

**Author's Note:** *This chapter is in line with Chapters 14 to 16 of The Fusion Ultimatum.*

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***The following morning***

***Wednesday, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2016***

I was awoken by a violent beeping sound – it was insistent.

The clock beside my bed said six in the morning. I buried my face into the pillow and groaned – but the beeping just got louder. I crawled out of bed and logged onto my laptop. I came awake almost instantly when I saw who it was.

“Happy Birthday, SD!”

It was a grinning Stephanie. I felt myself grinning too, despite the early hour.

“Hi, Steph – Happy Birthday to you, too!”

“Your hair sucks...”

“You just woke me up, bitch – it’s not long after six in the goddamn morning!”

I could not be angry with her; I was actually over the moon that she had called.

“Where are you?”

“Innsbruck – that’s in...”

“I know: Austria.”

“It’s really good to see you, SD...”

“You too, Steph . . . how’s your bruising?”

“Despite Mindy’s driving, I’m fine – it’s mostly gone now...”

“You don’t sound right...”

“You remember I mentioned Miranda?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“She’s dead.”

Stephanie’s voice was cold and devoid of all emotion. I knew that it was her way of keeping it together; it had nothing to do with her feeling, it was just her training.

“I’m so sorry, Steph.”

“I’ll get over it...”

“We’ll talk about it next time we’re together, okay?”

“Promise?”

“What are friends for?”

“Take care, SD!”

“Stay safe, Stephanie.”

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### **Later that morning**

#### **Safehouse F**

I had no idea what was going on, but the atmosphere in the Safehouse was distinctly chilly and I was not referring to the air-conditioning either.

Everybody was concentrating on their tasks and supporting those in Europe. Marty had mentioned that reinforcements may be required, but not who might be going. In the meantime, I was trying to maintain Lauren’s training regimen.

“Come on, Lauren, concentrate... The diameter of the bore in a Glock 22 is...?”

“Forty waffles...”

“Huh?” The girl was *not* concentrating. “What is Aiki-Jō?”

Lauren smiled.

“Aiki-Jō is the name given to the set of martial art pancakes practiced with a Jō...”

I blinked and stuck a finger in my left ear – had I heard her right?

“Who were Hit Girl and Kick-Ass fighting when they first joined forces?”

I hope she doesn’t say Frank doughnut!

“Err, that would be Cereal D’Amico. Easy, or what!”

“Or what...” I muttered. “I’ve never heard answers *so* wrong . . . and *so* breakfast-related!

Lauren’s stomach rumbled quite audibly.

“Did you skip breakfast, this morning?”

“Maybe...”

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### ***Two days later***

#### ***Friday Night***

#### **Safehouse F**

It was time for Lauren to learn how the Command Centre operated when operatives were out on the streets of Chicago.

Marty had spent an hour taking the young vigilante through all the systems and how we kept track of who were out in Chicago. The screens displayed location, status of the operatives and even the fuel load on their transport. Every Safehouse was listed along with their status.

“Why is Safehouse K greyed out?” Lauren asked.

“The CIA blew it up and it’s currently being rebuilt.”

“Oh.”

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“What’s down there, in Safehouse W?”

Marty chuckled.

“That, Lauren, would be the *Vigilante*.”

Marty punched some keys and the schematic of a sleek-hulled sports-yacht appeared on one of the screens.

“Wow!” I breathed and I had to admit, I was overawed by what Dave and Mindy had built.

“What is *that*?” I demanded as she pointed at the left-hand screen in the Control Centre.

I looked up at the indicated screen.

“That’s something different…” Marty commented.

It was not easy to see on the image from the camera, but the colours stood out if nothing else.

“Nice colour scheme,” I commented.

Marty chuckled as he directed Foxtail and Raven towards Chicago’s newest whatever.

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### ***Junction of 64<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup>***

“What do you think?”

I looked over at my big sister. Despite the fact that she *was* my *big* sister, she knew that Foxtail was *way* more skilled than Raven ever was. Raven slowed her motorcycle and we stopped just behind the small crowd that had formed near the garish . . . what the hell *was* she? We climbed off the Yamaha Super Ténéré and moved closer. Several people moved out of our way as we approached – it was obvious to all that we were *Fusion*, even if we *were* new on the streets of Chicago.

…\_…

She was clad from neck to ankle in a figure hugging suit that accentuated her slim but very feminine body. The usual key points of vulnerability were protected with extra armour for the joints and the chest while the young woman’s hands were encased in slim gauntlets and her feet in lightweight, knee-length, high-heeled boots. Overall, the suit was black, with the boots and the backs of the gauntlets highlighted in purple pizzazz – a lighter, almost pink, shade of purple.

