

This was a disaster, becoming a full-on fiasco by the moment. Werewolves in different stages of transformation, many with automatic weapons, were spilling out of the underground. The New York Protectorate had them on hold, PRT National gave a fucking busy signal, and she was currently negotiating truce terms with Victor of Empire 88 – to Emily Piggot’s credit, she was stonewalling him. He might be a skill-stealer with collective decades if not centuries of experience in rhetoric, but persuasion is useless against obstinance and bigotry. E88 was a cape gang and a criminal organization, and if they wanted the PRT to *not* shoot to kill on sight they’d abide by Piggot’s rules. No negotiation.

Her secretary opened up the door and held up a notepad: ‘Undersiders on Line 6. Tattletale offering help.’

Piggot scribbled down her own reply. ‘Pass them to Renick.’ She went back to bullheadedly refusing any entreaties for leniency.

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Wilson Renick was himself a skilled negotiator, better than Piggot. But his more pragmatic mindset made him more vulnerable to rhetorical arguments. That was, ironically, one of Emily’s strengths: she was so stubborn and mistrusting of capes that they couldn’t use logic to talk her over to their side.

Thus, it fell to him to speak with the Undersiders’ Thinker while Emily was busy with a greater threat. “This is Deputy-Director Renick. What can you do for us?”

“First thing you can do for us,” Tattletale said over rushing wind, “is don’t shoot us! We’re on our way to the Rig with about three dozen dogs of various sizes! We’re not here to fight, we’re offering help! Coming up from West-Northwest! Your secretary said she couldn’t authorize a stand-down order, so please get on that before we all die!”

“That depends on what help you can offer us,” Wilson replied smoothly. He was already inclined to give the order: the Undersiders were small-time thieves. It did little good to gun them down. But she sounded desperate.

“This isn’t a negotiation!” Typical. The next statement threw Renick for a loop, however. “I’ll give you the info even if you arrest us, but I’d prefer if you didn’t!”

The Deputy-Director typed up a quick order to be disseminated to the PRT personnel: those who were on duty, already armed with live ammunition, were to stand down upon seeing the Undersiders and their dogs. Marked as friendlies for the duration of this crisis. “Well, you have my attention. What information do you have?”

“Well, in addition to a bunch of dogs willing to fight these things – and able to hold their own in two-to-one odds – I’d like to give you a full group briefing so I don’t have to repeat myself much. But suffice to say that I’m pretty certain Coil is the cause of this, and we can help you find him once you have the forces.”

“I’ll let the Director know. We’ll arrange a meeting.” Renick hung up and composed a quick text to Piggot.

(BREAK)

After Regent had controlled her body, Tattletale had reminded Bitch that her shelter was in danger. The stocky girl had managed to shake off her grief enough to lead the exodus of dogs to the rig, and now that they were bunkered down in an auditorium Bitch could finally explode.

She tackled Regent and began beating him about the head, shoulders and chest. Meaty fists rained down on him, displacing his mask and bloodying his nose and lip. He took it, protecting himself but not fighting back or controlling her.

“Why!?” Rachel bellowed. Why did he save her? Why did he not let her die with her friends? Why wasn’t he fighting back now?

“I felt how much you loved them,” Alec said quietly, looking away. “How much it hurt...”

Rachel stood and gave him one swift, halfhearted kick to the side, then returned to her pack.

Alec adjusted his mask, then set his own mask firmly in place. He jauntily strode up to the PRT trooper stationed at the door. “Hey man, you got some antiseptic or something? Had a little domestic dispute.” He slipped two fingers under his mask, then displayed them again marred with blood.

“...Wait here,” the trooper said at length. “I’ll get someone to escort you to the bathroom.” He picked up his radio.

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Tattletale stood at the head of a table. Piggot, Renick and several PRT captains bored holes into her with their gaze. Every Protectorate cape was patched into the meeting via comms. A vulpine smile spread across her lips.

