

Author's Note: This chapter follows on from **Chapter 354: London Anniversary** of my other story: **Forsaken**.

The following morning

Thursday, November 3rd

London, England

The look on Stephanie's face as they all met up in Lambeth Palace Gardens that morning was priceless.

Keira could see the extra spring in Mindy's step and the redness of her cheeks. She could also see the happiness and satisfaction in Dave's expression. Keira had noticed that Stephanie did not approve of her parents' sex life. Like most youngsters, though, Stephanie thought that parents were not allowed intimate relations.

"It's disgusting, that's what it is," Stephanie announced as she looked Dave and Mindy up and down from head to toe.

"Good morning to you, my snapping viper," Dave chuckled.

"Happy Birthday, Mindy," Keira offered.

"Yeah, Happy Birthday, Mum," Stephanie added as she hugged Mindy and then Dave.

"You look slightly worn out," Keira commented.

"Three things have penetrated my body, but while bullets and knives have never put me down. . ."

"Do not finish that sentence if you value your life!" Stephanie directed as she glared up at the smirking Mindy.

Keira laughed - she knew Mindy was doing it on purpose, just to annoy Stephanie.

"Thanks for looking after her - any problems?" Mindy asked.

"Perfect little angel," Keira replied. "Bit out of character for a *Predator*."

"Stephanie's mellowing in her senior years," Dave chuckled as his ten-year-old daughter held his left hand with her right.

"I'm off to go see Harper. You three enjoy your day - and thanks."

"Stay firm, Keira," Mindy said as she gave her friend a hug.

"You have fun?" Dave asked Stephanie.

"It was good - we got Chinese and some popcorn, then we watched a couple of movies. Where we off to?"

"To see another crazy *Predator*," Dave advised.

St Thomas' Hospital

The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

Harper awoke in a surprisingly good mood that morning.

She followed instructions and she was eating her breakfast, slowly. She forced herself to take her time - she had no desire to get on Stephanie's bad side.

During her captivity, she had not eaten more than one meal a day. Even then, her torture had often resulted in her puking up anything she had eaten. She had become weaker and weaker. At one stage, she had to be forced to eat as she hardly had the energy remaining to move. There had been a constant supply of water, so dehydration had not been an issue. Her weak state had, however, resulted in her being unable to reach the bucket in her cell. She had slept in her own urine on many a night - it kept her warm for the most part. Though she blamed Radford and everything to do with Radford, she always kept coming back to that girl. Though she had been nasty, she had also been kind. Harper could vaguely remember glimpses of somebody forcing her to eat and drink. She was certain that it had been that Scarlett girl. Her thoughts were interrupted by her friend, Diana.

"You look a lot better," she commented as she wheeled herself in - her crutches had been confiscated to keep her off them.

"I feel a little better."

"There's another girl in here," Diana commented while Harper finished off her porridge. "A teenager - she lost her right hand at the wrist. She came in about the same time as you. Doesn't talk much - bit of a grumpy bitch, if you ask me. Mind you, losing a limb is hard to get used to . . ."

Harper paid little attention to what Diana was saying - the girl tended to ramble a bit. But then something caught her attention.

". . . Maybe it's just the red hair - I think *all* people with red hair are just angry people . . ."

"Did you say *red* hair?" Harper interrupted.

"Yeah - her name's Scarlett, I think."

So, Scarlett Radford was alive. But before Harper could consider that, Keira walked in.

"Morning, Harper. Morning, Diana."

"Hi, Keira," Diana offered cheerfully.

"We need to talk," Harper said coldly.

Keira rolled her eyes as she used her thumb to indicate to Diana it was time to leave.

Across the corridor and two doors down

"What do you want?"

"Just come to say, 'good morning', is all."

"Good morning, Diana - bye!"

"Why are you such a nasty person?"

"Because that is what I am."

"You look like a normal girl to me."

"I have no right hand."

"I have no legs, but you don't hear me bitching about life."

"Look, I don't need a friend; I'm okay as I am, Diana."

"You're like that damn girl down the corridor - you two have a lot in common, you know."

"Who might that be, then?"

Back across the corridor and two doors up

"Why the bloody hell did you not tell me that she was here?"

Keira did not bother asking who it was that Harper was all het up about.

"You had enough to worry about, Harps."

