

Author's Note: This chapter follows on from **Chapter 12: Hunted Creatures** of my other story: **Creatures of the Night**.

Thursday, December 1st, 2016

Haven

SAN DIEGO

"Riptide!" Trauma yelled. "Get the hell out of there!"

Logan grabbed up his pack and he ran for the doorway which was just feet away from him. He was struck by a piece of falling wood as the roof of the building was chewed apart by machinegun fire. Everything moved to slow motion and so much seemed to happen in so short a time.

"Come with me if you want to live!"

Logan looked up into the piercing eyes of a *Fusion* vigilante. He seized the outstretched gauntlet without hesitation and he allowed himself to be hauled to his feet.

"This way!" came another voice and Logan saw a second vigilante standing only a few feet away.

Then the explosion had come, and he knew that he was a gonna. The smoke and dust were choking as the building came apart all around him. He struggled to move but he felt strong arms propelling him towards the exit and safety. Then he had felt the breath of fresh air and he had taken in entire lungfuls of life-giving air before retching up the dust in his lungs. He was dragged to his feet and thrust away from the inferno and towards the storage facility.

He could not believe that he was alive.

..._...

Neither could any of his friends as they stared in disbelief at what they were seeing as a form jogged nonchalantly across the street from the burning safehouse.

"Where the fuck, have you been?" Lilim demanded she hugged Riptide, almost squeezing the life out of him; she had been so scared that he had died.

"I got delayed - and I got rescued by Venom and Bane," Riptide replied as he was hugged.

Lilith was certain that she could hear a helicopter closing on them. She scanned the skies, looking for the tell-tale flashing lights. 'Police?' she thought - it wasn't.

..._...

With a roar, the triple-barrelled GAU-19/B electrically-driven Gatling gun sent a stream of .50-calibre BMG rounds downrange.

There was a large explosion just beyond the San Diego Freeway on-ramp, beyond Haven, as a vehicle exploded. The inbound machinegun fire stopped, and Haven continued to crackle as it burnt, unmolested.

Mist hauled *GRIFFIN* around, checking that nobody was moving. She had been literally seconds away from blasting the bastards before they had taken the shot with the rocket, but time had not been on their side and the safehouse was burning steadily. Below, at the storage site, Mist could see *QUAKE*, the

Chevrolet Colorado which Sky had driven down from L.A. that very afternoon. Venom was making contact with *Team San Diego* even after having helped rescue Riptide while Bane, who had ridden her motorcycle down with Sky and then rescued Riptide, was on her way to a new destination, a few miles to the east. It would not be long before the authorities arrived, Mist knew, as she touched down in the empty parking lot located just below the storage facility.

She kept the rotors spinning as she ran towards *Team San Diego*.

..._...

"Mist!" Lilith exclaimed at the sight of the pilot.

She had also noticed the enormous machinegun mounted on the side of the helicopter which bore no visible registration or markings of any kind. Mist spoke rapidly.

"Yes - no time for pleasantries. It's time to bug out. Get into *QUAKE* and strip out of your combat suits. Venom will show you where to hide the kit and weapons when aboard. You will find food, water, and medical supplies. Venom will take you back to L.A., and safety, before onward travel to Chicago."

"Thank you," Lilith said on behalf of them all.

"Is there anything you need from your apartment?" Mist continued without missing a beat. "We have somebody on the way there now who can grab whatever you need, but there is no time for you to go back there."

There was hesitation as nobody wanted to reveal any secrets.

"Under my bed - there's a small removable floorboard," Lilith muttered.

"A small pack secured under my bed," Lilith admitted.

"I got nothing," Trauma said.

"Me, neither," Riptide added.

"Get aboard *QUAKE* and get the hell out of San Diego," Mist ordered. "I'll fly escort for as long as I can before I have to head home."

It was with great sadness that the four of them mounted the large SUV. There was also relief, but mainly sadness at having failed. They had failed the city of San Diego and they were leaving with their tails between their legs. As they pulled out of the parking lot, all eyes were on the raging flames that used to be their refuge.

Venom kept silent as she drove north, not knowing what to say to the defeated team.

The Apartment

The ride to the apartment complex had been quick.

