Long presumed dead, a decade later Artemis Crock returns to Gotham to face the consequences of her deception and the damages left in her wake, only to find former teammates divided and friendships shattered. All the while an unknown enemy is hunting down the fastest men alive, including the man she once loved.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Nicholas Saucier sprinted through the darkened side streets of west Paris, turning his head frantically to and fro while trying to navigate his way through the numerous tree lines and landscaping that littered the path before him. Unfamiliar back lots and alleyways became twice as confounding under the shade of darkness, but he couldn't stop, not even for a moment.

His lungs burned and white spots clouded his vision. Fatigue and hopelessness washed over him, until off in the distance he finally spotted his destination. The Frenchmen was less than a block away from his apartment when his legs finally gave out and he crashed to the ground, sending the local alley cats that prowled the Parisian streets scurrying in all directions. Saucier painfully rose to his knees, ducking behind one of the parked cars that lined the road, barely avoiding the oncoming headlights of some other weary traveler trying to make his way home. He was close, but once he made his way inside he knew his journey was just beginning.

He listened intently for the sounds of pursuit, scanning every street corner, every shaded nook between where he stood and the three story cobblestone building before him. Finding the coast clear, he raced to the main entrance of the apartment complex, his feet barely touching the landing as he ran to the second floor.

He wiped the heavy perspiration from his brow and took a deep breath before inserting his key into the deadbolt, turning it ever so carefully. The muzzle of his Beretta eased its way in first to the apartment as the Frenchman nervously stepped inside the small two bedroom unit, recklessly aiming the gun in all directions searching for intruders. His palms sweat, making it difficult to grip the weapon, not that it would have mattered much, in all the years he'd owned the gun he'd only fired it once, and that was for recreation.

Thankfully he found the apartment empty. He paused for a moment to catch his breath and considered his situation.

"How could I have been so stupid " he cursed himself, knowing full well the answer to that question was weakness, it had always been weakness. Years of gambling and womanizing had finally caught up to him and with mounting debt and a third divorce on the horizon, he had very little choice. That's how they worked.

He was approached by their representative stationed in France, assuring him his debts could be washed away, and his divorce finalized quickly and tidy. This organization just wanted a certain level of influence on minor decisions made within the French parliament. Initially their interests were only in a few minor amendments, freeing up trades and tariffs, but soon escalated into law making and national security. Some would call it spying, most would call it treason, either title did not sit well, but by then he was in too deep. Saucier soon realized that when you make a deal with the devil, there's was no such word as no.

When he'd reached his breaking point, when he'd grown exhausted of the waiting, the wondering if today would be the day authorities would barge into his office and take him into custody, he finally
realized what he had to do. Psychologists refer to it as *Acute Stress Response* or the *Hyperarousal Reflex*, but its most commonly known as *Flight or Fight*; a reaction that occurs in living creatures in response to a perceived harmful event, attack, or threat to survival. That response is made in seconds within the sympathetic nervous system. Saucier's choice took even less time. He chose flight. Literally

He didn't dare turn on a light, assured it would stand out like a beacon to whomever might be looking for him, so instead he stumbled through the darkness until found the closet in his bedroom that contained his safe.

Saucier began entering the combination into the keypad, having to start over three times because of the poor lighting and his nerves. Tucked away inside were his two passports, one real, one forged, along with ten thousand Euro's, and one small velvet bag, or more specifically the contents inside; the diamonds.

His fence had assured him it was the smartest and safest way to move his fortune, to forgo the normal money launderers and liquidate his cash into fine untraceable stones, far safer than his first choice of bearer bonds. There wasn't a jeweler in the world who wouldn't be interested in his inventory, allowing him to easily sell them individually or in mass, any method that would guarantee him quick cash on hand and draw the least suspicion.

All had been going according to plan until he stopped by the store to purchase the last set of stones, only to find the jeweler dead. A frantic call to the fence who'd introduced them was answered by the Paris police, who Saucier quickly hung up on and ran as fast as he could from the store, not stopping until he'd finally reached his apartment this night.

The Frenchman could be at the Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport within the hour, discarding his credit cards and I.D. before purchasing his ticket. The destination didn't matter. A country that wouldn't extradite would be ideal, but more importantly was a flight that would be disembarking sometime within the next few hours. He'd figure out the particulars later, but for now the most important thing was leaving France alive.

Once he'd gathered his belongings from the safe, he felt his way through the darkness back to the den, searching the wall mount for his keys. A cold chill blew through the room and when he turned to seek out and close the open window, he felt a sudden stinging sensation emanating from the side of his neck. Almost immediately his head began to ache and his limbs went numb. He crashed to the floor just as the sensations of dizziness and nausea washed over his body. He tried to get back to his feet only to fall right back to the floor, his muscles painfully constricting involuntarily.

On the farthest edge of his field of vision, he saw the figure seated in the plush chair next to the window, the moonlight dancing off her long blonde hair. He tried to beg, to plead for his life, but no sounds could escape his throat. His lungs burned and he frantically tried to breathe, finding that task impossible as well. He lay on the floor immobile, paralyzed, dying. His last moments on earth were the thundering sounds of his heart beating, and then silence.

Artemis Crock rose from the chair, walking over and kneeling down next to the body. She placed two fingers on his carotid artery, feeling no pulse. She glanced down at her work, taking no satisfaction in the targets death. He'd done nothing to her; she'd never even met the man before tonight. He was just another name; another name on a very long list that just seemed to get longer and longer.

She reached to his throat and retrieved the poison dart, placing it back in its case and into her bag. Next she removed the burner phone from her belt and took the man's picture, reviewing the image before typing in the coded message and sending it. Proof of receipt appeared on the display and she
promptly broke the phone in half, destroying any evidence of the evening's activities.

Before she stood, she glanced down once more at the target, shaking her head despondently and sighing. Did he have a wife or a child? she wondered. Would anyone miss him when he was gone? None of that mattered now, the job was done. She leaned closer, resting two fingers on his eyelids and closing them for the last time, whispering in his ear.....

"No one escapes the Shadows."

She knew that lesson better than anyone.

Chapter End Notes

This is a story I started over at Fan Fiction a while back that I've been struggling to finish. I'm hoping a change of venue and some new readers will provide inspiration. Thanks and enjoy.
Ten years ago

Artemis Crock moved quickly through the shadows of the abandoned oil refinery. The lead she'd acquired had been sketchy at best, but still strong enough to warrant Batman asking the Team to investigate and gather intel. The Dark Knight had long since learned that observe and report was rarely followed in the way he intended, but The Team had earned the right to handle situations on their own, and their success rate was hard to argue with.

The archer never revealed her source, always keeping things like that close to the vest, but Robin surmised that just because she was a hero now, didn't mean she still didn't have friends or associates who weren't; the mercenary Cheshire being case in point.

If the information was good, this refinery might very well be the central distribution hub the Justice League had been searching for—for well over a year now. Kobra-Venom was a deadly combination of Bane's neo-steroid, the designer drug Venom, and the Project Blockbuster formula created by Cadmus years ago. The resulting mix was three times stronger than its previous incarnations and permanent. Years earlier the Team had destroyed a similar facility on Santa Prisca, but it was just a matter of time before a new one popped up somewhere.

But to find one in New Jersey, a mere 183 miles from the Hall of Justice was pretty ballsy to say the least. Hiding in plain sight was sometimes the hardest place to locate.

Something in Artemis had changed over the last two months. Her mother's death had left her distant and cold, much like the person Green Arrow had first introduced her to the group of remarkable teenagers that resided within Mt. Justice, but whereas then she'd had a chip on her shoulder, secrets to keep, and something to prove, now she had friends and a surrogate family that cared for and supported her unconditionally, as well as a boyfriend that would love and protect her with his last breath.

The entire team hurt with her, wanting so badly to do what they could to ease the archer's pain and let her know she wasn't alone, but Artemis was and always would be private person, especially regarding family matters, so they gave her the space she requested. When a mission like this arose, everyone felt confident it was just what she needed to take her mind off her sorrows, even if just for a while.

xxx

Paula Crock had left the life of crime to care for and protect her two daughters from the homicidal psychopath she'd had the misfortune to procreate with. He was a master criminal, and Paula wouldn't lie to say she wasn't instantly attracted to the man. Together they'd become a formidable and dangerous combination; thieves and kidnappers by trade, enforcers and strong-arms when necessary, but most importantly deadly assassins for hire. They'd even taken contracts from organizations such as the League of Shadows, and if you worked for them you were considered elite, and by all accounts they were.

Soon disillusionment began creeping into her heart. Pregnancy and childbirth had changed her, and not long after she began to see how Lawrence Crock's coldness and cruelty were impacting their two daughters. Once when she'd returned from a mission in Malaysia, she came home to find the two siblings bloody and bruised, forced to fight each other to hone their skills. Sportsmaster was determined to make the duo master assassins, and his favorite saying was always you can't make an
omelet without breaking a few eggs. Paula had chosen the life she now led, her daughters had not. Sitting on the ground holding the two sobbing siblings was the last straw; she knew she had to get out.

But before she could do that, she had one last mission that had to be completed. A high profile assassination rumored to have come from as high as Ra's al Ghul. One never said no to jobs like that when the Shadows were involved.

Perhaps it was her lack of concentration, possibly the fear of not seeing her daughters again, or maybe even just wanting to fail to have an excuse for leaving the game, but by the end of that mission the target had escaped, Sportsmaster's reputation tarnished, and Huntress's use of her legs and nearly her life.

She spent almost two and a half agonizing years in prison away from her family, fearful that in her absence Lawrence was molding and shaping the two girls into the perfect little soldiers, the assassins he'd always hoped for. It was a family business after all.

When she flattened her sentence and returned to find her greatest nightmare had come true, Paula threatened to call the police, the FBI, any and every agency that had Lawrence "Crusher" Crock on their top 10 most wanted list. The deal was simple, her daughters for his life.

They left the dingy Starling City apartment for Gotham and a new beginning. Lawrence had vowed revenge, and now years later he'd finally had it. Paula Crock was dead; a self-inflicted gunshot wound for a woman who'd never touched a gun in her life. Exotic armaments and poisons were her weapons of choice. The police called it a suicide, but Artemis and Jade knew better.

xxx

The intel on the flash drive was massive. Pictures of trucks and Humvees arriving and leaving the facility late at night, schematics showing hidden labs within the refinery, pumping and filtering mechanisms retrofitted to produce the toxin. Everything a criminal organization needed to mass produce one of the deadliest formulas every created, all saved on one simple 512 GB flash drive.

Inside the facility, the Team had been searching for hours, unable to find the camouflaged corridor that led to the makeshift labs and distribution centers, and that was becoming a concern. Bane and his soldiers had been lying in wait the last time they'd entered one of his facilities, and there was no telling what was in store for them this time.

They needed something more concrete Robin had argued, but Artemis convinced him that they had to seize the moment while they still had the element of surprise. Despite that nagging voice in his head, Dick reluctantly agreed. He was team leader, but this was her mission.

With all the distractions of the last few weeks the last thing the archer wanted or needed were five other voices inside her brain, asking questions, intruding into her private thoughts, so she refused the mind link and the team was forced to go radio coms only.

An hour into the mission and several dead ends later, the archer had finally found what she'd been searching for. The small black duffle rested comfortably on the opposite side of the heavily reinforced steel blast door. She dropped to her knees, removing a small chisel from her quiver and pried open the faceplate that led to the internal wiring of the door mechanism. After cutting away and crossing a few wires, the door slowly lumbered open. She quickly placed the faceplate back over the wiring and sealed it into place with a strong epoxy.

They team had been on radio silence for the past half hour and Artemis was thankful for the respite.
Inside the hallway, under the red glowing emergency exit sign, the archer removed a metal section of the wall plating and found the old pipelines that led deep into the refinery's infrastructures. Artemis pulled out the old fiberglass insulation and removed the epoxy from her quiver, spraying it across the support beam that stood there. She didn't have much time. The archer reached into the black bag and placed the sensor device on the beam, quickly wiring it into the main power coupling when a sudden burst of wind announced the arrival of the hero Kid Flash, the teen who'd stolen her heart.

Wally West had been uncharacteristically patient during her grieving period, forcing himself to give her time and space to deal with all the emotions swirling inside her. He'd forced his way into her heart and she'd welcomed him in, but he knew there were still lines not to cross when it came to her family and her loss, but with a mission as risky and important as this was, the respect he had for Artemis's personal space was now not high on his priority list, her safety was.

"Babe what are you doing?"

"Wally! Are you trying to give me heart attack?" she exhaled surprised, "you're supposed to be at the pumping station."

"And you're supposed to contact us once you found the corridor," he scolded.

"Well I was going to Baywatch until I found this…"

"Whoa…" Wally gasped. "Is that what I think it is?"

Artemis nodded, "It's an Isopropyl nitrate of some kind with a motion trigger. It's connected to the pipeline and I bet it's wired to several duplicates all over the refinery. Someone really didn't want us in here. Wally if there's more of these around, they've got enough power to bring this whole building down."

"How did you know where to…" the speedster asked before Artemis cut him off.

"Wally that is sooooo not important right now, but I do know I can't defuse it. You've got to find Robin; he'll know what to do."

"Babe, just leave it be. Don't even breathe on it. You're lucky taking that panel off didn't trigger the timer."

"No kidding," she blew out her breath nervously.

"Look, I'm not leaving you next to this thing; you're getting the hell out of here. Dick can handle it and if something goes wrong I'll have him halfway to Mexico before that thing even starts to glow."

"Wally we can't risk it going off, it will destroy any chance we have of catching whoever's recreating the compound. I promise I won't touch it, but I'm not leaving it here unguarded. What if someone stumbles up on it, I'm not going to risk it. I'll be fine, but find Robin now. Hurry!"

"But…"

"Not buts Wally." she replied determined. Suddenly she reached up and palmed his face, kissing him fiercely. He returned it with fervor, not caring if the entire world was about to end as long as they were together, but her timing did leave a little to be desired.

"Babe, not that I'm complaining babe, but what was that for?"
"Luck, were going to need it. Now hurry."

He nodded and dropped into a runners stance when she yelled back to him, "Wally…I love you, be careful ok?"

"Love you too babe, be back in a sec. Don't…touch…anything. Promise?"

"Promise," she smiled.

Safely away from the device, he disappeared in a bolt of lightning. Artemis swallowed hard and went back to the device, pulling out her tool kit and taking off the detonator casing.

Second later she broke radio silence for the first time that evening….and the last.

"Oh God."

Wally found Robin four hundred yards ahead trying to hack into the antiquated security cameras when her message made it to their receivers. Seconds later Dick was holding on for dear life until they finally arrived at corridor junction 342-B.

"No…." Wally whispered in anguish.

Artemis stood on the wrong side of the thick blast doors, her voice muffled behind the two foot thick glass plating of the viewport. Her channel was open but full of static, the heavy steel doors interfering with the signal.

"I'm sorry Wally!" she cried.

"What'd you do?" he begged.

"The casing was coming loose and...I thought if I just disconnected the power coupling it might shut it off."

Robin immediately dropped to his knees, removing several tools from his utility belt and going to work on the panel. Without being able to see the bomb components or the display, there was no way he could talk the archer through disarming it. Instead he placed his entire focus on the locking mechanism and finding a way to hot wire it open, but already he was running into obstacles. The door panel would no pry open no manner how hard he pulled. Whatever substance that surrounded the faceplate was holding it securely and time was running out. After several failed attempts at dislodging it, Dick dropped the pry bar and pulled out a small acetylene torch to cut through the metal barrier, hoping to God he wouldn't damage the wires behind it.

"It must have triggered a backup timer," Robin spoke grimly, as the corridor began to fill with the metallic burning stench of the welder, "but I don't know how it could have overridden the blast door protocols. Artemis is there some kind of release mechanism on your side?"

Artemis looked around frantically at the wall. "I….I don't see one," she replied urgently.

"Fuck," Dick mumbled under his breath, trying to stay calm and remain the voice of reason in a very volatile situation, lessons long drilled into him by the Dark Knight. It was necessary because seconds later his best friend kicked logic and reason to the curb.

Wally's skin began the crackle with electricity and the red and yellow material of his uniform started to blur as the speedster suddenly crashed against the blast doors, knocking himself back a few feet from the impact. He willed himself to vibrate his molecules again and rushed the door again with no
success. His third attempt left him dazed and bloodied and Artemis screamed for him to stop, but he ignored her pleas.

Robin's torch finally melted through the metallic faceplate and Dick swallowed hard in response. Just as he feared, the control wires had melted away from the extreme heat. He'd had one chance, and now it was gone. There was nothing left he could do.

"Wally! Wally!" she screamed as the dizzy speedster stumbled to the door, his nose and mouth gushing blood but undeterred.

"You've got to stop," she cried, "It's going to be ok," she lied.

"No its not," he whimpered, placing his palm flat against the viewport. She placed hers next to his in kind.

Tears streamed from Wally's eyes just as Conner rushed into the scene. Superboy had tried to decipher the broken transmissions unsure of what to expect, but within seconds of his arrival he'd read the situation and his heart dropped to his stomach. The clone rushed to the barrier, knocking Kid Flash and Robin out of the way as his fingers dug into the steel blast door trying to jar it loose. Just when he felt the door shift slightly, a secondary door on the archer's side slid shut, blocking the viewport.

"What the hell!" Dick cursed in shock; a secondary door didn't make sense. "Artemis!" Robin screamed into the com unit, "How much time?"

Through a thickly static channel they heard her broken response. "Forty-five seconds…You've got to go," her voice crackled.

"No Artemis!" Wally screamed into his transmitter, "Stand back, I can vibrate through this, I swear to God I can!" he panted.

"Babe…please," she spoke unseen through the steel door.

Conner's throat tightened, trying so hard to refuse his friends request, but he knew what he had to do. He grabbed Wally's arm in a death grip as the desperate speedster tried to detach himself. The clone's hand began to smoke and glow as Wally violently tried to escape from his grasp, but Conner ignored the pain, smashing through the unfortified fire walls to the closest exit from the facility with Robin close behind.

The archer listened as Wally's screams broke up through the open channel, finally fading to static. She wiped her eyes and whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Then she closed her eyes and resigned herself to her fate.

The three heroes were almost to the emergency exit when the refinery blew, throwing them almost a hundred feet across the compound and away from the blast. Conner absorbed the brunt of it, knocking him unconscious while leaving Robin and Kid Flash singed and deafened, but alive.

Wally stared in horror at the glowing plume rising to the sky, three quarters of the building completely vaporized. The image of the heartbreaking look on his girlfriend's face would be seared forever in his mind. She was the center of his universe, and now his world would never be the same.
The feral woman hung weakly in her cell, her wrists locked and secured to heavy iron chains suspended from the old stone ceiling. Leaches and larva had laid claim to the multitude of open wounds stretching across her body, and what little water that trickled down the stone mortar she could reach was more than likely contaminated anyway, so the invading worms and insects were in good company she considered.

Her prison uniform, what was left of it, hung in tatters around her emaciated body. She'd lost any concern for modesty after weeks of being stripped for her daily beating and interrogations. When she was fed, which was only often enough to keep her alive, was usually thrown all across her cell floor. If she refused to eat, it was forced down her throat. She was needed alive, just for a bit longer.

Other than screams and curses, she'd spoken very little since her capture on the mountaintop near the remote village of Mae Salong. Her compatriots had escaped, but their location and arrest would come soon enough, the warden was convinced of it. This woman would not be able to hold out much longer, no one could.

A trio of assassins had been responsible for over seventeen murders in Northern Thailand alone, disrupting opium shipments within the Golden Triangle from Ruak to the Mekong River. Poppy fields had been burned, children designated for sex trafficking released and sent into hiding. Local gangs and enforcers sent to recapture the children or punish the poor farmers who'd allowed the crops to be destroyed were found brutally murdered in cold blood. Similar stories had been reported from the Koreas to Afghanistan; three ghost like figures that had killed and murdered everyone from pirates, terrorists, to warlords, must likely in attempt to create a power vacuum for someone to move in and take over. Now authorities believed they had disrupted the plot and had one of the conspirators in custody. Most thought she was a myth, but now the authorities had her, they'd captured the Tigress.

This land region the trio had mistakenly targeted was under the protection and guidance of the warlord Khun Sa We, easily the most powerful and ruthless of all the leaders of this region, a man shrouded in reputation and mystery that few had ever actually laid eyes on, but almost all had felt his presence or wrath at some point of their lives. He owned the police; he owned the government, the prisons. Every man, woman, and child in this area was his property, and someone had now dared attempt to take that away from him. Death would be too easy a punishment for someone so foolish. He planned to see to their suffering personally.

The woman was to be kept alive until local order and organization had been reestablished. She would identify her compatriots and remain incarcerated until the two other mercenaries were captured, then after Khan had had his way with them, the sweat release of death could finally arrive.

Her matted hair hung heavily over her face, her eyes closed in either exhaustion or deep mediation. Most of the guards knew better than to startle her, too many of their comrades had lost testicles or permanent eyesight trying to surprise or intimidate her. One of the first rules the guards learned was to make as much noise as possible upon entering her cell and have plenty of back-up with stun guns and mace pepper spray on hand.

Even under intensive interrogation, she'd never given her name, leaving the frustrated prison personnel to refer to her only as her Tigress or (white devil) despite her mixed ethnicity. Officially she was just designated as prisoner B24, and that suited Artemis Crock just fine.
The filthy covered inmate stood still as the guards secured her wrists and dislodged them from the hanging restraints. Without the support of the chains her weakened legs gave out and she sunk to the floor. The guards stood around her fallen form, staring nervously at each other to see who would lift her to her feet. After moments of bickering the two officers with the lowest seniority nervously raised the women to her feet, placing her arms over each shoulder under the watchful eye of the remaining armed patrol. A few steps out of her cell and the prisoner fell again, the two guards barely catching her before she slammed into the floor. She was dead weight, the torture and interrogations finally taking their toll. They eased her back up and dragged her dangling feet out of the complex and into the courtyard towards the warden's office.

Artemis winced at the sudden exposure to sun as she looked into the open sky for what seemed like the first time in months. It hung between the day marks of one to three p.m. she considered, giving her some small sense of time. Beneath her tangled mane, she stared down at her sore covered feet as they passed over the rough patchy grass and smiled. It wouldn't be long now.

Inside the air conditioned warden's office she was forced violently into the steel chair, her wrists secured and handcuffed to the backing behind her. A chill ran through her body as the cool air formed goose bumps across her tortured skin. They spoke in the standard Isan dialect, but the archer could make out traces of a Burmese accent from the warden. He was articulate, educated, most likely with some military experience, nothing she needed to be concerned about. The remaining guards were poorly trained thugs, making up for their lack of experience with cruelty and gang mentality. She'd been on the receiving end of that mindset, and while mildly effective, she was not impressed. They were used to dealing with broken men and defenseless women. They'd not seen true savageness before, but they were about to.

Once she was secured and strapped down, the group of men gathered in the warden's office watched nervously through the window for their employer's arrival, only occasionally looking back at the broken woman barely able to sit up right. The last time Khun Sa We had had visited the facility years ago, the warden in charge then had been shot and hung in the center courtyard for all to see. No one knew exactly what the man had done, perhaps nothing, but it was seen by all that he'd wronged the warlord and had to be made an example of. The current warden prayed he'd not suffer the same fate.

Off in the distance, a dust storm of black SUV's made their way to the remote facility at the bottom of the mountain. Frantic guards ran like scared children, opening the tall barbed wire gates to let the warlord and his entourage in. The warden and his lackeys scurried down the stairs leaving one fearful young guard standing watch over the semi-comatose woman that hung limply from the chair. The skittish guard was nervous being around prisoner B24 alone, but he was terrified of the man about to enter the office.

For the first time in weeks, the prisoner spoke, barely able to lift her head, her husky strained voice surprising the skittish officer.

"What time is it?" the blonde prisoner rasped.

"One…one thirty," the nervous guard stuttered distracted, briefly forgetting prison protocol regarding inmates, instead staring down to the courtyard, watching the warlord exit his vehicle while the warden and gathered personnel respectfully bowed and cowered.

After what seemed like an hour of formalities and pleasantries, the warlord and his bodyguard made their way up the stairs, leaving his patrol outside and entered the office. The warden pulled chairs from around the room and surrounded the prisoner, as the warlord sat down in front of her. The warden stood tensely behind him, watching as Khun violently grabbed the women's hair and jerked her head up to face him, her matted mane falling away from her face. The blonde's eyes were half
shut, and what part of her steel blue irises that could be seen, rolled up inside her head.

Khun Sa We smirked and released his hold, the archer's chin slumping back down to her chest.

"This is who's been killing my men? This is who's been disrupting my shipments?" he laughed, "this weak pathetic broken woman. Tell me warden; are you ignorant or do you believe me to be?"

He glanced at his bodyguard who just shrugged his shoulders in agreement. The warden's throat began to close, worrying that now he wasn't just considered incompetent, now he was a liability.

"Sir she was found outside the village in the drainage tunnels, her satchel laden with crossbows, arrows and other weapons. There was literally blood everywhere," he pleaded his case.

"You're a fool," Khun responded angrily. "She's nothing more than some petty criminal; just an errand girl sent to swim in the lake but has now found herself lost at sea miles from shore. What has she shared under your mindful interrogation?"

"She won't talk," the warden hung his head defeated.

"Then perhaps you haven't given her the proper motivation. Get her out of the chair!" he demanded.

The bodyguard and the warden grabbed the limp woman and released her cuffs, dragging her violently to her feet. Artemis immediately knew what was in store and struggled against them to no avail. The two men slammed her against the wall, pinning her against it as the few pictures that hung in the office fell shattering to the floor. Khun Sa We turned away from the prisoner and looked out the window as he removed his jacket, he was going to enjoy this. Behind him the sounds of struggle continued for a few moments before finally ceasing, followed by one small glass breaking chime

The warlord turned and smiled preparing a grotesque violation the woman would not soon forget when his blood turned cold. His bodyguard lay slumped on the ground, a bullet hole centered perfectly through his head, the remains of his skull plastered over the wall behind him. The warden stood with a shard of glass pressed to his throat as the archer held him in a choke hold, slowly approaching the militant.

Khun attempted to yell for his security patrol waiting in the courtyard just as the archer, sliced the warden's throat and tossed him aside, spinning and landing the point of her elbow directly into the warlord's throat. Khun's eyes grew wide in panic, unable to speak, barely able to breathe. The archer kneed him in the sternum and then in the groin for good measure, before catching him and quietly lowering him to the ground. His body lay spread across the office floor as the blond assassin knelt over him.

She whipped her hair out of her eyes and placed one palm of the man's mouth, ensuring if by any minute chance he could make a sound, it would never escape her grip.

"You were right, I just needed a little motivation," she smiled coldly.

She reached behind her and grabbed the long slender shard of glass she'd disposed the warden with. Her hand shook slightly in anticipation or relief, she wasn't sure which. In a few moments it would be over, or so she hoped.

With her free hand she took off the man's shoes, placing them onto her bruised and lacerated feet.

"You should never have wronged him Gon, He was generous with you all things considered, and you got greedy. Big mistake."

"You have the wrong person," the man rasped through her grip over his mouth.
"I don't think I do. You're Zhenli Ye Gon, or at least you were until you betrayed your employers. Did you really think adopting a new identity would keep you safe, that the Shadows would just forget?"

She took one more strike at his throat, rupturing his larynx. His eyes remained open, staring at her in terror as he slowly suffocated. She grabbed his wrist and checked the time on his watch.

Where is she? the archer cursed.

She slid to the fallen bodyguard and retrieved his automatic rifle, waiting for the sign. She hoped she wouldn't have to shoot her way out, but was prepared for anything at this point, she was too close.

Artemis gingerly knelt down one final time over the warlord, taking the glass shard from the floor and lining it up with his carotid artery.

"No one escapes the Shadows; Ra's al Ghul sends his regards," she hissed as she severed the side of his neck.

Blood pooled around the warlord's head as Artemis rose to the window. In the distance she caught sight of a metallic glimmer shining from the rocky terrain just below the mountain. It was time. The archer ducked for cover under the desk just as the first explosion went off in the courtyard. In the ensuing chaos, Khun Sa We's men stormed the office and one by one they fell to the ground, victims of a faraway assassin's sniper rifle. Artemis recognized the loud wine of an RPG heading towards the building and prayed the desk would be strong enough to hold back the roof in the event Cheshire's aim was off. In the end she had nothing to worry about. Moments later the far side of the room shattered and the mid-day sunlight burst in.

Artemis ran to the opening to see the guards below lying in bloody heaps. She scaled down the rubble and made it to the ground just as the final detonation went off, knocking down the outer guard wall and opening her exit to freedom.

The prison was in chaos. Guards were being overpowered by inmates, tear gas filled the courtyard and holding cells, and the few who even noticed blond scaling the broken walls were either dispatched by sniper or quickly consumed by the mass frenzy of prisoners with a score to settle.

A helicopter waited off a few hundred yards in the distance. A giant of a man stepped out from cockpit, his rifle still smoking and met the archer halfway, literally carrying her into the aircraft. She was running on pure adrenaline and willpower, but even she had her limits

"What the hell took you all so long?" she smirked weekly as he placed her in the cockpit and belted her in. Moments later Cheshire surreptitiously appeared from nowhere, discarding the spent RPG on the ground and closing the door of the aircraft behind her.

"Let's go handsome," Jade ordered to the hulking mercenary, and the helicopter rose quickly to the sky, heading towards the mountains. Artemis rested her head against the glass, watching the smoking ruins of the prison disappear into the distance until it was nothing more that terrible memory. Despite the load roar of the rotors overhead, she smiled peacefully. The adrenaline rush had left her body and weakness and exhaustion had taken their rightful place. She closed her eyes and sighed. It was over, it was finally over.

xxx

Artemis slept for the next thirty-six hours, waking only momentarily when it was time to take the painkillers and antibiotics Jade had set aside for her. Her sister and their partner had treated her
wounds around the clock, thoroughly disinfecting each open sore, suturing and bandaging each wound. There would be scars, there would always be scars, but they paled in comparison to the ones she carried inside.

Days later she awoke to the soft sounds of birds singing over the rushing river their safe house stood near. Artemis found it odd that her body ached more from actually sleeping on a mattress then it did the cold stone floor of her cell. To her right the sleeping form of her partner draped over her. Zane was mountain of a man, 6'5, ruggedly handsome, good in bed but better in a fight. He'd lived up to that reputation not only the night before, but throughout the time they'd been together. Their nocturnal activates probably added to her soreness, but she wasn't complaining.

It had been a little over nine years since she had left the states. Looking back to that life, it seemed more like a dream than a reality, an act of fiction much like the Alice in Wonderland chapters her mother read to her as a child.

Since she'd left, the only important thing in her life had been the debt, now that debt was paid. In accordance with the violation that she and her sister had committed against the Shadows, their choice had been simple. Work for us or die slowly and painfully.

They had killed a Shadow operative, and if it had not been for their lineage or the fact they owned certain talents that might be of service to the Shadows, they would have died as soon as they'd been captured. But they were the daughters of two well-known, well respected assassins. Both had unique skills that could be useful, oddly enough thanks to the man they had disposed of to end up in the situation to begin with.

Paula Crock's murder could not go unanswered, and for two sisters that had battled each other for years for their father's approval, they'd finally found common ground and forged a relationship they'd thought lost long ago. Sportsmasters' death was not nearly as satisfying as Artemis had hoped, but it was the last of a chapter of a book she could now discard, or so she thought at the time.

Long ops, infiltrations, and assassinations had all run together in her mind over the years, she honestly couldn't imagine another life outside of this one anymore. The three of them had become a dangerous team. Zane was equally disgraced in the eyes of the Shadows. A successful mercenary on the rise who'd failed the League at the most impromptu of times. He never spoke of it, but for a man as arrogant and brave as he was, she could read the fear in his eyes whenever the name Ra's al Ghul was mentioned. He may have been cocky, but he wasn't stupid. By either happenstance, good fortune, or just blind luck the trio had been paired and given a new lease on life, a chance to repay their debts and show their gratitude, The League of Shadows was not known for second chances, but their offer was truly never a choice.

The leadership had set their terms and if the trio was successful, they would gain their freedom. Few among that criminal organization thought they'd make it out alive, but the Shadows always kept their word. In some rare instances their actually was honor among thieves.

Artemis rose from the bed, and found Zane's shirt on the floor, stiffly reaching down and draping her naked form. She looked down at him and smiled. It was good to see him again; many times she doubted she would again. They'd saved each other's lives more time then she cared to count. She wondered if her attraction to him mirrored those of her mother's and the psychopath that would one day become her father. Much like Lawrence Crock, Zane could be so brutal to his enemies, while also having a certain softness about him when his guard was down and vulnerable. That was a side of her father she never saw, but Paula assured her had once existed.

Artemis cared for Zane, probably more than she should, but that was as far as she was willing to go. Zane was a girl in every port type of guy, not that it bothered her. What they had between them
worked; a partnership with benefits, purely physical, no emotional ties, no verbal commitments. They both had needs and he was more than willing to scratch that itch if and when she required.

They never spoke of it, matters of the heart were strictly forbidden in their agreed upon partnership, but every now and then, particularly after incredibly stressful missions, he would call out to them at night. Two names, two women, must likely a wife and daughter, stolen from him like her mother had been from her. His obligation to the Shadows was no doubt related to the person or persons who had murdered his family, the same group that the mercenary had taken his vengeance upon, unbeknownst to who they might be working for. It was all conjecture on her part, but over the years she'd learned to read him quite well. One thing was assured, he'd never be allowed in heart, no one would. Never again.

The archer walked out unto the creaky wooden deck and inhaled the fresh mountain air; it tasted of freedom and new beginnings. A voice behind her appeared from nowhere, but by now she was used to her sisters catlike approach.

"Good morning Artemis," Jade spoke softly, handing her sister a hot cup of Vietnamese tea. The archer inhaled the drink's aroma and moaned. She took a sip and smiled. It tasted like home.

"I forget how good Lotus tea tastes; you make it just like mom."

"The trick is in the blend," Jade smiled softly and stood by her sister as they looked out at the sun rising over the mountains. Artemis leaned in and rested her head on her siblings shoulder. "We really did it didn't we?"

"Yes we did," Jade sighed, taking in another sip. "So…. did you have fun last night?"

"I'm not complaining," Artemis half laughed, looking around and finding a chair to sit in. She eased her aching body gingerly into the old dilapidated Adirondack and raised her feet on the ottoman. There were very few parts of her body that were not blistered or bruised, and she stared curiously at her abraded knees and shins, wondering if one day the pain of this life would actually go away and heal, but deep inside she doubted it ever would.

"So what's next dear sister?" Jade asked, "As the saying goes the world is our oyster. We can go anywhere, do anything. People with our skillset can make a very comfortable living, or so I hear," Jade smirked.

"Oh I know," Artemis rolled her eyes sarcastically, thinking back at the many capers she'd tried to thwart of Cheshire's over the years. It seemed ironic to be on that side now, but it's not like she'd had much of a choice.

Artemis pondered the question for a long time. She'd never acquired a taste for killing, not like Jade or Zane had. She hoped to God she never would. It was always just a means to an end. She'd felt little comfort knowing that most of the people she'd dispatched had done terrible monstrous things. All of them had blood on their hands in some form or fashion, just like she did now. The idea of making a living that way didn't thrill her, but she wondered if somehow she could convince herself that in some twisted way she was dispensing a kind of justice. She was no hero anymore, and thanks to the last few years, could never be again, but that didn't mean she didn't care about punishing the guilty, her version had the chance to be a little more…permanent. It was something to consider at least.

They sat in silence for the next half hour, reflecting on the last few years, her mind ablaze with the feelings of wanderlust and freedom. Now with her debt paid she could give in to that desire and start anew. Nothing was holding her back anymore. The world was now about opportunities, but
something still gnawed at her, it had since the night she'd left the states almost a decade ago and had never left no matter how hard she wished it would.

"I have a few things I need to take care of first." Artemis disclosed, breaking the silence.

Jade studied her sister carefully after that remark, recognizing that look; even as a child she'd been able to read her so well. Cheshire sat down on the edge of the chair and took her sister's hand.

"You can't go home again," Jade said thoughtfully, "you know that."

The archer let those words sink in for a few moments before she replied, "I know," she sighed, "I know."
This was a mistake.

She'd told herself that during the entire nineteen hour flight from Kuala Lumpur to New York, but as she walked down the jet bridge into Gotham International, even as her mind screamed for her to turn around and get back on the plane, her feet kept pushing forward.

One minute she'd been making travel arrangements to Spain to meet her sister and Zane in Puerto de la Cruz to discuss contract work that he'd negotiated on their behalf, assisting a local businessman in tracking down a disgraced public official who'd run off with a few million Euros of the drug lord's money. She'd been assured there'd be no killing, just a simple reconnaissance and recovery operation. What the cartel did after that was none of their concern.

As she passed by the TSA officers, relieved that her forged ID and passports had been so well crafted, the reality of her situation finally sank in. This wasn't a dream; this wasn't some stress induced fantasy she'd created, this was Gotham, this was home.

She'd barely scraped together enough money to purchase the round trip tickets, borrowing from Jade without giving an explanation as to why. How Jade had come into possession of that kind of money to begin with she still had no idea and frankly didn't want to. They both had left the Shadows with exactly what they'd brought into it; nothing. But her sister had always been resourceful when she needed to be, and Jade loaned her the money without question, but Artemis was sure she had her suspicions, but was smart enough not to ask.

Artemis had never actually ruled out coming back to the States, but better opportunities and fewer complications lay elsewhere, and she'd always hated complicated.

The biggest issue was why. What did she hope to accomplish? Was it a sense of closure; nostalgia perhaps? Even now she still wasn't sure. Her plan was to go to her mother's gravesite and pay her respects, perhaps visit the old neighborhood one last time, see if the home she'd grown up in, the one that meant so much to her mother still stood. Gotham wasn't just where Artemis's new life had begun, but Paula Crock's as well. It was a new city where she could start over and finally be free of her criminal past and as well as the psychopath she'd shared more than half her life with.

Despite having only lived there a few short years, Gotham felt like home to Artemis as well. Perhaps just like her mother, it was the first time in her life she'd felt free from her father's shadow. It was where one night in her living room two vigilantes, two heroes she'd admired her whole life had sought her out and offered her an opportunity despite her past to become part of something bigger, something special, because she was special.

Boy we're they dead wrong she bemused.

Notwithstanding all these perfectly valid reasons for returning, deep down she knew the truth. It was them, it had always been them.

Despite the offering of an incredibly bad inflight movie, she'd chosen instead to browse the web, her first unfettered use of the internet in years. Shadow agent's access to cyberspace had always been highly restricted, mainly used to send and receive coded information and messages, target profiles, timetables, etc. Personal use was not tolerated, and the Shadows had eyes everywhere.

So with her new found freedom, she began a search for anything newsworthy or of note currently.
happening in Gotham City, just items or events she should be aware of prior to arrival. That was it, nothing more. That mindset lasted all of about five minutes before she changed the parameters and searched instead for specific individuals. As the information appeared on the screen, she was slightly surprised by the results, puzzled that her inquiries had provided such little information.

When she left the Team those many years ago, they were all heroes on the rise, future members in waiting to join the Justice League, but to her surprise none had, not the core group anyway. Doing a separate search of their civilian ID's had been a little more fruitful.

Of course the adopted son of one of the world's most powerful and well known businessmen had been easy enough to find, all one had to do was look at any Gotham tabloid and he'd be on the cover with some model or socialite under his arm. However his alter ego was another matter entirely.

The person wearing the slightly modified Robin uniform these days couldn't be more than fourteen, definitely not the teenager she fought side by side with all those years. According to the crime beat page of the Gotham News Journal website, the vigilante known as Nightwing had recently broken up another child trafficking ring. He dressed all in black except for a domino mask and a blue bird crested on his chest. It didn't take a detective to make the connection.

Another former teammate had become the Atlantean ambassador to the United Nations, not a terrible stretch for the noble and dignified person she remembered. Why he'd chosen to leave the life wasn't much of a puzzle either. His first responsibility as well as his heart had always belonged to Atlantis.

Zatanna Zatara, the daughter of the world famous magician Giovanni Zatara, was a master illusionist in her own right, with a recent stint of sold out shows stretching from Boston to San Francisco. Despite her notoriety, after a little digging Artemis recognized a striking resemblance to a reserve member of the Justice League, one wearing a slightly different uniform and hairstyle from that of her stage persona. How no one had ever made that connection was beyond her, but another League member had protected his secret identity for decades with nothing more than a set of eye glasses, so anything was possible she supposed.

The remainders were a mystery though, with no listings for Kent, Morse, or….West. It would take and effort to find them if she chose, but finding people is what she did. The problem was she didn't know if she should.

The smart thing to do was to lay low, stick with her original plan and a week from now she'd be sitting on some Spanish beach surveilling a target, finally having a little money in her pocket and starting a new life. There was no need to make contact. She didn't owe anyone an explanation. She was dead, end of story.

*I don't do complicated* Artemis reminded herself over and over.

xxx

A solitary figure in black raced across the rooftops of Gotham. The crossbow hanging from her belt beat roughly against her thigh, her footsteps heavy. She was stealthy by nature; one wouldn't survive long in the Shadows if they weren't, but not tonight. She was loud, she was trying to be.

The archer had sought out the normal high crime areas of Gotham, occasionally letting an arrow fly as a warning to the local criminal element that somebody was watching; all the while aware that someone was watching her as well. This quiet cat and mouse game went on for several hours before taking a break and perching herself on the ledge of the Gotham Metropolitan Opera, sipping her energy drink and staring down at the streets below.
She watched in amazement at the sheer mass of people that called the city home. At any moment regardless of the hour, the streets, sidewalks and subways would be filled to the tipping point with people going to work, visiting friends, going to school, enjoying a night out, just living their lives.

It was a far cry from a few months prior when she'd spend weeks never even seeing another living soul, lying in some marsh or cold desert floor, waiting for a target to trip up, climb out of some cave or hole in the ground just long enough, completely unaware that their life was about to change drastically.

Sitting here now watching the city seemed so surreal. The archer felt infused with the same energy and excitement she'd felt as a teen when Gotham had become her home and she became a hero. She watched as a couple walked hand in hand down the sidewalk below, completely oblivious to anything but each other, she remembered that feeling well. Artemis kept them in her sight until the two lovebirds finally disappeared off in the distance, just as the batarang landed at her feet.

Suddenly a voice behind her spoke out from the shadows "Welcome back from the dead."

Artemis jumped to her feet, her hands instinctively drifting towards her weapon. Nightwing noticed the motion but didn't react. If she was here to kill him, she would never have gone to such effort to be found.

"So no hugs for your long lost teammate huh?" she replied with a smirk, surprised at how nervous she suddenly felt standing in front of him. Behind the black domino mask all she saw was a cold calculating gaze, very reminiscent of the man he'd spent a lifetime working with, the same man Nightwing swore he'd never become.

There were very few traces of the teen she remembered in the man that stood before her now. He was at least a foot taller if not more, sporting a longer hairstyle, carrying a solid amount of muscle on his athletic frame. He looked very commanding, very authoritarian, much like the Dark Knight, but what she noticed most of all was he looked like someone who wasn't remotely overjoyed by her return.

"You don't seem surprised," she said, "how long have you known?"

"Awhile" he answered. "The Shadows have leaks just like any other organization. Rumors of two half Vietnamese female assassins on a killing spree throughout Asia and the South Pacific, a rare binary explosive that only handful of bomb makers know how to produce, blast doors that I couldn't hack, the momentum conservation and blast radius of an explosion timed just perfectly for the three of us to escape relatively unharmed; little pieces that all fell in to place. When Batman and I finally tracked down the bomb maker, after a little persuasion, he described you and your sister to a tee."

"Who else knows?" she asked.

"Just Batman and myself as far as I know," he confirmed.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Artemis questioned.

"What was the point? When we finally figured it out, you'd been "dead" for years. There was no suspect out there to apprehend, no killer to be caught. You'd obviously gone to a lot of trouble to cover your tracks and by then everyone had mourned and moved on. What good would it do? You joined the team full of secrets and lies, and you left that way. There was no purpose in reopening old wounds."

His words were factual if not a little biting. Unwilling to meet his eyes, instead she focused on the
blue insignia on his chest and studied his new uniform, his new persona. In person it was an impressive battle suit. Truth be told, she wasn't that fond of his old one. For a kid that liked to disappear in the shadows, bright red and yellow never seemed like a smart fashion choice.

They stood in silence, studying each other carefully before he finally spoke again. "Why are you here?" he asked sternly.

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "I've been asking myself the same question."

"Was it worth it?" he asked, surprising the archer with his query. He'd always known or figured out most of her secrets; it seemed some things about him hadn't changed that much after all. To her credit she didn't react surprised or shocked; her training wouldn't allow her to, but still she never hesitated with her answer.

"Yeah... it was." she answered coldly. "Dick he murdered my mom in cold blood, attacked a defenseless woman in a wheelchair and tortured her for days, all because she wanted something more for her daughters then to become just criminals or assassins."

"She must be so proud," he said bitterly.

Her brow furrowed, but she remained impassive. He'd become so much like his mentor, putting up a wall that no one could see past, she could relate but she didn't have to read him to know he was angry; betrayed. Deep down she didn't blame him. He'd been their team leader; her death had been on his watch. That was a lot of burden to place on a seventeen year old's shoulders.

"He got exactly what he deserved. There was no way in hell Jade and I were going to let him walk away. He must have known we'd be coming for him, but was either too arrogant or stupid to think we wouldn't kill him. So to answer your question, it was worth everything I've been through to make sure that piece of shit never hurt anyone else again and if I had to do it all over I would do the same exact fucking thing. If your waiting for an apology, you might be standing here for a long - long time. I owe you an explanation, nothing more."

They stood silently, starring each other down, unsure of what to do or say next. Dick had more to say she could tell, but he refused to. He'd cared for her once, had even developed a small crush on her during their time in the bowels of Mt Justice fighting the Reds, but this person now, this former teammate didn't want to have anything to do with her. If she'd sought him out for closure, she'd gotten it, just not in the way she'd hoped.

"What you do from this point on is your business, but remember this is my city, if you're here on business I'd suggest you do it somewhere else."

Nightwing reached down and recovered the spent baratang, locking it back into place on his belt. He began walking towards the edge pausing momentarily to face her.

"And just a word of advice; if you go searching for closure you may not like what you find. People have changed and moved on with their lives. I'd suggest you do the same."

She watched as his head tilted slightly, putting a finger to his ear, most likely listening in on some police channel he'd been monitoring. Nightwing stepped to the edge, removing the gun from his belt and shooting the grapple. Looking back briefly he spoke his final words.

"Sometimes the dead need to stay buried," and moments later Nightwing disappeared into the dark Gotham night.

xxx
She cursed herself for not listening to her inner voice. This had been a mistake. Thomas Wolfe had said it best when he wrote You Can't Go Home Again, and it became so ironic that his last published work, the only one she'd ever read had so aptly mirrored her own story. Artemis hadn't expected hugs and kisses from her former teammate, but maybe a bit more understanding from someone who'd lost their parents to the same kind of violence as she had.

… just a word of advice, if you go searching for closure you may not like what you find. Nightwing was probably right, but something about his remark had been so… cryptic. In all the years she'd known him, Dick Grayson rarely misspoke, and in those last words she felt there was a message hidden between the words, and she had a disheartened feeling of who he was most likely referring.

She spent the rest of the evening visiting old haunts. As she'd suspected, the apartment building she'd once lived had been torn down to make room for some urban revitalization project. Schwarz's Bakery, Zaragoza's Grocery, the Boys and Girls Club; all gone. The sign if front of the empty lots displayed images of high end condos and mixed-use neighborhood shopping, dining and entertainment venues that would soon be built in their place. All the things that gave the old neighborhood character and made it special had been stolen or stripped away, she could easily relate.

Next she made her way onto the grounds of Gotham North, now renamed Hamilton Hill High School in honor of the stuffy bureaucrat that had been the city's mayor for so many years. Despite the fancy new name it still looked old and worn down, much like the man it was now dedicated to. This school was the first place she'd actually made friends of her own, the first chance she'd gotten to feel what it was like to be a normal teenager, at least until she was forcibly enrolled into the snooty Gotham Academy. It seemed smaller now and Artemis wondered how long it too would last before being demolished and forgotten. It surprised the archer how the feelings of nostalgia pulled at her heartstrings, and even more so that she still had heartstrings left to pull.

Throughout the night she visited a few more haunts, places that still remained special to her, places that reminded her of who she'd once been. That in of itself had been worth the trip she convinced herself.

As dawn broke, jet lag and the emotional rollercoaster she'd been riding had finally taken their toll and she needed some sleep, however cash flow was a bit of a problem. She'd scrounged together just enough for the return ticket with little remaining. The job Zane had secured them in Spain was supposed to kick start that problem and help her start anew, but instead she'd found herself back in this god forsaken city still trying to figure out why, and with what money she did have, she frankly couldn't afford anyplace decent. But after spending the better part of a decade living in filthy shacks, shanties, or hostels, roughing it in Gotham for one night was more like a day at the spa comparatively speaking.

All she required was a quiet place where she could steal some Wi-Fi, book her return flight, close her eyes for an hour or so, and get her mind right. By late evening she'd be back sitting on the tarmac waiting for her flight to depart. Dick had been right, it was time to move on, there was nothing left for her here, she'd seen what she'd come to see, at least that's the lie she told herself.

As Artemis reached the far end of the borough heading towards the Narrows, she recognized a certain building off in the distance. Back in its heyday it was probably one of the nicer living complexes built in that era, until Gotham in all its wisdom decided to build an asylum just blocks away directly across the Gotham river. Once Arkham began accepting clientele, local residents couldn't move away fast enough. Now it was just another low rent apartment building in disrepair, probably worth more if the city would buy it and tear it down. However if she had her bearings correct, inside that complex might be just what she was looking for.
A former teammate, one she was not fond of in any sense, used to keep safe houses and weapons caches tucked away in different cities up and down the east coast. Rundown out of the way places where apartment owners would gladly accept rent for years in advance with no questions asked, and if Artemis wasn’t mistaken she was looking at one of them right now.

Secure hideaways were hard to come by which is why most people never let go of them simply because you just never knew when you’d need one. The archer was hopefully this particular person had followed that same rationale.

She mentally counted the windows; digging deep into her memories to find the exact floor it was once located. When she discovered the newspaper covered windows she concluded that was the one. In the dim morning light she easily reached the fire escape unnoticed and scaled the stairs until she reached the 22nd floor. The archer peaked through a small tear in the paper. The apartment appeared barren and empty, just as she hoped. She was surprised to find the window unlocked considering the apartments likely contents, but just to be safe she carefully examined the frame for any pressure triggers or sensors. Once everything appeared clean she slipped in silently. As she stepped over the sill she kept her bow raised and began scouting the space. The room was sparse, with no apparent weapon caches to be found, only a musty old couch and empty bookcase used for decor. It had an odd dank smell about it, and when she opened the refrigerator and closed it just as quickly she knew why, as the whiff of spoilt food filled the room. The outside door to the apartment caught her eye; being steel reinforced with a double sided lock confirming her theory of the apartment’s true nature. Unfortunately that also meant if things went south for any reason, the only entrance or exit would be through the window, so she kept it cracked slightly if needed.

Artemis sat down on the stale couch, stifling a yawn and placed her bag silently on the floor. The archer removed her heavy Kevlar boots and took out the civilian clothes she’d packed and neatly placed them on the arm of the couch. She stood, unzipped the black body suit and let it slide to the floor, quickly stowing it away and pulling out the hoodie and jeans she’s packed for the crisp Gotham fall. She closed the bag and laid her crossbow across the top and settled back on the couch. Her eyes were heavy but before she could rest she’d have to contact the airlines and check for available flights. Just as she began entering the number she heard a feint sound emanating from the lone bedroom; laughter she thought. She cursed her fatigue and weakness for not checking it before as she’s sat down. The archer grabbed her crossbow, cocked it, and headed back to the fire escape. Evidently she’d guessed wrong and there was no point in scaring its rightful occupants half to death.

As she opened the window and placed her bag on the fire escape, she spotted the gold arrow charm she wore, laying on the floor near the couch, most likely having slipped off her wrist as she changed. She cautiously slid over to pick it up just as the bedroom door opened and its very naked resident walked out laughing.

Roy Harper’s face turned deathly white as he gazed at the intruder.

"Fuck!" they cursed in unison.
Chapter 5

The two archers froze standing mere feet apart, locked on the other's eyes, waiting for their counterpart to strike. After the longest five seconds in recorded human history, Roy made the first move, instinctively reaching for his bow when he remembered not only was he unclothed, but unarmed as well. Artemis drew her weapon and aimed it center mass. She wasn't going to kill him, she didn't even want to hurt him, but if Nightwing's reaction was indication of how welcome she was back in Gotham, Red Arrow's was bound to be worse, much worse.

Dick Grayson had once been a close friend and confidant, but Red Arrow was a completely different matter altogether. Roy Harper never liked her, never trusted her. He'd always felt Artemis had been forced upon his friends, fellow protégés who were like brothers to him, as a replacement that no one had asked for. Had Harper been given a chance to clear his head and think it through, more than likely he would have joined his friends to form a team even stronger than the one he'd hungered for all those years just to spite the mighty Justice League, but thanks to Green Arrow and Batman, he never got that chance, and now with her actions from almost a decade ago, she'd proven him right once again. This unintended reunion was only going to fuel that fire even more.

Artemis's muscles tensed as she waited for Harper's next move when suddenly a familiar voice came out from the bedroom.

"We'll this is awkward," Jade spoke amusingly, strolling into the den as if she didn't have a care in world, equally as naked as the man in front of her.

Artemis's brow furrowed at her sister's sudden arrival and finally the pieces all fell into place.

"You've got to be kidding me," Artemis groaned lowering her weapon, "How long?"

"Oh a few months or so on and off, what the Shadows don't know won't hurt them. Besides Red's always been good at keeping secrets haven't you Roy?"

Roy rolled his eyes and cursed to himself, turning back to the bedroom to put something on. Artemis tried her best not stare as the archer walked away, much to the amusement of her sister. When she turned back towards Jade, the blonde had fire in her eyes.

"If the Shadows had found out you'd been communicating with someone on the outside they would have killed us both!" she barked. Jade shrugged off the remark and walked past her towards the dilapidated kitchenette.

"I assumed they were going to kill us anyway, but they didn't dear sister. So take a deep breath and relax. No harm no foul. I'd offer you some breakfast but Red evidently has never heard of fresh fruit or coffee."

Roy returned moments later, tying off the string of his sweatpants as he entered the room. Surprisingly he didn't seem as angry or venomous as Artemis would have predicted. She doubted he'd mellowed that much over the years, but something was different.

"For the record I only found about you a few days ago," Roy stated. "I should have known the Crock sisters would stick together."

"Yes you should have," Jade smiled, sitting down on the coach and patting the dusty cushion for her lover to join her.
Artemis stared at her irritably, not happy with sister's lack of honesty and even more so with her lack of clothing.

"Do you mind?" Artemis frowned.

"Do you?" Jade grinned tauntingly before standing and kissing Roy on the cheek.

"Fine. You weren't' such a prude a few weeks ago when you and Zane were breaking the box spring in that villa in Laos. I'll be right back. Red be nice, and Artemis…behave." Then she walked out of the den, closing the bedroom door behind her.

Roy stared at her from across the room, his expression unreadable. Artemis grew frustrated with herself that even after all these years he could still make her feel like an insecure thirteen year old girl with just a glance. She didn't owe him any explanation, but chances were that he knew the whole story anyway, or most of it.

"Do I need to ask who Zane is?"

"No," she replied sharply, trying to move past the subject as quickly as she could.

"So I guess you're probably pretty pissed at me?" the blonde delivered sarcastically, knowing that question to be a gross understatement.

His gaze never wavered, but his tone softened, not as accusatory or antagonistic as she'd expected. He sighed, "You had your reasons."

His attitude and demeanor confused her. This was not the person she remembered at all. It had been almost ten years, and he still looked just about the same, a little leaner than she recalled, but still just as muscular, now sporting a large oriental dragon tattoo draped across his shirtless back. But something was different; he was different. Mellower maybe, less accusing than the man who'd threatened her in that Gotham alleyway all those years ago. She still remembered that moment quite vividly.

"Don't hurt my friends."

Now his eyes look tired, weary, as if he'd been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders for years. When Artemis looked down towards his arms, she noticed the scars, not battle wounds but something else entirely. Roy caught her staring and crossed his arms self-consciously across his chest to hide them from her gaze.

"So does Ollie know?"

Roy paused for a moment. "No. We don't talk all that often anymore."

"How is he?" she asked hesitantly.

"Good from what I hear. He sold Queen Consolidated a few years back, but still remains the majority stockholder. I saw him about four or five months ago at a shareholders meeting. We hit the streets, did a little hero work, but that was about it. Oh yeah…he and Dinah finally got married."

Artemis smiled at his statement. "Bout time," she added pleasantly. It was the first bit of good news she'd come across since returning.

Roy continued. "So now he just plays philanthropist for Star City, vacations A LOT, and he and Canary show up whenever the League needs them. Not a bad life all things considered."
"Why didn't you tell him?" she asked curiously.

"Like I said he and I don't talk much, besides it's not my place. He took your death pretty hard, we all did."

"Even you?" she asked disbelievingly

"Even me," he nodded, frowning irritably at her question, "but Ollie blamed himself for getting you involved in this life in the first place. If or when he finds out, it's going to be from you. If you're not planning on sticking around then it's probably better off if he doesn't know."

"What if Nightwing's already told him?" she asked.

That question caught him off guard. "You talked to Dick?" he asked surprised.

"Not really talked to, as much as talked at."

"What did he say?" Roy asked.

"Not much, just that he and Bruce had known for years, that he never told anyone, and that everyone would be better off if I stayed dead. Charming huh?"

"Wow," he chuckled, "that's pretty cold, even for him. I'm not all that surprised that he knew. He always kept things close to the vest."

"I guess I can't blame him," she replied disheartened

"He's changed Artemis, we all have."

"I guess I just didn't expect that from him, you maybe…." she smirked.

Roy retuned the smile.

She sat down next to him on the couch and turned her head quizzically. "Why are you being so decent to me? You've always hated me."

"I didn't hate you Artemis, I just didn't trust you. Bats and Ollie had their reasons for bringing you in, but they never shared them. I don't know if I was more pissed at not being chosen for the League or getting replaced within weeks of leaving, but I have trust issues, my sponsor reminds me of that constantly."

"We'll I ended up screwing everybody over just like you said I would," she replied bitterly.

"Look Artemis, if it makes you feel any better I am pissed. You caused a lot of people a lot of heartache, people I care about."

Artemis nodded silently, staring at the floor unsure what to say.

"I know you had your reasons, I really do, but how did you think this was all was going to play out?"

She shook her head slightly, staring off in the distance, reliving the moment when she triggered the bomb and said goodbye to the people she loved.

"Not like this," she spoke barely above a whisper.
She'd hoped to feel some sort of fulfillment for putting down her mother's killer, the man she constantly disappointed, the man who mentally abused her and stole her childhood. She'd wished for some kind of coldblooded satisfaction, but to her surprise she'd felt nothing. Even as she watched Jade drag his lifeless body into that tub, filing it full of acids and compounds that would dissolve the last remnants of Lawrence Crock into nothingness, all she felt was numb and cold, just like she did after every death that had come at her hands since then.

"Look, you're not the only person who's screwed over and hurt people. I've been to some pretty dark places, places that I put myself. I got involved with the wrong people and ruined a lot of relationships in the process. I know you saw the tracks on my arms. I'm an addict" he shrugged, "pure and simple. I might be clean now, but I'll always be an addict."

She stared again but this time he didn't try to hide the tracks, instead looking at the scars with her, trying to remember back to a time he wasn't haunted by demons of one kind or another.

"After fuck up after fuck up and more relapses than I can count, just about everybody washed their hands of me. I don't blame them, but there were a few that never gave up on me and gave me more second chances than I deserved. One of the steps I learned in recovery is about making amends, and after all the shit I pulled over the years I'll probably be doing it for the rest of my life. It would be pretty hypocritical of me to judge based on my track record. I do have one question though, what are you hoping to accomplish by coming back?"

Artemis frowned. "I don't know. It's just…" she sighed wearily, "This was the only place that ever made sense to me. It was the first time in my whole fucked up life that I felt like I fit in, like I belonged somewhere. I don't know if I came back to explain myself, to make amends, or just say goodbye. Whatever the reason it's too late. I realize that now. Dick's right, I should just vanish."

"Dick's not always right Artemis, he's had his fair share of fuck ups over the years too, my guess is he thinks that if you're just going to disappear all over again, it's not worth opening up old wounds. I can respect that, but if you're considering staying around for a while, sooner or later there's a chance you're going to run in to someone. It would probably be better if it's on your terms rather than theirs."

Artemis paused for a moment to contemplate his words carefully.

In her mind, she knew she'd come too far not to know, not to ask the questions that had haunted her for years. She needed to know what had become of them, what had become of him. After that she'd finally have the closure she'd sought for so long, after that she could finally move on.

Artemis was just about to start her inquiry when her stomach growled loudly and she realized for the first time she hadn't eaten since she'd arrived in Gotham. Only then did she recognize how shaky she'd become, as the last of her adrenaline worked its way out after their initial confrontation. From years of training she refused to show any sign of weakness, but unfortunately her stomach had decided otherwise.

"How long's it been since you ate?" Roy asked concerned.

"A while," the blonde answered wearily.

Roy rose to his feet and reached out for Artemis's hand "Come on, I know just the place."

xxx

If today had been her last day on earth, Artemis could have died a happy woman. After the last few years consisting of items that would make a Billy goat puke, she was now actually eating an honest
to God greasy Gotham cheeseburger. Waves of pleasure washed over her as she devoured her meal. She knew she should slow down and savor every bite, but she had little self-control when it came to her first real American meal in close to a decade.

Roy and Jade watched amusingly as ketchup and mustard dripped down the ravenous blonde's chin, but Artemis didn't care, the burger and fries were heavenly. She couldn't recall a meal that had ever tasted so good. Her appetite had always leaned more towards Americana while Jade's chose a more traditional Asian cuisine, but Artemis decided not to point that out at the moment as Cheshire finished her second chili dog with extra onion. The Starlight Diner would never score highly on any Health Department's inspectors list, but for what it lacked in cleanliness it made up for in flavor.

Roy finished his BLT, wiping his mouth, and began his tale.

"Kaldur was the first to leave. He'd always been stretched thin with his obligations to Atlantis and balancing his time with the Team. He thought once he handed off the Team Leader title to Nightwing things would slow down, but you know in our line of work they never do. I know Dick tried to talk him out of it, but between Tula's death and yours, he'd had enough."

Artemis vaguely recalled the name, remembering her as Kaldur's one true yet unrequited one; however that story would have to wait for another day.

"Anyway we kept in touch on and off for a while, but it was never the same. A few years ago, he was named the Atlantean ambassador to the U.N. You could tell he'd missed the surface world, but his heroing days were long past. Unfortunately for me that was during one of my really low points. He tried to help, but I wouldn't let him. After a real knock down drag out he finally gave up and washed his hands of me. I can't say I blame him. Besides you can't have an Atlantean dignitary hanging out with some low life crack addict. I get an email from him occasionally, but that's about it."

Roy continued the roll call.

"I don't remember where Conner and Clark stood before you left, but they ended up becoming really close. Supes kind of became more of an older brother than a father figure, and that turned out to be exactly what each other needed. They've had a great relationship ever since. The Kent's took him in and Conner finally got what he always wanted, a mom and dad, a brother, you know; a real family. He deserved it."

Harper stroked his chin, trying to remember the exact order of things; it had been a while since he'd thought back on those days.

"I guess it's been about four and a half, maybe five years now since Jonathon Kent died. It was a massive heart attack from what I heard, Bruce had one of the best cardiac surgeons in the country flown in, but it was too late. It just crushed Conner. They were really close. So after the funeral Conner decided to stay with Martha and as far as I know he's been there ever since; working the farm, taking care of her. I guess Conner decided the world only needed one Superman."

"Megan didn't leave the team by choice, J'onn made her. Since you've been gone her telepathy and telekinesis had gotten stronger, a lot stronger. I've seen her do things even the Manhunter couldn't pull off on his best day. He always said she was the most powerful telepath he'd ever seen, but…."

"But?" Artemis mirrored.

Roy hesitated. "She started to became a danger to herself and everyone around her. On more than one occasion she got a little extreme with the guys they fought. Dick said she showed little remorse
about doing it. She almost lobotomized a few bad guys and from what I heard damn near killed Psimon. The official story was she was having problems keeping everyone's voices out of her head and she finally broke, but I know it was more than that. Kaldur told me she tried to—I don't know you'd call it… alter maybe? everyone's memories, trying to cover up or fix the things she'd done. She just wanted to make things the way they were before, but once you've crossed that line you can't go back. J'onn took her off the team, they gave up their civilian I.D.s and moved off somewhere up North, tranquil from what I understand, but isolated. Zatanna keeps in touch with her. Zee says she pretty fragile, but doing better. The bad thing was Conner had known what she was doing the whole time, but kept it to himself. That didn't sit well with the others. Not long after that they broke up and went their separate ways."

Artemis sat silently in disbelief. This was not the news she was expecting. Her life had taken some drastic turns over the years, but she assumed…hoped that the ones she'd left behind had fared better. With Roy's news she sadly realized that was not the case.

"Zatanna still plays Vegas and a few other places a couple times a year, they're crazy for her magic shows out there, but mostly she stays close to home and takes care of her dad. Giovanni just has never been the same since Dr. Fate released him. It's kind of ironic that Zee was the only one of us that made it to the League and she was probably the one that cared the least about it. But the League needed a sorcerer and there was no way Zatarra was going to be able to come back, so she said yes. She told everyone it was to honor her father, but I think Zee also needed a change of scenery. Things had become kind of toxic between she and Dick towards the end."

"They were still a couple?" Artemis asked surprised.

"I don't know if you'd call them a couple, they'd both deny it if you asked, but teenage crushes can't last forever. She was ready to take it to the next level and he wasn't. It became all about the next mission for him, sound familiar? Dick took your death really hard. It was the first and only time anyone had died on his watch. Back in the day he wanted so badly to lead the team, to be the guy, after that he just wasn't the same."

"It's funny; I can still remember him swearing up and down that he never wanted to be "the Batman", but we don't always get what we want. Now he runs an off-shoot of Wayne Enterprises; Wayne Tech. Yeah I know, real creative name right? Dick does a lot of research and development for special cyber projects for the Air Force, it eats up a lot of his time, but he loves it. And when he's not doing that, he's usually getting his picture taken with some supermodel or debutante under his arm. He and Bruce have the playboy persona down pat. I guess you noticed the new Robin huh?" Roy asked.

Artemis nodded.

