

Monday, October 10th, 2016

Safehouse E

Sub-Level 8

Room 25

"This, we believe, is Bandit."

Venom grimaced.

"Willow."

"Come again?" Hit Girl asked.

"Willow Hartman - First Intake. Known as Rampart. She was a good person until she reached Phase 3 and then she changed - don't know why," Venom reeled off.

"She became bitchy - way more than most of us girls - kind of like you, Hit Girl," Bane added.

"Thanks, I think."

The girl in question was unconscious in the bed with various wires and tubes running under the sheet which covered the obviously naked body.

"How come she's alive?" Bane asked.

"Ember shot her, but maybe she moved at the last second; the bullet went through her shoulder - nicked an artery: why she didn't bleed out. . ." Hit Girl tried to explain.

"I heard somebody was brought in wounded - I just thought it was the other girl," Venom commented.

"I had to keep her presence quiet for Stephanie's sake."

"We can understand that," Venom conceded.

Training Facility Echo

Level 2

Dave, Danny, Anne-Marie, and an understandably shy Stephanie exited the elevator into the recreational and briefing space.

A lot of faces turned to look in their direction and others were nudged to turn in her direction. All the faces looked decidedly grim which annoyed Stephanie.

"If any one of you bastards tries to give me sympathy, I will fuck you up so bad!" she growled.

There were a few surprised faces, but then Joshua started to laugh.

"Way to go, Stephanie!" he chuckled.

Everybody started to laugh and there was a round of applause for Stephanie who cringed - it was not the centre of attention she preferred.

"What's with the bruise on Anne-Marie's cheek?" Chloe asked.

Anne-Marie tried to hide her face in embarrassment. Danny scowled at his twin for a moment before he replied.

"She made a joke about Steph's hair: said we should call her Stephen. I slapped her."

Chloe just rolled her eyes and she smiled down at Stephanie.

"You, young lady, are coming with me."

Stephanie had no idea what was going on, but Chloe took her by the hand and then led the girl back into the elevator.

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There was a decidedly dark and sullen mood in the safehouse.

Despite Stephanie's bravado, everybody felt for her. Anne-Marie received a lot of stick for her actions and she was left sitting in a corner, alone, far away from everybody else. The mood had not been helped by those who had been injured the previous evening. Many were worried and as a direct consequence, the morale had begun to plunge. Two hours passed before Stephanie returned to the Safehouse looking very different and more than a little embarrassed by her transformation. Her hair had been professionally trimmed and styled to suit the new length and was now a very fitting pixie cut.

"Fucking, wow!" Joshua exclaimed. "Nice one, Steph!"

Stephanie found herself giggling, and her face began to burn bright red.

"So, hot!" Tommy said next as he ran up and gave Stephanie a kiss on the cheek.

The giggling just got worse as the compliments piled in from everybody present.

"Wow, that is so soft - I love it," Saoirse said with a friendly smile full of support as she ran a hand up the back of her friend's neck.

"Thank you, everybody. . ." Stephanie tried before she felt tears welling up in her eyes.

"You do look great, Steph . . . I'm really sorry," Anne-Marie said as she bravely faced her big sister, ignoring the angry stares from the others.

Stephanie could not hate the youngster - she looked miserable.

"Apology accepted," Stephanie said as she gave the girl a hug.

"Chloe?" Becky asked.

"Yes, Peanut."

"Can I get my hair done like that, please?"

"What? Get rid of your lovely long hair?" Chloe asked, dumbfounded - she knew that Becky loved her long hair.

"Becky - that's a big step," Joshua pointed out, appalled by the very idea.

"I like Steph's hair - it's great and well, long hair gets in the way and it takes ages to brush and to stuff into a mask," Becky pointed out.

"She has a point," Stephanie said.

"No, she doesn't!" Chloe corrected. "Not right now, Peanut."

"Okay," Becky said.

"She does look great, though, doesn't she, Tommy?" Saoirse asked suggestively in a very loaded question.

"Hell, yeah!" Tommy replied with a grin. "I've been hard ever since she walked in."

Stephanie's eyes almost popped out as her face went redder than ever.

