

Sunday, 12th June, 2016

11:00

Position: 43.7515° N 87.5508° W
Six nautical miles due east of Sheboygan

Salty Swallow

The next morning found us well away from anything illegal.

We were on the way home and the crews had got mixed up for the final few hours. I found Megan and Stephanie on the bow talking.

“Hi, girls!”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Sis.”

“Last night, Steph mentioned something about Wildcat ‘going wild’ . . .”

“Did you really have to use air quotes?” Megan groaned.

I shrugged in response and sat down. Stephanie and I both looked at Megan.

“All right! I was interrogating the bitch – you know, tell me what I want to know or I blow apart your limbs.”

I raised an eyebrow at my daughter and she just shrugged noncommittedly.

“She was strong-willed and very brave – I’ll give her that – but I needed answers. I blew apart her knees and had just destroyed an elbow when some cunt went and blew up the inbound fast boat.”

“That was Anne-Marie – not bad for an eight-year-old with a broken arm,” I commented.

“I suppose,” Megan responded. “The Captain proved superfluous to my needs . . .”

“So, she put a bullet in the remaining elbow and then one in each lung. The woman drowned in her own blood – it was quite cool to watch,” Stephanie cut in with a big grin.

“It was cool,” Megan agreed.

I chuckled at the two evil bitches.

Somebody was missing . . . Stephanie . . . oh, and Saoirse.

Those two Urban Princesses could be up to anything! I headed below and made my way through the main salon and then below again to the staterooms and cabins. I heard sounds coming from the starboard side cabin. I knocked on the cabin door but I heard nothing other than what sounded like . . . sobbing? That was totally out of character so I had to be wrong. I pushed open the door to find two young girls sitting on one bunk crying their eyes out as they held hands.

“Sorry – I’ll leave you two alone . . .”

“No,” Stephanie called out quickly and I gently closed the door behind me and sat on the opposite bunk.

“Mindy, please stay – we’re just relieving some rather nasty parts of our lives,” Saoirse explained.

“You remember what happened to me at Christmas?” Stephanie asked.

I well remembered that night when Stephanie had told me and Dave about how she had killed her parents and brother. I nodded at Stephanie without a smile.

“Back in Toulouse, SD and I came across a similar room and . . . well, SD had never remembered what she did. She went to pieces on me and I thought she was going to lose it, just as I did that night. She’s my best friend and I said I would take her through what happened.”

“I never realised that I had done that,” Saoirse explained as the tears flowed. “Murdered my own parents . . . I knew that we *Predators* were really bad people . . .”

Saoirse began to cry even harder. Stephanie held her hand firmly as her friend cried and she also cried. I felt so bad for them both. They had endured so much and been treated so badly. *Urban Predator* may have been over but it was in no way gone. The trauma would always be there, just as mine was.

“Saoirse . . . you are not bad anymore. You took a bullet for my daughter . . . that means a lot in Hit Girl’s book. I owe you for that, no matter what your past actions.”

Saoirse smiled through her tears.

“Both of you have done so much for me and without you both I would never have found people who loved and cared for me. I even have a sister – a sister who’s a nutcase for sure; but you can’t have everything, I suppose.”

“We may not know what the future holds. But hear us when we say that our past does not define us. ‘Cause our past is not today.”

“Very nice, Stephanie,” I commented. “Did you just paraphrase a My Little Pony song?”

“Maybe . . .”

“It fitted,” Saoirse commented with a grin at Stephanie. “Besides, Sunset Shimmer rocks!”

“You *Predators* are so fucking strange!” I growled as I left the cabin.

All I could hear was laughing and giggling as I headed up a deck.

16:00

It was nearing late afternoon when we approached our docks at the Burnham Harbor Marina.

Thirty minutes later we were each tied up and all engines had been shut down. Marcus appeared weary from his trip but he smiled across the dock at us. Paige and little Damon were also very happy and I was glad that we could all have some good family fun. I did not spend as much time as I wanted with my little brother but Paige had forced him on me the previous afternoon. Maybe I was worried about hurting such a little thing. I was, after all, more used to breaking things than being gentle!

