



Justice League #16
Susan Hillwig

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Justice League

Issue #16: "Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 3 (of 3)"

Written by Susan Hillwig

Cover by Borize

Edited by Mark Bowers

Hal Jordan wasn't having a good day. He'd woken up in the middle of the desert suffering from amnesia, and had spent quite a few hours wandering about before he crossed paths with a man named Jonah Hex, a rough-and-tumble bounty hunter who offered to help the Green Lantern until his memory came back. Despite his best efforts, Hal hadn't made much progress on that yet, and considering the situation he found himself in now, he wasn't sure if he'd live long enough to ever resolve his problem.

"Who are you?" Hal asked the stranger looking down on him, surprised at the calmness of his own voice: just moments before, this stranger had struck Hex down, and judging by the scream they'd heard earlier, he'd done even worse to the outlaw Hex had been tracking through the desert. Now it appeared that he'd set his sights on Green Lantern. Without a word, the stranger raised his hand, and a bright-red laser beam shot out — the action was so unexpected that Hal could think of nothing else to do but cross his arms in front of his face. The moment he did so, his ring suddenly sparked to life, encompassing both Hal and the bounty hunter laying next to him in an emerald bubble, which apparently the laser couldn't penetrate.

As Hal stared dumbstruck at the sight, a voice whispered in his ear, plain as day: *{Automatic defenses online. Power levels at 63.82 percent.*

Confused, Hal looked at Jonah, thinking perhaps he'd been the one to speak, but the bounty hunter seemed more concerned with trying to hold onto consciousness, his teeth gritted as he clutched at the wound on his side. It didn't appear to have been the stranger before them either,

who intensified the laser beam in an attempt to burn through the shield surrounding them. Hal thought he'd imagined it, then the voice returned: *{Power levels at 59.5 percent. With each syllable, Hal saw the light emanating from the center of his ring flicker ever so slightly, and he realized where the voice was coming from. "Jesus Christ," he said under his breath. "Jonah, I think this ring's talking to me."}*

"Lovely," Jonah groaned. "Tell it tuh kill this bastard afore he kills us."

"I can't do that! Weren't you even *listening* to me before?"

"Thet Ah was... but y'all obviously weren't listenin' tuh *me*." Jonah managed to sit up, then his hand shot out quick as a rattlesnake and grabbed hold of Hal's wrist, pointing the ring dead-square at their assailant. "'Round here, yuh gotta gun the owlhoots down afore they do any more damage, an' at the moment, yo're totin' the biggest damn gun in the arsenal."

"But I can't... I *won't*..." As he said the words, he saw that the bubble around them was beginning to weaken under the assault. He tried to concentrate, make the bubble stronger, but just like every other time he'd made the ring do anything, the ability seemed to wax and wane beyond his control. *{Power levels at 56.448 percent, the voice told him now, and Hal was suddenly struck by how familiar it was. He knew the voice, he knew it, and if he could just focus on it for a moment, he might be able to...}*

"Dammit, boy, Ah ain't gonna die today 'cause yuh cain't find an inch of guts in thet stinkin' green hide of yers!" Jonah screamed, the sweat beading on his brow the only sign of the pain he was fighting to ignore. "This skunk's already turned McAllister into charcoal, an' it looks like he wants tuh do the same tuh *us*! Ah tried shootin' him, but he laughs off bullets, so yo're gonna have tuh use thet goddam ring tuh blow him tuh Hell an' gone, yuh hear me? Yo're gonna do it, or else Ah'm gonna bash yer goddam *skull* in! Now *do it*, yuh gutless little nancy! *DO IT!*"

Hal tried to block out the order, but Hex's barking voice drilled straight into his brain, bringing forth thoughts that he didn't want to give form... but that was exactly what Hal did, a scream of his own tearing out of his throat as a massive bolt of green energy leapt out of the ring and blew a

hole through the stranger's midsection. Shrapnel rained down upon them, revealing to the stunned Green Lantern the stranger's true mechanical nature — Hal was still angry at Jonah for forcing him to destroy what he'd previously thought to be a living person, but was thankful that he hadn't actually done so. The bounty hunter, meanwhile, took in the metallic debris laying around them and muttered with a note of satisfaction, "Gotcha, yuh bastard."

Though he had no way of knowing it, Jonah's offhand remark, coupled with the shocking events of the past few minutes, set off something deep in Hal's subconscious — just a tiny spark that finally began to burn through the amnesiac fog Green Lantern's mind had been shrouded in for almost twelve hours. It was subtle at first, only a vague recollection of himself using that phrase before in a similar situation, but it soon began to grow at an exponential rate. *There was a sphere, he thought, a metal sphere hanging in the air, and it was shooting at me, same as this thing I just destroyed had been doing.* Hal shook his head — no, that wasn't right, but it was close — then he climbed to his feet, staring blankly before him as the memory began to coalesce into something more tangible: a sphere appearing out of nowhere, emitting a high-pitched whine that crippled himself and his friends, and then a man standing over them, gloating about how he was going to destroy them all. *But then he left, and I told the ring to destroy the sphere, and when that was done, I made the ring latch onto the man's ship... but who is he?* After a moment, it came to him, and he said aloud, "The Lord of Time."

