

Friday, September 9th, 2016

Early morning

Glenview

The dreams had been particularly vivid.

"You murdered me."

"No, Jamie; you're alive. I did not kill you."

The vision of her five-year-old brother with a bullet hole in his forehead dissolved and instead, she saw the five-year-old reappear with an accusing expression.

"You abandoned me."

"I had no choice - I didn't want to leave you. They took me away from you."

"But you did leave me; I was alone. You left me all alone. I was only five-years-old."

"Jamie - I tried. . ."

"You did nothing to find me."

"I thought I had killed you."

"But you did."

The vision changed back to the boy with a bullet hole in his forehead. Stephanie found herself in a vicious circle and no matter what she did, she was faced with the fact that she had murdered her little brother. She now knew that that was not true, but her subconscious kept trying to tell her something different. She found herself going from virtual room to virtual room in her dream - or nightmare - and each time she entered a room she would find her brother dead in a different manner . . . different, but all caused by her.

Stephanie began going out of her mind as the visions chopped and changed before she finally fell to her knees and she began screaming and screaming.

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Anne-Marie was dragged out of her own dream - a good dream where Rogue was winning a massive battle single-handed - by the sound of screaming. She recognised the scream as being that of her big sister. Less than a minute later, she heard footsteps padding across her carpet and then a body pushed its way into the bed beside her. Anne-Marie could feel the sweat on Stephanie's skin and the older girl was shaking as she cried into the pillow. Anne-Marie wrapped her arms around her big sister providing what comfort she could.

Stephanie had always been there for Anne-Marie, so Anne-Marie was determined to be there for Stephanie. She felt very sorry for what

Stephanie had been through in her short life. So much hell. So much pain, both physical and mental. How could Stephanie remain sane through it all? Anne-Marie knew that Stephanie was not *entirely* sane - she could not be. Mindy had tried to explain Stephanie to Anne-Marie and her brother, but to no avail - Stephanie's mind was a complicated one to understand.

Either way, Anne-Marie hugged her sister, calming her down until they both fell asleep.

Later that morning

Mindy breezed into Anne-Marie's bedroom at seven o'clock - she and Dave took turns waking the kids.

"Morning, Anne-Marie! Time to get up for school!"

There was a groan and then a little girl sat up in the bed, rubbing her eyes.

"Morning, Mom."

Anne-Marie motioned at the bump beside her in the duvet and Mindy grimaced. It could only be one person.

"I was awoken up by her screaming. Then she came through and climbed into the bed. She was all sweaty and shaking. I hugged her until she cried herself to sleep."

"Thanks for being there for her," Mindy said as she sat down on the bed.

"No problem, Mom - she's always been there for me, so I want to be there for her."

Anne-Marie scrambled out of the bed and ran for the bathroom which she shared with her twin brother who was already busy with his own ablutions.

"Hey! Hurry up, doofus, I need to pee!"

"I'm peeing as fast as I can, jeez!" Danny called back.

"Well, pee harder!" Anne-Marie called back.

Mindy chuckled at the twin's early morning bickering and she slowly pulled back the duvet to reveal the sleeping form of Stephanie Lizewski. She rubbed her daughter's back gently and very carefully. Stephanie moaned as she began to straighten herself out. Her eyes opened and she looked up at Mindy. She did not smile, in fact, Stephanie bore a very sad expression on her face. She sat up and wrapped her arms around Mindy, squeezing hard.

"Another nightmare?"

"It was the Jamie one again."

"It's understandable, honey. You've been through worse nightmares. We're going to find him, I promise."

"How will I ever face him? I betrayed him - I allowed them to take him."

Mindy pushed Stephanie away from her.

"Now you're just talking stupid, Stephanie."

"I - left - him."

"You had no goddamn choice!" Mindy said loudly enough to get her daughter's attention.

"I could have fought back. . ."

"Christ!"

Mindy pulled Stephanie off the bed and down the corridor to her own bedroom, slamming the door behind her as she went. Stephanie was almost thrown onto her own bed, bouncing twice before she came to rest.

"Snap out of it, Stephanie! You were seven-years-old and you knew *nothing!*"

"I would have tried!" Stephanie yelled back. "I would have died trying!"

