

Saturday, August 20th, 2016
Early Afternoon

Glenview - The British Sector

"Did you know she had a massive scar, Steph?" Kaitlin enquired over the video link.

Stephanie grimaced.

"Yes - I was there when she was wounded; I treated her. . ."

"With goddamn Duct Tape!" Electra exclaimed.

"I had nothing else to hand, but it stopped the bleeding and it kept your skinny arse alive."

"It did do that," Electra admitted.

"Electra won't tell us how she got the scar - she said it was too personal," Kaitlin said.

"Well, if Electra wants it kept a secret, then my lips are sealed," Stephanie commented.

"Tell them, Steph," Electra said.

"You sure?"

"Go ahead."

Anne-Marie, Danny, and Electra got comfortable in the bedroom while Kaitlin, Naomi, and Harper did the same, some 3,000 or so miles away.

"Well, you now know how Electra found herself in the middle of a *Predator* exercise - now, we go back to Virginia. . ."

Early June 2014

The State of Virginia

About forty miles, east-south-east of Richmond

Electra was very quiet for the next hour.

She kept rubbing her cheek where Stephanie had slapped her and sending dirty looks towards her mentor. Stephanie was oblivious to it as she kept a wary eye on her surroundings. She felt very tired, despite the short nap earlier. She was also very hungry but she did not dare dig into her food reserves any further until she was certain of being able to replenish the pitiful supplies she carried.

At least once she had had to stop Electra drinking too much. If she ran out of water, then she would dehydrate, not to mention that stopping to wee was also very dangerous - as that boy had discovered to his cost. Stephanie smiled at the recollection - it was the very first time that she had ever touched a boy down there. To be honest,

it had felt weird - very soft, but then it had hardened but was still soft; a conundrum. But a conundrum for another time.

"Electra, snap out of it - or you're going to get us both killed."

The girl nodded and smiled at Stephanie. A forced smile, but still a smile, nonetheless. Then, out of the blue, a girl dropped out of a nearby tree and kicked Electra to the ground before turning on Stephanie.

"Who the fuck, are you?" Stephanie demanded.

"They call me Fury. . ."

Stephanie grinned - *Target Number One!*

The girl was taller than Stephanie but dressed in a very similar fashion.

Stephanie ran her eyes across the other girl, checking and absorbing everything about her. She appeared to be about a year older than Stephanie, with an experienced air about her. Her kit was all in order, including her weapons.

'What was so special about Fury?' Stephanie wondered to herself as she slowly moved to put herself between her opposite number and Electra who was struggling back to her feet.

Fury carefully placed her feet down as she moved, keeping a set distance from Stephanie and her eyes could be seen darting around, taking in everything and maintaining a good situational awareness. Then she smirked and Stephanie caught the indicator of an attack - but only just in time as Fury lunged forwards with lightning speed and drove a fist into Stephanie's left shoulder.

Stephanie was angry at herself for getting caught out but it had only been a glancing blow and nothing more than a little pain. Stephanie responded, kicking out and missing but following through with a punch of her own which caught Fury on the left thigh.

..._...

Electra was in pain. She was tired. The sun was beginning to push its way through the trees but she was still cold. She was also very hungry and on top of everything, she was now very muddy and she had a wet arse. Stephanie was fighting the girl who had appeared out of a tree. The other girl was bigger than Stephanie, and that fact alone worried Electra. She was also very aware of another fact which sat squarely in her mind: if Fury beat Stephanie then Electra herself would be next.

While she could defeat the odd Yellow boy, who tried to hurt her, fighting properly against a skilled Phase 2 *Predator* was not even remotely on the cards. The idea was so remote that it sat squarely on the dark side of the fucking moon. As Electra watched her new

mentor fight, she watched taking in every movement, every punch, every kick, every word spoken, every insult passed. Watching and learning were something that Electra enjoyed. Normally, she would read books, but watching the real thing was unbeatable when it came to learning something new.

Stephanie was good, but Fury appeared better.

..._...

Stephanie went down into the mud and she struggled to regain her feet as she wiped the mud out of her eyes and her hair - her hat having come off much earlier in the fight. Stephanie knew that the fight had to end and soon - the noise was going to attract other interested parties and complicate things even further.

"Get up!" came a growl as Stephanie felt someone close by - Electra!

"I'm trying. . ."

Electra looked up at Fury as she closed on Stephanie, looking for the coup de grâce. Stephanie forced herself to stand but she slumped back down again - she was exhausted, but then so was Fury; the two girls had been fighting all out for over ten minutes. For whatever reason, Fury ignored the presumably insignificant Electra - to her cost, as Electra brought up the pistol which had been seized from the naked boy and she fired three shots into Fury's chest.

