

**Sunday, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

**Central Chicago**

It was a fairly normal Sunday morning, just like any other Sunday morning.

Only, Stephanie was not supposed to be there - she was grounded as the direct result of a slight misjudgement surrounding a car and the manoeuvring of said car. But, she could also argue that she was out of the house *because* of that slight misjudgement surrounding a car and the manoeuvring of said car. Stephanie had felt remorse like she had never felt before. Mindy was the one person she hated to upset - and not just because she was Hit Girl - Mindy was very special to Stephanie. There was nothing in the world that Stephanie loved more than her family.

Despite the goings-on in Chicago in the wake of the deadline passing, there was no reason to expect an attack; it was broad daylight and Stephanie was in a busy part of Chicago with hundreds of people around - and she was just one person. The plan had been to nip into the city, grab what she wanted and get back to D-JAK, preferably without anybody noticing that she had vanished. Only, there were five people out in the city that afternoon, who had *not* received Stephanie's schedule ahead of time, so they had no idea that their intervention would not be welcome. Actually, they knew full well that their intervention would not be welcome, but for very different reasons. Unluckily for Stephanie, if she had stepped out of D-JAK either two minutes earlier, or two minutes later, she would have missed them completely.

Stephanie never saw the five teenagers as she took her usual shortcut down a broad alleyway which would take her to the nearest shops. Nobody else was using the alleyway at that moment, so Stephanie was very much alone. Her senses perked up only when she sensed the presence of people closer than they needed to be, but by then, it was far too late as Stephanie found herself seized by ten strong hands. She kicked, and she bucked. She tried to scream, but her mouth was held firmly shut before it was then taped.

No matter what she tried, to fight off the attackers, Stephanie found herself dragged, kicking and punching, and attempting to scream obscenities through the tape, into another alley.

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The attackers all appeared to be girls, only their hair had been taken right back to a length measurable only in millimetres.

Their expressions were the same for the most part. Three of the girls looked like all their Christmases for the next twenty years had just come all at once. Of the other two, one seemed undecided while the other was noticeably hanging back. Stephanie had a feeling that she knew a couple of the girls but for the life of her, she had no idea where from. Finally, Stephanie found herself being pushed to the concrete that formed the ground in the alley and she was pinned and no struggling on her part would alter her situation. The tape was roughly ripped off her mouth and Stephanie began to holler, at least until one of the girls slapped her roughly into silence.

"Well, well, well - if it isn't the not so mighty, Stephanie Walker! Or should we call you, Psyche?" one of the girls offered happily. "Some of us owe you one for being such a fucking bitch . . ."

"Not to mention that you killed our friend," another cut in.

"You'll have to be a *little* more specific - I've killed a few people," Stephanie tried before adding, "But she probably had it coming to her."

"Now," a third began, ignoring Stephanie's barbed comment. "We have something special lined up for our favourite *Predator* . . . you wanna be a bitch - we're gonna fuck you like a bitch!"

Stephanie had no real idea what the girl was going on about, however, she had correctly worked out that they were all ex-*Predators*.

"First, let us introduce ourselves before we get down to business. You might be thinking that we are *Predators*. Well, you'd be wrong there, Psyche; we are no longer *Predators* - we are much more, so much more; we are *Marauders*. We've taken things to the next level and beyond."

That did not bode well, Stephanie thought unhappily. *Predators* were already at a pretty worrying level to start with.

"I am Bandit - these are my counterparts: Raider, Fence, Rustler, and Wrecker. They are *not* my friends - no fucking way!"

The other girls all laughed.

"We may fight alongside one another but we are our own woman. Now, sweetheart, this is going to hurt you way more than it is gonna hurt me, big time. But before we begin, I want a souvenir. . ."

The girl stepped closer to Stephanie and with a wave of her hand, the ten-year-old was hauled briskly to her feet before they span her around, slamming her face into the wall of the alley. Stephanie recognised the sound of a knife being flipped open and then the cold steel against the back of her neck. With a swift flick of the sharp knife, her head suddenly felt lighter and her neck colder. Stephanie was thrown to the ground as the bitch held up Stephanie's light brown ponytail for all to see.

