

Sunday, July 3rd, 2016

**Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Room 28**

Stephanie was not moving.

Nurses were all around her and one was astride her on the bed, her arms outstretched, elbows locked, as she pushed down hard on Stephanie's chest. Another nurse had placed a mask over Stephanie's mouth and she was squeezing rhythmically to send air into Stephanie's lungs.

"What's happened?" the doctor demanded as he burst into the room.

"She went into sudden cardiac arrest . . . she complained about intense pain in her right shoulder and then she lost consciousness; she went into arrest a few seconds later," a nurse reported as a crash trolley was rushed into the small room.

Mindy quickly moved out of the way. Her face had gone very white as nearly all the blood had drained away at the sight of her daughter being mauled as the nurses fought to keep her alive.

Twenty minutes later

Dave left the elevator and he turned left towards Stephanie's room.

As he turned the last corner, he instantly went on guard; Mindy was sitting on a chair outside the room with her head in her hands and he could hear sobbing.

"Mindy?"

Mindy looked up at Dave, her expression full of sadness

"Dave, I'm so sorry – she's gone. . ."

Dave was stunned and he dropped the bag he was carrying and knelt down beside his wife for a moment before he peered into Room 28. All that could be seen was the bed, a white sheet pulled up over a small mound which lay in the centre of the bed.

"What happened?"

"She arrested . . . I was with the doctor in his office – I wasn't. . . I wasn't there. . ."

Mindy began to sob even harder.

Room 28

With a jerk, Mindy bolted upright in the chair.

She looked around with a start as she heard Dave laughing and she felt her face warming up. Even Stephanie was smiling.

"Am I that boring?" she demanded with mock annoyance.

"I must have dozed off. . ." Mindy began.

“Snoring like a rhino!” Stephanie commented.

“Nah – more like a faulty chainsaw,” Dave chuckled.

“I’m sorry – I had the worst nightmare. . .”

“You need a coffee. Shall I?”

“No – I need to stretch my legs; back in a few minutes.”

Mindy left the room and she headed for the coffee machine. Just as she was straightening out a dollar bill to insert into the infernal machine, a speaker blared.

“*Code Blue. . .*” Mindy froze and she began to turn back towards Stephanie. “*Room 17 . . . Code Blue, Room 17!*”

Mindy almost collapsed at the relief which flooded over her.

It was embarrassing falling asleep, like that, but I *was* tired and the doctor’s words in his office had reassured me greatly so I must have let my guard down.

Humiliation number seven-hundred-and-forty-seven! Putting that aside, I was over the moon to see Stephanie smiling. She still looked very poorly as I walked back into the room but the smile on her face was an awesome step forward.

“You need rest, Mum.”

“I do . . . but I don’t want to leave you.”

I received a glare from Dave and another from Stephanie.

I continued to glare at my Mum.

“I’ll be fine – I’m in a hospital; it’s not like I’m going anywhere,” I grouched. “One arm is strapped to my side, I have numerous wires super-glued to where my boobs would be, if I had boobs, and a plastic tube is stuck up my. . .”

“Okay, Stephanie – enough. . .” Dad chuckled.

“. . . twat!” I finished and Mum laughed out loud.

“Let’s go before she uses up her *entire* vulgar vocabulary!” Mum suggested.

“Oh, I have plenty more in reserve,” I retorted.

“Take care,” Mum ordered as she gave me a hug.

“What she said,” Dad added as he ruffled my hair.

“Love you both.”

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To be honest, I was glad to be alone. It had been a very busy morning what with being prodded and poked in places that I had, up until that morning, deemed private. I was also feeling a little

overwhelmed with all the attention – especially from Mindy. I knew it wasn't her fault; she was just worried about me and that made me feel good inside. Somebody loved me and I knew it was not just Mindy; it was Dave and everybody else too. It was that love between us which had allowed me to tell them how I was really feeling without feeling ashamed or shy. I felt like a sissy crying all the time but neither Dave nor Mindy laughed at me. They were just there for me which was comforting and just what I needed.

Okay, sitrep!

