

M'gann left early the following day, leaving me in the cave by myself. M'gann, Tora, and Kaldur had all been worried about me being alone for so long, but I assured them all that this was just as much of a vacation for me as it was for them, even if I never left the cave, which I had several plans to do. After all, I had unilateral access to a global-scale teleporter and a day off, how could I not go somewhere?

In hindsight, I did feel a bit silly for not utilizing the teleporter for at least one of the few dates M'gann and I had been on.

After M'gann left, I went through an abridged morning workout, doing just enough to stay in the habit of working out every morning. When I was finished, I took a quick rinse in the shower before grabbing some things and using the Zeta-Tube to travel to the quarry. There was something I had wanted to try ever since I started getting good at fine-detail earthbending but had never actually had the opportunity to do.

I made my way around the quarry, looking for some of the older dig spots, where they would drag massive chunks of material out of the ground. Eventually, I stopped and kicked off my shoes, the pointy chunks of stone that made up the gravel road turned away with an idle trick of bending. I walked around the area, pulsing my energy, my chi down into the stone, feeling for something. When I found what I was looking for, I smiled and stopped, sending a deeper pulse of energy down into the ground.

With a grunt of exertion and effort, I grabbed my target with my energy, heaving upward and dragging it to the surface, revealing a chunk of white marble five feet tall and three feet wide and deep. I held it there for a moment before flexing again, this time shifting the earth beneath the stone chunk, stabilizing the base. I let out a sigh when it was done, releasing my control of the stone. Usually, bending this amount of material for a few seconds wouldn't be that hard, but my desire to have a single chunk of one material, not a solidified amalgam of whatever was nearby, meant I had to work much harder.

I walked around the solid slab of stone, feeling its internal structure as I ran my fingers along it, saturating it with my chi. After a few minutes of slowly healing any internal defects in the stone slab, I got to work.

When I first arrived in this world, I struggled under the weight of Steve Roger's mind. Even in its partial form, his desires, strong emotions, and even his instinct pushed down on me near constantly. Surprisingly, one of the more difficult instincts to ignore was the desire to sketch, something that most versions of Steve Rogers had been doing long before he became Captain America. I was very thankful to not have that urge anymore, as even as innocuous as it was, it was still foreign and wrong, an obviously alien desire that would creep up on me.

Despite that, I still knew how art could positively affect your mental health. I still remembered the echo of the positive emotions Steve felt when creating his art, at improving his skill, and I was interested enough to attempt something similar. I didn't think I could ever enjoy

drawing or sketching after having spent so long fighting against it, but with my earthbending, I had what could be the perfect tool set for a readily available medium.

I slowly carved the stone away with my hands, sculpting the general frame of a person, the top of their head coming to just under my chest. It was rough going at first. Even with the advantage of earthbending, my untrained hands often took off too much stone, turning it to sand. Fortunately, I had to grab another small chunk of marble, press it to the space I messed up on, and fuse it in place.

I spent about three hours practicing, carving with my hands, and slowly getting better when I felt something off around me. For a moment, I did nothing, continuing to carve away as if nothing had changed, only to whip around with my fist encased with stone, ready to defend myself, only to find Black Canary standing about thirty feet away, watching me work.

“Black Canary, sorry, I felt something was off....” I explained, letting the stone around my fist turn to sand and fall to the ground.

“Good instincts, I have only been here for a moment or two,” She responded with a light smile. “May I ask... who is that?”

I turned back to look at the statue. It looked decent, especially considering that I had never done this before. I was leaning heavily on my enhanced memory and abilities, but I still clearly had a way to go.

“It's my sister,” I answered with a weak smile, turning back to the experienced heroine. “It's not nearly good enough yet, but... I've got to start somewhere.”

“It is very well done, especially if it is your first time,” She responded, stepping closer to walk around the statue. “A bit crude, but I'm sure you will improve with practice.”

“I... Well, I was hoping to get good enough to immortalize them somehow, my whole family,” I explained, reaching out and adjusting the statue's nose. “I've heard that over time memories of how people look fade. My memory is enhanced, but it's not perfect. I don't want to forget what they look like.”

