

When Sophia awoke, she discovered a text on her work phone – thankfully only sent about an hour ago, so she wouldn't have to worry about getting chewed out by Piggy or Armsmaster. After all, she hadn't been scheduled for work until the evening on this particular Saturday, so excuse the shit out of her for getting some much-needed rest.

Meeting scheduled for 10 AM, the message read, to discuss new parahuman. Attendance not mandatory but recommended.

Shit, Hebert's little rampage had gotten her on the PRT's radar sooner than Sophia would have liked. Thankfully her lethality would mean they'd want the Wards far away, as if they didn't face deadly opponents on the regular here in Brockton Bay, so it would hopefully still give her time to either find a deadly weakness in Hebert or, as Greg favored, save her somehow.

Checking her clock, Sophia found that it was a little after 8. She'd ended up sleeping in two hours today, but she couldn't say it was unnecessary. She'd been drained after the whole Hebert revelation, much less having to deal with Veder. She did her basic exercises in her room to loosen and wake up her muscles, then opened up her laptop to check PHO. The thread about the new cape's bloody debut had more than tripled in length, and when Sophia clicked on it she found out why.

The OP had edited his post to include a new link: the cape – Hebert – had struck again. This time an Empire-connected shipping yard closer to the trainyards. Nine deaths this time, but the more important thing was that since the location was technically a legitimate business it had security cameras. Someone had gotten access to and shared the footage, which was far better quality than the cell video. Obviously it couldn't be posted directly to PHO but simple mention of LiveLeak made it easy to open a new tab and search it up.

The video seemed inordinately long until Sophia realized it was each of the cameras' feeds linked in turn. Whoever put this together was probably an employee, someone with access to the data but no real knowledge of how to edit it, so just slapped them together starting with Hebert's first appearance.

It opened with the girl vaulting the chain-link fence, stalking forward with back bent, much like how Sophia had caught Hebert moving at school when she thought people weren't looking. In the girl's left hand was that same pistol, but in her right was something different. Much smaller than the last weapon, Hebert was holding a jagged dagger. Bit of a downgrade, in Sophia's opinion. The cape stalked past the camera and Sophia had to fast-forward to when Hebert came back into frame, chasing down a fleeing skinhead. A dagger was held in each hand and she swung them inward like scissors, biting deep into his back and neck. Blood sprayed and he went down. She twisted to avoid gunfire and leapt back out of the picture, then finally returned to smoothly climb back over the chain fence and leave.

The next camera was the primary view of the yard, stocked with containers and concrete slabs for transport, with several members of Empire 88 present. Sophia counted seven rather than nine, so the other two must have been milling around somewhere else. The rest of the footage was basically pure violence lit primarily by the large yellow moon, Hebert leaping into action and carving one man from throat to groin. Once the others closed in on her, armed with guns and knives and bats, she holstered the pistol and grabbed the dagger with both hands, unfolding and snapping free a second blade from the first. From there she moved with a flowing, spinning grace that reminded Sophia of the Empire's own cape Cricket, slicing open each of her targets and taking just enough time to get herself coated in their blood before moving on.

Regret pooled in Sophia's stomach, making her sick. This was the kind of fighter, the kind of hunter that she could admire. If she hadn't spent the past year making Hebert's life miserable, she could have spent more time away from the Wards learning tricks of the trade from this goddess of death.

When time rolled around to get ready for the meeting, Sophia told her mother she had a briefing at "work," having to be more surreptitious since Naomi was still around. With one bump to jostle her little sister and hopefully add progress to toughening the girl up, so nothing like what happened to Sophia would ever happen to Naomi, the elder Hess daughter headed out to catch transport to the Rig.

