

***Sunday, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016***

***The Scottish Highlands, Scotland***

It had been a twelve-hour, five-hundred-mile, drive.

They had set off at four in the morning, avoiding the early morning traffic. Marinette, Adrien, Alya, Trevor, and Eric were remaining at the Safehouse with Amy and Alexandra, leaving the remaining eighteen to be shipped north in four vehicles.

"Where are we going?" Kaitlin bleated for about the thousandth time as they travelled along a narrow road.

"We are heading to sea," Cassie finally admitted, then she grinned, an evil glint in her eye. "You remember your SOLaS training, don't you, honey?"

"Vividly!" Kaitlin growled as her eyes narrowed.

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The four young girls were frightened.

It was impossible to see, what with all the water and the spray, but each of the girls had tears flooding down their faces. Each was very close to becoming terrified as they found themselves falling into the heaving water. They each plunged into the unforgiving waves which closed over their heads and it felt like hours, instead of just mere seconds, before four small heads burst out of the water and coughed out the water before breathing in lungful's of lifegiving air.

The waves peaked at over twelve feet lifting the girls upwards and then dropping them into the troughs before another wave swept in and carried them to the tip before dropping them again. Their lifejackets keeping them afloat and their heads above the water. Slowly, their training began to overtake the shock of the immersion into the cold, heaving water. Then came a shout over the screaming wind.

"Over here! Over here!"

The four girls began to swim towards the voice as rain splashed on their faces and the waves threw even more water over their heads. As they crested the next wave, they caught sight of the dayglo orange liferaft, just a dozen yards away from them. Hanging onto the boarding ladder were Cassie and Natasha. The four girls young were all reasonable swimmers, but the waves were strong and the raft was being blown by the wind in the opposite direction.

"Move!" came a voice from behind them and they turned to see Cameron and Craig swimming hard towards them.

With the help of the boys, the four girls were edged closer and closer to the liferaft and safety. Kaitlin was overjoyed when she felt Cassie grab her outstretched hand. But there was no time for

greetings as the girl was thrust out of the water and thrown into the liferaft. Electra followed, unceremoniously thrown aboard after her friend. Harper and Naomi both clambered up the boarding ladder and heaved themselves aboard. Craig hauled himself up next, then Cassie was heaved aboard by the strong arms of Cameron before he pushed his twin sister aboard and then climbed aboard himself.

The inside of the liferaft was lit only by a small LED light fitting at the apex of the rubber arch which held up the dayglo orange canopy. Cameron and Craig fought to seal the entry hatch and prevent more of the freezing cold water from entering their temporary shelter from the raging storm. The girls were each shaking with cold and fear as they tried to get comfortable and wait out the storm.

The wind roared making speech next to impossible. The raging sea heaved the small raft up and down and then over almost onto its beam ends. The eight people – men, women, and children – all crammed into the tiny space felt claustrophobic and queasy. The raft was tossed about on the towering waves for another fifteen minutes before the violent movements began to ease. Then miraculously, the raft stopped moving entirely and the raging wind died down to nothing. Silence reigned, followed by the very vocal relief of the eight people present. For a moment, nothing happened, but then there was movement and the Velcro fixings of the entry hatch were pulled apart.

"Well done, class; you all did very well. Let's get you all dried off, warmed up, and then we can debrief."

The man vanished as they began to scramble out of the liferaft and onto the side of the oversized swimming pool.

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Oh, yes, Kaitlin remembered her Safety Of Life at Sea training, all right! It had scared the living daylights out of her – Harper, Naomi, and Electra had not exactly enjoyed it, either. Craig had thought it was fun – but then he was a boy and therefore, strange. As far as she could remember, Cassie had not been a fan of her own dunking, so it was rich of her to be teasing her youngest daughter about it! Kaitlin was dragged out of her thoughts by the view over Loch Ewe – it was amazing. Midway between the two sides of the Loch, two hulls were visible. One, in a dark glossy blue, the other, slightly larger hull, in a glossy grey.

"She's moored out there on the Z-Berth," Cassie announced.

"There's *two* boats out there," Harper pointed out as she stared out over the water.

"The other yacht is Mindy's."

"The *Ocean Vigilante*?" Naomi asked.

"That would be the one."

"What's our one called?" Kaitlin asked.

"Well, she has no name right now, just a designation: Hull 67."

