

Brockton Bay's forces were arrayed. The Empire had, of course, continued to insinuate themselves. In the desperation of a citywide emergency, the Protectorate couldn't exactly turn down able-bodied parahumans willing to help, and the neo-Nazi organization was taking full advantage for the propaganda boon.

Finally having stepped off of Rune's manhole cover, Kaiser stood beside Hookwolf and discussed battle plans with Chevalier and Miss Militia. New Wave milled around nervously, and even Faultline and her people had arrived – led there, according to their commander, by Labyrinth who was acting like some sort of dowsing rod.

“Something is going on here,” the petite blonde replied when questioned. “It feels familiar, and I need to know why.”

“Between Gregor, Spitfire and myself,” Faultline added, “we can help shore up any gaps in your defense.”

“Speaking of,” Lady Photon drifted down, raising her voice enough to be overheard by the hero and villain team leaders, “what exactly is the plan here?”

The Victorian trio turned toward her, finally acknowledging another person instead of looming around like bizarre gargoyles. Before one of them could answer her, the deafening roar of an engine drowned out all voices.

A beast of a vehicle, something that had at one time been an APC but now looked more like the bastard child of a steam train and a monster truck, growled and garbled up the road. Its wheels locked up and the vehicle drifted into a full 180-degree turn, allowing the rear hatch to open and reveal Armsmaster.

“Got here just in time for the finale, bitches!” Sherrel Bailey, formerly known as Squealer, crowed from the driver's seat. The burn-scarred woman still had a manic energy to her, the frenzy of an addict on a bender – although she was stone sober per PRT protocols. Beside her, Kid Win clutched some sort of aircraft controls with such nervous pressure that his knuckles must have been white inside his armored gauntlets.

Despite his eyes being covered, Chevalier was clearly raising an eyebrow. Miss Militia wanted to ask something but was preempted by Hookwolf. “Alright, why exactly is Skidmark's cumrag acting like she's some sort of backup?”

“Charming,” Kaiser quipped, “but not inaccurate. Armsmaster, is there a reason for a serially underperforming Tinker to be here?”

“I'll give you a briefing of my theories later,” the ENE team leader said to his coworkers, smoothly ignoring Kaiser and obliquely answering the man's question through addressing his fellow heroes. “Miss Bailey has volunteered to assist in containment, and in addition to her above-average work on this vehicle I made the judgment call that one more cape on the scene would be beneficial in at least some small way.”

“I call this baby the Mucker!” Sherrel bellowed to anyone who would deign to listen. “Mobile Crisis Response!”

“And I keep telling you that’s a dumb name,” Kid Win sighed as if he’d had this brief exchange numerous times that night. He had.

Eyes were on the rumbling beast of a vehicle, leading to distraction: it took longer than it should have to notice the wobbly blonde tottering her way toward Bloodmoon. “Pizdets!” Gregor swore reflexively, only registering afterward that he swore in another language. “Labyrinth! Get back here!”

Bloodmoon turned and calmly regarded the swaying waif. Although with the cape’s history of extreme violence, calm could turn to bloodshed in a fraction of a second. Labyrinth rocked back and forth on her way, eventually coming to a stop and gazing up at the taller girl. “You’re familiar,” she said simply.

Bloodmoon tilted her head, looking at her companions for help. Owl stared blankly and Henryk gave an exaggerated shrug. “We can discuss any familiarity later.” She cleared her throat and her next words boomed across the streets, making Labyrinth flinch back. The heavy bellow rattled windows and teeth. “We need to act quickly,” she declared to the assembled parahumans. “Containment has already been broken, in both its forms. I will go inside and deal with the problem,” she stated, as if it was a given that she would exterminate a city-threatening menace.

Then again, with her performance against the Simurgh, it might just be a given.

“The rest of you are here to stop the escapees. When I go in, most beasts will panic. They will try to get away: they’ll run, they’ll climb, they’ll tunnel. If they make it out, they will spread their blood. That cannot be permitted. This scourge will end here and now, and I will prevent any and all incursions upon this Earth.”