*No, her own voice intoned in her mind. This is important. Don’t needle.*

Her facade of confidence slipped for a moment before she schooled her features into a flat poker face. “Alright, cards on the table: Coil was the Undersiders’ backer. Our employer. He cajoled us into this life with blackmail, carrot-or-stick bribes, or outright threats. He recruited me with a gun to the head, and I’ve woken up several times from a targeting laser beaming me in the eye. Just to remind me he could kill me anytime.

“He’s been acting...erratic, the past month or two. I suspect it has something to do with Bloodmoon and her anti-Thinker effect.”

“So he is a parahuman?” Captain Rowan interrupted.

“Correct,” Tattletale replied smoothly, getting into a groove now. “A Thinker, and I believe a powerful one. He’s taken a lot of precautions to keep me from figuring out his power, but less so recently. My supposition is some sort of precognitive ability based around splinterpoints – where making one choice or another results in wildly different outcomes. I suspect his attempts to suss out Bloodmoon had a degrading effect on his psyche. What I don’t get, however, is why he seems to have kept trying.”

The audience was quiet and Tattletale quirked an eyebrow. “Wait, have none of Watchdog’s Thinkers had this effect?” Her reaction wasn’t some theatrical needling, but genuine curiosity and worry. “Well, that’s unsettling... Um, to clarify,” she lost her rhythm and had to sputter for a moment, “I haven’t really been able to use my power regarding Bloodmoon. When I try, I get an instinctive feeling that I shouldn’t. So maybe it’s a me thing and everybody else doesn’t get that. Huh.”

“That makes you more insightful than most,” a deep and commanding voice spoke up suddenly from behind Tattletale.

*Don’t look, the voice in her head urged her, desperate and fearful. You won’t survive it yet. Center yourself. Calm. Calm. Focus inward. Restrain your power. You don’t want to know. You don’t want to see.*

Everyone else startled. Piggot had her gun drawn even before Captain Anders. “Peace,” the newcomer said, and Tattletale squeezed her eyes shut as he stepped past her to stand before them. “I am here to offer assistance. This scourge of beasts is not unknown to us. But my apologies, I have let a love of drama supersede efficiency in this instance.”

The tall man bowed low at the waist. “I am Valtr, confederate of the League and tactical organizer for the illustrious...Lady Bloodmoon,” he finished with a smirk. The man wore no mask, his long stringy hair dropping down to his shoulders and contrasting with a well-kept goatee. He had a lantern jaw but a somewhat weak chin. And as he smiled, his teeth were canid.

“You were at Ellisburg,” Piggot said before she could stop herself.

“And a sporting hunt it was,” Valtr grinned wide. “My Lady is currently attending the self-styled Goblin King’s last hurrah. It was a surprise to all of us, Impurity even here.”

Tattletale finally opened her eyes and let out a squeak, snapping them shut again. Multiple cephalopod eyes opened and closed arrhythmically in Valtr’s brow, his hair squirmed with snakes, and his body was covered in mangy fur... After more breathing exercises, she opened her eyes to see a tallish man in a constable’s outfit, a cape draped over one shoulder.

“How did you get here and what are you offering?” Piggot demanded.

“The how, I cannot tell you. Well, I could, but it would do you far more harm than good. I believe Owl called it...a cognitohazard. As for what I offer, we three lieutenants offer our services in slaying these beasts. We have faced them before.”

Tattletale made a sound like a punctured bagpipe.

“I offer advice as well as combat assistance,” Valtr continued. “These beasts are vulnerable to fire and to serrated weapons. Consider these as concepts made manifest, such as...” He pulled out a sheet of vellum and read off it. “...Stakes to a vampire, or silver against a werewolf. I personally recommend fire, for an ordinary human to face a beast even with serrated weaponry is a death sentence. Flame can frighten some of them, and will kill them quickly.

