

***The following morning
Sunday, August 7th, 2016***

Glenview

“Wakey, wakey, big sister!”

“Go fuck yourself!”

“That’s a nice way to talk to your eight-year-old little sister.”

“SD?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing in my bedroom?”

“We are here to help you get ready,” Anne-Marie stated.

“Ready for what?” Stephanie replied, her eyes still firmly closed.

“Your rehabilitation,” SD responded.

“You make it sound like I’m a criminal.”

“No comment,” SD grimaced.

“Okay!” Stephanie opened her eyes as Saoirse hauled back the duvet.

“Why am I only wearing my knickers – come to think of it; how did I get here?”

“You fell asleep, last night, so Dad carried you here and then I helped Mom undress you – I’d not seen your wounds before; they scared me.”

Stephanie looked over at her sister and she smiled, then she looked up at SD. She took in SD’s clothing which was very similar to that worn by Anne-Marie. Both girls wore a T-shirt and shorts.

“Still not wearing a bra, I see, SD.”

“My chest is still a bit too sore – but you can talk!”

“What’s with the getup?”

“All will be revealed,” Saoirse teased as she helped her friend to stand up.

Without any warning, Anne-Marie yanked down Stephanie’s knickers.

“Okay – I’m being stripped naked by an eight-year-old; I know SD goes in for that kind of thing, but I don’t, and I didn’t know you did, Anne-Marie: besides, aren’t you a bit young for that kind of thing?” Stephanie asked her sister who just scowled.

The scowl quickly vanished as Anne-Marie took in the various scars on her sister’s body.

“You’re running out of space for more scars, Steph,” Saoirse quipped to brighten the mood as she produced two items of material. Stephanie rolled her eyes and she grimaced.

“Talk about embarrassing!” she commented dryly.

“There’s no way that you can wear a one-piece; so, you either go naked, topless, or you wear one of these,” Saoirse pointed out quite reasonably.

“Okay, I suppose . . . thanks.”

“It ties around your neck, so no having to thread your arms through anything.”

“Mom picked blue – she said you’d like that,” Anne-Marie added.

“You two swimming, too?”

Saoirse and Anne-Marie both pulled off their shorts and T-shirts to reveal that both wore two-piece swimsuits. Saoirse’s was dark green and the top was more like a sports bra while the bottoms were very like skin-tight shorts. Anne-Marie’s was typically that which would be worn by a young girl and was covered in flowers.

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Stephanie was able to make her own way downstairs without any help and she smiled shyly as she found Dave, Mindy, and Danny lazily kicking their feet in the water as she entered the pool area.

“You look good in that, Steph,” Dave commented as he swept the girl off her feet and then gently lowered her into the water so she could stand on the bottom of the pool.

“Woah – warmer than usual. . .” Stephanie commented.

“We turned the temperature up a bit, just for you,” Mindy advised her eldest daughter as Anne-Marie jumped in followed by Saoirse who executed a perfect shallow dive and came up beside Dave.

“The water will help you to regain the use of your muscles and support you as you rehabilitate,” Mindy explained as she slid into the water. “Start using your left arm more and . . . let’s remove that support.”

Mindy lifted the sling from around Stephanie’s neck and then eased it off her right arm. Stephanie cringed with the pain and the ten-year-old bit her lip to stop from crying out.

“Try to move your elbow – slowly,” Mindy instructed as she looked down at the arm with concern etched in her face.

“I can’t; it hurts too much.”

“You must,” Mindy insisted as she gently took hold of Stephanie’s right hand.

“You can do this, Steph,” Saoirse added supportively as she stood beside her friend.

Stephanie dug deep down into herself for the energy to fight through the impending pain. Within her, she knew that everybody wanted her to succeed – she *had* to succeed if she ever wanted to be a vigilante again. She closed her eyes tightly and gripped Mindy’s hand as tightly as she could. She willed her elbow to move. . .

