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Habitat

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Habitat - Prolog

“Dang, Matt! At least look like you are busy!” Gills McBain whispered to his friend, Matt Ruby. It wasn’t like Gills to be nervous, but today was a special day. He was to find out if he was to be hired as one of the divers for the new underwater habitat that rich, old, slightly senile, Elias Johnson was planning to put in the Gulf of Mexico. Gills, called that more for his ability as a diver than his first name of Gilbert, had been diving since the age of six.

He’d learned early and had followed through with the sport, turning his abilities into a job, first with the US Navy, and then independently, working mostly on off shore gas and oil drilling rigs. He could do it all. From snorkel to mixed gas to hard suit diving.

His buddy, Matt, grinned, but didn’t let Gills see it. He turned around and began to clean some of the diving equipment, already clean as could be. But Gills wanted everything shipshape or better on the Munson fifty-two landing craft that was Gills’ dive boat before Johnson’s representative showed up to talk to him.

“Look alive, Matt! I think this is them,” Gills said quietly, all signs of nervousness gone now that the action was about to start.

“Gilbert McBain?” asked one of the three men that stopped on the dock where the *Green Dragon* was berthed.

“That’s me. Call me Gills. Everyone does.”

One of the other men chuckled and Gills frowned slightly. But the first man spoke again. “Can we go somewhere to discuss the details of your employment?”

“Woo hoo!” exclaimed Matt, drawing a frown from all three men. The other two looked around to see who might have noticed. Gills was

beginning to get the queasy feeling he occasionally had when things were about to go every way but the way Gills wanted them to.

“I thought we’d talk here on the *Green Dragon*. The cabin isn’t large, but it is comfortable,” Gills said.

The first man seemed to sniff the air, and it must not have smelled to his liking because he said, rather forcefully, “I think not, Mr. McBain. A place where we can talk privately, without interruption, would be more suitable.”

“But...” Gills said.

But before he could continue, the man that had chuckled very rudely said, “C’mon boss. Let’s leave this country bumpkin to his toys. Divers are a dime a dozen.”

“Hey!” Matt said. Three pairs of hard eyes turned to him and Matt fell silent. Best to let Gills guide the action.

“It’s okay. We can go up to Mona’s, in the marina clubhouse. There won’t be many people there this time of day.”

“What, some fish house?” asked the man that had not spoken up to this point.

“It’s a little more than a fish house,” Gills said, an edge to his voice. “A lot of the business done in this marina is done there. Mona has several private meeting rooms for negotiations between... well, anyone that needs some privacy to do their business.”

“Well, that sounds suitable to our needs,” said the first man.

“You have the con, Matt,” Gills said over his shoulder as he stepped onto the dock.

“Yes, sir,” replied Matt, watching the three men warily.

A few minutes later, Stanley Martin, as Gills had been informed the first man’s name was, spoke again while the other two men took up positions at the door into the room and the window looking out up the slope to the city.

“What we are looking for, Mr. McBain, is a person that is capable at the diving end of the job, but that can keep his mouth shut around others as to what it is he’s doing.”

“What’s with the secrecy? Everyone around here knows Mr. Johnson is planning on building an underwater habitat for research.”

Martin smiled slightly. “Yes. Of course. Everyone knows that. And let’s just keep it that way, no matter what you might see or hear. You understand me?”

Gills didn’t like it, but he nodded. “I understand. But before we go further, what are the terms?”

Martin stated a figure that Gills had to fight hard to not exclaim at the amount. The business was doing okay, but with the money he would make on the habitat would pay off everything, let him stock up on some things he’d been wanting for quite a while, and give him a nice nest egg to put on his retirement.

“I think we have a deal, then,” Gills said, holding out his hand to Martin.

Martin ignored it and shoved some papers over to Gills. “Read those through, especially the one about confidentiality, and sign each page.” Martin turned slightly in the chair and said, “Boomer, see if you can find anything like real coffee in this dump.”

Both the other men laughed and one left the room. Gills bristled at Martin's use of the word 'dump' referring to Mona's. But he held himself in check. He was looking at the biggest paycheck of his life if things went well on this job. He could afford to grow a thicker skin. Gills went back to reading and signing, liking things less and less as he read through the complex agreement.

Finally, hesitating just a little, Gills signed the last page. "What about Matt? He's my number two man in the business."

Martin looked like he was going to simply say no, but then looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "Wouldn't hurt to have a gopher around for odds and ends. He gets his cut out of yours. You make good and sure he understands everything in those papers or he goes, and it won't be a pleasant separation." Martin's eyes bored into Gills.

Gills managed to nod, thinking, "What have I got Matt and myself into?"

"Let's go, boys," Martin said, rising from the chair. He looked at Gills one last time. "You don't show up ready to go next Monday, or I hear you've been shooting your mouth off about the deal, and you'll be sorry you ever got involved in this project."

Gills managed not to say he was already feeling a bit sorry he had become involved. He simply nodded and watched the three men leave the meeting room, and then the main building as Gills walked out behind them.

"Hey! Gills!"

Gills turned around when Mona called to him.

She continued to speak as he walked over to the bar. "Yeah, Mona?"

“That big lug said to put the coffee and drinks on your tab. I have a sudden feeling you didn’t tell him to do that.”

Gills looked out the broad expanse of window as the three men got into the back of a limousine. “I didn’t, but it’s okay. I’ll pay it off.”

Mona watched as Gills pulled out his wallet and counted out the money when Mona told him the amount. “Premiums, obviously,” Gills said.

“Yep. They said they wanted the best that I had. I think they were surprised when I brought out the good stuff.”

“Yeah. Okay, Mona. Thanks.”

“Who were those jerks, Gills? Something to do with the Johnson habitat?”

“Can’t say, Mona. Part of the contract, if that tells you anything.”

“Yeah. It does. You watch yourself, Gills. I’ve got a bad feeling about this project. Have from the very start.”

Gills nodded, but said nothing more as he turned and headed outside, and then back to the *Green Dragon*.

Habitat - Chapter 1

“Man, Gills, we’ve been on this project for six months and hardly anything has been done! I like the money, sure. But I’m getting tired of just shuttling divers back and forth to the site and shore. They aren’t down there more than twenty minutes at a time.”

“I’ve been down there with them Matt. They aren’t doing nothing. They’ve been surveying the bottom in this area. For something. And I think that is all about to change. Look at the radar and then to the south.”

“Holy Moly! That is some size ship!” Matt exclaimed. “Uh, we aren’t in trouble with the Navy, are we?”

Gills seemed to ignore the question, his muttered, “Not yet, anyway,” unheard by the excited Matt.

“She’s not Navy, Matt. That’s a yacht.”

“Aw, come on, Gills! A yacht? Cruise ship maybe.”

Gills handed Matt the powerful binoculars and took the helm to let Matt get a good look at the ship approaching at high speed.

“Ge-man-ne! She’s gotta be doing thirty knots! That has to be Navy!”

“Nope. Don’t forget who we’re working for. It is Mr. Billionaire Johnson, you know.”

“Ah, man! That’s his yacht... Named after his granddaughter... Can’t remember the name,” Matt said. He took the binoculars down from his eyes. The yacht was close enough now to get a good look at it head on. “Sure hope she can slow down as well as she can run,” Matt suddenly said.

“Just hold on to something. We have right of way. I have a feeling the Captain of that yacht likes to show off.”

Sure enough, at the last possible moment, the view of the yacht shifted from head on to quartering, and it slowed dramatically, coming to a stop a hundred yards from the *Green Dragon*. Even at that, the huge wave the yacht had created, with the swell that was already running, rocked the landing craft enough that Matt decided to hang on, despite his resolution not to.

The VHF radio sounded and Gills picked up the mike to respond to the hail. He was pretty sure it was Martin speaking.

“Pull up to the stern and come aboard, McBain.”

“Will do,” Gills said, not liking the commanding tone in Martin’s voice. But it was a job, paying good money.

Gills fired up the center engine of the *Green Dragon* and maneuvered around the side and to the rear of the huge yacht. With a good look at it, he believed what he’d read about the giga-yacht when it was being constructed for the eccentric billionaire. One hundred fifty meters long at the waterline, twenty-five meter beam, drawing six meters, she was one of the largest private yachts afloat.

And one of the best equipped if all the rumors were true. The main things were the twin twenty thousand horsepower CAT/MaK diesel engines turning Rolls Royce controllable pitch props in a CODAG configuration with a GE LM1600 twenty thousand horsepower gas turbine powering a Kamewa jet drive. She was reported to be able to do forty-five knots, but had a range of thirty thousand nautical miles at five knots using the Sky Sail wind propulsion system she sported, without relying on the engines.

Gills remembered the name of the giga-yacht about the time he turned the *Green Dragon* across the yacht's stern. Not that he'd seen the name painted broadly across the stern, but he had seen the granddaughter of Elias Johnson standing at a rear railing. The name came to him when he saw her. She was unforgettable, even from only having seen her picture in magazines about the rich and famous of the seafaring set.

Marissa Holmes. A beautiful name for a woman, and *Marissa* wasn't a bad name for a yacht, either.

Before Gills could tell Matt to stay on the *Green Dragon*, Stanley Martin was telling Matt to do just that. Matt drew up angrily, but a look from Gills kept Matt from telling Martin that he took his orders from Gills. Matt hung the fenders over the side of the *Green Dragon* to protect both it and the yacht from damage.

A pair of the *Marissa*'s deck hands secured the *Green Dragon* fore and aft to the stern of the yacht. Gills was just about up the stairs to the main deck from the waterline stern deck when Marissa dropped the wrap she was wearing and dove over the side of the ship, slicing cleanly into the water. Gills had a quick look at the woman in the rather demure bikini before she dove. "Yep. Beautiful."

Matt had seen the dive, too, but was startled when Marissa reached up her hands and grasped the railing of the *Green Dragon* on the side away from the yacht. "Hey! Uh... Miss..."

"Holmes. But call me Marissa," said Marissa. "Could you lower the ramp and dive ladder? I'd like permission to come aboard."

Matt nearly stumbled in his haste to get to the ramp controls. He took Marissa's hand when she held it up as she climbed out of the water. He almost stumbled backwards as he stared at her.

Marissa smiled slightly, used to the effect she had on young men. But Matt wasn't her interest. She'd asked around about Gills McBain, out of simple curiosity, when she'd heard Stanley mention his name to her grandfather.

Stanley had only laughed and made a rude comment. "Nice boat," Marissa said, looking around.

"You want to come into the cabin? Out of the wind?" Matt managed to say.

"Thank you, yes." Marissa followed Matt into the cabin that took up about a third of the length of the boat. She slid into the galley booth.

"Coffee?" Matt asked.

"Perhaps a towel and some hot tea. Would that be too much trouble?"

"Of course not. Gills... Mr. McBain... drinks tea. Can't stand coffee." Matt turned to the galley stove and began to prepare the tea, after reaching into the head and handing Marissa one of the towels so she could dry off slightly and dry her hair.

"Tell me about him," Marissa said. "I've heard that he is something of a mystery man."

"Gills? Mystery man? Not hardly." Matt paused. "Well... There are some things I guess I don't know about him. But I still wouldn't call him a mystery man. He's just Gills. One of the best divers around. I knew some good ones in the Coast Guard, and was a pretty good one myself, but he's the best. He's tough on himself, and never lets people diving with him get into trouble. Sometimes I think he has eyes in the back of his head the way he can come around when a problem is developing behind our backs when we're working underwater."

“I see. You know Grandfather has to be careful. There are a lot of people out to cheat him out of money with various schemes. I never really got the feeling from what I heard about Gills that he was like that, but I like to check things out sometimes.”

“Oh, Gills would never take advantage! He’s as honest as the day is long. Too honest sometimes if you ask me. And always looking out for the other guy. He’s helped out so many people around town that people are always hitting him up for something or other.”

“Sounds like a good, solid man.” Marissa watched Matt closely when she asked, “I never heard anything about a wife. Surely he is involved with someone. He is a most striking looking man.”

“Yeah. Lots of women hit on him. But he... well... not my place to say... But he doesn’t go chasing women. Something from his past... But I don’t know what. And...”

“Probably shouldn’t say if you did,” Gills said from behind Matt.

Matt’s ears turned red and he hurried out of the cabin. “Pumping my friend for information about me?”

“I try to protect my grandfather from people that might take advantage of him,” Marissa said. She unabashedly looked Gills over.

And Gills was doing much the same with her, only slightly less obviously.

“I can understand that. But I’m no risk to your grandfather. I have a feeling he has enough trouble with his own people.”

To Gills’ surprise, Marissa wasn’t surprised at his remark.

“Stanley Martin and his thugs, you mean.”

“I didn’t say that...”

“No, you didn’t. But I don’t trust them any further than I could throw the yacht.”

“Have you talked to your grandfather about them?”

“Tried. But they have an inside track with him on this project.”

“Hey!” Matt yelled from outside.

Gills turned around and went out to join him. Matt was standing toe to toe with one of Stanley Martin’s ‘thugs’.

“I’ve come to escort Miss Holmes back to the *Marissa*.”

“I do believe that is up to Miss Holmes,” Gills said.

Matt moved out of the way. He’d never seen Gills get into a fight yet, but he had seen him work out. The thug might get something he wasn’t expecting.

“That’s enough, Boomer,” Marissa said, walking slowly over to the railing next to the stern of the *Marissa*. “Gills, would you mind?” she asked, holding her hand out to him. Gill helped her over the side onto the stern deck of the yacht.

“Watch what you do, tough guy,” Boomer said softly to Gills. “It’s a big, dangerous ocean out here.” He turned on his heel and climbed back aboard the *Marissa*.

Matt saw Gills cheek bones working. Gills was not a happy person at this particular moment. “Uh... Gills... about Marissa... Miss Holmes... I didn’t think...”

Gills' look softened. "It's alright buddy. She apparently has quite the persuasive ability."

The same two deckhands on the *Marissa* that had secured the *Green Dragon* released the lines and gave a slight shove to clear the landing craft from the stern deck of the yacht. Matt retrieved the fenders and stowed them as Gills fired up the center engine again and maneuvered slowly away from the *Marissa*.

When Gills started the other two engines and began to speed up, Matt went into the cabin and asked, "What did Mr. Johnson have to say?"

"Not too much," Gills replied, looking thoughtful. "Stanley did most of the talking. Elias just muttered and nodded some. I have a feeling the rumors about his encroaching senility are true. Johnson is not well at all. He looks ill, and barely aware of his surroundings. I think Stanley Martin is pulling his strings."

"That's too bad. I don't like Martin or his guys."

"Nor do I," Gills replied. "I'm thinking I might dump this job and find something else to do. But..."

"You're going to help Johnson, aren't you?" Matt asked, though it was more statement than question.

"A man deserves to be respected and allowed to age gracefully until death. Elias is just a puppet now, and his health is worse than it might be, if I learned anything in the medical part of Ship Master's School."

"And *Marissa* has nothing to do with it?" Matt asked, on a sudden impulse.

Gills was shaking his head, but Matt saw the small smile on Gills' face. "Yeah. Right," he muttered and then set about cleaning up the galley and dinette area.

Two hours later, Matt said to Gills, "You never really said what was said in that meeting. Something I should know?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, there is. We start construction on the habitat next week. There will be three work barges equipped with station holding gear towed out to the site and lined up on the benchmark the dive crew put down on that last trip. Once they are in place the construction starts. You'll be using the *Green Dragon* for various tasks to support the operation."

"Hey! I'm your dive partner! I'll be diving with you..."

Gills was shaking his head. "I'll be diving with the crew Martin hired. I want you up here and loose, in case of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Matt asked.

"Any kind." That was all Gills would say as he piloted the landing craft into the home berth at the marina.

"Not going to the Johnson pier where they park their small boats?"

"Not this time," Gills said. "Got some things to do I'd just as soon no one else knew about."

"Such as?"

Gills grinned. "You'll find out eventually, but for the moment, I want you to stock the *Green Dragon* for a long stay at sea."

"But you said I'd be going back and forth..."

“That’s the plan. But don’t forget we’re preppers. I want to be prepared for anything.”

“Oh. Well, okay. Sure wish I knew what you were thinking.”

“No, you don’t,” Gills replied, but he was grinning at Matt.

“Aw, nuts! Okay. I’ll get the supplies. And not ask any more questions.”

“Okay. That’s why you are my number two. See you Monday morning.”

For over a month nothing out of the ordinary happened, but Matt was surprised the sixth Monday morning when Gills didn’t show up at his normal time of five thirty when they were planning on going out. He was really surprised when Gills did show up. He wasn’t alone.

Matt’s jaw dropped when he got a good look at Gills’ companion. She wasn’t beautiful in the way that Marissa Holmes was. But the short, trim young woman was pretty in a girl-next-door kind of way. And she must be strong, Matt decided, for she was carrying a pack on her back, a bag slung over one shoulder, and was pulling another large case on wheels.

A bit distracted, Matt started when Gills whistled at him. “A hand, Matt?”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure. Sorry.” Matt was sure of his evaluation when the young woman swung the slung bag from her shoulder and Matt caught it. He didn’t stagger, but it was a near thing. He quickly set it aside and took the back pack, and finally the case.

Matt looked over at the smiling Gills when the woman was aboard and headed for the cabin. “Who is she? What’s she doing here? Where...”

“I’ll explain in a moment. But I need you to go up to the truck and get the other two cases.” Gills was piling the bags and cases he’d been carrying on the open deck of the *Green Dragon*, next to the woman’s.

“Okay,” Matt said. He wanted information in the worst way, so he hurried up to the marina parking lot and used his key to unlock the tailgate of Gills’ truck. He pulled one long, heavy Hardigg case from the bed of the truck, leaning the case carefully against the side of the truck to keep it from rolling away while he got the other equally heavy, but boxier shaped Hardigg case out of the truck and closed and locked the tailgate.

It was just a bit of a struggle for Matt to handle the two weighty cases. He was no lightweight, but the cases were heavy and a bit awkward to pull due to the different sizes of the wheeled cases.

Matt left one case on the dock and he and Gills moved the other one on board without much trouble. Then they loaded the other one. The woman was coming out of the cabin as Gills and Matt rolled the two cases toward it.

“Matt, this is my niece, Bridget. Bridget, my friend and coworker Matt.”

“Hey Matt,” Bridget said, holding out her hand.

Matt quickly shook hands with her. “Hi. I’m... uh...” Matt looked at Gills. “I didn’t know you had a niece.”

“Long lost,” Gills said, smiling fondly at Bridget. “I haven’t heard from my brother Mathew in twenty years. He and Bridget’s mother were killed in an automobile accident a month ago. Bridget came looking for me as her only remaining relative.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt said, looking back at Bridget.

Bridget sighed. “Thanks. But I’m getting over it. Slowly. We were pretty close. I didn’t know about Uncle Gilbert... Gills, until after the funeral.” She looked at Gills then and added, “I don’t know why my father and Gills didn’t speak.”

“It is a long story, Bridget. No need to go into it at the moment. Have Matt show you around the rest of the *Green Dragon* and get acquainted with her features and abilities. I need to go talk to Mona.”

When Gills left, Matt eagerly showed Bridget the landing craft. His pride in the boat was obvious. Bridget was smiling when the tour was over, and they were in the cabin, having stowed all the gear Gills and she had brought aboard. With what Matt had brought aboard Sunday, there wasn’t much room left in the cabin, and some of the supplies were in the deck lockers. Matt had made sure to keep the dive equipment and open space needed for the dive operations clear, but every other cubic foot of open space had something stored in it.

“I sure am glad I was able to find Uncle Gills,” Bridget said as they sat down across from one another in the dinette. “I don’t know what I would have done. I used almost all the money I had from the insurance looking for him. I had to drop out of college when... when it happened.”

“I’m really sorry about your parents, Bridget. It must be hard. I lost mine when I was little and don’t really remember them.”

“That’s so sad!” Bridget exclaimed.

“Well, it was just what happened. I had some nice enough foster parents. But they kept six children almost all the time I was there. We weren’t really close. Gills is more like family than anyone else. At least since I was in the Coast Guard. That was kind of like family.”

“You were Coast Guard?”

Matt nodded. “Trained as a diver. Full six year hitch. That’s where I met Gills. He was doing a contract job for them and we worked together. He hired me as soon as I got out of the service. I’m taking correspondence courses. Want to be a Ship’s Master someday, like Gills. What were you majoring in at college?”

“That’s pretty impressive, Matt. And I was planning on History as a major. But I don’t really know what I want to do now. I kept my eyes and ears open while I was looking for my Uncle. I’m not sure in this day and time that a History Degree would translate into a very good job. Uncle Gills said I could take the time to decide what I want to do, before we can arrange things for me to get into school again down here.”

“Where were you?”

“Missouri. Columbia. I was born and raised there and it is a nice college town.”

“I’m from here. Well, not right here, but Florida. Down the coast a ways. Naples. But I live here in St. Pete now.”

“You two get acquainted?” Gills asked from the open cabin door.

Matt slid from the dinette seat, coloring slightly. “Uh... Yeah. What... What do you want me to do now?”

“Show Bridget how to help cast off. We’re heading to meet the tugs and barges.”

Bridget joined Matt outside as Gills vented the bilges and then started the three powerful engines of the *Green Dragon*. Keeping the speed down in the marina, Gills idled the landing craft through the rows of slips and out of the marina. In the bay he opened the engines up slightly and headed for the Gulf.

Gills, with Matt standing nearby, showed Bridget the basics to handling the *Green Dragon*. She was a quick study and both Matt and Gills were surprised at how quickly she picked up the finer points of instrument navigation and handling the landing craft.

Matt took over when they approached the spot in the Gulf over where the habitat would be located. The barges, propelled by their tugs were just clearing the horizon. “Matt, why don’t you fix us an early lunch. It’ll be a bit before they get here and we’ll probably be working at the regular lunchtime.”

“Okay Gills.”

“I can help,” Bridget offered.

Matt decided to take her up on her offer after a micro second of hesitation. Gills was smiling as he studied the approaching barges through the binoculars. His smile faded as the barges reached the site and the tugs positioned them roughly over the target. He didn’t say anything to Matt or Bridget, but what he was seeing on one of the barges bothered him.

An hour later and the tugs were headed back to shore and the barges were station keeping on their own. Gills transferred over to the main barge and met with the work gang leader as the barge crews rigged the equipment they would begin to install on the bottom of the Gulf.

By the time everything was ready, another, smaller, barge was towed into position to make available its load of pre-made reinforced concrete components to the barge with large crane that would lower them into place. Matt and Bridget had very little to do, but watched fascinated at the operation.

Two work submarines began to position the sections of the foundation for the habitat as they were lowered by the cranes.

Exciting as it was, boredom set in fairly quickly for Matt and Bridget. Unlike most of the existing habitats, this one was very deep, with the uppermost part of the habitat to be at thirty meters below the surface, so even with the underwater cameras mounted on the *Green Dragon*, the items being lowered gradually just faded from sight as they were lowered.

Matt was in the process of deploying the underwater exploration sled when he heard his name called over a loudhailer. He looked up and saw Stanley Martin and his two men looking at him.

“Stop that immediately! There will be no cameras! You put that thing in the water and you will regret it!”

Matt hesitated. But Gills had asked him not to provoke anything. So he waved an acknowledgement and began to stow the sled. “What is that all about?” Bridget asked.

Matt wasn’t sure how much he should tell her, so he simply said, “Gills said to humor them. They are an eccentric bunch.”

Though Matt had seen her before, the sight of the *Marissa* bearing down on them was still stirring. Bridget was truly awed. “Holy cow! Matt? How big is she?”

That weekend Matt had done a little research online about the giga-yacht and proceeded to tell Bridget all about the ship. Again it came up fast and slowed just as quickly, taking up a holding position a hundred meters from the barges.

Matt saw Marissa standing at a railing. When she waved, he waved back. “Who is that?” Bridget asked.

“That’s Marissa Holmes, Mr. Johnson’s Granddaughter. The one the yacht is named after.” Matt lost sight of her and turned his attention back to the yacht. The yacht had been turned so the stern was toward the barges. Only a few minutes after Marissa had disappeared, the rear well deck hatch of the yacht began to open and a section of the waterline stern deck was raised up, giving full access to the yacht’s daughter craft carried in the well deck.

Matt expected to see some type of boat come floating out of that hatch, so was caught totally by surprise when a US Submarine Discovery 1000 six passenger private submarine eased out. Through the clear hull sections of the submarine Matt and Bridget saw Marissa at the helm, and three other people in passenger seats.

As soon as the submarine cleared the stern of the *Marissa* it began to submerge and was quickly out of sight. Matt and Bridget looked at one another and both said “Wow!”

Suddenly, the sound just part of the background noise of the machinery on the barges at first, the two heard Stanley Martin cursing.

“Get over here!” Matt finally made out and he hurried to the helm station in the cabin.

“I think maybe you’d better stay here in the cabin,” Matt said quietly but authoritatively to Bridget. She didn’t protest, seeing the look on Martin’s face, and the faces of Boomer and the other man that always seemed to be with him, when they were lowered down to the deck of the *Green Dragon*.

“Get us over there, now!” Martin commanded Matt. Mindful of Gills admonishment to not antagonize Martin and his goons, Matt guided the landing craft over to the stern of the yacht. He lowered the front ramp enough for the three men to just walk off the landing craft onto the stern deck of the yacht.

Easing back, Matt brought the *Green Dragon* to a stop a few feet off the stern and to one side of the yacht in case Martin wanted to go back to the barges. Apparently the *Marissa* had station holding equipment similar to the barges, for she seemed rock steady. Matt kept the *Green Dragon* steady in position with deft handling of the helm and engine controls.

But just a few minutes later Boomer leaned over the railing of the main deck of the yacht and yelled down to Matt, “What are you hanging around for? Go make yourself useful! And if you see that submarine, you stay well clear! You hear me?”

Matt, heavily influenced by his years of association with Gills managed to not shoot Boomer the bird, despite a few years of swearing like the sailor he was. So Matt just waved slightly and maneuvered the *Green Dragon* away from the *Marissa* and over closer to the barges.

