

Archimedes' warning screech pierced my mind.

William came instantly awake and sat up in his sleeping bag near ours. Marshall squeezed my arm in the dawning light.

*Archie?* I asked, sleepy-headed. *Where's Archie?*

*I'll get your owl in,* my Marshall groaned, shifting. *I promise. And caffeine to you, as soon as we're airborne.*

"You are wonderful," I muttered as the echoes of the shrill warning faded from my head.

*Up with ya, my Sweet.*

"Cristo! Eso es Van Der Hyde," Enrique called in a hushed and fearful voice from near the cockpit.

"We have two large trucks with angry, stealthy men coming our way," William reported evenly, eyes still closed. "Time to fly, Hann. Move!"

Grateful I'd slept in my jeans and t-shirt, I pushed myself out of the sleeping bag, calling Archimedes to come in. Then I scrambled for the cockpit, past Enrique, focusing on what I had to do to get us off the ground fast.

*Judica?* I called.

ONLY THE BIRD IS STILL OUTSIDE, she reported from the back of the plane.

"Do you guys want out?" I heard Marshall ask the brothers and then the hatch creaked open, hopefully allowing my owl into the aircraft. "This bus is leaving."

"Our business here is finished," Enrique quickly responded as my bottom hit the pilot's seat, and I rapidly started the emergency power up and preflight I'd dreamt about the night before.

"Where are *we* heading?" Louis laughed, as the Hawkeye's instrumentation jumped to life around me as I toggled switches across the panel above my head.

"William!" I shouted over my shoulder. "Buy me some time!"

*Marshall.* William called. *Pick an illusion and flash it.*

The Hawk's number one engine rumbled loudly to life, followed by the reassuring *hummmmm* that the plane was famous for. Number two engine sputtered several times before settling into a lovely *hummmmm*.

Standing on the pilot's brakes, I shouted, "Chocks! Pull the chocks."

*I'll get 'em,* William responded, and I felt his telekinetic force go out.

The copilot's side window cracked into a spider web design. The bullet exited into the overhead two inches above my head and I dropped below the window.

The Hawkeye rolled forward.

Happy that we'd positioned the aircraft the night before, I reached and nudged the throttles a bit, keeping my head down. Extending my spirit just a little, I tried to stand only as my ethereal self to look out at the runway before me. I could barely make it out. I sensed, rather than saw the big stock truck a ways down the track. Grabbing the yoke, I slapped the throttles full open and shouted a prayer for God's help.

I heard gunfire, but focused on the task at hand, willing the massive old aircraft to go faster. I felt the now-familiar wobble of the wings as the air gathered beneath them. Listening to the engines, I decided that they liked the fuel Enrique and Louis had brought. And now they were passengers, I thought, as the stock truck grew closer.

*Okay, boys.* I called on the astral plane as I pulled a struggling yoke to my chest. *Levitation! Now, please!*

I knew William touched Enrique's shoulder, and then I felt him enter our gestalt. The Hawk shuddered. A slip of talent moved into Enrique and the aircraft leapt into the predawn sky, wheels more than a foot above the roof of the truck on the runway.

As the plane climbed into the sky, I quickly scanned the instrumentation and, relieved, exhaled slowly. It looked like those people had not shot any crucial systems. Swallowing, I reached to fine-tune the engine throttles before making the first course change. We would head east across the Atlantic.

*The Hawk is whistling back here, Hann,* William said moments later, unable to block his concern from me.

*How many holes?* I asked, trimming the aircraft to 500 feet.

*We've counted nine,* Marshall reported, and I heard someone swear in the back of the plane.

*There's at least two more up here,* I remarked and waited for the protective testosterone to rise. I could sense my husband tremble where he stood near the craft's tail. *I've leveled off at 500 feet. Can you patch them?*

*I'll say a prayer to Saint Angus of MacGyver,* was William's dry comment.

*I could use some inspiration,* my husband sighed, as I focused on navigation.

To my right, wind whistled through the spider-webbed window, and I didn't want to take the Hawk much higher. I needed a bio-break.

\* \* \*

Glancing at the familiar stranger in the mirror a last time, I reached to swipe aside the curtain that belied my privacy. When I stepped out of the plane's crude restroom, Marshall pressed a hot cup of mint tea into my hand, touched my chin, and then gave me a slow loving kiss. Nearby, Enrique cleared his throat, and then Marshall chuckled above me. I heard the ruffling of Archimedes' feathers as our kiss ended too soon.

"We have a license," my husband said over his shoulder as I looked around the gutted interior of the Hawkeye.

"Married by a priest," I injected, stepping forward, toward both the owl and the cockpit.

Archimedes shook his body violently, just once, almost losing his balance on his pseudo-perch made from the frame of a gutted electronics rack. Eyes glowing a soft unnatural gold, the big bird turned to me, and I felt a sense of resignation from my feathered friend. I frowned. He shuddered again, caught his balance, and looked me in the eye again.

HE CANNOT GO WITH US LOOKING LIKE THAT, Judica explained from her big doggy bed.

*Looking like what? I questioned. Archie is now a fashionista?*

THAT SPECIES OF BIRD IS NOT NATIVE TO WHERE WE ARE GOING.

The great horned owl shook himself easily and then peered at me. With his gaze came an odd sensation of vertigo and determination. Then the animal seemed to shrink in on himself, feathers bending in unnatural ways in the dim light of the airplane.

I smelled fresh rain and wildflowers, and blinked a few times, distracted by the almost overwhelming presence of the amazing smell, so reminiscent of something from my childhood.

Archimedes chirped shrilly, and I focused back on him to find a much smaller bird balanced where the great horned owl had been. I felt Archimedes' familiar amusement, and then this small beige and brown bird of prey chirped happily at me.

"Ah, yes," I chuckled, as he extended his new, lighter wings and wiggled his tail feathers as if testing them. "With God, all things *are* possible."

AMEN.

Behind me, Marshall's initial surprise rippled across my spirit, followed by the wonderful feeling of his light touch at the base of my neck.

"All things are possible," he whispered at the end of a deep sigh.

"Coming up front?" I asked the bird, and he immediately vaulted from the metal rack towards me.

Instinct kicked in, my arm shifted to its perching position, and the next moment the creature was there, looking up at me with a sense of belonging. He felt lighter than he had been. I had to chuckle, but a wave of William's emotions reminded me how much he hated to take the Hawk's controls.

*What just happened?* He demanded as I moved forward again. *I sense a bunch of power back there, but no danger.*

*I didn't have words for what I'd just seen.*

*The owl just morphed into a... umm...* Marshall began.

*A RUFIOUS FISHING OWL*, Judica said mildly through the link.

I sipped my mint tea carefully, monitoring the hum of the engines while gazing at the small bird of prey on my arm. He was a different-looking bird with big dark eyes. It looked like someone had splattered the bird's beak with dark brown paint. And the paint had dripped down his feathered chest.

I reached out mentally. Archimedes felt the same in my mind, rubbing his small head against my bicep. I smiled, feeling content that we were on course to whatever God had for us next.

\* \* \*

The calm and sunny day wore on. We flew level at 500 feet above the blue/gray water of the Atlantic. I'd just finished a sandwich for my dinner while pacing the length of the fuselage to stretch my legs and was joking with Louis about the inflatable raft he had brought along.

The Hawk suddenly dropped briefly, listing, her nose slightly down and to the right. The sudden shift put me into the aircraft's metal wall.

*Marshall, scan for damage,* William ordered as I righted myself and glanced over to where Marshall stood, poker-faced, steadying himself by gripping an overhead I-beam.

*What was that?* I demanded, jumping quickly toward the cockpit.

The plane leveled, still bouncing, and I stumbled forward, arms extended to catch myself if I fell.

*Not sure,* was William's curt response, determination coloring his mind.

The Hawk bounced again and then its engines roared as its nose turned skyward.

As I came through the cockpit door, I saw the bearded man fiercely gripping the co-pilot's yoke. His knuckles looked gray-white.

The Hawk bounced again. I swung into my pilot's seat as he wrestled with the airplane to keep it steady. When my feet hit the rudder pedals, they sank to the metal firewall with no resistance. Swallowing a dry mouth, I buckled myself in as I scanned the instrumentation.

*I'm not getting anything,* Marshall reported as my eyes danced across what was left of the airplane's instrumentation. *Everything seems to be working.*

"We've lost steering!" Will hollered as I reached for the pilot's joystick. Before I touched it, the Hawk skidded sideways and my stomach flipped. "Dang! More wind! It just slammed us."

*It's coming in from the North,* Enrique put in. *I don't like the feel of it.*

The stick jarred and bucked in my hands, and I was grateful William had not released his.

*It felt like something just pushed us sideways,* I told him.

*What don't you like about it?* William quickly asked Enrique.

*Focus on the tail,* I told my Marshall. *Rudder pedals are way too soft.*

*This doesn't feel right.* Enrique answered, fear coloring his mind.

*I know what he means,* Marshall told me privately. *Smells a lot like Nameless.*

The old plane bounced again, I pulled the yoke to my chest, and in tandem with Will, raised the nose again. We started to gain back some altitude.

Behind us, the sun dipped, sinking into the Atlantic Ocean.

I checked the course indicators to find we'd drifted off course southward, and instinctually pressed the rudder pedals to turn the plane. There was nothing left in the pedals so this had no effect on our course.

*We're way off course,* I called, aware now of a taste of copper on my tongue. *Can you guys give a gentle push against our plane's nose? And I do mean gentle!*

"That's the taste of fear," William whispered. "God's with us, Hannah. Just do your job. He will do His."

"¡Dios nos ayuda!" Louis screamed from back in the fuselage as the plane bucked again. "¿Dónde podemos aterrizar el aeroplano?"

“Good question, Hann. Where can we land?”

“This Hawk is still flying,” I replied through clenched teeth.

I felt the men’s gestalt touch the plane’s nose through my hands on the yoke and glanced at the ship’s compass.

*We’re almost 25 degrees off course, I told them. Please be gentle.*

Marshall chuckled from behind me, so I knew he’d stepped into the cockpit.

*The safest place for you guys is near the wings, I announced to everyone as the plane dropped suddenly again. Stay away from the tail.*

A familiar sensation ran up my leg, my side, up my arm, and Linus burrowed deep into my hair at my neck. I could feel the little fellow shiver as I yanked the yoke to me again. A glance at the compass showed a 9-degree course correction.

*Why the wings?* Enrique asked.

*They have the strongest structural integrity, Marshall explained as he moved out of the cabin.*

*The tail WILL snap off on our first bounce, I told everyone, scanning the eastern horizon.*

No lights twinkled on a horizon. All I saw was more darkening water like what waited a few hundred feet below.

The Hawk dropped again, like it was hammered from above. I bit my lip as I bounced.

*That’s about the sixth bounce, William growled.*

“I mean bounce on the water,” I whispered. “I’m gonna have to skip this bird like a river rock.” And added just to him and my husband, *We’re being intentionally pounded from above. Sense it?*

*And the gusty wind to the side?* William muttered. *Some sort of weather mage?*

*We’re falling out of the sky, so stay in focus, Marshall whispered to both of us. We can levitate to increase air time and decrease drag. Hannah’s a fire mage, to use gaming jargon.*

“Am I?” I chuckled.

*Yup, Marshall sighed. Skip this bird like a rock, ya say? Sure...*

“God, bless all the MadMen,” Will and I sang in unison.

And then our airplane got slammed hard. Again from above. Worst yet. My head slammed into the side window.

As my eyes refocused, I realized how much my head hurt, and after touching the sensitive area, I saw blood on my fingertips. Not too much.

*I’m still airborne!* I reminded myself and grabbed the joystick, frantically peering at the instruments, praying for them to make sense. The plane bucked sideways, but not enough to bang my head into that side window again.

*Hannah?* Marshall called gently.

*Hello, Love,* was my reply. *We need a navigation fix.*

*Someone named Susanne says she’ll take care of that,* my mate replied, his mental touch a soothing salve.