"Come again?" Jonah asked. He'd been watching Hal closely the whole time, unsure if the apparent trance the man had fallen into was good or bad.

"I remember who did this to me." Green Lantern continued to stare straight ahead as he spoke. "I remember what happened before I got stuck out here in the desert. I remember..." He paused, then brought up his right hand and gazed upon the ring, which seemed to be glowing even brighter now. "I remember my name... my God, I remember who I am again!" Letting out a whoop of joy, Hal shot straight up into the night sky, the emerald-green nimbus surrounding him lighting up the desert like a flare. He zipped and dove about in various aerial maneuvers for a minute, laughing all the while, then got a hold of himself again and came back down to earth.

Jonah was on his feet now as well, holding his side as he watched the Lantern settle down next to him once more. "Yuh get it all outta yer system?" he asked, as if he saw people fly around in the air all the time.

"I couldn't help myself... I'm just so happy to feel like *me* again." Hal grinned. "It was just like you said it would be: something got triggered in my brain, and then it all came back. Well, maybe not all of it, but the real important thing is the mental block that was keeping me from using my ring properly is gone now." He held up his ring hand, saying, "Whatever I can't remember, it should be able to fill me in on."

"Thet's pretty handy," Hex said, then grunted and pressed his hand tighter over his wound. "Ah don't suppose it kin do anything 'bout this hole in muh side, kin it?"

"Maybe... it's patched me up before, but I've never tried it on another person." Hal pointed the ring at Jonah's wound, and it was soon bathed in green light — the bounty hunter grimaced as the burned flesh slowly began to heal. After about fifteen seconds, the light disappeared, and though the wound was still there, it looked nowhere near as bad as it had beforehand. "Sorry, but I think that's the most it can do for you," Hal said.

"Better'n nothin'... Ah kin deal with the pain, just so long as it don't go septic on me," Jonah replied. "Now, whut are we gonna do 'bout this 'Lord of Time' jackass?"

"'We'? Forget it, Hex, I can't let you get involved in this any further. This guy isn't some scuzzy outlaw, he's a dangerous man with technology you couldn't even fathom." Hal waved a hand towards the remains of the robot. "Believe me, that's just the tip of the iceberg — the Lord of Time's got all sorts of tricks up his sleeve. For your own safety, it'd be better if I went this alone." He began to rise off the ground again, his mind already on trying to find his friends, wherever they may be, but before he was more than five feet in the air, Jonah grabbed hold of Hal's ankle and yanked him back down.

"Seems tuh me thet the last time yuh went it alone, yuh damn-near died in the desert," Jonah said plainly when Hal was at his eye level once

more. “Now maybe Ah ain’t got no fancy-dan ring like yerself, but Ah kin at least watch yer back ‘til this whole mess is over an’ done with.” The unscarred side of his mouth curled up in a smile. “Sides, Ah might just surprise yuh with a few tricks of muh own.”

Hal mulled it over, then said, “I suppose you’re right. Okay, until we’ve taken care of the Lord of Time, you’re my backup... but you’ve got to swear to me that you won’t kill anyone, no matter how hairy things get.”

“Again with the ‘no killin’ nonsense... alright, fine, Ah swear. Yuh gonna make me lay muh hand on a Bible, too?”

Hal smirked, saying, “No, I think I can take you at your word.” He used his ring to generate a map of the area, indicating certain points to Jonah. “We’re down here, and the Lord of Time is about a hundred miles north of here, in a part of the Grand Canyon called Tuweep... at least, that’s where he was when my friends and I ran into him.”

“So that’s where we’re headed?”

“Not yet. I want to track down my friends first. My ring’s scanning the area for the locator beacons in their comlinks — they’re useless in this century for communication, but the beacons should still be sending out a signal.”

Seconds later, three spots lit up on the map, and the two men looked at each other in surprise. “Well now, ain’t that convenient?” Jonah said.

“It’s nice to catch a break every once in a while.” Hal hitched a thumb back towards camp and said, “Saddle up, ‘pardner’, it’s time to hit the trail.”

“Y’know, I’ve never found the sight of a woman smokin’ to be all that appealin’.”

“Remind me to never give up the habit, then.” Kate Manser took another

drag on the cigarette she'd rolled, not even bothering to look at Bat Lash standing in the saloon doorway. "What are you doin' out here, anyhow? I thought you were tryin' to help those two fellas dissect that machine-man."

