

Sophia had been nervous all through the previous evening and her anxiety hadn't dissipated in the morning. There were too many things pulling her attention in different directions. She was used to waking up before her alarm, but today woke up a good half-hour ahead of it. After doing her katas, she dialed Emma's house.

The Barneses were planning to have Emma examined by a neurologist and then a psychologist. Their first priority was to ensure Emma didn't have brain damage, their second to see if her memories could be recovered. Considering this was Taylor's doing, Sophia doubted that Emma's memories would return unless Taylor for some reason allowed them to.

Next she texted Greg, making sure he hadn't pussied out or forgotten about their mall appointment with Taylor. Thankfully he hadn't, but that meant she couldn't find an excuse either, and *that* meant that she had to figure out how to keep Taylor entertained. What the hell would Taylor want to do at the mall? She'd never even imagined the tall girl at someplace like the mall. Before, it was because she saw Taylor Hebert as something beneath her shoe, unworthy of a place of social interaction. Now, she couldn't envision Taylor as having any connection with any of these people. Taylor had horrific levels of insight, able to cut through her in moments. How could someone like that interact like a normal person?

Finally, she called Ellie. Perhaps she'd like to meet Greg after the mall. Her oldest friend sounded a little out of sorts and begged off, claiming to be sick. Sophia hoped Ellie was okay.

The reluctant Ward tied back her hair, looking at herself in the mirror. In a fitted tee and cargo pants, with a light jacket over the top to shield against the cold, Sophia at least looked ready to mall-crawl. Yesterday Taylor had openly declared a stay of execution, but Sophia couldn't help feeling nervous. What would Taylor think of her interests? What would Greg think? Why the hell did that second thought even enter her mind?

(BREAK)

Why the hell did he suggest the mall? Greg wasn't a mall rat: he went to the mall to go shopping, not to hang out. What was there even to do at the mall? He should have done this yesterday but was too hopped-up on adrenaline. Opening his laptop, he searched up Bayside Mall and looked at the various stores. It wasn't a full list, but some ideas popped in his head. The arcade was a good spot, maybe laser tag (though he'd have to make sure it was a team game: he didn't relish getting bullied by Sophia and outright obliterated by Taylor), and there was a nice Chinese restaurant. And then—

“Greg!” his mom called from downstairs. “You're going to be late for school!”

He closed his laptop and hurried downstairs, buttoning the collar of his polo shirt. “Coming, Mom!” Now he just had to wheedle some spending money out of his parents...

(BREAK)

Elijah Mathers was an expert with makeup. It was what allowed him to slip so easily past suspicion: people looked for a skinny young man with distinct tattoos on his lips like a maw of monstrous fangs. His preferred costume was two layers deep, concealing his tattoos and then leveraging his effeminate frame and long hair to masquerade as a homely young woman. However, that one might have been made due to Sophia's connection to Bloodmoon. As such, he'd used makeup to artificially age himself

and now looked like a burnt-out college dropout who hadn't gotten the message that Hanson was a thing fifteen years ago. He loitered in his flannel disguise, waiting on a street corner for one of his brainwashed informants to bring him information.

"I know you can hear me," a smooth feminine voice spoke up from behind and slightly above him. The fact that Valefor didn't immediately jump from the surprise told him exactly who it was, and the fact that his power knew before he did had even more terrifying implications. The next layer of terror came from the odd and instinctive certainty that she wasn't solely talking to him. Did Bloodmoon know that Mama was always listening? Elijah turned around, staring up into oblong hazel pupils.

When his power took effect, Valefor could feel a sort of channel open between himself and his victim. He could liken it to a river, flowing from him into his prey. This time it was whitewater, and Elijah felt himself swept up in the current, falling into the cephalopod eyes of Taylor Hebert.

Visions rushed past him, hazy, as if made of smoke. Some were still images, some animated. He saw more lupine beasts; creatures that sparkled in moonlight; a pumice-faced pillbug that wriggled pitifully; a beautiful woman seated in a chair, blood staining her collar and wrists, such a sad and tired expression on her face.

Until Elijah Mathers gave a command to his victims, they would stand paralyzed before him. Now, as he poured back into his own body, he was the one held immobile. Elijah had thought his self-hypnosis to not show fear was a stroke of genius, but now he hated himself for doing it. For all his newfound inability to express fear, he still felt it. Without that capacity to express his fear, it instead spiraled inward, compounding on itself like blocks of dry ice being heaped upon him. Bloodmoon let the silence drag on as he could feel her presence pressing against his psyche. The corner of her lip quirked upward. She knew he'd seen. No, she'd allowed him to see.

