

Sunday, November 13th, 2016

St Thomas' Hospital, London
The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

"You do realise that you may have just signed your own death warrant, don't you?" Harper challenged.

"So, you admit it?" Diana asked tentatively.

"I can neither confirm nor deny any affiliation with said group of illegal vigilantes," Harper went on.

"Which government manual did you get *that* out of?" Diana asked with a sarcastic grin.

Harper grinned.

"We know you aren't stupid, Diana, but you are sticking your nose into where it does not belong," Keira pointed out. "Again."

"I'm sorry - I just . . . my mind enjoys putting things together and figuring out problems."

"Yeah - she reads puzzle books, all day long!" Doctor Schneider commented from the doorway. "So - she knows?"

"Seems so," Keira commented.

"I promise not to say anything to anybody - I just can't help myself when it comes to puzzles," Diana tried.

"You had better keep your damn mouth shut," Harper growled, "or those missing legs will be the very least of your fucking problems."

"A little harsh," Diana responded indignantly as she wheeled herself out of the room without a backward glance.

That same evening

The Dollar Academy
Dollar, Scotland

For Electra, it was like she had entered a foreign country.

While Mary was no longer suffering the, 'Ooh, a Princess' thing, she was still a talking point, much to her annoyance. Appearing part way through the term, having vanished for a few weeks was also a talking point. Naturally, Ginny was two feet away, ensuring that nobody caused any problem - not that they would; they all knew Ginny and gave her a wide berth. While the exact details had been kept secret, it was well-known that Kensington Palace had been attacked, and many of the pupils at the academy knew that Mary lived at Kensington Palace. There were many questions, but one look from Ginny dissuaded them all. The only person allowed close to Mary was Leia Whiteford. Leia was Mary's best friend and the girl with whom Mary lived, sharing a two-bed bedsit in Argyll House. Mary was bundled off to her room by Ginny and Leia while Electra was taken by the House Master to her own room.

Electra's eyes flew all over, watching and absorbing everything as she was led up some stairs, then along two corridors before they stopped outside a white door with the number '9' on it. The House Master, Peter Rodney knocked and waited.

"Yo!" came a voice and Mr Rodney chuckled as he pushed the door open.

"Sorry, Electra - not the way we usually allow somebody into our room."

Electra found herself in a room with three beds, three desks, a window, and two young girls.

"Electra, please meet your roommates: Alyssia Whiteford, and Janette Cunningham. Girls, this is Electra Haig, and she will be occupying the third berth in here."

"Hi, Electra."

"Welcome, Electra."

"Hello," Electra replied with a wave of her hand.

"Electra, the girls will make you feel welcome and help you unpack and show you what is where. I'll leave you to settle in for tonight, and I will see you after lessons, tomorrow."

"Thank you, sir."

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Electra was feeling a little overwhelmed as she unpacked her clothing and personal effects.

"You've got a new bed," Alyssia commented. "It only arrived last week - didn't see a problem with the last one, to be honest."

Electra grinned to herself - the bed was special. It matched the other pair and had storage underneath which was accessed by lifting up the base on which the mattress sat on a pneumatic lift. After half an hour of feverish unpacking, there came a knock on the door.

"Yo!" Alyssia called out and Janette rolled her eyes.

"Ignore her - it's her current 'thing'!" Janette explained.

Electra was pleased to see Mary appear, with her friend, Leia.

"Hi, Electra. I see you've met Leia's little sister, Alyssia," Mary said.

"Yeah - she and Janette are making me feel welcome."

"You know the Princess?" Janette asked.

"We're friends," Electra explained.

"Watch out, Alyssia's a bit nuts," Mary hinted, and Leia nodded her agreement.

"Thanks!" Alyssia laughed.

"Ignore them, Electra," Janette grinned. "Come on, I'll show you around."

Three days later

Wednesday, November 16th

St Thomas' Hospital, London

The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

The goodbyes had been tearful, to say the least.

Despite many seeing Diana as an annoyance, they were all unhappy to see her go. None more than Harper - she found Diana annoying, but the girl was also a

breath of fresh air in a place which was decidedly depressing by its very being.

"I'm actually sorry to see you go," Scarlett commented. "You're a major pain in the backside and I so want to slap you, but you helped build a bridge between me and Harper. That is something which I can never thank you for. You stay safe, Diana Price."

