

Crawler and Ironrot

In the wealthy suburbs of Brockton Bay, a pair of unwanted villains waited impatiently for one of their members to join them, one who would never arrive. It was clear to see that their impatience was slowly getting to both of them.

"No more waiting!" Crawler growled, his clawed feet digging furrows in the truck floor beneath him. "Shatterbird can catch up. It's time to attack!"

"Oh, I wish to fight as well, my friend," Ironrot, the newest *willing* member of the Slaughterhouse 9, agreed, dragging his own jagged nails along the edge of a car bumper. "But surely Jack Slash would want us to wait for our backup?"

Where his thick nails scratched at the car's paint, the metal bodywork began to bubble and rust, before sagging and cracking. In moments, the rust and decay spread from the faint lines in the paint, the car falling apart as if it were speeding through time, going through hundreds of years in moments, all in the worst conditions possible. It spread like wildfire, the tires hissing and popping as their rims cracked and rusted. In just a handful of seconds, the car was collapsing under its own weight, crumbling to nothing.

The pair of villains stood there, one completely hidden inside the large moving truck they had used to bring him into the city without being seen. The massive, six-legged horror show was tearing the insides of the truck to ribbons, moments away from collapsing through the floor of the truck bed. It was only luck that kept him from tearing through the side, hiding his large, chitin and scale-covered frame, though it did nothing to hide the noise of him tearing deep lines in the metal and wood of the floor beneath him.

Only a few feet away, Ironrot, dressed in his buckled capotain hat and puritanical outfit, let his cloak flutter behind him. He watched as the monstrous murderer destroyed the vehicles with an approving look in his eyes.

"Sick of waiting!" Crawler repeated, claws reaching out of the truck's cargo box, curling around the sides. "Need to feel them attack! Need to see what they can do!"

And with that, it appeared that what little patience Crawler had was gone. He stepped out of cover, smashing the hood of a car behind the truck as he stretched, before turning and plodding down the street, heading directly towards their target, the home of New Wave, specifically the Pelhams. Ironrot ran to catch up, then grabbed the edge of a chitinous plate and pulled himself up onto the Crawler's back. The masochistic murderer resisted the urge to eviscerate his new passenger. Only Jack's order to work together kept him from leaving him a corpse on the road. Instead, the six-legged nightmare creature picked up speed, no longer needing to hold back.

"Hehe, so much fun!" The fully human man said, shouting to the wind. "So many interesting things to turn to dust! What should I start with, my friend? Those abominations to God, metal constructs built in his image? Or perhaps I should start on their precious gifts!"

"No!" Crawler said with a growl, even as he slammed into a car, sending it tumbling to the side, already rusting and falling apart thanks to Ironrot. "Do your job! I want to feel what magic man did to their powers! I want to feel their strength!"

"... fine! But when you're done crushing them, I want to feel their metal creation crumble between my fingers!" Ironrot said after a moment, letting out a giggle that ran harshly counter to his stature and outfit. "Such unique tinker technology, I wonder how it will fall apart!"

Crawler said nothing, just continued to bound up along the street. Finally, he locked onto one of the houses, a normal-looking home along the end of the road, where the neighborhood turned and connected to another. Laughing like a maniac, he picked up even more speed, charging up the front yard, smashing through bushes, and leaping up a stone wall. Ironrot jumped from his back as Crawler charged the front of the home, leaping up the stairs, ready to smash through the front door.

Only to slam into several woven shields, all of them absorbing his impact together. One of them cracked and shattered, but the remaining two held firm. The impact was hard enough that Crawler's face and front spikes snapped and cracked, a mangled bloody mess that almost immediately healed and snapped back into place.

Before he could recover, a barrage of fist-sized balls of light slid under him as he recovered from the impact. The balls of light detonated, revealing that the shield barrier continued under him, the explosion launching Crawler up and back over the stairs, just missing the slowly standing Ironrot as he slammed on his back, digging a furrow into the ground.

Crawler rolled over quickly, cracked scales and plates already healing, now even more reinforced. Slowly, all around them, New Wave emerged, as well as six brass golems and an extra hero, dressed as an insect.

"That's a lot more of them than we expected them all to be here," Ironrot pointed out. "And we are down a member... perhaps we should retreat."