Stephanie screamed out as her elbow began to straighten for the first time in over five weeks. Pain shot through the joint and then up her arm to her injured shoulder. She felt her legs buckle beneath her but then a strong arm wrapped itself around her waist to provide support and she looked up into the concerned face of her best friend.

“Thanks. . .”

“No sweat, Phase 2 reject!”

“Fuck this!” Stephanie growled. “I need to be able to kick your fucking arse!”

With that, she regained her footing and pushed Saoirse away. Stephanie gritted her teeth and focussed on a certain point ahead of her. She moved her right elbow and locked her arm fully extended. The whole arm shook while tears of pain and frustration ran down her face. After a few seconds, she moved her lower arm back across her stomach. Only then, did she lean into her friend for both the physical and mental support.

“Not bad,” Mindy said as she led Stephanie over to the steps so that she could sit down.

Saoirse supported her friend until she was safely ensconced on the steps and then sat down beside her.

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“That was progress, Steph – substantial progress,” Saoirse said encouragingly.

“Hurt like hell. . .” Stephanie replied as she lazily moved her feet in the water.

“You’re very brave, Steph,” Dave said with a smile.

“Thanks, Dad. You too, Mum – and the rest of you; I love you all.”

Mindy was genuinely speechless as she smiled at the ex-*Predator*.

“I couldn’t do this without you all. You are all my family. You’ve all been so good to me; I don’t deserve it, considering what I was. . . dammit; I so hate being helpless. . .”

Danny spoke first.

“I hate to hit girls; but she really needs a slap.”

Stephanie laughed.

“Yes – I do need a slap,” she admitted. “But if you fucking try it, boy. . .”

It was Danny’s turn to laugh.

“I could put you down with my pinkie, right now, little girl,” the eight-year-old pointed out quite reasonably.

“I would like to remind you that I put down an assassin a couple weeks ago.”

Stephanie looked quizzical as Danny pointedly looked around the pool as if he was looking for something.

“What?” Stephanie demanded in a perplexed tone.

“I don’t see no spoons.”

Stephanie really did laugh at that comment – until her side hurt too much.

That evening

Glenview

“Steph, would you join us in the study, please?”

“Yes, Dad.”

Stephanie had just awoken after a few hours’ nap and she felt a little concerned as she made her way the few short yards to Mindy’s study. Mindy was sitting behind her desk and Dave stood beside her. Stephanie was waved into a chair facing them both.

“Whatever it was – I don’t think I did it. . .”

Mindy laughed.

“You’re not in any trouble,” Dave confirmed. “For a change. . .”

“Steph – we’re here to discuss your future in *Fusion* and your future as *Psyche*,” Mindy said.

Stephanie looked horrified.

“Please don’t kick me out of *Fusion* – please. . .”

“Why do you think I would do that?”

“You kicked Chloe out . . . and she was your best friend.”

“You may have noticed that she still is. Chloe ignored my orders; she put both herself and others at extreme risk. That is why I did what I did. You, though, you have done nothing wrong, Steph. You were wounded; that is an exceptional circumstance.”

Stephanie looked relieved.

“There will be certain conditions for to obey and to follow – they will be *non-negotiable*,” Mindy said coldly. “If you disobey or refuse to follow those conditions then to keep you safe, I will turn to extreme measures. If required, I will break your other arm – then your legs, one at a time. If it keeps you safe, then I will do it – whatever it takes, remember?”

Stephanie looked and felt scared but she was also resigned to her fate.

“I understand.”

“Though we have not been together long, you are a true part of our little family, Stephanie. I know you have suffered a lot over the past weeks, but so have we. Each time you died, I couldn’t bear to consider life without you. I realised that I loved you more than I could have ever believed. Saoirse was right when she said that you could really be my daughter – we do have a lot in common.”

“Err, FYI,” Dave interrupted. “That is not necessarily something to be proud of.”

Mindy and Stephanie laughed.

“You know, Dad – I love you, but you can be such a geek!”