The divers had been down for some time and Matt was getting a bit worried. But the divers popped up one at a time, with Gills last. As usual, he kept an eye on the surrounding area when anyone was entering or leaving the water. Instead of going up onto the barge, Gills swam over to the landing craft.

Matt quickly lowered the ramp and Bridget flipped the diving ladder down so Gills could climb aboard. Gills turned quickly and watched as the *Marissa's* submarine surfaced and maneuvered backwards into the well deck of the yacht.

When the sub was out of sight, Gills turned around and told Matt, “Take us home, Matt. We’re done for the day.” He shrugged out of the diving harness and tanks, slipping them into a rack built into the boat.

Matt looked surprised but hurried to comply. Bridget had the dive ladder up and used the forward controls to lift the ramp as Matt started the

engines and engaged the jets. “What’s up, Gills?” Matt asked when Gills entered the cabin, the upper half of the wet suit hanging down his hips.

“Let me get out of this rig and I’ll fill you in.”

Matt nodded and ran the throttles up, bringing the *Green Dragon* up on plane on the slight swells of the slow running sea. Gills came out of the rear of the cabin dressed in shorts and a top.

“So, what’s the story?” Matt asked. Gills sat down at the dinette and Bridget sat down across the table from him.

“Sharks,” Gills said. “A bunch of them. Some of the guys have been taking fish just before we finish each day. The blood and commotion has drawn several Great Whites into the area, along with some Hammerheads and several other species.”

“Will you have to stop the project?” Bridget asked.

“Johnson, or more likely Martin, won’t allow that. I’m going to try to get Conservation out here to see if they can draw them away. We’re out a little far for their jurisdiction, but killing sharks now can get you into big trouble. With the numbers down there, we’d wind up killing a few if we don’t get them to move on.”

“I don’t think Stanley is going to like you going to Conservation,” Matt said.

“Yeah, well, I’m not intending to violate the law or risk my life more than necessary for the project.”

Matt and Bridget both started when the sound of the *Marissa*’s horn sounded behind them and the giga-yacht went by them like the landing craft was standing still. There was an impressive rooster tail behind the yacht.

Matt knew the *Green Dragon* was no slouch in the speed department and he reached for the throttles.

“Let them go, Matt,” Gills said evenly. “No need to let them know everything about this rig.”

“That Captain is just showing off,” Matt said. “Even with the CODAG she has, we can keep up and probably pass them.” There was an eager request in Matt’s statement.

“True. But I’m not going to get into a race with her until and unless it is important. And for right now, I want you to slow down and change heading.”

“Change heading? I thought we were going home.”

“We are,” Gills said. “But while Martin is doing whatever he plans to do about the sharks, I want to get a look in another area not far from here.”

“Oh. Okay.” Matt turned to the heading Gills gave him and Gills and Bridget got up to look at a chart on the chart table.

“Here’s where we’re going,” Gills said, touching a spot on the map to pinpoint it for Matt.

“What’s there?”

“Nothing, I hope,” Gills said. “We’ll see when we get there.”

An hour later, with the landing craft at rest, the ramp down, Gills and Matt put the work sled into the water.

“I’ve got a picture,” Bridget said through the open window.

“Keep an eye on the lines,” Gills said to Matt and went to join Bridget in the cabin. “Go have Matt show you how to handle the sled, Bridget, if you would.”

“Of course, Uncle Gills,” Bridget replied and went outside.

“Did you see anything?” Matt quietly asked Bridget when she joined him. He was keeping an eye on the sled’s deployment and recovery gear.

“No. Just open water,” Bridget replied.

With nothing forthcoming from Gills, Matt showed Bridget how to use the equipment. When slack appeared in the cables, Matt began to reel in the sled.

“She’s all yours, Matt,” Gills called out.

When Matt looked around, Gills wasn’t in sight. “Must have gone into the rear of the cabin,” Matt told Bridget. The two wasted no time securing the sled and raising the ramp. Both hurried back into the cabin.

“Gills? You okay back there?” Matt asked through the door between the helm and galley area and the small living quarters of the cabin.

Gills opened the door and stepped forward. “Yep. I’m fine. You take us home now. I’m going to go up top and do some thinking.”

“What did you see?” Matt asked.

“Not yet, Matt. Best you, and especially Bridget, not have a clue to what I might or might not have seen.”

“Aw, Gills!”

“Take us home, Matt.”

“Yes, sir,” Matt said, knowing any more questioning simply would cause Gills to clam up even tighter.

Habitat - Chapter 2

“Why so early?” Matt asked the next morning at four thirty. Bridget looked as sleepy as Matt felt.

“Taking another side trip this morning before we go to the site,” Gills replied. He looked just like he did every morning. Ready to take on the world. “Reverse our route home yesterday evening.”

“We’re going back to that point where we used the sled?” Bridget asked.

Gills nodded and poured himself a cup of tea and mugs of coffee for Bridget and Matt.

“What did the people at Conservation say about the sharks?” Matt asked as he idled the *Green Dragon* out of the slip.

“Nothing. Said I’d most likely seen a whale shark in the distance. That it wasn’t likely there would be any great number of sharks in the area until the water cooled quite a bit. They aren’t going to do anything.”

“Martin got to them!” Matt said heatedly.

“Possibly,” Gills replied. “I’m not going to start throwing accusations around until I know a lot more than I do now.”

“You won’t tell us what you saw from the sled?” Matt asked.

“No. Not yet. But I don’t want to the two of you worrying about things. I don’t think anything untoward will happen unless we start making trouble.” Gills looked at Bridget, and then at Matt.

“Okay, Gills,” Matt finally said. “I won’t start anything. But those goons better not try to hurt Bridget or anything.”

Gills hid his smile behind the tea mug when Bridget gave Matt an adoring look for his statement that he would protect her. Matt didn't notice. It was probably a good thing. He would most likely have passed out with embarrassment.

As they approached the spot they had stopped the day before, the radar sounded a warning that something was within its range. Gills went out with the binoculars and began to study the horizon. Matt and Bridget kept an eye on the radar as Matt kept the landing craft on a dead straight course.

"Okay," Gills said a couple of minutes later. "Head for the habitat site."

"What was it, Gills?" Matt asked.

Gills just shook his head. Matt sighed and let it go. He changed course and ran the throttles up. The seas were a little rougher this day and the *Green Dragon* leaped from one crest to another, with no trouble.

Everything appeared normal at the site. Except there was another barge on station. It took a moment for the three to recognize the habitat components the barge carried. They were the clear acrylic modules that would make up most of the rooms of the habitat.

"Pretty soon for those, isn't it, Gills?" Matt asked.

"A little. But we've been making good progress the last few weeks."

Matt edged up to the dive barge after Bridget put the fenders out, and Gills went aboard. There was no sign of Stanley Martin, thankfully. But that changed a couple hours later when *Marissa* showed up in the same imitable style.

This time Stanley looked rather subdued when Matt and Bridget transferred just him from the yacht to the dive barge. “Wonder what’s up with him?” Matt asked Bridget.

“Looks like he lost his best friend,” Bridget replied.

“Not likely,” Matt retorted. “I doubt he has any real friends.”

“Matt,” Bridget said, touching his arm. “I think that is Marissa waving at us.”

Matt turned around. Sure enough, there was no mistaking the come hither motion Marissa was making with her right arm from the rear deck of the giga-yacht. Matt eased back over to the yacht and lowered the ramp so Marissa could step aboard. She was dressed quite conservatively in a pale amber pant suit. “Matt, can you take me in to Saint Petersburg?”

Managing not to stammer, Matt answered Marissa, “Well, I can, but I kind of thought I was supposed to stay around the site...”

“There are several boats onboard the yacht...” Bridget said, staring at Marissa.

“I know,” Marissa said, shaking her head sadly. “But Stanley gave orders to not put any boats in the water and I need to get to St. Pete. I thought we were going to be there today and made several appointments for this afternoon.”

“Well, if Stanley Martin doesn’t want you to go, that’s good enough reason right there to take you.”

Bridget chuckled and Marissa smiled. “He hasn’t made a favorable impression on you, I take it,” Marissa said.

Matt shook his head. The three of them moved to the cabin and Matt raised the ramp, started up the other two engines and swung the *Green Dragon* around and headed for St. Pete at a brisk pace. He ignored the loudhailer blaring Stanley's voice for them to stop and come back.

"I know you must love your Grandfather," Bridget said, "but why do you stay on board if you aren't free to leave?"

Marissa sighed. "I know. It didn't use to be like this. Grandfather's health is failing and Stanley has gained a great deal of influence with him. There is something going on, and I intend to find out what it is. The idea of an underwater hotel is a good one. There are several around the world. But none this deep or out this far from a shore or island."

"Yeah. Hotel? I thought it was a research facility," Matt said. He wasn't willing to tell Marissa that Gills was concerned, but he did admit feeling the same way about Stanley and the situation. "And to top it off, Iran and China are getting really buddy buddy. Not to mention North Korea. They are shooting off test missiles all over the place."

"You're a prepper?" Bridget asked.

"Uh... Well... Yeah," Matt finally said, keeping his eyes on the horizon and on the compass.

"It will be used for research, paid for by the Luxury Hotel Operation. Pepper?" Marissa asked politely. "You drink Dr. Pepper?"

"Preppers are people similar to what the media calls survivalists. People that prepare for natural disasters and war and such," Bridget explained. "They aren't looking to bring down the government or anything like that. They just want to live safe, secure lives. As self-sufficient as possible for many of them. There are so many things in the world now that affect people negatively and often put them in danger."

“I see. I take it you are one,” Marissa said.

Bridget nodded. “I don’t go around advertising it. It is part of the movement. Keeping things quiet to avoid being overrun by those that made no preps when disaster strikes. Most of us are willing to help others. We just want to say who, when, and how much.”

“That is interesting. Grandfather actually does something like that, though financially. Diversification, he says, is the key to not losing greatly, though it sometimes limits profits. Still, a steady stream of income is better than the ups and downs so many people experience in financial activities. I can see where day to day activities could use the same diversity.”

“I doubt you have to worry too much about money.” Bridget made it a simple statement, not the accusation that Marissa heard often.

“I didn’t think I did. But with Stanley influencing Grandfather, I think, now that I think about it, that I could easily be left out in the cold if Stanley were to get his way.”

Matt looked around long enough to say, “Surely you have something set aside on your own. Something that Stanley Martin can’t touch.”

Marissa looked thoughtful. “Well, I have a checking account and credit cards, but Grandfather’s financial manager deposits money in the checking account when I ask for it, and takes care of the credit card bills.”

Just a little defensively, Marissa added, “I try not to be frivolous, and to get good values for what I buy. I actually don’t buy that much. Living with Grandfather... well, I just don’t have to buy much.”

There was a long silence and then Marissa said, “I need to think about this.” She sat down at the dinette and suddenly was lost in thought.

Bridget moved over to stand close to Matt. “I think Marissa is getting a taste of the world outside the normal paths that wealthy people travel.”

“You could be right,” Matt replied. “I hope so. She seems very nice. Be a shame for her to get dumped out in the cold by that sleeze Martin.”

“You think Uncle Gills might have a thing for her?” Bridget asked, more than a little curious what Matt’s answer would be.

“Gee, what red blooded male wouldn’t?” Matt said. And managed to redeem himself quite well when he added, totally clueless, “As pretty and rich as she is, I’d rather be with someone a little less elevated in the social area. Someone like you.”

Matt had turned red and stared straight ahead, waiting for Bridget’s response.

“You’re pretty smart. You know that?” Bridget said. “I think I could go for someone like you, too.”

“Really?” Matt asked, risking a look at Bridget’s face.

“Really.”

A huge smile on his face and a similar one on hers, Matt and Bridget said little else on the way into St. Petersburg, until it was time to tie up at the marina.

“I won’t be too long,” Marissa said, having joined the two when they approached the marina. Whatever she’d been thinking about, she seemed to have come to some kind of decision.

“You want us to take you somewhere?” Matt asked.

“No. But thank you. I’ll grab a cab. I shouldn’t be too long, but if you give me your cell number I’ll call if I get delayed, so you can head back without me.”

Matt quickly scribbled his and Gills’ cell phone numbers on a page in the pad on the helm cabinet, tore it out, and gave it to Marissa. “I’m going to refuel, and then take Bridget up to Mona’s for some lunch. We’ll be back down here afterwards.”

“Okay. Thank you, Matt.”

When Marissa left the *Green Dragon* Matt and Bridget spent the time they had getting the fuel and lunch and learning more about each other. They were holding hands when they went back down to the landing craft.

True to her word, Marissa didn’t take long and the three were headed back to the site by early afternoon. Matt was a little surprised when Marissa asked to talk to Bridget and the two slid into the dinette. Matt tuned them out, watching the horizon, compass, and weather radar. Things were building up to the west, it looked like.

When they arrived, the giga-yacht was still there, with the barges, plus two more barges. “Whoa! Look at that!” Matt exclaimed, looking over the equipment on the two new barges.

“They look like windmills,” Bridget said. “What are they going to do with them out here?”

“We’ll find out in a few minutes, I think,” Matt said. “There’s Gills waiting for us on the dive barge.”

“If Gills gives you a hard time, or especially Stanley,” Marissa said before she stepped off the ramp onto the stern deck of the *Marissa*, “you send them to see me.”

“Okay, Marissa,” Matt said. “I’m sure Gills will understand. Are you going to be alright?”

Marissa smiled faintly. “Oh, quite alright. I’m a little tougher than I look. Stanley doesn’t intimidate me.”

“I bet,” Bridget said. “If you want to discuss prepping some more, just let me know.”

“I will. Thank you, Bridget, Matt. It has been an enlightening day.”

Gills boarded the *Green Dragon* with a smile on his face. “I take it that Marissa left without Stanley’s permission.”

“Yes,” Matt said. “Didn’t mean to leave you in the lurch. I thought you wouldn’t mind if we ran her in.”

“Quite all right. Been learning a few things since we came up the last time.”

“What are those windmills for?” Bridget asked.

“Well, not technically windmills. Guess you call them current mills. They are going into the trench just west of the habitat. There is a strong current there and they will generate electricity for the habitat. Whoever did the preliminary research for this project really knew what he or she was doing.”

“You sound impressed,” Matt said, a bit surprised.

“I am. Despite what I think Stanley Martin is up to, this habitat is the real thing and going to be spectacular when it is finished.”

“Did you know it was going to be a Luxury Hotel as well as a research facility?” Matt asked then.

“Yeah. Found out a few days after we started. I didn’t tell you?”

Matt and Bridget shook their heads.

“I’m sorry. Had a lot on my mind.”

“What do you think Martin is doing?”

“Guess I might as well tell you. I think he’s putting in an underwater drilling rig at that other site. And, unless I’m completely off base, he has no plans for permits or licensing and plans to sell the crude on the black market.”

“An underwater drilling platform? Is that even doable?” Matt asked.

“From everything I’m finding out, yes, it is.” Gills said.

“Oh,” Bridget suddenly said, “How about the sharks? Are they still down there?”

Gills frowned. “Yes, they are. They are why we cut off early today. Had a couple of near misses. We’re not going down again until Martin gets us some shark armor and enough more divers to have some lookouts with bang sticks to protect everyone.

“Even if he does, I’ll be going down armed next time we dive. I picked up a few new spear guns and bang sticks recently to replace our old ones. A couple Mares Sten II Mini mini 42cm/6.5” pneumatics, and two Mares Cyrano 44 1100 44”/111.8cm pneumatics, plus a couple new twelve gauge bank sticks with extra barrels. I’ll be wearing the Mini on my right thigh and carrying the Cyrano and a bang stick down my back.”

“Wow! You must really be worried about those sharks!” Matt exclaimed.

Gills was looking off into the distance when he said a soft, “Yeah.” Then, his attention back on Matt and Bridget, he said, “Let’s take it home. That storm is brewing and it is going to get nasty. Might even put us back a couple of days.”

There was little talking the rest of the trip as the storm gained on them. But the *Green Dragon* was secured and the three were in Mona’s, at the bar, getting an early supper when the storm hit. “Can you turn that up a bit, Gary?” Gills asked the barman.

“Sure, Gills. This stuff has been on all day. I got tired of listening to it.”

Gills, Matt, and Bridget watched the news coverage of Chinese and Iranian military officials discussing a new treaty of mutual assistance if either was attacked by Israel or the United States. The US was being demonized as the Great Satan for Iran, and an untrustworthy trading party for China.

Shortly after the third report of the same activities, another segment came on about the ongoing set of missile tests that North Korea was carrying out, with several of them being targeted very close to, or over flying Japan and South Korea.

“I don’t like the way this is going,” Gills said quietly. “With dismal harvests in Russia and the Republics, and Southeast Asia, and the changing weather patterns everywhere, it is shaping up to be a very dangerous couple of years.”

“You know, it is funny,” Bridget said. “Marissa and I were discussing some of this today.”

Gills looked at her, surprise on his face. “Marissa? She takes an interest in...”

“Careful, Uncle Gills,” Bridget said, smiling at her uncle. “You don’t want to sound like a male chauvinist pig, now do you? Just because she’s beautiful and rich doesn’t make her incapable of worrying about the world situation and preparing for what might come.”

“I wasn’t going to say that!” Gills protested.

Matt laughed. “Maybe not. And we won’t tell Marissa you were going to say anything at all.”

“Yeah. Well. She actually showed an interest in prepping?” Gills asked after the other two stopped laughing.

“She did, Uncle Gills,” Bridget replied. “It isn’t a completely new concept for her. Her grandfather has always stressed diversification in his investments. She really picked up on the basics of prepping.”

“Interesting,” Gills said, looking thoughtful.

“You think we should add to our preps?” Matt asked, looking around to make sure Gary or anyone else wasn’t close enough to overhear.

“I’m thinking so,” Gills said. “Bridget, you had some things with you. Are you pretty well set up?”

“No really, Uncle Gills. I...”

“I can fill in some gaps you might have,” Matt quickly inserted. “I’ve got more of some things than I need...”

“That’s sweet, Matt. But I really want to make sure I have everything I might need on my own, in case we aren’t together when something

happens. And I'll be going back to college next semester and I want to have everything set when I do."

"Oh. Okay. But I'll be glad to help in any way I can," Matt said.

"I know. And thank you. I'll be taking you up on that."

"Okay, you two. That's settled. Now, while the offices are still open, I want to go make a few more discreet inquiries."

"What do you want us to do, Gills?" Matt asked.

A small smile on his face, Gills said, "Oh, just hang loose. Enjoy the rest of the day. If we go out tomorrow it could be pretty rough. For two or three days."

Gills paid the tab and left Mona's, his stride purposeful. Matt turned and asked Bridget, "What do you want to do?"

"I haven't seen a movie in a long time. Can we go to a movie?"

Eagerly Matt said, "Absolutely." The idea of having a 'date' with Bridget was a perfect use of the time.

Gills wasn't the only diver that refused to go down the next day, as well as the following two days. In part because of the storm, but also because of the sharks that were still hanging around. On the fourth day the sea was far from calm, but was divable. And Stanley had sprung for the metal armor shark suits for the four extra divers he put on the payroll.

Like Gills, several of the work divers had their own spear guns or bang sticks. Stanley didn't like the idea, but no work would be done without them, the divers assured him.

The *Marissa* was staying on station now, and Marissa often took her submarine down to watch the work being done. She even took Bridget down with her a couple of times. The two women were becoming fast friends. They had several additional discussions about prepping.

Bridget was competent enough handling the *Green Dragon* that Matt began doing some diving. Sometimes he worked and sometimes he stood guard for the workers.

Progress was swift now. A separate crew was installing the ocean current electrical generating system. The lines were already laid from that site to the habitat site, and the internal wiring was almost finished.

Then the work slowed considerably. Stanley pulled most of the diving crew off the job, without telling Gills and the others that were staying anything other than they would finish the habitat on their own.

Two of the barges left with the other divers, leaving the primary diving barge and one barge that held the final components of the habitat. Matt became a regular member of the crew, and the lone guard as the others worked on the exterior of the habitat. When the work was inside, he grabbed whatever tool was needed and lent a hand.

Marissa had taken to assisting Bridget on the *Green Dragon* as well as using one of the two Triton 1000 2-person manned submersibles the *Marissa* carried to help with some of the construction. When the other divers left, they took two of the three submersibles that had been working on the habitat.

Stanley was livid most of the time. Marissa's grandfather was still lucid enough to make at least some decisions for himself and Marissa had him wrapped around her little finger. So she did what she wanted. Up to a point. Stanley made it clear that certain things were off limits, even to her. Most especially to her.

The day finally came when only interior work needed to be done on the habitat. Gills was called to the *Marissa* and Elias Johnson questioned him about the state of the construction, with Stanley standing beside the desk, glaring at Gills the entire time.

“Then I suppose Stanley is correct. Your contract is terminated Mr. McBain. Thank you for the excellent work you have provided. Marissa speaks highly of you. No need to be a stranger.”

Stanley slapped an envelope against Gills chest. “Your final pay. Over pay, if you ask me.”

Elias didn’t hear the actual low growl that Stanley Martin emitted at Elias’ last words to Gills, but Gills did. He was about ready to slap the envelope away and brace the man, for his high handed ways, especially the way he treated Marissa. And her grandfather.

But Marissa walked into the shipboard office and Gills held back. “Grandfather,” she said, feeling the tension in the air, “I plan to spend a few days in St. Petersburg, doing some shopping. I hope you don’t mind. Can you get along alright without me for a full month?”

“Oh, dear. A month. I suppose so. Stanley will look after me. It’s time for you to be out on your own. To spread your wings, not be nanny to a doddering old man.”

“Oh, Grandfather! You aren’t doddering or old.” Marissa gave her grandfather a hug and kiss on the cheek, and then stood up, tall and commanding. She looked straight at Stanley. “I’ll be checking in by radio from time to time so I know Grandfather is doing all right.”

She turned then, not waiting for an answer and missed Stanley’s glare of hatred. But Gills saw it and his nostrils flared as he took a deep breath and started to step forward. But Marissa interrupted the about to be fight

once again. “Gills, I hate to be a bother, but I don’t want to tie up one of the *Marissa’s* daughter craft, as nice as they are. They need to be on-board for the length of time I plan to be away.

“If it isn’t too much trouble, would you agree to take me in and then ferry me back out when I’m finished in the city?”

“Of course,” Gills said, pleased at the question.

“Could be a long trip,” Stanley said, teeth clenched. “We don’t plan to be here forever, after all.”

“Noted,” Gills said. “But Marissa will be back aboard when she is ready. I’ll see to it.”

Again the two men were ready to fight, but Marissa took Gills arm and hurried him out of the office.

“That Martin...” Gills said softly, “is up to something, Marissa. I actually fear for your grandfather’s health...”

“So do I,” Marissa replied, not releasing Gill’s arm as they headed for the waterline stern deck and the *Green Dragon* where Matt and Bridget were waiting. “I intend to take matters into my own hands and get rid of Stanley. I have the distinct feeling he is a criminal and is just using Grandfather for some nefarious scheme. I’m worried about Grandfather, anyway. His dementia is getting worse. The lucid periods are shorter and further between than they have been.

“I’ve taken blood to have it analyzed and there do not appear to be any drugs in his system other than those he is supposed to be taking.”

“So you’ve been worried about this for some time, I take it.”

“Yes. Oh, Marie. Would you see to getting my bags down to the *Green Dragon*?”

Marissa’s maid nodded and went to find one of the cabin attendants to lend a hand as Gills and Marissa continued toward the stern of the gigayacht. They were aboard the *Green Dragon* when Gills saw the maid and the deck hand bringing the luggage down. He was surprised at the amount. He’d been prepared to joke with Marissa about traveling light, but if the three bags were all she was taking with her, then she really did travel light. And he said so.

“Expected me to have a dozen huge trunks, I bet,” Marissa said with a grin. She couldn’t see him turn red, as his face was tanned from the constant exposure to the sun, but Marissa could tell he did as he ducked his head slightly and grabbed one of the bags from the deck hand.

“Well,” he did say when he felt the weight of the bag, “I have a feeling you are very good at packing efficiently.”

“Nicely put. And I am.” Marissa took the bag from the maid and let Matt get the third bag as Bridget held the ramp against the stern deck of the yacht.

Gills set the bag down out of the way and lifted the ramp. Bridget reversed away from the yacht and spun the landing craft around, pointing it toward the coast. Matt went into the cabin, but Gills stayed outside on the deck with Marissa. She was watching the yacht disappear in the distance as Bridget pushed the *Green Dragon* hard. There was another storm brewing, and despite the fact that the landing craft could handle some rough seas, it was always better to avoid such things when possible.

“Just occurred to me,” Gills told Marissa. “What about the helicopters? I’m surprised Stanley hasn’t been using one of them for some of his trips. It would surely be much quicker and easier to use one of them.”

“So, you noticed the double hanger. A pair of Sikorsky S-76Ds. But Stanley is afraid to fly. And they are very expensive to operate. I only use one when it is really necessary. The pilots aren’t even on board at the moment. Actually our crew and staff is less than a third of normal when we’re on a blue water cruise.”

“Ah. But they are ready to go? The helicopters?”

“Always,” Marissa said.

Then, changing the subject, Gills said, “Marissa, I know you can afford to stay wherever you want, but you’re welcome to stay at my place. I have a spare bedroom.”

“I see,” Marissa said, finally turning to look at Gills. “I would like that. Too many prying eyes in the hotels.”

“Prying eyes?” Gills asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “Some just nosey people, and some probably getting paid to be.”

“You think Stanley is having you watched?”

“Yes. I do. I’m afraid that as soon as I contact an attorney that he might do something to Grandfather. Stanley wants control of the estate. And I aim to see he not only doesn’t get it, but goes to jail for what he’s been doing as a member of Grandfather’s advisory staff.”

“Well, I might just be able to help a little with that,” Gills said.

