

Monday, 9th May 2016

Ocean Vigilante

76nm west-northwest of Biarritz, France

Position: 43.7645° N 3.2947° W

Course: 102°, Speed: 15 knots

There was one more celebration before we made landfall.

It had been a major turning point for us all, only there was one member who while happy, had other reasons to be unhappy about the day's events exactly one year previously.

"Everybody, one year ago tonight, somebody died. It was the end of a saga that created Hit Girl. The man almost cost me my best friend one more than one occasion..."

I actually faltered and I saw Chloe unconsciously rubbing the barely visible scar on her left lower arm, just below the elbow. Dave picked things up.

"That man was Ralph D'Amico and his death brought to an end the tyranny that his family had represented for many years. It was the D'Amico family that first caused Damon Macready to desire revenge and therefore train his young daughter to become the most feared vigilante on the planet: Hit Girl."

I felt my face burning at Dave's words but I also felt pleasure as Chloe gripped my hand tightly.

"What happened?" Stephanie asked.

Chloe and I related that story of the attack on the *Nebuchadnezzar* and Wildcat coming face to face with Ralph D'Amico, followed by D'Amico blowing the yacht up; almost with us onboard. We detailed the attack which led to Shadow being taken and the joint attack with the Russians and SWAT to get her back.

Then came the more traumatic portion where Chloe described her arm almost being severed – that fact was not widely known and many wanted to see the scar on Chloe's arm. We finished the story with Jackal's rescue and then the decapitation of Ralph D'Amico. Everybody laughed as Megan described Eisenhower getting her own bite in on Ralph's family jewels.

"The D'Amico family were beyond evil; but they are now all very dead. That was the end of a very hectic couple of weeks that also saw us meet a new vigilante in town – Petra!"

Hailee grinned sheepishly.

"Yeah, Joshua thought she was 'very hot', I think the words were..." Chloe laughed and both Joshua and Hailee blushed wildly.

That night

I was lying on a mattress, on the floor of the cabin that I was now sharing with Cassie and Natasha.

Stephanie had come in to talk and as it usually did, the conversation veered into *Urban Predator* territory.

“Do you remember your training?”

“Huh?”

“Do you remember your training?” Stephanie repeated.

“I assume you mean the conditioning?”

“Yeah...”

“To be honest, I try not to...”

“I keep having nightmares and I see snippets of what I went through... During the attack on the *Ocean Vigilante*, I dreamt about water and being repeatedly dunked in it...”

I sat up in the bed and looked over at Stephanie. Every kid went through extensive conditioning during the three phases of their training. I vividly remembered being stripped and repeatedly dunked into a tank of freezing cold water. It had been during the Phase 1 training and it had scared the living daylight out of me. At the time, I had been just ten-years-old.

The water conditioning was two-fold. As well as conditioning the trainee – me – those actually doing the conditioning were usually teenage Phase 3 trainees and they were being taught torture and interrogation techniques. The two teenage girls who had dragged me out of a class, one morning, and then hauled me down to Room 101 had ignored my pleas – I knew that they had no choice but to follow orders. Once in the room, I was forcibly stripped down to my underwear and then forced headfirst into the ice cold tank of water.

I had never been so scared in my life and I had felt like I was going to drown.

“I remember it – I hated it; I was your age when I endured it... But, unlike you, I completed my Phase 2 and my Phase 3 training – I had to half drown other ten-year-old girls; I enjoyed doing it, I enjoyed the power of being in control...”

“You had no choice, SD – don’t dwell on it . . . I’m sorry that I even brought it up...”

“Not your fault – you needed answers and it’s not like there’s many other people you could ask!”

“There was Aiden.”

“You fancied that boy...”

“No way – that’s disgusting!”

“You’ll learn, little lady...”

“I am *not* little!”

“You’re no *lady* either!”

“That’s one hell of a statement coming from a fourteen-year-old girl who kept a well-used vibrator in her bathroom!”

“How...?”

“...could I know?” Stephanie smirked. “Mathilda told me... I gather there was a condom or two missing as well...”

My face was burning and I was *not* about to have that sort of conversation with a ten-year-old girl who had not even started puberty!

“I’m tired; goodnight, Stephanie...”

“Night, Foxy!”

I growled.

Tuesday, 10th May 2016

Early Morning

Biarritz, France

Considering that we had just blown another vessel out of the water, we could not afford for *Ocean Vigilante* to enter a port in France and then be immediately impounded, so she would be sailed to England and a secure port.

We, as in *Fusion* and *Vengeance*, would not be aboard. We went ashore very early that morning and we were met by our transport. I had a distinct feeling that Dave did not approve...

“Okay, Mindy – which bit of ‘subtle’ did you *not* understand?”

“But they’re cool, Dave...”

I stared at the four luxury cars that Mindy had acquired.

“They’re rentals...” she tried.

