

Author's Note: Yes, as the astute amongst you will probably notice, it is July 2018. However, here comes the 2016 Christmas season for the **Forsaken Universe!** (Yes, I am a little behind!) This storyline will be interconnected across three of my stories: **Forsaken, Fusion: Los Angeles, and Vengeance.** There will be seasonal happiness, seasonal mayhem, and some seasonal sadness.

Thursday, December 15th, 2016

Glenview

Dave had good reason to be dubious about December.

He had awoken two weeks previously to the dawning of December which had heralded a grinning Mindy.

"Oh, God - here we go again!" Dave groaned as his wife grinned happily.

"I promise not to go overboard," Mindy grinned with her right hand raised like she was taking an oath.

"Yeah - right!"

Since that moment, Mindy had been reasonably restrained and apart from some relatively minor decorations internally and out, she had not gone overboard - that fact alone had Dave cringing because he knew his wife and he knew that there was probably a surprise being developed by her devious mind.

Dave just hoped it would not be too explosive, and that nobody got hurt too badly.

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Lily, MacKenzie, and Isaac were staying with Mindy and family until somewhere more permanent could be sorted out for them.

To accommodate the youngsters, Anne-Marie had been moved out of her bedroom to make way for the three visitors. Anne-Marie had been welcomed into Stephanie's bedroom . . . maybe 'welcomed' was pushing the point.

"You touch anything, I break your fingers," Stephanie had commented that Monday.

"You don't trust me?" Anne-Marie demanded.

"Not really."

"Stephanie, you wouldn't happen to know about six feet of missing det-cord, would you?" Mindy asked with a twinkle in her eye and Stephanie grinned.

"No, Mum."

Anne-Marie's eyes went wide as she considered her sister lacing various parts of her bedroom with explosives. There was no missing det-cord, but Mindy and Stephanie could not resist fucking with the youngster's mind.

On Stephanie's return from Los Angeles, she went to visit Chloe.

That afternoon

Fielding Drive

Stephanie waved to Mindy as she drove off before knocking on the door.

"Peanut, answer the door please."

"Can't reach it!" came a shouted response.

"Rebecca!"

The door was finally opened, and Stephanie chuckled at the sight of the little girl who had turned to run back to the sofa.

"Hi, Chloe - can I have a few minutes of your time?"

"Yeah, Steph, come in - ignore the resident nudist," Chloe replied.

"Hi, Becky," Stephanie called out as she spied a very naked Becky stretched out on the sofa, watching TV. "She still at it?"

"Yeah," Chloe grimaced.

"I'm embracing naturism," Becky explained.

"Naturism?"

"It means. . ."

"I know what it means, Scamp," Stephanie growled.

"I heard that you went swimming naked, Steph," Becky countered.

"A very bad idea on Abigail's part - only we never actually reached the pool before covering up."

Chloe slapped Becky gently on her bottom.

"Go play, Peanut, while Steph and I talk, please."

The youngster scrambled up off the sofa and vanished down into the basement.

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Chloe could see that something was wrong.

It was not often that the two of them talked, and when they did, it was about *Fusion* things. Chloe was very aware that Stephanie had spent many hours with her mother, and Stephanie had been devastated by the loss of Cathy, just as much had Chloe, herself, had been. The ten-year-old looked very uncomfortable and she was fidgeting rather badly as she sat in a chair across from Chloe.

"I'm sorry for coming, Chloe - I just wanted somebody to talk to and . . . well . . . I used to talk with your Mum and . . ."

"That's okay, Steph, talk to me."

"You know I've just come back from Los Angeles, right?"

"Yes, you went out there to brief Maddie on *Urban Predator*."

"So many memories came flooding back and they scared the hell out of me. I spent so long crying - I even had Abigail hugging me . . . ugh!"

Chloe grinned but she turned serious very quickly.

"I can remember the beatings. I can remember the pain. I can remember the despair. I can remember the day I lost my brother. I try to push the memories deep down and ignore them - I used to be able to, but now, they just keep appearing. I'm scared that I might lose him again - and I couldn't survive that. That would tear me apart."

