

Despite the fact that I had beaten Mauser and Klarion had fled, we still had work to do. I stabilized my arm with a metal cast before we descended from the pyramid, Mauser over my shoulder. Slowly but surely, we began to round up the thugs and lock them down, their guns, knives, and other metal weapons becoming crude manacles to restrain them. I sealed Deathstroke in rock up to his neck when we found him still slumped along a broken wall in the ruins. Unfortunately, Lady Shiva was gone by the time we got back to her, the handcuffs and cordage that Artemis had wrapped her in in a pile on the ground.

A while after Klarion had fled, Superboy and Kid Flash finally arrived, vastly speeding up the process, rounding up the rest of the League of Shadows goons in rapid succession while I restrained them with my bending. When the first League member arrived, the Flash, we had already finished.

The next few hours blew by in a rush. The scene was soon bustling with activity, with League resources arriving, the Guatemalan government showing up, and quite a few other Justice League members. Alpha team never arrived, turning around mid-flight to return to the cave.

By the time Batman arrived, the team was sitting down on a bench I had summoned at the edge of the clearing, watching as artifacts were gathered and stored in secure crates. Most of the criminals had already been taken away, shipped off in chains. Mauser was the last to go, as Zatarra had spent a while going through his clothes, stripping every magical artifact he had, and even removing a few he had implanted inside of him.

"This situation is stable for now," The stoic, bat-themed hero said. "Kent Nelson has agreed to put together a cleansing ritual for the pyramid and will arrive shortly. Zatarra has accompanied UN ground forces to continue de-fanging Mauser. He has been locked into some sort of stasis, his body attempting to fix itself but failing due to the obstruction. What his fate will be after Zatarra declares him 'safe' is up to the UN."

I looked around at the team, most of them seemingly barely alert. When I looked back at Batman, he seemed to have realized how exhausted we were."

"For now, there is nothing left for you to do here," He explained. "Please return to base and head to the League care facility, they will be expecting you. I will stop by sometime in the next two days for a debriefing. Skarn, be aware there may be some questions about your methods over the coming weeks. The League stands by your choice, but there will be some who ask why it was necessary."

I nodded and turned to M'gann, who could sense my intention. She lifted off from the bench I formed and flew into the forest. A minute or so later, Bioship landed in the clearing, and the team piled in.

The next few hours were a bit of a blur. Bioship took us back to the Cave, beating Alpha team easily. Immediately, we stepped through the Zeta-Tube and into the League care facility, several nurses and a few doctors standing ready to take us through an examination.

The injury list was extensive but not life-threatening, my own arm being the worst, quickly followed by Tora's arm. Apparently, Klarion had cracked her cast and rebroken the slightly healed bone underneath. They had to set it again, but they were hopeful that there was no permanent damage. Artemis and Beatriz had a few minor injuries, with the former needing a dozen stitches on her leg and the latter a bandage to cover what was essentially some nasty road rash on her shoulder.

Tula and M'gann only had a few bruises and scrapes, unsurprising considering how much tougher they were than normal humans.

When we had all been treated, we returned to the cave through the Zeta-Tube, Alpha team waiting for us on the other side. After a quick dinner that doubled as an internal debriefing, Beta team headed off to bed. If my own level of exhaustion was anything to go off of, none of us had any issues falling asleep.

The days following our clash with Klarion and Mauser were spent recovering and unwinding. Kaldur and I knew that the team felt at least partially responsible for Mauser, but we had underestimated how much it had affected everyone, including ourselves. Everyone reacted in different ways, but collectively, we breathed a sigh of relief, a thick tension that had been spreading finally falling away. The monster we released was done.

We got together as a group and discussed Mauser's effects on us. With having just experienced the release from responsibility, natural or self-inflicted from guilt, no one tried to pretend they were fine. I pointed out that this was exactly the kind of thing that talking to a professional would help us with, and this time, I got very little pushback.

I went the following day, getting a checkup on my arm before spending an hour or so discussing what had happened, what I had done, and how I was handling them. The people Batman and the League had found were fantastic, and I was delighted with the fact that the entire team would be seeing them frequently. M'gann and I even overlapped our sessions, spending about twenty minutes discussing how our relationship was working in the confines of the team.

Not long after I returned back to the cave, Batman arrived for the debriefing. We talked about what had happened for a while, going over each step of the investigation. Batman seemed particularly interested in Dr. Fate's fight with Klarion and Mauser, unsurprising considering it led to the death of the helmet wearer. He also revealed some information that we hadn't known yet.

