

The Highlanders, Deck Seven, Passenger Cabins

Yes, yes, yes! More, fuck me more! Harder, oh God harder! Fuck me fuck me fuck meeeeeee!

Those were the only clear thoughts that raced through my head amidst the swirl of carnal delight I was experiencing as Angela thrust into me over and over with the strap-on I, thank *God*, had put into my overnight bag at the last second when we'd first boarded the ship. I'd actually started by donning the device and bringing my darling Angie to a delightful, screaming orgasm before we'd swapped it out and I now found myself on my hands and knees being gripped tightly by the hips as the thick, heavy length continued to bury itself within my hot, aching wetness again and again. I was so close, so very close, and practically keening with the need to feel that explosive, orgasmic release.

When I finally did cum, it was so powerful it sent us both crashing into the bulkhead alongside the bed before collapsing. While we desperately fought to regain our breath, I purred in contented delight and reached back to gently caress my lover's silky bare thigh. "Mmmmm, I don't think I've ever felt the Earth move like that before."

"That wasn't me," Angela said, the tone of her voice in no way sultry, cuddly, or even remotely sexual. In fact, she sounded very worried. "The entire boat just pitched and I doubt it was from me fucking your brains out."

No sooner had she said that but all of the lights went out in our cabin with the dim emergency lighting coming on a few seconds later. On the heels of that, a warning chime began sounding through the announcement speaker in the cabin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are currently experiencing technical difficulties. Please move to the forward lounge area in a calm and safe manner immediately. Ladies and gentlemen-"

Needing no further encouragement, the two of us scrambled to get back into our clothes before racing for the door to the cabin. The moment I threw it open I was confronted by Aiden and Ashley standing there with Aiden just a second away from putting her key card into the lock. “What the fuck is going on?” both Angie and I yelled.

“The boat’s stopped,” Ashley said with clear panic in her voice.

“Something’s going on with the engines,” Aiden said in a calmer tone as she slipped a comforting arm around Ashley’s waist, “They started working really hard and then suddenly shut off altogether.”

A thought occurred to me as Angela and I left the cabin and the four of us made our way down the hallway towards the forward lounge where everyone was being directed to go. “Did they ramp up really high and start whining?”

“I don’t know about ramping up,” Aiden said, her eyes darting about as she had taken the lead and was making sure we didn’t get trampled, “But yeah, they started making a really high-pitched whine before cutting off completely.”

“What are you thinking?” Angela asked as I reached out for Aiden’s shoulder to get her to stop.

“Overheating,” I said as we stopped to let an elderly couple out of the room so they could go ahead of us, “Something caused the engine to work so hard it overheated. The whining was from friction.”

“That’s nice,” Aiden snapped, “But we need to get to the lounge with everyone else.”

Probably because she was so focused on keeping us moving, Aiden failed to notice that Ashley’s look of fear was quickly elevating into a full blown panic attack. The way her eyes were darting about like a trapped animal told me that she was going to break and run at any moment. Considering one of the places she might go would be out on deck where it wouldn’t take much for her to slip and pitch right over the rail into the sea, this was the epitome of bad.

“Aiden wait,” I called, reaching out and snatching Ashley by the wrist to halt her flight. She barely had time to register what I’d done when I had her pulled

tightly into my embrace with her face buried against my breasts. “We can’t go into that mass of people, not with Ashley like this.” Gently stroking her hair, I murmured a few soothing words to her that she was okay, safe, and with us.

With a growl of frustration rippling from her throat, Aiden looked around to try and come up with some other solution. I could tell by the way her eyes were starting to slowly lose their human qualities and beginning to exemplify her wolf nature that her fear and anger were starting to involuntarily attempt to invoke a shift into her wolf form. “Aiden,” I said, trying to sound calming amidst all of this chaos, “Take a few breaths, you’re starting to wolf out.” Her blink of surprise told me that she hadn’t even realized what was happening to her before closing her eyes and taken several long, slow breaths. “We’re not sinking,” I reminded everyone, “We’ve simply lost the engines and with them the main power. With a ship this size there’s almost certainly backups that should easily last until the Coast Guard can come help us. All we’ll do is float around for a little while until someone comes and picks us up. We’re fine.”

While my words of rationale seemed to appease Angela and Aiden’s fears, Ashley was no so easily soothed. “What if there’s another ship out here that we might crash into?” she asked, her own imagination feeding her already nearly out of control panic, “I saw lights out there just before the engines stopped. What if they don’t see us and run right into us. We could sink and we’ll all drown!”

“Ashley,” Angela said, her own worry coloring her attempts to calm our friend down, “That’s not going to happen. We’re a huge ship, it’s not like we won’t be seen a long way away.”

From the look in my petite friend’s eyes, it was clear that she was no longer listening and that her PTSD had her completely within its irrational grasp. I only had a split second to realize her intentions and it wasn’t nearly enough time.

Before I could tighten my grip on her, Ashley tore out of my arms and sprinted for the nearest door leading to the outside decks. I think all of us had the same thought at the same time: she was going for the lifeboats. Aside from the fact that there was no way she would be able to even get into one much less launch it without a multitude of trained staff helping, the exterior deck was very slick and in her panicked state she was almost guaranteed to slip and fall, possibly off the ship

itself. As one, we all instantly took up pursuit but I knew it was Aiden that would reach her before any of us.

What none of us expected was for the exterior bulkhead door to fly open the moment Ashley's hand touched the handle.

Somewhere over the Cabot Strait

“*The Highlanders* just put out a vessel in distress call,” Flagg said, listening to what he was being told from the other end of the cell phone call. “Engine and power failure. They're dead in the water.”

“Shit,” Eric hissed, narrowing his eyes and trying to squint out into the darkness to try and see something. “They went earlier than we expect. Hank, I need to be on that island yesterday.”

“At the risk of sounding cliché,” the helicopter pilot, Hank, said as he tried to nudge the throttle a bit more, “She cannae go any faster Capt'n.” Given the man's deeply Newfoundland accent, that being of Irish decent, he actually pulled the joke off reasonably well. Unfortunately, neither the military Colonel nor the retired sniper were in any frame of mind to even realize it had taken place. “We should get there within the next ten minutes, but I'm going to have to take off right after. This bird isn't set up for extended orbit operations and I used up most of my fuel just getting here.”

“Understood,” Flagg acknowledged, “I'm set up with sat coms so I can call in a Coast Guard chopper to pick us up.”

Hank nodded and guided his aircraft through the night sky until his visual account of the seascape matched up with that on his GPS screen and he saw the tiny island perhaps a kilometer across that were his passengers' target. "Okay, I have a visual, beginning decent."

At those words, Eric slipped the dark brown rucksack he'd unloaded from Flagg's trunk onto his arms and took a firm grip of the long, carbon fiber rifle case beside him. For his part, Colonel Flagg secured his own ruck sack done in a digital camouflage style. The moment the skids of the helicopter bumped against the surface of the island, both men bailed out of the aircraft on their respective sides and quickly moved away from the landing zone at a low huddle as the rotary craft rose back into the sky, pivoted, and raced back towards the island province for refueling.

While the sounds of the spinning blades were still slowly fading from the air, Eric quickly made his way across the rocky island and began his ascent of its lone hilltop. Given the darkness of the night, the remoteness of the island, and the fact that any targets would be well out of visual range of them, he didn't bother trying to be careful or stealthy. Indeed, because it appeared their targets had moved ahead with their plan early, both men realized time was of the essence and treated the situation accordingly.

At the summit of the hill, Eric set down his bags and extracted a rolled up foam pad from the underside of the ruck sack. Once it was unrolled and laid out, he utilized his rifle case to weigh down the front end while his and Flagg's ruck sacks supplied anchor points for the rear. "Got a visual?" the sniper asked of Flagg, who had already retrieved his binoculars equipped with night vision enhancement.

"I do," the Colonel confirmed. "The ship appears dead in the water and is operating on emergency power. There are three other boats surrounding it, two to port and one to starboard, and all appear to be fishing vessels."

"Hmph," Eric grunted with a very small trace of appreciation.

"You think of something?" Flagg asked, looking over with a curious lift of an eyebrow.

“Tell me if you can see the rear of *The Highlanders*. Do you see what looks like some kind of a net trailing off it?”

A quick adjustment of his visual examination had the experienced military man blinking in surprise. “Indeed there is, a big one from the looks of how many buoys I’m seeing attached to it.”

“Fishing seine,” Eric confirmed, more to himself than Flagg, “That’s how they disabled the ship so they could board it. Just lay the thing out right in the ship’s path and let it run over it. Ship’s propellers get tangled up in the seine and there you go.”

“Not a bad plan,” Flagg admitted.

“Nope,” Eric agreed as he unlocked and opened his carbon fiber case, exposing the power, powder-coated sniper rifle laying on a bed of protective foam cut specifically for this exact weapon. “Any visuals on our hostage takers?”

This time, the Colonel did a slow pan of the vessel with his optics before sighing and shaking his head. “There’s too much activity happening right now. It looks pretty chaotic on board right now and I can’t separate civilian from combatant.”

Nodding, Eric took a spotting scope out of his ruck sack, setting it up on a small tripod next to his shooting platform. Peering through the scope, he completely ignored the entirety of the ship with the exception of the bridge. There, he could see the crew was clearly trying to balance devolving into chaos with maintaining order in the command center of the ship.

