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ABANDON

JULIAN WOKE TO THE DULL TONE of the seatbelt light illuminating. It was only an hour flight from Reykjavik, but somehow he'd drifted. He looked at his friend in the seat beside him. His wavy blond hair hung neat over his shoulders as he slept peacefully against the cabin's window. In this restful state, Julian found it hard to believe he was the same Ed Barbie, twice the Sea Shepherd veteran, who'd deployed to the Faroe Islands and successfully intervened with the annual hunt while capturing gut-wrenching video footage that exposed the slaughter to the world. Ed had balls.

"Sir," the stewardess said, resting her hand on Julian's arm. "It's time." She nodded at his seatbelt and tilted her head to his chair.

Julian fastened up, righted his seat, and woke his friend.

"I couldn't sleep the entire flight from Canada to Iceland, but this short haul and I'm out cold." Ed straightened his seat and tightened his seatbelt. "I hope everybody else makes it without any problems."

"We're not clear yet," Julian warned, eyebrows raised.

"We'll be just fine," Ed said with a grin, and Julian believed him.

The lone airstrip, set in a farmed valley between two hills, appeared in the window. Eight isolated buildings stood in variable colours of white, red, and beige adjacent to the runway. Several cars sat waiting in the parking lot. In moments, the plane would be on the ground.

Outside the opposite windows, the deep Northern Atlantic waters glittered, split only by the bright moss-green hills before the azure skies. Tourists murmured at the sight, unaware that the beautiful ocean cove would soon be soaked with blood, and the smell of copper and salt would taint every breath.

"Remember," Ed said, grabbing Julian's attention. "Make sure there are a few people between us when we go through customs. We can't walk together."

The plane touched down without incident, and some of the locals

cheered. Before the seatbelt light had turned off, most of the passengers were out of their seats and pulling the luggage from the overhead bins.

“See you on the other side,” Ed said, pushing past a few people and joining the shuffle off the plane.

“See you on the other side,” Julian repeated, the gravity of the mission beginning to settle in his stomach.

On the last campaign, two Sea Shepherd volunteers were arrested and charged for interfering with the whale hunt. Each were given the maximum penalty of two years less a day in prison. Another volunteer was beaten unconscious by several islanders while walking home from an observation shift. That was why they were never supposed to go anywhere alone—except maybe to insert themselves into the country to begin with.

Julian approached the customs agent and handed over his passport. He felt like he did the first time he had to give a speech in school. His heart beat so violently he would swear it could be heard three booths over. Beads of sweat dripped down his spine. He had to remind himself to breathe.

“Welcome to the Faroe Islands,” the customs agent said, returning Julian’s passport.

“Thank you.” Julian smiled and rolled his carry-on through.

He caught up with Ed in baggage claim.

“What did I tell you?” He laughed. “This was the easy part.” Ed put his arm around Julian and led him to the exit. “One of the crew will be outside to meet us.”

A lanky brunette in denim overalls and a white cap-sleeved shirt stood at the bottom of the escalator. As the two guys descended closer, she beamed, winked, then curbed her smile.

“Is she one of us?” Julian asked as they stepped off.

She stuck out her hand. “I’m Lisa.”

Ed slapped her hand away, hugged her close, and spun her around. Lisa squealed excitedly.

He set her down and kissed her cheek. “It’s good to see you, *Lisa*.”

“You guys are lucky you arrived when you did.”

Ed was still smiling. Julian shrugged. “What do you mean?” he asked.

Lisa started toward the exit. “The spotters confirmed a pod of pilot whales along the coast. Our ship should be able to cut them off before the small boats get to them, but if not we’re going to need a lot of cameras rolling to capture the carnage.”

Julian's face clouded with dread. "So, if our ship doesn't cut them off we have to sit by and watch the slaughter? We don't do anything?"

"We get video!" Lisa snapped. "Is this your first campaign?" She glared at him.

Ed raised his hand and signalled Lisa to tone it down. "I get where you're coming from, man," he said. "Obviously we want to save the whales—that's everyone's first priority—but pretty much all of our fundraising comes from visuals."

"So we exploit their deaths?"

"We give *meaning* to their deaths," Lisa corrected him.

"And we're supposed to stand there with a camera and watch it all go down?" he asked, visibly perturbed.

"If you can just stand there with a camera without being accosted, you have to tell me your secret," Ed sneered.