The two were sitting on the locker mounted just forward of the cabin that housed a heavy winch. Without realizing it, Marissa’s hand had sought out and taken Gills’ left hand into her right. “How so?”

“Stanley is setting up an underwater oil well drilling platform not that far from here. I think the habitat is cover for doing the other work and may be where the rig workers stay when they aren’t on the rig.”

Marissa’s eyes were huge when she looked at Gills in shock. “An underwater drilling platform? Is that even possible?”

“That’s exactly what Matt asked. Apparently it is. They are a long way from being ready to drill, and I think Stanley is getting worried. That’s why he let me go while there is still some diving work to do, despite what he said.”

“Hmm. What should we do?”

“While you are out and about doing what you need to do, with Matt and Bridget as guard dogs, I’m going to tip off the Coast Guard and take them out to the drill rig site.”

“Stanley...”

“Don’t worry about Stanley, except in terms of what he might try to do to you and your Grandfather. I’ll handle him if he tries anything with me. And Matt can take care of himself.”

“But I think Boomer and Clark both carry guns. Stanley, too.”

“I know they do. What I’m hoping, and believe, is that they don’t have a clue that both Matt and I have concealed carry permits and are armed almost all the time we’re out of the water. And I had the spear guns and boom stick when I was diving.”

“Oh, my! I never noticed that you had a gun!”

“I hope it doesn’t bother you, Marissa. I’ve been a gun owner and shooter all my life. It is second nature to me. And I practice to stay proficient with all my guns so I’m not a danger to anyone except those that would hurt others.”

“It’s not that I object... I just don’t know much about them. You think you could teach me how to shoot?”

“Well, sure!” Gills replied. “I’d be delighted!”

Marissa squeezed Gills’ hand lightly. “Good. I’ll add it to the things I’m learning as a new prepper. Matt and Bridget have been teaching me about preparing. And I’ve taken a much deeper interest in the news of what is going on in the US and around the world. Political, financial, and natural disaster wise, among other things.”

“I see,” Gills said. “And your conclusions?”

“I am a prepper in training. What does that tell you?”

Gills squeezed Marissa’s hand this time. “Tells me you are one smart lady with whom I want to get to know better.”

“Good answer,” Marissa said, smiling. The two sat back in comfortable silence the rest of the way to shore.

It didn’t take long to get Marissa settled into the last spare room in the house that Gills owned. With Bridget in one bedroom, Matt another, Gills in the master suite, and now Marissa in the last bedroom, the house was full. They went out to dinner, and then returned to the house late. Gills made sure the alarm system was set and everyone knew the activation code as well as the deactivation one. They went to bed, having all planned early activities for the next morning.

Habitat - Chapter 3

Gills had breakfast ready the next morning when everyone got up. A few hectic minutes afterwards and everyone was on their way, with Marissa catching a ride with Gills to get a rental car. Or SUV in this case. With her mobile they went their separate ways. When they all met for lunch each one was smiling.

“So,” Gills asked Matt and Bridget, “What has the two of you so happy?”

“She scored better than I did when she got her concealed carry permit. She’s been rubbing it in a little.”

Gills and Marissa both laughed at the expression on Matt’s face for a moment. But the smile was back. It was obvious that he was proud of Bridget’s actions.

“You two looked pretty pleased with yourselves, too,” Matt said.

“I think I made a very good dent in the long list of preps I’ve made up, thanks to you guys.”

“And I,” Gills said, holding a chair for Marissa, “have the Coast Guard interested enough to agree to go out to the drill rig site tomorrow. They said they would be doing some investigating on land first. But they didn’t throw me out the way I thought they might.”

“That’s good,” Marissa said. But she looked a bit worried when she asked, “What about Grandfather? I’m sure he isn’t a part of the plan. It is all Stanley and his low-life friends.”

“I explained that he was being duped and possibly drugged by Stanley Martin and crew. I was assured that he would be treated as a hostage until and unless something causes them to change their minds.”

“Hostage?” Marissa looked pale.

Gills winced. He shouldn’t have used the word ‘hostage’ when referring to Elias Johnson’s part in the situation. “I’m probably overstating the situation, but I wanted the Coast Guard personnel to treat him as an innocent in this, and not a participant.”

“Oh. Well good. Thank you. I’m surprised they didn’t want to talk to me about it.”

“I sort of... sort of left your name out of it. Kinda implied that you were off somewhere doing... heiress things.”

“Heiress things?” Marissa asked.

Matt and Bridget wisely kept their opinions to themselves, and hid their huge smiles behind menus.

“Not the way you say it,” Gills protested. “Just out spendi...”

“Spending Grandfather’s money.” Marissa glared at Gills. But only for a moment. She burst out laughing and laid a hand on Gills’ shoulder. “Oh, my!” she said then. “You are so gullible.”

Gills looked sheepish, but smiled back. “Yeah. Okay. Funny.”

“Actually I was doing some of what Matt and Bridget were doing. Getting some equipment and supplies ready for whatever might happen. Using my money. I do admit I was trying to manipulate some of Grandfather’s money to get it out of reach of Stanley. I’d never used my power of attorney before. There was some problem with it. It is rather overwhelming what Grandfather has that has to be managed in one way or another.”

“You were able to prevent Martin from accessing your Grandfather’s money?” Gills asked.

“Oh, only a small portion of it. Stanley is used to having free rein with the finances. Grandfather had, wisely, in the early days, locked up much of the fortune in things that Stanley couldn’t influence. It wasn’t something about Stanley at that time. Just common business sense not to put all your eggs in one basket.”

“That’s when you got the power of attorney?”

“Yes. Grandfather’s oldest friend, Abner Green drew it up for me. I’m surprised at him not getting it right.”

“And your grandfather started having memory problems shortly after Martin took over?”

“Yes. Gills, I’m worried about him. When Stanley finds out what is going on, he’ll be livid.”

“Yeah. I’m a little concerned about that, too, when the Coast Guard shows up. It is doubtful that Martin will be there. He’s bound to get word from the rig site that something is wrong. He could run for it... Or blame it all on Mr. Johnson... Or something really stupid,” Gills replied.

“Yes. That is what worries me.”

“Tell you what,” Gills said, putting one large hand on Marissa’s small one. “As soon as the Coast Guard confirms the presence of the rig, I’ll head for the *Marissa* and see about getting your grandfather off and in to shore.”

“And I’ll be right with him,” Matt said.

Bridget was saying the same thing when Gills interrupted. “No, Guys. It’ll just be me. I’ll...”

“You’ll have the three of us along, is what you’ll do,” Marissa said. From the tone in her voice Matt and Bridget kept quiet. Marissa was going to be right there in the thick of things. The two looked over at Gills when he tried to protest.

Marissa just looked at him when he said, “But...” The words trailed away. Gills realized the same thing Matt and Bridget had. Marissa would do whatever it took to get her grandfather to safety.

They didn’t waste time after breakfast. Gills headed for the Coast Guard station and Matt, Bridget, and Marissa headed for the *Green Dragon*. Gills had obtained solemn promises from each of them that they would not approach the *Marissa* until he was able to join them.

Bridget took the wheel after they left the marina and fell in line well to the stern of the Coast Guard patrol boat. Matt made himself scarce in the cabin, taking care of a few things that Gills had asked him to do.

He was back at the con when the now lone barge at the rig site came into view. “Almost waited too long,” Matt said. “The way Gills was talking the Coast Guard commanding officer wasn’t too inclined to believe anything was going on. If the barge wasn’t there, I’m not sure that they wouldn’t just have turned around and gone back to the base.”

Marissa had the marine binoculars to her eyes as Matt brought the *Green Dragon* to a position so they could watch but would be out of the way. And out of the line of fire, though Matt didn’t mention that.

“Seems to be going smoothly,” Marissa said.

Bridget and Matt could see how tense she was. And it wasn't about her Grandfather at the moment. They continued to watch as those on the barge were held under supervision by some of the Coasties. At least two others joined Gills, all in wet suits, on the deck of the patrol boat. They disappeared into the water and Marissa slowly lowered the binoculars and finally began to relax somewhat.

But she jumped, as did both Bridget and Matt, when the radar sounded a tone indicating something new had come within the longest range the radar was capable of seeing. Matt watched the display for several long seconds.

"It's big and it's fast," Matt said. He reached for the binoculars but Marissa had them, looking in the direction of the location of the habitat. "It has to be the *Marissa*."

"It is," Marissa said softly. And she's under full power."

All three of those on the *Green Dragon* looked over at the Coast Guard patrol boat. They obviously knew the yacht was headed their way. The gun crews were taking the covers off the two .50 caliber machine guns mounted port and starboard forward of the superstructure.

"I don't like this..." Matt was muttering. He looked toward the yacht, now easily visible, and back to the patrol boat. "You don't think Martin would do anything really stupid, do you?" Matt asked Marissa.

"He's not slowing down, Matt," Bridget said. She looked pale, but Marissa was pasty white as she continued to watch for Gills and the Coast Guard divers to come up and board the patrol boat.

"Okay," Matt suddenly said. "Gills may have my head for this, but I'm not going to stand by and..." his voice faded away as the three big diesels roared to life one after the other. They barely turned a dozen

revolutions when Matt engaged the jets and slammed the throttles forward.

Bridget, realizing what Matt was going to do, braced herself first, and then grabbed Marissa so she wouldn't fall at the sudden acceleration. It was a struggle, but neither went down. Marissa had to put the binoculars down to hold on as Matt pushed *Green Dragon* to her top speed. She was leaving rooster tail and bow wave like never before, but the rooster tail and bow wave of the *Marissa* dwarfed them.

Bridget looked at Matt suddenly when it became obvious he wasn't heading for the Coast Guard patrol boat, but was steering on an intercept course with the yacht.

"Matt?" Bridget asked quietly.

"They are sitting ducks, Bridget. He will run them over if we don't do something. Those fifties will barely scratch the paint on that thing, if they even have enough time to fire before it gets them."

But Matt wasn't giving the patrol boat Captain enough credit. Both Browning M-2 machineguns opened up, firing what amounted to a shot across the yacht's bows. The tracers arched high and burned out at their maximum range, well short of the yacht. But the message was plain enough.

Matt, Bridget, and Marissa could hear the Captain of the patrol boat calling the yacht on the marine radio. He was demanding the yacht to divert course and lose way. Matt pressed the throttles against the stops, holding them there, getting another two or three RPM out of them. He was well past the patrol boat and lined up dead on with the yacht. The patrol boats warning sirens were wailing as well.

"Matt?" Bridget asked again, her voice an octave higher than before.

Matt's only response was to say, "Hang on! I'm going to give those guys something to think about." He held the course. It wasn't until a round came through the wheel house window that Matt realized that one or more of Martin's goons was firing at them. Still he held his course. To the very last second. Then he whipped the wheel over, tossing Marissa and Bridget about slightly, even braced as they were.

"Didn't even slow them down," Matt muttered. With the *Green Dragon* well clear of the yacht now, the patrol boat was pouring long bursts of the heavy .50 caliber slugs toward the *Marissa*. But it was to naught.

Whoever was at the helm of the yacht had at least something of a change of mind, because just before the yacht hit the patrol boat, it began to turn. But it was far too late. Only the impact point was different from where it would have been. Instead of hitting amidships and slicing her in two, the steel, A5 class ice-rated, reinforced double hull bulbous bow on *Marissa* took a large bite out of the patrol boat's stern.

The impact slowed *Marissa* only marginally. There was very little damage to the yacht. It changed course, and Matt was getting ready to try and interfere again, but instead of coming back for another pass, the yacht took off in the direction from which it had come.

Marissa and Bridget had to plead with Matt to not go after the yacht, but see about Gills and the Coasties. Muttering under his breath, Matt guided the boat around the stern of the patrol boat. Apparently the water tight compartments were holding, since the boat was stable in the water, only slightly down at the stern.

The boat crew was calmly going about the business of securing the ship. The Captain had called for assistance when it was clear what Martin was going to do. But it would be some time before another ship came to help.

There was a bang on the side of the *Green Dragon* and Bridget hurried to lower the bow ramp and fold out the dive steps. The two Coast Guard

divers were clambering aboard the patrol boat. The Captain was there, quizzing them about what they'd found even as they struggled out of their tanks.

"I think that'll convince them," Gills said. He staggered when Marissa slammed against him, her arms going around him before he could drop his tanks. Matt lent a hand with the tanks as Bridget kept the landing craft steady.

"I'm okay! I'm okay!" Gills said, finally disengaging from Marissa.

There were tears in her eyes when she stepped back. "I was so scared for you!"

"Yeah. Well, we weren't in too much danger there in the water next to the barge." He looked over at Matt. "Speaking of which, we'll have a little talk about your kamikaze attempt later."

Gills turned toward the patrol boat and called up to the Captain. "You in need of assistance, Captain?"

"Got help on the way, Captain. But I strongly suggest you let another of our ships take care of this matter."

Matt shook his head. "I want Elias Johnson off that yacht before anything happens to him."

He didn't listen to the Captain any further. "Let's go, Matt. Everything ready?"

Matt nodded and hurried in to the wheelhouse cabin and took over for Bridget. He had the ramp up, the *Green Dragon* spun around in its own length, and was headed after the yacht, again at full throttle.

“What did you mean when you asked Matt if everything was ready,” Marissa asked after Gills had changed out of the wet suit into dungarees and a heavy tee shirt.

“Nothing for you to worry about. Just wanted to have some equalizers in case Stanley decides not to allow Elias to come with us.”

“What kind of equalizers?” Marissa asked. She gasped when Gills opened one of the compartments in the cabin. “You cannot be serious!”

Gills grinned, without humor, “Dead serious. The *Marissa* will be in no danger, but I aim to equalize the odds somewhat.” Gills was silent for a moment. “You think the crew will swing with Martin or try to help when they see what is going on.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Gills! They are all just working seamen and women. Stanley was overbearing, and the goons were always coming on to the women, but I’d made sure they wouldn’t be bothered. But I don’t know if they would actually help us. They definitely won’t help Stanley or the goons.”

“Okay. That’s all I need to know.” He turned to Matt. “How far behind are we?”

“They must have slowed down some. Only about three miles out. And I think they are slowing some more.”

“Why would he stop at the habitat?” Gills asked, more than a little worried about Stanley Martin’s sanity and just what he might do.

“I think I might know,” Marissa said slowly. “I found out yesterday he’s been pulling small amounts out of many of Grandfather’s accounts. And...”

“But wouldn’t he want that on shore. Or on the yacht?” Gills asked before Marissa could finish.

“One would think so. But there is something you don’t know about...”

Matt muttered, “Uh-oh.”

“And what is that?” Matt asked.

“It never came up,” Marissa said. “The habitat is to be Grandfather’s home away from home as well as an underwater hotel and research station. He ordered a US Submarines Phoenix 1000 sixty-five meter submarine yacht to complement the service.

“It can stay down for days and has a submerged range of almost two hundred fifty nautical miles. I think he may have a stash down in the habitat and is planning to use the Phoenix to take off in. He mentioned that the Phoenix was to be delivered within a few days. And that was a few days ago. It may be at the habitat now. Oh, Gills! He would more than likely kill Grandfather to help cover his tracks, wouldn’t he?”

“I am not going to let that happen. Why don’t you try and get some rest. It will be a while before we catch up to them.”

Marissa sat down at the dinette, with Bridget, as Matt kept an eye on the radar and Gills kept the landing craft at full speed.

They were nearing the habitat when the *Marissa* came into sight on the horizon. Suddenly Matt said, “They’ve slowed... and are turning... Gills? You think they might try to ram us too?”

“Probably. But we can out maneuver them. They might just want to get close enough to try to take us out with gunfire. And I have a plan to handle that.”

“Exactly. They won’t be expecting anything like the range it has, if they think we might even be armed. So take over, keep out of the yacht’s way no matter what they try, keeping us at least three hundred yards away. I have doubts that they have anything effective at that range.”

Marissa and Bridget looked on as Gills went deeper into the cabin and bring out the gun Marissa had seen earlier.

“That’s a VR-1?” Marissa asked.

“Yep,” Matt said. Gills was intent on checking the large scoped rifle and didn’t replay.

“It’s .408 CheyTac, semi-automatic, five round magazine. The .408 CheyTac is on a par with the .416 Barrett and .50 BMG. Surpasses them in some situations. It is a real long range hitter, with enough remaining energy and penetration to do some real damage.”

Gills was satisfied with the gun and headed out of the wheelhouse, saying a terse, “Stay in here and stay down on the floor when the shooting starts.”

“But Gills!” Marissa exclaimed.

Gills turned to her. “Do it. Please. I don’t want to lose you.” With the gun under one arm, Gills took Marissa in his other arm and kissed her. Long and hard. She didn’t protest.

“Do it,” Gills said again, and then turned and left the wheelhouse and then climbed up onto the cabin structure with the VR-1 slung over one shoulder.

He knew it would be some tricky shooting, but the gun was certainly capable of it, if he did his part. The sea was calm, with long smooth

swells. Gills ignored the rapidly approaching yacht and concentrated on getting the VR-1 set up on its bipod and adjusting his position behind it.

Gills looked up when he felt the *Green Dragon* slow significantly and began a gradual turn. The *Marissa* was bearing down on them, a thousand yards away. The VR-1 was capable of two thousand yard shots and more, but with the relative motion of the two ships, Gills wasn't capable of the accuracy the gun was.

So he snugged the gun up to his shoulder, braced himself and put his right eye to the scope. The high power Leupold scope brought the bow of the yacht into clear, close view. The image wavered just slightly with the motion of the landing craft.

Even at the speed the yacht was going, it was steady as a rock. It would make Gills' job easier. He watched as the yacht turned toward them again, as Matt carefully kept the boat moving, maneuvering to get into a three hundred yard orbit around the yacht.

Stanley and his men couldn't stand it. The *Green Dragon* was going to be a lot harder to ram than the stationary patrol boat had been. It was only slightly faster than the yacht, but it could turn on a dime.

Gills was adjusting to the motion of the landing craft, essentially floating the cross hairs on Stanly Martin, who was standing on the bridge deck. Gills didn't hear the shot when it came, but when a bullet slammed into the side of the wheelhouse, he knew the goons were planning on killing them.

While he wanted to just drop Stanley, he couldn't bring himself to do it with Stanley just standing there. So he quickly changed his aim, picking up either Boomer or Clark, he couldn't tell which, pointing a rifle at him.

“Bad move, slick,” Gills muttered, squeezing the trigger firmly. The cross hairs were not rock steady on the man’s chest, but they were staying on it somewhere all the time. The VR-1 went off and the man and gun went flying. “Sheer luck,” Gills muttered. As the other goon began to pour more fire toward the landing craft with an AK-47.

Gills heard a few pings as the bullets hit the *Green Dragon*, at least one of them entering the wheelhouse through a window. Gills jaw worked and he took careful aim. But he’d been right. That first shot had been luck. He quick changed magazines and drew another bead. This time it wasn’t luck. Gill drilled the man right in the heart with the third shot of the second magazine.

Quickly putting the scope on where Stanley Martin had been several long seconds ago, Gills froze, his trigger finger removing itself from the trigger almost by its own volition. Stanley had Elias Johnson in front of him, a pistol to his head.

Gills saw Stanley turn his head and then the power PA system on the yacht sounded. “He says to back off or he’ll kill Mr. Johnson.” The Captain sounded strained, but seemed to be maintaining his composure.

There was no way Gills could risk the shot. He rolled away from the VR-1, and stood up, lifting his hands in the air. It seemed to be enough. Stanley jerked Elias around and pushed him into the bridge of the yacht. He obviously said something to the Captain for the yacht began to turn away from the chase and headed back toward the habitat location.

Gills quickly secured the VR-1 and went down into the wheelhouse with it, dreading what he might find. It wasn’t as bad as it could be, but it was bad enough. One of the AK-47 rounds, sprayed wildly, had managed to find a human target. Bridget was already bandaging Marissa’s left upper arm.

“It’s just a scratch,” Marissa said, seeing the near panic and sheer rage in Gills eyes.

“She’s right,” Bridget said. “She’ll be okay.”

“What do we do now?” Matt asked. “I saw him threaten Mr. Johnson... Oops.”

“What?” Marissa asked, forcefully.

“I had to stop shooting when Martin put a gun to your Grandfather’s head. But he didn’t shoot. They disappeared into the bridge.”

Marissa sighed in relief.

“And,” Gills added, “What we are going to do is for me to board the yacht and take Martin out at close range. Are you pretty sure that Boomer and Stanley were Martin’s only men?” Gills looked at Marissa.

“Yes. I’m sure of it,” she replied.

“Okay.” Gills looked at Matt. “Get me up to the stern. Lower the ramp when you’re close and I’ll make the jump.”

There were protests, of course, because they were again traveling at high speed. And the yacht’s rooster tail would be right in their faces. Gills saw Matt pale and he reassured him. “You can do it, pal. Just stay to one side of the wake and put me right at the edge of the stern deck.”

Matt bit his lip, but after a moment he nodded. “Okay. I can do it.”

“When I get aboard, you back off and standoff at least a thousand yards. I don’t want Stanley to have any kind of shot at any of you.”

Bridget, Matt, and Gills could all three see that Marissa was torn. She didn't want Gills at risk, but she wanted her Grandfather safe. Finally, after a long look at Gills," she said, "Be careful."

Gills nodded. He pulled the Glock 21 .45 he was carrying in a behind the back inside the waistband holster. Satisfied it was fine he headed for the wheelhouse door again. But suddenly he stopped, on his way forward and leaned down. He stood up with one of the new bang sticks that he slung over one shoulder, and then did the same with the Mares Sten II Mini over the other shoulder.

The three in the wheel house looked at each other but said nothing as Matt brought the landing craft close to the stern of the fast moving gigayacht.

Gills was soaked and the scuppers were pouring the water from the yacht's rooster tail back into the sea. Matt lowered the ramp until Gills waved a hand. Gills prepared himself and waited. Ready to jump when he was close enough.

Matt touched the throttles slightly and the *Green Dragon* surged just enough to put the landing ramp right on the stern deck. Gills didn't have to jump. He just stepped aboard the yacht.

Though reluctant, Matt pulled back the throttles and let the landing craft fall back and away from the *Marissa*. When he was well clear, he sped up and paced the yacht the thousand yards off the port side of the yacht. Three sets of eyes were on the yacht as it began to slow down. Matt glanced down at the GPS mapping system. They were at the habitat.

Bridget was looking forward and suddenly pointed. "There's the snorkel barge!"

The yacht was stopping and Matt did the same with the landing craft. All they could do now was wait.

Gills crouched down at the bottom of the stairs that went from the stern deck to the deck above. For long seconds his eyes searched for anyone or anything. Nothing. He took the stairs slowly, one at a time, until he could see the deck above. When still nothing moved, he rose and ran up the last stairs and crouched down again, watching carefully.

It took him ten minutes of careful movement to get to the bridge. And he watched another ten minutes for any activity, his eye at one corner of one of the bridge windows. He could see the Captain tied to the command chair, but that was all.

Deciding that releasing the Captain might get the man killed, Matt entered the bridge. But he stood right by the door and asked the Captain, who was furiously struggling with his restraints again, “Where are they?”

“Untie me man! We can both...”

“Not going to happen. Not that I don’t trust you. But there is the fact that you might get killed trying to help. No. This is Stanley and me. I got two of his goons. He have any more aboard?”

“Negative. Look. I can help. I’ll stay out of the way, but I want that man. Badly.”

“You can have what is left of him when I get done,” Gills said. “Now, do you know where they went?”

“To the well deck. I think he’s going to take one of the subs. Don’t know where he thinks he can go. Not even the Discovery 1000 has the range to do him much good.”

“Yeah. Okay. You stay quiet and let me do this.”

“I know you had guns. You shot those two and I have holes here in the bridge to attest to it, too. Why are you carrying a spear gun?”

“Just a thought I had,” Gills said. He left the bridge, the Captain muttering behind him, and slowly made his way down into the bowels of the ship. From the sounds coming from some of the cabins, Gills figured out that the crew was all secured in their cabins. “Probably done by the goons before the shooting started,” Gills muttered. He ignored them and kept going.

Gills heart felt heavy when he peeked into the well deck and saw Elias Johnson slumped against a bulkhead, blood on his face. But the old man moved slightly and Gills realized that he’d been knocked out, but not killed.

Keeping as small of a silhouette that he could, Gills searched the large cavity of the well deck with his eyes. He couldn’t find Stanley and began to get worried. He obviously hadn’t left in any of the three subs. All were in their chocks, locked down securely in case of heavy seas.

Suddenly he heard the scuffle of a shoe and spun around when a soft whistle sounded behind him. There was Stanley Martin, crouched behind Marie, Marissa’s onboard maid, a pistol aimed at Gills over her shoulder.

“A spear gun and a bang stick!” Stanley laughed. Gills could tell that Stanley was on the verge of becoming maniacal. He slowly began to rise.

“You’re coming after me with a spear gun and bang stick!” Stanley’s voice changed, dropping down from the near hysterical note to a deep one. “You got no respect, diving man! You think you can take Stanley Martin with a puny pair of diver’s tools? I oughta just...”

Gills made his move when he saw Stanley move the pistol just slightly, lining it up directly on Gills' chest. He'd been studying the well deck for some time. There were plenty of places to hide among the various daughter craft and vehicles the yacht carried.

Two shots rang out, but Gills was gone. Marie screamed and Gills saw her land heavily beside the vehicle he was behind. "You come out of there, those weapons where I can see them, or I shoot her and then the old man."

Gills knew he had to do it. He had one chance. Hopefully it would work. Holding the spear gun in one hand, just out from his waist on his right side, and the bang stick in his left, at a similar position.

Stanley was smirking and beginning to laugh. "You're an idiot. You have to know I'm just going to shoot you."

"Yeah," Gills said softly. "I figured that." Gills moved faster than he'd ever done in his life. First the spear gun flew toward Stanley's face and then the bang stick toward the gun in Stanley's hand.

