

Greg Veder's weekend was relatively exciting. On Saturday he met with Taylor at her house for the first time, and found out later that before their meeting Bloodmoon had killed Crusader and a number of Coil's mercenaries, while rescuing a family from a burning building. The murderous cape was rapidly developing more fans, his (or her, the internet was still divided on that, and some were insisting that Bloodmoon was an "it") actions to stop the runaway truck and rescue a mother and daughter further cementing the idea that this was a killer with a heart of gold.

The meeting itself went relatively well, too. From the moment Greg's mom dropped him off, Taylor was on him. This was to be expected: he was a relative stranger coming into her home, and he knew what Taylor got up to. If she hadn't been watching him like a hawk's more OCD cousin, he'd have been a lot more worried.

"Watch out for— Oh, right, we fixed that. Sorry, force of habit," Taylor finished a little sheepishly. "Front step used to be a little rotten and we were always worried it'd break."

"Huh. Well, I'd offer to help if you need any more handyman stuff done around your place, but um... I'm no good at it," Greg replied with a self-deprecating chuckle. He hefted his backpack. "So I brought my laptop: all the articles and such are saved to my disk so you can see the pictures if that'll help."

After a quick meet-and-greet with Mr. Hebert, who seemed glad to see that Greg was clearly a bit nervous about doing anything Taylor might not like, the pair headed up to Taylor's room. Greg also felt a little guilty for wearing the bodycam hidden in his polo shirt's button, but this was to figure out how he could help her. He hadn't been brave enough to stand up for her before, so now he had to take the risk to make up for it.

"You dressed up nice today," Taylor said, voice smooth like metal. "Any reason? Were you hoping for this to be a date?"

Greg's spine tried to crawl out through his back and he fought against freezing up. It was as if a giant wasp had perched on his nose, or he'd looked in a mirror and seen a red-dot sight leveled over his forehead. *When in doubt, babble like the incoherent goon you are.* "I, n-no! That's, ah, not to say I wouldn't *like* it to be one, you're really pretty – like, wow – but honestly we barely know each other and I hope that if I ever got up the guts to ask you on a date I'd be straight about it and not set up some schoolwork thing and oh my god I'm still talking." When dealing with someone who might very well be able to smell falsehood, honesty is the best policy.

Taylor seemed to agree, her expression settling on a gentle smile after having briefly looked shocked during Greg's drivel. "Well, I'm glad we cleared the air about that. Anyway, I don't have much room so let's set you up on my bed and I'll sit in the rolling chair. I'm honestly a little glad Sparks couldn't make it because he'd have to sit on the floor."

From there, the two had quite the productive session working on ideas for the paper. And while Greg took the occasional time to look around for a place to hide a camera, or stretch to give the bodycam a better survey of the room, he found himself steadily more engaged by their discussion. By the end he was more invested in the project than in the investigation, guided every step of the way by Taylor. He didn't even notice, in the throes of a brainstorming moment, how Taylor very specifically looked straight into the hidden camera and gave a knowing smirk.

After that came Tuesday evening, when Bloodmoon's PHO page updated before the official Endbringer Battle report, with announcements that Bloodmoon had all but gone mano-a-mano with the Simurgh and won before half the song's time had ticked down. He was lucky his parents were used to him occasionally being clumsy, because he quite literally fell out of his chair in shock.

(BREAK)

The usual meeting room wasn't sufficient, so the same cleared auditorium used for Endbringer staging was subsequently filled with cheap folding chairs. Every Protectorate hero was gathered, along with multiple PRT captains. Emily Piggot was the only one with her own chair from her office, not just for gravitas and reinforcement of rank but to spare her the embarrassment of her extra pounds slipping off either side of the narrow folding chairs.

"We've forwarded the case files and AARs to the Chief Director," Piggot began without preamble. "But unless and until National gives us different marching orders, we need a plan. How do we deal with Bloodmoon?"

Assault instantly raised his hand. Not bothering for her to call on him – he knew she wouldn't – he volunteered his idea. "Stay out of her way and ask her politely not to kill too many people?" Usually the ex-villain would quip, make off-color jokes or otherwise lighten the situation or at least draw ire onto himself to bleed off tension from a dire situation. In this case, he bulldozed Piggot's response, raising his voice above hers to drown her out. Not yelling, but certainly elevating the volume. "No, I'm half-serious. Look, every step of the way Bloodmoon has acted not just to hunt criminals but to protect innocents. Whether it was the girls at the ABB stop, those people in the cafe, or the mom and daughter in the apartment, she goes out of her way to help when she can. I'd say that might be her main motivation: if she gets rid of the biggest threats, then she has to help fewer people overall.

