

ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #11



APOCALYPSE
WINDS

Copyright
Apocalypse Winds
by
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The Other Shoe
You'd Never Ask
Erased
I'm Ready
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Close

The Life We Chose

Safe Haven's ship has sailed.
It was a chilly day in November.
Half full of survivors and hope,
It became a time to not remember.

Dramas played out.
Tensions drew to a close.
Adapting began,
To the life we chose.

Surrounded by waves,
On an unforgiving tide.
The winds blew in,
Disturbing our ride.

Danger rose up.
Eagles put them down.
Bodies once again fell,
But there was no ground.

Liquid roads underneath,
A betting sky overhead.
We sailed away from home,
Trying to prove we too were dead.

But fate cannot be outrun.
Problems are never left behind.

Nature hasn't forgiven us,
And love will always be blind.

Chapter One
Aftermath
November 27th

1

“Is anyone down here?”

Marc walked the last bloody corridor on the bottom deck of the UN ship, gun holstered. The bright paint couldn't hide what the boat really was. He hoped it sank after they sailed away, then broke into a million pieces on the ocean floor. There were cages and torture rooms, and a holding pen with bodies being kept for identification purposes. Blood splatters and sprays decorated the walls, floors, and windows. Marc tried not to leave tracks, but some of the rooms were impossible to get through without stepping in a puddle. It was gruesome.

The inside of the ship was a mirror of the outer shell—blue and white with tiled floors and offices that held scenes from Marc's nightmares. The UN troops hadn't stood a chance. Most of the killing blows he identified had come from the rear. More than a few men had been using bathrooms or showering when attacked. He was impressed and horrified.

Marc cleared the final room on the bottom deck, but he knew he wasn't alone. He used his grid to

narrow down a dot less than two feet from his position, then sent out an alpha command. He needed to get back on their ship. He'd already been gone too long. He could feel Angela and others worrying.

“Don't hurt me...”

Marc scooped up the pristine boy, automatically holding his little hands. Marc didn't know how the kid wasn't dirty, but it was more disconcerting that he wasn't knocked out. Angela's spell had covered both ships.

“Angela?” The boy opened a powerful mental line. He dug into Marc's thoughts with ruthless glee.

Marc wanted to be kind, but there wasn't time. He sent a minor zap. “Never without permission, Dion.”

Dion nodded, retreating. “I'm sorry.”

Marc released the boy's hands and hugged him as he trotted up the steps. “You'll be okay now. We'll help you.”

Magic pressed in on Marc. By the time they reached the top deck, he was healed.

Marc traversed the ramp and jumped onto their boat, long coat flowing out. “Unhook us. Let's float!”

People snickered, hurrying to do as ordered.

Grant, waiting nearby with his security, came over to supervise.

Marc took the child to Angela.

Dion slid into her arms and wrapped himself around her like he'd always been there. “Forever?”

Angela kissed his cheek and hugged him. “Even longer if I can.” She put him on his feet. “Go below and let them make you sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Yes, Alpha.” The child strode through the surprised camp members who retreated to clear a path.

Marc scanned the deck; half the bodies had been removed. He went to help.

“I need time with these people.” Angela handed a paper to Kenn as he joined her. “In the next three hours.”

Kenn read it, holding tight so the morning draft didn’t rip it from his fingers. “Together or apart?”

Angela refused to think about everything she’d just gone through. There was work waiting. “Both. You’ll see to it for me?”

Kenn knew what she needed. “First meeting is in the command cabin with Jennifer. Ten minutes.” He departed without waiting for an answer. He needed time to organize the rest of it.

Angela motioned Grant back toward the bridge. “We’ll disconnect the ramp. You sail us south.”

Grant knew the crew needed the experience, but he couldn’t help several glances over his shoulder as he went up the metal steps with Ray on his heels. If they made a mistake, it could damage both ships.

Angela wasn’t worried. The crew she’d chosen for moments like this was solid. It was their nerve out on the open ocean that she doubted.

“Where do you want me?” Ivan finished reloading his gun and holstered. He’d wiped off most of the blood from his hands, but they were all leaving ugly footprints across the deck and stairs.

“Point man for this shift, with a rookie.” Angela motioned toward the man coming up the stairs from the infirmary. Jeff had helped get the western UN kids sedated while Marc cleared the UN ship. “Settle him back in.”

Jeff fell in with the soldier he’d briefly met at the mountain camp. They’d clashed then, making this moment important. Jeff didn’t intend to hold a grudge. If Ivan had been given point, he deserved it.

Ivan held out a hand. “Bygones?”

Jeff shook, heart lightening. “Absolutely.”

Ivan took his notebook out and handed it to his new trainee. “We’ll walk the ship and handle issues that come up. Read as we go but remember to pause and...” Ivan stopped as Jeff rotated to view Angela and what was going on around her. He handed the scruffy man a pen. “That’s perfect. Once a minute, you do that for me, and I’ll make sure you get the coldest beer I can find.”

Jeff was already annoyed with the new need to verify her safety. He was picking up Angela’s excitement and grief. It sucked. “I’d rather have a decent cup of coffee and a hot shower.”

“Deal.” Ivan led the way through the crowd that was now observing the shoreline. A few refugees were swimming toward the ships, not caring that their fellow men and women were being claimed by

the ocean. Sharks were all through the rough waves now, but the furious refugees refused to give up.

The camp leaned on the rails and each other as America faded. The two tugs laboring to get them out into open water shot streams of purple, blue, red, and clear liquid in large rainbows to mark the beginning of their journey. The water came from the same nozzles they would use to fight any fires. The Water Salute was a ceremonial custom to celebrate the arrival or leaving of certain ships. The camp clapped at the display, but no one's heart was in the response. They were leaving their homeland. It was almost gone already.

Angela watched too. Thick depression settled onto her shoulders. *Welcome back.*

Her depression smiled warmly and began causing pain. *We've missed you!*

She had been so torn up over never seeing Adrian again that she'd been able to block the other emotions. Now, her worst enemy had returned—her brain.

Angela sniffed, standing straighter. *I have work to do. I'll catch up with you later.*

The depression bowed out in favor of adrenaline. The terror squeezed harder as she began the next stage of her plans, of Adrian's plans that she'd added to and expanded. *Here we go.* "I want the team leaders for a few minutes—now."

Wade and Greg, both frowning, marched through the crowd to pass her instructions. They'd

been warned to watch Angela for signs of mental cracks; they'd just found one.

2

“Mom wants you two topside with the team leaders. I’ve got things covered down here.” Charlie waited for the duty crew to react, expecting trouble.

Harry and Courtney left without a protest. They were eager to go up and make sure things were okay. It helped that everyone down here was out cold except for Kendle and they knew she wasn’t a threat to Charlie. The island woman wasn’t dangerous to anyone but herself now, and maybe Angela. Harry believed Angela was in the clear on that too, though he wasn’t sure what would happen to Kendle. The alpha bond was strong. As it strengthened, the darkness would be replaced with light. Harry didn’t know how the boss planned to bond with Kendle against both their wills, but he looked forward to watching it happen.

Charlie took a folding chair from the wall and opened it next to Kendle’s cot. “They’re gone. Don’t know how they missed you being awake.”

Kendle stared at the ceiling. “They didn’t. They just don’t want to speak to me.” The sound of her own voice being so weak scared Kendle. *I’m dying again.* She was touched Charlie had come to say goodbye. No one else had yet, not even Tommy.

“They just don’t know what to say. They’re waiting for instructions.” Charlie sat, scanning her

bloody clothes and wrinkled skin. “Are you injured?”

Kendle snorted and then groaned at the pain. She’d never felt this weak. “Mortally wounded, boy. She nailed me with one shot.”

Charlie couldn’t help the pride. “I’m awake enough now to see how she does things like that. She learned to use people against themselves.”

“Adrian taught her. Marc abandoned her. Kenn abused her. Adrian took what was left and rebuilt her.”

Charlie didn’t argue. “Why can’t you let them do that for you?”

Kendle’s eyes shut.

He sighed. “I already know. Just say it.”

Kendle held in tears. “I don’t want to change. I like the blood, the killing. I don’t want to stop.”

Charlie put a hand on her wrist and began pushing energy into her. He was glad she was cooperating in these first steps of reform. He couldn’t stand the sight of her withered body. It would have hurt him to leave her like this. He knew what it felt like, thanks to his manhood test. He wouldn’t wish it on anyone.

Kendle groaned at the new pain. “Why?”

“For my dad.” Charlie increased the strength, sensing a guard coming down the hall to relieve him on his mom’s orders.

“Won’t matter... That stings!”

“True, he hates you now. He might vote to let you die, but it would damage him inside. We don’t want that.”

Kendle stiffened. “Angela sent you.”

Charlie let go of the magic, stopping before he was drained. He stood and put the chair away.

“Everything okay in here?” Ian scanned, missing Kendle’s returning health in favor of a long stare at the bloody UN kids in the cots.

“It’s getting better.” Charlie controlled his breathing and the urge to yawn in front of the blabbermouth.

Ian pointed at the door. “Monica wants you in the gymnasium. Use the stairs to the left.” Ian grinned. “And Tracy is waiting for you in the lobby to the right. Pick carefully.”

Charlie grunted. “Suck a dick.”

Ian gaped.

Kendle chuckled.

When he got to the intersection, Charlie jogged up the stairs to the left.

3

“Sign the logbook!”

Kenn’s voice carried through the noises and chatter, bringing calm. Despite his flaws, people trusted the beefy man to care for the camp. It was good to have him back.

“Get your name in the logbook or I’ll be on your ass tonight while you’re trying to sleep!”

People hurried to sign the book in Kenn's hand.

Ivan signaled his crew to join him, certain he would need them as he did rounds. There was a lot to cover on a ship this size and they weren't using radios until land was out of sight in all directions.

Jeff stayed by Ivan, trying to reabsorb the routines. Once a minute he checked on the boss. Now that he was back with Safe Haven, Jeff wanted to readjust as quickly as possible. He had a lot riding on the future.

"We all feel that way." Ivan was skimming as many thoughts as he could. This was a bad time for things to go wrong. "Welcome home."

"Yep." Jeff didn't distract the man with conversation. He could almost feel the heat from Ivan's mind as he ran through routines and possible problems while keeping track of thoughts and behaviors of the camp, as well as his team. Jeff was impressed. When he'd first met Ivan, he hadn't thought the younger man could handle team lead, let alone point. It was more proof that Angela was right in her choices. Jeff was finally able to let go of his anger at her. It was a relief. *Now, if I can just get rid of this bitterness and heartache.*

Ivan pointed at a cluster of camp kids hanging over the nearby rail. "James."

James trotted over to collect the fascinated children who had probably never been on a boat.

"We're clear to go!"

Marc's loud call echoed to the bridge, where Grant was pacing, eager to be under way. His adventures with Safe Haven were finally beginning.

Grant pushed buttons and flipped switches while he went over the steps in his mind, wanting to be positive he didn't miss anything. They couldn't just stop at a store if something went wrong.

Ray patrolled the bridge, rotating among the three entrances. They had one captain. Grant was the most valuable member of the camp. When Angela had told him that, Ray had been shocked she'd given him protection duty. It was an honor to be trusted with such a huge responsibility. He would kill or die to keep their captain safe.

Grant liked the protection, but he was too tense to thank the cute man as they began to slide by the bloody UN ship. The blue bottomed vessel appeared to be four stories, but Grant wasn't sure if his estimate was accurate. *There could be another level under the water.* The rest of the ship's deck was lined in cargo areas and windows, all dotted with cameras. Dozens of portholes glared at him.

The camp fell silent as they got a clear view of the carnage the kids had wreaked upon the enemy. Somber deliberations and concerns became the focus. Many people glanced toward the steps to the infirmary and then toward Angela, who had decided to bring the kids with them to the island. They trusted her, but with all the bodies in sight, they couldn't help worrying.

Angela headed for the stairs. *I made the right choice. They'll see it in time.*

Angela went down to the quarantine area first. She was glad to find heavy security, but she still gathered energy to bring up a strong barrier if it was needed. The vibes coming from this area weren't good and she'd already died once today. She didn't want to do it again so soon.

Kyle spotted Angela coming and slid into the entrance to provide front cover protection. "We're doing the debriefing. It'll still be a few before we can call them clear."

Angela saw Jennifer sitting with the strangers and ignored Kyle's silent request that she not enter. She went to Jennifer, aware of the growing tension. The strangers didn't like her or want to meet her. *That's new.* Angela took the chair on Jennifer's right and crossed her arms over her chest.

Kyle had chosen a security office on the bottom deck, near the loading center. There were three cluttered desks and three office chairs along one wall. Across from them was a leather couch and a bathroom. Two tiny windows provided enough light to see this room hadn't been cleaned yet. Angela made a mental note on it. The folders on the wall shelf might help them with running the ship, though she wasn't sure if this small office would have important details.

"Hiya, boss. Having a good day?"

Angela grunted, refusing to think about how it had felt to be dead. "You tell me."

Jennifer shrugged, consulting her clipboard. “Just getting started, but I doubt there’s an issue here. Leftover resentment for us not taking them in before now, for not stopping as the convoy passed, for not being strong enough to stop the war. You know—the usual crap broken folks hang onto when their world has been destroyed by the government we took out.”

Angela swept the starving man and woman, then the dirty child. “She still looks ill. Did you give her the medicine?”

Rachel’s lip came out in a pout. “Most of it.”

Jennifer wrote that on her clipboard. “What happened to the rest?”

“Traded for food so she didn’t starve!” The mother glared at Angela. “I won’t thank you for taking us. You didn’t stop!”

“The medic will be down shortly. Give her all the medication this time.” Angela stared back, expecting a continuation of the rant.

Jennifer cleared her throat to break the thick awkwardness. “Food is on the way. After you eat, you’ll get showers and clean clothes. Over the next few days, we’ll find jobs for you.”

The mother didn’t glance away from Angela. Hatred shined through her blue eyes.

Jennifer waved her pen in the air. “Hey!”

The woman’s attention snapped back to Jennifer.

“I like you so far. Don’t screw that up. Right now, I’m the only friend you have here.”

Hatred flashed brighter, then faded into bitter resignation. “She should have stopped for us.”

Angela studied the man and child, digging in for problems. The mother was trouble. Her hatred might never fade.

Leeroy tried to give Angela a smile, but his nervousness turned it into a sneer.

Angela understood. “I’m sorry for everything you’ve gone through.”

“Thank you.”

“Why are you being nice to her?!”

“Hush now, Rachel.” Leeroy took her hand to prevent the coming shout. “You have to let it go.”

Rachel slammed her body back against the chair, avoiding his comfort.

Leeroy sighed. “She’s upset.”

Angela and Jennifer waited for him to say more.

“We’re from Alabama. We’ve been run out of every home we tried to build. Damn draft got us the first time. Then the looters and scavengers, then soldiers again. After that, we had to hide from...”

“People like me.” Angela didn’t want them to know Jennifer was a descendant yet. It might shut off the teenager’s connection with them and prevent the family from settling in.

“Yes. They wanted to make us slaves.”

“There’s a lot of that going around.” Angela inspected the girl, hating the shudders hitting her small body. She motioned to Kyle. “Check on the medic.”

“Why don’t you just heal her?” Rachel couldn’t stop her rage.

Angela leaned forward. “Will it get rid of your hatred?”

Rachel opened her mouth to lie... “No. I loathe you.”

Angela sighed. “Also a lot of *that* going around.” She held out a hand to the woman instead of her daughter. “Trust goes both ways, Rachel Norton. Show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

Rachel paled. “I don’t want to touch you!”

“I don’t like you much either, but if you’re staying on this ship, you have to be cleared.”

Rachel slowly extended her hand.

Angela opened the door to her mental crypt.

Rachel stiffened as they made contact.

Angela blasted the woman with her pain. She clamped a hand around Rachel’s wrist when she tried to pull away. “Feel it for a minute, then tell me how angry *you* are.”

Rachel gasped, jerking to get her hand back.

Jennifer shook her head at Leeroy when he would have tried to help. “She’s showing her why we didn’t stop. Your wife is getting the answer she demanded.”

“Don’t hurt my mommy!”

Angela slammed the barriers shut and let go, on the edge of crying from reliving so much pain. “She’s just pissed, like the rest of us.” Angela stared at the little girl.

“What’s she doing now?!”

“Relax, Rachel. If she wanted you all dead, she would have left you on the beach.” Jennifer caught Angela’s thoughts. “Getting worse, yes. She needs the medication.”

“Morgan’s got his hands full with beach injuries.” Angela sighed. “Will you let me treat her? Before the war, I was a doctor.”

Rachel gave a short nod, heart still breaking. Her hatred wasn’t gone, but it was weighed down by Angela’s pain. “Don’t hurt her because of me.”

“She loves kids. She wouldn’t do that.” Jennifer studied the pale, blond parents while Angela held out a hand to the brunette child. She found adoption memories in Leeroy’s mind and let the discrepancy go.

The thin girl shivered. “I don’t feel good.”

“I’ll make that go away.”

“Will it hurt?”

Angela smiled. “Not even a little, Sally.”

The girl responded to the wave of peace, smiling back. She took Angela’s hand...then crawled into her lap.

Angela hugged her, eyes shutting. She shot currents of energy into the girl, unable to stop the tears. The love of a child was the only thing she truly enjoyed now.

Angela rubbed the girl’s arm and gently slid her back into the chair. “Better?”

Sally yawned. “I’m hungry!”

The Eagles chuckled.

The girl's family gawked in surprise despite knowing it would happen. They'd never witnessed magic, though they'd been around descendants since the war. Those people hadn't been willing to waste magic on normals unless they were getting paid for it.

"Thank you." Leeroy clasped Rachel's hand. "She'll be okay now."

Rachel tried to force an apology, but Angela stood up and staggered from the room before she could get it out through the remaining anger.

Jennifer motioned Kyle to escort the boss, then turned back to the family. "Now that we're done with this, we'll get you settled in a cabin near the deck. You can rest and eat while we wait for your blood work to come back. Sound good?"

Rachel was still staring at the doorway. "She's a hard one. Why did she cry?"

Jennifer sighed, brushing dark hair off her shoulder so she could see the clipboard. She hadn't had a chance to pin it up yet. "She regrets not stopping, but don't mistake that for a weakness you can use. Her choices are always based on what's best for our camp."

"Meaning, if I become a problem, she'll remove me?"

Jennifer turned cold, pinning the woman in place with glowing red orbs. "She won't have to. That's my job and I'm very good at it."

Chapter Two
Extinction

9am

1

“Boss.” Kyle retreated to allow Angela into the command room where Jennifer had been directed to wait. Two other Special Forces men were here with her. Angela had Jennifer under heavy protection. It was making Kyle nervous.

Angela smiled at Autumn, who was dozing in a pumpkin seat at Jennifer’s feet, then joined the teenager at the long table. It stretched the length of the business room and was lined in gray plush chairs with ergonomic designs and high arm rests. Angela enjoyed the comfort as she sat, admiring the cherry walls and neat white ceiling. A television in a wooden cabinet sat at the far end of the room, next to a small wet bar. The door in the rear led to a two-stall bathroom she hadn’t explored yet beyond verifying it was empty through the open door. This was a very nice room.

Jennifer got right to the problem. “You’re not taking me with you to the meeting.”

Angela began putting books and papers onto the table. “No. I need you to take my place if I don’t return.”

Jennifer was thrilled, honored, scared. “Who are you taking?”

“My dream team.” Angela didn’t elaborate. She’d chosen her companions as soon as she’d come up with this crazy plan, but she’d had to narrow it to the four allowed instead of the six she wanted. Now that the moment was only hours away, she was suddenly glad to be leaving the others here to help keep things together. “My notebooks will be delivered to you if something goes wrong. Read them from cover to cover before you make *any* decisions.”

“Why do you want me to hide?” Jennifer couldn’t take Kyle’s tension. She was picking up his bad vibes through the door. “What did you see?”

“Darkness and anger.” Angela handed her the slip of paper she’d shown to Marc on the way here from Ciemus. “Check it against the logbook after Kenn gets all the signatures.”

“I will.” Jennifer slid that to the top of her mental priority list. “What else?”

Angela waited for Jennifer to get her pen out, then began rattling off things she didn’t have covered yet.

Outside the door, Kyle’s concern changed to fury. They had another assassin in camp and this one had been sly enough to get on board with them even though they had a dozen descendants scanning thoughts. Kyle was sick of it. *What do we have to do to verify people?!*

Kyle's anger was on his face. Camp members and Eagles who came by his post kept going. That expression did not encourage conversation.

Marc also kept walking, aware of Kyle's problem. He didn't remind the man how important it was to keep cool until the moments came. Kyle knew his job better than almost anyone here. Marc had faith in him—so much that he hoped Angela had chosen to take the mobster along tonight. Kyle wouldn't hesitate to protect her from whatever came.

Marc shifted the sleeping child to his other shoulder as he walked, noted who was working and who seemed lost or upset. All the unconscious passengers needed to be secured before the sleep spell wore off. According to Adrian, there was a charm for removing memory, but Angela had made a deal with a higher power to cure the rage illness instead. Marc approved, but he liked knowing they may have a second option if things didn't go well tonight. He refused to consider more about that moment. He assumed Angela had it covered. She'd been ready with her responses to the Messenger. The only thing he didn't understand was how she was hiding her plans from the other player in this awful game. The Messenger could read minds.

“Yes, but never without permission still means something to them.” Adrian fell in behind Marc, also carrying an unconscious child to the infirmary. “When they find a mental crypt, they avoid it unless invited.”

Marc winced. Angela was hiding in her crypt of horrors when she made plans because she wasn't safe anywhere else. "I hate that."

Adrian grunted. "Yeah." He put the bloody girl in one of the few remaining bunks, aware of sentries showing up to take places in the shadows. "Will you let me help you now?"

"With what?"

Adrian entered Marc's mind and waited by the black door.

Marc went back up the nearest stairwell, already working on familiarizing himself with every entrance and exit on the huge ship. He was also stalling. He didn't want Adrian to view his shames, his regrets.

Adrian waited. He refused to contemplate why he was offering, needing it to happen because of the trust they'd been building and not for either of them to gain something from it.

Marc opened the mental barrier, wincing at the immediate screams and shouts. His mother's tones barreled out.

Ungrateful son! Devil's spawn!

Marc paused in the hall as other voices joined in. He couldn't help the shame and guilt as mental gunshots rang out; females fell. He'd always followed orders, no matter how bad they were.

Adrian stepped inside the drafty, bloody room, able to view the scenes playing out in each glass box. It was ugly. Some of it, he never would have suspected of the man standing stiffly in front of him.

“That one first.” Adrian pointed to the largest box, where a young girl stared at them in hatred. The ghost had grown bitter while waiting for Marc to release her. “Tell me her name.”

Camp members walking by understood the guys were working on something and didn’t interfere, but they did try to read it.

Marc would have shut the door, but Adrian put a hand on it, wincing when Marc shoved, pinching the mental grip he’d taken. “Tell me her name.”

The Marine shuddered. “I don’t want to.”

“Because you loved her.”

Marc’s nod was curt. “It’s all I have left.”

“She grows angrier by the day. It bleeds into your life.” Adrian stepped further into the crypt. “She’s the ugly voice in your mind telling you it’s never going to be enough; you’ll never be good enough to make up for whatever you’ve done.” Adrian put a hand on Marc’s shoulder. “Let her go. We’ll do it together.”

2

A deck below them, Angela paused, drawn by the moment. This was something she couldn’t do for Marc. She’d never discussed it with him because she hadn’t thought he would ever allow anyone in that deep. Letting go of a ghost was hard; a deep bond had to be severed. She was grateful Adrian wasn’t making Marc do it alone.

You asked me to help him in any way I can, Adrian sent. And I like Marc. I always have.

Angela knew that to be true. Marc's respect meant a lot to Adrian, though Marc didn't believe it.

Angela withdrew, letting them work while she switched to the next item on her list. "I don't want you to view every situation like I have or like I would." Angela placed her hand on Jennifer's wrist. "I chose you for the differences between us, not the similarities. Don't ask yourself what I would do, or what Adrian would do. Handle it as if you'd never met either of us."

"Why?" Jennifer was confused. "You've gotten us this far. Your methods clearly work."

"They work in the short term. I chose to do things that way because we've only had a short-term future since the war. I've cleared that hurdle for you. You can consider the future and long-term plans. I sacrificed a lot so you don't have to be held back like I've been."

Jennifer didn't think Angela had held back at all. It added more respect, and a little fear, that Angela could have done worse in their challenges to get here, though Jennifer didn't know what those choices might have been.

Angela sent an image of being in the bunker with Donner. "I could have joined them, gathered them all together and wiped them out." She sent her memory of planning the poisoning deaths of Sonja's

train of fighters. “I could have destroyed their town and hunted the survivors.”

Jennifer observed as Angela chose a few other moments in their fast, brutal history. In every case, she could have done more or worse, but she’d refused to eliminate as many lives as she needed to in order to ensure total peace for their camp.

“Do you get why?” Angela rubbed her boots against the carpet, then forced herself to stop. She didn’t want to get it dirty. Her filthy clothes and worn gear were out of place in here.

Jennifer ran through it again, searching for a common thread. When she grasped the end, the rest of it lit up in her mind. “Extinction.”

Angela leaned back, satisfied. “Yes. Our population has been decimated over the eleven months we’ve been nomads in our own homeland. I’m not sure two million citizens still exist in America.” Angela’s depression flared. “Over the next years, ninety percent of those will die. I’ve seen it. I couldn’t keep killing them.”

“You’re letting nature do it.”

Angela was glad the girl was catching on quickly, but it wasn’t quick enough. “Survival of the fittest, Jenny. The true survivors who should pass on their genes will be there when we return.”

Jennifer brooded. “I don’t like that.”

“I don’t either, but the world is based on it. If we help the weaker people, we take away from our limited resources, and we may all die together. I chose to follow the natural order of the planet.”

“That’s why Safe Haven stopped taking in refugees!”

“Yes, along with smaller reasons. Most of them have reverted to doing anything to stay alive another day. We don’t have the ability to change them back into civilized souls. We’ve stayed good because we’ve had leaders who made better choices, but also because we already had a strong moral ethic. That isn’t something you can give to people once they reach a certain age or stage in life. That’s why prison never reformed criminals. It just gave them other criminals to socialize with. Some things can’t be fixed. I accepted that. You’ll have to do the same as you sail, or you’ll stop at every town and village on the way and get wiped out on supplies and lives.”

Jennifer grasped the lesson now and hated it. “I’m not sure I want this job anymore.”

“Tell me about it.” Angela lit one of the few remaining smokes and inhaled deeply. She was very sore and low on energy. Dying had drained her. “While I’m gone, you’ll be sequestered. Spend the time working. Pick a council, a support structure, security, and a method of governing.”

“When you return, you’ll go over it for things I missed?”

“And things I’ve missed. Then I’ll merge it.” Angela exhaled. “Or you’ll do that with my notebooks and lead our camp to a place where they can sit and stand in safety.”

Jennifer stiffened, heat flowing out. “There won’t be any *sitters* in my Safe Haven.”

Angela let out a sound of relief. “That’s exactly why I chose you.”

3

“Tell me her name!”

Marc shuddered. Adrian was using his alpha command now. It was strong. “Brady. She’s a Brady.”

Adrian stared at the girl in shock. He’d been expecting Angela’s name. “What?”

Marc didn’t stop the tears. “My sister’s name was Melanie.”

The girl in the crypt began screaming awful accusations.

Adrian winced. He wanted it to stop and there was only one way to do that. “Tell me what happened to her.”

Marc ran a loving finger over the glass box. “My mother drowned her when we were five. That’s when I locked up my demon. I was scared.”

“Finish it now. Let her out.”

Marc’s voice broke. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell anyone, Melanie. I love you. I’m sorry.”

The box exploded. Invisible glass shattered into a puff of blue dust that took the form of a young girl. No longer screaming, she stared at Marc. *I love you too, brother.*

Adrian felt Marc’s pain deeply. The girl had been more than a sister. “She was your twin. That’s

why you're a hardass loner. Your mother killed your twin and made you hide it."

"Yes." Marc stared, heart lightening. "I've carried that my entire life."

Adrian felt only sympathy. "You were a kid. It wasn't your fault. You held onto her memory out of grief, not guilt. It's okay to let her go."

Marc tried to smile at the girl, aware of the dust breaking up, of her leaving him. "I'll see you again, some day."

The girl laughed, sending fresh pain through Marc's heart, but only from her loss, not from anger or bitterness. She vanished, leaving the two men alone in Marc's crypt.

Adrian was tempted to smash the rest of the boxes. He wanted Marc's soul freed.

Marc almost told him to go ahead. It was easier to do these things when he wasn't alone.

"We'll have a beer after the meeting, if there's time." Adrian left the mental hall of horrors. "If you want to do another one then, we will."

Marc closed the black door. *One hell at a time.*

Adrian snorted, walking in the opposite direction. "If only it worked that way."

4

"It's chow time, Safe Haven."

The radio jerked passengers from their activities, reminding them breakfast had been

missed. The refugees had arrived before most of the camp was even awake.

“The cook informed me they have fresh biscuits and gravy, eggs, and bacon. Anyone want to steer while I go eat?”

People who had been reluctant to go below now pushed toward the stairs to the lower decks at Grant’s cheerful announcement. Fresh biscuits and bacon were magic words to Americans.

The stairs from the top deck and activity levels filled with passengers chatting about everything that had happened. The returning members were quickly surrounded.

Doug and his boys were greeted with curiosity about the adventure. Roy and Romeo hadn’t been infected by the refugee children, but Angela had insisted they be taken to the infirmary anyway. Doug was escorting them there now. When Kimmie told Romeo he was almost angry enough on his own and didn’t need the UN drugs, she’d been right. Many of Safe Haven’s orphans had gone through too much since the war. There would be repercussions for that. Human brains didn’t do well with trauma.

Seth was shunned and walked alone even in the crowd. Most of the Eagles felt the way Jeff did. Seth had abandoned the camp. He would have to earn his way back in.

“Shift change in one hour.” Kyle and a few Eagles moved through the crowd, passing messages. The smell of perfume was cloying after

so much time outside. It reminded Kyle of being closed up in the mountain. By the time the quake had hit, many women had stopped wearing it to avoid offending everyone. “We need volunteers to go to the bottom deck and help Samantha with the garden. Have lunch and then go below.”

Kyle made note of camp members who pointed in recognition of the busywork. People wanted to be occupied to avoid contemplating what they were leaving behind. Neil had just taken Samantha below. A few people had gone with them then instead of watching America fade from sight. Theo and Debra were already down there.

The ship bobbed lightly in the water considering how large and heavy it was, but the slight sways and creaks caught many of them off guard and even sent some people into the walls as they gravitated toward the galley. It would take a bit before they became accustomed to this method of transportation.

Kyle nodded to Doug, who was carrying his insulin kit and a bag of items for his boys. He was certain the big man had stories to tell, but Kyle had a nagging sense of doom in the rear of his mind that he hoped was just tension about the meeting tonight.

As far as he knew, he would be here with Jennifer while the others went to determine the future. He expected problems while they were gone. He was trying to memorize all the main doorways on the ship in anticipation of a surprise attack. Unlike the halls on the lower decks, the employee areas weren't lavish or decorated with more than

signs reminding them to be polite to the passengers. White walls and floors showed a multitude of tracks and debris that would need to be swept once their cleaning crew was rolling. The survivors on this ship were half dressed, sandy, soaked, sooty, and wounded. The injuries were mostly minor, but everyone knew they'd just had another moment like at the hangar. They were lucky to be here at all.

The Ciemus women were the same as the rest of the camp—disheveled, slightly wounded, and grateful to be breathing. They were also in mourning over their dead. Safe Haven hadn't counted those losses yet, but Kyle expected it to be ugly. It always was.

Kyle didn't acknowledge Seth as the redhead walked by. Seth had protested Becky's sedation, but he'd concurred that she was dangerous. He hadn't given them details yet, other than to tell them Allan had died during the rescue of the UN children. Kyle wanted time alone with Seth to verify the former Eagle wasn't hiding anything. Everyone who had returned would be evaluated for problems.

Kyle spotted Jennifer coming through the next intersection, still under double guard, and couldn't help a quick stare. *That's my wife.* The special moments with her had been amazing. They would live in his brain forever, but knowing she loved him enough to marry him was more valuable.

Jennifer smiled, reading his thoughts and everyone else's in the corridor. She didn't want to be distracted, but his happiness was impossible to

resist. He was nothing like her former abuser. Kyle was her soulmate. She never wanted to be without him.

“I don’t know why you care. You threw him away!”

Heads swiveled toward the loud voice.

Brittani put her hand on her hip, stopping. “You’re just some skank he took up with because I hurt him. He won’t stay with you.”

People in the hall retreated.

Trinity didn’t back down. “Like I said, I don’t know why you care. He isn’t yours.” Trinity strode away without worrying about being hit in the back. Brittani wouldn’t be in the Eagles if she didn’t have honor, but more than that, Trinity wasn’t afraid of taking a hit for what she wanted. If the woman attacked, she would be sorry.

Brittani thought about it, but in the end, the Ciemus blonde was right. She had no claim on Gus anymore.

Brittani went the other way at the intersection, deciding the garden needed an extra set of hands.

Jennifer, Kyle, and the Eagles around them made mental notes to put the brief confrontation in their nightly report, then continued toward the galley. They were all glad it hadn’t been worse.

Neil appeared in the hallway ahead of the crowd.

Seth felt the glare and looked up, pausing.

Eagles stopped again, expecting this situation to come to blows. Unlike Brittani and Trinity, these two were likely to get violent.

Neil waited for Seth to react, looking forward to putting the redhead on the ground. He knew there would be a punishment, but he didn't care. Seth had abandoned the camp. If it had been up to Neil, all the people who left them would have been refused reentry. *Angela's too softhearted. I'm not.*

Seth glowered back. He still felt Neil was responsible in ways for what happened to Becky. Because of the choices the former state trooper had made, her life had changed forever. Seth hadn't forgiven him.

Charlie appeared behind Neil. He knew better than to touch the furious man. "You have a meeting. The boss said to hurry up."

It took every bit of willpower Neil possessed to follow the order. Seth's challenge was in his tense body and rebellious eyes, but Neil was also able to scan his thoughts. Neil was now able to read the mind of anyone he concentrated on, providing he'd had a recent physical moment with Samantha. Ever since Angela had told them power rubs off, Neil had been keeping track of it. He now knew how to use that advantage without compromising the choice he'd made a long time ago. It was the only way he and Samantha were comfortable with him accessing magic.

Everyone except Seth breathed a sigh of relief as Neil vanished down the hallway.

Charlie followed him, hand on his gun belt. He was Neil's escort to the command center where Angela was holding meetings. The teenager hadn't been called in yet himself, but he expected to be. Charlie didn't know how well that meeting would go, but he was determined to try saying and thinking the right things. He needed to be allowed to continue his relationship and also some parts of training. The time with Kenn, Adrian, and Kendle had revealed he had a lot to learn about human nature and how to be a man. Now that he had a baby on the way, he needed to fast track that education. He could only do it if he was allowed to stay close to the fighters who were mentoring the younger generation.

Dog padded swiftly down the hall with the passengers who were once again gravitating toward the galley. He looked over his shoulder, moving quicker.

Behind him, the cats hurried to catch up.

Dog increased speed, huge paws weaving in and out of the camp with expert movements meant to evade the tabbies.

Not to be outsmarted, the agile felines both leapt onto the side rails of the hallway and launched themselves into the air.

Dog yelped as both cats landed. They dug in to keep their precarious positions.

Dog took off running, yelping.

People hurried to get out of the way, but the wolf was impossible to avoid as he reached a small

crowd waiting to get down the stairs to the next level. The wolf slammed into Doug's leg, knocking the big man forward.

Doug smacked into the three Eagles he had been chatting with. People fell over like bowling pins.

The cats were dislodged. The big male from the bunker landed on Doug's arm and ripped into his skin as it tried to hold on through his flailing movements.

"I'm hit! It's got me!"

The other cat thumped into the wall above the stairs and crouched against it, hissing.

Doug took off down the stairs. *You humans can handle that.*

Jennifer laughed as she went to help untangle the body pile.

Doug tried to shake the cat from his arm, causing it to dig in deeper. Blood dripped onto the floor.

Tonya came up the stairs, travel bag around her neck. She glared at Doug from under her hoodie. "Hold still!" Tonya grabbed the cat by the scruff of the neck and ripped it off his arm.

Doug cringed. "Ow!"

Tonya snatched up the second cat and cradled them both on her shoulders. "Did the big man scare my sweet little babies?"

She hurried down the steps as Eagles snickered.

Jennifer patted Doug on his uninjured arm, laughing with everyone else. "Welcome home."

While Jennifer was distracted, Kyle tried to scan her. Much like Neil, he had figured out a pattern, but the only thing she was contemplating was how good it was to have more Eagles here to do the jobs. Jennifer didn't like training rookies.

Kyle assumed her meeting with the boss had gone well. He wasn't eager to know the details, however. Jennifer knew Angela's full plans now. Kyle had already guessed what duty his wife would be given if Angela didn't return, but he couldn't protest because Angela was right. Jennifer was the only one who might be able to lead Safe Haven to the island in that situation. An enforcer was invaluable.

Jennifer descended the stairs and entered the galley, trying to remember the route for next time. It was the quickest way here. Her meeting with Angela had been over for half an hour, but she had decided to do a quick round of the infirmary before tackling her next chore, which was rounds over breakfast and then the bridge. She'd convinced Angela that hiding would be a mistake, at least until the team left. Jennifer assumed Angela had given in because it was also bait for any would-be assassin to see her walking the halls with only two guards.

Everyone in the infirmary was unconscious; the security there was light. Jennifer didn't know if that was a good idea considering how violent some of the passengers were, but the guards needed to be rotated. They'd been on duty since before dawn.

She was freeing one of them by doing this sweep of their most important areas.

Jennifer took a post in the far corner of the galley. She wanted to be able to see around the lines forming at the counters. Orange chairs and white tables designed to hold ten people each lined one entire side of the long, wide room. The other was filled with orange stools in front of a wide stainless steel counter. Pull shutters between the counter and cooking area were up, letting the camp watch Brittani and her family prepare the meal. Narrow windows with dusty blue curtains gave dim light and a view of endless water surrounding the ship. Many camp members were sipping drinks and watching the waves with pensive expressions. Dark blue doors at either end kept a steady stream of people coming through the linoleum galley. The drink center by each door was already creating two minor traffic jams and blocking the view of the guards. Jennifer made a note in her book to have it repositioned.

Jennifer nodded to a few people but tried to appear standoffish. She didn't want to be distracted by conversations. A lot of people wanted to speak to her about how it felt to be married because they were considering doing it too. Jennifer didn't want to tell them Angela wasn't going to approve their impulsive unions. They had too many other things to worry about.

Jennifer swept the wide galley, noting Shawn being invited to sit with Ivan's team. Little Missy

was by his side and appeared happy. Shawn was also thrilled to get the invitation, telling Jennifer that Eagle had been accepted back into the fold. Jennifer guessed it was because his excellent marksmanship had saved lives today, but she hoped it was more than that. Shawn wasn't a threat to Missy. He was a threat to anyone who would try to hurt or use her gifts for their gain. All Safe Haven's orphans needed that type of support. When she was older, the story might change, but that was at least a decade away. Shawn had redeemed himself for the Tara mess, though people were curious about his relationship with Pam and Morgan. However, the threesome had only had one walk on the beach together and then one meal at the same table. It was too soon to ask how it was going. It was obvious they hadn't had time to judge yet.

Jennifer, along with the rest of the Eagles, watched the people who were either known for rocking the boat or suspected of it. All of them centered on Conner as he left the counter with a full tray and walked to where Candy was sitting alone in a small booth. Jennifer expected him to set the tray down and leave. She knew he had duty in the animal area shortly.

Conner did set the tray in front of Candy and try to leave. After their moment together and his giving himself away by being able to go through Angela's shield, Conner had decided to slow things down. He didn't want to ruin the progress he was making with her or the camp.

Candy was hooked. She grabbed his wrist, forcing him to look at her. “You can’t be banished right now. Join me?”

Conner knew he should deny her request, but he wanted nothing more than to spend a few quiet minutes with her. “It’s not a good idea.”

Candy released him and pointed at the seat. “Sit.”

Conner did.

Candy beamed, making his heart pound. Conner couldn’t resist smiling back, blue eyes gleaming. He loved it that she was making their relationship public. The Eagles would be forced to accept it and so would Angela.

Becoming aware of the glowers and mutters, Candy got nervous. She reached for her cup and knocked her spoon to the floor.

Conner retrieved it in a flash, then took it to the dirty bin. He retrieved a clean set of silverware and brought it to her without acknowledging the surprise of their witnesses. He resumed his seat, putting it next to her hand.

Candy gave him a grateful smile as she opened it.

Conner took the cream and sugar packets and began to doctor her coffee. He already knew how she liked it.

Candy worked on slathering gravy over top the biscuits, groaning. “I can’t wait to eat this. I’ve almost forgotten how fresh biscuits and gravy taste.”

Conner nudged the mug toward her and then began to open the fruit cup. “Try to force a little bit of this too, if you can.”

The couple went about their business, trying to ignore everyone around them. Distracted by her good thoughts, Conner missed the responses to him caring for her needs. Most of the men here had doubted Conner had the maturity to please Lee’s pink-haired widow, but Candy appeared happier and healthier than she had in months. It was hard to hold a grudge against the boy in the face of that. A few of them decided to stop trying and marked him off their list of suspects to be observed or removed.

Jennifer fingered her wedding ring absently, comforted by the feel of it as she swept to see who was here and who wasn’t. The list of names not here shouldn’t have been troubling, but it was. She didn’t see Adrian, Gus, Seth, and several others the Eagles were worrying over.

The camp, on the other hand, wasn’t discussing anything except the story of Angela dying and being brought back. Jennifer was suddenly sure her bait theory was wrong. She’d been allowed out to keep the fragile peace if people started to freak out. So far, the camp was only curious and grateful.

Jeff joined Jennifer in the corner, now wearing rookie Eagle gear that was too big for him. He’d lost weight while roaming the wastelands.

Jennifer frowned. “Why aren’t you taking a break with your team? I know Ivan invited you.”

Jeff didn't want to explain it to the teenager. Jennifer was more like the boss than the others here were. "Too many memories at one time. Needed to breathe."

Jennifer snickered. "And you're avoiding Kevin, right?"

Jeff nodded. "I expect him along at any point. I don't want any part of that."

"Sounds like you didn't like him."

"I don't."

"Well, then I have good news."

Jeff read her thoughts and grunted. "Doesn't surprise me that he's dead. I am surprised Brandon left, though."

"I was too." Jennifer brushed lint from her Eagle jacket. "Angela said he's hoping for a fresh start where his name won't be held against him."

"Good luck on that. Mitchels are trouble."

Jennifer concurred as Conner gave Jeff a dark glare. "Even the ones who seem okay turn out to be a problem."

"What about that one?" Jeff went along with what Jennifer wanted, but he didn't think the boy deserved a chance to fail on his own. His father's choices were enough for Jeff.

"We're watching him. He thinks we don't know he can move through our shields undetected. The next time he does it behind Angela's back, he'll be out of the Eagles and maybe tossed overboard. Kyle has no patience left for that family either."

“Good man.” Jeff glanced over, noting her hair was down. The long brown waves were pretty. She’d always kept her hair up before. “Right? He’s treating you okay and all that?”

Jennifer laughed at the gruff tone. “And then some. No worries.”

Jeff was glad. It would suck to lose another man he’d admired before Adrian’s betrayals.

“If he hadn’t gone after Angela, would you still feel the same?” Jennifer was curious how deep Jeff’s bias went.

“She’s the reason he didn’t turn us over to the government. If he hadn’t gone for her, we’d all be dead.”

“Do you believe that or is it your anger talking?”

Jeff sighed. He did want peace, but anger was hard to let go. “I’m not sure.”

“Fair enough.” Jennifer didn’t push or dig into his thoughts. The other descendants were doing that while she had him distracted.

Jeff glowered. “Why?”

Jennifer scowled back, aware of Eagles edging closer to them in case she needed backup. “You left us. We don’t care why. You won’t just be accepted back in after that. All of you have to earn it.”

“I will. I want to be here now. That makes a difference.”

“Not to me. At least Adrian never abandoned us. Excuse me.” Jennifer marched away. She took a post in the opposite corner to observe people.

Jeff knew he'd failed a test, but he refused to lie about how he felt. Kimmie would be safe here. That was why he'd returned. Even the survival of humanity wouldn't have been able to bring him back.

Descendants who'd needed to know his loyalties marked him off the list and switched to the others who had joined just before they sailed.

Jeff was confused. *That gives me a pass? Man, I'm confused.*

"Me too." Neil appeared by Jeff's elbow, making the man jump. He hadn't heard Neil's arrival.

"Why did you bring Seth and Becky back? We need you, not them."

Jeff snickered. "Still got a thing for her, huh?"

Neil spun away, going to the booth with Doug and Ivan's team.

Jeff grinned. It was easy to get under Neil's skin now. That hadn't been the case in the past.

Jennifer glanced through the porthole window, seeing only water. Jeff had Neil pegged right. Neil was worried his attraction to Becky would ruin his relationship with Samantha.

Neil caught her attention. *Will it?*

Jennifer had already peered into that future, but it was dark. She sent the image to Neil, shrugging sympathetically. *It won't clear until you make a choice.* Jennifer took pity. *I'm doing a round of the bridge next. Escort me and we'll talk?*

Neil immediately followed Jennifer from the galley, eager for the advice. He hadn't had a chance to discuss it with Angela yet and he was afraid to bring it up to Samantha. The last thing he needed was for her to suspect he was considering cheating. *I won't ever do that.*

Jennifer didn't call him on that. Instead, she tried to figure out what he needed from her that she was able to give.

“I need to know if I owe her, like Seth says. Is it my fault she got hurt?”

The pair climbed the stairs, followed by her shadows, while the rest of the camp ate, settled down somewhere to sleep, or stood guard. The relocation from land to sea was being accepted by everyone, but it was still daylight. When darkness fell, that might change.

Chapter Three
Bathed In The Light

Noon

1

“Permission only down here.”

Adrian glanced up from his map. “I’m late. What’s the penalty?”

“No idea. Leave your weapons out here.” Greg pointed to a table, and then to the metal detector next to this post. “Sign the board; smile for the camera.”

Adrian began to remove his gun belt. “Marc’s security is tighter now. That’s great.”

Greg responded with zipped lips. The top level Eagle was a little offended his former idol had assumed the increased security was Marc’s idea.

Footsteps echoed down the creaking hall.

Adrian and Greg both rotated, hands ready to react.

Marc ignored them, already removing his gun belt. He pushed by Adrian to place it on the table.

Adrian understood Marc was required to submit to the same security procedures as everyone else and revised his opinion. That couldn’t have come from anyone except the Eagles. Angela would never force Marc to go through it and Marc wouldn’t have

considered it on his own. Adrian gave Greg an approving nod as he joined Marc at the table.

Greg watched the two men, practicing his observational skills. Neither of them were a threat to the woman waiting impatiently behind the door, but a long sea voyage could make them all rusty. Moments like this would help him stay alert. It was also an opportune time to observe the two rivals for Angela's heart while no one else was around. Because there was only a single witness, the guys might reveal things in front of him. Greg continued his scans and kept his mouth shut.

Both men placed their gun and tool belts on the desk. With as many metal objects as they had in those belts, it was easier to unsnap them than it was to remove each item. Two people had already tried to do that, annoying Greg.

Both men removed a secondary weapon from their boot, and then a third gun from a holster on their backs. Both men also kept a knife inside their shirt, and another in their boot.

Marc pulled a small pouch from the rear of his shirt. It tore off with a loud rip. He placed it on the table, then lifted a brow at Adrian.

The blond man shrugged. "I couldn't find Velcro."

Marc pointed at his. "I have more. Take that poison pill when we come out."

Adrian assumed Marc wanted him to have all equipment necessary to help protect the camp and Angela.

“It’s also to keep *you* alive. This trip will be a lot easier if we cooperate.” Marc regarded the camera over the door, then Greg. “She said thirty minutes for this, but I’d like to be interrupted with a meal in twenty. She needs to recharge.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Greg had no problem with Marc helping her. When Angela had staggered in a few hours ago, Greg had almost called for a medic. *She looks rough.*

Marc and Adrian both frowned.

Greg was also glad Adrian wasn’t going in alone. Marc accompanying him would keep the camp from gossiping. They didn’t need more drama.

Marc shook his head. “They’re going to be spending regular time together. No retaliation is allowed. We’re working things out, but we can’t do that if you’re all in our way. Stay clear or get shoved.”

“I’ll make sure everyone knows.” Greg pushed a button on his watch.

The barrier creaked, then swung open.

Angela opened her mouth to apologize for the hassle they’d been put through. Waves of healing energy slammed into her chest.

Marc and Adrian, bothered by Greg’s thought and her appearance, hit her with another blast. Their hits were fueled by annoyance. Angela hardly ever asked for energy and only took it when they were in the middle of a crisis. Even then, she was quiet

about it and never took as much as she needed. This time, she'd died, and she still wouldn't.

Angela groaned at the mismatched levels, secretly savoring the feel of both men loving her at the same time. She immediately hated herself for it and brought up her shield.

Energy bounced back, missing both men and hitting Greg, who had come over to fasten the door. Kenn hadn't rigged that part of the system yet. There hadn't been time.

Greg sucked in air, stiffening.

Adrian and Marc watched to see what would happen to the stocky Eagle. Most descendant hits either landed or missed. Much like sniper fire, ricochets were rare.

Greg hissed, hands clenching. His skin turned red and his eyes shut, but nothing else happened.

Marc and Adrian were disappointed. They had both suspected Greg was an Invisible and wondered if the energy blast would unlock it.

"He's not." Angela waved a hand, slamming the door in Greg's face. "Sit."

Marc took her right.

Adrian took the chair in the far corner.

Both men swept the luxurious office and approved Kyle's choice for their command center. They had privacy and comfort—two things that had been lacking in the past months.

Angela pointed to a map she'd hung on the wall. "Show me where the international detention center is located."

Marc immediately got up and went to the map.

Angela pointed at a hand drawn schematic near Adrian. “Those are plans for the island. I left room for your notes on the paper taped to it. I’ll add the ones I want to use.”

Adrian got busy, thrilled he was getting this time, but also glad Marc was here. There was a lot to be done and Marc was a brilliant tactician.

Angela stepped to Marc’s hip, studying the area he was marking with a dry erase pencil. “There’s nothing there.”

Marc nodded. “It’s not on the map, apparently. All the governments of the world have places like that, though ours seems to have had more than the others.”

Angela pointed at a blank piece of paper taped on the wall. “I need an idea of how they’ll have it set up. I realize there’s no way for you to know for sure...” Angela fell silent as Marc began to draw the outline of what she assumed was a floating detention center onto the map itself. His movements were detailed and careful, allowing her to relax. She only had one other map of the area and she was carefully protecting this one.

“I’ll try to find you another while we travel.” Marc shrunk the size of his model and the text to save space. “Do you have a pen?”

Angela gave him one from her shirt pocket.

Using his left hand, Marc continued to make small marks on the map in pencil. With his right hand, he made notes on the taped paper in ink.

Satisfied he would give what she needed, Angela sank into the office chair without the groan that had accompanied the movement all day. She'd only allowed a little of their energy to make it through, but the double hit had been potent. She had no doubt her hair was glossy again and her skin was glowing. She felt like she could go for another twelve hours.

Adrian snickered.

Marc didn't. He kept working. Moments like this had always entranced him. Making plans was in his blood. *It's also in my demon.* Marc wondered vaguely where that spirit was now, but he didn't let it distract him. He loved this part of his job.

Adrian and Angela left him to work even when they finished. Adrian settled at the table across from her and took the folder she handed him without speaking. He went through the pages quickly, then started over to fill in the blank spots.

Angela slid a pencil in his direction, then resumed her notes on the things that needed to be accomplished over the next hours. Everyone had finally been collected and relocated to the infirmary. Many of those had been sedated until she was ready to perform the memory charm. Everyone had been accounted for, mostly thanks to Kenn and Tonya, and their serious injuries had been treated. She hadn't read the list of their dead yet, but she had it in her folder. The camp was settling down. Only half a dozen passengers were still on the top deck, according to the update Kenn had delivered half an

hour ago. Security was up, but unfortunately, it was light. The people who had been on duty when the refugees breached the beach had needed to be switched. They were now sleeping, leaving only half the Eagles to occupy posts.

Angela skimmed the list of dead from the beach, heart breaking. They'd lost good people, again. She was tired of that. *When we get to the island, I'll surround us with so much protection even the wind will barely be able to get through.*

When there was time, they would hold a memorial service for all their fallen men and women.

The ship groaned, shuddering lightly as it pushed through debris. Captain Grant had sent an update through Kenn, telling her the garbage would cause a lot of noise, but he didn't expect to have problems because the water was moving quickly. He had informed them still water meant there was a blockage somewhere.

Kenn had also given her an update on the tugs and the boat they were towing, the mood of the camp, and duty station coverage. Things were good. In a few hours, she would have to go up top because that's where the camp would be. Everyone wanted to view the first sunset from the deck, though most people knew it was likely to freak them out a bit. From there, she had the big meeting. The small amount of time she was spending below handling business was all the peace she was likely to get.

She skimmed her list again, trying to verify she had everything covered. If there was time, she also wanted to make rounds of the ship. She hoped to take Marc and Adrian along for that. They could offer suggestions on the way she had things set up.

Marc stepped back. "I think this is done, but give me a few more minutes."

"Same here." Adrian flipped to the beginning of the folder to reread and be positive he had filled in all the details.

Angela gazed at the man who had been forbidden to her for the last few weeks. She kept a firm lock on her thoughts, not wanting to disrespect Marc. He meant more to her than almost anyone and that emotion was growing again. She didn't want to do anything to stop it.

Adrian basked in the knowledge that she cared. Everyone knew it now and he didn't have to hide his enjoyment, though he did keep a tight rein on his thoughts, like she was. Marc had earned that respect.

Marc let out a sigh. "I don't want it to be like that."

Adrian immediately tested the water. He glanced over at Angela. *I missed you.*

Angela refused to give in. She shut the notebook. "I'm the one who needs time now."

Marc grunted.

Adrian reached across the table and took her hand, forcing her to accept the situation she had set up. "I missed you."

Angela was unable to deny the emotions bubbling up. Once again hating herself, she clasped his fingers. “I’ve never felt such pain. You could have taught me how to block that.”

Adrian tightened his grip and sent a small jolt of energy. “I never will.”

Angela sighed at the pleasure and the pain.

Marc stared at them, aware of his jealousy being drowned out by curiosity and the attention to detail he was known for. Even though Angela was higher in descendant status, Adrian had a bigger effect on people than she did. Marc wasn’t certain if that was because Angela held part of herself back or if it was because Adrian was different than the rest of them. Their former leader’s magnetism had brought people from across the country and the world. Many of those souls were still part of Safe Haven’s light. *What is it about him? What does he have that Angie doesn’t?* It was the first time Marc had ever asked that.

Adrian silently rooted for Marc to keep going with that line of thought, enjoying the skin-to-skin contact with the woman he loved. He wasn’t pulling anything shady; he wasn’t even rubbing her fingers. He was just enjoying the moment, with no schemes in mind.

That’s why I’m allowing it. Angela did rub his fingers, marveling at the difference in the textures. His fingers were soft, while hers were rough. It was an odd paradigm for their situation. She guessed he had taken energy recently that had healed his

wounds and scars, but she wasn't positive. Marc was right. Adrian was different than the rest of them.

Adrian was now rooting for both of them to figure it out.

Marc's eyes narrowed. He immediately suspected Adrian of keeping secrets again.

Adrian opened every barrier in his mind to allow the man to explore freely. "I'm not. It's been in front of you the entire time."

Marc thought of their beginnings, the betrayals in the garden. "Someone told Jennifer I'm cursed because of that moment, but you weren't." Marc dug in. "You betrayed the job. You seduced someone else's mate, but you weren't cursed. How is that possible?"

Angela felt a terrible revelation coming and braced for it, but she didn't hurry to beat Marc to the punch. This was their moment. She was just sharing it.

"You were protected!" Marc glared. "You've always been protected. That's why I couldn't kill you! You son of a bitch."

Adrian held up both hands. "I didn't ask to be the favorite in the garden. I just was."

Angela stared at him. "You were bathed in the light. That's why you draw people. You're more like the Creator than the rest of us."

Adrian shrugged, hands coming up. "I have no proof of that, you understand? It's just what I

assume. It's what you two will also now assume, but that doesn't make it true."

"It's true." Marc had no doubt. "It explains everything about you. It also makes me wish I had tried harder to kill you."

Angela hated the new tension between the men. She wanted the fighting to be over.

"It's not all against him." Marc tried not to sound angry as he explained. "This jealousy has nothing to do with you. Favoritism is wrong, and the entire world suffered for it. If Adrian had been punished properly, he probably wouldn't have been reborn. The war may not have happened."

Angela got the big picture, but it was impossible for her to agree. She didn't like favoritism either, but the world had been destined to end at some point. She no longer blamed the entire Mitchel family for the mistake of a couple bad apples. In fact, she was incredibly grateful to Adrian's mother. If she hadn't trained Adrian to prepare for this future, none of them would have survived. Angela didn't believe the war had been preventable. *It was destiny.*

Marc didn't want to argue about it. He was able to accept that she could be right and he could be wrong, but he knew he wasn't. He didn't need to belabor the point because he was positive.

So was Adrian. He had survived too many close calls and mortal injuries in his lifetimes to believe it was just luck or coincidence. He had been protected, given gifts no other descendant on the planet, so far

as he knew, possessed. That was why the government would never stop trying to capture and control him. *I'm unique.*

Angela felt time running down. "I need to know how this is supposed to work."

Neither man spoke, not sure how to explain the agreements they had reached in Ciemus. The few hours they'd spent talking had seen all their issues worked out except for the actual practice. Doing it was a lot harder than discussing it, but both Marines were positive they could handle whatever she might want. Angela had never been unreasonable. They were able to trust her not to use them against each other while they were all adjusting to the situation.

Angela decided to lay out her own rules to trump whatever they'd decided. "I'll never sleep with both of you. I don't want to be alone with *him*." She pointed at Adrian. "And I don't want you to try anything that will make me uncomfortable."

"I can do that." Adrian was willing to agree to anything.

"You *will* be sleeping with us." Marc's tone hardened. "Or we will return to fighting, right now."

Angela's mouth dropped open in shock.

Adrian laughed. He couldn't help it. He already knew what Marc meant.

Angela pulled the thoughts from them and chuckled along. "Okay. That's better." Adrian would have a cot in the cabin as security and he wouldn't always be there. It was perfect.

I wouldn't go that far, Marc thought. But it's tolerable.

Tension crept in again. Angela stared at the small window, not seeing the gauzy curtains or the afternoon sky. "I don't want to do this anymore." She stood and headed for the exit. "I want him moved to the other ship as soon as we return from the meeting."

"No, Angie." Marc slid in front of her. "I haven't caught the assassin yet. I need him to help me watch over you."

Angela knew that was the truth, but she didn't want to go through more drama. There was no way she could lay there at night and look at Adrian while Marc snored behind her. She'd woken in Ciemus that way and she didn't want to do it again.

"Then only one of us will be there when you go to sleep and only one of us will be there when you wake up." Marc ran a thumb across her cheek and slid a curl behind her ear. "I have to insist on this. Don't make me speak to the Eagles for help."

Angela already didn't like it that the camp was aware they were in here working out personal issues. "I want him relocated to the other ship or I'll move there, and you can explain it to the camp!" She left, slamming the door.

Greg fell in on her heels when neither man followed.

Marc and Adrian shared a look. They had known it would be hard to get Angela to accept the set up, but Marc had expected her to give in.

Adrian hadn't.

It was another hard moment for Marc to accept that Adrian knew her better than he did.

"We've discussed this. She has more honor than you give her credit for." Adrian shut the folder and slid it on top of Angela's notebook. "She never broke, man. Not even once and I tried hard."

"I know she has honor. I can't help being jealous."

"I get that."

"It's easier for you. You'll settle for anything she gives."

"And I don't understand why you won't do the same! Neither does anyone else in this damn camp." Adrian had used all of his patience on doing, saying, and thinking the right thing while they were in the room with Angela. Now that she was gone, he could speak freely. "You have to stop thinking of her as the girl you grew up with. That chick died a long time ago. The woman you have is above you in every way. Rage at fate if you want, but do it quick and hard, and then let it go. She needs you to fall in line and accept your place—a step behind her and next to me."

"You already know I'm trying. It's not easy."

"Maybe she should use the memory charm on you." Adrian was joking.

Marc immediately began to consider it.

Adrian backpedaled. "You can't do that. She would never do that to you."

Because Adrian didn't like the idea, Marc considered it further, but Adrian was right. Even if Angela would remove his memory of their love, it wasn't something he would permanently forget. He would always have flashes. Eventually it would all come back. Love couldn't be erased.

"Tell me about it." Adrian pulled a small flask from inside his jacket and held it out. "Let's have a drink and figure out how we can get her to accept this."

Marc took the flask.

Chapter Four

Bait

1

Angela strode down the hall, throwing off the impression she was angry, but nothing was further from the truth. Marc's willingness to cooperate implied she may get what she wanted out of their future at some point. The joy had been about to spill from her mouth. It would have caused another layer of awkwardness that might have made him change his mind.

Right now, Angela wanted two things. One of those might be settled after the meeting tonight. The other one was up to Marc. She didn't have to have Adrian in her life to survive, but if he wanted her to be happy, he would allow his rival to resume the place he had claimed when she first joined Safe Haven. The love she had for both men was opposite. Marc was her heart, her future and her mate. Adrian was her mentor and protector. They were different roles, but both were vital. Adrian still had a lot to teach and Angela wanted to learn it all.

The carpeted hallway under her boots swayed gently with the ship. The expensive prints on the walls didn't slide, though she was sure they would have if they hadn't been secured in place. She

hadn't realized it would be a rough ride down here, but it was. On the top decks, she hardly felt the turbulence of the ship shoving through the water. Below decks, it was impossible to miss.

Greg drew his gun. The safety was on, but after everything they'd been through, he refused to be down even the seconds it would take for him to pull the gun from the holster and lift it. This way, as soon as the threat presented itself, all he had to do was flip and the 9mm would be ready to kill for her.

Angela went by the infirmary first, glad she'd had them put it on the bottom level. The sound of moaning and groaning from their injured hit her ears before she reached the entryway. The camp didn't need to hear that while they were trying to adjust to life on the water. Angela hoped to get the wounded healed within the next few days, but if she didn't return tonight, Jennifer would have to handle it.

Jennifer was now aware of that massive duty, as were the top three levels of Eagles. A few others suspected she'd suggested tossing problems overboard, including Marc and Adrian, but that couldn't be helped. Those two Marines were the sharpest guys on the ship. It would be hard to hide almost anything from them. If not for how respectful she had always been about the situation, both of them might have seen through her ploy already. *I'm bringing you both around to where I need you to be, for me to be happy. It may not be right, but I've earned happiness and I've decided to*

chase it. At some point, I'll have exactly what I want, and Safe Haven will be better off for it.

Angela was always considering the future. The population of their country was now so low if they had been an endangered animal, the penalty for killing one of them would have been a lifetime in jail or fines that took a lifetime to pay off. Americans were going extinct. The women needed to breed, but Angela refused to allow the world to return to the way it had been for females in history. For centuries, they had been owned, sold off to gain more wealth and power. That wasn't going to happen in this future. Once the hurdles of the past were cleared, women would no longer be needy, clingy, and greedy. Men would no longer be abusive, controlling, and possessive. She wasn't trying to encourage promiscuous lifestyles that would lead to unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases to further endanger their population. She just wanted both genders to finally be able to live in peace together without the animosity and acts of retribution that had haunted all societies.

The children who grew up in Safe Haven would see relationships without hatred and violence. They would spread it to everyone they loved during their lifetimes. At some point in the future, monogamous relationships would no longer be how people were judged. Men would no longer be able to call women sluts for chasing their desires and men would no longer sneak around on their mates. The natural

cycle of life had always told humans that monogamy was an unnatural state. In her heart, Angela didn't concur, but mentally and logically, she knew it to be the truth. Humans were the only creatures on the planet that killed out of jealousy. All the lives she'd been responsible for taking had been in vain if that didn't end.

Solving the world's problems were easier now, but also harder. If she pushed too far into anarchy, the future would crumble. If she kept them in too many layers of puritanism, it would revert to what it had been or worse. She was searching for middle ground and she firmly believed those paths were under their feet.

She and Samantha would lead the way on this one, while Ray and Grant would keep tramping down a solution to biases and violence against someone based on their sexual orientation. Beating on spouses would end with Kenn and Zack. Jealousy and controlling a partner would end with Marc. Lusting after a much younger partner would end with Kyle.

Everyone in Adrian's chain of command had serious flaws. Angela had noticed a pattern. She hadn't verified the suspicion with Adrian yet because she was afraid to be disappointed if it turned out that he had done it by accident. Each person in the chain of command had a serious problem representing something from the old world that had contributed to not only the war, but to every bit of violence that had ever happened. From

murder and rape, to obsession, their leaders each represented a challenge to be fixed. Once they reformed and began to spread it, peace would find them and then the long, futile journey the world had made before wouldn't have to be repeated. An actual utopia might stand a chance then, but the strict laws to get them there were dangerous. The balancing act could fall at any time.

Meows and growls, accompanied by short trills, echoed down the hall. Tonya's cats were begging for food from everyone they passed. The only thing the animals seem to care about was sleeping and eating. Angela assumed another topic would be added when the female went into heat, but she wasn't concerned over it yet. They needed more mousers for the island. When the population got larger, operations would be performed to limit the number of breeding pairs—much like the human population would have to be watched and controlled at some point in the future.

Right now, it appeared as though there couldn't be large populations. She hated to set things that way in their new society, but once a population became too big, it was impossible to prevent bad behaviors and old mindsets from returning. The small town set up, while not liked by everyone, had worked out best in terms of keeping the peace among citizens who didn't like each other. That was a problem she would never be able to solve. There was always going to be something about someone else that caused them to be shunned. She was going

to remove as many of those biases as she could, but it wasn't totally solvable.

Marc and Adrian were perfect examples. They were going to cooperate and tolerate for the greater good, but she would never be able to make them become friends and she didn't plan to try. If they were alone with no buffer, violence would be the only thing that ever happened between them. Unfortunately, there would be situations like that in the future. The only way to prevent those things from bleeding onto the new generations and ruining them was to limit the number of citizens and make sure no one was ever alone.

That didn't mean privacy of course, only their surroundings. Big city living was a no-no, but isolating out in the country wasn't good either. They needed a happy medium where everyone knew their neighbor, and at the least, tolerated them. When the population in one area became so large that people no longer remembered who lived on their street or what mail carrier always came through, it would be time to establish a new town. It was the only way humans were going to be able to teach their children a new way of life. They had to watch each other.

Angela hadn't made up her mind on all those items, but she had to have a new constitution before they reached the island. Rules like that had to be part of it. America's founding fathers had been brilliant in how they set things up, but it had also been shortsighted. She doubted the forefathers, in that time period, had considered things like the internet,

mass abortion, gay marriage, or many other issues the world had been fighting over before it imploded. If they had been able to search that far ahead, she was certain they would have put in provisions to prevent the violence. America's constitution was supposed to guarantee the right to life, liberty, and a pursuit of happiness.

New America's constitution would guarantee those were never denied to any citizen, no matter how rich or poor, no matter their gender, or race. Then she was going to make sure the old corruption couldn't find a way in to destroy it. She was going to create the future the founding fathers had hoped America would become. Hindsight was going to make that possible, but she had little doubt there would be issues she hadn't foreseen that future rulers would need to revamp. "I'll have to keep Article V in there."

Greg kept track of the cats and Angela. He'd known she was stewing over something important, but her mutter had narrowed it. He put a hand on her elbow so he could push her out of the way if there was a problem. She was deep in the zone.

Daryl came around the corner and fell in next to Greg.

Greg didn't move his hand, but he did glance over with a lifted brow. His stomach was boiling.

Daryl flashed Eagle code, not wanting to interrupt Angela's thoughts. *You were stressing. I heard it.*

Greg was happy to have help, especially someone who could read thoughts. Knowing there was at least one assassin on the ship made all the Eagles nervous. Anything could happen in the bowels of the boat and the people on the upper decks wouldn't know until it was too late to help.

Angela slowed, attention snagged by the concern of the guys behind her. She was barely aware of Greg touching her, but she didn't like his unease. She also didn't ignore his instinct. He was top level for a reason. "I'm the bait."

Both men felt the shift in mood. Something was about to happen. Greg was right.

"Marc won't like that."

"Neither will Adrian," Greg added, unable to help himself. It was no secret Adrian would die for her.

Angela flipped her braid over her shoulder in annoyance. "Then maybe we shouldn't tell either of them until after it's over. Say it happened fast; there wasn't time."

Given a reasonable excuse, neither man protested.

Angela stopped and leaned against the damp feeling wall of the empty hall. She took her notebook out, then sank to a sitting position on the plush carpet. "I'm going to hang out here. Find a spot."

Daryl saw how she wanted it and motioned to Greg. "Let's go get some chow. The boss needs time to herself."

Greg reluctantly left her alone, accompanying Daryl up the next hall and then out of sight.

As soon as they reached the next intersection, Daryl took them into an employee stairwell most of the camp hadn't been shown yet.

The two men hurried back toward where they'd left Angela, both happy with her choice of location. The employee stairs came out almost directly across from where she was sitting, and the door had a small window for them to see through.

Using Eagle code, Greg told Daryl he was going to circle around to the other employee exit at the far end of the corridor and observe who went by. *I'll think their name as they come through, unless it's a descendant. If it's one of you guys, I'll flash the color blue.*

Daryl nodded. The two men split up.

Angela immediately fell back into the plans she'd been stewing over, trusting the guys to protect her. She wasn't positive something was going to happen. She hadn't seen anything, and neither had any of the other descendants, but the Eagles were sharp. One of Adrian's biggest rules was to listen to the Eagles, to study the things they paid attention to. He had told her the Eagles were more in tune with the camp than any descendant because members would speak openly in front of them. He had insisted a person's words could be more important than thoughts. Angela now agreed. There had been signs all along from their assassin's mouths, but

descendants had been busy scanning minds. She didn't want to keep making the same mistakes.

The ship shuddered and groaned again, causing Angela to look up.

She wasn't surprised by the person standing a few feet away from her, though she was dismayed as the danger was revealed. She didn't think her security could help with this. She stiffened her nerve and glared. "Come on, then!"

Gus lunged for her.

2

Descendants across the ship looked up in horror. Many of them took off running without explaining. There wasn't time.

Blue! Blue!

Daryl was aware of Greg mentally shouting the alert, but he wasn't to the door yet. He broke into a run.

Daryl jerked the door open, but he only saw Gus laying where Angela had been. Daryl assumed she was under the big black man, but he couldn't see her.

Daryl spotted the charred wall above Gus and the flames dying on the carpet by his body. *He's protecting her.*

"Duck!" Angela shouted in a muffled tone of pain.

Daryl hit the ground instead of shooting Gus.

Fiery magic flew through the hallway and barely missed Daryl. It slammed into the wall and broke apart in vicious sparks.

“Don’t make me shoot you!”

Greg’s shout from the end of the hall was panicked, confirming Gus wasn’t the threat. Daryl shoved to his feet.

Magic blasted into his arm, sending his weapon spinning down the corridor.

A gunshot rang out.

Footsteps and shouts echoed through the lower deck. Greg’s was the loudest.

“Last chance! I will shoot you again!”

“Do it already!” Gus felt Angela’s pain. “Kill that crazy bitch!”

Fire came again, then a scream. Greg was hurt.

Daryl sank back to his knees to avoid the next blast of heat.

Gus took the hit in full, screaming, but he didn’t move off Angela. His clothes flamed up. The smell of burning cloth filled his nose as he slapped at it.

Another blast hit his legs.

Daryl scrambled for his gun. “I need a location!”

“Right here!” Becky threw a blast of fire that encompassed the entire hall.

Daryl fired.

The flames swarmed over all of them, bringing fresh screams and the sizzle of cooking flesh.

Becky shouted as Daryl's bullet plunged into her leg, knocking her backward into the intersection.

Greg, recovering from her flames, fired a second bullet into her shoulder. He wanted to aim for the heart, but Angela was denying him mentally.

Becky fell to the ground, but it didn't stop her from firing a last blast of rage. "You have to die!"

Greg fired again.

Becky screamed, clutching her stomach as she fell. Blood pooled around her shoulder, arm and legs.

Flames came down the corridor in a huge fireball. It hit everyone.

Greg recoiled, screaming as the fire ran over his back and neck.

Daryl spun around and took the flames up and down his legs.

Gus shuddered as the fire engulfed him.

Angela passed out from lack of oxygen. Gus's weight was smothering her, and Becky's flames had pulled the air from the hallway.

Water sprinklers flipped on, drenching everyone and the weak flames trying to grow along the walls and carpet.

"Becky!"

Seth's shout was followed by his angry grunts as he fought against the guards refusing to let him reach his fallen mate.

"She's pregnant! She's pregnant!" Seth went into panic mode. "Save the baby!" He dropped to

his knees. “I’ll give you anything you want! Adrian! Help her!”

Ivan clubbed Seth on the head to shut him up, furious. He didn’t know if Seth had been part of the attack and he wasn’t taking the chance.

Adrian and Marc arrived at the same time. Adrian knelt by Becky as Marc hurried into the smoky hall. Angela’s last order had been to save the angry girl.

Marc waved his hand through the smoke, ears straining to hear something beyond groans and coughs. He pulled his shirt over his nose to muffle the smell of burnt flesh and cloth. He also held his breath. He didn’t care about inhaling the smoke. He was terrified because he wasn’t getting anything from Angela.

“She’s under Gus!” Greg choked out, hands groping for a landmark.

Marc flinched from Greg’s charred form. “Medic! Medic!”

Greg let Marc steer him in the right direction and pulled away. “Get the boss!” He staggered off and was grabbed by Morgan.

Daryl grabbed Marc’s leg as he went by. “Under Gus!”

“Fuck!” Marc’s startled shout echoed down the smoky hallway. “Medic! Medic!”

“More medics are coming!” Morgan shoved Greg toward the first set of arms they reached through the smoke. He was desperate to get back

and help the others. Marc's panic was raw pain in his brain.

Conner ran by Morgan, faster than the older man as he too answered the calls for a healer.

Morgan went to Daryl, almost able to see through the smoke. Portholes were being opened to let in the salty breeze. He immediately began sending healing orbs, grateful he had the new gift. His evolution had come as soon as he'd taken the first lifeforce on the beach.

"Over here!" Marc directed Conner to help with Gus. Other than being singed and probably bruised, Angela was unharmed. He'd verified she wasn't hurt and was breathing, then began to help Gus, but Marc's gift wasn't able to do much more than offer pain relief. There was a big difference between this and what he could do for his mate.

Conner didn't have that disadvantage. He shoved healing orbs into Gus's big body in huge blasts, eager to do his share and earn his place in camp despite his last name.

More footsteps and shouts came.

Marc stood, directing Brittani toward Gus. Then he addressed the rookies who didn't know what to do. "We need stretchers and people to carry them. Get bunks ready in the infirmary. We have three casualties here. I want a complete search for more."

Men and women hurried off as ordered, leaving Marc alone with the victims and healers. He stood watch over them, wishing he could do more.

Brittani held Gus's hand while Conner healed him, lending strength to both of them.

Harry came over to sedate Gus.

Brittani stared into his painfilled eyes until they closed. She didn't speak to him. She didn't need to. Being here was enough for both of them.

Adrian came through the smoky hallway, arms covered in blood. "She might live. Hard to say with her being so underweight."

"The baby?"

Adrian shrugged in response to Marc's question. "I did the best I could. Jennifer's working on her now. Fifty-fifty chance."

Eagles rolled Gus onto a stretcher and hefted him into the air.

Brittani kept pace as they took him toward the infirmary. Gus was unconscious, but only partly healed.

"Gus?!" Trinity appeared ahead of them. She ran toward the stretcher, ignoring everyone else.

Brittani sighed, pausing to let the procession go down the stinking hallway. She saw the stretcher with Daryl and paled. *Both my men were hurt.*

Adrian joined Marc in the corner. "Can you tell what happened?"

"I think so." Marc had been working it out in his head. "Becky came around the corner behind Angie just as Gus reached this intersection. Becky fired. Gus jumped on Angie to cover her. He didn't have time to pick a spell."

"We'll work on that."

“We need to. If he’d brought up a shield, half the fire might not have gotten through.”

“Would you have thought to do it?”

Marc grunted. “Doubtful. None of us are used to fighting that way yet.”

Adrian stepped aside for the Eagles to carry Daryl by them. All three injured men had now been given help. Morgan wasn’t strong enough to do all of them on his own and Conner’s banks were still low from not taking energy from camp members or Candy. Once they rested, their injured would receive another session of healing from someone.

At the other end of the intersection, Jennifer labored over Becky, trying to save the baby. Marc wasn’t encouraged by the waves of desperation coming from the scene. Jennifer was losing that fight. Marc thought it was for the best, but he would never say so. He agreed the babies weren’t responsible for what their parents did, but Becky would be hung for this. Doing it while she was pregnant would put a stain on Safe Haven that wouldn’t come off.

Morgan put his hand on Angela’s arm and used the last of his energy to heal her bruised rib.

Marc waved at Adrian. “Get her moved to the infirmary. I’ll be on your heels.” Marc went to the employee exit and took a post there. It gave him a good vantage point now that the smoke had cleared.

Adrian didn’t try to wake Angela as he lifted her. He sensed Marc didn’t want that. Adrian preferred her up and spitting fire too, but at this

moment, he agreed. Let her rest while she could. This attack would bring new tension for her to handle before the meeting tonight.

“That’s not it.”

Adrian frowned at Marc’s tone. *He’s hiding something from Angela.*

Marc grunted, turning to scan the hall as footsteps came again. *Yes, I am and you’re going to help me.*

What is it?

I’ll tell you while we have that beer.

3

Angela opened her eyes.

Marc and Adrian leaned over the cot. Hands came to her arm, her shoulder.

Angela snickered despite the uncomfortable bed and her sore body. “Wow. It’s like a dream I had...but you were both zombies.”

Adrian sniggered, letting go of her. He veered to a sentry position to give them a moment of privacy.

Marc helped her sit up. “How do you feel?”

“Like I was hit by a truck.” Angela swept the infirmary, seeing no one else was awake. “Did she survive?”

Marc nodded toward a rear area.

Angela spotted three guards, then Seth’s shadow on the floor by Becky’s cot.

“He dropped out a little while ago. We didn’t have to sedate him.”

“The baby?”

Marc shook his head, but he didn’t feel the sadness he tried to convey.

Angela shut her lids, shuddering. “I didn’t think she’d do it. I didn’t realize how bad off she was.”

“There wasn’t time to scan the new people.” Adrian felt that way about everyone who had come in last minute during the chaos on the beach.

“Agreed.” Marc didn’t want her feeling guilty, but there was no way they could have kept it from her.

Angela let a single tear roll over her cheek, then stopped the flow. She was tired of crying, tired of caring.

Adrian frowned.

So did Marc. Her depression was clear. “I thought time with you was supposed to help that.”

Adrian shrugged. “There’s only so much I could do in one night. You know?”

Marc grunted. He was still jealous of that one night. He couldn’t help it. The need to have her all to himself would never fade. The best he could do was fight it.

Angela’s fast glance at Kendle confirmed Adrian’s suspicions about who had ordered someone to heal her. The guards were unhappy over it and vaguely accusing a few in their own ranks, but Angela wasn’t surprised. He flashed a fast code to Wade. *It was her order.* He nodded to Kendle.

Wade shifted sideways, blocking the view to everyone except Adrian. *How do you know?*

Watch the boss.

Wade kept his attention on Angela, willing to trust Adrian, who definitely knew her better.

Angela swept the infirmary to cover her glance at Kendle, but she couldn't help coming back to the island woman. Instead of hatred, there was relief. She'd sent Charlie alone while he was still weak from the side trip. It had been a risk, and a new trust in her son that she planned to encourage.

Wade let the worry go, convinced. Kendle still had value, he assumed. If not, she would have been finished off instead of healed.

Angela stood, wobbling, then put her hand on her gun. She glanced at the sedated men who had defended her without a thought to their own lives. "I want to know when they wake."

So did Marc. "It won't be until morning. Morgan shot them up heavily. He said they shouldn't move too much."

"I'll try to heal them the rest of the way when we return."

Morgan entered the infirmary and went to his desk. "Conner did well. He just ran out of energy." Morgan was stewing on ways to increase his energy banks. He'd had the same problem.

"What happened, Angie?" Marc wasn't convinced it had been random, but the guards involved weren't available for questioning yet.

She didn't look at him. "You know what happened."

"Why didn't you call for either of us?" Adrian was on Marc's side in this moment. She deserved a scold if she'd used herself as bait.

The guards in the room agreed.

Angela's lips thinned. "I couldn't see ahead. I wasn't sure something was coming." She grunted, head dropping. "It won't happen again."

Adrian looked at Marc. "Did she just apologize?"

Marc nodded, frowning. "Yes. Be worried."

Angela chuckled. "I'll be on the top deck for a bit and then on rounds."

Adrian lifted a brow. "You're not removing their memories."

"No." Angela limped toward the door to the stairs. "Memory charms wear off, but if they're cured of the illness, we may not need it. We'll help them adjust."

"Is that possible?" Marc had witnessed the destruction the kids had caused on the UN ship. He doubted they could all be reformed.

"I have to try." She pointed at the guards over Becky's bound body. "Add another one. When she wakes and finds out she lost the baby, it might get ugly again."

Adrian did while Marc escorted Angela topside.

The deck of the cruise ship was too big to be considered packed by only two hundred people, but it was full. A cheer broke out as Angela joined them.

Angela waved at people to let them know she was okay, heart warmed. They really did love her.

Marc kissed her cheek. "Yes, we do."

Angela blushed, smiling.

The crowd around them thinned, sensing the couple wanted a private moment.

Angela held onto the rail and enjoyed the fresh air. She inhaled deeply, hoping it stayed this clean. The water was beautiful. The lack of land in view warred with the calming sensation. *I miss you already. No matter where we land, America, you're my home. Everywhere else is just a rest stop.*

Marc felt tension growing. "Is something wrong?"

Angela regarded him sideways, brows up and that V in her chin standing out. "What are you hiding from me?"

Marc winced. "Not even three hours. Damn, you're fast now."

Angela didn't let him distract her. She stared, waiting for an answer.

"What gave me away?"

"You and Adrian were touching me at the same time. You know I like that. I know you hate it. You only do it when I'm very low or you're guilty."

Marc sighed. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Why are you guilty?"

“It’s nothing to worry over. It’s a personal matter.”

Angela caught the image of her and Adrian discussing the baby charm. Her cheeks turned scarlet. “What about it?!”

Marc understood she hadn’t intended to follow through, but he did. “I want you, us, to have that. We’ll always lead the fights against evil, but there’s no reason we can’t be happy while doing it.”

