

The sky lit up as Legend descended upon the Rig. The modified oil rig was a frenzy of activity, heavily-armed troopers in blacked-out helmets patrolling every defensible angle. Containment foam was nowhere to be seen: in its place were automatic rifles, sniper rifles, shotguns loaded with dragonsbreath rounds. Each PRT location kept a stockpile of exotic ammunition, primarily for use with 12-gauge shotguns due to the weapons' versatility. While Brockton Bay did not currently have any villains particularly vulnerable to fire, this only meant that they'd never had reason to make use of the emergency incendiary rounds. Now, on Valtr's word, the PRT were arming their troopers with incendiary weapons and making firebombs with excess fuel.

The odd man had explained more of himself and his companions while Tattletale whimpered in the corner. Valtr had been selected as the one to go before the PRT due to his experience leading teams. He'd been in law enforcement before becoming a hunter, and if that wasn't some local parlance for their version of a cape then Emily Piggot would eat her desk. The way that Valtr specified that 'ordinary humans' were too vulnerable against these beasts was evidence enough by itself. Even as a hunter, Valtr led squads and coordinated an organization, making him best qualified to help with tactical deployment.

The man alerted them to his two companions: Henryk, the elderly man in yellow, was a veteran hunter with many years under his belt. He primarily worked alone or in a pair. "In the unlikely event that this becomes a common occurrence," Valtr had said, "Henryk will be the best to teach your soldiers how to fight this scourge. He understands the fundamentals better than any of us."

Of Owl, he was more cagey. The woman, slightly taller than Bloodmoon and with a fuller figure, was the only one to conceal her face. By Valtr's own admission she knew of the PRT and apparently hated them, which meant that she was most likely local – at least local to this world, as by this point Piggot strongly suspected these were transplants from another Earth. If Aleph was Earth without cape culture, wherever Valtr originated must be Earth as written by Edgar Allen Poe. Valtr freely admitted that Owl was by far the most talented fighter of Bloodmoon's subordinates, essentially their team's elite asset. She did best on her own and would find trouble without needing much direction.

His confusion when presented with an earpiece communicator only further cemented Piggot's certainty that he wasn't from this world: it would explain the Victorian dress and seemingly outdated – if ridiculously powerful – equipment. Aleph was about six years ahead of Bet chronologically, so why couldn't Valtr's Earth be about a century behind? When it was explained how the earpiece worked, to help him coordinate while still being in the field, his canid grin turned utterly feral and Tattletale, despite not looking at him, choked back a sob.

"You have my thanks," he intoned, licking his chops. "I have always led best from the front." Rather than vanishing as Bloodmoon tended to do, Valtr departed through the front doors and joined a deploying PRT detachment.

During the meeting, Armsmaster had departed to attend certain issues within the facility. Sherrel Bailey, still under a combination of house arrest and witness protection aboard the Rig, had become quite agitated and demanded to know what was happening. In the interest of potentially adding more hands to the "all hands on deck" order, a sergeant had informed her and the agitation became a sort of mania.

Nobody could explain how it had happened, but Bailey, Armsmaster and Kid Win were now in the motor pool rebuilding an APC. Armsmaster worked on the armor while Bailey pulled double duty,

upgrading the engine and working with Kid Win to design odd transforming weapon systems to be mounted on the vehicle. The three were apparently lost in a collective Tinker fugue and the only reason nobody stopped them was that it seemed like the end result would be quite useful for rapid-response during this crisis.

It was into this confusion that Legend entered, his arrival followed shortly by several jump-ins from Strider, Chevalier; one of Dragon's suits; the Chaturagh from out of New Orleans; and an Italian Master named Cacciatore who always showed up to Endbringer fights, were all delivered in rapid succession.

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For all the carnage ongoing, the Rig was operating like a well-oiled machine. Piggot's warlike background lent itself to crises such as this, Legend supposed. Knowing what he did about her personality, he was honestly surprised that she was willing to make use of known villains even in a crisis, but needs must. Perhaps Bloodmoon killing the Goblin King had left Piggot feeling more lenient.

The troopers had recruited Hellhound ("She prefers Bitch. Call her Hellhound and she's liable to kick your ass. Or feed you to one of her dogs.") to help cover the evacuation. With a screen of well-trained giant dogs and heavy gunfire to back up the animals, the overwhelming majority of evacuations from non-Empire territory were going well. A few of the transports got hit, two or three with no survivors and one that had been moving several families from a well-to-do part of town had been torn open but saved by a new cape named Owl – though one of the families needed immediate medical assistance.

