

Author's Note: This chapter follows on from events in **Chapter 362: Freedom of my other story: Forsaken.**

Monday, December 12th, 2016

Blairhoyle

Kaitlin was excited - there were three new *Predators* in country.

One of them was to be staying with them - Cassie had not gone into any detail and Kaitlin was certain that Cassie was holding something back. She ran into the house and up the stairs to her bedroom where she quickly changed out of her school uniform - leaving it scattered all over the floor as usual - before pulling on jeans, a blouse, and a pair of pink trainers. Then, as she made for the stairs, she heard running water coming from the spare bedroom beside Charlotte's bedroom.

Her curiosity overcame her - not surprisingly - and she followed the sounds.

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The twelve-year-old *Predator* was enjoying his shower.

He had not had a private shower in quite a while - not that showering with others had ever really bothered him; it just felt different, but in a good way. It also felt like freedom and not some institution where massed showering was the rule. The shower was good; powerful and hot. Most of his bruises had faded during his incarceration, including a few cuts and gouges. Even his hair was growing back and there was actually something to wash for the first time since he was eight.

"You have a dick."

Jake turned to look at the voice and he found a young girl staring at him.

"You have a dick," she repeated.

"I hope so; I'm a boy," Jake grinned.

"You have a dick."

"Do you have any other words of wisdom?"

"You have a dick."

"Kaitlin, he's a boy," came another voice which Jake recognised, and another girl appeared to look him up and down. "Boys have dicks - actually, boys are dicks, but that's an *entirely* different matter!"

"He has a dick," the younger girl persisted.

"Can I finish my shower in peace, please, without her talking about my dick all the time?" Jake asked Charlotte.

"Leave her to me, Jake."

Kaitlin was seized by the torso and yanked out of the bathroom, allowing Jake to finish off his shower in private.

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"He has a dick," Kaitlin growled as she was released out on the landing.

"You never seen a boy naked, Kaitlin?" Charlotte asked in disbelief.

"Dozens of them," Kaitlin responded. "But he has a dick. . ."

"You got a problem with boys, Kaitlin?" Cassie asked as she appeared on the landing.

"No - but he has a dick and that's not allowed in this house."

"Wow!" Naomi announced as she came out of the bedroom which she shared with Kaitlin. "I had no idea that you were so sexist."

"You never complained about Craig being here," Cassie reasoned. "I assume he has a dick."

"Oh, he has a dick," Naomi chuckled. "Olivia can't get enough of Craig's dick!" Kaitlin scowled.

"I think that Jake's a breath of fresh air," Alexandra threw into the conversation. "Having boys around is good; believe me, I've had enough of little girls!"

"Hey!" Cassie growled.

"You're no longer a little girl, Cassandra."

"Cassandra?" Charlotte echoed.

"Cassie's real name," Naomi whispered before elaborating further. "Cassie hates it."

"Oh!" Charlotte replied.

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The evening meal was fun.

"You settled in, Jake?" Richard Perrin asked.

"Yes, thank you, sir."

"You've met the two girls, and I believe you already know Charlotte."

"Yes, sir - we were taken at about the same time and were both part of the Fourth Intake."

Richard had taken an instant liking to the boy. He was very much like Kaitlin, but older - and a boy. He had had a good laugh at Kaitlin's expense over the 'dick' incident - she was still brooding over it and viciously stabbing at her steak. They did not usually have steak on a Monday night, but they did to welcome Jake to Blairhoyle.

"It's very nice to have you here, Jake," Alexandra said as she grinned at Kaitlin.

Lasswade Road, Edinburgh

Fourteen-year-old Ewan Campbell was also settling in with *his* new family.

Trevor and Jeremy had been welcoming to the boy and Ewan was very happy with his new home. Trevor had explained that it was just a trial to allow time to see how Ewan fitted in with them. Ewan agreed, knowing that it would not be easy for him, nor his foster family. However, he was very pleased to not be in an obvious prison facility. The safehouse in Chicago had been appealing, but he

was back in Scotland for the first time in many years and it just felt right. He even had his own room - front of the house, next door to Jeremy's room.

All in all, the boy was very happy with his rising fortunes.

