

“So,” Brian began, looking at the haggard blonde who sat at the coffee table, “are you ready to talk about it? Whatever happened to you?” She’d been throwing herself into her work in a manner that Brian recognized from his own father: fleeing from pain by focusing on pain she could control and understand. The Undersiders – well, Lisa almost exclusively, but she was supporting them – had acquired nearly all of Coil’s assets. They were set, if not for life, then for decades.

Rachel and Alec both had all but retired from cape life. Rachel focused on her shelter and hadn’t been back to the base in days, while Alec was currently draped snoring over the couch.

Lisa was a beautiful girl, Brian knew that objectively. Light-blonde hair; bright bottle-green eyes typically sparkling with mischief; rather tall and a perfect mix of slim and curvaceous to appeal to nearly any man’s sensibilities; her smattering of freckles added an innocence to her appearance, which was disarming in a way.

The girl who sat opposite him had little in common with herself. Her hair hung limp, seeming to have lost some of its color and luster. Her eyes were sunken, hollow with the thousand-yard stare, ringed by dark circles.

“...I don’t know what good it would do,” she replied at length. “Just someone else to traumatize.”

“A burden shared is a burden lessened,” Brian gently countered. How many times had he wished his father would let him in, let him help share the pain? Now, older and wiser, he understood his old man had been protecting him in his own way, trying to keep Brian from sharing in that deep suffering. But it had only given Brian a different kind of pain rather than protecting him.

“I don’t think that checks out with cosmic horror,” the blonde countered. Her tone was likewise gentle, but Brian could feel the wall she was erecting.

“Look at me.” It was a dirty tactic. He knew it. He didn’t care. “I don’t want you to suffer alone.” He knew she could see the various details of his life, how his father had shut him out of sharing his pain, Brian’s regrets over such. He could also see how she contemplated hurling her steaming coffee into his face – cup and all – as hard as she could. Her arm got all the way to tensing before she gave up.

“Fuck you, Laborn,” she growled.

He continued to stare, brown eyes locked onto green. Tired green blinked first.

“I saw them. The rest of the hunters, as I was being escorted out. With them, I don’t see facts. I see images. Valtr, the one who died – but I guess it didn’t stick? – he had eyes in his forehead like a pulsing hive, snakes in his hair, the fangs of a monster...”

Lisa took a breath and a long sip of her coffee. “Henryk, the one in yellow, was...dead. I saw a skeleton in a ragged coat. I just knew it should have died long ago but kept moving. In its chest...was a music box. I swear I could hear it playing when I looked at him.” She tapped in a strange rhythm on the table.

The sound made Brian shudder slightly. It was almost a gentle and soothing melody, but something about it felt fundamentally wrong.

“The one they called Owl, she was worse.” Lisa took a deep breath. “I never told you how I got my powers.”

Brian gripped the table with white knuckles. Powers came from the worst day of your life. Capes didn't like to talk about them, for obvious reasons. He didn't dare interrupt.

“My big brother, Reggie – I called him Rex sometimes... He killed himself. He was always so full of life and vibrancy, and then...” Her breath hitched. “I found him. After that, I was convinced it was my fault, that I hadn't seen the signs. And then, one day, I could see the signs. And I still didn't know why!” She gave a bitter, manic laugh.

“Owl,” she continued, “she fundamentally wanted to die. She was ready. And yet she was forcing herself to stay. She was...hard to look at. Some of the work Coil had me doing included researching how to manufacture accidents. Really bad car crashes, they twist a person's body until it barely resembles a person. Owl, she looked like that, and then somebody stretched her back into a person shape. Held together with...bungee cords made of blood.”

“...And Bloodmoon?” Brian's horrified curiosity was piqued.

At the mention of the original member of this killer-cape team, Lisa changed fundamentally. She didn't begin to audibly sob, but big tears started rolling from her eyes. She stared down into her coffee, silently weeping. “Do you know how epileptic seizures tend to happen?” Her voice was soft and ragged.

Brian blinked, shocked at this sudden turn. “Um, no, I don't.” He doubted his response was necessary.

“Photosensitive epilepsy. Too much flickering light, too much variance of input, causes the brain to misfire. Looking at Bloodmoon, it was like I was having a photosensitive seizure. Maybe I almost did. There was too much input, too many different images.

“A terrified little girl, clutching bars made of bone. Is it a prison, or a shelter? A savage beast, an electrical storm, holding more hate than I've ever seen. It wants us all to suffer and die for the wrongs it's suffered. An idol, like a statue of Athena, standing tall and implacable. Nothing will challenge it.”

Lisa took another breath. “Then, I was outside of myself. An out-of-body experience. It was too much to observe as myself, in myself. I had to be somewhere, something else.” Another manic, helpless laugh. “How many times I wished for just that. Now I wish it'd never happened.” She took another sip. “I saw the Earth. From the outside. Some point in space. Then enormous, spindly black fingers curled around the planet. Something...” She paused again.

