

Danger hung in the air like static electricity. Despite the Merchants having been easily the lowest rung as far as Brockton gangs were concerned, they were still arguably a major power if for nothing else than their control over the lowest echelons of nearly every category of crime. Their leadership's destruction had decapitated the gang and it was only a matter of time before things descended into outright warfare as the other two gangs carved up the Merchants' territory and – more importantly – their criminal enterprises.

It was likely disbelief in the sudden disruption of the status quo that had kept things quiet for so long. The reality that a cape-killer had exterminated the leadership of a gang wasn't something easy to accept. But it had been two days of inactivity and Sophia could taste the violence in the air. She found herself as twitchy as Hebert, half-lunging at any provocation as she anticipated the call for all hands in a gang war.

Greg had noticed but had managed to retain his laser-focus on the Taylor issue. She had begun updating the paper on File Cabinet and Greg reported to Sophia that Taylor hadn't lost her eloquence: the paper was coming along well, with the boys' research and Taylor's talent for words. He still hadn't been invited over to her place, but with her history that wasn't too much of a surprise for all that it was disappointing. Likewise, since Bloodmoon hadn't been since active, Sophia hadn't had the chance to sneak into Hebert's room again with actual preparation and photograph that burned journal.

The two situations – the Taylor investigation and the brewing gang war – would come to a head one overcast Thursday, in a manner that no-one could have predicted.

(BREAK)

The third floor of Winslow wasn't used for terribly much. According to stories – because nobody had either time or inclination to fraternize with the teachers – the third floor had originally been intended as a major development for Winslow's academic advancement: an entire computer-science wing and a new chemistry lab would have been its crown jewels. Instead, most of the rooms lay empty and a scant handful of classrooms held sessions. However, most of these classrooms were disused a majority of days, and even the lockers were a ghost town.

It was here that Nicole Suarez was confronted by a bulky oriental senior, Jun or something. Nicole was a burnout who had managed to turn her weakness into an advantage: she got addicted to methamphetamine shortly after starting high school but leveraged her unobtrusive nature to become a schoolyard dealer for the Merchants. In exchange for a sample of the product, she sold to other students – sometimes even other gang youth – and on occasion pocketed a tiny bit of the profits. Nicole was small and slight, very cute, and mostly well-liked among the delinquents.

Jun pressed his forearm against her collarbone, pinning her against the lockers, smirking down at her. Nicole tried to muster indignation through her fear. "I already told you, I don't have anything. The bosses aren't distributing, which means I don't have anything to sling."

"Oh, I figured," Jun replied, his lips curling further into something decidedly unpleasant. "Y'see, our own bosses—" Nicole's eyes darted to the green bandana tied around his arm, "had a standing policy: try to keep the inter-gang violence to a minimum so some little schoolyard fight doesn't escalate into gang's stepping just because some schoolkids got pissy. But you see, you don't *have* a gang anymore. So you're up for grabs."

Her eyes widened in horrified realization.

“You’re not Asian, so you don’t really count for the gang proper. But I could always use a pet dealer. And if you can’t *get* anything to sling, well, we can find something else for you to do in exchange for keeping you safe,” Jun practically purred.

“No,” Nicole whispered. “No, please...”

Jun rolled his eyes. “Y’see, this isn’t a yes-or-no question. It’s an either-or. As in, either you work for me, doing what I want...” A switchblade clicked open. “...Or you spread for this.”

The tiny hispanic girl looked like she was going to throw up then and there. All color had drained from her face, cold sweat beading across her skin. Her fear was so overpowering that it could practically be smelled. She began to cry, big droplets spilling from her dark eyes. The only thing she could think to do was to stall in the desperate hope that this would be interrupted, as Jun steadily dragged the blade down her body, rasping it against her clothes toward the junction of her legs.

“What the hell’s going on here!?” Salvation came in the form of the most unlikely rescuer Nicole could imagine. Greg Veder, the school’s resident weirdo, was trying his best to stand with shoulders squared and radiating masculine energy. His success was questionable at best.

Jun pressed his elbow against Nicole’s sternum so he could brandish his knife toward Greg. “What, skinny, you wanna be next?”

Greg did his best not to swallow hard. “One chance,” he said, trying to channel Taylor at her scariest. “Let her go.”

Jun turned more to square off against the newcomer. The pressure from his elbow let up just a bit. It was likely the only chance she’d get: with a scream, Nicole shoved her entire weight and strength against Jun and then pushed off from him to run past Greg. Jun caught up before the little girl could make it and caught her by her shirt, causing them to fall to the ground in a tangle of limbs and swearing. Greg intervened, grabbing Jun’s jacket, but he slipped out of it: attacker and victim fell into the stairwell, rolling over each other down two half-flights to plop before the second-floor access door.

Jun hit the ground back-first, the wind leaving his lungs. It journey was aided by Nicole landing on his chest. The girl scrambled to her feet, still whimpering a litany of “No, no, no,” and continued her journey down the stairs in pursuit of freedom. Meanwhile Greg pounded down the stairs, unsure of exactly what he could do, but he knew he had to do something. He tried to pounce but Jun moved just before Greg landed, leading the skinny boy to collapse onto the landing as Jun resumed chase.