Owl spoke up next. “Henryk and I have a bit of a sixth sense about this, so you’ll have time for some sort of Tinker device to monitor seismic activity. I’ll head off the first excursion, Henryk the second. After that, it’ll be up to you. We should be able to hold an exit point each, but if not we’ll call you. Henryk, you remember how to work your earpiece?” Adding to the mystery that was Owl, she made certain that the strange man understood how the technology worked.

Tattletale’s voice came over the comms as the heroes got into position. “*The code for today should be 127945513. I can repeat it for you if you need.*” She was gently rebuffed. “...*That monster, the one that attacked Dragon... It was a person, wasn’t it?*”

“They all used to be people,” Bloodmoon replied as she typed in the code. “There’s no cure, once they’re corrupted. The only mercy you can offer is a swift death before they profane the people they used to be.”

“*What made that one so much stronger than the others?*” On one level Tattletale didn’t want to know. But she had to ask. There was something important in this, she knew it.

“There’s no sure answer for that,” Owl picked up the slack as the doors hissed open. One set after another parted, three in total, providing a powerful defense against intrusion. Wolves snarled and leapt at the intruder, their raucous growls and snarls becoming yelps of terror even before Bloodmoon retaliated. Simply looking at her was enough to frighten the monsters. She drew her double-sword and darted inside, cutting down several monsters as the doors slid closed once again. “But that type, called the Abhorrent...delusions of persecution are common. But just as much is a real history of persecution.”

At the console, Tattletale bit her knuckle hard enough to draw blood. It was difficult to mentally reconcile that nightmarish force of nature with the creepy kicked-dog look of the small man named Mr. Pitter, but everything fit. And if a man drawn into Coil's service through a false rape accusation could transform into such a monstrosity, what other horrors awaited Bloodmoon in the depths of that base? And what did it say about the young woman that she entered with no fear?

Back at the base entrance, Owl perked up her head. "They work quickly." She dashed off with nearly as much speed as Bloodmoon, toward an unknown location. "Don't wait up. I have this in hand."

On the one hand, this was a nightmare come true. Yharnam had come to Brockton Bay, and dozens if not more had already died. The only saving grace was that the beasts thus far had been somehow false, their blood not lingering. Other than the Abhorrent, and he was thankfully burned.

On the other hand, there was finally some rich blood to sustain me. Murdering gangers could only do so much for my body, and Nilbog's monstrosities weren't much better than ordinary humans in terms of blood potency. His virus had been an interesting retaliation, but ultimately it failed when I trapped it within myself. As vile as it was, my body was so much worse. But I'd burned up a good amount of stamina in doing so: I was feeling sleepy again, so thankfully there was a nice smorgasbord of beasts to restore me.

Guns barked and beasts snarled in a mixture of panic and rage. The further along they were, the more they instinctively recognized what I was. Those who could still wield weapons, on the other hand, deluded themselves into thinking they could stop me. I dashed between them, easily separating bodies into segments, dousing myself in their sanguine bounty. There were no civilians, no witnesses to worry about my powers digging claws into their minds: I strode past bullets and even their lasers couldn't touch me. I brought my full power to bear, trivializing this extermination.

The beasts clawed at the ceiling and walls, destroying their bodies until they died and a companion would take up the task. Slowly some dug tunnels to escape, while I was busy killing still more. Sheer numbers could at the very least slow me.

A gunshot barked, louder and more authoritative than the others. I juked to the side, watching as a single bullet hissed through the air. A man stood, tall and broad-shouldered. A pistol in his left hand, a heavy dagger in his right. His features were ruggedly handsome but sallow, sickly. He lacked the glowing eyes, but otherwise I felt an Old Hunter. This was someone burdened by immense guilt and yet who hungered to kill more still. Why did he take the form of a hunter, however? This was not a normal step in the cycle of beasts.

I'd already suspected that the events here were not simply the result of a cape looking into me too deeply. This was some sort of outside interference, the same evil that clutched Yharnam. The squamous evil that lurked at the corners of the vision the Brain had shared with me, constantly waiting for me to falter.

The clouds once again drifted in front of the moon, sliding like fingers interlacing. Red light began to glow through the mist.

