

Thursday, October 5th, 2016

West Grace Street

Mindy needed an outlet, so she had decided to go visiting.

"Evening, Lucy."

Lucy jumped a mile.

"For heaven's sake!" she growled. "Can't you bloody knock? Maybe, we should put a fucking bell on you!"

Hit Girl chuckled, pleased that she had surprised the prototype *Predator*.

"You're a bit jumpy, tonight," another voice said out of the shadows.

"What did you bring Foxy, for - she homesick?" Lucy fumed.

"Do I need to slap you both?" Hit Girl hissed.

"I'm good," Foxtail muttered.

"Me too," Lucy agreed.

"I'm not asking you both to become fuck buddies - just friends would be a good start," Hit Girl went on.

"Truce?" Foxtail asked, holding out her hand in its armoured gauntlet.

Lucy nodded as she took the hand.

"Sorry - I'm just worried about everything," Lucy admitted.

"You have friends, Lucy - we're here to listen," Foxtail said. "I'm available for you, anytime."

"Thanks. Why the sneaky visit?"

"It's funny," Hit Girl chuckled.

"Ha, fucking, ha!"

"Seriously, though. I need to bring you up to speed with the goings on in this city and the fact that everything goes nuclear on Saturday."

"She is fucking with me, right?" Lucy asked Foxtail.

"I wish she was," Foxtail responded as she pulled off her mask. "*Fusion* is in deep shit, Lucy. While we still don't trust you - not fully - we don't want you getting hurt. We also want to make use of your skills."

"Go on."

The following morning

Friday, October 7th

West Columbia

"Hi, Paige!"

"Morning, Chloe, how are you?"

"Fine, thanks - where's Megan?"

"Up in her room - *still!*"

"That's not like her."

"Tell me about it - she's been up for over two hours. She won't tell me what she's up to . . . but then it is Megan!"

"True . . . holy, shit!" Chloe exclaimed as she looked past Paige.

Paige turned to look behind her and her mouth dropped open as she saw her daughter coming down the stairs. Megan had obviously spent a lot of time getting herself ready for school. Her uniform was pristine, just as it usually was, but it was not the uniform which was the surprise - it was the hair. Megan had cut her long hair short into a bob which was decidedly neat and tidy. She had also dyed her hair black again - but as she turned, Chloe noticed that only a part of her hair was black, the majority was almost white. The twelve-year-old appeared very different than on the previous evening.

"We fucking going?" the girl growled.

"Megan!" Paige exclaimed.

Megan simply slapped a pair of dollar bills down onto the table before stalking from the room and out to the car leaving Chloe and Paige too stunned to move.

Lake View High School

"Fuck me!"

"Knew she was nuts, but. . ."

"Time of the month?"

"Slut!"

"Creepy!"

The comments which greeted the 'new' Megan Williams were varied, to say the least. Chloe just chose to steer well clear of Megan - sensing that something was wildly wrong. She knew that Megan could have a fiery temper and Chloe had too much on her plate, right at that moment, to deal with a petulant tween. Chloe figured that Megan had some bad Gotham-related memories to sort out and Megan was perfectly capable of asking for help if she needed it.

"What the hell have you done?" Curtis demanded.

"You like it, right?" Megan asked.

Curtis, wise to how females changed their moods like colours on a traffic light, wisely kept his mouth shut and he just nodded - 'Wasn't her period over a week ago?' he thought to himself.

"Good choice."

Lunchtime

North Park Elementary School

"What's up with grumpy?" Katy asked, tipping her head at Stephanie who was poking at her lunch without much exuberance.

"She broke something at home and Mum isn't exactly over the moon with her," Jamie explained. "She's grounded until she's eighteen, or thereabouts."

"The new girl doesn't seem to happy, either," Ali mentioned, noticing the unhappy look on Abigail's face.

"Abigail was involved," Jamie offered.

"She's quiet, Abigail, isn't she?"

"She has a lot on her mind, I think."

"What are you doing on Saturday?" Jackson asked Jamie.

"I'm busy - I think," Jamie offered - he knew that he could be very busy, along with the rest of *Fusion*.

That evening

Safehouse F

"This sucks!" Abigail commented.

"Used to do this a lot when I was in The Cage," Stephanie said as she gathered up some more brass cartridges off the floor of the range and dumped them in a bucket."

"You did this for hours?" Becky asked.

"Yes, I spent four hours a day picking up brass - I was in a lot of pain by the end of it as I had two broken ribs at the time," Stephanie explained.

"How many more are there?" Becky asked.