The older girl fell backwards with a yell but she quickly regained her feet and advanced on Electra who just froze and dropped the pistol, fear coursing through her. Electra fell backwards with her own yell of pain as Fury punched her hard in the chest. Electra was saved from any further harm when Stephanie kicked out and caught Fury on the right thigh. She followed through with a punch to the girl's abdomen and another to her groin. Fury doubled over in agony - then the siren went, signalling the end of the latest phase.

"Till later, bitch!" Fury growled as she hobbled off into the trees.

"Good fucking riddance!" Stephanie called after her.

By the time the siren went again, signalling the start of the next phase, Stephanie was feeling very low.

The pain. The bruises. The wet clothing. The mud. The hunger. It was all coming to a head and Stephanie was struggling against the tears that kept wanting to fall. She was dejected and unsure if she could survive the event. She knew full well that if she failed, then Electra would die. How could those fucking bastards put another's life on her shoulders - she was only eight-years-old for fuck's sake!

Stephanie had spent several minutes trying to compose herself. She had to survive or the past years of hell would have been for nothing. Electra was still pure; untainted by Urban Predator.

Stephanie was determined for the girl to survive - Stephane so wanted to do something right for once that did not involve killing. Electra was going to be her personal project. Electra was going to be Stephanie's way to shove one up the instructors' tight backsides. Electra was going to become a very special *Predator*.

..._...

"Are we going to get out of this alive?"

"Yes."

"You certain?"

"Electra, I *will* get you through this, I promise."

"Don't make a promise that you can't keep, Stephanie."

"This one I have no intention of breaking and I mean that."

Electra stopped and looked up at Stephanie.

"I believe you, Steph."

Then, Electra continued walking.

'Well done, Steph - way to make promises you can't keep!', Stephanie thought to herself.

Ninety minutes later, Stephanie had cause to be haunted by that very thought.

Fury was in a fury.

The ambush had been almost perfect and for a moment, Stephanie and Electra had had the upper hand - until Fury changed tactics and she went after Electra, knowing that Stephanie would have to protect her and thus let her guard down.

It was like fighting with a millstone around her neck. She could take Fury, but having to defend Electra at the same time. Stephanie's mental agility was stressed to breaking point as she watched for Fury's attacks and she watched for Electra. Then, the moment Fury changed tactics and went for Electra, Stephanie snapped. Her exhaustion was starting to take its toll on her mind and she struggled to process everything that her senses were telling her.

Then, in a single lapse, everything fell apart when Stephanie went down onto the ground, just as Fury span, her short sword sweeping in an arc downwards. Electra screamed and she fell backwards as the sword very briefly came in contact with the front of her body. The high-pitched screaming continued as the seven-year-old girl clasped her chest, rolling in the mud.

Stephanie leapt back to her feet and she grabbed up a fallen billy club from the mud - her mind was filled with the screaming Electra

and what might happen if she died. For some reason, Stephanie found herself *caring* about the young girl and that gave her a feral edge in the fight as she struck out at Fury, parrying every strike from the sword with the club - which was getting very dented, to say the least, and probably would not last all that much longer.

With care and deft movements, Stephanie moved the fight closer to the fallen Electra and then, just as Fury moved into a very favourable position, Stephanie lunged forwards and Fury stepped to one side . . . but her foot came down onto Electra's left leg and Fury fell backwards. Stephanie kicked out, catching the girl on the jaw, momentarily stunning her. Fury dropped her sword as she fell to the ground. The girl scrambled to grab it but she screamed out as a knife was driven through the back of her hand and down into the earth.

Fury screamed. Electra screamed harder. Stephanie stared at the blade and the hand which held it. Electra released the blade and fell backwards cradling her torso again. Stephanie was stunned - but for a totally different reason. Electra, despite her injuries, had pulled a blade from her belt and she had stabbed Fury in her right hand, preventing the other girl from regaining the sword.

Stephanie picked up the sword and she was about to run it through Fury's still beating heart when bullets began to whizz past her head. She turned to see a large boy running towards her, a pistol in his hand. She grabbed hold of Electra, dragging her to her feet, and stowing the sword in her own webbing. She pulled her own pistol and fired off several rounds in the direction of the boy, putting his head down.

With a last kick at Fury, the two girls moved off into the denser undergrowth.

..._...

Stephanie dragged the girl through the woods.

Electra was stumbling, barely making sounds as her body struggled to cope with the trauma she had just endured. Stephanie knew that she could not go on forever, dragging a wounded seven-year-old through the woods of Virginia. It took a while longer to find a thicket where she could examine Electra in peace. She placed the young girl down and then began to remove Electra's webbing.

