

The following evening
Saturday, July 9th, 2016

Safehouse Zulu

The subterranean bunker was busy.

Battle Guy was making final preparations for the night's activities. Everybody had been activated and the city would be *very* busy. The city would also be *very* safe – for most . . . but *very* deadly for the rest.

On the lowest level of Zulu, *Mirage* was being loaded. Nobody would pay much attention to a blue Ford Transit 150 exiting from the parking lot of a small shopping mall. In the driver's seat of the covert surveillance van, Mist sat ready. Behind her, in the rear, sat Splinter, Nightmare, and Eisenhower.

Lynx handed over the last of the ammunition and weapons and she slammed the side door shut.

Earlier that evening

Erika's Apartment

"Where were you, for the past week, Erika?" Toni demanded as Erika walked into the living room of the apartment that they both shared. "It was like you went underground, or something."

Erika smirked.

"Something like that. I told you, I had to go out of town to see my parents."

"I missed you. . ."

Toni kissed Erika on the lips and ran the fingers of her left hand over Erika's right breast. Erika breathed in as she returned the favour but with a hand on Toni's snatch.

"I gotta go, hun. . ."

"What – you only just. . ."

Erika laid a finger on Toni's lips.

"I'll be back before you know it – I promise."

Toni moaned.

"I need you," she said meaningfully.

Safehouse W

The *Vigilante* was back in the water and ready in all respects for sea.

Ares and Athena, along with Torment were standing by to get underway. They would wait until it was truly dark before heading up the Calumet River in case they were needed. The craft needed a check-ride after the refit to ensure that she was working perfectly.

The three of them expected to have themselves a peaceful evening.

Safehouse F

Hal stepped out of the Command Center and she raised her hand.

“Go get ‘em!” she yelled and the Safehouse reverberated to motorcycle engines as Hit Girl, Kick-Ass, Jackal, Petra, and Raven started their engines.

Hal hit the button for the door and a minute later the noise diminished as the motorcycles ascended the concrete ramp. The high-speed fans in the ceiling drew out the clouds of carbon monoxide and Hal settled down to a night of monitoring her friends.

Chicago was going to be a hive of activity.

Safehouse D

“Let’s roll!” Shadow growled as Hawk gunned the engine in *Brute*.

“You sure about this?” Wildcat asked.

“You know she’s fucking nuts!” Trojan replied.

“Why did I agree to this?” Leon moaned as she ran her eyes across the dashboard before her. “It’s like Darth Vader’s bathroom!”

“You’ll be fine!” Battle Guy chuckled from Zulu. “Just get Z.O.E. moving!”

“Mathilda Lando, a lone crusader in a dangerous world. The world. . . of the vigilante!”

“Yeah, yeah!” Wildcat growled. “Get a fucking move on!”

With the squeal of protesting rubber, the rebuilt, gloss-black, 1982 Pontiac Trans Am powered out of the Safehouse with Wildcat and Trojan following on behind providing close escort.

Brute followed suit but Hawk turned the armoured vehicle in another direction.

That same time

Safehouse Q

Marc Ryan was getting moody.

Two weeks. He had been stuck in the house for two whole weeks. Okay, he had three beautiful girls to talk with but he just wanted to get out of the house. His wound was healing well and Dr Bennett had visited every couple of days to change his dressings. Both Marc and Sarah had known of the twin girls, Sky and Christina.

“Damn psychos!” Sarah had growled.

Sky had laughed at the reference.

“We had a reputation,” Christina had chuckled in confirmation.

The four of them found that they got on well together and they had quickly become friends. The fun had ended very quickly after a visit from Megan. She had told them that one of the other *Predators*, Stephanie, had been shot. All four teenagers had thought themselves safe only for that illusion to be shattered in a very violent fashion. Naturally, all four of them had immediately offered their help which Megan had politely declined – for the moment.

At first, Sarah had felt a slight satisfaction at hearing about Stephanie but almost immediately, she had felt bad about the thought and very worried about the *ex-Predator*. Stephanie had been right, they needed to stick together as much as possible.

Safehouse Zulu

Damon Williams was a little over six weeks old and he had just smiled for the first time only the night before while studying his big sister, Megan.

Marcus and Paige had been over the moon and both had started talking about two other little girls and their first smiles. For both Megan *and* Mindy, it had been a *very* embarrassing forty minutes! For the moment, Damon lay in his carry cot listening to his niece and nephew as they sparred together.

