

Friday, October 14th, 2016

Glenview

The following morning was not all that much fun.

Being Abigail's eleventh birthday, the day should have been full of joy, only it was one of sadness and apprehension. Abigail had not slept well, and she looked a mess when she found her way down to the kitchen along with a tired Stephanie.

"Happy Birthday, Abigail," Mindy said with a supportive smile.

"Thank you, Mindy," Abigail replied as she sat down at the table in the kitchen and proceeded to stare out of the window.

Horatio jumped up onto her lap and he curled up with a muted meow. Abigail forced a smile and she stroked the feline who was now more cat than kitten. Dave placed a plate of pancakes down in front of each of the two girls who dived in with gusto. Brad arrived next, his eyes red. He went straight over to Abigail and he gave her a hug.

"Happy Birthday," he said.

"Thanks, Brad."

"Your Mom rang," Dave advised the two youngsters. "Your dad is out of surgery and in ICU."

"Will we be able to see him?" Brad asked.

"Maybe, later - we need to wait and see what the doctors say."

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After breakfast, Mindy sought out Brad and Abigail, drawing them into her study.

"Abigail, I know you're looking forward tomorrow, but if you want to withdraw. . ."

"No, Mindy, I need to be doing something. Besides, it looks like I have a useless runt to train," Abigail replied coldly with a smirk in the direction of her step-brother.

"Okay," Mindy said. "I had to ask."

"Thanks, I know," Abigail replied.

Safehouse F

Level 0

They had left the barred door to the cell open, but the outer door was locked.

After two stops on the way back to Chicago - during one stop, Kelly had suffered the indignity of a very thorough, but familiar, strip search performed by Foxtail, before she was handed a set of joggers and a black hood - they had stopped, and Kelly had been hauled out. The hood had been removed after she had been guided down a set of steel steps, which had been very cold under her bare feet, and then into her 'cell'.

"Welcome," an electronic voice offered. "There's some food and drink for you. Get a good night's rest."

Then the door had been pulled closed behind her. The food had actually been really good, and she had slept well.

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On waking, she had sat on the bunk awaiting a visitor - it had not taken long.

"Good morning, Kelly, hope you slept well."

Kelly examined her visitor who had breezed in through the door with a big smile on her face.

"Come with me - I'll show you where you can clean up and I've got some clothes for you."

Kelly followed the girl with long, light brown hair who appeared to be full of energy. They emerged into a large cavern. . .

"Holy, shit!" Kelly breathed as she took in the towering rock roof above her.

"We'll get to that, later . . . oh, I'm Lauren, by the way."

"Hi."

Lauren led Kelly to a far corner and then into a bathroom.

"Go take a shower and get cleaned up - I'll get your clothes together."

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"I hope we got your sizes right," Lauren called out while Kelly showered. "I picked out the colours, so I hope you like them."

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Kelly called back as she finished rinsing her hair.

To Kelly, it was all part of some dream. Just the previous evening, she had been rescued from certain death by people who she saw as friends - did they see her the same way? Kelly took her time, enjoying the hot shower. For a few moments, she stopped to consider immediate events, then she spared a thought for her sister - what was she feeling?

Did she even care?

Joliet

To say that FEAR was pissed would be the understatement of the century.

On her return to the facility, she had lost control completely, as evidenced by the four dead *Corsairs* and the two dead *Marauders*. Their explanations, concerning the infiltration and the taking of her sister, had not gone down well with FEAR. Her sister was her life and her sister was gone. The two dead *Marauders* had come forward with some story about Dread going rogue. Their admission had resulted in their deaths.

FEAR swore vengeance on Hit Girl, she swore to find her sister, to get her back.

Safehouse F

"You done?"

Kelly looked up to see Lauren peering into the shower and she instinctively tried to cover herself. Lauren laughed.

"I've seen it all before, Kelly - I'm Nightmare, by the way."

Kelly scowled as she dropped her hands.

"Yeah - you had a thing for my snatch," Kelly commented dryly as she grabbed a towel.

"Sorry," Lauren offered honestly.

"No harm done," Kelly grinned as she dried herself off.

The Battle Bunker

"I've found the link!"

Mindy chuckled at Marty's geeky expression of success.

