

That same morning
Saturday, September 10th, 2016

Safehouse F

"Stephanie!"

Stephanie looked up above her to see Mindy waving at her from the steel walkway and then pointing towards the Command Centre. Stephanie nodded at Tommy who stepped back from their sparring and she headed over to meet Mindy at the bottom of the steps. Stephanie frowned - Mindy looked unhappy.

"Steph - we need to talk."

"What about?" Stephanie asked as they both headed into the Command Centre and the door locked behind them and Mindy motioned her daughter over to the couch and they sat down.

"*Vengeance* ran an operation, yesterday, in London," Mindy started to explain.

"Jamie?" Stephanie's tone was full of hope.

"No - but some valuable information was obtained. We have lead - a very good lead."

"Why didn't you let me know, yesterday?" Stephanie's tone had a hint of anger in it.

"I didn't want to get your hopes up unless we really knew something."

"I accept that; thanks for being honest with me."

"Steph - no lies between us; we promised each other, right?"

"Yeah, we did," Stephanie replied with a smile before she got down to business. "What leads?"

..._...

"*Vengeance* tracked down where Abigail was being held, along with Jamie. They spoke directly to the top dog, a William Fraser - CEO of Scorpio Enterprises. Apparently, he knows all about *Predators* and he sees a financial angle. He says that has *Predators* in his custody. .
."

"Jamie?" Stephanie interrupted.

"We don't know. We believe that he has others - but we have no idea who. We have one clue: he told us . . . well, listen to it for yourself."

Stephanie frowned as Mindy waved at Marty who punched a button on his keyboard. Sound began to emanate from the speakers in the room:

"I'll leave you with a teaser - Jamie and his whore headed southwest, maybe a hundred miles or so. Take it, or fucking leave it."

Stephanie's face contorted into anger as she listened to the voice. She imprinted the voice onto her brain so that she would recognise that bastard the moment she heard his voice again - then she could kill him.

"So - where does that put us?" she asked, looking up at Mindy.

Marty brought up a map which showed the southern section of the United Kingdom. A red circle was displayed centred on the Scorpio HQ in London.

"One hundred miles puts us towards the southwest of the UK - east of Portsmouth and Southampton," Marty advised.

"What's there?" Stephanie asked.

"Not a lot!" Marty commented. "Several large towns: Bath, Shaftesbury, Bournemouth. He could be leading us on a wild goose chase, or. . ."

"He could be leading us into a trap," Stephanie growled.

"Exactly," Mindy admitted.

"There's more," Stephanie stated, seeing Mindy's expression.

"Natasha and Abigail chased Fraser for over sixty miles. He was being a little obvious about it too which leads us to believe that he is leading us into a trap - he knows that there are many more *Predators* out there and we believe that he may be recruiting them to use for his own devices. Now, my girl, I want to assess you to see if you are capable of going back out into the field. Do you think you are ready?"

..._...

It had been many weeks since Stephanie had been shot, but she had been healing inside and out all that time. The ten-year-old had been constantly monitored and she had received many check-ups to ascertain how her shoulder and side were healing, not to mention everything inside her young body which had been moved about. Both Cathy and Mindy had come down heavily on Stephanie whenever she tried to hide any problems with her body. Both Mindy and Cathy had noticed pain in Stephanie's eyes when she moved her right arm and when she overstressed her left side.

Mindy had reminded Stephanie of their bond and that they would not lie to one another. In turn, Stephanie had tearfully admitted that she was still in pain. Cathy had arranged some different drugs to combat the pain while Mindy had devised a new training regime for her daughter. That, in turn, had improved and assisted the healing muscles in Stephanie's right shoulder. The weeks in bed had wasted

away at Stephanie's finely-honed body but since then, she had spent many hours returning her body to its previous state of excellence.

Mindy had no intention of allowing Stephanie into the field if she was not ready. Mindy was fully aware that she might have to physically restrain her daughter to prevent her from going after her brother, but should that be necessary, then Mindy would do it. She would do anything to keep the young girl alive - even if it meant putting a rift between mother and daughter.

