

"I would say to the House as I said to those who have joined this government: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat . . .' You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory. Victory at all costs – Victory in spite of all terror – Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival."

- Winston Churchill

relief

/rɪˈliːf/

noun

A feeling of reassurance and relaxation following release from anxiety or distress.

Friday, October 28th, 2016

Radford Air Facility

Thick smoke swirled around the battlefield as the guns all fell silent.

Mist and more smoke from the sea intermingled with that from the land as the naval guns also fell silent as troop-carrying Merlin HC.4 helicopters descended out of the smoke and swirling mists dropping medical personnel at strategic locations around the wreckage-strewn airfield. The airfield was secure and the Royal Marines were in full control of the facility. There were some sporadic gunshots and a few explosions here and there but that was just mopping up. Everywhere you looked, you saw grinning faces – they had won. They had beaten the enemy – not that that had been much of a surprise. You took on the Royal Marines and the chances of you winning were low . . . very low . . . low enough as to be almost non-existent. Everybody was relieved that it was over and that they could ease off, if only for a moment. There was still plenty of work to be done – prisoners to be rounded up, booby traps to be disarmed, and a host of other things.

At Target One, Royal Marines were sifting through the wreckage, searching for any remaining bad guys. Glide slumped down against a wall as the noise of battle faded.

"You okay, honey?" Nemesis asked.

Glide looked up at her mother.

"Can we go home now, please?" the exhausted eight-year-old asked.

"Yes, honey, it's all over."

Glide jumped to her feet feeling a lot happier. As Glide, Prowl, La Terreur, Ajax, and Drift were walking back up the road towards the airfield with Nemesis when they approached one of the Challenger II tanks as it lay parked up at the side of the road. The four-man crew were sitting on the top of their tank enjoying a brew and digging into their ration packs – the Challenger II, like all British armoured fighting vehicles, carried a boiling vessel producing instant hot water allowing the crew to enjoy their mugs of tea within minutes of stopping.

"Well, hello, Vengeance – how are you doing today?" the commander, a British Army Lieutenant asked.

"Very good, thanks," Nemesis replied.

"Anything left unsquished?" Ajax asked.

"Don't think so," the gunner replied as he looked over at the driver.

"Nah, don't think I missed anything," the driver quipped with a grin.

They left the tank behind and headed on towards the airfield.

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Scorpion set *TWILIGHT* down beside a pair of Wildcat helicopters and she rapidly shut down the aircraft before unstrapping.

She was exhausted, and she needed to stretch her legs. As she exited the aircraft, she was stopped by a female sailor in her shipboard RNPCS uniform.

"Some hot coffee, ma'am?"

"You're a saviour, sailor!" Scorpion exclaimed as she accepted the plastic mug of steaming fluid.

"Bacon butty, ma'am?" a male colleague asked handing Scorpion a foil-wrapped bundle.

"Perfect timing, thanks."

Scorpion chomped on the bacon roll and sipped the steaming coffee as she walked around her helicopter. She was quickly joined by the Chief who was sipping his own mug of coffee, a half-eaten bacon butty in his own hand. The battle-damage wasn't too bad, they both thought as they talked between themselves. Then Scorpion began to hear shouting, lots of it. A Royal Marine pointed at a pair of Royal Navy medics and he waved them towards a loitering Viking which roared off the moment they were aboard, heading towards the northern section of the airfield. Fifteen minutes later, the Viking was back, driving at speed before skidding to a halt at the edge of the helicopter landing zone. A few yards away from Scorpion, the Forward Air Controller, a Royal Navy lieutenant, was radioing for an urgent medevac, but from the radio chatter, Scorpion understood that no helicopters were available right at that moment.

"Can I help - my bird is still warm?" Scorpion asked the officer.

"We have a young girl - she was pulled from the wreckage . . ."

"What!?" Scorpion exclaimed as she ran over to the rear of the Viking and she froze as she stared inside the rear cabin of the articulated vehicle.

There was a single stretcher inside. The body on the stretcher was dirty and barely recognisable but it was definitely a little girl, and she was breathing. As the medic wiped away some of the grime on the little girl's face, Scorpion began to shake from head to toe.