Accessing the apartment had taken no time at all, despite the locks - Bane was a highly skilled lockpicker amongst her many other assets. It did not take her long to search the apartment for everything which she could safely carry. She recovered the secret stashes of kit from the bedrooms of Guinevere and Juno before grabbing anything else that she could get her hands on. She had just finished shoving various personal items into a large backpack, including those items from Juno's special place, when she heard a sound.

She followed the sound into Guinevere's bedroom and she pulled open a cupboard, then shifted a small box. Her eyes went wide as she saw the green numerals flicking down and down: 00:58 . . . 00:57 . . . 00:56 . . . 00:55. Bane bolted for the door, pulling the backpack onto her back. The time clicked down in her mind as she grabbed up a second backpack and she lunged for the front door and safety. She ran out the door and she had just reached the stairwell when there was a violent explosion and the apartment was destroyed by the explosive device which also obliterated the next-door apartment which was mercifully vacant. Bane pushed away bits of the fallen woodwork and masonry, racing for her motorcycle.

She wasted no time as she quickly pulled on her helmet and then started the engine.

Fairmount Avenue

Bane met up with *QUAKE* in a deserted underpass beneath I-8.

"The apartment's gone," she commented darkly. "I barely escaped with my life."

"What!" Juno exclaimed.

"An explosive charge," Bane elaborated.

"How?" Nicholas demanded. "How could they have found our home?"

"They found the safehouse, too," Guinevere growled unhappily. "It was all a fucking set up - I should have seen this coming."

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Bane suggested.

"Everything is gone," Guinevere said, tears streaming down her face.

She felt worse than she had ever felt. She had allowed everything to come apart. She had allowed them all to come so close to dying.

"Suck it up, Guinevere!" Venom growled. "You're all alive - that's all that fucking matters right now!"

"She has a point," Juno said as she tried to console her cousin.

Bane dumped the backpacks into the rear of *QUAKE* before she headed onto the I-15 northbound on point, watching out for trouble on the fastest route out of the city as *QUAKE* followed on her heels.

..._...

Dieter's people did not wait long for his counterstrike.

As they passed under the 52 intersection, on the I-15, Crypto sent out a warning.

"Inbound from the 163! I have three SUVs joining the Interstate."

Mist dived towards the on ramp from her overwatch position high in the night sky. Flying solo and scanning the ground was not easy and it sapped energy. Crypto was slaved into *GRIFFIN*'s systems and she was able to monitor the FLIR and onboard systems as an aid to Mist. As such, Crypto had already locked the FLIR onto the targets, making Mist's task a lot easier. A few miles ahead, Venom had put her foot hard to the floor, accelerating hard. To that point, they had been obeying the speed limits so as not to attract any unwanted attention from law enforcement. Even so, the powerful SUVs pursuing them quickly ate up the distance and on the relatively deserted Interstate, they

were an easy target. Bane dropped back to allow the attackers to pass her before she took up the chase, her P90 ready to engage.

"Holy fuck!" Nicholas exclaimed as he saw the first SUV close in and he saw a man stand as the roof popped open. "They got a fucking Raptor!"

"Pull up the hatch beneath your feet!" Venom directed.

Juno reacted remarkably fast as she pulled up the hatch and pulled out a pair of P90 personal defence weapons. Each was already loaded with a fifty-round magazine. Nicholas pushed open the rear armoured window of the crew-cab and he opened fire on the advancing GMC SUV. There was a blast of flame from the GMC as the M134D mini-gun opened fire, sending fifty-rounds a second towards *QUAKE*. Venom jinked from side-to-side as she attempted to avoid the incoming gunfire. The armoured vehicle received dozens of strikes and Juno screamed as the two-inch-thick window beside her crazed over but did not shatter.

Bane closed from the rear and she endeavoured to shoot at the man who had popped up out of the SUV. Unfortunately, that only brought her to the attention of the remaining two SUVs who began to try and run her down. She made good use of her motorcycle's power as she outmanoeuvred the massive vehicles which were determined to turn her into roadkill.

"Bane! Stand clear!"