I suppose gaining kids at seven and nine had been a challenge but at least they fed themselves (usually), washed themselves (with a little persuasion) and they used the bathroom without incident. They also took knocks in their stride which helped. I also hated seeing Paige breast feeding – gave me the creeps for some reason. As I watched, Anne-Marie walked down the gangway slowly and then she tentatively placed a foot on the dock followed by the other one. Then . . . she began to cheer!

“I survived a boat trip with my Mom!” she yelled triumphantly. “I’m alive!”

Everybody laughed.

“Not funny!” I growled but, as was usual, nobody appeared to be listening to me.

The following morning

Monday, 13th June

Glenview

The normal (abnormal to some) logistical nightmare of preparing three kids for school was underway.

I was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Danny was just sitting down to his cereal when I heard yelling and screaming from upstairs. Then the noise came closer.

“Stephanie! Give me back my bag!”

The two girls burst into the kitchen with Stephanie holding a dark purple backpack over her head well out of her sister’s reach.

“Say please,” Stephanie advised.

“Give me my back . . . now, before I fucking . . .”

“Anne-Marie!” I said sharply and the girl froze. “Jar!”

I glared at Stephanie who smiled sweetly before she returned the backpack to her sister. Anne-Marie walked over to the jar and then turned to look at me.

“I’ve no money left.”

“Then make out an IOU.”

Anne-Marie muttered something under her breath as she tore the top sheet off the pad located beside the swear jar.

“I still can’t believe you had a swear jar IOU pad printed up,” Stephanie laughed. “It even has our names on it – including yours . . .”

I scowled.

“That was Dave – he had the printer alter it,” I replied somewhat reluctantly.

Stephanie laughed as she grabbed herself a bowl from the cupboard. Then a loud bark was heard and a few seconds later a ginger ball of fluff flew into the kitchen and executed a perfect four-paw power slide on the stone floor before coming to rest beside my left foot. The ginger ball was hissing

and spitting as Razor skidded to a very rapid halt in front of me. Kiara peered inquisitively around the doorway.

“What have I told you about chasing Horatio?” I lectured Razor. “Last time, he scratched you.”

Razor whined and gave Horatio a big lick. Horatio meowed and then rubbed up against Razor’s left paw. The kitten then began to purr – loudly. Stephanie glared at her dog. Razor walked over and licked her hand in apology for his actions. Horatio followed him. The two were the best of friends, despite their antics together. Horatio’s favourite sleeping location was cuddled up with the five-month-old German Shepherd.

Kiara just shook her head in disgust, wandered over to her bowl and took a noisy gulp of water.

Two days later

Wednesday, 15th June

North Park Elementary School

Stephanie was smiling, as always, and Danny was chatting to his friends as he came out of school. A certain eight-year-old girl, though, did *not* look happy!

“What’s with sourpuss?” I asked.

Danny laughed.

“She got into trouble, today – *lots* of trouble.”

I groaned.

“Do I need to see the Principal?”

“Nah!” Danny replied. “She just has a tonne of homework to catch up on.”

“No swords. No Rogue.” I directed once we were in the Jaguar. “Until the homework is completed.”

“What? That’s not fair!”

“Who makes the rules?”

“Dave?”

“Quit while you’re ahead, would be my advice,” Stephanie chipped in wisely.

That night

Safehouse F

“What’s with misery guts,” Joshua asked as he noticed Anne-Marie sitting in a corner of the galley with piles of books.

“She has mounds of homework to catch up on – her fault for getting behind,” Stephanie replied.

Anne-Marie raised a single finger into the air and Joshua chuckled.

“Get back to your work, young lady!” Cathy growled from the kitchen. “You’re lucky Mindy allowed you to change into uniform, despite you not actually doing anything other than your homework.”

Anne-Marie grimaced and pouted at the rebuke but she went back to her homework.

“What are you grinning like a Cheshire Wildcat for, Megan?”

“Vengeance!” Stephanie grinned.

“Yes, you mad bitches; Vengeance will be here in a few days,” Hit Girl growled in exasperation.