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“Now – the rules,” Mindy began. “You will not train when at home. You will rest whenever you at home. You will be allowed to wear your duty uniform and mask at Safehouse F. You will not be allowed to wear your combat suit. You will not leave Safehouse F unless myself or Dave give you permission. You will not go out into the field. We will allow you to learn to shoot left-handed – with

a *small* pistol. But, if I have Dr Bennett on my back about you damaging anything while shooting or working with *Fusion*, guess who I will be visiting next with a baseball bat?"

Stephanie squirmed a bit in her seat.

"While you cannot take part in operations directly, you will be moved onto the Support Staff. As such, you will man the Kirk Chair when on duty. Your experience is invaluable, so, if I cannot use you as an operator, then I will use your experience and skills to provide guidance and support to those who are out on the streets. As such, we are going to give you a temporary promotion to Operator, so that you can take command of operations. You will work for Marty and Abby."

Stephanie nodded her approval.

"I expect you to show some maturity and professionalism when you are on duty. Due to your injuries, and your meds, you will tire easily. As such, you will take breaks and you will get some sleep. If you do not – I come visiting with that baseball bat. Marty has made arrangements for a couch to be placed in the Command Center – he's wanted one there for ages and you provided the excuse. As such, there will be a quilt and a pillow reserved for your use only."

Stephanie felt a lot happier. She hated being relegated to the sidelines, but at least she would be on the spot to see what was going on.

That same evening

Central Chicago

"Are you Sergeant Fellowes?"

Sam looked up from his sandwich and he turned towards the voice to find a young girl standing at the window of his SUV.

"Yes, I am – can I help you, young lady?"

The young girl hesitated and she seemed very unsure for a moment but then she braced up and spoke.

"I need to speak to Hit Girl."

"Why would you come to me for that?"

"You're a '*Fusion* Cop'; you can get a message to Hit Girl."

"Maybe I can. What is it about?"

"I can't say, but it concerns Hit Girl and FEAR. I also need the utmost confidentiality."

Sam scowled as FEAR was mentioned.

"Okay – give me your name."

"My name is Kelly Wright."

Two days later

Tuesday, August 9th

Safehouse F

It was Stephanie's first evening at the Safehouse in weeks.

Even better, she was wearing her uniform with the twin vertical silver bars of an Operator. She felt ultra-smug as she entered the Command Centre for the first time in just as many weeks. The whole place felt different but it also felt like home. The constant humming, the smell of gun oil, the smell of engine oil, the smell of sweat as *Fusion* members sparred on the mat or exercised close by. One difference was the compact .22-calibre pistol which hung on her left hip, as opposed to her right. It felt different, but *Predators* trained to use their non-dominant hand in combat, so it was no major issue; it would just take some getting used to. Abby smirked as Stephanie strode in.

"You look ready for this," she commented.

"I am – it's great to be back."

"It's good to have you back, Psyche – even if it does mean more immature behaviour from the lower ranks!"

"I can be mature . . . I just choose not to," Stephanie responded with a cheeky grin and Abby laughed.

"Okay – we have special 'girls-only' mission, tonight – seal up the Command Centre, please, Psyche."

Stephanie strode up to the 'Kirk Chair' which sat on a raised platform from where the occupant could oversee every screen and display in the high-tech facility. Stephanie logged onto the eight-inch touch screen which was embedded at a 45-degree angle into the right-hand arm of the chair. She accessed the security settings and with a single swipe, the access door was sealed and the steel security shutters closed within the twin pane glazing which formed the two inner walls of the Command Centre. Once 'sealed up', the space was all but impregnable. Nobody could see in, and nobody could get in.

"Sealed up and all electronic countermeasures armed," Stephanie reported, instantly all business.

That same time

Central Chicago

Kelly Wright was collected by Sam Fellowes and driven around in a seemingly random pattern for almost forty-minutes before she was dropped off, after dark, outside a dingy looking warehouse.

"Go in that door," he ordered. "Good luck."

