

An unknown location in the USA

Early June, 2014

Stephanie was led into the Head Instructor's office. She stopped the requisite distance before the desk and she looked nowhere but straight ahead - she knew the drill.

"Walker!"

"Sir!"

"We have something nice for you - well, 'nice' may not be your first reaction. . ." the bastard chuckled heartily before he continued.

"You're off to Virginia."

Virginia?

The State of Virginia

About forty miles, east-south-east of Richmond

Stephanie had absolutely no idea where she was.

She had spent almost two hours in the back of a C-130J Super Hercules, enduring the incessant roar of the four Rolls-Royce AE 2199D3 turboprop engines as the all but empty transport aircraft cruised at about 348 knots on an easterly heading. The landing had been rough and the deceleration spectacular. As the aircraft taxied to a stop, the rear ramp lowered. A few minutes later, a man in camouflage fatigues which bore no rank ascended the ramp and he beckoned for the eight-year-old girl to follow him. At the bottom of the ramp, the man pointed into some trees.

"Do you see that orange marker?"

"Yes, sir."

"There are others: follow them - DO NOT DEVIATE - after about a mile, you will find a hut. Inside the hut will be your kit - get changed, rest, get something to eat. The exercise has a start time which you will find on the instructions provided with your kit. Get going, girl - I would advise you to keep up a fast pace!"

The man chuckled as Stephanie began to run, fast, towards the orange marker at the treeline. She briefly looked behind her and she saw a long runway which pointed off towards some water. The airfield was otherwise surrounded by trees.

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Stephanie was worried as she found herself running hard down the side of a tarmac road with trees either side of her. She ran past a couple of large buildings with cars parked outside but she saw no people. It was humid but under the trees, she felt cold, and she would have shivered had she not been perspiring from the running. The weather was not the best and there was a slight drizzle. Her

trainers were soaked within a minute as she splashed through muddy puddles and her joggers were getting heavier and heavier as they absorbed more and more water and mud.

After running through more dense woodland and getting wetter and colder, she finally reached a T-junction with an orange marker which indicated she should turn left, which she did, and then very soon, she turned right and was much relieved to find herself outside a small wooden hut in a much larger clearing amongst the trees.

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As Stephanie tentatively pushed open the door to the wood hut, she tensed up, ready for any attack on her person.

The hut was cosy - a fire was lit in the stone fireplace which provided much needed warmth to the young girl. After a brief pause beside the fire to warm her hands, Stephanie moved further into the hut where she found a single camp bed, a small kitchen that consisted of a sink, a microwave, and a kettle. Beyond that, there was a surprisingly modern bathroom with an electric shower, sink, and a toilet.

The main open-plan area in the hut, which formed the living space, kitchen, and bedroom was lit by indirect spotlights and the three small windows had shutters closed over them. Stephanie closed and locked the door before she went over to a single wooden table that had two chairs. On the table was a single piece of paper with typed instructions.

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Exercise Ratchet

The exercise will begin at 1900hrs.

At that time, you will be expected to be located at the rally point: Point Ratchet, which is a 0.9-mile hike away (as shown on attached map). Further instructions will be received at that time. The exercise will be physically strenuous and will have very few limits, other than a few basic safety factors.

You will find the necessary fatigues, boots, and weapons in your accommodation. Take the spare time to familiarise yourself with the map and your weapons. You are advised to get as much rest as possible as the exercise is not over until it's over.

NOTE: *As of 1920hrs, you may be attacked at **ANY** time, **WITHOUT** warning. You will use any skills or weapons in your possession, or those which you may acquire during the exercise.*

*Emergency Code Phrase is: **BLACK DEATH**.*

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Stephanie was suddenly very annoyed as she looked up at the clock on the wall above the fireplace; it was a little after eleven in the

morning! Those fucking bastards; there had been no need to run - none . . . at . . . all! All the way to the hut, Stephanie had been sure that she was being watched - those cocky bastards were probably laughing at her, every damn minute of the run.

Stephanie kicked off her ruined trainers and then pulled off her dripping joggers along with her equally soggy shorts and underwear. The sweat-top and t-shirt joined the pile of dirty clothes as Stephanie made her way to the shower.