“I have the kids on this ship and I’m a busy girl. I don’t need that.” Angela tried to do the right thing. “We don’t–”

“I already told him we’re doing it at some point on this trip.” Marc kissed the corner of her open mouth. “Just accept it. Adrian and I are going to get you pregnant.”

Marc couldn’t help the laughter as he walked toward the bridge for a check in. After that, he had duty over the infirmary. Adrian would stay with Angela.

Adrian joined Angela, able to feel her shock and her excitement. “Easy... Careful...”

Angela locked it down, glaring at him. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“It was his idea. I’m not crazy enough to say no.”

“Moral enough, you mean.”

Adrian grinned. “That too.” His amusement faded. “You know he lied, right?”

Angela snorted. “Yes. But not about this.”

“No. He’s got the words now. We’ll work on the actual spell a bit when we return from the higher power meeting.”

“That’s what we’re calling it?” Angela snorted.

“Yep, though a few people have a more derogatory title.”

Angela tried to pull it from his mind and found a wall. She bristled, hand coming to her hip. “Really?”

Adrian nodded. “You need to work off some of those building nerves.”

Angela swept the ship and found passengers observing them. “Some other time maybe.”

“Angie, they know what we are, what *you* are, and they came anyway.”

“There’s no need to hide it...”

“No.” Adrian strengthened his mental wall. “Come on. Find the name.”

Angela began digging at the corner of his mental wall, sensing an opening.

“Very good. What about now?”

Angela dug under the front for the weak spot.

“Nice. How about now?”

She yanked the wall down from the top, grinning.

Adrian threw up a barrier and blocked her.

Angela snickered as she ripped it away from him and used it to strengthen her own gifts.

“Wow.” Adrian tried to do the same to her and failed.

Angela smirked. “Guess I get to teach you a few things.”

Adrian grew serious. “I’d be honored.”

Angela paused as a thought occurred. “Why don’t you know this stuff? You were a government tracker. You fought our kind for years.”

“All my life.” Adrian sighed. “I didn’t have gifts like this until you came to Safe Haven. You triggered my evolution. And everyone else’s.”

“The war did that.”

Adrian didn’t flinch from his duty to tell her the truth. “No, Angie. They would have remained Invisible without you.”

Angela wasn’t certain how to take that.

“It’s fate.”

She slowly lowered the shield. “Yeah. What a fickle bitch.”

Adrian shrugged. “Some days she’s amazing.”

“I’ll agree with that.” She ripped down his last shield as she walked away. “Tell the camp not to call it Dizzyland until after the meeting. It might be considered offensive.”

Adrian’s laughter echoed across the deck.

Chapter Five
My One Ace

1

“Hey.”

Marc glanced over to find Kendle awake. The scarred woman was staring at him in surprise instead of the regret or the defiance he’d expected.

“I know you.”

Marc let out a bitter snort. “If that were true, you wouldn’t be restrained.”

Kendle had already accepted the fact that she was bound to the cot. “I mean I still recognize you. She hasn’t done the memory charm.”

Marc rotated to scan the opposite direction. He couldn’t stand the sight of Kendle now. Angela had put him here to test his remaining bond with the castaway, but there wasn’t one.

“It won’t matter to you, will it?”

“No. I’ll always see you killing her. She’d have to erase my memory too.”

Kendle began to cry.

Marc felt nothing but contempt. Kendle didn’t deserve a free pass. He felt the same about Becky. If not for the danger they posed to Angela, he would have insisted they suffer the illness with everyone else. Getting a memory wipe was too easy.

“That’s why she let me do it.” Kendle grimaced as the truth hit her. “It was never for me.”

“She needed me to hate you.” Marc glowered at his onetime companion. “It worked. Don’t speak to me again. You turn my stomach.”

Her tears fell harder.

Marc watched her this time and still felt nothing.

The full cots around them held sleeping children who muttered at the bad vibes. Marc swept the long, narrow room, searching the unconscious people for trouble. The fifty cots here wouldn’t hold many more. He hoped they got this settled before the camp had an illness.

All the empty cots were occupied by Eagles taking a break before guard duty. They couldn’t rest in the living quarters. People were too talkative. In here, it was only groaning and tears.

Morgan came over to give Kendle a sedative.

Kendle went out fast, wishing she’d died.

Morgan placed the vial of medicine back into the cabinet and locked the glass case. He put the master key in his pocket and knelt by the next box. He wasn’t leaving any of the meds unlocked, even while sorting and unpacking. Morgan had gotten through a quarter of the boxes so far. The stacks of books would take a while. They were still being gathered from the cargo area. The medic desk nearest to the stairs was already covered in papers and folders. The cots on each side of the desk held napping guards who could be woken for help. The infirmary was in full swing. “We need to drop her

somewhere if the boss can't do a memory charm." Morgan gestured at Becky's unconscious body. "The camp will never forgive them. None of us will."

Marc shrugged. "I'd just as soon drop them into the ocean, but Angie probably has plans made. Talk to her."

"I will. We don't need either of them."

"Don't need who?" Shawn came through the farthest entry near the first aid cabinets.

Marc braced for fresh tension.

Morgan waved to Kendle, then Becky. "Them."

Shawn nodded his agreement. He sat down two cups of coffee on the small desk. "Busy later?"

Morgan shook his head. "Not tonight, honey. Tell her I have a headache."

Marc snickered with them, glad they'd accepted their new situation. Neil and Jeremy had fought much longer.

Morgan shrugged. "We're not rivals for Pam. It's different for us."

Marc frowned. "How is that possible?"

Shawn shrugged when Morgan looked at him for permission. "I don't mind Marc knowing. We can trust him."

Morgan was relieved. He felt the same. "It's less work. Women need a lot of shit, man, a lot of care. Men like freedom. It works out perfectly as far as we're concerned."

Marc wasn't convinced. "Sounds like laziness."

“Says the man who plans to use Adrian as a guard dog for this trip.” Shawn waited for Marc to fire back.

Marc grinned. “Fair enough, but I still don’t believe you.”

Morgan winked at him. “We also like watching, three-ways, and going against the norm. So does Pam.”

Male mirth filled the infirmary, bringing calmer dreams to the kids and lifting the mood of the ship. A wave of peace settled into the walls.

Steps echoed.

Kenn appeared. “They’re gathering on the deck. Your shift’s up.” He handed Marc a folded paper. “Read it on the way to the top. I’ve got your post.”

Kenn picked a sentry position as Marc departed, aware of the good mood in the infirmary. He chose not to interrupt it and kept his mouth shut.

2

Marc stuffed the note into his pocket as he climbed the carpeted stairs toward the top deck, nodding at the camp members he passed. His mind stayed on Shawn and Morgan, but he refused to let it skip to Kendle. He hated her now. Nothing would ever change that. His one regret was that Angie didn’t feel the same about Adrian.

Whitney pointed Marc in the right direction as he hit the top deck. The odor of fishy water hit his nose, but faded under his attention to detail as he

swept the ship. Marc counted three teams up here. He approved of the heavy security. There was a lot to secure.

The top deck was divided into five sections. The center, directly under the bridge, held a small swimming pool and a golf course. On each side of those were sunbathing areas and romantic tables with welded lamps and chairs. The front of the large ship held a giant pool with colorful slides at one end and dual saunas at the other. The rear of the cruise liner sported a fenced tennis court next to a gated playground that rivaled any schoolyard setup.

Chlorine from the swimming pools wafted on the tropical breeze, reminding Marc they hadn't made a choice about the water in those containers yet. After nearly a year in the open, the top deck needed to be cleaned before use, but none of them knew how to drain the massive pools yet. Theo and Grant would work on it when they got time, but the camp members were already staring in longing as the sun sank. That desire would spread. Angela would order it at some point. The happiness of camp was a top priority.

Marc spotted Angela's long braid and began brooding. She was surrounded by men, as usual. The cloudy horizon matched his mood swing.

Angela felt him coming and smiled over Adrian's shoulder.

Marc's jealousy was soothed. He hated that part of himself, but it was there whether he liked it or not. He still didn't know how their future was going

to work out, but at least they would be together. After witnessing Kendle's murder attempt, and now the results of Becky's try, in just six hours, surviving was all Marc wanted. Other concerns would wait.

The guys around Angie respectfully retreated to allow Marc into the perimeter. He received nods but no chatter, telling him this wasn't a good meeting. He didn't scan their thoughts, however. He would know shortly.

"We were discussing what happens tonight."

Marc leaned against the rail next to her. "Have you decided who you're taking?"

Angela gestured at the circle around her.

Marc grimaced a bit. "You're taking four killers to a meeting with beings who need us to be pure?"

Angela snickered. Each of the men here had reacted the same way upon learning that information.

"Yes."

Marc shrugged. "You're the boss." He was secretly relieved by her choices. Kyle, Neil, and Adrian would all die for her if it was called for.

"It won't be."

Marc frowned at Adrian. "Can you promise that?"

"He can't, but I can." Angela handed Marc a notebook. "They need me alive. I don't know why, but I'm positive of that. It may well be the one ace up my sleeve."

Marc believed that was the truth. If not, she would have already died for blasphemy, among other sins. Marc swept the passengers around them, like the other men were doing. After their most recent issues with people they'd thought were harmless, scanning everyone to verify they weren't a threat was an automatic defense.

Angela left the men alone, but she didn't believe there were more threats on the ship. Jennifer had matched the handwriting from the note to Becky. Jennifer had also told her Becky hadn't been trying to hurt her for personal reasons. It was a way to get to Adrian.

Marc glowered at the blonde man as he picked up Angela's thought. "It always comes back to him."

Angela didn't have patience to deal with this again. She redirected the conversation. "I'm not sure what's going to happen. I don't want to split up for any reason."

"Do you think you'll be in danger?"

Angela zipped her jacket against the damp chill of sunset. "That has not been revealed."

That answer drew the normal frowns and a new layer of concern.

"They haven't dealt with us honestly up to this point. No reason to believe that's going to change just because I forced them into a meeting. Watch your six and don't agree to anything without my permission."

All the men nodded. This was new territory.

“Has there ever been a meeting like this before?” Marc looked to Adrian for the answer.

Adrian shrugged. “Not that I know of, but I doubt the government would have given me access to that information. However, descendant legends do mention contact with the heavens. It was always passed off as exaggeration, but every report said not to trust the angels who spoke to mankind.”

“What else?” Marc could feel Adrian holding something back.

Adrian ignored Angela’s subtle head shake. Marc needed to know. “Most deals require a sacrifice. I don’t think we’ll get back here without blood being shed.”

Angela waved off their concern. “Just because blood has to be spilled, that doesn’t always mean a lot of it.”

Each of the Eagles stored the information as Marc switched to the next question.

“Will our guns work there?”

No one could answer that.

Marc’s frown covered most of his profile now. “What about leaving when we want to?”

Angela realized there was a lot more she should have covered when she arranged the meeting. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

Marc sighed. “Well, it’s too late now. We’ll do the best we can with what we do know.”

“And what is that?” Neil hated being separated from Samantha. “What exactly do we know?”

Angela leaned against Marc's shoulder, enjoying his warmth as the breeze blew over them. Nightfall was nearly here. "We know all the agreements are binding, throughout the generations. That's why you can't agree to anything."

"I don't like this. It's hinky." Kyle noticed camp members trying to listen. He motioned the guards to move them back, then looked to Adrian. "Tell us what you expect. Stop holding things back."

Adrian stiffened. "I can't just tell you everything. If I do that, you won't go."

Angela and Marc glared at him.

Adrian shrugged. "Okay, but remember you asked for it." He shifted a little closer, also aware of their growing audience. "If we don't strike a deal, I don't think any of us are coming back."

Angela wasn't surprised, though it did concern her that Adrian assumed the same as she did about it. "I made plans for that contingency. When you say your goodbyes, make them real. It might be the last time we see any of these people." Angela pulled a paper from her pocket and handed it to Marc before he could protest further or ask more questions. "I need you to make sure these things are taken care of in the next half hour, then meet us back here."

Marc skimmed the list, gave her shoulder a rub, then headed off to take care of the list.

The other three guys waited for chores, but Angela shook her head. "I'd like you to stay here until it's time to go. Marc has restless energy to burn

off. I don't want him flipping out in the middle of the meeting."

None of them were surprised, except that it was being said aloud. They all approved her choice.

Angela scanned the dark water around the ship. The line of orange lifeboats right below them looked small from this view. They held ten people each, covering all the camp members here. If their population grew too large in the next four years, it wouldn't be enough.

A few seconds later, the speakers on the deck crackled with Grant's voice.

"There's a debris field ahead of us. Things may get rough until we push through it."

Under their feet, the ship slowed.

"Shouldn't we try to go faster and ram through?" Neil had only been on a small fishing boat.

Angela bent to retie her boot. "Our captain doesn't think so."

The men were forced to accept that answer.

Across the deck, passengers gravitated toward the stairs for protection.

Angela didn't tell them it wasn't safer below. She didn't want to create a panic, and at this point, it didn't make any difference. She had asked for protection. She was confident they would receive it at least until the meeting was finished.

Debris littered the water in thick waves of twisted, tangled wreckage that smacked into the ship as it went through. Long fields of garbage

shook loose as the ripples hit, dislodging more jetsam from the rotting piles. Wood, plastic, cloth, and rope were the most common items.

The ship began to hit debris. Small and large items bounced off the hull, creating ripples that revealed more debris below the surface. As the ship's wake hit the field, noises of material being crushed echoed loudly, startling everyone.

Adrian felt Angela's fear and shifted closer to her, trying to lend strength. While he also believed they were protected, listening to the old world being crushed made it hard not to worry.

Angela leaned against Adrian's shoulder, the way she'd done with Marc.

Hardly anyone noticed. The debris smacking into the ship was holding everyone's attention.

Adrian kissed the top of her head and put his arm around her shoulder. It was indescribable to be allowed to comfort her openly.

Angela sighed. All she had to do now was get them through the meeting alive.

3

Marc paused in the entrance of the garden. He'd been down here twice before they set sail, but that was days ago. A lot of work had been done since then. The harsh smell of fresh compost made his eyes water. Samantha and Debra had just turned their corner heap for the first time. It was pungent.

Marc narrowed in on three shadowed figures across the wide area. Samantha, in a wheelchair, was being pushed by Theo and guarded by Debra. Eagles were also in each corner. All of them had acknowledged Marc as soon as he appeared.

“...figure out how to shut the awning at some point, but for now, the entire garden gets sunlight. It’s the perfect room.” Samantha consulted her map and pointed. “The bees are in the center now, in their coffee can. They’re already expanding the nest.”

Theo nodded to Marc, as did Debra.

Samantha didn’t notice. “We’ve also hung empty cans around the garden in case we get another queen, or they just want to move.”

Marc left without interrupting. Samantha was in the groove. It was obvious she’d been working hard despite being physically limited. Vertical gardens waiting for soil and seeds lined every wall. There wasn’t an empty space.

Those pouches would provide fruits, herbs, and medicinal plants. The wide, round grow bags in the center held up to twenty plants each, all put in according to the companion planting guide Samantha was using. Water buffalos sat at the end of the rear row, next to a small desk with clipboards. Samantha had already spent time filling out the details for plant care. Angela was going to use this massive setup as a training tool for camp members to learn to grow their future. Marc guessed the actual planting would take place over the next

couple of weeks. It appeared things were ready to go here.

Marc trotted back up the stairs. He'd just needed to check on Samantha. He didn't need to interrupt her concentration. He took the empty hallway to the children's zone, the next stop on his list. It had been the younger fun center of the ship before the war, complete with a daycare, first aid office, and a nice playground. All they'd done was clean and stock it.

Marc grimaced at a loud scream and squeal. "Sounds like they approve of their quarters." He stopped around the corner, positive he wouldn't go unnoticed.

"There!"

Safe Haven kids charged toward his location, laughing and shouting. Cody was in the lead.

Marc was mobbed, knocked down, and buried. His chuckles rang out from the bottom of the pile. "I surrender!"

"We want to use the pool!"

"Will you push us on the swings?"

"We want ice cream!"

Marc began tickling the bodies holding him. "How about I chase, and you run?!"

The kids scrambled away, squealing.

Marc didn't even notice the noise this time. He ran after the happy children, enjoying the moment.

“You’re on downtime during the meeting.” Shawn handed Ray the paper to prove it and took a post over the captain. The blue carpet up here was tracked with mud and beach sand, but the windows were so clean they almost disappeared. Shawn made a mental note to have someone come up and sweep. Angela had made it clear the ship needed to be cared for too. It wasn’t only the people who would respond better to clean surroundings. “We just changed shifts. We’re not putting that over the radio yet.”

Ray was torn. He didn’t want to leave Grant.

Grant grinned. “I felt that.”

Ray stormed from the cabin.

Shawn chuckled, scanning the rows of monitors. He was happier now and it showed. “Ray’s a great guy. Keep working on him.”

Grant studied the open water to be sure it was still clear, then looked at Shawn. “Is he right about it causing trouble?”

“Nope. We accepted him a long time ago.”

“What about me?”

Shawn shrugged. “It may cause you a few awkward conversations, but not because you’re a homo, you know?” Shawn grinned to be sure the man understood it was a joke.

Grant snorted. “They warned me that you Eagles say what you think.”

“Well, I think you two are cute together. So do some of the others, but acceptance is not about sex. It’s about not lying, ever.”

Grant studied the dark horizon. “I get that, clearly.”

“Good.” Shawn swept the dark entrances. “Now you can quit asking all of us if it’s a problem. You don’t need our approval to have a relationship with Ray.”

Grant flushed.

Shawn let him wriggle a bit. The man was starting to get on his nerves by never speaking about anything else. Shawn enjoyed the feel of the ocean breeze and the sight of the swells around the front of the ship. The debris was behind them and the view was amazing. If not for knowing this heavy ship was the only thing between them and drowning, it would be a great way to live. Shawn could understand the attraction for those who’d made the water their home.

So could Grant. He was settling right back into his environment. Computers and counters lined the front wall of the bridge, right up to the glass. All the control panels had been cleaned. Grant’s papers were spread here and there, along with notebooks and pen pouches. Handrails covered the front of the computers, telling his guards the bridge was a rough place to ride out a storm.

Shawn saw a group of Ciemus women on the deck, picking out a fishing location. They were also enjoying the floating ride. Near that group, two Safe Haven men were leering at the working women. Shawn noted their names and moved on with his observations. It was fine to let the females know you

were interested. It wasn't okay to stare and drool like they were porn stars.

Shawn saw Angela head for the chairs at the end of the deck; he tensed. *It's time.*

5

The sunset was beautiful, but people were too nervous to enjoy it. Angela and her team were about to leave for the power meeting. That meant laying in sunbathing chairs under the bridge and going to sleep. At least that's what Adrian had told everyone. When Angela sat in the center chair and leaned back, it proved his words.

The deck was lined with concerned people—camp and Eagles. The chairs and tables scattered along the rail of the deck allowed the guards places to sit and observe without being noticed right away. Now that the moment was here, no one wanted Angela to go.

Angela drew on her courage, enjoying the breeze that was making the table cloths flap. If not for being nailed down, those would have been gone long before they found the ship. A good wipe was all they'd needed to be usable, which was both a relief and a bit disconcerting. Plastics had held up much better than people.

"I'm ready." Angela shut her eyes, trying to calm herself. Grant and Jennifer were geniuses. Samantha was able to predict storms. Conner and Morgan could heal. The Eagles could train. Kenn

and the other descendants would throw the infected overboard if there was a breach in quarantine. It was the best she could do. “How does this work?”

For a few seconds, all she heard was the sound of water against the ship.

You will come now.

The men who’d been chosen to go along didn’t shut their eyes. They gave hand coded orders to the sentries or stared at their loved ones until the light grew too bright to stand.

Chapter Six

Levels

1

Marc opened his eyes. He did a fast sweep and was relieved to find his body here. They hadn't been given details on how that worked.

“Amusing.” A male chuckle echoed in a double timbre Marc instantly associated with their kind.

Are you there?

Marc's demon lifted a sleepy head. *Yes?*

Marc breathed another sigh. Angela hadn't clarified these little details. He'd been nervous.

The man chuckled again. “So easily distracted by the obvious.” His amusement fled. “It's no wonder you destroyed it all.”

Marc finally glanced around. He studied the short man with the scornful face and hairy body. “Messenger.” He'd recognized the voice.

The little man bowed, doffing his hat to reveal three short horns and a bald spot in the center of his tangled black locks.

Marc snickered. “Man, did I picture you differently.”

The Messenger donned his hat and straightened. “We come in all forms, *Adam.*”

Marc's hands dropped to his guns. "Don't call me that." He tapped cold steel. "Or I'll find out if these work up here. Curious, you know?"

The Messenger snapped his fingers.

Forms appeared around Marc. He stepped over the most familiar one, standing guard. White fog twined around them, obscuring the view of everything except the little man observing him, frowning.

But his eyes say something different, don't they, Marine? Marc use his sharpest skills to evaluate the Messenger. *He's full of glee. That feels dangerous.*

The Messenger smirked but didn't confirm it.

Marc felt Angela twitch against his leg. Her mutter alerted him to an issue. "She isn't waking."

"She is honoring her deal."

Marc scowled. "Send me to her."

"In time." The Messenger pointed to Angela's body. "She is agreeing to a demonstration. We are simply observing you in single order."

Marc listened to Angela's tones. He couldn't decipher the words, but he could hear her anger. He reacted like he thought she would want. "Send me to her or I'll use our bond and scream. She'll pull out of this meeting about two seconds later."

Marc had to shut his eyes as bright light glared. He opened them cautiously, shielding his face.

Angela put a hand on his shoulder as he sat up. "Let it wear off. Sit still."

Marc breathed a new sigh of relief at her alert, angry voice. *That's my baby.*

“I’m waiting for the others to realize they’re being tricked.”

Adrian and Kyle began to groan, waking.

Neil didn’t move.

Marc stood, keeping his hip pressed against Angela as he scanned, sniffing. He still didn’t smell anything at all, not even Angela’s vanilla.

Kyle helped Adrian up, noting bruises and blood. “Well, that answers a question.”

“What’s that?” Adrian let Kyle place him against Angela’s back.

“If we can be hurt here.”

Angela grunted. “So can they.” She gave Neil’s leg a kick. “I’m waiting.”

Neil farted, waking.

Uneasy snickers floated through the foggy area.

Neil stood, with help, head spinning. He rubbed his bloody fist down his jeans. “That little shit kept ducking. I don’t think I got him more than once.”

Angela waited for her team to recover, furious. She’d come here in honor and someone was already dinking with the rules. Her anger grew. “I’ll count to three, fast, and then nothing you can offer will get my agreement.”

Bright light glared once again, forcing all of them to protect their eyes.

Angela lowered her scarred hand to find a reception area with three cheery fires and sections of tables with chessboards.

“Better, young one?”

Angela snorted at the endearing tone. “It’s too late to suck up now.”

Marc sneered at the Messenger standing by the nearest table, but he didn’t speak. Mocking a powerful man was dangerous and he wasn’t on even ground here yet.

“You never will be!” The sly man observed their awe, the confusion, and the edge of fear. “Do not touch the boards. Anything else is yours.”

“Thank you for your hospitality.” Angela didn’t feel that way yet, but she was positive she still needed to say it.

The Messenger waddled to a gap in the cloudy wall at the far end of the lobby. He walked through, waving curtly.

The wall slammed shut.

Glasses appeared on one of the few empty tables.

Kyle snorted. “I’m thirsty, not stupid.”

Angela chuckled with the others. The angels here were trying to find weaknesses in the crew she’d chosen. They would eventually get nasty about it and then the real negotiations would begin. Until then, she planned to memorize every moment of their little tricks. This was an important game. She needed to discover their tells.

“Are those chessboards?” Kyle was studying the room.

Neil nodded. “Looks like it.”

The team moved further in. The room was a triangle separated into three areas by fluffy cloud

walls and floors that hid everything else from view. Fog swirled around their ankles as they moved.

To the right of the entrance was a large fireplace and a square table. There were no chairs. Directly in front of the entrance was another fireplace with a rectangle table. Again, no seats. To the right of the entrance was a huge stone fireplace with beautiful golden inlays and a half circle stone table. This one had chairs, though they were merely red cushions on the wispy floor.

“That piece moved.” Kyle pointed.

Everyone studied the nearest board in the center section.

One of the pieces moved forward a space. Almost immediately, two others on the board fell over and vanished.

“It’s happening on all the boards.” Adrian was fascinated. Some pieces were disappearing, some were moving, and some were even blinking dimly.

“We’re not alone.”

Angela concurred with Marc’s observation. “Still playing games.”

“I told you they would know we were here. You lose.”

“No!”

In the area to the left, two men appeared. Tall, wearing bright yellow robes, the beings ignored their mortal observers.

“Pay me.”

They shook hands.

Almost immediately, the robe of the man on the right changed hue, becoming a beautiful blue.

The man still in yellow stomped to a table and slammed his fist on the board, rattling the frosted pieces.

“Stop taking your anger out on them. You made a bad bet.” The man in the blue robe turned to Angela, lifting his hands in front of him. “I am Itis. Welcome.”

Angela felt more than heard the shift of people turning to look at them and realized there were more than just two angels here. “Show yourselves.”

Three more men appeared, all wearing yellow robes.

Itis smiled at the other angels. “I made the next level.”

The men came over to congratulate him, but they scanned Angela and her team continuously.

“No wings.” Neil was disappointed. “They look just like us.”

Angela let her team pick out details while she concentrated on thoughts. The angels didn't have shields up, but their heads were full of the same white fog forming the walls and floors of this place. So far, it was impossible to pick out individual threads.

Neil noted her troubled expression. *She can't get through the clouds...*

The man who had lost the bet knelt and rested his head in his hands, elbows on the table. “You

can't read our thoughts because we haven't given permission."

"We didn't give permission either. Why can you read ours?" Kyle was mad about being tempted.

"No one keeps us out. We are not bound to the same rules." The loser looked over at them. "I am Orin. They are Teus, Laistry, and Azeez. We are all pleased to meet you."

Everyone on the team frowned at his sarcastic tone.

Itis made a dismissive gesture. "Don't mind Orin. He's sore."

Marc studied the man who was easily twice his size and had a small gold star pendant on his lapel. Orin was the same size as Laistry, who towered over the two men next to him. All of them had a gold pin, each a different shape. Marc memorized them to examine later. He was good with symbols.

"New bets before we let them ask questions?" Itis glanced around.

No one spoke. They were eager for information first.

"Very well." Itis smiled arrogantly at Angela. "Pick one of us to guide you."

Angela immediately pointed at Orin.

Itis scowled, skin rippling. "But *I* leveled."

"He sounds more honest." Angela wasn't going to apologize for her choice. She already disliked Itis. She just wasn't sure why.

Orin snorted. "Figures." He rose gracefully and approached them. "Your time here will be short, so

let's get this over with." He pointed at the tables. "We're in the betting room. Level ones spend most of our time here trying to jump ranks. Ready to see the next room?"

Angela's team scowled at his curt words, but Angela sensed he was actually eager to give them a tour. She pointed at the tables. "Explain what's going on here."

"She likes the bad news first. That also figures." Orin moved to the first table they had noticed. "Each board is a planet, a world. All the boards are in the middle of games. These games determine the outcome of all life."

Marc confirmed a guess. "How do the pieces move?"

"Life choices determine those outcomes."

Marc sprang his small trap. "Then where do you come into the mix? Are you the finger of God that spins down and sends a tornado right as somebody hits the lottery?"

Orin tittered. "The Messenger was right. You are rebellious."

Marc only stared. That accusation didn't have power over him anymore.

Orin continued, voice becoming proud. "Our job is to direct the future of all life. We do that with meticulous care. We have never missed a day of work."

Before Marc could pick a fight, Adrian interrupted. He had a big question that needed an answer. "What is the Messenger's job here?"

Silence fell.

Teus, shortest and meekest among them, delivered rare anger in his words. “He is our captor!”

Angela held up a hand as everyone on her team started to ask the same question. She did it for them. “You’re prisoners here?”

Everyone nodded except Orin. Orin pointed toward one of the white walls. “I need to give you the tour. Come.”

Marc lingered at the rear of the team, memorizing the room and positions of some of the game pieces. He had no way to know which board represented their earth and at the same time, he did know. The table Orin had been upset over was the one. *That’s us. We need to protect that board at all costs. ...or destroy it.*

Marc caught up to the team, aware of the other angels casting glares toward Orin. They obviously wanted to air grievances, but Orin wasn’t allowing it. Marc assumed they weren’t allowed to delay the tour, but he did wish he could have spent more time in this room. Like the others on the team, he had a lot of questions and he wanted to study the angels. They looked like normal men, but they also didn’t. He needed time to figure that out.

Adrian also stored details as a space in the cloud wall opened up for them. *Everyone looked the same. The body sizes are different, but everything else is identical, all the way down to the chin shapes. I’m willing to bet they’re related. The gold lapel pins*

also mean something. There was a star, a hand, a bone, a knife, and a crown. Other than the color, the long robes and bare feet are identical. The hairdos are different, but the men all have pristine fingernails and smooth hands with no calluses. They don't do hard work up here.

Angela added to their observations. These aren't the heavenly surroundings we were fed in bible school. These men are dangerous. All of them are descendants and all of them have strong emotions. We already saw anger, disappointment, rudeness, sarcasm, and resignation. As I walk through this wall, I feel jealousy and hatred.

The tunnel they were in was surrounded by the same white walls and ceiling, but it was darker here. The Eagles fought urges to turn on flashlights, sensing they didn't have far to go. None of them touched the fluffy walls, but they all wanted to just to see how it felt.

“What did losing cost you?”

Orin sneered at Angela. “I thought you were smart.”

Marc growled.

Angela flushed. She immediately began digging for the answer to her question. “You lost...a bet, a chance to bet.”

“Yes. How did you figure it out?”

“You don't have anything else. None of you are wearing jewelry and you don't carry wallets. I assumed currency doesn't exist here. The other guy was promoted, but you didn't go lower. That gave

me reason to believe you're one of the lowest ranked here. As low rank, the only thing you would want is a chance to be promoted, which means that's the only thing you would have to wager. How do you earn betting tokens?"

Orin let out more contempt. "We don't use something as crass as tokens. We are given one bet daily."

"You have time up here? How long is a day?" Neil was interested in the basics.

"We adapt to the time of the worlds we view. We are not restrained by time, space, or dimension. While betting, we run a clock similar to yours."

Marc frowned. "You didn't answer the question."

"It has no answer. Time shifts with our activity. A day is what we want it to be."

Neil fell silent, trying to understand.

Kyle had been paying attention to the tones. "How many bets are *you* down?"

Orin began to understand he had underestimated this team. "Nineteen."

Angela shook her head. "I thought greed was a sin."

Orin shrugged. "It's not the longest stretch by any means. Itis has the record. He recovered from losing one hundred and twelve bets. Now he'll be allowed to sit at the center tables." Orin led the way to the next gap appearing in the wall. "He'll also get to sit in the center of the viewing room. It's a big

honor for him.” Orin moved over to allow them entry.

As soon as they were in, the wall closed. The team studied the diamond shaped room divided into three parts by the fluffy walls. To the far right was a projector screen and a square table. Again, there were no chairs. In the center area was a larger viewing screen with a rectangle table. To the far right, a huge screen waited with a comfortable looking round counter and cushions.

“Is this where you watch our lives so you can determine if we’ve been good or bad?” Angela began attempting to debunk century old theories.

“Yes. There is also betting here, but only on murders or mysteries that involve mortals. Level ones are forbidden from betting on animals or nature events.”

The view room was empty, allowing the team to walk through the partitioned areas. It was obvious there were three classes of people up here, but they’d only met one, not counting Itis and his promotion.

“Why isn’t anyone viewing right now?” Adrian expected a room like this to be busy.

Orin sighed, showing deep grief. “There are rarely wells available for spirits. There is no point in judging people who are waiting because we have no place to send them after we make the decision. This room was in constant use until your war. Then, the system became so full it will now take us more

than seven years of your years to process all the souls from that single day.”

“Seven years of trials and tribulations.”

Marc nodded at Angela’s mutter. The people up here didn’t seem to be as close to human as the people on earth wanted to believe. They didn’t cough or twitch or scratch, and their skin shifted as if a power underneath wanted out. They seemed alien.

Kyle spoke up. “When was the last time you sent out a new soul?”

Orin looked at Adrian.

“Nancy.” Adrian stifled the urge to ask about his offspring. “Do you see the souls as you judge them?”

“Yes. Then they are replanted so the crop may grow.”

“Spirits go in at conception?” Kyle wanted to clarify that. Nancy was only a couple weeks along. If a spirit had already been sent to her baby, that meant life began then, not at birth.

“Within seconds, yes. It takes time for a spirit to then be reborn. That is the reason for the gestation, not the other way around.” Orin gestured. “This is the weighing room.”

The team followed him in, all getting chills. No one wanted to be here yet. It was a reminder of their mortality; this waited for each of them.

The weighing room was laid out in a small triangle with a see-through containment system in the apex and a long, double row of partitioned

booths in a rectangle around it. A small pathway led down from where they were standing.

Angela walked the empty room, peering into the small booths. There were only two buttons on the consoles. The buttons weren't lit, so she wasn't able to read what was written on them. She assumed one was good and the other wasn't.

Marc stayed with Angela as she went to examine the containment system. They could only get within five feet of it. The space between the isle was made of black clouds none of them were willing to chance walking on.

“Souls come up. You watch...movies, to judge them. Then you come vote on their future.” Angela looked at Orin for confirmation.

“We watch choices in the first room. That is for planets, worlds. When we go to the viewing room, we narrow to individual lives. By the time souls make it to the weighing room, we know everything about them. We are then able to make a decision on what happens.”

“I only see two choices. Heaven or hell?”

Orin chuckled without mirth. “There is no heaven. You live on hell. Souls are either sent back down to try again or they are reabsorbed into the energy that makes all life possible.”

That settled a few of the confusions for the team, but Kyle doubted many people in Safe Haven would believe it even if they saw it. He was also having a hard time. *This is too much like a factory. It doesn't feel like heaven.*

“That’s because it isn’t.” Adrian stayed with Kyle as they continued to examine the containment system that was empty but had handprints on the inside. He’d never imagined spirits having hands. “It’s St. Peter’s pearly gates.”

None of the team snickered. It wasn’t a laughing matter.

“Does everyone get an equal vote or is it arranged by levels?” Neil was trying to figure out a reason for different ranks. He hadn’t imagined heaven being separated by classes.

“The first votes cast are the heaviest. Only the top level gets to vote first.” Orin gestured again, long robe flowing gracefully with the movement of his arm. “The booths know our level when we step inside. They activate according to rank.”

“Is that to prevent the lower levels from overriding a high-level decision?”

Orin nodded. “We’ve always believed so, but of course, we have no proof of that.”

The team stared in confusion.

“How can you not know?” Angela was putting pieces together, but this one didn’t fit. “You said you were captive. It’s time you filled me in on that.”

Orin pointed toward another gap opening in the cloud wall. “Everyone will tell you their story, I’m sure. You don’t need to hear it from me.”

“What if I want to hear it from you?”

“I’ll be at the meal with everyone else.” He led the way into the next tunnel without saying anything else.

Angela and her team followed, sharing glances and storing details as they'd done while exiting the other area.

Marc leaned toward Angela. "It's a giant circle. I've got it on my grid now."

She nodded. "I think it's supposed to represent a planet or a globe. We'll find the boss in the middle." She had also been tracking their location. She was sure the rest of the team was too. Eagles always wanted to know where they were and how to get out.

"It's a garden." Kyle stopped inside the cloud wall, staring. "There's a river."

The team gazed in awe and suspicion, hit with a sense of peace and tranquility that was hard to fight. The beautiful area in front of them was much like what they had all imagined the Garden of Eden to be, but better. Even the quick flashes from Adrian's time traveling hadn't done it justice.

A wide river ran in an S through the middle of a wild garden brimming with every plant they'd ever seen and then thousands more. The only thing they didn't see was life. There were no fish in the river, no birds or bugs around the plants. While pristine and perfect, it felt fake.

"You'll start over here." Orin led the way to a square table with square stone seats. "Once you finish your meeting with us, you will talk to the other levels. When you finish, the boss will see you."

It was a relief to know the tour would end with the big man, where they might be able to accomplish something. Right now, most of this seemed pointless except from the aspect of gathering information. That, they always needed.

The team took seats at the square table.

Orin sat across from Angela. “The others will arrive shortly. The garden is the only room that still sees activity according to schedule.”

That made sense to her since the weighing and viewing rooms were in slowdown because of the backup. Angela tried to peer around the S turn in the river and the plants surrounding it, but she couldn’t see very far. She thought she spotted another table and shadows of people, but she couldn’t be sure. Her mental gifts were not piercing the cloud walls. She assumed the same was true of the rest of her team or she would already have hints about what the next area held.

The clouds behind them parted, admitting Itis, Teus, Laistry, and Azeez. They joined the team but didn’t take seats on the rocks. They went to the edge of the river and sat, putting their bare feet into the water.

Angela was fascinated by how the water didn’t soak their robes. When Teus lifted his leg, his robe was still dry. “Do you swim in the river?”

“We used to.” Orin frowned a bit “It no longer brings us pleasure.”

“Only winning a bet does that?” Angela just about had the level ones pegged now even though she’d only spoken with Orin.

Orin nodded. “We live for it.”

Itis went by, headed for the level two area. “I’ll talk with you later.” He slid into the white fog wall and vanished.

The other angels stared toward that wall. All of them wanted to go through.

Angela studied their faces. “What’s on the other side?”

“A happier life.”

Orin sneered at Laistry’s answer. “Slavery is slavery. The cage doesn’t matter.”

Azeez clapped his hands, producing a melodic noise that immediately brought plates of food into existence in front of them. One second, the table was empty. The next, it was covered.

“Who sends the food?” Angela didn’t expect honest answers, but she had to ask for comparisons later.

“The Messenger.” Itis lifted his cup, tone sarcastic. “To the Messenger!”

The men dangling their feet in the river gave hand salutes and sneers.

Angela and her team exchanged another glance. The angels didn’t like the Messenger. That meant he wasn’t one of them.

“But I am.” The Messenger came through the wall from the second area and joined them at the table. He didn’t sit on one of the rocks. He stood on

it. “I am Hermes. I am the guider of souls and trickster of the Creator.” He straightened his gold pin.

Marc saw the pin looked like a broken egg and frowned. “Come to make sure they don’t tell us anything you don’t want us to know?”

“How rude!” The Messenger jumped from the rock and stormed toward the entrance. “Enjoy your conversation!” He leapt through the wall, waving a hand.

A reverberation went through the garden, sounding as if he’d slammed a door.

Orin looked at Marc in surprise. “Not just rebellious. You bring violence. How is that possible? You are Adam, the first.”

Marc only stared back, sensing their guide had important information. “What do you need?”

Orin broke into a smile, the first one they’d seen since arriving. “We need our old bets settled. All the rooms will ask this of you, but we level ones need it more. They interfere with our choices and make sure we’re never allowed to bump more than one rank. Those in the top spots have been there for centuries. The only way that’s possible is if they’re cheating. When you settle our bets, most of us will be promoted and the top level may fall to where we are now. We need balance restored.”

“Why do you hate the Messenger?” Kyle’s sharp mind was putting together clues as fast as the rest of the team, only he had taken a different path. There were a lot of mysteries up here to be solved.

“He supports ending these bets. Hermes is sympathetic to human lives and wishes us to allow all life to make choices without influence or interference.”

That surprised the team. They had gotten the clear sense that Hermes didn't like them.

“Can we talk to the Creator after we see the boss?”

Everyone turned toward Angela, even her team. They'd heard *boss* and assumed that's who they would be talking to, but Angela had remembered definitions of words mattered up here. Boss did not mean Creator.

Angela looked at the faces around her and drew her answer from that. “You don't know where he is, do you?”

Bitter disappointment filled the team as every head shook.

No one wanted to speak now. The Messenger had tricked Angela up here by making her believe she had a chance to negotiate a different future for her people. The lie had just been exposed. They were ashamed.

It was the first time the team had felt humility since arriving. They waited for Angela to speak again, marveling at where she had gone while they'd been digging. The items they were covering were important; she had gone straight to the most valuable piece of information. She'd verified their hosts could not be trusted.

“That’s why we make such a great team.” Angela gave Marc a small smile. “As you were. I’m working it from this end.”

A sense of Eagle kinship filled the table, making the level one hosts jealous and fascinating them at the same time. Being at the table together was a lot different than watching it on a screen.

Marc waved at Adrian. “Would you like to go first?”

“I’m actually working on a small thread now. I suggest Kyle as a starter.”

Everyone looked at Kyle, except Angela. She stared at Orin’s star pin.

Sitting next to her, Marc could almost feel the heat from her mind flying through ideas, conclusions.

Kyle took his notebook out as if this was any other day on earth, but it was a bit of a surprise for him to feel the weight in his hand. The hard stone seat under his butt wasn’t really hard. The ancient wooden table was almost comfortable to lean on. The rocky ground cushioned his boots instead of poking at them. It was all strange. The normal weight and feel of his notebook was a comfort. “Let’s start with the basics: who are you and what are you doing here?”

“We weigh souls that come up. I told you that.”

“What happens to the souls?” Kyle resisted the urge to light a smoke despite really wanting one for this moment.

Orin pointed toward the last room. “They are weighed. If the good measures is higher than the bad, they are consumed by the power of life. If they have more darkness than good, they are sent back to try again.”

“Hell really is on earth. Ironic.” Kyle kept going. “Where do you come from? Is there a town here?”

Orin’s lips twitched. “This is the afterlife. There are no towns.”

Kyle rolled with the punches. “How many are there like you and where do you live?”

“There are seventeen of us who live here, though there have been more or less.”

Angela looked up in surprise. “Heaven only has seventeen angels?”

Orin frowned a bit. “This is a Weigh Station.”

“Where is heaven?”

Orin didn’t understand the question. “What?”

“Okay, let me try again. Where do you go when you leave here? Where does anyone go when they leave here?”

“We do not leave here. No one leaves here, except the Messenger.”

“Where does he go?”

“We do not know. His mind has clouds.”

Angela waved to Kyle.

Kyle took back over the questioning. “How long have you been here?”

Orin glanced at the other angels for verification of the estimate. “Five thousand years.”

Most of the team gawked, mouths opening. It was hard for them to imagine.

“You’re immortal.” Adrian’s gaze sparkled with clever contemplations, but in the end, he chose not to pursue the temptation. “Interesting.”

The clouds parted behind them, revealing the Messenger coming through yet again. “You have just minutes left before they need to move to the next space. When you are finished, you may rest.”

The Messenger kept walking, disappearing into another wall of clouds.

The angels around Angela and her team relaxed, breaking into smiles.

“Is rest like sleep?” Angela didn’t understand why getting to take a nap was so important.

Kyle snorted. *You still have youth, sweetheart. It’ll hit you too at some point. You can’t fight age.*

The angels around them snickered. They were picking up every thought the team had.

Angela frowned, pointing at Orin. “You broke the rules of hospitality. I demand access to your mind.” She would have let it go. She’d expected the angels to read their thoughts, but she hated to be laughed at.

Orin scowled. “On what grounds?”

“Never without permission.” Angela crossed her arms over her chest. “Incoming.”

Angela’s scan was incredibly fast. Even though they were linked, none of her team was able to keep up.

Orin wasn't able to keep her out. His grip on the table tightened until his knuckles turned white, but there was little he could do as she ripped down his shields from tops, corners, and sides.

Adrian was proud. *I hope my daughter has become like her.*

I can give you that information.

The sleazy voice in Adrian's mind wasn't welcome. "No, thank you."

Azeez frowned at him in fake sympathy. *It must be hard on you to not know where she is, what's happening to her, if she's even alive. You must be curious if we've weighed her soul yet.*

"Not really, since knowing is probably worse." Adrian grew cold. "I will never betray Safe Haven again, not even for my daughter. Keep the information. I'll find out when I'm supposed to."

Forced by time, Orin stood. "I have to take you into the next area. Is there anything else you want to know? I can extend your time a little if you have questions."

Angela scanned each of the angels in turn. She noted the shapes of their pins while memorizing names. She would need this information later and she didn't want to have to ask Marc or Adrian for it. She wanted to already know it. "Are there rules on the bets level ones are allowed to make?"

"We can wager on minor environmental events, people not in leadership positions, and those with no descendant lineage."

Angela lifted her brow at her team. “Anything else?”

Marc shook his head, sifting through her memories of Orin’s thoughts. He was trying to fill in the pieces he’d missed.

“Where do your supplies come from?” Kyle hadn’t finished his list yet. “Does anyone else ever come and go? Do you know where the Creator is?”

Time seemed to freeze again as everyone looked at Orin for the answers.

“Things just appear. The Messenger is the only one who comes and goes here.” Orin sighed. “And that is a question we need answered as well. If we knew where he was, we could go to him and beg forgiveness until he returned. Because we cannot leave these walls, we do not know.”

“That has not been revealed.” Kyle shook his head. “I really hate that fucking answer.” He scanned his list and closed the book. “I’m done.”

Marc and Adrian exchanged a glance with Neil, but none of them had anything else for this level.

Angela moved on to her last questions. “What does the Messenger do when he’s not here?”

“He says he has to rest. We think he visits rooms like ours where others are being held captive.” Orin’s gaze warmed as he studied her, lingering on her long braid.

Sensing a moment of weakness in their guide, Angela sprung a surprise observation. “Why are there no women here?”

“How can you know that?!” Orin leaned down, nearly shouting. “You’ve only met a few of us! How can you know that?!”

Angela gave a curt nod toward the angels behind them. “I’m being leered at. It’s been going on the entire time we’ve been here. Men who are satisfied usually hide that behavior.”

“You can’t know about us! You have no idea who and what we really are.”

Angela gave Orin a cold smile. “Neither do you. Right?”

He refused to answer.

Angela insisted, sending her alpha command. “Why are there no women?”

Orin groaned at the pain. “We’re not allowed to answer that question!”

“You don’t know.”

“No.”

“What level will have that information?”

Orin struggled against her power. “The only one among us who can tell you that was just promoted and that’s the reason why he might be able to tell you that!”

Angela was tired of riddles, but there was no other choice. She let go of the magic and pointed Orin toward the gap in the wall.

As the team left, the remaining angels stared in hunger and dangerous contemplations. There hadn’t been a female up here in three hundred years.

“I think we need to discuss these recent events.”

The angels nodded at Azeez. All of them headed for the betting tables.

Chapter Seven

Your Grand Design Sucks

1

Angela considered their request as the team entered another dark tunnel. They wanted old bets settled. She doubted those were all centered on the future, which meant the angels knew she could search backwards and forward through time. They knew a lot more about her than she knew about them and the difference was frustrating. However, she'd discovered the most important part. The level ones could not be trusted.

“Agreed.” Her team echoed the thought, including Kyle who was able to keep track through his bond with Jennifer. *Power rubs off.*

Orin didn't ask what they were agreeing to or comment. Everyone assumed he was listening, but they weren't sure what to make of it when he didn't respond.

Light came ahead of them as the barrier parted. Much like the first area, the garden was vast, hanging over and around a meandering river. It was incredibly beautiful and deceptive.

Near them, a rectangle table waited with seven stone chairs. On the far side of the river, another stone table sat in the shape of a heart. That one

appeared to have double the number of round seats, but all of them were covered in leaves and bits of the garden that was growing over it. It was obvious that table hadn't been used in a long time.

The cloud wall parted to the right. Seven men in all shades and shapes came through; one of them was the Messenger.

Hermes kept walking as the other men stopped to study Angela and her team. The Messenger clapped, making double the amount of food appear on the rectangle table. He vanished into the tunnel they had just emerged from, leaving an awkward tension.

Orin gestured. "He's upset that you haven't accepted the hospitality you thanked him for."

Angela and her team slowly walked through the cloud floor toward the table, not sure if they should eat. All of them were hungry and thirsty, so much that throats were parched and stomachs were growling.

The team chose to examine their new companions and ignore the wonderful smells of the food and the fruits growing around them.

They were all wearing gold lapel pins with shapes that drew fresh attention. Angela memorized them again, hoping she was wrong about the horrible possibility that had come as she'd stared at Orin's pin. She spotted a lyre, a shield, a javelin, an arrow, and a smiling face this time. The last one drew a twitch from her lips. *It probably doesn't mean what I think.*

The six men were joined by another man in blue who came through the cloud wall. It was Itis. He looked at Orin. “We will call you when they are ready. Leave.”

Orin vanished back into the level one area without protesting.

The redhead with the lyre pin stepped forward. “You must eat as we talk.”

Angela picked up what appeared to be a slice of apple and took a bite. She watched their hosts for signs it was a bad idea. It tasted normal.

All the angels appeared relieved, but not in a triumphant way. Angela looked at Marc to ask her question since her mouth was full.

“She wants to know why you’re scared of the Messenger.”

The music man spoke for the rest of them when no one else did. “He has the power to send us to the weighing room. We don’t want to die.”

Angela gestured at the food. “Are you going to eat?”

The angel sat across from her and picked up something from the same plate. He chewed and swallowed with a grimace. “There is nothing wrong with the food. We are simply tired of the same thing day after day, year after year.”

Angela motioned to Kyle. “Let’s get it rolling.”

Kyle began his questions. “Who are you and why are you here?”

As soon as the same answers began coming, the team tuned them out to pick out their own details.

Unfortunately, there were none. The lapel pins were the same. The robes were the same. The cloudy minds and confused expressions were the same. All the angels were captives, but they didn't know why they had been put here.

Angela chose to verify that suspicion as soon as Kyle looked at her to indicate he was finished with his list. "What lives did you have before you came here?"

"We have no memories of a life before this one." The man with the lyre noticed Angela staring and fingered his pin. "I adore music. My name is Leeto."

That seemed to be a cue for the others to introduce themselves. The team struggled to memorize it all as names and information flew at them.

"I am Nysus. I bring joy."

"Ercu, strength of the half mortals."

"I am the athletic heart. Resus."

"I am Ares, the defender."

Silence fell for a moment as the wall opened once again to let the Messenger through. He studied all of them as he clomped into the third area. Everyone could feel him wondering what they had been discussing.

Angela looked around. "What's he worried about you telling us?"

"It's not information he fears." Leeto once again spoke for the rest when they didn't speak for

themselves. “He fears you will side with us in our request.”

“And now we get to the real reason for these separate meetings.” Angela leaned back, voice cold. “What demand do you make of me?”

Leeto frowned, hands clasping in front of him. “We wish for you to ascend and be the first female among us in five centuries. You will mate and we will once again have life flowing through these walls. We want to live again—through you.”

Angela’s laughter overrode the anger of her team. She let the bitter amusement flow, aware of attention turning their way from other areas. “I thought it was for my mind!”

Angela kept laughing but tears were forming behind her lids. Rage flared out suddenly, making everyone flinch back.

Angela stilled, hands coming together. She bowed her head.

The team waited, tensed for the fight to start.

The angels stared in confusion.

“What are you doing?”

“What is she doing?”

“Looks like she’s praying.” Marc shrugged. “Perhaps you should ask what she’s praying for.”

Ares frowned at Angela. “Well?”

“Amen.” Angela looked up at him with glowing red orbs. “I asked for permission to kill all of you. When I didn’t get an answer, I asked for forgiveness for doing it anyway.”

Angels scrambled from the table even though she didn't make a move toward them.

“You can't!”

“Why?”

“You'd have to take our place.” Leeto kept distance between them as he explained that. “The Weigh Station must always be manned. We can only get out if someone takes our place.”

“What would you do if you got out of here?” Angela braced for the answer. She needed to verify if this level was also trustworthy.

Ares leered. “We will rampage on earth until the Creator is forced to come and remove us.”

“Yeah, that's what I thought.”

“Why is our time here short?” Marc was working on the hints they'd gotten upon arrival.

“If you stay too long, you cannot go back.”

“How long do we have left?”

“Minutes with us. Time stops when you enter the boss's office.”

“Enough.” Angela rose and strode toward the gap widening in the wall. “Let's see what's behind door number three. Bet it isn't a grand showcase.”

Her team snickered at the pun and the Price Is Right reference, following.

The level two angels watched them leave, confused and angry.

“Where is my tour guide?” Angela kept walking through the tunnel.

A few seconds later, the cloud wall parted behind them. Orin came to her.

Angela paused, giving him an opening.

Orin had hoped to get time alone with her for this conversation, but time was short. “I need to tell you about the women. The others won’t. I’m sure you saw their table in the garden.”

“That’s where the women sat when they were here?” Angela had been waiting for this part of the story. She already knew she wasn’t going to like it.

“Yes.”

“They got a lot of seats compared to the other tables.”

“There were more women than men in these rooms. Hermes didn’t like that. When we became desperate to find a way out, he suggested sacrificing them.” Orin strode toward the gap appearing in the wall ahead of them. “I can’t tell you more because I wasn’t here then. Maybe one of the level threes can give you that information.”

“Why did you tell us that if you don’t know the rest?”

Orin spun around, surprising them again with his anger. “Because I miss my mate! I don’t know her name; I can’t remember her face, but I know I had a mate here!”

Adrian and Marc exchanged glances. *Periodic memory wipes?*

Impossible to say for sure. I’m not ruling anything out yet.

Orin composed himself and turned back toward the open entrance. “I will leave you here.”

None of the team looked at him as they slid into the next garden area.

A round table sat by the river bend with five angels enjoying drinks and food. Like the others here, they wore long robes and lapels pins in different shapes. Their color was red.

A clock, a moon, a globe, water, a sun. The team memorized the pins and got ready to learn names. There were only fifteen angels plus the Messenger and boss, but it was still hard to keep up.

One of the men, a muscular brunette, opened his hands toward them in greeting. “I am Kronus, keeper of time. Welcome to the next level.”

Kyle waited for Angela to tell him what she wanted, assuming they would go through the useless interrogation list once again.

Angela didn’t want to waste the time they had left. She moved to the table and took the only empty seat as her men gathered behind her. “Let’s get to it. What do you guys want from me?”

“Introductions must be observed.” Kronus waved around the table. “This is Pimet. He is hindsight. Atlas, next to him, is endurance. Cean controls the liquid of life. Romi is foresight. Together, we five make the basic elements of life.”

Angela concentrated. “Time, the moon and stars, the earth, the sun, and the oceans. That’s the basis for all life?”

Kronus gave an apologetic gesture. “Time is not necessarily necessary, but it keeps things relative.”

The other angels sniggered at his wordplay.

“You already know who we are. Are the introductions finished now?”

Kronus clapped, enjoying her curt responses. “You know what we want. We only care about magic, power, and the future of our species—descendants.”

Angela motioned to Kyle.

Kyle skipped the questions that were no longer important. “What are you allowed to bet on?”

Kronus smiled. “We can wager on anything and anyone, including the lower levels. We have no limits.”

“Why do you hate Messenger?”

“He is ending the games. That’s why your world was allowed to experience an apocalypse, but we hope a mate who loves mortals will convince the Creator to keep it all going—for her.”

Angela felt hot gazes on her skin, recognizing desire. *This isn’t anything like I envisioned.*

Adrian studied the bright beings. These were the only ones who appeared to have another form so far. Light shined from underneath their skin, but heavy shades of darkness also lingered around the edges. *I wonder if that’s what our true descendant bodies look like.*

Marc shrugged at Adrian’s contemplations, but didn’t comment. He lifted a brow at the angels. “You all want the same thing?”

All the men nodded.

Kronus explained further. “There is no need for us to fight over what will be. Angela will agree. She

will ascend and breed with the Creator. Life will flow back into these rooms and trickle down to all worlds. The reset will not happen.”

“Reset?” Kyle frowned.

Pimet went on. “When all souls are extinguished from a planet, it can be used for new projects. The Creator will have a blank slate to work on.”

“Okay, yeah. We’ll come back to that.” Marc tried to control his aggravation. “Why don’t the level threes use the other areas?” He had noticed the layers of filmy white webs.

“We no longer need boards or screens. We can simply call the moments to mind that we wish to view or bet on.” Atlas would have demonstrated, but Kronus denied him with a curt motion.

“Are you sure it isn’t because you don’t trust anybody else in your group not to cheat, so you never let each other out of your sight?” Marc wasn’t about to let them slide.

Kronus nodded an acknowledgment. “That may be so, but it does not matter to your visit here. Ask the next question. Time is running.”

Adrian studied the red robes, the gold pins. “Are you all byzantine?”

Surprise came that he had figured it out.

Kronus frowned. “It is what you would have become if you had not been corrupted.”

Again, Adrian refused to be pulled into the temptation of asking questions about his personal life or future. “How do you feel about mortals?”

Disgust, arrogance, and hatred flashed across all five faces. They didn't have sympathy for the targets of their bets.

"Never mind." Adrian made a motion to Angela to let her know he was done with his questions. He had found out what he needed to know. The level threes were strong and at the same time, weak. They didn't use power here. They had no need for it.

"Do you go down to the worlds you play with?"

Kronus sighed in longing at her question. "That is rarely approved."

"I assume when you do go, you don't want to come back."

"Some don't. Many of us hate going down there. Up here, we only eat when we enjoy it. We don't age or defecate. We don't get sick. We can't be hurt. There are a lot of disadvantages to being mortal."

Angela snorted. "I'm aware." She suddenly frowned toward Kronus. "I know what you're thinking of doing. It would be a bad idea."

Kronus couldn't resist her pull any more than the other men she used it on. He shifted toward her, expression lightening, mood lifting. "What would happen if I did?"

Angela leaned over and whispered something in his ear.

When she pulled away, Kronus made a face and shook his head. "I'd rather keep my wings, thank you."

Angela gave a bitter chuckle. “It’s much too late for that.”

“What happens if you stop weighing souls?”

The angels exchanged uneasy glances as Romi answered Kyle’s question.

“We have personally never tested that possibility.”

“You don’t know.”

“Others who were here before us tried to do that. They were removed. We chose not to try.”

“You don’t know where they went and you decided the risk was too great since it’s better to deal with the devil you know than the devil you don’t, right?”

The team winced at Kyle’s choice of words.

So did the angels.

Kronus recovered. “Yes. Many of us are content here. We see how other lifeforms struggle to exist. We have chosen to accept captivity, but that does not make it right. The people who want to leave should be free to do so.”

Neil had a question. He’d been quiet for most of the tour, simply observing and letting his brain do what it did best. “What were the women allowed to bet on?”

Romi exhibited contempt. “Parenthood and affairs of the heart. They wanted to know whom would end up with whom. It was quite tedious.”

“You were here when the women were here? You remember them?” Neil had the man trapped, he was suddenly sure.

Romi pointed toward the far end of the garden, where the river disappeared into the cloud wall. “The boss is waiting for her.”

Every man on the team dropped a hand to their gun.

“She’s not going anywhere without the rest of us.” Marc hated even the idea of her being out of his sight up here.

The Messenger appeared in the gap in the wall, eyes challenging her courage.

A V popped out on Angela’s chin and then on her forehead. Heat radiated from her in thick waves.

Marc shifted away. “Okay. Maybe you should go alone.”

Angela stood, letting the fury build. She was about to talk to the boss. He wasn’t going to like what she had to say.

Angela entered the tunnel and paused as the wall shut behind her, using the most powerful version of her gifts to read minds. When Adrian had thought the angels weak, he’d been absolutely correct. The only ones she wasn’t picking up now were the Messenger and the boss. Everyone else’s thoughts were wide open to her. It was ugly.

The level ones were on the edge of rebelling and refusing to weigh souls until a fairer system was enacted. The level twos were thrilled to be level two, but they hated the level threes because there was no way they could rise to that rank. The level threes hated each other and everyone else. They didn’t care about the lifeforms on the worlds they

manipulated. All they wanted was the Creator back so they could be freed. They didn't care how the goal was accomplished. *None of these beings are good. That's the final proof I needed that this is not heaven.* Angela moved through the opening in front of her, not sure what to expect. She tried to brace for anything.

"Please. Come in."

Angela scanned the small room that had a desk, a chair, and a fireplace in the corner, not surprised to discover the same cloudy walls and floors. The Messenger stood by the desk, staring at her with dark, malevolent eyes.

Angela studied the boss in the chair behind the desk, not surprised or impressed. He looked like any other man here, except his robe was glowing white and he didn't have a lapel pin. Instead of being intimidated, Angela found herself annoyed with the not-even-cute angel. "What am I supposed to call you?"

"You may call me Xaós."

Angela frowned at his sensual tone as she moved toward the desk. *Definitely byzan.* "I assume you know everything going on up here?"

The blond man's green eyes twinkled at her. "Of course. That's why I arranged for a tour before our conversation. Now you know it all too."

Angela noticed the desk didn't have anything on it. There were no pens or paper, nothing like a computer or a radio. *That's what I haven't seen up here,* she realized. *The containment center for souls*

looks like something from a medieval torture museum. Fireplaces are used. Even this room has one. Why is there no technology?

The boss and Messenger waited for her to get her bearings, monitoring her thoughts and admiring the process. Starting from the bottom corner, she worked her way up until she was back in the moment and staring at them in chilly dislike. “What does this room demand of me?”

“Only that you read the Book of Life so you will understand why the final battle has to take place.”

“I know a lie when I hear one.”

The Messenger cackled. He slapped his knee, letting out a belly laugh. “I can’t believe you tried to use that on her.”

Xaós gave the Messenger a tolerant glare, then regarded Angela. He spent a minute studying her, going from head to toe, lingering on the scars he could see. “I need you to defeat my enemies. I’m requesting you as my champion.”

Angela hadn’t expected that. “You want me to hurt the angels in the other rooms?”

Xaós gave a sad sigh. “They need to remember their place.”

“Why couldn’t I bring my team in here for this conversation?”

The boss delivered another tolerant glower toward the Messenger. “They have a bet on whether or not your men can be tempted. It has to be settled.”

Angela already knew the outcome, but she was curious about how angels viewed events without screens or boards. “Can I watch?”

The boss weaved his hands around each other, bringing up a beautiful golden orb that cleared into an image of the previous room. Her team was still sitting at the table with the level threes, digging for information.

“Let there be sound.” Xaós waved again, giving them audio.

Angela leaned in, fascinated. It was much clearer than the images she saw in her mind when she did this. *I wonder if I can copy it.*

2

Kronus recognized how uneasy the team was feeling without their leader and sought to offer comfort. “She will not be harmed. There is no reason for your concern.”

Adrian snorted.

Kyle rolled his eyes.

Neil shook his head.

“It’s not Angie we’re worried about.” Marc chose not to explain when he received confusion from the angels. These were strong, smart beings, but they didn’t understand who they were dealing with. Despite watching her, probably for most of her life, they didn’t really know Angie. Her team did. They’d felt her rage boil hotter with each farce of an interrogation she’d been forced to go through. She

was beyond being in a bad mood. She was on the edge of doing something drastic. Her men were worried it would trigger some rule that might keep them here indefinitely.

Neil was especially stressing over possibly being kept away from Samantha. After having so much trouble on the way to the shore, she didn't need to be alone.

Cean met Neil's eye across the round table. "You can go, right now. I'm sure no one will fault you for it. You have many duties there."

Neil tilted his hat back. "Why would I agree to do that?"

"I will tell you the future of your family if you abandon your leader and return now."

Neil's lips thinned. "If you think I can be bought so easily, I suggest updating your films."

Kyle grinned. "You just tried to bribe the man in our camp who would probably have been a priest in another lifetime. Good job."

Cean flushed, falling silent.

Pimet leaned over the table toward Marc, sure he had the jealous man pegged. He'd watched thousands of hours of Marc's lives. He knew everything there was to know.

Marc smiled as he caught the thought. "Let's see if that's true."

Directly challenged, Pimet sat up straighter. "Did you enjoy killing women?"

"Sometimes, sure."

It wasn't the answer the angel had expected. He tried intimidation next. "You helped cause the fall of civilization. At some point, your soul will come here. We will pass judgment on you."

Marc shrugged. "If there's any justice, I'll get to do that for you too. Bet we end up in the same place."

"I am not evil!" Pimet slammed his hand on the table, rattling dishes. "You are supposed to feel guilt and ask if I can absolve you. I can, you know."

"It's funny you think absolution is what I want the most." Marc smiled. "Guess you do need a new video library."

The team snickered again. They were trained to use an enemy against themselves whenever possible and with this group, it was like taking candy from a baby.

Adrian glared at Kronus. "Is it my turn? I can feel her watching. She's ready for us to be with her."

All the angels frowned. They hadn't realized they were being observed.

"How do you know she is watching this moment?" Kronus suspected cheating.

Adrian's eyes warmed. "We have a bond with her, all of us. You wouldn't understand because you don't like humanity. It's one of those things only a fan would notice." He waved a dismissive hand. "Try your temptation. My *boss* is calling."

The angels disliked the implication that Angela was the boss, but Adrian refused to pull it back. Angela would always be that to him now.

“Very well.” Kronus pointed. “Would you have turned Safe Haven in to your government if Angela had not joined?”

Heads on the team rotated toward Adrian. All of them had wondered that at one point or another.

Adrian’s voice stayed even. His body language went cold. “I see. You’re not going to try to tempt me. You’re going to try to rip her team apart through me.” Adrian shrugged. “Be careful what you wish for. Yes, I would have.”

It settled that question for the men around him, but it didn’t change anything. They already assumed that was the answer. It was almost a relief to know they were right. Adrian had had continuous streaks of luck where he appeared to be a good guy and made people doubt their instincts. This was confirmation that they had always been right and he had always been bad.

“Next?”

Romi held out a hand. “With the help of hindsight and foresight, you could go back and change the one big mistake that has always haunted you. Just touch me.”

Adrian froze. This was the temptation he had feared.

Marc and the others assumed the moment was Adrian choosing to use magic on Angela instead of competing for her heart.

Atlas blew out annoyance. “It was never about that. Adrian’s ghost joined his mind decades before

the war. We will banish it. In exchange, he will remain here when the rest of you return.”

Adrian wanted that box in his crypt destroyed, but thanks to recent events, he now knew he had someone else to help with it. “No, thank you.”

The team had never doubted Adrian’s choice. He wasn’t going to leave Angela.

Romi was disappointed, but he held out a hand to Pimet. “*You win.*”

Pimet shook.

No one’s robe changed color, but shouts of anger and grief echoed from the other areas. Someone else had taken the fall for their bet. Adrian wasn’t sure how he knew that, but he did. It made sense when he thought about it. As high-level rollers, the angels in here didn’t want new meat. They had picked a fall guy in case they were wrong. Orin’s group was correct. The top level was cheating.

A gap in the wall opened where Angela had disappeared. Angela’s annoyed voice rolled out. “Get in here.”

Marc and the others left the table and proudly joined their leader.

The cloud wall shut behind them, muting the grumbles of the level threes. The meeting wasn’t going like they’d envisioned either.

Chapter Eight
We Need Answers

1

“**G**et lost!”

The Messenger flushed under his matted hair and marched toward her, fists coming up.

Angela laughed, long and hard.

“Leave us.” Xaós waved. “See to the others. They need rest.”

Hermes clomped through the wall, again slamming the door behind him.

Angela stared at the boss, trying to determine the best way to handle him as her team joined her.

Kyle and Neil inspected the man behind the desk. His slouched posture and arrogant expression weren’t comforting.

Marc and Adrian dug into the boss’s mind and found only those same white clouds.

“He wants me to be his champion.” Angela didn’t spend time filling her team in on the rest. “How do you expect me to defeat your enemies?”

Xaós smiled. “They have to lose, of course. Nothing hurts them like falling from the ranks.”

“That’s all?” Kyle didn’t trust this newest man. Laughter came. “Yes.”

Kyle frowned. “I expected something...”

“Evil?”

Kyle nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Xaós let his sadness sweep them. “Constantly forgiving has serious consequences.”

Angela snorted, mind spinning. “So does love.”

“Yes. It’s hard to kill when you love the target.”

“You know what the levels want of me?”

Xaós gazed at her in resignation. “I know you don’t want it. Free will.”

Angela drew in a deep breath, suddenly wishing she’d never arranged this meeting. “Would you really keep it all going if I begged?”

“No.”

Sensual waves floated over them, drawing anger from the team.

“All you would have to do is ask.”

“You know I won’t or else we wouldn’t be having this meeting.” Angela had already figured out the other levels weren’t on an even playing field with Xaós. He was a million times more clever. “But you’re willing to...bond with me and give me what I want in exchange.” She scowled at the silence. “I can’t make an informed decision without that information.”

Surprise came from Xaós. “You’re considering it. Why?”

Angela let her true feelings be known. “Because I want to change things. Your grand design sucks.”

Mirth echoed from Xaós. “They think you’ll keep it going, that you’re on their side.” More laughter flowed through the office.

Angela shut out the anger and worry of her team, concentrating. "I'm on my own side now."

Xaós played his hands. "Yes, but if you die, you will come here and take your place."

She couldn't help being curious. "Which level?"

Xaós chuckled. "Mine. If you die without making the choice, it's a default rule. Every soul in the second and third level wants it. They have the majority vote. They'll put us together."

Angela prepared to spring the trap she'd set. "Sounds like I win either way. I get *you*, a powerful place, and I get to determine the future of all humanity." She glared. "Why don't you already have a mate?"

"That remarkable mind." A breathy sigh floated through the room. "Our women passed. We are not young bearing and few humans reach byzantine. Our population is never replenished."

"So you all think I'll just accept my fate and breed for you." Angela tapped her foot, controlling the rage. "What a lovely thought."

"It is." Xaós tried a reasonable tone. "You love your people. You would do anything for them. Why not us?"

"Yeah, let's come back to that." Adrian drew attention. "How did your women pass?"

A frown came. It was clear Xaós didn't want to talk about the women.

"We do not know. They vanished."

Adrian frowned. "You didn't hunt for them?"

Xaós grimaced, hands opening again. “Hunt where? These rooms are all there is.”

Angela snapped the trap, aware that she’d lost the advantage but not how. “You’re not the Creator! You’re pretending to be. I demand your real name!”

Xaós delivered more arrogance instead. “Do not question what must happen. Accept your place in the design and be thankful you were chosen.”

“Thankful?!” Angela flipped him the finger, rage almost boiling over now. “You talk about the grand plan, but you don’t even know what it is!”

“Do you?!” Xaós lunged forward and grabbed her wrist across the desk as he brought up a shield around them. “I command you to search!”

“Beg me!” Angela grimaced at the sharp pain from refusing old magic. “Get on your knees, like so many have through the ages, and beg me.” She sent a powerful zap of hatred into his hand. She paid no attention to the four men aiming guns and magic at the shield or the angels coming to the walls around them. She was on her own for this moment.

“Do you swear?” Skin burning from the contact, Xaós let go of her. “If I beg, you will look?”

“Yes.” Angela wanted to ask why he didn’t already have that information, but she chose to take a different path. “But no matter what I see, I’ll give the answer you’ve delivered for thousands of years when humanity begged.” She brought up a personal shield of fire, and then another, smothering herself in protection so he couldn’t force her to do it or touch her again. “Darkness and silence.”

Xaós didn't understand what was happening with her, but he knew it was dangerous. "You cannot burn these walls. We've tried, many times."

Angela increased the flames. "I'm not aiming for walls." She leered at him, like he'd been doing to her.

Xaós cringed, whining in terror. His shield shrank around him.

The cloud wall behind her opened, but Angela didn't flinch from the angels rushing toward them. Her own group was turning to meet them, tackling, firing spells.

Angela lifted her hand...

"Wait!" The Messenger entered the room amid the chaos. "You must not spill blood here!"

"Thank you." Angela lowered her arm, turning.

Hermes paused at her triumphant tone. "For what?"

"Telling me how to hurt you." She released the fireball.

Every angel screamed as flames slammed into the Messenger. He caught fire in a fast blur, shouting.

It quickly became shrieks.

Angela blocked the burning being from help with multiple layers of her shield. He burned alive in her bubble as they watched.

"What have you done?" Xaós sank back into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

“I’ve changed things.” She motioned her crew to let go of the easily subdued angels. “We’ve been tricked. They don’t know any more than we do.”

“So you rang a bell to see who might answer?” Adrian chuckled. “Nice.”

The ground rumbled, disturbing the fog.

Angela sighed, tired. “I doubt our company will feel the same. Brace for something. Who knows what.”

“No one ever shows up.” Xaós gestured without looking at anyone. “We’ve angered them before, but it doesn’t matter.”

“You’ve killed here... The women.” Angela directed Marc and Adrian forward. “Interrogation.”

Both men approached the desk.

Neil frowned at Angela. “You knew.”

She let out a sound of misery and anger. “I assumed the worst. Adrian taught me to do that.”

“I don’t get it.” Kyle was still watching the Messenger burn. The little man had just stopped twitching.

“She knew this was a trick.” Neil’s lips thinned further. “That’s why she brought four killers to heaven.”

“This isn’t heaven.” Adrian glowered at Xaós and then his angels. “Is it?”

Itis shook his head, not fighting them at all.

Angela noted his lip biting and stored that information. She concentrated, hand lifting. A small globe appeared, showing their planet and a small, spinning star where the moon should have been.

“What is that?”

“Her new gift.” Adrian answered Marc while comparing similarities between Angela and the cowering angels observing them all in confused mistrust. “She has a map of the heavens now.”

“It’s small.”

“That’s all we’ve uncovered.” Adrian took the seat across from Xaós. “It’s already more than anyone has ever found. We’re on a roll.”

Marc snorted hard laughter. He glanced at Angela. “What persuasion would you like us to use?”

Angela let go of the map. It used a lot of energy to open it. She would have to account for that. “He loves his people the way I love mine.”

Marc motioned at Adrian. “You go first. I’ll add in here and there. If he lies, we’ll kill the smallest one first.”

Adrian settled across from the scared, sullen boss man and got comfortable. He cracked all his knuckles in one quick move. “Hello. Having a bad day?”

Xaós let out a sound of miserable contempt. “We should have killed you.”

“I keep hearing that.” Adrian pulled his knife and fingered the sharp blade. “But you don’t get to pick and choose life, do you? Only the angels have that honor.”

When the man didn’t answer, Marc stepped toward the cringing cowards on the floor. “I’ve

never had a byzantine. Wonder what you guys taste like?”

Angela snickered at the common thought among the team. “You probably won’t enjoy it as much as me.”

Marc’s laughter flowed over the room, bringing calm despite the threat of torture.

“Don’t hurt them.” Xaós surrendered without a fight. “I’ll tell you.”

Adrian leaned back, crossing a leg over the other. He was curious how Angela had known Xaós’s weakness, but now wasn’t the time to ask. “How did you get here? What’s your job?”

Sullen tones came now. “We woke here with no memory.”

“And your job? Is it really to weigh the souls and bet on life?”

“We’ve never known.” Xaós seemed to collapse before them. “We need to know.”

Angela, suspicions confirmed, leaned against the cloud wall to conserve what energy she had left. She ran her fingers through it, annoyed when it felt like a cheap curtain. *This has been a disappointment... I’m still furious.* “So you woke here, in control of all this, of all our lives, and the best you could do was bet on the outcomes?”

A double timbre came from Xaós, finally revealing regret. “*We got bored just watching.*”

Neil swallowed rage at that answer. “Do you have books here or...I don’t know, guidelines?”

Xaós sneered. “We have the same book you refuse to follow.”

“You’re pissed at being here with no answers, so you decided to torment humankind to get revenge on the Creator. You know he loves his humans.” Angela lifted a brow. “Tell me that’s wrong.”

Xaós shook his head. “I wish I could, but we are too similar. You know too much about me.”

“Anyone could read you, without gifts. You’re pissed, like the humans you’re so jealous of and hate for existing.” Angela almost sobbed. “I’ve worried over this contingency for weeks.”

“Why?” Neil assumed she had it covered either way.

“I don’t. This is the one dead end. I don’t know where to go from here, except to commit such atrocities that replacements need to be sent.”

Cold danger filled the air.

“You mean kill them.” Neil just wanted to be sure what she needed from him. He didn’t have a problem with it after what they’d learned.

Her orbs turned red. “I want them burned alive.” She ignored the whimpering angels and eager team. “First, I need to figure out their real purpose here, what they were supposed to spend their time doing...” Angela signaled the interrogators to continue and shut her eyes. She’d discovered listening revealed clues she couldn’t catch with sight.

Adrian resumed his questioning. “How long have you been here? Did you all appear at the same time?”

“I was the first. The others came shortly after.”

“Shortly?”

“It was such a short time that I did not keep track of the exact passage. When the others came, we realized the rooms were getting a new arrival every two hundred years. Orin was the last to appear.”

“And you’ve been here how long now with no word from anyone?” Marc reinforced Adrian’s question while reminding Xaós he’d been abandoned and had no reason to stay loyal or lie.

“Thousands of years.”

“You have no job? You’re just here?”

The man nodded.

“Punishment.” Angela didn’t open her eyes. “This is a prison.”

“Yes. It has to be.” Xaós surprised them with his agreement. “We’ve been able to form no other conclusion.”

“Some jail.” Kyle was furious. “If they don’t know what they did wrong, they aren’t learning anything. The punishment is useless.”

“Revenge.” Marc gave them the correct answer. “This was set up to torture them. They might be valuable, though. After this long, hatred would fade. You’d want them gone.”

“But they haven’t been killed.” Angela put a piece into place. “In that scenario, the only reason I

wouldn't have killed them is if I had made other plans for them." *Or for this Weigh Station...*

"You think?" Xaós sounded hopeful for the first time.

Angela shrugged. "You've considered all the options during your imprisonment, I'm sure. Being allowed to have control over humans, being given or allowed to keep immortality, being cared for—all those things imply you will get out of here at some point. I assume that's what you've come up with?"

"Yes."

"You've skipped an obvious clue." Angela opened her eyes. "We're here now. This is the first time with open contact, right? The Messenger always forced you to be subtle in dealing with us."

"Yes. We were very excited to be allowed to bring you here. Company is rare."

"Yeah, we're not your company." She slid her hand to her belt. "We're your executioners. The hatred has finally faded. They just want you gone now."

The angels whimpered again, not considering fighting her.

Xaós grimaced. "I did consider that possibility, but I counted on something I know to be unshakable."

Angela sighed, sensing a trap springing around her. "And what is that?"

"Your determination to have answers you can live, or die, with."

“I don’t have to spare all of you to achieve it.”
Angela hoped that was true.

“But you will have to leave souls here to take our place. When we removed one of our own, he didn’t die. Even when we burnt Kronus, he survived.”

Angela’s horror was bitter. “You deserve this. I don’t know what you did to trigger such a final judgement, but Kyle is right. You didn’t learn anything. You have no remorse for your choices.”

“What is remorse?”

Angela stared at Xaós, mind adding the next clue. She now had a tiny corner framed. “You have no conscience. You’re like a patient...” Angela stood straight as another piece slammed into place. “Mental patients who are allowed to play, unsupervised...” She sucked in air. “We’re dogs in a reform program.” Her harsh laughter spilled through the rooms, bringing waves of thick tension.

“The women were sent to a female jail because you killed some of them. They had to be protected, even up here.” Angela blinked rapidly to stop her tears. “This is the first test of putting the inmates with the pets to determine what will happen.”

“And if the pets bite?” Marc hated the image, but it fit.

“You discontinue the program.”

Marc pushed her. “What if it’s already being ended?”

“That would end it faster. It would also bring someone to collect information on what went

wrong.” Angela pulled her knife and strode toward the angels. “I’ll leave a note of explanation.”

“Angie.” Adrian felt her rage trying to take control. He also felt like they were missing something. “We can’t do this.”

She paused to look at him. “They’ll come to put me down like the wild animal I am.”

“You’re bitter. I understand. We all are.”

“So why are you stopping me?”

Marc motioned. “He isn’t finished with his interrogation.”

“Yes, he is.”

“I do have another question, actually.” It had occurred to Adrian when they’d first arrived, but he’d forgotten. Marc interfering had reminded him. “Was the Messenger always here or did he show up when the rooms filled?”

Xaós hurried to answer and stall her actions. “He was always here.”

“You never forced him to talk?”

Xaós gave Adrian a nasty glare. “Of course, but we’re not fighters like you. He laughed at us.”

“And now you can’t question him at all.” Adrian stared at the charred mess on the floor. “Will a new Messenger be sent?”

Angela tapped her knife hilt. “I’m more interested in new angels.”

“Why are you threatening us?” Orin cowered on the floor, peering at her in wounded frustration. “We’ve done you no harm.”

“You’ve played God with the lives of all humans. Your bets have destroyed us. I should skin you alive!”

Everyone fell silent, not wanting to provoke her further.

Angela tried to control herself. “This is a waste of time. There are no answers to be found.”

“No!” Xaós moaned. “There has to be more than this! Don’t stop hunting it!”

“So you can be freed?”

He nodded tiredly. “Even being dead would be better.”

“We’ve all felt like that, thanks to your wagers. You deserve it.”

“But you don’t? After killing thousands since the war?”

Angela ran a hand through her wild curls, disgusted. “My death dealing isn’t over yet.” She moved into the tunnel. “But your days of betting on our lives are finished.”

Marc stayed behind her as Angela tracked back to the first room of chessboards. When she began destroying them with blasts of heat, he kept quiet, hoping the worlds connected to them weren’t harmed.

Angela spent the rest of her energy going through the rooms and burning every stick of furniture and entertainment. She also burnt their meager comforts.

The angels and boss shouted or cried when their favorite thing was destroyed, but they still didn't fight.

“Will it be...replenished?”

Neil shrugged at Kyle's query. “No idea.”

“Unlikely.” Adrian pointed at the desk Xaós was cowering behind. “The drawer is broken; it leans. They don't get fresh shipments.”

“The Messenger said these items had to last us.” Xaós groaned as Angela's fire got closer. “Please don't let her leave us here!”

“There's nowhere else for you to go.”

“We could follow you...”

“No!” Adrian, Neil, and Kyle denied him in unison.

“But you could teach us to—”

“No.” Adrian stood, also very bitter in his disappointment. “Send us back or she will burn you when she gets to this room. Her hatred is strong.”

“She's the only one who can send you back.” Xaós hid behind his desk. “If she kills me, she has to take my place.”

“How would you escort us if someone has to take your place?”

“We don't know for sure. The Messenger was clear we can visit for a time, but he made it seem like we'd be trapped there if we stayed too long.”

“And in your wisdom, you never tested the time limit.”

“No. We value our immortality.”

“But now that we’ve come, you’re willing. Why?”

Xaós sighed in awe. “She’ll protect us like she does all of you.”

“No, I won’t.” Angela paused in the entrance. “I’ll tell my camp the truth and let them have revenge. You’re safer right here, serving your punishment.”

“But you can’t! You don’t have answers!”

“Contact me when a new Messenger is sent.”

“But...that could be years!”

“Yes. We may all be dead and weighed before then.” She shrugged coldly. “Don’t blame me. I didn’t put you here. Your actions did.”

“You’re just going to leave us?!”

Angela veered toward the angels. “After I drop a message of my own.” Her grip tightened on the knife. “Who wants to be my pegboard?”

Souls fled into the first rooms, screaming.

Angela rotated back to Xaós. “They volunteered you.” Angela leapt over the desk and pinned the man to the wall. Her knife poked his neck.

The ground rumbled.

Adrian and Marc, both about to grab her, stopped and waited to see what would happen next.

Angela let the blade draw a speck of blood, hating the chore.

Walls shook...the floor buckled...

Angela drew a full droplet of crimson.

Power shot out of Xaós, blasting her and her team into the walls.