..._...

Forty minutes later, Psyche was on the mat.

For the first time in months, her body was encased in a combat suit. But not her original one - no, this one was brand new. Psyche was covered from head to toe in ultra-flexible Type IIA armour. The torso was a dark royal blue along with the arms which ended in deep royal red gauntlets. The remainder of the armour was a deep royal red right down to the boots on her feet. Embossed onto the chest was the gold symbol denoting the Greek letter 'psi'.

Around her waist, a gold utility belt held a pair of SIG Sauer P225-A1 Nitron Compact pistols in 9-mm calibre, each with a capacity of eight rounds. Also on the belt were a pair of SR09-K suppressors to fit the threaded barrels of the pistols. In the top of each boot, Psyche's custom-designed Sais fitted securely. Her right thigh supported a mount for three titanium throwing knives. Hanging from the utility belt, a much shorted, deep royal red skirt was visible.

The mask was new and it covered her face completely. The majority of the mask was the same dark royal blue but with a red stripe accentuating her eyes. The cape was also there.

"You ready?" Hit Girl demanded.

"Bring it on, bitch!" the electronically enhanced voice of Psyche replied.

..._...

The two vigilantes, mother and daughter, were both fully suited and booted. Both were fully equipped with their weapons and accessories. Kick-Ass was on hand in his own combat suit to act as referee. There was quite a large crowd on the balcony that morning and there was an ample supply of fresh popcorn available - thanks to Cathy and Paige. There was the sense of a carnival atmosphere in the safehouse as everybody gathered to watch a spectacle like no other.

"You can pull the plug at any time, honey - understand?" Hit Girl warned Psyche.

"No chance, Mum - but I promise not to push it too far," Psyche replied. "I promise not to hurt you, either!"

"As if!"

Then the festivities began as Kick-Ass addressed the assembled watchers.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Boys and girls! *Predators* and vigilantes! Curtis and Megan! Welcome to the extravaganza of the weekend. We have a mother vs daughter fight: Hit Girl vs Psyche. Can we please have a cheer for Psyche and her new combat suit."

There was a roar of clapping and cheering to which Psyche bowed theatrically.

"How about a cheer for our purple queen?"

"Fuck that!" Chloe yelled but she cheered none the less with everybody else.

"Hit Girl, are you ready?"

"I was *born* ready, green asshole!"

A ripple of laughter echoed around the Safehouse.

"Psyche, are you ready?"

"Hit Girl is going down!" Psyche called out and she was cheered on by a huge roar of approval from those watching.

"In your fucking dreams!" Hit Girl growled as they both shook hands before moving a few feet apart and facing one another.

"Let the fight begin!" Kick-Ass yelled as he stood away from his wife and daughter.

..._...

Hit Girl opted to give her daughter a chance - it was an assessment after all and not a 'kick the shit out of Psyche' fight. Psyche, on the other hand, saw the fight as a 'kick the shit out of Hit Girl' fight and she was *not* intending on holding anything back. Her mind had been working out how to put Hit Girl down but nothing workable had come to fruition so Psyche was just going to go all out and hope for the best - at least until something better came to mind.

Psyche did, however, have an ace-in-the-hole. The ten-year-old had spent many hours with Chloe and Tommy. With their help, Stephanie had been able to regain full use of her right arm. Chloe, naturally, was well aware of how difficult it was to regain the use of your shoulder once a bullet or two had fucked around with it. Chloe had also pushed Stephanie past the pain to get her arm moving. The air had been turned blue as Chloe had helped work the shoulder and also the elbow. Tears and some screaming had also been a standard part of the recuperation.

As a sweetener to Stephanie to apologise for causing her so much pain, Chloe, Tommy, and Joshua had helped her to learn some new moves. Nobody had told Mindy about them - which was part of Chloe's plan! The new moves were running through Psyche's mind but she had

to wait for the right opportunity and she did not want to tip her hand too early.

