearly the entire country and an area of nearly 1,000,000 km² (390,000 sq mi). The river and its tributaries (major offshoots include the Kasai, Sangha, Ubangi, Aruwimi, and Lulonga) form the backbone of Congolese economics and transportation. They have a dramatic impact on the daily lives of the people.

The sources of the Congo are in the Albertine Rift Mountains that flank the western branch of the East African Rift, as well as Lake Tanganyika and Lake Mweru. The river flows generally west from Kisangani just below Boyoma Falls, then gradually bends southwest, passing by Mbundaka, joining with the Ubangi River, and running into the Pool Malebo (Stanley Pool). Kinshasa and Brazzaville are on opposite sides of the river at the Pool.
Then the river narrows and falls through a number of cataracts in deep canyons (collectively known as the Livingstone Falls), and then running past Boma into the Atlantic Ocean. The river also has the second-largest flow and the second-largest watershed of any river in the world (trailing the Amazon in both respects). The river and a 45 km wide strip of land on its north bank provide the country's only outlet to the Atlantic.

The previously mentioned Albertine Rift plays a key role in shaping the Congo's geography. Not only is the northeastern section of the country much more mountainous, but due to the rift's tectonic activities, this area also experiences volcanic activity, occasionally with loss of life. The geologic activity in this area also created the famous African Great Lakes, three of which lie on the Congo's eastern frontier: Lake Albert (known previously as Lake Mobutu), Lake Edward, and Lake Tanganyika.

The Rift Valley has exposed an enormous amount of mineral wealth throughout the south and east of the Congo, making it accessible to mining. Cobalt, copper, cadmium, industrial and gem-quality diamonds, gold, silver, zinc, manganese, tin, germanium, uranium, radium, bauxite, iron ore, and coal are all found in plentiful supply, especially in the Congo's southeastern Katanga region.

On 17 January 2002 Mount Nyiragongo erupted in Congo, with the lava running out at 40 mph (64 km/h) and 50 yards (46 m) wide. One of the three streams of extremely fluid lava flowed through the nearby city of Goma, killing 45 and leaving 120,000 homeless. Four hundred thousand people were evacuated from the city during the eruption; the hero Anansi was seen helping people evacuate, as were the Hawks- Hawkman, Hawkwoman, Warhawk, and Hawkgirl. The lava poisoned the water of Lake Kivu, killing fish. Only two planes left the local airport because of the possibility of the explosion of stored petrol. The lava passed the airport but ruined the runway, entrapping several airplanes. Six months after the 2002 eruption, nearby Mount Nyamulagira also erupted.

It takes two days for Team Two to slog through the jungle; they eventually come across a funky bend in the Kasai river- and a hive of... Zombies. When they come upon it, it is a conglomeration of mud heaped and sliming into the roots of the trees that grew near the river; dark holes litter the mound, long pipelike rounded tubes of mud rising into the highest reaches of the trees, holes riddling the structure along with sticks of what looks like grass- and then they get close, and see that no, it isn’t a mound of mud, it’s a city, a city as if made by wasps, columns of mud and gaping holes smoothed by what can't have been human hands...

(Nothing human- nothing truly person shaped- lives in that city.)

Paris (oh god):

Inara wants to die. She wants to die- to scrub and rub herself away, until nothing, not even the ink on her birth certificate, remains. She can feel herself sinking into the earth, again- can feel the blood dripping down her side down her stomach out of her down down down onto the floor, pooling down and black because she’s been bleeding black for a while now and wasn’t that a shock last month and it was shiny black and gleaming but wrongly for it to be blood because it wasn’t blood anymore it was ink, it was ink, she tested it chemically- her blood had turned to ink, and she was leaving black smears on her clothing, lots of little black smears, so she started wearing black almost exclusively and
the smears and her blood smelled of the inside of the pen that had broken open and the ink of that pen was like his hair like his hair like his purple hair purple oh god oh god oh god and-

Inara wants to die- she wants to melt away into nothing. It’s only when she hears the booted steps, Shiv’s steps, returning that she feels the first flush of cold rushing through her- just like at home, when Ebon He doesn’t like it when I call him Ivan, even though that’s his name, and now he won’t answer to anything other than Ebon would steal her things to trade for drugs to sell, just like at home, when her mother would ignore what her son was doing, ignore what her decisions were doing to her family, to the city, just like at home, when she made herself cold cold cold so she could do what needed to be done and not think about what the consequences would be; like the time she called the cops on Ebon and her mother screamed at her screamed wouldn’t speak to her for six months and those months were the most peaceful of her life, and Ebon went to Juvie and when he came back six months later mother started speaking to her again and Ebon was worse than before; like the time Ebon broke her ribs and her mother wouldn’t leave the campaign trail long enough to take her to the hospital, so she went to the clinic across town she could have died- she felt herself going cold, and still and furious. Enraged. I am going to kill that man.

The thumping feet get closer, purple light gleaming darkly, lighting on her blood and glowing glowing glowing- and then he speaks, and that’s when Inara realizes that she might have gotten a little carried away with melting into nothing. “Hmmm? What’s this? Did my pretty new FRIEND melt? She’s supposed to be here on the table- and her blood, so sweet; it’s still here on the table, and under it; did she leave?” His eyes give away his fury- his voice hasn’t lost its deranged laughter. His eyes, glowing purple red crazy in the light stab into Allie’s; he smirks, and saunters over to her. She doesn’t quite hide her fear- she sticks her chin out in defiance, narrows her eyes into a glare that could strip paint and wallpaper and skin, but her throat, her throat swallows- he sees it. Of course he does. His hand, clawed and gleaming sharp, slides up across her side briefly cups her breast- she does nothing to hide the curl of disgust on her lips- he smirks, slides his hand up higher thumb catching in the translucent fabric over the crease of her breasts slicing up again the soft shrip of tearing fabric too audible in the dark space- behind him, Zatanna’s dark eyes glow from the light thrown from his purple blades. His other hand grabs a hank of Allie’s stiff hair, pulls her back with all his might- her head is roughly jerked, held at an awkward angle, no leverage. She can’t headbutt him now, can’t really breathe over the tears in her throat…

His hand finishes ripping the top portion of her dress, gently tickles up her throat, cups her cheek. His eyes get closer closer closer blocking out her world his lips so very close to her’s soft breaths out from him smelling of cardamom and rose and cloves and Come closer so I can bite you, shitlicking fucktard. Oh god. He smiles. “You know where she went, my pretty. Yes, you DO!” and then his lips are on hers his tongue is inside her mouth and squirming and his body is pressed right up against her and the wall is grinding into her back and his hips are thrusting into hers- and with a shout he’s thrown himself away from her. Blood slowly drips from his mouth- Allie smiles a smile full of teeth, her own bloody teeth gleam red purple black in the light and her eyes are not... her eyes are two black chips of night jeering laughing. He’s not laughing anymore; Shiv isn’t laughing anymore.

He glares at her, absently rubbing a hand against his mouth, steadily smearing the blood across his face; then he’s forward, his forearm against her throat pressing, and his finger pressing into the inside of her cheekbone where the bridge of her nose is, stabbing into her face. He presses harder harder harder and Allie can’t scream because she can’t breathe- and then the inky blood on the floor surges forwards and up into the nude form of a girl- and Inara’s fist catches Shiv in the head, jerks him to the right and unconscious, drawing a curved line into Allie’s face; he falls into the mucky cobblestone floor, soft grunt of pain gasping out of him- Inara’s foot catches him in the ribs and head once twice three- “INARA!” Zatanna screams, her face pale and drawn tight with fear. “It’s much more important for us to get outa here than it’s for him to die. We can’t kill him if we’re dead, Inara,
we can’t…” Inara nods, then walks over to Allie stomps on Shiv’s knee when she steps over him, slashes her wrists free from over her head, readies herself to cut her ankles free- then Allie has grown silver bright claws and is tending to her own legs, so Inara steps over Shiv again, stomps the same knee, slashes Zatanna’s arms free, then gets ready to bend down and cut her legs free of their shackles- “Cut my boots off.”

Inara stops dead, stares up into Zatanna’s face- her voice comes out as a ruined rasp. “But those are your-”

“Not anymore, they’re not. Slice ‘em.”

Inara nods, and makes a slim incision just below Zatanna’s kneecaps- with a little bracing against the wall, and some helpful lubrication, the boots slide off Zatanna’s legs- her bare feet touch the cold wet cobblestone floor; Allie makes short work of the manacles holding her on her toes, kicks off her yellow shoes I am keeping these- I’ve stood for hours in them, and my feet don’t hurt at all. Can’t fight in them, but I’m thinking that’s a Yet problem, not an Impossible- takes the time to stab Shiv in the kidney, walks over to the other two. They hug as a group- Allie rips off what remains of her sleeves, folds the sliced portion of her dress under itself, ignores the blood sluggishly dripping down her face; Zatanna pulls off her petticoat, undoes her neckscarf, unpins the little ruffles of the petticoat making it much longer; Inara watches as Allie winds the tattered remains of her sleeves together, winds them up and pins them to the top of the petticoat, lifts her arms over her head and only winces a little when the dress touches her belly, lets Zatanna tie her long neckscarf around her waist; then the three girls carefully walk out of the little alcove in a catacomb under Paris, follow the un-hidden path out into the predawn Paris countryside, and just keep walking.

-towards the sun-

Wonder Girl Blue is on a mountain bicycle, riding through the Sinne-et-Marne on a lovely trail when she hears the screams of young girls and scents blood on the air. She’s been tracking Zatanna’s magical signature for many kilometers- she picked up on it the second she got to Paris, took the time to provision herself adequately; three small rounds of a local smoked cheese, a five pound bag of rice, a three pound bag of lentils, a large ration of salted pork, a cooking pot, a small skillet, flint, knife, a long stave of warm oak, a leather pack, her alicula, a set of pouches to put her smaller things inside, a coil of rope, and two massive waterskin’s; she used her allocated funds to buy a pair of thick wool socks and a good mountain bike, and then she was off.

Two days later, and she’s followed the scent out to the edge of nowhere, rolling fields of golden wheat and endless blue sky; her hair is back in a long braid, and she’s wearing an oversize red sweater studded with white stars with her blue jumpsuit; she looks, from a distance, French. The tiara gives away her identity, however.

She comes upon what must be Zatanna Zatara- along with two other girls, one made of ink and purpling shadows, moving like water and snakes around the burning purple edged strikes of a man with a Mohawk, the other of silvery skin and copper hair- the man was staying out of her range, and whenever she would take a swipe at him from a distance, thin lines of silver appear in him- Zatanna is screaming something backwards, and suddenly the grasses are writhing around the man, but his hands turn purple and then to sickly and scythe before the girls spell can come to fruition.

One moment in time- her hand is on one of her smoked cheeses, and her other is gripping her sling and then it’s out and in her hand; her bike is spinning it’s wheels uselessly, her body just to the left leaning into each swing of the strip of woven leather and horse hair- zup!, and Shiv is knocked in the
head with an untouched cheese, his eyes rolling backwards, him falling forwards, and the girls are darting backwards, seeing her running as fast as their legs can take them to her, and then all three girls have their arms around her and are sobbing sobbing with relief and fear and hysteria. She hugs them all back, disentangles herself from them, takes the coil of rope from her bag—only it isn’t rope, it’s her lasso. A finely woven affair of simple cord, blessed by the goddesses at her birth so long ago—she ties the purple haired man up without the indignity to herself of requiring the use of knots.

And then the girls ask her for justice. (What is justice? Justice is a concept of moral rightness based on ethics, rationality, law, natural law, religion, or equity. It is also the act of being just and/or fair. Utilitarianism is a form of consequentialism, where punishment is forward-looking. Justified by the ability to achieve future social benefits resulting in crime reduction, the moral worth of an action is determined by its outcome. Retributive justice regulates proportionate response to crime proven by lawful evidence, so that punishment is justly imposed and considered as morally correct and fully deserved. The law of retaliation (lex talionis) is a military theory of retributive justice, which says that reciprocity should be equal to the wrong suffered; "life for life, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." Restorative justice is concerned not so much with retribution and punishment as with (a) making the victim whole and (b) reintegrating the offender into society. This approach frequently brings an offender and a victim together, so that the offender can better understand the effect his/her offense had on the victim. Distributive justice is directed at the proper allocation of things — wealth, power, reward, respect — among different people.

According to utilitarian thinkers including John Stuart Mill, justice is not as fundamental as we often think. Rather, it is derived from the more basic standard of rightness, consequentialism: what is right is what has the best consequences (usually measured by the total or average welfare caused). So, the proper principles of justice are those that tend to have the best consequences. These rules may turn out to be familiar ones such as keeping contracts; but equally, they may not, depending on the facts about real consequences. Either way, what is important is those consequences, and justice is important, if at all, only as derived from that fundamental standard. Mill tries to explain our mistaken belief that justice is overwhelmingly important by arguing that it derives from two natural human tendencies: our desire to retaliate against those who hurt us, and our ability to put ourselves imaginatively in another's place. So, when we see someone harmed, we project ourselves into their situation and feel a desire to retaliate on their behalf. If this process is the source of our feelings about justice, that ought to undermine our confidence in them.)

Allison Langford- Allie, wants Justice; she wants to make it so that the man who hurt her, and her friends—she wants him to be unable to do so again. “Your Royal Highness, I beg of you a ruling—my friends were hurt by this man. Please, I beg of you—hear our testimony and levy Justice for us all.” Donna—Princess Danae looks at the girl, with silver skin and copper brown hair, a halfmoon swoosh under her right eye, and while she is happy to hear her out and give Justice, she must know—“Who are You to ask such a thing from us?”

The girl lifts her chin high, stares with her robin’s egg blue eyes into Donna’s cerulean’s; “I am a Girl of Themyscira— I call myself Nails; I ask for your Judgment in this matter, as is my right. If you feel you cannot judge this matter impartially, I will ask Wonder Woman; if she cannot give me Justice, I will take this matter to Queen Hippolyta; if she cannot give me Justice, I will take it to the Goddesses themselves.” Wonder Girl Blue feels a hot rush of pride— and her voice is soft and conciliatory; “I am honored that you would come to me with this matter, Little Sister. Speak, and I shall listen—ask, and you shall receive.”

Allie does— Nails does. Wonder Girl Blue listens— as she speaks, the other two girls quietly settle down into the sun-warmed grass, safe in the shadow of Wonder Girl Blue; when Nails is finished
speaking, Wonder Girl Blue holds very still for a long moment, and then she looks at the two girls with kind eyes- but her voice is as unyielding and merciless as the first rays of dawn. “Tell me- is this true?”

Zatanna answers first- “I am called Zatanna, and I can verify the first, and last portions- I was not conscious for the middle.”

Inara answers second- “I was the one he… the one he raped. I am still injured from his hands- do you n-need to see?”

Wonder Girl Blue nods; Inara sighs, shudders, shrugs her shoulders out of the twisted yellow loops, pulls the dress down- and there they are, slices and burns and deep gouges some still weeping her ink black blood- “Tell me, gentle child, what is your name?”

Inara glances up, meets Donna’s eyes for a long, sharp moment. “I am the one called Inque, Your Royal Highness. I will, of course, respect your ruling, Ma’am.” She twitches slightly when Zatanna touches her hand, then twists and grips Zatanna’s hand with her own, her pale hand clenching black nails gleaming dully. (Respect, not obey. Clever.)

“Tell me, all three of you- what is it that you want?”

Nails answers first. “I want that one to never do something of this nature again- I seek the protection of future generations. It is… It is too late to stop what happened to us; it is not too late for the ones who will fall prey to that one in the future. I seek… That is what I seek.”

Inque answers second. “I want that one to be punished for his crime- I seek retribution. He took the last of my childhood; he hurt me, he defiled me, he… He took my power away. I want him to feel just like I did- I want him to hurt, and bleed, and be powerless. That is what I want.”

Zatanna answers third. “I want my friends to become whole- I seek reparation. I was not harmed- a few scars are matters of this material world, and are nothing to me; he took my pride, not my power, for he has no power over me- that one cannot harm me. I am untouched. He harmed my friends; he hurt them, took their power, took their pride, took their happiness- I want them to become whole. That is my wish.”

Wonder Girl Blue nods at the three girls- and then she says quietly, “I will need to consult with my mother and sisters- I do not know how to give what is deserved, and I am not an impartial judge in this matter. However, I can return you to the city; I can bind your wounds, and take that one to a holding cell of appropriate strength. Will this suffice for now?”

The three girls nod; Wonder Girl Blue smiles.

Africa:

Team Two has been watching the Mud City for two days- and the smell of rotting fruit is alternating with the stench of molding mud, a disturbing new development- the Zombies are oddly… organized, for the walking dead. Every day, what looks like women- except the occasional gaping hole in their abdomens make it very clear that they aren’t alive, and the strange wriggling yellow bits underneath that Superboy saw, and something is very very wrong- come out of the fathomless black holes, their many hues of skin ashy pale with dried clay dust, their eyes hollow
black and gleaming gleaming in the soft dawn light, wrapped in the rags of clothing or nothing at all, slowly moving stuttering limbs- Robin had snuck as close as he dared, saw the small black hairs delicately peeking out of one of the dark skinned sentries mouth- and the pale Zombies would go down to the river bank, and carefully wade into the water, wade in and quickly dive down, come back up with arms full of thin silty mud muck arms and shirts full of silt, wade back out and deposit their “catch” into baskets that aren’t seen in the light of day, and then a different group of Zombies would come, these just as soulless, just as mindless and pale, and they would pick up the baskets and take them up into the higher reaches of the city.

Wonder Girl Red and Superboy have seen the movement of these Zombies before- but in wasps not people. In fact, it’s rather… eerie, seeing a population of what looks like people- superficially, at least- moving, moving so wrong, and so silently. Wonder Girl Red has learned many things on Themyscira; at Team Two’s camp, five miles away, inside a hollow of a very tall tree above the canopy, she uses some of her new knowledge.

She takes her wide shield, covers it with the iridescent skin of a lizard (cockatrice from back home), her sharp obsidian knife, a cup made of horn from a blessed cow filled with wine (Palm wine- strong stuff. She’s not sure she wants to know where Kid Flash found it), a trio of coins (all exactly the same), a small wooden bowl, her dice- and, of course, the spell itself. She sets up her space, kicks all the boys out, lights a small candle to see by and some incense for ambiance, kneels in front of her makeshift altar- and they don’t dare get close to the City, which is why she’s doing this. We don’t know what’s in there- and I don’t want to send KF in without some inkling about what we’re getting into.

(“I really don’t see how this is necessary-”)

“KF… If this doesn’t work, we’ll be sending you in for recon.” Superboy’s quiet admonishment makes Kid Flash sit up straight and stare off at nothing for a long moment.

“…oh…”

Robin snickers- he has to, because he has a very bad feeling about this, and something is knocking out his comms so he wasn’t able to call his brother, but they were able to send the information; no guarantees it got there and he’s flashing back to CADMUS and that started just like this and he’s scared and he wants his brother right now- his quiet huffs of laughter hold the thin edge of hysteria in them.

“I’ll get started now, then.” Both Robin and Superboy make to say something- but before they get a chance, Kid Flash is gone in a soft whisper of wind, his bright yellow blur turning grey as he moves.

Robin looks over at Superboy, then back at the place where his best friend just was- and then he quickly, lithely, hand-walks across the thick branch, and curls up next to Superboy, who starts at the warm body curling into his side- Superman has been teaching him how to interpret the things he hears and sees, and Robin is showing all the signs of near-hysteria, so… Superboy loops an arm around barely shaking shoulders, tugs him close, holds him. “Robin, it’ll be alright; you’ll see.”

“(…We don’t know what we’re dealing with; we might not have back-up; KF just ran off; Red’s doing her Ancient Greek version of a Hail-Mary pass; if we get killed here, it is very unlikely that our families will find even a scrap of information about where we are. I don’t like this- this is just like… just like…” His voice is a near-dead thing, almost gone and done.
“Robin, this isn’t CADMUS. We know it’s going to be bad- it’s probably going to be horrible. We know that we probably won’t get out alright- but we will get out. We will survive this- and we will learn, and grow, and thrive; we’ll survive our mistakes, which Batman will happily tell us all about, and we’ll get out of many a future jam, probably just as bad as this one.”

Robin leans into Superboy’s hug, and sighs. “Yeah. Yeah! We’ll be fine- sorry, I got a little distraught there for a sec, heavy on the dis. Thanks for helping me get my ‘traught back… You can let go now.”

“No, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can- wait. Why can’t you let me go?”

Superboy glances down at the fluffy black haired boy, tucked close to his side. “I’m scared too, Robin.”

“…Oh. Well, alright then.”

Wonder Girl Red centers herself, draws her power inside, and reaches. “Artémidos, Athínás, Fortoúna, parakaló na mou chorigísei tin kathódigísí sas.” She carefully cuts her thumb, the base of her index finger, and the empty space between her heart and head, on her palm; lets the blood pool in her hand for a long moment, then pours some of the automatically sanctified wine into her blood, lets out a soft hiss of pain because the wine is really straight alcohol and it burns; she flexes her hand without losing a single spot of blood, and then smears it evenly and thickly across the nearly flat skin covered shield; pours her bone and ivory dice into her bloody hand, raises them to her mouth, carefully speaks into them, gently coating each one with her warm blood with steady rolls of her fingers.

“Vlépo gynaíkes symperiférontai san sfíkes prin apó ména mou- pei, ti tha boroúse na plíxei aftés tis ftóchés psychés?” She casts the dice- they roll, and then stick into the bloody skin, their faces obscured by blood- she uses her off hand to lift and tap the shield; the dice do not move. Wonder Girl Red bows her entire body to the altar, places all three coins into the small bowl, along with the last drips of her blood- murmurs her thanks. “Megalýteres efcharísties mou, Megál Artémidos, Vasilissas Athínás, Magikí Fortoúna.” This is the first time her prayers have ever been answered- before, the dice have either not become obscured by her blood, slid instead of rolled, or fallen off the shield when she tapped it.

She used her cut hand, the blood now dried and flaking off- gently touched and cleaned the face of each die, from left to right; the six dice in the upper portion signified a name, Mmoboro; four dice below for a warning “Seek to destroy the hornet’s nest at night; trap the humming darkness within the dried and empty gourd.”; and then Cassie knew what she was dealing with- anyone who had read the African Amazon Chronicles would.

She carefully put out the glowing light of the candle, tugged her mother’s black fingerless gloves on, pulled the cloak she had hung to one side-

“I know what we’re dealing with, guys. Hornets. We’re dealing with the Mmoboro Hornets.”

“I know what we’re dealing with guys- it’s worse than we thought. I found the Drake’s by the way- apparently, they decided to become cultists.”
Wally and Cassie speak at the same time- Wonder Girl Red and Kid Flash stare at each other for a long moment. “You first, KF. I want to hear why you disobeyed my clear orders to stay put.”

Wally winces.

Africa, four years ago:

Janet Drake is watching her newborn son sleep- standing over him, a slim gleam of sharp silvery glowing in her hand, watching the little body slumber; Jack Drake is watching his wife. He’s known for some time now that something is wrong with his wife, which is why he refuses to feel guilty about what he’s decided to do. (Fathers protect their children.)

He had noticed something wrong ages ago- almost from the day his baby boy, Timothy, was born- Janet had, well, changed; she was quieter, more withdrawn in her opinions, less… there. He noticed that she always seemed to have dirt under her nails now, always smelled very faintly of fruit… and he noticed the soft humming in her chest, when they would lie in bed at night, noticed that she ate lots of flowers and how she couldn’t make a decision and before she could and now she can’t and how there were blanks in her memory and how she was always complaining about how her body hurt…

He truly noticed something weird and wrong and bad when he saw inside his wife’s mouth- saw fine black hairs sprouting from the roof of her mouth, saw thin tendrils curled up where her tonsils were… Saw strange iridescent curves next to her spine, saw her muscles change and bulge, become hard- it was a gradual process, but he knew that he didn’t have very much time… His wife had turned into a monster, but- he swore. He swore to honor her faithfully- so long as they both shall live.

He truly became afraid when he saw his wife- was it truly his wife, or a wasp with a needle thin waist; a skeletal woman covered over with yellow and black armor, her hair up in two massive buns or were those eyes, wings or a cape diaphanous and thin so soft and gauzy down her back, and a marking like a crown like a crown, and in her hand in her crooked claw was a knife- stand over their sleeping son, holding a knife, waiting. (For what- for what?)

“Janet. Janet, my darling- come back to bed. It is late- he is sleeping. Come back to bed, my darling.” The woman except, no, that’s not a woman, not a human woman; she turns and moonlight shines across her body in jagged lines showing- she speaks, and her voice is a humming rasp, almost but not quite Janet’s voice too many voices inside her voice murmuring “…Ah. Jack. Of- Of course, of course. Go back to bed, Janet- he’ll be there in the morning. Ye-es, go back to bed and sleep…” He’s out of time- Damned if I do- damned if I don’t… Oh, Janet…

When the morning came, Jack’s plan had come to fruition- Timothy was gone, and there were booted footprints leading away under the window, deep in the mud; Janet, when he was sure she was really Janet, was inconsolable, distraught- when she wasn’t Janet, she wasn’t. When she was Janet, she wanted to do everything in her power to find her son; when she wasn’t Janet, she wanted to go to Africa.

Poor Jack- either way, he knew. He knew. He knew that he wasn’t going to survive this- too close to the center of the explosion, too close to the edge of night. He knew that if he got his son back, his wife would likely kill them all- his life had been forfeit since that antique African Gourd had broken open and that dust had washed over them both… He’s not sure why he hasn’t gone as crazy as his wife, but then again, perhaps he has: he could have sworn that he needed to eat and breathe, but he
hadn't, he hadn’t in days… could have sworn that he had slashed his arm with a knife the other day, and blood barely came out- was he too small, or were his clothes too big? When he looked in the mirror, was it his face looking back? Or was it the face of a wasp?

The decision was made for him when he learned that his men had been killed in a fire-fight; loyalty is one thing, but Gotham is Gotham- only the dead are unsurprised there. They went to Africa- and there… there, Jack and Janet ended, and Monsters rose from ancient grudge again- no trickster came to stop them.

Africa:

“It isn’t because I don’t trust your skills- it’s because I don’t trust anything I can’t see or quantify for myself. Besides, I found some information that will help us decide what to do next.” Wally is inside the alcove- Wonder Girl Red had cleared it out, and Team Two was quietly sitting in the alcove, listening to what Kid Flash had seen.

“Okay, so- I’ve been working on a few particularly explosive devices that work with my superspeed- I planted them all over Mud City, and I was able to find the leader of the Zombies.”

Robin asks it. “What’s the what?”

Kid Flash coughs a little cough of laughter- or horror. (Same, really.) “What’s the what? I’ll tell you what’s the what- Janet and Jack Drake are now the leaders of a Zombie cult. From what I’ve seen, they’re gearing up for a massive assault- I counted almost twelve thousand upright zombies, and massive caverns that I didn’t dare go into; we’re completely outnumbered. We should probably call the League at this point- we’re all running on fumes as it is; we didn’t prepare for a fight of this size; our team, while balanced, just isn’t large enough to take them on and win; and, like I said, I found the Drakes. That’s a mission complete.”

Cassie is staring at him, quietly- “Why set charges, then?”

Wally smirks. “Just because we can’t fight’em head on doesn’t mean we can’t give’em a little… busy work.”

Which is how Team Two caused massive, and reparable damage, to Mud City- only there was no evidence connecting them to the… explosions. Search/Destroy Wasps were sent to the end of Kid Flash’s electro-magnetic trail, but found only an empty hole in a tree, and a puzzle- they were soon recalled to the city to deal with damages from explosions, which were ruled as "Imperfections in Formation of Hive", and the appropriate measures were taken to correct the matter. As in, a whole bunch of perfectly good Mmoboro Hornets were killed, and Jack, or what was left of Jack, had survived by not getting in the way, and Queen Janet Hornet hated those who got in her Way.

Paris:

Permafrost is very worried. She went to the hotel that Zatanna was supposed to be at, and got stonewalled- apparently, Xania Zatara doesn’t show up as an emergency contact on their records for Zatanna Zatara- which shouldn’t be possible. Oracle had been amenable to setting up a fake identity
for her so why would there be a problem, unless… they truly don’t believe that the girl is missing- or they’re trying something sketchy with a look-alike…

So. Xania Zatara is in Paris, trying to get legitimate access to the hotel Zatanna disappeared from- Permafrost was trying to get illicit access to the hotel Zatanna disappeared from. I’m glad Blue’s searching for her out ther- Ha, yes! Lockpicking skills!

She quickly opened the window, pulled herself through- and stopped before she moved out of the window’s shadow. Some niggling feeling, some heroic instinct, made her exhale a mighty breath- to reveal a shape; a massive sleeping insect, dotted with her tiny ice crystals. No, not one- three; one to each bed, wearing…Nightgowns. Okay, that’s legitimately creepy- why are what looks like giant wasps wearing nightgowns? This room is Zatanna’s- and those should be Allison Langford and Inara Quen, respectively. But if they are wasps- where’s the nest? And the Queen?. She isn’t stupid- Gotham doesn’t suffer fools. She quietly takes a non-flash photo of what’s in the room; goes back out the way she came.

(And here, I think, I should explain about both the Mmoboro Hornets, and about Permafrost. Permafrost isn’t exactly… sane. She’s a schizophrenic; she’s an extremely high functioning one, but… she hears voices, in the darkness, sometimes- thinks about things that aren’t true as if they were.

And sometimes, not very often, but sometimes- she’ll see things that both are and aren’t.

The Mmoboro Hornets are one of the First Evils of the world- specifically, the evils that come from mob rule, and madness. It’s the madness part that’s important- insane people, like Maureen, see the Mmoboro Hornets as they truly are, for they are touched by their poison; they carry a memory of them, deep within, that cannot be hidden or changed.

People like Maureen don’t see with their eyes- people like Scarecrow don’t speak with their mouths.

And Scientists of Wally’s caliber are always a little- off.)

She rendezvous’ with Wonder Girl Blue, who has the real Zatanna, Allison, and Inara- and a prisoner. A prisoner she knows- she fought him before, almost got killed by him before; he was in Gotham, a few months back, threw her through a wall, caused an explosion which almost froze her to death; the worst part is, she doesn’t know why he was there or why he lost it like he did he was yelling something about a “Ravager”… and then Blue tells her why he’s a prisoner.

Permafrost isn’t like Scarecrow- she isn’t as… calm as he is. There are some things in the world that make her enraged- rape is one of those things. She, very badly, wants to kill him- she wants to freeze parts of him off- turn his balls black frozen icy and break them- make him suffer as much as possible, cut him tear him rip things out and freeze- possibly get some of Johnny’s nastiest things, make him scream and scream and SCREAM- “Oh. Did I say all that out loud?”

Wonder Girl Blue is trying very hard not to smile, because she’s a leader dammit, and she shouldn’t laugh at such things… even though she would be happily next to her, killing him too- “Yes. You did. I think you scared him.”

“Good.”

“Very good.”
Shiv feels a small twinge of worry- and a great clenching of terror. It’s one thing to play- it’s quite another to be… played with. The smiles on his playmates faces are distinctly unsettling- Zatanna’s face was never meant for a smirk, so she looks more like a pouting child; the dark twinkle in her eyes more than makes up for it- Inque is smiling with far too many teeth, her face stretching into a giant maw, gleaming blackness within- Nails starts to bleed again when she smiles, the blood curving down her face; her hands turn into claws, and her eyes haven’t really stopped gleaming with that dark rage.

A whooom from overhead breaks the moment; the sensation of presence, of the eyes sliding off of something that is and isn’t there- and then a door opens in the side of the Invisible Jet, and Wonder Girl Red steps out- “Heyla, Blue! Need a ride?”

Wonder Girl Blue calls back “Hoy, Red- Could you help me with something?”

“Sure!” Red bounds out of the plane, races over- listens to her sister speak. And her stance, her shadow, her expression- changes.

“Really.”

“Oh yes. I can’t think of an… appropriate response. Any ideas?”

“One or two- but we should ask Wonder Woman first- we need to let her know about…”

“My thoughts exactly. You want me to take them in?”

