

Thursday, June 30th, 2016

Outside North Park Elementary School

It was all a blur.

The ambulance arrived within three minutes and the paramedics quickly seized the unresponsive Stephanie from my arms. After laying her down on a blanket, they cut off her blood-soaked blouse; her entire torso was a mass of blood and I could see the torn flesh where the bullet had entered her body. I shook with a mix of anger and fear as Anne-Marie and Danny both grabbed hold of me. The only good thing, if there was such a thing at that point, was that Stephanie was still breathing. Her body was torn and it was broken; I had no idea if she was going to survive.

It was mere minutes before the paramedics stood up and Stephanie was placed onto a trolley and then moved into the waiting ambulance. My mind registered many more sirens and then I felt a pair of strong, and somehow familiar, hands pull me up to my feet.

“You go with Stephanie; I’ll take the twins.”

It was Marcus; I recognised his truck parked a few feet away, a blue light flashing on the dashboard. I had no idea how he had arrived so fast. As I just stood there in a state of stunned confusion, he turned to the paramedic as she was about to climb into the driver’s seat of the ambulance. He pointed at a CPD cruiser that sat several yards away, blue lights flashing.

“That unit, there, will escort you . . . that’s my granddaughter you have in there. . .”

“She’s in the very best of hands, Captain.”

With that, I climbed into the back of the ambulance and almost immediately, I felt us moving fast, the siren screaming. I sat where directed and I held my daughter’s limp hand as the paramedic monitored her condition.

Mercifully, the ride was not a long one.

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

“We have an inbound – ten-year-old girl; gunshot to the chest.”

“Maggie – page Dr Manning and prepare Trauma Three.”

The ambulance arrived minutes later.

“Maggie!” The Paramedic called as they wheeled in the girl.

“Talk to me.”

“Ten-year-old female, bullet wound to the chest. Unresponsive, flaccid agonal breathing.

“Trauma Three.”

Trauma Three

I followed the trolley and my daughter as both were wheeled towards a small, glass enclosed room over to the left.

“On my count . . . one, two, three. . .”

Stephanie was moved over to the hospital trolley and the Paramedic removed the one from the ambulance.

“ . . . IV is already in. Pulse is weak and thready . . .”

“ . . . having trouble bagging – a lot of resistance . . .”

I barely understood half of what they were saying but I knew enough to know that Stephanie was in serious trouble.

“ . . . BP seventy over forty, heart-rate one-thirty . . .”

That was bad; her blood pressure was very low. I felt completely overwhelmed and very alone as Stephanie lay there being prodded and poked by various doctors and nurses. Tears flooded down my cheeks; both unchecked and unbidden.

“Are you the mother?”

I turned to see a nurse before me.

“Yes, Stephanie’s my daughter . . . is she. . .?”

“She’s in the best of hands, but she’s lost a lot of blood and the trauma to her chest is bad.”

Safehouse F

Dave put down the dumbbell and he picked up his cell.

“It’s the purple terror!” he chuckled to Marty as he pressed the speaker button. “Hi, honey. . .”

There was no pre-amble and they barely recognised the voice that spoke, but the first three words sent a chill down their spines.

“*Thunder! Thunder! Thunder!*” Mindy began. “*Stephanie. . .*”

That was it, all they heard after those three words was sobbing.

The ‘Thunder’ codeword was reserved for a perceived direct threat to *Fusion* and there was a special set of arrangements to be actioned when that codeword was triggered. It was almost a full minute before Mindy spoke again and by that time, Dave and Marty were in the Command Centre. Marty had hit an alarm button as they had left Level 0 which had, in turn, drawn the other people in the Safehouse into the Command Centre. Therefore, it was Dave, Marty, Saoirse, and Hailee who heard Mindy’s explanation.

“*Stephanie was shot . . . sniper. She’s in the ER and it doesn’t look good. . .*”

“Anne-Marie, Danny . . . you?” Dave asked, his face stricken with a mixture of sorrow and anger.

“*The twins are with Marcus and I’m fine. I’m at Northwestern with Stephanie. . .*” Mindy paused for a moment and Dave took the cell off speaker and walked into a corner to speak with his wife. “Dave . . . she’s so young. . .”

Marty looked over at Saoirse and Hailee who were just as stricken but with horror on their faces. He quickly gathered his thoughts as he punched up some details onto a screen.