Hit Girl struck first with a swift punch which Psyche dodged and she retaliated with an equally swift kick to Hit Girl's left leg. There was a cheer as first contact went to Psyche. Hit Girl was not one to allow another to savour victory, so she quickly smacked her daughter in the chest, shoving her to the mat - a loud 'boo' followed the attack to which Hit Girl gave everybody the bird. Hit Girl was not exactly known for her kindness (Mindy was something else) and she demonstrated her cruel streak by executing a perfect spinning kick, catching Psyche around the head and sending her crashing to the mat.

Psyche scrambled to her feet, drawing a Sai with each hand and rushing at Hit Girl. Psyche was very skilled with the three-pronged weapons and Hit Girl knew it. The purple queen dodged each thrust, watching her opponent and the tips of each weapon with practiced ease. Hit Girl had a situational awareness like no other which she used to maximum advantage during a fight. Within another minute, Psyche had lost first one Sai and then the other and she was suddenly on the defensive with a very angry Hit Girl on the offensive, bearing down on her.

..._...

"She's fucking dead!" Lauren exclaimed and to be brutally honest, many agreed with her.

"Come on, Steph - you can take the bullying bitch!" Saoirse yelled out and there were cheers for Psyche.

Psyche, however, had her own ideas. As she stumbled back and fell to the mat, she swiftly rolled off to one side. Psyche then came back up with a pistol in each hand and she emptied both magazines into the approaching Hit Girl who fell backwards under the barrage of low-velocity training rounds. Psyche smoothly swapped out her empty magazines and she re-holstered her pistols as she closed on Hit Girl who was regaining her feet. Psyche struck just as Hit Girl turned to face her opponent and she received a kick to the shoulder followed up by a hard punch to the chest.

Hit Girl never learnt how to stay down, only how to stay standing. She absorbed the punches, showing no fear. Then she seized hold of Psyche and flipped her over as easily as she might turn over a mattress. Psyche hit the mat hard, knocking the air out of her lungs. The younger girl rolled away from her attacker and quickly regained her feet before turning back to face Hit Girl. Psyche punched and kicked, punched and kicked, not allowing Hit Girl a moment to gather her thoughts and reattack. Then, just before Psyche's energy began to flag, she shocked the fuck out of everybody there - especially Hit Girl.

Saoirse was getting very worried. While she could not see her best-friend beneath all the body armour, she knew that Stephanie had to be in pain and sweating buckets, not to mention being exhausted. The

attack on Hit Girl was blistering and the colliding limbs were almost blurred with the speed of movement, both on attack and on the defence. Then, just as it seemed that Hit Girl was about to turn the tide of the fight with her infinitely superior skills, Psyche executed her endgame. If you blinked, you might have missed it, but Psyche struck out at Hit Girl with her left fist before pushing off with her right foot and then *flipping* herself over and clobbering Hit Girl around the back of the head with the armoured boot on her left foot.

Hit Girl went down like the proverbial sack of spuds!

..._...

The Safehouse was almost totally silent as Hit Girl hit the mat and rolled off to one side. Psyche sprang back to her feet and she swept up a discarded Sai. She ran over and kned Hit Girl in the solar plexus. Hit Girl yelled out in pain but she did not move as she found the very sharp point of a Sai against her neck.

"You yield?" the victorious Psyche demanded.

Hit Girl considered her situation and for the first time ever, she uttered two words which she thought would never pass her lips. However, under the circumstances, she was very pleased to be saying them.

"I yield."

Psyche stood up and pulled off her mask, grinning hugely at the crowd of smiling faces above her. Hit Girl pulled off her own mask and then she seized Stephanie's right arm and raised it high.

"The champion!" Hit Girl called out with a broad smile.

The Safehouse erupted with cheering and yelling. Stephanie, sweat pouring off her, just stood there grinning like an insane idiot.

"Well done, honey," Mindy whispered into her daughter's right ear.

Stephanie swung around and hugged Mindy tightly.

..._...

Mindy cringed as she pulled off her body armour and she rubbed her abdomen. She was sweating buckets and after returning her weapons, she walked back to her suite in just her sports bra and boy shorts. Stephanie followed and joined Mindy in the capacious shower. While Mindy washed Stephanie's sweaty, tangled hair, they talked.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," Stephanie said as she saw the large bruise in the centre of Mindy's chest, just below her breasts.