His love poured into my spirit, reviving my body, and clearing my head. Remembering our situation triggered a new adrenaline dump, and I struggled to sit up in the pilot's seat as I looked over at Lord William.

He would meet his Lady Anne soon, I *Knew*.

*Susanne? Where are you?* I beckoned into the astral plane of helping souls that surrounded us, seeking the woman whose face recently had mirrored mine in a mirror. *Lady Anne? I need you!*

*Hannah! Dear girl!* She was instantly with me, feeling like rain smells and soft as a warm terrycloth robe. *Come to me. This way!*

I focused briefly on the woman's spirit, studying the sense of her that would guide us to her. The woman's spirit shined like a beacon from *over there*. I felt the airplane's nose dip. I shouted, "Keep the nose up!" while my hands fought the yoke. Again.

My seat dropped out from underneath my legs briefly as the plane got slammed from above this time. William shouted over his shoulder for Louis to ready that raft. Lord Enrique passed a brief visual of his brother frantically ripping into the large package.

I glanced at the altimeter and wondered how accurate it might be. Digital orange showed 267 feet and then we were slammed from above again.

The readout displayed 214 when my vision cleared.

A sudden stench filled the small cockpit - Will's fear. That baffled me for an instant. *Will, afraid?* Then I tasted copper and struggled briefly with my fear again.

William quietly began praying Psalm 91, forgetting his hands on the yoke.

"KEEP THE NOSE UP!" I shrieked and felt the combined force of *The Thirty* gently touch the plane's belly, supporting us.

"We're gonna skip this bird like a smooth river rock!" Will whooped with glee ending with a triumphant *shriek*.

His positive energy flowed all around us, and its touch made the hair stand up on my arms. My head cleared gradually. Leaving levitation efforts to *The Thirty*, I quickly evaluated the cockpit flight indicators while I steadied the Hawk's flight.

"I have a fix on our destination," I told everyone. "But we've got too much water too close below."

"Possibly speckled with well-guarded oil platforms," Marshall reminded us, and I could sense William tremble as I glanced at the plane's compass again.

*OK, my friends,* I called into the gestalt, *we need to turn this bird's nose...errr... ahhh... about 18 degrees left to be back on course.*

*Hostile patrols?* William demanded in a tight send to Marshall.

The Hawk creaked as their pressure increased. The seat beneath me shifted slightly and sounds of twisting metal squealed from various parts of the cabin.

*I don't know details,* Marshall replied, worry coloring his thought.

"What do you think, *Teller of Tomorrow?*"

*Busy now, William. Gently, my friends,* I directed the gathering. *Good. OK, we only need 13 degrees more.*

I swallowed once and stole a look William's way, afraid he'd be angry. His closed eyes glowed golden beneath a deeply furrowed brow. He headed the gestalt comprised of most of his *Thirty*, so I focused back to flying my bird.

That invisible hammer slammed us from overhead again.

Louis screamed like a frightened girl. I yanked my yoke to me in unison with William, who mentally pushed the throttles a notch higher. I felt Lord Thomas's calming presence and then I felt his *hands* cover mine at the yoke.

"Lord Thomas is our co-pilot," William whispered with a chuckle. "And God is our pilot."

"Thank you, God!" I yelled, determined that together we would land this plane safely.

The kinetic fist slammed the starboard side of the plane.

My head hit the side windshield. I think.

*Sin of Pride*, I thought as the world around me faded to a blur, and the plane bucked again. And then it jumped sideways – the other way.

My head throbbed from the windshield's impact.

I felt too tired to move. I was done flying.

*I had done enough, hadn't I, God?* I prayed. *Let someone else...*

Judica's presence washed over me as hands began to pull me up and out of the pilot's seat. I smelled Marshall rather than saw him. He vibrated a steeled fear of urgency as he muttered reassurances about getting us out safely, as he stepped back, taking me with him. Carefully shifting me, he pulled my feet free and past the pilot's seat, steadied us, as he stooped to stand in the cockpit. In the choppy ride of the crashing airplane, my Marshall lifted me slightly, rotated us around, and then passed me to somebody else. Was this Lord Enrique? I wondered.

I sensed Lady Anne's concern and felt the full *Thirty* supporting and encouraging us.

Then the world bucked again. I heard Louis' panicked prayers coming from the back. Near my ear, Lord Enrique prayed "Help us, Jesus" as he half-carried me from the cockpit.

I realized I was being hauled, half senseless out of the action, so resigned myself to the fact that I was no longer able to help. I sensed William's groan of frustration, but I felt relieved that this was no longer my problem.

Enrique gently eased me down. I settled on to some sleeping bags that smelled like Judica. My wolf friend radiated comfort and calm as she quickly settled between me and the fuselage's wall, protecting me with her big body. In my head and heart, I heard her praising God and thanking Him for His faithful care and love.

And my poor Hawk skidded sideways in the sky again. Hard.

*We're off course again,* I thought out half-heartedly.

*A moot point,* William sighed, his strained efforts washing over me.

*I AM HERE,* Judica whispered to me.

I decided to seek this assailant on the spiritual plane and gathered myself to do some recon work. *Focus,* I told myself as I sought to control my breathing and fearful thoughts.

Aircraft metal squealed and warped from *The Thirty's* efforts to put the Hawkeye back on course. Something like an explosion shattered my concentration as the whole airplane shuddered and shook violently. That was immediately followed by strong winds that whipped my hair painfully against my face. I could smell salt-sea air.

My head hurt worse now.

Opening my eyes, I found it was almost dark in the hollowed-out fuselage. In the twilight, I made out two figures wrestling with something large against the bulkhead in the stiff wind. Judica's warm body shifted behind mine, and I leaned into the big wolf, feeling queasy. Calm radiated from her, as I closed my eyes again.

Moments later... *or was it?* I heard Will barking orders, but I couldn't focus enough to understand him. I sensed Marshall's gentle touch in my mind, but no words. A man prayed in what sounded like gibberish. *Was that what praying in the Spirit sounded like?* I wondered.

Hands came under my arms and hauled me to my feet. That person smelled of fear. Urine... Body odor. Had to be Louis.

"Where's Marshall?" I mumbled as the man steadied me, and then turned me to what might have been the back of the plane. My knees decided not to work.

"I'm here. Stay with Louis, my Sweet," I heard him call as Mister Stinky gathered me to his chest, righting me and saying that I needed to move *NOW*.

"I'll get William out," Marshall added, and his presence subsided.

The floor dropped a fair distance ending with a loud *crash* and the Hawkeye bounced back into the air, metal screaming near the plane's tail. As I landed on the plane's floor, I lost my footing and Stinky again pulled me up to his barrel chest.

*First bounce*, I cautioned Will.

*Tail's gone*, Marshall reported with mild stoicism.

As engines roared in an effort to stay aloft, the angle of the room shuddered and then shifted slightly upward.

*How long can we stay aloft?* I wondered as hands turned me to the gaping hole in the back of the airplane.

The whole damn world slammed down and then bounced up.

I was on the airplane's floor again.

*Second bounce*, I warned, annoyed with the bright dots that danced before my eyes.

Darkness flooded in.

\* \* \*

The shock of cool waves splashing my face brought me back from a more pleasant place. I tasted salt in the splashed water. I shivered, soaked to the skin. Strong hands braced my arms, supporting me as Louis lifted me up and into the little inflatable raft. I spit out the awful seawater.

Nearby, someone yelled Louis' name several times in the dark night.



Louis, holding me stable as he treaded water, bellowed “Here!” while I heard his brother saying *Marshall’s helping Lord William get his guitar. I hope it’s worth it.*

*It may be.* I groaned at the pain throbbing through my head, barely aware of the strains of *Beck’s Bolero* that Marshall was sending to calm us all.

*Or is he just trying to calm himself?* William asked from somewhere in the darkness.

*Linus?* I wondered, knowing my husband’s musical selection indicated that our situation’s immediate dangers had subsided. Then I felt little sharp claws graze my back, running up and onto my head. The rascal settled and chittered unhappily, pulling on my hair for balance. *Judica? Where’s Tosha?*

HER CLAWS ARE IN MY NECK AND HEAD, the wolf-spirit responded dryly. LOOK TO YOUR LEFT.

I could see Judica swimming near the raft that I now floated in. A dark splotch of unhappy, yowling, wet cat balanced high on the wolf’s thick neck and head.

I could see them. *How?* I wondered groggily as my stomach erupted, causing me to empty its contents over the side. Head spinning, I looked up. Some twenty feet above the churning dark sea, a small glow bobbed and crackled, hovering in the night sky.

Lord William...

*I’ve got him,* Marshall assured me. *Guitar and all.*

*Thank God,* I breathed, having wondered for a while now, how the *Living Belle* would survive the night.

Metal screamed. Our raft danced on newly-churning waters. Nearby, my Hawkeye was quickly sinking below the gray waves.

Enrique’s face appeared in the water beyond the other side of the oval raft, and then it jerked suddenly. He was helping his brother Louis into the tiny craft. The older man made an amazingly graceful roll into the inflatable boat, jarring me as he did. The seawater felt surprisingly warm, and I reminded myself that even water at 72 degrees could eventually cause hypothermia.

“Mind her claws, lady,” I heard Louis say, and then Tosha, soaked and angry, was thrust into my hands. The dark cat burrowed beneath my arm, trembling as she went.

The raft dipped again, and my head screamed in pain from the jolt. I could sense an angry Marshall as he propelled Will into the small Zodiac boat. In the light of a three-quarter moon, I watched William shift his well-wrapped guitar case into a fold at the base of the raft wall. The raft dipped again in the restless sea.

The sound of gurgling and bubbling intensified nearby as my Hawkeye slipped into Davey Jones’ dark, cold locker.

My spirit sank with my airplane.

To my left, Marshall was pulling Judica into the raft, and Enrique maneuvered to assist him while a splash of red pain filled my eyes. Judica worked with the men as they hefted the big gray wolf up and in. In an instant she was at my side, careful with her claws as she settled against my left hip, radiating calm healing. The pain eased a little. I thanked her.

Across from me Will shifted around and extended his arm over the side. Louis moved to help him. My stomach lurched again, and I turned to empty its contents overboard. I did not see Marshall shove Enrique into the raft as the other two pulled.

I heard Will and Enrique pull Marshall in as I leaned weakly over the craft's side and vomited again.

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"There's a light over there!" A man shouted, bringing me up from a dream that felt prophetic. In it, I had been crouching in a warm, dry, and dusty old stairwell.

"Where?" Marshall asked, and I realized my head was in his lap, his comforting, strong hand rested on my wet shoulder. My headache had eased a bit, and I reached up to feel a goose egg bulging above my left ear. My hair felt wet and matted.

"Over there!" It was Enrique's excited voice. "Lord William, please dim your light."

"We need that light to be rescued." He said as I sniffed at my fingertips.

I opened my eyes and saw a light smear of red on my finger. *Was that blood?* Just then, Will's psionic light above us dimmed considerably.

"I will brighten it if we need it for rescue," he declared petulantly.

"Not IF" I muttered with an effort. "Only a matter of *when*."

I sensed Judica's agreement.

*Rest, my Sweet*, my spouse whispered affectionately.

The gentle motion of waves reminded me of our situation, and I forced a deep breath to clear my head. *Probably have a concussion*, I decided, slowly exhaling against the throbbing pain of my skull.

"Be careful not to tire," Marshall advised Will quietly.

"I have a compass," Enrique spoke up hopefully from my left. "I think we're paralleling the coast."

"What makes you think that?" Will demanded.

"I've been focusing on the coast since before we went down."

"With a compass?"

"Yes. East is that way." Enrique coughed deeply once. "Did you see the lights?"

"No," Both Marshall and Will said.

"You must understand, I *knew* I would be here today," he continued. "I've studied this area. Unfortunately, the Canary current off the West African coast pushes us southwest."

"Out to sea?" Louis gasped.

"Briefly. Then, the Equatorial current near the equator will push us southeast down the South African coast."