"That's alright," he could somehow feel the condescension even though her tone didn't change. "You don't have to speak. The only reason you're still alive is that you'll be useful soon. But think on this: the nail that sticks out, that catches flesh, is the nail that gets hammered down with prejudice." He didn't hear her move, her voice came from the same spot, but it felt as if she was looming further over him. The world seemed to sink down around him, buildings stretching into the sky. He was trapped and couldn't even express the white-cold fear that coursed through him. It only made him more acutely aware of his lack of agency in this moment, his imprisonment in his own lies where the only recourse was to die. "You know what I did to your god. Ask yourselves if you truly wish to invite my attention." She stepped past him, but despite breaking eye contact Elijah didn't feel himself broken free of the paralysis. A long-fingered hand came to rest on his shoulder, the touch gentle but threatening. "None of you are useful enough to be indispensable. While it would be more convenient to have you around, you are in no way granted immunity. I'll know when you overstep your bounds." Not if, when.

Her presence vanished, and Elijah couldn't bring himself to look and see where she went. The moment he was no longer under Bloodmoon's shadow, he collapsed to the ground sobbing, his bowels voiding themselves. Never, in all of Mama's abuse, in seeing what his family did to others, had he been that viscerally frightened. The Fallen were an eclectic group: some were genuine zealots, while others simply indulged in their monstrosity. Valefor had always straddled the line, revering the Simurgh as a concept but devoted entirely to himself. He'd never been in the evil angel's presence. But now Elijah Mathers understood Mama's religious fervor. He had been in the presence of something greater than him, something fundamentally more than human. Not simply a parahuman, something more.

He pulled out his compact to undo his previous hypnosis, and seeing his eyes in the mirror reminded him that the deepest suffering he'd experienced was entirely of his own making. His pain was his own fault: he'd been in the same agonizing compulsion as any of his playthings.

[DESTINATION]

[AGREEMENT]

*Hush, poor thing. You'll burn yourself out. Knowledge such as this, unearned, will tear you apart. Rest a while by the lantern-light.*

Elijah Mathers flopped sideways onto the sidewalk. The brief vision of two writhing crystalline serpents gave way to something both more and less. The glittering, opalescent moon shielded him from the hungry gaze of the baleful red moon, but it felt as if he was an afterthought...

(BREAK)

Greg couldn't sit still throughout school. He barely avoided detention, mostly because of his preexisting status as a weirdo. Occasionally he caught sight of Sophia, or Taylor, and each would favor him with a glance. Sophia looked surprisingly nice in her light jacket and cargos, while Taylor was swimming in her usual hoodie but wore normal jeans rather than the baggy things she usually wore – accentuating her powerful legs.

Then came lunch. Since she didn't have to worry about Emma's reaction, Sophia invited Greg and Taylor to sit with her. Madison, nearby, just looked in confusion. It reminded Sophia of a video she'd seen of the first time a housecat saw a horned owl.

Other students gave them a wide berth. Greg might have only gained a little credibility with his participation in the riot, but Taylor was the new scariest person in school.

“So Greg,” Sophia started, fully aware she was throwing him under the bus, “the mall was your idea. You have some things planned for us to do?”

He shocked her by answering in the affirmative. “A few things. I'm not that much into malls myself, but there's a nice arcade in Bayside so we could have some fun there. I should be able to cover most of the bill at Crystal Palace for an early dinner, and...” He blushed a little and looked away. “I found a karaoke place.”

Sophia barked a laugh. “Okay, I'm willing to go for that just to see you butcher some songs.”

Greg turned to Taylor. “Are you okay with that? You've been, ah, awfully quiet.”

Sophia reflexively wanted to dismiss it, say that Taylor was always quiet. But she bit that down. *Stay of execution*, she reminded herself.

“Maybe we can go to a bookstore too?” Taylor contributed.

(BREAK)

The bus ride was considerably more companionable than the previous day. Greg even felt comfortable making some small-talk. “So, Sophia, what do you typically do at the mall? Clothes-shopping? I can’t really see you as the type to lurk in perfume stores.” He winced after saying it, realizing it could be easily taken as an insult.