Stunned, with his ears ringing, Greg tried to force himself upright. It was slow going: he’d hit the landing hard and both his arms felt like broken porcelain. He heard the heavy first-floor door open, however, so did the only thing he could think of – taking in the deepest breath he could, the boy bellowed in the hope that his voice would echo out through the open door. “RAPIST!”

At this point, Jun wasn’t really thinking. If he was, he’d have cut his losses and vanished into the crowd with the anonymity of being just another troublemaking junior ABB member. But his brain was jostled by the fall and his pride was hurting twofold. His lizard brain was focused on the twofold goal of pushing and silencing the girl who refused to know her place. And so, as he gained ground on Nicole,

his tunnel-vision stopped him from noticing the tall and slender girl, shoulders too broad and hips too narrow, looking at him with hard hazel-green eyes.

Until a strong hand seized his throat like a vise and stopped him in his tracks. Taylor had heard Greg's shout, seen the tallish Chinese boy chasing the girl with single-minded ferocity, and understood.

"B-back off," Jun choked out, jabbing the switchblade directly at Taylor's face. She casually leaned out of the way of the strike, her grip only intensifying on his throat. His next stab aimed at her arm, to force her to release him.

Taylor released him through a nearby window, hurling his body out onto the Winslow campus.

Sophia Hess' ears weren't quite as discerning at the hunter's, and she hadn't recognized Greg as the one who shouted. Attacks in Winslow were common, and entirely not her problem. Why should she stick her neck out? Then she heard the shattering glass and decided it was worth at least investigating.

The murmuring already didn't bode well for the situation deescalating. "I think that's Jun," and other variations were heard from ABB devotees, while Empire kids could be overheard saying things like, "Slant's attacking a white girl!" This had not been the way Sophia had expected or hoped that the brewing tension would come to a head. The pit of her stomach went into freefall when she caught sight of just *which* white girl was being 'attacked'. Clad in her typical loose jeans and oversized hoodie, Taylor Hebert stepped outside through the broken window, radiating danger.

"Shit," Sophia heard herself whisper. As if things weren't bad enough, of course Hebert would be at the center. More ABB youth began to pile out to support their comrade, squaring off to posture against a thoroughly unimpressed Hebert. And then, of course, the Empire came crashing into their ranks to support one of their race.

The guy thrown through the window was down for the count, but one of the green-wearing students decided to act in solidarity and drew a thick survival knife, beginning to swipe at Hebert. She wove past his jabs and wide strikes with almost comical ease, feet sliding across the dirt as if she was on roller skates. Then she caught his arm. And, with the slightest twist, his arm crackled like styrofoam as his radius and ulna snapped inward.

*Oh no.* If Hebert destroyed these kids, the Protectorate would almost certainly investigate. Hebert would be studied, Sophia's activities would be outed, and Bloodmoon would probably make a beeline for her. But there was no way to defuse the situation, no way to pluck Hebert from out of that chaos and pack her away somewhere.

And so there was only one thing to do.

As still more people filtered out of the school, most sported armbands of red-and-black or green, but a noticeable minority didn't seem to have any allegiance and were just joining in for violence's sake as the schoolyard brawl was rapidly transforming into a riot. Hebert snapped another arm, smirking like a cat playing with its food. And then her next target was floored as Sophia crashed into him with a leaping drop-kick.

Sophia hit the ground like her instructors taught her, small of her back taking the impact and hands slapping the floor to help her spring back to her feet. She immediately ducked and slid out from an

incoming blow before her attacker was body-checked by a blond-haired brute of a young man. “Stay out of this, sheboon,” he snarled at her. “This is the Empire’s fight.”

“She doesn’t belong to you,” Sophia replied, kicking him in the back of the leg to cause him to lose balance and subsequently get laid out by a twitchy ABB member. In immediate hindsight, this was also a terrible idea, as now Sophia was targeted by both sides of the riot. She duck and wove, unable to get in a blow with her focus on defense, and instead opted to pursue Hebert. Someone seized her by the wrist and Sophia managed to twist free, skipping backward away from her attacker. Hebert was currently occupied with crippling yet another colors-wearing ganger and, while not startled, was certainly at least a bit surprised when Sophia bumped against her back. The taller girl looked over her shoulder, one thin black eyebrow arching elegantly in a silent yet still frustratingly imperious question.

“Shut up and fight, Hebert,” Sophia spat before adopting a wing chun stance. Now that there was a little more room rather than the crush of bodies, she could put her mobility to work. Against her back, she felt Hebert shrug and the girl turned back toward the encroaching crowd, strong and solid like a tower. Sophia leapt toward an Empire kid, which seemed to be enough of an explanation for Hebert. The tall girl was still untouched, weaving formlessly around fists with contemptuous ease before lashing out at nearly invisible speeds to shatter limbs with quick and violent motion.