"I need to go north," William said with a hint of alarm.

"What do we have for paddles?" Marshall asked innocently.

“The only thing we have for a paddle is my guitar, and that’s not going to happen,” Will responded in an iron tone.

“Food stores?” Marshall asked quickly.

“Gone,” Louis sighed. “They went over the side.”

“Storage pocket broke open,” his brother affirmed. “No food or water.”

My stomach lurched at the thought of food.

“Over there!” Enrique shouted suddenly. “Isn’t that a light?”

The small boat wobbled in the waves as everyone shifted to look where Enrique pointed. I couldn’t move, but my husband did.

“No,” Louis grumbled.

“Where?” William asked, hope in his tone.

We all fell silent as if *that* would bring the distant light again.

Linus shifted near my ear, and Tosha grumbled, rearranging herself against my left leg. I heard Judica sigh.

“Well, at least we know where the land is, thanks to Enrique.” William sighed. “There’re five of us, so Louis, Enrique, and I will watch the coast, and Hann and Marsh can watch the rest. Do we have any flares?”

Marshall guffawed and the brothers both laughed.

“Right,” I heard Will chuckle. “Guess we do have all the pyrotechnics we need.”

*Not gonna be able to stand my watch, Captain,* I sent to William, giving him a sample of how bad I felt. Of course, Marshall, whose hand rested on my back as I rested against him, could sense that too.

“Let Hannah rest,” Marshall growled.

“Aah... OK.” Will replied quietly and then drew a breath. “So. What to do? Psy-push the raft to shore?”

“That’s a thought,” Enrique said enthusiastically, and I sensed his energy increase.

“A thought that could cause a rupture,” Marshall quickly responded. “I, for one, do not wish to go swimming again.”

“Not if we go easy,” William remarked.

“What if we don’t?” Louis countered with anxiety obvious in his voice.

“We’ll go easy,” Will insisted.

“We’ll go swimming,” my husband insisted. “No, William. Too risky. Maybe if we had the help of the sea turtles in that *Swiss Family Robinson* film.”

“We have to do something. Night’s coming,” Enrique warned from his side of the little lifeboat.

“Ok, my *Teller of Tomorrow*... You’re up. Now what?” Will asked with a gentleness that surprised me.

“It’s not *tomorrow*, yet,” I muttered.

“Where’s my *Teller of Tomorrow* when I need her?”

“She hit her head on the windshield,” Marshall explained. “I think your *Teller of Tomorrow* has a concussion.”

“She’s just tired. Right, Hannah?”

*Go ‘way, I replied. Ah jus’ wanna sleep.*

“No, you don’t, my Sweet!” my husband said, hauling me to a sitting position. “You need to stay awake. Remember that old M\*A\*S\*H episode where Hawkeye gets a concussion while doctoring in a village? He struggles to stay awake. Great one-man show.”

“Ah remember,” I managed as he settled himself against me. “So?”

“Stay awake!” *Both my men* shouted at me.

“Hannah!” Will barked, a wave of fear beginning to radiate from him. “Be my Merlin. Be my *Teller of Tonight*. I need you.”

I reeled in the backlash of his mental/emotions but realized something had changed. And then Lady Anne touched my being with a sweeping caress, and I knew she could sense my circumstance. Energy flowed from her and into me. My head cleared a bit, but the pain returned.

*That’s enough, William David Martin, She whispered, sadness coloring her British accent. You let Miss Merlin alone.*

Our raft jerked as Will sat bolt upright across from me, a parade of emotions dancing across his face. The chest I rested on rumbled a deep chuckle.

*Greetings, Lady Anne, Marshall whispered, with the mental equivalent of a courtly bow.*

*Help is coming!* Lady Anne called back, followed by a soft apology for her volume. *Oh, do close your mouth, Mr. Martin. We’ve work to do.*

Lord William’s expression shifted from confusion, to thoughtfulness, then briefly to anger in the dim light. Next, the *Great Ah-Ha* brightened his face, as he realized his Anne’s identity. His right hand reached to caress his guitar case as his eyes began to glow that soft golden light. A slight smile touched his lips. Slowly they parted into a grin.

Our eyes met.

“You’re really not the *Witness* who is to walk at my side,” William said in a shaky voice. His eyes darted to each of our companions, and then came back to mine. “I must get to my Lady Anne.”

William’s hand snatched at the handle of his guitar case, and Marshall tensed and started to shift away from me. Will began to move around, starting to rise, and so did my husband. Enrique slapped a big hand across the bearded man’s chest, gripped his shirt, and dragged him to the raft’s floor.

“No.” Enrique hissed.

“Stay,” Marshall growled, lobbing one of his long legs across William’s. “Lady Anne said *help is coming*, so you’ll meet her soon enough. Safely!”

“I must go.”

“How?” Enrique challenged. “You are going to walk on water?”

“I can levitate! I have to *go!*” William shouted like an excited child. “I can sense her, Hannah! She’s over there!”

Will pointed roughly toward the North, and I felt relieved that I was not in physical contact with him and the emotions exploding within him. Enrique's grip tightened on Will's shirt.

"If she's a long ways away from here, you will tire." Marshall chuckled. "Will you begin swimming, then?"

"If I have to."

"No, William. To let you do that would break my vow to God. And to my wife."

"A vow to God, huh?" Will said, easing back against the raft's side and releasing the guitar case's handle.

Enrique and Louis both eased back. Marshall did not. He let out a soft sigh. William closed his eyes, and his face danced another pirouette of emotions in the dim light. Then his face melted into calm, and I thought *Good!* Marshall released his tensed muscles, but did not move, watching William closely as we bobbed in the ocean waves.

The side of the raft at my back moved oddly. Then it shifted, bowing slightly. The nose of the small boat shuddered and began changing its course.

"Don't, William..." Marshall growled.

The raft wobbled, resisting the psy-push and its normal shape began to warp as the bow struggled to turn north.

"Oh, God," Louis moaned, crossing himself in that Catholic ritual.

"Gently, Lord William!" Enrique screeched.

"I know..." Will said in quiet concentration as the little boat writhed under his mental pressure.

*Can you hold this raft together psychically if he rips it open?* I asked my husband discretely through our physical contact.

*Not if: wife. When,* was his distracted reply. *I'm getting a feel for that now.*

"A little help here, Hann?" William asked.

I opted not to answer, snuggling closer to my Marshall. The raft shook and then jumped in the waves, causing another wave of nausea. I leaned over the side in preparation, feeling a strong hand on the back of my neck. My husband's calming presence ended the urge.

"She has a concussion," he growled as I eased back again, shivering in the pooled water in the bottom of the little craft.

The quiet pop of the side seam could barely be heard above the wind and waves, but we all knew what had happened. Louis started praying in Spanish.

Enrique reached over and slapped William's shoulder. Energy quickly flowed from my spouse to the damaged area, sealing the breach.

The raft shuddered and its nose began to turn north again. I opened my eyes despite my headache and look up to see my husband's eyes closed in mild concentration. I knew he held the ripped seam closed with his mind. I glanced around the small vessel. Louis had his hands clasped in prayer, his lips moving silently. Enrique was watching William cautiously. Judica shifted slightly, causing Tosha to change her position on my lap.

Rocking in the waves, our plastic lifeboat skipped slightly forward and I sensed William's mental touch at the back of the boat. He nudged it gently and it slid forward. The sound of hissing air came from behind me, followed by the sensation of Marshall's mental 'cap' on that leak.

"William..." he grumbled.

"My Lady Anne is over there."

"And help is on the way. Please, William. Do NOT drown us before she arrives."

*I agree, I put in. Please stop, William.*

Our little boat hopped another wave, twisting severely and splashing us all. That didn't help my now-empty stomach.

"This raft was made for 4 men," Enrique stated with aggravation. "We have an additional woman on board. And a dog that is bigger than her. Be careful."

*Does he even know the meaning of that word?* My Marshall whispered through our personal link.

I didn't answer. I couldn't find one.

The plastic raft slid a bit sideways, causing Louis to gasp, and I heard Enrique laugh.

"Peace, big brother. Help is on the way!" he said. "God didn't bring us this far just to drown us."

My eyes grew tired and burned from the saltwater. So I closed them, leaning against my spouse. The boat shivered again as it cut through waves and wind. I felt William increase his psy-push. The little craft shuddered, and its nose raised high out of the water and smacked waves as it settled. My eyesight went red for a moment.

"Oops..." someone muttered.

"Ya think?" a man mumbled.

After another less bouncy wave, the little boat's nose eased back down.

I opened my eyes again, looked up at the weird globe of light hovering above me, and then at the sea-soaked men around me. My head hurt and scrambled my senses. I glanced up at the blond man who I rested against. *Who is he?* I asked myself. *What was going on here?*

Too tired to keep my head up, I rested back against the man.

\* \* \*

A huge, black dolphin with a high dorsal fin and white eyespots drifted in and out of my dream of warm blankets and hot tea. I remembered I'd seen these animals at Sea World in San Diego.

\* \* \*

My body was jolted and then pulled upright. Something... No, *someone* tapped my cold cheek with vigor. I reached to push the annoyance away.

“Wake up, Hannah,” a man urged gently. “Come on. You have to stay awake. Remember?”

“Go away,” I managed from behind a wall of throbbing fatigue.

“Oh, no you don’t,” he countered, briskly rubbing my chilly hands.

I opened my eyes to dim light and darkness beyond. Worried faces wobbled in the background, and a blond man shifted closer to me. The warmth of his body kept me from shifting away from whoever he was.

I did need to sit up and stretch my cramped, wet legs. *Why were they wet?* So I shifted around on the wet, squishy floor, and he moved to accommodate me.

“Why is the floor so squishy?” I mumbled.

Just then, the floor beneath me swelled and hardened briefly, and I felt a strange, unfamiliar *something* in my brain: Fins and swimming and Lady Anne’s great need to help swirled inside me. Near me, the blond man gasped and then pulled me closer to him. One of the other men, an older guy, muttered in another language, panic lacing his every word. The raft’s bottom swelled again and we were propelled forward in the choppy sea.

I tried to look around me, get my bearings while taking several deep breaths. All was dark beyond the light shed by an odd globe floating above us.

Suddenly, a huge black *something* breached the waves near us, slapped an enormous tail on the surface of the water, and slipped below the sea again as around me, four men shouted and pointed at the huge creature. Then the little rescue boat rocked dangerously as its floor swelled and hardened again momentarily. We were propelled forward again and our speed increased.

A glistening black dorsal fin appeared off to the right in the dim light. It was massive! I twisted around to see the fin change direction, retuning. Beyond it, a second beast broke the surface – a wall of glistening black with a white chin. The thing looked bigger than three SUVs put end to end.

“It’s Shamu!” The man I leaned against hooted. “My Sweet, you called orcas to help us!”

I watched the creatures in rapt adoration. I’d always wanted to swim with dolphins. A smaller whale broke the waves in front of us, and I grinned.

“I count 2 adults and 1 juvenile,” someone cried, as additional waves from their activities buffeted the raft, causing my eyes to blur and my head to spin.

“I think it’s a family.”

“A family is part of a pod. There may be more of them around,” said the man I leaned against. “I went to Sea World several times while I was stationed in San Diego.”

“So there may be more of these?” asked the oldest man. He had an accent.

“Probably, but Hannah can handle them,” the bearded man across from me said with confidence.

I assumed I was *Hannah* since I was the only woman there, but I didn’t understand what the man meant.

“*Dios mío!* Look at the size of that one!” the youngest man exclaimed, pointing. “It must be the length of three SUVs.”

“Must be the papa.”

The raft’s floor swelled as a killer whale lifted and nudged us from underneath again. We surged forward.

“Swiss Family Robinson only had sea turtles, Marshall,” the bearded man laughed. “God gives us so much more. His blessings are great indeed!”

