

Warren Boxer flipped the switch, responding to the blinking light. “911 emergency response. How can we help?”

There was an odd sound in the background, a grunting and scrabbling. “Yes, hello?” The old woman’s voice sounded so ancient that Warren half-expected dust to puff into his ears from the headset he wore. “My name is Jeanine Carter. I’m sure this will sound silly, but I’m pretty sure a werewolf is trying to break into my house.”

A werewolf? The only thing he could think of that vaguely fit the description was Hookwolf, the cape forming a rough quadrupedal mass of blades with a gigantic beartrap-thing at the front. “Can you describe this werewolf, ma’am?”

“It’s big, and black, and shaggy all over. And its eyes are the most unsettling yellow. Listen for yourself, young man.” The noises grew louder. Warren could hear a deep, guttural, saliva-laden snarling as claws scraped against wood.

“Ma’am, can you hear me?” Upon confirmation that she was again listening, he continued. “I’m transferring you to the PRT East-Northeast. Can you confirm that you’re calling from your home address?” With another confirmation, he switched her over to the PRT and immediately notified a PRT dispatcher.

“We have reports of a werewolf attempting a break-in at 716 Fairbrook Avenue. Whatever it is, it doesn’t sound normal. Possible new cape attacking,” he declared in a single breath.

“Understood. Rerouting a patrol,” responded a smooth and calm female voice.

Once the connection clicked off, Warren sent an in-office message to his other operators. *Just handled a werewolf call. Might have a new cape on the scene :*

His eyes widened when replies like *You too?* And *Weird, so did I...* began filtering in.

As the operators messaged back and forth, they shared their stories. A concerned caller had reported something big, black and shaggy was scrabbling around in the service-entrance area of several decrepit warehouses. “Doesn’t look like a bear,” the caller had said, “but it’s big and looks nasty.” Something human-but-not had tried to break into a family’s home and had been met with a protective father and seven rounds of 12-gauge buckshot. The monster, which was subsequently described as “Kind of like the old Lon Chaney Wolfman movie, but all-black with red eyes,” had been driven off but distinctly not killed. “I don’t even know if I hurt it so much as just annoying it...”

The call that made everyone’s stomachs drop out, however, was a little elementary-school girl home sick while her parents were at work. She called to report a monster on her house’s wall, leering into her second-floor window.

Over the course of the next two hours, 911 would log no fewer than ten werewolf-related calls.

(BREAK)

Motorcycles made for excellent transport, despite their fragility. Their narrow frame and low profile – particularly the Japanese-style models – were ideal for dodging between cars and navigating alleys at higher speeds than most criminals could hope to move.

Hannah Roosevelt, Miss Militia when she was on the clock as she was now, roared down Fairbrook Avenue and pulled up to the quaint little pink suburban house that was 716. “Dispatch, can you get me in touch with Mrs. Carter?”

“Negative, Miss M.,” the operative on the other end of the line responded. *“I started calling when you turned onto Fairbrook. No response.”*

Taking a deep breath, Hannah adjusted her bandana and manifested Masamune’s flechette caster. She normally couldn’t replicate Tinkertech, but Masamune’s was able to be mass-produced and that seemed to be a distinction that her power accepted. The oversized shotgun-adjacent weapon was a vicious anti-Brute weapon that fired a cluster of heavy blades rather than tiny metal balls like the normal shotgun.

If her motorcycle hadn’t alerted and driven off the cape, she wanted to make more noise to hopefully give Mrs. Carter a chance – if the woman was still alive. Rather than vaulting the relatively high fence to the backyard, Hannah kicked the gate open and stepped inside.

The image was jarring. Suburban tranquility was shattered by a massive burrow-hole dug up through the backyard. Deep trenches were torn in the grass, and then in the house’s walls with the same disturbing ease. The door was broken inward.

The kitchen inside was a scene of carnage. Miss Militia had seen a lot in her many years as a hero, but things like this still galled her. Blood was slathered everywhere, viscera smeared on the walls and floor. She could only identify a handful of body parts, including a hand still clutching onto the phone’s receiver. The majority of the body must have been eaten on-scene with incredible speed, because there was no gore trail leading to the hole and no claw marks deeper into the house. Still, it could be a Changer.

“Caller is dead,” she stated coolly into the communicator. “Eaten. Looks like a Changer or a violent Case-53. Checking the rest of the house for any more signs.” Hannah placed her hand against one of the more clear claw impressions in the wall. It looked human, including an opposable thumb, but it was massive. The palm was roughly double the size of hers, if not even larger, and the claw trenches looked to be a foot long or more.

The rest of the house was empty and silent. Jeanine Carter had been a widow. And now no life remained in the Carter household.

