

Tuesday arrived with little fanfare. It was getting more difficult for Sophia to justify her time with Greg to the rest of her clique, which grated on her to no end. Veder was an imbecile but he was also the only other person at the entirety of Winslow who had his eyes open. Sophia needed time with him to plan on how to deal with Hebert. At this point Sophia didn't know what to think about the girl always drowning in hoodies and sweatpants, and until she had more information she didn't want to risk taking action. Bloodmoon was exceedingly dangerous, willing to kill to a degree that Sophia hadn't seen since herself... And able to kill far more easily than Sophia ever had been. Even her first kill, that ambush, had left her battered and bruised—

She didn't want to think about that. Not his gargles as he choked on his own blood, or how her mother cried the next day. The two were linked in her mind and no amount of satisfaction and safety from the former could make her feel good about the latter.

If she couldn't justify spending time, then maybe she could make it look like aggression. As they entered the building, Sophia slunk to Greg, grabbed him by the shoulder, and slammed him into the lockers. Not enough to do real damage, but enough to make noise and draw a grunt of surprise and pain from him. "Just keeping up appearances, Veder," she growled under her breath. "If we want to go unnoticed, we have to play the part."

Greg's eyes widened and he actually managed to suppress the wide grin. "Now you're finally getting it," he replied, mirth still present in his voice. "So we had a productive evening," he began the debrief. "Taylor didn't talk much but her mind's still sharp as a tack and she knows her shit. She was lucid and with-it the whole time so I don't think insanity or wackiness from sleep deprivation can be blamed, at least not entirely."

Sophia grunted in affirmative. "Bodycam should arrive today so I'll get it to you after school and maybe you can visit her place later this week. I might be able to get ahold of a plantable spy cam from my own less savory sources, but without letting them in on this – which I won't do..." The genuineness of that statement in her own self-interest made it a good fake-out to pretend it was an assertion of loyalty, not that Sophia thought of it in such big words. "I can't guarantee I can get anything. Still, I'll see if I can swing by her place tonight and see what she does once all the lights are out." With another shove and a threatening statement of "Later, Veder," Sophia prowled deeper into the school.

(BREAK)

There was a scent in the air around Hebert. Sophia didn't really know how to articulate it, nor would she bring it up to anyone else. Her friends would just make a joke about the girl stinking, and Greg's mind would likely go somewhere dirty. Sophia hadn't noticed it before, only in the days since she saw Hebert kill those men. It wasn't a smell she had ever encountered before. Something instinctively said that it was a flower scent, but she couldn't place it and it definitely didn't smell floral. At the very least the scent was pretty strong and helped Sophia keep track of Hebert, since the girl made next to no sound when she moved. Without that assistance, it'd be like tracking a beanpole ninja.

...“Beanpole Ninja” sounded like the kind of movie Greg and Sparks would watch, and she hated that such a thought popped into her mind.

Hebert's overall behavior hadn't changed even after her massacres. She continued to trudge tiredly through the halls, reacting to surprise or intense stimuli with the sudden violent motion of a cornered animal. It reminded her of that Vin Diesel movie that had apparently been one of her real dad's favorite

popcorn flicks. ‘You ever look at lions in the zoo?’ Hebert reminded Sophia of one of these wild-captured lions, pacing and watching. But what she couldn’t decide was if Hebert was pacing to try to escape, or attempting to burn off her wild energy and settle down. The girl seemed desperate not to make waves despite her clear level of power. Was she hiding, waiting until the right moment to strike? Or was she really of two minds, like the Breaker of whom Vista spoke, and was trying to smother her violent side?

Sophia kept a comfortable distance from the black-haired girl, giving Hebert the requisite sneers when prompted but making no effort to harass the girl. She was sticking with her assertion to Emma that she was seeking new prey.