"I'll heal - I always do. I will admit, I was shocked with that somersault kick. Did Chloe teach you that?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny such a comment," Stephanie replied.

"It was good, huh?"

"It was perfectly executed and in the perfect place, too."

"And the student shall become the master," Stephanie quipped.

"Not fucking yet, honey!" Mindy said as she pulled downwards on her daughter's hair to look her in the eyes meaningfully.

Stephanie giggled as she received a face full of water from the shower head.

"So - am I cleared for action? Is Psyche back on the streets?"

Mindy looked down at the hopeful expression. Stephanie was biting her bottom lip, much like Mindy herself often did to reassure herself.

"Aww come on! Do I have to fucking beg?"

"You passed - just don't hug me, you fucking nutter!"

Stephanie sat down at the side of the shower and she began to cry. Mindy left her be. She could see the smile as well as the tears. She knew that it was sheer relief. Passing that assessment had brought Stephanie full circle. The shooting. The painful recovery. It was over - well, almost. . .

"Your arm hurts, doesn't it?"

"Like the buggery!" Stephanie grinned.

"You *Predators* are fucking psychotic!"

"It's a state of mind, Hit Girl!"

"I suppose."

..._...

Twenty minutes later, the freshly showered Mindy and Stephanie reappeared to cheers and yells.

"Mum says I'm psychotic," Stephanie informed Dave.

"Like mother, like daughter," Dave chuckled.

Anne-Marie and Danny rushed forwards and both hugged Stephanie, ignoring her cringing as they crushed her right arm. Chloe pushed through and hugged Stephanie and she whispered her congratulations into her ear. Mindy just growled and punched Chloe on her left shoulder.

"Ow!" Chloe grinned.

"Thanks - you too, Tommy and you, Josh. You all helped my little girl regain who she really is, thank you."

"I'm off downtown with Riley and Avery - see you guys soon!" Chloe said and she headed towards the exit.

"Right, Psyche - get your butt into that armoury and clean those pistols!"

"Aye, aye, Hit Girl, ma'am!" Stephanie replied with a mock salute as she ran to the steel steps which led below.

"Megan, Curtis, are you both ready to head up to D-JAK?" Mindy called out.

"Aye, aye, Hit Girl, ma'am!" Megan yelled as she snapped to attention and saluted - Curtis just rolled his eyes and grinned stupidly.

Mindy laughed as she headed down to her Jaguar.

Much later that afternoon

Central Chicago

Chloe was out with Avery and Riley enjoying a brief shopping trip.

They had not done very much - just been for something to eat and they had had a good chat. It was the first time that the friends had had to catch up with one another since school had begun; the first week had been very busy. They were walking down North Michigan Avenue when Chloe suddenly stopped dead and Avery almost bumped into her. Then as Avery and Riley watched in horror, Chloe doubled over, gripping her stomach and she fell to the sidewalk screaming out in agony.

"It hurts! It hurts so much!"

Avery quickly regained her senses and she began looking around desperately for help. A couple dozen yards away, she saw a police officer running towards them, alerted by the Chloe's screams.

"Quick, my friend needs help," she said in barely restrained panic as the cop reached her.

"We need an ambulance at corner of East Ohio and North Michigan," the police officer radioed as he knelt down.

The man tried to pry Chloe's hands from her stomach but she had an iron grip as she writhed with the agony.

"Are you injured, miss?" he asked but Chloe was in far too much pain to respond.

"She just keeled over," Riley offered as she stared down at her friend.

The ambulance was there within two minutes and Chloe was quickly helped to her feet and taken aboard.

"I'm pregnant. . ." Chloe managed to say as the paramedic helped her to lie down.

"What!" came the shocked exclamation from Riley and Avery as they joined their friend in the back of the ambulance.

"Let's move it!" the paramedic directed as she slammed the rear door and pounded on the bulkhead for the driver.

The ambulance accelerated away, siren screaming.