“Senior staff will go to *Safehouse Zulu*. We maintain a force here at *Fort Fusion* and we send personnel to *Safehouse W*,” he explained. “Petra, you will take charge here with Hal, Foxtail, Trojan, and Mist. You will be joined by Medic in due course. I will deploy with Kick-Ass to activate *Zulu* and we will be joined by Rhino, Hawk, Wildcat, Rogue, and Ravage. Jackal and Shadow will follow on to *Zulu* once they have checked out the surrounding area. Leon will be out on counter-sniper and overwatch. Nightmare, Torment, and Athena will remain on standby but on alert for *Safehouse W*. Ares, Aphrodite, and Splinter will go to *Safehouse W* with Raven.”

Dave returned as Marty finished speaking.

“You ready to roll, Battle Guy?” he asked.

“I was born ready. . .” Battle Guy replied.

“Dork!” Dave retorted with a forced smile.

West Columbia

Not surprisingly, Megan was pleasantly surprised to see her niece and nephew walk through the door. However, her surprise quickly turned to worry when she saw the tears on their faces and the set of Marcus’ expression. Paige was worried about her husband’s expression too.

“What is it, Marcus?” she asked her husband.

“Stephanie has been shot – it was a sniper. . .” Marcus replied.

There was stunned silence for almost a full minute before anybody said anything.

“What the fuck?” Megan exclaimed.

“She’s at Northwestern Memorial with Mindy – I heard the call over the radio and I was only a minute away . . . I saw Stephanie. . .”

“There was so much blood . . .” Anne-Marie wailed as Megan hugged her and Danny.

“Is this a threat?” Paige asked, just as her cell vibrated with a text message.

Megan’s beeped less than a second later.

“Yep!” Megan announced as she read the three simple words.

“Time to go. . .” Marcus announced as he drew his pistol.

“Right!” Megan commented as she reached behind the couch and produced a small Glock pistol.

Paige ran upstairs and within a minute, several ‘go-bags’ appeared at the foot of the stairs. Paige had Damon in her arms as Marcus scrambled for the bags and threw them towards the door.

Almost as one, they all headed for the door.

D-JAK Prime

We passed the other parked cars in the lower level of the parking lot and Dave drove the Audi directly towards a steel roller-shutter which raised at a signal from Marty’s tablet. Beyond the steel

shutter, there was a bare concrete area that had space for maybe half-a-dozen vehicles to park. There was no other *visible* exit.

Once the roller-shutter had closed behind them, the lights went out and at another signal from the tablet a rectangular area was illuminated in dull yellow dashes. Dave aimed for the closest end of the rectangle and lined himself up before he stopped dead-centre inside the rectangle. At another command, the car began to drop . . . and drop . . . and drop . . .

The elevator stopped about one hundred feet down the sheer concrete shaft and a steel door opened up directly ahead of the car.

Dave drove forward into total darkness.

Marcus parked his truck in the usual space in the parking lot and everybody unloaded the go-bags before he waved and drove off.

None of the kids had any idea what they were doing at D-JAK and, it seemed, neither did Paige!

“Welcome!” A voice called out.

Megan turned to see Kim walking toward them.

“Why. . .?” she began.

“Questions later, young lady – let’s move. . .”

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

After I finished the call to Dave, I returned to my daughter.

Stephanie was surrounded by numerous medical personnel. Her blood-soaked clothing was in a pile on the floor along with several bloody wound dressings and bandages. I could hear some of what was being said and none of it sounded good. The ten-year-old was lying naked on the bed and a tube had been thrust down her throat to help her breathe. An IV had been inserted into her left arm and another just above her right ankle. Various wires had been attached to her torn body and were connected to various machines.

I could see her vital statistics up on a large monitor above and to the right of her. She was breathing but her heartbeat was ominously slow and as I watched the line began to straighten. . .

“. . . stats are dropping . . .”

“. . . no breath sounds on the left . . . no pulse; she’s coding . . . milligram of epi . . .”

The Inner Psyche

I was happier than I had been in a long time and Mindy looked the same.

She had not been smiling all that much, recently – not surprising really. . . Then I felt a sharp pain on the left side of my chest which spread with a burning sensation as something moved across my body

and then the sensation ceased as whatever it was stopped ploughing through my body. Pain swept over me; I felt strange and my muscles would not obey my brain. . .

“Mum, I feel strange. . .”

That was all I could say as Mindy turned around and I felt my legs collapse beneath my body then blackness enveloped me.