"Harper!" she almost shouted, before her professionalism took over. "Get her into *Twilight* - I launch in one minute," she ordered.

The Chief was already aboard and flipping switches as the Royal Navy medic seized the girl and he carried her aboard the helicopter while Scorpion completed the start-up procedure. *TWILIGHT* was airborne seconds later and making directly for HMS BULWARK with her state-of-the-art medical facilities, not to mention a trauma surgeon. As Scorpion approached, a Merlin lifted off from the forward '1' spot and she was ordered to land directly and relaunch once her cargo was offloaded.

It wrenched at her heart to see her sister rushed off into the enormous grey superstructure, but she knew that Harper would gain the best of care - probably even better, considering she was a child.

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As she launched from *HMS BULWARK*, Scorpion came around to the south, as directed, before passing over the Type 45 destroyer *HMS DUNCAN* as she angled back towards the land.

She cranked on the power and then flew over the battlefield, taking a few moments to compose herself before she settled *TWILIGHT* into a grassy field just to the northwest of the airfield. Once on the ground, she shut down the engines but allowed the rotors to keep spinning as she pulled off her helmet and her mask. The Chief followed suit and he smiled.

"She's alive, Keira. We both saw her."

"I've got to tell people . . . but how?"

"I'm here, okay?"

"Thanks, David."

Keira took several deep breaths, holding the last for a moment before breathing out. She hesitated but then she pulled her helmet back on and adjusted the microphone.

"You have a *Vengeance*-only, channel," David prompted.

"*Vengeance*, this is Scorpion - heads up! We've been through a lot, but the past week has been hell. On that note, I have some news. . ." Keira said before her voice began to waver. "I don't know how to say it . . . she's alive . . ."

Keira could say no more as she began to sob. David took over as he heard chatter over the radio.

"Has she bloody lost it?" Prowl demanded.

"Is she saying what I think she's saying?" Glide added.

"Harper is alive," David explained. "I've seen her - now, she's in a bad way and she's got a long road ahead of her but she's breathing and she's in one piece. She's aboard the *Bulwark* with the surgeons and they're looking after her. We won, guys, and we're all still alive. Maybe a few more bumps and scratches but we're damn well still breathing, *ALL* of us."

Keira smiled through her tears of joy as she heard cheering and whooping over the radio channel. For over a week, she had thought her sister to be dead, but she had been unable to mourn. Maybe, deep in her heart, she had always known that her little sister was still alive. They were both somehow linked, even when separated.

Finally, Keira sorted herself out and they received orders to make for RNAS Yeovilton.

CALEDONIA

There was immense happiness aboard the yacht as the news came over the radio.

They had been cut out of the operation and apart from radio chatter, they really had no idea what was going on. Sarah had been pacing the bridge with Jessica and Mary while Alya had been in the command centre with Ginny and

Christopher monitoring the communications. It had not been easy for any of them waiting on the sidelines while their friends had been in a combat zone. They knew that things had started to go wrong soon after their landing but thankfully things had worked out. The news that Radford was dead was well received. Even better, hearing about Harper was simply amazing. Despite Mary's concerns with Harper and how the foul-mouthed younger girl had quite literally beaten the Princess into pulp during training, she was more than happy to hear that she was alive. The Princess owed Harper a lot - she may not be alive without the intensive training from the often-harsh *Predator*. Mary wished that she had been able to go with the fighting force, but she had not bothered wasting breath asking to go.

In retrospect, she had seen way too much combat already and the nightmares of the experiences and each person she had killed were still very vivid in her mind.

Radford Air Facility

The prisoners on shore were receiving harsh treatment.

They were traitors to the Crown. However, their treatment got considerably worse once the Royal Marines became aware of Harper's plight. The fact that a little girl had been imprisoned and tortured by Radford's organisation reduced the status of the prisoners from simple traitors to something lower than pond scum. The Royals were in a foul mood and Raptor had seen more than one prisoner suffer 'an accident' - not very professional, but the Royals were not about to let the men off the hook. If the Royals had known about Harper during the fighting - not a single mercenary would have survived the battle.