The black girl tsk’d. “That was always Emma and Madison’s thing. Ems is the clothes-horse, Mads...I swear she’s building a castle out of all her damn perfume bottles.”

“I once bet Emma a month’s worth of ice cream at the old Cold Stone that she couldn’t prove to me she’d worn the same top twice,” Taylor smirked. “I miss that place.” The Cold Stone Creamery had been one of the coveted enclosed shops at the boardwalk, helping maintain the ice cream’s temperature regardless of the beach’s weather. Unfortunately, it had been a collateral casualty in a running battle between the ABB and E88 and the franchise owner had been unable to pay for its repair. Now it was a cookie shop. Still a nice little place, but Taylor missed the ice-cream parlor.

“I remember that place,” Greg smiled. “Hey, what’s your favorite flavor of ice cream?” he asked to both girls.

“Peanut butter fudge,” Sophia replied. When she indulged, she did it right.

“Cookies ‘n cream,” Taylor followed up. She liked simple but satisfying.

“I can never pick between mint chocolate chip or chocolate chip cookie dough,” Greg grinned.

“Anyway, I usually go to the mall to just hang out. I go along with what the others like to do. I don’t normally go with my work friends,” she emphasized ‘work friends’ just slightly to indicate the Wards, much like she would when talking with Emma. “But when we have some team-building stuff I’m fine just wandering around. They always love to pile into the game store and the DVD place.”

Taylor’s eyes bored into Sophia’s body. It didn’t feel accusatory, but it felt to Sophia as though she was being vivisected, the girl further examining Sophia and understanding her. She fidgeted.

Taylor smoothly shucked her hoodie and tucked it behind her, revealing a nice white button-up shirt. Sophia likewise tied her jacket around her waist.

“You fucks have me feeling underdressed,” she grouched.

“Hey,” Greg smoothed out his collar, “not my fault I’ve got style.”

Sophia laughed in his face.

When they disembarked the bus, Taylor didn’t bother grabbing her jacket. It was nowhere to be seen. Just one more reminder of who, and what, Sophia and Greg were dealing with.

(BREAK)

The trio entered the mall and Greg made a beeline for the ‘You Are Here’ map. “So I figure we should hit the arcade first, then we can do a little shopping if you want. Then we can do Crystal Palace for an early dinner, or karaoke first and end with dinner.”

“Well now, you actually have a plan. Good work, Greg,” Sophia smirked. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“Hey, I’m always the man with the plan, Miss C-average,” he referenced that first meeting at his house that now felt so long ago. Then winced when Sophia slugged him in the arm.

Taylor’s long legs carried her toward the arcade, and the bickering friends had to scramble to keep up.

“We could do laser tag, too. There’s a place here for that,” Greg proposed.

Taylor slowed to let them come up on either side of her. She shook her head. “No thanks. Too physical... I have enough of a time regulating myself when there’s actual fighting.”

“How about DDR?” Sophia offered. Madison loved that game and was fiercely competitive, no matter how many times Sophia utterly trounced the smaller girl.

“Sounds good,” Greg grinned. “You two can play, and then I’ll play winner!”

“You just want to watch our asses while we play,” Sophia accused.

“Yeah, and?” At her dumbfounded look, he blushed a little and smiled sheepishly. “Hey, we did agree on honesty.”

Taylor giggled. It was a nice sound.

(BREAK)

Taylor was silent as she played, not even breathing heavily. Sophia was a girl in near-peak physical condition, with exceptional coordination, who played sports that demanded swift and dextrous footwork to say nothing of her actual job. She was getting destroyed by the taller girl, and knew Taylor wasn’t even trying.

Sophia barely missed any steps, getting mostly Good, Great and even some Perfect scores. Taylor received nothing but Perfect, hitting every step precisely. By the song’s end, Sophia was actually sweaty. She’d never played on such a difficulty: had she wanted to impress Taylor? Regardless, she didn’t feel particularly impressive.

The silent, expressionless facade slid aside as Taylor stepped off the platform. “That was...fun,” she stated with a hopeful half-smile, as if she hadn’t expected to enjoy herself. Why had she agreed to come, then, if she’d expected it to suck? Or was she hoping to be surprised as they’d done to her the day before?

