

**Author's Note:** Yes, as the astute amongst you will probably notice, it is August 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.

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*Early, the next morning*  
*Wednesday, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016*

**Prestwick Airport**  
**Scotland**

The lurching of the Cameron's Overfinch Range Rover coming to a halt woke the two sleeping teens.

"What are we doing here?" Craig demanded as he looked around.

"Yeah - there's no school, so I should be in bed, asleep," Olivia pointed out sulkily.

"Seeing as you two are the eldest of all the junior members of *Vengeance*, and you are both thirteen, we figured that you two should increase your skills," Cameron explained. "Craig, you can ride a motorcycle, so transiting onto four wheels should not be much of an issue. As for you, Olivia, you will be learning to drive the car, first."

"Cool!" Olivia exclaimed, waking up properly, her entire demeanour changing instantly.

"Apparently," Keira elaborated, "Jasper thinks you are mature enough to cope with the extra training."

Craig began laughing raucously before Olivia slapped him on the right cheek and he shut up with a scowl.

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The aircraft hangar covered 5,934 square metres and towered upwards over twenty-one metres - it was also very empty, apart from a neat stack of portacabins over in the far-right corner at the back of the hangar . . . and four cars.

Olivia wandered over to the four cars with Craig and they both began examining the pair of Ford Fiesta ST-3 cars, one in red with the other in blue.

"Nice, aren't they?" Keira commented. "Turbocharged 1.6-litre petrol engine with 6-speed manual gearbox. 182-bhp and zero to sixty in 6.9 seconds. Seventeen-inch alloy wheels. Brand new."

"A bloody wet dream on wheels," Craig breathed.

"Unfortunately," Cameron chuckled. "You won't be driving those for a while - you will be driving those two."

Cameron pointed at the two other Ford Fiestas present in the hangar. Craig looked seriously depressed.

"Basic," Keira commented. "A 1.25-litre petrol engine with 5-speed manual gearbox. Hundred less with just 82-bhp and zero to sixty - eventually - in 13.3 seconds. Fifteen-inch alloy wheels, too. Both brand new."

"Okay - no longer aroused," Craig commented dryly.

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### ***Craig with Cameron***

Craig was decidedly unhappy as he climbed behind the wheel of his light green Ford Fiesta.

In Craig's mind, the car was horrible. The steering wheel felt cheap, and the dashboard as a whole looked cheap. Craig figured that he knew what all the controls were, and he had seen his parents driving often enough. Cameron climbed in on the passenger side and he pulled the door closed.

"Okay, Craig, you have three pedals at your feet, from the left: clutch, brake, and accelerator. The arrangement is the same on every car, irrespective of which side of the car the steering wheel is located, or on which side of the road you drive."

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### ***Olivia with Keira***

"Ahead of you is the steering wheel, as you would expect," Keira grinned to Olivia.

"I kind of figured that out, thanks," Olivia replied.

"If you reach between your legs . . . no, under the seat . . . there is a handle to pull which will allow you to slide the seat backwards and forwards. Pull it and slide the seat so you can comfortably reach the pedals and the steering wheel while still allowing a bend in your elbows and knees. Pull the lever down the right side of the seat to adjust the rake of the seat back."

Olivia spent a minute or two adjusting the seat so that she was comfortable.

"These seats are basic, but the other cars have electric seats, so you can adjust them more easily and in height too. Now to the bit you'll like," Keira grinned. "Here, in the middle, we have a knob."

"It's bigger than Craig's knob," Olivia commented.

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### ***Craig with Cameron***

Cameron could see the two girls giggling about something in the other car, but he ignored them.

"In the middle here, we have the gear stick - very important. This model had five forward gears and one reverse gear. The gears are arranged in a standard 'H' format. On most vehicles, first gear is up and to the left, then back to second, then a dogleg upwards for third, straight back to fourth, then another dogleg upwards for fifth. Okay, what does the 'R' stand for?"

"Reverse gear," Craig ventured, fairly sure of his response.

