

A lot had changed in the last few months, and quite a few of those changes started with everyone returning from the mentorship and vacation week.

Kaldur arrived back from his trip earlier than we had expected, accompanied by both of his friends, Garth and Tula. He introduced them as his boyfriend and girlfriend and asked if they might be allowed to join the team, vouching for their skill and experience. At that point, I was alone in the cave. It took me a long moment to recover from the shock of Kaldur stoically delivering the news that not only dating, but dating two people. Considering that not even Wally or Robin had known the Atlantean hero was Bi, it was a rather large surprise.

Regardless of the rather large surprise, both Garth and Tula were precisely what we had been looking for, namely magic users with a flexible foundation who had gone beyond learning the minimum requirement as Kaldur had. Garth even had a talent for healing magic, though I was quickly informed that it had its own limitations. We had barely started talking about the process of being accepted, which, at that point, was still more of a vague concept than an actual process when Tora returned, Wonder Woman and Beatriz da Costa following along.

It was at that point that I realized it was going to be a long day.

Tora nervously and guiltily explained what she had learned and what she had done. She openly admitted knowing it was probably a bad idea but maintained that she knew she had to do something. She attributed her success to wonder woman, though I could see Beatriz behind her, shaking her head. The cryokinetic explained that Beatriz forgave her, though neither of them wanted to talk about what had led to that development.

Beatriz admitted her fault without hesitation and accepted all repercussions, but Tora quickly prompted her to explain the whole situation. Apparently, the Brazilian pyrokinetic had been suffering after her brother's death, and between the resulting depression, falling grades, and a fair bit of teenage naivete, she had mistakenly trusted the words of her boyfriend over everyone else's, including her parents. Unfortunately, when faced with Wonder Woman, he admitted to using her for his own clout and advancement in the gang, one she had almost joined. She finished by asking to *eventually* be allowed to try out for the team, explaining that she was going to train under Wonder Woman for a while.

Kaldur and I both expressed our disappointment in Tora, specifically that she had gone out on her own, reminding her that we were a team and that all it would have taken was a few messages, and many of us would have dropped everything to help. She understood and regretted her impulsiveness and promised to do better, which for her first mistake, was good enough for us.

After Wonder Woman and Beatriz left, and Kaldur had gotten Tula and Garth settled into their own rooms, Superman returned. It was a bit late at that point, but he seemed to be very happy, clearly having enjoyed his trip, meeting his extended family, and his subsequent training. He talked about what his training was like before spending much longer talking about his new

extended family. I could only imagine what M'gann's reaction would be when she learned he had started calling his guardians "Mom" and "Momma."

When Artemis returned the following morning, she was accompanied by Roy, Will, and Jim. The three red-headed clones looked good after their time away. Not long after that Robin and Wally returned, the former dressed in an entirely new blue and black costume. When the greetings and surprised words finally settled, everyone took a moment to explain what was happening.

Robin's new costume came with a new name, Nightwing, and was part of his decision to double down on the New Titans. He was clearly underplaying the significance of it, but he explained that his priorities had shifted, and it was time for a change. Kaldur had simply nodded, but Wally's reaction of a slack-jawed, wide-eyed face was a lot more telling.

When we looked at Artemis and her accompaniment, Roy explained he wasn't there to join, he just wanted to see the setup, but Will was interested. Will, who was the only clone who had a connection to the team through Nightwing, Kaldur, and Wally, was interested in joining the team but admitted he wasn't quite ready yet. Jim also expressed interest in the job I had offered but understood that a lot needed to be done before that position was ready.

The team spent a while discussing the situation, everyone immediately realizing that some shifting around would be required soon. The team was already bordering on being too big, and now we had four new people looking to join.

Over the next few days, between training and helping Garth and Tula move in properly, the team got together and hammered out what the acceptance process would look like for both people looking to join and the people we went out and made offers to. In the end, we settled on a grade or graduation requirement, a minimum competency which basically just boiled down to whatever talents or abilities a candidate possessed were under control and not a danger to themselves or others, as well as a few other things we tacked on, just in case.

With a finalized list of needed criteria set, we moved on to redesigning, or more accurately designing for the first time, what our team structures would look like going forward. We settled on first creating squads of three, then pairing those together with teams of six. Each squad would have a squad leader, and one squad leader would "rank" above the other to be the team leader.

It wasn't immediately necessary because almost everyone on the team or part of the group looking to join had at least some experience in crime fighting, or at least combat, but the idea was to have a more experienced squad paired with newer squads to mentor them. This way, when we bring more people in, the teams could split, and each squad, now experienced and trained, could mentor a new one. We made a note to emphasize that flexibility was important, so while working with your squad was key, the ability to work well with your entire team and teams you worked closely with was also vital.

For the next few weeks, we continued our training, going on a few minor missions and continuing to gain more and more experience. During that time, the cave was renovated, which I helped with. Several facilities were expanded, including the kitchen and dining room, the common room, the gym, the meeting room, and the dormitories. A mission control room was also added as well, built with Batman's help and input from Jim and Paula, who had agreed to be our mission control team.

Between my abilities and the help of the League, the additions and renovations were finished quickly, in time for Will and Beatriz to officially join the team. Will moved in immediately, but Beatriz was living at home and traveling to the cave.

Perhaps the most significant change, or at least my greatest personal victory, was when I *finally* managed to convince everyone that we should have a minimum required coverage in terms of armor and protection. Artemis, in particular, was against it, but I had come prepared, showing a few videos of helmet tests I had found online. It was hard to refuse to wear a helmet after watching a human head analog explode into chunks.