Beacon Croft, Stirling

It was much the same for sixteen-year-old Kate Fincham.

"Welcome, Catherine," Amy Montgomery said as Kate and David walked in the front door.

"I prefer: Kate."

"Kate it is," Amy replied with a friendly smile. "This is our son, Craig."

"Hello, Kate - welcome."

"This is Jordan - he's been living with us for the past month," Amy went on.

"May I?" Kate asked.

Craig and Jordan both tipped their heads forward and Kate swiftly found what she was looking for.

"Both of you, huh?"

"Best years of my life," Jordan smirked.

"Yes - been there, got the sodding tattoo," Craig grinned.

"Craig!" David warned.

"Sorry, Dad."

Kate chuckled.

"Kate," Amy said. "Your room is at the front - you even have the main bathroom to yourself."

"You're lucky," Craig grinned. "You're miles away from Dad's snoring!"

Blairhoyle

Charlotte had not commented on them, but eventually, her curiosity had got the better of her.

"What are those?" she asked, pointing to a row of glass jars, all stuffed with coins and notes which sat on a shelf in the kitchen.

Cassie laughed.

"You've found the swear jars belonging to Naomi and Kaitlin," she explained.

"Why so many?"

"The first two are Naomi's - the other seven belong to Kaitlin."

"Seven!" Charlotte exclaimed. "Fu. . . oops!"

"Seems to be a *Predator* thing," Cassie chuckled as she reached into a cupboard and a tenth jar joined the row.

It was labelled: **CHARLOTTE.**

Charlotte scowled.

Two days later

Wednesday, December 14th

The sound was sickening as the boy's fist smacked into his face.

The pain was intense, but he refused to raise a fist to stop the fight. He did, however, raise his hands to protect his face and body as the fists rained down. Nobody moved to help him – they all just cheered, enjoying the fight. The audience was enjoying the smell of blood in the air. He fell down as one particularly hard punch knocked him off balance and he felt more pain as he hit the ground. The boy did not stop, but he continued to punch, and he also used his feet to add to the pain. All he had done was stand up for somebody who could not stand up for themselves and he had been set upon. The boy attacking him was an animal – a wild animal. Then, out of nowhere, the cheering and the chanting ceased. The beating stopped, and he allowed himself to lie back on the floor.

Finally, he gave in and he let his tears fall.

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Beaconhurst School

Cassie cringed as she saw Jake coming out of school with the three girls.

His left eye was bruised and battered – as was most of his face. Cassie looked at the three girls for an answer, but they simply shrugged. A miserable-looking Jake handed Cassie an envelope which Cassie recognised as one which matched the two dozen or so letters that she already had in a drawer at home concerning Kaitlin and Naomi – but mostly Kaitlin.

"You've got a letter from the Head, Jake? It's only your second day at school . . . even Kaitlin waited until her *third* day!"

"That was a misunderstanding," Kaitlin pointed out as Naomi laughed.

"Well?" Cassie prompted the twelve-year-old boy.

"I was protecting another boy. I told the bully to leave him alone, but the bully turned on me. It was successful, I suppose – I saved the boy who was being bullied," Jake said slowly.

"What did you do to the other boy?" Cassie demanded, dreading the answer.

"I never touched him."

"You took the beating?" Charlotte exclaimed.

Jake simply nodded.

Cassie vanished inside the school for almost twenty minutes before she came back out and she motioned the kids into the car. She climbed in and the wheels span as she shot out of the school carpark. Naomi and Kaitlin exclaimed glances as they tightened their seatbelts: Cassie was pissed off to the point of killing.

The ride home was spirited and very short.

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Blairhoyle

"Come on, Jake - upstairs with you," Cassie directed.

"What's going on?" Alexandra asked from the kitchen - sensing trouble.

"Jake got beaten up at school," Naomi explained.

Upstairs, Jake sat down on his bed while Cassie checked out his wounds. They were superficial, and the bruising would heal over time.

"Are you hurt anywhere else, Jake?"

Jake pulled off his tie and his shirt to reveal lots of bruising on his chest and some lighter marks on his stomach. Cassie's expression hardened at the sight of so many bruises but then softened again.

