

I finished the last straps on my gloves before jumping into the ring, literally jumping up and over the ropes and into the ring, getting a wide-eyed response from Ted. He recovered quickly, shifting to stand in the opposite corner as me.

"Are we sticking to boxing or...?" I asked, moving to mirror the older boxer and stepping back into my corner of the ring. "I'm happy to stick to one style."

"Mix it up, but let's keep it friendly, yeah? Can't afford any time on hospital visits," He explained. "Nothing permanent, nothing cheap, and no extra powers."

I nodded and got into a standard boxing stance, eyeing up my opponent before slowly wading in, both of us judging each other's movements. At first, we tested each other's block, loosening up and getting into a rhythm. I was holding back, letting him get used to my enhancements.

Like a switch getting flicked, suddenly we were both serious, our fists flying. For now, I stuck with boxing, using what I knew from Steve's experience and my own limited knowledge from what my father taught me. With my lead arm low, I fired off an upwards jab, testing Ted's ability to handle me, putting more speed into my punch. He reacted to the jab like I had called it out, shifting to the side to push it away with his right arm and slamming his left hand up against me, punishing me for letting him get used to my speed.

I took the punch to my guardian arm, which was up and ready to block, thanks to my decreased reaction times. I fired back another jab, faster this time, only for him to weave out of the way, clearly reading my punches like an open book. Still, we kept going, each of us sliding in and out of each other's ranges, blocking and slipping into various punches. I recognized him slipping through a few different stances, some of which I recognized, but most of which I didn't, clearly testing me to see just how good I was.

We took a break after about five minutes, stepping back and catching our breath. Well, Ted needed to catch his breath, I was still barely sweating. When we waded back in, after our first traded blows, I spoke up.

"So... I'm pretty sure-" I started to say, pausing to block a jab and rock over it with a strong arm counter, which I managed to land only for Ted to turn away and massively decrease its effectiveness. "I'm pretty sure you're... supposed to be older."

"Noticed that didja?" He asked with a smirk, returning my punch with his own, snaking it under my guard to catch me in my ribs.

I tensed slightly, taking the punch relatively easily, though I was pretty sure that if he was so inclined, it could have been aimed at my kidney instead. I fired off a quick barrage of rapid punches, which he pulled up his guard to block. Seeing his stomach open, I finished with an uppercut, pulling the strength of the punch to keep from laying him out. Unfortunately, it was a

trap, and he slid around the punch faster than I thought possible for a baseline human, rocking me back with a massive blow to my shoulder. Once again, I could only assume that if he had wanted, he could have punched me somewhere worse, like my head, but chose not to.

"The Justice League, the old one, had a run-in with a crook named Chronos," He explained, stepping back for a moment before re-engaging, firing a barrage of his own punches. "Tried to escape with a damage time vortex doo dad, ended up catching us in a back blast of some kinda energy wave."

I blocked his barrage, the whumping sound of his perfectly aimed punches echoing through the gym. I tried to step back, only to find that he had been maneuvering me throughout the whole spar. My back was now against the ropes, meaning I had nowhere to retreat.

"I covered Dinah's mom from the blast," He said, now laying on some serious heat, keeping me from retaliating save a few ineffectual jabs. "We had no idea something was wrong until everyone started to get old, and I didn't."

I finally got fed up with being battered around and poured on my extra strength, shoving him back, the skilled boxer stumbling backward, recovering quickly but stopping to let me off the ropes.

"Immortal?" I asked simply, stepping back into my stance.

"No, thank god," He said with a snort, shaking his head. "Just aging much slower. Only cost me the ability to have kids."

I winced but said nothing, both of us stepping closer to continue. We sparred for a while longer, pausing for another two breaks. We switched up our styles a bit, eventually ending up in an anything-goes jumble that had us pinning and throwing each other around the ring. When we finally did separate, Ted was dripping with sweat and breathing hard, and I could feel my own tiredness slowing me down.

"I think that's enough," Dinah said, shocking us both as we had completely forgotten that she was here, wholly focused on the spar. "You guys have been at it for two and a half hours."

Ted pulled back and looked over his shoulder at a large clock that was easily visible from all angles of the gym. He laughed when he read the time, starting to pull off his gloves.

"I gotta say, kid, you got the patience of a saint," He said, shaking his head while hanging up his gloves. "Not many people can take being toyed with for that long and not lash out."

"I was getting there," I said, the older man brushing it off.

It had been obvious that he had been playing with me, even as we were fighting, from the moment he blocked my first punch. While I probably could have gotten a bit more out of the few hits I did manage to get in, at least if I had pushed into the higher levels of my strength, I

had never felt like I had an edge, not for a second. I was just skilled enough to see that he saw through every single punch I had thrown, not to mention every feint I tried to use. He was testing me, so I had done my best to hide my growing frustration.

"You got some skill. Clearly, you had some training. Your boxing style is old, though. Like around the 1950's, maybe 60's," He said as we both left the ring. "You get an old trainer or something?"

"You didn't tell him anything?" I asked, giving Black Canary a look, only getting a shrug in response.

"Not really my place to tell," She pointed out.

"Fair enough," I admitted, looking back at the retired hero. "I... well, how about we sit down? It's a bit of a long story."

Our "sitting down" to talk became lunch at a nearby pizza shop that Ted frequented. The pizzeria was the kind of mom-and-pop, hole-in-the-wall type shop you knew made good pizza, and the three slices of meat lovers I got certainly confirmed the trend. After Dinah, Ted, and I took our first bites, I started telling my story. I tried to keep it short, but I had to explain not one entirely separate reality but two. Luckily the basics of Marvel were easy to explain as just a world that was similar to this one, with a lot of the same themes, just mixed up in different ways.