"Will you stop making decisions for me - I don't need help."

"That's enough, Harper!" Keira replied. "I have had enough of you trying to be so damn high and mighty. Stop hiding behind your past life and look forward to your new life. I'm sorry that I thought you were dead. I had already lost you once, back when Mum and Dad died. Then I thought that I had lost you again. I had betrayed you."

"You gave up on me."

"No, Harper, I did not give up on you. However, I had a job to do, and mourning you had to wait until Radford was destroyed. Finding you was the happiest day of my life - for the second time. Now, you can be an obnoxious bitch all you want, but I will make decisions for you if I deem it correct. I am the adult here, Harper, and you are the nine-year-old child. If you don't like that, then tough fucking shit! Last night, Stephanie told me about a phrase that Mindy used on her: 'whatever it takes'. I intend to do 'whatever it takes' for you to get better and to get you home. You want to see Scarlett Radford, do you?"

Harper was a little surprised by her sister's outburst. Harper had always been able to get away with just about anything where her big sister was concerned but Harper figured that she had finally pushed things a little too far. Stephanie was right; Harper had to give in and swallow her pride.

"I don't know."

HM Treasury Whitehall

Dave, Mindy, and Stephanie were escorted inside the impressive building and across The Drum - the circular centre of the building - and then inside and up numerous flights of stone stairs until they were directed through a polished wooden door on the third floor.

The room beyond the door was very smart with dark wood panelling on the walls and a deep red carpet on the floor. They sat down in comfortable chairs while they were each served refreshments; coffee for Dave and Mindy while Stephanie settled for a tea. The lady who had escorted them upstairs departed and the door was closed behind her. They did not have long to wait as the door soon re-opened and Stephanie had barely stood up before she was almost flattened as the ten-year-old Electra Haig cannoned into her.

"Stephanie!" Electra exclaimed as she hugged her mentor. "So good to see you - shame about your hair; looks really weird."

"Gee, thanks, 'lectra!"

Stephanie peeled the girl off her and then watched with narrowed eyes as Electra walked around her.

"The hair isn't *that* bad, I suppose - just unexpected. What's this?"

Electra looked closely at Stephanie's chest for a moment before she walked behind her mentor and smirked. She then reached out and before Stephanie could react, Electra had dug two fingers into Stephanie's back and seized her horizontal bra strap and pulled it before allowing it to snap back.

"Yeoww!" Stephanie exclaimed. "Don't do that!"

"So, they finally made you wear a bra - cool."

"Oh, 'lectra, I should slap you, but you'd probably enjoy it."

"This must be Stephanie," a new voice interrupted.

Stephanie turned to find herself facing a tall girl of perhaps thirteen with long brown hair tied up in a single plait. Behind the girl was a young woman in a smart trouser suit. The woman's eyes told Stephanie that she had been around the block, so to speak.

"Hi, Mindy, Dave."

"Hello, Electra," Dave said.

"Hi, 'lectra," Mindy said with a smile.

"May I introduce: Her Royal Highness Princess Mary of. . ."

"Can it, Electra!" the tall girl said with a smirk. "Stephanie, please me call me Mary - any friend of this nutcase is a friend of mine. This is Ginny Turner, my Personal Protection Officer."

"Hello, Your Royal Highness," Dave offered with a nod of his head.

"Pleased to meet you, Your Royal Highness," Mindy said with a similar nod.

"Mary," Stephanie added with a passable curtsy.

"Please, all of you, my time spent with *Vengeance* has taught me humility - especially at the hands of this girl - call me Mary, in private at least."

"I understand you have been learning the ropes," Mindy said.

"Electra has taught me a thing or two."

Electra grinned, and she looked up at Mindy who nodded.

"Belle, please meet Hit Girl and Kick-Ass . . . and Psyche."

Mary's jaw dropped, and she said nothing for a moment before a giggle escaped.

"You are the famous Hit Girl?"

"Please, don't polish her ego - it's bad enough," Stephanie groaned.

"Yours isn't exactly far behind," Electra pointed out.

"I cannot believe that I am in the same room as Hit Girl."

"I have to admit, I've never met Royalty before," Mindy commented.