"Correct. For this car, you need to lift the knob before moving to select reverse - a safety feature to prevent you engaging reverse at speed and destroying your gearbox. Cars vary as to where reverse is located: top left, bottom left, top right, bottom right - you just have to be mindful when you get into a strange car. Some you have to push down to engage reverse, some don't have a safety catch. In the middle here, you have neutral."

"Cool."

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### **Olivia with Keira**

"The long handle to your left, that is the handbrake. This model has a manual one, others now have electronic parking brakes which make certain manoeuvres more difficult. Press the button and try to lower it," Keira directed.

Olivia gripped the lever with her left hand and she pressed the button on the end with her thumb.

"You may need to lift it slightly to release the ratchet."

Olivia tried again but with little success.

"Men!" Keira breathed. "Cameron was the last one in here and he's pulled the handbrake right to the top - men do that because we women often can't release the brake and we have to call for their help."

Keira grabbed the handle and she yanked it upwards before lowering it slightly.

"Your turn, honey."

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### **Craig with Cameron**

Craig had no problems with his handbrake and he could see Cameron grinning as Keira was obviously struggling with the yellow Ford Fiesta's handbrake.

"If you want to piss off a woman, always pull the handbrake right to the top when you park the car - they're often too weak to release it," Cameron chuckled. "Okay - that's the basics out of the way: start her up!"

As Cameron watched, Craig checked to make sure the car was not in gear. Cameron nodded his approval as Craig placed a foot on the left-hand pedal and then he hesitated for a moment before he turned the key. The engine caught instantly, and Craig released the key, grinning enormously.

"The other car has a button to start it, but many still use the common key," Cameron lectured. "Okay - you can see the dials are now alive. The left is the tachometer and is currently idling at just below a thousand RPMs. The right is the speedometer which is calibrated in miles-per-hour. In the centre, there is an important dial telling us what, Craig?"

"How much petrol we have in the tank?"

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### **Olivia with Keira**

After a minor issue with attempting to start the car while the gearbox was in gear, followed by a loud scream from Olivia as the car bolted forwards, Olivia quickly learnt what 'neutral' meant and they moved onto the dials and gauges.

"Naturally, you don't want to run out of petrol, or diesel, depending on what you are running. Some cars have bigger fuel tanks than others, but these are shitty, so they have shitty-sized fuel tanks."

"They look cool - I like the blue needles," Olivia commented.

"They are kind of nice," Keira agreed.

"Okay, we have the engine running. Place your left foot on the clutch . . . press it fully to the floor. Good. Now, engage first gear . . . over to the left and then forward - good. What's wrong?"

"I'm really nervous," Olivia admitted, and Keira could see the girl's hands shaking on the steering wheel.

"You'll do fine, Olivia."

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### ***Craig with Cameron***

"Gently ease the clutch up . . . apply a little pressure on the accelerator . . . slowly . . . stop when you feel the clutch biting."

Craig gently manipulated the pedals, much as he would the accelerator and clutch on a motorcycle. The car felt wildly different and he was using his feet as opposed to his hands, but he knew the result he was looking for. He felt the car rock forwards, just slightly, and he held it there.

"Let off the handbrake - gently. Now ease up further on the clutch."

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### ***Olivia with Keira***

The girl screamed with delight as she made the car move.

Okay, it was only two feet, but the car moved. The engine had stalled, for the eighth time, but Olivia did not care; she had made the car move.

"I just drove a car!" she exclaimed excitedly.

Just to prove the fact, Olivia restarted the car and she duplicated her momentous feat by moving the car forwards, about thirty feet before she slowed the car to a halt without stalling.

"I can drive!" she announced with a huge grin.

"You have a long ways to go, young lady," Keira chuckled. "Well done, Olivia."

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"That was so awesome!"

Craig was almost flattened by his girlfriend as she ran to hug him tightly. He understood why she was so happy, and he was just as pleased with that morning's accomplishments. Once Craig had peeled Olivia off of him, Cameron looked at them both.

"Well, done, guys!" he said. "You've both taken great steps this morning, and we're both very proud of you."

"It was fun," Olivia admitted.

"I think she came in her knickers," Cameron commented.

