

Friday, August 19th

Echo Team

Sentinel could be seen below, making for the MTA Green Line Station parking lot up South Ashland Avenue.

Scorpion expertly brought the Bell 429WLG twin-engine helicopter down towards the LZ where she touched down at almost the same instant that *Sentinel* hit the parking lot. Sleuth leapt out of the cockpit and pulled open the rear hatch. Hit Girl had dived out of *Sentinel* and run around to the rear, heaving open the armoured rear door. Nemesis jumped out and turned to pull out the two large packages.

Just then, a large calibre round struck the parking lot, inches from Nemesis' left foot. Everybody dived for cover, but just as they did so, their earpieces crackled into life.

"Leon has the sniper . . . adjusting . . . round away . . . he's dog meat; one ex-sniper . . . all clear!"

Nemesis was hauled back to her feet by Hit Girl and she grabbed the packages before running for the helicopter with the rapidly spinning rotor-blades. Sleuth grabbed the largest package and pushed it into the helicopter before Nemesis dived in behind with the second package. Sleuth waved at Hit Girl as he closed and latched the rear hatch before he climbed back in beside Scorpion.

Immediately, the helicopter performed a combat take-off, powering forwards and upwards before skimming across the rooftops as it made for Navy Pier.

Navy Pier

"What are we doing here?"

Bill Wright had been dragged out of the hospital, just four hours previously. His concussion had eased and he was all but ready to head home. He was not happy; he had failed in his mission and he had lost his packages. Now, he was being dropped off in the dead of night, beside Lake Michigan by a pair of plain-clothes Policemen.

"We are about to make you, a very happy man," Paul Murphy chuckled.

Bill was *not* convinced, but his curiosity was piqued when out of the night came the blatant sound of a helicopter, but without the usual accompaniment of flashing strobe lights. The helicopter settled onto the tarmac and the engines immediately shutdown, the rotors spinning slowly to a stop.

The pilot stepped out, head encased in a black flight helmet. In the darkness, it was impossible to see into the shadows of the helmet. The pilot turned to face away from the water, an MP7A1 PDW to her shoulder. He did, however, notice the Union Flag on the pilot's

flight suit, plus her callsign: **SCORPION**. Out of the rear of the helicopter came two people, one in body armour and masked, while the other wore a simple business suit with an English cut. The man strode forwards and handed over an identity card.

"Jasper Collins, Five. You are Bill Wright, Queens Messenger?"

"Yes, sir," Bill replied as he examined the identity card.

"You are among friends, Mr Wright. Apart from the Chicago Police Department, we are all British - these two are Scorpion and Nemesis. . ."

"Vengeance," Bill commented.

"HMG wanted its property back. . ." Jasper said as he motioned into the back of the helicopter.

Bill Wright displayed obvious relief as he instantly recognised his packages.

"Still sealed and unmolested. We are placing them back in your custody, Mr Wright. From here, you shall be taken across Lake Michigan to a pickup on the eastern shore. Good luck," Jasper finished.

With that, there was the sound of powerful marine diesels starting up and Bill Wright grabbed the two packages. He was escorted by Jasper aboard the *Vigilante* which sat in the water alongside Navy Pier. The man at the wheel wore a navy-blue mask and he waved as the packages were passed aboard into the hands of Ares who held them until Bill Wright was aboard before passing them off to him.

Jasper followed before turning and waving at Nemesis and Scorpion. With a roar, the *Vigilante* took off into the darkness, rapidly accelerating to over forty knots.

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A little over eighty minutes later, Neptune eased back on the power and *Vigilante* settled back into the water.

"What are we doing here?" Bill Wright asked for the second time in less than two hours.

"You have a ride waiting for you, plus an escort," Jasper replied cryptically. "Welcome to Benton Harbour."

The *Vigilante* eased up against the steel pilings, a couple hundred yards inside the breakwater. Four men emerged out of the darkness and Bill Wright froze. The men wore combat fatigues and their faces were blacked out. In their hands, each carried an assault rifle across their chests.