Angela laughed as she tried to stand, groaning like the rest of the team. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.” She brought up her shield, including her recovering team inside, and stared at the Messenger who was now behind the desk. “You died too easy. Who took your place?”

“One of my clones.” He cackled at her. “I use them at all times.”

“How many would I have to kill to reach the *real* you?”

“Seventeen thousand, five hundred and eight.” The horned man bowed to her. “Odds are your knife will break, you five will run out of ammunition, and you’ll exhaust yourselves mentally and physically with only half of those lives claimed.”

“What if I take my own?”

The Messenger froze for an instant.

Angela saw it. All of her recovering team did.

“If you die here, you stay here.”

“At least that would be by choice.”

The Messenger studied her without blinking. “Why would you want to remain here?”

“Same reasons I’ve already stated—control of the bets, and future changes.”

“Changes to what? You didn’t elaborate.”

“And I won’t, so you can’t cover it before I get to it.” Angela bowed back in contempt. “I passed your tests. Give me what I came for.”

“And if I don’t?”

Angela didn’t give away her ace. She stared expectantly, hand inching toward her gun.

“You came for information not yet earned. You are blessed to even be here!”

“Blessed isn’t the word I would have chosen, but I get your point. We’re at a stalemate. Send me back. You’re wasting my time and won’t even tell me why. This farce is over.” She turned toward the doorway. “I assume the entrance is also the exit?”

The Messenger’s frustration was loud and finally carried the levels of hatred she’d expected.

“You are an abomination! You’re not supposed to exist.”

Angela slowed but didn’t stop. “I won’t fall in line. No one knows what to do with me, right?”

“Yes! Female byzantine are docile, loving, obedient. You are none of those.”

“Nope. I’d just as soon cut your horns off and glue them to my shoelaces.” Angela kept walking, team following.

The Messenger hopped after her, ignoring the furious men still being shielded by her power. “You have to agree to take your place. You can’t leave it like this!”

“Sure I can. You lied, played games. You aren’t delivering on the agreed terms of our deal. Give me one reason why I should stay for another minute.”

“I’ll heal your kids! Right now!”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re lying.”

“Am not! I’ll heal them all. The adults too.”

“In exchange for?”

“Obedience.”

Angela's laughter rang through the rooms as she strode by hiding angels trying not to draw her attention. "You don't know me at all."

"We want to study you. We want to know why you evolved so fast and why you're so different. Are there more like you and the child you left in charge? What triggered so many angels in one generation? Did you know the war was coming? How powerful are you?"

Angela turned to stare at the Messenger as he continued to shoot the same rapid-fire questions she'd asked herself months ago.

"How have you survived so many enemies and injuries? How are you not crushed by your losses and the betrayals? How can you love the souls who try to kill you?" The Messenger sucked in air. "We need answers!"

Angela's lips curled. "You're supposed to be the higher power controlling all fates toward a grand plan. Why don't you already know?!"

"I... We haven't... It's not supposed to be this way! Female byzantine haven't existed except once in all of your human history! We have to know why it's happening now!"

"You don't control everything. That must suck for you."

"It's infuriating! There are not supposed to be deviations!"

"You haven't complained about the war or all the deaths even once... That means it really was part of the plan." She paused, adding the next clue.

“Oh, no.”

Angels whimpered.

“There she goes again.”

The angels had figured out her pattern of discovery and already dreaded it.

Angela’s fury filled the room with fresh waves of heat. “The bets were ending. The war was planned. You put them here to destroy the experiment. It’s over and has to be disposed of before you can start something new. It was a test of their rehabilitation.”

The Messenger stood in stiff silence as she added it up.

“You’ve studied us for something, but we didn’t produce results until now.” Angela’s fingers twitched against her gun belt. “You said there were female Byzan once before in history. When?”

The Messenger clearly didn’t want to answer.

Adrian came to Angela’s side. “You should give her the information. She’s kind of a genius, even for one of us. Maybe she can give you answers.”

The Messenger sighed in resignation. “When the Creator waked the earth, a child was born byzantine.”

“Uh-huh. She was killed before she could age enough to be a challenge?” Angela guessed.

“Yes. All the upper levels concurred.”

“Where’s the Creator now?”

“You will never get that information from me!”

“I already have it.” Angela turned toward the entrance. “I just didn’t want to believe it. The room

at the top of heaven is empty. You can't tell me where he is because you don't know. You haven't suffered like we have on earth. You've never considered that we sensed it." Angela went to the spot where she'd woken and rotated toward the cloud wall, where the Messenger was watching her. "You decided to end it in hopes it would draw the Creator back to you. But it didn't."

"No. The halls are empty and...we miss him!"

"I get that. Then I came along, and I assume I look like the byzantine child and I feel like her. You wondered if the Creator would come to me like he did her, so you brought me here and tried to get me to stay. Because after all this time, you still feel jealousy." She shook her head. "You disappointed him by killing that child and he left you."

"Yes."

"Well, I have bad news. If he returns and finds out you've destroyed his beloved, if not abandoned creation, do you suppose he'll be forgiving?"

The Messenger shrugged angrily. "We discussed that for the first thousand years. Since then, we've eased up on fear in favor of hoping it would bring him back to repair the damage."

Angela gasped.

Adrian put a hand on her arm. "Are you okay?"

"Not really. I just figured out why there's so many of us suddenly, why *I* exist."

The Messenger ran to her, stopping only when he had his face against her shield. "Tell me!"

Angela sneered at him. “To repair the damage you’ve done. He doesn’t have to return to those who hurt him with their betrayals and disobedience. You’ve admitted that you don’t know where I came from, but I know. He sent me instead.”

The Messenger screamed, beating on her barrier. “No! That can’t be true! No!”

Angela let him wear himself out, positive she was correct. “We were born into this time and place...” The memory flashed through her mind.

We were born into this time to help save our people, our country, and our very way of life. We have to get them to a place where they can Sit and Stand in safety. That’s why you’re different. That’s why you’re here.

“Yes.” She stared at the now crying Messenger without mercy, but also without hatred lingering. “If I’m contacted, I’ll call out to you. In the meantime, fix what you’ve broken.”

The Messenger sniffled. “We are sorry.”

“Prove that and maybe the Creator will forgive you.” Angela’s expression iced over. “But I never will and if I have any pull with the Creator, you’ll all be punished, no matter what level you are. Your best bet is to kill me and hope he never finds out, or support me in everything I do while I try to fix what you’ve done.” She kicked debris out of her path. “Send us back. I can’t stand the sight of you any longer.”

“You have not fulfilled the terms of our meeting.”

“Ah, yes. The Book of Life.” She put a hand to her hip. “You haven’t fulfilled your promises either. Are my people healed?”

“No.”

“Well?”

“As you return.”

“I get to take your word for that, when we all know you can’t be trusted?”

The Messenger waved a hand. “There, it is done. Now you will read the book.”

“We will read the book.”

“The killers with you will not understand.”

“That’s what they have me for.” Angela veered to the nearest table that wasn’t completely destroyed. “Let’s get this over with.”

Her team gathered around, eager to be done and get home.

The Messenger settled in the corner. He flipped his finger.

A large book appeared on the table.

Marc snorted. “I expected something more…”

“Magical?” Angela opened the plain brown cover.

Vivid light streamed upward, creating images of battles that had happened over the eons.

Marc leaned in. “That’s more like it.”

They observed the past in awe and anger, seeing the betrayals man had committed in the name of power and greed, and also in the name of love and God.

Neil reached out to touch the images.

Angela shook her head. “You’ll be sucked in. That’s a trap.”

Neil put his hand in his pocket. “Okay then. Don’t touch the shiny objects.”

Angela glanced at the smirking Messenger. “You’re stalling now to trap me here. I know time has restarted. Show me.”

The being glared at her, amusement falling to the ground. “You won’t like it.”

She shrugged. “I didn’t expect to like anything I learned up here and I haven’t. Show me who I’m fighting this time.”

The images came together into a single horned figure all of them recognized.

Angela sat back in the chair. “The other king.”

“Yes. Satan wants control. He always has. If you refuse to fight in the final battle, he will win, and evil will cover all worlds. No one will be spared. His army will breach the gates and come here. He will wait for the Creator and kill him.”

“I can’t win that fight.”

The Messenger chuckled. “No, child. Even all your gifts cannot defeat him. You must *convert* him. With your love.”

Angela’s team slid hands to weapons, revolted and furious.

Angela sighed. “That’s why you need me to ascend. When he wins that final battle and comes here, you want me to handle him and save everyone.”

The Messenger stared. “We’re not positive it’s possible now. You have little love left in your heart for your own people, let alone for ours.”

Angela’s pain was palpable. It hit them all in thick waves that tempered the anger. “I’ll think about it.”

“You have to agree. There is no other choice.”

“I always have a choice.” She gazed at the Messenger. “What if we don’t lose the final battle?”

“Then Satan will not come to earth. That fight will happen here.”

“Why?”

“He would be too weak on earth if you win. He will never sacrifice his advantage.”

“What advantage?”

“The human need for violence. He uses it against you.”

Angela blew out annoyance. “You still don’t understand what drives all of us! You think the Creator will get it right next time, but he didn’t get it wrong *this* time. Human life was not a mistake! He meant for us to be this way.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I can. I do. Weaknesses exist in every living thing, even here. None of you can resist a bet.”

Marc and Adrian’s minds went crazy with ideas that might tempt their adversary to a level where he could be defeated.

Kyle and Neil kept watching the evil figure in the images, seeing how much misery he was responsible for.

Angela breathed in deep and let it out. She stood up. “What triggers that final battle?”

“We don’t know. There is darkness when we search.”

“I don’t need to read the rest of the book.” Angela slid around the table to stand in front of the Messenger. “I’ll do it—all of it. On one condition.”

“Name your price.”

“When it’s all over and I’ve won back the Creator’s house for you—when He returns—you will support me in whatever choices I make to change things. Even if it goes against the Creator.”

“But we... You won’t...” The Messenger fell silent, studying her. His expression lit up suddenly. “You believe you can?”

“I’ve always known I’m different than even the other descendants. When I rule, I’ll never abandon you, no matter how much you disappoint me. I’ll just kill you.”

Instead of fear, there was only relief. “That would be a mercy compared to how we have existed these many years.”

“A mercy you don’t deserve, but when I assume control, you’ll atone. Be prepared to face my wrath.”

The Messenger’s ears drooped to his hairy feet. “A deal has been made. Go now and begin fulfilling it.”

The clouds dropped out from under their feet.

The team fell, screaming, all the way back to earth.

Chapter Nine
All Bets Are Off

1

“**Y**ou’re not allowed to be...” Ivan paused at the glower. “You’re supposed to be locked below.” He glanced to the security detail for help.

None of those men and women met his eye.

Ivan frowned at Jennifer through his bruises. “I have orders from the boss.”

“I am the boss.”

“Just until Angela...” Ivan sighed, sensing her disapproval. “What do you need?”

Jennifer stepped by him to reach the bodies on the deck. She settled into an empty seat. “I have it now.”

The dark deck was eerie. Jennifer was glad there were so many teams of Eagles up here, but it still felt light. There were too many corners and places for problems to hide. Jennifer was certain the boat was okay and there weren’t any stowaways, but she couldn’t help feeling unprotected. The ship was huge. It was possible they’d overlooked areas in their haste to get everything loaded.

Ivan frowned. “You expecting trouble?”

“Just felt like I should be up here. Now she has enough security.”

Ivan snickered. “Yeah, the boss... Angela went a bit overboard to make sure you were covered.”

Jennifer swept the two teams, lips pursed. She scanned the Eagles on the deck, glad Angela also had two teams here. “It still feels light.”

“We thought the same, but she was clear about keeping regular security on the camp. They might panic while she’s gone.”

“What about if she doesn’t return? What orders do you have for that?”

Ivan met her eye. “To follow your every command as if you’re her.”

Jennifer leaned against the hard, folding chair. “She’ll be back. No worries.”

“Have you seen that?”

“I’m forbidden to search the future. Angela told me to save my energy.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“No, but it’s why we love her in charge. She covers us in every way she can.”

“Agreed.” Ivan swept the unconscious team again. The deserted deck around them was dark except for automatic lamps that had switched on shortly after they’d dropped into unconsciousness. Ivan wished there was more. When there was time, he would talk to Grant about it. If this was it, they needed to put up more of their own. A dim deck was dangerous.

Jennifer shifted for a better position. Evening mess, followed by hot showers and snacks, would

keep people distracted for a bit. She was enjoying the calm while she had it.

“How do you think it’s going?”

Jennifer grumbled.

“Yeah.” Ivan signaled Quinn to take his post. “I’m starting rounds in a few minutes.”

Jennifer tried to placate the man. “I’ll be right here.”

Ivan kept walking. “Why don’t I believe that?”

Quinn pointed as he came over to switch places. “Because she’s lying. She came here for something she doesn’t want us to know about.”

“You think?”

Quinn flushed at Ivan’s sharp tone. “Sorry. I know she’s—”

“Sneaky? Tricky? A lot like Angela?”

“All of those.”

“So why are you leaving her alone to do what she wants?”

“Because she’s sneaky, tricky, and a lot like Angela.”

Quinn fell silent. Ivan approved of those traits. Quinn did too, to a point, but Quinn couldn’t help the concern. *How can a teenager take Angela’s place? We’d be better off with Kendle.*

Ivan snorted. “So you’re team Kendle, huh? Wouldn’t have guessed that.”

Quinn stiffened at the reference. “I’m team Adrian.”

“You’ll be disappointed.”

“Why?” Quinn respected Ivan’s loyalty and therefore, his opinion.

“She’s had chances and never took them. If it’s what she wanted, it would have happened already.”

“Maybe.”

“But?”

“But she hasn’t killed him and she’s even trying to get the camp to let him back in. We all know that.”

“Yep.”

“I think that means she does want him.”

“What if she just has plans based around him?”

Quinn brooded. “She does like her plans.”

“So do I. I’ll wait for that one as long as it takes. If that’s what it is.”

“You don’t think so.”

“No. There are no more plans or plots. She forgave him because he gifted her with leadership and taught her how to save all of us. When you view it that way, everything almost makes sense.”

“Almost?”

“Except for the spark.”

“They are hot together. That’s what sells me.”

“It takes more than sex.”

“I know that, but it isn’t just the sex with them.”

“How would you know?” Ivan had tired of the topic.

“It’s how they work together.”

“Yeah, we all see that, which is why we tolerate him. He still has things to teach her.” He headed up

the metal steps to the bridge. *I hope she learns faster. It feels like bad shit is coming.*

“Boss said it’s time for a shift change here.”

Grant adjusted the controls without glancing at Ivan as the soldier stopped in the doorway. “Which one?”

“Jennifer.” Ivan chuckled. “The crew you’ve been training is on the way for overnight duty.”

“Did you relay my request?”

“Of course.”

“And?”

“A cot is also on the way, but Jennifer said no to meals.”

Grant sighed. “Okay. I’ll eat on the walk back here.”

Ivan guessed Grant didn’t trust the new crew to handle the ship alone. He looked at Shawn. “You’re on until the main boss gets back or the new boss calls the next shift change.”

“Got it.” Shawn was enjoying the view and the calm water around the ship. He’d never been on a cruise boat. Mostly, it was nice.

“Angela said you didn’t like using yourself as bait.”

“I don’t.” Grant frowned. “I’m worried about the ship if something happens to me.”

“So was she. She rescinded the order right before she left. You’ll have open security too.”

“Good. Thank her for me.”

“I will.” Ivan nodded to Ray as he went by the man. “You’re on until he gets back to the bridge,

then Donald will take over and you will sleep. Angela's orders."

Ray didn't protest. He hated to leave Grant without protection, but he was exhausted.

"I feel it." Ivan headed for the inner stairwell. "Have some coffee while he eats." Ivan jogged down the dim stairs, thinking they needed to add more lights or switch more lights here too. He wasn't certain yet. Angela would decide based on power consumption, fuel, and availability of lights that could be hung without having cords everywhere.

Ivan heard loud chatter before he neared the galley and slowed. He was also getting tired, but the camp needed patience and a good performance. Angela had stressed being careful with the herd while she was gone, and Ivan had done that, but more than a hundred passengers were squeezed into the galley right now. He sucked in air and expelled it. "I can do this." Ivan put on a bored expression and entered.

Heads swiveled.

Conversations stopped.

A cough echoed like a gunshot in the silence.

Ivan shrugged. "Not yet. Sorry."

Some camp members resumed their food and conversations, but most of them continued to observe Ivan for signs of a problem.

Ivan made eye-contact with the sentries in the long room, then walked to the coffee line. He nodded at Conner, who was again sitting by Candy.

He'd decided to give the pair his approval because Angela wanted Conner to have a fair chance despite his father. *Won't matter. Kid's already bad. Time will prove it.* Ivan kept his mental shield up, flashing hospitable glances to scattered groups. When no fresh tension rose, he assumed he was doing a good job.

"Ivan's being nice..." Samantha regarded Theo, who was eating at the same table. "There's trouble, right?"

Theo tried to deny it, but Debra flashed hand signals too fast.

Samantha snorted at the comment. "Maybe. He is a rookie. Trying too hard is common."

Theo frowned at Debra. "What did I tell you this morning?"

Debra gave him the finger.

Samantha smirked. "She won't lie. That's awesome."

"Yeah." Theo frowned at his mate. "But she could have this time. You don't need the stress."

Samantha dipped her french fry into ketchup and plopped it into her mouth to keep from spewing her true emotions. They had no idea how stressed she really was, and it only had a little to do with Neil and the others being gone right now. "So what's the problem, besides Becky's sedative getting ready to wear off?"

Theo leaned in. "They've been gone too long, hours now. People are starting to wonder if they can get back."

Samantha rattled the ice in her cup to loosen it. “Nothing will keep Angela from returning to her camp, her kids.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling them.”

“Good.” Samantha chewed and swallowed, then belched.

Debra giggled.

Theo leaned toward her, drawn.

Samantha grimaced. *Damn it, Neil. Where are you?!*

2

“People are getting restless.” Brittani stayed near Daryl as he did rounds. She was thrilled that his injuries had been healed. Gus and Greg weren’t ready to resume full duty yet, but they were both on the mend. Brittani refused to think about Gus yelling at her to go away when he’d woken to find her hovering between his cot and Daryl’s. “They’ve been gone for four hours.”

Daryl grunted, still not sure how he was alive after being burned so badly. He didn’t even have scars. Conner and Morgan were powerful healers. “It’ll hold for a while.”

“Until morning?”

“Longer than that.”

“Are you sure?” Brittani had taken a break from the galley to get some movement and to familiarize herself with other parts of the ship, but she planned to go back and make snacks to keep people happy.

“Yes. Angela knew how long she’d have until things got ugly.”

“That’s why she set it for so late!”

“Exactly. She knew daylight would bring fresh calm.”

“And when evening comes again?”

“These people will riot unless Jennifer can convince them she’s up to the task.”

Brittani frowned. “Is she?”

Daryl checked his watch. “Don’t know; don’t want to find out.”

“Understandable.” Brittani put space between them and swept for problems. They were approaching the infirmary.

Daryl kept his concentration up, but he was aware of her warm body next to him. It was nice to think they would get a happy ending on the island.

Brittani beamed. “Yes, it is.”

“You’re keeping track of thoughts now. Good.”

“You told me I should. Angela did too, though she didn’t actually say it aloud.”

“She knew there was still an assassin. She might pull it back now that we’re in the clear.”

Brittani frowned. “Are we really?”

“Maybe.” Daryl paused outside the entrance to the infirmary. “It depends on the two angry females in here.” Daryl scanned the room, then entered.

Brittani didn’t ask her next question as she followed him. Talking on duty was fine, but not in the middle of a tense situation.

Seth glared at them from Becky’s bedside.

Becky cried harder, head turning away. Restrained, it was all she could do.

Kendle stared at them in concern. She was worried over Marc.

Daryl went to Kenn, the Eagle on point here.

Kendle shut her lids, controlling herself. She knew she was lucky to be here, to be alive at all, but the depression from Marc's words was growing. *I can't stay here. I'll snap.*

Brittani went to the chair by Kendle's cot and sank into it, nose wrinkling at the strong odor of medicine. "We're moving you to the other boat as soon as possible."

"Good."

"Are you still a threat to her?"

Kendle shook her head. "The alpha crap kicked in. It would tear me apart to hurt her now."

"You're broken. Everyone hates you. You know that, but you still only care about Marc. Interesting."

"Don't analyze me unless you have a degree!"

Brittani chuckled without humor. "I earned my degree by surviving the war and the aftermath."

Kendle forced tears back, hands clenching. "What do you want?"

"Peace, happiness, to live forever."

Kendle refused to feel humor. "Go away."

"Not a chance, honey." Brittani ignored the disapproving expressions from the guards. They wanted her to leave Kendle alone, fearing the island woman would try to hurt herself or someone else. "You have a lot to live for, you know."

Kendle grunted. “Give me the list. Should only take a few seconds.”

“You have to help us get settled on the island.”

Kendle’s nails cut into her palms. The rage rose, warring with the depression. “Angela will do that.”

“*You’re* going to do that.” Brittani pointed. “You’re going to snap out of this and take your place. Your job was never to kill or even to love. You’re our guide for the island. Do it.”

“I can’t. No one will listen to me now.” Kendle couldn’t stop a tear from slipping through her lashes “I’ve ruined everything.”

“And yet, you still have a job to do.” Brittani swept the chamber, hating it that they were all listening, but she didn’t shy from her duty. “The boss said you have one more chance. I heard her tell Marc that. It means you will have the opportunity to atone.”

“And if I don’t want it?”

“You do, or we wouldn’t be talking.”

“I need hope or I’ll slit my own throat.”

“We know. Like Angela, when you’re upset, we feel it.”

“Stop saying her name!”

“Because you do still hate her?”

“Because I can’t fight the guilt! These emotions just won’t stop!” Kendle broke into quiet sobs.

“Yeah, she nailed you to the wall. You have to admit, you do deserve it.” Brittani patted Kendle’s thin wrist. “We’re going to make you sleep now. You’ll wake in a better mood.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because crying it out helps women. Men need to spend time in the cage. Women cry.”

“What a load of bullshit.”

Brittani shrugged. “It is what it is. That doesn’t change the facts.”

Kendle tried to stop crying and found she could now. “Wow. That’s awful.”

“I know. I’d rather bleed than cry, but I was born a girl. It is what it is.”

Kendle finally looked at the pretty black woman, tears leaking down her red cheeks. “Why are you trying to help me?”

“I like you.”

“Liar! No one likes me.”

“I don’t know why not. You’re charming.” Brittani swallowed the rest of her sarcasm and signaled to the medic. “She needs a few hours of sleep. Send her off with a kind word, will ya? I’m all out.”

Morgan knelt by the cot, flashing a soothing smile despite his dislike of the island woman. “I’m a doctor and you’re a patient. No one will harm you while you sleep. My word on it.”

“What if I want them to?”

Morgan injected her arm. “The boss can handle that request. Until she makes the call, you’re under my protection and it won’t happen.”

Kendle tried to speak, but the drugs yanked her under before she could do more than grimace.

“It’s good.” Morgan capped the syringe and gave Brittani a real smile. “The boss will appreciate it.”

“I didn’t do it for Angela or Marc.”

“Who then?”

“For her.” Brittani waved at Kendle. “I do like her. She’s a survivor. I want her to recover. The rest of you just want her to go away.” Brittani held up a hand as she stood, stopping protests and defensive responses. “You don’t have to justify it. I know she’s got bad inside her, but I take in the scars and all I feel is pity. She latched onto Marc because she’s got nothing else.”

“We felt bad for her at one point too. I hope you don’t get surprised by it like we all were.” Morgan dropped the dirty syringe into the hazardous waste bin. “Be careful, okay?”

“I plan to, but I am going to help her.”

Wade sighed. “We’ll respect that. Just do what Morgan said; be careful. You haven’t been around her as long as some of us have. We wouldn’t feel this way if there wasn’t a good reason.”

“Noted.” Brittani took a post near the exit to wait for Daryl.

Peace suddenly filled the infirmary. Dreams smoothed out, bodies relaxed.

Daryl grinned, glancing around the guards for confirmation. “We’re okay now.”

Other descendants felt the same, nodding to him.

Those without gifts looked at the magic users, trying to figure it out.

“Wow. Even the ship feels happier.” Brittani smiled. “Angela must be back.”

3

Angela snapped awake, gasping in air.

Jennifer yelped, flinching backward.

Eagles reached for their guns.

Adrian was next. His gasp was louder, drawing attention from the few camp members on the deck.

The last three men came alert at the same time, groaning.

The wind pushed against them in earnest, carrying the smell of rain instead of rot. The storm was closer. Angela shuddered as cold wind hit her skin. She fought the nausea and reached for the kit at her feet. She took out her notebook and pen, and began to write, ignoring everyone.

Adrian shook his head when Jennifer would have spoken. “She needs a few minutes.”

“Okay. *You* tell us.”

Adrian snorted. He stretched, subtly checking for injuries. “We’ll wait and enjoy the quiet.”

Jennifer brooded, but didn’t insist. Angela’s pen was flying across the page. She was obviously copying things down before she forgot important details. Jennifer couldn’t wait to hear them. She also didn’t want to. None of the team was happy. Their glances were short, disappointed sweeps that

refused to give any hope. *It didn't go well. Jennifer sighed. I guess I knew it wouldn't. There's no way it could be good up there with the way things have been down here. Ugliness rubs off the same as magic.*

Adrian nodded in response to that thought. *Except it came from there. Not the other way around.* Before she could ask anything, Adrian stood and removed his jacket. He put it around Angela's shoulders, then rotated toward the guards for a check in.

Marc stayed by Angela as he swept the Eagles and passengers to determine if there had been problems while they were gone.

There wasn't. Jennifer studied Marc, hoping to glean details from his thoughts.

Marc locked down on his mind, not in a hurry to relive it. He signaled for the sentries to bring Angela something hot to drink, then added his coat to Adrian's. It was cool up here right now and she was shivering.

Angela didn't tell them it was from anger. She kept writing, drawing conclusions and making plans.

Neil waited to be told what to do, but he swept for his mate. He'd expected Samantha to be up here when they returned despite not being allowed to walk the steps yet.

Jennifer used hand codes to tell him Samantha and Autumn were in the galley having a snack.

Neil knew from Jennifer's body language that she'd denied Samantha's request to come up. He was glad. Sam needed to rest.

Jennifer waved him below. "We've got this covered."

Neil immediately departed, nodding to Marc.

Marc grunted in acknowledgement of the silent reminder not to speak until Angela decided what to tell everyone. He didn't need that advice, mostly because he didn't want to be the one who told the camp what had happened.

Kyle glanced at Jennifer, then resumed scanning. He needed to determine who would be a problem when Angela revealed it all.

Jennifer's unease grew. It hadn't just gone bad. It had gone *really* bad.

Kyle refused to dwell on it. He didn't want to be the one who told them either.

Angela kept writing. She'd learned a lot of small details during the meeting, but the chaos afterward, where she'd followed her instinct, had provided an answer that humankind had killed over for centuries. It was dangerous information and she wanted every word of it recorded before she tried to explain that the meeting had been both a success and a failure. Now that the deal had fallen through for them to have protection to the island, she couldn't afford to miss even a single clue that might help. She hadn't asked for it to be extended because she hadn't believed the angels would honor it. The chessboards would be replaced; the betting would

restart. As the biggest group of survivors together in one place, there was no way those bets wouldn't center around Safe Haven.

Ivan watched her expression, sad for her. He knew it wasn't good news and now she had to tell everyone else, when she appeared to need a long rest. He didn't envy her the job.

On duty over the top deck, neither did Jeff right then. He hadn't forgotten his previous resentments, but many of them were buried now. Today had been enlightening. He'd listened to the stories and felt the loyalty everyone had to Angela. He'd noted the changes in people and the new layers of training the Eagles and camp were exploring, but mostly, he'd witnessed dangerous citizens being rehabilitated.

It would take a long time, but he also already saw subtle differences in the children who were awake. Angela had saved them all by being ruthless. Safe Haven had lost a low number compared to all the threats they'd faced, and she'd still found time to try and barter a better future. She wasn't the monster he'd believed after Crista's death. She'd kept them alive with blood, sweat, and tears—much of it her own.

Angela made a fast motion and resumed writing.

Marc passed it on. "Finish shift changes, then get the Eagles in the infirmary." He keyed his radio and repeated the order. Then he went to supervise it. She wanted him to verify all stations were covered while she finished up. He assumed she

would call the camp together soon. He doubted letting it go until morning would work. It sounded like the entire camp was still wide awake and waiting for news. People cheered at the sound of his voice. They knew the team was back.

Marc didn't blame them. Until they'd gone, he'd also been eager for answers. Now, all he wanted was a solution. He had faith Angela would find it if they gave her enough time.

Angela sighed, but didn't stop writing. It was hard to carry the faith for so many when her own was constantly taking hits, but she would find a way to make this okay for her people. *Like usual, I'll pay any price required, but I'm no longer depending on fate or a higher power. I have my brain and my army. That's all I need.*

4

Adrian fell in with Marc for his round of ship stations.

"You still owe me an answer from the beach." Marc saw the garden had three guards. He motioned for a shift change, then headed for the next cargo area. "When we hit the path to the beach, I lost my grid and couldn't read emotions or thoughts without serious digging. What's the deal?"

Caught off guard, Adrian's brows drew together. "Sorry, thought we'd covered that."

"Nope. We had a lot going on afterwards."

“Yeah. Let’s see. Oh, the ocean king has a barrier. Like nature, he controls his areas completely. His scans are like walls of water that muffle thoughts and gifts.”

“So the barriers are like...fog.”

“Exactly. You still have your skills, but there’s too much fog for those skills to be as effective.”

“How do you know about the ocean king?”

Adrian sighed. *And here’s the part that drags us into the past.*

Marc scowled. “Just give me the short. I’ve heard enough of your life story.”

“That’s liberating. Most people want every detail to use against me. Nice to know you’re different.”

The contempt laced tone angered Marc. He spun around and shoved Adrian against the wall. He leaned in, voice low. “I saw your plan.” Marc’s eyes glowed deep crimson. “You’re not protected now, Mitchel. There are no more bets. It’s just you and me.”

Adrian delivered an icy smirk. “And Angie. And *my* Eagles. And a lot of the camp, since you acted so stupid over everything. Be careful. You may have finally picked a fight you can’t win.” Adrian shoved free of Marc’s loosening hold and cleared his throat. “I’ve had dealings with the ocean and nature.” His tone filled with arrogant contempt. “In fact, I’ve dealt with about everything you haven’t. If you were smart, you’d go along with my plans. It might still save your life.”

Adrian walked down the hallway toward the next guard post, not caring about the half dozen witnesses. Now that he knew a handful of gambling addicts were controlling things, he was his own master. *All bets are off.*

Marc followed, regretting his outburst. He didn't care about the calm of the camp, but he wished he hadn't let his enemy have the information.

“What were you hiding from her?”

Marc didn't want to tell Adrian now.

“I can ask her.”

Marc growled. “Leave it alone!”

“The baby charm.” Adrian was surprised. Despite teaching Marc the words, and teasing Angie about it, he hadn't really thought Marc would do it. “You picked a date.”

“I was timing it.” Marc gazed through the narrow window at the darkness. “In about three weeks, she should be ready.”

“I assume you've planned practice sessions.”

Marc grunted. “I had to let the skin grow back for a few days. She used me up while we were loading this ship.”

Adrian chortled. “I thought you had the John Wayne walk.”

Marc couldn't help the derisive laughter.

Adrian knew what was happening. “Now that the meeting went bad, you're changing your mind.”

Marc gave a curt nod. “Everything changed.”

“It's still what she wants.”

“Is it? I got the impression she wants more power now. She has enough kids.”

Adrian sighed. “I hope you’re wrong about that.”

“I’m telling Angie everything.”

Adrian stopped.

Marc sighed. “She won’t like it, and she’ll hate me again for a while. It’ll cause trouble with the camp too, but in the end, the truth will always set me free with her.” Marc veered toward the stairs.

“I’ll trade you.”

Marc hid triumph, pausing. “It had better be good to keep me playing this role. You’re not the only one who saw freedom in our answers tonight.”

“Ah, the boy scout doesn’t want to be that anymore.” Adrian laughed. “We would have been a lethal team if not for your streak of stubborn morality.”

“Make your offer. I’m out of patience.”

“When we return in four years, you step aside.”

“In exchange for?”

“You get four years with her, the kids, and my camp. I go to the other side of the island. If she assigns classes, they’ll come to me. You won’t see my ugly mug for four years.”

“That’s not enough for me to even consider it.”

“Four years for four months is a great deal.”

“Four months?”

“That’s all the time we have with her, Marine. Did you see how they fawned, caved to her every

wish? They want her up there even more than we do.”

Marc nodded reluctantly. He’d felt that too.

“After the final battle, she has to assume her place or they’ll destroy what remains of this planet, I’m guessing. With that threat, she’ll go.”

“Yeah. They made that a condition for the meeting and she didn’t even blink. She knows.”

“She also knows how much time she has left.” Adrian stepped forward, eyes blazing. “She loves me! You owe her happiness. Be a man and let her have it!” Adrian held out his hand. “Shake on it and I vanish for four years.”

“If I don’t?”

Adrian flashed an image. “She dies unsatisfied with this life and maybe makes us all repeat it until she finds happiness.”

“With you.”

“Hell, man.” Adrian waved a hand. “It could be Ivan for all I know! But it isn’t you. After so many repeats, it *can’t* be you.”

“In your plan, it was more than four months.”

“For me, yes. You guys? No. You will both be taken.”

Adrian’s words confirmed what Marc had figured out during the meeting. He and Angela had duties beyond this life.

“Yes. You’ll go together, and be together, for however long eternity is up there. Or she’ll restart us all again.” Adrian stepped closer. “I’ll sweeten the deal. I’ll even get myself thrown off this ship in

the next few days. You'll get the rest of the ride south."

"I want one other thing."

"Name it."

Marc hated the eager victory tone, but this deal would give him exactly what he needed. "Have her lock up your gifts. I want you powerless for those years."

"I've had power in every life. It means little to me." Adrian put his hand back out.

Marc shook it.

"This is your captain speaking." Grant cleared his throat. "There is a mandatory meeting in the ballroom on deck B at dawn. I repeat, in two hours, be on deck B for a meeting. Those unable to attend will have radios provided. That is all."

Marc nodded. "That is all. We're done now."

Adrian walked away without replying, heart light and mind heavy.

Marc resumed his rounds, refusing to contemplate what he'd just done. For four years, he would have peace. *That's enough...for now.*

Chapter Ten

Home, Sweet Home

1

“**W**e have bad weather coming.” Grant pointed at the horizon. “I’ve seen lightning strikes.”

Angela also caught a distant flash. “Great.”

She got her notebook back out. She’d just finished writing and come up for a check in. She’d only seen these vistas on television. Being here during the storm made her hope she’d chosen right. The sky was ugly, as were the rough waves rippling across the ocean surface toward them.

“I estimate it will hit right after the mandatory meeting. You should have an hour.”

“More than enough for my needs. What do *you* need?”

“Prayers. We’ve got the rest covered.”

Angela left the bridge without offering platitudes. The slick deck swayed under her feet, making handrails a necessity. Prayers wouldn’t help them; after her behavior during the power meeting, the angels controlling the game boards wouldn’t be in a kind mood right now. Only her deal with the ocean was still in place.

Cool wind blew over her double coated skin again, still bringing a shiver of unease. The wind

wasn't controlled by the ocean. Nature had dominion over that, and she wasn't ever going to be their friend. Angela keyed her radio. "Team meeting in ten minutes, infirmary."

She switched off the volume to the jumble of answers and jogged down the stairs. The Eagles already knew. Now the camp would start moaning when all the male guards disappeared and the Ciemus women took over duty.

Angela strode through the halls at a fast clip and entered the infirmary without being noticed by the patients.

The Eagles on duty spotted her but didn't speak. Their answers were coming soon. It made waiting easier.

Angela pretended not to see Kendle's sleeping form as she walked to the heavily guarded cots in the rear of the long room. Becky and Seth, both drugged now, were restrained. Gus and Greg were next to them. Their injured men had been put where Becky had to see them, but it wouldn't matter. Becky had snapped. Guilt didn't matter when someone was that far gone. "I'll be here for a minute. Take five."

Two of the sentries went straight to the bathroom. The rest stayed where they were.

Angela would have smiled but she was too sad about Becky and her baby. "Seth is okay. When he wakes, let him loose and send him to the galley. He needs a good meal."

Guards wrote down her instructions, frowning.

“He’s to stay away from Becky for a while. During that time, I want Adrian with her.”

Everyone approved that choice. It was fair he had to deal with it since it had happened on his watch, but more, Becky blamed Adrian. If she got to scream at him enough, maybe she would feel better. Despite her attack and their injuries, most of the guards who’d had duty here no longer wanted her to die. The crying and mutters about Rick had reminded them she was damaged through events that weren’t her fault. She had flirted, but she’d been too young to know him for what he was.

Morgan was relieved attitudes were calming, but he doubted time with the object of her hatred would ease her pain. Like Kendle, Becky was now forever on the outside of Safe Haven’s light.

Angela sighed, looking at Morgan.

Morgan’s lips raised in comfort, but he didn’t take back the thought or offer useless words. No one would ever trust those two women again. Nothing they could do would fix this.

“As you take Seth topside, tell him the lifeboats are always unguarded right before dawn. Give him the chance to get her out of here.” She shook her head to the rush of mental protests. “I won’t do that or give an order for it. Most of this isn’t her fault. It’s Rick’s. He fucked her, in every way.”

The blunt language was a graphic reminder of what the teenager had suffered.

“Make sure there are supplies in the boats. After they’ve gone, leave those items there. We’ll be

covered if we have to get out fast.” Angela studied Becky for a moment longer. “If they stay, she’ll be tried for attempted murder and probably be our first hanging.” Angela looked at Wade. “Make sure Seth knows that. That will encourage him to get her out of here.”

“We’ll handle it.” Wade gestured to Kendle. “What about her? Most of the camp feels the same.”

Angela’s tolerant expression changed to an angry glare. “She’ll stay right here where I can make her life hell.”

“Revenge or punishment?” Wade didn’t care which. He just needed to know.

“Atonement. When I get through, the camp will pity her so much they’ll protect her from me.”

“I don’t get it.”

Angela allowed the questions because she needed the Eagles on her side for this to work. Also, because they’d earned it. “We need her to recover and earn forgiveness from the camp. This will accomplish it.”

“Why bother? We know you hate her and we’re pretty sure we don’t need her for anything you can’t handle.” All the guards except Tommy glared at Kendle. Tommy refused to look at her at all.

Angela finally shifted to look at Kendle. She didn’t bother to hide what they all knew. Hatred flowed out in thick waves. “I’m doing what I’ve repeatedly asked Marc to do with Adrian—let it go.”

“Can you?”

Angela nodded immediately. “I’ve given up a lot more than killing someone on this trip to hell and back. And I get to help her earn that pass from the camp.”

Men chuckled uneasily, not sure if she was joking.

Angela went to Gus.

Greg was awake and watching her.

Gus was still sleeping. Morgan was keeping everyone sedated, though he would have to stop, or they would risk overdosing some of them.

Angela gathered energy and began healing their heroes.

2

Marc appeared in the farthest entrance.

The guards watched him instead of Angela, trying to determine how he felt about Kendle now.

Kenn didn’t watch Marc. He kept his eye on the boss. He already knew how Marc felt about the island woman. He wanted to know how Angela felt about it.

Marc’s loathing sneer wasn’t hidden. It allowed the guards to relax and assume the matter was settled.

Kenn saw Angela’s lips curl in triumph and felt his stomach drop. She had done all of it on purpose. She’d known the only way to eliminate a rival for Marc’s affections was to destroy her in his eyes. *Clever, patient, ruthless. I’m dead.*

Angela's head rotated toward him...

Kenn glanced away, not wanting to see the confirmation in her expression. Of course, she still hated him and wanted vengeance. He'd done little to atone yet.

"That's not exactly true." Angela waited for Kenn to look at her. She studied him. "I chose not to disrupt the new life you've been building. You've made an honest change. It keeps me from punishing you. Don't screw that up."

"I won't. I'm not that person anymore. I haven't been in a while."

Angela shrugged. "Only you know if that's really true, but if you can believe it, so can I."

Kenn nodded, aware of guards casting dark glances. Most of them had known about his past, but Ivan's vendetta had reminded them there hadn't been a punishment. Angela was stopping possible attacks. If she wasn't pushing it, they weren't allowed to either. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. No more pins in seats. No more beatings during practices. Am I clear?" She looked at Ivan.

Ivan's hand went to his ass cheek. "Should have known."

Angela snickered. "Yeah, you should have. Oh, and no more blue piss. It looks like someone drowned a Smurf. Pick a different color."

Men sniggered as Ivan glared at Kenn. He'd forgotten about that one.

Kenn yawned tiredly. “Her son taught me a valuable lesson. I was just passing it on.”

“Hey, Smurf Balls!”

Kenn groaned as Charlie entered the infirmary. “Yes, master?”

Laughter filled the room.

Charlie took a place near Kenn, grinning.

Kenn snorted and slapped the kid on the shoulder, gently. “Welcome back.”

Charlie sighed in happiness. “It’s good to be here.”

Everyone could feel the changes in the teenager. Charlie had grown up while they were exiled.

Angela also saw it. She wanted to speak to him, but there wasn’t time right now. She’d scheduled a meeting.

Conner entered.

Silence fell.

Angela grunted. “That’s another thing that’s over. Conner is no longer on my shit list.”

“Even though I lied?”

Angela sighed. “I felt you go through the shield. Not telling isn’t good, but you didn’t actually break a rule. Safe Haven citizens are free to leave the perimeter at any time, at their own risk.”

Conner let out the breath he’d taken. “Thank you. I was scared.”

“I know. Your dad told me when new gifts presented in the labs, the subjects were confined and tested for months.”

Conner's face paled; his demeanor became meek. "I really am sorry."

It was hard for Eagles to stay mad at the kid when he was terrified.

"That type of abuse doesn't go away. But now you know that won't happen under my leadership, so...?" She lifted a brow.

"I'll tell you right away."

"That's all I need. You are hereby cleared for full duty." She looked to Charlie next. "So are you. Second chances are why Safe Haven exists."

Charlie cleared his throat. "I'm sorry too. I knew deep down it was my issue, not yours." He slid a quick glance at Kenn. "An Eagle explained it to me in a way I could understand."

"I'm glad it went well. I've scheduled a debriefing on your run. After that, you'll be off duty."

Charlie paused. "Yeah, uh... Can I do an overnight shift?"

Angela rolled her eyes. "You have to face her sometime."

"Knew you were gonna say that." He had avoided Tracy since they set sail. "Should be fun."

"We'll have a medic standing by." Angela glanced toward the doorway, going still.

Adrian entered, attention going straight to her.

Marc motioned him toward Angela, refusing to contemplate the deal they'd made.

Adrian went to Angela, bracing for her next words. He knew what was coming.

“In 24-hours, a few passengers will be relocated to the other ship. Adrian will captain that boat.”

The Eagles understood big things had happened during the higher power meeting and none of it had boded well for Adrian.

“He hasn’t done anything else wrong. I don’t want him to disrupt my camp just to get himself tossed off this boat. I’m happy to pitch him over right now. If anyone wants to join him, let them.”

Adrian paled. *She knows, already.*

“What about security and training?” Marc hated it that she knew about their latest deal.

Angela glared. “You don’t care about that.”

Marc sighed. “No. I want him gone now that we know the truth.”

Her voice sharpened. “I’m giving that without disrupting my camp. Too bad you two couldn’t put my people first like you promised me not even twelve hours ago.” She waited for a response, eager to fire back. Marc wasn’t the only one angry about what they’d discovered. When he didn’t answer, her tone became smug. “I have a surprise for both of you.”

Marc braced for ugliness.

“You should. You’re going with him to the other ship or back to land with Seth and Becky. I don’t want to see you for a while. *Either of you.*”

Angela ignored the mutters and scowls. “Learn to get along or unhook that ship and sail off into the sunset, gentlemen. I’ve had enough.”

“You can’t mean that.”

“That’s not part of our deal.”

Angela shrugged at their protests. “You’ve both proven I can’t trust you to put the camp first. Kendle stays here. *You. Both. Go.*” Angela glanced around the Eagles, noting most of them were relieved by her choice. “I expect you to enforce it.”

“Can we talk to you for a minute?” Adrian knew the answer, but he had to ask.

“Nope. You two are my constant headache. You’re badasses and I’ve tolerated it because we need you. Up to a point. Guess what? You’ve both reached that point.” Angela settled onto a stool. “You two can get out now. Your services are no longer required.” She stared with unforgiving anger.

Marc spun from the room, furious. *She got me again. How does she keep getting ahead of me?!*

Adrian followed. *We really screwed this up.*

You think?

How do we fix it?

There is no we, you prick! Get away!

Adrian stayed on Marc’s heels as he went up to the next deck. *We have to find a way to get her to change her mind.*

You already know that won’t happen. I’ve never felt her this angry at me.

Well, we did come home and go right back to our own selfish desires.

You did that!

You followed me pretty quickly.

Marc tried to control the anger and sadness rolling through his heart. *I didn't know she'd catch it so fast!*

I did. Adrian stopped as Marc spun around.

You did this on purpose!

Of course. You want to go at it right here in the hall or wait until we're on the other boat? No one to break us up over there.

Marc gaped. *Why aren't you upset? She's pissed at you too.*

I've missed my bonding time with you. Now, we'll have a month together to explore the depths of our relationship.

You... What? Son of a bitch!

Adrian grinned. *Yep. Just you and me, alone together to let these feelings grow.* Adrian moved by him. *I'm looking forward to it.*

Marc stared at the former leader, confused. *What just happened?*

Adrian's mirth echoed to him. *She got us both by using our flaws against us. God, I love that woman.*

Marc went in the opposite direction. *So do I.*
"Damn it!"

3

"You can't do that."

Everyone looked over to find Kendle awake.

"They'll kill each other."

Angela shrugged. "That's not your concern."

Kendle shifted for a better position on the hard cot. “It’s everyone’s concern. You need those Marines.”

“I need them to do their jobs. They’re not.”

Kendle snorted. “You distracted them.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “They let themselves be distracted. Safe Haven’s future means little to either of them.”

“Not to Adrian. He wants both.”

“Then he should have put the right one first.” Angela took the cup of tea Morgan handed her, scanning him. “You need a break.”

“I’ll get it later. I’m good for now.” Morgan went to Kendle’s cot. “You shouldn’t be awake yet.”

Kendle shuddered. “Bad dreams.”

“I’ll put you under a little deeper.”

“No.” Angela gestured. “She stays awake now. They all do.”

Morgan grimaced, but didn’t argue. “You’re the boss.”

They all looked up as another group of Eagles entered for the meeting.

Angela gestured them toward the far corner, the only empty space left. “We’ll get started in a minute. I’m going to replay everything that happened and then you’ll all get a chance to weigh an opinion as to where we go from here.” She regarded Kendle. “You’re on cleaning duty as of dawn.”

“Wait.” James stopped chewing his gum, straightening. “Boss, I’m not certain that’s a good idea.”

“Are you sure?” Kendle’s voice broke. “I might snap again. I still hate you as much as I did.”

“So?”

“So you could be in danger from me!” Kendle tugged on the restraints to get Morgan’s attention. “Shoot me up again. Don’t let me hurt her!”

Angela motioned. “My point. You want me dead, but you can’t do it. We’re bonded now. Suck it up like I have.”

Uneasy chuckles went through the room.

Kendle’s eyes filled with tears. “You should have killed me.”

“Yes.” Angela shrugged. “I have work to do. So do you. Release her. Give her a notepad and some clothes.”

“You want her in Eagle gear?” James blew a bubble and sucked it back in.

“Medical garb will work for now. She’ll sleep here until I decide on a routine for the ship. No sedatives.”

The Eagles realized she was already starting on Kendle’s atonement and locked their opinions behind smirks and frowns.

“Before I show you what happened, I want you to know my thoughts. It’s not to influence you or even to keep you calm. It’s just how I feel.” She drew in a breath. “I think we should tell the camp nothing has changed.”

Neil cleared his throat. “There are descendants in the camp. We can’t keep much from them.”

“If they don’t accept it, I’ll perform the memory charm when everyone goes to sleep. It’ll be as if the higher power meeting never happened.”

“Why tell them then?” Neil’s hand waved. “Why tell us?”

Angela sighed. “Because I’m tired of assuming the reaction will be bad each time something happens. I’m hoping this will be different.”

“Will it?” Wade wanted to have hope.

“That doesn’t matter. I still have to give them the chance. The camp trusts me. I need to show the same respect.”

“What happens when they all remember?”

Kendle’s question was met by frowns.

Angela already had that answer. “They’ll accept it and move on because it happened months before and we’re still alive.”

Ivan waved off the cup Morgan was trying to give him. “What’s the ace in the hole? I know you have one.”

Angela ripped off the broken pinky nail driving her nuts and dropped it into the waste can by the cot. “I’m going to request another meeting and get a better outcome. I’m not giving up on the future. I never will.”

“When the camp finds out you wiped their memory, it could get ugly.” Kyle didn’t want Angela in the crossfire anymore either.

Angela drew energy from some of them; they didn't notice. "No, it won't. I'm going to get their permission first. They're going to be grateful I took away that memory." She opened mental barriers between all of them. "First, watch this and understand that we truly are on our own."

4

"I woke a few seconds later on the deck." Angela fell silent, judging their reactions. This is how the camp would respond, but it would be magnified by about half the rage and desperation.

The silence was loud, but none of it was ugly. They were resigned.

Angela stared. She had expected worse. "Did you have a meeting about this while we were gone?"

Wade shook his head. "We knew we were being used as pawns in some stupid game. There were too many signs to miss it."

Men and women nodded, anger in the movements.

"Wow. I hope the camp handles it this well."

Morgan shrugged, burying his own pain at the news. "I think they will, as long as you tell them what you told us, that you're still working on it. We trust you to keep going."

Angela smiled. "I love every one of you more than I can ever show."

"You show it with moments like this. Your trust and affection will always be enough."

Angela held back tears. She glanced around. “Does anyone have questions or comments about the meeting?”

“Can we see the map?”

Angela chuckled at Zack’s childlike query. “It takes a lot of energy. I’ll pull that from the camp, and everyone will see it then.”

“I have a suggestion.” Tracy, Candy by her side, stood in the entrance that was bathed in shadows. Both females were dressed in Eagle gear, though Candy’s was tight around her belly. They’d obviously been in the hall the entire time.

Angela gestured them in, throwing approval at them for showing up. “Let’s hear it.”

Tracy led Candy forward, but she didn’t go to Charlie, who had paled upon seeing her. She went to stand by Jennifer. “There has been a reason for everything we’ve suffered. It sucks, and it deserves a payback, but at least it wasn’t random like we’ve hurt over. We were targeted to suffer, but not by the Creator. It’s an answer to the anger in our hearts. Now, we might actually be able to serve when He returns—without hatred.” She smiled at the shock. “That’s what you tell them. Have Jennifer do it. She’s trusted too. You won’t need to wipe memories.”

Everyone was stunned as they viewed it through Tracy’s lenses. Tears welled to more than one eye as they came to the same understanding. Knowing for sure the Creator hadn’t cursed you, wasn’t tormenting you, was a tremendous relief.

“We’ve never had this much information.” Candy glanced at Conner. “It means some of the things we’ve done really weren’t all our fault. We had help in being bad. Knowing that will allow us to prevent them from doing it again.”

Conner motioned to the place by his side.

Candy went with a soft smile.

Tracy turned to Angela. “Finish it off with what they’ve already told you here and we’re good to go until you can uncover the next star on the map.”

Angela had to confess. She couldn’t take the guilt. “I don’t know if I can do that. It may take a thousand years before anyone can get that close again.”

“As long as you never quit working on it and you pass the job to successors, it will hold us.” Candy and Tonya had discussed this while Angela finished her tale. “Humanity needed progress. You’ve given us that.”

Angela didn’t look at her family as she replied. “I’ll never stop, no matter what it costs me. We not only deserve to know our origins, we need it. Without that information, we’ll never have peace.” She glanced around, relieved to see most of the depression and anger had been replaced by confidence in their leader and awe about what she’d done. “Okay. We’re going with Tracy’s plan. Any other questions, comments, or suggestions?”

“Is there still going to be a final battle when we go back?” Charlie didn’t doubt they would return.

“Yes.” Angela’s happiness slid a bit. “And I doubt we’ll be the only ones there. The betters, the humans, the monsters...and maybe the Creator. If we win, maybe it brings him back.”

“Then we have to win.” Wade flipped his hand around the warm room. “We’re Safe Haven Eagles and survivors of the apocalypse. If we can’t do it, no one can.”

Chapter Eleven
Ride It Out

1

“**T**his is the map.” Angela used the emotions of the crowd to bring up the glowing sphere. A tiny bright star winked at them from the edge of their planet.

While Angela held most of the camp enthralled, Eagles began passing Tracy’s opinion with quiet whispers and comments to each other that people were able to overhear. The meeting had gone well so far. The camp had even laughed at some of it, enjoying Angela’s open rebellion to the deities who’d played with all their lives.

The camp quieted, moving forward for a better view. Her story had kept them quiet for half an hour, but magic use, combined with the right whispers, woke them to the seriousness of what had happened. First contact had finally been made. They now knew a tiny part of what came after death.

Angela strained to keep the map up long enough for the Eagles to do their work. She didn’t have the energy to speak at the same time, but she kept a smile on. It was easy when she thought of Tracy’s words. That’s exactly how she felt about it...but there was still anger too. She planned to deal with

that later. She hadn't had a good workout with the Eagles in weeks.

Radios crackled around them, blurring together.

“Sorry to disturb you, but the weather is approaching faster than I estimated. It’s raining.”

The team was instantly reminded of the Messenger's voice. It sounded like that.

Angela released the power. The map vanished, drawing groans, then fear about the coming storm. It was their first one at sea. No one was looking forward to the rough swells.

Angela motioned to Kenn, their mouthpiece. He would relay her orders while she recovered. Angela dropped into the chair, shaking.

“Listen up!” Kenn bellowed it, getting attention. “Those who want to stay here until it’s over, can. If you’d feel safer in the galley, that’s fine too. All Eagles are on duty until the storm blows over. Two full shifts will remain in the infirmary. Ray and Kyle will remain in the bridge to help Grant, along with the crew he’s been training to run this big floatie toy. Stay calm. The first one who starts telling scary tales or screaming will be served to the Eagles for a snack.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “I don’t remember saying that part.”

Weak chuckles came, but most of the camp didn’t find it funny. They were scared.

Angela was too, but she forced it away to finish her chore. “Samantha sent a note. She said it will

get rough for a little while. I want life jackets on everyone.” She gathered energy for what came next.

“Will you look ahead?”

“Yeah! Look!”

“Please?”

Camp members shouted support of the request.

Angela concentrated, almost out of energy. She’d been drawing from their emotions, but she was now so low it wasn’t holding her steady.

Adrian came through the crowd and placed a hand on her arm. He opened his energy banks to her, letting her share his strength.

Angela nodded her thanks and then the magic took over, snatching her into the future.

Adrian fed her energy and observed the ugly images in her mind.

They both jumped at the strike and bright flash.

Angela released it, gasping in air. “We all survive. We’ll be fine, but I have to go help Grant.” She sagged against Adrian as people returned to their chatter about the Messenger and his angels. *Get me to the bridge.*

Adrian helped her to her feet and got her out of the galley, arm around her waist. “She just needs some air.”

He kept his thoughts blank, not wanting anyone to know what they’d seen. He was certain she didn’t want anyone to know yet.

“I didn’t lie.” She swallowed a groan. “We survive.”

“Yeah.” He kissed her cheek. “You did good. You always do.”

“You don’t.”

Adrian chuckled. “Exhausted and can still find breath to nag. You do your gender proud.”

Angela snorted out tired laughter. “So do you. Now let go of me unless I fall.”

Adrian knew she didn’t want the camp to see her weak or in his embrace. “The halls are empty.” He scooped her up and jogged toward the stairs to topside.

Angela held on, grateful for his strength, but she couldn’t help wishing it was Marc.

“You should change your mind about moving Marc to my ship.”

“Yeah, nature’s going to do that for me.”

Adrian hadn’t gotten as clear a glimpse as she had. He frowned. “But we all survive?”

“Yes. Hurry up. He’s about to make a second radio call.”

Adrian ran. The last thing they needed was for the camp to panic. They could do that when it was all over.

Marc was there for the handoff as Adrian reached the top deck, gasping. Marc took Angela’s warm body and ran for the bridge. Light rain splattered them.

Angela shut her mind to him and refused to speak.

Marc grunted.

Angela sniffed and lifted her chin.

Adrian followed slower, getting his breath back and scanning the deck for trouble. Only a single team was on duty up here. Angela's protection had been left in the infirmary, on her orders, to watch their prisoners during the meeting. Rain slapped him, coming harder. On the horizon, lights flashed almost continuously. *I don't hear thunder. Is that odd or normal for the ocean?*

Adrian made a mental note to ask Grant. He took a post near Ray in the rear of the bridge.

Ray nodded to him, stifling a yawn. He suspected adrenaline was about to keep him awake. *I'm just enjoying the calm before the storm.*

Angela chuckled at Ray's pun.

Grant didn't ask if Angela was okay, though all the men felt him wanting to. He pointed at one of the computer screens. "The navigation system is advising us to turn around. That never happens. This storm is ugly."

Angela wasn't surprised, only concerned. "We're in hurricane season..."

"Yes. That was my thought too." Grant handed her a towel.

"Does that mean we'll get a day of rough seas first or are we running into it now?" Angela wiped her face and hand, then passed the rag.

"According to radar, we're running into it now."

"Category One?"

"I'd say tropical because we came on it without warning. We should have had that full day of rough seas." Grant was impressed by how fast she'd added

it up. He'd expected to have to explain it to her.
"What do you want to do?"

"Ride it out."

Adrian's brow lifted. "Are you certain? You saw what happens."

"We survive."

"Barely. And the ship—"

"I made the call."

Angela hadn't yelled, but Adrian recoiled as if she had. "I'm sorry."

"What's going on?" Marc was becoming concerned. "Are we gonna lose the ship?"

"Not exactly." Adrian didn't say more, not sure if Angela wanted it known.

"I trust the guys here. Go on." Angela placed a hand on Marc's arm, drawing energy.

"The storm damages the ship. We'll be without engines by dawn."

Grant groaned, reaching for his night glasses. "I hate sailing blind."

Adrian frowned. "You can sail without engines?"

"We'll have limited manual steering, though I've only had to do that once."

Adrian assumed Angela had known.

"I didn't." She concentrated. "There's something around here we need..."

Adrian began to search with her, heart picking up a beat. He didn't doubt her, but searching the future was dangerous for her and she'd already done it for the camp.

Angela's energy ran out before she could see past dawn. She slumped against the console, trying to remain alert.

Marc put an arm around her waist for support, sharing his remaining energy to keep her conscious. He rotated her toward Adrian and stopped. Their former leader looked rough too. He didn't have the energy to spare. *I can't take her below. The camp might panic.*

Adrian pointed toward the coming storm. "Draw in the blast. It won't stop the storm and if we wait until it's on top of us, there won't be time for nature to increase strength by much."

"Retaliate..." Drained, Angela could hardly form words. "Next will be worse."

"We need you spitting fire during *this* storm. We'll handle the consequences."

Angela couldn't find the energy to argue.

Marc and Adrian took her onto the deck, both aware of the ship rocking rougher. The wind pushed against them; cold rain soaked their bodies in seconds.

Ray shouted Grant's call. "We're powering up, so we don't get blown off course!"

Donald tapped Grant on the shoulder. "Someone has to make sure our rear ship doesn't hit this one when we lose power."

Grant snorted. "All you can do is tell people to brace if we bump. I can't swerve out of the way."

Donald frowned, realizing he was right. "Will there be a lot of damage?"

Grant's grip tightened on the wheel. "If there's a big swell behind us, it could ride that force, but we remodeled the front of that ship so it wouldn't pierce another hull if there was a hard bump. We'll lose motion at the same rate of speed; we have the same wind and water resistance. It should be fine."

"Should?"

Grant shrugged. "It's the best we can do. Go keep an eye on it."

"I'll go tell the boss first, so she can get people into lifeboats!"

"She knows. Why do you think she had the life vests gathered up? You're the spotter to make that call."

Below the bridge, Angela began to draw energy from the storm, groaning at the mismatched power levels. Nature's strength was much greater than her own.

Lightning flashed directly over them, searching for a target.

Adrian and Marc protected her as something exploded on top of the ship. Sparks rained down and were quickly extinguished by the driving rain.

Angela sucked in endless energy, shuddering.

Adrian decided he needed a refill as well and also began to draw.

Marc chose not to. Instead, he listened to the approving roar of the water. The ocean king liked it that Angela was increasing her energy bank. *More for him when she dies.* Marc shielded her from the

rain with his body, hearing shouts from their camp as the waves grew higher.

Adrian moaned as his energy banks were filled. When it reached the top and kept going, expanding his small container, he opened all his mental barriers to help. The pain was nothing compared to the evolution. Drawing from nature was dangerous and rewarding.

Lightning flashed overhead again. Everyone braced for another hit.

The vivid streak glared against the pitch-black sky, forcing people to shield their eyes. Rain fell heavier, slamming into the deck and furniture with relentless determination.

Angela slumped in Marc's arms, lashes fluttering. She was as full as she could get and then a little more. Her gray hair shot out in waves of ebony that returned her curls to a glowing luster. Her skin healed, her wounds repaired, all in seconds. "Wow."

Marc would have chuckled at the after-sex tone, but the shouts were getting louder. Some of the camp was panicking, fleeing for topside.

"The lights are off!" Adrian shut his doors, feeling like he'd eaten an entire turkey. He didn't think he could move. "You have to calm them down!"

"How?" Marc didn't want to leave Angela.

"Light! They need lights!" Angela slid to her knees on the soaked deck, rain beating on her in driving waves that matched the angry swells around

the ship. “Let there be light, you assholes!” She shot energy into the ship. “Don’t make me come back up there!”

For one instant, the storm increased. It felt as if a tornado was rushing toward them... Then the rain eased. Sparks flared...

The ship’s lights came on all at once, bringing relief.

They immediately went back out.

Angela shot another blast of energy into the boat. “Help keep them calm or I’ll sink you!”

The ship shuddered, responding to her demand and her threat. A sense of peace invaded the hull and radiated outward, touching those closest.

Adrian gawked in stunned surprise. “It’s alive.”

Marc helped Angela to her feet. He’d already known the ship had an awareness of the people. He hadn’t known communication was possible. *I miss the old world*, he thought suddenly. *No monsters except the human kind, no fake gods betting on our lives, no magic to surprise us when we’re not looking, no battles for the future.*

“It was never like that.” Angela released him, able to stand on her own now. The power transfers were getting easier on her through repetition. “We were blinded by our egos and the veils of safety. All of this has always been there, just waiting for us to acknowledge it.”

“Well, I wish we hadn’t. It’s too much.”

Angela shot energy at Marc, filling him in one short blast. She watched him shake and bite back a

groan. “I don’t. I’d rather have the truth, no matter how ugly. I can’t fight what I don’t know is there.” She stepped around him and Adrian, who was still trying to process the new energy. “Get to the bridge when you can. Grant needs help. His crew ran when the lightning hit.”

“Where are you going?”

Angela jogged to the stairs. The wind was howling too loud for words at this distance. *To calm my people. The glowing walls won’t hold us for long. The ship will get tired too.*

Marc stared, in pain and shock. The hull of the ship was vivid in the darkness. It glowed bright green in a reminder of everything that Marc hated. *I want the old world back.*

Recovering, Adrian put a hand on Marc’s shoulder. “Most of us do. You’re not alone.”

Marc allowed the comfort because he needed it and there was no one else who could provide it. “I feel alone most of the time.”

“It’s who you are.”

“I can’t change. I’ve tried. She can’t change me either. She’s tried.”

Adrian snorted. “No, she really hasn’t, Marine, but we’ve pushed her far enough now. You can’t make yourself fall in line like the rest of us. She’s going to do it for you.”

“I don’t want that!”

“Then do what she said and escort Seth when he sneaks Becky off this ship. You can either be part of the solution or run away, but you can’t stay here

with that attitude. You'll destroy what she's still hoping..." Adrian clamped his mouth shut and went to find Angela.

Marc took longer to recover. The energy was healing his injuries and returning good health, but it hurt like hell. He was far below Angela's level. He glared upward. "I hate you!"

Ray watched Marc's rant from the entrance of the bridge, sympathizing. He'd heard it all. "If Marc leaves, I'm going with him." Ray glanced at Grant and wasn't surprised to see the man staring at him with wounded eyes.

"You'd abandon me?"

Ray nodded. "This is all too much. For a lot of people."

"Adjusting takes time."

"It's been eleven months. We're not going to adjust. We're slowly going insane."

Grant grabbed Ray's arm as the man went by. He pulled him in and hugged him. "I'm sorry this is so hard on you."

Ray clutched Grant's shoulder, fighting the urge to cry. "So am I. I want to be strong, but this is all just some crazy book. It can't be real!"

Grant kissed him.

Ray held still, distracted by the emotions, by the love in Grant's touch. *It's been so long!*

Grant retreated, scanning Ray's wet face. "It is real—all of it. We'll handle it together. You're not alone."

Ray blinked back tears and turned away from the man he now wanted more than he ever had Dale. “Mind the ship!”

Grant went back to the controls, but his tone was grim. “We’re at the mercy of the wind and the water now.”

“No.” Ray drew on his courage and his faith. “We’re at the mercy of Nature and the Ocean King.”

Grant smiled. “That’s good. Hold onto that.”

“I will.” Ray paused. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Grant stood straighter, grimacing. “Now find something else to do. I can’t concentrate with this much wood.”

2

Kenn slapped the light onto the wall, hit it, and shifted to the next place. The glowing walls were freaking folks out as much as being in the dark, but Kenn was grateful. He didn’t know how Angela had accomplished it, but he could see enough to traverse the passages and put up lights, making his job easier.

He sneezed suddenly, sending a loud echo down the hallway. The lack of an engine made the sound too loud. The storm wasn’t as bad as people had been expecting, but that hadn’t helped the snaps and fights among the camp, and they didn’t even know the worst part yet. It was scary to think they were adrift.

Angela appeared next to him. “Got another bag?”

Kenn jumped. “Damn it!”

Angela chuckled, taking his bag. “I’ll finish here.”

Kenn went back down the hall without a response, heart thumping. He wasn’t scared of the dark. Angela in the dark, was another story.

Kenn met Quinn at the intersection. “Got extras? The boss took mine.”

Quinn handed him the half empty bag. “These stickups were supposed to be in the bottom levels. How’d these bags get into the living quarters?”

Kenn rubbed his sore butt bone. “Foresight on someone’s part, I assume.” He went back to where Angela was putting up his lights. “Keep rolling. The sheep are on the verge of stampeding.”

Quinn let out a sound of contempt, moving off. “Don’t know where they think they’ll go unless they feel like a swim.”

Kenn agreed, disappointed by how easy the camp was able to be brought to panic. They still had a lot of work to do.

Kenn found Angela in the same deserted passage, standing near a brightly glowing light. “You okay?”

“Searching.”

Kenn lingered where he was, not wanting her to feel crowded. He didn’t approve of her being here alone. *I’ll bitch at Marc and Adrian for this later.*

Angela sighed. “I shot Marc full of energy and took off. He didn’t have a choice.”

Kenn grinned. Despite not wanting the boss alone, it was nice to know she’d gotten one over on Marc. Kenn held out the bag he’d just gotten. “More lights.”

Angela took it, moving down the next passage way. She didn’t want to tell Kenn she was a bit lost without her map.

Kenn took his from a pocket and peered at the grids while he followed. “We should be coming to the garden area soon.” He peered into the darkness. “I see a light that isn’t yellow or green.”

“Samantha has red lights for the plants. She and Theo probably switched them on as soon as the power went off.”

“Yah, about the power. We had lights again for a minute and then green walls. What happened?”

“Lightning. Grant’s going to tell us the strike burnt out the main power relay. What he’ll skip is how we didn’t check the lightning assessment system before we set sail. It should have been replaced.”

“Do we...punish him or something?”

“Negative. He was busy with other things and the rest of us didn’t know. It’s a lesson learned.”

“So it’s a relay box?”

“Yes. The lightning rod setup was probably lost before we found the ship. As soon as we replace whatever was damaged, we’ll have full power again.”

“And until then, we’re adrift.”

“I wouldn’t mention that part to the camp yet. We’ll tell them after we get it fixed.”

“Agreed.” Kenn felt the ship shift and instinctively grabbed Angela’s arm to keep her from being knocked into the wall. Screams and shouts echoed.

Angela controlled her instinctive need to kill him. “Thanks.”

Kenn let go and retreated. “Seas are rough.”

“We need to clear the top deck.”

Kenn frowned, glad she hadn’t blasted him for touching her. “Are there still camp members up there?”

“Just guards. Pass the word, will you?” Angela kept putting up lights.

Kenn went to do as ordered, wishing he’d let her fall. Anything was better than the waves of ice she was sending now.

Angela locked down on her rage. Being alone in the dark with Kenn was bad enough. His touch was too much.

“Who’s out there?!”

Angela chuckled at Theo’s aggressive tone. “The tooth fairy. I came for your molars.”

Theo appeared in the entrance, face distorted by the green walls. “Boss?”

“That’s me.” Angela entered the garden area, scanning. Samantha and Debra were in the far corner behind the corn planters, both with a gun in hand. “Nice.”

“Armed females or the garden being started?”

Angela laughed at Theo’s question. “Both.” Angela took a minute to tour the area, impressed. “You’ve gotten a lot done.”

Samantha and Debra joined her while Theo stood watch over the entrance. He was furious to find her alone.

“What’s going on up there?” Samantha was worrying over Neil. He’d checked in with her and then vanished again.

“Storm. Lightning hit us. We’re working on it.”

Theo nodded. “We assumed. No panic here.”

“That’s why I came down.” Angela walked the row of potato pots that had just been filled with dirt. “The Eagles are putting up lights and our Captain is steering us through the storm. I thought I’d come down for a minute of peace.”

Samantha rolled her eyes. “Like leadership gets much of that anywhere they go.”

Angela sighed. “Yeah. I really came for a report on the storm. How long do you think?”

“A few more hours. Nature is pissed you took her energy.”

Debra signed. *Was already mad anyway. A little more won’t matter.*

“True.” Samantha slowly rose from the wheelchair, ignoring the frowns of her sentries. “Can we talk for a minute?”

Angela followed Samantha to a far corner while Debra joined Theo at the door.

Samantha brought up a shield, grimacing. “Getting rusty. It stings a bit.”

“It’s your gift overriding the babies. They have their own small defenses now, thanks to your evolutions.”

Samantha widened her barrier to include Angela.

Angela assumed the storm tracker wanted a truly private moment and didn’t veto her magic use, but she watched for signs it was too much on Samantha’s weak system.

“I’m not the problem. Neil is.”

Angela’s upset stomach flared back to life. “Becky.”

“Yes. I need you to let him have time with her. I know you’re planning to let them...escape, but Neil needs closure.”

“And in her condition, it won’t be the type you were concerned over before?”

“Yes.” Samantha didn’t lie. “He loves me, and he’d never leave me, but a quick roll with that little whore wasn’t out of the question before.”

“It is now. They all hate her, like Kendle.”

Samantha put a hand on her swelled stomach, rubbing gently. “Not Neil. He thinks this is his fault. Talking to her will help him understand she went off the deep end on her own.”

“She really did. Neil isn’t responsible for her rape. Seth’s always been wrong about that.”

“Yes, but Neil’s honor took a nasty hit. I need him whole again.”

“I’ll arrange it.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. He’s going to try to rehabilitate her. He’ll come to me next and ask for more time, and then leniency when he convinces them to face the trial.”

“The storm already gave him more time. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Angela chuckled. “You’ve become smarter, quicker about adding up the future.”

Samantha let go of her shield. She rubbed her large stomach. “I’m sorry I’m not more help to you right now.”

“You’re doing what I would have been if not for the mountain. Enjoy your pregnancy as much as you can. You won’t get another.”

Samantha brooded. “But we need babies.”

“The camp will provide them. The rest of us have a war to win when we go home. We can’t do that if we’re barefoot and pregnant.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Samantha’s head tilted, listening. “Sounds like the Eagles have calmed everyone. No more shouts.”

“I don’t need to be on their heels as much now. The power going off surprised people, but they didn’t really panic.”

“That will come in the morning.”

Angela bobbed her head again. “Maybe. When they find out we’re lost, they won’t like it.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Stay here, where you’re safe. I don’t want you getting bumped around, even by accident.”

“I’m getting bored and a bit restless.”

“What if I gave you another job?”

Samantha perked up. “Sure! What can I do?”
“Train Debra to use her gifts. Just keep it quiet. I don’t want everyone playing with their power yet.”

“I’d be honored.” Samantha lowered her voice.
“She’s a sweet girl. Almost too kind to be a killer.”

Angela rotated toward the exit. “Don’t be fooled, Sam. Debra is just as dangerous as the rest of us. Time will prove that.”

Chapter Twelve

I Get To Keep Her

1

“**T**his is the Captain.”

Radios crackled, making people jump.

“The storm is getting worse. You may need to hang onto something that won’t slide.” Grant released the button. “I hope she has them covered. This is getting ugly.”

Ray took a rope from his belt. He quickly attached it to Grant’s belt and then his own. He refused to think about the glowing green walls giving them light.

Grant kept his attention on the ocean. The waves were high. Water rushed over the front deck of the ship each time they came down from cresting a swell. Their ship was in danger.

Ray held onto the wall rail, heart pounding. He hadn’t spent much time on boats. The rocking sucked. He fished in his pocket with his free hand, searching for the Dramamine Angela had given them all a few days ago.

“Do those work?” Donald appeared in the closest entrance.

Ray swallowed a pill. “I’ll let you know.”

Donald popped open his own bottle. “We’ll find out together.”

Donald was green even without the glowing floors and ceiling. Hoping to be distracted, he inspected the case with the various trophies and awards the ship and company had won. The boat they were on was impressive from front to back, but Donald was disappointed. Without the glamor of a launch, employees scurrying around, and a tour guide, it wasn’t anywhere near what he’d imagined.

Rain and hail slammed against the windows, making them all flinch.

Grant groaned. “We may have a water spout out there somewhere.”

“Great. Not like we can see it through this.” Donald noted Ray was tied to their captain and approved. “The boss sent me to verify you were covered. Need anything?”

Grant didn’t glance away from the next swell. “Yes. Pray. That’s a huge wave. When it comes down, we’ll take on a lot of water.”

Donald made a derisive noise. “Only the gamblers are listening. No point in prayer.”

Grant might have argued, but the ship began to rise, riding the swell.

“Oh, shit!” Ray got a glimpse of the trajectory they were on. “Pull up!”

“It isn’t a plane! We have to ride it out.”

The front of the ship sank...and kept going. It plunged beneath the waves.

Water rushed over the deck in furious torrents.

Everyone was relieved when the front came up and water ran off the sides.

Below decks, furniture and boxes slid, people stumbled, grabbing onto anything secure to keep from falling. Many of them were thrown to the floor, crying out in surprise and pain.

Eagles rushed to help them, also stumbling around in the dim light.

Angela joined her people in the living quarters, comforting and calming them.

Angela took a small bag from her jacket pocket. “These should last a few hours. Do not lose them or you get to go to the bathroom in the dark.” Angela passed out the mini flashlights, showing the kids how to wrap the straps around their wrists. She had enough for the entire camp, but most people refused them. The dozen lanterns in the room were providing good light—enough to illuminate the restroom stalls from the top and bottom. It helped that Kenn had also placed stick up lights on the stall doors. The ship’s glowing walls had dimmed as the boat tired. *Save your strength now. Come back on when the sun sets, please.*

I am not a switch to be flipped.

No, you’re a ship meant to be sailed. We’re doing that. Hold up your end.

Brighter light glowed from the walls for an instant, then faded.

Angela wasn’t sure if that was an apology or the equivalent of the boat giving her the finger.

The camp assumed it was their workers trying to get the power back on.

The descendants and Eagles knew Angela was responsible. They could tell by the fresh white streak in her hair and the hands clenched inside her Eagle jacket. She was always multitasking. Her people admired it, but it was exhausting to try keeping up with her. It was easier to scan the camp and their surroundings.

The employee living quarters were broken into two sections separated by a break area that held five bathroom stalls, two sinks, and half a dozen tables with colorful, ergonomic chairs. The windows were open, letting in the stiff breeze to clear the smoke from the few people who still had materials for it. Angela was tempted to join them, but she only had two packs. She was mourning having to quit. Despite the dangers, she loved a cigarette and a cup of tea. It was hard to imagine not having it again in her lifetime, but their crop growing years weren't going to be wasted on tobacco.

She noted the smell of vomit and was glad she hadn't eaten yet. "Get the buckets out and find some crackers to help settle stomachs." She stepped over a mess and went to one of the empty tables. "We've got a couple hours more. Take a seat and do something. No need to make it worse."

Angela's calm tones and directions brought peace to the crowded barracks. People began to settle, sitting, taking books and games from pockets and shelves.

Angela settled in, estimating she would need to spend at least an hour here. The storm would calm down and so would her people, as long as she was where they could see her. The first few tense situations onboard would revive a few of the old behaviors, but they would adjust. By the time they neared the island, people wouldn't even blink at rough seas. Power going off would always spook them, however. No one wanted to be lost on the ocean in the dark.

Dog padded over to Angela and sat by her boots. His head swiveled, warning people that he was her protection.

Angela motioned to Neil. "Come join me."

Neil had been hoping to get to the garden area once Angela arrived. He swallowed a protest and joined her at the small table.

Angela didn't waste time, but she did keep her voice low. "She wants you to have time with Becky before the trial."

Neil scowled. "I don't."

Angela lifted a brow. She didn't call him a liar. She didn't need to.

Neil hung his head. "I'm sorry."

"You're human, Neil." Angela handed him a sheet of paper from her notebook, glad the camp was now distracted. "While you're with her, try to get these answers for me."

Neil scanned the paper. "I will if she'll talk to me. Seth isn't going to allow that."

“Seth isn’t going to be there. I want him with me. After that, we’ll need hands for repairs and cleanup. Tell him I said it will keep the camp from lynching her while I sleep.”

Neil sighed. “This is my fault. Mine and Adrian’s.”

“No, but that reminds me. Adrian will be there too.”

Neil’s lips thinned. “Is that a good idea? She’s already upset.”

“She can be sedated lightly. She’s been under enough stress. Try to remind her what life was like before the war. Mentioning her mother might help.”

“I will.” Neil paused. “Thank you...I think.”

Angela opened her notebook. “You can go to her now. Guards are light there. I’d like you to stand watch until I send relief and then you can...visit.”

Neil left the crowded living quarters, mind in turmoil.

Angela signaled to the next contestant. “Doug.”

The big redhead squeezed into the small seat. Roy and Romeo huddled next to him, not comfortable around this many camp members.

“Tell me about the trip here.”

Doug grimaced. “All of it?”

“Yes.” Angela smiled at the boys. “Have them join the other children. Pam is handling the kids right now. See?” She pointed to the far corner where Pam and a few of the other women were handing out coloring books, crayons, and markers to the scared children gathered around them. “Let them

blend back in. Right now, there are no bullies. Everyone's scared. They'll bond."

Doug did as she instructed, not sure if he agreed with the order, but the boys did need friends to make this trip easier on them.

Roy and Romeo went slowly, casting looks back at Doug.

"Go on, now. You're tough squirts. Hold your heads up and take your places." Doug turned back to Angela. "Will they be okay here? We can get off somewhere if not. I won't have them hurt."

Angela smiled at the big man. "You're a great person, Doug. As long as you fit in, they will too."

He scowled. "Why wouldn't I fit in? Been part of Safe Haven longer than you have."

She shrugged. "You've been gone for a while and you didn't want to come back. The kids feel it."

Doug grunted at a sharp motion from the ship, stomach roiling with each wave. "I've made peace with that. I'm here to stay this time, unless the boys can't be accepted."

"That will be the easiest part of this trip. All the kids will get jobs. The new responsibilities will help them adjust and keep them out of trouble."

"What kind of job? Roy's awful little for Eagle training."

"No, he's not. They have to become Eagles, Doug, and it has to start now. If not, they'll turn out like their relatives and that will get them killed. Every child on this boat is in danger. Help them blend in and do the same for yourself. The future

needs all of us, no matter how young. Avoiding that fact will only bring misery.”

2

“Why are you avoiding me?”

Charlie flinched. “What the hell!”

“What’s going on with you?” Tracy studied him, seeing he was a bit taller and a lot harder. She wasn’t looking forward to hearing everything he’d gone through, but she hoped it had helped. There was a lot riding on them getting this right. She put a hand on her hip. “Well?”

Charlie continued down the dark passage, putting up lights. “You don’t want to do this now.” The halls around them were dim and empty of everyone except guards. The camp preferred to stay together when there was a crisis.

Hurt, Tracy ran after him. She grabbed his arm, jerking him around. “We’re having a baby! Don’t you treat me this way!”

Charlie pulled out of her grip. “I’m sorry.”

She stared at his grim face, sensing the truth. “You did something. You’re scared of how I’ll react.”

“Yes.”

Her hand went back to her hip. “Well?”

Charlie mouthed a curse. “Why do you have to be like this? Can’t you wait until I’m ready to tell you?” Charlie tried not to think about how good it had felt to be in her arms, to be pressed against her

naked skin. It hadn't been that long in real time, but emotionally it felt as though they'd been apart for months.

"If you're done with me, just say so!"

He paused in his guilty thoughts. "What?!"

"I know that look. You cheated on me and it was better. Now you don't want me anymore!"

Charlie kissed her.

The ship bucked under their feet, sliding them against the wall.

Tracy wanted to refuse, but she hugged him, lost.

Charlie retreated. "I didn't cheat on you." He looked away. "I tricked you into loving me."

Tracy stared at him. "You what?"

"I used a spell. You don't love me. It's all a lie."

"You used a spell to get me to care for you?"

The teenager nodded, voice subdued. "I heard what Adrian did and I copied it—only better. Now I need to break that spell and I don't want to!" His eyes darkened. "Even if you don't love me, I do feel that way about you. This will crush me."

"Always protecting your own ass. Did you get that from Adrian too?"

"No." Charlie braced, feeling another swell coming. "That came from my dad. Telling you the truth came from my mom."

"Because she's honorable."

"Because she knows. That's why she sent me out there. Kenn and I would have come to terms anyway. We were already working on it. She

wanted me to tell you the truth. She knew I was never going to.”

“Never?”

Charlie shook his head, holding her arm as the ship shuddered. “I need you too much.”

Tracy studied his misery, almost relieved. “Do it right now so we’ll both know. Don’t drag it out.”

Unlike Adrian, Charlie knew how to remove his magic. He just didn’t want to.

Tracy stepped against him and placed a soft kiss to his lips. “Do it now. I demand it for your betrayal.”

Charlie squeezed his eyes shut. “I release you.”

Tracy waited for something to happen, to feel different. “When does it work?”

“Instantly.”