My upper right arm was strapped to the side of my body with a bandage which passed around my torso just below my chest and held my forearm across my stomach. I was a little annoyed that I was naked but I could live with it. My shoulder hurt like hell when my meds began to wear off but for the remainder of the time, it was just a dull throbbing which I was able to tolerate. My chest was sore from the right to the left, but mainly on the right. Just like my shoulder, when the meds wore off, it was a killer. I had not, as yet, seen my wounds but my Mum's face as the dressing had been removed that morning remained with me. I knew that it would take a lot to shock *her*!

As for the rest of my body, there was something on my left side just behind where my right hand lay but I had no idea what was there; I could just feel another dressing. I knew that somebody had been playing between my legs as I could feel something taped to my left thigh and there was something between my . . . whatevers – I knew it was a urinary catheter which kind of freaked me out a bit. It felt strange having been in bed for heading on for three days – I hated it too; I preferred to be active, not stuck in a bed like a damn potato!

I also hated the fact that I had spent an inordinate amount of time crying and I felt ashamed about feeling scared. I had no reason to be scared; I was better than that. I was a *Predator*. I was *Psyche*. I was a member of *Fusion*. Only the whole shooting thing had frightened me to death. I had been hurt before but nothing so major. I knew enough to know that I should have died – in fact, I *had* died . . . once. It had hit me like a brick wall at 90 miles-per-hour; I was mortal. Ever since I had killed that girl in the shower, I had seen myself as immortal.

I could feel the tears running down my face as I considered how close to death I had come. I did not want to die; I had my whole life before me. I had a family. I had everything. I had almost lost everything and everybody that I cared about. I felt myself drifting into the doldrums and I cried even more.

Then something really good happened . . .

“Saoirse!”

“How's the Phase 2 reject?”

“Let's not go there – how about the Phase 3 fuck up?”

I tried not to notice the tears running down Stephanie's cheeks and the sad, depressed look on her face.

“I'm okay. Believe it, or not, I miss you.”

“Bullshit!” Stephanie retorted as she wiped away her tears with her left hand.

“Shit getting you down?” I asked as I sat down on a chair beside the bed.

I cringed at the sight of the bruising above Stephanie's dressings.

"That bad, eh?"

"Yes – it is."

"This must make you happy, Saoirse, seeing me like this," Stephanie offered with a grin.

"Don't even fucking joke about it, Stephanie!" I replied angrily.

I had cried my eyes out when I had heard about Stephanie being shot. Stephanie was only joking but it was very close to the mark – too close.

"Six months ago, I would have liked nothing less than to see you dead, or in a bed like you are now. Ever since I stopped trying to kill you, you've been so kind to me. You allowed me to stay in your room. You allowed me to sleep in your bed. You helped me through a lot of shit and I owe you everything, Steph. Now, I want to help *you*. Talk to me."

"I feel like crap and I hate being cooped up in here."

I reached over and took Stephanie's left hand – it was shaking as she cried again. I hated to see her like that. Normally she was a gobby bitch, always smiling and winding people up and we were like sisters as we both caused trouble together.

"It's gonna be hard, Steph, but I'm going to be with you, every step of the way."

"Promise?" Stephanie's voice wavered a little and Saoirse's heart went out to her former enemy.

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"You're going to regret it."

"You're going to be fine, Steph."

"I'm gonna be a disaster."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm in a hospital, for fuck's sake!"

I laughed; I liked to see the old Stephanie – belligerent and unyielding. I was frightened for her; I knew it would be a ferocious uphill struggle, like nothing she had faced before. I had witnessed kids shot and the aftermath. . . I knew that Stephanie was a tough young girl and I knew that as a person, she was well able to handle everything before her.

"I feel so weak and helpless and I'm always crying. I've never felt like this before; I couldn't even feed myself this morning – just like yesterday. I felt so ashamed having Mum stuff jelly in my mouth and then some crappy porridge, this morning."

"Steph, you're one of the strongest people I know. You've been through three years of hell and survived. If anybody can do it, you can. I hate to say this and if you tell *anybody*, I'll deny it; but . . . there are times that I envy you."

"Me?"

"You have a perfect life, now, and you handled being a *Predator* way better than I did."

I intended to make it as easy for her as I humanly could and I knew that I was not alone.

That afternoon

***Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Room 28***

As we walked up the corridor, they saw Saoirse leaving Room 28.

“Hi, guys,” she said.

