

Friday, September 23rd, 2016

Safehouse VY

North Yorkshire, England

Jasper chuckled as a stream of tired youngsters began to drift into the kitchen.

Alexandra and Lynn had been cooking breakfast for the previous forty minutes. Apparently, Alya and Adrien had sought out a supermarket or two and they had bought large quantities of bacon, eggs, and sausages. The smell of the cooking food had teased the kids out of their beds. The girls had appeared first, led by Olivia and Harper. As the dining room could only seat eight, breakfast was sandwiches and a plate was handed to each person as they appeared in the kitchen.

"For fuck's sake!" Kaitlin growled as some bright yellow egg yolk worked its way down the front of her pyjama top.

Olivia and Harper laughed so hard that they both ended up with egg down their own tops. Jasper was pleased to see that his kids were all integrating without any problems. Jessica was sitting with Naomi and Yvette and they were each chatting animatedly while Christopher was sitting with the other two boys and ignoring the antics of the fairer sex. All the kids had hit it off directly - even the new boy, Jeremy, who had just learnt about *Vengeance* the previous night. Jeremy's father, Trevor, was a likeable guy and Jasper had chatted with him over breakfast.

Keira and Trevor, along with David, had regaled everybody with an abbreviated version of their break in to and out of Boscombe Down, including the missile attack. The news of the missile attack had come as an unwelcome surprise to everybody.

"Hey - we could have been terrorists stealing a helicopter," Keira had pointed out to her appalled little sister.

"We are all in danger," Jasper advised everybody. "Until we find out who did this to us - we cannot undo it. Everybody needs to be at their best and ready for anything. Those of you who are new to *Vengeance* and have no training - you will be trained. It will be hard work and I am sorry but it will be painful, at times, too. Craig, I want you to take Jeremy and Christopher and start with some morning exercises to loosen them both up before starting a full training regimen for them both. Harper - you will be in charge of getting Olivia and Jessica into fighting form - go with Craig and work with him."

"Kaitlin, Naomi, Yvette - we need to inventory our kit," Cassie directed. "You three are coming with me, David, Keira, and Trevor. We're heading back to Thetis."

"Nats and me are working with Adrien and Marinette to ensure that we are secure here," Cameron went on. "Lynn, myself, Alya, and Eric -

we will be checking out the surrounding area and looking for threats. Good luck, everybody."

Craig and Harper gathered their trainees as everybody moved off to get dressed.

"Shorts and T-shirts - you won't need shoes or socks," Craig directed. "You have five minutes to be back down here."

"Move it!" Harper yelled.

Later that morning

Olivia had thought it fun to be training with *Vengeance*, however, after an hour's hard exercises, the thirteen-year-old was exhausted.

She fell down onto her hands and knees, panting for breath, her body dripping with sweat. Beside her, her sister lay on the carpet, breathing heavily, sweat pouring off her. Christopher and Jeremy fared no better, although Jeremy appeared to be the fittest.

"Get up!" Craig ordered.

"I can't move," Jessica wailed.

"I'm too sore," Olivia complained.

"Me, the same," Christopher added.

Before Jeremy could come up with some pitiful excuse, Harper stepped forwards and she kicked each older child in the side.

"Get the fuck up, now!" The nine-year-old yelled. "Do any of you have the slightest bloody idea about what is going on right now?"

The blank expressions told Harper everything that she needed to know.

"For the love of everything that is holy!" she seethed. "At any moment, armed men could burst in here and take us all down. As well as trying to protect ourselves, we would have to protect you four dumb fucks. Why the fuck, should we put our lives on the line to protect you four, if none of you can be bothered to do anything to protect yourselves?"

"We never. . ." Olivia began.

"You never asked for any of this? Well, neither did I, neither did Craig. Did I ask some sick organisation to make me kill my own fucking parents? Yes, I put a bullet in each of their heads when I was eight-years-old - got to see the video if it, too. I would give anything to have a life where all this shit wasn't in my head. I would give anything to have a life where I could just be a normal girl."

"I'm sorry. . ." Olivia replied.

"You will be, by the time we're finished with you dumb fuckers!" Harper finished as she glared down at the horrified kids.