\* \* \*

In the darkness of the night, we traveled the sea on a crest of orca-generated waves for what seemed like hours. I tried to sleep, but the blond wouldn’t let me, and I was too tired to argue. At one point a small bird dived-bombed us once and then circled overhead. Someone called out, *It’s Archie!* After several turns, it drew nearer. After a few more circles, it landed on my blond’s shoulder as if that was common practice. After he spoke to the little brown owl, *Archie* launched himself into the darkness, flying... *North?*

\* \* \*

“That is definitely a light,” the youngest man said in his thick accent, as we all watched the dim glow on the horizon before us.

Around me, the four men broke into happy cheers, while I sighed and rubbed my tired, salt-stung eyes.

“Enrique, go up on the astral plane and have a closer look,” the bearded man ordered with authority as the raft surged forward again, thanks to the orca.

“I’ll try, Lord William,” the youngest man said, frowning, and then closed his eyes as I wondered what the heck the *astral plane* was. “Yes, that is definitely a ship,” I heard him say after about 30 seconds.

“She’s on that ship!” the bearded one yelled excitedly. “I can feel her coming closer.”

“Stay here, William,” growled the blond man next to me as he put his big boot on to the bearded man’s chest.

“*Who* is on that boat?” I managed, and they all looked at me oddly as the orca pushed the little craft again.

\* \* \*

The *Livingstone* bobbed in the waves, bright against the dark sea and sky. Her engines silent, the ship waited as the orca pushed us closer. The big vessel had a tall crane on the back deck and two massive cable spools feeding it. Mostly a rusty white color, the *Livingstone* seemed to have turned every light on her at us.



When we were about 50 yards out from the ship, the bearded man shifted around in the life raft and started to rise. I don't mean he stood up. He began floating in the air a few inches above the floor of the raft.

*I will carry you, Miss Merlin,* came a British woman's soft voice in my head. *Relax.*

It felt like I was being lifted in a sling, almost sitting me up, and gently swaying a moment before my body settled in the invisible cradling cloth. *Something* hoisted me up into the air. The cat in my lap made a startled sound but stayed, and in my hair, I felt tiny claws gripping, but somehow I knew the critter belonged there.

The big dog/wolf from the raft began to float in the air near me, as I was taken up and toward the white ship. The bearded man, carrying a black guitar case, blurred past me with no visible means of suspension, up toward the boat. As I gained altitude, I could see a handful of people in the open area in the middle of the big vessel's top deck. A man's startled cry sounded below me, and I turned to see the oldest man from the raft begin to rise slowly into the air. He struggled, his legs dangling, as the youngest man shouted for him to *just relax*. The big blond grinned from where he crouched in the raft, his hand extended up and toward the older man.

The bearded man they'd called William, had reached the side of the ship, standing upright as he floated lightly up and over the side rails. Two women and several men watched his progress as he stepped gracefully onto the ship's deck before them. All but one woman bowed deeply to the bearded man, but he seemed to ignore them, setting his guitar case down. Straightening, he turned to the brown-haired woman who hadn't bowed and then hurried to her.

My invisible cradle faltered briefly, losing a little altitude, and then it stabilized. In the next instant, I was quickly propelled up and over the ship's rail, landing in the waiting arms of an older bald man. Blue eyes glowed and sparkled into mine with a strong calm. My headache eased as he carefully set my feet on to the gray deck.

Near us, the bearded man pulled the brunette woman roughly into his arms calling her *his Lady Ann*.

*"GET OFF!"* she screamed, eyes glowing like the aliens in that film, *Stargate*.

Suddenly, the bearded guy's body flew backward like in a cheap kung fu movie, across the metal deck, landing in a heap against a wall. As I found my balance, Baldy's hands steadying me, the bearded guy raised his head, looking across the deck at the brunette. Both were scowling.

"Welcome, Miss Merlin," said the short, bald man at my side, his eyes following the brunette woman. "I'm Rick Senelick. At your service."

As the oldest man from the raft floated over the rail, two men reached for him and eased him to the ship's deck. They quickly covered him with a big blanket as he began to get his footing. The other woman, an overweight grey-haired granny, draped a blanket across my wet shoulders.

That big wolf arrived next, gracefully stepping onto the ship's deck like Mary Poppins arriving at the front door of the Bank's home. The wet black cat in my arms catapulted from me and ran to touch noses with the wolf.

As the youngest man from the raft glided over the rail and onto the deck, the frowning brunette stepped over to me. She reminded me of ... of my own reflection. *She could be my fraternal twin*, I thought, trying to remember if I had any sisters.

“No, Miss Merlin,” she said with a slight smile, reaching her right hand out. “We are not related. My name is Susanne Sayer.”

“Hello,” I managed and a wave of fatigue washed over me as I realized I was safe and could now sleep.

“Do you know your name?” she asked in a slight British accent as she touched my left cheek.

“Hannah, I think.”

Her hand moved carefully along the side of my head, my scalp tingling at her touch. She reached toward the throbbing lump there. She closed her eyes, and I saw a slight golden glow behind her eyelids.

“Hm...Oh, dear! Concussion,” she muttered, lines furrowing her brow. “Rick, steady her, please.”

A wave of warmth moved past me like a summer breeze, and I realized I was no longer soaked to the skin. I felt wonderfully warm. The hand on the side of my head grew hot as I heard the woman praying in some other language. My headache *went away*. I met her kind brown eyes and she smiled.

“Thank you, God,” she breathed as the tall blond from the raft jumped the ship’s rail and rushed toward us. The woman asked, “Are you hungry, Hannah?”

“I’d love a cup of tea,” I sighed, remembering now that that handsome blond was *my* Marshall.

“And a hot meal. Rick, show them to the dining room,” Susanne said with authority. “Captain Tomas? Time to go, sir.”

“Yes, ma’am,” responded the tall dark-skinned man, who steadied a pale and weary-looking Louis.

“That way, please,” the bald man called out all as he nudged my elbow, gesturing to a wide hatch in the side of the ship. I now noticed that he had a bushy gray mustache.

Enrique stepped over to his older brother and took his arm as the captain moved away from the group. Captain Tomas went up some metal stairs on the side of the ship’s main structure. Judica and Tosha started toward the open hatch Rick had pointed to, followed by the brothers. William climbed to his feet. Face expressionless behind that beard, he looked around and then slowly stretched, bending his spine backwards arms in the air. I watched him cautiously, unsure of his state of mind. I could sense nothing unusual in him but reminded myself of his ability to masque his emotions, even from himself.

Rick Senelick moved toward William as Marshall wrapped a strong arm around my blanketed shoulders. He pulled me to him and kissed me gently and quickly.

*So, you remember me now, hey wot?* His thought was colored with amusement.

*Could you read my muddled mind?* I asked, leaning against his chest and watching William’s guarded posture as the bald man approached.

*Yes and no*, he replied, aware of my focus. You didn't respond to me mentally, so I knew something was very wrong. *You feel right again, my Sweet. Thanks to the real Lady Anne.*

*Thanks to God, my dear.*

*So, now you have experienced Divine Healing too.*

*Yes, I have! It felt wonderful! Does that mean I can be a member of your club?*

Marshall chuckled while across the deck, I heard Lord Richard Senelick introduce himself to Lord William as Lady Anne's guardian. Senelick quietly compared his role in *The Thirty* to mine, which I *Knew* was true. Will scowled, watching his Lady Anne follow Captain Tomas up those outside stairs. Marshall nudged me forward, and we stepped over to William.

"Ya must understand just what recently happened to *yer* Lady Anne, Lord William," the short bald man was saying. "Just after China invaded the US, a renegade military commander named Absalom Merebey used his private army to take over our government and began oppressing the locals of this region. Some call it 'human trafficking'. HA! That's just a polite way of saying *slavery*. Last month he and his army overran the local drug and alcohol rehabilitation mission run by your Anne's brother, the Reverend Joshua Sayer." He said the name with disdain. "They conscripted all the men and women there for his army. The reverend protested, which proved fatal. Merebey executed Joshua right in front of poor Susanne."

"Oh, dear God..." William whispered, glancing at me when I stepped to his side.

"Ah couldn't get there soon enough," Rick said with deep sadness, and then he took a long steadying breath. "His men beat and raped Susanne. Ah found her on the ground, naked and unconscious, with multiple lacerations, 3 broken ribs, and a broken nose."

I suddenly envisioned the first time I saw Lady Anne in the mirror, many days ago in Columbia, and shivered. Her nose *had* been broken. I hadn't realized she'd been blocking so much...

"I didn't know..." William murmured with grief and pain in his words and on his face. "How could she have blocked all that from *The Thirty*?"

Next to me, Marshall growled low and placed a hand on William's arm.

"And now, she probably can't stand to be touched by *any* man," my husband warned him.

"Too true," Rick said. "She can barely tolerate my touch, and Ah've known her since her parents started that rehab center fourteen years ago. Ah love her like a daughter."

"Where are her parents?" William asked.

"Merebey's men killed them about 5 years ago."

William's breath caught in his throat, and he held it for many beats, and then looked at me. The pain in his blue eyes was unlike anything I'd ever seen in them. With a heavy sigh, the bearded man turned toward the open hatch and the light that shown from it. Slump-shouldered, he slowly walked in that direction.

"A truly sad story," Marshall whispered as I wiped away a tear.

"Our cook, Lady Celeste has a hot meal waiting for ya," Rick said abruptly. "Please, get below before she comes looking for ya."

"One question," I began, my eyes following the brunette up those metal stairs.

“Okay...”

“Who called the orca?” I asked, feeling my stomach grumble, demanding food.

Rick Senelick grinned, blue eyes twinkling. He thought a moment, and then he nodded as if to himself. Turning, he gestured for me to follow and he stepped to the ship’s rail. Marshall and I joined him there. Beyond the lights of the *Livingstone*, the sea churned white water as it glided north.

From above us, I heard the woman’s voice softly call “Oscar, come here, please.”

“Look out there,” Rick said pointing into the sea of darkness. “Wait fer it...”

The big killer whale breached the surface less than 30 yards from us, clicking and whistling and then dove quickly below the waves again.

“He’s beautiful,” I breathed, and in my mind, I heard Lady Anne thank the orca for his help. “Oscar, huh?”

“Susanne named Oscar’s mate *Olivia* and their baby is *Ollie*. Now, git below with ya,” the bushy mustache insisted.

I filled my lungs with air and shouted “Thank you, Oscar. Thank you, Olivia. And thank you, little Ollie!”

Chuckling, Marshall nudged my shoulder and we turned together to go below, my clothing now stiff from the dried salt that permeated them.

\* \* \*

When Marshall and I entered the interior of the ship, it smelled like the musk of hard-working men, rust, and diesel fuel. That odor permeated the ship as we made our way through it with Rick’s guidance to the small mess hall. As I stepped into the dining room, I saw Louis was heaping chicken and dumplings, with vegetables, onto a blue metal plate. Enrique poured white wine into several mismatched glasses on a pea-green metal table that was set for dinner for five.

Judica and Tosha were in a corner of the room, eating from big bowls. Water had been set near them on the deck. Linus stirred in my hair, moved to my shoulder, and then jumped down to join the other critters and steal their food.

William glanced up at me darkly as he seated himself at the head of the table, and the strain of the last few days flashed briefly in his eyes. Traces of tears glistened there as well. I tried to smile, to encourage him. His mind felt quiet, and I realized how heavily guarded he had to be. I did not want even to imagine his pain, let alone feel it. He’d found Lady Anne, and she was not how he’d imagined her.

“I wonder why we didn’t sense you earlier, Rick,” Enrique said amicably, setting aside the wine bottle. “I know I’ve met you on the other plane. What did you call it, Lord William?”

“The astral plane,” he muttered in reply and then spoke louder. “And we weren’t aware of him because he uses the same *sneaking* technique that I’ve been practicing for over a year. Isn’t that right, Lord Richard?”

“Call me Rick. And, yeah, it’s essentially the same, but Ah’ve been doing it for many years.”

“Rick is what some call a *survivalist*,” Lady Celeste explained, setting a big wooden bowl of salad on the table as I took the closest seat.

“Weren’t you on the deck when we arrived?” I asked, accepting wine from Enrique.