"I'm very proud of you, Jake," Cassie began. "That must have taken a lot of self-control not to fight back. I know what you are, and I know what you are capable of. I would have expected you to really hurt the other boy. Why didn't you retaliate? You could have ended the fight in a second."

"I'm trying to be better than what I was. I'm ashamed of what I was. I'm ashamed of what I am. I didn't want to let Hit Girl down - nor you. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"Causing you trouble."

"Oh, Jake."

The boy crumpled into tears - a lot of tears.

"I don't want to fight; I've been doing that for so long. I just want to have a normal life. I want to be wanted. I want somebody to love me."

The tears had turned into sobbing. The boy was hurting both inside and out. Cassie just hugged the boy until he fell asleep. Cassie pulled off Jake's shoes and socks before covering him up with his duvet.

Jake had been so happy about going to school - 'eager' barely covered it. He had been given the choice of starting school directly or leaving it for a day or two - he had jumped at the chance. Alexandra had already bought his school uniform based on sizes from Mindy, so he had quickly dressed, and Cassie then made the boy even happier by removing his ankle tracker - Mindy had told Cassie that Jake appeared to be trustworthy. In fact, all three of the newcomers had lost their trackers - on pain of regaining them if they caused trouble. He had come bouncing out of the school after Tuesday's lessons - literally bouncing - saying that he had enjoyed everything. Cassie could understand the bully turning on the boy. Jake was short for his age, only about four feet eight inches as opposed to the five feet in height of his peers. Charlotte was the complete opposite - she was the same age as Jake; actually, a month younger - and almost four inches taller than him.

Cassie headed back downstairs where she found the other kids enjoying their tea.

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Charlotte was *not* happy.

She glowered at her food as she thought of what had happened to her friend. They had always been there for one another. From the very moment that they had first met. They had not even known each other's names for the first week. He had just grinned at her each time they had passed each other in a corridor or when their eyes had met across the crowded dining room. After a day or two, she

had started grinning back. They were just two eight-year-olds, scared to death by their new regime. Then, during their first weekend, they had met one another properly: Jake and Charlotte. They had become friends. Whenever the other was feeling blue, or they needed a shoulder to cry on, they would meet up at the weekend during their limited free time. They would spar together, improving their skills. Charlotte had struggled with the fighting part as she had been a very girly girl and she had despised 'boy' things - she had always seen fighting as a 'boy' thing. However, she had quickly learnt that if you could not fight then *Urban Predator* did not want you. If they did not want you then you died with a catastrophic head injury, usually brought on by a single bullet to the forehead.

Without Jake, Charlotte could never have survived to gain her coveted tattoo, let alone progressed through her training. The very same was valid for Jake: without Charlotte, he would never have survived his training. They had both stuck together, through thick and thin, never letting their friendship waver. They had grown up, reaching their ninth-year together and celebrating in secret - *Urban Predator* was not all that big on celebrations. After a little 'over-celebration', they had spent the three days following their tenth birthdays in the cage. As for their eleventh birthday - both tried to forget that fateful day. Then they had turned twelve and not long after, *Urban Predator* had begun to fall apart. They had both been in Colorado when they had been ordered out with a dozen others and into vehicles. They had made their escape, somewhere outside Kansas City before heading north for Des Moines. There, they had survived for three months before they had met Willow - she had enticed them with an unbelievable offer of becoming rich. FEAR had been true to her word as far as money was concerned. Both of them were very rich, but Charlotte and Jake had agreed to hide their cash and never spend a single dollar of it - it was blood money, they had both decided.

After dinner, Charlotte checked in on Jake - the boy was still sleeping soundly, so she headed for bed.

The following afternoon
Thursday, December 15th

Beaconhurst School

Charlotte looked a tad miserable as she handed Cassie an envelope.

"You trying to compete now?"

Charlotte never said a word as Cassie ripped open the envelope. Naomi watched Cassie's expression and she saw Cassie's face darken considerably as she read the letter from top to bottom. By the time Cassie had finished reading the letter, Naomi and Kaitlin had vanished into the car with Jake, leaving the unfortunate Charlotte to get nuked alone.

"What have you done?"

The question was purely rhetorical, and Charlotte decided it was best not to respond.

