

His name was Coil. Thomas Calvert was a disguise he wore, a face to show the rest of the world. He'd never been like them, and a single deal – favors to be paid back – had given him the ability to be who he truly was. His power was terrifying in its scope and potential, useful in both active and recreational settings. In his most hubristic moments he would even wager his power against the woman in the suit and fedora, but he was too attached to his power (and his life) to make such an overt move. Any steps taken against Cauldron would have to be couched behind at least a dozen proxies and several layers of deniability. Thankfully, Cauldron seemed content to allow him his plotting.

Brockton Bay was not his home. In truth, he'd only moved here for two reasons. The first was the high ratio of villains to heroes, giving him immense leeway to scheme. The Protectorate didn't turn nearly as much of a gimlet eye to villains killing villains. The second, which he would never admit to himself, was because Emily Piggot was stationed here. Emily was the only other remaining PRT survivor of the Ellisburg Incursion, and the only one who had been vocal in her disdain for his actions. Back before he got his power, before he became himself, he would imagine arguments in which he could properly defend his position: their superior officer was too slow. If they'd waited for him, they'd all be dead. Thomas saved all of their lives! Of course Emily saw things differently. *She* said that their superior knew the risks and was certain that he would have willingly held the line to give them the chance to escape: that Thomas' shooting him had actually placed them in more danger.

Yes, not that he would admit it to himself, but he chose Brockton Bay because it would let him steal Piggot's career out from under her, to leave her a shamed and destitute wreck whose employment prospects were as bleak as her physical.

Coil did not quite understand his own power. Apparently natural triggers granted some instinctive understanding, perhaps an inherent user's manual, but an artificial power was sorely lacking such assistance. He could see two potential paths, a splinter point of two choices, and could follow them through for an enormous duration – he'd never found an upper limit, but of course would eventually want to have a split for insurance purposes, so he never pathed out more than a day. The problem was that this wasn't exactly precognition: he experienced both timelines simultaneously, so he couldn't simply run his power and plan for both forks. But as long as he could stall in one timeline, pause for gravitas, ramble to sound self-important like a stereotypical villain, it gave him more and more opportunities to split the timeline and try new tactics.

It was how he, through proxy companies, had become one of the wealthiest men on the Eastern seaboard. Owning near-majority shares in Fortress Construction, one of the most prolific Endbringer-shelter companies in the United States, funded a great deal of his plans and gave him contacts who'd proven useful in constructing his own underground base.

Really, it was amusing how the more you played into the stereotype of a villain, the less people tried to look beneath the surface. He dressed up in a costume, hired mercenaries in Cobra-style uniforms with full-on laser guns (on the one hand, not many people remembered or referenced GI Joe nowadays. On the other, that meant his own rather blatant ripoff was less likely to be called out), and thus nobody noticed how the same few proxy companies and fake identities always seemed to be successful in the stock market the few times they played. With enough proxies, he could rotate them and not have any one draw undue attention. Honestly, though, was he really that good, was his power that intense, or was everyone else just varying shades of incompetent? The more he delved into manipulating the human animal, the more he grew to despise it.

And that led to his non-utility uses of his power. He'd been handed the Ring of Gyges in a test-tube and he was damn well going to use it. Incidentally, he'd been inclined to take the name Gyges until he realized it might be a bit too on-the-nose as to what his power was. Far better to take a name and theme not associated at all with his power, and leave people to speculate.

It started out simple enough. If someone got him angry and he didn't have the pressing need for a timeline, he'd split time and punch the offending person. That soon escalated into beatings, stabbings, shootings. He'd use one timeline to take his time murdering a person. Torture, as well, became both a viable interrogation option and a good relaxation tool. In one timeline he'd be having a pleasant chat with his mark, while in the other he had pliers and an acetylene torch. Some days he didn't even have a need for information but would split time for a few hours just to have fun pulling someone apart. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd spent a timeline split to call Emily for an important meeting, then killed her in a variety of brutal ways. His favorite was still when he'd hit her in the face with a nail bomb.

This extended to other proclivities as well. If he saw a beautiful woman and he wasn't running a split, what was the harm in splitting to cop a feel? Of course, diminishing dopamine returns soon forced him to escalate for the same kick. Dragging a woman into an alleyway or attacking her right there in the street: what did he care if he was stopped? He wasn't keeping that timeline regardless. He'd recently branched out to men, as well. They didn't arouse him, per se, but there was something primal in rendering another man helpless in such a violating fashion, hearing an otherwise strong man sob in hopelessness.