"Get off your fat arses," Craig ordered, his own anger building. "I swear to God, we will train you to stay alive even if it kills you. Now, get up, before Harper kicks you again."

All four kids jumped back to their feet very quickly, indeed. Craig stepped forwards and he glared down at the sobbing Jessica, then over at Olivia.

"You, Olivia, you were shot - a flesh wound. Your sister was not so lucky - she received a bullet in her left shoulder and was stuck in a cast for a month," Craig said.

Both girls were very surprised to hear Craig talk about their wounds - nobody outside the family knew about them.

"We know about the home invasion which cost you two your parents, and Christopher, his sister, Charlene," Harper said more calmly. "Do you want to be able to fight back? Do want to be able to defend yourselves against something like that happening again?"

All four kids nodded solemnly.

"None of us can get back those who have died. But we can do good in their name. That is what *Fusion* and *Vengeance* are all about," Harper continued. "Do not pity us for what we are - I am not sorry that I have skills which I can use to help other people. I want to use my skills to keep you four alive."

"Sorry, Harper," Olivia said quietly as she wiped away her tears.

"Yeah, sorry, Harper," Jeremy added as Christopher and Jessica nodded.

"Don't call me, Harper. Call me, Polaris. Craig is Stripe. You, Olivia, you are Ajax. Jessica is Overrun. Christopher is Forager. Jeremy is Harrier. When we train, you will use those names. Get used to using them. Our identities are our most precious commodity - protect it with your life. Never use real names in public while masked, understand me. If anybody hears you use our real names during training, you will pay the price."

"Right, now you little fucks can start back at your exercises. I want thirty squat thrusts - now!" Craig yelled.

..._...

Alexandra had listened to the entire exchange and she was impressed by Harper and Craig.

They had not kept anything back. Nothing had been chocolate-coated from the newbies. It was straight out there: *Vengeance* was at war. Alexandra knew that things were bad - many saw her as just some woman who was married to a senior Royal Navy officer - and she knew that things were going to get a lot worse before they were going to

get better. Alexandra decided that hitting the four newbies with everything until they dropped was a good way to get them acclimatised to their new world in the quickest way possible. Hence, she vanished down into the basement and into the armoury. A few minutes later, she returned with eight pistols in a stout plastic crate. She headed through upstairs to the training spaces on the top floor where she found the four newbies practicing some Taekwondo.

"Polaris - see what the little shits can do with these," Alexandra said as she dumped the crate onto the nearest table.

Polaris smiled as she looked into the box.

"Aye, aye, Amphitrite!"

"Does everybody have a codename?" Jessica asked.

"Yes - Jasper is Sleuth and Lynn is Doc," Alexander replied before she left the room.

"Each of you come up and select a weapon," Craig directed as Harper selected four books from a broad selection on the bookshelves along one wall.

"Use these books to identify the weapon which you have selected," Harper directed. "You have ten minutes."

..._...

Harper and Craig left the room and they found Alexandra down in the kitchen with Amy.

"Were we too hard on them?" Craig asked.

"No, honey, you weren't," Alexandra told the thirteen-year-old.

"Well done, both of you. I will make sure that your sister, Harper, and your father, Craig, hear about your work today."

"We have no time for pussyfooting around," Amy acknowledged. "It is not their fault that they are caught up in this. But that does not mean that they can sit back and let everyone else protect them. I'm proud of you, Craig - and I'm certain Keira will be proud of you, too, Harper."

Craig cringed at his mother's praise but he grinned nonetheless as did Harper before they grabbed six bottles of chilled water from the fridge and headed back up the stairs.

..._...

Polaris and Stripe pushed open the door to find the four trainees feverishly flicking through pages of books and bickering between themselves.

"Speak!" Polaris ordered as if she were talking to a group of dogs.

Forager spoke first.

"I think mine is a Browning Hi-Power - nine-millimetre," Forager replied. "I saw it once in a movie."

"Well done, Forager," Harper replied with an encouraging nod and the boy smiled for the first time in over an hour. "Overrun?"

Jessica looked scared and she bit her lip.