Gills dove to his left, his left hand lifting the back of his shirt and the right going for the grip of the Glock. He almost didn't make it. Stanley had been in a few scrapes before and had almost recovered enough to aim at Gills. But he was frightened, startled, and angry. He triggered three shots before the muzzle was pointed anywhere close to Gills.

Gills didn't miss. One quick shot that staggered Stanley and made him drop his pistol, and then two spaced shots that made sure Stanley would no longer be a threat.

Holstering the gun, Gills called to Marie, "Are you okay? I'm going to check on Elias."

It suddenly struck him, about the time the spear from the spear gun did too, in his right thigh, that Marie just might not be the hostage he first thought she was.

“You killed him! You killed him! I will kill you!”

Gills lunged toward her, his right leg dragging, as she bent down to get Stanley’s gun. There was no way Gills could get to his gun in time. And they were too close. Hoping to avoid a bullet, Gills lunged again, going down hard. But he had what he wanted. He merely swung the bang stick up from off the deck and let Marie step right into it. It hit her in the solar plexus and she went down, the gun in her hand sliding away. She didn’t even have time to scream in pain before she was dead.

A few minutes passed as Gills checked on Elias. Sure enough, he just seemed to be out and not seriously injured. Sitting down beside him, Gills gritted his teeth, and then muttered, “This is so gonna hurt.” He put both hands on the shaft of the spear gun shaft and started to push and then pull it the rest of the way through his leg.

He took a deep breath, but let it out quickly when he heard yelling. He left the spear where it was and pulled the Glock again, ready to defend Elias if Stanley had any other sleepers on the crew.

But it wasn’t anyone of Stanley’s. It was Marissa, Bridget, and Matt, with half a dozen armed Coasties behind them.

“He’s okay,” Gills said before he blacked out.

Habitat - Chapter 4

Gills came to an hour later. He groaned loudly, and opened his eyes. To his great surprise, he wasn't in the well deck of the *Marissa*, he was in a hospital emergency room. Marissa was sitting in a chair nearby and he saw Matt and Bridget standing outside the huge glass doors of the emergency room, talking quietly.

Marissa stood when she heard the groan. "Get the doctor," she called to Matt and leaned over Gills. "Are you all right?"

"Ow. My head hurts. Did someone shoot me by mistake or something?"

"No. You aren't shot," Marissa said, hiding a grin. "Looks like you hit your head during the fight." She touched his head just behind his right ear.

"Ow! OW! That hurts!" His right hand went up to touch the lump a bit more gingerly than Marissa had. "Musta been when I went down trying to get away from Marie."

Gills saw Marissa's eyes tear up for a second. And then she got a curious look on her face. "Get away from her? Wasn't she trying to help you and Stanley killed her with your bang stick he took away from her?"

"No. She was in it with him. I guess, spying on you and making sure you didn't get too close to the operation."

"Oh. My. I need to sit down," Marissa suddenly said. "Marie... I can't believe it. You'll have to tell the Coast Guard. They are counting her a victim of Stanley's."

"Yeah. I'll fill everyone in. Later. Right now I just want to get out of here and get something to eat. I'm starving."

A doctor came in, wearing a rumpled medical coat and picked up a penlight fixture from the rack of instruments on the wall beside the bed. Gills gritted his teeth, but let the doctor check his eyes closely.

“Hard head. No damage, looks like.” The doctor looked at Marissa. “I’ll sign him out and you can take him home.”

“You and the doctor have some kind of trouble?” Marissa asked.

Matt and Bridget had come into the room. Matt laughed. “Sorta. Doc Ferguson can’t stand the fact that Gills always catches a fish at least an inch longer or a pound heavier than the one he catches in some of the fishing tournaments.”

Gills started to laugh, but groaned instead. “Yeah. But if he says I’m okay, I’m okay. Matt, get my clothes.”

“Sure boss.”

It was obvious that Marissa hated to leave, even for him to get dressed, but she followed Bridget out of the room. A nurse paused long enough to close the privacy curtains and then continued her rounds, barely taking note of any of them.

It didn’t take Gills long to get dressed, though it sounded like he was in a fight with the clothing. Matt stepped outside to let Gills struggle on his own. “Yep. He’s okay. He’s always like this when he gets hurt and it isn’t too bad.”

“He does this a lot?” Marissa asked, only half joking.

“You’d be surprised,” Matt said. “While we’re waiting, I want to check the news in the regular waiting room. Something is going on.”

Marissa took a seat close to the emergency room Gills was still in and waited for him. Matt and Bridget were watching the news. Matt shook his head. “This is not a good thing. Gills is going to want to know about this as soon as possible.”

“It isn’t that big of a deal, is it? The sun puts out CMEs all the time.”

“Yes. But this one is massive, and on a direct intercept course with the earth in less than seventy two hours. I’m sure glad we’re not out in the Mid-Atlantic under that hole in the magnetosphere.”

“Hm.” Bridget looked thoughtful. They’d discussed the problems the magnetosphere seemed to be having during the upswing of this sunspot cycle. The news changed to the local news, with video of Gills being carried off the Coast Guard Cutter on a gurney, and Stanley, Boomer, Clark, and Marie in body bags. There was a crowd around Elias Johnson. He looked confused and Marissa was hurrying him away from the reports to a waiting ambulance.

“You’re Grandfather? Is he okay? The Ambulance...” Gills asked, walking up to them with Marissa and glancing up at the TV.

“He is fine,” Marissa said. “He’s already coming out from under the drugs that Stanley and probably Marie have been slipping into his food, though I can’t fathom why they didn’t show up in the tests. We’d better get to the base and tell them the rest of the story.”

“Okay. But we stop at Mona’s right after. Matt, what are you looking so somber for? I’m fine.”

Matt filled Gills and Marissa in on the CME headed for earth.

“This is not good,” Gills said as the four of them headed for the entrance of the hospital.

“That’s what I told Bridget. Told her I was glad that we weren’t out under the hole in the magnetosphere over the Atlantic.”

“That’s been moving,” Gills said. “And a couple more seem to be developing. Matt, call Hinkey and see if he can fit two extra people in our section of the shelter.”

“You think that CME is a problem, Uncle Gills?” asked Bridget.

“Yes. I do,” Gills said. “But more importantly, I’m afraid someone might decide to take advantage of the situation to do something as bad, or worse, to make things much worse than just the CME by itself.”

“That is convoluted,” Marissa said. She had to hurry to keep up with Gills, despite the pronounced limp he had. Gills seemed to be on another mission, as important to him as the last he’d just finished.

“It is a convoluted world, Marissa. I’ve been a prepper a long time and have had to use my preps for things I never planned for. Mostly nautical in nature, helping out other people, but once, for myself when an idiot charter Captain left me stranded with a pair of dead engines on a deserted island for six days. My preps that I carry on jobs kept me going until he got back with a tow.

“The idiot got a hotel room and messed around trying to get a cheaper deal on a tug to come get the ship. I don’t think he gave me a second thought. Only the ship.”

“Well. I can tell you have good reasons for wanting to prep. And I have done quite a bit myself in the last few days,” Marissa said.

Gills slowed down and turned toward her. “Yes. I know. And I’m sure glad you did. We may need them. Assuming... Uh... Never mind. I’m sure you got... appropriate things.”

“Side stepped that one, barely,” Marissa said.

“Yeah. I’ll say,” Matt said. He’d been lagging behind, talking on his cell phone. The four stopped at Gills truck in the parking lot that Matt had brought over. “You aren’t going to like this, Gills. Hinkey says no go.”

“What do you mean, no go? There is room in our section. Yeah, it’ll be some close quarters, but we have plenty...”

Matt was shaking his head. “Hinkey said, to put it in less graphic terms, for us to stick it where the sun don’t shine. If we come around, we’re persona non grata. And thanks for the extra supplies.”

“That S...” Matt controlled what he was going to say. He’d been reluctant to get hooked up with Hinkey and his survival group. They were hard core, more into guns than food and water. “We’re going to have to find another place to hole up...”

“What about the habitat?” Marissa asked. “I remember, finally, seeing something on one of the educational networks about a CME. It wouldn’t affect us down that deep, would it?”

“You, my dear, are a genius!” Gills grabbed and kissed her, hard. When he released her he was in get going mode, ignoring the pain in his head and that in his leg. “You sure your Grandfather won’t mind?” Gills asked Marissa, his hands still on her shoulders.

“He won’t mind at all. I think he’ll look forward for some time away from everything.”

Gills didn’t try to explain that he thought it might be quite some time away from everything. “We’re going to need to stock up.”

“You. Gills McBain, are going to explain what happened on the yacht. I want that cleared up before we do anything else.”

“But... Okay. Okay. Matt, go get our gear and everything we might need from the house. You can drop me off at the base and while Matt gets the gear we have, Bridget, you and Marissa start buying for Elias and Marissa.”

He stopped talking for a moment. “Marissa, that place can handle a lot of people. Would it be acceptable to bring along a few people? They are all people with useful skills...”

“Of course, Gills. Whoever you think.”

“Okay. Thank you!” Gills took out his wallet and started to give Marissa his credit cards.

“Pull-lleeaassee.” Marissa laughed. “I’ll take care of the finances. You just do what you know best how to do, and I’ll do the heiress thing to the max.”

“But... Okay. Let’s get going.”

The hospital wasn’t far from the base and Matt let Gills out. Mutual waves and Gills was hurrying into the base to talk to the Commander.

By the time they were finished with him he was nearly fuming. Not that the Coastguard did anything special, it just took so dang long to say that Marie was in on it. Though, at one point, the subject of his shooting four people might not sit well with a Grand Jury came up.

“Tell you what. I’ll be away for the next month or so and if you still feel the same way, I’ll come back and face a Grand Jury.” He looked at the Commander, not the lawyer type.

“Yeah. Sure thing, Gills. No way you’re leaving this area. It is in your blood. You go do what you think you need to do and come on back when I call for you. If I do. But out of curiosity, where are you headed for now?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Gills said. He stood up and shook the Commander’s hand. “And you and your guys take real good care of yourselves the next few weeks. I mean it. Things are going to get bad.”

“Is that a threat, Mr...”

Gills shook his head and muttered something under his breath. When he turned to leave the Commander was having a quiet, intense talk with her legal person.

Beginning to feel the pain in his leg, Gills suddenly wondered what he was supposed to do to take care of it. Doc Ferguson hadn’t really said in the few minutes they were both in the same room and both lucid.

Limping more heavily, Gills headed for Mona’s. Fortunately it was as close to the base as it was the Marina. When he entered, he flopped down heavily on one of the comfortable stools at the bar.

“You look like crap,” Mona said. “Heard about your little adventure. Never did like that bunch much. But that Marissa. She’s something else.”

“Yeah. I think we might just have...”

“I was taking about the yacht,” Mona said with a grin.

“Oh. Yeah. Well, anyway. How long would it take you to close down, move all your stock down to the *Green Dragon*?”

“What? Are you nuts?”

“Mona. I know you. You are fully aware of what that CME could mean.”

“Oh. Yes. That. Yeah. I know, Gills. But what can I do? I have no place to go that would be safe, and you know good and well that if that big old balloon goes up, this place won’t last intact for an hour.”

“Exactly. Get Gary to help you. Who else working for you do you trust with your life?”

“Gills, man!” Mona hesitated. “Mark. And Candy and Sheila. Sheila... Well, Mark won’t go if Sheila doesn’t. Nothing bad about her, but I’ve only known her about two months.”

“Bring them into the fold. Do whatever you must to get everything you need to restart business, basic business, down to the landing craft and sit on it until I get down there. And Mona. I’ll guarantee you’ll be glad you did.”

Mona nodded. She was already picking up the telephone when Gills left. He really wanted a drink, but could tell he’d been given something for the pain, so hadn’t asked. His brain in turmoil, he hailed a cab outside and headed back to the hospital. It seemed to take forever for Doc Ferguson would see him.

“Doc. Got a proposition for you. I won’t compete against you ever again in a fishing tournament if you do a couple favors for me.”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Doc said, his arms crossing in front of his chest as he leaned his rump against the desk.

“You shouldn’t. You know I’m a prepper. I’ve tried for years to get you to write me up some prescriptions for your use in a long term disaster. What I...”

“It’s the CME, isn’t it?” Doc asked, standing straight and letting his arms drop. “Ever since that dang show on the TV and you harping on prescriptions, at the same time, I haven’t been able to get it out of my head. You think this is the big one?”

“I do,” Gills said, barely able to contain his surprise. “Maybe not THE big one, but a very big one, none the less.”

“Okay. Rather than me write out a bunch of prescriptions, I’m going to do something highly illegal. You probably don’t know, but I’ve been sparking Luetta Hastings, over at the pharmacy for almost a year now. We’re about ready to tie the knot. I’ll get her, somehow, to bring everything she can. Which means we go with you, or you don’t get the stuff.”

Ferguson was frowning, looking downright grim.

“Okay. Deal.” Gills held out his hand.

“Just like that?”

“Yep. Just like that. If you have anyone else you want to keep safe, that has some useful skills that will be needed in the aftermath of all this, bring them. Up to... call it six more.”

“Really?”

“Really. I trust you, Doc. Gonna be some hard decisions once you get started. Always remember that ultimately, whoever you choose could be responsible for your life. Get everything and everyone down to the marina, somewhere near my berth.”

Ferguson nodded curtly and turned to his desk. Gills left the doctor to his phone calls and arrangements.

Another totally clueless cab driver and Gills was downtown. His leg was really bothering him, but he pressed on. There were seven coin shops in the area, and Gills hit every one of them.

There was nothing left in any of his bank accounts. Only due to the fact that it required ten days' notice was his retirement account not emptied. He was struggling, not just because of his leg when the next taxi showed up.

"Marina," Gills said and gathered the various bags around him. He'd fully intended to help pick up food and medical gear, but those seemed to be handled. So he put his money into more precious metals. Much of his retirement was US gold and silver coins, kept at home. But he figured, between the PMs and anything else he might get, they were the easiest to get his hands on.

When he reached the *Green Dragon*, there was not a soul around. Highly disappointed, Gills stashed the precious metals down in the bilges and closed them up. He pulled out his cell phone and started to make his own set of calls, but the battery was dead. He plugged it into the charger. Flopping down on the dinette bench, Gills put his head on his hands, on the table, for a few moments to rest and reevaluate. But his cell phone rang, and he lunged to answer it.

"Where are you, Gills? We've been calling all over for you!" It was Marissa and she sounded as much annoyed as fearful.

"I'm here on the landing craft? Where is everyone? We were supposed to meet down here."

“Hon, have you no idea what you have wrought? When Mona showed up and told me what you said, it gave me some ideas. So everyone is over here at the giga-yacht mooring area. Can you bring the *Green Dragon* over here?”

“Sure. Of course. How are things shaping up?”

“You’ll see when you get here,” Marissa said when she hung up.

Tiredly, Gills fired up an engine and released the lines. He travelled at a sedate speed over to the area of the marina where ships too large to fit in the berths were moored. Yachts, super-yachts, mega-yachts and the top of the line, half a billion dollar giga-yachts. Well, just one of the latter. And the *Marissa* dwarfed all the others.

The well deck was open and Gills guided the landing craft inside. Matt was there, moving items from two of the lighters that were used to transfer goods from shore to the big yachts. Not often were they able to pull inside the actual vessel to unload.

“You okay, man? You look beat.”

“Yeah. Been busy.”

“You didn’t bring any stuff back?” Matt asked.

Matt was making a simple statement, but it irritated Gills a little. He started to tell the young man just how much gold and silver he’d brought, but Marissa came walking in and all irritation left. He hurried over to her and she gave him a long, hard hug.

“I was worried about you when we couldn’t reach you. Doctor Ferguson said you were okay, but.... Still...”

“I’m sorry. Dang battery is about shot and won’t hold a charge very long. Have to charge it up every day.”

“Okay. You’re forgiven. But correct that situation. Matt says we have two days before we have to be under the water.”

Gills shook his head slightly. “I don’t know. I’m thinking a day and a half, tops. People are starting to get bad feelings about things. I think someone will start something before the CME actually gets here.”

“Oh. Okay. A day and a half it is. Come. Sit down. You look like you’re about to collapse.”

When they were seated sideways, hip to hip on one of the PWCs, Marissa began to tick off a list of things she’d done while Matt and Bridget, and Gills were running their errands.

“Okay. Got the fueling barge headed this way. We’ll have a full load of fuel in a couple of hours. Same with food, supposedly for the yacht, in four. The Phoenix is coming in tonight and will be fueled and supplied first thing tomorrow morning.

“I’ve let everyone go that had family they wanted to get to, or refused to go along with the plan. We still have plenty of crew for this short trip, even with the short crew to start with. And the deliveries for the habitat that were scheduled for yesterday, though late, will be here tomorrow. So we should be filled to the gills, pardon the pun, if everything shows up on time and gets transferred.

“I... uh... broke a few laws... some of the stuff I have coming isn’t quite legal the way I’m doing it. Though,” Marissa added hurriedly, “in normal times I still could have obtained them, just for a lot less money, and in a much longer time frame.”

“You’re kidding?”

Marissa shook her head. “Nope. Dead serious.”

“Oh, well. Can only hang once. So let’s not worry about it until it comes up.”

Marissa smiled and kissed him lightly on the lips. “And there is one other thing. My expediter. Someone I’ve known for a long time. He kind of has a thing for me. One way only, I assure you, but chances are he may try to step between the two of us in some way.”

“But you don’t have any feelings for him?”

“Just friendship. We’ve had dinner meetings and such, but never dated. Marcus just reads more into it than he should. But he is a good man, Gills. He will be useful to have around. He knows how to get things done. Not only in the corporate world, but in general. He’s personable and makes friends easily. People like him. Like doing business with him. He doesn’t cheat them in any way, but he does arrange things so they have the maximum advantage to me, and still leaves the other guy happy and smiling with the deal he just made.”

“This is important to you, isn’t it?”

Marissa nodded, her eyes locked on Gills’. “It is Gills. It will not be a problem between us, as long as you don’t let it be.”

Gills smiled and it was he who nodded. “Then so be it. Or, so don’t be it... Or...”

Marissa laughed. “You are quirky, aren’t you?” She kissed him again. “Why don’t you come up and lay down for a bit. I have your medicine in my purse. You look like you could use it and a nap before we have supper.”

Gills got up, still slightly smiling, but vowing to himself that nothing would come between him Marissa, no matter what.

When they got to the cabin areas, Marissa showed him into one. It was very obvious that it was the cabin Marissa always used.

She reached over to a table and picked up her purse. She took out two pharmacy pill bottles and handed them to Gills. "Take them as directed. And get some sleep. Dinner is at eight. No need to dress up the way we usually do."

"You mean we're staying on board tonight?"

"Yes. That is what I mean."

"But this is your..."

"It is ours," Marissa said firmly. "It is ours. Don't argue. You won't like the result."

"Okay. Thank you. I guess. I... ah..." Marissa was shaking her head. "Anyway," Gills continued, "Put out some guards. I don't think anyone will be trying anything this early, but better safe than sorry. As much as I hate to, you can use my carry pistol for one of them."

"No need. I've got it handled, with Matt's and Marcus' help."

"Oh. Well then... I guess I'll see you at supper."

"Yes. You will." Marissa stepped out and closed the cabin door, sighing in relief. She wasn't sure how Gills would take her just deciding for them to move in together, but it had gone fine. So far. And he'd assured her that Marcus wouldn't be a problem. So that was settled.

Over the next day and a half, Gills came to realize that Marissa really wasn't the typical heiress. Once she got her mental teeth into something, she chewed until every part of it was thoroughly savaged. Gills just stayed out of the way. He saw not one thing go wrong, or questioned a single purchase and delivery, made during that safe time.

But Gills had been right. People took notice of the news and of the activities based around the *Marissa*. With the way the giga-yacht was moored, when the Phoenix 1000 and Discovery 1000 surfaced on the side away from shore, only the lighter crews knew they were there. And they'd been hired on for the duration, so would not be letting anything out of the bag.

The only thing that Gills didn't like was when Marissa had Matt and Bridget take the *Green Dragon* in to have a diesel tank installed on deck. When it was filled, even the powerful engines of the landing craft couldn't get her up on plane, and she wallowed a bit, with only half the freeboard showing normally, or less. But she was run up to the stern of the yacht and secured, alongside a similar vessel that Marissa had found and purchased from the intended recipient. She'd paid an exorbitant price over what he'd paid the factory, to divert it and get it to the yacht in time for its sailing.

It, too, had fuel, this time three separate tanks. One tank, half the total capacity, was gasoline, a quarter was kerosene, and the last quarter was more diesel. There was no way they were going to park those inside the yacht. Not with that much fuel. And people ashore in the ugly mood they were in.

The authorities, all of them, were trying to keep things calm. The federal government wasn't issuing much in the way of information on how to cope with the crisis that was developing, after having announced its imminent arrival. Most of the yacht crews were armed, with some standing guard at all times. A couple of small boats, and one larger one, sailed or motored out to find out why they were taking what seemed to

them, all the food and fuel in the area. It wasn't true. Most of it had been ordered for the opening of the habitat, to top off the yacht, and supply the new Phoenix submarine yacht. Only a portion of the items came from local sources.

The shutting down of Mona's was a sore point, too, as was the signing on of so many good people to crew the operation. But no shots were fired, and at noon on the second full day, Marissa had Captain Arenesen, much subdued after his failure to do anything about the situation with Elias Johnson, except follow Stanley Martin's orders, fired up the diesels and slowly motored out of the marina. The *Green Dragon* and the other, as yet unnamed landing craft, were motoring well off to one side of the giga yacht. They weren't alone. Fully twenty-three other motor boats, motor-sailers, and sail boats were trailing them, hoping those on the yacht would be able to include them in whatever they were going to do.

But as the little flotilla headed south, apparently out into the gulf, nowhere near the habitat, one boat after another finally turned around and headed for home. A close eye on the radar finally convinced Marissa that the last of the other boats had given up and were out of radar range. Even so, she ordered Arenesen to do a slow, curving course change, to bring them, finally, on a heading toward the habitat.

They continued their slow pace, to allow the lumbering landing craft to keep up without danger. There was very little swell. It was almost as if the Gulf knew that something was coming. It was as calm as Gills or Arenesen had ever seen, with the very low swells hundreds of yard apart.

The sonar pinged, indicating the surface ships had caught up to the Phoenix and Discovery, making their slow, direct way to the habitat, having started two hours earlier than the yacht. All the ships were loaded to capacity with food, equipment, and fuel. When they reached the habitat site, the vessels circled the wagons, so to speak, around the

umbilical and snorkel that went down to the habitat. It was a solar powered barge in its own right, with station keeping drives to keep it near, but not necessarily over, the habitat.

As a backup to the electric drives, the barge was anchored securely, with eight lines going down to the sea bottom. The lines were kept slack for the most part, though they could be tightened up either from below or if you knew they were there and how, from above. So even a long stretch of no sun or the batteries being depleted or damaged, the barge would still stay within close range to the habitat.

The triple redundant snorkels that brought fresh air down and the three that brought up the stale air from below, would shut off in an instant if the lines were cut or the barge did, in fact, tear away. Or a wave washed over the aerodynamically constructed barge. Everything was designed to shut down and seal off if the waves were such that they began to roll over the barge. It was better than having it try to climb every wave and then come crashing down.

It would ride shallow waves, but once heavier waves pushed it against the anchors, it would simply stay in position and let the water roll over it.

Heavy electrical cables snaked down in their own triple redundant casings from the barge to the habitat. The habitat could, if need be, be powered from a surface ship, in particular, the *Marissa*. Even the Phoenix 1000 submarine could supply enough power running on the diesels on the surface to give time to evacuate the habitat if all the internal systems went down. Which had even more redundant modes than the surface connections.

There were strongly built antennas for a variety of frequencies, and the barge was wired with just about every environmental and physical event sensor made, including weather sensors, radar and sonar. The habitat also had powerful sonar of its own. Deep below, the habitants would be

able to keep a wary eye on the sea and everything around the area of the habitat.

With his leg the way it was, Gills let the others handle all the transfers and arrangements to get the supplies, equipment, and people down into the habitat before darkness fell. Gills spent the time in the giga-yacht's well equipped radio room. He was listening to what many would term TEOTWAWKI. The end of the world as we know it. Things had gone unbelievably wrong when the first particles of the CME hit the atmosphere at five in the afternoon, about halfway through the moving in process.

It wasn't anything local. Not yet. That would start the next day. But the worst of it was, when maniacal leaders and generals agree that it is better to use weapons systems than it was to lose them to nature, and proceed to do so, bad things happened.

When Iran launched nuclear weapons on Israel, it was as if a faucet was opened and weapons poured out their destruction. Israel responded in kind.

Pakistan wasn't far behind, launching on India. India retaliated. Then China, having discovered one of the holes in the magnetosphere developing over them, launched everything they had. At every one. When the Chinese and then Russian missiles targeting the US were confirmed the President launched at specific, key targets, but held back the majority of land and air based weapons, and all the submarine missiles.

Suddenly bright light filled the radio room. Gills began to shut things down. There'd been no sign of an EMP, and hopefully the all metal walls of the radio room would protect the electronics.

With the radio room secured, Gills limped out into the bridge and saw Marissa."

“Did you see the flash?”

“Not directly. But saw the reflection on the radio room wall through the open hatch. You say everyone else is down?”

Marissa nodded and Gills said, “I’ll start shutting down...”

“It is done... Except the radio room,” Marissa said.

“I shut it down just now. I hate the thought of leaving everything up here we have to.”

“I know, Gills. I’d hate to lose anything, but we have all five submarines. And Marcus got the monitoring system set up just before the blast. We can watch the boats and yacht from the cameras on each of them and on the barge.”

“Good. That’s good,” Gills said, pleasing Marissa with his calm acceptance of her mentioning Marcus. He’d arrived early that morning, two hours before they sailed, with a taxi full of suitcases and packing cases, complaining about how much it had cost to get everything shipped to him in time for him to pick it up when he arrived. He and Gills had yet to meet.

