

Chapter 37 - In the Jungle

It was slow progress through the dense jungle foliage, everyone doing their best to stay quiet. M'gann was hovering a few feet off the ground, dodging vines and tree branches while the rest of us struggled with the thick underbrush. Robin was the only one who was perfectly silent, which was why about a minute into our walk Kaldur had him walk about a hundred feet ahead to warn us if anyone was coming.

"Incoming, small armed patrol coming towards us," Robin thought to us. *"Four, armed with high-end rifles."*

"Everyone, take cover," Kaldur ordered, gesturing with his hand. *"We will wait for them to pass, we are not sufficient enough in stealth to move while they are close by."*

The entire team sunk low, M'gann fading from view as she engaged her camouflage and landing in a clear spot on the ground.

"I'm making stealth lessons a top priority when we get back," I said through the open link. *"For a team that's supposed to specialize in it, we have a disturbing lack of stealth."*

"Speak for yourself," Robin responded from further in the jungle.

"Stay focused everyone," Kaldur said, turning his head to scan around. *"Miss Martian, when the patrol passes do a scan of their minds. Kid Flash, Superboy, keep track of them with infrared."*

"Right," M'gann, responded simply, focused on the approaching group.

Kid Flash and Superboy both wordlessly nodded, the former pulling down his goggles and activating them, while the latter clicked his helmet, the face plate racking up, revealing his face as he stared intently, scanning the area.

"I can see them," Kid Flash said. *"They are about forty feet out and closing."*

For a long pause, the group was quiet. M'gann continued her scans and Kid Flash watched the approaching armed men. I could feel M'gann focusing through our close bond. Eventually, as the group passed us and kept going, the sense of focus from M'gann faded.

"Okay... so that was Bane and his men," M'gann explained, still mostly invisible. *"Bane is furious, keeps raging about a cult of some kind. His men though are nervous, one of them is a lieutenant and loyal, and the other two are looking for a chance to slip away and get off the*

island. Whoever this cult is, they took over the island and Bane has been trying to wrestle control back since then. It-"

"Guys, there's another group coming from the other direction," Kyle said, cutting M'gann off. *"Six of them, maybe forty feet out."*

"Miss Martian, can you reach them?" Kaldur asked.

"I... no, I mean I can, but somethings different. They are protected by something, maybe some sort of mental training?" She responded, sounding frustrated. *"It's why I didn't notice them even though they were so close. Their minds feel... different. I could force it I think but they would definitely notice."*

"Then leave them, better to not know for now and remain undetected," Kaldur said, opening his mouth to speak but snapping it shut when gunfire echoed through the jungle.

"They spotted each other," Superboy said, with a smirk. *"Looks like it was a surprise for both of them."*

"Alright, let's move!" Kaldur said, standing and rushing in the opposite direction of the gunfire. *"They just provided us with a perfectly good distraction, let's take advantage of it."*

"What about Bane?" Robin asked.

"He will keep, our first priority is identifying who this cult is and what they are doing here," Kaldur responded.

As quietly as possible we kept moving, following along the cleared path until eventually, we reached a clearing, a large warehouse on one side. We joined Robin along the tree line, all of us hiding in the shadows of the jungle.

"Cult of the Cobra, that's our mystery group," Robin said, passing Kaldur a compact set of binoculars. *"I recognize their uniforms, it just took a minute to click."*

"Anything we need to know?" I asked. *"I haven't gotten to their file yet."*

"Bunch of crazies who believe their leader is a snake god of some sort," Robin explained, accepting the binoculars back. *"They have a pretty broad list of crimes, everything from drug smuggling to a few attempts at human sacrifices."*

"Right, snakeguys bad then."

As we watched it was clear that the area was busy. Armed guards were all around the place, while workers, dressed in the same black mask and red cloak, moved around to prepare what looked like a sizable amount of product.

“So, what, Kobra wanted some roided out cultists?” Wally asked, looking confused.

