

Tuesday, 10th May 2016

CIA Station, Toulouse

Urban Predator Headquarters (Europe)

2350 Hours

It was over – for us all.

Battle Guy reported that French forces were inbound and had road-blocks out on every road, except one which led in a westerly direction, out of Toulouse. We gathered all the *Predator* kids together in the main Cafeteria. Several were kept restrained for their and other safety. Four guards had survived and they were in the custody of several Phase 3 *Predators* – was not certain if the four men would survive the night...

Shadow was very upset about the two girls that she had put down. I told her that she had had no choice, but she was very morose as we gathered everybody together. Then it was time to leave. There were eighty-four kids who would no longer be forced into a life of killing. The French authorities would take care of them with the assistance of the British security services. La Coccinelle said her goodbyes and then she vanished.

I saw Raven talking to two young girls. Raven had spoken to me about them herself. In turn, I had had a word with Nemesis who had nodded her agreement. There was every chance that two young kids might just get to return home. Jason too had been seen speaking with two kids in particular. I was certain that Jason and Nicky would make fine parents.

I had one phone call to make.

Langley, Virginia

United States of America

“Deputy Director Landy.”

“I regret to inform you that Noah Vossen and Dr Albert Hirsch were set upon and killed by their charges.”

“Did they suffer?”

“Horribly.”

“Thank you for the news.”

I smiled as I dropped the call. Somebody sounded both very pleased and very relieved.

Toulouse, France

Echo Alternate

I almost sprinted into the Safehouse – I was so desperate to see my kids.

They both ran at me as soon as I entered the room and then I was squeezed in a giant joint hug. Both kids seemed extremely happy and they were positively bursting to say something. Hailee had a look

of concern on her face, but she was otherwise unreadable. All three still wore their bloody combat suits but with their masks removed.

"Thank God, you're both alive," I said as I sank to my knees to hug them both properly.

"We're fine, Mom – just some bruises..." Danny explained before his smile faded. "I killed a man today..."

"How do you feel about that?" I asked.

"Okay, I guess – he wanted to hurt me and my sister . . . Hailee too..."

I was very proud of Daniel at that point; his response was just as I might have expected.

"I took down two of the cunts..." Anne-Marie said proudly but then she looked unhappy. "But my swords got all bloody... Do you think SD'll be mad at me for getting blood on the swords she gave me?"

I smiled at the girl and laughed but I stopped as I saw her genuinely hurt expression.

"That happens, honey; she won't be mad at you. You were both really brave. Your Dad and I; we're really proud of you both."

I stood up and looked over at Hailee.

"I'm really sorry, Boss; I should never have let them fight..."

Anne-Marie slapped Hailee on the arm and glared up at the much older girl.

"We *talked* about this!" She exclaimed indignantly. "What *did* I tell you? You are injured, there was no way that you could have protected us both from six men, so stop being a pussy or I'll just have to slap it outta you."

I smirked and shrugged as Hailee grinned sheepishly at the rebuke from the young girl who was ten years her junior.

"Rogue has spoken, so suck it up Petra!" I replied with a laugh. "Thanks... Where *is* Foxy?"

"Stop calling me that!" Saoirse announced in a very accurate imitation of Stephanie's British accent. "I would never be mad at you for getting blood on your swords; it's what they are for, after all. Just make sure that you clean them like I showed you."

"I did – they're as shiny as before..."

"Then you have nothing to worry about, honey."

"Saoirse," I said. "Thank you for the life of my kids – without your training..."

Saoirse blushed at the compliment and then blushed even worse as I hugged her tightly.

"Don't worry, I don't do that very often – at all actually," I offered as I let the embarrassed teenager go.

"Hey!" came an indignant voice from the doorway.

It was Stephanie.

"I trained the little sprogs too!" Stephanie exclaimed indignantly.

“Thank you for that, little one...”

Stephanie grimaced as I gave her a big hug.

While the equipment was packed up, I took Stephanie to one side and helped her to get herself cleaned up.

For everybody else, they removed their combat suits and pulled on normal clothes. Stephanie was not normally freaked out by the sight of blood, however on that occasion, with blood in her hair and on her face, she insisted it was all removed. The girl was exhausted, as was Saoirse, and they both struggled to remove their combat suits.

