

Sunday, June 5th, 2016

Bournemouth, Dorset

It was getting late, so I decided that we should head home.

It had been a good day and the first proper afternoon spent with my little sister doing something fun together. The two weeks since I had acquired custody of my eight-year-old sister had been difficult, to say the least, as I had reacquainted myself with her. I had been more than stunned on the second day when I had seen her in the bath. There had been a very visible mark on her backside and when I had enquired about it, she had simply called it 'punishment' and then left it at that.

Very little had been explained to me about *where* she had been for eighteen months and *what* had happened to her during that time. I decided that it would be best for the both of us if I just concentrated on the present and not on the past. On a positive note, Harper was smiling which in itself had been rare.

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I had not fully realised how badly damaged she was until we met a group of young men coming out of a side street. They were slightly inebriated as could be reasonably expected on a Saturday night. I had tried to steer Harper and myself around them, but the leader had decided to behave like a typical male chauvinist as he leered at my chest.

"Nice titties, girl. Fancy a tit fuck?"

"Go fuck yourself!" I replied forcefully.

"Ooh, playing hard to get – I like that in a woman. I want to..."

The man never got a chance to finish his comment as I felt Harper pull her hand from mine and then without a moment's hesitation, the nine-year-old span around and kicked the drunk in the chest. It was a hard strike; the man stumbled and he sank to his knees. As he sank to the concrete paving slabs which formed the pavement beneath our feet, Harper rammed her right elbow into the drunk's face and I saw a spray of blood as the guy's nose was smashed.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" I demanded of my sister.

She just looked up at me . . . no emotion . . . she just shrugged. The other men made for their fallen leader. I grabbed hold of Harper and I dragged her down another street and back towards where the car was parked. A few corners later, I seized hold of my sister and I thrust her up against a wall.

"What was that about?" I demanded. "You could have hurt that man."

"He deserved it. He said bad things to you."

I smiled briefly.

"Thank you, Harper, but I *can* look after myself."

"Sorry. I'm a bad person. They filled my brain with bad stuff. It's automatic. I just react. Can we go home now?"

"Of course, honey."

I decided that there was only one option open to me – I had to talk to somebody.

Almost the minute that we got home, I picked up the phone and dialled a certain mobile number from memory. I prayed that she would be there and that she would be able to listen to my problems like she usually did. The phone was answered by a very familiar voice.

“Sarah?”

“Keira! How are you doing?”

“I need help . . . you’re the only person that I can turn to.”

“What’s wrong?”

Sarah’s voice sounded guarded.

“It’s Harper – there’s something about her . . . I don’t know what. I just need somebody to talk to.”

“Get a flight up to Bonnie Scotland. I’ll meet you both at the airport. Just give me a time.”

“Thank you, Sarah.”

Blairhoyle

Sarah Perrin replaced her mobile phone into the back pocket of her jeans and thought for a few minutes.

Her mind was made up. She sought out her little sister. Cassie was helping herself to a large glass of ice-cold milk from the fridge – she always had been a milk-bandit! I motioned her to the table and we both sat down.

“Cass, I’m really struggling with this new you. You used to be scared of your own shadow . . . now you’ve killed people.”

“Only those who deserved it, sis.”

“There’s something about those two little girls. You remember Keira Sharp, my cabinmate at Dartmouth?”

“Yes, of course – she was nice.”

“Eighteen months ago, her little sister went missing and both of her parents were killed. Keira was at sea at the time. Then, just a little over two weeks ago, her little sister was reported as being alive and she was packed off on compassionate leave to look after her. Her sister appearing from nowhere kind of matches up with two more little girls that seemed to come from nowhere.”

Cassie did her utmost to keep a poker face but Sarah had seen Cassie growing up and therefore, she knew every twitch and expression.