(BREAK)

Most cities had the same general setup: PRT building in one area, which served more as the PR branch of PRT complete with tours and a gift shop, and an armed and armored Protectorate base from which both heroes and PRT troopers would deploy. The PRT building itself had troopers and its own armory, but nothing to the scale of the Protectorate base. Here in Brockton Bay the Protectorate base was virtually an unassailable fortress. The Rig was indeed a modified oil rig, typically docked in the middle of the Bay as a symbol to criminals: *we can see you, but you can't reach us*. In bad storms it would drift to one side of the Bay or the other and dock with solid ground to gain the protection of wave-breakers, and its primary means of access was a forcefield bridge which could be turned off at any time. Of course, with how rampant crime was in Brockton Bay, all too often the Rig was seen by the public as a sort of distant castle in which the lords sheltered away while their fiefdom fell apart more by the day.

The rest of the Wards were already there, Gallant having beaten Sophia to the Rig by mere minutes. Since this was just a briefing, most of them were in simple domino masks rather than full costume, and much as he annoyed the shit out of her with his fake goody-goody routine Sophia had to admit to herself that Dean was damn good-looking. Broad shoulders, strong jaw, perfectly coiffed hair. But something about him always rubbed her the wrong way, more so than the average that almost everyone did to her.

Clockblocker sat beside him, Dennis having donned his full-face mask. Sophia didn't understand how it worked, but when he wore the full suit all the clocks ticked in real time and showed various time zones around the world. With just the mask, his face was frozen at 3:07. Dennis was thin, almost worryingly so for those nutritionists who were assigned to the Wards, though he preferred to call himself wiry. His shock of slightly-curled red hair was hidden beneath his mask.

Carlos, Aegis, stood at parade rest like the noble leader he so desperately wanted to be. The only one who took herself more seriously was Vista, and Sophia had the same response to both of them: grow the fuck up. They were so desperate to be treated like adults that they ended up acting like children playing at adulthood. Carlos was broad-shouldered and strong, the classic superhero look with a lot of meat and muscle on him, but so much of that was his power letting him cheat or cheating for him.

Chris was scribbling notes and muttering to himself, having to scratch out what he wrote most of the time. Dumbass couldn't even do math right, so it was no surprise he wasn't a particularly impressive Tinker. His blond hair sat atop his head in tight curls and today reminded Sophia of Sparky, leading her to wonder what was in the water that she knew two curly-haired nerds with brain problems.

Finally was— No, wait, Browbeat was in the corner too. For such a big guy he was easily forgettable. Testing said Luke didn't have a Stranger power, the guy just had no presence at all and faded into the

background like a houseplant. Image had given him a dark-green bodysuit with heavy plating and a dour mask reminiscent of a Greek god and people still forgot he was even on the scene.

Vista was last, and Missy seemed angry with herself that she couldn't stop bouncing with excitement. The tiny girl, small even for her age, loved getting new intel. It made her feel grown-up. How fucking pathetic. You're only a kid once: why would Missy want to throw that away? It pissed Sophia off to the point where she often wanted to throttle the girl. How often had Sophia wished she could go back to before that first night when... How often had she wished to go back and be a kid again? And here was this girl all too eager to throw away her childhood when she still had the chance to be a kid.

The staff entered and today it was Armsmaster, PRT Captain Anders (no relation to the Medhall Anderses, sadly for his pocketbook), and another no-name and no-chin analyst that Sophia reflexively dubbed Melvin in her mind.

The Protectorate hero began the presentation while Melvin prepped the projector and screen. "I'm sure you all can guess the reason for this meeting. If you've been on PHO at all you're likely aware of the newest parahuman in Brockton Bay." The projector clicked, showing a sanitized close-up of Hebert. Triangular little hat perched on her head, long hair flowing from where it was gathered in a loose ponytail, cloth pulled up over her mouth and brass-fitted goggles covering her eyes. Only a little bit of blood splatter was visible. "We've been forced to fast-track this meeting after this second massacre, since it's clear that he or she is not going away. Brockton Bay has a new villain."

Despite herself, Sophia raised her hand. "Hasn't he—" she made sure to use 'he' to hopefully obfuscate, "just killed criminals? Why villain and not vigilante?" On some level it made sense for her to ask that, considering her own history. But to Sophia, it was a strange question that she couldn't help but ask. Why was she asking? Wouldn't labeling Hebert as a villain be better for her?