Anne-Marie and Danny had the job of looking after Damon, under the watchful eyes of Paige. Despite a ‘no fighting’ rule for most of the Safehouse, the twins were sparring in the Recreational Space on Level 1. Danny had the upper hand as he kicked his sister’s legs out from under her. Anne-Marie did not go down quietly; she yelled at her brother and made an attempt at sweeping out *his* legs. Danny was ready for the attack and he jumped upwards and then came down on top of his twin. Anne-Marie punched Danny in the stomach causing him to roll off her in pain. She jumped up and kicked him in the left thigh before he rolled out of her reach and scrambled to his feet.

“Not bad, Scrappy!” Danny laughed.

“I ain’t even started, Tinkerbelle!” Anne-Marie retorted.

Danny ran at his sister and just as he reached her, she sidestepped – but he had expected the move and he deftly adjusted, seizing hold of her and pushing her onto the couch where she landed heavily with a scream. He moved in to attack again. . .

“Okay, sparring is over!” Paige called out before anybody got seriously hurt – one kid in hospital was more than enough. “Both of you – go shower and then I’ve got some work to keep you both occupied and out of trouble.”

The two eight-year-olds ran off laughing.

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Paige then turned her attentions towards the scufflings on the other side of the large open space where Razor and Kiara were play fighting. The dogs seemed to have got the idea from the twins and there had been much growling, whining, and some yelping as the two six-month-old German Shepherd dogs rolled around the floor as Hercules and Hope just lay down and watched their siblings make fools of themselves.

Just as Paige headed over to break up the friendly squabble, Horatio decided to attack his pal and Razor yelped as several needle-like claws dug into his side. Razor barked at the diminutive ginger

puss who hissed and bolted for the Galley with Razor in hot pursuit. Kiara just lay on the floor, her four paws in the air and her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth.

Paige caught up with the cat and dog pursuit in the Galley where she found the two furry, four-legged friends wolfing down some liquid sustenance after their brief burst of exercise. Horatio lapped at his kitty milk while Razor slurped noisily at some cold water in a large metal bowl.

Paige just shook her head and grabbed a refill for her coffee.

South Kedzie Avenue & West 26th Street

Hit Girl studied the interior of her visor as she heard a beep and then read a brief text message which appeared on the HUD before her eyes.

'Got info. Worm.'

"Okay – time to see our Worm!" Hit Girl announced and the five motorcycles turned east.

McKinley Park

Worm was a little more skittish than usual.

"I know you're upset about something – at least that is the general vibe around Chicago."

"Oh?"

"Your people have been very angry and they've been very forceful about their enquiries."

"Sniper attack – a week ago, . . ."

"The little girl? That was a stupid thing. . ."

"Get on with it!"

"Nobody has taken responsibility for the attack. Targeting kids is bad, Hit Girl; nobody wants a part of it."

"So, you have *nothing!*"

"Sorry, Hit Girl – saving the best for last. . . bad idea – but here it is: he calls himself a 'Corsair'; he was wounded during your attack at the silos. I heard where he is staying. . ."

"Now, that's my Worm!"

With my cash pot a thousand bucks lighter, we headed to the address Worm had given us. En route, I decided to check in on the twins – in hindsight probably not the best idea!

"Hi, Hit Girl – all's good," Lynx commented over the radio.

I wasn't buying it.

"You think I was born yesterday, Lynx?"

“Okay – the mutts are fighting and the kitty is trying to show who’s the boss . . . hold on . . . Ravage! Give Rogue back her towel . . . and her underwear . . . no, she can’t run around naked. My God, they’re worse than Wildcat!”

“You seem to have everything under control.”

“Horatio. . .! When will you be getting back here?”

“Sorry, Lynx – you’re breaking up . . . call you later!”

“All good?” Kick-Ass enquired.

“Probably. . .” I commented in reply.

Mid-April, 2014

An unknown location in the USA

The days immediately after ‘the killing in the shower’, as most seemed to refer to it, were a combination of weird events and a complete change in my lifestyle – only, not all for good.

Nobody yelled at me when I cried at night – very few people even spoke to me. Each morning, when I went for a shower, my arrival in the showers would herald a surge of naked girls dashing *out* of the showers. I did not complain; I had the whole place to myself; my first private showers in months. At breakfast, in the past, I had always found it difficult to find a place – even for a skinny eight-year-old. Suddenly, entire swathes of table became available to me – it was like I had the plague or something.

