

***Tuesday, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016***

***Blairhoyle***

***Scotland, United Kingdom***

"If anybody dares. . ."

"Yes, Kaitlin?" Alexandra asked pointedly.

"You do look sweet, Kaitlin - just enjoy it," Cassie offered.

"Yuck!" the eight-year-old growled.

"You are starting Primary 5, young lady, so a new uniform is required."

"I preferred the pinafore."

"Give it a break, Kaitlin," Naomi suggested. "You're just grumpy 'cause Harper isn't here."

Kaitlin nodded.

"I miss her."

"You'll both see her at the weekend. She is starting her new school today," Alexandra cautioned.

"Okay - I'm ready," Kaitlin said as Naomi checked that her cousin's hair was up in her customary pigtails.

"Let's go!" Cassie announced, pushing the two girls towards the car.

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***Two days later***

***Thursday, August 25<sup>th</sup>***

***Early morning***

***Edinburgh Airport***

"Is she here yet?"

"Do you see her, you bloody idiot?" Naomi growled back.

"Bitchy!" Kaitlin retorted.

"Will you two shut the fuck up!" Harper suggested.

"I am going to smack your heads together if you three don't shut it!" Cassie growled angrily.

The three girls clammed up and looked skyward.

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The sleek light-grey executive jet taxied towards them before turning in and stopping a few metres short of the hanger.

The engines of the Gulfstream 650ER jet wound down and the forward hatch on the port side opened, deploying the air stairs. Once

deployed, the girl descended the stairs from the jet and she took a deep breath before she set foot onto solid ground.

"Finally, I'm back home again!"

"Stephanie!"

The three girls ran forwards and they almost flattened the ten-year-old.

"Careful, you little rats - I'm still recuperating," Stephanie warned as she protected her right arm which hung across her front on a wrist sling. The three girls eased off their welcome and gave Stephanie her space.

". . . aaaand the God complex is back . . . now that the she-bitch has her worshippers . . ."

"Go fuck yourself, SD!" Stephanie growled as her friend followed her down the stairs.

Saoirse looked over the faces before her and she cringed. They worshipped Stephanie, there was no other word for it.

"Electra!" SD called and the young girl appeared at the top of the steps.

"Creepy - it's the only word for it," the young girl commented as she joined SD on the tarmac.

"Thanks, 'lectra," Stephanie commented sourly.

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### **Blairhoyle**

"It is very good to see you again, Stephanie," Jasper said, holding out his hand.

"You, too, sir," Stephanie replied uneasily.

"Stephanie, Saoirse, I have something for the both of you."

The two friends exchanged glances, but they each sat down on a sofa as Jasper sat down in a chair.

"Considering that you two are now working on behalf of HMG, we have decided to equip you accordingly."

Jasper placed two identity cards on the glass-topped table.

"Oh, wow!" Saoirse commented as she examined the two Security Service identity cards. "You actually look pretty hot in your photo, Steph."

"Thanks!" Stephanie growled as her face turned pink. She picked up her own ID and examined it closely. "Why does my ID number end in '666'? You trying to say something?"

"Do I need to?" Jasper countered.

"You're the devil, Stephanie," Saoirse laughed.

"I am, aren't I?" Stephanie said as she pocketed her card. "Thank you."

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***Later that afternoon. . .***

Everything Stephanie did, the three girls just fawned over her. They did everything for her, including running to fetch a can of Coke or a packet of salt & vinegar crisps.

"I really don't know how you put up with all the hero worship," Saoirse commented.

"It's a gift, what can I say?"

"You're just lapping it up, aren't you?"

Stephanie's expression said it all.

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Dinner that evening was . . . well, Cassie was struggling to find a suitable word . . . maybe 'riot' would be a good choice, she thought dryly.

Cassie and her mother had discussed options for feeding six *Predators* without destroying the house, and a barbecue had therefore seemed the optimum choice. Cassie began to have second thoughts as the giggling Harper and Stephanie began to poke at the red-hot coals.

"Scram, you little pests!" Alexandra ordered and both girls ran off, laughing.

Despite her superior age, fifteen-year-old Saoirse was letting out her inner *Predator* and she joined in some of the more extreme 'games' which included fighting with kitchen knives and popping Mentos mints into bottles of Coke and watching said bottles explode all over each other.

"You look to be enjoying yourself, Saoirse."

"Yes, Mrs Perrin - sorry if I'm being a pain. Yes, I'm fifteen, but this just feels good, behaving like an imbecile."

"You enjoy yourself, honey."