The maybe-hunter suddenly closed the distance between us, propelled by a previously-unseen burst of power. I parried his knife strike and bent my body to ensure that his gunshot passed by me. I struck out with my shortsword and he barely deflected it with his pistol: his body might have been enhanced, but his weapons were not. Metal sparked and I could see a gouge carved into the gun.

More beastmen gathered, bombarding me with gunfire. The bullets didn't bother me, except for the kinetic force. It slowed me down, jerked me in different directions. They were giving their superior an advantage. He crashed into me again, creating a shockwave when our strikes met. I struck out with a quick kick to his side and was rewarded with the crackle of pulverized bone. He was empowered, but not to the same level of thoroughness: his body couldn't take it. He was strong but not durable.

He screamed, not in pain but horror. His body started to distend, skin too small to contain whatever was within him. His frame engorged, bulging in different directions. Red showed through his increasingly paper-thin skin. His face was swallowed up in a tumorous lump of meat. It was like some sort of Pthumerian Watcher, the kludged version. Whatever was, for lack of a better term, sponsoring this was trying to create something that could challenge me. Speed and strength hadn't worked, so it was breaking its toy in an attempt to stop me.

Labyrinth dropped to her knees, gritting her teeth and snarling. "No," she said, in a voice and cadence clearly not her own. "This is my home. Not yours. This is not your city. You are not my mother."

The clouds pulled away, as if torn aside by great hands, and the opalescent moon reasserted itself. Its glittering shine once again dispelled the evil and hatred.

No matter how many times I mutilated this thing, it put itself back together. What an absolute pest. And it continued to interpose itself, preventing me from reaching deeper into the base and stopping this by killing the nightmare's host.

The blood-dripping faux-Watcher stomped forward, then lost a step. Something had changed: I could feel it. The power that was keeping it alive was fading. I pushed more power into my legs, spiraling around the monster and ripping it apart with countless deep bites from Rakuyo. It dropped to its knees and I lopped off the top of its tumorous mass, what passed for its head. I held it over my own head, letting the blood spill over it. The blood was so rich, so potent. Far more than should have been possible. I wouldn't need to sleep for a while just from this.

I snapped out an arm and flung a dagger through the skull of the last surviving wolfman in this section, then sheathed Rakuyo. There was no sense in dulling the blades in this task: I dug my fingers into the next reinforced door and began to peel the metal apart.

While Faultline and her team tended to Labyrinth, who seemed to be Brockton Bay's ace in the hole against whatever this extradimensional assault was, the heroes and villains worked to prevent the monsters from ravaging the city. Henryk and Owl had their issues well in hand, and the Empire managed to bottleneck another tunnel. Kaiser layered the tunnel with blades, and those beasts that escaped were immediately set upon by Hookwolf. Any stragglers were impaled by a regenerated Menja, while Fenja stood at the ready to intercept one so lucky as to escape the rest.

The local Protectorate added what help was needed, but their tunnel was mostly handled by the MCR (name pending), driven by a burn-scarred madwoman. From the sides of the vehicle sprang any number of strange and exotic weapons, including spring-loaded chainsaws and a flamethrower turret on top. Keeping the windows rolled up, the vehicle was soon slathered in blood so dark it looked like black-cherry syrup.

Legend, Dragon, and the Blasters of New Wave held off one last hole. Chevalier, Cacciatore, the Chaturagh, and Assault and Battery (melee didn't mix well with a murder-train) stood guard around Labyrinth, backing up Faultline's Crew.

The nest was a place of shame. A parasite had made its home here. Numerous corpses covered the ground, dissolving as I stepped through them – possibilities made solid and then dismissed as I brought Truth with me like a bridal train. The identical bodies, most in black costumes decorated with looping white, took very little of my attention. Not only did corpses not faze me, but they were false. No reason to spare them a second thought.

“Damn you,” the parasite hissed. “God damn you. You curse. You contagion. You destroyed me and you never even knew.”

I could have simply used the emergency lights and had enough illumination for my own purposes. My hip lantern would be even more helpful. But the light wasn't just for me: I drew the hunter's torch and ignited it.

