

The following morning
Wednesday, 29th June, 2016

Vengeance Command Centre

Cassandra Perrin looked out the front windows as a Jaguar pulled up very sharply on the drive.

The man who stepped out of the luxury vehicle did not appear very impressed as he strode up the steps to the front door. Cassie opened the door and waved the man through into the Orangery.

“Well, you lot have stirred up an almighty hornet’s nest!” Jasper Collins growled as he sat down in a chair.

Cameron, Natasha, Cassie, and Eric sat across from Jasper. None of them showed the faintest hint of remorse.

“We saved that trucker,” Cassie pointed out.

“Yes, you did. You also created a hell of a mess on a very busy main road and caused no end of crap for the Police to mop up. The Home Office has put a lid on this mess – for the moment. You do, however, have one fan.”

“Oh?” Cameron commented.

“Yes. The Tesco driver – he thinks you guys are the best fucking thing since sliced bread!”

“We’re out there to help,” Natasha said simply.

Jasper rubbed his eyes and groaned.

“Please keep the body count to a reasonable level.”

“We’ll do our best,” Cameron responded for all of them.

“Yeah – just what I thought,” Jasper grimaced.

That evening

Moss-side Hall

Jessica ran into the living room.

“Jasper, can I get a fiver for tomorrow?” she asked excitedly.

“What for?” Jasper asked the eleven-year-old. “And what happened to saying ‘please’?”

“Please . . . I want to go out with my friends after school.”

“On a school night, Jess?” Lynn Collins cut in.

“It’s only maths on Friday morning. . .” Jessica pointed out.

“I don’t think so,” Jasper decided.

“Told you!” Jessica’s older sister muttered.

Jessica glared at Olivia and she stomped out of the room.

“What’s up with *her*?” Christopher asked as he jumped out of Jessica’s way.

“She’s not getting her own way,” Olivia smirked.

“Maybe we need to find them some extracurricular activities – maybe burn off some of their energy,” Lynn suggested. “Maybe . . .”

“No!” Jasper said strongly.

“Just kidding!” Lynn replied defensively.

The next night

Thursday, 30th June

Northern Edinburgh

The approach was in total darkness and across open grass.

Ten-thousand feet above Edinburgh, the \$3million ScanEagle X200 UAV, known as *EAGLE-1*, orbited at 60 knots in a thousand-yard circle. Various sensors, including visual and infra-red cameras, fed information back to Q in the *Vengeance* Command Centre and directly to the three vigilantes on the ground below. The 22kg air vehicle with a wingspan of just over three metres detected heat sources on the ground and passed the exact locations to the wrist-mounted screens fitted to the vigilante’s combat suits.

Crimson, Drift, and Nemesis were spread out in line abreast as they moved through the darkness. The first of several guards were visible via the team’s NVGs and were about two dozen yards ahead of them. Crimson indicated for Drift to move to the left and Nemesis to move to the right. Both drew their blades – twin 24-inch Tanto blades for Drift and a single 42-inch Katana for Nemesis. They closed on their targets and when a few yards away, they attacked.

First blood went to Nemesis as she removed a guard’s head silently and efficiently. The severed head made barely a sound as it fell onto the soft grass beneath and rolled to a stop, trailing hot blood behind that was super bright in the infra-red image. Drift drove his twin blades into his guard who went down never knowing what had struck him out of the darkness.

“Two down – moving on!” Drift reported.

“Is it just me, or is the Boss a little bit pissed?”

“I think those *Vengeance* guys upset him a bit.”

“Well, they did give him an ultimatum and order him out of town, Bill, and it’s not like they’d actually attack us – not here in the middle of Edinburgh . . . Bill?”

“Bill’s not here – please leave a message after the tone. . .”

“Holy fuck!”

The man turned to see a slim shadow emerge out of the darkness and then he felt unbelievable pain as the razor-sharp tip of a bō-staff came out of that same darkness and split his heart in two.

“Bill and some other fucker, are down,” Crimson growled. “The way in is clear.”

Craigcrook Castle was an imposing property, a little over three miles west of Edinburgh's city centre.