“I don’t feel different. I still care for you.”

“Give it time.” He repeated Adrian’s words to him. “When you’ve had a chance to think about it, you’ll hate me.”

Tracy’s hand went to her stomach. “And if I do? What happens to the baby?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Meaning?”

“I’ll be there for you or leave you alone. Whatever you want.”

“You won’t try to take the baby from me?”

He scowled. “No. Never.”

“Okay, then. That’s what I was worried about.” She veered toward a dim tunnel. “We have a cabin below the employee deck, along with a few other

couples. If you want to change your cabin, tell your mom.”

“Tracy.”

She stopped but didn’t turn. “Yes?”

“Do you want me to switch? Because I won’t unless you say so.”

Tracy knew she should be angry, but all she felt was relief that he still wanted her. “I don’t think it was all your spell because I don’t hate you and I’m not going to hate you over time.” She resumed walking. “Cabin 703.”

Charlie watched her walk away. The peace filling his heart was amazing.

Kenn joined the boy in the hall. He put a hand on the teenager’s shoulder. “Good job.”

“Thanks.” Charlie turned to him. “For all of it. I know that was hard for you. I could tell you didn’t enjoy it this time.”

“I never will again, kid. Your mom changed me in every way since her arrival. I suggest you let her do the same to you. She’s good at it.”

Charlie rotated to watch Tracy go up the stairs. “She gave me what I wanted. In every way.”

Kenn was curious. “What did you want?”

“Those big titties in my mouth.”

Kenn laughed. “Well, you got that.” Kenn dropped his hand. “So did Adrian.”

Charlie shrugged at the reminder that had always infuriated him before. “Yeah, but I get to keep her. Adrian doesn’t.”

Jennifer was near the intersection. She stored the entire exchange, then continued toward the infirmary. It was great Kenn and Charlie were at peace now. It was one less problem for them. *We have enough in the others. It's nice to know that rivalry is dead.*

Jennifer stopped in the doorway, scanning to see who was awake.

Everyone regarded her in anger, confusion, or fear.

Jennifer sighed. The drugs had worn off. The kids were confused about what was going on. The guards were scared of the kids and of the storm. Becky was angry. The mood sucked.

Neil eased by Jennifer and went toward Becky's cot.

Seth jumped up, placing himself between them. "Go away! You'll make it worse!"

Adrian appeared in the opposite entrance. "The boss wants you, Seth. Get to the living quarters." Adrian lowered his tone. "Now."

"You don't order me!" Seth couldn't help shouting. "Leave her alone!"

Adrian looked at the guards. "The boss wants him right now. If you have to knock him out and drag him to her, do it."

Seth shut up as five big Ciemus women marched his way eagerly. They wanted to get away from the kids. In comparison, one screaming man seemed like the better end of the deal. He was forced to go.

“We’ll deliver him after he gets a shower and a meal.” Claire squeezed Seth’s arm. “He’s starving, and he stinks.” She pushed him into the hallway where the women formed a barrier around him and marched him toward the living quarters.

“What do you want?” Becky trembled, staring at Neil and Adrian. Anger was thick in her tone.

“To talk, to shout, to work things out.”

“Funny.” Becky sneered at Adrian. “What about you?”

“The same. Boss’s orders.”

Becky shut her lids. “I have nothing to say. Hang me or toss me overboard, but don’t speak to me. I hate you both.”

Neil took the seat on her right.

Adrian took the seat on her left.

Becky felt tears welling and embraced her anger. “Get out!”

Kids flinched, able to sense her power rising.

Adrian brought up a shield over the angry girl so her hits wouldn’t be able to hurt anyone. “You’re going to listen to us. Then you can toss yourself overboard if you want to.”

Becky’s rage slammed into the barrier, straining Adrian’s mental strength.

Neil waited for this first battle to be over before he spoke. She wasn’t listening to anything right now except the voices in her mind and they were spewing ugly words. Neil could see the madness.

“I hate you! I hate you!”

Adrian winced at each blast. “I know.” He strengthened the shield and reached over to put a hand on hers. “But you have to stop now. It’s killing you and everything you hold dear.”

Becky’s scream echoed through the ship, dimming the walls. “I want my baby back!”

Everyone who’d lost a child sympathized with her pain; they also hated her for the reminder of their own losses.

Becky’s rage faded into awful sobs that made both men feel terrible. Adrian shot calming spells into her while Neil tried not to babble about how sorry he was. It wouldn’t help at this point. She was too far gone. *I did this.*

“No, you didn’t.” Adrian refused to let Neil carry the guilt. “I knew there would be sacrifices to beat Cesar. I didn’t know who or how, but I knew it would be ugly. This is my fault.”

“I led her on and then turned away from her.”

“She was off limits. You found a match with someone your own age. You still have your honor, no matter how it feels.”

Neil wasn’t ready to accept that. He stayed by Becky’s cot as she sobbed, hating himself.

Adrian didn’t try again. He believed there would be time later, after Becky had gotten more of the poison from her system. The screaming wasn’t over.

Becky and the storm howled for hours. Grant handled the heavy rains and winds, while Adrian and Neil fought to contain Becky's pain. It made everyone uneasy, adding to the tension from finding out they were all players in ruthless games by higher beings without mercy or compassion.

By dawn, the mood was dangerous.

"You hear that?"

Angela glanced up from the circle of kids she was distracting. "What?"

"The storm stopped. No more wind or rain."

Angela listened, agreeing with Ivan's assumption.

Below them, Becky sobbed quietly, drained.

Seth was unconscious in a cot near Angela. The shower, hot meal, and exercise of accompanying her on rounds for hours without a break had worn him down.

"Both banshees ran out of steam together. Good." Angela turned to the kids, ready to give the lesson now. "You see what comes of the rage? This is how it feels to lose everything."

Kids nodded or frowned at her.

Angela kept going even though she didn't like hurting them. "That's your future. The anger inside will destroy you and everyone around you. It will burn your heart and mind until there's nothing left. You have to push it out, whatever remains." She held out a hand. "I'm going to help you. The ocean needs to be cleaned. You will deliver your anger

into the ocean every time it comes up.” She blasted them with a current of punishment.

The kids flinched, whimpering at her displeasure.

Angela sent another jolt, steeling herself to their agony at the harder blast. “You will commit to regaining your honor with me and everyone aboard this ship. If you cannot do that, I will give you to the ocean.” A final blast put kids on their knees around her, begging for an end to the pain.

Angela released them and stood. “Go to the top deck right this minute and release as much of your anger as you can into the ocean. When you’re drained, come here and sleep until I send for you. Do not break my orders.”

The kids fled the infirmary, taking only seconds to get out of sight.

Angela spent a moment recovering, hating herself and this part of her duty.

“Will that hold?”

Angela shook her head at Jennifer’s question. “Not for all of them. I’m working on another solution. I needed time.”

Jennifer hoped Angela was able to. The thought of tossing kids overboard was horrific. She already knew she couldn’t have any part in it.

Angela walked toward Becky’s shaking form, forcing herself to complete the lesson. “I’ll do the same to you. I don’t care that you’ve lost a child. So have I. I don’t care that you were raped. So was I. I don’t care that you have so much anger you can’t

feel anything else. You will control yourself. Or I'll toss *Seth* overboard."

Becky stilled, eyes swinging to Angela. "He didn't do anything wrong!"

"No, he didn't, but I'll still do it. If you act out again, in any way, Seth will pay the price for it."

Becky's tears came harder, but there was fear this time instead of rage. "Don't hurt him... He's all I have left!"

"That's up to you, Rebecca. Mind my words. I'll kill him without blinking." Angela waited for Becky to nod, then left the infirmary. She couldn't take the surprise of her Eagles, the condemnation, and thoughts of rebelling. They were positive she would do it. *That hurts.*

The only one who didn't believe her was Adrian. He kept his shield up, not letting anyone know the truth. Angela would never kill an innocent. Anyone who thought she would didn't know her at all.

Everyone felt it when the kids started shooting their anger into the water. The sounds became too loud for conversations. Even the storm's fading noises were muffled as the ocean groaned in delight. Each blast brought more.

"It looks like the storm is almost over, folks." Grant's voice was tired over the radio. "It's okay to move about the ship again, but I'd avoid the top deck. Very wet and slippery up here."

Angela keyed her mike. "You heard him. Feel free to move around. I suggest you eat, brush your

teeth, and sleep for a few hours. Shift change will be called when guards have gotten enough rest. I'll be around if you need me." Angela glanced at Travis. "What about our tow?"

Travis skimmed the report. "It's drifting to the right. As long as the waves keep calming, we're good. It'll stop before the rope goes taut, and the propellers aren't running so it can't get tangled."

"Good. What about pulling up the towline?"

"Not until the storm stops. Grant implied it's a hard job and should only be done by strong people with stamina, in calm weather."

"He's the boss of the boat. Arrange it like he wants." Angela resumed her walk, but it was unsteady.

"She needs to sleep."

Marc grunted at Kenn's comment, but he didn't scold her or nag. She didn't need him to tell her what to do. She was the boss. *She'll do as she pleases.*

Kenn sensed Marc's bitterness. The wolfman had been put on duty over the animals and garden during the storm instead of being with Angela in the living quarters. He'd just finished that shift a few minutes ago. "Could have been you in charge, Marine. Remember that when you give her shit."

Marc delivered a nasty glare. "You're all supportive of her now. That's great, but I haven't forgotten what you did to her, or what you did to me and my son." Marc let his eyes glow red. "I never

will. Keep your comments to yourself or I'll make you eat those words."

Kenn laughed at him. "Threats are all you have. You can't do shit now but stand there and look pretty, so fuck off."

Kenn left him with his mouth open, enjoying the moment. It wasn't often he got one over on Marc, but this was easy. Kenn hadn't done anything wrong in a while. *And I won't. Let the others screw up. I'm a good boy now.*

4

"Got a minute?"

"Walk with me." Angela expected Seth to return at any moment. She'd sent him to deliver notes to the garden crew.

Kyle joined Angela on the stairs. "I noticed you didn't tell anyone here about the final battle. Not even the Eagles."

Angela led him into a small stateroom for privacy. She shut the door and lit a smoke.

Kyle watched her lean against the door, wondering why she was going to tell him her plans when she wasn't informing anyone else.

"Because I trust you to give me good advice." Angela exhaled a cloud of smoke. "I'm going to ask for another meeting."

Kyle's lips curled. "The other *king*."

"Yes. Maybe a deal can be made there."

“You won’t return from that one.” Kyle set his pocket ashtray onto the table for them to share.

“Probably not.”

“And even if you made a deal, it wouldn’t be honored.”

“Probably not.” Angela avoided the mirror in the room, worried her hair was gray again. She refilled, got drained. Refilled, got drained. *I’m always high or low. Where’s the happy middle?*

“But you think it’s a good idea.”

“Good? No.” Angela drank from her canteen. “Needed? Maybe. We only have one side of the story. We’ve always only had one side. I need the other half.”

“Marc and Adrian will never go for it.”

“No... But they’d follow me if I went.”

“I would too, along with Neil and Ivan.”

“And I may ask that of you. Right now, I’m working it through and trying to find a way to make it happen without endangering the future.”

Kyle studied her, not liking the reckless gleam in her eyes. “Why? Before we went, you were calming down, getting...happier.”

Angela held in the tears. “They’re fighting over me again. All the peace lasted ten hours.”

Kyle was suddenly furious with both men. “I wish they’d grow up.”

She sighed. “Too late now. They’ve reverted to drama and pettiness. If not for the storm, we would be removing them from the ship in a couple hours.”

Kyle took the seat by the small round window and lit the cheroot he'd hand rolled from butts. He inhaled deeply, groaning. "I love these. I wish we could grow tobacco."

Angela dug out a wedgie, blushing a bit. "As do I, my friend." She stubbed out the smoke and put the remainder in the half empty pack. "I'm scared of that meeting. It won't be anytime soon."

Kyle was glad to hear it, but that didn't interfere with his duty. "I'll escort you. I imagine killers are always welcome in hell."

"I hope so because I'll take the same crew."

"When?"

"Not for a while. I need to stew on it. The meeting will be a trap. I have to account for that." She lifted a brow. "You'll speak to Jennifer about it when you have privacy?"

"Of course."

"Good. But she can't go with us, no matter how she tries to force your hand. I'll never agree."

"Because she has to lead the camp if we don't return?"

"Because he'll want her more than me, Kyle. I'm nothing compared to the killer she'll become."

Kyle snorted. "How will that happen?"

"We're going to teach her. Jennifer is our secret weapon. No other exists on this planet like her."

Kyle wasn't surprised, only concerned. "So who leads while we go and she learns?"

Angela opened the door and resumed her walk to the top deck.

Kyle exhaled. “Damn, I hate that answer.”

“So do I.” Angela spotted Seth jogging up the stairs toward her. “But darkness is all I see when I search the future. Safe Haven’s next leader isn’t here yet. I have to hope they find us on the island. If not, we don’t have a future.”

Chapter Thirteen

Stop Helping Me

1

“I’m telling on you.” Missy finished pulling on her little robe. She’d woken as Leeann was slipping out of their cabin. Missy didn’t even have slippers on her cold feet.

Leeann kept walking over the slippery deck toward the lifeboats. The dim dawn provided both light and shadows.

Missy ran after her, shivering in the cool wind. “I mean it. The alpha is resting below, but I’ll go there right now.”

“Go ahead. I’ll be gone by the time they get up here.” Leeann stopped by the first boat. “How do I get this thing into the water?”

Missy joined her. She pointed. “You have to get in and have someone cut that rope.”

Leeann dug in her purse. “I brought a knife. The weapons area isn’t guarded.” She pulled a gun out and set it on the edge of the boat.

Missy picked it up and stuffed it into her pocket. “You’re gonna be in trouble.”

“I won’t be here to be punished.” Leeann flipped the knife open. “I’m getting my Billy back.”

Missy put a hand on her arm. “What do I tell them?”

Leeann shrugged her off. “Nothing. Go back to bed and act like you didn’t see me.”

“They’ll read my thoughts. I’ll be in trouble for you. That’s not fair.”

Dressed in stolen Eagle gear, Leeann struggled to climb into the boat, gear clinking and banging. “You can come with me if you want, but then no one will cut the rope.”

Missy didn’t want to get in trouble alone. “We can cut it after we’re in.”

Water splashed half way up the ship as it went through a rough wave left from the storm. Both girls stared, getting scared.

“Help me up. I don’t climb as well as you do.”

Missy shoved on Leeann’s leg and flipped her into the boat.

“Ow!”

“Sorry. Move over.” Missy gracefully climbed up on the edge. “Give me the knife.”

Leeann handed it to her and settled on the middle seat. “Okay. Cut it.”

Missy began sawing on the rope.

“Uh, Shawn?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Is that your girl cutting the rope on a lifeboat?”

Shawn stopped on his round of the deck. “What?”

Zack pointed. He wasn't allowed to leave his post over the captain. "Last boat." He cleared his throat when Shawn just stood there in shock. "You should probably run." Zack shoved him.

Shawn stumbled into a run, unable to believe what was happening.

Other guards had noticed and were headed in that direction. Boots stomped across the deck.

Shawn hit a wet spot and slipped. He flailed, unable to catch his balance.

"Look out!"

Shawn crashed into the group of Eagles coming to help. Men and women fell in a heap, grunting and groaning.

"Got it!" Missy dropped onto the seat as the rope snapped.

The boat didn't move.

Leeann's face squished up. "What the hell?"

"You said hell."

Leeann laughed. "Shhh..."

Eagles untangled themselves, trying to reach the lifeboat.

"Cut the other one." Leeann pointed.

Missy climbed the side of the rail and began sawing the second rope.

Shawn gained his feet and took off running. "Missy! Stop right now!" His boot hit another slick spot...

"Damn it, Shawn!" Ben shoved the Eagle off his chest. "Get your kid, man!"

“Got it!” Missy dropped the knife into the bottom of the boat. “Why isn’t it dropping?”

“Here comes Shawn! Hide!” Leeann ducked into the bottom of the boat.

Missy scrambled from the lifeboat onto the rail of the cruise ship. She hurried along it like a monkey, squealing as Shawn reached her.

“Come here!”

Missy leapt over his shoulder and hit the deck running.

Shawn slid into the railing and flipped over it.

Shawn thought fast enough to draw in a deep breath right before he hit the choppy water.

“Oh, shit!” Zack ran to help.

“No!” Missy jumped onto the rail and dove off.

“Tell them to stop the ship!” Zack was running toward the bridge, but he doubted the boat could be stopped before the pair were lost.

Several guards thought about diving in to help, but Angela and Grant had given them orders not to do so. They’d both insisted it would only put more people into the water that had to be found and rescued. No one had argued. Despite wanting to help, now they really agreed with the order. It was hard to see Shawn in the dipping waves with his dark clothes. Missy’s yellow robe helped to pinpoint her location, but the Eagle gear Shawn had on was no help at all.

Angela appeared on the deck, bleary orbs glowing red.

Ben pointed. “Two overboard!”

Guards flooded up the stairs behind her, bumping Seth out of the way in an effort to keep up with her.

Angela tossed a fireball at the lifeboat, knocking it off the rails holding it in place. Leeann screamed as it dropped like a stone, slamming into the water.

“Grant’s stopping us!” Zack shouted at them.

Angela ran to the rail, magic flowing from her hand. “We have a deal in place! Help them!”

Shawn slung Missy onto his back, fighting to keep them both above the calming water.

Missy clung to him, teeth chattering. “There’s a boat!”

Shawn sucked in air as another wave pulled at them, hand clamped tight around Missy’s ankle.

They went under but were popped right back up by the current.

Missy grabbed the boat.

Shawn shoved her into it, going under again.

“Shawn!” Missy crawled to the side, frantic. “Shawn!”

Watching from the deck, Angela breathed a sigh of relief as Shawn surfaced, hands reaching blindly for the boat. He found an edge and hung on, too weak to pull himself in yet. Angela increased the power of her shield, not sure what might be waiting under the waves for a meal. She narrowed it to the lifeboat, heart pounding, breath coming in short gasps.

Leeann peered over the side, bruised and soaked. “You can’t come!”

Shawn shoved her back so he could force his weight into the boat. He collapsed on the bottom, chest heaving.

Missy slapped him. “Keep breathing!” She hit him again.

Shawn rolled over to avoid it. “I am! Stop it!”

Missy followed, beating on his body. “It’s CRP! I’m helping you!”

Leeann got the idea and began slapping the moaning man. “We’ll save you!”

Shawn was too tired and terrified to defend himself. He huddled in a ball and tried to recover while they beat him up.

“We have to make him warm now.” Missy grabbed the knife from the bottom of the boat. “Get his wet clothes off!”

Leeann yanked on his jacket while Missy tried to cut through his shirt.

Angela sent a powerful blast toward the boat, hoping her aim was right.

The energy hit the side, knocking both girls into the side of the boat.

The knife fell, impaling Shawn’s hand. Blood ran over the wood.

Angela groaned. “Maybe I should stop helping him too.”

The cruise ship finally started to slow. The crew Grant had been training rushed toward the fire stairs on the side and began to descend.

The lifeboat bobbed heavily in the water as the tide pulled it toward the cruise ship. A minute later,

it bumped into the side, allowing the crew to secure ropes.

Ben grabbed Leeann and handed the wet, shivering girl to the next person up.

Missy avoided the hands trying to grab her. She pushed Shawn toward them. “He’s hurt! Take him first!”

Shawn snatched Missy by her robe and tossed her to Ben. “Get up there!” He carefully moved out of the lifeboat as soon as the ladder was clear, bleeding and cursing.

Ben held onto the side of the rail to let Shawn go ahead of him, ready to grab the man if he slipped.

Travis motioned Conner and Charlie to control the small crowd of camp members and descendants who’d heard the trouble and come to check it out. There wasn’t much else to do as they all waited for Shawn and the girls to climb the long ladder to the first deck with a balcony.

When Angela yelled for them to keep climbing straight to her, the Eagles were actually glad. These stairs ended in a short ladder and rails went all the way up. As long as everyone went slow, there was a minimum of danger. Sliding the girls and then the adults over a balcony next to the ladder could result in a death or another drop into the ocean.

Shawn heaved himself up the sturdy metal steps, terror and fury fueling his exhausted body. It had been the longest ten minutes of his life. He stomped toward the two crying girls who were already being yelled at aloud by Eagles and silently

by Angela. They all fell silent as he stopped in front of them, glowering. He opened his mouth to yell, to threaten, to demand answers, and snapped it shut, unable to form the words. He pointed at the steps to the lower level.

Missy ignored the order, hugging him. She looked at Angela around his waist.

Angela, hating herself for the choice, decided to follow through with her plan for separating Shawn and Missy. She glared at the little girl. *You could have killed him. You're going to get him killed. I've seen it.*

Missy didn't hear the lie, only the warning. She pulled away from Shawn and ran toward the steps, crying.

She switched her attention to Leeann, but there was nothing she could do to stop that pain or the attempts to get back to land.

Leeann begged her to help. *I need my Billy.*

Angela shook her head. *Not for years. If you do get away from us and find him, I'll have to hunt you down and kill you both. Don't push me again unless you're prepared to pick the darkness.*

Leeann trembled. *I don't want that.*

Then try harder! I need you here. Pledge your time to my work. Give another future a chance, for Billy's life.

Leeann forced herself to nod through the shivering. *I'll try again.*

That's all I ask.

It won't work.

Angela sighed deeply, disturbed. *It will if you decide his life is more important than your heart. Try to make the right choice and wait. In four years, you can be with him if he wants you. Four years isn't that long if you stay busy.*

Leeann sniffed. *Is that what you tell yourself?*

Of course. I've left my country. The hole in my heart is always there. I just don't let pain control me. I'm in charge of my life, not my emotions.

Leeann let Travis wrap a blanket around her, holding the ends together. *I'll try again. That's all I can give you.* The little girl turned toward the steps so she didn't have to keep talking. Failure was a miserable feeling.

“Don't I know it.” Angela swallowed a second mutter and scanned Shawn for other injuries.

Shawn was shivering, shocked to be alive. He'd expected to be pulled under the ship, to be eaten by a shark, to drown. All of those had gone through his mind as he went over the rail.

Angela motioned Morgan toward him as the medic came up the stairs. She leaned over the fire stairs to verify the crew was tying the lifeboat to the ship.

They were almost done, with many of them already making the climb. Angela rotated around to find Marc behind her.

Marc smiled. “Nice job getting the ocean to help. I never would have thought of that.”

“I didn’t.” She peered over his shoulder to Adrian. “Thank you for the idea. I never would have thought of it.”

Adrian kept walking. “I’ll talk to Grant. Maybe we can get that lifeboat back in place somehow.”

“Tell him we’ll stay here for a few hours. Drop anchor or whatever.”

Adrian left, not looking at her. For one instant, he’d thought about telling her to let all three of them go. He hadn’t because it would hurt her to do that, but she had to know Leeann was going to try again. If not for needing Shawn, those two kids might have gotten exactly what they wanted.

Angela tried to calm her emotions and breathing. She’d used a lot of power to keep the camp calm and then to deal with this crisis. She was tired again. She’d been snoozing in a chair in the command center when Shawn’s panic had swamped her.

“You’re going to sleep soon, right?” Marc was worried about her. Despite the energy refills, she hadn’t looked well since before Kendle tried to kill her.

“Tonight maybe.” She moved by him, scanning as the ship slowed. “We need to dry this deck and clean up the blood.”

“I’ll get a crew on it.”

“Seth can help.”

Marc watched her walk away, frowning. *She’s still mad at me.*

Angela kept going, not about to handle that now. *Let him stew on it. I'm busy and he won't really mean it when he says sorry anyway.*

Adrian listened to both of them. He was grateful to still be on the ship, but now that they were stopped, it was a perfect time for him and a few others to switch.

You're both staying here. Fate says to keep you close and I will, but I haven't forgotten your latest betrayal. Angela's tone was cold. *Get below and make sure our prisoners are secure.*

Adrian went immediately, hiding his happiness. Marc thought he was in trouble and he was, but it was nothing compared to the two girls being changed into dry clothes by den mothers while the medic sewed up Shawn's hand. Adrian expected her to remove their gifts over this and he approved. It was time for their kids to fall in line.

Not possible yet. Angela went up the steps to the bridge and joined Grant. The anchor began to fall, creating loud noises and fresh tension. It clanked down the aft of the ship and plunked into the calming water.

Angela didn't speak, observing the activity while she figured out what she wanted to say.

Grant felt a surprise coming and tried to brace for it.

"I don't want the camp to know. I need you to hide it until I'm ready. The only way you'll be able to do that is if you're not around them at all."

"How will I accomplish that?"

“You’ll stay in your cabin for the next few hours. Ray will bring you anything you need and then stay with you to guard the door.”

“I can’t leave the bridge. No one else can sail the ship yet.”

“We’re stopped. Go below and sleep. That’s an order.”

Ray led Grant from the bridge, glad.

Alone for a moment, Angela shuddered, reliving the fear and confusion of the events. “Hell of a way to start the day.” She spent another minute getting herself under control, then she began hiding weapons from her pockets in various compartments. She’d picked them up last night while adding lights to the halls. She didn’t know why it was needed, but her visions had insisted this area be armed. Grant had to be protected. If they lost him, the entire ship was doomed.

2

“Most of the camp is sleeping.” Kenn handed Angela a folder with a thick stack of papers as she entered. “Updates on everything you asked for. The ship’s a mess. We had cargo and personal items go everywhere during the storm. I’m not sure how to arrange teams for cleanup. Do it in shifts of ten?”

Angela shook her head. “Just tell everyone to clean the areas they use, starting with the living quarters. By the time they get hungry, the galley will have the kitchen up and cooking. People can clean their usual areas while they wait for food. It all gets

covered and it doesn't require pulling people from scheduled shifts."

"Wow. That's brilliant."

She sighed. "It's Adrian. He taught me how to be efficient with a skeleton crew. I just expanded that rationing of personnel so our people don't get worn out. We'll handle the cargo areas later." The cargo hold had been crammed. The storm hadn't done much damage to their already cluttered setup, though. It would be easy to clean; they just didn't have the manpower right now.

"Grant said to ask if you want him to change the towline yet." Kenn peered at the paper. "He says...we had a few shock force moments during the storm. Each one decreases the effectiveness of the line."

"Did he give a recommendation?"

"At the next stop for sure if you don't do it now."

Angela hated these choices too, but they only had so much towline. They needed to use what they had, as much as they could. "Not yet. Have him start drilling the crew on how to do it."

"You got it." Kenn gave Seth a nasty glower and left the infirmary. He hadn't had breakfast yet and the galley was always open. Angela wanted it that way for Eagles who couldn't get to meals with the camp.

Seth didn't react. He was standing stiff, expressionless, but his mind stayed on Becky. He'd helped clean the top deck, then toured the boat with

Angela for hours. They'd finally made it to the infirmary now and Seth could hardly force himself to remain still, to not go to the weeping girl he loved.

Angela's orders were being followed without sympathy from anyone but the medics. Morgan had already registered a formal complaint on his paperwork. He wanted to knock her out again with drugs.

Angela handed the paperwork to Seth. "Hold that for me."

Seth tucked it into his deepest pocket with the others. He'd protested at first but stopped at the ugly glares from his shadow.

"Ivan is *my* shadow." Angela handed Seth her canteen. "Fill it up and go give Becky a drink."

Ivan recognized the test and the trap for Seth, but he didn't know if the redhead had noticed. Ivan followed Seth, not sure the man cared either way. His reflections were chaotic wings beating against a cage. Ivan was recording them to give to Angela later. *Which is why she put me on a double shift*, he realized.

Seth filled the canteen from the deep sink and went to his mate.

Becky accepted the drink, sunken eyes searching him for signs of forgiveness. "I'm sorry."

Seth sat in the chair and helped her get another drink. He took her hand and leaned in. "I'll get you out of here."

Becky's profile relaxed. "I love you." Madness gleamed at him. "We'll go away, and it'll be just us again."

Seth kissed her cold cheek and awkwardly hugged her over the restraints. "Please try to be happy again."

Becky shuddered.

Seth released her, digging into her mind. It was full of dark patches and bleeding wounds. She needed help that none of them knew how to give. He let go and slowly returned to Angela's side. He didn't block his thoughts about anything he'd picked up from Becky.

Angela sighed. "Being in a medical room reminded me of my loss every second I was awake. We'll move her out of here."

Ivan wrote it on the medical clipboard next to them and in his notes.

Seth didn't relax. "Thank you."

Angela swept all the cots, mentally promising the remaining kids they would be freed soon. "I wish I could do more. No magic in the world will fill the hole from losing a child. You either come out of it or you don't."

"She wants me to take her away from here."

"You already know the lifeboats are available to you. No one will interfere." Angela looked at him. "But then you can't ever come back, Seth. The first time, you didn't know what was going on. This time, it's a final choice to stay with madness."

"Will she get better?"

“I can’t search the future that deep.” She held up her arm. “I’ve been marked. You’d have to ask someone else to do it.”

“But you know. I can feel you blocking it from me when I scan.”

She sighed. “Out of respect for you and for the future, I can’t tell you. Free will means doing what you decide is right for you and your loved ones. I won’t interfere.” Angela strode toward the cots in the rear.

Gus was smiling at her.

Greg was sleeping.

Morgan came over. “They both insisted on being given a shift tonight. I told them I’d discuss it with you.”

Angela chuckled at Gus’s thought. “Yes, it’s true. You saved my life.” Her amusement faded. “What do you want?”

To be loved so much they would do anything for me, never betray me.

“Ask for something else. That’s too easy.”

I want to be one of the top Eagles. I’m working on conquering my fears.

“Why do you want that?”

To be in the history books you’ll write. I want to be a hero again. This wasn’t enough for me.

“That’s a worthy legacy to pass on.”

Yes.

“Then you’ll have it.” Angela glanced at the guards. Gus had the same desire as these men and women. “You all will.” She moved toward the exit.

“I’m forming a kill team of five. One of them will *not* return. Submit your names to Kenn and I’ll make my choice based on the job.”

Ivan and Seth followed her, neither man speaking. Seth’s thoughts were still on Becky. Ivan was deciding if he wanted to be away from Angela long enough to complete a mission. Being a hero to the camp didn’t matter as much to him now as not missing moments with her that fed his soul. He wasn’t worried about being the one who didn’t return. Ivan didn’t fear death. He feared being alone.

“What’s next?” Angela paused at the intersection.

“Engineering. They’ve been up since we boarded.”

“Theo knows we need full power. It’s holding right now because most of the camp is sleeping.”

Ivan consulted the notes. “Last shift said people expect it to be on when they get up.”

Angela sighed, moving up the steps in a trot. “Then we’d best not disappoint them.” She went to the only occupied cabin on this side of the ship and knocked.

“Come in.” Theo peered up from the table with his maps and designs. “Been expecting you. We’re not ready to try. I need a few more hours.”

“What do you need that you don’t have?” She scanned the small, comfortable cabin and approved his living quarters. He already had every empty

surface filled with open books about different ship topics.

“A ship’s engineer.” Theo picked up a sheet of paper. “I understand how it works, but I’ve never seen it myself. I’m guessing on some of this.”

“Can Grant help?” Angela opened the small window, letting in fresh warm air.

“I sent questions, but he’s just the guy who steers this big scrapheap. He has no idea what makes her go.”

“Cole’s gear had notebooks. I’ll have them delivered.”

“Can’t hurt, but I doubt he knew anything on ship wiring either.” He frowned at her. “Hey, didn’t we bring books specifically for this?”

“Yes!” Angela waved at Seth. “Go tell Kenn I need gophers to dig through the cargo hold for engineering and medical books. Deliver them to the lab and Theo’s cabin.”

Ivan followed Seth, proving the redhead’s fears about the sentry being for him and not the boss.

“I really am *her* private security. She just wants you covered ahead of her. You should be honored to be first.”

“I’m ashamed. Having a guard makes it worse.”

Ivan wanted to have sympathy, but he couldn’t. “Your old lady tried to kill the boss. You knew she was having dangerous thoughts, but you protected her over us. You made the choices. Now you get to live with them.”

“Until we leave.”

Ivan snorted. “Eagles don’t run, though, do they? If you were really one of us, you’d at least know that.”

“I owe her!”

“You owe the boss first, before everyone else. Eagles are told that too, right? I haven’t made it far into training yet, but I’m positive these things are made clear.”

Seth jogged down the narrow stairs by the bridge, refusing to keep arguing.

Ivan didn’t push it. He would be glad when Seth and Becky were gone. It would mean less work and less stress.

“All right, they’re gone. What’s up?”

Angela chuckled at Theo’s tone. “I’m too obvious.”

“I’m just tired. What can I do for you, Boss?”

Angela fastened the door. “Defy me in front of the camp. I need you to make a demand.”

“What am I demanding?”

“A mandatory meeting to determine punishments for Becky, Kendle, Conner, Adrian and anyone else on the bad side of the camp.”

“Marc.” Theo stared at her, adding that clue even though she hadn’t spoken his name. “This is all about Marc.”

“Not all of it. This will settle our problem people at once.”

He lifted a brow. “What if the vote doesn’t go your way?”

She sighed. “That’s a chance I take every time I set up a moment like this. It has gone against me before.”

“You’re planning for that, I assume.”

“I’m counting on it this time.”

Theo grunted, not saying he was honored she’d asked him. It would be hard to be nasty to guys he admired, but he did love being on the inside of plans. “Tell me what the camp gains and I’ll agree.”

“Freedom from a few of the worst dramas for the duration of the trip. It might even hold on the island, for a week or so.”

“What price do I have to pay?”

“Debra will stay mad at you longer.”

“So not much for me. What about you?”

“It’s a bonus for me. I’ll be seen as a bit of a tyrant against those who commit crimes. Their tormentor, in ways. Most of the camp will approve.”

He scowled at her. “No, Angie. Inside. What price are you paying to do this? Going against your nature can’t be free.”

She sighed. “I get to learn a hard lesson that I’ve always avoided in the past.” She moved toward the door. “I get to find out if I’m a piece a shit like Kenn. If I enjoy even a second of it, I’ll have my answer.”

Theo returned to his designs when she shut the door. He had faith in her to do the right thing. Theo thought all the whispers of byzan being unstable depended on the person, like in any other situation. Angela was a doctor, and she was normally kind.

Torturing them would only be beating herself up for letting it all happen. *I'll do it. Tell me when.*

Angela's answer showed him a vision of the galley. She wanted the room crowded. It had to look like a random moment, and she knew Theo would be able to pull it off. She based that on the acting he was doing now. Theo hadn't needed the cane for at least a week. He was no longer crippled, but he hadn't told anyone.

Chapter Fourteen

I Don't Hear Anything

Day 2

1

“**T**hat’s all the engineering books.” Charlie shoved the box toward the door, then wiped his dusty hands on his jeans. “We just need the two medical boxes marked priority and we’re all set.”

The cargo area of the ship consisted of three gigantic rooms stacked with everything they’d brought. This section, near the very rear of the ship, was where all informational material and equipment had been placed. There hadn’t been time to get in here and organize it all before they sailed. Then the storm had added to the chaos. It was now a huge mess that had to be dug through to find anything.

“Do you hear beeping?” Conner paused in searching the stacks of boxes that occupied one full corner of this cargo room.

Charlie concentrated, hoping there weren’t rats lingering in the shadows of the thousands of boxes, crates, and bags. He shook his head. “I don’t hear anything.”

“It stopped again.” Conner returned to the search. “I’ve heard it twice now, both times while looking through these boxes.”

“I’ll listen for it the next time we’re sent down.”

“Cool.” Conner wondered how Charlie’s test of manhood had gone, but he didn’t ask. Some things were personal.

Charlie slid a stack aside to read the labels on the boxes behind them. “I don’t mind.”

“You sure? I have a lot of questions.”

“Why? You think my mom is going to do the same to you?” Charlie smiled to show it was a joke.

“Maybe, when I ask permission to marry Candy.”

Charlie’s mood fell. “That’s something else I need to do. My actual manhood title won’t come until I do the right thing.”

Conner glanced over his shoulder. “I would have thought you’d jump at the chance. I know you love her.”

“I do. I’m just...”

“Too young to be tied down in such a permanent way?”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m not sure what it is that’s holding me back. I’m working on figuring it out.”

“Good. The boss likes it when we make personal progress.”

Charlie’s wrist alarm beeped.

Conner spun around. His shoulders drooped. “That wasn’t it. Damn it.”

Charlie snickered. “That’s my meeting reminder. I have ten minutes to get there.”

“This boat takes time to cross. You’d better go now.”

“That’s okay. It’s only a few hallways from here.” Charlie shifted another stack. “So what’s your lot of questions?”

Conner grinned. “Cool. Did you kill anyone?”

“Yes.”

Conner licked his cracked lips. “Did you take a lifeforce? You did, didn’t you? That’s why your gifts aren’t working right.”

“I think my mom knows too. I expect to be punished.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Not at all. They were bad and I needed energy.”

Conner frowned. “That probably won’t give you a pass. Was it life threatening?”

“I could have spared them, and we probably would have had to handle them later anyway, but I can’t search the future without my gifts.”

“She’ll look. She doesn’t need to search ahead for that one, only the past.”

Charlie sighed in longing and concern. “I haven’t mastered alternate events. I was hoping she’d do lessons on it, but...”

“You’re afraid to bring it up because it might lead to a reminder and a punishment?”

Charlie grinned. “I missed you. I’m glad she’s giving us time together.”

Conner pointed. “Right back at ya, kiddo.”

The boys chuckled together and kept working. After a minute, Charlie lifted a brow. “Is that it?”

“No, but I don’t want to make you mad again. I can ask Kenn.”

Charlie read Conner’s thoughts. “You want information on your dad, about what it was like to be on a team with him.”

“Sorry. You don’t have to go through it. I know you don’t like him.”

“It’s not about liking.” Charlie ignored the soreness to heft another stack to the side. He’d spotted one of the boxes they were here for. “It’s about his choices and the reasons for them.”

“He never could follow rules.”

“No, but that’s not it either.” Charlie took the box, coughing a little at the layer of disturbed dust. “In his place, I might have done the same thing on many of them. That bothers me. It makes me hurt on the inside whenever I agree with him. My dad feels that way too.”

“Your dad does hate him.”

“Yes, and no. He wants to be like him. It’s hard to hate someone you idolize.”

“I get that.” Conner swiped at dust to read the next label. “Medical books for the infirmary! Yes!” He lifted the box and took it to the small stack they’d gathered. He began putting them on the dolly while Charlie straightened some of the rows. Angela had said to start clearing in the center of any pile they were sent to, pushing everything to the sides. She said it would eventually form rows they could walk between without spending that time directly. Charlie called that a twofer. “He was

arrogant and a badass, like he always is, but he wasn't obnoxious about it, and he even had a moment where he showed real emotion. It was...kind of nice, considering what I went through."

"What did you go through?" Conner wiped dust from his hands and arms, surprised by how much had gathered in the week they'd been loading and the two days they'd been aboard.

"Well, let's see... I was attacked by slavers. I had a steak. Kenn beat my ass because I needed it. I used my alpha gift on three women and your dad made me let them go... I learned how to make some explosive landmine thing. I can't remember what Kenn called it, but I remember how to make it and set it, which is more important." Charlie followed Conner out into the hall, pulling the dolly while Conner relocked the door. "I saved Kenn's life and drained myself. Kenn gave me a lifeforce." Charlie grew thoughtful. "I bet that's part of why I don't hate him as much now."

"You do seem like you've gotten out the poison."

"I'm still working through it. My mom and your dad both told me Eagles examine every second of a run after it's over, but I didn't understand it comes without us knowing. We're deep into it before we realize that's what we're doing. It's scary. It happens every time, too. All during that run, it wouldn't stop going through my mind. I even dreamed about it."

“Did your mom put a charm on you to make it like that?”

Charlie shook his head. “No. I think I’m just growing up.”

“You survived a mob and fought alongside everyone else.”

“I thought I was going to die—several times. I don’t like that.”

“Eagle training will help.”

“No, it won’t because I’m not going to be an Eagle.” Charlie went down the next hallway. “I have my meeting now. See you at lunch.”

Conner gazed after Charlie, wondering if Angela would be mad. Charlie had made his choice and it wasn’t to put his life on the line for Safe Haven’s future the way his parents were doing.

Charlie reached the last hallway and spotted a friend. “Dog!”

The wolf didn’t leave his post outside the meeting cabin, but he wagged his tail. *Welcome home!*

Charlie knelt for a hug and ear rubbing. “I’m glad you came, Dog. We can have fun again!”

Dog was glad the boy still had some childish notions left. Watching him grow up was painful for Dog. *I’ll find you after my shift ends.*

Charlie laughed. “That still sounds weird coming from an animal. You’re awesome.”

Dog lifted his big head. *I know.*

Charlie snickered, standing. “Can I go on in or do I wait until she calls me?”

When she calls. Your schedule is on the table.

Charlie retrieved the white envelope, but he didn’t open it yet. If she had him assigned as an Eagle, it meant she had a reason, but he needed to know what it was. He could force himself to do that job, though he would never excel at it; it would kill something inside him to live that way.

“I’ll be right back with updates on storm damage from the captain.” Kenn came out of the cabin, leaving the door open. He spotted Charlie and jerked a hand. “She’s ready for you. Good luck.”

Charlie sighed, assuming that meant she wasn’t in a good mood. “Same to you. I heard the captain hasn’t left to sleep yet, despite orders. Says he won’t unless someone drags him below.”

Kenn grunted. “We’ll send your mom up there again. That nasty mouth she’s got now will send anyone below to hide.” He continued down the dim passageway, muttering.

Charlie stepped into the long, narrow cabin and shut the door.

2

“I hate to tell you this, but most of the camp is waking up. I told the cooks to start the next meal to keep them occupied for a while.”

“I’m not surprised. The lack of noise, except for a creaking of the ship and waves, is disturbing them.

The fact that they can hear the waves and not the engine means power has not come back on. It's making them nervous." Angela stood, stretching. She had been taking a short break in the command room between meetings, but time was up. She'd finished with Charlie an hour ago and sent him to the next trainers for debriefing. She wasn't happy about some of the things he'd gone through, but she was thrilled by the way it had worked out. He'd grown up. "I'll stop by the galley next. As Eagles get up, put them to work. I gave you the list earlier. The three at the top are priority. Everything else is as you can manage it."

Kenn hurried after her, copying notes. The hallway around them was empty of everyone except sentries and a bleached patch where Becky had fallen. None of them glanced down that hall. The charred walls and carpet there were thick with ashes and the smell of smoke.

Behind Kenn, Seth also hurried to keep up, already tired. Angela had insisted he stay by her all day. He had been disarmed and frisked multiple times as she entered new levels and new guards came on duty, but so far, his patience had held.

Angela descended the stairs and headed toward the galley. She was half an hour early, but it would go over better if she was already there when the camp arrived.

Kenn did a scan and found more Eagles than camp members. "The bathrooms are getting full. They'll come here next." Kenn knew that's why she

had come here. “The main topics of discussion were what happened at the power meeting and the storm, but none of it was as bad as we were expecting.” Tracy and Candy’s idea had worked. If Theo got the power on soon, they were good to go.

Kenn gravitated to the corner to take a post that was out of the way but still near enough to write any notes she wanted to give him. It was the same setup he had used with Adrian. Until she told him to do it differently, he was following the old methods and rules.

Angela pointed at the counter, directing Seth there. Shortly, it would fill up with kids and Eagles. The reactions between them and Seth would help her make the final choice she was avoiding.

At the counter alone for the moment, Seth swallowed his embarrassment and took a slice of the fresh pizza Brittani slid onto the center of the counter. He juggled it and took a fast bite to keep from having to speak to her.

Brittani didn’t want to talk to him anyway. She had too much to do. No one else here knew how to run the kitchen or didn’t care enough to learn. She didn’t like leaving the camp with substandard meals. She’d told Angela she wanted to do this and be an Eagle. As far as she knew, the boss was working on it. Until then, Brittani was pulling double shifts. That was almost a relief, however. This way, she didn’t have to face Gus, Daryl, or Trinity.

Neil joined Angela and handed her a paper, then marched toward the stairs. “I’m going to go take a shower now. I won’t spend another second around her.”

Angela didn’t argue. She’d had a brief hope that Neil and Adrian might be able to pull Becky out of the horrible coming crash, but it hadn’t helped. She skimmed the paper and got exactly what she’d expected—nothing. Becky hadn’t given any answers.

Angela went to the counter and handed the paper to Seth. “Do you know anything about that?”

Seth read a few sentences and shook his head. “We were too busy for details about their plans.”

Angela tucked the paper back into her notebook. Despite having dealings with the UN during their time away from camp, none of the exiled group had been able to give her the information she needed. She would be depending upon Marc’s mental memory for that battle, and that was it.

Ten minutes later, the galley was crowded. Everyone who didn’t have a shift was either here now or on the way. Angela stayed in the center where she could be seen, calm smile plastered on. She wanted to see how they were acting without power. While she enjoyed it as much as anyone else, it wouldn’t pay for them to become dependent upon electricity again. This was the apocalypse. When they reached the island, it would be a while before they were able to have a set up like this. From what Kendle had told them, the island wasn’t wired for

electricity. People there used lamps, candles, and fireplaces.

The temperature in the galley rose as more passengers came in for coffee, a meal, and gossip. Angela listened vaguely, relieved that camp members weren't stressing over the power meeting or the lack of power. Seeing her here calmed the few who'd been wondering if there was something wrong. Everyone knew Angela wouldn't quit on either problem until it was solved.

A few of the missing faces allowed the situation to be almost pleasant despite the cramped quarters. Trinity was visiting Gus in the infirmary while Brittani cooked. Marc and Adrian were nowhere to be seen, though Angela knew where both men were. None of the new people were here yet either, despite her order for all of them to be released.

Zack had his sons a little more under control now, but Conner wasn't here for them to torment and neither was Charlie. Conner was caring for their animals and Charlie was with his dad, providing more details about the UN. Marc was trying to view everything through the boy's memories instead of just his mouth. Angela applauded the choice. Jennifer was with them to gather details she needed to do her job. She was also there to keep the peace between Marc and Adrian if a fight broke out.

Den mothers and children flooded through the far passage, screaming toward the stools.

Seth recoiled, leaping up. He smacked into the side of the counter, knocking over a cup.

The water splashed onto Tonya's male cat, sending it trotting off, yowling and shaking.

Dog looked up at Seth in annoyance. *I just got him down for a nap!*

Angela felt like it was a good time to move into the next stage of her plans. She nodded at Kenn. *Quiet them. I'm going to say a few words.*

Kenn stood and whistled.

People winced all across the galley. Kids clasped their ears with their hands, cringing.

Angela couldn't help a chuckle. *That was uncalled for.*

Kenn sat and pointed at her, letting people know what was going on.

Eagles settled in to listen. The camp followed their lead.

All without a single word being spoken. Very nice. Angela stood. "I have a few announcements. First, we're going to have Thanksgiving dinner tonight."

This cheer was louder than Kenn's whistle had been.

Dog padded out of the galley, unable to take the noise. *Where did that cat go? If he doesn't take his nap, he gets cranky.*

"Brittani is choosing part time Eagle duty so she can keep feeding us, but I don't want her stuck in this job. One of you knows how to do this. You've been avoiding it because there's not a spotlight. Get over it. I'll expect your name in the workbook when it gets passed around at our camp meeting. Which

brings me to the next piece of business. There's an evening lesson on the top deck for all adult descendants. That means we need camp members to step up and do guard duty. Everyone else is free to watch."

She looked at their kids. "As soon as you finished eating, you will report to the gymnasium for your first lesson. When that's finished, you'll come back here for a light lunch. After that, class number two, then three, until dinner. After dinner, you have another class."

Kids grumbled, faces crumbling, falling.

"Before you complain, remember you asked me for this. I expect you to put in full effort every second. If you don't, I'm going to lock up your gifts. I'm going to assign you to solitary cabins. I'm going to make you eat lunch at different times. I'm going to take away everything you enjoy if you don't follow the rules. I'll start with the pizza."

Gasps came from the children.

Angela motioned Brittani to serve them. "Don't forget to say thank you for all the work she's doing."

Subdued children neatly sat on the stools now and gushed with praise, eyeing the pans of pizza.

Angela glanced around the camp that was smiling or holding in snickers. "The tradition of Thanksgiving in America was often accompanied by bruises, vomit, flashing lights, and the occasional medical call. That will not be the case for us. I'm allowing alcohol to be served openly for the first time in the existence of Safe Haven beyond a

meeting or private event. If you take advantage of my generosity, I will enforce prohibition. America couldn't do that in the past, but I can here and now, and I will, but only if you make me. It's the same with other recreational pursuits. If you keep control of it, you're free to do as you like. If you break the rules and don't contribute, there's a place for you in the brig—right next to Becky.”

The mood instantly turned sour.

Angela curled her thumbs into her palms to control her stomach. “At the next camp meeting, we will have a trial and sentencing. No one is excused from that civic duty.”

Everyone was quiet, eager for more details.

Because they were taking it so well, Angela kept going. “We'll be voting on some amendments to the Constitution. We don't need to draw up a new document. The one we had was beautiful. It just needs a few tweaks. Now that we know how easy it is for evil people to take advantage of our system and turn it against us, we have to put rules in place to prevent that. This will be a majority vote, with leadership being able to overrule. It's not that I need everything to go my way, because on most of these issues, we can come together and solve them no matter which direction you pick. However, because a few of our members have more radical ideas than the others, I will be forced to include some choices I personally don't agree with. It would take 80% from the camp for some of these issues to pass.” Angela took a drink of her juice, shuddering at the

pineapple. She chugged it down to get it over with. “The only way I would overrule these votes is if I don’t believe both sides of the argument were fairly considered. For example, we’re going to be discussing the age limit. Some of the more progressive folks have suggested ages of twelve and thirteen, or as soon as the girl has her period. If 52% of the camp voted for that, it would mean 48% of the camp was against it. I would have to overrule that choice, because it’s the more radical of the decisions available to us. We don’t need to go all the way to the most desperate scenario. I believe we can keep more of our humanity if we try to protect some of the values and traditions that allowed America to be built and grow. Obviously, not all of them need to stay. We’ll be voting on those at the meeting, and in future meetings, until we get a document *everyone* is happy with.”

Angela gave them a few seconds to swallow that information and then hit them with a distraction. “The entertainment floor will also be open this evening.”

The mood improved, drawing low cheers and claps.

“If there’s tape across a door on that deck, do not go in. It’s because we’ve deemed that area not safe yet. You have to remember we don’t know how everything works and if we start a fire on the ship, the tugs may not be able to reach it, or we may not be able to find it in time. Do not break the tape over any door. Do not go into off limits areas. If there’s

even one violation of that tonight, I'll shut the entertainment down and we'll try again next month."

No one thought she was bluffing. She had no history of it.

"Eagle training is being restarted." Angela waited for the cheers to die down again. "We'll talk more about that tonight during dinner. I have some big announcements in that department, but I'll go ahead and give a third of you what you want to know now. Yes, tryouts for the Eagles will be open at the same time. Everyone, any age or gender, is welcome to try."

Equal amounts of frowns and smiles spread through the galley. Ciemus women were the happiest. The children were right behind them.

Men and women who were already Eagles weren't as thrilled. They didn't relish the idea of having to train some of these people.

Angela walked toward the exit, confident they would be calm for a while now.

Around them all, the ship absorbed the good mood and brightened the glowing walls. *It is great to have life here again. I have been lonely.*

Angela sighed. Even inanimate objects felt loneliness. It was both odd and comforting. "Last thing from me: We need volunteers to help pull in the towline and store it, then let it back out as we set sail. I'd like two full teams who can rotate as the other gets tired."

Nearby, Ben breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad she’s covering that. Grant’s gripes are getting on my nerves.”

Darryl looked at him, frowning. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem. We just have to pull up the slack on our towline. Grant is freaking about being in both places at the same time.”

“What’s the deal? Maybe I can help.”

“We have to keep the line from getting tangled around our propellers, under the water. Hold and wrap, I assume.”

Daryl shrugged. “I’ll meet you there when they call the time for it.”

“Cool. He sent Nathan and Claire to get set up and oversee it.” Ben snickered. “They’re carrying about ten books and a stack of folders. The rookies have a pool going for who drops what and where.”

Daryl frowned instead of laughing. “If they’re that bored, we need to give them something to do.”

“Cargo area still needs work...”

Now Daryl laughed.

3

“What do you need here?”

Morgan gestured at the full cots and empty stations. “The same as you did when you first joined Safe Haven—more hands.”

The rest of the injured were awake and watching her. Angela did a brief scan and sighed. “All Eagles may return to duty, effective this evening.”

Dull cheers went through the infirmary.

“Everyone on probation will report to the top deck for a job assignment tomorrow morning.”

More relief went through the infirmary, hitting Kendle the hardest. Kyle had made sure she knew she was on probation in every way.

“Prisoners will be relocated to the brig.”

Morgan opened his mouth to protest.

“She can’t stay here. It’s coloring your judgment. Yet another life will be ruined because we can’t do the right thing based on someone’s gender. Right and wrong don’t change.” Angela pointed. “She tried to kill me. She goes to the brig.”

A little ashamed of himself, Morgan nodded. “I’m sorry. I can’t help pitying her.”

“I understand how that feels. In your place, as the doctor, I would have done the same, but as the leader of this camp, I know she’s dangerous. When she heals up, none of us will be safe.”

Angela motioned at Seth. “You’ll stay with her now. You are not a prisoner, but you will be searched every time you go in and out. You can stay by her at night too, until the camp meeting. We’re going to hold her trial then. Consider this the official charge.” Angela turned toward the door, already tired of the company in this room.

“That’s a bad idea!” Quinn ran after Angela as she left the infirmary. “People up there want Kendle dead. You can’t let her loose. She’s not safe!”

Kenn wasn’t certain which way Quinn meant that. He frowned at the man but didn’t interfere. He was also a bit worried about Kendle being safe around the camp, but he meant protecting Safe Haven. The tone of Quinn’s voice implied he meant it the other way around.

Angela kept walking. “You’re going to be on duty over her half the time, Quinn. If something happens to her, it will be because you weren’t doing your job.”

Quinn stopped, temporarily pacified. “Well... What about the other people? We have the one refugee and the new family. I saw on the Eagle board that they can be turned loose too. Is that a good idea?”

Now Kenn did interfere. He stopped and rotated, making them bump chests. “What’s your beef?!”

Quinn stopped and went in the opposite direction. He stormed down the hall without responding.

Kenn caught up with Angela. “Why is he so twitchy? I know we’re all a little restless from lack of sleep and adjusting to the boat, but he’s really upset about something.”

Angela chuckled. “I’m going to let you figure that one out for yourself.” She kept going, finally making it to the garden area she hadn’t been able to

see very well last night. She paused in the entrance to admire the work being done.

The entire area was filled with pots and bags and planters, but the amazing part was the organization. She estimated they could grow three hundred different plants with this setup. As long as they kept the glass windows above them clean and enough sunlight came through, the garden would grow.

A bee flew by, reminding Angela humans hadn't been the only ones to suffer nature's wrath in the mountain. She looked for the coffee can and was delighted to see parts of the hive now over the metal. The bees were recovering too.

In the far corner, Samantha was in her wheelchair, being pushed by Debra. The women weren't speaking aloud. Samantha's hands were flying in sign language.

Behind them, two big guards were keeping track of the women. Both of those men had spotted Angela in the entrance and taken closer positions along the wall to be able to provide protection for all targets in the room. Adrian's training was still the primary tool they used to keep everyone alive. Angela had no intention of changing it.

Her personal security stayed in the hallway, scanning everyone who went by.

On the other side of the garden, Theo was laboring over battery packs and extension cords. His presence told Angela the ship's power had been restored even though it wasn't on yet. He was staying here where most people wouldn't see him,

but also where he was still able to accomplish something. Angela joined him. “We’re about ready.”

Theo took a radio from his pocket and held it up. “It’s already on the right channel. Two clicks is on. Three clicks is off.”

“What’s one click?”

Theo looked up at her. “Disconnect and pretend it was never fixed.”

Angela chuckled. “I love working with people who can keep up with me.”

Theo beamed at the praise. He resumed wrapping wires with electrical tape. “We’re setting more grow lights for the plants in the corners. Sam doesn’t think they’ll get enough sun from the glass top.”

“I’m willing to trust her judgment on that.” Angela leaned down to examine one of the cords. “Did you get the radar on?”

“No. It’s like you said. We have to rebuild it. Ozzie and Grant are working on that now.”

Angela frowned. “Grant needs to sleep at some point. Pass that on.”

“I will, but it won’t matter.”

Angela sighed, heading toward the stairs that led to the top deck. “I’ll talk to Ray. Maybe he can convince our captain to sleep.”

“Maybe if Ray got naked and crawled into his cot.” Theo laughed at his joke.

Angela didn’t. “If that’s what it takes, we’ll encourage it. Grant has to sleep, and he needs to do

it now while the seas are calm. The storm last night was just the beginning.”

Chapter Fifteen
I Won't Do It

1

Angela pushed the button on the radio twice as she left the garden. A few seconds later, full power came on all over the ship.

Cheers echoed from every corner of the vessel.

The sound of an anchor lifting echoed, muffling the other noises.

Angela headed toward the animal area next. It was her last stop before the deck that was already hosting a few classes. After that, she wanted to verify the entertainment was ready for this evening. Then, she hoped to get a nap.

“From the lakes of Minnesota...”

Angela’s head tilted. A pleasing voice was singing one of her favorite songs.

Drawn, she lightened her steps and eased along the wall to avoid interrupting.

Behind her, James drew his gun and tried to get near enough to help with whatever was coming. He hadn’t known there was a problem.

Angela didn’t speak. She was positive it would interrupt the singing.

“...sea to shining sea...”

Angela stopped at the entrance to the animal area, holding on as the huge ship began to inch forward through the water. More cheers rang out from the camp.

Angela nodded to the guard at the end of the hall.

Daryl was also enjoying the song. He was glad Angela didn't interrupt.

James realized he was overreacting and holstered his weapon, but he stayed close to Angela in case they were wrong. In moments like this, he was at a disadvantage because he wasn't a descendant.

"...bless the USA...!"

Angela started clapping and stepped into the area.

For an instant, sparks flew between her and Conner.

Conner stared in shock, body and gift responding.

Angela let the moment linger, reminded of the way it had been with her and Adrian when she'd first joined, back when she'd thought he was someone she could trust.

Conner lowered his eyes. "I know you guys want me to become that man, but I hated him. I can't do it."

Now observing from the entrance, Daryl stored the information and swept the hall, not wanting to be caught off guard again.

Angela moved toward the animal pen, not speaking. She hadn't searched the future for Conner and Candy since Ciemus. That had only been ten days, but it felt like a lot longer. The future shifted with every choice. If Conner and Candy hadn't crossed the line yet, what she had seen had already changed. All she had was a vaguely amused report from Dog that Candy had looked flustered and Conner had gone through her shield.

"Will I get in trouble if I give you an answer to that?"

Angela breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

Conner resumed raking hay into the chicken pen. "For breaking rules?"

"For telling me even though you know I have to punish you for it."

Conner coughed from the hay dust. "Nobody likes it when you're stressed. If I have toilet detail for a week because of that, it's worth it."

Angela studied him. "Are you positive, Conner? I can get you there without the ugliness that allows him to be so good."

Conner shook his head. "That's the part you guys don't understand. He liked his job. He wasn't abused or forced into it. He was good at it. I don't want to take the chance on that happening to me."

Instead of the understanding he expected, Angela scowled at him.

"You only get this offer once, Conner Mitchel. At least consider it before you throw away an opportunity many of my camp would kill for."

Conner flushed. He hadn't thought of it like that. "I'm sorry. It's a great honor to be taught by you, but I just..."

"Can't be like your dad. You don't think you have it in you. You're not scared of enjoying it. You share Charlie's fear of not being good enough."

Conner nodded, chin down.

"You may not be. Do you want to spend the rest of your life wondering if you missed the chance to be better than him?"

"You're that good?" Conner couldn't help the disbelieving tone.

Angela chuckled. "No, boy. I think *you* are." She turned for the exit. "Get back to me in a few days. Until then, work hard."

"I will."

"Good. Charlie has chosen not to be an Eagle. He will have various jobs in place of it. One of them will be to come here and help with the animals, and then the animal lessons. He won't be eligible to share point with you or even to wear his Eagle jacket."

Conner wasn't sure why she was telling him. "I get along with Charlie. Having him here will be good."

"For him too. I'd like you to help him through the deflated feeling that will hit him soon. Deciding to pass up the opportunity of a lifetime isn't easy." She headed for the door. "I'll be around if you need me."

Conner watched her leave, mind a chaotic mess. He was afraid of failure. *What if I don't have it in me? I'll be out of the Eagles too. Candy won't want me anymore...*

"Then I have to make sure I do it right if I make that choice. I'll give it everything I have, or I won't do it at all."

2

"I won't do it." Leeann crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not taking classes. I want my Billy!"

The other kids quieted, listening to the conversation.

"I might do some of the classes." Missy's thoughts went to falling overboard and immediately scared her again with the vision of Shawn hitting the water. *I thought he was going to die.* "I'm not running away anymore either."

Leeann slapped the counter. "You traitor!"

"You slut!"

Leeann recoiled. "Am not!"

Missy's lip came out. "I heard your thoughts. You want to kiss him."

"That doesn't make me a slut. Being slutty is wearing clothes that show my butt and boobs."

"You don't have any boobs!"

"That's why I don't wear those clothes."

"You're acting like a bad girl. You have to stop."

Tears welled in Leeann's eyes. "I'm not bad. I'm lonely."

"I am too, but acting stupid won't help us."

"I'm not stupid! I love him. I want him back!"

"You have to let go." Missy's anger flashed out. "She already had to send him away because of you. You're going to get him killed!"

"You take that back!" Leeann hopped off the stool and slapped Missy.

Missy kicked her in the stomach.

Leeann stumbled into her stool and fell to the hard floor, crying.

Missy stayed sitting, lip coming out further. "I hope she locks you up so no one gets hurt." Missy sat her cup down and stood up.

Leeann cringed into the counter, expecting pain.

Missy darted toward the exit, unable to take her friend being scared of her.

Just coming into the galley, Marc caught the little girl and swung her up to keep them from colliding. Her small arms went around his neck, hot tears soaking his shirt.

Marc patted the girl, scanning the quiet, still crowd. Two hundred passengers were staring at Missy or Leeann. Marc read Missy's thoughts in a quick blur and rubbed her shoulder. "We'll work something out to make her happy again, okay?"

Missy nodded against him, but she didn't stop crying.

Marc kept rubbing. “It’ll be okay. The good moments make up for the bad. That’s how life works for everyone.”

Missy sniffled, arms locked around his neck. “I know what happens when he comes back. It’s awful.”

Marc also knew. He’d concurred with Angela that hunting Billy down wouldn’t be necessary. At some point, he would return to Safe Haven. “We’ll try to handle that too. You’ll help us?”

“Yes.” Missy sniffed again. She wiped her nose on his shirt. “Lesson time, kids!”

Marc flinched from her bellow, barely managing to keep a hold of her.

Kids flooded toward Marc.

Missy pointed at Leeann. “He wants *you* to lead the way to the gym...gymnasium. On the way, stop at the playground next to the candy store.”

Leeann was convinced. She ran to the front of the group, waving. “Come on, kids! We have a lesson now.”

Missy dropped her cheek to Marc’s shoulder. *Was that good?*

Perfect. She didn’t feel the mood adjustment, and you gave her a way to agree without being embarrassed.

I like her. She’s my only friend here.

Marc hugged the girl and even nuzzled her cheek. “You’re growing on all of us, baby. Keep trying, okay? We need you as much as anyone else.” Marc followed the line of kids from the galley. He

didn't notice the approving looks from the camp or the surprised expressions of the Eagles. He was just doing what felt right.

3

"He's sleeping." Ray pointed to the cot in the corner of the bridge. "He didn't eat yet."

Angela entered the bridge. "Let him rest for another hour and then bring a tray. Tell him if he doesn't eat it, I'm relieving him of duty. I'll sail the ship myself. Tell him I called it driving."

Ray grinned. "Yeah, that should do it."

"I have a map." Angela put it on top of the stack of charts. "It's amazingly detailed. I've marked places where I want to stop. He'll find a few of those disturbing, but I've made my choices and we're going. When the radar comes back up, Grant can verify the locations."

"He's been working hard on that. No luck."

"I didn't expect it yet. It would be too soon."

Ray assumed she was talking about something she'd seen during a search of the future and didn't comment. He didn't have those gifts. It was hard for him to grasp most of it even when he was in the mood to think about it.

"There will be three guards on the captain now, all rotating. I expect you to take your off shifts like the rest of them."

Ray grimaced, but didn't voice the protest that came to mind. Angela was right. He needed downtime like anyone else.

"I'm sending people who can handle it. Try not to stress the entire time you're away from him. It's not good for your health." Angela inhaled deeply, getting salt and fish but not rot. She assumed the storm had cleared another layer of garbage from the top of the ocean, but she wasn't sure.

Ray hadn't known folks were aware of his developing feelings for Grant. He stared at Angela, waiting for more.

Angela left the bridge. In time, Ray would understand his fears were unfounded. Safe Haven had actual problems to worry about and even when they didn't, gay relationships were no longer a problem in their society. As long as the citizens contributed and followed the same rules as everyone else, basic life choices had been returned to their owners. Sexual orientation, sex in general, was something the government was going to stay out of from now on.

"It's sweet that you're worrying about me."

Ray swiveled around to find Grant watching him. "You shouldn't pretend like that around the boss."

"Who better to test the skill on?"

Ray paused in his next scold. Many of the Eagles tried to get one over on Angela and the other council members. It had become something of a

game. Ray considered it to be dangerous. It wasn't a big deal to pretend to be asleep but acting like you were out of hearing distance while listening to someone else's conversation was a total violation of privacy. So was forcing someone to take energy when they weren't expecting it and searching their minds while they were distracted by the feeling. Ray considered most of the things going on to be unethical.

“I heard the orders, but I'm not ready to eat yet. I'm in charge of a cruise ship that weighs 225,000 pounds and is hauling over three hundred people I've come to care for. My stomach's too upset for food.” Grant wondered how Ray had gotten his gunshot scars but didn't ask. He would save it for later, when he could offer proper sympathy as he pulled out details of the story that would help him continue to piece together the puzzle that was Ray. He wanted to know everything.

“I'll keep that in mind when I bring the tray. I'm pretty certain my relief will be here by then. She saw I haven't eaten or slept either, but she mostly eyed my jacket. It's filthy. She wants me to clean up.”

Grant grinned. “You do smell a little bit like ass.”

Ray kicked the leg of the cot.

The cot collapsed under Grant, dropping roughly to the floor.

Ray waited for retaliation, heart thumping.

Grant pushed himself up on his elbows. “Guess the truth hurts.”

Ray chortled. “Get up and I’ll fix your bed.”

Grant sucked in a breath.

Ray flushed. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

Grant studied him, expression dazed. “You said something similar in my dream... About twenty minutes ago. I was asleep for a little while. I woke when she came up the stairs. The fourth one creaks.”

Ray made a note of that in his logbook, not responding to the sparks or invitation in the captain’s tone. Ray stored the notebook and went to the stairs to see what was making the telltale noise.

Grant got up and fixed his cot. As former military, he’d slept on more of these than he had mattresses, even during his time on American soil. His problem was they were only big enough for one person at a time. Grant thought about the dream and the position they’d ended up in and silently cackled.

Ray felt the amusement as he stood in the entrance, but he didn’t revive the conversation. Besides being distracted, he was reluctant to interfere with anything that might jeopardize Safe Haven’s future. As far as he was concerned, the captain needed to remain single so he would focus on his job. That applied to men, women, wolves, cats and dolphins.

Ray glanced down, scanning for the dolphins duty Eagles had spotted late last night. It had only been for a few seconds. They had noted it in the logbook.

Ray wasn't disappointed when he didn't see anything but debris and water. They would have a lot of time on the ocean. He had little doubt the world beneath them would collide at some point and force them to acknowledge they no longer had land under their feet, but millions of animals and thousands of miles of unreachable ground. Anything and everything was between them and the island, but the same could be said for the ocean.

Standing in the shadows of the stairwell below the bridge, Angela echoed that thought. At times, she had doubted if being on the ocean was going to be as intimidating as land. Now that it was here, she could almost slap herself for ever doubting it. The land didn't shift the floor under her feet and send her sliding sideways. It didn't grunt and groan and smell like rotten water. There were no portholes layered with so much filth she couldn't view daylight through them. There wasn't chipped and peeling paint all over the floors that tracked on the bottom of shoes and even made it into beds. It was only day two, but all sorts of little annoyances were making an appearance.

Angela hoped the camp was handling it better than she was. Lack of sleep was responsible for a good chunk of how she was feeling at the moment. She hoped the dinner tonight would remind her these issues were nothing and allow her to regain her equilibrium. It didn't seem like a big thing, but if she couldn't do it, then the camp certainly

wouldn't be able to and that meant she would need to make plans for those situations. People were already tired of replacing their belongings on shelves as the ship bobbed in the water. She guessed previous employees had used a lot of tape and nails to secure things to the walls they were allowed to use, but without having a ship engineer here, she refused to put holes anywhere other than places she knew were not part of the main hull.

The employee galley was a great example of a place where they could hang things. It was in the center and stood alone, thanks to the golf course on top. It wasn't directly connected to anything the ship needed for sailing. The employee living quarters, however, were along one entire wall of the ship and that certainly would harm it. She'd just made a new list of rules to be posted all throughout the Adrianna and she was going to make sure the sentries told people not to damage the ship in any way. She didn't care if they hung posters and pictures. In fact, she encouraged it. They just needed to use tape or sticky tabs.

Angela thought about the taste of some of the folks in camp and forced herself to add a mental note that certain types of images were not going to be permitted in public. *Here comes the censorship.* Angela didn't see any way around it. Their children didn't need to view men and women having sex. The only solution was to tell camp members there were certain places they weren't allowed to do that or post images of it. People would have to accept

the compromise. Neither side had more rights than the other.

“Who are we spying on this time?” Ivan yawned. Her mental call had pulled him from bed two hours before his shift was supposed to start. Cuddled next to Jayda’s naked body, Ivan had planned to sleep until the last minute. Angela’s wild black curls blowing in the wind over clean clothes had settled his ire, but it hadn’t woken him up.

“Observing, not spying.” Angela pointed.

Ivan followed her finger to the group of kids coming up the stairs to the top decks. He wondered who was with them. He didn’t see an adult yet. *Leaving our children unattended is reckless.*

“They’re not unattended.”

It took a while for all the kids to make it up the stairs and onto the wide, square, wooden ramp connecting the top areas of the ship. Ivan was curious to know where the children were going for their first lesson.

Across the deck, Eagles on duty did the same, pausing to watch. Two of those men scanned desperately for signs their loved one was okay.

Ivan waited, curious if it was the two children he assumed.

So did Angela.

Kimie waved to Jeff, jumping up and down. “Hiya!”

Jeff’s expression melted into relief. He gave a vigorous wave in return. Then all expression drained; he turned back to his duty.

Satisfied that Jeff was okay, Kimmie gestured at the other kids. “Marc said to wait here. Move away from the stairs so everyone else can come up.”

The kids obeyed, all eager for the view. They had been rushed onto the ship during the chaos and then moved below as soon as the boat set sail. All of them wanted access to the areas they’d spotted in that brief time.

Last up the steps, Missy marched to the edge of the ramp and stood next to Cody. She didn’t look at anything except the water.

Shawn’s face fell.

Ivan could almost see the man holding in tears. *He lied.*

Angela nodded. *We are watching it and interfering where necessary, but some things are meant to be. Those two are probably soulmates. They’ll both be miserable for years.*

When she’s older?

I have no intention of keeping people apart if they want to be together. I just need them to obey the age rules.

You don’t think he will.

All I see is darkness when I search that future.

Just like the rest of her camp, Ivan hated that answer. It hadn’t taken long to understand it meant things could go either way, but likely, it would be bad.

Ivan thought about it for a minute, then switched to his next curiosity. “What about the first couple?”

Angela sighed. “I trust him to do the right thing. I also trust her to do the right thing. He’s grieving and she was raped. Good women who’ve had to sell themselves to survive don’t usually enter into physical relationships any sooner than they have to. Good men who are grieving usually avoid any type of physical attachment that could lead to putting them back into the horrible state of grief they’ve survived. By the time those two recover, she’ll be old enough to make that choice.”

Ivan was learning to read her. He frowned. “But?”

“But they may never find out. I don’t know if either of them survive the final battle.”

“That sucks. I assume you considered leaving them here.”

“Of course. But they aren’t me. Neither is Jennifer.” Angela looked at him “You have an instinctive feel for how things are supposed to work. You have no previous history with this side of existence to interfere. You’re the perfect sponge for what I need, but don’t ever sacrifice your morality. That was the first mistake I made. If you can get through a situation with your morals intact, you did the right thing no matter how it turned out. That’s almost always true. Make that the rule to guide every decision you make.” Angela marched out to meet the kids before Ivan could respond.

Ivan was stunned and honored. He stayed back as she greeted the children for a long round of hugs and tickles, mind spinning. He immediately

connected a few things from the last month. She'd been eyeing him for leadership from the very beginning.

Angela peered over her shoulder. She gave him a subtle nod and turned her attention back to the eager children. They'd promised to come up and wait on their own, without problems, as soon as they found out who was teaching the class.

Ivan took the sentry post, aware that Shawn and Jeff were being directed by Kyle to come over and join him on duty. That would allow him to absorb some of what she was doing and still not be lax in protecting her.

He looked to Angela for confirmation of that, but she was buried in the crowd of children now. Ivan chose to believe it was intentional. He stepped closer to observe.

4

Marc joined Ivan along the rail. The soldier was observing Angela and the kids. Standing a few feet away, it allowed him brief snatches of conversation but was still far enough to be out of the danger zone. "How are they doing?"

They'd been up here for an hour. Ivan stretched his spine, popping it in several places. He was tired but it wasn't bad. This was the first day it hadn't hurt him to eat. Marc's gut shots had lingered as long as the bruises. "Not bad, considering I can count their age on my hands."

Marc chuckled. “That took me some getting used to also. It helps to remember they didn’t ask to be this way.”

“I did ask for it, but I guess that wouldn’t have mattered. She always knew what I was.” Ivan looked at Marc.

Marc shook his head. “I don’t have that gift. That’s part of why I can’t lead this camp.” Marc glanced back in the same manner.

Ivan hadn’t considered it. “I’ve never tried.”

“She wants to know the future gifts of the kids she’s working with.”

“Some of them might know if I scan.”

“Wait until she has them bring up the shields and you should be good.” Marc assumed the man wouldn’t recognize a test of his own skills. Angela wanted to know if Ivan was strong enough to get through the kid’s barriers.

Ivan was willing to give it a try. Now that Angela had opened his mind to other possibilities for the future, he couldn’t help wanting to explore them. He observed the lesson, waiting for the moment the children would be the most distracted.

“Shield number three!” Angela added guidance and energy where it was needed to keep the barrier around the group of non-magic children in the center of the circle. It was necessary that non-magic camp members be part of the demonstrations or at least got to observe them. Otherwise they would feel like folks had in the mountains with Jimmy and

his group. They'd learned a valuable lesson. "Anyone may try the fourth shield."

Ivan began digging into the minds of the descendant children.

"Fire user, enforcer, fighter, fighter... Fighter, fighter, byzan." Ivan stopped, shocked.

Marc sighed. "Let me guess. Cody?"

Ivan was stunned. "Your son is Byzan. Is that even possible?"

"Yes." Marc spit over the rail. "I've known since we set sail, but that's all I know. I didn't recognize the clues until Cody gave her energy and it was a perfect match. If not for it being right in front of me, I still wouldn't know." Marc stared at the kids who were struggling with the fourth shield. "Keep digging. She wants them all scanned."

Ivan pushed aside the hundred new questions he had. He shut his eyes this time, able to view all the children on his mental grid. The ones he had already scanned now had a future skill listed above their outline. "Fighter... Storm gift, like Samantha... bad seed." Ivan forced himself to keep going rather than to stop and question that one. "Levitor...fighter...fighter...enforcer."

Ivan paused to draw from his reserve energy. He was almost drained already.

"She'll teach you how to increase your energy banks so you get more use each time." Marc put his hand on Ivan's wrist to lend strength. "Keep working."

Behind them, Kenn wrote down the information while Jeff and Shawn stood watch.

“Fighter...fighter... Six Invisibles in the center group.”

All of them paused at that, scanning the non-magic children. Ivan instinctively knew Angela didn't want those names passed around. He held out a hand for Kenn's notebook.

Kenn watched over his shoulder as Ivan wrote.

Marc took a deep breath and pulled peace from the air like Angela had taught him. His energy bank filled a quarter of the way. “Keep going.”

“Wait. You need to see this one.”

Marc read the skill, frowning. “Only the twins can do that.”

“I don't know this kid's name.” He flashed Marc the image of his mental grid to show the man which child he was referring to.

Marc scowled. “That's Cody. You can see him right there.”

Ivan kept his voice down. “Look again. Cody is showing up on my grid. The kid next to him is a *girl*.”

Marc studied it, heart dropping. “That's the twin signature. It's the first one I've ever seen.”

“Cody has a twin somewhere...and she can manipulate time.”

“It runs in our family.” Marc grunted through the agony. “I should have known it would pass down at some point.”

Ivan made more notes in the book and handed it back to Kenn. Thirsty, he grabbed Kenn's big arm and sucked hard.

Kenn held still, gritting his teeth. "I hate it when you guys do that without asking."

Marc sniggered. Since Kenn had been willingly volunteering his energy for the council before he'd found out he was an Invisible, many of them were using that freedom to catch him off guard. Angela didn't have to torture Kenn. Everyone else was still doing it for her.

Ivan groaned and rubbed his stomach. "I'm gonna need a nap after that meal. Let's see. We have... Fighters. Looks like eighteen more of them. Now I'll do the rest. We have someone like Chauncey, a tracker."

"What else?"

"There are two more fire walkers... A third enforcer, and two like you and Neil. I don't know what to call you guys."

"Angie says we're moral killers. The military used to call us strategic planners."

Ivan snickered. "What do you call it?"

"I like William's description in the book."

"I haven't read that. I want to, but it didn't feel right to ask."

Marc nodded. "She knows. It's in your bunk. She said you're in cabin 707."

It was more proof that his status had changed. Ivan held out his hand. "Bygones?"

Marc walked away.

Ivan stuck his hand in his pocket and resumed scanning the kids to verify he'd gotten them all. "I guess not."

Kenn felt the need to interrupt the awkward moment. "Looks like the kids are doing well."

Ivan stared at them, but his mind wasn't on the lesson anymore. "Yes."

"It's nice she's letting us view some of what we're going to go through tonight." Kenn followed Marc, notebook still in hand. Marc was headed to Angela. Kenn didn't know if there was anything else he needed to take down.

Ivan blinked, replaying what Kenn had said. He immediately frowned. *Shouldn't it be the other way around?*

Kenn shook his head. *It makes the kids think they have the hardest job and puts us at ease when we shouldn't be. Just testing our nerves.*

She'll actually expect more from us tonight?

Kenn chuckled mentally. *A lot more. You should see the plans she had Adrian working on.*

Ivan followed Kenn. *Can I?*

"That's the end of our lesson for today. All of you did very well." Angela stepped aside, putting Marc in front of the large group of children.

The kids immediately quieted. They liked Marc, but they still weren't sure what type of man he was and how he might react to them. They hadn't spent enough time together yet for that.

Marc pointed toward the stairs. "Between every class, you'll report to the gym for forty minutes of

free time. Use the toys and equipment that have been set out; listen to the den mothers. Don't break rules. When the time is up, the next teacher will be there to get you. Let's go." Marc pointed them toward the stairs, tone and body language allowing no argument.

The neatly dressed kids went down the stairs in the same manner they had arrived in.

Angela watched them go, running through the thoughts in Ivan's mind. She'd known about Cody for a while. She hadn't known about him having a twin. Because Ivan could see her on his grid, it meant the girl was alive. Angela didn't have to ask what Marc wanted to do. It just wasn't possible right now. She looked at him. "I need to know if you're going to be able to wait."

Marc took in a calming breath. "I'll have to answer when I've had time to consider it, but I already don't think so. I have a daughter out there somewhere. I need to go get her. That tops Safe Haven's future for me. I'm sorry."

"Hell, man. We would have been surprised if you had given a different answer." Kenn shrugged at him. "This always happens. People put family first." Kenn's amusement faded. "Maybe in the future we should have leaders who don't have children or emotional attachments. Then it can't be used against them."

Standing behind Kenn, Ivan frowned. All his life, he'd wanted to have children but hadn't been able to, and now, when his body was healing and

Angela had almost promised he would be able to procreate, Ivan wasn't sure it was the wisest decision for him anymore. If Angela was right, and she usually was, then he might lead Safe Haven at some point. If he had a child, or a wife, they could be hurt to get to him. He'd never considered that possibility.

"I consider it every day now." Kenn pointed toward the stairs to the living quarters. "If anything happens to them, I won't be able to do my job. It's the same for all of us, no matter what level of Safe Haven's hierarchy we're in. Loved ones are a weakness."

Ivan waited for Angela to argue with that statement. He expected her to say having loved ones gave folks the strength to keep going. When she didn't, he realized she agreed with Kenn. "You'd do it again, anyway, right?"

Angela regarded him in dead seriousness. "You have no idea how much misery my family has gone through because of me. If I could do it over again, I'd never have anybody to love or anybody to love me. Then I wouldn't have weaknesses."

"You also wouldn't have the people who love you to help get you through the hard days."

"Those people disappoint me continuously. I love my son and I love Marc. Part of me loves Adrian and another part of me loves everybody on this ship, but I also hate each and every one of them for being so dependent that I can't have any kind of a normal life with that family. The family, by the

way, who often hurts me. If I had known then, what I know now, I'd still be a virgin and Marc wouldn't even know my name." Angela moved away for her next appointment.

Ivan turned to Kenn. "She can't mean that."

Kenn sighed. "Yes, she does." Kenn also walked away, feeling guilty. He was part of the reason Angela was still miserable deep inside. He couldn't control fate or the war, but he'd laid the foundations for the ruthless woman now walking down the stairs. *I'll never be able to make up to her for what I've done, but I have to find a way to give her some peace, otherwise I'll never have any.* Kenn's mind resumed the task.

Ivan hurried to catch up to Angela despite her having other guards for the day. He wasn't ready for sleep yet. He wanted more knowledge.

Angela snorted in bitterness. *Don't we all? That's how we got into this mess in the first place.*

Chapter Sixteen

I Tell The Truth

1

“**T**he camp doesn’t like you.” Monica waited for the kids to quiet, aware of their defensive glares. The feeling was mutual and that was the problem. “You helped the camp get onto the boat when the refugees came and many of you fought for them. That helps your image, but now, they’ve seen two of you causing trouble and injuring an Eagle. It erases part of the good you’ve done.” Monica kept a hard tone even though she felt the camp should give the kids a break. “This class is art and music together. We’re calling it culture class.”

She paused again, seeing they weren’t paying full attention. “It’s actually a secret class to accomplish a different goal.” She pointed at Cody. “Tell them what we’re doing.”

Cody stood from the gym floor and rotated to face the other kids. “She’s trying to keep us from killing everyone.”