That evening

Safehouse F

"Welcome, Lucy," Saoirse and Shannon said together as they pulled off the girl's black hood.

"Pleasure's all mine. . ." Lucy said as her eyes became accustomed to the bright lights and she took in the enormous cavern-like structure before her. "Another one of Hit Girl's Safehouses?"

"Welcome to Safehouse F, Lucy."

Lucy turned to see a young woman striding towards her. She wore a uniform with a single gold star on the collar and her name tag read: **HIT GIRL**. Lucy was a little perturbed to see no mask in evidence.

"So, we meet in the flesh, so to speak. I assume I have you to thank for the, very thorough," Lucy glared at Chrissy, "cavity search."

"Can't be too careful in the current climate," Mindy offered, nonchalantly. "I am taking a leap of faith with you, Lucy."

"I noticed. Thanks."

"We have another job for you."

Safehouse E

Sub-Level 8

Room 25

"We brought her in, last night," Mindy explained as she swiped her access card and pushed open the door.

Lucy walked into what was evidently a hospital room with two beds occupying most of the space. Mindy waved Lucy over towards the one occupied bed. Lucy studied the unconscious form in the bed for a moment before stiffening.

"Willow - the girl who went bad."

"That's what Chrissy and Skye told me."

"What do you want of me?"

"We want you to interrogate her - find out what she is and why she is in Chicago. I have a few more questions, too," Mindy said as she dumped a large folder onto a table.

"A few?" Lucy growled.

"You will be watched - every movement recorded on the cameras," Mindy cautioned.

"I can live with that. How did you come by her?"

"Seems they knew Psyche - who doesn't!" Mindy replied. "She and her team of four girls ambushed Stephanie and they raped her with a baton."

Lucy's face went dark, confirming to Mindy that she had made the right decision.

"The other girls?"

"Dead, but one - she's in the room across the corridor. She killed three of her colleagues and wounded this bitch."

"Second Intake," Skye prompted. "Rachel Ascot."

"Not one to go bad, if I remember right," Lucy stated.

"We believe she might have just fallen in with the wrong crowd," Mindy said. "We want you to interrogate her, too."

"I can do that - can I see Stephanie?" Lucy asked.

"I'll see what I can arrange," Mindy promised.

Training Facility Echo

Level 1

Lucy sat at a table in the dining room.

She had a mug of coffee in her left hand and a pile of paper spread out all over the table.

"You okay, Lucy?" a voice asked.

Lucy looked up into the smiling face of. . .

"Shannon!"

"You look busy - I'll leave you be."

"No - sit down, please."

"I see that Mindy has put you to work," Shannon commented as she ran her eyes across all the papers.

"I'm on interrogation duty," Lucy grouched.

"Something's up - don't lie now, Lucy."

Lucy chuckled.

"After all I put you through, I would have thought that you'd not want to talk to me so readily."

"Lucy!" Shannon exclaimed. "Without you, I would have received a bullet in my skull - I was a fucking screwup."

"Yes, you were," Lucy agreed.

"You want to talk - you come over, okay?"

"What about your dad?"

"What about him?"

"I don't think he'd want me around."

"He cares about you - I know that, Lucy. Besides, he'll do what I want - I have him all figured out!"

Level 4

Mindy was pounding around the 400-metre track on the inside lane - she was on her third circuit of the evening and she was brooding.

The previous evening had been hard on Stephanie and at about one in the morning, Mindy and Dave had been awoken by Stephanie climbing into the bed and forcing her way in between the two of them. Without a word, Stephanie had fallen straight to sleep, cuddling into Dave who had just chuckled and shrugged while Mindy had just scowled in his direction from across the sleeping ten-year-old. Mindy was worried about Stephanie and what she had endured, but Stephanie was strong, and she had been through a lot in her short life - she could handle almost anything. It was the very first time that Stephanie had ever wormed her way into the bed - Anne-Marie had done it once or twice.

They were a close family, all of them; a fact which often surprised Mindy, but then she had been very close to her own father.

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Stephanie lazed around in the swimming pool and she watched Mindy running around the track, her legs striding out.