"I do what I can," Diana offered meekly.

"She has a point - even though it chokes me to say it," Harper commented dryly as she and Scarlett exchanged a scowl. "You've helped me come to terms with things, not to mention sticking your nose in where it does not fucking belong! But you've done good, Diana. Thanks for being a friend."

"I'm going to miss you both," Diana sobbed. "You're both certifiable, but you've both been my friend - thanks."

Harper held something out to Diana.

"Don't open it until you get to your new home. Your finger is the key."

"Thanks, Harper. I hope you get well and you can go home to your friends. They were really great. Hopefully, I will get a chance to have some friends just like yours."

It was Harper's turn to sob - she could not help it.

Friday, November 18th

***The Dollar Academy
Dollar, Scotland***

Her first week had gone well, and she was settled in with her new friends.

It did not take long for people to learn that Electra was a good friend of the Princess and that kind of elevated Electra in the eyes of the other pupils. They also left her alone as Ginny tended to be keeping a wary eye on her as well as her usual charge. Another reason for Electra to be left alone was her skills at Taekwondo - she was also the first who actually dared to put the Princess facedown on the mat. There had been loud exclamations, and many had expected Mary to yell and scream, but no, the Princess just got back to her feet and nodded to Electra. That gave Mary some kudos as many expected her to use her lineage as a barrier to harsh treatment. Secretly, Mary was glad that Electra had put her down as the other pupils now knew that it was safe to 'attack' the Princess - at least on the training mat.

Electra found the lessons a challenge, but nothing she could not handle, and she enjoyed them. The food was good and plentiful, so Electra was very happy. The other twenty-three girls, in the boarding house, varied in age from eight, all the way up to the eldest, a seventeen-year-old. It was like a large family and Electra was made to feel welcome by all. There were the usual tantrums from the younger girls and unhappy growling from the older ones, but it just added to the friendly atmosphere which Electra was enjoying.

The last educational facility at which she had boarded had not been so enjoyable.

***Saturday, November 19th
Early afternoon***

St Thomas' Hospital, London
The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

The next few days were sad.

Harper had had no visitors - everybody was back in Scotland. That had included Mary who had gone back to school, taking Mary with her. Scarlett tended to be a little depressing when it came to talking, and Diana had provided a little bit of humour which was now totally missing. Even the medical staff and especially Doctor Schneider were showing signs of missing the cheery double amputee.

For Harper, three weeks of being cooped up in the same room was getting her down and without Diana to bring some sunshine into her room, she was feeling low. Keira felt for her sister but there was a limit to what she could do. Harper needed her friends, but she was not going to be leaving the hospital for at least another week. It was approaching time for Keira to be heading back to the Safehouse when her mobile rang. Without looking at the screen, Keira thumbed to accept the call.

"Is that Keira?"

The voice was tearful and sounded scared.

"Diana?"

Keira checked the mobile and it was indeed the phone Harper had given Diana before she had left the hospital two days previously.

"I need . . . help . . . I hate it here."

Diana began to sob uncontrollably for a full minute before understandable words could be heard again.

"They bully me. They call me names. They make fun of my having no legs. I . . . this boy he . . . he tried to . . . PLEASE!"

"I'm coming, Diana - stay strong, honey."

Keira disconnected the call and she went in search of Blake.

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"Where did Diana go?" she demanded a few minutes later as she burst into the doctor's office.

"What?" the surprised man announced.

"She's in trouble - she just called me."

"She's in a care home - I have an address; it was out of my hands, Keira."

"I bet it was!" Keira growled as she pulled out her mobile and selected a contact.

The mobile rang a few times before it was answered.

"Sergeant Beck."

"Beck, this is Keira Sharp. I need your help."

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The red police BMW X5 cut through the London traffic like a hot knife through butter.

The screaming siren and flashing blue lights had everybody moving out of the way as Beck pushed his way towards Diana. Keira had only had to mention that a

child was in danger for Beck and his partner, Ryder, to drop what they were doing and immediately make their way to the hospital to pick up Keira, who had dived into the rear of the large 4x4 the moment it had stopped. From there, the X5 had blazed a noisy trail through the heart of London, heading south, away from the River Thames. They negotiated the major Elephant & Castle junction, upsetting many London travellers, but they all gave way to the red emergency vehicle. Keira was on tenterhooks as the vehicle stopped and started with the heavy traffic.