“We want Vengeance! We want Vengeance!” Both girls chanted to general amusement.

“Fucking mad bitches!” the exasperated vigilante yelled as she headed into the armoury for peace and quiet.

“Focus, Nightmare!” Foxtail growled as Hit Girl stormed off into the armoury.

Foxtail smirked but she turned back to her two charges: Nightmare and Ravage. They were each practicing with Ninja-To blades. A few yards away, Shadow and Mist were sparring. Despite the seven-year age difference, Mist held her own as she was taller than Shadow which gave her a slight edge.

Splinter and Trojan were heading to the lower level along with Psyche and Wildcat. They were each wearing shorts and t-shirts for some intensive sparring on the mat in the Exercise Room. Splinter was teaching Wildcat and Trojan the art of unconventional fighting. Psyche was already skilled but she was happy to learn anything new that Splinter may have picked up in his time with the Russians. Psyche wanted to be ‘bad-ass’ in every way possible, despite her tender age. The veteran *Predator* was very aware that she had never completed her training so she was determined to catch up with her best friend Saoirse.

And then overtake her.

An hour later

Hit Girl and Battle Guy had just returned from Safehouse E.

While Battle Guy headed back to his Command Center, Hit Girl decided to check on the kids below decks. She veered past Shadow and Mist who were still at it, sweat flying as both young women span across the mat. Foxtail was pointing out various factors that related to each of the women’s unique fighting styles. One of the key training methods within *Fusion* was encouraging each member to develop their own way of fighting. As well as allowing each person to fight in a way which matched their size, abilities, and weapons, it also kept potential enemies guessing and made attacking *Fusion* a decidedly iffy proposition.

As she reached the bottom of the steel steps, Hit Girl could see four very active individuals engaged in a fight ‘to the death’ – well, to exhaustion if nothing else. Wildcat was just picking herself up off the mat. Her face was very red and sweat poured from the eleven-year-old. The twelve-year-old Splinter was smirking as he limbered up to reattack Wildcat. The ten-year-old Psyche was terrorising the almost twelve-year-old Trojan. As was usual, Psyche’s clothing was soaked; she always went to one-hundred-and-ten percent when fighting, even when simply sparring. Trojan was maturing fast

and he had strength in his arms and legs plus a weight and height advantage over the diminutive Psyche.

To get past that advantage, Psyche had her more advanced skill set. Trojan was very keen to learn anything which might make him a deadlier adversary in combat. After the had boy literally dived to Wildcat's rescue in Gibraltar and almost died, his kudos had leapt within *Fusion*. Together with his partner, Wildcat, he was a force to be reckoned with and Hit Girl would fight alongside him any day, just as she would with any member of *Fusion*.

Nobody got a free ride. Everybody earned their spurs in *Fusion*. In most cases, they earned them the hard way, in combat, against overriding odds. The fight at the Chicago Silos had shown the world what *Fusion* could accomplish against the most extreme odds. Some sites on the internet were even ranking *Fusion* among the world's elite special forces – now that was an accolade worth fighting for but Hit Girl would never put her organisation above the brave men and women who kept entire countries safe; *Fusion* only had a city to keep safe.

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As Hit Girl entered the Exercise Room, she smiled at Wildcat's excessively vulgar language which was almost equally matched by the insults streaming from the ten-year-old's sewer of a mouth. The fighting was hard and I noticed a bruise on Megan's upper right arm. Trojan smiled in my direction but Psyche was ready and she took advantage of his momentary lapse of concentration and threw him down to the mat.

"Fucking bitch!" he breathed as he jumped straight back up and went for the younger girl but as he came close to Splinter he nudged his friend on the back.

The two boys swapped places and Psyche found herself facing off with Splinter while Wildcat smirked at her boyfriend. Trojan had long ago got over his aversion to hitting his girlfriend and he had no qualms in hitting her where it hurt! Conversely, Wildcat would rarely go near his lower regions – except, of course, when they were in bed . . . together.