"I won't apologise; waste of breath - open her up!"

There was more laughter as Stephanie watched the hair she loved vanish from sight while hands reached out for her, one slapping another piece of tape over her mouth.

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With that order, Stephanie's ankles were bound tightly before one girl rested her legs on Stephanie's ankles to hold her down.

Another girl bound her wrists and then yanked the arms above Stephanie's head where they were pinned down by the same girl. A third girl sat on Stephanie's abdomen, pinning her down completely. The remaining pair went to work on Stephanie's pants which were quickly undone before being pulled down to her ankles as far as they would go. They added to the existing restraints as they were then joined by Stephanie's panties. Stephanie screamed as she felt the cold concrete on her backside. She fought as her ankles were forced closer to her body so that she was then forced to bend her knees and spread her legs apart.

"Aww, isn't that sweet - little Stephanie has pubic hair; not very much, to be honest," Bandit sneered. "We can have some fun with that later. She has a tight little asshole, too - we're gonna ram something hard up there and it'll hurt so bad you won't be able to shit for a fucking month!"

Despite the humiliation, Stephanie was not prepared for what happened next as she felt alien fingers on her labia which were none too gently spread apart. Stephanie's eyes went wide as they focussed on a foot-long baton which Bandit produced and held before her eyes.

"One guess where *that* is going," one of the bitches laughed.

Then the baton vanished and within moments, she felt something very cold pushing into and then past her labia and onwards into places that had never before seen the light of day, let alone been touched by anything. Stephanie thrashed - or she tried to. She screamed - or she tried to.

She heard the laughter and the derisive comments as something cold and hard was pushed inexorably inside her.

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Stephanie was not stupid; she knew what was happening to her.

Her brain was rapidly catching up with events and she was working out strategies to escape the torture. The increasing pain coming from her vagina did not help her brain to function. Stephanie had experienced many levels of pain - only the current pain, it seemed to surpass almost everything.

Bandit spoke again.

"Does that feel good, Stephanie? Bet this is your first fuck, huh? Well, honey, we're going to get to work on your front door, then we're gonna flip you over and continue with your back door. This baton is going to be shoved right up your tight British asshole. Once we're done with you here, you're coming somewhere where we can fuck you until you bleed - then we'll fuck you again."

Stephanie rarely felt fear.

Nothing much scared her on a day to day basis, despite her regular nocturnal activities. The *Marauder* known as Bandit had done what many could not; she had put the fear of God into Psyche. It was not the mere attack which scared Stephanie; it was the invasion of her body. Cuts and bruises, even bullets, she could handle - but the invasion of her most private parts cut deep into Psyche's psyche. As the baton was thrust inside of her, her brain struggled to both plan her escape and cope with the unknown sensations which she was feeling from inside her groin. She was astonished to find that part of her was *enjoying* what she was experiencing - what the fuck?!

"You enjoying it, Psycho?" Bandit laughed at the play on Stephanie's codename as she punched Stephanie in the face. "Oh, yeah - she's fucking loving it!"

There was more derisive laughter as blood trickled into Stephanie's mouth from her nose.

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Then one of the girls made a mistake.

It was the girl who was supposed to have been pinning Stephanie's hands. She was laughing heartily and exchanging crude comments about Stephanie's pubescent physique with her friends and her attention was shifting. Stephanie felt the weight on her lower arms shift and she discovered with surprise that despite the bindings, her hands were free. Stephanie looked up at the girl's face and she could see the girl staring past the one sitting on her stomach and almost drooling at the sight of the baton being shoved relentlessly in and out. Her backside and back was raw from scraping on the bare concrete and the enforced position of her right arm was causing pains to shoot across her shoulder. Stephanie psyched herself for a moment, bracing herself against the movements and sensations in her pelvic region, and then she acted.