"The Faroese smash all tourist cameras within a mile of the bay." Lisa mashed her fist into her hand. "Not only that, if they even suspect you're with the organization you're in danger just being seen."

"That's what happened to the guy last year?"

"Exactly," she said. "That's why we move in pairs and only travel to and from our positions at night." Her eyes narrowed. "And just so you know: Sea Shepherd has been doing this for a long time, and it will keep on doing this for a long time after you leave the campaign."

They exited the airport, and Lisa led them to a white Ford Ranger. The truck bed was littered with scrap multifilament of green and blue and red, several five-gallon bottles of water, and a few wood-handled shovels.

Lisa took the wheel, and Ed climbed in the passenger side. "You don't mind riding in the bed, do you?" he asked.

Julian scanned the items again. "Is it legal?"

The cab's window slid open with a sharp clack. Lisa shook her head at his wheedling tone. "Assume anything we do *isn't* legal until we're back home."

She turned around and pounced on the gas pedal. Gravel shot from beneath the tires. Julian was tossed to the corner of the bed as the ass-end of the truck fishtailed to gain control.

The airport faded into the distance as the team made their way to the safe house on the outskirts of town. The houses they passed were sparse in proximity, and Julian counted only one paved road after leaving the airport;

the rest were loose gravel. There were also no stoplights or billboards to impede the drive, and he was amazed that the place was still largely unmarred by the sprawl of modern society.

Lisa pointed at the windshield. "There she is!"

The truck slowed down, and Julian craned his neck outside the cab to see the hobbit home in the distance. The property was surrounded by a weathered three-panel fence and a knoll of pine greens that extended to the ocean. A stone smokestack protruded from the foot-long field grass growing on the roof, and two skylights fell next to the stone. The wooden eaves-troughs ran into clay rain barrels below tiny windows framed in red, their shutters brown as the earth.

"It's beautiful," Julian shouted over the wind.

Ed winked. "Hop out and unlock the gate, will ya?"

Julian fumbled out of the pickup, unlatched the iron fitting, and opened the gate. Lisa laid on the horn, laughed, and sped up the driveway.

"She's going to be the death of me," Julian muttered, kicking at the gravel. He closed the gate, latched it shut, and walked toward the house.

"You coming inside?" Lisa called. "It's go time!"

Then Ed stuck his head out the door. "The ship didn't make it to the pod before the hunters." He stepped beside Lisa and hung his arm over her shoulders. He sucked his bottom lip.

Julian opened his mouth to speak, but Ed continued. "It's not an ideal way to start the campaign, but they have the whales and we need the evidence."

Julian nodded.

"You and me," he said. "We're heading up the bluff, see if we can't get a perfect angle over the bay."

"I'm meeting up with the spotters," Lisa said. "We're going down on the ground to see what happens."

Julian started toward the pair. "How much time do we have?"

"The sooner we get going the better," Lisa said, "but I'd say half an hour. Come pick out some gear. And get layered. It's freezing up there."

Ed handed Julian a duffle bag and passed him gear as he spoke. "Last year some of the guys got so cold," he looked at Lisa. "Do you remember? Chucky couldn't stop shivering, so they tucked him into a nook and . . ."

". . . blanketed him in those disgusting seabird carcasses? I would have sooner frozen to death before I ever used those poor birds to warm my

body.”

Julian turned each item over in his hand before placing it in the duffle: binoculars, rope, carabiners, snap rings, a Sony camcorder.

“Sometimes you have to do what you have to do to survive,” Ed said.

“Nope,” she shook her head. “No way.”

Julian looked up from the parabolic microphone in his hands. “Where did they get seabird carcasses? We just happen to keep those in stock?”

“No, dipshit,” Lisa barked. “The locals hunt the seabirds from the bluff. They swing big fucking butterfly-looking nets over the surface of the water and snag the birds while they’re diving for fish. Once the seabirds are netted, they’re swung into the rock face, knocked out, and retrieved to have their necks broken like a chicken.”

Julian’s face scrunched. “It’s barbaric.”

“It’s like everything out here,” Ed said. “They’re living so far in the past they won’t even entertain the idea that they could live differently.”

The verdantly green bluffs were robed in mist, and the ocean crashed against the rock walls in threatening overtures as the two young men struggled to locate a decent vantage point above the harbour.