The kids immediately denied they were a threat. Young voices rang out, bouncing off toy crates and sports racks full of equipment.

Cody put his hands in his pockets, looking like a small Marc to all of them.

“You’re going to use your gifts on our people. Our people will use their guns on you. It’s going to get ugly. We’re going to lose the only home we’ve had since the war.” His voice lowered into unhappiness. “We’re going to lose each other.”

Sadness filled the wide gym. Monica came forward to hug the boy. “I’m not going to let that happen.”

Cody hugged her back, sending another current of misery that slammed into everyone. Tears rolled over chubby and thin cheeks, stopping the protests. If Cody said it was coming, it was.

Kimmie came to him and added her little arms to the hug. “We’ll stop it.”

Cody pulled away from both females, getting angry. “You can’t stop it! They’re scared of us. They want us gone and the world back like it was. As soon as one of us loses control, we’ll all be killed—the kids and the camp. We’re going to be the reason Safe Haven falls.”

“You’ve seen it.” Kendle came into the gymnasium, ignoring the disapproval from the few adults here. “Is it like that every time you look?”

Cody sniffled. “I can’t find a way to stop it.” He regarded the crying kids. “So I told Monica. I asked her to help me find a way to save the future.”

“And I have a great idea.” Monica resisted the urge to hug the boy again. His pull was strong. “This class will be our secret defense against that. If you guys will do it.”

“We’ll do anything to stop his pain.” Missy hated it when Cody was upset. “It hurts all of us.”

Monica nodded. “The same with Kimmie. These two are alphas. If they feel bad, it spreads. If they feel good...”

The kids began nodding and wiping away tears, hoping Monica was able to help them.

Monica was confident she could do it. She just needed their cooperation.

“You’ll have it.” Cody looked at Kimmie, who nodded. “We’ll make sure you do.”

“Good.” Monica held up a sheet of paper. “This is a list of everyone in camp. We need to find out what they want for Christmas. We’re copying their names for ourselves today. The printers aren’t working yet.”

Kimmie put a hand on her hip. “Giving them presents won’t make them like us.”

“Special presents that show you care about their happiness are one step. You’re also going to take them trays, read to them, sing and smile. You’re going to act like loveable children and win their hearts. When problems come up, the camp will defend you.” She motioned Cody and Kimmie to sit.

They went straight to where Missy was. Missy, Cody, and Leeann were a team, often playing and sitting together for meals. Kimmie had begun to join the trio, coming out of her isolation a bit. Her bruises were almost gone, and she was starting to fill out with regular meals. The same was true of all the western UN kids, including Brea and Darren.

Wallace stayed close to those two, forming another trio the guards needed to keep track of.

Dion, along with the other UN kids, were at the tables. The Safe Haven children were at the rear. Jeff's group of kids were split between the two, encouraging them to mix and mingle. Monica knew that would happen over time. The UN kids from the ship had been abused longer, but they'd also been sent away by Angela the first time. They'd had to kill to get in. Now they were required to behave like it hadn't happened. Adjusting would take time, for all of them.

Roy and Romeo were still staying tight to Doug whenever he was in the room, but they were also loosening up a bit now. They weren't being seen as a threat because of their parentage. In fact, most people seemed to have forgotten about Cesar and his rampage. *Camp members have*, Monica corrected. *Eagles never will. Neither will Adrian.*

Nearby, Daryl nodded in recognition of how hard it had been for the former leader to burn Angela's wound closed. He'd saved her life and gained nightmares for it. So had Kyle, who had never discussed that night, even with his own team. It was still too painful.

Daryl finished rubbing ointment into his skin, not showing how much it hurt. He and Ben had helped reel in and then store the two hundred feet of towline. They'd used gloves, but the line had torn them up a little. They hadn't expected it to be so heavy or so rough. It had also been gooey from

being in the water since they'd lost power, making it slippery and easy to drop. Everyone on that crew had ignored the ocean view the camp observers had been so impressed by, only wanting to be done so they could go to the infirmary or the showers. They'd been bumped, smacked, scraped, splintered, splashed, poked, cut, pierced and a few others.

The camp members had enjoyed all of it, especially Claire and Nathan giving the lesson on towing and lines. They hadn't dropped anything. In fact, they'd been so good they'd scared Daryl. He now knew the danger in what they were doing and why Grant was hyper. Normally they had two captains. Each one kept course and speed, to stay in step. The ships were supposed to have enough line to ride the waves at the same time, meaning both were up or both were down on a swell, but never opposite. The force could cause their towline to snap.

They needed someone on the other ship, soon. Daryl had put it in his report, and he was sure Ben had done the same. The concern, along with the pain in his hands, was keeping him quiet and looking for a distraction. Monica's little notes to herself about the kids had been working for the stress, but the pain in his hands had gotten too bad to ignore. He'd finally used the ointment Morgan handed out.

Relief flooded his sore, scraped digits, letting Daryl return to listening to the update on the kids that Monica didn't even know she was giving him.

Monica was trying to judge their happiness. She was trying very hard to help the kids feel normal again. Caleb, rescued from the town where Angela had fallen ill, had become good friends with little Sean. It was nice for the boys. Monica was happy that the kids were settling in and responding to the good environment. She was sure there would be issues later, but for now, it was encouraging to think they might recover. Even their three refugee kids were doing better. The children Kenn and Tonya had adopted were fitting in, though they never spoke to anyone else. Even Angela couldn't get them to talk.

Tonya swore the trio spoke often when they were alone. Monica hoped that was true. The boy and two girls needed to assimilate. They also needed to shower more. The kids always had dirty hair, but Kenn had told everyone to leave them alone about it for now. Apparently, the children were terrified of water. No one had asked why. They just assumed it had been from abuse. The aftermath of the war was full of that.

"Kendle understands what it's like to be so angry you can barely breathe. She's going to help us. These people will too." Monica pointed at the farthest door.

Charlie came in, scowling at the chore.

Conner was behind him, thrilled to have been given this opportunity. He'd missed being around the kids.

Shawn entered next, not glancing at Missy. He kept his hands at his sides and his attention on the teacher. His bandage glared at them in a reminder that an Eagle had been hurt because of a child.

Zack and his sons came in next, drawing groans. None of them liked Zack's boys.

"They're here for the same reason." Monica pointed them to the rear of the group. "Mikey and Timmy have made mistakes. They're here to correct that problem."

Everyone could tell how unhappy they were to be here.

Zack glared at the boys. "Do it."

Mikey regarded Monica. "Thank you for giving me this chance." He sat, not hating it as much as his brother.

Timmy put his arms over his chest and glowered at all of them.

"Can't you even try?" Conner shook his head. "He's going to mess it up for all of them."

Kids glared at Timmy, scaring him a little as he realized a lot of descendants were in this class.

"No, he won't." Charlie snickered. "He wants to be emancipated so he can date an older woman."

"Shut up!" Timmy rose, ready to fight.

"Sit!" Charlie pointed. "I'm in the same boat, remember? If you really want it, you'll work with us and stop being such a dick."

The kids gasped and giggled at his language.

"You don't know! Stay out of my mind!"

“I do know.” Charlie went to the teenager and sat near his feet. “Be quiet and I’ll tell you what she said about you.”

Timmy kept his stubborn anger for another two seconds...then he leaned over. “What did she say?”

“After the lesson, if you cooperate.”

Timmy frowned but turned toward Monica.

Charlie hid a smirk. He’d known for a while why Timmy was mean. The boy was trying to look hard even though he wasn’t an Eagle yet, hoping to attract a woman’s attention. Charlie was bonded to him in that.

Monica was relieved. She pointed at the others who had entered during the drama. “The rest of us.”

Jeff, Roy and Romeo, and little Amy were by the door. They joined the kids, sitting.

Kendle did the same, hating her green scrubs.

“I’m Monica. I’m going to teach you how to make the camp like you. Then I’m going to teach you to like them.”

Kendle snorted, unable to help herself.

Monica’s eye narrowed. “You don’t like them because you see them as weak. Since when does that mean it’s okay if they die?”

“Weak people let the war happen.”

“I see.” Monica considered her options and went with the most obvious. “Maybe you’re right. All those older folks should have done something. All these kids should have stepped up and stopped it. Being weak is bad.”

“I didn’t say that. Kids and old people can’t help being weak.”

Monica pointed. “And yet, you don’t like them.”

Kendle grunted at the clever trap. “I don’t hate them.”

“They don’t hate you either. They just don’t like you.” Monica walked around, making eye contact. “They don’t like any of you at the moment, but that’s because they view you the same way. You think they’re weak. They think you are bloodthirsty killers lacking compassion. We’re going to change that view on both sides.” She motioned to the guards. “Close us up. No one comes in here.”

Travis went out and locked the door. Angela had told him to expect this. Travis was certain the few adults in there could handle the kids. It was Kendle he was worried about. She shouldn’t be running loose after trying to kill Angela.

“She’s not running loose.” Angela came around the corner. “She’s surrounded by kids who are reading her every thought and she’s reading them whether she wants to or not. They’ll monitor each other.”

“It’s not enough. She should be punished for what she did.”

“Yes.” Angela kept going. She didn’t want to be late for her next meeting, but she also didn’t want to give away her plan. Eventually, everyone would see those punishments. Then she would be hearing how

the island woman should be spared. *Like that's ever going to happen.*

A wave of familiar pain squeezed her heart.

Angela sighed. *Can you help him?*

Yes. Might get ugly.

Oh, like normal then. Do it.

Yes, ma'am. Adrian detoured from cleaning duty to find Marc.

Angela entered the next cabin with a cheery smile that matched the fake Christmas tree in the far corner of the main medical office. "How are all Safe Haven's medics today?"

2

"Drinking without eating first is a bad idea." Adrian paused a few feet away, not certain of Marc's mood.

Marc dropped the beer bottle into the trash can, causing a loud clank. "Did she send you here to get me in line?"

"Just to help if I can." Adrian leaned against the other rail. He observed Marc, seeing the man's attention was on their backtrail. "Thinking about taking a boat?"

"Did you pull that from my mind, 'cause I have my strongest shield up right now."

"Assumption based on known information." Adrian picked dirt from under his fingernails. "I don't invade minds for a first contact unless the person is a threat to my plans."

“And I’m not.”

“Nope. You’ve always been a part of my schemes and plots. You usually do what I expect. Drinking and stewing isn’t the Marc I know.”

“You don’t know me, not really.” Marc stared at the water rippling violently from the rear of the ship where huge propellers kept them moving. “Neither does she or she wouldn’t have sent you.”

“Yeah, sorry, but none of these weak-willed people will tell you what you need to hear. They’re too easily swayed by your pain or your anger.”

Marc belched again. “Did you bring me another beer?”

“No.”

“Then bugger off.”

Adrian laughed.

Marc ignored him, studying the waves.

Adrian lit a cigar he’d gotten from Kyle.

Marc narrowed in on the smell and grunted. “How did you con him out of that? Kyle doesn’t even give his cheroots to his team.”

“I promised to do something for him, of course.”

“What?”

“I told him I’d keep his wife happy when he dies in her place. She’ll need someone to look after her for a little while.”

Marc tensed. “You’ve seen that.”

“In the final battle.”

Marc stared at the water, wondering how cold it was.

Adrian shifted a step closer, preventing the nervous sentries from hearing. "I promised Jennifer the same thing this morning. She cornered me in a hall way and threatened to make me a girl if I didn't agree. Those two are a hell of a pair."

"What did she give you in exchange?"

"Nothing. She's a hardass who doesn't negotiate."

"Angela taught her well."

"And now she'll teach Ivan." Adrian waited for more of Marc's infamous jealousy.

Marc didn't have anger to give. The thought of his daughter being alone in America while he was out here on a cruise was impossible to fight through.

"I'll go with you."

Marc glared at him. "In exchange for what?"

Adrian's face tightened. "You have nothing I want that I can't get on my own. I'll escort you because you'll need my help. Besides Kenn and maybe Kendle, no one on this boat could aid with the run you have in mind."

"Angie could..."

"Don't ask her to do that, Grunt. She has a big enough job right here."

"You don't see me begging her, do you?"

"No. But I feel her indecision. She wants to go get that little girl. Not because she's family, but because the baby deserves the same safety we're enjoying. Your pain already made her interrupt plans for today. That's going to get worse the longer you stew over it. So I'll go too."

“To protect your dream.”

“Everything I do is for the dream, good and bad.”

“Chasing Angela wasn’t for the dream.”

“It was, in every way. I knew who she was the second we met.”

“You thought she’d be your queen.”

“Something like that. I underestimated your bond with her and her spells on you. Then I saw my plan wasn’t going to work if she was with me. I couldn’t kill you off like I’d planned.”

“I always knew.”

“She didn’t, or she would have ended me before I could give her leadership.”

“She inherited it when you were stripped.”

“Yeah, keep believing that. I gave her leadership and confessed my sins. She chose what happened from there—the trial and the fighting. She should have killed me.”

“Yeah.” Marc wasn’t hurt Angela had known longer that Adrian was a traitor. “She knows everything.”

“Most of it, but now that the Demon of Time marked her, she can’t search the future anymore.”

Marc had been curious about that. “What’s his deal, anyway? I can see your memories. He let her pass. It’s *you* he wanted.”

“Yes. When she tried to hide me, she became blacklisted.”

“How did she ever get permission?”

“She was born with it. She’s Eve. The past and the future belong to us.”

“What did you do to fuck it up?”

Adrian sighed. “I tried to change things I saw coming. The Demon of Time doesn’t like it when you try to stop a global war.”

Marc gave the scruffy man his full attention. “You tried to stop it even though you knew you were going to be a fucking king through most of it?”

“I did.” Adrian’s tone hardened. “I love my country, Marc, and every soul she gave birth to. You’ve watched me closer than any other man here. You have to know that. Each time one of them die, a part of me goes too.”

Marc did know that. Adrian had saved souls who didn’t deserve it, trying to give them a second chance to be good. “Doesn’t excuse your choices.”

“No.” Adrian puffed and had to relight the small cigar. It had gone out. “Unlike most of the people here, I didn’t have choices.” He puffed out smoke. “The war couldn’t be stopped. I made the best of it and brought together a group of citizens strong enough to survive the aftermath.”

“I don’t care what you do or say. Nothing excuses your betrayals.”

“I don’t need absolution from you, Marc. But I want it.”

“Good luck on that...” Marc realized what Adrian wanted in exchange. “You suppose I’ll forgive you if you help me.”

Adrian didn't confirm or deny. He held out a sheet of paper. "This is what we'll need. Get it gathered and wait for word."

"She sent you to talk me out of leaving. There isn't going to be word."

"Have I tried to do that?"

"No." Marc sighed, staring at the choppy water behind the ship. "I can't abandon her. I won't."

"That's why she'll send you. If you aren't giving her your all, she doesn't want you here."

"It's my daughter—another kid I didn't know I had. I can't forget about her and wait until we return. She needs me."

Adrian took a chance and put a hand on Marc's shoulder in comfort. "I'm sorry. You may not believe it, but I don't like it when you're upset either."

"Then help me!"

Adrian sent a light current of peace into the man, shocked by the demand. "Better?"

Marc nodded, not fighting the calm. His heart settled into a better rhythm. He let out the deep breath he'd taken when Adrian touched him. He'd been trying not to hit the man. "Are we ever going to be happy again?"

"Your kids will. This camp will. Us, personally?" Adrian shook his head, hand dropping. "We've made too many mistakes for that."

"I have to go."

"She knows."

"I can't leave."

“She knows that too. She’ll make the choice for you. Be ready for the call.”

Marc sighed, misery returning. “I hate this.”

“We’ll find her. I’m already working on it. I know you are too. We’ll ask Jennifer to search the future and past over the next few days, when she has time. Angela has her occupied.”

“She has all of you busy except me. Did she know?”

Adrian shrugged. “I doubt she would have left your daughter behind, so no, but you’d have to ask her to be sure. She doesn’t let me in anymore.”

“Me either.”

“We hurt her. She’ll forgive you in time and return to tolerating me. It’ll work out.”

“You see that too?”

Adrian chuckled. “I believe it in my heart.”

“Does she?”

Adrian’s amusement fell to the deck. “Not even a tiny bit. She’s pissed right now. It’ll take time.”

“Or I could give in.”

“That’s your choice, but you wouldn’t be the Marc we all know and love if you followed orders without question.”

“I wasn’t programmed to be a follower.”

“But you’re not ready to be a leader.”

“I have too many problems with how we have to manipulate to lead. I’d tell the truth. It doesn’t work.”

“It can, in the future. She’ll lead us into that. You’re meant to help her.”

“I’m tired of all this shit. I just...”

“Want your old life back.”

The calm allowed Marc to speak the truth. “I was a good man who’d made one big mistake before the war. I liked me. Now, I can’t stand the sight of myself in the mirror.”

“We all feel that way. Well, most of us anyway. I was a playboy working for the government. I didn’t feel any guilt. Now I can’t breathe without tasting it.”

“*Can* we go back?”

“And now we get to the heart of the matter.” Adrian took a seat on the chair meant for the sentry who was staying back to give them privacy. “You’ve finally added up the clues about Mike and Mia.”

Marc leaned against the rail, wishing he was drunk. “She planned for that too.”

“She’s hoping, like I am and like you will be now, but it’s never been done like this and certainly not by children. Messing with time is dangerous.”

“But it can be done?”

“I assume so. Remember that part in William’s book?”

“Yeah. It said to never try it unless you had a trinity of time keepers...” Marc gaped.

Adrian tapped his cigar on the rail and puffed again. He shut his lids and sent Marc an image.

Marc’s heart pounded. “I want to help.”

“I knew you would. We need your daughter. We can’t try without her.”

“I have to be ready when she gives the call.”

Adrian laughed. “Finally!”

Marc snatched Adrian’s cigar and tossed it overboard.

“Hey!”

“I hate it that you’re always ahead of me on everything! You’re like a fucking robot I can’t beat!”

“Stop trying. Follow my lead. Become my next protégé—the one I can’t corrupt.”

Marc gawked at him. “What?”

Adrian smiled. “I didn’t just want her, Marcus. I’ve had my eye on you too. She only has a couple of weaknesses, but you don’t even share those. With both of you ruling the world, we’ll finally have a just existence, peace, happiness.”

Marc tried to shake off the daze. “You decided Angie and I should rule the world.”

“It’s perfect. All we have to do is kill everyone who stands in our way.”

“I’ll never do that.”

“Your queen will handle those details.”

“She doesn’t want that. *I* don’t want that.”

“Liar.” Adrian decided it was time to call Marc on the rest of his half-truths. “You’re the son of God. Who else should rule this miserable shithole of a planet?”

“I don’t... I couldn’t...” Marc tried to keep fighting, but Adrian had uncovered his secret thought—one he’d even buried from Angie.

“You dreamed about it. She doesn’t know yet.”

Trapped, Marc's shoulders drooped. "What do you want from me?"

"Aren't you tired of asking me that yet?"

"You have no idea."

"How about you take a minute to consider my offer."

"I don't want to be like you."

"Lying again."

"Yeah." Marc let out a groan. "I hate this!"

"You can't fight destiny, Marc. Many have tried, and it never works. You were always meant to rule. If you'd stop fighting us at every turn, you'd be able to download your ethics into every generation. There would be a world full of Marc's who love 'em and leave 'em."

Marc's fists clenched; he sensed Adrian was about to knock him out, but he needed the information. "Will I ever get to see your body cold and rotting?"

"Just the opposite, though I'll take no pleasure in it."

"The final battle?"

"Yes. You and Angie will ascend to take your places."

"We'll be locked up there in those chambers, stuck playing games and making bets."

"Only if you allow it." Adrian met his eye. "Or you could change that future. By joining me." Adrian stood up. "Let me teach you and you'll be able to change that future for her too."

“Against her will.” Marc already knew Angela wanted to be up there.

“Yes. They’ve offered her a gilded cage connected to heaven. She wants to be there controlling fate.”

“So she can help them bring back the Maker. And then what?”

“I suspect she’ll die in those rooms without ever seeing that happen.” Adrian rotated toward the steps to the lower levels. “I need you, Marc. She needs you. If we don’t do something drastic, she’s going to leave us both and we’ll never get her back.”

There wasn’t much of a choice for Marc. “Where are you going? I need more details.”

Adrian swallowed the triumph and returned to Marc’s side. “Excellent.”

Chapter Seventeen
Follow My Lead

1

“Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Same to you.” Jennifer put Autumn into Kyle’s arms and kissed him.

Kyle held still at the public display, unable to help the reaction. He was too used to hiding his emotions.

Jennifer didn’t mind. She retreated, smiling. “I expect you to make it up to me.”

His eyes darkened. “I will.”

Around them, the curious camp and Eagles stole looks at the married couple.

Autumn cooed, drawing attention.

“She’s been fed and changed.” Jennifer picked loose hair from the baby blanket. “She said she needs daddy to hold her while she sleeps.”

Kyle grinned. “Really? That’s awesome.”

Jennifer grinned. Kyle’s bond with her daughter was adorable.

Autumn farted, letting out a loud, liquid sound.

An awful smell began to rise.

Shock filled Kyle’s expression. “She just shit on me!”

Jennifer giggled. “She has a diaper.”

“Then why is my arm getting wet?”

“Oh. Damn. She must have blown out a side.” Jennifer laughed. “She had prunes for lunch.”

Kyle grunted. “Prunes don’t smell like that.” He hurried toward the living quarters as Jennifer broke out into hard laughs.

“What’s so... Oh, my god!” Kenn retreated, hand coming up to his nose.

“Kyle had an accident!” Jennifer tried to stop laughing and couldn’t.

Kenn kept backing away. “What did he eat? I’ll skip it.”

Kyle kept going, not laughing. The smell really was awful. “We’ve got to adjust your diet, little lady.”

Jennifer went to the center table that had been slid there by a few camp members. They didn’t like Angela being on the edges. They wanted leadership in the center where they could see them.

Jennifer sat and swept the dozen staff members. Brittani was behind the cooking area and appeared very busy. Stanley was by her, stirring a pot of something dark and gooey. Around them, Lou and the rest of Brittani’s family were helping with various chores. There were also a few Ciemus women who appeared to be having a good time despite all the work. Judging it to be calm, Jennifer scanned the hundred and fifty camp members in the room.

Many of them were watching her.

Jennifer concentrated to find out why they looked nervous. Before she could get into it, the sound of kids echoed.

People tensed, sliding further into the booths.

Ah. Well, we're working on that. Jennifer caught the eye of the first kid through the door, glaring.

Kimmmie stopped laughing and straightened her shoulders. "Ready? Go!"

The kids began to sing.

The camp members relaxed.

So did the Eagles.

Jennifer breathed a mental sigh of relief and joined in the singing. "One little, two little..."

2

"She's tired."

Adrian nodded, surprised Marc had joined him at the far table. Despite their conversation earlier, he'd expected to spend dinner alone in a crowded galley of passengers. "Her hair's turning again."

"Already?" Marc narrowed in and spotted the gray glare under the fluorescent light overtop the center table. He scanned her for other signs and found them. "Skin's wrinkling. Lips are cracked."

"She keeps rubbing her hands, like her bones hurt."

"Is that arthritis?"

"Maybe. The few times I've been very low, it felt like my joints were breaking down. I suspect our

bodies consume cartilage when we get empty. Maybe it's energy in some way."

"Makes sense. There was an old study about shark cartilage being used like Botox in wealthy circles."

"I heard that too. Wonder if it worked."

"Probably. Not that they would have shared such a secret with the rest of the planet."

"Nope. It would have driven up the cost and eventually made shark farms a popular thing. Might have been embarrassing for them to have to buy it like common folks." Marc kept studying Angela, not liking what he was finding. "She doesn't have that...sparkle. Her smile's wooden. She's in pain."

"Good catch. I thought it was the drain at first, but she keeps wincing when no one's looking at her. Stomach maybe."

"Could be shark week coming. She's due about now."

"Maybe." Adrian took a breath and forked a bite of the potatoes and gravy. "I can tell you how to handle it without making her mad."

Marc had made a very hard choice earlier, as he gazed at the water, at the country behind them he hadn't been able to see. "We have to be careful if we do this. She may not like it."

"She won't. That's why it has to be done openly. I refuse to have her or anyone else suspect I'm repeating bad behavior." Adrian swirled his fork through the brown gravy. "This is my second chance. I'm not screwing that up, even for you."

Marc shoved away the tiny inkling of respect. “How?”

“Take her a dessert and coffee. Palm her a pain pill and walk away.”

Marc snickered. “Drop and go.”

“She can’t yell or refuse it without blowing her cover. She’ll glare for a minute, then she’ll cave and take it if she’s in enough pain. If she doesn’t take it, we can assume she isn’t as bad off as we’re worrying about.”

Marc fished in his pocket for the travel bottle of Advil he’d been nursing.

Adrian swallowed, surprised by how good the food was. “She needs something a little stronger.”

Marc sneered. “It’s Percocet. I stopped taking Advil about a month after I joined the Marines.”

Adrian sniggered. “Fair enough.” He forked a bite of the yams. He hadn’t had sweet potatoes in years. “She’ll know it by the symbol on it. Go hook her up. After you’re done, if you feel like it, I can give you an idea about how to get her to go take a shower and a nap.”

“She’s not going to leave these people right now.”

“She might if she didn’t have a choice.”

Marc frowned. “Keep going.”

“Well, what if someone...bumped Stanley as he went by her? He’s carrying the desserts out in a few minutes.”

Marc grinned. “That’s bad.”

Adrian stuck the bite into his mouth, getting tired. He was using a shield to guarantee Angela couldn't get into his thoughts without him knowing. All descendants developed that protection from being around their own kind. People could still get through, but he would know.

“Does she need coffee right now or hot tea to help make her sleepy?”

Adrian almost choked. He'd never thought Marc would agree, let alone contribute. “The tea!”

Marc thumped him on the back, distracted enough from all his emotions that he didn't feel like making it a punch. “Breathe, dude.”

“Trying!” Adrian wheezed. He signaled Marc on. “Drawing attention.”

Marc gravitated toward the coffee pots, smiling to people. He nodded to the guards to soothe them, then struck up a conversation with Lou across the counter as the man spooned chocolate pudding into small bowls.

Adrian was elated. He'd always known Marc had it in him, but getting to this point had been the struggle of a lifetime. It still might fall apart in minutes or hours, but for this one second in time, Marc was honestly one of his Eagles. It felt great.

The camp responded to Adrian's happiness. They leaned toward it unconsciously, proving how much they'd missed it.

Angela ignored it, but she was glad he and Marc weren't at each other's throats in public. She hoped their truce at least held until the evening was over.

Safe Haven had earned a good holiday. She returned her attention to Kenn's report on the entertainment floor.

Ivan watched it all happening, able to hear Adrian's deliberations without the man knowing. Now that he'd discovered he had other gifts, Ivan was playing with them. He wanted to get stronger and be of more value to their leader, but he was also naturally curious. Angela believed he was leadership material. He wanted to know what she'd seen that he hadn't.

Ivan swept the tables and booths, smiling at Jayda but not lingering as he went over her booth. It was full of kids. He liked that, but it reminded him of the epiphany he'd had earlier. He wasn't certain he wanted her to get pregnant now. In fact, he didn't know if he wanted to get attached to anyone at all.

Angela tensed as Marc came toward the table. As per Adrian's rules that she hadn't changed, camp members weren't supposed to come to the center table without being invited or reporting an emergency. It was to give the leaders a little peace from the constant demands of the camp, but Marc was coming right to the table and he wasn't an Eagle or council member anymore. Tension filled the air.

Marc sat the cup in front of her and held out the bowl. He didn't glance at her or contemplate anything, staying intentionally blank.

Angela took the bowl to keep from making more of a scene. She frowned as she felt something

under the bowl. As she sat it down, she palmed the pill, frown deepening.

Marc went straight back to Adrian's table.

Almost every adult stared in surprise that he was willingly spending time with Adrian.

While they were distracted, Angela viewed the pill.

Adrian kept his shield on full strength and his eyes on his plate. "Did she take it?"

Marc had been doing the same. "How would I know?"

"Well, I couldn't stare at her or it would have pissed off the camp again." Adrian sighed. "Sorry. I'm used to having multiple men on moments like this. Still haven't adjusted to doing it solo."

Marc scratched his arm where something had bitten him. "We'll find out in a little while if she loosens up."

"Or if she crushes it under her boot." Adrian speared a few green beans.

She took it. Do not look at me or she'll know. I can't hide it from her.

Marc groaned. "Damn it!"

Adrian wasn't pleased either. "She's right. He's sneaky."

"That's why she's eyeing him for various positions. I hope she knows what she's doing. He's dangerous."

"I think so too." Adrian swirled his beans through the gravy. "Maybe you should speak to him a few more times, like you have me."

Marc grunted. “He’s too thickheaded to care about pain.”

“He has other weaknesses.”

You two know I can hear you, right?

They ignored Ivan in favor of watching Stanley bring out the dessert tray. Adrian flashed a hand message to Marc.

Marc nodded. “Agreed.” *Heads up, Ivan.*

Ivan looked up.

Adrian flipped a finger, sending a current of need toward the women’s table in front of Ivan.

All four females jerked around, arms exceeding the length of the table.

Stanley hit one of those arms and staggered toward the center table. “No!”

Angela swiveled around, searching for the problem.

Ivan shoved Stanley away from her.

The bowls flew off the tray, smacking into the table. Pudding sprayed.

Kenn slowly wiped pudding from his neck and chest and slung it to the table. “Someone better have a good reason for this.”

Laughter burst out, smothering the tension.

Marc groaned. “I knew he was trouble.”

Adrian chuckled. “We have forces working against us. It might not be as easy as I’d thought.”

Ivan crossed his arms over his chest and hid his smug smile.

Kenn stood, ignoring Stanley's apologies. "One of these days..." He departed the galley, leaving chocolate drips.

Angela laughed aloud and silently. *Thank you.*

Ivan's good mood went up another notch. *It's my honor. Now eat something or that pill will make you sick.*

Angela obediently picked up her roll and took a bite.

In front of Ivan, the four women resumed eating, now eyeing the males around them for the origin of the need wave.

3

"Happy Thanksgiving, Safe Haven!"

Loud cheers echoed back to Angela.

She lifted her mug. Everyone joined her, even the kids who were happily feasting on Brittani's generous dinner.

Angela stayed standing, aware of adults wanting the details she'd promised them. "This holiday didn't have many traditions before. People ate a huge meal, said thanks to the cook and maybe God, then played football or slept. They spent time with family or went to a bar to get drunk so they could forget about those families, or they mourned not having someone to celebrate with. We're going to continue some of those things, but we're going to add one. We're actually going to *be* thankful for what we have." She lifted her cup again. "I'm

thankful for each of you, for Safe Haven and Adrian, who gave us this opportunity to reshape the future. I'm grateful for everyone who's saved my life and especially for those who died for me, for you and for this camp. I'm grateful you've given me the place I now hold. Thank you. I love all of you. You're my family."

Claps and cheers echoed through the crowded room.

Angela stayed standing. She drank and then sat her cup down, stifling the need to yawn. "Take a moment to do the same, even if it's just in your mind. Be thankful for what you've got. Many folks have less." She sat, smiling at Charlie. She'd assigned him to the table next to her and put Tracy there as well. The couple had been sharing laughs and good moments since they'd arrived. It was nice.

Charlie rose, encouraged by the mood. He pulled a box from his pocket.

The camp quieted to observe.

Charlie knelt in front of Tracy, cheeks reddening.

Tracy froze, paling. "What are you doing?"

Charlie opened the box and held it out to her. "I've loved you since I first saw you. I'll be a good husband. I'll never hurt you and I'll be a good father when we have kids. I'd give up anything for you." He took in a breath. "Will you marry me?"

Tracy nodded quickly, embarrassed by all the attention but relieved this was happening. "I love you too."

Charlie slid the ring onto her finger and then kissed her.

The camp yelled and cheered, offering support for the new couple.

Angela kept her happy expression on and hoped it worked out for them.

In the corner, at the table with Adrian, Marc noticed her fake smile and wondered what she had witnessed about the couple that was bad. He was positive she didn't approve.

"It's just his age." Adrian kept his voice low. "This was the only outcome for them if Charlie didn't stay behind. He does love her."

Marc believed that too. "It's good for him, in ways. He'll grow up faster."

"That's the part Angie has an issue with." Adrian nodded at the few people casting grateful looks as they finished their new tradition. He liked it that Angela had added this. Some people had done it before the war, but not enough. Humans forgot to be grateful for life, but they needed reminders that things could always be worse. It helped them to make the best of bad and awkward situations. "So why are you still here? It's attracting attention."

"I told you we're doing this openly."

"So we are doing it?" They'd talked at length, but the dinner call had interrupted them without a decision from Marc.

"Yes." Marc leaned forward. "Teach me something."

Adrian chuckled. "Pick a topic."

“Angie.”

“That’s a big topic. Any particular area?”

“Does she recognize the trap of the rooms?”

“Of course. She spotted it before I did.”

“She wants to be up there to hunt for more chambers, to keep trying to call the Creator.”

“Yes.”

“What’s your plan?”

Adrian bristled. “Why do you assume I have one mapped out already? Did it ever occur to you that I might need help on this one?”

“No.”

“Well, I do. This will take years and it involves keeping her satisfied with the progress we make.”

“She isn’t going to stay just for these people. I thought so before, but I can feel her working on that issue even now.”

“Me too. She needs to be able to uncover more spots on her map. That would keep her with us. It’s why she wants to go. She doesn’t think it can be done from here.”

“Can it?”

“I have no idea...but there is someone you can ask.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’ve made sure no one will give me important information.” Adrian’s eyes flashed to the full center table and back. “She’d never trust me on something like this.”

Marc groaned mentally. *She isn’t happy with me either.*

No, but she knows you love Angela and you'd never betray her with the information. If you ask her in the right way, she'd look for you.

Marc turned back. "What's the right way?"

"Carefully, my friend. Very carefully. She hasn't accessed many of her gifts yet. She's scared of becoming like Angela now."

"Which is why Angie had to pick another successor."

"Partly. Jennifer is perfect for leadership, but she has age and lack of experience as weaknesses. Now, she has a husband; she's happy."

"Angela doesn't want to ruin her."

"Exactly. She's sparing Jennifer."

"What happens when Jenny figures that out?"

Both men tensed as Kyle came to their small table and sat. "She knows. We discussed it."

Marc and Adrian gawked at the former mobster in shock.

Kyle shrugged. "It rubs off. You both know that."

"I have a shield up. So does Marc. That's more than a rub off."

Kyle casually sipped his hot chocolate. "Brittani's a great cook."

Marc understood someone else was listening. "The lack of privacy will make this harder."

"Not if it isn't needed." Kyle kept his voice low. "We know what's coming. The descendants want to help."

“And they sent you?” Marc glanced around the galley and received more attention than he was comfortable with. “They all know.”

“Yeah, Adrian’s shield is...ineffective.”

“Evolutions!” Adrian blew out a sound of frustration. “I should have accounted for that.”

“Yeah, you didn’t take lifeforces on the beach but almost every one of the others did, including Jennifer.” Kyle’s voice dropped to a mutter. “She’s planning to escort Angela. She wants those answers too.”

“Why doesn’t she just search the future?”

“She can’t.” Adrian lowered his chin at Marc’s accusing glare. “We hadn’t gotten to that part yet. Some barriers can’t be opened unless an alpha demands it. Jennifer doesn’t even know the door exists.”

“She does, actually. She said it will remain locked until someone asks her the right way.”

“What does that mean?” Marc noticed Adrian waiting for the answer too and scowled. “You don’t know!”

“It’s not like I took classes on this stuff, you know. I make conclusions based on evidence.” He regarded Kyle. “What did she say when you asked her what that meant?”

“She didn’t. She doesn’t know either.”

“You believe that?”

“No.”

Marc stared at Kyle, surprised by the honesty.

Kyle sighed. “You have to figure it out or we’re going to lose them.”

“Marc will handle that part. You arrange a time for them to be alone.”

“Jennifer said she’ll take a walk after midnight.”

“She knows?”

“Of course.” Kyle stood up. “She knows everything. You’d be scared if she let you into her head.”

“Are you?” Adrian couldn’t help the curiosity.

“Not at all. She loves me. I’m safe.” He moved toward the far corner to talk to the guards on duty.

Marc and Adrian exchanged glances.

“What if she doesn’t like the person asking?”

“Like I said, carefully. An enforcer’s mind is no place to screw around in.”

“That’s comforting.”

“Better than my odds of getting through.”

“Angela could do it.”

“But she won’t.” Adrian sensed Angela’s attention turning to them and finished the lesson.

“She doesn’t want Jennifer to open that barrier—ever.”

“Why not? It might hold the answers.”

Adrian stood up, gathering his mess. “Once that door is opened, we don’t know how to shut it. She’s sacrificing answers for Jennifer’s sanity.”

Marc didn’t like the sound of that. “Maybe we shouldn’t do it.”

Adrian belched, wiping his mouth. “That’s why you have to make this choice. Kyle and I aren’t ethical enough to make such a decision.”

“What does losing sanity mean? Will she go crazy and hurt people or herself?”

“Both and more. I believe that door leads to everywhere, Marc—to everything. That kind of knowledge has driven people insane with a glimpse.”

“And we won’t stop there, will we?”

“Not a chance. Once you open it, we’ll explore it. That’s what humans do.”

4

“Aren’t you worried about those two spending time together?”

Angela shook her head at Samantha and returned to her plate of food. It was good, but she didn’t have an appetite. “Marc’s a big boy. He can play with whomever he wants.”

“Adrian can’t be trusted. Don’t you worry about him corrupting Marc?” Samantha hadn’t forgiven Adrian. She doubted she ever would.

“Like I said. Marc’s a grown man. He knows to be careful.” Angela regarded Kyle, seeing he was getting an update from the guards. “All of them will be careful.”

Samantha caught the tone. “What are they planning?”

“Something they shouldn’t be; something dangerous to every living soul left on this planet.”

“Then why are you letting them do it?”

Angela sighed, feeling much older than her age. The cold draft from the top decks was sinking into her bones and making them ache. “Because we need another option than the one we found in the power meeting. If they can do it without killing all of us, the treasure might be priceless.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know.” Angela put a hand on Samantha’s wrist. “I don’t want you involved until after you give birth. Can you wait that long? Please?”

Samantha nodded. Angela didn’t ask her for much, if anything, beyond tracking the weather. “Whatever you think is best.”

“I want your twins born safely and then for you to recover from it. I’ll need you by my side when we return.”

Samantha nodded again. Now that she’d made the choice, she could breathe a little easier. She suspected that would change when the time to return neared, but she’d rather be with Neil, fighting for their future, for their country, than hiding on an island with her babies while waiting for word of his death. “What can I do?”

“Decide who your caretaker will be over that time.”

Samantha frowned. “I meant now, to help with the camp.”

“Other than training Debra, just deliver two live babies.” Angela removed her hand. “We need them, Sam. Your children are special. Protect them at all costs.”

“What’s coming for our kids? Neil told me. He had to.”

“I don’t know and that terrifies me.” Angela gestured at Samantha’s tray. “Eat some more.”

Sam picked up her fork, but she’d lost the desire for the great smelling food. “Tell me what you do know.”

“I suspect it’s an illness. I kept seeing kids getting medical care and magic healing, but it wasn’t working. They get a disease we can’t cure.”

“Is that what Tonya’s working on?”

Angela’s eyes flew to hers.

Samantha shrugged. “She’s on the same deck as my garden. I see her coming and going, the things she’s carrying. Looks like she’s doing more than just growing a batch of pot for her oil tests.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Really?”

“I’ve been distracted. I’ll talk to her about it.”

“So you’re not working on it at all?”

Angela’s voice was a worried whisper. “I’m depending on my witch and Marc’s demon. They’re off again, scroll diving.”

“I thought you looked tired.” Samantha smiled. “More than usual anyway.”

“I’m not sleeping again. At least not for long. My dreams keep waking me.”

“We’re all adjusting to being on this ship. Maybe it’s that.”

Angela let out a sound of weariness. “It’s more. I’m going through another evolution.”

Samantha’s tone carried her concern and a deep frown. “I thought you were as high as you could go.”

“Yeah, so did I.” Angela stood, bringing an end to the conversation and semi quiet to the crowded galley. “It’s time to talk about the Eagles, schedules and the future. Everyone get a drink or a dessert bowl and get comfortable. We’re going to be here for a few.”

“Can I go pee first?” Courtney slid out of the booth and hurried toward the lavatory.

Angela laughed. “Everyone can. We’ll start in ten minutes.” She motioned Kenn over and a few others.

They brought chairs to the center table, filling it out like the camp was used to.

Angela stared at the writing on the table, at the well wishes and pleas for peace. *I can’t give you that yet. We still have a long way to go.*

Chapter Eighteen
A Few Tweaks

1

“**E**agle training restarts tomorrow morning.”

Angela waited for the noise to die down. “Special Forces rosters will be posted after we’re finished here. Everyone else will take a skills test to determine placement.”

A stunned silence fell, even reaching the kids who were at corner tables with boxes of toys and craft supplies.

“Some of you were high level before we set sail. You may not think this choice is fair, but I’ve spent weeks considering it. We’re on teams, but we’re not really teammates anymore. The level fours aren’t all level four. The rookies aren’t all rookies. We can’t be teammates like this. I’m reordering all teams, except Special Forces. Everyone not assigned to a team will be placed on a crew for other purposes, such as medical, fishing, or homesteading. There’s a lot of work for everyone.”

Angela handed Kenn a sheet of paper. “All camp members, regardless of age, will be taking a skills test. Kenn’s posting the schedule. If you miss your test, you will be assigned to wherever I need you. That could be on a cleaning crew. Don’t miss

your test.” She handed Kenn another sheet of paper. “Some new crews and teams are also coming. These are being posted now. Some passengers will have more than one job.” Angela swept the galley, aware of the unhappiness with her announcements. The best she could do was force a weak smile. “I’m sorry. It has to be this way. Okay...who has questions?”

“Will previous positions be taken into account?” Kyle knew that was the top query on all Eagle minds.

“Of course. Everything you’ve already done and accomplished will be included. This is not a punishment. It’s organization for our future. We need these new crews. Once they get rolling, you’ll understand how much.” Angela took a final paper from her notebook. “As of dawn, this is the schedule all camp members will follow when not in classes. Please don’t force me to invent ugly punishments. Follow the schedule. It’ll make all our lives better.”

Kenn went to the board and began sticking the papers to it, scanning for his own name. When he didn’t view it anywhere, Kenn was relieved. That meant he would finally be able to be a real Eagle. He went to the table where Tonya was supposed to be, frowning upon finding it empty. He sat, vaguely aware of citizens crowding around the papers he’d just posted. *I miss her. What’s she doing down there?*

“I have an issue.”

People quieted, turning to view Theo.

“I know you want to handle it in your own way, but that’s not enough this time. We have a lot of people on this ship who shouldn’t be.” Theo glanced at the table where Marc and Adrian were sitting. “I demand a trial at the camp meeting to determine the fate of everyone who has committed crimes against Safe Haven but hasn’t been punished yet.”

Silence fell over the passengers.

“A camp meeting isn’t a legal way to handle things.” Angela kept her tone and face blank.

“Camp votes have determined the fate of criminals before, though that sentence wasn’t carried out like it should have been.”

Debra gasped, hands flying at Theo. Samantha was translating for her, also a bit shocked.

Theo ignored her and everyone else, giving the boss what she’d asked for. “Adrian was banished, yet he sits here eating our food. Marc was removed from the Eagles and council, but he still goes to the meetings. Becky tried to kill the boss and she’s still breathing. This isn’t the way it should be. I want a vote on it. A lot of us do.”

Some people voiced agreement, but most of the camp didn’t know where this would lead and waited. They didn’t want to upset Angela.

Those who were being discussed kept their heads down and hoped it was over soon.

“You realize we need them, right?”

“Yes, but they have to be punished for their offenses or the new justice system doesn’t mean dick.”

Angela sighed as if she was being forced. “Agreed. We’ll talk about that at the camp meeting in three days. Right after that meeting, we’ll have a trial.”

The galley went silent again. Attention swiveled to Kendle, who was cleaning the pudding mess.

Kendle gritted her teeth and kept working.

“Rebecca hurt several members of this camp in an attempt to kill me. She has confessed her motive. She wanted to hurt Adrian. She blames him for the rape. Not Rick, but *Adrian*. I believe she’s overwhelmed mentally. I’m going to recommend leniency.”

No one liked that. The mood turned almost hostile.

“However, I won’t overrule the decision of the camp.” Angela paused, blowing out a sigh. “I don’t want us to start this trip off with a hanging. I won’t overrule that choice, but as one of her victims, it’s my right to ask you to have pity. I do.” Angela regarded Greg, Daryl and Gus, who were at the same table. “Her other victims will also make their wishes clear before the jury decides on her sentence. If they pick death, the camp executioner will carry it out.”

Kyle crossed his arms over his chest, putting off an intimidating show of force, but inside, he didn’t know if he could do that. It would destroy his

friendship with Neil and make him hate himself. Becky was mentally ill. It wouldn't be right to kill her, especially since she would be an unarmed teenager at the time.

Angela was proud of Kyle for his reaction and for his thoughts. Before the war, he'd killed when told to by his masters. Now, he was making his own choices on his actions. He'd come a long way. Angela swept the listening camp, judging their mood. It wasn't calm, but the hostility was fading. She switched to the next order of business. "Because Becky hurt multiple Eagles, she has to be tried. Kendle only hurt me. I've decided not to press charges."

Boos and shouts came from the camp.

Someone threw a spoon at Kendle, hitting her in the back of the head.

"Stop right now!" Angela's anger was a powerful deterrent, but the rage of the crowd wasn't going to be halted this time. Angela brought up a shield around Kendle. She went to the castaway. "We need her. On the island, she'll be invaluable for information. I've been picking her brain for those details since she joined Safe Haven, but I don't have them all yet. Leave her alone or you'll screw me up." She glanced around, hands on her hips. "You don't want to screw me up, do you?"

Some heads shook, but the tension didn't break.

Angela sighed. "I'll give you what you want in time. Please believe me when I say she's going to be punished. It's my right to determine how."

More heads bobbed, finally breaking a little of the anger.

“She and I are connected. She can’t hurt me again.”

“Are you sure?” Pam didn’t have forgiveness for Kendle or Becky. “She still hates you. We can feel it even though she’s refusing to think about you at all, even now.”

“I’m sure. I used the alpha bond on her. She couldn’t hurt me if her life depended on it.”

“It does depend on it.” Marc didn’t want Kendle spared. “I’ll shoot her at the first wrong move or thought.”

Kendle’s tears ran over her cheeks, heart breaking all over again.

Angela held in her triumph. “This is her second chance. This is why Safe Haven exists.”

“What about Becky’s second chance?” Seth appeared in the far entrance. “Doesn’t she get one?”

“That’s up to the camp.” Angela waved off the shouts and calls for Seth to be punished too. “I know you tried to help her, but she’s too far gone to come back, Seth. She’d bring down this entire camp if it meant hurting Adrian.”

“A lot of people here still hate him. Why is she being held responsible for acting on thoughts we all have?”

“Because she hurt my Eagles!” Angela’s anger flew out of her mouth. “How dare you pick her over them again!”

“How dare you spare the island bitch so Marc won’t feel guilty!”

Eagles marched toward Seth.

So did several camp members.

Kendle shuddered at Angela’s feet, sensing her life about to be taken. If not for the shield around her, she would be hit again. Several passengers were holding silverware, waiting for it to lower.

“Kendle earned her second chance by helping eliminate the refugees on the beach.”

Seth stayed still as the Eagles surrounded him, fists clenched and cheeks red. “Becky helped rescue kids from the UN camp.”

“Yes, she did, but why did she do it?”

“Because they needed help!”

Angela scowled. “No, Seth. She did it to be allowed back in. She couldn’t hurt Adrian out in the west. Kendle only ever targeted her enemy—me. Becky hit anyone in her way.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. Ask her why she helped you save those kids. We’ll certainly be asking it at the trial.”

“What about me? Am I being tried too?”

“Have you done something to deserve that?”

Seth shoved his hands into his pockets. “No.” His anger fled, leaving horrible sadness. “I tried to save her.”

Angela nodded. “I’m sorry, Seth. I really am, but you can’t save someone who doesn’t want to be saved. In three days, she stands trial. That’s my final word on the matter.”

The camp was satisfied.

Seth stormed from the galley, leaving awkwardness in his wake.

“Okay. On to my next item.” Angela swept the camp. “Anyone who throws something when I lower my shield will be tossed overboard.” She didn’t smile, not letting them know if she was serious or not. “She belongs to me. Do not get in my way. You’ll be sorry.” Angela released the shield and regarded Kendle. “Toilet duty in the infirmary. Get on it.”

Kendle scrambled away from her and rushed for the steps.

No one threw anything or got in her way.

Angela recaptured their attention. “I know this isn’t in our constitution, but I’m making a few changes. One of those is punishments. Don’t ever hurt one of my Eagles. I’m making that a death sentence. It’s not to influence you about Becky or Kendle. It’s just how it should be. The Eagles keep us alive. They deserve protection. In the past, it was a felony and a 25-year jail sentence for killing a cop, but we’re not going to have jails. We already know it doesn’t work. If you hurt an Eagle, you die. That’s going to be the law. You’ll get to vote on most of my other tweaks, but not that one. It’s a deal breaker. If you want that rule changed, you’d better vote in a new leader. I won’t ever budge on it.”

Angela waited for protests or comments, but she found the camp in agreement. “Some of the other tweaks are based on the same values. There will be

no more deals with criminals, not even for information. I also want the penalty for murder to be harsh. I won't overrule anything I don't have to. I've explained that already, but I want to remind you lax enforcement of laws created an unsafe world for all of us. We know the parts that didn't work. We're going to fix them." She pointed at a box on the wall by the message board. "Drop suggestions in there. I'll go through them and maybe add them. Even if you think I already have it covered, drop me a note about whatever concerns you the most anyway. I'm not perfect. I could have missed something, and I need you to catch it." Angela took the cup of hot tea Stanley brought to her. She retreated as he tripped over his own feet.

Stanley landed at her boots.

Angela chuckled. "Take a break, will you? I don't want to be drenched."

Stanley blushed a furious red and scurried behind the cooking counters.

"That's all from me. Anyone have anything they'd like to add?"

No one spoke, but the mood wasn't bad. The camp resumed eating, armed with new conversational topics.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief, giving Theo a subtle nod. If she hadn't handled it this way, Kendle's body might have been found tomorrow morning. *I saved your life again, Kendle. You owe me.*

Below, Kendle caught the thought and shuddered. *I'd probably be better off dead.*

2

“Man, this is a lot of noise.” Wade looked over at Tommy.

“I agree. I’m glad we’re out here on the ocean so no one can hear it.”

Wade scanned the entertainment floor where almost two-hundred people were enjoying the open shops. Wade and Tommy were hallway sentries. Greg, Neil, Quinn, Doug and several others had been posted inside the entertainment venues. The two bars and the dance club were the loudest, but the theater was also blaring noise. After the quiet they were used to during Safe Haven’s evenings, it was a big adjustment.

Wade handed Tommy his bottle of aspirin. “You look like you could use one.”

Tommy dry swallowed two of the pills and returned the bottle. “Thanks. The music is great. I’m happy everyone is having a good time.”

“But you miss the peace and quiet we used to have?”

“Sometimes.” Tommy didn’t know where he stood in Safe Haven’s hierarchy anymore, despite being on Neil’s Special Forces team. He had been relieved to find his name there, but it hadn’t settled him down. Partnering with Kendle for that brief time had changed him.

Wade made a motion for Donald to relieve them. He pointed toward the cigar shop. “We have two ten-minute breaks. Let’s take one of them now.”

Tommy followed him.

The cigar shop smelled exactly like its name. Leather couches and dark decor, combined with dim lighting, made it the perfect place to go for his headache.

Wade went to a humidor and chose two once expensive cigars. He joined Tommy on the leather couch.

Both men smoked in silence for a moment, listening to the ship around them. Despite all the noise, they could still hear the water. A cruise ship moving through the ocean wasn’t quiet.

“Do you think Pam feels uncomfortable being the only female sentry on duty?”

Tommy cracked his back. “Shawn’s down the hall, watching over the Build-A-Bear workshop. I’m sure he’s keeping track of her. She’s fine.”

“Still, I’ll bet it makes her a little uncomfortable. We should speak to the boss about getting more female Eagles back on duty.”

“She said we all have to take a skills test.” Tommy exhaled a large cloud and looked at him. “Do you think she might eliminate female Eagles?”

“No. There are more women in Safe Haven than there are men. She needs them to be Eagles.”

Tommy nodded. “That makes sense. She’s definitely right. None of us are even level anymore. It is starting to feel like we’re not on teams.”

“Hopefully she’ll be able to sort that out. Any idea what type of test she’s got planned?”

Tommy shrugged. “Despite being Special Forces, I’m not usually in on those discussions.”

“Me either. We do stand duty for them during, though.”

Tommy snorted. “Without gifts, I’m positive I’m missing a lot of those moments.”

Wade concurred but didn’t voice another opinion as camp members came into the cigar shop.

A group of women crowded around the counter and immediately began lighting the cigars they found.

The two men were a bit surprised. They weren’t used to women smoking cigars.

The females ignored the Eagles, assuming they were having a quiet moment together. It was also because both guys were on Neil’s team. They were the highest Eagles here. Bugging them was a bad idea. A couple of the women did steal glances at the men, wondering if they were single. Special Forces Eagles were a great catch if someone could reel them in.

Tommy felt the air shift and shook his head. “Not available, ladies.”

All attention switched to Wade.

Wade flushed down to his roots. “I am, but I’m not. We’re on a duty break.” He was a bit surprised

Tommy had shut it down; Wade had already been scanning the Ciemus women for one who was compatible. Loneliness was catching.

“I’m Diana.” The Amazonian female scanned Wade from hat to boot. “We can have a drink sometime if you’re interested.”

Wade flushed darker. “Uh, okay.”

The girls returned to their cigars without saying anything else.

Tommy got up and left, taking his cigar along. He wasn’t ready to deal with matters of the heart or even sex. After Kendle ripping his guts out and stomping on them, he wasn’t certain he was ever going to be ready.

Tommy moved into the next small area, a DVD and CD shop. The speakers weren’t on in here, but many of the camp members, male and female, were exploring the headphones and iPods. Tommy lingered in the doorway to provide security, enjoying his smoke. He wondered briefly if Angela was going to implement no-smoking rules and then pushed the thought aside. She would cover that when she got to it. He was positive a lot more important things were on her mind than holes in the carpets and ashes on the floor, though the health effects would be taken into consideration.

Tommy wondered how much of the stock in these entertainment rooms would still be intact by the time they reached the island. People were shoving things into their pockets to take to their bunks and not signing it out. In fact, nothing was

being kept track of on this floor. He didn't know if Angela wanted it that way or not, but he also didn't know if he had the authority to insist camp members register their loot. He took out his notebook and wrote it down.

“Are we doing something wrong?”

Tommy regarded the small group of females to his right. “What?”

Erika pointed at his notebook. “You came in, saw us, and wrote something down. Are we doing something wrong?”

“Just a note to the boss about something we don't have rules for yet. You're fine.”

Erika sat the iPod down and began fishing CDs out of her pocket. “I don't want to break any rules. Maybe I can return for these later?”

Tommy made a dismissive gesture. “Go on and take them. If she didn't want passengers to have access to this, it wouldn't be open yet.”

Erika left the electronics on the counter and joined him by the door. She inhaled deeply of the smoke. “That smells good. I quit years ago, but I'm tempted.”

Being polite, Tommy held the cigar out to her. “You can have a hit if you want.”

Erika took it without touching him, wondering why such a high-level Eagle was even speaking to her. She didn't grasp Safe Haven's hierarchy yet, but she knew Special Forces was just that—special. She puffed on the cigar, drawing smoke into her mouth, then passed it back.

Tommy also puffed on the cigar. “The boss will get you guys going over the next few days. Then you’ll be too busy to be bored.”

Erika stared at him. “Are you one of them? Is that how you knew?”

“I’m trained to observe details.”

She relaxed. “So you’re like me? Non-magic.”

Tommy nodded.

Erika blew out the smoke and moved toward the counter to collect the items she’d chosen. “Nice to meet you.”

Tommy was surprised he didn’t want her to go yet. To fight that, he walked out the door without another word.

Erika didn’t watch him leave. She could already tell he’d been hurt, and she didn’t want to add to his misery, but she had her own heart ache as well. Much like smoking, men had been crossed off her list.

3

“This is nice.”

Gus leaned over, unable to hear. “What?!”

Trinity rested her head against his neck. “I said this is nice.”

Gus put an arm around her. They were in the theater, enjoying Harry Potter, popcorn and candy. When she’d suggested they go on a date, he had brought her here. He wasn’t much of a dancer and

he didn't feel like building a bear. He also wasn't a drinker.

Thanks to the injuries that were mostly healed now, he and a few other Eagles were still on medical leave. Gus didn't mind, but many of the other guys did. Zack and Ramer were both in the bar, complaining. Gus could hear it from here. Donald and Molly were at the small putt-putt course, taking their aggravation out on golf balls. A lot of the older population was also on the golf course, but most of the younger crowd had gravitated toward either the theater or the clubs. Pregnant women were grouped at the bear workshop, while the loners were either in the cigar shop or the bookstore that had a self-service coffee center set up. Angela had found something for every demographic of the camp, including the hardened Eagles who were upstairs in the descendant lesson or standing guard. They would come down as their shifts ended. Gus approved. People needed to be kept busy or they would find their own entertainments.

Trinity tried to get closer, but Gus wasn't in the mood for it. Brittani had visited him in the infirmary, but it had infuriated him. Now, he was sad. Reconciliation was not in their future. It had crushed him all over again.

Trinity felt the resistance but didn't yield. She ran her hand down his arm and tangled her fingers with his.

Gus allowed it, but his heart wasn't in it. He had thought he and Brittani would be together forever.

It was awful to find out how wrong he was. Getting a quick replacement didn't feel right.

A few rows behind them, Lou and his brothers observed the movie and Gus. They loved him the same as they did Brittani. They were hoping both of them would be able to find happiness as they moved on, but it wasn't looking good right now. Gus wasn't the only one avoiding his new mate. Brittani was in the galley, cleaning up from the meal. She'd refused to join the descendant lesson on the top deck because she'd thought Gus would be there, but she also hadn't wanted to perform in front of everyone, including Daryl. Lou had been glad when Gus and Trinity had come to the theater.

Lou appreciated Angela's foresight in having entertainment areas open, but he wasn't sure leaving all the camp members attended by non-magic guards was a good idea. There was no one here but Gus to read bad thoughts as they were happening. Lou suddenly wished he was a descendant too and tried to smother the desire. Over half the camp wished they were magic users. They were all adjusting to the fact they weren't part of the chosen bloodline. It hurt a little.

Lou watched Gus pat Trinity's hand and place it back on her own armrest. He frowned. *Maybe he needs to get laid. That always puts me in a better mood.*

Next to him, Katie snickered.

Lou turned to look her.

Katie stared back, brow lifted. *What?*

Lou shrugged. *I thought the descendants were supposed to be on the top deck.*

Katie turned to the movie without replying.

Lou understood she hadn't accepted her new abilities yet. He didn't know if he should tell someone.

Lou didn't push the matter, deciding not to tell. Coming to terms with something like this was a big deal. *I would need time to adjust if I were like that.* Lou shifted his attention back to the movie and left her alone.

Katie stole looks at him, impressed he wasn't going to immediately run and tattle. *Maybe he and I can be friends.*

In front of them, Gus gave Trinity an excuse and left the theater. He wasn't in the mood for romance and he didn't need more time to heal. He'd been worrying over being able to keep up with the Eagles, but it didn't matter. *I have to try.*

Gus went to the stairs and headed for the top deck. It was time to take his place by the other descendants and let fate put him where he was supposed to be.

Chapter Nineteen

Dangerous People

1

“Bring up the last shield!”

The descendants on the front deck struggled to build the fourth shield needed to pass to the next lesson. Angela had sworn they wouldn't be taught anything else until they mastered this.

“Now hold it in place.” Angela knew most of them wouldn't be able to maintain the barriers for long. “We're going to begin each lesson this way. Once official training opens, you'll be given time to practice. Hold those shields as long as you can. You're out if you can't keep it up.”

Amusement caused a few of the shields to drop right then.

Angela laughed, pointing. “Out.”

The top deck of the huge ship was lit by candles on the tables and lanterns tied to banisters and rails. The dark sky over the ship couldn't hide the fact that they were surrounded by water. It was impossible to miss the sound of it slapping against the hull and the smell of it, both salty and fishy, blowing through the lesson. None of them were used to such an eerie environment. Angela was counting on that to throw some of the more confident people off their game

and to toughen up the less experienced fighters. It was impossible to guess what they would face when they returned to America, but it was likely the conditions would be dark. She doubted their country would get it together while they were gone.

Moonlight beamed down for a minute, freed by the constant grit that was present even out over the ocean. The mood lifted.

Ahead, storm clouds were gathering. Only a few of the fighters had noticed. They were enjoying the class and the company. One of those who did notice was Samantha. Like the students, she was fascinated by the magic show, but she wasn't involved. It allowed her to spot the ominous horizon. By dawn, they would be riding rough seas.

Samantha had been carried up the stairs by Neil and was now sitting in a cushy chair with a warm drink and a blanket. Extra pillows made it almost comfortable. She was wearing shorts that allowed everyone to see the scar where she'd been impaled. It was an ironic match to how Jeremy had died. Carrying the constant reminder had to be awful. Everyone felt bad for her.

In the bridge atop the ship, Grant was also aware of the coming storm. He hated not having radar to track it. If the wind didn't shift soon, he would speak to Samantha while everyone was distracted by the lesson.

"Focus!" Angela wasn't being nice to anyone. She needed them excited or angry to fuel weak

energy banks. Without it, those banks wouldn't grow. "You have to get this. It's the easiest part!"

Debra cringed even though she couldn't hear the shout.

Angela walked the lines, poking people, pushing them, trying to break their concentration.

"Out! Out!"

Angela swept the five remaining descendants who still had shields, narrowing in.

All five men braced for an attack. Marc, Adrian, Kenn and Ivan had larger energy banks, so they'd been able to last longer.

Angela fired a mild blast of flames. "Absorb it!"

Morgan ducked, letting the fire go over him. It slammed into the railing.

People laughed as Ian rushed over to put it out with the extinguisher he'd been given at the start of the class.

Everyone else grabbed part of the blast and inhaled.

Those men dropped to their knees at the pain of different levels refilling them.

Angela gestured. "When you take energy, you're vulnerable. The choices are to become immune to pain or use an even match. Since we'll never be able to evenly match in a fight, we have to learn to ignore the pain." Angela gestured Jennifer forward.

On duty over the top deck, Kyle eased closer to make sure his wife wasn't harmed.

Jennifer brought up all four shields and waited. She hadn't participated until now because Angela had wanted her helping the others. *I get to play too!*

Angela chuckled. "Don't hold back, then, Enforcer. Let's see what you've got."

Jennifer used a powerful heat wave that burned without flames.

Angela bounced it, depending on Marc and Adrian to shield people from wayward hits.

The spell flew over the rail and into the dirty water.

The ocean roared approval, begging for more.

Angela fired back, using a flame spray at a high level.

Jennifer sucked them in and immediately blasted them back out, hitting Angela with her own spell.

"Wow. That's scary." Ian returned to his post over Samantha, entranced by the display. They'd all wondered what made an enforcer special.

Samantha popped a bubble at him, enjoying the treat from the movie theater. It was stale but still tasted wonderful to her. She knew better than to speak in front of Ian.

Angela fired, sending ice this time.

Not ready, Jennifer tried a risky move and was forced to drop to her knees.

"She tried to take the energy and send it out as a new layer of her shield. That's hard but very needed during a battle. You have to keep all four layers of it up while you fight." Angela waited for

Jennifer to stand. She lowered her shield. “Hit me hard.”

Jennifer’s wave of rage felt real to all of them. She uttered an ugly curse as she threw.

Kyle stared in surprised desire. *I didn’t know she knew that word.*

Angela grabbed the anger blast out of the air and held it with her shield. The rage pinged off the inside of the bubble too quickly to be more than a blur. “Our shields can hold things.” She inhaled, slow and deep. “It gives us time to recharge and to aim.” She dropped the bubble and ducked.

The rage flew over her head and hit Adrian’s shield. It bounced into the air and slammed down near Jennifer’s feet.

The ship shuddered.

Angela frowned, waving a hand to smother the heat. “Yeah, sorry. Someone put us in a bigger shield, please. Don’t want to damage our ride.”

People chuckled nervously as Marc brought up a barrier around the group.

Calm filled the air as Adrian soothed the startled ship that hadn’t been expecting the blow.

Angela pointed. “No one leaves this deck until they can grab a blast from someone, hold it, refill from it and send it back.”

“What?”

“That’s too much!”

Kenn smirked at the complaints.

Ivan nodded to him, glad he’d had the warning. It would impress Angela if he could keep up with

the people who'd known about their ancestry longer than he had. Her respect meant everything. Ivan waved Kenn over, hoping the Marine felt the same.

Kenn grimaced but joined him. He'd expected to be paired with Adrian.

"You're mine." Jennifer strode to Adrian's side and waited for his reaction.

Adrian didn't give her one but inside, he was thrilled to be working with her. He hadn't gotten to help Jennifer yet since she joined Safe Haven and if Angela had chosen the girl as her successor, she had to be talented.

"I am." Jennifer turned cold. "Be careful."

Adrian flashed to his conversation with Marc. "We will. No more mistakes."

Jennifer positioned herself a few feet in front of him. "She wants your old V formation used as much as possible. Add it in here somewhere."

"You got it." Delighted, Adrian began planning the lesson. He didn't mind being put on the spot. He already knew what they needed and how to get them there. All he'd needed was permission.

Marc watched Angela, uncomfortable with her being surrounded by descendants. Any of them could be like Becky.

They're not. These are all her converts. Ivan proudly included himself. I've searched them all. No one has doors or barriers up against me right now. It's almost amazing.

Almost?

Ivan regarded him across the crowd of excited people. *I can't get in to yours.*

Marc felt the emotional blow, but he wasn't ready to trust Ivan yet. The soldier still had to prove himself.

Ivan had expected the reaction. *I'm not a trained monkey. She's the only one I have to prove things to. Hold onto your bitterness and jealousy. Soon, it's all you'll have.* Ivan looked away before Marc could fire back. He didn't want the lesson interrupted. Angela was happy right now. Nothing was allowed to interfere with the feel of her pleasure.

Kenn nudged Marc toward the lone figure near them. "Boss said to put you with her." Kenn slid into the safety of the crowd before Marc could explode.

Kendle stared at Marc, silently begging for another chance. Her green scrubs seemed to glow in the darkness.

"I'm sitting this one out to observe." Marc walked away.

Kendle felt tears coming again. She dropped into a sunbathing chair and crossed her arms over her chest. *I won't cry. I won't cry.*

Those who caught her misery felt a momentary twinge at her discomfort, then pushed it aside. She'd earned this and more.

Angela joined Marc on the sidelines and leaned against his heat.

Marc tugged her under his arm; fighting was on hold for the moment.

“You’ll tell me when that starts to bother you?”

“You’ll know.” Marc shifted so he could view her face. “Why does it matter?”

Angela kept her happy mask on for their audience. “It’ll be enough for the camp too at that point. If I cross the line, it endangers my place here.”

Tension returned. Marc dropped his arm. “Always worried about your ass being covered. I wonder who taught you that.”

Angela straightened, flashing a warm smile at her mentor. “He taught me a lot of things; he wouldn’t expect me to fall in line until the next time he got horny.” She winced at Marc’s intake of breath. “I won’t retract that. You made a deal with me and reneged on it. You’ve made deals with Kenn and Adrian, then defaulted on them. It’s the reputation you’ve built.”

“This is war. Lying to your enemy is perfectly acceptable.”

Angela chuckled harshly. “Are we enemies, Marc?”

“Of course not!”

“But you treat me like one when things don’t go your way.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, nothing is going my way. More importantly, nothing is going the way we needed it to for this camp to have peace. That damn Dizzyland meeting changed everything.”

“Why?”

“Why?! You know why. We would be doing it for nothing.”

“Maybe not. You and Adrian have several plans in the works and others you’ve shelved until a better time. Are any of those viable?”

Marc realized she was serious. “You don’t know.”

She sighed, head shaking. “Another evolution, I suspect. Searching our future again is too dangerous right now.” She opened the mental connection between them. *Tell me. Help me merge all three brains for a solution I can use.*

Marc let her in.

Angela studied all the plots and schemes the two men were laboring over in secret, memorizing parts to merge with what she already had. When she exited his strategy center, she was still short a full corner of the puzzle. She stored the information and returned to observing the lesson.

Marc had skimmed her plans while she studied his. He was impressed and a bit excited that one of his deals with Adrian might work. *Years without seeing him. I can’t wait.*

Angela was also intrigued. *Years of a monthly lesson in his hut. Years of not hearing him and Marc fight anymore. Years of quiet training for the more advanced fighters. It’s perfect.*

The tension broke. It swept across the deck, adding strength to shields.

Involved in the lesson, Adrian still caught it all. He was the king of magical multitasking. He kept the same polite expression but inside, he celebrated. This deal would give Safe Haven everything it needed. And it would work out personally. Marc wouldn't ask how their lessons went. He wouldn't scan her thoughts or accuse her of betrayals. Angela would be free to visit as long as she wanted on those days, without pressure from either of them. *Now all I have to do is shove my feelings back into the box they arrived in. I can't make a single move on her the entire time.*

“Room for one more?”

Angela signaled Gus over to be Kendle's partner.

Gus took the spot without complaint, glad he was welcome.

Eagles who'd been stressing over the few missing descendants nodded approval.

Kendle was surprised. She tried to be friendly as she stood. “You can pull the demo from my mind.”

Across the training field, Ivan and Kenn were putting on a show. They'd quickly found a groove and were tossing flames like baseballs. Both men had mastered the inhale by giving each other time to recover between throws. They were now working on immunity while expanding the banks by taking in as much energy as they could hold, and then that little bit more for enlargement.

Stretching. It was in the history book. Angela nudged Marc. “Make it a three-way.”

Marc went, firing at both men.

Angela watched Gus joke with Kendle to put her at ease and help keep her attention on the flames he was tossing at her.

No one liked how easily Kendle caught and held the fire.

Angela wasn't surprised by it. Kendle had been out in the wilderness on her own. She'd learned a few tricks.

Next to Kendle and Gus, Adrian and Jennifer were discussing the lesson while bouncing her flames back-and-forth off their shields like a tennis ball. They weren't practicing the inhale like they were supposed to be, but Angela didn't interfere. This first session needed to have leeway for a little exploration.

Kenn and Ivan, not far away and not to be outdone, ganged up on Marc. They both began tossing fire and ice at him in rapid succession.

Marc expanded his shield, pushing them backward as he moved forward.

People clapped as he pinned them against the rail.

Adrian whistled. "Ladies on the left; gentleman on the right. Line up in the V."

The men and women separated, standing across from each other on the dim deck. Sparks flew as flirtations grew.

"We're going to call this the battle of the sexes. Lineup in the V formation you learned in the rookie classes. If you haven't had those yet, watch

everyone else. They'll show you what to do." Adrian pointed at Angela. "You lead the females. Marc will lead the men."

Marc and Angela moved into place. It made sense they would lead the teams and Adrian would train them all. It was obvious he'd always wanted this. His pleasure flowed over them in thick waves, reminding everyone why he had been their leader.

"On a count of three, everyone in the rear two rows will bring up a shield. Rear people only, will bounce hits to the opposite team. Front people will fire only. The team who gets a hit over their opponent's head gets a point. First team to five wins."

Angela threw as soon as he stopped talking, trying to catch Marc off guard.

Up on the bridge, Grant tried not to get distracted by the fireworks show, but it was hard. He'd heard about these amazing people for months and imagined what they'd be like. When he finally joined Safe Haven, Grant had experienced disappointments about the realities, but in a moment like this, it was easy to believe they truly were the chosen people. The beach battle had proven it. This was driving it in.

“Welcome to anger management class.” Jeff gestured at a group of kids loitering by the door. “Come in and sit.”

The western UN kids did it right away, as did the camp children. Everyone else stared at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“We’re going to the Eagle training room after this. Sit and listen.”

Now they rushed to the seats in the gymnasium.

“My name is Jeff. I’m a descendant. If you screw with me, we’ll have trouble. If you follow the rules, we can have fun—like taking field trips. I won’t keep you cooped up. We’ll go places and do things, but you have to do what I tell you or Angela will take away our trips. You don’t want that, do you?”

Even Leeann shook her head. She was sitting by herself, being shunned by her group.

“Good. We have anger left from the sickness. We were healed, but we remember what it was like. Sometimes, we miss it. Then we get angry because that’s not allowed here.” Jeff pulled the sheet off a large piece of equipment. “When it gets too bad, we’ll have our own cage matches.”

UN kids screamed in eagerness, startling the children who didn’t know about the nightly matches.

“We won’t use the cage first. I expect you to control yourself, to use the other outlets. Once a week, we’ll have a group cage match. No one *ever* dies in these matches. That’s rule number one,

kiddos: We're never allowed to hurt someone again, unless we're ordered to do it by a top Eagle or council member."

Kimmy's face squished up. "We have to be peaceful on the boat and the island. When we return to America, you'll want us to kill again. Does that make sense to you?"

Jeff sighed. "No, it doesn't, but the boss makes the rules, not me."

"She doesn't have a choice." Cody opened his hands to reveal Angela's star map.

Guards gawked.

Cody didn't worry over getting in trouble. "I copied it. See this star? That's where the bad people live. *They* make us fight. If they were stopped, we wouldn't have to kill anymore." Cody released the magic, swaying. It took a lot of power to open that door for even a few seconds.

The other descendant children were in awe of Cody for being so gifted. They wished they were like him.

The camp kids envied him because his mother and father were both badass. They wanted his life, his two parents. The sentries worried over him because he was a valuable target. They wanted him under protection at all times.

Jeff felt those emotions; the boy was special even for their kind. "Situations like this are confusing. That can turn to anger. When you feel it rising, there are steps you need to take. The first one is to do a workout. By that, I mean clean the ocean.

You can do it anytime, unless it's storming. It makes you sleepy and gives the anger to the ocean, who needs it to clean the garbage left from the war. If that isn't enough or it's storming, you take a cold shower." He scanned the slightly bored kids. "If all that doesn't work, you can come here to the cage and one of the Special Forces men will spar with you."

Kids perked up again.

Jeff frowned. "Remember what Angela said. Hurting an Eagle is a crime in Safe Haven. You have to try to get rid of the anger before you get into the cage. She means it when she says she'll remove you."

"I don't think she'd get rid of us." Dion was basking in the setup. The UN had been much harsher.

"You haven't seen her angry. She doesn't bluff." Jeff waved to the sentries on the entrance. "We'll take a walk now and get a workout in the training room. Remember your lesson with Monica. Don't tear through the halls. Be calm and smile. No one can resist a smile from a cute kid."

Jeff waited until they were lined up. "Follow Molly. And don't wear her out. She's on duty against orders. She should be in the infirmary healing up from being wounded during the beach fight."

The kids left, chattering. Jeff followed in the rear, stewing. Kimmie said he was the only descendant who could resist Angela's pull, but

Cody had connected him almost as soon as he'd arrived. Jeff doubted his immunity was still intact. She'd removed his free will and he'd accepted it gratefully.

Kimmie skipped along next to him, stealing looks.

"I'm fine."

She huffed. "You don't look fine."

Jeff sighed. "I don't like losing my freedom. You understand."

"What freedom have you lost?"

"The ability to tell Angela no on anything."

Kimmie frowned. "Says who?"

"Isn't that how it works when we connect to the hive?"

Kimmie laughed. "No. You still have free will. You just have to feel what she does. It tempers the choices when you experience her pain or her anger."

"Why did I have to be connected? She didn't do that to anyone else from what I've heard."

"You blocked her by shutting the mental link. I didn't know that before. Everyone else was already bonded to her."

"You've been snooping in memories."

"Yes."

Jeff liked it that Kimmie didn't lie or seem to be ashamed. "Why?"

"I needed to know what kind of people were around the alpha."

Jeff smiled. "And?"

Kimmie's expression darkened. "This is a dangerous ship. These are all dangerous people. She has to be careful."

"I'll let her know."

"No need. She's always known. In fact, she helped make many of them this way. If they aren't dangerous, they won't survive what's ahead."

Jeff paused.

Kimmie stopped by him in the hall, looking up. "What do you want to know?"

"It's not right for me to ask you."

"No, but it's too late now. Tell me."

Jeff leaned in to keep passing passengers from hearing. "What's waiting for us on that island?"

Kimmie grumbled. "She forbade me to search that future."

"Can you do it anyway?"

"Yes, but she'd know. I would be punished."

"A week of scrubbing toilets?" Jeff joked.

Kimmie lowered her voice. "She would lock my gifts because I can't be trusted."

After Leeann's runaway attempt, Jeff thought that should happen to all the kids now. "Would it be so bad?"

Kimmie shrugged. "Don't know. Not gonna find out. Ask someone else." She pranced down the hallway after the group of docile kids, flashing dimples at curious guards.

"Maybe I will." Jeff followed, still stewing.

3

“Why didn’t you come up for dinner?” Kenn entered the lab. “I had to sit by myself.”

Tonya glanced up from the papers spread out in front of her. “I missed dinner?”

“Sort of, yeah.” Kenn chuckled. He sat a plate near her hand.

Tonya took a big bite of the sandwich. “Wow. Brittani did a good job on this.” She took another bite, groaning.

Kenn sat nearby and swept the small lab. Tonya had everything out of boxes and put away. The neatly disassembled cartons were stacked by a window with closed curtains. Along the wide wall, Tonya had pushed two smaller desks together to create a large space where she had microscopes and other equipment now set up. Her desk was across from it and sported most of the remaining mess. Kenn didn’t see a grow closet for her next batch of pot. *I wonder where she stashed it.*

Tonya pointed up.

Kenn grinned when he saw the plants were suspended from hooks, like ferns. “How long will that hold?”

“Until they start stinking, and then everyone will be down here trying to clip parts off. I’ll have to sneak it to the garden, where it’s protected.”

Kenn snickered. “Is pot a companion plant?”

“Yes.” Tonya swallowed, moaning at the taste of the food. “It grows well with basil.”

“I’ll let Samantha know to keep a small area clear.”

“Don’t bother. These guys will go into a grow bag system. I can’t have them contaminated by her food plants. I need this batch to be as pure as possible.”

Kenn liked her confident tone. “You really believe the oil will help?”

“I do, but it isn’t just for the oil. Hemp makes great rope and we didn’t bring many of those, you know?”

He nodded. “We couldn’t find much beyond basic lengths in hardware stores. Ropes left in the open rotted faster than the labels claimed.”

“Well, acid rain can have that effect.”

Kenn swept her desk again. “What are you working on now?”

“Rage tests.”

Kenn frowned. “They were all healed.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” Tonya didn’t want to voice her concerns.

“We haven’t had another issue...”

“Yet.” She sighed. “Honestly, I’m more concerned with reinfection. Can they get it again? What if we get to the island and the sickness is still there? Most of the camp hasn’t had it, so they won’t have an immunity even if it works that way. And we don’t know that yet either. We might be able to get it over and over, every time we have contact.”

Kenn’s scowl had grown with every sentence she uttered. “Did the boss put you on this?”

“Just keeping busy.”

Kenn put a note in his book. “Angela may not want you to mention it around the camp. Don’t step on her toes.”

“I won’t.” Tonya stuffed the sandwich back together for the last bite. It had slid apart as she devoured it. “When I perfect the test, I’ll let her know. She can roll it out as she sees fit.”

“How are you learning this stuff so fast?”

Tonya didn’t stiffen, though her heart picked up a beat. “I had some classes in school. Then I hooked up with a chemistry major for about a year after I ran away. He liked to yap, and I was paid to listen.”

“You learned how to do this, from all that?”

“I had some odd hobbies before the war.” Tonya pointed, hoping her last evasion would work. “I’m also using the training books Angela sent.”

“Good.” Kenn knew Angela wouldn’t have sent books unless there was a reason. “She must think you can do it.”

Tonya smiled. “Feels nice to have someone believe in me, even if it is your ex.”

Kenn sniggered. “Still jealous?”

“Still hot for her?”

Kenn tried to laugh it off but deep down, there was only one answer.

Tonya grunted, hand going to her stomach. “I just got kicked, I think.”

The couple was instantly distracted by trying to feel their baby.

Guards on the door wrote it in the nightly reports. Kenn was asking questions about the tests. It wouldn't be long before the rest of the Eagles were too. Then the camp would follow. Angela needed to get ready to have her lab work exposed to the public.

4

“It’s bedtime, Safe Haven.” Speakers crackled with Grant’s tired voice. “Anyone who does not have duty should go to the living quarters for showers and sleep.”

Hallways filled with people from classes, the entertainment deck, and the gym.

Angela and frowning den mothers slid against the walls to let wild kids go by.

The living quarters at bedtime were chaos. Three hundred people crammed in together to get showers, brush their teeth and hair, get changed, and find privacy to do all of those things. The sound of doors slamming and toilets flushing was louder than anything else on the ship.

Kids ran back and forth, adding to the din of constant movement. Angela was looking forward to the time when they would be settled down, but she didn't interrupt or scold. They had only been aboard a few days. It took time to adjust, though she wished they would hurry up. Life on the boat was no different than on land, except they had to pay more attention to the weather and walls. Once they got

that through their heads, everyone would probably be so bored she would have to schedule entertainments to keep them interested. “Let’s see their schedule.”

Molly handed her the sheet of paper, glad Angela wasn’t complaining about her being on duty. Molly was only escorting the kids between classes, but she was already exhausted. It felt good. “We all agreed on it, even Marc.”

Angela skimmed the list.

Kids

8:00-Personal care, showers, dressed.

9:00-Breakfast

10:00-Lesson #1 Angela

11:00-Play time/recess

1:00-Math

2:00-Reading

3:00-Lunch

4:30-Lesson #2 Marc

5:30-Lesson #3 Jeff

6:30-Lesson #4 Adrian

7:00-Dinner

8:00-Free time

10:00-Bedtime routines start

11:00-Lights out/bedtime story

“This is good. Feel free to adjust it as needed.” She gave the sheet back to Molly and rotated toward a group of quiet kids coming down the hall. Leeann was in the center. Her lids were puffy from crying.

Missy came to Angela as the rest of that subdued group entered the living quarters. “She’s going to run again. We can’t stop her.”

“Thank you for trying so hard.”

Missy beamed at her alpha. “Will you read us the story tonight?”

“That’s why I’m here.” She signaled Missy to go in.

Greg felt Angela’s indecision as Leeann passed them. He let out a long sigh. “The Eagles are having a game, after the camp crashes. Let the girl overhear it and we’ll discuss Billy for a few minutes before we find her spying and send her back to bed.”

Angela nodded. “That’s good. Thank you.”

Greg grunted. “The guys won’t like this. You owe me.”

Angela snickered, then sobered. “Can’t be harder than taking fire for me.”

“That was easy. All I had to do was lay there and scream.” Greg laughed off the chills. “I guess that’s what I’ll do when I tell my team.”