“Okay. Beginning of May – it was a Thursday night, curry night. We altered course to intercept a vessel after reports of explosions seen by the bridge watchkeepers. The vessel in question was darkened and she glowed like a son-of-a-bitch on infrared like she had had a bad fire onboard. I wasn’t on the bridge; I was just coming off watch in the Ops Room when I heard the radio chatter and some weird code challenges that our Skipper accepted. The other vessel’s callsign was ‘Oscar Victor’ – ring a bell, dear sister?”

“What about us escorting said vessel into Gib and then two nights later, our Merlin is scrambled for a pickup on The Rock. Keira was the co-pilot on that one. She was sworn to absolute secrecy over the whole thing! There’s something going on behind the scenes here. Those two little girls just ain’t normal and Keira is coming up with her sister to get some help as Harper is not normal either...”

“Okay, Sarah, we need to talk,” her father interrupted as he came into the room. “Please calm down and we will do our best to explain everything.”

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“It was called *Urban Predator*...” Cassie began.

Cassie talked for over an hour with additional input from her father. Sarah was speechless and way beyond just stunned. It was a short while before she could speak again once the expose was completed.

“Those two little girls?”

“Yes, they are both killers in every sense of the word. I would expect that your friend’s sister, Harper, is just the same.”

Sarah thought for a moment before continuing.

“You were both at Gibraltar?”

“I swore your Captain to secrecy over my being aboard *Ocean Vigilante*. It was fate that it was Sutherland which intercepted us.”

The following afternoon

Monday, June 6th

Edinburgh Airport

As the two sisters stepped out of the British Airways Embraer 190 jet onto the mobile steps, they had no idea just how much their lives were about to change.

After a lengthy walk, they were met at Arrivals by Sarah. Keira and Sarah hugged. Sarah had never actually met Harper before, so she crouched down to say hello. Harper smiled just like any other shy little girl but Sarah could see something in her eyes. The same darkness was there; the same darkness as was visible in the eyes of not just Naomi and Kaitlin, but to a lesser extent in her own sister’s eyes.

They were all killers.

Ninety minutes later

Blairhoyle

Just to be on the safe side, I had the two girls seated and I sat between them, a hand securely on each arm.

Sarah came in with another woman. The woman had shoulder-length, dark brown hair. She smiled at me and nodded.

“Cass. I’m sure you remember Kiera Sharp and this is her sister...”

Sarah was cut off by a not so friendly growl from Naomi.

“Brown!”

“Ward!” Harper breathed in an equally unfriendly way.

The two girls obviously knew each other and they appeared to have had a none too friendly history.

“You two know each other?” Keira asked, very surprised.

“We were bitter rivals,” Harper explained coolly.

“But that was in the past, Brown.”

“I go by my real name, now: Sharp,” Harper corrected Naomi who had stood up.

“Sorry, Harper. Let’s leave the past in the past, shall we. We *Predators* need to stick together – for mutual support, if nothing else.”

Harper smiled as she stepped forwards and the young girl held out her right hand.

“Friends?”

“Friends,” Naomi confirmed as she gave her new friend a big hug. “You remember Kaitlin?”

Harper released Naomi and she looked down at the eight-year-old.

“Oh, yeah. I remember Kaitlin. She destroyed anything yet?”

“Funny you should ask,” Naomi laughed. “She wrecked a Police BMW the other night.”

“It was an accident!” Kaitlin growled.

“Kaitlin’s destroyed something before?” I asked.

Naomi looked down at her cousin. Kaitlin nodded and she looked really unhappy as Naomi began with an explanation.

“A few months back, Kaitlin was having a bad week. By the Thursday, she had had enough. However, during a weapons class, two Phase 2 girls entered the classroom. They seized Kaitlin and they dragged her out of the classroom and down to the tank room.”

“They stripped me down to my knickers and then they dunked me headfirst into the freezing cold water,” Kaitlin said quietly before going silent and her cousin continued the story.