"Good evening," came the challenge in a British accent.

"Hotel, Oscar, Four, Seven," Jasper called out.

"Six, Alpha, Foxtrot," the voice responded. "Lieutenant Jackson, Royal Marines Commando - let's move, we have a tight schedule."

Bill Wright and Jasper were hauled out of *Vigilante* and the packages were passed up and handed over to the Royal Marines. The sound of gas-turbines igniting rent the air as three Rolls-Royce Turbomeca RTM322-01 turboshafts increased speed. By the time Jasper and Bill had been led up the beach to the deserted parking lot, the Royal Navy Merlin HMA.2 helicopter had its rotor blades spinning at take-off speed.

The two men, plus the four Royal Marines climbed aboard and the giant helicopter instantly left the ground and turned north-west.

Safehouse F

It was a bunch of relieved vigilantes who returned to *Fort Fusion*, that night.

All, were tired, but all were pleased with the night's action. Even better, it had been one-hundred-percent successful. Mindy had announced that the *Vigilante* had transferred the packages and the courier to the Royal Navy for onward travel via helicopter to HMS Iron Duke which was alongside in Montreal, Canada. From there, the packages would be placed aboard a British Airways flight to London, Heathrow.

"Congratulations, and well done, to everybody," Dave called out.

"Also, well done to Electra - two of FEAR's cohorts will not see the day tomorrow."

"Beginner's luck," an embarrassed Electra commented as Stephanie swelled with pride.

"You trained her well, Steph," Chrissy commented.

"She had no choice but to learn - and fast," Stephanie replied darkly.

"That sounds like an entertaining story," Saoirse said. "But maybe another night - let's get some kip."

"Yeah - I'm back on watch in a few hours. . ." Stephanie groused.

The next morning

Saturday, August 20th

Eastern Chicago

Connor, Lucas, and Trinity were the best of friends.

They had been together ever since the first grade. Something had kept them joined together for the next eight years - much to the chagrin of their respective parents as the three restless youngsters

had dreamt up ever more ludicrous schemes to keep themselves occupied. Their current escapade was exploring derelict buildings within the Chicago area. All three fourteen-year-olds were highly intelligent and they had spent time examining old plans of the city going back to the 1950s. That evening, they had found their way into (actually, *broken* into) an almost lost and forgotten underground facility.

They had read about it on some obscure website that hadn't been updated in over ten years. They had been able to pinpoint the location as being just off South Sacramento Avenue. After several days searching, they had finally found evidence of a concealed doorway, partially covered in concrete. So, they had tooled up that evening and then, after telling each other's parents that they were staying at the other's house for the weekend, they left their respective homes and met up at the 36th Street & Kedzie Bus Terminal.

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The three teens had made short work of the thin covering of concrete and then they had found a steel door before them. That had taken quite a bit of forcing with a crowbar and the combined strength of each of them to pry it open just enough to squeeze through. Beyond that door, they found a concrete tunnel which ran for about ninety yards beneath a long abandoned rail track before it sloped steeply downwards and it made a sharp left turn and stretched for another fifty yards or so to where they found a second steel door - although it was more of a hatch, being only about three feet in height and raised about a foot off the ground.

"This is really creepy," Trinity pointed out as they sat down for a break and some chocolate.

"Trinity, you're scared of your own shadow," Connor laughed.

"You still sleep with a night-light, Connor," Lucas reminded his friend.

"It's there for safety - I don't *need* it."

Derisive but friendly laughter followed, echoing into the darkness.

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The hatch had not suffered as badly as the first steel door, but it still took some effort to force it open.

"Where, do you think this goes?" Connor asked.

"No idea," Trinity replied as she swung her powerful flashlight in all directions looking for anything and everything.

"These tunnels are old - at least sixty years . . ." Lucas commented.

"You think there's a bathroom down here?" Trinity quipped.

"You're kidding me?" Lucas replied.