Speed, quick-striking counterattacks... Sophia had to utilize momentum and leverage to deal any real damage to opponents. She might be vicious and muscular, but she was still only a fifteen-year-old girl. Her physical strength wasn’t exactly overwhelming. It was yet another thing that stung her as, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hebert almost casually toppling bulky jocks.

The riot was fully out of control at this point, and Sophia and Hebert were only one part of it. Hebert almost casually flowed through the fight and Sophia did her best to stay near the taller girl, taking the occasional blow that would leave ugly bruises on her dark skin as she wasn’t always fast enough. Not like Hebert, who was still untouched other than the occasional blow she opted to block.

Those who weren’t actively fighting had gathered into a semicircle, cell phones at the ready to record the mayhem. In particular, Greg Veder watched with knuckles white. For all of her strength, he feared for Taylor in some primal manner. The moment he’d realized she was taking part in the fight (and, honestly, why wouldn’t she?), he ran to his locker. Greg wasn’t particularly strong, or fit, and he didn’t know how to fight. What he did know, however, was just how heavy and sturdy his biology textbook was. And now he stood at the ready, in case Taylor needed him.

There! As Taylor practically danced around a knife-wielding attacker’s strikes, an Empire guy came up behind her with a heavy rock. Greg moved almost before he knew what he was doing. Without so much as a war cry, just a shout as he heaved the textbook, Greg brought it down on the bigger boy’s head. The book’s spine broke a bit from the impact but his target didn’t drop like a sack of potatoes as TV had led him to believe. So he struck again and again. By the time his unwilling opponent was laid-out on the ground, Greg was sweaty and exhausted with a handful of paper, the rest of the book having come unbound and lying around them.

Sophia noted this as she fought, such an oddity: weaklings didn’t fight back most of the time, but sometimes they did. However, she hadn’t heard of a weakling like Greg charging into a fight not even to protect himself. And now he was reaping the consequences of his actions, as another Empire boy had him by the collar and blackened his eye.

Then Greg's eyes widened and he did his best to go boneless as a flying body impacted his attacker. Hebert had thrown her latest opponent! Veder scrambled back into the crowd of observers, obviously unsuited for this fight.

At this point, Sophia and Taylor had been fighting alongside one another for long enough that the shorter girl was adapting to how Taylor fought, and the taller girl was taking Sophia into account. As Taylor wrenched yet another arm out of its socket, she leaned forward to allow Sophia a flying kick – sliding over Taylor's sturdy back – to bloody the nose of a big ABB brute.

As Taylor straightened up, someone finally managed to catch her. A huge Empire senior – probably close to 6'6" – grabbed the hem of Taylor's jacket and yanked it up. It was a dirty trick to blind and trap the opponent with their own clothing. He went to bring down an elbow on Taylor's spine, and the girl simply juke backward, ripping herself free of her jacket.

Eyes widened at the dark-haired girl's appearance. In just a tank top, Taylor's body had no extraneous meat on it. However, unlike with an anorexic, her body was so bereft of fat because the girl was preternaturally, disturbingly lean. Tightly corded muscle flowed along her arms like the most wiry of street fighters, undulating beneath her pale skin with the slightest movements.

Sophia watched as Taylor grabbed her hoodie and yanked it from her opponent's hands. He let go but the initial tug caused his arms to rise a little. Taylor caught him by the wrist and pulled, swinging him across in front of her. Then, with a forceful jerk, she arrested his momentum and his shoulder came out of its socket with a sickening crack-pop.

It seemed that the sight of one of the school pariahs as a sudden white female Bruce Lee took what fight remained from the crowd. It was little more than cleanup now, most of the remaining rioters dispersing.

The entire incident lasted barely more than ten minutes. More than thirty boys and girls from different grades and gangs lay beaten on the dirt. And finally the sirens were audible.

(BREAK)

Sophia didn't know if the BBPD people bought her story. She'd wrangled Greg to back her up, telling a tale of a bullied girl who'd had enough and how neither of them could stand idly by while Taylor faced the school's entire gang population by herself. Hopefully, by her presence, people would look at her and not Taylor: once her name was mentioned, the PRT would intervene and the investigators would begin to presume that Sophia was the one who'd had the most impact – after all, between a cape and an ordinary person, you'd naturally expect the cape to do more damage.

And now, as Taylor waited for her father to come pick her up, Greg sitting beside her as a sort of awkward moral support... Sophia approached with three root beer bottles in hand. "Veder, Taylor," she offered each one a bottle.

Taylor looked down at the bottle and back up to Sophia, her dubious expression saying enough.

"You kicked ass out there. Took those fuckers apart. I figure that deserves something, so..." she hefted her own bottle. "My treat." Sophia sat down and braced the metal cap against a bit of brickwork,

slapping the top to pop the cap off the bottle. “You did good yourself, Veder, for not knowing how to fight. You didn’t hesitate. So, you get a soda too.”

Greg imitated Sophia, trying to pop the cap, while Taylor simply flicked her thumbnail under the cap and popped it off in a single smooth motion. Then she held her hand out for Greg’s bottle and its mangled cap, doing the same for him.

None of them said anything further.