

“Any change?” Director Piggot asked the staff member she’d assigned to monitoring the Ellisburg containment zone. She’d been getting her own blood pressure too high with excitement and worry, and so had foisted the camera feed onto someone else. Excitement, because the curse of her nightmares was finally dead. Worry, because WEDGDG had for years insisted that Nilbog’s death would cause some cascading extinction event as a final fuck-you from the evil Master.

And then, as though Bloodmoon or one of her new entourage had been listening in on the PRT’s concerns, the entire quarantine facility was engulfed in Bloodmoon’s signature mist. It only hurt and disoriented a little when observed, but for several hours now the camera feeds were unchanged.

“Director,” her secretary interjected, “Chief Director Costa-Brown is on the line.”

Of course. As always, whenever something involving Brockton Bay occurred, Becky would call to berate her. Never approving additional troopers or capes for the city with the highest ratio of gang capes to population, but always ready to yell at her when something went wrong and the precarious house of cards slipped a bit further toward collapse. Not for the first time, Emily Piggot considered that her assignment here was somehow a punishment for her survival and resulting obvious mistrust of parahumans. She would probably have been better off taking the retirement package, but Emily...didn’t love her job, per se, but she did believe in its importance. She considered herself hardy and stubborn enough to keep going, helping to protect people from capes, and capes from themselves.

So, in an Oscar-worthy display of reining in her true emotions, Piggot nodded crisply. “Patch her through.” The tan, offensively aesthetic face of the Chief Director appeared on her screen. It wasn’t enough that Costa-Brown was a bitch who withheld resources and practiced negative reinforcement, but the woman had to look like a damn model. “Chief Director. I’d ask to what I owe the pleasure, but I have some idea.”

“Piggot,” the Chief Director intoned sharply. Ah, so she’d dispensed with the formality of titles already. “I’m going to ask this as gently as I can. Why did you not immediately contact us with the information that Bloodmoon, a potential S-class threat, was on the move? Why did we only hear about it from the Ellisburg quarantine, after Bloodmoon had already gotten inside?”

It must have been the adrenaline talking, the weight of night terrors finally lifted from her shoulders. “Since PRT National hadn’t yet given us marching orders regarding said potential S-class threat despite our reports, at this point we figured you were just as busy as every other time we’ve reported new threats and requested additional manpower. At a certain point it just seems rude to pester you when you’re clearly not interested.”

Costa-Brown’s jaw tensed. It might have been Piggot’s imagination but she thought she saw a twitch in the Chief Director’s eye. “As a Director for the Parahuman Response Team, it is your duty to report sudden changes in activity with major threats so that we can formulate a response—”

“And do what, Rebecca?” Piggot snapped, taking further bitter satisfaction in this being the first time she’d ever managed to cut off the Chief Director, who typically always slipped a word in edgewise. Maybe it was because she was so thoroughly flipping the script. *If you want to fire me*, she smirked internally, *go ahead*. “What could the PRT – even the Protectorate or Triumvirate – do against someone who beats up Endbringers in her spare time? Other than causing mass destruction and getting people killed by standing in Bloodmoon’s way?”

“Choose your words very carefully, Director Piggot.” Costa-Brown’s words cut like a frozen scalpel. “Because at this moment it sounds as though you’ve surrendered your authority to Bloodmoon.”

“No more than we were forced to surrender to Lung without proper backup,” Emily spat in reply. “I’m not going to send good men, women and capes to their deaths for no benefit. The pertinent difference is that Bloodmoon kills criminals. She doesn’t peddle drugs, kidnap people for prostitution and sex-slavery, forcibly conscript people with an offer of service or death, and she hasn’t killed a single LEO or innocent.

“We don’t have the forces or resources to stand against Bloodmoon – and, for once, it’s not just due to National dragging their heels and the Protectorate being too lazy to help. The Triumvirate regularly loses against Ziz, so odds are on Bloodmoon in that potential bout. And so, rather than sending dozens or hundreds of good people to their deaths and causing untold loss of property and life, I intend to employ a radical new innovation.” She spread her hands in a sarcastic imitation of a showman, purposely lacking all enthusiasm. “I call it: ‘Talking’.”

