

INNER DEMONS

By Paradox

West Haven RV Park, Pennsylvania

I woke up still feeling the lingering tears that had dampened my cheeks from the night before. They had long since dried, leaving twin, clammy tracks on my face that had me wanting to race into the bathroom and scrub my face clean with scalding hot water. However, I didn't do that, since it would have undoubtedly woken up the beautiful blonde whose arms I was currently entwined in. Unlike me, she continued to sleep peacefully with a look of contentedness on her deceptively young face. There was also a very satisfied smile on her face but that was easily attributed to the no less than five orgasms I'd given her last night, which she had eagerly repaid in kind.

Moving slowly and carefully so as not to wake her, I extricated myself from her arms and silently padded over to one of the dressers where I carefully drew out a pair of tiny, lycra running shorts in black and bright fuchsia, a matching sports bra, and a pair of ankle socks. All bore the world-renown logo of Under Armour. Only the best for a fashionista like me, and yes that was heavily laden with sarcasm. To say that I was dealing with some serious self-esteem issues the last couple of days would have been an understatement. Then again, I doubt too many other people would have been able to handle being programmed to be the ultimate sex slave, having that conditioning healed by one of your best friends, then have it literally fucked right back into you and still maintain a stellar self-image.

Stepping quietly out of the bedroom, I carefully closed the door so it wouldn't make any noise before slipping into my workout clothes. As I did, I noticed the living area bed of the R/V was empty. Since it was six in the morning, it didn't take someone of my considerable intelligence to figure out where its occupants might have gone. While one made it a habit of waking with the sun and going on very early morning runs, the other had been understandably on edge as of late and it made sense that she probably had some trouble sleeping. The fact that I was the cause of her uneasiness only added to the heartbreak I'd been experiencing for the last two days. It also drew a heavy sigh from me as I stepped out the door-

And walked directly into two sets of expectant gazes, one amber and gold, the other brilliantly green.

“Trouble sleeping?”

Shifting my own gaze, I peered at my dark-haired friend who was lovely in appearance and wild in presence. I had no doubt she would have boys sniffing around her more than when she tracked her prey. “You heard me wake up,” I deduced.

Aiden shrugged unapologetically and gave me a slight smile. “We were just getting ready to go so I figured we'd wait for you.”

“How did you know I would be going for a run too?” I challenged.

“Besides the fact that you run daily?” The question caused my attention to re-direct itself to the ethereal red-haired beauty that was my other friend. “Did you really think we’d let you just go off on your own, especially now?”

Sighing, I shook my head at Ashley before shifting so I looked at both of them. “You guys might want to think about staying away from me.”

“Now why the hell would we do that?” Aiden asked, actually sounding offended.

“Because I’m poison,” I said quietly, unable to stop the feelings of self-recrimination from boiling up within my mind, “No matter where I go it seems like this shit is constantly following me. It’s like I’m a goddamn pervert magnet.”

“Oh come on,” Ashley countered, “Just because some lust demon got her hooks into you doesn’t mean you’re a ‘pervert magnet’. Don’t forget Aiden was affected by her too.” The girl in question shifted ever so slightly, though whether it was from discomfort or the memory of what she herself described as a mind-blowing orgasm I couldn’t be sure.

“You’re forgetting about those boys from Laramie,” I pointed out, remembering the college trio who had come to our home town in Wolf Springs and had tried to seduce all of us into bed, even if that seduction took the form of attempted kidnapping and rape.

“Hey, they each went after one of us,” Aiden clarified, “And Ashley’s guy didn’t try to do anything to her, he just knew what the others planned.”

“But the other one tried to slip you a roofie ,” I almost cried, remembering at the last second that it was six A.M and to keep my voice down.

“He did,” Aiden acknowledged with a nod, “And thanks to my Wolverine healing factor it didn’t do anything to me.”

“But it could have,” I told her miserably, “And if you’d been raped it would have been my fault.”

“How?” Ashley asked in clear frustration, “Did you call those guys and invite them to town? Did you tell that asshole to try and drug Aiden? Did you

invite that son of a bitch into your house, tell him to chloroform Angela, tie her up, and then try to do the same thing to you?”

“No,” I admitted lamely.

“We had some shitty luck,” Aiden said, her tone not brooking any argument, “And that includes Iowa. You’re not the cause of this and if you keep thinking you are I might be forced to slap the shit out of you to try and knock some sense into you.”

“Slapping really isn’t your style,” Ashley observed.

“I don’t like punching girls,” Aiden clarified.

“You disemboweled Libidine,” I pointed out.

Aiden waved my statement away. “Lust demon, doesn’t count.”

“Regardless,” Ashley said, getting us back on track, “The point is, you aren’t attracting these things to us. By your own logic she should have come to us instead of us accidentally driving into her sphere of influence.”

“Nice terminology,” I muttered.

“Thank you. Anyway, you didn’t cause that, she did.”

“But all of that hard work you did healing what they did to my mind,” I said, feeling tears starting to brim. I’d cried so much these last two days I didn’t think I had any left. Apparently I was wrong. “She wiped it all away in an hour and now I’m back to the way I was. I mean, look at me,” I said, indicating myself. “Without even thinking about it I put on an outfit that made sure as much skin was revealed as possible so that anyone looking at me would automatically think about fucking me.”

Stepping towards me, Ashley took my hand and gave it a squeeze. “So we start over, work on controlling those impulses like we did when all of us first met. Even with your brain saturated with sexiness you were still able to control it then and you can control it now.”

“But I shouldn’t have to!” I cried, giving in to the feelings of self-pity that simply couldn’t be held back any longer.

Moving quickly, Aiden was immediately at my side gently covering my mouth so I wouldn’t wake our temporary neighbors while whispering, “But you do, so it’s either re-learn how to hold it back or get a one-way ticket to the nut house and stay locked in a straightjacket twenty-four seven so you aren’t fucking everything with a heartbeat. Pick one,” she demanded with a hiss.

I actually didn’t answer immediately, and not because Aiden’s hand was still over my mouth. Had I been alone, I very likely would have already checked myself into a mental ward with the lucidity I still possessed. However, I wasn’t alone. I had friends and a girl that I loved that would all be saddened by me leaving them. Aiden and Ashley were there to help me, as was Angela, and all of them had made it possible for me to actually feel normal despite the low throb of my sex drive lurking in the shadows of my mind. I had been able to get it under control before Ashley had healed me, and the strength of my friends’ compassion made me believe I could do it again. Besides, after our little adventure with Libidine, Angela had let us no in no uncertain terms that she was coming along for the rest of the trip and would fly back once we got to school. That meant I would have someone with me that I could let out the built up sexual urges I’d been experiencing ever since the demoness’s lust taint had re-activated my mental conditioning. Everyone I knew was leaping at any chance to help me. Was I really that much of a bitch to just throw it in their face and say they weren’t good enough?

“All right.”

“What?” Ashley asked, drawing Aiden’s hand from my mouth so what I said wasn’t an unintelligible mumble.

“I said ‘all right’. I’ll just have to re-learn how to be normal again. But just so you know,” I told Aiden with a tiny, wicked grin, “Straightjackets can be pretty kinky.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” she muttered with a roll of her eyes. “Here we go again. Come on, let’s get started. Maybe a good run will burn off some of the sex energy of yours.”

“Worth a shot,” I said with a shrug before we all started jogging down the main drive of the park.

It wasn't long before we deviated from it, and I wasn't surprised by our sudden veering from the path into the woodland that surrounded the park. When Aiden went out for a run, it wasn't your typical leisurely jog down the street. Since she was, at heart, a wolf, she needed something a little more strenuous to keep her interested. That's why she had introduced us to what she called 'wolf running'. It was very similar to parkour in that it utilized obstacles and uneven terrain, but it wasn't nearly as showy or acrobatic. Instead, it focused on navigating these obstacles and terrain with minimal effort while maximizing speed. It was basically how a wolf operated when it hunted since loss of acceleration could result in prey gaining a lead and potentially outdistancing the hunter. While Ashley had taken to the style quite readily, and was actually becoming pretty good at it, I still tended to lean more on the parkour side of movement.

That was probably due to my mutation. Apparently, in addition to being able to manifest energy knives consisting of a heat potential that I hadn't even been able to quantify yet, I also attained a heightened level of acrobatic dexterity and coordination that was easily at the level of an Olympic gymnast. That meant while Aiden and Ashley vaulted smoothly over a fallen tree, I actually flipped over it. It caused a loss in speed but I was able to quickly catch back up with them and maintain their pace.

We'd gotten about halfway through our run when I realized Aiden had been dead on with her theory. Instead of thinking about what cute outfit I wanted to wear that day or the best way to make Angela squeal with barely controlled desire, I was wholly focused on keeping pace with my friends and overcoming the next obstacle in our path. It gave me a small sense of hope that maybe I wouldn't turn into some sex-crazed fiend.

By the time we made it back to the R/V Aiden and I were breathing a bit harder than normal but were otherwise fine. While I certainly couldn't have done it, I'm sure my friend would have had no problem going another five miles at that pace. Ashley, on the other hand, had collapsed to her hands and knees and was frantically sucking in oxygen as fast as her lungs would allow. Aiden and I picked

up her up and put her hands atop her head so her ribcage would expand and allow her lungs to take in more air. Unlike us, Ashley wasn't possessed of enhanced endurance and we had run pretty hard that morning.

“Did **gasp** you have to **gasp** go so damn **gaaasp** *fast?*”

“She did it for me,” I told her, gently deflecting any blame from Aiden, “She probably thought a hard run would get my mind off things, and she was right,” I said as I gave my wild friend a grateful look.

“Just keep breathing evenly,” Aiden told Ashley while nodding her acknowledgement to me, “You’ll be fine in a minute. We really need to work on your endurance girl.”

“I’m too tired to think of one right now, so just pretend like I insulted you.” Ashley gasped as she worked to regulate her breathing.

“And I’ll pretend like you thoroughly put me in my place,” Aiden agreed with a smile.

“Well when you’re done with that, how about some breakfast?”

