

It was another day before they finally let me leave the hospital and return to the cave. Even then, I was banned from any heavy activity for the remainder of the week. Still, just being able to walk into the kitchen and sit down, rather than wait for a nurse to help me, was well worth the few days of being benched. I was only conscious in the hospital for just under two days, and that alone had been terrible, even with M'gann visiting.

The first thing I did when I got back was check in on everyone involved in the mission. Kyle had completely recovered, and I found him reading in the library. He waved away any worry I had and thanked me for coming to check up on him, before apologizing that he couldn't visit me after I woke up. Tora and Beatriz returned to the cave a few hours after I did, the latter looking fine and the former still in a cast and sling. Both of them were quick to assure me they were fine, as well as ask about my condition.

Tora was apparently going to be in her cast for months, which was unfortunate. She was hopeful that she could go on missions anyway, and I promised to think about it. She wasn't a physical fighter, so I was considering it.

Despite the temptation, I wasn't dumb enough to push myself too quickly after being impaled and then operated on. Instead of participating, I was stuck following along with the teams as they did their workouts and sparring, as well as training sessions with our tutors. It wasn't too bad, and I was very happy that I was healing much faster than Ice. As horrible as it was to say, being on the sidelines for two months and light duty for a few more sounded like torture.

At the tail end of the second day of taking it easy, Batman stopped by to fill us in on what was going on outside our base. They were pretty sure they had identified the item that had been inside Amazo's chest containment shell. He showed me a picture of what they suspected it had been, taken from some old records, and I confirmed it, though I wish they had been wrong. It was a talisman made of red jade, inscribed with a prayer to the Sumerian goddess of chaos, Tiamat. This all but confirmed that Mauser was working for or with Klarion.

If that wasn't horrifying enough, Batman reported that the situation with keeping track of Klarion or tracking down any chaos-focused ritual was not nearly as taken care of as we had first thought. Dr. Fate had assured the League that he had it all under control, but when they somehow found out he might have been stretching the truth, they sent Kent, Wonder Woman, and Jay Garrick to find out what was going on.

After plenty of prying, they finally got him to admit that his assurances had been given because he believed he could make up for any deficiencies in the process. Basically, the method he was using to track chaos wouldn't tell him until the ritual was already underway, but he was confident he could handle it, even then.

Personally, I thought that taking the word of a thousand-year-old wizard at face value was pretty stupid, but at the end of the day, I had just taken the League's word, so I didn't have much of a leg to stand on.

"So, what are we doing?" I asked, leaning forward in my chair, happy that the movement hadn't tugged at anything sensitive.

"Unfortunately, there is not much more we can do," He admitted, sounding extremely unhappy with what he was saying. "Wonder Woman believes we can continue to trust Dr. Fate, as she believes she was able to get through to him. He assures us he will notify us when the ritual is happening."

"When?" Kaldur asked, a slight frown on his lips. "Did we not work hard to prevent it in its entirety?"

"Having Mauser working with Klarion changes the situation," Batman answered. "We have no way of knowing just what resources he has access to, what type of magic he knows, or even how old he actually is. Klarion is immortal, but his chaotic nature makes it all but impossible for him to manage even the smallest of rituals. But with another immortal like Mauser on his side, the chances that they manage to get the ritual to work skyrocket. It is no longer about prevention, but intervention."

"So Dr. Fate isn't being a glory hound anymore, and is going to tell us when something is happening," Wally said. "Do we have teams set to head out? Should we be on high alert or something?"

"Both Kent Nelson and Zatara have access to the readings coming from the scanning... spell that Dr. Fate put together," Batman explained. "We have people watching certain places that would work well for the ritual, but again, with someone like Mauser working with him, it's near impossible to predict. This is a setback, but it's not one so large that we can't overcome it. In the meantime, we will continue to try and catch Mauser. If we manage to catch him, then the likelihood of the ritual being completed drastically drops."

Batman went over a bit more before eventually leaving the cave to do his own work. Rather than leaving the meeting room, which was where Batman did most of his briefings, we hung around to talk about internal business.

"Our most recent mission did not go as well as it could have," I said, standing up from my seat. "But I don't think that the blame for that falls on anyone. This job is dangerous, and it was inevitable that we would eventually run into something that hit back harder than we were prepared for."

I paused for a moment, letting my words sink in. I could see Tora look down when I said there was no one to blame, which told me she disagreed, something I would have to correct.

"It does, however, bring something back to mind that we have discussed before but not put into practice," I continued, looking around the room. "The newly instituted hospital that the League put together has two psychologists on staff, both of which have been briefed on the general circumstances of the New Titans."

"Don't you think we have more important things to be worrying about?" Nightwing asked, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair. "Mauser and Klarion could start their ritual at any time. We should be doing something about them."

"There will always be something more important, Nightwing," I responded, shaking my head. "We have chosen to be heroes, potentially for the rest of our lives. There will *always* be something, a catastrophe, some grand threat, a secret cabal, or a villain who makes it personal. If we don't prioritize our mental health to some degree, then we will never have time. Kaldur and I discussed this and have agreed that at least one one-hour-long session every two weeks is required to be a member of the New Titans. No excuses, no alternatives."

I got a few nods in agreement but also a few skeptical looks. I sat back down and let out a sigh.

"Look, I get it. Sitting down and opening up to a stranger for an hour doesn't exactly sound like a great time. But the fact of the matter is that this job, being heroes, is punishing, both physically and mentally," I explained, rubbing my face. "Being mentally healthy does not come naturally to people who do the kinds of things we do, or most people at all for that matter. Just like anything else worthwhile, you need to work at it. I'm not going to keep track of your appointments or anything like that, but the psychiatrists both know they should be seeing you once every two weeks. They will notify Kaldur or myself if someone misses them."