The care home was in New Cross, a suburb in south London. It was very rare to see a red police vehicle of any kind in that part of London, let alone an X5 with flashing strobes and screaming siren. The large vehicle raced down side streets before coming to a very abrupt halt outside a four-storey block of flats. Beck and Ryder leapt out followed by Keira who ran past the two officers and up the concrete steps which led to the first floor. She raced along the balcony and stopped outside the door with '1-2' beside it. Keira pounded on the door with her left fist.

"Security Service, open up!"

The door was opened a minute later, and a large lady looked over the young woman and the two armed police officers, not to mention the red police vehicle with flashing blue lights visible a level below.

"What is this?" she demanded. "What have the little brats done now?"

"Where is Diana Price?" Keira demanded in return.

"What's the little bitch said now?" the irate woman retorted derisively.

Keira shoved the woman against a wall, her left forearm across the woman's throat.

"Last time! WHERE. . .?"

"KEIRA!"

Keira released the woman and bolted for the sound of the scream.

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Keira ran down a short corridor passing several kids of varying ages to where a boy pointed out a room.

Keira tried the door - it was locked.

"KEIRA!"

The doorframe exploded as Keira took her right boot to the door near the lock. The door crashed against the wall with a loud bang. Diana was huddled in a corner while a boy of around fifteen advanced on her. The boy turned to Keira and he produced a knife from his pocket. By the time Beck reached the room, he was just in time to find the youth landing in a heap at his feet.

"He had this!" Keira growled as she held up the knife, before dropping it onto the single bed in the room.

Beck hauled the youth to his feet who suddenly found himself restrained in handcuffs and handed to Ryder.

"Get locals from Newlands to come get this piece of shit - attempted rape and assault with a deadly weapon," Beck directed as he turned back to the bedroom.

He found Keira over in the far corner talking to a sobbing girl of about eleven-years-old. The police officer immediately grabbed Keira's backpack and

he began carefully folding and packing the girl's limited clothing and personal effects. The girl was leaving the shitty care home, one way or another. By the time Beck was finished, Keira had lifted Diana off the floor and she carried the girl out into the corridor.

"Locals are one minute out, and I've called Social Services," Ryder reported as he glared at the unrepentant woman who should have been looking after the children.

"Let's get the girl out of here," Beck directed as he made a path out of the flat, Diana's backpack under one arm and her wheelchair and crutches under another.

Ryder went to meet the local police who had arrived in three vehicles and they were briefed on the situation. Six very unimpressed police officers took over the scene and took custody of the handcuffed youth. As for Diana, she was placed in the back of the X5 and once all were aboard, Beck took off, heading north.

In the rear seat, Keira hugged Diana tightly as the girl sobbed tears of relief.

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Forty minutes later, Beck turned into Hyde Park Street and stopped sixty yards in.

Ryder carried everything up to the front door and he climbed back into the X5. Beck himself carried Diana out of the X5 and placed her into the waiting wheelchair. He handed the young girl one of his cards.

"You have any trouble while you are in London, you call me, you understand?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you," Diana stammered.

"Thank you, Beck," Keira said.

"Give my regards to our mutual friend from Chicago," Beck replied as he returned to the X5.

"Where are we?" Diana asked.

"This," Keira replied as she pushed Diana inside and closing the door once she had retrieved the crutches and backpack, "is Safehouse Victor Lima - VL for short."

"This is a *Vengeance* safehouse?!" Diana exclaimed in awe.

"Just don't go spreading it around, right?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Okay - your bedroom is right here, in the back, on the ground floor. It even has its own bathroom."

Diana smiled enormously for a moment before her smile faltered.

"What's going to happen to me?"

"You're staying with me."

"For how long?"

"I'd prefer it if you moved out soon after you turned eighteen."

Safehouse VY
London

"So, this is where assassins live?"

"Funny, Blake," Keira chuckled as she waved Doctor Schneider into the house.

"Hi, Doc!"

"Hello, Diana. How are you doing?"

"It's great! I have my own room. It's on the ground floor, which is great, and I have my own bathroom. Keira says she'll take me shopping tomorrow for some clothes," came the excited response.

"You fancy a drink, Blake?" Keira asked.

"Please."

"Beer?"

"Perfect!"

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While the adults talked, Diana enjoyed her new room.