After a period of time as a business centre, the property had passed into the hands of Jack McNafferty. He had completely remodelled the property as a private home – with extensive security. Those security measures were state-of-the-art but Q's systems were a level beyond and he was able to bypass everything that was placed ahead of his colleagues as they approached the main building.

"Breaching in 4 – 3 – 2 – 1. . ."

Drift hit the button on the detonator and explosive charges detonated on the front and back doors, blasting them inwards. Crimson burst in through the demolished back door and she kicked a stunned security guard in the head. On the other side of the building, Nemesis kicked away the final parts of the front door and she ran inside and straight up the spiral staircase and out into a hallway. She immediately came under fire.

"Taking fire!" Nemesis radioed.

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Drift ran up the stairs and he quickly took up position beside his fellow vigilante, his G36C at the ready. The gunfire coming at them was small calibre, probably MP5 submachine guns. Both Drift and Nemesis had no problems with that – their armour was more than a match for the bullets coming at them.

The gunmen were skilled and they were caught in a crossfire from the left, a long hallway that went deeper into the castle, and from ahead, where two men were in an alcove which led to the Master Bedroom . . . and, they hoped, their target.

"*I'm coming up!*" Crimson radioed from below to warn her team so she didn't surprise them and get herself shot into the bargain.

As Crimson came up behind Nemesis, she touched her friend on the shoulder.

"Crimson – take the left, Nemesis – make for the right and work your way around. I'll provide covering fire. On three. One . . . Two . . . Three!"

Drift threw a pair of flashbangs to the left and then another ahead. After the immensely loud bang had begun to echo around the castle, and the flash has subsided, Nemesis and Crimson burst out of the staircase.

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Crimson ran down the hallway, putting bullets into the heads of two stunned guards as she went. She then came to a left-hand bend in the hallway. Ahead of her was a doorway into one of the bedrooms and to her left was a cupboard and beyond that a right-hand bend and she saw a head peer round the far bend at her – it vanished smartly as she sent a three-round burst towards it.

She held position, guarding her team's eastern flank.

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On the other side of the castle, Nemesis dove into an alcove which led to a door – it was the Master Bathroom and as she entered, a bullet struck her armour just below her left breast. She dived down behind a substantial steel bathtub and returned fire with her assault rifle.

“You can’t win, you fucking bitch!”

It was that bastard, McNafferty.

“I have the primary target!” Nemesis called out triumphantly over the communications.

“I have the east end of the castle pinned down,” Crimson reported.

“No way out via the main staircase,” Drift added.

“You’re going down, you motherfucking bastard!” Nemesis called out as she sent a short burst towards the voice and she moved around the bathtub and towards another doorway, the assault rifle at her shoulder.

As she moved through the door, she slowed – something was not right. She was in the Master Dressing Room and that bastard stood a dozen feet from her, in the Master Bedroom. He was smiling despite her having a weapon trained on him and a red laser dot, dead centre on his chest.

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“I wouldn’t move, honey – look at your feet; trip wire.”

Nemesis did not dare look down but as she looked up to her left and to her right, she felt a chill run up her spine as she recognised two Claymore mines.

“You can’t shoot me, either – Deadman’s switch. . .”

Nemesis could see the remote detonator in his hand – she didn’t dare move a muscle.

“I could shoot you where you stand, but you’re my ticket out of here, young *Nemesis*.”

Nemesis had never felt rage like it as her insides boiled with fury. She also felt angry at herself for getting caught out in such a way – the bastard had played them. Hindsight was a wonderful thing. . .

“Nemesis – status!”

“Drift – I’m fucked and he has the upper ground – Claymores.”

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Seconds later, Drift entered the Master Bathroom and then made his way through to the Master Dressing Room - slowly.

He checked for tripwires and anything else, equally as unsavoury, but he found nothing as he joined his friend. He crouched low and looked around – there was nothing at the feet of Nemesis, but he did see the Claymore mines.

“Where is he?”

“Gone!” came the dejected response.

“Let’s get you out of here.”

“Tripwire. . .”

"Can't find one."