Dave had to laugh as Mindy too appeared a little star-struck. Ginny chuckled - it was rare that her charge was ever speechless. But Mary had had many situations recently which had gone against her Royal lineage and she had received many shocks to her system as she was punched, thrown, pushed, shoved,

humiliated, sworn at, and suffered a host of other indignities. The girl was resilient, and she had learned a lot. However, she had also been wounded and she had been forced to kill to protect her father.

"Okay - this is uncomfortable," Stephanie pointed out. "Mum - sit down. Electra, please guide Mary to a chair."

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Once everybody was seated, Stephanie turned to Electra.

"How're your wounds?" Stephanie asked with obvious concern in her tone.

"Just some more scars to join the rest, I suppose."

"Don't be so modest, Electra," Mary said. "You saved my life."

"That's what I was trained to do," Electra replied meekly.

"Who trained you?" Ginny asked.

Electra looked over at Stephanie whose shoulder's slumped.

"She did," Electra said.

"I trained Electra to be something special. I trained her in my image, but I gave her a conscience so that she could see right from wrong," Stephanie explained.

"So, we have you to thank for Mary's life. If it was not for Electra, Mary might be dead. As an extension of that, no Mary might have meant no support for *Vengeance* . . . and maybe worse," Ginny said.

"Please, don't polish her ego - it's bad enough," Mindy groaned.

"Just catching up with you, Mum," Stephanie grinned but then she turned serious. "I'm very pleased that Electra has been able to put her training to good use. She's an amazing girl and she has been through a lot. Some of the bad stuff was my fault - as are the scars on her body - but she is one of the bravest people I know."

"She's my best friend," Mary commented. "She's also coming back to school with me as my unofficial protection, along with long-suffering Ginny."

"Well done, 'lectra," Mindy offered. "Royal protection duty."

"Thank you, Mindy," Electra commented, blushing slightly.

"Err, 'lectra?"

"Yeeesss," Electra replied in a leading tone having seen Stephanie's eyes drift downwards.

"Since when did you wear a skirt and tights?" Stephanie asked.

"I used to when I was a little girl," Electra replied. "There wasn't much call for skirts and tights when I was a *Yellow* or a *Predator*."

Electra stood up and she discarded the long coat she had been wearing to reveal a very smart school uniform. The ten-year-old wore a white long sleeve blouse with a smart blue tie bearing the school crest and a navy-blue blazer over a blue kilt with thick navy-blue tights. Mary removed her own coat to reveal an identical uniform and they both curtsied sweetly.

"I wanted Mindy to see my new uniform . . . you too, Steph," Electra explained.

"You look amazing, 'lectra," Mindy commented.

"You both do," Dave added.

Stephanie grinned. "You look really good, 'lectra."

Electra blushed a deep pink and she smiled happily.

St Thomas' Hospital

The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

Harper awoke to the sound of arguing.

"What is going on?" the girl moaned as she tried to focus on the three people at the foot of her bed. "Steph?"

"Hi, Harper!"

"Electra . . . Mary!"

"We thought we'd pop in to see you."

Harper was grinning as she tried to sit up. Mary and Keira moved to help Harper into a raised position. Once Harper was comfortable, Keira passed her sister a glass of water with a straw for her to sip through. After Harper had quenched her thirst, she smiled at her friends. They were the first she had seen since she had been captured.

"Your Royal Highness."

"Harper, please."

"Okay - Princess."

Mary raised an eyebrow and Harper grinned.

"Good to see you, Mary."

"That's better - time I taught you a thing or two."

Harper grinned.

"No hard feelings?"

"You kept me alive, Harper."

"Thanks to your training, Harper," Ginny stated. "Mary shot and killed a man intent on murdering us all. She is a very brave young lady."

Mary grinned, and her face glowed very red.

"At least she's good for something," Harper laughed, and Mary scowled.

"Can I see your scars?" Electra asked Harper and Stephanie rolled her eyes at Electra's brazen manner.

"I've seen yours, so why not?" Harper responded.

Electra, eased back the bedsheet and she froze. Her expression said it all as her eyes followed the white dressings and took in the cigarette burns. Mary peered in as well and she was shocked as she saw the wounds continuing down Harper's stomach and beyond her waist to her thighs and onto her legs.

"Your scars are going to be way worse than mine," Electra commented as she pulled the bedsheet back into place.