It was the commanding voice of Mist and Bane quickly accelerated ahead and she rapidly overtook all three SUVs and *QUAKE*, putting herself out of the line of fire from *GRIFFIN*. The helicopter came in from ahead on a southerly heading. Mist had the aiming reticule targeted on the Raptor SUV. The belching fire from the mini-gun made for easy target identification but the target zone was not easy, and it was obvious that the builders of the Interstate had not taken strafing runs into account. The overhead gantries made for an interesting run in and Mist was very keen to avoid collateral damage which an off-axis run would probably cause. Mist flew low over the closest gantry and she triggered off the GAU-19/B Gatling gun for the second time that night. The .50-calibre bullets tore up the concrete roadway, zipping past the fleeing *QUAKE*, before tearing into the Raptor SUV. The driver never even had the opportunity to take avoiding action, having never even seen the approaching helicopter, nor the approaching armour-piercing bullets which tore into the hood, windshield, driver, and gunner, in turn.

The Raptor SUV exploded and the shattered remains flipped end over end before smashing into the concrete median.

..._...

The other GMC SUVs swerved away from their destroyed companion, one narrowly avoiding the burning wreckage.

Mist brought *GRIFFIN* around in a hard left bank and she came up from behind the SUVs, wishing that she had a door gunner to provide a more accurate bombardment. Even so, she sent a short burst towards the right hand SUV, shredding the right-rear corner of the vehicle and laying those inside open to Bane's P90. The bullets from the P90 shredded flesh and bone, causing the SUV to skid and then flip onto its side once the driver was suitably dead. Bane accelerated in pursuit of the remaining SUV which in turn was still in pursuit of *QUAKE*.

The last SUV was too close to *QUAKE* to allow Mist to make use of her machinegun, so could do little more than look out for any more problems.

..._...

Nicholas yelled at Juno for a replacement magazine as he engaged the pursuing SUV.

His rounds were doing little more than chipping away at the armour on the SUV, and not preventing the vehicle from closing. Venom was doing her utmost to avoid the intercept, but the SUV was more powerful, and it was soon alongside *QUAKE*. With a crash, the SUV rammed *QUAKE* and Venom fought to control the heavy truck and it took all of her considerable skill not to lose control. The two vehicles continued to battle as they flew along at almost ninety-miles-per-hour. Forty yards behind, Bane followed, ensuring that she kept well clear of the behemoths battling it out ahead of her. Her bullets would have no effect on the armoured vehicle, so her mind was struggling to come up with alternatives.

High overhead, Mist groaned. As the battling armoured SUVs continued north up the I-15, she saw trouble at the 56 junction with the interstate. She could see vehicles on an overpass and as Crypto zoomed in with the low-light camera, she could make out long tube-like devices - rockets! She was low on ammunition for her GAU-19/B machinegun, so there was a limit to how much she could prevent the looming attack. Crypto advised Venom of what lay in wait ahead of her and she briefed those with her in *QUAKE*. Bane listened in, aghast at the potential for disaster and she wracked her brains for a solution.

Mist and Bane both came up with the same solution for the problem - only, the execution would be yet another problem.

..._...

"It's the only way," Bane insisted.

"You onboard with this, Venom?" Mist enquired.

"I'm not one to argue with her - she's just like me; she won't back down once her mind's made up," Venom pointed out as she was sideswiped again by the pursuing SUV.

"Crypto?" Mist called.

"I can do it," the girl replied, somewhat resignedly, from the safehouse in Los Angeles.

"If you are certain, Bane, then you go for it," Mist directed.

"Certain, no - but we have no choice," Bane responded as she mentally prepared herself for the task ahead.

..._...

The driver of the GMC SUV was a little perturbed.

His companions had been killed, their vehicles wrecked, but he knew that help was only a few miles ahead. He was purposefully keeping close by his quarry to prevent the helicopter from destroying him, too. The armed helicopter had been a very rude and unexpected surprise which had caused a lot of problems. However, all would be finished very soon, he knew . . . what was that? Something was coming directly at him, against the normal flow of traffic on the Interstate. Dazzling headlights were bearing down on him - it was the motorcycle which had been interfering with his attacks since the beginning. What was it doing? He was so focussed on the incoming threat that he never noticed that the enemy truck was corralling him towards the central median barrier.

The motorcycle closed, seemingly in a course to oblivion in a head-on collision.

..._...

Bane braced herself for the split-second move that she had to make.

