

New Wave converged on the emergency, leaving Henryk to massacre the wolves to his liking. The elderly man seemed to neither notice nor care, returning to his silent killing. Legend, Dragon and Chevalier were skirmishing with a ten-foot monstrosity, and losing ground. Dragon's battlesuit had taken significant damage, missing a leg and several weapon systems. Legend was singed, signs that either he hadn't been fast enough with his shifting into light or that the monster was somehow able to harm him through that Breaker state. Chevalier was the worst for the wear, the only melee fighter. He tried to keep the thing at bay with his cannonblade, but the shots did little more than stagger the beast briefly.

As it lunged down, Shielder interposed one of his titular shields between the hero and monster – and immediately gritted his teeth, grunting in phantom pain. He received a sort of mental feedback when his shields were struck, an alert that they were taking damage. When his shields were in danger of breaking, the sensation turned into a form of distant pain. At the moment he felt that pain. Eric Pelham had never gone up against a particularly ramped-up Lung, but this creature was stressing his shield more than an enraged Hookwolf. His mother and sister added their own input, concussive beams crashing into the creature and driving it back.

“Drop it!” Chevalier bellowed. Shielder barely understood what he meant in time and dissipated his shield, allowing the veteran hero to take another shot. The staggered beast took the cannon strike to the chest and fell backward, hitting the asphalt hard enough to shake the ground. Car alarms went off yet again.

“*Heroes, you call yourselves?*” The monster scoffed as it forced its way back up. Eric presented another shield, trying to pin it to the ground. With an all-too-human roar, the monstrosity unleashed a storm of electricity that shattered the shield and caused its creator to cry out, clutching his head.

“*You're parasites. You maintain this charade, growing fat off our suffering. We die in agony while you hide away in your shining towers.*” Its tone was oddly calm, and all the more horrific for it. It flexed its claws. “*You judge us as inferior, act like we should be thankful you help at all. We never asked for your kind! We'd be better off if you all just died!*”

It happened before he could react, before he could even comprehend what was happening: the monster flexed its mighty legs and leapt straight for Eric's mom! Its claws were inches away from eviscerating her when Dragon bodychecked the beast and bore it to the ground. In such close proximity, the suit was ravaged by electrical current. The monster cackled as it ripped the suit apart.

“Oh god, Dragon!” Legend darted in, ravaging the lightning wolfman with fiery lasers, but couldn't deter it from its prey. The monster tore open the cockpit, its face – barely recognizable as ever having been human – turning from malicious glee to disappointment and disgust. It tore out something fleshy, a lump of meat, and crushed it.

Everyone stopped shooting, staring in abject horror at what appeared to be the callous murder of the world's greatest Tinker.

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Finally those fools stopped shooting. In hindsight, Valtr felt foolish: he'd forgotten how to make his earpiece work, and didn't want to draw attention to himself by shouting. He was getting into position. All of that movement made his job even harder, as he had to run the rooftops like he was a constable again, chasing acrobatic youths who fancied themselves gentlemen thieves. Finally he was ready, and

as the assembled heroes gaped at the atrocity before them, Valtr the Beast Eater dropped from the sky blades-first. The moment the twin buzzsaws' teeth bit into flesh he revved the whirligig and began to tear great chunks from the Abhorrent beast. The moment he smelled ozone, he stopped running the saw so he could more easily kick off and break free. He swung the saw at the ground like an oar to kip himself to the side, barely avoiding a lance of lightning that melted a hole in a nearby building.

"The others know not how to deal with your kind, beast. But this is a dance I've done before. I'll delight in glutting myself on your meat." Taunt delivered, he immediately juked forward to dodge around a claw swipe. He broke the whirligig saw apart, slicing with the blades while he beat at the creature's kneecap with the cudgel that made up the weapon's haft. Letting his own knees go limp on instinct, Valtr hit the ground just in time for a backhanded swipe to pass over him.