“Sure- want me to knock him out and bring him?”

“…yeah. I’m not sure I can do it without-”

Red grips Blue’s arm, pulls her into a hug; stalks over to Shiv, kicks him in the head. He passes out; Red grabs his legs, starts dragging him to the plane- throws him with a little more force than strictly necessary onto a bunk, ties him down. “Red? Why didn’t you just fly him in?”

She smiles a grim, vicious smile. “Ask Supey, KF. I’m sure he heard.” He did- and his stare could freeze starlight. Wonder Woman is listening to her younger sister, whispering in her ear- she too, has gone very still. She speaks, her voice a melodious ringing in the cabin of the jet.

“I am taking everyone back to the House, to be dropped off- and then the Girls, my protégés, the Prisoner, and I are going to my home. We have some… things that need to be discussed. This is not up for debate- When we get back, Permafrost and Kid Flash will debrief in my protégés stead.”

Robin speaks up, the feeling of taking his life in his own hands almost overwhelming. “Why do the Girls, your protégés, and the Prisoner need to go to your home, Wonder Woman?”

Wonder Woman glances at Robin, smiles a very fake smile. “A matter of Justice has been called to my attention- and I wish to have their input in the matter.”

Robin swallows convulsively- nods. He knows what Themysciran Justice is- and he knows why it would be called for.
The plane is very silent- and remains that way until it is hovering over the same field Team Two’s mission started from. Permafrost, Robin, Kid Flash, and Superboy disembark- and then the jet screams off into the mid-day, and the mission is over.
I'm remembering it wrong. Fuck.

Dakota (during mission two):

Sharon Hawkins is having an interesting week- it all started when one of her dad’s old buddies from Africa came by the house. Virgil was out with his friend Richie; Lashawn was at the Theem, taking a self-defense class; her Dad was at work- she was at the house alone. She noticed, when she opened the door after his knock, that he was wearing all black- even his hat was black; his shirt, his pants, his boots- the laces on his boots, his… mask- he was wearing a mask, and it too was black- he himself was black, blue black with very white teeth.

Sharon herself is a warm mocha color- her hair is soft, wavy; she won the genetic lottery, got her mother’s features and her father’s coloring; she is tall, wide of shoulder and hip- and she feels almost pale next to the stranger. He is tall, of almost regal bearing; and then he speaks. “Ah- I haven’t seen you since Cairo, Maria.”

“Sorry, but Mom died when I was twelve.”

“Oh- I am sorry to hear that, Miss?”

“My name might be Maria- and you might be?”

“Anansi the Spider was my name- but I am an older man now, and that name no longer fits. Perhaps my name is… ah, but what does it matter? I didn’t come here for pleasantries- I came to give Robert this box- perhaps you could ask him to the door?”

“He’s away at the moment- I can hold it until he returns, is that not so?”

The man who was Anansi the Spider looks at her for a long moment- he knows just what she was trying to do- names are power, and she told him that her name might be Maria, not that it is. She’s young and untried, but so was he; she’s a tad- naïve, but- to his knowledge there has never been a female Anansi- he doesn’t know everything… and he can’t do it anymore. He’s barely alive as it is, and the stories are always changing- Sambo’s story went to a man in Central, and spread to the man’s children, as is only right- all the tales were renewing themselves, so he needed to do the same, but he couldn’t he couldn’t anymore change any more and that part of him that made him a person would vanish into nothing and duty and words- and that’s not what stories are.

However, he can’t just give her the power without making sure she knows what she’s getting into- He can’t just tell her either. That’s not the way it works. “Yes, that is so- but be cautioned; this box holds a secret, a secret that four people want desperately. They have done many things to possess it-”

“And they will do many more. They will not have it.”

He smiles, reaches into his pocket and hands Sharon a small velvet box- nods once to her. “Fair travels, Anansi.” And then he leaves- and I do mean left, as in, ceased. He wasn’t there anymore- his story ended. (Sharon’s began again.)

Sharon took the box from the man, watched as he faded into nothing- his voice fading away as well,
energy and echoes vanishing into the mid-morning air. She sighed, closed the door, locked it- took the box up to her room, shut that door- sat on her bed Indian-style, opened the box. It was a spider, small, gold with a deceptively simple pattern in black jagged lines repeating over its butt- Know that there’s another word for what that part of a spider is… meh, not important. She picks it up- and it comes alive, skitters up her arm, down her shirt, settles over her sternum- and when she yanks her shirt off, it’s a tattoo of gold and black, nestled between her breasts- she touches it, feels something intimately small and fuzzy where before she only felt skin. She rubs at it, just to be sure- and only feels skin now. She puts her shirt back on, leans against the headboard, sighs- and sticks.

After some impassioned cursing, she manages to peel her back off, leaves behind a thin tracery of cracks and webbing- and that’s when she realizes that she might have gotten into something bigger than she knows how to deal with- but. Too late now- I’m not going to give up just because I don’t know what to do, or how this heroing thing works- Virg’ said he’d be with Richie for the day; I think I can go test out some of my, ah, “new skills” in the Greenbelt- I know a few places I’ve never told anyone about; besides, Dad said the powers were superstrength, superspeed, webs, sticking to things, and illusions, right? I should learn some self-control, or I could really hurt someone. So, she does- she writes a note, takes a lunchbox and her backpack, goes.

The next day, she has a better understanding of what she can and can’t do- make a tree stump look and feel like a couch? Yes. Make it stay that way? Hell no. Dodge falling drops of water? In short bursts, yes. Continuously? No- I tire out, or I trip over my feet. Lift a boulder? Absolutely. Hold it up? Not… yet. Wall-crawl? Yes- but it’s not second nature to change my perspective; it doesn’t matter if I’m wearing gloves or shoes- I still stick. I haven’t figured out how to consciously spin webs, but I will. I think with some training, I could learn to do all this better- but I’m not sure where to get that training… Besides, I need a costume. That’s what I’m going to do today- go up to Gotham, with my duffle and a fifty, and get some stuff. She takes the bullet train to Gotham- makes a mini-vacation out of it. This Japanese-style bullet train is really fast- much better than the old one. She goes to the GCE- notices the new graffiti on the walls of the train station. That’s an interesting cat; it’s like a sideways “s” and a “c” together- wonder who “Starro” is, and why their being alive was in question- weird little face there, all yellow with little lightning bolts coming from the cranium- a bat- “Joker’s Wild”? Must be a local gang- purchases stuff at the GCE; a collection of black hoodies, spylar under armor not sure I want to know why this is in the lingerie section, but I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to patch it, re-enforce it, long sleeve shirts in a variety of colors, a yellow utility belt just need to add a few buttons to the pockets so they stay closed, black tights that fit her in all the right ways, shin guards, boots that she can move in- she gets multiples of everything, and a few other things, y’know: scarves, blouses, a new pair of skinny jeans, and some screen-printing supplies.

She spends the night in a church Hostel, in the Narrows- goes home in the morning- nice of Revered Anderson to let me stay on such short notice; starts screen printing variations of the black pattern on her black hoodies in matte gold- each one is slightly different, and so each one comes out to be unique… and identical. (If you’ve ever seen a busy pattern from a distance, you’ll understand.)

By Thursday, she’s got a handle on her powers, and a costume to go with them- and she’s been noticing her baby brother sneaking out at night, so… She puts on her new costume, all black but with touches of gold, slips her cowl over her head and hair, ties it on with a knot her mother taught her long ago- snug and cute, like a bow only more adult and sophisticated- and then she follows her baby bro.

She confronts him about it the next morning, after her Dad’s gone to work- “So, Virgil- you’re a superhero now? ‘Cuz I think I am too…”
To his credit, Virgil only snorts a little milk out of his nose.

By the next Monday, a week after the old Anansi man had given her the Spider powers, she got an inkling of what her father had meant by “Capturing the Four”. She got into a fight with Onini while she was on one of her first patrols, defeated him with a little quick thinking- Billy Batson was there on a mini-vacation; he had wanted to get a little more money somewhere—Uncle Dudley paid well, but… not enough for him to really be solvent, not like he wanted to be. So, he took a job with the online arm of Whiz Radio, who didn’t care how old he was, so long as he had a nice enough voice—

“and the man calls himself Onini the Python; he just used some kind of super strength to squeeze money out of ATM’s- wait, wait, he was just tied up and stopped by a strange figure in black and gold- She’s calling herself Anansi the Spider! This is quite a turn of events folks- if you’re just tuning in, this is Billy Batson with Whiz Internet Radio, on the live podcast of a superheroic event in Dakota, VA! Wow-ee, what a thing to be seeing folks, what a thing; Anansi has just jumped back-apparently, the bonds were not tight enough, and ooh, that was a nasty head-but, and Anansi has jumped back again but she’s looking woozy folks, looking really grim… Yowza! Looks like she’s not down for the count, not just yet- she’s dropped under a left hook, thrown a right, it connects and he goes back with a pop, and she’s dropped again- he hooked her legs folks, hooked ‘em good, and he’s reared back for a stomp and she’s rolled out of the way, he’s tripping folks- If you’re just tuning in, this is Billy Batson with Whiz Internet Radio, on the live podcast of a superheroic event in Dakota, VA- and what a thing to see! Anansi the Spider has just jumped to the side- Oh! Oh no, folks, it looks like Onini the Python’s about to crush Anansi against a lightpole- Oh, WHAT A HAT TRICK! The Spider has just danced out of The Python’s killer grip, and has wrapped him to the pole with a lovely selection of scarves- looks like silk, folks, exquisite! Which reminds me, today’s podcast is funded by C. C. Beck’s Fantabulous Fabrications- quality fabrics for every day and special occasions; 50% off all Silk and Satin products this week only, while supplies last- that’s C. C. Beck’s Fantabulous Fabrications, folks, corner of Twenty-First and Svensa, Fawcett City, beautiful and strong! Anansi is now… doing something with her hands- something very fine and shiny is being wrapped around Onini the Python- and oh my gosh people, Onini the Python is turning into an actual python! The light pole has just turned into some kind of stave- looks like a dark wood; Anansi has picked up the wrapped-up snake and is now leaping away, she is leaping away folks- This has been Billy Batson with Whiz Online Radio, and this marks the end of my live podcast; this podcast will be available online for the next week, and can be downloaded from Whiz Communication’s website- my thanks folks, my thanks.”

She listens to the podcast later that day- Onini went into a special case Virg’s friend Richie helped her make- and the next day (the day after Team Two returned from Africa), Captain Marvel seeks her out. “Are you Anansi the Spider?”

“How’s asking?”

“I am called Captain Marvel- I have… I need your help.”

Anansi stares hard at the man in red- “And what will I get for my help? Hmm?”

He smirks. “You might get friends; you might get new stories; you might even learn something.”

“And what do you need my help for?”

“The Mmoboro Hornets.”

Instantly, the air of mischief around her is gone- only seriousness and still purpose remain. “And
what do you know of them, Captain Marvel?"

“I know that you’re one of the only people in existence who can stop them before it’s too late. I- We, need you. Please.”

A quiet nod from the brown girl in black- the matte gold of her jagged stripes glows in the light of a passing car. “When do you need my help?”

“Ah, not so fast- even the greatest of tricksters needs help now and again.”

She snorts. “And whom shall be helping me, Captain?”

“A Team- my friends. They will need to trust you first; Meet me in this location at the time specified, and you’ll learn of something new.” She eyes the piece of paper for a long moment, then takes it from his hand, nods to him, and fades away into the shadows.

Captain Marvel smiles.

(It should be remembered that when there is good, there is evil- the more good you have, the more evil tries to kill the good. There are a lot of heroes in this world- and for every hero, there is a villain.)

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Star City:

Dana really loves Roller Derby. It’s not just the crashing into people at high speeds that appeals to her more violent instincts; not the domination of other alpha females that makes her violent blood sing- it’s the entire shebang. Helena explained the sport to her once- “Ah, well, Roller derby is a contact sport played by two teams of five members roller skating in the same direction around a track. Game play consists of a series of short matchups, called jams, in which both teams designate a scoring player- the "jammer"- who scores points by lapping members of the opposing team. The teams attempt to assist their own jammer while hindering the opposing jammer — in effect, playing both offense and defense simultaneously. Roller derby is played by more than 1,200 amateur leagues worldwide. Our local league, Birds of Prey, has five teams- Nightstalkers, Wild Ones, Ensorcelled, our junior team, BabyWannaMama, and the International team, Birds of Prey. I’m on Nightstalkers, and Birds of Prey. Everyone on Birds of Prey is a superheroine—"

“And Scarecrow, Aqualad, and Red Arrow?”

“Are considered superheroines in our files, and are all on Birds of Prey- Aqualad is Fishwife, and is normally on Wild Ones; Red Arrow is Hurtful Dodger, and is on Ensorcelled because he’s engaged to Aqualad, because in-team dating is prohibited in our League; Scarecrow is Creepypasta and he’s with me on Nightstalkers.”

Dana snickers. “How do you play?”

“Well- two teams of five skate counter clockwise; one jammer per team, and four blockers. One blocker per team can be the pivot; she can become the jammer during the bout. There are two bouts- however many jams will fit in each… The jammer who gets out of the pack- which is all the blockers arranged in a space twenty feet long, and no more than ten feet away from each other- first can call the jam at any time. So; the blockers start on the pivot line- the jammers start about thirty feet back; whistle blows, bout starts- jammer scores points; opposing blockers try and stop her. Her blockers protect her, and help her get through the pack. If the jammer gets tired during the bout, or the jammer
just isn’t fast enough for some reason, she can switch with her pivot. There’s a twenty minute break between the two bouts, which is when a band usually plays.

That’s really about it- there are certain subtleties in each game, and each league has its own specific penalty rules, but the basics are the same throughout.”

“So- how does one get on a team?”

Helena stared at Dana for a long moment. “She would have to try out, and have a track name.”

“How does… “Dyin’ da Hurtcha” sound?”

“Sounds good to me- Helbitch would be happy to introduce Dyin’ da Hurtcha to the rest of the Birds of Prey. After she got on BabyWannaMama, of course.”

“Of course.”

Lian is unaware of her aunt’s… hobby. She knows her aunt is a superhero- and she knows that their landlord is a superhero too. She also knows that her Aunt D, and Ms. Helena go out every Tuesday and Thursday night and Saturday nights sometimes too; one day, she decides that she’s going to find out where they’re going, and what they’re doing.

She gets dressed- she’s not too good at dressing herself yet, but she knows what goes where, sorta; she know that she has to be wearing a jacket when she goes out at night so she puts on her aunt’s coat because her aunt always puts her in a coat when they go out at night, and she puts on her favorite hat because she’s not supposed to go out when it’s cold without one and she checked and it’s cold and she takes her friend, Mimi, because Mimi had a nightmare and was very scared and her aunt wasn’t there and she wanted her right now- made sure that her left shoe was on her left foot, and her right shoe was on her right foot, and Mimi was safe in her blue backpack, and her Aunt’s coat was zipped up, and then she was off.

Her aunt had left her a phone number to call if there was a problem and a twenty if she wanted to order a pizza or something- she looked the number up on the Internet Phonebook, went over to Mister Kaldur and Mr. Roy’s house, asked them to take her to “Birdie’s House of Skate, please.”

“Are you sure you want to go to Keystone this late?”

“… I want my aunt. She’s here- this is the address, see? Will you take me, Mister Kaldur?”

“Very well- do you want something to eat or drink before we go?”

“Erm… do you have any juice?”

“I do indeed- come in, dear, it is very cold out.” Kaldur gently leads the little girl into the kitchen; helps her onto a kitchen stool, pours her a glass of juice. She He stifles a yawn, rolls his shoulders under the women’s kimono patterned with blue swirls and pink petals- Roy had gotten it for him when he complained of being cold and ugly in the same breath- and gently settles the little flutter in his womb. He takes in the sight of a little girl in a nightgown, with a massive bomber jacket over her shoulders, a knit cap from Guatemala on her head, bright orange and green rain boots on her feet. A mop of black hair, too coarse for it to be human- a doll? peeks over her shoulder; the dark circles under her eyes tell a story of their own.
He rolls his neck, sighs, and says- “Wait here, dear one. I will return shortly, and then we will go find your aunt.”

“Thank you, Mister Kaldur.”

Kaldur goes back to his bedroom, prods Roy awake- “Gnyar?”

“I am taking young Miss Lian to her Aunt, in Keystone. Do you want anything while I’m out?”

“Mnr-gles-mglfrpck.”

“They don’t sell that this late at night, dear.”

“Mmmguu?”

“No, I’m not buying that without you there, last time I got the wrong ones, remember?”

“Muh. Hmphhes-raagh?”

“…you don’t have to ask for that, my love.”

Roy props himself up on his elbows, blearily cracks his eyes open, glances at the time- it’s only nine o’clock. “Nyer?”

“If you want to- but you don’t need to…” It’s too late; Roy flops out of their bed, his red boxers riding just a little too low for polite company- Kaldur takes a moment to admire the view. Roy pushes himself up, staggers over to his side of the closet; puts on a pair of his derby-pants (actually a kilt), a derby shirt, tugs on a pair of shoes he can take on and off easily, but still kick ass in; grabs a red hoodie. His hair sticks up in every direction- his voice is a grumbling rasp in the dim air. “Right. Let’s take Lian to Dana.”

“My love, you do not have to-”

“Kaldur. You’re going to be my husband soon, right?” Kaldur nods. “Then you’ll have to get used to not doing some things on your own- and you’re pregnant with our child. I would be a cad of the worst caliber to let you go off into the night alone, pregnant, with a small child, alone, and in the- It’s cold out, right?”

“Yes, my love, it is.” Kaldur is quietly smiling.

“Right- in the cold, alone, without me. Did I say alone?”

“Yes, my love, you did. Is this a surface dweller chivalry thing?”

“No, this is a Roy Harper will never let his beloved Kaldur go into a potentially dangerous situation alone thing. Ready to go?”

“Just one thing to do first, my love.”

“What’s that?”
“This.” And then Kaldur kissed his Roy. And Roy kissed his Kaldur. And the little flutter between them did a flip. And Lian cleared her throat and said- “You can do that later. I want my Aunt D right now.” The hint of tears in the “right now” effectively broke the moment; Kaldur gently looked at Roy, who nodded once quietly. Roy grabs a big duffle bag, a spare domino mask- Kaldur grabs his new harpoons, made especially for him- they look like bracelets when not in use- pulls his derby-shirt on.

All three of them go out the back door, to the Zeta-tube in the backyard. With a murmur of a female voice in the night, all three of them vanish from Platinum Flatts- and re-appear in Keystone. Five blocks later, and they’re at Birdie’s House of Skate, Keystone- and that’s when Lian learns what her Aunt D and Ms. Helena do on Tuesdays and Thursdays and sometimes Saturdays.

Roy and Kaldur- that is, Hurtful Dodger and Fishwife, respectively, escort Lian into the roaring crowd- just in time to see Dyin’ da Hurtcha take a full deck from the opposing team (Keystral Hi’s); she tumbles with the hit, leaps to her feet, rolls on- the bright grey white stripe on her black helmet gleams in the disco strobe light. Lian is very quiet- it’s the second bout, and Fishwife and Hurtful Dodger are spotted by the rest of the Birds of Prey very quickly; the crowd soon notices them too, but gets the sense that they should wait to ask for autographs.

Lian ignores the catcalls, ignores the screams of the sweaty crowd- watches as her Aunt D, ‘cause she’d know those eyes anywhere, and no one moves quite like her- takes a star from another girl, strips off her stripe, and then her Aunt D is moving, left and right and eeling through spaces in the other girls, and the crowd roars, and Aunt D is lapping the group again and again, and then Aunt D is tapping her hips, and the teams stop- Lian doesn’t quite realize that she’s been screaming and whooping and hollering, but her aunt heard her, because her head whipped around and so did Ms. Helena’s and then Aunt D is talking to her team, and then she’s skating closer and then-

“Sweet Bun, what are you- why aren’t you at the house?”

“I had a nightmare and you weren’t there and I was scared so I went to Mr. Hurtful Dodger and Mister Fishwife’s house and I asked them to take me to you and they did ‘cause they’re nice and please don’t be mad Aunt D-” Artemis smiles, reaches forwards; tugs Lian into a warm, slightly sweaty hug.

“Sweet Bun, it’s okay. I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you were scared- do you want to sit with the rest of my team while I finish up here?” Lian presses herself closer to her sweaty, kinda stinky Aunt, but she doesn’t care because she’s safe now, she’s safe- she nods into her aunt’s chest, feels the world wobble a little when her mom aunt lifts her up and then they’re gliding and the crowd roars again, and then there are lots of women speaking and Mr. Roy and Mister Kaldur are speaking too, and then her aunt is sitting down and Ms. Helena is speaking, and Lian is very tired and so is Mimi, so she goes back to sleep.

Which is why Dyin’ da Hurtcha sat the last three minutes of bout two out- she was holding her niece while she slept and couldn’t be bothered to move; the score was twenty/forty in the Birds of Prey’s favor, so it wasn’t like it was a big deal.

That was the day Dyin’ da Hurtcha gained a devoted fanbase- and Dana Tan got a new level of respect from the Birds of Prey. (It’s one thing to kick ass; it’s another to hold a little girl so she can sleep through the night.) Her fans soon came up with this little bio: ‘Dyin’ da Hurtcha is a demoness from Helbitch’s dimension- and she shows it with her lightning fast moves, her incredible stamina, and her almost complete disregard for the rules. Off the track, she shows sparkling wit, a deep sense of personal honor, and a smile that could melt steel. Recently, it became known that Dyin’ da
Hurtcha is also an Aunt, and a very loving one indeed."

Her teammates would occasionally rib her about what Lian had said the next morning, when the team sans uniforms were eating breakfast at a local diner- “Aunt D! You never told me you were cool!” Lian’s face is scrunched up in indignation; Helena is snickering into her coffee.

“…I thought it was self-evident…”

“Well, it wasn’t. So… am I in trouble?”

“A bit, yes. You’re grounded ‘till Friday, Sweet Bun- no TV, no computer, and absolutely no ice cream.”

Lian stares at her aunt for a long moment. “Aunt D… Today’s Wednesday, I don’t watch TV, the computer is scary, and I’m eating ice cream right now.”

Dana glances at her niece, snorts. “I know what I said. And that’s a fro-yo.”

“Oh.”

Helena loses it completely- as do the rest of the Birds. And it was a good day.

(Perhaps Helena met a guy- a reporter- on the Birds of Prey tour, at the after-party for the Hub City match up with the Hub City Hooter’s- a cute guy by the name of Vic Sage, all red-brown hair, big grey eyes, and sneakily probing questions; he was also a bundle of adorable ticks and nervous habits. The way he watched her mouth, leaned in to speak to her- didn’t stare at her boobs when she got a bit dramatic- gave her just barely enough personal space, and he smelled good, sounded good; Dana, who was actually very hard to impress, liked him. Lian, who was a startlingly accurate litmus test, liked him. Roy barely approved of him- and Kaldur gave him the threat of a lifetime. He still asked for her phonenumber- the guys from before hadn’t- and he had called her and…

Love is funny and sweet and special.

And it was good.)

This part of the story is about Blue Beetle, both of the “junior” Green Lanterns, M’gann M’orzz, and politics:

Oan Space- too far up in the atmosphere to be seen with the naked eye:

Jamie Reyes- Blue Beetle- is a little… worried. Khaji Da was freaking out in the back of his head, and he needed him to be calm because his- >ohnoohnoohnonononononononononono< Khaji Da, you’re really fucking up my calm, chill out, it’s not that bad- >WE’REGONNADIEYOUJACKASSITOLDYOUTHATTHISWASABADIDEA< Calm down! attention was being taken up by a guy with scuffed up white skin and blackness around his eyes and he’s losing really badly and he can’t call his sister or Kai-Ro for backup because they’ll get in huge trouble, again, if they’re off Oa (near him) and he’s really about to die because those punches are taking a lot out of them both and it’s kinda hurting to breathe and-
Milagro Reyes has a *very bad* feeling- and no, it’s not because Mr. Kilowog just called her a poozer again *what does poozer even mean?* and it’s not because she has to do really well in the next exercise, otherwise *I won’t be assigned to Mr. Rayner’s squad and I need to because Zeta-Tubes make my stomach flippy weird and Earth is a really tough neighborhood and I won’t get assigned there if I’m anything other then top of the class and Kai-Ro -he’s kinda cute- but I don’t think he notices me like that- has been helping me with the “Focus Your Will” thing but I still haven’t managed a decent attack because I really don’t want to hurt Mr. Kilowog he growls a lot, but he means well, and he looks way too much like Bruno, our pitbull even though he calls me a poozer and Kai-Ro is too nice and I’m not allowed off-planet until my training is complete so I can’t ask for Jamie’s help and-

The scream of a person in blue armor as he falls to the glowing green ground of the HSF sub-training ring #647 breaks her flagging concentration; her own little sisterly intuition lets her know that the person is *Jamie!* and she unconsciously uses her Ring to make her eyes sharper- sharp enough to see a man with white skin all black and whites Lobo- *who? Doesn’t matter, nobody hurts my sidekick!* about to hurt smash break her brother- and then there is a flash of green burning burning and she’s there and her green cased fist is under his chin and he’s *flying- and she doesn’t stop to check if Kai-Ro is following her (he is), doesn’t check if Kilowog has noticed that she’s not there (he has; he tried to grab her when she bolted for Lobo, but was too slow; he was too slow to catch Kai-Ro, and *damn* if that boy wasn’t faster than he looked) because she’s a little too busy beating the hell out of some poozer named Lobo to *care* about what anyone else thinks about what she can do.

Kai-Ro quickly darts after his sister, Milagro *she’s really cool* lets her have the first round of fighting kneels by his brother, because that’s what they are, and begins running diagnostics with his ring. *Mil’s might not have the patience for taking the healing classes at the Sanitarium, but I am glad that I do- the teachers are not the best, but the information is the important thing- Oh, Jamie, why didn’t you call us, we would have come- Ah! The damage is not as bad as I thought- please, Khaji Da, I know you don’t like but Jamie really needs the help, his ribs are cracked and I know that you don’t like me either, but you do like him so for his sake please let give you the energy to heal him, please- and Khaji Da agrees and takes the energy from who doesn’t like him much either, but she’s much better than Puño Sacador who still actively tries kill him.

I do believe some key elements of exposition are missing here, so I will attempt to explain things. (I might be the narrator, but I’m not privy to everything that goes on in this world- I’m not God.) The key elements you’ll need for this part of the story are: what Oa is, and what a Green Lantern is; who the Reyes’ are, and where they live; and who is The Main Man?

In order:

One of the oldest planets in the universe, Oa serves as the home and headquarters for a race of blue-skinned powerful humanoids who have dubbed themselves the Guardians of the Universe. The Guardians administer the Green Lantern Corps, a group of powerful universal police officers equipped by the Guardians with green-colored power rings along with green lanterns with which to charge the rings. According to ancient custom, Oa's star is called Sto-Oa, or “The Light of Oa” by the children of the planet's inhabitants. It was the center of the universe in another world.

Oa's history is not clear; according to some, the Guardians originated on a planet called Maltus. These evolved Maltusians later moved to Oa and named themselves Oans- Oa became a convenient...
base of operations. Other had the Oans living there from the beginning- if asked, Anansi the Spider would say “Oa? It’s the place made of green and willpower, from the days long before the sky and earth and sea; some of the Oans were there from the beginning- other’s came there when Greed and Fear and Anger ate their home alive. There is more, but you are not old enough to hear the full tale…”

Oa appears as a desert-like, lifeless planet- and this is mostly true. It is an old place, the center of which has nearly cooled; it has a warm enough sun that throws out soft green-white light. In certain places there are oasis-like growths of a special kind of plant that grow only on Oa- they smell like vanilla and cheese. Milagro kind of loves them- the leaves of the shrub-sized tree-shaped plants feel like rabbit fur and are supple like leather, sturdy to lean against, soft to sit under; Kai-Ro thinks that the grove of them near the Dining Hall (about four Earth-hours away, actually) is an excellent place for meditative contemplation. The Oan’s have no name for the plant, so Milagro and Kai-Ro, after some consultation with Jamie, named them sofa-bushes.

The main feature is the Guardians' city- a massive sprawling citadel of emerald colored stones and gleaming black and white lines- white fountains and white benches and white walkways and white signs with black writings and black walkways and black fountains and black benches and black signs with white writings and the Green Lantern everywhere. Kai-Ro doesn’t exactly hate the city, but it wears on him, the lack of plants and the fountains are ultra-clean water nothing living nothing the real green only light gleaming gleaming- sterile.

Milagro and Kai-Ro met three years ago, and realized that they lived in the same house during the first few hours of Basic, on Oa- Milagro was pretty excited to be there, Kai-Ro… less so.

Milagro Reyes is from El Paso, Texas. She has shoulder length black hair that she wears up in a ponytail or braid most of the time- her eyes are the darkest caramel shade of brown; her skin is a lovely supercreamy do you want some coffee with your half and half color. She is thirteen years old; she’ll be fourteen in August- and her older brother, Jamie, is sixteen. She was playing in the park near her barrio one day- saw something green and glinting in the light; picked it out of the dirt. It was a ring- it looked to her ten year old eyes like the decoder ring she got out of the Sparkle Chews box (Sparkle Chews, turns your tongue to rainbows! The most colorful cereal around!), but it was… heavier, more… real. She took it home, washed the dust out of the circle on the ring and it looked like my daddy’s class ring, with the band all snug up to the circle part and that symbol, where have I seen it before?

She would find the Lantern that went with the ring about a week later, meet Kai-Ro the week after that- memorize the oath (add a little flair of her own; Kai-Ro thought the spin at the end was just a tad excessive, but that’s just the way she rolls)- fight off the occasional Kaiju, because that’s what they call them on Maiden Diana, and I guess that makes me Maiden Aphrodite- I like her the best with Kai-Ro and three years later all the adults vanished and she and Kai-Ro and Jamie had to stop a giant asteroid from crashing into the Gulf and then Mr. Rayner and Mr. Gardener (“Call me Guy, kiddo.” “Okay, Mr. Guy.”) and Mr. Stewart and Mr. Jordan were giving them a talking to about responsibility and effectiveness and Milagro shut them up with a bark of “You weren’t here- we were. If you really think we need to be… I dunno, trained, then give us training but don’t you dare imply that we don’t know what we’re doing. Don’t you dare.” Kai-Ro had backed her up with a face of stone and serenity; Jamie was still towing the asteroid back to the belt- and he had gotten them both earbuds that would connect them to him, and they discretely called him and told him that they had to go to Oa for formal Green Lantern training and he had said- “You have to tell mom and dad- and I’m going with you.”
Kai-Ro doesn’t actually know what his name is—his mother always called him “baby” or “Mijo” or “tonto cabrón” and those aren’t names. He has wavy soft purple hair that he keeps cropped short and close to his head because hairpulling hurts, a long thin face that narrows at the top and bottom, big black eyes, creamy pale skin that bruised too easily for his tastes, turns a warm olive in the summer—and he is a devout Buddhist. He has to be, because he loves his mother and sometimes she loves him— it was the only way he found that worked so that he wouldn’t hate his mother because it’s wrong to hate—it’s wrong, and sometimes his mother stopped loving him, because he would always always do something wrong and she would always stop and stare and she would start screaming at him and scratching at his face and hitting him and throwing things at him and hating him and his mother was always so… broken, like— he had heard once that innocence was a precious, fragile thing, so maybe his mother’s precious fragile thing got smashed to little pieces and she wasn’t ever able to move on and let those jagged pieces of dead girl go and stop them from scratching stabbing twisting her apart and she loved him sometimes and she hated him sometimes and the best times are when she doesn’t care— He had seen her back once, all curvy pale; got the thrashing of a lifetime, couldn’t move his body for days afterwards; a mass of burns and slashes, like something with claws of burning had scratched her all up…

How do you deal with suffering? What can you do with the sorrow and rage in your heart, when life decides to kick you where it hurts? Do you leave it alone, let it fester and boil under your soul until it rots you away from within (where do you think the- ah, but that is later) or do you accept that life is not always so sweet and kind, and that you are due some measure of suffering, and that the amount you experience is the exact and correct amount? (Suffering is part of being alive— learning how to accept suffering is part of growing up. Usually, a person learns how to deal when they’re in their teens—but. Some people learn how to deal before they’re born—Kai-Ro is one of those people.) Kai-Ro doesn’t know how suffering should be dealt with— but he does know that the amount of suffering he has is the amount he should have, is the amount he does have and he lives in the park mostly because he’s never had a Mommy and Mother doesn’t love him all the time (and Mothers always love their children. Oh Kai-Ro. Oh god.)