"Dick kind of became the odd man out when Bruce brought the kid in. Trust me I can relate," his brow furrowed looking at the blonde archer. "I know for a fact he was asked to join the League several times, but he always said no. I'd like to think it was because the four of us didn't go in together that first day we were invited into the Hall of Justice, that had always been our dream, but more than likely he just didn't want to. So now he does the solo thing mostly and keeps to himself. Occasionally he patrols with Barbara, but that's about it. We hook up for dinner about twice a year just for old times, but things aren't the same anymore."

Jade yawned, tiring of their trip down memory lane. Finally she stood and stretched her arms above her head contorting in all different directions, the sound of every joint in her back and neck popping simultaneously.

"As much as I'd love to hear more of this little soap opera, I thought I spotted an antique sword shop
on the way over. I think I'll browse their inventory while you two finish up. Red be a dear and catch the check for us, I'll make it worth your while," she purred in his ear, biting gently at his right lobe before walking out with a sway of her hips.

Roy smiled to himself, briefly imagining the different scenarios that promise could entail when he turned back to Artemis to notice the concern on her face, the worry in her normally unreadable eyes. She knew there was a reason for the order in which he'd shared, why someone who had been so important to her had been relegated to the end. The elephant in the room had been there long enough when she finally slayed it.

"What about Wally?" she asked, her husky voice cracking slightly.

Roy frowned. "It's complicated," he spoke softly, watching the condensation drip off his glass to the table below, remembering moments that made his troubles seem pale in comparison

"It all started with a man named Eobard Thawne."
She was beautiful. She'd taken his breath away from the moment they'd first met and every day since. He watched closely as she breathed peacefully, wishing he could freeze that moment in time and let it last forever. He could never imagine a life without her in it, and thanked God for everyday the almighty allowed them to spend together. He no longer took things for granted, life was too short and he didn't want to waste a nanosecond of it. As the sun finally broke through the last vestige of the storm clouds, a sliver of light cascading in from the window caught her in its beam and she began to stir. Her hair had fallen over her face and he attempted to lightly brush it away when her eyes popped open. He smiled at her as she looked up at him slightly confused by her strange surroundings.

"Mornin' Beautiful," he whispered in his quietest morning voice.

She smiled back. "Good Morning Daddy" Iris replied.

Wally West kissed her forehead and watched as his daughter yawned and stretched, rubbing the last remnants of sleep from her bright green eyes. On the opposite side of the bed Wally gently nudged his other nighttime visitor, but Jai West showed no signs of awakening anytime soon. Wally carefully climbed over him and exited the bed. A few extra minutes sleep wouldn't hurt anyone.

Severe thunderstorms were common place in the Midwest, and last night's tempest along with the unseasonably warm temperatures they'd been experiencing lately had brought not only the thunder and lightning, but two scared children from the bedroom they shared down the hall. Wally turned on some light music before he jumped into the shower to begin their morning ritual. He knew by the time he got out Jai and Iris would be out of the bed, school uniforms pulled from the dryer, teeth brushed and beds made. Next he'd meet Iris just in time to help his daughter with her long auburn mane that always seemed to be in perpetual knots.

As Wally cooked breakfast, Iris made lunches, and Jay packed up school bags and backpacks. In the West household everyone pulled their own weight. As the group began their trek out the door towards the bus stop, Iris reached out for her father's hand and looked up at him as they walked.

"Daddy, are you going to see mommy today?"

He smiled warmly. "Yes mam," he replied. "I'm even going to bring her flowers."

Both kids smiled back and Jai looked up at his dad grinning, "She likes that a lot."

Wally smiled and roughed up his son's finally combed raven hair that Jai had worked so hard on. The two playfully wrestled all the way to the stop as the bus appeared over the hill and eventually came to a stop in front of them. The kids boarded the bus and quickly found their seats, looking back to their father on the street.

"Love you guys," Wally mouthed through the glass, and the kids smiled and placed their palms on the window in response. Wally traced the outline of their tiny fingers on the glass as the door shut and the bus slowly pulled away. He looked down at his watch and sighed.

"Of course," he groaned, grabbing his back pack and tossing it into his beat up Jeep Wrangler. He was running late. He was always late.

Within minutes he'd left the small suburb of Blue Valley and headed towards the outskirts of Keystone City. He'd barely locked the parking brake into place before running into Import Flowers
and picking out the Gerber Daisies his wife loved so much. Flowers were quickly purchased and within minutes he was back on his way.

Off in the distance he could see the Gateway Suspension Bridge that crossed the mighty Mississippi River, connecting the sister cities of Keystone and Central. Up ahead the traffic flowing towards the bridge was relatively light for this time of morning, and Wally hoped it would continue after he made his stop. He drove past the on-ramp and continued on towards his destination. As he pulled in to the perfectly landscaped park, a warm breeze blew through the rolling hills around him. It was always peaceful this time of morning. Off in the distance he could hear birds singing and the light hiss of sprinklers coming to life. The red head turned off the engine and gathered the flowers, quietly shutting the heavy jeep door and heading up the path.

The speedster knelt down next to the gravesite, brushing away the withered flowers he'd placed there the previous month and putting the new daises into the vase provided. Finally he lowered himself to the ground, kneeling eye level with the marker.

He stroked his chin deep in thought, staring off at the immaculate engravings that embolden the tombstone before him.

In memory of Linda Park West, beloved wife and mother.

Wally sighed, and wiped the moisture from his eyes and spoke softly. "Hi babe."

xxx

"At first glance Eobard Thawne came across as just your basic super hero groupie. You know the type, wears the T-shirts, asks for autographs or pictures, shows up at public events trying to get some face time, or at least end up on the ten o’clock news." Roy explained between bites.

"But something about this guy was different. Whenever some organization had a press conference or public event, be it the Police Department, the Mayor's office, or some charity that had asked for one of the Flashes to make an appearance, Barry always drew the short straw. Wally and Bart hated those sorts of things and always found excuses to get out of them, but Barry didn't seem to mind, he considered it an honor. So the Flash would appear as expected, and at every event Thawne would be there, somewhere in the background wearing this weird, almost smug smile, like he knew something that no one else in the world did. Bart said it would just send a chill up your spine when you saw it."

"Anyway, not long after that he started showing up at crime scenes as well, usually the real gruesome ones, except by this time he'd gone full cosplay, wearing the same uniform like they did, except for some reason he'd switched the colors to the complete opposite palate of what Barry and Wally wore. Then these random bloggers started to take notice and even gave him the nickname the Reverse Flash. They'd post shit on Reddit or other social media sites whenever he'd show up. Occasionally one of these nerds would get the balls to go up and talk to him, and you should have heard the answers. He'd tell them stories like he was from the future, to call him Zoom, that he was here to help the Flash meet his destiny, you know just weird shit like that. No one took him seriously, why would they? He was just another mid-western nutjob, some wannabe that craved the attention, at least that's what we all thought, until that night."

Roy's expression grew grim, still shaking his head in disbelief even after all these years.

"What happened?" Artemis asked nervously.

"No one knows for sure, but somehow, he knew their identities, all of them. He knew where they lived, where they worked, where they went to school. Artemis…he knew everything."
Roy continued. "It was late fall, around Jay Garrick's seventieth birthday I think. All of them had
gotten together to celebrate, Jay and Joan, Barry and Iris, Rudy and Mary, Bart….Wally and Linda."

Before Artemis could ask, Roy answered.

"...his wife."

The archer felt her body tense. It had been almost ten years, but the news still took her breath away.
All Artemis had ever hoped for was for Wally to be happy. That one day he'd find someone that
would not only love him, but treat him the way he deserved, someone that wouldn't break his heart
and lie to him like she had. Now hearing Roy's words, knowing that not only had it happened, but
he'd taken that next step, Artemis had gotten her wish, but it hurt more than she'd expected,
deservedly so. She remained lost in her thoughts before she realized Roy had continued his story.

"...at some restaurant in downtown Central. It was surprise of course; you know how much they
loved doing cornball shit like that. They'd all been there about an hour or so before the explosions
went off."

"Explosions?"

Roy nodded. "Right across the street from the restaurant, a whole series of them back to back to
back. Office buildings, stores, condos, everything was burning. People were scrambling in all
directions, glass and debris everywhere. Civilians had been thrown all over the damn place and right
in the middle of all that chaos was Thawne.

Artemis just stared, mouth agape.

'They probably never even made a plan, they'd been together too long to need one, everyone already
knew their roles. Jay moved their families out of harm's way, Wally and Bart cleared the streets,
taking as many injured as they could carry to local hospitals while Barry stayed behind with Thawne.
That sick fucker just stood there wearing that stupid yellow costume and smiling, like he was
getting off on all the pain and misery he'd caused. Barry didn't waste any time trying to talk him
down, he needed to take Thawne down fast before anyone else could get hurt. That's when he…
when everyone found out he wasn't just some psychopath wannabe, he was a speedster."

Roy sighed sadly, "Barry never saw it coming."

"From the way it was told to me, things just went crazy after that. Two balls of lightning ricocheting
off everything and everyone in their path. The times they did slow down, just for the briefest of
moments, it was clear Thawne had the upper hand. He was throwing Barry around like a rag doll.
Every time Barry tried to lead him out of the city, Thawne would stop and circle back, like he was
looking for someone. Finally Zoom had him by the throat, just pummeling the shit out of him, blood
everywhere. Iris wrestled away from Jay and rushed to the street screaming and begging for Zoom to
stop, but when Thawne saw her, he dropped Barry and took off towards her. Jay did the best he
could, but he was seventy years old. What in the hell could he have done? Zoom sent him flying
through a wall and turned back to Iris when Barry limped back, all bleeding and broken to cut him
off. Zoom sped off back towards him and…Linda… just got in the way. She never had a chance."

Roy bit his lip, clearly struggling through the details.

"Zoom tore Barry apart. It was as gruesome as it sounds. His body literally disintegrated. Wally and
Bart arrived seconds later, just in time to see him die. Zoom just shot them this psychotic smile and
took off in a streak of red lightning. Wally was about to go off after him, until he heard his mom
screaming. That's when he saw Linda a few yards away slumped over, bleeding and bruised like
she'd been run over by a runaway train. She was conscious long enough for them to speak to each other one last time before she fell into a coma. The E.R. doctors diagnosed her with traumatic brain injury and put her on a ventilator shortly thereafter. It was a miracle they were able to save the twins after all of that."

"Twins?"

"They were eight months pregnant," Roy swallowed hard, "she was due in a few weeks. Linda never even got to hold her own children. She died a few days later."

"My god," Artemis replied in shock.

"I know," Roy nodded. "The League found him a few weeks later just outside of D.C. trying to break into a secure STAR labs facility. It took the heavy hitters; Superman, Manhunter, Wonder Woman to finally bring him down. I hear he's held at some Black Site Facility out west now, but even Ollie doesn't know for sure."

"Are they…"

"The Twins? They're fine. They're great kids Artemis, smart, healthy, happy and Wally's a great dad. With parents like his you knew he would be. We talk every couple of months. He updates me on the kids, we shoot the shit about the old days, he asks about some of the guys, but we never…ever talk about the Flash. I know Wally assumed the mantle but he quit the League a few weeks later. The tried talk him out of it, but his mind was made up. Now he and Bart just patrol the Keystone and Central areas and mostly keep to themselves. They've grown pretty tight over the years. Wally's a physics professor at the University of Missouri - Central City, and Bart's even a student there. They're both doing well from what I hear, but I know deep down they've never forgiven themselves for letting Barry die."

"Why didn't Dick say anything?" she snapped. "I know he's pissed at me, but my God."

"Probably because he and Wally don't talk anymore."

"What? You're kidding. Why?" she asked urgently.

"You'd have to ask them, God knows I've tried. We all have, but they refuse to talk about it, at least not to me anyways. This has been going on for years. The last time they saw each other as far as I know was at the funerals, so whatever caused all this shit happened before then."

"I don't understand. They were…best friends." she said despondently.

"I know, but things change Artemis, people change."

"Not them," she murmured in disbelief.

Off in the distance the distinctive whine of sirens began to grow, headed in the direction of the Gotham Flea Market a few blocks away. Roy and Artemis suddenly locked eyes, realizing that was the last known destination of a certain assassin and sword enthusiast.

"Oh shit," they both exclaimed, as Roy threw the money on the table and the two archers sprinted towards the door

"God what has she done now?" Artemis cursed.

xxx
"And the most familiar examples of condensed phases are...?"

"Umm solid and liquids?" the blonde answered hesitantly

"Which arise from the bonding of....."

"Magnetic forces between .....atoms?"

"It's electromagnetic actually, but great job Karen, that's a tough one."

The attractive student let out a deep breath and smiled, returning to her seat.

"Guys this stuff can get pretty complex sometimes, trust me I know, but we're going to keep it simple and take it slow. You can recite and memorize the definitions all you want, but it doesn't do any good if you don't understand the core principals behind them. So by next week I want you to re-read chapters three and four and we'll go over them again in class in case you guys have any questions. After that we're putting the books down for the next couple of weeks and doing some pretty cool experiments, so if you're going to blow off any of my classes, do them after November."

Science wasn't everyone's forte. By nature some majors deemed it mandatory as a general education requirement, for others just an interesting sounding elective, but those weren't the only reasons most students took Physics 101, it was the instructor. For the hard core science junkies or those choosing Physics as their major, it was a stepping stone into some of his more advanced classes, but the majority took it due to its professor. Professor West made science an extremely fun and exciting experience. Sure he wanted his introductory classes to entice students into following it all the way, but it was ok for others to just have fun while learning an interesting and sometimes confusing subject. The professor had an amazing ability to take the most complicated theories and dumb them down into terms that everyone could comprehend and understand. He'd been doing it for years.

If you did the work and came to a majority of his classes, you were assured an automatic A. The goal of this class wasn't to be hard, it was to have fun and learn at the same time. It also didn't hurt that the instructor was major eye candy to the ladies, and a sports and pop culture junkie for the guys. It's why his classes always filled first on registration day.

"Guys have a good weekend," the red head proclaimed to the exiting crowd, thankful for the break.

Trailing along at the end was a one Karen Thompson, the last student called upon before the bell rung for dismissal.

"Professor West?"

"What's up Karen?" Wally replied, packing his notes into his leather satchel.

"I was uh...just wondering if you'd made a decision yet on who your teaching assistant was going to be next semester? You know I've got most of my core classes down since I switched majors and you know how much I love your class, I'm pulling a 3.5 plus I could really use the stipend for tuition."

She continued on with the multitude of reason she was the best candidate, with her distracting blue eyes complicating the matter further. She was gorgeous, they all were, but the list of candidates for his T.A. position was long and qualified, and Wally was putting off making any decisions as long as possible not to hurt or disappoint all the people who'd signed up. Karen drew an inch closer as she spoke, and the speedster could practically feel the tiniest bead of perspiration forming on his forehead. She was still in mid-dissertation when Wally finally had to break through.

"Look Karen, You're definitely qualified, and I know you'd do a great job, but I still have a lot of
people to interview first. As soon as I know you'll know ok? Deal?"

"Deal," she smiled. "For what it's worth I think we'd make a great team."

"I'll keep that in mind. Have a great weekend."

"You too," she said, with just a hint of flirt in her smile. She strolled out of the classroom passing an incoming student as Wally blew out his breath in relief.

"Well she's attractive," Bart Allen chuckled as he turned to watch the curvaceous blonde exiting the lecture hall.

"I hadn't noticed," Wally lied, clearing his throat.

Bart dropped his overloaded back pack on Wally's desk with a loud thump and in a blink of an eye was sitting behind it with his feet resting on top of it, loose papers flying everywhere.

"Dude you need some paper weights," Bart chuckled watching Wally sigh as his study guides spread out across the classroom floor.

"And to think I was about to buy you lunch," the elder speedster jokingly scolded.

Suddenly in explosion of wind, the study guides were picked up and placed back into Wally's satchel. Nanoseconds later Bart appeared back behind the desk, sitting in the rolling chair spinning in circles.

"How's that?" he grinned.

"Better. How about Chinese?" Wally asked.

Bart's stomach growled loudly. "Crash." he replied, practically drooling.

Wally packed up his laptop, turned off the lights and the two made their way out of the science hall.

"How'd last night go?"

"Slow, one carjacker and a cat burglar. Oh yeah and a guy exposing himself in Warner Park. You should have seen his expression when I dropped him off at the precinct with his pants around his ankles. Priceless," he laughed the patented Bart Allen cackle.

"You have a gallery of Rogues and yet you spend your night trolling the parks of Central City. What's wrong with this picture?" Wally smirked.

"And for that remark wiseass, I'm ordering three entrées."

Wally rolled his eyes and they both threw their backpacks into his jeep. The redhead was about to retort, when he caught Bart's eyes raised in defense.

"Should we make it four?" Bart taunted

Wally bit his lip and put the jeep into gear.

xxx

"I'm insulted," Jade grumbled as Roy and Artemis hooked their elbows into hers and walked her away from the flea market. "I actually prevent a women form being mugged and suddenly I'm the bad guy?"
"You broke his arm in three places," Roy scolded.

"And I'll bet he'll remember that the next time and elderly woman with an oversized purse walks by," the brunette replied. "Some fat cat Wall Street businessman decked out in Gucci I can relate, but a defenseless old woman? he's lucky that's all I broke."

Roy continued to fume while Artemis remained silent. She herself had done worse things over the last years, much worse, and despite the violent outcome she appreciated the moral direction her sister was taking. After all they'd experienced together, she was worried about what Jade would do with her new found freedom. Seeing her stand up for someone who couldn't do it themselves made Artemis proud. Jade was no longer her father's pawn, she was a strong independent women who could make her own choices and choose her own fate. Her methods from time to time could be a little questionable, but Artemis knew more than anyone the real person that hid behind the Cheshire mask. Jade was her mother made over, and much like her mother, she was seeking to become something more than the mistakes of her past. That knowledge always warmed the archer's heart, and despite the lecture the assassin was getting from Red Arrow, she knew it did Roy's too.

But despite all that had just transpired around her, Artemis found herself distracted, her mind continuing to drift towards one thing, one person. Wally West. The story of his life that Roy had shared was tragic. The days of club houses and costumes were long past, with only a few of them still using their gifts for good. They weren't teens anymore, they were adults, adults who'd chosen separate paths, separate lives. Many a night when she lay alone under the stars, she imagined her friends still together; going on missions, celebrating birthdays, sharing dinners, hanging out together like families and friends were supposed to; all frozen in time, exactly the way she'd left them. This was nowhere near what she'd expected to find when her plane had landed in Gotham the night before, not even close.

The three continued their journey back uptown, finally arriving at Roy's apartment. They skipped the fire escape this time in favor of the main entrance, walking past the graffiti laden walls and entering the old creaky Otis elevator, the ceiling light flickering as the box jerked into motion. As the elevator rose, Jade reached over and gently took her sister's face, peering into her bloodshot sunken eyes. Needless to say the brunette did not like what she saw.

"Look Artemis, you're exhausted. Stay with Red and me for the night, get some sleep and then you can figure out your next move with a little better perspective."

"Jade I'm fine." she replied, stifling a yawn.

The brunette stared her down with the same disapproving eyes of her mother. Begrudgingly Artemis admitted that Jade was right, she was exhausted.

"Ok."

Jade smiled and walked out of the lift towards the apartment, presumably to find sheets to cover the musty couch. Once inside Artemis sat down and removed her boots, reaching down and popping the knuckles of her toes.

"So, you really live here huh?"

"What's wrong with it?" Roy replied defensively.

"Nothing it's uh ….nice."

"Hell yeah it is. It's got everything I need. Good location, affordable rent, close access to the
subways, all the basics."

Artemis nodded in agreement while Roy frowned in annoyance. She was about to apologize for her perceived slight when she noticed a sly smile stretching across his face.

"You're a terrible liar,' the blonde scolded with a smile.

Roy chuckled. "I've got a two bedroom on the West side; coming to this old safe house was Jade's idea to keep a low profile. I have some nosy neighbors and…"

"…he didn't want them to hear us fucking like rabbits "Jade interrupted, yelling from the adjacent room.

"God Jade!" Artemis groaned.

"Classy," Roy glowered. "Come on grab your shit Artemis, let's get out of here."

Artemis nodded appreciatively, reaching down and grabbing her backpack, but she was still troubled, and it wasn't something a good night sleep was going to be able to fix.

xxx

Outside of one night in Stockholm when she and Jade were tailing a rouge MI6 agent who'd wronged both the Shadows as well as the British Secret Service, Artemis had not felt a more comfortable bed in years. Much like Dick Grayson, Roy Harper was the adopted son of a very powerful, very wealthy business magnate, and despite his complicated and sometimes cantankerous relationship with Oliver Queen, Harper was still a majority stockholder as well as a beneficiary to a very sizable trust fund. It translated into a very comfortable living without ever having to walk through the doors of Queen Consolidated, and while Grayson had formed his own offshoot of Wayne Tech, Harper had chosen to stay out of the family business, occasionally picking up the stray job here and there, ranging anywhere from security consultant to club bouncer. You wouldn't get rich doing work like that, luckily Roy already was. But he was a living example that money couldn't buy happiness, and his wealth had been a hindrance more often than a help, the track marks on his arms were testament to that.

His condo overlooked Gotham Central Park, decorated with an industrial, yet elegant style the blonde would never have thought of her fellow archer. His abode would never be the centerpiece of a Gotham Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous fluff piece, but it was a beautiful home that Artemis strangely envied. She wondered if her life had worked out differently, would Green Arrow have set her up in a place similar. She of course would have refused, but it was still fun to dream about.

After close to an hour under the massaging hot stream, Artemis stepped out the luxurious shower, wrapping one small towel around her slender waist, the other around her long hair. Roy was evidently no stranger to entertaining women, a truth easily observable from the guest bathroom stocked full of every shampoo, conditioner, moisturizer on the market, items Artemis felt comfortable Harper would never use, let alone know about. Personal shoppers could be a godsend sometimes. The blonde knew this discovery was not lost on her sister, but theirs was a complex relationship to begin with, it had been from the first day Cheshire had crossed paths with Red Arrow. Despite finding themselves on the opposite side of the law most of the time, Roy and Jade had discovered a connection, a synchronicity that just worked for them despite their differences. The heart wants what the heart wants. Artemis understood this better than most.

She donned a bathrobe while her clothes continued to wash and exited the steam ridden bathroom, heading out towards the den. She could hear the muffled but raised voices of Roy and Jade coming
from the kitchen and Artemis hesitated. It didn't sound heated, but might be a conversation best left private so she waited, walking around the den, waiting for a break in the conversation.

Harper didn't keep many personal mementos or pictures out, he'd always been too private a person for that, but of the ones she discovered consisted mainly of landscape shots presumably from his many travels. He had a good eye, as an archer she wouldn't have expected less. Above the fireplace rested a few old dilapidated photos of a man and a woman who shared many of his facial features, people she could only assume were his real parents, but it was the one on Roy's desk that caught her eye.

Four teens; as different from the others as the day is long, but bonded in a way no one would ever be able to understand; four sidekicks, four brothers. Even out of uniform they looked like heroes.

Kaldur and Roy were the oldest of the group, probably seventeen at the time this was taken. That would have put Wally at somewhere around fifteen, and Dick would have barely started high school.

*My God* she sighed nostalgically, *they were so young.*

She turned on the desk lamp and brought the frame under the light for a better view. She wasn't sure, but the background looked a lot like the Queen estate back in Star City. Without a Mt. Justice at the time, the Queen mansion or Wayne Manor had to be the unofficial club house for four teens ready to escape the shadows of their mentors. None of them could have possibly guessed that a year and a half later they would literally save the world.

Roy walked up behind her, looking over her shoulder at the photo.

"That was about six months we before found out that we wouldn't be joining the Justice League. It was always our plan to go in together; all for one, one for all type thing. I guess it just wasn't meant to be. Bats probably already knew it, but you know how he is. I still wonder how different our lives would have ended up if we'd actually made it."

She nodded, still transfixed on the image, specifically the younger red head. The blonde archer had always wondered what it would have been like if they'd met under different circumstances; if he'd been a little less arrogant and more graceful for that matter, the memory of him busting his ass outside the Zeta tube still made her smile. For her part she too was curious what their relationship might have been if she hadn't come in with a chip on her shoulder and a mountain of secrets. Would they have been friends from the start? Would he have laid the same cheesy pickup lines on her as he did Megan? Would she have opened up or confided in him about her past? Would they have still fallen in love?

*Love*

She hadn't let herself feel that emotion in so long, fearing the distraction it might bring, that she might lose her edge and make that one mistake that would get her killed. What she and Zane had worked, but it wasn't love, nothing even close to it. They were partners, partners with benefits, but that was it. Artemis felt fairly confident that the mercenary felt the same way about her. No attachments, no commitments. Those were the rules.

Her father always said "Don't let yourself get attached to anything you are not willing to walk out on in thirty seconds flat if you feel the heat around the corner."

*Probably the only good advice that piece of shit ever gave,* she always considered.

Artemis took that advice, that same attitude into Mt. Justice that first day; Wally took it away from
her a year later. After their first kiss she was hooked and she knew it, but still she kept her guard up, she'd had her heart broken too many times not to. She never thought she could love, she warned him of that when they first began dating, but he proved her wrong, he usually did. When they were together it was the first and only time in her life when things made sense.

The archer had always been a realist, someone who'd never let herself get too high, because she knew how painful and fast the fall could be, but something about Wally was special. Despite being so young, Artemis could actually see a future with the speedster, a life outside of the masks, one that could possibly last. She'd never felt like this before and it scared her. Wally loved her, he meant it, he showed it, and despite all the horrible atrocities she'd been forced to commit over the years, in her mind breaking his heart was the worst thing she'd ever done.

She wanted him to know that, to really know and understand how sorry she was for what she'd done, but she just didn't know how. He deserved the truth, but her deepest fear of fears was that in the end it would do more harm than good.

"He'll never forgive me," she spoke sadly. "I told Dick I didn't owe him or anyone an apology, but I do to him, I just don't know if he'll let me. I know there's nothing I can say that will ever make it right, it's just….I owe him that much. If you were me, what do you think you'd do?"

"Honestly?"

"Yeah," she nodded.

"You're not going to like this, but I'd bail. I'd be on the next plane out of Gotham. I'm not saying that to be an asshole, I'm just being real. I think you're going to end up running into more resentment than redemption. You need to be prepared for that, especially with West. Is that really what you want? Is that what you want to take back with you?"

"Things have changed, Artemis, people have changed. There's no team anymore, no family. They've all gone their separate ways and moved on with their lives; the hero game just isn't for everyone. Teams are a fragile thing, that's why other than the League, you don't see many of them around anymore."

"Wally's been through a lot, it took a while to get him there, but he's finally in a good place. How do you think he's going to feel when he finds out what you did? He's not going to care about the how's or why's, he's going to care that you lied, and not just any lie, a huge one that just about destroyed him. Artemis he's lost his uncle, his wife…you. I respect that you want to make things right, I really do, but if you really care about him, you won't put him through that again. It's just an opinion, take it or leave it."

Artemis let those words soak in. Despite his troubles Roy still had relationships with them. He knew these people; she might as well be a stranger now. During her time away, during long ops when all she had was her thoughts and memories to keep company, she'd foolishly hoped her friends still thought about her from time to time, that they missed her. She wanted to remember them just as they were, almost frozen in time, hoping that one day if she ever came back that they'd be just as she left them. She knew it wasn't remotely realistic but still a pleasant fantasy to get her through the nightmare that had become her life.

Roy was right, the smart play was to leave and start over. She'd won back her life and she damn sure wasn't going to waste it. There was nothing left for her here; no family, no friends, no chances. Despite her overwhelming remorse, she knew deep down it was time to move on to the next chapter of her life.
Artemis had always assumed she, Jade and Zane would continue their partnership, leaving the states and going wherever the jobs would take them, but seeing her sister now with Roy she realized Jade never had any intention of joining them. *Three's a crowd* she used to tease, and now the archer knew why.

For Artemis, Zane scratched and itch, filled a need and nothing more, but what Roy and Jade had, despite how fucked up it looked on the surface, was something special, Artemis could tell. Jade had risked her own life to stay in contact with the archer even though the Shadows forbade it. You don't do something like that for a booty call, you do it for love. Artemis was happy for *and* hated her sister at the same time for it.

The blonde yawned wearily, "I think I'm going to turn in," she stated and walked towards the guest room. She paused for moment and turned back to her fellow archer. "I just want to say thanks Roy, thanks for everything. You've been really decent and you didn't have to. I won't forget it."

Roy smiled. "You're welcome, and for the record, I'm glad you're ok. You might not be Ollie's niece, but you are family. Sleep well and then we'll figure out what's next in the morning."

"Good night Roy."

"Good night Artemis."

Atemis walked into the guest bedroom, shutting the door behind her and sitting down on the bed. She was exhausted; she'd basically not stopped since she'd arrived back in Gotham. The archer took off her robe and slipped beneath the covers, sinking into the soft bed. She'd appreciated Roy's brutal honesty and she knew he was right. It didn't matter how good her intentions might be, too much time had passed. Wally had his life to lead, and she had a new one waiting for her. It wasn't the one she wanted, but it was the one that made the most sense considering where she'd been and what she'd done. The blonde slowly drifted away, thankful that for the next few hours she could just shut her mind down and leave her troubles behind her, even if it just for a while.

xxx

It had been a little more difficult for Jade Nguyen to adjust to being back in New York then she'd expected. It's not like she hadn't spent time in her fair share of big cities over the years, having been sent on operations across the globe from Tokyo, Seoul, Paris, Sydney, to towns and villages so small they didn't even appear on a map. What bothered her most was the constant duration of noise and energy that enveloped the city, it made her anxious. After missions when she wouldn't actually see another living soul for weeks, the non-stop honking of cars or rumbles of subways made it difficult to sleep or unwind. She felt confident she could adjust, but deep down she knew it was more than that. It wasn't the locale as much as it was getting comfortable with the idea that death was no longer waiting around the corner, that the target you'd been sent to kill wasn't about to turn the tables on you in an instant.

Snuggling up next to her handsome archer had helped tremendously. She'd never wanted nor needed anyone's protection, but it was still comforting to know he had her back if anyone was foolish enough to come look for her. Despite their tumultuous history, she needed him, he made her happy, they were fire and ice, opposites in almost every since of the word, but that's what she loved about him, that's what made it work. They'd made no guarantees with each other, knowing full well in her line of work travel would be mandatory, but she welcomed the idea of having a person, a home to come back to. It made her sad to know her sister wasn't as fortunate.

Artemis had - had someone like that once, but that person, even the idea of that person was gone now. Jade and Wally West had never been close due to her affiliation with the different criminal
organizations she’d aligned herself with over the years, and of course trying to kill him didn’t help matters much, but she still respected him. Jade appreciated how he’d fight for her sister, even if it meant getting his ass kicked by Sportsmaster in the process, and in a strange fucked up way she felt her father probably did too.

The assassin and the speedster never made their peace, but she begrudgingly admitted that once she got to know him, she actually kind of liked the annoying hero. They both realized their common ground was how much they both loved and cared about Artemis, and any lingering conflict would only hurt her in the end, but that was a long time ago and Jade never believed in living in the past, she wished Artemis felt the same.

Cheshire understood her sister's need to connect and yet Jade knew it was the wrong play, but it was a painful lesson that Artemis could only learn alone. Now that she’d been confronted with the reality that she wasn't welcome anymore, Cheshire hoped that would finally spur her on to different endeavors, and if that included having Zane in her life to watch out and take care of her, then all the better. He was a good man, and Artemis deserved to be treated well, she only hoped that one day her sister would see that as well.

Jade stealthy left the slumbering archer and made her way to the kitchen, hoping perhaps some warm Chamomile tea would settle her nerves and help her drift back into slumber. The apartment was silent, and she hoped Artemis was faring better than she was in the sleep department. The brunette quietly found the switch to the small pendent light hanging over the sink and turned it on, putting out just enough light to quietly find the teapot and not disturb anyone. She opened the cupboard to look for the tea packet when she saw Roy's wallet and the note next to it on the counter.

*I'm really sorry to do this and I swear to God I'll pay you back every penny. I'll see you both in a few days. – Artemis*

Jade sighed, picked up the note, instinctively folding into one of the origami shapes her mother had taught her. Roy's American Express Centurion Card was missing and it didn't take a detective to guess her sisters next destination. Artemis had finally started the real journey that she'd come back for, and Jade sadly knew that journey would end in heartbreak.

xxx

Standing at the Amtrak station with her bag slung over shoulder, the sleep deprived archer stood alone at the ticket counter. The next train would not leave Gotham Station for another hour, but after that it would be a nineteen hour trip to her destination, plenty of time to finally get the sleep she desperately needed and formulate her plan.

"One ticket to Central City please."
Chapter 7

"Ladies and gentlemen we've reached our destination. The doors will open momentarily once the train has come to a full stop. When exiting the car, remember to mind the gap and of course thank you for traveling with Amtrack. Welcome to Central City"

The arrival announcement echoed through the train cars and woke Artemis from a restless sleep. It had been a fourteen hour trip with minimal stops, but in all honesty the archer wouldn't have minded if it had taken longer. Nervous wasn't the correct word, perhaps anxious best described how she felt. If six months ago someone had told her she'd be free of the Shadows and sitting in a train depot in Missouri she would have considered them certifiable, and yet as she gathered her bags and carry-on, here she stood.

Artemis shook herself from her reverie and stepped off the train platform, walking towards the information kiosk. Overhead a large electronic marquee hung from the ceiling, welcoming all incoming visitors to their fair city.

Welcome to Central City, Home of the Flash

The font of the lettering was a large bold yellow, and seconds after the title appeared, the words raced off the display followed by a familiar lightning bolt and speed contrail that chased after the letters. Seconds later the message would reset and marquee would begin its welcome again. It was corny, but in a good natured mid-western way.

God they love their heroes  Artemis smiled, moving past the marquee and locating the direction of the car rental kiosk.

She couldn't blame them, the legacy of the Flash and the men behind the masks had watched over and protected the sister cities of Central and Keystone for decades. When it came to devotion, Midwestern's pledged allegiance to the Kansas Jayhawks, the St Louis Cardinals, the Kansas City Chiefs, but towering above that list were their heroes; speedsters all. In cities like Gotham and Metropolis where it seemed new vigilantes popped up every week it was commonplace, but in Missouri there were only two; and that's all they ever wanted. Midwesterners loved their Flashes and they weren't afraid to show it.

Despite access to Roy's no limits credit card, Artemis sought out the cheapest car rental and motel she could find. The Super 8 was located on the outskirts of the city near the airport, not exactly the best part of town, but she'd stayed in worse, much worse.

Soon after, she checked into her room, leaving her stay in the city open ended at the front desk; there was not telling how long or how short this trip might last. A map was tacked onto the moldy paneling of the motel room, and she highlighted key points of interest that she should investigate; the Allen's home in Central, the West's home in Keystone, the university Wally taught, even particular restaurants he'd taken her to as a teen provided they still stood. If she'd learned anything from her visit to Gotham it was that change was inevitable, she wondered if that held true for the speedster as well. A lot can happen in ten years, she knew that better than most.

Artemis slept the rest of the day, anticipating a very long night. She would scout out the West's and Allen's residences sometime the following day, provided they even lived in their old homes anymore. She'd do it mostly for nostalgia sake. Those families had meant something to her once; they had taken in a relative stranger and made her one of their own. Wally's dad had taught her how to drive a stick shift, his mother how not to burn a roast, Barry would take her along to crime scenes showing
the intricacies of what CSI did and why, basic intro to being a detective 101. Even Iris taught her something important; how to put up with and love a speedster, lessons that Paula never could.

Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, any and all holidays the archer could count on an invites from Mary and Rudy for get-togethers and celebrations. West/Allen/Garrick parties were always full of laughter, love and lots and lots of food.

Thoughts of warm summer nights, the aroma of burgers on the grill, the twinkle of fireflies in the yard, she still cherished those memories. They treated her like family, hoping one day she might actually become one. There was a time Artemis believed that could be true, until the Shadows came into her life.

She'd have to be careful, those families had all loved and lost someone special in their lives and breaking their hearts again was not on the agenda.

Finding Wally's home would be a little more difficult. By accident or on purpose he'd covered his tracks well. Her initial cursory searches had come up empty, but finding people is what she did. The real issue was if she should.

Walking up to his front door after all these years and ringing the bell saying I'm back was not an option. It wasn't about a building or structure, it was about principal. His home was where he'd started a new life with a woman he loved; it's where he'd raised his kids. It was his fortress of solitude, his haven from costumes and villains, his place just to be a dad and she had no right trespassing on that space.

When she finally made her move it would have to be out in the open. Not at his home, not at his work, but somewhere he'd have space to breathe and process her return. Where it went from there would be anyone's guess. No matter what she'd need to lead with her head not her heart, and that was a problem.

The realist in her didn't understand why she was going to so much time in effort for what was essentially a high school crush. The rational explanation was she had red in her ledger and it was time to balance it out, that the sole purpose of reconnecting with him was about debt and obligation. She owed him that. He had a life to lead and so did she. It was about closure and nothing more. Unfortunately her heart knew better.

He was first and only person she'd ever been in love with. He was special. They were special together. She just needed to see him one last time, to explain why she did it and to tell him how sorry she was. Even after all these years, after all the things she'd seen and done, in a small hidden place deep inside her, Wally still meant something to her, but sadly after he'd discover the truth, she was sure there was no way he could feel the same.

Whoever said Time heals all wounds was completely full of shit.

xxx

Her alarm went off around eight that evening as she rose from the musty smelling bed. She slammed her hand down on the snooze bar nearly shattering the clock. Artemis walked into the dank bathroom to shower and clear her thoughts in preparation for the mission; it was easier to think of it like that. The shower was nowhere near as luxurious as Roy's but it still did the trick, washing away the cobwebs and easing the stress running through her body. She stepped out, wrapping herself in the towel and going back to the room for her bag. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and stopped, staring quizzically at the image. In the reflection stood a young vibrant teenager with her ridiculously long hair tied in a ponytail, domineering and cocksure wearing a midriff baring emerald
uniform with attitude to match. She was so arrogant back then, and yet so innocent.

As the image faded, all she saw were the scars. She was easily in the best shape of her life, but thinking back to that teenager in the mirror made her old and broken, reminding her once again how unkind the years had been. Superficial things like self-image were unimportant when you never knew if this day would be your last, but still even with her newfound freedom, the torturous memories of all the atrocities that had been forced upon her over the years made her stomach burn. Those scars ran deep and she doubted they would ever completely heal.

She pulled on the form fitting body suit, adjusting it here and there to make sure its material covered her exposed skin thoroughly, confident that its layers of insulation would successfully mask her thermal signature. The sensory technology Wally had designed years ago for his goggles had surely evolved and been incorporated into both his and Bart's uniform by now, it had too much strategic advantage not to, and she didn't need to run the risk of being discovered until the time was right and she was ready to face him.

After much deliberation the archer decided the first phase of her mission should be simple reconnaissance, but dealing with superheroes was rarely simple. She'd not been around meta-humans for years, speedsters' even longer. Artemis would need to know more about her target, and that would take a boots on the ground approach. There were too many variables. Had he gotten faster, did he own any new abilities? Those were details she couldn't get from some news article or blogger post. Information like that, if it even existed, would only be stored in a heavily encrypted Justice League database, something that even on her best day she'd never get access to.

As much as she wanted to see his face again, to talk to him without the masks, the bottom line is she needed to see him in his element, as the Flash. The first step would be determining patrol patterns. Artemis doubted the existence of any type of master schedule. Wally had a job and children, Bart had school, even for the fastest men alive, neither probably had much time to spare. Logically in absence of some earth shattering event, the speedsters would likely patrol alone, knowing that if back up was ever needed, it would arrive in a flash…literally. At their top speeds both sister cities could be entirely canvased in a little over a half hour, easily a job for one speedster. It was time to test theory. The trick would be figuring out which one.

xxx

One of the issues a person gets used to when living in the mid-west is to never, under any circumstances. ever trust the weatherman. This night was a prime example of why. The official forecast for the Central City area was mostly cloudy with a ten percent chance of precipitation, so as Artemis stood atop the Central City Power and Light building, soaked to the bone, lightning striking all around, she decided to take that lesson to heart the next time she tuned into to the Weather Channel.

The power company's headquarters held no intrinsic value as a target for organized crime; however the same could not be said for the building located three blocks over, the Federal Gold Reserve of Missouri. The facility was protected by the latest Wayne Tech state of the art security system, 24 hour armed guard patrols, and high end 1080p cameras on every corner; basically the most secure facility in Missouri or Kansas.

Artemis had no intention of attempting to infiltrate the building despite liking the idea of the challenge, but robbing the gold reserve was not what this night was about, it was getting his attention.

The small vibration generator attached to her arrow landed smoothly on the glass surface of the third story window, a feat even Green Arrow would be impressed by when the fierce storm blowing all
around it was factored in. She let fly two more arrows that landed perfectly on target before packing up her gear and moving behind the large heating and air unit to add additional interference if someone was searching out a thermal footprint. She sat down on the asphalt covered rooftop and closed her eyes, listening to the sounds of the rain hammering against the metal HVAC unit, concentrating on the echoes of thunder that stretched forever in all directions. She was ready. Artemis took out the remote from her bag and flipped the switch; all that was left to do now was sit and wait.

Moments later the facility was a frenzy of motion, external lights kicking on, the wail of internal alarms emanating from all directions, armed guards with trained dogs shining lights up the exterior of the building. The small motors had created just enough vibration to trigger the automated response. The archer took out her field glasses, brushing her long rain-soaked hair away from the lenses and observed the activity.

It's wasn't the first time she'd triggered an alarm just to flush out a target, just the first time for a meta-human. A loud thunderclap briefly stole her attention, and when she turned back towards the Reserve she saw him, and despite her training and preparation, seeing the familiar crimson suit took her breath away.

She struggled to see through the rain streaked lenses as the tempest around her grew stronger, but there was no mistaking the hero. The wail of oncoming police cruisers resonated in the distance as the Flash skidded to a halt in front of the group of guards searching the grounds. They pointed to the building façade close to where the archer's arrows had struck. Moments later the Flash's skin began to glimmer and suddenly he shot up the side of the building like a bolt of lightning, recovering the mechanism and bringing it back down for all to investigate.

Artemis crouched down closer to the unit as the speedster held the arrow up to the flood lights to examine it closely. His head cocked curiously as he inspected it, as if some spark of recognition triggered in his mind. He handed the arrow off to one of the guard and began scanning the cityscape. After a few more seconds of discussion, the guards stepped back a few yards just as the speedster exploded into motion, making tight circles around the complex and adjoining buildings. He got no closer than the street below, but the archer still drew herself into a tighter ball praying she wouldn't be discovered.

Moments later he appeared back in front of the facility just as the police arrived on the scene. The storm began to subside for just the briefest of moments, and through the binoculars the archer finally got her first good look at the hero, it only lasted for a moment, but that was all she needed.

Wally looked so different in the scarlet suit. It had been slightly modified from the one she remembered but still unmistakable. Becoming the Flash was something he'd always dreamed, to take the mantle one day, but only upon Barry's retirement, not his death; he wouldn't have wanted it like this.

In some ways Barry was closer to Wally then his own father. It was nothing against Rudy, he was a wonderful husband and terrific dad, but it was just difficult sometimes for him to understand what it was like to live between the seconds. Barry may have taught Wally what it was like to be a hero, but Rudy was the one who taught him to be man and Wally loved him for that.

Watching his uncle, the hero he'd worshipped his whole life die in front of him most have been agonizing. Losing his wife the same way was beyond words. After a few more minutes of talking with the authorities, the Flash burst into motion, leaving the scene and resuming his patrol. Throughout the next few hours from her vantage point on the rooftop Artemis would see the electric contrails streak by the building; observing, protecting. Around three a.m. after his last sweep around
The muffled sneezes from the kitchen caused Barbara Gordon to stir. She rolled over, checked the display on the clock, and yawned loudly. She hadn't planned on waking up for another two hours, but she also hadn't planned on sleeping alone this night either. He was trying to be quiet she could tell, but his mood and demeanor had been so gloomy lately that Barbara thought she'd better check on him. The last thing she needed was for her fiancé to be bleeding out all over her kitchen while she tried to catch up on the last of her beauty sleep.

She opened the top drawer of her dresser, pulled on the Gotham Knights sweatshirt, and made her way towards the kitchen. Barbara understood the stress he'd been under lately, they both had felt it. Balancing a relationship, a job, and crime fighting was next to impossible on a good day, but hiding a secret engagement from the world's greatest detective was another matter entirely. Ideally both of them would have loved a small service, they'd even considered the idea of running off to Vegas for the weekend, but there was no way the adopted son of one of the world's wealthiest men and the daughter of the Police Commissioner of Gotham City would be permitted to wed like that, just as there was no way they'd be able to keep their relationship private much longer.

They both begrudgingly accepted they'd have to come clean eventually and make their engagement public, and unfortunately for them that day was arriving faster than a southbound train. Neither looked forward to the scrutiny, press, and paparazzi that would result from the discovery, but the longer they waited the harder it would be. Richard Grayson: businessman, playboy, serial dater of models worldwide was officially off the market.

In truth those public couplings were all for show, an image carefully crafted long ago by a hero before him, a blueprint and necessary evil to protect his identity and the ones he loved, but Barbara Gordon and Batgirl didn't need his protection.

The two heroes' had been in love with each other before they even knew what love was. They'd practically grown up together, having spent most of their lives training or fighting side by side. They were partners and friends first, but that attraction could only last so long before something had to give. To each other's quiet displeasure they'd dated others, but no one could ever compare. Friends and teammates could see what they refused to, but sometimes in life you have to find that path on your own, and after years of denying those feelings they bit the bullet and came clean. It was the best mistake they'd ever made.

Dick could spend his days with his arm wrapped around any model or aspiring actress his publicist could set up, but by night he was hers. Grayson knew how lucky was, and was almost relieved for the day he could stop pretending to be someone else. Dual identities where tough enough, but the spoiled billionaire model dating douchebag was one he was more than happy to abandon.

Barbara walked into the kitchen to the image of Nightwing sitting at the nook, head tilting downward, gloved hands cupping his coffee deep in thought. He breathed in the steam, not so much for the aroma, but to open up his clogged nasal passages. He hadn't even bothered to take off the mask, he was that tired. The latest venture between Wayne Industries and Queen Consolidated was his baby, and between the hours he put in at the office by day and his nights on the streets of Gotham, he'd finally hit the wall.

She walked behind him, snaking her arms around him and kissing the back of his neck. He felt hot...
and that was the final straw as far as she was considered.

"You're taking the day off Boy Wonder, period the end. I'm going make you some breakfast, get you in the shower, and you're going to sleep for the next fourteen hours, Wall Street's not going anywhere. I'll call the office before I head into work. So how about you make it easy on both of us ok? Don't make me tie you to the bed, and not in the fun way."

He smiled behind the mask, fully aware that his fiancé was right. Burning the candle at both ends was an understatement, but his current mood had nothing to do with his exhaustion. He hated secrets. He'd been forced to keep them for most of his life. He broke that rule once by sharing his identity with his best friend at the time, and despite the displeasure of the Dark Knight, it ended up being one of the best decisions he'd ever made, but the one he'd been keeping from his fiancé was easily the worst. He'd tried to tell her several times, but was never able to find the words.

Barbara poured herself a cup of coffee and walked down the hall to turn on the shower and steam up the bathroom. She laid out the towel, and brought in the laundry hamper they set aside just for their uniforms, those weren't items exactly designed for a standard washer/dryer.

She heard him say something from down the hall, but the steaming rush of water muffled his statement.

"Babe you got to speak up," she yelled back. Closing the door to the bathroom, she walked back towards the bedroom to pull down the sheets for him.

In the kitchen Dick sighed, gathering the strength to say the words again, dreading the reaction he was surely to receive. He cleared his throat and repeated the statement quietly.

"I said Artemis is alive."

From the next room the response he received was the sound of a porcelain coffee cup shattering on the hardwood floor.

xxx

The archer arrived back at the motel around four a.m. Her mind raced but the rest of her was exhausted. She was used to going on little sleep for days, but being awake for the better part of seventy two hours had finally caught up with her. She couldn't wait to get out of the wet body suit; it was beginning to creep up in all the wrong places. The archer would spoil herself one last time with a hot shower and once her head met the pillow she'd be asleep in minutes.

The parking lot was dark, with only a few flashes streaking across the night sky from the retreating storm. She pulled out her room key and was about to put it into the lock when she glanced up at the small almost invisible piece of clear masking tape she placed on the frame, it had been torn, the door had been opened. There was no housekeeping at this time of night, someone had broken in; someone was following her.

She slipped the dagger out from her boot while pulling the small crossbow from her belt and loading it. Through the curtain covered window she could tell the lights were off inside but that didn't mean anything. Her intruder may be long gone or waiting in wait, either way she wasn't taking any chances. She silently slipped the room key into the lock, but before she could even begin to push the door, it sprang open and powerful hands grabbed her from the darkness, pulling her to the bed. Her bow was knocked from her grip, but she still had the dagger. The intruder had her arms pinned down, his massive weight now resting on top of her. His cologne was a dead giveaway,
"Hey gorgeous, fancy meeting you here."

Artemis let go of the knife, but when his grip eased she pushed him off with all of her strength, throwing the blonde mercenary to the floor.

"God Damnit Zane, are you trying to get yourself killed?"

The hulking man laughed, pulling himself from the floor to the edge of the bed. Artemis reached to the wall and turned on the light, her scowl heavily illuminated by the bedside lamp.

"What are you doing here!" she snarled.

"Calm down gorgeous, I just wanted to make sure you hadn't gone all soft on me."

"Answer the question."

"Relax babe, and don't get all shitty with me. You're the one that stood me up in Spain. I had to walk away from a good paying gig. Del Toro was not happy, it's not exactly the way I wanted to start out my new reputation with this man. I'm just making sure you're ok. If we get a move on maybe that old geezer hasn't found a substitute team yet."

Artemis saw right through him. "Why are you really here Zane?"

The mercenary stared into her cold grey eyes dropping his shoulders a bit. He'd never had a problem with the violence, but lying was a different story, especially to someone he cared about.

"Jade sent me," he replied honestly.

"Of course she did," the archer grumbled, shaking her head and walking away.

"Look babe, she just wanted me to check on you and make sure you didn't do something stupid. She's worried about you."

"I'm fine; I just have...something I need to take care of here."

"Personal or professional?" he asked.

Artemis glared back at him coldly, never giving a response.

"Ok fine," he shrugged, knowing there was no point in prying. "Look I just drove eighteen hours to get to this shithole of a city. Let me help. The sooner we get whatever this is done the sooner we can go find some work that actually comes with a paycheck, one with a lot of zeros behind it."

Artemis walked out of the bathroom, towel wrapped around her head, wearing the only dry long sleeve t-shirt she owned, looking more aggravated than before.

"There is no we Zane, there is no us. That's how it works," she scolded.

"That's not what I meant and you know it. I'm just here to help. Don't get all "Artemis" on me."

"What the hell does that mean?" she asked angrily.

"It means starting some bullshit argument so you don't have to talk about what's really bothering you. I've known you too long gorgeous; this little game doesn't work on me. I'll ask again: personal or professional?"
"Personal," she answered softly, ratcheting down from anger to mild irritation.

"See was that so hard?" he grinned playfully, "So who do we have to kill?"

"Jesus Zane, it's not like that," she said in revulsion.

"Then what is it?" he questioned.

"I just….I just have something I need to make right."

"Then let me help," he asked.

"I don't know if you can."

He stood and walked over to her, wrapping his arms around her. Artemis stood stiffly, but didn't push away.

"At least let me try," he replied kindly, leaning in and kissing her. She returned the kiss in kind, unsure if it was out of comfort or habit. Things were complicated enough as it was. She knew he was being genuine, he was a good man who'd done bad things, just like her, and in all honesty she could use the help if for nothing more than logistical purposes, but trying to reach out to Wally with Zane being around made her uncomfortable and she didn't know why. Theirs' was a business relationship only, with some _benefits_ thrown in from time to time, but when she finally faced the speedster, she needed to be alone and not forced explain anyone else's presence but hers.

"Ok, but we do it my way."

"Whatever you say gorgeous, then when we're done it's off to Barcelona, two empty chairs on a beach and enough grilled shrimp and rum to make us puke."

"You're a real a wordsmith Zane," she smiled.

"It's part of my charm. You still have that green bikini I like so much?"

She laughed and hit him on the arm. "You never quit do you?"

"It's the only way to stay alive."

xxx

As dawn broke Artemis lay on the bed wide awake, Zane's body draped over hers. After three attempts at foreplay, he'd given up and fallen soundly to sleep leaving Artemis staring at the ceiling and irritable. She didn't blame him for coming; he was just trying to watch out for her. Sure some of his motives were purely selfish, but she was used to that by now and honestly who's weren't?

It was Jade who she was truly angry with. All Artemis had wanted was some privacy. After being basically connected at the hip for the last years; a little space wasn't too much to ask. Cheshire hadn't advertised to the world she was reconnecting with an old lover, she did it privately. Why couldn't she give her sister that same respect? Jade was so sure she would screw it up, lead with her heart and not her head, but even after all their time together sometimes she really didn't understand the archer at all.

Artemis wasn't trying to kick start a relationship long dead, all she wanted was an opportunity to make peace with a man she'd once loved, shake hands, hug, or whatever ex-lovers do and wish each other well, and then it would be time to move on.

_Right_ she convinced herself, ignoring the fact that the thought sounded more like a question.
In typical Midwestern fashion, the forecast for Friday had called for rain, but as Wally West sat on the secluded park bench outside of the Peck Hall courtyard, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. His midterm exam grades were due Monday, and in classic West fashion he'd waited till the last minute to get started. So instead of doing the smart thing and staying home and catching up on work, somehow he'd been coerced into joining friends for dinner and drinks. Wally didn't get out much anymore, an overloaded schedule and raising two kids can do that, but over the years he'd developed several close friendships with fellow professors and staff, and after many failed attempts and false starts, they'd finally convinced him to join them, and besides if he had to listen to one more lecture from his family that he needed to get out more often he was going to go postal.

His kids spent almost as much time and Grandma and Grandpa West's house as they did their own, with the difference being at Grandma's there were always delicious snacks and cakes, plus they got to stay up late as well, so Iris and Jay spending the night was a win/win for everyone. Wally knew how fortunate he was to have his parents; he'd never have survived Linda's death without them. Raising two incredibly active children would be challenging enough for any couple, but for a single working dad it was nearly impossible. Linda's family helped when they could, but South Korea was a long way from Keystone and aside from Skyping once a month, there was little else they could do from such a distance. Fortunately for Wally his parents were more than up to the task, and the keeping up with two young kids was still much easier than a certain redheaded speedster ever was.

All he had left today was a brief appearance in the Physics Lab to introduce his new teaching assistant for the next semester, then a short Science Department faculty meeting, after that the day was his. Wally decided to enjoy as much of the weather as he could until then, opening his lunch, putting on his headphones, stretching out and letting his mind drift. He ignored the mild jolt from the man sitting on the opposite side of the two sided bench, worried he'd get caught in some conversation that would eat up his afternoon, settling instead into classic REM and closing his eyes.

From the shaded hilltop overlooking the courtyard, Artemis held the binoculars tight, her long blonde hair neatly tucked into her ball cap. As astonished as she'd been when she first saw him in costume that first night in Central, this moment did literally take her breath away.

Artemis thought Dick had changed a lot over the years, but nothing had quite prepared her for this. Wally was several inches taller, that she had expected. She could still make out the runner's build he carried, but much more solid now, more muscular. His unkempt spiky red hair was now cut short, he wore glasses, and the freckles she'd spent lazy weekend afternoons counting had all but faded away. The teenager she'd locked away in her memory was gone, in his place now stood a man. He looked bigger in person than he did in costume, she was unsure if it had to do with her vantage point, the clear weather, or the fact that he was finally still for a few minutes, either way she was impressed, perhaps a little too impressed based on her body language that evidently someone had been reading for a while.

"You're drooling,"

Artemis ignored the comment, no longer shocked or impressed by she sister's sudden appearances from out of nowhere. She directed the field glasses off of Wally for a moment, focusing on the man on the other side of the bench playing with his cell phone.

"Go away Jade."

"Not happening," the brunette replied.

Artemis blew out her breath, glowering at her sister. "I'm so pissed off at you right now. Why in the
hell did you send him?" she snapped pointing to the man on the bench opposite the speedster.

"Because I care," Jade replied. "I just don't want to see you get hurt, and that is exactly what's going to happen. How can you not see that?"

"I don't get hurt," Artemis retorted sharply, adjusting the lenses and bringing the red head back into focus.

"Fine. Then maybe I don't want you to hurt him?" Cheshire countered

The archer put down the binoculars and laughed bitterly. "Are you seriously saying that to me? Don't give me that shit. You never liked him."

"I liked him fine Artemis."

"You fucking tried to drown him."

Jade rolled her eyes and groaned. "Are we really going to do this again? With that whole Dr. What's-her-face and that damn high school pool?"

"It's was Roquette," the blonde corrected, "and you almost killed him." Jade deadpanned. "If I'd wanted to kill him he'd been dead long ago dear sister and you know it. Plus if memory serves you didn't exactly care for him all that much back then either. He just needed to be taught a lesson in humility and manners. Believe it or not I was always quite fond of the ginger."

"Yeah right," the archer dismissed, putting down the glasses and frowning. "Name one thing you liked about him" she asked, assured that would shut her sister up for a while.

"I liked how he loved you. I like how he loved mom. I liked how he wasn't Cameron. I liked how he protected you. I liked the fact he was willing to get his ass kicked if it mean saving his friends. I liked that he was smart. I liked that he wanted to leave the game and go to college. And I like that he was going to take you with him. Satisfied?"

Artemis remained silent, looking away. She hated it when Jade outmaneuvered her, but she knew she wasn't lying, which made things even more complicated.

"I liked Wally and I liked the two of you together, but Artemis that ship has sailed. Roy asked me, hell he begged me to talk you out of doing this, and you and I both know Red doesn't beg. I know you think you need to do this, but it's a terrible idea."

Artemis started off into the distance, contemplating her sister's final words before she came up with the appropriate response.

"You done?"

"Yeah I'm done," Jade sighed, realizing there was no point in discussing it anymore, her sister's mind was made up.

"Good. You can stay or go, it's your choice. I'll contact you when I'm done and we can meet up later to discuss work if you want," the archer spoke matter of fact.

"I'll stay. Someone has to keep you two out of trouble."

"Fine,' Artemis agreed, 'but we do things my way? Understand?"
"Whatever you say dear sister," Jade replied amusingly, using a tone that basically translated into a ‘you’re going to regret this’ with a side order of ‘I told you so’ thrown in for good measure.

Moments later Zane lumbered up the hillside, ignoring the bickering sisters and handing off the black hat tracker phone to the archer. Artemis took it and checked the settings; assured the cloning process was complete. She now had full access to Wally's iPhone; his emails, pictures, contacts, texts – his life. If she'd been wondering where the line was not to cross, it was now three feet behind her.
Chapter 8

Conner Kent took in a long satisfying breath, looking proudly out at the north forty he'd just finished plowing. It would have been much easier and faster to just drag the plow himself by hand, but using the tractor was Jonathon Kent's way, it was the right way. He always thought back to his late adoptive father during planting season; he hoped he was proud of him.

"Once a year Mother Nature give's everyone a fresh start, you have to make the most of it" Pa Kent would always say.

The symbolism of those words were never lost on Superboy. Clark would be disappointed that the plowing would be finished by the time he arrived next week, but there was always plenty of work to do on the Kent farm, How Jonathon had accomplished so much by himself all these years when two Krypotonians struggled to stay on top of it always amazed Conner. Seems there'd been a Superman in the family way before Kal-El's rocket had ever made it to earth.

Conner drove the tractor back to the barn and called it a night. Martha Kent would not be home for a few hours; it was a bingo night at the church and she never left until the last ball dropped and the chairs put up. There were leftovers in the fridge, and some of Ma's lasagna would really hit the spot. Tonight was the double header between the Cardinals and Royals on ESPN, a real Midwestern grudge match that took place once a year both home and away. The visiting team from Missouri always reminded him of an old friend. It had been a while since he'd reached out to Wally West. Of all his former teammates, he was the only one who lived only a few hours away.

Conner hadn't seen Iris and Jay since they were…three or four? he considered.

Much too long he thought. "If it's important, you find the time" Pa would always say.

He decided after Clark's visit he'd give Wally a call, maybe look on the minor league schedule and see when Smallville played Keystone next. It might only be single A ball, but there was still bragging rights to be had. He walked in to put a note on the fridge to remind him to call when he smelled the familiar aroma. He walked to the porch swing and saw the warm apple pie once again resting on it. Twice a month like clockwork someone would drop of a delicious desert of some kind. Conner initially thought Martha was teasing him when she said it wasn't her, and then the same when he confronted Mrs. Hayworth across the street to thank her, but both women honestly had no idea and nothing to do with it and before long Conner decided to not over think it and enjoy the gift. Not every puzzle needed to be solved.

xxx

Wally washed up the plates, handing them off to his mother to dry while in the next room his children sat locked in front of the television watching whatever mindless program was currently showing on Cartoon Network. Rudy slept peacefully in his recliner, the noise and commotion of the TV not fazing him a bit.

"You sure I can't fix you something dear?"

"No I'm good mom, thanks."

Mary smiled, "I never thought I'd see the day when Wally West turned down a meal."

"Wonders never cease," he grinned in kind.
"So where are you all going?" she asked.

"That new Japanese place over in midtown. I've never been there but it's supposed have great sushi."

"You go out and have a good time. Your father's just getting his second wind. We're going to take the kids out for ice cream later."

"They'll love that. That's really nice of you guys. Thanks again for letting them stay over."

"It's our pleasure, but your father and I just wish we'd see a little more of you too."

"I know mom. I'm really gonna try to take the summer semester off, I promise this time. Then I can help dad with some of the projects around the house, maybe we could even plan a trip or something."

"That sounds wonderful dear," she kindly smiled before looking at her watch, "but shouldn't you be getting ready?"

"I actually brought my stuff with me. I thought I'd go for a quick run, shower and then leave from here, it would save me some time."

Mary's demeanor and smile faded away as she looked over at her son nervously. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"No worries mom, just a slow jog up to the high school and back. No big."

Wally finished washing the last plate and handed it off to her, kissing Mary's cheek and heading out the door, leaving a worried mother behind.

Wally stepped out onto the back porch and took a deep breath of the spring air. He closed his eyes feeling the wind drape across his face, inhaling the fragrant aroma of the Wisteria coming into bloom. He'd traveled the world in his day, but no matter how exotic or beautiful those locales might have been, nothing could ever beat springtime in Missouri.

Wally bent down and retied the laces of his running shows and took off towards Keystone High. It was a measured pace, the sound of the souls of his shoes hitting the payment almost hypnotically. Up ahead he could make out the glow of floodlights shining across the football field. He'd spent many a day doing laps around that track, staring enviously at the football players and their cheerleader girlfriends, hoping that one day he'd be part of that in-crowd but knowing deep down that Science and Math clubs were his true domain. He looked all around him, seeing nothing but empty streets and decided to pick up the pace a bit.

He changed gears and his low jog shifted into something a tad faster. It felt good this time, his lungs didn't burn, his legs didn't ache. As he reached the school grounds he pushed just a little too far and suddenly bright flashes filled his vision, excruciating pain dug into his chest. Wally doubled over and hit the ground hard. He rolled into a ball and held his breath fighting through the pain as it slowly subsided.

After a few moments he pulled himself into a sitting position, knees to his chest trying to catch his breath. Finally his vision cleared and he stood unsteadily. The red head began the walk towards home, cursing himself and wishing he'd listened to his mother's warning.

xxx

Later that night Wally pulled into the Riverfront Park parking lot only fifteen minutes late which was
surprisingly early for him. He checked his watch and glanced around the lot, not finding any UMCC college parking passes or familiar vehicles belonging to his coworkers. The speedster had a sinking suspicion that his friends had intentionally given him the wrong meeting time; a built in a thirty minute time cushion for the notoriously tardy professor. He didn't blame him, Linda used to do the same thing.

He sat back in his jeep and pressed his fingers deep into his temples. His head still ached from the incident at the high school. Other than Bart and his parents, no one else knew of these episodes. Eventually he'd have to talk to someone; perhaps Tina McGee over at Mercury Labs, someone who could respect his privacy and keep it just between them. The last thing he wanted was the almighty Justice League getting involved. This was a private matter and he intended for it to stay that way.

Wally stepped out of his old Wrangler and walked through the courtyard towards the observation deck that overlooked the waterway. Across the Mississippi River the city scape of Central City stood bright against the night sky. He'd been to the Central City River Park directly on the otherwise of the river several times, but the view from there to its sister city was not nearly as impressive, but still he liked his small town much better; slower pace, less congestion, less crime, but most of all he like Keystone City because it was home.

Before he had kids, he and Linda spent a great deal of time at this park; relaxing in the sun, dreaming and planning a future, or even just watching the fireworks of Central dancing across the river in the 4th of July. This place reminded him of her, along with a thousand other things he would see from day to day. His life was so different now, just not exactly how he'd planned. At twenty-seven he was supposed to be finishing up his doctorate, working at Star or Mercury Labs, possibly even some scientific think tank, not teaching physics and advance sciences at the University of Missouri. It's not that he didn't love his job, it's just that deep down he'd expected more; Barry had expected more, but now he was a widowed father of two, and just like the Stones song says; you can't always get what you want.

He was lost in his thoughts when he heard the scream. The red head spun around in the direction of the noise when he saw a figure in black grabbing and pounding on a vehicle across the parking lot, forcing the door open while the young girl inside screamed while trying to keep it closed.

"Get the fuck out of the car bitch!" the man screamed, pulling a gun from his belt and tapping it on the window. Tears rolled down the terrified girl's face as she nodded and opened the door. The carjacker grabbed her by hair and drug her to the ground, waving the pistol in her face demanding silence.

Off on the distance three figures stood in the shadows observing the event.

"Fuck," Artemis muttered, this was not part of the plan. Wally was finally in position; in an open and relatively empty public setting. This was the moment she was going to make her appearance, let him see her from across the park, he would slowly approach while she tried try her best to keep him calm. That's when she would explain everything. That's when could finally bare her soul. It had all sappiness of the harlequin novels she read secretly as a teen, but it had a simplicity to it that she thought might work, that was until some asshole decided to screw it up and try and carjack some Taylor Swift lookalike.

"Do you want me to..." Zane asked

"No," she cut him off, finding the approaching speedster through her binoculars. A small part of her actually felt sorry for the moronic robber who was about to learn the hard way that you don't pull shit like this in the home of the Flash.
She was mildly surprised Wally had not shifted into costume yet, and even more so that he didn't move with a sense of urgency. It was a relatively short distance she assumed, there was no real reason to put on the scarlet when he was essentially already there.

The carjacker was reaching for the frantic girls' purse when the hand he was holding the gun with was violently wrenched back behind him, his shoulder dislocating almost immediately. Wally then sent him flying head first into an adjacent car's door.