“Well, Kaitlin snapped. Somehow, a short while before our evening meal, Kaitlin had acquired a live hand grenade. She pulled the pin and dropped it into the tank of water – then she legged it. The tank was destroyed and the water caused major damage to the electrics in that part of the building.”

“Wow!” I commented as Naomi frowned. Harper’s expression turned dark as she took up the story.

“They came for Kaitlin during dinner. Two female instructors. One grabbed her off the bench and threw her down onto the table, on top of her food. They both wrenched down her joggers and her knickers. Then they took the strap to her – sixteen times.”

There was total silence. Harper looked pained.

"She screamed so much that she had trouble breathing. When they finished, they stripped off all her clothes, then they just dumped her on the floor and they left her screaming and sobbing with the pain."

"They did it as a warning to us all," Naomi added darkly.

"Naomi and another girl helped the naked Kaitlin to her bed in the dormitory on the first floor. Kaitlin screamed for over an hour before she finally succumbed and fell asleep. I'd seen a lot of bad stuff during my training, but for such a young girl to be beaten like that . . . I can never block out that sight from my mind – her backside was purple and there was some blood too. Everybody was curious and there must have been dozens of kids – even some boys snuck in – checking out her wounds. I'm really sorry about what happened to you, Kaitlin, and I'm glad you've recovered."

"I never knew that the whole world checked out my arse while I was sleeping," the slightly embarrassed Kaitlin commented. "Thanks, Harper. You my friend too?"

"Of course."

"Can somebody, *please*, tell me what the bloody hell is going on?"

Keira was struggling to understand what her own sister was saying, let alone what the other two girls were coming out with. Sarah came over to her friend.

"I only found out last night. I think you need to sit down, Sarah."

Sarah did so and Cassie motioned the three girls to sit down quietly. They each sat down on the floor in a tight group.

"It was called *Urban Predator*..." Cassie began.

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After the first ten minutes, Harper climbed up off the floor and cuddled in with her sister. A few minutes later, the two cousins did the same and sat close to Cassie. Everything was laid out. The plan behind *Urban Predator* and what it was intended to become. How the children were recruited and how they were brainwashed. An insight into the training methods. Then came the failures of *Urban Predator* and ultimately, it's total destruction. Certain details were skipped, however, such as Cassie's involvement.

"I knew that Harper had been through something bad . . . I'd seen the marks on her body. But . . . Harper, you received the strap too?"

Harper nodded grimly.

"You poor, poor girl."

While Alexandra Perrin provided a much-needed distraction with cake and fizzy drinks for the girls, Sarah, Cassie, and Keira went for a walk in the capacious grounds of the old house.

“What do I do now, Sarah?” Keira asked. “Do I give up my commission? I need to look after Harper . . . only, I don’t know if I can cope with her alone with what she is now.”

“Keira – you don’t need to do this alone. Harper will need a lot of support, but she also needs some stability. Come and live in Scotland. We can find you a place to live and we can find you a job,” Cassie suggested.

“It means giving up what I love. I love the sea. I love being there to help people who cannot help themselves. I love to fly.”

Sarah smiled at her sister.

“I think I might have some ideas about all that,” Cassie commented.

That night

“Girls!”

There was a lot of rowdy behaviour in the bathroom as the three friends got themselves washed prior to bed. Despite their early behaviour, the three girls were all now giggling and laughing like they had been friends forever. By the time Cassie had appeared to see if the girls were in bed, the scene was total chaos.

Harper was only wearing her pyjama bottoms and was chewing on her toothbrush while the nighty-clad Kaitlin had just thrown a cup of cold water over the older girl and was caught with the empty cup in hand. The eight-year-old grinned up at Cassie who frowned. The similarly nighty-clad Naomi was in the act of tipping another cup of water over her cousin but very quickly thought better of it as Cassie hove into view.

“Bed!”