"I was... but when I mentioned that I'd heard of a man named Edison who'd probably be quite interested in some of the metal guts they was pullin' out of it, they hustled me right out of the room." Kate was sitting on a bench in front of the saloon, and Lash sat down right next to her — she immediately responded by scooting away from him. "You don't like me much, do you?" Lash asked.

"I don't like the way you *look* at me. Makes me feel naked."

"I can't help it, I've always had a deep appreciation for the fairer sex." The gambler pulled out his pocket watch. "Been almost an hour now. I wonder if Ke-Woh-No-Tay and that Hawkgirl have found anything yet."

"Would there be anything to find, though? I mean, these things don't even have *feet*, so there won't be any tracks to follow."

"True, but if they did so much as bend a twig on their way into town, Scalphunter will find it. Plus, if that gal's eyes are as good as she claims, she might be able to spot any more trouble comin' our way." He propped his chin on his hand and said, "We probably would've had an even better chance of smokin' these owlhoots out if Johnny and his wife had answered that wire Ke-Woh-No-Tay sent. Arizona's more their area of expertise than any of ours."

"Who's that again?"

"More veterans of Puerta Del Sol... and to top it off, Johnny's a learned man with an interest in strange phenomena, so he'd be real helpful right about now."

"I'm not sure that there's anybody that can help us with this mess... at least not anybody from *this* century." She glanced over her shoulder and through the saloon's plate-glass window. Flash and Elongated Man were bent over one of the tables inside, hoping to discern some clue about their unknown enemy from the various bits of electronics spread out

before them. "I'll be honest with you: I like these folks, especially that Hawkgirl, but this future-world that they come from... just the little glimpses I've seen of it make me feel... I don't know... out-of-sorts."

"It does get rather unsettlin' at times, doesn't it?" Lash spared a glance himself, then said, "I just try to take comfort in the fact that I'll most likely be dead before the world reaches that particular future."

"A rather morbid way of lookin' at it, but you make a good point."

"Just speakin' the plain truth."

There was a rustling of wings overhead, and the two of them turned away from the window to see the aforementioned Hawkgirl descending to the street, calling out, "Guys, we found him! We found GL!" She touched down and immediately started running up to the saloon door, but there was no need: Flash was already zipping outside, with Elongated Man following not long after.

"Is he all right?" Barry asked, searching the sky for him. "Where is he?"

"Still a few miles off, with Scalphunter. I flew ahead to round up the rest of you."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Ralph stretched over to the hitching post near the saloon, where three horses were standing by — they'd prepped the animals before Scalphunter and Hawkgirl headed out, just in case, and it looked like their forward thinking was now paying off. Once Lash, Kate, and Ralph were mounted up, Kendra took to the air and led them south, with Barry racing alongside the horses on foot.

As they closed in, Kate and Lash could see a steady green haze cutting across the dark plain. It soon became clear that the haze was coming off, of all things, an emerald-green horse, upon which sat a rider dressed just as oddly as the other future-folk they'd met. Riding along his left side was Scalphunter, and to his right was a man that Lash was quite surprised to see. "Hey, Hex!" the gambler called out, removing his hat and waving it about. "Ain't you a sight for sore eyes!"

"You *know* him?" Kate asked.

"Know him? Heck, I saved that man's life on more'n one occasion." Bat brought his horse to a stop and dismounted, as did the others. "Matter of fact, I've been hearin' rumors off an' on the past three years that our Rebel friend here was as dead as Dixie." He walked over to Jonah with a questioning look in his eye and said, "Been hearin' some other odd things 'bout you durin' that time, but you ain't been around to clarify. Mind tellin' me what rock you've been hidin' under?"

"As a matter of fact, Ah *do* mind, so shut yer ever-runnin' mouth." The bounty hunter turned away from Lash and took in the sight of the other Leaguers for a moment or two. "Ah was expectin' more green long-johns," he said after a time.

"There are others," Hal said, "but right now, this is League business." He gestured to his teammates, saying, "Jonah Hex, let me introduce you to Elongated Man and Flash... and of course, you just met Hawkgirl." Jonah gave each of them a barely perceptible nod.

"And I'm Bartholomew Aloysius Lash, but you can call me Bat." The gambler stepped up to Hal, all smiles. "And in case Ke-Woh-No-Tay didn't inform you, we have a newcomer to both our groups." He started to sweep his hand towards Kate, but Jonah cut him off by walking right past him, taking off his hat as he approached the woman.

"Good tuh see yuh again, Cinnamon," Jonah said quietly.

"Same goes for you," Kate replied. "You're looking better than you did last time. Finally startin' to sleep through the night?"

"Most nights... it comes an' goes. How 'bout yerself? How many yuh got left?"

"Just two. Still got the one I gave you?"

"Thet Ah do." He patted the left side of his coat, over his heart. "Came in right handy over in Blood Creek a few months back."