QUAKE was in position, as was her target. Bane steadied her motorcycle and she engaged the cruise control of her beloved Aprilia RSV4 RR for the very last time. It had to be perfect - there was no opportunity for any mistake; the only alternative was death. With just a few feet to spare, Bane leapt off her motorcycle and she threw herself towards *QUAKE*. The proximity to the BMC SUV was enough that she actually rolled over the hood before rolling into *QUAKE*'s load bay. Then there was the spectacular sound of wrenching steel and carbon-fibre as Bane's Ascari Black motorcycle crashed onto its side, sparks flying, closely followed by a loud crunching sound as the front wheels of the SUV mounted the badly damaged motorcycle. *QUAKER* veered off to the righty as a second later, Crypto triggered the motorcycle's demolition charges and the armoured SUV's front end left the road, colliding with the concrete median, and the three-tonne vehicle span out of control before pulverising its front end on the same concrete median. Venom slammed on the brakes and she brought *QUAKE* to a rapid halt.

"That was fun!" Bane chuckled as she began to pull open containers mounted in the load bed of the truck.

A few miles down the Interstate

The two large SUVs were in place on the overpass while four men held shoulder-launched AT4 unguided anti-tank rockets.

Their target was coming unerringly closer and the optimum range was three-hundred metres meaning an almost guaranteed hit. The vehicle was approaching without lights; however, the overhead lighting was enough for them to follow their target. All heads turned at the sound of a helicopter approaching and then the lethal buzz of a rotary machinegun as their position was strafed with heavy bullets striking the concrete road surface and the vehicles themselves to devastating effect. Nobody was hit, although pieces of concrete had produced many injuries. Their vehicles were badly damaged and would probably never move again under their own power. The helicopter flew off and, surprisingly, it did not return. The leader of the men suddenly realised that the helicopter had been a diversion and he yelled for his men to return to the parapet and target the oncoming vehicle.

He raised his binoculars to check that the correct vehicle was approaching, and he was stunned to see two people standing up in the load bay; he also recognised the tubes at their shoulders - AT4 unguided anti-tank rockets.

..._...

Bane and Trauma both triggered off their rockets at the same time and they watched as the rockets exploded out of the end of the launch tubes at over 250-metres-per-second.

The projectiles had a flight time of a little over a second and both vigilantes were rewarded by a pair of huge explosions on the overpass. There was cheering from within *QUAKE* as the vehicle with its six occupants continued north. A good distance up the Interstate, *QUAKE* and *GRIFFIN* met up. Bane joined Mist in the helicopter while Nicholas climbed back into the rear seat of *QUAKE*. Mist and Bane flew off back to Los Angeles as they were low on fuel and the road ahead was clear.

The rest of the trip back to L.A. was decidedly uneventful.

Very early the following morning

Friday, December 2nd

Safehouse C

LOS ANGELES

Maddie was very happy to see *QUAKE* come to a stop in the garage.

The damage to the vehicle was evident and she was very worried about her team - not to mention the team which they had been rescuing. Everybody looked exhausted and most appeared to have been asleep before being rudely awakened by a very tired-looking Chrissy. Maddie quickly took charge.

"Okay, guys: beds in there and there - get some sleep and we'll sort everything out in the morning. Kitchen is through there should you be thirsty. Please do not go outside without checking with me first."

Chrissy grinned as the thirteen-year-old began organising everyone.

"You okay, Maddie?" she asked as she pulled off her combat suit.

"It was a little lonely, but I'm glad that you're back safe. Erika and Sky should be here in about half an hour after they've finished putting *GRIFFIN* to bed."

"Thanks for your support," Chrissy said as she made for her bed.

Maddie checked in on Team San Diego - they were all fast asleep. Maddie herself was fighting off sleep too as Erika and Sky returned to the safehouse.

"Everybody's asleep," Maddie reported.

"Go to bed, Maddie," Erika chuckled. "Thanks."

"Night, sport," Sky grinned.

Later that same morning

Everybody slept well - except for Guinevere.

Maddie awoke to find Juno in the kitchen making herself a coffee.

"Hi, Juno - sleep well?" Maddie asked as she reached for her own mug and a tea bag.

"Still knackered, but the rest helped a little. You drink tea, too, huh?"

"I don't like coffee."

"Guinevere and Nicholas drink tea by the gallon - must be a Brit thing," Juno replied.

The two girls got on well - they were both about the same age with just three months in between them (ignoring Juno's age boost for her cover). By the time Guinevere surfaced, they were both chatting over toasted bagels.