While I helped Stephanie, Morgan saw to her younger sister. Saoirse herself had blood on her skin but she was not as bothered about it as Stephanie seemed to be. There was no time for a full shower, so I just quickly washed Stephanie’s hair, face, and neck to remove all traces of the blood. Finally, I had Stephanie smiling up at me with gratitude as I handed her a t-shirt and jeans to put on.

“I’m so proud of you both, well done,” I said and they both smiled enormously at the compliment.

Both Saoirse and Stephanie seemed to have had a great weight lifted off of their shoulders.

Biarritz Airport

0830 Hours

The drive back to the airport in Biarritz had been tiring.

A pair of Gulfstream G650 business jets awaited us in the same hanger as before. Almost all of our equipment went onto the Lockheed L-100-30 Hercules which had absorbed the three Ford Transit vans, along with the two drones.

Just as we were about to board the two aircraft, Stephanie and Saoirse stepped forwards.

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“Before we all split up, we both have something to say,” Saoirse announced and then she waved at Stephanie who began to speak.

“We just want to say thank you to you all. Without you all, we could both be dead or worse. Our families are avenged and so are we. Nobody else will suffer like we did. You guys are all awesome and you have brought us both into your hearts and helped us without any thought of reward. I will always wonder what my life might have been like, if my family had never been kidnapped; I know SD will too. Mind you, if none of this had happened then I would never have met all of you. Yeah, some of you are bloody certifiable, but I love you all more than anything in the whole world.

“You have all tolerated a foul-mouthed little bitch and you’ve helped her to fit in, despite what she used to be or what nationality she was. Mindy and Dave took the certifiable decision to take me in as their daughter. Megan took me on as her partner. Anne-Marie and Daniel wanted me to be their big sister. Joshua and Chloe have given me shoulders to cry on...”

Stephanie stopped speaking and she bit her lip before she stared down at the concrete. Saoirse took over.

“You lot *are* all certifiable; you took *me* in, despite the fact that I had tried to kill a member of your team on *three* separate occasions. I will hold my hand up and say that I was shitting myself when I found out that Hit Girl wanted my blood – nothing has ever scared me as much before or since. Just as Stephanie has, I have found a home and I can now rebuild my life as a member of a truly amazing group of people.

“In a few short weeks, I have learnt that *Fusion* is neutral when it comes to its members. It doesn’t care if you are white or black, male or female, lesbian or straight, former enemy, or certifiable nut job. My eyes have been opened onto a new life and I am looking forward to what comes out of it – the past few weeks have shown me the danger and the risks that I will face. I want those dangers – I love the rush of going into action and I would not trade any of you...”

Saoirse tailed off into silence as both ex-*Predators* just stood there looking embarrassed.

“Well said, both of you, and thank you for some very kind words. I’ve never heard *Fusion* described in that way, but I liked it.”

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The two teams, *Fusion* and *Vengeance*, each occupied a separate jet as we were both going in separate directions. That had been a tearful goodbye as everybody had hugged our British opposite numbers. Abby and Eric were particularly difficult to prise apart.

We would miss them all, and I hoped that they might be able to join us in Chicago, later on in the year.

The United Kingdom Southern England

We flew in a northerly direction in a loose formation with the other jet, but then we went our separate ways over southern England.

Our G6 landed at the Northolt Jet Centre, a part of RAF Northolt, about twenty miles’ northeast of central London. There, we were met by three men who stood beside a larger version of my own Jaguar XJ, although this one was much more heavily armoured. Four of us deplaned. One of the men was readily recognisable.

“Good afternoon, James.”

“And to you, Mindy... Dave, Mindy, Stephanie, Saoirse; please meet Gareth Mallory, colloquially known as M, and Bill Tanner. M, Bill; please meet Dave and Mindy Lizewski, their daughter Stephanie and Saoirse Doherty.”

The tall man shook each of our hands in turn and he smiled for the girls.

“It is very good to meet you but I am very sorry about the circumstances that brought us together.”

“Thank you for all your assistance in taking those people down,” I replied.

“No, thank *you*, Mrs Lizewski. You exposed these people. I am horrified, actually embarrassed, to know that such an abhorrent scheme could fester in our own corridors of power,” M responded.

“It is the world that we live in, Mr Mallory.”

“Unfortunately, yes, it is...” M agreed. “Right, I have a meeting with the PM, later on, to explain this debacle, so let’s get on with it, shall we.”