“I am the only other woman on board, Miss Merlin.” She smiled, glancing around the table. “Oh! I forgot the bread.”

The heavy-set woman spun and hurried through a hatchway. I sampled the wine as Louis passed his brother a plate of food.

“Normally Anita Blevins is here too,” Rick said as Marshall settled in the chair next to me, and took up a glass of wine. “She’s part of the cable laying crew. And they’re on leave since we didn’t need them to drag ya otta the drink.”

“So this ship is a cable layer?” Will asked.

“The *Livingstone* is a 75-meter ship designed to lay subsea power cables. She has a 3,000-ton carousel, 4 point mooring system, a single drum winch with a pulling force of 80 tons as well as accommodation for 25 persons. She’s capable of burying cable up to 6 feet, making her ideal for deploying a variety of cables. Her main cable tanks provide a storage capacity of almost 2,900 cubic meters, giving her an overall cable load capacity of some 4,500 tons.”

“You sound like a proud papa,” Louis remarked.

“And the crew is all here?” William asked cautiously.

“We left the cable crew behind so ya could have their bunks.”

“When was the last time we slept in a real bed?” I chuckled, wistfully glancing at my husband.

“Far too long.” He winked at me then looked at William briefly. “Memphis?”

William nodded, accepting a glass of wine and taking a sip. Then he downed the whole thing and held his glass out for Enrique to refill. I couldn’t blame him, but I could feel Marshall’s frown, as our younger friend poured more.

Louis passed a plate of chicken and dumplings to Marshall, who passed it to me, telling the older man he wanted a larger portion. Louis nodded as I sampled the wonderful meal.

“So, er... Rick,” Enrique began. “Whose boat is this?”

“Mine, although Ah don’t usually ride it. Ah own a small oceanic cable laying company. Lord Tomas Samba is the *Livingstone*’s very capable captain, and Ah stay out of his way.”

“Wise man,” Marshall mumbled as a plate of food was passed to a sullen-looking William.

“Rule number 5: Ya don’t waste anything *good*.” Senelick laughed from where he stood and then reached to grab a wine glass from the table. “Ah may be crazy, but Ah ain’t stupid.”

“You got rules?” Louis asked between mouthfuls of food.

“A couple, yeah. And of course *The Ten*.”

“I prefer *The One*,” William said stoically. “Love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Which does require that we love ourselves,” Marshall put in. “Not many people seem to understand that part of it.”

“The world is full of self-loathing,” our bearded friend muttered and downed his wine.

*Someone is, that's for sure,* Marshall sent to me.

"Not completely, Lord William," said a new, deep voice, and I turned my head to see a very tall, very dark-skinned man step through the hatch where Celeste had gone. "Tomas Samba, at your service, literally. Here's fresh bread, my friends, with my Celeste's compliments."

The newcomer smiled broadly as he placed a platter of golden brown bread slices before William. Louis reached and quickly snatched one.

"We have a second Lord Thomas in *The Thirty*?" I asked, watching Will take a slice and pass the plate my way.

"So it would seem," the captain chuckled. "Miss Merlin, your tea is on its way."

"Thank you."

"How long until we reach Gibraltar, Captain?" William asked, picking up his fork.

"That cold Canary current pushes south, so at top speed, it will take us several days. Lord William."

"Define *several*, Captain."

"Five or six. Maybe four if Rick can maintain a goodtail wind." He glanced at the short man. "Could you do that for us, little brother?"

"You can control weather?" Marshall interjected, grinning, as I attended my meal.

"Only for a few hours at a time," Rick admitted, nodding as he looked hard at William. "Winds are tricky things and to control them is very tiring."

"We could mentally push the ship," William offered, speaking around a mouthful of food.

"Rick, you have *got* to teach me how to control weather!" Marshall declared at the same time.

"It's not good to mess with Mother Nature, Lord Marshall," Rick told him sternly. "God has reasons for doing all He does."

"I can see that there could be far-reaching consequences," Will said and then drained another glass of wine.

"And there is the matter of fuel," our captain continued. "We're almost out of it. Finding a non-hostile refueling port will prove to be a challenge."

"God will provide," William remarked and reached for the wine bottle.

"Susanne said you would take care of it," Rick said, glaring at Will.

"Then I guess I will," he replied, his brow furrowed. "I will pray about it. Hannah, you pray too."

"...um?" I managed around the bread in my mouth which I quickly swallowed.

"You prayed for and received a gallon of water in the desert," he explained. "You are a lot more talented now and could probably pray up a full fuel tank for this boat."

"That was God's doing, not mine." I said strongly and then thought a moment and added, "How did you know about that?"

"I have my ways. Pray! That's an order."

"Ya're an arrogant S-O-B, aren't ya?" Rick scowled at the bearded man. "The only thing yer Merlin will be doing for the next few days is resting. Lord Marshall, you and yer bride will have

the corporate stateroom until we reach Gibraltar. Lord William, ya bunk in the crew quarters with Louis and Enrique.”

I could *feel* William bristle with anger as he glared at the bald man with the thick mustache.

“William,” Marshall warned quietly. “Need I remind you: we are *guests* here.”

Behind his beard, William frowned briefly in thought. He inhaled deeply, and his shoulders settled into a more relaxed posture as he exhaled. I let go of a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“You’re right, of course,” he admitted quietly, looking down at his meal and then pushing his fork to it.

“Thank you,” my husband replied as Lord Tomas cleared his throat.

*He admits you’re right*, I sent to my husband with amazement.

“I’ll be on the bridge,” the captain announced, turned, and left the small dining room.

*He must have hit his head really hard when his Lady Anne tossed him across the deck*, Marshall replied thoughtfully. *This is gonna get interesting, hey wot?*

*Interesting may not be exactly the right word...* I responded.

The room fell quiet as my companions shoveled hot food down. I turned my attention to mine. William downed another glass of wine, grabbed the bottle, and emptied it into his glass. I could feel the discomfort in the room, like the mental equivalent of fingernails on a chalkboard. In the silence, Rick went to a gray metal side cabinet and drew another bottle from it. Enrique cleared his throat while Louis squirmed in his seat. As Rick uncorked the bottle, I decided to break the uncomfortable silence.

“Rick, I am accustomed to running for daily exercise.” I began, after draining my wine glass too. “What can I do while on board?”

“Ah’m a runner too, so Ah know what yer getting at. Our chief engineer, Damian, leads *Tai Chi* on the forward deck before breakfast almost every morning,” he replied. “Yer welcome to join us, but not tomorrow. Susanne wants ya to sleep in tomorrow.”

“Sounds good to me,” I sighed, stabbing a chunk of chicken in the thick gravy.

Marshall raised his glass, glancing around the group. “Here’s to *sleeping in*.”

\* \* \*

Regrettably, the shower stall was too cramped for both of us to enjoy together. So, as I slipped between clean sheets, my Marshall slipped into the tiny “rain locker”. Before I could get settled in the hard bed, a soft knock sounded on the metal door. I could sense her on the other side and mentally called for her to come in.

Susanne Sayer slipped in and closed the hatch carefully behind her. She turned, very straight-backed as her eyes swept over me. I felt her mental probe and pulled the bed covers up to my chin.

“How are you?” she whispered with a glanced toward the small bathroom with its hissing shower sound.

“A little tired, but OK. It’s good to be clean again.”

“Please, put your soiled clothes out in the passageway,” she said as her dark eyes quickly scanned the room. “We’ll wash them for you in the morning.”

“Thank you. I’ll ask Marshall to put them out.”

“Will your new clothes and shoes fit?”

“Everything looks like it should. Thank you. I appreciate all your efforts.”

Lady Anne’s face clouded as her brow furrowed. Her sadness, tangible, felt like a cold blanket around my shoulders. Cold rage surfaced for just an instant, and then she covered it.

“How can I help?” I whispered as the shower sounds in the next room stopped.

“How do you tolerate *him*?”

“Daily prayer. Sometimes hours in the Word. I tried to deal with one issue at a time. Compassion helps.” I heard my own sad sigh and continued. “*Avoid him* when you must. I did, sometimes for days when necessary, for the sake of my sanity.”

“Am I supposed to sing *God bless all the Mad Men* now?” She almost chuckled.

“No. You know this ship, yes? And William doesn’t, so you can sidestep him. But, you two need to accept that you’re both... er, *unworldly*. And you need to quickly settle your worldly differences. Your shared destiny will put you in very close quarters.”

“I have sensed him for years. I know he used you. He’s a bloody ...” she started forcefully, and then stopped, looking distantly at the wall. “So... er, he is so...”

She clenched her jaw shut.

“Demanding? Arrogant? Childish? Frustrating? Manipulative? He is all that, but he is also kind, gentle, compassionate, and *very* spiritual. He doesn’t want a mistress. William needs a companion.” I tried to smile as I continued, “Remember: God paired you two for many very good reasons, but you both have wounds to bind and hurts to heal before – together – you can fulfill the prophecy that you are destined to become.”

The straight-backed woman looked at me, startled, and then slumped again, frowning. She glanced at the old green carpet momentarily, and then haunted eyes met mine. I felt a kind of resignation in her.

“I will pray about this. Good night.” She sighed and then slipped silently out the door.

\* \* \*

“Time to get up, my Sweet,” Marshall whispered near my ear in dawn’s dim light and then shifted out of our cuddle. “You may have first use of the *head*.”

“Thank you, my Love,” I sighed, knowing he was right and then I realized that I *was* hungry. I wondered if he could sense that in me.

*Your tummy’s rumbling*, he remarked as he gently nudged me out of the small bed. *And I need coffee.*



Tosha jumped down from the foot of the bed as I swung my feet reluctantly to the floor. Stopping in mid-motion, I reversed direction and quickly ducked back under the light covers, snuggling up to the love of my life again.

*Not ready yet, eh wot?* He chuckled in my mind as he wrapped his strong arms around me.

\* \* \*

While observing Damian lead the morning tai chi session on the deck, I had to block William's dark mood as he ate breakfast alone in the small galley. His spirit felt drenched in loneliness, uncertainty, and regret. I glanced at my husband in the folding chair next to mine and saw his brow furrow.

"Do I have to instruct that boy about women *again*?" he mused aloud.

"Do you think any of the previous lessons seeped into his thick skull?"

"You'd know better than I," he said without guile.

I felt a soft sadness in my spouse. He wanted to help but didn't know how.

"Well, I guess he did learn a few things," I said kindly before turning my thoughts inward. *Lord William, you should know you have the skills and the means to win her over. You are still her Troubadour. Be a man from a more romantic time.*

*Merlin! God, I don't know if I can...* William moaned. *She was raped! Beaten.*

*You need to be kind and gentle. Romance, Troubadour, not sexuality.*

*I've forgotten the difference.*

*You need to remember,* Marshall put in mildly. *Do you recall our conversations in the Throne Room?*

*Some...*

*Well, there ya go, Mister Furry-face.* Marshall's thoughts were colored with a gentle humor. *Your homework assignment for this morning, young apprentice, is to remember those lessons and to meditate seriously on what I have already taught you. This time it's for real.*

\* \* \*

I spent most of the morning reading a dog-eared science fiction novel I'd found in the ship's common room. Staying in the shade on the cabling deck required shifting my location often, but I preferred the fresh sea air to being below decks. Archimedes perched nearby, taking his usual daytime rest, now in his new, smaller form of a Rufus fishing owl. Judica and Linus stayed near too, mostly napping. Judica told me Tosha was delighted by all the mice to hunt on board, and Celeste was rewarding the cat with fresh tuna tidbits for each dead rodent brought to her. Twice I saw the round little woman come on deck and toss several of Tosha's dead prey overboard.

My husband happily explored the machinery of the *Livingstone* with Louis and Enrique, as Rick Senelick played tour guide. Marshall's appreciation of mechanical engineering glowed from his being several times during the morning, making me smile. Twice he just had to share

visuals of the extraordinary cable-laying equipment with me, and I was enough of a *gearhead* to understand and share his enchantment.

