

Loss 8.06

There were very few people whom I truly hated, and the majority were already dead. That day, I decided that I hated Bonesaw. It wasn't enough for her to come into my city for the sole purpose of torturing and murdering innocent people; she had to further extend that to the truly innocent, having released a virus into the water. Animals – dogs, cats, rats, et cetera – who drank the standing water were subject to a transformation somewhat akin to Cerberus' power, becoming vastly larger, more durable and more aggressive. They didn't attack other infected, but anyone and anything else was fair game. There was no way to capture and study the animals to look for a cure without risking people being massacred; horrific as it was, I had to direct my critters to cull the mutated animals, guilty only of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It was a war in the back alleys and sewers, an endless orgy of blood and violence. I sobbed while directing my broodmothers to hatch more raptors, organizing my critters tactically to minimize losses. I created bottlenecks, taking advantage of my raptors' reach with their blades, and assembled firing lines of spikers to thin the numbers.

“*Skitter!*” Dragon's voice shrieked through my earpiece and I leapt off my bed, falling in a heap.

“D-Dragon? What is it?”

“*Crawler's attack was a bluff! Mannequin is inside the Rig and he's after Armsmaster! I lost contact with him; his armor's been compromised. Do you have any critters that can help?*”

I clenched my eyes shut, forcing my mind to stretch its range to the absolute limit. “Yes, there are a couple of raptors. One's near Armsmaster's lab.”

I added that raptor to my list of controlled critters, following Dragon's directions. Using one of its little finger-claws, the raptor punched in the emergency override code. While Armsmaster had his weaponry locked with biometric security, Dragon had convinced him to include an override just in case he was ever incapacitated and in need of equipment. My raptor took the halberd Dragon indicated and rushed to Armsmaster's side. Mannequin tried to kill it with a poison, but it was just painful rather than fatal. I got the satisfaction of watching a mass-murderer killed by his own intended victim.

Instead of triumph, however, Dragon's response was a keening sob. “*The Director...why was she out in the field? Why did she...*”

My blood ran cold. Something had happened to Piggot? I'd come to think of her as a good friend.

“Dragon, be specific. What happened?”

“*I'm sorry. Emily was fighting Jack Slash, and winning. Then the Siberian...killed her.*”

I swallowed hard. “If you have video of the fight, send it to Foresight. Maybe she can come up with a plan. Where did Jack go?”

“*They were headed southwest of the Rig before I lost visuals.*”

“Alright. Focus on coordinating a counteroffensive. I'm going to try to find them.”

While it was taxing on my brain, I forced myself to look through the eyes of every single bug in my range, all while still controlling my critters, and processed the images in order to locate the murderous monsters. I could feel something hot running out of my nose and over my lips; it tasted of copper.

There! One of my flies caught a glimpse of a striped figure. I had it move as quickly as it could, perching on her long hair and hiding within one of the black stripes. Releasing the rest of the bugs, I focused to listen in. Ordinary insects weren't as good as earbugs, but I'd been getting better at hearing through them.

I heard someone slammed against a wall; the feminine grunt accompanying it was too old to be Bonesaw. *"What the fuck was that!?"* Only two of the remaining men in the Nine spoke, and Crawler sounded like a nightmare from the few audio clips I'd heard. Therefore, by process of elimination, it was Jack Slash who was shouting. *"It was supposed to be a curbstomp!"* A weird metallic slick-click; probably unsheathing a straight razor. More female grunting, open-mouthed. He was jamming the razor into her mouth; since she wasn't yet screaming, I presumed he hadn't started cutting. *"Instead, we nearly lost Crawler and Burnscar and I was almost killed. By an ordinary woman! If the Siberian hadn't been there..."* His voice became far sweeter, yet infinitely more menacing. *"So I ask again, dear Cherish, what was that? Were you being a naughty little girl and backing up the Protectorate? Maybe trying to bump us off so you could welch on our agreement?"*

"Blow me, Jack," Cherish protested, forcing the razor out of her mouth. *"Somehow they weren't responding to fear or despair. Only other way I could back you up was suicidal overconfidence. And it worked, didn't it? You didn't get your head blown off."*

"That doesn't explain why Mannequin hasn't been reporting back, or why my little Bonesaw is MIA. Have you been working behind our backs?"

"Maybe it's 'cause you got comfortable," Cherish spat. *"You're so used to everybody panicking when you come to town, you're not prepared to deal with actual opposition. Fucking Hatchet Face was so arrogant he offed himself before even realizing he was being Mastered."*

The tinkling of glass. *"Watch what you say, little girl,"* an accented voice threatened. Shatterbird. *"Or I may just carve out your eyes."*

Good, they were arguing, caught up in petty squabbles. I could zero in on my bug, bring in the sprayers and every other critter in my arsenal, and—

My orange vision vanished. I couldn't feel my critters. Even Atlas disappeared from my contact. *Hatchet Face!* But wait, wasn't he dead? It didn't matter. I bolted down the stairs. While I trusted my critters to protect themselves, they couldn't organize themselves like I could, and if the Nine were coming to call I needed to confront them before they got to my dad. Of course, Atlas was guarding him in the basement, but that wouldn't be enough against something like Crawler.