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Joshua Cheng hated a lot of things. His parents, for giving him that name; his school – back when he still attended – for making him feel stupid; white people, for not recognizing inherent Chinese superiority; his parents (again) for moving to the US rather than raising him in China. He also hated the name of the Azn Bad Boyz, but was smart enough not to raise that issue to Lung. If a glorious Chinese dragon-monster man wanted to call his gang something so dumb, that was his prerogative.

While on a protection-collection patrol with Kim and Takumi (Korean and Japanese: inferior to Chinese, but still tolerable), Josh held up his hand to call for a halt and pointed at a nearby alleyway where a figure was hunched in the darkness.

Kim followed his gaze. “So it’s a bum. So what?”

“So I don’t like the vibe that fucker’s giving me. This is ABB territory. No gweilo here.” He pulled the Glock from his waistband and checked to make sure the safety was off, strutting across the quiet street. Kim and Takumi followed, concerned for what Josh might do by himself.

“Hey fucker,” Josh bellowed as he approached. “This is ABB territory. No gweilo allowed.” He wished he knew more slurs, but his parents had never taught him Chinese. “You on our turf, you pay the customs fee.” He was rather proud of that, having just come up with it.

The bum made a noise that was distinctly not human and straightened somewhat to face them. It was taller than any of the teens despite being hunched over, its head level with its shoulders. All blacks and grays, short fur covered its body except for a larger mane-like mass around its head. Incredibly lanky yet with a barrel chest, almost like a human greyhound or a starving wolf. Its eyes glowed silver.

And then the wolfman raised an automatic weapon, an assault rifle with some manner of exotic underbarrel attachment, and opened fire wildly. Bullets peppered the alley walls, the buildings and cars on the other side of the street, and ripped through the boys.

As the monster stalked forward and began to eat Josh, tearing into him with its canid maw, Takumi did the only thing he could with the last of his life: he called one of Lung’s underbosses. At least that way they’d be avenged.

(BREAK)

Empire 88 always flew the colors. That was one of the gang’s unofficial mottos. They had so much power that the police avoided them, not protected by the parahumans’ unwritten rules: if a cop got too cavalier in pursuing the Empire, his entire family would turn up dead. If he was really unlucky, they’d only kill most of the pig’s family and blackmail him into working for them on the chance that he’d ever see his wife or child again.

Therefore, in Empire territory, the rank and file were encouraged (under pain of beating – or worse, if one of Hookwolf’s crew found you not repping) to wear their armbands. Red cloth, with a black stylized 88 on a white circle. It was an open declaration of how much power they held in the Bay. In Empire territory, they were the law. The police barely patrolled and for the most part deferred to the gang out of self-preservation. The cops couldn’t control them, the Protectorate couldn’t beat them. It was a constant propaganda message of their supremacy.

It was heartening to see so many industrious young men proudly wearing the colors of the winning side. Well, that’s the kind of thing Kaiser would’ve said. For Stormtiger, it simply meant power. He’d always been hungry for power. It was one of the few things about the old life on which he disagreed with Hookwolf: Wolf held that the best fight was one in which you could respect your opponent – even if your ideologies clashed, if you both fought as hard and as well as you could, and didn’t immediately fail, there was a certain understanding between men that could be reached.

Stormtiger (he much preferred that or some variation over Stanley) liked his fights far more one-sided. Not quite so much as beating up a literal invalid or child – there was no real thrill in that. But to take an opponent to the ground, show him how outmatched and helpless he was...that was a true rush and it was what Stormtiger lived for.

The sound of sudden gunfire caught his attention, and behind his tiger-head mask (he still maintained that that prick Triumph's lion-head mask had been selected just to mock him) he frowned. Stormtiger pulled a radio off his belt, used to communicate with the ordinary people in the gang. "This is Tiger. I'm on North Cedar, hearing shots. The fuck is happening?"

At about that same time, his work phone rang. He snatched it up. "What do you need?"

"Sir," the voice on the other end was one of Kaiser's adjutants, the only ordinary people allowed to give orders to the capes – though technically, nine times out of ten they were merely relaying Kaiser's orders. "we're hearing reports about a monster attacking people along West Brock. You're the closest cape we have in the area: can you recon and let us know if you'll need backup?"

"Can do." It was days like today, when he'd only been out to fly the colors, that got Stormtiger upset. He'd just been walking to enjoy the atmosphere, so he didn't have his motorcycle nearby. Well, nothing for it: he took off in a run, pacing himself so he wasn't exhausted after the several blocks.

He skidded to a stop, slightly breathless, and hit Redial on his work phone. "Yeah, I'm gonna need backup," he panted into the receiver as he looked at a shaggy beast the size of a family sedan flanked by two more human-sized wolfmen. "No simpler way to say it: we got werewolves."