"Grow up, Stephanie!" Mindy retorted. "The scared little girl that you were back then was unable to do much more than fucking piss her panties and you damn well know it. The girl before me now, *she* would have died trying, but you have almost three years of training behind you, yes?"

"Yes."

"Don't play the blame game. Dave does that with my Daddy and me. Shit happens in life. I blame myself for not getting to my Daddy sooner, but no matter how good I was back then, there was nothing that I could have done - I lacked the experience."

Stephanie smiled for the first time.

"I did fucking piss my panties, you know."

"I wouldn't have blamed you for it," Mindy said calmly with a smirk. "I think you need a diversion and I have just the idea."

That evening

Glenview

"You finished your homework for the week?"

"All except today's."

"You been in trouble this week?"

Stephanie looked hurt.

"No."

"Do I have any letters on the way from the Principal?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Very diplomatic," Mindy laughed. "Go get yourself showered and changed. Your date awaits."

Stephanie's face lit up and she was gone in a flash.

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Nervous . . . so nervous.

It was so ridiculous - he was a boy, a boy that she had known for months, so what was the damn problem? Okay, they were friends and he was an awesome fighter and he was also cute, but he was twelve and she was only ten. . . What should that matter? Her Mum had said that it was okay and that was all she really cared about. God damn it! Why did she feel so nervous? Her stomach felt like she had been on a goddamn roller coaster.

'Oh, God! He's here - his Dad's dropping him off. Get yourself together girl!' she thought quickly.

Stephanie climbed out of the Jaguar and she just stood there feeling very stupid and her face was burning like a nuclear fire. He looked smart, Stephanie thought, much neater than usual and he looks nervous too, good. Stephanie scowled as she looked up at her Mum; she was smirking. . .

"Now, you two be good - no talking to strangers and *no killing!*"

"Yes, Mum!"

"Yes, Mindy!"

The nervous boy turned to Stephanie and he checked her out from head to toe. Stephanie put a hand to her stomach which was busy doing loop-the-loops.

"You look good tonight, Steph."

"So, do you, Tommy."

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They started the evening in McDonald's, enjoying a burger each and just talking.

"My Dad thought it was really funny when Mindy called up to arrange this," Tommy muttered.

"Yeah, parent's like to have their fun, don't they," Stephanie agreed. "Thank you for agreeing to come."

"Steph - I would *never* turn down time with you."

Stephanie giggled which made her feel stupid but Tommy's smile reassured her. Nevertheless, she took a large bite out of her quarter pounder to disguise her embarrassment. The conversation continued on with more mundane things. By the end of the meal, all the uncomfortable feelings had gone and they were happily laughing at each other's crude jokes. The two youngsters had a lot in common considering their fractured childhoods. Both had been taken and forced into lives which involved fighting to survive.

After they had eaten, they both headed outside to talk where they could not be easily overheard.

"When did you first kill, Tommy?"

"I was almost nine. I had been with the Russians for about four months. I had learnt to look after myself; there was no choice if you wanted to survive. Another boy - a Russian kid; Mikhail, his name was. He was about a year older than me and he tried to steal my food. We didn't get much; barely enough to survive on. You had to *earn* your food. Fighting gained you food - winning gained you even more. The kid was probably desperate; he had no choice - but it was him or me. I challenged him but he blew me off. I stabbed him with the knife I had been using to eat with. It was a lucky strike - the blade punctured his heart and he bled out fast. I was shocked by what I had done on pure reflex. You know what? They rewarded me with improved conditions, just for killing that kid."

"Been there," Stephanie commented dryly.

"What sort of a place rewards a kid for killing?"

"The very same thought that went through my mind when they gave me my codename. I suppose I was lucky - I lived in a relatively structured environment. You lived in hell, Tommy."

"It was bad, but they looked after us - to a point. We were valuable - at least those who could fight and those who would win fights. My biggest problem at first was learning the lingo. When I was taken, I had never even heard anybody speak Russian, let alone knew any of the language. That was one hell of a learning curve. One of the older boys took pity on me and he taught me some basic Russian - enough for me to get by and survive."

"Why do you like me so much, Tommy? I mean; you know what I was, what I am."

"Stephanie . . . you're beautiful and I love the way you talk - your accent is awesome."