The hideous roar of gear chains revving up became audible and the door splintered inward, battered down by some bizarre axe/chainsaw monstrosity. The creature wielding the weapon was every bit as monstrous. It was as though someone had taken Hatchet Face, shoved his head down into his ribcage, and piled on an entire person's worth of additional muscle. The immense hunched back flexed, muscles designed for swinging that axe demonstrating their power as he drove that weapon into the wall for intimidation's sake, easily cleaving through pipes, wires and a support beam. The ceiling above groaned

in protest. The beast's glassy, unfocused eyes turned toward me.

The rest of the team was prepared to join in, but without their powers only Grue would have a chance, and even that would be a remote one. Instead, I motioned for them to stay back, my gaze fixed on Hatchet Face. "Oh, I've got a *lot* of anger and self-loathing I need to work out," I snarled, unsheathing the claws from my fingers and toes. "Thanks for volunteering." I dropped into a low stance, fingers curled not quite into fists, hoping that Brian had drilled the fighting style into me well enough. I pushed off toward him, dipping down my left shoulder and digging my claws into the floor to suddenly pull my upper body parallel to the ground, sliding like a baseball player to avoid the next swing of that axe. I tucked my right leg under myself and sprang back upright, digging my claws into his back. Getting a grip on a clump of muscles, I put all of my weight into continuing that momentum and threw him back out the doorway.

I tried to hock up some bursters but my creep refused to transform; apparently his power kept me from controlling my internal creep as well as my critters. *Oh well, doing this the hard way.* I broke into a dead run, aiming a palm strike at his shoulder. All of my strength and body weight focused into the heel of my hand and I sent him sprawling again, the mound of muscle forcing himself back upright before I could capitalize on his stagger a second time.

With surprising dexterity for an undead Frankenstein/Igor hybrid, Hatchet Face spun his axe-saw and whipped it back and forth, warding me off. Even a glancing hit from that could deal major damage; while he wasn't swinging it that hard (comparatively, given how much force he could exert), speed took priority over power.

"Skitter! Pull back!" Grue's voice simultaneously filled me with hope and despair. Hope, in that I wanted to believe he and the others could help. Despair, because it was unlikely. The big man came sliding in, legs spread, and clamped them like scissors around Hatchet Face's own legs, twisting and pulling the abomination backward. Hatchet Face landed hard on his back with a heavy thud and Grue immediately scrambled away, but not fast enough. That mutant axe caught him in the leg and I could hear the meat churning between those vicious whirling teeth, Grue falling forward with a scream of total agony.

"Motherfucker!" It was bad enough that they turned innocent animals into weapons. It was bad enough that they killed and tortured people. But they'd killed one of my friends, and were hurting another. *It ends now!* Before I realized what I was doing, I'd closed the distance and was grabbing the weapon. The blades tore against my costume, ripping through it like it had Grue's, but I squeezed tighter. The chain stopped moving. I could hear the metal screeching beneath my grip, protesting its abuse, but I didn't feel any exertion: I didn't feel anything except pure animalistic rage. I squeezed and wrenched the weapon and tore it from Hatchet Face's grasp. The behemoth seized me by the neck and squeezed, those thick, sausage-like fingers squeezing off my air supply.

I wanted to respond in kind but his head was sunken in and surrounded by those immense muscles. So instead I extended my claws and drove them deep into the flesh, digging for his skull. I was going to tear it off his spine!

Apparently, while I didn't need food or drink, I still needed air. The fury of the fight was turning against me as I felt my energy draining, my body running out of oxygen to power itself. This only spurred me further to end the fight before I gave out, bracing a foot against his shoulder and pulling harder, my claws hooking beneath his jawbone, trying to get as much leverage as I could.

Then his other hand, damaged from my destruction of his weapon, tangled itself in my hair and pulled me down into a piledriver. I felt his boot come down on my head, exerting as much pressure as he could, trying to pop my skull like a zit. I kicked and struggled, trying to push myself up, but he had leverage and I couldn't see where he was positioned. Hatchet Face's body shook a bit; presumably someone had tried to tackle the undead monstrosity, but to no real effect. Then, however, I heard a sound that gave me genuine hope: the loud buzzing of immense wings. Either Dad had released him or Atlas had simply pried through the garage door, but either way my boy was here. I could hear the meaty impact even through the asphalt, and the weight vanished from my skull.