Splinter towered over Psyche and he *did* have real muscle. He could snap Psyche in two if he so wished and Psyche knew it. Splinter would also fight dirty. He rarely fought dirty with his friends in case he hurt them. He reserved it mainly for Hit Girl, Psyche, and Foxtail. They were trained for it while the others were still learning.

From Hit Girl's point of view, she enjoyed watching the two expert streetfighters scrap. The fighting often got very wild and a referee was usually required to prevent serious injury.

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Splinter and Psyche circled each other, neither taking their eyes off one another's eyes for even a second.

Both searched for a tell-tale which would telegraph their opponents next move. Both streetfighters were so advanced that neither could possibly guess which move or action might be selected from potentially hundreds.

"Make your move, dunderhead!" Psyche suggested.

"I'd say 'ladies first', but you are no fucking lady!" Splinter retorted.

"Okay, pussies first, eh, Splinter . . ."

“Off you go, then . . . or are you scared I might hurt the little girl?”

“The only scared bitch here, is you. Потеряли свои яички?”

“My testicles are fine, thanks. How are yours?”

“Hanging low, bitch!” Psyche chuckled as she drove forwards a fraction of a second before Splinter.

Psyche twisted and slid along the mat taking Splinter’s feet from under him . . . only he was ready and he dived into a roll before coming back up behind Psyche. She scowled but quickly flipped over backwards and kicked Splinter in the chest – at least that was her plan. Splinter caught one ankle and then grabbed hold of Psyche’s waistband and flung her across the mat where she crashed into Wildcat and both fell into a heap in the corner.

“Time out!” Hit Girl announced as Psyche pushed Wildcat off to one side. She was seething with anger.

“Go fuck yourself, ref – that fucker’s going down!” Psyche growled and her gunmetal-blue eyes flashed dangerously.

Hit Girl just shrugged and she stood back, her hands raised in a ‘have it your own way’ position.

“Назад для получения дополнительной, маленькая девочка?” Splinter chuckled. {“*Back for more, little girl?*”}

“Я возьму все, что вы можете блюдо, вы чертовски киску!” Psyche retorted with venom in her voice. {“*I’ll take whatever you can dish out, you fucking pussy!*”}

Psyche was pissed and that would probably be her downfall – possibly.

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Wildcat was not happy as she watched her niece throw herself around the mat. She knew that Psyche never backed down and not against a boy. Splinter was provoking Psyche and Wildcat was worried that Psyche might take things too far. Psyche and Splinter were fairly evenly matched. Psyche had the advantage of better training, but Splinter had strength and brawn on his side. Both were also known to go too far in sparring.

Wildcat took a moment to glare at Hit Girl who just shrugged – ‘what?’. Hit Girl should have stopped the fight, but no, she *had* to let it play out and somebody was going to get hurt . . . Wildcat looked over at Foxtail somewhat pointedly. Foxtail grimaced but otherwise did nothing to stop the fight. The hand to hand fighting was getting more and more advanced as the minutes passed. Both fighters were getting very close to exhaustion and that meant they would go to any lengths to end the fight.

Psyche allowed herself to be flipped over but she fainted and Splinter found himself in her ‘kill zone’ and he knew it.

“Sayonara, motherfucker!” Psyche growled as she kneed Splinter in the balls and followed through with a punch to the stomach.

Splinter went down, not knowing where to put his hands. He was breathing through the pain but he stayed down.

“Потеряли свои яички?” Psyche chuckled. {“*How’re your testicles?*”}

“They . . . sore . . . ouch!” Splinter grimaced in response as Psyche helped him up off the mat and over to a chair where she handed him an icepack with a big smirk on her face.

The following morning

Thursday, 16th June

North Park Elementary School

Anne-Marie was in a big rush that morning.

She was late – gossiping with her friends and she scrambled to sort out her books at her locker. She pulled all her homework out of her bag and thrust it into her locker to be sorted later. Several items fell to the floor which she quickly swept up and stuffed into her locker before she slammed it shut and locked it.

She ran off to her first lesson of the day.

Later that morning

“You think it’s real?”

“No idea . . .”

“It *can’t* be real.”

“But what if it *is* real?”

“If it *is* real then it means that somebody in this school is a member of *Fusion*.”