Jasper was not all that happy with the injuries. Nobody had been killed, but the *BULWARK* and the medics ashore were inundated with wounded. Some of the injuries were serious and a few life-threatening but for the most part, they were simple, but decidedly painful shrapnel wounds. One of those with more serious wounds was lying on a stretcher awaiting her turn on a Merlin. Jasper knelt down beside the wounded officer.

"How are you doing, Captain?"

Captain McFadden grimaced with the throbbing of her wound. She looked down at the field dressings on her left thigh and additional dressings around her stomach.

"A couple of scratches - nothing I can't handle."

"Typical bloody Royal!" Jasper chuckled. "You hang in there, Captain."

The officer was mad at being wounded. She was supposed to be leading her men, not lying on a stretcher fighting back the pain. She was a Royal Marines Commando and as such, she had to be better than everybody else. Jasper knew that the young officer had nothing to prove. She had the respect of her men and they had all been upset knowing that she had been wounded. However, the injuries had been received in combat when the officer had been leading her men from the front. Even the most chauvinistic Royal Marine had respect for the young officer who was proving that just because she was 'the weaker sex' did not mean she could not keep up.

Jasper chuckled at the thought that the young officer reminded him of a young American woman over three thousand miles away to the east.

Early afternoon

RNAS YEOVILTON

The attack helicopters had all returned to the airfield to be serviced and disarmed.

Keira was battling mixed emotions and her mind was in turmoil. The flight had been completed in silence apart from important communications over the radio or with David. Trevor, Adrien, David, and Keira retreated to the Officers' Wardroom for a late lunch and some light discussion. Keira found that talking with the three men helped to bring her mind back to where it was supposed to be. She had a life and she had her sister. While they were eating, a junior officer appeared, and he handed David a note before vanishing. There were three sets of raised eyebrows as David pocketed the piece of paper and he was grinning.

"Well?" Keira wanted to know.

"They're moving Harper," David explained.

"Where?" Keira demanded. "When?"

"Harper will be airlifted off the *Bulwark* and flown here, to Yeovilton. She's due to arrive in about two hours. Then Harper will be taken by road to London to where there is a secure unit which caters for 'at-risk' children. She will receive the best of care there, Keira. I've made arrangements for you to travel with Harper to London in the ambulance - only if you want to, of course," David replied.

"Thank you."

Keira was unable to say anything else.

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The flight arrived right on schedule and Keira was there to meet the Merlin HC.4 as the transport helicopter landed with its precious cargo.

There were four stretcher cases and three walking wounded aboard. All but two stretcher cases headed for the base medical facilities on Royal Navy transport. The two civilian emergency ambulances were waiting, and Keira stiffened as she saw the stretchers removed from the helicopter and carried carefully down the ramp. The first bore her little sister, wrapped snugly up in blankets and barely visible. The other stretcher bore another young girl, only older. Keira fought off the urge to pull her pistol and put a bullet into the red-haired girl's skull as Harper was transferred onto the trolley from the ambulance. Keira hesitated as she reached out and gently touched her sister's cheek - it was warm to the touch, but her eyes remained closed. Harper appeared to be sleeping peacefully which was a blessing. She was attached to three different drips and there were wires disappearing under the blankets which the ambulance crew were connecting up to monitors aboard the ambulance.

Within twenty minutes, they were heading east on the A303 towards London.

Castlemartin, Pembrokeshire, Wales

Everyone was very tired.

On their return from the airfield, everybody had grabbed a fast breakfast before falling asleep anywhere that was remotely comfortable. As Natasha checked in the girls on the way to her camp bed, she smiled at the youngsters,

fast asleep and, for the most part, looking innocent. Even Cassie looked content as she slept a few feet away from her two daughters. Natasha was very pleased that everybody had come through with nothing worse than bruises and scratches. The fight had almost gone so very, very wrong. For five weeks, they had been pursued across the country. They had been hounded. They had been persecuted. They had been threatened. But it was finally over. They could go back to their lives and live in peace.

Natasha lay down on the camp bed next to the one which her brother occupied, and she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

The following afternoon

Saturday, October 29th

Blairhoyle, Scotland

Thirty-seven days.