Crawler laughed a dark, gravel-filled laughter that quickly became manic. He turned slowly before focusing on one of the younger members, the young Shielder. Experience told him that maiming or killing the younger members of a team would make the others fly into a rage, attacking him harder, hurting him more.

"Yes! Hurt me!" He shouted, before lunging and jumping at the short, blonde hero. "Show me what you've got!"

Another shield broke his momentum, but now Crawler was prepared, and with a roar, a clawed leg smashed through the shield, letting him continue his charge. Seeing a member at risk, the metal golems charged, disregarding their own safety and grabbing at the charging monster. Crawler struggled, smacking and trying to pull free. Finally, he opened his jaws, the hissing and spattering sound of acid coming up from his gorge.

Before he could unleash the wave of acid, Shielder raised both his hands and fired two powerful blasts of energy, enhanced by his blue leather gloves. They slammed into Crawler's open mouth, burning through his flesh, cutting into him. Unfortunately, the damage was gone in moments, and the acid continued to rise, the monster preparing to spew it everywhere.

Before he could release the spray, a massive swarm of insects, mostly roaches and flies, flew down his throat, burning in the acid, but simultaneously neutralizing it into a thickly glooping sludge. The monstrosity retched, trying to clear his throat. He didn't need to breathe, but with his throat clogged, one of his most potent weapons was useless.

From beside him, another blast of energy burned along his side, soon followed by more and more, as all of the ranged capable members of New Wave poured fire into the squirming, struggling monstrosity. They weren't doing much damage, and what they were doing was healing almost instantly, but they were keeping him busy. He struggled against the metal constructs, trying to shake them free, tearing gouges in them with his claws, but failing to do any real damage.

"The metal men!" Crawler shouted to his teammate, blinded by snapping balls of energy, blowing his eye sockets to pulp. "Get them off of me!"

Unknown to Crawler, Ironrot was already trying to do just that. Standing in the epicenter of a decaying, rusting metal circle almost twenty meters wide, he had his hands out, face tight in a rictus of strain. His eyes were bulging as he tried to force his powers to work, even as cars, fences, lawn decorations, and more crumbled away.

"It's not working!" he screamed, blood dripping down from his nose as he pushed his power past its limit.

And yet, the half dozen metal humanoids, the blasphemous metal constructs made in God's image, refused to rot! They stood, gleaming and clean as they held on to a choking and struggling Crawler. The villain screamed and attempted to charge the meta constructs, running across the yard to reach them and attack them directly with his hands. Maybe then they would rust, maybe then they would rot!

He only managed to get a few feet before Manpower jumped at him, slapping him in the chest hard enough to launch the villain back the way he came and beyond, slamming into the crumbling remnants of the neighbor's van. The villain punched through the side, hard enough to fold it inward, but did not come out the other side.

Even as acid sizzled and burned at the ground, Manpower and Glory Girl both leaped in to help the golems hold Crawler down, with Glory Girl slamming her fist into his skull, cracking and splitting the thick, reinforced plated head, punching it again and again as it continually healed. Manpower grabbed its tail, dragging and pinning it to the ground.

"You can't hold me forever!" Crawler shouted, trying to spew another glob of acid, swarms of bugs pouring in his throat again.

"We know."

From the darkness of the porch roof leaped Panacea, the healer. She did a complete necessary flip as she landed on Crawler's back. Drops of acid spit splattered all along her body, only for her shield to catch them, the drops of viscous liquid dripping off. The healing hero gripped one of the Crawler's spines before raising her arm and slamming her hand into his back, her fingers forming a crude shovel. With her enhanced strength, she just managed to punch into his flesh, and only for a second.

Thankfully, that's all she needed.

Crawler convulsed once, like his body was fighting something from within, then tensing like a bowstring, before something inside him snapped, and his body sagged. Then, with the sound of cracking bones and snapping chitinous plates, a mass pushed from inside him, a bloody orb pushed through his back, a core that looked similar to what Arcnaum had reduced Hookwolf to, though noticeably smaller.

"Vicky! Tear it off and throw it into the air!" Panacea shouted, her body shaking with strain. "Quickly! His body is already adapting!"