“More important, however, is their blood.” Up until now, Valtr had been polite and even a little playful, almost condescending in his address. Now he was deadly serious, the life draining from his eyes. “Do

*not* collect it. *Do not* allow exposure to it. *Do not* leave it lying around. Burn it. Scour it. Cleanse it with fire, acid, whatever the most corrosive or caustic substances you have. Their blood cannot remain. It is a—” He glanced at the vellum again. “—A bio- and cognitohazard. There is no cure, save incineration of the infected.”

“Excuse me,” Renick spoke up now. “Earlier you said that someone called Owl termed something a cognitohazard, and you’re clearly reading from a cheat-sheet. Why isn’t Owl telling us these things in person?”

“Well that’s simple,” Valtr replied with a lupine smile. “She hates you.”

(BREAK)

Citywide evacuation was in progress. With these things burrowing up from underground, the Endbringer Shelters were considered a poor fit – nobody knew how the monsters burrowed, and if they could magically tunnel their way through the reinforced shelter hulls then the populace within would be canned food. Alan, Zoe, Anne and Emma Barnes huddled together as best they could on two bench-seats within the APC. Clutching a few precious keepsakes, they hoped their home would be there when they got back. They hoped they wouldn’t die.

The vehicle lurched into a higher gear and the girls shrieked as they felt as much as heard the thunderous rumble of the massive .50-caliber machine gun opening fire. The APC rocked as something impacted its side, then huge scything claws tore through the metal armor. Alan Barnes screamed in agony as a single massive claw effortlessly separated his left forearm from his body. The creature didn’t even notice: its purpose was to pry open the APC like a can, not yet to kill the people within.

A new gunshot, outside of the rhythm of the machine gun but even louder, tore through the air and the monster’s head snapped to the side. Light footfalls skipped across the APC’s roof before a glistening spike – some oversized pick – embedded itself into the wolf’s skull. Thin arms hoisted the creature up and whipped it across the street, crashing into dumpsters.

While trying to use Alan’s belt as a tourniquet, the Barnes family could see a tall woman – slim, long black hair flowing in the wind – dance around the monster’s attacks and tear it apart. One more gunshot and she drove her hand into its chest cavity, tearing out a mass of viscera. The beast fell dead and began to disintegrate.

The woman didn’t stop to check on the evacuees. She ran off, head held high and shoulders straight. Deep brown eyes were briefly visible behind her wireframe spectacles.

(BREAK)

“No,” Labyrinth muttered once again, walking stiffly with the rest of Faultline’s Crew. “No, no...” Oddly, this was a rather lucid day for her. She was aware, responsive to her compatriots, moving in time with them as they made for the evacuation sites. “This is my home. You’re not welcome...”

Thus far the Crew had only been attacked by beasts which they’d noticed well in advance, the slavering monsters easily noticed. Newter, on the wide-band radio (it was far too dangerous for the salamander-boy to go into melee with these things, so he was staying out of combat until it was their last resort),

finally looked to Faultline. “Hey, something I’m wondering. Everybody else says these things burrow out from the street or lunge at you from an alley, no warning. Why isn’t that happening to us?”

Gregor the Snail, the enormous Case-53 man with translucent slimy skin growing small snail shells like other people would grow moles, looked pointedly at Labyrinth. To his shock, she replied.

“They’re not real when they’re down there,” the monstrously powerful Shaker replied. “They’re only real when they come up, when they come out. Until then they’re just a possibility. I don’t let them be. This is my home. My friends. They don’t get to *be*.”

“More wolves,” Faultline called. “Five o’clock!”

Gregor and Spitfire spun to deliver what had become their usual one-two punch against the beasts: Gregor would spew a form of rubber cement to slow or even stop the beasts, while Spitfire would douse them with napalm.

“We should take a left up ahead,” Labyrinth stated, the little blonde losing her balance briefly until Faultline took her hand. “Going straight through isn’t safe.”

“How do you know?” Newter believed her, but was still curious.

“I know,” Labyrinth said simply. She hoped that would be that. It would be far too complicated to explain the sweet pale lady with whom she occasionally had tea. Although perhaps she should. Her accent reminded Labyrinth of Gregor’s a little: maybe she’d know where he was from.