"Glock 26 G - e - n - 4," Overrun offered.

"It's pronounced 'gen four' as in Generation Four," Polaris corrected.

"Any more?" Stripe asked none too gently.

"It was made in Austria. . ."

"Find out the calibre or you get punished," Stripe suggested before he turned to Harrier, leaving Overrun with tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Heckler and Koch P30SK," Harrier said slowly.

"Calibre?" Stripe prompted impatiently.

"Err . . . nine-millimetre."

"Good, Harrier - what about you, Ajax?"

Polaris looked at Ajax who appeared just as apprehensive as her sister There were tears running down her face.

"I . . . I don't know - I couldn't find it in the book. . ."

"You thick bitch!" Stripe growled. "Turn the fucking thing over!"

Olivia shook at the rebuke as she turned the pistol over.

"It's written on the fucking slide . . . dumb shit!" Stripe pointed out.

"Where did you get your information from?" Polaris demanded of Overrun.

"I read it off the gun."

"Well, why didn't you think to help your sister? You're all part of a bloody team, for fuck's sake - help each other out if they get stuck!" Polaris yelled causing more tears to erupt out of the older girl - then she turned on Ajax. "Take your finger away from the trigger."

Ajax did so.

"You never touch the trigger until you are ready to shoot. I know these are not loaded but you follow the rules at ALL TIMES!" the last two words were shouted by Polaris. "You mess about with a weapon and somebody can get hurt if you accidentally squeeze the trigger."

With that proclamation, there were three sharp reports as Stripe pulled the trigger, three times, on a Glock 19, firing off three blank rounds. All four kids jumped, Overrun screamed. Ajax just shook violently.

"Okay - enough," Polaris said calmly. "Place the weapons back in the crate, please . . . good. Now, each of you will drink this bottle of water - drink it slowly but I want each of you to drink every last drop."

Overrun looked dubiously at the full litre of chilled water as she wiped away her tears but she twisted off the cap and began to drink as did everybody else, including Polaris and Stripe.

Thetis

The two helicopters, *Scourge* and *Twilight*, had been turned around to face the exit.

Both aircraft were fully fuelled and ready to launch at a moment's notice. Flight helmets were in the aircraft and flight suits were laid out in the accommodation along with personal weapons. For the moment, there were no plans to use the aircraft, however, they were maintained at an advanced state of readiness. Keira and Trevor were busy checking over *Scourge* ensuring that the aircraft was ready for its next flight.

"This sucks!" Kaitlin complained as she ticked off another item on a seemingly endless checklist.

"It needs to be done, young lady," David pointed out as he dug through yet another crate of weapons. "Heckler & Koch G36C - twenty-four weapons."

"Twenty-four - got it!" Kaitlin replied.

"I have eighty-six, thirty-round magazines for the G36 - all empty," Naomi declared from beyond David in the back of one of the trucks.

"Eighty-six - got it! Bet Harper's having way more fun!"

"Tell me about it!" Naomi responded in agreement.

"Get on with it, Prowl!" David directed.

"Onto the massive crate of 5.56-millimetre ball ammunition!" Prowl growled.

Jasper and Eric

It had turned out to be a pleasant drive in the country.

There were not all that many approach roads into the area which made it easier for Eric to place wireless, solar-powered, detection devices with built-in, low-light cameras. All vehicles which passed

within a four-mile radius would have their registration plates recorded and their movements tracked within the fifty-square-mile area.

Lynn and Alya were installing similar devices at the same radius around Thetis.

"How do you think the kids are getting on," Eric asked conversationally.

"I would expect them to be suffering by now," Jasper commented. "I told Harper and Craig to kick the shit out of them - Trevor agreed. The four of them are in for a rude surprise. I'm sorry that we got them involved in all this but it is safer if they can defend themselves, otherwise, they are a liability to the rest of us.

"Very true, Jasper, but I hope Harper and Craig know their limits - from what I've seen, *Predators* sometimes get carried away," Eric pointed out.

"Alexandra is keeping a very close eye on them," Jasper admitted.

Safehouse VY

The six kids were sitting on the floor, finishing off their water.