"Okay - bear with me. The prints came back to one Summer Frasier - retrieved her Drivers Licence and guess where she lives?"

"Que us in," Dave said as the image of a young woman appeared on a large screen.

"2275 Winnetka Avenue, Glenview - almost exactly 80 yards from your front door.

"What!" Mindy exclaimed.

"You know you do you little 3.5 miles run a couple times each week? Well, you run straight past her front door."

"Fuck!" Mindy exclaimed.

"Okay - Summer Frasier. Born November 18th, 1998 - aged eighteen. Lives alone. parents are dead - they went missing March 2011 and they were found dead a few months later - a single bullet to each head. Miss Frasier was twelve when they went missing and she had been away with relatives in Canada at the time. Dug a little deeper and I found out Miss Frasier had a younger sister. That girl went missing at the same time as her parents - she was nine-years-old, and her name was Kara Frasier."

"Get on with it, Marty!" Mindy exclaimed, the suspense getting to her.

"Did some searching through the *Urban Predator* data and I found a Kara Frasier. Her name had been subsequently changed to Kara Newton which was why we had trouble finding her. She was also missing from current *Urban Predator* records as she died in 2014. According to those records, Kara Newton was murdered on October 12th of that year - she was murdered by a younger girl during a fight in a shower. Ring any bells?"

"Stephanie!" Mindy exclaimed.

"She's quick today!" Marty quipped.

Mindy growled dangerously, so Marty sped up his presentation.

"I sent Abby and Mathilda over to her address - her house keys were in her suit. Well, in the basement, they found a 'Stephanie Walker Must Die' wall. It appears that Sunset Phoenix AKA Summer Frasier had a thing about Stephanie and wanted her dead. There is a good case for her being the sniper who shot Stephanie, too."

Mindy was silent as the thoughts of Stephanie and the memories of the young girl's struggle for life flooded through her mind. She could see Stephanie

bleeding in her arms. She could see Stephanie dying, again and again, in the hospital.

Had they finally caught the person behind Stephanie's suffering?

Training Facility Echo

Level 0

"This place is unbelievable!"

"You enjoying yourself, Kelly?"

Kelly turned to see a girl coming towards her.

"Hi, I'm Chloe - you knew me as Shadow."

"Another one who had a thing about my snatch!" Kelly growled.

"No comment," Chloe chuckled. "Let me show you around."

That afternoon

Level 3

After a lot of thought, Mindy decided it was time for Stephanie to be told about Summer Frasier.

Mindy found her daughter sitting with Saoirse in the capacious armoury, cleaning their pistols. They were both giggling about something which was fine with Mindy; anything which gave Stephanie a distraction from recent events was good. For Mindy, seeing the short hair was an instant reminder of those events, and after almost a year, seeing Stephanie without her ponytail just seemed weird and wrong.

"Hi, Mum."

"Steph - got a moment?"

"Yes."

"You want me to go?" Saoirse asked.

"No - I think you can help with this, Saoirse - why don't you come around and sit next to Steph," Mindy suggested.

Once Saoirse had moved, Mindy continued.

"Something has come up concerning Sunset Phoenix. We've identified her, and we believe we might have found out why she is fighting *Fusion* and why she may have had a hand in you getting shot, Steph."

"Okay," Stephanie replied as she subconsciously rubbed her right shoulder.

"Would the name, 'Kara Newton', mean anything to either of you?"

Stephanie's eyes closed, and her hands balled into fists. Saoirse scowled, and she looked up at Mindy with anger in her eyes. For Stephanie, it was the cue for a vicious flashback of a fight that she had never expected to survive, let alone win. She remembered the water, the spray, the hard tile walls and floor. She remembered the other *Predators* baying for blood. She remembered the anger she felt towards her adversary. She remembered the pain as she was punched and thrown to the tile floor. Between the water from the shower and the tears in

her eyes, it had been difficult to see what was going on around her. She remembered punching out at the other girl, striking wherever she could, searching for the more sensitive areas of the other girl who was just as naked as Stephanie was.