Mindy was being super-supportive, as was Dave and everybody else. Some were avoiding her to some extent, appalled by what she had gone through. For solace, Stephanie had retreated into the bowels of the facility to where she could be alone. Her thoughts were on Mindy, Dave, her family - and the girl who meant so much to her brother and Abigail. Rachel was a conundrum, but Jamie and Abigail loved her, so Stephanie was happy to give her the benefit of the doubt - for the moment.

"A penny for your thoughts."

Stephanie looked up to see Abigail slipping into the swimming pool. That was a surprise - Abigail was not a big fan of swimming, but she tolerated it on occasions.

"Sulking," Stephanie replied.

"I want to say that I had an idea of what you went through, but I can't remember any of it."

"It was horrible."

"I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy," Abigail said as she swam slowly around the drifting Stephanie.

"I tried to get you raped, remember?"

"It never happened and if you really wanted me raped, you would have made it happen."

"I suppose. I hate that word."

"It's not supposed to be a nice word in any context," Abigail pointed out.

"True."

The two girls swam around for several minutes without talking.

"You two, okay?" Mindy asked as she dripped sweat.

"Yes, Mum."

"Yes, Mrs Lizewski," Abigail grinned.

"Oh, God!" Mindy exclaimed. "You make me sound old!"

"You are old," Abigail pointed out with a grin which faltered as Mindy glared down at her. "I'll go drown myself - save you the trouble."

Mindy laughed.

"Thank you for looking after my daughter, Abigail."

"Somebody has to," Abigail replied. "She can't keep out of trouble, or away from her past, it seems."

"Tell me about it!" Mindy grimaced as Stephanie just grinned sheepishly.

"Hey!" Mindy yelled into the steam filled showers where laughing and girly giggling could be heard.

"Coming!" came Stephanie's voice before she began giggling again.

Mindy had completed her own shower, just as the two girls had appeared. Mindy had no complaints about seeing her daughter grinning and hearing her laughing and giggling. However, *Predators* laughing and giggling, including former enemies, was worrying.

"What's up, Mum?" Stephanie asked as she appeared with her towel wrapped tightly around her body.

The short hair suited her very well and Chloe had been able to obtain a perfect styling. Abigail was right behind, wrapped up in her own towel. It was hard to see the two girls as mortal enemies as they stood there dripping.

"Get yourselves dried and dressed - Steph: you have a visitor up in the dining room."

Level 1

Stephanie followed Mindy into the dining room, unsure of what was awaiting her.

There, at a table, sat the first *Predator*, Lucy Ford. Mindy waved Stephanie over before manoeuvring Abigail elsewhere and leaving the two girls alone. Lucy waved Stephanie to a seat and Saoirse appeared with two mugs of hot tea which she placed down onto the table before vanishing.

"We are special, you and me," Lucy began as she looked at Stephanie.

"How so?"

"I started *Urban Predator* and you finished it. We are the beginning and the end of something inhuman but also of something that began as something noble only to be destroyed by the limited sight of one man."

"Noah Vossen."

"You met?"

"Yeah - Saoirse killed him in the end."

"Oh?"

"She chopped off his hand, liquidised it and had him drink it. . ."

"Cool!"

"She plucked out his eyes with a knife and then she finished him - blade to the heart."

"I'd have preferred him to have suffered - cushy way out," Lucy commented, and Stephanie grinned fiendishly.

"Hirsch suffered - I enjoyed making him suffer for what he did."

"That man, he made kids kill their families. That was one of the reasons Instructor Millar, err I mean, Patrick, began to revolt against the other instructors - he disagreed with it all."

"I know - he's a good man."

"That he is. He helped to keep me sane in my darkest hour."

"I wish I had had somebody - it was hard. I suppose I had friends, kind of. They called themselves my 'posse'. I was feared by many but that only drew me to the attention of those bastard instructors. Killing that girl in the shower may have stopped the bullying but it made me suffer even worse deprivations and experiences."

"You survived all that, Stephanie and you endured it all from such a young age. I was the age you are now when I was taken and flown to Colorado and I struggled. I suppose my time was easier as I had him, I had Leo. We helped each other and . . ."

"You miss him, right?"

"Yes, I do. I have no idea if he is still alive - we broke contact when the last mission went awry."

