

Madison Clements tried not to bob or groove to the song that was still running through her mind. A few of her fellow degenerates online had put Owl's dance-like combat to music and Madison definitely had a new crush. Her next story was coming along well, the idea that Bloodmoon's lieutenants were her harem. She fought to keep the blush from her cheeks as she imagined Owl, Henryk and Valtr kneeling before Bloodmoon, and in her kink-fueled haze she nearly bumped into Taylor Hebert.

After the riot, people gave Taylor a wide berth. Madison was definitely one of them: standing barely five feet and weighing less than a hundred pounds, Madison could've been folded like laundry if the old Taylor had been so inclined. Now that Taylor was some sort of amazon nightmare, Mads most certainly didn't want to draw the tall girl's attention. Thankfully, Taylor had long since stopped noticing Madison, as if she couldn't even remember the little blonde. Ordinarily Madison would have been offended, but given the circumstances she wasn't complaining.

Taylor leaned against the lockers, eyes closed and looking almost meditative. Madison took the opportunity to look at Taylor with a tilted head, like a bird or dog contemplating something. The tall girl looked good, healthy. The dark circles were gone from her eyes, her skin was pink and lively. She'd been party to many insults against the girl, but at this moment, Madison couldn't help thinking that Taylor was actually quite pretty.

Then Taylor's hazel eyes opened. They briefly flicked across Madison, once again holding only the barest hint of recognition, before turning toward a point in the distance – some unknown event held her attention. She pushed off from the lockers and her long legs carried her off to whatever had caught her attention.

Madison hurried away. She'd been friends with Emma and Sophia for almost two years now, but even with all the cattiness and bullying, she had never seen so cruel and sadistic a smile as what had spread across Taylor Hebert's face.

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“You have friends?” The question wasn't asked sarcastically and it cut all the deeper for it.

When did she start valuing his opinion enough that he could hurt her, even slightly? “Yes, Greg. What do you think Emma is?”

He shrugged. “Honestly, I thought you two were in some kind of cult.”

Opting not to address that, as it would lead to yet another conspiracy ramble, Sophia continued. “I think you'll get along with Ellie. She's...more mellow than me. She might even be able to help us with the investigation, she's always been insightful that way.”

Greg snorted. “What investigation? The only thing we can do is find a good time to tell Taylor what we've been up to. She knows, and we can only come clean and hope she's lenient.” He gave Sophia a sidelong look. She'd been there. He'd held her as she cried. Why was she pushing it as though there was still something they could uncover in secret?

“Y-yeah,” Sophia replied with a sigh. “Don't know what I was thinking. Must just be all the stress after Wolf Day, getting back into school and just...” She shrugged while spreading her arms. “...trying to pretend everything's normal again.”

Greg gave another snort, this one more goodnatured. “Things haven’t been normal for a long time, Sophia. There’s no ‘normal again’. We can only go forward and hope we’re doing the right thing.”

“Is that what this has all been about, Greg?” Emma’s voice was hostile, on-edge, as she slunk into the empty classroom where Sophia and Greg were holding their little meeting. “Doing the right thing, by your definition?”

Greg raised an eyebrow in utter confusion, shoulders already slumping in his instinctive reaction to confrontation. “Uh, isn’t that what most people do? I think most of us want to do the right thing, or at least get along. Other than criminals and villains, I guess.”

She’d hoped to catch him alone, but couldn’t stand idly by while he poured more poison into Sophia’s ear. “And you don’t fit that last category?” Before Greg could voice his confusion, she withdrew the .32 pistol and leveled it at him. “Let Sophia go from whatever you’ve done to her, and maybe I don’t shoot you.”

Greg stumbled backward, hands already rising up beside his head. “Wh-whoa, what? What I did to her? I..I don’t understand.” His mouth was dry. His skin was paling, a waxy sheen of cold sweat breaking out over his face and forehead.

“Jesus, Emma, what the fuck?” Sophia took a step away from Greg, hoping to force her friend to split concentration between them. “Greg’s not a cape! He’s just...just a dweeb!”

“Then ask yourself why you’re spending so much time with him!” Emma snapped back. “He spent so much time around Taylor, and look what he turned her into!” Her eyes lashed back to Greg like cracking whips. “Is this what you’re into? You couldn’t get enough from making Taylor into some sort of MMA girl so you got started on Sophia?”

“Fuck, Emma,” Sophia tried to keep her voice even and somewhat gentle, “put the gun down. It’s not my secret to tell, but if it’ll keep you from shooting him...”

“Oh?” Emma’s tone was derisive. “He’s so important to you that you want to protect him?”