Alexandra laughed as the teenager ran off in the direction of Electra and Kaitlin - the two younger girls were throwing sections of barbecued sausage into each other's mouths. Typically, for Kaitlin, she had thought it a good idea to first dip the sausage sections in ketchup - oh well, she thought, kids wash!

Considering their history, Cassie was pleased to see the six girls having fun on that sunny evening. It had only been a few months previously that Stephanie and Saoirse had begun an operation in

Scotland that had ultimately resulted in Harper, Naomi, Kaitlin, and Electra being released from their enforced training regime.

Cassie could not consider life without her two girls - they were very much a part of her daily life now.

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Cleaning up after the barbecue had been epic, too.

Not surprisingly, two bathrooms had seen an awful lot of water as the six *Predators* had cleaned themselves up. Cassie had come running up the stairs after hearing a very loud and very high-pitched scream. Cassie had appeared on the landing to find a naked Stephanie and Harper running away from an equally naked Saoirse who was yelling bloody murder as she ran. All three skidded to a halt before Cassie. Saoirse quickly covered herself up and she looked very embarrassed.

"Those two little bitches threw freezing cold water over me when I was in the shower and then turned the shower to cold!" Saoirse growled angrily.

"Yeah - I figured that; your nipples were sticking out a mile!" Cassie laughed.

Harper and Stephanie giggled as Saoirse went bright red and she ran into the bedroom she was sharing with Stephanie and Electra. The other three girls, all grinning and all just as naked, peered out of another bedroom door.

Cassie just rolled her eyes and heading back down the stairs.

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That night, Electra sat on Stephanie's bed, glaring at her mentor.

"You are coming back?"

"Yes, 'lectra, SD and me; we are just nipping to check on another *Predator*."

"Can I come?"

Stephanie groaned.

"Okay!" Stephanie exclaimed as she gave in. "Those three nutcases do everything I tell them, but you, 'lectra, you do the complete damn opposite!"

"It's a gift, what can I say!" Electra grinned and Saoirse laughed from the other side of the room.

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***The following morning***

***Friday, August 26<sup>th</sup>***

***Paris, France***

Stephanie stretched as the aircraft came to a halt beside the hanger at Paris Charles de Gaulle airport.

"You coming with us?" SD enquired of her slovenly friend.

"The last time we were both in this country. . ."

"I know - but that was then, and this is now."

"Okay, let's see what reprobate they've scraped off the streets now."

"Can't be any worse than you, Steph!" Electra grinned.

"She has a point," SD laughed.

"We shall see, my Irish friend," Stephanie replied as she ignored Electra completely.

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Awaiting them, they found a tall man with messy brown hair, leaning against a large Citroen.

"Good morning, my friends, I am Adrien."

"And to you, Adrien. I am Saoirse and this is my friend Stephanie, and her friend, Electra."

"You are all. . ."

"Predators? Yes," replied Stephanie. "Good to meet you, Adrien."

"Likewise," Electra added.

"Let's make a move, Marinette is looking forward to meeting you all - again, for you two, at any rate."

"Your English is very good, Adrien," Electra pointed out.

Adrien laughed.

"Thank you. I spent a couple of years living in Southampton where I attended university," he explained.

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The house was large and very impressive.

Stephanie, Saoirse, and Electra were led from the car up some steps to a set of large wooden doors. One of the doors flew open before Adrien could touch it and Marinette smiled down on her three British visitors.

"Welcome, mon ami!"

"Hi, Marinette," Stephanie offered.

"Ah, young Stephanie - taller than when I last saw you. Saoirse - you are getting more beautiful as the months roll by."

The two girls blushed at the compliments. Stephanie pushed Electra forwards and introduced her.

"This is Electra, another one."

"Pleased to meet you, Electra," Marinette said as she shook hands with the young girl. "This way, please."

Marinette led them into a large living room with a very high ceiling.

"This is. . ."

"Yvette!"

Stephanie was speechless for a moment as she laid eyes on Yvette for the first time in many, many months.

Yvette was just the same and it was almost two full minutes before Yvette burst into tears and she hugged Stephanie - not too tightly due to her arm. The two friends just hugged and then went back to staring at one another.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Yvette said.

"I never thought I'd live this long," Stephanie replied, wiping away her tears.

"So, you two know each other?" Marinette asked.

"From way back," Stephanie replied. "We provided support for each other, back when we were *Predators*. Me, Jasmine, Ruth, Maxine, and Yvette. *They* called themselves the *Psyche Crew*!"

"Oh, God . . . *Psyche Crew*?" Saoirse said dryly.

