

Everyone was talking about the huge fight that went down amid some of the derelict warehouses on the northern end of the docks. Rumor had it that Bloodmoon had struck again, decapitating the Merchants' leadership and taking millions' worth of drugs off the street in one fell swoop. Both online and at school, debates raged about the morality of the situation. Bloodmoon was taking action and proving to be an implacable opponent, and a single unknown vigilante was far more effective at taking the risks of breaking cape etiquette than a team would be. Normally, when the gloves come off, villains are far better at hunting down a person's loved ones and have far fewer qualms about pulling the trigger in that case. But with a complete unknown, no loved ones to find or workplace to bomb, the villains could do nothing but hunker down. Perhaps what New Wave had thought to accomplish with the defeat of the Marquis might actually be brought to fruition with Bloodmoon: the ousting of major parahuman crime from Brockton Bay.

For one Greg Veder, he had a herculean task in front of him. Namely, not turning into a total fanboy and blowing his cover. He'd always known Taylor was strong, able to survive the abuse heaped upon her. But there's a difference between the strength to handle life's daily beatdowns and the strength needed to attack a gang at near-full strength, all capes present, and scratch the whole thing in one go.

On the one hand, Taylor having that kind of power was terrifying. There was something deeply wrong with her, something broken in her soul, and she needed help to heal. On the other, it could be his crush talking but there were few people he'd trust more with such power than Taylor. If he and his unlikely comrade Sophia could help Taylor recover from whatever was eating at her, he'd sleep easier at night knowing someone like her was keeping watch against evil.

And it was into this ever-more delicate balancing act that Greg was thrust, as Taylor and Sparky sat in his bedroom to discuss ideas for their project. Sparky was seated in a beanbag chair and Taylor perched like a gargoyle on Greg's bed, stocking feet framed on either side by her spindly hands. Greg himself sat in the rolling chair before his computer, trying not to look directly at the girl who'd inadvertently adopted one of the signature 'brooding edgy antihero' poses.

It'd been weird, seeing Taylor interact with his mom. Every second the girl seemed ready to bolt or bawl as Mama Miriam Veder lavished her with affection and sandwiches. "You're so skinny, sweetheart! C'mon, I'll make you a couple to take upstairs. You like PB&J? I've got crunchy and creamy peanut butter, and raspberry jelly!"

That plate sat empty, Taylor having devoured the contents like a soldier would wolf down rations in a combat zone. To keep himself from saying something stupid, Greg opted to launch into this mostly unprepared. "Alright, so I'll be honest, I've been busy with other stuff and haven't had the chance to focus on the project nearly as much as I'd wanted. My first thought was how the Endbringers disrupted trade, but I don't know if that would count as parahuman stuff."

"Plus," Sparky commented, "you know a fuckton of others are using the Endbringer angle. It's big, flashy, grabs attention."

"Which sucks," Greg nodded at his friend, "because the disruption of trade caused a major increase in local manufacturing, which is a great angle."

"The Elite," Taylor said flatly. Two sets of eyes turned to focus on her and she actually flushed a little at the attention. Another thought popped into Greg's head: was she always like this and he'd never noticed due to lack of close contact, or did Taylor somehow get more adorable since turning into a

killing machine? “Ah,” she half-squeaked, “the economy isn’t just legal means. A lot of the Elite are capes who tried to do business before the government cut them off for ‘unfair advantages’, right? So you have a massive black market of cape-produced goods, stock speculation, all sorts of stuff like that. And if Sparky is as good at running numbers as he is at putting together raid plans on that Space Opera thing you play—”

“I am,” Sparky interjected.

“...Then we can get a bunch of police reports and news articles about Elite underground businesses. Because that’s economics too.”

Greg gave a genuine smile. “Taylor, you’re a genius! Sparky, you and I can get that going. I can do my best to help with the writing but, well, you’re the best writer out of all of us, Taylor. I know your internet’s slow at home – hope you’re not mad but I asked Mrs. Knott about your computer situation since we’re kinda spread-out – but I think I can set up a File Cabinet and as long as we keep it to text only you should be able to open things and edit the paper. Sparky and I will swap stories ourselves and I’ll just put into text what the articles say.”

Taylor nodded, focused on the practical. “That sounds good. I don’t think I’m as good a writer as you’re giving me credit for, but...”

“Ah-ah,” Greg admonished. “No buts. Remember when Mr. Gladly had us swap papers to test our ability to catch typos and shit?” He blushed a bit himself, remembering how Taylor had handed his back covered in red marks. “You write really well. I want you to take the lead on the actual writing: you can do it.”