Artemis smiled in pride when she recognized the moves she taught him so long ago, drilling them into him time and time again until the clumsy speedster finally got them right. The robber struggled to his feet and took a wild swing which Wally easily avoided. The red head gave one final blow to the gut and a leg sweep that brought the man hard to the pavement, his skull bouncing off the pavement into unconsciousness.

Wally bent forward, placing his hands on his knees, slightly out of breath. It had been a while since he'd had any use for his old martial arts training; it was nice to know they still worked. The red head bent down extending his hand to the scared teen.

"You ok?" he asked kindly

"I…I think so," she said in between sobbing breaths trying to calm herself

"It's going to be ok," he smiled reaching into his back pocket to retrieve his phone and call 911. He had only pushed the first numeral before the young girl shrieked and a blinding pain dropped him to his knees. Wally writhed on the ground, sensing dampness on the back of his collar most likely coming from a gash in his skull. He'd gotten sloppy and had he'd never seen it coming.

A partner Wally cursed.

The second robber, if you could even call him that, was just supposed to stay in the shadows, wait for the all clear and join his partner in the car down the block to quickly go through the purse and take out all the credit and debit card to use quickly before they'd be cancelled. No one was supposed to get hurt, but as the slender man nervously waved the pistol at the sobbing girl and her fallen hero, he realized that might no longer be possible. It was supposed to be a simple smash and grab until the damn red head got in the way.

Across the courtyard, Artemis dropped the glasses in shock.

"Something's wrong" she said urgently, turning to Jade to have her watch her back only to find the raven haired assassin already gone.

Wally attempted to get to his knees, but the searing pain in his skull and the dizziness from the blow overwhelmed him, sending him sliding back to the pavement.

"I'm sorry mister, I swear to god I am, but I can't back to Iron Heights. I got a kid on the way, and this wasn't supposed to go down like this. Billy promised!" he cried as his trembling hand pulled back the hammer of the gun. Wally had only one move left and it was a gamble if it was even going to work at all this time, but he had nothing left to lose. He held his breath and began searching for the lightning when suddenly the teen next to him screamed, joined next by her perpetrator.

Wally looked up to the Sai sticking directly through the gunman's hand, sending the weapon flying from his grip into the courtyard just as a vicious high kick jerked his neck violently and the second carjacker crumbled to the ground next to his fallen partner

"Oh no," Wally whispered, instantly recognizing the weapon of choice. He looked up and from the
darkness appeared the grinning Cheshire mask stepping into the moonlight.

She'd found him, after all these years she'd finally found him.

"Well hello Mr. West. It's been a while. Let's talk," she purred.

Wally had searched for her before and after the funeral. The two Crock siblings had always had an extremely tempestuous relationship, but no matter how many times they'd battle, how many times they'd end up on the opposite sides of a conflict, Wally knew Artemis loved her sister and that more than likely Jade felt the same. However the relationship between the assassin and the speedster had always been very clear. They were enemies when Artemis was still alive, and her death wasn't going to change that.

The teen shrieked in terror as Cheshire knelt down beside her, taking off the mask and placing her hand of the young girl's mouth.

"Shut the hell up and get out of here… right …now, while I'm still in a good mood."

The young woman nodded urgently, rose to her feet, and took off like a bat out of hell, never making a sound. Jade calculated she'd only have about fifteen minutes before the girl would find a cop and send them this way, so she had to get to work. She turned back to the red head, but all she saw was a pool of blood where his head had rested on the concrete. She turned the opposite way to see him sprinting away about thirty yards ahead.

Wally always knew that Jade wouldn't care that he'd tried to save her sister, she wouldn't care if he was sorry, or that sometimes he still wished he'd died with her, all she'd care about was Artemis was dead and she'd still be alive if she'd never joined his stupid Team, she'd still be alive if she'd never met him.

Wally turned back to see the assassin, slowly picking up the Sai, tucking it into her belt and showing no signs or interest in pursuit. Seconds later Wally realized why. When he turned back ahead he slammed directly into a wall, a six foot four blonde haired chiseled wall.

The ginger bounced of the mercenary, hitting the ground with a bone jarring thud, while Zane barely reacted to the impact. Lying prone on the ground Wally looked up at the man towering above him. His immediately thought it to be Lawrence Crock he'd slammed into, but at second glance realized the man before him wasn't Sportsmaster or anyone he even recognized, but everyone looked different outside of the masks, and the speedster had an extremely long list of enemies. Determining which one the man was - was not important now, making it out alive was.

"I believe the lady said she'd like a word with you, and trust me she's not the type to ask twice."

Zane explained.

Images of his children flashed through his mind. They'd barely survived the death of their mother, and there was no way in hell he was going to let them become orphans. In the corner of his eye Wally saw the steel glimmer catching the light from the park lampposts. It was his only play.

Wally carefully rose to his feet, raising his hands up in surrender. The mercenary definitely didn't consider the red head a threat and turned towards Cheshire for just a moment when Wally sprung. The speedster brought his knee up with all his strength, catching Zane directly in the groin. As the mercenary doubled over, Wally grabbed his ears pulling his head down violently just as his knee came up again with crashing force, landing directly on the bridge of the giant's nose, dropping him momentarily to the ground.
Wally made it a few yards away before the two assassins could react, but that's all he needed. The red head grabbed the discarded pistol gripping it firmly. Weapons had never been his thing, and he could count the times he's ever held a gun before on one hand, but that didn't matter anymore. The pistol was loaded and ready and he wasn't afraid to use it.

Jade continued walking slowly towards him from across the park, making no attempt to disappear into the shadows. There were no words left at this point, he doubted any plea or command would have made any difference anyway. She wasn't there to talk, she was there for revenge.

His hands shook as he trained the pistol on Cheshire, the wide grin of her mask taunting him. Behind him he heard the groans of the mercenary struggling to his feet. Now there was no choice. Wally swallowed hard and pulled back the hammer and prepared to fire.

"Wally!" a voice screamed through darkness sending a cold shiver up his spine. His senses shot into overdrive. He knew that voice, but it was... impossible.

Artemis Crock stepped out of the Shadows and stood in-between the speedster and her sister. Wally's arms dropped to his side, but still firmly holding the weapon. His eyes grew wide in utter disbelief; it was all happening too fast. His skull ached, his mind ablaze. This had to be more of Cheshire's sick games, or some kind of concussion induced hallucination.

"Wally it's me. Please put down the gun, No one's going to hurt you. I just need you to listen......"

Her words seemed to deflect off of him as his arm slowly raised again, the pistol nervously pointing directly in his dead girlfriend's direction.

Before Artemis could plead with him, a small zipping sound flew through the air, the tranq dart landing inches below his carotid, sending Wally to the ground one final time.

"Motherfucker!" Zane spit as he stumbled forward wiping his bloody nose on his sleeves with one hand, while the other reached under his belt, checking his *equipment.* He walked towards the prone speedster, preparing to repay the man in kind when Jade put out her arm silently blocking his approach.

Ahead Artemis knelt over her fallen ex, resting his head gently on her knee

"Damnit Wally," she whispered in defeat, brushing the wet grass clippings from his face, "this wasn't how it was suspend to happen."

Zane pushed Cheshire's arm away but remained in place, still furious at the sucker punch, but even angrier with himself for not seeing it coming. He turned towards the assassin as she pulled off the her mask

"Is this what you were so worried about? You needed three of us for one god damn guy? Are you kidding me? What in the hell were you expecting?"

"Someone...faster," Jade replied curiously.

xxx

*The wind rushed across the speedster's face as he lost himself in the serenity of the desert sunrise. The mountain ranges to the east speed by in a blur, while the sun ahead remained transfixed on the horizon, a brilliant orange beacon to tomorrow. The road called to him in a way it hadn't in years and for the first time in as long as he could remember he felt at peace.*
Wally jerked up from the bed with his head screaming in agony. He was disoriented, dizzy, panicked. He stumbled to his feet slamming against the dresser and desk, screaming for his children when gentle but firm hands led him back on the end of his bed. He was sweating and pale, but he wasn't scared until his emerald green eyes locked onto steel grey.

"Who in the hell are you?" he demanded shivering; only now realizing he'd been stripped all the way down to his boxers.

"Wally, I need you to take a breath," Artemis pleaded, placing her hand gently on his shoulder. His skin was cold and he jerked away from her touch like it was acid.

"Don't...touch...me!" he snarled. "Who the fuck are you? Where are my kids!"

"Wally your kids are fine," the archer said patiently, "they're at you parents, and you know exactly who I am. So please try to calm down; I know you're freaked and I understand, but we need to talk, there's a lot I need to tell you…"

He palmed his eyes, rubbing them frantically, trying to make this illusion disappear and his head to stop throbbing.

"This isn't happening," he muttered repeatedly while Artemis sat at the other end of the bed. Finally she stood, taking the comforter and wrapping it around his trembling form. She knelt in front of him and gently took his hand.

"Wally this is real, I'm real ok? It's a really long story that doesn't have much of a happy ending. It isn't going to make a lot of sense, and I know there's nothing I can say that will even begin to make this right, but I am so sorry."

Wally just stared blankly at her, gently rubbing his temples, trying to massage the blinding pain behind his eyes away. His eyes shifted between confusion and mistrust, before finally settling on incensed.

"How?" he growled.

"The blast radius was directed outward and I used the tunnels under the complex for an escape route," she shook her head sadly "I faked it Wally, I faked all of it, and I am so damn sorry. It was the only way I…"

Suddenly he bolted from the bed. Artemis rose and chased after him, fearful for what would happen when Wally burst into his den to find two assassins sitting on his couch, but instead of running out the bedroom he jerked hard to the right and fell to his knees in front of the toilet, throwing his guts up.

Perspiration dripped off his forehead while his cheek rested on the cold porcelain, the only source of comfort he'd found since opening his eyes.

Artemis knelt down next to him, once again covering his body with a blanket, handing him a Sprite to try and settle his stomach. This time Wally accepted her gesture, rubbing the cold can across his cheeks before taking small sip, throwing them up immediately after.

"What…" he rasped out of breath. "What in the hell did you do to me?"

"It's a jellyfish toxin-xylazine tranquilizer. Jade was afraid….you were going to kill me."

He nodded weakly in understanding, his head never leaving the toilet seat he held on to for dear life.
He tried several times to speak, starting and stopping words in mid-sentence, trying to fight through the nausea and dry heaves for some coherent thought that would translate into what he was trying to say. Finally one word escaped his lips.

"Why?"

"There's no easy way to answer that."

Wally pushed himself off the toilet and rolled into a sitting position next to the tub, he looked paler than before, and his ashen complexion made the fire in his eyes stand out even more.

"Try," he said coldly demanding.

She began her tale with stories of abuse and manipulation, things her father had done to both she and her sister, things she'd never shared before with him or anyone. Then the death of her mother, the plan to murder her father, the steps she went through to fake her death and allow her to confront him without her friends' interference. Finally his death, the capture by the Shadows, the offer, the jobs, her freedom, and now she was here, trying to right and unrightable wrong.

Wally sat emotionless through the story, sipping the liquid that he'd finally been able to keep down, showing no signs of affirmation or denial. When the archer concluded her account she took a deep breath, waiting for some kind of reaction. She didn't wait long.

"You need to get out of my house right now," he spoke in an emotionless tone that sent chills through her, struggling to his feet and exiting the bathroom.

"Wally wait....."

"You are so fucking unbelievable; all those things that you did, all the people you hurt, and it was all about fucking revenge? Are you kidding me? After all the years you spent being a hero, did any of it mean anything to you? Did I? You were supposed to be better than him, you joined us to be better, and you pissed every bit of it away, all the good you did. Now you're no better than him...You are him."

"Wally it's not that simple," she growled through gritted teeth. "He didn't play by our rules; he wouldn't have stooped until one of us was dead."

"We could have stopped him," he disagreed.

"No Wally you couldn't, none of you could, because the only way to do it was the one way none of you would."

The speedster made his way to the dresser, losing his balance, but catching himself before falling. In the mirror, he noticed the dried crusted blood on his shoulder. Immediately he reached back to his head and winced, gently rubbing the still raw wound on skull. She stood next to him in the reflection, unsure what to do or say. Artemis had been worried since she'd arrived in Central what his response might be, but now she was more worried about what she'd witnessed tonight. This was not the time to interrogate him, but something of this magnitude could not go unaddressed.

"What happened to you tonight?"

"You did!" he snapped angrily, disregarding the question and searching his dresser for clothes. He stormed out of the bedroom only to come face to face with his remaining assailant's from earlier sitting in his kitchen. Jade was the first to notice, sitting at his kitchen table drinking his coffee, which she raised to him in recognition, throwing a taunting smile in his direction.
"Unfucking believable, you've brought goddamn assassins into my house, where my kids live. They could be here any minute!"

"They're fine Wally. Your mom is keeping them until this evening." Artemis replied

"She's doing what? How would she….."

"Uh because she texted her from your phone dumbass," Zane replied with a mouth fill of leftovers pulled from the fridge.

"You texted my mom?! My God what is wrong with you? And who in the hell is this?"

Zane rose from the recliner, intentionally wiping his grease covered hands on the fabric and walked up to the red head, towering above him. Wally tried his best not to act intimidated, but his body language gave him away as he stepped back a few feet.

"I'm the guy you nut-shotted last night. Pussy move by the way." he growled, staring directly into the red head's eyes causing Wally to swallow hard. The speedster had tangled with bigger guys before, but that was a long time ago and his circumstances were much different now.

Artemis followed quickly behind, carefully grasping the speedster's arm. "Wally don't walk away from me, answer the question."

He spun around, shaking his arm from her grasp, his mouth agape. "Did you really just say don't walk away from me? Do you even hear yourself? Is that supposed to be some kind joke?"

"You almost got yourself killed last night. I want to know why?" the archer demanded.

Jade rolled her eyes, finishing the last sip of the bland American blend she'd found in his cupboards before checking the angles and tossing the cup across the room at the speedster, barely missing his head as it shattered across the floor. "I know why," she answered smoothly.

"You've lost your speed." Artemis whispered in shock.

Wally glared at the sisters, but didn't deny it. He bent down to the floor picking up the shattered fragments.

"But the Flash, Kid Flash, they've both been all over the news..."

Jade sighed, no longer bored but now irritated with her sister's naiveté. "Good god Artemis, are you that blind? It's the cousin. He's both of them."

"Wally?" Artemis questioned, eyes wide in disbelief.

He turned and walked away, opening the pantry and throwing away the broken cup. When he turned back the archer was right in his face, unmoving until he answered.

"I guess I'm not as good a scientist as everyone thought," he answered bitterly. "So there's your answer. Satisfied? Now this is the last time I'm going to tell you, leave before I call the cops. If you need some kind of forgiveness to clear your soul, you got it. Now get the fuck out!"

From the other side of the room Zane laughed, "Real big man aren't ya."
"Zane!" Artemis snapped, realizing he and Jade's company and interference weren't helping matters. "Go wait outside please!" she groaned exasperatedly.

"Sure thing gorgeous," Zane smiled, grabbing the archer and planting a kiss on her lips before she could react, marking his property as it were.

She pushed him off cursing as he smiled back at the speedster, "Nice meeting you kid. Remember paybacks are hell," he spouted tauntingly.

Jade followed him out, pausing briefly in front of the speedster and simply acknowledging the goodbye. "West." she nodded before exiting the house just as Zane slammed the door hard enough that a few pictures fell from the wall.

Artemis rubbed her eyes in anger; things couldn't have gone worse if she'd tried. The situations was progressively turning worse by the second, just as Jade had predicted.

Wally followed behind, picking up the shattered picture of his wife and kids, placing them on the bookshelf, and flopping into the recliner in exasperation.

She walked over, sitting across from him on the lime green couch. "Wally I'm so sorry. It wasn't supposed to go down like this. I….I don't know what to say. Your speed, Barry, Linda….."

"Don't!" he screamed, "Don't say her name. Don't act like you know one thing about her... or care.

"of course I care damnit. Do you think any of this has been easy for me?"

"There you go," Wally laughed bitterly

"What the hell does that mean?" she roared back

"I was waiting to see how long it would take for you to play the victim card," he spit

"The victim card?" she yelled back. The victim card!" she repeated louder. "Do you have any goddamn idea what my life's been like? No you fucking don't! The shadows made me do things that make my skin crawl, things that are burned into my goddamn mind forever. Do you think I wanted any of this? Do you?! I loved being a hero; I loved having friends in my life that were closer to me than family. Do you think I wanted my mom to be murdered, is that it? So I could finally have an excuse to off my dad? God what the hell was I thinking trying to find you?"

"No one asked you to! And just out of curiosity did you even think about anyone else before you did it? Do you have any goddamn idea what you did to me? I would have died to get you out of that corridor, I almost did, and for what? A lie. Everything you've ever told me, everything we've ever had was a lie!"

"Don't say that."

"Artemis you've been lying for so long, you're actually starting to believe them. From the day you walked into that cave you had secrets on top of secrets, even when we were dating I could feel it, but I didn't want to push you away, I cared too fucking much and I hoped one day you'd trust me enough to share them. I ignored it because I wanted you to love me."

"I did love you - you asshole," she screamed, "I didn't want any of you knowing cause I was afraid you'd stop me, or even worse…. join me. I couldn't do that to you, I couldn't give you that choice."

"Nice try," he laughed mockingly at her pain. "You had nothing to worry about there. You were the
fucking assassin, not us. You know when we said 'You're not your family,' we were dead wrong. You're exactly who we thought you were Artemis. Just go home ok? You're broken; and I stopped trying to fix you a long time ago."

The speedster could have said a thousand other things; cruel, cold-blooded, vicious things, but two words reached inside and crushed her heart. Two words shattered all the memories of cold lonely nights with death breathing down her neck when all she longed for was his gentle touch, one last kiss.

Two words…You're broken.

"Fuck you Wally!" she hissed, refusing to cry, grabbing her gear and storming out the door. "You're not the only person who lost something."

The archer left the house slamming the door even harder than Zane before her. Off to the side Jade stood silently. She'd warned the archer several times, and now that warning had come to fruition

"I told you this was a mistake."

Artemis slammed her sister into the tree she leaned against, sticking a finger an inch from her face.

"Don't!" the archer growled.

She walked to the curb throwing her gear into the shitty rent a car and speeding off, rubber screaming against the pavement, leaving the two behind to fend for themselves. She doubted Zane or Jade would go back and confront the ex-speedster, but she honestly didn't care anymore.
Dick Grayson stood in the private bathroom of his office holding the ice pack to his swollen eye. It's not like this was the first time he'd come into work a little bruised. Clayface or the Joker didn't seem to care much about his 9 to 5 alter ego, and as a billionaire playboy and extreme sports enthusiast he had plenty of built in excuses to use when he'd show up ragged, the difference was this was not some supervillan who'd pummeled him this day, it was much much worse.

"She got you pretty good didn't she?" the deep timber of Bruce Wayne reverberated from behind his former partner.

Dick frowned, pulling the pack from his eye and readjusted it. "I had it coming."

"You did what you thought was right." Wayne added.

"Bruce, no offense, but you don't exactly have a track record with women I'd like pattern myself after. She's my fiancée; she's going to be my wife….hopefully. You can't expect to have a healthy relationship with someone you love and keep secrets like this. Barbara's is one of us, I should have told her."

"Would that have made things any better?" Bruce asked looking mildly impressed at the damage.

"Probably not, but that's not the point." Dick argued.

"Barbara would have wanted all of you to go after Artemis and then the Shadows would have killed her."

"It's not that simple Bruce."

"Yes it is. You just don't like the math. I think the bigger issue is what do you do now that she's back? Artemis came back for something, and I think you and I both now what it is."

"Yeah," Dick sighed.

"She could have faded away into the sunset. Taken up a new identity and started a new life, but she didn't did she? She came here; she came home. This isn't about retribution, it's about redemption. We give second chances to even our worst enemies on occasion, but sometimes it's harder when it's our friends, people we really care about. I think she's been punished enough already, don't you?"

"When did you become such an Artemis apologist?" Dick chuckled, placing the ice pack in the sink and drying his face.

"Probably the day I saw in her what I see in you. Dick, you and I've both been on paths that could have deviated much like hers did. For whatever reason the Shadow's decided to give her a second chance, the question is; are you willing to do the same?"

Bruce put his arm on his protégés shoulder, a rare moment of warmth most never go to see.

"When it comes to openness I know I've been no role model to you. I'll never win any popularly contests within the League because deep down I know the ends justifies the means. The League needs that voice and it's a part I'm willing to play, but Dick that's not who you are. Those people out there, they weren't just teammates, they were your friends. They need to know; all of them, and they need to hear it from you."
Dick remained silent, regarding the Dark Knight's words. They were his friends first and foremost. He had grown up with most of them; put his life on the line for them on more than once occasion. A lot had happened in the last ten years, not all of it things he was proud of, but the good far outweighed the bad. It wasn't going to be easy, but it was the right thing to do.

"They're not going to take it well. I'm not sure who'll they be more pissed at; Artemis or me?"

"You won't know unless you try. Go home Dick. I've got things here; I can call you if I need you. Talk things out with Barbara once she cools down, she can be as stubborn as her father sometimes but just as understanding. Once you get past that, the rest of it will be nowhere near as difficult.'

Dick sighed. "I hope you're right."

xxx

Wally rested his head on the cold porcelain toilet. Once the trio had left his home and his adrenaline and fury dissipated, the nausea crept back in with a vengeance. Moments after his front door slammed shut he ran for the bathroom where he'd remained ever since. Wally couldn't remember a time he'd felt so bad. It was like his bachelor party hangover multiplied to the power of ten. At least back then he had the metabolism to work through it, but without it…miserable wasn't a strong enough word.

He didn't even want to know all the compounds Jade and injected him with, he just wanted them gone. Trying to flush them out with liquids was a nonstarter, everytime something wet touched his lips, violent vomiting followed suit. All he could do now was wait, but while his body remained immobile, his mind was moving a thousand miles an hour.

Artemis was alive. A person he once cared about deeply had miraculously survived. But instead of feeling joyous, or at the very least relieved on some level, all he felt was anger and resentment. Instead of remembering the first girl he ever loved and the special times they shared, all he could think about was the guilt and helplessness of watching her die. The months of tears and depression that followed. The pain of visiting her gravestone and breaking down time and time again to the point Dick and Kaldur had to set security cameras near the cemetery to alert them when he'd show, fearful of what he ultimately might do.

The girl he loved before he ever knew what love was – was alive, and he hated her for it.

The speedster glanced at his watch, knowing full well he needed to get up and make his way to his folks to get his kids, but just the mere thought of standing caused his stomach to churn and bile to race up his throat. This was all Artemis's fault. Every god damned bit of it. He should have felt guilty for thinking it, but a part of him still wished she was dead, that way he wouldn't have to hate himself for the way he had treated her.

xxx

"Good Morning Mr. Ambassador," the young Atalantean smiled, standing respectfully at the man's arrival.

"Good morning Makaira. How are you today?"

"Fine thank you sir. Your 8:30 is already here, and your call list is on your desk. Don't forget you have a video conference with the Under-Secretary at 12:30 and a meeting with the Amazonian ambassador at 2:00."

Kaldur rubbed his weary eyes; it was going to be another one of those days.
For King and Country he sighed, but not for much longer.

Like his king, he was the child of two worlds, the perfect emissary to educate and guide two distinct cultures to respect and coexist with each other, but that job was becoming progressively more difficult with each passing day.

"For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal."

President John F Kennedy's speech still held as much truth and gravitas today as it did back in the 1960's, but despite those wise words, humans had so much difficulty accepting that they were not the most dominant species on the planet.

Atlantis had its faults like most culture's do, but world domination and negligent climate change was not one of them. The governments of the surface world, if left unchecked would eventually destroy the very planet they were trying to rule. That mindset baffled him.

After battling enemies like the Light and the Injustice League, the hero assumed that taking part in civilized rhetoric among fellow representatives in order to work for peace, prosperity, and the benefit of all mankind would be far easier. He was wrong.

He'd started this journey to make a true measured difference, an opportunity push for strong reforms that would benefit all, only to find them wrapped in so much regulatory commissions and red tape. One of the first lessons Kaldur ever learned about being an ambassador was that bureaucracy sometimes is the complete antithesis to real change.

All those years ago when he'd first accepted this position, he imagined something a bit more… hands on. Being on the front lines in creating and shaping foreign policy, enhancing Atlantis's image as a sovereign nation, being where the action was. That's how his peers and fellow ambassadors described the job that Kaldur was signing on for, but those men and women had no idea what true action was, not unless they'd stood side by side with the hero back in the day when a handful of teenagers bonded together and saved the planet. No matter how much he'd ever accomplish as an ambassador, it would never hold a candle to that.

He dropped his heavy leather satchel on the desk, poured himself a coffee and walked over to the big bay window overlooking the East River. It wasn't the vast fathoms of the Atlantic, but for now it would have to do.

No one, not his family nor his closest friends knew that his days in this office were nearing an end. This job had been the right choice at the time, but the constraints of the position had left him feeling stagnant and powerless. This was not where he'd seen himself at thirty. His heart wasn't in it anymore, and although the hero known as Aqualad hadn't accomplished everything he'd originally set out to do, he'd left a solid framework in place for his predecessor to take over, hopefully someone more energetic and inspired than Kaldur had become.

It was time to move on and try something new, to see where the tides would take him. It could be back home, it could be to distant lands, even possibly side by side with his King in the Justice League, or something as simple as on a deserted island somewhere enjoying the solitude. The next choice would be his and his alone.

He placed the cup on his desk and opened his satchel, pulling out the large file regarding the group of businessmen awaiting him in the lobby. The representatives from the Roxxco oil company were there to discuss the new safety initiatives and protocols the company had recently put into place after the last environmental disaster the oil giant had caused. It was all purely for public relations purposes,
nothing they'd propose would have any real teeth to it. Kaldur knew they weren't ready yet, but at least it was a start.

The ambassador looked through his call sheet, determining the order in who he would return first when suddenly a name and number jumped off the paper. He took the sheet and went back out to the receptionist’s desk.

"Makaira, when did this call come in?"

She scanned through her voice mail and searched the number. "Approximately 11:00 pm last night. Would you like me to connect you?"

Kaldur smiled. "Yes please," and walked back into his office and shut the door.

The young secretary dialed the number, awaiting her counterpart on the other end of the line to answer

"Good Morning Wayne Tech, how may I direct your call?" the voice asked.

"Yes this Ambassador Kaldur'ahm's office returning a call from Mr. Grayson."

"One moment please."

xxx

She was a fool, a weak minded, pathetic, fucking fool. If she'd been this sloppy and careless with the Shadows, the archer knew she would have been dead long ago. Maybe it was her new found sense of freedom, maybe it was Roy's unexpected kindness and understanding, but Nightwing's reaction to her arrival should have been the warning sign she paid attention to, but still she held out hope. In retrospect the foreshowing was blinding.

Jade saw it coming, knew exactly how it would play out, and yet the archer still took the chance, still rolled the dice because in her mind the risk was worth it, all because of hope.

"What a fucking joke," she cursed to herself.

Guilt, redemption, obligation, closure...love; whatever the reason it had been a colossal Titanic-esque mistake and she'd known it the entire time. If she'd been searching for closure, she'd definitely found it.

Artemis never bothered to return to the motel, only giving the front desk a cursory call to check out. What few belongings she'd left behind they could keep, she wanted out of this god damn state as fast as possible, and nothing was going to stop her, least of all the return of a three dollar plastic room key.

Her anger fueled her as the cheap Ford Escape pushed 80 m.p.h. down I-70. She had no destination in mind except forward.

After eighteen hours she pulled over to a rest stop, ignoring the barrage of calls and texts left by her sister and just slept. All she had left now was Jade and Zane, and despite having people that actually gave a damn about her, it still gave the archer little comfort. Artemis would contact them once she'd left the country. A rendezvous point would be set if they wanted to continue their partnership, but until then she wanted to be left alone. Perhaps she'd just go solo; she did her best work when she only had herself to count on, but at this point she honestly didn't care anymore.
When she passed through Pennsylvania the on ramp towards New York loomed just ahead. Despite Roy’s cordialness, she knew he’d be furious, not so much about stealing his credit card as opposed to ignoring his warning. Wally was still his friend, still someone he cared deeply about, and she ignored his advice just like she did in that alleyway all those years ago. The echo of *don't hurt my friends* resonated in her mind but still ultimately fell on deaf ears.

She drove past the exit to New York and continued eastward with a new destination in mind. It was still several hours away, but her mind was made up. She had one last place to say goodbye to, the place where it all started. After that she was a ghost.

***

She pulled into the harbor town around 5:00 p.m. local time. While the areas of Gotham she’d visited recently had gone through drastic redevelopment, Happy Harbor was exactly the same. She’d have time to walk the streets and corners soon enough, but for now she wanted the feeling of warm sand between her toes. It wasn’t the beach in Barcelona that Zane had promised, but for now it would do.

Even over the roar of the ocean she still could make out the sounds of the seagulls flying overhead. Down the beach children flew kites and teens bodysurfed, while the locales sat in beach chairs with their fishing poles cast in the surf, and of course off in the distance…the Mountain.

The harbor sounded the same, it smelt the same, and for just a few minutes it washed away all the pain and anguish of the last few days. Gotham was where she grew up, but in some ways Happy Harbor felt more like home that New York ever could.

For the next hour she walked the beach, soaking in the rays and sounds when her stomach began to grumble. Once again she’d forgotten to eat, the idea of the availability of food at any moment still a little foreign to her.

A few yards down she caught sight of the patio of the Dough Boys Pizzeria, a favorite among the locales, not to mention a few teenagers she once knew. Remembering the times she’d spent in this place made her smile; eating pizza, drinking the best milkshakes she’d ever tasted, coming down from the rush of missions, laughing and crying with her friends, fighting and subsequently making up and out with Wally, all precious memories from a different life. Despite all that had happened since her return, this place, this moment warmed her heart. This was the feeling she’d been searching for all along, and now she’d found it.

Artemis sat down on the plastic chair and tuned it to face the beach when the waitress appeared.

"What can I get you darling?" the older brunette asked.

The archer scanned the menu for a few seconds before making her decision.

"Two slices of pepperoni and a Corona please?"

"With lime?" the waitress added.

"Yes please." The waitress nodded and was about to take her menu when the blonde slyly smiled. "Do you all still make the best shakes on the east coast?"

"You better believe it," the waitress answered proudly.

"I'll skip the Corona, one large chocolate shake….with whip cream and a cherry."

"Coming right up doll," the women replied as she collected the menu and walked back towards the
A few minutes the archer discovered heaven on earth. It was everything she remembered and more. Chicago and New York style couldn't hold a candle to this Rhode Island pizza shack. Despite her fullness Artemis was tempted to order another when the waitress arrived with check. "Can I get you anything else honey?"

"No thank you," the blonde sweetly smiled, "but can I ask a quick question? What's the deal with all the signs on the beach around the mountain, are people not allowed over there anymore?"

"Not since the government took it over a few years back," the older woman frowned, "now it's some bombing range for the Air Force. You can see the jets flying over it from time to time. They've got barbed wire all around it now. It's a shame; it used to be such a special place. Have you ever been over there?"

"A long time ago," Artemis sighed.

After midnight Artemis scaled the barbed wire fence, ignoring the signs displayed in all different directions. There were no guards, no patrols, just a sign that carried enough weight to scare most curious teenage kids and tourists.

**Warning - Restricted Area**

*Mt. Justice Bombing and Gunnery Range*

*U.S. Air Force Property*

*No Trespassing – Violators Will Be Prosecuted.*

Nothing on the sign said anything about former occupants so she took the liberty to ignore it. The archer scaled the fence, summersaulting to avoid the barbs and landed gracefully on the other side.

It seemed like a lifetime ago that she stood outside this mountain. Hidden inside the rock formation may have been a secret base that housed superpowered teens and a Martian spaceship, but standing on the shores of Mt. Justice in the moonlight reminded her of long walks on the beach, skinny dipping, campfires and cookouts. Her skin still tingled at the rush of excitement when the call would come in and they'd take off to missions unknown. It was easily one of the best times of her life, but most importantly she remembered them.

Despite the Earth shaking experiences, alien invasions, tyrannical androids, sorcerers and demons, and more costumed supervillains then you'd find at Comicon, it was the little things she remembered the most.

The metallic resonance of the computer announcing a hero's arrival, the sound of Robin's cackle, the smell of Megan's' cooking, the serenity of Kaldur's voice, Zatanna's spells, even Conner's strange habit of watching static, but nothing stood out more than green eyes.

From the moment he kissed her on the Watchtower, things were never the same. She never expected to fall in love, least of all with someone like Wally West.

Sure she was attracted to Conner, who wasn’t? He was a younger angstier version of the Man of Steel, complete with smoldering blue eyes and a brooding mysterious demeanor to go along with them, but even if Megan hadn't fallen for him first, Artemis knew deep down, despite his gorgeous
looks, he just wasn't her type. She'd had enough coldness in her life; she didn't need to seek out more.

Wally was different. Where Conner was withdrawn and sullen, Wally was loud and obnoxious. A cocky, self-proclaimed Casanova who's most impressive superpower was his ability to piss her off. Early on he'd made it plainly clear the he didn't want her here. The feeling was quite mutual.

He was all fire and she was ice, positive and negative electrical currents that constantly collided. Complete polar opposites. That exact qualities that made them so perfect for each other. They argued all time, disagreeing on anything from science and math to TV shows and videogames. She had denied it for months, but she was crushing on him hard and despite his infuriating demeanor, she suspected he felt the same about her. That day on the BioShip, when he told her she had nothing to prove, she was hooked. That was the day she fell in love with Wally West.

After that first kiss on the Watchtower they were inseparable, constantly arguing and fighting one minute, and then making out furiously the next. He loved her, cared for her, made her happier than she ever dreamed possible. He was her everything and she was his. They'd even discussed going to college together, living together; it's not like they didn't basically share the same room anyway.

It didn't scare her at all, if anything it excited her. She never wanted to be more than a few feet away in case she needed to grab him and remind the red head how much she loved him. God how she wished she could turn back time and relive those moments all over again and erase all the pain and suffering she'd caused.

Artemis walked ahead a few hundred yards, noticing all the course grass that had grown over the dunes since the abandonment of the base. Finally she made it around the mountain and to the camouflaged door that led inside. She knew from Roy that the base had long been deserted, but was surprised to find all the security and electrical systems that protected and powered the base had been removed as well. She pulled open the rock encrusted heavy iron door to a loud creek that echoed inside for seconds. The archer heard the fluttering of bats, shaking her and smiling; what would a cave be without bats.

She turned on her flashlight and began exploring the old base. All technological and engineering based systems had been removed, but the League in all its wisdom hadn't found it necessary to discard the simple things. The kitchen and its counter tops were more or less the same. The recessed cabinet where the video screens once rested still stood. There should have been thick layers of mold and dust covering everything, but surprisingly enough, everything seemed relatively clean all things considered.

She made her way down the corridor towards the living quarters, soon finding the room she once occupied. The archer was unsure what hero had next stayed there after her departure, but inside the bed and dresser still sat in the exact same place as she's arranged them. Everything inside was covered in a thick layer of dust. She pulled the nightstand away from the bed and turned it until the back of the piece was visible. The archer smiled as her light shone brightly on the carving of Artemis Crock that she'd dug into that wood all those years ago. It was a delinquent act she knew, but she wanted a lasting testament that she had once been there, she'd once been a hero.

The archer walked down the hall a bit further, two rooms away from hers to be exact, and found the one she'd spent as much time in as her own. Nostalgia pulled at her heartstring as she thought back to all the events and moments that had taken place in there. The times he would hold her after she'd had the many nightmares that haunted her, the occasions where she would stay up waiting for his return from missions, the times they would cram all night for exams; where he'd tutor her in Physics and Algebra while she did the same in French and History, and of course the night two nervous teens
both lost their virginity. So many memories tied directly to this room, to this person.

Artemis left the hall and walked towards the kitchen when her light began to flicker. She smacked the flashlight hard against the cave wall, hoping it would jar the device back on when it slipped from her grasp and fell to the floor, banging loudly and rolling away.

"Great," she growled, reaching back into her quiver for the phosphorus arrow she could ignite to find her way out, when suddenly she felt the pack snap off her back and go flying off into the darkness. The archer wasn't alone.

Artemis still had her bow over her shoulder and armed it quickly with the only arrow she had left, spinning around and aiming wildly.

She was scared, the first time she'd felt that way in years. A cold sweat formed on her brow as she frantically tried to remember her bearings, panicked that she'd never find her way out before who or whatever was in there found her.

A few yards away glowing eyes appeared in the darkness and without warning she felt a powerful force grip and paralyze her body, taking the bow away and her last chance to defend herself.

"Who are you?!" the archer demanded, her plea echoing all around, hoping she sounded more threatening than fearful.

A quiet voice responded. "You won't be needing that."

Artemis's blood grew cold as she recognized the voice. In the darkness, only illuminated by her glowing green eyes stood a girl she'd not seen in years, a woman that long ago she'd once considered a sister, someone she loved and cared for like family. Now in her place appeared a woman who'd become dangerous and unstable. A being who could cripple or lobotomize someone with a mere thought, someone else who'd suffered due to Artemis' lies and deceit.

"Megan?" she rasped against the force tightening around her. Instantly she felt the mental grip dissipate and the archer finally could breathe again. Her flashlight flickered back to life and the same green skinned women she once knew appeared before her out of the darkness, looking exactly the same as she did almost a decade ago, un-aged and unchanged.

"Hi Artemis," the voice said pleasantly.

The archer hesitated before she answered, unsure what she might trigger with the wrong response.

"Hi Megan," she replied bravely, nervous at her friend's calm and friendly demeanor, worried that she was dealing with someone who'd completely lost her mind.

"You can relax Artemis; I'm not going to hurt you. I know what you've probably been told, but I'm much better now."

"Are you… reading my mind?"

Megan smiled. "No Artemis, just your expressions. I don't go into anyone's mind anymore unless I'm invited."

"Are you… ya know… ok?"

"I'm fine….really. Thank you for asking. Not a lot of our old friends feel… comfortable talking to me anymore, not after…the incidents."
"I know the feeling." Artemis replied sadly.

"I'm sure you do. I'm glad to see you again."

"Did you know?" Artemis asked.

"Know what?" the Martian questioned. "That you were still alive? I'm not sure really. When you link with someone, that feeling, that connection never truly goes away. I could still feel you, but I wasn't sure if you were alive, or if I just wanted you to be. I was a little confused back then. I was already having… issues and I just couldn't trust what I was feeling anymore."

"What… happened to you Megan?"

The Martian paused for a moment; trying to put something so personal and yet so alien into thoughts and words that someone else, someone human could understand.

"Uncle J'onn warned me that one day it might become too much, all the noise, all the pain. He told me that I needed to limit my contact with humans and protect myself, but Artemis it was a chance I was willing to take to actually connect with people. If I'd followed his advice I'd never have gotten to be close to you guys. You all accepted me for who I was. You didn't care or judge me for what color I was, or what race of Martian I belonged to, you all accepted me for the person inside. It was worth the risk."

She sighed heavily and continued.

"But when the team began to fray, when the threads that held us together started to tear, I let my guard down. That's when all the darkness that surrounds us, the anger and the evil that emanated from people made its way inside. There came a point when I just wasn't strong enough to shield it out anymore. As we all started to break apart, the absence of everyone's minds made me…more susceptible to the ugliness. I kind of…unintentionally tried to correct that flaw in the people around me. It was a horrible-horrible mistake. I never meant for it to happen…" she choked, stopping mid-sentence and walking away to gather herself. Megan hadn't had many chances to tell her story, it was just nice to have someone to listen, someone who wouldn't judge her, but bringing it all back up was difficult.

"As things started to snowball, I decided to go into to everyone's minds with the intentions of removing certain memories of what I'd done to them. I was so desperate to make things right again, but I couldn't go through with it. Just thinking about doing such a thing betrayed every rule you follow as a telepath. I shattered their trust, and now I have to take responsibility for my actions."

Artemis understood exactly what she was saying; blown away by how similar their paths had mimicked the other. The biggest difference between them was that she'd made her choice, she walked away knowing full well the damage it could do. Megan's path was much different. She wanted to stay, to stay with her friends and family, but despite that desire, that option had been taken away from her by no fault of her own. Artemis knew where the fault lay, or at least where it began, and she hated herself for it.

Artemis walked over to her friend, no longer afraid and took her hands. "I'm so sorry Megan, I'm sorry for what I might have caused. I wish you could understand why I did it, it's …it's just so hard to explain."

Artemis stopped, realizing exactly what she needed to do. It was a risky move, and trust was something she'd always found difficult. It was trust that had brought her to this place and these friends to begin with. It was that lack of trust that eventually drew her away to a path she wanted no
one to follow. She took Megan's hands and brought them up to her temples. The Martian
instinctively tried to pull away, but the archer stood firm.

"It's ok. You're invited. Just please understand…. I've done horrible…horrible things. Things I wish I
could wish away and forget, but I can't. I won't. It's my punishment, my penance. I just want
someone to understand. I hope that person is you."

Megan nodded and her eyes began to glow. The sensation of someone else in the archer's mind
disoriented her for a moment. Even though she'd asked Megan in, it was still hard to let down her
shields, share her secrets. She remembered how scared she was that night in Bialya, worried the
Martian would discover who she was and where she'd come from. And now, more than a decade
later she still harbored those fears. Finally the intrusion settled and she began to feel Megan's warm
embrace within her mind. She'd missed that more than she'd realized. Instead of rifling through her
memory, the Martian carefully turned each page, without hesitation, without judgment. She felt
Megan's fingers leave her temple and take the archer's hand. A few minutes later, the Martian gently
stepped out of her mind.

Artemis ignored the tears that slid down her cheeks, but before she could wipe them away, the damn
broke and she sobbed into the Martian's shoulder. Megan held tight and Artemis cried for the first
time in years, letting out emotions and anguish that that had long been buried; feelings and fears that
had haunted her for so long. She never realized until that moment how much she'd been holding
back. Megan embraced her friend until the tears stopped and her breathing calmed. Artemis stepped
away shaken but strong.

"Thank you," she whispered to her earth sister.

"You're welcome. Thank you for letting me."

Artemis sniffled, rubbing her eyes and nose on her sleeve before turning back to her friend. Megan
took her hand and led the archer down the darkened hallway towards the adjacent living quarters one
corridor over from where Artemis's used to be. When she reached the door to Megan's old room
Artemis noticed the flickering candlelight escaping into the darkness from inside. When the door
opened Artemis stood in disbelief, the room was exactly as it was all those years ago, a perfect
recreation all the way from the flower covered comforter to the Hello Megan poster that hung from
the mirror. Megan still looked like a teenager and her room reflected that to a tee.

"Kind of weird huh?" Megan spoke, gesturing around the room.

"No, not really," the archer replied, "this was a time you were happy. I can totally get that."

"Even so it's a little strange for a fifty five year old to decorate her room like a teenager, but I still like
it."

"Fifty-five?"

"Artemis I was a lot older than you all were, Martian's age differently. Uncle J'onn is a hundred and
forty, I'm still a kid compared to him?"


"Well it's not polite to ask a lady her age," Megan smiled as they both broke into laughter.

"How did you know I'd be here?" Artemis asked, feeling the weight she'd carried alone lifted of her
shoulders, even if just for a moment.
"I didn't," the Martian replied. "When I'm not at my uncle's house I come back here from time to time, just to remember when the world made sense, back when we were all still friends. I usually go to the peak and watch the tides roll in and out. It's tranquil up there, the perfect spot to mediate; it's kind of my happy place. And all of the sudden I felt this presence, something I hadn't felt in years, and there you were."

"I'm so sorry Megan, I'm sorry for what I did."

"I know you are," the Martian replied, "but you don't owe me an apology. We've all made mistakes, maybe some more drastic than others, and now we have to live with the consequences."

"Megan, yours was an accident, mine was a choice."

"In the end, they're all the same thing, they carry the same weight. Conner didn't seem to grasp that concept either."

"Is that why he ended things with you?" the archer asked.

"Actually I ended it with him, he didn't want to split up, but I couldn't stay with someone I'd hurt like that. All he'd ever shown me was love and kindness, and I betrayed his trust. I didn't deserve him."

"Don't you think that's his call?" Artemis questioned.

"That's exactly what he said, but ultimately I did him a favor. He needs someone who'll treat him right, he needs someone… stable."

It amazed Artemis how in so many ways Megan's life had mimicked her own. The Martian truly understood the loss and guilt the archer carried. It still made her sad to know someone she'd cared for had suffered so much, but hearing Megan's feelings of guilt and loss over what she'd done to Conner made Artemis feel even worse about what she'd done to Wally.

"Do you….still talk to him?"

"No, but I check up on them from time to time?" Megan remarked. "I've been to Roy's AA meetings, Kaldur's lectures, Wally's classes, Zatanna's shows; I even sat in on one of Dick's board meetings once. Of course they'd never know, if they ever found out they'd think I was really crazy, so let's keep that between us," she winked.

"That's so cool," Artemis laughed out loud.

"I care about them Artemis, I miss them, and If I can sit in on their lives, even just for a few moments, It make me feel…. whole I guess."

"What about Conner?" the archer asked, fully aware that his name had been omitted from that list.


xxx

Later that evening the two women made their way up to the observation point atop Mt. Justice. It was a cloudless sky, and the moon blanketed the beach and the ocean its light. It was as spectacular as the archer remembered.

So have you seen any of them?" the Martian asked

"Just Roy, Dick, and … Wally." Artemis replied
"How'd that go?"

"Surprisingly good with Roy, Dick…not so much, and Wally…..well that was a complete fucking disaster. Megan I had no idea about his wife, Barry, his kids. I don't know what I was thinking. I gave him absolutely no warning, I just barged straight in, but I….I just wanted to see him, one last time."

The archer chose not to mention the speedster's lost abilities, unsure if Megan was either aware already or had inadvertently discovered that secret during their link. Either way Artemis was relived the Martian chose not to discuss it. Something's were better left unsaid.

"I can understand. I'm sure it's been a shock to everyone?"

"Megan, I just can't seem to stop screwing up. All I just wanted was to come back and say goodbye, the right way this time."

"Are you sure it's goodbye you want?"

"Yes…No…God…I don't know!" the archer growled, running her hands through her hair in frustration. "It's….."

"Complicated?" the Martian interrupted.

"You could say that," the archer sighed.

"Do you remember the mental exercise we all did, when my subconscious kind of went out of whack?"

"How could I forget, it was the first time I ever died," Artemis chuckled at the irony

"It was a terrible moment when you disappeared, and when it was all over, once Canary had helped us come to grips with everything, including our feelings for each other, I always thought that was when we truly became a family. I'm sure everyone's still hurt and angry, but they need time to sort through their feelings, even you. Leaving again isn't going to make things better; it's only going to make things worse. They're still your friends Artemis, give them another chance, I think you'll be surprised."

"I wish I believed that," Artemis answered sadly, "besides I could say the same thing to you ya know," the archer pointed out.

Megan sighed, "I knew that was going to get thrown back in my face somehow," she smiled.

"How could you guess? Artemis smirked.

"I read your mind."

"Not funny Megan," Artemis chided with a grin, "Not funny."

xxx

The crowds continued to applaud as the magician left the stage and walked into her flower adorned dressing room. There were no encores in magic shows, but this particular audience had been great and for a few scant moments Zatanna considered one more act. She still had a few tricks up her sleeve, not so much illusions as actual real hardcore magic, but the moment she sat down and took of her high heeled boots that was the end of that ride.
She opened a bottle of wine someone had been nice enough to leave for her and poured herself a celebratory glass. This was the last night of her tour, a relatively short one all things considered, but her dad always said it was best to leave them wanting more.

She was due for a small stretch of monitor duty on the Watchtower soon, the minimum a part time member was obligated for according to the Justice League by-laws, and despite the adoring crowds, she was looking forward to the solitude. Her manager had tried to convince her for one more West Coast stretch, but even a sorceress supreme gets tired of talking backwards from time to time.

She couldn't wait to get back to the hotel and pour herself a nice long bath. The Bellagio had great masseuses on staff, and she was quite fond of Riccardo: she'd always had a thing for brunettes.

Zatanna reached into her bag for her phone to schedule her appointment when she noticed the voice mail waiting for her. The name on the caller I.D. surprised her. It had been months, maybe longer since she'd last spoken to Barbara Gordon. She'd long moved past any animosity about the red head's not so secret crush on her ex-boyfriend. The sorceress wished her nothing but the best, but knew full well it wouldn't lead anywhere, god knows she'd tried.

Dick Grayson wasn't one to be tied down, and if Barbara could do somehow convince him otherwise, then more power to her.

Zatanna entered her pin number and pushed the playback button, sitting back in her chair looking forward to a message from an old friend

Outside the dressing room, the stage manager was supervising the dismantling of the speaker system when several loud crashes exploded from inside the star's dressing room. The manager ran to the room to check on the magician when the door suddenly swung open and the brunette stormed out, speaking in a tongue he didn't recognize

"Mi gniog ot llik reh,' Zatanna growled, heading towards the awaiting limo.
Wally sat alone on the edge of her bed; hands folded staring at the floor. The room was empty now, sterile. Dinah had come in days earlier and packed up her belongings and taken them back to the Queen Mansion. She had no family to return them to, just a villainous sister who'd disappeared into the wind. It was not done out of necessity, there were plenty of living quarters available for any new upcoming team members; it was done purely for closure.

When it was appropriate, she and Ollie would go through the archer's belongings, saving photos and keepsakes to share with her friends, but for now all that remained was the Alice in Wonderland poster that hung on her wall.

The speedster had quickly made his way through the seven stages of grief; shock, denial, bargaining, guilt, anger, depression, but hope and acceptance were not forthcoming, he doubted they ever would be.

His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, his heart numb. He hadn't slept more than a few hours since her death, hoping that he'd awake to find it all just some bad dream, that she'd be cuddled next to him making some snarky remark about him waking her. All that was left now was an empty room.

Artemis was the bravest, kindest, and most loving girl he'd ever known. They'd started out as enemies and they ended up closer than either expected. They were in love. She was his spitfire and now she was gone. Artemis Crock was dead.

There were always risks in their line of work, no one was ever promised a tomorrow, but they were young and invincible, a team that could survive anything and win the day. Her death was a devastating reminder of just how dangerous their line of work truly was, and the image of her tears from the opposite side of the blast doors would be burned in his mind for the rest of his life.

A lone figure walked into the room, another friend and teammate as heartbroken as he was, Robin felt little comfort in knowing he'd done everything in his power, everything he'd be trained for to save her. In the end it wasn't his fault any more than Wally's, but regardless they both carried the same burden, the same guilt. They'd failed her.

Dick hated to disturb him, but it was time to say goodbye.

"We have to go. The service starts in an hour. Everybody's waiting"

Wally nodded, wiping his eyes and reaching over and pulling on the black suit jacket.

"I can't believe she's gone," he spoke softly

"I know," Dick replied, his mind searching desperately for something...anything he could have done differently to save her, and for the thousandth time he'd come up empty.

The two friends stood and walked out of the room. Wally turned back one final time to lock away in his mind all the precious moments that had taken place in there. He had no intention of ever opening that door again.

They made their way down the hall towards the hanger when Wally turned to his best friend. "Does it ever go away? the pain?"

Dick contemplated the question for a moment. He'd lost more than most in his relatively short life;
parents, brothers, a sister. He wished there was a way to ease his friend's burden, to say something that would make it all better, but the most honest answer was also the most painful one.

"No," Dick replied sadly, "but it does get easier over time. Even after all these years I still have my bad days, but in a way I'm kind of glad. I never want to forget them; I never want to trick myself into thinking it's ok."

He turned and put his hand on the red head's shoulder. "You won't be going through this alone. I'll be with you every step of the way, we all will. We'll make it through this I promise."

Wally nodded and began to tear up again when Dick embraced the speedster and patted his back. A few moments later Wally eased away and took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"Thanks Rob, I really appreciate it."

"Hey, what are best pals for?" Dick smiled.

"…..Uh…Professor West?"

Wally's head jerked up, snapping out his reverie to see his entire class staring at him curiously. One minute he was discussing Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle before trailing off and staring into the smart board.

"Are you ok?" the young brunette student asked.

"Yeah…sorry guys. Um where were we?"

Another student chimed in, "That Niels Bohr had discovered an electron with the qualities of both a particle and a wave."

"Right," Wally confirmed, "the wave-particle duality theory. So when we measure an electron's position, we are treating it as a particle at a specific point in space but with an uncertain wavelength….""

Wally paused again, before putting down his pen and turning off the projector. "Tell you what guys, let's finish this later. No homework this weekend, just kick back and relax, life's too short. We'll come back to this on Tuesday."

The room erupted in cheers and not one student complained they were getting out of class and hour early this day, another prime example why Professor West was the coolest teacher on campus. The students shuffled out, walking around the auburn haired student waiting in the doorway.

Bart walked in, and shut the door behind him, pulling up a chair and sitting across the desk from his cousin.

"You ok?" he asked.

Wally sighed. "How'd you find out?"

"Tim," Bart answered simply. "Evidently she showed up in Gotham about a week ago."

"Nice of him to warn me. She showed up at my house yesterday."

"No way!" Bart gasped. "How'd that go?" he asked shocked.
"Well I got my ass handed to me by a carjacker, I was drugged by an assassin, my house got trashed, and when I wasn't throwing up I spent most of my morning in a screaming match with my dead ex-girlfriend, so other than not too bad I guess."

"You are freaking kidding me? Are you ok? We're the twins home?"

"No thank God," Wally exhaled. "They were at mom and dads, but they could have just as easily been, and that scares the hell out of me."

"I bet," Bart confirmed. "Does she know? about Barry? about your speed?"

"Yeah, she knew about Barry, and after watching me getting my ass kicked she figured the rest out pretty quickly."

"Why didn't you call? I could have been there in a second…literally"

"I thought I had it, I really did. It was just one freaking guy, but he had partner I never saw coming, then all of the sudden Artemis, Cheshire and some huge dude come out of nowhere, and the next thing I know I'm in my bed, puking my guts up, arguing with a ghost, so I didn't have a lot of time to make a call," Wally lamented

"So she shows up out of nowhere, saves your life and then roofies you."

"Pretty sure those weren't roofies, but you get the drift," Wally frowned.

"What did she want?"

"I have no idea," the elder speedster replied. "To explain maybe? Apologize? Justify? Who the hell knows? I don't even know why she bothered. What's done is done."

"So what happened to her? Where is she now?"

"It's a long a story." Wally sighed.

"You can tell me over lunch, your treat of course," Bart grinned.

"Of course," Wally sighed, digging into his wallet looking for cash. A folded up note he'd placed there weeks earlier slipped out from inside and landed at the speedster's feet. Wally knelt down to pick it up, opening the note and staring curiously at it, right before his face went pale.

"Oh shit! No..No..No..No….What's today's date!?" he has asked his cousin frantically. "Is it the 21st?"

"Uh yeah I think so," Bart replied a bit confused. "What wrong?"

"Parent teacher conferences, that were supposed to start…" he looked down at his watch, …"Oh about ten minutes ago."

He grabbed his bag and ran to his jeep, cursing the entire way. It wasn't fighting supervillains or saving the world that made his miss his speed most, it was days like these.

Thirty minutes later Wally pulled into the school parking lot, his wheels squealing as his jeep lurched to a stop. The crossing guard shot him an angry glare, but the red head ignored it, jumping out and running towards the school office. Jai sat inside and leapt to his feet when he saw his father sprinting towards him.
The raven haired boy ran to the door and opened it for his approaching father. "Dad come on!"

Wally nodded, reaching the entrance of the school just in time catch the irritated frowns of both his son and daughter, as well as their teacher as Mrs. Fogle, who was nice enough to go the extra mile to point to her watch angrily. Wally bent over hands on his knees trying to catch his breath.

"Won't….happen…again…" he panted.

"Um-hm," the grey haired woman replied sarcastically, opening the door to her office and leading the West clan inside. Her reports were mostly positive; straight A students, social, respectful, a bit too chatty when they shouldn't be, as well as a bit too easily distracted. Basically like every other third grader since the dawn of time. Wally nodded in agreement to every statement; barely listening to the same report he'd heard since the day they'd started kindergarten.

He gazed out the office window for a moment, taking a brief respite from the educator's annoying nasality, when he noticed an odd figure standing between the departing school busses a good fifty yards away. He wore a trench coat and hat that seemed a bit out of place for such a warm spring day. But what was even more odd was whoever this person was seemed to be looking specifically in his direction. An eerie feeling washed over the speedster, and he squinted harder trying to make at the person's features when the teacher cleared her throat loudly for the second time. "Mr. West?"

Wally shook the cobwebs from his head, and quickly turned back towards the homeroom teacher. "I'm sorry Mrs. Fogle, I think we were at... easily distracted. Right?"

The teacher rolled her eyes. "I wonder where they get that from."

Wally bit his lip and took her jibe. She reached down to hand out the folder of his kid's schoolwork when Wally looked back out the window only to find the man gone, nowhere to be seen.

Wally palmed his eyes and stifled a yawn, chocking up the paranoia as side effect to the series of poisons he been injected with days earlier.

_Thanks a hell of a lot Artemis_ he grumbled bitterly.

xxx

"I want to see her," the red head demanded.

"It's not that simple," he countered.

"Bullshit."

"I don't know where she is Barbara, that's the truth."

_The truth? You got a lot of damn gall using that word around me Grayson. Find her. Your boss is the Batman. That's what he does, that's what you do._

"Babs it's not that easy."

"Easy like how? Finding out one of your closest friends isn't really dead or easy like my fiancé knew it the whole time and kept it from me."

"I didn't know it the whole time," Dick carefully corrected.

"You knew enough. Dick you had no right to keep me in the dark." she argued. "She was my friend too."
"It was a bad call," the hero frowned.

"Bad call? Bad call?! It's a bad call when you get drunk and accidently text dick pics to your old girlfriend instead of your new one. It's a bad call when you send Dahlias to your fiancé when they are the only flower in the entire world she's allergic to. This is not a bad call, this gigantic fuck up. You don't do shit like this to the person you supposedly want to spend the rest of your life with. Is there anything else you're not telling me?"

Dick knew the question was rhetorical and any answer he could give would only be met by the same ire, so smartly he remained silent. He'd learned long ago when Barbara Gordon was on a tear, you keep your head down and your arms inside the vehicle at all time until she comes to a complete stop. As she continued to vent he held his tongue, trying not to fuel the fire.

He understood Barbara's rage, remembering well the sharp sting of betrayal the day Batman showed him the blurred images of two masked assassins he'd been sent from an agent deep inside Interpol. He remembered the burning pain in his stomach when the Dark Knight suggested her death had perhaps been staged, but most importantly he remembered the anger as his hands tightened around the bomb maker's neck as the man described the clients who'd hired him to create the explosives, the same explosives he thought had killed one of his closest friends. He remembered feeling all the same conflicting emotions that his fiancé felt now, but after a few more minutes of accusations and allegations, Dick had finally had enough.

"I screwed up ok? he yelled. "I've spent years blaming myself for her death...years! I was literally a foot away from her and there was nothing I could do to save her. Then I find out not only she was alive, but that she'd faked everything and was now working for the Shadows? Of course I wanted to tell you, I wanted to tell everyone, but Bruce knows how the Shadows work, what they do, what they can make you do. He convinced me that if we went after her they'd kill her, and as much as I hated it, I knew he was right. So I lied. I lied so no one else would have to feel as helpless, as angry, as sick as I felt...as I feel."

He paced the room, trying to get control of his anger, his pain. On the horizon an approaching storm caught his attention and he walked to the bay window to stare out across the city watching, the wind pick up and the clouds darken, feeling his soul was do much the same.

"You feel betrayed. I totally get that, but I didn't do it be selfish or cruel. I did it to keep her safe and to keep you safe too by not trying to go after her. If you tangle with the Shadows, it's not just one fight, it's an all-out war, and you know that as well as I do."

"But your forgetting one little thing," he added, his voice becoming louder "This was her decision! She went to a lot of time and effort to lie to all of us. She knew what this would do to us, how many people she'd hurt, but she didn't care. So maybe instead of chewing my ass you should think about who started all of this shit to begin with! But know this: if keeping it from you keeps you alive and off the Shadow's radar, I'd do the exact same thing again!"

The room fell silent as Dick searched the den for his sunglasses and keys. Once again another problem he'd tried to fix had blown up in his face; it was slowly becoming the story of his life. Bruce had convinced him to apologize, and make things right, but the bitter irony of it all was Bruce was the one who'd convinced him to keep it secret to begin with.

It wasn't until after his outburst did Dick realize an ugly truth, that perhaps deep down he wasn't sorry at all. He felt betrayed and angry, but it wasn't just at Artemis, but someone else he'd lost long ago, someone closer than a brother who blamed him like he did the archer. Dick was no stranger to loss; parents, teammates, family; all dead and buried now, but for some strange reason nothing stung quite like losing his best friend. He'd kept these feeling locked deep down inside, but when the dam
finally broke, years of regret and pain flowed out as well.

Dick turned and wiped the beginnings of a tear away. He needed to get out of there, but when he turned back towards the door a gentle hand rested on his shoulder and slowly guided him back. Strong feminine arms wrapped around his neck, softly resting his head on his shoulder.

Barbara had been worried about him for so long; worried about the way he'd changed when he put on the mask, how his voice grew deeper, his eyes more narrow. He may not have had a bat plastered across his chest, but Dick was becoming more and more like the Dark Knight with each passing day.

But Dick wasn't Bruce, and where Wayne could lock his feelings and secrets away in a cold vault, Dick Grayson hurt, and he'd been hurting for a long time. He didn't like showing this side of himself, he didn't like letting the world see how weak and vulnerable he felt sometimes, but Artemis's appearance in New York had reopened a wound he thought long healed.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as she held him tight and his body began to relax. "If you want to reconsider this whole wedding thing, now might be a good time to bail."

"Not a chance," she smiled stroking his hair, "We're going to be fine Boy Wonder. There's a... tiny...molecular sized chance that I overacted a little."

She felt his body chuckle, feeling his smile form against her shoulder.

"I wish you'd told me," she said kindly, "I wished I could have carried this burden too. It wasn't fair to you. You've got to stop listening to Bruce babe, he gives the worst advice sometimes."

Dick laughed, resting his forehead against hers. "You'll get no argument from me"

"Good, let's keep it that way. It's a good lesson for when we're married," she smiled before her face grew serious. "I'm pissed at her too Dick, pissed, hurt, sad, angry...you name it, but I need to know her side. We can't just let her walk out of our lives not knowing why. She came back for reason; I want to know what it is. She owes us that."

"Yeah," he sighed in agreement. "She tried, I wouldn't listen."

"Let's change that," the red head answered

"I wasn't lying Barbara, I don't know where she is."

"You'll find her."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Because you're a detective," she smiled, kissing his lips warmly.

xxx

Supermax is the name commonly used to describe a handful of prisons scattered across the continental United States and abroad, long considered to be the most secure facilities every built. A typical day for an inmate housed in one of the facilities involves a twenty three hour per day, single-cell confinement lasting for an indefinite period of time. Inmates in Supermax housing have minimal contact with staff and other inmates. The bottom line is once you arrive you never leave.

But these state of the art prisons could not compare to the facility located within the desolate mountain ranges just outside of Nye County, Nevada. This prison had no title, no designation, just a
taunting nickname used by the guards to antagonize the inmates. They called it The Tomb. Its location was beyond top secret, completely off the grid, located in what was presumed to be a radioactive wasteland of a former U.S Government nuclear test site. There were no roads, no landing pads or runways, just miles and miles of barren desert.

On the surface stood fractured remnants of Survival Town, a collection of structures, buildings, even mannequins designed to measure the effects of atomic weapons used against urban centers. Radioactive Fallout Warning signs dotted the landscape in all directions for miles and miles, but only a handful knew the testing grounds true purpose. No bomb was ever dropped here, not one explosive ever detonated. Two thousand feet beneath the broken structures rested the most secure and secretive holding facility ever created. It only had one purpose, it only held one type of prisoner. Meta-Humans, criminal so vile, so dangerous, that they could never be allowed to walk amongst society again.

No one knew for sure who'd built or funded the facility, and the only way in or out of the bunker was a heavily encrypted Zeta Tube, so everyone inside, including the inmates, knew more than likely where that technology had come from and who had gave it to them; The Justice League.

The large steel door of cell block three groaned to life, allowing Officer Michael Warren to enter, carrying the cardboard lunch tray. Inside sitting at the control panel, feet resting on the desk, Officer Ken Brady sat watching the clock on the wall, wanting desperately for two o'clock to strike and his shift to end. It's not like he had a home to return to any time soon, shifts inside the Tomb lasted for months, but at least back in the guard's quarters were movies, videogames, books, some form of connection to the outside world. There was no sun, no sky, only a paper calendar on the wall that counted down the days till the relief team arrived.

There was only one prisoner housed at this end of the facility, and unlike the other cells blocks, where unruly super villains and Meta humans kept the guards entertained and on their toes, prisoner 341 sat quietly on his bed, Mozart playing softly throughout the room. His days consisted of reading and rest, with only one hour a day set aside for exercise with heavy shackled and inhibitor collar firmly in place.

As of late, prisoner 341 had begun declining that option, settling instead for books and solitude, the preparation for any movement outside the cell just too much of a hassle. As far as inmates go, prisoner 341 was the most well-behaved, as well as the most boring.

"Anything to report?" the guard asked his partner.

"Nope. Same old same old. Hasn't made a peep in hours. Just laying in bed and reading as usual."

Warren sighed and walked to the thick transparent aluminum wall, unlocking the narrow compartment to slide the tray through.

"Soups on Professor," the guard said sarcastically, using the nickname given to the man early on in his incarceration, back when prisoner 341 would lecture anyone within earshot about the history of the future, his statements always dismissed as the ramblings of a madman. Over the past year the lectures had finally stopped presumably as the prisoner resigned himself to his fate. The Tomb had that effect on people, but the guards assigned to his detail now wished he'd start back up, anything to kill the time and make the day move faster.

The tray rested on the floor, with the occupant not even acknowledging its entrance.

Warren sighed and walked back towards the exit. As boring as his job assignment was, he was still thankful he didn't have Brady's job. Weeks of this and he be as insane as the guys housed in the
psychiatric ward.

Warren was about to say his goodbyes when the lights flickered, just for a moment before returning to their depressing florescent brilliance. Brady seemed nonplussed by the brownout, checking the readings on his control panel of the energy field around the cell, its charge never dropping and amp during the half-second long event.

"This shit keeps happening," Brady groaned irritably, "but the boys down at engineering keep saying it's nothing big."

Warren nodded. "It's annoying as hell, but it happens so fast the backup generators don't even have a chance to kick on. They say it all the radiation around here that messes with the power lines or something."

