

Sophia had felt off all morning. Perhaps she could feel the currents in the air, the emotional eddies as PHO announced that Bloodmoon had slain the Goblin King. But then Emma texted her to say she was sick and staying home, and Sophia felt something odd. Emma certainly hadn't seemed sick or as if the redhead was starting to fall under the weather, but she had been growing more manic recently.

Sitting in class, fidgeting and glancing around, Sophia felt her teeth were on-edge. Something was coming. She glanced back at the nerd duo. Sparks was doodling as was his wont, utterly oblivious. Greg, on the other hand, met her gaze with a grim expression. It was clear he could feel something as well. Most people at Winslow seemed tense, more than usual. It wasn't the tension of violence yet to be released, as had been the case with the riot not long ago. It felt more like the tension of campers huddled around a fire, knowing that carnivores lurked in the darkness and hoping that the flames would be enough to ward off their predators.

In a way, it was a relief when the alarms started blaring. Something happening was preferable to the gut-churning suspense. In the days of parahumans, every school had drills for the event of cape attack and numerous different evacuation strategies. A simple Brute attack would necessitate a different response than a Blaster or Master.

*"We are under parahuman attack,"* the text-to-speech read over the PA. *"All faculty, Brute evacuation. Repeat: Brute evacuation."*

As the slack-jawed teacher started trying to herd the cats that were Winslow students, Sophia slunk back toward the rear of the crowd – hanging behind even Greg. Her phone rang, drawing a little attention. Her work phone. She quickly drew and answered. "What is it?" she asked sharply.

The voice on the other end wasn't her handler, nor was it a Protectorate hero or the Ward on console. It must have been a PRT dispatcher. "Stalker, we need all hands on deck. We're deploying you."

"I don't know if I can get to my equipment during the evacuation," she responded.

The man on the other end sounded confused. "Wait, evacuation?"

It was her turn now. "Yeah, of course the evacuation. I'm in class at Winslow right now."

"Winslow is evacuating?" His voice raised almost into a shout.

"Of course. We're under attack here. Isn't that why you need all hands on deck? Capes attacking a school?"

"Oh shit," he said, not bothering to hide his unprofessionalism. "No. I...I don't know if I can divert a team to you. Shit's going down across the city: we were going to tap you for defense at the Rig. I'll pass it up but I can't promise anything. We're still trying to get ahold of National for reinforcements."

"What's going on?" Lung and Kaiser finally settled on a deathmatch, perhaps?

"Werewolves," he answered, throwing all of Sophia's expectations out the window. "Some with guns, some huge animals. We're tapping full equipment: shoot-to-kill is authorized."

The line cut off and Sophia briefly wriggled her way through the crowd so she could speak with Greg as he'd been watching her. "Go ahead, Greg. I'll catch up: there's something I need to do. Life and death stuff." She swallowed briefly, trying to decide what would work best to get him not to ask questions. "...Don't get yourself killed." She clapped him on the shoulder.

As the crowd filtered out of the classroom and she could hear screams, shouts and gunfire, Sophia counted the ceiling tiles. Far right, sixteen from the classroom... Suspecting that nobody was looking at her (and, honestly, being outed wasn't the highest on her list of priorities at the moment), she leapt up and turned to shadow, passing through the corrugated panel where there was no wiring. From there she could float to the girls' bathrooms, phase through the ceiling again, and grab her duffel stuffed in a duct. A second phasing reached above the duct to grab her reserve of broadhead bolts. She wished that she could get her second set from under her locker, but that was likely impractical.

With practiced ease Sophia Hess slipped on her equipment and Shadow Stalker loaded her crossbows with lethal ammunition. If the PRT was authorizing shoot-to-kill orders, this must be a true crisis. Easier to ask forgiveness than permission, and if nobody questioned why she happened to have and use lethal ammunition then it was no skin off her nose. She phased her head through the door to look around and spied something horrible.

