

Danny Hebert arrived at his daughter's school to the aftermath of carnage. Cleaning crews were scattering sand to soak up bloodstains and then scraping it up with snow shovels. EMTs scurried to and fro, loading people onto stretchers. Many had bloodstained clothes and deep stab wounds, even more had limbs broken and bent at unnatural angles. He saw at least one body bag.

The school had called him, said Taylor had been involved in a fight. He'd had no idea what exactly that would entail, considering how little the school had done before then. If all of the bullying, the abuse, the...the bruises, if all of that hadn't warranted a call, how bad was it this time? With all of the damaged bodies, his hair stood on end over his entire body and he felt the cold chill of fear settle into his ribcage.

Until, coming through the crowds, he saw his beautiful baby girl, completely unblemished, drinking root beer with two other kids who looked far worse for the wear. The gangly boy had a horrible black eye, his sclera mostly red from ruptured blood vessels. The athletic girl already had nasty bruising marring her dark skin.

The way Taylor sat gave him pause. It was the kind of easy caution that Danny would see in military veterans who joined the Union. While on the surface Taylor looked relaxed, the way she held herself betrayed muscles coiled to spring. Her lips might sport a gentle smile but her eyes darted about, monitoring her surroundings and ready to commit violence upon whatever disturbed her. And then her eyes landed on him. In an instant, the visage of a dangerous protector melted away and he was again looking at his daughter's big soulful eyes. She sprang up and jogged over to hug him.

"Hey Dad. They told me they called you. I've been waiting with Greg and Sophia, wondering whose parents would get here first."

"We figured my mom or Sophia's would be last," the boy piped up, his voice a little ragged from the obvious pain of his eye.

"Taylor, are you going to introduce me to your friends?" The question was a bit more loaded than Danny had wanted it to feel, and he really didn't want to voice his thoughts: *I thought you didn't have friends.*

If Taylor noticed, she didn't show it. "This is Greg, we're working on a project in World History together. That's Sophia, she's in some of my classes. They helped me in the fight."

Danny blinked at her easy, almost casual declaration. Taylor had always been non-confrontational, and now she was so nonchalant about having fought in what had quite obviously been a riot. "So you were in the middle of that?"

"Was she!" Greg leapt unsteadily to his feet. "You should've seen her, Mr. Hebert!" He began to gesticulate wildly, trying to express the events. "She was like Bruce Lee or something, darting all around and dropping, uh, d-dropping..." He started to wobble and Sophia grabbed him by the waistband, tugging him down to land in her lap. She then shoved him to the side, back onto the stairs.

"Dumbass," the black girl scoffed. "You probably have a concussion. Don't wave around like that."

*What happened to my daughter?* Danny took advantage of the other kids engaging him. "Are you two okay? You both seem pretty worse for wear."

"I've had worse," Sophia replied. "Winslow's not exactly a nice place. Veder, on the other hand," she looked over at the boy, "I'm still not sure what you were thinking, or how you're still standing."

"Hey," Greg protested, "that guy was gonna hit Taylor. I wasn't about to let that happen."

"That's if he could hit her in the first place," Sophia cut in. "But honestly it was pretty impressive. I thought you were a bit of a bitch, Veder, but you got guts."

Much as he worried for these kids, Danny had his daughter to worry about first and foremost. "I'm gonna get Taylor home. Will you two be alright?"

"Sure," Greg smirked. "Sophia might not be on Taylor's level but I think we'll be good in a pinch. And I have a few more textbooks," the boy chuckled at a joke that Danny didn't get, while Sophia looked torn between being scandalized and humiliated.

Danny placed a hand on Taylor's back and made to guide her away. For the briefest moment, his motion was arrested as it felt like he was pushing on a granite boulder. Then the moment passed and he was herding his gangly daughter to the car.

"Oh, Mr. Hebert!" Greg called after him. "That project I'm working on with Taylor, would you mind if I came over to your house on Saturday so we can work on it some more?"

(BREAK)

Jenna Hess and Miriam Veder arrived at roughly the same time. One stomped forward indignant, while the other was a blubbing mess of worry. While Greg was buried in incoherently babbling mother, Sophia stared down her own maternal figure. "What did you do this time, Sophia?" the older woman demanded.

"She protected people, that's what," Greg interjected. "I was trying to stop this ABB guy from doing horrific things to a girl. Sophia joined in and had my back. It sucks that it turned into a big thing, but she did a good thing."