There was a TV and a DVD player, plus dozens of DVD movies - some of which were way beyond her age range. She selected a Hilary Duff movie and lay down on the bed. For the first time in a while, she felt safe. The hospital had been safe, but the safehouse made her feel safer and she knew that nothing could happen to her - not ever. She missed her daily chats with the doctors and nurses, not to mention the other patients. She missed Harper especially. Scarlett not so much, to be honest. She was also struggling a little with the abrupt changes in her life. First her family had died, and she lost both of her legs. Then she had somehow found herself amongst people she liked and who turned out to be vigilantes. That second one was a good thing after a bad thing. Then had come another bad thing - that care home, and the boy who had tried to do something bad to her. Then another good thing: she had been rescued and there she was, watching a DVD in a *Vengeance* safehouse.

Wow - that was the only word that her mind could conjure up.

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Around nine o'clock, Keira went to check on Diana who had gone uncharacteristically quiet.

She grinned as she found the youngster fast asleep on the bed, the DVD still playing. Keira pulled up a blanket from the foot of the bed and she laid it over the young girl. Keira sat beside Diana for a while as she considered everything that had happened and her part in things. Unwittingly, she had taken custody of the eleven-year-old girl with no legs. What would Harper say? Diana was a lovely girl and Harper liked her very much, but was she pushing things a bit; moving a bit too fast, maybe? It was enough of a struggle bringing up her wayward nine-year-old sister, but a disabled eleven-year-old!? Keira knew that she tended to make rash decisions from time to time, but she had surprised herself with how she had reacted to Diana being in trouble. It had taken all of her considerable willpower not to draw her Glock while at the care home.

"You, okay?"

Keira looked up at Blake.

"She's exhausted."

"She's happy and she feels safe."

"What am I doing, Blake?"

"You're doing the right thing from where I'm standing," Blake replied.

"I have a little sister who's hurt to look after - Harper comes first."

"Harper's past the worst of it. Her skin and bones are healing, and they will continue to heal. Give it six months and Harper will be back to her normal self."

"God forbid!" Keira grimaced.

"She's not *that* bad, I'm sure," Blake chuckled.

"You know what she said to me, the very first time we sparred? *'You a fucking pussy or what? Get a goddamn grip, Scorpion, or you ain't going to last thirty fucking seconds out there!'*"

Blake laughed.

"She followed up with: *'I am not a china fucking doll, sis; the sooner you understand that, the fucking better! I am a fucking Predator. I am a killer. I can take a beating, believe me. Now, I know we both want each other to live, so let's get back to trying to kill each other, right?'*"

"Ouch!" Blake commented.

"She's an animal, to be brutally honest. I think it's that animal instinct, deep within her which helped her to survive everything that they did to her. There are times that she scares the hell out of me. I love her, I really do, but it's like loving G.I. Jane, for heaven's sake!"

"Harper's a lovely girl and she has a wonderful big sister who loves her. Now, I had better be going - how about I take you both out for dinner, tomorrow night?"

Keira simply grinned as her cheeks turned pink.

Sunday, November 20th

St Thomas' Hospital, London
The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

"You did what!?"

"It was just like I said," Keira responded.

"I thought you buggered off pretty quickly," Harper growled. "I'm glad you went after her, but damn!"

"I had no choice; Diana needed to go somewhere safe."

"Was Blake there?"

"Yes - he came over to check on Diana."

"He boned you, yet?"

Keira's jaw dropped at the blatant question.

"That has nothing to do with you, young lady!"

Harper's eyes bored into those of her sister for a full minute before she relented.

"Okay. You seeing him again?"

"He's taking me and Diana to dinner, tonight."

"He boning you, tonight, then?"

"HARPER!"

"Just a question - jeez!"

..._...

"Okay, Harper, let's remove this bandage," Doctor Schneider said that afternoon as he gently eased back the bandage on Harper's right foot.

"You boning my sister, Doc?"

Doctor Schneider almost ripped the bandage off in surprise as the nurse exploded into giggles.

"Time and a place, Miss Sharp."

Harper realised that she had overstepped her bounds by quite a wide margin, according to the doctor's tone which was icy cold. The girl considered that annoying the doctor who was caring for some very bad injuries which were also quite painful, was probably *not* her best idea.

"Sorry, Doctor Schneider," she muttered.

That evening

She might have been missing her lower extremities, but there was absolutely nothing wrong with her mouth, her stomach, nor her appetite.