A week or so after the renovations were complete, Kent Nelson finally reached out to talk to me. I volunteered to meet him at the Tower of Fate, but apparently, he had happily moved out now that Dr. Fate was once again an active hero. Instead, he came to visit the cave again, this time laden with three scrolls and a book. He apologized for taking so long, and we talked about Dr. Fate and how everything was going. After making small talk for a while, the magician explained that when he said he recognized the energy I was using, he had been referring to chi in general rather than my ability to earthbend.

He explained that while the baseline humans of this universe could use chi, it was nowhere near the level I could. After a bit of debating, we both agreed that the likely reason for such a stark difference was the constant presence of spirits and spiritual energy that the Avatar world was exposed. Further, while the energy, chi, were identical as far as Kent could tell, the way I manipulated and influenced it fundamentally differed from what humans on this earth were capable of.

Still, he happily gave me the research he had on chi use, which was admittedly very little. So far, I had been unable to replicate anything that the records described, though I had managed to push myself further along the normal chi user development scale that the Toph construct had mentioned was natural for people from the Avatar universe. I was just a tiny bit stronger, faster, tougher, and more flexible than before. It was a welcome addition, of course, but it was hardly noticeable overall.

It had been about two months since things had settled down, and we had once again returned to our "Normal" schedule. We trained constantly, working with the Colonel, Ghost, and Ted Grant to improve ourselves and our abilities. Those of us who needed to go to school, namely Kyle, Tora, Beatriz, Wally, Nightwing, and Artemis, were around less but still participated

as much as they could, with most of them still living in the cave. To make it easier, we stuffed the weekends with as much training as possible and moved everything else later in the day.

The idea of having everyone go to the same school was floated around but eventually discarded. In the end, Tora and Beatriz went to the same school together, as the Costa family had decided to move to the US, wanting to get away from the trouble that Beatriz had gotten herself into, as well as be closer to Tora's family. Wally was going to the same school he always did, and Artemis got into a private school near where she lived. M'gann admitted that she had considered going to an American school just as an experience since she had already completed her own education. I supported her, but she eventually decided the urge was mainly just her wanting to experience the rose-tinted version she had seen on the TV.

Kyle was surprisingly excited to go to a high school in Central City, freely admitting that he needed to experience stuff other than fighting and the hero world. As for Nightwing, well... we still had no idea where he went, much to his regret. He stated several times that he wanted to share his real identity, but it would make Batman's identity very obvious, and while he was no longer planning on inheriting the title, he wasn't willing to betray him like that.

Tula suggested going by Robin to friends and adopting that as a nickname, but he just shook his head, explaining that it wasn't his name anymore and it might get confusing eventually.

Everyone was riding high, the growth and so far success of the team making everyone feel invincible. Unfortunately, those kinds of feelings often invite the universe to prove how wrong they were.

Mauser, the arms dealer who had escaped Central City custody after we caught him, cut a bloody streak across the US. It took frustratingly long for anyone to put it together, but he robbed a full dozen stores while constantly evading police in increasingly frustrating ways. We could only watch as report after report of his crimes came in, all brutal and chaotic. Our original understanding of what he was capable of, which he had already proven wrong once, continued to be defied as he showed various skills we had no idea he possessed, including a type of blood magic that Kent Nelson warned us was old, potent, and dangerous. We were desperate to find his location, to apprehend him and put an end to his tear across the states, but almost immediately after we started personally hunting him down, he went to the ground, vanishing completely before we could even get close.

We did manage to convince Batman that we should be notified the second he came up again, and the bat-themed hero reluctantly agreed. Every member of the team understood that making things personal was not healthy, but it was impossible not to take his chaotic and brutal actions to heart. We all wanted to take him down, even those of us who hadn't been on the team for his original apprehension.

Still, we kept ourselves busy in the meantime, waiting for Batman's investigation to turn up something. We went on two separate missions, an attack on a nuclear power plant by Professor Ojo and the recovery of a group of hostages in Bialya. Alpha team handled the nuclear reactor, which thankfully was stopped before anything major happened, while about a month later, Beta team was sent to Bialya.

While Queen Bee was long gone at this point, and the country was slowly recovering, there was a minor group trying to seize power from the resulting vacuum. Batman contacted us early on a Tuesday morning, and the Beta team arrived on location within seven minutes.

The group that took the hostages, two of which were American citizens who had been living nearby, had holed up in one of Queen Bee's abandoned palaces. The situation was dire, as all of the buildings that the megalomaniac villainess had constructed for her use were ridiculously overbuilt, with armor, security, and even traps. This made a normal assault by baseline humans near impossible. Luckily we managed to free the hostages and take down the perpetrators. Unfortunately, the younger of the two American hostages was harmed in the process. Thankfully, M'gann managed to save him with some quick thinking and creative use of her shape-shifting abilities.

Imagine her surprise when the kid's mom turned out to be one of her favorite actresses. The woman was thankful enough for our help that she agreed to sign M'gann's copy of her old show, despite clearly hating the connection. Thankfully M'gann didn't notice.

Beyond the two missions, we kept up our patrols, going to various cities, both during the day and at night. Our method of using Bioship as a rapid response vehicle only got more efficient with two teams deployed at once. We would break up into squads, usually modified to keep everyone moving around and active while leaving one in a Bioship to keep track of the police scanner. That got even better with the introduction of the Bus, allowing us to rapidly respond to multiple locations, basically patrolling entire cities at once.

It wasn't until recently that our patrols turned up another self-assigned mission, similar to what we did with Central Cities' advanced weapons problem. After responding to a series of overdoses and complications from Meth, we brought the issue to Batman, who confirmed a rising problem with a new drug peddling ring. An investigation uncovered a few distribution centers, which we then hit and cleared out, using what we learned to locate more. Last night's raid and trap were the results of that information.

It had been a long few months, but I was extremely proud of the New Titans and what we had accomplished. A lot had changed, and I was pretty sure there were more changes to come.