Stephanie remembered the anger as she had forced the older, bigger girl down to the tiles and begun to punch her in the face, the chest, the face, the chest. Then as Kara Newton had begun to lose consciousness, Stephanie had seized her head and smashed it repeatedly into the tile floor . . . again . . . again . . . again . . . until bright red blood had begun to flow in huge amounts across the tiles, gurgling into the drain.

Kara Newton had never moved again.

"Yes, that name means a lot to me," Stephanie replied after almost two minutes. "That was the girl I killed in the shower. That was the kill which gained me my codename: Psyche. That was the single event which stopped the bullying, but which also thrust me into the spotlight."

"I had never seen so much blood in one place," Saoirse said slowly as she rested her hand on Stephanie's. "At the time, I had hoped that Stephanie was the one who had died, but she was just a victim of circumstance. Kids were bullied. Kids bullied. It was a fact of life as a *Predator*. Stephanie made a lot of enemies that day, only many of them were too scared to stand up to the little eight-year-old. Some saw her reward as giving Stephanie Walker carte blanche to kill again - so everybody left her alone; including me."

"So, why are you dredging all this shit up, Mindy?" Stephanie asked.

"Kara Newton was previously Kara Frasier. Sunset Phoenix is Summer Frasier. Kara was her younger sister. Somehow, she received her sister's *Urban Predator* file, including details on her death. Abby and Mathilda found it when they searched Frasier's house. There were autopsy photos of Kara after you killed her. I saw the photos and while I knew what you had done - seeing the results . . ."

"I did go to town on her," Stephanie admitted.

An hour later

Safehouse M

Stephanie paused at the door for a moment before pushing it open.

Summer Frasier was conscious and sitting up in the bed. Standing beside her was Medic. Stephanie was not wearing a mask, although Mindy and Saoirse were, as was Medic. Frasier's expression changed as she recognised Stephanie from the photos which she had studied and from the view through her sniper scope, some months before.

"You!"

"I used to be Stephanie Walker. I killed your sister."

"I know. That is why you had to die."

"I am sorry for what I did - I did not set out to kill her. To this day, I have no idea how I managed it. Right up until the moment that I killed your sister, I was bullied. I was bullied for being seven. I was bullied for being small. I was bullied for speaking with an English Accent. I was bullied for being British. I was bullied for crying myself to sleep at night. I was bullied for

being a girl. I was bullied for being me. I was bullied just for existing. I did not choose to be there and neither did the girl I knew as Kara Newton."

Tears were spilling down Stephanie's cheeks.

"May I chip in?" Foxtail asked.

"Foxtail? What the hell has this got to do with you?" Frasier demanded.

"I was a Predator, just like Stephanie. I was there. I missed the fight, but I saw the aftermath. I saw Stephanie standing there, naked and covered in blood, with the girl we knew as Kara Newton dead at her feet. Kara bullied Stephanie a lot. So, did I, whenever I could. If I had gone to shower five minutes earlier, then it might have been me who pushed Stephanie over the edge. I would have liked nothing better than to torment the girl. In that case, I would have been dead at her hands. We were all bullied - me, Kara, everyone there. It's no defence, but there is no guarantee that Kara would be alive today or survived her training. There were many nasty ways for a *Predator* to die. Believe it or not, Stephanie suffered for what she did. While we were all too scared to bait her, the instructors took over and they pushed her and pushed her. They didn't care if she died, nobody did, they just wanted a product that could do their bidding. Stephanie was just a victim, just as much as your sister. I was a victim too, plus hundreds more."

"If I could go back, I would probably kill her again. I had no choice. I look back and there were so many times that I wish I could have taken my own life, only I was too chicken," Stephanie offered when Foxtail had finished her speech.

Summer Frasier considered everything she had been told, looking at Stephanie, then Foxtail, and finally at Hit Girl.

"I don't want excuses. You killed my little sister. I don't care what she was or what she had done. I don't care that you 'had no choice'. The fact remains - you killed my Kara and for that you are going to pay, Stephanie Walker. I will pursue you. I will hunt you. I will destroy you and everything which you hold dear. I will never rest. NEVER! YOU - WILL - DIE! I WILL NOT STOP. I DON'T CARE IF IT TAKES ME THE REST OF MY LIFE . . . BUT YOU - WILL - DIE!"