In a way, I began to miss the bullying – I had become Little Miss Invisible which was a little bit depressing. On the funny side, I had kids almost twice my age giving me a wide berth in the corridors and elsewhere in the facility. I also suffered a lack of partners in sparring sessions – normally, they *fought* over who would get to spar against me; they loved to hurt me – but not anymore; they all thought I’d kill them!

Slowly, over a period of a couple of weeks, some girls began to graduate towards me. Mostly girls of eight and nine who were bullied, much in the same way I had been. I assumed that they thought being associated with me might give them some form of protection. There were four girls, three were Americans – apparently, the other Brits saw me as a traitor – and the other was a young French girl called Yvette. The American girls were called Jasmine, Ruth, and Maxine. Ruth was closer to nine while the others were just eight, like me.

Yvette spoke very little English which suited me as I spoke very little French. She said I was ‘incroyable’ – apparently, that meant ‘amazing’. She was a nice enough girl with long, jet-black hair and pale green eyes. Jasmine was the youngest and she seemed to see me as somebody special – well, maybe I *was* special as I *did* have my codename. That made me grin, even after a few weeks had passed. It kind of made everything worthwhile – all the suffering – in a warped kind of way.

Not that my codename improved my behaviour any.

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“Walker!”

“Sir!”

“Are you listening?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t think you are, young lady.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Alright! *‘An ambush is a surprise attack by fire from concealed positions on a moving or temporarily halted enemy’* – happy?”

“Less of the insolence, young lady!”

“Fucking retarded dipshit!” I growled under my breath and Jasmine giggled.

“I am *not* going to warn you again, Walker!”

“Yes, sir – sorry, sir.”

“Okay, back to ambushes. . .”

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“He really rubs me the wrong way,” I moaned as we left the classroom forty minutes later.

“I hate him,” Jasmine agreed.

“He’s no worse than the rest,” Maxine warned.

“C’est un méchant homme,” Yvette added.

“Huh?” Ruth asked.

I laughed.

“She says that the cunt is a bad cunt!” I explained.

“Instructor Graham?” An older boy asked with a smirk which goaded me into continuing my insults.

“Yeah,” I replied. “He’s a dumb fuck. . .”

Ruth had gone white and Yvette was shaking her head violently but like a dumb idiot, I ploughed on oblivious as the boy encouraged me.

“Instructor Graham is a grade one cunt fuck, and as far as I am concerned, he can go shit on a fucking stick!”

“Is that so, Walker!”

I span around to find myself face to face with Instructor Graham, himself, and he seemed a little annoyed. Everybody fled as the man grabbed hold of my sweatshirt and he dragged me down the corridor. I was for it – and in a big fucking way.

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I was thrown across a desk in a classroom as the door was slammed behind us.

“Time for you to be taught some manners, you little bitch. Grab the end of the table and you let go, you get a whole lot more!”

I began to shake with fear as all my bravado vanished within just a millisecond and I grabbed hold of the end of the table. As I did so, I felt a hand grab hold of the waistband of my joggers and those of my knickers, at the back, and then yank them down to my ankles. I gritted my teeth and pressed my forehead down against the table top.

The leather strap bit into the soft skin of my right buttock and I screamed out as the sensation surged through me. I had never felt anything like it but before I could come to terms with that first strike, the next struck my left buttock and I screamed out again. I struggled to take a breath as I fought against the agony from my burning backside. Four more, two on each buttock, and it was over.

I barely heard the bastard as he whispered in my ear: “Don’t you ever disrespect me again, Walker!”

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I struggled to move as I sobbed into the desk. My arms hurt from gripping the table. It took many minutes before I was able to regain my feet and then I yelled out in pain again as I tried to bend down to pull up my knickers and joggers. Once that agonising task was completed, I wiped my eyes on the sleeve of my sweatshirt and opened the classroom door. I felt so angry and very humiliated by my treatment – not that I could do anything about it; the world of the *Predator* was a harsh one.

I turned right to head directly back to the dormitory – I needed somewhere I could collapse and cry. But, before I had gone far, I met a smirking older girl.

“Bet that smarted, Walker!” the thirteen-year-old girl sneered.