Kai-Ro got the name Kai-Ro when Milagro met him during a fight with a kaiju from the ocean—a Giant giant squid, to be exact—she asked for his name, he told her “I don’t have one.”

“…Can I call you Cairo until you figure out what your name should be? Duck!”

He did—the massive tentacle with spiked tipped suckers missed his midsection—“Thanks! Yeah, that sounds good to me—on your Six!”

Jamie got his powers from a beetle shaped amulet of some alien stone—it attached itself to the middle of his back much the same way the spider attached to Sharon’s front—he touched it, it skittered across his body, there was a moment of searing pain—oh, wait, no, Sharon knew exactly what she was getting into. Jamie didn’t. And Jamie is really just like his little sister—he has a tendency to give names to creatures that talk, and the Beetle talked; it took a few hours for him to recognize the buzz in the back of his head as words, speaking, and then came tones and phrases and by the next day, he understood what the beetle was saying and it was something along the lines of “FUCKFUCKFUCK-SHITFUCKGODAMNOWFUCKSHIT” which just wasn’t going to work in his subconscious, so… “OI! CAN IT, WOULD’YA?”

He learned how to use his powers when his sister and her friend—who-is-also-a-permanent-houseguest tried to kill him (the first time); their parents (because Kai-Ro became the second son of the Reyes family, and he’s the same age as Milagro but he’d never been to school—so, Bianica laid
down the law and took Kai-Ro (who spelled Cairo, K-A-I dash R-O, sweet baby) with her to work to get checked out and Alberto put in a few extra hours at his garage and Abuelita Elena made him a pot of chili and pronounced him her second grandson- and Jamie got a new younger brother to watch out for) learned that they had all gotten superpowers when Milagro’s giant green fist tried to smash Jamie into pulp in the backyard- “MILAGRO ALESSANDRA CORTÈZ ROSA MARIA REYES, IS THAT A GIANT GREEN FIST?”

“BUT MOM, HE’S A-”

“MILAGRO ALESSANDRA CORTÈZ ROSA MARIA REYES, DO NOT MAKE EXCUSES! IS THAT A GIANT GREEN FIST?”

“YES MAMA, BUT-”

“NO BUTS! THERE WILL BE NO BE FIGHTING IN MY HOUSE! MIJA- PUT THAT FIST AWAY RIGHT NOW! JAMIE, THOSE HAD BETTER NOT BE CANONS WHIRRING ON YOUR ARMS! KAI-RO! Please let go of your brother and sister- I don’t think they’ll be hurting each other tonight.” Alberto quietly sipped his beer- glanced into the backyard, where his two younger children were lowering or letting go of their older brother, who was carefully depowering an interesting set of blue armor- listened with half an ear to his wonderful, magnificent, incredible wife bawl their children out… was quietly thankful that his wife was the one who disciplined the children by yelling at them- she usually caught their mistakes before his subtler “Catholic Guilt Internal Flambé” approach was necessary. He would later learn from his darling Bianica that his two youngest are Green Lanterns, and his oldest is Blue Beetle; they would talk, and argue a little bit, about it for most of the night- by the next morning, they had a set of ground-rules ready for their three children.

(Those rules are:

School comes first- I don’t care if the world’s about to end. If your homework isn’t done and your grades aren’t up to par, NO HABRA SUPERHERO.

If you need to go off-planet for longer than it takes to save the day, I expect a call telling me so.

ABSOLUTELY NO FIGHTING! I don’t care what was done, or who got hurt- you talk it out first, ¿Entiendes?)

Their children have followed those rules for three years, nearly four- being near senior heroes isn’t going to change that. “You need training, that’s for sure- you’ll have to go to Oa to get it.”

“…So, Oa is off planet?”

“Yeah- why?”

“I need to tell my mom where I’m going, duh.” Milagro looks at Mr. Rayner with all of the intense are-you-stupid-of-course-I’m-going-to-call-my-mother-and-tell-her-where-I’m-going a thirteen year old girl can muster. Kai-Ro has texted his (their) dad where he’s going- Milagro’s phonecall went like this:

“¿Mija? ¿Qué es?”

“Mamá, tengo que ir por formación oficial, yo no sabemos cuánto tiempo me habré ido...”
“Que está bien, nena. Go-yo contar todo cuando regreses, ¿vale?”

“Si, si Mama. Love you.”

“Love you too, sweetie.”

Around a week of intergalactic flight later- and Jamie had a hell of a time convincing Khaji Da to chart a course to Oa- and both underage Green Lanterns are at Basic. Jamie cheerfully camps out on one of Oa’s many moons- it’s one that’s riddled with caverns, so he has lots of places to hide. He’s also the one who stumbles on the crash site of The Main Man.

Who is The Main Man? He’s the last Czarnian in existence- semi-immortal, extremely dangerous, and the finest bounty hunter in existence. His name is unhearable to human ears- but Khaji Da isn’t human. He knows who The Main Man is- and he realizes too late that the stasis-pod they’ve found is one of the old “Waking Death” models, and that by them being in proximity to it, the automatic opening mechanism has activated.

>Oh, Fuck. His name translates as He Who Devours Your Entrails And Thoroughly Enjoys It; He’s also known as The Main Man, The Scourge of the Cosmos, The Last Czarnian, The Destroyer, The Master Fragger, The 'Bo, The Wolf, Mister Machete- Oh, FUCK! Jamie I… you don’t want to use lethal force, but that’s the only way we’ll live through being attacked by Lobo- ohno it’s too late- Jamie, RUN!<&

Kilowog is stunned. He has the not-very private opinion that the two new Lanterns from Sector 2418 are pansies- this is changing that opinion very quickly. Milagro hasn’t shown any aggression- not even when she sneak-attacked her in the Lavatories; she has consistently shown nothing but reasonability and kindness, which is admirable… in a person.

Green Lanterns aren’t people- they’re Green Lanterns. Kilowog wasn’t about to let one of his poozers out into the big wide ’Verses without knowing that they’ll “comport themselves in a manner reflective of the Green Lantern ethos” or in not-polite vernacular- “I expect you to act like fucking hardasses, because that’s what we are. We’re the policing entity for the majority of the ’Verse- we must be able to be impartial, respectful, and in many cases, Unyielding.” And Kai-Ro wants to join the Medisect of the Corps- which wouldn’t be a bad idea for 2814; any sector with four fully realized Green Lanterns who are always busy and two trainees has some issues, okay? Anyway, he thought that his newest trainees were going to wash out- but they’re fighting Lobo.

They’re fighting Lobo- and it’s only their second week of training.

He’s not sure that they know who it is they’re fighting- and then he gets close enough to hear the… Blue Beetle- an infiltrator class? Here? Why- they’re talking- “What’s his deal?”

“He’s a bounty hunter, goes by the name of Lobo- he’s really powerful; he’s also smarter than he looks.”

“Weaknesses?”

“…”
“Crap. You get that Mills?”

Milagro’s screams of anger answer that question. They definitely don’t know what they’re doing. This should be interesting.

We’re going to skip ahead—because the aftermath is much more interesting than the actual fight.

“Green Lantern Six of Sector 2814, you have violated several treaties, destroyed the majority of HSF Sub-Training Ring #647, allowed an Infiltrator to run loose on your planet, ignored Our express order to not leave Oa during your training, and, against Our express wishes, used lethal force without being a full Lantern. Do you deny the charges?”

“No sir, I don’t.”

“Have you any explanation for your actions?”

“Yes sir, I do.”

“Well?”

“In order of the offences listed:

I will be happy to help clean, repair, and replace the training ring.

There’s a difference between Justice, and What Is Just— that’s what my Mamá and my Papi taught me. I don’t know if I did the legally correct thing— but I know I did the right thing.

I trust my older brother— and I love him. I also know my older brother— he will not betray our Homeworld.

I hate to tell you this, but… I’m not going to miss a call from my Mamá just because of orders. There are some things in life that are necessary.

He started it.”

“Green Lantern Six of Sector 2814. Are you ready to face the punishment we have decided necessary for your crimes?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You are hereby on probation— you are to be under the direct supervision of Green Lantern Three of Sector 2814 for a period of no less than five Oan Lunar years. You are also to complete Basic, and to complete Dynamic Studies with nothing less than distinction. Do you understand?”

“Erm… To clarify, five Oan Lunar years is equivalent to fourteen Earth days, and Dynamic Studies is the Diplomatic course work, yes?”

“Yes.”

Milagro stares at the Guardian for a long moment. “Yes. I understand, sir.” Guy Gardener— Green
Lantern Three of Sector 2814- who was quietly standing at her side, gently places his hand on her shoulder, tugs her away. They’re out of the Hall of Order, and inside their Sector House when Milagro finally finds her voice. “Mr. Guy?”

“Yeah, kiddo?”

“Did I just get a slap on the wrist?”

“Not really. The mortality rate of DiploSect is one of the highest- most of the things us Lanterns deal with aren’t really “talk it out” kinds of fights.”

“DiploSect focuses on interstellar relations and languages, right?”

“Yeah-”

“So there’s no fight simulation?”

Guy stares ahead very quietly, then down at the youngest Green Lantern on Oa. “Kiddo, I can’t tell you that. I can tell you, however, that DiploSect has some of the least physically capable Lanterns in the Corps- mostly the ones who didn’t wash out, but…”

“But also couldn’t be assigned to regular missions. I’ve been reassigned to Antarctica. An extremely dangerous Antarctica.”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Milagro and Guy are sitting at the kitchen table of their Sector House- Milagro is carefully clenching and unclenching her fists.

“So. I have to learn how to talk to creatures who want to kill me and mine, and I’m not going to have access to the skills necessary to fight them off, is that it?”

“Not quite. I’m a member of SpeciSect- don’t look at me like that, would you have known if I hadn’t told you?- and I can get you into a few… classes, if you want.”

Milagro grins- then frowns. “I would love that, Mr. Guy- but I don’t want to play favorites. If I’m going to do anything, learn anything, it has to be by my own merits, not the words of someone else.”

Guy sighs, then smirks. “Oi, you’re young… Kiddo, if you aren’t worth it, you’ll be kicked out of the classes. I wouldn’t recommend anyone who doesn’t have the chutzpah for the work- they know that. It’ll be up to you to figure out how to succeed.”

Milagro stares at Guy, wide eyed, then blushes- she’s a thirteen year old girl, who just got complimented by one of her personal heroes.

“Green Lantern Five of Sector 2814, you have violated several treaties, destroyed the majority of HSF Sub-Training Ring #647, aided an injured Infiltrator, ignored Our express order to not leave Oa during your training, neglected your studies, and aided Six of 2814 in her imprisonment of the one called Lobo. Do you deny the charges?”

“No ma’am, I do not.”

“What do you have to say for yourself?”
“I’ll be happy to help fix the training ring, or build a new one.

I don’t know which treaties I violated, but I’m very sorry, and I’ll try not to do it again.

The Infiltrator is my older brother- family comes before interstellar allegiances.

I do not want to kill anyone, as that is against the order of the world- and I only fight when it is necessary.

Six is my sister- of course I aided her.”

“Green Lantern Five of Sector 2814. Are you ready to face the punishment we have decided necessary for the atonement of your crimes?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You are on probation for a period of no less than five Lunar Oan Years. During that time, you are to be supervised by Green Lantern Four of Sector 2814. You are also to complete Basic, and to complete ExnoBio training with full honors. Is that understood?”

“Yes ma’am; that is understood.”

Kyle Rayner- Green Lantern Four of Sector 2814- pushes off the wall, takes his hands out of his pockets, casually saunters over to Kai-Ro- walks past him; Kai-Ro follows him with all the intent of a duckling. They’re back at the Sector House- in the kitchen, leaning against the counter- Milagro and Guy have gone to Guy’s restaurant; Hal and John are off doing stuff. “You don’t fight unless it’s necessary, because it’s against the “order of the world”?” Kyle’s voice is laced with incredulity.

Kai-Ro stares ahead for a long moment; when he speaks, his voice is a solemn, quiet thing- he’s never said it out loud, but he knows. He knows. “My mother is a wonderful woman. She has big eyes, like mine- I get my nose from her, my hands… My ears and mouth and hair come from my… Father. My mother hates my father- I am half of my father; my mother hates half of me. I have never done anything to my mother- I have only been her… been her loving son. I want to love my mother, so I do. I don’t live with my mother; it isn’t safe- she would kill me, given the chance. She has already tried- there is a scar on my side that came from her hands. Understand, Mr. Rayner- I love my mother. She doesn’t always love me, but I will always, always love her. That doesn’t mean I have to like her, and that doesn’t mean I don’t have anger issues. I do. I know what I’m capable of- and I know that I will never forgive myself for hurting, for killing someone just because I lost my temper. That’s why… Well. That’s why I only fight when it is necessary.

As for the world’s order- I cannot change my mother; this is the way it is. I do not possess the power to change her heart and mind and soul. It is beyond me. I have accepted this- and I have also accepted that my mother wants to kill me, has always wanted to kill me, doesn’t want me, never did want me… And I’ve accepted that. I also know that she can only hurt me if I let her; she can only harm me if I’m there. So- I make myself still, and quiet, and peaceful, because I’ve accepted that the only power I have is over myself… and while I’ll never be safe again, she’ll never hurt me again.

To me, that is a fair enough trade.” Kai-Ro’s voice doesn’t lose its soft melodious tone- his eyes glow with quiet fury, and unnerving focus- and his face is… blank. There is no quirk to his brow, no twitch in his lip, no scrunch in his nose- his face is porcelain and serene. And he is still, and quiet.

Kyle stares down at the young man next to him, then sighs. “Any reason you want to be in
“Fine… But you’re also going to learn how to control yourself, even when angered - don’t give me that look- because you’ll need to. We face dangerous things in the ‘Verses, Kai-Ro; things that sometimes find ways into our hearts; try to destroy us from within by growing our apathy and complacency. You need to get mad sometimes- you need to know how you can let that mad out- and here, in this place, it is safe to get mad, and it is safe to find your limits, to find ways to rage and scream and rant and roar. You are safe here, Kai-Ro.”

Kai-Ro doesn’t move, doesn’t speak- but there is a slight softening of his face, a slight relaxation in his small stature; he leans slightly closer, the soft fuzz of his purple hair glinting in the light. Kyle gently touches Kai-Ro’s shoulder; Kai-Ro (bless him) doesn’t shrug his shoulder for a good twenty seconds.

_Dervish:_

Teekl is worried. It’s odd- she hasn’t gotten a vibe like this for a long time, not since Klarion had to crash on her couch for a few years, not since her mother and father didn’t come back from the Hunts, not since she had gone with Klarion to the material world and was touched by the half-Djinn girl with a Destiny, not since her Uncle Osebo got out of gaol, not since… Not since the place called Chick’a Gami turned into a place called Gotham.

I think I should tell you more about Teekl, Dervish, Klarion, and… some other things. Specifically, Lia West-Allen- not so specifically, her place in this world (and possibly point out a few connections that aren’t visible from the outside.)

Teekl le Chat is a female _Homo felis magi_; that is to say, she’s a woman who can also turn into a cat, if she wants to. She usually turns into a cat in the material world, not because she has to, but because _she can spy better as a cat_. It is wrong, completely wrong, to think that she can’t trade forms as easily as breathing- during one memorable illness when she was a medium sized child, she sneezed so hard and often that she spent more time switching in between forms than she did in one or the other. Teekl is also a very sweet and loyal individual- she’s the rarest of cats, one who in a past life was a dog; she comes when you call her name, likes people, and adores games of all kinds. She’s a sensual creature- she likes to touch and feel things, rub and wriggle and lean into things and purr. She has thick, dark brown hair that shines with glossy health- it’s cut into a sharp, clever bob, close to her jawline, curving to her skull. Her eyes are a bright and lively red with flecks of warm orange, copper, brown, and gold scattered through her iris- her lashes are long and thick and make her eyes look twice as big as they are (her eyes are quite large, though), shaped like almonds. Her nose is small, pert- cute and triangular; her mouth is wide, but she paints it to look much smaller. Her skin is a soft honey cream color- a pale, never-touched by sunlight color, glossed over with gold, burnished with a soft rosy gold on the apple of each cheek; her body is wide at the hip, narrow at the waist, and sparing at the bust. She has long, graceful limbs; thin, clever fingers. As a cat, she is a tabby of warm orange and black, striped and swirled like a tiger or a particularly unhealthy ice-cream.

Why does this matter? You’ll know soon enough- if it didn’t matter, you’d never hear about it.
Blunted affect is the scientific term describing a lack of emotional reactivity (affect display) on the part of an individual. It is manifest as a failure to express feelings either verbally or non-verbally, especially when talking about issues that would normally be expected to engage the emotions. Expressive gestures are rare and there is little animation in facial expression or vocal inflection.

Blunt affect can be symptomatic of schizophrenia, depression, or brain damage. The difference between flat and blunted affect is in degree. A person with flat affect has no or nearly no emotional expression. He or she may not react at all to circumstances that usually evoke strong emotions in others. A person with blunted affect, on the other hand, has a significantly reduced intensity in emotional expression.

In this story, there are only five people (that we care about- the ones who have a bearing on future events; the ones who will have to save the world repeatedly) who have a blunted, or flat affect- those people are Scarecrow, M’gann, Permafrost, and Tangent. The thing is, those first three people were damaged into flatness- Lia was born that way. She isn’t just different- she’s very different. She laughs at jokes long after they’ve stopped being funny- she cries over nothing. She doesn’t get truly sad very often, and when she does, she doesn’t deal with it by crying and sobbing- for her, there is no grief. Just a vague sort of dreaminess that, frankly, worries her mother and father- and then Doan or Dawn will come screaming through the door, or break something again, or Doan will hit his sister, or Dawn will put jello in Doan’s shoes or or or- and Lia, quiet Lia, will get lost in the shuffle.

At home, Lia Hélène West-Allen is quiet like a leaf- in the field, she won’t shut up. Why? In psychology, coping is "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing” or "exceeding the resources of the person". Coping is expending conscious effort to solve personal and interpersonal problems, and seeking to master, minimize or tolerate stress or conflict. Psychological coping mechanisms are commonly termed coping strategies or coping skills. Unconscious or non-conscious strategies (e.g., defense mechanisms) are generally excluded. The term coping generally refers to adaptive or constructive coping strategies, i.e., the strategies reduce stress levels. However, some coping strategies can be considered maladaptive, i.e., stress levels increase. Maladaptive coping can thus be described, in effect, as non-coping. Furthermore, the term coping generally refers to reactive coping, i.e., the coping response follows the stressor. This contrasts with proactive coping, in which a coping response aims to head off a future stressor. Coping responses are partly controlled by personality (habitual traits), but also partly by the social context, particularly the nature of the stressful environment.

Lia Hélène West-Allen’s coping mechanism, the one that works, is the steady recitation of something she knows to be true. In her normal life, this would mean that she would say, just under her breath, over and over and over “I love my family”, or “they don’t mean it like that”. As a super hero, she can’t do that, so she regurgitates factoids and figures that she’s picked up by osmosis from her much more scientifically inclined family. And she knows that they already know this stuff, she knows that they think she’s a meat-head; knows that she’s not all that smart, but she’s started reading the Encyclopedia Britannia and no one said she couldn’t and she’s remembering stuff and the words aren’t swimming around on the page so much so long as she does her mutter- that’s what she calls it, her “mutter”- and she never, ever ever ever lets on that she can hear them when they talk about how “dear, sweet, pretty Lia” is and how “she’ll be a wonderful… adult”. Like she doesn’t know. Lia works very hard to never ever get angry- not the real anger, not the blackness that she knows is inside her, waiting, watching- hungry dark. (She knows something is wrong with her- that she’s missing something important and vital to being alive. There is an easy way to explain what it is- love comes from the heart. Lia’s love is in her head.)

(People want to separate the world into polarities- dark and light, ugly and beautiful, good and evil,
right and wrong, inside and outside- material and real; true and false. Polarities serve us in our learning and growth, but as souls we are all of those things, together and indifferent.)

Sadly, Lia actually genuinely enjoys (not loves, takes joy in) cooking and cleaning and sewing and gardening and painting- all the things Grammy Joan likes to teach her how to do. Lia’s other coping mechanism, the one that doesn’t work, is housework. For example, the day her pet cat got run over by a car, she sighed with a great exhalation of air, took her birthday money (which was actually her savings, and amounted to close to fifty dollars), bought supplies, and baked over fifteen thousand cookies. Most of them got donated to the food bank- some got frozen, and some got eaten. And Lia learned that a batch of cookie dough could be baked off in loaf pans. And she learned about something called “molecular gastronomy”, or in less fancy words, the science of cooking. Another time, she heard her cousin Wally call her an “annoyance” on Christmas Eve and proceeded to knit her entire family a hat- each person got their own, personalized hat- which was given to them the next day. Did any of this make her a happier person? No. But it made her family happy, and that’s something… Right? (No. In fact, that’s rather awful- it is a correct and true assumption to make that Lia doesn’t really do anything to make herself happy. Ever.)

How do these two people fit together? Well- while Wally was in Africa for approximately two weeks, Lia was sucked through a Dervish-made portal to the 1950’s. (Same place, different time.) And Teekl, who is above all things, polite, went to her parents to tell them so- and explain to them that their daughter might be back unchanged, might be back very changed, or might not be back at all. She was trying to figure out where her bad vibes were coming from- as head of Dervishes Special Security, she has to keep track of such things. She had modified a scrying spell- a little more blood and dribbly candles than she really liked to deal with, but… and then she watched Bat Lash pick up a satchel filled with rocks- except one of them wasn’t a rock, it was a piece of a shattered world that had fallen from the sky long ago, sharp and green and covered with ash… and then she felt it as a person- She looks like… she looks a lot like Flash, but why would she be… Oh fuck. Oh Bast and Diana, oh mighty ones. Oh shit.- fell through the window she had opened to the past.

Central City, 1952:

Jay Garrick isn’t sure what to make of the person- looks like a boy- who just slammed into him. The boy- sure looks like a boy with hair that short, and those shoes is short, lanky, and small in a way that screams “UNDERFED”; big blue eyes, strawberry blonde hair cut short on the sides and long on the top, a firm set to his jaw, a sharply upturned nose; his mouth is half open in… shock it looks like. The boy is wearing a pair of dark blue jeans, a bright green t-shirt, and a stripey overshirt left open- it looks pretty good on him, to be fair, although the jeans are a tad worn, the shoes are a bit large, and everything just seems a bit… ill fitting, worn. He’s wearing a round brown cap on his head, carrying a big sack on his back; it’s lumpy, and that vaguely off white color undyed canvas is.

“Son? Son, you all right?” His voice seems to startle the boy out of whatever stupor he was in- when he speaks, his voice comes out softer than he would have thought, instantly dropping the boy’s age down. “Y-yeah… I mean, yes sir, I’m perfectly alright.”

“What are you doing out this late?”

The boy looks at him oddly for a second, then glances around- it’s just past midnight, and the streetlights are quietly turning off. He looks back at Jay- the Flash- and swallows nervously. Then, he speaks, quietly, hesitantly, his high voice breaking at the end… “I was… I was walking home sir,
but… but I think I got lost somewhere… and I should have been home by now, but I… I think I’m l-
lost sir.”

Jay looks at the little boy for a long moment, then sighs and says, under his breath, “I hope Joanie
doesn’t kill me for this… Son, it seems to me you could use a place to stay for the night. Now, I
think the best place for you would be my house, alright?”

Lia nods her head, then frowns. “…If you touch me weird, I’m cutting your hands off. Just so you
know.” Jay looks at the little boy for a long moment, then nods carefully. Brave boy. Around that
time he realizes that they’ve been speaking at superspeed- and he thinks… -but just to be
sure. ‘Think you can keep up, son?”

“No problem, sir.” With that, both of them race off into the night, taking twists and turns with the
ease only true speedsters can manage- of course, Lia isn’t exactly a speedster, she’s a light
manipulator, but she can fake it really well, and she is connected to the speedforce… Anyway, they
make it back to a small house on the Keystone side of Central, near what is, in Lia’s time, the
Greenbelt- but now, it’s actually a big stretch of woods and fields, going far off into the distance- the
gently twinkling lights from the Keystone airport glow on the horizon. This is Grandpa Jay and
Grammy Joan’s house- nah, that’s crazy, this guy is much too young to be- but it was noon just
before, and daddy doesn’t look or sound like this, and he sounds like Grandpa Jay, and…

Jay and Lia stop at the back fence, and here Jay looks down at the boy and says, “Okay, son- Now,
my wife doesn’t know you’re coming, so let me do the talking, alright?”

“…Yes sir.” Lia unconsciously hunches herself in and down, the leather strap of her canvas bag
digging into her small shoulder. She was out shopping with her saved up allowance- she had gone to
her favorite thrift store, Cowboy’s Special Reserve- they always had clothing she would actually like
wearing, for cheap enough that she could usually buy a few other things; she had been wanting her
own copy of Shakespeare's plays for a while, as well as a copy of A Farewell to Arms. She wasn’t
sure how her parents had missed the fact that she was reading very old, very subversive stories, but
they had so… The other things in her bag weren’t really interesting- a pencil case full of pencils, a
dime-store sketchbook, toothbrushes that she was going to keep in her backpack and at school, a
new hairbrush, a scarf… nothing very special or exciting. She had left for her shopping just after
breakfast, realized too late that she had left her phone at home- she had packed a lunch, and left a
note, and if her parents didn’t trust her to go, she wouldn’t have gone.

(Why would she go on her own for clothes shopping? Well- most of the family budget goes towards
food, and Lia doesn’t actually eat all that much; she’ll give her share of food away, let someone else
have it, usually a real speedster- because she’s self-aware enough to know that, just like her love isn’t
the same as everyone else’s, her stomach isn’t either, nor are her powers- and the clothing she gets is
either a hand-me-down, or something she normally wouldn’t be caught dead in. And, to be frank- it’s
a relief for her parents to have her out of the house because the twins are little hellions, and Dora and
Bella are over at the house at all hours trying to get away from Bart who wants to be his older
brother Wally because Wally is the coolest thing since sliced bread, cooler than Uncle Barry even,
and… Well, Lia’s not being there frees up some valuable attention for the rest of them, and Lia stays
out of the family affairs because Daddy is Daddy, and she likes to draw and paint and read, and
science isn’t fun for her like it is for the rest of her family, so she usually doesn’t have anything to
say, and who are they to say magic doesn’t exist? Do they know everything?)

Jay quietly opens the back-gate on the white picket fence, steps through; Lia follows him, her cap
helping to shade her face from the moonlight. Jay steps up onto the porch, sighs, looks down and
back at the boy- who speaks then, his voice slightly scared, but oddly… accepting. “I can wait, you
know. I c-can wait out here for you to- you don’t have to… I can wait. It’s okay.” He looks very
csmall then, his bag almost too big on his back, his small body almost swamped by his clothing- there
are dark circles under his eyes.

Lia hasn’t been sleeping well lately; she’s had dreams that her older cousin Wally is in terrible
danger- or perhaps will be in terrible danger; Bart has taken to running over to their house at all hours
to “make sure everyone is still there” of course, she doesn’t really understand Portuguese all that
well, so his words come out in a half-understood rush that to anyone not a speedster sounds like a
mindnumbing blur of half-formed words; Lia doesn’t actually hear what her family says when they
talk at superspeed- she reads their lips. Dora and Bella had been sleeping over the past four days, and
Dawn and Doan had decided to play tricks on them, only Dora and Bella give as good as they get,
and Bart brought them all supplies and the mayhem had only stopped when her mom had given them
all spankings and dear god she hadn’t slept at all because they were all really loud and they never
invited her to join in, not even once…

Joan listens to her husband talk on the front porch, tugs her house coat closer over her body; she’s
always too nervous to sleep when her husband goes out on patrol, too worried. When her Jay walks
in the back door, he sees her sitting at the kitchen table, her mug of hot cocoa gone long cold. “Who
were you talking to dear?”

“A boy- a young boy who was running like me; I crashed into him, and he was lost so I brought him
home… I should have called ahead to tell you, but it’s late and I couldn’t just leave him there and-”

“How old is he?”

“He can’t be more than ten years old Joanie honey- you and I know that the hostels won’t let anyone
that young stay, and orphanages are no place for children- you know that as well as I do- so I
brought him home and I was hoping he could stay for a while…”

“Go on upstairs and shower, Jay-bird. I’ll see him in, settle him down. We’ve both got work in the
morning, remember?”

“But, honey-”

“You go on, Jay. What kind of teacher can I be if I can’t talk to a little boy so he isn’t scared of me,
ah?”

“Well- alright, but… alright. Alright. He’s right outside, so I’ll just-”

“Jay. Go on. I can handle a little boy.” Jay stares at his beautiful wife for a long moment, then sighs,
nods his head, and with a quiet clunking, steps up the stairs. The rushing sound of water through
pipes startles Joan out of her late-night slump; she stands up, reties her house coat over her
nightgown, and steps around the table- opens the backdoor to see… Oh, Jaybird- you can be
remarkably dense sometimes. If that’s a little boy, I’ll eat my gloves. “Come in sweetie- I don’t
mind.”

“Yes ma’am.” The little girl- because Lia is a girl- carefully walks up the three back steps, scrapes
her feet on the mat; steps inside the house.
Dervish:

Teekl is trying to figure out what she should wear to the material world- she usually goes as a cat, so this doesn’t really come up for her. Klarion finally steps in when he realizes that she’s been tossing the same clothing around her closet in the Palace for the past four days- “Teekl. Wear that black sari you got in Thuvaraiyam Pathi, and the jewelry set from Shangri-La; the shoes should be those ballet flats you got from the Opera house in Paris, you know, the one that burned down?”

“The one with the vampire in the basement?”

“The very same.”

“Okay- makeup?”

“Nothing too heavy, but a little blush on the cheekbones- sharp, but a little wider than for court- some tiny, and I do mean tiny, additions to the eyes; make your lips coral or salmon if you must, but the orange is a no go. Pack for at least a month their time- and do you have any idea why the spell allowed physical transference instead of strictly visual?”

“The only thing I can think of is that there was already a weak point in the era- my spell must have tipped the balance…”

“A little scrying spell like that?”

“No- I used it in conjunction with a basic locator, and the arcane forces could have multiplied-”

“Yeah, no. Even combining a scrying spell with a location spell is only ever going to equal a µ rune form, which has enough thaumic resonance to bake a cake… that shouldn’t be anywhere near enough to break a hole through the Âther, so there must be an underlying cause-”

“My uncle. Oh fucking hells and demons therein, my gods damned uncle.”

“Osebo? The leopard, Osebo? What’s so bad about-”

“He’s not just a leopard, Klarion he’s…” Teekl sighs. “I should have explained this to you long ago, but I was ashamed of my… of where I come from. Where all of my kind comes from. Do you know where stories come from? Not those silly things that get told to children, but the driving forces behind the world- you know, the threads from which all stories, all lives, are woven?”

“I… yeah, I think I do- in Africa, the king of the Sky bade a pretentious spider to find and capture four dangerous creatures… a python, a swarm of hornets, a dwarf, and a leopard. The spider did so with cleverness and tricks- brought the captured creatures to the king, and was given every story in the world.”