"Well, Mindy decided to have P90 practice," Abigail replied unhappily. "Each magazine takes fifty rounds, and *eight* people fired off two magazines each - you do the maths."

"Eight *hundred* rounds!" Becky exclaimed as her shoulders slumped.

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A little over an hour later, the three girls relaxed in the showers, washing off the dirt and muck which they had accumulated over two hours of hard graft.

"Why am I always getting into trouble?" Becky asked. "I've only been here a few weeks and I've been in big trouble, *twice!*"

"Tell me about it," Stephanie muttered as she smiled down at the diminutive girl.

"What's about to happen?" Becky asked. "Are we in for a war? Chloe and Josh are worried."

"I won't lie to you, Becky, it's going to get very bad and probably get worse, way before it gets better," Stephanie replied as honestly as she could. "People are going to die, and many are going to get hurt. As long as we stay together, we stand a chance. We are all friends and we will help each other."

"I stand with you, Steph - we might have been sworn enemies, but that is in the past. Where you go, I go," Abigail stated.

"Will I be allowed to fight - you know, if I want to. I don't like to fight, but I don't want to sit and watch while my friends fight and get hurt?" Beck asked Stephanie.

"That's up to your Mum and my Mum - but I would have you by my side, any day, Scamp."

Becky beamed with pride.

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They were as prepared as they could be - Mindy hoped.

She had purchased enormous quantities of ammunition which would last most armies, months. Every vehicle was serviced and ready for action. Every member of Fusion had a combat suit and spare sections. The medical facilities were ready, but Mindy hoped to God that they would not be needed. The Safehouses, scattered throughout the city were all fully stocked with food, water, ammunition, and vehicles. There was nothing more that could be done, except just hope that they would prevail in short order.

She smiled as she saw Stephanie, Abigail, and Becky appear from the showers. All three still had wet hair, which in Becky's case, was still dripping water from her ponytail. The three girls were often seen together - which probably fitted in with why they had all been together when Stephanie had decided to try some car driving. Mindy was also happy to see them smiling - she figured that smiling would be very limited in the coming days. In the coming days, Chicago was descending into hell. Mindy figured that she could wave to Frank D'Amico as they went past. As long as Chicago rose out of hell, at the end of it all - or did she have a place booked for her, ready and waiting.

Oh, yes, Mindy knew that she would be going to hell, when her time came to pay the piper.

The following evening
Saturday, October 8th

Deadline Day

Western Chicago

Hit Girl was wary.

She was fully aware that the timer on the deadline had reached zero. It had been Vito Genovese via his goons back in early July, while Stephanie had still been in hospital.

"A message from Vito Genovese. Hit Girl and her vigilantes have ninety days to leave Chicago. Or hell on earth will descend on both Chicago and Fusion."

The message had been decidedly unequivocal, as far as *Fusion* had been concerned. Since then, there had been a few well-timed 'reminders' from good old Vito, as to the rapidly approaching deadline, too. Therefore, Hit Girl and Kick-Ass, along with Wildcat, Shadow, and Foxtail were waiting at the intersection of North Western Avenue and West Fulton Street.

"Well, well, well, little Miss Hit Girl doesn't listen!"

Hit Girl glared as FEAR appeared on the street before her. Behind her, three SUVs appeared, which proceeded to unload five Sicilian goons a piece. They were backed up by about a dozen, very welcome, Corsairs.

"Where are your Russian pals?" Kick-Ass growled.

"Late, as usual," FEAR growled, just as the sound of more vehicles came from behind the massed *Fusion* forces.

"I think they're here!" Wildcat growled unnecessarily as a round dozen men appeared behind them.

"You have one last chance to avoid bloodshed, Hit Girl - take your team and leave Chicago," FEAR directed. "The odds are not in your favour."

"They never are. . ." Hit Girl hissed. "That's why we brought our friends."

Hit Girl waved her gauntleted hands theatrically and the sound of steel shutters rising echoed from surrounding buildings. Stormtide appeared, leading Tempest, Trojan, Cut-Throat, and Nightmare. They appeared behind FEAR's Corsairs. Jackal appeared behind the Sicilians and he was backed up by Petra, Raven, Discord, Rage, and Fury. The Russians turned to meet Psyche and Splinter, who led Tigercat, Hellcat, Relentless, and Torment. FEAR appeared a little perturbed at seeing her eight to one superiority cut instantly to a fairly even two to one.

"You have one last chance to avoid bloodshed, you fucked up witch - the odds are not in your favour."

The twenty-two vigilantes faced off against the forty or so Axis of Evil fighters showing no fear.

