

*This is the continuation of the storyline from Chapter 29: Closure of The Fusion Ultimatum.*

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**Wednesday, 11<sup>th</sup> May, 2016**

**Chicago, United States of America**

We taxied into the cavernous hanger owned by Wayne Enterprises.

The main doors were closed and then the stairs lowered at the port side, forward hatch. There was a welcoming committee arrayed before us. Hailee made her way over to her Mother and I saw Hailee grimace with pain as she was hugged.

“What happened, Hailee?” Vicky demanded.

“Everything...” the poor girl replied before she burst into tears.

I saw Cathy looking at me.

“It was bad; let’s just leave it at that for now,” I suggested and the happiness quickly returned as everybody left the jet.

Cathy hugged Chloe and Curtis tightly; I could see the tears of both mother and daughter. Cathy had no idea, yet, what had happened to Curtis and I was not all that keen on telling her that her nephew had almost died.

Many of the team had grown in stature and maturity during our trip around Europe. Everybody had been hurt in some way and some had suffered serious injuries. But, we had all made it home in more or less one piece *and* with the mission completed successfully.

I was happy to leave it at that.

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**Two days later**

**Friday, 13<sup>th</sup> May**

**Maple and Ash Restaurant**

**8 West Maple Street, Chicago**

I had hoped for some quiet time to cool down after our European ‘vacation’.

It was Dave’s twenty-third Birthday, so we had gone out for dinner – no expense spared. We had wanted to keep it intimate, so it was just Dave, myself, Stephanie, Anne-Marie, Danny, Chloe, Josh, Abby, Marty and Kim. Therefore, the ten of us met up outside the restaurant at seven that night.

“Hi, guys!” Kim exclaimed as she hugged the kids. “You look very smart, tonight, kids.”

“Hi, Kim,” the kids replied. “Thanks.”

Stephanie and Anne-Marie blushed while Danny smiled sweetly. You’d never believe that just seventy-two or so hours previously, Anne-Marie and Danny had been fighting for their lives in a foreign country, 3,000 miles away. A few hours later, we had almost lost Stephanie. Seeing her now, clean and tidy – *and* in a dress, just like any other ten-year-old girl, it was difficult to see her as the girl in body armour with blood all over her face, hair, and body armour. However, she was the very

same girl who had been rescued by Dave who then went to town on her attacker and killed him. Chloe and Josh, along with Kim had fought valiantly themselves, often two or more to one.

Marty and Abby had co-ordinated all the required support that had kept us all safe and informed during the complex assault. Apart from Stephanie, Anne-Marie, and Danny, the senior staff of *Fusion* were all represented that night. The next senior person in the Fusion hierarchy would be Hailee and then young Megan – in fact, she was in charge at the Safehouse at that moment. I grimaced at whether I would ever see my Safehouse in one piece again... I trusted Megan explicitly – well, to a point. She had a fiery temper and she had (inadvertently, apparently) shoved one of my senior staff off the roof of an eight-storey building!

Considering that most of us were covered in bruises, we had all opted for anything but bare legs. Stephanie and Anne-Marie wore thick tights, while the older girls wore long skirts – I hated wearing tights of any description; I left those to the more feminine around, such as Superman!

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We were led inside by the maître d' and shown to our table on the third floor. The place was enormous and very smart. Neither Danny, Anne-Marie, nor Stephanie, had been in such a place before and their eyes went wide at the splendour that surrounded us. However, all three enjoyed the attention!

For the starter, we all ate a king crab salad each. Four weeks of fighting and near-death experiences could give you one hell of an appetite! For the main course, the boys went to town. Dave and Josh each ordered the \$145, 'Eisenhower' 40-ounce+ steak. Anne-Marie was not amused about them eating 'Eisenhower', but Joshua insisted that she would not mind... Marty was not to be outdone and he went for the 22-ounce Ribeye.

'Greedy gits!' Chloe breathed.

She went and ordered the 'Bone in Cowgirl' steak which weighed in at a more decent 16-ounces – Stephanie thought the name was outrageously funny. I scowled and ignored Chloe's smile in Joshua's direction. The three kids chose to share an enormous \$175, 'Roasted Seafood Tower'. That just left the three 'civilised' ladies. We ordered an enormous pile of Alaskan King Crab Legs, each.

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There was a lot of munching, and not a lot of talking – except of course for Anne-Marie. We had only been back in the US, a few days. I still worried about what might have been as I gazed around at all the happy, smiling faces. I noticed Chloe giving me 'a look' – she knew what was going through my mind, so I just smiled and stuck my tongue out at my best friend.