The only thing that Hebert had done less in recent days was to hide. One could argue that the way she moved all but soundlessly from one place to the next and slid like liquid through the crowds was a form of hiding in itself, but she no longer went to the third-floor bathrooms to eat lunch. Her overall sedate lack of reaction to harassment, not looking beaten down so much as just tired and bored, had led a number of Emma’s clique to give it a rest with the bullying. It’s not really fun when you can’t even make your victim flinch, after all.

So it should have occurred to Sophia that Emma would try something else big, to provoke a reaction from Taylor. And when she saw Emma’s particular smile, the ‘knife goes in, guts come out’ type of smile, Sophia knew that something bad was going to happen. She did her best to pick up the pace and close the distance to stand beside Emma. If she was going to save her friend, she’d have to be there to intervene.

The whole posse was there, forming a sort of dam in the traffic and blocking Hebert’s path. Emma, Madison, Julia and Sierra made a wedge, and Sophia slid easily into place. “What’s up, girls?” she asked as casually as she could manage. Whatever nervousness was in her voice was probably mistaken for anticipation.

“Oh, we were just having a chat with Taylor here,” Sierra replied flippantly.

“I’ve been worried about you, Tay,” Emma cooed. “You’ve been looking so sad and lost. You’re not crying yourself to sleep again, are you? Last time you did that it was for a whole week, and I worry a crybaby like you might be worse this time.”

Hebert’s eyes widened. Her jaw went somewhat slack. Her lip trembled. Sophia, when she’d grilled Emma more thoroughly about Hebert, had heard of how Taylor had cried herself to sleep for days on end in Emma’s room when her dad was even more useless than he was now. That was quite a low blow to strike, and Sophia heard the softest intake of breath from the tall girl, a shaky inhalation to precede a sob.

Then Hebert’s pupils *pinched*. The top and bottom squashed inward, leaving her pupils shaped more like an octopus’. Her quivering lip pulled to reveal sharpening teeth, transforming into what looked like jagged fangs before Sophia’s eyes.

Panic shot down the athlete’s spine. Time slowed down, adrenaline surging through her veins. She only had a literal split-second to take action, and she had to defuse the situation: trying to fight Hebert would only get them all killed, she was sure of it.

*I hope you can forgive me, Emma.*

Sophia turned and delivered a sharp right cross to her friend's cheek, sending Emma sprawling to the floor. Hebert startled, her face going back to its normal gawkiness as she tried to process what she'd just seen. "Damn it, Emma," she snapped. "There are some lines you don't fucking cross." She turned slightly, one eye on Hebert. "My dad's dead," she said to every onlooker. "I'm not gonna stand around and let anybody use that against a person. Some lines..." she repeated, trailing off.

Emma stared up at Sophia, tears spilling from her eyes as she rubbed her reddening cheek. That would probably bruise. The rest of the girls were giving the pair space, afraid of Sophia's wrath as much as Emma's retaliation. Sophia stooped down and took Emma by the arm, pulling her up as gently as she could. "C'mon," she said with genuine affection, "let's get some ice on that."

(BREAK)

Upon meeting Greg for the hand-off of the camera, he updated her that Taylor had been in a haze for most of the day. Well, Sophia's actions had left an impact at least. And now came the true test of her skills. Since she wasn't scheduled for patrol that night, Shadow Stalker put on the costume she kept at home and stole out into the darkness to spy on Hebert.

Sophia never would have considered finding the girl at home before. Hebert was entertainment, a distraction and a free punching bag. It didn't matter what she was like at home. Now that she had to understand, Sophia took note that the girl's neighborhood was almost as bad as her own, the result of plummeting property values from nearby gang activity. The homes were all well-made, brick edifices with wooden porches and patios, probably built in the 50s when suburbia was first becoming a real thing. Most were run-down. Hebert's place was too, but not to the point that it was falling apart: the neglect was obvious, however.

Hopping from rooftop to rooftop, circling the house, Sophia looked for a light on or any sign of activity. It was around 10:30, well into night, yet one window on the upper story still showed light. Unfortunately it turned out to be her dad's room and Mr. Hebert was lying in bed reading a book. Sophia finally got a good angle on what looked like motion in a dark room, and brought out her monocular. It wasn't anywhere near as good as PRT equipment, but it was easy to carry and she didn't risk any electricity interfering with her powers.