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### ***Aultbea***

#### ***Northwest Highlands, Scotland***

They were met at the dock by a dirty workboat which sat in the water, its diesel engines burbling away in readiness for departure.

"Good evening!" a smiling Petty Officer offered in greeting.

"Evening, Petty Officer!" Chief Petty Officer (Retired) David Montgomery responded as he waved everybody aboard the workboat.

A seaman stood on the foredeck ready to cast off as bags and packs were passed aboard. After fifteen minutes, all was ready and the mooring lines were cast off as the Petty Officer advanced the throttles, turning the workboat away from the NATO POL depot on the east shore of the loch and turned northwest to leave the Isle of Ewe to port en route to the Z-Berth and the two moored yachts.

The trip was short, being well under two nautical miles.

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### ***Hull 67***

The forty-metre hull was a gloss deep blue with a red hull below the waterline.

A quarter-inch gold stripe ran from just above the anchor, along the port and starboard sides. The upper works of the mega-yacht were white and extended up over three decks topped off with a rigid sun canopy and a pair of satellite communications domes mounted high-up above the superstructure on the buff-coloured mast. Aft, the hull carved down to a teak deck just above the water with a pair of stairways leading up to the main deck on either side.

The workboat came alongside at the stern and a naval rating aboard the yacht took the mooring lines and tied them off on a pair of highly-polished, stainless steel stanchions. Many sets of eyes darted around as they all looked up at the towering decks above them. The yacht was lit up, looking homely and inviting in the looming darkness and under the grey Scottish skies.

"Engines are warm, as is the lub oil. Fuel tanks are full and the fresh water's been topped off. I also took the liberty of storing the galley with fresh goods."

"Thank you, Petty Officer," the Chief replied approvingly.

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Once aboard, Natasha took charge.

"This is the main deck and we have the lounge, the dining area, the galley, and the master cabin. Jasper and Lynn will take the master

cabin, forward. Everyone else will sleep on the lower deck. Olivia, Jessica, Naomi, and Harper – you will occupy the aft cabin. Kaitlin, Yvette, and Electra – the forward cabin. Cassie and Keira will take the starboard cabin while myself and my brother will occupy the port cabin. Take the stairs down on the starboard side. The boys need to go past the galley and head down the stairs forward. Craig, Jeremy and Christopher will take the aft starboard side cabin while David will take the port forward cabin.”

“You all have fifteen minutes to stow your gear securely,” the Chief directed. “Then you will all return to the lounge for a safety brief before we head out to sea.”

“Safety brief?” Harper growled unhappily.

“Yes, young lady,” the Chief said sternly. “You may have free rein while fighting ashore, but when you are in one of my aircraft, or on this yacht, *I* set the rules.”

“Yes, Chief,” Harper replied quickly as she fled forward.

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### ***Twenty minutes later***

“... The seas off Scotland are wild, at this time of year. This yacht is nothing but a pint pot in the grand scheme of things. Those of you who received training in life rafts can inform those who have not, about what it was like to be dunked in cold water and forced to swim for your lives. While we are on what amounts to a pleasure cruise, *do not get complacent!* The events of the yesterday should all be fresh in everybody’s mind – *constant vigilance!* You have all been shown your lifejackets and the locations for the life rafts. I urge you all to familiarise yourselves with the routine for abandoning ship and the fire-fighting facilities. For now, I want Cameron, Craig, Jeremy, and Olivia on the fo’c’sle to help with the lines, if you please. Natasha, Cassie, Naomi, and Harper, please lay aft to remove the springs and aft mooring lines. Keira, I understand you have your bridge ticket – please lay to the bridge. You and I will take this barge to sea.”

“Aye, aye, Chief!” Keira said smartly as she headed for the stairs to the bridge.

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### ***The Bridge***

Keira received a shock when she entered the broad bridge which extended from beam to beam and was located roughly amidships. Five large, sharply-angled, windows looked out over the extensive bow with additional glazing to port and starboard as well as a door to each bridge wing.

Standing at the port console, facing forwards was a tall woman with her fiery-red hair tied back into a bun on the back of her head. The

woman turned to greet Keira with a broad grin. Keira was more than surprised to see her former cabinmate aboard the yacht.

"Daddy suggested that I take some leave to come help you guys. I understand that you've got yourselves into a little bit of a pickle!" Sub-Lieutenant Sarah Perrin commented.