“This way, please...” James said and he waved his hand towards a large, very black, unmarked helicopter.

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The ubiquitous ‘black helicopter’ had no visible identification and the pilots both wore black flight suits and black helmets. The machine was an AgustaWestland AW169 and could easily seat the seven of us in comfort.

“Nice!” Stephanie commented as she strapped herself into one of the very plush leather seats.

The engines began to scream the moment that we boarded and had obviously been warmed up in advance. We took off a few minutes later and headed in a north-westerly direction. The flight took less than fifteen minutes and we soon came down into a field, a short distance from a main road. Two dark blue Range Rovers awaited us and we split up, James and his colleagues in the first Range Rover while the rest of us went in the second.

We drove for about ten minutes at high speed before we slowed and both vehicles pulled over to the side of the road in a small village. Mallory climbed out and he walked back to us while Tanner and Bond walked a few yards down the road.

I opened the door and Mallory began to explain what was going on.

“This man headed up the MI5 end of *Urban Predator*. He was directly responsible for keeping an eye on British families with young children. He would select those children that might be of use to the programme. He is directly responsible for you, Stephanie, becoming whom you are today.”

I saw Stephanie scowl and from her body language, I knew that her anger was building.

“He may also be responsible for you, too, Saoirse.”

Saoirse was already scowling but now her eyes narrowed and she looked very pissed, to put it mildly.

“I will make the introductions and once Bond has secured the premises – the bastard will be all yours...”

Mallory walked up the path that led to a large cottage.

He knocked loudly on the door. A minute later, the door opened and a tall man stood on the threshold with a look of confusion on his face at the unexpected crowd of people who had just arrived at his door.

“Kenneth!” Mallory called out. “May we come in?”

“Of course, Gareth... Who?”

“All in good time...” Mallory offered impatiently as he pushed past Kenneth.

Bond appeared from deeper in the cottage along with Tanner – where had they come from? The man, Kenneth, appeared more shocked than we were that two men were already in his home.

“What is this, Gareth?”

“Kenneth, I am here to introduce you to your misdeeds,” Mallory explained. “The young lady, here, is called Stephanie and she no longer has her parents or her brother; she killed them...”

“What?”

“She killed them while under the influence of a despicable programme called *Urban Predator*...”

I saw instant recognition when *Urban Predator* was mentioned – he would make a very bad poker player, not that he would ever get the chance to play...

“You are directly responsible for this young girl’s suffering, Boyd, and it is now time to pay the piper, or maybe that should be the devil,” Mallory finished without any emotion in his voice.

Kenneth Boyd went white; he knew what was coming and I could tell that he knew that there was no way to escape the inevitable.

“I don’t suppose that there is anything I can say...”

“No, there is not.”

“I am truly sorry, young lady, I really am – not that that is going to change anything that I have done.”

Stephanie glowered at the man, as did Saoirse.

“Tanner; it’s time to leave. Goodbye, Kenneth, we won’t meet again – I have no intention of going to hell when I die... Mr and Mrs Lizewski, 007 will remain with you.”

Bond nodded and headed out the door after his boss and he was followed by Tanner. The door closed and I turned to face Kenneth Boyd.

The man showed no outward signs of fear, but I was certain that the fear was in there and fighting to get out.

“Kneel!” Saoirse growled. The man looked up at myself and Dave. He hoped for some form of reprieve. We both turned and walked to the door before we both turned to face Kenneth Boyd for the last time.

“Goodbye,” I said simply and we both left the room.

From the next room, we both heard the actions on a pair of automatic pistols cycling as they stripped a round from the magazine and thrust it smoothly into the breech. Then came the muted sounds as two rounds were fired followed by a thud as a body hit the ground.

Both girls appeared and they both holstered their pistols.

“All good?” I asked.

“All good,” both girls replied together.

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Bond returned quietly and he stood behind Stephanie.

“Is ‘Psyche’ short for something?” Bond enquired casually “*Psych*-otic maybe?”

Stephanie scowled but raised to the bait.

“Why are you named after the international dialling code for Russia?” She retorted with a snide smile. “Or are you just into *bond*-age?”

“Snappy, yet pretentious – a dangerous combination in any woman...”

Stephanie thought for a moment.

“You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

Bond nodded approvingly before he responded.