"I need to pee."

"Well, go find a corner to pee in, then."

Trinity headed off for a patch of darkness beyond the reach of the boy's flashlights - she did not trust them not to illuminate her in all her glory. Once she was certain that nobody was observing, she shrugged off her backpack and placed it down on the floor along with her flashlight. She unclasped her belt then pushed down her jeans and panties. She squatted down and with a sigh of relief, she released her bladder and then tried to ignore the sound her pee made as it struck the concrete floor below.

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Connor and Lucas were exchanging crude jokes about their friend peeing - they could hear her, if not actually see her - when they heard a rumbling sound and then the tunnel shook and a cloud of dust billowed out from the direction their friend had gone.

"Trinity!"

"Trinity!"

There was no response from Trinity. Both boys rushed forwards, covering their faces with their jackets to assist their breathing against the clouds of dust which were billowing around them. When the boys reached the place where Trinity had been, they found her flashlight, the beam aimed at the ceiling.

"Here's her back pack," Connor called out. "Trinity!"

"She's gone. . ." Lucas said as he stared at the large pile of reinforced concrete and rock which blocked their path.

"We've got to find a way around this blockage - she's gotta be on the other side, Lucas."

The two boys turned back and they both began to search for another passageway.

Early hours of Saturday Morning

Safehouse F

All, was very quiet.

The Command Centre was empty, as could be expected at just after one in the morning. The only visible activity was the computers as they monitored, among other things, the Safehouse, the Safehouse entrances, and the Safehouse surroundings. A large 27-inch computer screen, off to the left side of the large space, was split into eighteen segments, each showing the feed from a security camera. The images changed every few seconds in a seemingly random fashion to show further images from around the Safehouse, and its exterior.

Then, one image froze as the computer system detected movement and an orange border began to flash, highlighting the image. The image automatically moved to one of the larger monitors and the view showed concrete and rock crumbling from the ceiling, plus something else falling into the subterranean tunnel. The image was labelled 'X422' and it showed one of the myriads of tunnels which ran beneath the City of Chicago, only a small portion of which were close to the Safehouse and therefore monitored by the highly-advanced security systems. The tunnel in question was located approximately eighty yards to the south of the Safehouse. The tunnel defences were part of the outer perimeter which protected Safehouse F and Safehouse E from attack.

Once the computer had confirmed a security breach, it began to execute a pre-arranged set of commands. The first was to notify everybody in the Safehouse that there was a potential attack underway: a raucous klaxon sounded throughout the Safehouse and red beacons began to flash in every space. The lights in the sleeping areas came on automatically, dazzling the sleeping - and very tired - vigilantes.

The computer system armed all primary and secondary protection systems and shutdown the access routes by dropping armoured steel covers over elevator shafts and staircases, sealing off the Safehouse completely.

Level 2

Abby awoke with a start at the sound of the klaxon.

She struggled to see as she was first dazzled by a bright flashing red light, and then by the harsh white light from above her as the strip lighting on the ceiling snapped to life. Once her brain had caught up with her hearing and her sight, she jumped off the top bunk and prodded the almost-awake Hailee into life.

"Defence One!" Abby yelled at Hailee and then at Morgan and Saoirse.

All four girls scrambled as they grabbed up their clothes and ran out of the bedroom.

As Abby, and the other girls burst out of their accommodation, Mindy and Dave burst forth from their own bedroom, with Danny and Anne-Marie close behind.

"Rogue, Ravage - get to the galley and stay there," Dave ordered.

"Yes, Kick-Ass," both kids replied dutifully as they ran for the galley, pistols ready in their hands.

Mindy ran down to the Command Centre, close behind Abby who immediately jumped into her chair and began to hammer away at her keyboard.

"Status!" Mindy ordered as the klaxon stopped its deafening roar.

"We have a breach in Sector Four - Inner Ring," Abby replied as she pointed up at the image: 'X422'.

"A cave-in?" Dave asked.