“*Still* not subtle!”

The first two vehicles were four-door, but that was where ‘normal’ came to a crashing halt... One was Madagascar Orange, the other Cobalt Blue. I knew the specs – they each had a 6.0-litre V12 engine under their hoods and they could reach 203mph and 60mph in 4.2 seconds. Each Aston Martin Rapide S could carry four comfortably.

I noticed that Mindy had acquired a two-door coupe for herself! She had selected an Aston Martin Vanquish in a very appealing Volcano Red. It had a slower top-speed, by two – but it could reach sixty in only 3.6 seconds!

The fourth vehicle was a monstrous long wheelbase Range Rover in a contrastingly subtle Aintree Green. It was powered by a 4.4-litre V8 diesel engine and the huge vehicle could hit sixty in 6.6 seconds and then fly to 135 miles-per-hour.

Our first stop was the airport.

We pulled into a large hanger and the doors were closed behind us.

“Marty!”

Kim ran towards the love of her life and they both hugged each other. Abby and Eric ignored the lovefest and they both headed over to a Lockheed L-100-30 Hercules, where three short-wheelbase

Ford Transit vans were being unloaded. Each was dark grey and nearly identical, though one van sported some strange appendages on the roof but nothing that stood out too much.

There was another aircraft in the hanger, over to the side. The Gulfstream G280 was one of the smaller executive jets on the market, but still just as luxurious as the larger models. Standing beside the lowered staircase were two people that we had not seen in many months.

“Selina, Bruce!”

Chloe and Megan ran forward and gave both teens an enormous hug.

“What are you doing here?” Chloe exclaimed.

“I needed to check on my French assets,” Bruce Wayne explained somewhat cryptically.

“Anything, to get outta Gotham!” Selina Kyle grimaced.

“It’s good to see you guys,” I said as I hugged Selina.

“It’s good to see *you*, Mindy, you too, Dave, and the others...” Selina replied. “A few more recruits, I see.”

“This is my eldest daughter, Stephanie,” I offered. “Stephanie, please meet Selina Kyle, and her boyfriend, Bruce Wayne!”

“Mindy!” Selina exclaimed with a blush.

“I could spot it a mile away, girl!”

“Good to meet you, Stephanie; I look forward to getting to know you.” Selina was obviously very pleased to be able to change the subject!

I introduced the other newcomers to *Fusion* as well as those from *Vengeance*. Anne-Marie and Danny insisted on showing off their Balisongs and Anne-Marie her Butterfly Swords. Selina had commented that she was very pleased to see that the twins had grown and had flourished since leaving Gotham. She commented that not much of what came out of Gotham ever did so well.

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I turned to the boy who was standing over near the Range Rover. He looked beyond apprehensive and I understood that he had been very quiet ever since we had left *Ocean Vigilante*. Stephanie and Saoirse brought him over to me. He almost flinched as I spoke.

Onboard, he had avoided me. I knew why – I had a reputation – and he was sit scared of me, despite Stephanie telling him that I was harmless!

“Aiden – this is Bruce and Selina; you will be safe with them and a long way away from the CIA.”

“Hi, Aiden,” Bruce said as he held out his right hand. “We have a home for you...”

“Hi,” Aiden replied, shaking the outstretched hand.

“Selina.”

“Hi, Selina.”

“You obey Selina and Bruce; they will look after you and they will help you to adjust,” I suggested.

“You need to talk, Aiden, then me, Stephanie, even Saoirse; we will be available if you need us.”

“Thanks, Mindy.”

The boy was nervous as he was led aboard the executive jet and I saw him take a seat beside a window – he actually smiled for the first time that day.

We left the airport in convoy with the vans interspersed between the other vehicles.

They had to be protected at all costs as they were crucial to the next twenty-four hours and our attack on the *Urban Predator* HQ. The four-hour drive east along the northern flank of the Pyrenees was tense as everybody knew what was coming up. It was a fast Autoroute most of the way with some of it arrow-straight.

I noticed that Stephanie was very quiet and she just stared out of the window for the majority of the ride. She knew what was at stake and what finishing off Vossen would mean.

Tuesday, 10th May 2016

Late Morning

Toulouse, France

We pulled up at the deployment point to find a car already there.

Leaning against the glacier white Clio RenaultSport car which sat on giant eighteen-inch alloy wheels, was a stunning young woman. She wore tight fitting purple trousers with a dark grey blazer, which was lined with pink polka dots over a plain white t-shirt. On her feet were functional pink trainers with soft soles. Her hair was black, with pale blue highlights and currently hung loosely across her shoulders. Her bluebell eyes were sparkling as she smiled in our direction.

“Nice!” Joshua commented as he climbed out of one of the Astons.

“The car or the French tart?” Chloe enquired with menace in her tone as she excited from the other side of the same vehicle.

“The car – definitely the car...”