"It's good to see you, Sarah," Keira said as she hugged her friend. "Does Cassie know?"

"Not yet - Mum does, though."

"She'll freak," Keira pointed out.

"That she will," Sarah grinned. "You'll be the First Lieutenant aboard. I'll be assuming the Captain's duties with the Chief in charge of the deck and the engine room. We'll alternate the watches while at sea - you take the port watch while I'll take the starboard watch."

"Standard dogged?" Keira queried.

"Well remembered!" Sarah chuckled.

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The yacht was a hive of activity.

From the bridge which was bathed in a dull red illumination, Keira and Sarah kept an eye on the digital and graphical instrumentation whilst watching the activity on the cameras which covered the entire vessel. On the bow, Cameron, Craig, Jeremy, and Olivia were under the instruction of a Royal Navy seaman as he directed them towards the forward moorings which secured the yacht, both to the neighbouring *Ocean Vigilante*, and the huge steel mooring buoy. The trick was to disengage their own yacht without casting Mindy's pride and joy adrift - not a good idea should you be looking forward to a long and healthy life!

The engines were alive, sending small vibrations throughout the yacht, and primed to move the 260-ton yacht through the surging North Atlantic Ocean swells beyond the sheltered inlet. On the port-side deck, the springs - which prevented the yachts from rubbing fore and aft when secured together - were cast off by Cassie and Naomi under the watchful eyes of another Royal Navy seaman.

At the stern, the Chief supervised Natasha and Harper as they begin to loosen the stern lines.

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As the clock ticked over to 20:00, Sarah picked up the microphone for the ship-wide tannoy.

"All hands! Standby for departure - single up all lines, fore and aft."

After a short pause, reports came in from the foredeck and the afterdeck confirming that the lines were singled up.

"Cast off, forward . . . port shaft, dead-slow ahead . . . starboard shaft, dead-slow astern.

Keira made the necessary adjustments to the engine controls and the twin 51.7-litre diesel engines, each producing 3,460-horsepower, increased their output to the gearbox and thence the twin shafts. The boy began to slowly swing out, away from the buoy and the *Ocean Vigilante*.

"Forward lines, clear," came the report from the foredeck.

"Stop shafts . . . cast off, aft."

Two minutes later, came the call.

"Stern lines, clear."

"Half ahead, both," Sarah directed.

Keira obeyed the commands instantly as Sarah switched between the chart on the screen before her, the radar, the foredeck, and a set of large marine binoculars to check what was ahead. The two Royal Navy officers were all business as they conned the multi-million-pound mega-yacht out of the inlet. They headed on a course which took them around the northern tip of the Isle of Ewe before slowing to allow the Royal Navy seamen to jump aboard the workboat which then headed for the land.

Hull 67 came around onto a heading of 334° which would take them well clear of the land.

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***Ten miles northwest of Loch Ewe***

***Position: 58.0046° N 5.7291° W***

***Course: 294°, Speed: 12 knots, 10nm logged***

Kaitlin was giggling.

Olivia was puking.

"Wait for it. . ." Cassie grinned as Kaitlin continued to giggle at the unfortunate teenager.

Cassie had noticed that despite Kaitlin's happiness, the little girl was turning an interesting shade of green. Olivia was soon joined out on the afterdeck by Kaitlin who began to heave up everything that she had eaten in the past few hours. Within minutes, the two girls were joined by Harper, Jeremy, and Yvette. Naomi and Electra both looked unwell as they sat on a couch. Craig had no such issues and he was on the bridge assisting the watchkeepers.

Cassie still had no idea who was on the bridge with Keira. She was too busy keeping an eye on the kids. Lynn was in the galley producing coffee and a light supper of meat sandwiches - for those

with stronger stomachs! Jasper had ferried some coffee up to the watchkeepers, earlier that evening while David and Cameron had spent some time down in the engine room checking everything over. The night was dark and the sea was anything but calm. The rolling waves peaked at five feet before breaking and the movement had the yacht's stabilisers working fulltime to counter the seas constant undulating motion. Once they were out of the lee of the land, the wind began to hammer the yacht, shaking the windows and lashing said windows with cold needle-like spray.

It was another hour before the queasy girls acquired their sea legs - at least enough to abandon the cold outer deck and curl up on the cosy couches in the lounge.

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"Did we *have* to hand him over?" Kaitlin whined. "I wanted to torture him."