His eye twitched when he saw the bulkhead door leading from the bridge kicked open and several men flood inside. Two of the men held hunting rifles, which they used to quickly subdue the crew and move them over to one side of the glass-enclosed room. Once the command crew was secure and no longer a threat, a large man who clearly carried himself with an air of command walked through the open bulkhead door and onto the bridge carrying a pistol in his hand. He appeared to be speaking to the crew, but unfortunately Eric’s lip-reading skills failed him since the spotting scope didn’t have enough magnification for him to be able to see the man’s mouth clearly.

“They’ve taken control of the bridge,” Eric reported, never moving from the scope’s eyepiece.

“It looks like they’re getting everyone else rounded up in the forward lounge,” Flagg added, “So far I’m counting one rifle, one pistol, a few machetes and hatchets, and plenty of fillet knives.”

“Basically what they happened to have at home,” Eric muttered to himself, confirming his suspicions that this was really a ragtag group of people and not well-organized terrorists. “The guy on the bridge that looks like he’s in charge will probably be making a ransom demand or something shortly.”

“I’ll make sure I’m in on that call,” the Colonel assured him.

“Just make sure your ringer is on silent,” the sniper warned him. “We’re far away, but sharp sounds like that can travel pretty easily, especially if we’re upwind at the time.”

“I am familiar with function during silent ops,” the military man reminded the *retired* sniper.

“Just checking,” Eric said with a wicked grin as he removed his rifle from its case and began the meticulous task of setting up its bipod and loading one of the three five-round magazines into its open well without actually chambering a round yet. From his ruck sack, he withdrew a hard, plastic case that contained within it a multifunction night/thermal scope with a 10x zoom capacity.

“Is that a military-issue C14 Timberwolf?” The Colonel asked with more than a little curiosity.

“And W57 multi-operational sighting system,” Eric confirmed.

“Do I want to know how you managed to come to possess a highly restricted weapon like that?”

A faint shrug was the bulk of his response while Eric fitted the scope on the picany rail system on the rifle’s upper receiver and began the careful process of dialing it in. “Saving your CO’s life comes with a few perks.”

The Highlanders, Unspecified Location

The feeling of something cool and damp on her forehead was enough to allow Ashley to finally breach that last, dark barrier separating consciousness from unconsciousness with a soft moan.

“Easy,” a deep, male voice told her gently, “Ya got a pretty good knock on the head there.”

“Wha’ happened?” she mumbled, lifting her hand to touch what was still a tender spot on her temple beneath her hair.

Her movement halted almost instantly when she realized that by lifting one hand, the other had come along on the journey. Opening her eyes, she blinked them furiously to try and clear the fog that still warped her vision until she was finally able to see clearly. Unfortunately, seeing her wrists tightly bound with a plastic zip tie did nothing to still her frantically beating heart. “What?”

“Just relax,” the voice said, causing her eyes to flash to the side and see an older man sitting beside her on the edge of the bunk she currently was laid upon, “The door hit you in the head when Jerry opened it and knocked you out. You feelin’ sick or wanting to throw up?”

“What’s going on?” she asked in a small, frightened voice, “Why am I tied up?”

“Capt’n’s order I’m afraid,” the man said, running his hand through his shaggy white hair in a clearly agitated gesture.

“What captain?” Ashley asked, squirming up on the bunk so she was in more of a sitting position and fighting back a small wave of vertigo at the sudden movement. “Please don’t let me have a concussion,” she murmured to herself.

“Captain Shepherd,” the man replied, grabbing the singular chair in the room and pulling it up beside the bunk before sitting down.

“The ferry captain?” she asked in confusion.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head, “Our captain.”

Shaking her head as well, though it was due to confusion on her part, Ashley pulled at the binding at her wrists for a moment before letting them fall into her lap. “Please, what is going on?” she asked with growing panic.

“The Captain needs to send a message to the gov’rment,” the man explained as he gazed down at the young girl with sympathetic eyes, “They need to know how they’ve been hurtin’ us.”

“My friends,” Ashley said, as she realized they were alone in the room for the first time, “Where are my friends?”

“They’re with everyone else in the forward lounge,” he explained, “They’re fine, long as they didn’t try to fight.”

Considering they were talking about Aiden and Kitty, one of whom tended to have a more primal outlook when it came to threats, that wasn’t exactly confidence building. “I need to see them,” she said and began scooting towards the edge of the bed.

Her progress was halted by the man’s hand gently pushing her back down on the bunk by the shoulder. “Easy honey. You got a pretty good whack on the head and I don’t want ya passing out again. I told the Captain I’d take care of ya and I’m gonna do just that. Think you can stomach some water?”

Rational thought fought a fierce battle with the emotional instability of PTSD inside of her mind. While one told her to evaluate her situation and figure out what solutions were at her disposal, the PTSD-fueled panic was screaming at her to claw this man’s eyes out and then run as fast and as far as she could.

Thankfully, rationale won out this time and she slowly relaxed back on the bed and gave the man a nod.

When he returned the gesture and moved to get a bottle of water on the opposite bunk, Ashley's gut reaction was to maybe give him a kick in the ass and run when he stumbled onto the bunk. However, not only were her hands still bound, but she had no idea what was happening or how many men were with this person and his captain. So, when he turned back, she was exactly in the same spot he'd left her in a few seconds ago.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Toby," he said with a smile, as though this was just a normal, friendly introduction between two people and one of them wasn't currently tied up and being held hostage.

"I'm Ashley."

"Very nice to meet you Ashley," Toby said with a smile that reached his slightly faded blue eyes, "Wish it was under better circumstances."

"So," she said carefully as she took the bottle from him and carefully tipped some of the cool liquid into her mouth, "You're not going to hurt me?"

"Hurt you?" he seemed actually offended by the notion, "Sweet Jesus no. You wouldn't have been hurt in the first place 'cept no one knew you were on the other side of the door when Brian kicked it open. I'm just glad all you got was just got a knock on the head or I'd have kicked old Brian's ass up and down the Strait."

Nodding and taking another sip of water, thankful that neither of which caused any kind of nausea that would be an indicator of the feared concussion, Ashley's gaze flicked to the door of the cabin for a moment before returning to Toby's kind eyes. "Why are all of you here? What are you doing?"

Sighing, Toby sat back in his chair and folded his arms thoughtfully. "Government's come up with a lotta rules when it comes to fishing lately. Newfangled engine requirements, catch limitations, things like that. It's hurtin' a lot of folks and no one in St. John's seems to want to listen to us 'bout it. So, Captain Shepherd figured this was the best way to git their attention."

Listening to his explanation, Ashley blinked in stupefied shock when she realized just what he was saying. “So, this is just a protest?”

“Kinda,” he allowed with a shrug, “Captain says he’ll be able to get us rep...reperrrr...”

“Reparations?” Ashley supplied helpfully.

“That’s it,” Toby said with a snap of his fingers, “Reparations for our lost wages for the last few years.”

“Can the government even do that?” she asked, “Wouldn’t you need to file a lawsuit to get any kind of compensation for lost wages?”

“Courts, ha!” Toby spat, “They’re just as useless as the government these days. Every time someone gets arrested for hurting someone, seems like the criminal’s more protected than the victim. Some poor little girl got raped by some piece of shit pedophile and he only got four years in jail. Hell, more’n half o’ that’s already gone ‘cause the judge gave him credit for the time he spent in jail during the trial.”

“That’s awful,” Ashley whispered sympathetically.

“So you see, them courts aren’t any kind of an option,” he went on to explain, “They’d just side with the government and wouldn’t even listen to us.”

Reaching up with her bound hands to try and brush some hair out of her face but with the way her wrists were pinned she didn’t have much success. “So,” she said with a smile of thanks when Toby reached over and gently tucked the offending lock of hair behind her ear, “You’re doing this because you feel like you don’t have any other option?”

“That ‘bout sums it up.”

While Ashley sat and sipped from her water, Toby observed her attain a thoughtful expression on her face. While she wasn’t as old as her, Ashley reminded Toby of his granddaughter back when she was young. Beautiful, obviously smart, and clearly possessed of a kind and giving nature. He’d actually had to fight to be allowed to bring her to one of these cabins so he could take care of her. Captain

Shepherd was perfectly content to just tie her up and toss her in the lounge with everyone else, but that wasn't something the aging fisherman would allow. Maybe it was because of who she reminded him of, or maybe it was just something all on her own, but Toby's instincts told him he needed to keep this girl safe and protect her from the chaos that was happening out on the rest of the ship.

"Toby?"

"Huh?" he asked, blinking out of his inner reverie to look at the young girl smiling at him. "Everything okay?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, "And thank you for looking out for me, but you know what you and your friends are doing is wrong, don't you?"

"It's not the way I would have done it," he admitted with a sigh, "But Captain Shepherd's smarter'n me and he's always done right by me and my family so I owed it to him to help out."

"I don't think you're as dumb as you make yourself out to be," the red-haired beauty pointed out. "You know that this is the wrong way to do things and you knew that I might have had a concussion from getting hit by the door. That's why you wanted to bring me here isn't it?"

"Well yeah," he said as though it was obvious, "I've seen people take a hit like you did before and I know how it can mess up someone."

Reaching out, she took one of his large, calloused hands in her smaller bound ones. "You're not stupid Toby," she told him firmly, "And you're a good man, better than this Captain Shepherd."

"Now see here-" he said, immediately leaping to his Captain's defense even though his heart wasn't really in it.

"It's true," Ashley insisted, "When I got hurt, your first thought was to help me even when your Captain wanted to just toss me with all the rest of the hostages. That's the difference between someone good and someone selfishly willing to do whatever they want."

He wanted to argue the logic, but despite the fact that he didn't possess a college education he couldn't deny the truth in her words. "I don't want *anyone* to get hurt, a lot of the guys don't."

"They're good men like you?"

"I'd like to think so," Toby said.