I shook my head and ignored Joshua’s obvious discomfort. Everybody else laughed, except for Chloe who just glowered at her boyfriend.

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“Bonjour mes amis!” The woman offered pleasantly.

“Hello – we’ve met before, haven’t we...?” I enquired as I approached.

The girl smiled.

“In the day time, I’m Marinette; just a normal girl, with a normal life, but there’s something about me, that no one knows yet, ‘cause I have a secret. I live a life that’s full of fun, that keeps me sharp and on the run. When evil comes, I find a way to use my force and save the day. Life’s got me spinning ‘round, my feet are off the ground and when the sun goes down, you had better hang around!”

“Sounds like the theme to some cheesy anime!” Chloe quipped bitchily.

Marinette ignored her.

“That’s when I become...”

“Ladybug!” I cut in with a grin.

“Oui, La Coccinelle!”

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“Mindy Lizewski...” I said as I held out my hand.

“Marinette Cheng...”

I turned to the others who all seemed somewhat confused.

“I called Marinette here and asked for her help, plus her local knowledge. I had no idea of her true identity at the time, but she has seen fit to trust us all and reveal it to us. I trust her, and so can you. Marinette knows what we are doing, so...”

“Thank you for your support, Marinette,” Dave said with a grin.

“Toulouse is where I was born and I lived there for ten years before I moved to Paris – I think I know what you are looking for and I can help you.”

Stephanie stepped forwards.

“Thank you...” she said simply.

“I am sorry to hear about what happened to you and to your friend,” Marinette offered, looking from Stephanie to Saoirse.

“We have a lot to do,” I cut in. “Let’s get to the Safehouse and begin our reconnaissance.”

The Safehouse

Everybody rested as much as possible at the Toulouse Safehouse.

Marty had given it a dorky name; no surprise there! The Safehouse was now known as *Echo Base*, while his Command Van was *Echo Three* and there were no prizes for guessing his motivation for those codenames. We also had a backup Safehouse, *Echo Alternate*. All our spare equipment and kit would be packed up and ready to go, just in case we had to run – it would also be booby-trapped; just in case...

We were taking no chances.

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As for the plans for the day, the twins would remain at the Safehouse for the duration of the day and the attack that night – with Hailee to keep an eye on them. Hailee hated being kept out of the action, but she was experienced and mature enough to realise that she would just be a liability rather than an asset.

The attack, itself, was timed for eight that night and there was plenty to be done, even after resting. Everybody was on edge, which was expected. Marty was with Abby and Eric and they were all hard at work preparing the UAVs and support equipment.

The only unknown was when the CIA might detect our presence in the French city and counter-attack.

1700 Hours

I was feeling emotional, just as I often was before a major attack.

Usually the emotion was pent up anger and other similar feelings, but now, I felt sadness and fear. I was busy helping my kids to gear up and not just the eldest, Stephanie, but also the twins. I had issued orders that nobody was to take any unnecessary risks or chances. In line with that order, I had the twins pulling on their combat suits and preparing their weapons. The chances of them seeing any action were very slim and they would have Hailee to defend them.

As I helped Anne-Marie to pull on her suit, I felt scared that I might never have the chance to do the same again. I knew that the night's attack would be bad and that some may be injured . . . or worse.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Anne-Marie asked.

"Nothing, honey . . . you make sure that you and your brother listen to Hailee and you stay sharp, okay?"

"I promise," Anne-Marie replied.

"I promise," Danny added.

I saw Stephanie grimace as she zipped up the top of her own combat suit. She knew what was going through my mind. Once the twins were suitably dressed, Stephanie and I armed them. We secured their utility belts around their waists and helped them check their pistols, spare magazines, and their Balisong knives. Next, came their melee weapons which were mounted on their backs.

For Rogue, it was her Butterfly Swords, while for Ravage, it was his tactical Wakizashi.

1800 Hours

An hour later, it was time to leave.

"You too be good, understand?"

"Always," my sister replied.

"We will," my brother added.

"Look after them, Petra..."

"I will not let anything happen to them, Psyche, rest easy – you too, Hit Girl," Petra replied.

I looked over at Mum and she seemed uneasy.

"Let's go, Hit Girl," I suggested and I gave each of my siblings a final hug.

1930 Hours

Fusion Safehouse

Echo Base

I was the delegated child minder.

It wasn't the first time, either. I could handle Ravage and Rogue – Petra could handle anything – even a pair of slightly wild eight-year-olds! Despite us being over a dozen miles from the action, Hit Girl had made sure that we were prepared for anything and as such, we each wore our full combat suits, with our weapons, but with masks removed and close to hand.

We sat eating pizza and drinking Coke while we monitored the sensors and cameras which Marty and Eric had installed around the property.

CIA Station, Toulouse

The time had come, and with just over twenty minutes to go, I was focussed on the task ahead.