"There are times when I hate my life," Stephanie said, gloomily. "But I love my new family - even my brat sister. I have the most incredible stepparents and I love them very much. I have two brothers, one being the boy I thought that I had lost for so long. If I can find somebody dear to me, then I'm certain that you can, too, Lucy."

"I hope so, Stephanie, I really do."

Safehouse E

Sub-Level 8

Room 22

Rachel looked up from her bed as the door opened.

She grinned as she saw Jamie and then Abigail appear . . . but the grin faded as she saw who was next.

"Didn't think that I would ever see you again, Lucy," she growled.

"Yeah - I never thought I would see any of you. Before you start on me, please, let me say. . ."

"Sorry?" Rachel interrupted. "You can keep your fucking apologies!"

Lucy sat down on a chair beside the bed with Abigail and Jamie taking two more seats.

"How are you feeling?" Lucy asked.

"Like I got run over by a truck."

Abigail and Jamie both cringed at the comment.

"Sorry - I had to get that in," Rachel smiled darkly as she grinned down at the two youngsters.

"Bitch!" Jamie grimaced.

"What he said," Abigail muttered as she frowned.

"Can we get down to business, please, I have a lot of questions for you, err - what should I call you? Ember? Raider? Rachel?"

"Not Raider," Rachel replied. "I never want to hear that name again."

"Okay, Rachel. What are you?" Lucy began as she studied her notes.

"Like I said, yesterday, *Marauders* are *Predators* who refused to go back to a normal life. That woman, FEAR, she had her agents seeking us out. They found me beating up some bastard, somewhere in Virginia. They offered me money and a life, freedom from a normal life, the ability to kill, almost at will."

"You accepted."

"It sounded appealing and my life was shit at the time. I decided to use my skills - thought I could make them work for *me*, for a change. After *Urban Predator* fell apart, I had nothing - it folded with no warning."

"My Mum did that, along with my sister," Jamie said proudly.

"Oh?" Rachel said. "I heard rumours, but I had no idea."

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The questions continued, moving on from the friendlier questions to the less friendly ones.

"Why did you allow yourself to be taken?" Lucy asked.

"Stephanie thought I might be able to get out of that life."

"What life?"

"As a *Marauder*."

"How do we know this isn't just some elaborate setup to infiltrate us?" Lucy continued.

"It isn't - I had no idea. . ."

"You're after Hit Girl, aren't you?"

"No . . . I . . ."

"You want to kill her?"

"No!"

"You're a fucking mole!" Lucy yelled.

"NO!"

"I know your training! I know what you are capable of! Tell me what you are doing here!"

"I don't want that life. I don't want to be part of that . . ."

"Okay," Lucy offered, softly. "Suppose we believe you . . . you got anything for us?"

"Yes."

"I never liked you - Rachel, isn't it?"

"You know. . ."

"You're here to infiltrate *Fusion*! You are here to kill Hit Girl - maybe make another attempt on Psyche?"

"No! You've got it all wrong, Lucy . . . I . . ."

"You're so full of shit, Ember, I'm surprised you can stand the fucking stench!"

"What!?"

"You're a fucking traitor and I'm going to recommend to Hit Girl that she kills you."

Lucy stood up to leave and Rachel appeared horror-stricken. Her eyes were red with worry and stress. She was breathing heavily and there were tears welling up in her eyes.

"I'm not lying - I know about FEAR's plans . . . PLEASE!"

Lucy walked out of the room, closely followed by a fuming Abigail and Jamie.

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"She's telling the truth!" Jamie blurted out.

"I know," Lucy replied.

"But. . ." Abigail began before Lucy put a finger to Abigail's lips.

"I had to test her - I'm not sorry about doing that; we live in a dangerous world."

"I know," Jamie responded, sounding very relieved.

"Come on, both of you - we'll leave Rachel to rest and go check in with that crazed woman upstairs."

"You mean, Mom?" Jamie asked.

"Yeah, her."

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"Hello, Rachel."

"Hi . . . Steph."

Rachel struggled to wipe away her tears as Stephanie sat down on a chair. Neither spoke for a few minutes until Rachel had composed herself. Then Stephanie stood up and she walked around the bed. She was sore and still getting used to things, so she was not in the best of moods.