"Then we can't let this Captain Shepherd do something to make things even worse than they already are. You're going to get in trouble for this," she told him honestly, thinking he deserved at least that, "But it might get a lot worse if he goes to extremes and actively tries to hurt someone to try and get the government to concede...listen to his demands," she corrected with more pedestrian terminology.

Again, the lovely girl's logic was unarguable, and it was actually something Toby had been wrestling with from the very start of things. "I don't want that," he asserted, "None of us do. But the Captain, he's in charge of things now and I don't think anyone's gonna listen."

"But you can try," Ashley insisted, "There's more of you than there are of him." When he still looked doubtful, she lifted her hands to gently touch his chin and get him to lift his eyes to meet her own brilliant, emerald gaze.

"You can do this. *We* can do this."

The Highlanders, Forward Lounge Area

“Why the hell did I let you stop me?” Aiden growled as she once again twisted her hands against the unyielding plastic zip tie that currently fastened her wrists together, “I could have torn those guys apart in seconds.”

“If you’d shifted, yes,” I agreed, “And then you would have caused an even bigger panic that could have gotten you or someone else killed when one of those guys with guns started shooting wildly. Stop squirming,” I ordered her, pinching her thigh and making her jump, “You know I can cut these in a heartbeat.”

“Then why haven’t you?” she snapped, her eyes crackling with barely controlled anger, “Between the two of us, taking these guys out would be a cinch.”

“Because we don’t know where they’ve taken Ashley yet and they might hurt her if we suddenly attack them,” I reasoned. “Besides, you don’t think I’m pissed right now? Angela was just starting to really get into the groove before these idiots interrupted us.”

“Time and a place dear,” my lover chided me, her eyes flicking about.

I joined her in a few moments of silent observation to take in the current situation. After the door leading out to the deck had been kicked in, striking Ashley and knocking her out, twenty or so men had flooded into the landing we’d been standing on. Armed with rifles, pistols, and even long, wicked looking knives, they started rounding people up and binding their hands before them before herding everyone into the lounge. Both Angela and I had had to restrain Aiden from wolfing out and tearing into the group while one large man with white hair had immediately gone to Ashley’s side to examine her. There had been a heated exchange between him and a rather rotund man possessing an air of command regarding the white-haired man wanting to care for her. The end result, after the two had nearly come to blows about it, had the white-haired man finally being given permission to do so before he had gently picked Ashley up and carried her back towards the cabin area.

After that, we had little choice but to go along with everyone else, including having our hands tied, and move to the lounge. Of course, Aiden had wanted to fight back, but I persuaded her not to for the very reasons I had just re-emphasized to her a moment ago. Now, all of the passengers and most of the crew were all

seated in one fashion or another in the lounge while approximately fifteen of the hostage-takers continually walked through the area. I could tell by the look on some people's faces that they wanted to fight back. The likely reason they didn't was the same reasons we had held back as well. The chance of one of the men armed with a rifle or pistol firing wildly and hitting any number of the children present was simply too great to risk. I knew there would be an opportunity to strike soon, I just had to wait for it.

"So you got a plan?" Aiden asked out of the corner of her mouth as one of the guards slowly strolled by near us.

"Working on it," I mumbled. "Have you heard them say anything about why they're doing this yet?"

"As best as I can tell," she said, speaking a little more clearly now that the guard had moved on, "That fat guy who looked like he was in charge is Captain Shepherd and he's planning on contacting the government about some kind of payback for fishing regulations or something."

I nodded, the information confirming my earlier suspicions. This was no evil terrorist organization. It was a bunch of fishermen that had some kind of a beef with the government. Political activists maybe? Lord knew there were plenty of news stories about PETA doing crazy shit almost as bad as this.

"They don't have the look of hardened criminals," Angela observed. "In fact, some of them are practically shaking in their boots."

At her nod, I looked over to see a man who was younger than most of the others, perhaps in his early twenties. He was looking around at everyone making sure none of them tried anything, but the wideness of his eyes and the rapid pace of his breathing definitely had me thinking this was out of the norm for him. Glancing over at Aiden, she nodded. "He's scared," she confirmed, "Most of them are. This isn't something they've ever done before."

"Maybe they just got caught up in that one man's war on the government," Angela suggested.

“Seems reasonable,” I concluded, “He did seem to exude a rather strong, charismatic leadership quality.”

“Hey,” one of the men barked as he drew close to us, “Knock off the talking.”

“Leave ‘em be Rich,” another said, walking over and putting his hand on the other’s, Rich’s, shoulder, “They’re scared little girls.”

I could actually feel Aiden bristle at being called a ‘scared little girl’ but a quick, warning look from both me and Angela had her settling a bit. “Captain said no talking,” Rich argued with his companion.

“You really think the Captain would want you to yell at a bunch of scared girls?” the man countered.

“Well...it’s just...I dunno,” he finally mumbled.

“Go on,” the man said, nudging Rich’s shoulder and sending the man trudging away. When he was halfway to the other side of the room, our ‘savior’ crouched down and rested his hands across his knees. “You girls doing okay?”

The fact that he did in fact sound sincere in his query, something Aiden unknowingly confirmed by the shocked look on her face, was unexpected to say the least. “Ummm, sure,” I said hesitantly.

“Good, good. You girls just relax and everything’ll be fine.” Standing, the man looked over at a member of the ship’s crew sitting several feet away. “Hey, you got enough tea and coffee for everyone on board?”

More than a bit surprised at the question, the crewman in tan pants and a black shirt bearing the Marine Atlantic logo nodded slowly. “We should, we’re fully stocked.”

“Well come on then b’y,” the man said, waving the crewman to his feet.

“Rod,” Rich said uncertainly, “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Captain Shepherd might not like it.”

“Captain’s busy,” Rod said, indicating the crewman should precede him towards where the small café stand resided in the back of the lounge, “And there’s no reason not to be hospitable to these folks. Come on b’y,” he said to the crew member as they headed back to get everyone...a cup of tea?

Aiden gave voice to the surprise and confusion I’m sure all three of us felt at the moment. “Did we fall into the Twilight Zone when I wasn’t looking?”

The Highlanders, Command Bridge

“Copy that *Highlanders*,” the voice said over the radio, “We’ll be in contact within the hour.”

Howard Shepherd smiled as he hung the radio mic back on its holder before settling himself in the Captain’s chair on the bridge. This was going better than he thought it would. Once Rod’s seine had disabled the ship, they’d gotten aboard pretty fast using his boat’s grappling hooks and it had taken no time at all to unroll the rope ladder and get the rest of the crews on board after. From that point, it had been a simple matter of waving the few guns they had, demanding everyone obey his commands, and getting everyone into the lounge where his people systematically tied them up. All in all, it had maybe taken ten minutes from start to finish.

He counted himself lucky that this particular trip had passengers that mostly comprised of elderly people and tourist families, so there wasn’t really any resistance. He hadn’t even needed to have someone struck to gain compliance. In

fact, the only injury was that young girl who'd gotten hit when Brian kicked open the door. He'd been content to just have her friends carry her along into the lounge but that damn bleeding heart Toby just *had* to stick his nose into it and insist on taking care of her. He'd been sorely tempted to read the man the riot act when it came to obeying one's captain, but when he'd seen the look on the rest of the crew's faces he knew that using that tact might have earned him more ire than admiration. So, he became benevolent for a moment and agreed before getting back to the real business at hand: taking the bridge.

That, too, had gone surprisingly easy. The crew had buckled almost instantly when he and several of his men confronted them and within moments the bridge had been theirs. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that while all of them were seamen, none of them had actually served in the military before so they didn't have a clue when it came to repelling boarders. Whatever, it made his job that much easier.

Now, after having contacted the Coast Guard and demanding they get in contact with the government so he could make his demands, Howard relaxed in the command chair and waited for a response. As easy as this had been, he considered that maybe a career change might be in order. It seemed like he made a pretty damn good pirate.

Undisclosed Island in the Cabot Strait

“They just made the call,” Flagg reported as he hung up his sat phone, “They’re expecting a reply within the hour.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Eric mumbled as he never took his eye a millimeter off his rifle scope. “I’ve got eyes on the bridge,” he said in a low voice designed to minimize vibration along the rifle as much as possible. “Five targets, primary sitting in the Captain seat.”

“Do you have a shot?”

“Clear line of sight,” Eric reported, “But the glass is too thick for the shot to be clean. The flight path will deviate wildly after it goes through, if it penetrates at all.”

“Options?” Flagg asked, already working out a tactical assault plan in his head.

For several minutes, the sniper didn’t say a word as he carefully scanned every inch of the glass-enclosed bridge. To the inexperienced, it would seem to be a hopeless endeavor since it would likely require one shot to shatter a window and a second shot to actually strike the target. Since the rifle was bolt-action, there would be no way for him to be able to send two rounds downrange fast enough before everyone on that bridge reacted. Considering the distance, wind, and movement of the ship in the water, he would only be guaranteed one shot and it had to count.

“Well I’ll be damned,” he finally muttered.

“Got something?” the Colonel asked, crouching to look through the spotting scope at the ship’s bridge.

“You really should talk with Marine Atlantic about the upkeep of their ships after this,” he commented, “I’ve got three, two millimeter holes in the forward-looking window.”

“Meaning?” Flagg asked as he attempted to find the imperfections the sniper had indicated.

“Meaning those points in the glass are weak enough that I should be able to get a round through clean.”

It took a second, but when the Colonel realized what Eric was talking about he glanced over with a look of shock. “You’re telling me that you can put a round directly through one of those two millimeter holes?”

Instead of replying, the sniper merely grinned slowly and began his mental calculations to make the shot.