Above the neck, the woman’s head was encased in a mask that covered all but her mouth and lower jaw. The mask was the same purple pizzazz, while the long wig that extended more than halfway down her back was primarily a venetian red, with lemon yellow highlights. On either thigh, she carried an eighteen-inch Tanto, each with a twelve-inch blade. Mounted over each Tanto was a holster from which a SIG Sauer SP2022 pistol in nine-millimetre calibre peeked out. On her back she carried a double-bladed ninja sword staff.

Behind her stood a beautiful Kawasaki Ninja ZX-10R in a dark red with neon orange highlights to the wheel rims and frame. The machine matched her flamboyant image to a T. She noticed us in the crowd.

“Ah, the mighty *Fusion* arrives...”

I just stood there, my arms folded across my chest. Raven took up an equally non-threatening position with her hands on her hips.

“I think it is time to introduce myself . . . I, am Sunset Phoenix,” she said with a flourish.

Raven began to slow-clap.

“Welcome to Chicago, Sunset Phoenix...” She replied. “You here to cause us trouble?”

“Only time will tell, Raven . . . who is your little friend?”

I bristled at that!

“I, am Foxtail...”

“Nice – anyway...”

There was the roar of a powerful motorcycle engine and a Honda Fireblade Black Edition appeared behind the so-called Sunset Phoenix. Medic came to a rapid halt, dismounted and stood with her arms folded; she glared disapprovingly at the garish newcomer. My attention was momentarily taken by the awesome set of wheels – Medic was going through a mid-life crisis; I was certain of it...

Sunset looked at Medic for a moment, before she continued to speak.

“Welcome, *Medic* – nice wheels – get used to seeing me around, *Fusion*, we’re gonna get to know each other so well...”

“Is that so?” Raven stated rhetorically.

“My time is up; a girl is very busy on Friday night...”

With that, the flamboyant vigilante swung a long leg over her Kawasaki and started the engine before pulling on a pink and black helmet. Then with a completely unnecessary amount of power, she sped off leaving a pungent smell of burnt rubber.

“Fucking lunatic!” Raven commented under her breath.

The crowd being to disperse and once they were mostly gone, we remounted our machines and the three of us headed off for a coffee.

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### ***Across Chicago***

Sunset Phoenix slowed her Kawasaki and she pressed the button on a small remote.

A roller-shutter to her right opened and she turned her motorcycle into the concrete structure and then down a curved ramp that descended into the depths. After she had descended about forty feet, she entered a large cavernous concrete room which immediately erupted into light as she came off the ramp. Behind her, a steel door slid shut, closing off the ramp. She stopped her motorcycle in a space between two other motorcycles and killed the engine.

Off came the pink and black helmet which Sunset then placed gently onto a rack beside several other helmets after she had climbed off her motorcycle. She walked over towards a steel door set

into the concrete, punched a code into an adjacent keypad and as the door clicked open, she vanished through it.

Forty minutes later, a young woman, with below shoulder-length light brown hair and brown eyes walked out of the same door. She walked over to a competition orange Shelby GT350 Mustang and climbed in. She pressed a button on the car's dashboard and the steel door covering the ramp slid to one side. With a roar the car accelerated up the ramp and out onto the streets of Chicago.

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### ***Saturday, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2016***

Apparently, Stephanie and the others were in Germany – how did I know?

The wall to wall news coverage of a 'high-speed shootout at the Nürburgring' and 'carnage on the roads of Germany' gave me a small hint. There was no direct reference to *Fusion*, however, Mindy seemed to have her own ways of leaving trails of mass-destruction behind her as she went. It was really close as to what caused more mayhem and destruction: Hit Girl on a mission or a nuclear bomb...

I understood that Captain Williams was on the verge of a nervous breakdown; not surprising really when you considered what he had to put up with. As for Paige; she was struggling no end when you considered that she looked like she had just swallowed a whole water melon – people weren't kidding when they referred to pregnant women as beached whales. I was also struggling to work out how something so big could come out of somewhere that was actually relatively small... Note to self: *never* get pregnant!

Anyway, Foxtail had work to do – I was packing as apparently, I had been drafted to fight in Mindy's little war in Europe. I was not the only person packing; three others were packing their kit too. One of them was *very* eager to get into the action, wherever and whatever that might be.

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### ***Safehouse F***

I picked up the phone almost absent-mindedly.

"6281," I offered.

"My name is Akuma and I work for a mutual friend..."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," I replied smoothly.

The caller had a strong French accent so I began to have an idea about what the caller was about to say.

"Miraculous."

A simple word but it was also a code challenge.

"Bonjour, Akuma – I am Battle Guy, how can I help you?"