"That... is one hell of a trip, kid," The older boxer said, shaking his head and taking a sip of his beer. "Makes what you're doing with your team much more impressive."

"Thank you, sir," I responded, fiddling with my fork, absentmindedly shifting with my metal bending. "When I joined the team, all I could see was a group with incredible potential. It would have been a waste to play second fiddle to the League forever. I couldn't just sit back and do nothing."

"We didn't exactly help at first," Dinah said, looking down at her slice of Margherita. "We treated the New Titans as training wheels rather than a project that could grow into something world-changing."

"To be fair, the others really weren't looking for that at first," I pointed out. "They were happy with the idea of being trained to one day join the League."

"Until you showed up, threw them for a loop," Ted said, leaning forward in his chair. "Pushed them to something big."

"I just didn't have any of the preconceived notions they did," I explained, shaking my head. "An outside perspective can be a powerful thing, especially when the perspective is built from multiple examples."

"Don't sell yourself short, kid. You got something special."

"I do my best."

Ted snorted and took another bite of his pepperoni pizza, swallowing it before looking at Dinah.

"I'm honestly surprised you haven't brought up training them yet," He said, Dinah rolling her eyes. "I half expected Bats to try and coach him into playing to my ego or guilt-tripping you."

"You asked me to introduce you," She said. "Batman is looking into alternatives. I'm still hoping to convince you, though."

"I wouldn't have listened anyway," I added, shaking my head. "I wouldn't be comfortable trying to convince a retired hero to give up their earned rest."

"...I appreciate the sentiment," He responded after a moment. "So, what are your plans?"

"The teams or my own plans?" I asked before shaking my head. "Never mind, they are more or less the same at this point. I am committed to making the New Titans work."

"Well, what's next for the team then?" He asked, gesturing for me to continue.

"That's not an easy question to answer," I admitted, leaning back into my chair. "Short term? The team needs more experience, more time working with each other, and some more time with our tutors."

"And long term?" Black Canary asked.

"Long term, we expand. I'm not sure how we will structure it, but we will mentor a second team. We also need to set up the infrastructure so we can separate from the League and become an independent entity." I explained. "And in the distant future? At some point, I would like to have New Titan teams all over the globe, patrolling cities and helping however we can."

"Some lofty goals kid," Ted said, studying me closely. "Especially for a group with so many young people."

"I know," I said, nodding in agreement. "But it's something to strive for. We will get there eventually, we just need to keep working on it."

"You plan on recruiting so young for your next team?" Ted asked. "I never agreed with Batman taking Robin out at such a young age."

"If we don't take them in, then who will?" I asked. "It's better for them to face the world with friends and allies than it is for them to stand on their own, isn't it? Yes, for some of the younger heroes, we will probably introduce a junior group, but that won't be enough for a lot of them. They need to help. Sometimes, it's the only thing keeping them going."

"Giving them a purpose, giving them something to fight for?" Ted asked, to which I nodded. "I get that, kid, I really do...."

We silently ate pizza for a while, finishing our food and making our way back to Ted's gym. Once we were inside, Ted brought us into his office, dropping down into an old, well-worn but comfortable-looking chair, Dinah and I sitting across from him. One side of the office was a one-way mirror, with a view into the ring, looking down into it slightly. The other wall was covered in framed pictures, newspaper articles, and even a few letters and notes. As I scanned the wall, Ted was silent, facing the wall completely and staring at one particular picture.

It was a large image of the Justice League of America, all of the members standing side by side. It took a full minute for the retired hero to look back at us.

"Hypothetically, say I was considering leaving retirement," He said. "How would you convince me to actually do it?"

"I wouldn't," I answered immediately, surprising both of them. "Ted, you are clearly an incredible fighter with more experience than most heroes ever really manage. I have no doubt that even if I was going all out, you would still find a way to take me down. Even better, Dinah vouches for your training abilities. I have no doubt that you would make a good trainer, a great trainer even. Your work, after all, speaks for itself. But none of that makes me have the slightest interest in convincing you."

I paused to take a breath, looking out at the ring for a moment before looking back to the older man, who was now leaning forward.

"My team and I are trying to build something that will change the world. We need the best of the best because someday, someone's life will depend on whether or not we can stand up and measure up. We have no time for someone who needs convincing. We have no time for someone who maybe sort of kind of might want to help when the weather's right and they feel like it. I mean no disrespect to you or your achievements Ted, you are a hero, and you have done your part. But I have no interest in trying to convince you to do a damn thing. I want *you to convince me* that you will train my teammates and me so that when Murphy comes calling and the fate of the world is on our shoulders that we can carry that weight. That we can carry that weight and still stand tall."

The room was silent for a long moment, Ted staring at me, the expression on his face unreadable. I could see Dinah out of the corner of my eye, staring at me, her jaw open slightly. Eventually, after a long few seconds, Ted smiled.

"Alright, kid, how do I go about convincing you then?"

"The team is currently spending some time working with their mentors and taking some time off," I explained. "When everyone returns, I want you to come watch us spar for a while. You use our morning sparring time as a sort of workshop for our abilities and techniques. So come help us work on our fight."

He nodded and stood, holding out his hand, prompting me to stand and shake it.

"Alright, kid, I'll be there."