"When the report came in that you had discovered the ritual's location, we informed Nabu with the intention of using his magic to teleport several members of the League to assist. Dr. Fate ignored the request as he felt we would take too long to get to him, and we would only get in his way," He explained, his frustration just barely leaking out around his normal stoicism. "He believed he could handle whatever Klarion threw at him."

"And he got his wearer killed in the process," I finished, my fingers slightly denting the armrest of my chair. "Damn..."

"All other members of the rotation to wear his helmet have resigned, refusing to put it on," Batman continued. "Whether or not we assist in finding him new people is something the League will be discussing soon. We are hesitant to enable a being who refuses aid and, as a result, gets someone killed."

"How is Nabu taking that?" Nightwing asked.

"Not well," The older hero confirmed. "Kent Nelson has expressed further concern about Nabu's behavior. An investigation is planned once the chaotic materials have been dealt with, a much larger undertaking without Dr. Fate's aid."

"Perhaps you could request the aid of Atlantis?" Garth suggested, getting Batman's attention. "I'm sure they would recognize the importance of neutralizing these artifacts."

"...I will speak to Aquaman."

Our debriefing continued, discussing our objectives and how we approached the scenario. When we finally got to the fights, Klarion versus the team, as well as myself versus Mauser, M'gann took over most of the talking for the team's fight while I went over my own fight. After close to an hour, we finally finished. M'gann was holding my hand and mentally snuggling me in support as I described Mauser breaking my arm and my final attack against him. The room was quiet for a while before Batman finally spoke.

"As I said before, the League supports your decision." He assured me. "His healing factor and magical flexibility made Mauser a dangerous adversary. It makes complete sense for you to stop pulling your punches. The UN is investigating, but only to keep its own records. You will most likely have an interview with someone in the next few days."

Batman was silent for a while, looking at each of us, his gaze scanning the room. After a long pause, he continued.

"This mission was, overall, a success. However, I think you all understand that it could have been better. Splitting the team and spreading yourself so thin goes directly against your founding concept. Your investigation was rushed, and while it provided the necessary

information, if it was a normal criminal investigation, most of what you found would have likely been useless in court. Still, well done."

Kaldur and I shared a look, understanding exactly what Batman was talking about. We had learned a lot over the last few months, and the team had improved by leaps and bounds. But there was still much to learn. While we were trying to figure out what we could do differently, I watched Batman as he turned off the room's holoprojector but remained standing in the front of the meeting room. After a few moments, the rest of us noticed and slowly went quiet, Wally getting an elbow from Artemis when he didn't realize what was going on.

"Prior to this mission, the Justice League discussed the progress and development of the New Titans. The topic of your integration into the UN charter that allows the League to function as an international policing force was discussed, as was what would be the next step in your team's development," He explained, his face completely neutral, as usual. "Your founding concept has been proven over and over again to be a near-complete success. We quickly came to the conclusion that we would do whatever we could to support your growth and development, as directed by yourselves."

I could see my teammates sitting up a little straighter, clearly proud of our achievements. I smiled and focused back on Batman, who nodded subtly.

"We also came to the conclusion that instead of myself or another member of the League feeding you information at our convenience, we would invite the team leaders to join our meetings so you can get that information firsthand. You won't be able to vote on our decisions, but you would be present while we make them. This has the bonus effect of preparing some of you to deal with the processes that working with the UN entails."

Once again, Kaldur and I shared a look, and I nodded encouragingly, the Atlantean understanding and leaning forward.

"Is this offer only open to team leaders?" He asked. "Or would we have someone dedicated to interacting with the League?"

"We would accept anyone delegated to the task," Batman responded with a nod. "As long as they understand the implications of being present for these meetings."

We both nodded and after a bit longer, Batman left the cave, leaving us to discuss what he had revealed. I put forward the idea that we should think about the offer and decide if we wanted to keep it to the team leaders or delegate the meetings to other team members. The others agreed, deciding to think about it for at least twenty-four hours.

With the debrief over, our week slowed down considerably. Most of Beta team was nursing some sort of injury, which meant participating in physical training was hit or miss. Instead, we focused on mentally recovering, with lessons from the Colonel or Ghost to keep us

occupied. By the time the week was over, we were all chomping at the bit to return to our regular schedule.

We had patrols to do, villains to fight, a world to protect.

Epilogue

The New Titans movement was growing.

