

"So Kaldur sees the barrier and immediately tries to break through it," Tula explained, clearly holding back a laugh. "Meanwhile, Garth, he tried to attack it like a riddle, working along the edges, trying to figure out a weak spot."

The five of us, Kaldur, Tula, Garth, M'gann, and I, were all sitting in a cafe a few days after our gang bust. It was Wednesday, and our double date was going well, despite the fact that our "double" outnumbered us. The date had started with a pleasant walk through some parks, followed by a light picnic lunch while we enjoyed the scenery, ending with some city exploration afterward. Now, as we wound down, we were sitting at a cute cafe we had stumbled on, all of us savoring the best coffee I had ever had.

The fact that this was Paris was personally just background noise to me, though Tula and M'gann clearly loved it. After she took a sip of her drink, Tula continued her story about their academy entrance challenge. She still looked like she was about to break down into giggles, which was infectious.

"While they try to plow through the barrier, I just sit back and watch for a second. While I did, I noticed the controls, clearly labeled and everything," The red-headed Atlantean continued. "It wasn't part of the test at all, just the door to the next part! I let them struggle at it for another minute, trying not to laugh before pulling the lever. The barrier immediately faded, and they *BOTH* turned around with big smiles on their faces like they had defeated the big scary door!"

Tua finally lost her battle with her laughter, which quickly spread to the rest of the group. She had been talking about the process of becoming Queen Mera's personal apprentices before Kaldur had decided to shift his studies to be more martial in nature. She had stopped when Garth brought up their academy entrance exams to tell her story, much to Garth and Kaldur's chagrin.

"In my defense, I did not believe I could actually knock it down," Kaldur said, barely keeping his embarrassment out of his face. "I was testing to see its reaction."

"It also didn't look like a simple door," Garth added, his blush a lot more obvious. "It was big and glowing and really intricate."

We all chuckled at their excuses, and they both accepted the ribbing, laughing along with us after a moment. Tula rewarded them with a kiss on each of their cheeks while I wrapped my arm around M'gann, the Martian happily leaning closer. The seats at this outdoor cafe were basically loveseats, and while the throuple were sitting just a bit tightly, there was plenty of room for M'gann and I, especially when we were sitting so close.

"Oh, that reminds me. How are the humidifiers working out?" I asked, taking a bite of my scone once we had all recovered. "You guys sleeping better?"

"They are working great," Garth responded with a smile, Tula nodding in agreement. "I don't know how Kal survived that long without them."

A few weeks ago, Tula had admitted that sleeping on land was a bit of a hassle, as she had an alarm set to wake her up two times a night so she could drink and splash her face with water. If she didn't, she would wake up with a sore, dry throat and dry gills the next morning. Even with the routine, she could feel the dryness affecting her quality of rest. Garth admitted to just dealing with a sore throat at first before mimicking what Kaldur eventually admitted he did, which was sleeping with a damp, wet washcloth around his neck, covering his gills. A short brainstorm later and I ordered three industrial humidifiers, which we installed in their rooms.

"I regret not bringing it up sooner," Kaldur admitted, "Our rooms feel much more comfortable."

"If it were any more humid in your room, it would start to rain," I said with a smirk. "Just remember to keep an eye out for mold. I smoothed out the walls to make it more difficult for spores to attach, but I don't know if that will be enough."

"Even if I have to wipe down every surface every week, it would be worth it," Tula said, leaning on Kaldur, pulling Garth's hand into her lap. "The last few weeks of sleep have been wonderful, almost as good as sleeping fully submerged."

"I still think we could develop some sort of water pod," I said. "It wouldn't be too hard, like a fish tank but bigger."

"I fear sleeping in a cramped location like a pod would trigger claustrophobia," Kaldur pointed out.

"It would also get kind of gross," Tula added with a shiver. "Sleeping in that little water, and breathing it in?"