"Why don't you speak with Mindy about this?" Chloe asked, knowing the answer.

"Mum loves me, and she does everything she can for me, and I am very grateful for that, but . . . she's Hit Girl, and not so good at all that stuff."

"I know," Chloe replied.

"I shouldn't be burdening you with this, but you and Josh are the closest I have after Dave and Mindy."

Chloe was a bit taken aback by that comment. Stephanie had often talked with Joshua, but it was usually just about Brit things.

"If I can help you, Steph, then I will - I know the past year has been a major struggle for you, what with you being found by Dave, then being taken in by Dave and Mindy. I know the trip across Europe took a lot out of you. Then came the shooting - that was a bad time for us all."

"I know that Mindy went through a lot each time my heart stopped. I put her through a bad time - but she stayed with me the whole way. Going from a life where nobody gave a shit about you, to one where so many care - it's taken a lot of adjusting. I so want to be a normal person, but I know that I will never be normal."

Chloe pulled Stephanie out of the chair she was in and onto the sofa before sitting down beside her. The tears began, and Chloe hugged the ten-year-old. That was when Joshua came in. He took one look at the two girls on the sofa and he grimaced.

"I'll go put the kettle on," he suggested.

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When Joshua returned with a tray of mugs and other items, Stephanie was wiping her eyes.

"Hi, Josh," she said.

"Fancy a brew?"

Stephanie grinned as Joshua handed her a cup of steaming Earl Grey.

"You're a lifesaver, Josh," Stephanie admitted as she took the cup.

Chloe took a similar cup - Breakfast Tea - and she poked at the other items on the tray.

"Crumpets?"

"There's always time for some crumpet," Joshua chuckled as he sat down with his own mug of tea. "Where's o naked one?"

"In the basement, I think, with Hercules," Chloe replied. "Stephanie came over to talk."

"You okay, Steph?" Joshua asked, seeing her expression.

"A bunch of really bad memories keep going around and around in my head . . . even worse, new ones keep appearing. I keep remembering each time I was strapped. I remember each time I was bullied. I can't take them all. . ."

Stephanie broke down again.

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The youngster must have been exhausted from the flight back as she cried, herself to sleep and Joshua had laid a thin blanket over the sleeping girl.

"Is she okay?" Becky asked.

"Some bad memories are resurfacing," Joshua explained. "You decided to cover up, then?"

Becky was wearing an overly large T-shirt which extended almost to her ankles and Hercules stood beside her, examining the scene.

"I think Hercules was uncomfortable with me being naked," the eight-year-old suggested.

"Every girl in my life is a nutcase!" Joshua exclaimed with a smirk.

"Are you saying that *I* am a nutcase?" Chloe challenged with a warning twinkle in her eye.

"The very worst, beautiful."

Chloe opened her mouth to respond, but the last word had her anger melting away in a second.

"If you two are going to kiss . . . or worse . . . I am going to take Hercules to safety; he's far too young to be seeing stuff like that."

Chloe just stared after the youngster as she vanished with the dog.

"Where were we?" Joshua asked as he pulled Chloe into a kiss.

"I want worse. . . ." Chloe groaned as she took a breath.

The following morning

Friday, December 16th

The Battle Bunker

Marty had decrypted some further data from the *Urban Predator* servers - an ongoing task.

More files. More snuff videos. More project data. Nothing majorly exciting, to be honest. However, one thing did catch Marty's eye. He had called in Mindy and shown her the new data - she had no more of an idea about what it meant than he did, so she called in two more people. Lucy Ford and Patrick Millar had shown some nervousness as they had joined Mindy deep in the Safehouse bunker.

"What is a *Kestrel*?" Mindy asked them both without much fanfare.

Lucy exchanged a look with Patrick, who nodded.

"It was a part of *Urban Predator* which ultimately only lasted about eighteen months before the funds were pulled and it folded. The successful graduates were known as *Kestrels*," Lucy explained.

"Keep going," Mindy prompted.