Cerberus was on the ground, clutching her ribs. Foresight was administering her best first-aid to Grue. Hatchet Face was wrestling with Atlas, and losing.

While the dead villain was certainly strong enough to match or even overpower my bug, he didn't have Hookwolf's durability and Atlas' enormous blades were slowly carving through his arms, splitting them apart. I staggered backward until I was out of Hatchet Face's range and forced myself to cough up an uglybug; we'd need a cuddlebug to help staunch Grue's bleeding. The moment I was clear, I felt Atlas' mind touch mine once again. I took control and had him give ground, only for a moment, throwing Hatchet Face off-balance. I spread his blades wide and then scissored them together, neatly separating the murderer's torso from his legs. Hatchet Face's halves landed on the street with a meaty slap and then I brought down the blades again, hacking off his arms. I didn't know how much damage a reanimated corpse could endure, but without limbs it wasn't much of a threat.

My cuddlebug hatched and I lurched over to Grue, pointing it at his wound. *Squee*, it declared, spitting creep onto his mangled leg. It then turned and spat onto my hand, helping my wounds knit together. I could actually see the purple goop melding with my flesh, causing it to close up. "Alright," I panted, "is everybody okay?"

"I'll need a visit from Panacea if I want to keep use of my leg," Grue said, "but I'm not in danger of bleeding out and it doesn't hurt as bad anymore. Those cuddlebugs do good work."

Squee, the bug agreed.

"It feels like this was all a distraction, though," Foresight said while helping Cerberus brace her ribs. "Couple of these are broken," she commented while the stockier girl grunted in discomfort. "Like they were testing you, testing us," she returned to her previous train of thought.

"They were." Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, the sadness returned. "They attacked the Rig. Director Piggot was killed."

Grue looked up from the pavement. "Wait, what? How?"

"Apparently Cherish dosed the area with suicidal overconfidence," I answered. "I managed to spy on the Nine for a bit, before Hatchet Face negated my power. The upside, if there is one here, is that Piggot fucked Jack Slash up before she died." I couldn't help the hint of a cruel smile that blossomed on my lips. "From how he sounded, I think she came close to killing him."

Foresight had frozen in place, arms limp at her sides. "Uh, Foresight? Hon? You alright?" I reached over to poke her.

“Holy fuck,” she whispered. “Holy fucking fuck.”

From where he and Imp were jury-rigging stretchers for Cerberus and Grue, Regent spoke up. “Oh great, our Thinker's broken.”

“This is the second time it's happened,” Foresight said, standing and beginning to pace. She was talking a mile a minute, her motions frenetic. “Relying on my power is almost second nature. While I can't use it too much or it's migraine city, I base my further deductions on conclusions reached with my power. First it was Calvert somehow hiding an obvious connection from me, and now...” She turned to look at me. “Jack has a second power!” She answered my question before I could ask it. “It's how he's survived for so long: some sort of Trump ability that interferes with other parahumans!”

“Not that I doubt you,” Grue said as Regent and Imp helped him crawl onto the stretcher, “but how'd you figure this out?”

“Because I finally wasn't using my power,” she replied. “I've made it second nature to briefly activate my power whenever I'm faced with a puzzle: it helps me suss out the answers much more quickly. But just now, I was so stressed with everything that happened that I forgot to switch my power on. Everything makes sense: there's no way that someone like Jack could command a group of killers all so much more powerful than him. Charisma only goes so far, after all. Moreover, it's pretty much impossible that he's escaped more than one attack by the Triumvirate. Unless, he has some sort of fuck-up shield. But it must only work on other capes, like...” She paused. “Huh, that's something for later. I just figured out that Migraine's power only works on parahumans. But she was able to use it on Leviathan, even if it didn't work. But that's a problem for another time. Anyway, if we consider his secondary ability to be a Trump, then it makes sense that it only works on capes. So somebody like Piggot – admittedly a badass, but a baseline human – would be able to move around his defenses.”

“So we arm the PRT for lethal combat and send them after Jack while we deal with the greater threats,” I concluded, using spiders to weave cables and attach them to the stretchers. Atlas was ready to grab them up. “Cerberus, grab your dogs. Let's head to the Rig. We'll need to get some equipment of our own. Foresight, while we're in transit, I want you to think on the Siberian. We need a way to kill her.”

“Even better if I can do it with my bare hands,” Cerberus added, wheezing through her broken ribs. “I owe that bitch.”

Atlas lifted off, airlifting my wounded teammates. “Everyone, be ready to kill without remorse or hesitation. It's time for a counteroffensive.”

A/N: A bit of a shorter chapter, but I needed a good stopping point between the action or this would've taken forever to get out.