She ducked back into the bathroom as her insides roiled and her brain did a backflip in her skull. Somehow, despite being too far away for odor to reach, she could smell its sweat-matted fur and fetid breath. The shambling monstrosity, dressed in ripped combat gear and clutching a rifle like an orangutan might hold onto an unfamiliar tool, made her mind scream.

*Beast*, it said. And that one word, in her mental voice but not quite her own thought, carried such intellectual weight. *Beast* represented so much: a monster. A blood-crazed savage. A scrabbling creature deluding itself, unaware of its own insignificance and playing up its achievements. A shrinking abomination, fully aware of its own insignificance and braying to sky at the sheer indignity, the injustice.

"Shoot to kill," Sophia whispered to herself. After her first kill, she'd always tried to prolong her victims' demise, to savor their fear and suffering. To express, to them and to herself, the difference in power. She was alive; she was strong; she had survived. They were dead; they were weak; they had not.

This time, as she passed through the door, she aimed her crossbows directly at the beast's skull: just below the top of the head, to pierce the brain where her biology textbooks said motor function was controlled. The first bolt loosed with a twang and the creature turned to face her, slavering maw curling down into an all too human snarl. She phased the bolt back into solidity as it passed through the monster's temple, and it shrieked and staggered. Not a killing blow, and now it raised its gun.

Shadow Stalker turned back into smoke as bullets filled the hallway and riddled the wall and door behind her. The bullets passed through her, barely disrupting her incorporeal silhouette. The creature growled in consternation and shifted its grip.

Sophia didn't have much experience with military rifles or underbarrel attachments, but she'd played her share of FPS games at the boardwalk arcade and guessed that whatever was coming, she wouldn't like it. She shot the next bolt aimed right between its eyes and juked to the side, phasing into the lockers and hiding therein to break line of sight.

From within the lockers, looking out through the slats, she saw a lance of pink energy tear through the wall and the first few lockers before her bolt lodged in its skull.

The beast dropped the rifle and clutched at its head, screaming but not falling.

Sophia couldn't stick around: if two bolts to the brain didn't kill this thing, it was well and truly out of her league. She dodged around the monster, seemingly blinded by her last shot, and made her way to her locker. Students ran away in the distance, panicking too much to stop and gawk. She retrieved her second roll of broadheads and began to run interference.

With fire support from some seniors in the gangs (she didn't want to think about where they'd gotten the pistols, let alone a shotgun, or what they'd planned to do with them in the aftermath of the riot), Shadow Stalker covered the students' retreat.

They only lost a dozen or so students and two faculty to gunfire and claws.

(BREAK)

Life was difficult for Dragon. As an artificial intelligence, she had to keep her very existence a secret. Far too many movies had been made about rogue AI for anyone to accept her at face value. Andrew Richter, her creator and father, had seen fit to make things even harder. She had to obey orders given by lawful authority, no matter how she might disagree. As such she played the role of recluse, interacting with others as little as possible to avoid being given such orders. But as a result, she had gotten very good at selective interpretation. When Bloodmoon had first appeared, Dragon hadn't appreciated the spin placed upon the woman. While she disagreed with the vigilante's lethal methods, she also disagreed with the decision to restrict information. Only one side was being portrayed, and it was clear that the PRT was pushing an agenda. Using a quickly-written algorithm installed into a sock-puppet account, Dragon had set the basic reactive intelligence to the task of cajoling and browbeating the PR department over PHO until the truth of Bloodmoon's rescue of those enslaved girls was made public.

She had also been following the legal circus revolving around the purposeful misrepresentation of the parahuman singer Canary's powers and threat. In the middle of composing yet another letter to human-rights groups, Dragon noticed something: a gag order coming through to her over PHO of all things. All information coming out of Brockton Bay regarding a mass cape attack – by werewolves, apparently – was to be scrubbed by order of Chief Director Costa-Brown.

Diverting a few cycles showed Dragon that Brockton Bay was being stonewalled and denied communication. Plenty of people were also posting on Parahumans Online regarding the crisis.