As a result, she was filling her mouth, and therefore her stomach, with as much food as her appetite could handle. It was not exactly an up-market restaurant, but neither was it Pizza Hut. That afternoon, Diana had been stunned to find herself being dragged off to Oxford Street where Keira had outfitted the girl with everything from knickers to pyjamas and jeans to dresses. The youngster felt humbled by Keira's attentions, and a little worried when they returned to the safehouse. While Keira hung up some of the new clothes, Diana got ready for a bath and she undressed while sitting on her bed. As Keira helped her into the hot bath water, laced with copious amounts of bubbles, Diana asked Keira a question.

"What will Harper say? I don't want her to feel put out by me getting in the way. You spent way too much on me, today."

Keira laughed as she washed Diana's long deep brown hair.

"Harper won't mind - I'll take her shopping when she comes out of hospital and get her new clothes; she's about grown out of those she has. Besides, it's my money to spend how I wish. Anyway, she likes you, Diana - just think about yourself for a while, okay?"

Therefore, Diana was thinking of herself, via her stomach. She was oblivious to the stares that accompanied her as she wheeled herself around. She was also oblivious to the chatting of the adults as they dug into their food and drank some expensive wine. Diana was too young to notice the relationship which was developing between the two adults. She even overlooked Keira's giggling as

Blake talked to her about this and that. Eventually, the talking stopped, and so did the eating.

"Are you two just going to stare at each other," Diana asked.

There was no response.

"Helloooo."

Keira looked over at the girl.

"Sorry, Diana - we were just taking a breather."

"Adults are so weird!"

Two days later

Tuesday, November 22nd

Isle of Dogs

Diana had no idea why the grinning Keira had brought her to Docklands, a long stone's throw away from Canary Wharf.

They left the taxi and Diana found herself being wheeled towards a large building with a half-dozen floors and which was built in an 'L' shape. The building appeared anonymous, at least until they approached the reception desk.

"Welcome to Wayne Enterprises, how may I help you?"

"Keira Sharp and Diana Price to see Lucius Fox."

"Please take a seat, and Mr Fox will be with you, directly."

"I already am seated," Diana growled as she wheeled herself over to the where Keira could sit down. "I'm always sitting down - except when I'm lying down."

"Diana, calm down."

"What are we doing here?"

"Seeing a friend."

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"Good morning!"

Diana looked up to see a kindly faced black man with a moustache and short greying hair.

"Who are you?" Diana asked, a little rudely.

"Most people call me Fox, but for a beautiful lady like yourself; you may call me Lucius."

Diana giggled.

"Okay, Mr Fox, err, Lucius, why am I here?"

Lucius Fox grinned as he smiled at Diana.

"I have some goodies for *you*, Miss Price."

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Diana was full of curiosity as they were led to a lift which took them down four levels.

The doors opened up onto a large open area occupied by about a dozen people, all working on various items. Diana's eyes only widened as they moved further into the area. Diana could see weapons, vehicles, and many things which were totally alien to her. Fox stopped beside a bench and he pulled the sheet off several items. Diana could tell it was some kind of body armour, but then she saw the colour - it was purple - and the initials on the belt buckle of the utility belt - H and G.

"O-M-G!"

"Don't tell Hit Girl - it's a surprise," Fox chuckled.

There was another combat suit, this one in black and green. It was like nothing either of them had ever seen, but the modular contoured armour bore a name in a light grey stencilled over the left chest, just below the twin sabres of the Vengeance symbol: POLARIS. Keira looked up at Fox and she grinned.

"I thought she needed some new body armour - it's a new style, the same with Hit Girl's. They're the only versions of this new armour in existence to this point. Should have Harper's ready for when she leaves hospital and you say she can have it, Keira."

"Our secret, Diana," Keira cautioned, and Diana grinned.

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Then something caught Keira's eye.

"What is that?"

"Oh, the CSH? You wouldn't be interested in that," Fox grinned as they walked over towards where a large helicopter sat in the centre of a landing grid. "The Combat Support Helicopter prototype - we call her *Cadmus*."

"Oh, I would," Keira responded in awe.

The fourteen-tonne helicopter was blacker than sin and to say that it was heavily modified was a major understatement.

The nose carried the usual radar, defensive, and FLIR systems seen on Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) Merlin helicopters, but the glazing appeared heavier but lighter.