Yes, Sophia realized. Greg was her friend. “It’s not him I’m trying to protect,” she replied, her voice even softer. “Killing someone, especially for the wrong reasons or because you made a mistake...it leaves a mark on you.” She’d been running from those scars, trying to leave them behind.

Then Sophia’s voice rang out again, weak and shaky. “Oh god...”

Had Greg affected her so much that Sophia was terrified for him? Emma spared a glance at her friend and saw the black girl’s skin almost chalk-white with fear, dark eyes wide in utter terror...and looking behind Emma.

Taylor rested her back against the closed door. Gone was her hoodie, her corded arms bared in a tank top. “Oh, don’t mind me,” she smirked, drawling her words in a smooth flow that instantly reminded Emma of a serpent. “I’m just here to watch the festivities.”

Emma had seen a variant of that smirk many times in her own reflection. It looked wholly unnatural on Taylor's wide mouth. She took a few steps to the side and pivoted so she could sweep her attention between all three people, keeping the gun in Greg's direction. "W-well, good! Now I can make you free them both. I'll be a hero and you'll be back where you belong!"

Taylor's condescending smirk didn't waver. It felt like an abusive mother, taking amusement in her daughter's mistakes.

"I didn't do anything," Greg protested. "Taylor, please..." He begged to be allowed to share her secret.

Emma quickly snapped the gun in Taylor's direction, her movements too fast and erratic for Sophia to take a risk of disarming her. "You're not helping him!" she ordered.

Taylor's lips only curled further, her smile becoming more cruel. "Like I said, I'm just here for the fun." Her eyes swept over to Sophia. *What will you do, Hess?*

"There's more going on here than you know, Emma. Please, put the gun away. Killing Greg will accomplish nothing," Sophia pleaded. She took a step closer.

"Another step and I shoot him, damn the consequences!" Emma threatened. "Last chance, Veder! Let them go from whatever you did and I'll only turn you over to the PRT."

"Alright, I'm bored. You're so pedestrian, Emma." Taylor stood behind the redhead, and none of them could tell when she'd moved. "You don't even have the conviction to shoot him despite firmly believing he's responsible, because the responsibility for his death would land on your shoulders. You used Sophia as your thug, your enforcer, so you didn't have to sully your hands." Her tone was disgusted. "Not because you thought yourself superior, but because *you were too afraid*."

"Not that you minded, right Sophia? It didn't take much to convince you to start hurting me, despite the fact that I didn't fight back. Did you get off on it? Hurting someone who wouldn't hit back?"

Taylor's hazel eyes' cephalopod pupils landed on Greg. "And you were too much of a coward to stand up for me. It was easier to take the abuse you knew was coming rather than open yourself to more, even if you wanted to keep me safe. Cowards, all of you. All afraid of the consequences. You two, terrified of what might happen. And you," her gaze fell on Sophia, "terrified of them catching up to you."

Sophia swallowed hard. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. It felt like she was staring up at Behemoth, not at Taylor, not even at Bloodmoon. She'd never been so scared in her entire life, not even those nights when she knew he would visit.

"I'm sorry." Once again, Greg was her salvation. His eyes were reddening, tears trying to make their way to the surface. Fear, regret, shame were all intermingling and welling up. "I should've been there for you. I had such a crush on you, but I was too afraid to do anything to help."

Taylor's eyes pierced him. "What happened that Thursday?"

He didn't need her to elaborate. "I got fed up with regrets and hating myself. I had a feeling, went up to the third floor and found that guy threatening the girl. Then, when the fight started, I knew I couldn't live with myself if I didn't at least try to protect you."

“What the fuck is wrong with you, you stupid bitch!?” Emma interjected, jamming the barrel of Annette’s gun against Taylor’s ribs. “I’m the one with the gun! I’m the one arresting the cape! Don’t act as if I don’t matter, you weakling!”

Taylor’s oblong eyes settled on Emma. “God, you’re pathetic. This isn’t even entertaining. Is this all you are?”

Sophia was already moving, trying to keep out of Emma’s line of sight, but she had to try to get the redhead away from Taylor.

Emma pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

Taylor’s grin widened. “And that’s what you are. Unwilling to take the responsibility when it’s to save your friend, but when I talk down to you...” She gathered Emma’s crimson locks in her long-fingered hand and hoisted the shrieking redhead into the air by her hair. “You just can’t tolerate the idea that you broke and I survived, so you had to break me as well.” Her grin faltered, becoming melancholic. “I’d wondered, some days, if you were trying to toughen me up in your own twisted way. But it was never about building me up: it was about making sure I was down in the pit with you.”

Emma tried pulling the trigger again, several more times. She knew she’d loaded it. Finally the slide clicked open, showing nothing in the chamber.