"It was dangerous to hang onto him and it was safer to hand him off to Commander Haig," Jasper explained.

"It sucks!" Kaitlin went on. "We're on the run and we've accomplished nothing in over a week!"

"Easy, Kaitlin," Jasper said, smiling at the fiery little eight-year-old girl. "We *will* start making a dent in the Axis behind this, I promise you that, Kaitlin."

"I just hate this waiting and . . ."

"We know, honey," Cassie said as she hugged the girl tightly but then Cassie's eyes went wide as somebody else appeared in the lounge.

"I'm hungry - any chance of a sandwich?"

"Sarah!" Cassie exclaimed as she jumped up, causing Kaitlin to fall to the deck. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Cassie stepped over Kaitlin and she made for her sister.

"Don't mind me!" Kaitlin growled from the deck. "I'm only your goddamn daughter!"

"I came aboard this afternoon. Daddy wanted me to help out where I could - I was on the way north when I heard from Spook that you were heading for Loch Ewe and I changed my destination."

Sarah hugged her younger sister for well over a minute before they both separated.

"I hear that I have a pair of petulant nieces," Sarah said as she looked down at Kaitlin then over at Naomi. "Does Aunt Sarah, get a hug?"

The two girls scrambled up off the floor and the couch before they threw themselves at their Aunt Sarah. After a few moments, Natasha broke the mood.

"Right - there is a busy day ahead, tomorrow. All will be up at 0600. . ."

"Fuck that!" Kaitlin muttered to general agreement from the other youngsters.

". . . you will wash - that includes you Kaitlin. . ."

"Why does everybody always look at me?"

"Because, honey, when there is something going down, you are always smack in the middle of it."

"Not my fault - shit just finds me. . ."

There was a bang as Cassie placed something on the table.

"Let's agree on a fiver, for now, sweetie," she said with a smile.

Kaitlin reluctantly dug in her pocket from where she produced a handful of change and a partially consumed packet of Haribo's.

"I can do, four pounds and . . . forty-two pence."

Cassie pointed at the swear jar and Kaitlin dumped her life's savings inside.

"As I was saying," Natasha grouched. "You will wash and be dressed by 0645. You will report to the dining area for breakfast at 0700. After breakfast, you will be allocated a watch, beginning with the Forenoon watch at 0800."

"What's a watch?" Kaitlin asked.

"All will be revealed on the 'morrow - for now, everybody under the age of fourteen: BED!"

There was a chorus of complaining and Kaitlin opened her mouth to say something but Naomi clamped a hand over her sister's mouth before dragging her off to the stairway below.

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The girls all gathered in the larger aft cabin once they had changed for bed.

"We've not been formally introduced - I'm Electra Haig."

"Olivia Kensington - and this is my sister, Jessica. Our step-brother, Christopher is through with the boys."

"So, considering that you're not a *Predator* - how did you get involved with these psychos?"



"Home invasion," Olivia offered, casually. "Parents murdered. We got taken in by our neighbours who turned out to be spies for MI5 and looking after *Vengeance* for the Government."

"A few weeks ago, I stumbled across *Vengeance* and Naomi wanted to kill me - I pissed myself," Jessica added.

"I only found out about *Vengeance*, last week, and since then Harper and Craig have been trying to kill me," Olivia grumbled.

Electra grinned.

"You training them?" Electra asked Harper.

"Yes - the two girls and the two boys. We were very hard on them, the first few days," Harper explained.

"They need to learn," Electra reasoned.

"Is she Electra of you?" Jessica asked.

"Definitely," Naomi said as she saw the apprehensive look on Electra's face. "She wasn't always a *Predator*, but she's earned her stripes, believe me."

Electra grinned.

"You've had a difficult week, from what I've seen - what with the cop-shop and all."

"I thought it was rather easy, to be honest," Olivia stated.

"Olivia - you talk *so much* shit," Naomi stated, anger evident in her voice. "You have no fucking idea, do you?"

Olivia flinched at the expressions she was seeing and she knew that she had made a big mistake.

"Electra, show Olivia what happens when things go to shit," Kaitlin directed.

"Do I have to?" a reluctant Electra asked.

"They need to know," Kaitlin pushed reasonably and Electra sighed as she stood up.

Resignedly, Electra pulled off her pyjamas, dumping them on the bed before turning around. The two sisters were stunned by what was revealed as Electra turned to face them. Their eyes followed the scar which flowed across the eight-year-old's body, from top to bottom, and neither said a word as they took in the two knife wounds.

