

As I stepped past the main entrance and into a foyer of sorts, I paused for a moment to gather myself. There was an empty help desk to the right and a waiting lounge area to the left. Directly ahead of me was a sealed door, guarded by a uniformed security guard on the far side. As I walked further into the room, heading for the door, I was immediately stopped by the security officer. He was clearly nervous, looking me up and down while holding his hand out to stop me from continuing.

"Sir, the building is in lockdown. I'm going to need you to leave, we-"

"My name is Skarn, I'm a member of the New Titans, an affiliate group of the Justice League," I explained, slowing down as I approached the uniformed individual. "What's the situation?"

For a moment, I thought he was going to refuse, but he looked down at my uniform again before reaching up to his walkie-talkie. He had a short conversation with someone who sounded like someone in charge. As he was finishing up, I was joined by Snapshot, Fire, and Superboy, who had been on Bioship for quick responses. The security guard eyed all four of us before nodding.

"Al, the head of security says to bring you down to the seventh level," He said, nodding to the door I had been heading towards. "Follow me."

I nodded, and we followed as he led us to a stairwell, swiping a security card on a panel, which unlocked the door. The stairwell was filled with flashing red lights, but they were almost completely silent, the alarms cutting out as the door shut behind us. As we climbed lower, I tried to ask what was going on, but the guard assured me his boss would explain what was going on.

We quickly descended several flights of stairs, passing by a few people rushing out the opposite direction, not stopping until we reached a floor marked by a large "7" detailed on the wall. The guard reached for his card instinctively but shook his head and stepped through the doorway, the entire frame having been cut away by something, leaving an open hole.

As we stepped onto the floor, we were greeted by a lot more security, around fifteen people, four of them in the same uniform as the man escorting us and ten in a much more comprehensive, full combat uniform, armed with high-powered rifles. Two of the heavily armed security guards were using a plasma torch to cut a large metal door. The last man, who our guide led us directly to, was dressed in a suit and tie, though he was clearly armed. He reached out and shook my hand.

"We were briefed you would be patrolling the city today, I had no idea you would respond so fast," He said, releasing my hand and shaking his head.

"What's the situation?" I asked,

"About fifteen minutes ago, the building went into silent lockdown, following commands sent from the Nanotech Lab on this floor," He explained. "We evacuated all personnel above level seven, which was only a handful of cleaning staff and a few people watching high-priority work. When we attempted to investigate the lockdown, the entire system locked up even more, all floors below this sealing themselves completely."

"What about the explosion?" I asked.

"The elevators and stairwells being sealed and blocked," He explained, shaking his head. "The charges were part of our failsafe, the Wildcat Destabilization Protocols. Basically, our last-ditch efforts to seal in something dangerous."

"Why are you trying to breach them then?" I asked, looking behind the man to the guards cutting at the door, noting they had made very little progress.

"Because they were activated without approval and for seemingly no reason. We are trying to break into this lab to try and free up the computer systems," He responded. "With any luck, it will tell us what the hell is going on in the lower floors."

As he said, the vibrations and tremors, which had been going on constantly, spiked for a moment before settling down again. I turned back to Superboy, nodding towards the door.

"Take a peek. Can you see inside?"

The stoic young hero nodded and stepped forward, squinting a bit, like he was trying to look through something difficult, like a fog or a tinted window. After a moment, he shook his head.

"It's lined with something, an alloy that's too dense for me to see through. Not sure what it is." He admitted, shaking his head in frustration.

While Superboy had picked up almost all of Superman's abilities over the last few months, Kyle often hit roadblocks and limitations that Superman didn't have to deal with, or at least not as often. Where Superman's X-Ray vision is blocked by lead or anything more dense, Superboy's limit was a bit higher up the scale. Pure Iron was easy, but some alloys gave him trouble, depending on their ratios.

When he admitted he couldn't see through it, I nodded and tapped my ear, waiting a moment for Mission Control to respond.

"Ranger here, go ahead," He said quickly, not a moment later.

"We have a lockdown inside the lower levels of Star Labs, but the source and trigger aren't adding up," I explained. "Keep the League in the loop, preferably with some people on standby. What's Miss Martians Eta on me?"

"She was on the other side of the city, a few minutes, We-"

Another spike of shaking and reverberations shook the floor hard enough that dust fell from the ceiling.

"Direct her down, tell her to meet up with Security Head AI and hold the sixth floor with them, and link us up when we are in range," I said before turning to AI again. "Take everyone back up to floor six. We are going to breach the lab and investigate. I want you guys ready to shut everything down again, up to the sixth floor if necessary,"

"That's not a bad plan if you can get through the door without us.... I will evacuate most of the team to the sixth, but you need someone from my team to access the computers," He pointed out with a grim look.

We quickly decided that two security officers would follow us after we breached so that they could access the systems. While we were doing that, everyone else would go back up to the sixth floor and prepare a response from there. By the time everyone was in position, M'gann and Ice had arrived and had stopped at the sixth floor.

"Can you feel anyone inside the next room or below us?" I asked M'gann when she arrived and hooked us all together.

"I can feel someone below you... just one," She responded. *"But even they are... muted. Almost like they are fading in and out of consciousness, leaning more and more towards the latter."*

"Dammit, there should be at least a few people below us..." I said, going off of what AI had said. *"Okay, I'm going to breach. Tell the head of security what you sensed and that we are moving in."*

I turned to the two security guards who would be following us in, giving them the ready signal before I stepped forward to the large vault door that marked the entrance into the Nanotech lab. Superboy followed behind me, standing to my left as I put my hand on the door and focused. It was a relatively simple mechanism, with twelve metal rods locking the door into place. The security forces had already cut through three of them, which left the remaining nine to me.