A small shuffling sound caught their attention and suddenly prisoner 341 now sat at his table, eating his lunch silently, raising his glass to the two guards before cutting into his chicken parmesan

Brady cracked his knuckles and yawned as Warren scanned his ID card and waited for the retinal scan.

"See ya tomorrow," he said as the steel door closed behind him.

"Yeah see ya," Brady grumbled, turning and resting his feet back on the desk.

We got guys like Neckron, Metallo, and the Absorbing Man here, how in the hell did I get stuck with Eobard freaking Thawne he sighed.

xxx

Very few things shocked the archer anymore these days, but seeing this specific name appear on the caller ID of a disposable burner phone truly surprised her. Phones like these were typically used only a handful of times before being discarded and a new one purchased, it's user never wanting to leave a digital footprint behind to be tracked, but what was really impressive was the fact that this specific phone and just been activated a day prior and had yet to make an outgoing call.

How Barbara Gordon had found her number was assuredly a trade secret learned under the tutelage of one of the world's greatest detectives, but what intrigued the archer more than the how was the why.

Artemis sipped her tea, grateful she was inside on this rainy Gotham day. It was surreal being back inside the City Café, it had once been one of her favorite hangouts back in the day, and one of the few coffee shops in the city that actually made decent Vietnamese Tea. She held the mug with both hands, savoring the flavor when her guest finally arrived and approached the table.

"Artemis," the red head spoke respectfully.

"Hi Barbara."

Artemis rose uncomfortably from the booth, unsure if a handshake was appropriate after all these years. She extended her hand to the red head when Barbara brushed past it and wrapped her arms around the archer and embraced her. Artemis relaxed into it, surprised at how good it felt. She knew she didn't deserve it, but after the cold reactions she received from former teammates, it was a welcome change, but still she remained cautious, it was her nature.

"You look good," Barbra complimented.
"You too. I guess there's no point in asking how you got my number. I'm impressed."

"Detective. Remember?" the red had grinned, "besides how often does a person get to share a cup of coffee with an actual ghost."

"Touché," the arched chuckled, just as the waitress came by and took Barbara's order.

"So..." the red head began.

"Yeah," the archer sighed, "I'm a real bitch. I know."

Batgirl remained silent, neither confirming nor denying her friend's appraisal.

"It's been a shock to say the least."

"I guess you know the story by now."

"More or less," Barbara confirmed.

"I'm really surprised you called. I know I'm not exactly welcome around here anymore, Dick made that pretty clear."

Barbara frowned. "Dick suffers from an acute case of verbal diarrhea sometimes, but for what it's worth, he's sorry about the way he acted."

Artemis paused for moment before replying with a smile, "No he's not."

"No he's not," Barbara grinned in agreement and her honest reply made them both laugh, "but he does wish he'd handled it differently."

"I deserved it."

"Maybe, but you're not the first hero who's screwed up and lost their way. I'm pretty sure you won't be the last."

"I'm no hero Barbara, not anymore."

"I suppose that's up to you. It's not my place to judge, I've never had to walk a day in your shoes."

"Trust me you don't," Artemis said regretfully, taking a long sip of her tea.

"I guess not," Barbara nodded. "I'm sorry to do this, but I have to ask, was it worth it?"

The archer stared down into her cup, hoping for some profound explanation that would make sense. When none came she just answered as truthfully as she could.

"I told Dick it was, but honestly I'm not sure anymore. I was expecting something more. I thought there would at least be some sick satisfaction that he was dead, that before he died he'd see the irony that the daughters he'd spent a lifetime trying to turn into assassins had been the ones to take out the mighty Sportsmaster."

"But when it was all over, when he was dead and lying at my feet, I was just as numb as the day we buried my mom. I was so blind with revenge; it was all I could think about. After all the things he did to our family, I just couldn't let him do something like that to anyone else, especially you guys, and trust me, he would've kept trying, he was that fucking vindictive. So that's how I justified it, that's how I thought it was ok. I knew if anyone of you had found out you would've stopped me, that's
why I tried so hard to cover my tracks."

Artemis's closed her eyes in regret, unable to look at her former teammate. "I should have known Dick or Bruce would have figured it out. I don't know…maybe I was hoping they would. Right after it happened I tried to figure a way to come back and explain…to apologize, but I got scared and then the Shadows arrived and….well you know the rest. What I did to you all was unforgivable. I'm …"

She fought the tears as her voice cracked. She took her cup and drank another sip, unable to finish her thoughts.

Barbara remained silent as the server arrived with her beverage. Her reaction was pretty much what Artemis had expected. They were close once, but her actions had destroyed so many relationships, why should this be any different? The archer looked out the large storefront window, watching as the forecasted rain began to fall, searching for something to say when she noticed a single tear sliding down her friend's cheek just before the red head quickly wiped it away.

Artemis swallowed hard, completely taken aback by her friend's reaction. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, her husky voice betraying the pain she tried so hard to hide. "I fucked everything up, it's what I do."

"I'm so pissed at you," Barbara sniffled, "but I'm so glad you're alive. I missed you." she spoke, reaching over and taking the archer's hand.

"I missed you too. I missed all of you. I knew I wasn't going to make it, that eventually the Shadows were going to kill me, but I thought about you all so much, but after a while it just hurt so much and I just…let go."

Barbara squeezed her hand before finally letting go and palming the remaining moisture from her eyes.

"I know Dick hates me, you probably do too" the blonde sighed, "I don't blame you."

"Artemis, I wouldn't be sitting here drinking overpriced coffee if I hated you, I'd be taking you out back and beating the living shit out of you for what you put us through," she smiled.

"And Dick doesn't hate you either; he's just…really conflicted right now. It's been a rough couple of years for him. He blamed himself for your death. Not being able to save you crushed him. You weren't just his friend Artemis, you were his family. It wasn't long after that the team started to splinter. It wasn't just because of you; it was a lot of things. We weren't kids anymore. We were growing up and a lot of us just didn't want to keep playing cops and robbers. There was school and family and jobs. Dick felt obligated to stay, but the others felt differently and gradually dropped down to part timers, occasionally going on missions with the new recruits every now and then, but it just wasn't the same. And then the whole thing with Wally….."

"Barbara what happened between them? Roy said he didn't know, but I know he was full of shit. He's hiding something."

The red head nodded understandingly, blowing into her cup to cool the coffee. She hated bringing this back up after years of trying to make peace with it, but Artemis deserved to know.

"I guess he told you about Wally's wife? About Thawne?"

Artemis nodded.

Barbara glanced around the café, pulling her chair in closer to the archer. "Right after it happened;
the League went on a worldwide manhunt for Thawne. They called in everybody and I mean everybody. Thawne hadn't just murdered Wally's wife, he'd killed one of their own. Barry was a founding member; he was the glue that kept everyone together."

"Superman was the first to find him. He wasn't anywhere close to Thawne's speed, but he kept him busy enough until Wonder Woman, the three Lanterns, and the Manhunter arrived. It took all of them to wrestle him down and get the inhibitor collar on him, and when they finally did he just sat on the ground and laughed and laughed. They said it was like watching the Joker, it was that twisted."

"When they got him back to the Hall of Justice and into a holding cell, everyone took a breath and waited for Bruce to arrive to figure out what to do with him. It wasn't like they could just send him to Blackgate or Iron Heights. There'd have to be an arrest, a trial of some kind, but the League knew they couldn't risk it. He knew secret identities, family members, things that would come out if any of this went public. It would've put even more innocent lives at risk. It all happened so fast and getting him off the streets was their biggest priority, but afterwards no one knew what to do with him. Something like this had never happened before; there were no protocols in place."

"Hindsight's twenty/twenty, but as soon as Zoom was secured the first thing they should have done was track down Wally and Bart and keep them away from the Hall, but like I said, nothing like this had ever happened before. Everyone was so busy waiting on Batman and throwing out suggestions that they never heard him arrive. That's when Wally took him."

"Hold on a second. Wally took him? Took him where?"

Barbara looked curiously at the archer, not realizing until that moment that her friend didn't know the whole story. "What exactly did Roy tell you?"

"He told me the League tracked Thawne down while he was trying to break into STAR, and from there took him into custody and sent him off to some black site." Artemis replied in confusion.

"That's the official story, that's what the founding members told everyone, but it wasn't the truth, not even close."

Barbara took a deep breath and continued. "In all the confusion Wally grabbed Zoom from the holding cell and shot through the Zeta Tubes before anyone could even move. His speed overloaded every readout and there was no way of tracking him until the system was rebooted, and that would take time, but Dick knew exactly where he'd go. So after everyone took off towards Central and Keystone, Dick transported to Mt. Justice alone. It had been abandoned for years, but he knew that would be the last place anyone would look."

"Wally had Thawne on his knees execution style, preparing to vibrate his fist through Zoom's skull when Dick tackled him and pumped him with enough tranquilizers to kill a buffalo. He knew Wally wouldn't be able to live with himself if he took a life. Dick did what he thought was right and hoped Wally would understand once he could calm down and think clearly again."

"Days later a few of us arrived at the Hall to pay our respects and to check on him. When we walked into the conference room they were going at it full bore. Wally was screaming, completely out of control, just knocking the shit out of Dick left and right, but Dick refused to fight him. He just took it, blow after blow until Kaldur and Conner pulled Wally off of him. Dick had three broken ribs, a dislocated jaw, and a fractured occipital bone, but he refused to put up a fight or even defend himself. That was the moment Wally walked away and they haven't spoken sense."

Artemis was in shock, completely stunned by this discovery. The two friends were closer than brothers, in and out of uniform. They'd saved each other's lives more times then she could count,
always there for the other no matter what. Never in a million years would she have believed something like this could've happened, not between them.

"Wally quit the League and that's the last time just about anyone's heard from him. Conner and Zatanna see him from time to time, I know Roy checks up on him, but mostly he and just keeps to himself and raises the twins. As far as Zoom goes, no one knows for sure where he is. The only thing Batman's ever said was he's in a place where he'll never hurt anyone again. I know he's not dead, but whatever Bruce's done with him, even Dick doesn't know."

"Did you all know...." the blonde asked hesitantly.

"...about his speed?" Barbara answered. "Yeah Dick figured it out. The Flash doesn't just one day shrink four inches and become left handed. It took only a few times seeing him on CNN before we knew it wasn't him. Then Tim confirmed it."

"Tim?"

"Robin, well the new one to you I suppose. A lot's changed since you've been gone." Barbara replied.

"Tim and Bart are pretty close. Kid Flash was one of the new recruits just like Robin was, but when Barry died Bart and Wally pulled away. Bart quit the Team, Wally quit the League. We're not sure what happened or why, I doubt we'll ever know. As to why Bart wears both suits, our best guess is that he keeps up both personas just for appearances, to keep Central City feeling safe and the bad guys on their toes. Barry's death was never made public and I guess they wanted Central and Keystone to keep thinking everything was still status quo. So how'd you find out?"

"I saw Wally almost get killed by carjacker. If Jade and I had jumped in he'd be dead."

"Oh my God," the red head worriedly exclaimed. "Is he ok?"

"Yeah, for the most part I guess," the archer shrugged dejectedly.

"So you've seen him? How'd that go?"

"Let's just say not well," she sighed. "I still care about him Barbara. I care a lot, and it's not like I expected him to welcome me back with open arms, I just wanted...I needed to explain, to make things somehow right, but it was stupid and selfish and things went south pretty quickly."

"I'm sorry Artemis, I really am. Wally's different now; he's not the same guy you remember. None of us are."

Artemis nodded; truer words had never been spoken. The archer could feel the mood of the conversation taking a definite downward turn, and the last thing she wanted was to hurt the feelings of the last friend she had.

"So you and Dick huh?" the archer asked.

"What?" Barbara asked.

Artemis's gaze never waivered.

Barbara laughed it off, tilting her head in the direction of the news rack. "You do see him on the cover of Gotham Post over there don't you? Ms. September I think, I don't usually keep track of playmates, it's bad for my self-esteem."
Artemis pursed her lips, staring down the hero. "You're a terrible liar."

Barbara tried to feign ignorance the best she could, come up with a millions different cover stories, but soon realized someone who'd worked for the Shadows for almost a decade could most likely smell a lie from a mile away sighed, it was probably one of the reasons she was still alive. After a few seconds she realized there was no point in trying to hide it. She opened her purse, and pulled out the ring.

"Holy shit! You're engaged!" Artemis blurted out loud enough that a few other surprised patrons glanced over at them. Barbara's eyes grew wide and she quickly reached over and covered the archer's mouth. The hero scooted closer to the table, trying to shrink their distance as Artemis as did the same

"Engaged?" Artemis repeated with a whisper.

"Yes," Barbra shushed. "No one knows, not even Bruce. You can't tell anyone."

"Who am I going to tell?" the archer deadpanned.

"Ok good point," the red head agreed.

High school romances very rarely last, and Artemis had seen enough of the will they won't they from Dick and Zatanna back in the day to make certain assumptions. Since her return, after seeing enough of Gotham's golden boy plastered across every tabloid in New York with some bimbo by his side, she'd assumed that, much like his mentor; Grayson would remain a bachelor for life. Looking back now Artemis couldn't believe she'd ignored the obvious. Batgirl and Robin had trained together, fought together, literally grew up with each other. No one understood the curse nor the privilege of wearing the bat more than they did. It's usually the most obvious choices that were the hardest to see. It was only natural that they'd eventually discover feelings for each other; the courage to act on them was a whole different matter, but courage was something Dick Grayson and Barbara Gordon held in great supply, and besides if an archer and a certain speedster could have ended up together despite their glaring differences, anyone in this crazy world had a shot.

"Well congratulations," Artemis smiled, unable to take her eyes off the impressive diamond.

"A little gaudy if you ask me, I don't like the idea of wearing a ring that could literally pay off someone's mortgage, but Dick says it all about appearances, just like those girls his publicist arranges for him to appear with. Trust me when this is all over, this ring is going back to the jeweler and turned into something good, like a scholarship of some kind. If we had our way though, we'd be in a chapel in Vegas tying the knot, but Mr. 'high society' is a tad too well known to do something like that, so we have to do the whole formal announcement thing. I'm just don't know if I'm ready to live my life in the gossip section of the Gotham Times, and he knows better than to think for a second I'm giving up being Batgirl. I swear lately I just want to choke the life out of him, especially when he does the things like this, things like you. It's going to take a lot of time and patience trying to be his partner in and out of costume. We know it's going to be a bit complicated at first, but we're working on it."

"Anything worth having usually is. When's the big day? the blonde asked.

"Well he's got to tell Bruce soon, so I imagine there will have to be some kind of formal announcement out in a few days or so, then some Wayne Foundation engagement party, Dick has all the timetables in his head, he knows how fast Bruce works. We don't have a set date in mind yet, but somewhere along the lines of six months to a year I guessing, if we last that long."
"You will." Artemis smiled.

"You should come."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Barbara repeated. "You should come. Dick's been looking for an excuse to get everyone together. Everyone's schedules are always so packed, but people always make time for engagement parties, especially our friends. When are you going to have another chance like this? There are a lot of people who I know would like to see you, people who need to see you."

Artemis frowned slightly. "Barbara I can't. I appreciate the sentiment, I really do, but it would be a huge mistake. I'm not going to be in Gotham much longer, besides you've seen how Dick and Wally reacted, can you imagine how pissed Conner and Kaldur probably are? And oh god I don't want to even think about Zee, I'd be lucky to survive the night. This is about you guys; the last thing you need is that kind of stress."

Barbara shook her head in agreement, but didn't give up. "Just consider it ok? You came back for a reason. If you're really leaving, when are you ever going to get another opportunity like this to say goodbye, the right way," she glared. "I won't put any pressure on you, but just think about it ok?"

Artemis nodded, knowing full well there was no way in hell she'd ever put herself back in a situation like this, she'd learned her lesson well, but still...if Barbara had gone to so much trouble to reach out to her, the least she could do was think it over, despite how terrible and idea it would be.

They continued reminiscing with Barbara telling stories of old friends, triumphs and tragedies, things that made the archer smile. Artemis shared what she could, never getting into any gory detail, but still sharing things about the Shadows that the detective part of Batgirl would find interesting. They talked for hours, as if the last ten years had never existed. The waitress came over with the check, and the red head grabbed for it before the archer her could react. Barbara grinned to Artemis dismay. "You'll get it next time," the hero smiled.

"Next time," the archer agreed. The waitress took her card and went to the register as the red head gathered her purse. As she was about to stand she looked to see Artemis fidgeting about, biting her nails, twisting her hair, all signs Barbara easily remembered despite the years. There was still something on the archer's mind, something she'd held back until now.

"Barbara, what was she like? Wally's wife?"

Barbara exhaled, a small reminiscing smile crossing her face. "She reminded me a lot of you."

"Asian?" Artemis chuckled.

"He does have a type," the hero smiled. "She was beautiful, elegant, funny, fearless. Even in a room full of meta-humans, aliens, and vigilantes, she was never intimidated. The Flash is one of the fastest men alive, a true superhero, but to her Wally was just a normal guy, a bit obnoxious from time to time, but normal," she smiled as they both chuckled.

"She kept him grounded, and they were both just really happy, until that monster took it all away," she said bitterly. "Linda never even got to hold her own babies. That piece of garbage took everything from him, his wife, his mentor, his friend. If there's any justice in this world, Thawne will rot away in whatever prions he's in and then hell after that."

Artemis took Barbara's hand, regretful she's asked and the bad memories it had brought back. "I'm
sorry Barbara."

The read head squeezed it, "No its ok, it's just still really sad. Look I gotta run. Think about what I said. It would mean a lot to me if you'd come, but if not we definitely have to get together one more time before you leave ok? Promise?"

"I promise." the blonde warmly smiled.

Barbara's brows furrowed. "Artemis…"

"I promise" the archer chuckled. "You're going to hold this whole faking my death thing over me for a long time aren't you?"

"You have no idea, the red head evilly grinned. "Talk to you soon."

xxx

Wally sat on the back porch in his zero gravity rocking chair staring up at the stars. It was a clear Missouri night. The moon shone brightly as the warm spring breeze blew through, carrying fragrant traces of honeysuckle along with it. He covered one eye, spying a slow moving point of light in the northern sky, trying to decide if it was one of a thousand satellites that moved through that orbit, or something much larger.

Wally had been to the Watchtower dozens of times over the years; mission briefings, holiday celebrations, retirement ceremonies, and of course honoring the dead, but no memory of that place stood out more than that December night, hours before the New Year, when he and an unruly set of sidekicks literally saved the world. The last time he set foot on that space station was to inform its members that the Flash was formally retiring from the Justice League. Before he transported back to Earth he took one final walk through the Memorial to the Fallen, pausing at every marker and paying his respects one last time. Ted Kord, Jason Todd, Barry Allen...Artemis Crock. At least now there was one less marker up there he supposed.

To say Artemis's return had him sent for a loop would be an understatement. Redheads are stereotyped as being hot-headed, tempestuous, dramatic, high-strung; and he'd lived up to every word of that definition when it came to the events of a few nights earlier. He needed someone to talk to, to help him sort out what he was going through and god knows he couldn't tell his mom, her Irish temper at times dwarfed his own, and between her freaking out that he'd played hero again and almost died along with Artemis being alive and the one that saved him, well that was a road he wasn't anywhere close to wanting to go down yet.

Bart had tried and Wally appreciated his cousin's effort, but the speedster was still young, and despite the enormous pressure that rested on his shoulders, the super hero game was still fun to him, it still gave him the rush. Wally needed someone who could talk him down off the edge and help him sort through his conflicting feelings. He needed his wife, he needed his uncle. He needed his best friend. Two of them had been violently torn away from him, and the other pushed away and punished for something he didn't deserve.

Dick would have known exactly what to say; he would have understood exactly how he felt, all it would have taken was a simple phone call or text, but it was too late now, too much time had passed, just another thing Zoom had stolen from him.

He'd spent years blaming himself for Artemis's death. Barry would have easily been able to vibrate though that blast door and save the day, but the younger speedster had failed time and time again. The look on her face from behind the glass when she knew he wouldn't be able to save her still
haunted Wally to this day. It was the same failure he felt as he held his dying wife's hands when the
doctors took her off the respirator and she slowly faded away. All because he wasn't fast enough, he
wasn't good enough.

Now one of those haunting memories was a lie. He wished he could have felt some sort of relief or
comfort knowing the archer was still alive, but the only thing he felt was anger and resentment. She'd
played him on so many levels. Looking back now he realized that her master plan all along had
factored in his inabilities, his weaknesses, his blind love.

He'd barely listened to the stories she shared, the pain and suffering she'd caused, the torture and guilt
she'd experienced, the nightmares that her life had become. Instead all he thought about was himself
and what he'd lost. She didn't care about that, she didn't care about him. How do you do something
like this to someone you love? Maybe it wasn't really love after all?

If that was true then why was she here now? It made no sense. Once she'd made it out alive, released
from her captors and given another chance at life, she could have gone anywhere, done anything.
She was finally free, and what was the first thing she'd done with her new found freedom? She'd
come back to apologize and saved his life in the process.

He'd thanked her by throwing her out of his house and telling her how broken she was. Artemis
might not have been a hero anymore, but he sure as hell wasn't one either. He was lost in those
thoughts when he felt the tug of his shirt and bright green eyes came into focus.

"Daddy?"

"What is it baby?"

"The Avengers is on TV, want to come watch it with us?"

At that moment all the self-loathing, anger and guilt slowly drifted away. Behind Iris, Jai stood
impatiently at the screen door, "Come on… it's starting!"

Wally smiled, getting out of the chair and in one fell swoop reached for his daughter and shot her
into the sky above him. The freckle faced girl shrieked in delight as she fell safely back into her
father's arms.

Wally placed her down in front of the screen and raced to the kitchen to get some food. Three
minutes later he appeared with a huge bowl of buttered popcorn and settled down between the two.

They'd seen the movie so many times they could literally recite Loki's dialogue word for word or
hum along with the heroic score. A few minutes later a commercial came on and Jai rushed to the
bathroom, leaving Iris and Wally sitting against the couch.

"It must be so cool to be a superhero," she said, shoving another handful of popcorn into her mouth
before her brother could come back and yell for her to share.

Wally smiled to himself.

It had its moments.
Chapter 11

Artemis sat on the rooftop edge of Roy's apartment building, adjusting the drawback tension of the borrowed compound bow. It was an almost exact replica of the model Oliver Queen had first given her all those years ago, with the exception of the more pronounced wheel cams and an improved target sight. It had been quite a while since she'd held something so finely crafted; the weapons provided by the Shadow's usually were more crude and compact, but still just as deadly.

All things considered Roy had been fairly decent about the theft and subsequent use of his credit card, not so much so however about her ignoring his warning and pleas about making contact with the former speedster. It had gone just as bad as everyone had predicted, and Artemis had prepared herself for the warranted backlash that was sure to come. She was met with furrowed brow and body language that spoke volumes, but not the ass chewing or kicking she deserved, something Artemis attributed more to him currently sleeping with her sister than any active step in his long road to recovery. It was also likely the reason he had loaned her his spare bow and current array of trick arrows to examine, any excuse to get her out of the apartment and let his trademark temper subside.

As she held the arrows to the hovering moonlight she stood impressed. Oliver and Roy had really upped their game since she'd last seen weapons like this. Their cache of Acetylene, Acidic, Sonic, Stunner, and Tri-Clamp arrows had all been greatly improved upon, not just in sophistication, but design as well since she'd last played hero. Artemis was also quite fond of the stronger filament bow string, most likely the ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylenes she'd read so much about. It felt solid, elegant, powerful; everything she remembered when the billionaire first took her under his wing and presented her the weapon. She'd been a prodigy when it came to archery, but nothing compared to the Green Arrow. He told her she was good, but he'd make her better. He was right.

She wasn't sure what she heard first, the scream or the gunshot; but regardless one minute she was sitting alone on a Gotham rooftop contemplating her immediate future and the next she was standing over a dazed robber with a razor sharp titanium tip resting on his throat. His belt served well enough as a makeshift restraint, and once she was sure the victim was ok and the wails of sirens closing in, she smiled at the woman, told her everything would be ok and then disappeared into the night. Never once had she considered killing the criminal and that knowledge filled her heart with something she hadn't felt in a long time. Hope.

Twenty minutes later she was on the scene of a burglary in process, and after that a shootout between two rival gangs; each incident ended quickly, quietly, but most importantly with no casualties. That when she felt it, just like all those years ago; the rush, the excitement, and for just the briefest moments she remembered what it was like to be a hero.

It was going on one a.m., but her adrenaline was pumping way too hard to go back to Roy's. She was planning her next move when off in the distance she saw it. A beam of light slicing through the night sky, a familiar insignia resting within it, broadcasted to the clouds. Someone needed help. Someone needed the Dark Knight.

xxx

Nightwing cursed to himself as his custom Dodge Tomahawk screamed through the streets of Gotham. How many more people would have to die before the experts at Arkham realized that some people were beyond saving? Like Alfred once told him; some people just like to watch the world burn, people like Victor Zsasz.

New doctors, new therapies, same results, and while the two first year residents politely disagreed
with each other on their conflicting diagnosis of psychopath verses sociopath, the sedated killer just sat calmly in wait until he saw his moment and took advantage of it. With nothing more than a ball point pen, Zasaz killed both doctors, slashed the throat of the security guard on duty, and after nearly maiming a young father that had stopped to see if he needed help, was now speeding down 4th Avenue towards the shipping district with the man's young wife and daughter in tow. If Zasaz made it out of the city, his two hostages were as good as dead, or worse. Four other patients escaped along with him, but none were as important, none was a deadly as this man. He had to be stopped at all costs.

Nightwing weaved in and out of traffic as he spotted the stolen car making a hard turn onto Foster Ave. A few miles ahead would be blocks and blocks of dilapidated buildings and abandoned warehouses, perfect locations for the serial killer to disappear into if Dick didn't reach him soon. The cycle took a sharp right turn, and for the first time in the pursuit, the hero had a straight line of site and at the fleeing vehicle. He had to be careful, if he didn't make the right call, both women would be dead before the car came to a halt.

Nightwing entered a command onto the vehicle control pad, and seconds later a small panel opened on the front of the motorcycle, launching a small circular projectile. The mini E.M.P generator skidded across the pavement before landing softly under the trunk of the car, activating immediately upon impact. Instantly the car began to decelerate while Nightwing accelerated, overshooting the vehicle by at least hundred yards. Zasaz screamed in fury until up ahead he saw the bike begin to wobble out of control and seconds later the hero was thrown from it. The Tomahawk flipped to its side, sparks erupting from the ground as it skidded down the roadway, while its occupant flipped across the pavement helplessly before landing squarely into a lamppost with a sickening thud, his body splayed out in painful angles in all directions.

The killer erupted form the car, knife in one hand resting against the young girls neck, while he dragged her mother violently by her hair, gun jammed directly into her ribs. He grinned at the fallen hero, blood pouring from his face. The row of abandoned warehouses were easily within his reach, he and the two women could be safely inside in less than a minute and then his fun could begin, but the injured hero was just too tempting.

He dragged the screaming girls towards the incapacitated crime fighter. Zasaz quickly realized he'd need a free hand if were to operate on the young hero, so after quickly weighing his options, Zasaz decided the mother would be easier to control and the daughter easier to find once he was done, so he pushed the young girl away, threatening to kill her mother if she didn't run and hide. The young girl sprinted away sobbing, unsure what to do or where to go, but away from the carnage nonetheless, just as Dick had hoped.

**One down**

Zasaz took his free hand and once again garnished the blade and knelt down beside the hero, jerking his unconscious head to the side, searching out his carotid, when suddenly Dick jerked forward launching his forehead right onto the bridge of the killer nose, while simultaneously grabbing Zasaz ‘s gun with one hand and his blade with the other. The young wife screamed in panic as the presumed fallen hero flipped to his feet and began wrestling with the sociopath for his weapons while trying to free the woman at the same time. In his frenzy, Zasaz slashed the hero's arm, digging deep into his bicep until he finally slid past Kevlar and reached unprotected skin. Dick winced in pain, but continued his fight, finally prying lose the gun and tossing it aside as it discharged.

The bullet ricocheted off two walls before sparking the ground near both men's feet. That moment of distraction was all Zasaz needed to pull another blade from the back of his belt andjabbed it into the woman's throat, barely breaking the skin but making his point clearly
"Back off hero, you know I'll do it, you know how much I'll enjoy it!" he warned tauntingly.

Dick brows furrowed from beneath the domino mask just as something from behind the killer caught his eye. He rose slowly to his feet, his hands raised passively in the air.

"Step back nice and slow," Zsasz warned. "Whatever you did to my car, you have ten seconds to deactivate it or I will cut her fucking head right off her shoulders."

Dick stood motionless, making no effort whatsoever to comply.

"Are you fucking crazy? I will KILL her; this woman's bloody corpse will be the last thing her little girls see's before I come after her next. Turn the car back on now or she dies."

Dick's face grew grim as he uttered his next words.

"Do it."

Of all the things the serial killer had expected to hear, after all the years they'd battled on and off, those words were dead last on the list. Nightwing's unfathomable statement was nothing short of stunning, and it wasn't till a millisecond before the Taser arrow lodged into his spine, did Zsasz realize Nightwing wasn't talking to him.

Dick rushed towards the killer, absorbing the residual voltage that now flowed through the villain and pried the woman away with nothing more than a few singed hairs.

Zsasz lay on the ground, the Taser arrow still sparking, sending 50,000 volts through the killer's central nervous system, and before the last bit of consciousness escaped him, the last thing he saw was the soul of Nightwing's boot rushing towards his face, and then darkness.

Before he had ditched his bike, the hero had activated an emergency 911 call with GPS coordinates attached. In the distance across the Gotham River Bridge he could see the flashing blue lights fast approaching. He sat both mother and daughter away from the scene, grabbing a compact aluminum blanket from his bike and covering the hysterical women with it until the EMT's could arrive. They were traumatized, but alive, and that's all that mattered.

He tossed Artemis a set of titanium reinforced handcuffs and she quickly secured the sociopath, rolling him over to his stomach and jerking his wrists together firmly. This animal deserved much worse, but that wasn't her job anymore.

"Nice shot," he smiled. "Thanks for the assist."

"I was in the neighborhood," the archer smiled back. "You had this."

Nightwing sighed and shook his head. "No, I really didn't. Those two women are alive because of you."

Artemis brushed aside the compliment walking over to him and noticing the odd hue of red that covered his face. Underneath the liquid there was no gashes or scrapes, as a matter of fact he didn't appear to be injured at all; it had all been an act.

"Fake blood?" she questioned.

"I was performer remember? Sometimes it all about theatrics."

The stood awkwardly together in silence for a few moments as the police arrived. When the officer
in charge motioned for the hero to come over and give a statement. Dick turned back to the archer and spoke. "So look, I um... need to take care of this."

"Yeah, I understand," she replied. "I probably should go anyway."

Dick nodded and started to walk away before pausing momentarily and turning back to her. "Four other inmates broke out of Arkham tonight with him. They couldn't have gotten far. Looks like my next couple nights are going to be tied up searching for them. You could...join me if you want."

Artemis smiled widely. "Yeah. I might just do that."

xxx

Superheroes don't get days off, it's just the nature of the beast, but with the last few days having little to no criminal activity in the Central/Keystone area, Bart decided to take one anyway. He'd stayed late the night before at the campus computer lab working on his final term paper with his study group, and then almost immediately hitting the streets to patrol. Trying to balance school and a super hero alter-ego was wearing him down, and summer vacation couldn't come soon enough. He wondered how Barry had managed it all those years with commitments to a wife, job, and the League.

At last, the weekend had finally arrived, and not just any weekend, but the annual Garrick Fourth of July extravaganza weekend. Once a year the retired speedster would host friends and family at their farm for food, drinks, fireworks, food, games, great company, and most importantly food. The Garrick's knew how to throw a party, and definitely knew how to feed a speedster. Jay and Joan were the closest things he had to relatives outside of his grandma Iris. Bart still went to see her every week, hoping this year she'd change her mind and join him, but Iris Allen wanted little to do with the superhero community anymore. Losing her husband had taken its toll, and sitting around a campfire listening to old stories of his heroics would just break her heart all over again. Jay and Joan understood, but everyone felt her loss just the same.

Tim Drake would arrive at his apartment by eight; they'd head out for breakfast, and then meet up with a few other members of his former team, that's when the fun would begin. Bart missed his old team, especially a young blonde Amazon he'd had a crush on from the first day she arrived at the Mountain, but Barry's death and Wally's loss of powers had made him grow up a lot faster than he'd expected. He was ready to be a normal teenager for once, even if it was just for a weekend.

He was sound asleep when his alarm went off. Bart groaned and reached for the clock to slam the snooze down button when he realized it wasn't his clock but his communicator. He opened it and with blurry eyes made out the 459A Burglar alarm Police code. Standard burglaries were not something that normally popped up on his radar, but the communicator was programmed to activate when alerts came from specific parts of town. When he read the displayed address he immediately knew why; The Union Square shopping district.

Bart rubbed his eyes and stretched, stepping out of bed and activating the secret ring he wore on his right hand. A second later the crimson suit shot forth and formed around the young speedster."

"Hero time," he yawned, and disappeared into the darkness.

It took no time to arrive at Union Square. Though fairly fancy for the Midwest, no one would ever mistake it for the high end shopping of Gotham or Metropolis, but none the less it was still home to many fine jewelry shops, clothing outlets, and electronic stores. Bart quickly determined that the Galleria Fine Jewels and Gifts was the source of the blaring alarm. He sped to the window looking in, and then a quick lap around all the buildings for signs of intrusion. Nothing.
Moments later a second alarm sounded, then a third, then a fourth, until every store in the complex's security system had been triggered. The combined wail of multiple alarms was deafening. A minute or two later several units of the CCPD arrived and jumped out of their vehicles, weapons at the ready. Bart just stared around the district in confusion, shrugging his shoulders at the arriving officers who were just as puzzled as he was.

"What's happening!" the officer in charge yelled over the blaring sirens.

"I have no clue!" Bart screamed back. "There's not one open door, no shattered windows. I don't get it!"

"Dispatch says the security companies have been alerted and are sending technicians in, but it's going to take a little time to get here!"

"Perfect!" Bart yelled sarcastically. Not the start of the weekend he'd hoped for.

So much for the night off he groaned.

Bart left the officer to do a second perimeter check and then expanded his patrol to the neighboring city blocks, every few minutes adding even more. Once again he'd found nothing. Twenty minutes later the alarms were shut down and he could finally think straight.

This is too weird he thought to himself. Union Square was a few blocks from the subway, but those vibrations shouldn't have set them off, they never had before. A small earthquake wasn't entirely out if the question, but its epicenter being right in one of the richest parts of Central City could not have been a coincidence. For a brief second he considered calling Wally, but there was little his cousin could do now, the event was over, and there was no point in making Wally as tired and miserable as he was.

Away from prying eyes, he removed his cowl and rubbed at his aching ears. Off to the east it was still dark, but he knew the sun would be rising on the horizon before too long. He's decided to do one more pass through the district, check in with the officer in charge, and maybe have time for a an hour or so power nap before his friend arrived.

Five minutes later he arrived back to the apartment, scanning the area around him before putting the scarlet suit back in his ring and walking the stairs. He looked at his watch and yawned before opening the door, trying to determine if it was even worth getting back in bed. The speedster walked in and reached back to the door to fasten the deadbolt when suddenly he was sent flying into the nearest wall, struck harder than he'd ever been hit before, and then again, and again.

xxx

Nightwing and Artemis sat atop the old Jolly Jack Candy Company, watching as the last of the escaped prisoners were loaded into the prison transport vehicles. For some unknown reason instead of splitting up and going their separate ways, they'd decided to stay together, some genius within the group convincing the rest there was strength in numbers, but if these guys were Einstein's they wouldn't have ended up in Arkham in the first place.

The inmates had put up a decent fight all things considered, but it didn't take long for the escapees to realize they were outmatched and outgunned. However there's always one guy who thinks he'll beat the odds this time and come out ahead. Tonight that man was Robert Jones, or as he was known within the asylum as the Frogman. Standing easily at seven feet tall, he'd given the archer a fairly decent blow to the jaw driving her viciously to the pavement. For the briefest of moments Dick worried how the archer might retaliate, but two round house kicks to the face and a shot to the groin
later, he rested easier seeing the man face down on the concrete but still breathing. Procreating one day might be a whole another matter.

Almost all of their dialogue this evening had been strictly strategy and tactics, Backgrounds and criminal histories of the men, typical modus operandi, what to do in certain scenarios, how to handle hostages situations, etc. They were cordial but with a very professional air about them, but as they escaped inmates were driven away and the dust settled, awkward silences began to creep back in and a certain level of anxiety hung back in the air.

"So um...I guess congratulations are in order huh?" Artemis began, regarding the upcoming nuptials.

"Yeah thanks. Barbara's been pretty patient with me all things considered, but she wasn't going to wait forever. Honestly I'm just glad she said yes," he chuckled.

"Like there was ever a doubt? Even when you and Zee were together, I could see the way you two looked at each other. It was more than just being partners; you and Barbara had a history."

"Why didn't you ever say anything then?" he asked curiously.

"Because it was none of my business, God knows I didn't like it when people got into mine. I assumed you'd figure it out one day, I'm just glad no hearts were broken along the way. Roy says for the most part you and Zee are still friends?"

"Yeah, I'd like to think so. I saw her a while back when her show came through Gotham. We occasionally bump into each other when she and Bruce have some kind of League business, but for the most part it seems all right."

"Good," Artemis nodded. "I'm glad you two could move past it and remain civil. First loves can be hard to get over."

Dick glanced over, seeing the archer's eyes staring distantly to the horizon, reading between the lines.

"I'm with who I'm supposed to be," he added, "damn lucky too."

"I'd say so,' Artemis smiled slyly.

"Have you seen Zee yet?" Nightwing asked.

"No. We've exchanged voicemails but that's about it. If or when we meet, I'm hoping Barbara will consider tagging along to mediate. Zee's not very happy needless to say, the last thing I need is for a pissed off sorceress turning me into some kind of farm animal."

Dick chuckled. "I doubt she'd do that, but you never know."

Artemis smiled in agreement.

"I have a question Dick, and you don't have to answer it if you don't want to."

"Shoot," he replied.

"Why didn't you ever join the League? Roy said you were asked more than a few times. I thought it's what you always wanted?"

Dick stroked his chin, contemplating the question for a moment. "It just wasn't for me. I'd done the team thing once, didn't work out so well. Sometimes you're just better off on your own. Let's just leave it at that."
Artemis didn't like the answer, but she understood it. When you're a part of a team, you watch out for each other, care for each other, but everyone has to buy into it or it doesn't work. She was living proof.

"Well for what it's worth, I think you would have been great. I think all of you would have."

Dick nodded. "Yeah...I'd like to think so."

It became Dick's turn to go on the offensive. "So... what was it like...the Shadows I mean? Do the stories do them justice?"

Artemis stared at her hands, remembering moments and times when she couldn't see the olive hue of her skin past all the blood. "It was a nightmare," she sighed. "There were days I wished they'd just gone ahead and killed us. It was little comfort knowing that most of the guys we went after were scum. When you read some of their dossiers it was like a demon's resume, pure fucking evil. But there were also some guys that had just gotten into deep and couldn't take it anymore. Those are the ones that haunt me; those eyes, those faces. I'll never forget them. I don't deserve to."

She stood, stretching her legs, adjusting her tender jaw. "I knew then they'd never let us go, but I will say this about the Shadows, they do have a code and they stick with it. I only got to see Ra's al Ghul once, but it was at a distance. The Shadows are very compartmentalized, and it's not like we were ever going to move up in the hierarchy."

She swallowed hard, trying to maintain her composure. "I try not to think about what I've done Dick, but that doesn't mean I'm not sorry."

"So what now?" he asked.

The archer shrugged her shoulders "I honestly don't know. I've had people telling me what to do and where to go for as long as I can remember, but now that it's finally my choice, I'm not sure what to do. I know what the smart thing is; disappear and start a new life somewhere else, but so far I haven't done anything close to the smart thing since I've been back."

"I think that mother and daughter you saved might feel a little bit different," he interjected.

Artemis smiled for a moment. "Yeah, it really did feel good."

For a few minutes they sat in silence, listening to the sounds of the city, the blaring horns of a thousand cars and cabs, the clanging bells of the buoys floating in the harbor, the howls of sirens speeding through the city answering desperate calls for help from those who couldn't help themselves.

She recalled moments just like this, when the two young heroes' and would team up and patrol the city they both called home. They'd confide and complain about relationship troubles, discuss where they were and where they wanted to be one day, share goals, hopes, dreams. She missed those days, but those two teenagers had been gone for a long time now.

Dick interrupted silence. "I owe you an apology."

"You don't owe me anything." the archer replied with a touch of bitterness. "Anything you think you might have done; anything Barbara's convinced you of..." she paused, trying to find the words. In the end all she could come up with was, "I had coming."

"I handled it poorly."
The archer sighed, realizing her former teammate was trying to extend an olive branch. "Fine you handled it poorly," she agreed reluctantly. "If that'll put an end to that patented Dick Grayson self-loathing thing you used to do, then I forgive you," she smirked.

A smile crept out from under his mask.

"Dick there's never going to be anything I can say or do to make it right. What I did was selfish and cruel. It doesn't matter if that was my intent or not, it happened and there's no going back. Trust me. I wish I could go back and tell myself that ten years ago, I hope to God I would have listened, but it doesn't matter anymore. You asked me if it was worth it, the honest answer's no. Wally was right, killing him made me no better than him and thanks to the Shadows a hell of a lot worse. I have to live with that."

"I wouldn't lie and say something like that hasn't crossed my mind a few times if I ever found my parents killer." Dick added.

Artemis disagreed. "That's not who you are Dick, no matter how much you wish it could be sometimes. I used to think what I did was about justice for my mom, not vengeance, that's how I rationalized it. In the end, seeing what I caused and what I walked away from, it was probably the most cowardly thing I've ever done."

"Artemis we were already drifting apart, you had to have seen that. Not everyone wants to wear a costume for the rest of their lives. Kaldur had Atlantis, Wally had college, Roy had rehab, Connor had the Kent's. We were already teetering; your death just pushed some of us over the edge, but it was eventually going to happen regardless of what you did."

"When you found out the truth, why did you keep it to yourself? The others deserved to know what a piece of shit I was."

"It's not like I didn't consider it. When I found out you were still alive, I was so fucking angry, I guess in a way I still am, but that didn't mean I didn't care. I came close, but Bruce convinced me if we'd tried to come get you, they'd kill you. No one knows the Shadows like he does, and the thought of taking on some reckless mission that would put yours and anyone else's lives at risk, I just couldn't take that chance. We'd been apart for too long, we weren't the well-oiled machine we once were, and one missed assignment, one small mistake and that would have been it. So that's how I justified it. I kept it from Barbara, I kept it from everybody. You'd made your choice, and you had your reasons, but if you'd wanted our help, you would have asked."

"I couldn't."

"I know that now," Dick agreed sadly, "but you're not the first one to do something like this, and you won't the last. I took it personal, and I never considered the price you paid."

"I got what I deserved," the archer confirmed.

"That's kind of an understatement don't you think?"

"Yeah," she replied sorrowfully, thinking back to the lives she'd taken, the life she'd lost.

"I miss the old days, I miss our friends, but we all have to grow up sometime right?" Dick stated, more as a statement than a question.

Artemis nodded. Thanks to her father she'd had to grow up a lot faster than most, being in the Shadows only made things worse. Maybe that's what attracted her to Gotham, it was the first time she got to feel like a normal kid, even if it was just for a little while.
"I should have said this before, but I'm glad you're ok. All things considered you're pretty lucky, not many people get second chances, especially from the Shadows. I hope you'll make the most of it."

"Me too, " she answered, knowing full well she had no idea what to do with that chance. Zane was still out there waiting, but he wasn't going to stay that way much longer. He had a plan, a direction, one that she wasn't so sure know she wanted to be a part of anymore, but without better options it still seemed like the best choice. All she had to do know was convince herself of that.

"Look I'm starving. You want to get something to eat? The Starlight Diner is only five blocks from here. I've got some civies you borrow. How about a greasy Gotham breakfast, my treat?"

The archer beamed widely. "You're on."

xxx

Tim Drake was irritated thirty minutes ago, after an hour he was pissed.

What is it about the fastest men alive and being late? he wondered, it was beyond a character flaw, it had to be genetic. Neither teen would ever be mistaken as being "morning people," but when it came to the annual Garrick extravaganza, there were always exceptions. Every fourth of July for as long as he could remember, Jay and Joan hosted a cookout to end all cookouts; slow roasted barbeque, enough hamburgers and hot dogs to feed an army, tubs of homemade potato salad and banana pudding, and with a little meta human assistance, a pretty impressive fireworks display. But by far the best thing about the holiday was the company. It was one of the few times of the year that members of the superhero community could relax and let their hair down, when his friends and peers could take a day off from saving the world and just be normal. When instead of discussing crowd control or attack strategies, they could talk about sports, movies, girlfriends, boyfriends etc: normal things that normal people do. No costumes or capes allowed.

It was also going to one of the few times he and one of his best friends would actually get to spend time together. With Bart leaving the team and going off to college, carving out time to hang out between two incredibly busy schedules had been more challenging than either had first thought, and now that they'd actually had made the time, Bart was late...as usual.

Standing outside the three level college apartment complex was starting to make Tim feel like some kind of stalker, and after nodding and saying hi to a few wary looking residents that passed him by, he'd finally he'd had enough. The young detective walked in through the ground floor entrance, making his way up the stairs to Bart's room. It would take little to no effort to pick the lock and wait inside, so as Tim reached into to his backpack to retrieve his pick set, he heard a moan coming from the other side of the door. Drake's brows furrowed as he reached for the door knob only to find it unlocked, the sound of heavy breathing coming from inside. That was the last straw.

"I swear to God Allen, if you're in there sleeping I'm going to kick your sorry a...Oh God!" he gasped.

Slumped on the floor, covered in blood and fresh bruises, was his best friend; semi-conscious, moaning, and crawling towards his phone before his strength gave out, landing into puddle of bright crimson.

His breaths were shallow, his eyes hooded. In his daze he thought he recognized Tim's voice, and in between gasps for air and spitting up blood, he reached up with what remaining strength he had and whispered, "Got...to...warn...Wally...Zoo..." and with those final words he passed out to the floor.

Tim rushed to his side, checking for a pulse. It was weak, but still there. Drake quickly reached into
his backpack, pulling out his utility belt and arming his battarangs. Next he feverishly searched through the apartment, looking for any signs of an intruder. When he reached Bart's bedroom, the young hero stopped dead in his tracks. On the wall, a familiar insignia; a scarlet lightning bolt striking through a sphere, was drawn on the wall in blood. Bart's blood.

xxx

The diner was louder than she remembered. The constant clanging of dishes and glasses, the waitresses yelling orders back to the cooks, all the while crowds of people raising their voices over the ambient noise in a futile effort to make conversation were a bit overwhelming, but she could tolerate the noise if the food was always this good.

Dick cut into his buttermilk pancakes, while the archer savored her egg white omelet. Though she'd always prefer the banh mi op la her mom was famous for, there was still something to be said for plain old eggs, cheese, and sausage. She could tell by the quiet moans emanating from the other side of the table that Dick didn't get out to places like this very much, one of the drawbacks of being one of Gotham's golden boys she supposed, which also explained why he ate with his sunglasses on. Looking back now, she'd never understand how she'd missed the connection between the boy wonder and the annoying underclassman at Gotham academy, the only difference being a little hair gel and a pair of Oakley's.

Dick was shoveling his breakfast in at a pretty healthy pace, and watching him brought back memories of another boy she once knew, one who could eat three times that amount in half the time. The speedster had been the elephant in the room too long.

"I'm sorry about Wally," she said over the background noise.

Dick frowned, putting down his fork for the moment. "Yeah, me too. It's stupid I know, but I've tried to talk to him and he's made it very clear he doesn't want me in his life, So…I'm not," he sighed.

The archer knew exactly how that felt, and she didn't have to be a detective to see the pain in her friend's eyes. It hurt to see him like that, but it hurt more to know the boy she once loved was gone.

It was time to change the subject, and as much as she didn't want to, it was doing no good reopening old wounds.

"So, big engagement party coming up I hear?"

Dick rolled his eyes and sighed. "Not my idea, but the sooner we get it over with, the sooner I can stop playing this billionaire douchebag role that Bruce perfected. It's kind of funny in a twisted kind of way, but I've seen Barbara go up against guys like the Joker, the Riddler, Killer Croc, and never break a sweat, but I've never seen her so scared by something as dumb as a little engagement party."

"From what I've heard it's not exactly going to be little," the blonde smirked,

"Yeah, about that…" he started, just as his ringer went off. He reached for his phone only to discover it wasn't the source, instead it was his communicator flashing a priority one alert. He picked it up, listening for a moment before his face grew grim

"Tim…Tim… slow down!" he pleaded.

On the other end his partner exclaimed. "Its bad Dick, I've called 911, there's an ambulance on the way, but we've got to warn Wally."

"Warn him about what?"
"Zoom? It was Zoom."

Dick's mouth fell open in shock. "Tim it can't be. Bruce said he's gone...permanently."

"I know what he said, but something's not right. I've already tried calling Wally on Bart's phone, but he's not picking. What if it's too late?"

Dick wouldn't go there, not yet. "Alright, stay there with him, I'm on my way. Get Bruce to triangulate Wally's GPS and feed it to the computer on my bike...and let me know as soon as the ambulance gets there. Have you secured all the...?"

"Yeah I have his ring in my pocket, and there nothing else in the apartment that would tie him into any alter-egos, other than the big goddamn bloody flash insignia on his wall!"

"I'll be there as soon as I can!" he replied before closing his communicator and getting to his feet

"What is it?" Artemis demanded.

"Bart's been attacked, and Tim thinks Wally's next."

"By who?" she asked urgently.

"A man named Eobard Thawne, he's the man who....."

"I know who he is," the archer cut him off, "What does he want with Wally?"

"That just it, it can't be him. Bruce assured me of that, but Wally's not answering hos phone and I can't take the chance. Look I'll get Barbara to call you as soon as I know something."

Artemis stood from the table, leaving her napkin and a tip next to her plate.

"I'm coming with you."

Dick shook his head no. "Right now the last thing he ne...."

"I'm...Coming...With...You!" she replied with a growled that spoke don't fuck with me right now.

Dick knew from past experience that was no dissuading a pissed off archer, and though she'd changed some over the years, she hadn't changed that much.

"Lets' go. There's a Zeta Station three blocks from here."

Moments later they were on his bike screaming down the streets of Gotham, Artemis wrapping her arms around him holding on for dear life.

xxx

Wally pulled into his parent's driveway, walking to the porch and reaching for the key hidden inside the hanging fern. He was grateful his mom had taken the kids for the night; they'd probably been up since the crack of dawn harassing his folks to get a move on to Uncle Jay and Aunt Joan's farm, allowing him to get a few extra hours sleep. However when the call came in at 7:30 in the morning that Mary had forgotten the gallons of ice cream in the freezer, her son was unfortunately called into action.

As soon as he walked in, the smell of breakfast nearly overwhelmed him. He made his way to kitchen hoping to find leftovers, and as usual Mary didn't disappoint. With a mouthful of bacon, he
went back towards the den; making sure nothing else had been left behind. It was a two and a half hour drive to the Garrick's farm, and he didn't intend to make it twice. Satisfied he went to the hall and opened the door heading down to the basement and the large upright freezer that resided there.

The stairs creaked as he made his way down them. As usual the dank basement reeked of mold and sulfur, causing him to sneeze. It was normal for in-ground basements to hold a certain musty smell, but the burning scent of sulfur was all him, more specifically the remnants of the chemical reaction he'd recreated that gave him his speed. Reaction was actually too kind a word, explosion was a bit more accurate, and it was a miracle he hadn't burned the whole house down in the process.

Ah, the good old days he chuckled.

His dad had cleaned up the aftermath of his experiment years ago, but preserved the makeshift laboratory Wally had painstakingly built behind a patrician in the corner; a monument to his son's brilliance or recklessness, depending on his mood. One day he'd possibly consider donating it to some kind of Flash museum.

Wally walked over to the freezer, shocked at the sheer volume of ice cream he'd be taking with him. Next to the freezer on the floor was his father's large Yeti cooler. It was thirty four pounds when empty, stocked full of ice cream and dry ice probably twice as much. Wally started to suspect that the deserts hadn't been left behind accidently at all.

He sighed and began packing it when he noticed a test-tube, sticking out from under the make shift walls his dad had built around the lab. It struck him a bit odd, and he hoped to God his kids hadn't been down there playing with it, Iris in particular. She'd always shared his obsession with science. He knelt down to pick up the item, when he thought he heard a voice whisper from behind, something barely audible.

"Boom"

And for the second time in his life, his makeshift laboratory violently exploded, sending him flying into the cinderblock wall across the basement, and turning his house into a raging inferno.

Outside in his jeep, his phone ring endlessly, a desperate caller on the other end hoping for someone to answer it.

xxx

Keystone City had never been a location deemed necessary by the League to place a Zeta Tube in. While spacing the transport system in different cities across the country and beyond, the powers that be considered it redundant to place two units so close together when the hero's that patrolled those two cities could arrive at a single transport unit in seconds.

As Nightwing and Artemis sped out the abandoned Wayne Warehouse on the Riverfront district of Central City, the tires of his retrofitted Tomahawk squealed and smoked against the payment. Her skin tingled from the transport, her stomach still a bit unsettled. It had been a decade since she'd stepped foot in a Zeta Beam, and despite it convenience she honestly hadn't missed it. The idea of mixing her molecules with alien radiation never set well with her, but at the moment that was the least of her concerns. She glanced ahead to discover they were already nearing the Gateway suspension bridge with the cityscape of Keystone directly ahead.

There was a brief crackle in her helmet as Dick's voice came over the speaker.

"Bruce is sending me Wally's phone's last known location. He's still not answering but that could be
for any number of reasons."

On his back he felt Artemis nod, neither one wanted to consider the alternative, but ten minutes later as Nightwing's bike skidded to a stop at 1016 Elm Lane, that concern turned to outright fear as she saw the West's house engulfed in flames.

"Oh God," she gasped.

Worried neighbors gathered around the yard, the heat of the blaze burning their skin even at a distance. The ensuing explosion took out half of the second story roof, sending panicked residents running, while Wally's jeep sat in the driveway, flaming debris scattered across its hood.

Dick saw an elderly man off in the distance on his cellphone hopeful he was on the phone with a 911 emergency responder. When he turned back to formulate a plan with the archer she was gone.

Dick raced behind Artemis as she kicked in the front door. They both dove to the side as the backdraft shot flames out the newly formed exit. The blaze subsided momentarily and the two rushed inside the burning structure, cloths covering their mouths to avoid inhaling the smoke and gases that mixed with the air.

Over the roaring fire Artemis screamed "Wally!" but got no response.

Dick yelled over the thundering inferno. "I'll check what's left of the second floor, you look down here. His parent's cars weren't out front, but that doesn't mean he was alone!"

Artemis nodded and took off in one direction, as Dick jumped through the flaming framework and ran up the stairs. The archer ran through den screaming his name, finally making her way to the kitchen. The smoke was getting thicker and she was having trouble seeing. She rounded the hallway towards the dining room when she saw the basement door ajar.

She opened it to a wave of searing heat blasting her in the face, the old wooden stairs heading down were completely engulfed in flames. She knew the brittle staircase would never support her weight, but the West's cellar also doubled as a storm shelter so there was an outside door on the back of the house if she needed and exit. Artemis held on to the door frame, stomping the wooden planks until they split and fell to the dirt floor underneath; clearing a solid path for her to land on. Her hands began to blister as she released the frame and jumped down below.

If she thought the smoke was bad above, it was as thick as a London fog below. The stone and wood pillars that supported the house cracked as the intense heat began eating away at their foundations. She didn't have much time before the entire house would collapse on top of her.

She was about to scream his name again when she heard coughing coming from the far side of the basement, that's when she saw him. Wally weakly crawled across the ground, dragging his limp body over the dirt floor towards the concrete stairs that led up to the back yard.

"Wally!" she yelled, flipping him over and cradling his head. His nose and ears bled, his skin hot, but not yet blistered. He was in out of consciousness, aware someone was with him, but little more. His clothes were singed, but not melted on his skin, but it wouldn't stay that way if she didn't act.

Artemis didn't have any choice when she yanked him to his feet, wrapping a dead arm around her shoulder and dragging him towards the exit. He was a lot heavier than she remembered, definitely carrying more weight than before, not that that knowledge was doing her much good at the moment.

As if on cue, Dick met them at the stairs outside. After clearing the house and not finding the archer, the cellar was the most obvious escape route. They carried him to the edge of the back yard just as
the supports finally gave way and the house caved in on itself.

His face was pink, and when Artemis placed her head on his chest, she frantically looked up at her partner. "He's not breathing."

They both immediately began CPR, Artemis sending air into his lungs while Dick massaged his heart. She wouldn't allow herself to panic, and even if he didn't respond she'd keep this up until the paramedics arrived, hours if she had to, but she was not letting him go, not like this.

In the distance the wail of sirens could be heard blocks away. Artemis leaned up taking a deep breath to share when Wally began coughing and breathing on his own again. Dick and Artemis exchanged relived glances, her head resting on the brunette's shoulder as they caught their breath.

Even as far away from the house as they were, the heat of the blaze still prickled at their skin, so instead of waiting for the paramedics, Dick and Artemis carried him to the street for the oncoming ambulance. The speedster continued coughing, as his eyes struggled to open. In his daze Wally heard sounds, familiar voices that made no sense, as if they were speaking to him underwater. Blistered hands cupped his face and blurred figure with long blonde hair spoke slowly to him in deep measure tones, "Wally, can you hear me? You're going to be all right. Just open your eyes….please!"

He struggled to comply until the darkness finally took him.

xxx

Wally spent the rest of the night at Keystone Memorial Hospital being treated for burns and monitored for signs of concussion and smoke inhalation. He was lucky.

Frantic calls from neighbors had brought the Wests back to Keystone, only to find their son in the hospital and their home destroyed. Mary and Rudy were exhausted but refused to close their eyes until they spoke to the E.R. doctor. When the tall African American physician came out to tell them the good news, Mary West finally broke down, that's just how mothers are. The rest of the night she and her husband took alternating shifts to sleep, keeping in touch with the Garrick's who were watching Iris and Jai and giving them updates, while occasionally going to the coffee machine for a caffeine boost.

All the while Dick and Artemis sat in a faraway corner of the waiting room, trying to give the West's space and privacy. Later that night Dick stepped outside to take a call from Bruce Wayne, update him on Wally's status, and make temporary living arrangements for the Wests, knowing that all they'd thought about at the moment was their son's recovery and nothing else.

The West's had never held any animosity towards Dick for the end of his friendship with their son, as neither did he towards them, but he still felt guilty all the same. Mary and Rudy had been like second parents to him, giving him a taste of what a normal teen's life should be and treating him like one of their own. Dick had never forgotten their love and kindness, and anything he could do now to ease their burden would be done in a heartbeat.

At around three in the morning Mary West came out of Wally's room to stretch her legs. She couldn't sleep with all the constant buzzing and beeping of monitors. She paced the hallway to the lobby, looking for a couch somewhere away from the clamor when her eyes made contact with the blonde. Mary's brows furrowed in betrayal, and she turned away, sending a stabbing but expected dagger into Artemis's heart. The archer sighed exhausted, her eyes closing until moments later when she smelt the aroma of cheap hospital coffee. When she opened them again Mary West knelt down next to her, holding two cups, her green eyes filled with tears.
"Thank you," Mary whispered.

Without thinking, Artemis’s wrapped her arms around the women and held her tight as they cried together. There’d be time for stories later; time for her to tell her tale, with hope for forgiveness, but for now all she wanted to do was bury herself in the red heads loving arms, and wish away the last ten years was just a bad dream.
Chapter 12

Recognize Nightwing B-03

The Dark Knight was barely fazed by the computers announcement of Dick's arrival as he sat in the cold darkness of the Batcave studying the images on the center monitor. It had been a long night. Before Dick Grayson could even ask the question, the Batman answered it.

"It's not him."

Dick frowned at the news; too angry to be impressed that Batman was already one step ahead in the investigation.

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm looking at a live feed of Eobard Thawne as we speak."

Dick walked next to him to see the image of Zoom laying peacefully in his cell reading.

Bruce continued. "I've reviewed security footage from the past week, specifically the time frames of the alleged attacks, he's been right there the entire time."

"I still want to question him," Dick declared, preparing for the argument that would likely ensue considering the secret nature of Thawne's incarceration.

"I agree," Bruce replied.

Dick was taken aback by the detective's response. A brutal attack upon a hero retired or not fell directly under the purview of the Justice League, and more specifically the Dark Knight himself, but Bruce knew this was personal, and Dick had shown time and time again that the title of the world's greatest detective needed to be shared.

"I'll make arrangements.

"That was surprisingly easy. You think it's a dead end don't you?"

"I never said that, but right now what little evidence we have points in a different direction. It's troubling that whoever the assailant is knows their identities, but the fact remains that Thawne's in a state of the art holding facility secured with a next-gen inhibitor collar. He's not allowed visitors or contact with the outside world of any kind, and all video surveillance has shown him in his cell, but that doesn't mean he might not have some insight into who may be responsible. It's worth a conversation. In the meantime you've secured housing for the Wests?"

"I've got them at the Central City Four Season while their insurance company prepares temporary housing. If State Farm drags their feet, I might get you to make a call."

Wayne nodded. "Do they know what's going on?"

"They have their suspicions. They're not stupid."

"Tim has volunteered to stay on campus to keep watch over Bart."

"And Wally?" Dick asked uncomfortably.
"Arrangements have been made. It's a League issue now."

"Who?" Dick asked again.

"It's been taken care of; trust me, but right now you have pressing matters that need to be attended to."

"Bruce, don't talk to me like some kind of teammate. This is personal and you know it."

"I'm sorry, you're right. You'll be involved in every step of the investigation, but right now you other obligations."

"Bruce there's a psychopath on the loose; an engagement party seems pretty trivial right now."

"I understand, but that doesn't change the fact that you've made a commitment. This party, this engagement isn't going away. As your friend, as your family, I'll tell you no matter the circumstances, right now Barbara needs to be your priority. If you don't, take it from an expert, you don’t want to end up like me."

"Oh God no," Dick laughed.

"Wally will be taken care of. You have my word."

Dick sighed. "Ok. I just wish things were, you know… different."

"I do too," Wayne replied, placing his hand on his ward's shoulder, "Let's get changed and head upstairs. Alfred's meeting with the caterer in an hour, and unless you want nothing but hummus, cucumber bites and lamb dishes, I'd get up there and give some input."

Dick's face soured. "Oh shit, we better hurry."

xxx

Wally sat across the street from Keystone Elementary in the adjoining park, watching as his children played at recess. He'd passed all the chemical and thermal irritation asphyxiation tests his doctors had put him through, and after a two night stay was released. He was lucky, and his injuries were nothing compared to what Bart had suffered, but thanks to his cousins healing factor, the young speedster was nearly himself by the next day. Wally wished he still had that ability.

UMCC had been kind enough to offer him an extended leave of absence, but Wally had declined, only taking a few days to help his parents get their affairs in order while the fire department did their investigation. He did his best to downplay the events to his children. There was no need in letting them know how close they'd been to losing their father. They'd lost one parent already and he intended to do everything in his power to make sure they didn't lose two.

Bart's attack had him worried. The League had been in contact with him just briefly to let him know the matter was being investigated with the utmost urgency, and they remained confident that that the assailant was not the man who'd killed Linda Park-West and Barry Allen, but Wally was not convinced.

The scientist in him could easily point out that his parents' house was over thirty years old and in desperate need of new wiring. That it was heated by natural gas and a small leak in the line was not beyond the realm of possibility. Combine those two factors and it didn't take a genius to figure out what could happen next. He'd know more once the official report came back from the fire department, but he was fairly confident that Batman's would be back sooner and much more
thorough. All he could do now was wait.

But there was still the matter of the voice.

"Boom," it whispered.

Coupled with Bart's attack at nearly the same time, it was just too much of a coincidence, and there was only one man he knew who could have pulled it off.

"But it's impossible," he thought to himself. "Right?"

The troubled speedster turned his attention to Jai as he and one of his friends wrestled each other to the ground, laughing all the way until the recess monitor blew her whistle and the two scurried away for cover. Iris was busy on the other end of the playground, reaching unnerving heights on the swing. All in all everything seemed normal, and right now normal was good. Wally continued watching the controlled chaos as a figure came up from behind him and cleared her voice not to spook him anymore than he probably already was.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" Artemis asked politely

"No please." Wally replied, scooting over on the park bench to give her room. She sat next to him scanning the group across from them, looking for two small children in particular.

"Which ones are yours?"

Wally beamed proudly, pointing to the playground "He's the short brunette over by the monkey bars, just to the right of the kid picking his nose, and she's the redhead who's about to launch herself down the slide that she's not supposed to be climbing."

Iris reached the top, looking over and waving at her dad before catapulting herself down with reckless abandon, landing hard on her derriere only to get up and do it again even faster.

"She's fearless," Artemis smiled.

"She's her mother. She might look like me, but she's Linda made over."

"I know you don't want to talk about it but I'm sorry about your wife. I know she must have been special."

"I appreciate it."

For minutes they sat silently watching the children across the street running and laughing under the sunlight of a beautiful Missouri sky when Wally finally spoke up.

"Thank you." he whispered, referring to his recue.

"You're welcome," she answered in kind.

"The way I acted, the way I treated you that night, it was inexcusable," he said with regret.

"Don't!" she replied sharply.

"But…"

"Don't even go there Wally. You have nothing, and I mean nothing to apologize for. I brought this all on myself. There's nothing you could have said or done that I didn't deserve. I know my apology
doesn't mean much, but I truly meant it. This was never what I intended. I hope you can believe that."

He nodded, looking to the ground and pursing his lips. "I do."

After a few moments he looked back up and asked. "So what's next for you?"

"I'm going back to Europe. That seems to be where all the good paying jobs are."

Wally shot her a troubled look.

"Legitimate work," she spit out quickly. "No killing or anything like that. I'm done with that chapter."

"Thank God," he sighed

"What about you?"

He gestured to the playground. "You're looking at it.

She nodded and smiled. They were beautiful kids and she'd be lying if she didn't admit to having a few pangs of envy. How special it must be to have a father that loved and cared for them. Someone that put their needs above anything else. Artemis knew she'd probably never be a mother, but if she did she'd hope for kids like those and a man like him. It infuriated her that someone had tried to take that all away.

"Are there any leads?" she asked

"None yet, but if they find anything I'm sure they'll contact me. I guess being back on the Leagues radar I'm going to have to come clean about my speed. I just really don't need them back in my life, but I've suppose I've got no choice."

"Why do you say that? What's wrong with them wanting to watch over you?"

"I don't know. Insecurity I guess. Because I'm not Barry, and because I just don't like not being able to fend for myself, it's stupid I know."

