

“The border conflict is all but over,” Hawkwoman assured the gathered members of the Justice League. “We *were* called in to assist the newly elected Bialyan government in stopping two separate radical groups, as well as a second hostage-taking attempt, this time of a group of Quroc volunteer doctors and nurses. Despite those interventions, the country is taking its independence seriously and plans on holding elections for its council positions later this year.”

“And the outbreak?” Superman asked, referring to a rise in infectious diseases that had cropped up during the chaos caused by Queen Bee being deposed.

“Quroc’s aid curtailed the growing issue for the most part. The medical supply chain has been re-established from donated and untested Lexcorp drugs and equipment to other companies. Any emerging issues can be handled without further help,” Hawkman responded. “The citizens have shown an incredible amount of restraint and understanding as their government was rebuilt from the ground up, despite the many bumps along the way.”

“The Bialyan government also wishes to thank the Justice League for their intervention and continued support,” Hawkwoman added. “As well as extending their thanks to the New Titans for their help with their first hostage situation.”

As the New Titans were mentioned, several pairs of eyes shifted to look at Batman, who would eventually deliver the report on one of Titan’s latest missions. The stoic man showed no sign of even noticing the looks, instead staying focused on Hawkman and Hawkwoman.

“We believe that while we should pull out our near-constant presence, we should keep patrolling Bialya frequently,” Hawkman finished, crossing his arms. “Their newly created police force can handle street-level crime, but we should be on hand to help with larger situations, should they develop.”

Several people nodded in agreement, including Hawkwoman from beside her husband. The conversation stuck for a while on what sort of patrol schedule should be set up before eventually continuing on to the next League member’s report. Hawkwoman and Hawkman sat back down in their seats, and Zatara stood a moment later, greeting everyone with a nod.

“As you all know, the last month has been extremely busy,” The career magician started, getting a soft snort from Captain Marvel at the understatement. “Dr Fate has been increasingly more difficult to reach over the last few weeks, constantly working in the Tower of Fate to both neutralize chaos-linked items of power, or securely lock them away when that is not an option. In fact, our updates have primarily come from his hosts as they rotate through.”

“What about Kent Nelson?” Flash asked. “He was working with him too, right?”

“He was, but has been forced to take a step back and reduce his aid,” Zatara explained, his concern evident through his accent. “His magic has helped him age well, but that can only

go so far. His age is catching up with him, his time spent as Nabu's host has only compounded the issue. I ended up recruiting Wonder Woman to convince him to slow down."

"He eventually admitted to forgetting his age in all the excitement," Wonder Woman added, her voice unusually soft.

"Indeed. Thankfully, between Dr. Fate's and Kent Nelson's near-constant work, most of the artifacts and enchanted items we managed to gather and keep out of the Klarion's hands have been stored or neutralized sufficiently."

"What about this method of tracking?" Captain Atom asked. "I don't know much about magic, but I know a lot about energy emissions. Detecting something on a global scale isn't easily done."

"You... are unfortunately correct," Zatara admitted with a wince. "According to Dr. Fate, the system is in place and can scan the entire planet. However... according to Kent Nelson, the series of spells and rituals that Nabu is using... It's not nearly as good as he assured us it was."

Several members leaned forward at this admission. Even Batman reacted, his usual glare shifting.

"How specifically is it not as good?" The bat-themed hero asked.

"It does detect high concentrations of chaotic energy and magic... but the concentrations would have to be high," Zatara explained. "High enough that the ritual would already be started. Certainly, it would detect the ritual before it was completed, but probably close to half completed."

"We were under the impression that Klarion wouldn't even be able to gather all of the items he would need to complete his ritual without showing up on his scans," Superman pointed out. "Is that not true?"

"No... it is not," Zatara admitted, looking down at the desk. "I apologize, I... I should have realized that Dr. Fate overestimated his abilities. I wasn't familiar with this level of Order magic, so I took his assurances at face value."

"Why would he do that?" Captain Marvel asked. "We are allies. Why would he tell us he had it under control if he didn't?"

