

The police took over the scene immediately after they arrived, cordoning off the area and beginning to collect the shooters. I helped remove the stone restraints I had put a few of them in, allowing them to be treated for their injuries and carted off. The police were clearly used to working with heroes, and after we gave them our statements, Artemis and I headed off, leaving our New Titans contact information with them.

As we continued our patrol, the fight stuck with me. The entire situation came off as a ramped-up fight between gangs, but the plasma pistol didn't fit in the slightest. Where would a small-time gang of fewer than ten people get access to super tech like that? The high-temperature plasma weapon had melted concrete, stone, and metal. It was a horrifyingly dangerous weapon in the hands of a jumped-up idiot having a shoot-out in a populated area.

What was even more worrying was how crappy the gun itself looked. Its casing was cheap 3D printing, and the trigger was a premade activator button you could buy from any hobby store. Its charging port, if I was looking at it correctly, was the standard female port for computer power cables. Everything about it reeked of a homemade disaster, which was a terrifying concept.

The night passed, and we finished our patrol, riding Bioship home to the cave. We immediately headed to bed, woke up in the afternoon, ate, relaxed, and recovered before heading out for our final patrol.

Unlike our first two patrols, our third was relatively relaxed. There was a minor break-in at a gas station, a few muggings, and one car accident, but none of them were anything compared to the apartment fire or the shoot-out. We completed the final patrol, heading back to the cave to recover. When we arrived, Batman was there waiting for us.

"As much as you might want to, I suggest you force yourselves to stay awake until later tonight," He warned us as we sat around the meeting room we had started using lately. "You risk making this your new sleep schedule otherwise."

After that suggestion, Batman started the debrief on the last three days. He congratulated us for our well-planned deployment and our reaction to both the fire and the shoot-out. He warned me specifically about the dangers of going into situations like the apartment fire alone, but admitted my options were limited with who I was grouped with. He suggested that in the future, we be more cognizant of any weaknesses we were introducing by breaking the group up like that.

Instead of telling us to write a report, we spent a few minutes reviewing what we could have done better and a few points that Batman thought we did well in. When the debriefing was over, I got everyone's attention before the older hero could leave.

"What was going on with the energy weapon that was used in the shoot-out?" I asked him, the oddity still bothering me.

“Unfortunately, it appears that Central City has a new tech provider selling their goods to anyone with money,” He explained, activating the projector at the end of the table again. “This is the fourth instance of super tech in the hands of common criminals in the past week or so.”

The screen showed images of the plasma pistol, some sort of device that I didn’t recognize, and two rifles that were clearly different tech than the plasma pistol but were constructed with the same shoddy materials. They were all poorly made, put together with spare parts and exposed wires.

“A group of bank robbers used this device to cut into an armored vault,” He explained, gesturing to the device I hadn’t recognized. “It used a high-powered laser to slice through the locking mechanism and several large locking bolts. The culprits were caught when they spent too long filling their bags, and the device was recovered undamaged. One of the rifles was found during a drug bust two days ago, and the other was recovered from the scene of another shooting four days ago.”

“What do you know about whoever is making them?” Robin asked.

“This latest weapon was confirmation that this is not a small-scale production and that someone is selling these devices to anyone with the right money,” Batman explained. “Beyond the specs and materials used to make the weapons, we know very little as there hasn’t been enough time for a full analysis.”

“Could we head this investigation?” I asked, leaning forward in my seat. “The latest discovery happened on our watch. Seems like we would be good candidates.”

Batman looked at me before scanning the room. He was silent for a long moment before finally speaking in his usual serious voice.

“This is a high-priority investigation. The creation and sale of dangerous super tech, especially weapons, is not something we can allow to happen freely,” He explained. “Furthermore, while the weapons function, their poor quality is worrying. There has already been a serious accident due to a malfunction. We are worried that further developments will create more dangerous failures.”

“We understand, sir,” Kaldure said before confidently continuing. “I believe our record so far, as well as our dedication to improving ourselves, proves we take this seriously.”

“It does,” Batman agreed, giving us all another look before nodding. “Very well, you have four days to investigate this independently. I expect consistent reports on your activities and progress, as well as a warning before any planned interception of criminals. If I believe you are not doing an adequate job, or the fourth day has passed, the Justice League will take over the

investigation. I will have all the information we have acquired on the situation here by tomorrow morning. For now, decompress and get some rest tonight.”