"Foxtail!" Medic ordered. "Get her outta here!"

Foxtail grabbed the sobbing Stephanie and she hauled her out of the room.

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It took several minutes for Stephanie to calm down.

Foxtail was furious with Hit Girl for putting her friend through that.

"Don't blame, Mum," Stephanie said. "She was hoping I might get closure. I hoped so, too. I was foolish enough to expect forgiveness."

"Despite everything you can do, Steph, you are still barely in double figures. There is so much which you cannot hope to grasp. Not your fault; you are young."

"Everybody wants to kill me. Newton. You. Her. Why does the world hate me so much?"

"As Saoirse said, you did not bring this upon yourself," Mindy said as she pulled off her mask once the door was firmly closed behind her. "Nobody that matters, hates you, Stephanie. Anybody that matters, loves you."

Stephanie grinned.

That evening

Safehouse E

Sub-Level 8

Room 22

Nobody was going out - they could not afford for anybody to get hurt.

It seemed that FEAR and her friends were staying home, too. Nobody was complaining as it gave everybody time to prepare for the fight of their lives. Mindy and Dave had talked long about adding to their ranks and both had come to the same decision.

"Ember?"

"Hit Girl."

Rachel turned to see Hit Girl standing at the door to the room where she had been recuperating. She had been allowed to get out of bed and she even had clothes to wear.

"Can I trust you?"

"Yes."

Rachel flinched as Hit Girl removed her mask. She knew that seeing Hit Girl's face was a route from which there was to be no return.

"You can call me, Mindy. We have a major battle ahead of us and I need boots on the ground. I would like to offer you a place on our team as an Operator."

"I'm not in any condition to fight," Rachel pointed out.

"I want you in the Battle Bunker with Battle Guy and Hal."

"You would trust me?"

"You put a foot wrong, you get a bullet in the head," Mindy offered with a nasty grin.

"That's fair."

"I'll send Abigail and Jamie to show you around."

Training Facility Echo

Level 0

"Hi, Lucy, what's up?" Shannon asked her friend.

"I'm looking for the evil one."

"That would be me," Mindy chuckled as she emerged from the Battle Bunker.

Shannon laughed.

"Glad you could make it, Lucy - come with me," Mindy suggested as she made her way towards the elevator.

"Nice knowing you, Luc!" Shannon called out.

"Is she kidding?" Lucy asked but Mindy just smirked as she pressed the button beside the steel doors. "I mean it - should I be worried?"

"Probably."

The doors closed, and Mindy pressed the 'LEVEL 3' button.

Level 3

"You can be so damn infuriating!"

Lucy was getting annoyed with Mindy. Being taken down into the bowels to God only knew where by Hit Girl worried the veteran *Predator* more than a little. They excited the elevator into the main equipment store.

"Nice!" Lucy commented as her eyes took in all the equipment piled on racks.

Mindy led her over to the armoury, to the left and beyond the shelving. With a swipe of her access card, Mindy shoved open the heavy steel door, waving Lucy inside. Lucy stepped forwards as directed and her eyes went wide as she saw every conceivable weapon system and then some. Mindy moved towards a table in the centre of the room where two sets of body armour were laid out on a table. Mindy pointed to the left-hand set.

"Piranha - your new armour; use it well."

"Mindy . . . I . . ."

"I am going to trust you - besides, I need somebody with your skills; I don't have any choice: don't let me down."

"You're really scraping the bottom of the barrel, huh?"

"Oh, yeah!" Hit Girl growled.

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There was a buzzing sound and Mindy looked up at a screen before pressing a button to release the access door.

"Hey, Lucy!"

Lucy turned to see Jamie and Abigail heading towards her with Rachel.

"Hello, Lucy," Rachel offered, a little stiffly.

"You look a little better," Lucy offered.

"I'm coping."

The door opened again, and Chloe entered, followed by . . .

"What is *she* doing here?" Rachel demanded as she recognised Kelly. "You know who she is?"

"Yes," Mindy said quickly. "She reports to me. She was a mole in FEAR's organisation."

"Hello, Raider," Kelly said.

"I am Ember - *not* that name," Rachel pointed out nastily.

"Sorry," Kelly tried.