“Yes, that’s the short version. The long version is centuries and centuries of those same four creatures- or I should say, versions of those same four creatures- escaping every time the sky king, Nabu, died; the spider, who is always named Anansi, would have to find and capture the four creatures, and return them to the kings holdings. What neither history mentions, what no tale ever really says, is why the creatures needed to be captured, or… or what is descended from them.” Teekl sighs, settles her heavy body (cats are muscle, not fat) on the small seat inside her closet- Klarion settles on his haunches, gently takes her hands in his, slowly rubs his thumbs over the backs of her hands- soothing, soft gently, red eyes meeting dark black red; warm and soft.
Teekl, after a moment of silence, forces the word out. *If I'm right, things are about to get very very bad.* “The creatures from so long ago - they were… they were the first evils in the world. Onini, the python- he is from where all murderers, all assassins come from. He’s the very first creature to kill by ambush; he preyed on the weak, on the old, on the sick- understand, before he did these things… before he did these things, *they did not exist.* It is from him that these things took shape, gained their own terrible momentum- and he was the one who allowed the others out.” She is shaking, shaking in her seat, her eyes almost overflowing with tears- Klarion tugs her out of the seat, off the little bench, down onto the floor and onto his lap, into his arms- tucks her head under his chin, lets her curl and wiggle into a comfortable seat, carefully ignoring the interesting twinges in the pit of his stomach, the tingles up and down his spine Oh god, no no no- *I will not have relations with my familiar, that’s how my mother and my father got me, and I know who I am and I don’t want my children to be as I am, no no no that is not okay no no* and just… holds her, holds his strong and gentle friend, waits for her to compose herself- and through a titanic effort of will, forces his intense attraction down, because he hasn’t grown up in a hellaciously dangerous excuse of a house to lose control of his baser instincts yet- and yes, he’s a sexually mature male *Homo felis magi* but Gods damning praise to him, he has standards. (He will not be his parents- he made that choice, has stayed with that choice, *will deny himself happiness*, because there is a girl waiting in the far beyond, a girl with no skin and no name, bleeding all down the world and screaming. She is waiting for him to die; waiting, so she can have her revenge- or perhaps, to tell him her name. Anansi knows which one it is, but she won’t say- “That’s a story that I do know the end to- both of them- but I can’t say which one is true, because it hasn’t happened yet.”)

Teekl shudders, leans back into the strong chest of her best friend, her most favorite person- her master, and her companion, and *it will never happen- give that one up and away to the starqueens, Teekl, he’ll never go for it, and you can’t you can’t you can’t*, and she speaks again, her voice soft in the quiet muffled space of colored fabric and beads. “Mmoboro, the Hornets, are the ones who came next. No one is entirely sure where they came from, but all know what they are- they are that which screams in the night, they are… when- have you ever seen something that looked like a normal person, but then when you watched their face and eyes and heard them speak, you knew beyond all doubts that the creature before you was not and had never been, could never be- they’re the first true evil… the ones who came from the depths, the ones who want nothing more than to kill and kill and kill for the sake of killing.”

She sighs in his arms, settles herself against him- he resists the urge to bury his face in her soft black hair, but gods it’s soft on his throat and he can see down her shirt to the pink strip of her bra and- “Mnotia, the Dwarf- she is one of the more… mutable creatures. Generally speaking, she’s one of the only ones who could be considered… tragic, I suppose. The only reason she ever hurt anyone is that she couldn’t control her anger- it controlled her, allowed her to do terrible things; when this was pointed out to her, she did everything in her power to stop herself. She couldn’t- and then… well, there is a reason that there is always only one of her, never a team or a group or a family- Onini can work on a team- in later versions, he almost always does- Mmoboro is a family, though all of them are women, and Osebo has great charisma, can raise an army at will- Mnotia is the only one who is always alone.” Teekl is outright sobbing now, her body wracked with juddering screams.

Klarion lets out his deep humming purr, a rare and rolling thing that rumbles out of his chest only for Teekl- and Teekl loves the sound of it, the depth of it and the rolling timber and the way it chases her fears away and the way he only ever purrs for her and only like this when they’re alone together and she wants him so much; she’s loved him since before they were friends but- it is *highly* improper for either of them to act on their feelings, in her case because she is of much lower rank than he, in his case because he is of much higher rank than her, and neither of them are willing to besmirch the others honor even the slightest bit, no- not ever.
But… but Klarion will purr for Teekl when she’s scared and upset, like now, and Teekl will cuddle-not pet and touch, but intimately hold- with Klarion when he’s sad and angry- and if either of them ever manage to make it past their own inhibitions and the ways of their courtly upbringing, they could be truly happy. (It might happen- of course, one of them might have to be drugged or almost die first, but… it’s entirely possible. Oh dear.) Teekl begins to really relax, because Klarion doesn’t purr unless it’s absolutely safe- he doesn’t do anything by halves, after all- and then she speaks, at last explaining about her uncle. “Osebo, the leopard. He’s… he’s where all cats come from- he’s where independence, and cruelty for cruelty’s sake and torture… He’s your distant ancestor, and mine, and I hate him so much- but the reason. The reason any of them would have any effect on the power of my spells is that… When the first four creatures, the original monsters in the dark, are loose in the world, their descendants become much more powerful in their pursuits- every creature touched by madness, every thing that sneaks close and waits to kill, every creature that cannot control their anger, the ones like us, Klarion, them and us- and I think… I think that’s what happened here. I think that my combined spell, which should never have been more than five thaums maximum- I think it was amplified, and it tore a hole through time and that poor girl child fell through, and I don’t know if I can get her back- I- I don’t… I don’t know… I don’t know what to do, and, and I never know until it’s too late and I can’t- I can’t, Klarion, I can’t-” Teekl is crying, and Klarion is strong- but she’s never truly cried near him before, and she needs him and… he loves her. He loves her so much, he’ll kill for her- he’ll die for her, and she needs him. He carefully leans into her, one hand splaying across her stomach- which is shivering with the force of her sobs, bucking with each gasp of pain- and pulls her in and close, lets his warm breath chase across her neck and down and oh oh oh. If they both didn’t know better, they’d be half-way to naked by now. (They care about each other too damn much to leap into a physical relationship- they know that once they do… once they cross that bridge, there is no going back, and so sorry, but Klarion wants Teekl to only be thinking of the way he makes her feel when he touches her, not any mistakes or tribulations, and Teekl… Teekl wants Klarion to scream her name- wants him to lose his mind, wants him to make strange faces and speak in tongues, leave marks on her honey-pale skin. Yes, they want to have wild broke-the-bed-and-parts-of-the-walls-and-brought-the-guards-running-because-it-sounded-like-a-pitched-battle-with-lots-of-collateral-damage-BOOYAH! sex, but… they also want it to mean something.

Good for them- yet so painful to watch at the same time.)

Central, 1958:

After the first year in the past, Lia isn’t sure she’ll ever see her parents, her family again- not as she knew them- so, she gets a really nice piece of paper from the Art College and she makes a portrait of all of them, Mommy and Daddy and Dawn and Doan and Aunt Mary and Uncle Rudy and Wally and Bart and Dora and Bella and Grandpa Jay and Grammy Joan and she shades it and colors it, and gets it framed and hangs it on her wall. It is only later- two years later- that she realizes that she hadn’t drawn herself into the picture. By then, she was eleven years old and just going into junior high- Lash Junior High, which was an elementary school in her time, but… this time was her time at the moment, and Jay still hadn’t quite figured out that she’s a girl, but he should by the time of junior prom… or he knows, and doesn’t care. (Her life became more important than her feelings- and in this time, in this place, she began to learn how to live.)

Central City was certainly surprised by the addition of Kid Flash to their hero gallery- the JSA definitely thought the Flash’s sidekick was a strange person. After all, it’s one thing to have a boy watching your back- it’s another thing entirely to have a girl watch it. Wonder Woman eventually
just straight out asks Kid Flash if Flash knows that she’s a girl, and the Kid replies “He will by junior prom, Miss Wonder Woman. Or he already does, and’s in denial. It doesn’t really matter to me- I can get a cat out of a tree and put out a fire and dodge bullets easy as anyone else.” And that was that- and if Wildcat or Phantom Stranger thought she was a little… odd, they couldn’t deny the fact that she was a damn fine hero, a damn fine hero.

And Hawkgirl- Shayera Hol- thinks she’s beautiful.

And Senator McCarthy thinks they’re all dangers to society- gets King Faraday and his group to start, quietly, carefully… moving them out of the picture. Three years after Lia gets thrown back in time, three years after Kid Flash debuts in Central City, it becomes a capital offense to be a costumed vigilante, for better or worse. Three years after Lia puts together a bedroom she’s happy in- where she can sleep the whole night through without being woken up by her younger siblings and her cousins screaming; where they let her pick out her own clothing… Not that she didn’t before, but now there is a lovely selection of dresses and skirts in her closet that simply weren’t there before, and Ms. Joan likes hearing about what she read that day, and Mr. Jay likes the pictures she draws and it’s all just so much… better. Three years of- well. How to explain it? It’s like she finally found a place where she could be herself- good or bad. Could relax, and knew that no one would tease her for being herself- no one would disparage her beliefs, or make fun of her ignorance. (Have you ever looked, really looked, into the eyes of a chimpanzee who’s grown up as a member of a human family? When they’re babies, it doesn’t matter to them that everyone’s not quite like them- doesn’t look, or feel, or smell like them- but when they’ve grown. Oho, when they’ve grown- they know. All creatures know who they are- know what they are; know what they aren’t. Stellaluna knew she wasn’t a bird; Jason Wayne knew he wasn’t a cat. And Lia? Lia always knew she was the monkey at the table- she had known that since she was three years old.)

It was three years after Lia had fallen back in time- and she’s eleven now, and she’s found out who she is. Lia Hélène West-Allen is the kind of girl who is happiest fighting a bully- it doesn’t matter to her who that bully is, or where they come from; she has no truck with them, none at all. And Senator McCarthy, and all his skeezy policies about the way people should think and act and live scream bully to her like nothing else. However, Kid Flash is a sidekick- but Tangent. Tangent- the girl out of time- was never let out of Central often enough to get known as anything. And… well. She always wanted to be a superhero ine. She’s taken those three years to experiment- learned how to fly and glow and dance in the light and shadows. And then- she fights.

When she turned thirteen, she had a price on her head in three countries, a long rap-sheet of offences, and Hawkgirl, who’s become her steady- and neither of them care that it isn’t legal, they’ve gotten very good at deflecting questions- and that was when she made the pact. She really- she took joy in making Hawkgirl, making Shayera Hol- Shay- happy… she liked the way her eyes would go all golden brown with a perfect rim of green around the pupil when she kissed her breathless, liked the way she smiled and how the colors of light would smolder across her tanned cheeks, liked the way she laughed and the way her wings smoothed into scaly skin across her shoulders, liked the exact shape and texture of each and every feather, and the way Shay would tug her closer when they kissed with her wings and the way she ate the things Lia cooked and baked with such joy and the way her hair turned to fire in the light- god, just her… everything. But- Lia’s from the twenty-first century. (Shayera Hol- all of the Hol’s- is from another galaxy, but she was born on earth; you’ll find out about that later.) “Shay- before we go too far forward, before we… I need to tell you something important, and you need to keep it a secret. I haven’t ever told anyone this, not even- well. I need to tell someone, I need to tell you, because… because you’re special, and you make me happy, and I can’t… I’m from the twenty-first century. I need you to know so that- so that if I slide forwards in time you won’t… you’ll be able to-“
“So I’ll know to wait for you, Lia.” Shayera is taller, broader- thicker in the way only a person who often uses their entire body to move can be. Her hair falls to the middle of her shoulders, a warm whirling mass of auburn and brown- her eyes are big and hazel, lined with long thick lashes; her mouth is wide and soft and her cheeks are dusted with light cinnamon colored freckles that Lia likes to kiss. Her nose is a sharp plane on her face, and her skin is smooth and soft and the fine hairs on her body are tightly spaced and hold oil close to her skin and are waxy in texture. Her eyes are staring into Lia’s with all the love and wonder of a first crushing love- and Lia, who is just under five feet tall and a darker sandy blonde now, with seafoam eyes and warm pink lips, sweet Lia… doesn’t know exactly what the expression in Shayera’s eyes mean, but she does know that it’s making her physical heart pound inside her chest, and her mouth is wet and she can’t swallow she’s breathless, breathless- “Shay, that could be… that could be almost seventy years of a wait; I don’t want you to be… I can’t make you wait that long, for something that might not ever… When I slide forwards, I might not be the girl you know, and you won’t be the girl I know and-”

“Lia. I love you- and I know your love is in your head, but my love is in my heart, and I love you. My heart loves your head, Lia- and if I have to wait seventy-five years to be with you. If I have to wait seventy-five years for you to touch me, and… and to kiss me, and to hold me- if I have to wait that long for your fingers in my hair, for your hands on my wings, for you… if I have to wait that long for you, I’ll do it. I’ll wait a thousand summers to be with you, Lia.”

“-I- Shayera. I love- My head loves your heart, and the happiness I’ve had with you is… I just wanted it to not be a surprise, because… because we’ll always be… Oh god, Shayera, I don’t want to leave you, but it’s very likely that I’ll have to, and in the time I’m gone-”

“-I’ve told you, I’ll wait for you.”

“-In the time I’m gone, I don’t want you to be alone. I can’t- Shayera, before you, I was so alone, so very alone, and I don’t want that for you, I don’t want you to be alone-”

“Lia… There will never be anyone that makes me feel the way you make me feel, and I will wait for you. I will always wait for you- and while we’re together, we’ll be as happy as we both can be, alright?”

Lia has to forcibly yank her mind back into her body- whenever her emotions truly expand inside her, they have the strange tendency to push her thoughts out of her head, and she’s done some stupid things without her mind inside her body. “Shayera- do you wanna go get pancakes?”

Shayera leans forwards, presses her lips to Lia’s, all warmth and soft sweetness and love- even though Lia doesn’t feel love in her heart, her mind is boiling with pleasure and happy and starbursts. “I would love that. Can we leave the closet now? The broom bristles are kinda digging into my back.”

“Sure sweetheart- let’s get outta here.”

And one year later, when Lia’s getting ready to go to highschool and she’s got a date with Shay after and- Teekl’s hand grabs her arm and yanks her into her time, the future; away. When Lia opens her eyes from the whirling maelstrom of time flowing around her, she’s in her living room- the living room of her childhood, and there’s her mommy and her daddy and Wally and Dawn and Doan and Bart and Dora Uncle Rudy and Aunt Mary and Bella and Grandpa Jay and Grammy Joan- who’re looking… stricken, looking like they saw someone from a long time ago who had died and they had grieved for them but there they are, same as ever- they look like they’ve made a terrible mistake. (Have they? Who can say?) And a woman in a dark black wrapped skirt with orange beading and
her chest is dripping with sparkles, striped black and orange fabric with simple pearls of golden sheen sliding across her neck and down her face glowing glowing… and she looks horrified, because she knows and she knows (some things are always known)- and her mommy says “Lia? Sweetheart?”

“…Mommy?”

“Lia!” and then her mommy is up and her arms are around a suddenly teenage girl, not a little girl and she almost doesn’t know what to do, neither of them and then they do- an adjustment gets made on the fly and Lia isn’t so little anymore and daddy is hugging her and crying and shaking, and her new shirtwaist dress is getting horribly crumpled in the front and her bag is on the ground and her art supplies and her notebooks and her folders are all falling out and and and (Why did Lia become a teenage girl? Children are small and weak- they just are. Teenagers aren’t so much small and weak but… just because a teenager does something doesn’t mean that it’s easy to do. And Shayera waited.)

(Some peoples stories end with “and they lived as happily ever after as they could.” Klarion and Teekl’s story ends that way- Shayera and Lia’s story… doesn’t. And that’s life, said the ironmonger. Happiness is never guaranteed- and in this story, happiness will happen, but… no one said anything about eternity, or for whom.

Just because you’re happy together doesn’t mean you’ll stay that way- and just because you love each other doesn’t mean you should, or can, be together.)

Vega:

M’gann M’orzz is a princess on a mission; she has the three exiled royals of Tamaran in her bio-ship, and she’s running hell for choco’s to get out of Gordainian Space and into the Thanagarian Minefields, and- this is a little to abrupt of an opening. Let’s adjourn and figure a few things out, yeah?

So. J’onn J’onnz is a prince- and his sister, the one M’gann was fostered with, is third in line for the throne of Mars. J’onn J’onnz is- was, was, the war is over and people died- seventeenth in line for the throne; he remembers the war, not as a reigning authority, but as a soldier- as a medic, actually. (What kind of medic? Oh. That kind…)

He remembers how his brother, Ma’alefa’ak Sh’razz, second to the throne Oh gods, that he should be second to the throne- but what can I do?, was killed during the war- he had gone off on his own, like he did sometimes, and his hearts had been frozen shut when they found him. No one was overly sad about his death- and J’onn (who used to be M’orzz, not J’onnz) was almost happy, but that is against decorum. Ma’alefa’ak had something wrong with his soul- it wasn’t noticeable until you got close enough to touch, and felt the emptiness where love should have been. (J’onn remembers Ma’alefa’ak. J’onn remembers how Ma’alefa’ak would cut the little fluffy soft sweet and gentle Lo’pin’s open and look at their insides, how he would quiet their screams and snicker when the blood splashed over his fingers. How Ma’alefa’ak threatened M’ara M’razz, nineteenth to the throne, with a knife and his own oppressive presence- how he gained a staunch supporter in M’ara for coming to her aid, and an enemy for life in Ma’alefa’ak and in Ma’alefa’ak’s twin sister D’kay D’razz- who was third; J’onn remembers how Ma’alefa’ak would mark people.)
Ma’alefa’ak would mark people who got in his way with his rage- warp part of them in the screaming heat of it, twist and distort whatever he could grab hold of; in J’onn, Ma’alefa’ak warped his sense of Duty.

In M’gann, Ma’alefa’ak warped her sense of fear- when he came upon her, as a scout, she was understandably scared for her life. And with his death- only he wasn’t dead, he wasn’t… didn’t stay dead- during the War, D’kay learned how to raise the dead and he rose, he ushered in a new, more vicious, era of the White-Green war- as a prince, no one wanted him; as a martyr, they avenged him.

(Perhaps later, historians and artists will argue over the validity of the war- why there should have been a conflict at all. What, in fact, was the entire point of the White-Green War?

In Anansi’s words… “The war of White and Green was a long time ago for us, but just the other day for the participants- and it was a simple matter of class. White was lower than Green- White wanted to be equal. They fought a war about it. White lost. And Green was never right with themselves again.”)

And M’gann (who was always just M’gann, because she was the first born, and firstborns do not need last names, M’orzz was just her troop number, just a number- M’gann of tra’M’orzz, checking in!), poor girl, knew true and lasting fear- will know true and lasting fear- for the rest of her life, natural or otherwise.

And J’onn (who wasn’t a M’orzz because the sixteen before him had died, and he was a J’onzz now and J’onzz means third- J’onzz means three, and Yellow, and Sorry), poor man, put his soul inside a box and shut the lid- he knew what was happening was wrong. He knew that when it was happening- he knew that when he was… Well. Everybody has things that haunt them- secrets they don’t want anyone to know. J’onn’s happen to have- to have had, did have, always had but he made himself stop looking and seeing turned them into monsters because monsters don’t feel fear- faces, and names, and families, and secrets the Green Hierarchy wanted to know and medics know all about bodies and their connection to the mind and… if you ever want to get truly messed up, have a doctor not know what they’re doing when they try to heal you. And J’onn was trained as a doctor- but that wasn’t what he did. No. That wasn’t what he did. (Except, that it really was. Ma’alefa’ak was the one who… and J’onn gave them hope. His hands might have fumbled and faltered- the touch of his mind too soft and too rough to truly heal, but… Ma’alefa’ak needed them to despair. He tortured J’onn. And J’onn left.

Hope came from a Saint.

Salvation came from a Sinner.

Question is… which one was which?)

(What does any of this matter?)

J’onn hasn’t- hadn’t, didn’t wouldn’t couldn’t won’t- thought of Ma’alefa’ak, or his role in the War in years… until a girl calling herself his niece snuck onto his ship. Never mind that a fully realized Espion would have had trouble getting on his ship; never mind that the brief touch of his mind to hers was a look into a screaming maelstrom of onionskin fine layers of emotion. She called herself his niece. And she is- was, has been, met fought killed- marked by Ma’alefa’ak.
Process of elimination. J’onn has- had, did have, were killed in the war and by each other’s Byzantine plotting- forty siblings. Two of them are female. Half of all his siblings died in the war. Five of his brothers are barren. Twenty five of his brothers are- were, still are- not interested in having children. Fourteen of his brothers should not have children.

Two brothers were- are, still will never be- not allowed around the children; one of them died before the war- the other still lives.

One sister he knows- knew very well, was affectionate with- knows the feel of her children, because he took them in after the Battle of Ma’kar.

One sister actively hates him, hates everyone- and he knows the feel of her children too, but not the way he would want to.

M’gann was taken in by D’kay- and M’gann was marked by Ma’alefa’ak.

All the children of D’kay are too young to have known Ma’alefa’ak.

M’gann is not a child of D’kay; she says her last name is M’orzz- but no Green Martian would willingly admit that.

D’kay is second to the throne- her name is Sh’razz.

J’onn is a J’onnz.

And M’gann is seventeenth.

(In Green Martian culture, seventeen is the number of the unwanted one- the beast, the unlucky, the unknown, the forgotten one. Seventeen is also associated with White Martians, for what should be obvious reasons.

In White Martian culture, seventeen was just a number- the number that meant all those things was Two; D’razz. And in White Martian culture, D’razz was Green, and Hate, and Sorry-not.

And J’onn’s brother, Ma’alefa’ak, was returned to the asylum... three weeks after all but one White was sent to the Still Zone. He can no longer inherit; J’onn made sure his war-crimes were documented and that he was charged for them; J’onn will not let Mars fall into the clutches of Ma’alefa’ak, so he no longer has any name other than his own to hide behind.))

Martian Manhunter is not a fool. He knows when he’s being lied to- D’kay D’Sh’razz took care of that quickly. If M’gann M’orzz is a Martian, she is no Green- he would lay money on the fact that she is White. He remembers something about one White being “unfit for emendation through exposure to the Still Zone”; what does that mean? It means that for whatever reason, the Green Hierarchy couldn’t bring themselves to expose a White to the expansive nothingness of the Still Zone- and J’onn knows, from experience he would rather not have, that the ones who go into the Still Zone don’t come back out; their bodies might come back, but the actual person? No. Never. What could make them spare a White from that fate?

(Hate. Hate. Hate.)

He tries not to think about the fact that Ma’alefa’ak was very… cozy, with Van’ai, their mother; how Van’ai had always listened to what Ma’alefa’ak had to say, always sided with him in the disputes,
even when Ma’alefa’ak went bad… and Van’ai was always too cold for any sort of comfort.

*I know who you are, M’gann- Wait, wait! I know who you are- and I know what you were are is are were. I want you to know…* and then, J’onn shows M’gann his brother, Ma’alefa’ak, and what he was like, and the edges of what he did. And M’gann- she isn’t she shouldn’t care she shouldn’t understand, but she does she does; and she shows him the edges of the soldier who found her as a scout, and the muted but burning brightly screaming STOP! and J’onn knows who she is.

*M’gann- my niece. Please-* and then M’gann is engulfed in a wordless formless rush of love and acceptance and *-It is okay to not be okay. I should know- I’m not okay either.*

For the first time since she was a very small child, M’gann gives in to her emotions- and J’onn is able to keep her from broadcasting them across the Watchtower. And M’gann feels sorrow and anger and fear and gratefulness because she isn’t so damn alone and and and- J’onn is her uncle. And he loves her, unlike her not-mother, and… *I don’t remember them- I remember the feelings, but not them. Is that bad?* J’onn sighs.

*No. That’s normal- when my father died, I was very young. I remember how happy he made my mother, and how he made me feel… but I don’t remember him.*

(Family is what you make of it- and comfort can come from unexpected sources. And, sometimes, there really isn’t anything you can do.)

These revelations came on the heels of the separation of children and adults; M’gann went to the Vega system soon after.

The Vega system is a collection of galaxies that encircle the stable black hole, Vega. (Wait, what?) In our world, Vega is the brightest star in the constellation Lyra, the fifth brightest star in the night sky and the second brightest star in the northern celestial hemisphere, after Arcturus. It is a relatively close star at only 25 light-years from Earth, and, together with Arcturus and Sirius, one of the most luminous stars in the Sun’s neighborhood.

(Okay, but what’s a “stable” black hole?

A star that doesn’t emit light.

Whaa-)

Vega has been extensively studied by astronomers, leading it to be termed "arguably the next most important star in the sky after the Sun." Vega was the northern pole star around 12,000 BC and will be so again around AD 13,727 when the declination will be +86°14'. Vega was the first star other than the Sun to be photographed and the first to have its spectrum recorded. It was one of the first stars whose distance was estimated through parallax measurements. Vega has served as the baseline for calibrating the photometric brightness scale, and was one of the stars used to define the mean values for the UBV photometric system.

Vega is only about a tenth of the age of the Sun, but since it is 2.1 times as massive its expected
lifetime is also one tenth of that of the Sun; both stars are at present approaching the midpoint of their life expectancies. Vega has an unusually low abundance of the elements with a higher atomic number than that of helium. Vega is also a suspected variable star that may vary slightly in magnitude in a periodic manner. It is rotating rapidly with a velocity of 274 km/s at the equator. This is causing the equator to bulge outward because of centrifugal effects, and, as a result, there is a variation of temperature across the star's photosphere that reaches a maximum at the poles. From Earth, Vega is being observed from the direction of one of these poles.

Based on an observed excess emission of infrared radiation, Vega appears to have a circumstellar disk of dust. This dust is likely to be the result of collisions between objects in an orbiting debris disk, which is analogous to the Kuiper belt in the Solar System. Stars that display an infrared excess because of dust emission are termed Vega-like stars. Irregularities in Vega's disk also suggest the presence of at least one planet, likely to be about the size of Jupiter, in orbit around Vega.

In that world, the Jupiter-sized planet that orbits Vega is called Tamaran.

Watchtower, four days ago:

*I have a mission for you, my niece. You have become a fine Espion- yes, you have, you have. My sources tell me that there is something happening in the V’ega, something that could be detrimental to the safety of Ma’aleca’andra. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to discover the veracity of these claims, and to return with whatever proof you feel necessary.*

The two Martians are standing in the Hangar of the Watchtower, pointing out towards Lyra- M’gann is in a new bio-suit, it’s colors dimmer than her uncles, her hood down around her neck. They are both standing in front of J’onn’s Bio-ship- *Ex’elsia. Is she ready?*

*Yes. I have trained her as well as I can- I was able to modify her to the specifications you asked of me. She will do well.*

*M’gann. I have asked Ex’elsia to change one of her daughters into a ship worthy of you- is that alright?*

M’gann has to fight down a sharp rush of tears, but lets the warm rush of affection love disbelief how can this be real is this really my life- *Uncle- yes, that is more than alright. Ex’elsia, May I… May I? *

*You may, niece of my friend.*

A large, egg shaped orb, dark blue with sharp red lines curving around hovers in front of them- it develops a bulge, and then a part of a red streak becomes rounder rounder and then there is a much smaller egg shaped orb, red in color with small blue splotches. It huddles next to its mother for a long moment; then it slowly floats into its own space, a warm swirl of apprehension/excitement washing over through with together her mother.

M’gann makes herself still, and small. Quiet. *Hello. I am M’gann M’orzz. Who are you?*

A voice, young and bubbly- *Hi, M’gann. I’m Ex’alte. Are we… are we to be friends?*

*Yes. I do believe we are. Uncle- I will go see what can be seen, and return with proof of danger or otherwise. How long do I have?*
*Two weeks, my niece- Ex’alte has been changed for the journey. She is now the fastest of all our ships; she will take you to the V’ega, and return without straining herself. She has everything you will need for this mission onboard- Ex’elsia and I will escort you to the best jump point.* M’gann nods, her brown-red eyes overbright- she throws herself forwards, wraps her arms around her uncle. Squeezes.

He hugs her back, then both of them turn to face their- with a mental physical wave of the hand, the orbs become ships; Ex’elsia becomes a great curve of motion, shaped like a manta ray, large glowing engine where the tail would be.

Ex’alte becomes shaped like the curved and dented form of a thumb- but narrow and sharp and fast, a swooshing curve over her aft; the wings. Speed and maneuvering distilled to their essences- leaping motion.

*Uncle, if I do not… I love you, my Uncle. Tell my mother I said something nice about her, if I do not return… and tell my sisters that I love them.*

(So- why have you never heard of Gordanians? That’s simple- in the Vega system, Gordanians are Gordanians. Outside the Vega system, Gordanians are Thanagarians. Gordanian is the Tamaranean word for them- Thanagarian is what everyone else calls them. Mars has fought many a skirmish with Thanagar- they have spies all through it’s upper, lower, inside every level of Thanagarain Society.

And it will be four or five years before we get to see the results of M’gann’s mad dash through space- which ends somewhere inside the Thanagarian minefields, where the Thanagarians don’t go because it’s a minefield. Ex’alte will make a leap through space, hit a mine, and accidentally hurl her occupants in three distinct directions; M’gann and Komand’r will land on Earth, which he will not be happy about- but he will also find out who he is, and possibly find love; Koridan’r will end up in a realm called Æzarath, and make the first true friend she’s ever had; Roridan’r will stay with Ex’alte, and they’ll end up in Sector 1- Oa, where he too, will make friends.

I’ll let you know now- the fallout from M’gann’s decision of what constitutes proof, and how she went about finding that proof won’t be pretty.

And, God or Gods or God and Gods help her, Shayera Hol will have waited, and she will have to pick a side.

God help her, she will have to pick a side- and Lia will too.)

Africa, five or two or six years ago (no one knows how old Tim is):

*I am going to die.*

(Stop. Stop. We- I need to… I- I… I’m sorry. I can’t go on like this- I have lied to you by omission. I cannot go on letting you think that this is a mere story; I cannot continue to be a voice in your ear, telling you of the excitement of days long past, not when- And, honestly, I’m tired of pretending. This is real. This really happened. I am real- the words I am writing to you, my- This is real.
First, I should explain who I am.

I am the senior- no, the only person, now, involved in the Heroes in History Study- I was given a grant for further work by the InterGalactic Council for my superior studies on the role of Genetics and Morality in the… It doesn’t really matter, not anymore. The Legion soon found me, and convinced- as if I needed it then- me to study the history of the Superhero. Their best minds gave me the technology to travel undetected through the Timestream, tracking devices to find subjects for study, and every concealing method they could configure for me. I was then sent to the past, to document and record everything I could about the heroes of the age, and anything that would be able to put them into context.

I am a fool- these are people, not subjects; I am a fool. I cannot interfere; I know my history, and I know many of the things to come, but I cannot interfere. Should I leave this place, I would crumble into ash faster than I could send a message- and they would not believe me. I can do nothing but… watch. And pray.

If you truly must have a name to assign me, call me Librarian; my name is of no consequence, and my powers have no use in a battle. I will not appear on any log of the Legion’s membership- please, do not look for me. My name will never be noted as one who “saved the day”- that is not what I do. I have no true bearing on the events of this story- I am a scientist; I only observe, and try to word and quantify what I have observed. In some cases, I merely… remember.

I was sent to the past- long ago, but- but accidentally overshot my starting point; I landed in a realm that is slightly removed from the time of the universe I observe, as was intended- unfortunately, the mechanism that was supposed to control this flow of time was destroyed in my voyage; time passes faster there than here- well, truly, it ebbs and flows, where I am, so even as I have watched fire turn to sea turn to lands innumerable, I have not aged- and during the greatest and most violent of battles, I have watched them with slow and careful focus, slower than the time they happened in; seen cities countries states empires bloom and turn to little more than ash and dust in less time than it takes to mark their existence.

It is a beautiful and wonderful and bright and terrible thing, this world- I am entranced by it.

I soon discovered that the universe I observed had diverged wildly from the one I had originally come from- I believe it is my fault that this is so. “Observational Bias” is what they taught us to call it; I have been documenting the divergences as much as I can. When I use the terms “you” and “we”, it is a tool to marshal my thoughts- I am used to lecturing others, you see. Ah, I have done it again.

This is the largest one- the largest divergence- I have yet seen; and I have been tracking these… things, good, bad, bizarre; since the very beginning. I saw it all, of course; the last time in their century these creatures were out was… well, they called these ones the Widow-makers of Nagreyv, I believe. With each of these monsters, their crimes have only gotten more… worse; though many a forgotten year (not and never by me) has passed, their rage has not abated.