"May I ask a question, please?"

Everybody turned to look at Mindy.

"It's just struck me like a 45-calibre full-metal-jacket bullet. Stephanie and Electra curtsied like they had been trained - explain?"

Stephanie simply shrugged.

"We are assassins," she explained. "Part of basic Phase 1 training - infiltration. We were all taught how to blend in, and for girls that included learning manners and how to behave in a cultured environment. We all learnt how to curtsy and behave like perfect little girls and young ladies."

Dave rolled his eyes and he chuckled. Mindy scowled.

"So," Mindy began. "All this time, we've had to put up with obnoxious, nasty, disagreeable . . . help me, Keira."

"Pesky, objectionable, loathsome, annoying. . ."

"Hey!" Electra cut in.

". . . little shits!" Mindy finished. "All this time, you could have behaved like polite young girls and spared us all the unpleasant behaviour."

"You can curtsey?" Keira asked Harper, who nodded with a big smile. "She's nodding - I'm going to bloody kill her for real this time. I've had to put up with so much fucking shit since she came back. I put it off to her experiences as a *Predator*, but now, I find out that she could have behaved like a perfect little lady and spared me so much bloody grief."

Harper looked unhappy for a moment, but she shrugged, just as Stephanie had done. Then she looked at Mindy and her sister as she spoke.

"We are *Predators*."

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An hour or so later, Dave, Mindy, and Stephanie said their goodbyes - which was not easy for Electra and Stephanie - and they made for the City Airport where a jet was awaiting them.

Once they were aboard, the jet took off and turned north for Scotland.

Vengeance Command Centre
Edinburgh, Scotland

"Shouldn't . . . we be getting . . . this kit . . . installed?"

"Yes . . . we . . . should."

Eric and Abby were lying beneath a computer console in the basement Control Room. Partially installed computer equipment and circuit boards surrounded them. Somehow, a forty-minute job had turned into one lasting almost two hours, although neither knew why. Maybe it was all the kissing and fondling. Maybe it was the sex underneath the master control console . . . or maybe the sex on top of the new state-of-the-art smart operations table . . . or even the sex in the new server room. Whichever, not a lot of time had actually gone into installing computer equipment.

"You two finished?" a voice called out.

There was a scuffling and a loud bang followed by an exclamation as somebody cracked their head. Then, two dishevelled geeks appeared. Mindy just rolled her eyes at her own geek. Natasha looked at her geek and grinned.

"The computers or . . ." Eric commented with a grin.

"Honestly, Abby," Mindy commented. "Can't you two keep your hands off each other for a moment?"

"You and Dave didn't spend the other night fucking into the wee hours, then?" Abby replied.

Mindy just grinned.

"I may be out of touch, but I'm not sure this is an essential part of a computer network," Stephanie pointed out as she held up Abby's bra.

"Must have fallen off," Abby commented as she and Eric vanished back under the master control console.

Mindy heard Abby giggling, so she just turned to walk out of the room.

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Dave, Mindy, and Stephanie sat comfortably in the drawing room with Cameron and Natasha.

They were discussing *Fusion* and *Vengeance* when they were joined by Cassie, Adrien, and Marinette. After the introductions and some further talking, Mindy changed the subject.

"We've been taken for mugs," Mindy stated simply as she looked at Cassie. "Ask your two if they can curtsy."

"Nah - they're too uncouth for something as elegant as a curtsy," Cassie replied while Stephanie just rolled her eyes.

"Stephanie?" Dave prompted.

Reluctantly, Stephanie stood up and she performed a perfect curtsy for Cassie, all while grinning broadly.

"Little bitches," Cassie muttered as she raised two fingers to her mouth and she whistled shrilly.

Within a minute, there was the sound of running feet and three hot and sweaty girls appeared, all of whom were very dirty.

"You called," Naomi offered in greeting, then she stopped. "Stephanie!"

Stephanie was hugged by all three girls before she shook them off and all three were smiling happily now their friend was back amongst them.

"I understand that you three are able to behave like civilised young ladies and curtsy," Cassie stated.

"Yeah," Kaitlin said in reply. "What of it?"

"Let's see it," Cassie pushed.

The three girls each performed a perfect curtsy and there were some very sour expressions on the faces of Cassie and Marinette.