"So, you're a turncoat, are you?" Rachel asked.

"I offered myself to Mindy when I found out what my sister was - who she was."

"We pulled Kelly out, Thursday night," Chloe explained. "I know you two won't see eye to eye, but the past is the past and we cannot change that. Please, you must learn to trust one another and look forward instead of back."

"She has a point, I suppose," Rachel said. "I've accepted Lucy, why not you?"

"Kelly goes by Fortune, now," Mindy said. "Speaking of which - Fortune, your new combat suit."

"Cool!"

"Let's get you both changed," Chloe suggested as she grabbed Lucy and her new combat suit while Mindy assisted Kelly.

Jamie looked up at Rachel.

"We have body armour you can use, plus a mask - at least until your real combat suit is ready. You will, however, need a weapon - take your pick."

Rachel gazed around the armoury, then focussed on the racks of pistols. She pulled a few off and checked them over, feeling them in her hand. She was surprised to be trusted with a weapon - it had only been a week.

She finally selected a pistol she liked, and she began to field-strip it.

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"Kelly - you feel up to fighting your sister's forces?" Mindy asked as Kelly tried on her new combat suit.

"I need to end this."

"It won't be easy, but we're all there for you."

"Thanks."

Kelly finished pulling on the combat suit and then turned to look in the full-length mirror. She was stunned. The suit appeared skin-tight but wasn't. It was black with dark blue markings on the arms and legs. The mask covered her entire face and the eyes glowed the same dark blue. Around her waist, a dark blue utility belt held a pair of SIG Sauer P229 Legion compact pistols along with the usual *Fusion* fittings. On each thigh, below the pair of pistols which sat on her hips, were a trio of titanium throwing knives. Her right calf held a scabbard in which a Fairburn-Sykes fighting knife sat. On her back, a twenty-inch Gladius sword sat in a scabbard angled over to her right shoulder. At the top her chest, a clip was mounted so she could clip on a P90 Personal Defence Weapon.

"I don't know what to say," Fortune commented as she turned and twisted.

"Go and try it out . . . just don't kill anybody," Mindy suggested.

Level 0

Everything stopped when Fortune set foot out of the elevator.

Megan, Annabelle, Anne-Marie, and Lizzie were training nearest the elevator and they stared at the sight of a new vigilante. Her armour was of a new design which none of them had seen before, but they were impressed. Fortune had barely set foot on the mat when the elevator doors opened again, and several people emerged. First Mindy stepped out, followed by Jamie and then Abigail. Rachel appeared, a pistol in a holster on her left hip. Behind them came another armour-clad individual with Chloe closing off the group.

The armour was very similar to that which Fortune wore, only, the markings were a vivid opal colour. The weapons were the same and although Piranha was taller, the two complimented one another well. Space was cleared on the mat to allow both vigilantes to test their new suits and get used to them prior to the following day's activities. For some, it was the first time seeing Lucy in action. Mindy knew that Lucy had been keeping fit in her apartment, so the impromptu sparring should not be an issue for the senior *Predator*. For Mindy, it was crucial that other members of *Fusion* were able to see Piranha and Fortune at work and to see what they were capable of when engaged in a fight.

First, the pair of them limbered up with some basic martial arts movements to test out the flexibility of the combat suits. The pair made a good team as they exchanged blows which appeared to increase in force and speed. Some knew Kelly from D-JAK and they knew that she was very skilled. Though few knew Lucy, they all assumed her to be highly skilled due to what she was and the training which she had endured. Those *Fusion* members who were not *Predators* were always cautious about sparring with those that were as they were unrelenting with their stamina and skills.

Once they were warmed up, the swords were drawn, and the pair worked up their movements, starting slow and working up to fast movements. The cold steel clashed and echoed around the concrete facility enthralling everybody who was watching. Chloe and Joshua were impressed as they watched for mistakes of which there were very few. After twenty minutes, Mindy called a halt to the proceedings. Both girls pulled off their masks and allowed their sweat-soaked hair to get some air. There was a round of applause for their sparring to which both girls grinned.

"Lucy and Kelly will be fighting tomorrow," Mindy explained. "Piranha and Fortune will join the teams and I expect them to be treated properly, irrelevant of past actions."