Anders stepped in. "The sheer brutality and the fact that he wasn't apprehending people in commission of a crime, but hunting down people who weren't actively engaging in criminal activity. These were massacres, executions if you want to stretch the definition."

"The new cape, current designation Bloodmoon," Armsmaster smoothly picked up the thread from Anders, "is high-priority. This level of lethality hasn't been seen since the debuts of Oni Lee or Hookwolf. As such, Wards will all be issued additional con-foam grenades. Your standing orders, should you sight Bloodmoon, are to disengage and leave while drawing as little attention as possible. Should you be pursued, use the grenades to either attempt to entangle the cape or block pursuit like with an alleyway. Mr. Fulton will tell you more, but Bloodmoon is resilient enough to endure anything you can likely throw at him and I don't want any close-range engagement even if you could theoretically take him out of the fight." His gaze turned demonstrably toward Clockblocker, who swallowed thickly and nodded. The entire time Melvin had been clicking through still images, either zoomed in or photoshopped to get rid of the majority of blood and viscera, shots of Hebert – Bloodmoon – in action.

Fulton (Sophia was still calling him Melvin) spoke up next. "With the strength to hack people apart and the resilience to take gunshots and survive – the latest video even shows bullets falling out of him – Bloodmoon is most definitely a Brute. Perhaps not the highest level, but when combined with the superhuman speed and agility of a Mover who can dodge bullets it becomes far more dangerous. And that's not even addressing the specialized weaponry, which is almost certainly Tinkertech. Whether Bloodmoon is a full grab-bag with a minor Tinker aspect or has some sort of backer, the point is that

he's equipped with esoteric and exceedingly dangerous weaponry. Current weapons include a large-caliber pistol loaded with rounds we're still analyzing, a long weapon that we can only describe as a saw-backed glaive, and this latest weapon that's some kind of paired daggers."

Anders piped up next. "But perhaps the most worrying aspect is that we're assigning Bloodmoon a Stranger rating. A person slathered in blood, dressed like that and carrying obvious weapons, disappears into the night. Already unlikely but possible. However, he also confounds Protectorate Thinkers. Our best answer came from Hunch, who simply said 'Nightmares'. Everyone else has ended up with a headache or full migraine. With an inability to predict or easily analyze his motives, we're labeling him a villain for rules of engagement."

"So," Dennis couldn't help himself, "why the name Bloodmoon? It's pretty ominous and a bit more dramatic than we normally like to assign to villains, isn't it?"

Armsmaster nodded. "For ease of remembrance, to reinforce just how dangerous this new cape is, and the main reason is that both massacres thus far have involved bloodletting to a frankly ridiculous degree while the full moon was in the sky."

The briefing went on until almost noon, discussing revised patrol routes as well as what to look for in case of potential escalation by the gangs. Both E88 and ABB were likely to blame the other for the attacks, perhaps even look to the Merchants as a third-party source of the violence through a new trigger or hired mercenary, and any of the gangs might launch new attacks to probe their opposition for weakness in light of the loss of manpower.

Once the meeting was over, Sophia checked her personal phone. No texts from Emma, understandable since she'd told the redhead she had a meeting. A couple memes and a cat video from the other girls. What stood out, though, was a message from her newest contact. Greg Veder wanted her to come over to his place.

(BREAK)

Why did I ever decide to do undercover work? That thought radiated through Sophia's mind as she put on her best fake smile. Mrs. Veder was like her son, lanky and a bit doughy, standing about Sophia's height with frizzy brown hair. Her blue eyes were bright and her smile was so obnoxiously genuine it made Sophia want to punch her. "It's always good to meet more of Greg's friends. For a while I was worried Sparky would be the only one who'd visit. The boy's a sweetheart but I worry he's not entirely all there."

"I know what you mean," she grunted. "And no offense intended but I don't know if Greg and I count as friends yet. We're working on this project together but we haven't really hung out before now."

