

I quickly rushed back to the manhole we entered through, launching myself almost two-thirds up the ladder with a pillar of stone before climbing the rest and emerging into the street. I winced at the brightness, looking around, trying to spot M'gann, Fire, and Garth. A blast of green flame came up from the opposite side of the house, tall enough to be seen even from where I was standing, revealing exactly where my three teammates were.

With time being critical and the streets already mostly cleared of civilians, I kicked and jumped, summoning an earthen wave to propel me down the street, quickly crossing down the road and around the corner, immediately spotting Garth, M'gann and Fire. All three of my teammates were fighting two people, older adults, the first of which was a rather large man, his hand replaced by a dangerous-looking hook. I immediately recognized the second combatant.

"Ranger, we have Deathstroke on the field, repeat, Deathstroke on the field!" I messaged mission control, not slowing down in the slightest.

I barreled toward the experienced assassin, leaning in and pushing my bending-enhanced speed to its maximum. I flexed my power and pushed all of the meteorite metal I had on my hands and arms down around my hands, forcing it back into a vague shield shape, just in time to plow into the orange and black-clad assassin.

Of course, I had no illusions that I would catch him unawares, instead wanting to force him to disengage from Fire and Garth, who were only managing to keep him at bay using wild area-of-effect attacks, which was clearly tiring them out. The master assassin turned towards me, probably having picked up on the vibrations that the earthen wave put out, raising his sword to slash at me while spinning to the left. Having expected him to dodge, though, I was ready, spinning and dragging up a block of asphalt and stone right where he was dodging too.

Even caught up in the process of dodging, though, he still managed to mitigate my strike, bringing up his blade and slashing at the stone, carving it into chunks that fell out of my control. Some still hit him, but what should have been a blow strong enough to lift him off his feet now only made him stumble backward.

*"Garth, M'gann, take down the unknown,"* I said, knowing that Fire's fire would only serve as a distraction for the two of them. *"Fire, you're with me. Keep him honest with fire blasts while I get in close. And stay out of range!"*

I felt more than heard their agreement, M'gann and Garth shifting their focus to the larger, hook-wielding man while Fire rose off the ground to fly behind and above me, floating to my left, ready to help. I shifted my stance, watching the dangerous man in front of me, both of us wordlessly sizing each other up.

Before I could consider attacking to throw him off guard, he moved. Without hesitation, Deathstroke pulled out a compact machine pistol that vaguely resembled a Mac-10. I slammed my foot into the ground and pulled up a large chunk of the street, just in time for the hail of

bullets to slam into the asphalt and stone barrier. As he shot at me, Fire swooped down, blasting the mercenary assassin with fire, forcing him to roll and jump out of the way. As he did, I leaped over the barrier I had made, desperate to get closer to him. Once within range, I managed to yank the gun out of his hand, pulling the metal towards me and stomping the gun flat.

The experienced mercenary immediately rolled, jumped, and slid backward, holding his sword out in front of him, slowly backing away. After a moment of staring me down, he turned his head slightly just in time to watch M'gann grab the other man's hook, which could apparently be fired from his arm. She snagged it with her TK and flung it back at the larger man before wrapping him up with the chain that connected the man's arm to his weapon. Once he was wrapped up tight, Garth flung a thick blast of electricity at him, the metal surrounding him conducting it all around his body, knocking him out completely, the larger man collapsing like a cut puppet.

Deathstroke looked back at me before reaching down to his utility belt. I rushed him, trying to stop whatever he was doing, but he was too fast, and he threw down a smoke bomb that filled the road with thick, irritating smoke. I was lucky, as I hadn't taken off my mask yet. My teammate, however, was driven back, hacking and coughing.

As he faded into the smoke, he continued to watch me, studying me closely before vanishing completely.

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The irritating smoke hung around for a surprising amount of time, seemingly too dense to disperse. I eventually had Fire heat up and walk around inside it while wearing a mask, her heat causing an updraft that eventually pulled the smoke up into the air and out of the street.

Transport for the villains we caught in the sewers, as well as the hook-armed amputee, arrived after a few minutes, during which we kept our eyes open for reinforcements or anyone looking to come and free the knocked-out or restrained villains.

Once they were ready, I opened a hole into the abandoned sewers below, letting the authorities take the criminals away. When they were done, I fixed the hole before going around and repairing the streets that I had torn up while fighting. Batman, who had arrived not long after the fight was over, pulled me aside when I was done.

"The owner has finally agreed to let us seal away the gem," He started.

"Good. The fact that they sent two teams, and Deathstroke was in one of them..."

"They would have kept trying until they succeeded," Batman finished, and I agreed with a nod. "Did Deathstroke say anything to you?"

"No, he was silent the entire time," I responded, shaking my head. "He was good. I have a feeling he could have won if he pushed."

"No, not against all of you. Even he would be overwhelmed with your numbers, especially with how smart you have been fighting. He would have retreated even earlier," Batman assured me. "I believe his retreat was inevitable when he realized you could manipulate metal from a distance, he is adaptable, but all of his weapons are metallic in nature. Be careful. Next time you see him, he might not have any metal on him."

"That makes sense, actually," I admitted with a nod, before changing the subject slightly. "I'm sure you figured this out already, but I think the first team was a distraction, and the second team was there to actually acquire the gem. Sacrifice the disposable assets, giving the in-house team a better shot. Might be worth passing that on to everyone else."

"Not an unusual strategy for the League of Shadows. I have already passed on the possibility to several groups, as well as the rest of the League. They are disseminating it further," He assured me, turning to look at the local police as they worked to keep the crowd back. "You and your team did well."