“It's a good idea, and I can't imagine a better medium for you than stone,” She admitted, stopping beside me. “Using art to express yourself is a great way to heal.”

She was dressed in a casual version of her outfit, one that could let her pass as a civilian. She put her hand on my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“As long as you use this as a way to move forward rather than sticking in the past,” She warned softly.

"I... I honestly think I'm doing alright," I said with a small smile. "M'gann is a great listener, and my team is supportive even if I haven't talked about my past much with them. Also... you probably won't like how this sounds, but the super soldier serum enhances *all* parts of me, including my resistance to negative emotional spirals. I don't think I even could get diagnosably depressed, at least not without significant outside interference."

"You're right, I don't like how that sounds, but I won't judge," She admitted, pulling her hand off my shoulder. "As long as you feel that you're alright, and you know that you have people around you who will help if you need it."

"I do, thank you, though," I said, turning to the slightly shorter woman with a smile. "So what can I do for you, I'm sure you didn't stumble on me out here by accident."

"You're right, I tracked you down for a reason. I was just with Green Arrow and Snapshot, and she said that you would be all alone in the cave for a week?"

"Not quite a week, but yeah," I confirmed before holding up my hand. "Before you worry, though, I was looking forward to this. The team is the largest group of friends I've had in a while, having some time to myself is not a bad thing."

"Well, I'm glad you're getting some time to yourself, but I thought I would invite you to meet an old friend of mine," She explained. "He was who Batman is hoping to make your martial instructor...."

"Sensing a rather large but there," I said.

"Ted has been around for a while. He taught my mom, he taught me, he taught Batman and even Superman how to fight. But... he sees himself as retired."

"So... what's the issue? If he doesn't want to work..."

"Oh, he still works, just not for superheroes anymore," Canary explained, gesturing to head back to the warehouse that contained the Zeta-Tube. "Walk and talk?"

"Yeah, sure, let me grab my stuff."

I quickly packed up and put my shoes back on, following the older heroine as she made her way back to the warehouse.

"Ted has retired from training superheroes, and we would like to respect his choice, but I've known him my whole life, there is no way he will stay away for long," She assured me. "And beyond that... We want to get you the best. We made the mistake of taking half-measures with your team once, and we refuse to make it again. There are a few dozen people on this planet who are better martial artists than Ted Grant, but none of them are even close to being as good

of a trainer as him. He is the best, and we want him training your team, both the current and future.”

We stopped in front of the Zeta-Tube, and Black Canary stepped forward, tapping a few buttons, the teleporter starting to wind up.

“So what... you want me to talk him into it?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I feel comfortable pushing an old man to give up his retirement, even if it’s for a good cause.”

“No, he was interested in meeting the leaders of the team, seeing how you stack up,” She explained with a smirk. “He is a stubborn bastard, but he can’t help himself.”

We stepped into the Zeta-Tube, and in a flash, we were standing in a small alcove along a long alleyway. As we stepped out into the alley, the wall slid closed behind us, disguising the teleporter completely.

“We are going to be in public, so no hero names. Just call me Dinah, alright?” She said as she led us out of the alley. “It’s just a ten-minute walk from here.”

It didn’t take me long to realize we were in Gotham, even if we were in one of the “better” areas. I wasn’t nervous, but it was a stark difference when compared to the few days the team and I had just spent patrolling Metropolis. We spent most of the trip talking about the last few weeks and how the team had been doing, as well as how the Harpers were doing.

Apparently, all three of the clones had formed a brotherly bond with each other, with the clone that I had met changing his name to Will Harper and the clone going by Guardian changing his name to Jim. Roy Harper had forgiven his mentor and expressed interest in returning to the role of Speedy as his partner, while Will Harper was looking to return as well but was unsure as to what capacity. Jim Harper was still undecided.

“You know... I was thinking that the team needed a guy-in-the-chair,” I admitted. “Would Jim be interested in that?”

“A what?”

“Mission control,” I explained. “Someone to ask questions about things you run into. Like.... Hey, mission control, what gang in Gotham wears black and white, and is it normal for them to be in this area?”