“You’re such a stupid little girl, Emma. But Sophia, I’m surprised at you. You made me redesign the entire plan. Of all the people, I’d never expected that you would actually *try*.”

“Please.” Sophia’s voice was weak. “Please, don’t...”

“Don’t what? Take my vengeance, as you did? Hypocrite that you are, I can smell it on you. You would deny me the justice so duly owed?” She straightened up, seeming to tower even further above Sophia. “Would anyone deny me my bounty, knowing what I do for this broken world? Would anyone, confronted with the evidence, deny me my prize? Her family, perhaps, but even that is in question.”

Sophia’s voice was even smaller. “She’s my fault.”

Taylor seemed to loom a bit less, curiosity gleaming in her octopus eyes. “Illuminate.”

Sophia glanced at Greg. He’d never been privy to this. “I...I’m Shadow Stalker.” Greg gasped but Taylor was utterly unsurprised. “In 2009, Emma was attacked by the ABB.” Emma made a soft keening noise in her throat. “They were going to mutilate her. Her dad didn’t even fight to save her, just cried and begged. I could have saved her, but I didn’t. I wanted to see if...if she was worth saving. It wasn’t until she fought back that I saved her. I taught her about being predators and prey. I’m the one who taught her to hurt others in order to be strong.”

Big tears spilled from Sophia’s eyes. “Everything she did to you, I’m the cause. I made her into this. If you’re going to take revenge, take it on me.”

Taylor casually tossed Emma aside, where the girl hit the wall and crumpled into a heap. “And why shouldn’t I just kill you both?”

Sophia whimpered. She didn’t have a good answer.

Greg finally spoke up. “...Because you’re a good person.”

Both girls’ heads snapped toward him. He cowered for only a moment. “Everything you’ve done, you’ve been trying to help and protect people. Even this, if Emma hadn’t taken the bait...would you have tried to hurt her?” He didn’t let her answer. “I don’t think you would. You’re better than them, you’re better than me. You’re a good person, Taylor.”

“And what do you know of me?”

“Less than I used to. Less than I ever should, for how much I was crushing on you. But I still know that you’re the girl who didn’t go to the Empire despite being abused by a black girl. You took it all and tried to endure. You didn’t want to sink to their level. And even all of this, you made it all Emma’s choice. If she hadn’t gone after you...after me, did you even have another plan?”

Taylor smirked. “You give me too much credit. My original plan was to steal Sophia’s friendship, isolate Emma, and get her to kill herself. It wasn’t until Sophia made friends with you, and you started investigating me, that I decided to provoke her differently.”

“I don’t think you’d have gone through with it.” This time it was Sophia speaking, a fact that shocked even her. Taylor’s eyes swung over to her. “You’re better than me. Whatever hell you lived through, whatever made you this, you still work to help others.”

Emma squeaked from the floor, regaining her senses. “What...what is all this? Are you saying this is Taylor’s fault?”

Taylor strode over and cupped Emma’s cheek, a hint of childhood affection behind the cruel condescension. “No, Emma. This is all your fault. You and Sophia... And the other one, I suppose,” she said casually.

“What are you?” the redhead asked weakly.

Taylor’s smile stretched across her entire face. “I’m a Nightmare, of course.”

Sophia took a deep breath. “...What do we do now?”

Taylor pursed her lips. “She knows a bit too much, and unlike you I can’t trust her to keep her trap shut...” She turned and looked Sophia dead in the eyes. “You were really willing to die for her.”

“She’s my friend, and my responsibility. I hurt her, I should take the blame for the people she hurt.”

The taller girl regarded Sophia. “You’ve grown up somewhat. Consider it a stay of execution, for the moment. As for you, Emma,” she looked down at the crumpled heap of a girl. “We’ll need something more...personal.

“You two, wait outside.” The mist, which neither had noticed obscuring the door’s window, receded.

Realizing that Taylor would brook no dissent this time, the pair slunk out and fidgeted silently in the hallway.

Several minutes later, Taylor emerged with a sleeping Emma in her arms. “Hold out your arms,” she commanded them. “Emma had a psychotic break, her psyche finally collapsing after all these years.” She looked to Sophia. “You were with her when she passed out, and got Greg to help you carry her. Take her to the nurse’s office.”

Greg couldn’t help himself. “What did you do to her?”

Taylor gave another melancholic smile. “I gave her the only mercy in my power to grant. Now we’ll find out if Sophia was right, if she broke Emma.” Her voice firmed. “One chance. There will not be another.”

Sophia, with Emma’s upper body in her arms, locked eyes with Taylor and nodded. “We...we need to talk. Just the three of us. About you.”

“At least you came clean,” Taylor chuckled. “Meet me after school. I’ll take you to my warehouse.”