"Do you have footage of her talking to me and Battery before the Ziz fight? Her posture, her speech...her voice might've sounded authoritative on the surface but that was a front. She was shy, almost deferential with how she approached. She doesn't want to be a burden. Mark my words," he punctuated by spiking his index finger down onto his knee, "this is someone who was deeply hurt, someone whom the system failed, and she's doing what she thinks is right so nobody else gets hurt like she did. Maybe she's delusional, maybe she's unreasonable. But what if she isn't? What if we can solve all this just by talking?"

Beside him, Battery shrugged. "He makes a good point, and not just from the hopeless optimist's perspective. Pragmatically, we're dealing with a cape who can make an Endbringer run for the hills – more than that, an anti-Thinker so potent she can outfox the Simurgh's precog. She's willing to fight the Endbringers. Not only would making an enemy of her be a suicidally stupid idea, she doesn't seem to hold any animosity toward heroes. The only sticking point would be our refusal to kill, but as much as it rankles me to say this, her kill count is an acceptable sacrifice if it means we can reduce by orders of magnitude the Endbringers' death tolls."

Assault, having waited until his wife was finished, turned to her with a pout. "Hopeless optimist? Puppy, that hurts. I'm always hopeful. Like tonight, I'm hoping that you'll—" *Whap*, Battery smacked him in the mouth. Unfazed and unharmed, his mouth was curled in a smirk when her hand departed. "Yep, still got it," he chirped.

“Dragon and I have been parsing the battle footage,” Armsmaster spoke up to draw attention away from the couple. “While she’s currently briefing the Chief Director, I’ve noticed a few very significant things. With your permission, Director, I’d like to play a few clips. I recommend that everyone brace themselves – that is, quite literally grab onto your chairs. There’s some sort of metaphysical presence to some of these clips that caused my knees to give out even on a secondhand viewing.”

“And that’s without getting into the song,” Dauntless interjected.

“I’d say it doesn’t sound like Bloodmoon,” Assault posited, “but the first time I heard her speak she sounded like some kind of after-effects Hollywood monster. Plus that roar, so I guess I’m saying that I don’t *think* the song was Bloodmoon’s singing but I can’t say we should rule it out.”

With Piggot’s go-ahead, Armsmaster activated a projector. Any footage of a Simurgh fight was scrubbed clean of sound, then reformatted into a .gif to completely eliminate any trace of hidden sound before translated back into a pauseable .mp4 file.

“Our first indication of Bloodmoon’s unique anti-monitoring abilities is here.” There was a still image of the woman kneeling, fingers touching something, but that something was obscured by digital noise. “Much like with Assault’s bodycam, we can’t verify what she was doing because the cameras refused to parse it. The few people who noticed made mention that it made them feel a little woozy or seasick, but nobody could make out more than a hazy mist.”

“At least we didn’t get a disappearing-arm event or the freaky blood cascade,” Assault muttered, humor gone from his voice. That had been frightening, and the way Alice had screamed... Beside him, his wife shuddered.

“In a way, it’s more worrisome that we didn’t,” Armsmaster hit Play. Next was footage of Bloodmoon impaled by the shards of her greatsword. Her corpse hit the ground, then after a few frames it was gone. No artifacting, no stutter, no missed frames. “From what I can gather, the moment everyone’s eyes were off her corpse, it was gone. Likewise, none of her leavings were found. No blood, no bullets or shrapnel, no weapon fragments. Both the greatsword hilt and the blood-katana disappeared.”

“What worries me is the idea that she might have some control over it,” Miss Militia spoke up. “Put out a lot of mist to make people sick, leave an opening for retaliation. Or put out no mist so observers – people on her side – aren’t rendered helpless in the face of an Endbringer.”

“Somehow a conscious decision even after her body died?” Captain Anders shuddered. “Jesus, that’s some control.”

“Next, when Bloodmoon drew her third weapon. Everyone brace yourselves.” Armsmaster played the footage. Zoomed in, it could be seen how a double-ended sword rose from a cloud of mist. Everyone present felt their gorge rise from the mist, before something primal hit them. It wasn’t fear, not really. It was awareness of something superior, the ancient pack instinct to submit to a greater being in order to secure one’s own safety.