The Highlanders, Cabin Area

“Mmmmmm,” I moaned quietly to myself, twisting my hands back and forth within their plastic bindings so I could feel their tightness biting into my wrists.

“The fuck are you doing?” Aiden hissed angrily in my ear.

“Just enjoying these zip ties,” I purred, squirming and rolling my hips while rubbing my thighs together to try and create some desperately needed friction against the hot need swirling through my loins.

“Wha-”

“We got interrupted,” Angela explained quickly in a whisper, “She’s still keyed up from when we were in bed. She can’t help it.” Lifting her own bound hands, she took my face and forced me to look into her worried eyes. “Kitty, we need you to focus right now. We can’t get out of these zip ties without Aiden shifting and causing a massive panic. You’re the only one who can do it.”

“But I want it,” I pouted, my voice coming out petulant and childish as I shifted slightly so I could try and press my swollen mound against my lover’s knee.

“We’re going to draw attention like this,” Aiden warned, her eyes flicking over to where the man, Rod, was still working with the crew member to assemble a very large amount of hot tea while the rest of the invaders were milling about.

The feeling of Angela’s fingers pressing sharply into my jaw caused a quick spike of heat to race through me due to the decidedly dominant gesture while also sharpening my focus so she was all I could see. “Kitty, listen to me, hear my voice.”

I purred at the sound of that wonderfully authoritative voice and silently begged her to command me as her slutty little slave girl. Maybe she’d have me take her jeans off with my teeth before slipping my tongue into her panties and-

The sudden, sharp pinch on my hip was neither pleasant nor sexy. I liked a little pain but not when it was designed to deliberately hurt. I started to yelp when Angela’s hand slapped over my mouth, silencing the cry before it ever came out. “Goddammit Kitty,” Aiden snarled in my ear, “You get your head on straight or I’ll take a chunk out of you!”

Perhaps it was the pain finally cutting through the pink haze of sex that had clouded my vision, or perhaps it was my own mind re-asserting itself. Whatever it was, I was able to think a little more clearly and push the nymphomaniac back into the recesses of my consciousness. At the same time, I understood that the stress she must have been experiencing was causing Aiden to start regressing to her wolfen state. Not only was her voice growing rougher and more animalistic, but her threat spoke directly towards how a wolf disciplines a member of its pack. She wasn’t trying to be cruel, she was simply trying to re-establish order within our pack in a time of crisis.

“I’m okay,” I gasped when Angela lowered her hand as my mind worked frantically on a means of getting us out of this. There were a total of fifteen men in the room, which left approximately seven or eight more somewhere else on the ship if I’d gotten my headcount right when all of this had started. Of those

currently with us, none of them seemed to possess any kind of discipline that one would equate with professionals who dealt with hostages on a regular basis. That meant it was highly unlikely any of them would be suspicious if I-

Suddenly lurching forward, I pressed myself against Aiden and whimpered, a bit louder than necessary, “Oh Aiden I’m so scared! Don’t move a fucking muscle!” I finished with a harsh whisper and activated my power, bringing a crackling energy blade to life in my hands. Aiden herself froze and seemed to not even dare to breathe as I used my own body as a shield to hide what I was doing. There was a risk that someone might see something since my energy blade glowed as though it were actually made of fire, but I hoped the fact that we were tucked into a corner of the room would be enough to obstruct anyone’s view.

Moving very carefully, I brought the energy blade up between Aiden’s arms towards her hands. She caught on immediately and pulled her hands as far apart as she could to try and expose the zip tie to me. With a critical eye, I just barely touched the edge of my blade to the plastic on the underside of Aiden’s wrists, causing a very small section of it to melt into non-existence. It wasn’t much, but the binding was now broken and my friend wouldn’t even have to try to pull her hands free.

“What’s going on here?”

Dissipating my energy blade with a thought, I turned slightly against Aiden and schooled my expression so I looked appropriately scared when my gaze met that of one of the hostage takers who had come upon us. “Please don’t hurt me,” I whimpered.

“She’s scared,” Angela asserted, picking up on my deception immediately and scooting closer so the three of us were huddled together like a quintessential trio of frightened teenage girls. Aiden couldn’t quite pull off looking like she was afraid, but at least she was able to look concerned. I guessed that was largely due to her not knowing if this man had seen what I had just done or not and was already thinking of the fastest and most brutal way to attack.

“Well you don’t need to be,” the man said, surprising all of us by just how caring he sounded, “Once the Captain does his thing all of y’all ’ll be on your way.”

“Hey Pete, what’s goin’ on?” Rod said as he walked up with the crew member holding a sleeve of wax paper cups while the crew member himself held two large thermos-style carafes.

“Just letting these gals know they don’t need to be scared,” Pete said.

“Well now that’s right,” Rod confirmed, slipping three cups from the sleeve and holding them out to us. We each took one with Aiden being careful not to let any of the men see the underside of her wrists where I’d sliced the zip tie free. “You girls like tea?”

“I prefer coffee,” Aiden said before I gave her a sharp look, “But tea’s fine in a pinch.”

Nodding, Rod had the crew member fill our cups with the steaming liquid before all three of them moved on to deliver drinks to the rest of the hostages.

“Nice work,” Angela mumbled against the rim of her cup without actually drinking.

“Thanks,” I murmured back, actually taking a sip from the tea. “I’ll take care of you next but I’ll need both your help to get mine.”

“How?” Aiden asked, flexing her fingers with the desire to pull her hands free of the now useless binding.

“I have to move a lot slower and more carefully since I’ll be holding my blade in a reverse grip and don’t want to lop off my hand because I won’t be able to see what I’m doing very well. You guys will need to block anyone from seeing what I’m doing.”

Nodding, Angela looked around to make sure none of the hostage takers were listening in on us. Thankfully, all of them were currently occupied with helping pass out cups of tea, almost like they were being good hosts and not criminals. “You just say the word, we’ll take care of it.”

I was about to say more when I caught movement on the far side of the room. Shifting my gaze, my eyes widened at what I saw and I quickly elbowed Angela and Aiden to get their attention.

* * * *

“Can’t you untie me?” Ashley asked as she and Toby walked down the hall of the cabin area. She pulled against the zip tie still binding her wrists but just like the many times before it refused to budge even a little.

“Sorry sweetheart,” Toby said in a genuinely regretful voice, “But even though I agreed we should talk to the Captain, I still can’t go against his orders and that’s everyone stays tied up.”

As the young girl sighed, Toby had to fight once again against the urge to whip out his pocket knife and do exactly as she’d asked and free her hands. From the first moment he’d seen her unconscious on the floor with Robbie tying her hands, he’d been struck by the fragile, delicate beauty the girl possessed. Even then, he’d almost said something to stop his fellow fisherman from binding the girl’s wrists but had stopped just before the words could leave his mouth. Since that moment, the predominant emotion he’d experienced when it came to this ethereal beauty of a girl was that he wanted to make sure that she was safe and protected. It hadn’t been strong enough to have him go against the orders of Captain Shepherd, but that hadn’t meant he couldn’t get her somewhere to rest and recover. The same applied now as the two of them made their way through the ship. He would make sure she was safe, and he would go along with her idea that

maybe she could talk the Captain into going a different route, but he still had to follow the man's orders and that meant her hands stayed bound.

“So what do you plan on sayin’ to the Captain?” he asked curiously.

“I’m not sure,” Ashely responded honestly as they left the cabin area hallway and entered into the main landing with stairs leading both up and down. “I’m hoping he will listen to reason and understand that this isn’t the way to do this. Governments don’t take the demands of people who act like terrorists seriously,” she told him honestly, “How can they? They’re basically holding a gun to the government’s head saying, ‘Tell me I’m right or I’ll blow your brains out.’”

“It doesn’t make a lot of sense,” Toby admitted, leading her by the arm towards the staircase that would take them up to higher decks.

As they passed the entryway to the lounge area, Ashley peered at the gathering that had been assembled there by the fishermen. From the brief look she was able to get, everyone seemed scared but okay. In fact, it almost looked as though a couple of the fisherman had gotten one of the crew members to start passing out...was that tea? Were they giving everyone a cup of tea? Well, that seemed to fit if most of the rest of these men had the same level of kindness that Toby had displayed thus far.

When she caught sight of her friends on the far corner of the room, she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out to them. Based upon the way they were huddled together with rather serious expressions on their faces, Ashley had no doubt they were working on a plan to get free and probably strike back against the hostage takers. It was also likely they didn’t have the same kind of insight into what was really going on that she did. Any chance she had to end this peacefully would be in serious jeopardy if Aiden succumbed to her animal instincts or Kitty flying off the handle because she was losing control of her sex drive.

The worst part was, her two friends could very easily decimate the entire group of fishermen in moments. Disturbingly graphic images of bodies ripped apart by Aiden’s jaws and sliced to ribbons by Kitty’s energy blades flashed through her mind, making her shudder in horror. This wasn’t like it was back in Iowa. These men weren’t having their already inhumane impulses amplified by a

demon sex goddess. They were just ordinary men trying to live good lives and were frustrated by the way their own government had chosen to handle their industry. They deserved compassion and they certainly shouldn't die because of their acts of desperation.

When Kitty's eyes lifted and met her own, she saw the gorgeous brunette nudge the rest of her friends, who shifted their own gazes in her direction. Thinking quickly, she flashed them a brief smile while also making a small, downward pushing motion with her bound hands before they were lost from view by the ship's bulkhead. It wasn't much, but she hoped it was enough to communicate to them that she wanted them to essentially 'stand down', at least until she was able speak with this Captain Shepherd and stop this insanity before anyone else was hurt.