"Do you miss it?" she inquired.

Wally paused for a few moments before shaking his head no. "No not really. My head was always a million miles away, thinking five moves ahead instead of focusing on where I was. I need to be living in the here and now, I owe it to those two," he tilted his head towards his kids. "It's better this way."

Artemis nodded in acknowledgment, before her brows furrowed just a bit and a disbelieving smile crept across her face,

Wally shrugged his shoulders and threw her a guilty grin. "Ok maybe a little. I get a tad impatient with how slow everyone is. I miss the uniform, I miss helping people, but what I really miss is the sensations. I wake up at night with these dreams that are so real, so vivid. It's those moments where it really hits me. Plus with raising those two munchkins over there, there are times when super speed would really come in handy."

"I bet," she grinned, "and you don't know how or why?"

"No," he sighed. "Right after Barry died it just started cutting out; like a bad spark plug. It would just
come and go until one day it just...stopped. Like I was somehow unplugged from the..."

Suddenly he stopped talking, like he'd said something wrong

"Unplugged from what?" she asked

He scrambled nervously. "You know...the chemical compounds that altered my DNA. Never mind it's kind of technical. It doesn't matter anymore. The fact of the matter is I didn't remotely live up to his legacy. I know that sounds stupid, but there was a time I really wanted that mantle, when I thought all of us would one day replace our mentors. Those days are over, but for the brief time I was the Flash, I choked. I think Barry would be pretty disappointed."

"Don't say that Wally. Barry loved you. He was proud of you regardless if you were a Flash or not. This isn't your fault, none of it is."

"If you'd told me ten years ago that one day I'd be a slow, non-meta widowed parent of two, carrying a mortgage I can barely afford, a jeep that barely runs, and a job at a community college teaching teenagers that are so stoned half the time that they don't know the difference between a hypotenuse or hypnosis, I would have said you're insane. But you know what? I wouldn't give up this life for anything. Those two, they're my whole world, and if this is all I ever do with my life, I'm fine with it. I just... kind of expected something different."

"I guess neither of our lives turned out the way we planned."

"I guess not," he replied, pausing briefly before asking, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything."

Wally paused searching for the words to something that had haunted him for almost a decade. "Why didn't you trust me?"

"Wally I did trust you. That was the problem."

"Where you afraid I'd stop you from killing your dad?" he asked

She shook her head no. "I was afraid you'd join me."

The answer wasn't exactly what he wanted to hear, but at least it was honest. She knew he was still hurt, still angry. Her death must have been the most traumatic thing he'd experienced in his young life and it had scarred him. The life that followed hadn't been any easier, for either of them.

In reality they'd only known each other a few years, dated for even less, but you never forget the ups and downs, the pangs of joy and sorrow of first love. When you put your life on the line day in and day out, that connection, that relationship becomes timeless, special. He was special and they were special together. Even years later, rarely a few weeks went by that he wasn't in her thoughts in some form or fashion; be it a beautiful sunset, a cutting joke, an impressive maneuver, a daring last minute escape, or just a constellation in the sky that she'd watch at night dreaming of a different life. By accident or by purpose he had always been her beacon of hope, all of them were.

"I'm sorry Wally."

"Yeah me too," he answered.

"So um...Dick really came through." she stated hesitantly.
The speedster nodded. "Yeah, my folks tell me he's the one who put them up at the hotel, probably
the same guy who's got a construction crew already working on the house before the insurance
company's even had a chance to process the claim."

"Did you know he and Barbara are engaged?"

The speedster's draw jaw dropped "No shit!" he said astonishment. "Good. That's good. I um…
guess I need to send them a gift or something."

"He'd rather have a call. It's been too long Wally. He misses you."

"I know," he sighed. "It's… complicated."

"It doesn't have to be," she replied. "Despite all that's happened he's still your best friend. I know he
cares. I think he's proved that."

"Artemis it's been too long. I wouldn't even know where to start."

"Like any good scientist would, at the beginning. Sir Isaac Newton once said…"

Wally groaned. "Please don't quote Newton's First Law of Motion to me."

Artemis pretended to hold an imaginary book in her hand, licking her finger as she turned the pages
until she found the appropriate chapter

"Newton's First Law of Motion: she announced clearing her voice. "Every object in a state of
uniform motion tends to remain in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it.

"I always hated it when you threw science back at me," he sighed

"I know," the archer grinned

"But I'm pretty impressed you still remember that."

"I had a good teacher," she smiled. "Things aren't going to change unless you try. He's reached out,
reach back. He deserves it, so do you. Just tell me you'll think about?"

"I will."

"Wally…?" she scolded.

"I will," he smiled, his green eyes shining in the sun. "I promise."

"Good."

"So you and hulk huh?" he asked.

Artemis looked at the red head curiously, as his eyes drew past her looking at the muscle bound
mercenary standing by the rental car in the adjoining parking lot.

"Zane? No, it's not like that. He's just…We'll it's…." she hesitated just as Wally finished her
explanation for her.

"Complicated?"

"Yeah," she surrendered.
"Things with you usually are. I mean that in a good way," he smiled as she reached over and playfully punched his arm.

"Ow!" he winced.

"Sorry old habits die hard," she grinned.

They both got a laugh out of the moment, but it was just a form of deflection, a way to stall. There were still so many things she wanted to say, but above all she wanted to tell him she loved him and she always would. They were just words, but if this was really goodbye, she knew she'd never have another chance. As she struggled to find the courage, a blaring horn from behind stole the moment.

"I guess they're playing your song," he chuckled.

"Yeah," she frowned turning back to the car and shooting a deadly look to the mercenary.

Wally took her hand, "Take care of yourself harpy."

"You too Baywatch," she smiled, leaning over and kissing his cheek. "And just know if you ever need anything..."

"Yeah," he smiled. "Thanks."

She stood and began walking towards the car, pausing briefly to look out at the playground one last time; the life that might have been. This goodbye felt more final, more permanent, and in some ways this moment hurt more than it did all those years ago. She ran with a dangerous crowd, and that crowd had no right being anywhere near him or his family. It was for the best, the hard part would be convincing herself of that.

Wally watched as her car pulled away, a surprising sadness washing over him. Neither of them were the people they once knew, both of their lives having taken drastic turns, but at least she was trying hard to make amends, to be more than the assassin she'd been forced to play. He'd spent so much time believing he'd cornered the market on pain and loss, never once had he considering hers. Artemis had made a huge mistake and she'd admitted as much, but god knows she'd paid for that mistake a dozen times over.

The archer had earned a second chance, and with that chance she could have easily faded into the sunset and started her life over again, but instead she chose to came back to bare her soul and take responsibility for her mistakes, saving his life in the process. At that moment she'd become exactly the person he remembered, the person he once loved. Wally wished he had told her that now, he wished he'd told her a lot of things, but it was too late. And for the second time in his life the speedster watched her disappear in the ether.

The ring of the recess bell awoke him from his reverie and he looked at his watch, seeing he only had an hour before his next class. He hated not saying goodbye to the twins, but his kids were preoccupied by friends and chaos, and he'd see them again in a few short hours anyway. He threw his backpack into the jeep, and headed out for the short drive into the city, while his mind raced a million miles away.

The kids stood in line and began their march back to class when Iris West realized she'd left her soccer ball on the playground and ran back to retrieve it. The young redhead searched frantically for it, worried that any moment she'd get a scolding from the recess monitor when she saw its unique pink and green coloring resting in the wooded pine trees behind the playground,

She ducked under branches to reach for it when an older man stepped out from behind the tree and
picked up the ball.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

The red head nodded nervously, reaching out cautiously for the Adidas Brazuca her Korean grandparent's had sent her for Christmas.

"Do you have a name?" the older man smiled

"My daddy says I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

The older man smiled. "Sounds like your father is a very smart man. Here child," he replied, gently tossing it to the relieved young girl.

"Thank you!" he heard her say, as she dropped the ball, dribbling it back to the recess line.

"You're welcome," he answered back, pulling on his coat and walking back into the woods unseen, "but we're not strangers' child, were practically family."

xxx

Artemis rode in silence for the next half hour, staring out the window at once familiar places. Zane knew he'd overstepped his boundaries a bit, but he'd always known what was best for the archer, even when she didn't. From time to time she'd even begrudgingly admit to it, but it still didn't make that pill any easier to swallow.

She was the risk taker; he was her level headed wingman. They'd kept each other alive with that approach for years, and it had worked out fairly well for both. Any physical or romantic relationship that came as a result of it was a bonus as far as he was concerned.

The quiet ride would give her time to work things out and reflect, to see that he was right and only watching out for her well-being. The mercenary was sure her mood when improve once they got out of the city. This trip had lasted way too long, and the siren song of a life she couldn't get back had clouded her judgement. He'd known her a long time, and felt assured that once they were on a plane and away from these pointless distractions, the woman he once knew would return.

Through the corner of his eye he saw her reach over to him, and with that gesture he knew he'd made the right call, that was until she grabbed the wheel and jerked them off the road.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he shouted, slamming on the breaks, barely missing several parked cars on the side of the freeway.

"What in the hell is wrong with you!?" she shot back. "This," she gestured between them, "is not how this works!"

"I'm just looking out you," he countered.

"Are you? Are you really? Or is this personal? You knew what I gave up. You knew what I left behind. Do you think I'm that blind or that stupid to just assume I can have that life again? This isn't Beijing, this isn't even Bangkok. I'm not that scared little girl afraid of her shadow anymore. And I sure as hell don't need you saving me from myself. All I'm doing is weighing my options. Did you give Jade this same kind of shit when she went back to Roy? Or did you know what she was going to do all along? Were you afraid I was going to do the same thing and you'd end up alone? Is that what this is?" she asked fiercely.
"Gorgeous. You're spinning your wheels here. What happened to a whole new life? Skin-diving in Fiji, dining at Relais Borgo Santo Pietro near the canals, living the high in Ibiza?"

"Those were your fantasies Zane, not mine. They were coping mechanisms, things we daydreamed about to give us the hope when we didn't have any. I know this life has passed me by, but I'm not so sure I'm that interested in yours either."

The mercenary shook his head and chuckled. "You're breaking you own rule beautiful, you're getting attached. Big mistake."

"Then it's my mistake to make." the archer replied as the rental car got back on the road, leaving Central City and beginning its long journey back to New York.

xxx

Two days later the archer rushed from her hotel room towards the mercantile district of downtown Gotham. Barbara's message seemed imperative, albeit a bit cryptic, only giving specific coordinates in lieu of standard directions and stating only one word; urgent.

Despite being mid-day, she brought her crossbow just in case, she wasn't about to be caught in a crossfire unprepared.

Zane was not happy about being thrown out of her hotel room, but he was lucky that was all she'd done. These were her friends, and the length and manner of her goodbyes would not be dictated by him or anyone.

Her cab was stick in gridlock when in exasperation she threw her money into the front seat and ran the rest of the way on foot. Five blocks ahead she reached the corner of Broadway and W. 20th, the designated coordinates she'd been sent. All around her droves of people moved normally throughout the sidewalks and streets, no signs or indications of any disturbance or troubles.

She peered all around her, looking for anything out of the ordinary when from inside of one of the shops Barbara appeared, waving the archer in off of the streets.

"Are you ok? The blonde asked the redhead urgently, her finger still tickling the trigger of the crossbow tucked away in her bag.

"I'm fine. You?"

"Barbara your message sounded like and emergency. I thought you were…in…some…kind…of…troub… Aw damnit," she cursed, as she noticed the fine formal and cocktail dresses that hung all around the shop.

"No,no,no," she said irately. "Barbara we talked about this already."

"I know we did, and I decided we should talk about it again, in a more neutral location."

"You call this neutral," she frowned, absentmindedly caressing the fine fabric of the teal dress hanging closest to her. "I call this entrapment."

"You can call it whatever you want to, but the simple fact of the matter is I need you there. Artemis, these aren't my people, this isn't my element. I'm a cop's daughter, not some socialite. And to be honest I don't care how uncomfortable the idea of coming to this makes you feel, because for me it ten times worse."
"Barbara…," the blonde whined.

"It would really mean a lot to Dick and me. I mean it, besides I figure you owe me."

The archer sighed, she knew when she'd been beat. A few extra days in Gotham wasn't going to kill her, and the adventurous side of her knew that she'd never be invited to something so fancy and formal ever again, so what the hell.

"Fine," Artemis grumbled, "but there's no way in hell I can afford any of these. You're going to have to loan me the money."

"I'm not going to do that," the redhead grinned, "but she will."

The archer was beyond confused at this point until the whiff of a unique fragrance spread throughout the room, a sweet scent lightly floral with hints of a citrusy note. Despite the years, she'd know that fragrance anywhere, and with that knowledge her face went pale.

"Oh shit," the archer gasped

"Oh shit is right," the sorcerers replied angrily.”Uoy era ni os hcum elbuort."

xxx

Zatanna was not a fighter by nature; she didn't have to be with her abilities. She'd been trained by the Justice League in the basics of self-defense, even excelling in a few, but on her best day she was still no match for the archer. However even with that knowledge, when she drug Artemis to the alleyway in the back of the store, genuine worry began to fill the archer's heart, because if the sorceress didn't have success in landing a few blows, she might just turn the archer into a frog out of pure spite.

A half hours later after a long tirade of Italian curse words and tears, they finally embraced each other, Artemis stroking her long raven hair, apologizing over and over, wiping both their tears away.

"You are such a bitch," Zatanna sniffled worth a grin.

"I am" the archer agreed.

"If you ever pull something like this ever again, I will kill you myself, and not something quick and painless, but something long and painful, magical mafia style."

"I know," the archer chuckled. For someone so fluid in three different languages including magic, her friend was still so bad at making threats that didn't come off as cartoonish, at least some things hadn't changed, but just to safe the Artemis decided she'd better no push her it.

"So tell me about this Zane guy?" Zatanna asked as Artemis looked over at the red head in displeasure.

Barbara shrugged and smiled. "This is what happens when one decides to keep secrets."

Artemis sighed, taking the sorceress's hand and walking back in the store to begin their shopping. "It's a long story."

xxx

It was well past ten as Wally sat in his darkened office grading term papers, his desk lamp providing the only illumination to the room. Dean Washburn, the head of the science department had been more than understanding about his absences, telling the young professor to take his time in returning,
but Wally had grown restless and needed something to take his mind off his troubles; nothing did that better than science.

His children were excited to spend the night with Gran and Granps, not entirely sure if the hotel they now resided was actually their new home or not, but it had a pool and that's all that mattered. As always the speedster appreciated the assist, but with the mountain of work he'd come back to, it looked like he'd be calling in a lot more favors for the foreseeable future.

On his phone played his Best of the Beatles playlist. Barry had always joked that his young protégé he'd been born four decades too late, but even if he didn't understand the meanings of the lyrics back then, even at the age of thirteen, those songs spoke to him. Now in his mid-twenties he appreciated them even more

_In My Life_ was currently playing, and as he paused for a moment from his papers to ponder the meaning for the thousandth time, he would swear it had been written for him.

The song recalled all the people and places John Lennon had known and loved throughout his life, and it went on to confess that they still meant something special to him even though he was leaving it all behind. Lennon still manages to say that these people and places will always have a place in his heart, even if they have since changed. Words, lyrics, and meanings that couldn't have hit home harder if they tried.

Wally tried to focus on his work, but too many distractions ran rampant through his mind. Something out there, something he didn't understand yet was trying to kill him. Bart had barely survived, and he still had his speed. What kind of chance did that leave him? His kids, his parents, none of them would be safe as long as that person was still out there. Now it was all in the hands of the Justice League, but still Wally drew little comfort from that. It's not that he didn't trust them, but if that thing was fast enough to sneak up on Bart, he had serious doubts the League would be able to keep up.

And then there was Artemis. She'd stormed back into his life so fast, and had left just as quickly. Her mere presence in his mind racked him with guilt. The way he'd reacted, the way he'd treated her. With Artemis now alive it had brought back so many old feelings, and it made Wally feel uncomfortable that those feeling somehow disrespected his wife's memory.

He'd only loved two women in his life, and he'd lost them both. Linda was his entire world, and the gift she'd given him by not only saying yes to his proposal, but giving life to the two most perfect kids in the world could never be matched or replaced. Every time he looked in his children's eyes, he could see her, feel her, and it renewed his love for her daily. She was his everything. Artemis being alive and well had now caused a similar effect.

_was it really love?_ he questioned himself.

He was so young and it was such a strange experience. It was something weird and frightening and exciting and new, and at the time he called it love.

Throughout his time in therapy, his shrink would always tell him that people often compare their current relationship to their first love in order to determine if their feelings for their current partner align. If that was the case then it definitely was, and for some reason that made him feel even worse.

What if Artemis had never left, how would his life have played out? The thought of not having his children in his life was more than he could bear, but caring about Artemis and at the same time caring about Linda made is stomach churn, like he was some kind of low life cheating husband trying so hard to carry on two separate lives. It felt like he was trapped in a causal loop in his own personal fucked up temporal paradox.
Suddenly science had lost its appeal and he put down his grading book and leaned back in his chair, thankful Yellow Submarine had been next of the playlist, and not something deeper, but even then his thoughts drifted back to the archer.

"God," he sighed. "Get a grip West. You're lonely, tired and sacred. Don't add stupid to the mix."

He took a deep breath to clear his mind when he heard a loud thud coming from the hallway outside. Wally dismissed it as one of the cleaning crew going about their jobs when less than a minute later he heard it again, that's when he grew worried.

He rose from his desk, stepping out in the hallway.

"Hello?" he yelled, his words echoing off the walls. He took a few steps forward, now concerned why his movements hadn't activated the hall sensors to turn on the overhead lights. He stayed frozen for a few moments, listening for the sound again, but it never came.

"God Wally, you're losing your shit," he chuckled to himself, just as a hand reached through the darkness and pulled him inside it.
Chapter 13

Wally had barely time to react, when a gloved hand covered his mouth and quickly dragged him into an adjoining study room. Once again the light sensors didn't activate, but the glow from the numerous monitors lit up his assailant enough that Wally could make finally out his features.

"Jesus Christ Bruce! Are you trying to give me a fucking heart attack?"

The Dark Knight remained stoic as ever. "We need to talk."

Wally took a deep breath, running his hands through his hair trying to calm his speeding heartbeat. He reached into his pocket pulling out a device.

"Phone? Ever heard of one?" he said angrily.

"In person," Batman demanded. "Ten minutes, courtyard next to Peck Hall, stretch limo. Be there."

Wally just stared at him in utter disbelief. The speedster turned back to the door, looking down the hall to make sure they were alone, worried that some unsuspecting grad student might come stumbling in and getting the shit scared out of him or her like he had.

"Do you seriously think that you can just barge in here, scare me half to death, and then order me to sit down like some kind of child?" He turned back to the detective only to find silence and darkness.

"Batman?" he whispered, glancing around the darkened study hall. "Bruce?" he repeated quieter just as the lights kicked on and he jumped out of his skin again for the second time. He rubbed his eyes and searched the empty room.

"God I hate it when he does that."

xxx

The black Mercedes Benz limousine sat parked in front of the deserted science building, resting comfortably in the darkness, its driver standing ever vigilantly outside waiting for their guest. Even in the shadows, Wally would recognize his silhouette anywhere; he'd practically grown up in the man's house.

"Alfred," Wally smiled taking and shaking the Englishman's hand.

"Master West" he answered ever professional. "You look well. He's waiting inside."

Wally nodded, and the butler opened the door as the speedster leaned in and sat down, expecting to see the Dark Knight in his full regalia; instead sat the billionaire business man, complete with his trademark pin striped Armani suit.

"It's good to see you Wally," the dark haired man announced, reaching over and shaking the young professor's hand. It always puzzled Wally how Bruce Wayne could be this intelligent, obsessed, mysterious detective one minute, and the next a genial friend and mentor. The dichotomy was maddening. No wonder Dick had created his own persona, being two people at once must be exhausting "I hope this isn't a bad time."

Wally just laughed, unsure if Wayne was trying to be funny or if he might be a little insane. A bit of both the red head decided.
"Nope." Wally shrugged, like any other answer would have mattered to the man anyway. "I guess this is about the attack huh?"

"Not quite," Wayne replied.

"Oh," Wally paused, traces of worry beginning to form. "So no leads huh? That's um…not good is it?"

Wayne countered. "We have leads, but that's not what this is about."

The speedster's head dropped. "It's about Dick isn't it?"

The billionaire nodded. Bruce Wayne had kept a respectful distance between them over the years regarding he and Dick's issues, but after discovering the man's adopted son was about to get married, Wally was surprised it had taken him this long. He could have done without the costumed vigilante dragging him out of his office though.

"Look Bruce, I don't know what to say."

"I know happened," the Dark Knight answered soberly.

Wally shook his head, "I'm not sure you do."

"I've seen the video feed, all of it."

Wally looked back at him speechless. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do, and you've been holding on to this lie for much too long."

The speedster tried to defend himself, but the detective would have none of it.

"You hold Dick responsible for stopping you from killing the man who murdered your wife and uncle. You blame him for rushing in at the last second and stealing away your chance at revenge. That's been your stance for years, but we know the truth don't we?"

Wally exhaled and nodded remorsefully. He'd never told anyone the true events of that night; he'd always prayed he wouldn't have to.

"You had Zoom alone in that cave for close to an hour. You had any number of chances to kill him, but you hesitated. Why?"

The speedster paused, unwilling to look the detective in the eye. There was no place left to hide. "I couldn't do it," he whispered.

"And you waited just long enough until someone could come and stop you, someone that would take that burden away. Someone you could place the blame on while taking the guilt off your shoulders."

The speedster sighed. "I wanted to so bad. I wanted him to beg for his life, but he just wouldn't. He kept daring me to do it, over and over. I wanted him dead Bruce, I wanted him erased off this planet like he never existed. I was ready to do it, but all I could think about was what Barry would have done, and I choked and took the coward's way out."

The car became stifling and his claustrophobia was bringing the walls in around him. Wally opened the door and bolted from the car, pacing around the parking lot in circles as Wayne exited to join him

"I knew it was going to be Dick. I knew he'd figure out where I took him."
"It was easier to live the lie than to admit the truth wasn't it?"

"Yes," Wally hissed, his eyes began to sting.

"You never intended for it to last this long, but the lie took on a life of its own and you never found your way back from it."

The speedster nodded, wiping a tear away, the similarities of what he'd done as opposed to that of a former deceased former teammate not lost on him. Was he really that transparent? Was there anything about him the Dark Knight didn't know?

"Does he know?"

"No, but he deserves to. He's carried the burden of this lie for way too long. It's not been fair to him; you've not been fair to him. If it's important to you to right this wrong, if he's important to you, this is your best chance. It might be your last chance."

Wally sighed. "How do I do it?"

"Well it's not exactly my strong suit, but you speak from the heart, say your peace and keep moving forward. If you think for one second he's going to reject you, then you don't know Dick Grayson very well."

"I'll talk to him."

"When?" the detective asked, pressing for an answer much gentler than he would the common criminal on the street, but he still expecting the information nonetheless.

"Um…I don't exactly know. Any suggestions?"

"Do you have plans next Saturday?" Wayne asked.

"I uh...don't think so. Why?" Wally questioned

"You do now."

xxx

Conner sat comfortably in Pa Kent's favorite recliner enjoying the evening. His feet were up, his beer was cold, and his favorite baseball team was in ESPN. It was just another lazy night in Smallville, or as Connor would call it, a perfect evening.

"Conner are you still hungry? There's still plenty of meatloaf left."

"I'm good ma, thanks. And don't clean up ok? I'll knock it all out as soon as the innings over."

"You sure?"

"Yes mam, and by the way dinner was delicious."

Martha smiled. "I'm glad you liked it. Its Clark's favorite too. What is about meat, ketchup and Kryptonians?"

Connor laughed, "I guess green meteors aren't our only weakness."

"Guess not," she chuckled. "I'm heading up to read, don't stay up too late ok?"
"I won't Ma." he replied. "Sleep well."

"You too honey."

Connor leaned back as Edinson Volquez threw another perfect curve ball, sending the batter back to the dugout in shame. At this rate he'd pitch his third straight perfect game and the Royals would move even closer to first place. Another strike out later and the inning was over. Connor put the foot rest down and began to rise when the phone began to ring. The young hero caught it on the first ring, assured it was Clark calling from Metropolis to do his weekly check in.

"Hello?" he answered, to dead silence.

"Uh…Hello?" he repeated, hearing the person on the other end clearing her voice nervously.

After a few more moments if silence, the person on the other end of the phone began to speak. "Connor…its…its Artemis. Can we talk?"

Superboy stood stunned, feeling as if he'd been hit by something faster than a speeding bullet.

xxx

Wayne Manor had never looked more elegant. The mansion was long known for its host of parties, charity events, private art exhibits, and entertaining politicians and captains of industry, but tonight was perhaps the most important event held there in years. Bruce Wayne's son was getting married

Technically, adopted was the more accurate term, but for celebrity gossip magazines, blogs and websites, son had a better ring to it. Paparazzi were held at the bottom of the long winding driveway as guests pulled up in limo after limo, with the occasional Tesla and Lamborghini in-between. An army of caterers, decorators, lighting companies, valets, and security personnel had been brought in to make sure the event went smoothly and would be an occasion no one would soon forget. The mansion and surrounding grounds were impressively lit and landscaped for the holidays, the sweet smell of peppermint, pine and cedar radiating in air in all directions, the outdoor Bose speakers playing a lovely holiday concerto for the arriving guests.

Security teams were polite but firm as they scanned each guest that entered the grounds, positively identifying invited guests from the dozen or so paparazzi that would inevitably attempt to sneak in and photograph the celebration for distribution. Of course certain guests were able to bypass these measures; CEO's of friendly but rival companies that had come to pay their respects, the Richard Bransons', Larry Elisions and Elon Musks of the world were brought in a special entrance, along with politicians, Mayors, and disgruntled Police Commissioners, who considered the whole event nonsense.

As impressive as the Manor presented itself on the outside, inside was beyond description in its grandeur. Intricate woodwork, antique furniture, century old hardwood paneled rooms, magnificent staircases, numerous libraries and studies, hand crafted brick and copper fireplaces, African Blackwood bookshelves, the entire mansion oozed of culture and history while still setting a tone for a relaxing atmosphere. The high-ceilinged foyer was adorned with an impressive crystal chandelier that transformed the room into a makeshift ballroom. Upstairs, the open spacious second floor balcony overlooked the proceedings while behind it French doors opened to a richly landscaped patio, offering splendid views of the grounds and gardens. A six piece string ensemble played beautifully in the background, as guests mingled around the house, eating hors d'oeuvres, appetizers, and enjoying fine wines provided by a battalion of waiters that carefully maneuvered their way through the crowds.
Barbra Gordon stood next to her fiancé as wave after wave of friends and guests made their way over, offering greetings, congratulations, and unsolicited advice to the happy couple. She wore a tasteful ivory J. Mendel Crepe High Neck Gown while Dick wore his custom tailored Ermenegildo Zegna Bespoke tuxedo he'd picked up on his last trip to Italy. She'd never worn something so expensive in her life, and in all honesty it made her extremely uncomfortable. This was not how she was raised and was not how she intended to live. The Dick Grayson she knew felt the same way, but occasionally had to step back into that life when the call arose. Barbara didn't like it, but she understood it, and for the night she could find a way to suffer through; she did look stunning after all and she knew it.

While some of the well-wishers came off as sincere; most seemed more absorbed in being seen or catching up with old friends then interested in the happy couple or their upcoming nuptials. Such it was with high society she supposed.

Dick patiently indulged the crowds as Barbara bit her tongue and put forth the fakest, most polite smile she could conjure, shaking hands and giving hugs to people she'd never met and hopefully wouldn't again. Her fiancé could really lay on the charm when pressed, but deep down she knew events and moments like this made him as uncountable as she, well almost as uncomfortable.

The line began to thin and Barbara took a breath, counting the seconds until she could find a waiter and have a glass of wine, or five. After everyone had finally passed, Bruce walked over to the couple, handing off drinks to the overwhelmed duo.

"This is beyond words," Dick began gratefully.

"Yeah I'll say," Barbara added with just a tint of sarcasm that caused her finance to politely nudge her not to ruin the moment.

"What Barbara means is..." Dick attempted to smooth over.

Wayne laughed. "I know exactly what she means, and I couldn't agree more, but unfortunately events like this are sometimes necessary for people like us that have, let's just say unique hobbies. Keeping up appearances is important and distracting, which is essential in our line of work. Once this is over you two can have your private wedding, and leave all the pretentiousness and magniloquence to the experts," he smiled, pointing his thumb to his chest.

"I don't know how you do it," Barbara shook her head in disbelief.

"Anyway..." Dick spoke, trying to steer the conversation back on track, "Sincerely, thanks for all this, it's really an amazing gift."

Barbara nodded in agreement with a warm genuine smile. It was a lovely and incredibly generous gesture; just one she hoped could be soon be over so she could try to restore some semblance of normal back into her life.

Wayne shook his head and smiled. "This is nothing, the real gift comes later. Now unfortunately I'm going to have to borrow your finance for a few minutes. We have a little business to discuss with a certain senator if he wants our support come campaign time. I'll have him back to you safe and sound shortly.

Dick shrugged, reaching for her hand and kissing it. "Be right back."

Barbara sighed as she watched the two brunettes walk away. She knew a few minutes would likely turn into a half hour or more.
She closed her eyes, rubbing her aching temples when the smell of a familiar cologne came up behind her, handing off a glass of wine and an assortment of appetizers he'd collected.

"Oh God Dad, thank you so much. I think if I have to give one more phony smile I'm going to freak out. What have I gotten myself into?"

Jim Gordon laughed, wrapping his arm around his daughter and guiding her to a quiet corner of the room away from the crowds.

"I tried to warn you," he smiled, "but you wouldn't listen any more then you did when you took on your second job."

"I have absolutely know I idea what you're talking about," Barbara deadpanned, taking the appetizer her father was about to eat, and shoving it into her mouth.

It had been a longstanding unwritten rule that the father and daughter would not talk about such matters. The young redhead had never officially shared or confirmed the identity of her alter ego, but Jim Gordon was first and foremost a detective, and it didn't take much deduction to figure out her not only her I.D as Batgirl, but also that of her two most common compatriots, both who were shockingly present at the evening's festivities. Jim Gordon and the Dark Knight had always had a similar arrangement, but as much as he wished Barbara would lead a normal quiet life, he respected the job she did, and knew that the men behind the masks would protect her like she was their own. His relationship with the Batman was a partnership beyond words. He owed the hero his life many times over, as the vigilante did his. And as far as her fiancé went, he'd known the hero for most of the his young life, and deep down knew he couldn't ask for a better son in law, but that didn't prevent him from secretly wishing them both an early retirement from the superhero life and settling for giving him grandchildren instead. Ironically Barbara wished the same retirement for her father as well.

"Well I'll be your backup for the night, but if Riddler or the Penguin crash this little shindig you are on your own, because the only way I'm going to make it through this night is to drink heavily. Let's head over to the bar, I want some of Wayne's good stuff."

Barbara laughed, "I'll second that, show me the way.

xxx

Dick sighed as he listened to the long dissertation Senator Kelly was giving a group of businessman on cyber security. It was the exact same speech he'd given to a senate subcommittee meeting four days earlier, almost word for word, but if Bruce wanted the security contract he'd have to sit and listen patiently to the blowhard's every word. Before long the talk switched over to Gotham political races, and Dick tried desperately to find an out when a webbed hand reached over and rested on his shoulder.

"Hello my friend."

"Ambassador," Dick smiled warmly, turning and grasping the hand of one of his oldest and dearest friends. With the vast array of political figures present this night, it was not at all odd that the Atlantean ambassador would make an appearance for the festivities, especially given the close relation he and the company had regarding the Wayne Industries Clean Seas initiative that Dick was leading.

"You look well my friend. It's been too long," Kaldur declared
"Yes it has," he smiled, patting the dark skinned man on the arm. "I really appreciate you coming."

"I would not have missed this occasion. It's not often in our former line of work that one gets a happy ending. Barbara looks especially lovely this evening; you are a most fortunate man."

"Yeah," he smiled, "I really am, and by the way not all of us have retired Kal, the door is always open for you if you decide you want to come back."

"Perhaps when my tenure with the ambassadorship is done I'd consider it. This job has made me restless. I sometimes long for those days again, so who knows, anything is possible. Speaking of the old days, I received a most unusual call last week."

Dick chuckled, "From my understanding Conner did as well."

"Is he coming?" the Atlantean inquired.

"See for yourself" he smiled gesturing to his fiancé hugging the man of steel in question.

"Very nice. It will be good to be with each other again, even if just for a while."

"Can you stay?" Dick asked

"I have cleared my calendar. Alfred has been most kind to reserve a room for me in the residence, near the pool no less. Most appreciated. And where is our formerly deceased teammate?"

"She's on the balcony with Zatanna, probably enjoying watching Barbara and I squirm."

"It is an amusing site, but unfortunately one I am very familiar with. The pomp and circumstance that comes with events such as these can be somewhat tiresome. Regarding Artemis, I assume you two have buried the proverbial hatchet?"

Dick nodded sternly. "It wasn't easy, but knowing now everything she's been through, what she's lost, it really changes my opinion."

"She shared similar stories with me as well."

Dick nodded. "Artemis didn't have to come back; it would have been so much easier to just stay dead and start a new life somewhere. But she needed for us to know the truth, it was important to her. I see that now. Since that day at the refinery, her life's been a living hell; a series of nightmares that she's finally been able to wake up from. When I put all that together and considered the predicament she was in, it really put things in perspective. I have Barbara and Bruce to thank for that. She's my friend, she's our friend. If she's been given a second chance, the last thing I'm going to do is take that away from her."

"I agree, and have told her as much myself. From what she has shared, Connor has come to the same conclusion as well, so that is good. From what I recall he could be a little…volatile from time to time?"

"The years have changed him, they've changed us all."

"For the better I hope," Kaldur asserted.

Dick smiled. "Me too."

"Will anyone else be joining us?"
Grayson frowned slightly. "Well events like this aren't exactly good for Roy's recovery, so he sends his best, and I left a message with J'onn, but I don't know if Megan received it or would even consider coming if she did."

"A pity, it would be good to see them both. And anyone else?" Kaldur asked hesitantly, trying to maneuver delicately around the red headed elephant in the room.

Dick looked to the ground dolefully. "No probably not."

Kaldur reached over and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Well then we are very fortunate for the ones we have."

Suddenly an idea sparked in Nightwing's mind. "Tell you what, do me a favor Kal. Walk with me like we're in some kind of deep discussion. Do you remember where Bruce's study is?"

"Of course. How could one forget its location considering what its rests upon?"

Dick grinned. "I'm going to go grab Barbara and the others and let's spend a few minutes having a drink and catching up privately. You guys might be the only thing that keeps her sane this evening."

"I will meet you there shortly." Kaldur agreed.

xxx

On the balcony Artemis just stared out in amazement. It had taken some major convincing, perhaps coupled with a bit of threatening for the archer to agree to allow her friends to buy her evening attire, but after a few mimosas while they tried on dresses, she eventually relented, picking out an emerald Olivia Gisela High-Necked gown with closed back for obvious reasons; scars and old wounds didn't go well with anything.

As she scanned the crowd, she wasn't as much impressed as she was displeased.

"My God, look at all that money."

"Yeah it's kind of disgusting isn't it?" Zatanna bemused.

"No I'm serious," the archer answered. "There's so much greed and corruption down there. These are the exact type people the Shadows go after. They think they're buying power and all they're doing is signing their lives away. I'd be willing to bet there are a couple of folks down there in the Shadow's pocket right now and they don't even know it."

"We'll that not your problem anymore is it?"

"Amen to that," the blonde sighed.

"Look, don't get all melancholy on me now. This is a party, probably the nicest one you're ever going to get invited to."

"Gee thanks," Artemis laughed.

"You're welcome," the sorceress snickered. "I know you're unconformable being around all this, but you've had a chance to talk with everyone, you've made your peace. Now relax and start enjoying yourself. We look hot as hell, and not all of us have a muscle bound boyfriend waiting for us when we get home."

"For the hundredth time, he's not my boyfriend," the archer groaned. "Just a …work associate, and
an ex-one at that."

"Whatever. Just do me a favor and smile and look happy when the hot guys walk by. No one wants to talk to the gorgeous brunette with the pissed off ex assassin friend scowling at them. Fake it if you have to, but don't ruin my mood. I'm actually starting to like you again."

"God forbid," the archer chortled.

Zatanna finished her wine and looked for the cute dark skinned Jamaican waiter she'd been flirting with when her communicator buzzed in her purse.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me!" the magician growled, assuming it to be the League calling. She'd asked off for this night weeks in advance, and unless there was an alien invasion happening, which in truth was never entirely out of the question, she wasn't leaving. As she looked down to the readout she smiled, taking the archer by the hand and leading her away from the party and down the hallway towards the residence.

"Trouble?" Artemis asked concerned.

"Staff meeting, the fun kind," the brunette smiled. "Come on I know a shortcut."

"You seem to remember your way around these hallways pretty well," Artemis smirked.

"We have a history," Zatanna grinned, looking for the secret panel that led directly towards the private study

xxx

Wally West stroked his chin nervously, trying to run through a thousand different scenarios in his head; what to say, what to do, how to make small talk, how not to make an ass of himself, how to apologize. Beads of sweat dripped down his face to the point the driver took pity on him and turned the air conditioner on in the middle of winter just to comfort his occupant.

Any other time a flight on a private jet and a chauffeur from the airport would be cool as hell, but not when it was to celebrate a special event for guy, for a best friend you'd been an asshole to for years. Bruce had gone out of his way to make the trip as convenient as possible, but he also made it clear that it wasn't just an invitation, it was an obligation. As they made their way past the Gotham City limits, the speedster actually thought he might throw up, he was that nervous. Times like these he really missed his speed.

Shortly after nine p.m. under a cloudy moonlit sky, the Lincoln towncar finally reached 1007 Mountain Drive, parked behind a long line of cars and limos on the street waiting to get cleared to enter the gate, Wally took a deep breath, finding peace at the realization it would take a half hour or more to bring everyone in. He barely noticed the driver talking on his phone when security personnel paused traffic and waived the car through; by-passing the line of disgruntled partygoers. Wally put his hands over his face, taking in deep breaths, trying not to pass out as they approached the main drive to the top of the hill.

"Fuck you Bruce," he groaned as the car reached the entry way in front of the mansion.

xxx

Inside the study, the mood was light and breezy; it was hard for the archer to believe she was actually here, making pleasant conversation with old friends. It had always been her fondest hope that everyone was still together, still close. Her initial foray into Gotham had ended that wish, and yet
here she was, watching old friends hug and laugh, tell stories and exchange pictures. It was surreal, like a dream, the most pleasant one she'd had in a long time. She was home.

Dick cleared his voice, and grabbed a gold plated letter opener from the desk and clinked his glass for their attention.

"Guys I'd like to make a toast. I really suck at these as Barbara can attest to, but here goes. I just want to thank all of you for being here. It's been tough watching all of us go our separate ways, some a little farther than others," he smirked in the archer's directions. "I remember thinking back as a kid that all these friendships we took for granted would last forever. That we'd stay friends, stay teammates, and that one day we'd all be Leaguers. Things didn't turn out exactly the way we imagined, but the most important thing is we're all here now; still friends, still family. This is honestly the nicest gift Barbara and I could ever have hoped for, and we thank you all from the bottom of our hearts. Cheers."

"Cheers," the group replied in unison.

"Not bad boy wonder," the red head smiled, reaching over and kissing her fiancé.

"We'll said my friend," Kadlur added.

"I agree," Connor confirmed. "Barbara did you write that for him?" the former Superboy smiled as the group began to laugh.

"Believe it or not, he thought that all up all by his lonesome. It's the one he was supposed to give later that was written by the Wayne public relations staff. Thank God Bruce decided to step in and give it for him."

Artemis chuckled, "You'd think after twelve years of private school he would have learned something about writing."

"Hey, math was my specialty, not English."

"We'll if you did the math you'd realize we're about out of liquor." the sorceress jeered.

Aqualad raised his glass. "Well while we still have some left I'd like to add to what Dick has expressed. It is a pleasure to see you all again. We should not wait until events like this arise to get together. Life is too short. You all are the closest thing I have to family, one I've neglected that fact for far too long."

Everyone nodded as he made his toast "To the bride and groom to be."

"And absent friends," Dick added solemnly

"Absent friends," they replied as pangs of sadness pull slightly at the archer's heart. One look over at Dick and she knew he felt the same, but it had to be said. Moments later a smile returned to his face. He looked down at his watch and rolled his eyes. "Well I guess we better get back. You guys are welcome to hang out here as long as you like, but we have to get back out there for the big reveal. Try not to laugh when Bruce makes his toast ok? he worked hard on it, but expressing heartfelt sentiments are not really his strong suit? Alfred's given you all your room keys I assume, let's try and meet up around 1:00 near the pool. I think when this is all said and done I'm going to need a swim to wash all the fake off me if you know what I mean."

"I do!" Zatanna spoke up a little too quickly, causing Artemis to nearly choke on her wine, barely stopping it from coming out her nose.
"Sorry," the sorceress apologized. "I think that was the alcohol talking."

Dick shot her and irritated glance as his fiancé led him out the study.

"Oops?" the sorceress giggled as the room just stared at her in shock. Perhaps all the talk of the old days brought back a few feelings for the young hero she'd long thought gone. As the crowd followed the duo out, Zatanna stayed behind, waiting till the group was out of sight.

"Shit," she cursed; embarrassed that Dick Grayson could still have that effect on her after all these years.

"Don't worry about it," Artemis shrugged, thinking back fondly at all the times her friend would storm into her room at the cave so they could complain about their significant others. Alcohol was never involved back then, so this was a new wrinkle to a very old dilemma.

"Easy for you to say. I'm not used to being the bitch; that what Roy's for. At least if he'd been here there'd been some kind of eye candy around. He's still a dick, but easy on the eyes. Get this, when I called to ask him if he was coming, all I could hear was some skank screaming his name in the background. He was probably having sex while we were on the phone. That's just gross."

The archer sighed. "That was probably my sister."

Zatanna nearly did a spit take, quickly casting a small spell to make sure no wine had made it to the Wayne crested afghan rug.

"Cheshire? Are you freaking kidding me?!!"

"It's a long story," the archer exhaled.

As they left the room to go back to the party, Zatanna murmured to herself just loud enough for the archer to hear. "I really need to get laid," she groaned.

"Let's see what we can about do that," the archer chuckled, taking her friend's hand, preparing to release her on some unsuspecting male guest.

xxx

Outside the manor Wally stood impatiently in the long line waiting to be screened. Every few minutes he would step out, allowing a handful of others to go ahead, but delaying the inevitable was only making things worse.

*Come on Wal-man, you can do this.*

As he neared the main entrance, the security guard closest to the door asked for his i.d, checking it against the guest list. The next guard used his Garrett Superscanner V Security wand and waved it up and down the speedster body, while the other carefully frisked his jacket, pants and pockets; double checking for any cameras or recording devices. Wayne was serious about the privacy of this event.

"Whoa whoa, buy me a drink first sailor," the red head joked, trying to break the tension, only to see the emotionless musclebound guard hand him back his invitation, phone, and driver's license. "Enjoy your evening."

"Enjoy yours." Wally replied sardonically, taking back his belongings and finally walking into the mansion. It looked phenomenal.
The speedster had spent what seemed like half his life at Wayne Manor. He was just an average middle class Midwestern kid, not poor, not rich, but somewhere firmly in-between and completely fine with that, but coming to Gotham and sleeping over at his best friend's mansion, well that was pretty damn cool as far as he was concerned. Wally could never comprehend that Dick felt much the same way when he'd stay with him in Keystone; getting a taste of a normal life with loving parents that treated him like a son. A place where he could eat junk food and go to the movies, things he wasn't able to do as a son of Gotham. Dick loved feeling normal, Wally enjoyed feeling opulent. It was a win - win for both.

As he walked in, he barely recognized the place. He'd seen it decorated for Christmas before, but nothing like this, nothing so extravagant. There were crowds of people, standing, talking, and dancing. His memories of this place were of it being fairly empty, its owner occasionally entertaining small groups of guests while he and Dick would be tucked away in the residence, playing video games or watching movies.

He walked into a room full of Gucci and Armani, wearing the only suit he owned; a black jacket and pants he'd purchased at Men's Warehouse years ago. Now he could add underdressed to the growing list of insecurities that swelled within him with each passing moment, fighting the urge to curse the host for a third time, but the night was still young.

Wally scanned the room to no avail, searching for familiar faces within the hordes of guests. At this point even Capitan Cold or Mirror Master would be somewhat comforting, but all he saw was strangers.

He bit his lip and made his way down the stairs to the ground floor. A waiter immediately approached and asked him his beverage of choice.

"Got any beer?" the red head asked desperately.

"Sir, we're only serving wine and cocktails," the steward replied a little too snooty for the speedster's taste.

"Fine,' she sighed, "can I get the strongest thing you have. Make it a double."

"Very good sir"

Wally frowned, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

What in the hell am I doing here

He stood in the corner, politely nodding to the numerous people that passed by quietly judging him. He didn't belong here and they knew it. Why Bruce had thought his presence at an event like this would be a good idea was beyond him. Perhaps the billionaire held a grudge after all. Maybe it was some kind of passive aggressive form of punishment. Either way he was losing his nerve by the second as he decided his endgame. He'd finish his drink, force himself around the giant reception area one time and then bolt. He was prepared to walk; doubtful the courtesy of a chauffeur would be extended if he'd chickened out. Getting out of Gotham would be even trickier, with only a maxed out credit card and a few bucks to his name, but he'd cross that bridge when he got there.

I'm so screwed.

Just as he was looking for the waiter to hand off his glass, Bruce Wayne stepped to the center of the room, mic in hand. The string quartet ceased as the host stood front and center with the guests of honor by his side.
"Ladies and Gentleman, you've heard me make enough speeches over the years, so I'll make this brief. I've always been told a good marriage is at least eighty percent luck in finding the right person at the right time, and he rest is trust. We'll I'm here to tell you there was no luck involved in this case. These two were practically made for each other. Everyone already knew it, but it took them a little longer to come around, but as they say good things come to those who wait. Although today is arguably the most important day in Dick’s life, it's pretty special to me as well. I see so much hope and happiness in his eyes that only a woman as lovely as Barbara can inspire. Jim, Barbara you have raised a wonderful daughter, and if I could offer one word of advice, it would be to count each moment that you spend together a blessing, because that's how I consider you both."

"To Dick and Barbara; we all wish you nothing but the best. Now for God's sake, hurry up and marry her before realizes what's she's gotten herself into. Cheers."

The room erupted in applause as Dick leaned over, took her hand and twirled her around, catching her in the perfect dip kiss, a move straight out of a Hollywood movie that took his fiancé by surprise.

As he slowly eased her up, she looked into his steel blue eyes and smiled. "Pretty smooth Mr. Grayson. You're just full of surprises tonight."

"I try Ms. Gordon. I try."

The commissioner and his ex-wife walked over and joined the trio for pictures, the policeman complimenting their host on his toasting prowess as Barbara's mother smiled and whispered words of encouragement. The party sprung back to life, and with all the music and conversations swirling around again, the group almost didn't hear the uncomfortable clearing of a voice behind them.

"Hey guys," the redhead spoke softly.

Barbara spun around as her mouth and her glass nearly dropped to the floor.

"Wally!" she exclaimed in wide eyed astonishment, wrapping her arms tightly around the speedster, and squeezing as hard as she could. "You came!"

The speedster smiled. "What kind of jerk would I be if I missed something this important?"

She held tight kissing his cheek, slowly letting go as the speedster and the detective stood face to face.

"Hey Dick."

"Hey Wally," he replied in astonishment.

"Congratulations. I uh.. didn't bring a gift, it was kinda a last minute thing. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," the brunette chuckled.

Wally took Barbara's hand, examining the engagement ring, clearly impressed. "So... you finally took the plunge. Took you long enough."

"Thank you," Barbara replied sarcastically in agreement, mock frowning at her fiancé.

"We'll I had to make sure she was the right one, you can never be too careful these days. I had to know it wasn't just for my body," he smiled to the annoyance of his red head.

"If it was anything it would have been about the money, trust me on that," she deadpanned.
"Ouch." the brunette grimaced

"Truth hurts doesn't it?" she laughed, leaning over and kissing his cheek, "I'll be back in a few, you two need to catch up. Mom show me where you found those crab cakes, I'm starving."

Both men watched the two depart, as Dick smiled turning back to the speedster. "So how bad did Bruce have to threaten you to get you out here?"

Wally chuckled. "Your boss can be very persuasive, but I'm glad he did it."

"Me too."

Wally paused for a moment, trying to find the words that should have been expressed years before. When they didn't come he just gave up, remembering Batman's advice and powered through.

"Look Dick, I um...I don't really know what to say," he began, scratching the back of his neck nervously. "I don't deserve to be here, not after the way I've treated you. I didn't even had the courage to say thank you after you saved my life. That's just...that's just wrong. I'll spare you all the lame excuses." he sighed. "I just want you two to know that this is awesome thing you guys are doing, I know its was the best thing I ever did, and I wish you guys all the happiness in the world, you deserve it."

The speedster extended his hand to his friend. "I hope one day maybe you can forgive me."

Dick stared down at it for a moment, before knocking Wally's hand away and embracing the red head.

The speedster did his best not to choke up, "I love you man. I'm so sorry."

"I am too Wally, but the most important thing is you're here."

"I'm really happy for you guys." Wally said sincerely.

"I appreciate it. Can you going to stay for a while?"

"Considering Bruce is my ride home, I think I can stick around. Keystone's a pretty long walk from here."

"Good point," Dick laughed. "So you hungry?"

Wally eyes opened wide. "Are you kidding?"

xxx

Back on the balcony, Artemis stood next to the sorceress, watching the brunette flirt and make small talk, all the while smiling and faking interest in numerous amounts of inane conversations trying not scare off any potential suitors for her friend. It was exhausting. She remembered guys like this at Gotham Academy; more money than sense with an inflated ego to match. It was moments like this she missed her poisoned darts the most.

Zatanna's obnoxious laugh shook the archer back to reality as she watched her friend hand the guy her number, putting her thumbs to her ear and mouthing 'call me'

As the blonde haired blue eyed daddy's boy walked away, the sorceresses turned back to Artemis. "We'll he was a real winner," she said sarcastically.
"No shit," the blonde said bitterly. "I just wanted to knock that smug smile off his face, and his creepy friend who was eye-banging me behind him. Why in the hell did you give him your number?"

"It was to the suicide prevention line. Maybe he'll get the message."

Artemis laughed. "Nice. You haven't lost your touch."

"I'm a performer remember. So I'm going to track down that cute waiter with the nice ass carrying around the stuffed shrimp. Try not to fake your death and disappear while I'm gone."

The archer just dropped her head and sighed. "How long are we going to be be doing this?" she groaned.

"Till I say so," Zatanna smiled, bouncing away and tracking down her favorite appetizer, shrimp and men.

The archer leaned her elbows on the railing and stared down at the crowd. Despite her saucy banter, she really was glad to be back, not in the city per se, but in their lives. It was a foundation, a first step. Nothing would ever be like it once was, but that was ok.

It had been a long road to redemption, and she still had miles to go, but having these people, these friends back in her life was big start. No matter where she went from this point, she knew she'd have people to welcome her back, to welcome her home. It was more than the archer could have ever hoped for.

The string quartet played softly in the background as the chandeliers in the main hall shimmered, cascading the room in a dazzling light show, like some 18th Century planetarium, with each crystal representing a pinhole in the in the curtain of night. Knowing Alfred Pennyworth's attention to detail, she'd bet good money that every crystalline jewel had been set perfectly, just to give off the exact amount of brilliance. It reminded her of the millions of stars she'd fall asleep under in the middle of some jungle or desert, away from all the light pollution, where she could just stare off into forever. It was one of the few memories of her former life that she wanted to keep.

Artemis looked down at her watch and decided it was time to track down her friend and save her from herself when off in the distance something caught her eye. Barbara was standing next to her fiancé, wiping her eyes as Dick had his arms wrapped around….

Oh my God.

She watched from her perch as they talked, thinking she might have actually seen a smile, a laugh perhaps. Wally had actually done it, he'd kept his promise. Her heart began to swell when suddenly Dick paused their conversation for a moment and began searching the crowds, eventually catching an image of long golden hair among and ocean of guests. Moments later he took the speedster by the arm, guiding his eyes to the small corner of the balcony Artemis had secluded herself in. The two said some parting words and Dick patted the red head on the shoulder and walked back to his fiancé as Wally stood motionless, just staring at her from a distance, like she was the sun in this dizzying constellation of lights that unfolded all around them.. Eventually he raised his hand shyly to say hello. Artemis returned the wave as her cheeks began to redden.

He swallowed hard, panicking inwardly. Her presence had literally taken his breath away. He'd keyed himself up to face his biggest fear, seeing a man he loved like a brother and seeking absolution. Within mere moments the guilt he'd carried for so long slowly began to ebb, but now a new fear had taken over, and he cursed himself that his natural reaction was to run.
Out of pure reflex he checked his distance from the door, just as a worst case scenario, quickly turning back to the balcony only to see her gone. His heart sank. Without so much as a thought he quickly navigated through the hordes of people who were irritatingly oblivious to the urgency of his mission. He reached the bottom of the staircase and began his way up when caught sight of her again, her long blonde hair hanging freely, her emerald dress sparkling under the lights. He'd never seen her look more beautiful.

For every step he took upwards, she matched his going down, eventually meeting in the middle. With only seconds to spare he desperately tried to think of something snappy or charming, or sincere to say, but all his words and thoughts had abandoned him. He didn't care.

"Hi," he smiled.

"Hi," she replied; her husky voice nearly cracking.

"You look....:

"Ridiculous?" she interrupted.

"Amazing," he countered, swallowing nervously.

She too was at a complete loss for words, unbelieving he was actually here standing in front of her, and even more so that suddenly she'd become a nervous sixteen year old again. "Thanks. I...um like your tie."

As soon as the words escaped her mouth she wanted to head-palm herself. Wally looked down unfazed, realizing it was the same exact shade of green the archer was draped in.

"We match,' she smiled nervously.

"Yeah," he grinned, his cheeks beginning to flush. They both stood lost in each other, until from behind the sorceress bumped into the archer, sending her sprawling down into the speedster's arms.'

"Sorry, my bad," Zatanna smirked, never losing stride except for briefly stopping to kiss the speedster's cheek. "Hi Wally, nice catch," she spoke as she continued unabated to the main floor and disappearing into the crowd.

He couldn't even reply as he held the blonde in his arms, jolts of electricity shooting through his body. "You ok?"

"I hate her," she lied, staring up at his smiling green eyes, eventually freeing herself from his tender hold and standing upright again, straitening her dress.

"I didn't know you were coming," she began softly.

"I didn't know you were either. I thought you were on your way out of the country."

"I had a last minute change of heart", she answered. "That is ok isn't it?"

"Definitely," he replied, his ears beginning to pinken, the heat of her gaze only making his condition worse.

"What convinced you to come?" she asked

"I promised you I'd try remember? but Batman coming on campus, scaring the living shit out of me while I was grading papers kind of sealed the deal."
"You're kidding," she said trying to stifle a laugh

"Nope," he shrugged, "Pulled the whole ninja thing, disabling the lights, jumping out of the shadows, All the shit Dick used to do. God I hated that."

"I know you did, but that's what made it funny."

"Yeah I guess it kinda was." he smiled warmly, still lost in her eyes. "Is it hot in here?"

She easily saw his cheeks all aglow, imagining hers the same. "Yeah a little, you want to get so outside and get some air?"

"Please," he gushed, wiping new beads of sweat from his brow.

"Let's go," she smiled, turning and both making their way back up the staircase to the patio.

Below, Barbara watched as the two distanced themselves from the crowds escaping through the French doors to the veranda. It was almost as heartwarming a site as the speedster's homecoming with Dick had been; a moment she worried she'd never see. The memory of their embrace still choked her up, and she could see a new shine to Dick's eyes, a lightness that she'd had missed so much. Suddenly for a night that she thought would never end now suddenly couldn't last long enough. He fiancé soon joined her, bringing over two glasses to steal her attention away.

"Best engagement party ever huh?" the red head sighed, laying her head on Dick's shoulder.

"Yeah," her fiancé smiled off to the distance, before turning back and kissing her soft lips. "Did you know?"

"God no! This was a complete surprise, but if I had, I sure as hell wouldn't have told you. Paybacks a bitch boy wonder."

"I love it when you talk dirty," he grinned, drawing the red head in even closer. "So where did they go?"

"I think they wanted to be alone," she replied. "Maybe we should take a page out of their playbook?"

"I think that's a great idea," he confirmed.

"Lead the way boy wonder." she said as he took her hand, leading her to a well-planned escape route through the service entrance into parts unknown

xxx

Outside one the patio the archer and speedster stood facing each other, the moon above finally escaping its cloudy prison, casting light on the brick walkway and manicured grounds all around them.

"So did you two make your peace?" she asked hopeful

"I don't know. I hope so, It a start at least. I've got a lot to make up for; it's not going to happen overnight"

"I can relate."

"You can can't you?"
"Coming tonight was a big step Wally. I know it was hard."

"Not as much as I thought it was going to be. It was...really nice. Sort of like...I don't know...old times in a way."

"Good," she replied, noticing his tie was slightly crooked. She delicately grasped it, straitening the knot, her skin barley grazing the roughness of his cheek. "You two deserve it. Now don't fuck it up," she laughed bringing a wide grin to his face

"Yes mam," he replied, still feeling the light traces of her touch.

"I owe him Artemis, more than you'll ever know."

"That sounds pretty cryptic."

He nodded. "I'll tell you about it one of these days, but for now it's just kind of nice to feel like maybe we got a chance at a fresh start."

"I like fresh starts," she said softly.

He moved a little closer, and she could smell the scent of the cologne she used to like so much. If it ain't broke don't fix it she bemused to herself.

"I'm really glad you're here, I still had so many things I still needed to say."

"Like what?" she asked, moving away ever slowly

"Like... I don't want you to go."

"You don't?" she asked shyly, easing back against the brick wall behind her, daring him to follow. "Why?"

"Because this is your home Artemis, because you don't need to run anymore, and because...I'd miss you."

"You would?" she asked softly.

"Yeah, I would." he replied, his fingers reaching down, grazing hers ever so lightly, hoping she wouldn't pull away. "Saying goodbye to you was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Then years later I had to do it all over again with two people I loved. I've spent so much time just treading water, I've been too afraid to look to what's ahead."

"You don't have to be afraid," she replied, her words a breathless whisper. His body finally leaned forward to meet hers, gently resting her against the wall. Gentle was not something she'd had much experience with over the years

Her fingers left his as he reached upwards to ghost his cheek, moving a strand of shaggy auburn hair from his eyes. He'd changed so much over the years; freckles that have long since faded, a strong well defined jawline that he struggled to keep shaved, broader shoulder, an air of maturity that comes with age, but yet she could still see so much of the boy she once loved, his eyes an almost unnatural green, the same unkempt hair that could never be tamed, an Adam's apple that still bobbed uncontrollably when he was nervous, a flush in his cheeks that even his thick five o'clock shadow couldn't hide, but most importantly his smile, which she'd finally able to find.

"You're shaking," she whispered, drawing his cheek near to hers.
"I'm nervous," he replied, swallowing hard, breathing in her intoxicating perfume.

"Why?" she smiled, her lips barely grazing his ear, causing the hairs in his arms to stand up.

"I don't know what this is," he signed, closing his eyes and lifting his chin as she laid soft kisses up and down his neck, struggling to catch his breath.

"I don't either," she murmured, an impassioned moan forming in her throat as his body pushed deeper into hers. "What should we do?"

He placed his palms on either side of her face, his determined gaze locked into her steel grey eyes. "We run with it."

And with those words, he leaned down and kissed her.

She'd imagined this moment for years, foolishly hoping that one day the boy she'd loved and lost would somehow find his way back to her. It was an irrational fantasy, but one that had kept her going during the hardest of times. But now it was real. It was happening and it was everything she remembered.

As their lips met she felt a strange sensation in her stomach, the fluttering of riding a roller coaster for the first time, shooting up to unimaginable heights, and then skyrocketing down twice as fast. No one else had ever made her feel like that before or since. His lips were soft and perfect, and she could feel his heart racing as he eased in closer, their bodies molding into one.

A soft moan escaped their lips, neither one knowing nor caring who it had come from. She was the first girl he'd ever kissed, the first one that had counted anyway. Despite believing he was some modern day Romeo back then, she was the experienced one, the girl who'd taught him how to do it right; when to be patient and when to be passionate; when to be slow and when to go so fast that it would steal her breath away. She'd been an amazing tutor, and he's always been a quick study.

The initial meeting of lips was slow and cautious, but soon followed by so much urgency and desire that she literally melted in his arms. Before long they both began to move in concord, devouring each other with their lips, mouths, and tongues as if that was the only way they could express how they felt.

They continued on for minutes until they finally broke apart, gasping for breath, their hearts racing, their faces flushed.

His head eased forward, his damp brow becoming hers.

"Is everyone staring?" he asked between breaths.

"Who the hell cares," she panted, her fingers making their way through his untamed hair.

"Maybe we should find somewhere more….

She cut him off, talking his hand and literally dragging him from the veranda searching several outside doors until she finally found an unlocked one leading into the private residence.

They fell into the second story laundry room, stumbling over hampers and baskets towards the closest wall, neither one willing to let go of the other. The gentleness of minutes ago was set aside, replaced now by need and desire. His mouth became more demanding, more assertive, as waves of lust washed over her. She wanted him desperately.
The battled for position and dominance, exploring the other body feverishly before Wally lifted her atop a laundry table, the archer raising the hem of her skirt just slightly to allow him to move in closer. She grabbed his hips drawing him in tighter, as he growled in her shoulder, kissing her clavicle and up her neck line. His hands reached through the open sleeve of her dress, snaking their way to the skin of her back, when suddenly he paused, his fingers reaching the precipice of several jagged lines of scars that raced up and down her back, unwanted souvenirs of a tortuous life she wanted to forget.

Without acknowledging his discovery, she grabbed his hands, throwing them forward to allow her access to remove his jacket and tie. She unbuttoned the top two buttons of his dress shirt, nipping at his chest as he hissed at the sting of her mouth. Her tongue traced his pectoral muscles, driving him insane with desire when he grabbed her and brought her demanding lips back to his. Her hips were drawing ever closer to his now, to the point they could both feel the heat emanating underneath. They continued to tiptoe the boundary between control and chaos, their movements becoming primal, almost animalistic when the archer had had all she could take, frantically grabbing at his belt buckle and the button underneath. Wally let out a guttural man and then suddenly froze, catching her hands and easing back away from her.

His sudden rejection was like a knife though her heart. Once again she felt like damaged goods, that despite how close they'd become again, he still held some kind of resentment inside for what she'd done. She looked up with stinging eyes to see confusion and guilt draped across his face. He swallowed hard, trying to catch his breath, before stepping away nervously running his fingers through his hair.

"I'm …I'm sorry Artemis…I can't do this," he spoke despondently, unable to look her in the eyes.

That's when it hit her; these feelings, this need, this act, the last time he'd probably shared himself with another was with her. His wife, and the conflict in his eyes made her heart ache. Sex meant something special to him, it was personal, intimate, not the wanton act she and Zane were known to perpetrate from time to time. The archer had to be careful now, to say or do something that would possibly damage what they'd just rediscovered was a risk she was not willing to take.

He prepared for her ire, when gentle hands, brought him back, the fever of lust fading as caring eyes cast down upon him.

"It's ok," she said softly, bringing his forehead to hers.

"Artemis I'm sorry."

"Shhhhh," she whispered. "I shouldn't have rushed things."

"You didn't," he corrected, "I did."

"Wally we don't…"

"I want this Artemis," he gestured between them. "This is kind of…new territory for me. I just need to take it slow….if that's ok. I know it sounds stupid."

"It's not stupid. I understand. I want this too, I want us, and I'm willing to wait as long as you need me to."

"What about your boyf…?"

She placed her hand over his mouth. "He's not my boyfriend, and you have nothing to worry about. I'm here with you. I want to be with you. He's a good man and a good friend, but he's remnant of
another life. I'm looking forward now, not back, Care to join me?"

Wally smiled. "Yeah, I think I would."

"Let's straighten ourselves up and head back down and make sure everyone's behaving themselves," she smiled. He nodded, taking her hand and kissing it before placing it firmly into his.

They leaned out the door scanning both ends of the hallway before walking out hand in hand, just another lost couple who'd taken themselves on a self-guided tour of the mansion. They decided to take the long way back to the foyer, and Artemis leaned her head against his shoulder as they maneuvered the labyrinth Bruce Wayne called home.

"By the way, you haven't lost a step Mr. West."

Wally blushed. "I had a really good teacher."

"Yeah you did," she grinned. "What was his name again?"

Wally shook his head and laughed, leaning in and kissing her nose. "And there she is..." he chuckled. "Artemis Crock, moment killer."
A half hour later, two slightly disheveled figures reappeared in the main ballroom, arriving minutes apart from opposite sides of the room. The duo searched through a sea of strangers for the safe haven of former teammates as the engaged couple made their way through the reception line, shaking hands and sharing hugs with people neither knew nor cared to. Such was high society.

The archer navigated the masses, avoiding the superficial gazes of guests before finding the Atlantean standing in the corner, watching the festivities in amusement.

"Artemis," he said formally upon her arrival, a custom he'd owned since the day they'd first met.

"Kaldur," she replied in kind.

She eyed him curiously, searching back through the years for a memory that had piqued her curiosity since the beginning of the night. "You know, I've never actually seen you in a tux before."

He smiled. "It is not the most comfortable attire considering my physiology," he gestured to his gills resting awkwardly against the starch white collar, "but it is for a good cause, however I might say the same about you as well."

She laughed stepping back to show off the entirety of the dress. "In my line of work there were times," she paused hearing the words, reminded of moments, of missions that she hoped to forget. "My former of work I mean."

Kaldur nodded respectfully and without judgment, another trait she always appreciated. He looked ahead to the banquet line, watching Dick and Barbara meet guest after guest paying their respects.

"Did you know they were…together?" she asked. "Evidently you can't pick up a tabloid around this town without seeing his picture with some model plastered across the society section"

"Wayne Industries and Atlantis have shared many business ventures throughout the years, so he and I speak quite often, but as always he tends to keep things very close to the vest. However…" he said with a wry smile, "the vigilantes Nightwing and Batgirl are often spotted patrolling together, so I had my suspicions. To be honest, I am quite envious. How fortunate it is to find what you've always searched for right by your side the entire time."

Artemis glanced over her shoulder looking for a tuft of red hair in the masses. "I know exactly what you mean."