"So," Cassie began. "You three are able to behave like little ladies and not just like uncouth barbarians. New rule - one day, each week, you spend twenty-four hours as perfect little girls . . . or no pocket money."

"That's blackmail," Naomi pointed out.

"Yes, it is," Cassie grinned.

"It's extortion," Kaitlin added.

"Yes, it is," Cassie confirmed.

"Hard luck!" Yvette grinned.

"La même chose s'applique à vous, jeune fille," Marinette pointed out and Yvette grimaced, muttering in French for a few moments.

Marinette raised an eyebrow at the crude comments which did not require translation for those who did not speak French.

"Okay, moving on from *Predator* inadequacies," Cassie commented but then she paused. "Kaitlin, stop pouting. I love you for who and what you are. Yes, you and Naomi have some rough edges and a few habits which I hate. However, I love you both very much and I want you both to remain as you are - with maybe a few changes along the way."

Kaitlin grinned as did Naomi.

"Nous, aussi," Marinette said to Yvette, producing a smile on the young girl.

"Who dobbed us in," Naomi asked.

"Err, well, Electra, I suppose - plus me," Stephanie admitted. "Not her fault."

"Mary?" Kaitlin asked.

"Yeah," Stephanie confirmed.

"Okay, you three, go back to whatever depraved activity you were taking part in and take Stephanie with you . . . what were you doing?"

"Building a trap for the boys," Naomi explained. "It . . ."

Cassie grimaced and raised her right hand.

"I don't want to know," Cassie said before the three giggling girls grabbed Stephanie and they all vanished outside.

Mindy laughed.

"What?" Cassie asked.

"Now I can see what Marcus put up with all those years. That was his favourite phrase whenever he caught me doing something that wasn't 'normal' or was 'Hit Girl' type stuff. If those girls are anything to go by - he really suffered!"

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It was not all that long until it was time for the American contingent to return from whence they had come.

Kaitlin hugged Stephanie really tightly, as did Naomi. Then it was Yvette's turn. Her hug squished Stephanie as she hugged her friend. Stephanie meant a lot to Yvette and the feeling was mutual.

"Please stay out of trouble, Stephanie," Yvette said.

"I'm different, now," Stephanie replied.

"Yeah - bullshit!"

Stephanie grinned.

Two days later

Saturday, November 5th

London

They had all travelled down by train the previous evening and slept at the Safehouse.

The kids had quickly recognised that the adults were in no mood for bad behaviour. On their arrival at the Safehouse, they had all been ordered to bed with no messing about. In fact, Kaitlin had been shouted at for pushing her luck, so the young girl had sulked herself to sleep. However, by that morning, tempers had eased, and the adults appeared to be in a much better mood. The large group walked as it was a pleasant if cool, day. Public transport was out as there was a high chance of the more rebellious kids being evicted from the tube. For the adults: Natasha, Cameron, Cassie, Trevor, Adrien, and Marinette, it was like herding cats as they strolled through Green Park and then St James' Park. For the kids: Craig, Olivia, Naomi, Kaitlin, Jeremy, Yvette, Christopher, and Jessica, it was a chance to run riot and cause mayhem. Some may have expected the older Olivia to show some restraint but no, she was descending into the role of a pseudo-Predator, not that her boyfriend, Craig, minded one bit.

Just to add insult to injury, the boys had decided to gang up on the girls and they were causing a lot of screaming despite being outnumbered two to one. The girls, of course, enjoyed the rowdy behaviour and they loved to be chased and manhandled. Marinette commented that maybe visiting the hospital was a good idea as Harper may be receiving some company very soon. Cassie groaned at the thought, but they were out of control - not surprisingly - and Kaitlin was running around like a wild animal, complete with snarling.

"Maybe we can just pretend they aren't ours and run away?" Cameron commented.

"Not a bad idea," Cassie thought as she watched Craig pickup Kaitlin by her upper arms and then spin her around and around before releasing her to fly through the air and crash down onto the damp grass.

Kaitlin was up again, giggling her little head off - her clothes were muddy and damp but the eight-year-old did not care and she was having the time of her life. The same applied to her friends - even the older ones who should have known better - but there had not been much time over the past two months to have some fun and not have to worry about anything. To a child, they were ecstatic about seeing their friend again. They had all thought her dead but finding out that she was alive . . . it was a struggle to cope with it as some of them had kind of made peace with the fact that Harper was dead.

