

It was disturbingly easy to get Alan Barnes' assistance in acquiring a surreptitious bodycam. Emma had her dad wrapped around her finger, to a degree that it made sense why Alan either didn't know or didn't care that his daughter was bullying her former sister in all but blood, daughter to the man who'd been Alan's best friend in college.

This and further details were revealed as Sophia and Emma discussed Taylor. At Emma's inquiry as to Sophia's sudden increased interest, the athlete responded, "I dunno, it's just getting boring for me. Hebert's been a wet blanket since she went into the hospital and I need excitement. It's no fun just beating a dead cat against the wall. Hebert's broken, so why not find a new toy?" Truthfully Sophia didn't need some grand chase or challenge: simply exerting her power over another was entertainment enough, and hurting someone fit that criterion. Emma was still her friend, though, and if she could direct the redhead away from the walking massacre then she would.

"She hasn't learned her place yet," Emma insisted. "She keeps coming to school, going through the motions, like being a good little lemming will get her anywhere. Taylor needs to understand that a weakling like her isn't wanted, doesn't belong."

*Damn it, Emma...* "If you say so," Sophia shrugged. "I'll probably start looking for new game, myself. Hebert's lost my interest. Have fun." Well, that discussion could have gone better.

Worse, now the ball was in Greg's court. A looming incident that could cost her friend's life, her own reputation, her freedom, and it all rested in the hands of Greg Veder.

*I'm doomed.*

(BREAK)

The first step of any investigation is to establish parameters. If you just try gathering any and all information, you'll end up with piles of useless intel and only stumble onto clues through sheer luck. Likewise, if you set too narrow a focus then you risk throwing out vital info because it doesn't fit your expectations.

Greg had prepared as soon as he had help, putting together his own conspiracy board. From aliens to zombies to faerie changelings, all sorts of potential ideas were on the table. Most of them were probably complete bullshit but it always pays to keep an open mind.

Now came the second and most important aspect: actually gathering the intel. The best analysts in the world can't come up with answers if they don't have information, and the best theory will go unproven without evidence. Stage 1 of that info-gathering began on Monday.

Taylor still looked undead, the circles under her eyes just as dark as ever, and the girl had taken to sneaking a can of caffeinated energy drink inside her backpack with one of those attachable sippy tops so she could slurp it when she thought nobody was looking. Whatever was happening, Taylor seemed desperate to avoid sleep.

Was it a problem at home? With her dad, maybe? He never really heard her talk about her dad, but before she started scaring him Greg also never heard or saw anything that was a red flag for abuse. And he'd been looking – maybe not for that specifically, but he liked to think he would have noticed if it'd been there. So some other reason for her to be avoiding sleep. Of course, the need for caffeine could be

something else: perhaps her powers left her constantly exhausted. Or there was some sort of time-dilation where things took longer for her than for anyone else. Could she be living hours in another person's minutes, and so got sleepy that much faster? Maybe she was traveling to another dimension – wherever she got her costume and weapons – and time didn't work the same way there as here. Maybe she'd only ever intended to be a hero in that other universe.

In Earth Aleph, where Japan was one of the world's booming economies, anime and manga were big and there was a genre called *isekai*. Greg had no clue what it translated to, but essentially it was a normal person dropped into a fantasy world. Normally those stories just ended up weird Mary-Sue wish fulfillment that left the reader unsatisfied, but some of them explored the ideas of how a person from the modern world might react to a fantasy one, and how someone adapted to a world where killing was a way of life might struggle to function once brought back to the real world.

That idea held some merit, but it still didn't explain Taylor's behavior in school. Unless school was her anchor, something she was doing to keep reminding herself she was normal. That didn't really make sense, on second thought. Why would she come to such an awful place as Winslow, with Emma Barnes there, if she wanted to feel normal and give herself solid mental ground?

No, idle theorizing would do no good. Operation Taylor Investigation had to get down to the nitty-gritty, and that started with getting Taylor into his team for World Affairs' next group project. Then he could come over to her place to study and discuss ideas. A body camera would do for now, and if he found something that felt like a clue...maybe Greg could somehow buy a stealth camera from Leet or Toybox, to plant in her place? It made him feel terribly like a stalker, but Taylor wasn't this killer cape. She was a sweet, timid girl and needed his help.

They didn't have terribly many classes together so, during Computer Science after finishing the light workload Mrs. Knott assigned that Monday, Greg opted to browse Parahumans Online and see if anyone had leaked or otherwise distributed information about Taylor's debut on the cape scene. According to some information leaks, the PRT were designating her with the intimidating name Bloodmoon, ostensibly to discourage people from trying to approach her. Thankfully the various people posting used "he" and "she" interchangeably to describe Bloodmoon depending on who was talking, so nobody seemed to know her real identity.