"Thought I smelt something," Keira said.

Olivia's face turned pink as everybody laughed at her and she scowled.

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### ***That evening***

### ***Dreadnought House***

Cassie knew that it was a special time, so she gave the two girls and the boy some slack.

Andrew had obtained and dragged in a massive Christmas tree which the kids were decorating. Kaitlin was arranging miles of tinsel while Naomi arranged various ornaments on the branches. Jake helped by lifting Kaitlin higher up the tree when her arms became too short to reach a relevant branch. Overall, it took them over an hour to properly decorate the tree and all three kids then stood back to observe their handiwork. They were very pleased with the results.

"You guys done?" Cassie asked as she checked in on the youngsters.

"Yep!" Kaitlin announced. "Can I turn on the lights? Please?"

Naomi and Jake both exchanged a look and nodded.

"Go on," Cassie directed, and Kaitlin dived under the tree.

As Kaitlin flicked on the switch, the tree lit up from top to bottom. Kaitlin scrambled back out from under the tree and the girl sat at Jake's feet, gazing up in amazement at the glittering tree above her. Cassie chuckled to herself as she saw the amazed looks on the faces of all three youngsters. None of them had had a real Christmas in quite a while - for Jake, it had been the longest. Andrew put his arm around Cassie and she leaned into him while they both contemplated the kids as they surveyed the lights which twinkled around the room. There was a triple intake of breath as Andrew flipped off the overhead lights, plunging the room into semi-darkness, lit only by the twinkling, multi-coloured fairy lights which reflected off the various baubles, ornaments, and lengths of tinsel which adorned the tree.

"It's going to be an amazing Christmas," Andrew commented.

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***The following morning***  
***Thursday, December 22<sup>nd</sup>***

***Beacon Croft***

"Kate!"

There was the thud of feet on the stairs and the sixteen-year-old breezed into the living room, moments later.

"You called?"

"Sit down, please," David Montgomery directed.

Kate looked over at David and then at Cassie, a worried expression crossing the girl's face.

"Hi, Cassie," Kate offered. "Am I in trouble?"

"No," Cassie replied with a smile. "We just want to learn some more about you."

"Huh?"

"What is a *Kestrel*?"

Kate looked pensive for a few moments before a resigned expression crossed her face. The girl sat down, and she took a deep breath.

"I've not heard that term in a few years," Kate admitted. "It took up eighteen months of my life, but it was the best part of *Urban Predator*, to be honest. I felt different when I was flying - for the first time in a long time, I actually felt in control."

"Flying is very special," a voice said from the doorway.

"Kate, this is Keira - she is a pilot," Cassie said in introduction. "I'm sure you know the girl with Keira."

"Hello, Willow - they let you out, huh?" Kate offered with a grin.

"I suppose," Willow replied.

"A girl of many words," David commented dryly.

Keira simply shook her head.

"Kate, Willow - I would like you both to come with us," she said.

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### ***Prestwick Airport***

The hanger was enormous, but they did not go inside.

Keira had parked the car around the side and she led the two girls and Cassie back around the front and towards a small single-engine helicopter which sat on the concrete hardstanding.

"The AgustaWestland AW009 helicopter. Five seats, three-bladed articulated hub for the main rotors, twin-bladed tail rotor. You two, are going flying," Keira announced.

For the first time since her arrival in the UK, Willow actually smiled. Kate, too, was grinning enormously. Keira walked the two girls around the helicopter, pre-flighting the aircraft. Keira was very impressed by the girls' knowledge as she quizzed them on the various parts of the helicopter during the walk around. Finally, they all returned to the cockpit and Keira waved Kate into the left front seat while Cassie and Willow climbed into the rear and each took one of the outer seats, Willow seated behind Kate. Keira climbed into the pilot's seat and all four strapped in as David Montgomery shut and secured the two sliding rear doors and the two front hatches. Keira and Cassie double-checked the harnesses of their charges and they were happy to see that both had fitted their five-point harnesses together correctly.

"Girls, please watch what I do," Keira said as she reached over to the centre console on her left, and she flipped the BATTERY switch to the ON position.