Angela’s chuckle hit Greg hard. He turned to scan the opposite hall to keep her from noticing his reaction.

Angela was preoccupied with more noisy kids running by. She followed them into the living quarters, leaving the guards to handle the hallway. *Best time of the night for me starts right now. I love my kids—all of them.*

“Are you mad at me?”

Samantha shook her head against Neil’s chest. “I understand.” They were in their cabin, in bed. The room was cozy, with too many earth tones in her opinion. It had tan walls, tan cushions, tan blankets, and tan curtains. Everything else was white. She had already put away their belongings, except for Neil’s big duffel bag. It was sitting in front of the closet, waiting for him to get around to it. That was his personal gear and even though they were a couple, she didn’t feel right messing with it.

This almost seemed like a small home for them now, but Samantha wasn’t able to enjoy it for more than a few minutes at a time. Tension had returned with Becky. She doubted it was leaving anytime soon.

Neil had hated his time with Becky. He’d finally been able to see her for the spoiled brat she’d always been. The lack of sympathy bothered him.

“Are you mad I told Angela to do it?”

“No.” He wasn’t. Neil had learned things about himself over the last few days. “I love you. I would never betray you.”

“I know. Some things just have to have closure.”

“Yes.” Neil shifted so he could view her in the dim nightlight. “How are you?”

Samantha was proud of herself for her even tone and lack of tears. “Better now, I think. Thank you

for helping me adjust. I know this has been hard on you too.”

“It has. I’d never had a best friend before. I do have some awesome memories, though.” He smiled. “Our shower moments were a favorite for both of us.”

Samantha laughed, glad she finally could.

They lay in quiet for a moment, each lost in their own minds.

Neil hated to ruin the calm, but he needed to know what she had to have to be happy now. Just content wasn’t enough for him. “Do you want me to...search for a partner for us?”

Samantha stiffened. “Where did that come from?”

Neil kissed the top of her head. “I need to know where we stand, Sam. If you like that set up more than this one, I’ll hunt up a guy for us to spend time with.”

“You’d do that?”

“It doesn’t bother me now.” He rubbed her shoulder. “I wish it was Jeremy, of course, but maybe we could adjust to a new friend.”

Samantha shut her lids, holding him tighter. “It’s too soon.”

“Okay.” Neil wasn’t positive avoiding it was the right way to go, but he was happy enough to let this situation linger for a few more weeks or months. After she had the babies, they could discuss it again. He had expected this part to be hard, but he was surprised to discover he did miss the setup they’d

had. Another pair of hands to help care for Samantha wasn't a bad idea. If she got attached, the man might replace Jeremy and give them closure.

Neil felt tears slip onto his bare chest. He sat up. "Sam?"

Samantha forced herself to stop crying, but her tone was full of sobs. "Don't ever think that around me again. We may get someone to fill a hole here and there, but no one will ever replace Jeremy."

Neil tugged her back into his arms, realizing his mistake. "I'm sorry, Sammi. I didn't mean it that way. You know I didn't."

Sam held her head up to his, eager for a distraction. "Love me? We'll be careful."

Neil kissed her.

When his turn to groan and shudder came, he took himself in hand and let her help. Real sex was waiting until the babies were born. One of those boys was Jeremy's son. If anything happened, Neil would never recover.

Chapter Twenty
Death Sleep

1

Marc didn't beat around the bush as he joined Jennifer near the front of the ship. "I'm not going to ask. I just didn't want to leave you hanging up here."

"That's good. You made a good choice."

Marc studied her. "Then why are you frowning at me?"

Jennifer sighed. "I can't unlock it on my own."

"You want to take the risk?"

"Life is a risk."

"Don't give me clichés. Give me the truth."

Jennifer's brows creased further. "I'm not going to convince you. You made the choice. Now we'll both live with it."

Marc shrugged. "Okay, then."

"Good."

"Fine."

Jennifer grinned. "That was fun."

Marc snorted. "For you."

"Yep." Jennifer inspected the water she could see from the deck, refusing to contemplate what was beneath it. "Do you know how to swim?"

“Sure.” Marc stepped closer, getting worried. “You don’t?”

“No.” She dug deeper. “I think we should start swimming lessons.”

Marc immediately wrote it down.

Jennifer fell into the daze, updating him. “Talk to Seth about Amy... Check on the new family... Put a guard on the weapons. The sentries are noticing Cody’s differences. The camp will discover it next. He should have a guard too.”

Marc wrote faster, trying to keep up. She was giving him the nightly report and while it wasn’t his job, he didn’t want to miss any of it.

“Tell her the next meeting might go like she needs. Make contact the way she has planned but go alone.”

Marc added his own note. *If you’re going up to renegotiate with the Messenger, I’m coming too.*

Jennifer returned to the present, yawning. “You need anything else from me?”

“Nope. You’re off duty now, as far as I know.”

“Awesome. Excuse me.” She walked toward the steps. “Where’s that husband of mine?”

Wade pointed her in the right direction. “He’s making sure all the posts are manned before calling it a night.”

“Are they?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Wade watched her go. *Kyle’s a lucky guy.*

Jennifer found Kyle on the stairs. “When does your shift end?”

Kyle glanced up to find Jennifer coming down from the top deck. “Now. My relief’s already roaming posts. I’m just making sure the other slots are covered before I crash.”

Jennifer sat on the steps, glad the camp was sleeping. The descendant lesson had provided entertainment for those who didn’t want to patronize the clubs and shops below, but it had also worn them out. Everyone had been tired and ready to sleep. It was now midnight, shift change.

Kyle chortled. “Why did you ask if you already knew?”

“Ice breaker.”

“You never need an ice breaker with me.” Kyle leered in the moonlight. “Just tell me what you want and it’s yours.”

She hit him with a blast of need. “You, between my legs. Me, moaning your name while I cum all—”

Jennifer gasped as Kyle swept her into his arms and jogged down the stairs toward their cabin.

Kyle kissed her scarred shoulder, shuddering. *I need you!*

Guards leaned out of their way, laughing instead of disapproving. A marriage shouldn’t have made so much difference, but it had, for all of them.

Angela also stepped aside, catching Jennifer’s blush and Kyle’s flush. It was clear what was going on.

Angela trudged toward the next post.

Ivan and his team walked behind her, silently begging her to go to bed.

Angela stopped at the next intersection. She didn't turn or wave. She didn't have the energy. "Marc and Adrian will take over duty now. Get lost."

The happy Marines came out of the shadows.

Ivan and his men handed over reports and vanished.

"That was a twenty-four-hour shift for Ivan." Adrian was impressed.

Marc was too but he only grunted. They could discuss Ivan some other time. Right now, he wanted to see what Angela was doing next. She really did need to sleep.

"What areas are still active?"

Adrian skimmed the nightly reports for an answer. "Uh... Infirmary had people who can't sleep without the sedative. The lab has lights on."

"I've got that one." Weary steps caught up to them. Kenn didn't linger to chat. "Give me ten minutes and she'll be in bed. I'll lock things down there."

Adrian made a note on who was handling the lab and searched the notes again. "I think that's it. The bridge is wide awake, the galley has snacks and coffee for the sentries, and the infirmary has people awake."

"I have a nightly report from Ray." Marc was also sorting through the notes. "The captain woke

from his nap and ordered the guards to go get showers so he didn't puke from the smell."

Angela chuckled as she leaned against the wall. "The infirmary first."

Both men sighed but neither argued. Angela was also at the twenty-hour mark. If she believed she could keep going, they would follow.

Angela didn't move.

Adrian stepped closer, sensing her knees buckling.

Marc waited until she started to fall and scooped her into his arms, bumping Adrian aside. "Check the notes. I don't know where her cabin is."

Adrian scanned, not offended. If he'd known Marc was watching for it too, he wouldn't have tried at all. "Cabin 799." He pulled out a small map of the ship and pointed. "That way."

Marc followed Adrian's instructions, trying not to laugh. She was already snoring against his chest.

"Who has point over the ship right now?"

Marc's mirth faded. "Why? You want it?"

Adrian snorted at the reminder of his status. "Just need to alert them their shift has begun."

"She gave it to Whitney and Greg. They're already on duty."

Adrian relaxed. "Splits, like on the final leg to the shore."

"Yes, though you shouldn't know. You weren't even in camp then."

"Logical conclusion based on evidence."

“More like snooping in memories for images of Angela.”

“Not just Angela. I need to know everything happening in this camp. It’s easier because I’m an outcast. I can be in the shadows. It’s where people want me now anyway.”

“Why?”

“So I can keep predicting the future. You forget, I’ve never been able to search ahead like she does. I’ve always had to use my brain to stay ahead of the pack.”

Marc waited for Adrian to consult the map at the next intersection. *She needs to eat more.* Her weight was nothing in his arms.

“Um, that’s you, actually. She’s been bulking you up.” Adrian patted Marc’s thick arm. “As big as Kenn now.”

Adrian laughed at Marc’s stunned expression. “Nightly hot chocolate no matter what, right?”

Marc was dumbfounded. “Protein powder.”

Adrian snickered. “She’s slick. You have to admire that.”

“Or be afraid of it.” Marc stopped outside the correct cabin, frowning. These were the tiniest rooms on the ship.

“She hates for people to think she’s acting like a leader from the old world.”

“Even though she’ll be a queen in the future.”

“A President, but yes. Humility is also another reason to admire her. I certainly couldn’t handle it.”

“Arrogance is one of your bigger talents.”

Adrian cackled, closing the door behind them. “Thank you. Nicest thing you’ve said in an hour.”

Marc snorted, easing around the tightly placed furniture. “We’re switching cabins tomorrow. Pick one I’d approve of. I’ll adjust the numbers on the paperwork. When she asks, tell her Ivan did it.”

Adrian sniggered, pulling the blankets down. “Okay.”

Marc put her on the bed and began removing her boots. He didn’t mind this part of caring for her. It was what he’d thought he would be doing all along.

“She still needs a good body man.” Adrian took the filthy boots and put them into the shower. He would scrub them later and bring her a pair of gym shoes so she would be comfortable while her boots dried. “Maybe when we return, she’ll give you another chance.”

“Maybe.” Marc got her out of the heavy Eagle jacket and deftly unsnapped her bra. He pulled the blanket to her chin and switched out the light on her side table. He retreated, now shoulder to shoulder with Adrian. There wasn’t space to be anywhere else.

Adrian saw the cramped chair and sighed. “I’ll be there. You should hold her. She loves waking in your arms.”

Marc pointed at a lever. “It leans. She isn’t punishing you with that one, just herself.”

Adrian dropped into the small chair and hit the button.

The footrest snapped up, tipping him over.

He slid backward out of the chair and smacked into the wall.

Marc fell on the bed, laughing so hard he couldn't breathe.

Angela didn't budge.

Adrian stared at the bed from his painful position, fall already forgotten. "She should have woken up. The guards heard that down the hall."

"Everything okay in there?" Travis tapped on the door.

"We're fine. Tripped." Marc was still chuckling. He couldn't help it.

"Well, trip somewhere else and let the boss sleep or Eagles will remove both of you from this position."

That sobered Marc.

Adrian pushed up onto his knees, expression grim. "It's the death sleep."

"The what?"

"She died. We brought her back...or she demanded to come home, and they allowed it. Now she's evolving. While it happens, she'll be in the death sleep."

"Named that because nothing wakes them until they're ready?" Marc knew better, but he was allowed to hope.

"It's named that because the person goes through such a big evolution that their minds and bodies can't always handle it. Sometimes they die during the process."

Marc swept Adrian's memories of her death and shook his head. "If they wanted her dead, they would have kept her up there then or when we visited. We just have to worry about her evolution."

"Why?"

"What could be so big that she doesn't already have?"

"Damn. I didn't think about it that way." Adrian climbed back into the slippery chair and began stewing on it.

Marc slid into the bed and wrapped his arms around Angela's body, doing the same.

Around them, the ship creaked and groaned, sliding through the water at the grace of the ocean king.

2

"Thank you for escorting me to my cabin." On the way, Candy had noticed Conner had a limp, but she didn't bring it up. He'd been shot in the leg in Little Rock. That type of injury took a long time to heal and often did lasting damage. When he was tired, it would probably always bother him.

"It's my honor." Conner opened the door for her and scanned the small residence. He was pleased to find it clean. She had put away her things and even gathered garbage and put it by the door for the cleaning crew to collect. Everything looked proper, in its place, but more importantly, she looked happy

as she moved around the room. Conner hoped it was true.

Her cabin wasn't different than the others, except in the color. He had mentioned to Kenn and Angela that Candy preferred pink. It was nice to find her cabin decorated in that hue. All the pillows, blankets, towels and curtains matched the paint. He hoped she enjoyed it. "I'm down the hall. Next to Ivan."

"He's good."

"Yeah. You know, he refused a permanent cabin with Jayda? He wants to be with all Eagles when the final assignments are handed out."

"That's interesting." Candy placed her bag on the small desk. She studied Conner, cheeks red.

Conner felt the wave of need she was trying to smother. He flipped on the bedside lamp and went to the door. It was getting harder and harder to resist throwing hints and whiffs of sexual energy. He wanted her, in every way.

Candy almost let him leave. She was reaching out to shut the door behind him when he stopped to ask if she had enough blankets. His arm slid against her hand, making them both stiffen. Desire filled the air.

"I should go now." Conner swallowed the lump in his throat. "See you in the morning?"

Candy let her hand run up his shoulder. "Stay with me?"

Conner froze.

“Just as a guard.” Candy wasn’t sure if she’d pushed too hard. “The chair over there by the bathroom folds out.”

Conner knew he should say no. “Are you...afraid to be alone right now?”

Candy gave a fast nod. “Yes, that’s it. I don’t want to be alone.”

Conner locked the door. He turned to face her, heart thumping. “You should get in bed.”

Candy groaned. “I do need to be in bed. It’s better when I’m lying down.” She flushed scarlet. “To sleep, I mean.”

Conner sniggered at her nervous chirps. “Just tell me what you want. I’ll try to give it to you without breaking a lot of rules.”

Candy sent the memory of what he’d done for them before.

Conner swallowed again, heat rising. “But with you lying down?”

She swallowed, throat suddenly parched. “My feet hurt. I need to get off.”

Conner gasped.

Candy groaned. “My feet! I need to get off my feet!”

“I’ll give you a knock out and then go get a shower. How’s that?”

“No.” Candy sat on the bed. “I didn’t get to see it last time.”

Conner broke. He sat on the edge of the bed next to her and drew in a deep breath. “We’re not going all the way.”

“No, of course not! We’re just...”

“Exploring to discover if we’re compatible.”

“Yes!” She eased out of her shoes and then her jacket, aware of his tense body and hot eyes. “Help me undo my shirt?”

Conner gulped. “Whatever you want.”

“I want you to stop holding back for a little while, okay? I need to feel it.”

Conner let the need show. “But just for an hour, okay? When the guards come by, I want them to see us sleeping, in different beds.”

“Agreed.” She arched her body. “Now help me let the girls out.”

Conner laughed, hands coming up. “Free range is best.”

3

I need a drink.

Daryl grabbed a beer off the shelf and twisted around. “Here ya...” He glanced down at the wolf in surprise.

Dog pawed the plate he’d swiped from the galley. *Right here, friend. Fill me up.*

Daryl knelt and poured half the bottle into the paper plate, chuckling. Eagle downtime was being held in the smaller gymnasium. The senior men had already set up various perks the Eagles were used to, and then added more. There was now an instant coffee machine on the counter and a basket of

snacks. The tables for them to smoke and play games were set up the same as usual.

Dog went to town on the beer. *Yum! That's good! I needed this!*

Daryl refilled the plate at Dog's whine.

Dog sucked down the second helping and let out a loud belch. *Thank you! Fill me up.*

Daryl emptied the bottle, laughing. He put it in the bin next to them. "Hard day?"

You have no idea. Dog licked the foam from his whiskers and muzzle, then dropped down to finish the rest.

"Cats?"

Where?! Dog yelped, spinning to confront the felines.

Guards burst out laughing, able to figure out what was going on. The cats were ready for bed. Faint yowls made their way through the halls.

Dog whimpered. *Hide me!*

"I thought you liked sleeping with them."

Dog grumped and sat. *The warm weight on my back is nice, but they stick their claws in me when they're happy. It's just sick, man!*

Daryl used Eagle code to have Whitney shut the door. "Better?"

Dog lapped up the rest of the beer. *I will be after you fill me up again.*

Daryl did, wondering what Dog would be like drunk.

Thick smoke swirled around the three dozen men enjoying downtime together. Most were

playing cards at the center tables. The rest were gathered around the edges of the room in small groups where they chatted about things they'd gone through or things they were about to go through. On the opposite side from the poker tables, dart boards were up, and a stack of handheld video games were waiting. The kids would be surprised to find the Eagles playing those, but everyone enjoyed a good escape from reality. The only difference was in the choice of game.

Daryl spotted a small face pressed against the swinging employee door to the gym. He sent Dog an image. "Want to help us?"

Sure. Anything to keep me away from those cats!

"Go drag her out here. She's scared of you, so don't go overboard or her shouts will wake the boss."

Eagles moved aside as the now slightly unsteady wolf padded toward the swinging door.

Dog pounced through the opening, catching Leeann's robe.

She yelped, trying to tug it from his teeth. "Stop it! Bad, dog!"

I am not. Dog let go and nudged her out into the room of Eagles. *Spying is bad.*

Leeann clenched her fists inside her pockets, lips clamping together. She braced for a real punishment this time. She was scared of the Eagle men. Most of the kids were.

Daryl pointed at the corner. "Stand in it until we tell you to go to bed."

Leeann went, surprised she wasn't being kicked out. She put her nose in the corner and strained to hear conversations.

Daryl nodded at Wade.

Wade cleared his throat. "Has anyone heard from Billy?"

Silence fell. It was the first time his name had been spoken at an Eagle gathering in months.

Daryl shrugged. "Adrian told me he's alive. Billy had work in the west or something."

"Maybe it was important work. That would excuse him leaving like he did, right?" Ben wanted the moment done and the little girl gone. She didn't need to be here. Some of these men were being watched for violations of the age law and Leeann's nightgown-clan body was too young for them to be gawking at. There were also dirty jokes and crude comments flying about that didn't need to be in her ears.

"Some of it." Morgan wanted to let it go but couldn't. "We'll still give him hell if he tries to come back."

"Do you think we'll see him when we return to America?" Ben kept reaching for the goal of finishing this and getting Leeann out of here.

Tommy snorted. "I bet he's waiting at the dock and asks to help with our luggage."

Men laughed, but they didn't feel it. Many of them were worried about Billy's return because of bits they'd picked up about that future from Angela and Jennifer.

Leeann didn't catch any of the thoughts. She was listening to the words that were easing the pain in her heart.

“Do you remember when he drove that tank straight into the soldiers and cleared a path for his team to escape?”

“Remember it?” James laughed. “I was one of those soldiers. He ran over my foot.”

A better mood filled the room. Other men added stories about Billy, unaware they were also easing their own pain from his betrayals.

Leeann stayed in the corner for the next half hour, legs aching and heart healing. When Daryl finally told her to go to bed, she delivered a nod of gratitude to the Special Forces man and left.

Silence fell for a few seconds after she departed, with Ben as an escort.

Daryl chuckled. “Why stop now? We're having a good time. Someone else pick a Billy story. I'd forgotten how funny he was.”

4

“We should go now.”

Seth winced at Becky's loud voice. “The sea's still too rough. We have to wait a couple days.” Seth tucked the blanket around her, hating the gloomy, dank conditions. “Try to rest. You'll need your strength if we do go.”

Becky cuddled beneath the warm blankets, lids shutting. “Yes, we’ll go. Out there, we can do what we want.”

Seth swallowed a protest. He didn’t want to leave. His daughter was here. He couldn’t take Amy along, but Becky hadn’t thought of that. She was deep in her own mind. Nothing else was getting through.

“Can we stop by the weapon area on the way to the lifeboats? We shouldn’t go unarmed.”

Seth didn’t reveal he had several weapons hidden in their kits. The guards hadn’t searched him or their gear. “Maybe.”

“And the mess. We’ll need food.”

“I’ll take care of it. You rest.”

Becky didn’t hear him. “If I can get close enough to her, I guess I could use a pillow or something.”

Seth froze, scowling. “What?”

“For Angela. We have to kill her before we go. Then these people will be free.”

“Shhh!” Seth was scared the guards outside the brig could hear her. “We’re not doing that.”

“I can’t leave these people in slavery.”

“They aren’t slaves.”

“Well, sure they are. Angela orders it and they jump. It’s not her fault, though. Adrian set it all up. When they find her body, Adrian will hang for it.” Becky smiled in delight. “Too bad we won’t get to see that part.”

Seth shushed her again. “You can’t say these things! You have to stop.”

“Oh, yeah. We’ll discuss it during my shower in the morning. They can’t hear us over the water.”

Seth started to remind her descendants could hear thoughts, but she drifted off, snoring lightly against him.

Seth was more horrified than he’d already been. Becky hadn’t learned from her losses. She was going to try to kill Angela again. *And I’ll get the blame for it this time.*

Seth lay in the cool darkness, mind spinning between ways to help her and ways to stop her. He finally fell asleep without a solution.

The guards wrote it all down and made sure they had extra mags.

Chapter Twenty-One
Little Cracks
Day Three

1

Ivan stretched out on his bed, enjoying the luxury of a nice mattress and a thick blanket. Like the rest of the cabins on this floor, it had been outfitted with luxuries the others lacked. The people in the living quarters had employee blankets, not the big comforters that had been meant for passengers. Ivan didn't plan to mention it to anyone, and he was certain the other Eagles wouldn't either. There were perks to this job that were unspoken.

His bunk with Jayda had a full bed surrounded by lilac decorations and velvet curtains. Ivan didn't like that Jayda had requested it. He understood there hadn't been many luxuries for any of them since the war, and it was nice their women were getting a treat, but the men didn't care about the frivolous things a lot of the females did. It was one way Ivan was beginning to be able to tell potential female Eagles from female camp members. Eagles cared about more important things than the color of the curtains or the decorative holders in the bathrooms. They were concerned with how much water they

were using and how much water the ship was producing in comparison.

Ivan returned to where he had been in the book before he'd needed to use the well-outfitted lavatory. He thumbed to the page, alone right now and able to read. The History of the Descendants was inside his comic book. While he was positive Angela would release copies of it to the camp at some point, he knew she didn't want it floating around sticky fingers right now. This was the only copy they had.

Ivan slid to the middle of the bed to get comfortable. It was nice to have Jayda sharing a cabin at times. The chores were divided and occasionally she would ask for a service, but he missed the quiet of solitude. Jayda was at an early morning skills test with Kyle and his team right now. She was one of the few camp members who had a problem getting up early; this was Angela's way of testing her on it. Eagles were required to perform their duties at all hours.

Ivan skimmed the page again.

Descendants have to be carefully observed for cracks in their mental stability. It's not certain yet which factors cause these cracks, but the three suggested below seem the most likely based on the evidence presented at the end of this chapter, and in individual case examinations.

Ivan stopped reading again, distracted. It wasn't because passengers were starting to wake on the ship, or that the wind sounded harsher outside his window. It was because he had already spotted several of those mental cracks in Angela and he didn't know what to do about it. He only had this chapter left and it was more of a reference connecting to all the other parts of the book. There were no solutions in here, only studies of the problem.

Ivan returned to the beginning of the chapter.

Mental Instability in Byzan Descendants

Mental instability has been documented in descendants as young as ten, but usually occurs after the age of twenty. Male or female does not seem to make a difference. Once the cracks appear, they continue to spread until the person becomes unstable and oftentimes dangerous. There are no known cases of Byzan graduating this level without mental cracks.

On a personal note, I've noticed these cracks in myself. Donna has also picked up on it, though she doesn't understand what's happening to me. To be fair, neither do I.

William's notes were troubling. Ivan had known the man was a problem, but not how big. He could have snapped at any point and tried to kill them all. It was scary to think about how close he had been to leadership at different points, but it was

even worse to contemplate Angela snapping. Her gifts were beyond what William had been playing with. In a battle between the two, Ivan was positive she would come out on top. William might have the benefit of book knowledge, but Angela had actually used hers in battle multiple times and was training her army to do the same. William wouldn't stand a chance. Neither would anyone on this ship. Her behavior implied she was in control, but he and Greg, and a few of the others who were catching on, would continue to observe her. Ivan had no idea what they would do from there. She was ahead of them at every turn. It would be almost impossible to get anything over on her.

Ivan heard voices coming down the hall and made sure the comic book completely hid the real book he was reading. He recognized Jayda's voice.

Jayda entered the cabin. She pushed the door shut, letting it slam. "Good morning!"

Ivan grimaced. People were sleeping in the cabins around them, including Angela. "Morning."

Jayda didn't notice his displeasure. She dropped her dirty jacket onto the hamper and went to the closet. She had already put away her clothes and personal items. Ivan hadn't. "I have to get a shower and go to the gym. They're handing out schedules. I hope I get to be a rookie and go to training. I'm looking forward to learning kai."

Ivan let Jayda prattle, not listening but paying enough attention to nod his head in the right places. His mind was on the book.

“We had to take a crazy test. Lot of converting measurements.”

“Ah.”

Jayda grabbed a change of clothes. She bent to kiss him on the head, then hurried toward the shower. “I hope you have a good day.” She went into the bathroom but didn’t shut the door all the way. “I don’t know exactly where I’ll be, but I’ll try to catch up to you for dinner. I heard she’s doing something with...”

Ivan stood and began searching for his boots as she continued to babble at him. By the time the shower water came on, he was fully dressed, kit in hand. He had duty shortly anyway.

Ivan waited while she entered the water and slipped out of the cabin, locking the door. He stuffed the book inside his kit, hoping he got to finish it on a break. He was enjoying his new relationship, but there were times when he just wanted her to shut up.

He had told Angela it was a bad idea for Jayda to become a rookie. When she got her schedule and found out she’d been assigned to the kitchen crew, Ivan expected her to hit the roof.

He didn’t plan to be anywhere near her at that point. He also didn’t plan for Angela to be anywhere near her. Everyone was being assigned a job, whether they wanted one or not. There was no exception to that rule. Jayda would either do the work or she would find someone else to bunk with. Ivan knew it was wrong, but he was almost hoping she did cause a scene. This was a point in his life

where he needed to be able to think about the future, but it was impossible to make choices when the person next to him never stopped yapping.

2

“What’s all that noise?” Angela groaned, body aching. “Why is it loud?”

Marc jerked awake, sitting up.

Adrian shifted in the chair and brought it upright, listening. “There’s no noise.”

Angela let Marc help her sit up. “I hear people...” She scowled a bit. “Better mind reading skills? That’s it?”

Marc chuckled, glad she seemed to be herself.

Adrian swept her for the latest evolution and whistled. “Not just mind reading. Check out the fire.”

Angela slowly opened the upgraded weapon a hair... a powerful blast of heat sailed from her hand.

It smashed into the desk by Adrian’s chair, showering sparks.

“Automatic fire.” Adrian grabbed the extinguisher from the bathroom wall and sprayed the smoldering carpet. “Nice. I’ve only been around one other person who could do that, but his energy banks were small. I’ll bet yours can handle it for a full minute.”

“I’ll test it when I’m topside.” Angela went to the bathroom.

Marc opened the door to the cabin, meaning to go locate a guard for a check in.

Ivan yawned at him.

Marc snorted. "Same to you."

"Coffee for the boss?"

Marc reset his wrist alarm. "Some food too. Whatever you guys have been getting her to eat."

"Chocolate and potatoes."

Marc grimaced. "Yuck."

"Not together. We alternate those two until she complains."

"What does she change it to then?"

Ivan turned toward the next post. "Nothing."

Marc snickered. "That's Angie."

Adrian got up to leave them alone. He paused by the entrance, giving Marc a knowing look. "Now might be a good time to practice. I can delay the coffee by ten minutes."

"I need more than that."

"She doesn't. Haven't you ever grabbed her, made her cum and walked away?" Adrian shook his head, closing the door. "You have a lot to learn."

I've thought about it! Marc defended in his mind. *I just hate blue balls. Her moans make me hard.*

Adrian laughed all the way down the hall.

Marc went to the lavatory to find out if he could get them both there in ten minutes.

“We’re a kid short.”

Allison regarded Monica in horror. “No.”

“Yes. I counted three times. Then I went over the names. Amy isn’t here.”

Allison hesitated. “What do we do? Call for a search?”

“I’m not sure. Let’s ask the guards if they’ve seen her. If not, we’ll check the areas they’ve been to this morning. Maybe she got lost in all these halls.”

“Deal. You take the front. I’ve got the rear.”

The women went to opposite ends of the gymnasium to talk to the Eagles on the exits.

The guards panicked.

“We have a loose western UN kid!” Blake used his radio for the first time since they’d set sail. “She is three-foot, reddish blond, dangerous!”

“She’s lost, you idiot!” Ivan keyed his mike. “She’s not dangerous! It’s a little girl who wandered away from her group. If you see her, help her to a guard post.”

Ivan flashed Blake an ugly glare and spun toward the main hallway. “We’ll hunt for her. Keep the other kids on schedule.”

Monica was relieved, though she was certain they’d interrupted Ivan. He’d been hurrying by with a tray as Blake made the call.

Allison returned to helping the kids finish their math assignments.

Monica stayed by the guards, hoping for an update. Amy was missing on her watch. It was an awful feeling.

4

“Do you hear that?” Samantha cocked her head. “It sounds like crying.”

Theo hobbled toward the passage to check it out.

Debra stayed close to Samantha and studied them both to figure out what was going on.

“Are you lost?” Theo held out a hand. “You can wait in here. Want to see the bees?”

Amy sniffled, coming toward him. “I lost my Kimmie.”

“I don’t know who that is, sweetheart, but we’ll call someone to come get you. Don’t cry. It’ll be okay.” Theo led the child into the garden and pointed at Samantha. “She’ll show you the bees.”

Theo keyed his mike as Amy went to Samantha. “Can we get an escort down in the garden? We have a little girl who got lost.”

“Copy that.”

“Thank you!” Monica’s voice followed Wade’s over the radio.

Samantha studied Seth’s daughter, wondering how talented she was. Seth hadn’t shown many signs of power, but with their kind, that didn’t mean much. Samantha had heard the stories of how vicious Amy was during her time in the west, but it

was hard to believe when she looked at the cute girl in the jean jumper staring back at her with innocent hope.

“Where’s the bee?”

Samantha narrowed in on a nearby plant they’d brought from the mountain. She pointed. “Right there on the yellow flower. Pretty, huh?”

Around them, the garden wasn’t showing many signs of life. Things were still being planted, sorted and organized. In another month or two, this room would turn green and then burst out with patches of color. The seeds from these plants would be used in personal gardens around the island, both in and outside the homes they eventually built. Angela had big plans for the small space on the island.

Amy wiped away her tears so she could view the bee.

She stayed back, surprising Samantha. Most kids rushed in without contemplating the consequences. It was what made them kids.

Amy plopped her thumb into her mouth.

Samantha frowned. “Have you seen your daddy today?”

“Wis Becky.”

Samantha’s displeasure grew. “Instead of caring for you. Figures.” Samantha patted her knee. “You want to sit on my lap while Debra pushes us around?”

Amy climbed up, being careful not to hit Samantha’s stomach. She patted her belly. “Babies.”

Samantha nodded. "Two of them."

Amy smirked. "All boys. Sorry for you."

Samantha laughed and gave the girl a hug. She couldn't help it. Amy was cute.

"Stay here?"

Samantha shook her head. "I'm sorry. All kids have a schedule."

The little girl puckered up.

"Wait. What if we add an hour a week here for you? I can teach you how to care for the plants."

"Yes! And bees!"

"Of course. I'll add it to my nightly report. It will take Angela a few days to set it up, so no complaining until she gets to it, okay?"

"I promise."

"Did someone call for a piggyback ride expert here?" Wade appeared in the doorway.

"Wade!" Amy squealed, leaping from Samantha's lap.

Wade helped the girl onto his back and jogged down the hallway. "We're off to see the wizard..."

"Cute kid." Theo returned to the wires he was having trouble getting to reach all the outlets and plants.

Samantha stared. "Yes, she is." *I may never have a daughter... If Seth doesn't want her, I might.*

"Is that Dog?"

Charlie squinted down the dim hallway. Dog's fur blended in with the walls. "I think so. Looks like he's playing with...a mouse."

"We have mice?" Candy eased closer to Conner. "Ew!"

Charlie and Conner chuckled.

"It looks like a toy." Charlie pointed. "The cats are behind him."

"Where?" Candy didn't see as well as the teenage boys.

"In the shadows, lower right." Charlie softened his steps, hoping they didn't interrupt the fun until they'd gotten to witness some of it.

The trio neared Dog, who hadn't noticed them yet.

You grab it, like this! Dog pounced on the mouse. *Then you sling it and toss it.*

Dog paused, head cocking. *What do you mean, why? Because it's fun and it's your job.*

The two cats delivered haughty glares and slid around the corner, tails up.

You don't play with your food? Dog dropped the soggy mouse. *Where's the fun in that?*

Charlie and Conner were laughing hard.

Dog huffed, picking up the toy. *Come back here and learn how to do this!* He trotted around the corner. *Here, kitty-kitty...*

Candy enjoyed the good mood of the amused boys and the warm glow left by Conner's touch. He'd stayed the rest of the night in the chair, blue orbs smoldering at her whenever she glanced over.

“What are you scheduled for today?” Conner tried to break the flaring sexual tension.

“I have a skills test.”

Conner frowned. “What test can you take in your condition?”

Candy waddled along. “No idea, but I’m not worried over it. Angela wouldn’t endanger babies.”

“That’s true.” Charlie held the swinging door to the employee entrance for the galley. “Let’s try to sneak up on Serio. Mom sent him here an hour ago when she couldn’t take his stomach rumbling anymore. Told him to eat and then do guard duty until Ivan relieved him.”

“What is it with those two?” Conner grinned to show he was joking. “She got a thing for him?”

Candy snorted. “Ivan’s talented. Get used to him doing quiet and public duty for the boss.”

“But it’s more, right? That’s why she’s considering him for leadership.”

Candy frowned. “I doubt Angela would consider giving this camp to anyone who couldn’t handle the job.”

“She wouldn’t.” Adrian came around the corner with Ivan, both carrying trays and mugs.

“Agreed.” Charlie resumed walking to the galley, shelving his idea about Serio for another time.

Conner held the swinging door, flushing at all the attention shifting their way. “I smell eggs.” He sniffed. “Fried eggs. Can’t be.”

Candy laughed as they reached the line. “Omelets! Where did they come from?”

Lou smiled at her from across the serving island. “Brittani made them from powdered eggs. She’s got all sorts of recipes like this from after the war.”

“Bet she does great on her skills test.” Candy pointed while Conner loaded up a plate.

Lou chuckled. “Brittani does great at whatever she sets her mind to. Always did.”

Candy used a wipe on her hands while they chatted. “It’s nice to find a family who loves each other.”

“Thanks!” Lou reached around Brittani’s mother, Thelma, and grabbed a large cookie. He slid it onto the plate Conner was loading. “Boss said sugar goes to kids.”

“How sweet.” Candy immediately broke it in half and held out part of it. “It’s mine. I can share.”

“Thank you.” Lou took it, touched. Despite helping cook for Safe Haven, he hadn’t enjoyed the treats unless they were open to the general public. He wasn’t a kid and hadn’t felt right depriving them.

Conner enjoyed the moment. Candy was a kind person who had locked herself inside a tough shell so she could survive. When people got to know her, they would love her too.

Charlie gestured them to the farthest booth, hoping Tracy liked the note he’d left. He’d tried to make her a poem. Instead of soft and mushy, it had been funny. He’d heard amusement helped diffuse anger. He would work on romance next. He needed

a secure bond with his wife-to-be. She loved him right now. All he wanted to do was keep adding to that feeling. When the baby came, they would be close enough to endure the hard parts.

“Nice.” Conner was relieved Charlie had finally come around to the adult side of the life he’d chosen. “We can learn some of it together.”

Charlie ignored the Ciemus woman at the next table flipping her freshly-washed hair in his direction. “Yes, please. Start by telling me how to set up a great wedding for her. I want to do it so she’ll know it’s important to me; she’s important to me.”

“That’s perfect!” Candy dug out her notebook. “Let’s discuss a theme first.”

Conner stayed quiet, content to let her do whatever made her happy. When their turn came, he would know enough of what she liked to give her the perfect day. *I just need more time.*

6

“I believe he needs a little more time.”

Adrian leaned against the opposite wall, trying to block the moans coming from behind the door. He was glad Marc was taking care of her needs, but he didn’t want to listen to it.

The hallway outside Angela’s tiny cabin was narrow and covered in a cheaper carpeting than what was upstairs. *The pictures are also tackier.* Ivan flushed as the moans reached a climax and sent

chills through everyone who heard it. His body wanted to respond but he'd been loved recently. He willed it down and waited patiently with full hands for the couple to finish.

Adrian studied the residences around them, determining which ones were occupied.

“None for three rooms around hers. Mine is closest to the right, with Sam and Neil across from me. To the left, Wade’s cabin is first, with Shawn across from him. The rest of the residences in this hall are all Special Forces and their mates or kids.” Ivan had slotted the rooms himself. “Mention these *cells* are all small. She’s making her Eagles suffer so she can be selfless.”

Adrian chuckled. “I will. Thanks.”

“Got another one for you but wait until he’s blowing so he doesn’t hear me.”

Adrian frowned. Marc’s grunts and hisses were reaching their peak now.

Ivan stepped closer. “He doesn’t touch her enough. He’s scared to, I think. Unless it’s sex, there’s only physical contact when she initiates. Get him to change that. She needs ties to humanity, to *this* physical realm.” Ivan resumed his place on the wall as Marc’s noises faded.

Now that Ivan had pointed it out, he would watch for it. Adrian studied Ivan. “Why are you helping?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll assume it’s so you can be the leader while she’s pregnant.”

“I would never do that to her!”

Adrian believed the man. “Then tell me why and we can move on.”

“I can’t.” Ivan dropped his head. “You would probably understand more than anyone, but they’ll read it in your thoughts. I’m sorry. It’s not personal. Under other circumstances, we could even be partners.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed. “Do you mean harm to her or anyone she loves?”

Ivan grimaced. “No. But the spoils from someone else’s war are fair game.”

Adrian’s heart dropped, but he refused to contemplate it further and give the man away. Marc was now scanning the hall to see if the food was here.

Adrian concentrated and managed to turn the knob with his mind. Angela wasn’t the only one who had received a nice boost during an evolution.

Ivan snorted. “Show off.”

“Rookie.”

Both men chuckled as they entered and put the trays wherever they found room.

Adrian saw Angela was in the bathroom and went to her kit. He removed her extra shirt and tossed it to Ivan. “Hold that.” Adrian gestured at the shirt Marc was removing. “Give me that. Quick now.”

Marc handed him the dirty shirt, frowning. *What are you doing?*

Helping you. Adrian draped Marc's dirty shirt over Angela's kit and stepped away from it as she emerged.

Ivan shoved her clean shirt into his pants, scowling at Adrian.

Angela went for the coffee mug, then grabbed her kit. Marc's shirt stayed on the kit handle where Adrian had put it.

Angela stopped as something caught her attention, head turning. *What is that?* She saw the bulge in Ivan's pants... Angela flushed. "Good grief!" She marched into the bathroom with the kit.

Marc and Adrian burst out laughing as she slammed the door.

"Time for me to go." Ivan fled, not sure what to do with the shirt now.

Adrian ran a hand through his soft, clean hair, loving it. His first shower on the ship had been amazing. "What's on your list for the day?"

"A shower, then..." Marc stopped when Adrian shook his head. "What?"

"No shower."

Marc grinned. *I smell like her. Everyone will know what we've been doing.*

So?

It embarrasses her.

Are you scheduled around her today?

Marc ran through his list. *Not until later. I have a kid class after breakfast.*

Then leave it.

If she won't know, how does that help?

She will later and she'll like it you weren't bothered by it.

I'm not that much. Just seems cruel to rub it in.
Marc sighed. *Even to you. I'm not a monster.*

It doesn't bother me as much as you believe. Stop holding back on signs you keep her needs covered, that you love her. The camp wants to know you feel that way. It's good to show a little of it.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Angela joined them, buttoning Marc's shirt. "Didn't I have another clean shirt in my kit?"

Adrian shrugged. "I think Ivan packed it. You should ask him."

Marc hid a laugh. "Sounds reasonable to me."

Angela glanced between them. "What's going on?"

Adrian gave her an innocent look. "Why does something have to be going on?"

She frowned. "You're getting along. It's scary."

Marc chuckled. He slid his boots on and began lacing them. "Dinner when I return? Just us?"

Covered in his smell, Angela nodded eagerly. "I'd love that." His musky scent was fascinating. She didn't get it often. Marc was always careful to come to her clean, but sometimes a woman liked a bit of odor.

"Can I escort you or have a table waiting?"

"Ivan will handle it." Adrian encouraged the date. "Might be a good time to wear that ring."

Angela flashed disapproval in his direction. "What's your deal now?"

“Just think the camp would relax about all your fighting if they knew you were engaged.”

Angela’s anger faded into concern. “Are they worrying over the fighting again?”

“Yes.” Adrian tossed her a butterscotch from the wakeup tray the galley had sent. He wasn’t lying, only exaggerating. “The reasonable people have bets going. The crazier ones are contemplating trying to help by locking you together in a cabin for a week.”

Angela snorted out amusement. “He doesn’t have enough skin for that!”

Adrian burst out laughing. He’d forgotten she could hang with the guys and be just as crude.

So had Marc. He’d only glimpsed it a few times, unlike Adrian who’d witnessed her win over the Eagles when she’d joined his army. “Glad you’re in a good mood, Baby-cakes.” He smiled at her.

Angela noticed Marc’s smile didn’t expose his chipped tooth. She wondered if he was feeling self-conscious about it. She hoped not. It didn’t detract from his great looks at all. She planned to get the dentistry class going soon, though. He would still be the first patient. “Can we schedule that in, even when you’re pissing me off?”

“Of course. Oh, Ivan?” Marc used a snooty voice. “Can you please arrange a romp for the boss every Tuesday morning? The woman needs me to surrender my body, if not my mind, to all her passionate desires.”

Angela scowled at him. “Only one day a week?”

Adrian hit the chair, laughing too hard to stand. *This is interesting. I've never seen them like this.*

“Yes, darling. Don’t be greedy.” Marc played the royal husband effortlessly, chest puffing out, hands going behind his back. He peered down his nose at Adrian. “When in dire straits, I shall have skin grafted from you and sewn into a penile suit.”

Angela snorted amusement.

Adrian wiped away tears.

Marc sniffed, pretending to shift glasses further onto his nose. “I shall call my penile suit the dandy dickie. All the land shall want my dandy dickie.”

Angela wanted to help keep it going, but she was laughing too hard to talk.

Marc felt tension coming. *This is all we get. A couple of good moments surrounded by stress and discomfort.*

Angela sobered, nodding. *It's all we ever get. If you've got one more in there, give it now. We'll need it to help us through the separation.*

The fun had already faded for Marc.

Ivan tapped on the door. “Sir? The dressmaker has refused to make your dandy dickie. Can we offer you something in a lotion, perhaps? Or maybe an ointment?”

Howling amusement filled the halls and sank into the ship. The lights glowed brighter; the boat lifted in the water. *I had forgotten how human happiness feeds me.* The ship groaned and creaked, then settled in place. *I hope they keep laughing.* The

species was sometimes destructive, but the benefits outweighed the horror.

Voices overwhelmed Angela. She clasped her ears, trying to sort through it.

Marc and Adrian watched in concern.

Ivan came in to discover what had caused the instant mood shift. “Is she okay?”

“Hang on.” Angela forced the voices to a lower level and began sorting through them. “There’s a problem happening...”

Marc returned to working on his boots. “Get ready. We’re going early.”

“You think?”

Marc’s fingers flew over the laces. “Everything here is covered. It has to be something happening elsewhere. Our timeline has shortened.”

“Yes. I’m trying to see where it lands, but I can’t go deep enough to view it without the blur.” Angela strained to walk that line and pull enough details.

Adrian sympathized. That was how he’d been doing it all along. It was easy to miss problems.

“Leave at sunset instead of dawn. Stick to the plans we drew up.”

“Who’s our fourth?” Marc pulled on his Eagle jacket, still only accepting it for runs.

“Kyle’s bringing them. They’ll meet you at the boat.”

“What are you doing to keep the camp from seeing us leave?”

“The captain is about to announce a dinner movie marathon with the boss. It’s not mandatory

but it's highly recommended." Angela rubbed at her eyes, refusing to say goodbye to either of them. "Is your demon back yet?"

"No. It's only been a couple days. Scroll diving takes time."

Angela sighed. "Yeah. I miss the witch." She sighed, plopping down to get her boots from beneath the chair. She pulled up a pair of new shoes. "What are these?"

"Alternates so Ivan can get your boots cleaned." Marc ducked a gym shoe.

Adrian ducked the other.

"I guess you're barefoot today." Ivan gave her a disapproving frown. "Your boots had blood on them from the beach. None of us want to look at it anymore."

"Stop screwing with my head. I need things to be the same so I can keep all the other shit straight! You have no idea how annoying it is to lose part of a plan because you're sidelined by footwear." Angela retrieved the shoes and sat on the edge of the bed to don them. "Gym shoes? Really?"

"Stop worrying over your image. No one thinks you're fluffy in any way."

Soothed, Angela tied them tight and stood up to get her jacket.

Marc would have moved out of her way.

Adrian flashed a fast message in hand code. *Kiss her!*

Marc frowned, letting her get around him. *What's up with you today?!*

Preparations matter, Marine, but it's more than mood. Do you love her? Then show her. Love is an action as much as it's a feeling.

“Let’s roll.” Angela headed out the door. She delivered a quick look to Ivan, giving him the greeting that he liked. The one glance without any barriers allowed him to judge her mood and arrange her schedule accordingly. It also gave him private information he was storing for future use.

Adrian followed the couple, walking with Ivan to provide extra security. He had a couple items he wanted to mention to the man who would keep her alive until they returned.

Angela blew out a frustrated grunt. “Stop yelling.”

Adrian paused. “That was through my strongest shield.”

“So?”

“So you’re not even trying. Do someone else. Can anyone block you now?”

Angela went straight to Jennifer and Kyle, who were the best at keeping secrets from the camp. Their thoughts came through—loud.

Adrian felt concern instead of being happy for her. “No one keeps out an angel either. They told us that.”

Angela refused to answer.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Admit The Problem

1

“**I** repeat, dinner and a movie with the boss begins at 6pm. Meet in the mess for pizza and french fries. Slushies will be served during the show, along with popcorn and candies.” Grant hung up the mike, feeling cheers coming. He let the noise fade before addressing his crew. “Angela chose you men and women to help me sail this ship. Some of you know me from Ciemus. Some of us are strangers. We’ll get over all of that and put the ship first. Understood?”

Nine heads bobbed and waited for him to finish his speech. They were all eager to get to work. It would have been hard for them to explain how it felt to be atop a cruise ship, standing in the captain’s domain. At some point along this ride, they would get to sail the ship without Grant. It was a scary thought.

“We’ll man the boat in three shifts, three people each. I will sleep during the last half of the second shift and the first half of the third shift. You will wake me up for even the smallest questions.” Grant pointed at his cot. “For the first week or so, I’ll bunk here so you can get to me fast.”

Grant went to the board on the wall next to the award display. “These are the radio channels for areas of the ship. Memorize them, but do *not* write them down anywhere. Most of the camp is not allowed up here to view the information that’s posted. You will not discuss it anywhere but here.”

Most of the crew didn’t need to hear this speech, but the Eagles among them were glad Grant was following their code by starting the lesson this way. Angela had added a few more people to the boat crew, the same as she’d added guards to Grant’s protection detail. Those Eagles were in the shadows now, studying people. Ray had gone to get a shower and bring clean sheets for Grant’s cot. Before he departed, he’d given a speech of his own to the guards. It had been abrupt.

The Ciemus part of the crew knew they were being observed for problems, but they were all honored to have been chosen and a little bored by the words they’d already heard back in their town.

“Any questions?” Grant waited a few seconds, then went to the main console. “This is where it happens. I can start and stop us, kill the power to decks, drop the anchor or lift it. All main functions are on this keyboard. Never let me catch you leaning on it, eating over it, or getting it dirty in any way. Without this, we’re a small toy adrift in a huge bathtub.”

Grant motioned at the other panels. “Those control separate functions; some of them are also identical to those on the main panel. That side

covers the ship itself and sailing aspects that we'll get into during each class. Nathan, take that spot."

Nathan realized it was the XO seat and swallowed pride with his questions as he entered the small three-sided booth.

"This station handles ship quarters, entertainments, temperature controls and weather readouts. Claire, you'll handle it."

Claire, a tall brunette from Ciemus, flashed a smile and took her new post.

"The rest of you divide between those and observe everything I have them do. Tomorrow, you'll rotate. After a couple weeks, we'll begin rotating my post."

Everyone felt better as they realized everyone was going to learn all the stations.

The guards hated the idea. Instead of just having Grant to watch for betrayals, there would be nine more easily tempted humans to monitor.

"The dark screens are either things we don't need or things we don't know how to work yet. I'll be handling those until we figure them out. That way, if something goes wrong, it's because *I* did it. I always have a backup plan ready when I try something new or dangerous. This is definitely that. Do not push any button unless you are positive it's the one you mean to hit."

Gus stood in the rear of the crew, also honored to be here. He had a knack for numbers, but he hadn't believed Angela would assign him to

something so important. He'd expected to be a personal guard because of his size.

Quinn stood next to Gus, wishing the class was over. He had places to be and passengers to check on.

"Once every fifteen minutes, you will do a visual scan." Grant lifted his binoculars and studied the ocean on both sides, then in front of them. "While you do this, always check the horizon."

"What are we searching for?" Claire wanted to do well. She loved sailing.

"Anything out of place, including storm clouds. Damn." Grant keyed his belt radio. "There's another debris field, Boss. Do you want me to make an announcement?"

"That's your call, Captain." Angela's voice was calm, indicating she had faith in him.

Grant pointed at the radio. "This is for the entire ship. You hit this button and that one, then flip this switch." Grant took in a deep breath. "This is the Captain speaking. There's another debris field coming. I can't tell where it ends, but it doesn't appear very thick. Be prepared for a few minutes of rough sailing."

Light tension went through the ship and the crew.

Teams on the deck stopped what they were doing to go below for safety or to stare at the debris they were approaching.

Grant handed out two pairs of binoculars. "When this happens, you'll be my spotters. If

there's something we can't push out of the way, I'll try to steer around it."

"Uh, you mean like another boat?"

"Yes." Grant was already adjusting course. He'd spotted it on his first sweep. "Keep searching for problems. Don't get distracted."

It was hard not to. The debris piles were tangled webs of garbage and plastic clinging to trapped relics. The fishing boat only had a front hull, but it was still large enough to cause trouble if they ran into it.

Grant slowed the ship and depended on his skills since he didn't have radar to show him a path.

They slid by the rotting wooden ship, debris smacking into them.

Grant eased toward a clearer spot, frowning. He didn't understand why it wasn't... Grant readjusted, turning toward the debris instead of away from it.

His crew observed in confusion.

"Something right there is keeping the debris from gathering. Could be a place where the current's circling. It's not usually an issue for a ship this size, but I refuse to take chances. Eddies can be powerful. You have to have respect."

As they got closer to the clear spot, everyone viewed the swirling center and believed Grant was correct.

"I see something that looks too heavy to float." Ben held out the binos. "Concrete maybe?"

Grant surveyed the area. "Fish farm."

"Say again?"

“It was a fish farm. Concrete anchors with netted sides and bottoms. A lot of frozen fish came from places like this.”

Claire scowled. “Yeah, so did the sea lice outbreaks.”

“Yeah, but you have to admit, it’s better than cramming them into a tank in a warehouse. At least out here they got some of the same influences.”

“Yeah, like sea lice.” Claire wasn’t going to budge. She hated fish farms, no matter what they were raising.

“How did they get them to stay in place?” Nathan wanted to break the tension.

“The larger, more expensive farms were anchored to the ocean floor by concrete pillars. The cheaper setups and beginners used sinkers made of anything heavy.” Grant pointed, handing the glasses back to Nathan. “There’s a bigger whirlpool at three o’clock. For those of you who don’t know where that is, learn it. Clock Positioning is invaluable for pointing out location as we sail. Just saying to the right isn’t enough. Three o’clock narrows it to where on the right.”

“I see it!” Claire adjusted the glasses, no longer worrying over the debris they were hitting, shoving aside. “It’s sucking garbage from somewhere.”

“Coastal cities are still being wiped out. Hurricane season is busy now. There’s a lot of debris to be washed into the oceans.”

“What happens if we find a field that isn’t moving?” Gus had been worrying over that.

“We have to stop in time and try to locate the best place to go through. We also have to decide if we ease through or ram it with one of the smaller ships first. Let’s hope we don’t find one.”

Gus stared at the swells, stressing. It didn’t help to have his fear confirmed. They could get stuck. It had happened after tsunamis. Fishermen had been discovered alive, in debris fields.

But we won’t ever be found. Gus shuddered and tried not to think about it anymore as Grant steered them through the stinking garbage.

Claire was the only one who noticed the lack of birds. She started to ask about that, but it felt wrong to distract Grant with questions right now. *I’ll put it in my book for later*, she decided, resuming her search of the debris. *It’s probably not important.*

2

“You’re going away again.” Cody’s lower lip quivered.

“Yes.” Marc knelt by the boy to tie his little shoes. Both were unlaced. “You should be doing this.”

“I like them loose.”

“Why?”

“Noise.” Cody stomped, making the laces smack against the gym floor.

Monica rotated toward them. “Cody! Leave them tied!”

Cody snickered. “Me drives her crazy.”

Marc double knotted them, positive it wouldn't hold against the boy for long. "Why are you picking on Monica?" He frowned. "And why are you talking like a baby?"

"Missy said it might get you to stay if I act out."

Marc sniggered. "Good try. What else you got?"

"I don't feel well."

"Nope. Next?"

"I really don't."

Marc studied the boy. "Are you lying?"

Cody grinned. "Yes."

Marc tickled him, causing squeals to ring through the gym.

The other kids watched, envious that Cody had two parents. They'd forgotten about Julia's death.

Marc felt the envy, but he didn't interfere. His son would become heir to Safe Haven the instant he and Angie got married. If Cody grew into the job, he would probably get it since Charlie didn't want it. There would always be people who were jealous of what birth had provided. Cody had to learn to deal with it now.

"I am." Cody delivered a stiff glare to the closest boys, daring them to let the tiger cub out of its cage.

The boys lowered their eyes or dropped their heads, unwilling to meet the challenge. Marc doubted it was because he was here. Cody had bruises on his knuckles. "Been fighting since we set sail?"

Cody shoved his hands into his pockets. “Who, me?”

“Yes, you.” Marc pushed aside the pride to be a good parent. “Come on, fess up.”

Cody glanced at Timmy. “I couldn’t reach his face.”

Marc studied Timmy, picking out details.

Timmy limped to the basketball net and removed one ball. He didn’t look at any of the kids. He started his workout with subdued throws that landed in the hoop again and again.

Marc led Cody to a nearby bench and waited for the boy to get settled.

Cody opened the mental barriers. “I’m ready.”

Marc entered his son’s mind, not straying. He felt bad about not being with Cody while he was born and growing. He didn’t want to know how bad it had been. Thanks to the discovery of a twin, he would have to find out, but it didn’t need to be now.

Cody waited patiently, enjoying the scents of musk and vanilla. *He smells good today, like a real dad.*

Marc caught that thought as the memory began to replay. Timmy had tried to bully the kids into letting him be their leader because he was the oldest. Cody and others had refused. Before Timmy could hit him, Cody and Missy had attacked.

“She climbs better than me. She got a hit on his neck. When he bends to get the ball, you can see it.” Cody stared, waiting for Timmy to look at him.

“Then they voted for Kimmie over you.” Marc pulled it out of Cody’s mind. “Does that bother you?”

Cody frowned. “Why would it? She’s an alpha.”

“You’re Byzan.”

“I will be when Angela unlocks it for the final battle, but Kimmie already has access. She deserves to be in charge.”

Marc was glad the kids weren’t fighting over leadership either. “Anything else like that happen?”

Cody grew sad. “We talked to Leeann. If she makes more trouble for the kids, Kimmie will ask Angela to lock away her gifts so we don’t get blamed.”

“That’s very good.”

“Kimmie wanted to ask for that now. I told her everyone deserves a second chance.”

Marc recognized his own weakness in his son and immediately wanted to set the cute boy straight on it. He chose to handle it when he returned because of the depth of that conversation. He didn’t have enough time right now to be sure Cody didn’t fall into the same traps he had. “Anything else?”

Cody stood up, feeling the moment coming. “Hang on.” The boy let his red orbs come forward just as Timmy stole a glance at him.

Marc hid amusement as Timmy stumbled over the ball and barely kept himself from hitting the floor.

“Why did you do that?”

Cody led Marc toward the jungle gym, away from everyone else. “He was thinking about catching Missy alone. I reminded him that she’s never alone.”

Marc felt a stronger bond forming. Cody was protecting his friend the way he protected Angela.

“She’ll be mine when we grow up.” Cody ducked into the round playground and began climbing the inside bars. “We’ll be best friends by then. We’ll put flowers on the graves of our family together.”

Marc shivered at the chill. “You mean me and Angela.”

“We bury you together. Shawn is there too. Missy doesn’t know. She thinks someone saves him.”

Marc swallowed questions as other kids came over, drawn by the sadness Cody was emitting. Missy was in the lead.

Marc put a hand on Cody’s ankle, all he could reach now. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Hurry home.” Cody pulled his leg free and kept climbing.

Marc left as the other kids surrounded his son, even those who had shown jealousy. He was glad the boy had comfort, but he was also worried about it. Jennifer was right. Cody needed a fulltime guard. *I’ll do that before I leave.* When he returned, they would discuss the visions Cody had seen. They would also talk about his past. Marc needed a clue on where to begin searching. He was convinced

Cody knew about his sister. Much like his own heart, Cody's had a hole that was dark and unfillable. Missing a twin was awful.

3

“Is anyone listening to us right now?” Adrian paused in the stairwell. Marc and Ivan had left them after breakfast. Ivan had other chores and Marc was arranging a guard for Cody.

Angela concentrated, nose filled with Marc's scent and ears ringing with the thoughts and voices of everyone on the ship. She was relearning how to keep that caged. “No. They're all eating lunch. Brittani did something great with Vienna Sausages apparently.”

“Good. I want to talk to you about what happened when you died.”

Angela froze, thrown back into terror and joy. “What about it?”

“You had a choice to go right then. What happened? Something made you change your mind.”

Angela stared at the display case showing the former employees, not seeing it. “I decided they couldn't be trusted, no matter what deal was made. I chose to conquer them when it's all over.”

“What about the great reset?”

“I haven't figured that all out yet. The angels and Messenger mentioned it, but I didn't want to give away my idea by asking questions. So far, it's

like erasing a bad game to start a new one now that you have the information. They think wiping the board will bring the Creator back to paint a new picture. They're searching for a second chance, the same as we all are." She regarded Adrian. "Did you see me taking over heaven and hell when we first met?"

"If I saw it, I didn't recognize it for what it was." He waited for more, hoping she would share.

Angela descended the stairs to the training room. She'd spoken to Kyle about it. Marc and Adrian would find out at some point, but not until she'd finished her plans. The second meeting was more dangerous than the first one had been. The opposite king didn't need anything she had.

Adrian caught up to her, scanning the halls as they emerged onto the entertainment level. The Eagles had set up a workout area in the rear room. It was a good design that allowed them to keep track of the passengers who wanted to party. There were quite a few of those, making the senior men uneasy. If Safe Haven grew lazy, they were all in trouble.

"Hey!" Ian hurried toward them. "Did you give this order?!"

Adrian slid in front of Angela, frowning. "Calm down."

"Fuck you." Ian shoved by him.

Adrian spun and grabbed Ian by the arm and neck. He used their forward motion to slam the man against the wall, then held him there, ignoring the grunts and shouts.

“Let me go! Get off me!”

“Calm down.”

“I’ll kill you!”

Angela placed a hand on Ian’s shoulder.

Ian stilled, unable to fight it.

Adrian let him go, but he didn’t retreat.

Eagles reached them at full runs. They surrounded Ian, hands on knives. Firing weapons on the ship was forbidden except in emergencies.

Angela picked up the folder Ian had dropped and scanned the single sheet of paper. “Yes, it’s my order. What’s the problem?”

Ian’s anger returned, but he knew better than to move or yell. “You’re asking me to do the same thing that got me bumped to a shit job in the first place!”

“No, Ian.” Her tone went cold. “I’m teaching you when to run your mouth and when to listen.”

“I knew it! This is punishment!”

“For breaking Eagle code.” Adrian tugged on Ian’s jacket, straightening it. “She can’t talk around you. If you fail this, you’ll never be a true Eagle. They can be trusted to keep a leader’s secrets and help with plans.”

Adrian retreated, motioning the guards to return to their posts. “If all you care about is clucking, *dude*, there’s space open with the hens.” Adrian rotated to Angela, scowling at her. “I hate it when you put words in my mouth and make me say them. That’s why you do it, right?”

“Of course. You’ve been banished. You can’t tell him anything, but I can make you do it, make you feel it. Knowing you may never get to again is awful, I suspect.” Angela switched her attention to Ian. “Are you taking the job?”

Ian, red-faced and glaring, gave her a curt nod.

“I need to hear it, Ian. There are a lot of Eagles who do want the job.”

“I’ll do it, but not for the secrets. I want my place back.” He gestured. “They all believe I’m a blabbermouth.”

“You are.” Angela pushed harder, ready for this moment to be done. “Your first test is now. Say it. Admit the problem.”

Ian almost shouted at her. He wanted to rant and scream and maybe even swing.

Angela studied him. “That’s disappointing. Shall we go over the list?” She held out a hand.

Ivan quickly dug through the daily logbook and handed it to her, open to the correct page.

“You told a senior Eagle that Adrian helped gather cargo with the crews. You almost repeated that to a camp member, but the same senior Eagle interrupted the conversation. You informed a lower level Eagle about us observing several camp members for violations of the morality code, specifically, the age law.”

“Candy and Conner.” Ian’s anger fled. “I did. I thought it was okay to—”

Angela walked away.

Adrian and Ivan followed, disappointed because Angela was.

“Wait!” Ian considered the moments where he’d teased people with tidbits and hinted about operations Angela had going. “I’m sorry.”

Angela stopped but didn’t turn. “And?”

Ian’s hands clenched into fists. “I’m a gossip. I talk too much.”

She resumed her walk. “Get to work, Ian. I’ll expect your first report at dawn, the morning of the camp meeting.” Angela turned left at the intersection. Ian would take the opposite hallway and join the cleaning crew who was about to begin scouring bathrooms throughout the ship. While there, he would gather information and keep it to himself. If she’d heard about anything he reported, before he gave her that report, Ian would be out of the Eagles.

4

“All I have to do is answer these questions?” Candy held up the paper she’d been given upon entering. “That’s my test?”

Neil pointed at the desk next to Samantha. “When you’re done, we’d also like an eye exam and hearing test if you’re feeling well enough for it.” The room they were in had been a small bookstore that hadn’t been used for a while. It had been closed, dusty and didn’t have any books. The Eagles had turned it in to a classroom. It still smelled musty and

needed a good dusting from the cleaning crew, but it was perfect in size and location. It was close to all the steps that led to the top and bottom decks.

Candy moved toward the desk. "I'll be fine." She took the seat, noting all the students here were female and pregnant. Tonya and Rose were in the rear, not looking at each other.

Samantha winced at a paper cut and stuck her finger in her mouth, sucking. "Get comfy. These are detailed questions."

Candy shifted to find a spot. The chairs weren't bad, but a baby was on her bladder today.

Rose, and Sabrina from Ciemus, nodded when she glanced around. Everyone else was working on their test. Candy opened hers and read the first question.

List three things you dreamed of being as a child.

Candy frowned, skipping ahead to the next question.

List five things you think you excel at.

"What is this?" She regarded Neil.

"Told ya." Tonya held out her hand. "Not even thirty seconds before she asked."

"There's still one more." Rose moped at possibly losing their bet.

Courtney opened the door and peered in. "Am I in the right place?"

Neil held out a test. "You're late."

“I had to pee.” Courtney swept the room and paled, realizing the same as everyone else—this class only held pregnant females.

“Have a seat.” Neil pointed.

Courtney went to the desk by itself, face red. “I haven’t known for long. I wasn’t hiding it from the camp or the father.”

“Have you told him yet?” Tonya was curious who it was.

“No. He’s been busy.”

“Can I ask?”

Courtney shook her head. “It wouldn’t be right.”

Tonya beamed at the rookie. “It’ll be okay. Eagles are stand up guys.”

“I’m not telling him.” Courtney opened her test. She read the first question.

The rest of the women waited, holding in comments.

“Oh, cool. Self-evaluation testing! I used to love doing these in college.” She got to work answering the first question.

Tonya and Rose stared at each other.

“We didn’t account for anyone liking it.”

“No. Does that invalidate our bet?”

“We said all of them.”

Tonya shifted restlessly, sweating. “Fine, you lose. Be at the lab tomorrow to help me put away the rest of the books.”

“I will.”

Neil snickered. They were like any group of male students. Angela would be able to make big plans around these females once they gave birth. He held up a notebook that was locked like a diary. “This is my collection of notes on descendant pregnancies. The answers you put on some of those pages will be added to it. Be generous in your details and opinions about what’s happening to you. No one knows your body better than you do.”

“Is it a medical journal or an everything journal?”

Neil frowned at Tonya. “Why?”

“Because you may not need to know about crazy dreams if it’s just medical.”

“What kind of crazy dreams?”

“Aliens.” Tonya chuckled, hiding how much it had bothered her. “Something came from the sky. Funny, right?”

The women gave weak chuckles, but Neil wrote it down. “Add everything. Angela can decide later if it should be separated.”

“You got it.” Tonya resumed writing, bracing to relive her nightmare.

Neil didn’t tell them Samantha had dreamed something similar last week. He felt Sam staring, but he refused to look at her and confirm there was a reason to worry. He would make sure Angela got his notes on it. He didn’t believe for a minute it was aliens coming to enslave them all, but maybe the Messenger had decided to pay them another visit.

“The boss knows you can’t do physical testing right now. After you’ve recovered from having your babies, you will be given the full test then. When you’re finished here, the boss wants you in the mess for lunch and then down to the medical bay for a checkup.” He scowled at them. “*No exceptions.*”

“I have tests running in the lab. I can only be gone another hour and twenty minutes.” Tonya was prepared to fight over it.

“I have a class of gardeners coming at about the same time.” Samantha was enjoying being in charge of the garden, without other responsibilities. It was peaceful.

“Then you should both get your food to go and attend that medical checkup. The boss said if exams can’t be kept, then your jobs are keeping you too busy.”

Scolded by Angela without her even being here, both women fell silent.

Neil pointed at the chalkboard. “Sign out when you leave. Security is being revamped for the next week and we want to know where you are or where you’ve been.”

“Is there a new problem?” Candy didn’t like the idea of being tracked like a loose dog.

“No. Anyone who doesn’t want a guard can discuss it with the boss.”

The women relaxed. Only a couple of them planned to ask for complete freedom. It was nice to have someone nearby to make sure they stayed alive.

“The last item on my list is mouse control. We have two cats and a half ton of traps. No poisons will be used, but pregnant women are still not allowed to interact with the traps for any reason. If you have problems in your work area, report it, try to cover whatever they’re messing in and encourage the cats to spend time there. If the cats leave a pile of anything behind, do *not* touch it.” Neil looked up. “I assume you all understand why?”

Everyone nodded. It was well known that cat feces was dangerous to the unborn.

“That’s it, then. Finish your survey.” Neil made notes and waited for them to be done, restless. It felt like trouble was coming and not just for the camp. He felt as if he personally was in danger.

The speaker crackled. “It’s nearing lunch time, Safe Haven. I’m told we have Vienna Sausage spaghetti. After lunch, all descendants who have not yet informed the boss of new gifts or been given a time for a personal test will go to the workout center on the third deck. That’s deck C. While it is optional, anyone expecting to join the Eagles or retain Eagle status must attend.”

“Is that any of us?” Tonya glanced around.

“Not me.” Samantha grimaced at a sharp kick. “I’m not even allowed to climb the stairs. If there’s no ramp for my chair, I have to be carried.”

“Same here.” Candy waved the note. “Kenn gave me this a few minutes ago. It’s a list of ‘don’t do or face the wrath of the boss’ warnings.”

Tonya scowled. She dug hers out and held it up. “Kenn left it on my pillow. At first, I thought it was a poem or a note.”

The other women flashed similar papers, laughing.

“I’ll be free after I get the next batch of tests running. We could grab a snack then and go watch the next magic show.” Tonya was finally organized enough that she felt okay being out of the lab between batches.

“Sounds good.” Samantha was also eager for a change. She missed the wind on her skin.

“I wish we could sit on the top deck and enjoy the sun. People are saying it’s warmer and not cloudy today.” Rose also wanted to know if land was still in view, but she didn’t mention that.

Courtney was already mourning the lack of freedom. If not for being given the note and a time to be here, she wouldn’t have shown up. She’d only begun to suspect the pregnancy. Now she knew for sure. *I’m having a baby.* “I know a way we could get up there without breaking the no-stairs rule.”

Neil frowned. “I didn’t hear that.”

Courtney ignored him. “The service elevators don’t have guards. One goes to the top deck for serving the passengers. It’s big enough for a wheelchair.”

Neil groaned. “I told Angela putting guards there couldn’t wait another day.” Neil made a note in his book, but it was too late to stop this minirebellion unless he called and tattled on them.

Samantha glared. “Don’t do that.”

Neil knew she was feeling caged. “I won’t, but only because there’s room for your chair.”

Samantha beamed. “Awesome. This is going to be a good day. You’ll see.”

Neil wished he could concur, but death was heavy on his shoulders. *I’ll be happy if we just get through it alive.*

Chapter Twenty-Three
Powerful Signs
Day Four

1

“**S**how me what you’ve got.” Angela settled into her seat, notebook and pen in hand. There were guards, camp members in the stands to observe, and descendants waiting to be called. Only the kids and pregnant females were missing. They were undergoing medical checks in the infirmary. Everyone was avoiding that area to give privacy. This lesson was being held in the ballroom that had been emptied. Safe Haven wouldn’t be hosting dances here.

There were several clubs downstairs for that. The fragile, expensive furnishings they had found in here would be recycled into something else or stored as trade items for when they returned. They didn’t need gold forks and spoons, but it could be used for something else later.

Trinity drew in a breath and brought up the four-layered shield to prove she’d mastered it.

“Good. What else?” Angela assumed everyone had at least one skill beyond shielding and mind reading.

Trinity released the barriers and picked a target.

Guards stared, not understanding what was happening.

Trinity pointed at Daryl. A wave of energy sailed toward him.

Daryl took a step forward, snared. He fought back, mentally and physically.

Trinity hit him again, yanking her hand inward.

Daryl groaned at the pain of resisting.

Trinity took pity. "Use your shield."

Daryl brought up two layers, then dropped to his knees, out of energy.

Trinity stopped snaring, loving the claps and respect coming from the observers, but she was also disappointed Angela wasn't impressed.

"Anything else?"

Trinity had planned to keep her last gift to herself, but she couldn't stand Angela's bored tone. She pointed at the farthest entrance, where the guards weren't paying attention to her.

The door opened and slammed.

Guards shouted, some of them drawing weapons.

Angela wrote it down. "Thank you. Please return to whatever you were doing or scheduled for." Angela waited for her to stomp off.

Marc motioned Brittani forward, getting attention. The two women were rivals. Did Brittani have gifts to match? Everyone waited to see.

So did Trinity. She lingered behind the bleachers, watching around the side.

With so many descendants in one room and so many minds on alert against people prying into their secrets, it was tenser than Angela had planned on. “Whenever you’re ready.” She flipped the page to Brittani’s name.

Brittani waved her hand and opened *all* the doors to the room. When she slammed them, almost everyone jumped.

“I think I should have called off today.” Ivan was already getting a headache from the noise. He yawned and waited for the next surprise, wishing he’d slept more and read less.

Brittani brought up a shield and wrapped it around the person next in line. Then she repeated the action, six more times.

Descendants stared, wondering how they were going to match that.

Brittani drew in air, struggling to do the last one. *I want this. Help me!*

Her witch woke, whimpering at all the light.

You’re one of the good guys. Get over it. Help me.

Energy surged through her body. Brittani lifted a final shield over herself, making it a total of eight.

“How do you do that?” Angela waved her pen. “Specifically, I mean. I use chocolate.”

Brittani let them all go, gasping. “Same.”

“Interesting.” Angela wrote, talking at the same time. “Chocolate helps strengthen energy banks. We’ll add a daily serving of some type as soon as I get settled into ration amounts for the next year. I

almost have that worked out now.” She regarded Brittani. “Anything else?”

Brittani shook her head, breathing harsh. “Got food cooking... Go?”

“Yes. Next?”

“That’s me.” Conner stepped forward in the silence. “I need a shield.” He regarded his dad.

“No family allowed during a test.” Angela gestured at Marc.

“Make it big.” Conner waited for Marc to bring up the shield and then walked through it. He stopped chest to chest. “Can we test someone else to see if it works on everyone? I don’t know that yet.”

“Granted. Jennifer?”

Jennifer took Marc’s place, bringing up her strongest shield without being in battle mode.

Conner came right through.

“I didn’t even feel it.” Jennifer returned to her place, not happy about Conner’s evolution. If he could do it, others could too.

Eagles observed, also doing their own evaluations. The rumors of Angela forming a kill team were associated with this demonstration. They all assumed the people with the best skills would be chosen to return with Marc and Adrian to find Cody’s missing sister. Stories still flew fast in Safe Haven.

“My fire also gets through.” Conner’s head tilted. “I think. It was hard to test on my own.”

Jennifer moved back, waving at him. “I’ll absorb it. Hit me.”

Conner sent a weak blast through her shield. It landed in her hands, inches from her face.

Jennifer sucked it down, then belched loudly, drawing snickers from the witnesses. Then she dropped to her knees from the pain.

“Secret weapon. Nice. Practice with anyone brave enough to try.” Angela added a rule. “Fire gear is mandatory.”

Conner strolled to the bleachers and sat down to view the rest of the demonstrations, proud of himself.

Kyle helped Jennifer to her post, glad she would be filled after the power finished merging.

“Next?” Angela was also glad Jennifer was being refilled. Jenny had been busy, but her work wasn’t done yet. The girl had given her a small stack of notes on topics they’d discussed. Angela planned to sort through them tonight, but she’d spotted one to be worried about. Jennifer’s conversation with Neil hadn’t gone well. He was blaming himself for Becky’s condition. Worse, he was stressing over her trial hurting his place in camp. Beneath Neil’s cool demeanor, trouble was brewing.

Morgan moved to the center of the room. He made eye contact with Angela for permission. “A shield maybe?”

Angela gestured toward the guards. “Pinpoint a target.”

“It’ll hurt them.”

“Lower the pitch.”

Morgan smiled. "I didn't think of that. Hang on." He concentrated, then sent out a wave of power. It flew through the air and slammed into Tommy, taking him to his knees.

"What was that?!"

"A type of sonic blast, like what Marc did at the mountain. Some of these gifts can't get a real test here, but we'll make do." Angela wrote it in his file. "Next?"

Marc tensed as Charlie came forward. He'd often wondered what gifts his firstborn child had, but he'd never asked. After a while, he had assumed the boy couldn't do much or he would have shown it. Then the fight at the mountain had come and revealed a power to rival his mother at some point.

Charlie knew they were all expecting something big, but he didn't feel like showing off. He brought up a copy of his mom's fire shield and spun it across the room to protect her.

The witnesses liked that, as he'd known they would. Charlie quickly changed it to a wind shield blowing around her like a defensive tornado. When he released it, he wasn't even winded.

"What else?"

Much like Trinity, Charlie didn't like the bored tone. He brought up a new shield around himself and made the wind inside it spin so hard that he vanished from sight. He lowered the shield and kept the wind around him as he walked toward his mother. Few descendants could shield themselves

while they were moving, but he was also using nature instead of his normal shield. “Better?”

She wrote it down. “Much. Next?”

Charlie frowned at her coldness. He understood she couldn’t show favoritism, but he’d hoped for more.

You didn’t put in the effort for more.

Marc sighed when Charlie ignored him and left. The boy still had a lot to learn about growing up. *I hope I get the chance to teach you. A few years doesn’t seem like enough.*

Tell me about it. Angela pushed aside personal thoughts and got back to work. “Next?”

2

“I’m here to pick up four kits.” Ivan handed the note to Brittani, thinking about what he’d watched her do at the demonstration. She would be valuable in a fight. She could protect an entire team.

Between meals, the galley was quiet and almost deserted. Only part of the cooking crew was here while everyone else took their tests or slept between shifts. Ivan heard the dishwasher running and smelled food cooking. The equipment was getting a work out.

Brittani marked the note and pushed it across the counter. She ducked down and pulled out four kits. “Boss wants these in the armory next. Leave them by the right lockers and you’re all done.”

“No one signs for them?”

“I didn’t ask.” She turned toward the row of ovens. “I’m sorry, but I have a lot going on here right now.”

Ivan wasn’t offended. “Have a good one.” He headed for the armory, located near the new cabin that Marc had arranged for Angela a short time ago. She didn’t know yet and he wasn’t anticipating telling her. He understood what she meant about having things remain constant, but he also believed she needed to be reasonable about some changes. A larger cabin would be beneficial in many ways.

Ivan increased his pace, wanting to be with Angela when she went to the top deck. The captain had sent a note that passengers were gathering up there. Ivan was positive she would go up soon to check it out. Afterwards, there was dinner and entertainment to get through before he would be able to return to his cabin and reread the book he’d finished on a break. Many of the parts were lingering, especially the ones about power and how it corrupts even the best people.

Ivan tapped on the armory window and went in.

The room was empty, but a camera rotated toward him as soon as he entered. Ivan waved, making a face and put the kits below the matching lockers. He wasn’t sure having names on them was a good idea, but he also didn’t know how else they would identify everyone’s gear. None of the bags were standard, though all of them had the basics.

Ivan left. He approached the intersection to take him to the top deck, able to feel Angela heading that

way now, and stopped. Unease was flowing, but not from the deck where people were gathering. Ivan followed the feel, dismayed when it led to the stairs at the end of the hall. *The brig's down there. It's Becky again.* Ivan slid down the steps and went to the guard station.

Ben and Wade lifted guns at his footfalls.

“Easy.” Ivan joined them, noticing they kept their guns in hand. “What’s up?”

Wade gestured toward the cell. “She’s...upset. Seth’s trying to calm her.”

“She had a bad dream and it rolled from there.” Ben holstered, feeling like they were overreacting to a teenager. “Tell the boss she’s getting worse.”

Ivan wrote it down, then went to the barred window to observe and listen. Ben and Wade couldn’t read her thoughts, so they were missing a part of the picture. He concentrated, straining to read through the red haze in Becky’s mind.

We have to do it now. The weather’s calm. The boat isn’t rocking at all.

Too many guards, and people up and about. We’ll leave during the camp meeting.

Now!

No. I have to get more ammunition. You need to rest.

I have to kill her.

Why?!

Slavery is wrong.

I keep telling you, these people are not slaves.

She hooked them in. You too, maybe. None of you can see around that.

I'm not brainwashed.

You are! She's evil!

Shh. Calm down. It'll be okay.

I'm sorry.

So am I. Here, take your medicine.

Ivan retreated to write it in his book.

Wade cleared his throat and tried not to sound totally freaked out. "What are you going to do about her?"

"Send you more ammunition." Ivan stored his notebook. "We may need to keep her out of her own trial, or she'll be hanged."

Ben frowned. "They're set to *escape* soon. She won't face a trial."

Ivan snorted, heading for the stairs. "Becky isn't leaving. She'll come to the trial to reach Angela. Seth will have to drug her to get her off this ship."

Wade immediately added that to the report for the end of his shift, hoping Ivan repeated it to Angela. Knowing they were in sync would encourage the boss to do something about it. Wade definitely thought an intervention was needed. If Becky walked out of that cell, someone would die.

3

"We get the kids, while the camp gets the boss?" James hammered a peg into the rail. "Doesn't seem like a fair trade."

Greg chuckled, handing him another peg for the next rail. “Get used to it. Those little monsters will be Eagles, someday, caring for us in our old age.”

“We’re in deep shit.”

“Yep.”

The new training room for the kids had been a daycare center. The Eagles had cleared it out and restocked it, providing a place for their kids to exercise and release some of their pent-up anger. The Disney decorations on the walls and floors had been left to please the younger ones.

The other men in the room listened to the jokes and helped with the massive project. When Safe Haven first began, Adrian had used a training course for the kids, but when things got crazy, they hadn’t been able to keep up with that tradition. Angela had gotten Theo to design a setup they could dismantle or put up in half an hour, allowing them to restart the workouts for the kids. The adults got one too—putting it together and away.

Greg glanced at the guards for a confirmation that things were okay and was glad when he got one. People were all off on their own projects now. Security on the boss and council was light. It was peaceful again and going well. That worried him. Greg held in a shudder at the memory of Becky setting him on fire. He’d never felt pain like that.

James tackled the last rail, back aching. “We’re ready for the connector in thirty seconds.”

Men on break hurried to collect the top portion of the wooden setup. On the bottom, the kids could

run a zig-zag course throughout the level, ending in a slide back to the floor. The top level had pullup bars, a tall, netted ladder along the wall and several areas for a rotated workout on weights and a treadmill. It wasn't painted, but it had been sanded and was fine for use.

Near the chairs put out for breaks, Dog was sleeping with his head on his front paws. He'd come in to get scratched and snooze while the cats were getting a flea treatment.

“Ug! Is that a rat?!”

Men grabbed for guns, spinning around to find two long haired creatures with wild yellow orbs glaring at them from the entrance.

People cackled as they realized what it was.

“Must be bath day!” Greg returned to the work of lining up the top and bottom to take the pressure off the men holding it in place.

Both cats stalked into the room, spotting Dog. They paused to shake and lick where needed, twitching at the laughs.

“Look out, Dog.”

The wolf didn't move.

The cats walked faster, sensing a window closing to sleep on his warm body.

Dog lunged upward, tossing a large toy mouse with his teeth. *Get it, kitties!*

One cat hissed and smacked at the flying object, knocking it back toward Dog.

The male cat yowled, fleeing blindly. It smacked into the open door and skidded out into the hallway.

The female followed the mouse in a fast blur, pouncing on it as it slid under Dog's side.

Witnesses howled as Dog panicked, fleeing the attack cat with a whimper and his tail tucked.

He went into the hallway, followed by the cat.

She swiped at his back legs, furious about being set up.

The toy mouse was abandoned to the humans who couldn't stop laughing.

4

"Is everything set?" Jennifer joined Kyle in the employee hall across from the row of den mother cabins. Those men and women were on rotating shifts in the living quarters, allowing them a few nights a week here in the quiet area.

Kyle held out her kit. "All covered. Allison has Autumn until we get home?"