"Armoured glazing - tougher than glass three times as thick," Fox explained. "Up-rated engines - almost seven thousand shaft-horsepower."

"Those are not standard Merlin weapon wings!"

"State of the art, carbon-fibre and titanium. You have a potential for five hardpoints on each wing. For load testing, we have to port, a single ASRAAM on the upper launch rail, four Hellfire missiles below on the number one position, a pair of Brimstone II missiles on the number three position, and a pair of Stinger rounds on the number four position. To starboard, we have six Brimstone I missiles, an ASRAAM and another pair of Stinger rounds."

"A heavy load. Twelve ground targets and four airborne targets - on a good day," Keira commented. "Brimstone I outstrips Hellfire by a good two and a half miles while the Brimstone II more than trebles the range."

"The inside still needs work, but we have three mini-guns - port, starboard, and aft. She should be ready for her maiden flight in a few months. Before you ask, Vengeance may be getting something similar," Fox added cryptically.

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Finally, Fox waved them both into a plush-looking office and he closed the door.

"A drink, maybe?"

Keira and Diana both selected cold cans of Coke from the fridge and then sat back to await what Fox had to offer. Fox sat down behind his desk and looked at Diana.

"You, young lady, have suffered a traumatic experience, but I have been informed that you have been very brave. I also understand that you have tumbled to what Harper and Keira do at night. As such, I have been asked to get you back on your feet."

"Funny!" Diana growled.

"No, Miss Price. I mean it. I received your details the other day, and I set my team to work. A prosthesis is something we have been working on. You will be the very first to try our latest models. They are state-of-the-art and everything that a young lady would want."

Fox got up from his chair and walked over to a cupboard set into the wall. He reached in and he grasped an object, pulling it out and placing it on his desk. It was a right foot, complete with ankle and lower, lower leg. It looked suspiciously like what Diana had lost from her right leg. Fox returned to the cupboard and he returned with another, much larger, item. It matched the other item, only as far as the calf, extending upwards with its own knee joint and stopping several inches above the knee joint. Again, it looked suspiciously like what Diana had lost, this time from her left leg. Both artificial prosthetics were very futuristic and while they were shaped like legs, they had pistons and actuators which were visible within the skeletal structures. They kind of reminded Diana of when she had watched Terminator.

"You want to try them on?" Fox beamed.

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"Lightweight carbon-fibre with titanium-alloy construction. Actually, they're lighter than the legs you lost. Now, these are not like a new pair of shoes - you can't just strap them on and run out the door."

"I figured that," Diana groaned.

"Let's go see Doctor Noble."

Diana found herself being pushed down the corridor and then into a lift. They headed up six floors and exited out into a corridor filled with daylight. A minute later, Diana found herself in what appeared to be a doctor's office. A middle-aged woman in a white lab coat was waiting - she was smiling.

"Diana, this is Doctor Noble. She will take an exact three-dimensional rendering of your stumps. I will leave you and Keira with the doctor and I will see you later on."

With that, Fox vanished, leaving Diana and Keira with the doctor.

"Okay, Diana. For this, I need you to remove your joggers and then we will scan your stumps. That will enable us to make an accurate mounting for your new limbs. The more accurate this is, the more comfortable your stumps will be. The scan will also identify where your remaining bones are and the fat deposits. That will allow us to ensure the correct support for your body as all your bodyweight will be on your stumps. This is not an exact science and initially, your stumps will be painful as they have never supported your weight before."

There will be a lot of pain - I won't lie to you there - and it will be an uphill struggle for you. However, Diana, it will be worth every bit of pain and every tear."

Diana thought about all that and she nodded as she slipped off her joggers.

"Thanks for telling me that. Where do you want me?"

Keira lifted Diana out of the wheelchair and placed her onto a small stool with a seat much like that found on a racing bicycle within a weird circular booth. Diana was seated vertically, her stumps hanging naturally downwards. She was handed a set of darkened goggles to wear and Diana pulled them on, feeling suddenly very apprehensive.

"Sit as still as you can, please," Doctor Noble directed.

Four times the machine whirred, and Diana saw flashes of red and green lights. Four minutes later, Doctor Noble came in and Keira helped Diana back into her wheelchair. On a computer screen, over on a desk, Diana was amazed to see a perfect representation of her body from the waist down. She could see her stumps with every contour and dimple in exacting detail, including the parts which she could not and had never seen before. Another image showed the remains of her leg bones, beneath the fleshy stumps.

