

Contagion 1.08

In. Out. In. Out. I ignored the snickering in the back of my mind, the gangers finding my choice of mental words infinitely amusing.

Brockton Bay was a corpse that hadn't yet realized it was dead. Countless buildings stood abandoned, some occupied by squatters or converted into crack houses and/or brothels, but most simply hung open like wounds that refused to heal. It was to one of these empty tenements that I had sojourned. I could feel the lingering presences, imprints of all the pain and sadness that had dripped into the concrete and steel. Perhaps it was because I retained memories that I had developed this more superstitious aspect of my personality, but I could practically sense the ghosts of those who had died here.

Still, it had meant that I would be undisturbed as I experimented with my powers. Each parahuman's memories and instincts helped me to further hone my own abilities. I was back in my true form – well, I'm not sure if I could legitimately say it was my true form. For all I knew, my true form was a blood-colored puddle like a palette-swapped black pudding from one of Mom's old D&D books. I was back to looking like Taylor, though, as I was most comfortable with making changes and experimenting in that body. Made sense, since it was mine.

At the moment I was practicing to extend blades of organic metal from my fingernails. Somehow, I could actually imitate metal, and mine was far more durable than Hookwolf's had been. I'd guess that its density and tensile strength would match or possibly exceed Tinker-made materials.

A scuttling noise, concrete chips rattling against the floor, caught my attention. On reflex I manifested the hoodie and bandana that concealed my identity, whirling to pinpoint the intruder. There was nothing there, which likely meant I was being paranoid; not like I didn't have reason to be. My hands felt different, though, and I gasped when I looked down at them.

My arms were a mass of ebon cables, shining like black metal. It looked like a winding tangle of steel cords, weaving in and around one another in an imitation of muscle fibers. I bent my elbow and saw a vicious saw blade exposed, jutting off the back of my forearm. My hands, however, were the truest surprise and they even frightened me.

The palms were almost as wide as my shoulders, each finger an enormous scythe of shimmering chrome. The inner curve was wickedly serrated, the spiked edges jutting out far enough to dig into whatever they cut and either grip deeply or tear chunks out of their target. The outer curve was only slightly less sharp than the inside; it wasn't that they were dull, rather that the blades were wider, made for impact more than cutting, though the blade was nothing to scoff at. My hands and arms felt even more unnaturally strong than normal, the metal muscles somehow focusing my strength better than the arms I typically utilized.

Deciding to experiment, I picked a random spot – a point on my back between the shoulder and spine – and focused. There was a brief stab of pain, like a hornet sting but without the burn of the venom, and a long, thin blade lanced out from the location I'd chosen. *Yeah*, I thought, *I can work with this*.

I hadn't planned on going after any of the heavy hitters until I'd trained my skills, but with Hookwolf's brain came much of his tactical knowledge. The man was a savage, barely deigning to speak and seeing himself as a giant metal beast normally trapped in a human shell, and yet he was a savant when it came to pre-combat planning. He could invent complex strategies and pass them to lieutenants and higher-

ups who would then ensure the groups cooperated. Hookwolf hadn't been very good at battlefield improvisation, excluding his own transformations to deal with threats, but pre-planning was something that I'd desperately needed. For too long I'd been running off half-cocked and I had nearly died several times because of it. If not for certain aspects of my power I would be dead many times over.

I sat down cross-legged, arms folded across my chest. It was Sophia's preferred meditation pose. *Not that meditation helped that evil bitch.* Still, it did help to focus my thoughts. I needed to come up with a reliable strategy to help me take down the gangs, preferably without causing too much of a commotion. I was strong, I was fast, I was durable, I was deadly. But none of that would help with the entire world after me. I wasn't the most powerful parahuman in existence, not by a long shot, and I needed to remember that. Drawing attention was bad.

Then use your other powers, my mind prompted. You're a shapeshifter. You can look like anyone. Use that. You have clothes and colors for every gang in the Bay, and your face collection will only increase. That was a very good point. Thank you, me. The police and Protectorate had been trying and failing to unseat the gangs; besieging them from without would never work. I could slither in and destroy them from the inside out: start off faking a nameless grunt, then eat my way up the ladder, imitating faces and personalities until I could catch the parahuman leaders.

The Merchants were still my current target. They represented everything wrong with the city and preyed on the weakest and most easily swayed. Once they were gone, the ABB were next. As evil as Empire Eighty-Eight was, they at least pretended to be civilized. Lung and Oni Lee were savage murderers and thought nothing of civilian lives being caught in the crossfire. Kaiser wanted to rule the city; Lung would be satisfied with ruling a mountain of ash. Once the ABB were gone, E88 would definitely be on their guard, but they wouldn't be able to resist trying to take the city. Even if they consolidated their parahuman power, I could pick off their human subordinates. Besides, only three of their capes were a legitimate threat to me – Fog, Night and Purity. If I could get them first, the rest of the Nazis would be relatively simple.