Mindy glared at the *Predators* present and they all nodded.

"Lucy is one of us and we've all put our past behind us," Shannon pointed out. "She is very welcome."

Glenview

"I wish I could be there with you."

"I know, honey, I really do. You will be with us, but not on the streets - I have put you with Ryan, so you take part. I expect you to be masked and suited with your weapons. If you feel you can join in and the situation arises, then I will not object to you seeing some action. I know you are still in pain; I can see it in your eyes."

"It still hurts but I can fight through the pain."

"I know you can, but I don't want you to. Your siblings will be out on the streets and they will fight well, I know it."

"I'm going to be speaking with them, next."

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Stephanie headed straight upstairs to where her younger siblings were getting ready for bed.

She made straight for Danny's room where she found the boy sitting on his bed, in his pyjamas, reading a book on gun maintenance. She looked upwards, at Jamie's room up above.

"Jamie!" she called out. "Down here, now!"

Jamie scrambled off his bed immediately and made his way down the spiral staircase to Danny's room. The boy recognised the tone of his sister's voice and it brooked no argument. In the weeks since he had been with Stephanie, he had learnt the hard way that when Stephanie gave orders in a certain tone of voice, disobedience resulted in pain. Jamie had also learnt that Stephanie could inflict pain without causing any physical injury. Therefore, he dutifully sat down beside his new brother.

"Anne-Marie!" Stephanie called out and less than a minute later, the final Lizewski child appeared from the shared bathroom - she also knew when not to test Stephanie's mood.

"Tomorrow will be the fight of your lives. I will miss fighting alongside you, therefore, I want to pass on some of my hard-won wisdom."

All three kids could see the anger in their sister's eyes and the tears which she was holding at bay.

"Jamie is a *Predator* and as such, I expect him to have the skills he needs to survive tomorrow - Shannon assures me that he can look after himself. As for you two, you both have kills under your belt, and you have faced limited combat. I trust you both to use your skills correctly. Whatever you all do, look out for yourself. Look out for each other. Watch out for some cunt sneaking around you to attack from the rear. Tomorrow, not one of you will leave that Safehouse until I have personally checked your armour, your weapons, everything. If at any stage you are worried, concerned, even scared - and you will be scared - you talk to your team and you can talk to me, too, by asking Marty for a discrete channel. Now, each of you, bed - no talking, no fucking about; you each have a big day ahead of you tomorrow and you need every minute of sleep you can get. Good night."

The two boys and one girl jumped up as one. They hugged Stephanie tightly before they each ran off towards their own bed.

"Night!" they all yelled as they went.

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Stephanie stepped out of Danny's room, closing the door behind her.

"A very good pep-talk, Steph, I'm impressed," Mindy said honestly.

"I had to say something; I'm worried about them all."

"So am I. I couldn't bear anything to happen to either one of you. I never thought that I would take to motherhood so readily - it's surprised the hell out of me."

"You're good at it, Mum."

"It's so alien to me, seeing you with short hair. I miss your ponytail and . . ."

"I miss it too but that is in the past - don't worry about it; I'm getting used to it.

"I myself have a pep-talk to put together and I hope it's as good as yours - night, Steph."

"Night, Mom."

The following afternoon

Saturday, October 15th, 2016

Northwestern Memorial Hospital

"Maggie!"

"How you doing, Jen?"

"Fine. I need another trauma kit; can you find one for me. Damn, it feels like I'm back on patrol in Afghanistan."

Doctor Jennifer Staite was a rising star at the hospital. She specialised in emergency medicine. Her task for the day was to preposition herself in a fully-equipped SUV, out in the city and await the fighting to begin. She was strapping on a flak-jacket and there was a Kevlar helmet on the table beside her. Overall, she looked very warlike as she prepared for her excursion into the city.

"Here you are, Jen," Maggie said as he handed a pack to Jennifer. "Stay safe out there."

"I will. *Fusion* will take down those bastards and we will have our city back."

"While there are some aspects to Hit Girl which I dislike, she did keep this city in order and the criminals kept to a kind of code. With these new, whatever, it's total anarchy out there," Maggie pointed out.

"See you later!"

