

The night was unseasonably warm. Brockton Bay's western mountains helped keep wind shear to a minimum and made the winters more mild than most of the Northeast Coast, but mild is a relative term and temperatures still routinely dipped below freezing. Tonight it felt like Sophia was in a sauna, the normal dewy winter-chill humidity becoming actual swamp-ass moisture. It didn't help that she was crammed into her old costume, the one she'd worn before joining the Wards – technically it was her old spare, in case the first got damaged or too bloody, but she'd kept it after joining. It was a homemade thing, made for safety and intimidation, and that meant a large amount of thick padding without the breathable materials offered by the Wards costume department. She was broiling inside her own outfit after months of being spoiled by her new costume, and it only amplified her discomfort.

Given her current goal, she was already uncomfortable enough to fill an entire sports-team stable devoted to discomfort, so every little bit was another straw weighing down the camel, one more grain of thought saying *You don't have to do this*.

But the PRT scanner had noted Bloodmoon was currently hacking her way through some rioting crazies in the docks. She wouldn't get a better opportunity to look into Taylor's room. And so, with trepidation racing up and down her spine like gerbils on speed, Sophia ghosted back into the bedroom of the person she feared most in the world. She'd brought with her a simple digital camera to take quick photos of Taylor's diary and then escape before she could get caught. She didn't need to take the time to read the passages then and there, just make sure everything was in frame and not blurry.

With her flashlight on, Sophia noted that Taylor's bedsheets were a soft pink this time. The absurdity of such a terrifying being sleeping on cute, girly sheets forced her to suppress a chortle. Lifting her arm to wipe at her brow – and subsequently finding herself unable since her mask was in the way – she cursed under her breath and tried to ignore the sweat falling into her eye. The diary opened, the first page was in frame. Click. She flipped the page. Click, click. Click, click. Click, click. Some entries were long, taking up multiple pages. Some didn't even use up half of a page. Blood and beasts were mentioned often, the words standing out from how frequently they appeared. Other words that seemed like they shouldn't be capitalized were: Doll, Dream, Nightmare.

At long last Sophia arrived at the final written page, the terrifying statement of worry and apology that had captured her attention. Click.

Footsteps echoed outside. Had Taylor's father heard that just now? Why was he here? Oh shit, if she were just to shadow out...

She heard the knob start to turn and made her decision. Grabbing the diary, she shadowed into the sheets and pulled them up over herself. Her hand covered the flashlight to conceal the light. The door creaked open ever so slightly, and she heard what sounded like a relieved exhale. Slowly, quietly, the door clicked shut and Mr. Hebert's footfalls receded.

Once she could no longer hear his steps, Sophia replaced the diary, shut off her flashlight, and left. She could deliver the camera to Greg and he could figure out something from all of the rambling.

(BREAK)

She had stopped coming to him. He could see Her every night when he dreamed, framed against the crimson moon. But when he dreamt he was so heavy, so bloated and laden, that he couldn't reach. He

leapt for the sky to join Her but would always plummet into the mud, into the flowers, into the crushing depths of the ocean waters...

His tongue felt so short and thick in his mouth when he woke up, and it was taking longer each morning to acclimate to it. He'd taken to splitting time whenever he gave an order, because sometimes his mercenaries would be utterly confused by a command he delivered: it wasn't due to their incompetence this time, at least not really. Once or twice he'd used the wrong word for an important thing, calling it something entirely different. Calling a bank a church, for example. One time, during a split, he'd recorded his orders and played them back to realize he'd spoken an entirely reasonable command, only in reverse.

He'd tried to reach out to Accord for help only to realize halfway through their interaction that it was all happening in a dream. He couldn't bring himself to make the call while awake. She didn't want him getting outsiders involved in Her game.

His mercenaries had begun requesting larger food rations, primarily of meat. Lamb and veal especially, cooked rare. He saw nothing wrong with these requisitions and had put in the orders.

His little whisperer (Tattletale, she was his Tattletale) had been increasingly out of contact. She still accepted his orders, but seemed to want to have even less contact with him than usual. That was fine; She found his pet unpalatable. It was, of course, not his place to ask the reason for Her animosity.

His Morlocks (Underdwellers, no, Undersiders) might be a good means by which to lure her out, make her return to Her. It still rankled him to some extent, the idea of sacrificing so many assets for a chance at simply catching someone's attention. But his annoyance at the idea was simply proof that he was not yet pure enough to join Her. He needed to let go such attachments: what was money compared to Her love?

Yes, she stalked the docks sometimes. Had just killed rioters there. He could send his assets to irritate that damnable dragon. Once he was properly riled, she would arrive to put out the first (fires, put out the fires) and he could begin guiding her.

No child should be separated from her mother.

(BREAK)

In the morning, Emily Piggot sighed upon reviewing the previous night's after-action report. The sudden rioters seemed to have no clear affiliation and many were not local, which didn't bode well for Brockton Bay. Further, the police had been unable to talk to Bloodmoon and ask her to stick around. How were they supposed to communicate with the greatest anti-Endbringer force since Scion (possibly greater, considering his inconsistency) if they couldn't even get someone to talk at her, let alone to her?

The possible solution to the problem came later that afternoon. In preparation for his graduating to the Protectorate, Triumph was attending more and more meetings to get a feel of how adult operations worked, and through a chain of anecdotes the fact that they had no means of contacting Bloodmoon had gotten down to him.

"I figured it wouldn't hurt to brainstorm with the Wards," he said to the director, "and Clockblocker had what might actually be a good idea. It'd be tedious and maybe a bit embarrassing, but our best bet

might be just to print up flyers. Let Bloodmoon know that the PRT wants to meet under the tenets of the Endbringer Truce.” The rather fluffy lion-head helmet lent him less authority than he likely warranted, and it was still up in the air whether he was going to keep it, streamline, or go in a completely different direction when he graduated.