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Earlier that evening, Hit Girl and her senior staff had looked down at the gathered members of *Fusion*, from the experienced to the novice, who waited patiently on the mat beneath them, all ready to go into battle.

As Hit Girl scanned the faces below, she could see a few smiles, but mostly blank expressions and one or two showing the beginnings of fear. Would they all still be alive to see the dawn?

"This is it, *Fusion*, the war is about to begin. This is the first battle and I hope it ends the war, only that is rarely the case. People are going to die tonight, and I damn well hope it's the enemy. You have all trained for this and I know that you are all ready for what tonight is going to throw at us. Use your skills. Use your weapons. Stay alert. Above all, be a team. As a team, we shall prevail."

"*Fusion!*" Wildcat yelled from below and there was a resounding cheer as everybody masked up.

Mindy was unsure as she looked over at Dave.

"Dave. . ."

"Don't say it," he warned.

Mindy looked over at Chloe who was staring down at the mat and more particularly at her daughter who was pulling on her mask, ready for action.

"I know what you're thinking, Chloe," Joshua warned. "Cut it out! To quote somebody famous: 'If you think you're gonna die, then you're gonna die.'"

"I know," Chloe replied.

"Will you stop using my words!" Mindy growled, but she grinned nonetheless.

"Stop coming out with such good phrases, then," Joshua countered.

Mindy knew what he was doing, and she was glad of it. To all those below, they would see their commanders laughing and joking. Moral was already high within *Fusion* and it had just risen a couple of points - after all, if Hit Girl was laughing, what could go wrong.

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"All teams, standby!" Battle Guy called over the comms.

"CPD is cordoning off the surrounding streets," Hal advised.

The two veterans were occupying the Command Bunker in Echo - Hit Girl had duly renamed it the Battle Bunker and it was the command nexus coordinating *Fusion's* defence of Chicago. A short distance away, in a separate bunker, *Synthesis* were monitoring the traffic cameras to ensure that nobody was trying to break through the police cordon to backup FEAR and her cohorts. High above Chicago, the drone, EAGLE-1 was sending back high-definition colour images of the road intersection in real time for Hal and Battle Guy to coordinate the fight from.

On the level below the Battle Bunker, Audacious, Lynx and Scamp were standing by for incoming casualties. Medic, Athena, Rogue, and Ravage were standing ready in *Titan*, not far from the intersection, ready to evacuate any wounded. Atop a six-storey building, an easy 170-yards to the north of the intersection, Leon and her spotter, Astute, were preparing to rain down a deadly storm of lead.

"Overwatch - you are cleared for action; execute!"

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With that single command, Leon steadied her aim.

After she took a few shallow breaths and then held the last one, she squeezed the trigger and a .338-calibre Lapua Magnum bullet erupted from the suppressed muzzle of her AXMC sniper rifle. The bullet took less than a second to strike the lead Sicilian in the chest, knocking the man backwards as the bullet continued through him and embedding itself in the man behind - both were dead before they hit the blacktop. Pandemonium ensued as the fight rapidly got underway. Swords flashed in the illumination from the street lighting and bullets flew in all directions. Within minutes, the drains were filling with blood.

Every vigilante had a partner - that had been impressed, forced if you like, on them all. They would watch each other's back as they fought. Indeed, Nightmare and Cut-Throat were doing well as they fought alongside Stormtide and Trojan. Their opponents, the Corsairs, fought reasonably well but they were no match for the highly trained forces which attacked them. It was a first for Stormtide - fighting out on the street in such a free-for-all. It was the same for Cut-Throat. As such, they were partnered with experienced *Fusion* members. Nightmare was young and just out of training, but she had endured, and survived, some of the worst fighting Chicago had seen in many years. Nightmare had reason to hate the Corsairs and she relished killing them.

Cut-Throat was a relative novice to street-fighting, but he was a seasoned *Predator* who knew how to fight dirty and how to fight to win. The first Corsair he met, found out to his cost how skilled the twelve-year-old was when Cut-Throat's twin combat-machetes first severed an arm and then his head in a procession of swift, calculated movements. The boy was focussed as he supported his more-experienced colleague who was in her element as the fourteen-year-old girl slashed a Corsair to death with her jungle sword. Cut-Throat prevented a cowardly strike at Nightmare's exposed back, from another Corsair, before he killed the offending attacker. It had been months since the boy had last killed and the outlet felt amazing - all the apprehension and emotions since *Urban Predator* had fallen were gone and he felt reborn as he and Nightmare ran to support Stormtide and Trojan.