"No. . ."

Electra made feeble efforts at pushing away Stephanie's hands.

"We need to check your wound, 'lectra - hands off!"

Ignoring Electra's pathetic efforts, Stephanie pulled off Electra's webbing and then her upper clothing.

"Crap!" Stephanie announced to nobody in particular.

The wound was *long* - but mercifully, it was *not* very deep; just a flesh wound. Stephanie pulled down Electra's trousers and underwear to follow the wound. The wound extended from just above Electra's right breast, and down to her left thigh, passing just below her belly button. The wound seeped blood and the surrounding skin was covered in the same dried substance.

Stephanie had no wound dressings, so she did the next best thing. She poured water on the wound to wash it out - Electra screamed - before Stephanie dug into her backpack and produced a roll of the ubiquitous Duct Tape. Since becoming a *Predator*, Stephanie had learnt to love the silver fabric tape - you could secure people with it, secure explosives to a building with it, even waterproof your lunch with it. Stephanie firmly believed in the philosophy where if a roll of Duct Tape failed to fix the problem, you simply hadn't used enough of the stuff.

Electra's eyes went wide as she heard the tape being ripped off the roll and she began to complain bitterly as Stephanie went ahead and secured Electra's wound with the fabric tape from top to bottom, and she then added a few more strips at various strategic points for good measure. Finally, Stephanie stood back to contemplate her feat of medicine.

"Well, you won't bleed to death - and no shit should get into the wound either," Stephanie explained with a satisfied expression on her face.

Electra wiped away her tears and she groaned as she looked down her body.

"You taped me up?"

"Yup."

"With Duct Tape."

"A little unorthodox, I will admit, but the end result is good - you're going to have a scar that the boys will really like, but you're going to live."

"It hurts. . . ." Electra said as the tears started again.

"Damn right it will, but you've just got to put up with the pain. We have a task to complete, you and I."

"I can't. . . ."

"You have to - or we both die. Do you want to die?"

"No," Electra replied after a short pause.

"Well, let's get you dressed - you can't wonder around the woods with your fanny hanging out, now, can you?"

..._...

They had barely gone a hundred yards when a man appeared; he wore a white armband.

"Can she continue?" he asked as he looked over at Electra.

'Shall I put your dog down?' - that was how it had come across to Stephanie and she bristled with hate and anger.

"Fuck you! We're *both* able to continue - you are *not* killing either of us, this day."

The umpire grinned.

"Well, I applaud you for that. Due to Haig's wound and to your exceptional behaviour, so far, not to mention the behaviour of *some* of the other participants, you are all being granted an eight-hour stand down. A vehicle will be coming by when the siren goes at 16:00 to take you both back to your accommodation. You will find proper medical supplies awaiting you. The exercise recommences at midnight."

The man headed off into the trees, and five minutes later the siren blew. A camouflaged Humvee pulled up almost immediately and Stephanie pushed Electra and all their equipment into the back. Electra was sobbing almost uncontrollably with the pain as the vehicle bucked and rolled over the rough terrain.

The ride was over within three minutes as they were dumped, along with their kit, outside the hut where Stephanie had begun the whole escapade the previous morning.

16:08

When Stephanie entered the hut, she froze and quickly pulled out her pistol.

"Come out, with your hands in the air!" she called out.

She heard shuffling and then she was startled to see a small boy appear, he was about the same age as Electra, but with fiery red hair. He also wore yellow joggers with a matching sweatshirt.

"Hi, Electra," he said with a wave of his hand.

Stephanie scowled.

"Hi, Billy," Electra said before she collapsed onto the floor.

Stephanie swore as she holstered her pistol.

"What. . .?"

"Go lock the fucking door!" Stephanie ordered and she watched as the boy did as he was told. "Go turn on the shower, then make sure the kettle is full and put it on."

The boy followed instructions as Stephanie set to work stripping every item of clothing off the unconscious girl. By the time the boy had returned, Electra was naked and Stephanie was pulling off the. . .

"You used Duct Tape on her?" Billy asked as he stared at the wound.

"All I had - the wound isn't all bad, but it's going to hurt like hell for a while."

"What happened?"

"Fury happened. That bitch used that sword to slash her. I'm going to fucking kill the fucking bitch!"

Stephanie began to strip off her own kit as she talked. Once she was down to her T-shirt and knickers, she enlisted the not-so-eager Yellow to assist her with carrying Electra into the bathroom and then set to work washing the girl from head to toe. The camo-cream on her face took some work and Stephanie was glad that the girl was unconscious while the decidedly extensive wound was cleaned.