Her wide mouth curled up into a hesitant smile, and Greg felt his stomach flip-flop. It was such an anime cliché to the point that even he felt like a tool, but in that moment, there was only one thing he could think:

*I must protect that smile.*

(BREAK)

This was the first time there had been survivors of a Bloodmoon attack who could actually talk. Maureen Cho didn’t count, as she’d hunkered down on reflex and had only heard the violence before the killer cape left her prison open; the other surviving girls they’d recovered from the ABB transfer site were further insensate and currently on Tinker-made detox, completely useless for information.

Now they had actual survivors, witnesses – best of all, they had a cape who’d survived for the better part of a decade on her canny, acumen and sheer stubborn will: the rest of the Merchants were being debriefed by the BBPD but were varying degrees of useless, yammering about everything from laser eyes to tiny glowing aliens. The sheer carnage had been too much for them to comprehend most of the fight. Only a few things stuck out as consistent, and hopefully with the event burned into Squealer’s mind they could get a more complete picture. Seated behind the one-way mirror, Emily Piggot sipped her holistic brew of caffeinated carob – better for her damaged body than coffee – and watched the interview.

“Interview begins at 12:34pm Eastern Standard Time. Deputy Director Wilson Renick and Miss Militia interviewing parahuman Tinker designated Squealer.” The older man’s voice was smooth, businesslike. Piggot didn’t like interviewing capes herself. She didn’t like capes in general. She’d been a field agent, her job to bring down these wannabe-demigods. Meanwhile Renick had been in intelligence and counterespionage, a man specialized in logistics and human resources. “Squealer, do you consent to this recording?”

It was a formality to call her by her cape name, a politeness that had to be respected simply because of the volatile state of the Bay. Everyone sitting there knew that the haunted, scarred blonde was Sherrel Bailey. The jumpsuit – not prison orange but rather a surplus workman’s gray for her emotional wellbeing – was the most clothing she’d worn in public in her entire time as a cape. With a body like hers, it seemed that she had been all too eager to show it off. Now she seemed tiny, mousy, not the six-foot towering bombshell that the PRT were used to facing. Her hair hung limp, her eyes were sunken worse than Renick’s (saying a lot, considering the celebrity most often mentioned as his lookalike was Peter Cushing) with deep rings of black from lack of sleep. She hugged her legs and rocked a little. Finally, in a voice soft and hollow, “...Yes, I do.”

They’d wanted to have Armsmaster present as well but there just wasn’t enough room in the enclosed space without things starting to feel cramped, which might make the traumatized woman feel threatened. Usually Tinkers were encouraged by another Tinker present – or immediately launched into a rivalry. Miss Militia was there because Sherrel had latched onto her as an anchor. “Alright, we need to understand what happened last night, and you’re the one best equipped to tell us,” Renick stated, his voice soft. “I wish we could give you more time, but we don’t have that luxury. Let’s start from the beginning. You’d gathered to distribute drugs?”

Squealer stared into empty space for several long seconds before nodding seemingly in slow motion. “Yes. With the nazis and slants getting hit, we figured it was likely that Chopper would try to go three-for-three.”

“And Chopper was...your term for the cape that attacked? That we’ve designated Bloodmoon?”

“...Yeah. Skids couldn’t be bothered remembering the name. Came up with Chopper so we started calling him that.” Several tears slid noiselessly from her eyes. “W-we didn’t want to get caught with our pants down. I rigged up a few panel vans with my Somebody-Else’s-Problem generators. If...if I’d worked faster, or built fewer vans, maybe we’d have done this sooner. Maybe he wouldn’t–” She cut herself off and started crying, weeping for several minutes.

Once Sherrel began to calm down, Miss Militia spoke up. “I’m sorry to put you through this. We need any information you can provide that might help us face Bloodmoon in the future, to capture him.”

“Fuckin’ typical,” Squealer muttered under her breath, the microphone picking it up. “Cunts.” She steeled herself and looked up. “We were all there, getting things loaded up, when there was a noise. Sounded metallic. Not a ping, more like...a wrenching noise. Skidmark sent somebody to check it, door didn’t budge. We’d...locked it from the outside, so it’d look more like nobody was home. Then the door opened, and he was standing there. He kicked our guy, folded him in half, and came in like...like something out of Hell itself.”

“What weapons did he use?” Militia asked. “The destruction doesn’t match the other attacks.”

Squealer clicked her tongue. “He had some sort of mini-flamethrower that never seemed to run out of fuel, and this big-ass hammer. Wrought-iron, like a cage. Maybe...three feet, pommel to end. Slap something on the back of the hammer – like where the claw would be on your everyday claw hammer – and something in that cage crackles to life. It was like a furnace, and it made a huge explosion. He came in, staggered some of the boys, knocked Mush out in one hit. If Mush hadn’t seen it coming he’d have died then and there.