Stormtide whirled her bō-staff, stabbing into the mass of Corsairs and relishing the blood and screaming. She felt right at home on the street,

slashing and killing. It was in her blood after five years of enforced training and she had no way of preventing the bloodlust she felt. There was but one outlet and that was the death of FEAR's cohorts. A short distance away from Stormtide, Trojan was bringing death of his own into the fray. The boy appeared to have some bottled up emotions which he was taking out on the unfortunate Corsairs with his trusty sword making short work of anybody who came within range.

The boy also received two bullets for his trouble, but he ignored their stings and he drove on, using the pain to drive his anger and his killing.

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Jackal was having the time of his life as he fought the Sicilians, many of whom were physically large.

It was mostly an intensive fistfight with the occasional bit of blade work involved. He was working with Petra, who was enjoying the more physical form of contact fighting. She happily used her fists to break ribs and noses, following up with her armoured knees to snap a spine or fracture a sternum. Another female vigilante, Raven, was partnered with Fury. The pair of them were well-matched in their skill levels, with Fury using her amazing manoeuvrability to great effect as she exercised her agility and made use of her slim frame to dodge incoming strikes and deliver her own attacks with her bō-staff. The ten-year-old was fearless and the sixteen-year-old Raven was impressed by the youngster's energy and drive.

That just left Discord and Rage. While Rage demonstrated the same impressive drive and energy as his counterpart, Fury, he also struggled at times to maintain situational awareness - but that was what Discord was there for. Discord was highly skilled and very experienced thanks to her *Predator* training which had seen her complete Phase 3 and move on to active status. The fifteen-year-old apparently had a lot of bitterness inside and she dealt it out, snapping bones and generally hurting anything in her way while keeping an eye open for the nine-year-old who was driving his Messer sword into anything which came close - by anything, that apparently included Discord herself who dodged at the very last second, but she still received a sharp stab into her armour.

Rage yelled a brief, "Sorry!" before moving on.

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As for Psyche and Splinter, they were having great fun with their Russians.

Unlike the other teams, who were in pairs, Psyche led her all-girl team of Hellcat and Torment while Splinter led the boys: Tigercat and Relentless. Each trio faced off against the dozen Solntsevskaya Brotherhood heavies who were all smirking at the limited stature of the vigilantes before them. Psyche was having none of it as she ran forwards with her team and the first pair of Russians were so startled at the spirited attack that they did nothing to defend themselves before it was far too late to do anything. Psyche cut the throat of the first while Hellcat and Torment almost ripped the head off their man before he fell to the ground, his neck viciously twisted and the eyes facing in a very unnatural direction.

The death of their two colleagues did not improve the temper of the remaining ten Russians who screamed the Russian version of bloody murder and attacked. Splinter took the first man while Tigercat and Relentless went to work on two more. Relentless yelled out as he was bodily thrown to the street, but he quickly sprang back up and launched himself at the man who had thrown him. The ten-year-old *Predator* was 'relentless' by character and not just by name.

Tigercat ripped into the enemy with his claws, drawing blood from some nasty wounds. However, the Russians were able to take a lot of damage before they actually went down, and Hellcat was the next to be hurt as she was almost trampled by several of the Russians when she fell to the ground. She finally regained her knees by slashing out with her own claws until the legs moved out of her way. Psyche yanked the twelve-year-old up to her feet whilst driving one of her Sai into the heart of the nearest Russian.

Psyche was enjoying her return to action and she was making good use of her time - her right arm hurt but nowhere near as much as it did. The adrenalin helped a lot as she fought without a care in the world - except maybe for winning.

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FEAR was facing off against Hit Girl, Kick-Ass, Shadow, Wildcat, and Foxtail. Wildcat and Foxtail peeled off to take out two of her bodyguards while Shadow went after the third.

Hit Girl and Kick-Ass went for FEAR who drew a pair of Katana swords instead of her usual war sword which she appeared to have misplaced some time ago. Hit Girl nodded approvingly as she drew her own twin blades. Kick-Ass drew his Ko-Wakizashi blades and he ensured that Hit Girl was not disturbed or stabbed in the back while she concentrated on FEAR.

Wildcat was well, a wild cat. She flew at her selected enemy and she had him backing down from her frenzied attack with her Katana and Wakizashi. The Corsair's Messer sword was heavyweight but that just meant it could not be wielded with as much finesse as the lighter fighting swords which Wildcat had trained for many hours to use as a pair. Naturally, FEAR's bodyguards were very experienced and totally fearless. They did not back down as they were attacked by the female vigilantes.