This creature was inexperienced but powerful. Fast, as well. They'd never determined exactly what made a particular Abhorrent stronger or weaker than others, but this one seemed to be powerful indeed. All the better that it was stupid and green in a fight. Valtr would not permit it to grow old and lethal.

Another pulse of lightning, this one indiscriminate. Valtr had no recourse but to take the hit, immediately injecting himself with a blood vial even while his blood boiled in his veins. He smashed his elbows backward into the street to knock himself back to standing, reassembling the whirligig saw and immediately driving the roaring buzzsaw into the creature's obliques.

It scuttled back. Valtr could feel more than see its fear, glinting in the beast's luminous red eyes. He grinned, his jaw elongating slightly. His muzzle craved to push forward, to feast. His teeth grew longer and more jagged. This was his element. The hunt and the feast.

With a defiant bellow the monster charged and Valtr met it head-on, at the last second dropping backward and sliding heels-first between its legs. He raised the saw and carved a trench in its torso, then used the sawteeth biting into the street to stop his momentum. He kicked off the ground, drawing the hunter's axe with his off hand, and stomped onto the beast's back. It turned, just as he'd expected it would, and his axe sailed to tear open its throat. If not a lethal blow in and of itself, exsanguination would weaken the beast and empower Valtr.

The world stuttered. Instead of turning its head, the beast spun in the opposite direction. The meaty back of its hand caught Valtr in the side, pulping his ribs and pitching him into a building.

"Wh-what was that?" Valtr spat, injecting himself twice more while he forced himself to his feet. "Some sort of Dreamer trick? No, too fast-acting. What are you, monster?"

"*You're the monster,*" it screamed. "*You glory in this! I'll show you the same pain you visit on others!*" Its cry devolved into an all too human wail of hatred and it charged again. A cannon blast and a volley of forceful, burning lasers sent the monster off its course and it crashed headlong into the building instead. Before Valtr could capitalize, the beast released another pulse of lightning and forced him to back off.

It leapt at him and was driven into the ground by another volley – Legend and the Pelhams teaming up to bombard the beast. Then the world stuttered again. Instead of leaping, the beast crashed further through the building's wall and disappeared inside. No-one else expressed consternation over the attack suddenly changing: was Valtr the only one aware?

They could hear it smashing around through the structures and storefronts, tried to track it by sound. The monstrosity then exploded out of the wall beside Valtr, having doubled back. The hunter met it with a laugh and a roaring buzzsaw, borne to the ground by the beast's sheer mass. He tore into it but knew the result the moment he smelled the ozone. *I've always wondered, Valtr thought to himself, whether those summoned hunters who die remember their deaths. I suppose I'll find out.*

The electrical pulse turned the asphalt to glass and disintegrated Valtr's body.

Immediately after, a single concentrated beam of heat impaled the beast like an orbital laser. The concentrated power of the sun impaled the monster and split it in two, leaving a burning corpse. Feeling uncharacteristically vindictive, Legend spat on the ground from his high vantage.

Legend's earpiece crackled with a voice he'd not expected to hear. Dragon's gentle Newfoundlander accent greeted him. *"Ugh, what'd I miss? When my suit gets taken out like that, the VR feedback is pretty nasty..."*

Before he could respond, the hair on the back of his neck prickled and Legend looked down. The burning corpse was stirring, wrenching itself up onto its arms. Its chest heaved and the beast wordlessly began clawing its way toward the heroes. The day had been overcast, the clouds thick and oddly foggy. Now the clouds parted and the moon glared down at them in midday, red and hateful.

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The ground that the heroes and their erstwhile villain allies had gained was suddenly diminishing. The beasts' eyes glowed the same hateful red as the moon, their bodies seemed larger and more substantial.

Labyrinth screamed in agony as beasts began pouring out around her friends, no longer held at bay by her power. She could feel the hate, the seething *want* that glared down at her from the evil moon. It desired something, craved it, and it would eat them all up until it got what it wanted.