"I have to thank you again for saving my life," Stephanie said. "Jamie and Abigail speak very highly of you. They were both very upset about hurting you."

"They got me strapped and sent to the cage, back when they were younger."

"I see. Me and that cage were well acquainted," Stephanie replied with a pained expression. "The strap, too."

"Lucy said. . ."

"Stop - she was just testing you. Tell me more about what FEAR is up to if you please."

Rachel looked very relieved as she settled back onto her pillows.

"Something big was planned for some weeks back, only that pink pansy fucked things up," Rachel explained.

Stephanie chuckled.

"You've met Sunset Phoenix, I assume?"

"Not in person, but our paths have crossed - she does seem to love pink!"

"Yeah - well, FEAR has what she is calling: The First Wave."

The Battle Bunker

"... FEAR is calling it: The First Wave," Marty explained as he continued flipping through the document which had been decrypted from the recovered USB drive. "Between FEAR, the Russians, and the Sicilians, there's gonna be around two-hundred enemy to be put down."

"Not good!" Mindy mused.

"Any good news, pal?" Dave asked.

"They ain't gonna be in one big group - it looks like they're gonna be scattered around the city and then some, in smaller groups causing mayhem and spreading us about in smaller groups," Marty explained.

"That's good," Abby offered.

"Yeah - great!" Mindy growled as she began to consider the ramifications of spitting *Fusion* up even further than it already was, not to mention those unavailable for combat.

"What else do we know?" Dave asked Abby.

"Things are not going well on the *Fusion* popularity front," Abby reported. "For now, the worst weapon used against us has been rotten eggs. We're working on getting the citizens of Chicago back on our side."

"So, when is this attack expected?" Mindy wanted to know.

"Try Saturday," Marty stated.

"This Saturday?" Dave queried.

"This Saturday."

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Mindy was not happy with the state of affairs, but then nobody was.

"What else is there?" she asked, a little worried as to the potential response.

"We know where FEAR is based," Marty offered.

Mindy's sour mood brightened up considerably.

"Joliet City," Abby added.

"Do we have enough to assault the place?" Dave queried.

"We know the location, but we know very little about that location - it's an old jail and plans are scarce. It's a lot of area to cover with many buildings and levels - it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to mount an assault in just a few days," Marty said.

"We might be able to infiltrate and sabotage them," Abby suggested.

"Anything we can do to impede their attack at the weekend would help," Dave confirmed.

"Okay," Mindy decided. "Let's plan a recon for Wednesday morning and an infiltration for Thursday night."

"Who will you take?"

"I'll take Steph and Tommy on Wednesday. For Thursday, prepare Hailee and Saoirse on primary, with Stormtide and Megan on secondary."

The following morning

Tuesday, October 11th

Glenview

Anne-Marie smiled supportively as she came down the stairs and she saw Stephanie appearing from Dave and Mindy's bedroom.

"Hi, Steph!"

"Oh, hi, Anne-Marie."

Stephanie looked embarrassed.

"I'm not judging you, Steph - hungry?"

"Yeah," Steph replied with a forced smile.

In the kitchen, Anne-Marie manoeuvred her big sister towards a chair at the table overlooking the back garden. Stephanie appeared a little confused as Anne-Marie proceeded to bring over a bowl for each of them, a spoon each, a carton of milk, and then Stephanie's favourite Cocoa Krispies, plus her own Cheerios. Stephanie was glad that Anne-Marie stopped there, allowing her to pour her own cereal - she was not an invalid.

"I'm sorry I was nasty to you, yesterday," Anne-Marie began."

"Don't worry about it - I know you're there for me, and that's enough," Stephanie offered in between spoonful's.

Anne-Marie felt her face heating up, so she buried her head into her cereal.

"How are my girls?" Dave asked as he strolled into the kitchen and made for the coffee machine.

"We're good, thanks, Dad," Stephanie replied for them both.

Four hours later

North Park Elementary School

Understandably, Mindy was fuming.