"Thank you, I'm proud of them," I admitted with a grin, looking over at Superboy, who was talking to a police officer about twenty feet away. "Are we done here? I want to get everyone back to the cave."

"Dr. Fate has already secured the gem. Your team is free to return to base to recuperate," Batman said with a nod. "We may call you back if we discover another artifact that cannot be moved immediately."

I nodded and mentally communicated with M'gann to gather everyone together, making my way to her. In short order, we piled into Bioship and took off into the air, heading directly for the cave. We arrived to find Kaldur waiting for us, as well as Nightwing and Tula, the latter of which rushed to Garth's side. He had only sustained minimal injuries, mostly a few bruises and scrapes, but Tula doted on him, taking his arm and pulling him to our medical room, one of the few new rooms that had been added during the addition. It wasn't much. Basically, just a room overly stocked with first aid materials, though it could function as a surgery suite or recovery room in a pinch. Tula made sure to give Kaldur a kiss on the cheek as she led her second boyfriend down and out of the hangar.

"It is good to see you have all returned uninjured," He said, nodding to me. "Were there any issues?"

"No, everyone is fine, and we stopped the Shadows from getting the gem," I answered, the stoic Atlantean nodding in response.

"You got lucky," Nightwing said, shaking his head. "Deathstroke has a history of punching way above his weight class and coming out clean. If you weren't a direct counter for a lot of his weapons...."

"I'm aware. Worse is that now he knows, which means that not only does everyone else, but next time he might come at me with something I can't deflect or manipulate from range," I added with a frown. "I need to be prepared. Next time I face the Shadows, I wouldn't put it past them to try and trick me or create weapons specifically to counter me if they know I'm coming."

We talked for a bit long before M'gann and I headed to the kitchen to make some lunch, eating with the rest of the Beta team, including Garth when Tula was done doting on him. Kaldur stopped by as well to see his boyfriend before heading back to his room.

Over the next several days, we were called on three more times to defend, transport, and investigate chaos-related items and artifacts. Beta team spent time in China, at the behest of a private collector, helping transport an ancient sculpture of Eris that Dr. Fate couldn't teleport. We ended up having to defend a small convoy and armored truck from the Triad on the way to the airport, culminating in a fight on the runway against a few metahumans I didn't recognize.

In the end, the artifact was successfully loaded into the plane, but in the process, Superboy was injured, though not terribly. One of the meta-humans, who went by Snakepit, seemed obsessed with targeting Superboy. Worse was that he seemed to draw power from kryptonite, his snake tattoos glowing a familiar radioactive green, the light of which affected the young Kryptonian hybrid badly. Kyle ended up with burns along his arms, though they were already starting to show signs of healing.

Alpha team was sent out soon after we returned to investigate a potential artifact that Kent Nelson believed he had located in the deserts of Egypt. The mission was eventually successful, the team recovering a ruby amulet containing a powerful chaotic curse. It was linked to the Egyptian god Seth, which ended up being very important, because on top of being the Egyptian god of disorder, he was also the god of storms and the desert. While they were successful, they were buffeted by a heavy sandstorm and intense heat, so bad that the Bus couldn't take off.

By the time they returned, all of them were tired, dehydrated, and sunburned. The three Atlanteans, in particular, were especially exhausted. It took half a day for Kent to put together a unique containment vessel and even longer for Captain Marvel to bring it to them. Thankfully, the storms vanished the second they secured and isolated the amulet.

Our final assignment was another defense mission, this time for a private collection of an English businessman of questionable ethics. The owner of the chaotic artifact, a staff said to be owned by a previous Chaos Lord's minion, refused to sell or hand over the artifact, even when

shown the evidence of what was happening. That meant it was up to us to keep the Shadows from getting their hands on it.

This time, however, we mixed up the teams so those of us who needed to be at school could attend while the rest of us were on patrol. We would then switch for enough time for us to get some sleep before heading back out. It was grueling, but we agreed that skipping school too often was not a precedent we wanted to set unless it was an absolute crisis situation.

Luckily, we didn't have to patrol long. On the third day, Superman stopped by with lunch, flying down from the sky with a box of subs. While we were eating, a mysterious burglar broke in and stole the staff. Surprisingly, Superman saw nothing, despite being able to see through walls.

He claimed the sun got in his eyes.

Eventually, Dr. Fate finally said that we could scale back the patrols. Between setting up an early warning system for significant, chaos-infused rituals, he also was confident that we had deprived the Lord of Chaos of the most critical part of the ritual he was most likely attempting, its primary power source. Technically he could achieve the ritual with smaller sources of chaotic magic, but the ritual would lose its potency by a significant degree, something Fate was pretty sure wouldn't be acceptable to the insane magical being.

With this news, everyone let out a sigh of relief. We were still on alert, as was the League, prepared to dash off if Klarion tried to attempt his ritual, but the fact that we had a reliable way to track any attempts at said ritual, as well as having grabbed the majority of dangerous artifacts, helped us all breathe a bit easier.

Unfortunately, that didn't last long.

A few days after we got the good news, Batman arrived with the bad. Mauser, who had been quiet for a while at this point, had reappeared in Japan, cutting a bloody path across the country, only to go to ground the second the League dispatched Hawkwoman and Hawkman to apprehend him. I would have complained about not being sent ourselves, but at the time, we were preoccupied with the final Dr. Fate requested mission, and he was already gone by the time the artifact had "disappeared."

It had taken a few days to even connect the crimes together, the gunman and thief only showing his mask for a few seconds to an ATM machine outside a convenience store.

Even though all evidence and prior experience said he had gone to ground, we still spent a week patrolling Japan, keeping an eye out for the mentally unstable villain. It was frustrating, knowing he was already long gone, but we made it work anyway.