

It was odd, how sedate everything became after the crisis ended. Chevalier helped Legend to stand: he and Battery had suffered badly from the effect of the glittering moon, and unlike Battery Legend had no Assault to carry him back.

As Assault held his wife in his arms (no point in pretending otherwise, since the Empire had already fucked off) and gently kissed her, Chevalier looked at Legend. "I'm not doing that for you," he stated flatly.

The Triumvirate hero's uproarious laughter helped raise assembled spirits.

Armsmaster stealthily shot Bailey with a tranquilizer: there was no way she'd willingly relinquish the APC, and he didn't want to see what she'd do when directly faced with Bloodmoon. "Win, climb out of there. Velocity, I don't want you scouting ABB territory by yourself. Take the APC. Militia, ride shotgun. If the weapons on this thing die, you have your own. Let's take some detachments of troopers, have Dauntless run vanguard with them, and make sure the slums and Asian sections are secure. Any objections, Director?"

"No, that's reasonable," Piggot's calm voice responded. "*Make sure you bring Bloodmoon back to the Rig for an AAR. We need to understand what just happened.*"

"You really, really don't," Tattletale interjected over the comms. "*You don't want to know, and you **definitely** don't want to understand.*"

"*That girl has sense.*" Everyone had forgotten that Bloodmoon had her own communicator, since she hadn't used it after entering Coil's base. "*I'll answer questions but there are many things I cannot share, and more that I will not. For your own safety more than mine.*"

"I'd love to stick around," Dragon chirped nearby, "but I do need to get back and make sure everything's fine back home. I'll call in later if you still need me. Or if you just want to talk." Her suit turned its head to look unsubtly at Armsmaster.

The Chaturagh shrugged. "I've got nothing to do until Strider comes back to take me home. Not like I carry bus far back to New Orleans in my pocket." His accent was that of high-class Louisiana, the old-money families that still fully enunciated the city's name.

Cacciatore nodded, his own English heavily accented by his native Italian. "I'll gladly offer help until it's time to go home."

From nearby, Faultline spoke up. "Do we have to worry about anything?" Her companions looked exhausted but tense.

"No," Armsmaster replied before anyone else could offer input. "Labyrinth was instrumental in keeping casualties low and carnage to a minimum. I would like for you to come with us to the Rig for your own after-action report so we can understand what Labyrinth was doing to prevent this, but I can't demand your presence: you're not under arrest, not after today's events."

"We'll do a sweep of the affluent areas," Lady Photon offered, "and then pop in for reports later. Gotta make sure the Empire isn't getting up to anything."

“We can get a transport here for you in a few minutes,” Armsmaster said to Faultline and her team. “If you don’t mind waiting here.”

“It makes me a bit uncomfortable,” Gregor the Snail spoke up. “But after electric claws and an implosion, I doubt anything else will come crawling up out of there.”

“And I would offer a transport to you as well,” Armsmaster looked to Bloodmoon, head only lowering a few degrees to look at her. She was exceptionally tall for a woman, only exceeded by Owl, who had a few inches on even her – nearly at Armsmaster’s own not-inconsiderable height. “But I wonder if you’d be alright riding back to the Rig with me.”

Most people in Brockton Bay, even heroes and villains, would be excited to ride on his advanced motorcycle. The simply-named RRM, Rapid-Response Motorcycle, was colloquially referred to by fans as the Armscycle, and toys and models were sold under both names. It could exceed 150 miles per hour at standard output, featured boosters for nearly double that speed, and featured advanced gyroscopic balancing and predictive software for cornering at the full 150mph speed.

Bloodmoon shrugged in reply and made to casually climb onto the back. Armsmaster had to suppress a pout as the vigilante treated his offer like he’d invited her to ride back on a sputtering Vespa. Then his bruised ego was the least of his concerns. It didn’t feel like a slim and tall woman was perching on the back of his bike. The presence behind him was vast, ancient, incomprehensible. Far larger than it should be, too big for her skin, like some prehistoric beast. A salt-water crocodile in human form, colossal and patient, content to simply wait and pretend to be harmless. Until it was time to strike. The ancient beast, the mosasaurus he’d invited to ride with him, casually rested her hands on her thighs rather than gripping onto him. “Ready when you are,” she said softly.

Armsmaster gunned the engine, not to show off, but to be rid of his passenger as soon as possible.

(BREAK)

The forcefield bridge, which had been turned back on once it was established that the Rig wouldn’t be bum-rushed by werewolves, glittered underneath them and Bloodmoon stared at the swirling patterns of color. It resembled oil mixed with water, various colors rising up as pressure to the forcefield stirred them up. The coloration had not been intentional but it was considered aesthetically pleasing, so Armsmaster never took the time to try adjusting it.

“And here we are,” he said over the low whine of the RRM’s engine. “That’s Deputy-Director Wilson Renick: he’ll escort you inside while I get my cycle parked.”

Thankfully, Bloodmoon needed no further prompting and climbed off his vehicle. The warmth returned to Armsmaster’s spine and he quickly drove into the garage and from there to his private corridor to store the RRM.