I was in no mood for *anybody*, so I strode directly up to the girl and I yanked down on her sweatshirt bringing her face down to my own height.

“Look, Hampton, you wanna be a clown?”

Hampton looked around at the other kids as they gathered to watch the impromptu entertainment.

“Fuck you, Walker – you ain’t gonna kill me!”

“If you’re going to be a clown, you need a big red nose. . .”

I rammed my fist into the shocked teenager’s face and she screamed out in pain as her nose exploded and blood went in all directions.

“You fucking little *bitch!*” Sarah Hampton growled but before I could do anything, my ‘crew’ appeared and they quickly dragged me away from the scene and an impending pounding from the thirteen-year-old Phase 3 *Predator*.

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I struggled to sleep that night and I woke up most of the dormitory when I went to the toilet for a wee. The following morning saw a very subdued Psyche keeping well away from others and not going out of her way to cause shit. I spent most classes hovering over my chair as sitting was unbelievably painful. The girls each took the opportunity to check out my strap marks and bruises when I showered the following evening.

“Mon Dieu!” Yvette commented in shock at the sight of my red, blue, and black buttocks.

Hampton would glower at me whenever our paths crossed and in general I kept away from her for my own self-preservation. Not that that worked. A week later, the girl still had a red nose and a major sense of humour failure. She cornered me – alone.

“I owe you something, Walker, and it’s going to hurt you a lot more than it’s going to hurt me. . .”

I did not wait to find out what she had planned – I whipped out a small switch-blade knife and slashed the girl on her left side. The knife skimmed her, cutting through her sweatshirt and I heard a scream as the blade found skin.

Not surprisingly, I was punished.

I received two strikes with a strap on my bare arse – for carrying a knife. Sarah Hampton also received the strap – *three* times – for allowing herself, a Phase 3 *Predator*, to be slashed by a Phase 2 *Predator*.

I never saw the girl again as she was transferred soon after her strapping.

Saturday, July 9th, 2016

***Northwestern Memorial Hospital
Room 28***

I was bored and my mind had wandered back over two years into my distant past – well, distant for a ten-year-old!

I smiled at the thought of my triumphs and grimaced at the thought of my impressive downfalls. I actually wriggled my bottom on the bed and I felt like I could feel the strap marks which were still faintly visible on my fair skinned backside. To be honest, I had forgotten much of my past – and for good reason, too. There had been pain and tragedy, some more pain, and also some pain. Did I mention pain?

Ever since other *Predators* had started to appear out of the woodwork, my long-term memory had begun to return – in part. Unfortunately, I had not been able to select what memories were restored and in which order. Sarah’s arrival had brought many memories to the fore, including my first appointment with the strap and my journey of self-destruction which resulted in a much more severe punishment which indirectly led me to be the *Predator* that I ultimately became.

I began to feel depressed as I thought about what led to *that* punishment . . . but I was then rudely interrupted!

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“Got time for some visitors?” a voice called out as the door was pushed open.

I was very surprised by my visitors – not to mention the time. But then I remembered what they used to be and that sneaking into a hospital after visiting hours was literally child’s play!

“Hi, Sarah – come in, please.”

“How you doing, shorty?” Chrissy smiled.

"I'm doing good, Chrissy, thanks . . . hi, Sky . . . hi, Marc."

"We just wanted to see how our fellow *Predator* was doing."

"Thanks, Marc – err . . . does Mindy know you lot are out?"

"You think we can't handle Chicago?" Sarah queried.

"Actually, I was more worried about what effect four *Predators* at large might have on Chicago!" I quipped.

"Too true," Chrissy laughed.

As I looked at the four laughing teenagers, I felt pleased. Without *Fusion*, without Mindy, what life might those four kids have had? I felt sorry for the two older girls; they had fallen victim to Shadow and her bō-staff. Marc was still recovering from his bullet wound, but it was nothing like my own. Sarah was intact – physically at least. I had heard about what she had been going through when she was rescued; horrible. . .

"We hear that you're past the worst," Marc commented as he came to sit on the edge of my bed.

"I bloody well hope so," I growled. "I want to get out there and start to tear limb from bloody limb!"

"That's the Psyche we all know and love," Sky offered with a friendly smile.

I laughed but then grimaced at the pain which shot through my busted ribs.

"Sorry!" Sky said with her own grimace.