“How is she?” Mindy asked.

“She’s sleeping – been asleep for about two hours.”

“Thanks, Saoirse, you’re a really great friend.”

“No sweat, Mindy.”

Mindy smiled as she walked past, entourage in tow, then Saoirse turned.

“Mindy?”

“Yeah, SD?”

“Thanks . . . for everything.”

Saoirse blushed as she said it and then turned and headed for the exit before Mindy could respond. Dave looked over at Mindy who just shrugged.

“Now, don’t go waking your sister, please,” Dave warned the two tearaways as they all entered Room 28.

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“Holy, shit!” Anne-Marie almost exploded when she saw her big sister.

“She looks bad,” Danny agreed.

“She is bad, Danny, she is,” Dave commented quietly.

Anne-Marie went around the bed and peered at her sister’s bruises. Sadness and compassion spread across the eight-year-old’s face and she looked up at her Dad.

“She will get better, right, Dad?”

“I hope so, honey, I really do. The bullet did a lot of damage to her insides and it will take months for her to heal fully. She will need your love and understanding as she heals. She will be very frustrated and she may say things she doesn’t really mean – always remember that,” Dave said as he crouched down to look into his daughter’s concerned eyes.

“Will she still be the same?” Danny asked.

“Yes, she’ll still be the same foul-mouthed, little bitch,” Mindy told her son.

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“Somebody talking about me?” a sleepy voice queried from the bed.

Anne-Marie and Danny turned to see their sister looking at them. She looked very tired and her eyes had lost their usual sparkle. The twins appeared apprehensive about approaching their sister but they moved forwards none the less. Stephanie smiled happily as she saw who her visitors were.

“Hi, guys,” she whispered.

“Hi, Steph,” Anne-Marie began. “You look really bad.”

“Thanks – I think.”

“I didn’t mean. . .”

“I know. I feel pretty crappy and I know I must look like shit, Anne-Marie. I’m just really happy that you all came to see me.”

“We’ve missed you, Steph,” Danny said slowly.

“I’ve missed you all – I hate being here.”

“I can believe that,” Anne-Marie stated. “I was really scared when I saw you covered in blood. . .”

Stephanie reached out and she grasped her little sister’s hand. Anne-Marie was rather surprised at how weak her big sister’s grip was. She decided that Psyche or not, Rogue could put her big sister down with one hand tied behind her back. As she squeezed Stephanie’s left hand the older girl sniffed back some tears which Anne-Marie never noticed but Mindy did; Mindy missed nothing.

“Just saw Saoirse – is everything okay?” Mindy asked.

“Yeah – I was really pleased to see her. We chatted for a while and then I felt tired and I fell asleep.”

Stephanie never mentioned the fact that she had held Saoirse’s hand until she had fallen asleep.

The following morning

Monday, July 4th

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

Room 28

Nobody was in much of a celebrating mood, besides, ever since Fusion’s British connections had grown, Mindy had decided it was in bad taste – not that Joshua had ever complained.

Rather than spend the night with Stephanie, Mindy had chosen to spend the evening with the twins and Dave at Safehouse Zulu. That morning, Mindy returned to the hospital with the twins and Megan in tow. However, Stephanie was not in a very receptive mood and Mindy was very worried.

“Can’t I be left in fucking peace?” Stephanie moaned as everybody entered.

“I thought you’d be pleased to see us,” Mindy suggested.

“Well I’m not.”

“Not even happy to see *me*?” Megan asked.

“Should I be?” came the tart response.

“What the fuck’s up with her?” Megan asked Mindy who just shrugged.

“Megan, why don’t you take the twins to get a soda?”

“Okay.”

Once Megan and the twins had left the room, Mindy turned on her daughter.

“What *has* got into you?” Mindy demanded.

“A bullet, apparently.”

“Stephanie!”

“I need to get out of here.”

“You need to rest.”

“I hate it here.”

“I know you are frustrated. . .”

“You know *nothing* about me!”

“You’re my daughter. . .”

“No, I’m not! I’m just some shitty wretch you scooped up off the damn pavement like a fresh, steaming, dog turd.”

“What!”

“Why do you care? I am nothing to you – I am nothing – I . . .”