"Bastard!" Nemesis seethed as she moved her feet in a relieved fashion.

"He's gone up to the roof and then down an escape ladder," Q called.

"Crimson – pull back; time to leave," Drift ordered.

"Falling back," Crimson acknowledged.

Nemesis and Crimson ran out of the building and back towards their transport.

Behind them, about four hundred yards away were six high-performance cars, varying from Audis, to BMWs and Fords. Heading towards them were about a dozen men; that was a problem – only Crimson had a plan. She reached into a pouch on her belt and pulled out a remote detonator before she smirked at Nemesis and pressed the button just as Drift came out of the castle.

"Nothing's happening!" Nemesis commented dryly.

"Fuck!" Crimson growled as she stabbed the button again and again. The men were just about to pass the cars.

"Did you check the batteries?" Nemesis asked.

"Damn it – you lose focus for one second in this game. . ."

"Did you turn it off and back on again?" Q asked.

"Your bloody answer to everything, Q!"

"It works for me," Drift threw in as he caught up and frowned at their latest predicament.

Crimson, however, did so and then she pressed the button. . .

First, an Audi went airborne on a pillar of fire, followed by a Ford, a BMW, and finally another Audi – then silence. Two-seconds later, another Audi flew upwards into the air – then nothing. Nemesis and Crimson glared at the final BMW as Crimson hammered the button on the remote and then out of sheer frustration, she smacked her hand against it. . . That did it – the final car, and men, died in a ball of flame.

"Q?"

"Yes, my Crimson queen. . ."

"Where the fuck did you buy this toy-town shit?"

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The drive back was sombre – considering that they had missed the bastard. They consoled themselves with the knowledge that he now knew he was in danger and that he could be hit anywhere and at any time. The sombre mood worsened as they entered the Command Centre.

Q was ashen-faced as he met them.

"Stephanie was shot, a few hours ago; it was a sniper. I have no further information at this point."

The following morning
Friday, 1st July

Blairhoyle

The mood was sullen that morning.

All three girls moped as they pushed their cereal around in their bowls, not really eating anything. Stephanie was still not out of danger but she was still fighting. The event had brought it home to the three girls that they were all very much mortal. During their brief time together, the girls had become very attached to Stephanie and they saw the older ex-*Predator* as their future selves.

It also raised questions in Cassie's mind as to whether her own brood and Harper might be at risk.

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There was another reason for the sullen behaviour: Keira and Harper were moving into their own home.

"It's not fair!" Kaitlin moaned after breakfast as Harper finished packing her belongings.

"I know," Harper replied. "I'm going to miss you both – all of you – but I'm not far away and you can come visit me. We can set Edinburgh on fire!"

"I do hope that is metaphorical, Harper," Keira commented from the door.

"Of course, it is – I don't burn things."

"Bullshit!" Naomi exploded before she clamped a hand over her mouth and she dug a hand into her pocket for a pound coin which she then placed in Keira's outstretched hand.

"Oh?" Keira hinted with a raised eyebrow.

"Something for later, sis – a little problem I had. . ."

"Okay, let's get your stuff into the car, then."

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It was one of the very few times that we had ever seen the three girls cry. Poor Kaitlin had tears streaming down her face as she hugged Harper. Naomi was the same as she hugged Keira.

"Christ in heaven!" Alexandra complained. "They're moving a few miles down the road – it's not like they're moving to another country!"

"I'll miss having you running around, Harper," Cassie said, with tears in her eyes. "But maybe not the trouble you cause!"

Harper grinned and quickly wiped away her own tears.

"Promise you'll come to visit?" she asked.

"We're coming over tomorrow," Cassie reminded the nine-year-old. "Remember?"

The three girls grinned enormously and Keira rolled her eyes.

That night***East Mayfield***

Keira was sitting on her brand-new, ultra-soft sofa, in the living room of her new home.

It felt strange being somewhere new, but she was pleased to have her own space. Even better. . .

“Can I join you?”

Harper ran into the living room and jumped onto the sofa, cuddling into her sister. Harper had just come down from her bedroom and she was in her pyjamas.