Foxtail's Corsair was very careful to avoid the expertly-wielded Butterfly swords which flashed through the air. Foxtail was a fast-moving enemy who did not stay still long enough for the Corsair to make a successful strike - all he found was disturbed air. It did not take long before Foxtail had the man spilling his guts down the street before collapsing into a bloody heap. Shadow's kill joined the blood flowing down the gutter enroute for the nearest drain. Shadow's bō-staff left nobody standing when it came into contact with a body. The Corsairs' needed better armour if they wanted to survive a melee fight against *Fusion*.

Shadow and Foxtail watched as Wildcat continued her attack. There was something not quite right about the fight - it should have been over. Foxtail caught on first. Wildcat was pushing her opponent to near defeat before allowing him to regain the advantage and then taking it away from him. Basically, she was playing with her food before she killed it. Shadow figured it out, too, and she was surprised at the behaviour. *Fusion* killed, they did not torture when out on the streets - that was not the *Fusion* way.

Finally, Foxtail had had enough, so she drew one of her Beretta Px4 Storm Compact Type G pistols. She put a bullet in the poor cunt's head, killing him instantly. Wildcat whirled around, and she actually made to drive her blades into Foxtail who quickly stepped back to avoid being stabbed and slashed.

"What the fuck, Wildcat?" Foxtail exclaimed.

"He was mine!" Wildcat hissed angrily.

"We'll talk later," Shadow promised.

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As the fighting continued around FEAR and Hit Girl, the city watched with baited breath.

Much of the fight was being filmed from a distance by news crews and after a short delay was being fed live to the city. There were many who leaned into their televisions and watched barely breathing as the two masters fought. The cold steel clashed as both women twisted and turned to avoid each other's blades. Four swords flashed under the street lighting as the blades moved swiftly through the air. Strikes were made on both sets of armour, drawing unintended ooohs and aaahs from those watching.

Every now and then, a Russian, or a Sicilian would break towards the fight and make an attempt on Hit Girl from behind. They were taken down by either Kick-Ass, or by Overwatch, before they came anywhere near.

345 North Western Avenue

Dread was not happy.

She had been put in charge of a very important mission - to keep her sister alive and rescue her if required. Shouldn't have been a difficult mission to complete, only the seventeen-year-old was in two minds about whether her sister should actually be allowed to live. Her life had taken a sharp turn to the left in recent days and it was all she could do to stick with the plan and not run to Hit Girl begging for refuge. Instead, she was stuck with six of her sister's fucked up minions. They were all teenagers and they were warped enough to freak the hell out of Dread as they climbed up several staircases towards the roof of a six-storey building a short distance from the fight which did not seem to be going her sister's way. The armour she wore was heavy and she hated that it covered her face. She hated the attention that she gained from being FEAR's sister. That first time when she had been paraded before an admittedly awe-inspiring array of armour-clad minions had been humiliating but also exciting - that had been two weeks previously and she had been allocated her own team of six individuals.

As FEAR's sister, she was offered a lot of respect from everybody present - maybe they assumed that Dread was some seasoned killer, rather than a scared young woman way out of her depth.

"You ready, Dread?" Tumor asked. "Or are you too busy in fucking dreamland?"

"Fuck you, you jumped up twat!" Dread growled as she pistol-whipped the fifteen-year-old across his armoured mask. "Now, go kill me that sniper!"

The young man bristled but he knew his place and Dread was 'untouchable', even if she disliked playing the tough bitch to cover herself.

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"You hear a noise?" Astute asked as he rolled over and sat up from his prone position on the roof.

"I did," Leon commented as she brought her lethal sniper rifle around towards the access door to the roof.

The direct line of sight was blocked by the lift shaft, but neither were born yesterday. There was a loud bang and a bright flash as the explosive device rigged to the access door detonated. The bang was followed by several yells and some very bad language. Astute jumped up and he readied a P90, bringing it up

to his shoulder and running the corner of the lift shaft. He dived flat at the corner, just in time as submachinegun fire struck the lift shaft, chipping off the stone cladding.

Astute replied with short bursts from the P90 as Leon came up behind him and she readied their escape apparatus. With her rifle across her back, she threw a pair of quarter-inch lines off the rooftop and she clipped the rope into a carabiner at her crotch. The ends of the lines were secured to an eyebolt embedded in the rooftop. Astute passed his P90 onto Leon while he clipped on his own line to the carabiner he wore. The enemy were coming closer, using rooftop fittings to cover their approach - there was something very familiar about the tactics being employed. Beyond them, he could see what he assumed to be their commander. As the person passed through a patch of moonlight, he got a good view of the armour which marked the person out as somebody special.