Gills dropped down into the Discovery 1000 after they got to the wet deck and started the hatch closing, ducking under it in plenty of time. He looked in the direction of the shore. Not even any evidence of the nuke having gone off. And there was no reflected light from the cities. It was pitch black. Until he looked skyward just before Marissa blocked his view. There was a brilliant green aurora shimmering overhead. Pretty as it was, Gills took it as the warning that it was. Things on earth would never be quite the same.

Gills and Marissa shared not a word on the trip down. The only sounds were the hum of the electric drive motors. Marissa hadn't turned on the Discovery lights, wanting to give Gills the full effect of the habitat occupied and lighted up. She heard him draw a deep breath behind her when it came into view and smiled. "Quite the sight. Grandfather was right. This was a wonderful idea. It's just too bad it will never be seen by more than a few people now."

"You aren't kidding. It is amazing. And so is the rig. Gotta give Stanley credit. It was even bigger than I expected. He sure had ambitious plans. Even if they were evil."

"I'm glad he's gone. Grandfather won't last much longer, I know, but it's likely he'd be dead, now, never having had a chance to see his creation. He was ecstatic."

They grew silent again when Marissa began the docking maneuver to connect the pressurized sub to the pressurized habitat. There were locks where divers and the two small subs could enter the 'garage' of the habitat, but most things were done under one atmosphere pressure.

The air was a bit fresher than Gills expected, even with the snorkels. "Might want to shut down the snorkels until after any chance of fallout getting into them is over. They are shielded, but better not to take the chance."

"Well, well, well. This must be the Gills I've been hearing about." A tall, lanky man, golden blonde hair, showing signs of careful attention, held out his hand toward Gills. "Marcus Felling at your service, old chap."

"Marcus," Gills said his eyes on the other man's. He was tempted to try to hold the handshake, but Marcus was making it a test of strength. He'd promised Marissa he would behave so he turned his head toward Marissa and tugged his hand clear of Marcus'.

“How many do we have, total, including Marcus, yourself, and me?” Gills simply ignored Marcus’ presence.

“58,” Marissa said. “Plus three on the way.”

“And the capacity was designed to have thirty guests and thirty staff and crew. You are quite the planner, Marissa.”

She took Gills arm and steered him away from the group that was gathering. It was tough not to look over his shoulder at Marcus. But he didn’t. He should have. He would have caught the momentary look of sheer hatred on Marcus’ face. No one saw it, except Matt. And it was gone in an instant when another woman, obviously already under Marcus’ spell, came up to him and engaged him in discussion.

“How is everyone adjusting to the confinement?” Gills asked quietly after entering one of the guest suites. The Presidential Suite. He sat down on the comfortable bed and rubbed the area of the wound in his leg.

“Doc is keeping a close eye on everyone. And one of the people he brought on board has mental health training and can help. Plus, we have the medications we need to help. Luetta had just received her delivery and brought all of it and some of the existing pharmacy supplies. She wouldn’t strip it feeling like there should be some left for those that couldn’t come.”

“I’m glad she did,” Gills said. “I really didn’t intend to take everything useful. Just enough to ensure our survival.”

“I know.” Marissa sat down on the bed next to Gills and took his right hand in her left. “I’m not sure what would have happened to me if you hadn’t come along just when you did. I have the awful feeling that both

Grandfather and I would be feeding the fishes by now if Stanley hadn't been stopped.

Gills took Marissa into his arms and held her for a long time. She didn't cry, but she shuddered twice, fighting back tears. After a few minutes she drew away. She smiled, and asked, "You about ready for your first underwater meal? Mona has kind of taken over the kitchen area and service needs."

"Oh. We'll have to watch that. We're all in this together. Everyone has to pull their weight."

"I know. But you just wait. They wouldn't let me lift a hand. And I'm betting they don't you, either. Matt and Bridget took over a couple of administration jobs which the others understood. So everyone is planning on sharing the duties round about, so no one gets stuck with all the nasty details."

"Well, that's good at least. It sounds like everyone that brought in people brought people that understand the situation."

"Yes. Exactly. Now come on. Even if you aren't, I'm hungry. I never did get lunch today." Marissa leaned forward and gave Gills a quick kiss on the lips and then leaned back, his hand in hers, pulling him up to go with her.

Marissa was right. After an excellent, if modest meal, when Gills announced he was going to be helping with the dishes on this shift he was quietly, and firmly, told that "no he wasn't. He had more important things to do."

Gills caught Matt looking between him and Marcus several times. He'd make a point the next day to put him at ease about Marcus being a problem.

The sensors on the barge above them began showing fallout and radiation just four hours after they'd buttoned up. "I'm going to check the radios before I go to bed," Gills told Marissa after being directed away from the kitchen.

"Don't be long," Marissa said softly.

Gills actually gulped. It had been a long time since he'd been with anyone, and never with anyone as beautiful as Marissa.

"You need your rest," Marissa added with a grin, dancing away from him when Gills cut a hungry look at her.

Gills did listen to some of the slight radio chatter the radios were picking up from the surface antennas. But between the nukes, the nuclear HEMP devices, the natural EMP caused by the CME, and the rapidly distorting magnetosphere, there wasn't much to hear. That's what Gills told himself when he headed for the bedroom he would be sharing with Marissa.

She was waiting for him, in the bed, covered, as he stripped, went in to shower and shave in the en suite bathroom. It was a night that he wouldn't forget for the rest of his life, and it wasn't because of the things going on all around the world. He learned a great deal about Marissa and himself that night.

Habitat - Chapter 5

Gills didn't show it much, but Marissa's comment about him needing his rest was certainly true the next day. Only Marissa herself, Matt, and Bridget could tell that he was more tired than he was showing. But he didn't neglect any duties. Already familiar with the habitat, Gills made a point to go around the entire facility, checking on things one after another, making sure that the people tasked with the running and maintaining of the habitat were reading the multitude of manuals that had been generated for the place by professional technical writers. It was mostly the different yacht crew people that took the technical jobs that they were familiar with from their work on their ships.

Gills was both pleased and relieved to find that everyone was doing the work that needed done, and doing it well. The group as a whole was about as good of a mutual aid group as could be hoped for, especially on two days' notice.

Mona had the kitchen shipshape, Doc the same with the small clinic the habitat boasted for safety reasons, Matt and Bridget had the inventories tallied and were distributing things as needed and updating their data.

Only Marcus, Gills noted, was languishing around, talking to several of the women that were working. Fortunately for the state of mind of the residents, everyone was pretty well paired up and had been for some time before the disaster started. Marcus was out of luck. And he didn't like it. It didn't show, but the seething anger just below the surface was getting worse.

He tried to corner Marissa's attention, citing business concerns, but she brushed him off, preferring to accompany Gills on his rounds. Despite Elias, and thus Marissa, being the owners of the habitat, and having two yacht Captains in the facility, Gills was in de facto command of the group. Marcus didn't like that one bit, either.

They had their first test of the group when nine month plus pregnant wife of one of the *Marissa's* crew went into labor. Doc Ferguson, his nurse, and another nurse, this one the nurse that had been taking care of Elias before Stanley Martin had come into the picture, took care of it. Kila had been working at the hospital, hoping to get her job back with the yacht when Marissa saw her when they took Gills in.

The test was a good one. It cheered everyone up to hear the first wails of the newborn, with all working body parts, when it was piped through the habitat to announce the birth.

“How many is that for you, Doc?” Gills asked that evening at dinner.

“You can’t count that high.” Those around them laughed when Gills did.

“Probably so. You’ve been around so long it could be in the thousands.”

Luetta elbowed Doc and Doc let the remark go. It wasn’t as much fun under these circumstances as it usually was, anyway. Doc even changed the subject. “How’s your leg doing, Gills? Any signs of infection?”

“None at all. You do good work, Doc.”

“Of course. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I want to read up on some more of the clinic equipment. Some of it is newer and better than what I had at my practice and even the hospital.”

“Grandfather wanted to have the means to handle any type of medical problem, being isolated down here the way the crew, staff, and guests would be,” Marissa told the doctor.

“Where is Elias?” Gills asked. He hadn’t seen him all day.

“He is resting. All the excitement has him on edge. Doc Ferguson advised bed rest. Kila is keeping an eye on him. I can’t believe we ran into her at the hospital.”

“It was sheer good luck,” Gills said, “Though, with your skills, I’m not surprised, anyway. You have a knack of getting things done.”

Marcus was monitoring the discussion, his back to them, at another table. He fully expected for Marissa to lay off the praise onto him, the way she usually did when the subject came up. This time nothing.

Gills caught a few moments with Matt and told him what Marissa had said. “Don’t worry about it, Matt. Marissa and I are together now, and she’d never do anything remotely questionable.”

“Maybe so,” Matt replied, keeping his voice low. “But that man has feelings for Marissa, and he does not like you and I don’t trust him. I’m going to keep an eye on him anyway.”

“Now don’t stir up anything, Matt. We’re all in close quarters down here and things could grow out of proportion.”

Matt nodded. “Yeah. I know. I won’t do anything stupid. But that man is up to something. I can just feel it.”

Gills put it off to the fact that Matt was a very protective person, and a good friend that wanted the best for his friends.

The next test of the systems was a Gulf storm that blew in from the Atlantic. Waves were rolling over twenty feet, and the winds were steady at sixty knots, with gusts to seventy.

Everyone that knew about it was a bit tense until the storm passed and the Gulf had calmed again. Only Gills, Marissa, Elias, Matt, Bridget, and the Captains were aware of the storm and they only because they

were the ones that monitored surface conditions. There were no signs of the storm raging overhead inside the habitat, and everyone else went about their daily activities none the wiser.

Marcus was more than a bit put out not to be included in the inner circle, the way he had been before Gills entered the scene. He could tell something was up, but Marissa just told him that all was well, and that the leadership had things well under control.

After the first few days of adjustment to the confinement of the habitat, large and luxurious as it was, everyone fell into daily routines that kept them and their thoughts away from the disaster that had brought them to the habitat. They would deal with the rest of the world when they went back ashore.

Many of them spent hours at a time in the several sea viewing rooms, watching the parade of sea life just outside the thick, clear armor that made up much of the habitat. Everyone seemed happy with the accommodations, despite some of them getting the guest rooms and the rest getting the crew and staff rooms.

Elias had planned well, knowing the confines of the habitat would be hard on some people without being in nice surroundings. So, though there were some minor differences, mostly in the size of the rooms, the rest of the amenities were the same for everyone. No one had priority over what movie to watch, and game to play, or, for the divers in the bunch, who could use the diving equipment to spear fish or just explore the surrounding sea bed.

Gills went himself after the storm to check on the electrical generating plants in the trench. They'd been pouring out more than enough energy to supply the habitat, but Gills wanted to know how the storm had affected them, if any.

Matt declined to buddy him on the dive, citing needing to do something Bridget had asked him to do. So he asked one of the *Marissa* yacht crew that dove to go with him.

And Marissa insisted on taking one of the Triton 1000 2-person work subs out to accompany them, “Just in case,” she said. She managed to dissuade Marcus from riding along, telling him that without some training it was too dangerous.

Matt saw the annoyance on Marcus’ face when he turned away from Marissa, but quickly turned away when Marcus started to look in his direction. When he saw Marcus’ face a few minutes later, Marcus was smiling. As he headed for one of the elevators, announcing that he was going to see if he could find a snack in the kitchen.

“Why would he tell people that?” Matt asked himself. He waited for a bit and then went down himself. Marcus was nowhere to be found. He hadn’t shown up in the kitchen for any snack.

There was nothing else to do but head back up and look like he was busy with something, rather than trying to keep an eye on Marcus. It was over an hour before Matt saw Marcus again. He didn’t look too happy, but didn’t say anything to Gills or Marissa when they came up from down in the docking area, laughing together at something they’d seen on the trip.

All good things must come to an end, or so it is said. So, three months after taking up residence in the habitat, the leadership, with Gills in the forefront, suggested a trip up and to shore to see how things were going. The radiation level had never risen very high, and even with it probably accumulating on land, unlike at sea, Gills thought it would be safe enough to go in, if they wore protective equipment.

There were plenty of volunteers. People were ready to get back to the surface. Gills could not convince Marissa to stay in the habitat, and to

his surprise she actually suggested that Marcus be one of those that went with them. “We’ll turn him loose and let him see what he can come up with that might be beneficial to the group. As I said, he’s an excellent expediter. He’ll look out for our interests.”

Gills barely hesitated and Marissa looked pleased when he nodded. “We’re going to need a great deal of cooperation with whoever made it through. We’re still well set on supplies, but they will eventually be used up. We need to get started on crops and stock animals as soon as we can. Make sure Marcus concentrates on that.”

“Good idea,” Marissa said. “No wonder I love you.”

Gills smiled and left to start packing some things for the trip. Matt ran into him and wanted to go along, too, especially with Marcus going. But Gills told him, “I need you down here, Matt. Keeping an eye on things. People are going to start getting anxious to go up and may get a little lax handling their duties.”

Matt sighed and nodded. “Okay, Boss. I’ll keep an eye on things.”

“Good. I knew I could count on you.”

Gills was a bit surprised when Marissa added a leather gun belt with holster and magazine pouches to the small mound of gear she was taking with her. “I took some training those days I was in the city. I’m qualified to carry.”

“Oh. That’s good.”

“What about me?” Marcus asked. He was standing nearby plucking at the Tyvek hooded and footed coverall he was wearing.

“You an experienced shooter?” Gills asked.

“I’ve been around the block a time or two. If you two are going to be armed you must believe there is a reason. Don’t leave me in a position where I can’t defend myself. Or the rest of you, if needed.”

It was a logical request, though Gills wished it hadn’t come up. So he went back to the locked room where the armory was kept and took down one of the Hi-Point pistols that Marissa had managed to round up on short notice, along with several of their long guns and some of the same from Kel-tec. They weren’t what Gills would have picked up, but getting what she did on short notice was a real feat. And would have been probably four times the expense if he’d done it.

Along with the Hi-Point C-9, 9mmP pistol and nylon holster he grabbed four spare magazines for the C-9 9mm pistol, and a box of white label Winchester FMJ. Gills hesitated and put two of the magazines back. “One in the gun and two spares should do it,” he muttered.

When Gills handed the items to Marcus, Marcus started to load the magazines, quite proficiently, Gills thought. “Let’s wait until we’re topside before we load the weapons.”

“Good idea,” Marissa said. “Last thing we need is a hole in the submarine.”

Marcus didn’t object, just stuck the gun and holster in one pocket of his pants and the two spare magazines in another. The box of 9mmP went on top of his small stack of gear.

Captain Arenesen came up, dressed the same as the other three. He was followed by two of the *Marissa* crew, also suited up in PPE.

Gills handed them the firearms he’d selected beforehand for them. The Captain got another of the C-9s, and the two crew, who had both stated

that they were experienced shooters, got Hi-Point 995 carbines, also 9mmP. One asked, “This the best you got?”

“For the moment,” Gills said. “And no magazines in the weapons while we are in the sub.” Gills wasn’t going to arm anyone with the higher quality weapons in his own extensive arsenal until he knew a lot more about what was happening topside, and whether or not he would be likely to get the weapons back.

They loaded the gear into the Discovery 1000 six place sub and then boarded, with Marissa at the helm and Gills beside her. It was a quick, easy trip up to the surface. A quick check from a distance indicated that there had not been anyone out to them, nor had the storm caused any visible damage.

Marissa held the submarine next to the stern deck of the yacht and Gills climbed up and out of the submarine. He took a moment to load his Glock .45, and then, carrying a radiation survey meter, Gills began to check the area for residual radiation. And for any signs of anyone having been aboard.

Marissa was about ready to send the two crewmen up to check on Gills after some time passed and he didn’t reappear. She decided to try the radio first. Gills had a VHF marine band handheld on his belt.

But the stern well deck hatch began to open and Gills ducked under and out onto the stern deck. He gave a thumbs up and Marissa maneuvered the sub into the well deck. While Gills held it in place the others exited the sub and the two crewmen began to secure it.

With that done, Marissa, Gills, and Captain Arenesen began to unload the sub as the two crewmen headed up to the boat deck. It had been discussed and decided to use the *Marissa’s* Captain’s Gig to go to shore. Gills would have preferred to take the *Green Dragon*, but with the diesel tank still full, it wouldn’t do.

Gills called over his shoulder for Marcus to take one of the bags. There was no response and Captain Arenesen took the bag from Gills. “Where’s Marcus?” Gills asked Marissa.

“Said something about a bathroom and disappeared. He’s never been on board before. Probably got lost.”

“But there is a bathroom here in the well deck.”

“Yes, Gills. I’m aware of that. But he walked right past it.”

“Hm,” Gills replied, but said nothing more. He tossed the last bag up to Arenesen, climbed out of the sub and secured the hatch.

“This is a big ship, Gills. It really is easy to get lost in it.”

“Of course. I was just curious.”

“Of course,” Marissa said.

Nothing more was said for a while as the Nautica 41 Cabin RIB eased into the well deck. A few minutes later everything was loaded into the Gig. And Marcus still was nowhere around.

“I’m going to go look for...” Gills was saying when Marcus strolled into sight.

“Sorry guys. Got lost.”

“Marissa said she thought that probably was what happened,” Gills said.

Marcus’ clenched his teeth at the comment, but everyone had turned away and didn’t see the reaction. Marcus made sure his iPod computer

with detailed drawings of the yacht and habitat was secure under the Tyvek suit in its case on his belt, under the suit.

He boarded the Nautica and found a seat in the cabin, letting the others handle getting it out of the well deck and the well deck secured. A few minutes later, Gills, at the helm of the RIB, put the throttles forward and headed for land.

Everything looked normal at first, as they entered the marina, Gills keeping the speed down. Captain Arenesen was scanning the shore with binoculars. "I don't see a soul," he said.

"Okay," Gills said. "If you haven't already, lock and load. There is no telling what the reaction will be when we are spotted. And I think that just happened."

Not quite like floodgates opening, but half a dozen people suddenly appeared from where they had been hiding when the two crewmen left the cabin, ready to secure the Nautica in Gills' regular berth.

"You the government?" one of the survivors yelled over. All six were armed, and they all had the weapons at the ready.

"Didn't know if there was a government left," Gills said, stepping onto the dock. "We're from the yacht *Marissa*. Not the Government."

"I heard about you! Took all of our stuff and took off!" The man began to raise the rifle he carried, but as Gills hand went to his pistol, a strong voice came from behind the group.

"Stand down Bluenstien. Too many people are dead already."

A big man stepped forward, through the line of people. "We don't have much. Is there anything you can spare?"

“We can work out something. We’ve been at sea for a long time and would like to have the chance to get back on land and start trying to get something set up to help everyone. Not just ourselves.”

Gills wasn’t much of a speech maker, but he did okay. “We have some fuel, medical supplies, and can provide a lot of seafood. Not much other food, though.”

“We’ll take what you have,” Bluenstien said.

Gills saw the big man shake his head. “We aren’t going to Take anything, Bluenstien. It’s a matter of the community working together.” The man looked over at Gills again. “I’m Nick Uberti. Own... Owned a motel. Burned in the riots. I’ve sort of been selected to act as leader for a while.”

“Gills McBain,” Gills said, stepping forward. The two men shook hands. “Kinda the same thing here. Where can we talk? Looks like Mona’s is still standing.”

“You don’t want to go there. The place is okay outside, but gutted by fire inside. Totally ransacked early on and then set afire, the way my motel was. Come on up to the house I’m using. It’s not too far away.”

Captain Arenesen and the two crewmen stayed aboard the Nautica, as Marcus, Marissa, and Gills followed Uberti, the others of Uberti’s group falling in behind.

“What’s the radiation situation?” Gills asked. “We’d like to get out of these suits if we can. We weren’t showing anything when we approached.”

“It’s not a problem. We got a little fall out, but not much. The killer, around here, anyway, was the cosmic radiation when the magnetosphere

began to collapse. That and people fighting over a liter of fuel or scrap of bread.”

To Bluenstien’s disgust, only the two from the *Marissa* were asked to enter the house Uberti was using.

A very scared young girl ran to hide when Uberti opened the door and announced his presence, and those of his guests.

“You sure they are okay? Not sick? Not looters?” asked a petite woman standing in the kitchen door, a shotgun in her right hand. She looked like she was ready to use it.

“They are okay, my dear. Try to reassure Sissy.” Uberti indicated that the three take seats as he said, “Sorry about that. She was almost killed, twice. Once in the fire, and then again when we were first setting up here. The looters were brutal.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Gills said. “What’s the current situation?”

“I’d offer tea or coffee, but we just don’t have any. But to more important matters. What do you know of what happened?”

“CME, EMP, nuke war, magnetosphere collapse.” Gills said. “We’ve been monitoring all the long range radio bands, but haven’t picked up very much at all. Conditions are really only just getting back to any semblance of normal.”

“I’m afraid we don’t know much more than you. There was one National Guard unit that came through. They handed out some MREs, water, and medical supplies and then disappeared as fast as they had shown up. They left a couple of vehicles behind, disabled, for the lack of fuel.

“They talked to the Coast Guard commander and she called in everyone that would come in and left, taking their equipment. I don’t think she was happy about it, either, from what a couple of the guys that stayed behind said.”

Gills nodded. He caught a glance at Marcus. The man looked like he was evaluating a meal as he looked at Uberti. But Gills ignored it and responded to Uberti. “How many survivors in this area?”

“No many,” Uberti said with a sigh. “Only forty-seven that I know about. Could be a few still hiding out from the gangs and looters and other violence we had during the worst of it.”

“Forty-seven?” Marissa asked, “Out of all those that lived here?” She looked like she was about to cry.

“Yes,” Uberti replied. “It was terrible, I must tell you. Those of us that had any real shelter, and stayed out of the sun managed to survive. The others... We haven’t been able to clear up and bury all the dead yet. Many of them... well, there’s not much left to bury after the animal depredation. We’ve only managed to clean up the places we’re actually using.”

Gills sighed. “We’ll be able to help with that,” Gills said. He looked over at Marissa as he said, “We can bring the *Marissa* in and some of us stay aboard her. No need to take any of the available space here we don’t need to.”

“After the stay at sea,” Marissa said, “I think some of the group will definitely want to be back on dry land.”

“Yes. But we’ll do our own clean up and make new space available,” Gills reassured Uberti.

Uberti nodded. “There will be more than a little animosity toward your group, much as you saw Bluenstien express. I think a helping hand here and there will be a start to dispel some of those feelings.”

“What is with Bluenstien?” Marcus asked, finally speaking up. “What’s his gripe?”

“His cousin was one of those that left with you. He wasn’t invited. Specifically un-invited when he insisted he go along with Patty to take care of her.”

“Patty Jones?” Marissa asked.

Uberti nodded.

“That’s Tom’s wife. The first one to have a baby,” Marissa said.

“There is bad feeling between Tom Jones and Dave Bluenstien. Don’t know what, just that it exists,” Uberti explained further.

“Too bad,” Marcus said.

For some reason Gills just didn’t like the tone of Marcus’ voice, though the comment, on the surface, as more or less appropriate. It didn’t seem to bother anyone else, so he let it slide.

“What are you in need of first?” Gills asked.

“Fuel. And some food that the children will eat. What we’ve been scrounging up lately just is not palatable for them after eating it for so long. Despite being hungry, some of them are not eating even what is available.”

“Consider it done,” Marissa said, without waiting for Gills to say anything.

“Yes,” Gills added. “Where would be the best place for those coming ashore be? We’ll scrounge up what we need to clear things and bury the dead. We don’t want to step on anyone’s toes. We’re equipped to take care of our needs for some time; but want to set up gardens, find some stock, and get on with life in the PAW.”

“PAW?” Uberti asked.

“Post-Apocalyptic World.”

“Ah. Suitable. I will do everything I can, but my leadership is at the whim of the others. If there are problems... Well... There could be serious problems.”

“We can handle them,” Marcus said, placing his hand on the grip of the Hi-Point.

Gills frowned openly this time. He shot Marcus a hard look. “We’re not here to start trouble and will avoid it whenever we can. Our goal is to limit friction and try to form a viable community. Guns are a very last choice and only if absolutely necessary.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Marcus said, hating the feeling of being chastised by Gills. “That is what I was talking about. Certainly.”

“That’s good to hear,” Uberti said. “But you will, more than likely, need to use them at some point. The looters have left us alone for the last month. But when they hear you have arrived, with so much at your disposal, they will be back. I’m sure of it.”

Gills nodded. “Then so be it. But it will be a combined community facing them. We will not let our presence bring you any more harm than we possibly can.”

“I’m sure any tradeoffs will be in our favor,” Uberti said. When he did, Marcus caught Marissa’s eye and grinned and winked.

Marissa’s mouth formed a thin, hard line. This was not the Marcus she was used to.

Gills stood, followed by Marissa and Marcus. Uberti stood, too, walking them to the door. “I’ll walk you back down.”

“That really isn’t necessary,” Gills asked, “is it?”

“Probably not, but I want to explain to the others what is going on.”

Gills nodded and stepped outside. Bluenstien was waiting in the street, leaning again the picket fence.

“You make a deal with them, Uberti?”

“One that I think will be beneficial to all,” Uberti replied.

Again, no one saw the look and nod that Marcus gave to Bluenstien, except Bluenstien. And he straightened up quickly, a small smile curling his lips as he nodded back, thinking, “There was something up with that guy.”

Captain Arenesen and the crew members stayed aboard the *Marissa* to start getting her ship shape when they returned to the yacht. And Marcus, stating he was beginning to get claustrophobic, now that he’d been out of the habitat and in the open again, said he was staying aboard.

It wasn’t a request and Gills didn’t much like Marcus having the run of the yacht, but he didn’t say anything to Marissa. Though he did note that Marissa gave Marcus a careful look.

Gills tried to explain the situation to the others when he and Marissa went back to the habitat. But there was so much excitement that there really was a world left, and that they were finally getting out of the habitat, that Gills really didn't get a chance to explain fully.

"It's okay, Gills," Marissa told him when he made an exasperated sound. "We've still got to get everyone on board the yacht and those to shore that prefer it to the yacht."