When we started the original team, we had a primary goal: to create a new type of crime-fighting organization focused on teamwork, stealth, and tactics rather than massive broken superpowers. The original team of Nightwing, Kaldur, Wally, Artemis, M'gann, Kyle, and myself had quickly realized that we discovered something special. This was only driven home by how quickly and easily we could integrate new members, swelling our ranks and increasing how much good we could do.

And good we did. Between our work at Santa Prisca and our constant work on patrols, to our apprehension of Mauser in Guatemala, we proved again and again that not only did we have what it takes, but our training, tactics, and teamwork could take down and stop problems that would have normally taken massive amounts of police work or even the intervention of the Justice League. We were effective, clean, and, more often than not, safe.

After a meteoric rise to success, we managed to convince the Justice League and the UN to fund a massive expansion. After a long debate, way too many meetings, and dozens more examples of the New Titan's effectiveness, we were finally given the go-ahead to start the expansion process. The first step was to choose our new locations, four in total. After a long debate, we settled on London, New York, Central City, and Quebec. These would be our "Home Cities," with each having a team "stationed" there.

In truth, those cities would be where Titans would patrol and where they would live, but their training would take place at New Titans headquarters, otherwise known as the cave, and at the Quarry. Of course, the Quarry wasn't an abandoned hole in the ground with a couple of warehouses and a plywood building anymore. Now, it was a multi-square-mile training facility filled with every training setting you could imagine, from a miniature desert to a suburban neighborhood and even eight floors of a simulated skyscraper.

With our training facilities set, our "Home Cities" chosen, and corresponding branch locations bought and filled with noncombatant staff, all that was left was to expand our teams.

Over the span of a month, we interviewed nearly thirty people. Some of them had come to us, hoping to join, while others we sought out, offering a chance to work with us and become

part of the team. Most of these people had powers, but a few didn't. Those that did were tested for their control and skill, while those who were standard humans were tested for their combat abilities. Over a month, we whittled down the applicants until only twelve remained. Many of those who didn't make it were put on the shortlist to invite should we expand again.

Those twelve people were trained and taught the same way the original team had been, this time with the added benefit of having us around to give them advice to help them work as members of a coherent team. We then broke them up into squads, assigning each one to a more experienced counterpart. We were left with four teams, each with three experienced members and three fresh cadets. Kaldur, Nightwing, Artemis and I were now each team leaders, with Kladur's team stationed in London, Nightwing's team in New York City, Artemis' team in Quebec, and my team in Central City.

Of course, we would see each other often despite being stationed all over the place. We would still gather for training, and when the need arose, we would always be on hand to call in for assistance.

"You ready?" M'gann asked, pulling me from my thoughts and back to our room.

I turned away from the window, which overlooked a long street in Central City. We were lucky to get such an amazing location for this branch, and M'gann and I couldn't help but grab the rooms with the best view when we finally decided this was where our team would be stationed.

"Yeah, just thinking about the last... well, you know," I said, trailing off with a shrug, sending out a nostalgic pulse.

"It's been a wild ride. Ready for the next step?" She asked, returning the sensation as she stepped forward and reached out with her hand.

My loving girlfriend had changed so much since we first started, it was hard not to constantly brag. Long gone was the nervous Martian, worried about people finding out what she looked like. While she frequented a humanoid look, she also proudly wore her pale white skin, her pupils now yellow with black sclera. She frequently shifted back and forth between this and her default form, as well as half a dozen other forms she liked to wear.

When she reached out, I happily took her hand, smiling and pulling her close, spinning her around before kissing her soundly. When we pulled back, I could see a red blush along her cheeks, which she quickly shape-shifted away. I couldn't help but chuckle, even as she scrunched her nose at me.

"I am, this is just one of many though," I reminded her.

"Maybe, but don't lose sight of your progress because we have a long way left to go," She pointed out.

As M'gann talked, she reached out behind me, and after a second, she was holding my helmet, which she taped against my chest. I smiled and took it from her, clipping it onto my belt.

"You're right," I admitted, giving her another kiss, this one on her forehead. *"Alright, now I'm ready."*

We made our way through the building, stepping out of our room and into the dorm hallway before entering the entry hall, which was just a fancy way of saying it was where we put the Zeta-Tube. The space was empty, as was most of the team's living facility since the team hadn't moved in officially yet. A quick tap into the Zeta-Tube control screen and I selected our destination before we both stepped into the glowing light, stepping out into the UN building's entrance hall.

UN security promptly escorted us through the building, not stopping until we were seated along the front row of one of their meeting halls. There we sat, shaking hands and waving occasionally as the rest of the team, several members of the Justice League, and other people arrived.