"I'm fine – they snapped three of my ribs while resuscitating me the other day," I explained before I turned my head to look at Sarah. "I was just remembering our meeting in the corridor and later . . . when I slashed you."

Sarah winced and subconsciously rubbed her nose.

"My big gob got me into trouble, didn't it! If I had kept my mouth shut then you wouldn't have broken my nose, nor would I have got myself slashed and then strapped."

"You broke her nose, too?" Marc exclaimed.

"I'd like to say it was an accident. . ."

"*Nothing* you do is accidental," Sky commented dryly.

I tried to come up with a witty answer, but I failed and I just grinned stupidly instead.

"You know – at the time, it pissed me off no end that you never got The Cage. Even now, it rankles a bit," Sarah commented. "You were a wild animal, Steph; you reacted with your fists whenever anybody wound you up. Excluding me, and that girl in the shower, . . ."

Stephanie grinned sweetly.

". . . you broke that ten-year-old boy's arm, then you broke two ribs on that twelve-year-old girl, and that was only while I was at the same centre as you. You kept the Hospital Wing in business, girl!"

Chrissy gave Stephanie an approving look. Stephanie did not seem happy about Sarah's description of her.

"I don't know what was wrong with me – maybe it was the attention, or the lack of it. I began to lay out a path of self-destruction which, you will be pleased to know, led me to spend two weeks in The Cage."

"Two weeks?" Marc demanded. "What did you do?"

Stephanie grimaced and her face took on a pained expression as she thought back to those horrific events when she was just eight-years-old.

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"I was stupid. I allowed those bastards to get to me – I let my guard down, badly. It started with my just being insolent to the instructors – they tolerated that for a while and some even laughed at my nifty behaviour. But then I took things too far – I began to ignore my conscience; I went against all reason. In hindsight I am shocked by my behaviour and my own total lack of regard for my own personal safety. Maybe I wanted them to kill me – I don't know. The instructors began to get annoyed with me – I'd receive a tap from a baton. That tap would increase to a blow. I gathered bruises all over my body until one day, they had pushed me too far.

"It was that bastard, Graham. He was the instructor who took the strap to me, the very first time. I hated him because of that and because he seemed to enjoy tormenting an eight-year-old little girl called Stephanie Walker. Yes, I had my codename, but all that seemed to do was paint a target on my back for that bastard to hit. I turned the beatings around and used them to give me the gall to cause more shit. I'd get beaten for answering back to an instructor. I would get beaten for taking a sparring session too far. I would get beaten for being too cocky for my own good. It all came to a head, one Saturday afternoon."

Mid-June, 2014

An unknown location in the USA

It was Yvette that first noticed Stephanie's behaviour going deep into the danger zone.

The other girls did their best to warn Stephanie off but Stephanie was the boss and nobody dared to argue with her, especially when she got 'that look'. On the Saturday afternoon, 'that look' was back and Yvette nudged Ruth.

"She is going to, err – faire quelque chose de mal . . . do something bad, yes?"

Ruth studied Stephanie's expression and she flinched away at the sight of it. She nodded and tried to grab Stephanie's arm. Stephanie lashed out and struck Ruth in the face. Ruth screamed out in pain which attracted the attention of Instructor Graham. He advanced on Stephanie and brandished his baton.

"You don't learn, girl, do you?" he growled angrily.

"Fuck you!" Stephanie responded as she glared up at her tormentor.

There was a massive intake of breath from the two-dozen or so kids in the room that afternoon.

Nobody said that to an instructor – and lived. . . The instructor's face went a strange puce colour as

his anger built. His hands flexed for a moment before he turned and picked up his baton. None of the other kids dared to breath as the six-foot man approached the four-foot slim, blonde girl who just glared insolently up at the approaching pain.

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Not many of the kids there had any liking for the girl known as Stephanie 'Psyche' Walker. They saw her as a show-off, a violent psychopath, or just a fucked-up nutcase, among many other crude and nasty comments about the young Brit. Nonetheless, they all cringed in horror while the eight-year-old girl screamed out in pain as the baton cracked across her body and she fell to the ground, writhing in agony. After a dozen strikes, the instructor stepped back to admire his handy work.

Stephanie Walker was bleeding from several cuts on her face and tears poured down her face. Everybody thought that that was it, but no, the young girl was not finished – not by a long shot. Psyche struggled to her feet, her face a mask of hatred and filled with a hunger for revenge. She strode towards her attacker before she executed a perfect spinning kick and the baton fell to the ground. The instructor was incensed at the attack but also very surprised – no kid had *ever* turned on an instructor before.