"Get in the car, young lady - MOVE IT!"

As with the day before, the ride home was similarly spirited and even shorter.

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Blairhoyle

"Get upstairs and stay in your room."

Charlotte went without saying a word. She knew that she was in *big* trouble, but she reasoned that she had done the right thing. It was almost an hour before Cassie appeared in Charlotte's bedroom. Cassie was still seething as she leaned against the wall, staring down at Charlotte.

"How dare you attack that boy!"

"He had it coming," Charlotte said.

"I did not say you could talk. For the moment, nobody is pressing charges against you."

"Me! What about that bastard who battered Jake! The fucking school all but let that bloody bully off!"

"You finished?" Cassie asked calmly.

Charlotte was wise enough to take the hint.

"Yes - I'm sorry."

"Sorry is not going to cut it, young lady. I was willing to give you guys some leeway, considering who and what you are, but this was going too damn far, Charlotte. You may go downstairs for your tea, then you will come back up here to do your homework, then bed."

"Cassie?"

"Yes, Charlotte."

"I'm really sorry."

"Were you hurt?"

"No - I can fight without hurting myself."

"I spoke with Abigail - she tells me that you and Jake are close."

"Yes, we are."

"You let me down, Charlotte, and even worse, you let yourself down. Think about that. Go get your tea."

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After her tea which she had eaten alone at the kitchen table, Charlotte had returned to her bedroom to complete her homework.

Once her homework was complete, she changed into her pyjamas before slipping under the duvet. That was when her mobile rang.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Charlie."

"Abigail!"

"Got yourself into a bit of shit, huh?"

"Just a bit."

"It isn't easy adjusting to a new life, Charlie. I struggled, but I had friends. Go talk to Naomi or Harper - they can be trusted, I promise you."

"What will they do to me? Will they send me back?"

"Anything is on the table, right now, Charlie. You messed up big."

"I love it here. I just didn't think. I don't want to leave."

"Just take it a day at a time, Charlie."

"It's good just hearing your voice, Abigail."

"I'm here if you need me, too. My number's in your phone. Night or day, you call me, understand?"

"Yes, I understand . . . and thanks for being there for me."

"You hang in there and you'll get through it."

"I'll keep positive."

"Night, Charlie."

"Night, Abigail."

Charlotte just stared at the phone as she placed it down on the bed. She felt miserable. Cassie's words had stung and the thought of being sent back to Chicago scared the hell out of her. She knew that actions had consequences, so she knew that punishment would follow. She had had to avenge Jake, but she had gone off half-cocked without thinking things through at all.

She closed her eyes and hoped that she would stay brave and see things through.

The following afternoon

Friday, December 16th

Beaconhurst School

"Charlotte - you're not coming home with us," Cassie said. "You're going home with Sinead and Dakota."

"Why?" Charlotte asked, her face a mask of worry.

"Sinead is going to supervise your punishment - Dakota's too. I'll see you after school on Monday. Sinead has a bag with your things. I expect you to follow instructions as they are given by Sinead. I won't tell you to have fun because there won't be much of that for you. Just hang in there and you'll get through it. Okay?"

Cassie smiled her support and she gave the girl a hug.

"Actions have consequences - I know," Charlotte grinned as she hugged Cassie back.

After Cassie, Naomi, Kaitlin, and Jake had gone, Charlotte turned to Dakota.

"What are you in trouble for?"

Dakota looked uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"Tell her," Sinead directed.

Dakota's shoulders slumped.

"I'm a gobby bitch with a big mouth," Dakota responded.

"This I must hear," Charlotte replied uneasily.

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Vengeance Training Facility: Wolf

"I'm scared."

"Don't be stupid, Mary - it's not like they're going to strip you naked and strap you," Electra pointed out.

"You certain about that?" Mary asked, unconvinced.

"They *will* be hard on you and they *will* humiliate you, I suppose, but they will *not* hurt you - not badly. They are your friends, Mary, but they need to get the message across to you in a way that you will remember."

"I know; I made an enormous blunder, but I meant good by it."

"That isn't the point," Electra clarified. "We are not going to go soft on you, but neither are we going to give you the full Olivia treatment."