I changed form to Benny, a doughy drug addict, and overlaid my hoodie and jeans. He looked like any other anonymous schmo in the crowd, which was exactly what I intended to become. For the moment, I needed to disappear.

(BREAK)

On my walk I passed a Wards publicity event and felt my gorge rise. They paraded these kids in front of the brainless masses to convince them that the Protectorate was in control, that they were doing good for the people. Meanwhile, the gangs preyed on the weak and downtrodden and the wealthy either fled or ensconced themselves within their little communities. The government would prefer to be seen as powerful than to actually flex their military muscle and save their people, because that might send the wrong PR message. Actually helping people was less desirable than a flashy song-and-dance show.

And that was before taking into account that they were happy to cover up the crimes committed by their own. Shadow Stalker was a hateful, murderous psychopath and they let her run wild, too afraid of the Youth Guard and federal sanctions to actually do their job and protect the people from a parahuman that they definitely *could* capture and control.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, hunched my shoulders and trudged on.

(BREAK)

Guard duty was intensely boring. Well, if D'ondre had a word like 'intensely' in his vocabulary, that's how he would have described his current job. Apparently he had good eyes and fast reflexes, which made him ideal for covering the various operations around town. With Skidmark gone, Squealer was doing her best to take the reins of the Merchants but she wasn't used to the role of leader.

D'ondre did his best to look inconspicuous, sitting on the curb and smoking a joint, appearing like just another burnout. Well, he *was* just another burnout, but this one actually had a job to do. A few hobos and even members of other gangs passed him by, not demeaning themselves by paying him the slightest bit of attention.

A pudgy guy approached, hands in his pockets, and slowed his gait as he neared the door D'ondre was technically guarding. “Yo, my brother, you want some of the good shit?” The easiest way to assess potential threats was to offer them some pot. The actual Merchants would identify themselves, while others would give D'ondre a chance to react.

The newcomer rolled his eyes. “Christ, Dre, you're so fucked-up on that cheap ganja you don't even recognize me, do you? I'm here with the shipment.”

D'ondre's smile widened. “Shit, we've been waiting for you, man. You're the only one coming tonight, right?”

“I think so. Why, you wanna go on break or somethin'?”

D'ondre shoved his hand down the man's throat, dragging him into the darkness. “You could say that.” Tendrils flowed down the courier's esophagus, deflating his body and devouring him from the inside out.

I assumed the courier's – Ric's – form next. I'd found that it was easiest to think of myself as the people whose faces I was wearing if I wanted to imitate their mannerisms. Now that I was relatively certain we wouldn't have any interruptions, I took a moment to get into character.

Once firmly ensconced in the Ric persona, I clomped up the steps and pounded a fist on the door. After nearly a minute the eye slot unlocked and slid open. “I got the shit,” I declared without preamble.

The door opened and I stepped inside. Numerous little meth labs were set up in the back, hidden behind ratty Japanese paper screens that looked to have been fished out of a dumpster. The ingredients I had in the package were some of the chemicals needed to actually cook up the drug, as well as more with which to cut it and stretch the production.

The door swung shut and locked. *Perfect.*

(BREAK)

BBPD

Detective Moretz tilted his head. “So...what do we got here?”

Riggs shrugged. “Honestly? I'm not sure. Some concerned citizen calls to report 'screaming like a horror movie' and the place is abandoned and locked up tight, apparently from the inside.” She pointed around at the wreckage. “We have clear evidence of meth labs, as well as bodies being thrown through them and these shitty screens, but no bodies.”

Moretz tilted more; he was like a dog in that respect, tilting his head when he tried to figure something out. “With all the chemicals spilled, you'd think there would be flesh sloughed off everywhere.” He ran a hand over his balding pate, smoothing back his black hair. “Is there any evidence, aside from the wreckage, that people were ever here?”

“Minor blood splatter,” Riggs replied, the lanky woman rising from her crouch. “It's damn difficult to see without a blacklight, but the way it spreads makes no sense. It's as though the splatter is residue from an attempt to clean off actual arterial spray, but there's no evidence of cleaning products having been used.”

Moretz heaved a sigh. “Sounds like we've got a cape killing on our hands.”

“Yep. Hey, didn't Grant ask for some files related to the Merchants a little while ago?” Riggs closed her eyes to focus her memory. “Yeah, something about drug-related deaths that could've led to a new cape out for revenge.”

“And you think this could be the same cape?” The hispanic detective tapped his bottom lip. “I'll admit, that sounds too related to be coincidence. But, wait, if this is linked to the other Merchant killings, it's also possible that it's involved with Hookwolf's death as well. The Adrestia murders are way above our pay grade.”

