

Taylor vanished into the distance, leaving Sophia and Greg to carry Emma to the school nurse. What could they do but share the story Taylor had given them? Emma had a psychotic break, and they brought her to the nurse.

Far too nervous to focus on class, Sophia asked Nurse Marshall to stay and watch over her friend. She vouched for Greg as well, and so the two sat in silence near the cot where Emma rested. What could they say? Even if they weren't in public, could either of them really find some way to express what they'd just experienced?

After about an hour, Emma stirred with a squeak. Sophia was at her side immediately while Greg rushed to get the nurse. As he was outside, getting the squat blonde's attention, Greg missed the initial exchange.

"Emma," Sophia gasped. "Are you alright?"

The redhead jerked back from Sophia's face being right in hers. "I...I'm not sure. My head's killing me. Where am I?"

"You're in the nurse's office. God," Sophia slumped, "you had me so worried."

"...Why?"

That had Sophia look up at her friend. "What do you mean, why?"

"Well, not that I'm not thankful for your concern, but...do we even know each other? I don't think I've ever seen you before."

Nurse Marshall and Greg returned to find Emma awake and looking confused, her right eye sharply bloodshot. Beside her, Sophia's eyes were wide with worry and her jaw slack in shock.

"Sit down, Miss Hess. I don't need two patients today: I'll check you over after I'm done with Miss Barnes." The nurse, gruff but professional, began looking Emma over. While she took the redhead's pulse with one hand, she checked Emma's eyes with a light. "Alright, miss, can you tell me your name?"

"E-Emma Barnes."

"How old are you?"

"Twelve, almost thirteen."

Sophia started and Greg took a seat beside her, his own face set in shock now.

Nurse Marshall soldiered on. "And the date?"

Emma worried her bottom lip. "I'm not sure of the date, but it's 2008, I think."

"And you're at school. Can you tell me its name?"

Emma nodded, then winced at the swimming sensation in her head. “If I’m in school, it’s Simon Brock Middle School.”

Nurse Marshall bit her own lip. “Alright, you seem stable. I’ll call your parents. Miss Hess,” she looked pointedly at the Ward, “can I trust you to be tactful in how you address this?”

Sophia nodded almost absently, drowning in confusion and terror there on the uncomfortable infirmary seat.

Once the nurse was gone, Emma spoke softly. “Look, I’m good enough at reading a room to know something’s wrong. What am I not getting?”

The boy with the sandy-brown hair replied. “S-since Sophia seems a bit glitched, I guess I’ll take it? I’m bad at being subtle, so sorry in advance. Oh,” he offered a half-hearted wave. “Hi, I’m Greg. Veder, if it matters. So, uh, you had some sort of brain injury. You’re at Winslow High School. It’s, ah, 2011. And Sophia here is one of your closest friends.”

Emma’s eyes snapped to him at mention of friends. “I-I got hurt? Where’s Taylor? Is she okay?”

The genuine concern, care and love in Emma’s voice made Sophia’s heart feel like it was going to rupture. “She’s not hurt,” she managed to say.

Emma narrowed her eyes. “That’s a weird way to phrase it.”

“You and Taylor...sorta drifted apart,” Sophia replied, trying to find a way to couch things as painlessly as possible.

“Bull! She’s my best friend, my little sister!”

Greg piped up, “Isn’t she two months older than you?”

Imitating Taylor, Emma flicked her hand and dismissively snipped, “Semantics!”

Sophia swallowed hard. “I’ll...I’ll see if I can find her. She’ll probably want to know that...that you’re alright.”

She stepped outside, swallowing back tears. She’d lost her best friend, her only friend until Greg (*But what about Ellie?* Her subconscious asked), and she wouldn’t even call him that close of a friend (*Liar*). But the way Emma behaved, already Sophia could see the difference. She’d never seen it, because how could she have seen a difference when she’d never seen the original? There was a constant pain to Emma, a way in which fundamentally she was always on-guard, and that translated in her to always being on the attack. But here, now, even when confused and afraid there was a lightness to Emma – an innocence.

Wiping her eyes, she bumped into a brick wall. Covered in skin. And clothes. She looked up to see Taylor staring down at her. She took a deep breath. “Emma’s awake. She...she wants you.”

For the first time in a long time, Sophia saw that facade crack. Taylor looked vulnerable, nervous, afraid for what might happen. She pushed, nearly choking on her words. “She needs her friend. Her best friend.”

Taylor’s eyes flicked toward the infirmary, then back to Sophia. She swallowed. “You’ve learned a lot,” she said softly, sidling past Sophia and into the nurse’s office.

As Taylor entered, dressed in her typical loose hoodie and baggy jeans, Emma looked up. “T-Taylor?” She shuddered, unable to deny now that she was a girl out of time. There was no mistaking her friend, even with three years of changes. “You...you grew up. Look at you, you’re huge. And gorgeous!”