"Eight Phase 2 *Predators* were selected - they were about twelve-years-old, and they had each demonstrated higher than average intelligence, as well as perfect vision, the ability to think quickly, enhanced spatial awareness, and better than usual coordination," Patrick elaborated. "Only five survived the one-year course, ultimately gaining their prized *Kestrel* designation. The training was completed in Colorado and followed the FAA Student Pilot training syllabus."

Mindy was impressed.

"They cancelled it?"

"Yes," Patrick replied. "Somebody decided it was too risky giving youngsters those sorts of skills."

"Understandable, I suppose," Mindy commented. "You said eighteen months?"

"Of those five, three went on to the second phase of their training which lasted six months," Lucy continued. "They learned to fly single-engine rotary aircraft - helicopters."

"Did any pass?" Marty asked.

"Two," Lucy admitted after a glance at Patrick who nodded. "And . . . both of them passed through your facility."

"They were *Marauders*?" Mindy asked.

"Yes - Kate Fincham and Willow Hartman."

Safehouse E

Level 8 - Detention Level

"Hello, Willow."

"Hit Girl."

"Bit lonely down here - just the six of you, now."

"I like it - peaceful."

"I learnt something today."

"Good for you."

"I understand that you are a *Kestrel*."

Willow frowned at the name, but then she simply shrugged her shoulders.

"So?"

"That's something very special, Willow."

"Don't see why."

"You can fly a fucking helicopter, Willow - that's awesome; I can do many things, but I can't fly a helicopter."

Willow grinned - just a little.

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"There you are!"

Hit Girl pulled the door shut, then turned to find Stephanie jogging down the concrete subterranean corridor towards her.

"I was talking to Willow."

"Riveting conversation was it?"

"Not so much," Hit Girl responded.

"I just wanted to apologise for not coming home, last night."

"Chloe told me what went on - it's fine, Steph."

"You're not mad?"

Mindy laughed.

"No, honey. If I'm unable to help, you go find somebody else, okay. Dave and I are fine with the that."

"Thanks."

"Where you off to?" Hit Girl asked as Stephanie turned to go.

"Armoury."

"Have fun," Hit Girl chuckled.

Training Facility Echo

Level 3: Main Armoury

"The fucking bitch!"

Stephanie swiped her access card for a second time and a red LED illuminated and the panel buzzed - for the second time. The girl then placed her hand on the hand scanner beside the card slot - it flashed red . . . and then the next thing she knew she was lying on the ground and staring up at the ceiling.

"I warned you," Abigail pointed out as Stephanie began to regain feeling in her right arm. "You getting up, or are you just going to lie there looking like a dick."

"I'll just lie here for a few minutes and look like a dick," Stephanie decided.

"Suit yourself."

Level 1: Dining Room

Despite her current disability, Foxtail was enjoying being back at work making the lives of the younger vigilantes, utter misery.

Torment and Hellcat were not enjoying their evening, even as Tigercat and Relentless watched from another table, grinning. It had been a simple task - reassemble a Glock 22. The boys had completed the task without any trouble, however, the girls had not been paying attention and Foxtail had lost her temper with them and the tongue lashing they received was not fun.

"Get back to your own work!" Wildcat growled at the minnows she was training a few tables away.

Ravage, Rogue, and Scamp were being pushed hard by the veteran vigilante. The task for that session was assembling a Claymore mine - one of Hit Girl's favourite defensive weapons.

"Rogue - remind us why the M57 firing device should be kept safe while you are assembling and siting the mine," Wildcat directed.

"So, somebody doesn't set the mine off while you're working on it," Rogue replied.

"Good. There are two main methods for arming the mine: controlled and uncontrolled. Controlled means we control the detonation, either via a wire or via an electrical trigger. We then have uncontrolled - what does that mean, Scamp?"

"No idea."

"How else might a mine be triggered."

"Tripwire?"

"Perfect. Uncontrolled is when it is set to be triggered by something or someone which has no idea that they are about to die."

"In many pieces," Ravage commented.