Throughout that time, none of them thought that they would ever lay eyes on their home again. As Alexandra Perrin unlocked her front door, she smiled. The house was immaculate - not a speck of dust anywhere - it was obvious that somebody had been in, cleaning. With a loud yell, Kaitlin ran through the door.

"Home sweet home!" she exclaimed as she vanished up the stairs to her bedroom.

Cassie grinned at her mother as Naomi ran after the younger girl. Everything appeared to be back to normal - well, as normal as it ever got. Almost the instant the front door was closed, the phone rang, and Cassie picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Cassandra!"

"Daddy!"

"I hear you have all been having some fun in my absence," Commander Richard Perrin commented.

"Wait till I tell you what's been going on. . ."

Moss-Side Hall

"For the love of God, Olivia!" Jessica moaned.

"I miss him."

"You saw him two hours ago and your last text was just a minute ago," Jessica pointed out to her lovesick sister.

"I hate to admit it, but Jess has a point," Christopher added.

"You'll see him at school on Monday, Olivia," Lynn tried.

"None of you understand!" Olivia declared as she ran up the stairs to her bedroom.

"Back to normal, I suppose," Jasper commented with a chuckle.

Liberton, Edinburgh

"This is our new home, Dad?"

"Yes, Jeremy, it is. We're a stone's throw from the centre of Edinburgh and Keira lives just up the road. It was good of them to offer us this place. We can finally get back to us being a family - just you and me . . . at least for the moment."

"It's amazing!" Jeremy exclaimed.

The house was pleasant and spacious. Somehow, he and his Dad had landed on their feet with the most amazing friends and one hell of a life to look forward to.

Jeremy Lai was a very happy boy.

Southfield Letham

It was much the same for Natasha and Cameron.

They were overjoyed to be back in their home and in familiar surroundings. It was an even better feeling to know that you weren't about to be attacked. The French contingent had come with them until they were to return to France on the Monday.

"Get yourselves settled in guys - we can go and get dinner out as we've nothing in," Cameron suggested.

"Cool!" Yvette replied.

"Thanks for coming to help us," Natasha said to Marinette.

"We help people, you and I; it's what we do," Marinette responded.

"So, you and Yvette look to be getting close."

"She's a wonderful girl."

"That she is."

"Adrien and I are going to adopt her before the end of the year. She needs a home and we love having her around."

"Good luck to both of you - a *Predator* is a lot of work, but very rewarding work."

London

Three weeks she had been away from her home.

She had seen her Grandpa several times, but she had missed her brother. As such, she had almost flattened the boy on her return home. He had returned the hug and Electra was giggling by the time he had finished hugging her. Then, she stopped dead a man stepped out of the living room.

"Daddy!" Electra exclaimed as she burst into tears and ran towards her father.

Her father had still been in hospital when she had left to fight - now he was home and she jumped into his arms, sobbing violently.

"It's okay, sweetie; I'm here."

Electra had never been happier.

10 Downing Street

The cabinet meeting to address the situation following the fall of Sebastian Radford was heated, to say the least.

The topic of contention was what to do with the ministers, both in government and in opposition, who were part of Radford's scheme to dominate and turn the government of the United Kingdom. Some had been coerced - with money or blackmail. Some had willingly gone over. Most screamed their innocence, and some were saying nothing. It had had to be handled carefully as there was a dangerous air in the room. Many of those present wanted the death penalty - despite such a penalty no longer existing on the statute books.

"We could send them all to Cape Wraith to witness a weapon's demonstration and a missile could drift off course. . ."

"Thank you, Air Chief Marshal for that input," the Prime Minister responded dryly, although secretly, she agreed. "Can't we just put them all up against a wall and shoot them?"

"We don't do that sort of thing, anymore, ma'am."

The Prime Minister glared at the head of MI5.

"Well, who does?" she demanded of those present in the cabinet room.

"Officially, ma'am," Admiral Hunt replied. "Nobody does. Should it be allowed, I would keel-haul the traitorous bastards . . . excuse me, ma'am . . . however, under the circumstances, I think external forces may assist us."

"First Sea Lord, you are being very cryptic; however, I believe I understand what you are getting at. Plausible deniability, am I right?"

"Yes, Prime Minister."