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Twenty minutes later, a much revitalised - and much cleaner - Stephanie reappeared wrapped in a dark green towel. She stopped at the camp bed. Laid out with military precision was her kit. She pulled on black underwear, a black T-shirt, black combat trousers, and black socks. The trousers were supplied with a webbing belt which she quickly fitted through the loops. She grabbed up the remainder of the gear, except for the boots, and then headed over to the table.

She placed down a shoulder holster, which would allow a small pistol to hang under her left arm. Space for two spare magazines was allowed under her right arm. The pistol was a Smith & Wesson M&P 22 Compact. Stephanie checked through the items before her but found no magazines and the pistol was unloaded with no round in the breech. She frowned but assumed that she would receive ammunition at the rally point. She strapped on the holster, then an eight-inch combat knife was inserted vertically into a scabbard mounted on the shoulder holster strap and aligned between her shoulder blades. A black combat jacket and a black woollen cap completed the ensemble.

After pulling on the waterproof, light-weight walking boots, Stephanie heated up a can of tomato soup in the microwave and buttered several slices of white bread. She sat down on a chair at the table and slowly consumed her meal. The hot shower, the soup, and the fire, all combined to warm her body ready for the night's action.

After the meal, Stephanie double-checked the locked door before she lay down on the camp bed and the young girl quickly fell asleep.

1850

Point Ratchet

The instructor smirked as he saw the diminutive girl approach.

He was impressed by her turnout. She was dressed correctly and she was black from head to toe. Her blonde hair was hidden under the woollen cap, and her pale face had been dulled down with camouflage face cream. The kid actually appeared deadly which surprised him.

"Okay, Walker. You have two targets for tonight. Target number one, is codenamed Fury. Target number two, is codenamed Blaze. You will find your way blocked by other targets of opportunity. If you are able to take down both targets, the exercise ends. The exercise will also end if one of the targets takes down you and the other target. You have the map - DO NOT go past the marked boundaries. Understand, so far?"

"Yes, sir."

"You will find caches of equipment out there which you can make use of, as you see fit. The caches will include food. Here are three loaded magazines for you - rubber bullets. If you encounter anybody wearing a white armband - ignore them as they are neutral umpires. There is no set time limit but there will be four timeouts of one hour each, per twenty-four-hour period. The first will be at 0600, tomorrow morning. Good luck, Psyche - you have ten minutes to get going before you are open to attack."

"Thank you, sir."

With that, Stephanie ran off into the trees.

There was not long to wait as a single blast of an air horn echoed around the woods.

Stephanie prepared herself for action as she headed deeper into the woods. She kept off both the paths and the roads, preferring the safety and comfort of the undergrowth. Her short stature assisted the eight-year-old to hide within the greenery which flourished in the cold winter's night.

Stephanie thought about her instructions. She had two targets that had to be taken down - not to mention God only knew how many supernumeraries to make her life more difficult. She had a distinct feeling that there would be no silver medal for second place - besides, Psyche only went for gold.

Snap!

Stephanie braced up at the sound - it was close.

The boy was fourteen and he had only been a Phase 3 *Predator* for a very short time.

The exercise was to be part of his training and if he did well, he would be advanced in his training - if he failed . . . he did not want to fail. He, and fourteen other *Predators* had arrived at the training area, the previous afternoon. All were either senior Phase 2 or early Phase 3. They had been issued combat clothing and weapons. Then had come the briefing and the issuing of maps and supplies.

He was determined to succeed - he *had* to succeed. . .

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The undergrowth was thick and he had had to jump over a fallen tree trunk. He had heard the branch snap beneath his boot. He froze and quickly scanned all around him. Nothing - he was safe. . .

No - something was there . . . in the darkness. It was small - maybe a wild animal . . . it was! The 'animal' flew at him just as he drew his pistol. But his final sight was of the broad smile of his attacker and the butt of a pistol as it struck his left temple.

Stephanie frisked the unconscious boy and she liberated a second knife, three more magazines of rubber bullets, and his pistol.

She decided against taking the pistol as it was a large frame Glock and she did not need the extra weight, so she disassembled the weapon and scattered the parts all around her. Then, just for kicks, she kicked the boy between the legs and quickly moved off, away from the 'kill'. About a hundred yards to the west, she stopped by a tree, and she smiled. There, at the base, was a small pack.