Keira then reached up to the overhead console and she flicked on two switches: the switches for the anti-collision lights and the radio/navigation receivers. Next came the fuel pump switch and the master fuel system switch which was protected by a red cover, once on, to prevent accidental switch off during flight. Keira pushed the protective red cover into place. A few more switches later, she released the red rotor brake lever, then she engaged the yellow clutch lever, both located above the windshield, and as the single Rolls Royce gas-turbine screamed, the main rotor began to turn, spinning faster and faster until they were ready for take-off. After a brief radio exchange with the tower, Keira pulled up on the collective held in her left hand and the helicopter slowly lifted off the concrete, the skid landing gear coming free.

With a small pressure on the left pedal, the helicopter came around to port as it gained height vertically. At a little over two hundred feet, Keira pushed forwards on the cyclic in her right hand and the helicopter dipped at the nose and gained forward momentum, increasing speed as it rose higher into the air. The helicopter was small, and not very powerful, but it was agile and perfect for short flights and for training which was exactly why Keira had acquired it just two weeks previously. The seats were comfortable and the four of them conversed over headsets, talking about the take-off. Even Willow appeared to

have come to life, joining in using many more words than she had used on the entire ninety-minute drive to Prestwick. As they flew, Keira demonstrated various systems present on the helicopter and she explained everything to Willow and Kate. In return, both girls asked many intelligent questions as they both gleaned information on the aircraft.

Keira flew about a dozen miles to the northeast before settling the machine down in a vast grassy field.

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Leaving the rotors spinning at idle, Keira released her harness, pulled off her headset, and pushed open the hatch beside her.

Kate looked worried as Keira walked around the blunt nose of the helicopter. Keira stopped beside the other hatch and she pulled it open, waving the girl out. Kate released her harness and hung up her headset, then slipped out and down to the ground.

"Other seat, *Goshawk!*" Keira yelled over the howling engine and whirling rotor blades.

Kate grimaced as she walked around the front of the helicopter and she pulled herself into the cockpit again, pulling the hatch shut behind her and securing it. As Kate connected up her harness and pulled on her headset, Keira was doing the same on the opposite side of the helicopter. Kate's hands shook slightly as she gripped the controls and she rested her feet on the pedals.

"Take a deep breath and, Kate," Keira said calmly. "Can you feel the pedals?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Keira pulled up slightly on the collective, lifting the skids about an inch off the grass.

"Okay, turn us to port."

With a gentle press of a pedal, the helicopter turned a few degrees to port before Kate shakily cancelled out the turn with opposite pressure on the opposing pedal.

"I'm a little rusty," she said.

"That's good, honey," Keira replied supportively. "Now, lift us off into a low hover, please."

Kate took a few deep breaths before she gently eased up on the collective and the helicopter lifted off the ground, inch by inch. She gently massaged the pedals to keep control of the yaw, and she gently moved the cyclic to maintain position. Keira was impressed; the hover was a little jerky but controlled. Kate definitely knew what she was doing, Keira decided, indicating that her flight training had been very real.

"I'm impressed, Kate."

Kate blushed under her headset and she grinned.

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"Translate us into forward flight and give us a twenty feet-per-minute climb."

Kate followed the instructions and the helicopter dipped at the nose and with a little wobble, moved slowly forwards and began to climb. Kate's eyes kept moving across her instruments as she set up a subconscious scan, taking in the readings and moving onto the next dial, then the next. She also kept an eye on

her surroundings, ahead, to port, to starboard, and a brief glance in the rear-view mirrors mounted on the outside of the helicopter. Keira recognised the look on Kate's face as the same which she was used to seeing on Harper's face when she was in *Predator* mode. The girl was very focussed on her tasks as she watched the twin six-inch by 8-inch screens in the cockpit and she gently moved the collective, cyclic, and pedals simultaneously to maintain the steady forward flight of the helicopter.

"STOP!" Keira shouted, and Kate instantly brought the helicopter into a surprisingly steady hover. "Drop us back to the ground, Kate."