His hesitation cost him as Stephanie swept up the baton and she belted him around the head – once, twice, three times. The next blow took the man in the stomach followed up by a blow to the area between his legs. Instructor Graham yelled out and went down hard as he used his hands to cover his torso and protect himself from the blows which rained down on him.

The worm had most definitely turned!

Saturday, July 9th, 2016

South-eastern Chicago

The man was very down about his lot in life.

He had somehow got himself wrapped up with some major criminal shit and, as a result, he had found himself up against Hit Girl and her minions. At the time, they had all seen themselves onto a winner; they had outnumbered *Fusion*, ten to one. Only, Hit Girl did not appear to listen to odds – she just killed every fucker that came her way. Ned had been shot, twice, in the left leg and then his life had gone down the tubes even further. His day job as a security guard was at risk as he could not 'perform' thanks to his wounds and he also had a bitch of a masked boss who wanted him back to work at night.

The idea of being a hired gun had appealed to Ned and the awesome-looking armour had pretty much sealed the deal! He had never seen such hi-tech armour – not that it had done any of his colleagues any good at the silos. No, the silos had not done him any good at all – he needed to rest and recuperate so he could get his life back on track.

He sat watching the TV whiling away the hours until it was time for him to go get some sleep before work the following morning. There was a slight hitch to his planned rest and schedule for the following day – a certain young woman had not read the same memo. Ned started as his front door disintegrated before his eyes and something big, yellow, and green thrust itself through the splintered wood. Ned jumped up and ran for the bedroom and the fire escape. However, he only

made it as far as the doorway of the bedroom before he stopped dead and his feet refused to move any further.

A very large black and purple pistol was aimed directly at the centre of his forehead. He could see the purple finger pulling back on the trigger. His injured leg finally gave way and he fell to the floor and his eyes went wide as they focused on the purple boots before him.

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“Get up!”

The growl was anything but friendly but Ned complied as quickly as his hurt leg would allow. Hit Girl thrust him backwards into a chair, none too gently. The man’s eyes were very active as they danced from armoured vigilante to armoured vigilante. He took in the large form of Kick-Ass over by the remains of his front door. Beside him was the smaller form of Petra. Behind Hit Girl there was a newer vigilante; he recognised her as Raven.

“You really do make a mess!” an electronic snarl announced as Jackal walked through the pile of matchwood which had once been a door.

“The buzzer wasn’t working,” Kick-Ass retorted with an electronically enhanced laugh.

“When you two have finished!” Hit Girl snarled.

Raven wondered back into the man’s bedroom as Hit Girl began her interrogation.

“Tell me, what the fuck *is* a ‘Corsair’?”

“A pirate, that’s the definition, I believe. Look it up if you don’t believe me,” Ned replied insolently but he soon regretted it as Hit Girl smacked him around the face with the back of her armoured gauntlet.

“You’ve been wounded?”

“What of it?” Ned replied as he favoured his left leg and Hit Girl smirked.

“Who was it?”

“A break-in – where I work. . .”

A cough from the doorway to Ned’s bedroom revealed Raven and she held a combined helmet and mask, in one hand, and a set of dark blue torso body armour, in the other.

“Yours?”

“Never seen it before. . .”

“You were at the silos. You fought against my team. Who shot you?”

Ned gave in.

“That Nightmare – she shot me; fucking bitch!”

Hit Girl backhanded Ned, hard, across the face. He recoiled in pain with a loud yell.

“I can go easy, or I can go hard. . . No other choices.”

“Fuck you – I betray her; she kills me. . .”

“Oh, sweetie,” Petra drawled. “If you *don’t* betray her – *we’ll* kill you!”

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“Where is she?” Hit Girl growled from merely inches away.

“Who?”

“FEAR. . .”

“She moves around – I don’t know.”

“Where, is she based?”

“I can’t. . .”

“*WHERE!*”

“No. . .”

Hit Girl glared down at Ned before she smirked.

“Time to turn up the fucking heat!”

With that, Hit Girl ignited a road flare which she had produced from her utility belt. The smoke alarm above their heads went off almost immediately – until Kick-Ass smashed it to pieces with his armoured fist.

“You wouldn’t. . .”