Undisclosed Island, Cabot Strait

"Dammitt!" Eric hissed as he felt the muscles in his arms transition from rippling tremors to almost violent leaps.

"What's wrong?" Colonel Flagg asked with concern, lifting his eyes from the spotting scope to look over at the otherwise motionless sniper as he slowly slid his hand off the grip and trigger assembly to carefully shake it out without disturbing his view through the scope.

"Muscle spasms," he said, returning his hand to the rifle to repeat the process with the other. "Go into my ruck and get the small black case in the central front pouch."

Doing as requested, the military man retreated to the dark brown ruck sack and unfastened the clasp on the center-most pouch located on the front of the bag.

Within seconds he was able to locate the item in question, mostly due to the fact that it was the only item the pocket contained. It was slim, composed of sturdy hard plastic, and almost looked like a pen case. “Got it,” he reported and returned to Eric’s side. “What is it?”

“Tetrabenazine. I use it when I start losing control of my muscles.”

Popping open the case, Flagg saw three syringes secured to the felt-lined interior by elastic loops. Carefully removing one of them, he prepared to hand it to the sniper when he paused. “Where’s your injection site?”

“Upper arm.”

Drawing a folding knife from his pocket, Flagg flicked open the blade and set the tip against Eric’s upper arm. “You got any real love for this shirt?”

“Ten bucks at Walmart,” he said with a hint of a smile in his voice, “I’ll live.”

Nodding, the Colonel used the knife to slice away a tiny portion of the man’s shirt, ensuring he didn’t use too much force or pressure that would result in the sniper’s aim being thrown off. Once he had exposed just enough skin to accommodate the needle, he folded his knife back up and returned it to his pocket before taking up the syringe. “Any change?” he asked as he slipped the needle into the man’s flesh with surprising skill and proceeded to depress the plunger.

“Not really,” Eric said with a sigh as he felt the relief of his muscle spasms easing almost immediately, “Shepherd is still sitting pretty in the Captain’s chair and the rest of his crew on the bridge is just standing around. It does look like they’re getting anxious,” he reported, “They’re making some pretty jerky gestures every time they talk to him but it looks like he’s blowing them off.”

“This isn’t the kind of thing they used to,” Flagg reasoned, using the bit of shirt he’d cut away as a means of staunching the pinprick of blood left behind when he removed the syringe.

“Probably not. I’d say most of them are starting to get worried about doing this whole operation in the first place. Any word on when someone from the government is going to respond?”

“I’ve briefed Strategic Command on our position and what we’re doing. They feel the best course of action is to have the Fisheries Minister make contact to try and stall them until we have an opening.”

“That’s a gamble,” Eric noted, “These guys are pissed at the Fisheries right now and him calling might just set the Captain off.”

“Do you really think he would kill all of those people because he’s angry at the Fisheries Minister?” Flagg asked, returning to the spotting scope.

“For the rest of the crew, I’d say probably not. But with this guy Shepherd...He’s already taken the steps of disabling the ferry and creating a hostage situation. That was his plan. We have to go on the assumption that even if he can’t get his crew to comply, he’ll personally start killing people if his demands aren’t met.”

“And even if that causes an internal mutiny,” Flagg reasoned, following the sniper’s train of thought, “We’re still looking at casualties before that can happen or even during with the ensuing chaos. Which means,” he said grimly, “If you get a clean shot you have a green light.”

“Copy that,” Eric intoned evenly, “Give me a current wind speed.”

The Colonel used one of the ship’s flags snapping in the breeze as a windsock and did a quick calculation before relaying the information to the sniper. Eric modified the windage on his sight and continued to wait for his opening.

The Highlanders, Lounge Area

“Excuse me.”

The closest man guarding everyone in the lounge looked over as I walked towards him, using a combination of a seductress’s slink and big, innocent doe eyes to make sure I had his full and undivided attention. “I need to use the bathroom,” I told him, putting just a hint of a purr into my voice.

“Can’t ya hold it?” he said in an agitated voice as his eyes flicked over to where Aiden and Angela sat in the corner behind me.

“No, I’m sorry,” I said with a pretty little pout, “I’m just so scared, and with the tea you were so nice enough to give us, I really have to go.” I finished by giving him a fluttering of my eyelashes designed to silently convey: *I’m just a helpless little girl.*

With a grumbling sigh, he jerked his head, indicating I should precede him. With exaggerated lip movement designed so he would see just how soft and supple they were, perfect for giving a man untold pleasures, I mouthed *thank you* before starting towards the other side of the ship where the public bathrooms were located. During the long walk through the lounge, across the landing, and through the restaurant area that would have opened in a couple of hours, I made certain to put a seductive sway to my walk that would draw his eye to the generous swell of my hips and the sweetness of my ass highlighted by tight skirt I wore. I didn’t need to, but I glanced back occasionally to see his gaze riveted on my twitching hips and swaying ass. *Just like a man*, I thought with a silent giggle as we finally got to the restroom.

“I’ll have to go in with you,” he said, though from the hesitation in his voice it was clear that the idea made him quite uncomfortable.

“Really?” I said with a pretty frown, “Do you have to? I mean, I’m already *so* embarrassed about this.”

“Gotta make sure you don’t try anything funny,” the man asserted, though I’m sure even he knew that sounded like a line.

“Look,” I told him, “I don’t have anything on me that I can use to cut these,” I said, lifting my hands to indicate the zip tie binding my wrists, “And it’s already

going to be awkward doing my business with my hands tied. Do you really *have* to come in with me?” When he hesitated, I slowly lifted my hands up and over my head so they were behind my neck, the action causing my breasts to push out into greater prominence against my top. “You can frisk me if you want,” I said with a purr, sliding in close so my breasts gently nudged against his chest and my pelvis gently ground against his thigh, “Make sure I don’t have any dangerous weapons.”

While I had been seeking to seduce the man into complacency, I was actually quite surprised when he grabbed me by the shoulders, spun me around, and hurried me through the restroom doorway. “Just hurry it up,” he said with a tightness in his voice that indicated he was troubled, but clearly aroused.

Well, that wasn’t the reaction that I had been going for, but it would still work. My original plan had been to use my feminine charms to arouse the man into stupidity, act like I was going to give him the blowjob of his life, and then knock him out with a well-placed knee to the face. Apparently he was one of the wonderful few that still possessed moral standards when it came to fucking teenage girls and my attempts to get him hard and ready had resulted in him trying to get me away from him as fast as possible. Good to know there were still decent guys out there.

Inside the bathroom, I hurried into one of the stalls and sat down on the seat, taking a few minutes to calm my racing heartbeat. Already I had sliced Angela’s bindings loose just as I had Aiden’s, but I’d backtracked on my plan to take care of my own. Not only did I now no longer think I would be able to do it without the actions being seen, but Ashley’s sudden appearance with another member of the hostage takers taking her to places unknown truly frightened me and my friends. Yes, she had smiled at us, and yes she had made some kind of hand gesture, but who the hell knew what it was supposed to mean? Did she have a plan and wanted us to lay low? Did she want us to get to the R/V on the lower deck? Was she doing some kind of funky dance? None of us knew. What we did know was that she was awake and being taken somewhere on the upper decks, possibly to the bridge. Of course, Aiden immediately thought that meant that she was going to be gang raped by the man in charge and his cronies and we almost had to tackle her to keep her from going full wolf right then and there. It wasn’t until I pointed out that Ashley had smiled at us and she wouldn’t have done that if she was scared that Aiden

finally calmed enough that we weren't worried about her rage form making an unwelcome appearance. It had, however, added a new urgency to my plan to get all of us free. Thus I came up with the brilliant idea of using the bathroom to conceal my true motives.

Now, as my heart settled back to normal, I activated my energy blade and worked it around in my hand so I held it in a reverse grip. With my hands held high over my head, I carefully rotated the blade inward towards the thin band of plastic binding me until the very tip touched it. Instantly, a tiny portion of the plastic tie evaporated and I could feel the tight grip immediately loosen. Dissipating my blade before I accidentally cut off too much and spoil my ruse, or sever a limb, I flushed the toilet before quickly wetting my hands in the sink and drying them with a paper towel.

When I exited the bathroom, the man who was currently my personal guard was shifting from foot to foot nervously. The moment he saw me he grabbed me by the upper arm and jerked me back down the hall towards the lounge so quickly I almost flailed my arms out of instinct. Fortunately, I quickly clasped my hands together before that could happen and thus for all the world it looked like my hands were still tied.

As we drew closer to the lounge area, I caught Aiden and Angela looking expectantly towards me, both of them clearly tensed and ready to spring into action. A quick look around gave me an update on just where our guards were currently located. They were scattered, but had clustered in small groups. As Aiden would have undoubtedly pointed out, they were adopting a herd mentality where they congregated in numbers due to an instinctual urge to amass numbers to fight off any attackers. The problem was, they didn't realize the attacks were coming from all directions and were more than capable of dealing with small groups.

As I returned my gaze to that of my friends' while passing through the entryway into the lounge, I gave them a predatory smile which Aiden returned, nodded, and attacked.

The Highlanders, Bridge

“What you doin’ here with her Toby?” a young man in his twenties standing outside the doorway to the bridge inquired as his gaze shifted to the beautiful young girl standing at his side with a look of desire that had her squirming uncomfortably.

“She wanted to talk with Captain Shepherd,” Toby said, shifting slightly so he partially blocked the man’s view of Ashley in a subtle gesture of protection.

“Don’t think Captain’s gonna like that,” the man said, frowning at what was clearly a breach of protocol. Well, protocol hadn’t actually been established during this little takeover, but it seemed like the right way for him to think about it.