Once Electra was tucked up in the bed with fresh dressings on her wounds, Stephanie stripped off completely and took a shower herself. The hot water eased her aching muscles and while it made her feel better, it also made her feel drowsy. Once she had finished, she dried off and pulled on her decidedly unappealing underwear and settled down on a blanket to get some much-needed, uninterrupted, sleep.

"Rest up, kid - wake me up at nine; unless Electra wakes, then wake me."

The Yellow nodded his head and Stephanie was asleep within seconds.

Two miles away. . .

Fury was very unhappy as she carefully applied a bandage to her right hand after enjoying a hot shower.

It had been a clean wound; the blade had missed every bone in her hand, so it was expected to heal fully - in time. The wound would hamper the way she fought and she still had two primary targets to take down. Psyche had successfully put her down, despite her having to protect that Yellow welp.

Psyche! What a fucking name! The girl had passed up the chance to kill her to save herself and that Yellow welp. Her mistake, Fury was determined to put that bitch down, permanently. Fury was the best, which was why she was there. Blaze was obviously the best from his facility, and Psyche the best from hers - from the Phase 2 level, at least.

After getting something to eat, Fury lay down to get some much-needed rest.

21:00

Stephanie came awake as she felt a hand on her shoulder.

Then there was a scream as Stephanie flipped the hand's owner onto his back on the floor before twisting the wrist.

"Stephanie!"

Stephanie stopped and looked around. She released the boy's wrist and stood back. She then looked over at the glaring seven-year-old on the camp-bed.

"Sorry, kid - Billy, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Electra, are you okay?" Stephanie asked.

"Yes, I feel a lot better, despite the pain. Looks better without the Duct Tape, too."

Electra forced a smile but Stephanie could see the pain in the young girl's eyes.

"Let's get something to eat before we have to get kitted up and back out there."

Stephanie headed into the kitchen to make some soup, tea, and toast. Billy followed her.

"Why do you care? You're a Phase 2 and she's just a Yellow, like me."

"A very good question, Billy. I have no damn idea - but some fucker threw that young girl into this fucking exercise and I have to keep her alive. She might be a Yellow, but she's still a human being and so are you."

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"Treating *me* like a human being."

Stephanie smiled at the boy as she carried three sets of hot soup over to the table before she helped Electra to sit up in the camp-bed.

"Drink this - all of it!" Stephanie ordered as she handed the girl the steaming mug of tomato soup. "You're going to need your strength. You're going to eat two slices of toast, as well as drink a mug of tea."

"You trying to fatten me up?"

"Just trying to keep you alive."

"She cares, Electra," Billy offered.

"I know - weird, huh?"

23:40

Electra was feeling a lot better having had some more food and drink - plus some painkillers.

Stephanie checked over every inch of Electra for about the tenth time, which was well past the point of annoying for the girl. Billy was actually laughing as Stephanie applied the finishing touches to Electra's face paint.

"Stop laughing, Billy!"

"You'd better listen to her, Billy - she stabbed and shot a girl, yesterday."

"She did?"

"Oh, yeah - she's a bad-ass!"

By the time the siren went off, twenty minutes later, both girls were deep in the pitch-dark woods.

Revitalised by eight hours of rest, the two young girls concocted plan after plan for what might lay ahead of them. They both knew that neither of them had laid eyes on Blaze - although Stephanie was fairly certain that he had been the large boy who had gone after them, preventing her from killing Fury.

That still rankled; she had been so close to taking out one of her primary targets - permanently. Nevertheless, Fury had been wounded - by Electra no less! Stephanie had mentioned the knife through the hand, but Electra couldn't really remember doing it.

"I just reacted, I think," was her reasoning.

"I'm glad you did or we could both be very dead."

"What's the difference between 'very dead' and just being 'dead'?" the ever-inquisitive girl asked.

"Nothing, I suppose," Stephanie replied.

There was a rumble of noise not too far away and Electra seized hold of Stephanie's left arm.

"It's just thunder. . ."

There was a flash of forked lightning and the heaven's opened, soaking both girls in minutes, despite the trees above them.

"Let go of me - let's get a move on; we need to be extra careful as we won't be able to hear anybody coming with so much rain pounding down."

"Which means that nobody will be able to hear us moving, either," Electra pointed out.

"Exactly - well done. . ."

Her mind was trying to figure out where her targets might be and what they might be doing. But, it seemed, one of her targets had taken the opportunity to alleviate that little conundrum. As appeared to be the trend, Electra was unceremoniously kicked off to one side.

"Aw, come on!" she yelled out indignantly as she hit the wet, oozing mud - again.