“We are together, in a new home, starting a new life,” Keira began.

“Yes, as Polaris and Scorpion,” Harper replied with a cheeky grin.

“I am so happy that we are together, Harps.”

“Me too. Oh – please don’t *ever* call me that in front of the girls; I’d never hear the end of it!”

“No problem, Harps.”

“Love you, sis.”

“Love you, too, little sis.”

That same time***Blairhoyle***

“This sucks!”

“Kaitlin! Less of that language, please,” Cassie warned.

“She’s right – even though I hate to admit it,” Naomi said. “I miss Harper.”

Naomi stared over at the other sofa where Harper used to sit and cuddle into her big sister. It was a little game that the girls would play in their continuing one-upmanship. Harper would cuddle into her sister and make faces at Naomi and Kaitlin as they reciprocated by cuddling onto Cassie and making faces back.

Cassie and Keira thought it was cute (privately!) and often joined in.

The following morning***Saturday, 2nd July******East Mayfield***

“Harper!”

“Naomi, Kaitlin!”

The three girls rushed towards each other and hugged.

"For the love of God!" Cassie growled. "It's only been twenty fucking hours!"

"Harper's been climbing the walls waiting for you to get here," Keira chuckled.

"Kaitlin was up at five," Cassie countered. "She asked if we could leave early."

"It's good to see that they are such good friends; they need each other," Keira admitted.

"So, how was your first night in your new home?"

"A little quiet, but it was great – just me and Harper."

Coatbridge

"I'm not so sure about this. . ."

"Come on Kaitlin – you can do this," Keira said encouragingly as she held out a hand to the eight-year-old.

"We're better than this!" Harper exclaimed as she tentatively put a toe into the water.

"Good point," Naomi commented as she ran forwards and splashed into the same water.

"God give me strength!" Cassie groaned as she scooped up Harper and Kaitlin, one under each arm, and she dragged them into deeper water before dropping them both into the pool.

The two girls quickly regained their feet and, with a bit of coughing and spluttering, they stood up and glared at Cassie. Naomi laughed but not for long as Keira swept the nine-year-old off her feet and she went under water before quickly resurfacing, coughing and spluttering.

"You two are *so* evil!" Kaitlin commented.

Keira smirked at Cassie who just smiled innocently.

"That's something coming from three vicious killers," Keira pointed out.

"Go have fun, girls, and please don't kill anybody," Cassie suggested with a steady glare at each girl in turn.

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Earlier, before leaving Edinburgh, Cassie had sat the girls down.

"Okay, girls," Natasha said with a smile. "We need to find out how well you three can swim."

"Fuck that!" Kaitlin said with finality.

"I know you *Predators* are not big fans of water but we need to know that you can all swim as we may be operating at sea at some stage in the future."

The girls had reluctantly accepted, until . . .

Swimming costumes had not been as easy to obtain as Cassie and Keira had thought. Cassie had selected a pair of dark blue, two-piece swimsuits (no frills, more like a sports bra and high-cut shorts) for Kaitlin and Naomi, however, Naomi had *not* been amused.

"I am *not* a little girl – I want a grown-up swimsuit," she had demanded.

"I am what I am," Kaitlin had said and she had stuck with the two-piece while her cousin had selected a dark blue one-piece.

Keira had picked out a red, one-piece for Harper and the young girl was very happy with the selection.

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Thus, the five of them had travelled to Coatbridge to visit the Time Capsule – a small but fun swimming pool that had flumes and other fun activities, plus a wave pool. Considering their forced exposure to water in the past, the three girls had been understandably apprehensive about the water, but once in, they loved it and it was not long before Kaitlin received the first warning from a watching lifeguard as she tried to duck her cousin.

For Keira and Cassie, it had been a magical afternoon – the girls were able to be normal little girls for a few hours. Kaitlin, ever the adventurous one, was the first on the flumes, and when the three girls went on the Tornado Tantrum together, there was a *lot* of screaming! As for the wave pool, all three girls – plus Keira and Cassie – giggled their way through the 2-metre plus waves as they rose and fell the length of the pool.