“I see... And that’s the penguin’s crew, and yes, it’s normal,” She said, looking over at the five men walking down the opposite side of the street. “I’ll ask if he would be interested.”

“Good. I was thinking of asking Puala Nguyen,” I added. “She has a lot of experience, even if it’s for the opposite side, but I’m not sure how she would handle being on mission control for her daughter. Honestly, when we start to grow, we will probably need more than one.”

We chatted a bit more before finally reaching our destination. It was the cleanest building on the block, with a large, block letter sign that read “Wildcat Gym” and a jaguar’s face at the end.

“Huh... I think I figured out who Ted Grant is,” I said, looking up at the sign.

“It’s public knowledge,” Dinah explained. “C’mon, looks like it’s slow at the moment.”

“How does he not get overrun?” I asked as I followed her inside.

“His fans are getting a little old at this point to hang around outside, hoping to get a signature,” She explained with a chuckle as we stepped into the second set of doors and into the gym itself.

“This...”

I started, trailing off as I looked around. In the center of the large room was what looked like a regulation boxing ring, raised off the floor and everything. Around that were three different areas, one for weight machines, another for endurance machines like treadmills and rowing machines, and one with punching bags and reflex bags. It was a pretty big space, all things considered. It also reminded me of the gym I had been taken to during my conversation with Steve Rogers.

“Deacon? You alright?” Dinah asked, turning back to look at me.

“Yeah, sorry, I just had some major Deja Vu,” I explained, looking around. “So, where is your friend?”

As I scanned around the room, I spotted four people. One of them was running on the treadmill, while another slowly lifted weights on a bench. The last two were by the punching bags, the younger of the two, maybe a bit older than me, was punching the bag pretty hard, sweat dripping down their forehead. The man standing next to them seemed to be in his late forties, maybe early fifties and was coaching them through their drills. The older man spotted Dinah and me and waved.

“That’s him?” I asked, surprised. “I thought Wildcat was like eighty or ninety by now...”

“He is,” Dinah responded simply.

Before I could ask for an explanation, the hero legend broke away from his student and walked to us.

“Dinah, it's good to see you,” He said, wrapping the woman in a hug, which Dinah happily returned. “Even if I know you're here to bug me again.”

“No bugging today, Ted, I promise,” She responded as they pulled away, gesturing to me. “This is one of the leaders from the group I mentioned. The one you *asked* to see.”

“Him? Bull, he looks like he should be worried about making rent, not running with a kid's team,” He said, still reaching out to shake my hand, despite his disbelief. “What's your name, kid?”

“Warren Reeves,” I said, shaking his hand easily, very carefully squeezing as hard as he did, which for an unenhanced human was impressive. “And I'm younger than I look.”

“I see, heck of a grip you got there, son, I-”

“Don't call me that,” I said, cutting him off. “Please.”

Still holding my hand, the older man looked into my eyes for a second, seeming to spot something after a long moment.

“Let me guess, your old man?” He asked before finally releasing my hand. “We get that a lot around here, Warren, I hope he got what was coming to him?”

“I don't know, he disappeared when I was younger,” I answered, a little off balance. “How did you...?”

“Like I said, we get that a lot. Half the kids I work with are working off aggression their fathers left them,” He explained. “You need help with that?”

“No, I got a real father eventually, he helped me deal with it,” I explained, looking around.

“That's good, better than what usually happens,” He responded before turning and walking back to the ring. “C'mon, kid, climb in the ring.”

“What?” I asked, looking at Dinah, who simply shrugged. “I'm not sure-”

“What, you think an old man like me can't handle a young buck like you?” He asked, easily sliding into the ring and grabbing a pair of hanging gloves. “Dinah, help him into his.”

“No, I have no doubt you could kick my ass all over this gym,” I assured him, reluctantly accepting the gloves and putting them on correctly, something the old boxer noticed with a smile. “Just wasn’t expecting a spar.”

“It’s a great way to get to know someone,” He insisted. “Now, come on. Show me what you got.”