Across the crowded ballroom Wally anxiously searched for familiar faces; a 6'2 junior man of steel, or dark Atlantean features set against an alabaster backdrop, even a fellow ginger with a bad attitude would have been a relief to the insecure underdressed speedster, but instead all he found was the judgmental eyes of strangers, not so subtly critiquing how someone such as him had been allowed inside the mansion this night. It probably wasn't as bad as it seemed, but to the apprehensive red head he might as well have been wearing just his boxers, he felt that insecure.

In the distance he saw the ambassador; relieved to have finally found someone familiar to talk to. Wally was fairly sure events like these still made Kaldur as uncomfortable as he felt, but before he could get any closer, a familiar emerald dress appeared by the Atlantean's side, claiming his attention.

Wally sighed, disheartened that Artemis had found him first. Walking up and engaging the two in
conversation would just be awkward. They were trying so hard not to be obvious, that it was becoming blindingly obvious.

Irritable guests moved around him in a huff, but Wally barely noticed, his eyes unable to stop staring at the vision in green. She was so different from the teenager he remembered, and yet still so strikingly similar; a graceful athletic build, dark grey eyes, exotic features, a distinctive shade of olive skin, long blonde hair that scientifically had no business belonging to someone of her ethnicity. She truly was one of a kind, but for every moment his heart excitedly fluttered at her smile, an image of her sobbing behind a cold blast door seconds away from death took its place. It was all too easy to allow the anger of betrayal to creep back inside. He wanted to trust her, to look past the mistakes she'd made for the girl he once cared for, but still he couldn't shake the feeling he was setting himself up for another heartbreak. It was times like this when he missed Barry the most; he always knew the right things to say.

He was lost in her in his thoughts when a familiar voice spoke out from behind

"Your fly's down Wall-man."

Panicked, Wally's head whipped downward searching for the seam, thankfully finding everything in its place. The giggle that followed easily gave away the perpetrator's identity.

"I'm sure it's not from lack of trying," the sorceress laughed, wrapping her arms wide and hugging him.

"Not funny Zee," he frowned, taking a deep calming breath.

She smiled, straightening his tie. "You had it coming. I'm still mad at you by the way."

"What did I do now?" he sighed.

"Um… do the words Sold Out, One Night Only, Central City Performing Arts Theater ring a bell?"

"Aw damnit!" he groaned, face-palming himself. "It was the 28th, wasn't it?"

"Yep," she replied, popping the P. "I left you three tickets."

"Oh god Zee, I'm so sorry."

"If it's forgetfulness I can forgive that, but if I find out you ditched me, because unlike their father, Jai and Iris might actually have an honest affinity for sorcery, I'm going to turn you into a turnip… just for fun."

"You've got nothing to worry about there, they love your shows. They're going to be so disappointed. I don't remember what it was; soccer, scouts, school, detentions, more detentions."

"God I love that girl." Zee laughed, thinking of father and daughter sitting in a cramped library on a Saturday morning because the younger redhead couldn't stop talking in class. "So…done anything interesting lately?"

His brow furrowed at the sorceress. There was no point denying it, he knew he'd been busted.

"You're scared shitless aren't you?"

"A little," he replied, before uttering a more honest answer. "All right, a lot actually. Zee, I don't know what I'm doing."
"I'll tell you what you're not going to do. You're not going to overthink this. You're going to live in the moment and just enjoy it. There's no point in looking back, what's done is done."

"It's not that easy Zee."

"Wally we've been friends forever. I still remember the stubborn kid that refused to admit magic was real, that everything could be explained by science. Well you and I both know that's not true don't we? I create illusions for a living, and half of the people that come to my shows don't even believe in magic, they just come to try to find out how it's done, how to solve the puzzle because they can't accept the truth. Well I don't need my magic to figure out the puzzle that is Wally West. You feel guilty for still having feelings for her, you feel that by doing so somehow dishonors Linda's memory; you're scared you might get hurt again, and you're even more scared of what happens if you don't. Am I close?"

"Uh…wow," Wally exhaled. "No magic huh?"

"Nope, you're that easy, but that one over there…" she gestured towards Dick, "he's the one I still can't figure out."

"Guess I'm not the only one that still has feelings huh?"

Zatanna shot him a sly grin. "Nice try science boy, but this isn't about me. You know how much I loved Linda, everybody did. She was amazing, and funny, and you two were perfect for each other. You were a great husband and you are great father, but Wally, she wouldn't want you to spend the rest of your life alone, and I bet if you were being honest with yourself you don't want that either. But here's the catch, to do that you've got to be willing to take a risk, and she's standing right over there, trying really really hard not to be obvious that she's can't stop staring at you, hoping no one will notice."

As if on cue, Artemis turned slightly to look in their direction, quickly angling away when they caught her gaze.

"God I hope she was a better mercenary than she is at flirting," the sorceress chuckled. "Remember what I said ok? Don't overthink it. You're not the same person you were ten years ago, she's not either. You both deserve a win. Tabula rasa"

The speedster crooked his head. "Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"It's Latin for blank slate," she frowned. "I thought you were a teacher."

"Science Zee, you know the study of things that make the world go round, not some dead language no one speaks anymore."

"No one but us sorcerers," she grinned, straightening his tie one last time and kissing his cheek. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to see if I can't find some gorgeous thing out thereto buy me a drink."

"Uh Zee…the drinks are free."

She turned and winked. "Sometimes it's the thought that counts."

From across the room, the sight of the brunette kissing the red head did not escape the archer. She was surprised how envious she felt. The speedster and the sorceress had always shared a deep friendship, one that had carried on long since her disappearance. Zatanna had probably been there the day he got married. She was undoubtedly there when Linda died. They had a history.
Artemis had to remind herself that Wally wasn't her property, far from it, but the idea of him was, that was still hers. It was personal, and when the archer had been her bleakest, or even in the arms of another, he was there. He'd always been there.

Lost loves, you never get over them, but maybe now she didn't have to. It was in her grasp and the feelings he brought out in her was everything she remembered and more. She just hoped he felt the same way; that he'd give her a chance again, give them a chance. His heart had been broken too many times before, and she was determined that it wouldn't happen again.

xxx

Connor Kent stood on the balcony watching the flurry of activity below. Parties were not really his thing, and formal ones even less so, but like Kaldur and Zatanna, being there for his friends and former teammates, especially at such a special occasion was important to him. He'd be lying if he said he didn't miss the old days from time to time, but the way things ended still left a sour taste in his mouth even after all these years.

Superboy was still shocked to see that the speedster had actually come. Much like everyone else, Connor had never been made privy to the reasons behind Wally and Dick's falling out, but whatever had caused the rift had happened not long of Barry Allen and Linda West's death, an incredibly stressful time for all involved, including himself. Jonathon Kent's fatal heart attack would happen only a few months later. Not long after that, super-heroing just lost its allure. Martha and Jonathon Kent were the only parents he'd ever known. They'd treated him like a son, their son, not a weapon, not a clone, but family. With Ma Kent alone, a farm to take care of, and an older son who was constantly gone saving the world, it became a pretty simple choice.

He'd sworn to himself that after Linda's death he'd stay in touch. Smallville to Keystone was only a two and half hour train ride, and early on he'd kept that promise; meeting for ballgames, or taking the kids to the Kent farm. Much like her father, Iris was loud, energetic; full of life, but Jai was quiet, reserved. Connor could identify with that, and the two had an instant connection.

Connor never used his powers around the kids, Wally forbade it. He wanted his kids to have no part or knowledge of his former life, and Superboy respected that. During visits to the Kent's, on occasion Connor and Jai would take long walks around the property; he'd listen to the boy talk of the mother he didn't remember, or feeling like he lived in his sister's shadow. He'd talk about the rage he felt inside him sometimes. Connor knew just how he felt. Now with the news of the attacks on both Wally and Bart, it only made him feel more guilty. He should have been there, he should have done something. That was the curse of being a man of steel.

Artemis brought out an entirely different set of emotions. Unlike the helplessness he felt with Wally's situation, he had been there the day Artemis died. He'd tried everything to save her, but was faced with the impossible choice of saving her or saving his friends. The archer's death had been one of the most painful burdens he'd ever carried, and now she stood at the bottom of the stairs, talking with Kaldur alive and well, as if nothing had happened. But that wasn't entirely true and he knew it. You could use whatever terminology that made you the most comfortable, but the truth of the matter was she'd been turned into a slave, a weapon forced to do the bidding of cruel masters. That too he could identify with, and much like him, she'd been freed to live her own life, to make her own choices once again.

Forgiveness wasn't going to be easy, trust even more so, but if Dick, Barbara, Zatanna, and Kaldur could find it in their hearts to do so, he had no intention of being the lone holdout. That's what friends and family do, that's what Jonathon Kent would have done, and that was enough for him.

However, contemplating the intricacies of guilt and forgiveness was not the reason Connor found
himself up on that terrace, it was her

He'd noticed her early on, a stunning African American woman, standing above the crowd, eyes locked on the small intimate group for friends for most of evening. Connor was surprised Dick hadn't noticed her first, observation and deduction being his strong suits, but Nightwing had his hands full, so tonight it fell to him

She stood at the curved corner of the balcony, back to the wall, a solitary flute of champagne in her right hand barely touched. The women was easily six foot, rich brown eyes, long flowing hair with auburn highlights, wearing an elegant black tight fitting gown, accentuating her goddess like form.

As he approached, carrying a small plate of o'dourves, he could see her noticeably tense, instantly uncomfortable with the location she'd trapped herself into. Connor stopped a foot away, turning to match her stance, staring down at the festivities below.

"Nice party."

Her only response was a curt nod, hoping her detached standoffish behavior would give him the hint and he'd leave her in peace. No such luck.

"So are you a friend of the future bride or groom?" he asked, looking down to the intended couple.

"Neither,' she replied hesitantly in what Connor thought carried traces of a Nigerian accent. "My… uncle works with Mr. Wayne."

"I see." he replied.

They continued to stand in silence watching the masses. The ebony beauty made no attempt at polite conversation, asked no questions, just stood eerily silent, occasionally taking small sips of the twelve year old Dom Perignon.

"Have you tried the crab cakes?" Connor asked politely, raising his plate in offering. She shook her head timidly, refusing to partake, or even acknowledging the gesture, which only seemed to fuel his resolve.

"You don't know what you're missing," he smiled, taking another bite of the delectable appetizer. "Best crab cakes this side of Baltimore…or at least Rhode Island."

In his peripheral vision, he noticed her body stiffen, her lip quiver slightly. Out of respect, he didn't acknowledge the reaction, keeping his gaze forward and allowing her a moment to compose herself as they continued to watch the masses.

Did you really think I wouldn't notice he reached out to her mentally, that I wouldn't feel you in here?

For a fraction of a second, her eyes sparkled with an emerald glow, barley perceivable unless you were standing next to her. She'd been discovered, and she knew it. She didn't try to lie, there was no point and she'd never been very good at it anyway. Finally M'gann turned to face him, biting her lip.

I shouldn't be here, she projected. This was a mistake.

This is exactly where you should be he countered, reaching down and lightly grazing her hand, sending pleasurable chills through her. They're your friends. They'd love to know you were here.

"Connor you can't say anything," she replied verbally in a pleaded whisper. "They can't know."
"When are you going to stop pushing us away? What happened was a long time ago. We've all made mistakes. Look down there," he gestured to the corner where Artemis and Kaldur stood. "Artemis told me she'd seen you. You know what she's done, but she's here. People forgive. You've got to stop punishing yourself."

"I… I know," she stuttered, "I'm just not ready, not yet."

"Ok," he said calmly, moving closer as her body eased. "No pressure, but someday ok? Someday soon."

"Ok," she exhaled in relief.

They stood silently for a few minutes, both unsure where to go or what to do. Finally M'gann spoke up. "Connor, would you mind….just …staying up her for a while? We don't have to talk or anything, I just…"

"I've got all the time in the world," he smiled. "Oh and…Ma thanks you for the deserts. Apple is her favorite."

She hid the smile, talking a long sip of champagne, feeling the warm blush of her skin, feeling happy.

xxx

Later into the evening, as the last of the party goers were politely encouraged to leave the mansion, the seven retreated to the saltwater indoor pool, the girls bringing along a few bottles of wine for good measure.

By this point, Artemis and Wally had given up all pretenses, now sitting across from each other in conversation with the rest. Conversations ranged from amusing memories to work place dramas and everything in between. It was just old friends reminiscing about the good times, steering clear of the bad. During all of this, there were stolen glances, warm smiles, an occasionally foot brushing against the other's legs, neither one worried if anyone noticed.

A half hour later, Kaldur stood waist deep in the restorative waters, his gills finally free of the uncomfortable binding tuxedo, while the three girls having finally ditched their heels, dangled their aching arches in the warm salt water.

"Oh my God, "Zatanna moaned, as skilled fingers massaged hot spots on the arch and ball of her foot. "Kaldur, how am I just learning about this new Atlantean super power of yours?"

Aqualad chucked. "With great respect to my lineage and mentors, this certain skill I learned on my own, after much practice."

Another loud moan caused Artemis's eyes to roll, an action unfortunately caught by the sorceress, Her brows furrowed at her friend, when suddenly she reached down, grabbing the archer's leg and placing her foot in Kaldur's skilled hands.

Before Artemis could protest, Kaldur placed the appropriate amount of pressure on all the right spots, forcing an involuntary "Ohhhh" to escape her lips, causing the group to break into laughter.

"Ok," she chuckled, trying to stifle a groan. "I take it all back."

"Connor you want to give it a try?" Zatanna grinned.
The Man of Steel's eyes were a million miles away, distanced by the by events of the evening, by the women he couldn't speak of. Suddenly he realized what had been asked, and smirked at the odd suggestion. "No, I'm good,' he laughed waving her off.

Kaldur continued his ministrations, alternating between the three women's feet, when after a few minutes they all looked to the other side of the pool at Dick and Wally sitting at a wrought iron table in deep conversation.

"What do you think they're talking about?" Zatanna asked.

"Who cares," Barbara replied. "The main thing is they're taking." The five nodded in agreement.

Sitting across for each other, Dick took a swig of the Sam Adams he and Wally were drinking. "So how did you know Linda was the one?"

Wally stroked his chin, smiling at the question. "I guess it was when I told her I was the Flash. I'd been a superhero since what? thirteen I guess? By then we'd probably helped save the world a couple of times, and she was utterly and completely unimpressed. It was classic. I felt like the damsel in distress around her. Linda tolerated the guy in scarlet, but she loved the guy underneath."

Wally paused to take a pull off the fine craft beer. "God she was so damn funny. Her humor was her superpower. I knew I was in over my head, but I was so lucky to have had her, even if it was just for a little while."

"She was pretty lucky to you know," Dick added.

"She would have been a lot luckier if we'd never met." the speedster said painfully.

"Don't say that, you know that's not true."

"Look this conversation's talking a nose dive. Let's get back on track. This is your big day. You've picked a great girl, she's your best friend, she knows all your secrets, she's beautiful, funny. She's the whole package dude. You guys are gonna have a great life together. You deserve it."

"Thanks buddy."

Wally stared down at the table sighing. He began to mumbling something before quickly losing his nerve, instead reaching down to finish his beer. Finally he found the courage to say what had been years overdue.

"Dick I'm really sorry about what I did. I don't deserve this friendship."

"Look Wally….

"No," he cut him off. "I was a complete fucking coward. It was so stupid for me to think I'd have the guts to follow through with it. I knew I couldn't kill Thawne. It wasn't because of Barry, or Linda, It's because I was afraid, an absolute fucking coward. He knew it too."

Wally pinched the bridge of nose, pushing back against burning eyes. "I knew you'd show up. I knew you'd be the one to find me. When you Zeta'd in, God I was so relieved. I wanted so bad for someone to stop me, to give me an excuse for chickening out, but I….I think when you arrived, I…hoped… you'd to kill him for me, that you'd take all the weight and guilt off me because you knew I wasn't strong enough to. When you wouldn't, when you did the right thing, it just gave me an excuse to blame someone else, someone who wasn't me."
"After what you'd been through, your mind was everywhere. I understood."

"That's not an excuse, not after all these years."

"Wally you lost your family. You woke up one day and you're a single father. The whole world crumbled around you man. I get that that."

"It's wasn't a pride thing Dick. It wasn't because I blamed you for anything. I was scared. I know it makes no sense, but if I'd had the guts to come and apologize back then and you'd told me to fuck myself, it just would have been one more person I'd lost. I convinced myself somehow if it was my decision, if I was the one who was wronged, it wouldn't be my fault. It's just messed up. You didn't deserve any of it. It took Bruce scaring the shit out of me to finally admit out loud."

"He does that," Dick chuckled. "Trust me you're not the only one. I can't tell you how many times he pulled me aside for something similar."

"I'm sorry man. I'm really really sorry."

"It's in the past. Gone. Forgotten. You're here and that's all that matters, and I mean this in the most hetero way I possibly can; you're the best present I could have hoped for."

Wally looked at him for a few seconds before breaking out laughing. "That's the most hetero you got? Wow. I hope you're not that touchy feely with the all guys you bust. Probably makes them feel all warm and fuzzy before they head out to Blackgate. Do you tell them you'll come visit too, bring chocolates? And I thought Barry's bantering was bad."

"You're a real prick," Dick smiled. "Anyone ever told you that?"

"The list is long and distinguished," Wally smiled proudly.

"I bet, and since we're on the subject of the past, what going on with you and….."

"Whoa. Nice try dude, Classic Dick Grayson misdirection. This isn't about me tonight. I want to hear about how you tricked Babs into getting hitched."

Dick smiled. "Well it started with lots of alcohol and a lot of begging…..

xxx

Around two a.m. the forecasted storms finally arrived in Gotham. Kaldur stared up through the glass ceiling, seeing the rain pounding against the glass, the echoes of thunder in the distance. He decided it was the right time to call it a night. With all the yawning of the last hour, he was fairly confident everyone else felt the same. He regretted that the night was coming to an end. For just a few hours he wasn't an ambassador, he wasn't a public figure. He was just a friend, one that his missed his more than he'd realized.

"My friends, I must turn in. It has been a most enjoyable evening. I am grateful to have had the chance to catch up, but I am afraid affairs of state await me in the morning."

Everyone nodded, thinking about the lives they'd have to return to. This night had been carefree, reminding everyone of similar ones at Mt. Justice, sitting on the beach, in the media room, their favorite pizza place in Happy Harbor, their only care being the adrenaline rush that would follow when the call to arms came in, when they'd stop being teenagers for a while and become heroes.

Sadly it reminded Artemis that she didn't have a life to return to. Instead she'd have to build one; and
these men and women, these friends were going to be part of it, one especially if she could have her way.

Everyone hugged, and Dick reminded them that Alfred would have breakfast ready by seven. No one was going to miss out on a Pennyworth breakfast, they were legendary.

As they began to disperse towards their assigned rooms, Wally walked up to the archer.

"So…he began

"So…. she retorted with a smile.

"I'm going to have to catch an early flight out. I…the kids I mean… have soccer games in the morning. It's a three hour flight, so…I may not see you in the morning."

"Oh..ok" she said, hiding her disappointment.

"So… it might be awhile before I can see you again. You know with school and the kids, and my folk's house and all that….

She sighed quietly….here it comes. She kind of expected it she guessed.

He ran his hands through his hair sheepishly before continuing, "But if um, if I can find a cheap flight to Gotham, my mom and dad have tons of frequent flier miles, maybe we can…. hook up…I mean meet up, and spend some time together. Just you and me."

A warm grin spread across her face. "Yeah, I might be able to squeeze you in."

The speedster laughed. "Well I know how busy you must be, with not having a job, a place to stay, and mooching off your old friends and all."

"Watch it West," she chuckled. "If that's the way you ask a girl out, you're sorely out of practice. Do you want my number or not?"

"Oh I think I've got your number," he grinned.

They stood by each other in the empty pool room, flashes of lighting bursting overhead. Wally raised his hand, gently moving a few strands of hair out of her face. "I had a nice time tonight."

"Me too."

Artemis didn't want the night to end, and she could tell he didn't either, but it was late and she knew he had an early morning. They all did.

*Take it slow* she reminded herself. *Take it slow*

She reached up and palmed his check, drawing his lips to hers. They both closed their eyes as their limbs entwined. It was such an odd feeling having his arms around hers' again. He was gentle, careful, and it had been a long time since someone had treated her like that, treated her so tenderly, honestly it was a bit unnerving.

Men and women; targets all. Insincere liars and manipulators who would spew bullshit platitudes all in the name of seduction, all for the hunt just to be with her, never realizing that they themselves were the hunted. Their gestures and her responses were all part of the game, and their deaths left the same numbness in her heart every time. There were days when she wondered if she'd ever be able to feel again, doubting she'd every have the need to actually worry about it, and yet here she was.
This moment was something she'd fantasized about for as long as she could remember. It was a dangerous desperate dream, one she knew could never be fulfilled, but it distracted her long enough to get through the sorrow and loneliness of dangerous missions. But his was not some faceless target to seduce, this wasn't some sexual disconnect with Zane, This was real. This was right. She could spot the players a mile away, and Wally West had never been one of them.

A loud thunderclap above ended the kiss, signaling the end of their night as well.

"Good night Artemis. Sleep well"

"You too Wally."

He placed one last gentle kiss on her check and headed upstairs towards the guest residence. Out of some misplaced old fashioned British prudeness, Alfred had placed all the women in the mansion proper, while Wally, Connor, and Kaldur had rooms assigned to them in the guest residence.

Dick and Barbara lived together for Christ sake, but when at Wayne Manor, Alfred all but mandated separate rooms. Yeah have fun with that Babs, Artemis humphed bitterly as the speedster vanished in the darkness.

Take it slow, she said calmly to herself. A mantra she begrudgingly knew she'd be repeating for awhile

xxx

It was around 3:30 a.m. as Artemis laid wide awake, eyes fixated on the vaulted ceiling. The room smelled old, stale, Victorian. Antiquities were not her strong suit, but she felt fairly certain that a few of the pieces were probably hundreds of years old. It's was an odd mix of antique furniture and modern conveniences she considered, best represented by the large flat screen that hung over a 19th century chest of drawers.

Through the window, the brilliant bursts of lightening created moving stereoscopic shadows across the ceiling, reminding her of the old French Diableries her mother was so fond of.

As a child, she never liked storms. They seemed like giant ferocious creatures roaming the countryside, one's that would strike at night when everyone was peacefully asleep, everyone but her. Only when her father was away, would she run and seek comfort in her mother's bed. Later as adult, she was forced to tolerate them, to sit in the tempests for hours, awaiting the arrival persons of interest, targets that would lead her to someone else up the chain.

Long ago Paula Crock had taught her a trick that eased the young girls mind somewhat; a way to tell just how far away the monsters were.

Artemis, after you see the lightning, I want you to count until you hear the thunder. When those numbers begin to get higher and higher, the storms will be gone.

She lay on that guest bed, watching the illumination and beginning that same exercise.

A flash of light - 1...2...3... followed by a roll of thunder,

Again.

A flash of light - 1...2...3...again the roll of thunder.

The storms remained steady, with no sighs not of letting up. Artemis rolled over in the bed, placing
the goose down pillows over her head to block out the bursts of light.

*A flash of light - 1...2...3...The roll of thunder.*

How many nights she'd play this game with herself? Laying in wet Asian rice fields, outside of French chateaus, underneath the foggy bridges of West London, the Carnivals of Brazil, surrounded by floods of energy and the heat of bodies dancing through the streets, soaking in the downpours.

*A flash of light - 1...2...3...The roll of thunder.*

The thoughts of missions brought her back to Jade and Zane. She was still angry at Cheshire for the secret contact she'd kept with Roy. It's had been foolish, selfish, and dangerous. It could have gotten them all killed if the shadows had discovered it. Love makes you do stupid things; like tracking down ex-boyfriends from a lifetime ago.

Wally was a husband, a parent, a professional with a 9-5 job. He wasn't some daredevil vigilante anymore, he wasn't a superhero, he was just...normal. She didn't know what normal was anymore, but right now normal seemed perfect. Artemis knew she couldn't mold her life to fit into his, but there had to be a happy medium somewhere. It might work, she'd make it work of she'd let him, and that was a big *if.*

The heat, the passion, the tenderness, it felt so real, the lasting feelings that stirred inside her felt real as well. This wasn't a *fling,* a *one night stand,* or a *for old time's sakes.* It felt natural, organic, not forced or rushed. It was hard not to wish they'd gone farther tonight. Sex was no stranger to either of them by now, but together? That's what she wanted, that's what she'd dreamed about for so long, and surprisingly it was within her reach, and that realization scared the shit out of her. How many ways could she fuck this up? How many stumbles would she trip before he'd finally give up and walk away? To make it work, to make it really work, she'd have to be the one thing she'd struggled with her whole life. *Honest.*

Suddenly *take it slow* didn't seem so bad.

*A flash of light - 1...2...3...4...The roll of thunder.* The storm was beginning to ease.

Unfortunately sex made her think of Zane. She needed to end it. It wouldn't be a huge shock to him; he knew why she was here, back in the states, back in Gotham. He knew why she'd come back and probably knew why she wouldn't leave.

He'd been a good friend, a good partner. Since the beginning Zane had always been there for her, kept her alert, kept her alive. Taking it to a physical level was inevitable, but there was a distinct difference between sex and intimacy. Sex satisfied a need, intimacy…well that was dangerous. Emotions weren't allowed, those were the rules.

Being back in Gotham, this could end up being the hardest mission she'd ever undertake; piecing together two fractured hearts in hope of making them one again. It was easier in some ways to actually think of it as a mission. It was time to compartmentalize

*Irrational – Yes*

*Dangerous – Most definitely*

*Risk Level – High*

*Likelihood of success - 25 – 39%*
Reward – Unquantifiable.

Such was love, and she did love him. She always had.

A flash of light - 1...2...3...4...The roll of thunder.

The shadows continued their dance on the ceiling as she pleaded for sleep to finally arrive.

It was a mission, she had a mark. The archer could stalk a target for weeks when necessary. The key was patience. It was all about patience. You wait for the sign, you wait for an instant, for an opening, you wait for just the right moment.

"Take it slow Artemis," she said again out loud.

A flash of light - 1...2...3...4...The roll of thunder.

"Fuck it!" she cursed, throwing off the covers. Slow didn't mean stop.

The archer zipped open her bag, pulling on her sweat pants, shirt, and sandals, before opening the creaky oak door, which she was fairly certain everyone on the floor could hear. Thankfully the wind and the rain muffled her exit. Dick would have to be a master's level escape artist to escape such a loud old house right under the nose of the world's greatest detective, but she assumed he tried anyway. This was Robin after all.

She finally left the residence and reached the entrance to the pool, stationed on the other side of the structure, one of several entrances to the guest quarters. Wally had mentioned off hand being placed on the second floor.

Why would he say that? Was it just small talk, an invitation, did he have some kind of irrational fear of residencies with multiple levels?

"My God, grow a pair!" she cursed to the twelve year old girl inside her. She was a mercenary, a trained and deadly killer. Stalking her ex-boyfreind to his bedroom was child's play. Fish in a barrel, Insane and irrational, but still a piece of cake

"God I hate idioms," she sighed.

She reached the second floor landing in dead silence. The hall seemed fairly empty, leaving her wondering who else the bitter old Englishmen might have placed up here with him to make stealthy transgressions even more difficult

A flash of light - 1...2...3...4...5. The roll of thunder.

There were at least ten rooms up this level; five per side. With Connor's hearing he would have already detected her, so logic told her he was on the floor below. There was just enough of a howl of wind outside to mask her tracks as she began searching for breathing. She carefully put her ear to the first doors on either side, finding nothing but silence. Two down…eight to go.

The next to door came with the same results. Four down six to go.

A flash of light - 1...2...3...4... roll of thunder.

The trained killer in her deduced that because of his physiology, it made the most sense to have Kaldur as close to the proximity to water as possible. Another target to cross off the list. Two doors later, she was even closer to her prize.
More than two thirds down the hall, she heard a soft moan, a low muttering, a bad dream. It was coming from the last room on the right. She'd finally found her target.

Despite her urges, she would respect the boundaries he'd placed, all she wanted was to be beside him, to hold him and wish the years away. She just wanted to hear him breathe and let that sound ease her to sleep. Nothing more…

*A blinding flash of light – 1….The deafening roll of thunder*

Suddenly the residence shook like a bomb had dropped just outside. Underneath the door gap, the inside of the room blazed like the fourth of July, if only for a moment. A moment too long Artemis decided,

Worried, she turned the knob only to find it locked. A louder moan inside ignited her senses, and she put her shoulder into the door, knocking it wide open.

She looked to the disheveled bed, searching the piles of covers only to find it empty. In the darkness she heard another moan and spotted a figure in the corner. On the floor in the fetal position lay the sweat soaked speedster, semi-conscious, breathing heavily, muttering words and sounds she could barely understand.

Artemis reached down, not wanting to startle him any more than she had to, hoping doing so wouldn't make whatever nightmare he was having any worse, but this was no ordinary night terror, this was something more, something worse. She could feel it in her bones.

"Wally?" she whispered, placing the tips of her fingers on his bare shoulder. He was hot. Not like a fever, something much more.

"Wally are you ok?" she repeated more urgently, shaking him slightly "I need you to talk to me."

"Ohh," he groaned rubbing his head. "Where am I?"

"You're in your room. I think...I think you were having a nightmare."

The speedster looked confused, bordering on terrified. He placed his fingers on his throbbing temples, moments later trying to stand. He was unsteady, and the archer had to catch him from falling. She eased him back into bed, grabbing a towel from the bathroom and wiping him down, placing a pillow under his head.

"I'm ok. I'm just…really tired," he said through hooded eyes.

"Go back to sleep Wally, I'm here ok?" He nodded yawning, rolling on to his stomach. His frantic breathing had calmed, and minutes later he was sound asleep, but the archer that lay to his side, arms protectively wrapped around him was now wide awake and very worried.

"What's happening to you?" she whispered, wiping the last droplets of sweat away from his brow.
Chapter 15

The next morning, Wally, Kaldur, Connor, and Zatanna, all made brief appearances at the breakfast table; saying their goodbyes, pledging to stay in touch, marking their calendars, and updating contact information, before heading off in their respective destinations, leaving Dick and Artemis alone at the table for the rest of the morning.

"There's something wrong with him isn't there?"

Artemis nearly choked on her eggs at Dick's assertion. "Excuse me?"

"Something's not right? I can tell."

"Why do you say that?" she asked, distractedly rearranging the barely touched food around her plate.

"It's written all over your face; between last night at the party and you wandering around the mansion at three o'clock this morning…"

Artemis's eyes widened.

"Please," Dick scoffed, "I grew up here. You don't think I recognize the sound of someone sneaking out? Anyway, everything seemed fine last night and when he left so I assume you guys made amends of some kind," Dick said with added emphasis, "but the moment he walked out the door, you lost your appetite, your body went stiff, and your expression tightened. You're not mad, you're not upset, you're worried, and that's not something people usually see on you I assume. So it's not about seeing him again, not after the way you two said goodbye, it's something else, something serious."

The archer stared at the brunette with brows furrowed. "You got all that from a five minute dine and dash?"

"Yeah… I did," Dick replied with a bit more attitude then he'd intended. "Last night was pure deflection, classic Wally West denial. You and I've both seen that before. Don't get me wrong, he and I had a great time together and I think we worked through a lot of issues, but what's weird is he never once mentioned anything about the attacks, never once talked about his speed. The only one he's told as far as I know is you, and I'm willing to bet it wasn't by choice, after saving him from getting shot, you had him pretty dead to rights. But I'd bet he didn't give you any explanation did he?"

She shook her head no. "All he said was he wasn't as smart as everyone thought, or something like that."

Dick face grew tense. "He's a scientist; he would have at least figured out why he lost his powers a long time ago. The Wally I remember wouldn't have stopped searching until he had an explanation. So either he doesn't know or doesn't want anyone else to. There's got to be more to it, and I think you know something you're not telling."

The archer sighed, cursing the conundrum she'd found herself in. On one hand she was trying to win back the trust of someone she cared for deeply, someone who she'd betrayed and broken his heart in the process. If Wally found out she was spreading rumors and conjecture, it would shatter any progress they'd made.

At the same time keeping something secret, something as important as to what might have happened
the previous night, keeping it from a man who cared for the speedster as much as she did, all that would prove was she was the same guarded selfish teenager that lied to her friends, kept secret her lineage, and ultimately fell victim to her own plan that had subsequently stolen ten years of her life.

Despite everything she'd done and all the years in between, Dick was still her friend, and when it came to his lifelong friend, his best friend, he deserved to know. Hopefully if she was being paranoid he'd call her out in it and walk her down off the edge.

She took a deep breath. "Something happened last night…..

xxx

Earlier that morning

"Damnit!" Wally cursed, kneeling down and frantically searching under the bed, before tearing off the sheets and shaking them out. "Where are they?"

"Wally we really need to talk," Artemis pleaded.

The speedster ignored her appeal, continuing his search for his absent wallet and cufflinks.

"Wally." she sighed.

"It was a nightmare Artemis, nothing more."

"Wally it wasn't a nightmare, you were soaked, your skin was red hot."

"I'm probably coming just down with something. It's no big deal I promise."

Artemis bit her lip. She didn't want to argue, and calling him a liar despite her best intentions would only make things worse.

"God I am going to be so late. Mom's gonna kill me."

After minutes of refusing to join the search until she'd gotten an answer, a real answer, Artemis reached into his duffle bag, and calmly pulled out the missing items.

Wally rolled his eyes and sighed. "Oh my God," he groaned in disbelief. "Thank you."

His mind was everywhere, except the one place she wanted it. She gently took his hand "I'm just worried about you ok?"

Wally took a deep breath, slowing his roll. "I know. I'm fine I promise."

He slid his wallet into his back pocket, checked the time again, and grabbed his bags. "I am so sorry that I've got to jet out like this, but my plane leaves in an hour and I can't be late if I'm going to be back in Keystone by noon."

"I'm sure Alfred could make you a to-go bag"

"Great idea." he smiled, until he saw the troubled look in her eyes.

"Artemis I'm fine? Scouts honor."

"You were never a scout," she replied with a half-smile.
"Yeah, scouts were nerds."

"Coming from the president of the science club, the chemistry club, the chess club…"

"Touche," he chuckled; expecting a return smile, but Artemis remained on the bed with a cheerless expression across her face.

Wally knelt down in front of her as she sat on the bed. "I'll call you tonight once everyone's gets settled in."

"You don't half to Wally, really," she answered trying to let him off the hook. It had been a great night, but maybe that's all it was supposed to be.

A hurt expression appeared in his eyes. "Don't say that. I know I don't have to, but I want to. I meant what I said last night Artemis."

She nodded, as he pulled the archer to her feet, wrapping his arms around her.

"We'll talk soon I promise, about whatever you want ok? Come on, let's eat. I'm starving."

She chuckled dryly. "When are you not?"

xxx

"It was sometime after three. I couldn't sleep. I just needed…I needed to talk to him. So I went to find his room. The storm had just about passed when all of the sudden there was this loud thunderclap, it literally shook mansion."

"Yeah I heard it. What about it?"

Artemis closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I swear it came from… Wally's room."

"What?" Dick asked confused.

"Yeah I know how crazy it sounds, but after the thunder, there was this burst of light that shot out from under the door gap, bright enough to light up the entire hallway. I ran down to check and make sure he was all right, and when I opened the door I found him slumped over in the far corner of the room, covered in sweat. His body was hot, I mean like almost burning. At first I thought the room had been struck, but the walls, windows, everything was fine, but he was completely out of it, mumbling and moaning till I woke him. Dick he didn't even know where he was."

"Ok….that's not good."

"Ya think?" she snapped irritably. "He told me it was a bad dream, that maybe he was coming down with something. Look I know it's been a long time, and I know I don't really know him all that well anymore, but I can tell when people are lying. It's what I do…did. Maybe it's nothing, maybe it's exactly what he said, but there's just something…I don't know. I'm just worried."

Dick paused for a moment, soaking in her words. "If I ask him, I'll probably get the same answer, then he'll feel like were teaming up against him. Not exactly the play you run if you're trying to rebuild a friendship."

"So what we do? Just ignore it, pretend like it didn't happen just to find out later something really bad might be going on?"

"No," Dick replied quickly. "Bart's the key. He has to know what's going on. He wouldn't be
playing the role of two heroes if Wally had left him completely in the dark. They've worked hard to keep this secret under wraps, but I bet the stress is getting to him, especially after what happened at his apartment and at the Wests. Let me get Tim to talk to him, maybe being away from Wally he'll slip up and let something out."

Behind them a deep voice cleared. "Good morning," Bruce Wayne offered, pulling out a chair and joining his former protégés, his hair still damp from the shower. He reached over, taking the pitcher from the center of the table and pouring himself a glass of orange juice. Dick glanced over at his knuckles as he took a sip, chapped with fresh abrasions.

"Sleep well?" Dick asked sarcastically, knowing full well his mentor had left the party to patrol the storm swept streets of Gotham last night.

"Fine, thank you," he said dryly. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to talk protection details with Dick for a moment."

Artemis nodded, rising from her seat, when Dick took her arm and guided her back down. "No, it's fine. You probably should hear this."

Bruce continued, "I've tasked League and Team members based on schedule and availability to observe and safeguard the West's, Allen's, and Garrick's until further notice."

"Do they know this?" Dick asked.

"Not at present. We don't want to alarm them, but until we have some firm leads I believe it's for the best, and besides I'm sure you realize what their reactions would be if they were made aware."

Dick nodded in passive agreement.

"I've assigned Renee Montoya to Iris Allen, Jamie Reyes will shadow Bart, several former JSA members have volunteered to spend time with the Jay and Joan, Virgil Hawkins will guard the Wests, and Cassie Sandsmark will watch over Wally and his family."

"Who?" the archer inquired, no longer well versed in the younger heroes of the day.

"Wondergirl," Dick quickly dismissed before voicing his displeasure. "Bruce I assumed I'd be doing it. No disrespect towards Cassie, but I think I'd be better suited for something like this."

"This operation must remain covert. Their daily routines need to remain as normal as possible to not draw the attention of whoever may be responsible for all this. Because of your profile and status, you'd stand out in Central City as Dick Grayson or Nightwing. Cassie can more easily blend in on campus and we've already rented a condo for her two doors down from Wally's house."

Dick frowned, understanding the Dark Knight's logic though not in total agreement. He turned and looked at the archer, preparing a counter proposal to Batman's when Artemis spoke up.

"I could do it." she said plainly. "I'd like to."

Wayne shook his head. "Respectfully Ms. Crock this is a League issue now. They'll be protocols involved, mission parameters, contingency plans. You're very resourceful but there's not enough time to get you up to speed with all of them, and quite honestly with the events of your past, there would be other League members who would not approve of your involvement."

Artemis nodded dejectedly. "I understand."
Wayne reached over and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Just to be clear, I wouldn't be one of them."

The archer smiled. "Thanks."

The trio continued on for another half hour, making small talk and such until Wayne finally rose, preparing to head into Gotham for a few hours in the office. "I can give you a ride into the city if you like."

"I appreciate the offer, but Barbara and I have lunch plans later, so I'll probably just wait around until she's ready."

"Suit yourself. Have a good day, I'll keep you updated."

As the door shut, Dick looked over at the blonde. "You know Barbara's not going anywhere right? She's nursing a massive four o'clock hangover."

"Oh I know," she replied, stowing away numerous items in her backpack. "Grab your keys; I need you to drop me off at Roy's. I've got a few things I need to take care of."

"You're going to Keystone aren't you?" Dick smiled deviously.

"Duh," she smirked, grabbing her backpack and heading out.

xxx

In the main auditorium of the Kord Science Building, Professor West put the finishing touches on his lecture about vectors and the differences between two dimensional and projectile motions. Only about twenty percent of the students in his Survey of Physics class would remain in that field of study and continue on, but that never bothered Wally. Science was a passion, an obsession, and he understood it wasn't everyone's cup of tea. That realization only challenged him to make the subject as fun and interesting as possible, maybe even accidentally awakening someone's inner scientist. His fifth grade teacher Mr. Griffith had done just that.

Unfortunately today's lesson was one of those mandatory principles that a teacher must get through to move on to the more interesting topics ahead, but with the cascade of yawns spreading across the auditorium Wally soon realized today's lesson was a wash. As the mass of students hectically copied his notes from the smart board regarding the upcoming quiz, Wally grabbed a seat, taking a sip of his diet coke and reflected back on his chaotic week.

It was hard to believe that five days earlier he'd been on a private jet to Gotham, but even in his wildest dreams he would have never been able to expect what was waiting for him. Redemption. Words couldn't properly describe how good it felt to reconnect with Dick again. It was as if a weight he'd forgotten he'd still carried for years had been stripped away. That weight had part a part of him for so long, it almost felt unnatural to breathe easier, to smile more.

They'd had another enjoyable conversation midweek, and it's was slowly becoming more and more like old times. Eventually he'd be forced to acknowledge the elephant in the room and confide in Dick about his lost speed, but knowing Nightwing, the speedster figured he'd surmised it already but was too polite to ask. He was a detective after all.

Artemis however was a different story entirely. Weeks earlier in a jellyfish toxin induced haze, she'd appeared as an apparition, stepping out of the ether, confessing her sins, and asking forgiveness. A request that ended with screams and curses.
The next thing he knew, she's was dragging his unconscious body from a burning inferno. The same woman he'd told to get out of his life and never come back.

That day on the playground, when they said their goodbyes, he instantly regretted not saying the things he still held in his heart, instead settling for watching her drive away in the sunset, just another thing he'd lost or let go of. Weeks later, as he watched her come down the ballroom stairs in that emerald evening gown, he sent his thanks and prayers to the gods of second chances, and yet now he stood on an uncertain precipice.

They'd exchanged a few voicemails and texts, but had never actually spoken. A part of him wondered if it by accident or on purpose.

She knew he was lying about the incident at Wayne Mansion, but what was he supposed to do? Explain something that was unexplainable. It's not like he hadn't worked tirelessly to find the answers. He'd seen Tina McGee at Mercury Labs for years, trying to deduce what had happened, to figure out the *why's and how's* involved with his loss of powers, why he was now having blackouts and seizures, why he'd lost his connection to the dimension that powered all speedsters; all of nothing. They'd worked persistently and still had no answers. After a while he just stopped trying.

Barry Allen would have known what to do, Barry would have figured it out and found the answers, but Wally wasn't Barry and would never be.

Maybe being away for a few days made Artemis realize he wasn't worth the baggage. The more he discovered the feelings he still had for her, the more it bothered him that she might be easing out of his life again. With all of the issues he was going through, honestly he couldn't blame her. He looked at his watch, just as the bell rung.

"Ok, let's take this up next Wednesday. Remember term papers are due in a few weeks, and I'm still missing outlines from some of you. Also don't forget to read….

He paused mid-sentence, momentarily distracted by a flash of familiar blonde hair in a sea of students "….. Chapter seven, and do the review. Ok guys have a good weekend."

Similar farewells and goodbyes were returned, but the young professor barely acknowledged them, instead quickly heading out the back exit and on the hunt.

The blonde, worrying that she'd been discovered swiftly made it out of the auditorium and into the courtyard. She knew she should have changed her hair color, but she'd barely had time to settle in before making it onto campus. She looked back to check for pursuit and luckily found none. When she turned back ahead she plowed into the professor like an Amazonian Mac Truck.

"Oh my Gods," Wondergirl flinched, quickly dropping down to check on the gasping professor.

"Good to see you too Cassie," Wally wheezed.

"I am sooooo sorry Mr. West." she pleaded, as the speedster reached out to be pulled to his feet effortlessly by the amazon warrior.

The speedster shot her an annoyed glance. "It's Wally Cassie. Come on it hasn't been that long."

The blonde nodded nervously in agreement. Even though they'd been teammates long ago, she still felt uncomfortable calling one of the members of the Justice League by his first name, even if he was
"Sorry Wally, it's just…aww Hera…" she groaned, "You weren't supposed to see me. I'm going to be in so much trouble."

The professor chuckled. "Cassie you're fine. No one's going to be writing you up. So let me guess, you're going to be my babysitter for a while."

Wally had been expecting this. The League didn't take kindly to an attack on one of their own, and with Bart suffering a similar incident; it was only a matter of time. He was irritated but not upset, not when it came to securing the safety of his family, it's just that he was expecting… someone else.

"Yeah," she sighed, still dreading the lecture she'd most certainly be getting from either Diana, Batman or both, "but I wouldn't call it babysitting, I'd call it a kick ass partnership. Someone would be pretty stupid to tangle with Wondergirl and the Flash."

"Uh...yeah," Wally replied hesitantly.

"The orders Batman gave me was to split time between here and Keystone Elementary. You still have your JLA communicator, right?"

Wally nodded.

"He'd like you to activate it and keep it on your person at all times. If something happens, just hit the emergency alert and I'll be there in a flash, well not that fast, but you get the picture."

The speedster sighed. He wished Bruce would have just explained this to him in person, instead of sending a junior hero to do it covertly.

"We're going to catch this guy Wally, whoever he is. We'll find him."

The ginger nodded, but he'd had his suspicions for a while now, and if he was right, Wally knew exactly what he had to do next, and it scared the hell out of him.

xxx

The sound bar was blaring so loud, the young red head barely heard the chiming of the doorbell.

"Daddy, pizza's here" Iris screamed over the previews currently paying on the wall mounted flat screen. Tonight was Saturday night, which meant West movie night.

"What!?" Wally yelled back into the den while wrestling Jay back into the shower to actually wash his hair with soap instead of water. "Irey turn that down!"

The spunky red head remained oblivious to her father's orders, instead sitting on the couch entranced by the previews of the upcoming Pixar movies.

The chime rang a second time, and the distracted red head yelled back to the bathroom again. "Daddy, pizza's here."

The frustrated speedster stormed into the room, taking the remote out of his daughters hand and scowling at her. "God," he cursed, turning the volume down to a more tolerable and human level. "What are you saying?" he growled.

The doorbell rang a third time.
"That?" she pointed to the door, now distracted on her iPad.

Wally was about to erupt when green eyes and freckles looked up and grinned. She knew exactly how to play him.

"Go in there and don't let your brother out of the shower till I get there. Understand?"

She nodded and took off down the hallway "Jai, Dad says I'm the boss of you now…"

Wally sighed, taking out his wallet and cash to pay the Domino's driver, but when he opened the door the blonde standing on his stoop was most definitely not the pizza guy.

"Artemis," he said in wide eyed astonishment.

"Hi," she smiled.

"Hi," he answered still in disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

"I was um… in the neighborhood."

"Just driving around Keystone, catching the sights huh?" he chuckled.

"Yeah," she shrugged. "I heard it's kinda nice this time of year."

He smiled warmly. "I tried to call."

"I know you did, but we kept missing each other, and I hate phone tag, so I thought I'd just… drop by. If this is a bad time, I can come back later."

"What? No. We were just about to sit down and watch a movie,"

"We? Oh hey I'm sorry. I'll just… call you later."

Wally laughed. "It's movie night the the kids, it's no big deal. I'm glad you're here. Come in."

"Are you sure, I really didn't mean to intrude, I...I just wanted to see you."

"Really?" he said surprised.

"Yes really," she frowned. "I didn't take a fourteen hour train ride just to catch a Keystone Riverdog's game."

"You took a fourteen hour train ride just to say hi?" he said with mouth agape.

"Not all of us get to take a private jet back and forth," she smiled. "Plus I've done it before,' she said tongue firmly in cheek. The less brought up about her last visit the better."

"We'll come in, You've got to be starving. We were just waiting on the pizza guy. Make yourself at home. There's beer and cokes in the fridge if you like, and you already know your way around, "he smirked. "I've got one kid in the shower and one playing crossing guard, so just give me a minute or two ok?"

She nodded as he disappeared down the hallway. Artemis stepped in, shutting the door, sending a smirk out to anyone who might be watching

"Tell your boss I got this Wonderchick," she said to herself
She took her boots off at the door and walked over to the refrigerator. She was starving. Despite Dick's protests, she used the last of her money to buy her round-trip ticket, leaving nothing left for drinks and snacks. Pizza sounded perfect, and if she remembered correctly, Wally always bought the best.

The house was different from the last time she was here. The den and kitchen were the exact same, it was being welcome that made it different. She'd held out hope that his parents might have the kids for the evening, evidently it was fairly common, but she just really wanted to talk without distraction. Nothing intrusive, nothing about the incident in the guest room, nothing about making out in the laundry room, she just wanted to hear his voice, to see his smile. Just spend a little more time with him alone.

In all honesty, children made her a little uncomfortable. They were vulnerable to elements, helpless and could be used against you for leverage or worse. She shuddered at the thought of all the children she'd made orphans. It wasn't their fault their parents were scum and criminals, but that didn't mean they didn't mourn their loss, that their little hearts hadn't shattered in a millions pieces. She could walk away from a mark and not feel a thing, that's what the Shadows do to you, but when she'd look through her binoculars at a child rushing over to their fallen parent, that's when she had to learn to turn a part of herself off, the part that feels.

The archer sat down on the couch, leaned back and closed her eyes. She was tired and it had been a long week. Roy had lectured her about Wally again. Jade the same about Zane. The towering mercenary had left a few messages of his own, warning her she was missing out on a great opportunity, warning her to lead with her head, not her heart. All three had offered good sound advice, and like she'd done so many times in the past, she didn't listen to any of them. Her head had sent her in plenty of wrong directions before, this time she was going to try something new.

The archer began to drift just for a moment, when suddenly her senses jolted. She was being watched. She opened her eyes, hand slowly drifting towards the blade in her belt when she was met by a familiar set of green eyes, just a tad smaller.

"You're pretty," the small freckled red head spoke.

"Uh...thank you?"

"You're welcome. I'm Iris. What's your name?"

The archer couldn't help but smile at the young girl's boldness. "I'm Artemis - Artemis Crock. I'm a friend of your dad's from a long time ago."

Iris studied her for a moment, scrutinizing her every word.

"Ok I believe you," she snickered. Her smile was contagious. "Well Artemis - Artemis Crock. We're watching a movie tonight, eating three Domino's pizzas, one with pineapple, and if we're really good we get ice cream."

The blonde grinned. "Well I love ice cream, so we better be good."

"Sounds like a plan. " Iris nodded sharply. "My dad will be right back. Jai forgot to wash his hair with shampoo. He does that. It's kinda gross."

Artemis couldn't stop smiling; the little red head was infectious. She was Wally West made over, turning strangers into friends at the speed of light. His charms didn't translate quite as well to the opposite sex back in the day, she and M'gann were testament to that, but just like any math problem
or science experiment, when Wally slowed down and took his time, he could literally do anything. It
definitely worked on her, and evidently to Iris's mother as well.

She tried not think about the woman named Linda Park West. Of course as any good operative
would, she'd studied up on the subject; covertly of course. Everything she'd come up with, from
stories, comments, even from pictures and images stolen from the speedster's phone, all pointed to the
same conclusion. She was an amazing woman. And now Artemis was sitting in her house, talking to
her child, falling in love again with her husband. The guilt alone could drive a person crazy, so the
archer forced herself past it and instead put all her focus on the young girl in front of her.

Hidden under freckles and red hair, Artemis could see her subtle Asian features; a child of two
cultures, the archer understood that designation better than anyone. Jai's were more pronounced from
what she'd seen, and Roy said he favored his mother as much as Iris did her father. As careful as he
needed to be around Wally, she would need to be doubly so around his kids.

"So what are we watching?"

"The Incredibles," Iris said simply. "It's about a family of superheroes, it's kind of an old movie, but
it's my favorite, Jai's too I think, but he mainly watches it for the popcorn. Have you seen it before?"

"I'm not sure. Only one way to find out."

"Dad! Artemis wants to start the movie now!" she yelled down the hall

"No, wait, I didn't mean it like..."

Wally came into the room, son in tow. "Don't worry, she does that. It's part of her charm. Artemis
this is Jai."

The archer reached out her hand, and Jai took it firmly, always maintaining eye contact, just like his
father had taught him.

"Nice to meet you Jai."

"Nice to meet you too. I guess you've met my obnoxious sister," he rolled his eyes at his twin as she
stuck out her tongue in reply.

"Ok then," Wally sighed. Moments later the doorbell rung and dinner had finally arrived. "Iris go get
the plates, Jai get the TV trays."

The small brunette watched his sister skip around the kitchen in annoyance. He leaned over to the
archer and asked, "Do you have a sister?"

Artemis could already see where this was going. "Oh yeah" she laughed. "Don't get me started."
The young boy giggled, he knew exactly what she was talking about.

Connection made.

xxx

Later that evening as the long school week, pizza, and ice cream finally took their toll, Artemis
watched as Wally hoisted two passed out kids over each shoulder and took them back to the
bedroom they shared. The archer had never seen this side of him before, the doting and loving father.
Her memories were of an adventurous albeit reckless hero, dashing back in forth from one
emergency to the next. landing face first as many times as he saved the day. She didn't even try to keep up with him back then, knowing sooner or later he would tire and slow down; and that's when he would be hers.

The speed was gone, but his smile, his warmth, his gentleness remained the same. She loved Kid Flash, but sometimes speed just got in the way. She wanted his undivided attention, and now she had it.

They spent the rest of the night talking, holding hands, kissing, stopping suddenly like high schools kids whenever a noise came from the back of the house. Passion's got heated, temptations strong, but they kept things under control. Artemis wasn't about to be the one to explain the birds and the bees to two eight year olds if they walked in and caught she and their father half naked on the couch, but the desire was there, and tonight that's all that mattered.

He asked for tales of the Shadows. She asked for tales of his life. There were no judgment, no shock or disgust, just a level of understanding and acceptance as to what the years had brought. They talked about Linda, they talked about Zane. Very little was off limits, but good sense and sound judgment kept either from digging to deep. As special as she considered their night at the engagement party, it paled in comparison to this. Broken hearts were becoming whole again, and where that would lead was a question for another day, right now, this was the moment she'd waited a lifetime for.

Her watch beeped at 4:30 a.m., as she quickly hit snooze. Time had gotten away from them, but neither was complaining.

"This was really nice Wally." she smiled. "and your kids are adorable."

"They have their moments," he chuckled.

Artemis walked over to the speedster, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. I know it's going to take awhile before you trust me, but I want you to know I'm trying. I'm not going anywhere, and if I have to keep taking train rides from Gotham to prove it, I will."

He smiled. "I'll see if my Zeta Tube account is still active, if not…I know a guy."

"We'll my wallet would appreciate it, I'm…in between jobs right now."

"Good," he replied, leaning in and kissing her one last time.

"Will you call me this weekend?" she asked

"I'll call you tonight if you want,"

'Let's meet in the middle and say Sunday. I've got some sleep to catch up on and a job to find."

"Sounds good.

"Oh and Wally….get moving on that Zeta thing ok? I'll make it worth your while."

xxx

Jamie Reyes lay upside down on the couch with a magazine, trying to entertain himself with the room's new topsy-turvy orientation, literally bored to tears. While covertly playing bodyguard, the teen assumed a majority of it would be a lot of hanging out on campus, or an apartment with Wi-Fi, or even possibly around girls that dug a Latino accent, but definitely not on Garrick's farm, watching Bart work on the elder speedster's tractor. This was not what he'd signed up for, not that Batman had
given him much choice on the matter.

Reyes was about to crack when a rush of wind blew into the house, sending magazines and papers scattering across the room, including the one he'd been trying to read for over an hour.

"It's hot out there mi amigo, like Africa hot. I've never been there, but I assume it's scorching or at least mildly uncomfortable which is why I assume everyone's always fighting over there and...."

"Bart!" Jamie had had enough. "Is it fixed. Can we go now?"

"Yes and no," the speedster shrugged. The gear shift's fixed, but the clutch's gone bad, but that's an easy fix and I'll only take about a half hour may be less but it's hot and I'm thirsty and so I was fixing the clutch. Twenty minutes tops ok?" he answered deliberately and annoyingly slow.

"That's all I wanted to hear. Was that so hard?"

Bart rolled his eyes, and walked off to the kitchen.

Jamie looked his watch and sighed. When Bart asked if he'd like to come up to the farm for the day, it kind of sounded like fun. Blue Valley was a far cry from El Paso, and besides he'd never actually been to a working plantation before let alone the state of Missouri. The Garrick's had become something of adoptive parents for the temporally misplaced speedster, and while the farmstead was impressive and Joan's cooking delicious, he was ready to get back to the city, or at least somewhere his phone could get a signal.

Trying to speed up the process a bit, Reyes began walking around the room, gathering the magazines Bart had sent scattering across the den when suddenly a blinding flash of light erupted across the north pasture, followed soon by Joan Garrick's blood curdling scream. Jamie immediately activated the Scarab, the alien armor quickly forming across his body, but before he could take one single step Bart Allen erupted out the kitchen door like a hurricane, nearly knocking his friend sideways, speeding towards his surrogate grandfather. Twenty feet away he stopped on a dime in horror.

Stretched out across the hood of his tractor, the elderly speedster lay on his back unbreathing, his body glowing with a blinding red hot hue. Two fists were sunk deep into his chest cavity...two yellow gloved fists.

"Hello Bartholomew," the man in yellow grinned grotesquely, a hooded cowl covering his face, but the voice all too familiar. "It's good to see you again."

'You motherfucker!' Kid Flash screamed, throwing caution to the wind and racing ahead, bloodlust in his eyes. Bart was three feet from the tractor, when his target disappeared, leaving the young speedster racing helplessly through his after image. Before the teen could orient himself, his assailant grabbed him in full stride, using the red head's momentum against him, sending him flying into the grove of Pear trees that lined the pasture, his body landing with a sickening thud.

"Now Bartholomew, I'll be with you in a moment, you'll just have to wait your turn," the man in yellow said with a homicidal pleasantness towards the unconscious young speedster.

"Please!" Joan begged the man, but her appeals fell on deaf ears.

"Joan," he said with a smile, "take comfort in knowing he's going to a better place, and in a few
moments so will your grandson."

In a blink of an eye, the yellow speedster was back on the tractor, finishing the job he'd started. Jay Garrick’s body had begun to cool, until blurred gloves entered his chest cavity again, causing the old man's body to blaze like a nova. Seconds later the Flash disintegrated into thin air.

"Noooooo!" Joan shrieked as the assassin blew past her, grabbing the unconscious speedster by the throat, lifting him easily, his right hand beginning to blur once again.

He was seconds away from beginning the same process on Bart, when a powerful vibrational discharge smashed into the two speedsters, throwing Bart to the side, and leaving the man called Zoom as its primary target.

"Increasing output to one hundred fifty percent Jamie Reyes," the scarab spoke to the teen inside his helmet.

"Go as far the hell up as you can!" the teen yelled to the alien computer inside the armor. Upon his command sonic waves of devastating power intensified, driving Zoom into the ground, his mouth bloodied, and dripping down his chin, making his hideous smile that much more sinister. The evil speedster struggled to his feet, red lightning beginning to dance across his skin as he struggled to maintain his balance. In the blink on an eye he was gone. Blue Beetle quickly whipped around, trying to catch sight of the villain racing off in the distance, only to come face to face with the man clad in yellow seconds later.

"Not…very…nice," the speedster said coldly, his blurred fist entering into Beetle armor. Without Jamie's consent, the armor automatically switched into self-preservation mode, electrifying the armored plates as well as the teenager inside it. It was the mandated protocol programmed into Scarab, and the only way to maintain structural integrity and keep its host alive. The armor switched to reset mode, quickly giving its host the needed adrenaline compound and electric shock to bring him back to consciousness, but when Reyes could finally see again, Zoom was gone…and Jay Garrick was dead.
Chapter 16

The archer and detective sat outside on the veranda of the Mission Cantina, dining at one of Gotham's best kept secrets tucked away in the newly developed lower east side. After the blowout of the engagement party, neither woman were much in the mood for margaritas, instead perfectly happy with tea and the best homemade guacamole in the city.

"...and then I left that morning, and he called me on Sunday night just like he said he would, and I guess we talked for...a couple hours at least."

"That's great!" Barbara exclaimed, before noticing her friend's slightly sullen expression. "Right?" she added in a quiet concerned voice.

"Yeah, I think so," the blonde replied hesitantly. "It's just...."

"What?"

The blonde sighed. "What am I doing Barbara? You know what I've done; you know all the blood I have on my hands. How can he want someone like me in back his life again, around his kids? He has a faint idea about my past but what if he asks me for specifics, what if he starts adding the numbers up? I'm not going to lie to him. I can't...I won't. What if he decides I'm not good enough, what if realizes he was right and I am broken."

"That's a lot of what's," Barbara chuckled

"I'm serious," the archer scolded.

"Artemis, Wally's a really really smart guy, and trust me when it comes to his family, they'll always come first, but he's not walking into this blind. If he's welcomed you into his life, if you're spending time with his family, he knows what he's getting into."

"What if I hurt him again?"

The red head's genial demeanor suddenly grew serious. "Don't. That's my advice, just don't. If you're scared I understand, you're not used to feeling vulnerable, but I'd be willing to bet that Wally's just as nervous as you are, and that's ok. If this is something you want, I mean really want, talk to him, tell him, but if you're not willing to see where this might go, it's better to end it now before it goes any farther. End it as friends, for both of your sakes."

Artemis stared into her taco salad, like it was some fortune telling magic eight ball. Barbara hadn't said anything she wasn't already thinking, all except for one; being vulnerable.

That was a feeling she wasn't prepared for, something she'd refused to allow herself to be. Scared sure, fear kept you sharp, but naked and helpless were things that gave someone else power over you, just the Shadows had. She'd sworn never to let that happen again, but unfortunately for her, vulnerability was the price you sometimes pay when dealing with matters of the heart.

"Does this have anything to do with Zane?" the detective asked.

"No," Artemis answered quickly, "not even in the slightest. Why does everyone keep asking that? I owe him my life, several times over actually, but that's a life I'm not living anymore. I'll always care about him, but I don't love him." Her eyes grew distant as she said quietly. "Those were the rules."
"I'd be sure if I were you," Barbara replied.

Artemis's brows furrowed, preparing to defend herself when the detective's communicator began to chime.

"Sorry," the red head winced, taking the micro receiver from her purse and placing it into her ear. "Go for Batgirl," she whispered. Moments later her eyes grew wide and her face went pale.

"Understood," she replied shakily. "I'll be at Zeta Tubes in ten minutes. Batgirl out."

Barbara froze for a moment, fumbling with her purse, trying to put the communicator away while getting out her debit card to pay. She was so distracted she nearly forgot about the women sitting across the table.

The archer grabbed her hand. "Barbara what is it?"

"Jay…Jay Garrick's dead," she replies in stunned disbelief.

"What?" the archer asked equally shocked. "How?"

"It was Zoom, or someone claiming to be him. The intels pretty vague right now, but Batman's issued a League wide priority one alert. Everyone's being called in."

"What about Wally?" the blonde asked urgently.

"Bruce didn't say anything else. Look I'm sorry, but I've got to go; I'll call you as soon as I know anything I promise. Try not to worry ok? Cassie's with him. She's a fighter."

Artemis nodded nervously. "Go!"

The detective squeezed her hand firmly before rushing out of the restaurant, leaving the archer alone at the table, lost in her thoughts, her mind everywhere.

This was not happening, not now. She needed to do something, to be a part of something, but she'd lost that privilege a long time ago. Wally was hundreds of miles away, hopefully being rushed with his family to the closest Zeta Tube and safe house. The League would protect him; they'd keep him and his family safe.

Just like they did for Jay

The archer swallowed hard, trying to force the bile back down. There was nothing she could do, and for the first time in years she felt completely and utterly helpless.

Artemis took a deep cleansing breath and found her center. She was too well trained to panic. She needed a plan.

Sitting alone in the restaurant was stifling. She had to be in motion. Artemis threw down enough cash cover her meal and tip, and exited the veranda. The first logical step was to find Roy and tell him what had happened. Together they'd figure the next one.

She got her bearings and began to head towards the upper west side when suddenly a car screeched to a stop and a hand reached out and grabbed her.

"What the hell!?" the archer cursed, immediately taking a fighting stance when she recognized her assailant.
Barbara Gordon grasped her hand, pulling her into the cab. "Come on let's go."

"What?"

"You're coming with me."

"But the League…." the blonde protested.

"I'll handle the League. Now shut up and get in the damn cab."

The redhead leaned through the partition to the driver. "The old warehouse district; and I'll double your fare if you skip the red lights."

A quick cab ride later and the two women arrived at the abandoned row of buildings, jumping out of the car and taking off down the alleyway, searching for a very specific broken down telephone booth. Moments later they'd reached their destination.

Barbara stepped inside the booth, entering in her ID code and interrupting the automatic transport sequence.

"This is Batgirl - B16 requesting passenger override."

The detective waited impatiently, tapping her feet until the Zeta system processed her identity and request.

"Recognized," the computer's metallic voice replied. "Adding additional transport beam in five – four – three…"

Barbara reached out quickly, dragging the archer into the booth with her. "Stay close… and try not to piss anyone off."

Seconds later a bright light consumed the booth, as Zeta radiation flooded the chamber, deconstructing molecules and sending the detective and the archer into the heavens.

xxx

As the zeta beam reassembled her molecular structure, Artemis palmed both her eyes, massaging away the spots in her vision caused by the blinding light of transporter. It had been a very long time since she'd last stepped foot on this satellite, but if memory served, they should have materialized just outside of the promenade, instead she found herself in some kind of dressing room? 

"Um…did we talk a wrong turn?"

Barbara chuckled, rushing over to a wall of lockers, quickly finding hers an opening it with a fingerprint scan.

"Things are a little different from the old days," the red head replied with an amused expression. She reached back, taking her hair and putting into a ponytail as she began to change "There are several Tubes located across this base to choose from during transit. The one we took brings you to the UUV?"

"Excuse me?" the archer begged

"Uniforms and utilities vault. It's a secured area outside of the main hall for storing personal items and suiting up, and in our case trying to sneak you on board the most secured installation on the planet without anyone noticing."
Artemis felt her brow begin to dampen.

The detective peeled out of her civilian clothing, her jeans and t-shirt pooling on to the floor as she searched the spacious locker for pieces of her uniform. Artemis examined the room while her friend dressed, finding familiar code names scattered across the wall of storage units.

"Even auxiliary members have access to the satellite now," Barbara spoke, as she pulled the light Kevlar laced top tightly across her chest. "That's why you see so many names that aren't full time Leaguers."

Artemis nodded as Barbara walked to the opposite side of the room, opening the corresponding weapons vault and taking her utility belt and a handful of armaments that she attached to it. At the bottom of the vault she grabbed one final item, reaching over and placing it on the archer's head.

"A grey ball cap." Artemis frowned, "That's my masterful disguise?"

"This way," she directed the archer towards the exit.

"Barbara I'm going to stand out like a sore……"

Moments later the archer's jaw dropped.

What was once a cold stone and steel construct now stood a cavernous ivory cathedral. Iron beams were now replaced by some kind of glowing crystalline structure. Five stories tall transparent aluminum walls encompassed the main hall, giving the illusion that you could literally walk off the satellite straight into space. Alien technology that was light years ahead of what she recalled, surrounded the main halls and corresponding rooms and junctures. This new base was massive; easily three times the size of its predecessor by her accounts. This moment was beyond surreal.