When lunch was served, neither William nor Susanne made an appearance.

\* \* \*

In the early afternoon, I grew tired of sitting and decided to explore the *Livingstone*. The cable ship was an older DPS-class, cable-laying vessel, I was told by engineer Damian, with excellent maneuvering capabilities. The ship, when empty of cabling, was capable of speeds up to 25 knots, which he said was about 28 miles per hour. My biggest discovery was that I could ‘run’ up and down the ladders below deck for exercise.

\* \* \*

“My ferret’s name is Chauncey,” Lady Anne told me, as I stood on the breezy deck. “He is a fine companion if you do not mind a bit of mischief occasionally.”

“Benign until provoked, eh?” Marshall chuckled, glancing at me. “I wouldn’t want him mad at me. I’ve seen ferret teeth.”

Susanne’s light laugh caught on the wind, and I smiled, happy that she was able to laugh after all she’d been through.

“He likes to burrow in there,” she continued in her slight accent, glancing around the cable spools and rigging. “I have not seen him since breakfast.”

“Don’t ferrets eat rats?” I asked, thinking of Tosha’s hunting successes.

“Chauncey thinks himself above that.” Lady Anne frowned and chewed her lip in the late afternoon light. “He would rather chase down rabbits. He’s a big boy ...”

“Adult rabbits?” I gasped, wondering if Linus would be safe around her pet ferret.

“Oh... do not be concerned for your squirrel, Miss Merlin. I have told Chauncey several times that Linus is our friend, not food.” Her frown deepened briefly as her eye began to search the sky. “Oh yes, one other animal. Now, where is she?”

“*What* is she?” I inquired, pushing my hair out of my face as a gust of salt-sea air hit us.

“My harrier hawk, Carmen. There!” Susanne pointed to a speck of something grayish-brown soaring high above. “She is a clever and inquisitive little lady, with very powerful legs and feet, so be careful around her.”

“Carnivore?” I asked uncomfortably.

“Omnivore, actually.” She radiated a calm into me unlike anything I’d ever felt before, and I felt my shoulders melt in relaxation. “And unlike your Archimedes, Carmen is a daytime hunter, so we will have an avian sentinel both day and night.”

\* \* \*

*Come for Vespers*, William whispered to my mind with a touch of insistence.

*We'll be right there*, Marshall responded, reaching for my hand as I set my book on the nightstand.

Moments later, we emerged onto the aft deck to find our bearded friend standing in its center, arms cradling his 12-string guitar. Lonely chords serenaded the setting sun, as Enrique came around the side of the box-like conning structure, Louis in his wake. Rick came down the external stairs with Captain Tomas behind him. Lady Celeste emerged from the hatch that went down into the ship with Lord Damian on her heels.

William began praying his traditional opening prayer as we formed a loose circle around him. "O God, come to our assistance. O Lord, make haste to help us in all things. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

"Amen and Alleluia," Damian added, as William strummed a familiar tune's introductory chords.

"On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross," William began, and we all sang: "The emblem of suffering and shame; And I love that old cross where the dearest and best, for a world of lost sinners was slain. So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, Till my trophies, at last, I lay down, I will cling to the old rugged cross, And exchange it some day for a crown."

*That's odd...* I thought to Marshall as we concluded. *William has never played or sung a non-Catholic song during a service since I'd known him.*

*These times they are a-changin'*, my husband responded with a mental chuckle.

William called, "Let us pray."

\* \* \*

At dinner, Lord William looked glassy-eyed as he ignored the general conversations that bounced around the big table. Susanne had not joined us for the evening meal. Will fed himself absently, and one time, stabbed his own lip with his fork. I wondered if he was communicating with his *Lady Anne*, while blocking me. Around me, the men talked about oceanic navigation, recent European events, and the possibility of fishing off the aft deck. I became the silent observer as Louis and Enrique bantered with Rick Senelick about how to improvise some fishing gear. Celeste promised happily that she would cook anything they could catch if someone else gutted and scaled the fish.

\* \* \*

Across the Atlantic Ocean to the west, I could sense Lord Thomas, Lady Jennifer, and Lady Candice. To my surprise, Lord Eric was with them. Here it was almost bedtime: In Columbia, it was early afternoon, I think. My Marshall held my right hand, and William had my left. On his

opposite side, Lady Anne gripped his hand as we stood in a circle. William prayed aloud before we each focused on the task at hand.

Marshall had come up with the idea of using *The Thirty* to speak with our long-time friend, Penny Pulaski.

Penny's spirit entered the gestalt as a thin wisp of a being in comparison, but I could easily sense my dear friend and knew she could feel us as we sang "Happy Birthday" to her. I had strong impressions of her happiness, her love of Tom, and their son, Samuel who slept in her arms. She was content and doing well, and I thanked God for her peace.

This was so much better than a cell phone call, but we did phone her too.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Marshall and I joined some of the crew on the aft deck for Damian's hour-long tai chi session. I'd always wanted to try this form of exercise, and it felt wonderful to stretch recently sedentary muscles. I continued reading books on the aft deck the rest of the morning, stopping for a brief run of all the ship's ladders and a quick shower before lunch. After a mid-afternoon cuddle and nap with my husband, I returned to the sunlight of the aft deck to find William, alone, casually playing his 12-string guitar. I sensed that I was intruding.

Will smiled at me as I crossed the metal surface, intending to take my book up to the front of the ship, but he didn't speak. He looked calm, almost content as he turned to the sound of footsteps descending the stairs that lead to the pilothouse. Captain Tomas came down grinning, white teeth a strong contrast against his dark skin.

"We are enjoying your music, Lord William," he said with an air of sincerity. "On behalf of my crew, we thank you."

"I've been meaning to ask you, Captain, how is that fuel supply?" the bearded man remarked casually, and I realized that I had forgotten to pray about that.

"Praise the Lord!" Tomas laughed with delight and wonder. "We have more than yesterday!"

"Thank You, God!" I cheered

"Amen to that!" William smiled, striking a bright new chord on his guitar, and then he looked over and winked at me.

William bent to begin another song while I continued on my way, smiling and silently saying thank you again to my amazing God.

*Amen to that, Little One.* William whispered in my mind.

\* \* \*

Marshall and I enjoyed a nightcap with Rick and Susanne and her ferret, Josiah, in Lady Anne's small sitting room. Her little hawk settled onto her shoulder as outside, Archie perched aloft in the cable crane's rigging to take the night watch. I asked why she had named the bird *Carmen*.

“It is Latin for *song*,” she replied crisply.

“Said the girl whose childhood nickname was *La Tronada*,” Rick chuckled, and I saw and felt Will’s dark-haired woman bristle. “That means *partly cloudy* in Spanish. She was not quite a full-blown storm.”

“An appropriate name for a bird, you have to admit,” I remarked.

“Partly cloudy, huh?” Marshall mused, pushing his long blond hair away from his face.

“And she *will* become a storm,” I said without thought first.

“Yes, I will.” Susanne looked at me confidently but mentally warned me not to tell secrets too soon. I agreed.

“But first,” Rick interjected, “There must be Anne’s year of forgiveness.”

I sensed *Truth* of his words and gazed deep into the man in the silence that followed. Nothing spoke of him as a prophet, but I *Knew* he was right.

“Miss Merlin?” Lady Anne called.

“I am here,” I said through a sudden, yet familiar fog. “And your Lord Richard is right, my lady. You and Lord William cannot bring your spiritual message to Jerusalem until you have learned to forgive.”

Lady Anne’s small sitting room grew cool in the silence that followed as Rick looked uncomfortably from Susanne to me and then back to the woman he’d known for years. She sat rigidly in control of herself, hands folded in her lap in a deceptive calm.

“You can be unnerving,” she said distantly, then took up her delicate yellow teacup.

*Are you all right?* Marshall asked.

*I’m fine. Can you please change the subject, my love? They are uncomfortable.*

“Ah, Rick?” my husband began. “Speaking of partly cloudy weather, I wanted to ask you about your meteorological talents.”

“Ah’ve been using the wind to push the ship a few hours every day after breakfast,” he muttered, shaking off other thoughts. “Ya want to observe tomorrow?”

“Maybe I could give it a try, eh wot?”

This time, Rick bristled, and Susanne quickly said, “Rick, you said you tire. Let him help.”

\* \* \*

Day Three at sea found us just south of the coast west of the Sahara, according to Damian before he began our morning tai chi. He led us in an enthusiastic program, guiding us through more complex moves and forms. By the end of the session, I felt like I’d been given a good, deep massage. My husband’s handsome face glowed with health beneath a slight sweat.

At Susanne’s insistence, breakfast was brought to her stateroom, so she and I could talk *in honest privacy*, as she had put it. I would have preferred to shower first, but as Will’s companion in the years to come, this woman, his true *Lady Anne*, commanded my service and support as much – if not more – than William did.

I pitied her for the role she had accepted, having contemplated it for myself for too many years. Perhaps that was why she'd insisted on this discussion.

We mostly talked about William, his idiosyncrasies, philosophies, personality quirks, and his personal habits. That took most of the morning but does not need to be reviewed here. Anne knew fully what she was tasked by God to do, and she only needed to understand how William fit into her personal picture.

We both agreed that William needed a companion, not a mistress, much to Susanne's relief. She said she could easily accept the role of *sister-companion* to our furry-faced Witness of God. And as I left Lady Anne's stateroom hours later, I *Knew* that this was what God had in mind since the beginning.

\* \* \*

Sometime in the late afternoon, William sought out Marshall's advice once again about women, and the two men sat together at the ship's bow in subdued discussion until Celeste announced dinner. I had already briefed my husband on my earlier conversation with Lady Anne.

When our meal was over, Lady Celeste surprised my Marshall with a delicious chocolate upside-down cake and vanilla ice cream for his birthday.

\* \* \*

Bored with surfing the internet on the ship's satellite connection, I decided to take a stroll on deck to look at the night sky. Marshall, Damian, and two other crew members played pinochle in the common room, and I kissed my husband's cheek on my way through, mentally telling him where I was going.

When I stepped out onto the aft deck, I was greeted by the stunning visual song of the universe shining from horizon to horizon. The night sky glittered with the belt of the Milky Way stretching across to the horizon. I had seen pictures, but actually experiencing it left me staring, slack-jawed at the heavenly expanse. As I drank in the beauty of God's universe in the clear night sky, I quietly moved up the outside steps to the pilothouse. Once up there, I eased down on the top step outside the small building to take in the vista before me. I leaned my head against the banister to ease my cramping neck muscles. Looking at the horizon as we glided forward, I presumed I was seeing a northeastern sky. I recognized Polaris and the Big Dipper, but that was the extent of my knowledge.

I heard footsteps below me and caught the scent of pipe tobacco on the breeze. Looking down, I saw the smolder of a pipe, and William's bearded face in its glow.

A second set of footfalls sounded from the right, and a smaller, dark-haired woman stepped around the structure I sat atop of. She was straight-backed and rigid against the wind. William pulled on his pipe again, his brow furrowed in its glow.

Something from the past came and stared down into my very soul. A dream? A vision? The fragrance of fresh rain and flower fields washed my senses as a shiver that ran up and then down my spine. Shaking that off, I resigned myself to eavesdrop as a peace settled within me.

I willed myself invisible to them.

Taking the tobacco pipe from his mouth, Lord William greeted his Lady Anne with a courtly bow.

“Thank you for coming, miss,” he said gently.

“Could I have stayed away?” Susanne’s voice held an icy and impersonal tone.

“Take my hand. Please.”

She reached to take William’s outstretched hand but still managed to keep her distance, standing inert, set, and rigid.

“Heavenly Father, please be with Susanne and me as we begin our journey together,” he prayed with deep conviction. “Watch over us and keep us safe, and help us to quickly understand each other, so we can walk this fatal path which we have accepted for your Glory. I ask this in Jesus’ holy name.”

“Amen,” she responded strongly and then released his hand as if it had burned hers. She drew a deep breath and turned to look out at the advancing seas. “I should think that now our madness truly begins.”