"That is usually the result of one of these going off with you in front of it," Wildcat replied. "Hit Girl loves these, and almost every protected home, facility, or Safehouse features a few strategically placed Claymore mines which are usually set for command detonation. I believe that over two hundred are deployed protecting Safehouse F alone."

"Awesome!" Rogue commented.

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Ten minutes later, the other vigilantes began filing in for some refreshment and the Claymores and pistols vanished from sight.

Hit Girl was sitting with Foxtail and Petra when Psyche appeared looking somewhat annoyed. The trio watched her walk past them without a glance and sit down between Fury and Rage.

"You look a little shocked, Psyche," Hit Girl chuckled.

"Fuck you!" Psyche retorted.

There was laughter as Hit Girl simply grinned before going back to her coffee and her conversation with Foxtail and Petra. At the table with Psyche, Fury, Nightmare, Cut-Throat, and Discord, Rage appeared a little too happy with himself.

"What are looking so damn happy about?" Stormtide called out from the next table where she sat with Ember, Tempest, and Fortune.

Rage sauntered up to the large screen TV and he fiddled around with his phone for a minute before an image flashed up on the screen and after a few more seconds everybody burst out laughing. Stephanie and Abigail both scowled as the picture taken of them in Los Angeles was displayed for all to see as they stood in the middle of nowhere in just their knickers. Eventually, both girls laughed along with the others, enduring yet more humiliation. Psyche and Fury both walked over to Raven who sat with Wildcat, Trojan, and Splinter.

"Thank you, Raven," Fury said.

"You're welcome, Fury - you too, Psyche."

"That was hot!" Splinter commented much to Psyche's annoyance.

That evening

D-JAK

The classes were gathering for that evening's session.

Chloe and Kyle had the advanced class which included Chloe's two best friends: Avery Lee and Riley Scott. The class also included Cameron Fellowes and Brad Murphy. Beside Brad, stood his girlfriend, Lauren Edwards. They tended to hold hands a lot, so the first thing Chloe did was separate the pair - much to Lauren's annoyance and Brad's blushes.

"Please try to concentrate on the instructor, Lauren - your boyfriend's cock can wait until later."

Lauren was speechless as her mouth dropped open and her cheeks blossomed into a pleasant shade of red with a hint of pink. Avery and Riley burst out laughing, annoying Lauren even more. Cameron pulled his friend off to one side - he was not all that happy with the creepy goings on between his friend and Lauren . . . in public too. Lauren soon found herself partnered with Avery, much to her annoyance.

"I'm not exactly pleased to be matched with you, either, sweetheart," Avery commented.

"I could put you down. . ." Lauren retorted before her world turned upside down as Avery slammed the fourteen-year-old down onto the mat.

"Keep your mouth shut, Lauren, unless you're about to suck Brad off, okay?" Avery suggested.

"Ewww!" Riley commented.

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Chloe chuckled at her best friend's attitude and comment.

Avery had become darker ever since that day when Chloe had lost her baby. The whole event had scared the living daylights out of the girl. The fact that Avery knew all about what her best friend did at night, only appeared to make her moods a lot darker. Riley, on the other hand, was handling things a lot better. Both girls had spent the past few months improving their already advanced skills on the mat. At the break, Riley and then Avery were ambushed by Becky who hugged each one tightly in turn. To her, the two girls were like aunts, much to the sixteen-year-olds' disgust - both felt that they were far too young to be aunts. That was until Megan had reminded them both that she had two nephews and two nieces, despite her being only twelve-years-old. Riley and Avery were regular visitors at Chloe's house and both were very used to the eccentricities of the eight-year-old girl who spent most of her time nude. Becky thought that it was 'neat' that Avery was a rebel and that she rode a motorcycle.

Her Daddy had given into his wayward daughter and he had bought her a yellow Kawasaki Versys 650 Tourer for her birthday - actually, it had only been delivered in mid-October, almost two months after her sixteenth birthday.

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Lauren had got over her minor humiliation, and she was giggling about something crude with Avery.

