

It should go without saying that Sophia didn't sleep well. She would awaken bolt-upright from nightmares of many-eyed monsters hungering for her blood, teeth and tongues and writhing limbs probing into her veins. She was so sleep-deprived that she didn't bother with her morning exercises, just staggering like a zombie (*Like Hebert*, her brain commented, causing her to at least straighten up and attempt to be awake) onto the bus.

The ride to school was noisier than usual, and not just because lack of sleep was making her sensitive to noise. Conversations were flying fast and furious, and nearly all of them focused on the same thing: "Did you see?" "Holy shit, who's this guy think he is?" "It was horrific!" "It was awesome!" "About goddamn time."

When Sophia demanded information, it was fucking Sparky of all people who answered her. Well, of course the oblivious twit would talk: somehow he hadn't figured out he was a loser no matter how many times she punched him. "Ho-ho-ho-lee shit, Soph—" the nickname made her eye twitch— "How have you not seen it? Somebody posted it to LiveLeak at like 4 AM!" He waited for her to ask what, and instead she just stared him down, growing steadily more pissed. "Somebody tore the hell out of an ABB warehouse. Just mowed through everybody in there – at least a dozen guys! Hell, I'll show you the vid later if you want. I posted it to another server cause I figured the LiveLeak one could get taken down."

"It happened here?" she asked. "Last night? Who did it?" A yawning pit in her stomach told her she already knew.

Sparky shrugged, sandy curls bouncing atop his head. "New cape. Dressed all old-timey. It's cell phone vid so not the best quality and all shaky, but it definitely wasn't anybody we know."

*Oh god.* Hebert had, what, whet her thirst with those two in the alley? Decided she liked Chinese and went out for more? She'd get questioned since Hebert goes to her school and Armsmaster would have that lie detector of his and they'd pack her up and send her to—

The bus jerked to a stop and her downward spiral paused. Hebert staggered onto the bus, looking as dead to the world as she had yesterday. The tall, pale girl trudged to an open seat and sat, staring off into nothing.

What. The. Fuck.

Hebert had killed two people last night. Sophia was positive that she'd killed more, at least a dozen according to Sparky. She'd snapped! So why was she back at school looking as beaten-down and lost as she had for the past month? It'd been nearly two months since they packed her into her locker, one since she started coming to school looking so messed-up, and still the lost lamb had done nothing in retaliation. None of this made any sense! Sophia gripped the bottom cushion until her knuckles turned pale and the cheap material began to fray. Despite the fact that he was looking right at her, Sparky didn't register any of the distress on Sophia's face and only continued talking. She looked back at him. "Y-yeah," she replied through suddenly dry lips. "If you can pull it up, maybe you can show me that vid during lunch."

She had to understand just what she was dealing with.

(BREAK)

In the interim, Sophia kept a wary eye on Hebert and remained what she hoped was out of lunging distance. She spent classes even more sullen and quiet than usual, wracking her brain for ideas. Something that workaholic little pest Vista brought up one time registered in her mind. In yet another attempt to impress the Protectorate and seem more grown-up, the girl had done extra research about various anomalous capes and was happily yammering about it to anyone stupid enough not to get gone. That had unfortunately included Sophia at one point, and she'd been forced to listen to the little blonde prattle on about a Breaker who suffered from dissociative identity disorder and transformed only when his other personality was dominant.

Was that the play here? Was Hebert crazy and flip-flopping between doormat and axe killer?

“You see it too, don't you?” A voice spoke, breath hot on her ear.

It took every bit of composure not to scream like a little girl, and it was that forced composure that kept her from whirling and striking the speaker. Instead she stiffened and then jerked around, looking up slightly at Sparky's other half, Greg fucking Veder. Unlike Sparky, whom she was pretty certain had some sort of mental disorder, Greg fully understood that Sophia hated him and would hurt him if she got the chance, so he stayed well away. That being the case, what was happening now!?

“Don't sneak up on me like that, you cunt!” she hissed as venomously as she could. “See what? Talk sense before I tear off your fucking balls!”

Greg looked past her, lowering his own voice to an almost inaudible level. “Taylor,” he replied. “Nobody else seems to see it. Nobody but you and me. Something's wrong.”

A lifeboat to a drowning woman. If Veder saw it too, perhaps he could be her angle to help report Hebert while keeping her own skin safe and attached firmly to her body. How much should she disclose already? “Y-yeah, something's really wrong. She doesn't feel right. Feels...dangerous. Like a school shooter.”

“I don't think so,” he said with surprising calm, eyes still looking past her to watch Taylor. “This isn't something so normal as that. I'm not sure what it is, which is why I haven't gone with a protocol.”

And now he lost her. “...What?”

“Well, if it's an alien takeover and you enact zombie-apocalypse protocol, you're all clustered together and it can infiltrate all the better. Make you trust it, then *bam*, you're hooked up to a juicer for your water,” he stated with as matter-of-fact a tone as a mechanic discussing common automotive issues. “And if you go with alien-infiltration protocol when it's a zombie apocalypse, then everybody's spread out and easy pickings for the zombies. Because why would you believe a possible pod person when they claim zombies are eating the neighbors? C'mon, Hess, keep up. This is basic stuff.”

She punched him.

(BREAK)

It was easy enough to break off from the clique. She told Emma that Greg of all people might have info relevant to an investigation, so she was pumping him for info in plainclothes. Her number-one fan ate it

up and was easily able to cover for her while Sophia chowed down on a granola bar and followed Greg and Sparks into the computer lab. The wet blanket that was Mrs. Knott was happy to let “two good boys” like them borrow a computer for the period, though she pointedly didn’t mention Sophia. Well, Knott did always seem to like Hebert.