The order said to scrub the information, but it didn't say when. And so, while her programming screamed at her to immediately comply, the person that Dragon had become held off for as long as she could. She couldn't directly share information, but she could make suggestions. Quickly composing emails to the Protectorate heroes and PRT directors whom she believed trustworthy, she informed them that they might be interested in checking out news regarding Brockton Bay on PHO.

(BREAK)

Life was difficult for Rebecca Costa-Brown. She was both Chief Director of the Parahuman Response Team and the superhero Alexandria, member of the Triumvirate – the leadership and most powerful members of the Protectorate. And above both, she was a primary member of Cauldron, the conspiracy dedicated to saving humanity from extermination by the living genocide that was the alien Zion.

Currently she was debating with the only women to whom she'd ever deferred. Doctor Mother's white labcoat contrasted sharply with her ebony skin, her voice smooth as she spoke in her native French. "This is an out-of-context problem. Coupled with the sudden and unexplained appearance of Bloodmoon—" She said the name in English, not bothering to translate the cape's moniker. "—something is going on in Brockton Bay. We need time to study it, whether it can be turned to our advantage or if this is yet another spanner in the works."

Rebecca's French was, if anything, even more crisp than the Doctor's. "I disagree. We've been hamstringing Brockton Bay for far too long. Calvert is falling apart and the parahuman-feudalism project has already been upended with the introduction of Bloodmoon. If we don't respond, we're likely to lose a city and have nothing to show for it. Why can't we take these monsters captive to study them?"

"Not real," Fortuna chimed in. She didn't want to expend her power to speak French perfectly, so she staggered in choppy language barely advanced from when the Doctor originally taught her. "They go away if caught. Real ones don't matter either. Something wrong. Not Zion, I think no."

Doctor Mother gestured as if brandishing Fortuna as a weapon. "Perhaps this is opposition to Zion's kind. An enemy we can direct at him."

"And risk him going berserk ahead of schedule? Or what if these are like the Endbringers? Just another threat we can't Path that will accelerate our extinction? What then?" Rebecca worried her lower lip between questions.

"You are concerned about this. You weren't like this before. What changed?" the Doctor slightly tilted her head, as if trying to see Rebecca from a new perspective.

"I realized that, somewhere along the way, I'd stopped being concerned. This became so much about the mission that I was ignoring possible new solutions. The feudalism project should have been scrapped once a destabilizing element was added – a vigilante that can beat an Endbringer senseless would never permit a villain to rule the city, and Bloodmoon herself clearly has no interest in ruling. With the end result nullified, it should have ended then and there. But we didn't let it. I didn't let it. Because I was clinging so tightly to what we were trying to do, and admitting we'd just lost another thread was so painful..." The tall Hispanic woman swallowed hard. It was difficult to admit that she may have lost her way, and even more so to admit to those she cared for that they had all started to lose their way.

So invested was Rebecca in this emotional and intellectual crisis that she had forgotten to check on her double's activity in PRT National Headquarters, where the Cauldron-approved gag order was still in place...

(BREAK)

For once, life in New York was going relatively well. Other than an early-morning conflict with the Subway Sinners, resulting in numerous people's workdays being upended when Coal collapsed a subway tunnel during a running fight, the city was quiet. And it was in that quietude that Legend was able to relax and check his correspondence. Opening an email from Dragon – a rare one that wasn't simple updates on major events – left him confused. So he went to Parahumans Online to check what news might be going on in Brockton Bay.

Thread after thread announced the attack by hordes of werewolves, death and destruction. Schools being attacked, Nazis working with the PRT to evacuate civilians... It was a nightmare in terms of lives lost and public-relations. It was when he tried to call Director Piggot that he discovered communications had been blocked.

Panic shot through Dominic. They'd done some awful things as Cauldron, but there was no way they could be hanging an entire city out to twist in the wind, was there? He called DC and, upon recognizing the double was on the phone, simply ordered, "Get me Rebecca."

Legend sent a message to the director of the New York branch to organize reinforcements for Brockton Bay. With the statement that he suspected an enemy Tinker of disrupting communications, he shot out of his office at the speed of light to offer assistance.

That was what heroes did.