Without hesitation, Kate dropped the machine in a controlled fashion, down to the ground, touching down with only a slight bump. Kate pushed the collective downwards to hold the helicopter on the ground.

"Kate, out - Willow, your turn."

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Willow was out of her seat and hauling open Kate's hatch before had released her harness and hung up her headset.

Kate secure Willow's hatch before running around to the rear door, sliding it shut once she was in her seat. Willow was already familiarising herself with the controls and the cockpit while Kate was strapping herself in and pulling on her headset.

"A little bit eager, eh, Rampart," Kate chuckled.

"Bite me, Katie," came the response.

Kate scowled at the one version of her name which she really hated. While she had no real dislike for Willow, the American ticked her off at times with her 'I don't give a shit' attitude. They had been friends, on and off, ever since they had both been taken as ten-year-olds for the First Intake, all those years ago. They had been together as *Urban Predator* had fallen, and they had been together when FEAR had recruited them. The two girls had been inseparable for a few months during training, but then they had drifted apart.

"Do we need to put you two in a room together?" Cassie asked pointedly.

"Sorry, Kate," Willow responded.

"Show them what you can do, Willow - you were always better than me when it came to flying," Kate replied.

"Let's see some moves, Rampart," Keira said. "Your aircraft."

"My aircraft," the sixteen-year-old said as she eased the 1,800-kilogramme helicopter into the air and after hovering for a few moments, Willow spun the helicopter around on its axis.

After spinning one hundred degrees, Willow translated into sideways flight to starboard with the helicopter still spinning on its axis. Then the helicopter straightened out and tipped forwards as the machine rocketed forwards, rapidly increasing speed to about sixty knots and rising to six-hundred feet. Keira was busy on the radio, clearing their flight with the Prestwick Airport tower with a full VFR flight-plan out to sea.

"Take us out on a course of two-eight-four, Rampart, altitude five thousand."

"Copy two-eight-four at five thousand," Willow responded.

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The helicopter raced across the coast at one hundred knots.

Troon passed five thousand feet beneath them as Willow turned the helicopter towards Lady Isle, a small uninhabited island, some two miles southwest of Troon. Willow expertly brought the helicopter swooping downwards towards the island, passing within four hundred yards as she blazed across the raging surface of the Firth of Clyde at an altitude of about sixty feet, then curving upwards, back into the sky and banking the helicopter hard to the right and towards the land. As Keira watched the very talented pilot, she was amazed by the concentration that the sixteen-year-old exhibited as Willow demonstrated skills normally only acquired by those a lot older with much more recent experience. The girl's recall of how to fly was exemplary.

Keira had one final test for the girl as she crossed the coast to the south of Ayr. As they approached a large open field, Keira reached up and she pulled back on the yellow main rotor clutch lever, disconnecting the turbine engine from the rotor blades. A loud horn sounded in the cockpit and rather than panic, Willow expertly controlled the helicopter as it sank like a stone, the main rotor blades wind-milling, providing limited lift to the lightweight machine.

"Brace! Brace! Brace!" Willow called out as they neared the ground and she performed a perfect autorotation landing, the helicopter striking the ground and sliding along on its skids for a dozen yards before Keira pushed in the clutch lever and Willow pulled the stricken aircraft back into the air.

"My aircraft!" Keira announced as she took control.

"Your aircraft," Willow acknowledged removing her hands and feet from the controls.

Willow grinned happily as she turned to look at Kate who smiled back, holding up the thumb of her right hand.

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### ***South of Glasgow***

On the way home, the five of them stopped at a Pizza Hut for a bite to eat.

All of them were very hungry and they chatted animatedly as they all crammed slices of stuffed crust pizza into their mouths. The talk naturally turned to flying.

"What did you fly, Keira?" Kate asked.

"I learnt to fly on the Gazelle AH.1, then I moved onto the Lynx HAS.3 with some time spent in the Sea King HAS.6. I updated to the Lynx HMA.8 and then the Merlin HAS.1 which was my final posting with the Royal Navy."

"You still in the navy?" Willow asked.

"I'm on the Reserve List as a Lieutenant Commander."