“I suppose you’re right,” William sighed sadly, watching her move away from him. “Good night, Miss.”

“Good night, Mister Martin.”

\* \* \*

Day Four began with a relaxing sleep-in with Marshall. We opted for cuddling rather than joining the group stretching up on deck. After breakfast, Damian and my husband joined Rick on the ship’s stern to learn how to psychically push the vessel to increase speed and reduce fuel usage. I’m not sure why they were still concerned with fuel since its supply had increased steadily since William’s arrival.

Tosha was again with Celeste, Judica reported, and I wondered if my black cat was just mooching food or was honestly fond of our cook. Archimedes, now in the form of a small brown fishing owl, had retired to his usual roost in the overhead rigging, wherever that was.

I worked below decks, cleaning out the large animal commode that Judica, Tosha, Linus, and Anne’s ferret Chauncey all used. While scooping poop, I mentally eavesdropped on Rick’s ship-pushing lesson through Marshall. A few times I almost lost my footing as the *Livingstone* lurched forward under the novices’ attempts, but soon that subsided, and the cable-laying vessel smoothly continued its northward journey.

\* \* \*

That afternoon, as I listened to William and Anne converse on the aft deck, I watched their ardent gestures as they explained their personal interpretations of the *End Time*, sharing biblical passages to support each opinion. Half amused by their lively discussion, I tried again to focus on one of the books in Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins' *Left Behind* series. As I sat in the shade of the pilothouse, I prayed my visible presence would dampen William's temper, and to my delight, he conducted himself as a gentleman should.

The two discussed biblical concepts and theories, mostly agreeing with joyous enthusiasm, but then suddenly something made a frowning Anne leave briefly, returning a few minutes later with her well-worn black bible. After flicking tersely through the pages, the small brunette shoved the bible into William's hands while pointing at a particular passage on that page.

William's displeasure reverberated harshly across the psychic plane and caused my head to spin briefly until I blocked him. Anne paced away from him as he read. Then he examined the book's cover and several of its initial pages, frowning.

"This does support your point," William rumbled, and she spun around to face him, thick brows furrowed in anger. "But I need to look it up in a reliable bible."

"That is a *reliable* bible!" She retorted coldly.

"I was taught not to trust a protestant bible," William replied with less passion in his words and emotions. "I can see why you drew the conclusion you did, based on this translation, but I'd like to check other translations."

"My father gave me that bible," Lady Anne said with angry tones as she hurried across the deck toward him.

Reaching William, she snatched her bible from his fingertips with one unexpected and fluid motion. Her anger beat a prickly vibration on my mind and reverberated through my skull - William's too, no doubt. With a deep scowl, the woman looked him up and down with disapproval.

"I'd like to check a different translation," he repeated, gently.

"You will find it is essentially the same," she hissed, wagging a thin finger in his face.

"I need to see that for myself."

"Do as you like," Anne spat and turned away, hurrying toward the stairs and then going below.

\* \* \*

After dinner William played guitar and sang out on the deck in the fading light, while Marshall and I lingered nearby, sometimes singing along. I missed my own guitar, left behind in Memphis, and wondered if there might be another on board. I mentally touched Rick Senelick and asked. He replied that he would check.

To my surprise, Anne joined us on deck a few minutes later along with Rick and Damian, who carried a battered guitar case. After unpacking it, he and William focused on tuning their



instruments, and Rick stepped to the ship's far rail in silence, looking out across the darkening sea.

Anne disappeared through the hatch and into the ship's interior as Marshall wrapped his strong arms around me with a contented sigh.

As the two men strummed the intro chords to *Amazing Grace*, Anne stepped onto the deck again with a serving tray loaded with various drinks. William and Damian sang. We all joined in. Stepping over to me, she presented a choice of beer, water, wine, or pomegranate juice on a black lacquer tray. I opted for wine, realizing that the musicians were assessing each other's abilities through an easy and well-known classic.

As we sang, Lady Anne set a bottle of beer near Lord William and a large glass of ice water at Damian's elbow. Each man bowed slightly to her as he strummed, smiling at her as they continued to play.

Next, Damian began *The Old Rugged Cross*, and William easily played along, watching Damian's left hand for the chord changes. Rick's deep base harmonized with Anne's descants. I was content to maintain the melody line in a lower-register alto with Marshall singing two octaves below me.

Rick asked Damian if he knew *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, and William happily said "I do," and began that hymn. Finishing it, William changed tempo, strummed an intro in waltz time, and started singing *Morning Has Broken*.

As that tune finished, William strummed a different chord to find the right key and started singing *This Little Light of Mine*, and we all sang along. When we'd finished that, Damian went into *Blessed Be Thy Name*. We all sang with gusto. William followed with the old Edwin Hawkins song *Oh, Happy Day*, which we almost turned into a revival song, clapping our hands and stomping our feet while swaying to the music.

Then Damian said his throat was dry from all the singing and suggested a break.

*I am surprised you know so many non-Catholic tunes*, I said to William, as he drank from his beer. *I didn't think you would.*

*I don't!* William's laughter rang in my mind. *Praise God! They're just flowing through me.*

*Look how happy she is*, Marshall put in, nodding toward where Anne stood chuckling at something Rick had said.

*Good job, Troubadour*, I whispered.

*I am my Lady Anne's human jukebox*, Will sent happily.

*It's been a while since I've heard her laugh.* Rick's thought touched us, as he turned toward William, bowed slightly, and smiled, eyes twinkling in the fading light. *Thank you, Lord William.*

\* \* \*

At dinner earlier that night, Damian had reported that we were off the coast of Casablanca, and I both saw and felt my husband, a film buff, grinning. Later that evening, my Marshall was

feeling especially romantic and brought a bottle of wine and a few candles into our stateroom. He lit the candles and then turned off the lights. Bending over me where I sat reading on the bed, he kissed my neck briefly and grinned happily. Eyes sparkling, he took away my book and slid it onto the nightstand.

"*They had a date with fate in Casablanca,*" he whispered in a deep, dramatically low voice, and I knew he was quoting the tagline of that classic film.

"I hope you and I will do better than Rick and Ilsa, my dear." I smiled, reaching for him.

"Oh, we already have, my Sweet."

\* \* \*

During morning tai chi on the fifth day, I worked through the forms from my place at the end of a line of the six people on the aft deck. Marshall stood to my left. As I twisted my torso right in one of the positions, a movement off starboard caught my attention. Straightening, I saw a fairly large ship on the horizon and a small vessel filled with several people had approached us and was only a few hundred yards away. I sent out a psychic feeler to investigate.

The occupants *stank* on the astral plane, so I *Knew* they meant trouble. *Was Captain Tomas aware of their approach?* I wondered.

*Marshall! Rick! Captain Tomas!* I called out on a tight thought thread, not wanting to alarm the others. *We've got company!*

Through Rick, I sensed a second incoming skiff on our port side and then heard him yell, "*WE GOT TROUBLE. TAKE COVER!*"

People scattered, the crew quickly disappearing down the hatch to the safety of below decks.

William whirled a fast 360, scanning the situation and the hairs on my neck and arms stood up. Then he hurried to Anne, who had stopped in the center of the aft deck, white-faced, wild-eyed, and ridged.

*Protect her!* Rick shouted on the mental plane. *Ah'll deal with this scum.*

Looking back out to sea, I saw a flash from the small vessel. Without thinking, I threw a psychic shield between their rocket grenade and our boat. Something exploded against my barrier, causing a burst of mental backlash. The effort to hold back the concussive shock almost knocked me to the deck, but Marshall's strong hands caught my fall.

"Who are they?" William demanded.

"You don't know!" Rick spat. "Pirates!"

"Don't hurt them," Anne yelled as I threw a protective force field around her while Marshall telekinetically pushed me under the big empty cable spool that dominated the back section of our ship.

Annoyed at being shoved out of the action, I felt rather than saw Rick throw his psychic shield at an incoming projectile from the other side of the ship. I felt the explosion on both planes. The small man withstood the dual-plane shock wave with ease, and suddenly I *Knew* that he'd done this before.

Gunshots rang out from both skiffs. Bullets impacted all around as William mentally propelled Anne across the deck and under the cable spool with me.

"Cor!" she gasped, looking at me big-eyed. "Pirates?"

"Our guys can handle them," I replied, watching Marshall sprint across the deck and knock William to his knees as bullets passed just above their heads. "Please God, keep them safe."

*Amen!* Celeste and Damian responded from below deck.

"Don't hurt them," Anne pleaded.

*Capsize their boats!* William ordered, crawling toward us, my husband at his heels. *Marshall, help Rick. Merlin? You're with me. On the count of three, people.*

I sensed the two warriors acknowledge his plan, so I did too.

"Ready? On three," William shouted as he slid in next to me on all fours. I linked my energy to his as Marshall positioned his body to protect us three. "One. Two. Three!"

Psychic energy flowed from me to Lord William, and I sensed Lady Anne lending her Talent and strength to our effort as well as Rick and Marshall's.

I sensed about a dozen confused men tumble into the sea, as the two boats went flying safely away from them. Then I heard the woman next to me chuckle, and I turned my still-open focus on her. The power behind her energy sent my brain reeling and I felt dazed and dazzled by her being. I instinctively blocked the connection, stunned by the metaphysical depth of this woman. I mentally shook myself to focus on the situation, rattled by this certain knowledge: Lady Anne was an *extremely* powerful Talent.

"And so the madness begins," Anne sighed as she shifted around. "Lord Marshall? Move, please - Oh! Dear God!" I felt her inner shudder and then she gasped: "Tomas! I'm coming! Out of my way, Mister Martin. *NOW!*"

Then I *knew* our captain had been shot.

In the next moments, Lady Anne had climbed over Marshall in her haste, scuttled upright as she ran, and then leapt up the pilothouse stairs, two at a time. We three followed. As I reached the door of the small navigation shack moments later, a massive shock wave of God's healing energy burst from the room with staggering force. I grabbed the ship's rail to stay upright.

Lady Anne had an *amazingly* healing Talent.

I heard the captain's low, tired moan, as I regained my footing. As I hurried in, Anne's back was to me. Tomas lay stretched on the floor, his shirt-front stained with blood, as were Anne's hands. An overweight crew member sat on the dull gray floor nearby and leaned against the bulkhead, holding his shoulder as blood seeped through his fingers. Anne hurried to him, arm outstretched. I braced myself mentally. When she touched his bloody fingers, a flash of light and energy briefly enveloped us all.

I knew this feeling well, and I rejoiced in the healing power of God, saying a fast prayer of praise and thanks.

Lord William skirted around me. Squatting near Captain Tomas, he reached to help him sit up, and I heard the crew member praising God for his miraculous healing. I grinned as Marshall touched my back and looked up to see him smiling at me. He knew that feeling too.

\* \* \*

“I just don’t understand why Tomas didn't know those pirates were out there,” William protested loudly as he shuffled into the common room many minutes later. “Why didn’t his radar indicate an approaching ship?”

“Maybe one of them had Rick’s talent for stealth,” Lord Damian suggested behind him while stepping through the hatch. “If so, they could have cloaked their whole ship.”

“Possibly...” Will conceded, grabbing up a coffee mug from the sidebar.

“Maybe someone psychically kept our bridge crew from seeing them on the radar,” Anne put in, catching my eye as she came through the door next, and I could sense her worry as well as her fatigue.

*He’ll be fine*, I assured her from my seat at the big table and watched as her shoulders relaxed a bit. *A cup of tea will do you wonders, my lady. Will, would you please bring Anne a cup of tea?*

*Certainly*, he responded, taking up a second clean mug.

I touched Marshall’s hand, resting next to mine on the wooden table, and privately shared my impressions of Lady Anne’s immense healing abilities. He shuddered slightly.

*Is she stronger than William?* he asked, wide-eyed as he glanced my way.