We talked for a while longer, the sun was quickly setting on the beautiful city of Paris. We were idly discussing waiting until it was dark and experiencing the city's nightlife when that option was taken away. Kaldur and I both received messages simultaneously. Our phones when sounded off a ring tone that marked the message as urgent but not life-threatening, which everyone recognized immediately. Our conversations halted completely while we pulled out our phones.

"Batman is at the cave with a mission for us," I explained, answering everyone's curious looks. "Looks like we need to cut this short."

"We got a full day out of it," M'gann pointed out with a smile. "We can do the night tour another time."

We quickly cleaned up while I went and found a waiter, quickly paid for our meal, and left. Within ten minutes, we had all climbed into Bioship, the ship invisibly waiting for us above one of the many parks we had explored earlier. With a mental poke from M'gann, Bioshop landed, and we piled in, the Martian spacecraft taking off immediately.

Once we landed in the hangar, the Bus sitting not far away, we quickly made our way through the base to our conference room. Batman was waiting for us, as was Will, the only Titan who wasn't at school or with us in Paris. Jim Harper was also there as Ranger, our mission control. Oddly Paula Crock was not.

"Apologies for the wait," Kaldur said as we sat down. "The message was marked urgent, but we were among civilians."

"Not a problem," Batman responded, turning to start whatever presentation he had prepared.

A projected hologram screen popped up, and several newspaper articles, police reports, and other documents showing all at once before stacking into several piles, each labeled with times and locations. Those then shifted into a list, showing a consistent pattern over the last few weeks.

"Over the last three weeks, several artifacts and magic items have gone missing or been directly stolen," The older hero explained. "Until recently, these crimes went unconnected due to the perpetrators being random. However, the most recent theft, a heist of an ancient Egyptian tablet dedicated to the god Isfet, was intercepted by the Flash."

An image of a thick tablet, about the size of a large textbook, set with large faceted jewels and lined with gold, popped up on the screen. It showed a display in a museum, the tablet sealed inside a large glass display.

"By the end of the battle, one of the criminals was injured enough that Flash needed to render aid, allowing the remaining criminals to vanish with the magical artifact."

Five images replaced the image of the tablet on the holoscreen, showing several criminals. The final one flashed twice before the remaining four faded. It was a mugshot I recognized, having memorized it when her sister joined the team.

"That explains why Paula isn't here," Jim said. "For her sake, I hope her injury wasn't too severe?"

"...When attempting to delay the Flash, Cheshire laid a trap," Batman explained, Jim immediately tensing when he refused to answer directly. "Unfortunately, when the Flash triggered her trap, she was knocked aside, falling into another exhibit. The exhibit collapsed,

and her left leg was crushed by a large stone statue. The surgeons were forced to remove her leg to save her life. Warden and Snapshot are already with her."

Jim cursed under his breath when Batman paused his response. I took a moment to work through what Batman had just said before I shook my head.

"Dammit. That is rough," I said, shaking my head. "She was a piece of work, but Artemis and Paula clearly care about her. And I can't imagine how the Flash feels."

For a moment, the room was silent, going over what we had just learned from the stoic hero. When the moment was over, he continued his briefing.

"While examining Cheshire's equipment, I discovered their mission parameters. The League of Shadow was hired to facilitate the gathering of over three dozen artifacts, some well known, others not, some in public collections, some placed in private collections," He explained. "One of the reasons it took so long for us to realize something was happening was because the private collectors were keeping the thefts to themselves."

"What's the connection?" I asked. "Who hired them?"

"Klarion." Batman responded.

"Wait, Klarion? Lord of Chaos Klarion? Why would he need to hire anyone to do anything for him?" I asked with a confused look. "He is a global-scale teleporter with no shortage of power. Seems kind of silly for him hire out."

"Dr. Fate believes it is due to his power that he is hiring," Batman responded. "Klarion is chaos incarnate, and he acknowledges that at least. We can't know for sure, but he might have hoped that this could be done quietly without attracting attention, something he could never personally manage."

"Anyone able to figure out what the artifacts are for?"