16:00

Level 3

The collective Safehouses were heaving with activity.

All around, people were scattered, cleaning weapons, dressing, sharpening knives and swords, checking communications equipment, and mentally preparing themselves for the fight of their lives. Morale was as high as it ever was and there was plenty of joking from the boys. The girls, generally, just made crude comments about whatever came to mind. On Level 2, Mindy was surprised to hear quite a bit of giggling which somehow appeared out of place. On closer inspection, there was a group of girls, all wearing their combat suits, minus their masks, sitting on the floor outside the cabins. Saoirse, Stephanie, Shannon, Sarah, Lucy, and Abigail were busy cleaning their pistols and loading spare magazines from a large pile of nine-millimetre bullets piled on the floor.

"Do you remember when they made us pick up brass for almost an entire day?" Sarah asked Saoirse.

"That was bad," Saoirse grinned.

"An entire day. . ." Stephanie growled. "I did it for four days straight when I was in The Cage - that sucked on no breakfast and no lunch."

"As I understand it, you did sorta deserve it," Saoirse pointed out. "Pass me a cleaning patch, Sarah."

"Maybe I didn't deserve it!" Stephanie growled as she forced bullets into a magazine.

Saoirse laughed.

"Stephanie was starting La Révolution!" Lucy chuckled.

"See, SD, Lucy gets it," Stephanie grinned cheekily.

"Why, I put up with you, Stephanie, I have no idea," Saoirse complained.

"You tried to kill me, three times."

"I really should have put more effort in," Saoirse muttered darkly.

Mindy smirked as she left Stephanie and Saoirse bickering and she peered inside one of the cabins.

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Sitting on a bunk, she found Lizzie and Lauren, each sharpening knives.

On the floor sat Annabelle, Anne-Marie, and Sophia. All three were in their combat suits, without masks. The two girls were sorting through a pile of bullets and loading various different sub-machinegun magazines. Sophia looked up at Mindy and she woofed.

"Hi, Mindy!" Lauren called out.

"You girls, okay?"

"Oh, yeah!" Annabelle called out with a broad grin.

"Keep doing what you're doing and don't mind me," Mindy directed as she left the cabin.

She made her way past the group of *Predators* - Saoirse was now bickering with Lucy who was grinning - and she headed for the recreational area at the opposite end of the level.

"Well, the man had no choice but to stick his dick . . . oh, hi, Mindy!"

"Joshua."

"Josh is telling us a really cool joke where a man gets his dick bitten off by a . . ."

"Thanks, Daniel, I don't wanna know," Mindy replied with a horrified look on her face.

Joshua just grinned foolishly as Mindy rolled her eyes at him. Mindy tried not to laugh - his jokes were crude, and they creeped her out, but Joshua had his own ways of keeping morale high amongst the younger members of *Fusion* and she was grateful for it. As Mindy looked around at the assembled boys she noticed that somebody was missing - where was Megan? She left the boys to their obnoxious behaviour and headed upwards to Level 0.

Raucous laughter followed her to the elevator as Joshua delivered his punchline.

Level 0

Mindy found Kelly with the twins, Chrissy and Sky.

"What are these two teaching you?" Mindy asked.

"Just a few pointers," Sky replied.

"We're not *always* up to something," Chrissy grumbled.

Mindy chuckled.

"Watch out for these two, Kelly."

"They can be a real nightmare," Cathy confirmed as she exited the elevator.

"Not fair!" Sky complained bitterly.

"I think they're okay," Kelly commented.

"So innocent," Cathy chuckled as she went on her way.

Mindy made her way to the changing rooms and she found Megan - with Becky.

"This is ominous," Mindy commented.

"Megan's helping me with my combat suit," Becky responded.

"Just helping," Megan commented.

Megan wore her full combat suit with swords and she exuded menace even without her mask. Her new, self-inflicted, hairstyle was taking longer to get used to than Mindy had expected it would. There was also something about her step-sister which worried Mindy. Ever since her return from Gotham she had been a very different girl. Needless to say, then was not the moment to discuss such things; Megan was one of Mindy's best fighters and she did not need any distractions. It was also strange seeing the diminutive Becky in her full combat suit with a Balisong on her belt, plus a Walther P22 Nickel pistol in a holster. The girl could shoot, there was no doubt on that - she was also wicked with a knife. Scamp had been allocated to Medical Team Alpha where she would be under the watchful eye of Medic along with Ravage, with all three very safe in the bulk of *Titan*.