"Cool!" Willow replied.

"Why did you leave the navy?" Kate asked.

"My sister is one of you. She was rescued, earlier this year, and I took time off to be with her."

"Sorry to hear that," Willow said with real meaning.

"Harper's young; she will be okay."

"I just have two *Predators* for daughters," Cassie grimaced. "I thought I was bad at that age, but those two are a handful."

"We are, aren't we?" Kate grinned.

"Tell me about it!" David commented. "I have two in the house, now."

"Craig's sweet," Kate offered.

"He has his moments, but you kids went through a lot," David said. "I know you guys learnt a lot of skills, many of which are about hurting people, but flying is something worth knowing."

"You a pilot?" Willow asked.

"No chance!" David chuckled. "I was aircrew. I began on the Wasp HAS.1, then moved through the Wessex 3 and 5, before seeing out the Sea King from service. I do the hard work, leaving the bloody officers to do the easy bit and fly my birds."

Keira raised an eyebrow, but she did not rise to the obvious bait which she had heard many, many times before.

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### ***Friday, December 23<sup>rd</sup>***

#### ***Dreadnought House***

It was Charlotte's first visit to the house

She had spent forty minutes being dragged (literally) around by Kaitlin as she was shown every nook and cranny. The pair then found Jake in his bedroom when Kaitlin shoved open his door.

"Kaitlin!" Jake exclaimed. "Cassie told you to knock."

"Forgot," Kaitlin responded with a wave of her hand. "This is Jake's bedroom."

"I figured that," Charlotte replied. "Hi, Jake."

"Hi, Charlie," Jake replied.

The three kids headed downstairs to the living room where they found Naomi playing with Sasha. The adults, Cassie, Andrew, and Alexandra were in the kitchen having a drink of tea.

"You okay?" Naomi asked Charlotte who had sunk into a chair to rest after her enforced tour of the property.

"She's fine," Kaitlin replied for Charlotte who had barely opened her mouth to respond.

Jake simply grinned at his friend of many years who grinned back.

"Has little miss bossy boots shown you everything, Charlotte?" Cassie asked.

"Yes, she. . ." Kaitlin began before Cassie clamped a hand over the girl's mouth.

"Yes, thank you, Cassie," Charlotte replied as Kaitlin was released.

Kaitlin scowled as she sank into a chair, staring at her outstretched feet, ignoring the giggling from Naomi.

"You have an amazing house, Cassie," Charlotte went on.

"You are always welcome here, Charlotte," Cassie replied.

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**Saturday, December 24<sup>th</sup>**

**Christmas Eve**

**Dreadnought House**

That night, every child was on their best behaviour, whether or not they believed in Father Christmas.

Even little Kaitlin, the youngest of them all had managed over twenty-four hours without a single bad word passing her lips - a minor miracle in itself, Cassie had thought to herself. As for Naomi, she had not once picked on Kaitlin, nor teased her even a smidgen. Andrew had commented to Cassie that it was unnatural for two little girls to behave so perfectly - especially when you considered what they were inside. As for young Jake, he was being the perfect gentleman, always on hand to help Cassie in the kitchen, or Andrew around the house. The weather was cold, so Andrew and Jake had ensured that the fire in the living room was laid and that there was plenty of coal and wood ready to keep the fire burning and the warmth emptying out into the room where the curtains had been securely closed to ward out any draughts. At five, that evening, the fire had been lit and the family sat down to enjoy some special time together.

Cassie put on a DVD from her childhood, encouraging the three youngsters to sit and watch the movie.

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**Blairhoyle**

Another fire raged in another fireplace that evening.

The house was old and could be a little chilly at night. Richard had laid and lit the fire that evening before encouraging their charge to settle down and watch a DVD which was a family tradition for the Perrin family. Charlotte could vaguely remember seeing the short film, many years before. It was called, The Snowman, and it was an animated film with a Christmas theme. At first, Charlotte had considered herself to be too old for such triviality, but the music and the Christmas theme of the movie had her entranced, throughout the entire twenty-six-minute run.