This is not going to be pretty; I’m telling you this now. This is going to be nasty- and
only speculation, I’m happy to say. The original site of the following events was washed away in a summer rain storm; only Anansi herself knows what truly happened.

It wakes- will wake- her screaming from the night sometimes- both the knowledge of what happened, and why it happened. There is only so much she will say aloud- and there is very little I know for myself. I have filled in the blanks of Anansi’s battle as much as I can; through my own observations on the life cycles of wasps, and the steady watching of these four creatures throughout the ages, I have filled in still more.

Some things are wholly of my own invention- they have to be. Most things aren’t- my imagination is not very great, I am afraid.

There is a reason the Mmboro Hornets are female- and it’s not a good one. I’m about to tell you why. I really don’t know what’s about to happen. I do know that it’s necessary for the story’s internal logic to know- I’ll try to fuzz the worst of it out, but some things might bleed through.

I’m sorry.

Oh god.

(It is perhaps possible that no one will ever listen to these AudioFiles- no one will ever know that they exist, and they too will burn at the End. It is possible that I am the only witness to these events, and that they did not happen- perhaps I have been hit by a shuttle, and am even now in an IC pod, sequestered in some artificially lit ward of a local Hospice. These events could be no more than the synaptic misfires of a scrambled brain. I don’t think that is true- as I have said, my imagination is not so very great.

There are things in this story that I have never known, could never have known. I know them by virtue of my powers- and by rights, should I call it a story? Perhaps an Observational Narrative- yes, that is more accurate.

Oh god.))

Look at the sky- it’s close to dawn, but the chill of midnight still lingers, dew and starlight dripping off of blood spilt on the floor, bubbling from a mouth stretched wide and screaming, rivulets of red slipping down sweaty sheets, the thin wriggling of unreal shapes underneath pale skin- Hornets are very sensitive to heat and light, did you know that?

I am going to die.

The Mmoboro Hornets are the kind of hornet that lays their eggs inside a still living creature. It only makes sense- if you want your young relatively protected and fed, what better place than inside the still living flesh of another creature? And Jack was close at hand, even though he wasn’t the best choice- too skinny, too little muscles he wasn’t fat he was mostly muscle but not very much and Janet liked that about him and-

I hope that you are safer, far away from here. I hope that the Atlantic will stop her from finding you.
Listen, can you hear that? It’s a chewing sound, like the sound of thick bacon being crunched between the back teeth— it’s a warm, heavy sound, steady— the slow moans of agony from a raspy throat… They were screams before, you know? But, there’s only so long you can scream before you can’t anymore, so now Jack just moans when the things inside him chew on a particularly sensitive portion of nerves. Did you know that the nerves are held inside bundles of thin skin, and that the larvae secrete a kind of enzyme that dissolves this skin, causing the nerves to reticulate, which sends impulses up and down them that are registered as pain and— The body is mostly connective tissues, did you know that? So… connective tissues are muscles, and organs and Jack doesn’t have very many of those left, did you know that?

I don’t want to be one of them!

Mmoboro Hornets, when they capture a man, entice him with touches and sex into dropping his guard— he can still, possibly, get away with his life but not if he kisses with the tongue because— because sweetness flowing down the throat, and when he woke from his slumber, Janet only no, that isn’t Janet, she’s biting into his neck, and something small and hard warm is pushing into him, and she’s bitten all over his body. Small hard warm things are wiggling and stretching under his skin inside his muscles chewing chewing chewing him away and it HURTS, and he can’t move can’t breathe there are threads of shining wrapping him down tight but he should be dead by now why isn’t he dead—

(Carried in Jack’s line of the Drake family is something called the Moon-touch; I won’t bore you with the intricacies, only that it’s a predisposition towards clairvoyance passed through the paternal line. Jack has it very strongly— Tim, less so.

He still woke screaming when he felt his father start to writhe across the sea; he carries a low level of anxiety and unhappiness around with him, always, because on some level below his skin, inside his bones where the blood gets made, he knows exactly what happened to his father.)

(Oh god.)

What happened to Janet? Why did she change? (The dust the dust, it was the dust—) Mmoboro Hornets, when they catch a woman, create another Mmoboro Hornet. The way is simple enough— an usurpation of will and form—and if the female be pregnant, of child—and if not— (These are real people, not subjects, but someone has to know, even if no one ever knows— I’ll know.

I’ll know; that will have to be enough. Character. Maybe that’s why they chose me to go for them.)

There is a lake bed in Africa— it is from this bed of clay that the first of all the humans sprang forth; the first of all humans, the First, were women who would become the Amazons; before that lake was a burnt out hole in the ground for half the year and a mucky puddle filled with green slime and stinging flies, it was a village.

So long ago so long ago was this thing— a crime; a sorrow, rage and misunderstanding and fear and a woman torn apart and burned, her ashes flung into an empty gourd and buried with stones tied with the deadened flesh extruded and stripped and made into ropes from the killed woman’s body; Jack and Janet found the petrified and emptied (not empty) fruit, took it home…

The bones are made of stone (calcium salt; limestone, almost)— the same stone can be found on the
bottom of a lake, was used to make the gourd sink down down down; when the dust fell inside of Janet, it touched the things that had held it prisoner for so long and it began to dissolve them, anger and buzzing rasps of a thousand susurrating wings wearing away the limestone bones of a woman fated to die, as are we all. (This is real. This really happened. I am real- but I haven’t or won’t and- No! I am real!)

Her hair fell out in clumps, after Jack stole Tim away- fell out, as her muscles dissolved and flowed through her body, but her brain had already changed into a mass of electrically conductive crystal- and Janet was only human-looking now, only human at her very edges; in her center, she was no more human than a dog. (No matter what you say about your dog’s character, it is not a person; it is a dog. If you die, and it begins to starve, it will eat your cold and rotting corpse.

I miss my dog. Funny, how it's little things like that... I can't remember what kind of dog it was. Or if it even was a dog. Or if I'm even- No. No. This is real.)

The moonlight in Jack’s blood showed him a little of what was to come; was able to change him into- Queen Mmoboro Hornets are the only egg laying female in their hive, as all the other organisms, excepting the drones, are her non-reproductive daughters. The drones are the necessary, but disdained, male of the species- and their only purpose is to keep the Queen pregnant.

The Queen, if already fertilized (oh god), will go forth and make herself a nest, usually a tube of mud, (a special kind of mud- oh god) somewhere out of the way and hard to get to; she will make it just about the size of a coffin, lay her egg, and go hunting for men to feed her new daughter- and she will repeat this process for every egg she lays; a fertilized Queen can have upwards of fifty eggs at a time.

(Oh god)

An unfertilized Queen is very different; she must find and keep a harem of drones for her use, that she may- and the Thing that was Janet considered Jack unsuitable, but… he survived the first wave of daughters being born of his flesh, and he smells like one of us and we ache for our aloneness so perhaps it is not so vile a thing to be borne, no, not so vile-

(Oh god.)

Jack knows pain- the raw, burning ache of a body betraying itself, the boil of bones moving to the outside, the steady stabbing of creatures pushing themselves out of his own flesh, having eaten their fill and now grown and ready to spring upon the world, whole and furious- Jack knows the pain of watching the person he loved cease to exist, be devoured by something out of his control; knows the pain of choosing between his wife and his child, and knows that whichever he chose, he would never be happy again, but he had to do something- he had to.

Ah, look- it has become dawn. Now we see what the night has brought us; NotJanet has become almost gelatinous, her every movement subtly wrong, like her arms and legs are not being moved by limbs that bend correctly, like there is too much length in her torso and not enough neck and her eyes are too large too large there is not a woman there but something only pretending- tied to the bed is a bloody, mud splattered form. It is male, only because of the width of the shoulders in proportion to the hips- great rents have torn from the sternum to the pelvis, his abdomen falling open just enough to see that his body has been stabbed from within, and the mud is flowing from his wound and drying
quickly into powder in the light of dawn, quickly crumbling with the subtle movements of air through miniscule holes on the side of what was a ribcage, now striped black and yellow, dark oranges and greens stippling in strange, ancient designs- the throat has sunken into the chest, the head bulging, and then and then it splits opens and out sits up a wasp of massive proportions.

He is lightly covered in musty dust- around them both, knife thin larvae quietly wiggle around themselves, rolling first in the splattered mud, and then winding silken strands around themselves, cocooning- Not Janet doesn’t spare them a second glance because Oh! But he is most seemly- no, this will not be a vile burden, not at all.

And she makes use of him.

When it is over, Jack is curled up on his side, shivering touch of her hand- No than to his chest and then she lunged- his wings gently buzz against his back, needle thin waist surprisingly pliant the snapping sound of rubber, a ripping like fabric only too creaking and then there are hands under the bases of his wings stroking so warm and good and the warm familiar strange press of lips soft to his jaw and clever nothands at his hips all warm and gently scratching pressing but he's not a-, his abdomen being held by his long legs- another terrible ripping, and the sight of a ridged spine, so unlike his own smooth waist and the warm curve of hips without legs but unragged and banded black and lurid yellow, the soft swell of Janet’s breasts against his chest (oh how they had laughed when they had swollen, Timothy!) and something bursting from her face, eyes gone too large and tall thin posts bursting from her scalp and her scalp sloughing away; wrong body shoving him down and touching him and he yearns- he is ignoring the smell- screams, from the others; pushing himself into a small, tight coil of insectoid revulsion- ‘This is wrong- that is not my… I promised!’ and it is far too late. Oh god. Oh god. Jack didn’t know that guys could be- and he’s not sure that he even was, because it felt really good, and he had liked it at the end, so it wasn’t… right? But… but no, he hadn’t wanted to, and he couldn’t speak because because- Wasps, and other insects, communicate by pheromones, and possibly with certain frequencies of sound- it is instinctive, innate knowledge. Mmoboro Hornets don’t talk to each other- they don’t communicate. The only thing each member of the Hive does- they are born knowing what they are to do in service to the hive and are met with absolute destruction should they… Deviate. Mmoboro Hornets are xenophobic to the extreme of killing any Hornet that does not match their collective standards of behavior.

(Poor Jack. Oh god.)

After, after Queen Janet has made use of her… her sons- not daughters, even though they are all her Daughters, some just… don’t act like girls (oh god), she rests for a time; while she sleeps, her sons, led by Hornet Jack, go out into the outlying forest and find every human they can, as well as a selection of grazing animals. These they bring back to the Nest (which was once the home of Jack and Janet, and all the servants left with Tim; it’s in a clearing in the jungle, warm and dark- a millpond diverted from the river, and flowering vines growing up the base of the tree- it’s maybe an hour’s walk to the river’s bank; chirping of birds and monkeys and the warm buzzing rasp of insects… only now, there is nothing but the buzzing rasp of insects, and even that too is fading away, the jungle around the Nest becoming still and quiet- Mmoboro Hornets are predatory), and trap in the upper reaches- their poisonous stings cannot kill, only immobilize. The women and girls are left in what once was a meditation room, it’s walls painted with gently coiling flowers and filigreed vines, verdant dappled light falling in soft sheeting waves, puffy soft and warm throws and pillows puddled across the floor like multi-hued scraps of some great and divine beast- each female has been divested of their clothing, though on some, thin scraps of fabric remain. Each female is laid out on a pillow, their legs splayed wide, their chests and arms covered by warm cloth; two Drones remain in the Nursery, and the rest haul their catch- man and beast, alike and immobile, although on some the eyes
have gone round and glistening with fear; the poison is not so immobilizing, after all- away, to the
Kitchen.

Blood is spilt, and thick red stew-meat shaped pieces, sized for a giant’s table, are soon carried to the
sleeping Queen- she awakens at the scent of fresh meat, and descends on them with great relish. For
two days, the Queen does little more than sleep and eat- and she visits the Nursery, and makes use of
the women there. Jack peers in on the women and girls- *female bodies gone gravid*- *stick thin limbs
and wide wriggling roundness and the cracking of bones* Jack is still Jack enough to feel the
wrongness of his situation, to be repulsed by what was his wife, by- *the sharp scent of poison, and
pulsing through the breastbone of one of the girls is a thin, black claw, soon followed by a
segmented limb- the creaking persists, and soon every woman, some from their chests, some from
their massive bellies, one’s forehead cracking open with a sound like a rifle; out of them come
Wasps, each almost exactly alike, slim and massive and terrible to behold in the fluttering light of
dawn. And those women were saved.

(The women, after… incubation, are little more than dusty dirt, scraps of skin- the Wasps gathered up
these things, and carried them to the pond. Tossed them in.

Mud City is three miles around; its highest point is just below the canopy- it digs down some forty
feet. River mud doesn’t stick and stay enough for major use- River Mud is for decorative purposes.
So, my friend, my question to you is this- what kind of mud is Mud City made of?)

(Oh God. I wish that- No. No. This is real. This really happened.

Oh god.)

(And now I ask for a moment of your time.

[There is a long pause, punctuated by soft breathing, and the occasional rustle of fabric. There is
murmuring in the background, and the words “I might as well, no one will ever hear this, I can just
delete it- but I shouldn’t even be- no, I have to, I have to-” can be heard. A sigh like a sob.]

In watching this world grow, I have come to a realization about my own. For the sake of clarity, let
the future from which I came be my world, and the past to which I went be this world- and the world
I am not aware of, the world that, for all intents and purposes is a mere extension of this one, that is
to say, the one I currently inhabit- the world I create in my head every time I speak into this
mechanism and record my only record for what has occurred; *that* is your world… and that world is
the world I should have gone to- that is, the past of the world I am from. That world.

I think sometimes the cinema gets it right. Not often, of course- the films I have seen, I now know,
are not real reflections of the world… they are- distillations. For example, I now know that love at
first sight does indeed exist- and it sometimes is as sweeping as the cinema likes to portray.
Sometimes it’s more of a soft susurration in the soul, an easing of a hurt that never existed- and
sometimes it doesn’t happen at all.)

[Librarian was never privy to his Legion file- point of fact, he is naïve enough to believe that they
don’t really exist. May the Light show nothing to him.]

LEGION FILE #4000-900-8734; FOR LEADERSHIP EYES ONLY-
NO, QUERL. ALEXIS, YOU CAN’T HAVE A COPY FOR YOUR MENTAL RECORDS, BECAUSE WE SAID SO, LEAVE IT ALONE.

Code Name: Librarian
Real Name: Mar Dumax
Powers: REDACTED

[that was a strange tryout]
{I thought he had merit–a little refinement, and he would have done well on the Y.O.U.N.G. Team}
[His PsychEval didn’t wash]
{pity}

Special Skills: Extreme Organization.

(There are things I do not know–there are things I will never know. I do know this–I…[There is a sound like a deep breath, only it is mixed almost imperceptibly with barely held back tears. A soft wheeze, and then-] I have been lied to. The world I lived in…It. It wasn’t real.

I had always noticed a sort of…monotony, a repetition to my life…events seemed to repeat themselves endlessly; I would hear the same news on different years, see the same, the exact same storms and skies and flowers and birds and people and–[A sharp gasp. Soft sobs–then a strangled sound. Muffled whimpers go on for several minutes. Gasping breaths come softly, and then subside.]

My world was not real.)

[Mar Dumax was alone for the parts of his life that mattered–and the world in which he lived had stripped all character building challenge from general life. And yet, somehow, Mar gained a true and honest character–and through his own subdued instincts and general air of harmlessness, he got to keep his character.

May the Light shine past him.]

Age: 18 years
Species: Human
Gender: Male
Height: 5’6”
Weight: 110 lbs

Eval: MAR DUMAX exhibited extreme Agoraphobic tendencies, as well as socially phobic responses that barred him from Regular service in the Legion. Health screening showed a susceptibility to REDACTED, genetic predisposition to frailty, as well as possible future susceptibility to Paranoid Schizophrenia, further barring him from service. MAR DUMAX was sent to the SPECIAL SERVICES.

Offense Record:

12 Curfew Breaks
3 Unauthorized Books Read
78 Unclaimed Chores
23 Failed Missions
2 Failed Experiments
{those were awful. The fUIhSG Thesaurus-}
(don’t remind me. We still haven’t caught that thing. The teeth-)
1 Evil Ex
[you know, I never thought that skinny geek would’ve had it in him]
(me either)
Mission in Brief: Procure accurate records of the “Hero” from REDACTED to REDACTED.
ALLOCATIONS: Six cases of self-sustaining LC Stealth-Eyes
[that is nowhere near enough]
{oh, I’m sorry, do you have credits I don’t know about for LexCorp gear?};
Bioship Ex’alte
[It was rendered inert during Third Engagement, but is still considered usable]
{I wouldn’t call “Lifesupport, Allflight, and defensive mechanisms” usable- besides, it’s all kinds of foul luck to give something so… bad…}
[we couldn’t give him anything… more contemporary; and if he had been discovered, we needed to be able to deny all association]
{I still say it was a dick move};
Temporal Tuner
[He was accidentally given an older model- I’m not… entirely sure that it works correctly]
{I told you we should have found a more deadly mission to send him on}
[Speed was required; he was destabilizing the Team’s dynamics]
{True. Still- a better way should have been found};
Temporal Viewer
[this requires a Temporal Tuner to work at its full potential]
{No, Really? I never would have guessed that};
Thamologicator
(hate those things)
Basic Mission Gear.

(He wasn’t one of us long enough to get his own basic mission gear- he got the spares and scraps from everyone else; We shouldn’t have ever made this mission available to him)

{No, we shouldn’t have- but we had to get him out of HQ somehow}

[our “callousness” aside, It’s too late now]

(No, it isn’t)

{yeah, it is; we can’t find him anymore}

(What? Why?)

[he probably went sideways]

(fuck- well, oh well… It’s not like it was important…)

Status: This is a LEVEL S-9 MISSION. The only people who are aware of it are the Legion Leaders themselves, the Alpha Green Corpse, and the High Priestesses of Chik’a Gami.

NOTE: It is very likely that this mission file will, at some point, cease to exist. Temporal Shift. You know how it is.

(The world I lived in was never real- my world wasn’t… Right. It was… Pure. It was- [voice drops to a whisper] it was bright and clean and empty of all feeling and thought. *My world is a world without evil. My world is a world without good.* My world was a world without sin. Oh god.

My world is a world that is ruled by… Light. Ever present Light in a world stripped of all darkness.

Oh god. That world- Oh *god.*)

[Every day, there is less and less of me- every day, I die a little more. This day is my last; I can feel it. My friend, M’gann, died long ago- I was not able to save her.

I wasn’t able to save anyone- except Mar. Him, I saved- but I cannot help him now. There isn’t enough time left. Perhaps he’ll find what I’ve left for him. I hope he does- there are things to be done.

I saw how this went; and when they who came After found this one- this throwback to a killed and forgotten era, I saw my chance. I saw my chance, and I took it; I was a hero once.

I was a hero once. I flew through the black of night, danced around enemies and leapt faster than death- I was a hero once.

I was a hero.

I was.
I'm so tired… I hope I have changed the world enough- I hope that something different comes. Turn Off the Light- let the Dark flow in...

< The AudioFile has ended.

Replay? Y/N
Save? Y/N
Delete? Y/N
Send? Y/N

The File has been saved.

Make New File? Y/N >

< This File was created on: --------. This File has been corrupted.

Play File? Y/N >

There is more to this world than just what I have seen- and, if things go like they have before- I should explain. I have watched this world change; I have noticed and recorded many strange and esoteric patterns. To understand the import of events both past and yet to come, you need to know this story- the story of how the Demon under Gotham got trapped there, and.

Imagine the following words in as grandiose manner as you like- I can only do so much with my I'm sorry:

Once upon a time, there was a place in the far forested reaches of the world, and in this place was a bottomless hole. This hole was deeper than could be perceived- was deeper than could be explained. The hole had been made by a passing god- (The hole screamed when he did it- screamed because the god took away the only thing a hole ever really has. But that’s a different story.)

The hole was in a clearing in the middle of a vast and ancient forest; the clearing grew high with grass, almost obscuring the massive and ancient stone the god had left behind to mark the depthless place he had made. This stone is important. Remember it.

In the surrounding forest, there lived many people- one was called Baht. Baht was an orphan- his parents killed by elves on one of their many Hunting trips. Baht’s parents were not unskilled in the fighting arts- together, they killed two of the elven hunters, their feline reflexes no match for the cornered bats they had caught- but. Two bats are nothing in the face of twenty angry hunting cats- and so they died. (That was the day Teekl’s parent’s didn’t come back from the Hunts, and that was the day Teekl began to grow as a person; without them, she found her own path.)

Baht was found in a bramble, down a sharp hill from the place where the bats and cats had fought, by a hedgewitch of great wisdom; his name was Ylfard. Ylfard didn’t know all that much about children, as such- but Baht was a baby, and babies, in Ylfard’s experience, were kind of hard to mess up. Good Food goes in one end, keep the other end as clean as possible, don’t shake ‘em, hold em when they cry, and try not to kill em. Easy. In retrospect, Ylfard wasn’t so much wise as he was… smart. Clever, really.

Anyway. Ten and four summers later, Baht was a youth- and Ylfard had taught him everything he
could. (Ylfard then died- Ten and four summers of raising a Hero will age you faster than a hard-
drinking rock and roll tour with hot and cold running drugs and women.) Baht knew of the many
small dances of the forest- where to find a cloak that would turn one into a swan by day (edge of the
river, by the bend under the oak tree- wait three days, and on the fourth it shall be there), where to
find mu, which road to follow to find a helpful witch (you actually need to go road- the best one
would be the one with an oak tree); knew how to make and break a bridle that turned the wearer into
a horse (don’t ask), knew how to shoe a unicorn (use silver), knew where the firebird hides her
crown of flames (in a fire else), which temple opens to the spirit world (cross the bridge), Whisper
Man is. That last name is important. Remember it.

Thus did Baht, Cyt, their many sons and daughters, and their allies defeat the Whisper Man.

That's the story, as I saw it. The things you need to remember are: the demon was trapped in a
bottomless pit; he was cut apart with the Sword; he was bound in one form with the Bridle; he was
trapped in the pit with the Stone. The Stone was covered by mud and waters- and a city grew over
this place where the demon was trapped. These items then changed their shape, moved around the
world- the Sword became the Sword of Beowulf; the others remain lost to me.

These items are needed to release the demon.

Evil doesn’t die. It doesn't have the common decency to stay dead when you kill it. It Grows.
Changes. In my world, Evil stopped being Evil, and became… Normal.

Oh god.)

< This File has been corrupted.

Overwrite? Y/N
Replay? Y/N
Delete? Y/N
Save? Y/N

The File has been Deleted.

Make New File? Y/N >

Central City:

Lia had been back-forward-now for just over three months- and her brother and sister won’t go near
her. She tired of it- tired all the time now. Of course, she’s happy- ecstatic, to be back in her own
time, in her world… but she’s just a little tired. That’s all. Just a little sad and tired. (Oh Lia.)

She isn’t happy about how her parents don’t know what to do with her- how no one knows what to
do with her; they don’t let her train on her own, they don’t let her patrol, they... They let her go to
school, but she hasn’t done anything wrong, why are they acting like she should be grounded?

She isn’t happy that she had to get poked and prodded by the scientists at STAR Labs- nor is she
happy that they took readings of her powers. She worked very hard in the past to never, ever, EVER
get captured- by her enemies or the government- so now it rankles her that she has to show
everything she has, and have it recorded, and prove that she’s who she says she is… It rankles.
She isn’t happy that she couldn’t get into pre-AP English like she wanted; nor is she happy about having to re-take Latin I. She worked hard for both of those classes; she should get to take them, gouded!

She isn’t happy that she can’t get free Art lessons at the local art college because it closed due to budget cuts in 1978.

She isn’t happy about getting lost in downtown Keystone- which used to be much grubbier.

She isn’t happy that they don’t make her favorite pecan/nougat chewy things anymore, and they haven’t since the 80’s.

She isn’t happy that she has to justify wearing skirts and dresses to anyone- especially her mother.

She isn’t happy that the Central City Cornhusks, her favorite baseball team, are now the Metropolis Cornhusks. Spozzing Kansas.

She isn’t happy that her foulest cursing is now only quaint, half-forgotten slang. Sfavnges!

She isn’t happy that she can’t buy a decent sketchbook for less than a dollar. Galsehad!

She isn’t happy that she doesn’t have her Shayera anymore, to touch kiss hold feel love. Shay!

Lia isn’t happy.

_Spozzing time-warps. Go die in a fire. Spozzes._

Lia is taller, now- taller and curvy, like her mother. She hasn’t filled those curves in yet- but now her “cheerleading” outfit is much more provocative than it ever was before: it hugs her curves like a lonely lover; shirt-vest like a second skin, skirt a wholesome purple length of fabric when she’s still and an exotic, almost certainly illegal, suggestion when she moves. She has an almost hourglass figure now (not quite enough boob to make it work, but she’ll get there)- long, lanky limbs, long sandy blond hair held back in a scrunchie, and big dark blue eyes with thick lashes and fathomless depth. She holds herself with confidence, moves with force and focus- she’s learned to smile like she means it (even though she almost never does), learned to speak her mind, learned to _not take that shit._

Basically, while she was in the past, Lia _grew the fuck up._

The first person to figure this out was her cousin, Wally. He figured this out by watching Lia explain the movement of the planets to Dawn, and Doan (and at some point Bart, Dora, and Bella who snuck in); and he watched her use her powers. And in that moment he knew- the girl who left will never return. Never.

“Okay, what’s wrong?”

“Thestupidplanetsaren’t… Ugh.Idon’tgetit!Ialwaysgetitand-”

“Stop. Breathe. Now, as slowly as you can- what, exactly, is wrong?”

“I don’t understand the solar system, and it’s a project for school that’s due Friday, and today’s
Wednesday and—"

Lia hums softly, then speaks calmly. Soothing— it’s one of the first direct interactions she’s had with her little sister. “Do you want me to help with it?”

Dawn looks up at her older sister— and this is what the inside of her head looked like. She probably knows how it works. SHE’S SO BORING! She never minded helping me before… SO BORING And she’s… different, now. “Well… Okay. Yes, please do.”

“Okay.” There is a smile in Lia’s voice— her hand quickly draws the drapes, darkening the living room. “So— what should I start with?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well… I’m going to model the solar system for you, so you can understand it… so where should I start?”

“The… beginning?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Start at the beginning.”

“Okay— what is that?”

Dawn is stumped for a long moment, then says, hesitantly “…the Sun?”

(Let me set the scene. It’s midevening— the sun has gone down, but it’s still relatively light out. The Lia and Dawn are sitting in a near blackened living room— Lia sitting Indian-style in front of the coffee table, Dawn sitting with her legs under her on the couch.)

“…What’s the Sun?”

“The Sun is a star.”

“Like this?” and there, inbetween Lia’s hands is a small shimmering shape; it coalesces into a curved star, false bright white yellow. Lia’s face is illuminated with the harsh white light from this false star— and Doan suddenly speaks, his head poking over the couch. “That’s not what the sun looks like!”

Lia hides a real smile— “Oh? Why not?”

Doan clambers over the back of the couch, his lithe little body flipping into a seated position. “That’s a symbol for a star; real stars are round!”

“Oh, so like this?” And it changes, almost with a comical “pop”— one second there is a symbol for a star, false white bright; then there is a small orb, small flaring white bright.

“The color’s wrong.” Dawn— she’s getting into it.

“What should the color be?”

“Amarelo!” Bart has been standing in the doorway— this is interesting. He pads over to the couch—
Doan scoots over, Bart doesn’t quite flop down next to him. There is a little jostling and then-

“Oh, okay. So… the Sun is a round yellow star?” and the orb changes to a soft warm bright, gleaming glowing- warm summer sunlight from long ago. (A memory of the Sun. Oh Lia.) “What next?”

“…Mercury.” Doan- his voice comes out of the near darkness like a sigh.

“What’s that?”

“Mercury is a planet. Like Earth.”

“So… like this?” and there is a large grey-blue lump of rock, almost dwarfing the small glowing orb.

Twin shouts of “NO!” can be heard- and with a soft crackling of sparks, Dora and Bella are there. “That isn’t! what Mercury looks like.”

What happens next is… science. Bonding. An older sister teaching her younger siblings how a small portion of the world is.

(Let me tell you about the model of the Solar system Lia made. A golden red orange orb of light- the memory of sunlight through long red hair, and giggles that wouldn’t stop; next to it, a small blackened thing, like a whole black peppercorn; then an orb of similar size to the blue-green one, it’s surface lit from within by flashes of… lightning, and the roar of fires; a blue-green orb circled by a small white orb, the surface near the orb pocked and scarred, the surface away from the orb smooth and clean; a rust red orb, circled by two tiny white ones; a scattering of lumpy browns and greys, no bigger than peas no smaller than sand; a swirling red and pink and grey and white thing- a face gone whirling with time and memory, encircled by sixty-seven off white orbs, ranging in size and shape; a planet ringed by sparkling slivers; a planet on its side; a planet that is larger, and blue. All these things whirl around each other in a stately, steady dance- spiraling through the darkness of Wally’s parent’s living room.

Lights in the dark.

Oh Lia.)

Wally came in just when Lia gave the final explanation for the solar system- punctuated by her glowing, glimmering model made out of light.

“The Solar System consists of the Sun and the astronomical objects gravitationally bound in orbit around it, all of which formed from the collapse of a giant molecular cloud approximately 4.6 billion years ago. The vast majority of the system’s mass is in the Sun. Of the many objects that orbit the Sun, most of the mass is contained within eight relatively solitary planets whose orbits are almost circular and lie within a nearly flat disc called the ecliptic plane. The four inner planets, Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars, also called the terrestrial planets, are primarily composed of rock and metal.

The four outer planets, the gas giants, are substantially more massive than the terrestrials. The two largest, Jupiter and Saturn, are composed mainly of hydrogen and helium; the two outermost planets, Uranus and Neptune, are composed largely of ices, such as water, ammonia and methane, and are often referred to separately as “ice giants.” At first, the entire model glows brightly- then as she lists each object in its category, parts dim- other parts light brighter; the model is the focus of her… Lecture, because Lia is lecturing them about the Solar System. And they’re listening. Wow.
“The Solar System is also home to a number of regions populated by smaller objects. The asteroid belt” and a thousand tiny pea and smaller flecks of grey suddenly glint and glisten like the silvery scales of a freshly killed tuna “, which lies between Mars and Jupiter, is similar to the terrestrial planets as it is composed mainly of rock and metal. Beyond Neptune's orbit lie the Kuiper belt and scattered disc.”

Near invisible flecks of gray-brown and blue flash bright, burning orangey-white “These are linked populations of trans-Neptunian objects composed mostly of ices such as water, ammonia and methane. Within these populations, five individual objects,” glowing brighter than the rest “Ceres, Pluto, Haumea, Makemake and Eris, are recognized to be large enough to have been rounded by their own gravity, and are thus termed dwarf planets. In addition to thousands of small bodies in those two regions, various other small body populations including comets, centaurs and interplanetary dust freely travel between regions.” A miasma of softly purple and green splendor drifts through the model- Lia’s face is briefly lit; she is having fun. “Six of the planets and three of the dwarf planets are orbited by natural satellites, usually termed "moons" after Earth's Moon. Each of the outer planets is encircled by planetary rings of dust and other particles.

The solar wind, a flow of plasma from the Sun,” a coil of red and yellow flows out and around, glowing softer finer gossamer thin and pulsing “creates a bubble in the interstellar medium known as the heliosphere, which extends out to the edge of the scattered disc. The Oort cloud,” suddenly flashing some ways away from the golden red radiance ovoid is a flutterly slashing of blue and green and purple and grey “which is believed to be the source for long-period comets, may also exist at a distance roughly a thousand times further than the heliosphere. The heliopause is the point at which pressure from the solar wind is equal to the opposing pressure of interstellar wind. The Solar System is located within one of the outer arms of Milky Way galaxy, which contains about 200 billion stars.”

At the last, her model becomes smaller and smaller, vanishing into a swirling spiral of stars and darkness- then those too, fade into nothing.

There is a long moment of silence; quiet, in the calming dark. Lia speaks again. “Tomorrow, if you have anything you want to know- and I do mean anything- please ask me, and I’ll… Show-and-Tell, again. Tonight, you’re all going to go to bed. Alright?”