Mrs. Veder patted her hand. "Aw, well you seem like a nice girl. Just give Greg a little patience – he's at that age where he has to share everything about what he likes with everyone – and I'm sure you two will be fast friends."

Greg came downstairs and gave his mom a casual hug like it was the most normal thing in the world. "Hey Mom. Hey Sophia. So I think I've got everything set up, come have a look and tell me what you think." He turned back to his mother. "Is it alright if we head up?"

She affectionately waved them off. "I'll make some sandwiches for a late lunch. You two have fun and don't get up to any trouble!"

Following him upstairs, Sophia noted that Greg seemed to take his build entirely from his mother. Well, she hadn't met Greg's father who was still out with friends, but both Veders she'd met shared the same thin and lanky build but were soggy around the midsection. Greg was taller than his mother, taller than Sophia, maybe a little shorter than Hebert. His own brown hair was straight, though mussed and unkempt.

Once they were inside Greg's room, the boy went to his closet and took out two slats of pegboard, unfolding them and resting them against the wall. The weird bastard had made his very own conspiracy board, complete with red string and pushpins. He looked damn proud of it, too.

At the center of the board, in lieu of a picture, he'd written TAYLOR on a piece of paper. Most of the other images were stock photos or pictures downloaded from the internet. This included the formal logo for E88, a picture of ABB graffiti, and plenty of horror-movie images.

"So this latest video clinches it: I think we can take zombies off the board." Greg sounded a bit disappointed as he unwound the string from the pin holding a miniature *Night of the Living Dead* poster to the board. "She's definitely not a classic zombie despite the proclivity for blood and gore, and not a rage zombie either with how she behaves in class. My last thought was something like the *iZombie* comic, but unless she's been snacking entirely on the brains of depressive types we should have seen some random mania in her behavior.

"Aliens, too, I think are less and less likely. A full alien invasion obviously isn't happening, and on further consideration infiltration doesn't make much sense due to who Taylor is: usually you want someone more popular or at least not a social pariah, so you can lure more people in to get pod person'd."

Sophia just blinked. "You confuse me, Veder."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Miss C-average." He held up a finger to forestall her retaliation. "Ah, no punching the intel."

"You haven't provided any 'intel' yet, just discounting things I already knew were bullshit."

"The investigation is brand-new," Greg countered. "Plus, you're not exactly the ideal partner. Normally I'd have both of us cycle how we look for information but there's no chance she'd let you into her home. So I have to take the time to plan for that as well."

Greg went over to a binder with a provocative anime-girl image on the front and rifled through it. "I had Sparky get the lesson plan for next week: world affairs is having a group project, so if I can get Taylor into my team then I'll have an in to stop by her house. You on the other hand have a line to Daddy Warbucks so hopefully you can get me something like a discreet bodycam. If we're lucky we can find what's affecting Taylor and then figure out how to deal with it."

Sophia just looked at the binder. "Why do you...?"

"Sparky's good with computers. I asked and he delivered."

“I was going to ask why you had the lesson plan in *that* fucking binder,” she replied.

“Well, would *you* look in here for a lesson plan?” he responded with a smirk.

Unwilling to admit she couldn't refute his point, she changed the subject. “So am I just here to get Emma's dad to buy shit?”

“No, you also managed to track Taylor without being noticed. So your job is to try and follow her whenever she starts acting particularly suspicious. I'm not expecting you to put your life on the line when she's in cape mode, but we need to know if there are certain locations or events which trigger some sort of Jekyll/Hyde change in her.”

Much as it could get her caught, either by Hebert or the Protectorate, Sophia did want the opportunity to see more of the girl's work firsthand. It was like art, something in the way Hebert fought lit inspiration within Sophia.

“I can't promise anything,” she prefaced, “but I'll do my best.” And, oddly, she meant it.

A/N: Thanks to UnwelcomeStorm for the use of the name Bloodmoon. It just fits too well not to use it.