“Of all the animals, man is the only one that is cruel. He is the only one that inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it.”

“I’ve read Mark Twain, asshole!” Stephanie retorted. “Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“The pen is mightier than the sword,” Bond challenged.

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

“People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.”

“Fortune favours the bold.”

“Better late than never.”

“Keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” Saoirse chimed in.

“Good one!” Bond agreed.

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch,” Dave added.

I thought long and hard but failed miserably: “Don’t run with scissors...”

“I am embarrassed to refer to you as my mother!” Stephanie growled.

“Easy come, easy go,” I muttered to myself.

“Better!” Bond said cheerfully.

Sky News excerpt...

“In foreign news, it was reported today that several employees of the American Central Intelligence Agency have been found dead at an undisclosed site in Toulouse, France. The French Government have refused to comment on the events that led to the deaths of CIA Deputy Director Noah Vossen and Dr Albert Hirsch. Rumours abound that an unknown group of well-armed mercenaries were part of the operation that took down an illegal CIA operation which is reported to be closely related to *Operation Blackbriar* that became front-page news, around a decade ago. A spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency has refused to comment on the reports.

“Closer to home, a man was found dead in his home, in the village of Theale. The details of the man’s injuries have not been revealed by authorities. Neighbours report that the forty-eight-year-old man lived alone and he was not known to have any relatives. Police say that there are *no* suspicious circumstances.

“In other news, conspiracy theorists have been flooding the internet with talk of a black helicopter that landed in fields not far from the village of Bradfield, despite local authorities denying any knowledge of such an aircraft. Conspiracy theorists believe that black helicopters are used by the Government to undertake nefarious activities, however, there is very little evidence of their existence.”

Wayne Industries Gulfstream G650

Altitude: 41,850 feet

Speed: 488 Knots

Course: 289°

We were at our cruising altitude and well on our way back to the United States when I noticed that Abby was busy pounding away on her laptop, which I noticed had been painted a dark grey to cover the blood.

It was her expression which had intrigued me and that was the reason why I walked aft and took a vacant seat beside her. Abby seemed very concerned about something.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I found something and I wish I hadn’t but I’m also glad that I did, I think...”

“Abby – English please, for us mere mortals.”

Abby grinned.

“Marty sent over some more decrypted files – I now have Stephanie’s full and mostly unredacted file. It tells us everything that happened to her while she was being trained but it also raises some disturbing questions. It talks about her parents...”

“She killed them...” I interrupted.

“Yes – she did, and the file confirms that; I got photos too – however, there’s a question mark over her brother, James.”

“She killed him, too,” I replied – a little confused by what Abby was getting at.

“As far as we know, yes... However, I also have a file here for one James Reeman – his name was changed to James Carter for his training. He was supposed to have been killed by his sister as part of her indoctrination, only according to his notes, he seemed to exhibit something that his watchers liked and another boy was put in his place... He began to train, about two months’ after Stephanie began her own training – in another training centre. According to the records, their paths crossed at least twice. The boy will be nine at the beginning of October.”

“Will be? Is he alive?”

“According to the records, he was last seen in England, about two months ago – there’s nothing to say that he is alive but nothing to say that he is dead either.”

I gazed down the length of the jet to where Stephanie was giggling away with Anne-Marie and Megan. The girl was so happy – as far as she was concerned, her past was behind her and both her family, and Miranda, had been avenged. How could I introduce doubt now?

“We have a difficult choice, Abigail...”

“Yeah – do we tell her?”

Stephanie looked up and she saw me watching her – she smiled at me and then went back to her laughing and giggling. She was so happy; how could I destroy that...

Why could nothing in my life be plain black or white; it always had to be fucking grey!

An hour later

Mindy called the twins over so that we could go through their After Action Reports.

“Anne-Marie, Daniel.”

“Yeah, Mom.”

“Can we talk about your AARs?”

The twins walked down to the rear of the aircraft and sat down next to Mindy, Chloe, Hailee and me.

“Anne-Marie, your handwriting sucks, not to mention your grammar – how about you take us through what happened, step-by-step,” I suggested.

“Okay, Dad – but in my defence, I am only eight...” Anne-Marie replied with her shit-eating smile. “Ready?”

“Go ahead,” Mindy replied.

“We were having fun... Hailee was telling us a story about her early days in Chicago when an alarm went off. Hailee checked the computer and we saw men approaching the Safehouse – they were armed...”