“That would be *so* cool!”

“I’ve never heard of this one, though. Maybe it *is* a fake ID . . .”

“A new vigilante, maybe?”

“Let’s see it again . . .”

The card was a dark blue all over and it was the normal size for an ID card. At the bottom left was a QR code. Above that, there was an inverted stripe like that worn by a Private First Class in the US Marine Corps. Over to the right and taking up most of the right half of the card was the easily recognisable symbol used by *Fusion*. To the right of that was a code: ‘SC01’. Above the symbol was another code: ‘FUSION-887436-9862-AHIU’. Finally, at the bottom right was a single word: ‘ROGUE’.

“Where’d you say you found it?”

“By the lockers.”

“What do we do with it?”

“I have no idea.”

A little over five weeks previously

Toulouse, France

It was time to end it. Shadow kicked out and she caught the blonde girl in the left thigh; she staggered and Shadow brought the razor-sharp tip of her bō-staff around and she rammed the blade into the girl's chest, just below her left lung. The girl froze in shock at the invasion of her body and she dropped her weapon. It clattered to the floor as the girl quickly sank to her knees, her eyes wide with the pain as Shadow pulled her blade out and rammed the other end of the bō-staff into the red-haired girl's side.

That girl fell beside her fellow *Predator* in a pool of blood.

The Present

Friday, 17th June

Safehouse Q

Chatham Road

No matter how much she tried, Chloe struggled to maintain a neutral expression around the girls who had just left the hospital that morning.

The guilt that she felt every time she saw them was palpable. Chloe had no idea if the girls had noticed her guilt and that just made things worse. Finally, it was Sky that voiced Chloe's worst fear that Friday afternoon.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

"Me, what?" Chloe asked defensively and way too obviously.

"You are Shadow; you did this," Sky said as she pulled up her t-shirt and exposed the slightly off vertical scar that was prominently visible on her left side and which was about six inches in length.

"Why would you think that?"

"Oh, come on! Neither you, Chloe, nor us are *that* stupid. We can almost touch the guilt that you're feeling and every day, since that day we met in the hospital, we see the remorse in your expressions."

"I did not want to do it . . . only, I had no choice."

Tears began to pour down Chloe's cheeks. Sky smiled and sat down beside Chloe, an arm around the distraught fifteen-year-old's shoulder. She was joined by her twin sister, Christina.

"We've had many weeks to think about what happened, ever since that night in France, and we've come to the only sensible conclusion: you had *no* other choice."

Chloe looked up at the two girls and smiled.

"Really?"

Sky looked up at Mindy who nodded.

"Chloe – I told you," Mindy explained. "Nobody blames you; there was nothing else that you could have done. These girls have forgiven you; you have given them a new life."

The twins now sported near identical long dark brown hair. Sky had been the one to sport fiery-red hair that day and her sister, Christina had had the blonde hair. The dye had been removed during their lengthy stay in hospital and they were both happy to remain their natural colour.

“So,” Christina began. “What sort of new life can we expect?”

Mindy smiled at the two fifteen-year-olds knowing that they had already worked out that if Chloe was Shadow, then I would have to be . . .

“That is entirely up to you both.”

“Considering our lack of any other skills, would we join *you*, Hit Girl, and your *Fusion*?” Sky asked with a grin.

“Only if you wanted.”

“I, for one, aren’t all that keen on Chicago . . .” Christina ventured.

“The place sucks,” Sky admitted and Chloe laughed.

“Anywhere in particular?” Mindy asked tentatively.

“We have some ideas.”

That evening

Glenview

“*What* are you watching?”

Anne-Marie was sprawled on the living room floor and the eight-year-old barely looked up from the TV.

“Dance Moms.”

“What?”

“It’s awesome!” Anne-Marie squealed. “You’d love it.”

“You’d never get *me* dancing in next to nothing . . . like that – it’s indecent!”

“You’ve worn a lot less!” Anne-Marie reminded her sister who blushed involuntarily.

“That is *so* not me,” Stephanie persisted.

“Stranger things have happened,” Anne-Marie commented with a giggle.