

Something was deeply wrong with Taylor Hebert. Of course, this was obvious (or should have been obvious) to numerous people. To some, it was seen as a victory – Emma counted it as such that Taylor had become so broken down, changed from the optimistic and imaginative chatterbox she'd once been. To others, it was ignored, Danny desperately shying from more pain as he tried to hold himself together for his daughter's sake, inadvertently causing further harm.

The two people who came, independently, to the conclusion that something new and potentially dangerous was wrong didn't even interact with Taylor all that much. But they observed her all the same. Greg Veder, likewise social outcast (though with at least one person he could arguably call a friend), had a crush on Taylor and often watched her both during and between classes, eyes tracking the sway of her black ringlets. The reasons, before, that he'd never made a move were shyness and fear of further abuse for romancing one of the school populace's favorite punching bags. Now she scared him. Now he watched her so that he could be where she wasn't.

It wasn't some massive thing, some outburst or declaration of intent that had Greg frightened. No, it was one of the simplest principles of horror that directors and writers would use in the scary books and movies he often enjoyed: things were ever so slightly off. When Taylor's eyes darted around now, they held a different, alien emotion within them. She tensed at different stimuli than before, and tensed in different ways. She still hunched, but in a different way, legs flexing and back bowed, almost like an animal ready to lunge or begin bounding away. At least, when Greg spied on her, she did all of this. Sometimes she'd do it when others saw, but always there would be a twinge of realization, of fear or guilt, and then she'd start to behave as she had before. This was far too much to blame on mere sleep deprivation, no matter how dark the circles under Taylor's eyes. It was an act, one that Taylor was keeping up, one that she had to remind herself to maintain and all too easily forgot, like an amateur actor trying to play spy. There was no other way to put it, and at the same time there was no way anyone would believe him, but Taylor wasn't Taylor anymore. Something was wearing her skin, doing a decent job of imitating her, but the differences were glaring to anyone who'd actually taken the time to (stalk) know her.

The other person who noted that something was wrong happened to be one of Taylor's ongoing bullies. Sophia Hess knew violence. She knew it intimately, from both sides. It wasn't necessarily fair to say that she loved violence, loved hurting people, for does a wolf enjoy tearing out its prey's throat? Certainly some could, but that enjoyment arose from need rather than want. And Sophia Hess needed violence. It was part of her on an intrinsic level, woven into her soul in threads of smoke and shadow, not that she would ever take the time or mental exertion to describe it as such. So when Hebert began twitching differently, Sophia's instincts started to scream at her.

*Hebert doesn't flinch the same.* That was the thought which started Sophia down this path, when she'd bodychecked Taylor one morning, and the evidence continued to mount from there. Hebert's head and even her entire body still jerked back, eyelids narrowed, all the same signals were there. But they were just different enough that Sophia could recognize, and they told an entirely different story. Where before thin lips curled into a distressed pout, now they split apart over a silent snarl. Eyes that had closed entirely now narrowed to slits, lashes set to protect against shrapnel or spray. Hebert still jerked back – oftentimes farther than before – but the curl in her spine, the tensed legs and shoulders, spoke not of someone frightened and involuntarily curling in on herself but of barely-restrained retaliation. And taken all together, the glint in Hebert's eyes was something that Sophia had seen in veteran gang members. It wasn't just violence, but intent. Intent to kill each and every person who caused that reflex.

And then that intent was gone. No, not gone, not truly. *Hidden*. Stamped down and replaced with a mask of the same fear and sadness that had been genuine just a month ago. The bags under Hebert's eyes and the bone-deep exhaustion with which she moved helped to hide her changes, but exhaustion shouldn't permit a person to react so quickly. Hebert had gone from a frightened rabbit to a potential threat, wound tighter than Armsmaster and reacting with speed that Sophia would never admit scared her. Sophia would not, could not acknowledge that Hebert reacted and moved more quickly than she did.

But why? That was the question. Was Hebert a cape now? No, the idea was absurd – not because it was Hebert, as Sophia would have dismissed the concept before the last month, but because she knew violence. Someone with that much pure animal fury twitching beneath her skin, if she was a cape Hebert would have slaughtered the entire school by now. Something else was going on, something that had changed the girl, something dangerous. And Sophia wasn't stupid enough to report this, risk her activities coming to light. Emma wouldn't believe her, the redhead too invested in the idea of breaking Taylor. If there was a chance Hebert could retaliate, the girl might lose her marbles with fear. Madison couldn't keep a fucking secret to save her life. So it was up to Sophia to answer these questions.