Without another word, the bat-themed hero left the conference room, the security door closing behind him. Robin quickly got up and followed his mentor out of the room while the rest of us collectively flopped back into our seats.

“I think, eventually, this schedule would become normal,” Kaldur admitted. “But keeping such late hours is a strange experience. I feel as if I have changed depth a dozen times very quickly, only to be returned to the original pressure level.”

“I feel that I need coffee if I’m going to stay up for much longer,” Artemis said, rubbing her face. “Coffee and an energy drink.”

“What? How can you guys be tired?” Wally asked. “We just got our own investigation mission! This is a big deal!”

“We know Wally. I’m sure everyone will be more excited tomorrow,” M’gann said with a smile.

We all went our separate ways, everyone doing their best to stay awake. I was only just starting to feel the fatigue, so staying up wasn’t too difficult. I kept myself busy, doing some basic training with earth and metalbending, as well as some light physical exercise. We all called it a day when it was late enough and headed to our rooms.

When we all finished our morning rituals the following day, including our workouts and some light sparring, we reconvened in the conference room. Batman had dropped off our information, so that meant it was time to get to work.

The team started reading through the files provided for us, spreading them out on the conference room table. There were some preliminary examinations from the first examples of the tech found, as well as the police case for the drug bust, bank robbery, and the now two shoot-outs. It wasn’t a small amount of information to cover, but luckily everyone was eager to get to work, so it didn’t take too long for at least one person to read each file.

“We need to do this quickly,” Wally said, flipping through the technical specs of the first rifle recovered. “These things are dangerous to everyone around them, including the person shooting them.”

“How bad is it?”

“Pretty bad. If I’m reading this right, the energy storage system they use is basically two steps away from being a bomb,” He explained. “And everything else isn’t much safer, especially considering they are being made from cheap parts. I’m surprised they work at all!”

“The news is bad on this end as well,” Tora said, shaking her head. “The CCPD wasn’t expecting energy weaponry at the drug bust, and it made everything a lot more difficult. Luckily no one was killed, but four officers were hurt with severe burns. They aren’t equipped to handle this kind of tech.”

“And not just in the field,” Kyle said, continuing from where Tora had left off. “The first rifle was stored in a secure locker in the evidence room, alongside a dozen other weapons. The rifle’s energy containment field failed and melted down the locker. Literally. Several cases are now in jeopardy because of it. They clearly don’t have the right kind of training or equipment for this.”

Kyle had suddenly become very interested when he heard police officers from the CCPD had been hurt. It took me a second to remember that Kyle’s adoptive guardians both worked at the CCPD. Judging how calm he was now, though, they must be fine.

“Can’t blame them for that. Super science on this scale is a new thing,” Robin said. “We are at a weird place right now, where super science is possible with standard science materials. It used to be that a super scientist would have to craft their materials by hand.”

“Situations like this are going to become more and more common then,” I said, shaking my head. “Well... I guess that’s what we are here for.”

“Indeed. Which means we need to find whoever is doing this and stop them,” Kaldur said.

“They may not be doing it willingly,” M’gann pointed out. “Not saying for sure, but we should keep in mind that this might be a rescue mission as well.”

“That true M’gann, which just makes this more important.”

“I think our best bet is to start with the people caught using the tech,” I said, tapping one of the mugshots of the bank robbers. “I’m not sure if we are going to get anything.”

“Umm... what about the trigger?” Tora asked.

The rest of the group looked at the Norwegian heroine, who faltered momentarily before steeling herself and continuing.

“You said the trigger was a stock part, like from a hobby or hardware store.” She confirmed. “Well, parts like that usually have batch numbers or something, right?”

“Damn... that’s a really good idea,” Wally said, Tora perking up significantly. “We would have to take it apart...”

“Star Labs would probably be up for that,” I pointed out. “But the CCPD would probably be against handing out evidence in an investigation. Let’s call that a solid and well-figured-out plan B.”

Tora nodded with a smile, clearly happy to have helped.

“So we start with one of the criminals,” Kaldur asked. “But which one?”

“Nobody from the drug bust is talking about anything, despite being caught red-handed,” Robin said, flipping through the investigation report for the aforementioned crime. “They are all pretty set on staying loyal and silent for their bosses.”

“So far, the guys we busted are pretty ride or die, too,” Artemis said. “We might be able to convince one of them, but no way to know.”

