

Wednesday, June 1st, 2016

West Moors, Dorset

The nine-year-old girl before me was no longer the little girl that I had last known, eighteen months or so before.

She looked the same, only she was older and a little bit taller, but something about her manner was different. Her eyes were cold and dark. They were not the usual eyes of a girl her age, eyes that should have been full of joy and happiness.

To be blunt, she scared me.

Two weeks previously

***Royal Navy Type 23 Frigate
HMS Sutherland***

Somewhere in the Mediterranean Sea

Lieutenant Keira Sharp grimaced as her name was announced over the ship-wide tannoy.

She was not overly happy with her ordered destination either. However, she hurried out of the Wardroom on 01 deck into the corridor. She turned right in the direction of the bow and went up a broad ladder. She turned immediately right and then knocked on the doorframe of the first cabin.

“Come!”

Keira pushed aside the curtain and entered her commanding officer’s at sea cabin. Commander Jacobs was seated at his desk and he looked up as one of his junior officers entered.

“Lieutenant Sharp reporting as ordered, Sir!”

“At ease, Lieutenant. Take a pew.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Keira sat down at a chair to the left of the desk. As a rule, she tried to avoid direct contact with her commanding officer and she wondered what she might have done to have been summoned out of the blue. Commander Jacobs smiled to put her at ease.

“A signal arrived today. One part – eyes only for yourself, plus another for me. I am directed to place you on indefinite compassionate leave. As of this minute, you are relieved of your duties. You will be flown ashore to the nearest airport this afternoon.”

“Sir?”

“I have no idea why – you’ll have to read your own part of the signal in the privacy of your cabin.”

Commander Jacobs rose to his feet and Lieutenant Sharp followed suit. The Commander handed over a brown envelope, plus a small sheet of paper which the Lieutenant signed to acknowledge receipt of the signal.

“Your time aboard has been exemplary, Lieutenant. You will be missed, but you are welcome back aboard anytime. Good luck, Keira.”

"Thank you, Sir."

Keira braced up and she nodded to her, now former, commanding officer. She left the cabin and in a daze she dropped down a deck and headed aft a short way before she found herself in her small cabin on the port side of the frigate.

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"Hi, Keira. All good?"

Keira turned to her cabin mate who lay in her bunk reading one of her usual Tom Clancy novels.

"I don't know, Sarah."

Sarah looked on as Keira sat down in her chair and she ripped open the brown envelope. She withdrew a folded piece of A4 paper and began to read. Sarah was curious as to what had caused her friend to be summoned to the Captain's lair. Her curiosity turned to worry as her friend put a hand to her mouth and she began to sob. After a minute, Keira looked up at Sarah, a smile on her face amidst the tears.

"She's alive..."

Sarah knew that Keira had lost both of her parents, and her younger sister, about eighteen months previously. They had gone missing and nobody knew what had happened to them. They had been declared dead only a month since.

"Who?"

"Harper – my sister . . . she's alive!"

Thursday, June 2nd

Leeds, West Yorkshire

Vengeance was on a field trip.

Well, some of us were. Eric and I had taken the Overfinch down to Yorkshire at the bequest of MI5. The girls were staying in Scotland to hold down the fort, so to speak. Our directions led us down a street of terraced houses that looked in need of some general care. Some were boarded up with steel shutters and had obviously been empty for a while. We pulled up beside a Ford Mondeo which had two men leaning on the bonnet. As we emerged from the Overfinch, the men approached us and we each exchanged IDs. They were both 'five'.

"So, what is this about?" Eric asked.

"We seem to have a CIA Safehouse that has been compromised," one of the two men explained as we walked towards a building with a smashed – actually, demolished – window on the first floor. "About a week ago, the fire brigade responded to a call of explosions at this address. They found this..."

Several photos were passed over. Eric grimaced at the full-colour glossy images of death.

“That guy – one, maybe two bullets in the head. The next guy...” The man pointed up the staircase to where there was a ragged hole and the adjacent walls were covered in a gooey substance that had dried. “Claymore, in the step. Needless to say, he didn’t fill the body bag.”