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I seemed to wake up . . . only there was blackness and then light appeared dissolving the blackness into white and a great feeling of peace swept over me. There was no pain – no feeling at all. Then I blinked as two people walked towards me . . . Mum? Dad? It was them but how?

“Hello, Stephanie.”

“Mum?”

“Yes, honey.”

“Dad?”

“I’m here.”

“How . . . ? I . . .”

“Yes, we know what happened – that was not your fault, honey,” my Dad said and I felt immense guilt surge through me at the thought of what I had done to my parents.

I looked around – somebody was missing.

“Where’s Jamie?”

My parents looked at each other and exchanged a glance like I had seen them do a million times before. Then my Mum replied.

“You will be reunited with him again, Stephanie; I can promise you that. . .”

He should have been there; I so wanted to see my little brother – I did not understand.

“But. . .”

“You need to go, honey – now is not your time; you have so much more to do,” my Dad said with a smile as he began to walk away.

No . . . don’t go.

“Go . . . be strong – you are a survivor, Stephanie,” my Mum added as she walked after Dad.

I didn’t want them to leave me but everything went black again and I could hear different voices around me.

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

Tears were flooding down my face as I watched my daughter die before my eyes.

The doctors and nurses were doing everything they could; I knew that. But I was hearing bad phrases: 'still V fib', 'give her another milligram of epi', and worse still: 'no pulse'. A doctor was violently pounding on my daughter's bare chest as he tried to restart her heart then another doctor moved in and he unwrapped something.

"Slide over so I can needle the left chest . . . hold compressions. . ."

With that, the doctor stabbed my daughter below her left shoulder and I almost collapsed with the next comment.

"We've got a pulse. . . Pressure?"

My anxiety and downright distress had eased and my legs felt. The emotions flowing through me were way beyond anything I could cope with.

"A hundred over seventy-eight. . . Heart-rate, one-twenty. Let's get her to the OR. . ."

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I had to let her go.

I hated to see her being wheeled out of the room and into the elevator but that was as far as I could go. I was left a wreck with tears streaming down my face. Never, in all my life had I *ever* expected to be in such a state – and in public! None of my extensive training covered anything like what I was struggling with right at that moment. Even worse, I had never felt as bad as I was at that moment about losing my own Daddy and there I was bawling my eyes out over a little girl that I had only known for seven and a half months. . .

"Mindy?"

I turned to see Hank Voight and Erin Lindsay a few feet away.

"We came as soon as the Captain told us," Hank explained and he smiled the way he did when he tried to look compassionate.

"How is she?" Erin asked.

"They've just taken up to the OR . . . oh, God . . . Erin, she crashed and I thought I'd lost her. . ."

That was it; I folded and Erin caught me, hugging me tightly as I sobbed.

Safehouse Zulu

"Holy crap!" Megan breathed as she was led towards a barely noticeable elevator.

Kim looked up at an equally unremarkable camera and the doors to the elevator slid open. The inside looked grungy and dirty but Kim waved them all inside with our bags. The moment that they were all inside, the doors closed and they all began to drop. It moved as fast as the elevator at *Safehouse F* and stopped less than twenty-seconds later. The doors opened and Megan peered out. There were many bright lights and she noticed that the elevator exited into a glass and steel enclosed area – a kill zone.

Kim placed her hand on a scanner which turned green and the elevator doors slid shut before the glass and steel doors directly ahead of them, slid open soundlessly.

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“Welcome to *Zulu*!” Marty announced with a flourish.

“Cool!” Megan breathed, a sentiment that was echoed by Anne-Marie, Danny, and Paige.

“This is Level 1 – the main living space. Below us is Level 0 and above us are Levels 2 and 3,” Marty went on.

The newcomers each ran their eyes over everything that was laid out before them. There was a large area which was luxuriously decorated in easy-on-the-eye pastel colours which detracted from the fact that they were seventy feet below ground. Unlike *Safehouse F* which was purely functional, *Zulu* was much more comfortable and a bit like *Safehouse K* had been before it had been destroyed.

Plush right-angled couches and chairs were arranged which allowed upwards of a dozen people to sit in comfort and there was an enormous TV mounted on a small partition wall. The ceiling had subdued and diffused lighting that gave a homelier feel to the large space.