Lash's face screwed up in obvious annoyance. "Hey, can the two of you quit bein' all moony over each other for a minute?"

"You're just jealous 'cause she keeps giving you the cold shoulder," Scalphunter said to him, smirking. Lash declined to reply.

"Glad to see you found a little local help of your own," Barry said as he and the other Leaguers clustered around Hal. "After those robots attacked us in the saloon, I was afraid that you'd end up dead before we could find you."

"Not that finding you turned out to be so tough," Kendra chimed in. "It was easy for Scalphunter and I to zero in on that lightshow you were generating."

Hal shrugged, saying, "That wasn't my intention... call it a happy accident. The important thing is that we've found each other, and just in time: between what I can remember now and what my ring's told me, we've got a major problem breathing down our necks." He called up an image of a man in faux military dress from his ring. "This is the Lord of Time, and while none of *us* have ever faced him before, I get the impression that *he's* quite familiar with us."

"Okay, you've lost me already," Ralph said.

"He's a time traveler, presumably from somewhere a little further on in our future, and judging by the way he talks, I'd say he's butted heads with us more than once." The image shifted to show all four of the Leaguers collapsed on the ground, with the Lord of Time standing over them. "I also get the impression that he's sick of losing."

"I think... I remember this." Barry was staring hard at the verdant image, his hand unconsciously going up to his throat as he did so. Seconds later, the holographic Time Lord pressed his foot down on the holographic speedster's neck and said, "*I should make you lick my boots for the way you insulted me last time.*"

"So he decided to come back to a time *before* we ran into him and eliminate us? Is that it?" Kendra asked. "Wouldn't changing the timeline that drastically mess things up for himself as well?"

"Maybe he doesn't give a damn 'bout messin' things up." The Leaguers

turned to see Jonah standing nearby, gazing at the image projected by the ring with a cold look in his eyes. Lash, Kate, and Scalphunter were standing not far behind him. "Maybe y'all riled him up so bad in the future that he's willin' tuh take the risk."

"Whatever his reasoning, that's only one part of the problem. We've also got *this* heading our way." Once again, the image changed, this time showing what appeared to me a meteor passing near Earth. "If left alone, this piece of anti-matter would just float on by and never even come close to us, but the Lord of Time has some scheme to capture it here in the past and transfer it to the future so he can conquer our time. Judging by my own scans, the anti-matter will be in optimal range within a few hours."

"He told us he'd have what he wanted by dawn, then he'd come after the rest of us personally," Barry said, looking up at the night-shrouded sky. "I for one don't want to wait that long."

"Neither do I, but considering how easily he got the drop on us before, we'd better have a good plan in place before we head out to the Grand Canyon." Hal nodded to Scalphunter and Jonah, saying, "We were discussing some things on the way in, and we think we found a blind spot in the Lord of Time's defenses."

"What sort of blind spot?"

"Us," Scalphunter replied. "When your enemy was speaking through that machine-man, he said your friend here was all alone... but by that time, Hex had already been with him for quite a while. Now perhaps your enemy already knew this and was merely taunting you, but the Green Lantern seems to believe that he couldn't see Hex."

"More specifically, I think the Lord of Time is only bothering to watch the four of us." Hal gestured to himself and his teammates in turn. "Think about it for a second: we got tossed at random across Arizona, but he managed to track us all down. He knew *exactly* where we were, even though none of us stayed in the location we landed in. I don't know if it's the locator beacons in our comlinks or the simple fact that we're anomalies in this time, but he's somehow keeping close tabs on us." He then gestured to their new gun-toting friends. "However, I doubt that

he's even giving the local population a second glance."

Ralph tugged at his rubbery bottom lip. "So you're thinking that, while the Lord of Time is focusing all his attention on us, these other guys sneak up and blindside him?"

"Lovely idea, and I'd gladly take part in it," Lash said, "but this fella we're fightin' has us seriously outclassed in the weapons department." He stepped up between Scalphunter and Hex, laying his hands on their shoulders in a gesture of camaraderie. "Now I know you two are good in a fight, but what do y'all plan on doin' if he throws more of those machine-men at us? They're bulletproof."

"Then Ah reckon we ain't gonna use bullets." Jonah shrugged off Lash, then went over to the horse conjured up by the Green Lantern's ring, complete with saddlebags. The bounty hunter yanked one of them open, revealing the remains of the machine-man that had attacked the two of them out in the desert. "Time fer us tuh start fightin' fire with fire."

The sky over the remote outlook of Tuweep was just beginning to lighten as the Lord of Time's ship fully materialized. It had been sitting cloaked within a pocket of space-time ever since he'd arrived, but the task ahead of him required that he be within the exact same timeframe as his target. Besides, he obviously had no reason to hide anymore: he'd been keeping an eye on the sensors tracking the Justice League, and while all four of them were now together again, their erratic movements suggested to him that they had no clue as to where he was or what he was doing. They'd skirted rather close to the Grand Canyon about a half-hour before, but they'd headed back the way they came long before they even got near Tuweep, and now appeared to be moving in an easterly direction, away from his position. There was a chance that they might wise up now that he was sitting in plain view, but if they did, he still had more than enough ways to take them out of the picture. For now, however, the Lord of Time was content to let them chase their own shadows while he set down to work.