“No, the equipment to use venom properly is pretty obvious,” Robin responded. *“And you can’t wear restrictive clothes either, they get in the way of the transformation. If it’s for his men then he hasn’t passed it out yet, which makes no sense considering who they are fighting against to hold the factory.”*

“So either he is hoarding it for a later date or just here to sell it?” Kyle suggested.

“We need more information,” Kaldur said, Robin nodding his head in agreement. *“Things aren’t adding up in a way that makes sense. The League of Shadows has never shown any interest in Venom before, why start now?”*

For a few moments, we were quiet, observing the cultists as they worked. Eventually, Kaldur made up his mind about whatever he was thinking about.

“We will circle this clearing to the opposite side, where the warehouse is closer to the cover of the jungle,” Kaldure said. *“Hopefully we will find answers inside the facility. If not we will retreat and come up with another plan. Robin, message our backup what we have learned so far.”*

We pulled back into the forest, making our way along the vaguely circular clearing. After he was done informing the three Justice League members that made up our emergency reinforcements of the situation, Robin moved closer to the clearing to keep a better eye on the cultists. They were still clearly agitated, probably by Bane and his men.

After about twenty minutes of slow progress around the clearing, we eventually made it to the back of the warehouse. From here we could see a few tower-like machines, some sort of smoke stack or tank system. There were a dozen armed cultists standing by, stationed around the back and scanning the forest. We were all about thirty feet back into the forest now, hiding in the darkness.

“Once we start taking out cultists our window of stealth shrinks,” Kaldur said as we watched a patrol walk along the jungle edge. *“We need a way to get inside without revealing ourselves.”*

“There are seven cultists inside the warehouse,” Superboy said, squinting and staring intently. *“Two on the second floor and five working on the first.”*

"In most factories like this, a second floor would be a control room of some kind," Robin pointed out. "That's where we need to be."

"Very well. Miss Martian, Robin, I want you up and in through the roof of the warehouse. Gain access to the control room," Kaldur instructed. "The rest of us will continue our surveillance."

Robin nodded and looked at M'gann as she decloaked. The young hero held out his hand, which M'gann took. She flew up into the air, fading from view again as she carried Robin along the tree tops. I lost sight of her almost immediately, but a few seconds after they left Robin spoke through the mind link.

"Now!" He said, pausing for a long moment before continuing. "We are on the roof, all clear, looking for an entrance point now."

"Good, keep us in the loop. We will continue around to the front entrance so we may observe the cult members," Kaldur said, before looking to the three of us, nodding to the left. "Let's go."

As quietly as we could Kaldur, Wally, Kyle and I walked around the warehouse, deep in the forest. Eventually, we arrived closer to the front entrance, allowing us to see the cultists.

"There are about twenty-five cultists outside in the front, almost half of them unarmed and working," Superboys said, peering out of the darkness. "There's also... what is that?"

I frown and peek out from around a thick tree, looking for what Superboy was talking about. Standing at the far corner of the warehouse was a hulking beast of a humanoid. It was easily around seven feet tall, and was a grey tan color, though it was hard to tell with the low light. It had red hair and...

"What is wrong with it? It looks like it's tearing out of its skin," I said, unable to hide my revulsion. "That looks... painful."

"Whatever it is, it looks strong," Wally pointed out. "Who is it standing next to?"

The large humanoid beast was standing next to a robed man as well as a skinny red head woman, maybe twenty years old at most. She was constantly looking around, her head on a swivel.

"I do not know, but I would put money on them being in charge," I responded. "Those three are the only ones not working, and his robes are different from everyone else."

"If it's Kobra he is a martial arts expert a peak plus physical levels," Robin said, pausing before continuing. "We found a hatch, by the way, making our way inside now."

"Copy that," Kaldur acknowledged.

The four of us watched, each of us making mental notes of the cultists, watching patrols, and keeping an eye on the probable leader. Robin and M'gann were silent for just over a minute before finally talking again.

"Okay, had to take down the cultists in the control room," He explained. *"Accessing the computer now..."*

Another tense minute passed, all of us keeping our eyes peeled for any aggressive movement. When Robin's voice finally came back it was full of tension.