"Woah!" Maddie exclaimed. "You look horrible!"

"Thanks, runt!" Guinevere growled.

"I mean this in the kindest possible way, Guinny," Juno chuckled. "You look like shit!"

"I love you too, Juno."

Guinevere flopped down at the counter as she sagged onto a stool. Juno laughed as she got up to make her mentor some tea - she made a second cup as she figured that Nicholas would not be too far behind. He was not far behind, but he looked only minorly better than Guinevere did.

"She did not get a fucking wink of sleep, last night," he explained. "She kept tossing and turning - and crying. She blames herself for everything."

Guinevere took a long gulp of hot tea before responding.

"I was the leader and I allowed our team to get fucked over, and our safehouse and home destroyed. I fucked up!"

With that, Guinevere downed the rest of her tea, and she stormed off towards the showers.

..._...

"You drowned yourself, yet?"

Guinevere looked up from where she sat on the tiles beneath the steaming blast of water from the shower head. She recognised Chrissy and Sky as they turned on two more showers, either side of Guinevere. After the two girls had studied and cringed at Guinevere's bruised body, the twins then sat down either side of Guinevere.

"Mind if we join you?"

"What have you two got to drown yourselves over?" Guinevere growled.

"I lost my motorcycle, last night," Sky pointed out. "And somebody tried to blow me up."

"Way to make me feel worse!"

"I got nothing to drown myself over, but I know when somebody is beating themselves up about something which was not their fault," Chrissy added. "You ought to speak with a friend of mind - her name's Chloe and she beat herself up for months about sticking her bō-staff through me and my sister. She had no choice but to put us both down and she picked the safest parts of our bodies."

Chrissy pointed out the pale white scar on her abdomen while Sky did the same.

"I was in charge, and I could have lost my entire team. If you two hadn't rescued Logan, he would have died. Somehow, I lead them right to us."

Chrissy looked over at her sister.

"Do you wanna do it? I haven't the heart."

Sky nodded as she slapped Guinevere around the face . . . twice.

"What the fuck!" Guinevere exclaimed as she jumped up, glaring down at the twins.

"Your team is alive, Guinny - get the fuck over it!" Sky growled as she stood up and began washing her hair.

..._...

Three hours later, Guinevere was still sulking.

Everybody ignored her as they sorted themselves out. Erika and Chrissy had gone out to buy new clothing for their guests as a lot had been left behind and

ultimately burned up. All of their cell phones had been destroyed before leaving San Diego - not that *Panther* would need to be ultra-intelligent to figure out that they had gone to Los Angeles. Once they were fully rested, they would fly out to Chicago on Saturday evening. Erika had checked out each member of Team San Diego - there were many bruises. Juno and Guinevere had the worst, thanks to bullets, clubs, and motorcycle accidents. Logan had his own fair share, but nothing life-threatening. Above all, they just needed rest and time for their wounds to heal. Although, Erika figured that Guinevere's wounds may have gone beyond the physical. Juno and Maddie had spent the time together which, Erika had noticed, was preventing Juno from worrying about what she might have lost. The two boys were keeping themselves to themselves which also worried Erika, but there were better resources awaiting their arrival in Chicago, including a real doctor.

Erika also had to consider the expended weaponry, used fuel, and damaged/destroyed vehicles. As such, she put together a report for Mindy summing up expended ordnance, fuel, and what would be required to bring them back to operational readiness. Sky was only slightly miserable about losing her treasured motorcycle, but the teenager was bearing it well. All of her team had done well during a demanding operation. Erika was very proud of each and every one of them. Maddie had endured a good number of hours, all alone, but she had not been bothered by any of it. Erika worried most about Maddie. She could not help worrying about the youngster. She worried about the twins, but for a whole lot of different reasons. Maddie, she saw as needing support and attention at the maternal level. But Erika was unsure if she could provide that much-needed support for a youngster who was just ten years her junior.

Maybe Maddie just needed a friend, Erika considered.

Late the following evening
Saturday, December 3rd

Burbank Airport

The Gulfstream G650 sat on the tarmac as the four passengers mounted the airstair.

The feelings of failure were still there as they climbed aboard and took their seats. Juno took hold of Guinevere's hand, holding it tightly. Across from them, Nicholas and Logan strapped in. Erika leaned down and she whispered into Guinevere's ear.