All three of us looked over to see Angela standing in the doorway of the R/V in a red silk robe that hung open to reveal the sexy little lace nightie she wore beneath it. “It’s just about ready.”

“Lots of meat?” Aiden asked with a hungry kind of anxiousness.

“Yes, you carnivore,” Angela laughed, “I’ve got a whole plate of sausage just for you.”

“Foood,” she practically howled and raced into the R/V while Ashley and I walked in at a more leisurely pace.

As we ascended the small steps, Angela gathered me into her arms and gave me a long, deep kiss. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better,” I admitted.

“Hey Kitty,” Ashley warned from the dining area table that was laden with food, “If you want any of this sausage or bacon you’d better hurry. I think Aiden is trying to set a world record for how much she can cram into her mouth at once.”

Laughing, I stepped fully into the R/V arm in arm with my lover and went about enjoying a nice, hearty breakfast with the people I loved and cared about who never hesitated to show me the same.

Chicago, Illinois

The sound of gunshots exploding in the air had Gear coming awake with heat-stopping alacrity and scrambling for the hidden holster beneath desk. It wasn’t until his hand closed around the handle of the Colt forty-five that he realized the gunshots were coming from the indoor test range located on the far end of the complex. Normally, he would have barely detected the gunfire coming from the area, except someone had neglected to close the door to it and ensure the soundproofing within was complete. Since there were only three people on the planet that knew about the existence of what he liked to joking call their ‘lair’, and one of them was currently on the road, it didn’t take someone with gadgeteer-level intelligence to figure out who was left. Of course, that only raised more questions, since making sure the room was sealed during weapons testing was crucial to keeping their location secret. While it was still highly unlikely anyone would hear anything outside of the facility, the potential of it was one of the reasons why such strict security measures had been put in place. Considering the man who had implemented such protocols, it was even stranger that he’d chosen to ignore them.

Grumbling tiredly beneath his breath, he stalked over to the range, snagging a pair of muffling headphones as he did and slipping them on, thereby reducing the previously deafening echo to a dull thudding. As he reached the entry point to the range, he watched as his friend and boss went through a series of tests with his side arms. He first took careful, precise aim, squeezed off a round, then made a note on the clipboard hanging on the wall beside him. Once he'd done that to the point that the magazine of the weapon was empty, he set it aside and repeated the process with the firearm's mate. Once both mags were dry, he reloaded and then conducted a rapid-fire test where each weapon emptied its contents as fast as he could pull the trigger, which was scary fast. The final test consisted of a variation on the rapid-fire drill where he used both weapons simultaneously against five different targets downrange. It was only then that he reeled the targets back in where he could inspect the small, circular perforations within each target.

"Nice grouping," Gear said loudly to compensate for the ear protection as he saw all of the shots had gone in either the head or the heart in an incredibly tight grouping.

While he didn't outwardly acknowledge the presence of his trusted weaponsmith, Ashe removed the noise cancelation plugs from his ears and made a notation on the clipboard while saying, "The sights are off by one millimeter."

Taking off his own earphones, Gear sighed. "Ashe, the best marksmen in the world can't get that kind of consistent grouping, especially not with dual weapons."

"The grouping should have been within twenty-one point twenty-one millimeters. Greater than that is unacceptable."

Even though the gadgeteer was familiar with his boss's insanely difficult standards when it came to...well, everything, he'd always had slightly more lenience when it came to his shot groupings. Yes, he strived for the aforementioned twenty-one point twenty-one grouping, but he was always satisfied with the twenty-four point twenty-six that he'd just accomplished. Insanely high standards were one thing, but Ashe was always well aware that for all of his vaunted ability he was still human and there would always need to be a margin for error.

“You’ve never had a problem with it before,” he pointed out.

Instead of replying, Ashe collected his weapons and silently walked passed his friend and colleague out to the very well-used weapons table where he began methodically disassembling the thirty-eight semi-autos for cleaning. For a few minutes, Gear watched him go through the process of breaking the weapon down to a level only a master gunsmith would try before meticulously cleaning every single part of the weapon, applying the proper lubrication to all moving parts, and then reassemble it as easily as changing the batteries on a flashlight.

It wasn’t until he began the same process on his second weapon that the weaponsmith could no longer hold his tongue. “Okay, what’s going on with you?”

“What do you mean?” the man asked, never taking his focus from the process laid out before him.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Gear told him, pulling up a stool across the table from him and fixing him with a knowing stare, “In the last twenty-four hours you’ve been more reckless than I’ve ever seen you in all the time we’ve known one another.”

Ashe didn’t look up from his firearm cleaning, though he did lift an eyebrow. “Exactly how have I been reckless?”

“The Red Cobra Case.”

There was a tiny movement of a shoulder that Gear was able to interpret as a shrug as the vigilante began the process of reassembling the cleaned and lubed weapon. “The case was closed, what more is there to say?”

“Ashe, we’ve been working on the case for months, nailing down delivery times, client bases, money transactions, and even operational hierarchy. We were going to systematically disassemble them and funnel their proceeds into our accounts once you got the financials out of their in-house accountant.”

“The operation was eliminated,” Ashe said simply.

“Because you blew up the fucking building!” Gear said in exasperation. “Yeah the bulk of the gang is dead and all that’s left are peons that don’t have

anywhere near the brains to try and put it back together, but now there's no way to get to the financials or lock down their suppliers."

"We don't need the money," was the terse reply, "And we'll have another opportunity to locate the suppliers soon enough and eliminate them."

For a moment, the weaponsmith could do nothing but sit and blink at his boss in shock. It wasn't that long ago that such losses on an operation would have been unacceptable to him. While the Red Cobra gang was a problem, their drug and weapon suppliers were just as big of one and Ashe had been firm that they needed to gather as much intelligence on them as possible. "Okay, what the fuck!" he nearly yelled.

Slowly, that steely gaze lifted from his now fully assembled weapon to address the expletive with a penetrating glare that might have sent anyone else running screaming for their lives. "Excuse me?"

"Ashe, I've never had a problem with the way we operate. The criminals we go after need to be gone from the world, no question, but you've never been this bloodthirsty before. Blowing up an entire building just to eliminate the gang? That's not your style. Yeah, there were no civilians in it but both of us know that was a pretty fucking loud and brutal way of doing it and it brought more than the local cops this time. The ATF is investigating it too."

"And they'll find it was nothing," Ashe said calmly, far too calmly. "Absolutely no trace of my presence was left behind."

"How do you know?" Gear demanded, "With a demolition of that size you had to have used an explosive that any bomb dog would easily pick up. Once they figure out which kind was used they'll be sure to look into the sale of all explosives in the area and could trace it back to us."

While the weaponsmith gasped for breath after that forceful tirade, Ashe sat back with a completely blank expression on his face. Had Gear not been so fired up about the potential threat to their operation he might have seen it for the warning sign it was. "The explosion was facilitated by three holes drilled into the main gas line of the building, after the safety valves had been compromised, and ignited by a single firecracker."

Gear blinked several times in amazement before shaking his head. “You blew up an entire building using a firecracker?”

“I’d already mapped out the layout of the gas distribution through the building and determined that a single, small explosion would be more than enough to trigger a catastrophic failure of the entire line. Where are the girls currently located?”

Just as he was opening his mouth to respond with a mixture of adoration for his boss’s thorough planning and anger that he’d deviated from the pre-existing one, he blinked several times and tried to reorient his line of thinking as his boss suddenly changed topics without him realizing it. “What?”

“The girls, what is their current location?”

“I don’t know,” Gear asked in exasperation, “Why do you want to know that?”

Instead of answering, Ashe stood and holstered his weapons before stepping from the weapons station over to the bank of computers that served as their communications and intelligence station with Gear quickly following behind him. He watched as the man tapped in a few commands on his keyboard and brought up the holographic map projection on the wall zoomed in to a small area with a single red dot in the center. “West Haven Park,” Ashe said, more to himself than anyone else, and keyed in a command that changed the display from the map to an interior camera image of a recreational vehicle. Both watched as Ashley and Aiden sat at the dining area table going over a map on Ashley’s computer while Kitty and Angela cleaned up what was clearly breakfast dishes. “They should be leaving shortly.”

Gear’s hand flashed down, stabbing at a key on the keyboard and causing the holographic display to wink out. “You’re spying on them now?” he accused even as Ashe fixed him with a cold, narrowed gaze. “What, do you plan on watching them while they sleep too? When the hell did you install hidden cameras in their R/V?”

“Back off Gear,” he said *very* quietly.

“No Ashe, this is nuts. I know you want to make sure they get to Tearmann safe but you’ve got to draw the line somewhere. These girls are entitled to privacy and they don’t need you literally looking over their shoulders at any moment.”

“It’s my fault!” Ashe shouted, slamming his fist down on the keyboard so hard it shattered, sending keys, pieces of plastic, and circuitry flying throughout the room.

The level of sudden, spontaneous, and violent loss of control, something that *never* happened with the dark vigilante, had Gear standing frozen in such shock he didn’t even realize Ashe had said something at first. When his mind caught back up he shook his head in confusion. “What are you talking about? What’s your fault?”

Spinning, Ashe stalked towards his command center with a look of fury on his face that was terrifying in that Gear never seen it before. After a moment’s hesitation, he hurried after his friend and arrived just in time to see him pulling up a map stretched out between four of the multiple screens displaying northeastern United States with a single blue line following interstate ninety up to Canada. Along that line were various text boxes detailing potential threats ranging from recorded petty crime to potential supervillain activity. One of the other screens currently not occupied by the map also showed an incredibly detailed listing of the current state of Whateley Academy, its enrollment population, and extensive security logs for the last six months.

“Ashe, what are you doing?” Gear asked hesitantly, “What was your fault?”

“Libidine,” he said, and for the second time in less than five minutes Gear found himself shocked at the tone in the man’s voice. It wasn’t hyper violent anymore, it was...regretful. In all his time with Ashe, he couldn’t recall a single time he’d ever heard that particular emotion in his voice. If an operation ever went bad, he’d always just looked at it logically and tactically, made appropriate adjustments to their operations, and continued on. He never dwelled upon it for more time than necessary.