Josh and Dave were operating a conveyor belt of enormous chunks of beef into their mouths – the steaks were fucking enormous. To be honest, they were ridiculous! I liked steak, just as much as any red-blooded American, only I ate them in smaller sizes.

"You two are gonna be in the bog for a week," Stephanie observed halfway through the meal.

"Trust you to lower the tone of the conversation," Abby laughed and Stephanie grinned.

By the end of the main course, I was surprised and annoyed, to find that both Dave and Josh had almost finished their half-cows and they were overtaking *me*!

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It was approaching nine o'clock when it happened.

We had finished our main course and we were well into our dessert when the restaurant shook - violently.

"What the...?" Chloe asked with a worried expression on her face.

Then I heard the sound of the explosions – four in all. I grabbed hold of Anne-Marie and I dragged her to the floor just as the glass from the windows exploded into the restaurant. I saw that Chloe had grabbed Danny while Dave covered Stephanie. Marty, not surprisingly, had protected Kim and I saw that Joshua had sheltered Abby.

There was screaming and yelling from other diners as the glass fell all around us.

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### ***Safehouse F***

Hailee bolted up from her seat in the Control Centre.

The screen before her had automatically zoomed into a part of Chicago and an alarm had sounded throughout the Safehouse. She was rapidly joined by Mathilda and Megan who ran in from where they had been exercising on the mat.

"There's been some explosions in North State Street..." Hailee explained as she examined the map.

"Oh, shit – that's right where Mindy and Dave are, with the others!" She exclaimed.

Without any further hesitation, Megan reached forward and she pushed a button on the console before her.

"*Hound, Sentinel*, this is Wildcat – explosions, North State Street – move in and assess the situation, prepare to extract the team," she ordered smoothly as she took charge. "Petra – keep an eye on the situation; Leon, let's gear up – we're taking *Brute*!"

Despite her tender age, Wildcat was the ranking *Fusion* operator present in the Safehouse, Hailee being on reduced duties.

"Wow..." Hailee chuckled. "She's a bossy bitch!"

Megan glared at Hailee.

"Move!" She growled as she ran out the door.

"Yes, ma'am!" Mathilda replied as she ran after the eleven-year-old vigilante.

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### ***Oak Street Beach***

With so many senior *Fusion* members congregating in one place, it had been deemed prudent to provide overwatch – you know, just in case.

The two armoured GMC Yukon Denali SUVs had been parked up beside the beach until the order from Wildcat had come in. *Sentinel* had Mist behind the wheel and seated beside her was Foxtail, with Raven in the back. *Hound* was being driven by Medic and seated beside her was Splinter, with Trojan seated behind them.

As soon as Wildcat had declared the alert, everybody braced up and began to look around for danger.

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### ***Maple and Ash Restaurant***

The shouting and screaming was still around us.

No more glass was falling and as far as I could tell, the building that we were in, was still intact. I looked over at Dave and he tilted his head towards the door. I nodded, just as my cell began to vibrate in one of several pockets that were hidden in the dress which I wore.

“Hello, dear, you destroyed my Safehouse yet?”

“I’ll pretend you never said that and kill you later,” Wildcat responded.

“You enjoying the big chair...?”

“Yes, and I hate to burst your bubble, but there’s been four explosions – you might have heard them,” Wildcat cut in dryly.

“One or two, or four...”

“I’ve ordered *Sentinel* and *Hound* to readiness and I’m heading out in *Brute* with Leon.”

“See what you can do to help, but *do not* extract us until we call.”

“Copy that. Stay safe.”

“You’re doing good.”

“Always the tone of surprise!”

I disconnected the call and dropped the phone back into its secret pocket. I grabbed Anne-Marie and climbed to my feet, a hand close to my hidden pistol. Dave led us all towards the exit where there was the expected hoard of people desperate to escape.

Unlike most, *our* party was calm and collected.

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Outside, there was pandemonium.

Glass was everywhere and I could see lots of injuries caused by flying glass. Strangely, I could see no more damage than shattered glass. I had expected to see downed buildings or something. Maybe that was just my overactive imagination. Megan had said that there had been four explosions, but there was little damage. Whomsoever had detonated the bombs – assuming they *were* bombs – had obviously taken the effort to minimise damage. In my mind, the bombs – and I was certain that they had been bombs – had been for psychological value.