"Damn, this is bad. Kobra has somehow combined Project: Blockbuster with Venom. The new formula is three times as powerful and completely permanent. This... This could change everything. We need to stop this from ever getting out."

Everyone was silent as the consequences of a drug like that washed over us.

"Agreed. Contact our reinforcements... Recommend that they encircle the island to prevent anyone from leaving," Kaldur said. *"I believe we can handle the cultists, but stopping this new formula from leaving the island is paramount."*

Again, we were forced to do nothing but wait, our eyes still on the clearing. After a few minutes, Robin talked in our heads through the mind link.

"They have given us the go-ahead to try and take them down ourselves." He said, sounding excited but still tense. *"They are circling the island to prevent anyone from escaping."*

"Good, then here is the plan. Robin, Miss Martian, leave the way you came, I want to regroup by the back entrance," He explained, all of us standing and creeping back along the jungle. *"We start by taking down the cultists isolated by the warehouse. After they are dealt with we split up into groups of two and take out the other patrols along the treeline."*

We quickly made our way to the far back section of the warehouse, M'gann and Robin meeting us there. A quick discussion had us breaking up into groups of two, with Robin and Superboy together, Kaldur and Wall forming the second pair, and M'gann and I as the third. We spread out and waited for the word from Kaldur, simultaneously breaking the cover of the treeline and snatching the lookouts.

Thankfully the element of surprise let us take them down with very little noise. M'gann lifted two cultists off the ground and slammed them into each other, while I kicked up sand and pummeled another one down with it. Kaldur zapped a pair of them that were standing close together with his electricity, while Wally and Robin each took out one. Superboy used his

low-end superspeed to zip across the ground and knock out four of them, each with a single punch.

We all looked around for a moment, waiting to see if any more remained before quickly dragging the unconscious cultists back into the forest.

"That... that went better than it had any right to," I said as I restrained the out cold cultist with zip ties.

"Just imagine what we will be able to do when you are all properly trained," Robin pointed out, his smirk noticeable through the mind link. *"Superboy that was kick ass. You feel anything from pushing yourself?"*

"No, I managed to stay under the limit," He responded, testing his arms and legs. *"I'm ready to go."*

"Alright everyone, split up, take down the patrols along the out rim," Kaldur said, repeating the plan before adding more. *"This is much less likely to go unnoticed. Superboy, Robin, when our cover is blown I want you to try and focus on Kobra. Skarn, Miss Martian, take down the big guy. Kid Flash and I will work on taking down the cultists."*

With a few mental words of confirmation, we separated. Robin and Superboy traveled with us for a while before stopping alongside their patrol. Another minute or so of traversing the dense jungle and we were alongside ours.

"Is everyone ready? Good, on the count of three," Kaldur said before starting his countdown. *"One... Two... Three!"*

M'gann and I lunged from the forest, taking down the patrol of four cultists that we had been assigned to. M'gann grabbed on with her telekinesis and swung him around in an arc that slammed him into a second caped cultist, lifting the second with sheer force, sending them both tumbling into the jungle. I, on the other hand, used an earthen wave-assisted jump to jettison over the clearing and slam my foot into my target's chest. He skidded and tumbled through the dirt while I grabbed the second man's gun and tore it from his hands, swinging it like a club to smash his face. I winced when I saw two teeth pop free.

We both looked around to see our teammates doing just as well as us, spotting Kyle just in time for him to knock out his last target. Unfortunately, before we could say anything a shout came from the general direction of the warehouse, and I turned to see various cultists pointing in our direction. I immediately sent M'gann the urge to get behind me as I grabbed my shield off my back and held it up just in time for a half dozen bullets to ping off of it.

Before the barrage of bullets could pick up into anything I couldn't handle it started to slow, prompting me to peek around the shield to see Wally and Kaldur had engaged the mooks,

prompting most of them to turn and target them. Unfortunately, the large behemoth humanoid also turned toward them.