This time, I got a few more nods of agreement, and while I knew I would probably end up having to poke and prod, I was hoping I could get through to everyone. I couldn't really say I blamed them for being reluctant, I was not looking forward to having to get to know a new shrink, not after having such a strong rapport with who I used to see before I was sent here. I wasn't exactly sure I needed one, I hadn't been lying when I told Black Canary that I was pretty sure I couldn't be mentally unhealthy with the Super Soldier Serum enhancing my mental resilience, but there was also no way I could get out of it after making it sound so important. Not that I would even try.

Once the meeting was over, the team went their separate ways, our training, lessons, and workout done for the day. I gave M'gann a kiss before heading down into the grotto. Once there, I slowly went through the many forms and stances of earthbending, slowing them down until it was almost like doing tai chi. I used it to focus, calm down my mind, and test to see if there were any sore spots or tightness in any of my many wounds. For the most part, I felt good. My body was almost completely healed, and my deeper injuries were reduced to the point that they were barely noticeable. Still, I didn't want to push myself, so I kept things slow.

When I was finally satisfied, I sat down on my meditation platform and closed my eyes. I sent a mental hug to M'gann, who had been mentally checking up on me occasionally, before letting myself go, slowly returning to my familiar meditative state.

"Welcome back, Mopey," The Toph construct said, standing just a dozen or so feet in front of me. "C'mon. It's time for another check-up."

I had worked with Toph a few times over the last few months, having advanced through my earth and metalbending in that time. But I had come back for a specific reason, to ask about the sudden breakthrough that I had while fighting the nanites. I hadn't expected a test.

"I didn't really-"

I barely had time to react as she came at me, her face serious as she concentrated. I spun to the left, dodging the line of rock shards she had summoned with a stomp of her foot. I retaliated with a kick, carving out a chunk out of one of the rock shards and launching it back at her. I could tell she was taking this seriously or at least projecting a severe expression.

We sparred for hours, going back and forth. I clearly had the advantage of strength and speed, but her bending was perfect, always having an answer to whatever angle I attacked her from. I had grown used to this from the dozen or so other times we had sparred before, but I could feel it even more this time. I couldn't tell if it was because she was a construct and therefore not bound to normal rules or if Toph was just that fucking good, but she trounced me at every opportunity. Thank god this wasn't real, or my goal of taking it easy would have been completely crushed.

When she finally called it done, I was sweating and breathing heavily, somehow having pushed myself that far even with my enhancements. After a few minutes of recovering, I finally focused back on her.

"What was that for?" I asked, wiping the sweat off my face with a towel. "I just came to ask a question about bending."

"There is nothing to worry about," She said, waving off my concern, despite the fact that I hadn't actually explained to her what I was worried about. "All bending has a mental component. Going through something intense can unlock new aspects or help you push through things you previously struggled with, especially when those things coincide with your element."

"Coincide with my element?"

"You stared down a metal monster that was immune to your bending, just punched out the heaviest hitter on your team, and impaled you. Not only did you hold your ground, but when it turned around to ignore you, you grabbed it and told it you weren't done with it yet," She said, giving me a look, her eyebrow raised. "Congratulations, you've got more persistence and

endurance than most earthbenders could dream of. You're also kind of an idiot, but beggars can't be choosers. Anyway, your breakthrough is because you faced probable death without blinking, then told it to get fucked."

I sat down, pulling a stone pillar out of the ground to land on as I did.

"Great. I was nervous that something was wrong," I admitted, shaking my head. "Though looking back, I'm not sure why."

"Well, congrats, but we need to discuss what happens now," She said, summoning her own chair to sit in. "You're ready to start learning my final techniques. The ones I only shared with a few people. Tremorsense, the final version of my metal armor, and a few others. Are you ready for them?"

"Yes, absolutely!" I said, standing quickly, the towel and seat forgotten. "Which one are you going to teach me first?"

"That's up to you," She admitted, crossing her arms. "The tremorsense will take a long time to be useful to you. You live in a world with much more movement, so becoming sensitive enough to use it reliably will be tough. That said, it worked well enough for me in Republic City, so its definitely possible."

"I've seen your metal armor technique, but what else do you have to teach me?"

We discussed our choices for a while, but by the time I left, we really hadn't reached a conclusion. These more advanced techniques would likely take *months* to learn with frequent visits, so we both wanted to be certain I knew what I wanted before starting. She ended up sending me off with a few high-level practice techniques to improve my fine control and total mass control even further, even though I was already pushing what could be considered a master earthbender.

I left the meditation world without much fanfare, managing to avoid any of the Toph constructs pranks. I stood up and stretched, looking out over the small pond that took up the grotto's center. The water flowed quietly, and the whole scene was beautiful and tranquil. Even so, I couldn't help but frown. With the threat of Klarion and Mauser hanging over us, the sense of unease permeating the cave was almost palpable. It was impossible to ignore, and as I climbed the stairs back up to the main living space of the cave, I could feel M'gann mentally reaching out for me again.

"*Why aren't you asleep?*" I asked, stopping by the kitchen to grab a drink.

"*Couldn't. Everyone is feeling a lot right now,*" She explained. "*I can even feel it with everyone asleep.*"

*"... Grab some blankets and some pillows, and then meet me by the Zeta-Tube," I said, heading back to the fridge. "We can sleep under the stars, somewhere with less people."*

It took us a few minutes to get everything together, but soon, we were sitting on a blanket in one of the grassy corners of the quarry, far away from anyone else. We were both sipping hot chocolate, leaning against each other, and sharing a second blanket to keep warm.

Eventually, after an hour or so, we laid back, falling asleep while looking up at the stars, a full moon filling up the sky.