"Yeah. You're right. But I don't want anyone walking into something that might surprise them or be dangerous."

"I know. And we'll make sure it doesn't happen. Now, let's get something to eat and make a few plans."

On a whim, Gills asked Matt, expecting to stay in the habitat until everyone was up top, to go up with the first load and keep an eye on things for him. Gills hadn't said anything about Marcus, but knowing Marcus hadn't come back to the habitat, Matt decided that just maybe Gills was getting a clue. "Okay, Boss. I'm on it. I'll keep an eye on the whole operation for you."

"Oh, Matt," Marissa said as she came up to them. "Marcus isn't feeling well enough to come back down..."

"So I heard," Matt said. Gills gave him a hard look.

Marissa ignored it, and continued. "It would be a personal favor if you took his gear up to him. He said it is all packed up and ready to go."

Gills was proud of Matt. Despite his feelings, Matt agreed to do Marcus' grunt work. "Sure, Marissa. No problem."

Gills mouthed a “Thank you,” to Matt when Marissa turned around, and Gills moved to follow her. Matt nodded. He wasn’t a snoop, but he fully intended to find out what Marcus was up to. Even Bridget had noticed the man’s numerous disappearances when most everyone was in watching a movie or having a meal together. Not only was he obviously doing something, he was asking for meals that he missed after the kitchen was closed up following one.

Mona had taken an instant dislike to him, much as Matt had, but Matt asked her to humor him, on behalf of Marissa. So she did. Marissa, Mona liked.

Marissa was handling the Discovery 1000, shuttling people up. The crews had gone up first, securing the two Triton 1000 subs in their berths in the well deck, and expected Gills to shut things down. Gills caught Marissa alone before she took the next to last load up.

“Make sure no one will be in the well deck, except perhaps Matt, before you come back down, for when you come back up, supposedly with me.”

“What? Why? Supposedly? ” Marissa asked, seeing the pinched look on Gills’ face.

“Come over here,” he said. “Recognize this?” Gills pointed at an access panel in the wall of the docking chamber.

“It’s a power access hatch. For the hydraulics to work the doors and pumps for the docking equipment.”

“Exactly. Tap on it.”

Marissa shook her head, but she tapped the panel with the knuckles of her right hand. She looked up. “So? Nice sound. A little hard to dance to, but...”

Before she could finish the joke, Gills took over to an identical panel on the other side of a door way. “Try this one.”

When Marissa tapped her knuckles against the second hatch the sound was much different. Just a soft thud. “That’s strange. It’s like something is blocking the hatch.”

“It is,” Gills said. “I found Martin’s stash, by accident. Had to make a couple of adjustments the other day and had to take the other panel off. I decided to check this one, too, to make sure the backup equipment was adjusted the same way. It isn’t what I expected.”

Gills hurried to bend down and remove the turn screws that held the hatch in place. “I thought it was a couple bags of cash or some type of stocks and bonds.” Gills opened the satchel that had leaned outward when the panel was moved.

“My gosh! That’s gold coins!”

“Yep. I guess Stanley was a believer in hard currency,” Gills said. He was hurriedly putting the panel back into place. “It is undoubtedly your Grandfather’s money. I’d rather no one knew about it until you can get him, and it, secured to your satisfaction. In these days and times, this is a King’s ransom.”

“Yes. Yes. Of course. You’ll bring it up when I take you up?”

“Nope. Going to get some buoyancy bags and take it up to the *Green Dragon*, and hang them off the jets. Once we get separated when you go in a lot faster in the yacht than we can in the landing craft, I’ll recover it and stash it in a safe place I know.”

“You think it is that dangerous having that much?”

“I certainly do,” Gills said. He rose quickly and gave Marissa an even quicker kiss.

“You guys!” Bridget said, laughing. “Get a room!”

“Hush, niece,” Gills said and let Bridget and the last person besides himself that would be in the habitat, perhaps ever, go by them. “I’ll see you top side. And take your time both up and down and back up. Can’t have it seem to be taking too long, though.”

“Okay. Gills, I love you. If this money gets dangerous to you, I’d rather give it away than risk losing you.”

“Don’t worry. I like being married to an heiress. It has certain compensations.”

“You coming, Marissa?” Bridget yelled from the Discovery 1000.

“Yes!” Marissa kissed Gills again and hurried over to the sub.

As soon as he had the docking station secured, Gills worked quickly to get the hidden gold, and, he found out, silver, from the utility duct. He’d only seen the two bags until he dragged the first one out. He found four more. Two more of gold and two of silver coins.

On a hunch, Gills checked the other utility conduits. Sure enough, six more bags, this time three each of gold and silver. And one leather portfolio he almost missed. He opened it up and found a sheath of papers inside. They were GIA diamond certification sheets, each with a small plastic bag containing a diamond stapled to it. “Sheesh!” Gills muttered. He secured the diamonds in one of the leather cases.

The rest of the habitat had been shut down as sections were emptied. All Gills had to do was put a couple of systems on automatic, don his

diving gear, which was still in the rack with the others that were part of the habitat guest equipment.

The bags of coins were by the diving hatch, with buoyancy bags attached. Gills pressurized the compartment, opened the hatch when the pressure was equal, and lifted a bag over into the water. It was awkward and he felt a rib slip. One from a prior fall he'd taken. But he grimaced through the pain of getting all the bags in the water, tied to one another.

He closed the upper hatch, dropped down and closed the bottom hatch. "You been a life saver, girl," Gills thought, touching the hatch lightly. "Hopefully someone will be back to take advantage of your attributes."

Gills began to fill the buoyancy bags one at a time from his regulator, adding just enough air to go just a bit more than negative buoyancy. With the string of bags firmly in hand, he began to drift upward with them.

He could see the lights of the Discovery 1000 in the distance as Marissa made a couple of circles to kill some time. He was almost to the surface when he saw Marissa head upward. Gills had plenty of time to secure the bags to the jet nacelles on the two Munson Landing craft, two to each outboard engine.

He dove again, pleased that the two landing craft had drifted over away from the yacht. It made what he'd done essentially invisible. He startled Marissa when he popped up beside the submarine just as she docked it in the well deck.

Gills lunged up out of the water as Marissa secured the sub. "I'm going to change. I left some other clothes hidden down here when I figured out the plan. Someone may be getting anxious. You'd better head up and head off anyone coming down to check."

Marissa gave Gills a thumbs up and headed for the elevator that would take her up to the living areas of the yacht.

When Gills stepped out of the elevator a few minutes later, Marissa was engaging Marcus in conversation. Marcus didn't look happy, but Marissa was bending his ear and he couldn't, wouldn't, just walk away from her to go looking for Gills.

"Thought she'd left you behind," Marcus said to Gills, "despite her reassurances that you were right behind her."

"Had to go to the bathroom," Gills said, drawing a slightly larger frown than the one Marcus already had on his face, at Gills' use of the same excuse Marcus had used once.

"I suppose we all do at one time or another," Marissa said, putting herself between the two men. "It's late. I'm sure someone has some supper ready for us. Let's go." She had her left arm wrapped around Gills' right so he had no choice but to follow along or hurt her getting free.

She whispered to Gills when they were a few steps ahead of Marcus. "You promised!"

"I'm being good, Marissa. I really am. It is just hard. I don't know what you ever saw in that guy, even as a friend."

"I'm beginning to have some doubts myself. But for the moment, we have too many irons in the fire for you to get into anything with Marcus."

It made Gills feel significantly better. Marissa had, in a way, given him permission to "get into something" with Marcus at some point in the future. For now, getting things set up on shore would be first priority.

Habitat - Chapter 6

Friendships had formed, and minor alliances, among the habitat group over the months of close confinement. Fortunately there had been very little friction, and what there was had been minor, the matter worked out to everyone's satisfaction. Marissa, and especially Gills, was well aware of the good luck they'd had in that matter. Fifty-eight people, plus three babies, could have been a real disaster in itself.

The quality and luxury of the habitat had helped a great deal. Such things had been researched and the habitat designed to eliminate physiological as well as psychological problems that could turn into big problems when no one could walk away from them.

So, there were essentially four groups from the habitat. Some locals that wanted to reintegrate back into what was left of the local population. There were only a few that took that route.

Then there was Captain Arenesen and the crew of the *Marissa*, plus a few and minus a few.

The same thing with Captain Marilyn Mack, the Captain of the *Lindi Lu*, the Phoenix 1000 submarine yacht. She too had a couple people go elsewhere and a couple join up.

Gills, Marissa, Matt, Bridget, Elias, and Kila stayed together.

Only Marcus went off on his own. He was the first one to leave the yacht, shuttled over in the Nautica 41 RIB early that next day. Marcus paid one of the hangers on at the marina to carry his gear and simply walked away from the dock, without a word to anyone else. Matt started to yell at him to bring back the extra bags he was taking over what he'd brought with him to the yacht.

But Gills saw the same thing, and Matt getting ready to make a scene, and asked him to let it go. “Can’t be much,” Gills said. It is only the two bags extra. He got into one of them to pay old Harry... how he survived is beyond me, to carry the bags. I think it was a can of food.”

“You’ve been too easy on him, Gills. He might not be as bad as Stanley was, but I think he’s rotten to the core.”

Gills didn’t tell Matt that he planned to take care of the situation at some point. He just laughed and slapped Matt on the back. “I’ll keep that in mind. Now, let’s get some things done. Going to be some long hours of hard work. You’ll forget all about Marcus.

Any thoughts that Marissa had that Marcus would essentially work for her in his old position getting things done, now for the groups, rather than herself, left her mind when she asked Gills if he knew where Marcus was and he told her what he’d seen.

“I told him I would make sure he got a fair share of things. Even in the old days people thought he was a slacker because they didn’t see him do much. So much of what he did was in the background.”

“I can understand that. It is a letdown. But we simply have to cope. I have a feeling you will be doing his old job justice on your own. You’ve done wonderfully. Managed to save a lot of lives that would have been lost.”

Marissa leaned against Gills for a moment, seeming to draw strength from him. “Thanks Gills. I can’t believe I’ve found someone like you, at a time like this.”

“Same here, Sweetheart. I think we’re being looked after from on high.”

Marissa gave him a quick kiss and then said, “Well, I’d better get started on my day. I want to monitor the distribution of the equipment and supplies.”

“Okay,” Gills said. He had his own jobs to do. And he wasn’t relishing them. The only good thing would be that the *Green Dragon* would soon be able to get rid of the anchor of a fuel tank aboard.

They wouldn’t even be able to unload one of the land vehicles the *Marissa* carried until one of the landing craft was free. Normally, they were lifted from the garage at the inner end of the well deck and set on the dock, but there simply wasn’t a place they could do that here.

So Gills headed ashore with one of the work groups. They’d get things cleaned up before anyone else, Gills hoped, would leave the fold.

It was dirty, nasty, smelly, hard work. And despite being in central west Florida, it was cold. Colder than normal for this time of year. Gills cut a glance up to the sky. There was a high bank of thin clouds that just seemed to suck the warmth from the sun.

That wasn’t necessarily bad. Many of the illnesses and some of the deaths had come from hard cosmic radiation, and even Ultraviolet radiation. Several of the towns’ people had terrible scars from the deep sunburns they received going out into the sun during the days that the magnetosphere was in serious flux.

Gills had never been much of a hat person, though he did wear caps quite a bit to shade his eyes on the water, but he was sporting a wide brim straw hat, one of many that Marissa had come up with on her buying spree earlier. He also had long sleeves and long pants, both for the cold and to protect from any higher than normal levels of UV that might be getting through the atmosphere. UVA/UVB protective sunglasses covered his eyes.

There was no longer any excessive hard cosmic radiation triggering the radiation meters, so the magnetosphere had recovered enough to bring at least that worry to an end. And fallout had been light, too, so radiation was no longer a real problem locally.

A backhoe tractor was parked in the middle of the street that the group was headed for, looking more than a little incongruous among the cars and trucks that were also abandoned where their engines died from EMP or they ran out of fuel after surviving the EMP.

The latter was the case with the backhoe. It was out of fuel. They had a five gallon fuel can of diesel with them. It was enough to get the backhoe's engine primed and then started. They took it to the marina and as close to the docks as they could go before transferring more fuel from the tank in the *Green Dragon*.

Four people were assigned to the task of rounding up more diesel powered vehicles that had survived the EMP to get them fueled and back into operation. Trucks and utility vehicles were the primary things Gills wanted running.

Almost everyone put in long days for the next month, making ready two nearby housing sections, each with a motel handy that was cleaned up for those that didn't want to take one of the abandoned houses.

Finally, with the first snow beginning to fall, the two ship's groups left the yachts and took up residence in the cleaned and in some cases, refurbished, homes and motels. None of the houses had working fireplaces, and a few had only electrical heat, so one of the jobs had been finding and installing enough propane fueled heaters and propane tanks so everyone would have heat and cooking facilities for the winter.

The electrical grid was not within their ability to restore. And there weren't enough generators to go around, much less fuel. So only the motels were powered, using the two diesel generators from the hospitals.

They would only be run for a couple of hour's morning and evening plus any time there was a medical need. For any serious work, Doctor Ferguson would use the facilities on the *Marissa*. It had an excellent small clinic already equipped, but it was too cumbersome to get people to and from it.

The medical group took over one of the motels' small group of meeting rooms for the clinic. Like Mona's, the hospital and clinics had suffered greatly in the aftermath as people, desperate for both legal and illegal drugs ran out and tore the places apart looking or in anger. The same, if not more so, the pharmacies. Though Doc Ferguson kept a small team busy during the same time the housing was being prepared gathering anything and everything that could be salvaged for the new land based clinic, there was still a limited number of medications to be had.

There was enough propane in the area to keep things going for at least two years. The long range planning had not been undertaken, though it had been discussed that they would need to make plans before the fuel ran out.

The two groups were only a quarter mile from one another, the locations chosen for the available resources and to be able to have them close enough to lend aid and defense if the raiders came back.

Gills and group decided to continue to stay onboard the *Marissa*. Gills house was in a neighborhood that had burned, without a single house spared, so there the decision to stay aboard. Well, that, and to make sure none of the vast resources she contained would go missing. Matt didn't like it much, but he was often tasked with staying aboard with Elias and usually Kila, when the others were out doing things.

Matt and Marissa, with the *Green Dragon* fuel tank empty and moved, had transported the Mercedes Benz G-55AMG SUV from the *Marissa*, along with two ROKON two wheel drive motorcycles with diesel engine conversions and in-line trailers. All three vehicles had been put to good

use during the cleanup and preparations for winter. The two military Hummers that Gills had planned on adding to the fleet had disappeared.

Now, Gills and Marissa were venturing further out, looking for additional survivors and usable goods using the G-55. The precious metals and diamonds had been moved one dark night from their landing craft jet nozzle hiding places and put in several of the different safes on board the yacht. They'd yet to try using any of the gold and silver that Gills had that he'd never thought to mention to Marissa, nor any of Marissa's that she had forgotten to tell Gills about when she first picked it up as one of her first preps.

Everyone was going armed, thanks to Marissa's stock of Hi-Point and Kel-tec firearms. Some of the towns' people that hadn't managed to recover any of the available weapons that were being found here and there during the cleanup got the handout weapons.

Matt had proven very adept at snooping out weapons, ammunition, and accessories during that time. He wanted to be doing more of it, which was what was chaffing at him staying about the giga-yacht.

But there had been no sign of the raiders between the time the group returned from the habitat, and the time they took up residence on land.

Marcus was out of sight, and out of mind, since he'd first left. Even Marissa quit asking if anyone had seen him on their journeys out and about. Only Gills, and especially Matt, ever gave him a thought any more.

Gills was spending his evenings in the yacht radio room. The atmosphere was calming down and Shortwave and HF Amateur radio frequencies were again becoming usable. The bad thing was that he was hearing mostly bad things.

What few small countries around the world that had surviving governments were in no shape to help anyone but themselves, and the larger governments were more or less nonexistent. Not even the US government, with the series of bunkers that were to ensure Continuity of Government had not been used in time.

There were some well supplied staff in those bunkers, but they weren't allowing anyone in or out. And no one close enough had enough firepower to open them up.

Local governments were becoming reorganized, at the town, city, and county level, with a couple of state governments trying to reform, without much success. Transportation was just too difficult and expensive with the precious resources.

Gills and Marissa had been gone overnight, as they did occasionally, and, as usual, Matt was keeping an eye on things. He was about ready to inside to get breakfast that Bridget was making for all of them when he noticed something. Again. He continued inside, but quickly picked up the binoculars and brought them to his eyes.

This time he was sure. It was Arthur Bluenstien. And he was doing the same thing that Matt was doing, in reverse. Bluenstien was watching the *Marissa* the way Matt was watching Bluenstien. But Bluenstien didn't have binoculars. He did have a hand held radio. Possibly feeling Matt's gaze, Bluenstien eased back behind the building he was using for cover.

Matt watched a little longer, but Bluenstien was simply easing around a corner, taking a look, and easing back. Nothing to keep Matt from getting breakfast.

"We're about out of eggs," Bridget told the small group.

"Oh, my," Elias said. "I do so love a boiled egg from time to time."

“I know, Mr. Johnson. But everyone that has chickens seems to be out of eggs at the moment.”

“It is alright, Sir,” Kila told her patient. “Miss Holmes said that there might be more from another small farm they’ve found. Very clandestine, she said. Went past it several times before they realized it was there, she said. They’ve been hiding from the bandits, she said.”

“Ah,” Elias said, but that was all. He carefully cracked the egg in the egg cup, sliced the tip off the egg and dipped a toast point in the yoke. The look on his face was ecstasy. The other three smiled and began to eat.

“Anything left?” Gills asked, entering the dining room with Marissa on his heels. They both dropped backpacks in a corner of the room and stepped over to the table.

“It’ll just take me a minute,” Bridget said and started to get up.

“No, no!” Gills said. “I was just asking. We’ll make our own. You just keep your seat and eat.”

Bridget slid back down into her seat and picked up her fork. “What did you find this trip?” she asked.

As Gills looked in the refrigerator for breakfast makings, Marissa answered Bridget. “Quite the haul, this time. But it is getting harder. We dropped off most of it in town to the three groups. The townspeople seem much more appreciative than before, and less belligerent.”

“It is because we are doing just as we said we would,” Gills said. He’d seen the limited number of eggs and closed the refrigerator. He took down a canister of oatmeal and began to boil water. “Every group is cooperating with each of the other groups. I think we’d be just one large group, except for the need to use only those dwellings that are habitable

under current circumstance. It was down to 32° last night. If we just had more diesel, or could grow enough oil crops, we could get more gensets and power up just one subdivision. The gated one out past Earl's. It would be ideal. But it is all electric."

"But you know..." Gills voice trailed away and he was looking at nothing, obviously thinking.

"You've come up with something?" Matt asked excitedly. "I know that look."

Gills quickly shook his head. "No. Nothing really. Just a thought. Not doable."

"Well... if you say so," Matt said. "But I need to talk to you after you have breakfast."

"Isn't it something you can discuss here?" Bridget asked.

"No. Just a hunch I have. I want to let Gills go over it first before I say anything."

"Okay, Matt. Sure." Gills was stirring the oatmeal. "Won't be long. Would you fuel up the G-55 for me? We want to get back out there. Got a lead on some cattle."

"Sure, Boss. Uh..." Matt looked at Marissa. "Don't suppose you'd like to stay behind and have me go with Gills?" He didn't look hopeful.

Gills took pity on him and nodded to Marissa. Matt didn't see it, but began to smile when Marissa suddenly smiled and nodded. "Sure. Why not."

Matt let out an enthusiastic "Yes!" and did a hard fist punch into the air. But the smile faded. "Oh. No. I can't this time. There's something..."

Well, I think I'd better just stay here today. But I really would like a rain check. I'll go fuel up the Mercedes."

Matt was gone before anyone could question him about it. Gills looked at Bridget. "You have any idea about what that was about?"

"No, Uncle Gills. Not a clue. He's been so restless these days when you go off without him."

"I really should let him go with you some of the time," Marissa said softly.

"Yeah. I think so, too," Gills admitted. He poured the oatmeal into two bowls and set one before Marissa and one at his place before he sat down.

"How are you this morning, Grandfather?" Marissa asked.

"Good. Yes. Good. Not too good. But good. Not like yesterday. That wasn't bad. Not bad at all. But not good. Not good like today."

Gills' eyes cut to Marissa. She was about to cry. Elias was going downhill rapidly. He'd fallen once recently, but it was more mental than physical that seemed to be the problem.

Marissa looked at Kila. Kila bit her lip, and gave a tiny shrug.

"You worry too much. All of you," Elias suddenly said. "I'm perfectly all right." He started to get up from the chair but couldn't quite make it. The lucid look was gone again and Gills and Kila hurried to help him to his feet.

They got him in the wheelchair that Marissa insisted he use since the fall. He could go almost everywhere on the yacht, since it had three

elevators going to each deck. He usually sat on one of the bow decks and looked out to sea much of the day.

When Kila wheeled Elias away, Gills sat down beside Marissa and took her in his arms. Bridget quietly cleared the table, except for Marissa and Gills and then left the dining room.

Marissa continued to cry in Gills arms for some time. But she eventually straightened up. Gills handed her his bandana and she wiped her eyes. “He doesn’t have much time left, does he?”

“There is no way of knowing, Honey. Doc said he was still fairly healthy. The bang on the head wasn’t as serious as it looked.”

“I know. But when he gets like he did this morning... It just hurts me so to see him like that. I know he hates the fact that we aren’t sailing, but seems to understand why. At least sometimes.”

“All we can do is be there for him. Maybe, when we have some time we can fire up the yacht and take him on a run,” Gills said.

“Oh, Gills! That would be so good for him! And... Christmas is not that far away...”

“Christmas it is then. Maybe invite everyone aboard for a Christmas party. Not going to be much individually, but I think the two crews would switch off and help out to put up a good feed and make it a fun trip for everyone.”

“You are so good to me!”

“You are more than worth it. Now, before this gets out of hand, we’d better get packed up again and get back on the road. I’ll see what Matt wants if you’ll take care of the gear.”

“Okay. Twenty minutes?”

“Twenty minutes,” Gills agreed

Matt was parking the G-55 when Gills went down to find him.

“Lock is broken again,” was the first thing Matt said.

“On the diesel tank?” Gills asked.

“No. Gasoline this time.”

“Man, we cannot afford to lose gasoline! There just isn’t much of a substitute for it now. We at least have the hope of being able to make some biodiesel at some point, but gasoline...” Suddenly that faraway look was in Gills eyes.

“You’re thinking again,” Matt said.

“Maybe. Just maybe. But time enough for that later. The lock wasn’t what you wanted to talk to me about, was it?”

“No. Well. I’m beginning to think the two things might be connected. I thought I had seen someone watching the *Marissa* from time to time. This time he got careless and I got a good look at him. It’s Bluenstien. Has a radio and has been watching for several days. Well, I guess he could be switching off with someone, but I think it is just him. And now another fuel theft.”

“And we are not going to store those tanks in the yacht to protect them,” Gills said. He was angry, and it showed. They might not be being overly generous with the fuel supplies, but were giving it out without charge when it was really needed. They had plenty of diesel for the moment, but gasoline was in very short supply.

“Okay.” Gills looked thoughtful for a moment, though nothing like the thousand yard stare. “I have to check this lead out on the cattle, but as soon as we are done, we’ll come back and park the G-55 for a while and I’ll stay around a bit more. Help keep an eye on the fuel and everything else.”

“Okay, Gills. Thanks. I just didn’t want things going south when I was in charge. I don’t know what else I can do by myself.”

“Nothing, my friend. That’s why we’re a team, when we need to be. So, it’ll be late for me today; if you could, let Bluenstien look all he wants and get a good long nap today, so you can stay up tonight, I’ll stay up tomorrow night. If we look like we’re being lax, it may prompt whoever is doing it to try again and we can catch him or her red handed.”

“Her? You think it is a woman?”

Gills chuckled. “No. But I don’t leave women out of any equation now, having been with Marissa long enough to learn not to.”

Matt laughed as well. “Okay. Bridget is a little like that, but not much. I can’t believe I’ve fallen in love with your niece.”

“Well, you’ve been part of my family for years. Might as well make it factual.”

“You’d be okay if we got married?”

“Sure I would. And just so you’ll know, though it isn’t for public dissemination, we’ll be taking the yacht out on Christmas for a cruise for everyone that wants to go and celebrate Christmas at sea. For Elias’ sake.”

“Wow! That’s fantastic! I’m going to ask Bridget right now and see if we can get married then. Either of the Captains could marry us, right?”

“That’s not a bad idea, actually,” Gills replied. “You have a ring yet?”

“No. What am I going to do? I want to get her a ring.”

“Don’t worry,” Gills said. “I’ve picked up quite the collection on my salvage trips. You can have your pick of the lot. Right after me. A good idea is a good idea, and I think I’ll see if we can’t make this a double wedding.”

“That would be cool! Bridget will love it!”

“Bridget can’t know before I arrange it with Marissa. So mums the word. I’ll have those rings available tonight for you to look at. Here comes Marissa. Time to go.”

“Everything all straightened out?” she asked when Marissa came up, carrying one of the back packs and half dragging the other.

“Yep. We’re going to set up a trap the next few nights. Gasoline is disappearing.” Gills took his backpack from Marissa and put it in the G-55. She added hers and went around to the passenger door of the SUV.

“We can’t allow that, Guys. So count me in on the watch list.”

Matt watched Gills struggle for a moment mentally and then said. “Yes. Of course. We’ll rotate.”

“Good answer,” Marissa said. “You ready yet?”

When Gills drove away, Matt heard Marissa through the open front window ask, “We there yet?” and then let out a delighted laugh.

Matt shook his head. “Like a pair of kids,” he muttered. He looked out of the corners of his eyes as he went aboard the landing craft again to go back to the yacht. Bluenstien was just stepping back behind the corner of the building. Matt smiled. Someone was going to pay for that gas, one way or another. Hopefully it was Bluenstien. It would be nice to have him not hanging around anymore.