Kelly watched as the unmarked police car drove off leaving her standing beside the dismal looking warehouse. She took a deep breath, exhaled, and headed for the single steel door. On pulling it open and stepping through, she found herself in total darkness as the door clanged shut behind her.

"Over here!" came an electronic voice out of the darkness.

Kelly moved towards the voice and after about fifty yards, she found herself dazzled by super bright lights.

"Stop!" she was ordered.

She stopped dead and a shape appeared – more of a silhouette than a shape – and another voice was heard.

“Who are you?” the electronic voice demanded.

“My name is Kelly Wright. . .”

“What do you want?”

“I have information for Hit Girl. . .”

“Hold your arms out to your sides and slowly turn around.”

Kelly did as she was ordered, holding her arms out parallel to the ground and she slowly turned around before she found herself facing the bright lights again.

“You have information for Hit Girl?”

“I do – who am I talking to?”

“Shadow. Before we take you to Hit Girl you we must be certain that you are not being tracked and that you not carrying any weapons.”

“I have nothing, I promise.”

“We’ll be the judge of that . . . Strip!” came the next command.

“What!” Kelly demanded hoping that she had somehow misheard the command.

“Strip to the skin . . . or get the fuck outta here!”

Kelly heard a bone-chilling snarl from out of the darkness which unnerved her greatly. She knew that she had to get her information to Hit Girl and she understood the risks they were taking just by listening to her – so she complied. She found it hard, especially in full view of at least one other person. Kelly pulled off her jacket . . .

“Hand each item to Nightmare,” came the order as a shorter than usual vigilante stepped foot into the light and took her jacket. After a brief check of the jacket, Nightmare placed the item carefully down on the floor.

Kelly unbuttoned and pulled off her blouse where it was then swiftly taken from her hand. Next came her shoes, socks, and then her jeans. She felt cold and humiliated as she stood in the bright lights wearing only her bra and knickers.

“Keep it coming. . .”

The voice was polite, but insistent. Kelly hesitated for a moment before she reached behind her back and undid her bra, dropping it to the floor. Before she could be prompted, her knickers followed.

“Arms out to your sides and turn around slowly.”

Kelly did so, fully aware that she was completely naked and that her body was bathed in dazzling white light for all to see – which, she assumed, was the point.

“Stand still – arms out.”

Nightmare came out of the darkness and she waved a wand-scanner over Kelly’s body from head to toe; first her front, and then her back.

“Spread your legs – keep your arms out.”

Kelly reluctantly did as she was ordered and she watched as Nightmare checked her armpits and then knelt down to check between her legs.

“Spread your labia, please,” Nightmare ordered.

Kelly did so, and Nightmare shone a flashlight up inside her vagina.

“Get in the vehicle!” Nightmare ordered when she was satisfied. Nightmare had never touched Kelly’s naked body during the entire search but Kelly still felt violated.

“My clothes. . .”

“Get in the vehicle!” Nightmare repeated as she waved Kelly forwards.

The still naked Kelly pulled open the rear door on the left side of the SUV and she climbed up onto the leather seat which was cold to the touch on her bare skin. Nightmare finished stuffing her clothing into a clear plastic bag that had wires interwoven through it. The bag was then placed in the rear compartment of the SUV.

“Eisenhower!”

A large dog clad in body-armor ran out of the darkness and jumped into the rear compartment of the vehicle before the door was closed.

“Move over.”

Kelly moved over to allow Nightmare to climb in and she was handed a package.

“Put them on.”

The package held a pair of joggers and a sweatshirt. Kelly did not hesitate and she pulled both on, quickly covering up her naked body. Once she was dressed, Nightmare turned to Kelly.

“One more thing. . .”

Nightmare pulled a black bag over Kelly’s head.

A short while later

West 78th Street

“What *is* this place?” Nemesis asked as she climbed out of the SUV.

“Safehouse Alpha,” Shadow replied curtly. “Get our guest out.”