After a quick check for tripwires or other booby-traps, she opened the pack and found a torch, three chocolate bars, and most importantly, a litre of water. After a quick swig of refreshing water, Stephanie slung the pack over her shoulders and headed off into the trees.

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About half an hour later, Stephanie turned as she heard pounding behind her and it became obvious that somebody was blindly running through the trees with reckless abandon. Their loss, she thought; an easy mark! Stephanie slipped behind a tree and she became instantly invisible to anybody running headlong through a forest in the dead of night. As the runner came closer, she could hear . . . sobbing?

At the very last moment, just as the runner made to run past Stephanie's tree, Stephanie stuck out her left arm and the runner impacted the arm with her face and was flipped over onto her back. The scream had identified the runner as a girl - the size meant a short girl. Stephanie seized the girl and dragged her fifty yards to the east to avoid any immediate attack from anybody who had heard the girl's scream. The girl was wearing near identical clothing as Stephanie was but something did not seem right and on closer inspection, the girl was completely unarmed.

"Stop snivelling, you little bitch, or I'll throw you to the fucking wolves!" Stephanie hissed into the girl's ear.

The girl immediately stopped snivelling and looked up at her captor.

"Walker?"

Stephanie dropped the girl in surprise.

"Electra?"

"What the fucking hell are you doing here, Electra?"

"I don't know. They told me to board a plane and then I found myself handed a load of clothes and they told me to change. They threw me out of a car, just a few minutes ago. The darkness scared me - I ran."

"Okay - still doesn't explain your presence."

"I was ordered to give this to you," Electra said as she passed over a sealed envelope.

Stephanie grabbed the envelope, shoving it into a pocket, then she grabbed hold of Electra and they both ran two hundred yards or so to the north to where there was denser woodland. There, Stephanie stopped and they both sat down beneath a large fir tree. Stephanie shielded the torch before she turned it on and she looked at the envelope. The envelope was dark grey - ignoring the mud and tears - and it had a single word written on the front, in red ink: 'PSYCHE'. Stephanie ripped open the envelope. Inside, there was a single sheet of paper which she unfolded and then she began to read the bold, printed text.

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If you are PSYCHE, continue to read this document.

If you are NOT then you are ordered to read NO FURTHER and you are further ordered to KILL the courier.

...#...

EYES ONLY: PSYCHE

1: It has been determined that the difficulty of your task should be increased.

2: You will take immediate responsibility for ELECTRA HAIG.

3: If you complete the exercise without ELECTRA HAIG, you will be deemed to have failed the exercise.

4: If ELECTRA HAIG is taken down, you will be deemed to have failed the exercise.

5: Failure to protect ELECTRA HAIG will affect your future as a PREDATOR.

6: You may make use of ELECTRA HAIG as you see fit.

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Stephanie looked over at Electra as she turned off the torch.

'Those fucking bastards!' she thought.

"You are one lucky bitch, Electra," Stephanie whispered. "If you had found somebody else, they would have killed you. Instead, I have to lump your sorry arse about for the duration of the exercise!"

"Sorry."

"Don't be - we are at the whim of some sick bastards. Let me check-out your kit."

Stephanie stuffed the envelope back into a pocket and she ran her hands over Electra's combat trousers and jacket. Everything was being worn correctly and the boots were properly secured. The only issue was Electra's pale-skinned face which shone like a beacon, so Stephanie dug out some face cream and she applied it to the younger girl's face after removing her glasses.

"Can you see anything without those things?"

"Not really."

Stephanie chuckled and gave the girl a hug.

"You stick with me, kid - I'll get us both through this. Whatever you do, stay quiet, and you do exactly as I tell you."

"I promise. I won't let you down."

"You'll do *anything* I say?"

"Anything."

Sometime later. . .

Electra complicated things, no end!

Stephanie had water and she had food, but unless she could secure more, she would have to share what she had - even if she was *not* responsible for the girl, Stephanie would have still fed her and helped her.

"Right, you stick to me like fucking glue. I duck, you duck. I dive to the ground, you follow like your fucking life depends on it - 'cause it does."

"I understand. I'll do my best."

"Let's move on - we have some fucking bastards to take down."