The Chaturagh and Cacciatore got to work immediately, summoning their minions to further add to the defensive strength. Cacciatore called up various hard-light constructs in the form of animals, in larger numbers than the Protectorate member Ursa Aurora, but commensurately weaker and more expendable. They made for excellent distractions and could be lethal under the right circumstances.

The Chaturagh was in many ways Cacciatore's opposite. He summoned a small number of what he called spirits, which resembled different types of undead: a maximum of three zombies, two larger zombie-types with their right arms replaced with blades, and Prophet – a towering monstrosity reminiscent of a fantasy lich, wrapped in sackcloth and arguably sapient. It could apparently operate independently and was known to bicker with its summoner. The Chaturagh was arguably New Orleans' only heavy hitter, an independent hero who only came out when a crisis hit. In his gray hooded coat and sharp-angled green mask, he seemed small and frail compared to the Returned that flanked him – particularly Prophet, who could look down at the likes of Manpower.

While Chevalier got to work coordinating with the PRT and getting introduced to Valtr, Legend met with the Director and her Deputy. And, oddly, with Tattletale. "I'm pleasantly surprised to see you're still here, Miss," he said to the girl. "The Undersiders are known for their avoidance of conflict: I would've thought that you'd have made for an escape rather than coming to the Protectorate."

"Hey, we live here too," the blonde replied with a weary smirk that didn't reach her eyes. "Besides, this is personal on a few levels. I never wanted to be a villain: Coil forced me into it. And now I'm certain this is Coil's doing." She switched on her headset. "Charlie Golf, you're about to face another wave. Get ready."

Sure enough, feedback stated that within a couple of minutes the team was attacked. “How many were there? What kind?” Tattletale asked.

“*Five,*” came the reply. “*Four wolfmen with guns, one big one.*”

“Just like last time,” she muttered loud enough to be heard. “Okay everyone,” she said much louder and more confidently, “I’m certain of it now: these aren’t just waves. They’re respawning, to use a game term. Can one of the techies call up some of the bodycam stills from team Bravo Tango?”

The images came up and Tattletale got to work exhorting the techie to zoom in toward a patch on a wolfman’s chest. Zooming in and trying to clear up the pixels didn’t really resolve the image, but that mattered little to a Thinker. “Coil’s men don’t have names on their uniforms, but they do have serial numbers. This one, this and this.” She indicated three different photos, pointing at the blurry strip of what might be numbers. “They’re all the same serial. But more than that, look at the rips in the outfit. The tufts of fur poking through. They’re identical. These are copies, like they were xeroxed.”

The teenage Thinker took in a deep breath. “These waves won’t stop until we can get to Coil. Whatever he’s doing, whether it’s his doing directly or something he has in his facility, it’s creating these copies. Once everyone’s evacuated and we have a decent defensive line, perhaps we can push in. If somebody can call up a map of the city, I’ll show you where the main entrance to Coil’s evil underground lair is. Then you tactical types can figure out a plan to get in there and end this.”

Legend nodded. “I’ll keep in touch on comms, but I should be out there helping. I’ll provide fire support until you’re ready to make a push.” Accelerating to near-lightspeed, he blinked out of the room in a literal flash.

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In a way, it was heartening to see parahumans come together in a crisis. It was achievement enough for these people, permanently broken by their trigger events, to choose to do good rather than trying to make others suffer like them – not that Legend could truly understand, with his lack of such an event. To travel from their own personal territory and fight to protect complete strangers who didn’t share the barest history, that was an act of true heroism. Those capes who’d managed to come to Brockton Bay’s aid on such short notice, they deserved praise. Whether their powers were just useful cannon fodder like Cacciatore’s and arguably the Chaturagh’s; a veteran and authoritative leader like Chevalier; or the force of nature that was Dragon and her Tinker constructs; Legend deeply appreciated each and every one of them.

Throwing his arms wide and unloading a volley of fractal heat-beam lasers, Legend tore through a contingent of wolves assaulting an evacuation caravan. The wolfmen retaliated, their own pink lasers lancing through the air and forcing Legend to take evasive maneuvers. Maintaining eye-contact on his targets allowed him to keep his lasers arcing back again and again until the monsters were silenced.

As he floated down with intent to give a pep-talk to the troopers, Legend was distracted by his earpiece beeping. Another attack. He blinked into the sky in a flash of light.