“Both men were CIA Agents on the Diplomatic List. Grosvenor Square has not been able to explain the presence of either the Safehouse, nor the dead men,” the other man went on.

We stepped over the large hole which had been bridged with an aluminium framework. At the top of the stairs, we walked into the room with the demolished window frame. I saw the obvious child’s accoutrements and looked at Eric. He nodded.

“Urban Predator.”

“That’s what we thought, Mr King.”

“Maybe they came to terminate a kid and the kid fought back?” Eric mused.

“Sure looks that way.”

That same time

Edinburgh Airport

During my last phone call with Mum, she had been rather vague concerning who might be picking me up from the airport.

I was more than a little surprised to see Dad, but not only Dad, my younger sister too. She *never* came to pick me up from the airport! Cass came bounding up and she grabbed me in a surprisingly strong bear hug. Cass was grinning fit to burst – she had a secret and she was desperate to tell me that secret. I knew my sister’s expressions and mannerisms only too well.

“What are you being so loving for, Cass?”

“Is it a crime to love your big sister?” Cass pouted.

I laughed.

“No. Good to see you, Daddy.”

I gave my father a big hug and then gave him a questioning look. I saw his expression turn serious.

“We need to talk; all three of us, *before* we get home. There is a house, a little way from here, where we can talk in private.”

Talk about cloak and dagger!

Vengeance Command Centre

“Sorry, Sarah, the traffic was heavier than I thought,” Richard Perrin apologised to his eldest daughter.

“Should I be worried, Dad?” Sarah Perrin enquired as she climbed out of her father’s Audi and looked up at the stone building. “What is this place?”

“Worried? No, you are perfectly safe, believe me,” her father replied with a sly grin at his youngest daughter.

“You didn’t answer my question?”

“It’s the Command Centre.”

“Command Centre? For what?”

“Come in and sit down.”

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Ten minutes later, the three Perrins were seated in the comfortable living room. Richard was in a chair while his two daughters sat on a large couch. Sarah still wore an expression of confusion. Cassie smiled at her sister, and she tried very hard to control her excitement.

“Sarah. A lot has happened over the past six months or so. For your own safety, you have been kept in the dark. December 29th, last year, it was. On the flight deck of my own command. We were alongside in Antigua and we had a party on the go. A good friend in the United States Navy introduced me to a young woman, her husband, and two of her friends. I had been read in on an organisation that operated out of the American city of Chicago, only the month before.”

“Chicago? You mean those vigilantes?”

“Yes, I do. That woman at my cocktail party . . . she was Hit Girl. She was there with Kick-Ass and her two lieutenants, Shadow and Jackal. The following day was normal and we went back to sea. Then, later that evening, we received a ship-to-ship from the *USS Churchill* requesting some information concerning traffic out of Guadeloupe. Later on, I found out that some dickhead had kidnapped a little seven-year-old girl off the streets. Only, he made a *slight* miscalculation – he took the daughter of Hit Girl...”

“Not an act that would be seen as conducive to a long and healthy life,” Sarah mused as she struggled to wrap her head around what her father was saying.

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“Funny you should say that...” Commander Perrin chuckled. “New Year’s Eve. I received a directive from their Lordships. With that directive under my belt, I put my Royal’s ashore by boat drop and closed the coast. In the early hours, we launched our Wildcats to escort a pair of Oceanhawks from the *Churchill*. A battle was raging on an island in the BVI. We covered the extraction as best we could. One of our Wildcats achieved an air-to-air kill against another helicopter.”

“I heard rumours about that, but I saw them as bullshit,” Sarah commented as her father continued.

“Hit Girl rescued her daughter and they all escaped. The island was a scene of carnage – nobody survived.”

“I should think not,” Sarah replied coldly and her father chuckled. He was pleased with his daughter’s comment.

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“We thought that was that, but a few hours later I was on the bridge...”

“Dozing?”

“Dozing. Then a Mayday came in. I recognised the voice directly and ordered an immediate change of course and an increase to 28 knots. I also scrambled the ready Wildcat. Somebody was not happy with events and they had sent some go-fasts after Hit Girl’s yacht – the *Atlantic Storm*, by the way. The idiots opened fire on the Wildcat and the pilot went defensive. We closed to four-five range and opened fire. I understand that poor Cassie – she was aboard since Antigua and she was at her action station in the wardroom – I understand that she jumped a mile when the four-five went off!”