“That wasn’t your fault,” Gear told him, “You weren’t even in Iowa at the time.”

“It should have been dealt with months ago,” Ashe told him, looking over with an expression of pain in that steely gaze. It was certainly a red letter day for things Gear had never seen his boss do. “I knew the route the she was planning to use and I could have eliminated the threat before they’d even gotten on the road. Instead, I delegated the responsibility to someone else so I could focus on Chicago.”

“You said you saw potential in the Cornfield Brigade,” Gear rationalized, “You told me you wanted to give them something that would bolster their confidence.”

“And they never even tried to accomplish the mission,” Ashe concluded, “They only cared about using their powers to impress women and show off. I could have done it myself and known it would have been done right the first time. Because I didn’t, because instead I kept my attention here, they...she...was nearly lost to that lust demon. That failure is on me and I will *not* allow another.”

“Ashe,” Gear said, walking over and putting a companionly hand on his friend’s shoulder, “You can’t be everywhere at once. You’re only human. Yeah, things could have gone bad, that’s true, but the girls handled themselves pretty damn well all things considered. They got into a sticky spot but they ended up doing exactly what you wanted to happen, they eliminated the enemy and completed the operation. You said it yourself, they’re stronger than anyone else realizes. That means they’re strong enough to look out for each other and themselves. You constantly looking out for them and sacrificing your own principles to do it doesn’t do them any kind of a service and it only undermines your own opinion of her.”

“She’s not a combatant,” Ashe argued, albeit weakly, “All of her inner strength means nothing if she’s not capable of defending herself.”

“That’s why she has her friends,” Gear countered, “And you saw yourself that they seem to be pretty damn capable of doing that.”

Looking from his friend back to the computer bank, Ashe’s gaze focused on a singular image located on the center screen depicting a photo of three beautiful girls with their arms around one another smiling happily at the camera. Beneath

their image was a single line of text in flowing, feminine script proclaiming how its author wished that he was there. “I’d never forgive myself if something happened to her,” he said quietly.

“That’s not something you can put on your shoulders,” his friend told him, “She’s not something you can control like a tactical plan. She’s a person who has to be allowed to make her own choices and mistakes. You can be there for her,” Gear assured him, “If she’s in trouble, I’ll have you set up with transportation before you’re even out the door, but you need to let her live her own life. Doing anything less is an insult to who you know she is, not a benefit.”

For some time, neither man spoke a word. While Gear looked down at his tormented friend, Ashe stared at the photograph on the computer screen. Finally, the dark vigilante sighed and leaned back in his chair. “You’re right. Interfering like that would only tarnish her spirit instead of letting it grow. However-”

Working his fingers over the keyboard, the map screen winked out and was replaced with a multitude of tactical infiltration and battle plans detailing how certain supervillain groups could be effectively eliminated. “That doesn’t mean precautions can’t be taken.”

Looking over the information on the screens, Gear nodded approvingly at what Ashe was proposing. “You’re going to send this to the Brooklyn Sentinels, Shielders, and STAR League?”

“They have proven records, and were able to effectively implement the tactical plans I sent them in the past.”

Gear noted something in his friend’s voice. It was subtle, but he could tell there was more going on. “But you still don’t trust them,” he reasoned.

“They aren’t me,” Ashe both confirmed and clarified, “But unless I intend on leaving the city, and several open cases needing immediate attention, I don’t have any choice.” Attaching the strategies in a heavily encrypted email, he sent it to the respective super hero teams.

“They’ll be fine Ashe,” Gear assured him, “You said yourself they’re strong and capable girls.”

Bringing up the map detailing the current position of the R/V, he rested his elbows on the desk and folded his hands before his mouth. “It’s not their capability I’m worried about.”

Iroquois Travel Plaza, New York

“Oh come on!” Angela cried in disbelief.

“What?” Aiden asked.

“That,” the blonde waved at the television where a group of intrepid young high schoolers were working feverishly to try and crash a company supercomputer. “Do they really think a bunch of laptops working off a 28.8 bps modem can really take down a corporate-sized computer system so openly? The only way any of those viruses would even work is if someone actually opened the virus file within the system and I highly doubt anyone would be that stupid with their resident computer expert at the keyboard.”

“This was back in the nineties Angel,” I pointed out, using my pet name for her.

Shooting me a look of superiority, my lover huffed. “It still doesn’t excuse such gross overreaching when it comes to hacking. I mean, what the fuck is that guy wearing on his head? What is that supposed to be, some kind of Hollywood VR rig? It looks like someone started making a wearable magnifier and just said, ‘Ah, fuck it,’ halfway through.”

“I knew watching *Hackers* was a bad idea,” I said, giving Aiden an I-told-you-so look.

“It was her turn to pick out the movie,” Aiden said with a helpless shrug. “I still can’t believe you’ve never seen it before Angie,” she said, having adopted the more friend-based nickname I’d given Angela a while ago, “It’s your wheelhouse after all.”

“I got warned off of it by some hacker friends back when it came out,” she explained, snatching her can of Coke off the dining table and taking a swallow, “Now I see why.”

“Is she still critiquing?” I heard, turning to see Ashley coming out of the bathroom.

“Uh huh,” I said.

“We tried to warn her,” the redhead sighed as she flopped down next to Aiden on the L-shaped bench.

Suddenly inspired, I couldn’t stop the grin from forming even as Ashley’s eyes grew wide when she realized her tragic mistake. “I warned you,” I cried in what I attempted to make a lower, gravellier voice and just ended up purring sexily.

“Oh God what have I done,” Ashley moaned.

“I warned you but did you listen to me oooooh noooo. Nooo. Nooo it’s just a harmless little bunny in’t it? Well it’s always the same,” I bemoaned, attempted to affect a British accent, “I always tell them but do they listen to me ooh nooo.”

“Shut up!” All three of them cried before we all burst into howling laughter.

“I should have expected that,” Aiden said when she finally was able to reduce herself to giggling.

Only after she spoke was it her turn for her eyes to go wide at the second mistake made by my friends. This time however, instead of only myself speaking, all of us crowed, “No one expects that Spanish Inquisition!” before bursting into fresh laughter.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Angela told me as she gave my bare thigh a squeeze.

No, I wasn’t naked you perverts. I was just wearing some very short, tight jean shorts that left nearly never inch of my legs exposed. Yes, it was a departure for me not to be wearing a dress or a skirt, but I had decided after our run that morning that I would make a concerted effort to stem the overly sexual posturing I was so prone to do. While it might not seem like much of a difference to anyone who didn’t know me, given that the shorts were so tiny Daisy Duke might have thought twice about wearing them, for me it was a significant change in behavior. The primary reason for that is it essentially put a barrier between my legs that was far more sturdy than a silk thong. For someone whose brain was pretty much hard-wired for sex, that was almost the same as putting on a chastity belt, and no I wasn’t going anywhere near that concept.

“They say laughter is the best medicine,” I told her, looking to Ashley who confirmed this with a nod of approval. “And I think I’ll take the next shift behind the wheel.”

“You sure about that?” Angela asked with concern.

“I don’t mind driving some more,” Ashley offered quickly.

“Guys,” I said, waving their words away, “I’m okay, really. I’m not going to let you keep doing the work while I lounge back here like the queen of Sheba, it’s unfair.”

“We don’t mind driving,” Angela told me.

That might have been true, but I’d seen how all of that driving yesterday had really taken its toll on Ashley. By the time we’d gotten to the R/V park she’d been utterly exhausted and only wanted to just cuddle up against Aiden. She’d even been too tired to cook, which was really telling considering how much she enjoyed it. There was no way I was going to let my friend go through that again because of me.

“No, really, I’m good,” I assured them, “And I need to do it, for myself if nothing else. I can’t just let this...thing in my head beat me and the best way to start fighting back is to just do something normal.”

“All right,” Aiden agreed hesitantly, “But the second you start feeling off you pull over and either Ashley or Angela will take over, clear?”

“Yes Ma’am,” I said, snapping a sharp salute.

“Asshole,” my friend muttered with a smile.

Responding only with a saucy wink, I headed up to the driver’s area and dropped in behind the wheel. I’d just started the engine when someone slipped into the passenger seat. I’d fully expected it to be Angela, so I was rather surprised to turn and see Aiden clicking her seatbelt into place. “Ashley wanted to give Angie some cooking pointers for when she gets back home so she doesn’t starve to death.”

“Good idea,” I said as I piloted the R/V out of the parking lot and onto the highway, “Since I was usually the one doing the cooking. She’d end up gorging on junk food and energy drinks and I’d come home to a blimp for winter break.”

“Something tells me Ashley’s mom will make sure that won’t happen,” she said, glancing towards the back where Ashley was teaching Angela the finer points of ingredient measurements. “She promised she’d make sure Angie didn’t stick her head in her computer and forget to take it out. My guess, she’ll be eating at Ashley’s place more than yours most of the time.”

“Actually,” I said as I remembered our conversation from several days ago, “I forgot, Angie’s going to be leaving pretty soon after she flies back. She’s got a job to keep her busy while I’m gone.”

“Oh?” Aiden asked with interest, “What kind of a job?”

“Apparently a Wisecrack kind,” I said, deliberately using Angela’s hacker handle.

“Ah,” the girl said with a knowing nod, “Probably best not to ask then huh? Plausible deniability and all that?”

“Probably,” I confirmed, though I wasn’t worried about Angela doing something illegal and being arrested. Okay, so she was probably going to be doing something illegal, but she wouldn’t get caught.

For the next twenty minutes, the two of us chatted about inconsequential stuff: my opinion on how Aiden was doing with her fashion sense (getting better), what kind of classes we wanted to take when we got to school (applied sciences for me and metalwork for Aiden), and various other “safe” topics. It wasn’t until we’d finally exhausted our limited repertoire of neutral issues that she finally brought up something I’m sure she’d been dying to talk about.