Her bound hands flew upwards and she grasped the girls head, either side of her face as she then sunk a finger into each eye and pushed straight through,

crushing the eyeball into a squishy pulp. The girl screamed out in agony, falling backwards. Before anybody could react, Stephanie had reached down to her stomach where she grabbed the pistol out of the waistband of the girl who sat there. Without any conscious thought, Stephanie squeezed the trigger three times, killing the girl with the first two bullets. Blood splashed across Stephanie's face and she struggled to see for a moment until she was able to wipe her face. She braced up as she heard three more pistol shots in rapid succession, but strangely, she did not feel any pain, and then the weight on her ankles vanished and a hand reached down with a knife to cut her wrists free.

It was the fifth girl, the one who had hung back, her pistol still smoking from the three shots which had killed the other three girls with single shots to each forehead - including the girl who Stephanie had blinded. The fifth girl quickly went to work on Stephanie's ankles. Stephanie felt relief for a moment as she felt her ankles freed, but then she screamed as the baton was very roughly pulled out of her.

"Sorry . . .!" the girl said, and she actually sounded sincere. "I'm Raider - but I prefer my old codename: Ember."

Stephanie was on the verge of passing out from the combination of the pain, what she figured may have been an 'almost' orgasm, and her other injuries.

"My phone - I need it to call help," Stephanie breathed.

"I'll call an ambulance . . ."

"No! Cannot go to hospital."

Ember passed Stephanie the cell which she had retrieved from the jeans around her ankles and Stephanie quickly activated the panic facility.

"Listen! If you stay with me, you *must* throw away your weapons and you *must not* resist when they come for me - if you resist, they *will* kill you."

"I need to go . . ."

"Stay . . . please . . . I sense good in you . . . please . . . stay . . ."

Stephanie passed out then and Ember did her best to pull Stephanie's panties and pants back into place, restoring some of her dignity. As instructed, she threw her knife and her pistol down the alley and then she leaned back against the alley wall as she cradled Stephanie's head in her lap. Ember did not know who Stephanie was, even though the others obviously did, but there was something about the younger girl's face which was somehow familiar to the *Marauder*, something in the eyes.

Within twenty minutes, a large dark grey vehicle pulled into the alleyway and Ember found herself hauled to her feet and then thrown bodily against the brick wall of the adjacent building. She felt blood on her face and then she was pulled around and the very last thing that the fourteen-year-old girl saw was a large gauntlet as it was rammed into her face.

Everything went black.

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### ***Safehouse K***

#### ***Subterranean Level 1***

The girl awoke, and she screamed out in pain as she felt the cuts and bruises on her face.

Her eyes focussed and she found herself lying on a thin mattress over a concrete base. The space was small, about six-foot by four-foot, and the walls were bare poured concrete. A fluorescent light was embedded into the concrete ceiling and the harsh light dazzled the girl as she sat up. Three walls were concrete, but the forth was made up of steel bars fitted vertically with a horizontal spacing of about three inches. To the left was a vertically barred door which was hinged to open outwards. She reached out and touched it - unsurprisingly, it was locked.

She felt a chill and quickly realised that her clothes were gone, and she was wearing just her sports bra and boy-shorts, nothing else. She looked beyond the bars and she saw a steel table which was bolted to the concrete floor. The place screamed interrogation. There was a steel door which presumably led out of the holding area. No windows were in evidence but her eyes focussed on a dome in one corner of the space, above the door. There was a twin dome in the adjacent corner.

The girl glared at both domes for a moment before lying back down on the bunk. Minutes later, the doors opened and a masked individual with purple markings yanked the girl up off the mattress before shoving her out of the door where she stumbled and fell to her knees, grazing both. Another masked individual grabbed hold of the girl by her left arm, yanking her to her feet, totally ignoring the blood which ran down the girl's pale-skinned legs.

The girl began to shake as she was marched up a ramp into a large open area; she recognised what could only be the place where she was going to die.

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***Safehouse K***  
***Subterranean Level 0***

Waking up in a medical facility was really getting old.

Stephanie ached all over. Without thinking, she moved her legs and she almost screamed out as pain shot through her pelvic region.

"Don't try to move, Stephanie," Dr Bennett cautioned.

"Am I okay?"

"Yes - you're going to be a little bruised down below for a while but there's no permanent damage and you should have no problem having kids, later on in life."

Stephanie growled at that.