There is much assent, naturally- Lia gives her young cousins and siblings a hug and kiss each, tells them she loves them, and sends them all to bed- the wander to their beds with the confused and blinded air of someone who has just had their mind blown- or at the very least, had their mind expanded.

And Wally steps out of the other hallway -his house is laid out in a circuitous pattern- and says, quietly “You really are my baby cousin, aren’t you?”

Lia glances up at him- she’s flopped onto the couch, hair over her face. She blows her long bangs out of her eyes- “Well, yeah. That’s only what I’ve been saying for the past three months.”

Wally smiles, then flops down next to his cousin- You’re still kind of annoying, but then again, you’re a girl- I think it doesn’t count- and sighs. “So. How long till our parents figure out you aren’t a little girl anymore?”

“…How long till they figure out that you have a friend with benefits?”

Wally stares at her, wide eyed. Lia raises an eyebrow. Wally looks away, hides a grin. She got him. “Point. So, back in the day- which was like three months ago- did you ever… Team up?”
“Yeah…”

“Wanna do it again?”

Lia stares at her cousin for a long time. Then the most terrifying smirk Wally has ever seen crosses her face- it’s an unholy cross between his mother’s “just found a bargain” and his aunt’s “just found a scoop” grin; “I would be delighted, cuz.”

Wally takes a moment- he nods, composes himself, then asks… slightly embarrassed… “Can you do those feathery dinosaurs?”

Lia smiles, wiggles her fingers- and there is a six foot, faintly glowing, feathery Velociraptor standing in the living room. The sound Wally then made was not quite a squeal or an eep- it was a squee.

(I’ve figured out why Lia and Shayera’s story doesn’t end happily. Shayera has- she has a Destiny. Lia… isn’t a part of it. Now, I would normally think that this meant that their timelines don’t match up, but… They do. The parts of their lives that come together in happiness match up perfectly.

Magic A is always Magic A. If Person A is meant to fall in love with Person B, but instead falls in love with Person C, Person B will do everything in their power to… remove Person C.

Oh god.)

Metropolis:

In the end, Cat Grant is the best friend you could ever ask for. (Why- Oh my, never mind; this should be interesting. Oh, and… this has some bearing on future events, but I really just wanted a breather. Oh wow- I keep forgetting how magnificent a musician Pied Piper really is- er, was… Will be? Time displacement is hell on the adverbs… or is it verbs? Ugh, whatever…)

Cat Grant volunteered at a children’s hospital when she was in L.A.; she actually does know a frightening amount about what people are like, because she’s seen them at their best and worst. She actually does draw on a lot of personal experience to write her column- and what she can’t remember or talk about, she researches. She works from home- as she is never in a professional setting, she’s never seen a point in wearing anything… “nice”. (I will admit, I stopped wearing pants for a while- no one’s here, no one’s going to see or care or get me arrested about my star-print undies. They glow in the dark. Shut up.)

Hartley has been on her French silk couch for the past four days- the one she got in France when she went with Serling- he bathes, thank god, but he mostly just lies there and sobs into the cushioning. Cat’s had enough- she doesn’t know what happened, or why the boys are being stupid with each other, but she’s had enough of it, and is going to go do something about it.

First, find the target; Conner Kent, 68th floor of the Daily Planet building. Saturday, half an hour before noon- he’s there.

Second, prepare a reasonable approach towards reconciliation- check and half-done. Talked to Hartley first; made him put on real clothing and say what was wrong out loud- apparently, Conner doesn’t want to have sex yet, only he worded it like a break-up, and Hartley’s been too distraught to figure that out. Lord, save me from stupid hormonal boys.
Third, get your war gear on. This meant a shower, first- and hair brushed, combed and coiffed; new bra that actually fits, new blouse- *Milo’s probably not had lunch- God, it took me forever to figure it out…*, pretty skirt that swirls around her, new shoes- in the end, she looks like a cutie. She also applied a light coat of makeup- a little eyeshadow, a little lipstick- and suddenly, she’s elevated from cutie to hottie. She makes Hartley eat something on a paper towel (Oh ow- for when you’re too lazy for a paper plate, but not sad enough to eat over the sink.), grabs her purse and her Daily Planet Press Pass; then she’s on her mission.

She steps out of her little Hell’s Gate apartment- walks down the street, turns left, gets onto the subway- then she’s up and out; for the next fifteen minutes, she’s walking through New Troy.

Over the years, Metropolis' features have greatly changed from its founding; however, Metropolis has always been a world class city of the same caliber as Gotham, Central, or Star, and is often referred to as The Big Apricot. Metropolis is made up of six boroughs, the largest being New Troy- Joe Shuster, one of the first architects, stated that Metropolis was modeled after Toronto, in France, a lovely city that also comprises six boroughs. Each of the boroughs has its own distinct character and feel; New Troy is the largest borough in Metropolis.

New Troy is a skyscraper island bustling with commerce and business. The concrete and steel canyons of the city rise to dizzying heights- think 1930s architecture stretched like a rubber band. The Daily Planet Building is the most recognizable landmark in the Metropolis skyline. Located in "Planet Square," it is particularly known for the Daily Planet globe atop the building. Other prominent skyscrapers include the Emperor Building, the Newstime Building, home of the national Newstime magazine, and the Twin Towered LexCorp Tower, headquarters for Lex Luthor's company as well as his private home. Besides the Financial District, notable areas of New Troy include Chinatown, Little Bohemia (the arts capital of Metropolis), and Glenmorgan Square.

Famous streets in New Troy include Fifth Avenue, Bessolo Boulevard, and Topaz Lane. Bessolo Boulevard's name is derived from... Actually, it’s better that you don’t know. Centennial Park, sometimes labeled as Metropolis Park, is Metropolis' largest city park. Its most noteworthy feature will be a statue of Superman and Superboy with an American bald eagle, erected after their deaths fighting Doomsday and Match.

New Troy is separated from the more suburban boroughs by the West River and Hobb's River, to the north and the south, and the Potomac to the east.

Midvale is a suburb of Metropolis, and will be well known as the home of Supergirl and the site of the Midvale Orphanage.

Bakerline is another borough of Metropolis. Located north of New Troy, across the West River (don’t ask), Bakerline is the home of newspaper reporter Jimmy Olsen and appears to be based on The Bronx.

Other boroughs and suburban areas include Queensland Park, Hell's Gate (where Cat lives- a nice enough neighborhood, but also very working class; still, the rent’s cheap, the neighbors are nice, and she’s close enough to her mother to check on her daily but not actually have to live in the same house. She can’t do it. Not anymore.), St. Martin's.
Eventually, she’s a block away from Planet Square- and then she’s there. She crosses the street, flashes her pass, takes the elevator up to the 68th floor- and when she gets into the office, she does not yell, nor make a scene. She just walks in like she owns the place- sweeping past Jimmy, who cuts himself off mid-sentence, his eyes bulging in his head- and stalks past all the reporters, grabs Conner by the loop of his pants, and keeps walking, dragging him away from the copier; she drags him out into an unused closet, shoves him in, and shuts the door behind her. There is a conversation that is muffled by the walls and door- just barely audible are the words “You need to calm him down” and “He’s not my boyfriend, Conner!”- eventually, whatever argument is happening ends, and Cat whirls out of the closet, her last words being “Conner, if you want the relationship, you have to talk it out with him.”

She then walks back through the newspaper’s office, stops in front of Jimmy and says “Milo, do you want to go have lunch with me?”

Jimmy- Milo says “I would love that, Cat.”

And without further discussion, both Cat and Milo are out the door, to lunch. (Conner has to sit in the closet for a few minutes before he gets up the nerve to stick his head out the door- Lois Lane raises an eyebrow at him, and says “What did you do to my nephew, Kent?”

“Nothing that he didn’t want me to, Ms. Lane.”

To this day, Hartley still smacks the back of Conner’s head for that remark.)

Cat and Jimmy go to Centennial Park- a lovely golden red, leaves turned to cool bright fire on the trees, the sharp and spicy smell of fall in the air. It’s November, just barely started, but Metro gets cold fast- Cat’s forgotten her jacket, as usual. The wind is cool and fast from the north, toothy and sharp- winter is definitely on its way. Cat’s skirt swirls, doing basically nothing to keep her warm; she doesn’t quite shiver. Her skin is pale and her cheeks and nose are pink, her eyes big and dark and gleaming bright behind her glasses- Jimmy finds his courage.

Jimmy sweeps his coat off, and tucks it around her shoulders- one of the oldest romantic moves you can do. His coat is a trench, and settles just above her ankles; it is warm from his body, warm and smelling faintly of lavender and plums. Cat can feel the warm blush stealing across her face- and here is where she finds courage.

She leans over to Jimmy- who is now shivering in the cold- and gives him a chaste and sweet kiss on the lips.

Jimmy doesn’t feel cold for the rest of the day- and he goes back to work with a goofy grin that nothing, not even Conner’s snarking or Mr. White’s general air of barely restrained loathing, can ruin.

At the end of his day- near midnight- Conner screws his courage to the sticking place, and goes to Cat’s Hell’s Gate apartment. He unlocks the door, walks in, and there… there is Hartley, red eyed and miserable looking. He’s in his ultra-soft because it’s been washed a bajillion times MetroMuseum shirt and short shorts combo- his longish hair is fluffed and frazzled. To put it more
bluntly, he looks like a rain soaked freshly warmed over piece of hell- only without the rain or puss oozing boils.

Conner steps forwards, closes the door behind him- Hartley doesn’t look up from the static on the TV, just mumbles “go away, Cat; I can’t deal with your pity-hate right now”. Conner carefully oozes over the back of the couch, wraps his arms around Hartley- his deep voice rumbles into the air, vibrating against Hartley’s spine.

“I said what I said because I’m not ready to have sex yet, Hartley. You are the first and only person I’ve ever wanted to date- the only person I’ve ever wanted to kiss and touch and dance under stars with. If I mess up sometimes, I’m sorry- I just… I wanted to… I’m sorry. I’m sorry for not saying what I meant. I’m sorry that you didn’t know that I- I really love you, Hartley. Please… please don’t hate me.”

Hartley leans back into Conner, his breath coming easily to him at last; he inhales and smells Conner, all warm sugar and lemon and soap and musky guy, exhaust and motor oil, freshly cut grass- and some sharp smell that’s unique to him… it smells like starlight sounds, which he knows doesn’t make any sense because smells and sounds are not the same, but that’s what Conner smells like; his orangey red hair, fluffy and long- it’s to his shoulder blades- curls around and under Conner’s head and neck. Hartley’s voice is a tear-roughed rasp; slightly nasal from snotty build up- allergies. “I don’t hate you, Conner, I… I lo-love you. And I’m- I’m sorry I overreacted and it’s perfectly alright to not be ready, just… when you are, I’ll be here, okay?”

“Oh my.”

“Okay.”

“So… are we still… us?”

“I don’t think we ever stopped being us, Hart.” Hartley opens his eyes, reddened with shed tears, and looks over his shoulder into the kind and gentle blueness of his boyfriend’s gaze. Conner smiles at Hartley with all the warming kindness of a young and radiant bath towel- all fuzzy, fluffly warmth, and ultra-soft plush- and gently kisses the side of Hartley’s forehead.

Hartley twists around so that he is straddling Conner’s hips; his arms coil around Conner’s broad chest, head tucking into the junction of the neck and shoulder. Conner’s arms come up around his body, tugs him close to his heart- smells Hartley, his sweet sweaty smell, rubber and metal polish, goat milk lemon soap and his rich conditioner, the inky-dry sweetly dusty smell of paper- his sheet music, the stuff he never shows anyone; Conner kisses Hartley, warm and soft and gentle and Hartley kisses Conner rough and needy and sweet and shy; they kiss, and gasp, and kiss again and they fall over onto the couch.

Hartley breaks away, gasps for air- “Tell me to stop if you... Just tell me, okay?”

“Okay.” (Oh my.) Hartley’s mouth touches Conner’s- slight little nips to the lips, warm licks and touching, their teeth nearly clacking together; Conner rolls his hips up under Hartley, who wiggles on top of him- Conner groans a little bit, warm rumbles through their chests and Hartley lets out a little squeaking moan, his teeth nipping sharply on Conner’s bottom lip. They smell each other, the music of two loving hearts rushing through their ears- Hartley presses greedy kisses into Conner’s neck; Conner whimpers a little, his lips wibbling in the half light.

Conner’s right hand strokes up Hartley’s thigh, his left buried in his orangey copper soft and wavy and long hair, gently tugging; Hartley’s left hand is running up Conner’s shirt, his right hand on his bellybutton, fingers gently inching across and down his hair, slowly rubbing underneath his pants
and underwear almost but not quite touching; Conner’s right hand gently palpitates Hartley right where the flesh gets soft and gives under his fingers- pushes just enough for Hartley to feel it, pushes so that the muscles of his legs that go right there twitch and wiggle, pulls his chest and head closer, gently mouths his neck and his throat and down where it connects to his shoulders, right in the hollow space between muscles and bone, that little cupping place just so, tongue rasping across- Hartley lets out a soft, breathy shriek.

Hips wiggling against each other, and moaning soft and gasping and Conner can’t remember how to breathe right now, but he’s not sure if he really cares, sweat and sweet touches and Hartley’s green green eyes gone dark jade with desire- Coppery red hair dark brown in the no-light living room, the smell of silk and exotic incense, spices from another world and the whilly-whril of the overhead fan sending gentle tiny slaps of air against sweat cooled blood heated twitchy flesh. Touching. Tasting. Feeling.

Panting. Warm breath scented with peaches; the cinnamony spice of that red gum Conner hates the taste of but loves to chew- and Hartley’s minty aftershave mixing in, warm and cool; softly muggy right between their faces, warm and breath intermingling slingback slinky sinuous arms and legs winding around each other, and Hartley is stronger than he looks.

A stunning lack of color. Only dark shades of almost grey- this could almost be a yellow or a red; no, Cat’s house is mostly reds with oranges and pinks… yellow is there, but it’s brassy brash bold-starlight shines pure and clear and clean, bounces off of a vase shot through with bashed and fractured mauve stripes, see the freckled shoulder gently rippling in the reflection that is only barely there, the pale creamy soft shirt down around narrow hips and the dark plum shorts are near the ankles now- Cat’s good, but she’s no angel, she can’t make a guy put on undies if he doesn’t want to.

The smell of musk and man and sweat, and Hartley always smells faintly of India ink, and Conner is licking the tiny beads of salty sweat from behind Hartley’s ear and Hartley is yanking Conner’s pants down and his their touching-

They get into it. You know?

(Hot damn. Wow- I- Wow. Crossing swords. Wow… Wo- AUGH OH GOD STOP STOP YOU IDIOTS STOP, CAT'S COMING, OH SHIT! NEITHER OF YOU ACTUALLY LIVE THERE, HOLY SHIT!)

Cat walks into her living room, her oversize Cornhusks T-shirt gently ruffling around her knees; she was thirsty, so she got up to get a glass of water. She flips the kitchen light on and then she glances into her living room- “EY-EY-EY! HOLY MOTHER OF GOD WHAT THE HELL!” Her hand claps over her eyes, and her voice has taken a loud and commanding tone; her voice is a screaming what-the-no-not-fuck-because-JEEZE! “WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL!! I DON’T CARE WHAT YOU DO- BUT NOT ON MY FRENCH SILK COUCH. THERE WILL BE NO DUBIOUS FLUIDS ON MY DAMN FRENCH SILK COUCH, HOLY SHIT. PUT YOUR DAMN CLOTHES ON AND LEAVE MY DAMN APARTMENT, YOUR COUCH SITTING PRIVLIGES HAVE BEEN OFFICIALLY REVOKED! GO THE HELL HOME; OH MY GOD! THERE ARE THINGS I DO NOT NEED TO KNOW! AUGH!”

Conner and Hartley roll off the couch- Conner yanks his pants back up; Hartley yanks his shirt back over his head; a flurry of rustling fabric and barely restrained libidos. Cat keeps her eyes closed until she hears the stumbling and the thumpings stop- doesn’t look until she hears the door slam.
She slowly opens her eyes, glances around her formal living room- no half naked boys, no heavy petting; peace and celibacy have been restored to her apartment. *If I’m not getting any, nobody’s getting any. And there will be no almost sex on my French silk couch. Not now, not ever.* She then gets her drink, and goes back to bed.

And, across town at CADMUS Labs, Sandy has discovered just how much of a jerk his father really is.
"Temporal Shift: Adjective. Defined as

CADMUS (The same day, from two different perspectives. Aw hell.):

People never really die- not when they work for CADMUS.

Are owned by CADMUS- Lex Luthor. (Same same.)

Mary McGinnis- Dubbilex- learned that the hard way. Is learning that. (Aw hell.)

Alexander “Sandy” Luthor II is learning that first hand- up close and personal. (Oh god.)

Serling Roquette works for CADMUS- she’s a geneticist, a data programmer; she’s used to not being particularly important, easily replaceable; CADMUS takes it to a whole new level.

(Wait, wait, fuck- let’s go back a bit. Who is Serling Roquette, why is Sandy at CADMUS, and… something else is bugging me… fuck, what is it…)

Serling Roquette is a geneticist- now the top, the only geneticist, and a fine data programmer; she graduated from GIT when she was fourteen; her parents died in a car-crash and she was separated from her little sister, Alice, when she was eight- Social Services in Gotham are more concerned with reaching certain quotas than they are the preservation of the family. She’s in her late teens now- has the occasional vague disjointed nightmare about loud voices and motion and then a great blinding thump and copper tasting warmth in her mouth on her face and screaming- of too many voices speaking loudly and being alone and lonely- of endless darkness pierced through with brightly glemings too far away to hear, on and on and on and only her own vague murmurings to keep her sane. (Oh. Oh shit. That’s- but no, there’s something else…) She’s of average height and build; mid-length blonde hair that’s seen better days- “Why would I do my hair when I could be doing SCIENCE!?!?”- scruffy ironic if she were more self-aware T-shirts ;Today’s reads “Playing with your brain is fun ^w^”; skinny jeans that are more patching than jean, pink lips, blue-green eyes, thick glasses, oversized lab-coat because she keeps “forgetting” to send in the requisition form, almost no figure to speak of, a lanyard that she got volunteering in the ICU at the children’s hospital back in L. A. (It’s blue with little robots on it. She double checked the dress code, and there wasn’t anything saying she couldn’t…)

She looks more like a pre-teen girl playing Scientist than an actual almost twenty-something grown ass adult. Why does that matter? It matters because, on first glance, Serling isn’t a threatening person- she’s too… young for that. Cross her, however, and you’ll soon discover just what kind of person graduates Gotham Tech at fourteen, becomes an emancipated minor at twelve- holds fourteen degrees, three doctorates, and has written two technical handbooks; invented several revolutionary procedures for fertility, including a process by which a human baby is grown in a non-human surrogate (a pig, if you must know- goats, while cheaper, were also less effective. Don’t look at the speaker like that, I’m just telling you what she invented…), an effective rotary combustion engine (30000 rpms on three gallons for four months? I’d call that effective, wouldn’t you?), and a tea that effectively staves off heatstroke.

(All these inventions have rather hilarious- well, Serling thought some of them were funny- stories behind them. I’ll tell you about the tea; it’s a good segue, and it will allow you to take your own measure of Serling’s character.)
Serling has a large amount of autonomy at her CADMUS job- she’s only had the job for four months, but as long as her work quota gets turned in on time, her superiors really don’t care what she wears, or what her work space is like. Case in point- her third week of employment by CADMUS, the AC for her lab broke; and somebody switched the low watt bulbs with high output halogen no-I-didn’t-need-my-eyes-or-the-ability-to-breathe-that’s-crazy bulbs. Serling sent in work-requisition forms to get these things fixed… which got lost. Somehow. However, Serling isn’t the kind of person to just skip work because it’s uncomfortable- She had taken the last of her AppleFizz scholarship money (“Fizzly Happily! Appley Fizzly!” If you win it, you get fifty-thousand dollars for whatever you want to do. Best. Scholarship. Ever.) and had gone on a trip to Spain- spring and summer in wonderful Spain with two weeks in France and a wonderful whirlwind romance and breakup with a girl named Cat- sweet, special, and over in a week and a half (huh- they bought a cou- OH MY LORD, CAT. YOU KEPT THE COUCH. DEAR LORD,); she’d come back with a better understanding of how to… relax, go with the flow, and move on. She’d also come back with a rather fantastic two-piece swim suit, and an outstanding sense of personal style.

Now, understand- Serling Roquette is built like a skinny boy. This means that, in her swimsuit, her body has curves that only exist by way of clever design and additional ruffles. Her hair is long, and slightly oily- it has a tendency to slip out of whatever hairdo she puts it up in. Serling Roquette is also a very practical person- she considers her own comfort a minor detail in the pursuit of SCIENCE.

“-and Gentlemen, this will absolutely revolutionize the field as we know it!” The door to the lab swings open; in walks Lex Luthor, followed by several men in dark suits; Serling looked up from her computer bank, then looked again; the men stopped.

Picture it: A long legged girl in a seafoam green two piece swimsuit, a frilling of ruffles across her chest, and a single strip of ruffles around her hips; sweat is gleaming across and down her body. Her hair is up near the top of her head, a looped mass of sandy blonde hair dark near the scalp; her eyes are covered by a pair of sun-safe goggles that she modified, gleaming like gems in the too bright light; her hands are in bright green gloves, snug and sleek. There is a coaster on almost every lab table- on the coaster nearest Serling is a plastic bottle with a thick film of condensation on the outside. The room itself is overbright, and a horrible, still, humid ninety degrees. A small fan- which is a twenty cent plastic fan fused open and attached between a magnetic contraption, one end of the obvious fulcrum bouncing back and forth- near the computer towers does very little to alleviate the stifling heat of the room.

Serling caught only the end of Mr. Luthor’s sentence- she raised one eyebrow, glanced over the assembled men, sipped her drink, and went back to work.

The men leave the room.

The sounds of male laughter soon reach her ears- Serling shakes her head in exasperation, then mutters to herself “Men”.

An E-mail from Mr. Luthor soon appeared in her Inbox- asking (ordering) an explanation; her reply was thus:

TO: bossman@CADMUS_LexCorp.net
FROM:roquettescientist@CADMUS_PromethianIndustries.net
Subject: RE: Your Clothing
Sir,

Although I can offer no excuse for violating the company conduct code, please allow me this explanation for my actions:

The AC unit that cools the laboratory that I work in has been broken for five weeks- I filed a form requesting that this unit be repaired the very first day it broke, but alas, it has not happened. The low-watt, low heat lightbulbs in the same laboratory were replaced with high-wattage, high heat bulbs, greatly increasing the amount of heat inside the same laboratory, and increasing the need for the AC unit- which, as you know, is broken. I filed a form requesting that these bulbs be changed back to the lower wattage bulbs; this has not happened. The alarm system that alerts medical staff to possible emergency does not reach the laboratory I work in- therefore, I did not assume that I could continue as I had been without the dire risk of death. I have filed a complaint form about this issue, but I have not received any written confirmation about what is to be done about this dangerous situation, if anything.

I was hired by your company to transcribe genomes from paper to file and I am paid on the basis of my work per day. It became my prerogative to find the most economical and effective way to mitigate the antagonistic effects of the situation, as my rent is due next week. I did three things to that effect;

I brought a fan from home to try and cool the mainframes. This was mildly effective, as the computers still worked on Day 35 of the increased heat conditions; unfortunately they were very slow and considerably slowed the rate of my work.

I wore clothing that would help protect me from the conditions present in the laboratory, while also obeying the dress code. As you saw, this meant clothing that only covered me enough for the sake of modesty, and in the company approved colors- anything more, and I would have been courting heatstroke. I have also done my best to protect the workspace from any bodily secretions, particularly the computers and files; I used a very absorbent beach towel for this purpose, as well as non-porous medical gloves. I protected my eyes with goggles I got in Tethran, as the prescription of my normal glasses does not darken enough to protect me from eyestrain.

I brought refreshments that would keep me hydrated and reasonably cool in the laboratory, as well as pose very little danger to the equipment therein. I used a tea made from genetically altered bay leaves, mint, and tea roses that was then frozen in multiple vessels, brought to work in a cooler, and removed from said cooler as needed- this combination was the most refreshing, long lasting, and least dangerous to the laboratory equipment. I do not recommend the flavor, however.

I apologize for any offence, or inconvenience, that may have been incurred from my actions, and accept any punishment you deem fit. However, if you choose to fire me, please allow me two days to remove my effects from the workplace.

Regards, Dr. Serling Roquette

Serling’s AC got fixed that day- her lights were fixed by the start of the next. And she got a raise … which somehow morphed into a promotion- Serling doesn’t know all the details, but that skuzzy Donovan vanished one day, and she was his only competition. (Promethian Industries... why is that
Serling also has a curious streak. She has to- to be one of the top genetisists in the world, you have to have a certain curiosity… and slightly loose morals, but, SCIENCE, so… (Oh dear god. Serling Roquette. I wrote my first dissertation on her- she’s the inventor of the Combustible Lemon, Youth-anization, and the New Metropolis Lightrail. Sweet Jesus… No, that’s not what I’m not remembering- the last time this happened, something got written out of history… I’m so far on the edge of everything, changes like that always take longer than instant to effect me…

Great, now I’ve got the (“Fuck! Alright, bitches, I’ve been thinking. I’ve been thinking about that old saying, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”’’ Fuck. When life gives you lemons, don't make lemonade - make life take the fucking lemons back! Get fucking passionate, goddamn it! I don't want your damm fucking lemons, what am I supposed to do with these? I fucking hate fucking stupid damn lemons! Fuck! Bitch, what the fuck am I supposed to do with these damn things? You’re Life and you can do what you want? Fuck that- bitch, please. You know who I am? I'm the woman who's gonna burn your house down! With the fucking stupid lemons. I'm going to genetically alter these fucking lemons you just gave me and turn them into combustible lemons and use them to burn your house down! Bitch, I know where you live- I am going to burn your house down! With the fucking lemons!”’, also known as the) “Fucking Lemon” rant stuck in my head…)

When Serling still lived in Gotham, in June, a Cat- a girl in purple and black, yellow stripes down the legs, floppy kitty ears, called herself “Spoiler”- had found her and wanted to have a word; she listened to what the girl had to say. And her curiosity was… piqued.

“Something stinks at CADMUS- too many stinks in the Dead Waters. Y’know?”

“Might. Why- me, this time now?”

“Yer old enough- gots the skills and the ages to fake it real good, yeah?”

“Yeah yeah. What kinda stenches we jabbling?”

“There be five bodies that wash out of the Sea of the Dead, few time ago- not news ‘cept is news ‘cause the bullet holes in they’s skulls was too small, yeah? So, did some sniffing and found that the same men had been there that place- at CADMUS, yeah? for fifty years, and not got old. And those same men had been there fifty years before, but did get old. Newsies- the musical, yeah?- was based of’dem. So so- something stinks foul at CADMUS. I’se or mine cain’t go- s’too young. You go for us then?”

“Yeah yeah. No problems- but still, me?”

“Yeah yeah- Puss in Boots rides again!”

(Stray Cat strut.)

She’s been Puss in Boots for as long as she’s been an orphan in the Gotham Child Protective Services- you need that kind of a name, in the GCPS; some things are really real. There are scars on her body- scars Serling doesn’t talk about, doesn’t refer to; Spoiler (Steph) was in the GCPS for a few months, off and on… Before, There’s a secret canting catty language in the GCPS you learn quick if you want to stay safe, keep your secrets- learn things the adults won’t tell you, learn about where your parents are, learn where your siblings are, learn which foster houses to stay out of, which
families only want you for the money, which back-streets and alleyways are safe during the day, and which ones are safe at night, and which tunnels have openings on the street and where they go and who has what and for what and why and and and- a secret language of dropped consonants and vowels, made up words, gender-specific euphemisms and turns of phrase; a language of symbols and near-words, pictograms and colors, maps drawn in chalk and charcoal and washed away in the rain—no one knows who redraws them, or when; a world made small and flimsy, small enough to ball up and twist so it fits inside whatever shape your head might be. It’s a language you have to learn on the fly, a language that can only be learned, never taught; a quick-living language, subject to change every day.

Some words are so clear, they pop up and out of older peoples mouths- the first word of the Gothamspeak the boys learned was for “home” and it’s not actually a word, it’s a phrase- “back there good”, only you have to say it like there are only two vowels in the whole thing “BAHKDGUD”... Baked good. Yeah. All the Five have words like this… and somehow, Ceallach’s spell makes it so that the most important words are always the same.

Spoiler’s colors mark her as kind and considerate person, someone who will help you out. Trustworthy; insane.

Carrie’s colors mark her as a trouble maker- someone you don’t turn your back on, someone who might do something, but will never get blamed for it. Trustworthy; sane.

Maureen’s colors mark her as safe- extra safe, because the sad ones will never hurt you, not really; insane.

Cass’ colors mark her as… dangerous. You don’t mess with the ones all in black- they’re crazy. Trustworthy- you can trust a snake to strike, after all; sane.

Tim… is Tim. Sometimes, they go the other way on the crazy scale- and the ones in black are just normal, stab you in the back crazy. The colorful crazy will put ammonia in your shampoo after you beat them up; will tie you down and silence you, and then cut out your internal organs. Will slam your head onto a desk, jamming a pencil in through your eye into your brain- call it “magic”. Un-trustworthy; insane.

They tell stories about that one, the one who did “magic”. No one comes from nowhere- the adults might not notice, but every child knows the children around them; and they always know the crazy from the sane.

Serling remembers the stories she heard about the one called Jack- she remembers his laughter. His greenish-blond hair, that red smile. Teeth, on her neck- and how good it felt. Other things. (Her friends who were younger than her- except Jack; Flowers, Mally, Hat, and Quiz… Those days long gone, from long ago…)

Scars aren’t always on the surface. There’s a reason Serling dates girls.

(Holy shit. Holy shit. HOLY FUCKING SHIT.)

If you knew her then- still know her now, you would call her Puss. And, yes, she does almost always wear boots- anti slip, all weather, steel shank and toe “Bitch, Please- I’m doing SCIENCE!” boots.

The file she’s reading… the theory is amazing. That, of course, is obvious- she’s heard of Mary
McGinnis. In her field of work, Mary McGinnis is synonymous with Jesus of Nazareth. But this file-it’s laid out like a record of… Experimental Procedures. Holy shit. If this is correct… then CADMUS has opened a Pandora’s box- I don’t think they even realize… They’ve figured out how to synthesize Life. Totally copying this in my head.

_Huh- Project: MATCH_V1-2; this one has been completed… and Project: SANDMAN_V1; this one’s in progress… What- or, more likely, Who are these, I wonder?

(Oh fuck. That’s what I was forgetting remembering- oh son of a bitch. Sandman. Dammit- this isn’t supposed to happen! Fuck- that means that… aw, dammit!

I… I suppose I should tell you- fuck! -because of where I am, physically, psychically, spiritually, temporally- whatever you want to call my existence… I- I. I don’t always know what is and isn’t real. This has led to some interesting philosophical discourses on the nature of reality, but the important thing for this observational narrative is that… I’m not a reliable narrator. I should be a reliable narrator- ”Tell my tale to those who ask. Tell it truly, the ill deeds, along with the good, and let me be judged accordingly. The rest is silence.” – This is my, my only purpose, now, in this life.

I should be able to tell you what happened, to tell you the truth. That’s- that is my only purpose in this world. It’s my job, okay- it’s the one thing, the one damn thing that I should be able to do to the best of my ability; my powers make it so that I can tell you anyone’s life story, tell you any place’s story, tell you any thing’s story… But not when those stories are continually changing. I don’t Look at myself the mirror anymore, did you know that? I can see all of my past unfurling behind me, like a scarf made of memories- but, I suppose I should say I don’t Look into my eyes in the mirror anymore. It’s because… it’s because I can see my soul reflected in my eyes-

I’ve seen souls before, and they always have a… a sort of- a pausing place, because I can track, well, have tracked… I can see someone’s death in their eyes. Freaky, but useful.