For the adults, it was a minor relief to see the hospital looming above them.

St Thomas' Hospital

The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

There was something going on, she was sure of it.

The problem with hospitals was that they were boring, and for an active youngster unused to being cooped up for weeks on end, her brain began to develop its own methods of stimulation. Yes, she had plenty of magazines and books which the hospital had supplied but even they got boring after a while.

However, all the dull routine had changed the moment that two girls had arrived just five days earlier. Harper was a strange one and somehow there was a link between her and that other girl, Scarlett. Diana's mind was piecing together a ginormous jigsaw puzzle in her head. Harper was the centre piece and Scarlett was one of those odd-shaped pieces which hovered off to one side for the moment but with no direct connection to Harper. Then, had come that other girl, Stephanie; she was a Brit, but her parents were most definitely Americans. Stephanie was nice enough but she had the same eyes as Harper - those eyes scared Diana. A lot had changed on that Monday morning when Harper and Scarlett had arrived on the fifth floor and Diana had no idea how it might affect her.

The ward was a secure one with links to the military, and various kids had come and gone over the preceding weeks, many with military parents. As such, the ward had its own security, however, on the Monday morning a pair of gorillas in suits had appeared and they had rotated every eight hours with three different pairs appearing over a twenty-four-hour period. They were nice enough and they treated everybody well - except for a noticeable coldness towards Scarlett - and they were obviously guarding Harper and Scarlett. Then, out of the blue had come a visit from Royalty. Diana was convinced that she had seen the Princess Mary visiting Harper - that was something out of the ordinary and another piece to her virtual jigsaw puzzle along with that of Stephanie and two other pieces for her parents. Then, that Saturday morning, everything changed. Normally, only two visitors were allowed, however, *fourteen* people descended on Harper that morning. Indeed, Diana found herself coming face-to-face with a scrappy, dishevelled looking little girl with blonde hair. That little girl had the same eyes as Harper and Stephanie. The girl with muddy jeans and her hair all over the place simply smiled as she walked past with her friends. Once inside Harper's room, the door had been firmly closed and a gorilla had taken up position in front of it, precluding any listening at the keyhole.

"Diana!"

Diana looked up to find Doctor Schneider grinning down at her.

"Come on - time for me to check over your stumps."

Diana grimaced. She hated that - it was always humiliating and often painful. She hated to see those stumps - all that remained of her legs - but there was no avoiding them. What was worse was taking a bath - she had to be lowered in by a pair of nurses and she knew that that was her fate that very evening. She was still mastering using her arms more to lever herself out of her wheelchair and onto her bed - the bath was something else, but she had been informed that she would figure it out in due course.

"Who is Harper and why is she so special?" Diana asked as she lay on the bed while the doctor removed the dressings from her tender stumps.

"Diana, that nose of yours will go the way of your legs if you don't reel it in," Doctor Schneider cautioned.

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Twenty minutes later, Doctor Blake Schneider sat down at his desk in his tiny office, four doors down from the intrepid young Diana Price.

He pulled out the girl's file and he flipped through the pages, running his eyes over the neatly typed pages. Diana Amelia Price. Born October 4th, 2005. Parents killed in a car crash, August 2016. The girl was fairly tall for her eleven years and she was slim with deep brown hair and matching eyes. The youngster had a fiery temper when she was provoked and the anger at losing her mobility had caused many an angry word to pass her lips during fits of

depression. She was not profane in any way, showing that she had been brought up properly. Indeed, the girl was very polite when dealing with the medical staff and apart from her annoying inclination for getting into trouble by being somewhere she was not supposed to be, she was a delightful patient to have on the ward.

Blake closed the folder. Before the end of November, Diana would have to leave the ward. She would be put up at a local children's home for a short while until her prosthetic legs were ready. To be honest, Blake was worried for the girl. She may have been happy in hospital, but the world outside for an eleven-year-old girl with no parents and no legs was a bleak one. He worried for her sanity as she had to get used to somewhere new after three months in the hospital where she had felt safe and she knew everybody and everything. Doctors were not supposed to become close to their patients, but with a child such as Diana, it was difficult to remain distant as you might with an adult patient.

