

The giant humanoid continued to slam its fists and dig into the reinforced door, its thick, almost tendril-like blast of black sand carving furrows in the metal surface.

"I think we found our target," I said, mainly to M'gann and everyone waiting above. *"I can confirm it looks like some sort of nanomachine conglomerate with strong human influences. I'm going to make contact."*

I stepped forward, holding my hand out to signal my team to stay back. I stopped at the top of the stairs that led down into the room proper, with dozens of vault-like doors around a surprisingly wide-open area.

"Hello. Could you stop doing that for a moment?" I asked, calling out to the violent humanoid.

I felt like an idiot, and I knew that I was giving away a substantial tactical advantage by letting them know we were there. Unfortunately, the fact of the matter was we had no idea what was going on. With no context to base our judgments on, making any assumptions was a risk I wasn't willing to take. Whatever this thing was was already on thin ice because of the corpse we found on the way down, but I would not jump to conclusions in a situation like this.

The creature spun around the moment I began to speak, the black sand around it seeming to pull into its body, almost defensively, giving us a better look at its form. Despite its hunched-over stance, it was clear that the creature was feminine, or at least based on a feminine form. Its limbs were longer than they would be on a human, with its hands almost reaching down to its knees and its legs even longer. Its body was oddly amorphous, as if it was constantly swirling and churning, unsurprising given what it was most likely made of.

Suddenly, one of its hands, its fingers long and spindly, reached up and grabbed its head, its form wavering for a second.

"There's someone inside that!" Superboy called out. *"I could see them for just a second!"*

"Help.... Me....."

The creature spoke, the voice of a woman followed by dozens of others, the accompanying voices grainy and processed like a text-to-speech generator. I could feel Ice take a step back, the unnerving speech making all of us tense.

"Oh god! Please! I didn't- I don't- AARRGHH" She screamed, two hands now gripping its head, its disproportionate body swaying back and forth like it was about to stumble and fall.
"HELP ME!"

"We want to, we do, but we need you to stand down," I said, stepping down one of the steps and holding my hands out non-threateningly. "A lot has happened tonight, and everyone is understandably tense. But-

"Help me. Help me. Help me," The creature repeated, faster and faster. "Help. help. Help HELP!"

Too late, I realized that the human female voice that had originally been calling for help had faded, leaving just the computerized artificial voice. The creature lunged forward, the concrete beneath its feet chipping as it ran at me in a haphazard, almost falling-over way. It was fast, crossing the distance between us in a blink. I had just enough time to raise my shield, catching the first massive impact. Rather than fight it, I went with it, jumping up and letting the energy of the hit carry me backward, skidding to a stop alongside the rest of my team.

"Strip down the nanites, but avoid hurting whoever is inside!" I mentally called out. *"Avoid getting caught in any clouds of nanites!"*

I felt my team confirm my orders before Superboy zipped by me, grabbing the creature's wrist as it lunged at me again, only for his hand to pass through it. The hand turned into a burst of black sand again but quickly reformed. The female humanoid reacted to the attempted grab with a punch that caught Superboy across the chin, sending him up and over me before he managed to stop himself with his flight.

Seeing an opening, I reached out and slammed my fist into their chest, not full power, because my intention wasn't to cause damage but rather to feel what the humanoid was made of. My earthbending resonated with the metal prison that was locked around whoever had called for help. I could feel the nanites, like a fine powder, made mostly of metal but of a blend and purity that resisted my attempts to bend it.

When my energy refused to budge, I slammed into them again, knocking them back down the stairs toward the middle of the room.

"Their limbs!" Superboy mentally called out. *"They aren't real!"*

"Fire, Superboy, burn its limbs!"

Both of them immediately let loose, Superboy with his heat vision and Fire with her green flames. Fire aimed for the feet, creating a floor of green fire that crept up the monstrous humanoid's legs. Unfortunately, the fire didn't seem to be hot enough, and while I knew she could crank up the temperature, from past experiences, we knew doing that in an enclosed space with allies nearby was a bad idea.

Superboy's attack, however, was marginally more effective, his heat vision blasting completely through the left bicep and splattering melted metal out the other side. I could see

that it was burning nanites away, eating into the concentration of tiny machines, but the second he stopped, the hole was filled, completely disappearing as if it never happened.

I sprinted to the humanoid, swinging my fists and blocking a backhanded strike with my shield, trying to keep it off-center from my earlier shove.