According to his instruments, the chunk of anti-matter was as close to Earth as it would naturally get, so now it was time to give it an unnatural nudge. He fired up a high-intensity tractor beam and locked it onto the anti-matter, tugging it towards the planet — once it had come far enough down to the surface, he would activate the chrono-stasis generators and draw all that raw power into them. There was the possibility of spillage, of course, so he'd have to make sure his shields were up beforehand... and if the Leaguers were caught unawares and engulfed in an anti-matter backlash, so much the better.

As he monitored the anti-matter's progress, an alarm began to chime: one of the generators he'd placed on the eastern end of the Grand Canyon had suddenly gone offline. The Lord of Time opened a video feed focused on the area to see Elongated Man standing at the lip of the canyon, stretching down to take hold of the four-foot-wide generator as Hawkgirl finished working it loose from the rock. He also caught a glimpse of Flash and Green Lantern moving along the opposite lip of the canyon, obviously on the lookout for more of the devices. "So, you're beginning to catch on," the Lord of Time mused. "I doubt you'll have time to take out all the generators, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to sit idly by while you destroy my work." With the push of a button, he launched a sphere containing a psionic scrambler identical to the one he'd sent after the Justice League in their own time — it had been quite effective at crippling them before, and considering the damage he'd already inflicted on them with it, a second exposure could very well kill them. A small smile played across his lips as he watched the exterior monitor, seeing the sphere leave the ship and begin climbing into the air... only to suddenly explode before it could activate.

The Lord of Time stared numbly at the screen, unable to comprehend what just occurred. "Must have been a malfunction," he decided, and launched another sphere... which didn't even make it out of the launch tube this time before it was destroyed by what appeared to be a laser blast. "What... what's going on?" he said as a second laser joined the first, burning the ship's hull with such intensity that the material began to melt, sealing the launch tube shut. He looked at his sensors again, trying to figure out which of the Leaguers was attacking him, but they were all still miles away on the eastern end of the canyon. Then another laser blast hit the ship, this time from a different angle — just a glancing blow, but enough to make the Lord of Time yell in frustration, "*Who's doing this*

to me?!?” He cycled through the exterior video feeds until he caught a glimpse of a figure barely visible behind a ridge overlooking his ship — it was a woman, judging by the hair, training a primitive rifle on his position. He zoomed in on the image until he got a better view of her, and saw that her weapon consisted of a roughly-made wooden stock with a short tube and some other metallic components lashed to it with wire. There were some thin cables attached to it as well, trailing off the weapon and into a leather satchel slung over her shoulder. After a moment, he realized that he was looking at cannibalized parts from one of his own drones!

“You... you... ” he started to sputter, his face turning red, then yelled at the screen, “I will *not* be *mocked* by such... *primitives!*” His hands flew over the control pad in front of him, activating every drone left in his inventory — nearly twenty of them — and instructing them to kill anyone in the vicinity. “I hope you had fun,” he said as the robots began to file out of the ship, “because it’s the last thing you’ll ever do.” The Lord of Time sat back in his chair, watching the chaos he’d sown outside: though some had been cut down within moments of leaving the ship, the remaining drones had already flushed out the ones sniping at him. In addition to the woman, there was also an Indian and a man in fancy clothes toting jerry-rigged weapons, all of whom the Lord of Time recognized from the video feed inside the Desecration Saloon — how desperate the Justice League must have been to enlist *their* help! He had to concede their bravery, however: even as the gunfighters ran for cover, they continued to take aim at the robots, lessening the number of pursuers they had... but there was no way they could destroy them all. Then he saw that the League was heading towards Tuweep in earnest now, probably alerted by the laser fire. “Makes no difference,” the Lord of Time said. “Soon, the anti-matter will be within range of the remaining generators, and then I can just... ”

One of the instruments on the control pad began to beep shrilly, and he looked at it in confusion. According to the sensors, someone with an anomalous choral signature had just entered his ship, which meant that it had to be one of the Leaguers... but he could see them all plainly on the monitors. “Those interlopers must have dealt the ship more damage than I thought,” he reasoned as the readings flickered in and out, like the sensors couldn’t decide if what it was picking up was real or not. “Either way, I’d best prepare for visitors.” Though he preferred not to get

physically involved most of the time, he did keep a few handheld weapons onboard. He got up from his seat and went to the control room door, which swished open at his approach... to reveal a scarred cowboy standing just inches in front of him, revolver in hand.