The biggest problem was then getting them *out* of the pool, dried off, and changed!

Friday, 15th July

HMS Dragon
North Atlantic

The Royal Navy destroyer was on a southerly heading, about 750 miles due west of Monrovia, off the African coast.

The Officer of the Watch lowered her binoculars and studied the radar, she then turned to the chart.

"Quartermaster, call the Captain!"

"Aye, aye, Ma'am."

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Within minutes, the Captain stepped onto his bridge.

"Captain on the bridge!"

"Okay, what have you got, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Harvey, was the Officer of the Watch on the Forenoon Watch. She quickly brought her Captain up to date on the current situation.

"We have a vessel, Captain, four nautical miles off the port bow: she's the *Dauphin* – French registered – and she's requesting a doctor."

The Captain studied the chart for a moment, followed by the radar.

"Okay – call away the sea-boat and send for the PMO."

"Sir!"

The Dauphin

The 7.8-metre, BAE Systems Pacific 24 RIB, cut across the ice-cold waters of the North Atlantic Ocean towards the French vessel. The rolling waves topped four feet and the swell was moderate but well within the capabilities of the Pacific 24. Onboard the RIB, that afternoon, was a crew of six: the helmsman, two crewmen, the *Dragon's* Principal Medical Officer and two medical ratings.

The *Dauphin* was not a large vessel, she had a gross tonnage of 9,593 tonnes and a length of 120 metres. Nor was she old – only ten-years-old. Her black hull was clean with only limited streaks of rust and she was otherwise a smart vessel with her white-painted upperworks. The Tricolour flew with pride from the vessel's stern as the RIB came around to the more sheltered port side of the vessel.

A companion ladder had been lowered and the PMO jumped over onto the lower platform with two ratings for company. The RIB moved off and easily kept pace with the *Dauphin*.

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Forty minutes later, the PMO left the cabin where he had found a crewman with what turned out to be a mild inflammation of the appendix. The PMO had advised the *Dauphin's* Captain to get the man to shore and he had proscribed a course of antibiotics. On the way, back to the main deck, a shout was heard.

“Arrêtez la fille!”

“Tais-toi!”

“What’s going on?” the Royal Navy officer demanded as he saw struggling a few yards down a passageway.

“Help. . .!”

The cry sounded like that of a child but it was quickly cut off.

“Bates, Dyer, get down there!” Lieutenant Harris ordered his men.

“Sortez-la d’ici!”

“Get off that girl!” one of the Royal Navy ratings yelled as he saw that two French crewmen were struggling with a small girl on the deck.

There then began a fight, the French on one side, the British sailors on another – and then the girl! She was kicking and punching as she fought to escape both groups of sailors. Finally, three of the French crewmen were subdued – one by the girl – before she found herself pinned to a steel bulkhead by one of the British seamen.

“Calm down, lassie,” the sailor suggested as the girl struggled and fought. “The Navy’s ‘ere!”

“Let me go, you fucking bastard!”

“We have ourselves a spirited lassie, sir,” the sailor said as he eased the pressure on the girl but kept a firm hand on her upper left arm.

The young girl in question was covered in muck and it was difficult to see that her skin was, in fact, white. Her clothes were in a terrible state and there were obvious bruises on what skin was visible.

“What are you doing aboard a French vessel, girl?” the Royal Navy officer asked gently.

“I’m not saying anything until I’m off this ship.”

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Within minutes, the Captain of *Dauphin* had appeared at the scene.

“Putain d’enfer!” he exclaimed and his crewmen looked scared. “Qui a amené cette fille à bord?”

One of the crewmen raised his hand and the Captain turned to a large man who stood behind him.

“Place cet homme en état d’arrestation,” the Captain ordered before he turned to the infuriated Royal Navy officer. “I knew nothing about this girl. I am placing that man under arrest and he will be handed over to the authorities when we reach our destination. I can only apologise to the girl and to you and your men. Will you take her with you?”

The girl looked pleadingly up at the officer.

“Yes, she will come back to the *Dragon*. Bates, Dyer – get the girl to the seaboat.”

“Aye, aye, sir!”