"We are looking at providing you with a system called vacuum suspension. This is a procedure which seals the prosthetic limb to your stump - we don't want it falling off, do we?"

Diana forced a laugh, she was feeling a little squeamish about it all.

"Okay, Diana. You've had it explained about your amputations, I assume?"

"Yes, Diana replied. "My right leg has a transtibial amputation or 'BK', short for 'Below the Knee'. My left leg has a transfemoral amputation or 'AK, short for 'Above the Knee'. That was explained to me some weeks back."

"Very good!"

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An hour later, after everything was explained to Diana and Keira with intricate detail, Lucius Fox reappeared, and he escorted them both back down six levels into the basement.

There, Diana and Keira were amazed to see the two legs, each fitted with a transparent plastic funnel at the top.

"That was fast!"

"Three-dimensional printing, Diana," Fox explained.

Doctor Noble appeared with what looked like baggy socks and Diana was wheeled over to a pair of parallel bars.

"These are silicone socks which you will wear over your stumps allowing an air-tight seal for the sockets on the prosthesis," she explained as she showed Keira and Diana how they went on.

"They feel weird," Diana pointed out.

"You'll get used to it," Doctor Noble chuckled. "The system inside your leg automatically regulates the seal as your stumps expand or shrink with activity. This method is ideal for active youngsters such as yourself. You can even swim in these, if you so wished - they are a little over neutrally buoyant, just

like real legs which float, especially the full leg on your left side. Okay - let's put on your legs."

It took several minutes to attach each prosthesis and test the seal. It was also essential to check that Diana felt no pain. She nodded her acceptance of them and then she began to cry.

"I'm scared. What if. . .?"

"Diana - stop that; let's just go with it, okay?" Keira said as she wiped away the tears.

With Keira's help, Diana was lifted up and she gasped as she felt weight on her remaining limbs for the first time in months. The sensations were weird but there was no real pain.

"How do they feel?" Doctor Noble asked.

"Good - I think."

"Normally, we would just do one limb at a time, but I think you are strong enough to handle both. Now, grip each bar with your hands and see if you can move your limbs."

Diana just stood there for a moment, savouring the fact that she was seeing the world properly for the first time in ages - crutches did not count. She moved her right leg as she would have normally done and that felt normal, apart from not having an ankle and the metal foot which had a rubber undercoating landed flat on the carpeted floor and she was left standing in a very undignified position with her legs apart and unable to move. She pulled at her left leg with her thigh, but nothing happened. The tears began in earnest.

"I can't move. I'm stuck."

"Diana, calm down and take a deep breath. You are doing fine."

Doctor Noble stood directly ahead of Diana.

"Look at me, not your feet. Move your left thigh in a flicking movement - don't use force."

The leg moved, and Diana found herself standing up straight with both metal feet side by side. She grinned broadly, the tears drying up. She moved her right leg and then with a flick, the left leg. The right leg, the left leg. The right leg, the left leg. The right leg, the left leg. It was working. . .

"I'm walking!" Diana exclaimed as she burst into tears of joy.

Keira was right behind her and she gave Diana a hug before helping her to sit back down in her wheelchair - the girl was exhausted, despite only having taken half-a-dozen steps. Keira felt tears on her own cheeks and she was surprised at how happy she felt for the little girl.

"Can I try again?" Diana begged.

"No," Doctor Noble replied. "I want you to get your stumps checked out by your doctor who will be able to tell if there is any damage. We will check and adjust the legs - they have microcomputers in them which will tell us if anything needs adjusting."

"Have no fear, Miss Price," Fox chuckled as he saw Diana's appalled expression. "The legs are uniquely yours, and you can come back in a day or two to try again."

"Thank you, Mr Fox, and thank you Doctor Noble. You've given me hope."

St Thomas' Hospital, London
The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

"I WALKED!"

"Hello, Diana. How are you? Good to see you, Harper. How are you?" Harper growled.

"Sorry - I'm just so excited!"

"I'd never have guessed," Harper grouched.

"Turn a frown, upside down. . ." Diana grinned.

"Okay, I'm happy for you," Harper replied. "You just startled me was all."

"You have the best sister EVER!" the overexcited girl proclaimed.

"I do, don't I."