"Fire, focus on the free-floating clouds, Superboy and Ice, try to freeze the nanites!" I said, switching tactics again. *"M'gann, try and wake up the mind inside!"*

The humanoid grew angry as we attacked it, winding up to slam an enlarged fist into me. Luckily, Ice raised her hand and blasted it with cryokinetic energy, freezing it solid. The fist, as well as a significant portion of the wrist and forearm, fell away from the arm as if cut, the chunk of ice falling to the ground and shattering into a few dozen pieces. The creature recoiled, screeching with a bone-rattling volume.

Immediately it tried to attack again, lashing out with another fist, only for Superboy to exhale a cloud of subzero air, the limb quickly freezing solid and smashing to the ground just like the other. The screech turned into a roar as whatever pain it felt fed into its rage. It struck me again and again as I stayed close to the violent entity, holding its attention to let Superboy and Ice do their jobs. It continued to swipe and lash out at me, its long limbs slowly becoming less and less human-like with every attack. Before long, they were more like tendrils, bending and slamming into my shield, trying to find an opening.

It didn't seem to notice that with every punch and swipe, it had less and less material to work with, more and more nanites stuck in frozen chunks of ice on the ground. Eventually, I could see who was inside. A woman with blond hair and blue eyes, a broken pair of glasses on her face, and a deep cut along her cheek. She was dressed in a tattered and blood-spattered lab coat and a Star Labs ID card on her coat, though I couldn't make out her name.

The entity, which had lost what had to be around seventy-five percent of its mass at this point, was barely even holding up the blonde scientist. I took a step towards her, hoping to maybe pull her free of the remaining nanites, only for the remaining black sand to disperse off of her in a cloud. She ended up on her knees, facing toward us. I took another step forward, stopping when the giant black cloud began pulsing and spinning around her, as if the nanites were straining against themselves, pulling and grabbing. I barely had time to notice that the near thousands of black ice shards that littered the ground were dancing to the same pulse and spinning.

"GET D-"

The thousands of black ice shards around us exploded like a field of landmines, every single frozen shard of nanomachines suddenly expanding, the particles freeing themselves violently. The near instantaneous increase in volume, from ice shards to a large thick cloud, caused a kinetic blast that slammed into us like a brick wall. The impact sent Ice and Fire flying,

slamming them into walls and rubble, where they stayed, unmoving. Superboy was slammed into the roof, having been flying above me as the expansion happened. I managed to keep from flying by sinking myself into the floor all the way to my thighs and fusing my shield to the ground. My ears were ringing, and I felt the telltale sign of blood dripping down them, which told me the explosive pressure change had seriously damaged them. Even Superboy looked rough as he slowly floated back down.

Understandably, I was more than a little dazed. I could only watch as the black nanite dust flowed back to the woman, who was still unconscious as far as I could see. Once again, she was sealed away inside the tall humanoid nanomachine construct. The nanite construct surged to its feet, bulged as if gathering itself, and sprung towards Superboy, slamming into him and driving them both into a wall. The building shook as it pummeled the half-Kryptonian, who was almost as stunned as me.

I leaped towards them, using the fact my legs were still in the floor to push myself, clearing the gap in a moment. I slammed into the particle conglomerate, bashing my shield across their back, only for a third limb to grow from its spin and slam into me, throwing me backward. I tumbled and rolled, coming to my feet just in time to watch Superboy get lifted up into the air and slammed down into the pile of rubble created by the construct's rampage.

I could see that the front of his uniform, all around his chest and torso, had been torn away, the exposed skin bleeding lightly like road rash. Idly I realized the stinging in my hands was probably a similar thing, the nanites having eaten through my gloves.

The construct turned towards me, pausing for a moment. I raised my shield, holding steady as it took a step towards me. I shifted as it did, a tendril of black sand slamming into my shield, denting it severely. I could hear the nanites eating into the metal as I shifted to the left, dodging the next tendril, ducking under a third and-

I stopped as a fourth slammed into my side, stabbing through my armor and into me. The construct surged, and the tendril pushed deeper, punching out the back of my armor. I dropped the shield and gripped the tendril, looking up into the humanoid's featureless face.

"Why?" I asked, wincing as the tendril shifted inside me. "Why are you doing this?"

It said nothing before slowly pulling itself out of my ribs, the nanomachine constructs slithering free. Just before it pulled away completely, I moved.

"You're not going *anywhere*," I said, reaching out and grabbing the appendage, my fingers sinking into it.