“This is the recreation area. Beyond it, over there, are two storerooms, then a bathroom and the dining room – beyond the dining room is the kitchen. Over there, beside the kitchen, is a staircase that leads to all levels and over there, opposite the stairs, there is an elevator that also services all levels,” Kim explained. “To our left is a door that leads to the suites, of which there are three. Mindy and Dave have a three-bedroom setup: Suite A. Marty and I, along with Matty, have a bedroom in Suite B. Megan, you will stay with Paige and Damon in the next bedroom. Chloe and Joshua and probably Cathy will share the remaining two-bedroom Suite.”

“I’ll let you all settle in and unpack before we show you the other levels,” Marty added.

“Where’s Dave?” Anne-Marie demanded, refusing to be distracted.

“He’s in the Operations Centre up on Level 3.”

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

It was several minutes before I was able to compose myself properly and I was ashamed about my public show of emotion.

“I’m sorry, Erin.”

“Don’t be. Look, can we go somewhere and talk?”

“Yeah.”

I was led into a vacant treatment room where Hank closed the doors and stood against them while I sat down in (actually collapsed into) a chair and Erin sat on the edge of the bed.

“I know about what you do, Mindy. Hank never told me . . . I figured it out myself. Can I assume that Stephanie is one, too?”

I looked over at Hank and he nodded.

“You could,” I replied cautiously.

“She’s highly skilled but she has not been with you long; can I assume that she gained her skills somewhere else?”

“You could.”

“Can I assume that Stephanie has enemies of her own?”

I laughed.

“The list is extensive and distinguished but it was decreased by two big players a few months back.”

“The organisation that created her?”

“Gone – partly by her own hand.”

“Somebody tried to frame the girl for firearms trafficking, a few months back,” Hank informed Erin.

“Oh?”

“Frame up – but a good one. The idea was for the CPD and then ATF to crucify Stephanie – that part failed but there was a backup plan, actually two,” I explained. “The video showing her buying weapons had a teaser in it – she and a friend saw it. They acted on it in error. They met with two other kids from that organisation which created Stephanie. She got the drop on them and persuaded them to turn – only there was a backup. The kids were killed – sniper. The sniper missed Stephanie and her friend.”

“Those two kids?” Erin mused. “Their heads were almost blown clean off. The FBI removed their bodies before we could investigate; I remember it.”

“It hit Stephanie hard but she’s resilient.”

“Tell me about her.”

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“Stephanie’s favourite place is cuddled up with Dave on the sofa. While she’ll argue with me about the stupidest things, she never talks back to him or gives him a second of grief. It was Dave who found her and he rescued her. Maybe she’s just a Daddy’s girl . . . Even though she’s a killer and an expert in many forms of combat, she can be the sweetest, kindest, little girl out there. I’ve seen her treat her younger brother and sister with love and understanding, even though she is mad as hell with them both. Don’t get me wrong, if she was pissed off, she could put a bullet into the very centre of your foreheads without a second’s thought or the slightest remorse.”

“I would really like to get to know her . . . if you allowed me; she seems a wonderful little girl,” Erin said.

“She’s a Brit to the core. Her idea of a comforting snack is a plate of toast with marmite and a mug of tea. She loves to stretch out on the sofa and watch Disney Channel with her siblings. Her favourite music tends to be stuff from the 80s and 90s. She hates meatballs, but loves spaghetti Bolognese – she’s quite a good cook too; way better than me. While her cooking is palatable, her mouth even gives *me* cause to wince from time to time!”

Hank chuckled.

Safehouse Zulu

Anne-Marie headed towards the elevator they had just left.

“The other elevator – over there,” Marty pointed out.

“Thanks, Marty!”

Anne-Marie turned to her left and headed towards another kill zone. She placed her hand on the pad beside the door. The glass and steel doors slid open soundlessly so that Anne-Marie, Danny, and Megan could pass through. Once the doors closed behind them, just as soundlessly, the elevator doors opened and they entered the elevator itself and Megan pressed ‘LEVEL 3’. After the elevator doors had closed, the elevator shot upwards at speed before stopping at Level 3. They exited into another kill zone before they saw the smiling face of Dave on the other side of the armoured glass and steel. Once clear of the kill zone, the twins ran to hug their father.

“Welcome, guys – you too, Megan.”

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Dave took the kids through another kill zone to the left and then into the Operations Area. Unlike Level 1, the area was very sparsely decorated with bare concrete walls and a functional tiled carpet on the floor. The space was lit with bright white light which made the space feel very business-like.