“You know, I think I understand what you’re going through a little.”

“Oh?” I asked carefully, keeping my gaze firmly on the highway.

“Not completely,” she clarified, “I’m not going to insult you by doing that stupid thing people do and say ‘I know how you feel’ when they don’t have clue one about it. It’s just...” She squirmed a little in her seat, though whether it was from discomfort or something else I couldn’t be quite sure of. “After what Libidine did to me-” Dammit, why did the very mention of that bitch’s name still send erotic thrills down my spine and molten heat pooling between my legs? “-the way I lost control of myself, I think I understand a little bit about what you go through every day. I mean, you’re not out of control sex crazy,” she assured me, “But I think the impulse might be similar, just nowhere near as intense.”

“I can’t say if you’re right or wrong,” I allowed, working very hard to keep my voice even and conversational instead of flat out telling Aiden to shut the fuck up because I didn’t want to talk about this, “But I suppose it’s a lot like being constantly on a low simmer. It’s almost like my brain processes everything through a sexual filter before it reaches the intellectual part. Kind of like how almost anything anyone says can be taken as a euphemism or innuendo for sex, only without the humor.”

“So, that whole joke about someone saying something like ‘it’s so big’ when looking at a bratwurst and someone else immediately saying ‘that’s what she said’.”

“Except for me it isn’t a joke,” I kind of agreed, “If someone had said the first part to me, my immediate thought would be ‘I bet that thing would fill me up great’.”

The hot blush that colored Aiden’s cheeks immediately had me regretting this particular topic of conversation. True, I wasn’t the one who had started it, but I could have shut it down immediately by saying I didn’t want to talk about it. I’m sure many girlfriends discussed sex with each other, probably often in great detail, but I doubted many of them did it with an almost literal sex fiend. “Sorry,” I mumbled, “TMI I guess.”

“A little,” she admitted, “But it’s why I asked. Knowing you have this mental conditioning, I really want to try and understand it better.”

“Kind of like how you’ve explained how your wolf affects you?” I asked, finally understanding why she’d started talking about this.

“Exactly,” she smiled, “I mean, I don’t want to piss you guys off when I accidentally slip into my wolf mindset and call someone a bitch when I’m not using it as an insult.”

Nodding, I cast her a smile of appreciation briefly before returning my attention back to the road. “I get that, and I’m glad that you want to understand it better instead of just writing me off as some kind of sex freak.”

When I felt her hand gently pat my knee, I had to immediately fight back the automatic urge to take the gesture as one of sexual advance instead of the touch of friendship I knew it was. “Kit, you’re our friend. We’ve all been through a lot in the last couple of days. Hell, we’ve gone through a lot in the last couple of months. You should know by now that we wouldn’t just put you in a box because of just one part of you. Now,” she said, rapidly changing topics on me, “Let’s talk about those energy knives of yours.”

Blinking at the sudden shift, I looked over at her in surprise before remembering I was driving and quickly brought my focus back to that particular task. “What about them?”

“Well, duh, they’ve changed. Why do you think that is?”

I sighed and knew there was no point in trying to play dumb on this one. When I'd first met Aiden and Ashley, I'd demonstrated the energy blades I was able to manifest through my mutant power. At the time, they were simple, plain, double-edged knives composed of a blue/white energy that were at a level of heat I hadn't even been able to quantify without proper testing equipment. Ever since Libidine had tainted me with her otherworldly lust and set my recovery of my sex slave mental programming back to zero, it seemed that her influence had affected more than my libido.

Now, every time I manifested my blades, they were no longer simple and...pure is the best word to describe them. Instead, they were wickedly shaped, almost like spearheads or enlarged arrowheads you would see in fantasy comics or movies. They also no longer glowed blue/white, but instead were a fiery red and orange and seemed to actually be engulfed in tightly controlled flames. Since I hadn't been able to gauge the strength of their thermal quality before, I had no idea if the change was simply aesthetic in nature or if they had actually grown in strength.

"My first blush reaction," I said after considering it with the analytical, scientific part of my mind, "Is that it's a direct result of Libidine's influence. If my power is influenced by my mental state in any way, then logically it would make sense that the physical manifestation could change along with any core changes to my mental state or self-image."

"All right," Aiden nodded as she considered my evaluation, "So if we were to go with that line of thinking, do you think maybe it would be possible for you change your blades to look like whatever you want? Could you maybe form a karambit-style knife or maybe a kukri? What about creating an actual sword?"

"You're assuming that I have some kind of direct influence over it," I told her, "But I think my power works with my subconscious mind rather than my conscious one. Before we all met, when Angela and I were still on the road, I had a little time to experiment with my power and one of the things I tried to do was change the shape of my knife. I tried using sheer will, mental commands, even deliberately evoking different emotions like sadness and anger. Every time, my energy blades manifested the same way, until Libidine."

“So,” Aiden said quietly, “You’re saying that what was done to your mind is far more powerful than what that crazy doctor and your fake father did to you.”

“Exactly,” I said, unable to keep a tremor of anger from my voice. “What she did changed me on a very basic mental level that goes well beyond simple brainwashing or mental conditioning. I think she changed the very structure of my brain’s neural pathways in a way that it’s completely natural. That’s why Ashley wasn’t able to heal it back in Chicago.”

Aiden nodded, remembering like I did how when we’d first gotten to Ashe’s safe house she tried to reverse what the demoness had done to me with her ability to heal just like she’d done before. Unfortunately, when tried this time, she had discovered that her power didn’t sense any aberrations in my brain structure and thus there was nothing for her to heal. It was almost as though I had come out of the womb hard-wired for sex.

“Maybe it’s because it was done with magic,” she suggested, “Because her power didn’t operate on a more physical principle it’s harder to detect.”

“Possibly,” I allowed, “And it’s also possible that someone from Tearmann might possess enough skill in magic to try and figure out what was done and maybe even reverse it.”

“Huh,” Aiden said, “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“I did.”

Her mouth quirked up at the corner so she was smirking at me. “Taking lessons from Ashe are we?”

I shrugged as though I didn’t care, but comparing me favorably towards arguably the greatest tactical mind in the world was far from insulting. “From a scientific standpoint it makes sense,” I told her, “We’re going to a school specifically for teaching mutants and people of magic how to use their abilities. Logically, they would have people on staff well versed in magical afflictions that are capable of determining their effects and how to reverse them.”

I was about to say more when I realized something. During our entire conversation about this particular topic, not once had I had a sexual thought or

inclination. I was so wholly focused on the science and logic of the topic that all carnal influences had utterly silent within my mind. When I looked over at Aiden to voice this realization I saw her smiling proudly. “You did that on purpose,” I accused without heat.

“It worked didn’t it?” she grinned.

Reaching over, I took Aiden’s hand and gave it a firm squeeze, happy that the gesture of friendship did have the slightest sexual feeling behind it. “Thank you,” I whispered.

“Anytime.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Ashley said, suddenly appearing on the small bench behind us in the living area and leaning over the seats with a smile.

“Just trying to figure out why Kitty’s blades are manifesting differently now,” Aiden said, giving me a knowing look.

“Oh, I have a theory about that,” she said excitedly.

It didn’t matter that her idea was nearly exactly the same as I’d had, it sparked off a whole new batch of conversations that had us talking, laughing, yelling, and bonding even closer as friends in a way that didn’t have my mind derailing to the bedroom even once.

While that might not have been a big deal for most people, for me it was definitely a checkmark in the ‘win’ column.

Undocumented Island, Between Nova Scotia and Newfoundland

“Where’re we at?”

Jonathan Swift looked up from the laptop he was working on to see the large and rather portly man saunter into his office. At least, it would have been an office if it hadn’t been a shack constructed out of corrugated sheet metal and only had enough space for a beaten up table, the chair he currently occupied, and a length of cable running out to the solar panel that powered his computer. He was lucky to have that much, and it had really taken a lot of effort to get his leader to buy the solar panel. Howard Shepard really didn’t care much for technology beyond that contained on his boats and he never really seemed to grasp the need to keep up with the times.

“We’re up to three boats with the latest acquisition-”

“I’ve told ya before,” Howard snapped, cutting the man off, “Enough with the fancy talk.”

Sighing, and not for the first time questioning just why he got involved with Howard and his group of miscreants. Then again, economic-based jobs were a bit difficult to come by these days in this area and those student loans were a real bitch. “Okay then, we’ve got three boats, twenty men, three rifles, and two pistols.”

“I think that should be enough b’y,” the rather rotund man announced more to himself than anyone else.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Jonathan asked. He’d posed the question to the man before, wondering if this was really the best way to make the statement he was trying to put out to the world.

“Why you keep askin’ me that?” Howard drawled, “We’re paying ye good aren’t we?”

Frowning, the young number cruncher sat back and folded his arms. “You haven’t paid me a dime.”

“Well I will,” the portly man said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“When?” Jonathan demanded.

“Soon as we get this done,” came the rather vague reply. “I’d say we should be ready in a couple days and then ye’ll git paid b’y.”

Shaking his head as the man departed the ramshackle building, the economics major from Halifax once again questioned his own sanity in getting involved with a bunch of redneck fishermen from Newfoundland.

Leaving the tin shed behind him, Howard Shepard strolled the grounds of what he considered one of his greatest accomplishments. A ten year veteran of the Canadian Naval Forces and a twenty-five year veteran of the fishing industry, Howard was used to being in command. Whether it was a crew of military seamen or a fisherman’s deckhands, Howard knew what he wanted and he expected full compliance with whatever order he gave. It was what made him such a good captain and how he always kept his boat full of fish year after year.

At least, it used to. The last couple of years had been difficult. With the province’s focus being primarily on their energy production efforts, the fisheries had been left behind and with it the fishermen that had been the life’s blood of Newfoundland for generations. Every year, the limitations on fishing seasons and catch yields had grown smaller and smaller until the various fleets of boats were barely making a profit anymore. There had been the usual government excuses that they were doing it for the good of the planet and that fishermen needed to adapt to new, renewable resource-based equipment, but it was all bullshit. Howard had been out on one of those boats that had been outfitted with some newfangled biodiesel engine and the progress that they’d made in a week he could have done in a day on his trusty traditional diesel boat. The electric ones were no better, according to some of the other captains he often shared a beer with. It was damn unfair that those captaining those weak pieces of shit should be exempt from the season and catch limitations just because they were less effective at doing the job.