"See you both later," Mindy said as she left the changing room.

..._...

Mindy swiped her access card in the slot beside the armoured door and it released with an audible click. On entering the Battle Bunker, Mindy found a hive of activity with Marty and Abigail working feverishly with the assistance of Rachel and Dave.

"Hi, Mindy," Marty said. "The two UAVs are up and patrolling the city. We have identified two units of Russians and three of Sicilians - nothing from FEAR as yet."

"Mixed news but better than nothing," Mindy commented.

"We're ready here, honey," Dave confirmed.

"Settled in, Rachel?" Mindy asked.

"Yes, Mindy - and thank you for trusting me."

"As long as my trust is not misplaced, Rachel," Mindy replied darkly as she took the spiral staircase down into the Server Facility on the level below.

..._...

Dave followed, and they took a few moments to talk together about their impending evening.

"You stay safe, Dave."

"You too, Mindy - we've been through a lot together and we're always going to be together. So many have tried to destroy us both - it's never worked."

"How much of that was due to good planning and how much was down to dumb luck?" Mindy queried.

"Good question," Dave allowed. "Everybody knows what they are doing, honey. We have almost fifty people working on this operation and nothing has been left to chance - you would never allow it."

Mindy grinned sheepishly as she hugged her husband. Everything was different. So many things could go wrong, with such a complex situation, with so many people involved. When it had just been her and Dave, or even just with Chloe, there had been much less to think about and worry about. Mindy felt safe when Dave was close - he had kept her safe for so long - and his warmth felt so reassuring in situations where things began to get on top of her.

"I have a speech to make - you stick with me, you hear," Mindy directed as she headed back up to the Battle Bunker.

"On your six, Hit Girl!" Dave chuckled.

17:25

Battle Guy handed Hit Girl a headset and he swiftly punched a few buttons before he nodded, and Hit Girl's voice echoed throughout each of the *Fusion* facilities.

"We have a momentous task ahead of us, tonight. The combined forces of FEAR, The Sicilians, and The Solntsevskaya Brotherhood are arrayed throughout Chicago. They are pitting everything that they have into a last-ditch effort to destroy *Fusion* and take Chicago for themselves. We *will not* let that happen - we *shall* meet them, and we *shall* destroy them on *our* terms. This time tomorrow, it will all be decided, one way or another. You *will* all survive, or by God, I will hunt you down in the afterlife.

"Protect each other. Protect the city. Protect the people who live in this city. Stay true to what makes *Fusion* special. The enemy do not care who they hurt and who they trample on as they make their way into this city. They will not take our city away from us. Whether we are fucked up superheroes. Whether we are corrupted children turned into *Predators*. Whether we are just people who believe that what we are doing is right. Whatever your motivation for being who you are, use that motivation to get through the night.

"This night will be the longest of our lives. Do *not* put yourselves at unnecessary risk. Remember, he who runs away, lives to fight another day. Pick your fights - ensure that you have the edge *before* you engage. We are few in number, and the enemy is large, but we have faced large numbers before and we *have prevailed*. As long as we stand together, united in our task, the enemy *will not* win, this night.

"The battle for Chicago begins right now, in the next few minutes. We will fight, and we will keep fighting. We will keep fighting until the battle is won and Chicago's enemies are destroyed, once and for all. WE - ARE - *FUSION!* We are a single entity formed from many. We are each joined by the very same nuclear fire in our hearts and we will fight from our hearts to protect this city from those who wish to do it harm.

"Go, take up your positions out in Chicago and listen for guidance from the Battle Bunker. We have two UAVs up, tonight, and we have activated every camera

in this city to provide us with the intelligence we need to counter the Axis movements. Battle Guy, Hal, and *Synthesis* will be watching our backs, tonight. You all have a direct link to call for help - *do not* feel afraid to use that link; it could save your life."

Hit Girl's voice was replaced by that of Kick-Ass.

"*Fusion!* Roll Out!"