“We need a nook,” Ed said. He pointed to a landing thirty feet below, jutting from the bluff like a conk on a tree trunk. “There!”

“How the hell are we supposed to get down?”

Ed tossed the coil of rope on the grass and ran his hands along the surface in search of something. Julian stared but did not speak.

“Knew it.” Ed snapped his fingers, stood tall, and pointed at the ground. Julian shrugged. “Here,” Ed said. He pulled Julian’s arm to the spot.

Julian fingered the ground apprehensively, and the cold steel surprised his touch as he traced a ring covered with moss.

“It’s an anchor point directly above the landing we spotted,” Ed explained. “It’s too perfect a shelf to have not been used by the locals.”

Julian tugged at the moss around the anchor and exposed the ring bolted into the rock. He shook his head and raised his brows. “It doesn’t look like it’s been used in years.”

“It’s nothing to worry about.” Ed snatched the ring and gave it a firm tug. Nothing. He adjusted his fingers and yanked like it was the pull cord on a lawnmower. “Ahh!” He clenched his fist and rubbed his shoulder with his free hand. “The thing’s bolted tight,” he said, flexing his hand. “We have to get down there. It’s not anything to be worried about.”

“I really don’t want to do this,” Julian said, shaking his head, eyes bugged.

Ed ignored him, kneeled to the ring, and pressed on the moss in either direction. He stopped a foot away and tore at the greenery exposing a second ring. “An anchor point is only as good as its second.” He tugged the bolted steel with as much force as the first, winced, and set to work on the rig.

For a moment, Julian relinquished his fear and watched in admiration. Then he squatted down beside him. “What do you need me to do?”

Ed pointed to the duffle bag. “Hand me the nylon cordelette and a few carabiners.”

He snapped two of the carabiners through the rings, knotted the ends of the nylon together to complete a circle, twisted a fisherman’s knot, and set the cordelette on the ground. Two spring-loaded snaps from the carabiners signalled the line secure and the third, Ed said, meant “number one on rappel.” He smiled. “It’s easy. Besides, I’m going first. Someone has to be down there to brake you if you fall.”

Julian shook his head. “I can’t do this.”

“Harness up. We have to get moving.”

Like the veteran he was, Ed demonstrated how to thread the long rope through the anchors and the harness. He secured the rope in his left hand and tucked his fist behind his back. His right hand held loose around the guide line in front of him.

“Step back until there’s no more ground beneath your heels, then lean.” He winked.

Ed descended backward over the edge at a controlled speed. Julian peered down at him.

“If you’re feeling really adventurous,” Ed hollered, “try this.”

He pushed off with both feet, threw his brake hand from behind his back fully extended like a wing, and fell through the air above the landing.

A few feet from the surface, Ed shot his hand behind his body, swung toward the rock wall, and then pushed off gently to land upright on the shelf. It looked like he’d rappelled a hundred times before; he probably had.

“Number one off rappel,” Ed reported, removing the rope from his harness and giving Julian the thumbs up.

A deep two-tone lonely cry echoed across the fogged water. The MV Farley Mowat had arrived. The young men smiled and turned their heads to

the sea. The fog was still too thick for a visual, but the ship had to be close.

“You better get down here quick! Drop the bag and thread the rope like I showed you.”

Julian tied up and stepped to the edge of the bluff. Ed held the end of the rope lightly.

Even thirty feet below, the virgin rappeller’s gasp could be heard as he leaned over the edge. And then it happened, any first-time rappeller’s mistake. Julian looked over his shoulder, loosened his brake hand gripping the rope behind his back, and slipped.

He screamed and squeezed the line as he fell. The rope snapped taut, hit him under the chin, and threw him against the wall. Ed gripped the rope with both hands and dropped to the ground.

Julian struggled to catch his breath. He was winded and shocked, like a child who’d fallen from the monkey bars, and the rope was tight across his neck, holding his head against the rock.

“You have to let go of the rope,” Ed yelled, calm and confident.

Julian tried to speak, but his lungs still didn’t have air. He choked on the ocean mist.

“If you don’t let go, you’re going to pass out,” Ed threatened or reassured. “I have you braked from here, and I’ll let you down easy. Scout’s honour.”