Even someone as old and experienced as Wilson Renick could be taken aback, and he found himself swallowing hard as Bloodmoon approached. She radiated danger: the only cape he’d met in person who did the same was Alexandria, but even the Triumvirate’s Brute of Brutes didn’t make his fight-or-flight instinct scream so much. Still, he swallowed as subtly as he could and gave a tight politician’s smile. “Welcome to the Rig, Bloodmoon. It’s the first time you’ve had a chance to actually take it in,

isn't it? I'm Deputy-Director Wilson Renick. Would you like a bit of a tour of the facility, or straight to business?"

"I didn't come here to sightsee," she replied in that deep voice that Assault believed wasn't her real timbre. Wilson was inclined to agree. "I'd rather get to business and then back to my own life, if you don't mind."

"Certainly. We'll be meeting with the Director, and as such it's policy for parahumans to disarm. Will that be a problem?"

The weapons at her hips dissolved into mist and Renick resisted the urge to heave, but only barely. Of course she wouldn't have a problem with disarming: she could probably take the entire Protectorate bare-handed.

(BREAK)

After a silent and most uncomfortable elevator ride, Renick led Bloodmoon to a meeting room. Emily Piggot was already seated, along with several analysts and two PRT captains. The express elevator dinged behind them and hissed open to reveal Armsmaster: Renick would never let himself be crammed into that hell-box. Either it was only rated for power armor or Armsmaster had done something to his own internal organs, because the speed and pressure generated by that elevator universally sickened others who used it.

"Well, it seems we're all here," Piggot opened. "Please take your seats. I hope you consent to being recorded, Bloodmoon, because we'll use this live after-action report to help brief our other heroes and commanders on the events as we understand them.

"That's fine, just don't look too deeply into the recording."

"So we've been warned," Renick said with a wry smile. "Tattletale had wanted to attend, but she's currently in the infirmary."

"I'll get straight to the point." Any artificial lightness drained from Piggot's voice, leaving only the hard steel of a commander worn down by years of drudge. "What was unleashed on us today? And how do you and your companions know it so intimately?"

Bloodmoon sighed and pulled down her face cover so everyone could see her thin pink lips set in a hard line. "I warned before: there will be much I cannot answer, due either to lack of knowledge or promises made. More still that I will not answer, for your safety more than mine. But I'll do my best to explain in a way that's not a cognitohazard."

"Valtr said something similar," Captain Anders quickly replied. "My condolences for his loss, by the by."

Bloodmoon tilted her head like a confused animal, before recognition glimmered in her cephalopod eyes. "Oh. Valtr isn't dead. It's complicated, and I don't quite understand it myself, but that wasn't really him: I summoned a memory of him. So his memory died, but the real Valtr is alive and well."

"You summoned him?" Armsmaster was intrigued. "You're a Master on top of everything else?"

“Uh, Master? It’s been a long time and I don’t really remember the cape designations...”

The assembled people quickly ran her through the definitions.

“Oh, no. I don’t think I’m a Master,” she replied. “It’s...complicated. Probably something you’re better off not knowing the inner workings.” She took a deep breath. “I should start with the fundamentals. My mission statement is to prevent the incursion of another world into yours. This was the first time the other world was briefly successful, and I suspect only because it had inside help – a parahuman from your world, this Coil, had somehow made contact with something from the other world. It used him as a foothold: the beasts were a side effect.”

“A side effect?” Piggot was incredulous, raising a blonde brow. “A plague of werewolves that nearly necessitated a city quarantine was a side effect?”

“I have fought things that can rewrite reality and fundamentally and permanently alter human physiology. Things that make your Endbringers look petty in comparison. *A side effect*, Director.” Bloodmoon’s voice was flinty, daring the Director to question her.

Piggot chose not to rise to the challenge. This wasn’t meant to be a fight, and Bloodmoon’s performances against the Simurgh and Nilbog spoke for themselves. “So what was the intended effect?”

“I’m not certain. Most likely it wanted to subsume the city and make everyone its playthings, but the beasts got loose before it could more effectively subvert others. While we were unlucky with it finding an anchor in the first place, we were lucky with whom it anchored. A petty man, a parasite, self-interested and gluttonous. He had no higher-minded goals than self-aggrandizement. If it had found someone of stronger convictions, convinced him to help it...we’d have been in much greater trouble.”

“So what do we do against this...thing from another world?” One of the analysts spoke up, clearly out of his depth.

“Nothing. I’ve been handling it. With my coalition – the League is from that other world, and likewise dedicated to stopping the forces that reach outward – we’ve been successful thus far. If it hadn’t been for a parahuman from here giving it an inroad, our success would have continued.”

“You’re really advocating for a policy not only of non-interference, but of ignorance.” Piggot was incredulous but couldn’t deny her curiosity. *Give me a good reason*, her body language said.

“Treat it like the Sleeper,” Bloodmoon replied smoothly. “Warn that it’s a cognitohazard and don’t poke it. If it has no footholds, you won’t even notice that it’s trying anything.”