More and more beasts spilled out from the darkness, too many for the hunter called Owl to stop. They tore through the dockworkers' barricades, forcing the blue-collar men and women to retreat and abandon their wounded. Frankie's makeshift firebombs didn't make a very big boom but they at least created flames which gave the monsters pause.

Danny fell out of the crane as monsters clambered over it, tearing apart the metal. One wolfman landed on him, using its rifle like a club to beat him about the head and shoulders. He spat blood, losing teeth, trying to fight back. There was no way he could simply protect himself and hope it would stop.

Then every single wolf froze in its tracks. As one, their heads turned to the sky. Clouds had obscured the moon once more, and soon enough moved aside to reveal the celestial body. Instead of a red and hateful orb, burning down at the world like a sinister eye, the moon hung glittering and opalescent.

The wolves faded away as the truth reasserted itself. The moon shared its Insight with those beneath it: the beasts had only ever been a possibility, not a fact.

And Legend dropped out of the sky, wailing in horror and agony. Shielder only barely caught the man on one of his shields before he reached terminal velocity, but the impact still appeared to knock him

unconscious. Glory Girl lifted him off of the shield, noticing with worry his blankly staring eyes. The man was seemingly catatonic.

The only monster that remained was the burning beast that had attacked Dragon and slain Valtr. It crawled toward the heroes with a kind of desperation in its movements, as if determined to cause more pain before its death.

Bloodmoon stepped out of a dark alleyway the same way that the beasts had, and observers' worlds tilted on their axes as she brandished that twin-bladed weapon. There was no posturing this time: she closed the distance and tore into the burning monster, slicing it to pieces. In seconds it lay in chunks.

Tattletale could be heard vomiting noisily and sobbing over the comms link.

Passing her weapon back into the fog where it could cause no further mental trauma, the tall and slender young woman approached the heroes. "Who's in charge?" she asked, her voice deep and authoritative.

Trudging from his injuries – mostly superficial but no less painful – Chevalier stepped forth. "Valtr and I were coordinating the defense and evacuation. That monster, it...killed him."

Bloodmoon showed no sign of remorse or upset. "Do you know where these things were coming from? I don't know if I can stop them for long."

Shielder spoke up before he could stop himself. "Wait, you're doing this!?"

Bloodmoon wiggled her hand in a surprisingly human 'so-so' gesture. "Close enough to true. The beasts are fooling you into thinking they're real. I can show the lie, but it won't last long. The real beasts are still here: we need to get them before they rally."

"A-and that thing?" Shielder's sister, Laserdream, gestured to the still-burning chunks of beast. When Bloodmoon looked at it, mist began to envelop the chunks and make them vanish.

"That was a real beast. It came out to make others hurt like it did."

"Do you know what happened to Legend?" Chevalier asked, gesturing at the unconscious man in Glory Girl's arms. "He dropped when the monsters disappeared."

Bloodmoon tilted her head. "We can deal with casualties after handling the main threat." She loaded something down the barrel of her pistol and fired it into the air, creating a flare in the sky.

Emily Piggot's gruff voice came over the communicator. *"We have confirmation that all werewolf attacks have ceased. This is a universal order: all free transports, coordinate and collect those heroes who can't fly. We're moving on Coil's base. I'm not letting this happen again."*

Owl, the woman a little taller and more built than Bloodmoon, leapt off of a building and landed gracefully beside her apparent superior. Henryk wasn't far behind, though moving with less alacrity.

“Relay this message to the PRT and Protectorate,” Bloodmoon said to Chevalier. It was not a request. “You will cordon off the area and ensure that no beasts escape. I will go into this base alone. Whatever’s inside there, it’s a curse that I wish on none of you. I’ll deal with it, cut out this infection.”

(BREAK)

As Gregor carried her on his shoulders, Labyrinth gazed contemplatively at the moon.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Faultline asked in a gentle tone.

At length, the slender blonde responded. “It feels like someone I know. Not directly related, but the feeling you get when you almost recognize someone...”