"Could be," Abby confirmed.

"We need to check it out," Mindy declared. "I'll go with Petra and Raven and we'll see what's going on."

"Psyche - I want guards posted at the entrance to Echo and the ladder below. Ensure that the trainees are safe; see to it," Dave ordered the girl as she entered the Command Centre, a pistol in her left hand and her mask in place.

"Got it!" Stephanie replied as she ran out of the Command Centre. "Wildcat, Splinter - mask up, you're with me. Nightmare, Torment, Rigour; get to the galley - ensure all are masked."

Mindy also ran out of the Command Centre, pulling her own mask into place.

"Raven, Petra - with me!"

Trinity

Trinity had no idea where she was.

Everything was dark and her body appeared to be on fire. Pain was everywhere and it became worse as she tried to move. Then she heard movement and voices. The voices were not of people; they were electronically altered. Her closed eyes caught the flicker of bright lights as the voices came closer.

"Definitely, a rock fall."

"Any sign of trouble?"

"Nah."

"Holy shit!"

"What?"

"I have somebody."

Trinity heard the unmistakable sound of a pistol being made ready and she forced her eyes to open. Her eyes went wide as in the bright, almost dazzling, light she saw the gaping muzzle of a pistol just inches from her face. Beyond the pistol, she could make out a purple mask and below that a dark grey uniform with a single silver star on the collar.

"Why are her pants around her ankles?"

Trinity kicked out, hitting the person, but she passed out with the pain of moving. She awoke a short while later as she felt herself being moved. She tried to move her head but it was secured tightly, as was the rest of her body. Then she felt a jolt and a sharp wave of pain which made her pass out again.

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When she next regained consciousness, Trinity was being moved onto a bed and she felt her clothes being removed - she also heard real voices.

"She's got a lot of bruising to her legs, especially her thighs. Her stomach has a bad cut - that'll need stitches. I'll need to check her out fully before I can be certain there are no internal injuries. For now, it is unsafe to move her out of the Safehouse."

"Do what you can, thanks."

A masked face appeared.

"I'm just going to give you a sedative - you're in safe hands, Trinity."

Trinity felt the prick of a needle in her left arm and then as her eyes closed, she felt nothing.

Lucas and Connor

"I think we're getting somewhere. . ." Lucas huffed as he pulled open yet another steel hatch.

"These tunnels seem to go on forever - I have no idea which way is out, Lucas," Connor replied as he gave his friend a worried look. "What time is it?"

"A little after five in the morning."

"We've been wondering around for *four* hours?"

"Apparently. . ."

"Let's try down here - we've got to find Trinity. . ."

After about twenty yards, the boy's progress was stopped by what looked like a large box suspended between the roof and floor by four steel wires that held the box in the centre of the tunnel.

"What is it?" Lucas asked.

"Nothing good - if I had to guess, I'd say it was a mine of some sort; I've seen 'em in my computer games."

"What do we do?"

"I can't see any other way to go but past it. We touch any of those wires. . ."

"We can *just* slip through - I'll go first," Lucas said as he handed his backpack to Connor.

The boy was skinny, so he was quite well-suited to squeezing through the narrow opening. He felt really nervous, not knowing if the object was truly a threat or not. He pushed through with his head and right arm, then his right leg and finally the rest of his body and remaining limbs. The boy breathed out not realising that he had held his breath the whole time.

"Pass the backpacks through . . . good . . . now, it's your turn, Connor."

"Was it scary?"

"Yeah, it was," Lucas admitted.

Connor did exactly the same as Lucas, only his right leg caught on the wire.

"A red light is flashing!" Lucas almost yelled.

Connor froze as he also saw the pulsing red light.

"Oh, God. . ." he muttered.

***Safehouse F
Command Center***

"Disarm the primary and secondary defences," Mindy ordered and Abby punched some buttons.

"Done."

"This is a fucking nightmare! We have a fourteen-year-old girl . . . could she be a *Predator*?"