Astute disconnected the line from his carabiner and he took back his P90 much to Leon's disapproval. There was something he needed to find out about the attackers and the person in the special body armour.

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Leon provided covering fire with her sniper rifle, sending the massive bullets streaking past the attackers.

Astute raced up the far side of the bridge, flanking the attackers. There appeared to be five or six of them . . . fuck! One less - a .338 Lapua Magnum bullet took a poor bastard's head off. The leader was clearly visible as she remained near to the doorway off the roof. She was yelling at her minions, exhorting them to move. The armour was reminiscent of that worn by the Corsairs - at least the combined mask and helmet was, only while the Corsairs generally used grey armour, the armour for that individual was black with vivid red markings. There was no skin visible, but the shape of the body indicated a female.

Panels of body armour covered the chest, shoulders, upper arms, thighs, lower legs, and back. She was much better armoured than her cohorts which indicated her importance. The armour appeared relatively light for its design, too - very advanced. She bore a pair of pistols on her hips - possible H&K pistols. On her right calf, there was a large combat knife and she carried a sword of unknown design on her back. As for her cohorts, they each sported the same armour as the Corsairs, although they all appeared to be . . . no? Astute was certain they were not adults which could only make them. . .

With the death of their colleague, the gunfire intensified and Astute saw the commander turn her head to stare at him - she pulled a pistol and she fired off several rounds in his direction as she ran in his direction. Leon had her head down due to incoming fire so was unable to assist as Astute took several bullets in his chest armour before he was attacked at close range by the commander. She was a good fighter and they exchanged blows. Astute noticed somebody blindsiding him and he kicked out, putting the new attacker down hard before he found himself grabbed by the commander and thrown to the floor. She pulled her pistol and she was about to put a bullet in his head when the gun clicked on an empty chamber.

"Fuck!" came the electronic growl from the enraged commander who yelled out a warning as Leon dived off the side of the building and abseiled to the ground.

It was all the distraction that Astute needed as he ran for his own rope and rapidly connected on before diving over the parapet and rocketing to the

ground, pulling up short at the last moment. Leon covered his descent by sending four large rounds towards the parapet high above them.

"That was engaging," Astute commented as they both ran towards the exfiltration point.

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Further down the street, things were not looking too good for FEAR and her . . . well, there were none of her cohorts left.

There were a smattering of Russians and Sicilians still in the fight, only their confidence was waning, and they were beginning to seriously reconsider their career choice. The five remaining men were moving to protect their principal - FEAR - only they were unable to get anywhere near her, until there was a hail of gunfire from up the street and *Fusion* instantly moved onto the defensive as six people ran down the street towards them, firing off submachineguns. Before *Fusion* could do much more than turn towards the threat, smoke began to erupt all over the intersection as grenades landed and detonated all around.

Vehicles were heard to accelerate away and there was also the sound of high-powered motorcycles departing very quickly. As Battle Guy called for updates - his drone was momentarily struggling to see through the smoke as the hot grenades caused issues with the infra-red sensors. Not surprisingly, when the smoke cleared, Hit Girl glared at a street empty of living bodies, except for those belonging to *Fusion*.

"Let's go!" she growled.

Safehouse E

Hit Girl was fuming by the time she returned to the Safehouse.

Once she was happy that everybody had returned, she finally conceded to sort herself out and she pulled off her armour. After a brief shower, she pulled on panties, a sports bra, and some tight pants before pushing her feet into a pair of sandals. Mindy head for Level 1 and the Medical Centre. There she found Cathy, Taylor, and Paige looking after the wounded with Becky providing much-needed assistance. Mindy, of course, was unhappy to find that anybody required medical attention, but she was being realistic, and she knew that it was unavoidable.

The first to be treated was the young Leo Graves. The ten-year-old was grinning, despite the large bruise on his left shoulder-blade and another on his left thigh. The boy sat on a bed, in just his underwear as Cathy rubbed some gunk onto his bruises.

"He's fine," Cathy said. "He's a growing boy and the bruises will fade over time."

"I've had worse," Leo offered bravely as he winced with the pain.

"Thank you, Leo - you fought well."

Leo grinned at the praise as Mindy moved onto the next bed where Paige was checking out Tommy's chest.

"No big deal," he assured Mindy. "You know I've had worse."

"Not the point, Tommy."

Mindy was interrupted from saying any more as somebody bolted into the Medical Centre and Taylor was pushed to one side.