A conference room with glass walls backed up against the kill zone. A polished, dark wood table occupied most of the space with seating for twelve and a trio of large-screen monitors were mounted on the walls. The rest of the area was giving over to the Briefing Space. There, three very large touch-screens were mounted on a wall and eighteen chairs, arranged in rows of six, faced the screens.

Beyond the Operations Area, was the Command Centre.

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The Command Centre was beyond a large partition made up from two layers of armoured glass spaced eight-inches apart, just like that at *Safehouse F*. Again, in an emergency, steel shutters would close off the Command Centre in an emergency. Dave pressed his hand against a glass pad to release the inner and outer doors which slid to one side.

“Cool!” Danny muttered.

The Command Centre was almost clinical in design. The walls to the left and right were painted a dark grey while the far wall was white with six, eight-paned, mock windows spread across the wall. Diffused light filtered through to illuminate the room. The floor was a light grey, almost white, and was made up of many 2-foot by 2-foot tiles – a computer floor.

“Not bad,” Anne-Marie commented.

“Pretty slick,” Megan agreed.

Five, large, curved desks were arranged in the shape of a pentagon. The three furthest desks, one straight ahead and the others to the left and right, were identical. Each desk had a single chair but eleven computer monitors. Five, 24-inch screens were arranged side by side on the desktop, while six, 48-inch screens were arranged in two rows of three above the lower screens with the top row angled over at 45-degrees. The remaining pair of desks were clear of conventional computer screens

but each still had a single chair. On closer inspection, those desks each contained 72" horizontal touch-screens.

"How's Steph?" Anne-Marie then demanded of Dave getting things back on track.

"I'm not going to lie to any of you; Steph is in a real bad way right now."

"When can we see her?"

"Not for a while, honey."

"I want to see her *right now!*" Anne-Marie persisted.

"Believe me, honey, you don't wanna see your sister like she is right now and I'm sure that she wouldn't want you seeing her like that, either."

"She helped me when I broke my arm – I need to be with *her.*"

"Look – she's lying on a bed and she's stark naked, with tubes and wires running into her. I know it's difficult, but give it a few days and then as soon as she is ready, we'll go see her."

Anne-Marie could be seen struggling with the perfectly reasonable comment until she finally gave in.

"*FUCK!*" she yelled before she cringed and looked up at Dave. "Sorry. . ."

"We'll let that one slide; you just voiced what we were all thinking, little one."

4500 North Winchester Avenue

The woman finished her climb to the rooftop and she looked around before she climbed up a vertical ladder onto the next level above the roof.

She paused before a point on the south-east corner and raised a portable sniper-scope on a bearing of 211-degrees. In the eye-piece, she could easily make out the police and the blue tape surrounding the scene of the shooting. The range was a very basic 307-yards; an easy shot for even the most rookie sniper.

The woman pulled out her cell.

"Go ahead!" came the familiar voice.

"Definitely a sniper; I've found the nest."

"Okay – thanks, Mathilda."

Safehouse Zulu Command Centre

Dave turned to look at Megan.

"It's a confirmed sniper."

"Shit," Megan replied, understanding the implications.

Dave walked over to one of the horizontal screens and brought up a list of *Fusion* members. He selected 'ATHENA' and then 'MOBILISE'.

"I'm moving Nightmare, Torment, and Athena to *Safehouse W*."

An hour later

"Where we going, Mom?"

"Someplace safe, Lizzie."

"What could be beside the Calumet River?" Lauren asked.

"You'll like it. . ." Emily promised.

"Is it one of Mindy's whacked out warehouses?"

"Wait and see. . ."

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The building was right on the water with a good-sized portion extending out over the water. The outside of the building was made up from apparently rusted sections of corrugated steel which made the building blend into the surroundings. Historically, the building belonged to a shipping company and barges would dock inside the building to be unloaded.

Emily Edwards made for an equally rusty-looming steel door which clicked open as they approached. Lauren frowned and went on guard as her mother pulled open the door and waved her two daughters in ahead of her. As the door closed silently behind them, lights came on and a very modern, very clean, armoured door appeared before them.

With a click, the door opened and Tommy Morgan smiled at the new arrivals.

"Come on in, ladies."

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A yacht sat in pride of place over to one side of the building. Unusually for a yacht, it was out of the water and resting in a frame on the dock. Straddling the yacht was a large boat hoist with twin six-foot-tall wheels at each corner. Three sets of bright orange webbing slings ran beneath the yacht's keel.