Kelly found herself hauled out of the SUV – she still had the bag over her head as she was lead, bare foot, across a rough concrete floor which was very cold. She heard a beeping sound, then the sound of a door opening. She was pulled onto rough carpet which was much warmer under her feet. The door shut behind her, there was another beep and another door opened. She was then led, still on rough carpet, a distance before she heard another beep before she was pushed through another door and then she felt cold metal under her feet. Was she in an elevator?

Yes – the floor moved downwards and stopped after barely ten seconds.

Safehouse F

The entire strip search at the warehouse had been watched by Hal and Psyche – no male had been present in the Command Centre at Safehouse F and the security shutters had been closed for Kelly's privacy. During the drive to the Safehouse, Hal and Psyche had scrutinised the images to ensure that the girl was clean – from an electronic point of view.

"Is she clear?" Hit Girl asked from Alpha.

"All clear, Hit Girl," Psyche responded.

Safehouse Alpha

Main Level

As the hood was pulled off, Kelly blinked in the harsh lighting.

She was in a comfortable living area, with couches and chairs. The walls were covered by what appeared to be curtains and Kelly could not see a doorway. Then she stiffened . . . sitting just a few feet away from her was a masked woman wearing a dark grey uniform. She bore a single silver star on her collar and a name tag: **HIT GIRL**.

"I will not apologise for your treatment – it was necessary," Hit Girl commented in an electronically enhanced voice.

"I understand – you have no reason to trust me," Kelly hesitated. "To be honest, I am about to give you a reason to kill me – if you so wished."

Hit Girl pulled out a small tablet computer and she began to read.

"Kelly Wright. Date of birth: 27th November 1998. You are an American National. You live at 2275 Winnetka Road, Glenview. Your parents are both deceased. You live with your elder sister: Katrina. Am I correct?"

"You are!" Kelly exclaimed, a little surprised at how knowledgeable Hit Girl was.

"Continue . . . please."

Kelly took a deep breath."

"I think my sister is involved with FEAR."

"Think?"

"Every time something has gone down – she's been out there. After the silos, she came back badly hurt and soaking wet. Since, then, she's come back covered in bruises. She says that *you* killed my father, in New York. My mother died from a broken heart. I don't believe in what my sister is doing; it is wrong. I believe in the good that you bring to this city. My father was a bad person and I don't blame you for killing him. I'm scared that my sister will drag me into her world and I don't want that. Will you help me?"

"How do we know that we can trust you?" Hit Girl asked casually.

Two hours later

***Safehouse Alpha
Lower Level***

Mindy sat in a chair in the conference room looking up at the eighty-inch screen on one wall which was split into four.

“Well, we can’t keep her confined for ever,” Marty offered quite reasonably from one of the four sections.

“No – but is she what she says she is?” Mindy persisted.

“She’s not lying,” Stephanie commented from the top-right portion.

“I agree,” Cathy added from below Stephanie.

“Me too,” Saoirse chipped in from the final quarter.

“Okay – how do we use her?” Chloe cut in from the other side of the long, ten-seat, polished-mahogany conference table.

Stephanie smiled.

“Go ahead, Steph,” Mindy directed.

“SD? How about we turn her into a double-agent – it’d allow us to monitor her?”

“Yes, that might work,” SD agreed.

“It would give us time to work out if we can trust her,” Chloe concluded.

***Safehouse Alpha
Main Level***

“Leave us!”

Nightmare left the holding area where Kelly Wright sat in a cell with the door open.

“Kelly – we have a proposition for you. It will be a dangerous tasking, but essential if you want us to trust you. You will be protected – I always protect those who assist me.”

Kelly took a moment to think, but she knew that she had no choice – none, none at all.

“You want me to spy on my sister?”

“Can you do that? It would mean getting involved in what she is doing without tipping her off – not easy.”

“I can do it – I must.”

Hit Girl stood up and she waved Kelly towards the door.

“Go – Shadow will take you back to the warehouse where your clothing will be returned to you.”

“Thank you, Hit Girl.”

“Oh, Kelly? You fuck me over. . .”

Kelly swallowed hard and she felt chills racing up her backbone.