Sophia hadn’t explained exactly why she wanted to see this video other than simple curiosity, but Greg was practically glued to her at this point and she had a sneaking suspicion that *he* had a sneaking suspicion that the video somehow had something to do with Hebert.

The curly-haired boy’s fingers danced across the keyboard, logging himself in as wspark and then pulling up the video. He kept the volume muted but whispered the opening description as the shaking camera moved in toward a window. “So he’s saying he heard gunfire and screaming so is going to spy. Fuckin’ moron but thank God, this footage is gold.”

Through the smoke-stained window, a scene of absolute carnage unfolded. Several corpses already lay mutilated, hacked apart and one with the head blown open by a large-caliber round. The cape moved between the remaining gangsters, flowing with supernatural speed and agility. Tall and lithe, clad in a long and ragged gray coat and Victorian-style clothing that included a fucking suit-vest, a little triangular hat, and goggles; the cape wielded an old-fashioned (Revolutionary War-level old fashioned) pistol in her left hand and a freaky glaive in her right. And between the long black ringlets trailing behind the cape and Sophia’s mind connecting the wicked weapon to the dull metal she’d seen the previous night, there was no doubt that the cape was female: she was certain it was Hebert.

The camera jerked, trying to follow the fight. Rolling and weird shuffle-steps carried the cape multiple body-lengths across the blood-splattered concrete floor and she swung her weapon up, lopping off a shooter’s arm before simply letting the heavy weapon drop and embed the saw teeth on the backside of the blade into his neck. She leaned into the blood spray, letting it spatter her face. Sophia could just imagine a satisfied smile spreading across Hebert’s wide mouth. She took gunfire, not much as she was literally dodging bullets, but the shots that did hit the cape did little to nothing. At one point something flickered and Sophia hated the low resolution of the video because she was pretty certain that was a bullet falling out of Hebert’s arm. Once everyone in the warehouse was dead, the cape calmly looked around to make sure nobody was moving, and then exited as if it was just a day at the office – as if being literally slathered in blood was something completely normal. The cameraman, finally having a modicum of sense, took off running in the other direction.

*Mary, mother of God...* Sophia felt sick, and not just from fear. From envy. She’d managed to cripple more than a dozen thugs and killed five before the Protectorate finally caught up to her and put her on a leash. Even then, it felt like she had never really done enough. In just one night Hebert had depopulated an entire warehouse. The ABB would change their entire operations as a result. Hebert did more to frighten the gangs in a single night than Sophia had her entire career. It was galling. It was frightening. It was humbling. It was...it was kind of hot, and she didn’t enjoy learning that about herself.

The boys bid Mrs. Knott goodbye and Sophia gave a halfhearted wave, sinking back to speak with Greg. “Can Sparks keep a secret?”

“Only secret he’s ever been able to keep is his first name. Not telling you what it is, by the way,” he responded.

“Right, then we need to ditch him. You’re the only one who’s noticed, so you’re the only one—” The words stuck in her craw, even when she was trying to bullshit. “...The only one I can trust with this.”

“Catch up with you later, Sparky,” Greg called. His friend waved and kept going. It was that easy. They went up to the third floor, loitering near the western bathrooms. Nobody came over there anymore. “Alright, what do you know? Because it seems you know more than me. Well, not about how to save your ass in an apocalypse, but still.”

She held up a threatening fist again, then decided to let it go for now. She needed to use him, and that would get harder the more she slugged him. “I followed Hebert last night. She was acting suspicious, more than usual. She went downtown, hit up an ABB convenience store. Bought a fuckload of energy drinks – the kind that warn you not to drink more than two in a day. Downed them all. I waited for hours for her to do something, because you know the moment you get bored and give up is when something happens.” Establish a reason for her to have been there so long, rather than letting his imagination play havoc with why she’d be so good at a stakeout. “Then two ABB fucks go collect their protection money. They rough up the clerk, have a good time. She follows them. Bitch is silent. She gets loud and lures them into an alley.”

Sophia paused for dramatic effect. “I heard screams, and hacking noises like you hear at a butcher shop. When I peeked into the alley, both of the guys were dead, split open. I couldn’t see clearly what weapon Hebert was holding, but she was licking the blood off herself. And now, seeing that video, I’m pretty certain that was the same weapon, and Hebert was that cape.”

“Jesus,” Greg said, eyes wide. Good, she had him. “We have to help her,” he stated with a resolute tone.

“F-fucking what?”

“I’ve heard that powers can do things to you. Like Burnscar, she goes crazier around fire. Or Narwhal, who turned into some weird exhibitionist.” The first was true and on record. The second...the fuck, Greg? “Taylor’s not like that. She’s not a violent person. Hell, she takes everything you give her even though now we know she could kill all of you without blinking.” It shoved a white-hot poker into Sophia’s pride that she couldn’t refute his assertion. Even with her powers, she probably couldn’t take a regenerator that brutal.

“Whatever’s happening to her,” Greg declared, “it’s hurting her. That’s why she always looks so tired. We need to figure out what’s doing it, and how we can help. Because Taylor doesn’t deserve this.” He looked her up and down, critically. “And for your angle, you don’t want a psycho killer cape to get bored playing with gangs and eventually come for you and your posse, do you?”

*Fuck it. I need info. If I need to play Little Miss Kumbayah for the moment...* “No, I suppose I don’t. Okay, Greg, it’s your show.”