(BREAK)

After coming to the conclusion that something was indeed wrong with Hebert, Sophia started her investigation. She'd never been all that good about gathering clues or putting together puzzles, but she was sneaky and damn good at following people even before getting her powers. It was a bitch to beg off after-school fun with Emma, Madison and the others but Sophia had to understand what was going on with Hebert, if the girl was genuinely a threat. If the girl was on the wrong kind of drugs – or worse, Tinkertech drugs – she might eventually attack the school. And Sophia was a hero: she didn't let psycho killers just do what they wanted.

At least Hebert wasn't somehow pretending to be tired: the girl practically staggered to the bus stop. Not to catch the school bus, but further down to a city bus, heading downtown. It took a bit of effort to catch up, as Shadow Stalker's powers didn't make her any faster than the average human, but the bus hit enough red lights that she was able to watch Hebert get off at a nondescript corner and head into a shitty convenience store. This neighborhood was ABB, and even the *Open* sign was in red-and-green neon. Why would a white girl willingly go to a convenience store in Asian-supremacist territory? Hebert went inside, bought some energy drinks, and went back to perch on a bench. The black-haired girl stared out into space, eyes somewhat unfocused, seeing nothing as she drank one energy drink after another. She tilted her head back, guzzling the liquid, throat pulsing with heavy gulps. Hebert drank like the proverbial man lost in the desert would drink from a sudden oasis, with the enthusiasm of someone thankful to stave off death. Far above her, Sophia settled in on a rooftop to observe, wondering when the girl's heart would explode from all the caffeine. After the first three, Hebert settled down to sips, making the rest of the drinks last for hours. She didn't even look at the cans, popping the tops by rote muscle memory and almost demurely drawing from them. The sun slowly dipped and all Hebert did was sit, and stare, and drink.

Hours later, as night fell, Hebert stirred. Shadow Stalker had almost fallen asleep from watching the girl do absolutely fuck-all, and now she was moving with purpose back toward the convenience store. *What, more energy drinks? Is Hebert just jumpy because she's always high on caffeine?* If that was the answer to all this, Sophia might kill the girl herself just for having the gall to waste her time. But no, the tall girl didn't go inside. Instead she smoothly began to tail two men in ABB colors, one of whom wore a modified letterman jacket denoting that he had some low-rung rank in the gang. The ostensible

officer was stuffing something in his pocket – protection money, most likely. The clerk was bruised, slumped miserably over the counter: he either couldn't or hadn't wanted to pay the full price. Sophia didn't spare the man another thought. If he didn't have the balls to fight back, he wasn't worth protecting.

Hebert moved almost soundlessly, long legs eating up distance as her head remained even. She walked like a predator, a creature on the hunt. Then, after her targets passed an alleyway, the girl began taking louder steps to draw their attention.

The pair turned around, seeing the white girl. Sophia wasn't close enough to hear what was being said, but could tell the tone: a combination of threatening and jeering. Hebert jerked her head toward the alleyway, muttered something brief. The men followed, one drawing a switchblade. *What the hell, Hebert?* Was Sophia going to have to save this girl? Well, that would normally be predicated on the girl defending herself, but would Sophia even want to intervene to save Hebert? Regardless, she wanted – in some way needed – to see what would happen, to get an explanation for why this girl felt wrong nowadays. As Shadow Stalker moved to get an overlook, she heard noises. Wet, slick, visceral. Ragged. Something was being cut, and not cleanly. Barely a gasp of fright from a masculine throat before it was drowned out by more noise.

Shadow Stalker looked down on the site of a double homicide. Both men had been split open by something, some massive weapon. She only knew because there was no way a knife could cleave a person open like that, and even a cleaver wouldn't leave such a long cut. And standing there, covered in blood splatter, was Hebert. She clutched something in her right hand, something relatively large but dull, not really glinting in the dim light. It was hard to tell what it was, especially when Shadow Stalker had other concerns. The girl raised her left arm toward her face and began to lick the blood off, cleaning herself like a cat.

Sophia Hess knew fear. She had stared down the barrels of guns, faced villains out for her blood, curled up in her bed hoping he wouldn't open her door that night. But this was something else. The same way that humans instinctively flinch when confronted with something that resembles a spider or snake, some ancient aspect flared up within her. The Ward threw herself back, away from the sight, collapsing onto all fours on the rooftop as her stomach convulsed. Nothing about what she'd seen should have provoked this kind of reaction, but that didn't stop her beating heart. It didn't keep her gorge from rising and she had to slip a hand beneath her mouth to silence her heaves and try to contain her vomit. Just seeing a girl lick blood from herself had no inherently frightening aspect that Sophia could tell, but everything down to her very soul screamed at her that she'd just seen the scariest thing in her life. It hurt, her head buzzed, her eyes lost focus. She was crying, trying to keep her sobs silent as tears spilled from her eyes. She fled the site, the rising moon lighting her way home.

The next day, Greg Veder noticed that Sophia Hess was keeping her distance from Taylor Hebert and favoring the black-haired girl with surreptitious, frightened glances.