“Yeah, it was really funny, Dad!” Cassie growled good-naturedly.

“Poor, Cass – you always scared easily,” Sarah laughed with a nudge in her sister’s side.

“She *did*... Well, after seeing off the go-fasts, we escorted Atlantic Storm to a secret island and while she received hull checks and some repairs, we all sat down to dinner. I introduced your sister to the world of the vigilante . . . and to Hit Girl.”

“You’ve seen Hit Girl?” Sarah gasped in surprise as she turned to her sister. “Without her mask?”

“I have – most of the rest of her team, too.”

“Holy Mother of God!”

“There’s more,” Sarah’s father continued. “A whole lot more...”

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“I think it might be easier just to show her,” Cassie suggested to her father who nodded.

Sarah followed her sister as she headed out of the living room and down to the lower ground floor. She turned right at the base of the staircase and then left towards a wall with three doorways. One, to the left, was marked, ‘WC’. The next was covered in steel and there was a code lock to the left of it. The third door was not covered in steel, but still had a code lock to the left of it.

Cassie headed for the third door and punched in an eight-digit code which released the door. She waved her elder sister through. Sarah was amazed to see a very well equipped gym, but she was then stunned to see what was arranged along one wall. Three glass-fronted lockers were arranged side-by-side. In each was a set of battle armour. Cassie stopped in front of the locker, third from the left. Above each locker was a name: ‘Crimson’, ‘Drift’, and ‘Nemesis’.

“Sarah, I am Nemesis. I am a vigilante. I was trained by Hit Girl and I fight with an organisation called *Vengeance*.”

That night

Blairhoyle

I was awoken by an incessant buzzing.

As my eyes came open, I locked onto the clock beside me bed. It was a little after one in the morning – I groaned as I reached for my buzzing mobile.

“Hello?”

“This is Sergeant Barlow from Police Scotland. Is this Miss Perrin?”

“It is...”

"I have a young lady with me who says that she belongs to you – Kaitlin, she says her name is."

I bolted out of bed and ran down to the girl's bedroom. I pushed the door open and turned on the overhead light. Other than a bleary eyed and annoyed looking Naomi, the room was empty.

"Where is she?" I asked the Police Officer.

"A couple of miles east of you, Miss."

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Fifteen minutes later, I pulled up beside a BMW Police car a 'couple of miles' along the A873. The BMW saloon appeared to have suffered some damage. Two Police Officers in fluorescent jackets stood beside their motor and one had hold of Kaitlin. Her hands were by her sides and she was crying. I climbed out of my Audi and I gave the eight-year-old a withering look. Kaitlin flinched slightly at my expression. As I came close to the BMW, I noticed that every single piece of glazing had been smashed and that each of the four tyres were very flat.

"Could I have a word in private, Sergeant?" I asked and he nodded. We headed back over to the Audi and I pulled out my M15 identification. "We need to keep this low key, Sergeant."

"I see. I suppose I could release the girl into your custody, but there *will* be fallout from this."

"I understand. You know where to find us."

With that, I returned to Kaitlin and without a word and I pointed to the Audi. The young girl hung her head and climbed into the backseat. Nobody spoke on the short drive back to the house.

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Everybody was awake and in the kitchen. Kaitlin looked very embarrassed as she saw all the eyes staring at her. Naomi glared at her younger cousin and then headed upstairs back to bed without a word.

"I'm sorry," Kaitlin offered weakly.

"Bed, young lady," Richard Perrin ordered. "Oh, Kaitlin, please stay in bed until you are called in the morning."

"Yes, sir."

Wednesday, June 3rd

Beaconhurst School

"You are such an idiot!"

"Leave me alone."

"You keep this up and they aren't going to want to keep us any longer."

Kaitlin grabbed her cousin's arm and pulled her over to one side of the corridor.

"I'm sorry. Everything is just too normal; I needed a release."