Riggs adjusted her little gray military cap. “Yeah. I'll kick it up the chain.”

(BREAK)

'He who fights monsters should see to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.'

It's a quote that most people have heard, in one form or another, but most don't truly understand; particularly the second sentence, as what does it matter if the abyss gazes into you? If someone asked me for the answer, I would point them to the events of the previous night. One gazes into the abyss to understand it, but linger too long and the abyss comes to understand you as well. You begin to merge, your differences disappearing.

While wearing Ric's body, I had devoured more than a dozen people, most of them unarmed, and even before consuming them I'd been reasonably certain that some of them were only guilty of cooking and distributing meth. I could have let them go; not a single one could have given a useful description to the PRT. But I couldn't afford the luxury of mercy.

It was interesting to me that I now thought of mercy as a luxury, as I had always seen it as a virtue, a symbol of heroism that was only rescinded for the most vile of monsters. But now that I had the responsibility of protecting others, I saw the truth in this diseased city: set a criminal free and the blood of their future victims stains your hands as much as theirs. I had wanted to help those homeless men escape the hobo fight, and instead they had tried to kill me in retaliation. They were so far gone, so

happy to surrender themselves to their addiction, that murdering another human being – another addict manipulated into fighting and dying for the amusement of others – was something they were eager to do if it won them another dose of poison. I had no way to know which of last night's victims would commit horrific crimes to survive if I let them go free, and I had no inclination to find out. The counterargument was that I had no proof that any of them would kill, rape, kidnap or whatever else; that was a true and valid point, but I needed to err on the side of caution. Take one life to save many more. Further, these massacres would send a much-needed message: being in a gang no longer meant safety. For many career criminals, prison was a nice vacation from the harsh world outside, and imprisonment meant little or nothing to those who knew their organization would be waiting to welcome them back. Death, however, was something you didn't return from. With such a consequence, I foresaw gang recruitments dropping significantly.

Good people can be bent to evil if forced to associate with and perform evil in order to survive and protect their loved ones. If one cannot remove the need for protection, then another option is to make joining with evil markedly less safe than going it alone. Remove the good people from those circumstances and they are free to remain good, to help restore the honor and virtue of their home.

That was not my fate, however. I may have been one of those good people, once upon a time, but I had been crushed and broken and remade into something far darker and more dangerous. My only saving grace, at least to my eyes, was that I managed to focus all of my hatred and darkness upon the deserving rather than preying on the innocent who had never wronged me. Not for the first time, I wanted desperately to go back home and sob into my father's shirt, to resume being a helpless little girl and just cry out all of my pain.

But I didn't dare.

If I started crying, letting out all of my pain, my tears would drown the world. If I returned home, it would be only a matter of time until my rage boiled over once again. To seek comfort would be to endanger the one who offered it to me, and I could never put my father in that situation. Since Mom's death he had been virtually nonexistent as a parent, but two years of uselessness didn't outweigh thirteen of love and support. No, this was my burden to carry, my war to fight.

Besides, I finally had a plan. I didn't necessarily like the plan, but I admitted that it was the best one I'd thought up, both in terms of efficiency and chance of success. And it all hinged on actively distributing the poison that kept Brockton Bay's wounds festering. I had somewhere close to fifteen fresh sets of memories that all contained snippets about Merchant trade routes: the rounds their dealers would make before returning to the warehouses for a resupply. I just needed to catch one of them, take his or her place, and follow the circuit. Once that was done, I'd be able to get into one of their distribution warehouses, no questions asked. It was almost a certainty that a lieutenant or two would be there, people with more expansive knowledge of Merchant operations. And after wiping that stain off the map, I'd be able to plan out more elaborate tactics for disposing of the entire gang.

A shadow passed overhead, letting me stop squinting for a moment...then it became larger and darker, and I leapt aside to avoid being smashed by a car that screamed out of the air like a meteor. I checked to see if anyone was nearby before shifting into my cape disguise and leaping atop the nearest tall building I could find. It was really only a few stories tall, but this place had been a residential development back in the day so most buildings only had one or two floors.

Several blocks over, Rune, Fenja, Menja and Kaiser himself were squaring off against Dauntless,

Battery and Velocity. Not only were the heroes outnumbered, they were pretty well outgunned too. Of the trio, only Dauntless was in any position to be a real threat and there was only one of him.

I knew that I would regret this decision, but it was a lose-lose situation and I believed that taking action would be the better of the two bad options. While I held no love for heroes more concerned with appearances and the status quo than actually helping people, the city would be worse off without them; at least, until it got back on its feet. Then we'd see. But for the moment they were the lesser of two evils and they could use some help.

I shifted to a larger, more muscular and male body, let my legs coil like springs, and launched myself into the air.