Mary shuddered at that.

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Mary was still very worried as she descended into the training centre with Electra.

Unsurprisingly, she found Harper waiting for her. Electra, though, was very surprised to see Harper there wearing a *Vengeance* T-shirt, shorts, and a pair of white trainers. Electra also noticed that Harper was a fraction of what she used to be. The nine-year-old had lost a lot of weight during her incarceration, torture, and subsequent hospitalisation. Harper's legs still showed evidence of scarring and they were very thin. The same applied to her arms - her left arm was strapped up in a sling across her chest. Harper also hobbled a bit as she walked and Electra had spied a crutch leaning against the wall.

"Strip!" Harper ordered and she pointed to a pile of clothing.

Mary saw the same clothing that Harper wore, and she grabbed up the pile and went to change.

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"You look good," Electra said.

"Don't lie, Electra - I look like crap," Harper responded.

"Just trying to make you feel better. It is good to see you getting involved again."

"I never thought that I would ever see this place again. I looked around it earlier on - only I couldn't go into the interrogation rooms."

"Was that where they . . . you know?"

"That's where they tortured me, yes."

Electra worried about her friend. Harper was struggling on an emotional level and she had everything locked away as usual. Harper never liked talking about herself - maybe she needed too.

"You're going to town on Mary, aren't you?"

"Yes - I talked with Keira, Ginny, and Mindy. Of anybody here, I have the most experience of what happens when things go badly wrong. I hated being cruel to the newbies when *Vengeance* went dark. I'm going to hate doing this - but it has to be done."

Electra nodded her understanding and she felt sorry for Mary, but only to a point.

"Will you be alone?"

"No - Olivia will ensure I don't go too far. You go enjoy the evening. Mary will probably be needing you by the time you get back," Harper replied ominously.

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When Mary returned, she found Electra had gone, as had everybody else as the place was silent as a tomb.

Just Harper remained, although Olivia appeared a minute later looking decidedly unhappy.

"Where is everyone?" Mary asked timidly.

"They've gone out into Glasgow," Harper replied.

"I wish I was going with them."

"Not fucking likely!" Harper growled. "You can't be bloody trusted."

Mary flinched at the barbed comments - they had stung. For a moment, she thought that Harper was about to apologise, but no.

"You think you're so fucking special that you can do anything you like, Your Royal Highness?" Harper hissed.

"Don't call me that - not here," Mary responded.

"I'll call you what the fuck I want!" Harper snapped back. "You put lives at risk, Princess! You put my friends lives at risk, Princess! You went to help Fury - big fucking deal! You were told to stay in the fucking truck, right?"

"Yes."

"What were you told?"

"To stay in the vehicle."

"Well - WHY THE FUCK DID YOU LEAVE THE FUCKING TRUCK?" Harper bellowed.

"I . . ."

"Because you think you're better than every other fucker, despite their fucking experience!"

"No!"

"Bullshit, Princess!"

Mary was sobbing. It was the same as when she had gone out as Belle, in London - she had not been thinking. She had operated as if she were the only one there. Worse, she had been in a foreign city, three-thousand miles from home.

"I didn't think," she muttered.

"Is that the fucking best a fucking Princess has to come up with?"

"It's the truth!" Mary almost screamed.

"Fucking hell!" Harper growled as she stepped back. "Let's work through a scenario, shall we?"

"What are you two . . . what are you . . . going to do to me?" Mary asked a little hesitantly as she wiped her eyes.

"Olivia is here to ensure that I don't go too far - nothing more," Harper replied in a tone that scared Mary. "But I am going to knock into you some obviously-needed sense."

Mary looked over at Olivia, but her friend refused to match her gaze.

"Suppose you were taken - they would have bundled you into a van, probably taken you to some shithole of a warehouse. You would have been roughed up a bit, then they would have unmasked you. At first, they would have just seen a young girl - nobody special. They'd have slapped you around a bit . . ."

Harper slapped Mary with an open palm, across her left cheek. Mary yelled out in pain, jumping back, away from Harper. Harper simply moved closer.

". . . Then I'm sure somebody might have decided to see more of you - they'd have stripped the body armour off of you and left you standing naked . . ."