*Why does everything about you have to be such a mystery, Taylor Hebert?*

Greg took Sophia’s place and ratcheted down the difficulty. On Normal, he did passably, but Taylor still destroyed him with a full Perfect run. Wiping his brow, Greg smiled. “Yeah, that was a good time. You kick ass, Taylor!” Of course, Hurricane Veder would not be placated with a single sacrifice. He dragged the girls deeper in to a light-gun game where you battle zombies.

Sophia grinned as she drew the plastic pistol. It wasn't quite a crossbow, but her marksmanship was exceptional. Taylor took the pistol with her left hand, because of course that's how Bloodmoon would shoot.

Greg and Sophia bickered good-naturedly back and forth, excoriating one another for various screwups, as the game continued for level after level. Each time they faltered, Taylor covered their failings. Minutes stretched by as they pushed through boss battles and legions of enemies, all the way to the final boss – which was honestly disappointing, a warped still-frame of the main villain's face, across which zombies charged.

Finally the last cutscene played and the credits began to roll. “Holy crap,” Greg grinned. “We should've recorded that. I bet we're the first people to beat this game without losing a single life!”

“Second, actually,” a nearby worker commented while cleaning the air-hockey table. “But the first turned out to be Uber and Leet, so I don't think they count.”

Speaking for the first time since they'd started playing, Taylor piped up with a rather demure-sounding voice. “Can we try something less intense?”

They settled on skee-ball. Sophia was immensely aggravated that Greg beat her score. Neither were at all surprised when Taylor silently got the maximum score.

“Why do you do that?” Greg, bless his heart, ignored or lacked all awareness of the social cues in this situation. At a questioning look from Taylor, he soldiered on. “You go all quiet when you're playing. Or, well, when you're working,” he emphasized ‘working’ much like Sophia had before.

Sophia hadn't expected the question to cause very familiar emotions to flash across Taylor's face: regret, and the pain of an old wound. “...It's a habit I fell into. It's comfortable, for me. When I need to concentrate, I suppose I go quiet.”

Proving that he wasn't as hopeless as Sparks in social situations, Greg read Taylor's expression and nodded, opting not to press further. “Well, we agreed to hit up a bookstore, so how about we do some shopping now?”

Taylor's mood slowly brightened as they went to the bookstore. “I haven't had much time to read recently, so it'd be nice to pick out something new.” Her expression briefly dipped. “I'm not sure what to look for, though.”

Sophia wasn't much for reading for entertainment. Thankfully, Greg picked up the thread. “Well, if you like fantasy, some of my Space Opera clan are raving about a guy named Jim Butcher. They're importing his stuff from Aleph.”

Taylor shrugged as they headed inside, and she wandered with a seemingly aimless gait through the rows of bookshelves. Eventually, however, she made her way to the B section of Fantasy. Not wanting to be left out, Greg grabbed the novelization of a sci-fi movie he'd really enjoyed a couple of years ago.

The store didn't simply feature books, of course: it also had a section for music, and the checkout area was stocked with other paraphernalia. While Greg was distracted, Taylor's sharp eyes watched Sophia

slink into the music section and pick up a CD, holding it close to herself – not as if to steal it, but clearly she was embarrassed over being seen with it.

When Sophia looked up from her prize, she jumped with an involuntary squeak: Taylor was right in front of her. “What do you have there?” the taller girl asked with an even tone. It wasn’t threatening, or even aggressive, but some level of leadenness told Sophia that Taylor wouldn’t accept a deflection.

Trying to keep the flush from her cheeks, Sophia flashed the cover to Taylor. She suspected the girl wouldn’t need more than a glance to fully read and process the cover that proclaimed it to be a smooth jazz compilation. “It helps me sleep,” she said, as if in protestation.

Almost as if they were having two different conversations, Taylor responded. “You don’t have to share in front of Greg, but eventually you’ll have to tell me. You owe me that much, and far more.”

Sophia swallowed. She knew exactly what Taylor meant. It hurt to remember. She’d spent so much time running from it, but it had been what set her on this course. Did Taylor intend to take her memories, the way she’d done to Emma?

Perhaps Greg’s arrival was Sophia’s salvation from an inward spiral, or perhaps he’d given Taylor more time to plot. But he interrupted their conversation. “Okay, are we ready to check out? I think the cashier’s giving me the evil eye and I don’t know why.”

“I think we are,” Taylor replied, getting silent confirmation from Sophia.

“Sounds good. I don’t think we should sing on a full stomach, especially if we want to really belt it,” he smiled, “so let’s do karaoke next.”