“Normally, no; I usually prefer more subtle forms of torture – you know, like a car crusher; got one around? Didn’t think so. . .” Hit Girl replied conversationally before she quickly plunged the 1,500-degree flame into the man’s right shoulder.

Not surprisingly, the man screamed.

Mid-April, 2014

The following morning

An unknown location in the USA

The Cage

Stephanie Walker awoke to a sharp pain in her chest and she cried out.

She looked around her and took stock of her position. She noticed the hefty steel bars that surrounded her and she felt the rough mattress below her body. She grimaced as she noticed she was also naked – not a surprise if she was in The Cage.

‘The Cage’, was a large concrete, windowless room in which the centre was taken up by a floor to ceiling steel cage which in turn was separated into four smaller cages. Each of the smaller cages had a single door which opened outwards. The floor of each cage was bare concrete with a single, bare mattress to one side and a single plastic bucket in a corner.

“Fuck!” she growled to nobody in particular as she rolled onto her back.

A dozen feet away a small girl sat on a chair.

The seven-year-old girl was dressed in a yellow sweatshirt with a matching pair of joggers. Her job was to keep an eye on those unlucky enough to end up in The Cage. Technically, she was in charge – irrelevant of which phase the incarcerated were in, or how old they were. At that moment, only one eight-year-old Phase 2 girl was in residence. Stephanie Walker had been brought in the evening before. She had been unconscious and covered in blood.

Two instructors had dumped her on the floor before they roughly stripped off her clothing and then literally threw her into a cage. One of the instructors had then proceeded to kick and punch the girl before a rib had snapped and both instructors had left the room. The girl had remained unconscious throughout the night – thankfully, by the look of her injuries.

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Once the Walker girl had awoken, the younger girl ran forwards and grabbed a bottle of water from a fridge before passing it through the bars.

“Drink this, Walker,” she ordered the naked girl.

“What?”

“You’ve gotta keep hydrated while you’re in here – and you’ve two whole weeks ahead of you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Look, Walker; I’m in charge in here . . . so do what I tell ya!”

“Vicious little yellow bitch, aren’t you,” Walker growled.

The younger girl relented – slightly.

“You don’t obey me and I get in shit – please?”

“Okay – you be nice to me and I’ll follow your orders – deal?”

“Deal.”

Saturday, July 9th, 2016

South Racine Avenue and West Harrison Street

Foxtail stopped to go see a snout.

She parked up at the side of the street and ignored all the stares from passers-by – she was finally used to it. She never saw the man, two-dozen yards up the street. As he watched the dismounted vigilante walk down the street away from him, he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a small black box. With a smile, he flipped up a safety lever and then flicked the switch beneath the lever. Almost before the LED had fully lit on the small black box, a signal was beamed down the street at the speed of light. Milliseconds later, the signal reached a mottled grey aluminium can that used to hold a few kilos of potatoes but had been repurposed and was now wrapped in copious amounts of duct tape.

A small circuit board attached to the can registered the signal and closed a circuit which allowed an electric charge to flow through a pair of black wires. The electric charge reached the blasting cap

embedded in the top of the can and the small triggering explosive charge detonated which in turn triggered the larger, primary charge of Semtex plastic explosive which detonated and sent a pressure wave outwards at a speed of over 3,000 metres-per-second.

The supersonic overpressure blast wave struck Foxtail without any warning, way before the sound of the explosion reached her. The concussive force hurled her across the street ahead of a 40 mile-per-hour wind where she collided with the windshield of a parked car. The blast blew out all windows for half-a-mile and sent numerous pedestrians flying through the air. Shrapnel and debris billowed through the air, cutting people down by the dozen. Foxtail's armour protected her fragile human physiology from the shrapnel but not from the worst of the overpressure. She rolled off the hood of the demolished Buick and landed heavily on the sidewalk.

Her hearing was temporarily inhibited by a ringing in her ears and she could feel a wetness around her nose and in her ears – she assumed blood from the overpressure. Her head hurt from the explosion and her body hurt from striking the windshield which had shattered under her. As she looked around, she could make out many injured people and several prone bodies around which the walking wounded staggered. As she made to stand up, she felt weak and she used the body of the car to support herself as she triggered her communications equipment.

“Fusion! Explosion . . . my position . . . many wounded. Foxtail down!”

She collapsed to the sidewalk and blackness enveloped her.