"I know it's difficult, Kaitlin. We are really lucky to have found people who love us for who we are. They know what we were, but that is all in the past and we need to try and get on with our lives. Look, Kaitlin – talk to me next time you feel an urge to destroy something, okay?"

Kaitlin grinned for the first time that day and she nodded.

"Let's get to class before we're late."

South Letham

"She did what?"

Cameron was genuinely shocked by the revelation of Kaitlin's nocturnal activities. Eric was stunned to say the least. Both had just returned from their sojourn to Yorkshire.

"The car was wrecked – glass, tyres, the lot," I confirmed.

"Way to go, girl!" Natasha laughed.

"Not funny – there's going to be trouble over this," I warned.

"Cass is right, that was a step too far for the girl," Eric replied. "Obviously she's having trouble adjusting to a normal life – can't really blame her there."

"No," Natasha agreed.

"What can we do about it?" Cameron asked.

"Bring them into *Vengeance*?" Eric mused.

"No way!" I said sharply. "They are way too young for that."

"Anne-Marie and Danny cope," Natasha commented.

"I have an idea," I muttered. "I think I might be able to give them something to do without revealing *Vengeance* to them."

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"Changing the subject slightly," Cameron said. "How did your sister take finding out that her little sister is a cold-blooded killer?"

"Cameron!" Natasha growled.

"She's still struggling to get her head around it. She's gone into Falkirk with Mum and Dad."

"It'll work out, Cass," Eric said soothingly.

"Thanks."

That afternoon

Blairhoyle

"Have you both done your homework?"

"Yes, Cassie," both girls replied.

"Now. About last night."

Kaitlin's smile vanished in a flash and she looked down at her white ankle socks.

"Naomi. You didn't notice anything about your cousin? Anything to show that she was about to go on a violent and destructive rampage?"

"Me?" Naomi responded in surprise. "I'm her cousin, not her keeper. I am not responsible for what she does."

"Yes, you are. You know her a lot better than the rest of us do."

"That isn't fair," Naomi retorted and I noticed the anger building. Kaitlin looked up a little confused as to why her cousin was getting into trouble and not her – after all, it had been *her* who had slashed four tyres and smashed all the glass on that BMW.

"I am telling you that from this point on, you are responsible for that little girl."

"No way!"

"You will do what you are told, young lady," I replied firmly and knew that I had hit the nail on the head, or was that the button on the detonator?

"Uh, oh!" Kaitlin muttered as she took a step back, away from her cousin.

"You do *not* tell me what to do – you are *not* my mother!" Naomi growled. There was anger in the tone and I knew that the *Predator* inside was coming out for the very first time since her arrival in Scotland.

We had seen Kaitlin's anger manifest in the attack on the police car. Naomi was something new and we had no idea how she might react when pushed. I had felt that it might be safer to set her off in a more controlled environment.

I had no idea what I had just walked into.

The three of us had just returned from Falkirk and I had heard raised voices. On venturing into the morning room, I had found Cassie and the two girls. Cassie and Naomi were shouting at each other. I had met the two girls only the night before. They appeared very sweet but then the younger one had got up to something during the night – something about vandalism. Dad had been angry but he had just sent the young girl to bed. I had recognised the tone of his voice and I knew that he was just biding his time.

Cassie reached out to touch the girl, but Naomi blocked her. By 'blocked', I meant a professional Martial Arts block – not something which you might expect from a nine-year-old girl in Primary 6. Cassie grimaced and I saw her smirk. The next thing Naomi knew, she lay on her back, on the floor. Her face was a maze of anger, humiliation, and shock. I was shocked too – I knew what my sister was, but wow!

"Yeah, I can do that shit, too," Cassie said as she glared down at the fallen girl.

“Don’t you *dare* hurt my cousin!” Kaitlin called out as she joined in the fray. She kicked out in what appeared to be a reflex action and caught Cassie in her left kidney. So much for a sweet little girl in Primary 5.

Cassie screamed out in pain and she fell to the ground. I recognised her expression – she was faking it! Kaitlin stopped her attack instantly and she sank to the floor beside my sister.

“Cassie!” Kaitlin almost screamed. “I am so sorry.”