"Complete the list and I will set the operation in motion. What shall we call it?"

There were murmurings before one voice spoke out.

"Operation Turncoat. Sounds ideal, ma'am."

There were approving nods from around the table.

"Thank you, Admiral."

"Of course, Prime Minister."

St Thomas' Hospital

The Fifth Floor, Children's Wing

Keira was beyond exhausted despite an hour's sleep in the ambulance.

All of her attentions were on her little sister. Harper had been whisked away within minutes of their arrival at the hospital. Keira was grilled for every fact concerning her sister: full name, age, medical history etc. That was slightly difficult as Keira knew very little about her sister for a certain period of her life. So far, nobody had provided Keira with details on what was wrong with Harper. She was passed from pillar to post and then back to the damn pillar again. Eventually, she had been led up to the fifth floor and into a private room where Harper lay sleeping. Keira may have been tired, but she was

still able to comprehend how poorly her sister was. The nine-year-old girl was connected up to four plastic tubes filled with various liquids - two into her left arm, another into her right, and a fourth into her right ankle. A catheter has been fitted along with a host of multi-coloured electrical wires and a thin plastic tube running from behind her ears and then under her nostrils. She was no longer swaddled in blankets but covered by a white sheet and a thick blanket. Keira could see that Harper was otherwise naked beneath the bedding. She was also a lot cleaner than when Keira had last seen her. However, her sister's features were marred by copious plasters on her face along with a dressing on her left cheek. Her left arm and hand were bandaged from part way down the forearm, all the way to her fingers. Other than those visual cues, Keira had no idea what other horrors were hidden by the bedding.

A nurse had made up a sofa with bedding for Keira so that she could stay in the room with her sister. Keira thought that sleep might never come but she was so tired that she went out like a light.

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It was dark when she thought she heard a noise and she was instantly awake.

"Good morning," a voice offered, and Keira saw a tall man in a doctor's coat standing over her sister. "May I continue, or do you wish to shoot me?"

Keira realised that she had automatically drawn her pistol and she was aiming it at the doctor. She quickly holstered the weapon as she grinned sheepishly.

"Sorry, doc."

"I know that security is high - there are two Royals on patrol in the corridor."

"Service?"

"Active service - Lieutenant-Commander Blake Schneider, Royal Navy. I've been spending time attached to the children's ward here."

"Lieutenant Keira Sharp, Royal Navy. I'm temporarily assigned to somewhere classified. Harper is my little sister."

"I see - thought you were much too young to be her mother," Schneider responded with a twinkle in his eye. "I have been assigned to Harper's case; partly due to the sensitive nature of the case. I understand that she has been tortured and has been held for a number of weeks, yes?"

"Correct. She was only rescued yesterday."

"I inspected Harper when she came in yesterday and I've been collating her injuries and working out the best way forwards for her. I am assuming that you currently have no idea what your sister has been through?"

"I have no idea and part of me does not want to know . . . but I need to know."

"I'll come back later this morning and I'll take you through Harper's injuries from head to toe."

"Thank you, commander."

CALEDONIA

Southampton

Mary had been the last to leave the yacht.

She had Sarah had walked down the gangway onto the dock at Southampton in the late afternoon. They were replaced by several Royal Navy ratings who would take the yacht in for a refit. Mary could not help looking back at the yacht which had been her home. She had boarded the yacht for the first time just a month previously as a royal princess who thought she knew everything - only that notion was very quickly kicked out of her . . . literally. She had learnt to be part of a team. She had learnt respect for those with better skills than her own. She had learnt new skills and polished off her existing ones. She had helped bring *Vengeance* out of the darkness and back into the light. She had even killed while defending her own father. So much had happened and while a lot had been bad, there was also a lot of good. She had made new friends - real friends; not like those who just wanted to cosy up with a royal princess. Her friends were the real deal and thought they tended to ignore her lineage, Mary did not care. Her new friends were irreplaceable and she owed them her life. In the past, she had sometimes hated it when people treated her as a normal girl - it had seemed so false - only her new friends made her feel welcome in the most genuine way possible. Their private lives could not have been any more different but that was what made the friendship so special.

"Will we see her again?" Mary asked.