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It was getting darker and colder as the evening turned into night. The rain was increasing too just to make everything that little bit more miserable.

Towards ten o'clock, Stephanie froze and she groaned as Electra cannoned into her from behind. Before Electra could start to

apologise, Stephanie placed a finger to the younger girl's lips. She then pointed into the darkness and Electra stared ahead before she nodded in understanding.

"I have an idea but you are *not* going to like it," Stephanie whispered.

"Don't worry; I've not liked very much of what has happened to me since I was taken four months ago."

"I'll go gentle, I promise."

"I trust you, Stephanie."

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"Are you trying to get me killed?"

"Sweetheart, if I wanted you dead, I would have snapped your pretty little neck, hours ago. . ."

"I feel so much safer!" Electra growled.

"You got something better to be doing, right now?"

"Nothing that I can think of. . ."

"Get out there and start making a little noise - remember, a *little* noise."

"Okay - I'll do it."

Electra swallowed hard and stepped out onto a muddy path where she took a deep breath and looked in the darkness to where a shadow was crouched down.

"Oh, shit!" she exclaimed, just enough for the shadow to hear her and stand up.

Electra turned to run as the shadow bolted in her direction. The shadow did not get anywhere near her . . . instead, the shadow suddenly fell forwards and hit the mud. The shadow was a girl - about thirteen-years-old and very skilled but all her training seemed to vanish as her face was shoved into the mud by a size two boot. She fought to breath as mud went up her nose and into her mouth. Her legs kicked, trying to get purchase in the mud. Her hands flailed trying to seek her assailant. Then she began to suffocate in the mud.

Electra could only stare as Stephanie pushed down harder on her boot and hence the girl. The struggling began to get more spasmodic as the girl ingested more mud. Electra began to shake as she watched Stephanie kill the girl - Electra had witnessed a lot in the previous four months but never a murder right before her very eyes. Stephanie removed her foot after another minute and looked over at Electra.

"It had to be done - I want them to know that I will *not* be fucked with."

"I think I understand," Electra whispered as her shaking turned into sobbing.

"No - please, Electra; you need to fucking toughen up."

Electra sank down to the mud beside the dead girl.

"Ok - we need to talk. Can we just get the fuck away from the scene of the crime?"

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Half an hour later, they both found some deep undergrowth and after Stephanie setup some 'early warning' traps, she sat down opposite Electra.

"You're a Yellow, right?"

"Yes - I was. . ."

"Somebody seems to think that you are more than that - can't think why; as far as I am aware no Yellow has ever become anything more . . . except maybe dead. It seems that as I have been training you to protect yourself, some funny fucker decided to have me train you some more. Now, I am going to train you to look after yourself, and not just because that benefits me, but because I want to show those fuckers that Electra Haig is more than just cannon-fodder. You can be more, Electra - and I hope that being more means that you'll get the chance to live, to survive. One day, I will take this organisation down, you mark my words. But before I can do that, we need to get through this whatever it is."

Electra nodded.

"Now, let's get some rest - I hope you don't fucking snore!"

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It was very cold when Stephanie suddenly came awake. It was a little after four in the morning and the early strains of daylight were spreading through the woods. She carefully nudged Electra awake with a hand over her mouth.

"Morning," Stephanie whispered.

"Hi - I need to pee."

"Okay; so, do I - go pee over there and I'll keep watch," Stephanie said as she handed Electra a single tissue.

Once Electra had peed, wiped, and was struggling to pull up her underwear and trousers, Stephanie took one more look around before she slid down her own trousers and underwear. Electra giggled as Stephanie emptied her bladder into the mud, somewhat noisily.

"Stop it," Stephanie ordered as she grinned.

After the refreshing pee, they both shared an energy bar and took a long swig of water.

"We have two hours until the first timeout - we just need to last until then," Stephanie said and Electra looked hopeful.

Both girls froze as they heard a snapping sound and Stephanie dived forwards, a pistol in her hands. It looked like a boy and he approached their hiding place before he stopped, unzipped his trousers and pulled out his dick. There was another sound from a short distance away and something fast could be heard running through the trees - a rabbit. The boy shoved his dick back into his trousers and zipped back up before moving off towards a tree.

"This should be a good one!" Stephanie hissed into Electra's ear. "You stay hidden while I take him out."