"Daddy!" Shannon exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

"She cares about me!" Patrick said, and he sounded surprised.

"Don't be an ass, Daddy - of course, I care about you - I forgave you weeks ago; I've just been playing on it."

Shannon was genuinely upset at seeing her father hurt - despite it only being angry red welts, much like Tommy had.

"I'm fine, Shannon - just a little sore."

"Good. . ."

There was a slapping sound and Shannon screamed. She turned and scowled.

"Hi, Stormy!"

"There are times when I dream about having abandoned you in Whitby," Shannon growled.

Jamie grinned hugely but then the grin faded.

"James," Sarah said from where she sat on the next bed. "We need to talk."

"Sorry, Sarah - it was an accident."

"Accident? Shannon, did Jamie ever stab you?"

"He hurt me once or twice, but stab? Not that I can recall," Shannon replied, and she winced at the sight of the large bruise on Sarah's right side.

"Luckily, Mindy's armour protected me."

"You in trouble again, Jamie-boy?" Stephanie asked as she breezed into the Medical Centre.

"Yeah, my women are causing me grief."

"We are *not*, your women!" Shannon and Sarah exclaimed together.

"See!" Jamie said, and Mindy couldn't help laughing.

She was quickly joined by Leo and Tommy and Jamie slunk out of the Medical Centre, his face very red.

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Mindy grabbed her daughter and they followed Jamie.

"Since when was Sarah one of 'your' women, Jamie?" Stephanie asked her brother.

"Thought you dreamed about Abigail," Mindy chuckled.

"Mum!" Jamie growled as his face turned bright red. "Sarah isn't one of my women - she's just a girl that I accidentally stabbed."

Stephanie laughed.

"Jamie - can you go find out if the twins are back, please?" Mindy asked.

"Yes, Mum."

The boy vanished towards the elevator.

"Mindy?"

"Hi, Patrick. You okay?"

"A little sore but Taylor will soothe things in bed, tonight," Patrick grinned. Stephanie feigned puking by shoving a finger down her throat. Mindy ignored her daughter's antics as Patrick began to speak.

"I met somebody new, today. She appeared to be quite high up in FEAR's organisation - at least by the look of her suit; she had red markings and her armour was of a higher quality than that of the Corsairs," Patrick explained. "She tried to kill me - that was the bullets. But she then went hand-to-hand and it was only when I undressed back here that I found this."

Patrick held out a small USB drive which Stephanie took and examined. She exchanged a look with her mother.

"Something going on?" Patrick asked.

"We need to go see Marty," Mindy said.

..._...

Just as Mindy, Stephanie, and Patrick walked into the Battle Bunker, Jamie came running up.

"The bitches from hell are back," he called out, almost breathlessly.

"Thank you, Jamie," Mindy said.

"What you doing?" the boy asked.

"Above your paygrade, runt!" Stephanie said as she closed the armoured door in his face.

"What is so special?" Patrick asked.

"We secure, guys?" Marty asked Abby and Marty.

"I'll pretend you never asked that," Marty growled as he feigned a hurt expression.

"I am so sorry, Marty," Mindy replied. "It looks like Fortune has sent us a message."

"Fortune?" Patrick asked.

"He cleared for this?" Marty asked.

"He is now," Mindy stated.

"Okay," Marty said as he pulled a rather tatty-looking laptop out of a cupboard. "I am just going to check this stick for anything nasty. This laptop is air gapped, so if it's a trap. . ."

"We only trust our source, so far," Mindy explained to Patrick.

"Who is she?"

"She is FEAR's sister - that's all I'm going to say, right now."

"I can live with that."

"Let me know what's on there, Marty."

"No problem, my purple queen!"

Mindy muttered good-natured obscenities under her breath as she left the Battle Bunker and sought out the Abbott twins.

..._...

"So, how did it go?"

"Hi, Mindy!" Sky exclaimed as she and her twin sister drank hot chocolate in the Dining Room.

They were both surrounded by various other Fusion members enjoying a drink of some sort with some getting something to eat.

"She did good," Chrissy said. "She did what she was supposed to, and then she headed home."

"She's still there as far as we know," Sky added.

"Did any of FEAR's goons see any of you?"

"Not as far as we could tell," Sky replied.

"Thank you, both of you. Go get some sleep."

"Night, Mindy!"

The two very different, but very similar girls, finished off their hot chocolate before heading off down to Level 2 and the accommodation. Mindy headed in the same direction, but she stopped at another table where Stephanie, Jamie, Abigail, Shannon, Marc, Annabelle, and Iain sat with their own mugs of hot chocolate. They were all laughing and talking animatedly.