Stephanie was blushing and so was Tommy.

"You've also been through a lot - just like me. I feel that I can relate to you. You're also an awesome fighter and I respect you for who you are. . ."

Tommy tailed off with embarrassment. Stephanie stopped walking and she turned to Tommy. Then she reached up and she kissed him, putting as much meaning into the kiss as she knew how. She pulled away, her face burning. Tommy was grinning.

"What was that for?"

"For saying such wonderful things about me. I know I kissed you before, but this was my real first kiss, so suck it up, asshole!"

Tommy laughed and he put his arm around Stephanie's shoulders.

"You are a fucking nutcase, Stephanie Lizewski!"

"That's rich coming from you, Tommy Morgan!"

Stephanie pulled Tommy around into another kiss - she was enjoying the tingling feeling on her lips each time they kissed.

"You think anybody is watching?" Tommy asked.

"Probably - you know who my Mum is."

"Yeah - she'll have a dozen cameras on us at all times. If I so much as make an advance on your body, she'll appear out of nowhere and slit my throat," Tommy laughed.

Stephanie laughed as they sat down on a vacant bench.

"I don't have much of a body, I'm afraid."

"It looks lovely from my point of view."

Stephanie found herself giggling again.

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"So, Mum - you get everything on camera?" Stephanie asked Mindy as they headed home, an hour or so later.

Mindy laughed.

"Dave persuaded me not to have Marty monitor your activities. I'm sorry; I just wanted to protect you. I know, I'm being stupid."

"No, Mum. It feels good to know that you care."

"The kissing looked fun!" Mindy quipped.

Stephanie's mouth dropped open and her entire face exploded into life and turned a very deep shade of red.

"It was my first proper kiss. . ." Stephanie mumbled.

"You'll remember that kiss forever."

"I hope so. Thank you for setting this up, Mum. It was a great evening and it allowed me to have some fun without worrying about Jamie all the time."

Mindy smiled happily. It had been Dave's idea - as usual. She was very pleased that all had gone well.

Glenview

"Had a good time?"

"Yes - thanks Dad," Stephanie said as she gave Dave a big hug.

"You two had sex?" Anne-Marie asked and Stephanie's jaw dropped open.

"Can I slap her?" Stephanie asked.

"No," Mindy said with a chuckle.

"Maybe a finger-fuck?" Anne-Marie went on.

"Anne-Marie!" Dave exclaimed.

"Just askin'" Anne-Marie muttered.

"Now, you can slap her!" Mindy suggested as she scowled at her youngest daughter.

Anne-Marie let out a little scream as she bolted for the kitchen, continuing through into the pool area. Stephanie gave chase.

"Get back here, you little bitch!"

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Dave and Mindy listened to Anne-Marie's screams and Stephanie's crude language. Then they heard giggling and uncontrollable laughter - Anne-Marie was being tickled; apparently mercilessly.

"I'm - going - to pee - myself!" Anne-Marie managed to get out as Stephanie tickled her.

Then the giggling stopped and Anne-Marie screamed again.

"No!" she yelled before there was an almighty splash.

Dave and Mindy ran through to see Anne-Marie in the water, swimming towards the steps. From the view, and the pile of clothes beside the pool, it was obvious that the eight-year-old was naked. Stephanie was smiling sweetly, trying to look innocent.

"What have you done, now?" Danny asked as he entered the pool area and took in the smiling Stephanie and his naked sister sitting on the pool steps.

"I opened my mouth," the dejected Anne-Marie groused.

"That's normally all it takes," Danny mused. "However, I have to protect my twin, so. . ."

Danny shoved Stephanie and she fell into the water, swearing violently.

"Far from us to have a favourite twin, so we must treat you both fairly," Mindy said as she gave Danny a shove and he fell in beside his big sister.

"Far from us to miss out," Dave chuckled as he grabbed Mindy around the waist and then jumped into the deep end.

Mindy screamed bloody murder but she then laughed as she tried, unsuccessfully, to duck her husband. Danny had pulled off his soggy clothes and he quickly joined his sister in the buff as they swam around chasing one another. Stephanie kicked off her shoes and her jeans, chucking them onto the side of the pool. Dave and Mindy removed their outer clothing and Dave began to chase Mindy who pretended to be scared and she emitted mock screams, mimicking Anne-Marie who just laughed.