“Let me worry about what the Captain’s gonna like and not like. This girl’s got something she wants to say to him and I think we should let her.”

“But-”

“It’s a little girl,” Toby interrupted, “And her hands are still tied. It’s not like she can hurt you Cletus, unless you’re scared a pretty little thing like this can knock you on your ass,” he challenged.

The affront to his manhood was more than enough to have Cletus glare at the older man before jerking his head in a ‘go ahead’ gesture, allowing Toby to lead Ashley onto the bridge.

Looking about as they entered the room, Ashley noted that several of the crew members of the ship remained at their stations; however they were being closely monitored by members of the invading force to ensure none of them tried anything inappropriate. The large, overweight man relaxing in the Captain’s chair

was laughing with one of his people when his attention swung over to her and Toby upon their entry.

“Toby,” The man who was obviously the Captain Shepherd she’d been told about said suspiciously, “What’s going on here?” She didn’t miss the way his hand dropped to the butt of his pistol settled in its holster on his hip and suppressed a shudder that wanted to ripple through her body.

“This is Ashley,” Toby introduced her, “She wanted to talk with you.”

“Now why the hell would I want to talk to some little girl?” Captain Shepherd barked, half laughing at the ludicrous idea that he would deign to let a teenage girl address him.

Before Toby could respond to defend her, Ashley spoke up, “Because you know what you’re doing is wrong.”

The laughter immediately fled from the Captain’s eyes and he slowly eased his bulk out of the chair. “What did you say girl?”

Swallowing down the lump of fear that suddenly formed in her throat and temporarily cut off her voice, she continued without being able to keep the tremor out of her voice. “Toby explained why you’re doing this, and I understand that everything that has happened is causing you and your people pain, but taking over a ship and holding people hostage to make demands of the government isn’t the way to deal with it.”

“Oh really,” the Captain said in a sarcastically conversational tone, “And what would you suggest, huh little girl?”

Taking a deep breath to steady her now jangling nerves, Ashley lifted her gaze so she was looking directly up into the large man’s dark one. “I know you’ve already tried to contact your Fisheries Minister, and that you’ve been ignored. I’m not defending that because it’s indefensible. But there are other ways for you to raise awareness about what you and your fellow fishermen are so worried about that don’t involve borderline terrorist activities.”

“Like what?” the man scoffed, clearly enjoying how he was about to put this uppity little bitch in her place when she obviously had no idea what she was talking about.

“Have you tried contacting the media?”

“The media? Pah!” he spat, grinning triumphantly that he was so easily able to counter her obvious argument. “They had plenty of people on the radio when the government first made these new regs and it didn’t change a thing.”

“Were they people like you?”

Shepherd blinked, taken off guard by the girl’s question. “Whadya mean?”

“Were they official representatives of the government? Science experts? Or were they fishermen like you and your people?”

“Well,” he said, deflating just a bit, “They were people from the government and eco...eco.”

“Ecology experts?” Ashley suggested gently.

“Yeah, them.”

“Then why don’t you go on the radio or television and tell people, including the government, just how much these regulations have hurt you?” she inquired. “Why not add your voice to the discussion?”

“Oh we’re adding it,” Captain Shepherd sneered, waving his hand at the bridge behind him, “This will make sure we get heard by everyone.”

Shaking her head, Ashley looked at him imploringly. “It will make people look at you like you’re extremists. A bunch of wild fishermen who can’t handle what has happened so they’ve gone to extremes to throw a tantrum.”

Instantly, the pistol whipped out of its holster so it was pointed squarely at Ashley’s head, making her scream in terror and lift her bound hands before face in an instinctive, protective gesture that would ultimately prove futile.

“Howie!” Toby yelled in horror.

“What the hell do you know!” Captain Shepherd shouted, his eyes blazing with anger. “You stupid bitch. You’re not even from here. I can tell by yer voice. Yer from the mainland. Why the fuck should you even care about what happens to people like me. All you care about is making sure that fish that *we* caught gets cooked up just right otherwise you throw a shit fit about it. You want to talk about *me* throwin’ a tantrum?”

By this point, the Captain had slowly stepped closer to the terrified girl, who had since sunk to her knees and was peering up at him with frightened eyes as tears rolled down her cheeks. His gaze was so focused on her that he never even saw Toby step forward and slam a fist squarely into his face, causing the ship Captain to stumble back.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!” Toby shouted in anger and disbelief. “What the fuck are you thinking pointing a gun at a little girl like that and scaring the life out of her?”

“Yeah Howard,” another, older man who had been on the bridge said, “That ain’t right at all. She’s just a kid.”

“Shut up!” Captain Shepherd bellowed, reasserting his command by standing straight once more and futilely trying to wipe the blood pouring from his nose as he leveled the gun in everyone’s general direction. “I’m in command here and if you don’t like it you’re a traitor. And traitors don’t have any place on *my* ship!”

Shifting his position, Toby stood directly in front of where Ashley knelt, folding his arms across his chest and glaring at the man whom he’d called friend for so many years. “I’m not letting you hurt this girl Howard.”

The grin the Captain gave him was the only warning anyone had that the man was quickly losing his grip on sanity and rational thought. “Fine.”

* * * *

As my latest target went down like a sack of potatoes, I quickly did an evaluation of how we were doing. The element of surprise had definitely been on our side and we'd taken full advantage of it. Once I'd downed my guard with a swift punch to the balls, Aiden, Angela, and I had all moved as one to engage the hostage takers. We each took a different tact as was appropriate to our own individual abilities.

For Angela, that was simply...well, fighting like a girl. She had started by kicking the man closest to her in the nuts, doubling him over before driving her knee up into his face. Once that man had fallen, she had leaped for the second in the pair and raked her nails across his face, blinding him and setting him up for a punch in the throat that had him collapsing to the ground and struggling to breathe.

By the time Angela had dropped her second opponent, Aiden had already working on her fifth. I had been slightly occupied with my own targets at the time, but even if I hadn't been I doubt I would have even been able to follow her blur of movement. My wild friend had been more than ready to attack and my signal had been the quintessential "letting her off the chain" moment, allowing her unleash that pent up fury that had been steadily building inside of her. She hadn't wolfed out, or exploded into her rage form, thank God, but her attacks had truly been vicious. Whatever it was that she had done, it had left the men she'd attacked broken and bleeding, and fortunately alive. She'd also never hesitated before launching her second attack against yet another cluster of hostage takers, who by this point were justifiably horrified.

For my part, I'd taken on a more skilled and precise course of attack. The first thing I'd done is manifest a pair of energy blades, one for each hand, which I had used to slice apart the firearms my first cluster of targets had held. Once they were weaponless, it had been actually surprisingly easy to nimbly dodge their clumsy swings and retaliate with precisely aimed strikes that had each of them

down on the floor and groaning within moments. Clearly, these men had no concept of fighting beyond perhaps a bar brawl. Certainly they had proven that they had no idea how to handle a pair of genetically enhanced girls possessed of speed and/or strength that was far superior to them. Our technique was not perfect, we weren't skilled martial artists after all, but our mutations allowed us to take rudimentary ability and amplify it to a degree that ordinary humans simply couldn't match. Within perhaps five minutes, if my internal clock remained accurate, all of the hostage takers were down and out of commission.

“We have to get to Ashley!” Aiden yelled, already racing in the direction we had last seen her being taken towards.

I knew Angela would never be able to keep up with us, especially since Aiden was moving at a full sprint, so I called out to her, “Stay here and help these people,” before racing after Aiden. I'd only just managed to catch up with her as she was rebounding off a wall with such force she actually cleared the stairs in one leap before sprinting up the next flight. I pushed myself to stay right behind her and didn't bother to ask if she knew where she was going. She clearly had Ashley's scent and was on the hunt. We did encounter a small pocket of resistance during our flight, but it turned out I didn't even need to do anything. Aiden simply tore through them without even breaking stride and I actually found myself hoping one of them would still be able to walk okay when he finally recovered.

We had just passed by a sign on the wall indicating the location of the bridge just up a flight of stairs when the sound of a gunshot exploded through the air, immediately followed by a terrified scream that I would know anywhere. Aiden obviously recognized it as well because her growl was something truly terrifying to hear. We exploded through the open doorway of the bridge and entered our worst nightmare.

An older man lying upon the ground with blood blossoming on the front of his shirt. His head was cradled in Ashley's lap as she sobbed and worked furiously to try and staunch the wound with her still bound hands. The bulk of the hostage takers, as well as the crew that still remained on the bridge, were all staring in shocked horror at one rather overweight man who was grinning wildly as he stood

over Ashley and the man he'd apparently shot with the gun he held pressed against the back of Ashley's head.

"Fucking bitch!" he sneered as his finger began tightening on the trigger that would end our friend's life even as Aiden and I leapt to end his.

That was when his head exploded, along with the electrical control panel directly beside him. Whatever it was that had caused it also served to jerk him bodily enough that when his finger reflexively tightened on the trigger, the shot went wild and buried itself in the ceiling of the bridge instead of Ashley's head. As his headless corpse collapsed to the floor, the entire bridge erupted into chaos as the bridge crew valiantly fought against the hostage takers to reclaim control of their ship.

This lasted for approximately three seconds before an inhuman roar filled the air and caused everyone to freeze like frightened animals before looking at a very pissed off Aiden whose eyes were practically glowing with golden light.

"Get...The Fuck...*DOWN!*"

In light of her voice regressing to the level of her primal rage form, and the fact that no girl should be capable of sounding like that, every man in the room was face down on the floor in less than a heartbeat. For my part, I put my hand on her shoulder and tried to soothe the nearly out of control rage she was quickly losing her grip on. "Aiden, it's okay," I told her quietly, "Their done. It's over."