It was a whirlwind of people until, finally, after thirty minutes, the ceremony began. Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman walked up to the room's podium, with Superman standing directly behind it. After a moment, the subtle sound of a microphone clicked on, and the hall went silent.

"Welcome, everyone, and thank you for coming," He said, his teammates standing behind him. "Today marks a great occasion, the first expansion of the New Titans. There is much I could say about the individuals who started the team. All of them have worked hard, and all of them are heroes in their own right. But rather than stand here and extol their individual virtues, I will instead treat them how they have always presented themselves. As a team. Together, the New Titans have saved countless lives, stopped dangerous villains, and defended the innocent. Time and time again, they have proven their founding idea, that together we are stronger than any individual."

Superman stepped back, allowing Woman to step behind the podium, the proud woman warrior looking out into the audience.

"Together, they have proven that their idea has merit, even beyond what we had hoped. Through their dedication to their training, heroic efforts, and determination, they have stepped up to a level that only the Justice League has previously stood. I am proud to see those who we once considered our proteges and wards now sitting before us as equals, determined to help the world. To protect the innocent. To stop the wicked."

I turned my head to look at Kaldur sitting between his girlfriend and boyfriend. He caught my eye and nodded, a small smile on his face. M'gann squeezed my hand, and I looked back at the podium just in time for Batman to take the stage.

"We are here to mark the first expansion of the New Titans, the first step in a new era of heroes," The bat-themed hero said, with no different inflection than when he used to give our debriefings. "The New Titans are now an entity independent of the Justice League. No longer is the League alone, fighting the good fight."

"*You guys ready?*" I asked, feeling out Artemis, Kaldur, and Nightwing through the connection M'gann formed the second we were in range.

"We are ready."

"Yup."

"After you, big guy."

I mentally nodded, and as Batman finished his speech, he looked at us and nodded. Together, all four of us stood and slowly made our way to the podium, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman stepping down and leaving. I stepped up to the podium first, silently waiting for everyone to quiet down, Nightwing, Kaldur, and Artemis standing on either side of me.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming," I said, making sure to not lock eyes with anyone in particular yet, though I couldn't help but give M'gann a mental squeeze. "On behalf of the New Titans, I want to thank the UN and the Justice League for their support. Our goal, our dream, our mission is only possible because of the faith and trust you have placed with us."

For a moment, I paused, looking out into the crowd, my eyes now lingering over the twelve new cadets, each of them dressed in their uniforms.

"We stand before you, leaders of the New Titans, as we finally take our first steps into the international stage. We stand before you, taking the first step of many," I said, smiling confidently. "The New Titans represent a new age, a shift in what superheroics are. By working together by shoring up our weaknesses with the strengths of those we trust, we have created teams that save lives, stop disasters, and protect the innocent. And as I said, this is the first step of many. My hope is that, eventually, the New Titans will have teams ready to help all over the globe, ready to step in at a moment's notice."

I stopped and stood back, Nightwing stepping forward.

"We also hope to set an example. With Meta-Human percentages rising, many out there are scared," He said, leaning on the podium. "The New Titans stand with those who are

confused, lost, and without guidance. And we stand against those who would use their newfound powers to steal, hurt, or dominate."

Artemis stepped forward next, Nighting stepping back, patting her shoulder.

"Together, we hope to show that there is always a better way, and that with help, we can find it. There is always another option, and there is always hope," She said, seeming confident despite her nervousness echoing through the link. "We stand ready to help those who wish to change."

Again, we shifted, Kaldur stepping up to the podium.

"The New Titans represent an idea. The idea that together, we are stronger. That together we can change the world," He said, scanning the crowd silently for a moment before continuing. "Today is a celebration of taking that a step further. Cadets, please stand."

All twelve of our new members stood, eyes locked on us at the podium. I could see several people in one of the guest galleries whispering, and I recognized a few as the families of our new members.

"Today marks your official recognition as members of the New Titans. The second wave, the next step in our journey to make our mission, our dream, come true. I called you cadets not a moment ago, but that no longer describes you. You are now full members of the New Titans. Congratulations."

While the crowd applauded and our newest members stood proud, Kaldur and I switched, and I once again stood before the audience. I smiled and gestured to our teammates to sit again.

"Thank you, everyone, for your support of the New Titans," I said, nodding to a few people who had supported us heavily through this process. "This step is the first of many, but each step is one we can be proud of. It may seem like an impossibly long journey, with each step seeming difficult, maybe even impossible. But today marks the completion of one such step, and tomorrow will bring another. Together, we can mark that one as well. Today is the day."