"I don't know what to say. . ." Olivia muttered.

"Simple - if you don't know what to say, or cannot say something useful, shut the fuck up!" Harper growled.

"Réfléchis avant de parler!" Yvette commented dryly.

The group split up; Kaitlin, Yvette, and Electra heading over to their own cabin. Olivia and Jessica slipped into their sleeping bags and kept their heads down as Naomi and Harper shared the enormous bed.

Olivia felt rotten.

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***The following morning***

***Monday, October 3<sup>rd</sup>***

***Off the east coast of Benbecula***

***Position: 57.4415° N 7.1781° W***

***Course: 165°, Speed: 8 knots, 90.3nm logged***

***0600 hours***

The kids were *not* happy at the early rise - *not at all!*

The adults handled it better, despite not being all that enthralled by the early hour.

"It's still dark!" Naomi exclaimed as she scrambled out of bed and made her way to the bathroom.

Harper rolled out of bed next while Olivia and Jessica made appearances and glared up at the grinning Lynn. There was noise from other parts of the yacht as people stirred from sleep and began the new day.

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"At least you didn't crash the boat!" Harper grinned, forty-five minutes later as she saw her sister sitting down on a couch in the lounge with a mug of tea.

Keira looked up at her grinning younger sister.

"Fuck off, Harps, there's a good little girl!" Keira growled.

"What did I do?" Harper whined, genuinely at a loss.

"Your sister has been on watch for the past five hours," Jasper explained. "She and Sarah split the first watches between themselves."

Harper grimaced.

"Sorry, sis."

"I just need rest and some sleep, kid, okay?"

"Yes," Harper replied meekly.

"Get your food and sit down to eat - no fucking about!" the Chief directed and the kids followed orders figuring that it wasn't a good time to test the waters, so to speak.

"You put your foot in your mouth again, 'Harps'?" Naomi grinned.

"Yes - but anybody calls me that and I *will* hurt them," Harper growled as she sat down with her bacon, sausage, and tattie scone roll plus a mug of tea.

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As 0800 approached, Natasha and Cassie appeared, grinning.

"Why do I see hell steaming over the horizon?" Electra muttered as Cassie spoke.

"Firstly, thank you, Craig, for assisting on the bridge, last night - well done!"

Craig looked very smug as he lapped up the compliment, ignoring the unfriendly glares, as Cassie continued.

"Jeremy, Harper, Christopher, and Yvette - you each have the Forenoon watch which runs from 0800 to 1200. Report to Sarah on the bridge, now."

The four kids vanished forward as Natasha took over.

"The day is split into seven time zones, or watches. The First watch begins at 2000 and ends at midnight. From midnight to 0400, we have the Middle watch - the most difficult. From 0400, we have the Morning watch which runs to 0800. As I have already mentioned, at 0800, the Forenoon watch begins and runs for four hours until midday. At midday, we begin the Afternoon watch which takes us to 1600, and the start of the Dog watches. Now, they are different from all the others as instead of being four hours in length, they are two hours each. This means that the watches are staggered over each day so you won't be on the same watch two days running. The First Dog runs from 1600 to 1800 with the Second Dog running from 1800 and bringing us back around to 2000 and the . . . Kaitlin?"

"The First watch."

"Well, done, girl! Now - we are all separated into two watches - Port and Starboard. The Port watch consists of myself, Cassie, Kaitlin, Harper, Yvette, Lynn, Christopher, Jeremy, and Sarah. The Starboard Watch will be: Cameron, Keira, David, Naomi, Craig, Electra, Jasper, Olivia, and Jessica. At your allocated time, you will report for duty, here, where you will be given your duties. When you are not on duty, you will be sleeping, eating, or training - understood?"

"So much for resting. . ." Kaitlin mused.

"We are at war, Kaitlin - we are safe out here and we have a lot of work to do. Keeping busy is important," Cameron said sharply.

"The remainder of Port Watch - we have the decks to walk to ensure nothing has been damaged during the night. You will also learn the layout of this vessel. We carry limited armament at this time - the main armament won't be fitted for several weeks - but we still need to ensure that we are safe."

"Starboard watch," Cameron directed. "Report to the Upper deck where we will begin with some training."

"Move!" the Chief called out.