Stephanie lay back in the bed and her face scrunched up in obvious pain. Then she yelled out in pain before she started to shake. Mindy stabbed the emergency call button that lay on Stephanie’s pillow just as Megan and the twins returned. That was the moment when Stephanie screamed out and then went silent and very still.

Two nurses burst in the door and Mindy shoved Anne-Marie and Danny out of the way. One nurse checked Stephanie’s carotid artery in her neck.

“No pulse!” the nurse called out as she hit an illuminated blue button labelled ‘CODE’ above the bed and Mindy’s nightmare became all too real.

“Code Blue, Room 28 . . . Code Blue, Room 28!”

One nurse yanked back the sheet and began to compress Stephanie’s chest. Megan screamed out as three of Stephanie’s ribs audibly snapped under the pressure being exerted by the nurse. A doctor arrived next and took charge.

“Hold!” she called out and the nurse stopped compressions while the doctor checked the monitor.

“There we go. . .”

The nurses stood back while the doctor checked the carotid artery again and then listened to Stephanie’s chest.

“Let’s get her up to CT!”

The nurses rapidly disconnected wires and tubes from the panels above the bed and reconnected some into a portable monitor before opening the room doors wide and wheeling the bed with Stephanie out of the room.

“What’s going on?” Mindy demanded in horror at the rapid change in events.

“She arrested. We’re sending her for a CT scan to find out why,” the doctor said as she headed after Stephanie.

Anne-Marie was speechless with tears streaming down her face and she gripped tightly onto her brother and Megan.

“What the fuck just happened?” Megan breathed.

Morton Grove

“It’s not fair!”

Joshua was getting his Initial Licence on Thursday.

“He’s older than you, honey.”

“P – l – e – a – s – e . . . I’ll be the best daughter ever . . . I’ll never be bad – ever. . .”

“Like that would ever happen!” Curtis muttered with a grin.

Chloe opened her mouth to retort but she closed it and smiled sweetly.

“She’s making me feel sick. . .” Curtis added.

“She *is* being more loving and sweet than usual,” Mom agreed.

“Aw, come on – I’m being a perfect lady about this,” I tried.

“Why would I want to sign anything that says I am: ‘legally responsible for the below mentioned minor’?”

“Because you love me and you’re the greatest Mommy ever. . .”

“I’m gonna throw up!” Curtis growled.

“Pretty please. . .”

“You’re right Curtis; this is making me feel queasy too. . .”

Mom finished filling in the form and I held my breath as she signed it.

“YES!” I exclaimed.

What had made me literally grovel? Mom was filling in my Form DSD X 174 . . . It gave consent for me to DRIVE as Chloe Bennett! I had gained my instruction permit when I had turned fifteen and in another month, after turning sixteen and having completed *fifty* hours of practice driving and a Drivers-Ed course, I could get my Initial Licence. Okay, I had been driving for a while, as Shadow, and on public roads, and at high speed, and I had crashed a car *and* two motorcycles – another advantage of the licence was that I could get it endorsed so I could ride a motorcycle as *me*, as Chloe Bennett.

I was so excited; my next appointment was with Joshua to ease my built-up tension. I crossed my legs and Curtis raised an eyebrow as Mom's cell rang.

"Mindy. . . Calm down – tell me. . ."

My smile faded and so did my cousin's. I saw Mom's face go pale as she listened to Mindy for a few minutes before she returned her cell to her pocket.

"Stephanie's been rushed back into the OR after her heart stopped."

Three days later

Thursday, July 7th

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

Room 28

"Hi, Stephanie, I'm Doctor Natalie Manning. I'm a paediatrician here at Northwestern."

"Hello."

"You've had a bad week, so far, but it appears that the worst is now behind you. Now we've removed that fragment of bone which was crushing your artery you are expected make a perfect recovery. It will be hard – I won't lie to you about that – but I understand you're a strong little girl."

Stephanie smiled as the Doctor made some annotations on her notes.

"I don't remember very much of Monday, or much else until last night," Stephanie admitted.

"You were out of it from when you crashed to when the anaesthetic wore off sometime yesterday afternoon. You've had three operations to repair some more damage which Doctor Salmon found after opening you up again."

"I'm hungry."

"How'd you fancy some oatmeal – your Mom said you aren't all that keen on Jello?"