*Maybe. I can’t tell.* I sighed. *I thought they would be equals.*

*What do you know that you are not telling us?*

*Things to be revealed soon, my dear.*

*Have I ever told you that I love it when you talk in riddles?*

*Do you really?*

*No.* Marshall’s laughter, speckled with affection, caressed my being. *Which is why I have never said that, hey wot?*

“So, Damian?” William asked as he brought a steaming cup to his pale-looking Lady Anne. “Should we expect these pirates to return?”

*Two big healings like she just did, would have knocked me out for days*, I remarked privately to William and Marshall. *I’m surprised she’s conscious.*

“Rick is more the pirate expert,” Damian, glancing at his employer. “This is not the first time one of his ships has been attacked.”

“This is the sixth,” the bald man said through clenched teeth. “Unfortunately, several years ago China stopped a UN resolution that would allow several Security Council member countries to hunt down pirates in West Africa coastal waterways. Those seven countries were the same navies that chased the Somalian pirates causing havoc on the east African coast. And nowadays, there is so much anarchy in Africa and the Middle East that piracy has become just another business expense.”

“What are they after?” Marshall asked, and then passed a platter of pancakes to me.

“Copper, fuel, guns, and ammo.” Rick winced and looked deeply into his coffee mug for a moment. “Most will also take captives. Human trafficking has skyrocketed in third world

countries since the United States was destroyed. They especially like small white women. We'll need to be very cautious."

William caught his breath and turned pale as he handed the cup of tea to Anne. The knowing glance that went between them caused a cold shiver to run up my spine. I stifled a moan of anticipation.

"And of course they want the actual ships. Usually, they have a big mother ship – often an old whaler," Rick continued. "They use skiffs for the actual attacks, approaching from the rear and usually striking in early morning. They like to use rocket-propelled grenades and AKM Russian assault rifles."

"So we've seen," Marshall said dryly.

"Most locals think of piracy as a form of national defense of their territorial waters." Damian put in from where he stood by the beverage sidebar. "I heard about a group that calls themselves the National Volunteer Coast Guard."

"Cor..." Anne whispered next to me.

"Why us?" I asked, looking from the engineer to Rick. "Why *this* ship?"

"In addition to the reasons Ah already said?" Rich chuckled sadly. "The cable we lay has a copper jacket. They steal buried cable for the copper, so then Ah have to lay more cable, and that keeps me in business."

"We service the SAT-3 WASC cable system which runs down the Atlantic coast, linking Spain and Portugal to South Africa," Damian explained. "There, the SAFE cable system links to Asian systems, bypassing the continual troubles in the Middle East."

"Dangerous work," William commented as Lord Tomas, wearing clean clothing, stepped slowly into the room.

"That, it is," the captain said wearily and several of us greeted him while Lord Damian handed him his fresh cup of coffee, and then gestured for Tomas to sit down.

"We used to get a certain amount of protection from the security patrols around the floating production, storage, and offloading units out here," Tomas said as he eased down into a chair.

"I didn't see any security today," Marshall muttered, and William quietly agreed.

"The pirates have begun making deals with various petroleum corporations' rent-a-cops," Rick responded, his mug hitting the table with a loud *thud*. "So, as soon as our crew finishes inspecting the hull for bullet holes, we'll be underway."

"How long will that take?" Will inquired.

"A few hours," Captain Tomas reported, his coffee cup paused near his lips.

"Is there any chance we could go swimming?" Marshall asked hopefully.

Rick and Tomas exchanged glances, and the captain shrugged.

"Ah don't see why not," Rick replied, turning to the woman next to me. "But only if Susanne is up to standing the *shark* watch."

"I could do *that*," I said quickly, turning to the brunette next to me. "That is, if *you* would like to go for a swim."

“Hannah does have a strong talent for animals,” William affirmed, smiling hopefully. “That is if you’re too tired.”

“And your bird, Carmen could keep watch too,” Marshall put in.

“She could,” Anne responded, brows furrowed in thought, and then her face brightened. “And, yes, I *do* fancy a swim!”

\* \* \*

During dinner, William and Rick quietly discussed the pros and cons of conventional small arms over the God-given talents of *The Thirty*. Rick, a product of a North African upbringing, had learned to rely heavily on guns and rifles for hunting and protection through the years. In contrast, William had been raised by liberal parents who abhorred violence of any kind and never allowed him to even play with toy guns or toy soldiers.

I felt quite surprised by this, considering William’s displays of temper in the past. Then I realized he had not thrown a hissy-fit since we’d left Memphis. I said nothing, even to my husband who was also silent in the light of William’s seemingly contradictory statements.

I was amazed William had ever joined the US Navy.

By dinner’s end, that conversation had finally run its course. I sensed Marshall’s indecision, and then I heard his slow deep sigh.

“Is it alright to ask what happens when we get to Tangier tomorrow?” he asked, as Lady Celeste distributed huge slices of *some kind of berry* pie around the table.

“Our feet will touch on dry ground,” Rick deadpanned, waited a heartbeat, and then continued. “And we will begin the next leg of our journey.”

“Could you be a little more vague?” Marshall chuckled. “Please?”

“Ah’ll try.”

“Really, Rick!” Lady Anne frowned as she glared at the mustached man.

“Truly, Susanne,” he replied smugly. “Ah may be crazy, but Ah’m not stupid.”

“Crazy?” Marshall muttered wistfully. “I was crazy once.” *Remember, my Sweet?*

“More than *once*,” William put in. “Merlin? Any insight for us?”

The vision came rapidly on me, like a fainting fit, and as its fog engulfed me, I heard myself speak. “I see the city of Tangier in chaos. A tall skinny black woman with the world’s fastest motor-mouth will drive us out of the city before the bad guys can catch up with us.”

“Ah was just about to say that,” Rick protested quickly, as my prophecy faded.

“And when did *you* become clairvoyant?” Anne inquired sarcastically of him.

“This morning, my dear girl, when Ah talked to Miriam over the ship’s radio,” Rick replied smugly.

“Miriam?” Anne asked, serious again.

“*Lady Miriam of The Thirty*,” William explained around a mouthful of pie.

“That’s the one,” Rich affirmed, grinning. “And she is just as Miss Merlin described her: A tall skinny black gal with the world’s fastest motor-mouth.”

Lady Anne pinched Lord Richard lightly on the cheek, as he sat next to her, and chuckles from the rest of the diners helped release the residual tension from the weapons discussion.

“So what’s the plan?” Marshall asked, looking in William’s direction.

“Let’s just let God guide us,” William suggested as he glanced at Lord Richard, and then Will pushed himself back from the table. “That will be sufficient for the day.”

*A skinny motor-mouthed black woman?* Marshall asked, amusement and curiosity coloring his thought.

*That’s right,* I replied.

“I assure you all, I *am* a good travel guide,” Rick said with a grim look at William. “I will get us all safely to Israel.”

I could sense a brief thought pass between the two men, but could not discern its content.

“Enrique?” William asked as he pulled his pipe and pouch from his shirt pocket. “I believe you have something you want to share?”

The young Mexican blushed slightly, looking at our leader with eyes wide. He exchanged a glance with his older brother and then grinned sheepishly around the table.

“I would expect the Lady Merlin to know such a thing,” Enrique answered with another look my way before he met William’s eyes. “But you? How?”

“I’m learning from a very good teacher,” William explained with uncharacteristic gentleness as a heavy-browed Captain Tomas stepped in through the kitchen hatch. “You’ve received different marching orders, haven’t you?”

“Er... Yes. Last night I had a dream,” he said slowly. “Now I *Know* that Louis and I will follow the Holy Spirit into Northern Spain to do God’s work there.”

“Well, you’ll be able to walk there,” Tomas rumbled. “We just heard on the radio that there have been several major earthquakes around the Mediterranean Sea in the last half hour. The seabed beneath the Straights of Gibraltar has risen. The Med now appears to be landlocked.”

The room fell silent except for the background thrum of the ship’s engines.

And then the ship lurched up and sideways as if the ship had been snatched out of the sea.

I was catapulted backward and onto the floor, hearing a riot of breaking dinnerware and alarmed shouting.

“Tsunami!” Tomas yelled as the lights went out.

The *Livingstone* spun crazily, throwing us and everything around the room. I landed with a thump amid broken dishes and fallen chairs. All was momentarily quiet, but then the ship jolted up and sideways again. I slammed into the sidebar with my left shoulder and I heard a *pop*. I frantically grabbed a nearby stanchion with my right hand and arm.

The complete darkness startled me as the ship rocked violently. I held on, praying for our safety. In a moment, all became quiet, except for the rhythmic rattle of the still-rocking boat.

“Everybody okay?” William gasped from somewhere on my right.

“I think I’m bleeding.” Damian groaned. “My head...”

As other people responded that they were all right, I rolled my shoulder, felt a sharp pain, and gasped as a jagged lightning bolt of pain flashed across my vision. Then I felt Marshall's supportive spirit envelop mine.

"Hannah's hurt." I heard and *felt* Lady Anne's soft voice.

"My shoulder," I moaned as the ship continued pitching crazily. "May be dislocated..."

Emergency lights flashed on, displaying a chaotic mess of a room. Dishware, overturned chairs, and people littered the floor of the room. I shut my eyes and tried to push away the pain. Then God's wonderful healing energy tingled across my being from across the room, and I heard Damian's relaxing sigh.

"That should do you," Susanne breathed, her words sweet with compassion.

I heard her crawl across the floor towards me as Marshall gently touched my cheek. His strength and presence pushed back the new fiery heat in my shoulder reminding me of a gunshot wound not so long ago.

A gentle hand touched and then pushed slightly on my shoulder and God's divine and wonderful energy enveloped me. After a slight popping sound, the pain ceased as the ship's rocking eased down.

I heard William gasp a sobbing breath and felt his heart wrench within him.

Instinctively blocking his emotional upheaval, I opened my eyes and sought him in the red emergency lights. My bearded friend knelt in the far corner of the common room, shoulders now shuddering under his great sobs. On the floor, beneath books and the big old-style TV set, lay his beloved 12-string guitar, crushed and broken, never to sing again.

\* \* \*

"You know this could be our last cuddle in a real bed for a while," Marshall whispered, still breathing deeply.

He kissed my hair as I laid my head on his broad chest.

"There will be other places where we can play," I reminded him, thinking of a swimming pool in the moonlight, years ago.

"Ooo-oh, baby, I love your way," he sang softly.

\* \* \*

I took one more look around the stateroom to make sure I had all my meager possessions in this new purple backpack. Three sets of underwear, one full change of clothes, a few toiletries, the dark blue windbreaker I wore, and a small bible were all I owned now. And I had my animals, although that was not truly ownership. Stepping into the hall, I moved a few paces down the passageway and turned to see my tall blond warrior quietly close the door. He turned to me, grim eyes cold and his brows knit, but when he saw that I was watching, he brightened a bit.



*What's on your mind, dearest?* I asked gently as he gestured for me to precede him down the hall.

He shrugged with a sigh. Worry lines pinched his mouth. *God's grace is sufficient for the day*, was his guarded response.

\* \* \*

After a somber breakfast, we of *The Thirty* stood together on the aft deck watching Anne and Damian sign some paperwork as witnesses. Then Rick handed *The Livingstone's* title to Captain Tomas. After stuffing other documents into four large yellow envelopes, Rick handed Tomas these, explaining that there was one for each of the five captains of the other ships in his cable-laying fleet. Finally, he directed the captain to convene the other captains as a new board of directors with Tomas as interim president until the details of their new corporation could be hammered out with the help of Rick's lawyers.

During our silence, Rick next requested that the crew prepare the small captain's skiff for launch so that we could go into the city of Tangier, Morocco on the Strait of Gibraltar.

Our journey aboard this cable ship had come to an end.

*I never did get to be the Dread Pirate Roberts*, my spouse muttered sadly.

\* \* \*

YOUR CAT NO LONGER WISHES TO ACCOMPANY US, Judica explained solemnly while Linus settled into my hair.

As I waited my turn to board the small landing craft, my heart sank and an odd emptiness burrowed in.

To be Continued