"Yes. She's very sweet. She can't have kids of her own, you know. She's one of the Safe Haven females who are sterile. Being a den mother was the next best choice for her." Jennifer knelt to dig in her kit. She changed quickly so she could blend into the shadows.

"The guards are coming. I hear Daryl's big mouth." Kyle liked Daryl, but it was a telltale sign.

“Angela ordered Allison to stay in the cabin with the babies until we return. She has Special Forces on all details outside the entrance.”

“I ordered it, Jenny. Angela signed off on it.”

“What?”

“I don’t know Allison very well.”

“Oh.” Jennifer relaxed, buttoning her shirt. “That actually makes me feel better. If there was a problem coming, Angela would have already had it on her list for this run.”

“I think the same.”

The couple quieted as the voices got closer. The wall between them was thin, allowing Kyle and Jennifer to overhear the conversation.

“I think it’s a bad sign.”

“It’s probably a satellite burning up.”

“Could be a meteor too.”

“Agreed. Now let it go. We’re on duty in three...two...one.”

Knock-knock. “This is security team A. Is everything okay in there? Do you need anything?”

“Just quiet so the kids will take their nap.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jennifer tugged on her jacket, trying to be silent so the guards didn’t find out they were here. She hoped Autumn had a good time while she was gone, but it felt wrong to leave her baby at all. If not for the run they were making being so important, she would have refused it.

Kyle waited for her, then led them through the dim corridors. He'd memorized the routes to half the ship through these dingy, twisting paths, but few of the other Eagles were bothering to learn them yet. Kyle planned to add it to training. Angela had given him free rein to change and tweak the plans she'd delivered yesterday.

Jennifer dwelled on the conversation they'd just overheard. She assumed people had spotted something in the sky, but she and Kyle weren't stopping to view it. They would be on the open ocean shortly. They could view it from there, along with their teammates.

Kyle increased the pace. They were going to be late by almost a minute.

"This way." Jennifer grabbed his wrist and ran, using her mental map to drag him through the passages he hadn't explored yet.

"Here. Squeeze in." Jennifer shoved him into the elevator and shimmied in with him. She hit the button and flinched as the gate snapped shut.

Kyle held her close, taking the rusty ride with a smile. "I'll be using this again. Don't tell my team."

Jennifer let them out and took off running again.

Kyle chuckled, easily staying on her heels in the narrow hallway meant for employees to traverse unseen, one at a time. The halls were roughly two-foot wide and coated in layers of dust. Kyle didn't think many of them had been used even while the ship was in operation. The paint here was peeling off the walls and it held a damp smell that implied

one of the pipes might be leaking somewhere, though he didn't spot puddles as they ran.

Jennifer pushed through a wide door and stopped. "We've been here a while. Look the part." She began smoothing her clothes and slowing her breathing as voices echoed outside the opposite entrance to the rear loading chamber.

Kyle did the same, smothering amusement. Neil would have fun keeping up with her on runs.

"There they are." Jennifer pointed as Marc and Adrian entered.

"You guys ready?" Kyle followed up, deflecting from their appearance.

"We did an extra check on security posts. That thing in the sky is making people nervous." Marc scanned the couple and shook his head, smirking. He went to the small boat Kenn had gotten ready.

Adrian hadn't noticed. He was lowering the rear ramp. It was his job to launch the boat and jump in without dying or being dragged across the ridged floor. Neil would be by in a few minutes to close the ramp.

Kyle directed Jennifer into the right place on the boat, showing her where to brace her feet to keep from sliding. He was a bit surprised neither man had protested her being assigned for the run. It was dangerous.

"We want to see what she can do." Marc settled into place, ready to make the call for Adrian to launch them. "Angela had her tests. Jennifer's having one now."

Jennifer laughed, clapping. “Yeah! Tell me who to shoot.”

The men snorted or rolled their eyes.

Marc dropped his hand.

Adrian was watching for it. “Hang on!”

Jennifer clutched the rubber handles and kept her attention on Kyle so she would know what to do next.

The launch and Adrian’s jump happened at the same time, allowing the former leader to land in his seat with perfect grace... Then he hit the floor and slipped, flying onto Marc’s lap as they launched.

The Marine boat shot out of the rear of the cruise ship with two passengers shouting and two of them laughing.

5

Ivan climbed the next set of stairs, bad feeling growing. Something was happening on the top deck now and the boss was up there with only half a team for security. Almost everyone was on the top deck now. No one was panicking, but tension had once again joined their ranks. There was even talk about it being a missile, that the war was happening again.

Ivan weaved in and out of groups of camp members, not running so he didn’t spread panic. He didn’t know yet if there was a reason to run.

Ivan emerged on the top deck, shielding his eyes from the sun. He’d spent the last few days organizing below decks for Angela. He’d had one

shift up here yesterday while she worked with the children. That was all the fresh air he'd gotten since they set sail.

Ivan spotted Angela across the deck. As he went to her, he noticed everyone was peering upward.

Ivan didn't let himself glance at it until he reached Angela's side, putting them hip-to-hip.

She had security from the men who were on duty up here. Those men resumed positions, confident Ivan would protect the boss.

Ivan finally looked up. When he did, he found it hard to glance away.

A blazing ball was streaking through the sky, leaving a crackling and sparkling tail. It appeared as if it were on fire. The front of the glowing ball was pale blue. The sky around it was pristine.

Camp members began calling to each other for information.

"Does anyone know what it is?"

"Maybe it's a meteor."

"I believe meteors travel faster."

"Maybe the space station fell. Or a satellite."

"I think there would be disturbances in the sky. That looks like it's still in space."

"Do we have anybody who might be able to tell?"

Heads twisted, searching for Samantha. Storm tracking was her gift, so people naturally assumed space was included in that.

Huddled in the protective center of the other pregnant females, Samantha shrugged at the

questioning glances. “I can track storms. I know squat about the sky.”

“I think it’s a comet.”

People turned to Thelma.

“I’m pretty sure we were supposed to get a comet. I remember talking about it at work with some friends before the war. We were all saying there’s a Russian comet coming next year.”

“We’ll check the books on it. In the meantime, let’s have a closer look.” Angela turned to Ozzie. “Go tell Theo we need the telescopes. Everyone can stay up here until dinner is ready and take turns viewing it.”

Ivan sighed tiredly. “I know where those boxes are. I’ll need some help.”

Angela motioned a few of the bigger camp members along to help carry. To ease Ivan’s discomfort, she moved closer to a guard post.

Ivan descended, thinking he’d never gotten this good of a workout before. There were more stairs on the ship than hallways.

Angela observed the sky with a hand over her eyes to shade them for a better view, like almost everyone else was doing. She used her improved sight to narrow details the others would have to see through the magnifying lenses of the equipment they had brought along. She thought Thelma was right. They were seeing a comet. It was the first one she had viewed in her lifetime, beyond pictures or television. That was probably true of most of the people here.

Because the boss wasn't showing signs of panic or worry, neither did the camp. They passed the word and accepted it as a normal phenomenon that occasionally happened. Passengers who had planned to go below and wait in the galley for dinner now took seats around the large, dirty pools in the center of the ship and gazed at the sky.

"Aren't comets harbingers of doom?"

Eagles gave Blake dirty glares, but the rookie didn't notice. He was on break. He'd come up to hit on the single women, but they weren't paying attention to anything but the sky.

"I mean, in the past, entire civilizations have fallen over the appearance of a comet because they believed it was God telling them to make war. Won't that happen again, especially now that society is almost gone?"

No one wanted to answer because he was right. There was little doubt the more primitive people of the world who were viewing it might interpret this as a sign to do something drastic. Those societies hadn't been big on science in the first place. Many of them wouldn't understand it was natural and didn't mean anything.

Are you sure it doesn't mean anything? Angela's witch slowly returned to her cell, limping and dripping muck. *Just because something is a normal event in your world, that doesn't mean it can't be a sign of something else in someone else's world.*

Angela was forced to acknowledge that. She stewed on it while the witch went to her mental bunk and collapsed. *Have I missed anything? Who isn't covered?*

Her mind went straight to the team that had just departed, unnoticed. *Please keep them safe.*

Unwilling to dwell on what couldn't be changed, Angela joined the pregnant women for a light scold and to deliver permission for them to come up using the elevator from now on. As long as they had their medical checks, even Samantha could navigate the stairs, but Angela wasn't rescinding the no-steps order. Dreams of something coming for their kids had only increased since they set sail. She'd scolded Marc and Adrian this morning for interrupting her thought process, but the nightmare had actually been responsible for it. She was terrified. Once again, death was flying toward them and this time, she had no defenses ready.

6

“Wow. That's amazing.” Angela swallowed and scooped up another bite. “What's in it?”

“Rehydrated beef, kidney beans, carrots, capsicum, and sweet potato. It's called chili con carne. I added the rice a little heavy to boost health levels. More vitamin A and potassium, plus fiber. I've been feeding everyone rich meals. Gotta keep those bowels flowing.”

“Well, it’s really good.” Angela took a bowl for her tray, making the cook smile. “I think we’re stocked on all those items. I’d like you to add this once a week as a standard meal for either lunch or dinner.”

“I can do that.” Brittani wrote it on her sheet of notes and returned to filling bowls from the large steel pot next to her. “I’m making that list now. I should have it done and turned in over the next few days.”

“You’re using recipes with items we have a lot of?”

“Yes. So far, we’ve got three bean meals, two rice meals, four cereal and powdered milk days. Nine of twenty-one slots. I’ll also add snacks and desserts when I finish the main courses.”

Angela swept the kitchen crew, aware of Jayda glowering at her. Jayda had been denied Eagle duty because she talked too much, but she wasn’t saying anything now. “How’s your replacement doing?”

Brittani kept writing, aware of the sparks flying around her head. “She’s smart enough to do all of it. Will she? That remains to be seen.”

“You explained how important the job is?”

“Oh, yeah. She doesn’t care about the level of work involved. She just wanted to do other things.”

“Did she tell you what those other things were?”

“Yeah.” Brittani sighed. “Thank you for telling her no. The interview went fast. I only said about five words. Ivan’s right.”

“I thought so too. Any idea yet what will tip it in her favor?”

“Her first meal for everyone.” Brittani shut the notebook and stretched, spine popping and neck aching. She was beat. “The happiness of a full camp anticipating the next invention sold me. It might her too, but it depends on how strong her desire to be a fighter really is. You know that.”

“Yes. I’m hoping this will give her some of the same feelings.”

“We’ll see.” Brittani picked up a small cup of vitamins and deposited it onto Angela’s tray. “Once a week. Orders from the medics for all females who are or might become pregnant in the future.”

Angela took them without arguing, heart hurting. *I still miss them both. I could have thirty more live births and I’d still miss my two dead children.*

Around her, the camp chatted about the day’s events, the comet, the magic demonstrations and the meal. The clutter of voices and reflections gave Angela a headache. She went to the center table and perched on it instead of taking a bench. No one else was at the table. Angela didn’t expect anyone.

She slid into the center and crossed her legs, drawing attention and tolerance. In a polite society, her actions would have been unacceptable. For addressing Safe Haven, it still felt right. “Bad news first, then the good. Ready?”

People braced. Those in the middle of making plans for the evening scowled, sensing they were about to be upended.

“The top deck is off limits for tonight unless you have guard duty.”

Groans filled the room. More than one couple had been going to sky gaze and make out in the dim lamp light.

“The wind has picked up all day. Those of you who just came down noticed it, I’m sure. The comet is out of sight, but another storm is coming. Please, make me happy and wait until morning or tomorrow night, okay? If you fall overboard, we won’t be able to hear you or see you, let alone try a rescue.”

A somber mood came in. Many people shifted to view Shawn or Missy, who had experienced that.

Shawn glared at Missy and Leeann in turn.

Leeann kept her eyes on her plate and didn’t respond to the sudden attention.

Missy glared back at everyone but Shawn, arms crossing over her chest. She didn’t glance at Shawn at all. Seeing him fall into the water had been the worst moment of her life so far, easily beating out any of her time with Tara. Samantha had warned her she was going to get Shawn killed and it had almost happened. *I’m not having anything to do with him ever again. Then, he’ll stay safe forever.*

Across the galley, Angela and Samantha caught the thought. Neither woman was relieved. Missy had just proven her love was real. By giving up her heart for his life, she’d proven it wasn’t a spell or an

obsession that needed to be blocked. They were meant to be together.

“That’s all the bad news. All I have left is to let you know that a few people in leadership have been overloaded. I insisted on them taking a break. Don’t bug them. One of those couples needs the...rest.”

Everyone who got the inuendo tittered or whistled. They’d noticed Kyle and Jennifer were absent.

“To make up for the top decks being closed tonight, we’re opening...” Angela peered at the sheet and cleared her throat. “Okay. We’re opening ‘Spanky’s Dance Disco’ for couples only. A guard will be posted.”

More amusement echoed, breaking the rest of the tension from the appearance of the comet. Theo had verified that suspicion by finding a passage in a science journal about celestial events. The book was floating through the meal, getting dirty.

We need to laminate the books. Angela smiled at her people. “You’ve got me for two movies, a late-night snack right here and a tour of all the open shops.”

The cheer from that drew attention from the ship. The walls began to give off a soft green light that warmed chilly skin.

“All kids are to go to the small training room after you eat. The guards there built something special. They’re going to teach you to use it.”

Once again lined up on stools across from each other, the kids and fighters eyed each other in the same wary suspicion.

“The shops and clubs from last night are opening as we speak, along with the beauty shop. Candy has been authorized to open one hair booth and supervise a worker, so sign the sheet I’m passing out now.” Angela let it fly toward a group of healthy camp women who pushed and shoved in fun to reach it.

The women around Candy were from the pregnancy class. They’d stayed together all afternoon and into the evening. They smiled at Candy, glad her place in camp was smoothing out.

Candy searched the crowd for Conner, aware of the good vibes but not enjoying it. They’d been apart all day and she didn’t know the plan for tonight. She could be alone; she just wanted to know if she would be.

Never. Conner appeared in the window along the opposite wall. He flashed her a quick leer and disappeared again. *Just busy, baby.*

Candy blushed at the endearment. *Okay.*

“That’s it from me.” Angela held up her mug. “Here’s to six hours of fun!” Angela drank the toast and picked up her bowl of chili as people came by her table and went to others.

Some of those were guards waved into position by Travis. Ivan was off duty and Travis hated it. No one kept track of Angela the way Ivan did.

The camp started gravitating toward the fun, encouraging others to finish faster. It didn't take long for the galley to empty, leaving only a few passengers who weren't going to the entertainment floor. Angela swept them, making sure everyone was covered. Most of them were contemplating sore bodies needing a bed. She approved and followed her camp to the fun. She hadn't had many nights like this where she could relax, and she didn't expect to have many more. She hated being without Marc, but she was anticipating a little fun without any of her men sniffing and getting jealous. Tonight, for a change, it really would be just her and her people. *I need it as much as they do.*

Chapter Twenty-Four
Under The Weather

1

“People aren’t going to like this.”

Ivan led Jeff toward Angela’s new cabin for third shift duty. “She gave us a list of names for when we need to rotate. You’re on it.”

Jeff liked how that felt. He wanted to be useful to Safe Haven as more than just anger control for their kids.

“Don’t knock that job. She spends a lot of time on plans for them. Your classes have to be related.” Ivan handed him a notebook. “I’m two cabins down on the left. Greg is two cabins down on the right. You’ll have a partner, but not for the first two hours. You have the code book for rookies?”

“Yes. I remember a lot of it.”

“Good. We hate giving out books, but it’s hard to practice on your own without a manual or guide. Don’t forget to sign it. We only let one copy out at a time.”

“You have a waiting list?” Jeff stored the items in his new Eagle jacket. The Scott vests were great.

“It goes to those who show promise or are needed in other places.” Ivan strolled down the hall. “Doug gets it next.”

Jeff liked that too. Doug was a good guy. In his day, he'd no doubt been a loyal badass. Now, he was a dependable Eagle for shifts that needed to be filled. In time, maybe Angela could find a more important job for Doug. He had earned it, in Jeff's opinion. The big man was doing duty over Cody right now, proving he was trusted by the boy's father.

Jeff wondered who his partner would be as he took his post and got set to be there a while. In two hours, all the shifts changed. Angela had requested hers early so Ivan would get some extra sleep. He'd stayed up too late reading the last couple nights. Jeff didn't know what the book was, but the soldier was protecting it as if it were a gold brick. That made Jeff want to know. He loved to read.

Following the rules, he tapped on Angela's door to make contact and ensure his protectee was fine upon taking over a shift. "Everything good in there?"

"It'ss fine."

Jeff heard the slur and assumed she'd had too much to drink. "I'm out here if you need me."

Something fell over, thumping to the floor.

"I'll get that when I come back." The sound of gagging came next.

Jeff left her alone. Alcohol was rough, especially for those who didn't binge often.

Jeff glanced up as Ivan returned. "Problem?"

“She didn’t drink anything.” Ivan dug out his key. “I knew she rushed me out for something.” He went into the cabin as the sound of vomiting echoed.

Jeff stayed in the hall to deflect passengers, wondering if she might be pregnant. When a woman got sick, it was the first condition he suspected.

“See if anyone else is ill. Could have been dinner. It’s been about five hours since mess.”

Jeff went to find the man on point tonight.

Angela recovered slowly and opened the bathroom door, but she stayed near the john as she flushed.

Ivan got a glass of water ready and then dug through her kit for the crackers he’d stashed there. “Seasick?”

“No.”

“Other symptoms?”

“Just tired now.” Angela rinsed her mouth and sat on a stool. “I’ll be fine in a few minutes. I probably mixed something I shouldn’t have.”

Angela’s new cabin was twice the size and held an extra bed that was already covered in her gear. Ivan hadn’t put it away for her because he didn’t know where she wanted everything. If she was like the other Eagles, the weapons duffel bag would go under her side of the bed and not in the closet.

“We’re checking on dinner to be sure.”

Angela groaned. “I didn’t eat lunch or breakfast, other than the wakeup tray the galley sent. Chili on empty guts is hard.”

“Any heartburn?”

“No.”

“We’ll check things out, per your rules.”

“If someone else is sick too, there might be a problem. One is random. Two might be a pattern.”

“We’ll know in a little bit.” Ivan heard steps and went to the hallway. He saw Morgan coming with his medical bag.

Morgan yawned as he entered the cabin. “Jeff said I should stop by. Evening, Boss.”

Angela came from the bathroom, shaky and pale. “Same to you.” She sat in the chair and let him give her a quick exam.

“There are no other illnesses, that we know of.” Morgan soothed her concern as he got to work. “Other than me. I have enough heartburn to fuel a jet.”

Angela chuckled weakly, relaxing. All she wanted was sleep. It was a relief to know there wasn’t a problem with anyone else. “The chili got me. Don’t make a fuss.”

“I won’t.” Morgan wrote the results on his clipboard and went on to the next test. He hummed as he worked, wondering what the waves looked like. The wind was almost howling. It couldn’t be pretty.

“How are all your patients?”

“Fully recovered, except for Zack and Ramer. Both are coming along nicely with Conner’s healing sessions.”

“Sally?”

“Fully healed.” Morgan’s calm faded. “Becky’s the one I’m worried about. Jennifer handled the gunshot and baby damage but mentally, she’s pouring blood.”

“I’ve been thinking about talking to her.”

Everyone scowled.

Angela sighed. “I can’t think of anything else to get through to her.”

“You can’t save everyone.” Morgan put his equipment away and left without giving a diagnosis.

Angela returned to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She felt better now, but she wanted to sleep.

“I’ll stay here tonight.”

Angela didn’t argue. She always felt better having someone she trusted close by in case things went hinky.

Jeff joined them, finally releasing the scowl he’d hid all the way here. “The captain got sick half an hour ago but refused to make a medic call. He’s in his cot on the bridge, sleeping. Ray’s watching for a fever. The boat crew is on duty—all of them, with Claire and Nathan in charge.”

Angela came out of the bathroom and went to her bed. “Wake me in an hour with an update.” She tried not to yawn as she climbed under the blankets, boots on.

Jeff and Ivan shared a worried glance and settled into their posts, leaving the door open so they could communicate by hand gestures.

Angela dropped out right away, tormented by images of death and endless failures at sea.

Down the hall, Jayda pulled the sheet up and lay there. *I'm just a distraction when he isn't serving the queen. I don't like this deal. I was supposed to get a good man, a good mate. All I'm getting from this is quick sex and sweaty arms that aren't even here half the nights. And when the permanent cabins come out, we aren't being put together unless I'm pregnant and maybe not even then.*

Jayda rubbed her belly, letting her mind drift. She'd wanted a baby for a long time. When the war came, she'd never believed she would have one. Now that there was a chance, she still wanted the kid. She just didn't want the man. She might if he wasn't already in love. Competing against Angela was impossible. *It would be easier to kill her.*

2

Tracy opened the cabin door, responding to the quiet tap. Charlie had just finished taking care of their animals.

Charlie handed her a small bag and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll be around if you need me."

"Are you working?"

He tried not to glance at her long legs in the pink nightgown. "Doing rounds before I crash. It may be a while."

"Okay." She came forward for a kiss.

Charlie held her, heart settling into a peaceful rhythm he knew he would always associate with her. No one else made him feel this way.

“Sleep well.” He waited for her to lock the door, then continued down the hall. Many of the pregnant women were in this deck of cabins. He had delivered snacks to all of them. He’d thought of it for Tracy and realized everyone probably wanted one. Tracy had been his last stop.

Wind howled outside the ship, drawing reactions from those sleeping. Dreams shifted; mutters echoed.

Charlie strolled through the hall, nodding to guards who were also feeling the absence of four strong members of their camp. Few people had noticed the team was gone, but everyone still felt it.

Dog came around the corner and fell in on his heels.

Charlie was glad of the company. He wasn’t scared, but he wasn’t calm either.

Dog studied the voices and vibes, not liking the unease of the humans. Even the cats were acting strange. He hadn’t seen them in hours. The rocking swells and loud wind made the felines jumpy.

Charlie went to the brig deck. He’d told Tracy it might be a while because he wanted to spend time down there, listening. Now that he didn’t have to be an Eagle anymore, he had free hours to do with as he pleased. Choosing to spend it on rounds didn’t feel strange to him. His dad was off ship. It fell to him to keep his mom safe and things weren’t right

somewhere. He was betting on Becky being involved.

When he finished the brig deck, where everyone was sleeping but the guards, Charlie did the same to all the other decks, Dog at his hip.

When dawn arrived, he fell into a restless slumber in the living quarters with the wolf across his ankles.

People wondered if he and Tracy were fighting, but no one woke him to ask or to alert him to his next shift. He wasn't an Eagle anymore. His schedule wasn't important to them.

3

“Hi, Panaji. Enjoying breakfast?”

Panaji grinned, showing a mouthful of chewed pancakes. “Is good!”

Daryl sat across from the man, noticing he was alone at this far table. He'd just woken and wanted coffee. “Things okay for you?”

Panaji shrugged. “They no trust me yet.”

“Is anyone bothering you?”

“No. Just no talk.” He pointed. “Except the angels. You all talk to me.”

“Sorry about that. Over time, the camp will understand you're one of us.” The other new citizens weren't being given a warm reception either. It had only been a few days; Safe Haven hadn't forgotten their enemies. Rachel and Leeroy

were under heavy scrutiny from nearly all the two hundred people in this galley. Their daughter, Sally, was at the counter with the other kids. She appeared to be having fun chatting with Sean and Caleb. The other children weren't paying her much attention, telling Daryl they hadn't found a problem with her or they hadn't scanned her yet. Unlike the adults in here, the kids weren't concerned over the rough seas or rocking boat now. The weather topside wasn't a concern for them.

They were all eager for the classes scheduled today. Conner, sitting at the end of the counter to suck down a quick meal, was slotted to go in the first wave. His test was being done in the gymnasium while the kids were doing their workout with Jeff in the training room.

Daryl spotted Kenn in the corner, working on a CB system that would enable them to have contact with home until they rounded the tip of South America. Once they reached the island, Kenn hoped to set up a high distance repeater tower to carry their transmissions all the way from Pitcairn. Daryl yawned, hoping Kenn succeeded. It would be good to get reports of what was happening there while they were gone. *Eagles always look ahead. Lesson...?* Daryl frowned. *I forget the lesson number. That's not good.*

“Can we still see the comet from the deck?”

“I don't think so.”

“Too bad. I've never seen a comet.”

“Me either. Hopefully the storm clears before it passes our hemisphere.”

Daryl listened to the conversations and thoughts, but he didn't dig deep. He was enjoying the peace and the sight of Brittani working behind the counter of the galley. She had flour on her face. It was cute.

Brittani swiped at her cheek, spreading more flour. *Did I get it?*

Daryl nodded, trying not to laugh.

Brittani grabbed a towel and went to the rear of the cooking area to scrub.

Daryl switched his attention to the crew in the center. The fishing team had been scheduled to spend their first day learning the ropes, but the captain had vetoed it because of heavy wind and rough seas. They were now drawing up plans for a system to use during rough weather. Afterwards, they were on downtime. Daryl expected the crew to show up at the testing area. Everyone wanted to watch the demonstrations.

Daryl took two Advil with the last of his coffee, then cleaned up his mess. He was aching in places and it was a bad day for it. He was on duty during the tests. Then he had duty over Autumn again.

Brittani returned to the line, joining Jayda at the serving trays where they were jamming up. She took the farthest tray first and slid it onto the counter, allowing the others to drop. It was an odd loading system but efficient for such a small space.

“Cool.” Jayda switched to that method, following the leader. She was disappointed she hadn’t gotten an Eagle slot, but she did enjoy cooking. Brittani had fun recipes to play with and she was an easygoing teacher. She led by example.

“You okay with this now?”

“I will be.” Jayda dumped the coffee grounds into the recycle jar and placed the used filter on the shelf. It would be wiped off and reused. “I’m not used to the fast pace. That’s the hard part.”

Brittani snickered. “Yeah. These people like to eat.”

“And have sex.” Jayda shrugged at the surprised glance. “What? You hear them too. I know you do because it’s everywhere. Damn ship full of rabbits.”

“Like you aren’t enjoying having a top Eagle at your beck and call.”

Jayda didn’t reveal her inner turmoil. “That does have perks. I just meant it seems like sex is all people care about since we set sail.”

“I don’t believe that’s true. You just haven’t seen everything going on.”

Jayda snorted. “You must be one of the few women not jumping your man at every chance in hopes you’ll get pregnant.”

Brittani stole a look at the table where Daryl was sitting and found it empty. “I’m on the pill.” She refused to say she and Daryl hadn’t had sex yet.

“Then you’re in about the same boat as Trinity. She stopped taking her pills, but she said Gus

won't..." Jayda realized who she was speaking to. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"Gus won't what?"

"Give her a baby yet."

"What about you?" Brittani neatly flipped the conversation. "Are you trying, like the others?"

Jayda touched the cooking food and determined it needed a bit longer. "I quit taking my pills after the war, but we don't get a lot of time together."

"Well, that should change once the camp settles down. We've only been at sea a few days."

"Yeah." Jayda began chatting at the next person who'd come to get a tray, sensing Brittani didn't really want to talk.

Brittani finished the meal and slipped away as soon as she could. She'd forgotten something important.

Brittani jogged down the stairs and went to the infirmary, hoping no one else was there.

4

Morgan glanced up. He sat the inventory clipboard list on the counter and picked up the one for passengers. "What can I do for you today?"

Brittani cleared her throat. "I'm out of birth control."

Morgan didn't blink. "No problem." He pointed to a glass case. "See if you recognize the kind you normally use. If not, I'll dig out the book and ask you some questions to narrow it down."

Brittani scanned the round containers. “That one, on the end.”

Morgan retrieved it and relocked the glass. He wrote her name and the serial numbers on the clipboard, then slid it into a small brown bag.

Brittani smiled at him for the discretion. “Thank you.”

Morgan let some charm come through, practicing for Pam. “It’s my pleasure.”

Brittani shivered, then laughed. “Be careful. A male snare is powerful.”

Morgan frowned. “I wasn’t using a gift.”

“Yes, you were.” She held out her arm, showing goosebumps. “I always keep a shield up and I still felt it. That’s a rare gift.” She tossed advice over her shoulder as she left. “Make sure you tell the boss. Someone else will if you don’t. Not me, of course. I’m just the cook.”

Morgan chuckled with her and added it to his report for the day. He added his respect that Brittani was preventing a pregnancy and his curiosity as to why. The other females wanted to have babies and the men were coming around to the idea now that there were so many females to pick from. Something was different for Brittani. Angela might need to figure out what. Like Adrian, Angela encouraged the races to mix, but it would be hard if all races didn’t breed. As far as Morgan could tell, Brittani was one of only a few black females here who might be able to have children. At some point, Angela might ask her to procreate for the survival

of her race. If there was a big reason why she wouldn't, they needed to know that now.

Daryl appeared in the infirmary doorway, appearing as though he'd been kicked.

"You okay?" Morgan put the sheet from the clipboard into Brittani's file and got a new one for the next passenger who might come in.

"I didn't know she's scared to have kids." Daryl had caught her thoughts as he came down the steps. She'd been busy sneaking into the storage area to take a shortcut to the elevator and hadn't noticed him. Daryl hurried after her.

Morgan added the observation to his notes and returned to doing inventory. He enjoyed this work. It was soothing and easier than being put with the kids or fixing meals for the camp. He could have done those jobs, but Angela had rewarded him with the career he'd always wanted and couldn't afford. Becoming a doctor had been expensive before the war. Now, it was free, but he had to learn hands-on. Morgan was eager for the challenge.

Daryl caught up to Brittani while she was waiting for the elevator. He stopped a few feet away, not sure what to say. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but her pain was hard to ignore.

"I'm fine. I'll get over it."

"We don't have to have kids."

Brittani frowned. "I want to. Just not yet."

"There's no pressure from me, but Morgan's right, you know. I'm white. I can't help keep your

race alive. You need a black man to give you children.”

“Stop it. I don’t care about that.”

“You might when we return and you see how bad it is for them, for everyone. You could be a queen too. You’re good. You should have that honor.”

Brittani put a hand on her hip. “Don’t you think I’ve already considered those options? I don’t want that life. I don’t want a separate black society. I like it here, and....” She took a step toward him. “I want love. I don’t care what color it comes in.”

Daryl’s eyes darkened. “I’ll give you all of that you can handle. But you have to love me back. I won’t settle for anything else, not even for you.”

She held a hand out. “I feel the same way.”

Daryl took her hand and pulled her into his arms. He lowered his head to hers, groaning at the full body contact. “I want you!”

Brittani had been worrying over that a bit. Desire flooded her.

Daryl kissed her cheek and slid to her neck. His grip tightened, pulse racing. “I had you moved to the cabin next to mine.” He reached into his pocket and held out two keys. “The extra is to my cabin. You can have your own or you can move in with me. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

Brittani took both keys, blushing. “How soon do you need an answer?”

“I don’t. When you’re ready to use the second key, use it. If you don’t, keep it to make you smile.”

He grinned at her warm reaction. “Just like that.” He kissed her cheek again and retreated as the elevator opened and people emerged. “Have a nice day.” He went to the stairs and quickly vanished from sight.

Brittani got into the elevator, happiness lingering. He was perfect. It was scary.

Daryl strolled the lower halls, checking on guard posts and enjoying the quiet moment to think. He was courting Brittani the way he’d always hoped to do with his future wife. He knew they were a soul match and he wanted her in his bed. Now, they would begin building a future together.

Daryl slowed as a crackling noise caught his attention. A mix of a beep and a grind, it sounded like a wire spewing electricity. He followed it to the messy cargo area and entered the first huge room. The stacks of gear and supplies here were massive. The noise could be coming from any or none of those.

Daryl listened hard but lost the sound as the ship’s engines kicked on. He left, frowning. A watch alarm was driving them all crazy.

Satisfied the lower levels had guards who were alert, Daryl went up the steps, heading for the skills test. He had a busy day ahead, with no time to track down one annoying little sound.

5

“She’s crazy. Tell the boss she needs to be sedated.”

“I’ll mention it, but Angela isn’t going to agree.” Ivan wrote notes in his book, listening to Becky’s whisper of blood and death. The girl was falling off the edge faster by the minute. A lot of people had come and tried to talk to her, but she wanted Angela dead. She wasn’t going to change her mind.

Ivan passed Kendle, who was cleaning the bathrooms in the other cells. He nodded to her but didn’t stop. He wanted her locked up too. Maybe listening to Becky’s rants would help the castaway resist her need to try again. Either way, Ivan had two bullets ready—one for each female.

Kendle was listening to Becky and hating it. She recognized her own illness in the teenager, but there was more. Becky had truly snapped, and she wasn’t coming back. Kendle didn’t want to go there. She had another chance to live and she was suddenly grateful for Angela’s choice to spare her life. When the end came for Becky, she wouldn’t even know what was happening or why.

Tonya came down the hall. When she spotted Kendle, she gestured. “Got a minute?”

Kendle wiped her arm across her brow to remove the sweat. “Depends on why.”

“I need blood samples from some passengers. You’re one of them.”

Kendle didn’t mind. She hoped Tonya’s tests resulted in something that helped the cancer patients. “Go ahead.” She rolled up her sleeve.

Tonya used precise movements to take the blood, getting good with practice. She'd already done everyone in Jeff's western group, including the kids.

Kendle noticed Tonya appeared happy and was able to be glad for her. Kenn was a good mate for the once wild redhead. "I'll be by later to clean the lab and change the litter boxes."

"Okay. It's locked when I'm not there. The guard can let you in."

Kendle waited for more, but Tonya finished and headed for the brig without saying anything else.

Kendle returned to scrubbing, not offended. Tonya was busy keeping her tests going and her nose clean. Kendle planned to do the same. Listening to Becky was enough. *I'm pulling back from that dark edge. I still hurt, but I no longer enjoy the pain. I have a chance to recover now and I want it as much as I want Marc.*

6

"There are seven parts to this test. They will be spread over a few sessions. Fail one, you fail them all." Greg paused to be sure the rookies were listening. "These results, combined with your skills demonstration, will determine your place in Safe Haven. Give it everything you've got if you have hopes of becoming an Eagle." Greg pointed to the first of three tents in the gymnasium. "This is part one. Go in, sit down, view the images. Come out

and speak to one of the Special Forces men who will be waiting. They'll tell you where to go from there. Line up."

Conner hurried to the front of the line so he could get rolling and get gone. He had animal and kid duties after this.

Wade wrote his name down, certain the boy would be directed to the tent on the right when he finished here. Conner was sharp on details and light on recklessness. It was a good match for an Eagle. Unlike Charlie, who had been sharp on both. Seth had been like that when he joined too. Wade was glad Charlie had dropped out of training. The boy was only here to complete the skills evaluation.

Rookies went into the tent, emptying the gym. There were only ten of them today. Angela was sending groups of people they needed cleared first and fastest. It would probably take the entire trip to the island to get everyone done.

Wade signaled for Kenn to begin the film they had chosen to use. They'd watched it themselves, then wrote down what they remembered for use in the test. There were easy and hard observations on the sheet, with an underlying theme of loyalty. All Adrian's training videos encouraged that.

After this, rookies would go to a weapons test or fitness challenge. Weapons meant they were still in the running to be Eagles. Fitness meant to finish the tests so Angela could assign them a job on the ship or island. Eagles who scanned those sheets would see which test had come second and know

that person's future status. Wade believed Angela had done it so Special Forces could begin culling the herd down to the next eighteen men and women who would be rookies.

The ship lurched suddenly, sending items and passengers sliding.

Guards chortled, trying to project calm. The storm was getting worse.

The double doors at the end of the gym opened. Samantha entered, with Amy sitting on her knee. Debra was pushing the chair.

Samantha ignored Neil's frown, pointing to the row of chairs along a far wall. "I'll be right there. Go take your test."

Debra ran. It drew attention but not disapproval. She was one of them. They could tell just by looking at her. Debra's red tank top accented her muscles and the gunshot scar on her shoulder. It matched many of the female Eagles who had now been in similar situations. That included Jennifer and Angela, who had burns, a gunshot, and a knife scar on one side. Freedom came at a high price and the women were paying it, making the men relive their own injuries. All Eagles had scars—mental and physical.

Wade wrote Debra's name down and fastened the flap on the first tent. Everyone on his list was here.

Neil relaxed when he realized Samantha was only here to support Debra. He was glad she had a new friend. He narrowed in on the squirming child

on her knee, recognizing Seth's daughter. He didn't know how that had happened, but they both appeared happy with it. Seth, on the other hand, didn't seem to care about his daughter at all. He still hadn't left Becky alone in the brig, even to eat.

For an instant, Neil desperately wanted to know what Samantha was thinking as she played with the girl's curls and whispered something that made the child giggle.

May I? Neil's demon didn't rush the bars of the cage. He was shocked the door to the prison was open even a crack.

Neil studied Samantha, heart breaking. *Just this once. Tell me.*

The demon connected them, letting Neil hear it.

I wish I could keep her. I'll never have a girl of my own.

It bothered Neil that Samantha felt that way, but he didn't doubt the prediction.

The connection was strong. As he listened to Samantha, Neil also caught Amy's thoughts.

She's nice, like my old mommy was. Maybe I can stay with her and start life over.

Neil broke. He waved Tommy into his place and left the gym. He hadn't been scheduled; he'd just come to help. He left the hallway and then the deck, lost in his mental voices.

Samantha let out the breath she'd taken when Neil entered her mind. She was too sharp to miss something like that.

So was Amy. She peered up at Sam. “Was enough?”

“Yes. He’ll do it now.” Sam felt bad. Her misery lingered over them both.

Amy hugged her belly. “Better this way.”

“Yes, now be quiet or one of the others will hear us and know what we’re doing.”

“He’ll do it soon?” Amy pushed.

“Yes, but he’ll think it through first. It’s part of why I love him so much. He doesn’t do anything without thinking it through.”

“He be mad when he finds out.”

Samantha sighed. “He’ll understand it’s the only solution that makes sense. After that, he’ll do it quick and I’ll handle the consequences.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Spooked

Evening Mess

1

“**W**hat?”

“I said, I heard Conner did well today.” Pam put a hand on Shawn’s wrist. “Are you okay?”

Shawn nodded, but returned to staring at the kids on the stools. Dinner was in full swing. The room was crowded; nearly every seat was taken. Missy was at the end next to Cody, with her back to them. She hadn’t glanced his way once.

Doug frowned at Shawn, still on duty over Cody. He was aware of Shawn’s gaze lingering on the little girl. He didn’t like it.

Pam would have asked Shawn another question, but Morgan put a hand over hers. “Let him be. He has choices to make.”

Shawn didn’t hear them. He was hurting over Missy’s rejection and examining why.

“Maybe we should arrange some time together for them, supervised.” Pam didn’t like it when Shawn was upset.

Morgan had already gone through this with Kyle and Jennifer. “Let him make his choice first. We’ll help if we need to.”

“She’s blocking him completely. It’s kind of mean.”

“So is she.” Morgan grunted, spearing some green beans. He hated them but ate them anyway. “Better than the other one, though.”

Pam scanned Leeann’s red face. “She’s been crying again.”

“This bonding stuff is some serious shit.” Morgan laughed with her, but he meant it.

Thunder cracked, making them all jump. That question had been answered. Thunder on the high seas was common. So were storms apparently, because it was pouring rain once again. The wind beat against the boat, making the engines work harder, louder. People were nervous.

Angela appeared, radiating calm. She waved at the yawning kids as she went to get a tray. They’d been busy today with classes and play time. Angela was both wet and dusty, but also hungry. She’d been tired when she woke, though it had worn off shortly after her shower. She’d spent most of the day in tests. Tomorrow would be about the same after the camp meeting and trial, though that outcome would determine her actual schedule. If Seth didn’t get Becky off this ship tonight, she would probably hang tomorrow.

Angela wiped the rain from her arms and face while she waited for Jayda to load her tray. She’d just come from checking on Grant. Like herself, he’d woken tired and snapped out of it not long

after. He had concurred the chili was too rich on stomachs that weren't used to it.

Thunder cracked again, louder. They were nearing the main part of the storm now. Grant had told her it was ugly even without the radar. Kenn had updated her on that equipment a few minutes ago. They were ready to replace what was fried. They just needed dry weather to do it. In the meantime, there was a lot of work waiting, though the ship was mostly back in order from the storm. It had happened fast, thanks to having done it once already. Within three hours, the ship had been put back to normal and several new precautions had been put in place.

Leaving loose gear around was becoming rarer. No one wanted to keep cleaning up after storms, so they were adapting. The towline had also been pulled up and stored until they were ready to go. That crew was in the infirmary being treated for minor hand injuries. The cargo areas were all that remained to be tackled. None of it had been secured yet. There just hadn't been time and the last storm had been rough. It was now a jumbled pile of boxes and supplies that had to be sorted and restacked, then secured. *Let's leave that for workouts and Eagle training.*

Angela addressed the camp. "As you can hear, mother nature is still pissed we're alive. She hates it that we keep surviving. She wants us to give up and die."

Angela took a set of silverware and a mug of iced tea, noticing the freezing cubes with delight. She loved to crunch them, though it was bad for her teeth. Luxuries like ice were still new and welcome. “Lifejackets are being put in the living quarters, at all guard posts and on the bridge. If the power goes off, stay where you are and give us a chance to come around and put up lights like we did last time. Ships like these are meant to survive storms. If they weren’t, the cruise ship business would have gone under a long time ago.”

Angela took her tray to the center table, but she didn’t take her seat. She pulled a small pouch from her belt.

In a nearby corner, Dog lifted his head.

Across the room, begging for scraps, both cats also looked in her direction.

Angela took the small, soft mice from the pouch and began throwing them at Dog.

Dog howled as if he were being shot. *They’re getting me! They’re getting me! Somebody help!*

Angela hurried that way as if to help.

Surprising everyone except Angela and Dog, the two cats flew over, pouncing on the nearest toys.

Angela kept throwing the mice and Dog kept howling, entertaining the camp and teaching the cats that mice were bad.

When Dog finally stopped whining, the camp clapped and cheered his success.

Debra, still pushing Samantha’s wheelchair, paused in the entrance to the galley as all attention

shifted to them. The wheelchair had a loud creak that gave notice of their arrival no matter where they went.

Across the galley, Theo gestured with his cane. Samantha pointed. "I want to sit by him."

Debra had no choice but to take her there. She refused to look at Theo or speak to him.

Theo wasn't surprised. After his open challenge of the boss, Debra's anger had been extended. She might stay upset the entire trip to the island. He was prepared to deal with that.

"Rookie lists will be posted in the next few days. Right now, I have three names that definitely made it through. Do you want to know now or wait for the list to come out?"

People shouted both answers but the loudest demanded that she tell them.

"First place, out of the tests done today, was Conner." Angela waited for the camp to clap. It wasn't as hearty as if someone else had come in first, but there was enough of it to make her believe the camp was getting used to having Adrian's son among them.

"Then Debra."

Debra beamed and waved as everyone rotated toward her in surprise. She wasn't as shy anymore. She knew no one here would hurt her because of her disability. She also knew a timid Eagle probably wouldn't make it very far through the ranks.

"And Brittani."

The camp clapped and cheered loudly. The woman had a lot of friends here and it wasn't just because of her cooking. She was dependable in a crisis; she had saved lives. Combine that with a great personality and the interest of a top Eagle, and it made her one of the most popular people in camp.

Brittani waved at them across the counter, sending flour into the air.

Jayda, new hairdo on display, was hit in the ear.

Jayda swiped at the mess, scowling. "What was that for?"

In the opposite corner of the galley, tension flared.

"You got a piece of ass and dropped out of sight! You don't care about her." Quinn shoved up from the table, knocking glasses over. "Don't talk to me!" He stormed from the room.

Tommy was embarrassed at all the attention, but he didn't speak. Quinn's opinion didn't need to be spread around camp. Tommy was already feeling that way himself. He didn't need to have it confirmed.

The camp slowly swiveled back to Angela for more updates, but they kept an eye on Tommy. Most people assumed the fight had been about Kendle.

Another disturbance broke out at the counter.

"She tried to kill the boss!"

"She's a stupid kid!"

"Settle down!" Ivan shoved through the crowd, glowering at Doug and Serio. He didn't know who

would have won the fight, but they weren't going to find out. "That's enough. We'll go with what the camp decides."

Doug crossed his arms over his chest, snorting. "Care to make me?"

"Oh, grow up." Ivan pointed at Serio. "Find a table with your team."

Serio went immediately. He wasn't about to disobey. Ivan was bringing his crew up through the ranks as he leveled. The perks were amazing.

Doug spun around and picked up his spoon, muttering.

Ivan swept the tense camp, angry. "It's a trial and a storm. Is that all it takes to spook the legendary Safe Haven?"

People dropped their heads, ashamed, or voiced agreement. They'd faced much worse.

Angela hid a victorious wave of emotion. She was right about Ivan. He was going to be a great leader. He was already showing signs of it.

In the quiet, Neil slipped into the galley and went to the table where Samantha was getting settled by Theo. He whispered in her ear.

"Sure." Samantha let him push her to a table away from the others so they could talk.

"What do you think that's about?" Kenn joined Angela at the center table, handing her a folder of updates. He ignored the crack of thunder that made nearly everyone else flinch.

"I'm not sure. She has a wall up. She'll know if I go through it."

“I wonder if Conner can.”

Angela stared at Kenn. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Kenn wrote it down, glad he could help. He didn’t often feel like he was contributing enough under her leadership.

Angela skimmed the updates and cleared her throat to get attention. “The comet, ISON, appears to be gone, but you might get another chance to view it through the telescopes after the weather clears.” Angela flipped through the other updates Kenn had delivered. She held up a sheet of paper. “These people have a test tomorrow, before the camp meeting. We’ll begin that right after lunch mess. I want everyone else in the ballroom when we start the trial. Life and death should never be decided by people who are yawning.” Angela stifled a yawn herself and sat. “That’s it for now. I’ll be doing rounds of the entire ship after I eat. If you need something, let me know then.”

Several passengers immediately made plans around that.

Kenn added himself to her list. He’d noticed something about the camp and wanted her opinion on it. He hoped he was wrong.

“Oh, yeah. Some of you have injuries from the beach.” She waved a tired hand. “One of the kids will be around to heal those up. Just hold still. They won’t bite.”

Descendant children jumped from the counter stools and marched into the crowd, searching for

injuries. They couldn't use their excess energy on the ocean right now. This would help drain them so they could sleep.

Across the room, Shawn stood up. He'd made his choice.

Pam tensed as he turned to her, expecting him to end their relationship before it had really begun.

"You busy tonight?"

Pam's happiness broke over her lips. "Nope. What do you have in mind?"

"You, me, Morgan, and some privacy."

Pam nodded eagerly. "I'll set it up. Are you sure?"

Shawn kissed her.

Pam chuckled against his lips. "Awesome."

Missy looked at Angela, tears in her eyes. *You promise?*

I do. You'll end up with what you want if you're strong enough to wait.

Missy swiveled to Jeff, who was on a stool nearby. *I need a lesson.*

On what?

How to not kill someone.

Jeff took pity on the girl and left his half-finished tray. *Come on. We'll do a workout. When that fails, you can kick me around in the cage and then get a cold shower.*

Angela was happy with both of them and not at all surprised when a few other UN kids followed. They were adjusting to being in civilized company, but none of them would ever be normal. They would

always need ways to blow off steam. The end of the world hadn't meant the end of their lives physically, but they'd lost everything else.

"Want company on your rounds?" Kenn wanted to be her first private conversation.

"Is it in this folder?"

Kenn shook his head. He hadn't wanted to alarm anyone who might read it.

Angela sighed. "You can't stay with me while I do rounds. I need you to be visible on the entertainment floor. The storm will encourage heavier drinking than we've had so far. Your big body, along with Doug's, will discourage some of that. Just tell me now."

"I'll catch you another time. It's not a rush. Is there anything you want me to get ready for the meeting tomorrow?"

Angela knew he meant an escape route for Becky. "No. This one is a straight shot, Marine. No tricks."

"Adrian would have tried to sway the camp."

"Yes."

"But you're not going to."

Angela looked away instead of answering.

Kenn wasn't sure how to take that. He hoped it meant she had a plan despite calling it an honest vote. He didn't want to be around Seth every day after they hanged his mate.

The lights flickered above them...

They stayed on, drawing a cheer from the kids.

Thunder cracked out, muting all conversations. The storm was right on top of them now.

Angela opened her mouth to order the guards to start putting up lights.

Power went off across the ship. The engines began to fade.

“Little late on that one.” Angela flipped on her neck light like the other Eagles were doing. “Put the lights around these walls first and then head for the halls outside the galley. Split it up between ten of you. Everyone take different stairs or corridors. All plans and events are on hold.” Thoughts on the edge of panic overwhelmed Angela for a moment, coming from all areas of the ship.

Wade took over, directing Special Forces men first, then the rookies who’d been chosen today.

Debra hurried over to get a bag of lights, leaving Theo alone with Samantha.

Amy climbed from a stool and came to Samantha. She got onto her knees and hugged Sam’s belly. “I hear babies.”

Theo smiled at the girl. “She’s sweet.”

“Yes.” Samantha played with her hair as light slowly returned to the room. She wondered if the ship’s walls would glow for them again, but she didn’t want to bother Angela with the question. She had joined the guards to hand out more instructions.

The cooks finished the meals they had going or covered them until the power returned, refrigerating some of it. Then they started brewing fresh coffee

on their old setups. All the travel gear for cooking was in a narrow pantry in the rear of the galley.

Angela led Kenn to the doorway. “So what’s your beef?”

Kenn pouted. “It’s not a beef, just an observation.”

“I’m all ears.”

Kenn waited for Gus and Brittani to go by. Brittani was taking trays to the brig. With Gus escorting her, she didn’t need a guard, but she had one anyway in case the former couple got into a fight.

“Everyone’s scared and pretending not to be.”

Angela slid her pencil behind ear. “Sailing off is a big change, frightening.”

“It’s more than that. The nightmares are back for some of you and insomnia for others. People are snapping, tense. Do you know what’s causing it?”

“No, but it’s bothering me. I’m going to do some careful searching when I get time alone.”

“Are you able to do that?” Kenn had heard about the Demon of Time issue, but he didn’t understand it.

“Not really, but when the cats are away, the queen will play.”

Kenn sniggered as she got started on rounds of the shadowy ship. When her guards fell in behind them, Kenn went another direction, not offended. It would still be a long time before he’d earned full trust. He planned to work on it every day until he died.

The storm raged around the ship, battering it with violent swells and harsh wind that tried to blow them off course. Grant stayed at the wheel, using his instincts to guide the huge ship.

Grant adjusted the wheel, glad of the reserve generators that were allowing navigation. It wasn't the same as steering, but it was effective when nothing else worked. Come daylight or storm's end, he would use the star charts to determine where they were. He'd increased their speed as the storm got bad, hoping it would stay true to the course he'd set, but there was little chance of it. The best he could do was follow his nose.

Lightning flashed in front of the ship, glaring.

Grant flinched and recovered.

The crew, Claire included, abandoned their booths to huddle in the rear of the bridge. Nathan was the only one who kept his post.

Grant concentrated on the storm and the powerful currents under them. Large chunks of debris swirled around the ship, banging into it.

The pitch-black sky lit up in a vicious blast of energy, showing walls of water on all sides.

"Go below. Take the stairs."

The crew fled into the rain, grateful.

Ray took Grant's right. He was scared too, but he wasn't leaving his post.

Nathan waited for instructions, not sure if they would survive this. Cruise ships adjusted course when bad weather came, but without the radar, they didn't know exactly where the storm was. This might be the edge of a hurricane or it could be the center of one. They had no way to know.

Grant made another adjustment, feeling the ship slowing against the resistance of the wind and water. Soon, his tiny bit of control would be gone.

"Should I get the boss?" Nathan didn't know what else to try.

"She's already doing her job. This is mine."

"Can't she ask the ocean dude to calm down?"

"Nature controls storms, not the ocean." Ray didn't want Grant distracted. He put his fingers over his lips.

Nathan nodded. He hadn't meant to interrupt. He was just scared.

The walls of water collapsed onto the deck of the ship. It immediately plunged downward, groaning from the pressure.

Ray heard passengers screaming, but there wasn't time to check on them. He anchored Grant to his belt by a rope, then braced the man with his hip and an arm on the wall to keep their captain from sliding as the ship plunged again.

Water ran up the deck, reaching the bridge...

Everyone held their breath, praying for it to come back up.

Grant hit the anchor switch, dropping the huge chain. The sudden weight release from the rear of

the ship evened out the distribution and popped the front upward. Water flew in all directions as the deck broke the surface.

The ship shuddered and groaned from the sudden drag, but the deck stayed above the waves on the next dip.

The anchor kept dropping, making more noise than the storm. Two hundred feet of chain took a while to run out.

“Bring it back up as soon as it finishes.”

Nathan nodded, hand going to the switch. The anchor would weigh them down if they left it that way.

Another swell roiled toward the ship.

Grant tightened his grip on the now useless wheel, hating the feeling of being helpless.

The swell overwhelmed the ship from the front, soaking it and rolling by.

Grant was glad the waves were hitting them straight on. From the side might cause a roll, though the wave would have to be huge to do that to a cruise ship this big. *Please don't send one that big. Please don't send one that big...*

Nathan and Ray stayed with Grant for the next three hours as he tried to keep the ship on the course in his head. They did whatever he told them and smothered the urge to flee below with the rest of the crew. It wasn't safe down there either. It only seemed that way.

3

“Sounds like it’s finally winding down.” Gus was almost able to breathe again, though he was ashamed he’d left the bridge. He was terrified of the ship being damaged, leaving them adrift with no way back to land.

“What about our tow?”

“Same as last time, drifting right and slowing at the same rate of speed. Nathan is gathering FND volunteers for pulling in the line this time.”

“Yeah, gonna skip that one.” Quinn listened. The rain and wind weren’t beating against them anymore. Thunder was rolling away, according to the counting passengers were doing at each flash of lightning.

“Can I help you?”

Quinn turned from his post on the galley hallway. “What?”

Gus leaned closer. “I’d like to help you.”

Quinn studied the big man, confused. “With what?”

“Matters of the heart.”

Quinn immediately got defensive. “What do you mean by that?!”

“I know heartache when I smell it. You need help.”

Quinn started to shout and then realized Gus might be on his side. “You don’t mind the idea?”

“No. Other people will, though. That’s why you need help.”

“It will make me an outcast.”

“We don’t get to pick who we’re attracted to.”

“No.” Quinn peered through the window to the galley. “How about you?”

“Trinity’s great, but I’m still hurting. We’re taking it slow.”

“Well, you’d better settle with her soon or she may pick someone who can give her what she wants.” Quinn pointed.

Gus peered through the window into the lantern lit room. He found Trinity at the engineering table, where the team was eating and enjoying the flirting. All the camp females had recognized the engineers as valuable. Jonny, a black man with a stellar reputation in Safe Haven, leaned in to chat with Trinity, giving her a generous smile.

Gus was surprised to feel the slight edge of jealousy. *I guess I do have some feelings for her. That’s good, right?*

Quinn let Gus work on his personal problems, but he was encouraged that the man was on his side. Very few people would be when they discovered who he’d fallen for. Quinn couldn’t believe it himself.

Brittani came toward the entrance carrying a basket.

Gus opened and held the door for her.

“Thanks.” She sensed he wanted to say something and lingered despite the weight of the food. This basket was going to the bridge. The storm was fading, but the captain still hadn’t been down to eat.

“I need to know why.”

Brittani had been expecting this conversation earlier, but Gus had only acted as escort. He hadn't spoken. “Are you able to walk with me?”

“I've got this post. Go ahead.” Quinn hoped they could find peace. He didn't care who they ended up with as long as everyone was happy. Gus's situation wasn't complicated. He was allowed to be with either of the women he wanted.

Quinn shut the door as they moved toward the stairs.

Inside the galley, Trinity moped. She'd been studying Gus's shadow through the window. She was aware of Jonny droning on in her ear about candles and lanterns being romantic, but she wasn't interested despite him being an upstanding member of Safe Haven. She wanted Gus. She had since she'd first spotted him in Ciemus. *Then you'd better start fighting for him. There's no bond yet because we haven't gotten physical, but that isn't always needed and I know it, don't I? All it takes are good moments and love that he can always count on.*

Trinity returned to the conversation and directed it away from romance. She wouldn't hassle Gus about conversing with his ex. She would give him a great moment and then another and then another, until all he could see was her. Brittani wouldn't be a rival when she was finished. The cook would be a distant memory fading behind a fire that couldn't be put out.

“Thank you for not screaming at me.”

Brittani slowed as they got out of sight. “What did you want to discuss?”

Their guard dropped back to give them privacy. Donald was eager to be off duty, but he also liked the quiet jobs he was being given. The two descendants in front of him were important. Angela had blended them right in under everyone’s nose. It was impressive. He couldn’t wait to view them in full action.

“Are you happy...with him?”

She shrugged. “I’m not *with* him. We’re dating. Like you.”

“That’s what I want to talk about.”

Brittani braced, feeling another blow coming. *I dumped him, cruelly. I deserve whatever he gives.*

“Trinity wants a baby. I’m going to give her one. We’ll be moving in together soon, I’d guess.”

“Oh.” Brittani tried not to feel anything. She shoved away the anger and sadness. “I’m happy for you.”

Gus knew she didn’t mean it, but he hadn’t expected this to be easy. “I’m sorry you’re hurt. It’s best if I move on. You understand.”

“I do, absolutely.” She waited for more, fake smile plastered to her face.

Gus patted her arm. “You can still come to me if you have trouble.”

“Thanks.”

Gus left her alone with her guard, eager to return to the light of Safe Haven.

Brittani stared at the guard who came to her side.

Donald stared back, thinking she wasn't as hooked on Daryl as that Eagle thought she was.

Brittani lit up. "Actually, it means I'm free now to do anything I want. I just got scared for a minute."

"Because Daryl isn't what you considered first, is he?"

"No. I want to lead my own team. Everything else will have to come second."

"He'll need to hear that." Donald tossed approval at her. "Welcome to Angela's army."

4

Power came on, flickering and stuttering.

Cheers echoed throughout the boat. The storm was over. The lights were back on. Life was looking up.

Kendle enjoyed it too, though she didn't react. She was in the living quarters, scrubbing toilets again. She'd done every john on this ship now. The power returning didn't change her job, but it did help her mood. The lack of light and abundance of shadows had been getting to her. She was reminded of her own start to the war. The wave that had rolled her ship had also come with poison clouds that turned the floating shelter into a nightmarish trap she and her sister had barely escaped with their lives. Dawn hadn't kept hers and Kendle had washed ashore on Pitcairn Island in a dead

speedboat. She was the sole survivor. *Sole survivor...*

“You about finished?”

“Yes.” Kendle ignored Ian’s curt tone as she switched off her flashlight. The Eagle was pissed he’d been demoted to the cleaning crew. He was taking it out on everyone.

Ian saw her pale cheeks and eased off. “I can finish this room if you like.” It had to be hard on her. Most of the camp was here, coming in and out, dropping garbage for her to clean up, making jokes and heated threats. He was impressed she’d controlled herself so well.

“This is part of my punishment. You can’t do it for me. She’ll just add something else later.” Kendle stripped off her gloves and shoved them into the garbage bag on the side of the cart. “Besides, it’s done now. They can come on in and start shitting the place up again.”

Ian snickered. He took a closer look at her. “Have you eaten today?”

Ian frowned when she didn’t answer. “You were avoiding the galley, so she made you come here, where you can’t avoid people.”

Kendle gave a curt nod. “She’s not going to let me out of any of it.” Kendle pushed the cart toward the exit, bracing to be the center of attention again. “And she shouldn’t. I deserve this.”

Ian waited until she’d gone to record it in the book he called a spy’s diary. Angela wanted details on everyone, and he was gathering them. It was

difficult not to discuss some of the secrets he was learning, however. This was a test and a huge lesson, but he didn't know if he would come out on the other side. To keep that flood from coming now, Ian slipped from the living quarters so he wouldn't be tempted to chat with anyone. People hadn't noticed his quietness yet, as far as he knew, but they would. When they asked what was wrong, he would have to act like a senior Eagle and fool them into believing he'd grown up.

Ian hoped that really happened and soon. He wasn't sure how much more he could take of keeping these nuggets. The one he'd learned an hour ago about Candy and Conner was juicy but knowing Marc's son was a byzan was bigger. Overhearing the kill team had been sent, knowing who was on that list and was now missing from camp, was killing him. He felt like his head would explode if he didn't discuss what was happening on this ship. The camp thought they were in the loop, but they didn't know half the drama.

She put me in this position, knowing it would give me all the damn details I'd ever want. Then she punished me by sealing my mouth. That's incredible and cruel. I don't know if I love her or hate her, but I'll never mess with her. I can't match that type of thinking.

Ian shored up his determination to win this game and headed for his next check with guards on the galley. Anyone who wasn't in the living quarters trying to sleep was in the galley. He would learn

more secrets while there, he had no doubt. He loved the job and hated it.

5

“That looks uncomfortable.” Charlie grinned at Dog.

Dog let out a weary grunt. *They believe the mice are planning an attack.*

Charlie petted the cat on Dog’s back, but left the one on his neck alone. The big cat from the bunker wasn’t friendly. “It’s a bit like my relationship with Kendle.” Charlie wiped the fur from his hand and continued their rounds of the sleeping ship. “She carried me on her back too.”

Running for your life doesn’t count.

Charlie chuckled. “Does for you. I saw you save them on the beach.”

Dog huffed. *They keep my fur clean. They serve a purpose.*

“Whatever you say.”

Dog stiffened his shoulder when the biggest cat began to purr-claw his skin. *The island woman serves a purpose too. You can unload your pain to her, and she gives it right back.*

“I don’t need to do that anymore.”

Pain doesn’t stop coming, child. As soon as you recover from one blow, you are hit by the next. Getting up and continuing your mission is what keeps humans sane.

Charlie moped. "I don't have a mission anymore. I'm not an Eagle."

You have a mate and a pup on the way.

"It's not the same."

You knew it wouldn't be before making the choice. Why did you go through with it?

"Because I'm not like the rest of them."

No. You've always been different, even from your own kind.

"Do you know why?"

No. I smell the differences and notice behaviors. Beyond that, I am as blind as you to the reasons behind life.

"I know why." Charlie looked into the room they were passing and kept going. "I'm the heir to Safe Haven, to my mother's legacy. And I'm terrified of it."

Yes. It's a hard job. Many tremble before leadership when it's given to them.

"It has to be earned."

Yes. You do not believe you can earn it.

"I just don't want to. I could be a good leader in time. I don't want to make those choices."

It's a good reason. Just being afraid isn't enough.

"It will change me, like my drama almost did."

Do not fool yourself. You have changed already. The boy I first met was not obsessed with mates and inheriting at the death of his parent.

“I’m not obsessed...anymore. I needed to work it out for myself. I could be a leader, but I don’t want it.”

Dog dropped his shoulder as the big cat curled up, tired of clawing. *There are other worthwhile missions you could adopt.*

“Yeah.” Charlie picked up trash someone had dropped. He shoved it into a can at the intersection. “I’m sorting through those, but it feels like I took the easy way out.”

You shame yourself when no one else does.

“I don’t want her to think bad of me.”

Your mother does not think bad of you. She loves you more than the others here.

“Maybe. That doesn’t matter to me as much as how she sees me. There are good, brave men here. I’m not one of them.” Charlie stopped at the next residence and waited for Dog to do the check. They were alternating.

Dog came right out, cats still on his big back. *They are sleeping in there. Next?*

Charlie consulted his map. He hadn’t had as much time on the ship as the other guards. “Looks like we need to do a round of the bottom floor and then we’re on break for half an hour.”

Dog led them toward the stairs. Like the humans, he was shunning the elevators used for passengers. The smaller service elevators didn’t feel as dangerous. It was an odd paradigm when they considered the camp had used the elevators in Ciemus without a single concern.

Charlie trotted down the steps ahead of Dog, letting him have the room in case the cats wanted to exit their ride. They were known to jump from him to the people nearby. It wasn't pleasant.

Dog slid as he landed, hitting the edge of a carpet.

The cats flew off, smacking into each other and the stair. They scrambled away, emitting low screeches.

Charlie thought Dog would follow to make sure they were okay, but the wolf did a long stretch and moaned.

Much better.

Charlie chuckled as they resumed walking. He opened the bottom door and nodded to Conner, one of a dozen sentries here. The brig was heavily guarded tonight, but Charlie thought anyone with basic skills could get by them. They were all reading or playing handheld video games. *It's rookie duty*, he realized. *Why would she have all rookies on duty over a dangerous prisoner?*

Seth is supposed to escape. Becky has refused to go. Dog remembered Charlie didn't know most of what had been going on. *You were at the briefing. The alpha told us to let them leave.*

"Oh, yeah! I forgot about that." Charlie put it from his mind and went down the hall to start on the first row of rooms. They would do the cells last.

The trees are going up again. Dog went to the corner and sniffed the Christmas tree.

“Mom has me on that chore tomorrow too, after the meeting. People will like it. There’s about fifty fake trees on this ship. Everyone will get a chance to put on ornaments.”

Why are the tops different?

“The tops?”

No people in white fur with golden ears.

“Oh, angels. I guess people don’t like that image as much now.”

*The origin has not changed, yet you are angry.
I do not understand why it shifts the view.*

“People want to enjoy the holiday, but they’re mad about what happened at the big meeting.”

Your orders are to only put up the shapes?

“She wants one angel topper on each floor. If they’re stolen or damaged, I think she plans to yell.”

Inclusion is good. All are happy and tolerant.

“As long as it doesn’t break camp rules.”

Some rules are meant to be broken.

“Yes, and no.” Charlie went into the first room and cleared it, checking corners and under the empty beds. Charlie noted mouse droppings but didn’t scan for the rodents. He was sure Tonya’s cats would find them eventually. These were storage chambers and extra cells if there was a large problem the normal brig couldn’t handle. They’d been recently cleaned. The room smelled like bleach and lemons.

Kendle didn’t glance up at the voices in the hall outside the bathroom. Only the guards used this one and so far, they weren’t being careless. The female

lavatory upstairs had been rough. These were almost a relief.

Dog sniffed Kendle's butt.

Kendle spun around, swinging.

Hey! Dog flinched. *I was just checking your mood!*

Kendle lowered her arm. "I'm sorry. I thought you were..." Kendle frowned at him. "You know we don't do things that way."

Dog smirked at her, tongue lolling out.

Kendle kicked at him. "Get out of here! You can't sniff me!"

Dog retreated, chuckling.

Kendle thought about chasing the wolf and decided the kick had pushed her luck enough. She returned to scrubbing on the mirror. Her thoughts immediately returned to the rumor she'd heard about Quinn and Tommy arguing. Her name hadn't been mentioned, but everyone assumed she was the topic. She didn't want to know so she could use it or gloat over causing trouble. She considered Quinn a friend and she would always have a soft spot for Tommy, who she'd used as a substitute for Marc. If they were fighting because of her, she wanted it to stop.

"Go on. You know better."

Kendle turned again at Charlie's voice.

Charlie pointed at her, angry. "Do it."

Dog shuffled forward. *I am sorry for sticking my nose in your rear.*

Kendle laughed. She couldn't help it. "I forgive you."

Dog's tongue lolled out again, head tilting. *I wish I was human. I'd sniff you all the time.*

Kendle blushed.

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Dog's been out in the wilderness too long." He clicked his tongue. "Come on, horn-dog."

The wolf winked at Kendle and followed Charlie out into the hall.

Kendle stared after them, realizing she was smiling. *How did that happen?*

On a deck above, a descendant was observing Kendle, like she'd done at bedtime every night since they'd set sail. *It won't happen again. Bad luck, Chick—that's all the future has in store for you.* Mutters filled the cabin.

Chapter Twenty-Six
Unwanted Guest

Day Five

1

“**T**his is disgusting.” Jennifer stapled the long, sticky strand of kelp to the tarp and picked up the next one.

Kyle chuckled. “Even on the ocean, we have to build our own blind.”

Jennifer made a face. Their small boat was tied to a chunk of debris in the thickest part of the garbage pile. The stiff breeze was keeping the smell down, but the feel of the garbage was nasty.

Kyle examined the work they’d done so far. “A few more on this end and we’ll tie the other garbage to it. You guys ready?”

Marc gave him an ugly glare.

Adrian grinned. He and Marc were fishing out random pieces of garbage to attach to the tarp. It was revolting work that made everyone glad they were almost finished. Working by flashlight was a pain and Jennifer was right about it being gross, but it was also dangerous. The floating garbage contained all sorts of sharp ends and deadly items, including animals. Snakes were slithering through the pile.

“How are we on time?”

Jennifer concentrated. She was full of restless energy. “Half an hour; a little less.”

“Perfect.” Kyle finished tying garbage to his end of the tarp, then began securing it to the boat. They were anchored in two places, but a disturbance in the water might shake them loose. If that happened, they would have to float until it was time to come up.

Jennifer stapled the last piece of garbage and immediately dug in her kit for the Purell. She used it twice, then passed it to Kyle.

Marc and Adrian attached their choices, being careful to make it appear as though the cans and cloth had gotten tangled in the tarp. They would secure their end to the boat once they finished.

“When’s the last time you had a run like this?” Adrian wasn’t sure why Marc was upset, but the man was.

Marc contemplated it, hands busy. “About eight years, I think. Kenn and I led a double team into Ramadi. Intelligence screwed up and sent us into the port. We had to stay under a crab harvest until it got dark so they could extract us.”

“How did it go?”

Marc shrugged. “Fine except for Kenn crop dusting us the whole time. We never let him drink beer the night before a mission again.”

Adrian and the others sniggered.

“Kinda smells like now.” Marc finished and took the Purell. Like Jennifer, he used it twice. This debris had blown apart in the war and washed here

in the near year since then. The number of contaminants was probably staggering.

“Anyone want to eat?” Kyle wasn’t surprised at the grimaces. His stomach didn’t feel like it either. “Okay. Let’s go over the plan. We’ll get under cover from there. No crop dusting allowed.”

The men looked at Jennifer.

Still chuckling, Jennifer rattled off, “Be quiet, pay attention, do what you tell me.” She grinned. “This is gonna be fun.”

All three men groaned. Rookie excitement had taken over her nerves. From here, she would either lose control and start babbling or settle into fighter mode and wait for orders.

“Do you hear that?” Marc leaned toward the dark, cold water.

Adrian put a hand on his arm, listening. “You hear differently now. That sounds like frogs to the camp.”

“They’re screaming!” Marc was horrified again. “The fish are screaming.”

“Yes. Their lives have always been violent, but the war filled their homes with garbage. The ocean is very unhappy.”

“We can’t make a dent in that.”

“No. But Angela will try anyway and honestly, something is better than nothing. A few species may survive along our path that may not have otherwise.”

Marc had to be consoled with that. They could empty themselves into the ocean daily and never make a real dent in the damage.

“Block it out again. We have a mission to handle.” Kyle wasn’t hearing it, but he didn’t doubt them.

Marc did, sealing it in a smaller box in his crypt. He’d never imagined animals screaming. It was awful to be able to understand them... “Wait. I speak fish?”

Adrian burst out laughing as he slid into his place in the wet boat.

Marc also got into position, dwelling on the new gift. “Does this mean I can talk to the cats now? If they don’t learn to hunt mice soon, Dog may have a stroke.”

“Damn.” Jennifer stilled. “My timing is off for water. Five minutes, guys. Could be—” Jennifer grunted as Kyle shoved her down and began pulling the tarp over the boat.

Marc and Adrian quickly secured their ends to the hooks, hoping it appeared like any other pile of debris in the darkness.

Tension filled the space. There was a chance the debris would crush them or expose them.

Adrian muttered, magic flowing. “We have a deal. Honor it and keep us hidden.”

Debris pushed in around them, shifting onto the tarp and boat.

Jennifer reached out for Kyle’s hand.

It was there to clasp hers and offer comfort. They lived in a strange world.

Marc put his hand on the first box attached to the boat. He had been given the job of firing. He had two more boxes attached in case he missed. It had been years since he'd done this and even then, only once before. It hadn't gone well, though not because of his aim or timing. An IED on the dock had exploded, killing the people under surveillance and two of his team.

"I hear an engine." Adrian strained to pinpoint the location. He and Marc had agreed this location, near a small gap in the debris, was to their advantage but the garbage was constantly shifting. Another gap could have opened. Their target might take a different path.

The water under them sloshed, splattering cold liquid against the debris and their boat. The water rose, pushing garbage together and apart. Their boat shifted, but the ropes on the other side stopped it from going far.

The people inside held their breath.

Engines rumbled louder.

Marc peered through his unblocked corner. "Just like she said—big and moving fast. Hang on for a ride." Marc studied the boat as it neared, detecting only a few lights and no one on the deck. He assumed there was a captain, though, and waited for the right moment. As dark as it was, their little boat should be hard to see even without the garbage and tarp.

The huge ship shoved through the debris wall. Loud bangs and cracks echoed.

“Ready... Set... Here we go. Cut the anchors.” Marc pushed the button as the ship sailed by, sending a large ripple of debris in their direction.

The metal claw slammed into the hull of the big ship.

Wire spun out of the reel in a blur. It ended abruptly, going taut.

Their small boat leapt forward and upward. Debris flew over them. Part of the tarp flew into the air, lifting them higher. Kyle cut it loose; gravity jerked them back to the water, spraying more cold, nasty garbage.

The line went taut again, jerking them forward. They fishtailed to the right and then to the left as the big boat cleared the debris field.

Marc felt for the button and pushed it.

The small engine made a grinding noise, then began tugging them toward the ship. As long as the little engine held, it would tow them right up to the rear. Marc tried to scan the big boat for anyone watching, but the wake was too rough. He caught blurs of a dark deck and that was it.

Jennifer scanned mentally, white knuckled grip on the boat never loosening. It was too loud for conversation. She sent the images to her teammates instead, letting them glean their own details.

Marc studied the familiar ship, resigned. *I knew she wanted it.*

Adrian chuckled. *The next ship in her armada.*

Kyle was relieved the deck was empty, but not because of the fight that might trigger the rest of the ship's occupants to come running. Jennifer was boiling with restless anticipation. He'd hoped she would hang in the rear and learn, but that wasn't going to happen. She would be in the thick of things.

The small winch finally stopped them a few feet from the hull; the little boat bounced on the choppy wake.

Marc spotted the rusty ladder. They needed to swing to the right. He motioned the others to join his side, then directed Adrian to go first. He was in the front seat.

As the small boat swung to the right from the weight adjustment, Adrian leapt onto the ladder and pulled himself up a few feet. He stayed there to be close enough to lend a hand if it was needed.

Jennifer jumped next. Marc gave her a strong foot-to-butt boost, helping her reach the ladder.

Jennifer grasped the wet bars and held on, eyes closed and heart thumping in her chest. *This is that moment. You promised you'd view it honestly.*

Jennifer slowly opened her eyes. She was scared, like she'd worried over being, but it wasn't so bad that she was in panic mode. This was the hardest part of the run, in her opinion, and she'd done it. *Feels great!* She began to climb, carefully sliding by Adrian.

Marc and Kyle jumped together, leaving the boat to seesaw behind the big ship like a piece of debris. It might draw attention in the morning, but

they couldn't reach the hook to cut it free. They both caught a rung of the ladder and used each other for balance with the other hands.

The team began climbing at Marc's gesture.

A few minutes later, they reached the top deck and stood in the shadows, preparing for the next stage of Angela's plan. Kyle had made minor adjustments, but the outline she'd given was solid.

Jennifer shed her wet clothes and tossed them off the side. Her kit had held everyday clothes and a pouch of beautiful knives that she couldn't wait to play with on the run. The guys wanted her to observe and learn, but that wasn't why she'd been sent.

Adrian kept his back to them as he also changed, aware that Kyle and Marc weren't changing.

Marc used his grid, estimating threats. He didn't mind wet clothes. He found the four dozen heat signatures they'd been told to expect, then a dozen more in the depths of the ship. Marc narrowed in, dismayed to sense power and even more signatures. There were twice as many people on this ship as they'd been told.

Jennifer felt it. "No mental communication." She switched to hands. *We have to get to that center room first and remove the descendant or we'll be fighting magic and all hundred people at the same time.*

Marc took the lead, using his mental grid to locate the stairs and avoid refugees wandering the stinking ship. It hadn't been cleaned, though it

appeared the bodies had been dumped. Fresh corpses had taken their place, recreating the same scenes he'd viewed at the beach. All it was missing was young killers snoring in the corners.

Marc led them to the brig, hoping he'd learned enough from Angela to fight one of their kind. The sense of power was strong.

Adrian stayed on Marc's heels, picking up a new feeling of hope radiating from the cell.

Knives only. Marc drew his as they approached the door.

Jennifer had already placed her new blades into her belt. She chose two of the sturdiest and took Marc's right.

Kyle sighed. *Jennifer's an Eagle. I need to accept that.*

Marc opened the door.

A dozen sleeping refugees were sprawled around a torture chair. Blood was dried to the floor and walls below a dim bare bulb hanging over the prisoner.

Jennifer lunged forward, knives flashing as a few of the filthy people woke.

The men did the same, but they didn't grunt in pleasure and enjoy the sounds of death like Jennifer did.

Marc let Jennifer finish the last man, turning to the prisoner. He stared in uneasy recognition.

So did Adrian. They knew him, though only on basic terms. Light flickered around the angel like a missing halo.

Kyle turned, gaping. “What are you doing here?!”

Jennifer pulled it from their thoughts. She strode forward with two bloody knives and gore up to her wrists. “I’ll talk to him this time.”

Kronus struggled against the ropes, talking behind the gag. His red robe had soaked up new layers of the shade. Most of it appeared to be his.

Marc put a hand on Jennifer’s wrist as she came in for a death blow. “We’re taking him to Angela.”

She shrugged, stepping back, but she kept her knives in hand. Jennifer liked playing the bad cop. She didn’t think she’d be good at the flip side.

Kronus breathed a deep sigh, stilling.

Adrian removed the gag and gave Kronus a drink from his canteen while Kyle worked on the bonds. Kronus had been beaten and sliced in multiple places. Whatever he was doing here, it wasn’t going well.

Marc and Jennifer watched the angel and listened for company. They hadn’t made a lot of noise, but they didn’t know if there were guards on this ship who might find them during a patrol.

Kronus took the drink and swallowed, grimacing. “Get me out of this chair.”

No one reached for the latches that controlled the straps.

Kronus studied them through his beaten, swelled face. “She sent you for me. Unlock the chair. Get me out of here.”

Marc regarded Jennifer.

Jennifer slowly shook her head. “She didn’t mention it to me. Why are you here?”

Kronus’s lips clamped shut.

Jennifer’s eyes narrowed as she went back to playing her role. “I guess we have to take you to Angela to get answers.”

Kronus nodded.

Marc gestured. “Slit his throat.”

“Glad to.” Jennifer came forward as Adrian and Kyle retreated.

“Wait! I have news! I have news!”

“Spill it quick or you’ll see your own guts on this floor.” Jennifer tapped her knife against his leg. “Bet you bleed like a pig.”

“We rebelled! We rebelled!”

Jennifer’s eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“We’re no longer weighing the souls. We’re not betting. We refused it all.”

“Why?”

“You humans never follow the rules and the Creator loves you. We’re tired of always being second best.”

Marc grunted. “So you decided to come and raise hell on hell.”

“I’ve come to warn of a danger. I was captured as I descended.”

Marc frowned. “You descended on this ship?”

Kronus delivered a bruised glare. “I wanted to know if I could tread water, like in the stories.” He looked at the latch again. “Please.”

“Did it work?”

“I was captured before I could test it.” Kronus scanned the bodies around his feet. “These humans are primitive. They could not communicate in any way but violence.”

“Even after you told them who you are?”

“They did not believe. They called me a magic user.” The angel let out a frustrated moan. “It hurts me!”

“Welcome to our world.” Marc flipped the latch, releasing the man.

Kronus fell to the filthy floor, groaning and crying in gratitude. “I will reward her for this mercy!”

“Reward me first.” Marc hauled the angel to his shaking feet. “Tell me what these people are doing out here.”

“Chasing the dream.” Kronus sat up and rubbed his bloody wrists. “They desire to be a part of Safe Haven’s light, though they shun your rules. The attraction outweighed the possible outcomes.”

Marc blasted light energy into the angel, healing some of his injuries.

Jennifer would have finished the job, but Kyle denied it with a hand on her tacky wrist. “That’s for the boss to decide. Marc’s just keeping him alive while we finish our mission.”

Kronus sneered. “I am the mission.”

“This boat is our goal, not you.” Marc went to the entrance and swept the dark halls. Their plans had to change now. As soon as the people on this

ship discovered the captive gone, they would start searching.

“We can work until they find this room.” Jennifer was still eager to play with her new knives. “When they start searching, we’ll head for the bridge.”

Marc nodded. “We’re already in everyday clothes. When the search begins, blend in and get to the captain. Once we have him, we’re good.”

“Her.”

Kronus explained at their glances. “The captain is a female. She was forced to sail the boat here. I was hiding from them when it happened. I saw them take her. Lila hates descendants. She was going to use the guns on this ship to sink Safe Haven.” Kronus wiped at his clothes and tried to get ready for more ugliness. Getting off this ship wouldn’t be easy. For some reason, he hadn’t expected earth to be so primitive. It was different from those five rooms. Up there, it was a movie. Down here, it was life and death.

Marc gestured at Adrian. “Make our new guest feel welcome.”

Adrian blasted Kronus with his heaviest sleep spell. The angel crumpled on top of the pile of bodies.

“Leave him until we’re done clearing.” Kyle opened the door. “We’ll do this hall first. Two to a side. Adrian drops them, we finish ‘em off.”

Kyle and Jennifer went to the right.

Marc and Adrian took the left.

“That’s enough. I can’t keep doing this.” Jennifer wiped her knife on her bloody pants and sheathed it. “It’s wrong.”

Kyle had been catching her waves of unease for the last hour they’d spent using Adrian’s sleep spell on rooms of people and then slaughtering them. “We’re only half through the ship, Jenny.”

She walked to the rail and gazed at the waves, refusing to think about anything for a few minutes.

Marc was certain Adrian and Kyle could push her through this, but he suddenly didn’t want it. Angela had been stripped of her morality in a fight. He didn’t want the same for Jennifer. “We could head for the bridge now and take over the ship. We’ll handle them in waves from there. She can make the captain do what we want.”

Jennifer slowly turned, eyes blank. “I can fight. I *came* for the fighting. I don’t butcher sheep. I’m a shepherd.”

Adrian beamed at her.

So did Kyle. She was a true Eagle now.

Marc just wanted to get done and get home. “Okay. We take the bridge and fight from there.”

Jennifer walked to the front.

Kyle followed his wife, proud of her.

Marc walked with Adrian. “Is she okay?”

“She just reached the next level. She has the ice shield now, the one we use to get through a rough

job. Most of my army didn't gain that until Little Rock, other than Kyle and Neil's teams. The others were still jittery and quick-tempered when we went into the mountain. They got their shield there."

"I thought Jennifer already had it. I assumed being female is giving her a twitch."

Adrian snorted. "It's that thinking that pisses women off, Marc. The difference isn't hormones. It's heart. It takes longer to turn their hearts dark enough to do something like this. Killing people gets tiresome after a while, but slitting their throats in their sleep is heavy, dark work. The fights with the troops were easy for her in comparison."