"Dr. Fate believes he is trying to perform a ritual," He explained, the list of artifacts stolen recognizing and shifted into a few different lists. "There are a few commonalities in the artifacts that point in that direction. He believes it *could* be an empowerment ritual, something to bump up his connection to the primordial chaos that feeds his magic. He also has expressed disbelief that Klarion is even capable of conducting a ritual considering how adverse he is to order, which means he might have a partner."

"The same one he mentioned?" M'gann asked. "During our fight?"

"It's possible, but we can't be sure," Batman responded. "Needless to say, Klarion becoming more powerful is not something we can allow. Dr. Fate is working around the clock to

try and locate him, but since Klarion isn't actually going out himself, he hasn't been able to track him down. So far, our only lead is on the stolen artifacts themselves, as well as what else he might need. Unfortunately, according to Dr. Fate, the list is particularly long."

"Which is where we come in," I said, Batman nodding.

"You, along with many other League members, friends of the League, anyone we can get our hands on and convince to work with us," He added. "We are spreading ourselves thin but hoping that we can prevent more of the artifacts from being stolen, buying time for Dr. Fate to locate and subdue Klarion, or at least weaken him enough that he won't be able to perform the ritual."

"I was under the impression that the Lords of Order and Chaos have rules they have to obey," Will said, everyone turning to look at the archer. "This kind of seems like it goes against those."

"It would if it worked, but we can't expect Klarion to succeed. Rituals such as these are intense, difficult, and dangerous. Even if he did, and he was sent away, the ritual could have a significant effect on the balance of this world," Batman explained. "If he failed and managed to open a connection to primordial chaos, the damage to Earth would be catastrophic. We need to prevent this ritual from occurring. The first step of that is to buy Dr. Fate as much time as possible. Several dozen artifacts that he believes could be targeted have already been stored away in secure locations, but there are too many that refuse to take the danger into consideration. We are working on getting permission to confiscate them anyways, but that takes time."

Batman continued to outline the plan, what we needed to worry about, and where we would be stationed. After a short discussion, it was decided that the teams would be split up, taking turns to watch over a private collection in a large New Orleans home. Technically we hadn't been given permission to watch over the private collection, but we didn't need permission to patrol the area directly around the large private home since it was public land.

The specific magic item we were being charged with guarding was a large cluster of red and orange crystals growing from a chunk of black and red stone speckled. There were several spires ranging in size and growth, but the whole cluster was about the size of my head. According to the information that Batman had, the crystal cluster was hot to the touch and made the room smell like smoke, even in a cool and ventilated room.

Apparently, the crystal cluster, called the Chaos Gem according to the current owner, was a powerful and chaotic source of magical power. It would fit nicely into the ritual that Dr. Fate suspected Klarion and their mysterious partner were gathering resources for. If we prevented it from falling into the wrong hands, it would potentially reduce the effectiveness of the ritual or force Klarion to find a new source, slowing them down considerably.

We quickly made our plans, and by the time everyone returned from school, we were ready. Since Tula and Garth had the most advanced knowledge of magic, they would be split up between the teams. We had planned around Artemis not being around, but she arrived shortly before the Alpha team left. After Assuring everyone she was more than ready to go to work, she left with Alpha team while Garth stayed behind with us.

Since we were now on the clock, Tora and Beatriz called their parents, who both called them out for the next two days of school, which meant they were all set for four days since the weekend was coming up. Once the Alpha team left, Beta team immediately headed for bed, wanting to get as much rest as possible.

When we eventually traded places and got our first look at the area surrounding the building, the private home where the crystal cluster was being kept. It was a large house, especially by the standards of city houses in New Orleans. It was built far enough from the city center that it actually had a small yard and space between it and the other buildings around it, but close enough that it still felt like a part of the main city center.

According to the intelligence that Batman had given us, the Chaos Gem was on the second of three floors and in the general center of the large house. Our shift started early in the morning, but plenty of people were still moving about, so we set up a simple undercover patrol, with the Bioship floating over the mansion itself with the rest of the team, ready to deploy at the first sign of trouble.