Swaggering his way to the general gathering area where a nice, crackling fire cast a warm glow throughout the camp, Howard looked over his ‘army’ with pride. It hadn’t taken much to convince his own crew to go along with this little ‘protest action’ he’d cooked up, and little more effort to encourage two of his fellow captains to add themselves, their crew, and their gear to the cause. Of course, it didn’t take much these days to get people riled up when it came to the

government. Everyone knew they were a bunch of pansies and the media just fed everyone a bunch of lies with that nonsense of the ‘highest approval rating in decades’ shit. After all, the comment sections on Facebook were full of people who had the same opinion as him, so he must be right.

Howard knew a big, public display would be just what was needed to show the world just how badly the fishermen of the province were being treated, and what better way than to go after the one seafaring government business that Newfoundland depended on when it came to goods and tourism: Marine Atlantic.

It was a gamble, using only twenty men to try and take one of those monstrous ferries, but Howard had done his homework. Ten rides back and forth between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia had gotten him a pretty good understanding of the layout of the boats, how the crew operated, and the types of people that made up the passengers. There’d probably be a few hard-core truck drivers to deal with, but mostly it was just elderly people and families who would turn into crying babies the second they saw one of the rifles or pistols waved at them. After that, it would be an easy matter of taking over the bridge and making the call to the government demanding the fishermen get their rights back. Easy.

Walking over to join his men in a beer, he smiled and clinked bottles with them while knowing that in a couple of days they would all get exactly what they were due.

Tuxbury Pond RV Resort, New Hampshire

“So how are you holding up?”

Ashley looked up from the medical journal she'd been perusing on her computer while relaxing on the jump bench behind the driver's compartment to blink questioningly at Angela lounging in the living area. "What do you mean?"

"Come on Ashley," the blonde hacker said knowingly as she sat up, "You went through that nightmare too back in Iowa. Yeah you didn't get hit with it nearly as bad as Aiden and Kitty, but with...everything you've been dealing with..." she said, tripping over her tongue in an effort to be delicate.

"You mean my PTSD," Ashley said plainly and offered her a gentle smile. "It's okay, you can say it."

"All right," Angela said with a sigh, "With your PTSD and everything, it must have been at least as bad for you as it was for them."

Closing her laptop and setting it aside, Ashley nodded and folded her hands in her lap. "It was terrifying," she admitted, "I thought for sure all of my worst nightmares were about to come true and that what Doctor Taylor almost did to me would actually happen."

"But it didn't," the other girl nudged.

Shaking her head, the redhead couldn't quite keep the haunted look out of her lovely eyes. "It didn't, but in this case close most definitely counts. I was in full panic-attack mode, only I couldn't run because I was chained to a wall." She shivered at the memory as her arms wrapped about herself in the ancient gesture of self-comfort. "I felt like a trapped animal, ready to chew off my own arm to try and escape."

"But you held it together," Angela noted, "Aiden told me how you really took charge and made it possible for you two to find Kitty when that demon bitch was working her confusion mojo."

The young girl worried her lip gently with her perfect white teeth for a moment before replying. "It was because of Milton," she said softly.

"The mentally handicapped guy?" Angela asked with surprise.

Nodding, Ashley lifted her gaze to meet her friend's and this time she didn't bother trying to hide the horror in her eyes that she'd experienced at the hands of Libidine. "He might have been under her influence before, but he showed me such kindness and gentleness. He protected me when Aiden or Kitty wasn't there and it was because of that I think I was able to just barely keep it together. I still wanted to run as fast as I could screaming at the top of my lungs, but somehow knowing he was there to keep me safe made it possible to actually think straight. After that," she shrugged, "I was so focused on getting us to Kitty I didn't really have time to be scared anymore."

"It sounds like you're making progress," the hacker observed. "From what Kitty's told me, and I don't mean to insult you or anything, but you would have probably curled up in a ball and gone catatonic if this happened a few weeks ago."

The lovely mutant offered a wane smile at the completely truthful statement. "Probably," she admitted, "Maybe it does mean I'm getting better. No," she said with a shake of her head, "That's not right. PTSD never goes away, so I'll never 'get better', but I guess I am beginning to cope with it. Maybe one day I'll be able to get to the point where it's just kind of background noise that I can ignore."

"Not to take anything away from you," Angela said, moving through the living area of the R/V to sit down beside Ashley, "But you and Kitty are kind of going through the same thing. Obviously it's a lot different in many respects, but you're both coping with serious mental trauma that you're always fighting against."

"I know," she said, "I've made the same parallel myself. The biggest difference is that my PTSD isn't always 'on' if I'm not in any perceived danger. I'm not looking at every shadow thinking the boogeyman is going to leap out or always thinking there's a rapist under my bed. With Kitty, it's actually closer to a drug addiction than a trauma. She's always fighting against those urges and bless her she fights so damn hard."

"I have to admit," Angela said with a cheeky grin, endeavoring to lighten the mood, "They do come in kind of handy for sexy time at night."

Laughing, Ashley shook her head in amazement. “You know, I don’t think any health class could have taught me more about sex than you guys. I’ve gotten quite an education these last few weeks.”

“Just think of it as lessons for when you finally meet that special someone and can blow his or her mind.” For a moment, Ashley just sat there with her lips slightly pursed before she burst out laughing hard enough tears formed in her eyes. “What?” Angela asked, the other girl’s laughter so infectious she couldn’t keep it out of her own voice.

“Now I know I’ve spent too much time around Kitty. The first place my brain went to was a different kind of ‘blowing’,” Ashley guffawed.

When Aiden and Kitty re-entered the R/V with their collective dinner a few moments later, they found the pair holding onto one another for support as they howled with laughter. “What’s so funny?” Aiden asked, unable to keep the smile off her face.

“Oh,” Angela said, wiping a tear from her eye, “Just discussing the finer points of a good...umm...education.”

The uncontrollable snickers that came from Ashley when the blonde said that had Kitty lifting a suspicious eyebrow. “Oh really.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Ashley hummed between bursts of barely contained laughter.

Looking from one to the other, the brunette’s eyes widened with delightful realization when she caught the hot flush of pink in the girls’ cheeks. “Ohhhhh,” she intoned knowingly, “Well, in that case you really should come to the expert, though Angie is certainly no slouch either.”

“Thank you dear,” Angela said with a grin and a slight bow.

“Okay,” Aiden huffed, “Will someone please tell me what the hell you guys are talking about?”

Patting her arm with the kind of compassion one would have for a dim-witted child who simply didn't understand adult humor, Kitty smiled pityingly at her. "Maybe when you're older sweetheart."

"Hey!" the wolf girl cried, "I'm less than a year younger than you guys for fuck's sake. You know what, never mind," she grumped, stalking over to the dining area and setting the sacks of Chinese on the table in a huff.

Stepping up behind her, Ashley slipped her arms around the taller girl's waist and hugged her closely from behind, resting her cheek on her shoulder. "We're just teasing Aiden," she whispered fondly in her ear, "We were talking about sex."

Though the blush was quick and hot on the sable-haired beauty's cheeks, it disappeared just as quickly. "And, what, you're afraid of hurting my oh so delicate ears?" she snarked, reaching back and giving Ashley's thigh a quick pinch that had the smaller girl squealing in surprise and leaping away. "I'm not some innocent babe in the woods you know. I believe you still retain that particular distinction," she said with a wolfish grin aimed squarely at her redheaded friend.

Pressing a hand to her heart, Ashley swooned and collapsed onto the living area sofa with a moan of despair. "Oh woe is me, I'm forever going to be known as a delicate little flower."

Dropping down next to her, Kitty slipped an arm around her shoulders and gave them a companionly squeeze. "And don't you ever change," she said only half-jokingly before looking over at Aiden, "You too wolf girl."

"Perish the thought," Aiden said with a wave of her hand, joining her friends on the couch where Ashley automatically snuggled in against her side.

"Listen guys," Angela said, taking the last open spot next to Kitty on the couch, "Tomorrow we'll probably cross the border into Canada just after lunch. Now Ashley and Aiden, you shouldn't have any problems because your passports were applied for and obtained legally. Kitty and I, however, are a different story. I have no doubt ours will hold up since I created some really thorough backgrounds for us, but on the off chance that something does happen don't freak out or

anything. All three of you have your admittance letters from Tearmann so those are just as good as passports and I can always work the data on the fly if need be.”

“But if that happens,” Ashley said with a note of worry in her voice, “They probably won’t let you anywhere near a computer while they check on your identities.”

“A computer, no,” she admitted before reaching into her laptop bag and pulled out her cell phone, “But I’ll still have this.”

“You can hack into the United States Passport database on a cellphone?” Aiden asked in disbelief.

“It’ll be a pain in the ass,” Angela acknowledged, “But I can do it. So, basically, don’t sweat it.”

“Maybe I should call Ashe,” Ashley suggested, “I’m sure he would be able to clear the way for us.”

“Ashley,” Aiden said quietly while gently stroking her hair, “You can’t run to Ashe for every little thing, you know. The whole reason we’re going to this school is so we can stand on our own and not depend on someone else.”

Sighing, the girl nodded. “I guess you’re right. I kind of have been leaning on him pretty hard lately huh?”

“It’s okay to have someone you can depend on if you really need them,” Kitty pointed out, “But you’re actually done pretty good on your own so far. You didn’t need him to deal with that guy back in Wolf Springs, you didn’t need him when we dealt with Libidine, and I’m pretty sure you don’t need him to deal with mine and Angie’s passport issue.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” the crimson-haired beauty admitted before lapsing into silence while their dinner was divvied up amongst them. While more banal chatter dominated the feast, Ashley couldn’t stop thinking about how her default whenever there was trouble was to call Ashe. Her friends were absolutely correct when they said she’d been doing pretty well with just her wits and physicality, non-violent as it was. So why was she still so ready to make that phone call to him at a moment’s notice?