"Hey - somebody as important as me needs her entourage," Stephanie replied with a grin.

"What's with the arm?" Yvette asked.

"Sniper," Stephanie replied simply.

"Doesn't surprise me really. . ."

"Why?" Stephanie demanded.

"You just can't keep out of trouble, can you girl? Well, I suppose that was our job."

"You did keep me alive. . ." Stephanie admitted.

"Hey," Yvette commented distractedly as she moved to check out her friend from the side. "You getting boobs?"

"Why does everybody have a fascination with my physical development - yes, I have boobs . . . well, kind of. . ."

"Cool!" Yvette commented.

"Believe me, there's not a great deal there," Electra deadpanned.

Yvette and Electra giggled while Saoirse did her utmost not to laugh. Stephanie just seethed.

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Yvette next hugged Electra.

"It's good to see that you are still alive, 'lectra."

"Stephanie taught me well. Without those skills. . ."

"Yeah - she's a good teacher," Yvette admitted as Stephanie looked embarrassed.

Stephanie noticed that Yvette had pointedly ignored Saoirse, despite them both knowing each other very well.

"Yvette, you remember Saoirse."

Her expression was glacial as Yvette looked up at the teenager.

"Yes, I remember the bitch!"

Saoirse looked very downcast and Stephanie felt sorry for her friend, and angry with Yvette - Electra too; she was tolerant of Saoirse, but she refused to enter into conversation with her.

"Enough!" Stephanie growled angrily as she turned to the two younger girls.

Both girls flinched - they both knew exactly what Stephanie was capable of when she was angry.

"Saoirse is my friend! We all did terrible things. We were all encouraged to treat our fellow *Predators* like crap. When I first came across Saoirse, I needed her; I had nobody else who could relate to my situation. Since she came over to our side, she also discovered that she needed me to help her transition from psycho-assassin, to normal school-girl.

"I'm sure that you two remember how far I go to get my own way. . . I see that you do - now, this will end, you will both make friends with Saoirse. I'm not saying you have to make love to her; she'd like that, but I just want you to stop ignoring each other and fucking talk - or do I have to bang your thick skulls together?"

Yvette exchanged glances with Electra and she took a deep breath as she turned to Saoirse.

"Hi, Saoirse. I'm, Electra. I'm sorry for being a bitch and I want you to be my friend."

Electra held out her hand and Saoirse took it.

"Thank you, Electra."

"I'm sorry for ignoring you, Saoirse. As usual, Stephanie has a point. We all did crappy things, back then, which we had no control over. Friends?"

"Yes, Yvette, we are friends."

"Okay, now the sappy shit is over, let's get down to business!" Stephanie growled as she shoved all three girls down onto a sofa. "My apologies, Marinette, Adrien - I just had to get that off my chest."

"Yeah," Electra quipped. "Steph needs to make room for her new boobs."

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### ***Scotland, United Kingdom***

Craig Montgomery had been brought up to respect life and his fellow human beings.

Up until a week before his eighth birthday, the boy was a model child. He was doing well at school, he had good friends, he rarely got into trouble and never anything serious. In return, his parents gave him a happy family life and he wanted for nothing. His father, David, was away a lot, at sea with the Royal Navy. As such, he mainly lived with his mother, Amy, but when his father was home, he was the happiest boy on the planet.

Then, during mid-October 2011, everything changed. Craig went missing, along with his aunt and uncle with whom he had been staying for a few days. None of them were seen again despite extensive searching and inquiries by the Police. David and Amy Montgomery had been devastated at losing their only son. Despite them holding out hope, life went on for the Montgomery's and time passed.

Four and a half years later, a knock on the door one sunny Wednesday in May 2016, had led to a family reunion.

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### ***That afternoon***

***Friday, August 26<sup>th</sup>***

### ***Bridge of Allan, Stirling***

When Craig had returned home, he had been twelve-years-old, and very different to the little boy who had gone missing as an eight-year-old. Now, three months later, the boy was almost a teenager and his parents were struggling with the boy's antics. A faceless government bureaucrat had made a half-hearted effort to explain what the boy had been doing over the previous four or so years, but Craig's parents had had major difficulty understanding any of it; so much had been thrown at them.

Their son was alive. Their son was an assassin. Their son was a killer.

Craig was just as lost.



For almost five years, he had known but one life. A life of hardship and pain. A life of being told what to do, each and every minute. Being back in what was only just beginning to feel like familiar surroundings was tremendously difficult. He had forgotten about a life of ease and not having to fight to survive. He had forgotten about a life where somebody actually cared about his wellbeing rather than how well he could kill.