It was difficult manipulating metal that was so pure, but thankfully I wasn't trying to do any fine manipulation or even any real bending. With a solid punch, I lashed out with my energy and forced the metal pins in the door to twist and shear, each one cracking with a muffled

explosion of kinetic energy that rattled the door. By the time I managed to break the last one, I was sweating but not exhausted. I couldn't help but smirk at the direct proof that my training was paying off.

Once the pins were sheared off, I nodded to Superboy, who gripped the large door by the seams and yanked it free, pulling it out of the doorway and to the side. Normally we would jump into the room, but since we had no idea what was going on and we didn't want to jump head-first into anything dangerous, we slowly stepped into the room. The entire room was destroyed, with sparking equipment tossed and smashed, tables and lab stations overturned, and computers broken and clearly smashed to bits. It was a disaster zone, but as far as I could tell, there was nothing that would require a massive lockdown.

While everything was clearly smashed and broken, there was also a lot of damage that almost seemed like weathering, as if a sandblaster had worn down the counters, cabinets, and trashed equipment. Even more strange was the dust settled into piles and spread out everywhere. Some of it shined, clearly metal, but a lot of it was plastic or even concrete dust.

As we investigated the room further, the two security people came in behind us. I assumed we were screwed because there was nothing even partially intact for them to tap into, but one of them took out a custom-looking tool and opened a thickly plated panel along one of the walls. Inside was a simple touch screen, which the security guards started scrolling through.

"There was some kind of containment breach here, in the Nanotech Lab," He explained as I stepped closer. "But it was marked as a minor issue, meaning a clean-up team wasn't called in. An hour later was when everything started to go wrong. We-

"Skarn, take a look at this!"

Fire called from a small room off to the side, prompting me, one of the security guys, and the rest of the team to head to her. She was standing beside a hole in the floor about three feet wide, carved through metal plating, concrete, rebar, wires, and what looked to be some sort of foam layer. It was almost ten feet of space between each floor, a ridiculous amount of reinforcement, but judging from how someone had smashed and carved through it, probably not enough.

"Okay, something, probably some sort of Nanotech, busted through the floor here and headed deeper into the facility after setting off a bunch of security protocols. I'm getting the feeling they were trying to slow us down while they did something, so we need to step up the pace," I said, turning back to the security guys. "We need access to the people who know what was happening here. Artemis, I need you to tag in with Ice. This is close quarters, and I need someone who can put out fires. Work with Ranger to cordon off this building, we have a potentially aggressive and at least partially intelligent entity causing havoc. We need to set up a parameter. Wake up the Alpha team, and get them here ASAP."

I got a series of nods, Artemis leading the way out of the room, the security guards following behind her, including the one who had finished their work on their emergency computer access. It took a few seconds for Ice to make her way down, but soon we were ready, and I led the way down to the eighth floor through the hole in the floor.

As I dropped, I slowed myself by bending a handhold into the wall of the tunnel and using it to lower myself down. Fire was next, followed by Ice and Superboy, the latter carrying the former down. As I waited for them, I cleared the room, which appeared to be a large supply closet for some sort of lab, which was not very surprising.

It was also in complete disarray, just as bad as the previous room, torn to shreds with the door knocked out of the wall and blown out into the hallway. As I stepped out of the storage room, Fire following right behind me, I could see that the damage continued, both the smashed and broken type and the weathering gouges we saw in the Nanotech lab.

"There is a lot of damage," I informed M'gann. *"Whatever is down here is either out of control or really, really pissed."*

"Be careful," She said, her worry and desire to be closer coming through the bond.

"Alpha team is awake and on their way, ETA five minutes," Artemis added, continuing after a long pause. *"And we will have League reinforcements not long after that, Batman says you can take the lead but keep everyone in the loop."*

"Your my point of contact Snapshot," I said, getting a mental nod from the blonde archer.

Superboy, Ice, and Fire followed as I made my way down the hall, following the path of destruction. It was direct, with no deviation, with only a single path destroyed. Every hallway and lab we passed was utterly pristine, a stark contrast from the direction we were following.

"Whatever it is, they knew where they were going," Fire said, looking down another perfectly intact corridor. *"Save the corners, there's no damage beyond here."*

"They might have had a map, or they might be familiar with the facility," I suggested but continued right after. *"But don't make any assumptions, we have no idea what we are walking into."*

The path led us to another small lab, the door already smashed and ground down, the broken, high-security door bent and beaten, laying across a far table, which was sparking and smoking.

"Ice, hit that before it starts a fire," I said, Ice nodding in agreement and blasting it with her freezing energy.

Just inside the room was another carved hole in the floor, leading down to the ninth floor. We quickly dropped down, immediately greeted by a very similar level of destruction. We followed it in much the same way before, quickly making our way through the lab, only topping when we found our first casualty. A black-haired woman, dressed in a lab coat, had been slammed into a wall, blood dripping down from where she had impacted and from the grisly wound to her head. Ice could hardly even look at her as I leaned down and felt for a pulse. When I found none, I stood and shook my head.

"We found someone. No pulse," I said, specifically for M'gann and Artemis. *"Picking up the pace."*

We quickly rushed through the halls, now with grim but determined faces on. We dropped through a final hole in the floor, landing on the last floor, Level Ten, which according to the head of security, was the vault floor, where the lab's stored everything delicate, volatile, dangerous, or anything that might be stolen.

We immediately spotted our target, as they were making no effort to hide. There, slightly hunched over, was a seven or eight-foot-tall humanoid, surrounded by a haze of black sand. They were standing in front of a heavily damaged security door, with three doors already smashed and destroyed behind them. Their current target sparked and shook as they swung a giant fist, which only got bigger before slamming into the door, the tremors we had been feeling spreading out from the impact. As they pounded on the vault door, the black dust surrounding them whirled and whipped around, carving into the large metal door.