Taylor blushed softly. “Thanks, Emma. You look good too.” She was still tense, nervous.

“Where are your glasses, though? Trying out contacts now? I thought you wanted to emulate Auntie Annette.”

Sensing what was to come, Sophia grabbed Greg’s shoulder. “We should give them space,” she whispered.

Taylor slumped, staggering to sit on the bed beside Emma. “Ems... Mom, she...”

Sophia ushered Greg out just as Taylor began to cry, years of pain finally finding release.

(BREAK)

A few hours later, after handing Emma over to her family, Taylor met Sophia and Greg at the front of the school. The tall girl finally looked like a burden had been lifted from her shoulders, and she wore a gentle and open smile. “Thank you, both of you. This...didn’t go anywhere like I’d expected it would, but for once it was a nice surprise.” Her face dropped back to an empty, dangerous expression. “I hope nothing counters that.” Then, instantly, back to the smile. “Have you made sure your parents won’t miss you for a while? We’ll be going a fair distance.” She started walking, not waiting for an answer.

Sophia and Greg jogged to catch up. Sophia couldn’t stop the incredulous half-laugh that bubbled up from her throat when she realized they were going to the same bus that she’d followed that first day when she decided to stake-out Taylor.

Once again they sat in silence, half nervous and half companionable. Taylor led them to a second bus, bringing them down toward the Docks, then led them on foot into the empty rows of warehouses. They were undisturbed on their journey, though Sophia caught the occasional glimpse of someone on the rooftops.

Everything was gray, washed-out. There was barely even debris, so abandoned was this area. Finally they stopped before a massive warehouse and Taylor’s strong arms wrenched open the heavy steel door. She ushered them inside.

When Taylor had invited them to her warehouse, Sophia presumed it would be Bloodmoon’s base of operations. She expected a veritable butcher shop, littered with macabre trophies and racks of Victorian weaponry. Instead, it was like standing on the edge of a magical forest. Luminous flowers that smelled like Taylor (or did she smell like them?) dotted the floor, growing straight through the concrete, while

strange pale-green lichen grew as if the walls and various support columns were trees upon which they could anchor.

Taylor yanked the door shut with a clang, then ambled over to a crate and took a seat. "I'd never intended to have guests, so make yourselves comfortable wherever." She took a breath. "I'll answer some of your questions."

"What did you do to Emma?" It was the first question on Sophia's tongue, burning in her mind.

"A calculated risk," Taylor replied. "I took her memories. Consider it an experiment to see if her experience and your 'help' changed her, or if she was always going to end up like that."

"And if she backslides?"

Taylor silently twirled the elegant, filigree-inlaid pistol that she most definitely had not been holding before.

Sophia swallowed hard.

"You saw us," Greg spoke up. "Through the camera."

"Of course," Taylor shrugged. "You see me, I see you."

"You're not merciful toward threats. Why did you just toy with us like that?" Greg was afraid of her answer, but couldn't pass up the chance to ask.

Taylor smirked. "I knew you weren't malicious. More surprisingly, I could tell Sophia wasn't malicious. That was a shock right there."

"The fight," Sophia interjected. "The riot. You let it happen."

"It was always going to happen. I just participated."

"To impress me, and get Emma's attention."

"Guilty as charged," Taylor grinned.

"What is all of this?" Greg asked. "The flowers, the mist, your powers..."

Taylor clucked her tongue. "Too much knowledge, unearned, is an extremely dangerous thing. I'll answer some questions, but others you have to put together on your own."

"So are you living years in a day? Or did you go to another dimension and get your equipment there?"

It was, on some level, gratifying for Sophia to see Taylor so dumbstruck. The taller girl stared at Greg for a moment. "...You're dangerous, Greg," she finally smiled.

"Where do we go from here?" Sophia asked. "You're sharing this with us, you dealt with Emma...what next?"

Taylor looked genuinely embarrassed. “I hadn’t really thought ahead to that. I’ve had other irons in the fire.”

Yet again Greg Veder surprised her by coming entirely out of left field. “Well, want to go to the mall tomorrow?”

Both Taylor and Sophia paused for a moment to stare in bewilderment at Greg, who gazed back with the innocent confusion of a puppy unaware of why his owners are upset that he peed on the floor. Or an idiot-savant uncomprehending of his family’s awe when he composes a symphony.

Finally Taylor chuckled. “I said it before and I’ll say it again. You’re a dangerous man, Greg Veder. Sure, I should be free tomorrow.”

“How many questions do we get? You said you’ll only answer some: or is it based on content rather than number?” Taylor and Greg looked at her expectantly until Sophia bristled and then finally wilted. “...Fine, I can make it tomorrow for the fuckin’ mall.”