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The doorbell rang a little after noon and when Amy Montgomery went to answer the door, she found a tall handsome man standing there.

"Good morning, ma'am. You must be Mrs Montgomery. I am Commander Craig Lawrence and I am here about your son, err Craig."

"He's at school, Commander," Amy explained.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs Montgomery; he's in the car, outside."

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### ***Two hours earlier***

#### ***Falkirk Police Station***

Craig was not a happy boy.

He had just been nicked!

Right at that moment in his short but troubled life, the twelve-year-old was handcuffed to the steel table which was securely bolted to the floor of the rather small interrogation room. He looked up lazily as the door opened and somebody walked in closing the door behind them. He focused on the person and then his eyes went wide as he took in the most beautiful young woman that he had ever seen. Something about her was familiar but he could not quite place it.

The young woman sat down across from him and she just stared at him for a minute or two.

"Who are you?" he demanded insolently, in an attempt to get the upper hand in the interrogation.

"Call me your only bloody chance of getting out of here a free man."

The Irish accent was strong.

"Fuck off!"

Without changing her expression, the woman placed the tablet which she had been carrying onto the table top and she slowly walked around to his side of the table. Without warning, she smacked his head down onto the metal table top - not hard enough to harm but hard enough for him to take notice.

"Fuck me around, boy, and you're off to Polmont Young Offenders for the next six fucking years."

The tone was menacing and it scared the boy.

"Now," the woman said calmly as she sat back down and picked up her tablet. "Craig Montgomery, born 18<sup>th</sup> October 2003. Parents: David and Amy. Taken by the sinister dark forces of the Central Intelligence Agency, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2011. Indoctrinated into the *Urban Predator* program. Completed Phase 1 by the skin of your teeth, and moved onto a rather lacklustre performance in Phase 2. I have no idea *how* you moved onto Phase 3!"

Craig was stunned. The woman knew *everything* about him. How was that possible?

"What a fucked-up codename: *Stripe* - I ask you! From what I see you should never have completed Phase 1, let alone Phase 2. You did well in Fight Club, during your third year. I always enjoyed those fights - hurt like the buggar afterwards, but that was life. No - you're not what I'm looking for; it's Polmont for you, boy."

With that, the woman stood up and she turned for the door. Craig realised he did not have all that many options available to him - actually, on second thoughts, he had none.

"I can change," he blurted out and the woman stopped. "I'm really good; I *earned* my codename and if you are what I think you are, then you know that."

She turned and she smiled. The smile worried him but he filed that thought worry away for another time.

"Who are you?"

"They call me Foxtail."

The woman vanished out the door.

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Minutes later, two uniformed Police officers entered the room and they proceeded to unlock the boy from the table.

"What's happening?" he demanded to closed ears.

Craig was worried. He did not want to go to prison. He just wanted to go home. Once unlocked, the handcuffs were removed, much to Craig's surprise, and he was escorted to the front door of the Police Station.

The two Police officers left him standing before a tall man and the smirking Irish girl.

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### ***Bridge of Allan, Stirling***

"I'm afraid that your son was not at school; we picked him up from Falkirk Police Station, just over half an hour ago. He is in our custody, at least for now. We would like to take the boy for an, err

an interview, if you like. It may prove beneficial to him, not to mention to both you and your husband."

"Is he in a lot of trouble?"

"Yes, he is. He verbally abused a Police officer and he resisted arrest - quite violently, I understand. We'll return him this evening - more or less in one piece, and then we'll explain everything."

"He's a good lad. I don't know what really happened to the boy, but I just want my son back and whatever it takes, I'll go along with it - David will too."

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"Where are we going?" Craig asked as Commander Lawrence climbed back into the car.

"Hell!" The Irish girl responded with a decidedly disturbing laugh.

The car moved off and headed west. Twenty minutes later, the tall man stopped the dark blue BMW X5 beside a large barn-type building.

"Out!" he ordered and Craig did so.

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"Follow me!" The Irish girl directed, and he was led into the building which appeared to be some sort of office building by the looks of the plush reception area. "In here . . ."

Craig followed the girl through a heavy steel door which led into a concrete-blocked area before they passed through another steel door, offset to the right of the first one. His mind said, 'kill zone' but his senses had been dulled after several months of inactivity and he missed all the tell tales. As the steel door closed silently behind him, he had mere seconds to take in what appeared to be a large open area over several storeys with mezzanine floors above and below him.

Just before the lights went out, the boy caught sight of a training mat and some gym equipment. Then he felt a hand wrap around his wrist and he was thrown over a railing and down onto what felt like a soft crash mat.