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Shotguns barked and engines roared, forklifts and loaders being used as battering rams while a crane swung a shipping container like a flail as best it could. The monsters had been attacking the Dockworkers' Union in regular waves for hour after hour. No relief had come, the emergency lines were busy: it was obvious that emergency services were prioritizing the wealthy and affluent. On one level, it only made sense – without citizens with money to pay taxes, the city would slip even further into collapse. It was pure pragmatism to save the people who'd be able to feed the most into the government coffers. But that didn't take the sting out of being designated minimal priority for having the misfortune to be laborers in a seemingly purposely-mismanaged city.

Bullet and claw wounds racked up, and both casualties and corpses began to pile. Alexander sat with his shredded leg tied as tight as possible with a belt-tourniquet, wielding a shotgun until he bled out. As a massive wolf bore down on him, unfazed by the buckshot he unloaded into its face, the creature was knocked aside. Kurt drove a forklift like a jousting knight, driving the prongs into the beast's side and lifting up to flip it over even as he impaled the shaggy monster. Weighing down the pedal with a cinderblock, he bailed out before the monster's claws could find their mark and left the forklift to drive its victim into other wolves like fleshy bowling pins.

Accumulating yet another scar from the road rash, Kurt wiped blood from his broad forehead and jogged back to the makeshift defensive line while his wife Lacey did her best to tend to the wounded. Pete lay on a stretcher, eyes unseeing. The big blond mute had used his wide, thick body to provide cover from gunfire and had paid for his heroism with his life.

Danny wrenched the levers within the crane, rapidly raising and lowering the rectangular container to crush and swat what monsters he could reach. They were all trying to buy time for Frankie and the rest of the eggheads to come up with some sort of fertilizer bomb. At the very least, the explosions should bring heroes to investigate, and with luck the blasts would be effective enough to score the Union some breathing room.

A dark form darted past the crane's cockpit and Danny Hebert yelped involuntarily, expecting a wolfman to crash through the glass and end his life. Instead the humanoid shape sailed toward the fighting, one arm extended. The few remaining security cameras would show nothing more than a flashing haze of white-violet light. Those unlucky enough to see it in person instead saw a hazy cloud form before the outstretched hand and a cluster of thick, pale tentacles whipped out to crash into the wolves. Many were smashed to paste, the rest flung backward from the resultant force.

Once eyes cleared from the brightness of the tentacular light, the dark figure resolved into a tall and slender woman. She attached her odd rhombus-sword to the pole on her back, then depressed something in the pole and swung the weapon. From a sort of scythe-pick, the weapon changed into a straight line – some manner of spear. Her black ringlets waved in the gentle bayside winds as she quickly rubbed a sheet of paper over the weapon, causing it to burst into flame.

As the woman waded into the thick of the wolves, effortlessly slaughtering the beasts while practically dancing around their attacks, Lacey shoved Alexander onto an under-car roller and carted him back to the impromptu medical center.

Danny scanned the area to watch for other wolf incursions. His attention was occasionally drawn back to the woman fighting, and he felt a wistful sense of loss. Especially as the cape bent backward under a wolf's claw swipe, an old memory floated to the surface of the time Annette tried to teach him how to tango...

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Being from an affluent area themselves, New Wave were alerted to the carnage as APCs – both PRT and Empire, and wasn't that a strange sight – rolled in to empty out houses and bring people to safety. Brandish and Manpower did what they could, but neither were exactly equipped to deal with giant wolves or laser-toting wolfmen. Eventually they settled for directly guarding the PRT transports, helping drive back any monsters that made it through the cordon. Of course, Panacea was put on the first wave of evacuation transports, her power far too valuable to risk leaving her behind.

Skyward, the quartet of Lady Photon, Laserdream, Shielder and Glory Girl kept a tight patrol of the surrounding area, intercepting wolves before they could incur upon the APCs. And it was from this vantage point that they saw a man in yellow hacking his way through the wolves. Nothing could touch him: he was always just a hair's breadth out of reach, juking sideways away from bullet volleys and ducking under claws. When an enemy drew a bead on him and he couldn't dodge, his left arm blurred and a throwing knife would plant itself in the shooter's body to make the shot go wide.

Not wanting to risk the children, Lady Photon descended by herself to offer aid. Her beams crashed into a wolfman and bore it to the ground. "Do you need help?" she called.

His response was preceded by hurling a molotov cocktail onto the downed wolfman, making it scream in agony. "You've no experience." His voice was barely audible over the din. "Wrong instincts. Too soft." He jerked backward out of a wolf's claw swipe despite showing no external sign of having noticed it, and hacked the creature's neck open. The elderly man (his voice meant he could be nothing else, despite his face mostly concealed by a collar similar to Bloodmoon's) leaned into the blood spray, letting it coat his yellow outfit.