"You were very lucky; you also have some wicked scratches and bruises on your butt, plus some on your back. As for your hair - it'll grow back in time."

Stephanie had forgotten all about that. She reached her hand up to the back of her neck - it felt weird; she could not remember ever having had short hair before. They had stopped shaving heads by the time she had been drafted into *Urban Predator*.

"Mindy is going mad upstairs and I think she's preparing a lynching for that bitch who attacked you."

"Shit!" Stephanie breathed. "You've got it all wrong, Cathy. That girl saved my life and . . . I need to go see Mindy."

"I kept you sedated for a few hours while I checked you out; you need more rest but if you think you can walk . . . it'll be very painful."

Dr Bennett was not kidding about the pain. It took several attempts for Stephanie to get out of the bed and then another ten minutes for Dr Bennett to help her get dressed. Stephanie swore as she tried a few steps before gripping onto the wall for support as her hips gave way. She was on a lower level of the Safehouse and there were many stairs and a ramp to negotiate which was not easy.

"Mindy needs a bloody lift in here!"

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**Safehouse K**  
**Upper Level 1**

The girl was a mess, having endured several sessions with Hit Girl and Wildcat.

While they had gone relatively easy to prolong the agony, they had also relented in their punishment to allow Fury and Rage to have their own session with the girl who had been responsible for hurting someone very dear to them both. Fury dived in with a punch to the face which elicited a scream and some blood while Rage drove a fist into the girls left side, doubling her over before she sank to her knees.

"Let's get a better look at you!" Fury growled as she pulled her knife and slid the blade underneath the girl's sports bra and deftly cut it away.

Rage followed the example and slipped his own knife into the boy-shorts which fell to the ground beneath their owner. The girl remained on her knees, staring into nothing through her tears and the blood which ran over her eyes from cuts on her forehead. Fury drove her right fist into the girl's bared left breast and the girl screamed out in agony. Fury's left fist drove into the girl's right side and the girl fell forward into her own blood and urine. Rage seized her by the left ear and he yanked her back to her knees, ignoring the screaming.

Then Rage froze, just as he was about to strike the girl again. Her legs had opened as she had struggled to her knees and he had seen something which he had not seen in quite a while. In the cleft between the girl's left inner thigh and her vulva, there was a small birthmark which was partially obscured by her pubic hair. The boy recognised it instantly for what it was. Fury looked into the girl's left eye - the right one was bonded shut by dried blood - and she too froze as she saw the familiar hazel eye look back at her. Both youngsters called out the name as one as they both staggered back in surprise and horror.

"Rachel!"

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At the same moment, Stephanie appeared in the space and she almost fell into Foxtail's arms as she stumbled.

Stephanie took in the scene before her. The space was wide open and all concrete. In the centre of the space was a thick piece of industrial plastic sheeting which covered about thirty square metres. Upon that blood-covered sheeting which wreaked of urine, a teenaged girl knelt, completely naked, her underwear torn and scattered around her. The girl was covered in blood and her pale skin was puffy with bruises which varied from blue and black, to red. Her right eye was unable to open and the very short hair on her head was matted with sweat and blood. Standing before the naked girl stood Rage and Fury, with Hit Girl and Wildcat not too far away.

"Stop!" Stephanie called out. "That girl saved my life . . . she doesn't deserve to die. Saoirse, for the love of God, help me!"

Foxtail looked startled at the last few words which were barely audible. Stephanie very rarely called her by her full name; it was almost always 'SD' and never when in her combat suit. Saoirse helped her friend over towards the battered girl.

"You okay, Psyche?" Hit Girl asked as she looked down at her daughter.

"Yes, I am. That girl saved my life and I want her to be given a second chance."

"No fucking way!" Hit Girl growled angrily. "Not after what she did to you."

"So, she tried to hurt me - Foxtail did *much* worse and you gave *her* a second chance *and* a goddamn promotion!" Stephanie pointed out. "Not to mention Fury, over there."

"She does have a point," Foxtail commented but her bravery wavered, and she flinched as she saw Hit Girl's head come around in her direction.

Foxtail feared but one person and that was Hit Girl.

"I'm going to be okay, according to Medic."