It would have been easy to just brush it off as him being probably one of the most lethal individuals in the world, not to mention the greatest tactician. Who wouldn't think to take advantage of their close friendship? But then, Ashley didn't want to take advantage of him. From the moment they'd met in San Francisco, Ashe had been her protector, her provider, and her confidant even if he wasn't physically around very often. There was no question he would drop everything and come if she called, which is precisely why she didn't want to do that. What Ashe had done for her was give her the chance to live her own life as she saw fit and it would be cruel to not only squander that, but to constantly use him as a crutch when things got a little tough. So then, why was she always so ready to call him? It was between bites of sweet and sour shrimp that the realization struck her like a lightning bolt. Ashe was so many things to her. He was her protector, her provider, and while he didn't think of himself as such, he was most certainly her hero.

Only one kind of man was all of those things to a young girl.

Corner Brook, Newfoundland

Chad always loved coming to Canadian Tire. Sure, a lot of people liked to nickname it 'Crappy Tire', but those same people also liked to make fun of Walmart too and they still shopped at both places a lot. Of course, given the fact that they were the only two major retailers of their types in the small city, there weren't exactly a lot of choices. Still, Chad enjoyed going there. He could easily spend an hour or more just wandering around looking at the various wares for sale. There was that new modular drill set with interchangeable heads that he'd like to

get, along with the half dozen available heads themselves. He could use a new ladder. Oh, there was that new high-impact toolbox that had triple the capacity of his current one. He loved tools, so much so that he'd often go on and on about one particular drill's torque strength, or the RPM capabilities of a table saw. It had ended up getting him the sometimes used nickname Tim Taylor, whoever the hell that was.

Still, as much as he loved to look around, he couldn't actually afford any of the shiny toys that were always calling out to him. And the reason he couldn't afford it, apparently, was because the government had decided to slash the opportunities for revenue for the fishermen while dumping loads of money into their wind farm project. It was stealing, there was no other word for it, and no one seemed to care that the government they elected was happily screwing over its people. Oh yeah, sure, occasionally he saw something on CBC where a fisherman tried to tell the media just how badly the fishing community was hurting because of what was done to them, but they just spun it so they looked like a bunch of dumb hillbillies who didn't have a clue what they were talking about. All that ever came out of that kind of exposure was some government crony saying that he and others of his trade need to get with the times and either find different work or adapt to the changing world. Changing world, pah! Those fucking crooks were too busy lining their pockets with kickbacks from their buddies to give a shit about a bunch of fisherman going down the tubes into poverty. Did any of them even go out with the fishermen when they told the fishermen they had to use those new biodiesel engines in their boats?

No, of course not. But Captain Shepard did, and he told him and the rest of the crew just what a pile of shit it was. They fished circles around those boats that had the newfangled engines installed and if they'd followed suit they'd probably still only catch as much as they were taking on-board now, maybe even less. So it was a lose-lose situation and no one from Parliament Hill was going to even try to listen to reason. Why would they? It's not like Captain Shepard could throw millions of dollars into their campaigns or anything to get them on his side. He told Chad and the rest of the crew that he tried to talk to them about it but he couldn't even get passed the Fisheries Minister. And since fishermen were a dwindling part of the population, their voices didn't carry nearly as much weight anymore.

That was why Chad had been proud to be standing on deck with Howard Shepard when the captain announced that he would be heading up the cause to get the fishermen their livelihoods back. He hadn't really even listened to the Captain warning everyone that it might mean doing things that didn't exactly sit right with the law. This was Newfoundland. They did their own thing for the most part anyways and it usually wasn't exactly legal.

This was why Chad had readily volunteered to go on this little errand for Captain Shepard. It was a small thing to do, but the Captain had told him it was a crucial part of the operation that they'd be doing in a couple of days. With the venture they would be undertaking, speed would be just as important as strength. Chad didn't quite get what he meant, but if the Captain knew what he was talking about so he was more than happy to do whatever was needed to help.

Considering that the three packs of one hundred count cable ties only ended up costing him thirty bucks, it wasn't like it was a hardship to give up a little of his money for the cause when his Captain had given up so much more. He could have gone cheaper, but after having it explained to him just what they were for, Chad figured it was probably best getting the strongest kind they had.

After he'd paid for the cable ties without the cashier even looking at him funny, he made his way out to the parking lot with a happy bounce in his step and a vision in his eyes of Captain Shepard smiling proudly at him for a job well done.

One Hundred Kilometers North of Burgeo, Newfoundland

There was little movement about, save for a faint rustling of the leaves by the wind that was currently traveling northward. That was good, because he had positioned himself upwind and that would prevent his scent from carrying to his target. A quick scan of his binoculars revealed no other movement within the wide open craggy area before him so he took a few moments to relax his previously motionless prone position high on one of the sizable hills in the area. Carefully sitting up, the sixty-year-old carefully worked out the cramps that had been stabbing into the muscles of his arms and his legs with such intensity it had taken every bit of discipline he'd possessed not to utter a sound of pain and give his position away. That in itself was a sign of just how far he'd deteriorated in the last twenty years.

Not that you'd ever hear a word of complaint from Eric Howlett. Twenty years in the Canadian Armed Forces, fifteen of which had been spent with the 3/41 Highlander Division, had instilled discipline and intensity that was one of the core reasons why he'd been recognized as the best sniper in the world. There had been a time when laying prone beneath a ghillie suit for hours or even days on end had been nothing to him, just part of the job that he was good at.

Now, twenty years post-discharge, time had finally caught up with him. It wasn't the increasing age or the onset of osteoporosis that was causing him such hardships, those things he could ignore. It was the diagnosis of Huntington's Disease that had finally been an enemy he simply couldn't beat. The systematic deterioration of his nervous system with no known cure was beginning to take from him the one thing that had been a constant in his life: his ability to shoot.

He wasn't to the point where he couldn't hold his rifle without shaking violently, but the disease had progressed enough to the point that he was forced to constantly make use of a small bi-pod attached to the handguard of his rifle. While he'd made good use of mounts in the past, particularly during long sorties, it pained him to be lowered to the point that it was an item he now absolutely required any time he wanted to shoot his rifle and not be grossly off-target. The hardest part was it would only get worse. Depending on how quickly the disease advanced, there would soon come a point where he would be unable to shoot at all, regardless of mechanical assistance.

He vowed he would never live to see that day.

But that wasn't Eric's current focus. No, that distinction was reserved for the rogue bear that was currently threatening the coastal town of Burgeo after a couple of drunken idiots had tried to take it down with a very poorly aimed rifle shot. That mistake had not only served to enrage the bear, causing it to chase down and kill the men, but it was suspected that the non-fatal injury had caused significant brain damage to the animal that was enough to insight a killing frenzy that was making its way towards the town.

Though he didn't live there, the frantic call from an acquaintance from his military days that currently worked for the Fish and Wildlife Department had had him loaded up in his truck and racing the three and a half hours from Corner Brook to the area. Thankfully, this acquaintance had thought to keep an eye on the general whereabouts of the bear so he didn't have to actually hunt for the animal. Instead, he had located an area directly in the flight path of the rogue and proceeded to wait.

That had been a day ago and thus far there was still no sign of the animal. While this wouldn't have bothered him in the past, Eric's current physical condition wouldn't allow him to remain as he was for much longer and he dreaded needing to make the call to Fish and Wildlife telling them of his failure. The whole reason he had been contacted in the first place was because he would be able to put the animal down quickly and safely from a distance so no other lives would be placed in danger with a closer and more dangerous interception. While his determination was still as strong as ever, there was no fighting against the physical weakness that was more and more dictating his actions.

He was just about to reach for the satellite phone he'd been given to call and inform the Department of his lack of success when his still supremely keen vision caught movement on the horizon. Instead of doing what most inexperienced individuals would do and throw themselves to the ground where his rifle sat, Eric slowly relaxed back down into a prone position so as not to lose sight of the location where he'd spied the movement or give away his own location. With his gaze never wavering, he brought the binoculars up to his eyes and did a slow, methodical scan of the area.

His meticulousness was rewarded when he saw the huge, hulking form of the brown bear lumbering oddly across the craggy hillside. Focusing on the bear's head, he quickly confirmed this was his target based upon the severe indentation in the skull that could only have been caused by a badly aimed rifle shot. That combined with the unusually wobbly and jerky movements of the animal was all he needed to know this was, in fact, his target.

Slowly placing his binoculars at his side, he eased himself forward until the butt of his rifle was snugged into the pocket of his shoulder and his cheek rested on the stock. After a quick re-acquiring of the target through his weapon's scope, he checked the improvised wind markers composed of bright red cloth strips he'd set out a day ago. Once he determined the wind speed at fifty, one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, and five hundred meters, he adjusted the windage knob on his scope to compensate for both wind and distance. All through this, he never lost sight of the bear, keeping it centered within his crosshairs.

Given the distance and the fact that a bear was incredibly tough to kill due to thick bone structure and incredibly heavy muscle mass, Eric decided the only way to ensure an instant kill would be to strike in one of the few vulnerable areas the animal possessed. That would require a combination of trigger discipline, timing, and a touch of luck. As such, he waited patiently, lightly sliding the pad of his finger against the trigger, keeping his breathing slow and steady, as the bear continued lumbering alone, scenting the air and looking for anything to kill.

When the opportunity finally presented itself, there was no hesitation or rush to action. He simply pressed back on the trigger smoothly and calmly and allowed the rifle's padded stock to buck backwards into the pocket of his shoulder. The crack of the gunshot echoed through the hills, causing the bear to suddenly start.

Thankfully, before the animal could lift its head to scent the air, Eric watched through his scope as the bear's right eyeball burst in a shower of viscous liquids milliseconds before the back of its head exploded, sending fur, skull, and brain matter showering through the air in a fine, red mist. Unlike in the movies, there was no staggering around dramatically from such a lethal wound. The animal simply collapsed as though whatever invisible strings that had been holding it up had suddenly been cut and ceased to move.