Chloe ignored them as she kept a wary eye on Megan who was instructing the younger kids which included the wayward Anne-Marie, ambitious Becky, and the constantly grinning Danny. The three youngsters were causing Megan a bit of grief and Chloe was concerned that Megan might go all Wildcat on them, but no, the girl was controlling her often-fiery temper. Chloe had still not got to the bottom of why Megan was suddenly a different person. She was not complaining, it was just not natural for Megan Williams to be well behaved. On the other side of the enormous space which was D-JAK, Joshua was sparring with Shannon and Marc.

Joshua could easily handle the teenagers without much thought, but the pair were highly skilled in their own right and they did not make things easy for Joshua. Beyond them, Lucy was tutoring Kelly with the assistance of Rachel.

Kelly was settling into life without her sister. Yes, it had been a struggle, and it would also be her very first Christmas on her own - not that she would actually be on her own as she would be spending Christmas with Mathilda, with whom she was currently living. Rachel and Kelly were laughing together, and Lucy kept joining in, her laughter easily audible on the far side of the facility.

Mindy looked up at the sound of laughter as she sparred with Petra, Tommy, and Morgan. She was pleased to hear laughter, rather than tears. There was more laughter coming from another distant corner where the more immature members were gathered. Stephanie was there with her brother, Jamie, who was casually exchanging blows with Abigail while Lizzie fought Iain and Annabelle, leaving Leo, who was partnered with his brother, Hunter. At times there was a lot of coarse laughter and more than once, Paige had lost her temper as she had admonished the youngsters for their appalling language. All around the *Fusion* members were normal members of the public who did not take kindly to the brusque behaviour of some of the more regular members.

Dave and Saoirse sat together with Kim and Tony, planning and scheming. What they were planning was top secret and due to be spectacular. Stephanie and Abigail had been trying to find out what it was all about, only Saoirse was sworn to secrecy by Dave and Mindy on pain of death. The only clue that Stephanie and Abigail had been able to glean was two words scrawled on a binder which Saoirse carried around with her: Battle Born.

Mindy had not helped, either, hinting at something big after Christmas, but otherwise revealing nothing.

The following morning
Saturday, December 18th

Glenview

For nine-year-old MacKenzie Morley and her five-year-old brother, Isaac, it had been a very strange week.

They had gone from being homeless, their father dead, and to expecting to die underground in Atlanta, to living in the biggest house either one of them had ever encountered. The early days had been decidedly traumatic as they had been surrounded by new faces, all smiling and supportive, but still daunting to the youngsters. They had been given new clothing to replace their rags after enduring long baths - two actually - to get rid of the dirt and stench from their underground home where they had been living for the previous three weeks. Everybody was being so nice to them both and everybody was going out of their way to feel at home. It had been Isaac who seemed to settle in the easiest, maybe because of his tender age. It was what MacKenzie called his 'charm'. All the girls they had met thought he was 'so cute' and the boy had happily grinned at the positive compliments as he had been hugged and mauled by the likes of Stephanie and Anne-Marie. For the most part, MacKenzie was disgusted by her brother's attention-seeking attitude - he was anything but cute in her eyes, and often just a menace, but she loved the boy dearly and he was all that she had left in the whole world. MacKenzie felt a little ashamed that Anne-Marie had been booted out of her own bedroom to make way for her, Isaac, and Lily. However, she was very pleased that they had not been separated. She knew that the time would come for Lily to go her own way, but her and Isaac were far too close to Lily for the moment.

That morning, they headed downstairs for breakfast.

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"Hi, guys!" Anne-Marie called out as the three kids slipped into the kitchen and took seats at the counter.

"Hi, Anne-Marie," Isaac replied.

"Hi," MacKenzie offered with a wave of her hand.

"Hello," Lily added.

Dave grinned as he pushed a bowl towards each youngster and he tipped a generous helping of chocolate-covered cereal into each one.

"Dig in - milk's there!" he directed.

"Thanks, Dave," Lily replied.

"Hey!" MacKenzie said as her brother shoved a spoonful of milk-less cereal into his mouth. "You need milk in that!"

The muffled response sounded suspiciously like, "No, I don't."