“I need to simply explain. It'll be stream-of-consciousness. It's the only way I can get it out.” She didn't wait for confirmation from Brian. “It was immense. Vaguely humanoid, sometimes. Arms, legs, body. A tail sometimes. Tentacles like hair, or hair like tentacles. No face, maybe a face. Eyes. Two. Only two. Never more. The eyes are everywhere else, all around us. It only needs two. It holds the Earth to its chest. Not possessively, protectively. That's the only reason I can sleep at all. It begins to shift, squamous and immense, looking to cocoon the world.” She shuddered with a hiccup. “The next thing I knew, PRT troopers were picking me up from the ground. I'd vomited all over myself and passed out. I think in that order.”

“Christ, Lisa. I...” Brian swallowed. His father had been a hard man. No real comfort. He tried to be a good father, but mostly failed. Brian hadn’t learned much from him in those respects. Still, he’d seen enough of the world. “Can I hug you?”

Lisa nodded wordlessly, then began to sob in earnest when the big man put his arms around her.

(BREAK)

The schools were reopening. Most of the public thought it was too early, but Mayor Christner insisted that the young people needed to be kept occupied or new gang activity would skyrocket. Considering that Wolf Day had just happened and Bloodmoon lived in Brockton Bay, the average person thought he was talking out of his ass and simply wanted to pretend things were normal again.

Winslow had a rambling orientation, the sickly-thin Blackwell yammering away about conduct and safety. Sophia picked out Greg in the crowd, easily noticed Taylor’s tall form, and spotted Emma’s shock of red hair. By the time the speech was done, Sophia once again pussied out from speaking with Taylor. As she moved to meet up with Emma, Sophia bumped into a tallish, square-jawed blonde. “Out of my way,” she grunted.

“Oh my god, it’s you!” the blonde squeaked in an unfortunately mannish voice. At Sophia’s incomprehension, blue eyes locked onto brown. “It’s me, Ellie! They used to call me Man-Jaw? We were friends as kids! God, how’ve you been?”

Of course. How could Sophia have forgotten about Ellie? Thoughts of Emma were set to the wayside as she caught up with her old friend.

(BREAK)

The Hebert household had once been vibrant and full of life. That attitude had died with Annette. Emma herself had helped to fully murder it when she killed Taylor’s energetic behavior. Now, though, it didn’t just feel melancholic: it felt actively hostile. The split-level house (Emma thought that was the term) seemed to be warning her against entrance. Of course, Emma was driven by manic determination and ignored the sensible parts of her psyche that told her this was a bad idea.

She forgot about the rotting first step and planted her foot, flinching and waiting for pain. But her foot didn’t break through the frail wood: it had apparently been replaced. Just how much had Taylor changed? And what gave her the right to do so? She was the weak one, the one who needed Emma to put her back together!

Emma tucked her hair into a beanie: she hadn’t been entirely a vapid airhead when Sophia discussed operations and infiltration. She knew the Hebert house well, and had worn some of her rattiest clothes that could be easily disposed-of after the fact. The spare key had been moved, but she had a secondary plan. The old coal chute into the basement. Emma went around to the back and managed to wrench it open, leaping down the steel gullet and riding her backpack for some modicum of safety.

She tumbled into the basement, covered in soot and cobwebs, and immediately felt as if she was being watched. “Taylor?” she asked quietly, looking around. Only clutter and the laundry machines stared back. She sat there in the darkness for far too long before shaking off her hesitation and ascending the stairs into the hallway between the kitchen and dining room. Once again, it was empty. The house was

well-maintained, however. Free of dust. It would have felt welcoming if not for the pervasive feeling of eyes on her.

Emma made her way up the next flight of stairs and into Danny and Annette's room. Taylor had discussed this once, and Emma hoped that she could find it. A false wall panel in the closet concealed the family's firearms. After some fumbling, and knocking down a pile of clothes onto herself, she found it. The panel lifted off to reveal...a gun safe. Well, fuck. Combinations were usually left-right-left, right? She tried Taylor's birthdate, then realized the numbers didn't go up to 95. She didn't know Danny or Annette's birth years. She could always just try 9 as the third number...

Frustration saw her grab the handle and wrench it. The safe popped open. It had been unlocked the whole time!? Thanking her lucky stars, Emma grabbed Annette's pistol and magazine. She could figure out how it worked later: the Internet had guides for everything.

She put everything back as best as she could remember and left through the front door, leaving it unlocked. If anybody robbed Taylor's house, that'd be just too bad.

She was far enough away not to hear as the lock and deadbolt slid into place, the Little Ones ensuring the house was closed-up as Taylor wanted.