And, with all of that occurring solely in abandoned timelines, Coil was blameless. Only he held the memories of all the could-have-beens. In the real world, Coil was squeaky-clean compared to other gang leaders, and Thomas Calvert had years of unimpeachable record speaking to strong moral character.

Recently, however, his plans were being derailed, and the worst part was that the derailing didn't even seem intentional. Over the past month-and-a-half or so, on occasion his strike teams would deploy and be lost with no evidence as to what had happened. Rarely he'd get snippets of his men screaming, but even that turned up nothing. Multiple operations had to be delayed or even scrubbed because he couldn't deploy on the right days, or windows of opportunity would close within hours while he waited to give the order every few seconds with a new split, meeting the same failure each time.

It was at the tail end of January – or was it early February? – when he finally got a glimpse of his antagonist, one who likely only knew he existed as a sort of curiosity. A pair of young ABB toughs who couldn't help running their mouths had mentioned they were on rotation to help transport girls to the farms – the sex-slaving and organ-harvesting operations the ABB ran on the city's outskirts and exterior. He'd had men tracking them, a team waiting to intercept...but the pair never arrived. Later that night was Bloodmoon's first official appearance, as she massacred the stop-off point and left the few still-living girls to be rescued by the authorities. No real loss on Coil's part: he'd intended to break up the stop-off as well, maybe blackmail some payment from the girls' grateful parents, but ultimately Bloodmoon had carried out his own operation without forcing him to risk his men. The footage recovered, of the massacre backlit by the Moon, had been helpful for his research as well.

The slaughter of E88 operatives and the BBPD's subsequent seizure of such a massive weapons shipment was less favorable. A majority of those weapons could have served as backups for his mercenaries, or sold on the black market for favors or untraceable cash. But when he'd sent his soldiers

to intercept, all that had resulted was Bloodmoon's body count for the night more than doubling, and the cape looking through one of the body cameras straight into Coil's eyes – as if he knew who was watching and was figuring out how to get to him.

With a new parahuman on the field, Coil had to Make Contact, to get this man's measure. He spared several splits over the next few days to try approaching Bloodmoon as both Coil and Calvert, offering various incentives, and each time he was rebuffed (as Calvert) or his messengers were killed (as Coil). Later, Bloodmoon even began reacting violently to his overtures as Calvert.

The worst event thus far was when he lost an entire team to Bloodmoon. They hadn't even managed to deal lasting damage to the cape, nor had any evidence of how Bloodmoon managed to heal been left behind. From Squealer's interview it was apparent that the mass-murderer relied on blood to some degree, but none of Coil's offensive fishing expeditions had resulted in anything. It was as if something was blocking his soldiers' cameras, some manner of Impurity...no, interference. That was the word he was looking for.

Coil had been forced to accept his team's demise, because the timeline wherein he managed to evacuate his people had led Bloodmoon straight to his base. Bloodmoon had been initially deterred, but the cape had stalked off with purpose...and Coil was willing to bet his colossal life savings that Bloodmoon would have returned with something capable of battering its way into Coil's base. Possibly that explosive hammer or something else equally ridiculous.

But now, after the footage from the Endbringer battle over Canberra, Coil was glad he hadn't pushed Bloodmoon in any kept timeline. This was too dangerous. A Blood-crazed berserker, some Hunter with a vendetta, he – *she*, apparently – couldn't be bought or reasoned with. No, he'd have to pack up and move somewhere else–

He sat bolt-upright in his chair. No, he can't leave. How would She find him, then? He could almost imagine Her long fingers comfortingly stroking over his close-shorn hair, cradling him close. No, no, he had to stay. He needed to study Bloodmoon. If he didn't... If he didn't, there was the very real chance that She would never visit him again. He'd lose Her, never again dream of Her gentle embrace. No, he needed to figure out Bloodmoon, what made her tick. The deeper he delved, the happier She was, he was sure of it.

If he could make Her happy enough, everything would go back to how it used to be. It would make up for the losses of manpower, of money both real and potential, of time and sleepless nights fearing that Bloodmoon would darken the doorway of his bedroom as Calvert. Yes, he just needed to keep going, keep working. He was close to a revelation, then it would all be good again.

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