Chicago was under attack.

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Dave turned to me as we headed away from the restaurant to where we had parked our cars.

“Your mind is working away, I can see it,” he commented with concern in his voice.

He knew me too damn well.

“Chicago is under attack, Dave. Again. Why does this shit keep happening?”

“It keeps happening because there are bad people in the world. That is why we do what we do. We *will* protect this city,” Dave replied.

“From who? We need to find out who is doing this before somebody ends up with something much worse than just glass cuts.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see what the CPD find out.”

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### ***Glenview***

I kept quiet, the whole ride home.

The kids kept quiet too. They had sensed my mood and they had each been scared by the night’s events.

“I’m sorry, I’ve not been very sociable, guys.”

“Don’t worry, Mum,” Stephanie offered. “We know how you react to attacks on this city and we’re with you every step along the way.”

“Yeah, we’re *Fusion*,” Danny agreed. “Together, whatever.”

Anne-Marie actually looked surprised by her twin’s comment but then she nodded approvingly.

“I think he just about covered it.”

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### ***The following morning***

#### ***Saturday***

#### ***Glenview***

“Mom...”

“Mom...”

“Mom...”

“WHAT!”

“I’m hungry...”

“Anne-Marie... You are trying my patience! Okay . . . plates are there . . . bread is there . . . the fridge is over there . . . get a knife out of the goddamn drawer over there...”

Anne-Marie glared up at me.

“You thought *I* would make you a damn sandwich, or maybe you want me to cook...”

“No thanks, Mom; I’ll make myself a sandwich. I have school on Monday and I *don’t* want food poisoning...”

I heard a noise from behind me and I turned to see Stephanie giggling away in the archway to the living room. I smoothly swept up a knife from the kitchen side and the ten-year-old girl instantly braced up as the knife embedded itself an inch or two into the archway, a mere three inches from her left ear.

“I think I hear Dave calling me...” Stephanie muttered as she fled.

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The seven bundles of fluff were now four months old.

However, they were no longer cute little bundles of fluff – they were gangly legged canine’s bent on attacking each other and having fun. Their training was going very well and they were very well behaved – well, as much as any kid, really! Sophia still thought nothing of striking them with a paw or tearing a strip off them with her bark or growl. The pups thoroughly respected their mother, and for good reason; she was hard on them and more than once her bark had caused a young pup to lose control of its bladder.

Saoirse and Morgan had been very happy to quit their dog-walking job – something about hyperactive canines. All the dogs had been very pleased to see their owners after almost a month and there had been lots of laughter and some happy tears.

I also got the impression that Sophia was itching to get back out onto the streets.

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### ***That evening*** ***Safehouse F***

Everybody was wearing their new, ‘on duty’ uniforms.

These were dark grey and lined with multiple layers of lightweight Kevlar. The pants were of a military design with quick-release straps for attaching holsters, pouches, and the like. Light-weight, light-grey, desert boots were worn as footwear. *Fusion* t-shirts, complete with logo on the right chest, were available in white, purple, and dark blue. For normal wear, a high neck long-sleeve top was worn. On the right-hand-side, at the top of the neck, rank insignia was worn.

Whilst ranks had existed on *Fusion* for a while, it was the first time that we had actually worn insignia. There were many reasons, but the main was that we seemed to be working more with external agencies, so a visible rank structure would be of use. As such, we could go out in the field in the ‘on duty’ uniforms – each set of pants had a pocket reserved for a full-face mask. We had opted to go for the standard US military insignia, but with different names.

Dave and I each wore a single silver star and carried the rank of Master. Marty was our lone Commander and wore a silver eagle. Chloe, Joshua and Cathy were Sub-Commanders and they each wore a silver oak leaf. A gold oak leaf was worn by Erika, Hailee, Abby, and Kim as Senior Operators. Megan, Saoirse, and Morgan were Operators and they wore twin, vertical silver bars. The junior Operators were Curtis, Tommy, and Stephanie. They each wore a single, vertical silver bar. Our three Trainee Operators, Lauren, Anne-Marie, and Danny, wore a single inverted yellow stripe.

That night, though, that was about to change.

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"I hope everybody is well rested and ready for action. It seems that a long rest is not on the cards. After the past month, I cannot force any of you to go back into action so soon – Chloe, slap me and so help me God..."

Chloe raised her hands defensively and smiled.

"I know you will all volunteer no matter what, but I had to put the offer on the table. Anyway... Trojan, get you sorry ass out here."