While that wasn't the entire truth, it was shockingly accurate and Sophia couldn't remember the last time someone not in her clique (other than Ms. Bright, her "social worker") had stood up for her. Even her own mother hadn't been terribly supportive of her ever since...

She swallowed hard and turned back to her mother, eyes a mixture of defiance and hope that she wouldn't have to be defiant.

"Is this boy telling the truth?" Jenna questioned.

Sophia nodded. "I got into the fight to protect a mutual friend, not Veder so much, but yeah."

"Oh screw you," Greg laughed. "You didn't do it to back me up?" he teased.

"Hey, you could do with some toughening up," Sophia said with a smile, one that she realized was genuine. She only smiled like this when she and Emma had quiet moments together. "You didn't bitch

out, which is more than I can say for most of the school. You could do with some actual training, but I guess a textbook works in a pinch.”

Miriam just looked between the conversation, confused.

Inwardly, Sophia was just as confused for different reasons. First Taylor hadn't ratted her out when she'd had ample opportunity, and now she was feeling camaraderie with Veder? Was this the Hollywood “brothers in battle” shit? Was it some additional aspect of Taylor's power? Or was something truly changing?

(BREAK)

Emma Barnes felt as if her world had lost its axis. She'd spoken to her mom when she picked her up, but Emma would be damned if she could remember a single thing she'd said. She was running on autopilot, still processing what she'd seen and experienced. Little extras occasionally swam into her awareness: Sophia had kicked ass, as expected. Greg had, surprisingly, fought until getting his ass handed to him. But she couldn't focus on any of that for terribly long. Her mind always centered back on Taylor.

When the fight started, before Emma had realized who the main combatant was, Emma had been impressed. The tall, willowy girl in the oversized clothes moved like a dancer, weaving beautifully between blows like the entire thing was choreographed and the other performers were moving in slow motion. This girl was fighting alongside Sophia, which was one of Emma's dreams – one she would never, could never realize. Training to fight would harm her figure, and any scars to her face or even her body could destroy her modeling career before it could even get off the ground.

Then Emma caught sight of the girl's face, and her world had tipped 110 degrees. Taylor was the one destroying these gangbangers. Taylor was the one putting even Sophia to shame in the fight. Taylor was flowing through the opposition with the gentle, playful smirk she'd wear when she was about to win a board game. Taylor always wore her heart on her sleeve. It made her terrible at poker, but at the same time even knowing Taylor had some dastardly scheme planned didn't make it any easier to actually counter those schemes in Risk, or Scrabble, or Protectorate.

Seeing Taylor with that expression, happy and confident and supremely in her element, had briefly warmed Emma's heart. It brought back memories of happier days, when Taylor hadn't been the albatross around Emma's neck that she had desperately attempted to dislodge; when Taylor hadn't been her punching bag, her tool to convince herself she wasn't broken inside. But then she remembered what she'd spent nearly two years doing, and fear settled in. That fight had proven to Emma that she couldn't take Taylor. In a serious fight, even Sophia couldn't take Taylor. What good would shadow powers do against someone too fast and smooth to hit? Eventually Sophia would slow down or slip up and Taylor would have her. So what could Emma do?

That question would haunt her over the entire weekend: *What can I do?* Another, quieter question haunted her when she was drifting off to sleep, or had quiet moments to herself: *what should I do?*

(BREAK)

The drive home was awkward. There was tension that Danny had no idea how to defuse. He didn't even know how to begin broaching the subject. He'd seen the bodies, at least one corpse. He'd seen the

bruises on the other two. How was Taylor unmarred? It was obvious she'd been in the thick of things. Was it pure luck? It was certainly *possible*, according to quantum physics, but the likelihood approached zero.

The school would be closed at least until Monday, so that gave him time to find a good opportunity to try and safely ask just what had happened. Not just today, but overall. Taylor had been making progress for a couple of weeks, then backslid hard and had been practically sleepwalking through life. Now he found out she had friends and was getting in massive fights?

He opted to make lasagna. Annette's recipe. Taylor helped. In those brief moments, the preparing and baking and the cozy dinner, they almost felt like a family again.

(BREAK)

The next day, while a good part of him wanted to stay home with Taylor, Danny also had to help keep the Union going and offer direction in the face of what promised to be a new gang upheaval. Plus, the internet was better at the DWU office and he wanted to do some research. Little shits couldn't help posting everything online, and he was sure that at least one kid must have recorded the events.