The boy ignored the insignificant little girl as he strode through the driving rain and he threw a punch at Stephanie.

Stephanie caught the fist and she twisted it but she missed the size 6 boot as the twelve-year-old boy kicked into her left thigh sending her splatting into the mud beside the very unhappy Electra.

"Get up!" Electra exclaimed as she wiped the rain from her face.

"I am - for fuck's sake!" Stephanie growled at Electra who just made a face and then rolled into the undergrowth.

'Good girl,' Stephanie thought. Electra had taken herself out of play.

The boy faced off against the girl who was well over a foot shorter than he was. An easy target, was his first impression, but then he considered that his targets had not been selected for their incompetence.

"Just before I squash you into the mud, are you Fury or Psyche?"

"Which was your number one target?"

"Psyche."

Stephanie grinned enormously.

"You must be Blaze - you are *my* number two target, so that puts me above you, you gay twat - I'm Psyche and don't you fucking forget that, bitch!"

Stephanie lashed out with her knife, catching the boy on his right cheek. He yelled out in pain and glared down at Stephanie.

"I'm going to make you regret that. When I'm done with you, I'm gonna fuck you till you can't fucking walk; you hear me, bitch!"

Stephanie laughed as she moved.

"Well, if your dick is as small as that kid's dick was, yesterday, then we've got nothing to worry about. . ."

Stephanie slashed out with her knife, catching his left lower arm, slashing the material of his jacket. He responded with his own knife, a blade which was three inches longer than Stephanie's own. Stephanie had the advantages of speed and size on her side as she ducked and weaved to avoid the razor-sharp blade. Blaze had a longer reach, to be sure, but Stephanie was able to manoeuvre her body which was light and slim offering a smaller target for the boy.

Conversely, Blaze was a larger target and susceptible to Stephanie's attacks - as long as she kept out of reach of his muscular arms. The boy was on the verge of puberty and his body was changing. He had plenty of muscle available if only he could get a firm hold of the rapidly moving Psyche. When he did, he could snap her in half, or simply crush the life out of her. His chance came when Psyche made to stab him in the thigh but her blade caught and was yanked from her hand, disarming her in an instant. Before she could react, the boy had grasped her arm and twisted it around behind her back, eliciting a scream of pain from the eight-year-old girl.

She struggled to twist herself out of the grip but the boy was very strong, much stronger than Psyche was.

..._...

Images from her training began to play through her mind, the different techniques intended for different situations. She had less than a second to come up with a way to escape. With a split-second remaining, Stephanie reached backwards and she grasped the boy's left ear and wrenched. The boy yelled out and he released Stephanie.

As far as anger was concerned, the boy was apoplectic. There was no way that the little bitch was going to get the better of him. He never let a girl beat him, ever! 'Psyche was nothing special; her age wasn't even in double figures for fuck's sake,' he thought to himself. He reached out and punched her in the face - at the last moment, she moved but not before his fist struck her left cheek and she went down into the mud.

Stephanie could do nothing as the bastard held her down. The mud was cold and sapping her strength. The rain pounded into her face and into her eyes. Her senses were failing her and so was her skillset - nothing she could think of would work as she felt a knee pushing into her stomach, pinning her down. She tried to reach for her pistol but her hand was knocked away and then she felt Blaze's hands on her neck.

She began to panic, kicking and punching at the boy - but his arms were longer than hers by a mile. She struck at his arms but she might as well have been punching a mature oak tree.

Stephanie knew that the end was in sight - for her. His hands were tightening around her neck and despite the ferocity of her kicking

and punching, she could not push away the blackness which began to creep in from all sides of her vision. She needed to breathe, but she could not and she thought, she probably never would again. Her struggling was becoming less forceful as her body was starved of lifegiving oxygen and she began to suffocate and then die. The boy grinned down at her, satisfaction in his eyes - he had won, he had killed his primary target.

One down, one to go. . .

..._...

Stephanie barely registered the change in his expression which changed from satisfaction to shock and surprise in an instant. Then Stephanie felt something on her face that was not cooling rain; it was warm and she could make out blood dripping from the boy's mouth. Suddenly, she found that she could breathe again as the death grip around her neck eased. She sucked in several lungful's of lifegiving air and then she effortlessly pushed the boy away from her. He fell onto his side, then rolled onto his front, motionless.

As the lightening flashed, Stephanie was shocked to see a sword sticking out of the boy's back. After the next flash, she was even more shocked to see Electra standing behind the boy, her chest heaving with the exertion of her approach and of driving the sword into the boy's back - contrary to popular belief, driving a sword into a person's back is not as easy as it often appears to be in the movies.

A streak of fresh blood marred her face paint and the front of her webbing.