With one last gasp, Julian released his grip on the rope. He hung suspended where he’d fallen. Then slowly, very slowly, Ed let out inches of line, and Julian floated gently to the landing. He laid on his back and rubbed his neck. “I told you I didn’t want to do that.”

Ed pointed at the lump on the ground. “You didn’t follow my instructions,” he said and shook his head. “That’s on you.”

Julian removed his hand from his neck. Splotches of red dotted his palm. He showed it to his friend.

Ed nodded. “It’s going to hurt for a while, right over the collar line and all. But look at it this way,” he paused, a big grin on his face. “You just earned your first battle scar. Chicks dig guys with scars. They’re magnets.”

“There has to be a better way.”

Ed shook his head. “Pass me the binoculars. The Farley is close, and we need eyes on.”

Julian propped himself on his elbows, turned his head in either direction, and slowly pushed himself to standing. He moseyed through the duffle

and produced a pair of Bushnell's.

Ed sat, dangling his feet over the edge, and scanned the harbour's entrance. "Grab a seat," he said, patting the rock floor beside him. "Help is on the way."

He handed the binoculars over and pointed in the direction of the incoming ship.

"It's here!" Julian cried. "The Farley is really here." Then, as an afterthought, he admitted, "I've only ever seen it in pictures."

The 110-foot Coast Guard Cutter, refurbished and named the Farley Mowat, motored into view. The unmistakable twelve-foot skull and crossbones painted below the bridge in black tore through the fog. It represented their identity as pirates for the betterment of humanity.

"It's beautiful," he whispered.

Ed grabbed the binoculars and traced the deck, looking for old friends. The weathered decking bubbled from years of neglect by the untrained volunteer crew. Rust streaked the white hull. The life rings hung in place along the bulkheads, but the lines were tangled and the lights were shattered. Hatches and doors were propped open. Two quick swells would be enough to sink it.

Ed smiled. As haphazard as the entire operation was, somehow they always managed to survive. Everything was exactly how he remembered it. "We better get the camera ready."

They huddled over the duffle, and Ed pieced the video camera and parabolic microphone together. "Footage is one thing," he said as he worked, "but if you can get the screams of the mammals as they're being bludgeoned and sliced and the calves are crying out for their dead families as they swim for hours in the bloodied waters, well, that's pay dirt."

Julian didn't know whether to laugh or puke. He shook the image off and raised his hands. "What do I do?"

"Just keep the mic pointed on the action."

An iron bleat and two bursts of an air raid siren lurched from the sea, and then they saw it. Masked near perfect with the gloomy day and swelling sea, the matte death gray of the Royal Danish Navy Iver frigate stood stoic in the harbour's entrance. The bridge of a dozen frozen black windows glared piercingly, adorned with floodlights, a radar, and a mast toting 50 mm cannons trained directly on the Farley Mowat.

"Fuck," they said in unison.

The frigate opened its starboard bay door and revealed two Riverine Command Boats, black and mean as an alley at night. A crane lowered the vessels into the sea, and their engines roared like squealing chainsaws about to slay a hundred-year-old tree.

“Are you recording?” Julian asked.

“Just keep aiming the mic,” Ed said, keeping his eye on the viewfinder as he manipulated the zoom for a clearer picture.

The Farley’s captain—the legendary Jesse Treeville, who had been arrested and deported from Japan for taking a rigid-hull inflatable boat in pursuit of whaling ships, hurling eight-inch braided ropes at the ships’ propellers, and achieving three different prop fouls—exited the bridge and stood above the deck’s main ladder. She held her hands firm to her hips, elbows akimbo. Ed smiled. “She’s not going to go down without a fight.”

The boats tied up on either side of the ship, secured their own ladders to the stanchions, and ran the steps with military precision, carbines gripped tight in one hand and their free hands pointing in the direction they were about to travel. The boarding team dispersed along the port and starboard fore and aft decks, clearing each square-foot of free space. They kept their guns trained on each companionway and open hatch.

None of the Farley’s crew emerged.

“What’s happening?” Julian asked.

Ed raised his finger to his lips.

The static of the intercom reverberated above the water. The mother ship, the Iver frigate, cleared its throat.

One of the soldiers in the boarding crew barked a command at the Farley’s captain. Jesse slowly dropped to her knees and placed her hands on her head. Ed shook his own in disbelief.