Instead of rising and relieving his aching muscles and bones, Eric continued to watch the body as he slowly drew back the bolt on his rifle to extract the spent casing into his hand while simultaneously loading a fresh round into the chamber and sliding the bolt closed. He remained that way for another full hour, not moving a muscle save for an occasional, slow blink of his eyes, until he was satisfied his target was dead. Only then did he relax with a long, slow sigh.

Retracting the bolt on his rifle, he retrieved the unfired round and returned it to its slot in the small, carbon fiber pouch secured on his belt at his hip before closing the bolt and slowly rising amidst of silent protesting by his tired bones and sore muscles. With meticulous care, he repacked his rifle in its hard case along with his binoculars before rummaging about in his small ruck sack for the satellite phone Fish and Wildlife had loaned him. Within moments he was connected to the Provincial Headquarters in Corner Brook.

“Target eliminated,” he reported, disgusted with himself for being unable to keep the fatigue out of his voice, “I’ll send you the coordinates.”

“Fine work Mr. Howlett,” came the reply from the head agent in charge of the operation whose name Eric couldn’t recall for the life of him, “I realize this must have been an exhausting couple of days for you, but would you be able to stop into our offices tomorrow just after lunch? There is someone here who would like to speak with you.”

While the notion of going home, taking a very long, hot shower, and then sleeping for a good twenty-four hours straight was tempting almost beyond measure, Eric’s curiosity was piqued at the notion that someone wanted to talk to an old, retired sniper who was slowly starting to lose control of his body. “I can be there in about four hours.”

“No, no,” the agent assured him, “This isn’t anything pressing. It can wait until tomorrow and you’ve rested.”

“All right,” Eric said, managing to conceal his relief, “I’ll be there around one.”

“Very good Mr. Howlett, we will see you then.”

After disconnecting from the call and sending the coordinates of the bear carcass via text to a pre-arranged number, the aging sniper gathered up his supplies and weapon and made his way back to where his truck was waiting at a currently unused hunting cabin. Who would want to meet with him, and why? He had no family, immediate or extended, that he was aware of. That was one reason why he was such a good soldier. He could do his job without the worries of coming home to anyone marring his judgement.

It certainly was a mystery, but as he slid behind the wheel of his truck, he reflected on the fact that at this point in his life a little mystery might be just the thing to take his mind off his ailing body and troubled mind.

I95, between Houlton, Maine and The Canadian Land Border

“Okay guys, we’re about twenty minutes away from the border,” Angela announced from behind the wheel.

“Twenty minutes? That’s it?” Ashley cried before she dove for her purse and started rooting around in it.

“What are you freaking out about?” I asked, twisting in the passenger seat so I could look back at her with a frown of confusion.

“I’m looking for my passport,” she said in a voice mixed with both excitement and worry.

“Ashley,” Aiden said in a voice designed to soothe and calm, “Relax. They aren’t expecting you to be standing ready with your passport held out the instant we pull up to the border.”

“I just don’t want to look suspicious by needing to dig for it instead of having it ready,” she explained, talking so rapidly her sentences started to run together, “I mean there are plenty of people who try to sneak across the border on a daily basis and I don’t want the border patrol to think I’m doing something illegal I mean I’m just going into Canada to go to school not to try and blow up their capital or anything.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” Aiden muttered, shaking her head and giving me an exasperated look.

“Ashley, this is Canada we’re talking about, not Afghanistan. They’re not going to flog you for not being perfect.”

“They flog people?” she gasped in horrified shock.

Blinking in confusion, I suddenly realized what was happening. It looked like Aiden had clued into it the same time as me because after breathing a curse she was already moving to Ashley’s side while I unbuckled my seatbelt and scrambled over the back of the seat to get to the living area.

“What the hell is going on?” Angela asked worriedly while Ashley started gasping for breath.

“She’s having a panic attack,” I shot back, diving for the couch to tuck into Ashley’s side while Aiden did the same opposite me. Together, we both wrapped our arms around her tightly and gently rocked the terrified girl. While Aiden whispered calming words into her ear, I gently stroked her hair much as one would do with a frightened child.

“It’s fine Ashley,” Aiden assured her, “Thousands of people cross the border every day and no one gets in trouble unless they’re trying to do something illegal, which we’re not.”

“But what if they *think* we are,” Ashley reasoned irrationally, “What if they think we’re trying to smuggle in drugs or something. I mean, Kitty’s and Angela’s

passports aren't really legal so what if they see something's wrong with them and then start looking at all of us. They'll think we're all doing something illegal and then they'll tell us we can't get into the country or maybe lock us up for fraud. Oh God I don't want to go to jail!"

Looking over the top of Ashley's head, Aiden and I shared a look of deep concern. This was bad. She was freaking out much worse than normal and I was seriously worried she might very well try and dive out of the R/V while it was still moving. "Angie, pull over," I called out, "We need some time here." I saw the back of her head move in a nod before she guided the R/V into the last rest stop before the border crossing.

"Ashley," Aiden told her quietly, "What's going on? Why are you so freaked out about this?"

When she couldn't catch her breath enough to answer, I made a concerted effort to reason the issue out with the analytical part of my mind. Ashley was, for all intents and purposes, quite sheltered. Yes, she'd been through a lot with the death of her parents, the abuse by her foster parents, and the kidnapping and attempted dissection by the MCO agent and medical doctor in San Francisco, but she hadn't had much of a life outside of those events. The time she'd spent in Wolf Springs with her adoptive mother had seen her mostly stay within her own home other than spending time alone on her walks in the surrounding forest. She'd only really started venturing outside what had been established as her comfort zone when she'd met Aiden and I, and most of the time one or both of us was always with her.

This trip into Canada was a huge unknown for her. While Aiden and I weren't exactly worldly, we were both confident in ourselves and our abilities to be able to handle whatever was thrown at us. Ashley, on the other hand, had nothing to protect her other than us, and the prospect of entering into an entirely new country with no real safety net was clearly terrifying for her.

"Ashley," I said in a voice deliberately pitched to sound conversational, "Did you know that Canada is widely considered one of the friendliest places in the world?"

“I-it is?” she stammered through tears that were now trickling down her cheeks.

“Indeed it is. Why do you think so many comedians make jokes about how Canada would never invade the United States because they would immediately apologize for it and say they were just kidding?”

“I’ve never heard that joke,” she said, thankfully in a non-stammering voice.

“Oh sure,” Aiden said, picking up on where I was going with this, “People talk all the time about how if you bump into someone there and it’s entirely you’re fault, they apologize and insist it was their fault instead.”

“I...I didn’t know that.”

“I mean, it’s a joke,” I clarified, “But the principle behind it is that Canada is a very friendly country. That’s probably why Tearmann opened their school there, so they would be operating in a friendly and inclusive environment that fosters togetherness and compassion in others.” Of course, that could very well be a line of bullshit since I didn’t know the actual reason why the school was set up in Newfoundland. For all I knew, it was because they got great tax breaks from the government. Still, if it calmed Ashley down I was willing to offer a little white lie to do it.

“People do always say how nice Canadians are,” Ashley said in a small, child-like voice as she leaned into my stroking of her hair a bit more.

“And there’s likely a very good reason for that,” I told her. “You don’t become nationally known for something if there aren’t facts supporting the idea.”

“So you think the border patrol will be nice to us?” she asked, looking up at me with wide, worried eyes.

“I think they’ll be professional,” I clarified, “But I also think that you’ll be treated by them a *lot* better than the MCO at an airport would treat you.”

“Yeah,” Aiden agreed, “I’ve heard a lot of horror stories about how they treat mutants the way minorities were treated about thirty years ago.”

“But your passports-” she started to argue.

“Were obtained legally,” I assured her. “Yeah, our identities themselves are fabricated, but we applied for our passports themselves the same way everyone else in the country has. When they scan them, it’ll be no different than when they scan yours or Aiden’s.”

Ashley seemed to take all of this in and took several minutes to bring her breathing under control and try to regain her composure. Truly, it was heartbreaking seeing the ethereal beauty that was my friend be gripped by such debilitating fear like this. I could almost compare it to seeing a mythical princess being distraught, along with the overwhelming need to protect her from all the evils of the world.

“Okay,” she finally said with a sniffle and flicked her tears away with her fingers, “I think I’m okay now.”

“We can take a few more minutes,” Aiden told her, to which Ashley shook her head.

“No, I’m good. I guess everything we’re doing and what we’ve been through finally caught up with me all at once and I just couldn’t handle it.”

“Sometimes a good cry can be very therapeutic,” I told her sagely.

“A good cry, yes,” she agreed with a watery smile, “I wouldn’t call the sudden urge to run in the opposite direction therapeutic.”

“But you didn’t run,” Aiden pointed out, “You were scared, sure, but you didn’t run. That’s something.”

“I guess,” the redhead admitted, though she didn’t sound quite convinced.

“It’ll take time,” I told her, “You know better than us that PTSD isn’t something that magically just goes away and it’s rarely rational. But you can adapt and learn to live with it.”

“Kind of like you?” she asked, then immediately winced and looked apologetic, “Sorry, that’s not fair.”

“It’s perfectly fair,” I asserted, running my fingers through the silky thickness of her hair now as a means of centering myself instead of her. “While it’s

not PTSD, what I'm dealing with is just as debilitating and just as overwhelming. Hell, I've spent the last hour worrying that I might try to jump the border officer's bones if he happens to be cute."

"You'd better not," Angie called from the front, giving me a smile and a wink to let me know she was only kidding around.

"Don't worry Angel," I assured her, "This Kitty is all yours."

"Phrasing!" Aiden cried, instantly sending all of us into peals of laughter.

"Seriously guys," Ashley said when we'd finally reduced to giggles, "Thank you so much for being here for me. I really don't think I would be even close to where I am now if it wasn't for you."

The three of us embraced tightly for a few moments before I looked towards the front of the R/V and called out, "Okay Jeeves, take us to the border."