"Kent Nelson explained it was hubris. He admitted he was biased himself, but explained that Nabu is certain that he is the only effective tool against Chaos, that he alone can handle anything that the Chaos Lords could send," Zatara explained, shaking his head. "Admittedly, his capabilities with Order magic are far and above anything anyone else on the planet is capable of... but this lie makes it much harder to trust him."

“Then we need to prepare our own response,” Batman said, standing up. “Dr. Fate is an asset, but one we now have reason to doubt. I suggest we begin investigating the situation on our own, as, by the sounds of it, we can no longer trust Dr. Fate to keep us in the loop.”

“He will not like that,” Zatara pointed out. “I agree with you, Batman, but that still needed to be pointed out. He considered the dangers of Chaos to be his domain. He will not like others butting in his way.”

“Would he purposely hinder us?” Batman asked. “Or become antagonistic if we do?”

“...No, not unless we directly cause an issue ourselves,” Zatara explained. “There may be a point where he refuses to interact with us at all, however...”

“Was he always like this?” Flash asked. “Jay always said he had a strong personality but was generally agreeable.”

“The signs of his arrogance have always been there. It's part of why Kent Nelson refused to continue being Dr. Fate,” Wonder Woman said. “But this is beyond what I believed he was capable of.”

“Is it possible that his time in solitude affected him more than we realized?” Black Canary asked, leaning forward in her chair. “Solitude for that long can have a profound effect on the human mind. I'm aware he might not be considered fully human anymore...”

“It is possible,” Zatara admitted, tilting his head back and forth. “I am not fully familiar with the enchantments that have attached Nabu to his helmet, but having investigated *other* souls and minds bound to specific objects and locations, I can say that the level of awareness varies. If he has been fully aware and cognizant the entire time... It is possible he is not as stable as he has let on.”

“We need to have our own system if we can't rely on Dr. Fate to report his findings and the information he learns,” Green Lantern Stewart added. “Bad intel is worse than no intel, and we can't trust him to tell us anything anymore.”

“We should at least give him a chance,” Superman said. “Why don't we send some people to talk to him and encourage him to share more. We had intended to eventually ask him to join the League, right?”

“I'm a bit worried that Dr. Fate was more the wearer's influence than Nabu's,” Green Arrow volunteered, crossing his arms. “If his heroic, kinder tendencies were all because his past bearers were kind and heroic, what happens when his wearers can't stand up to his mental presence and he dominates their link?”

The group was silent for a long moment as they digested what Green Arrow was suggesting.

“The situation needs to be investigated. I suggest we send someone to talk to him, as Superman suggested, but also investigate what he is doing,” Batman suggested. “Someone should also investigate the mental health of his wearers.”

A short conversation passed around the room, eventually settling on Wonder Woman and Red Tornado as the ones going to talk with Dr. Fate, mostly due to their previous work together. Batman and Green Martian would investigate his bearers. Shortly after the decision was made, Batman stood up out of his chair again, and the room quieted down.

“As many of you heard and have seen, the new Titans Beta team stumbled into an incident three days ago.”

The holoprojector activated behind the caped hero, showing the aftermath of the Star Labs breach. Several images depicted the damage to the facility, showed off evidence, and cataloged important points.

“At approximately two AM, Star Labs Nanotech division had a breach in containment. It was reported as minor, and due to the late hour and relatively few people present, no one was sent to confirm.”

As he talked, the images focused on a sealed tank, zooming on a corner that was burst outward. The projected screen focused on the hole before shifting around to the back of the vessel, revealing a carved symbol. Above that was a much more complicated carving, all around a fingerprint made with a black and blue substance.

“We found this marking along the back of the breached vessel,” Batman explained. “According to Dr. Roquette, the only one working in the lab at this time, two liters of nanites breached their vessel and attacked her, knocking her unconscious. This should have been impossible as the nanomachines had no programming to follow. They were completely inert.”

“The influence of magic?” Captain Atom asked, Batman nodding in response.