“... We were in our combat suits, with our weapons – so we pulled on our masks and Hailee checked us over to ensure that we were ready...” Danny added.

“...Hey, I was getting to that – *my report!*” Anne-Marie cut-in angrily.

“Go ahead, mega-mouth...”

Before a full-blown argument ensued, I got Anne-Marie back on track.

“What happened next...?”

“Petra suggested that we make our stand inside. She said that running might get us killed. I was scared; it was just the three of us. I knew that Petra was injured and that while she would fight to the death, I knew that Danny and I had to help, somehow. We had our weapons and we knew how to use them.

“The men broke in – I think they used a battering ram... There was a lot of noise and then four men appeared in the room – they were all armed with pistols, Berettas I think. They stopped when they saw us and I was surprised that they didn’t just shoot us. Petra put herself between them and us, called out the codewords and drew her swords. Petra then threatened them; which didn’t work – she said it wouldn’t... We both stepped up beside Petra and drew our blades.”

“They laughed at us...” Danny interrupted dejectedly.

“Let them,” Chloe said. “You are better than them. Don’t you ever allow anybody to make you feel bad about yourself, about who you are.”

Danny and Anne-Marie both nodded.

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Anne-Marie continued her report.

“One of them said that we might hurt somebody with our swords . . . that made me mad, so I said, ‘That’s kinda the point, you stupid dumb fuck’...”

Anne-Marie tailed off into an embarrassed silence.

“Interesting choice of words, Rogue...” I commented.

Anne-Marie blushed.

“I, err, said, ‘bring it on, motherfuckers’,” Danny added and he looked ashamed.

“You too, Ravage...” I added.

“Sorry,” Danny blushed.

“No – you did good,” Mindy cut in. “Continue...”

“Petra ordered us to attack, so we did... They brought out their retractable club thingys, but they were no match for our blades and armour – they hurt when they struck us, but that was all. I slashed a man across his stomach. My blade cut through his jacket and caught him just below his Kevlar vest – my blades were clean up to that point and that annoyed me, so I stabbed him with the other sword – got blood on that one too – he died.

“Petra had dropped two men and Danny had taken the last one – chopped the guy’s arm off at the elbow before stabbing him in the stomach. Then two more men appeared from the doorway; one of my swords was still embedded in that man’s stomach, so I drew my pistol and put a bullet into the head of the first man through the door. Petra killed the last man with a knife – it hit him right between the eyes.”

Chloe nodded approvingly as Anne-Marie finished.

“Damn well done, Rogue, and that applies to you as well, Ravage,” Chloe said and the twins blushed and smiled at the compliment.

“It was a brilliant shot, Mindy,” Hailee confirmed.

After Anne-Marie had finished her After Action Report, I went for a walk around the plane.

Megan and Stephanie were talking to Joshua and the young man was blushing. Both girls were thanking him for helping them both over the previous weeks. He had given them both council and he had been there when they had needed him on a personal level.

“Without you, we might both be dead,” Megan commented.

“We love you, Josh, and thank you for being there when we needed you,” Stephanie added.

Joshua did not seem to know what to do with himself as both girls gave him a deep and meaningful hug. I smiled at him in encouragement.

Chloe and Hailee just laughed at Joshua's obvious discomfort.

Chicago, United States of America

After a flight of almost four-thousand miles and nearly nine-hours cooped up in a relatively tiny aluminium tube, I was never happier to hear the chirp of the tyres as they bit into the tarmac at Chicago Midway Airport.

The time zones had completely fucked with my body clock, so I had no real idea of what day it was. I was knackered, and so was everybody else. The younger kids were worse than knackered, they were overtired and grumpy. The squabbling had started somewhere over Canada and had resulted in Stephanie slapping her younger sister across the face. The older girl had instantly regretted her action and it had not been *entirely* her fault – Anne-Marie learnt a valuable lesson about winding up tired people who were more likely to respond with violence, rather than words.

As far as I knew, it was late on Wednesday evening, local time. As the jet taxied into a hanger and came to a halt, I saw the welcoming committee, but all I wanted was my bed and about a month's worth of sleep...

The Fusion Ultimatum is not yet over, however, the storyline continues in **Chapter 272: Shit Storm – Part I of Forsaken**.