She still had a long way to go, but she was recovering well, and he did not want to see her relapse.

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Harper was having the time of her life - sort of.

It was the first time she had seen her friends in a long time and she was enjoying the attention - although maybe not the insistence on everybody peering under the bedsheet to see the wounds for themselves. Another problem she faced were the apologies. Kaitlin had apologised for being so close, but unable to rescue Harper. Finally, Harper had had enough.

"Look!" she almost yelled out. "It is nobody's goddamn fault that I was taken and nobody's goddamn fault that the rescue failed - it was just bad luck. I just think you were all fucking stupid for thinking me dead!"

The room had gone very silent as everybody absorbed Harper's words.

"I don't want pity. I don't want apologies. I don't want to be treated any differently. I am Harper Sharp. I am a *Predator*. Anybody fucks me about, then I will make damn sure that they join me in this shithole . . . do you fucking cocksuckers hear me?"

There were several nods from the kids and a grimace from Keira.

"You really know how to fuck up people's happiness, don't you?" Kaitlin growled. "Fucking lesbian twat!"

Harper laughed as did some of the others present. "Sis - would you?" she asked.

Keira slapped Kaitlin on the back of her head.

"Somebody had to say it!" Kaitlin growled as she stalked out of the room.

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"Hi."

Diana looked up to see the same scrappy little girl peering around the door.

"Hello - come in. I'm Diana."

"Kaitlin."

Kaitlin pushed open the door, closing it too behind her as she entered the room.

"Mind if I come in?" Kaitlin asked.

"Feel free. You here to see Harper?"

"Yes . . . you know her?"

"We've talked once or twice . . . she's nice."

"Nice!" Kaitlin exclaimed.

"I like her."

"So, do I," Kaitlin admitted. "I just hate seeing her like that . . . I was so damn close . . . I just want my friend back. Sorry - what are you in for?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Diana asked.

The eleven-year-old was sitting on her bed with what was left of her legs ahead of her. She was wearing shorts, so the dressings were readily visible on her stumps.

"Sorry," Kaitlin said.

Her eyes had not clocked the stumps while she had been thinking about Harper. Now, she could not keep her eyes off them - to be honest, she was horrified at the sight.

"Getting a good look?" Diana asked.

"I'm . . . I'm really sorry," Kaitlin stuttered as she bolted from the room.

"Hey!" Diana called after the girl, but Kaitlin had vanished.

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Kaitlin ran down the corridor before colliding with somebody coming the other way.

"I'm sorry," Kaitlin offered.

"Have no fear, Kaitlin. Good to see you again."

"Huh?"

Kaitlin looked up into the familiar face of Captain Sinead McFadden, Royal Marines. The officer was grimacing from the pain of the impact and leaning on a short crutch with her left hand.

"Hi, Captain."

"Call me, Sinead. I'm not in uniform, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am . . . err, Sinead."

"What's wrong?"

"I just saw a girl with no legs and it shocked me a bit."

"That doesn't surprise me. You may not be a normal girl, Kaitlin, but you're only human."

Kaitlin grinned.

"I've come to see Harper; we've not met."

The two females walked back down the corridor. As they approached the two Royal Marines, both came to attention, despite being in civvies.

"Thank you," Captain McFadden commented. "At ease."

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The Captain was mobbed almost the second she walked in the door.

"Wow!" she exclaimed. "Talk about a welcome."

"You helped us win against Radford, Captain," Cameron pointed out.

"You helped me get my Harper back," Keira added.

"Hello, Harper, I'm Captain Sinead McFadden of Her Majesty's Royal Marines - 42 Commando, Reconnaissance Troop."

"Hello. I gather I owe my life to your Royal Marines," Harper responded with a brave smile.

"I am glad that we could help. I understand that you were putting your life on the line a long time before we joined the show. I heard a couple of your friends talking about you and what you meant to them. I also heard how skilled you are."

Harper had lapsed into an embarrassed silence which only got worse as the Captain pulled something from her pocket.

"This is for you, Harper Sharp, in recognition of your bravery and dedication to *Vengeance*."

Harper took the offered item and she struggled to say anything as she held the green beret in her hand. She then ran her hand over the globe and laurel badge before looking up at the Captain as tears spilt down her cheeks.

"Thank you."