"Look, guys," Harper offered. "We're not sorry for being hard on you - we have no time to be nice and take things slowly. But we are sorry for hurting our friends. During training, we'll be harsh - we need to be - but when we aren't training, like now, I hope that we can still be friends."

"I think I understand," Jessica replied. "I'm still your friend. I know you're being hard on us because you care. You scared me - that was the first time I'd heard a gunshot since I was shot."

"It was actually kind of cool," Christopher said with a grin. "The gunshots, I mean."

"Boys!" Olivia growled. "I'm sorry for messing up, Craig, Harper. I wasn't putting any effort in. I will in future, I promise. I felt humiliated but I think that was the point."

"I apologise for calling you a bitch," Craig said with a smile.

"Don't worry," Olivia replied. "I can handle it."

"She is a bitch!" Jessica whispered to Jeremy who laughed.

"Thanks, little sis!" Olivia said as she scowled at her sister but she laughed nonetheless.

..._...

Alexandra and Amy had listened to the exchange and they smiled.

Both had been a little worried about how the harsh treatment might land on the four new kids but so far, all appeared well and they were all still friends - at least for the moment.

"Right," Alexandra directed as she pushed open the door. "all six of you, go get yourselves cleaned up and we'll have lunch at twelve."

They all acknowledged the request and jumped up off the floor and headed for the bathroom.

"Girls, first!" Olivia directed.

"You do stink - so, good idea!" Christopher teased his step-sister.

Craig and Jeremy laughed.

"Idiots!" Harper growled as she pushed past the smirking boys into the bathroom, dragging Jessica with her.

As Olivia followed, she was surprised to see Harper stripping off her clothing before the door was even closed.

"What exactly is a *Predator*?" Olivia asked as Harper dived under the hot water and she began to wash herself. "You obviously have no modesty."

Harper laughed as she replied.

"They stripped off your identity - they removed your clothing, they shaved off your hair. The degradations and humiliations were constant. They trained us to kill, to maim, to torture, to win - no matter what the odds. Besides, I'm only nine; puberty is a ways off."

"Sounds like you had things bad," Jessica commented as she herself stripped off her clothing while her sister scowled.

"Jess - what are you doing?" Olivia demanded.

"Harper has a point - I have nothing to hide; like her, I have no boobs and no hair. What have I to be bothered about?"

"Well, I'll wait until you two have finished before I expose myself in such an outrageous fashion," Olivia advised the younger girls in an attempt at appearing older and more mature.

"She hasn't much to see - her boobs are barely more than bumps with knobs on and the hair between her legs is a little sparse."

Olivia's mouth dropped open as Harper and Jessica giggled before they both burst out laughing. The thirteen-year-old decided that she was *not* going to give the last word to her eleven-year-old sister. She quickly pulled off her T-shirt and sports bra and pushed down her shorts and knickers in one.

"You two happy, now?" Olivia growled as she stood naked in the bathroom while Harper and Jessica swapped places.

"Welcome to *Vengeance*, Olivia!" Harper grinned as she took in the blushing naked teenager.

..._...

The six kids eagerly joined Cameron, Natasha, Adrien, Marinette, Alexandra and Amy for bacon sandwiches and blackcurrant juice.

"So, Olivia - how did your morning go?" Natasha asked.

"Not well," Olivia replied, honestly. "It was exhausting and humiliating but I understand why Harper and Craig were hard on us."

"Do we get the afternoon off?" Jessica asked hopefully.

"No, honey," Cameron replied. "Now you've exercised, you can start your physical training after lunch."

Jeremy groaned loudly and his head hit the table. Christopher and his step-sisters looked horrified.

"You're kidding, right?" Jeremy asked.

"No, Jeremy - the only rest you're going to get is when you go to bed, tonight," Cameron explained.

"I can take it!" Olivia proclaimed.

Olivia missed the evil grin on Harper's face but Jessica did not and she grimaced.

Forty-eight minutes later

Olivia was in tears again.

She wasn't the only one - Jessica and Jeremy were in the same state as Harper and Craig put all four kids down onto the mat in quick succession. The kids were well outside their comfort zones and they were not being given the chance to rest or even a chance to learn what they were doing wrong.