"Howdy," Jonah Hex said, bringing the revolver up and pointing it dead-center at the Lord of Time's face. "Hope yuh weren't plannin' on leavin' just yet, 'cause we've got business to discuss. Namely, y'all shuttin' down these infernal machines of yers an' surrenderin' real peaceful-like."

The Lord of Time could barely hide his anger. Another primitive, and this one actually inside his ship and threatening him with antique weaponry! The *gall* of him! Fortunately, primitives were always easy to sway, if you knew the right methods. Stepping back as Hex entered the control room proper, the Lord of Time said, "I don't know what those people outside told you, but I am not a threat to you. In fact, if you let me go, I'll make it worth your while. Whatever you want, whatever you can *imagine*. I've got storehouses full of gold, jewels, priceless artifacts... I can give you the power to rule over your fellow man with impunity!" He pointed towards the still-open doorway. "Just follow me down there, you'll see..."

Jonah paused, glanced briefly towards the doorway, then turned back to the Lord of Time and cocked the hammer on his gun, saying, "Mister, y'all ain't got one damn thing in this whole place that Ah'd even want tuh piss on."

"You... how *dare* you talk to me like that! Do you *know* who I am? Do you have any *idea* what I'm *capable* of?"

"Course Ah know who yuh are: Yo're an idiot who thinks he's God just 'cause he kin push a button." Hex dipped the gun down and pulled the trigger, driving a bullet into the Lord of Time's left thigh and causing the man to fall to the floor. "An' Ah reckon that yo're capable of bleedin' tuh death if'n Ah put enough holes in yuh."

An involuntary tremble ran through the Lord of Time as blood pulsed out of the wound in his leg. Over the years, he'd become accustomed to dealing with so-called "superheroes", who each had a strict code of

ethics to follow. But this man... this crude, hideous-looking 19th Century barbarian... obviously didn't trouble himself with such restrictions. He flinched as Jonah reached down and grabbed hold of him, pulling him to his feet, then dragged him over to the control pad, saying, "Now, yuh'd better start turnin' off all these gadgets of yers right quick, or else Ah'm gonna even out yer limp. Yuh got thet?"

As the Lord of Time leaned over the controls, his eyes went up to the monitors. Outside, the heroes were nearly done destroying his drones, and were making their way towards the ship, Flash in the lead — he could be standing in the control room within seconds if he wanted. *I can't let it come to this*, he thought, *not again*. Then another thought occurred to him, and he said to Jonah, "I need to adjust some instruments on the wall over there."

The bounty hunter grabbed him by the collar and walked him over, holding fast as the Lord of Time began flipping switches and turning dials. He tried looking over the man's shoulder to see what he was doing, but none of the symbols on the instruments made any sense to Jonah — some of it looked like English, but the rest was gibberish. Then a low hum started to emanate from the ceiling, making the hairs on the back of Jonah's neck stand up. "Whut is thet?" he asked. "Yuh'd better tell me, or Ah'll..."

The Lord of Time whirled around, trying to break free of Jonah's grip, but the bounty hunter wasn't about to let go that easy. He struck the Lord of Time repeatedly across the face with the butt of his gun, fighting the urge to just shoot the skunk dead right then and there — he knew Hal and the others needed this man alive, but they never said anything about undamaged. Then there was a shout from behind them, and someone took hold of Jonah and pulled him off the man. The bounty hunter immediately turned his rage on the newcomer, yelling at Flash, "Never mind me, dammit! *Get him!*"

But it was too late. Bruised and bloody from Hex's assault, the Lord of Time hit a switch on the wall, engulfing himself in shimmering light. Flash ran forward to take hold of him, but the light was already fading away, taking their enemy with it. Green Lantern and Elongated Man began to enter the control room after that, and Barry turned to them, saying, "He's gone. Looks like he had some kind of emergency transporter."

“And here’s some worse news,” Ralph said as he glanced at the monitors. “The anti-matter’s still descending, and without those generators to soak up the energy on impact, it’ll blow a decent portion of Arizona — and all of us — right off the map.”

Barry swore under his breath, then studied the control pad. “If I had a little time, I might be able to figure out these controls and reverse whatever he did.” He looked at Hal. “You mind buying me a few minutes?”

“You got it.” Hal left an emerald trail in his wake as he flew out of the ship and into the upper atmosphere. Above him, a chunk of anti-matter about as wide as a football field was leaving a trail of its own as it tore through the sky — it had fallen far enough that, even if Barry managed to shut down the tractor beam, gravity would still drag it the rest of the way down. *Guess we’ll have to keep that from happening*, Hal thought, and trained his ring on the anti-matter, trying to stop its forward momentum. He could feel the Lord of Time’s tractor beam tugging in the object, but managed to exert enough force of his own to hold it still. *Okay, all I have to do now is wait for Barry to do his thing, and we can shove it back into space*. Unfortunately, the thought had barely formed in his mind when Abin Sur’s voice came from the ring: *{Warning: Instability detected in anti-matter. Chance of detonation under current conditions: 78.3 percent.*

“Should’ve figured,” Lantern said under his breath. “All this pushing and pulling is probably tearing it apart.” He had no choice, though: if he eased up, the anti-matter would start falling to Earth once more. “Hurry up, Barry,” he said, watching as dark cracks began to form on the glowing rock before him.