Electra giggled quietly as Stephanie slid out of the undergrowth and closed the gap to where the boy, of maybe twelve years of age, was busy unzipping his trousers and reaching inside for his equipment. Stephanie was just a foot away when the boy unleashed a yellow torrent at the tree which he stood facing.

'What is it with boys and trees?' Stephanie thought to herself as she reached around the tree and while the boy was checking out his surroundings, she grabbed hold of his manhood, just as he was finishing his urination. The boy yelped.

"Make a sound and I fucking squeeze!" Stephanie hissed with an evil chuckle.

The boy froze, knowing that the small girl, who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, quite literally held all the cards.

"Not even a handful - you'll never impress the girls; maybe I should just cut your dick off . . . not that you'd really notice the difference . . . ewww!"

The boy's appendage was hardening - and getting bigger - as she grasped it and that fact freaked Stephanie out, no end.

"Stop it!" she ordered.

"I can't - it does that all on its own; maybe I think you're hot."

Stephanie growled as she felt her face getting very warm. With one hand occupied, she placed her pistol against his head. Don't fucking move.

"lectra!"

The seven-year-old bounded out from her hiding place and she scowled at what Stephanie was holding.

"Is he hard?"

"Yeah. . ." Stephanie growled back feeling just a little embarrassed. "Undo his belt and his trousers."

Electra followed instructions.

"Yank them down - take a knife to his boxers. . ."

Electra pulled the boy's trousers down to his ankles and cut off his boxer shorts, leaving him naked from the waist down. The boy was unable to run, so Stephanie released the boy's dick and wiped her hand on his thigh. She kept the pistol pointed at his head.

"Remove the rest, yourself - move!"

The boy reluctantly removed his upper clothing, dumping everything on the ground. Electra kept an eye on their surroundings while Stephanie kept her pistol pointed at the boy's head. When he was finished, she ordered him to remove his boots, trousers and socks. Once he was completely naked, she ordered him to spread his legs. Stephanie smirked as she ran the tip of her knife across his balls - his dick began to rapidly soften before her eyes. She back handed his equipment and as the boy fell to the ground, his hands between his legs, she placed the pistol at the back of his head.

"Run - now!"

The naked boy stood up, tears running down his face. He took one look at Stephanie's expression and he took off into the woods. Electra giggled for a moment, at least until she heard a gunshot and a scream.

"Okay - somebody is in that direction, so let's go this way," Stephanie suggested coldly after she had gathered some items from the boy's equipment. Electra now had her own small rucksack and some rations of her own, too.

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The siren blasted out at six am and they both dropped to the ground. Both girls were exhausted but due to the freezing morning, they cuddled together as they each bit into a chocolate bar.

"How much longer?" Electra demanded.

"God only knows. We've only taken down losers, so far."

Both girls slept until they heard the siren and they began to hike off into the woods together. For the next hour, they saw nobody but Electra was not enjoying the early morning walk in the woods.

"I can't do this," Electra moaned.

After a full hour of it, Stephanie was fed up with the moaning and the complaining - it had finally got to the point where Stephanie was having murderous thoughts and visions of slitting Electra's throat and dumping her body. When it really was too much, Stephanie stopped and quick as a flash, she pinned Electra to a convenient tree by that very same throat.

"Look, you little fuck: I'm sorry that your life is so shit. I'm sorry that you got taken at such a young age. I'm sorry that you're

stuck here with me in this hell hole. I'm sorry that our sodding lives are now intertwined."

Electra had tears streaming down her face as Stephanie spoke slowly and clearly mere inches from her face.

"You die, I die. I die, you die. We need to stick together to stay alive. I never wanted you here - I don't need you - nevertheless, I have no fucking choice but to lug your sorry arse around these godforsaken woods. Now the crunch question? Do you *want* to become what I am? Do you *want* to become a *Predator*? I have a feeling that is why they dumped you with me - so that I could train you."

Electra nodded and she wiped away her tears.

"Yes, Stephanie, I want to be like you. I want to walk the walk, talk the talk - please. . ."

Stephanie grimaced and then she slapped Electra hard across the face. Electra looked stunned; Stephanie had *never* hurt the girl up until that point.

"That's for complaining and making me into a bitch."