“Which just leaves the guys who robbed the bank,” Wally said, looking through the notes in front of him. “The leader's name is Daryl Tornac. He claimed he was just trying to make a quick buck and got sick of working his ass off for chump change.”

“So he robbed a bank?” I asked incredulously. “Damn... well he sounds like the perfect person to interview. Who was he working with?”

“Two coworkers he convinced to join. They rolled on him almost immediately.” Wally responded.

We talked about the plan for a while longer before deciding that M’gann and I would be the ones to interview Daryl. I was going because I looked the oldest, and M’gann could shift could match that. She would also be making sure he was telling the truth. As a last resort, she would scan his mind, but we all agreed that deep diving into someone's head should be held in reserve as much as possible. These guys were clearly idiots, but according to the police report had actually done their best not to hurt anyone.

I made a call to the district of the CCPD that was holding Daryl and notified them that we wanted to speak to him. It took them a while to confirm our credentials, but eventually, they invited us to the station. It didn’t take us long to get there with Bioship, and after a quick conversation with the woman in charge of the case, Detective Reza, we were led to an interrogation room. Daryl Tornac was already sitting in the room, waiting for us.

“What the fuck do you want?” He asked bluntly, leaning back in his chair. “They already told me they’ve got me dead ta rights. Why you costume crazy’s getting involved.”

“Well, Daryl, I’m here with some bad news,” I said, sitting across from him at the table, M’gann standing near the door. “You see, until recently, your case was an oddity but nothing

more. Super tech like the laser system you used to cut into the vault doesn't pop up in amateur hands very often, but it does occasionally happen.”

“So what?” He asked, leaning back and trying to cross his arms, scowling when his handcuffs stopped him.

“So, when your case came through, it was considered odd but not exactly not overly noteworthy. Then three more cases of super tech came through,” I explained, putting down images of the pistol and rifles. “Suddenly, a lot more people are worried about what’s going on.”

I watched him as he looked down at the pictures. He was obviously familiar with the laser cutting device, but he also seemed to recognize the rifles as well. I paused for a moment before leaning forward.

“Daryl, this tech? It's dangerously unstable. This rifle, it melted down not long ago. Turned a gun locker into slag,” I explained. “It was poorly made and dangerous, to say nothing of the lives lost from criminals having access to that kind of firepower. Central City has a problem, a big problem, and you, my friend, are sitting in the middle of it.”

He looked up at me, eyes going a bit wide as he started to realize his position.

“Now, you have two options. One is you cover for whatever idiot sold you tech that was one jostle or drop away from slicing you and your buddies up. Option two is you tell us where you bought the tech. You get a nice little cooperative note in your file, and we get to stop the idiot from selling more dangerous and unstable tech. As an added bonus, we can stop paying attention to your case and focus on the real problem.”

Daryl broke down pretty quickly after that, eagerly explaining that he had bought it from a weapons dealer around town, one that had apparently been around for a while. According to Daryl, he started selling more high-tech items recently, and when he heard he had a way to cut through bank vaults, Daryl couldn't resist.

“Thank you, Daryl,” I said, standing from the table with a smile. “With any luck, you'll never see me again. Try to stay out of trouble.”

M'gann and I left, the door closing behind us, the detective in charge of the bank robbery investigation meeting me in the hall.

“That was nicely done,” She said, crossing her arms. “You got a lot of experience interrogating criminals?”

“In a way, it's honestly complicated,” I said, reaching out my hand. “Thank you for letting us talk to him.”

"It wasn't a problem. His case was already more or less shut," She admitted with a shrug, reaching out and shaking my hand. "Besides, I want whoever is making that tech in a nice dark cell. My wife was visiting the precinct where the energy weapon melted down when it happened. She usually works here, at this precinct, but she was consulting on another case.

At the mention of her wife, a few things clicked into place. I could feel M'gann's surprise and bubbling eagerness. She had wanted to meet Kyle's guardians for a while.

"Oh my god, are you Lily?" She asked, stepping closer to the detective.

"I was wondering if you guys would connect the dots," She said with a smirk. "But unfortunately, I don't think now is the time to socialize. Though it is nice to meet some of my ward's teammates."

"Oh, right, sorry," M'gann said, looking embarrassed.

"It's alright," She said with a professional smile before continuing. "Kyle has mentioned introducing us to the team a few times. I'll talk to Sarah about setting something like that up. But for now, let's get the file on your weapons dealer."