Alexandra and Richard grinned happily as she sipped their sherry and watched the young girl as she lay on her front, her chin supported by her hands, her legs lazily kicking in the air as she watched the snowmen dance on the television. For them, it had been a long time since they had had a youngster to look after directly, and they knew from past experience that teenagers were a struggle to bring up at the best of times. Once the film was over, Charlotte looked around at the adults, a big smile on her young face.

"Again?" she asked.

Richard chuckled as he reset the film.

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**Beacon Croft**

The story was much the same, but without the fire, as Craig sat watching his own Christmas favourite: Star Wars Episode 4 - A New Hope.

Sixteen-year-old Kate Fincham was very happy to join in – she was not a Star Wars fan, but she became enthralled by the unfolding story and she grinned at the antics of Princess Leia Organa and scowled at Han Solo's blatantly sexist behaviour towards the princess. Nonetheless, she cheered on the Rebel Alliance as they fought against the odds and she booed Darth Vader as he went after Luke and his friends. However, when Ben fell to Vader, her hand flew to her mouth, unbidden, shocked by the turn of events.

At the end of the movie, just as the Death Star exploded, she cheered, then she turned on Craig.

"More! I need more!"

At a nod from his father, Craig dug out *The Empire Strikes Back* on Blu-ray.

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### ***Moss-Side Hall***

There were many mixed emotions as the family gathered for dinner that night.

It was to be the very first Christmas for them all in their new family unit. For Olivia and Jessica, it was their first Christmas without their own parents and the fact was not lost on the two sisters. For Christopher and his parents, they each felt the loss of Charlene, a wonderful sister and daughter, taken by a stray bullet during the same incident which had taken the Kensington's lives. The two girls had fitted into their adoptive family perfectly, despite a rocky few hours for Olivia at one point. Despite that, the youngster was amazingly resilient, and she had grown in stature to become a more rounded young lady and a key member of *Vengeance*. As for Jessica, she had been the first of the pair to meet *Vengeance*, in a very unexpected manner, but the girl had also grown up a lot over the past few months and become an important asset for *Vengeance*. Jasper was very proud of his adoptive daughters, as was Lynn.

Though Christopher still mourned his little sister, he had moved on and he accepted his new sisters, one older and one younger, without reservation.

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### ***Auchenross***

The fire raged in the fireplace, and for the first time in a long time, Dakota felt at ease with her life.

She stared at the flames, smiling at her codename while she had been a *Marauder*: Firebrand. She had lived up to that name in every way as a *Marauder*, but she was glad to have shed that name. She knew that Charlotte, known as Intrepid, wanted to keep her codename. But Charlotte had not received her *Predator* codename, as Dakota had, so she had no other to fall back to. It was a quandary for the girl and a bit of an identity crisis, but Arbiter was who she was, not Firebrand.

"A penny for your thoughts," Sinead said as she sat down in a chair close to the fire.

"Just contemplating my identity."

"I can see that as being important."

"I'm just glad that that is my biggest worry right now. Thanks for being there for me."

"Always, Dakota."

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## **London**

"*Electra!*"

"Coming, Grandpa! I need to go, Mary."

"*I miss you, Electra,*" Mary said from northern Scotland, over the video link.

"I miss you too, Mary - you're my best friend; after Stephanie, of course."

"Of course," Mary laughed. "*Merry Christmas, Electra.*"

"You stay safe, Mary, and Merry Christmas to you."

Electra waved to her friend until the connection was cut. The girl then ran out of her bedroom and she scampered down the stairs to where her Grandpa, Father, and Brother all awaited her arrival in the living room. It was her very first Christmas for many years and the massive tree in the corner of the room had filled her with joy when it had been set up. She had never felt so much joy and for a while, it had overwhelmed her, and it had taken her father's soothing voice to calm her down on more than one occasion.

Electra had spent time talking with Stephanie and Mary, relying on her two best friends to organise her thoughts and emotions. Mary was the control, providing guidance where Stephanie could not. That Christmas was to be amazing and the ten-year-old was determined to enjoy every bit of it.

Life was good.