Fearing that the brutish-looking humanoid would overwhelm them I quickly pushed my shield onto my pack and ran towards it. I bent down as I did, scooping up one of the cultist's discarded rifles. Pulling on Steve's old instincts I looked down its sights and fired a quick burst, peppering the ground around Kobra, the brute, and the third, unknown woman. Another quick burst slammed into the brute's legs, skittering off and doing little to no damage. It must have stung though because I was suddenly the center of its attention.

The seven-foot-tall tower of muscle and anger roared, the bellow echoing through the clearing. I could see the woman run into the warehouse while the behemoth lowered its stance and charged at us, ignoring everything else, including whatever it was that Kobra was trying to tell it. Seeing that I had its attention I sent an image of a plan to M'gann, who mentally confirmed it a moment later. I could feel her fading into her camouflage and flying up, while I spun and dragged my foot along the ground, kicking it forward to launch a clod of sand directly into the big guy's face. It smacked into his face perfectly, blinding him long enough for me to thrust both my hands forward and pull a foot and a half thick pillar of stone, jutting from the ground directly in his path.

The behemoth couldn't even try to stop his momentum, his eyes clearing just in time to clobber himself with the pillar of stone. I jumped back just in time to avoid getting caught in the explosion of stone from the impact.

I looked around to my teammates, watching as Robin and Superboy double-teamed Kobra, who had lost his cloak at some point. Superboy, despite his increased speed and strength, was no match for Kobra it seemed, who was using Kyle's strength and speed against him. However, Kobra had no way of actually hurting the incredibly tough clone, meaning that any judo throw or tripping technique he used, Superboy just stood right back up and came back for more. If it had been one-on-one this would have been a stalemate, but Robin was using the distractions to get through Kobra's defenses, landing a few kicks and punches as I watched.

I had just enough time to see that Wally and Kaldur were quickly working through the cultists, looking on as Kaldur tore down a water tower to use as more ammo for his water bearers before M'gann sent me a wash of danger and warning through our deeper connection. Almost without thinking I pulled the earth below me up, thrusting my arm upwards and rising the pillar of stone, just in time for the terrible-looking monster to smash into it. The eight-foot-tall rock column shook and cracked, falling over slowly, letting me jump and flip onto the ground, whirling around to get ready for the big bastard.

He was bleeding from his shoulder... meat, the crack in his thick skin hanging open even more. His shoulder seemed dislocated or broken as well, his arm hanging uselessly by his side. It seemed like that shoulder took the brunt of that last impact. He refocused on me immediately, roaring again before charging me full tilt. I desperately did my best to keep him off center by

moving the earth under his feet, but despite his brutish appearance, he was a pretty decent fighter, managing to stay on his feet and fire off a barrage of punches that I was barely staying ahead off.

Suddenly I could feel M'gann urging me to get as low as possible, which I did by sliding under a punch and using the earth softening technique to drop down, sinking beneath ground level, laying on my back. The massive brute-looking bastard looked down at me in confusion before he was driven over me with a bone-rattling blow from M'gann, who had hefted the majority of the second pillar I had made with her TK and swung it around like a massive baseball bat. I leaned up just in time to watch the big behemoth smash *through* the warehouse's outer wall with a crash.

I quickly stood up and dusted myself off, sending M'gann a wave of gratitude and pride, which she returned with a happy smile.

"Does anyone need any help?" I asked through the link, scanning the clearing to check on my teammates.

"Nope," Kyle said smugly, as he finally landed a solid hit on Kobra, taking advantage of an attack by Robin to crack the pale, strange-looking man across his chin, the criminal tumbling across the ground before stopping, face down and not moving. *"We're all set."*

"We... require everyone's aid," Kaldur said, rising tension in his voice. *"The situation has escalated."*

The rest of the team whirled and focused on where Wally and Kaldur were, watching as four hulking bipeds stepped out of the warehouse, all of them looking similar to the bastard M'gann had just smacked like a home run. They were dressed in the tattered remains of their Cult of the Kobra uniforms.