More interesting was the information shared by others. Greg and Sparky were both firm believers in the power of basement-dwelling weirdos on the internet, and that belief was once again justified: Somebody was aware that the Empire was moving in shipments of guns and brought this up, which forced the PRT to admit that the cape they were already labeling as a villain had halted a massive load of automatic weapons which the PRT had seized in the aftermath of the massacre.

Even more notable, after the PRT's admission about the guns came a deluge of insistent, cajoling and threatening posts demanding that the Parahuman Response Team be honest about what happened at the ABB warehouse. According to the poster, there had been more body bags removed than ABB grunts had been stationed there, and at least one person had been brought out alive. If Greg had been the one making those accusations, he'd have suffered another ban – and possibly a permanent one. But the mods didn't silence this poster.

Finally, Reave (account name for one of the PRT's liaisons for Brockton Bay) shared the whole story. The Azn Bad Boyz hadn't just been occupying some random warehouse: they had been shipping girls between locations. Perhaps some had been imported, some ready for export. Nobody could be sure

because the survivors weren't talking. But there had been at least two dead girls there, beaten to death or dead from infection, and one or more still alive by the time Bloodmoon attacked. And the cape hadn't touched a hair on the girl's head.

That kicked off a shitstorm that was apparently still ongoing, new posts flooding in as users argued whether Bloodmoon should be counted as a villain or even a vigilante, countless low-content posts simply stating "Good riddance" or a variation of such, and threadbans being tossed out left and right.

Reading through all this, Greg bit his lip. This was the injection of hope he needed, the bit of proof that Taylor was still in there beneath the costume and the blood and the violence. He'd been obsessed with her for almost two years now, and more than ever hated himself for his cowardice in not defending her. But he knew the kind of person she was: protective, stubborn, gentle. The willingness to kill was new but it was focused, and even more than he'd presumed. Even when Bloodmoon was out and active, it was still Taylor. And she could be saved.

(BREAK)

*Now or never, Veder*, Greg girded himself. World Affairs was here. He'd need to swallow his fear, focus on his goal, and actually talk to Taylor again. More than that, he had to convince her to work with him and Sparky.

On cue, Taylor shuffled into class and took her seat just before the bell. Madison batted her eyelashes teasingly at her and Greg rolled his eyes. How did this girl not notice the seething danger just beneath Taylor's skin? Primal threat radiated off the girl like stink off a linebacker's jockstrap!

Mr. G. started in on his little lecture and it was so much noise to Greg. Gladly never really had much interesting to say but usually he tried to at least frame it in a cool way, sitting on the desk with his tie mostly undone. Right now Greg couldn't have been less interested in what the teacher was saying, just waiting for Gladly to get to the project.

"Now, since we've been dealing with parahumans this semester, I think it's fitting that our group project should focus on them as well. I want you all to gather in groups of three or four and put together a presentation on how the economy has changed due to parahumans," Mr. G. Declared. *Jackpot!*

"Taylor," Madison singsonged, "you can come work with Katie and me." Unknown to her, Madison had just played right into Greg's hands and he hadn't even needed to do anything. He just had to speak up now, before Mr. G. could say what a splendid idea it was that someone was helping the class pariah.

His voice first came out in a cracked squeak that he managed to disguise with a cough. "Ah, sorry Madison. Sparky, Taylor and I already agreed to work together on the next World Affairs project. I'm sure you can find another third for your group."

Gladly sat back behind his desk, pulling out some papers. "Alright, the rest of class is for you all to plan. Feel free to mill around and gather up with your partners. If you haven't got a full three-person group by the end of class, stick around and see me and we'll see what we can do."

Greg had to smack Sparky, who was busy doodling in his notebook. "C'mon. You know Taylor won't come to us."

His longtime friend pouted. “Do I have to? She’s so boring.”

“You can bring your notebook, dude. Just show some solidarity.”

That perked his friend right up. Sparky was insensitive sometimes, but easy to please.

It felt like one moment of truth after another. Greg had to continually steel himself against the fear that made him want to run in the other direction. Every step forward on this plan could crumble apart if he faltered, and the pressure felt like a hydraulic press on his skull. Still, he was proud of himself that he only stuttered once. “H-hey, Taylor. So, sorry to rope you in with Sparky here but I know you didn’t want to get stuck with those two. But, ah, I think we could come up with a good project. Sparky’s really good with numbers, I know a lot of cape stuff, and you’re really smart.” It was coming more easily now. “Maybe we could meet up after school? Get one of those side rooms at the library, maybe?” It was definitely too early to go over to her house yet, not just because the body camera wasn’t scheduled to arrive until Tuesday. Taylor’s trust was in short supply and she could see a premature request to come to her house as some sort of threat – and someone like Taylor, like Bloodmoon, responded to threats in a very visceral way.

The girl still hadn’t said anything, just blinking owlishly at them. Then she parted her lips, working her jaw for a split-second like it was suffering from disuse. “Uh, okay?” she replied in that cute, confused voice in a way that was entirely Taylor.