I haven’t seen mine in… however long I’ve been here. I don’t think it can happen- I mean, sure, there’s more food in this place than I could ever eat in a lifetime, and food growing besides- I’ll never starve.

Oh god. Fuck. Oh god.

Think of it like this- I am a pebble that got thrown into a pond, right, and my purpose is to mark down the effects of all the ripples on the pond, okay? Well, sometimes it takes longer for all the ripples to travel to the edges of the pond- and I am at the very edge of the pond. Sometimes, ripples don’t reach me at all. Fuck! I- I can’t always tell what’s real… it’s like… aw fuck, it’s like I just… I woke up one day, and discovered that not only was my world not real, but my life was never… [sobbing fills the recording for a while. whispered on the edge of the audible range is the phrase “rocks aren’t alive, so they can’t die… oh, god- why did you make me a stone?”]

Do you understand what I’m trying to say to you- what am I saying, you’ll never be able to tell me if you do or don’t. _Fuck!_ I really- I hate this.

I hate being so… useless. Just an after-action report. Just a voice- “No one knows the teller. The story remains.” _Fuck!_ What if I wanted more out of life, huh?)

Gotham:
At the end of the summer, the warm soapy water steadily dripping down the stairs was the most visible indication that Bruce might have bitten off more than he could chew. There were rubber ducks of every size, from the truly miniscule to one that had its eyes at his knees, floating in the water as it rushed down the stairs- of particular note is the one that had a multitude of smaller ducks on its back. There were multi-colored soap bubbles, floating on the water- as well as small boats, and Cass in a bucket, padding. She completely ignored Selina, who was leaning against the wall, giggling, and gave a perfunctory nod to Bruce, who was pinching the bridge of his nose. They were both dressed to the nines- Bruce in a lovely dark suit, Selina in a flowing dress of gold; the splashing and laughter of small children grew steadily closer. Cass steps out of her paddle-bucket, dainty in her off-pink nightgown; her dress is completely dry, but her hair is slicked to her skull. She also looks resigned to whatever is coming next.

Jason and Tim soon slide down the stairs, naked, along with a river of bathwater- Jason has a red hand-towel wrapped around his head, folded to look like a swan, and Tim has a rather fantastic updo of suds; both toddlers slide to a stop in the middle of the landing, glance at each other, and dissolve into giggles. By now, Bruce has both hands over his face, and Selina is bent double with laughter; Cass steps over next to Bruce, and tugs on his pantleg.

“…They broke tub. Can’t make water off. Sorry.” Her voice is small, flat- her eyes betray her sincerity.

I should explain how things got this far- well, snowballed this far. Ahem. So.

Selina… never actually left Wayne Manor. Oh, sure, she goes to work every day- but not from the front door. She got into Wayne Manor through the Batcave- she goes to work from the Batcave. And she considers the traps, alarms, pitfalls, and general annoyances in the local tunnel system to be utterly charming failures.

Her boys go to school at Gotham Prep- a little hacking, a little forgery, and she suddenly had a custody agreement, three sons, a multitude of adopted daughters, and a car. She was going to get the car anyway, but now she had gotten a simple four door sedan, the one with the four rows of seating, not that little mini-cooper she had wanted. Ah well.

So, she got a lovely silvery-purple sedan- and thus did the Halcyon years begin.

(The Halcyon years are… well, they’re these quiet stretches of life in-between heart pounding world saving heroism that happen because… I’m not sure why they happen, actually. Basically, there are these big quiet stretches of time, where not much actually happens- other than life and growing up. Yes, the world gets saved a bunch, but for the Batclan, it’s mostly just the small, personal world that needs dealing with, not the entire blue and green spinning spaceship. The things you need to remember about the Halcyon years are that they don’t happen for everyone- in fact, they really only happen for the great Heroes- regular Peacekeepers and basic Vigilantes don’t really get breaks. Batman and most of his children are great Heroes- Wonder Woman, Superman, Aquaman, and Flash are too. Green Arrow, Martian Manhunter, Green Lantern, and others, while still great, are much more minor in the scale of this world…

But, to get back on topic- the major clannish families are getting, or are about to get around five years of calm peaceful drowsy time. When the Halcyon years end, it’s usually because… well, there’s
really not a polite way to say it. When the Halcyon years end, it means the nastiest shit you can imagine is about to hit the fan. Remember the Great Flood, or the Crucifixion, or The Great Depression, The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fires, the shard of Thanagarian Interstellar Mine that turned out to be reactive to Tachyon Particles and blasted me into another dimension of the time-space continuum?

Halcyon years. Love ‘em while they last- when they end, things get dangerous.

Shi-it.)

Thanksgiving was interesting that year- by then, Selina and the many children had more firmly entrenched themselves in Wayne Manor; Alfred had made changes to the menus, both in the amount of food served, and in what got served, “-as it’s only sensible to eat what’s in season when it’s in season, and only so much as you actually can, Alfred, but those babies need a varied diet, and they need to know that they will not go hungry or cold again. Alright?”

“I couldn’t agree more, Miss Kyle.”

It became normal for there to be a full table at every meal eaten at home- normal for “Brucie” to go out with only one woman, “Lina”, who everyone can see is more than half in love with Brucie, and Brucie is- shockingly- almost over the moon and into the stars about Lina; and yes, Lina might come from… less than perfect stock, and yes, Brucie might be known for leaving a string of broken hearts behind him; yes, Lina might be a shy creature of habit, and Brucie might be a spontaneous creature of partying… but when you see them together in public, it’s completely obvious what they have together- whatever it is, wherever it came from- is as true and real as it needs to be.

It became normal for the boys to mediate the massive games of Ninja Death Tag that took over several floors and rooms in the house every morning- and those semi-silent, carnage filled wars of sibling love would go down in the family history as Epic Struggles; Cass would make a series of quilts detailing the major events of each session; those quilts, along with (eventually) heavily annotated copies of Our Bodies, Ourselves, and My Body, My Self, would become the basis for a religion in the future. (Huh. So that’s how the Batkine started. Apparently, my childhood prayers were to a six year old girl with massive shares in stoicism.

Welp. There goes another piece of my childhood.)

Highlights from the mediations of the boys include, but are not limited to:

“No, Jason, it is never okay to throw blunted shuriken with intent to maim. If you throw a knife-weapon of any kind, it has to be sharp, and it has to be deadly. No backsies in this house- either you mean to kill someone, or you don’t.”

“Marcus, stop trying to make Alexander pretty when he’s asleep- revenge is not to be confused with transvestitism. Consenting beautification or none at all is the rule in this household, awrite? And anyway, mere hair-gel isn’t enough to combat short hair cow-licks- You need wax for that. And if you “borrow” mine, little brother, I will be most displeased.”

“Steph, Carrie, there are better ways to release your aggression than by beating up Marcus and Alexander. Marc, Alex, petty insults will not make Caroline or Stephanie like you more. Stoppit, yezidjits.’

“Stephanie, give Dick his pants back. No one needs to see his undies this early in the morning, yeah?”
Dickhead- what have I told you about situational awareness, he-enh?"

“Carrie, Jason- I love you both dearly, but if you don’t stop biting my legs I’ll make your backsides shine brighter than Wayne Tower. Geroff me, ya little shites.”

“DICKHEAD- YAR DEAD, AWRITE, YAR FECKIN’ DEAD, BABY BRO! YALITTLESHITE, I’MMA BEAT YOU BLACK AND GREEN!”

“Alex, no live steel before breakfast! You can use a practice sword, but absolutely no live steel! Jayzuschrist, d’ya think they’ll grow back if you choppa them?"

“Tim, beaded skirts are better for playing pretend- I am impressed at your trapping skills, however. Next time, I would recommend you get the solvent that removes the glue along with the glue itself- accidents do happen, after all.

Jason, Marc, Alex- Bone up on your situational awareness, ya little dumbfucks. That’s all I can say.”

“Hi, Maureen.” (Oh dear god.)

“Oracle, stop encouraging the Damians. They don’t need your help to be feckin’ idjits.”

(I’ll let you imagine the circumstances surrounding these comments… Incidentally, I’m pretty sure that the Batclan has the worst mouth out of all the clans- when you can give a perfectly articulated and formal report with cusswords for your nouns, verbs, and adjectives, you’ve got a mouth on you. The worst offender of the virgin ear would, in time, become Jason- Jaybird, cute but foul mouthed.

The most creative offender, however, would be Cass- not because she knew fouler words, but because she figured out a way to cuss someone out without ever using a curse word stronger than “Spoons”. Her favorite catch-all exclamation? “Kitty-spoons”. Yes, really.)

Interestingly, so long as nothing irreplaceable gets destroyed, Alfred, Bruce, and Selina don’t try to stop the ultra-violent and destructive games of Ninja Death Tag… probably because Bruce and Selina don’t actually know about the games of Ninja Death Tag, and because Alfred had many, many cousins.

Ninja Death Tag is, crazily, almost exactly what it sounds like. It’s what happens when you put several highly-strung, highly-trained children in one place and ask them to cohabitate peacefully. The rules are simple- beat up everyone not on your team, don’t wake up the parents, don’t kill each other, and no eye gouging. There are different rules each time- but those are the ones that stick every time.

Anyway, these games are where the “alliances” within the Batclan were formed; Tim, Cass (although Cass will generally ally with Steph, Carrie, and Oracle- and if things get really desperate, she’ll team up with Harlan, even though she doesn’t like him), and Jason- Johnny, Dick, and Maureen (although Dick is usually allied with everyone, even Pamela) – Steph and Carrie- and Oracle (who tends to stay out of the games, although when she does get involved, the shit tends to get really confusing and really real, really. Fucking FAST. She has also been banned from teaming up with Pamela, again, ever.)

Eventually, the Non-identical Sia-mime-ese twins, Vicky and Bette will join up with Steph and Carrie; Oracle will become Shriek, Inque, and Oracle (but that will be a few years); Matt will join up with Tim and Jason; Terry and Harlan will join up with Johnny, Dick, and Maureen; Pamela will almost always stay out of all of it. Except when she doesn’t (which happens), things quickly devolve
into a free for all that generally results in someone making someone else’s ribs creak, several broken sticks of furniture, and a general air of love and camaraderie usually found only in the bottom of a fox-hole.

Damn that’s a big family- and best of all, they all really do love each other, despite the occasionally ridiculous amount of ultra-violence that takes over the general relations of the family. Somehow, though, everything works out okay- although, no one lets Tim near power tools any more, Jason’s been banned from grocery shopping without female supervision, the boys go a little twitchy at the mention of “fried birdseed”, Dick developed an allergy to kiwi, Alex still has absolutely no fashion sense, Marcus got pizza-face acne, Carrie got chicken pox twice, Steph broke both her arms, and Cass dismantled the Ghoul-ride, Dick’s ultra-light airplane, and the Batmobile- several times.

(I should explain what my powers are- I can… it’s hard to say out loud.

I can’t read my part- not anymore, not since the explosion… is that strange, do you think? I think it means that- well, it means that I’m not in the Book anymore. I’m not part of the Story- well, not this story, at least. I think that’s why I can’t see my Part, or See my Death or- I’m not explaining this very well.

Okay, so- pretend that the world- and by the world I mean every world that exists, could-should-would-never ever exist, or existed- is a story, that’s being written down somewhere- somewhere massive beyond comprehension, somewhere that isn’t here; and every day, more of the story gets written. For every day that ever was, there are “pages” of writing that detail the events that took place therein. There are a few other details that I’ve always gotten the impression of, but I doubt that they’re important- the Book, because where else do you put pages, is chained to the arm of a person who walks through a garden made of growing plants and seven statues and sometimes the people who make the world the world come and visit the person who reads the book and they are the Book-reader’s siblings and they are powerful and old and they were here, have always been here; one is only met twice, for she is kind and dutiful; one is king of dreams; the one I know best is the Book-reader, who reads the world true- and one day he will read the last page and close the book and give the book to the first and eldest, and everything Ends, and this made the youngest of them go mad, this knowledge- I can’t understand why, everything ends- so, anyway.

The pages of the Book- I can read them. Well, that’s the best metaphor I’ve ever come up with.

I can read the story- and for me, it’s not like reading a book, it’s like reading a Wiki- yes, I could read the whole article… or I could save my place, and click that little hyperlink, and before I know it I’m reading about the growth rates of heroic children versus normal children in sub-striated vectors and their effect on the future oraclumnar populace… which is strangely apropos to this situation, but-

Anyway, the point is- I am not in the book. They are. You are. But I am not- I was. But now…”

No.

I am.

I am a person.

I am!

I was…}
Do the tabloids go crazy over the appearance of “The Brothers Damian”, Marcus and Alexander? (Is the Pope Catholic? Well, actually- that depends on which one you’re asking about… nevermind.) And how does Bruce Wayne ask Selina Kyle to marry him?

Actually, it never happens in public. One day, after another round of rather spectacular sex, Bruce and Selina are lying in bed. Bruce pulls himself together just enough to ask “Do you want to make this an official thing? Like- I have a ring made for you, to your specifications and we throw a party and sign paperwork so that if one of us dies our kids won’t be alone or separated, and maybe… you could be a Wayne? Officially? And all the kids could be Waynes too? I guess- if you want to, and you don’t have to I just thought that-”


Bruce grins. “Of course.”

Do the tabloids completely lose their shit when one paper-pusher runs to them with the news that Selina Kyle is now Selina Wayne, and that all her children are now Waynes, and they filed the prenuptial agreement (mandatory for all marriages in Gotham County) and for a marriage license (not mandatory for all marriages in Gotham County- I’ll explain that at some point)?

(Does the sun rise in the eastern perspective? Yes. It does- even when, like me, you don’t have a sun anywhere except overhead, and that isn’t a sun, it’s grow lights; even when you don’t have stars, just a screen that used to be like a windshield, but is now a massive computer; even when your living space used to be the bridge of a sentient space ship that was alive enough to change the fate of the entire universe, and the lower decks have a hydroponic garden and washing facilities and an automated medical center that can fix nearly everything (emotions aren’t entirely physical) and a gym and and and… I wish I had had the nerve to talk to her before she died.

It might have been nice. You know, talking to someone other than, what is at the end of the day and in the cold light of what passes for dawn here, myself. Might have been nice.)

Do the tabloids go crazier when the entire family- up to this point- goes on an outing to the park?

Has Maureen been in love with Johnny since she was eight?

Yes, she has. (Oh god.)

He doesn’t remember her, exactly- those memories were almost irrecoverably damaged during his homeless years in London, and the fever he got from saving her life the very first time made everything from that event blurry… for example, unless you were an outside observer like me, you would never know that Johnny was actually homeless twice, and that Maureen has always had a propensity for getting frozen.

Lousy goddamn concussions coupled with complications due to hypothermia.

The boys took to having Selina in the house readily enough, although their English reserve had never really left, leading to interactions at once stilted and heartwarming. For example, right around Halloween, the boys always have a series of screaming-awake-glad-this-part-of-the-house-is-semi-soundproof nightmares, generally culminating with one where they go Beast and then can’t change
back. This year, these nightmares coincided with his midterms, leading to some… interesting situations. Okay- this has to stop. I don’t think I can take getting stuck inside my notes and set on fire again. ‘I couldn’t agree more. This is simply… preposterous- combining all of our skills, there should be a way to stop these nightmares at the inception, or at least discover the source.’ Well. We could always break up our somnial rhythms more… ‘Abso-fecking-loutly not. We’ve already switched things around’s much’s we can wivout extreme consequences- the only other thing t’dos’s merge, and… well.’ That won’t work- we’ve all become too distinct to revert to what we once were. I don’t really remember being… One, do you? Any of you? No- I don’t really ever remember a time when you all weren’t here wiv me. ‘S nice, havin’ y’round- not sure what would happen if you weren’t here. ‘I- I do remember it… slightly. But… Something very very bad happened. It hurt- and then we were We.’

During their internal quatrelogue, the boys had settled at the kitchen table- which is about half the size of the dining room table; it’s bigger than a card table, but not quite big enough to go anywhere except the kitchen. They had mechanically made themselves an after-Midnight/Nightmare sandwich- two slices of bread, whatever spread was open, something vaguely cheesy, and some sort of meatlike substance. This time it was pimento spread on challah, with goose pate. (Oh ew.) They sat down at the table- and that was when Selina scuttled through the door.

She’s in her pajama’s- an overlarge t-shirt, a pair of loose pants, no make-up; her long hair was in a clean braid, wrapped with a silk scarf. She had come down to the kitchen for- actually, she didn’t know. Sometimes she would get these little twinges inside her, and they would make her go where she needed to be- on several occasions, they had made her move or stay put when a guard came out of nowhere (research will only get you so far); and once, she had talked a young man who called himself Mally out of suicide when his boyfriend- but that’s not important right now. (Wait- oh my sweet god. Mally?! God damn it- stupid interdimensional timey-wimey shit. Fucking hell- he’s a boy. Dammit!) Her eyes are the half open of the sleepwalker, because that’s what she’s doing- she’s sleepwalking.

(Selina Kyle sleepwalks- it’s not a big deal… except for the simple fact that her physical situational awareness is so heightened, she can pull off heists she wouldn’t even consider in her waking hours. This has not yet become apparent; it will later. (Oh dear.))

She saw- heard- the eldest child of this family- he’s almost eighteen, now, but… there is still the heart of a child in there, pulsating. She quietly pads over to him on her socked feet- she takes the seat across from him, folds her hands over each other. Waits a long moment. Her intuition doesn’t fail her- “Y’know, the only way to deal with most fears is to face them, and take them apart to show the delicious custardy underbelly to the light of day. Monsters are only scary if you let them be- and the monster I defeated turned out to be a little goblin no bigger than my thumb… It was my shadow that frightened me, not the actual goblin.”

“Ma’am?”

“Boys- you can’t sleep because of nightmares, right?”

“Well-”

“And all of your skills together haven’t been able to fix whatever’s bothering you, right?”
“Erm…” Right about here, the boys realize that Selina is not fully conscious.

“Johnny, Scarecrow, Doc, Beast- this will not go away with time. It’s only festered. You have to face the monster, boys. Face it- and drag all four of them, squealing and ugly, into the true light of day. Or… you could let your fears rule your lives. Your choice.”

With that, Selina is up, and out the door again- and her eyes still have not opened. The boys realize that Selina sleepwalks during their third after-midnight conversation. “Still having those scary stories in your heads, boys?”

“Mistress Wayne-”

“Yep. Still having those scary dreams. Tell me about the source of them- I won’t remember and think less of you in the morning.”

“…The thing you have to understand is that I don’t know how real this dream really is… and it can start out any old way, but the nightmare… I suppose… The Nightmare really starts when I look into a mirror and I see myself, only I have been quatre-fircated into four distinct portions that are all, indelibly, the same. Only one of them is a girl- the rest are boys. I know that the ones around me are not real- they can’t be real, because I am the only child there and god knows that I am not a child. I walk forwards, closer to the mirror, and imagine, as hard as I can, that the people, the children I see next to me are real. Then, before I can touch their hands, behind me I can see my mother, standing in the doorway, and in her hands is something sharp, and silvery bright. I can’t tell exactly what it is- but I do know that it’s dangerous, and that my mother, in that moment, is dangerous. I could see her, standing there behind me, waiting for some signal I wasn’t aware of- and I knew that whatever was going to happen, I didn’t want to see. So, I closed my eyes.

I do not know how long I stand, stood, will stand there- but I am waiting. I am waiting to discover if I am going to live… or if I am going to die. The nights I awaken screaming are the ones where my mother slits my throat, and I do not stop her. The nights I awaken screaming and do not return to my slumber are the ones where I fight her off of me, and she ends up dead by my hands. The problem is…

The problem is- I know, I know that this dream I have so regularly, each year, every year- for as long as I can remember… I know that it’s a memory. It has to be. However I can’t remember which ending is the true one. I cannot verify the truth with any of the relatives who were there at the time to remember, because they are all dead. So now, I live in uncertainty- because my mother died around this time, and she died of stabbing, and I have a scar around my neck, and they changed the carpeting and I KNOW THAT I’VE DONE SOMETHING WRONG I JUST CAN’T REMEMBER WHAT AND-

It’s making me Crazy.

Well… crazier.”
Raven doesn’t know what to do with the girl who has just appeared on her bed. In her bed. On top of her. She’s not sure what just happened- but if the confusion and pain-terror are anything to go by, the girl on top of her doesn’t know either. Joy.

It felt like- vibrations, like burning- a hole was made just above her, and then the girl came out flying and slammed into her; she smells of stars and darkness, this strange orange-skinned girl, warm against her skin. When she came through, the girl was too startled to scream, slammed into her and knocked them both breathless, and now as Raven gasps her breath back she smells the… life, inherent in the stranger.

Raven is seventeen- a woman by her people’s standards. She has never had a lover, nor has she ever been courted; she knows how, and has completed all the training for such pursuits, but that was just training, and she took no true pleasure from it- other than the pleasure of a job completed. Since that time, those worrisome days where she knew that if she did not moan with just the right inflections her grades would suffer- there are merits and demerits to a comprehensive sexual education- Raven has never seen someone who has caught her eye in that way.

The orange girl having a freak out on her bedroom floor is not different.

(What Raven doesn’t know, of course, is that she isn’t attracted to physical features.)

There are three things you need to know about Æzarath:

Æzarath is a place that exists in a dimension slightly to the left and exactly four quarter turns along the 235o x and 256o y axises to the one we inhabit currently. It’s just a little jump to the left, and then a slide up and left again… (Second star to the right…)

Æzarath is a monocultural theocratic utopian society: it’s comparable to a monastery- think Xiaolin, not Georgian. Yes, really- look, it’s like you take all the aspects of a culture, and you turn it into a church. The Dancers of Æzarath are known throughout the realms as some of the finest, willingest, most beautiful bedmates in existence; The Monks of Æzarath are some of the most deadly and enlightened folks you’ll ever meet.

And Raven lives there- has lived as a Nun of Æzarath- since before she can remember. She can move with a pure and deadly grace- meditate for hours and days without stopping- as a Nun, she was trained in every aspect of Æzarathian society available to women, and quite a few that normally aren’t; Raven knows how to please a husband in all possible ways, please a wife in all possible ways, raise children- human or otherwise- with dignity and honor, cook, clean, pray, sew… and she can defend or attack as needed. In short, Raven of Æzarath has one of the largest, most well rounded skill sets of all the heroes of this story- sorry, heroines- but lacks practical experience.

(Oh dear.)

There are three things you need to know about Raven of Æzarath:
Raven is a master of Æzarathian martial arts- which, through interdimensional osmosis, became T’ai Chi Chu’an on Earth. The term "t’ai chi ch’uan" translates as "supreme ultimate fist", "boundless fist", or "great extremes boxing". The chi in this instance is jí, and is distinct from qì (ch’i, "life energy"). The concept of the taiji ("supreme ultimate"), in contrast with wuji ("without ultimate"), appears in both Taoist and Confucian Chinese philosophy, where it represents the fusion of Yin and Yang into a single ultimate, represented by the taijitu symbol. T’ai chi ch’uan theory and practice evolved in agreement with many Chinese philosophical principles, including those of Taoism and Confucianism.

T’ai chi ch’uan training involves five elements, solo hand and weapons routines/forms, breathing, movement and awareness exercises and meditation, response drills and self defence techniques. While t’ai chi ch’uan is typified by some for its slow movements, many t’ai chi styles -including the three most popular, Yang, Wu, and Chen- have secondary forms of a faster pace. Some traditional schools of t’ai chi teach partner exercises known as "pushing hands", and martial applications of the forms' postures.

In China, t’ai chi ch’uan is categorized under the Wudang grouping of Chinese martial arts — that is, the arts applied with internal power. Although the Wudang name falsely suggests these arts originated at the so-called Wudang Mountain, it is simply used to distinguish the skills, theories and applications of neijia ("internal arts") from those of the Shaolin grouping, waijia ("hard" or "external") martial art styles. (The majority of the Batclan is trained in waijia style martial arts- Except for Pamela. Pamela just knows ballet and how to throw a softball- everything else is guess-work.)

Since the first widespread promotion of t’ai chi ch’uan's health benefits by Yang Shaohou,Yang Chengfu, Wu Chien-ch’uan, and Sun Lutang in the early 20th century, it has developed a worldwide following among people with little or no interest in martial training, for its benefit to health and health maintenance. Medical studies of t’ai chi support its effectiveness as an alternative exercise and a form of martial arts therapy.

It is purported that focusing the mind solely on the movements of the form helps to bring about a state of mental calm and clarity. Besides general health benefits and stress management attributed to t’ai chi ch’uan training, aspects of traditional Chinese medicine are taught to advanced t’ai chi ch’uan students in some traditional schools.

Some other forms of martial arts require students to wear a uniform during practice. In general, t’ai chi ch’uan schools do not require a uniform, but both traditional and modern teachers often advocate loose, comfortable clothing and flat-soled shoes.

The physical techniques of t’ai chi ch’uan are described in the "Tai chi classics", a set of writings by traditional masters, as being characterized by the use of leverage through the joints based on coordination and relaxation, rather than muscular tension, in order to neutralize, yield, or initiate attacks. The slow, repetitive work involved in the process of learning how that leverage is generated gently and measurably increases and opens the internal circulation (breath, body heat, blood, lymph, peristalsis, etc.)

The study of t’ai chi ch’uan primarily involves three aspects:

Health: An unhealthy or otherwise uncomfortable person may find it difficult to meditate to a state of calmness or to use t’ai chi ch’uan as a martial art. T’ai chi ch’uan's health training, therefore, concentrates on relieving the physical effects of stress on the body and mind. For those focused on t’ai chi ch’uan's martial application, good physical fitness is an important step towards effective self-
defense.

Meditation: The focus and calmness cultivated by the meditative aspect of t'ai chi ch'uan is seen as necessary in maintaining optimum health (in the sense of relieving stress and maintaining homeostasis) and in application of the form as a soft style martial art.

Self Defense: The ability to use t'ai chi ch'uan as a form of self-defense in combat is the test of a student's understanding of the art. T'ai chi ch'uan is the study of appropriate change in response to outside forces, the study of yielding and "sticking" to an incoming attack rather than attempting to meet it with opposing force. The use of t'ai chi ch'uan as a martial art is quite challenging and requires a great deal of training.

Raven is a Princess. She is the princess of Æzarath, and she wears the symbols of Æzarath- the rings of Azar- with pride. The rings of Azar are psychically linked to Æzarath and to the bearer. This has never been a problem.

Raven is the only daughter of Trigon. There are many children of Trigon- but Raven is his only Daughter, and one of the only two children sired by him to ever reach their majority. (Of fucking course. Mother-fuck.)

Here’s what you should know about Trigon:

Trigon came into being hundreds and hundreds of years ago when a group of humans abandoned life on Earth and established a sect of pacifists in the extradimensional world of Æzarath. Embracing the concept of peace, these humans exorcised the dark passions of their souls from their bodies and cast it beyond the Great Door of Æzarath into the nether-realms. This pariahic evil energy floated in space for years before finally coalescing into a single physical form. A cult from an alien world, which was soon destroyed (oh god), summoned this darkness from the ether and it impregnated a woman from the order. Nine months later Trigon was born.

As an infant, Trigon slaughtered the very cult responsible for his birth including his own mother. In less than a year, he had conquered the entire planet. By the time he was six, he had destroyed his home world and began traveling across the cosmos in search of new planets to conquer. By the time he was thirty, Trigon had conquered his entire dimension and several million worlds.

(Fun fact: Krypton wasn’t in the same dimension as Earth. Superman is an alien in two ways, not one. Oh God.)

Over the span of centuries, Trigon sired many children - all of whom he hoped would become extensions of his own great power. In many cases, the children of Trigon rebelled against him and were destroyed. Other times, their mothers recognized the threat such spawn represented and killed them while they were infants. For all of the seeds he had spread across the dimensions, only two of his offspring have survived to become the heir of Trigon. One is perfectly willing to become- the other is not.

One of those offspring was called the Whisper Man- and he is still alive, slashed into pieces and scattered this world over, the majority of them collected in a hole with no bottom covered over by stone and sea, then city; and there is a Prophecy about him escaping.
(The Bright One is his Sacrifice; His body made anew; 
The City shall Burn; The Sea Dry; The Stone Lift; 
Justice and Honor shall bear him up 
And the Gem shall bring him down.

He will wear the Crown of Eyes 
The Pure Sword shall be his; 
He will be fought by Fear and Winter and all the Birds of the Burned City; 
They will hold him back until the Dawn of the Fifth Day, when all the Eagles fly, 
But the Gem and three cats shall bring his end.

One of the descendants of those offspring was the ancestor of a man who calls himself Scarecrow… 
Oh god.)

The other is Raven.

Over two decades ago on Earth, a Zandian woman- girl, really- named Angela Roth had fallen in 
with an occult circle. Though they were rank amateurs in the field of Satanic ritual, they nevertheless 
tried to summon the Devil- but to them, they were summoning their god- what they succeeded 
in conjuring was far worse.

Zandia, over twenty years ago:

There- look here, just there. See that? It’s blood, dripping down- well, paint, but it’s meant to be 
blood- representative of blood. It’s red, and drippy- it’s that too real red paint always is, that too real 
red fake blood is, because real blood looks fake and thin and it is more like ink only too thin and not 
good for painting or bathing or anything other than what it’s meant for.

Blood is meant to carry the breath of God through the body. Anoint yourself with Blood, and be 
cleansed by the Breath of God. - Excerpt from the Log of Brother Blood LCXXVII

This country was a peaceful place, once- Teth-Adam freed it from the Romans, long time ago. The
Drakes had a castle here - but then came fire and steel and the screaming of iron-winged birds who dropped eggs of burning; war came to that place again, and... passed it by.

Why? Because - it had the conquerors respect. (Oh god.)

There is a church, in that country - a Church built of Blood and stone and over a cave system of dripping caverns, and in the bottommost cavern is a pool of sacred and sanctified blood and in that blood is a wisp of night dark oil black iridescent sludge - the stuff that brings the dead back to life. Every hundred years or so, the only son of the high priest will go fight his father in the pool of blood, and will slay his father, and will bathe in the blood pool - and the Breath of God will cleanse him.

Today, a woman is being taken down into the bowels of that blood drenched church - a woman of the hills, a woman who's line came to be when the 4th Crusaders came and a Knight came and did lie with the descendant of an Amazonian woman who had stayed (she and a man of Teth-Adam's army founded that little village - it's a city now). They were not wed - and for three days, and three nights they did lie together, and on the fourth day, the knight moved on. Three and three months later, and the woman was round and round with growing, and her parents and her family saw her roundness.

She was banished from her village - rocks thrown and dogs set, men and women spitting in her shadow to invite the demons in, and she and her line were forever banned from society. The woman and her child were thrown to the dusty and o'ergrown cave ridden hills, to live their days out in isolation. But the woman and her daughter were beautiful - and (I will now tell a small lie. I'm sure you'll notice it) a small bird told one man in a village, possibly the woman's former village, of the woman, and her daughter, and their beauty.

Men are men - and sometimes, men are animals. The difference is staggering.

(I'll explain it, shall I? It goes like this - a foul deed can be performed on one human by another, if, and only if, one human believes the other to be less than human. And there are degrees of foulness - a cruel word here, a sharp look there... a lowering of standards. Theft. Murder. Rape.)

Do animals do these things? Yes, of course. Do animals care when they are stolen from, their loved ones murdered - do animals have feelings... souls, even? Yes, of course.

I can see your confusion that you're confused - allow me to put it in words.

If animals have souls, and humans have souls, what makes a human different from an animal?

The answer to that, is, of course - nothing. There is no "real" difference from a human and a beast... unless you count a strange behavioral quirk humans possess. Humans are hard wired to help and connect with each other - whether or not that other is human or not, that's what we're meant to do. Which is why I find it so troubling when we don't do that. It bothers me, when things don't go right.

Sorry. Got off topic. Moving on.)

Thusly did the line of Roth begin. In ancient Zandian, Roth meant "Fallen" - in later iterations, Roth simply means "Whore". The last daughter of this line, Angela, had lived as her ancestors had lived-
hard, scrabble, scrape-grace, hand to mouth- Leave me alone! LEAVE ME ALONE!; when the Clerics, in their red-hemmed robes, came to her village, they took the prettiest girls and the strongest smartest boys and they didn’t look at her didn’t see her- but she saw them, and she followed them. She followed them along the dirt paved roads, and hid in bushes and behind rocks- snuck into the Red city, whisper soft from the desert.