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"Feeling better?" Anne-Marie asked Stephanie almost an hour later.

"Yes - it's been a very memorable evening," Stephanie replied as she lounged around on the steps. She too had stripped off her wet clothes and was just as naked as her siblings. "Thanks, all of you, for helping to give me something else to think about."

"You're worth spending time on, Stephanie," Dave said with a smile.

"I'm hungry," Danny complained.

"Let's go get something to eat," Mindy suggested as she climbed out of the pool, followed by Dave.

"I'll go get some towels," Dave suggested as he jogged around the pool to a table which was piled high with fluffy towels in assorted colours.

He selected five towels and walked back around the pool to where everybody was waiting, standing on the side of the pool, before handing a purple one to Mindy, a pink one to Anne-Marie, a yellow one to Danny, and a blue one to Stephanie. Dave wrapped himself in a green towel. Everybody grabbed a stool at the breakfast bar while Dave began to pull food out of the fridge. He threw some bacon into a pan on the stove and then began to butter some thick slices of bread. Mindy took the time to take off her panties and her sports bra, wrapping herself tightly in her purple towel. By the time she had finished, Dave had the bacon cooked and he had passed out the thick bacon sandwiches.

"You going to start wearing a bra?" Mindy asked as she looked pointedly at Stephanie's chest - the ten-year-old had only bothered to wrap the towel around herself loosely and it had slipped down - not that she was particularly bothered.

"Nope!"

"I think she wants Tommy to be able to see them properly," Danny laughed.

"Maybe I do," Stephanie pouted.

"I think they need to grow a bit, don't you?" Anne-Marie grinned.

"So, Anne-Marie," Dave asked conversationally. "Where did you hear that phrase?"

"Which one?" Anne-Marie asked innocently - she had hoped that everybody had forgotten about her little faux pas!

Mindy laughed as she dropped a big hint, "That would be the 'finger-fuck' one."

"Oh. . ." Anne-Marie replied. "I heard SD say it to Morgan at Foxtrot."

"I might have known!" Stephanie commented. "Do you actually know what a finger-fuck is?"

Anne-Marie thought about it for a moment, but then she shook her head.

"No, I don't?"

"It's when a girl has a finger stuck up her snatch and she receives stimulation," Stephanie explained.

Mindy raised an eyebrow at Stephanie's explanation.

"I must have read it somewhere," Stephanie muttered as she went red in the face and dug into her bacon sandwich.

"Ewww - that's totally gross!" Anne-Marie growled as her own cheeks went very pink.

"Oh, I don't think so," Mindy commented as she took a deep breath. Dave's hand had wandered up her towel and was 'busy'. "Not gross - just . . . aaahhh . . . not now, Dave!"

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At bedtime, that evening, Stephanie had just pulled on her pyjamas and she was climbing into bed when Anne-Marie and Danny trooped into the bedroom.

"What do you two want?" Stephanie demanded. She was tired, but not looking forward to going to sleep.

"We're here to keep you company, tonight," Danny explained as he clambered onto the bed and dived under the Duvet beside Stephanie.

Stephanie scowled as Anne-Marie did the same on the other side of her.

"I know I'm not the boy that you *really* want in bed with you," Danny went on.

Stephanie laughed.

"One more word, Daniel! Thank you, both of you."

"We love you, big sis," Anne-Marie offered as she cuddled into Stephanie.

Stephanie smiled happily, "I love you both very much, too."

Mindy peeked into the room and she smiled at the sight of the three kids settling down for the night.

"You three be good, okay?"

"Night, Mom!" the twins called out.

"Night, Mum!" Stephanie added.

"Sleep tight," Mindy replied as she turned out the light.

The following morning
Saturday, September 10th

Safehouse F

"In light of the current influx of Predators, we've been compiling lists of who we know to be alive, who we know to be missing, and who we know to be dead. We have more and more information coming from Marty's data extraction of the CIA data we originally acquired, back in May," Mindy explained.