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Stephanie hobbled forwards and she all but fell to her own knees as she knelt beside the girl who now lay on the plastic; she had collapsed out of sheer exhaustion.

"Stay still, Ember; you're safe, I promise."

Stephanie looked up at her brother.

"Go get some water - NOW! Fury, go get Medic."

Fury looked up at Hit Girl who nodded and the young girl bolted for the ramp below.

"She's an enemy combatant, Psyche," Hit Girl cautioned her protégé. "She cannot be trusted."

"I know that!" Stephanie growled angrily as she held the girl's left hand. "I want her to live - you can keep her cuffed to the damn bed but she's going to live!"

Hit Girl stepped back as Medic ran over, her bag in her hand.

"What the fucking hell is going on?" Hit Girl demanded as she turned on Fury and Rage.

"That girl is Rachel Ascot; without her . . . well, I would be long dead for starters," Rage revealed.

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### ***Ember***

The pain was extreme.

Her body hurt from head to toe and she was struggling to stay conscious. She could feel the liquid in which she lay, made up of her own bodily fluids, and she felt disgusted. There was an argument going on between those psychos. Somebody had stopped the beating; it sounded like the girl they had been

raping. Before that, though, through the haze of her mind, she had heard a pair of electronic voices calling her by a name that she had not used in many months. She felt somebody holding her hand and saying something to her but her mind would not process the words.

Then she passed out.

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**Safehouse E**

**Sub-Level 8**

**Room 22**

The pain was still there as she regained consciousness.

Something felt different; she was no longer lying in her own bodily fluids, she was lying in a comfortable bed and she felt clean. Her right eye wouldn't open as if something was covering it. She opened her left eye, but she could not see much; wherever she was, it was dark. She listened, but she could hear nothing more than the whir of fans and the hum of air-conditioning. She tried to sit up, but the pain was too much, and she gave up almost immediately.

Then she passed out.

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She heard a voice, familiar, yet distant.

It took a minute for her mind and then her eyes - she could open her right eye again which was a surprise - to focus properly. Then she heard her name - her real name; the girl had not heard it spoken allowed in many months.

"Rachel?"

There it was again. Something shifted in the girl's fogged brain and she saw the mental image of a boy, six-years-old, and wearing yellow joggers. Another image of the same boy taking down a girl, two years his senior.

"Jamie?"

"Hi, Rachel."

Rachel looked over to her left and she saw a face grinning at her. She recognised him easily enough, despite it having been many months since they had last seen one another.

"Thought somebody would have killed you by now."

"Oh, they tried!" Jamie growled.

Then Rachel's eyes focussed on another familiar face.

"Is that little Abigail?"

Abigail grinned enormously.

"I'm not so little now, Rach."

"Can Jamie still take you down?"

"That was a one off!" Abigail scowled.

"Just trying to make a joke."

Rachel's speech was laboured, and she was feeling very weak. The girl whom she knew as Stephanie Walker stepped forwards and she smiled.



"I owe you an apology, Rachel. Jamie's mentioned you - not in detail - but I believe I owe you for saving his life. I'm his big sister, by the way. You will not die today; you get a second chance, because of what you did for my brother - and it seems, Abigail."

"Where am I?"

"You are at a classified location beneath the streets of Chicago, Rachel," Jamie offered his friend. "We're both very sorry for what we did to you - we had no idea it was you."

Rachel looked into Jamie's eyes and then over at Abigail Wilde.

"Not your fault."

"We caused you unbelievable pain, before," Abigail said quietly. "Now, we've gone and done it again."

"Not . . . your . . . fault . . ."

The girl passed out again.

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### ***Two hours later***

"How old are you?" Medic asked.

"Fourteen."

"What are you?"

"I'm a *Marauder*."

"A what?" Hit Girl asked as she entered the room.

"A super-*Predator*," Stephanie replied.

"*Marauders* are *Predators* who refused to go back to a normal life and who just wanted to fight and kill," Rachel explained. "Before you ask - I chose this life; I had nowhere to go and I thought that I could make something of my life. I was so wrong."

"Ember, isn't it?" Jamie asked.