(Actually, Zandia is one of the most European Middle Eastern countries- has been for as long as there has been a Zandia. It’s really more grasslands, rolling hills, and gaping caverns than anything else…)

She followed the Clerics and their collection to the Church of Blood- snuck herself in. Made herself unnoticeable by washing her face for the first time in her life, by cutting her hair, and brushing it- by glinting in the light, like a chip of some sparkling stone… only, Angela is no chip of worthless rock- Angela is a piece of starlight made flesh.

They notice her.

And Angela becomes a bride. The Bride. And she is… Pure. (Oh. Oh god.)

(I’m going to stop things here- I cannot leave anything out of this next part. I can’t fuzz the details, I can’t interject, or any of the other things because… because it’s Him. And He will notice if I make too much noise, if I change too much; He’s one of the only ones I know of who could find me here, could kill me.

I might not be real, not a person, anymore- but that doesn’t mean I want to die.

I’m sorry.

You’re going to have to do this next part without me.

I’m so sorry.)

There is a ledge of stone, inset in a depression. It is warm here, thick tang of copper in the too still air- too warm, down here, heady humid thick bones too small to be anything other than children scattered in the corners, at the edges. Creaking sounds of ghosts long dead, the soft shuffling steps of a procession, down down down into that dark blood soaked place.

Angela- bathed in warm waters scented with honey and saffron, her skin smoothed soft and hair combed and smoothed and coiffed- body painted with runes and well wishes, neck and breasts and back and arms and buttocks touched by only women’s hands and smoothed soft and clean and ready. Willing. Implicit explicit invitation.

She is wearing a gown of finest silk and lace- it goes from the middle of her neck to somewhere below her ankles; her nails are painted with the symbols of her soon to be husband, and she is Pure.

She is beautiful.

She is bedecked and gowned as a bride; chanting that echoes up and down, warm and wrapping the world in warm soft rage born silence. Depression is only frozen rage- Angela has always been frozen.
The priests lead her to the slab of stone—her wedding night bed—and bid her lie upon it. A blade—a sword, of pure intentions—is pressed into her hands.

She was given something to drink, something sweet and spicy, warm on the way down and the warmth spread throughout her body, shifting things and making everything feel so good. So good.

Chanting, chanting.

She lifts the blade, lifts her legs, lifts her skirts of soft fabric and fine filigree weavings and woven beading and soft well wishes and fertility; guides the tip of the blade to herself and presses inwards, razor edges parting slick pink walls and further cutting cutting cutting.

Blood oozing inside her from the edges of the sword where they cut her, from the edges of her body and from within deeper deeper blood dripping out of her down her pooling around her butt and sticky wet red—a pool steadily growing larger of her own drip red blood and sweet smell of copper.

Chanting, chanting.

The chanting sets her pace.

Faster faster deeper harder more warmth dripping down her hands wrapped around the handle and shoving warm and sharp and sweet warm strong soft stabbing and the chanting all around her it feels so good and then and then the blade is not a blade but a man; in her blood drenched hands—her blood, her hands, she volunteered, she didn’t say no, and Evil needs to be allowed in— is the waist of a red-skinned man, bone white hair and four eyes of burning, a branching of horns at his brow. He grips her waist, grips her soul, and presses himself into her, burns himself into her; warm to burning to scorched and she is afire and he is the flame.

They join, and there is a perfect union.

The runes pressed on her body, on her clothing, drawn in her blood—ensure that she will live through the congress of herself and the one who was summoned, ensure that she will bear fruit from their union, ensure that that fruit will be viable. A misspelling makes it so that the fruit is a gem.

Then it is done, and the blade is a blade once more, and the demon is gone, the woman—Angela—is a ruined mass of flesh, blood and burns and too pale skin; not dead, but soon.

The high-priest takes a wineskin of blood from the deepest place—sacred blood from the pool of sacrifice, and he takes it in hand and he bathes her with it—Angela— and she is healed. The sword is pulled from her body, and with it’s passing her wounds are healed. Six months, and she is round and round with roundness, and the war comes. They do not respect the country—so they bomb the cloister where she was sequestered; and her body is never found.

They who came soon learned to respect the country of Blood.

Trigon manipulated the priests of Æzarath to journey to Earth in search of Angela Roth—trickery, false prophecy... the works. He knew that the mother of his soon-to-be child would be safe under the care of the pacifists—they found Angela and brought her to Æzarath where she was renamed Arella. And Arella became a woman of high status, possibly the highest—her arrival brought an influx of... how to put it... verve, excitement, charisma—something changed, and Æzarath had a Queen.
Not everyone in Æzarath was pleased to know that the wife of Trigon was among them. But Azar and High Magistrate Coman (Wait- nah, couldn’t be…) realized that should the child of Trigon be allowed to grow on Earth, her existence would threaten all life on that planet, and indeed, the entire universe as well. Shortly thereafter, Arella gave birth to a daughter who was provided an Azarathian name - Raven. (It's pronounced *ragh-vaan*, hard stop between syllables. At least, here it is.)

The Magistrate of Food Production, Juris, felt that Raven's existence threatened the sanctity on all life on Azarath. To safeguard his people, he would elect to break Azarath's most sacred law - the taking of a soul-bearing life. Snatching Raven from her nursemaid, he attempted to hurl the child through the Great Door into Limbo (also known as the Chaos space, Nightmare place, and Still Zone), which separates Azarath from other dimensions. Upon opening the door however, he exposed himself to the power of Trigon who disintegrated him with a blast of energy. Raven was unharmed.

Over the next several years, Raven felt her father's evil influence slowly growing inside of her.

When she was eighteen, she should have opened the Great Door and encountered her father for the very first time. This meeting would have then prompted Raven to manifest her soul self for the very first time - that part of herself that was of her father. This would have allowed her to realize the danger that Trigon truly represented; Raven should have fled Azarath and gone to Earth where she would have sought help in what would one day become a great battle. She would first try to enlist the aid of the Justice League of America, but Zatanna would sense a great evil in Raven, and she would be refused. Instead, she would use her empathic powers to force Robin, Changeling, Cyborg, Kid Flash, Starfire and Wonder Girl (Blue) to form the New Teen Titans. This would have all manner of nasty repercussions.

Trigon, meanwhile, would continue his efforts to conqueror new territories, but found resistance in the form of three powerful mystics- Shazaam, Mordru, and Traci 13. These mystics pooled their power to bar Trigon's path, thus keeping him physically contained within the netherworld; he could still, and did still, monitor activity on other worlds. He discovered the Earth scientist Simon Jones during an experiment in which Jones succeeded in inventing a machine that could peer into other dimensions- an experiment which, in another world would lead to a half-dead hero (Whoops! Sorry, wrong universe, never mind…) Trigon's power reached through the dimensional aperture and transformed Jones into the super-villain known as Psimon. He ordered him to destroy the mystic priests that barred his ability to come to Earth. To this end, Psimon formed the Fearsome Five, but he failed to destroy the mystics due in large part to the fact that Mordru is too powerful, Shazaam is unkillable, and Traci 13 is only findable when she wants to be.

Realizing that Psimon had failed him, Trigon would then send his advance warrior Goronn to Earth to destroy the Titans. The Titans defeated Goronn, but by this point Trigon had amassed enough raw power to finally enter the Earth dimension on his own. He revealed his displeasure with his agents by dissipating Psimon's body into the ether, and destroying Goronn altogether. Trigon then began his conquest by attacking the city of Gotham. The Titans engaged him directly in battle, but were no match for his power. During the fight, Raven teleported back to Azarath where her power would be its strongest, but in doing so, she inadvertently showed Trigon the path to the realm of her birth. Trigon appeared in the Temple Azarath and Raven struck a bargain with him. If he agreed to leave Earth and Azarath be, Raven would return with him to his home dimension and willingly serve him. Trigon accepted her proposal and took her to his nether-realm.

Raven discovered that Trigon's empire consisted of worlds populated by people who lived in perpetual terror of Trigon's wrath. She tried to help these downtrodden souls, but Trigon quickly showed her the futility of such efforts. Trigon demonstrated his ruthlessness, by eradicating the world
of Xynthia, after which, he voiced his plans on taking the Earth. Raven realized that her demonic father never intended on honoring the pact he made, and Raven rebelled against him. The New Teen Titans arrived on this world assisted by Raven's mother Arella. Trigon captured the Titans, but Raven managed to elude his grasp and she soon set them free. Arella used her empathic powers to weaken Trigon's will which allowed the Titans the opportunity to take him down. Wonder Girl supplemented Arella's efforts by using her magic lasso to weaken Trigon even further, while Kid Flash spun his body so fast that he succeeded in opening a doorway to another dimension altogether. Starfire channeled her starbolt energy through Cyborg's amplifier and they succeeded in blasting Trigon through the portal. Arella remained behind to guard the portal and ensure that Trigon could never return to Earth. This plan however, was doomed to failure.

After biding his time for years, Trigon's power grew in strength and he broke through the portal. Accompanied by hordes of winged demons, he laid siege to Azarath. Trigon's forces razed the Temple Azarath and slaughtered all of the priests. The souls of those who died housed themselves within the Rings of Azar, worn by Raven herself. The Teen Titans, now accompanied by their former teammate Lilith Clay, journeyed to Azarath in the hopes of saving the soul of Raven. Trigon reunited with Raven and completely corrupted her. After destroying Azarath, father and daughter continued their campaign of destruction on Earth.

Trigon chose Titans Tower as his personal throne and transformed it into a T-shaped slab of rough-hewn rock. Trigon issued a decree to the entire world demanding complete and total subservience. From there, he began to remake the world in his own image. The island of Metropolis was terraformed into a nightmarish landscape of decaying bone and rock. The bodies of four-million inhabitants were fused together as part of an ever-growing spire of writhing, tormented souls.

The subjugation of Earth was but a stepping stone in a much more ambitious plan to recreate his home reality. Once Earth was completely under his domination, he intended on physically displacing it into his native Neververse. As Trigon's circle of influence spread outward, Trigon himself entered a state of meditation to recoup his expended power. When he awakened, he discovered that Raven had been defeated by the Titans, Lilith and her mother Arella. By this point, Lilith had taken possession of the Rings of Azar and in so doing became a conduit for Azar's spirit. She placed the rings back in Raven's fingers and the souls of Azarath purged the evil from Raven's form. These disembodied spirits, acting on a plot preordained centuries earlier, coalesced into an energy form of pure white light and attacked Trigon. They insinuated themselves into Trigon's being, in effect corrupting his own soul. The conflicting mystical energy proved too much for Trigon and his body disorporated. With Trigon seemingly destroyed, all of his geological manipulations reversed themselves and the world returned to normal.

Trigon was not truly dead however. He returned to his native realm and once again attempted to reestablish a power base. While expanding his empire, he discovered that he had developed new adversaries from within his own ranks. These were actually the surviving Sons of Trigon who had become the embodiment of the fabled Deadly Sins of Man. As Trigon's offspring gained power, Trigon grew weak. The Sons of Trigon came to Earth where they began conducting strategic attacks against the only group of humans to ever defeat their father - the Titans.

All this should have happened as I have related it to you- except now it can't because Raven is about to make a friend named Starfire; they will become sister-friends, and when Trigon comes, Raven will not be ready for him.

Great.
This is how the Sirens of Themyscira died:

When the purple Ick spreads outside the warriors of clan Teh’myscra, Dolphin knows it’s too late to save anyone other than herself and the ones who are not sick- at this point, only the two new orphans are healthy enough to make the journey. Usually, the Ick is black, and strikes younger souls- it was strange that the warriors were the first ones. Of course, they also ate of the man-flesh, so perhaps it wasn’t so strange.

Dolphin has lived with the Teh’myscra Siren clan for three years; they made her one of theirs after the separation, and she took care of the youngest children, even though they didn’t trust her, she still did it; when the women returned, they saw her untangle a girl from one of the nets, and they saw the scratches from other times she had helped- they saw what she was willing to do for them.

They took her in- they were kind to her, those wave women, and gave her the trappings of an easier life. Clothing that didn’t chafe- knives, and the knowledge to make her own when the gifts broke, ropes and traps and a family for the first time since her pod was lost to her in a storm- oh yes, Dolphin loves the Teh’myscra clan very much.

She was apprenticed to the clan wytch- and that was no shameful thing, but the wytch was the first to die of the purple Ick, and Dolphin is no fool- she was a wise woman long before her apprenticeship with the clan’s apothecary. When plague comes, if you have any sense, you leave.

She gathered up what food would travel well, and was untouched by the sickness- weapons that she could use, and rope, clothing that would mend easily- her favorite vest of shells and knotted rope, for special occasions, but why not, how else is she to remember them- and when she asked καλαμάρι and καρχαρία to go with her, they said yes; she helped them pack the few things that they could carry- Cali was stronger than she looked, but Kathi tired too easily for heavy lifting, and it would take quite a lot to keep them both safe with her, but…

They are her clan- she has to. And she asked. And she is the adult- the only one who isn’t...- and she has to.

If she can make it, with them, through the next three days, the humpback whales will be here, and she will leave with them- she, and the last two who are not dead. Squid is an oracle- she takes long journeys into the darkest of places, lets the waves and stones sing their songs to her, and returns to the clan to tell them of what she has heard. She is often gone for months at a time. She Saw what would happen if the man was eaten by the clan- Saw that the man with purple hair had bathed in darkness, and that the darkness would consume them, as they consumed him- but she returned to the clan too late. Warrior sisters dead, and parents long gone- she’s alone, now.
Shark is a herder- she was out in the open ocean with her mother and aunts, working their herds, and had been late returning from checking on them- big tuna like theirs didn’t need coddling exactly, but they did need to be checked on. It’s a two day journey out to the pastures- and when she returned, her family was dead, and her clan was dying.

They are both orphans, like Dolphin, now. They both now know why, when the song times come- why Dolphin will not sing. She knows many songs- she’s a Dolphin. They now know of the pain that comes from trying to sing when your heart overflows with sorrow. (Sometimes, it hurts too much to speak.) She takes them to her hiding place- bids them follow with gesture and glance- for when she needs to be alone; often enough for the way to be easy to find again. The follow her, this strange not siren person- one head, four limbs; sirens have one head and three- but she is clan, and they trust her.

Dolphin’s hiding place is a cave, with an entrance underwater, and another on land- and it is here that the three discover the secret of the siren- the mermaid of legend. When a mermaid is set on land, she dies. When a siren is set on land, her tail becomes legs. Squid and Shark are sirens- when they follow Dolphin up onto the shelf of stone over hanging the softly lapping waves lit by gently glimmering plankton, their scaly tails turn to long limber legs, supple and divine; they spend the next three days learning to walk and run on their legs, just in case.

And Dolphin paints the walls of that cave, above the tide line, so the paint will not wash away- paints the memory-story of her clan, because she cannot bear to sing the songs; paints of the Justice they were asked to deliver on behalf of the Amazons who dwell on that island, and how all who partook of the criminal flesh were eaten from within by a strange sickness- when their flesh had turned purple, they were dead within hours- and how only herself and Squid and Shark had not eaten the poison flesh and were spared the plague. She painted what she had chosen they would do- how they went to a cave and the girls learned to walk and run and play on their land legs, how the whales came on the third day, and the last three sirens of Themyscira left with them- how they traveled with the whales, to the capital of Atlantis, never to return.

And the things Dolphin painted were are true.

After weeks of traveling with the humpback pod- taking the occasional dram of milk from the sows, swimming in the slipstreams created by their mighty passage- Dolphin, Squid, and Shark left that herd of sea beasts and swam to the capital of Atlantis: Poseidonis. There were story songs of a great service the Teh’myscra clan had rendered to the ancient kings of Atlantis; a favor that had gone unpaid for many years- memories passed down from generation to generation. Dolphin remembered them, and sought the truth of their claim.

Together, they swam inside the city, long bodies and light clothing making many stop and stare- sirens are from warmer seas than the ones Poseidonis resides in.

Dolphin, with her long blonde hair and lacey vest of seashells, deep brown breast band of seaweed and strings, soft blue wrap with sharp grey and white markings around her hips marking her as an outsider- she is first in line, her long body moving through the ocean with an ease and grace usually held by dolphins. She is holding herself back, too- it is apparent with every gesture and movement that she is leading the two who follow her; a girl with the sharp, jagged smile of a shark, all big brown eyes and forward motion, two long tendrils of hair floating in front of her face- and a girl with tentacles for hands and six long legs of tentacles, beautiful and curvy, eternally smiling.
Dolphin swims to the arch of Sorcerers, and it is there that Dolphin meets what will soon become her queen, Mera. They talk- Dolphin explains their situation, and calls in their favor.

Squid is sent to the Cloisters, where she learns that her way of Seeing is one of the hardest to know, and there are easier ways- but hers brings the most correct information. While there, she meets the maker of beautiful mosaics, Topo- and he is beautiful too, but she cannot talk to him. Too shy.

Shark is sent to the Guard, where she finds an outlet for all the aggression of her soul- and meets her “eternal rival”, La’gann. Of course, she has a fiery nature tempered by the sweetest sugar- so, she can’t talk to him either.

Dolphin joins the Physicians, where she learns more about wytching- which is apparently an ancient word for doctor- than she ever could from a single wise woman.

A year later, and Dolphin is moving again- leaving the last of her clan behind. Well, no, actually- she’s going to her assignment, and she’s sending letters back to her… her sister-daughters, and they will keep in touch, yes, they will keep in touch.

From the first letter sent to Squid and Shark:

Calimari- I am in a place called Shayeris, now. I am so happy for you, that you have become what you always have been- Seer for the Crown, my gods- and I hope it brings you joy.

I don’t know if you remember the fields of our homelands, but the ones here- my gods, Cali, they are mirrors! It is so beautiful here, Cali- but I am not sure I can stay.

It hurts my heart, to stay.

Also, the local smith is a jerk- which wouldn’t be so bad if he weren’t so… enticing. Which reminds me- how are things going with Topo?

Kathiari- I am so proud of you, for getting into the Queen’s Guard! I know that your rivalry with La’gann has only escalated- perhaps now you will find some resolution?

I have not yet seen a spear suitable for you, Kathy, but I am looking; I have collected a set of shells, and have woven a new vest. It is lovely, but… I wish you- both of you- were here to tell me how it looked on.

Ah, well. We all have duties- mine is to wytch this village. Cali- I know your work ethic is amazing, but burnout is a very real thing. If your head even twinges, you need to stop trying to See, and take a break. Kathy- I know that your aggression sometimes gets the best of you, but true power comes from restraint. I know he annoys you, but biting him will not help- unless you want to bite him for a different reason, and have been misreading the situation. Keep an open mind, and… try to keep him alive, ah?

I love you both, very much.

Delphini Teh'myscra
Somewhere near the Ural Mountains, on the Eastern front of Vlatvia:

“We can’t do this anymore. That last “punishment” you got- it nearly killed you. Terry- we can’t be their dogs anymore. We have to go.”

Terry sighed. “I know, Matt- but where, exactly, will we go? It’s all well and good to run when there’s need for it, but where will we be running to?”

“Remember that time with the thing in that place?”

“Yeah- wait, you don’t mean-”

“It’s a big city- we can become different people, with different lives; isn’t that the traditional thing to do? In that city?”

“Yes, it is, but-”

“And there are so many people there- we have the skill to vanish into them, like a drop of water in the sea, right?”

“Absolutely, but-”

“One more beating like that, and they’ll do permanent damage- or I will. You are the only family I have, bro- I can’t just let them… I can’t. And you… you aren’t as… as green as you were before. Neither am I.”

“Matt- that city has a reputation for turning even the best of intentions so foul and sour as to pave the road to hell thrice over. Are you absolutely sure we can handle that?”

“All we want to do is live as free men- and that city is the only one that’s big enough to hide, far enough to run to, and free of Shadow.”

“Yes… it is free of Shadow- but is it free of Light?”

“Of course- it’s the Dark City, bro. The Light cannot abide it- every Beam they send gets swallowed whole and devoured within moments, only to float away in pieces on the Sea of the Dead.”

“Heh. Alright- we’ll go. We’ll go right now, yeah; I know you’ve packed for me.”

Terry smiles a sharp toothed smile, lip fat with blood- nevermind that he’s missing a few near the back. His cheek is yellow green with bruising only just beginning to fade- his eye still swollen shut, purple black, oozing slowly from where the leech bit and suckled. His other eye sparks deep sea blue, sharp as blades- his coal black hair matted to one side where he lay in the mud and his blood until Matt found him and carried him away from where-

Matt smiles back, his own blue eyes crinkled with- relief, joy- wrinkled at the tops from too much worry in a short dangerous life.

A small sheaf of banknotes of indeterminate denomination and country changes hands- a pair of horses bought, saddle, blankets, tent and gear- swords and bows and a pair of hand guns (Matt
insisted); a map old enough to not be missed, new enough to still be worth something- and their packed belongings. And then the two Shadow boys step out of the dark- and ride away into the sunset, making for the City of Darkness, the City of Fools- the City called Gotham.

Belle Reeve:

Cameron had been waiting for about an hour; She’s late. She said she’d be here, and she’s not. He’d been sitting on a stump for a few hours- the Tferore twins had been picked up by a girl with silver skin, yellow top, fawn brown pants, fighter’s muscles; from the way the van moved, I wouldn’t want to fight her at close range almost as soon as they got let out of the premises.

So. The sun is close to setting- Cameron is preparing himself to get back to civilization on his own when he hears… The roar of a motorcycle- sees it, dark blue, grey and black highlights; no flash, no shine, no sparkle. It slides to a stop, a cloud of smoke fine dust kicked up in its wake.

Cameron jumps from the stump- reshoes his bag, climbs onto the back of Artemis’ motorcycle; they roar off into the sunset.

Together.

Four days later, they are stopped at a diner/truckstop; Cameron is taking his first shower outside of a prison block in five years- Artemis has washed the colorant out of her hair, changed into a ruffled top and loose bluegreen skirt tight grey jeans boots, pretty lady waiting as the soft rain falls.

She is waiting for Cameron in a green top booth, slidy sparkling red pleather not leather seats that are easy to wipe down with bleach treated water at the end of the day because who knows where those people have been sitting, really; her back in a corner because the truckstop’s diner is in the shape of a square and there is no back wall, it’s all windows and isn’t that screeching scraping screaming on Artemis’ nerves. She’s nursing a mug of the diner’s bilge water acid fire starter paint stripping coffee- two sugars and one spoonful of non-dairy creamer (Lactose Intolerant for as long as she can remember- sister and mother too)- and that took her back to many years ago when she had to train all night and go to school all day and- She’s watching the rain fall, slow sheets of mist and fading the world into soft off white swirls of color and shape.

_Hard to shoot in this weather. Beautiful from inside though._

The coffee is bad. Her chicken fried steak is also bad. The French fries, however, are not- she’s ordered two servings of them, and is eyeing Cameron’s with a lustful gaze. Artemis resists their sirenical allure, swipes her greasy salty fingers on a paper napkin; tucks a thick strand of hair behind her ear. Cameron walks into the diner- spies her, slides into the seat across from her. Pale cream-white skin, warm cast bronze from sunlight; freckles where his shoulders peek out from the collar of Dana’s PFCC hoodie- it’s slightly too small for him, hugging the gentle curve of his waist, snug against the ripple of his pectorals and the bulge of his shoulders; the hood a rumple of powder green fabric at the junction of his neck and shoulders. Loose black shorts, black sandals that loop over the thick wide of his foot; wrists wrapped in loose white bandaging. He looks at the pistachio icecream green table top, smiles.

“You didn’t eat my fries this time?”
“Not like I didn’t want to.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Oh, so you’re offering?”

“Nah- but I’m impressed at your restraint.”

Artemis snorts with derision. “Restraint is for people who want what they can’t have- and I already have what I want, so…”

Cameron smirks. “Not everything.”

“Well…” and Artemis’ voice is a sultry summer concoction of booze and sun and indecent intentions, “Not quite as of yet, no. But. I’m working on it.”

“Yes, you are.” Cameron is smiling, his voice a soft admiring chuckle, his mouth quirked up in a smirk with teeth slightly showing. He eats some fries.

“The coffee any good?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“You order one for me?”

“A’course. Should be here in a moment-”

And that was when the Shadows struck.

There was a battle. That is a very short sentence encompassing a rather fantastic amount of incident.

When it was over, Cameron- Icicle Jr.- was wiping blood off of his face with a heated towlette, paying careful attention to the slightly squidgy bits of grey matter clinging to his eyebrows.

Artemis was shirtless, sports bra slightly looped off of one shoulder- her shirt had been shredded (casualty of war)- and her belly had scraped scratched on the tiled floor. She was awkwardly swiping at the scrapes and scratches; she had rolled, and slid, and the scratches went from her navel to almost the small of her back and it was slightly hard to reach- and then Cameron was there, gently tugging the rubbing alcohol drenched fabric from her fingers; he crouched, one hand on her hip for balance-the other attending her wounds.

For Artemis, the world was suddenly a cascade of electricity and warm tingles spreading out from where Cameron’s fingers met the skin of her upper hip; like the swipe of a fletching against her lip, like the softest caress of a lover. The gentle press of fabric and cool breath on her back diffused with a warm and golden glow- like a sweet wine drunken in a rush, cool heat spinning through the body- and she felt herself flush.

They attended their wounds, disabled all evidence- rode on.

Ten days later, and they’re in Platinum Flatts- through the long and winding road; sleeping side by side, Artemis’ bow betwixt them in clear warning; switching off for hours at a time because it’s hard
driving a motorcycle cross-country; across endless plains of waving grasses (and a single wrong turn led them down an old country road to the two kindest people they’d ever met; Artemis got their address, promised to send them a postcard when they got where they were going- Mr. and Mrs. Kent, so nice- and both Artemis and Cameron would become penpals with them) (oh dear)- and Cameron has to find an apartment; Dana got Shado to hire Cameron in her old position of stock boy. Of course, that job isn’t one that pays very much and the only apartment in Cam’s price range is a shitty hellhole Dana refused to even entertain the thought of living in several years ago- how it hasn’t been torn down in the interim is a question for the ages.

(They do not notice that the Landlady is not human- is, in fact, a giant wasp who’s only Pretending to be a human woman. They do notice that the entire building smells very faintly of river mud and mold gone dead from heat, which leads Dana to do what she does- advancing the pace of their relationship much farther than it rightfully should have been at that stage. However, in light of what would have happened to Cameron if he had stayed- I am pleased it did.)

Thus did Cameron move in with Dana- who had moved into Helena’s spare room so that Lian could have her own room; teenage years are coming on fast and she needed, and rightly deserved, her own space. Cameron only had the contents of his duffle bag- shower kit consisting of two in one shampoo conditioner, a cup with soap stuck to the bottom, a soft bristle brush with a small knobby handle, a cut-throat razor with a simple teak handle, bodywash that smelled of musk, lotion that smelled faintly of peppermint, toothbrush and toothpaste; five days’ worth of clothing- four shirts not counting the one he’s wearing, two pairs of pants, six pairs of underwear, two pairs of shoes, one small sewing kit, one small first aid kit, and several components for explosives that could be made out of household cleaning supplies.

In the bathroom, Cameron’s orange-white toothbrush joins Dana’s electric blue and Lian’s bubblegum pink in the chipped red and black mug that sits like a disgruntled toad on the shelf below the mirror; his hair and body wash get settled in a small corner of the shower shelving, and try to ignore the vast mountain of body cleaning supplies arranged in some indiscernible way; a drawer gets cleaned out, and his meager shaving supplies are placed there- space in the smaller of the closets is cleared for his things, Dana gets another pillow for the bed, texts Helena to grab more condoms from the store while she’s out (safety first), changes the sheets.

They’re done moving Cameron in by two in the afternoon- at three, Lian comes home from school. The conversation where Artemis explained that she is also Dana, but sometimes she is also Artemis, happened somewhere before the diner in the heartland but after they got out of Louisiana. Sadly, a similar conversation never happened between Lian, Helena, and Dana, while also being in regards to Cameron.

There was another battle- well, sort-of. Lian very vaguely remembered Cameron before it was too late- and Helena never took him as too much of a threat while Dana was around. And, to be fair, Cameron didn’t use his ice, much as he wanted to- Dana had laid down rules about that sort of thing.

Central:

Lia was doing much better now. Her parents would say it had to do with her new bff, Shayera, who goes to the same highschool and comes over almost every day and does homework with her and they’re so very close, the best of bests.

And they’d be right- of course, Shayera isn’t Lia’s bff, Shay is Lia’s girlfriend. If they had been privy to Lia’s sketchbooks, from years ago or today- but they aren’t. They don’t know the depth of
Lia’s emotions- she’s gotten better, you see. At faking it. At showing a famiscle of proper emotions at the proper moments. Lia can smile like she means it, have it reach all the way to her eyes no problem; Lia can laugh at the jokes, can pretend to be normal.

She isn’t normal.

She gets up, every morning- she gets out of bed, washes her face, brushes teeth and hair, puts on clothing she picked the day before, goes downstairs and eats her breakfast- usually five minutes before her schedule says she should be- and is out the door with a cheery “See you this afternoon!” and they think she is okay.

Lia is not okay.

Lia has had her world shattered twice. She has had all that she knows to be true torn away from her- every moment of her life, wiped clean and gone and made worthless- twice. Once, on the cusp of womanhood- again, during transition from child to youth; she is not okay. She grieves, underneath her heavy mask of seeming- and every day, she sets a small innocuous goal for herself, so that she will get up, and move, and keep going.

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I have to get up today; I have class.
I have to get up today; I have a date with Shay.
I have to get up today; I have work.
I have to get up today; I have a mission.
I have to get up today; I need a shower.
I have to get up today; I need to cook something special.
I have to get up today; I need to do my laundry.
I have to get up today; I need to work on my project.
I have to get up today; I have to tell my little brother and sister a story.
I have to get up today; I have to re-read the Bible.
I have to get up today; I have to argue my point.
I have to get up today; I have a date with Shay.
I have to get up today; I have class.
I have to get up today; I have to brush my hair.
I have to get up today; I need to eat.
I have to get up today; I need to plant some flowers.
I have to get up today; I have to finish my painting.
I have to get up today; I have to buy new shoes.
I have to get up today; I have to work.
I have to get up today; I have to go to the park.
I have to get up today; I have to fly a pretty kite today.
I have to get up today; I have to bake bread today.
I have to get up today; I have to read a new book from the library.
I have to get up today; I have to go to the museum and sketch.
I have to get up today; I have to draw Shay.
I have to get up today; I have to arrange flowers for my mom.
I have to get up today; I have to visit the pediatric burn ward and play with the children.
I have to get up today; I have to sing in a choir.
I have to get up today; I have a date with Shay.
I have to get up today; I have to work.
I have to get up today; I have a mission.
I have to get up today; I need to wash myself.
I have to get up today; I need to do laundry.
I have to get up today; I need to eat.
I have to get up today; I need to go outside.
I have to get up today; I have to live.
Even though it hurts, I have to get up today.

Lia is far from okay- but she sets a thousand tiny goals for herself, every day, and uses their momentum to propel herself through the long, listless hours- chopping eternity into small, squealing pieces that are easier to kill. Lia has discovered her English heritage- has discovered that the easiest way to survive a calamity, is quietly. Dignified. (To not be a bother. Lia is hanging on with quiet desperation- but. She won’t be able to hold on forever.)

(I’m not sure why I’m telling you this- I don’t know why any of what I’m telling you really matters.

I don’t matter- where I here or dead, the story would go on.

(No one remembers the singer. The song remains.)

Even if I did want more out of my life- it’s not going to happen now. It doesn’t matter now. For better, or for worse- this is what I have become, and what you are listening reading watching listening to is all that what is left of me and all that my soul has left for you to see and I’m so sorry. I wish I was more- that I was better, that I could change something, anything.

But I can’t. I just get to watch.

I don’t can’t do anything but… watch. And remember.

As I have done for the past millennia- as I did for these past five years- as I will do for the countless eons yet to come.

I will watch. And I will remember.)

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