"Very good sir," Angela called back in a really bad British accent.

The next twenty minutes were spent with Aiden and I coming up with whatever idle chit chat we could to keep Ashley's mind off the fact that the border was getting closer and closer. Fortunately, it seemed like she'd gotten over her panic attack pretty well because with each passing moment she was becoming more and more like the girl we knew and loved.

By the time the sight of the U.S/Canadian Border station came into view in the distance, we were once again talking and laughing as though Ashley's panic attack had never even occurred. She even raced over to the jump bench behind the driver's section to watch the multi-lane exchange grow larger and larger with a child-like fascination. By the time we reached the toll-booth like officer's station for our lane, I was surprised her face wasn't splitting in two because of her grin.

"Hello," the Border Agent greeted us cheerfully in that distinct Canadian accent.

"Hi," Angie replied brightly.

"How many of you are aboard today?" He asked, leaning out slightly in an effort to see better into the back.

“Four,” she replied, offering her passport to him.

“See,” Ashley whispered to me, “She had hers all ready to go.”

I lightly slapped her on the shoulder while the agent placed Angela’s passport on a scanner and made a note on his computer. “If you wouldn’t mind, would you pull over there into secondary processing,” he said amiably while pointing to a covered parking area.

Frowning, Angela looked from the area back to the agent. “Is something wrong?”

Still maintaining that pleasant smile, the agent merely shook his head. “Nothing serious, we just need to do a quick inspection of your vehicle.”

“Okay,” Angela drawled, and while she might have seemed agreeable on the outside, I caught that subtle undertone that was distinctly suspicious.

“What’s going on?” Aiden asked in equal suspicion as Angela maneuvered the R/V to the parking area.

“Not sure,” Angela said carefully. “I’m pretty sure it has nothing to do with my passport. The guy didn’t show any kind of surprise or suspicion. My guess is because we’re in an R/V they probably want to make sure we’re not smuggling drugs or something. They’ll probably just do a quick check on our passports, maybe run the dog around, and tell us to have a good day.”

The sudden, tight grip on my hand had me looking back into Ashley’s wide, worried eyes. “It’s okay,” I assured her gently, giving her hand a comforting squeeze, “We’re not smuggling drugs or guns or anything. Everything’s fine.”

Despite my confident words, I was actually a bit concerned. Had we just passed right on through the checkpoint, there would have been no problem whatsoever. However, because we had been asked to go through a secondary inspection, it was obvious that Ashley’s PTSD was trying to rear its head once more and bring about another panic attack. While it certainly wouldn’t prevent us from entering the country if that happened, particularly if we explained the situation to the border patrol, I had no doubt it would affect Ashley. She would probably feel embarrassed and humiliated by the experience and while it wouldn’t

be the end of the world, I didn't want her to have to go through that for something that was out of her control.

"Just stay with Aiden," I told her with a confident smile, "And be your usual wonderful self. We'll be back on the road in no time."

Though she nodded her understanding, I could tell that she was still very worried. This was evidenced by the way she pressed up against Aiden's side and snuggled into her when the dark-haired girl put an arm around her shoulders.

The sudden, light knock on the entry door precipitated its opening to reveal a rather handsome Border Patrol Agent. He was easily six feet tall and his uniform fit him quite nicely. I had no doubt that he had some well-developed muscles under those clothes that he knew exactly how to use to make a girl just moan and squirm while he-

Down girl! I chided myself. This was exactly what I was afraid of. Even though I'd kind of made a joke about it, I really was worried my heightened sex drive would have me drooling should the Border Agent be attractive. Now here I was doing almost exactly that, minus the drooling part. At least I was able to keep a grip on that particular reaction. However, I still couldn't keep a flurry of delicious sexual fantasies from stampeding through my brain, every one of which had this hunk of a man making me scream with orgasmic delight.

"Good afternoon," The agent, who according to the name strip on his uniform identified him as Wells, said pleasantly. The sound of his rather manly voice causing a delighted thrill to shoot down my spine and heat to pool low in my belly. "Would you mind stepping out with your passports please."

While I retrieved mine from my purse and Aiden got hers from her bag, Ashley shakily offered hers out to Agent Wells with a look of petrified fear in her eyes that had me mentally groaning.

Chuckling lightly, the agent shook his head and gestured for us to exit the vehicle. "It's all right miss, you can give your passport to that agent over there."

"O-okay," she said in a trembling voice as she slowly descended the R/V steps and looked to all the world like she was walking to her own execution.

“Is this your first visit to Canada?” he asked brightly. When she nodded jerkily he smiled disarmingly. “Well this shouldn’t take very long and we’ll have you on your way.”

A thought occurred to me as I started towards the door myself that there might be a way to be both cooperative and to alleviate Ashley’s fears at the same time. “Pardon me sir,” I said, trying *very* hard to keep the seductive purr out of my voice and not entirely sure how successful I was, “But how come you have to inspect our vehicle.”

“Well,” he said conversationally as Aiden followed behind me before moving to Ashley’s side where the smaller girl pressed against her side, “Recreational vehicles can often be used in smuggling drugs and we just want to make sure that’s not the case here. You don’t have anything illegal on board do you?”

“No sir,” Angela said directly as Ashley, Aiden, and I handed our passports over to another equally handsome border agent, “We’re just heading to Tearmann.”

“Tearmann?” the second agent, identified as Clay by his uniform, asked with a raised eyebrow as Wells stepped into the R/V, “Really?”

“Yes sir,” Aiden replied.

“So all of you are mutants?”

“They are,” Angela qualified, “I’m just along to give them a hand with the driving.”

Glancing down at one of our passports, mine actually, Agent Clay nodded. “You drove all the way from Wyoming? That’s quite a trip.”

“It was my idea,” Ashley blurted out before she realized how that sounded and her mouth closed with a snap.

“Oh?” the agent asked, the look in his eyes beginning to shift towards suspicious.

I was fully ready to leap in and explain things, as were Aiden and Angela by the way they were starting to open their mouths, but Ashley had already started and

it looked like she wasn't about to stop. "I thought it would be nice to have a little road trip adventure before we started school because I was pretty scared about leaving home and I thought it would do me some good to just take some time and get used to it by driving instead of flying and since my friends would be with me I knew I would be okay even when I got scared which kind of happens a lot."

By the time she'd run out of breath and was gasping for air, I was working myself up in preparation for a full body cavity search while hoping it was as sexy as porn made it seem. After rambling on like that, there was no way these guys wouldn't be completely suspicious of us and it was probably very likely at this point we'd be spending the rest of the day trying to explain how Ashley's actions were influenced by her PTSD.

I was just starting to try and work out how to minimize her embarrassment when Agent Wells approached Clay and whispered in his ear. Clay nodded and walked over to Ashley. "Miss, you're not in trouble, I promise you, but could I perhaps have a few minutes of your time to speak privately over here?" he asked, nodding to an area about ten feet away.

"Excuse me," Angela said, her expression darkening and I could tell she was gearing up to state that as minors a parent or appointed guardian would need to be present for any interrogations.

"None of you are in trouble," Agent Wells said, lifting his hands up in a gesture of calm and surrender as Clay guided a frightened-looking Ashley over to a spot in the parking lot where they were out of earshot of us, "And you're free to be on your way. My partner," he continued when he seemed certain they were far enough away not to hear, "Just wanted to speak with your friend and try and alleviate her fears."

Looking over at the agent speaking with Ashley, I watched as her eyes widened in surprise before taking on a sheen that I recognized as empathetic tears. The two spoke quietly for some time, with Ashley actively responding and nodding occasionally.

"He recognizes her from her press conference in San Francisco a few months back," Aiden whispered in my ear. Thank God for mutant enhanced wolf

hearing. “From the sound of it, he’s ex-military and giving her some advice on coping with her PTSD like he did.”

I nodded, but I still didn’t like it. “Are we so sure it’s a good idea to be letting a complete stranger talk to her alone like this?” I whispered back, “I mean, strangers are one of her panic triggers, even if they are scrum-diddly-umptious.”

A sudden, hard pinch on my ass had me squealing and looking over at Angela, who was pouting quite prettily. Unable to resist, I leaned over and gave her a quick but firm kiss and murmured against her lips, “But he doesn’t compare to you, sexy.”

“Better not,” she mumbled back before we broke and saw Aiden rolling her eyes in exasperation.

“Do you ever stop?” she asked quietly.

“Newp,” I replied proudly before returning my attention to where Ashley and Agent Clay were still speaking quietly.

Eventually, after they’d talked for about five more minutes, I could see the fear had fled from her expression and had been replaced by one of sympathy. When she rose up on her toes to kiss the agent on the cheek, it was a sure sign that everything was okay with her.

When the pair of them returned to where we were waiting, minus the agent who had gone on about his duties, the man had a smile on his face. “You have a very courageous friend here.”

“We tell her that all the time,” I assured him as Ashley slipped into Aiden’s welcoming embrace.

“Take good care of her,” he said to all of us, “She’s very lucky to have such a strong support system.”

“We’d die for her,” Aiden said honestly.

Or kill, I thought but didn’t say out loud.

Nodding in approval, the agent smiled. “Do you need any help figuring out how to get to Tearmann or do you already have your route planned?”

“Ashley’s had it planned for weeks,” I said with a smile cast in her direction that she happily returned.

“Well drive safely, and good luck with school,” he said, giving us a wave before heading back towards the Patrol Station.

As we all piled back into the R/V and got ready to resume our trip, I remaining in the living area with Aiden and Ashley instead of returning to the passenger seat. Despite looking much better than she had about twenty minutes ago, I could tell there was still a trace of uncertainty in her eyes and didn’t want to leave her alone at the moment. True, she had Aiden with her, and the two were probably about as close as sisters, but with her hurting right now I didn’t want to be anywhere but at her side offering her whatever comfort I could provide.

So, while Angela got us back on the road to Tearmann, Ashely, Aiden, and I all snuggled on the couch and did what we always did: be there and give one another strength.