In-between organizing the dockworkers, Danny sat down at his desk and searched up "Winslow riot." Plenty of news stories, of course, but he was more interested in the image-macros and "memes."

Even with his suspicions, when he clicked on a forum thread titled "Badass Winslow chick," he still expected it to be about Sophia or another girl at the fight and maybe he could see Taylor in the background. Instead, he was inundated with gifs of his little girl weaving around multiple simultaneous attacks with contemptuous ease, splintering limbs like balsa wood. One image in particular left him slack-jawed: it was a photo from behind, but that hair was unmistakably Taylor's. Her jacket was gone and her arms rippled with corded muscle as she wrenched a much-larger man's arm out of its socket. Beneath the picture was the caption: *Training to Replace Alexandria*.

Danny took a moment to assess some of the other pictures and gifs, realizing something important: Taylor wasn't wearing her glasses in any of them. Come to think of it, she hadn't worn them during the drive home, or while they made dinner. When had she stopped wearing them? How had he not noticed?

"Taylor," he mumbled to himself, "what happened?"

(BREAK)

The early-morning light shone through the massive bulletproof-glass windows of the conference room. Emily Piggot sipped her carob, face set in a heavy frown as she looked at the others in the room: Wilson Renick; Triumph, Wards captain at least until his graduation; Miss Militia. "So how much of the speculation is close to the mark?"

Renick had set several lower-level intel operatives to combing the most-frequented sites for discussing parahumans, and had done some of the work himself. The older man gave a firm shake of his head. "Thankfully, very little. While there was of course the usual speculation that anyone who walks away from a fight must be a cape, the majority wasn't directed at Hess." He turned his laptop so his boss could see the screen. "Most of the discussion centers around this girl, the tall brunette. Referencing and research leads us to believe the girl is named Taylor Hebert." He clicked to another tab, the *Training to*

*Replace Alexandria* image dead-center. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t know if a girl her age could develop musculature like that naturally. Moreover, if it was possible, it would still require near-daily regiments of intense exercise, and Hebert doesn’t seem to fit that profile. No gym membership, no presence on exercise or self-improvement ideological fora, and school records paint her as some sort of complaining troublemaker rather than the type who would intervene to save a girl from a would-be rapist – if the reports on the inciting event are to be believed. And with the Empire kids, Merchant holdouts and ostensibly neutral parties all giving essentially the same story, I’m inclined to believe it.”

“So something in all of this isn’t adding up,” Piggot nodded as much to herself as to the others. “To me, this seems like a low-level Brute package. Recent trigger, perhaps? That solves the lack of regimented exercise...”

“But not the altruistic bent,” Renick picked up her train of thought. “The kind of attention-seeking troublemaker that the school reports paint might stop a rapist, but she’d wait until he was already attacking a girl for maximum attention and adulation.”

“Winslow’s a hole,” Triumph spoke up. “Stalker says as much quite often. In a place where a riot like this can happen, and where much of the student body doesn’t bat an eye at the scream of ‘rapist’, who’s to say Hebert hasn’t been the victim and the incompetent or uncaring staff just wrote her off?”

“Bullying leads to a trigger event, and a new Brute steps in to protect someone in the way nobody ever protected her,” Militia injected. “It shows strong altruistic tendencies. We should keep an eye for new capes with her general build: someone like her would be a good fit for the Wards.”

“Stalker spoke up and did her best to direct attention onto herself and away from Hebert,” Renick noted. “It doesn’t exactly seem her style, but if she too suspects a new trigger she might have been trying to keep the girl out of the spotlight, keep her from getting railroaded by the gangs. Or by us,” he finished with a chuckle, considering that they’d had to drag Shadow Stalker into the Wards almost literally in handcuffs and an ankle bracelet.

There was a gif beneath the image on Renick’s screen, a clip from the fight as Hebert wove around attackers. The way she slid to the side, pushing off with her right foot and sliding left, body dipping low and then smoothly rising to her full height for a quick strike, it tripped something in Emily’s memory, but she couldn’t put her finger on exactly what. “The best we can do for now,” she said at length, “is keep an eye out for a new Brute, and hope she doesn’t piss off Lung, Hookwolf or Bloodmoon.” The director let out a puff of air from her nostrils, a noise that would easily be interpreted as a snort, especially with her heavysset face and upturned nose. “Maybe we can convince Stalker to make a new friend.”