(BREAK)

The Undersiders' loft hideout had an undercurrent of tension, though none of them could explain the source. Even Alec, emotionally stunted as he was, seemed nervous. Rachel was a bundle of nerves and aggression, practically (and in one case quite literally) jumping at shadows.

As for Lisa, she was at the brink. Coil hadn't called her in several days. She'd expected an immediate call – or perhaps a less gentle interrogation – after Bloodmoon visited Ellisburg. Instead she was met with utter silence. Even those few people in Coil's organization with whom she'd managed to weasel the slightest of ins were completely out of contact. She even tried calling one, instead of texting or waiting for a call. It rang and rang.

Something itched at the back of her mind, a promise of violence.

Then Rachel's dogs went berserk.

The stocky strawberry-blonde had three favorite dogs: Brutus, a huge Rottweiler; Judas, a Doberman mix; and Angelica, a one-eyed mutt. All three were her best-trained and most reliable, and traveled with her most of the time. They would growl at best, not barking even at a direct threat. Not without Rachel's permission.

Except today all three were immediately whipped into a frothing, panicked rage. Facing eastward, they barked and snapped and bellowed.

It's coming.

Normally Lisa couldn't exactly explain the sensation of her power. Information was fed into her mind and became part of her thoughts. It resolved into a kind of inner monologue, but it wasn't like she was noting things down or reading them aloud. If anything, it was like a telegram, feeding information with the smallest amount of superfluous articles, conjunctions and prepositions.

The voice that just whispered in the back of her mind was her own, in a sibilant hiss. She had no idea what that meant, but she knew what she had to do. She only had time to grab one item and made for her laptop – too much dangerous information on there – rather than her domino mask.

“People! We have to move NOW! Something's coming and we're fucked if it gets us! We need to head west! No time for masks: it's almost here!” Her voice cracked as her shouting rose into a shriek.

For once, Rachel didn't question. She might not understand people, but she'd been on-edge all day and she understood fear. Lisa was terrified, more scared than anyone she'd ever heard before. “Brutus! Judas! Angelica! Heel!”

The dogs did not heel. Instead they began to grow and tore at the wall, toward whatever Lisa said was coming.

Now it was Rachel's turn to be afraid. “I'm not doing that,” she stated, gesturing at her dogs. “At least, I don't think I am.” Her power hadn't worked without her input since Rollo...

The dogs tore through the wall and bounded out, quickly reaching full size. They crashed into a group of other canids, huge wolves that crawled along the street and even the sides of buildings. The wolves were larger and outnumbered them, but the dogs had more mass. However, a dogpile ensued and the wolves began to tear chunks out of the dogs.

Rachel screamed, tears in her eyes. Brian caught her and tried to keep her from joining the fray. She fought him and every second the time the dogs had bought was dwindling.

“Alec!” Lisa's voice was sharp. “You need to walk Rachel out of here!” The smaller boy looked up in shock and once again a glint of fear was visible in his eyes. “Yes, I know,” she said, refusing to elaborate. “I need you to use it. You've been around us long enough. *Please.*” She begged. Lisa, the smuggest smug to ever smug, was begging.

Jean-Paul Vasil, Hijack, Alec Merceau, Regent... He had used his power often. When he was younger, he was forced to do it, to help break whatever inborn morals he might have. In his early teens, he used it voluntarily, trying to drown himself in debauchery to forget what he was doing. He hadn't used his full power in more than a year. It reminded him of his family, of his father. It made him feel ugly, like some squamous thing pretending to be a person.

Now, for the first time, he used it for someone else's good. For the first time, he used it to help people he might have called friends if he could feel properly. And as he'd been discovering, just wanting it hard enough might have been making the difference – at the very least he could fool himself somewhat.

Rachel went ramrod stiff, then spasmed as her body went through some last adjustments. “I got her,” Alec called to Brian. “Let's go! Cover our trail, big guy!” Rachel's burly, powerful body turned and

joined in the escape as Lisa – skinny, needling, non-physical Lisa – broke a window apart with a kitchen chair.

“Is your car nearby?” Lisa asked Brian once they were on the ground.

“It’s on the other side of the warehouse,” he grimaced.

“Then you bust out a window on the first reliable car we find. I’ll hotwire it. We need to get to the Rig,” she responded.

“Fucking what!?” Rachel said with Alec’s timbre, the Master forgetting himself. “Why’re are we going to the cop shop?” he finished from his own mouth.

“Because this isn’t going to stop,” Lisa replied, still as pale as when she’d first started screaming. “And we’ll need all the help we can get.”