A wraith stalked around in the pitch dark, pacing almost violently. Sophia could see bits of movement, the girl jerking her limbs or perhaps shaking her head and setting her long hair in motion. Then the pacing girl froze. For a moment Sophia thought she'd been made and began to very slowly lower herself behind the lip of the rooftop, then her brain caught up to her eyes and she noticed that the light radiating out from Mr. Hebert's room had apparently gone out.

Something happened then, some kind of soft light and mist. Sophia's eyes crossed and her skull pulsed, and she found herself again dry-heaving. She fought through whatever sort of attack her body was having and managed to keep blurry vision on the window. After a few minutes, as Sophia's sight returned to normal, the window opened. A gloved hand gripped the sill, and Bloodmoon leapt out onto the grass.

The killer cape knelt beside the tree next to her house, hovering her hand in empty air. More mist set Shadow Stalker's world off-kilter, and she caught a glimpse of soft violet light coming from something

that didn't exist. Then Hebert's body swirled in on itself and dissolved into mist, disappearing. The remaining low-set fog dissipated, leaving no evidence other than an open window that Bloodmoon had ever been there.

Leaping through the air and turning to shadow, the vigilante defied gravity's pull and drifted through Hebert's window. This was supposed to be Greg's job but she was not going to turn down a golden opportunity. The first places to check were the closet and under the bed, but neither held a cache of Victorian Tinkertech and the closet didn't have the look of a place that had just been plundered. There was no sudden absence of mass from the retrieval of a costume. No crawl space either, so where had Hebert gotten her outfit in that short time?

On the top shelf of the closet was a collection of moleskin journals. Sophia plucked the topmost one from its position – taking a moment to memorize how it had sat so she could put it back with Hebert none the wiser – and clicked on Hebert's table lamp before opening the journal. It contained documentation of every abuse that she, Emma and the school in general had performed against Hebert, documented in such painstaking detail it made Sparky's spreadsheets and Greg's conspiracy board look like finger paintings. Every punch, kick, shove and mean word spoken in November and early December was written down. This seemed to be the most recent journal at least by stack, so where was the January edition? February and March? Had she stopped documenting things when she started to get tired? Maybe when she got her powers?

It didn't make sense. Shadow Stalker put the journal back as close to exactly how she found it. Maybe the newest copy was in Hebert's nightstand. No lock on it, not that it would have mattered... She retrieved another journal, this one cracked and burned. She couldn't help but wonder why. Had Hebert set it on fire? Recycled a junk journal rather than buy a new one? Most of the journal was empty, so Sophia flipped back to the most recent entry.

*The lumenflowers were bad enough, but I can just pluck them. I've started to find lumenwood growths at the warehouse, and I swear I can hear the baby crying. The Brain wasn't lying, not that I ever thought it could: things are leaking over. It was bad enough when the Dream was seeping through, but the Nightmare is as well. I can't let it. I can't sleep anymore. I won't let this evil infest my home. Dad, if you read this after I'm gone, I'm so sorry.*

Almost compulsively, Sophia closed the journal and opened it to the first page.

*After enough prodding from both Doll and Arianna, I'm writing my experiences down. Arianna's listened to enough hunters to know her stuff, and I suppose Doll has the same experience from another angle. I can't really talk to anyone there, they don't have the context to understand. Arianna, Adella, Siobhan... They have enough on their plate already. Desmond would have no clue. Gehrman, I don't dare make him sadder than he is. And Doll knows nothing firsthand outside the Dream. If I'm to vent, as I'm apparently already doing, it'll need to be to a damn book.*

The entry went on for much longer but Sophia heard a creak and panic set in. If she was caught by Hebert's dad it would be bad enough. But if Bloodmoon had teleported back home... She set the book back in its drawer, closed it as quietly as she could, and shadowed out the window.