The three girls giggled and scampered out of the bathroom. Harper pulled on her pyjama top after drying herself off with a towel. She had chosen to share Naomi’s bed for the night and she scrambled under the duvet after unceremoniously dumping the towel on the floor beside the various discarded piles of clothing. No attempt had been made to keep the dirty clothes even remotely together. Cassie recognised Kaitlin’s top by one window, her trousers and knickers by another, and her socks several feet away, over by the bathroom door. Naomi’s and Harper’s were similarly scattered to every point of the compass.

“Didn’t they teach you *Predators* how to keep things tidy?” Cassie asked in exasperation as she gathered up three sets of everything.

“Yeah,” Naomi replied.

“Only we aren’t *Predators* anymore,” Harper added.

“Couldn’t you have given up that foul-mouthed skill of swearing and kept the skill of keeping things tidy?”

“Probably,” Harper mused.

“Sorry,” Kaitlin said with a big smile.

“I’ve not forgotten about that glass of water...”

"Oh," Kaitlin muttered as Harper and Naomi laughed.

Downstairs

"I won't waste my breath and ask if they were asleep," Richard Perrin chuckled.

"Far from it," Cassie advised her father with a grin. "I got there just in time to prevent a naval battle in the bathroom."

Sarah grinned at Cassie. She and her younger sister used to enjoy water fights when they were younger much to their parents' chagrin.

"Harper?" Keira ventured.

"No, Kaitlin; with backup from Naomi. Harper was the opposing side by the looks of things."

Richard laughed deeply. It brought back fond memories of his own daughters as they grew up all too fast. Both he and his wife were very happy to have young children in the house again – even if they were children with worrying abilities.

"Keira," Richard announced. "Please look on Blairhoyle as your home until we can find you somewhere more permanent to live. I'll speak with a friend in Whitehall and arrange for your commission to be transferred. You will not need to give up what you have obviously fought very much for."

"I see no benefit with you remaining down south, in Dorset, alone," Alexandra said. "Please stay, for as long, as you wish. Feel free to go back so sort out your affairs. We can look after young Harper – she seems to have settled in very quickly with her former peers."

"Thank you," Keira said slowly. "Thank you, all of you."

The following morning – early!

Tuesday, June 7th

"Girls!"

I growled the word into my pillow after glaring at the clock beside my bed.

It was barely 6am and the three girls were up and about. Considering that Cassie's bedroom was a considerable distance from the girl's bedroom, it also indicated that they were *not* in their bedroom either. Cassie soon found out where the three girls were as she heard loud whispering from outside her door. Something was being planned...

Cassie, though, was no stranger to rowdy behaviour, at least not recently.

"You ready?" Naomi asked her two compatriots.

"You have remembered that Cassie can defend herself, have you?" Kaitlin reminded her cousin.

"She'll still be asleep," Naomi countered.

"I suppose."

"Well, are we going to attack?" Harper demanded with one hand on the door handle.

Keira bolted awake as she heard three screams in rapid succession.

They were the screams of young girls. Harper! She bolted out of her bed and ran out onto the landing. Instead of screams, she heard giggling. She turned left and followed the sound. There, after she passed through a small archway, on the right she looked inside Cassie's bedroom. There, she saw Cassie standing a few feet inside the room and at her feet three girls lying on the floor. They were giggling despite some obvious pain.

"They tried to attack me, this morning. Only, their attack was not all that stealthy," Cassie explained with a grin.

"She ambushed us," Harper groaned as she rubbed her slightly bruised side.

"We thought she'd be asleep, not waiting around a corner to slip us over and onto the floor!" Naomi explained.

"I warned you both, but neither of you listened to me."

"Oh, shut up, Kaitlin!" Naomi growled.

Forty minutes later

Downstairs

"All had a good morning?" Alexandra asked cheerfully.

"Yes, thanks, Mum," Cassie responded just as cheerfully.

"Girls?"

"Could have gone better," Harper replied.

"Oh, yeah!" Kaitlin added.

"Not exactly the best laid plans of the year," Naomi answered with a grin at her fellow conspirators.