Without warning, Mary found Olivia yanking off her T-shirt, shorts, and underwear, leaving her standing completely naked on the mat in the training area. Mary was shaking with fear.

". . . There would probably have been at least one sick bastard who got turned on by a naked thirteen-year-old girl. They would have had a good look - maybe even a feel . . ."

Mary was shocked when Harper grabbed a handful of Mary's pubic hair with her right hand and then shoved Mary back against a wall. Mary screamed out in pain and she tried to pull away, but to no avail.

". . . Maybe they consider raping you. I was lucky, I had nothing to turn anybody on and those who would have been turned on by a ten-year-old weren't around. Then, somebody might have suddenly recognised a Royal Princess and your life would have just taken a nasty turn . . ."

Mary nodded at Olivia as she released Mary. Olivia grabbed the naked girl by the arm and she marched her up the stairs and before Mary knew it, she was being pushed outside into the freezing cold of the night. She felt the cold mud beneath her bare feet, oozing between her toes. She felt the terror rising inside her as the 'scenario' began to feel so real and her mind began to conjure up appalling events.

". . . Now, one of two things might happen. They might feel that you are way too much trouble for them - so they shoot you." Mary found herself forced to her knees and something cold shoved into her back. "BANG! You're dead!"

Mary was kicked in the back and she fell forward onto her face before she rolled into a puddle of freezing water and mud. She screamed out at the cold and the abuse.

"As for the second thing - they hold you for ransom. I would not expect HMG to respond too favourably, to be honest. A ransom may not be forthcoming - best case? You die, and your body is never recovered. Worst case? You die, and your dead body is paraded for the whole world to see and your family is humiliated worldwide."

Harper nodded to Olivia who lifted the sobbing Mary out of the puddle and wrapped a blanket around her before guiding her back inside.

Mary was shaking uncontrollably - both from the cold and from the fear of what she had just experienced.

She found herself passing back into the warmth of the bunker and then she felt warmer still as she was pushed under the hot water of a shower. She felt somebody using a sponge to clean her face and her upper body.

"I'm sorry, Mary, I really am," Harper said from a few feet away. "I was told to be harsh - I hated it, but you had to learn."

"I . . . I'm okay. Nobody ever died of humiliation, huh?"

Olivia felt really bad for her friend as she helped her to clean up. She had been horrified by Harper's plan, but she had also understood why it had had to be done. Olivia also knew why Harper had selected her to assist - Mary trusted Olivia and Olivia knew exactly why it had to be done. Once Mary had cleaned herself up, she had dressed, and she had been taken to the dining room for some hot sweet tea.

"I deserved that," Mary commented. "Don't feel bad, Harper - I needed to experience that. You made it seem so real, even though I knew it wasn't and I knew that I was safe."

"I never want anybody to experience what I did. The pain was like nothing I'd ever experienced. You're important, Mary, even more than the rest of us. I had to make Olivia suffer when she thought I was pushing her too hard. She never wanted any of it, but like you, she found herself in a situation she couldn't escape from. You were born into it which is different, but you are governed by different rules," Harper lectured.

"Thank you, Harper. I'm really sorry for fucking up," Mary responded.

"I know you are," Harper grinned. "Now, let's go see what the other guys are up to."

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Olivia led the way down to Sub-Level Two.

After all the exertion of earlier, Harper was a little sore and she moved slowly. Finally, they reached a ginormous concrete edifice. Olivia swiped a card in a lot and she placed her hand on a pulsing orange translucent panel. The panel flashed green and a steel door slid open. Inside, the room was cool, and it smelt of ozone. On the far wall, three giant eighty-inch LED screens covered the wall in a line horizontally. Before them, a steel control desk was set back, six feet from the wall. On the control desk were a row of six twenty-four-inch touch screens with a keyboard and mouse.

"Welcome to the Vengeance Auxiliary Command Centre!" Jasper announced. "Or VACC for short."

"You've been here all the time?" Mary asked worriedly.

"I knew what was going on, so I stayed in here . . . and the cameras were all disabled," Jasper responded. "Your dignity is safe, Princess."

"Thanks."

"Now, let me show you around."