Glory Girl pushed off and grabbed the orb, which was as large as a basketball. With her hands on either side, she planted her feet on a pair of spikes and pulled, straining with all her strength before the orb tore free, like tearing something from a sucking pit. She spun once and hurled the orb into the air.

"Now shoot it!"

With their bodies wired on adrenaline, nobody paused to consider Panacea's words. Instead, everyone with lasers at their disposal raised their hands and fired, including Shielder and Glory Girl. The ball glowed, cracked, and finally exploded as it fell back to Earth, detonating into a flash of green and red, far above the surrounding homes.

For a long moment, nothing happened, silence falling over the front yard, torn up and ruined as it was. Beneath Panacea, the corpse of Crawler began to liquify, breaking down rapidly under her feet. She calmly jumped off, performing an absolutely necessary flip, before turning around and grabbing the monstrous villain's skull. She focused for a moment before lifting it away from the rest of his liquifying body, somehow stabilizing it with her powers, dropping it to the ground by her feat.

Before anyone could react, the familiar sound of Arcanum's teleportation came from behind them, and the capes turned to see who had arrived. One of the many guardian pairs watching over the city appeared, as well as another group of golems. They stepped forward, expecting combat, only to freeze when they saw the scene in front of them.

"... Is everything alright?" One of them asked. "Anyone need healing?"

"I believe we are fine," Lady Photon said, stepping forward. "How is the city? Where are we needed?"

"We have injured near the PRT headquarters, where Shatterbird managed to scream for just a short moment," They explained. "We've been helping as best we could, until a warning went out that they may be targeting Arcanum's allies."

"We should find him," Glory Girl said, turning between the guardians. "Do you know where he is?"

Arcanum

I was out in the boat graveyard, collecting scrap for future projects, when a distant scream echoed over the water. At first, I looked around, wondering if someone had snuck out into the yard and had fallen or gotten hurt. Just before I took off into the sky to have a better look around, and maybe spot the still screaming woman, I caught something back in the city.

It was hard to make out clearly with just how far away I was, but when several tall buildings near the center of town suddenly exploded in a shower of glass, changing color as their interior was exposed, I finally realized what was happening. I picked up my phone, but before I could make a call, a message appeared from Smokey, telling me they were nearby the silica kinetic and were already moving to intercept.

Suddenly, only seconds after the message, the screaming cut off. I waited, preparing to take off and head to the epicenter to help when Smokey messaged me again, this time confirming the worst. Shatterbird had screamed, meaning that the Slaughterhouse 9 was in town. I was surprised to hear that Piper had completely negated Shatterbird, but I was happy to hear it, nonetheless.

As I was wondering what we should do, Alya whispered into my ear.

"This is no time to be modest, William," She said, wind blowing from behind me, like she was pushing me forward. "They are here because of you, because of how much you and your friends have done for the town. If someone wanted to hurt you, to slap you in the face with your success, where would the need to go?"

My eyes went wide as I reached along my belt and grabbed a teleport stone, vanishing from the boat graveyard in a moment, landing on a roof and quickly jumping off. I was at the Docks community, where people were gathering for the day. People turned to greet me, but I blew past them, searching desperately for Charles. When I found him, I gripped his arm tightly.

"Charles, the Slaughterhouse 9 are here. You need to get everyone somewhere safe," I said, ignoring the gasps around us. "Spread out, find places to lay low. If everyone is here, they-"

The sound of tearing metal filled the Docks community, and I whirled around to see what it was. A massive chunk of a nearby warehouse had been torn apart and was levitating in the air, strips being torn off to form head-sized cannonballs. From inside the warehouse, three forms I knew very well walked out. Siberian, Jack Slash, and Bonesaw stepped out of the dark, followed by a trio of mishappen humanoid bodies, each one a mishmash of different people's

arms and legs. At the head was a floating glass bulb, a chunk of brain sitting inside, connected to the grotesque body, which moved in broken jerks, barely standing.

I could see that as the wall was torn to pieces, it was the grotesque experiments that directed the movement, manipulating the metal as if it were three capes with the same power. As people screamed, running this way and that, Jack Slash stepped forward, holding a straight razor casually as he smirked.

"Hello Arcanum, it's so nice to finally meet you," he said. "As I'm sure you know, my name is Jack Slash. We've been looking forward to this moment for *weeks!*"