Instead of relaxing, I only saw a smile appeared on her face that had me wondering if we would need to find a lawyer to defend her in a murder case after all this was done. "Check on Ashley," she said in a voice that was only still partially human, "I'll make sure no one does something stupid." When she turned her head slightly, I saw her give me a quick wink that had me breathing a little easier. Aiden might still have been pissed, but she was also still in control. It was likely there was little to no danger of her rage form making a sudden appearance...at least as long as the hostage takers didn't do something incredibly foolish like try to attack.

Nodding to my friend, I quickly went to my knees at Ashley's side and saw that while tears still dampened her cheeks, her expression had changed from fear to

one of determination. “He’s been shot near the heart,” she informed me in what I’m sure she thought was a clinical tone but was filled with hitches and tear-filled gasps. When her gaze lifted to mine I could tell what she was going to say before the words ever left her mouth. “He won’t make it before help gets here.”

There was no need to ask what she was planning to do, nor was there any reason to argue against it. I knew our sweet little Ashley far too well to try and talk her out of trying to help someone in need, particularly someone who would die without her help, regardless of the fact that they had committed a terrorist-like act. “Go ahead,” I told her, not so much giving her permission but assurance, “I’ll be right here the whole time.”

Nodding, she closed her eyes and pressed her hands flat against the man’s wound. A bare moment later I saw her hands begin to faintly glow a soft green, a glow which intensified as she poured her healing energies into him, causing the bullet which had been lodged within his chest to work its way out of the wound and fall to the floor with a soft *tink* of metal. Immediately following that, I observed the wound begin to quite rapidly close in on itself until nothing remained of it save for some traces of blood on the skin and a hole in the man’s shirt.

When I looked up to Ashley to make sure she was all right, I was struck by what I saw. Ashley herself was a very ethereal creature. Aiden often said she was the embodiment of the “Disney princess” in both looks and spirit and I often agreed with her. However, as she used her power to save the life of this man, I experienced something entirely different when I looked at my friend. She no longer even appeared human. No, that’s not quite correct. She still looked as she always did, but there was something about her now that transcended humanity. It was almost as though she was a benevolent entity, a goddess of purity, goodness, and light. I had observed her use her power before when she had healed me after spraining an ankle while running with Aiden, but she’d never displayed anything like this.

With a soft moan, Ashley slumped to the floor as consciousness fled from her and I quickly gathered her into my lap. I knew from her telling us about the previous times she’d used her power that she might be out for a while, but it was impossible to know just how long that would be. Regardless, I silently vowed that I

would watch over her and protect her the entire time; and anyone who sought her harm would die knowing what a woman's wrath truly was.

"She okay?" Aiden asked from where she still stood watch, her voice having returned to its normal tone and cadence.

"I think so," I said as I saw the man she healed slowly regain consciousness, "She just needs to rest for a little bit."

"Ashley!" the man cried in horror as he opened his eyes and saw her asleep in my lap.

"She's all right," I told him cautiously, preparing to manifest a blade that turn him into so much sliced and cooked meat the instant he displayed any kind of intent to harm her. "She healed you."

"Howie," the man said vaguely, clearly still mentally recovering from being so grievously wounded, "He shot me. He really shot me. Where is he?" he raged, getting to his feet and looking about only to stop when his gaze fell upon his headless corpse. "Son of a bitch," he whispered before looking at me, "You did that?"

Shaking my head, I looked around briefly before I saw it. Had I not known exactly what I was looking for it would have been easy to miss with the darkness outside contrasting starkly with the lit up interior of the bridge to create an almost mirror-like quality on the bridge's windows. But there it was, causing a disruption in what was otherwise a perfect reflection in the glass.

It was a single bullet hole.

* * * *

By the time the Coast Guard arrived thirty minutes later, Ashley had since recovered, been freed of her restraint, and was huddled beneath a blanket snuggling against both Aiden and I in a corner of the lounge sipping a hot cup of tea provided by the man she'd healed, Toby. He'd actually sat with us the entire time while the two of them explained exactly what had happened and why the attack had occurred in the first place. By the time they had finished, I still was obviously less than happy about the whole thing even happening, but it was tempered with an understanding that these were men who were rapidly approaching desperate straits and doing the only thing they could think of to keep their families safe. I could tell by the look of sympathy on Angela's face that they thought the same, but Aiden was clearly unconvinced. Then again, having witnessed their leader essentially going rogue and nearly putting a bullet in our friend's head, her unwillingness to forgive so easily was perfectly understandable.

It was also during this time while we waited for the Coast Guard and Naval Forces to arrive and take custody of the men that I heard various rumblings coming from the passengers regarding our sudden counter-offensive against our hostage takers. I had hoped that perhaps the chaos of the fight would have been enough to obscure the use of my powers, but Aiden shortly confirmed my fears.

"They're talking about your energy blade," she said quietly, clearly trying very hard not to growl at anyone that looked at us funny, "And how fast both of us were. Word's also spread about how Ashley healed Toby." Sighing, she shook her head. "I think we need to get ready for some serious interrogation."

"Canada doesn't have an MCO," I pointed out, "And unless I miss my guess, we have a very effective ambassador spreading some serious good will right now."

When Aiden looked at me in confusion, I nodded to a space in the lounge across the way. Shifting her gaze, she joined me in watching Ashley sitting within a circle of small children, a book in her lap as she read them a fairy tale in her soft, melodious voice while they looked on with huge smiles on their faces and looks of adoration in their eyes. Had she been wearing a princess gown like Cinderella or Belle at the moment, it would not have only been heartbreakingly sweet, but ironically enough it would have seemed perfectly normal for her.

“How the hell does she do that?” Aiden wondered aloud.

“Our Ashley is a very special girl,” I said.

When one of the parents, who had been sitting close by the story circle, rose and approached us, I could feel Aiden tense in preparation to get a tongue lashing of some sort regarding putting her child or children in danger. What she didn't expect, nor did I, was for the woman to embrace her without saying a word before doing the same with me. “Thank you,” she said earnestly.

“Ummm,” Aiden shuddered, clearly not knowing how to respond to this unexpected gratitude.

“You're welcome,” I said with a shy smile.

“And don't you go worrying about being mutants,” she said firmly, “We don't think like they do in the States, Hell, we got that mutant school in Corner Brook after all. I'm guessin' that's where you girls are headed.”

“Yes ma'am,” Aiden said politely.

“Well you don't be shy about comin' down the bay for a visit and a cup of tea.”

“Thank you ma'am,” I said, not wanting to tarnish her obviously kind gesture by pointing out I had no idea who this woman was, where she lived, and what the hell “down the bay” even meant.

As she returned to where Ashley was reading to the children, it struck me just how oddly everyone was treating this entire situation. Yes, plenty of people had been scared during the entire hostage event, but now that it was over they had come together with a sense of community I had never experienced before, not even in Wolf Springs. What made it even more surreal was the fact that the ferry crew was actually sitting with our hostage takers drinking tea and conversing like everything was normal when I would have fully expected them to have placed them somewhere far more secure.

“They can't go anywhere,” I heard behind me and turned to see Angela holding two steaming cups of tea, one of which she handed to me. “You had a

confused look on your face,” she explained when I started wondering if she possessed some kind of telepathy I didn’t know about. “I was chatting with one of the crew and asked him about their pretty unorthodox holding method. He told me that these guys have nowhere to go, that half of the passengers know who they are already, and they’re fully prepared to accept the consequences of their actions.”

“Not exactly hardened criminals huh?” I said before taking a sip.

“Not in the slightest,” she agreed. “You heard Toby’s story. They’re just a bunch of normal guys who were pushed to the breaking point with government regulations. They were probably even more surprised than we were when their Captain went all psycho killer. According to them, none of their guns were even loaded except his, and his was supposed to be empty too.”

“They didn’t want to hurt anyone,” I surmised with a nod, “They just wanted to get the government’s attention so they could plead their case.”

“That’s what it looks like.”

Sighing, I looked over at the assemblage of hostage takers. They were smiling and talking as though this was just another normal sea voyage, but I could see the pain and worry in their eyes. Each and every one of them knew what they had done was wrong and now faced the uncertainty of what was to come next. “I hope the courts don’t treat them too harshly,” I mused.

“From what I understand from talking to people,” my lover said, slipping an arm around my waist, causing a quickly little thrill to run through me from the contact, “The court system in Newfoundland is pretty liberal and understanding. They’ll do some prison time, but it’s a good bet their circumstances will mitigate it.”

“Good,” I replied, turning my head to press a kiss to her temple and smiling when I felt a small shiver come from her. “You know, we’ve got a little time before the authorities show up,” I purred in her ear.

Grinning, she took the cup out of my hand and placed it on a nearby table along with her own before taking me by the hand and leading me from the lounge. When I looked back I saw Aiden blinking at us in surprise before rolling her eyes.

Just before I lost sight of her around the corner I heard her say in exasperation, “Oh for fuck’s sake!”

Bingo.

Undisclosed Island, Cabot Strait

“Fine work Sergeant,” Colonel Flagg said as they packed up their gear and waited for Eric’s friend to return with his helicopter to pick them up.

“Mmmhmmm,” the sniper mumbled, clearly in deep thought.

“Something on your mind?”

Shaking his head, Eric carefully reseated his rifle in its foam cut-out before closing and securing the case. “Just doing a mental after-action review of the operation.”

“Well don’t worry,” the military man said with a grin, “You’ll be going through a full debrief.”