Armsmaster swallowed hard and spoke through gritted teeth. “A-as you can ssssseeeeeee, it’s some kind of double-sword... One, one blade long, like a Japanese ka-ta-na, the other one shorter and more ma...maneuverable. A, a... Oh, forget it.” He paused the video and took a shuddering breath. “It’s not worth trying to talk through that footage. It’s kind of like someone took a samurai’s classic two

weapons – the katana and wakizashi – and fit them together at the pommel. When she strikes whatever pose, the mental pressure is most powerful. My working theory is that whatever this aura is, it hit a being like the Simurgh extra hard.

“The final thing I wanted to share is, to me, the most interesting. I didn’t notice it until Dragon pointed it out, and I’m willing to bet none of you saw it during the fight either. My suspicion is that, much like how some aspects of Bloodmoon’s power refuse to be captured on film, this was hiding from human senses. What that could mean, well, I couldn’t begin to tell you.”

The projector clicked over to a collage of still scenes. In the afternoon sky, glittering and opalescent, hung the moon.

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“I wish Fortuna was available,” Rebecca said quite loudly, “but as she’s recovering and this can’t wait, we’ll just have to soldier on without her.” It was a dig, and she knew it, toward the ultimate child soldier, but Alexandria had just had a hell of a day and was in no mood for leniency toward anyone.

From the other room, sipping from a juice box and watching the Transformers movie, Fortuna pointedly ignored Rebecca’s jab. From the moment her people had died, Contessa had relied on the Path to Victory to guide her, to the point that she often behaved more like an automaton than a person. On the rare occasions when her power began to take its toll, she scheduled break times to simply be what she had never been permitted to be: a child. And so, childishly, she turned up the volume as Galvatron chased the Autobots through space.

Number Man tapped a stack of papers on the table to straighten them. “The footage and AARs paint the picture of a competent and deadly but rather generic cape, characterized by her anti-Thinker effect and willingness to commit violence. This sudden escalation is many orders of magnitude beyond what we would expect from someone like this.”

Legend, Dominic with his mask off, nodded. “Initial supposition would be a cape like Dauntless, but there’s no real marked improvement until today. Yes, each time we see her she displays something new, but no sudden trump card or overwhelming level of power. She moved with speed and struck with power unlike anything before. In addition, her behavior on the battlefield indicates someone with a plan, who had an idea how her powers might interact with the Simurgh’s.”

The Number Man – Kurt, since he never wore a mask – nodded. “Especially with her first appearance not even two weeks prior, Bloodmoon’s activity reflects that of a veteran with at least a year, if not more, of constant experience using her power in combat.”

David, though he left his Eidolon hood up as he wasn’t appreciative of his appearance, shook his head. “That’s interesting in itself but it still doesn’t explain the change. Some of Bloodmoon’s dodges registered as supersonic despite somehow not breaking the sound barrier. That’s a far cry from her dodging *most but not all* bullets and just shrugging off the ones that hit. Everything she did today was magnitudes higher than it should’ve been,” he parroted some of Kurt’s words.

Rebecca had been listening to the discussion the entire time, her eyes flitting over the various images and videos of Bloodmoon’s fights. “...Unless she’s been holding back the entire time.” She shook her finger between three screens. “Look at the motions. In every Brockton Bay fight, we see this smooth

movement, sliding and dipping and almost skating across the ground, flowing around strikes rather than outright dodging. It's very...martial-arts movie. Now," she moved her finger to the last screen, "look at this one. Jerky movements, violent thrusts with the legs to induce motion, these are the movements of an actual fighter, someone doing everything to win."

Kurt nodded, shifting on his feet. "I noticed that as well. I'd folded it into the idea of escalation, but you may be right: it does make more sense if we instead look at the previous fights as someone not giving their all. The issue is, I can tell she *is* giving her all."

Since Fortuna was on her break, Rebecca knew what she had to do next. "Shut up, Fortuna! I know what you're going to say!" With that out of the way, she continued. "This is a very...anime idea, but concepts like these tend to have at least some truth in reality: what if she was holding back by imposing restrictions on herself? Like wearing ankle and wrist weights, but for her powers? Be it a Tinkertech device like her equipment or some esoteric quirk, she suppresses her power – maybe out of fear for collateral damage, maybe because she likes the challenge, I couldn't say – and she took off the metaphorical weights for the Endbringer fight."

Kurt made a noise in his throat, running his fingers through his blond hair. "The idea has potential. On some level, I'd like you to be wrong but I don't think you are."

Eidolon took the bait. "Why would you want her to be wrong?"

"You were there. You felt that presence, that pressure, in person. This theory fits best out of what we have currently. And that means, everything Bloodmoon did to the Simurgh? I'm all but certain she was still holding back."