"Hey! I've seen that boat before," Lauren exclaimed as she laid eyes on the *Vigilante*. "Well, the schematics, at least."

The performance motor-yacht was just over sixty feet in length overall, with a 44.5-foot waterline. The 27-tonne craft had a top speed of around 32-knots. The hull was black, while the upperworks were purple, which appeared almost black in the dark. Mounted at the highest point of the yacht were a radar antenna and twin domes that housed satellite communications and navigation equipment. There were also two large whip antennae for non-satellite communications.

"That is one of the most beautiful sights that I have ever seen!" Lizzie exclaimed.

"She's nice, isn't she?" Tony Morgan, AKA Ares, grinned. "The *Vigilante* was Mindy's first boat."

“Lauren, Lizzie?” Tommy asked. “You wanna see where you’re sleeping?”

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

Ever since Hank and Erin had left, I had been alone.

I hated being alone, especially as my eldest daughter was being cut up in the operating room several floors above. I needed Dave. I needed his support. I needed his love. But I knew that there was a bigger picture and Dave was busy keeping many other people safe; I would just have to wait my turn – the needs of the many outweighed the needs of just one veteran purple vigilante and her vigilante daughter.

Then, after having waited for almost four hours, my needs were partially met as my cell rang.

“Hi, honey.”

“Dave!”

“What’s happening?”

“She’s in the OR . . . she crashed and . . . oh, God, she can’t die, Dave. She just can’t.”

“They’re doing everything that they can, I’m sure.”

“I just couldn’t bear to lose her . . . I wouldn’t know what to *do* without her in my life. . .”

“I know, honey; *Stephanie is a big part of everybody’s life.*”

Just then, a Doctor appeared and he headed directly towards Mindy.

“Dave – I need to call you back.”

“*Stay strong, honey.*”

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“Mrs Lizewski?”

“Yes.”

“Your daughter is out of surgery, Mrs Lizewski. She’s not out of the woods, not yet; she’s a very sick little girl,” the Doctor said. “She’s responding well, so her prognosis looks good. The next forty-eight hours will be critical.”

“Can I see her?” I asked – hopefully not *too* eagerly.

The Doctor grinned.

“Yes, in about half an hour. They’re going to move her to Room 28. Don’t expect her to wake up – not for a while. Her body is putting everything it has into healing itself, so don’t expect her to wake up for at least another twenty-four hours.”

“Thank you, Doctor, thank you so much – I really mean that.”

Room 28

I paced backwards and forwards outside Room 28 as I awaited Stephanie's arrival.

Finally, after what felt like hours but had only been about thirty minutes, I saw a bed being wheeled down the corridor towards me. As the bed approached, I felt trepidation about how Stephanie might look.

"Mrs Lizewski?" a nurse asked.

"Yes!"

"Here's your daughter. Please don't be alarmed; she looks much worse than she really is."

Stephanie was almost completely covered in a pure white sheet as she was wheeled past but I could make out her long blonde hair spread out liberally on the pillow despite the medical apparatus spread around her. Once the bed was pushed into place, Stephanie and the bed were connected up to the room's sensory systems.

The sheet was pulled back and folded down to reveal my daughter's torso down to her waist. My hand went to my mouth at the sight of her and I pushed back on a sob as it tried to form. The majority of Stephanie's torso was a vivid purple from the bruising and most of her chest was covered under medical dressings but there was enough skin visible to see the vivid bruising. Many wires led out from various places on her young body and connected into various monitors beside the bed. Two intravenous drips fed blood and a saline solution into her left forearm and the back of her left hand respectively.

A nasal cannula fed oxygen directly into Stephanie's nose. She appeared to be sleeping peacefully but I knew that inside, her body was fighting to heal her. I fervently hoped that her body would fight just as hard and uncompromisingly as Psyche did when she was in action. I hated seeing the ten-year-old in such a vulnerable state; her body torn and bruised by just a single bullet. She had been through so much in her short life and at that moment, she appeared frail and I hesitated to touch her once the nurses had left the room and closed the door behind them.

Nevertheless, I touched her right hand and I felt warmth on my skin. Even if outwardly asleep, Stephanie would have reacted to any touch. Her finely tuned reflexes would have brought her awake and I would have found a knife to my throat – or worse. But, instead, nothing. I felt so overwhelmed by everything.

"I can't do this alone. . ." I said out loud.

"You will never be alone," a voice said and the reassuring arms of my husband wrapped themselves around me as I began to sob uncontrollably.