A few feet ahead rested what appeared to be an interactive holographic kiosk of some kind, designating directions to other areas of the satellite; hydroponics, the armory, recreation areas, holographic training room, laboratories, medical bays, engineering workshops. The list went on and on.

The satellite was a frenzy of activity, and it took a few moments before it dawned on her that there were now civilian personnel working aboard, wearing uniforms and matching caps, just like the one Barbara had placed on her head.

*When in the hell did this happen?* Artemis whispered, but Batgirl ignored the query, grabbing her friend's hand and dragging her through the chaos and confusion of grey uniforms, trusting their deception would last just long enough for them to find Batman and Nightwing. It wasn't one of her better plans, but it was the best she could come up with on the fly. The messy details could be sorted out later Barbara hoped, if not this might well be her last trip to the satellite as well.

The Watchtower was bigger, the League was bigger, and Artemis felt so….small. This was a sanctuary for heroes, not assassins.

Moments later they reached the center of the complex where the monitor womb stood; the nerve center of the Watchtower, where the Leagues' vast computer communications sensor networks rested. That's where they found Batman.

Grouped together with the Dark Knight were Nightwing, Green Arrow, and the Atom, cycling through multiple images displayed across the large monitor on the wall. On the far left screen Mr. Terrific and his CSI team could be seen at the Garrick's farm investigating the crime scene. In the background was the heartbreaking image of Black Canary consoling the elderly speedster's wife.
The screen on the far right showed a collection of video feeds from the last twelve hours, obtained from home security systems, local businesses, and highway patrol cameras in and around upstate Missouri, all failing to catch any glimpse of the villainous speedster's approach.

The monitor above showed moving images captured by Blue Beetle's armor during the battle. Those visuals were what currently held the four heroes' attention.

"Hell of a time for Clark, J'onn and Hal to be off planet," Oliver Queen grumbled.

"A message has been sent." Batman remarked, "However there's no telling when it will be received."

Ray Palmer leaned in closer, adjusting and filtering Beetle's raw video. "It definitely looks like him, but at the speed his moving there's no way our facial recognition software can get a match."

Batman nodded grimly. "And so far Terrific and his team haven't found any DNA traces other than the two Flashes'."

"Bart said the voice was modulated, masked somehow." Dick interjected. "but his inflection, his tone, his choice of proper names were a lot like the Zoom he remembered."

Batman nodded, reaching up and brushing aside two of the videos to alternate monitors, leaving the battle playing as he added one final video feed side by side to it. The detective reached down to the keyboard adding a time stamp to both broadcasts. As the savagery of Jay Garrick's death played out on one, the reversed could be seen on the other; a solitary man resting tranquilly in his bed in peaceful solitude. The detective reversed the film back several frames, watching again as both times stamps synced up perfectly.

"It's not him." Nightwing sighed in bewilderment, looking up at his mentor. Very rarely had he seen the Dark Knight perplexed. This happened to be one of those times.

"Apparently not," Batman replied emotionless, "but that doesn't mean he might not have some insight that could be helpful."

"There's only one way to find out," Nightwing added.

As the four heroes continued scrutinizing the playback, Dick felt a familiar hand ghost his shoulder, relieved to finally have his fiancé aboard. When he turned to welcome her, he noticed the archer by her side. Nightwing's eyes widened under the domino mask for a moment as Batgirl leaned in and whispered in his ear. "I'm in a lot of trouble aren't I?"

Dick smirked stepping to the side, allowing the two women better access to the screens. As usual the Dark Knight's demeanor remained composed, as if neither surprised nor concerned by their sudden appearance.

"Ray would you mind bringing them up to speed please?" Batman asked.

Palmer stepped forward. "At approximately 16:30 CST, Jay Garrick and Bart Allen were attacked at the Garrick's farm in northern Missouri by an unknown assailant. The images you see here." he gestured toward the screen, "came directly from Blue Beetle's sensor array. Cross referencing the readouts to our own computer systems, we estimate the assailant was moving at approximately 3068 mph; roughly four times the speed of sound."

"Damn." Batgirl whispered.
"The figure in yellow attacked Jay first, pinning him against the hood of his tractor. We don't know much about the struggle beforehand, but the video and eyewitness accounts needless to say...are pretty grisly."

The two women gasped as the speedster's blurred hands sunk deep into the elder Flashes' chest cavity.

"Bart rushed out to defend Jay, but whoever this was easily tossed Bart around like a rag doll, sending him hurdling into the orchard."

"Is he ok?" Artemis worriedly asked.

"Broken arm and two fractured ribs. All things considered he's pretty lucky." Nightwing added.

"This speedster returned seconds later, finishing the job. Superheating Jay's body until he basically...de-materialized for lack of a better word. He attempted the same course of action with Beetle, but the armor went into self-preservation mode and somehow fended off the attack, and the next thing they knew the assailant was gone. Mr. Terrific is currently onsite as we speak searching for tissues and DNA samples of both Jay and whoever did this is."

Batman entered in a command, and the video brought the attacker into sharper focus. "There is a distinct vibrational shift, a blur if you will, that's preventing us from getting any kind of positive facial or voice identification"

"What more do you need? Barbara replied angrily. "It's freaking Zoom. This is the exact M.O. that happened to Barry!"

"The image to the right begs to differ," Wayne argued, pushing the third video off to the side, leaving the feed inside Eobard Thawne's cell front and center.

"This is Thawne, twelve hours ago, sitting in a classified Cadmus Meta-Human holding facility two thousand miles away, at the exact time of Jay Garrick's death. Eyewitness accounts back this up. He's never left."

"There's must be a new speedster in play," Dick suggested. "With either a Zoom fixation..."

"Or a Flash's," the Atom concluded.

As the four heroes continued their debate, Green Arrow pulled Artemis to the side. "You doing ok kid?"

Artemis chuckled. Ollie was the only one who'd ever called her that. From the first day he and Batman had walked into her den to give her a once in a lifetime offer. From the moment she stepped foot in the cave, he'd always been by her side, the security blanket she'd argued time and time again that she didn't want or need, but still was always grateful to have.

Oliver Queen was what a father figure was supposed to be, and without children of his own, she became the daughter he never had. It didn't hurt either that he knew a thing or two about being indebted to the Shadows as well.

She nodded, trying to mask her complete and utter insecurity. Even back in the day when she'd been welcomed here, this place and the heroes who resided here were intimidating to say the least. Now under the current circumstances it was ten times worse.
"I guess we're going to have to put your trip out to Star City on hold for a little while longer."

"Ollie I know I don't belong here. Trust me this wasn't my idea," she frowned in Bargirl's general direction, "but I just want to...help somehow. I've got to do something."

"I know kid, I know it's personal. We'll figure something out. Just stay close and try not to piss anyone off ok?"

She was about to ask if anyone knew of Wally's current whereabouts, when she turned and looked at her old mentor curiously. "You're the second person to say that to me."

Moments later she knew why.

"What is she doing here!?" a voice echoed from across the Watchtower, hushing the satellite into nervous silence.

"Aw shit," Arrow mumbled.

Artemis cringed when she heard that voice; she being the only she the speaker could possibly be referring to. The teenager that had left her friends and teammates behind all those years ago didn't exist anymore, and a skilled and deadly assassin had now taken her place, more accustomed to being the hunter, than the huntee, but those skills paled in comparison to the hero bellowing from across the satellite; this person being on the top of a very short list of people you do not want to cross, let alone be pursued by. Artemis swallowed hard as the figure approached. This was not going to be good.

The sea of grey quickly parted as Princess Diana of Themyscira stormed across the main hall, the satellite seemingly quaking with each powerful step, stopping less than a foot away from the two archers.

"Diana, the kid just wants to..."

"I'm not talking to you Oliver, I'm talking to her. How dare you step foot in the place after what you've done," Wonder Woman practically snarled. "What gives you the right to think you're even remotely welcome here? By the Gods I should throw you out the airlock right now!"

Artemis swallowed hard again, but stood her ground. If the Amazonian was trying to intimidate her, then mission freaking accomplished.

Truth be told, the two had never been particularly close. Family ties run deep, and all the protégés and their mentors had a long history together fighting side by side; all but her.

How much of that resentment stemmed from the Amazonian's conflicts with both Sportsmaster and Huntress, Artemis didn't know for sure, but the lies and deceit she'd spun during her early days with the team didn't help the matter. Even after the Team had defeated and saved the mighty Justice League, when heartfelt thanks and congratulations were handed out to the young heroes, Artemis could still feel the sting of judgement coming from the princess.

And then there was Wally.

Wonder Woman had always been surprisingly protective and nurturing of the protégés; standing up and supportive of their successes, stern but caring in the light of their failures, but none more than with the young speedster.
Maybe it was his enthusiastic innocence, maybe because his abilities reminded her so much of the god Hermes, or maybe because every time he fell flat on his face (which he did quite often), he got up on his own and kept moving forward. Whatever the case, Kid Flash held a special place in Diana's heart, and from the beginning Artemis could see it in the heroine's eyes that she did not approve of their relationship.

Loyalty and honesty were paramount among heroes and warriors, and because of those same family ties, the princess had always doubted the archer's. In the end Artemis had proven her right.

The Amazonian tuned to the gathered masses. "How did she get onboard? Who is responsible?"

From out of the shadows, Batman stepped forward. "I am."

It was moments like these when Wonder Woman regretted having a civilian crew on board, but the facility was now too large to function without them, and this was not the time nor place to air the League's dirty laundry.

"A word," she fumed, demanding as much requesting for Batman to follow her into the adjacent conference room. The Dark Knight turned and nodded for the rest of them to join. As they made their way to the private conference room, Barbara walked up beside the archer.

"What I'd say about not pissing anyone off?" she smirked.

Artemis threw her hands up in exasperation, eyes wide, mouth agape.

The princess maintained her composure all the way inside, until the automatic doors slid shut firmly behind then, then that composure completely eroded away.

"Bruce are you insane?" We're at a priority One alert. One of our own is dead, and you're bringing a wanted criminal on board during a time like this? Who's next? Ra's himself?"

Batman ignored the jibe. "Diana, I believe Artemis will be an invaluable asset to the next stage of my investigation."

"Really?" the warrior said sarcastically.

"Diana, it's my call, I need you to honor that"

There weren't many mortals she respected as much as she did Bruce Wayne, but she was also well aware of the detective's propensity to be the king of lost causes.

"I doubt if Hal or Clark would feel the same way about bringing a known assassin onto our base," the princess grumbled.

"Now wait a minute..." Green Arrow protested.

"Oliver I'd hold your tongue if I were you." she glared before turning to the young archer. "They have more faith in you then you deserve. Betray them again and you will face my fury."

Artemis remained silent as the warrior princess exited the room, exhaling deeply as soon as the door shut.

"Thanks a lot Barbara," she growled as the young red head sighed just as loudly.

Bruce turned to his future daughter in law, eyes narrowed behind the cowl. "A little warning would be appreciated next time," he said with a slight scowl.
Barbara nodded; eyes still wide from the uproar.

Artemis raised her hand; much like a child would in elementary school, careful not to repeat the last few minutes and anger anyone. "If I could change the subject for a second, does anyone know where Wally is?"

"Wondergirl is in route right now. As soon as she arrives, she'll get he and his family to safety. Once they're settled in, then we'll inform him about Jay."

"He's not going to like that." Dick added

"It can't be helped. In the meantime we'll need to prepare the safe house. Oliver I'd like you take lead on this. Until further notice, the families' will need twenty four hour protection around the clock. I'm thinking three League members at a time taking eight hour shifts. We'll use auxiliary members to relieve them."

"On it," Arrow answered, heading towards the door before stopping in front of the archer, gently placing his thumb under her jaw, guiding her eyes to his. "Chin up kid, it's going to be ok."

"Thanks Ollie," she whispered, watching him until the doors slid shut behind him.

"Barbara I'll need you to assist in retrieving the West's, Garrick's and Allen's. This needs to be handled delicately. Their situation is stressful enough as it is, but placing them into protective custody after what has just happened is going to reopen old wounds. I think you'd be best suited in working with them.

"Ok. I'm going to start making some calls," she replied, kissing her finance's cheek before she turned to the archer and shrugged. "Stay out of trouble ok?" the red head stated with a crooked grin.

"Barbara I swear to God…" Artemis fumed as the detective left the room.

"What about me?" Dick asked

"Thawne needs to be thoroughly interrogated to determine what he knows...if anything. It could be dead end, but it still needs to be investigated. The two of us will…'"

"Three," Bart Allen interjected, limping into the conference room and grimacing as he sat down next to the archer."

"Bart, you can barely stand," Nightwing argued

"Dick, I need to see him with my own eyes. I don't care what your monitors say. If it's him, I'll know it."

"Flash….." Batman protested.

In a seriousness rarely seen from the young speedster, he looked directly into the Dark Knight's eyes. "Batman I have to do this. This is my family. I've already lost one grandfather and now a man who's been like one too? If this had been Dick, or Tim, or Barbara, you'd want to be there, you'd have to."

Bruce remained silent, thinking back to the one hero Bart hadn't mentioned by name. It would have taken an act of God to keep him from being involved in every facet of the investigation into of Jason Todd's death. He couldn't deny Bart the same courtesy.

Nightwing nodded, turning to archer seated alone at the conference table. He turned back to his
mentor and chuckled. "It's not like we can leave her here," he shrugged.

xxx

"Dad!" the young red head shrieked. "Hurry! I can't hold on much longer!"

Wally and his son rushed over to find Iris struggling mightily against the monster, being drug foot by foot into the crystal blue abyss.

"It's huge!" she laughed, pulling the fishing rod as hard as she could, the line tight and taut, as the choppy waters splashed around it.

Jai stepped in front of his father, grabbing the rod and pulling and reeling, trying not to lose the fish. After a few tugs he looked over to his sister and frowned.

"It's not a fish Iris; you got it snagged on something."

"Did not!" she argued, looking at her father to save the day. "Tell him it was a fish daddy."

Jai reeled the rest of the line in as Wally grabbed the end, seeing not only the hook but the weights and bobber gone as well.

"Sorry pumpkin, but I think Jai's right," he chuckled.

Iris huffed, kicking the tackle box and storming off. "Fishing is stupid."

"It's because you stink at....." Jay began to taunt before catching his father's stern gaze. It wasn't worth getting grounded just to one-up his sister.

It was a beautiful day at Stockton Lake. The sun blazed across the water, ducking behind the clouds ever so often, all the while reflecting perfectly off the surface of the water like a mirror to the heavens.

Days like this were important to the speedster, getting back to the basics. No iPads, iPhones. No distractions and certainly no Justice League communicators. Ironically times like this he didn't miss his speed as much. Life moved way to fast as it was, and being out here alone with his kids, he was thankful for the slow, allowing him to capture a perfect moment in time, but still his heart weighed heavy.

There was someone out there, someone hunting speedsters. With the Justice League now involved, he knew the threat was real. It frustrated him that the very men and women he'd tried so hard to separate himself from, were now the ones he had to count on. It's not that he didn't respect or care about them, they were just a part of another life; one he didn't want his kids anywhere near.

But at the same time, he knew it wasn't fair to Bart to carry the burden alone, to have to play two heroes at once to keep the legacy of the Flash alive, but at least now he'd have support and back up in the hunt for this man. Wally knew he'd be no help, and the only thing worse that not having his speed, was the feeling of being worthless.

They were all busy seeing who could skip rocks the farthest across the water when Iris asked a question that caught him completely off guard.

"Dad are you going to ask Artemis on another date?"

Wally looked down quizzically at his daughter. "Is that what you think that was? A date? Iris she's
just a friend. All she did was come over for dinner and a movie."

"Sounds like a date to me." Jai added, one of the few times siding with his sister.

"Guys relax. It wasn't a date," Wally eyes narrowed at the two disbelieving sets staring back to him.

For the second time in as many minutes, his daughter figuratively knocked the wind out of him.

"Do you want to?" Go on a date with her I mean."

God she was so perceptive, all the traits of a good scientist.

"I don't know," he replied hesitantly. "How would you all feel if I did?"

"She seems nice," the young red head smiled, "I think it would be ok."

"She's cool," Jai added. "She has an annoying sister she can't stand too."

Wally rolled his eyes as Iris stuck out her tongue at her sibling.

"You smile a lot when she's around. We like it when you smile."

Her brother nodded in agreement.

"I don't know." Wally shrugged, before a wry smiled stretched across his face, "but when I do you'll be the first persons I tell." lurching forward, grabbing them into bear hugs, tickling until they squealed.

He looked down at his watch. "Time to go kiddos. We've got to meet grandma and grandpa for dinner at 6:00."

Jai took off towards the shore line, picking up and throwing as many rocks as he could into the lake on the way the jeep while Iris took her dad's hand, watching her brother zoom around like an idiot.

Wally looked down at matching green eyes and freckles. "You know you and your brother are the most important things in my life right? Nothing's ever going to change that. You're my guys, were a family, and nothing's more important than family."

"But….If I do decide to ask her out, you have to promise me that you'll tell me if it makes you or your brother uncomfortable. Besides, there no telling if she'd actually say yes anyway."

Iris leaned her head against her father, squeezing his hand tightly. "She'd say yes."

"Why do you say that?" Wally laughed.

"Cause I'm a girl, we know these things," she grinned.

A few minutes later, the three finally reached the dusty gravel parking lot where the jeep was parked. The kids had just strapped themselves in as Wally finished loading the back when suddenly his ears began to ring, and the world around him went white.

A wave of pain and nausea struck, driving the unsuspecting speedster to the ground. His skin was hot, prickly. He was sweating. The lake and everything around him started spinning out of control. Wally struggled to get to his knees as both kids burst form the jeep.

"Daddy!" Iris screamed, running to his side, followed by Jai, grabbing his father's waist, fruitlessly
"Dad are you ok?" Jai asked urgently as his father tried to breathe through the pain. Minutes later, the spinning and nausea began to subside, his tender skin beginning to cool.

"Yeah," he nodded to his kid's relief; finally steady enough to get to his feet. He wiped his damp brow, leaning against the Wrangler for support, swallowing hard through his tight throat.

"What happened Daddy?" his daughter asked nervously, her hands still trembling.

"I don't know pumpkin; maybe it was .....too much sun. Don't worry. I'm fine, really," he lied. "Let's get going. Grandma and Grandpa are waiting."

Both kids nodded hesitantly, jumping in the back and pulling on their seatbelts. Wally climbed into the front seat, closing his eyes for a moment. He'd had similar sensations before, but nothing like this. Since he'd lost his speed, the times he'd tried to run, tried to push himself too far, when he thought he could hear the lightning calling, he'd have these spells. Moments where his body warned him don't go too far, that that part of him was gone, but yet he'd try anyway. It was his nature. But this one, this spell was unlike anything he'd ever felt. And he wasn't pushing or exerting himself. He was basically standing still. This wasn't his body talking to him, this was something else. Something had happened and Wally knew it wasn't good.
Chapter 17

A half hour later, Wally pulled into the crowded parking lot of the Four Seasons hotel. The kids had already packed their sleeping bags and swimsuits for the night before they'd left for the lake. They always looked forward to sleepovers with their grandparents, and as much as they loved Grandma's old house, her new one, as temporary as it might be, had a pool, and nothing was cooler than a pool.

Wally had already decided to pass on dinner, playing it off as long day with papers left to grade as opposed to worrying his parents that something was wrong. The longer he stayed the better chance his mom would begin to notice something was off; she could read him like a book. By the time they'd crossed the bridge into Central City, his head had already stopped aching and the feeling of impending doom had begun to pass. As far as the kids knew, all was right with world, and Wally had actually started to believe it until he saw Cassie Sandsmark pacing up and down the lobby. That's when he knew something had happened.

As he walked into the lobby, Wally waived off the anxious Amazon for a moment, shuffling his kids past her and into the elevator, pressing the button and sending them up to the penthouse Dick Grayson had so generously provided. When the elevator doors shut, he turned to Cassie.

"What's happened?" he asked, his heart full of dread.

"Jay," she swallowed hard, unable to look into his eyes. "He's... he's dead."

Wally's stumbled back, feeling like he'd been punched in the gut, his knees barely able to keep him upright. "Oh my God. When? How?" he asked desperately.

"About three hours ago, at his farm."

"Zoom?" he swallowed, his mind beginning to rage.

"We don't know yet."

"But Jay was under your protection right? League protection" he said angrily. "You didn't leave him alone out there did you?"

"Of course not," she defended. "Blue Beetle and Kid Flash were there with him."

"Is Bart...are they ok?" the speedster asked, his heart pounding through his chest.

"I don't know. Nobody's told me anything other than to find you and get your family to safety."

She pulled his com unit irritably from her belt. "You have to carry this Wally; I can't protect you if I can't find you."

I don't think it matters anymore, he thought to himself. You can't stop him.

"Batman has a team prepping a safe house in a secure location somewhere, but until it's ready, we're all on lockdown. Back-up is on its way, and Black Canary has gone to retrieve Iris All..."

As if on cue they turned to the loud rumble of Dinah's Suzuki AEM pulling into the parking lot, her blonde hair splayed in all directions as her passenger pulled off the heroine's helmet. From across the lot, green eyes met green eyes, and his aunt rushed into the lobby, grasping her nephew fiercely.

"It's him isn't it?"
"The League doesn't know yet. I've got to find Bart."

Canary joined them. "Wally, Bart's fine. He's on a mission with Batman at this moment trying to determine this assailant's identity, but until we get the all-clear to move, protecting your family is our number one priority. I'm going to need you all to go upstairs."

Wally nodded. "Dinah give us a minute ok?"

Canary respectfully nodded, taking Wondergirl and stepping away, leaving aunt and nephew to their privacy.

"Someone's needs to be with Joan."

"They will Iris, wherever they end up taking you all, I'm sure she's coming too."

"You all? You're coming too right?"

"Absolutely" he nodded eagerly, "I just need to go get something first."

"Wally you heard Dinah. I don't like this anymore than you do, but we need to stay…"

"It's important Iris!" the speedster interrupted. "You just have to trust me. Until I get back I need you to help Mom and Dad with the kids. They have no idea what's going on or what's about to happen, but they're not stupid, it won't take them long to realize who these strangers are that are hanging around them. They're gonna be scared and they're gonna have a lot of questions. They'll need their favorite aunt to let them know it's all going to be ok."

"What am I supposed about tell them if they ask who Dinah or Ollie are?"

"You tell them the same thing you told me back in the day what you introduced me to the Flash; That you're the number one reporter in Central City, and you literally know everybody," he said with a wry smile.

"Wally…" she protested.

"I'll be back in less than an hour. I'll be careful I promise, but I need you to do this for me Iris… please."

The older redhead paused, sighing as she nodded her head. Wally took out his phone to make a call as Iris walked to Dinah. "Let's head up."

"One minute," the speedster answered, directing his phone around the lobby, searching for a better cell signal. "Just let me finish this call."

Canary turned to Wondergirl. "Stay with him, don't let him out of your sight."

"Understood." the junior hero replied.

"Damnit," Wally cursed to himself, hoping his bodyguard would have joined them and followed suite. He needed another plan quick.

His mind ran to his children. How do you tell two eight year olds their lives are in danger? That the boogeyman is real and he's coming. How in a matter of minutes do you strip away their innocence, and throw them into a world they can't possibly understand. How do explain evil?

Even though his body might not follow suit, his mind still moved at light speed. He knew exactly
what he had to do even before Cassie's last words to Canary had escaped her lips.

Suddenly the speedster stumbled back slightly, finding a chair for support and easing himself down.

"Wally! Are you ok?" Cassie asked, rushing to his side.

The red head took a deep breath, rubbing his eyes. "I'm fine Cassie, just... just a little dizzy. I need my meds. Would you do me a huge favor and go up to the room and get them, I really don't want my kids to see you carrying me in from the elevator if you don't mind, I have image to protect," he said with a wry smile.

"My mom knows exactly where they are. I'll stay right here, scouts honor," he chuckled weakly.

Cassie nodded hesitantly, weighing Canary's orders versus common sense. The Flash was a senior member of the League too after all. "Sure... anything. Just stay off your feet and I'll be right back."

Growing up Wally West had been a lot of things; president of the math club, the science club, the founder of the Blue Valley Flash fan club, sidekick, and junior hero, but the one thing he'd never been was a scout. As soon as the elevator door shut, he was already in the parking lot, jeep tires screeching as he sped towards the interstate.

Once the elevator reached the top floor, Cassie rushed out, finding the penthouse door open as Iris explained the situation to the Wests. She could see the kids in the other room watching TV, and with them safely out of earshot, Wondergirl respectfully broke into their conversation.

"I'm really sorry for interrupting, but Wally's feeling a little... under the weather. He asked for his meds."

Mary West stared quizzically at the young blonde's request. "Meds? What meds?"

"Oh gods" she mumbled to herself in disbelief realizing she'd been played. Her head dropped in defeat as Canary's eyes shot daggers through her. For someone training to be an Amazon warrior, she still had a lot to learn about strategy.

"Diana's so going to kill me," she cringed.

xxx

Batman and Nightwing stood at the monitor, coordinating with other League members on a plan of action as Bart came out from the uniform's vault, his broken arm wrapped in a sling. Artemis doubted it would stay that way when they finally faced Eobard Thawne. If he was anything like his older cousin, the arm was already healing as they spoke.

The speedster walked up next to the archer, staring out at the commotion, unsure if this was common place or utter confusion. Bart had never really spent much time aboard the satellite. The Flash's self-imposed exile for the League had kept him away when wearing the scarlet, but still he, Tim, and Jamie were known to sneak aboard from time to time, just for kicks.

"If you want to change into something, I'd bet your old uniform is somewhere up here on file."

Artemis shook her head. "That girl's long gone," she said with a tinge of bitterness, her eyes locked onto the Amazon princess in the distance, watching Wonder Woman as she made her way around the Monitor Womb.

Wonder Woman was one of the original seven, a hero born and bred, but the archer wondered how
high and mighty she'd be if she'd been raised by the devil instead of a Queen. If she'd spent her youth being trained and tortured, told what a failure she was time and time again instead of being revered; if she'd been taught to be a tool of evil instead a symbol of hope. Artemis had long accepted her past, but she resented being judged by someone who'd never walked a day in her shoes. The archer had made her mistakes, she'd paid the price, and now she'd earned a chance at redemption. Immortal princess be damned.

It was always rumored that the Amazons were originally created to protect "man's world," but ultimately abandoned it instead. It seemed she and Diana of Themyscira were both trying to make up for their families past mistakes. How did that make Wonder Woman any different? Any better?

The archer quickly realized that her resentment was overshadowing the young hero next to her and all he was going through, all he had lost.

Looking at his heartbroken eyes, it pulled at the heartstrings Artemis wasn't sure she still owned. It was scary how much he looked like Wally in the yellow and red.

"I'm sorry Bart. I appreciate the thought. I'm just ready to get out of here."

"Me too." he replied stoically

From across the room, Dick caught her eye, gesturing for them to head towards the main transport area. As they walked towards the far end of the satellite, Green Arrow caught up and joined them mid stride.

"You two be careful ok? This is probably a dead end, but maybe Thawne does know something. Just remember, if for any reason things start to go south, get out of there asap. Batman and Nightwing can hold their own until the League arrives.

They both nodded. At face value it might appear that Green Arrow doubted their worth on a mission like this, but Artemis knew what Ollie meant. Bart was hurt, and she…she was just an assassin, albeit a really talented and dangerous one, but those skills paled in comparison to someone like Zoom, someone fast and deadly enough to sneak up on a speedster.

"But just in case…." Oliver smiled, handing over his bow and quiver to his former protégé. "I think you still remember how to use these, right?"

Artemis matched his smile warmly. "I think I can figure it out."

They reached the platform, joining Batman and Nightwing, as Green Arrow stepped to the console, activating the Zeta Tube Transit System.

"Good hunting!" he yelled over the whirling engines as they slowly came to life. The transport tube soon filled with blinding alien radiation, opening a portal to their earthly destination.

_Recognized Batman 02, Nightwing B01, Kid Flash B23, Artemis B07_

And for the second time in less than a day, the archer watched as her molecules deconstructed and faded into the ether.

xxx

It was a rough jostling ride into Keystone. The speedster's backpack and other belongings bounced across the jeep floorboards as he took sharp turn after sharp turn before finally pulling into his old neighborhood, the vehicle jerking as his tire hit the curb.
Moments later he pulled up to his parent's house, or what was left of it. The remaining stricture had been leveled, police tape and orange and white cones surrounding the sunken gap that was once his basement, but he didn't have time for nostalgia, he was on the hunt.

Wally jumped out of the jeep and took off running into the back yard, searching out the lone Red Oak tree on the property. Looking up, it was hard not to notice the missing mass of scarlet leaves, the scorched and blackened limbs. Wally knew it would eventually recover, so would the house, but it wasn't the tree that he came back for, it was what rested underneath it.

At the base sat several heavy limestone rocks encircling the base tree. At first glance it would appear a poor man's attempt at landscaping, or perhaps even the gravesite of a beloved pet, but what lay hidden underneath was much more important.

Wally lifted the massive stones from atop each other, removing three layers of rocks until he found it; his time capsule, his message in a bottle, possibly his salvation.

Years ago, a teenage science prodigy had nearly blown up his family's home in an experiment that just about killed him, an experiment to create the impossible. Like any good scientist, he kept detailed notes and logs leading up to that fateful night. Chemical compounds, atmospheric conditions, hyper-physics, time of day; notes written by a wunderkind in his own messy version of shorthand. These notes were way too dangerous to ever be placed on a disc or hard drive. Maybe it was for posterity or fear of discovery, or possibly to leave a map to follow in the event he ever needed to do it again. To recreate the impossible

There in a hermitically sealed glass bottle rested the answer, a desperate Hail Mary, more likely to fail than succeed, but he had to do something, to protect his family, his friends and himself. He pulled out the crumpled paper, holding them up to the sun. They weren't in mint condition, but they would do. He quickly pulled out his cell phone from his back pocket, searching through his contacts until he found her number.

Moments later a voice answered on the other end of the line.

_Thank you for calling Mercury Labs, who may I direct your call?_

xxx

The quartet materialized within the sealed transport chamber, locked behind a three foot thick, reinforced titanium steel door. Artemis immediately knew wherever they were; they took their security very seriously here. Once their identities had been confirmed, the one ton vault door creeped open to find a middle-aged grey haired man waiting to greet his guests.

It was a complete juxtaposition from where they'd left. Where the Watchtower was consistently in a state of barely controlled chaos, this facility was quiet, almost tranquil. A place completely secret and off the books, housing a classified group of the most powerful and deadly villains the world had ever known. Beings so dangerous that they could never be allowed to walk the Earth again. Less than seven Leaguers even knew of its existence, and only three knew its exact location.

"Batman," the grizzled ex-government spook greeted the Dark Knight in his trademark low gruff voice.

"Faraday," Batman replied in kind, extending his hand to the former Suicide Squad director.

"It's good to see you, but like I said in my message, I think it's going to be a wasted trip."

"Possibly," the detective replied, always a man of few words. King Faraday eyed Batman's
companions briefly, aware of their identities, all except for one, but never bothered acknowledging any of them. They weren't supposed to be here in the first place. This was a secured facility, visitors of any kind were strictly prohibited, those were the rules dictated by the clandestine donor who funded it, but if the Dark Knight was willing to break his own rules and bring a team along, it had to be important.

The group made their way to the single elevator in the lobby, entering it as Faraday swiped his badge and typed in his key code. Suddenly the elevator began to drop, speeding down hundreds of feet into the main holding floors.

Moments later Batman and Faraday stepped out into the large access tunnel. It was at least twenty five feet tall, and just as wide; spacious enough to allow the transport of temporary holding cells on unmarked flatbeds throughout the complex and into their permanent and final destinations. How something like this was ever constructed so far underground was unfathomable.

Artemis and Nightwing followed next, leaving Bart the last to leave the car, his face unreadable. Artemis wasn't sure if it was fear, focus, or something else, but just to be safe she stepped back to the young speedster. Revenge can make you do foolish things. She literally wrote the book on that chapter.

Faraday stepped ahead, leaving the quartet behind for a moment to inform the guard at master control to prepare to open the outer doors to Cellblock Two.

"There are seven floors to this facility," Batman spoke, his eyes never leaving Faraday as he addressed his team. "Five for prisoner holding, one administrative, and, and one for transportation. There are never more than seven meta-humans detainees housed here at any given time with a guard to prisoner ratio of ten to one."

"Who do they have in here?" Bart asked

"It's classified. All of this is classified, so you will not discuss this with anyone; friends or teammates. Is that clear?"

They all nodded as Faraday came back to join them. "They're ready. Three rules; don't cross the red line, don't antagonize the prisoner, and don't get in the way if we have to discipline him. I don't give a shit if you're superheroes or Jesus Christ himself. If you break any of my rules, you'll end up tazed and in a matching cell. Understood?"

Artemis smirked at his bullshit bravado, but just to be safe she'd make sure she and the speedster stayed far behind. This man and this place were no joke. This wasn't Akrham, this wasn't Supermax, this was a facility where they kept the worst of the worst. Powerhouses that had gone toe to toe with the likes of Superman. The prisoners housed here probably had had no preliminary hearings, no trials, mist likely had never even spent a minute in a courtroom. They were too dangerous for that, and in cases like this, the League didn't much worry about anyone's 6th amendment rights.

She was an observer, nothing more, and if she was being honest, a nervous one at that. As dangerous as the life she'd left behind had been, the Shadows paled in comparison to the evils that dwelled her. These weren't drug lords, mafia kingpins, or the endless list of people who'd wronged the secret society. They were psychopaths and mass murderers, far too dangerous to be left on the streets, and now she was trapped in here with them.

Hero or assassin, she knew she was way out of her depth. If Batman wanted her help, he'd ask, but other than that, shut-up and stay out of the way was the plan. That was the price of admission.
The steel vault door hissed as the turbines slowly came to life opening the heavy reinforced hatch. Inside, soft classical music played, echoing peacefully throughout the room. As they walked in, they found themselves standing on a large raised metal platform. One guard sat to the left behind a control panel, the other to the right armed with a state of the art stun rifle.

Directly ahead, three steps down, fifteen feet behind a red painted line stood the transparent aluminum cell. Spacious but sparse, covered on all sides with small circular air holes that could be closed with a push of a button when quantities of nitrous needed to be pumped in through the ventilation system in order to keep the prisoner docile and calm. To the side of cell was a narrow opening, used to insert and retrieve meal trays, deposit books, or place restraints on for the detainees for their one hour exercise period.

And inside that cell lay Eobard Thawne; speedster, mass murderer, propped up on his bunk, book resting on his chest reading.

"As I said in my communique," Faraday reiterated, "Thawne never leaves his cell, not even for his one hour recreation period. Prisoners are never allowed to interact with each other. He never requests anything other than a few new books every now and then, and never gives any of the guards or staff the slightest bit of trouble. I don't like to use the words model prisoner, not after what some of these sick fucks have done, but Thawne is as close as they come."

"Zoom," a quiet voice corrected from inside his cell.

"Sorry Professor," Faraday replied with an eye roll. "I've got months of surveillance footage you can go through, but the bottom line is, whoever you're looking for, this aint your guy. You've got fifteen minutes."

"Stay here," the Dark Knight ordered to his team as he approached the cell, stopping less than an inch away from the broken red line.

"Thawne," Batman began, "I have a few questions I'd like you to answer if you could."

The speedster and the archer eyed each of in mild disbelief, this is not how the Batman they knew interrogated prisoners, but Nightwing understood the approach. Thawne was not your ordinary criminal. He was psychotic and calculating. Every single word meant something to him. He needed to be recognized and respected. Aggression and threats would have little effect on him. In a nutshell, he needed to be needed. Dick was fairly sure this would be Bruce's play, anything just short of actually saying please.

The villainous speedster made no attempt at a reply, instead just flipping the page of the T.H. White novel in his possession; The Once and Future King.

Batman collected himself and began again. "Professor Zoom…"

"Bartholomew, are you not even going to come forward to say hello?"

Bart tensed as he stepped towards the cell. "Just answer the damn questions." he demanded.

The older speedster placed his book down gently on the bedside table, changing positions and slowly sitting upright, his hands folded around his waist

"Don't be vulgar Bartholomew, it's beneath you. Still, I'm touched to see a fellow speedster so I'm willing to overlook it," he smiled graciously.
"Thanks professor," Bart replied sarcastically.

Zoom rose to his feet, wearing an unmarked yellow jump suit, an inhibitor collar around his neck and two gravity bracelets on his ankles, ready to be activated in a moment's notice as a failsafe.

Zoom finally turned from Bart to his inquisitor, very unimpressed with the specter in black on the other side of the glass. Most men would cower at the idea of being interrogated by the vigilante, but Thawne wasn't most men. Batman was prepared for that.

"Bartholomew, where are your manners. You haven't introduced me to your friends. The young man looks very familiar; I believe we may have met many years ago correct?"

Dick remained stoic behind the mask as Zoom nodded in recognition.

"Yes, yes now I remember. You were the one who spared me a most gruesome death at the hands of dear Wallace, however the lovely lady, I don't believe we've met?"

The archer snarled soundlessly at the man in yellow, wishing for her dagger instead of the arrows. One of the first lessons taught by her former taskmasters was how to make a person talk. It was one of the few skills she was now grateful for from the Shadows. It would take very little effort to step inside that cell and show the professor what a good student she'd become.

When Zoom received no response from either Artemis or Nightwing, he sighed, turning to Batman. "I believe you had questions."

Batman began his interrogation, choosing his words carefully as Nightwing and Artemis studied Thawne's responses, his infections, his body language. The way his eyes shifted when he answered, any pause or delay in his answers, any kind of hand-to-face activity.

Questions and answers went back and forth, but Bart payed no attention, his mind distracted, repeating the same words over and over in his head.

Something's not right

He wished Wally was here. He'd be able to figure it out. Pinpoint what was off what he was missing. Be a second set of eyes.

Eyes

That's when it stuck him, the odd feeling he wrote off as nerves when he first looked at the villain. Trying not to be conspicuous, Bart slowly reached up to his forehead, pulling down his goggles, activating the light/radiation wavelength and thermal imaging detectors. What he discovered took all his strength and effort not to gasp, not to give it away, but that millisecond of hesitation was not lost on the prisoner.

Thawne smiled, halting the line questioning, looking directly at the young speedster. "Clever boy," he grinned. And with those words, all hell broke loose.

Thawne started to blur, his body vibrating faster and faster, beginning to flicker. His body dissolved into photons, the inhibitor collar and boots falling to the ground with a metallic thud.

Faraday ordered everyone back from the cell, two words escaping his lips when he noticed a glowing yellow glove sticking out of the center of his chest.

Behind him Professor Zoom pulled his hand free, the dead bloodied body of Faraday and the two
guards slumping to the cold steel floor. He stood arrogantly over the dead men, his face unmasked, a statement that he wanted there to be no confusion as to who was responsible for these deaths, and soon many others.

A contrail of red lightning began to encircle the room, jagged blinding lines of raw energy spinning in circles, finally forming into three distinct bolts racing out towards the three non-meta heroes.

Before they could impact, a familiar yellow bolt shot thorough the enclosure sending the three heroes slamming against the side of the cell to safety. Dazed, the Dark Knight reached to his waist, unlocking a Batarang from his belt as Nightwing did the same, but before Batman's fingers could activate the release mechanism, his vision began to blur, his skin burning. Waves of nausea formed in his gut and he felt himself losing consciousness before suddenly subsiding.

Across the room, red and yellow streaks of lightning collided and repelled off the walls, blinding contrails sparking like fireworks on the fourth of July, but there was nothing the two detectives or the archer could do but watch as they found themselves trapped inside of the transparent aluminum cell, vibrated through the construct and now prisoners courtesy of Zoom.

The light show ended suddenly, as the elder speedster held the younger one by the neck, pinned against the shorted out control panel.

"Impressed, Bartholomew? You should be. I call it a speed mirage. The Force just keeps bestowing such wonderful gifts. And with each life I take, my connection gets stronger and stronger."

The arrogant villain looked back at the confused heroes, focusing directly to the elder detective.

"Come now Batman, did you really think a scattering of chemicals and a bolt of lightning was enough to allow us to travel between the seconds?"

He looked at the struggling teenager in his grip. "You never told them?" turning back to his captives. "He never told you?" he repeated in disbelief.

"Told us what?" the archer demanded though the air holes.

"The source of our power. The electrochemical manifestations we all went through just opened the door; the Speed Force is what gives us the lightning. That's what we call it anyway. A few moments from now I'll have his share and be on my way."

Zoom looked up at the struggling speedster with pity. "It's incredibly fortuitous that you came to me, almost destiny I suppose. You were next on my list, but you have been for quite some time. I have to admit I'm impressed with your elusiveness, first at your apartment and then at that old fool’s house."

"Don't say his name," Bart rasped, struggling and kicking, only to be spun across the room, pinned against the very cell that housed his tormentor, his head slammed repeatedly at the blink of eye against the surface, blood flowing freely from his eyes and mouth.

"You son of bitch." Dick cursed, slamming his gloved fist on the cell wall.

Thawne cocked his head, mocking the young detective. "What is it about the youth of this century and vulgarity? You truly are savages."

"Fuck you!" Artemis hissed at the smiling speedster as he just rolled his eyes in confirmation.

"I'd love to continue this banter, but even for someone like me, time is a factor. Just know this, the only reason any of you are still breathing is because I let you. I want there to be a record, a witness of
what I do today."

He spun the broken speedster around, slamming the back of his head against the cell one last time for good measure. "Say hello to your grandfather for me. Once I figure out where dear Wallace hid his speed, he'll be joining you all soon enough. Then it will all be mine and I can finally go home. The line will be broken. No more speedsters, no one but me."

Kid Flash’s jaw tightened, showing as brave a face as he could muster as Zoom's hands began to blur, his fingertips barley phasing through the surface of the young speedster’s breast bone. Bart screamed out in agony as Thawne turned towards the trapped heroes. "Enjoy your stay; it might be the only safe refuge in this entire godforsaken prison, once I release my fellow inmates and all. For all its failings, it is an impressive cell, just not for the likes of me."

He looked to the Dark Knight to see him smiling through the glass at him. Every logical molecule in his body warned him to ignore it. He'd won the day, seconds away from killing another speedster, and had outmaneuvered and outsmarted the world's greatest detective in the process, but his ego just couldn't ignore the chance to have the final word.

"Please, grace me with what's so amusing, Share your final warning, your unfulfillable promise to stop me.

The Dark Knight mouthed something towards him, nodding in satisfaction afterword, but his muffled words struggled to escape the glass. Zoom chuckled at his pathetic attempt to delay the inevitable, but his curiosity got the better of him, placing himself now within earshot.

"You were saying?" Zoom sneered

Batman let slip two words. "Listen… carefully"

At that signal, Nightwing dropped two small spherical devices out the air holes, speeding towards the floor, ready to detonate on impact, but before they could hit the ground, Zoom had them in hand, literally plucking them out of the air at the blink of eye. Before either man could react, Thawne had already examined them for incendiary devices, shaking his head at the pathetic attempt.

Zoom smiled. "Duds I believe the term is," he mocked just as Nightwing reached to his belt, arming the emitters. A second later to sonic grenades activated, sending Zoom and Bart seizing to the floor.

The shriek was deafening as blood flowed from Thawne's unprotected ears. He sped unsteadily to his feet. Rushing towards the cell, his hands beginning to vibrate through the dense molecular structure of the construct, as a blurred glove reached through grabbing at the Dark Knight.

"I've changed my mind," he rasped, his blurred fingers trying to make contact with Batman's chest. "The surveillance cameras will be my testament, as will your deaths. There is no Batman where I come from; perhaps today is the reason why."

Klaxons and alarms began to flood the room, florescent lighting now replaced by spinning warning lights. More sonic grenades were dropped through the cell opening followed by flashbangs, but this time Zoom had no defense. Artemis ran to the small rectangular open, breaking off arrow tips and tossing explosives to the center of the room adding to the chaos.

Nightwing winced in pain, covering his ears while searching through the smoke for the young speedster, hoping Bart's goggles and earpieces were providing him so small ounce of protection from the blinding sonic onslaught. Even inside the sealed cell, the noise was deafening, and as a small section of smoke cleared, Dick could see both Zoom and Kid Flash writhing on the floor in agony.
He pulled two sets of sonic dampener form his belt, placing one set in his ears and the other to the fallen archer struggling on the floor. He looked to Batman only to find him on the opposite side of the cell, searching fruitlessly for a locking mechanism of some kind to escape the cell.

Zoom pulled himself to his hands and knees, crawling towards the young speedster, determined to finish what he started. Thawne would take no satisfaction in the teen's death. Bart Allen was unique, one of only a few individuals who'd ever ridden the lightning, but for Zoom to achieve his goal, he had to take from Allen what rightfully belonged to him. The same however could not be said for the heroes behind the glass. They were going to pay for their audacity, perhaps not now, but soon. Once he'd killed the last speedster, he'd be unstoppable.

Zoom stood above his prey lying helpless on the floor preparing to strike, when suddenly his eyes went wide as a strange sensation washed over him.

Someone was trying to open a door, a door to another dimension. At that moment Zoom knew exactly who it was and what he was trying to do. Bart Allen would have to wait. Another speedster was out there searching for what he'd lost. Zoom had to be there when he found it.

With all the determination and strength he had left, Thawne crawled to the far side of the room, fighting through the pain. Willing his molecules to vibrate, his body began to blur once again, and moments later the bloody battered form of Eobard Thawne slowly slipped through the prison walls, heading towards the surface. After that he'd be free, free to finish the job he'd started in Keystone years before.

xxx

"Wally this is insane," Dr. McGee pleaded, as the middle aged physicists struggled to keep up with the speedster, rushing through the maze of hallways inside Mercury Labs.

Tina McGee had been a longtime friend and confidant of the Allen/West clan. Then working at STAR Labs, she'd been the first scientist Barry approached after acquiring his speed and becoming the Flash. Together they'd worked to solve the mystery of his metamorphosis; testing his limits, discovering new abilities, striving to help him get even faster.

It was only natural that after Wally's accident, she'd be the one he'd take him to. Together the three had become quite the team. Tina had even gone as far as to help Wally design his first uniform. She recognized something in the young speedster that she saw in herself; his love and thirst for science. Though never to be mistaken for kid friendly, she'd become something of a surrogate sister to him. There were no secrets between them, and she'd be lying if she didn't find it a bit exciting to be drawn into the world of secrets and superheroes.

It was her letter of recommendation that eventually got him into Stanford. An alumni herself, it didn't take much convincing for her former professors and instructors to see Wally's brilliance.

She been heartbroken when he quit his doctorate program, but his wife had just died, his uncle and mentor as well. He was suddenly a single father, needing a job and a career to provide for his burgeoning family. Tina had no doubt in her mind Wally was an amazing teacher, but he was meant to be something more; a scientist. One of her fondest hopes was that he'd return to that path one day.

In her new role as Director and CEO of Mercury Labs, she'd always planned to bring him onboard, but Wally couldn't commit the time and energy it would take to be his best; his family came first.

Life seemed to have other plans for him. It was his current one however that made her so worried. She reached forward, grabbing the red head by his shirt, spinning him around towards her.
"Stop and think about what you're asking. We've spent years trying to figure out what happened to your abilities with absolutely no answers. Now you just want to re-create the accident all over again. Do you realize how dangerous this is?"

"Tina it wasn't an accident, it was an experiment. I've got the notes right here to prove it."

Her expression hardened. "You and I both know there's a lot more to it than that." she replied. "You're upset, I get that, but Wally you're not thinking clearly. What you're taking about is suicide. Think about your kids."

"I am!" he screamed as his hands balled into fists, causing the doctor to jump. Instantly he regretted the outburst, taking a step back to regain his composure. Tina was asking all the right questions, questions that a good friend is supposed to ask. What upset the speedster was he didn't have the answers, any good ones at least.

He took a calming breath. "Tina I'm sorry. You're right, this is stupid and reckless, but I've got to do something. That monster out there isn't going to stop and until he kills every one of us, and he doesn't care who gets in the way."

McGee nodded, realizing he was talking his late wife as much as the danger to his kids.

"Wally, you said yourself, they don't even know for sure who's doing this…or why."

"It's him. I can't tell you how, but I just know, and he's not going to stop."

Wally turned away, unsure of who he was trying to convince more; the doctor or himself, but he was quickly running out of time and neve.

"Tina I'm out of options. I'm scared shitless, but hiding's not the answer, he'll find us. He always has. I have to do something to protect my family, and I can't do it like this," he gestured to himself. She understood what he meant by it.

_Slow_

"If I don't do this, I'm as good as dead already."

McGee knew by the look on his face that he was going to do this with or without her help, and he'd have a better chance of success if he had a partner. She'd always wondered what it would be like to be a sidekick. She was about to have her chance.

"Ok," she signed. "Let me get my staff out of here. We're going to need some privacy."

_xxx_

Bart Allen lay prone on the floor unconscious, barely breathing; with remainder of the away team trapped on the other side of the transparent aluminum cell, helpless to reach him.

Batman adjusted the sensor array on his glove, extending his fingertips through the small air holes in the cell in hopes of getting a periphery scan of Bart’ Allens’s vitals. It wouldn’t be very accurate from this distance, but it was the best he could so.

“Heart rate 40 beats per minute, respiration 16 breaths per minute.”
“That not good,” Dick replied anxiously, looking over the Dark Knight’s shoulder.

“It’s only an estimate. Quite honestly I have no idea what would be considered normal vitals would be for a speedster.”

"It's taking the facility rescue team way too long to get inside," Dick asserted.

"That's provided anyone up there is still alive to rescue us," the Dark Knight added

"So no luck finding an escape route out of here?"

Batman frowned, "the designers were extremely thorough."

Dick chuckled dourly, "Let me guess, it was you."

Bruce’s silence was his answer.

Across the cell, Artemis’s eyes couldn’t leave the fallen speedster, the reflection he cast so much like the teen she once knew long ago. Finally she turned to the dynamic duo “Have you ever heard any of them say anything about a speed force before?”

Bruce scratched his chin. “It would make sense. Sixty percent of the human body is just fluid. Imagine rocketing five hundred mile per hour and suddenly stopping on a dime? A body would essentially explode. Also what about friction? There were times at Barry’s top speed he could reach levels of almost 4.1 miles per second. It’s possible their uniforms had some form of heat shielding built into then, but not probable.”

“If this speed force is real, something like that would be very hard to prove scientifically. Maybe that why Wally chose physics as a major. You know he couldn’t let a mystery like that remained unsolved,” Dick chuckled to himself remembering back to once of Wally’s constant mantras when confronted with things he couldn’t define.

*Everything can be explained by science.*

Artemis knelt down to the wall closest to Bart, anxiously watching the rise and fall of his chest, trying to determine if his breaths were getting stronger…or weaker.
What did Thawne mean when he said finding where Wally had hidden his speed?” Artemis asked.

"I have no idea,” Dick shrugged. “At face value, if you believe anything that maniac said, it would sound like Wally didn’t actually lose his speed, but …but somehow voluntarily gave it up? That doesn’t make any sense. Even if he didn’t want to be a hero anymore, I don’t think that ability is something you can just walk away from. It’s second nature to him. It would be like someone with perfect eyesight trying not to see."

“No matter the cause or effect, Thawne is looking for it,” Batman added.

“And Wally has no idea he’s coming for him right now,” Artemis replied with a quake of fear in her voice. “We’ve got to…..”

Suddenly a powerful jolt shook the room, ceiling tiles and dust dropping from the above, followed by another, then another and then another.

Moments later the two-ton steel door was ripped from its hinges, a statuesque Amazon warrior standing on the other side tossing it down the now abandoned hallway, followed by the prison’s security team rushing in, bypassing the damaged control console and activating the emergency release protocols.

Diana rushed to Bart's side, lifting his unconscious form effortlessly, standing back as the cell began to hum, tumblers clicking into place unlocking. Suddenly the four walls came falling forward, allowing its inmates freedom.

Wayne rushed to the fallen speedster, checking his vitals, finally able to get a accurate. Reading; He didn’t like what he found. Green Arrow stepped through the rubble, joining them."

"Dead end huh?" Ollie stated.

"Are you all ok?" Diana questioned.

"Bart needs immediate medical attention, but the rest of us, other than a little hearing loss are fine. I'll explain later," Batman replied.

"It was Thawne?"

Batman nodded grimly. "And he's more powerful than we initially imagined. He's had some kind of speed construct impersonating him in this cell while he was been out, presumably on the hunt."

"How many more casualties?" Nightwing asked gravely.

"Seven on this floor. Five more on the admin level." Ollie replied dejected, "but no prisoners released, thank God."

"King Faraday was a good man, he didn't deserve this, none of them did," Diana replied sadly.

"How did the kid survive?" Ollie asked, looking over at the bloodied speedster.
“Thawne was probably worried about your estimated time of your arrival. “Maybe something like this takes time.” Dick suggested.

“It doesn’t matter right now!” the archer snapped. “He's going after Wally. Please tell me you have him someplace safe!”

Green Arrow's face grew grim. "He ditched his protection detail about an hour ago and took off towards Keystone."

"He did what!?” Artemis yelled.

"He deactivated his com unit, but we're triangulating his position through cell tower pings. The last contact we had, he was heading northeast towards the outskirts of Central City. I was just about to assign a team to track and retrieve him when we received the prison’s automated emergency call."

“What’s northeast of Central City that’s could be so important?” Arrow asked

That’s when the pieces all fell into place and Dark Night figured out the connection between Wally's last location and Thawne's cryptic words, there was only one place he'd be going and one thing to do when he got there.

"He’s going to Mercury Labs. That's what Zoom meant by knocking on the door. If Wally truly believes he’s lost his speed, that’s where he would go to recreate the experiment."

"He's what?” Nightwing demanded

Batman had to act quickly, and code names were just getting in the way. Diana, get Bart to the Watchtower. He needs a neurological scan right away. In the meantime we need a Zeta Tube to Central City.

"It's going to take a few minutes to bypass the dashboard,” Arrow replied. “Zoom trashed it pretty good on his way out."

"I'll get it working," Nightwing asserted, stepping out of the cell followed by the others, sprinting towards the elevator shaft.

Fifteen minutes later, on the top floor of the Cadmus facility, Ollie stood next the transport console, programming in their destination. "We have two tubes in Central City; the closest one to Mercury Labs is twenty miles out. I doubt I can get a police escort there in time to meet you, you might need to….commandeer…. some transportation."

"Understood."
The princess looked to the entire team standing on the transport pad, eyeing each one carefully one by one, ending with the archer. This time there was no angry glares sent in her direction, no frowns of judgement.

Artemis knew what the Amazon saw on her face, fear, but something unexpected happened when she stared back at the heroine. The archer saw a different emotion entirely. Hope

"Be careful, all of you, Transport in five...four...three..."

Two second later the room erupted in light and they were gone.

xxx

Wally rushed to the chemical catalogue, searching for specific compounds and their locations in different storage areas around the facility. So many of the chemicals he needed were incompatible with others for bulk storage, some needing to be stored at room temperature, others well below.

He fought the temptation to add anything else to the volatile mix. So many of the new compounds available didn't exist years ago, and they had such potential to be much more beneficial than the ones he'd had access to back then, but this wasn't the time hypothesize. To have any hope of success he needed to stick to the original formula. Looking back now, how he'd accomplished such a task at the age of fourteen actually seemed as much dumb luck as a controlled experiment.

*Maybe Tina was right after all he shrugged.*

After gathering what they needed, the duo carefully made their way to the Hazardous Chemicals Lab, the only place safe enough to mix such combustible chemicals into one compound.

After a few minutes of crossing fingers and prayers, the mixture was complete; no signs of combustibility registering on any of the lab sensors, but that was only temporary. Once it was supercharged, that's exactly what it was designed to do. The last step was to load the chemical into the safety container and transport it to the vault.

Wally and Tina carefully lifted the vat onto a dolly, easing the container slowly down the hallway, trying not to jostle or splash the compound any more than they had to.

"Turn here," McGee directed, swiveling to dolly slowly to enter into the lab

"What's this?"

"It's a steel reinforced testing lab were sharing with some engineers from Boeing. They have a new large scale lithium-ion battery they're testing for their Dreamliner fleet. Essentially they work with our people trying to make the thing explode. This room is the strongest most reinforced lab I have."

"This last time I tried this I nearly burned my parents' house down, this will do just fine. Now all we have to do is find the lightning."

"I have some ideas on that."
Chapter 18

Any other time it would be almost comical to see four superheroes in full costume crammed into a Dodge minivan, but Artemis wasn't in any mood to laugh. The husband and wife they'd waved down outside of the northeast Zeta Station, after getting over the initial shock of seeing the Dark Knight standing in the middle of the road in broad daylight, had been more the generous, They were mid westerners after all, and oh how they loved their superheroes. It was definitely going to be a story the expectant parents would tell their baby girl for years to come.

"How much longer?" Dick demanded, his anxiety breaking through his well-crafted calm exterior.

"Roughly fifteen minutes," Batman answered, turning to his goateed co-pilot. "Arrow?"

Ollie looked one last time at the holo-projector on his wrist tied directly into the computer banks onboard the Watchtower. "The GPS on his phone hasn't moved in an hour, he's there or at least his phone is."

"Any contact?"

"The satellite support staff has been calling nonstop to the labs for the last thirty minutes, but all calls are going straight to voice mail, including the facilities director. They either won't respond…"

"Or they can't," Artemis added with troubled tightness in her husky voice.

"Any police reports, anything out of the ordinary?" Dick asked

Ollie looked back to his wrist, changing the readout. "Nothing."

With that news, the quartet remained silent for the rest of the trip, there wasn't really anything left to say.

xxx

Wally lay on the make shift gurney, his arms heavily duct taped to the rails. This wasn't a medical facility; it wasn't designed for human testing. It was a physics lab pure and simple, and he and Tina had had to scramble to get the pieces they needed to fit, including using a first-aid wagon as a medical bed, and sticky polyurethane mesh as restraints.

On either side of the bed sat two sets of Tesla coils and multi-megavolt electrodes, connected by forty foot strands of pre-rigged fire wire stretched in between. Creating the lightning, scientifically speaking, was a fairly easy process. A high energy electrical pulse is created. It evaporates the wire and an electrical arc follows the path. Longer lasting lightning bolts are arranged by running a series of wires, and firing them simultaneously in quick succession.

The plan, if you could call it that, would be to create the surge, while at the same time releasing the compounds in the form of a fine fist, dousing the subject with the electrified chemicals before directing one final powerful bolt to strike the test subject. On paper extremely feasible, the subject actually surviving the process, not as much, but Wally had beaten the odds one before.

The time for modesty long past, Tina stood by the speedster, removing his shirt and pants, as well as his watch and jewelry. Wally visibly jerked when she slid of his wedding ring, suddenly feeling extremely vulnerable without it.
"I'll keep them safe I promise," she said, gently stroking the speedster's cheek, trying to comfort him. 

"I know you will."

"Wally," she sighed, "There's still time to back out. There's has to be another way. You have the entire Justice League on your side, surely they can stop him."

"I wish I could believe that," he replied, swallowing hard, "but every time I close my eyes, I see Thawne standing over my kids while I'm sitting there helpless. I can't do that."

Tina could hear his voice tremble; she could see the tears forming in his eyes. He was terrified, but she knew it wasn't a fear of dying; it was abandoning his kids, leaving them unprotected and alone. They were his whole life; nothing mattered more.

It was a sickening game he played in his head, trying to justify and compartmentalize a decision that was so fundamentally flawed on so many levels. Aunt Iris would take the twins without hesitation. She'd be an amazing surrogate mother. His parents would step in and help every way they could; Iris and Jai were their treasures. Bart would watch out for them and be the big brother they always wanted.

Then there was the Justice League. If this didn't work, if he didn't survive it, they'd find a way somehow to keep his children safe. He had to believe that, it was all he had left.

Finally there was nothing left but the fall. She placed the plastic mouth guard in between his teeth, squeezing his hand one final time and left for the safety of the control behind the glass. It was time.

The first thing he heard was the gentle hiss of air clearing the nozzles as the compound began to release, leaving a moist sheen across his bare skin. It burned more than he remembered. The chemicals alone would take at least an hour before causing his skin to blister, but the worst part was yet to come.

Dr. McGee stood over the control board, seeing all readings as nominal. She peered through the glass at the subject strapped to the table, the generators humming, the Tesla coils beginning to spark. At that moment it dawned on her that she'd suddenly become Dr. Frankenstein. She morosely hoped Wally would live long enough to become the monster.

The speedster prayed he would blackout like he did all those years ago, being electrocuted alive was not a memory he'd like to keep. As the generators around him began to spark, the vision of Linda Park entered his mind. If he was wrong, if he died on this table, would he see his wife again? Would she be angry that he'd done such a stupid and foolish thing leaving her babies unprotected? This opened the doors to so many thoughts and fears, but as the first jolt of pain shot through his body, they quickly faded. The pain would keep him clear.

"We'll start at 10,000 volts and go from there," he heard Tina's voice amplified over the intercom. All he could muster was a shaky thumbs up in response.

Streaks of lightning began to arc over his head, the spray of chemical growing stronger, soaking and absorbing into his pores. Mild convulsions rocked his body, it was expected. He bit down hard on the mouth guard and powered through the pain. It was only going to get worse from here.

He closed his eyes as the bolts grew stronger, his convulsions more violent. Wally held his breath trying to muffle his screams. Tina had promised to ignore them and continue on with the experiment, he prayed she had the resolve to live up to that promise. There was no turning back from here.

Two bolts came together simultaneously inches from his skin, leaving a glowing burn trailing across
his chest. His rigid body began to seize more violently, straining forcefully against the restraints.

The electrical hum around him was growing louder, each streak of light dancing across the room more blinding. Through his haze Wally could sense something wasn’t right. Something had changed.

He no longer could hear the hiss of the nozzles, feel the burning compound that it was supposed to be releasing. All he could feel was the agonizing bursts of lightning growing stronger with each strike. The smell of burning flesh filled the room, his flesh. The stench was nauseating.

He began to panic, spitting out his mouth guard and screaming over the electrical storm. "The compound!" he rasped over the humming and popping of the coils. "Tina check the compound! I can't feel it anymore!"

He cried out as his skin began to ignite, begging for the coma he'd fallen into all those years ago. He was in sheer agony now, with no end in sight. Why hadn't she sent that final bolt to supercharge the particles rushing through his bloodstream? What was she waiting for?

Blinding light burned into his retina and he couldn't think clearly anymore. His flesh was tender and pink, blistering and bubbling away. With his last clear thought he knew they'd failed, it was over.

Foam and bile bubbled up from his throat as he struggled to breathe. Swirls of gold and red lighting intermingled, creating a hypnotic final effect. His neurons were dying, it wouldn't be long now.

Red lightning

Oh god

The storm suddenly ende, the chamber powering down and cooling. His body oozed as he turned towards the control panel, chunks of charred flesh falling of his bones onto the floor with every muscle constriction. Through broken blood vessels, he watched Tina McGee's body slump to the floor and Zoom's sinister sneer standing beside her. Nanoseconds later he was straddling the dying hero.

"Wallace you've looked better," he chuckled dryly, hiding his own urge to wretch at the sights and scents of his helpless enemy."

"Why...?" Wally rasped, coughing up thick clumps of black blood.

"It's nothing you did dear Wallace, it's what you will do. Already I can feel my future changing, because none of you are in it."

Thawne pulled the mask from his face, so he could look unobstructed into Wally's broken eyes. "It's ironic. Of all of us, you and I were the most alike, men of science. In another life we might even have even been friends, allies. Unfortunately you would still have your code, your morals, whereas I don't suffer such restrictions."

"What I'm trying to accomplish I know you'll understand more than anyone else. I have to know what's on the other side of the event horizon. I have to understand its mysteries. I want to be one with the Speed Force. I want to be unique, the last of my kind. Christlike," he laughed, "if I believed in such things. And I couldn't accomplish this as long as you lived."

"I've been as patient as I could be, but I'm tired of this ridiculous charade; subjecting myself to your petty laws, sitting in a cell that had no chance of holding me to begin with, hiding my true nature from the world. I waited, waited till you all had become fat and complacent. Till you'd become sheep. None of you wanted to take that last step, too content with your pathetic little lives. I thought
taking Barry would prompt you all to search for the answer, to investigate the mystery like I was, but instead you let yourself become…” he gestured to Wally's blackened and bloody body… "this"

"I have no desire to rule, I don't want riches or power. I want answers, answers to the great mystery. In my future, my past future really, you all would thwart me time and again, but those days are past. I've removed you all from the equation."

He looked down at the dying man, not with satisfaction as much as pity. "I'm rambling, forgive me."

Zoom then pulled the mask back on, his rare moment of humanity now hidden behind glowing eyes and modulated voice.

"I wanted you to be last, I tried, I really did, I knew you, more than any of the others, would understand, but I couldn't pass up this opportunity. Rest assured Barholyomew will be joining you shortly. I will make this promise to you. He won't suffer. You have my word."

Wally eyes fluttered, choking on tar like blood, struggling to stay alive. Sadly Thawne realized the speedster beneath him, in his condition, may not have been able to understand a word he said, but he'd made his act of contrition, he bared his soul and was now ready to move on.

"Noooooo!" a scream erupted from the control room, as Artemis and the others rushed in. Batman shattered the glass just as Zoom's blurred hands sunk into Wally's charred and bloodied chest. Seconds later Wally's body began to glow. Burning brightly like a star. Zoom's concentration never wavered, and there was no chance any of them would remotely reach him in time, no way to stop him.

Wally's hairless scorched face turned towards the sound, his eyes meeting with hers once last time, and then… he was gone.

Time stopped as Artemis found herself back in that refinery a decade ago. It was now her turn to be on the other side of the blast door, her turn to stand helpless. There'd be no words of comfort shared, no promises that everything would be all right. She would never have to imagine the visions of her demise that Wally must have created in his mind.

She'd never be able to count his faded freckles again, to feel the touch of his tender lips, the warmth of his body. And she'd never be able to tell him she was in love with him all over again. Those words would never be spoken.

In slow motion she barely noticed Dick and Bruce crashing through the control room window into the lab, never saw Oliver giving the thumbs up to them when he found the pulse of the fallen doctor. It never fazed her when Dick fell to his knees by the chalky outline of where the speedster's body once lay. She was past all that now.

Artemis didn't cry, she didn't hurt, that part of her was dead once again. The woman left in her place only craved one thing; bloody, excruciating, merciless revenge. To do this she'd have to go to that place once more, she'd have to become a Shadow again, and even if it meant her life, Zoom would die.

xxx

The Batplane landed stealthily on the outskirts of Gotham as its passengers quietly disembarked. It had been a silent flight from Central City. Batman had left the remaining investigation to Green Arrow and the League CSI team in order to provide transportation back to New York to regroup. There was nothing else they could do there now.
Words of comfort were not the Dark Knight's strong suit, but there was very little left to say at this point. All of them, including himself, had lost someone special, and they'd have barely enough time to grieve before being forced to suit up again and continue on with the mission. The hunt for Zoom would now be the League's number one priority. Bart Allen would still need protection, and someone...someone would have to inform the Wests. Bruce decided he'd rather face a team of Joker's as compared to that task. He wasn't the man for the job, and right now he had no idea who was.