MacKenzie gave up and she poured some milk into her own bowl and started eating, ignoring her little brother. Lily grinned, as did Anne-Marie.

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Mindy breezed in as Dave took away the empty bowls and the kids slipped down off the stools.

"Okay - blue for Isaac, pink for MacKenzie, and red for Lily," Mindy said as she handed a small package to each child. "See you in about half an hour."

As Mindy vanished, MacKenzie turned her packet over and she looked inside - it was a one-piece swimming costume in pink with a design depicting hair bows on the front.

"A swimsuit?" Isaac asked as he held up the contents of his own package.

"Seems so," Lily replied as she held up a red one-piece swimsuit.

"I don't know," Isaac said as his sister manoeuvred him upstairs. "I don't like the water."

"You'll be fine - what's that in your hands?" Lily asked.

The boy handed over two items which had been in the packet with his swimming trunks. They were coloured green and yellow.

"They're water wings!" MacKenzie exclaimed as she studied them. "Kick-Ass water wings."

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By the time the trio had returned to the kitchen, they could already hear yelling and splashing coming from the pool.

"Come on, guys!" Stephanie announced as she came past wearing a one-piece pale green swimming costume. "Nice armbands, Isaac!"

"Thanks."

"Took ages to blow the damn things up," MacKenzie groused.

"You have plenty of hot air available, MacKenzie," Lily laughed.

Anne-Marie and Danny were already in the pool, along with Jamie. Anne-Marie was being chased by the boys and she was yelling as she tried to make her escape. The three youngsters all looked a little apprehensive, especially Lily. Stephanie jumped into the pool and she turned to look up at Lily.

"I know what you're thinking - we don't like water," Stephanie said. "And for good reason. It took me a while to get used to swimming for pleasure. I know you can swim, Lily, so get in the pool."

Lily hesitated, but she reluctantly sat down on the side of the pool and dangled her legs in the water.

"Ooh, that's nice," MacKenzie commented as she dipped a toe into the water before jumping in.

Isaac was just as apprehensive as Lily and he stood on the side of the pool scowling at his big sister.

"Sit down beside Lily, Isaac," MacKenzie said.

The boy did exactly that and he gripped Lily's left hand with his right.

"Both of you, together, okay?" Stephanie suggested, and Isaac nodded.

Lily knew that she had no choice now that Isaac was relying on her and very reluctantly, she took Stephanie's outstretched hand and she allowed herself to be pulled into the water. Isaac came with her and as he entered the water, he gripped Lily very tightly around the neck and he wrapped his legs around her waist.

"Don't panic," Lily said, looking directly into the five-year-old's eyes, her own worries overridden by her worries for the boy.

Stephanie chuckled.

"I remember when my little brother was five - he was very sweet, but he was so annoying!" Stephanie said to MacKenzie. "A little brat!"

"Tell me about it!" MacKenzie replied as she saw around Lily and her brother. "I love Isaac, but he is *really* annoying, *and* a little brat."

"I am not a brat!" Isaac retorted as he pushed himself away from Lily, bobbing safely on the water, supported by his water wings.

"But you are annoying," MacKenzie countered.

Isaac produced a toothy grin as he floated past Stephanie who laughed.

"Did I hear somebody talking about 'a little brat'?" Jamie asked as he ducked his sister.

"You little . . . c - u - n - t!" Stephanie spluttered as she resurfaced, spelling out the word in deference to Isaac.

Jamie laughed as he dove under the water and he used his strong arms to pull away from his annoyed sister who dove after him.

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Jamie did not get far as Dave scooped the youngster out of the water and threw him several feet away.

The boy exploded out of the water, amidst the still sloshing water from his gravity-induced entry, gasping for air. Anne-Marie laughed - but only for a moment as Mindy scooped *her* out of the water and jettisoned the youngster down

range. Anne-Marie emerged from the water giggling her head off and grinning enormously. The eight-year-old loved to be handled roughly and she tried to hide behind Lily who simply flipped the girl over and dropped her into the water head first. Lily laughed as the girl returned to the surface spluttering and wiping her eyes clear.