"Best off on defense," he continued, quickly drawing a small blunderbuss and unloading into a beast before jamming his arm into its chest and tearing out a mass of viscera. "Protect them. Leave the hunt to hunters."

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They were all battle-weary. Hookwolf had been forced to repeatedly rebuild his form, torn apart again and again by the enormous monsters. Fenja and Menja were covered in cuts and abrasions and burns from those damned lasers. Stormtiger had borrowed one of Krieg's greatcoats and was doing his best to fight, though most of his attacks did little to the monsters.

Above the fight, riding on one of Rune's platforms while the girl rained heavy debris upon the beasts, Kaiser called up a hedgehog of spikes to hinder or even deter the monsters. They wore themselves to death like army ants, their corpses enabling their companions to crawl over his creations, but Kaiser only subsequently called up more. Thick columns of metal sprouted branches like claws, curling toward the alleyways to make them even more difficult to clamber over. Even more wolves would have to die in order to overcome his defenses.

And then, in the middle of the fight, as more wolves poured out of the darkness and one massive beast tore up through the asphalt, something changed. The buildings became more defined, the mild misty fog vanished, only noticeable in its absence. The wolves stopped coming, and once Hookwolf and the twins brought down the giant wolf, no more emerged from the darkness.

“...Did...did we win?” Rune asked, her voice sounding like a cannon shot in the sudden oppressive silence.

A collection of heavy footfalls became audible, and around a thoroughfare corner came Faultline’s Crew, clustered in defensive formation around Labyrinth. The unmasked capes’ lips curled at the sight of the Empire devotees, but they made no move to provoke.

“We’re on our way to the Protectorate.” If Rune’s voice had been like a cannon shot, Faultline’s shout was like a cataclysm in the quiet. “Are you going to stop us?”

Magnanimously, Kaiser swung an arm and metal receded from the street. “You came in peace. Go in peace. This is not the time to settle any grudges.”

With a calm nod, and intentionally no words of thanks, Faultline led her people through. Labyrinth paused mid-stride and looked vaguely in the direction of the other parahumans. “You should move,” the small young woman said softly. “They’ll be back. They want to feast. Find a better place while they’re distracted.”

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Although their command styles differed vastly, Chevalier knew how the Protectorate and PRT operated and was able to translate that according to Valtr’s orders, deferring to the experience of the veteran of this crisis. With this coordination, and backup from the various parahumans who were actually effective against the monsters, the PRT began to turn the tide. With Cacciatore screening, Chaturagh acting as a combination of scalpel and battering ram, and Legend and Dragon serving as artillery support, they were making a difference. Bitch stayed back, her dogs obediently standing with the armor support as a line of home-base defense. Inch by inch, foot by foot, the PRT was reclaiming land. Each step took them closer to Coil, and to ending this nightmare.

And then Tattletale’s shriek pierced their ears. “Something’s coming!” she screeched, so high and panicked that her voice almost became inaudible. “It’s bad! Oh god it’s bad! Oh god, oh god...” From her position at one of the consoles, the blonde villainess curled up and started to dry-heave.

A hint of ozone met Legend’s nostrils, just before a different scream reached his ears. Deep and booming, guttural and thick with saliva, echoing as if from multiple mouths at once. A nearby building exploded and a massive beast lunged through the scattering brick. Walking on two legs, the shaggy monster had blazing red eyes and crackled with purple electricity.

**“They all went along with it!”** the monster boomed. **“All of you! You support it! I gave everything! My life! And you’re happy to destroy me on nothing but her say-so!”** It threw back its head and screamed again, a mix of pain and rage that turned Legend’s stomach. A dome of electricity spread out from the beast, breaking apart nearby buildings and turning some chunks of debris to ash.

Dragon launched a pair of shaped-charge missiles, the destructive equivalent of bunker-busters. They struck the monster square in the chest and it staggered back, but stepped forward almost immediately after. Its fur was barely singed. She only barely juked out of the way as electricity lanced out from the beast, shearing one of her suit’s legs off with the effortlessness of a hand passing through water.

“I think we need some sort of backup,” Legend said as he began unloading more incendiary beams on the creature. “We’ve encountered a new monster that tanked Dragon’s missiles.”

Valtr, who was always nearby and turning stomachs as he tore into the wolfmen with his teeth, spied the monster through an alleyway. “Oh gods,” his exclamation was soft, breathy, even fearful. What he said next was so quiet that no human could properly make out. Only Dragon’s systems could parse such weak sound waves. “Taylor, I hope you’re done. We could really use your help. We’ve an Abhorrent on our hands.”