Matt told Bridget what was on and went to take a nap. Bridget would keep an eye on things in the meantime.

Habitat - Chapter 7

It took three nights of watching to catch the fuel thief. It turned out it wasn't Bluenstien, but one of the other locals. The man started to cry when he was confronted by Gills.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! But I have to get food for my family. I don't have anything to trade with and fuel is the only thing anyone will take for food!"

"Okay," Gills said. He called Matt on the radio to have him come down to help. "Take it easy." Gills shifted the powerful flashlight from the man's face and holstered the Glock.

Matt showed up quickly, also well-armed. "Got him, huh? What are we going to do with him?"

"I don't know," Gills said. He took a couple of steps back, with Matt following. The man was so dejected Gills didn't think he would try to run, much less start anything. In a low voice Gills told Matt what the man had said.

"Well, nuts," Matt said. "I thought it would be easy. Just lock whoever it was up. But you have to sympathize with someone just trying to feed his family." Matt repeated, "Well, nuts. We'd just have to feed the family. No way Marissa is going to let a family starve over something like this."

"Exactly. I'll talk it over with Marissa in the morning and we can decide what to do." Gills stepped back to the dejected man. "Okay. Pull another five gallons and get your family some food. But I want to know who is buying. They have to know it is coming from here, don't they?"

The man nodded.

“Come back here tomorrow afternoon and we’ll decide what we’re going to do about this.”

The man looked amazed. “You’re letting me go? And giving me the gasoline?”

“Yes. But don’t count on it again. Now, Matt will unlock the pump and fill your container. And you’d better show up tomorrow afternoon.”

“Oh, man! I don’t know what to say. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!”

“Don’t think you’re getting out of this unscathed,” Gills said sternly. “You’ll make up the loss someday. But don’t worry about your family. We thought everyone was doing all right or we would have done something to help. I hope you believe that.”

“Yes. I do. Now I do. I was told... Well...”

“Leave it until tomorrow afternoon. I want to get some sleep tonight.” Gills turned on his heel and headed for the landing craft to go back out to the *Marissa*, leaving Matt to secure everything. He cut a glance up at the sky. The full moon looked watery. There was still haze high in the atmosphere and it was cold out. Gills slid into bed beside Marissa. She didn’t wake up, but snuggled up against him when he put his arm around her.

It went much as Matt had suggested. There was no way Marissa would see a family go hungry and was open to any ideas Gills might have on how to correct the situation. “I agree we can’t just let things go, but I won’t have anything that even smacks of indentured servitude.”

“Don’t get mad at me,” Gills said lightly. “I’m just the messenger.”

“Oh, Gills, I’m sorry. It’s just that I thought things were going fairly well. There have been no signs of the raiders or bandits, and very few problems since everyone started working together.

“And I’m just on edge. It’s the hormones. Gills, I’m pregnant. Just confirmed it yesterday.”

“Pregnant! Oh, honey! That is great! Will you marry me?”

“You’re really happy about it? With so much going on and...” She was starting to cry and Gills took her in his arms for a good cry. She didn’t let things get to her very often, but when they did she tended to break out into tears. Gills didn’t care. He just held her and murmured reassurances in her ear.

A few minutes later Marissa wiped her eyes on Gills bandana yet another time. “I’m sorry. I...”

“You needed a good release of emotion. I’m glad I was here for you. Now. About that question. Will you marry me?”

“Yes. Oh, yes!” They hugged again and when Marissa stepped back she added, “And Gills... I don’t want to be pushy... but I’d like to get married soon. Before Grandfather gets worse. I can only hope that he lasts long enough to see his great grandchild.”

“Christmas. On the cruise. Captain Arenesen can marry us.” Gills started suddenly and exclaimed, “Geez! I completely forgot about...” Gills went down on one knee, pulling the ring box from his pocket. He opened it and held it up to Marissa. “Will you marry me?”

“You were going to ask me anyway! Even before you knew about the baby? Yes. Yes. I’ll marry you. Get up off your knee.” A pair of tears rolled down her cheeks, but that was all. She suddenly looked sternly at

him. “It appears... you’ve been planning this for a little while. The ceremony on the yacht at Christmas and all.”

Gills was busy putting the ring on Marissa ring finger. “Uh... Well... Yeah. Matt and I kinda...”

“You and Matt?” Suddenly Marissa squealed. “You guys are planning a double wedding for Christmas! Has he asked her yet?”

“I don’t know,” Gills said, glad he was off the hot seat. “I let him pick out a ring from that last batch we found. He took the one you said that Bridget would probably like.”

There was a loud knock on the cabin door and Bridget called out, “Are you guys decent? I need to talk to Marissa!”

“Yep. He asked her,” Marissa said.

Gills made himself scarce after opening the door and letting Bridget rush in to show Marissa her ring. He heard the “He asked you, too? That is so romantic...”

When Gills found Matt up in the bridge, sitting in the Captain’s chair Matt was shaking slightly. Matt looked at him and cleared his throat. “She said yes.”

“So I saw. She’s down with Marissa now. Marissa said yes, too. And Marissa is pregnant.”

Matt’s eyes widened. “Wow! So is Bridget. She just found out yesterday.”

“Marissa, too.”

“She liked the ring. I’m glad you told me what Marissa said. Did Marissa like the one you got her?”

“Actually, she didn’t say. It was sort of an afterthought to give it to her. She was already excited that I asked her after she told me about the baby.”

“But you were going to ask anyway.”

“Which in some way made it even better.”

“I wish I knew more about women,” Matt muttered. “I’m starting to get scared. A wife and a baby on the way, all at once.”

“Yeah. You have a point. Let’s find something to do until... What was that guy’s name last night? I don’t ever remember asking or him saying.”

“I don’t know, Gills. I thought you already knew. He isn’t anyone I recognized.”

“Oh, well, if he shows, I’ll make a point to ask him.”

In order to stay out of their way, and have something to do, the two men decided to do some maintenance on some of the yacht’s systems. About the only thing they were using was one generator to power what systems they needed to use. But even idle equipment needs some service from time to time, and the yacht would be going out in the matter of a few weeks.

Bridget and Marissa were talking happily in the kitchen of the yacht, preparing a noon meal, along with Kila.

Elias was already in the dining room when they carried the light lunch in and set it on the table they used. The one closest to the kitchen door. He

did not look well. He ate a few bites of the fish filet, but then asked Kila to help him back to the cabin he was using, the one next to Marissa and Gills.

With Kila and Elias away from the table, Gills decided it was a good time to discuss what to do about the thief.

“I think just some labor for us, so he can maintain his respect and feel like he’s paying off a debt and be a productive member of the community. I wonder why he isn’t working with one of the groups.” Marissa looked thoughtful.

“I’ll find out,” Gills said. “And I agree. I’ll set up something with him. I was hoping we could do a garden ourselves in the spring. He could put in the winter hours getting the ground ready.”

“That’s a plan,” Marissa said. She suddenly looked ill and rose, hurrying off without saying anything.

“Oh, my,” Bridget said. “Morning sickness...” Her voice faded, and she too took off at a run.

“Aw, man!” Matt said.

“Yeah.” Gills agreed. They decided they better clean up after the lunch. Neither woman showed up by the time they were done and Gills headed down to the dock to meet the thief.

Gills felt sorry for the guy. His wife was with him and she was not happy. She mumbled apology after apology on his behalf. The man just stood there, head down. Gills was finally able to get a word in.

“Look, Mrs.... I didn’t get the name last night.”

“Whitica. Sally and Joe Whitica,” Sally said.

Gills hurried to continue before Sally could. “I’m not going to turn this into a big thing. It was wrong for Joe to steal, but I understand his reasons. Why aren’t you getting some food from one of the groups? They’ve been fishing and salvaging food for some time.”

“Joe has a bad back. He can’t do much physically. And no one needs a bank teller with a bad back. I won’t take charity and I have two little ones at home and...”

Gills was getting used to women crying when they were talking to him. Sally wiped away her tears angrily.

“Well, I’m not going to give you charity. You’ll have to work for what you get. But I don’t want anyone going hungry when it isn’t necessary. Our plan was to have Joe work a garden for us next spring and do some odd jobs around the boats in the meantime. But that is obviously not a viable plan with Joe’s back. But we’ll come up with something...”

Gills suddenly paused. “A bank teller?”

“Yes. Senior Teller.” Joe lifted his head proudly. “I never took a penny in all my years.”

“I believe you Joe. But it gives me an idea for later. For the moment I think...” Gills paused again. “Not to be too blunt about it, but you did a pretty good job sneaking down here and getting the fuel without getting caught. Think you can do some quiet surveillance for me?”

“Surveillance? Well, I was, at one time, a very good still hunter, as well as a stalker. I think I can still manage those activities.”

“You used to hunt? You never told me you hunted. When did you hunt?” Sally didn’t seem too happy about Joe’s past hunting.

“Long time ago. Before we met, Sally. It’s not important. I don’t hunt now because you don’t approve.”

“Well. No. I don’t. Fishing, yes. Hunting is cruel.”

Gills kept his mouth shut. He’d stepped into something he wasn’t expecting.

Joe looked over at Gills again. “Yes, sir. Captain McBain. I’m your man. You just give me a target and I will monitor their activities. Who and where?”

“We’ll discuss that this evening. For now, get some sleep. Come back this evening about dark. Note anyone you see nearby as you leave. Just to get an idea who is around this time of day.”

“Gills!” It was Marissa calling to him. “Have them come get this package before they leave.”

“We don’t take charity,” Sally said stubbornly.

“It isn’t charity,” Gills said firmly. “Joe now works for me. And in the spring, if you are able, we’ll hire you as well to help with the garden. I have a feeling you are pretty good in one.”

“Well, sir, you are correct. Very well. Go get the package, Joe.”

Joe obediently followed Sally’s orders and jogged down to where Marissa was standing, a picnic basket in her hand. “Please tell your wife to return the basket when she can. I’d like to have a word with her sometime.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Joe said, touching the brim of the cowboy hat tugged down on his head. It was cold and getting colder. Marissa hurried back aboard the landing craft, feeling the heat being drawn from her skin in the thin blouse she had on. “We need to find winter clothing on our next run,” she told herself. “Should have already done so. And some things for the babies.” She was smiling again when she entered the main lounge of the yacht to spend some time with her Grandfather.

Joe Whitica looked rather different when he showed up that evening. Partly was the fact that he had on more clothes for the cold of the night, but the clothing wasn’t what Gills was expecting. It was all subdued colors and suitable for field use. Gills halfway expected the same suit and overcoat Joe had worn the night before and for the meeting earlier.

In the dim light of the moon, Gills explained that the yacht and its occupants were being watched by someone. “I want to know who, and why. You indicated you hunted. Are you comfortable with a gun? I don’t want you out there unarmed if you get discovered. A man needs a chance.”

“I’m quite comfortable. I just don’t have one.”

Gills slipped Joe another of the Hi-Point 9mmP semi-auto pistols in its holster and four spare magazines, already loaded, and another box of 9mmP FMJ.

“Thank you, Sir. Perhaps if I do well enough I might be able to afford a .45. I’m not keen on 9mmP.”

Gills chuckled. “A man after my own heart. We’ll see what we can do if this works out the way I’m hoping. And it’s Gills, not sir. What about your wife?”

“I’ll work it out. This is a different time. Some things are going to have to change for us to make it. And society in general.”

“You think about the future of society?”

“From time to time. Yes. I do.”

“That’s good, Joe. We need people that do. It is going to take a long time, but I think we can rebuild better than we were before.”

“So do I.” With that, Joe slipped away into the darkness, with just a lone clink as he slipped the magazines into several different pockets.

Despite watching for some time, once Joe was out of his sight, Gills was not able to pick him up again. Finally Gills returned to the yacht. He stopped on the bridge, where Matt was keeping an eye on things. With everything going on, none of the group wanted to chance anything happening.

Gills was beginning to think he’d made an error in judgment, and Matt was sure of it, when they didn’t hear from Joe for over a week. But five days before Thanksgiving, Joe hailed the *Marissa* from the dock.

Matt called for Gills on the radio and then hurried down from the bridge to greet Joe.

“Hey, man! You don’t look good! Come on and we’ll get you cleaned up.”

Kila was checking the bruises and contusions on Joe’s chest and back when Gills entered the clinic deep in the hull of the yacht.

“What happened, Joe?”

“Found out who’s been watching. And I suspect you won’t like the answer. Might not even believe me.”

“Bluenstien?” Matt asked.

Joe grunted a bit when Kila wrapped his ribs with an elastic bandage. “Yes. But he’s only a cheap stoolie.”

Gills held up his hand slightly and Joe fell silent. But only until Kila had finished and left. “Let’s go get a cup of coffee,” Gills said. “And you can fill us in.”

“You have coffee? Man, I haven’t had coffee since the... since the whatever it was happened. I’ve never been straight on that.”

Matt headed for the kitchen and Gills took Joe to the dining room. Joe savored the aroma of the coffee for a moment when Matt brought the pot in and poured him a cup. Then he took a sip. “I feel so guilty. Sally doesn’t drink coffee, but she loves tea and hasn’t had any for two months.”

“We’ll get her some before you go, Joe. What happened to you?”

“Got caught. That weasel Bluenstien and two other guys worked me over before I could get away. Sheer luck they didn’t find my pistol. I think they would have killed me if they had. But, like I said, “Bluenstien is just a flunky. He was watching for a chance to make trouble on his own at first. But then a guy... You may know him... Anthony Breakers?”

“The architect?” Gills asked.

“One and the same,” Joe replied. “I followed Bluenstien the second night I was on the job. I picked him up that first night, but wasn’t ready to do a long trip and suspected I might have to.

“So, then next day, I shadowed Bluenstien. He showed up about nine. Don’t know if you saw him. But he stayed most of the day. When he left that afternoon I kept him in sight. It was actually pretty easy. He wasn’t even trying to hide his movements. Well, he walked to a house out of town about a mile. There was one of the military Hummers parked in the driveway and three or four guys hanging around, all armed with either military weapons or clones.

“It was almost dark, so I waited for a few minutes after everyone went inside the house. It was a dump. Been trashed. But there was a table and some chairs set up. There were three paper sacks on the table and Bluenstien headed right for one.

“I couldn’t hear much, but I finally saw Breakers’ face and recognized him. He banked where I used to work so I’m sure that is who it is. I knew Bluenstien, of course, and one of the other guys. A real cowboy. Wears cowboy boots, hat, blue jeans, the whole I wanna be a cowboy thing, including a pair of single action revolvers. Calls himself Johnny Ringo.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard of him,” Matt said. “Got into and out of some trouble about a year ago. Wasn’t’ around much after that.”

“Yep. That’s the one,” Joe continued. “And the other one is a guy named Hinkey. I finally found another window, to another room, but it was open a crack and I could hear what was being said. Breakers was mostly interested in Bluenstien’s report about what he’d been seeing.

“I guess you guys have a new ranch or something...” Joe looked at them expectantly.

“Not quite,” Gills said softly. “But we have made a long range arrangement with a pair of brothers and a sister that have some ground south of here that have managed to keep their small herds of stock

going. We've been setting up things to move them here, fence off several blocks of homes and pasture them in close.

"Clean out some of the houses and convert them to barns. We'd be set for meat for some time if we're very careful."

"Well, Breakers was really interested in what Bluenstien had to say. Then told him and the other two to take their bags of goodies and get home. That Breakers was headed back to his house. I gathered that he had a good shelter and supplies. He's the raider that was hitting the town a few months ago. I have a feeling he will again, soon."

"How did Bluenstien catch you?" Matt asked when Joe fell silent for a moment.

"That idiot didn't. It was someone else. I was hiding in the shadows when someone whacked me from behind with something. Don't know who it was. I only saw a couple of people that I knew.

"But anyway, I staggered and Breakers sic'd Bluenstien, Hinkey, and Ringo on me. I don't know what their orders were, but they worked me over pretty good. They didn't find the pistol, and I don't think anyone realized why I was there. Bluenstien must have seen me getting gas at the docks once, because he told me, in between blows, that I wasn't going to steal anything from them and live to tell about it.

"So I faked it pretty good... Oh, it was hurting all right. Bad. But I went down early and they stopped after a couple of kicks. As soon as they left I got up and high tailed it back here."

"I can't believe Anthony Breakers is behind this," Gills muttered.

"I swear it was him," Joe quickly said.

"Oh. I wasn't doubting you. It is just so out of character."

“Don’t be so sure. We had a lot of contractors come in wanting checks cashed on one or another of his accounts that didn’t have much money in them. I’ve thought he was just a petty crook until now. I am a little surprised he didn’t hit the town as soon as you guys showed up.”

Gills rubbed his chin for a moment. “Can you get home all right? Or should we take you home,” Gills asked.

“Oh, I’m hurting, but I think I’d better go back the way I came in. Only Sally knows what I’m doing and I’d rather keep it that way. Kila gave me some pain killer samples so I’ll be able to stand the pain until I’m okay again.”

“Okay, then. Matt,” Gills asked, “Would you get that tea for Sally and see Joe down to the docks and take a look around. And be careful.”

“You got it, Boss.”

Gills sat at the table for a long time, thinking. Things were coming together for long term survival of the groups and he intended to see that it continued. Matt stuck his head into the dining room and said “Joe’s off safe and sound. Can you believe that Hinkey? What now?”

“Yeah. After he shut us out, I can believe it of Hinkey. As for what now, bed,” Gills replied with a sigh. “We’ve got to try to head off Breakers in some way and I don’t have a clue how to do it.”

“You’ll figure something, Gills. Just let me know what my part of it is and I do whatever it takes.”

“Thanks, Matt. I’ll see you in the... later this morning.”

Gills didn't rest very well that night and was a bit groggy when he and Marissa got up a little later than usual. As they got ready to face the day, Gills filled Marissa in on what Joe had found out.

"Breakers? Breakers... I know that name from somewhere."

"He's an architect and contractor here in the area."

Marissa shook her head. "No. I know the name from somewhere else. It'll come to me eventually."

"Okay. That is curious, to say the least. I guess I'd better get a move on. I want to talk to the Grimes and see if we can get the farm operation moved now, rather than later. It would be a lot easier to defend if Breakers tries something. That family is a sitting duck where they are, if anyone knows of them. Well off the beaten path, but once you know the path is there, it is easy to get there."

"Okay. But you be careful. I'll go get some breakfast started and shower after," Marissa said, giving Gills a quick kiss before he went to get his shower.

Gills got on the radio as soon as breakfast was over and asked the Captains and Nick Uberti for a quick meeting at noon, on the yacht. All agreed and Gills decided to clean his guns. It just seemed like a good time to do it.

He'd been a bit worried about Nick and Captain Arenesen being willing to take a proactive role in putting an end to the Breakers and the raiders. Captain Mack was something of a fireball and was ready to go as soon as the meeting was over.

"First," Gills said when all three said they would lend a hand with their group. "We need to move the farm here before Breakers can get to it and

take everything. It would be such a waste to lose the breeding stock just to have a feast.”

Nick nodded. “I’ll get some people to prepping the area we talked about before. There is that one property with a good fence we can hold everything in until things are set up permanently.”

Captain Arenesen chimed in with, “We’ll get security set up to protect everything when you arrive. We’re a little short on armament, if you could spare a few things.”

“Consider it done. Marissa managed to buy out every Hi-Point and Kel-tec gun in the area somehow, before this all started. As soon as we break I’ll take you to the armory and get you what you need.”

“And,” Captain Marilyn Mack said, “My people will go with you, Gills, to help with the move and provide security. We could use a few things armament wise, too. Mostly ammunition, but a few more arms, too, if you have them to spare.”

“Okay then. Sounds like we’re set. We’ll head out tomorrow at six, geared up for a two to three day trip. You need anything for that, Marilyn?”

“No. We’re good. Just the ammunition, mostly.”

Ah hour later Gills used the G-55 to transport the three community leaders back to their respective locations, with the weapons and ammunition in the back.

Gills fretted all day, worried that they might be too late. But they had to plan things and get everything ready or it could all be for naught anyway.

Gills was up and ready to go before five the next morning. He had his first real argument with Marissa. She insisted on going along, and he insisted that she didn't. It finally came down to using the baby as an excuse. Gills really didn't like doing it, but it was the only thing he could think of that might change Marissa's mind.

Quietly, Marissa finally said. "Okay. You win. The baby comes first. But you'd better not get killed." She turned and left, leaving Gills as dejected as he would have been if she'd continued to argue.

A few minutes later she came back into the room and sat down on Gills lap without a word and wrapped her arms around him. There were tears shed, but no words exchanged. After a while, still silent, Marissa got up and headed for the bedroom to get more sleep. If she could.

Gills checked the time and then he and Matt went down to the dock, got in the G-55 and headed for the meeting area. Everyone was ready, it seemed, though only a few seemed eager to be there.

Gills delegated Matt to man the G-55, in the rear of the group that was going to the farm. He would stay back, with three heavily armed men to come forward in case of trouble. It would burn too much fuel for him to idle along at walking speed, so he would be stationary, engine off, and then move forward after each mile the column moved forward.

Keeping the pace slow, despite everyone being in relatively good shape with the moderate diet they were on, and the exercise they were getting walking almost everywhere in and around town to conserve fuel, they made constant progress.

It was shortly after four that afternoon when they reached the Grimes farm and set up a camp for the night. Gills stationed guards around the place and then met with the brothers and sister, with Captain Mack along.

“I’m glad you are okay with this. I know it is sudden, but our information was hard won and is accurate. Breakers could hit this place at any time.”

The sister, Carolyn, spoke for her brothers. “We’ve been on pins and needles lately. Always with the feeling we’re being watched. I’m ready to get out of here. I’m just glad we can go lock, stock, and barrel, with your help.”

“The least we can do. We actually need you more than you need us. I think everyone is getting a bargain.”

“We have some things ready to go, but if we could get some help for our two hands and us, we can get everything ready to go by midnight, so we can leave at first light tomorrow.”

“Cap’n?” Gills asked, looking over at Captain Mack.

“I’ve got a couple of farmer types that know the ropes, and the rest of us not on guard can lend a hand wherever we can be of assistance.”

“That’s good,” Carolyn said. “Timmy. You and Bing go with the Captain. I’ll finish up in here.”

Everyone stood and went to put the plan in motion. It was a long night. It took until almost three in the morning to have everything ready. The three tractors, each with two trailers in tow, and the two bob trucks, also pulling trailers, were lined up at the entrance of the barnyard and everyone except the guards got a few hours of sleep.

They fired up the vehicles at five and were on the road before six. This time Matt took the lead, again with three heavily armed men. He would go a half mile and stop to wait for the convoy to catch up to him and then scout ahead a little bit further. When they hit the main road, Matt dropped back and kept an eye on their back trail.

It was good that he did, for just three miles from the marina area, two Hummers roared up toward them. Matt and the gunners bailed out of the G-55 and took to the road ditches. Their heavy fire had the Hummers stopped and backing up before they could get close. Those inside the Hummers exchanged some fire with Matt and his team, but quickly decided they were out gunned for the moment and jumped back into the Hummers and turned to flee. Matt and the others kept firing until the Hummers were out of sight around a bend in the road.

“Anyone hit?” Matt asked.

It was a weak, “Yes,” that had Matt running over to the two men in the other road ditch. One was working on the other.

“It’s not too bad,” said the one doing the treating. “But he’s losing blood. I put on a combat tourniquet, so we need to get him in to Doc to take a look at it.”

“Okay,” Matt said. “Get him into the G-55. I hate to ask but...”

The third man spoke before Matt could continue. “Mitch and I will hang back a ways and keep an eye on the road, in case they try something else. We’ll take Harry’s ammo to replace what we’ve used.”

Matt nodded. “Thanks guys. You did a good job. Be careful.”

It was an anxious Gills that finally got Matt on the radio. They’d heard the shooting, but no one was answering the radio at first. Matt told him what happened and then zipped past the convoy, though he slowed going through the stock animals being herded down the road.

“Let us know as soon as you can what the Doc says.”

“Will do, Gills.” Matt hung up the radio microphone and concentrated on the road. No other cars to worry about, but the pavement was already showing some damage from the elements.

The night before had been a long one. The day following was even longer. It had been decided that instead of camping out one night, with the chance of Breakers people hitting them again, they decided to push on.

It was well past midnight when they turned the stock into the fenced in yard of the large estate that would be their home for a while. The tractors and trucks were shut down, guards posted, and the rest headed home. Carolyn, Tim, and Bing would take rooms in the estate house and the two hands in a nearby house.

Marissa had Gills in a tight bear hug as soon as he stepped onto the yacht. She’d been following the activity on the radio and knew he was on the way. “It is a good thing you didn’t get killed,” Marissa finally said. “Come to bed. You look exhausted.”

“It’ll have to wait, Sweetheart. I’ve got people on guard and they are as tired as I am. I’m going to relieve them one at a time so they can get a quick nap.”

“I should have known,” Marissa said. “Okay. I’ll see you sometime later today. And you will be getting some rest.”

“Yes, Dear.”

“Don’t ‘Yes, Dear’ me.” Marissa replied giving Gills another hug and a kiss before letting him get something to eat and head back out into the darkness.

Two uneventful days passed before Gills called the leadership together again. “Does anyone think that Breakers will just leave us alone now?” he asked.

Every one of them shook their head. “Well, I’m thinking that perhaps we should take the fight to them.” Gills looked around at the others. The looks ranged from, “What? Are you crazy?” to “When do we leave?”

“Hm,” Gills finally said when none of the others spoke. “Tough crowd. Okay. So what are our other options?”

There was no time for answers. Sitting on the open fly bridge during the much warmer than usual weather lately, the sound of gunfire was clear. All jumped up and headed down to the lower deck. The others took their boats to shore while Gills reassured Marissa, Bridget, and Kila. Matt he took aside and tasked him with getting the *Green Dragon* ready to take them out to sea if things got close.

“Okay, Gills. You can count on me.”