"Oh, wow," Saoirse commented as she read through the names which ran down the large screen in the Command Centre. "I recognise many of these - you even have Lucy and Leo. Those two were very special; if they are still alive, Lucy would give Hit Girl a run for her money, Mindy."

"Oh?"

"She was the best that I have ever seen and totally dedicated to her training. She was a bitch, no denying that - but no worse than Hit Girl. . ."

Mindy growled.

". . . I liked her - some of the time - at least when she wasn't humiliating me. If you meet her - she *is* deadly; be warned. Leo is just as highly skilled. I've sparred with them both and they never lost a fight - *never*. Lucy is a seasoned killer - she has the deaths of at least three *Predators* and three *Yellows* on her conscience. Leo has killed at least two *Predators* to my knowledge."

"I look forward to meeting them - assuming they are still alive," Mindy commented.

Saoirse looked very pensive for a few minutes as she thought back to her early days as a young ten-year-old *Predator*. Mindy came over and she wrapped an arm around Saoirse's shoulders.

"I didn't mean to bring back bad memories, SD."

"No, it's nothing like that. Seeing those names: Lucy, Leo, Willow, Guinevere, Carrie, Dakota - it brought back memories, yes, but they weren't all bad. While we did not exactly have friends - some of us got on together, at least enough for moral support, anyway. We all suffered together, so I can't hold grudges, just as I don't with Steph."

"You've been through a lot, Saoirse. It's good for you to have a positive outlook on things."

"Thanks, Mindy."

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Saoirse headed up to the galley for a hot drink. She found Sarah and Marc there along with the Abbott twins. They were chatting raucously and enjoying each other's company. They stopped chatting as Saoirse sat down with her cup of tea.

"Saoirse," Sarah began. "From what I understand, you are *uniquely* qualified to answer this question. As the only person, presumably ever, to have been actively hunted by Hit Girl and to have actually survived - what did it feel like?"

Saoirse grimaced and then her face took on a very pained expression and she looked like she might be physically sick.

"That night, the night when I realised that Hit Girl knew my whereabouts . . . I had never been so scared in all my life. I was only fourteen and at that moment, I never expected to reach my next birthday. I knew that I would never see the sun rise the next morning, or ever again for that matter. So many things I had not done - I considered my life to be over; *finito*. I just sat in a chair and I awaited my fate. I cried for hours as I waited. I wanted to have kids. I wanted to fall in love. I wanted so many things - I knew that I would never get to experience any of them.

"Then she appeared in my apartment - like a ghost in the night. Don't laugh - but I pissed myself when I realised she was there; I was that scared. I thought I had mere seconds left to live . . . but then she let me go - I was stunned beyond belief. Nobody's ever explained to me why she let me live. Then Stephanie did the most wonderful thing - she forgave me and she offered me a life. I can never repay her kindness and I will always look on her as my best friend, no matter what."

"I saw something in you," came a voice and everybody turned to see Mindy walking over towards them. "I was going to kill you, right there in your apartment. I looked into your eyes, just as I have done with so many of my victims. I saw a frightened little girl in them. A little girl who had been forced into a life of killing. I knew it was not your fault that you were trying to kill Stephanie. I knew that you had no choice but to follow orders.

"Stephanie lost it - she called me a 'soft fuck'. I explained to Stephanie that Foxtail deserved to die, just as much as she did.

Just as much as I did. Just as much as all of you here. I saw myself in Foxtail's eyes. I saw Stephanie. I couldn't kill her, I could not kill Foxtail. We hatched a plan to turn Foxtail. It worked and we brought Saoirse Doherty into our midst. It is a decision that I have not regretted. Mind you, the two Predator Princesses have kept me up, many a night with their antics!"

Saoirse grinned as Mindy finished.

"Thank you for telling me that, Mindy. I was too scared to ask you why you didn't kill me."

"You have no reason to be scared of me, Saoirse. You've earned my trust on many an occasion. You are selfless and a very good friend to all who see you as their friend," Mindy said.

"You will always scare me, Mindy," Saoirse commented.

"That's good, I suppose," Mindy reasoned with an evil smirk.

"Did Stephanie really call you a 'soft fuck'?" Marc asked.

"Yes, she did."

"What did you do to her?"

"I kicked her across that very mat, down there," Mindy replied with a twinkle in her eye.