“It appears so. According to Kent Nelson and Zatara, the larger symbol caused the breach, while the more complicated carving would have affected the contents,” He confirmed, nodding to the League's magic expert. “The security feed for the lab, as well as all other sensors, were reprogrammed and disabled by the nanites using a brute force method that I am still studying. It was effective, however, and took the security completely offline. It then spent two and a half hours utilizing all materials located in the lab to make as many nanites as it could.”

Images showed a ransacked supply closet, as well as several computers, cabinets, and even a light bulb that had been worn down by the nanites.

“Once it had grown in size, it purposely activated a much more strict containment procedure before beginning to dig downwards. It navigated down to the bottom floor of Star Labs, where it began to break into the sealed vaults located there. This entire time, Dr. Roquette was being carried inside the swarm, a humanoid construct forming around her. We are not entirely sure why it was carrying her around, but we do believe that it was at least accessing her memories, primarily because of the direct route it took to the vault.”

The images projected on the floating screen changed to show off the vault doors, showing the damage to each one.

“It was at this point that Skarn, Ice, Fire, and Superboy attempted to make contact with the construct, with Artemis and M’gann staying back with the security teams of Star Labs. Unfortunately, the construct did not react well to the attempt, instead almost immediately attacking them. Between its lack of a real body to attack and the fact that there was an innocent victim strapped inside the torso of the construct, the team was at a disadvantage.”

Batman paused, allowing everyone the chance to digest what he was saying before continuing.

“Despite being at a disadvantage, they managed to come up with a solution, freezing chunks of nanites in ice to contain them. Unfortunately, this was only restraining them, not destroying them, as the construct eventually adapted, and the nanites broke free. The blast immediately knocked Ice and Fire unconscious, and Superboy was attacked and knocked out next. Thankfully, all three are already on their feet and recovering well. Skarn managed to stay conscious.”

The projected image shifted again, now showing an unmasked Skarn in a hospital bed. His hands were bandaged heavily, as was his entire upper torso. His body was covered in bruises and lesser cuts as well, his face slightly swollen.

“Past this point, we aren’t entirely sure what happened, as Skarn has yet to regain consciousness, and everyone else present, including Dr. Roquette was unconscious. However, judging from the nanite remains and the injuries he sustained, it appears that Skarn was able to break through a previous barrier in his ability that prevented him from bending the nanites,” Batman explained, the images showing off a few dozen clumps of black crumbling material, like lumps of clay that were squeezed by a bare hand.

The last five had a worrying amount of blood on them.

“He was able to destroy the nanites with his ability, but in the process, they were scouring his hands and body. He also sustained half a dozen other injuries before seeming to finally destroy enough nanites that the swarm lost cohesion and failed.”

The holo projection switched off, and the picture of the heavily injured hero disappeared. Batman waited another moment before continuing.

“Until Skarn wakes up, we will not likely know what exactly happened. We do know that only the contents of one vault was disturbed, that being the one containing the chest parts of Amazo,” Batman stopped as quite a few people spoke up at once, shooting them a look, the room eventually quieting back down. “We have confirmed all other parts are safe and still contained. Further, only the artificial rib cage was disturbed, and the containment for its energy source breached.”

“The construct?” Wonder Woman asked.

“Unlikely, as the constructed materials are almost completely accounted for. If it had managed to breach and remove whatever was inside the chest containment, whatever was inside would still be in the room.”

“So someone else came along and took it,” Flash responded. “Someone hired by Professor Ivo?”

“Or whoever was responsible for the magitech inside Amazo,” Black Canary suggested. “We might not be able to force Ivo to talk, but we already know he has no idea how to use magic. And he is willing to work with people he really doesn't like to get his stuff back.”

“Amazo is Professor Ivo's magnum opus. There is no way he wouldn't take everything,” Green Arrow pointed out. “And there is definitely no way he would destroy it like that, especially because he has no way of remaking it.”

“How close was Star Labs to identifying what Amazo was drawing power from?” Green Lantern Hal asked. “I know they were struggling to see through the containment...”

The conversation continued for an hour more before the meeting eventually moved on to the next report. Their final verdict was that with any luck, Skarn would be able to shed light on what had happened. Until then, they still had work to do.