Piggot sipped her carob. “You’re right that it would be a bit embarrassing to post flyers like a kid whose dog’s gone missing, but it would be more embarrassing to have no means of communication with a danger like her. I’ll talk to Renick, have him get some of our people on designing a flyer that doesn’t look too pathetic.”

Image wasn’t her thing. Emily Piggot was all gray and gunmetal, hard lines and kevlar. She understood the point of looking good, hearts and minds and keeping the public encouraged, but she also knew that her own personal distaste for such extravagance would color her decisions. Renick was old-school intelligence and counterespionage: he knew propaganda and how to encourage people, and he’d work with the PR department to make something decent on a tight schedule.

Of course, by the time the flyers were ready, they would turn out to be unnecessary.

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The plan hadn’t been all that sound to Valefor, but he knew better than to question Mama Mathers. Better than most: the majority of the Mathers clan were adopted in, kidnapping victims, tortured and brainwashed. Mama was Mama, and it was their duty to obey. Christine Mathers was genuinely Elijah’s mother, and instead of affording him any lenience it led to even more harshness and cruelty than the average members of the clan received. Valefor had to be superior to his clanmates, for he was the spawn of Mama’s loins.

He understood the principle: the Fallen had to retaliate against Bloodmoon, but you didn’t just rock up and try to punch someone in the face who could win a fight with an Endbringer. Hence, Mama’s plan. Their contacts within the PRT – and Mama’s specific contacts about whom Elijah was supposed to never enquire – said that Bloodmoon’s anti-Thinker abilities were strange, that some unsettling aspect of her presence seemed to bleed over into Watchdog (Elijah refused to call it by its absurd acronym) capes’ dreams when they tried to Think on her. Mama’s abilities would initially trigger when the victim perceived her in person with one of their senses. She could then ride along on that sense, and each time the victim thought of her with that sense she gained more presence and eventually control.

Mama had gambled that, with Bloodmoon’s weird anti-Thinker effect, perhaps simple exposure to her static image would be enough. A drip-feed of photos, recordings of Mama’s voice, constantly barraged onto Bloodmoon for the next several weeks. Converting a campground into Mad Max raiders had been no trouble for Valefor and he sent them on their mission happily, but he still hadn’t thought that the plan would work. It all sounded backward to him: other Thinkers would Think about Bloodmoon. Their powers would reach out to her, and wouldn’t like what they saw. Mama was hoping that somehow Bloodmoon would reach out to her power.

And perhaps that was exactly what had happened.

Christine Mathers was a cruel, hateful and domineering woman. She delighted in exerting power over others, especially through unconventional means. She kept herself emaciated, harmless-looking, yet maintained a stranglehold of fear over her family. She was like a Heartbreaker that required regular

upkeep. And so when she emerged, manic and wild-eyed with the revelation of a new God, the rest of the clan reluctantly went along. Coronzon and Bamet were the most vocal opponents, but even their seniority couldn't overrule the programmed enthusiasm of the rest of the clan. Seir was just happy to get moving and potentially cause new devastation. Even that little bitch Rain was in favor, though Elijah suspected the weakling was hoping for something new to worship. Ever since his trigger the kid hadn't been right.

The clan acquired (sometimes legally, such as their hurry) a fleet of RVs to bring the entire family. This was a true Mathers pilgrimage: not just the capes and killers were coming, but the sluts and gelded slaves. As Mama had once told Elijah, as explanation for why she insisted on everyone wearing their hair long, "It's to remind you: if you won't be a soldier, you'll be a slut. We'll get children out of you. And if you fail at that, if they're sickly or disobedient, we'll geld you like any of the farm animals." It was a relatively common speech, but one that never lost its icy bite.

And every single member was moving Eastward, from Kansas to New Hampshire. They were traveling to see the truth of Mama's new God, to see if it was as worthy of worship as she seemed to think. Coronzon seemed to cling to the idea that if Mama's deity was unworthy he could ambush it, cause enough devastation to properly punish the nonbelievers. Show them the error of ever thinking the Endbringers could be challenged, much less defeated.

As they careened down the highway, overtaxed shocks shrieking, Elijah Mathers found himself questioning his mother's orders for the first time since he'd hypnotized himself to obey so it would stop hurting. Something deep within him, like a well of ice-cold water behind his heart, told him that they were charging head-first into a nightmare. Into something none of them could understand.

(BREAK)

Was Sophia even her friend anymore? The girl spent more and more of her time off on Wards work, and around school she was less and less engaged. Ever since Sophia had punched her for what she'd said to Taylor – Taylor! – the heroine had been growing ever more distant. And then the riot. She'd seen Sophia sitting with Taylor and Greg fucking Veder.

Taylor was strong now, Taylor was dangerous. Taylor was taking Sophia from her.

There was no way Emma could win in a fight. But Sophia had taught her, you didn't need to win in a straight-up contest of strength. Humanity didn't get to the top of the food chain by fist-fighting woolly mammoths. Uncle Danny – Taylor's dad, she mentally corrected herself – had kept a shotgun and Taylor's mom had a pistol. The memory had suddenly surfaced of an idle mention, and then the parents being embarrassed for mentioning firearms around such young children. It was unlikely that the sadsack had bothered to get rid of it.

Sophia had taught her some useful life skills, such as picking locks. She would call in sick to school. Find some way to dodge around her mom and get free for the rest of the day. Danny would be at his dead-end job all day, and nobody would look suspiciously at a pretty girl loitering around a house.

With Annette's pistol, Emma would destroy Taylor before Taylor could destroy her. She had to keep herself safe: she wouldn't let Taylor ruin her life.