“Joy,” Eric grumbled.

“It won’t take long,” the Colonel assured him, “Since I was here with you I’ll be able to confirm everything. How do you feel it went?”

“I would have preferred having a different loadout,” the sniper replied. “I got lucky that I saw those imperfections in the window. If they hadn’t been there, I would have been forced to fire a spoiler shot to break the glass before trying for a

kill shot and that could have resulted in the Captain shooting more than one person. He definitely would have blown the girl's head off before I got off the kill shot.”

“So you would have preferred an anti-material rifle,” Flagg reasoned.

“Absolutely,” Eric confirmed, “I would have been able to eliminate the target with the first shot regardless of the glass.”

“That’s good to know,” the Colonel said to himself, making a mental note. “What about backup?”

Eric shrugged at that. “With this operation, it may or may not have made a difference. According to what you heard from Operations, we got lucky that there were a couple of mutants who could handle themselves among the passengers, so they made our job a lot easier, but the entire group would have stood down the moment their Captain was dead anyway.”

“Well, I can tell you I’m very happy with this little ‘field test’,” Flagg said, looking over at the sound of whirling helicopter blades in the distance, “And I think you’ll be a very valuable addition to Apex Group.”

Eric was about to ask just what the hell Apex Group was when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. While the Colonel went about signaling the incoming help and guiding it to land with a flashlight, he opened the smartphone and looked down at the single text message displayed listed as coming from an unknown source.

Good work.

Chicago, Illinois

“So they’re okay?”

Ashe closed out the cellular communication program and glanced over from his command center as Gear walked in from his fabrication lab. “Yeah. No casualties beyond the leader of the assault party, thanks to Ashley.”

Nodding, the gadgeteer took a seat next to his friend and boss and looked at the multitude of screens displaying various cameras from *The Highlander’s* interior. “You surprised me, you know.”

“How so?” Ashe asked as he picked up a tablet and began reviewing some intelligence data regarding sightings of a new super villain in town.

“I thought for sure I wouldn’t even have a chance to call for an airlift before you were already at the airport.”

The truth of the matter was, that had nearly happened. Once Ashe had intercepted the distress communication from the ferry and tapped into the onboard video surveillance system, he had been nearly out the door when he saw Ashley’s unconscious form being bound and carried away. It was only his eminently pragmatic side that told him it would take far too long for him to get there and that only thing he could do was monitor the situation and try to glean as much information as possible in order to effectively mount a retaliatory strike against the assault force at a later time. It was only when he did a full psychological profile on every member of the group, a task that took all of ten minutes, and realized that they were non-violent that he had relaxed fractionally. Social media indicated that they had all been quite upset about the changes to the fishing regulations within the province and this had all the earmarks of desperate, but peaceful men simply trying to inform a receptive, yet increasingly environmentally friendly government of their troubles. The fact that not one of them, save for the leader, displayed any physical signs of significant aggression was another piece of data that eased his mind only very slightly.

The real source of minimal relief had been the sat phone communication from the Canadian Special Forces Group indicating they had a command officer and sniper in position preparing to take out the leader. A quick tap into satellite imaging had located their position quite easily and facial recognition had taken care of identifying the sniper himself. *At least they were smart enough to bring in the best*, he had thought. If anyone would have been capable of making a precise kill shot from that distance, factoring in Newfoundland's substantial changing winds, and the constant movement of the ship itself, it was Eric Howlett. Thankfully, he had been proven correct when the sniper had indeed eliminated the one aggressor on the vessel.

Of course, that wasn't in any way discounting the actions on the part of Aiden, Kitty, and WiseCrack who had once again proven that they were increasing in skill and effectiveness when it came to threat assessment, tactical planning, and implementation. While it certainly hadn't been the way he would have handled the situation, the trio had done a very effective job of eliminating all of their threats with casualties, both civilian and combatant.

Still, that didn't mean that he hadn't been practically vibrating with the need to act the entire time he watched the events unfold before him. One thing Ashe did not do well with was standing by and watching helplessly.

Instead of responding to Gear's statement regarding his inaction, Ashe tapped out a few commands on the tablet before handing it to his friend. "I want you to start working on this."

Taking the device, Gear looked it over for several minutes, panning and zooming in to examine the details of the technical schematic displayed on the screen. "Interesting," he mused, "This isn't your standard hardware."

"I recognize that I need to have more options available to me to fit the mission parameters."

"Well," Gear said as he already had started working out how he could make what he saw on the screen a reality, "It shouldn't be too hard to work up the receiver itself. The magazine well, bolt configuration, and barrel modifications are going to be damn tricky. We're almost going into divisor territory here."

“The entire assembly is fully within the scope of modern physics and metallurgy,” Ashe said as he turned back to his command center, “WiseCrack can help you with the programming algorithms when she gets here. You’ll need to make sure that the fabrication can be done rapidly and in multiple numbers.”

“Multiple-?” The weaponsmith looked at his friend in surprise. “Are thinking of-”

“Recent events have had me reconsidering the option,” Ashe interrupted, steepling his fingers before him as his narrowed gaze took in everything on the multitude of computer monitors before him.

“You always said you didn’t trust anyone else to do this,” Gear pointed out needlessly.

“I still don’t,” the dark vigilante confirmed, “But I also recognize that our current operation doesn’t allow for multiple or rapid long-distance deployment. It’s just one avenue I am exploring,” he said, tapping a few keys on his keyboard and bringing up a technical schematic of some kind of circular object affixed to a flat base.

“What’s that?” Gear asked, leaning closer.

“Another avenue.”

Channel Port Aux Basque, Newfoundland

“Well this certainly was a fun trip,” Angela grumbled as she started the R/V and waited for the vehicles in front of her to proceed off the ferry.

“Come on Angel,” I said from the passenger seat, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek, “At least we got to finish what we started,” I told her with a husky purr.

“Yeah, right before we spent about two hours talking to the cops,” Aiden quipped from the jump bench behind them. “I thought for sure they were going to start looking for silver bullets when I told them I was a werewolf.”

“Stop being dramatic,” Ashley chided from beside her, “You two saved everyone and the RCMP knew it. How many times did that constable tell you how impressed he was again?”

“I...lost count,” Aiden admitted grudgingly, clearly still uncomfortable with all of the praise she and I had received. “What about you?” she said, quickly diverting the attention to our crimson-haired friend, “Those kids were just fawning all over you and their parents thought you were God’s gift.”

Ashley shrugged but couldn’t hide the faint blush that tinted her cheeks. “They were scared and I just wanted them to feel safe after everything that happened. Besides, I love kids.”

“Speaking of which,” I said, turning in my seat to smile at her, “I have to say, you handled that whole thing pretty well. Well, after you had a panic attack and got knocked out that is.”

“Don’t remind me,” she groaned, placing her hand to the bump on her head that was hidden beneath that glorious red mane, “I really hate being knocked out. I’m just glad I woke up to something a lot better than I did the last time it happened.”

“But you didn’t panic,” I pointed out, “Even though you were tied up and away from us, you stayed calm and even got Toby on your side, though I do think it was pretty stupid to have him take you to his Captain.”

“They weren’t bad people,” she insisted, “They were just hard working fishermen trying to cope with what they thought was a raw deal by their government. It wasn’t their fault that psycho conned them into committing an act of terror, they were just desperate.”

“She’s right,” Angela said as she started guiding the R/V towards the ferry exit ramp now that traffic ahead of us had started moving, “They weren’t like the bad guys we’ve met before. From what I got talking with other passengers, they were generally good guys.”

“Why do you think I didn’t rip their throats out?” Aiden said, grinning when I blinked at her in surprise. “What? You think I went full out when we attacked? Super hearing, remember?” she said, tapping her ear. “The whole time when we were planning I was hearing a whole bunch of people talking about how weird it was for those guys to be taking over a ship like that, that they never hurt anyone, how did it come to this, yadda yadda yadda.” Seeing the looks of disbelief on mine and Ashley’s face’s, her own darkened with a look of hurt. “I’m not just some out of control animal, you know,” she accused quietly.

“No,” I assured her, reaching back to take her hand while Ashley slipped her arms around her waist to hug her, “We *never* think that. Brash, yes. Quick to act, sure. But never out of control and definitely not an animal.”

“You’re our friend,” Ashley told her in a passionate whisper, “Our best friend. Our sister. And I’ll slap the shit out of anyone who calls you an out of control animal.”

I was about to make a joke about Ashley hitting anyone, and from the smirk on her face I’d wager Aiden was too, but one look at the solemn determination on our friend’s face made the words evaporate before they had a chance to form. She absolutely meant what she said, every word. Despite being a vehemently non-violent person, almost to the point of professional victim in my opinion, I didn’t have a single doubt in that moment that should anyone speak such offensive words about Aiden, Ashley wouldn’t hesitate to slap the bitch right out of them. To that end, I also would happily slice anyone who thought it was a good idea to harm my friends into tiny, meaty chunks and I’d wager Aiden would do far worse.

As Angela guided the R/V onto the highway for the three hour drive that would take us to Tearmann, I reflected on all of our lives and the way they had changed. Things had come a long way from that moment when Angela had almost run Ashley over in downtown Wolf Springs. We’d gone from complete strangers who didn’t really trust anyone, to friends, to the closest of sisters regardless of a

lack of blood connection. We laughed, we cried, and we fought, but we were always there for one another without hesitation or question. No matter the trials we had faced these last months, absolutely nothing could even shake the bond that the three of us had, no matter how bad things got. From oversexed college rapists, to lust demons, to our own inner nightmares, we had survived because together we had a strength that nothing or no one could even touch.

We were the ultimate triquetra.