"Yes, that was my *Predator* codename. They called me Raider as a *Marauder* but I hated it. Those girls who attacked Stephanie . . . believe me, I had no idea what they were going to do; I just followed orders. Stephanie . . . I am so very sorry for what happened to you. Jamie, I can't believe you found your sister . . . I thought she was dead."

"Later . . . just rest," Jamie suggested.

Tears spilled down Rachel's cheeks. The boy reached out and he took hold of her right hand.

"You're safe now, Rachel. We'll look after you - right, Hit Girl?"

Hit Girl looked down at her son. Then, with much reluctance, she nodded slowly.

"I would think so. Rachel, you are welcome here . . . only . . ."

"I know; I can't be trusted. I know; I'll need to earn that trust. I promise you that I can change. I used to be good - Jamie can confirm that," Rachel replied with a brief smile as she turned to Stephanie. "I've got some stories

for you, Stephanie. I'm sure there's some things from his time as a *Predator* that he's *not* told you about."

Jamie felt his cheeks warming up and he groaned.

"Looking forward to it, Ember - now, you need rest," Stephanie advised.

Everybody left the girl alone and Hit Girl ensured that the door was locked.

"She will need to be guarded at all times. Two people in the Safehouse as a minimum. Once she's healed enough to be moved, she goes to Safehouse Q. She sees no more faces - you three are enough for now."

Stephanie, Abigail, and Jamie nodded.

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Jamie hung back as the two girls went on ahead with Cathy and he turned to Mindy.

"Please don't be mad at her, Mindy."

"She's my daughter and I will discipline her as I see fit."

"She meant well. . ."

"James!"

Jamie shut up, but he glared at Mindy, nonetheless.

"You've been with us barely a month, Jamie. Stephanie has been here almost a year. I know her very well and I know that she knows my rules. She knows what I expect and what I will not tolerate. I will give you some leeway, as I gave her, but that only goes so far. Stephanie put her own life at risk and while she had a noble reason for going out, she should never have left D-JAK. She *will* be punished, Jamie - no buts and it *will* be severe, I promise you - I would advise you to take heed and learn from your sister's mistakes."

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Later that evening, Mindy found Stephanie loitering in the galley.

She did not look happy and Mindy had an idea why - Stephanie knew that was in deep shit, but so far, Mindy had not actually spoken to her directly.

"Okay, I've spoken with Marcus. He's handed the investigation over to Voight and Intelligence. Voight has agreed to keep Rachel out of it - for the moment. She *will* need to be questioned. Voight is very worried. He's worried about three kids being killed. He's worried about a group of kids raping another, younger kid. He's worried about armed kids being on the streets. He's worried about what those kids are about."

Stephanie looked over at Mindy and she nodded but there was a question on her face at the mention of only 'three' dead kids.

"Marty and Abby are looking for Rachel's file and they will see what they can do to check her out. Come on, let's go home. You've had one hell of a day, Steph, and I want you to rest . . . I know; you hate that . . . please?"

Stephanie gave up the fight before it had even begun.

"Yes, Mum. Come on, Jamie."

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**Glenview**  
**The British Sector**

"Sis?"

"Come in, Jamie."

Jamie closed the door behind him and he sat down on the bed beside his sister. He grimaced at her pained expression. She had been sent to her room, the very moment they had got home.

"I have no idea about what you went through but I'm glad you're okay. It must have really hurt."

"It did. I've felt pain - but that was the very worst, I can tell you. Despite what *some* might think, that was the very first object to ever enter my vagina . . . oh, get a grip, Jamie! Nothing has ever passed my labia but some nurse's fingers when she inserted my catheter in hospital, back when I was shot. My vagina was as virgin as the driven snow!"

The nine-year-old boy cringed at the explicit terminology.

"You really are a pussy!" Stephanie laughed. "Tell me about her."

"She was in punishment when we met. I was a Yellow - you know . . ."

"I do; you were a nobody."

"Yes - I had to bring her food and escort her to empty her bucket. I was six at the time. We talked a lot and she taught me things. The Doc saw her teaching me. When she was out of punishment, I was dragged before the Doc and he told me I was to become a Phase 1 *Predator* - probationary, of course. Only there was a catch - Rachel was to train me . . . if I failed, she failed, if you get my drift."