"What the bloody . . ."

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A strobe light broke through the darkness and Craig braced up. He had no idea what was going on but there was no way that it could be anything good. He put his attention onto his peripheral vision to avoid the strobe lighting which was beginning to disorient him. He caught sight of something crimson just as he was kicked backwards, then a gloved hand took a hold of his face and shoved him bodily against a wall.

"Get out of this, you little fuck!"

The voice was electronically enhanced and it freaked Craig out. His mind was racing as he tried to process everything that was going on around him and come up with a plan of action. Those months of inactivity vanished in a flash as his training came back in a rush of anger. He executed a perfect release from the hand which gripped his face and he kicked out at his assailant. His kick was blocked but a quick feint and he struck the crimson clad individual in the chest.

As the attacker fell backwards, he dove forwards and seized the pistol which he recognised as an FN Five-seveN, from its holster. He flicked off the safety and fired off three rounds into his attacker's chest. Quickly, he turned but he received an armoured fist to his own chest. He fell backwards and fired off six more rounds before the pistol was kicked out of his hands and he was thrown across the mat to land in a heap.

A hand reached down to help him up. He could not make out much, thanks to the strobe effect which fucked up his vision. Then he heard a familiar voice as he clambered back to his feet.

"Had enough, yet, you fucked up reject?"

The voice had a strong Irish lilt to it. That girl! He had no time to ponder anything else as the girl kneed him in his right thigh. He went down, but not before he grabbed the girl's left ankle and he yanked. There was a scream and the girl landed beside him on the mat. To his surprise, she laughed.

Then the strobe-effect stopped and the lights came back on.

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"Holy fuck!"

Two armour-clad individuals came over and they stopped before him. He knew who they were: Crimson and Drift - leaders of the vigilante organisation known as *Vengeance*.

"Let's debrief after a shower, shall we," Crimson suggested and she turned to head for a far corner of the space.

Craig got back to his feet and he helped the Irish girl to her feet.

"Thanks, Craig - my name is Saoirse."

"Hi."

Craig followed the girl as she pushed through an unmarked doorway and she pointed to a door over to her right while she passed through a door behind her. The doors were labelled - **GENTS** and **LADIES**. Craig smiled as he pushed open the door and walked into the male changing rooms.

"Hi, Craig, I'm Cameron - otherwise known as Drift."

The young man was removing his body armour and placing the items into a large dufflebag.

"Where am I?"

"This is the *Vengeance Training Centre*. You fought well, I suggest you go take a shower."

Cameron finished undressing and picked up a towel before vanishing through a door at the back of the changing rooms. Craig realised he was sweaty, so he quickly pulled off his clothes and swept up a towel, following Cameron. He found himself in a large tiled room that was hazy with drifting steam. He hung his towel on a hook and passed around the wall to find a row of six showers, in two groups of three.

He passed between the two groups to find an identical set of showers, two of which were occupied. His eyes went wide as they worked their way up the most gorgeous set of legs he had ever seen and they stopped at. . .

"You like what you're seein'?" Saoirse asked.

"Looks like it!" another voice commented with a chuckle.

Craig peered down at his . . . and he felt his face heating up.

"I'm Natasha. . ."

"Crimson?" Craig ventured as he covered himself with both hands.

"Got it in one, kid!" Natasha replied. "I suggest that you go use the boy's showers, back the way you came."

"Uh, huh."

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***An hour later***

***Bridge of Allan, Stirling***

"Craig!"

"Hi, Mum."

"He passed the interview," Natasha advised Mrs Montgomery. "Hello, I am Natasha King."

"Hello."

"Your son did well. He has had a decidedly unhappy few years and we are here to help him adjust to a normal life. Unfortunately, he has needs; we can help him with those needs."

"Needs?" Amy Montgomery asked as she sat down and waved Natasha to do the same.

"Craig was trained to be a killer. He has killed and he has a need to assuage an urge for violence. Both you and your husband have held

security clearances. Those clearances have been renewed. I will leave Craig to run you through what he went through, earlier. I will not throw any more at you, for now. But rest assured that we are here to help you and son."

"Thank you," Amy said. "He's actually smiling - something he has not done since he returned. Did you see something you liked, Craig?"

Craig simply nodded, his grin growing.

"Mr Montgomery..."

"Please, Mrs King, call me Monty, or Chief."

"Then please call me Natasha."

"Of course, Natasha."

"Chief, Cassie is going to pick you up, tomorrow night at 19:30 - we have a surprise for you."