{Chance of detonation now at 83.551 percent. Power levels at 34.4 percent.

“I know, ring... now *shut up!*” He focused his mind on the task at hand, blocking out thoughts of what would happen if the anti-matter exploded in his face. After what felt like an eternity, the tug of the tractor beam disappeared, and the anti-matter began to move upward slowly. Breathing a sigh of relief, Hal increased his ring’s influence on the object as he tried to push it back into space — moments later, the tractor beam returned, this time aiding Hal’s efforts instead of hindering. “Okay, looks

like we're gonna make it," he started to say, then saw one of the dark cracks suddenly split open, and the ring chimed, *{Warning: Detonation imminent. Please recede to a safe distance.*

"Is the anti-matter far enough away from the planet?"

A pause — too long of one, in Hal's opinion — and the ring came back with, *{At current rate of speed, anti-matter will be at an acceptable distance in 8.5 seconds. Detonation is predicted to occur in 7.9 seconds.*

"Pedal to the metal, then." He poured everything he had left into pushing the anti-matter as fast as he could, all the while moving himself away from it. Seconds later, it exploded, and Green Lantern's ring instantly wrapped him in an emerald cocoon to protect him from the blast. Even so, he could feel the force of it buffeting him around the upper atmosphere. When it finally passed, he scanned the planet for any lingering effects, and breathed a sigh of relief when he found none. "Nothing like a close call to get your blood pumping," Hal said, gazing down upon the Earth far beneath his feet. Dawn had not yet come to the entire West Coast, the stark dividing line between day and night currently falling across Nevada. Out of habit, his eyes traveled up the Pacific coastline, searching for a specific pattern of lights that didn't exist yet — he was sure that there was a Coast City in 1878, but without all those lights that he was accustomed to seeing, it was difficult to discern its location with the naked eye. Still, he had to admit that this was a rather unique opportunity, to be able to see the world in such an innocent state, unadorned by satellites or electricity. The people down there had no idea of the wonders to come in the next century, nor could they conceive of some of the horrors that would also occur in that time. Then again, there were probably many things they considered commonplace that Hal was completely ignorant of. That was the problem with progress: in order to gain some things, you had to lose others, until the old ways became just as strange and incomprehensible as the new ways had once been.

"Same planet, different worlds," Hal said to himself, then plunged back into Earth's atmosphere like a falling star.

The sun had fully risen by the time they'd collected up every stray piece of the Lord of Time's equipment. After the near-disaster that had been averted, the Leaguers wanted to make sure no more possible damage to the timestream could be done by an overlooked scrap of future tech. Of course, there was still the dilemma of the four local witnesses to it all. "There's no way we can keep you to your word," Flash said to them as both groups stood outside the Lord of Time's ship, "but we will ask that you don't tell anyone about what happened here, just the same."

"I think we can all agree to that," Scalphunter said. Hex gave a silent nod.

"Nobody'd ever believe us, anyways," Bat Lash added. "Heck, I was there, and I hardly believe it myself."

"All the more reason not to talk. People would think we were crazy, tellin' them about machine-men and such." Kate smiled. "Gotta admit, though, I admire the lot of you. Anybody that can deal with bizarre things like this without battin' an eye has got to have a lot of sand."

Elongated Man smiled back at Kate, saying, "Thanks... I think." He then waved towards the ship with an exaggerated sweep of his hand. "Well, I hate to sound like I'm in a rush, but I can't wait to get home and tell Sue all about this little adventure."

The others agreed as well that it was time to go, and the Leaguers said their good-byes before filing up into the ship. As Hal began to walk towards the gangplank, however, Jonah reached out and took hold of his arm, saying, "Hold up a minute, son."

Green Lantern looked at Jonah expectantly. The bounty hunter had been rather quiet ever since the Lord of Time escaped, and Hal attributed it to the man being angry with himself over letting that happen. But now, as Hal waited for him to speak his piece, he saw a strange look on Jonah's face, as if the man wanted to say something terribly important but couldn't find the words. Then the look passed away, to be replaced with the same unreadable expression that he always wore, and Hex merely said, "Hell of a day, wasn't it?"

Hal let out a quick chuckle of surprise. "Yeah, I suppose that's one way of putting it. Thanks again, by the way, for saving my life out there in the desert."

"Ah reckon yuh would've done the same, had it been the other way around." Jonah shifted his grip to shake Hal's hand. "Take care of yer-self, Lantern."