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I smirked. Even if I was reevaluating my plans for her, it was still fun to watch Sophia squirm. This day had not gone the way I’d expected, though on some level I shouldn’t be surprised. Ever since I caught wind that Greg and *Sophia*, of all people, were trying to help me – and that Greg at least was genuine in his desperation to make my life better – it had been more difficult to draw on the lightning, the rage and hatred. Someone, despite his helplessness, was trying to help me. It was a shocking feeling, one I’d only rarely felt in the Dream. And only once, arguably twice, in the Nightmares.

“You don’t have a set number. Ask and I’ll answer what I choose.”

“Alright,” Sophia shrugged. “I’ll pick up from where Greg left off. What’s with the flowers? They smell like you.”

Now that was interesting. She must have seen my expression change, since her interest was further piqued. “They’re part of the reason why I don’t sleep. When I do, they start to grow. Not only would that put my dad in danger if they started growing around the house, but it means some of the other world is leaking over.”

“Like the wolves,” Greg muttered, then snapped his fingers. “Holy shit, I was right!” His finger came around to point triumphantly at me like this was one of his anime. “You really are going to another dimension!”

Letting him stew in that for the moment, I swung my gaze back to Sophia. “Now it’s my turn to ask you a question. What happened with Emma? How did you break her like that? And how is someone like you a hero?” I didn’t necessarily mean her immorality: many heroes were likely labeled such simply because they went after acceptable targets. But Sophia was the type to chafe at a leash – how did she remain in what passed for the Wards’ good graces?

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It was Sophia's turn to be startled. On some level she had been expecting the question, but it still caught her off-guard. She winced. "I'd... I'll explain, but not quite all of it. There's some stuff I really don't want to talk about."

"I'll ask you later." There was a solidness in Taylor's voice, like a block of sandstone, that she would brook no disagreement.

Sophia bit her lip. "I...taught her that there are only two kinds of people in this world, predators and prey. The prey, those who break, are worthless. Only those who become more dangerous deserve to continue on."

"You never really believed that." The words were said calmly, factually rather than accusing, and cut like a scalpel. "You made it up. Not to justify your behavior, but to make his have meaning."

Sophia's eyes snapped open wide, tears welling up. Her breath hitched. Then something else happened which shocked each girl to some degree. Greg crossed the distance and hugged Sophia, holding her close. Sophia only hesitated for a moment, before letting him hold her as she cried.

When Sophia could finally see through her tears once more, she found Taylor still seated on her box, now wearing a gentle, wistful half-smile. Not a hint of cruelty to be seen. "You only answered half of my question," the taller girl prodded, her tone soft.

"I don't know what you want me to say. I'm good at bringing in criminals?" The words sounded hollow to her as well.

"Before, I thought it was Emma who had the power, because her dad worked with Carol Dallon. Then I learned you're Shadow Stalker. It explains a lot. They covered it up for you, and I don't think you even knew. No, you knew, on some level, but you blocked it out. After all, it would mean you still have no control. Not over yourself, nor your future."

Sophia hunched in on herself, practically hiding behind Greg.

"And yet," Taylor continued, "you controlled yourself here. Initially out of self-preservation, true, but now..." She stretched languidly. "What changed?"

Sophia was sure at this point that Taylor already knew and could tell her the answer better than she herself could. Still, there was obviously a purpose to this little game. "When I saw what you do, it made me feel bad..."

Taylor's smile widened slightly. There was still no hint of cruelty. "Illuminate," she said like before.

"I hurt you. I took your friend, ruined your life... And you're still helping people, not just 'helping' by getting rid of criminals, but saving people; I don't know how much you're risking your life, but... It made me realize..." She trailed off.

"You carry your pain like a bloodstain from an open wound," Taylor stated, speaking in an almost poetic cadence. "You tried to get rid of it by rubbing the blood onto others, but that only spread it: it didn't stop flowing from you. Only now have you taken the time to begin to bandage that wound."

Sophia let out a heavy breath. "...Can this be enough revelations for today? I don't think I can take any more right now..."

Taylor chuckled. "Sure. Eventually you'll have to come to terms with what you've done and what you'll do in the future. For now, I guess I'll see you tomorrow. Your assignment," she darted her eyes between them both, "is to decide what we're doing. I don't really know malls anymore. If you have any more questions, try to understand my journal."

The taller girl stood and smoothly wrenched open the door. "I'll walk you back to the bus stop."

Realizing there was no point in whispering, Greg at least pretended at politeness and spoke softly to Sophia. "So you said the flowers smell like Taylor? What do they smell like?"

Sophia looked back. "You can't smell it? Huh." She filed that away. "...It's weird, but if I had to say it smelled like anything, I'd say it smells like moonlight."