Everybody was in position and as far as we knew, the CIA were not privy to our presence. While the main physical attack was not launching for another twenty minutes, a cyber-attack on the Urban Predator HQ had been underway for a number of hours. Marty had engaged his *Synthesis* team to disrupt the site over the internet. Exactly what they were doing, I had no idea, but if it distracted the enemy, then fine. I turned to Kick-Ass.

“Looking good...”

“Yes, it does, my love.”

Fusion Safehouse

Echo Base

I took up position in front of the twins as I keyed the VOX on my combat suit and sent the panic codewords: “*Flank Two! Flank Two!*”

“You will not pass,” I growled as I made my position *very* clear.

I drew my tactical Katanas.

Fusion Command Van

'Echo Three'

Battle Guy bolted upright at the codewords.

“Oh, fuck!”

Hal was startled but she immediately pressed a button to open up a channel to Hit Girl.

“Hit Girl, Hal – we have a ‘Flank Two’ codeword from *Echo Base*...”

Marty was already in the driver's seat and he had started the engine. Eric pulled out weapons and prepared them for when they arrived.

CIA Station, Toulouse

We were a mere twenty minutes from breaching as one of my deepest, darkest nightmares came true – talk about shitty timing!

Preparations for such an eventuality had been made and I had to trust in the plan, no matter how much I hated doing it. I had to trust my team to support me, and that meant leaving my kids' safety in the hands of others.

I turned back to my part of the plan.

Echo Base

"This ain't the first time that these two have been threatened nor had attempts made on their lives..." I growled. "You guys wanna know what happened to the man who kidnapped Rogue?"

The big man shook his head.

"She fired ten-rounds into the fucker – guess what; he's dead..."

Rogue stepped forwards on my right, reached behind her waist with both hands and then swept them both downwards in mirrored fluid movements. The twin Butterfly swords were both ominously very beautiful and very deadly – I was actually a tiny bit jealous; maybe more than a bit actually... Rogue brought the swords out in front of her ready to fight. Ravage stepped forwards on my left and he reached above his right shoulder and drew his tactical Wakizashi before he too took up a fighting stance, ready to attack.

The four men smirked at the sight of the two pint-sized vigilantes as they showed some teeth.

"You two might hurt somebody with those!" One chuckled.

"That's kinda the point, you stupid dumb fuck!" Rogue snarled.

The man looked pissed.

"Bring it on, motherfuckers!" Ravage added and I smiled, proud to serve alongside Rogue and Ravage.

"*TAKE THEM!*" I yelled.

The three of us moved as one, directly *at* the four CIA men.

Echo Three

I drove as fast as I dared, which was still way too fast, especially when you considered that I was driving a van with borderline lethal top-weight and horrendous handling.

The situation was bad; we had a pair of UAVs airborne and we had to maintain communications with them while simultaneously relaying the images to the strike force. What shitty timing! I just hoped that Petra could hold the attackers off until we arrived... All three were on VOX and I could hear the fighting and rather surprisingly, I could have sworn that I heard the CIA men calling for backup!

I actually chuckled at one stage when Rogue spoke.

“The fucker got blood on my sword!” Came the surprisingly indignant comment.

“That’s what happens when you slash somebody, Rogue...” Petra responded in a very calm tone.

We were just around the corner...

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Forty seconds later, I skidded to a halt outside ‘Echo Base’ and dived out of the van, an H&K G36C in my hands. I ran inside, followed by Eric, a pistol in his hands, and...

“Holy fuck!” Eric exclaimed as he took in the scene laid out before us.

It was total carnage... There were *six* dead bodies on the floor and blood everywhere... I saw Petra down on one knee, breathing heavily and in obvious pain. I looked over at the twins, Rogue and Ravage...

“Took your fucking time, Battle Guy – sorry, we left nothing for you to do...” Rogue exclaimed.

“That was actually fun!” Ravage added.

I saw that each of the five visible blades had blood dripping from them. It seemed that Rogue had a few more notches for her belt and Ravage had gained a place on the scoreboard. The twins were obviously having fun and were in high spirits, but Petra looked like she needed help.

“You okay, Petra?” I asked as I helped her to her feet and over to a chair.

“Some of my bruises have yet to heal and those bastards found every fucking one!”

“We need to move – Rogue, Ravage: start gathering kit, we’re heading for ‘Echo Alternate’. Hal, Signal ‘Flank Zero’.”

CIA Station, Toulouse

I had never been so happy to hear Hal and then those very special words.

The twins were safe and so was Hailee – thank God... With only minutes to go before the assault began, I would be able to fight without worrying about anything which may distract me from my task ahead. Other than Kick-Ass, who had held my hand tightly over the past eight minutes, nobody else knew how close tragedy had been.

Eight minutes was all it had taken – I was looking forward to the After Action Report from the twins and Petra.