"Yes, please. Can I feed myself?"

"You can try. Your right arm is still immobilised but if you feel strong enough. . ."

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"Ready for breakfast?"

"Mum!"

Mindy sat down on the bed beside her daughter and smiled. She gently stroked Stephanie's long blonde hair and her cheek.

"You feeling better?"

"I think so."

"Here."

Mindy placed a bowl of oatmeal before her daughter and then passed over a spoon. Stephanie picked up the spoon unused to using her left hand. Her fingers refused to work correctly but after a few frustrating minutes, she was able to scoop out some oatmeal and raise it to her mouth. Her hand was shaking which made the usually simple task a lot harder. Mindy did not intercede despite the looks of intense concentration and frustration that crossed her daughter's face as she tried to feed herself.

Finally, Stephanie succeeded and the look of success and jubilation on her face almost made Mindy cry but she had no idea why. Once started, Stephanie began to shovel the oatmeal in her mouth as fast as her shaking hand would manage.

"That was good," Stephanie said as she put the spoon back down. "Thank you."

"Whatever it takes, remember?"

"Whatever it takes," Stephanie confirmed with a grin before she sagged back onto the pillow, exhausted. "Whatever . . . it . . ."

Stephanie was asleep before she could finish the sentence.

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"She finished it all?" Doctor Manning asked.

"All of it – she fed herself, too."

"Very good – we'll have her home before the end of the month. When did you last eat, Mrs Lizewski?"

Mindy frowned.

"I don't know. . ."

"Here."

Doctor Manning handed over two packs of sandwiches which Mindy almost ripped open in her desire for food.

"Your health is just as important as your daughter's. She can't heal properly if you become ill."

"Yes . . . doctor." Mindy mumbled between bites, too hungry to argue the point.

That afternoon

"Joshua!"

"Hi, kid. Sorry I couldn't get here sooner."

"What the fuck are those?"

"Flowers. . ."

"What do you think I am?"

"A girl."

"I am not . . . okay . . . nice colours – what are they?"

"Electric blue galaxy Dendrobium orchids."

"Cool . . . thanks!"

"Anything for my little pal."

Stephanie scowled as a thought came to her.

"What day is it, Mum?"

"Thursday."

"Date!"

"July 7th – why?"

Stephanie grinned and reached over to Joshua.

"Happy Birthday, Joshua."

"Thanks, Steph."

"You having a party?" Stephanie asked dejectedly.

"No – I've postponed it till next month. Me and Chloe will have one together. That means you'll be there – no party without my pal."

Stephanie appeared to dissolve into tears and she refused to let go of Joshua's arm as she sobbed. Joshua looked up at Mindy in confusion. Mindy just shrugged.

"I just miss everybody. . ."

That evening

Safehouse F

It was time to get back out into the City.

Voight had not found anything and as far as he could tell there were no pending attacks on *Fusion* beyond what we normally coped with every day. Shadow and Jackal were out checking on the situation. Everybody else was trying to get back to normal. The intention was to return to our own homes by the weekend. Fellowes and Murphy had been patrolling our homes looking for anything untoward but nobody appeared to be monitoring anywhere that we usually frequented.

While I worried about Stephanie almost every waking minute (I had nightmares every sleeping one), I still found the downtime therapeutic in some warped way. There was a lot of anger as everybody trained and a strategy was built. I had toured all the Safehouses with Marty to ensure that nothing had been compromised. Abby had set her Synthesis minions to work digging into the internet and the dark web to find out anything they could about a hit on a young girl in Chicago. Mathilda was scouring Chicago's underworld looking for information there. Tommy was assisting her with his in-depth knowledge of the Russian side of the underworld.

I was on the mat with Megan, when Abby yelled my name.

"Mindy!"

I ran into the Command Centre and Abby looked upset.

“Shadow’s been injured – she’s on the way back in with Jackal. . .”

The wait was interminable but finally, Abby yelled out that they were coming down the ramp. Hailee and Saoirse were there and they both grabbed Shadow’s motorcycle as she almost fell off it. Jackal parked his own machine rapidly and jumped off. He picked Shadow up like she weighed nothing and carried her through the barrier and onto the mat. Abby screamed.

There was an arrow embedded in the armour of Shadow’s left thigh.