"Checked over her body and I couldn't find a single mark of any kind," Cathy confirmed.

"Her name is Trinity Thompson," Abby reminded Mindy.

"Yeah, her . . . we can't move her to a hospital, neither can we keep her here - her parents will be worried sick!"

"Above my paygrade, Boss," Abby quipped in an attempt to put a different spin on things - the attempt failed miserably.

"This is bad, but I suppose it can't really get any worse."

"You're tempting fate, Boss."

"I know - thanks, Abby."

Lucas and Connor

"Where the hell are we?"

"Damned if I know."

"Whatever it is; it's lit - maybe it's a . . . I dunno."

The two boys were stood facing an aluminium duct which angled downwards into the floor. Through the vent, they could make out what looked like a changing room . . . a changing room? They had to be over forty feet below the ground - maybe the place was a left over from something; no . . . there was lighting and it didn't smell musty like the rest of the tunnels. There was no sign of any activity, so Connor reached down and he carefully lifted up the air vent.

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Both boys dropped down into the changing room, leaving the air vent as they had found it. The two boys found themselves in the middle of a large room surrounded by lockers. At the far end, there were toilets and showers. Then Lucas read the names stencilled onto three of the lockers: **FOXTAIL, PSYCHE, WILDCAT**.

"Oh, fuck!"

"What?" Connor asked but then he followed his friend's glance and his face drained of all colour.

"We just found the *Fusion* hideout," Lucas commented unnecessarily.

"We are in so much shit," Connor muttered as he moved over towards the changing room door.

"Ya think!" Lucas replied, moving past his friend.

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Lucas eased open the door and squeezed through. There was another door a few yards away: **MEN**. He looked up at the door from which he had just come: **BITCHES**. He smiled at the sign as he turned to his left and found another door. He eased it open, pulling it towards him. Directly ahead was a small glass enclosure. Past that, there was a large room with glass walls, full of computer equipment and large screens. As he watched, a girl, her head covered in a mask and wearing a dark grey uniform with a pistol on her left hip, walked out of the glass-walled room and headed down the . . . Lucas looked upwards and he could only describe it as a large cavern. He heard voices.

"Wildcat, Splinter - stand down and go get some breakfast."

"Thanks, Psyche," a female voice replied.

The two boys slunk out of the doorway but they suddenly stopped and both quickly slunk back inside as the girl came back towards them - her right arm was held in a sling across her chest. There was no sign that either of the boys had been seen. The smell of freshly cooked bacon was wafting around the cavern and all of a sudden, both boys felt very hungry.

"What do we do?" Lucas asked his friend.

"See those steps going up?"

"Yeah."

"Let's make a dash for them," Connor suggested.

"Then what?"

"We try and hide in one of those rooms up there," Connor said as he pointed to where doors were visible on the next level up.

"On three," Lucas said as he took a deep breath. "One . . . two . . . three . . ."

The two boys ran out of the doorway and towards the steel steps which ran up beside the glass-enclosed room filled with computers; three people were visible, all facing away from them. Lucas was in front and just as he reached the steps, one of the people in the glass-enclosed room turned to look directly at him. Lucas was instantly aware of the purple markings on the mask, not to mention the name tag on the woman's left breast: **HIT GIRL**. His legs went weak as he tried to run up the steps. He made it to the top, but Lucas never saw the pistol as it smashed into his face; he just saw blackness . . . and then nothing.

Connor was very scared. He had seen his friend fall at the top of the steel steps. All around him he could hear shouting accompanied by the pounding of running feet. A klaxon was sounding; the loud sound disorientating the boy as he ran the length of the cavern. He crossed what looked to be a large training mat and he came face to face with a short girl in a mask, her name tag read: **WILDCAT**. She pulled a device from a holster and aimed it at him. Connor instantly recognised the yellow device held by the young girl but before he could do anything, all his senses went wild as his body tensed up and he fell to the ground. . .

. . . then he passed out.