"You do the same, Hex." Hal continued on his way, the ship closing up as soon as he was inside. His fellow Justice Leaguers were already in the control room, and Ralph stretched his neck over to the Lantern when he came through the doorway. "What's so funny?" Hal asked when he saw the grin on the rubber-man's face.

"I've been dying to ask you for hours: Is that Hex guy Two-Face's great-great-grandfather, or is that ugly mug of his sheer coincidence?"

"You don't have a lot of room to talk," Kendra said to Ralph. "You spent a good part of the day playing Lone Ranger with your own personal Tonto. Probably a dream come true for you."

"So I got picked up by an Indian, so what? At least he doesn't look all freaky like Hal's new buddy does." Ralph pinched his right cheek and yanked, making his eye bulge out a bit and his back teeth show. "Plus somebody forgot to tell that guy the Civil War's been over with for about a decade, and his side lost."

"I'll admit, Jonah's got some... image problems," Hal said, "and his social skills need some work, but if you spent some time with him like I did, you'd see he's not all bad. Just don't piss him off, though, because he's got a mean streak about a mile wide."

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience."

"Let's just say we had a little discussion about the use of excessive force." Hal stepped over to where Barry stood at the main console, the speedster moving his hands over the controls so fast that they became a red blur. "Can you understand all that data?" Hal asked him, watching the stats fly by on the screen.

“Just enough to backtrack the ship’s flight path through time. We’ll have no problem getting home, but we should call in Ray Palmer later on to give this stuff a more in-depth look.” A slight thrum could be felt throughout the ship as it began to move into the timestream once more. “Matter of fact, I think we should call the entire Justice League together as soon as possible, just to keep everyone abreast of what’s to come.”

“What do you mean?” Hawkgirl asked. “Are you planning some sort of big time-trip with your new toy already?”

“Far from it.” Flash turned to look at his friends. “The Lord of Time said that he’d fought us before, possibly on more than one occasion... which means we’ve got quite a few more battles with him waiting for us on the horizon. And since he can jump across the centuries and pull resources from wherever and whenever he feels like, I have a feeling that those battles aren’t going to be easy.”

EPILOGUE

The four of them watched the ship fade away, the sound of it passing into the timestream lingering on for a few seconds afterward. Once all traces of it were gone, they began to walk back to where they’d hidden their horses. All of them had agreed that heading back to Desecration was probably a bad idea: there was the possibility that the townsfolk might be a little upset with them over the ruckus they’d caused earlier, not to mention the awkward questions that might come up regarding said ruckus, so better to avoid all that nonsense by steering clear of the place entirely. As they walked, Lash brought up to Scalphunter the matter of all his luggage still being in Tucson, and the gambler was trying to talk the Kiowa warrior into compensating him for the train fare it would cost him to go retrieve it, seeing as how it was — in a way — Scalphunter’s fault. So far, Lash wasn’t making any progress on that front.

Kate paid little attention to their conversation, being lost in her own thoughts. Her mind kept circling around the instant sense of familiarity she’d had with Hawkgirl — Kendra, as she’d heard the other future-folk call her — and wondered why that was so. She figured it may have been due to the simple fact that, like Kate, she was a woman that dared to play by a man’s rules, but the longer she thought about it, the more she

believed it to be more than that. Could it be that Kendra was somehow a distant relation of hers, descended from children Kate hadn't even conceived yet? It was certainly a possibility, she supposed. To be sure, it was a strange notion, especially for Kate: she had never been one for thinking about the future, having spent the majority of her life dwelling on a single event from her past, and rectifying it no matter what the cost. Jonah had once told her that sort of narrow focus would do her more harm than good in the long run, but it was a hard habit to break after thirteen years. Besides, he...

Kate stopped walking and looked around. Where *was* Jonah? He'd been right behind her when they'd left the plateau. Then she spotted him a ways back, standing with his shoulders slumped and facing the barren plain that was Tuweep. She walked back to his side and laid a hand on his shoulder, saying, "Jonah? Are you okay?"

The bounty hunter didn't answer at first, his eyes appearing to be fixed on a point on the horizon, though there was nothing there of note that Kate could see save the rising sun. Then, without looking at her, he said quietly, "Right as rain."

"You sure? 'Cause you're acting the way you did when you told me about that girl... what was her name again? Stella?"

A long pause, then Jonah turned around. He glanced over to the receding forms of Scalphunter and Lash for a moment before looking at her directly. "Yuh want tuh know a secret, sugar?" he asked. Before she could answer, he leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Ah've had an interestin' life."

Kate didn't know what he meant by that, but she could see a hint of a smile on his face as he straightened up. Whatever was troubling him had apparently passed away, and she decided not to press him about it. Without a word, Hex slipped an arm around Kate's waist, and together, they walked away from Tuweep, the bright morning sun throwing long shadows before them.

THE END

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