Curtis looked a little concerned as Megan shoved him to his feet and he walked towards me.

"This young man here, put many of us older vigilantes to shame. While in Gibraltar, he selflessly put himself between a grenade and Wildcat. That act cannot go unrewarded – although I am sure Wildcat showed her appreciation back at the Safehouse..."

Everybody laughed as both Megan and Curtis blushed a deep purple. Abby came up and held out a small box to me. I took it. Without another word, I removed the single vertical bar on Curtis's collar and replaced it with the twin vertical bars from the small box.

"Trojan is now an Operator and I think Megan is very happy that Curtis is in one piece, especially certain parts..."

"Yep, all there and all working – I checked..."

Megan paused and clamped her hand over her mouth as she realised what she had just said in front of everybody. Her face went a very pleasant shade of bright red and she edged behind Saoirse to hide her embarrassment.

There were cheers and applause for the freshly promoted vigilante. Once that had died down, I turned to Abby.

"Somebody else also went above and beyond. She showed that she is somebody to be reckoned with and as a result, Hal is being prompted as well."

Abby looked stunned and more than a little embarrassed as Chloe stood up and handed me a small box very similar to that which Abby had handed me for Curtis. I removed the gold oak leaf from her collar and attached the silver oak leaf of Sub-Commander in its place.

After another round of cheering and applause, we all broke up and went off to our relevant duties.

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"How come you made Operator?" Stephanie demanded as she looked up at her friend's collar.

"Phase 3, bitch!" Saoirse replied smugly as she held up three fingers.

"Phase 2, bitch!" Stephanie responded as she stuck two fingers up, in the shape of a V-sign, at Saoirse.

"Funny..." Saoirse growled back. "Right, time to get back to training, pal, let's go."

"Nightmare, Rogue, Ravage!" Stephanie yelled out as she headed onto the mat.

I smiled as I watched the three Trainee Operators make their way onto the mat. The uniforms suited them. Lauren was fairly tall and with the uniform she looked very smart. The twins looked cute, as they usually did.

“Thanks, Mindy.”

I turned to see Abby standing beside me.

“You earned it, Abby. Without everything that you did...”

“I know.”

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### ***Sunday morning***

#### ***Lower Wacker Drive***

If *Fusion* had wanted to make a high-profile return to the city of Chicago, then they had most definitely picked the right place.

“What the hell is that racket?” Office Pete Howser exclaimed as his voice was all but drowned out by the sound of many powerful motorcycle engines.

As he turned to stare at the . . . motorcycle motorcade – that was the only way to describe it – the first motorcycle, a purple Ducati 1200 Panigale R, came past, alongside a black and green Ducati Diavel Carbon. The two motorcycles were ridden by Hit Girl and Kick-Ass respectively. Behind them, came two more motorcycles in tandem, the nearest, a Kawasaki Ninja ZX-10R, was tan in colour. The furthest machine was a Ducati Superbike 899 Panigale in dark blue and the rider was the stunning female vigilante known as Shadow, while her partner Jackal rode the tan Kawasaki beside her.

The next group was generally made up of the younger vigilantes. Three identical machines, although with different colour schemes, rode side by side. The Ducati Hypermotard SP machines, all with silver frames were being ridden by the vigilantes known as Wildcat, Trojan and Splinter. Their machines were, respectively, brown, silver and black with silver trim. Behind them was a much smaller machine, with an equally smaller vigilante who was actually the shortest in the group. That vigilante was Psyche, and she rode on her red over blue Honda CRF250L motorcycle.

Behind her came several other machines. Petra rode her graphite black Honda CBR1000RR Fireblade motorcycle alongside Mist on her Ducati Streetfighter 848 in black with light blue highlights. Two more motorcycles completed the motorcade: The Honda Fireblade Black Edition was under the command of Medic and behind her came Raven on her Yamaha Super Ténéré with Foxtail on the back.

“Put that away, before you hurt yourself,” Officer Howser ordered his much younger partner.

The younger officer sheepishly holstered his pistol.

A short distance ahead, the traffic had ground to a halt and the *Fusion* motorcade changed formation into single-file.

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“Mommy, Mommy!”

“What honey?” The mother replied. “I’m on the phone...”

Both kids had their eyes glued to the rear window as an awesome sight bore down on them. Then came the roar as twelve motorcycles roared past only inches away.



“Wow...”

“Awesome... Mommy – I just saw vigilantes...”

“That’s nice, dear...”

Fusion was home!