"It is getting late - time for bed," Mindy warned.

Several yawns backed up Mindy's comments.

The kids headed for Elevator #2 which brought them out beside the accommodation area. There they split up, with most of the younger kids heading into Cabin #3. There, Mindy was a little concerned to find Stephanie, Jamie, Abigail, Annabelle, Iain, Anne-Marie, Danny, and Becky all sharing the same cabin.

"Sleep!" Mindy ordered as she closed the door to a host of giggles.

Despite Annabelle at twelve-years-old being the eldest, Stephanie took charge in a vain attempt to keep order. Nevertheless, it was well into the early hours before there was silence in the facility.

Two days later
Monday, October 10th

Safehouse F

Mindy stared at the report which Marty had just handed her.

...

Fusion

Status Report

Date: 10/10/16

Fusion Complement: 46

Fit for Combat: 41

Injured (Available): 3 - RAVEN/SPLINTER/TEMPEST

Injured (No Combat): 2 - PSYCHE/TROJAN

Prisoners in Holding: 1

Combat Vehicles: 5

Vehicles Offline: 1 - BEAST

...

Mindy grimaced at the stats - they were barely 72 hours into the fight and they were taking significant damage. It had been anticipated, but that was not the point. They had given much more punishment than they had taken, but that was not the point. The point was that people were getting hurt . . . because of her determination to remain in Chicago at all costs. People were getting hurt, because of her . . . at what point would 'at all costs' become too expensive? Mindy screwed up the piece of paper and she threw it across the briefing room.

Down below her, she could see Wildcat and Stormtide sparring. Both girls were angry as their partners were both hurt - Trojan more seriously than Tempest - and thus they trained to keep their minds focussed on the task ahead, just like the professionals that they were. Cathy had told Mindy about the civilian casualties - the hospitals were filling up with gunshot wounds, stabbings, and other bodily injuries. The morgues were fully employed, as were the morticians and medical examiners. Jack Bay had reported on the status of the CPD - they were unhappy, too, with injuries spreading as they attempted to maintain order in the troubled city. *Fusion* were there to assist, only they were small in number and they could not be everywhere.

Trojan and Splinter had been hurt when out on patrol with Shadow and Petra. The team had run into the Solntsevskaya Brotherhood - the fight had been short but epic and eight Russians were dead at the end of it, however, Trojan and Splinter had both taken significant hits - Trojan had taken several bullets into his left side. None of the bullets had penetrated his armour, but the concussive force had badly bruised his side and he would be laid up for several days as he recovered. Splinter only had some heavy bruising which would clear up quickly and he was ready, and eager, for combat when needed. The two girls had escaped anything major, but they had both been very concerned with the heavy firepower wielded by the Russians.

As for Raven, she had been out in *Beast* with Jackal, Discord, Rage, and Fury. All had gone well - they had prevented the outright murder of two police officers by Corsairs and assisted in keeping the peace despite the varied attempts by the Sicilians to encourage anarchy. Then, just as they had put down three of the Sicilians, encouraging the rest to flee, *she* had shown up! Sunset Phoenix and a handful of Corsairs had ambushed *Beast* just as they were about to leave the scene - the armour-plating prevented any major injuries from the bullets, except Raven got blasted against a wall by some form of explosive device; Foxtail's mysterious Irish bomber back for more? Raven's armour had taken the brunt of the impact, but she was bruised to hell and back and feeling a little stunned.

Mindy had taken it on herself to personally apologise to each of those who were injured. That had not gone down well - all of them, to a vigilante, had told Mindy where she could stick her apology. There were times when Mindy felt herself to be unworthy to lead such an illustrious team, but that was her task and she would lead *Fusion* to the very best of her ability. She knew that every member of *Fusion* would follow her into the deepest pits of hell, should that be needed, only Mindy hoped that she was not leading her team on a one-way trip to hell.

That just left Stephanie.

..._...

Mindy was mad at her daughter for being injured - it had been her own fault, only it had not been.

Jamie had broken the news to Dave that Stephanie was overdue and also why she had broken her own grounding to go out. Even worse, she had gone out into what amounted to a virtual combat zone, alone. Despite the incident, Stephanie had brought back a prisoner and some valuable intelligence which was always a bonus. However, what Stephanie had endured during the attack was keeping Mindy awake at nights. It was made even worse when Stephanie would yell out in pain due to her injuries.

From a certain point of view, it was not even a combat-related injury which had put Stephanie out of action - more her past catching up with her.

Again.