"Oh, yes," Sarah responded. "*Caledonia* has many operations ahead of her."

"What are they going to do to her?"

"Change the oil, empty the ash trays - the usual," Sarah chuckled. "When she re-emerges, she will be deadly. Right now, she has no teeth - that is going to change and she will have fangs."

Mary laughed. The yacht meant a lot to her; not just because of how her life had changed during her time aboard but because it had been Princess Mary herself who had named the vessel. The yacht would forever be a part of her and it had been the very first royal duty which she had ever performed. She could remember the words like it was yesterday.

'I name this vessel: *Caledonia*. May God bless her and all who sail in her.'

"Good luck, *Caledonia*, and thank you."

Something felt different.

She was no longer cold. Her limbs ached, but not from lying on a thin mattress resting on bare concrete. She felt at ease for the first time in weeks. Her mind told her to relax and enjoy the peace and comfort. Only, her overactive *Predator* instincts told her it was all a ploy and that she should resist it all. Every few minutes she would hear a voice calling her name: 'Harper. Harper.' But she would resist responding to what had to be yet another attempt to get at her and seek information on *Vengeance*.

She would fight, and she would continue to fight with every fibre of her being.

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The scene in her mind changed as it always did, and it refocussed on the worst event her mind could muster.

Harper relieved the scene for what had to be the hundredth time. The screech of brakes as a car slithered to a halt. The rear door being yanked open and then the man beside her being pulled out and then Keira's face appearing. Happiness. Joy. Relief. It all flooded through her; each emotion better than the last.

Harper reached out her hand and she actually touched her sister - that touch felt so good . . . the pain - somebody had seized her left arm and yanked it very hard. Harper saw the fiery red hair of her assailant for a brief moment as she was forced into the back of another car, her bare feet barely touching the tarmac. She was screaming. All the happiness gone, wiped out in a millisecond of horror. Gunshots - lots of them. So close, yet so far. The fear of knowing that she would never see her friends again welled up inside her and mixed with the knowledge that she would never see her sister again. The desperation of having touched her sister, having her so close. Keira was leaving her . . . she couldn't . . . she wouldn't . . . the anguish she felt was overwhelming.

"Keira! Keira! Don't leave me! *Please . . . K-E-I-R-A!*"

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Abruptly, the scene changed, and Harper was a good deal younger and dressed in a grey jogging top and bottoms with white trainers. She was in a class of similarly aged kids learning the basics of hand to hand fighting from an older girl dressed in black. That girl stepped forward and stopped before the unhappy looking girl.

"What's your name, little runt?"

"Har - Harper Brown, err Lucy."

"Step out here, Brown - you too, Ward."

The two young girls appeared very wary as they stepped out before their class and turned to face one another.

"Ward - hit Brown."

The other girl looked over at Brown and she smiled. The next thing Harper knew, she was flat on her back and her cheek was stinging viciously.

"Not bad, Ward - Brown, get with it and start protecting yourself or you'll never amount to anything."

Harper regained her feet to the sounds of laughter from her fellow phase 1 *Predators*. She was angry - she hated humiliation. She subconsciously rubbed the skin behind her right ear - it itched. Just the previous afternoon, she had been promoted from probationer to phase 1 Predator. She could still remember the session, if not what had occurred in the hours preceding it.

The pricking sensation had been very painful and before long it was very sore.

"Keep still!" the tattooist had demanded.

"I am!" Harper had retorted.

Finally, after what had seemed like hours, Harper had been released, and she stood up before looking in a mirror and pulling back her right ear. The redness matched with the throbbing pain, but the symbol of her success was there and Harper grinned - she well knew the alternative to receiving the dagger.

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Then, she began to feel pain - real pain - and she fell to the mat.

"What's wrong, Brown?" Ward sneered.

Harper could see faces gathering around her, looking down more out of curiosity than from any desire to help. The faces began to swim and then they vanished, and two new faces appeared. One was familiar, the other was not.

"Harper!"

The voice was very familiar. Keira?

"Harper, for the love of God!"

"Quit with the shouting, Keira - I need to sleep."

"Harps?"

Harper's eyes flew open and she found herself staring into the eyes of. . .

"Keira!"