“Then he’s coming after us. Jumping around like some sorta Mover, bouncing off the walls. I waited until he was coming right at us and got him with my shotgun. He twisted a little but I still took off most of his head.” This was a part upon which every interviewed thug agreed, and with further context it was even more worrying. “He landed and kept moving. I took off his hat and goggles with the shot. Had one eye left, it was glowing yellow, like the harvest moon. His hair came loose from its tie but...but it didn’t move like hair. It was...” She held her hands up near her head, weaving them in random circles while wiggling her fingers. “...writhing. Like tentacles. Lovecraft. He—” Sherrel took a deep breath and shuddered violently. She took in a deep breath, held it, and slowly exhaled.

It took a fair while for her to continue her thought. “He stopped coming after us. Went after one of our boys. He...he grabbed the guy, ripped him in half – HE RIPPED HIM IN FUCKING HALF!” she screeched, lunging forward in her chair to grip the bolted-down desk. “And held him over his head. The blood, the meat, the...viscera, it was, i-it was anointing him. And as we watched, *his head grew back*,” she finished with a hissing whisper.

Several more moments passed. “Those eyes, they’re like nothing you’ve ever fucking seen. I swear I was looking at the Devil, or at least a demon. That, that *thing*, he ain’t human. I tried to run him over with the van. Figured, if a gun won’t put him down, a couple tons of metal might keep him pinned long enough for us to get out. Somehow,” she let out a manic giggle. “Somehow this fuck gets on the roof and punches through the armor plate like it’s nothing. Pours fire into the cabin.” She gestured at her scarred body. “Mush threw him outside at that point.”

“He recovered from unconsciousness?” Renick asked, for clarification.

“He always was tough. Hard to keep down.” She swallowed hard. “I didn’t see what happened to Mush, but I know he died. Put myself out just in time to see Skids standing there like some movie hero, launching shit bigger than almost any time before. That cape flips over a dumpster – backflips over a fucking dumpster, like this is a goddamn John Woo movie – and shoots my man in the head *while upside-down in midair*. The crew forms a firing line and starts shooting, and this fuck dodges most of it. Sets ‘em all on fire, coming for me. Then, well, then you showed up.”

“Indeed. Thank you for your cooperation and your assistance, Squealer,” Renick nodded.

“You wanna thank me? Kill that son of a bitch.”

“Interview concludes,” Miss Militia said as she clicked the recorder. Squealer was escorted out.

Emily depressed the button until it clicked, keeping the channel open. “None of this bodes well,” her voice crackled into the interview room. Since it was less cramped than gathering on the other side of the mirror, the other two stayed put.

“It was bad enough when he was killing normal people,” Renick sighed. “Gangers die, that’s normal around here. Maybe in greater numbers than usual, but still. But capes? There’s blood in the water now and I fully expect Kaiser and Lung to start making moves.”

“Capes value their own,” Piggot nodded to herself. “Neither Lung nor Kaiser would bat much of an eye at those killings. But once parahumans are on the table, suddenly they get nervous. And without any easy target for retaliation, they’re going to have to make shows of strength. And that means hitting the ordinary people of Brockton Bay,” she spat.

On the one hand, Piggot almost wanted to applaud Bloodmoon. The cape wasn’t behaving like so many other killers, putting fellow parahumans on a pedestal. Apparently this was about hunting criminals, regardless of cape status. But this was only riling the remaining gangs and Emily severely doubted that Bloodmoon could hold his own against Lung and the entirety of the Empire. If the killer cape could somehow cripple the other gangs... Well, they’d have yet another threat to worry about, but if Bloodmoon was more vigilante than bloodthirsty murderer, perhaps they could arrive at some sort of detente. It was almost certainly a pipe dream: capes didn’t behave like that. Then again, Bloodmoon was bucking a good deal of cape preconceptions already.

She was going down a rabbit hole of maybes. Back to the present. “A Mover who dodges bullets and jumps with enough force to leave footprints in metal; a Brute who can survive losing most of his head and heal it back with the lifeblood of another human being; a cape armed with Tinkertech that can devastate entire crowds; a teleporter that doesn’t need line-of-sight; a Stranger that confounds Thinkers and can somehow slip away unnoticed dressed like that and covered in blood. Any one of those would be a considerable threat.”

“We’re dealing with all of that in a single person,” Renick finished her thought.

“When Lung moved here, he fought the entire Protectorate and won,” Emily stated bitterly. “But neither he nor Oni Lee nor Hookwolf – nor some bizarre event where they cooperate – scare me as much as Bloodmoon.” She swallowed heavily. “Renick, I’ll need to talk with you in my office.”

Wilson still had contacts on the other side of the law. If their own Thinkers couldn’t peg Bloodmoon, and their Tinkers were working blind, they might have to reach out through illegal channels – get assistance from Toybox or the Elite. Emily was willing to take the hit to her pride, and to PR if it got out, if it meant keeping the city from devolving into outright war and slaughter.