"Bitch!" Anne-Marie exclaimed as Lily grinned happily.

"Bad word!" Isaac called out and Anne-Marie blushed.

"Sorry, Isaac."

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"Thank you," Isaac said as Dave hauled the boy out of the pool.

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, I did. Can I do it again, tomorrow?"

"Say please, Isaac," MacKenzie said pointedly.

"Please?"

Dave laughed. "We shall see."

"Go get yourselves changed, please," Mindy called out.

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Later that afternoon, MacKenzie went looking for her brother.

She found him in the living room, sitting on the floor with his legs crossed, gazing up at the enormous ten-foot-tall Christmas tree, topped with a shiny star. At his feet, a large dog lay stretched out on the floor with a ginger cat curled up alongside. MacKenzie couldn't remember the dog's name, but she remembered that the cat was called Horatio. MacKenzie sat down next to her brother.

"Will Santa find us here?"

"I suppose so," MacKenzie responded.

"I miss Daddy."

"So, do I, Isaac."

"What's going to happen to us, 'Kenzie?"

"Right now, I have no idea, but we're safe, here - Lily said so."

"I like it here; they're all really nice."

"Yeah - we've done good, Isaac."

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Despite the fun morning, Lily was feeling a little morose.

She knew that Christmas was approaching, and she knew that her life past December was very unclear. That unnerved the girl. For many years, her life had been structured and planned, all the way down to the minute. When to wake. When to shower. When to eat. When to pee. When to go to classes. It had gone on. Then all that structure and order had crumbled around her and she had been alone, so alone. The other boys and girls had been company, if not her friends, and she had missed the sound of voices. The sound of the crude jokes had always

been there as a constant background sound that had soon been replaced by silence. That silence had been horrible.

"Your life is what you make it, Lily."

"Huh?" Lily asked as she stopped walking around the garden.

She turned to find Stephanie walking towards her.

"I know what you're thinking, Lily," Stephanie said. "There's a patch of grass over there that Mum had to have re-seeded because I wore it out walking in circles as I tried to figure out my new life, last year. It is your life, Lily. You can do whatever you want. You're a Brit, like me - actually an Irish skank, like Saoirse, but that's another story. Do you want to go back to Ireland? That is up to you, and we will do what we can to help you settle down somewhere."

"I don't know what I want, Stephanie; I'm just scared about everything."

"That's expected, Lily, but you are perfectly safe. You can stay with us for as long as you want."

"How did you cope with the change?" Lily asked. "Going from what our life was, to what this life is."

"It wasn't easy, I can tell you. I made many mistakes, but I had people who love me to guide me back onto the rails."

"You've been really lucky, Stephanie. You have all this, and you have a lovely family . . . I just hope that I can find something even half as good as what you have."

"Lily, I will make sure that you find a family and a secure, safe life. Without you, I might not be alive today."

"The little girl I used to know before I kicked her into shape couldn't have smashed a bar of soap, let alone the head of a Phase 2 *Predator*," Lily grinned.

"I've come a long way, Styx."

"Yes, you have, Psyche."

A few days later

Wednesday, December 21st

Safehouse E

Level 8 - Detention Level

Being summoned to see Hit Girl was enough to make anybody nervous, let alone a sixteen-year-old who was certain that the whole world had it in for her.

Nevertheless, Willow Hartman followed Shannon out of her prison (as the girl saw it) and a few doors down to where Hit Girl awaited her arrival. Willow hated to be scared of anybody, but she could feel her legs trembling and her instincts told her to run. Only she did not, she forced herself to remain calm and take the proffered seat. Hit Girl said nothing for two full minutes, a tactic which Willow had experienced many times. Hit Girl was not the first to try and bait her into action, but Willow was perfectly capable of controlling herself . . . when she wanted to.

"What the fuck do you want?" Willow growled.

"You, young lady, are going on a field trip."

"A field trip?"

"Yes, a field trip."

"Where?"

"Scotland."

"Scotland?"

"Is there a fucking echo in here? Yes, Scotland!"

"Moody!" Willow muttered.