Gills headed for the other landing craft and headed for shore from the yacht after grabbing a rifle and vest of magazines. It was over before he got to the new farm location. Captain Mack, a bandage on her left thigh where she’d been nicked by a bullet, filled Gills in as Nick and Captain Arenesen checked on their people.

“Had a good response, Captain. Every one qualified turned out with a gun as soon as the shooting started. We got five of them and only one of us was hurt and that not too seriously. Doc’s got her in his clutches now. Well, besides me. This doesn’t count,” Marilyn said, touching her left thigh gently. “And none of the stock was hurt, either.”

“How many total do you think there were?”

“At least seven, not more than fifteen.”

“Hm. Anyone we know among the KIA?”

“The Townies looked them over. Knew a couple. Both that hang out with someone called Johnny Ringo. A something or another Hinkey someone said was one of the dead.”

“It was Breakers bunch then,” Gills said thoughtfully. “But with or without his approval?”

“You could be right. One of the ones that lasted a few minutes said they only wanted some food.”

“So they may be getting desperate. Breakers won’t be happy either way, unless I miss my guess. If some of his guys did this on their own, he’ll be livid. If it was his plan, he’ll still be livid. Hm. Well, let’s do the cleanup. And we’ll double the guards.”

“I’ll see to that. Gotta little payback to take care of.”

Gills nodded. He went over to look at the bodies. All men, all looking gaunt in their death. They’d been armed fairly well and Gills had one of those close gather things up and put them into the G-55. He recognized another of the men when he got a look at him. He was one of the men in Hinkey’s MAG. They’d turned rogue as soon as the balloon went up, Gills figured. “And look where it got you guys,” he muttered.

When things were more or less back to normal, Gills went back to the yacht. The *Green Dragon* was tied up at the stern deck of the *Marissa* as usual, but the engines were idling and there were several bags and totes on the deck.

Kila was with Elias, who was in a wheelchair with a blanket around him, ready to go aboard. Matt, Gills saw, was up on the fly bridge, binoculars to his eyes. He’d waved at Gills when Gills brought the other landing

craft out, but continued to scan the shore for any attempt to approach the docks.

Bridget and Marissa, both wearing soft body armor salvaged from police departments, and armed to the teeth, were in the main lounge, waiting for him. Gills quickly told them what Captain Mack had told him, and Gills thoughts about it. Both sighed in relief that no one had been hurt too badly.

“I’m not sure I can do this very often,” Marissa said. She ran for the bathroom.

“Morning sickness and stress,” Bridget said. “Oh, my!” She suddenly headed for the next nearest bathroom.

Gills headed up topside. “What do you think, Matt?” Gills asked after filling him in.

“We need to take it to them, just like you said.”

“That’s what I’m still thinking. But we’re going to need to do some recon to find them.”

“I’ll get right on it,” Matt said, handing the binoculars to Gills.

“Not so fast, my friend. We need to do some planning first. And then decide who would be best to go.”

“Bridget is scared to death that I’m going to get hurt. I’d like to see this end so we can get married and go about rebuilding civilization.”

“Yeah. Marissa, too. I’m going to bring it up again. That was what I planned on proposing to the others when the fighting broke out.”

But as Gung-Ho as Captain Mack was, the others weren't so enthusiastic. Reluctantly, Gills tabled the matter until after Thanksgiving, coming up in just a few days. So the guards stayed in place, and life assumed a more or less normal routine.

A community Thanksgiving was planned and executed, with only one small hitch. All those that provided food complained that someone had either sampled or flat made off with some of the dishes before the meal could be served.

The guards were quizzed but none of them had seen anything.

"I don't like it," Matt told Gills. "It is hard for me to believe that any of our people would steal. They're all getting good food and enough of it."

"That would mean we had someone sneak in and then back out."

The two exchanged a quick look. "The farm!"

Gills and Matt excused themselves and headed for the new farm area at a fast walk. They got there almost in time. The blood and gut pile was still steaming in the cold air. One of the calves had been killed and gutted behind the house being used as a barn. They checked the seed stocks that were to be used to plant the gardens and fields come spring.

It wasn't that big of a loss overall, but any loss put them at risk. Suddenly afraid of what they might find, they went looking for the guard that was assigned to the farm for that hour. They were rotating out on an hourly basis so everyone could celebrate the Holiday.

They found no signs of anyone. But before they left, the next scheduled guard showed up. "Wess, who are you replacing?"

"I don't know, the young man said. "The Cap'n just said to come replace whoever was on duty. It was one of the townies."

“Hm. Okay. Well, we’ve been hit, so keep an eye out and stay out of sight. Radio at the least sign they might come back.”

Wess blanched slightly. “Oh. Okay. At least it is only an hour.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “We’ll make sure your relief checks on you.”

Wess nodded and headed for the converted barn.

“Let’s get back and talk to Nick,” Gill said. He and Matt headed back to the celebration. Once there, Nick told them that none of his people were scheduled until that evening. A quick conversation with Captain Arenesen and Captain Mack, and they realized that there’d been a major screw up in the scheduling.

When the quiet investigation continued, it was determined that one of the townies had volunteered to Captain Mack that they would take a shift since they didn’t celebrate Thanksgiving.

“One of my people?” Nick asked. “Who was it?”

“You know,” Marilyn said, “I don’t remember him saying his name. Pretty small guy. Really rough beard. Clothes a mess. Mumbled more than talked. Carried a beat up .30-30.”

“Bluenstien!” Matt said and Nick sighed.

“I thought we were done with him,” Nick said. “He’s been begging food and trying to buy all sorts of things. Seems to have plenty of cash, but no one is selling. Money is just about useless.”

“I may have a fix for that,” Gills said, “But more on that later. The point is, was he alone or working for Breakers?”

“I can’t see him doing it on his own,” Nick said. “He’s too big of a coward. And it would take some time to butcher that calf alone. I think there were probably two or three of them.”

“My thoughts exactly. So, the meeting was to decide whether or not we go after Breakers group.”

“Maybe they’ll leave us alone now,” Nick said, but not very forcefully.

Marilyn was shaking her head. “It should buy us some time, but probably not much. This is shaping up to be a bad winter despite the short warm spell. January and February are going to be brutal unless I miss my guess.”

“That is my feeling, too,” Captain Arenesen said. “If we’re going to do it, let’s take our time and plan it out thoroughly. When we go, we will have to be prepared to wipe them out.”

Gills had listened to each of them. “I’d rather do it sooner rather than later,” he said.

Marilyn seemed about to agree with him, but said, instead, “Perhaps they are right. We need to get ready for the upcoming weather. Once we get things put by and then ready for next spring, then we can go after him. I don’t think he has enough men to bother us much at the moment.”

Gills couldn’t do much with just him and Matt, so he acquiesced. He didn’t like it, but that was the way it was going to be.

Along with the garden harvest and butchering of everything but the breeding stock, thoughts turned to the Christmas cruise. The danger of an attack at that time was high, everyone conceded, so a plan was put together to leave a guard force behind, to be amply compensated for

their service. There were enough to make it very unlikely that if Breakers did attack, that they would be able to drive them off.

A couple of ex-military had come up with some lethal and non-lethal traps to help prevent access to the animals if the guards had to fall back and hole up if the force was too large. That satisfied even Matt. Gills was the only one having second thoughts about the cruise. And he simply wouldn't voice them. Bridget was excited, but Marissa was much more so.

Elias seemed to be doing somewhat better and was up and about for short periods of time. Doc checked him over and declared him fit to go and participate by giving Marissa away.

Habitat - Chapter 8

Gills had to admit that things were going amazingly well when they got ready to sail Christmas Eve. He, like several of the others, that had done quite a bit of salvage had, even early on, had Christmas in mind. All of them opened up their individual storerooms and let people go “Christmas Shopping” a few days before the trip was scheduled.

Everyone was happy and excited. Marissa and Bridget were absolutely glowing, both just starting to show. It took nothing away from their looks in their wedding dresses, though Matt and Gills had no way of knowing, other than the reports that Kila and Sally, now working full time for Marissa, told them gleefully.

The *Marissa* had been cleaned stem to stern, and decorated brightly. Even the *Green Dragon*, the official shuttle from the docks to the yacht was polished up and decorated. She was in the well deck with the other small craft.

Elias was on the bridge, and though he could have taken command, he let Captain Arenesen handle everything. No need to put himself at risk of overdoing it the day before the wedding.

Everyone was assigned some sort of ship’s job to spread the work and so no one would be “crew” vs “guest” for the event. Everyone was dressed in their best and the whole scene was like something from a previous time. Only Gills and Matt knew that key people were carrying concealed firearms.

Gills finally began to relax when evening came and nothing untoward had happened. There was the usual ‘can we open presents tonight?’ debate, with the children getting permission to open a single present before being ushered off to bed.

There was still quite a bit of Mona's alcohol, matched by the supplies of magnificent bars on the yacht. Still a little worried, no one objected when things were shut down at ten and everyone ushered off to bed except the four on four off of the working crew.

Gills was up early the next morning, on the bridge with Captain Mack, who had the con for the morning's slow run, now in a long sweeping turn that would have them headed back to shore late that afternoon.

"How's it feel, Cap'n?" Marilyn asked, her eyes constantly on the move keeping an eye on every detail of what was happening on the bridge. "You just didn't seem like the type to be marrying an heiress."

Gills smiled. "I find it a little amazing myself. Marissa isn't your typical heiress, though I'm beginning to think, hearing Marissa talk about some of her associates, that many of them are a lot more down to earth than the paparazzi would make it seem."

"I like her," Marilyn said. "All these people. I think we had great luck in being with the people we are with during this crisis."

"I agree whole heartedly. I'll leave you to your duties. Going to see if I can rustle up a hot cuppa."

Bridget and Marissa put in an appearance at breakfast, lingering over a last cup of herbal tea. Then they disappeared, as did Sally and Kila.

Elias was being swamped with people introducing themselves and telling him, for the most part, what a beautiful 'boat' he had. Very few of them had met Elias before. He'd not gone ashore the entire time they'd been in the marina.

He was friendly and articulate, shaking hands and responding to peoples comments graciously. But Gills could see he was getting tired and went over shortly after. "Guess it is time for us to get ready."

“Perhaps... Perhaps the wheelchair?” Elisa asked.

Gills felt a stab of guilt about having put Elias in a position to get so tired so quickly. The chair was always handy and it only took a minute for Elias to stand and then sit back down, this time in the wheelchair.

Taking the handles himself, Elias had never bothered with an electric wheelchair as there was always staff around to push the manual one, Gills took his soon to be Grandfather-in-law to his cabin and helped him lay down on the bed.

“Have Kila come help me when it is time,” Elias said, sounding a bit groggy.

“You mean Anita? She’s helping with you today so Kila can help Bridget.

“Oh. Yes, of course. Anita. I remember now. That would be fine. Allow me plenty of time. And if you wouldn’t mind, come by before time for the ceremony. There is something I want to give to you.”

“Sir, there is nothing...”

“Please humor an old man.”

“Yes, Sir. Of course. I’ll be by before the ceremony.”

Gills left him on the bed, Elias already asleep before Gills quietly closed the suite door. Gills found Anita to remind her of Elias needing her help. She seemed a little annoyed that he thought he had to remind her of her duties.

He found Matt, who was up on the fly bridge, enjoying the cool air, wearing his pea coat. Gills didn’t stay long, as it was cold and he wasn’t

dressed for it. After a few minutes of mutual supporting silence, Gills slapped Matt on the back and headed inside, wondering just how much trouble he'd get into if he had a drink to calm himself slightly.

"Way too much," he told himself. There were quite a few activities going on to entertain everyone, some doing the entertaining and then being the audience. Karaoke was a big hit with a large number of people showing more talent than Gills expected.

Still restless, Gills started to go down to the suite, but remembered that he was locked out for the duration. So he headed aft, snagged a blanket from one of the deck lockers and wrapped up to take a nap on one of the expansive deck settees.

He came to with a start when Matt shook him.

"Man! Are you crazy? We're going to be late!"

"What? What time is it?" Gills asked, hurriedly folding the blanket and putting it back into the locker.

"Ten till three!" Matt told him.

"We're not late! The service isn't until four."

"Yeah, but... well... I guess so... I'm just kinda nervous. I've been looking for you to have someone to talk to."

"Well, let's not push it, anyway," Gills replied. "Elias wants to see me before the ceremony. We can get dressed and I'll drop in on him after that and make sure he gets up to the main lounge."

Gills and Matt both felt the difference in the feel of the yacht when the turn was made to head them back to the marina. As slow as they were going, the motion was obvious to the two men. A minute or so later the

slight rolling motion stopped. Captain Arenesen had deployed the stabilizer system to compensate. The yacht was too well insulated for the men to sense the cold, windblown rain now coming down.

Both were showing some anxiety when they left Matt and Bridget's suite after dressing in their tuxedos. Matt, unlike Gills, headed for the bar in the second lounge to get a drink. Gills went around the corner and knocked on Elias' suite door.

Anita answered and let Gills in.

"If you'll excuse us, Anita," Elias said, "I have something to discuss with Mr. McBain."

"Of course, Sir. It's been a pleasure serving you."

"Nice young woman," Elias said. He was back to normal, showing no signs of his earlier slight distress. "Now. For you. Here. Help me up."

Gills hurried over and helped Elias out of the massive leather chair. "If you'll stand over there, your back to me, I need to get something out of the safe."

"Sir, you don't have to..."

"If you please, son."

"Yes, Sir."

Gills turned around and then heard the sounds of a painting being moved and a safe with a very heavy door open up. A thump later, and the sounds of the painting being swung back into place, and Elias said, "Okay. Gills. I have something for you here."

Gills turned around. Elias had a large manila envelope, so full it bulged. “My Granddaughter’s Legacy. It’s up to you to take care of her.”

“Sir... Elias... Shouldn’t you be giving this to Marissa?” Gills hesitated, but finally took the heavy envelope.

“No. I think not. She is female, not suited for business. Better if her husband takes control of the businesses.”

Gills was stunned. There were no words that came to him to express his feelings about the old prejudice against women. Finally, after Elias plopped back down, this time in the wheel chair again, Gills managed to speak. “Sir! I honestly think...”

“No mind. The companies are yours. We’d better get up there. Wouldn’t want to be late to my Granddaughter’s wedding. I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

Gills didn’t know what to do. He tossed the envelope on Elias’ bed and stepped behind the wheelchair. He was still trying to come up with something to say when they reached the lounge. He would just have to discuss it with Marissa. Somehow tell her that her Grandfather thought she wasn’t fit to have his holdings. “Doesn’t matter, anyway,” Gills suddenly told himself. “I don’t even have to tell her. Just give her the papers. She doesn’t have to know what he said and thinks.”

Feeling a bit better, Gills parked Elias at the end of the red carpet to wait for Marissa so he could walk her down the aisle. Gills barely registered the people in chairs along each side of the carpet. He did notice the weather outside. And finally, when he got up to the alter and turned around, it hit him like a punch in the gut. He was going to get married to a beautiful woman, who was carrying his child. And they must have rounded up every chair on the *Marissa* to bring to the main lounge for the ceremony.

He felt a little numb, barely able to acknowledge Matt when Matt slapped him on the back and said something. Then the music started and Gills focused, tightly, on the approaching Marissa and Bridget.

Elias was walking beside Marissa, but Kila was right behind him with the wheel chair. Gills could not believe how radiant and beautiful Marissa was in the wedding dress so white it almost hurt the eyes. And those eyes of Marissa... Never more beautiful he murmured. Then the ceremony started.

They'd had one quick walk through the afternoon before, so Gills knew mostly what to do. He gave Bridget to Matt as her closest living relative, and then accepted Marissa's hand from Elias. Kila rapidly rolled Elias to the spot in the front row of chairs left open for the wheelchair and then went to stand by Marissa.

The ceremony was short, though very sweet, and Gills found himself in a crowd of people congratulating him when all he wanted was to be holding Marissa in his arms. But it was a wedding, and even if it was Gills', and partly because it was, he had certain duties to perform. Matt, Bridget, and Marissa all seemed to be getting through the process admirably. He knew he was faking it, but Marissa hadn't given him one of those looks that told him he was in trouble yet, so he kept on bluffing his way through.

Finally, a just before six, the two couples headed for their suites to change clothes and get ready for the ship to moor in the marina again. They thanked everyone in turn as they headed down to be shuttled to the dock in the Captains gig as it had a larger cabin and could take more people in out of the weather than the *Green Dragon*.

The last person left, Captain Arenesen, and Marissa and Gills, and Matt and Bridget all four flopped down on the settees in the lounge to rest for a bit. Kila rolled a sleeping Elias near, and went to her cabin, leaving Elias to his family to get him to his suite.

“Oh, Gills! This was so...” Marissa let out a small scream and her right hand went to her mouth.

Gills started to rise, and was turning around when something hit him in the back of the head and he landed face down on the carpeted deck. He came to in only a few seconds. Terrifying seconds.

He was yanked to his feet and shoved down onto the settee beside Marissa. Gills looked at her a moment. She was sitting there, glaring furiously at the attackers. Gills checked Matt and Bridget to see how they were. Both were rigid and Matt looked ready to kill someone. A quick glance at Elias confirmed that he was wide awake now.

Only then did he look to see who’d hit him. What he saw astonished him. It was Marcus. And with him were Breakers, Bluenstien, and who he took to be Johnny Ringo by the pair of single action revolvers on his hips. Ringo was grinning and Matt took it that it had been him that struck the blow that had put Gills on the carpet.

“Well, well, well,” Marcus said. “What did I tell you? Huh? Worked like a charm, didn’t it.”

“That it did, Marcus boy. You sure came through. You told me you were an expediter and sure enough, you are. Took a little longer than I thought it should, but I have to admit, it is a better set up now than it would have been before.”

“I get the younger one,” Johnny Ringo said, glinting and smiling at Bridget. Matt went crazy. He started up, but four guns were on him, and Johnny whacked him across the face with the right hand revolver. Bridget screamed and Matt fell back against the settee.

“And I’m going to make you watch before I kill her and then you.”

“That’s enough, Ringo,” Breakers said firmly. “All that can come later. For now we do what we came for. Expediter, you said you could get what we want without too much hassle.”

Marcus looked at Marissa. “Where is the gold and the corporate holdings papers?”

“What are you talking about?” Marissa asked.

This time it was Gills wiping blood off his face. Marcus had swung the Hi-Point barrel first across Gills’ cheek. Gills glared and Marissa gasped.

“Marcus! Please! We can work this out!”

“You and I will ‘work things out’ after we get what we came for, just like Breakers said. “Now, I know Stanley had stripped the accounts the best he could and converted to gold and diamonds, and set up the ownership of the company so it could be taken over with just one signature. Elias’. I don’t think we’ll have much trouble getting that, will we, Elias?”

Elias began to cry. “I’m sorry, Marissa! I thought it was the best thing to do. If you’d only been a boy...”

Marissa’s eyes widened. “Grandfather? What are you saying?”

“He saying he worked with Stanley and me to gut the company and get the rest of it ready to sell for even more. But this... whatever it is that happened...” Marcus was waving the gun around and Gills almost made a move on him. But the gun was pointing at Marissa and Gills eased back again.

“You were working with Stanley Martin?” Marissa gasped. “And Grandfather was part of it all the time?”

“Sure ‘nough, Sweetheart,” Breakers said with a laugh. “I thought I’d devised some complex shenanigans, but Marcus the Expediter puts me to shame. Almost. Known him for ages. Just never worked a scam with him before. Great luck he wound up here, wouldn’t you say?”

“Grandfather?” Marissa asked again.

“You should have been a boy. They told me they were having a boy. Someone I could turn over the business to. Your father wasn’t able to take care of it.”

Marissa could only stare, tears streaming down her face. Suddenly Elias jerked and grabbed at his chest.

“Oh, no you don’t, Old Man!” Marcus screamed, stepping over the Elias in the wheelchair. “You aren’t dying until I have those papers in my hand, with your signature on them!”

“I’ll not,” Elias was able to whisper. “It’s too late anyway.”

“NO! You will not die!” Marcus whirled around and pointed the Hi-Point towards Marissa. “I’ll kill her, Elias! Deader than Stanley! Tell me where the papers are! I’ll get the gold out of the diver boy when he sees what I’ll do to Heiress Marissa if he doesn’t tell me where it is. I searched the habitat and the yacht both, with detailed plans on my iPod. I didn’t find it, so I know you have it. You have to have found it. That last trip up from the habitat. You weren’t on it.”

“She may not be a boy, but she is my family,” Elias said, a little more strength in his voice. Before Marcus could turn around to confront him again, the sound of a light caliber gun sounded.

“You son of a... You shot me!” Marcus yelled. He turned back to Marissa and lifted the Hi-point. Elias fired the second barrel of the .22

short derringer. Marcus screamed in anger and jerked the trigger of his pistol. But Matt and Gills were both already moving. Gills to get between Marissa and the gun, and Matt to take out Ringo. Matt was ready to die before letting Ringo get to Bridget.

Matt tackled Ringo and Marissa rolled away from Gills, getting out of the way so Gills could maneuver. She swung her legs around and caught Breakers off guard, knocking his feet out from under him.

The bullet meant for Marissa nicked Gills, but didn't slow him down any. The Glock was in his hand and he pointed it at Marcus. But Elias lunged from the wheelchair and tackled the man the best he could, images of a long ago football game between the Army and Naval Academies flashing in his mind.

Marcus' second shot took Elias right in the top of the head, just before the heavy .45 bullet from the Glock hit him low in the chest. Marcus went down and Gills turned to help Marissa.

Matt and Johnny Ringo were going at it full bore, fighting over one of Ringo's revolvers. Bridget was trying to help and Matt was yelling at her to run. Marissa hadn't stopped with knocking Breakers down.

She didn't have time to get up, but she was rolling around on the floor, flailing her legs, keeping Breakers from getting up, and, temporarily, keeping him from bringing his pistol to bear. Gills took enough time to carefully aim, making sure there was no way he'd hit Marissa, and squeezed the trigger of the Glock again.

Breakers tried to bring his pistol up and scoot away, but Gills stepped forward and put a bullet in the bandit's forehead. Gills spun around when the revolver Matt and Ringo were fighting over went off, three times in quick succession. Bridget screamed and ran to Matt. He had blood all over his shirt, but it was the would be cowboy that fell to the deck, dead, staining the carpet with his blood.

Then Gills felt the hot stab of pain burn through his side. He managed to turn around before he went down, to see the mortally shot Marcus with a hideout .32 pistol in his hand. Gills tried to lift the Glock for another shot, but couldn't quite make it. Another burning pain, this one on the side of his head and Gills went down. He didn't hear the shot from Breakers' gun that Marissa had picked up. Marcus fell back, dead for sure now.

Despite his injuries, Matt was on the way to get Doc Ferguson. Kila had heard the shots and was just now coming into the lounge to see what had happened. Seeing the carnage she headed to the clinic, down below, and then came running back with the trauma kit banging her in the thigh.

Marissa was crying silently, her tears dripping on Gills head, which was in her lap. Kila dropped to her knees and did a quick survey. All the wounds, though they would be painful, were fairly minor. The one into Gills' stomach was a different story.

She put a pressure bandage on the entrance and exit wounds. "Help me get him to the clinic," Kila said. "Where's Matt? Someone should go get Doctor Ferguson."

"He's on his way," Bridget said.

"Okay. You two help me get him into the wheelchair so I can get him into the clinic."

"Bridget," Marissa said, rather calmly, "Gather up the guns and keep an eye out."

"Okay, Marissa."

Marissa went with Kila to get Gills up on an operating table in the well-equipped clinic.

Habitat - Epilog

It was a long time before Doc quit reminding Gills how he'd saved him from certain death, finding and stitching together three severed veins and one artery. And taking out a foot of ruined small intestine.

But Gills survived the wounds and accepted the aggravation silently. He was grateful. But Doc sure put a fine point on things.

The few others that Breakers had brought in to hit the farm were either killed or run off. It was the last of the raids.

Gills and Marissa were both awash in precious metals now. They found Marcus' stash he'd bought with his stolen corporate money, hidden with the precious metals and jewelry that Breakers had accumulated before and after the disaster.

And to Marissa's great surprise, there were several hundred ounces of gold and silver in the main safe in Marissa and Gills suite on the yacht that Captain Arenesen said was there for dealing with foreign countries when they were on long cruises. And of course they had the gold, silver and diamonds that Stanley had accumulated. That was all on top of what Gills and Marissa had both purchased before the disaster.

The local economy quickly went to one based on the precious metals that Gills, Marissa, Bridget, and Matt fed into the economy a little at a time to replace the main means of exchange, an hour of labor. Joe Whitica was their banker.

Gills, with Marissa's agreement, financed several projects in the area to improve life for everyone. One of those projects, the most expensive, was the reactivation of the underwater drilling platform. Gills had been amazed at the size of the thing and it was only later that he realized that

Stanley's plan, or more accurately the gang consisting of Elias, Marcus, and Stanley wasn't to sell crude oil on the international black market.

They took it a step further and had a small, efficient refinery on the platform and were in the process of accumulating their first shiploads of refined fuels and lubricants when the disaster struck.

That refinery was a key factor in the early stages of rebuilding the country. The habitat, soon after, was cut free from the bottom of the ocean and allowed to slowly float to the surface. It was carefully towed to a spot adjacent to the oil platform and secured to the seabed again.

The electrical generation plants were also moved, giving the platform the capability of housing the workers on-site rather than shuttling them back and forth from land, a process that the gang had been trying to find a way to rectify. It was right under their noses, but it took Gills to figure it out and implement it.

The Johnson family of companies, between having been stripped to shells, and then the disaster, were simply paper reminders of a time gone by.

It took years for the recovery to advance enough that Gills and Marissa, Matt and Bridget and their children could finally relax and rest on their laurels, cruising the world, buying and selling one of the oldest of expensive commodities. Spices. Every trip abroad brought back a few tons of the welcomed goods, keeping the families going for generations

End *****

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