I flooded it with my energy, pushing with everything that I had, even as the action of grabbing it kept me impaled. I funneled in more and more of my chi, grabbing on with my other

hand, feeling the black sand slice and burn at my skin. With a roar, I squeezed, focusing on the metal and through the pain.

The sound of rending metal filled the room as its arm compressed, the black material solidifying as I bent it into a solid clump.

The creature roared and threw me, losing the entire arm as I pulled more, crushing and molding the metal as I flew, slamming into the ground and skidding to a stop. The slab of black metal crumbled partially, no longer sand but chunks and pebbles of crushed black material. I could feel it inside me as well, shifting as I slowly stood, wincing until I was standing.

The creature was watching me, wary now that I had really hurt it. Knowing I only had so much time left, I charged, springing off a slab of broken concrete and launching myself directly at the creature. It reeled back as I did, slamming its arms against my back as I tore into it, pouring every bit of chi I had left, tearing and yanking at it like a man possessed, pulling handfuls of nanites off and crushing them until they were useless. The construct stabbed at me three more times, spearing my leg through the thigh, punching another hole into my side, and finally driving a spike through my lower shoulder, but I kept tearing and crushing, even as I started to feel weak.

There must have been a minimum amount of functioning nanites required to keep the swarm going because every chunk that I ruined seemed to slow it down, its attacks becoming weaker and less accurate. Eventually, after we stood on a mound of ruined nanites and the scientist inside was almost completely revealed again, the tiny machines lost cohesion completely.

Both of us tumbled to the ground, the scientist still completely unconscious. I tried to shift, to move, to check her pulse or tend to my own wounds, but nothing happened.

And then someone was clapping.

"Bravo!" An unfortunately familiar voice said. "I'll admit, I really had no idea what to expect from the girls' project, but it was certainly impressive. And yet you still came out on top... well, assuming you live."

Mauser, the bastard, slowly climbed down a set of stairs not too far from where I was lying, walking over to me.

"It did a number on you though... hmm... maybe I should..."

The psychopath reached for their holster and pulled out another Mauser, pointing it at my head. I struggled to move but could barely shift as he held the pistol steady... only to pull it back and shake his head.

"No... No, I don't think I will," He said with a frown. "It seems too... easy. Boring really. And wouldn't that be horrible?"

He chuckled to himself, holstering his pistol and turning away from me. He stepped over the scientist's body and walked across the open room to the vault door that the nanite construct had been pounding on when we had first arrived. He reached out and put his hand on it, shaking his head.

"All that effort and it failed just before it had completed its mission," He said, annoyance leaking into his voice. "I think I might have gone a bit overboard with the planning this time. Still getting the hang of it. Next time I'll keep it simple. Or do it myself... or maybe...."

He pulled a knife out of his jacket and quickly started chanting, carving a symbol into the half-wrecked door. After a few seconds, the knife vanished from his hands, and the door peeled back, the reinforced metal frame rent from the wall before collapsing to the ground. The insane murderer let out a happy sound before stepping into the vault and out of view. A few seconds later, he returned, carrying a metal ribcage with a growth in the middle.

It took a second for me to realize what it was, my brain slowing down from exhaustion, blood loss, and probably a concussion. Finally, I remembered what it was, the power source for Amazo, the android that had nearly taken down the Justice League. I had read the analysis reports and seen the pictures they had taken.

"You know, you should thank me for this," He said, turning the artificial ribcage simulacrum over in his hands.

Eventually, he seemed to decide something and slammed the ribcage down against his knee, the entire thing breaking into pieces. He reached into the container in the center, which I now remembered served as the containment for whatever had powered the android. Mauser pulled out a blood-red disk with dozens of golden carvings into it, dropping the remains of the android to the ground.

"A few dozen years of containment and this thing would have exploded," He said, turning the object over in his hands. "It would have done some serious damage... probably killed the city! Kinda wish I didn't need it now. Oh well!"

The insane psychopath shrugged before focusing back on me, his white harlequin showing a disturbingly wide grin.

"Well, I got what I wanted, so... bye!"

He waved as he stepped backward, some sort of pitch-black portal opening up behind him, swallowing him up and vanishing. The room was silent and dark and slowly getting darker. I tried desperately to move, to shift, to do anything, but my body refused. I could feel myself

slipping when a blur of movement suddenly sped into the room, stopping in the middle and looking around.

"Holy... Shit, they are down, repeat, the team is down, I need medics down here!" Wally shouted, before he was suddenly kneeling down over me.

I tried to speak, but my head swam and the darkness swallowed me up.