As she walked down the corridor, she could see two small boys sitting on two of five chairs which sat beside a door in a line, over to the left. Both boys stared at the floor, not daring to look up as Mindy approached - they could both sense her anger and they knew that their world was about to come crashing down around them. Mindy was welcomed at the door by the Principal who waved her into her office - both adults ignored the two miserable miscreants. Both boys

jumped a minute later when a loud bellow was heard from the other side of the door.

"*They did what!?*"

A few minutes later, Mindy reappeared and without saying a word, she pointed down the corridor. Both boys stood up and they headed down the corridor, very aware of the very angry Mindy walking a few feet behind. For Jamie, it felt like the longest walk of his short life and the corridors appeared to go on forever.

It was with limited relief that they reached the car park.

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Stephanie noticed the British Racing Green Jaguar XJ parked in the school carpark when she left her classroom for lunch.

Her unasked question was answered moments later as she saw her two brothers being 'escorted' by a ferocious looking Mindy across the carpark. She just shook her head and made her way towards the dining room.

"Where's Danny?" Anne-Marie asked a little later.

"I saw him, and Jamie, being escorted off the premises by Mum - she looked like was going to kill 'em," Stephanie replied.

"What have the idiots done, this time?" Anne-Marie asked, rhetorically.

"Not sure, to be honest."

"Boys!"

That evening

Training Facility Echo

Level 0

Neither Stephanie, nor Anne-Marie had seen the boys when they had returned home after school.

Dave had picked them up, instead of Mindy. They had asked about the boys, only for Dave to simply shrug in response. However, on passing through from Safehouse F, they found the two miscreants engaged in shuttle-runs, from one side of the primary training area to the other, and judging by their sweat-soaked hair and clothes, they had obviously been at it for quite a while. Standing a few feet away, herself drenched in sweat, stood Mindy and she sound very angry as she barked orders at the two boys. Mindy looked up and she saw her two daughters. Stephanie had expected a smile, but she just received a glare and a single barked word of welcome.

"Train!"

Anne-Marie opened her mouth to make a snappy retort, but Stephanie wisely hustled her off towards the changing rooms.

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"What's up with Mum?" Stephanie asked Megan, who was herself, changing.

"The boys fucked up," Megan replied. "As I understand it, they got into a fight with Aimee Grant. Her big sister used to be the high school bully - until Lauren put her down. Aimee was a nice girl - very different to her big sister -

only she's changed. Aimee started to spout off the same bullshit that her sister once did, only with *anti-Fusion* crap. Well, she got into an argument with another girl and Jamie went to support that girl. Aimee slugged both the girl and Jamie which unfortunately brought Daniel into the fight."

"Was anybody hurt?" Stephanie asked.

"Nothing worse than some bruising - shame; the bitch deserved worse," Megan finished. "See you guys, later - I've no time for idle chitchat."

"She seem any different to you, since her return from Gotham?" Stephanie asked Anne-Marie as Megan ran out of the changing room.

"Not all that much."

"Okay."

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For next hour they trained under the watchful eyes of Mindy.

The veteran vigilante was in a foul mood and she was pushing everybody to their limits - even Megan. Nobody dared argue; they just pushed on through the pain barrier and continued training. The first to collapse were the two boys who had been pushed beyond normal endurance. Danny went first, with Jamie about forty minutes later. Stephanie, for all her *Predator* training was not far behind, her thighs still very sore. As she sank to the mats, she saw the disapproving look from Mindy, but Stephanie ignored it.

It was only in the dining room that Mindy tried to explain her feelings.

..._...

"Mindy?"

"Hi, Steph."

"I'll leave you be, if you want?"

"I'm sorry for being a bitch."

"You're just being you, Mum."

Mindy smiled for the first time that day.

"I'm just mad at your brothers for causing trouble. I know they were being valiant, but I have enough fucking shit on my plate without two immature little shits causing trouble!"

Stephanie chuckled.

"What?"

"I don't know why, but I find it funny when you're mad," Stephanie grinned.

"Oh, God!" Mindy growled. "You're so much like Dave!"

Stephanie grinned, enormously - that was a massive compliment as far as she was concerned. Before she could come out with some witty remark, Abby came running into the dining room.

"Bandit is awake."

Stephanie's face clouded over and went very dark.

"Bandit."