“This is Admiral Michiel Adriaenzoon de Ruyter of the Royal Danish Navy. You are illegally operating in Faroese territorial waters.” A squelch cracked with the pause. “We are forced to take control of your vessel and escort your crew to shore, where you will be arrested.”

Ed shrank to his knees and murmured, “No, no, no, no, no.”

The balaclava-wearing boson guided Jesse facedown while the Lieutenant handcuffed her. The two men hoisted her to her feet and led her down the stairs. They seated her in the starboard boat, which detached from the ship and took off toward the frigate. The remaining navy team sealed the companionways and hatches. Several of them stayed on deck, carbines re-

laxed, while the others secured the bridge, and presumably the Sea Shepherd crew below, in preparation to bring the ship to shore.

Two short pulls of the frigate's air horn and the MV Farley Mowat began a slow exit from the harbour. When it cleared the entrance and disappeared behind the rocks, an eerie silence descended on the bay. It was as if the waves had stopped crashing on the bluff, the wind had tapered into a gentle breeze, and only the reflexive fog remained unchanged.

Ed and Julian sat in disbelief.

"What the fuck do we do now?" Julian asked.

"We climb."

Julian's face turned light. His hands trembled.

"And you're going first in case of last time."

Julian threaded the lead line through his belt. He pressed one foot against the bluff and stopped.

"Just walk, and don't let go."

His hands shook as he leaned back, stepped his other foot, and started to walk. Ed gripped the rope in anticipation of a fall, but it never happened. Once Julian had cleared the ridge, Ed picked up the slack and stepped confidently into position.

"We're screwed," Julian said.

Ed quick marched up the wall. "Take the harness off and be prepared to go home," he said, pulling himself over the ledge.

"We're not leaving already."

"They commandeered our ship." Ed scowled. "What are we supposed to do?"

They removed their harnesses and placed them in the bag. Ed strapped the duffle to his back and walked toward the hobbit home they'd only just arrived from.

Julian puffed up his bottom lip and shook his head. "I'm not going back to Canada."

"We can't afford to lose everybody over a single ship. We have at least a dozen here."

"Here, like in the fleet?" Julian started after Ed.

"Fucking fly, Julian." He cast a quick snarl over his shoulder. "This mission is over."

Julian couldn't believe his ears. He thought about the Sea Shepherd he'd seen on TV, how they always fought fire with some of their own, throw-

ing acid, scuttling boats, preparing to ram. They wouldn't quit over a minor setback. Fast and cheeky he quipped, "Maybe we should wait for your girlfriend before we take off." No response. "She probably has more information on what we're supposed to do, having been here so long already."

They arrived at the house to find crew members bumping into each other as they loaded trucks with their most important gear. Hard cases were dropped ("Those drones cost thirty-grand!"). Flash drives and memory cards bounced out of bins ("Shit-shit-shit-shit-shi-shi-shit!"). Others fell to their knees to scour the grass, ensuring none were left behind. Several volunteers received glares ("Six months of footage they're just tossing around haphazardly."). Someone cursed ("I can't wait to get away from this land crew. They're fucking useless."). Others narrowed their eyes and mumbled under their breath. Lisa dashed through the line of people, skirted the crew in the grass, and aimed herself directly at Ed.

"Why didn't you answer your radio?" she screamed. "I've been calling you for hours! I was sure they got you." Tears welled in her eyes. "You're such a fucking asshole." She pounded his chest.

Ed wrapped his arms around her and rubbed her back gently. "I'm okay," he whispered. "Everything's okay."

Julian tossed his duffle into the bed of Lisa's truck and climbed in after it. The other two trucks pulled out, took off down the gravel road, and were consumed in a cloud of dust before they broke the crest and descended the hill.

As Ed and Lisa approached, Julian asked, "Do you think they'll let us leave?"

"None of us got arrested," Lisa shrugged. "We came in legally. We're leaving without having done anything. They'll be happy to see us go."

"This isn't a failure," Ed added. "It's all just part of the game."

Lisa hummed along. "We've been here years now, hunt after hunt, and now you can say you were here with us."

"But I didn't do anything," Julian complained.

"You showed up. You responded to the call. That's more than most." She grinned, cheeks raised, corners of the mouth to each ear. "The fight will continue—I promise you that."

They took their seats in the truck and Lisa punched it into reverse. Julian flattened against the cab and sighed. "I hope so," he said as he watched the sea disappear from view.