"Don't see this as the end of something, Guinevere; see this as the start of something new. You still have your team, and you need to look after them. They need you. They need a leader. The boys are *Predators* and can look after themselves, but Juno needs you, remember that."

Guinevere looked up at Erika and she smiled.

"Thanks. I know I've got a lot of baggage to sort out, but I will - and I won't let my team down, I promise."

Erika headed out of the aircraft and over to the hanger. She watched as the airstair folded up and the hatch sealed. The engines increased their roar and the executive jet began to taxi towards the runway for take-off. Three minutes later the jet roared into the air and turned onto a north-easterly heading. Erika pulled out her cell and dialed a number.

"It's Mindy."

Erika could hear what sounded like a riot in the background as kids yelled and screamed.

"You at the safehouse?" Erika asked.

"No," Mindy chuckled. *"I'm at home - the kids are trying to kill each other which is business as usual at the Lizewski house."*

"Team San Diego has just departed and are heading your way."

"Good to know, thanks, Erika. I got your report; you all did very well. Tell Sky that her new motorcycle is on order - may take a few weeks, though. If she's good, she can borrow mine."

"She'll like that," Erika replied.

"She scratches it . . . I hunt her down," Mindy chuckled pointedly.

"It was a close-run thing, Mindy."

"You ready for extra support, yet?"

"I read the files - go ahead and send the first one and we'll see how things go."

"Anne-Marie!" Mindy bellowed. *"Sorry - I gotta go. . ."*

"Night, Mindy."

The following evening

Sunday, December 4th

Downtown Los Angeles

Sky volunteered to take Maddie into the city.

First stop, was the FBI Building - Maddie had to prove that she was still in L.A. by showing her face personally for F.B.I. Special Agent Frank Draper and his partner, F.B.I. Special Agent Aimee Francis. The idea was that if they saw her, in person, they would not need to appear at the most inopportune moment. After checking in, Sky took the scowling Maddie for a drink. They drove a mile or so to the south before Sky parked her tangerine scream Ford Focus ST and they left the car to get that drink.

"You miss your bike, huh?" Maddie asked.

"Yeah," Sky admitted with a smirk. "You noticed?"

"I've been with you guys for six weeks, now," Maddie replied. "I've seen a hell of a lot and experienced even more. I've learnt to read you two - once I figured out which was which - and I figured out that there are differences between the two of you. Ignoring the obvious visual ques - you know, like the fact that Chrissy likes to go mad with the clippers down below and you don't . . . never have figured out why girls like to have no pubes, but that's another story."

Sky rolled her eyes and just listened to the girl as she went on and on . . . and on. Yes, it had only been six weeks, but Maddie had become a functional and essential member of their team. She was a very hard worker and she did not crack under pressure. Sky had not known about Maddie's background nor that her family lived in L.A. - Erika had been economical with the truth and Sky figured that she had good reasons for it. There were many things that Maddie did not know about Sky and her sister - most of which they both found acutely

embarrassing to talk about. Sky respected the youngster and she had actually surprised herself by having feelings (non-sexual) for Maddie that she had never felt for anybody other than for her own twin sister.

"You ready to go?" Maddie asked as Sky tuned back into the conversation.

"Come on - Erika'll be wondering where we are."

The sudden screech of tyres and the roar of engines heralded something dangerous approaching. Maddie turned to see a pair of dark-coloured SUVs swerving left and right as they zigzagged through the traffic on Sepulveda Boulevard. Sharp cracks of gunfire could be heard, and the muzzle flashes indicated that the pair of vehicles were exchanging gunfire. Maddie reacted out of an unknown instinct, shoving two kids younger than herself down to the sidewalk. Sky, in turn, then shoved Maddie to the ground, just as the vehicles drove past, still engaged in their deadly battle. Then they were gone, and all that remained were startled observers as the sounds of gunfire was quickly replaced by chatter and some screaming.

"That was damn close!" Sky observed dryly. "Maddie?"

Maddie did not respond, so Sky turned to look at her. All colour drained from her face as she took in the scene beside her.

The young girl lay on her side, her eyes closed, and a growing pool of blood spreading from beneath her torso.

*The future for Team San Diego continues in **Chapter 362: Freedom** of my other story: **Forsaken**.*