For the first time that evening, Emily Piggot’s voice was hesitant. “Can you stop it?”

Bloodmoon’s lips curved downward slightly. “I’ve been stopping it. If you mean ‘Can I stop it permanently?’ I don’t know. I need more preparation before I can make the effort. And if I fail...the League can’t stop it, not without my brute force.” It was Bloodmoon’s turn to show weakness, the young woman worrying her lip. “It may be a better policy to just keep doing what I’m doing, stymying

it, when I know that works. Rather than an all-or-nothing that may result in us losing all and gaining nothing.”

(BREAK)

ABB territory was a ravaged nightmare. Blood was slathered everywhere, homes and storefronts ravaged by claws. There was no sign of Lung. But there were numerous sites of explosion where Oni Lee had clearly put up a fight.

Speaking of, several clones appeared ahead of the convoy. They crumbled to ash but were a clear sign to pull over. Since he wasn't attacking, this was almost certainly a call for parley. As Protectorate second-in-command, Miss Militia exited the modified APC and approached. The real Lee teleported in front of her. “Is it over?” His voice was the flat tone of an exhausted soldier, long since past his limits and clinging on simply because he had nothing else.

“It's over,” Militia replied, shocked to feel her heartstrings to violently tugged. “They're all dead.”

Lee sank to the ground, his legs giving out at the last minute, and he looked up at her from the heap that was his body. “All dead here, too. Lung... I know not where he is. Found one dead, charred wolf. No Lung. Will you...make the people safe?”

A villain, asking the Protectorate for help – not for himself, but for the people. Lee's entire life had been called into question today, hadn't it? “We'll do everything we can. I can't promise that they'll all be safe: unless we get more resources, we can't do that. But I'll advocate as best I can.”

“It is better than nothing.” Oni Lee fell backward and passed out.

“Console, we need an ambulance for Oni Lee, and probably more emergency services out here in ABB territory.” Miss Militia switched to her local communicator frequency. “Alright, people, fan out and look for survivors.”

(BREAK)

The Fallen camped out in the mountainous exterior, well outside Brockton Bay's city limits. The street rats Valefor had enthralled and sent inward had been a godsend, calling to warn about the quarantine and the werewolves. And now that Bloodmoon had stopped it. It sent Mama Mathers into more throes of evangelical praise, and made the rest of the Fallen both nervous and hopeful. If one cape could defeat the Simurgh and undo a city quarantine against a fucking werewolf invasion, perhaps Bloodmoon actually was worthy of worship.

Either way, in the next few days when the patrols dried up, they'd make their incursion...

(BREAK)

“We're going to have to wind down our operations,” Max Anders said to his gathered lieutenants. He received various incredulous noises in response. He held up a hand for quiet. “Already our moles in the PRT report that the ABB is all but gone. Lee is in medical custody, Lung disappeared and abandoned his territory, and the rank-and-file are gone. Coil is dead. The heroes can focus entirely on Empire 88. Worse still, *Bloodmoon* can focus entirely on Empire 88. She defeated the Simurgh. She stopped this

city's quarantine. Do any of you think you have a chance? Even all together, do you think we have a chance?"

"Fuck no," Brad shouted. "No, Max is right. This is worse than if Eidolon decided to squat on the Medhall roof, because at least he'd just arrest us and we could break out. Bloodmoon will kill us."

"The Empire will need to slowly relocate," Max continued. "Keep our heads down and begin the exodus once the patrols reduce. Don't start trouble in the new city until you're properly reinforced. And that's the other part. I can't leave Medhall. Kaiser is officially retiring from Empire 88." And good riddance to it. Max had never really believed the white-supremacy ideology like his father and sister had, but E88 was an already-established source of power. Now it was an albatross around his neck. He could do better as a simple business mogul, not having to worry about a bloodstained vigilante hunting him down. "Hookwolf, you're our best strategist. Until we can find a new figurehead, you and Krieg will be co-leaders. Krieg will handle the ideological angle and keep contact with Gessellschaft, while Hookwolf organizes the operations."

This would lead to great upheaval, and perhaps an assassination attempt or two. But Max would rather deal with that than always looking over his shoulder and waiting for Bloodmoon to slaughter her way through his defenses.

(BREAK)

Within the PRT transport, Labyrinth slept exhausted on Gregor the Snail's large belly. In the world of her dreams, she was somewhere else entirely.

The pale, doll-like woman poured another glass of steaming tea for her. "You did very well, Elle. I am proud of you," she said with a smile, her accent still reminding somewhat of Gregor.

"Sometimes I felt like it wasn't me in control," Labyrinth looked nervously at her companion. "Was...was that you?"

The Doll shook her head, her burgundy bonnet immaculate as always. A small bronze comb glimmered in her hair. "It was always you. But you were tapping into a friend's resolve. The two of you were supporting one another, though you have never met. You are a good person, and I am happy to know you." She favored Elle with another soft smile. "Now, please, you were going to tell me about ice skating?"