"Stop it!" Olivia screamed at Harper. "Leave me *alone*!"

The teenager was screaming with tears streaming down her face. Harper was having none of it as she slapped the girl around the face with one hand and then kicked her back down onto the mat. Jessica tried to attack Harper and protect her sister but she screamed as a fist struck her in the side and she went down to one knee. Jeremy struck at Craig who was easily holding off both boys and grinning at their misfortune.

Harper was cutting it fine as she laid into the two girls again and again until they were both barely able to cry, let alone move. Then Harper and Craig stood back for a moment before helping each of the exhausted kids back to their feet. Olivia was very upset and she was breathing heavily as she slapped Harper across the face very hard. Harper closed her eyes for a few moments as she absorbed the blow

which brought tears to her eyes and she knew that she would have a whopping great bruise on her left cheek come the morning.

"Did that make you feel better?" Harper asked without humour.

"No."

"Why are you *doing* this?" Christopher asked.

"Do we really have to go through *that* again?" Craig sneered rhetorically.

That evening

Jasper was not surprised when he returned to the house to find four very unhappy youngsters.

Olivia actually ran forwards in a fit of tears and the girl wrapped her arms around his waist. Lynn just shrugged as she gave her husband a kiss. They exchanged looks but said nothing.

"You stink, Olivia - go get a shower before dinner, please," Jasper said.

Olivia scowled as she released her hold on Jasper and she stomped out of the room and up the stairs. She was followed by an angry Jessica. Naomi and Kaitlin exchanged glances with their counterparts, Harper and Craig.

"Somebody got you good," Kaitlin commented as she studied Harper's cheek.

"It was a bad day for Olivia," Harper commented dryly.

"They have to learn," Naomi stated with little sympathy.

"Go easy on them, tonight, please," Lynn directed.

"We will," Kaitlin replied. "We're not total bitches!"

"Yeah, right!" Craig muttered as he hurried off after Christopher.

"Come on, Jeremy."

Jeremy released the hold he had around his father's waist and he followed Craig up the stairs.

..._...

That evening, dinner was a difficult affair as the newbies scowled at their tormentors and at the *Predators* in general.

"Enough of the animosity!" Natasha said. "I know your four had a bad day, but so did the rest. You think Harper and Craig *enjoyed* hurting you?"

Olivia scowled at Harper.

"Olivia, I know I was harsh on you but my experiences have told me that it will keep you alive. I hope to God that you don't find yourself in a position where your life is put at risk but we have no idea how badly things are going to go," Harper said.

"It's not fair - none of us asked for any of this!" Olivia exclaimed as she stood up. "We never asked for our parents to be murdered. We never asked to be beaten up by weird, fucked up, little girls."

"Olivia!" Lynn growled.

"No - I've had enough of you psychos!" Olivia turned and she stormed off up the stairs.

Harper made to go after the girl but Lynn stopped her.

"Let her go, Harper."

..._...

Harper went for a walk after dinner. She felt more than a little guilty for how she had treated the newbies. She had tried to ease her guilt with the argument that she was keeping them alive but that was not working - not anymore. When she had been a full-on *Predator*, her mindset would have buried the emotion, but not now that she was trying to live a normal life. She had learnt to feel guilt. She had learnt to feel bad about hurting people.

Life sucked!

"Harper?"

Harper spun around to find Olivia a few feet away, walking towards her.

"Hi, Olivia."

"Look, Harper - I'm sorry about what I said and I'm sorry for slapping you."

Harper subconsciously rubbed her left cheek which was still sore.

"You got a good right hook, there, Olivia!" Harper quipped and the older girl grinned.

"I want to learn. I promise I won't behave like a spoilt little brat."

"I know this is hard, Olivia, but if a brat like me can survive it, then I'm certain you can - Jessica too. I won't go easy on any of you - that wouldn't be right - so I apologise in advance for the suffering that we are going to cause you."

"Bring it on, Harper - do your worst!" Olivia said as she gave the girl a hug.

"Oh, I will, I will."