The beast shrieked and recoiled. Not in fear, but in shame. It tried to pull backward, but its bloated belly prevented it from moving. Much like the bloodlickers, this parasite was distended and immobile atop its engorged gut. Its dark skin was leathery around an emaciated body, belly stuffed full of churning memories. Its tongue whipped angrily. “You took everything from me,” it accused. “My men became monsters, my plans continually broken by your interference. And now even She won't come to me!”

I drew Rakuyo, speaking derisively to the creature. It was no true beast, so I no longer needed to be a hunter. It was a thief in the night. A second parasite briefly formed, pushing out from the original, dragging around on bloated belly like a blood-gorged tick. To an ordinary person, this pair of monsters would have been a double threat. But I saw deeper. It was only ever one monster. The other was not even a possibility: it was an illusion, a lie told even to itself, to delude the beast into believing it was grander than its station.

“You are the kind of curious grave-robber of whom Maria spoke.” I gestured casually with my weapon, heedless of the second beast as it charged me as best it could. It did not exist, had never, could never exist. And so it dissolved as it impacted me. “You steal and hoard knowledge unearned.” Overlong

limbs struck out at me and I carelessly deflected them. It had no strength behind it: the monster had gorged itself on knowledge but it had no understanding, an illiterate hoarding books because it heard all smart people had libraries. “I can taste the cruelty in you. I could take the risk to grant you a quick death, but why bother?” The smaller blade passed through several of its clawed fingers. “You’ll be dead soon enough regardless, and I see no reason to offer mercy to a monster that never understood the concept.”

“You bitch,” it hissed, trying to pull away from me as it cradled its mutilated hand to its chest. “All of this because a spoiled girl won’t do what her mother asks!”

My eyes widened behind the wireframe spectacles. The creature wilted further under my gaze. “My **mother**, you say?” The growl rumbled in my chest.

It whimpered. “She wants you to come home!” it wheedled at me, trying some last appeal as if that would change its fate.

“Does she?” I tried to keep my voice calm, and only succeeded in sounding robotic as I struggled to hold in the fury. “Name her, then.”

The parasite’s milky eyes, set deep in its dark-brown skin, widened painfully until fluid began to leak from the corners, skin splitting. It stammered, but after a few seconds seemed to decide it was more afraid of me in this moment. “Flora,” it rasped.

I’m not sure what was louder. Its scream of terror, mine of rage, or the crackling lightning that became my roar. The red from my eyes fully illuminated the creature before it was burned to ash by the dome of electricity that expanded out from me. It tore into the ceiling and walls, erasing all traces of these beasts.

The scent of ozone was barely enough warning to get clear of the tunnels before lances of electricity pushed outward like grasping claws, reaching for anything near. Beasts and their corpses were incinerated, their blood boiled away to nothing. Several blocks of low-income housing were pushed up and then collapsed into a sinkhole atop the ruins of what was once Coil’s underground base.

Owl sighed over the communicator. She sounded sad. “Bloodmoon is done. Let’s dig her out...”

(BREAK)

It took a good fifteen minutes of the stronger capes moving slabs of concrete, rock and asphalt until the slabs started moving seemingly of their own accord as Bloodmoon pushed her way up from beneath all of that rubble.

“It’s over,” the murderous vigilante stated in a flat, empty voice.

In a gesture that surprised everyone (and made Tattletale groan in pain yet again), Owl hugged Bloodmoon tight and pulled the shorter woman to her chest.

As the capes breathed a sigh of relief and prepared for how the hell they would write their after-action reports, Labyrinth bit her lip. It scratched at the corners of her mind: something was still here, lurking, waiting.

Armsmaster approached Bloodmoon and Owl. "I'd like to offer you a bunk aboard the Rig if you need to convalesce. Also, we would greatly appreciate if you'd come back to the Rig with us so that we can debrief on what exactly happened and how we can prevent it in the future.

Owl stiffened but Bloodmoon sat up straighter and nodded. "I can't promise that I can explain much, but at this point you should be equipped to some degree." She turned her head. "Henryk, you can leave." Then she looked to Owl. "You can too, if--"

"I'm not leaving," Owl responded. "Not yet. But..."

Bloodmoon nodded in understanding. "I'll be alright." She stood and dusted herself off.

Owl fidgeted, her body language screaming regret at so many things left unsaid, then dashed off into the darkness.