Stephanie looked at her brother and she again felt sorry for him; sorry for everything that he had experienced and endured.

"I do - you would die . . . and so would she," Stephanie replied darkly.

"She trained me. She was my friend. She kept me going when I wanted to just give up. She was the only reason that I could stay alive. Come to think of it, she was the one who told me about you."

"Huh?"

"Rachel came to me one morning and she told me about this twelve-year-old girl. That girl had died; her head caved in. She had been killed by another *Predator* - an eight-year-old - in the shower while both were naked."

"Guilty as charged!" Stephanie admitted with a smile.

"I wish I had known, back then, that my own sister was the famous Psyche."

"Infamous, more like!"

"What can we do about Rachel? Will Mindy take her in? I know it'll be one hell of a risk, considering what Rachel is . . . or was."

"That's up to us and I know that SD and Megan will help."

"Mindy and Megan really love you; they both went to town on Rachel - not their fault; they had no way of knowing."

Stephanie received a surprise visitor - apparently, the condemned was allowed visitors prior to her sentencing.

"Lauren?"

"Hi, Steph."

"I don't need you here, I . . ."

"Denial is normal - I've been there. It makes no difference whether it was a man's dick or some other object - the fact remains, Stephanie: you were raped."

"No . . . I wasn't . . . I . . ."

Lauren remained calm as she continued.

"Was an object shoved into your vagina repeatedly?"

Stephanie scowled at the vulgarity of the comment, but reluctantly, she nodded, as tears began to fall.

"Don't fight it, Steph. You're going to have nightmares tonight and for many more nights. I let my attack get to me - I want to help you with yours."

"Yours was way worse," Stephanie said.

"Maybe - but you are only ten. There's no good age to be raped, but ten is definitely not a good age. I am three years older than you, but I struggled to cope. Maybe your *Predator* training will help you, but . . . but you are not alone, Steph."

"Thank you, Lauren, you're a great friend."

Lauren held Stephanie as she sobbed.

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Mindy appeared around ten that night.

Stephanie was feeling very depressed as she tried to use the mirror to look at the back of her head. Her hair was a mess and she felt the hot tears running down her face - how could she have been so stupid!? Mindy stood by the door for a few moments, seeing if Stephanie would get herself together - Mindy could not cope with people crying at the best of times. Finally, she pushed the door closed quietly and she walked over to where Stephanie was sitting on the edge of her bed.

"Mum!"

Stephanie stood up and she wrapped her arms around Mindy, tears spilling out of her eyes. The tears were very real and Mindy could feel the remorse that Stephanie felt for her actions as the ten-year-old sobbed and shook. Mindy pulled Stephanie over to the bed and they both sat down, but Stephanie refused to let go of Mindy who was finding it all very uncomfortable. Finally, Mindy pulled Stephanie's arms from around her and pushed her back. For a moment their eyes locked and Mindy kept a neutral expression on her face.

"You went out when you were grounded - I thought better of you, Stephanie. I don't care the reason behind you ignoring me - your brother has tried to plead your case, but there is nothing you can say that will be a valid excuse for going out against my express instructions. Now, as a direct result of your actions, you lost your hair," Stephanie began to sob again, "and you were attacked by people who wanted you dead. Then you suffered something awful and I am struggling to put that act into words."

"Did you ask Lauren to come over?"

"I did - did it help?"

Stephanie nodded.

"I just wanted to get you something nice . . . to say sorry for the car . . ."

Mindy had been beating herself up about it being her fault Stephanie had gone out - until Dave had told her to stop being 'so fucking stupid' and he had threatened to get Marcus on the phone to have a go at her.

"Considering what you endured, I will take your hair and the err, other things, into account when considering your sentence. I was thinking of demoting you until you can demonstrate better judgement . . . however, I am putting you on probation and we will see if you can follow my instructions."

Stephanie was crying again so Mindy decided it was time to leave her to get some rest. Without any further words, Mindy helped her daughter into bed before she turned out the light and closed the bedroom door behind her.