The Chief Director’s brows furrowed in bemusement. This was clearly not how she’d envisioned this discussion going. Things that would have pushed Piggot’s buttons weren’t working, the jaded battleaxe already emotionally drained. “You think, what, you’re going to parley with a mass-murderer?”

“She’s displayed a willingness to speak with others and both give and accept help. Our issue is that we have no easy means to contact her. However, we’re working on a solution to this. Local consultants expect that simple diplomacy could lead to a decent or at least tolerable working relationship, so long as we don’t try to stupidly strong-arm her into an agreement.” She briefly sucked her teeth. “I don’t have to find her lethal methods palatable to recognize that it’s infinitely better than having her set against us. Bloodmoon has gone from a relatively unknown and elusive killer to an internationally-renowned hero. Even if we had the power to defeat her, which I seriously question, we’d take a colossal blow to public relations for taking down the first person to save a city from the Simurgh’s predations.”

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From the other side of the screen, Rebecca Costa-Brown seethed behind her schooled features. How dare this sow think to be defiant? Emily Piggot had been placed in PRT East-Northeast due to her trauma and hatred of parahumans. Her antagonism would make for a more hostile environment and lead to all sides becoming more and more belligerent until one of the gangs pulled off a coup. Current bets were still on Coil despite him having gone mostly silent recently.

This was intended to be a social experiment analyzing the viability of parahuman feudalism post-collapse, whether capes could hold together a society through force of arms and personality following the inevitable apocalypse. Bloodmoon had initially been a wrench in this plan, until they’d realized that she could be the collapse needed. Just a bit of antagonism in the right place, modeled on the demure way in which Bloodmoon had interacted with Assault and Battery, and they had a good chance of sending the girl on a rampage – then whomever was left could pick up the pieces.

Every bit of pressure in this conversation had been specifically intended to yank at Piggot’s stressors. Accusing her of surrendering to a parahuman had been the trump card, a verbal nuclear warhead that should have resulted in immediate and vehement denial, seeding doubt and resentment within Piggot and pushing her toward antagonistic action.

Emily Piggot's behavior had changed, more than could be explained away by her source of trauma suddenly dying. Rebecca – Alexandria – had no immediate answer as to why. Nor, honestly, could she say why she was so focused on provoking Emily. They'd had to adjust their plan once already: what was a second alteration? Perhaps they'd have to put the feudalism experiment on hold, but what harm did that do?

Ah, there it was. It harmed morale. Cauldron was already stumbling in the dark, desperately searching for a magic bullet that would save them. Eidolon had supposedly been their answer, but he was steadily weakening. They had their enemies arrayed before them, and they had their assets categorized. Their experiments all had i's dotted and t's crossed. Bloodmoon represented a loss of control: such sudden power, and no real way to manipulate her. The girl was a mystery, their only real toehold was an idea of how to anger her.

The more that things derailed, the less control that Cauldron had, the more they were lashing out around them. Pure anger and panic. In a way, it was good that things happened this way. Now she'd sussed out their panicked reactions and could stand against it in the future.

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Rebecca Costa-Brown was silent for a good few seconds, full lips set in a thin line. Emily Piggot remained ramrod-stiff and matched her silence, letting it stretch defiantly. At long last the Chief Director spoke. "You've managed to comport yourself well, Director. Consider me reluctantly impressed." She relaxed her shoulders. "Your argument is tentatively accepted. Keep National apprised of all interactions with Bloodmoon. We'll deploy a profiler team to help you build an emotional and interaction-based plan for engaging with Bloodmoon."

"Don't strain yourselves, Chief Director," the blonde replied. "More troopers and parahuman backup would be infinitely more helpful than some eggheads who'll tell us what we already know, but with extra condescension and a five-digit price tag." Her console beeped and, in yet another gesture of disrespect, she answered it. "What is it, Renick?" She hoped it would be something frivolous, although Renick was professional enough not to interrupt a meeting with something like asking what she wanted for lunch.

"I'm sorry to interject," the older man's smooth voice intoned, "but I knew you'd want to be informed of this the moment it reached us: we've gotten several different calls from downtown. We're seeing werewolf attacks."