Dick walked silently to the vehicles head downtrodden as he approached the archer and detective. Roy grasped him tightly as Dick returned the steel embrace before turning and taking his fiancé into his arms, cradling her head as she sobbed silently, streaks of mascara streaking down her cheeks.

Roy turned to find Jade now standing outside the convertible as Artemis approached. They stood silently for a moment looking at each other until Jade reached out to embrace her sister. Before her arms could touch the blonde, Artemis knocked her sister's hands away and got into the back of the car.

"Let's go."

Roy nodded respectfully to Dick as he closed the driver's side door and pulled away. Through his embrace Barbara watched the trio drive off, hurt that her friend couldn't find the decency to at least let her extend some kind of comfort. Barbara knew how much Wally had meant to Artemis, she understood he was the real reason she'd come back.

*The archer and the speedster together again.* They'd shared a small sliver of happiness, a hope and desire of something more, but now that hope was gone, brutally torn away in front of her eyes. Barbara worried that she might never see archer again, at least not the one that had returned from the dead.
Roy Harper stood at the large bay window overlooking Gotham Central Park. A blanket of stars coated the sky above while below couples walked hand in hand under the bright gas lights of the greenway. The streets below were a river of taxi cabs, Ubers and busses, bumper to bumper as usual no matter the hour; the litany of life.

It had been nearly a week and yet it still didn’t feel real. His friend was dead.

Being a vigilante was dangerous work, that’s the job. Fighting the good fight. Protecting those who can’t protect themselves. Stopping evil and those that do its bidding.

But Wally West didn’t play hero anymore. He was a scholar, a father, a friend. Something like this shouldn’t have happened, at least not to him.

Oliver Queen had reached out, trying to be supportive in his Ollie kind of way, worried about the spiral that Wally’s death might ensue, but Harper assured him he was fine. Just a few years ago, a loss like this would have ended with him at the bottom of a Jack Daniel's bottle or worse with a needle in his arm, but Roy Harper wasn't that man anymore. He wasn't cured, no one's ever completely cured of addiction; it’s a lifetime battle. But the archer had a strong support system and an understanding sponsor who knew all his secrets. He'd spoken with him earlier that evening; promising to meet the man in the morning for breakfast and an AA meeting afterwards.

Ollie assured him he’d keep his former partner in the loop regarding the search for Thawne, but this was a task left for the big guns, not for two grown men playing with bows and arrows.

The young archer left the window, making his way towards the kitchen when he stopped at the mantle, the silver glint of the picture frame catching his eye. Reaching up, he carefully removed it from the ledge, holding it to the light as his mind traveled back in time.

*He was a brash, cocky sixteen year old, bordering on arrogant but with the chops to back it up; all business all the time. He was Green Arrow's partner, not some sort of “fanboy sidekick”, and found it almost disrespectful the day Ollie forced him to meet his junior peers.*

*Two years older than both the Atlantean and the speedster, almost five the young detective, the*
archer had no interest in befriending let alone babysitting some group of pre-teen amateur wannabes. Just because Ollie was teammates with their mentors didn’t mean he had to be.

Aqualad was more mature than he’d expected, more seasoned. Robin had a pedigree that rivaled his own, having been a hero even longer than even he had, but the speedster was different, he was a clown, and Roy had not time for idiots like that.

Their first mission, if you could even call it that, was to investigate a series of bank robberies in and around Star City; his city. Speedy had a reputation in this town, and dragging around the junior Justice League was not only humiliating, but would only slow down his investigation. Roy had already come up with his plan to ditch his “teammates” when he came face to face with Thomas Meryln, one of Green Arrow's deadliest enemies, caught right in the act.

Roy finally had the fight he’d always wanted, a chance to prove to Ollie that he was ready for the next step, and who better to prove it against then a master of hand-to-hand combat, martial arts and stealth. Someone whose archery skills Green Arrow considered his equal if not superior. It took less than a minute for Speedy to realize he was in over his head.

Bleeding profusely, a concussion grenade having slammed him into a concrete wall, Roy could see the villain's smile as he let fly a razor tipped arrow heading directly for the young archer’s heart. Roy closed his eyes and cringed, waiting for the deadly impact when...nothing happened

Speedy opened his eyes to see Wally holding the arrow in his hand, inches away from the archer’s chest, looking just as surprised that he’d caught the damn thing as Roy did. The look on Merlyn’s face was priceless, and before he could reload, gas pellets landed at his feet, filling the alleyway with smoke.

A blinding light erupted in the middle of the grey cloud, and the archer watched in disbelief as every water pipe and fire hydrant within a block radius exploded from the ground, sending wave after crushing wave of electrified water slamming into villain. The liquid just as quickly dispersed, and a flying acrobat swung in from out of nowhere, landing a viscous kick onto Merlyn’s jaw, followed by a two hundred mile and hour yellow blur sending the evil archer flying into a brick wall and unconsciousness.

It didn’t take a genius to point out the weak link in this scenario, but when Green Arrow arrived at the scene, all the sidekicks could talk about was what a badass Speedy had been in literally taking down the villain solo.

With Merlyn covered in water and soot, electric burns, suffering a car wreck like concussion, Oliver
knew the story was complete bullshit, but liked how the junior heroes had covered for one another. On that day an arrogant sixteen year old learned a valuable lesson, and suddenly the term sidekick was a little easier to swallow. No thanks were asked for and none were given, but that was the day a brotherhood began, one that had lasted to this day, now minus one.

Roy placed the picture of the four brothers in arms back on his mantle, looking down and shaking his head.

"This is so fucked up," he sighed, wiping a tear away and stretching out on his couch for some much needed reflection.

He stared down the hall, watching the flicker of light escape from under the guestroom door. It had been days and Artemis had barely spoken a word, spending most of her time locked away inside, only responding sharply to Jade in Vietnamese when the assassin would enter her room without permission.

At times, he could hear rustling from the kitchen late at night, coming in the next morning to find everything washed and its place. Food was missing and that was good, as least she was eating.

Roy was a pragmatist, knowing more than most that everyone grieves in their own way, but this was unhealthy for anyone, especially for someone who’d taken the journey she had to get back here.

He rose to his feet, slowly making his way down the hallway towards her room, trying to piece together the right words to say when a callused but delicate hand took his, leading him in another direction.

Roy turned to look at the assassin.

"She needs time," Jade answered before Roy could even ask the question.

“She’s had time, what she needs is a friend. That’s not me, but she needs someone. Maybe we should call Zee or Barbara….

“She’s leaving,” Jade interrupted. “You realize that.”

“She shouldn’t,” Roy replied. “Artemis needs….”
“That’s not Artemis in there anymore, it’s Tigress. You need to be prepared for that.”

Harper shook his head in frustration, pulling away from Jade’s hold. He really didn’t have time for this kind of bullshit drama right now. “Ok, I’ll bite,” he sighed. “Who’s Tigress?”

“It’s the person she has to become to survive this. It’s the same person Cheshire is.”

“Jade, you can change code names all you want, but you’re both still the person underneath.”

"Are we?" Jade replied cryptically.

Before the couple could finish the debate, the archer stepped out of her room, dressed to leave, bags and backpack at her side.

"I need a ride to the airport," the blonde demanded more than asked.

"Really," Harper replied irritably. “And where do you think you're going?"

“Any..where..but..here,” she answered coldly.

“Just running away huh?”

“Don’t fucking lecture me…” she snarled, finger pointed angrily at the older archer, just as her sister stepped in between.

Jade took a deep breath, more than a little surprised at finding herself becoming the lone voice of reason, a first for her.

“Red, can you give us a moment.”
“Fine! But I already told you once you should have stayed out of this, but you wouldn’t listen. Well guess what? You’re in it now, and just because he’s gone doesn’t mean you don’t owe it to him to see this thing through to the end.”

“I don’t owe anything to anyone!” she snapped. “This is up to your mighty Justice League now, you know “faster than a speeding bullet” her words dripping in sarcasm. “Cause they’re gonna have to be. I just hope to god they do a better job protecting Bart then they did him.”

“What in the fuck does that mean?”

“Red,” Jade pleaded, ready to cast aside the role of peacemaker when Artemis said her final ill-timed farewell.

“Oh and by the way, I sure as hell don’t need to be lectured by you about abandoning people. You pretty much wrote the book on it didn’t you Speedy.”

With those words, Artemis slammed the door behind her, most likely waking every neighbor on the floor, like she gave a damn, almost hoping one of them was stupid enough to pop their head out and say something. Pressing the call button to elevator, it was all she could do not to put her fist through it.

She had no idea where Zane was, but she didn’t need him to start her new life. She had enough connections overseas to pick up a few contract jobs before really making a name for herself.

In a million years, she would never have guessed she and her sister’s roles being reversed: Jade staying behind for love and she being the one to walk away. Oh well, it was her fucking funeral.

Funeral

Things change in an instant and you have to adapt and roll with the punches or you’re dead; one of the few lessons she actually appreciated being taught by the Shadows.

Dead
She needed action, she needed to hurt someone. In a cesspool like this god forsaken city, it wouldn’t take much to find someone out there waiting in the shadows to prey on the weak. Smashing someone’s skull might just be enough to calm her nerves for the long flight...to anywhere.

At this time of night, what the hell was taking the elevator so god damn long.

“Fuck it!” she cursed, grabbing her bags and finding the closest stairs down the hall. She was furious, barely keeping the anger inside from boiling over. She needed out of this fucking city.

The echoes of her bags banging against the concrete and iron stairs echoed up and down the stairwell, when finally two flights down she stopped and let loose a primal scream.

She wasn’t pissed at Roy or upset with Jade or even disgusted with the League; she was angry, angry at ....Wally.

She stopped dead in her tracks, her bags dropping to the ground

“Why in the hell would you do something so god damn stupid!” she screamed, her words echoing back at her.

Above her, a hallway door soon opened, and an irritated resident stuck his head down the stairwell

“What the hell is going in down there? Do you know what time it is?”

The man’s answer came in a haunting snarl. “Get the fuck back in your room or I’ll come up there and show you!”

The resident quickly complied, no doubt calling building security asap, when from higher above another door opened, and a familiar voice shooting down.

“Artemis!”
There were times when Jade could sound exactly like their mother. Moments later the assassin was dragging the archer back upstairs, passing Roy’s floor and heading to the roof.

“Get your hands of me Jade!” Artemis growled as her sister closed the access door behind her, turning to look the blonde in the eye with a taunting smile.

“Why don’t you make me,” the assassin smirked, that same antagonizing smile she used to use back in their youth.

“Don’t fuck with me Jade, I’m not in the mood!”

“Why? Because your little boy toy bit the dust? God Artemis, grow up. People die, that’s what they do. The trick is being on the other end of that equation. You know that.”

They circled each other slowly, the archer clearly seeing the glimmer of Jade’s sai shining in the moonlight, while Artemis kept her hand near the blade on her belt.

“Don’t you say another fucking word Jade, or so help me...”

“...God?” she scoffed, “like you ever believed in him.”

“Jade....”

“He’s dead. Get over it. He was weak, and you were meant for something more than a schoolteacher. He was weak Artemis, he was always weak, but you were either too blind or too stupid to notice. Isn’t that right baby girl, just like dear old dad always said.”

The image of a hockey mask filled the archer’s mind as Artemis launched herself at her sister in primal fury, barely missing the assassin as Jade easily sidestepped the attack.

The archer hit the ground, rolling into a summersault, executing an impressive backflip, continuing the attack.
Cheshire just smiled, her antagonizing grin matching the one of the mask she once wore as Artemis swung wildly, the assassin knocking the punch to the side and open hand slapping her sister on the cheek viciously, like some petulant child.

“Sloppy,” the assassin said in disgust.

Artemis raged as she shot forth a leg sweep, one that totally missed its mark. Her sister smirked at her ineptness, slapping the archer harder and somersaulting away with a taunting laugh, clearly enjoying the one sided dance. Artemis stepped back, feeling her eye beginning to swell, her fists shaking with rage.

“He’s dead baby girl, and you were powerless to stop it. You consider yourself a professional, but you’re no match for a meta. You’re out of your league, and so was he. It wouldn’t have mattered if your dead boyfriend had had his precious speed or not. Wally West was weak, a pathetic excuse for a hero....and a man.”

Artemis mind went blinding white as she launched herself at her sister again, except feigning left and striking right. The maneuver took Cheshire by surprise, and before the assassin could recover, a side kick landed in her gut, knocking the wind from her lungs, soon followed by a roundhouse kick that sent Jade toppling. In seconds, the archer was on top of her fallen sister, the sheen of her freshly drawn dagger glowing in the moonlight, inches above her sister’s throat.

Artemis breathed heavy, sweat dripping from her brow while Jade lay underneath her quietly, not struggling for her freedom, but patiently waiting for someone to arrive. Her sister.

Moments later Artemis recognized the play, and took a deep breath, throwing her blade to the side.

“Feel better?” Jade smiled, blood dripping from her nose.

“A little,” the archer chucked, standing up and reaching down to pull her sister to her feet. “The baby girl was a nice touch.”

“I thought you’d appreciate that,” her sister smiled warmly, wiping the crimson streak from her cheek. “Now can we get down to business please?”

“What business?” Artemis asked.
“Well Thawne of course,” Cheshire replied simply. “Red’s right. You do have to see this through to the end. That man took something precious from you and his continued freedom cannot be tolerated.”

“What are saying?”

“I’m saying, we help your friends and the League apprehend him. Offer them any assistance or connections we’ve made over the years and remind them the Shadows have eyes everywhere. I’m sure Batman would have no issues with their help considering the circumstances. And when they finally capture the speedster and stop to pat themselves on the back for a job well done, we go in....and kill him. It’s that simple.”

Jade continued. “This is dad all over again. Zoom, or whatever ridiculous name he calls himself, he’ll never stop. He has a taste for it now. You and I have seen this time and time again, and there is only one way to deal with someone like that. It should have been done a long time ago but your mighty Justice League doesn’t work that way, and how did that work out?”

Artemis stared cautiously at her sister, surprised at the suggestion and even more by her knee jerk approval if it. She’d thought she wasn’t that person anymore; that she’d moved forward and could possibly reclaim the life she once led, but unfortunately her father may have been right all along.

*You tried, baby girl. You can fight Jade. You can fight me. But you can’t fight who you are. Time to switch sides, Artemis. You’ll never be one of them. You belong with us.*

Artemis nodded, hating her sister’s inescapable logic.

“How do we stop someone like him?” the archer asked.

Jade chuckled. “He’s a meta Artemis, not a god. I’ve been fighting metas half my life. You treat this like any other mission; preparation, patience, cognizance, and without mercy. It hasn’t been that long sister, these are lessons we can’t unlearn. And you know who would be helpful with a mission like this?”

Artemis shook her head. “No,” she said firmly, “I don’t want Zane involved in this.”
“Artemis, put your feelings aside for a moment. When it comes to life or death, something that’s this important, do you really want to count on your friends, who you know good and well, won’t do you what needs to be done. Don’t you want someone who understands the mission and will do whatever it takes to make sure it succeeds? Plus with your...history, who knows where this may lead....”

“Don’t push it Jade.”

“Whatever you say,” the assassin smirked, still enjoying the power she had to get under her sister’s skin.

“For now, I’ll reach out to him and you reach out to Grayson. We’ll figure out our next step after that.”

The archer sighed. “I guess I owe Roy an apology,”

“I’ll take care of Roy, have no fear,” she grinned with an devious smile. “You just gather as much intel as you can. And whatever you do, don’t tip your hand. You’ve always had a weak spot when it comes to your friends.”

“That’s not true, I can be as unreadable as…”

Jade’s eyes narrowed as Artemis stopped mid-sentence. She was so sick of her sister being right all of the time.

“Fine, but when all this is said and done, I’m the one who kills him.”

Jade smiled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Aboard the Watchtower, orbiting 23,000 miles above the Earth, Dick Grayson emerged from the Zeta Tube, bypassing all pleasantries as he passed through the League members present,
fixated on reaching the monitor womb, or more importantly the man currently on duty inside it.

“Tell me your joking,” he barked at the Dark Knight, as the detective cycled through a series of monitors currently scanning a dozen locales. “You can’t just abandon them.”

Batman countered. "No one is abandoning anyone, were simply reallocating resources until more personnel arrives."

"You can phrase it anyway you want, but you're leaving the Wests defenseless."

“Dick, Bart Allen is Thawne’s primary target now. He has no more need of the Wests, Joan Garrick or Iris Allen.”

“What if he tries to hold them hostage? A bargaining chip to use against the League to hand over Bart?” Grayson asked.

“Thawne had every opportunity to use Joan and Iris in a similar fashion before now. Oliver and Dinah will remain assigned to the Wests for the time being. The rebuild on their home won’t be completed for a few more months. Longer if need be, if it gives us more time to apprehend Zoom, but so you know, Iris and Joan have declined any protection detail.”

Dick shook his head. “Bruce, I think this is a mistake.”

Batman turned one of the larger monitors towards his former partner, initiating a video loop of prerecorded surveillance feeds. On the screen, a familiar figure in yellow appeared.

“Metropolis, San Francisco, Boston, Nashville, Miami, Denver. Locations we’ve placed Zeta Tubes across the country. Somehow he’s found them. He’s testing them, trying to figure out how they work.”

“Do you think he knows about the Watchtower?” Dick asked.
“I’m not sure. For all intents and purposes The Hall of Justice is only headquarters anyone outside of the League should be aware of,” Bruce replied. “However, there have been no signs of him anywhere around or near the D.C. area, so at this point we can’t rule anything out. For now we have contingencies in place if he should attempt an incursion.”

“Who?”

“Captain Atom, Red Tornado, Aquaman and the Manhunter are currently stationed there. We’ve even had J’onn make brief appearances outside the lobby in the form of Kid Flash, but so far Thawne hasn’t taken the bait.”

“He knows it’s a trap. Any word on Superman and the Lanterns?”

Bruce shook his head. “They are still at least a week out from Earth.”

“Any chance they could speed it up a bit?” Dick inquired. “We could really use the firepower.”

“Not at present – no.” Batman replied dourly.

“That’s why I think the Wests need more protection.”

Bruce sighed. “Dick, I just don’t have the resources. We have to get Thawne off the streets, but we’re not playing on an even playing field. We need Superman and the Lanterns to have any hope of stopping him. You saw what he did back at the complex. The closest we come to having someone that could match his abilities is Diana, and truthfully she’s not even close.”

“How’s Bart?”

Bruce entered in a new command, and soon a live feed of the Med Bay appeared overhead.

“He’s been in an out, but his vitals are improving. The neurologist from Johns Hopkins that Leslie Thompkins brought in has been keeping him sedated a majority of the time, hoping the rest will allow his healing factor to take over and speed up his recovery. Whatever Thawne did to him, really took its toll.”
Dick sympathized with his mentor. It was a chess game; one that Bruce Wayne didn’t have enough pieces on the board to play with. Thawne was unpredictable, literally one step ahead at all times. It had been that way from the beginning, before anyone had even realized it yet, but what troubled Dick the most was what his endgame might be.

Something just didn’t add up. Thawne’s interest in the Zeta Tubes combined with his disinterest in where they could lead seemed off. He’d boasted many times in the past about being from the future, what if he already knew of the existence of the Watchtower and just how to reach it.

Yet what would happen if Zoom couldn’t and became desperate. Thawne didn’t come all this way not to finish the job.

When Superman, Hal and John Stewart returned, it would even up the odds, but until then Dick wasn’t willing to take any chances. He owed that to Wally.

“I’ll take the West detail; maybe even convince Iris or Joan to stay around for a while. I know Wally’s folks would probably do better with some familiar faces around.”

“Faces?” Bruce asked curiously.

“I think it’s time to get the band back together,” Dick smiled.

xxx

Dinah Lance stared out the sliding glass door at the raven haired youth sitting alone on the swing. Both Rudy and Oliver had taken turns sitting quietly next to him, attempting to strike up a conversation when the situation presented itself. At the very least trying to make sure the child knew he wasn’t alone through all this, but Jai West was having nothing of it.

His dad was gone; and he and his sister were alone. Jai and Iris had been too young to remember their mother, but the stories Wally told gave them a connection to her, somehow feeling the love she had for her two children she’d never met. With their father’s death, that connection was now lost, along with so much more.
The youth still didn’t understand the how’s and whys. Grandpa West said it was a freak accident, barely holding back tears as the words left his lips. Grandma West said nothing, just walking around and hugging he and his sister every chance she had. Jay knew his grandmother wasn’t ready to talk about it, but things just didn’t make sense. What kind of accident? What exactly had happened? Why wouldn’t anyone tell them?

His father always told him one day he’d be the man of the house, Jai just never suspected it would be so soon. What was he supposed to do now? What would his father want him to do? It was all too much to lay on a seven year old’s shoulders.

Ollie walked in, watching his partner in life staring out to the yard at the lonely figure. He wanted to make a quip, a joke, some cheesy line just to see her smile, but nothing came to mind. She was hurting, they all were. All the joy that he and Dinah had felt with Artemis’s sudden reappearance back from the dead had all but faded away, and all Ollie could do was wrap his arms around his love and hold on for dear life.

Canary had been almost a surrogate mother to the Team back in the day. Part time counselor, full time confidante; she pulled her kids through some of the worse times in their lives as well as the best. When the original members got older and moved on to the next phase of life, it truly made her understand how hard it was for parents to let go. New heroes would soon take their place, but the first group, the Team, they were special.

Losing Wally felt like losing her own flesh and blood. Dinah couldn’t bear to even think about how Mary and Rudy West were feeling right now.

Down the hall, Iris Allen stood hesitantly outside the bedroom door, placing her ear quietly against the wood listening for signs of life on the other side. It had been a long time since the house she shared with her husband had felt so full of life. If only it could have been for a more joyous occasion.

Despite many lucrative offers, Iris had refused to sell the home she and Barry Allen had built, and with times such as this with her brother’s clan needing a place to stay, she was so glad she hadn’t. One day Rudy and Mary would leave to move back to their new home, but until then she would cherish every single moment.

Iris had long ago stopped counting the days since her husband’s death. She wished she could give some words of comfort to her brother and his wife, but she was at a complete loss. The truth of the matter was, that empty feeling, that loneliness, it never goes away. You have to learn to live with it, accept the pain and move forward, but that wasn’t advice you share when the wounds were still so fresh, so raw. As terrible a tragedy it was to lose her spouse, she couldn't begin to comprehend the
pain of losing a child. Parents should never outlive their children. That's the way life's supposed to work.

*Children,* she sighed.

Barry had always wanted a big family. Having grown up an only child, he always talked about the envy and sadness he felt when he'd see families out at church or dinner, wishing he had a brother or sister to share his life with, but a sibling was not in the cards.

He and Iris both assumed it would happen when the time was right, but when Wally announced to the family that he and Linda were expecting, she could tell in her husband's eyes and smile that he was ready. Sadly they never got the chance.

She filled the void by diving headfirst into her work at the Gazette, keeping herself busy reporting the news, searching out leads, fighting through the red tape of bureaucracy to expose government waste and political corruption. Iris loved her work, and had always been naturally curious; in some ways as much a CSI as her late husband; always searching for an answer, looking for the truth.

There was one answer that still puzzled her even after all these years; a one Bartholomew Henry Allen II.

Iris just could never fathom the intricacies of temporal mechanics, and it eased her mind a little that she wasn't alone when she'd watch Wally struggle himself into cerebral knots trying to explain the unexplainable. But the simple truth of the matter was he didn't have an answer either, and things like that pissed Wally off to no end.

Bart was her grandson, the child of her children, children she never had, so how could she have Bart. It seemed so ungrateful to question his existence; he was a blessing, and a part of Barry lived on within him. She could see Barry in Bart's smile, in the lazy way he lumbered, in the way he laughed.

Iris wiped the dampness from her eyes, so lost in her thoughts that she almost didn't hear the faint sobs coming from inside the room. Her selfishness suddenly made her sick; she wasn't there to grieve, she was there to provide strength and stability for Wally’s family. Her time to grieve would have to come later.

Wally was gone, *her Wally.* The son she'd never had, one of her closest friends despite being related. Why did she let him go? Why did she not try and stop him. Why did he always have to be the hero?
Just like Barry.

She and her nephew were kindred spirits, partners in crime. Inseparable before there had even been a Barry Allen or a Flash, let alone a Kid Flash. She knew she would never get over this, but as much as she wanted to be able to hurt and grieve, she too had a mission; she had to save a life.

Iris knocked lightly on the door, already turning the knob before permission was even given.

"Iris," the older woman said quietly to her namesake inside, "Can I come in?"

She opened the door to see her great-niece, sitting on the floor in the corner of the bedroom, hidden between desk and dresser, knees drawn to her chest, crying ever so quietly. The image broke Iris's heart.

"Irey," she whispered, leaning down and taking the young girl into her arms, carrying her to the bedside and holding on to her for dear life. "Come sit with me."

The young girl literally collapsed in her arms, wedging herself in the crock of her aunt's neck. Irey's sobs grew louder as Iris stroked her long auburn hair.

"Why is God so mad at me." she whimpered, damp tears pooling on the older woman's shoulders.

"Irey, God's not mad at you baby. He loves you."

"Then why did he take my mommy and daddy away. Why is he so mean?" she cried, grasping her aunt tighter and tighter.

"I don't know honey, no one knows why he does what he does, but it's nothing you did I promise," the older woman replied, her own eyes stinging.

"Daddy promised us he wouldn't leave. He promised," she cried, wiping her runny nose across her sleeve,
"Shhh," Iris replied, resting Irey's exhausted head onto her shoulder, trying to soothe her. "I know he did. Your uncle Barry promised me the same thing, but sometimes people can't keep their promises. Sometimes God has other plans for them."

"I miss my daddy," she whispered, her body shaking in sorrow.

"I do too Iris, I do too," she whispered as the young girl squeezed in tighter.

A few minutes later the young red head was sound asleep in her arms. Iris tucked her in, closing the curtains to let her sleep for a while. If she was going to hold vigil over her niece her she was going to need some coffee.

She stood there for a moment as Irey rolled over and adjusted her pillow. Content that she had a few minutes to run to the kitchen, Iris Allen stepped out, pulling the door behind her closed, never seeing the small spark that suddenly appeared across her niece's exposed skin, never seeing the lightning.

xxx

Sitting outside La Palette on this warm spring day, a man calmly sipped his espresso, reading the morning paper while blocks away La Défense burned, Paris's chief financial district. This morning's devastation was going to cause havoc on the world's financial market, not to mention the fear he'd struck in its residents. Fire engines blew past the café as they rushed to the scene, praying to God there was still someone there left to save.

*He could play this game forever if need be.*

It wouldn't be long before the mighty Justice League would have to leave their perch on Mt Olympus and face him. This incident was only the beginning. Happenings like this would just continue to grow in frequency and ferocity if they didn't.

Did they really think he wasn't aware of their orbiting fortress in the sky? Did they truly believe its existence and location weren't common knowledge where he came from? They continued to underestimate him and that would be their downfall.
He would keep them scurrying around the globe, putting out proverbial forest fires until someone would get sloppy; exhausted by the constant cries for help, not paying full attention when they entered into their precious transporter. They’d never see him coming.

If the Justice League refused to bring him Bartholomew Allen, then he would just have go up and get him. And soon after the young speedster’s death, this dance would be over; years of planning and patience finally rewarded. He would finally be the fastest man alive; the last and only speedster.

Thawne took his napkin, carefully wiping the cream from the corner of his mouth. As he stood and prepared to leave, suddenly the speedster became light headed and nauseous, the café around him beginning to spin. An invisible wave of raw energy passed through him towards a long awaited destination.

Zoom slumped back in his seat, beads of perspiration forming on his brow. As the world around him began to settle, a wide grin stretched across his face. The Speed Force had reached out once again, and Thawne knew exactly where to. And just like that, Bart Allen was no longer the only person alive who could ride the lightning.

"The Twins"

"Trauma Team to the Med Bay STAT!" Wonder Woman yelled into the intercom, her order echoing throughout the satellite. The staff on duty stood feet back, completely helpless as Kid Flash lay prone on the metal floor, convulsing and seizing as lightning streaked across his body.

"Bart help is coming! Hang on!" Tim Drake yelled, unsure if his friend could even hear him. With foam forming at the corner of his mouth Bart rasped two words before his eyes rolled up in his head and fell into unconsciousness.

"The Twins"

He was drowning; the world around him dark and cold; his body weakening by the second as it continued its descent into the abyss.
His lungs burned; his limbs heavy. He finally gave up the struggle, waiting for the darkness to consume him and his pain to end. It was over.

Wally gasped for air as he lurched out of bed. His skin was clammy, his sheets soaked. It was that dream again.

His legs swung over the side of the bed, as his elbows rested on his knees, holding his hands on his head.

_Just a dream, just a dream._

Wally yawned, rising to his feet and quietly making his way towards the kitchen for some water or any leftovers that might be hiding in the back of the refrigerator. After dreams like that, he could never fall back to sleep.

He paused briefly outside the twin's room, walking over to the crib they shared, the nursery glowing in a peaceful blue. The two infants were still swaddled in their sheets like tiny human burritos, breathing softly and sleeping soundly, just as they always did, just as they should be.

Wally left the room quietly, pulling the door ajar behind him.

_Cribs? Why suddenly did that seem so strange?_

The house had a slight chill to it, making him wish he'd grabbed a long sleeve shirt on his way out. There was a time when the cold never used to bother him.

He dug into the fridge, moving aside milk jugs and Coke bottles in search of protein. Right behind the orange juice he found it; leftover General Tso's. Wally lifted the lid, taking a deep inhale. It still smelled great. There were probably so many preservatives in it that it would last for months, but honestly he didn't care. Pulling the container out, he searched the side door for water bottles when warm arms wrapped around his cool skin.

Her cheek rested against his shoulder, instantly bringing his body temperature up five degrees. She always had that affect on him?
"You ok babe?"

Wally sighed. "I'm fine Linda," he smiled, grasping her arms around him tight. "Everything is just fine."

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Notes

Well I’m back from the dead. I can’t believe it’s been almost two years since I touched this story. The Last Speedster took a lot out of me and I kind lost my mojo for a while. Also it kind of seemed the fandom was dying off and moving on. Then DC had to go bring back Young Justice and suddenly all is well in the world. I’m pretty pumped as I’m sure everyone is, and I’m ready for some real storytelling, and of course the return of Wally (fingers crossed). To those of you who gave up on this story years ago, please forgive me, For any new readers I hope you enjoy. 1/4/19 can’t come soon enough. As usual please excuse the typos, I’ll go back and correct them. The perils of not using a beta.

Cheers.
Barbara slowly closed the bedroom door behind her, taking one last look back to make sure her fiancé had finally drifted off. Their lovemaking had been passionate, fierce; not so much out of intimacy but a reminder that they were still alive, something to push back against the constant numbness of the last few weeks.

She pulled on an old Gotham Academy sweatshirt from the hamper and quietly made her way down the hallway towards the kitchen. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she sat down at the table opening her laptop. Despite her obvious fatigue, she still had work emails to return, caterers and wedding photographers to meet with, hotel rooms to book; jobs and tasks that had been put on hold for far too long.

She’d barely made it through the second email before closing the laptop and slumping back in her chair.

“What am I doing,” she sighed.

Here she was, making wedding plans while the Wests made funeral arrangements. She felt sick to her stomach.

Her mother had fussed at her; telling her that someone had to be the pragmatic one, someone had to steer the ship while Dick mourned the loss of his oldest friend. That someone had to be her.

Never, ever look to a cop’s ex-wife for sympathy.

Her mom may have thought things differently had she’d known the alter egos of her fiancé and his late best friend, not to mention the murderous psychopath still on the loose. Telling her mother the cold hard truth would only have opened doors that Batgirl wasn’t remotely ready to step though… if ever. Ignorance was bliss.
It had been nearly three weeks since Wally’s murder, and just as she assumed it would play out, Dick somehow felt responsible. It came to him naturally. Bruce Wayne was the exact same way, an unhealthy by-product of leading a Team or a League for so long. In truth, Dick was no more responsible for Wally’s death than he was for the sun rising or setting.

There hadn’t been much time to grieve, not while half the League stood guard over Bart Allen while the other scoured the countryside looking for signs of Eobard Thawne. They’d been down this road before with the murder of Barry Allen years earlier, so sadly there was some precedent.

That left Dick and few others to watch over the Wests, staking out the new hotel where the families had been placed for their own protection.

Protection

This was every hero’s greatest nightmare personified; the entire reason for masks and capes. Not just to protect their own identity, but more importantly to those closest to them; innocent people that could easily fall into harm’s way. One day that could just as easily be her mother or father. That was selfish side of the life heroes’ chose.

Much like Bruce, Dick was the strategist, but it was actually Conner who’d come up with the plan. Until Thawne was caught, the Wests, Joan Garrick and Iris Allen needed to be placed somewhere safe. Somewhere off the grid. Somewhere small.

Now instead of the tactician, Dick had to become the salesman. To convince people he’d been estranged with for years to trust him and allow him to move their entire family to a rural farming community in southern Kansas.

Smallville
To do that, Dick had to be at his best, and he was nowhere near that right now. Ollie and Dinah had nearly come to blows with the young detective to force him to go home and take care of himself, but it was Iris Allen who sealed the deal. In every way still as much a hero as her deceased husband.

So now while Dick caught up on some desperately needed sleep, Conner returned home to speak to Martha Kent, but it was already a forgone conclusion. The Kent’s had always welcomed strangers, strays and aliens to their door with open arms.

The trick would be getting the families there safely, quickly and quietly. Batman was adamant in his belief that Thawne had moved on, but no one could know for certain, and Dick just wasn’t willing to play those odds; not when it came to the Wests.

If the evil speedster went after them as some kind of bargaining chip for Bart Allen, who among them would be powerful enough to stop the fastest man alive. Possibly the most dangerous one too.

Barbara rubbed her weary eyes; there was no point in trying to get any work done. She wasn’t willing to take a chance of waking Dick if she tried to get back in bed, instead choosing the couch and a good book until the sandman came calling.

She rose from the table, wrapping an afghan around her bare legs as she made her way towards the couch, just as a knock on the door echoed throughout the apartment. At a pace that would impress even a speedster, she was standing in front of the entryway in seconds.

She and Dick were infamous for the sheer decibel of their bedroom activities, something they both took inane pride in, but from time to time unappreciative neighbors would either pound on an adjoining wall, or flat out come to the door to complain; Mrs. Velasco being the more ballsy of the three others they shared the floor with.

If that bitch wakes him up I’ll swear to God I’ll kill her and hide the body myself.

Looking through the peephole, instead of seeing an entitled elderly Puerto Rican woman, she found blonde hair and steel grey eyes staring back. The detective slowly opened the door with an irritated glare.
“Hi,” the archer begun, a cold stoicism draped across her face.

“Hi,” Barbara replied sternly, not even trying to hide her displeasure.

Artemis Crock, her teammate, her partner in crime, her friend; miraculously rising from the dead and returning years later to confess her sins, hoping for a chance to make amends. No one had been more understanding and welcoming than Barbara, and not even hours after Wally’s death, the archer had disappeared again, abandoning her friends in their time of mourning.

Fool me twice…shame on me

“I um…” the blonde began, awkwardly searching for words. Barbara was not having it.

“What do you want Artemis?” the young detective asked shortly, no longer concealing her disdain at the archer’s unexpected appearance.

“I…” Artemis began again, stopping midway to find herself counting the number of escape routes at her disposal.

Gordon had had enough. “It’s late Artemis. Dick hasn’t slept in days and I don’t have all night to stand out here in my underwear. If you ever figure out why you’re here or what it is you’re trying to say, just…leave a message or something,” she shrugged.

As the detective turned back towards the door, Artemis reached out and gently took Barbara’s arm. The red head stared coldly at the hand currently on her bicep, all the way up to the archer’s desperate eyes.

“I just want to help,” the blonde whispered, her husky voice beginning to crack.

“Really?” Barb bit back.
“Yeah.”

“Then why’d you leave? Why’d you run?”

“I don’t know,” the archer sighed. “It’s what I always do.”

“What? Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?” Gordon growled. “The League’s stretched paper thin. Superman and his team have been delayed on Rann, Diana and Bruce can’t leave Bart’s side, and whoever’s left is pulling double shifts trying to track down Zoom. We’re all that’s left.”

Artemis could barely look Barbara in the eyes, feeling the heat of her friend’s scornful gaze upon her. “I want in.”

“Really? Because I want someone I can count on. Someone I know who’ll be there for backup instead of running when things get tough.”

The archer’s brow furrowed. “That’s not fair.”

“Oh really? You’re about the last person who needs to lecture me on what is and isn’t fair! My fiancé is back there passed out; barely holding things together, pulling twenty hour days trying to watch out for his best friend’s family even though Batman says it’s a waste of time and resources. Kaldur’s taking leave from the U.N. to be here. Conner’s setting up a place for the Wests to hide out. Even Megan’s trying to help after all she’s been through. You think that’s easy for her? Easy for any of us?”

Artemis stood her ground, absorbing blow after verbal blow. When it came to pain, this barely moved the needle compared to what she’d endured in the past.
Easy. What the fuck did Barbara know about easy?

She was free; she’d paid her debt and escaped the Shadows grasp. She could now do anything with her life she wanted. Someone with her skill set and reputation could make a very nice life for themselves. Gun for hire, fixer, problem solver. An ex-Shadow could command top dollar in that kind of market, and there would always be no shortage of work.

Dubai, Paris, Monaco, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong. She could have her choice of jobs and live like a queen as long as she was willing to get her hands a little dirty. And her destination to begin this new life...

*Gotham fucking City*

Everyone from her sister, to Zane, to Roy, to Dick had told her coming back was a mistake. She’d known that fact the moment she first booked her flight to the States. Once there, once home, things had gone pretty much as she expected, until she made her one fatal mistake. She fell in love again.

Wally West had turned her life upside down once more, stupidly opening up his heart to her, knowing full well there was a good chance she’d tear it out all over again. Artemis didn’t want to hurt him, and for a brief moment in time she even tricked herself into thinking that maybe…just maybe they might have a second chance. Then Eobard Thawne came and took that all away.

She stopped being a hero the moment she faked her death and slit her father’s throat. She’d tried to pick up the pieces, but there were just too many, they’d never fit together the same way again. She’d arrived in Gotham an assassin, it was only fitting that she’d leave that way too, because the moment she had Zoom in her sights, she would make that motherfucker pay for everything he’d done; to Barry, to Jay, to Wally….to her.

An ass chewing from Barbara Gordon was a small price to pay to get her foot in the door. Guarding the Wests would be her cover, but to really protect them, to truly keep them safe, Eobard Thawne had to die. Wally would never have approved, but she’d broken his heart so many times, why should now be any different? In the end, if it kept his family safe, she’d take her chances facing him in the afterlife, if there was even such a thing for someone like her.

It was time to seal the deal.
“You’re pissed. I get it. I fucked up and it’s no one else’s fault but my own. I’m not here asking for forgiveness or redemption. As soon as Thawne is captured I’m in the wind, but for now I just want to keep his family alive. I owe him that. Look, I have connections, the type we don’t talk about, the type that has eyes everywhere. I think they’d be useful don’t you? But if you want them, you have to take me. So which is it? Do you want my help or not?”

“We do,” Dick Grayson replied, stepping out from behind the door with bed swept hair and dark sunken eyes.

“God damnit!” Barbara cursed. All she’d wanted was for him to have just a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. In the dim lights of the hallway, he looked like he’d aged ten years.

Stifling a yawn, he continued. “Conner’s finalizing a few things right now. There’s no timetable other than soon, but when we get the green light were gone. No turning back. You sure you want in?”

“Yeah,” she nodded.

“You willing to follow orders?”

“Yes,” the archer hissed with eyes narrowed. She didn’t appreciate being treated like an amateur, much less a child.

“Alright then,” Dick nodded. “Meet me tomorrow morning at the Mission Street Zeta Tube near the old warehouse district. It’s out of the way, but if Thawne is really surveilling all the Zeta Stations, this will be the last one he’d expect. I’ll have your transport rights reinstated.”

“Then what?” she asked.

“Then I’m going to Central City to try and convince the Wests it’s time to move...and you’re coming with me.”

Shit
This wasn’t part of the plan. She was more than willing to stand guard over them for as long as it took, but safely from afar. She didn’t want Wally’s parents or children anywhere nearby when she did what she had to do. But if she wanted in, it had to be under Dick’s terms. The archer knew that was non-negotiable.

“Be there at 8:30 sharp.”

“Ok. I’ll ...”

Artemis never got the chance to finish as an angry Barbara Gordon glared her down one last time before shutting the door abruptly.

The archer stood alone in the empty hallway, just she and her thoughts. The plan was in motion, just not the one she’d agreed to. Dick’s trust in her had always been misplaced. What was one more betrayal among friends?

Her intentions were good, her cause righteous. This was the only one way to keep the Wests safe, truly safe.

She was now as much the villain of the story as Thawne. She was Tigress and there was no turning back, but maybe with her last act she could still be a hero.

Artemis chuckled as she made her way towards the elevator.

“Hero, what a fucking joke.”
Wally stood at the window sipping his chamomile tea; watching as grey sheets of rain blurred the world outside. Lightning danced across the sky, but for some odd reason the roar of thunder never seemed to follow.

It was late, the sun still hours away from peeking out over the horizon. Despite the storm, Linda and the kids slept soundly. All was as it was supposed to be. Everything was perfect, and yet Wally was troubled.

He couldn’t sleep, his mind seeming to race itself every time his head hit the pillow. Linda was a calming influence as always; her lips and touch soothed his troubled thoughts, but when he was alone, something felt odd, an eerie sensation of déjà vu that just wouldn’t let go.

The red head rubbed weary his eyes, taking another sip as he looked out the bay window at the tempest. Thunderstorms were old hat, the Midwest springtime a thing of legend, but it seemed like weeks since he’d last seen the sun. Still, he was the happiest he could recall in long long time. They were all together, everything was perfect, and yet standing here alone, he just couldn’t shake the feeling.

Eventually the storms and this brief reprieve would end; the kids going back to daycare while he and Linda retuned to work. Lately it felt like years since he’d last stepped foot in a....

Wally scratched his head, searching for the word escaping him.

Stepped foot where?

Wally racked his brain trying to remember his life outside these doors. They were blurred visions, images distorted like they lived behind a wall of water, something that when his mind approached, quickly retreated away.

Perhaps it was just the hour, the fatigue, or the tea. He stifled a yawn, giving up the chase of this random thoughts. He’d remember it in the morning.
Another flash streaked across the heavens, tendrils of lightning breaking off from the main bolt, scratching at the roof of the sky like a vulture’s claw. Something about the lightning, the raw power of it, it seemed to call out to him.

As Wally pulled the blinds closed, the yard outside lit up from the glow of the lightning streaking above, causing the Maple trees that lined the property to cast off eerie shadows across the lawn. Just as Wally walked away, he could have sworn for a brief moment, one of those apparitions almost looked human. When he turned back to the window, the shadow was gone.

All right Wall-man. Enough of the Twilight Zone crap, it’s time to crash.

xxx

High above the Earth, the Watchtower floated peacefully in orbit, safeguarding the fragile blue marble below, but onboard it was anything but tranquil. A trio over concerned heroes stood over the unconscious form of Bart Allen.

“How is he?” Batman asked.

Diana shook her head, triple checking the readings on the Medbay monitor. “As best as I can tell his vitals have stabilized, but Bruce he needs a real doctor.”

“We’re still waiting on a call back from Star Labs. With Dr. McGee still hospitalized, finding specialists with a background in meta-human physiology like Bart’s is proving to be a challenge.”

“Have you considered reaching out to Cadmus?”

Wayne frowned. “No. Oliver has a contact at A.R.G.U.S. he’s working with. For now, I’d prefer not get Amanda Waller involved.”
“Bruce, if he doesn’t come around soon, we may not have a choice.”

The Dark Knight shook his head in acknowledgment, hoping it would never get that far. Waller was not a woman you wanted to owe a debt to.

“What do you think Bart meant by the twins? Shayera asked. “Wally’s twins?”

“I don’t believe so,” Wayne replied. “He’s concerned for his family, but with the neural trauma he’s suffered, I wouldn’t put a lot of stock in any of his assertions for the moment.”

“But what if he’s right?”

Bruce hesitated, knowing the backlash that was soon to follow, “During their last physical....I had them tested again for the meta-gene. Neither one carry it. It seems to have skipped a generation.”

Diana’s eyes grew wide. “You did what?” she gasped. “Without Wally’s knowledge or consent?”

“Don’t be naive Diana. It’s simple risk management.”

Shayera snapped. “It’s not simple at all! It’s an invasion of their privacy!”

“Do you know remember the last time you collected personal information about the League without our knowledge? Hera, Bruce, when are you ever going to learn? Trust goes both ways.”
“Threats like this are exactly why I collect information.”

“They not threats Bruce, they’re children.”

“Diana, they might not be threats to others, but they might end up being threats to themselves if something ever changes. I just want to have contingencies in place for their safety. That’s all. Be that as it may, this is a discussion for another time.”

“....Oh and we will have it,” Hawkwoman scolded.

Batman ignored the interruption and continued on. “Thawne’s gone dark. I believe there’s a strong possibility that he may have identified and is currently pursuing other targets; individuals carrying the meta-gene that may or may not have manifested itself yet, perhaps abilities similar to the Flashes.”

“Then we have to find them too,” Diana added. “For the love of Hera, Clark, Hal and the others have got to get here soon.”

“Bruce, despite what the tests say, what if you’re wrong about the West twins?” Hall asked.

“That’s why I have contingencies in place. He just doesn’t realize it yet.”

xxx

Artemis was waiting when Dick arrived. As the car stopped, he leaned over and kissed his fiancé before stepping out of the passenger seat of the black Mercedes Benz Roadster. Barbara stared out at
the archer expressionless before rolling up the window and pulling away. Evidently a night’s sleep hadn’t mellowed her one bit, not that Artemis could blame her. If Barbara felt betrayed now, once this mission was over, she’d have to get in line.

The two walked down the deserted alleyway; the warehouses all around in various forms of disrepair, and that’s the way they would remain. Bruce Wayne had purchased the lot years ago, letting them decay to allow for the perfect place to hide a Zeta Tube…in plain sight.

Around the corner, they walked over to the broken down phone booth, prying the jammed door open with a louder than anticipated crunch. Dick paused, scanning the area for any activity; the supersonic kind. After a few moments, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his communicator.

“Nightwing to Watchtower.”

“This is Watchtower, go ahead.”

Artemis thought she recognized the voice of Mr. Terrific on the other end of the channel, but as much as the League had expanded over the years, now with even a small civilian crew on board, there was no way to be sure.

“Preparing for transport from GC4 to CC1. Any activity in or around Central City?”

After a pause, the Watchtower replied. “Negative. Motion sensors show GC4 and CC1 all clear.”


The archer chuckled. “Fancy, you guys are so professional now.”

Dick smirked. “It’s protocol when the League’s on high alert. It’s not like in the old days when everyone and their wolf could just stroll into Mt. Justice. Anyway, after you.” he smiled, motioning for the archer to step inside. He leaned in, allowing the retinal scanner to do its job.
Recognize Nightwing B-01.

“Requesting passenger override.”

“Recognized. Adding additional transport beam in 5...4...3...”

Artemis closed her eyes. *Here we go again.*

Second later, dreary grey skies were replaced by bright blue ones; they’d arrived in Central City. Dick and Artemis scanned the area again before stepping out and walking down the alley into the heart of downtown.

“Now what?” the archer asked.

Dick smiled. “We Uber.”

xxx

Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at the Grand Luthor Hotel, not Dick’s lodging of choice due to its affiliation, but a hotel conveniently located on the edge of the shopping district with interstate access just a few blocks away.

The duo walked in to find several men in dark suits discreetly scattered around the lobby, all within close proximity to the elevator.

Dick looked over to Artemis, noticing her subtly reaching behind her back for quick access to her blade if she needed it. To the trained eye, these guys stood out like sore thumbs.

The detective leaned in and whispered to the archer. “Wayne Security. They’re just here for back up if needed. They’re discreet and highly trained. Most of them are ex-Mercs. You ought to fit right in,” he smirked.
“They’re amateurs,” Artemis frowned. “Anyone who knows what to look for will spot them in a second, even less for someone like Thawne.”

Dick shook his head. “All they are is the first line. They’re not to engage, there just supposed to report if anything looks out of the ordinary. Quit being so cynical. It’s the best I could do on short notice.”

Dick nodded at one of the men as he and the archer boarded the elevator, pushing the button to the penthouse. Artemis felt her palms beginning to dampen. She was nervous. Why in the hell would she be nervous? After everything she’d seen and done over the last decade, why would this cause concern?

She’d seen Mary and Rudy West just a few weeks ago when she and Dick pulled Wally from their house fire. They’d made their peace, and all things considered were on fairly decent terms she thought. She didn’t know Joan Garrick at all, and had only met Iris Allen a few times while she and Wally were dating, neither one caused her any kind of apprehension. All that was left was…. 

She took a deep sigh. The kids. Wally’s kids.

*How scared they must be? How alone they must feel?*

Losing a mother and a father; Artemis was no stranger to that. She still remembered all too well the pain of losing her mom, but justifying the satisfaction she felt at her father’s death by her own hand served no purpose now.

But what may have troubled the archer more was her realization of the number of children she’d turned into orphans when the Shadows called in a marker. It didn’t matter if they were bad men or women; their families still suffered all the same. Perhaps this was her penance, her punishment; to be forced to look into Wally’s children’s eyes, and bear witness to a similar pain like the countless ones she may have caused over the years. Perhaps that had been Dick’s plan all along.

As the elevator made its way up, she turned to Dick. “Do they know? Jai and Iris, do they know the truth?”
“About Wally’s alter ego or how he died?” he asked.

“Either,”

Dick sighed. “I don’t think so. As sad as it is, I’ve never sat down and even talked with them. Barbara and I were supposed to be their godparents, but when everything fell apart with Wally and I… well you know. Pictures and stuff were passed around, but… I’d never seen them in person, not until last week. How fucked up is that?”

Artemis stared at floor; there was nothing she could really say. After faking her own death and all the consequences that followed, ultimately those were her decisions, her fault. Dick hadn’t make that choice. He and Wally’s fallout was all the speedster’s doing; a stupid and selfish way to deal with his own weakness and guilt for not having the stones to kill Thawne when he had the chance.

Her fists clenched in anger, knowing all this pain; his parents, his children, Dick… her, this could have all been avoided if Wally had just had the guts.

The elevator door opened and Grayson took a step outside, only to see the archer staying behind.

“Artemis?”

“Give me a minute ok?”

“Yeah, sure,” Dick nodded, leaving the car and waiting down the hallway for her to join him.

When she was finally alone, the archer wiped a tear from her eye. This was the second time she’d cursed Wally’s ghost; screaming at the heavens at Roy’s apartment over his stupidity for trying to regain his lost speed. And now, blaming him for making the choice not to kill, to not become her.
Releasing a deep sigh, she rested her palm on her forehead, disgusted with herself. Wally was only human, carrying with him a standard amount of flaws and foibles like everyone else, but stupid and selfish were not one of them. He was no saint, he’d made his share of mistakes along the way, but he was good man; kind, brave, loving. He did what he thought was right. He did it in attempt to save others; he did it because that’s what heroes do.

All during those lost years; grueling missions facing certain death, she dreamed of him. Perhaps not the person, but the idea of him. Hoping he was happy and that he was living his best life. His joy brought her joy. Deep in her heart she hoped he’d remember her, that he’d forgiven her. Now it was time to forgive him.

She caught up to Dick and they made their way down to the West’s suite. The detective took a calming breath and knocked. Moments later Rudy opened the door.

“Dick,” he smiled amicably.

“Mr. West,” Grayson replied with a firm handshake.

The older man frowned. “How many times do I have to tell you? Call me Rudy.”

Dick smiled, even after all they’d lost the West’s still had that unique ability to make everyone feel welcome, to feel like family. That was their super power.

“You remember Artemis.”

“I do,” he nodded gratefully, “she saved my boy’s li.....”

Rudy’s voice cracked, his lips quivered, but after a moment’s pause he regained his composure.
“Anyway,” he sighed, “Come in. Can I get you all something?”

“No sir, but thank you,” Dick replied respectfully. “Is there a place you and I could talk?”

“Mary’s resting right now; we could go out on the balcony.”

“That’d be great, Artemis would you...”

But when the detective turned, the archer was already across the room, standing silently behind the young girl sitting with her back to the room, a small brush in her tiny hand, untangling the knots of her Disney Princess dolls.

Artemis sat down beside her, watching as the young red head worked diligently trying to unravel the thick knots of multi colored hair.

“That’s quite a mess you get there.” Artemis smiled.

“Yeah. Jai tried to help, but he only made things worse,” Iris sighed. “Daddy could do it really really fast.”

The archer swallowed hard, but didn’t flinch. “Your daddy was always good at fixing things. Can I help?”

“Naw, I can do it, but thanks Artemis.”

The archer lost her breath at hearing her name escape Iris’s lips. “You remember.”

“Yeah, you’re daddy’s friend from a long time ago. He really liked you,” the young red head said sweetly. “You made him smile a lot.”
The archer had faced down stone cold killers, warlords, meta-humans, but it took all her strength to be able to simply remain next to a girl who had sadly accepted her fate but could still find the courage to try to make someone else feel special; a West family trait.

“He made me smile a lot too,” Artemis replied softly, untangling her legs to get comfortable for as long as the young redhead would have her. “So tell me your dolls’ names....”

As Iris recited off the long list of every one in her collection, Artemis had never felt more sure of her plan, her decision. Children were already so vulnerable; adding a psychopath into that fragile mix was just fucking cruel.

The archer had never really been a kid person, never truly knowing how to relate having never been allowed to be one herself.

However there was one time, a mission where Klarion had made every adult in the world vanish from reality. The Team had tasked themselves with gathering and guarding over as many children as they could find within a 25 mile radius of Happy Harbor. It was barely a drop in a bucket, but it was the best they could come up with at the time.

Artemis was antsy, ready to dive into action, not be tied down looking after clingy and whiny kids, but something happened in that gymnasium. They gravitated to her, they looked up to her, made her strength their strength. Soon, the archer that was itching for a fight found herself singing along with nursery rhymes and making a complete fool of herself. Oddly enough, she loved every minute of it, becoming the big sister she never had. She wasn’t quite a natural, but she had potential.

Years later, lying in a sweat soaked bed in Taiwan with the tough as nails mercenary she’d paired up with; she’d listen to him mumbling in his sleep, crying out for his dead wife and child. Artemis knew then that could never be her, she’d never be stupid enough to make that mistake, to bring into this world a weakness someone else could exploit.

Now looking at a beautiful young girl with Wally’s eyes, that weakness would become her strength. If she had any doubt of her resolve, it was gone now.

Wally’s children would not spend the rest of their days fearful for their lives, looking over their
Thawne would die, or she’d die trying. It was time to reach out to Jade and see exactly what the Shadows know.

Outside on the patio, Dick and Rudy leaned over the rails, looking out at the sun as it began to set behind the cityscape.

“So how much danger are we in?”

“I think a lot,” Dick frowned. “I’m alone on this Rudy. Batman is one of the smartest strategists on the planet, and he thinks I’m wrong. He believes my grief is clouding my judgment and that if you or your family had any value to Thawne, he would have made his move a long time ago.”

“And you?” Rudy asked.

Dick sighed. “I think Thawne’s smart, patient and unpredictable. I think he’s a three dimensional thinker and attacks a problem from all sides simultaneously.

“How so?” West asked.

“One - he’s been searching across the globe for locations the League has placed Zeta Tubes. I don’t need to tell you that they’re highly classified and well camouflaged, and yet he’s found almost three quarters of them. As far as the League can tell, he doesn’t have a handle on the technology or the security systems behind it yet, but he’s smart. How long can that last? And the League can’t just shut them down; they’d end up leaving people stranded not just across the planet, but a whole lot farther.”
“Two – I’d bet he knows you all are still somewhere near Keystone or Central, that gives him access, keeps you within arm’s reach. He knew where your house was. He knew about the Garrick’s farm. I’d bet good money he knew where Wally lived and work. The same for Barry back in the day. I think your family is his backup plan if he gets desperate. If he realizes Bart is out of reach, that’s when he comes for you.”

“And three – I’m not convinced Bart is the last speedster. As far as I know the League hasn’t had any active reports of individuals possessing those type abilities in years, but if Thawne’s really going after anyone with speed, were finding out more and more people are carrying the meta-gene every day, and most don’t even know it. Their abilities haven’t manifested themselves yet, but in most cases it’s only a matter of time, and when they do…well Wally, Bart, Barry, and Jay can’t be the only ones. The math just doesn’t work. I think Thawne knows that and that’s why he’s not willing to put all his eggs in one basket. He can wait Bart out if there are other targets he could be hunting.”

Rudy swallowed hard at the thought.

“Why is he so determined to go after anyone who might have abilities like Barry and Wally?”

“I don’t know,” Dick sighed. “Thawne said for each life he took, his connection to something called the Speed Force would get stronger. Did Wally ever mention something like that to you?”

Rudy shook his. “I don’t believe so. Anything that had to do with his abilities, he usually reserved for Barry. Honestly he was the only who would understand it. Mary and I were out of our league when it came to the science of it. He probably didn’t want us to worry.”

“Well if it makes you feel any better, he never discussed it with me either. When Bart comes back, he’s going to have to be the once to explain it, cause I’m in over my head too.”

Dick continued. “I want to move you all someplace safe. Somewhere Thawne can’t find you. Also somewhere wide-open that if by any chance he does, we can see him coming from miles away and be ready.”

“We?”

“The Team...Wally’s team, but Rudy, I can’t make this decision, it’s got to be up to you. I know there will be a lot of questions from the twins; questions you all might not be ready to answer, but...
“Dick.”

“Yes sir.”

“My son trusted you. I trust you. I’ve been in over my head since the day Wally blew up our basement and became Kid Flash. I’ll never be as smart as he was, but I do know this, if he was here now, he’d say that if Dick says it’s so, bet the farm. I’m not betting them farm, I’m betting on you.”

Rudy walked over and out his hand on the detectives shoulder. “When do we start?”

xxx

As the raging tempest surged outside, Wally held his child in his arms, rocking her gently as she finished her bottle, undisturbed by the storm. The nursery glowed in the peaceful blue hue of the aquarium mobile hanging from the crib. Her brother was already sleeping soundly inside, swaddled at the opposite end, subconsciously awaitng his sister’s arrival. The pediatrician told him the twins would share a special connection. They would calm each other; soothe each other, just by their mere presence together. Wally and Linda liked the sound of that.

Eventually they would have to part; separate beds, separate rooms: but for now they belonged together.

He placed Iris gently inside the crib, her eyes already heavy and hooded. Within seconds she was sound asleep. He stood there for minutes, just watching each breath, each sigh, each gentle movement. He’d never felt so fulfilled, so content, wishing this moment could just last forever.

Unexpected warm arms wrapped around his torso, a soft cheek resting against his back.

“God they’re beautiful,” Wally sighed. “Just like their mother.”
He could feel his wife’s smile as her soft lips kissed the back of his neck, sending the usual tingles up and down his spine.

“Let’s go sit by the fire,” she suggested, “I’m in the mood for some Cabernet; it feels like a red night to me.”

“You know Cabernet is not actually a red wine,” he corrected. “It’s a combination of red and white. About a hundred years ago there was this accidental breeding of a red Cabernet Franc plant and a white Sauvignon Blanc one. It had healthy level of tannins, which means the wine could evolve in the bottle for….”

A warm finger was placed on his lips, followed by an annoyed but loving smile. “Let’s not analyze it babe, let’s just drink it. No one cares about the science behind it. It’s how it tastes, how it makes you feel. That’s what’s important.”

Wally sighed, she was right. She usually was.

“I can’t help myself sometimes beautiful. I just want to dazzle you with my brilliance.”

“Mr. West, you do more than dazzle me,” she smiled, leaning over and capturing his lips. She was an amazing kisser, always had been. No one could hold a candle to her skill and prowess in that particular field, except for maybe….

Wally pulled away slowly, breaking the kiss. There was that feeling again.

“Babe?” Linda asked curiously.

Wally played it off carefully. “You take my breath away sometimes,” he chuckled, bringing a smile back to his partner’s lips.

“Ok,” she rolled her eyes with soft laugh. “I’ll be back.”
Watching her leave the room, the way she walked, the way she moved, the way she swayed her hips; it still took his breath away.

_God she was so beautiful._

Raven black hair, dark brown eyes, exotic features that only complemented her Korean heritage. She was perfect, statuesque. How he’d ever convinced her to marry him would always remain one of the great mysteries of the universe.

Linda Park West: wife, mother, best friend and soulmate. The center of his universe, just as she was supposed to be. But there’d been times lately when she’d fall asleep in his arms and his heart would ache. He’d feel a tear escape, a pang of loss. Why would he react like that?

Wally reached down, collecting the blankets and toys spread out across the floor. They’d placed the twins on the mat by the fireplace and watched them roll around and coo for hours. It wouldn’t be long before they’d start crawling, and after that the fun would begin. Thankfully there were two of them; divide and conquer.

Wally chuckled at the memory of Iris and Jai’s first steps, falling over each other like a couple of drunk…

*Wait. What?*

Suddenly a blinding light seared through his mind as waves of _déjà vu_ washed over him, much stronger than before. He felt light headed, dizzy; like he was trapped in a dream he couldn’t wake from. The images quickly sped away, leaving goosebumps forming across his skin.

*What the hell was happening to him?*
These episodes were occurring more and more often. It had stopped being a minor annoyance, instead becoming something that was really beginning to spook him. Wally knew he should tell his wife, but all it would do was frighten her. It could still be nothing.

Just to be safe, he’d call the doctor in the morning and schedule an appointment to calm his fears, but for now he just needed some air.

Wally walked outside to the porch as a fine mist rushed towards him, dampening his face and shirt. The storm outside was relentless, lightning popping all around like strobes at a movie premiere.

He looked to the horizon, searching for the city lights of Keystone. They lived fairly far from the city, but at night he expected to at least see some kind of light pollution off in the distance, but as usual all he could see was streaks of lightning and darkness.

Not that it mattered much he supposed; he and Linda hardly ever made it into the city. To be honest, he couldn’t remember the last time they had.

“Babe what are you doing?” a voice called out from behind.

“I just needed some air,” he replied, looking back to see his wife holding two glasses and a bottle. “I think I’m getting a little cabin fever. What do you say tomorrow we head into town, to hell with the weather. Go to the ice cream place on Broadway that Jai and Iris love so…..”

*There it was again.*

Wally flinched as his vision went white, bile forming in his throat. He was going to throw up.

“Babe!” Linda ran to him, putting his arm around her shoulder and walking him back inside.

“Oh God…” Wally moaned, covering his mouth with his hand, fighting off waves of nausea.

“Wally, we need to get you in bed.”
“Just give me a second,” he replied breathlessly, holding his arm in the air in protest. “Jesus.”

His forehead was clammy, the room still spinning ever so slightly. “It must have been something I ate.”

“You just need some sleep.”

“Maybe,” he agreed, “but I probably need to go into town tomorrow and hit the doc in the box. I don’t want to take a chance of you all catching whatever it is I might have.”

“You’ll be fine in the morning babe. You just need to rest, that’s all.”

“You’re probably right,” he sighed, “But you know, with two newborns in the house, I just don’t want to risk it. Plus it will be good to get out and stretch my legs for a bit.”

“Why?” Linda asked; a pained look draped across her face.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “It just seems like forever since we left the house.”

“Is that bad? Isn’t this all you ever wanted? Are we not enough?”

Wally turned to look at his wife curiously.

“Of course you are. Why would you say something like that?” he replied in an addled tone.

“Then don’t go. Stay here; just the four of us…together.”

His body grew tense. “Babe, you’re starting to freak me out. I’m just talking about running into town, not across the planet.”

Running. Why did that word sound so foreign? So alien?
“I think you should stay.” Linda replied firmly, her voice sounding different, almost like a stranger.

Suddenly the room seemed to close in around him; the air becoming thick, stifling. Every instinct was telling him to get out. Why? This was his wife, his home.

He stood at the edge of the stairs when a lightning bolt struck close to the property, powerful enough to shake the house.

It wouldn’t be long before Jay and Iris would leap from their beds and come running to his bedr…

“God!” he cried out, grabbing at his head. His mind seared in pain as he lost his balance and stumbled down the stairs to the wet ground below.

Wind and rain pummeled him like a kite in a hurricane. All the while a myriad of images raced through his mind; a similar life and yet so different.

*Infants and children, family and friends, classrooms and students, funerals and gravesites, blurred landscapes ahead, the wind at his back… lightning.*

Wally rolled on to his back, soaked to the bone, looking up at as his Linda as she stood silently at the door.

His wife, his soulmate, his lightning rod, looking down at him emotionlessly like a stranger.

The wind picked up as rain and debris struck him across the face. Wally rose to his feet, wobbling a few steps in the wrong direction before falling face first back in the mud.

What was happening? His vision began to cloud, his ears ringing. He felt like he was about to pass out.

The red head tried a different approach, rolling onto all fours, his feet sliding helplessly in the mud as
he tried to gain traction.

Another bolt struck near the tree line, quickly catching his attention. When he looked over to where it landed, a dark silhouette appeared on the periphery of his vision, slowing making its way towards him.

Wally had transitioned from frightened to terrified. He rolled over to his back once more; knees upright, his feet pushing into the mud away from the shadow to no avail. Seconds later the figure was upon him, standing right above him.

Lightning crashed nearby, illuminating the yard in an eerie glow, washing away the shadows and exposing the figure standing above.

Wally gasped as he came face to face with a man he hadn’t seen in a lifetime.

“Hey kid,” the blonde spoke warmly, extending his hand down to the rain soaked red head.

“Barry?”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: I’m still plodding away at this. YJ Season three has inspired me. Waiting till June is bit hard to swallow though. Hopefully a little Spitfire will tide us over.

Author’s Note: I’m still plodding away at this. YJ Season three has inspired me. Waiting till June is bit hard to swallow though. Hopefully a little Spitfire will tide us over.

Speaking of, there better be a beautiful and emotional Spitfire reunion, or I’m asking DC Universe for my money back. Nah…it’s still pretty great. Thanks to everyone still following the story, and to Embleer_Frith0323 for all the encouragement. Any typos and errors still in there will be fixed along the way, I needed to get this out while I had the time. Enjoy.
I'm working on the final two chapters now, hope you'll stick around till the end. Reviews and comments always appreciated. Enjoy.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!