"Because females give life."

"Exactly. Not hormones—heart. They have to overcome their basic instincts. It takes longer."

"So what changes for her now?"

"Jennifer will take her destined place as Safe Haven's top female fighter. Word will spread about this trip, like the others. More women will see a teenager, underestimate her, and assume they can do it too. Some of them will succeed."

"And spawn the army of female fighters you've dreamed of."

"That we need." Adrian decided it was time to let Marc in on a secret he'd been holding for months. "Watch the births we have. I'm predicting 75% female. They have to fight. There won't be enough males to do it."

Marc thought about his calls on the camp women, then added in the new ones he'd learned of. "I'm getting 60%."

"That survive."

Marc realized Adrian had seen the future and their kids were indeed in danger. "What is it?"

"We don't know. Even Jennifer doesn't and she spends all of her free time trying to locate the danger so she can save Autumn and the rest. When we all get to that spot, there's darkness. Then it skips ahead to the morgue." Adrian's eyes were haunted. "The bodies are small. Small!"

Marc put a hand on Adrian's shoulder, spooked. "Come back."

Adrian shook off the chills and the hand. "I'm good." He walked around Marc. "Let's take the bridge. I'm ready to be banished again."

Frowning in confusion and concern, Marc followed.

3

"There's another locked door here." Jennifer eased back as Adrian came forward to kick it open. It was his turn. They were alternating as they finished up the last hall before the bridge. Two hours had passed. No one on the ship had noticed their captive had been freed. She assumed finding his body in the pile hadn't alarmed them. In the rooms around the team, slaughtered refugees, some

of whom had been awake and some who hadn't, lay as evidence of what they'd been doing.

Jennifer hadn't changed her feelings about hitting people with sleep spells to kill them without danger, but it wasn't bothering her as much now either. The things they were finding were horrifying. These people needed to be removed before they reached Safe Haven. It was a hard job, though. The men were opening the door and letting her catch any runners. Then Adrian was hitting them with a sleep spell for the rest of the team to finish off. She realized they were endangering everyone to accommodate her, but she refused to back down on that. Safe Haven didn't slaughter sleeping people unless there was no other choice. Because there were descendants on this team, they had another choice.

The door cracked under Adrian's boot and swung open. The sick smell of rotting meat rolled out.

Jennifer forced herself to go inside when neither she nor Marc picked up movement on their mental grids.

"This room is clear." Kyle shined his light again, narrowing in. "I stand corrected."

Jennifer fired a single shot at the white-clad man in the rear of the room behind the stove, hitting him in the shoulder. He slipped and fell, landing on the knife he'd been using. It plunged into his chest, sending blood down his stomach and onto the floor where it merged with other puddles.

“Look at that.” Marc pointed, backing out of the room.

Human body parts were stacked on a refrigerator shelf that had been nailed to the wall. Blood was draining into the pans below. Next to them, a reeking stack of bodies waited to be diced.

“There’s gear in the corner. Eagle gear.” Jennifer stared at the jacket. “Did we leave survivors on the beach?” Panic came into her voice and body. She spun to Kyle, small fists punching Kyle’s chest. “Tell me! Did we leave Eagles alive on that beach?!”

Kyle hugged her, not noticing the filth she was coated in now. “I don’t know, Jenny. I’m sorry.”

Jennifer held in sobs, but she shuddered in his arms. “I want to go home now. Let’s get this mission finished.”

Every member of the team sympathized. There wasn’t a single run Angela had sent them on that hadn’t ended in one of them feeling that way about something that had happened or something they’d seen. Life after war was hard.

“How is everyone on power and ammo?” Marc paused, mental grid narrowing the location of the bridge. They were one hallway out.

“Fine on ammo, but low on energy.” Jennifer was getting tired. She didn’t think she’d ever used her arms this much.

“Low on ammo, fine on energy. I’ll get her through.” Kyle had planned on doing this for their

missions together. He just hadn't expected it to be so soon.

"Low on both." Adrian had used a lot of his energy on sleep spells. "I have one big hit left and then I'm gonna need to recharge—one way or the other." Implying he was willing to take a lifeforce to be able to keep going.

"She doesn't want us to do that anymore unless we're so low we can't recharge on our own or we're in danger." Jennifer was positive how Angela felt.

"This looks like danger to me." Kyle had no problem with it. He considered it to be a fair trade. Instead of doing evil, their energy would be used to accomplish good things.

Marc made the call. "We'll play it straight and save it up. We take the bridge like any other team and Adrian can hit the entire boat from there. Then we'll bring Kronus up and get set for anyone still brave enough to complain about the change in ownership."

Adrian frowned. "That's still going to leave about forty bodies to handle when they wake up."

"How long will your spell hold?" They were 24-hours from catching up to Safe Haven.

"Six to eight hours. If I sleep, I might be able to hit them with a second spell, but it won't be as strong, and we'll be one man down for guard duty during that time."

"I'll play that by ear. Let's go." Marc led them to the bridge.

On the way, they didn't surround Jennifer with protection. She walked in the assigned slot as a full member of the team.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Matchup

1

Conner stopped in the doorway. “Oh. I didn’t know anyone would be here yet.”

Eagles stared, pausing in their workouts.

Conner scanned the room, hoping he was welcome. “Is it okay if I stay or should I wait for open camp time?”

Wade gestured toward an empty bike on the end. The new Eagle training room had a ring for match ups, two rows of lockers and showers connected through the bathrooms. It was a great setup and all portable.

Conner went to the bike, not enjoying being the center of attention. He needed a hard workout and then a cold shower. He and Candy were pushing the age law, but he hadn’t broken. It was hard.

Conner flushed at his reflections. He settled carefully onto the bike, adjusting to keep from hurting himself.

Around him, two dozen men returned to their workouts. Eagles were required to put in two hours every day. It was good Conner had come, but he wasn’t going to get an open welcome despite doing

so well on yesterday's tests. He had to prove himself in other ways now.

Conversations also resumed, letting Conner off the hook. He settled into a quick, steady pace and tried not to think about having Candy's legs wrapped around his neck. He'd gone straight to the shower afterward, but he was still able to smell her scent on his skin and he was still horny. *I'm not going to last much longer.* Conner increased the speed and fell deeper into his thoughts.

"The comet is out of view now." Donald lifted the weights as he continued their conversation, proud of the body he'd been working on while serving Safe Haven. He'd never been this fit in his life.

"I heard Shawn got pictures of it before the storm."

"Is it over now, do you think? Hurricane season."

"No idea." Daryl was also lifting weights. Sweat ran down his bare chest in tiny rivers. "I hope so. Sitting here like a giant fish lure is weird."

Ben cackled. "Fish lure. Good one."

"I got it from Katie, that hot little brunette from Ciemus who's hooked on Lou. She's on the fishing crew."

"She's a descendant. She doesn't think we know." Donald put the weights on the rack and reached for a towel.

"Is she a problem?"

“Doubtful. She’s one of the few still on the fence about joining.”

“Like Trinity.” Whitney joined them at the weights. “She got cooking detail.” He grinned.

Ben paused. “She’ll be working under Brittani.”

“For a while. Should be interesting.”

Daryl put his weights away. “Why would anyone pick mess duty over being an Eagle?”

“She can’t match Brittani there. She hopes she can do it with her cooking.” Greg was listening from the next station over. He was practicing his knife skills on their dummy. He slammed the blade into the wooden man’s eye. “She’s not hooked into the hive yet either.”

All three men chuckled at the wording. The camp was using it too, but it had started as a snide title from the Eagles after they’d discovered Adrian’s betrayal.

Tommy entered the training room, happy with the job that he and the remainder of his old team had done in here. Ramer had read the instructions while the rest of the crew had assembled. Then they’d gotten drunk and he’d been able to forget Quinn’s accusations for a little while.

“What’s the word on the radio and power?” Wade knew Tommy had just come from doing an off-duty check on the captain.

“No radio, but almost full power. The captain said we’ll be moving again about this time tomorrow.”

“Good.” Wade gestured, grinning. “Daryl thinks we may reel in Jaws.”

Tommy chuckled. That joke was floating around all the levels. “Anything new since I went through?”

Wade’s amusement faded. “We had an injury overnight. Actually, we had two of them. One of Tonya’s cats tripped a guard. Ed is in the infirmary. Morgan thinks he has a broken rib. The cat has an identical injury.”

Tommy stared at him. “Identical?”

“Morgan thought it was a little weird too, but Ed said it happened so fast he wasn’t sure if he tripped or the cat tripped him. Other than that, overnight was quiet.”

“Does Tonya know yet?”

“She was a good sport about it, actually. Told Ed she was sorry. We almost choked.”

Tension entered the room. Tommy looked around and found Quinn coming from the shower.

Quinn glared as he went to the pullup bar. He began a punishing pace of chin-ups.

Zack came from the shower next, ribs still yellow but bandage gone. He felt the unease and decided to act like a high-level Eagle—because he was, no matter how the teams were reordered. “This is downtime. Swallow it or hide it in a tissue.”

Tommy and Quinn both nodded at the crude reminder of who they were. Zack was one of their trainers; they respected him. Neither man wanted marks on their record either. Tommy was still

Special Forces, but Quinn hadn't gotten his new placement yet. He didn't need trouble.

In the far corner on a treadmill, Gus couldn't hear the conversation for the fans above him. They were automatic and he hadn't figured out how to turn them off. It worked out, though. He didn't want to be distracted right now. He had big choices to make. He was going to try to be a true Eagle, but he also wanted a family. He'd believed it would be with Brittani. Now he had to shift the dream a little. Trinity was a nice girl. He could be happy with her if his heart would give it a chance.

Next to Gus, a line of Eagles were also running, sweating and holding in groans. Everyone was feeling out of shape. Aches were the most common complaint. All the steps on the ship were acting like workout equipment.

"Can I come in?" Kendle waited in the entrance. It was all men in here right now, but that wasn't the problem.

Morgan gestured. "I need a sparring partner. You up for it?"

Kendle came toward the small ring. "Uh... Are you sure? I still get carried away sometimes."

Morgan laughed.

Kendle shrugged. She needed to beat on someone. If he wanted to be beaten, it was a good match.

"That confident, are you? I like that."

Kendle snorted. "Save your butter for Pam's popcorn."

Morgan burst out laughing. *I gave her that last night.* “Fine. I’m going to pound your ass. You have no chance of winning this match. Better?”

Kendle sniggered. “If you say so.”

Morgan knew he didn’t have to take it easy on her. The few workouts and matches she’d been in since joining this camp had all been victories. That was about to change.

Nearby, the warehouse men followed the video instructions, grateful Kendle was here. They’d been worried over people staring at their scars, but Safe Haven was full of people who had been marred by survival. No one gave them a second glance as they worked out with their teammates and friends. The one they did gawk at was Kendle. She had so many scars it was hard to find a place where her skin was clear. Kendle’s body was a mess. Her tank top and jeans let them see the chunks that had been ripped from her arms and stomach. When she bent to get into the ring, her jeans pulled tight over identical shapes under the leg material. She was covered in bites.

Kendle didn’t care about their pity or revulsion. “Rules?”

Morgan advanced. “Same as usual. You bleed, you’re out.”

Kendle entered the center of the ring. “Stakes?”

Morgan paused. “We don’t usually bet.”

“Chicken?”

He frowned at her. “It’s against our rules. Betting on matches is only allowed with approval from the boss.”

“I have something you want.”

Morgan’s frown grew. “Is this a psych-out?”

“Of course. I overheard great gossip while cleaning the nastiest bathroom ever.”

Morgan tried not to laugh again. The men in camp were thawing toward Kendle, but the females were trying to sink her in every way. “What?”

“That’s my stake. I’ll tell you who said it and then you’ll sign away your firstborn for it.”

Intrigued, Morgan nodded. “Who?”

Kendle answered with a lilt and a grin. “Pamela.”

“What? What did she say?! Was it about last night?” Morgan’s stress flowed out in thick waves. “I knew she was faking it.”

Kendle and the others who heard were laughing and shaking their heads. Morgan was hooked.

“So, you ready to play?”

Morgan’s lips thinned. “First blood calls it.”

“Yes. Now, what’s your stake?”

There was one thing they all wanted from Kendle, but her leaving Marc alone was an impossible demand. “I want your full story. The scars and all.”

Kendle froze for an instant as Ethan’s face flashed in front of her. Yeah, *I’m still with you, baby.*

Morgan held up a hand. “I’m sorry. I’ll pick something else.”

Kendle shook it off. “No, it’s okay. It just means you’ll have more bruises than I’d planned on. When I win, you have to give me private lessons.”

“Deal.”

Eagles gathered around the ring.

Wade and Donald went to the main entrance to keep a lookout for camp members. Fights like this one were not against the rules, but if it got ugly, the camp would have issues, especially if Morgan did beat her up. It was one reason they matched women against other women in training. The camp still didn’t like seeing men beat on women, for any reason.

Gus finished his set and went to his locker to get clean clothes. He wanted to view the match and hit the shower before lunch. Angela had already given him a schedule. He had duty over the camp meeting that was happening as soon as everyone had been fed. He didn’t want to eat or stand guard while wearing dried sweat.

A paper floated from his locker. He picked it up and read it.

I hope you have an awesome day. -T

Gus studied the note, touched.

Quinn stomped by Gus, headed for the ring to stop the fight.

Tommy grabbed Quinn by the shoulder and spun him into the row of towel racks out of sight of the ring. “You’ll get in trouble for it. Stop!”

Quinn paused. The surprise punctured his anger. “What?”

“All you can do is bitch and you’ll be voted down. Then you get the rep that you don’t think women are equals, blah blah. Just suck it up or get out of here!”

Quinn didn’t think he could stand to watch the fight. He shoved by Tommy to leave, but he stopped as both participants came from their corners.

“On the right, we have the 110lb. island fighter adorned in mystery scars and glowing red orbs. She specializes in blood and has a fondness for the boss’s main man.” Kenn ignored the shocked gasps and stares as he continued the mock announcement from next to the ring. He’d just come from the shower, but he’d been listening, practicing his mental skills. “In the opposite corner, we have the 210 lb. senior Eagle with huge guns and excellent kai skills. If he can’t beat this little girl, the machoman will be known as a wimp and have to forfeit his next night in the hot tub with Pam and Shawn.” Kenn waited for the amusement and red faces to fade, then kept it going. “Since this betting session isn’t okay, let’s open it up to the audience. Who has chores they’d like to trade or food they won’t be eating? Make your bets. We begin in one minute...” Kenn stiffened. He turned to glare at Kendle and then Morgan, who were laughing at his antics.

“Damn.” Kendle knew that look. “We’re in trouble.”

“Yep. Boss just got off the elevator.” Morgan now regretted being in the ring.

“Coming this way?” Kendle wanted to leave now too. It wasn’t fun anymore.

“Don’t move, either of you.” Kenn leaned over the top rope, pointing. “You wound them up and now you’ll settle them down. Stand by for the boss!”

Kenn’s hissed words knocked the air from both of them. They hadn’t meant to stir people up. They were just having fun.

Silence fell over the training room and rippled into the showers where people were hurrying to finish as they heard about the coming fight.

Angela entered, face expressionless. She advanced into the room, head turning to mark everyone who was there and those who weren’t. She went to Kenn and dropped onto a stool next to him. “As you were.”

Kenn held up an imaginary mike this time. “We have thirty seconds; betting ends in thirty seconds.” Kenn pointed at the clock on the wall.

Angela absorbed it all, catching unguarded thoughts and the desire for their lives to return to what passed as normal in Safe Haven. She didn’t glance at Kendle or Morgan yet.

Kendle stayed away from Angela. Ropes between them weren’t enough. She still wanted the woman dead. She just didn’t have the will to try it now.

Morgan made Kendle switch sides with him. He didn't want her that close to the boss.

Angela ignored them, studying the crowd. Observing their faces and hearing their words was as important as searching mental doors. Images didn't always convey mood. She needed to know what, if anything, was bothering her army.

Quinn stayed next to Tommy, torn. "Why isn't she stopping it?"

"She can't. Do you feel the anger in the air?"

Quinn hadn't but he did now. "Who are they mad at?" Quinn had forgotten their rivalry for the moment. This was a senior man educating a lower level Eagle.

"Kendle. She betrayed us. They want payback."

"So does Angela."

"I would too, but it can go too far. The boss came to make sure no one gets hurt in the wrong way."

"To prevent a riot or a lynching?"

"Never a riot, but Kendle could be tossed overboard if she makes another mistake. If these men get wound up tight enough without a release, she could be tossed over without making the mistake."

"Would that be the same if it was all women in here?"

Tommy snorted. "We're giving her a chance to regain a little honor. The women will never give her that. They have no forgiveness."

Quinn forced out his next question. “It would be the same for her next mate, right? Shunned, outcast.”

Tommy shrugged. “That depends on the mate. Is he already an outcast?”

“No.”

“Does he plan on becoming one?”

“No.”

“Is he going to try to get her accepted by the camp?”

Quinn sighed. “He wants to, but he has no idea if she does.”

Tommy moved into the aisle for a better view. “Sounds like that guy might have a chance at all his goals, except one.”

“Just one?”

“Getting her to love him as much as she does Marc. Any man who dates Kendle will never be first in her heart. I couldn’t handle that. Neither could Adrian. If you can, good luck. I mean that.” Tommy went to the ring to view the fight.

Angela delivered an ugly glower to the man at her side.

Kenn paused, about to announce the start. “Uh, hang on folks. Stand by.” He lowered his voice. “What did I forget?”

Angela didn’t censor her angry tone. “I haven’t made a bet yet.”

The room went silent again. Angela didn’t break rules. She wasn’t betting. She was dropping the hammer.

“If Morgan wins and we get her story, she’s blacklisted from the Eagles. If she wins and we get to hear about Morgan’s sex life, she’s blacklisted from the Eagles. She’s taking the punishment for everyone breaking the no-betting rule. Let’s have some fun!”

No one spoke. Angela wasn’t usually outright mean.

Angela regarded Kenn. “Restart the count. Let’s get this fight rolling!”

Kenn, out of fun mode, hesitated.

“What are you waiting for? You and that big mouth jumped right in before I showed up.”

Kenn stepped to the center of the platform around the ring, wishing he and his big mouth had stayed in the shower.

Angela swept the nervous men and women, seeing more people had come from the training rooms in the hall around them. “We have time for two more matches after this one. Pick ‘em and get set. We do have a camp meeting to attend, so all bets will be settled after the matches are over.”

Kenn got excited again, though he knew it would probably make the situation worse. “Who do we have for our second match up? Anyone want to be the center of attention for the boss’s ‘you’re all so fucked’ lesson?”

“Sign me up.” Quinn advanced toward the ring amid oohs and noos. He had a lot of anger to work off.

“I’ll take that match.” Monica was positive she could beat Quinn in a fair fight.

Quinn paused.

The crowd laughed, Angela included.

Kenn got louder to be heard. “Okay, so for match number two, we have the new girl and the twitchy guy. Who wants a piece of match three?!”

People called names and nudged their favorites, creating waves of sound that drew more of the would-be fighters from the other training rooms. Guards on the hall peered inside to verify Angela’s protection was doing their job.

Kids also appeared on the floor, but they stayed in the hall with their guards and personal protectors. The kids knew they weren’t allowed in training rooms without permission, but camp members wandering by had to be dissuaded by the guards.

“I could use a good workout.” Ray came through the crowd, acting timid. “Anyone wanna beat me up?”

People laughed at his game.

“I’ve got two minutes.” Ian didn’t control his cocky attitude as he joined the other fighters near the ring. “Should be over quick.”

Grant stayed in the doorway. He’d let Ray convince him to come along for rounds so he could tell the boss he’d left the bridge for a while. Angela was getting upset with him over it. Now, Grant wished he’d refused. He didn’t want to watch Ray get beat up. Ian’s muscled arms looked like they could pound nails.

Whitney went to stand by Grant before Angela could order it. There were now sixty people in here and another three dozen in the halls. Grant needed a guard.

“It’s not to the death, right?” Grant didn’t know much about Safe Haven’s inner workings yet.

Whitney chuckled. “No. You bleed, you’re out.”

“Bleed?”

“Don’t worry. Ray won’t get in trouble for hurting him.”

Grant heard the tone. “How can you be sure Ray will win?”

“Because my team helped Marc and Kenn make him one of the best fighters in camp. You’ve heard of small but scrappy, right? Well, that’s Ray.”

Grant was soothed a little, but he couldn’t help the concern as he compared bodies on the two men. Ray needed to eat a lot more sandwiches.

“Are you ready?” Kenn noticed Kendle refusing to glance in Angela’s direction and approved.

Kendle nodded, not surprised Angela had trapped them, but she was still eager to fight. She needed to blow off the steam so she could keep walking the line.

Morgan smirked at her as Kenn rang an imaginary bell and people crowded closer. “Come on, scars. Let’s see it.”

Kendle snorted, taking up a stance she knew the man wasn’t familiar with. She’d reverse engineered

it from a move Marc had taught her while they were fighting the troops. “You can do better.”

Morgan grinned wider. “Home wrecker?”

“That’ll do it.” She lunged forward, swinging.

Morgan grabbed her arm.

Kendle twisted and used his weight to flip him over her shoulder.

Morgan landed hard but he was up fast. “Don’t stop now.”

Kendle lunged again, coming in low.

Morgan grabbed her again. When she began to attack, he shoved her, hard. She hit the mat, gasping as the air was knocked out of her.

Morgan followed up with a mild kick to her ribs.

Kendle rolled over and got to her feet, expression wild.

Morgan advanced, grin never wavering.

Kendle’s survival mode kicked in without her permission. She punched, rocking Morgan’s head back.

Morgan swung with the same strength, catching her below the eye.

Kendle hit the mat again.

Morgan waved at her. “You need those private lessons. Show me you deserve it.” Her punch had been solid and she was fast. He could do a lot with that.

Kendle stood, swallowing the blood from her split lip instead of letting anyone see it. She lunged without warning, tackling Morgan head-on.

Not expecting it, Morgan staggered at the weight.

Kendle began punching, using more force.

Morgan took four of her hits and then he punched her back, pounding her.

Kendle slid to the mat, dazed. Blood ran from the corner of her mouth.

“We have a winner! Morgan has beaten her ass and leaves the ring with hardly a scratch. Kendle may need a hand. Why did she do it, folks? The world may never know.” Kenn signaled at Quinn to help her out of the ring as people cheered.

Quinn gave Kendle a hand on the arm to help her out and immediately released her.

Kendle sat on the edge of the platform and pretended she wasn't in a lot of pain. She also didn't show that she was enjoying it. Physical pain was a distraction from her mental anguish.

Monica leapt over the ropes and landed in the center of the mat.

Quinn also leapt in, not as eager to be facing a woman.

Kenn decided to finish having a good time and pay the price later with everyone else. “In the right corner, we have Quinn, the lovelorn Eagle who can't seem to hook up with a good woman. In the left corner, we have Monica, the Ciemus fisherwoman who will now lead her own team of hot men. Will she ride them all in her quest for the camp's best servicer? Will the twitchy guy get one

unstuck from his chamber? Let's find out! Ring that bell!"

Quinn shouted at Kenn, hating the amusement and public knowledge.

Monica laughed with the crowd. She didn't care about a reputation. She liked men and after a good fight, she wanted one. *What's so wrong with that?*

Quinn shoved everything else out, not wanting to lose this fight. He'd watched Monica training with Neil. She caught on fast and she'd been practicing.

"Go!"

Monica stepped forward and swept with her leg, hitting a braced knee.

Quinn punched downward, getting a shoulder flinch-off as she spun out of his reach.

Monica dropped and twisted, leg again sweeping.

Quinn jumped. He landed and jumped again, avoiding her second sweep. He lunged backward as she came up swinging but misjudged the step. He staggered, arms flailing.

Monica threw her first punch. She caught Quinn under the chin and knocked his teeth together.

Quinn tried to recover, but his eyes were watering from the blow. He shoved her back in a defensive motion and tried to advance.

Monica punched him in the chest, bringing him to his knees. She wanted to finish him off, but his whimpering gasps were pitiful. She retreated and gave him the chance to recover.

Quinn got to his feet. He understood now that he was going to lose this fight, but he wasn't going to lay down for her. If she wanted it, she had to take it.

Monica nodded, reading it in his eyes. "I'll give you a rematch whenever you're ready."

Quinn opened his mouth to give a smart remark.

Monica punched him, coming from her hip.

Quinn fell backward onto the mat and stayed there, groaning. Blood dripped from his mouth.

"And we have our winner!" Kenn cleared his throat as Tonya, Candy and Tracy entered the room, let in by friendly guards who would be scolded for it later. "The new girl is making a name for herself in more than just the bedroom...and poor Quinn now needs a medic. Uh, seriously, can we get a medic over here?"

Kendle helped Quinn out of the ring the same as he'd done for her. She heard his slight intake of air at the contact. *Beaten and dizzy and still has a thing for me. Bet he would have gotten back up if the no-bleed rule wasn't in effect.*

Angela gave a subtle nod. *He would have. Quinn isn't a great fighter, though he excels at most weapons. He's a planner, a deadly foe who gives us those plots and schemes.*

He's like you.

Yes. In time, he might even be like Marc. It depends on the grooming. He was on Marc's team. He earned XO against stiff competition.

I don't want a substitute from you! Kendle glared at Angela. *Leave me alone.*

Angela laughed, hard and loud.

Kendle limped from the room, unable to take it. Angela wouldn't stop until she settled down with someone or left. *You'll get your wish, you cruel bitch. When we get to Pitcairn, I'm leaving your Safe Haven. Luke's bunker will be perfect for me.*

Kenn's voice echoed again. "And now we have our final match, ladies and gentlemen. The captain's bodyguard against the boss's former body man. Will Grant get to view his boytoy having a glorious victory or will Ian's mouth swallow him whole?" Kenn waved his arm. "Let's roll."

Ray and Ian got into the ring at the same time, not looking at each other. They weren't friends, but they'd never had problems. They'd also never matched up in a cage fight or in training because Ray was four levels above Ian.

Grant bit his lip as Kenn rang the imaginary bell.

Ray stood still and let the cocky fighter come to him.

Ian realized at the last minute he was in trouble, but it was too late to avoid the whirlwind Ray became as he threw punch after punch that landed in Ian's kidneys and gut.

Ray used extra force on the next upswing.

Ian vomited.

"Uh..." Kenn wasn't sure if he should call it because puke wasn't blood.

Ian wiped his mouth on his sleeve and stalked forward.

Ray blocked the decoy leg sweep and the fast punch. He wasn't prepared for the headbutt.

Ian struck him twice, hard.

Ray stumbled and went down on one knee, arms rising in defense.

Ian used both fists together and hit Ray in the forehead.

Ray sprawled backward.

Ian leaned over to deliver a final blow.

Ray struck upward with his knee, cracking into Ian's jaw. Blood ran into his mouth.

Like Kendle, Ian swallowed it, swinging.

Ray rolled to avoid the leg kick and got trapped by the corner post. He rose to his feet, arms crossed above him to absorb the fast punches Ian threw.

Ray kicked out, getting Ian's knee. He used the outside of his elbow to batter the man's ribs and shoulder, causing pain like he'd been taught.

As Ian slid sideways to protect his kidney, Ray repeated Marc's stomach punch.

Ian dropped, puking again.

Ray hit him in the mouth as he came up for air, splattering blood and debris to end the match.

"There's your winner! And when he gets off duty, we can all thank Marc Brady for that wonderful new move flying through the Eagles."

Ray held out a hand to Ian, not bothered by the mess. "Still friends?"

Ian snickered roughly, controlling the next gag as he took the hand up. "If you teach me that move, we can *be* friends."

"Deal." Ray retreated and gave the camp a surprise. He wiggled his hand and peered down in a feminine gesture. "You will wash first?"

Ian broke into amusement as the cramp eased off. "I promise. No dirty dick here."

Ray cackled as he wiped off on a towel Kenn tossed him, finally being himself. Among his kind, he'd been the life of the party during gatherings. "Good. Dirty dicks are so last season." Ray sauntered away from the ring. Grant was right. He didn't have to worry over Safe Haven's reaction. He'd proved, again, that a man could be gay and a badass. That was all he needed.

Grant was laughing so hard he was almost crying. It wrinkled his face and made him appear young, innocent.

Something snapped in Ray. The last barrier to who he wanted to be vanished. He stepped forward and kissed Grant.

Most of the witnesses cheered. Everyone knew Grant wanted Ray, and Ray was a good guy. Their match had already been approved.

Grant clutched Ray's hips, lost.

Ray pulled back, grinning. "Will you be mine?"

Grant nodded, smiling warmly. "Kiss me again and I'll be anything you want."

Ray did.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
The Other Shoe

1

Candy joined Angela, aware of the line of Eagles behind them frowning at everyone. All sorts of rules were being broken right now, including non-Eagles being let inside a training room during downtime. “I wanted to thank you for putting me back on the engineering team.” Candy fingered her schedule. She’d just gotten it.

“You belong there.” Angela slid over for the pregnant woman to join her. Candy looked better than Angela had ever seen.

Candy blushed at the boss’s scrutiny. “Thank you for Conner.”

Angela shrugged. “I doubt it will be smooth sailing. You both have baggage.”

Candy laughed. “Yes, we do. I’m glad to know. I’ve been waiting for the next shoe to fall.”

“Well, you may want to brace. It just tumbled off the shelf.” Angela directed her attention to the other side of the room.

Candy’s happiness dulled as she saw Conner. Like the other males who’d already been assigned to a team or cleared as an Eagle, he was surrounded by women wanting his attention. “Golddiggers.”

Angela chuckled. “Not exactly. Monica was given her own team. She doesn’t need him to further her own image or goals.”

Candy stiffened. “I didn’t know she was hunting fresh meat.”

Angela tried not to laugh again and failed. “A lot of Ciemus women flooded in. She wanted top of the pack and she got it. None of the others here are going to match her for a while.”

“You could. Jennifer could.”

“We’ve already earned our places, but we can’t lead teams. She doesn’t have enough experience and I have another job. Monica might be the next one of us to ascend the ranks. Be happy for her.”

“I am.”

“You sound angry.”

“I am. She knows he’s taken. *They all do.*”

Angela shifted so she and Candy were face-to-face. “Really?”

Candy flushed, but anger flowed from her stance. “Yes.” She glared at Monica, willing the woman to look at her.

Monica knew she was being observed by leadership, but she’d achieved a huge personal goal today and she liked younger men. Conner had also proven himself and he was adorable. Now that there was time for it, she wanted a service.

Conner increased the speed on the treadmill, forcing several of the women to retreat. He wasn’t interested in what they were selling.

Monica stood in his downdraft, so he caught her smell. She'd attempted an advantage by picking vanilla soap. She assumed he was his father's son.

Conner couldn't stop the instant inhale of the sweet odor. *I am Adrian's son, but you're not my Candy.*

Monica, like everyone else, knew where Conner's heart was. *But that's not the part I'm after.*

Conner's head swiveled. "You want me to be your relief source?" The boy bristled. "Do I look like a whore to you?"

Monica laughed. "It's been a standard for as long as Safe Haven has existed. The difference is that a female Eagle is asking for care."

Conner chuckled at her clever switch. "You know, most of the Special Forces men specialize in that."

"I've heard. Are you suggesting I hunt elsewhere or asking if I've made those rounds?"

Conner's amusement was magnetic, drawing Monica and the other females closer.

"I don't know the rules on this. If I refuse, am I demoted or something?"

"Of course not." Monica leaned in to show the tops of breasts even larger than Candy's.

Conner was flattered and as a young man, he was enjoying the banter, but he didn't like how Candy had frozen half way to them as if she was waiting for him to make a choice. "Sorry. Charlie's the titty-baby, not me."

Eagles cackled at his quip, proud of him for resisting.

Monica liked his spunk. “Guess that’s a no, huh?”

Conner nodded. “I recommend Greg. Whoever he had in his cabin last night sounded...very happy.”

Monica swept for Greg and found him on duty. She ignored Candy’s glares. “Special Forces...”

Conner leaned in to keep from embarrassing her further. “He’s not my dad, but he’ll get you there.”

Monica paled, secret exposed. *What gave me away, kid?*

You knew he prefers vanilla. You’ve been watching him to see what he likes. He knows too, by the way. I just wouldn’t let that slip to the boss.

Conner shrugged as she stomped off, face red. “Some people can’t take a joke.” He looked through the crowd at Candy.

Candy resumed her walk, heart lightening. *This is what you want?*

Conner stepped off the treadmill. *With all my heart. I love you.*

Candy met him in the middle of the room, ignoring the quieting, staring witnesses. She didn’t know how this was supposed to happen, so she did what felt good—she dove on in. “I challenge the age law.”

Silence fell.

Heads rotated toward Angela.

Angela was ready. “For you or the entire camp?”

“The entire camp.”

“No. You don’t have enough status here for that demand.”

“For myself, then. I’ll work up from there.”

Angela gestured. “Make your case.”

Candy swallowed. “It’s unconstitutional. In the beginning, teenagers were able to make these choices and it built the world, including this ship. They had jobs and served in the military. Making them sneak around is wrong and encourages them to go bad to get what they need.” Candy smiled at Conner. “We want to spend time together. We’re tired of trying to hide it.”

Angela was impressed by the choice of defense. “Denied. The age law is fifteen. Stick to it.”

“What if I want to marry her?” Conner took Candy’s hand amid the surprise and mutters. “I planned to do it the right way, after we’d settled into a better place, but it is what I want. What *we* want.”

“Marriage doesn’t preempt the law.”

Conner frowned. “The law is wrong.”

Angela shrugged. “We voted on it when our situation was desperate. Fifteen was chosen. If you insist on another vote now, which *you* can as an Eagle, it will probably be changed to sixteen.”

People scowled at Candy and Conner now. Many of them had potential partners who were about to become legal on their next birthday. They didn’t want more time added.

“You approved other couples.” Candy knew they were going to lose, but she had to keep fighting. She wanted this, a lot.

“I did, one of them was my son. Jennifer was the other.”

Candy held up a hand. “Jenny was pregnant and needed a protector. I understand that.”

“My son was headed down a bad path. Tracy was the only person who could stop him from becoming like Adrian instead of Marc. I made a mother’s choice, against my will.”

“That’s favoritism.”

“It would be if I’d only do it for him. There are always exceptions to rules. Safe Haven recognizes that. We try to save people.”

Candy worked it through. “Conner and I don’t need saving anymore.”

Angela beamed at them. “No. You two are good together. You make each other better.”

“Then why can’t we be together openly?” Conner’s voice carried his frustration.

“Because you’re the example I have to make. The third couple to come through gets the weight of change this time. If you want teenagers to have more status and respect, help them earn it. Follow the laws and be accepted in every way. Break them and be the couple who pays the heaviest price.”

“What if we don’t want any of this?” Conner hadn’t planned on an open challenge. Candy had caught him by surprise.

“Then obey the rules.”

“That’s the challenge.” Candy’s hand went to her hip. “We’re stuck doing it either way.”

“Yes. You joined Safe Haven and promised to uphold our rules, but you’re taking an Eagle’s honor. Stop it. We need them.” Angela glanced around the crowd that was now expecting a punishment. “Report all breaks of rules, even if you agree with the person doing it, even if you are the one doing it. Eagles own up to their mistakes and their choices.” She looked back at the nervous couple. “If you want to be together, four weeks isn’t long to wait.”

“Is that your final word?”

Angela nodded. “It is.”

Candy knew she was beaten, but she didn’t feel as if she’d lost. “We can do it.”

“I believe that too. Now prove it.” Angela waved. “Kendle has cleanup.”

Conversations and workouts slowly resumed. Angela subtly searched for Monica and found her hitting on Greg. Like she had with Conner, Monica was showing cleavage and getting no sparks. Greg was nodding and checking his watch, setting up a service, but he didn’t want it.

You’re a hard one to match up, Greg, but I will get your DNA spread into this camp. Angela surveyed the crowd again. Most of the servicing setups were over. Almost all the females were asking for a commitment or friend benefits instead of automatic sex to those who were higher ranked. They were learning to get their own needs covered.

She wanted the same for Greg. She looked back at him to scan for what she'd missed.

Greg leered at her in open longing for one second. Then he closed up and sent her an answer mentally. He didn't need to read minds. He was too good with women to not know what she was doing. *I can't have who I want. All these bodies can't compare, but they'll keep me on the right side of my honor. Please, stop now.*

Angela's heart broke for him. *How can I reward you?*

I have my honor intact. That's enough.

As you wish.

Greg motioned he was going off duty now. He draped an arm around Monica's shoulders and turned on the charm.

Angela clapped her hands. "All right. Settle those bets and get ready for the camp meeting right after lunch. Today's fun isn't over."

2

"There were so many bodies the refrigerators were cleaned out to hold them. When the captain refused to help us, the crew stopped storing bodies at all." Kendle scrubbed the freshly cleaned mat with a towel, giving it a rough dry. She'd come back as soon as the third match was over. She refused to give Angela any reason to add more chores. "Most of us locked ourselves in the cabins, but you've seen the flimsy doors on this ship. Ours were the same.

Gangs of passengers kicked them open and ransacked the cabins. After the crew died, the ship stopped filtering fresh water. The taps stopped running and the galley stopped serving. We were on our own.” Kendle tossed the towel into the hamper on the side of the cart. She went to the lavatory to wash her hands, shuddering from reliving her story.

The training room was silent. She’d been talking while she cleaned. No one had left, not even the people who knew her story through gossip. Hearing it from her was eerie and mesmerizing. Even Angela was still here, lingering by the exit with her security.

Kendle came back out, drying her hands on a paper towel. “My sister and I barricaded the door and tried to figure out a plan. We worked on it all night, listening to the ship tear itself apart. Even when the drunks passed out and the kids stopped crying, there were still moans of grief, puking, coughing, dying. It was never quiet.”

Kendle began gathering up the cleaning supplies and storing them on the cart. “We snuck off in a lifeboat with a few other passengers.” Kendle paused. “It bothers me that I didn’t know their names. I was the last one to see them alive, to know for certain what happened to them and I can’t tell their family if I run across them because I don’t know their damn names!” Kendle clenched her fists. “Dawn went during the storm.” Kendle held up her wrist, showing the rope burns and bite marks. “We got the great idea to tie ourselves to the boat. When

the railing ripped off..." Kendle sobbed, fighting for control.

"You can stop." Morgan was sorry he'd insisted. "It's okay to stop now."

Kendle wiped away her tears and took a deep breath. "I washed up on an island where the population was infected by the rage illness. As you've all stared at, I had an encounter." Kendle forced herself to finish it. "Ethan liked to bite. When he took me into that cave, I believed I would die there. I should have died there." Kendle pushed the cart toward the employee hall. "Instead, Luke rescued me and flew me home on a supply plane. He died and I joined Safe Haven's fight against the government so I'd have a reason to go on living." She paused at the entrance, ignoring Angela and her scowling security to glance back at Morgan. "Thank you."

He frowned. "For what?"

"A few hours of dwelling on my sore spots instead of my past. I owe you one."

Morgan smiled, not understanding but glad she seemed calmer now. "When you're ready for a rematch, you call it."

Kendle snorted. "It'll be a while. I have a lot to learn."

3

"More team lists are up. Come on." Tonya dragged Kenn to the pegboard in the main lounge

even though he was the one who'd posted it an hour ago. "I can't believe Monica beat Quinn."

"Same here."

She skimmed for her name and found it near the top. "Medical team!"

Kenn was thrilled for her. "She thinks you're happy in there with the chemicals and beakers. Are you?"

"Very. Hey! Did you see where Rose was placed?"

"Yes, dear."

Tonya snickered. "Never would have believed she'd be helpful to the engineers."

"Me either, but she has a degree in architectural design. She'll fit right in there."

"How did Candy make that crew?"

Kenn shrugged. "No idea. I wasn't around for that decision. Angela made her choice on Candy weeks ago."

Tonya kept scanning for familiar names on the listed teams. "Aww. Panaji got the fishing crew with Pam and Katie. He'll love that. Pam's a good leader and she's funny when Katie gets her going."

Kenn didn't tell her Katie would be reassigned once she accepted who she was. Angela had insisted they not force the issue for anyone who was still on the fence about using their gifts to protect the camp. She had faith they would come around to it on their own. Kenn had no reason to disbelieve that, but he happened to know Katie was in trouble for not

telling anyone she was a descendant. She was hiding it and that was forbidden.

“Wow.” Tonya pointed at the list. “She put her own son on the cleaning crew. That’s harsh.”

“She put him back with his team.”

Tonya frowned as she noted the other names on that new crew. “She wants him around Kendle and Adrian?”

“He did well out there with us. She knows he needs the teachers who were able to get through to him.”

Tonya’s ire rose. “What about you? Not that I want you cleaning my toilet, but shouldn’t you be included in that teaching?”

“I am, actually.” Kenn made sure no one else was close and held out his schedule for her to read.

“Private time with Charlie starting next week.” Tonya gave the paper back to him, impressed. “You really did do a good job out there in hell.”

“I tried. I’m still trying.”

Tonya took his hand and led him into the galley kitchen. It was empty.

Kenn let her take him toward the walk-in pantry. He checked for guards in sight and didn’t find any.

When Tonya entered the darkness and pulled down her pants, Kenn joined her. Right when he started feeling too normal, Tonya reminded him they had a choice. *I love her so much.*

Tonya felt tears coming. “I love you too.”

Kenn shoved between her legs.

The pantry opened. “Very sweet. Now get out of there!” Brittani chased Kenn, swatting his bare ass with the broom. She was careful not to even bump Tonya, who was laughing. Striking one of Safe Haven’s pregnant females was a death sentence.

Kenn fled, calling something over his shoulder as he tried to fasten his pants and run, but no one listened to him through the amusement.

Brittani pointed at a stool. “Have a seat. I need a taster.”

Surprised, Tonya fixed her clothes and sat, studying the pretty black woman. Brittani’s arms were defined, dark pistons that would be shaped into spears during her time in the Eagles. It happened to all of them, but it was quite noticeable in the females because most of those non-fighters had flabby arms. With long legs in black shorts and a flat stomach under her white tank top, Brittani was sexy, confident, and capable. “Have you been placed yet?”

“No.” Brittani sat a small bowl in front of Kenn’s mate. “That’s made with powdered milk, but it’s fresh churned. You’re not allergic to strawberries, are you?”

“No. I don’t like them, though.” Tonya took a small bite of the ice cream. Her lids shut. Tears began to run over her cheeks.

“Are you okay?”

Tonya sniffled, halting the tears like she'd been doing whenever the hormones got the best of her. "Flashes of the past. Some good, some bad."

Brittani understood. She liked it that the redhead was confident enough to admit it to a near stranger. "I haven't decided on a flavor for the big meal. Hang around and you can test the other two for me."

"Sure." Tonya was waiting on another batch of tests to finish so she could move them and start the next ones. The book said a Karyotyping test took a minimum of seven days, but fourteen was better. Tonya was activating all the tests that took a long time. As she got them running, she had small windows of free time.

"What tests can you do down there?"

Tonya looked up at the cautious tone. "You didn't ask me to stay as a taster. What do you want?"

Brittani leaned in. "Information."

"About what?"

"Everything, everyone."

Tonya bristled. "I don't run the rumor shop anymore. You'll have to get someone else to break the rules."

"Excellent." Brittani took a book from under the counter. "The boss swore I can trust you, but I had to be positive." She slid the book in front of Tonya. "Can you do this test?"

Tonya scanned it and looked up in surprise. "Are you pregnant?"

Brittani chuckled. “No, but I think your cat is. Are you able to use this test to find out?”

“A version of it, yes.”

“Awesome.”

“Here it comes.” Tonya grinned. “You want a kitten.”

“Please? I’d owe you a huge favor.”

Tonya shrugged. “I’ll put your name at the top of the list. I’ve already had a couple people ask, but they don’t have access to scraps to make sure the sweeties are well fed. We didn’t bring cat food.” Tonya studied her. “In exchange, you can save a tiny bit of compost for my plants.”

“Deal. When will you do the test?”

Tonya stood up, heading for her lab. “I won’t. When she starts getting fat, we’ll know. Until then, keep your fingers crossed the kittens survive.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

Tonya didn’t answer, not sharing her fears.

Brittani stewed on it while she worked, adding another worry to her growing list.

4

“The mandatory camp meeting begins in five minutes. If you have duty, keep your radio on and listen. You will still be required to vote.” Grant flipped switches, ending the transmission. Theo’s team had done a wonderful job of replacing blown fuses and changing the settings to account for increased lightning activity. They would have a

little more protection from it now. Kenn had also gotten the new lightning rod up this morning. Grant doubted they would lose power again.

Ray yawned, sitting up. He had another hour on his break, but he was escorting Grant to the meeting. He wanted to be awake for it.

Grant glanced over and delivered a warm smile.

Ray chuckled. “You’re in a good mood.” The vibes were thick and welcome.

“Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Ray stood, nodding to the guards. Angela had four men up here now. They were all big, scary looking, and nervous. It could only mean one thing. Grant was in danger. The weapons hidden here supported that theory.

“What do you want for Christmas?” Grant set the autopilot that wasn’t really needed with them anchored, then accompanied Ray to the elevator. He liked to be covered for all contingencies. So did the boss. Angela had ordered him to stay with his guard even while traveling through the ship and he was obeying. He’d also memorized locations of stashed weapons.

Ray swept the empty elevator and let Grant get in first. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Can you get back to me?”

“Sure. Anything your heart desires?”

Grant beamed at him. “I’ve got it. My Christmas came early.”

Ray got them moving, fighting guilt again. He'd dreamed about Dale. Finding the body had hurt him in ways that would never heal.

Grant felt the sadness, but there wasn't anything he could say to ease that pain. Instead, he chose to distract Ray. "I heard some interesting scuttlebutt about the matchups this morning."

"We were there. We saw what happened."

"Apparently we arrived late. Kendle was blacklisted from the Eagles as a punishment for everyone betting."

"Wow."

"Yeah, and she was added to the permanent cleaning crew."

Ray hadn't read the teams lists yet.

"A lot of betting happened in the mad rush. People are paying off while we're anchored. Angela wrote 'no trading' on the bottom of the daily schedules. People are regretting those hasty wagers now."

"Kendle took all the open punishment. The boss knew people would hurt themselves. She didn't need to."

"Affirmative."

"You sound happy about it." Ray didn't know Grant very well yet. That would take time and questions.

"I'm sailing Safe Haven to the promised land. What's not to be happy about?"

"Agreed." Ray already knew what place he was getting. Angela had told him that and other details

when she'd given him duty over the captain. He was more than satisfied. Ray led the way to the ballroom the Eagles had cleared. It was big enough to allow the entire camp to attend.

Greg, Wade, and Daryl met them at the double exits from this hall. They were clearing and seating everyone.

"Boss wants the captain by the security booth at the far corner." Greg handed Ray a note and waved them in.

Ray read it as they walked, covering the message from prying eyes.

Take him to the command center, through the employee tunnels. The stairs are directly behind you.

Ray wadded the note and stuffed it into his pocket under the various gear he always carried. Angela had given him an escape route to save Grant if there was a problem. Instead of feeling better, it made him twitch harder. *She's expecting trouble.*

Grant sat in the plexiglass booth. He was now surrounded on three sides. "She's going overboard."

"Not a bit. If there's a riot, this won't be enough." Ray took a post, standing, behind Grant's folding seat. He could sweep the crowd and try to spot anyone staring at their captain.

Other guards were doing the same. Senior men were right here or on the exits, and there were only a few people who would be sitting near his booth. One of them was on her way through the crowd.

Samantha flushed at all the stares as Debra pushed her wheelchair to the empty place by Grant. She studied the big men lined up around them, then the booth, frowning. “Something’s happening.”

Ray put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Not sure she wants us discussing it.”

Samantha understood they were expecting an attack now that targets were out in the open. ...*I’m a target.*

Ray removed his hand and returned to scanning. He watched her and Grant too, in case they suspected who might be stalking them but hadn’t mentioned it from fear of being wrong.

Kenn escorted Angela into the ballroom. He cleared a wide path, growling at people to accomplish it.

Angela took a seat at the center table, next to Gus. She removed a folder from her pocket and put it on the table.

People began to take a seat, chatter fading. Safe Haven had never had a meeting like this one. Most trials had been held in private by the moral board, but they didn’t have one of those now. The few former members of it were relieved. They hadn’t enjoyed making those choices alone. Adrian had done it that way to prevent the camp from turning into a lynch mob whenever someone was accused of a crime, but Angela didn’t believe that was necessary anymore.

Kenn opened his notebook and began checking off names on his roster to verify everyone was here.

Angela had ordered them to set the area like a court room, but now that she was here, she realized it was bringing back memories of the justice system before the war. All she could see was criminals going free and judges taking bribes; prosecutors making deals, innocent people being hurt. Angela stood up. "Move this table over there. I'll sit with the camp."

Every guard protested, openly.

Angela went to the center of the seats and plopped down on Theo's lap. "It's time for secrets to come out. Yours first." She wiggled.

Theo gasped, getting hard. It had been a long time. He couldn't help it.

"Stand up."

"Get off my lap!"

"Stand up." Angela wrapped her arms around his neck, leaning in as if to kiss him. "Do it right now or stand trial after Becky."

Theo glared at her, body betraying him as she settled around his hips like the perfect glove. The lack of physical contact was something he often mourned at night, alone. She was using it against him.

"It's what I do." Angela arched, sparking with him for an instant. It was common for an alpha to be a fit to anyone, but rare for those people to be a spark for them. Like usual, there was nothing for her.

Theo gritted his teeth and stood up with her wrapped around him.

Gasps echoed through the chamber, growing louder as they realized he wasn't crippled.

Theo walked forward, hands at his sides. He didn't strain or stumble.

He's more than recovered. Debra stared in hurt shock. To do that, he'd been working out in secret. It would have taken time. *He's been lying to me, to everyone, since...?*

"I got my legs back in Ciemus. William took me into the water; he carried me. When it receded, I could walk." Theo, already in trouble, put his hands on Angela's cheeks and kissed her.

Angela held still, not participating but allowing it.

Theo drew back. "Now get off me!"

Angela laughed as she slid down his hard body, but the sound was cold. She pointed at someone near the Eagle booth. "It's time for more blood in the water. Come clean."

Tonya rolled her eyes. "I can read minds through his kid. So what? All of the pregnant women can."

Kenn had known. The camp hadn't.

"And?" Angela insisted.

Tonya's chin dropped. "I can move objects and bring up a little fire, on my fingers."

Kenn gawked at his mate. He hadn't known that.

People around them shrank back as Angela pointed again.

Leeann's lip quivered. She started crying.

Angela wanted to take pity but couldn't. "Get it out."

"I tried to run away again. The other kids stopped me." Leeann cried harder. "I want him back so bad!"

Angela shifted, finger coming out again. "Share your poison so we can all move on."

"I've been sleeping on third shift duty since we got on the boat." James glanced around, hands coming up. "We're safe now, right?"

"Dude!" Ivan yelled from his post. "That's the boss's door! You're suspended, immediately!"

Angela turned again, narrowing in on someone who planned to remain silent.

Panaji shook his head. "They be mad!"

Angela waited, foot tapping.

The refugee didn't want to tell on people. "Fine. I hear two things."

"About people you've been working with."

"Yes. A man on my crew gives candy bars to ex slave girl, so she'll..."

"Have sex with him?"

Panaji nodded. "Randal."

"And?"

"And there is two descendants, on my team."

"We know Pam's like us."

"Not Pam."

Katie held up a hand. "He means me." She pointed at Sabrina. "She's an Invisible, but her power's starting to unlock."

Kenn keyed his radio. “All alert, Eagles. Randal is to report to the boss right away. If you run into him, give the man an escort.” Kenn had been checking the lists of the passengers Angela pointed to. Randal wasn’t here.

“As you can tell, this isn’t a normal camp meeting.” Angela drew in a deep breath. “We haven’t really changed, none of us. We’re making the same mistakes that ruined our lives before the war ever came.” Her chin lifted. “I’m no different. The brig’s empty. I told the guards to let Becky and Seth escape.”

Anger came toward her, combined with shouts and mutters.

“You can’t do that!”

“Why?!”

“She’s a troubled kid, that’s why!” Angela let them observe her true feelings. “We can’t execute her like a dog! We’re Safe Haven Refugee Camp! We’re supposed to be the light in the darkness!” Angela waved at Donald as the camp’s anger continued. “Make sure they’re gone. If they were stupid enough to stay, we’re still having the trial.”

Ben hurried off, not wanting to miss whatever came next.

Angela shoved a stray curl out of her face, angry like her camp now was. “I won’t threaten you. I’ll still lead you, but if you kill her over this, you’ll kill a part of me too. We save people; we reform them and give them a second chance. Becky’s mistake was trusting Rick. She’s not all there anymore,

mentally. Any of the guards can verify that. We'd just be killing a shell." Angela motioned at Kenn. "Do the rest of them from the list I gave you this morning."

Kenn opened the paper and began to read. "Stanley, stealing food from the galley to hoard. Why?"

Stanley flushed. "We might all get sick, like Kendle's boat did, and people could go crazy."

Chills went through the room.

Kenn cleared his throat. "Vicky, theft from the garden stock. Why?"

Vicky shifted away from her stunned boyfriend, Whitney. "I might want to leave. I'll need to grow my own food."

Whitney dropped his arm from her shoulders, shocked. He hadn't known she wanted to leave. He'd thought they were a committed couple trying to build a life together.

"Ramer, theft of narcotics from the infirmary. Why?"

Ramer twitched. "I can't sleep without them. I lay there and hear the sound of Carl dying on that warehouse wall."

More chills traveled the room.

"Blake, assault on a cat. Why?!" Kenn was personally pissed about this one.

Blake stood up as guards moved his way in case he was a problem. "I wanted to see if it landed on its feet."

“So you kicked it down the stairwell last night and broke one of its ribs?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt it. I thought it would land on its feet.”

“The rib broke from your boot, dumbass. Also, assault on teammate. Why?”

“Same reason.”

“You son of a bitch!” Ed, wearing a bandage around his own ribs, lunged over the chairs. He tackled Blake, knocking the man’s head against the hard floor. He shrugged off the guards. “Hang on. I want to see if he lands on his feet!”

Kenn waited for the guards to break it up, waving them to take Blake to the brig. “Okay, who’s next?”

Angela pointed. “Last on the list, for today.”

Kenn sighed as the camp muttered. “You sure? They admitted it recently.”

“No, neither of them did.”

Kenn realized she was right. “Candy and Conner, breaking the age rule. Why?”

“You liar!” Conner shouted at Angela. “You said we could be together!”

“You were and you broke the rules. I told you I was going to make you an example. Why are you surprised?”

“You put us together!”

“And you broke my rules. Then you shattered the camp rules! You never intended to follow them. You’re like your dad.”

The crowd gasped. He would never live that status down now.

Conner stared in hurt surprise. “Why did you do this?”

Angela shrugged, tone cold. “I gave you a chance to be one of us and you threw it in my face while breaking the deal we made. That’s why. Don’t make a deal with a devil, kid, not if you don’t mean it. Things get ugly.”

Candy was also angry. “If we’d admitted it earlier, would this be happening?”

“No.” Angela gave the truth. “We were all hoping you would. You disappointed us with that choice. Separate them.”

Kenn motioned at Morgan.

Morgan took Conner’s arm and led him to the other side of the room.

“I’d like to be done now.” Angela moved to the center of the tense, pissed people. “I will do this to begin every day if I have to. We’re not taking all this baggage to the island. I mean that. Stop breaking the rules or be exposed.” Angela went on, glad the worst of it was over. “The kill team has been chosen. No more names are needed.”

“She said chosen, not sent.” Ivan looked at Greg. “If Marc’s wasn’t the kill team, where did they go?”

Greg shrugged. “We don’t ask those questions unless she’s in the mood to talk to us. Since they left, she hasn’t been.”

Angela kept updating them. “Food will be hard to locate. Please bulk up before I send you out.” The chosen people would know each other by their dietary choices. “We’re trying to get the radar fixed to verify if someone is following us. I sent a hard team to check it out. As soon as I hear from them, we’ll make an announcement. I expect it soon.”

People were upset they’d been followed and relieved to know who was handling it. That was indeed a hard team.

“More crews will be posted as other tests are finished.” She looked around, feeling the mood.

They’re ready.

Angela smiled mentally. *Welcome back!*

The witch crawled into her cot, once again reeking. *Talk later.*

Angela let the demon rest. “When that team returns, the camp will have a new vote on Adrian’s banishment and Marc’s removal from leadership and the Eagles. Whatever you decide, I will enforce. And obviously, we will hold trials for some of the violations exposed today. Does anyone want to speak before I end...” Angela heard footsteps running and shifted toward the door, feeling trouble coming. “I missed something.” She gathered energy in case it was a mass attack, the only event she wasn’t prepared for.

Daryl appeared in the doorway, shaken. “We need you at the brig.”

Angela read his thoughts. She wanted to puke as she viewed the images. She’d been searching ahead

while avoiding the Demon of Time. She'd known something stopped this meeting but not what. She had assumed it was Marc's team returning, but she'd had to leave that time period repeatedly when the demon sensed her. Most of her information was from looking ahead before she was marked.

Kenn skimmed his list, heart pounding in time with hers. "I don't have that one on here."

"That's because I didn't see it." Angela tried to recover from the shock. "Tell them. Then seal off the brig."

Daryl looked around, voice stunned. "Seth and Becky are both dead. They've been murdered."

Chapter Twenty-Nine
You'd Never Ask

1

“Something happened.”

Adrian nodded, holding the door against bodies slamming into it. “I felt it too.”

Marc braced his legs, holding the opposite door. Shouts echoed near his head.

“Can I do it now?” Jennifer stood in the center of the bridge, bloody knives in both hands.

Kyle stood in front of her, Glock ready.

“A couple more. There are thirty-one left. We’re missing a dozen.”

Kronus swept the halls, counting bodies crammed into the filthy corridors to reach them. He’d woken to chaos. It hadn’t stopped. “Another group is coming—right side.” The team had come back and retrieved him after they took the bridge, but the refugees had woken from Adrian’s sleep spell at that point. It had been a mad dash to get him to the bridge.

“Shit.” Adrian tried to brace, but there was only so much he could do against so many people.

Refugees pounded on the door, hitting it with fists and knives. The screamed threats were graphic.

“Here they come.” The angel retreated as Jennifer and Kyle advanced, bloody robe leaving smears on the floor.

“Let go on three...two...one... Now!”

Marc and Adrian stood up and spun behind the doors.

A group of furious refugees scrambled in.

Marc and Adrian shoved on the doors to slow the flow.

Jennifer lunged forward, slashing with both knives.

Kyle fired, hitting those attacking Marc or Adrian. He was careful with his aim.

The doors slammed shut.

“We’re using her wolf-killing method.”

Marc held the door, kicking a refugee about to hit Kyle’s arm. “So?”

“Just thought it was poetic.” Adrian waited for Kyle to finish the last screaming man and opened the door again.

Marc kept his door closed. He wasn’t sure Jennifer was ready for a full wave.

Jennifer slashed her way over to Marc’s door and yanked it open. She plunged into the swarm of men and women, screaming and slicing.

Marc sighed in resignation. “Okay, then.”

Kyle observed in shocked desire as Jennifer killed them all.

Adrian kept fighting. “A little help here!”

Marc snapped out of it and helped Adrian finish the refugees in that hallway.

Kyle reloaded and reminded himself that he was married to that vicious female. *Life is good.*

“There are a few fleeing for lifeboats.” Kronus stayed back as Jennifer returned, but he gazed at her with wide, adoring eyes. She was covered in blood and glory to him. “I always bet for you, never against.”

“I’ll slit your throat right now!” Jennifer came toward him, furious. “You really think you’re safe because you bet for me?!”

“Jenny.” Kyle hated to stop her. He felt the same way.

Jennifer spun around and took off running through the boat to find more alert targets for her rage.

Adrian wiped his hands and took a seat, breathing hard. He waved at their unwanted guest. “Get these bodies out of here. Then find a change of clothes. You can’t go back to Safe Haven in that robe.”

Kronus did as ordered, but he hated the chore of pulling dead people out by their ankles.

Kyle stared at the smoky hall where Jennifer had disappeared. “Was she like this on the runs against the troops? Is this what the men refused to show me?”

“Not really.” Marc cleared his throat. “She’s actually in a good mood this time.”

“Yeah, I’d agree with that.” Adrian swiveled the seat to study the screens in front of him. “How far out are we?” He regarded the woman who was

bound and lying under the console next to his boots.
“Speak up, Captain.”

“A day!” Lila spat at him.

Adrian sent a wave of sleep and knocked her out.

Another body fell behind him.

“What the hell, Adrian?!” Marc went to Kyle, who had crumbled. “Watch where you point that thing!”

“Damn. My bad.” Adrian couldn’t lift the spell. They would be a three-man crew until Kyle woke.

Screams echoed from Jennifer’s hunt.

Okay, a two-man team for a while. Adrian checked the next screen, spotting the outline of a ship on the radar. It was the Adrianna, but it was a lot closer than a day. Their captive captain had lied.

Adrian now understood why they were here. This was a four-fer. They’d collected a lost angel and taken control of the ship. The refugees coming to attack Safe Haven were now dead, and they would have a reserve captain if they could sway her to the light.

“She also got us out of camp for whatever’s going on right now.”

“Oh, yeah.” Adrian contemplated it. “She gave Kyle and Jennifer a honeymoon too.”

“A what?” Marc helped Kronus pull bodies beyond the threshold.

“A few hours to kill together. They’ll be so wound up they probably won’t make it to their cabin when we get back.”

Marc laughed, not bothered by this work. He'd spent his career doing forms of it. "What do you think happened in camp? It doesn't feel like a drama problem."

"I'll try to get a read if you want to watch the exits until she comes back or he wakes up."

"Deal." Marc went to the center of the room and reloaded, listening for anyone they'd missed.

Adrian lit up the bond he had with Angela. She didn't want him to use it because Marc would know they still had a private form of communication, but they did, and he was using it. He refused to hide anything or lie anymore. "She's at a table with the Eagles. They're going over papers... Schedules, it's schedules."

"Eagles or camp?"

"I'd say both, for third shift." Adrian paused in reciting, heart speeding up. "Shit."

Marc almost left his post. "What is it?"

"Two bodies. I can't tell where. It's too dark."

Marc reached down and zapped Kyle. "Wake up! We have to go."

Adrian picked up the mike for the UN ship. "We need you on the bridge."

What's the problem? I'm busy here!

Adrian couldn't find any amusement to force out. *Trouble at home. Let's go.*

A few seconds later, Jennifer's footsteps echoed in the hall. Flames danced around her bloody body as she entered. "Hey!" She went to Kyle. "Is he okay?"

“Sleeping. Adrian needs to perfect his aim. How long will it take us to get there?”

“I’m increasing speed now.” Adrian carefully chose buttons and switches, bringing more engine noise. “About eighteen hours, maybe less.”

Jennifer pouted. “Then why did you make me come up now?”

“Because you’re enjoying it too much.” Adrian frowned at her. “Remember who you are.”

Jennifer accepted the scold and took a post over the other hallway. He was right. The freedom to kill was amazing and awful. She didn’t want to enjoy it, but she did, more than almost anything.

Marc gave a comforting nod. Killers recognized each other’s joy. It was the single thing they all had in common, no matter how differently they’d been raised or trained—they enjoyed it.

“I can get us there faster.” Kronus was eager to be with Angela and Safe Haven.

“No.” Adrian was curious about the actual practice, but he knew better than to allow it.

Kronus frowned, pausing in pulling clothes from a blood-splattered bag. “Why?”

“She plans missions based on time. She wouldn’t count on us showing up early.”

“She knew you were picking me up.”

Marc looked at Adrian. “Any chance he’s right?”

“No. Moving through time would attract the demon’s attention.”

“And she wouldn’t risk you that way.” Marc snorted. “Figures.”

“It’s to protect *her*, Marc. The Demon of Time can access this plane if he senses his target.”

“He can’t come forward.” Kronus sat on an overturned bucket between the entrances to change into the clean clothes. “But he can cause evil if he can see his target.”

“Well, we won’t be doing that.” Marc felt his mental doors light up as his spirit returned. *Nice trip?*

No. They never are. Marc’s demon curled up on his pallet. *That woman of yours is wild.* The demon crashed.

Marc chortled. “That she is.”

Adrian kept scanning through his link with Angela.

“Did you get them all?”

Jennifer shrugged at Marc’s question. “If not, I’ll hunt them later.”

Marc sprang his trap on the distracted teenager. “Why does Angela want this boat?”

Jennifer shrugged, fighting the urge to go kill the rest of the rats deserting their ship. “I didn’t ask. I get the feeling she wants it for a decoy.”

“A decoy?” Marc kept his tone casual.

Adrian looked up, sensing a secret about to fall.

“For the International De...” Jennifer stopped as she realized they didn’t know. “That was sneaky.”

Marc and Adrian shared a look and similar thoughts.

When we return, she's got some explaining to do.

Yep. We'll do that as soon as we find out who died and how. Adrian sent them an image of the bodies. *That looks like Seth.*

So the smaller one is probably Becky.

I think so. Did the camp riot and hang them?

No, Angela is too calm going over those papers. She doesn't know who did it. Adrian looked to Jennifer. "Do you know?"

Jennifer refused to answer the question. "I'm going to flush out survivors now that Kyle's awake."

She left as Kyle sat up, yawning. The top Eagle stretched and looked around. "What did I miss?"

"A lot." Marc stared after Jennifer. *Jenny knows what's going on, but she isn't allowed to tell. I am so yelling at Angela this time.*

Adrian grunted. *I'm next when you're done. Sending us in blind just to be out of the way isn't Eagle rules of operation.*

Kronus studied them in confusion. "Of course not. *You* invented that system. It is inherently flawed. She was forced to create her own way of handling the problems."

"What do you mean, flawed?"

"You view them as a means to an end. She sees their souls and loves them."

“He does, though.” Marc didn’t want to defend Adrian, but truth was truth. “He dies with them, hurts when she sends them out. You’re wrong.”

Kronus fell silent, considering that possibility.

Marc finished the lesson, seeing where it needed to go. “She didn’t just use the good ideas, did she?”

“No. A lot of those plans were something I’d considered trying, but I didn’t have all the pieces, or it took too many lives. She adapted them or employed them outright.”

“She’s the one who uses people as a means to an end.”

“Yes. She doesn’t love them the same way I do, but she does love them just as much. She simply stopped letting it hurt her.” Adrian shrugged. “She’s had to do it too many times to keep letting it rip her open.”

“But it is, ripping her open.” Kyle had caught up to the conversation now. “We’re seeing cracks from her holding everything in. The Eagles had hoped you two would help her get it together, but you’ve made it worse with your games and fights. She’s almost done with both of you.” Kyle went to find Jennifer, words coming over his shoulder. “We all are.”

Marc and Adrian shifted uncomfortably. They were aware of the discontent caused by their newest choices and actions.

“Another deal?” Adrian hated to suggest it, but he had been born to solve problems. He had to try again.

“No. I like the one we made.”

Adrian was relieved. “So does she. I caught her thinking about it, the day Becky attacked her. When Angela stormed off, she was happy.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, let’s keep working on it. We have seventeen hours.”

2

“I thought you were hunting survivors.”

Jennifer leaned on the dusty couch in a cabin that was clean “They need privacy to talk.”

Kyle groaned. “Making another deal they won’t honor. Great.”

“Maybe.”

Kyle caught the tone. “You don’t think so?”

“No. I believe it’s over now. Everyone knows where everyone stands and what they’ll do to reach their goals.”

“That didn’t matter a few days ago when they went right back to fighting over her.”

“It’s different this time.”

“How?”

“All three of them are satisfied with it.”

Kyle considered that. Neither man would be happy unless they got Angela. “Are they splitting her?”

“Sort of. It’s four and four.”

“I assume Marc gets years and Adrian gets the months?”

“Of course. She would never take it any other way.” Jennifer had already mentioned the deal to Kyle. She told him almost everything. As the top Eagle, he could be trusted with Angela’s plans because he had been all along.

“She’ll still get to see Adrian, right?” Kyle hadn’t asked for details before because he’d been waiting for them to change their minds yet again.

“Yes. Marc understands now. Those three destinies can’t be separated, ever. He’ll let her visit and not ask questions. He never has to be around Adrian, and she’ll be happy.”

“Will she...?”

“Does it matter?”

Kyle nodded. “A little, yeah.”

“Not to me. I didn’t ask, and I didn’t search for it.”

“But you know. I can feel you hiding it from me.”

“I know. I’m trying hard; please stop. It’s her life to live.”

“Okay.” Kyle opened the door next to the couch. “Here’s a shower none of them used. Let’s get cleaned up and sleep for a shift.”

Jennifer followed him. “Does it bother you to see me this way?”

“No. It’s been...educational.”

“Then leave it on a bit longer.”

“Whatever you want, baby.”

Jennifer shivered at the hungry tone. “There are other levels for us to bond on...other ways we can be closer.”

Kyle didn’t let the smile spread over his lips, but he didn’t hide the truth from her the way he did the others. “I’ve waited for you to offer. You already know I want it more than anything.”

“I’ll show you one way. You can decide when you discover the price.”

Kyle already knew he would pay it. He wasn’t scared of this side of her. He’d always wanted it.

Jennifer knew. Kyle’s secret desire to be a descendant was something else they had in common. She didn’t hate her gifts, like Samantha. She never wanted to be without that power, that advantage.

Kyle felt the moment arrive. He turned to her, hands going to her bloody shoulders. “Can you make me a descendant, Jenny?”

Wickedness slowly spread over her expression, ensnaring him. “Yes, I can.”

His heart pounded. “Is it forbidden?”

“Very.”

Kyle drew in a breath, voice breaking. “Will you?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“Stand watch.” Marc shoved Kronus into the corpse-ridden hall and slammed the bridge door in his pale face.

Adrian approved. “How are things below?”

“They’re in a bathtub.” Marc had just returned from a check of the ship. Other than their team and the two captives, the boat was now empty of life.

“That’s good. She was a mess.”

“No, I mean they’re still there. It looks like they fucked and fell asleep. No shower.”

Adrian laughed. “You gotta like her. She’s wild and dependable at the same time.”

“Just like the guy she spends time with.”

Adrian knew it probably wasn’t a good moment for it, but he did it anyway. “Can I get you to do me a favor and ease up on Kendle a little? Say something nice?”

Marc snorted. “Even if I wanted to, that won’t happen. If Angela senses we’re bonding in any way, Kendle will die.”

Adrian pouted, jealous. Angela didn’t care who he bonded with as long as she got what she needed from their relationship.

“Yeah, she does at least care about my happiness. She’ll make sure I’m content.” Marc leaned back in the chair, enjoying the breeze that lightened the odor of death. “Plus, she’ll feel bad when she comes home. I’ll get extra care each time to make up for it.”

“You’re a greedy bastard.”

Marc smirked coldly. “Yes, I am.”

“Good.”

“Why is that good?”

“If you don’t punish her, at least a little, she might punish herself and no one wants that.”

“Oh. I’m sure I’ll be able to manage a scowl or two when she comes back...smelling like you.”
Marc hated Adrian more than ever at that moment.

“If she does, which I doubt, it’ll be because we were training or working out in the cage I plan to build.”

“I see the sparks with you two, I feel it. At some point, you’ll wear her down.”

Adrian realized Marc had tossed Kronus out so they had the privacy to talk.

“It’s also so he’ll see the results of their bets.”

Adrian was fine with that. He picked up the thread of their conversation. “I won’t have my gifts. I won’t be able to read her mind. Nothing I try will work.”

“You read people, women, better than anyone. You planned all this. Don’t tell me you can’t seduce her because I’ll call you a liar. She has weaknesses to use, just like anyone else.”

“She won’t cave. When she comes back after our visits and you’re half mad and half acting, remember this talk.”

“It’s bullshit, like all the others. They blur together.”

Adrian dug for a solution. “Okay, if she comes home and tells you she had a weak moment and rode

me like her favorite horse, what would happen? What would change?"

Marc opened his mouth to say five different things, but nothing came out.

Adrian gestured. "You don't know. Neither does she and that's why she never will. She's put your life ahead of mine from the first minute she took charge of Safe Haven. There's no way she'd trade physical moments with me, for having you by her side. She wouldn't ever take that chance. The only way it would happen is if she knew she'd still have you when it was over."

Marc didn't know what to say. He didn't know; therefore, *she* couldn't know. The price was too high. Angela loved to take risks, but not the ones without a guaranteed win of some sort. "What if I told her she could, then managed to never ask or look. Would she then?"

"In a heartbeat."

"You're such an asshole!"

"It's not for the sex, you jealous idiot. She knows I can give her a baby that will survive. If she had that, it would be another way to guarantee she'd never break."

"But you still plan to try, don't you?" Marc glowered in hatred. "After all this talking and these doomed plans, you still want her enough to give up the little bit of honor you've earned back."

Adrian stared, eyes like chips of ice. "Wouldn't you?"

Marc sighed. “You know I would. I’m no boy scout anymore.”

“You never were, but we’ll keep you as clean as we can—not for you, but because it makes her happy. That’s the goal here: her happiness. We can both have most of what we need and a lot of what we want, as long as she’s happy. If we disappoint her again, she’ll drop us both and switch to Ivan.”

“She’d have to break our engagement.” Marc waited for the reaction, enjoying delivering the blow.

Adrian stood. “I heard about that. Actually, I felt it, you prick!” Adrian spun around and punched Marc in the mouth. “That’s for trapping her into something she doesn’t want yet!”

Marc stayed on the ground, eyes closing. “I should have waited, but these feelings are hard to fight. I was losing her again.”

“No. Your illness was telling you that, but it wasn’t true. She was using you like a bull in a bar. You were getting that extra attention. It wasn’t enough.”

“That’s why I know it was wrong.” Marc sat up but stayed on the floor as Adrian returned to his chair. “I’ll let her out of it.”

“You will not! The camp needs a final decision and she’s got plans around it by now, I’m sure. You’ll follow through and never rub it in to me again because I know you trapped her.” Adrian dug in his kit for a bottle of painkillers. He popped one and tossed the bottle to Marc.

Marc wasn't looking at him, but he caught the bottle in midair.

They sat in silence for a moment, contemplating what had been said and what needed to come next.

"I got her a gift."

Marc knew he was being told so he didn't flip out in public. "What is it?"

"A gift she'll understand."

"Something that will make her think of you while you're apart."

"I don't need that, Marc."

"No, you don't. Fine. Give her your gift."

"How are we handling the rest of this trip?"

"How do you want to handle it?"

Adrian met Marc's eye. "I want to give her what she really wants from us."

"You mean...?"

"Yes. If it goes badly, she has the memory and won't ever think about trying it again. If it goes well, she'll have everything she wants, and her light will shine over the flock."

"We could do it, but I doubt she would."

"And you'll be salty afterwards because you hate me and don't want to share."

"I'm afraid she'll like it and want you more than me." Marc released another fear, another small box in his crypt. "I'm not good enough in bed." It was something almost every man feared.

Adrian knew better than to make offers that were impossible to fulfill without Angela's approval. Instead, he dug into the moment,

searching for what Marc needed from this. “Is that all?”

“I don’t match up to most of the Eagles. She has to see how much better they are. She has her pick and always will.”

Adrian was surprised by Marc’s admission. “We can work on your confidence.”

“That’s not my problem. I can be as arrogant as you. I chose not to.”

“You’ve been taught to never flaunt what you have, but you’re surrounded by men who learned the opposite. Of course, you feel the differences, but she sees the tiger inside, and she wants him, not the cool boy scout the camp sees. She hates the idea of you being corrupt, but she likes the image of you as a badass. You should let it go a little in that area and rein in the anger. Then make her laugh, like in the cabin the other morning.” Adrian grinned at the memory. “That was good for her.”

“What if we get her drunk first?”

“Maybe, and Tonya’s got a batch growing that we might be able to snip from, but I don’t want to. If we ever have a moment, I want to remember it all, good or bad.”

“Same here.”

“I know, which brings us to the next confusion. How can you hate me, but be willing to share a bed with me?”

Marc clammed up.

Adrian snickered. “More fears. I never would have suspected.”

“It’s not a fear.” Marc sighed. “It’s embarrassing.”

Adrian concentrated. “Oh, you want to know if you’re doing something wrong.” Adrian chuckled. “Never been that kind of trainer before.”

“But you could, right? You and your nasty past could teach what you know?”

“Yes, but you’d never loosen up that tightly puckered rectum enough to really learn it, so let me say no now and end your pain.”

“Thank you.”

“For saying no?”

Marc nodded. “If you’d agreed, I would have to follow through and I don’t want to.”

“Man, are you conflicted about everything. No wonder you have such far out mood swings.”

“I assumed I was on the rag.”

Adrian cackled. “That’s all we need.”

Marc let the bond grow between him and Adrian. They were connected. He might as well get whatever he could from it.

“So you want to watch. It doesn’t need to be her for that.”

“You won’t be the same with someone else.”

Adrian cleared his throat. “Pretty close. I like to role play even when my partner doesn’t.”

Marc perked up. “Who would you pick?”

“Kendle.”

“She won’t go for that.”

Adrian laughed.

“Okay, maybe she would.” Marc tried to resist, but he needed to know what Angela had in Adrian that she didn’t get from him. He’d compared them in every other way over the months of their rivalry. Sexual technique was the only information he didn’t have. “When?”

“Woah, there. You’re forgetting an important part of that puzzle.”

Marc frowned. “What?”

“You want to watch me love *Kendle*, so you can pick up any magical...techniques I have. Angela won’t be happy.”

Marc’s head tilted. “I’d never get them all in one sitting, would I?”

Adrian decided to be honest. “No. It took me a lifetime. I prefer to use something different on every woman. You’d have to schedule a nightly viewing session. If I ever do settle down, my wife will have a different meal every night for a year, at least.”

Marc chuckled, believing him. “So no, on this one.”

Adrian shrugged. “I can pick someone else, but I still believe your fiancé would disapprove.”

“It has to be her.”

“We could try it alone.”

Marc stared at him. “Excuse me?”

“I’d have to touch your dickie.” Adrian burst out laughing, unable to keep up the farce.

Marc joined him. “Asshole.”

Adrian dug out a canteen and drank, then passed it to Marc. “I can try to direct things. You’d have to

block her. Would that give you what you're asking for?"

"Maybe. How?"

"I'll pass out before you get to the room."

"Mmm. That could work."

"You say the word."

"You mean give you permission to do what *I* want to do?"

"Yes, if it gives you what you need."

Marc caved. "Your timing is better than mine. Set it up and I'll follow through."

"What about Kendle?"

Marc stiffened. "What about her?"

"Will you ease up on hating her openly? She can't recover if you do that."

"She stuck a knife in Angela's stomach and twisted it."

"I was there."

"Angie died."

"I know. I was there."

"She still wants Angie dead. Why should I help her recover so she can try again?"

"Because you love her, you want her, and during that four months when we return, you'll need her to hold you, to love you the way Angie can't."

"Kendle killed those feelings. The best she'll ever get from me now is contempt and pity."

"Four years is a long time, Marine. You hate her now, but that won't always be the case. She'll fade back into the woman you could have loved, and the bond will grow."

“That would be dangerous—for Kendle.”

“Agreed. Doesn’t change the facts. In four years, we’re going home, and you can have what you secretly want—a woman to worship you and love you above everyone else.”

“I don’t want that.”

“You do. All men do; don’t lie to me.”

“Stop talking.”

“Okay.”

Marc drank, mind spinning. In time, he might not hate Kendle anymore, but the love would never be there.

You don’t need love to use her for comfort, his demon reprimanded. *She’ll take whatever you give and be grateful.*

Why are you encouraging this?

The demon grunted. *Because I want you to survive when you finally have to honor this stupid deal.*

Marc gave the canteen back and settled in for the trip.

Adrian didn’t push. He’d already done that, with good results. To insist on more now would be suicide.

“Suicide would be letting Angie know about these fantasy talks we have.”

Adrian ignored the stomach cramps that began to hit, hoping it passed. “Some of it would amuse her.”

“Yeah, but the rest would make her shoot fire.”

“...do you think she already knows?”

Marc belched. “Yes, I do. Now shut up. I’m feeling the need to kill you again.”

Silence filled the bridge.

Chapter Thirty

Erased

1

“**T**hat can’t be right.” Angela stared at the list of names Kenn had just given her. “That can’t...”

Kenn put the next sheet on the table. “These people were not in the training room with us or any of the other rooms. I have those attendance logs here.” He added that list. “Randal is locked in the brig. No one interrogated him yet, but the guards who caught him did some damage. He needed stitches. Morgan is there now.”

That was a related issue because Morgan wasn’t the top medic. He shouldn’t be handling it.

“And then we have this. A statement from two descendants about thoughts they’ve picked up.”

Angela stood, sweeping the papers into her folder. “I need more than this to accuse someone of murder.”

“I know. I just didn’t want to gather it.”

Angela understood. Neither did she. “Everyone else has an alibi?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve searched every inch of the ship for stowaways?”

“In progress, but nearly finished.”

Angela straightened her shoulders. “Okay, then. We’ll do it together, by the book.”

Kenn snorted. “What book?”

Angela pulled out a half-sized notebook. “Start on page one. If you get to page five, if it’s all there, we’ll make an arrest.”

Kenn let Ivan take the guard position so he could read as he walked. The ship around them creaked and groaned with unease and it wasn’t just from being anchored. The ship was reacting to the bad emotions from the passengers. The waves around them were calm. So was the sky. There wasn’t a reason for the ship to lurch sideways as they followed Angela to the brig, but it still happened.

Angela held onto the rail and made her way down the hall. Guards met them at every intersection and followed until she had more protection than space.

Angela let them do their overprotective thing, but it wasn’t needed. She wasn’t seeing or hearing plans for anything bad and she was digging deep. Everyone had gone silent. That meant the danger was over or would be for a short grace period. They had that long to figure this out. A second attack would trigger panic. She wouldn’t be able to stop it, only slow it.

The cell was open. Angela ripped off the yellow tape as she went in. “Use a different color.” She stuffed it into her pocket and examined the cell. The bodies were in the infirmary, where she’d ordered

them stored until Morgan completed an autopsy if she determined it necessary. They also needed to clear a path to the morgue. Men were on that chore now, but it would take the rest of the day and maybe tomorrow as well.

Angela shined her light on the ground. “We got pictures of these prints?”

“Yes. Shawn went to get more film. He did the bodies before they were moved.”

Ivan checked his list. He’d supervised all of it. “We also have pictures of this hallway and inside the door. The key is still in the lock.”

“The sentries who were on duty?”

“Still unconscious. Muttering a lot, tossing blankets off.”

“Sounds like a sleep spell. Has their blood work come back?”

“No. Tonya said around dinner time.”

“She has guards?”

Kenn nodded. “All council members and mates do.”

“Autumn?”

“Checked on her myself. Allison looks tired, but they’re both fine.”

“Mine?”

“The same. Molly said take as long as you need. She’s catching up on her reading, but those books didn’t look like pleasure.”

“I asked her to find a way for us to use fireplaces to make wax molds. She’s determining if we need to adapt the fireplaces or our methods.”

“Good, I can mark her off the suspicious behaviors list.” Kenn did it and then returned to reading her five page plan for murders. He was impressed and eager to get through all the steps so their main suspect could be cleared. Then they would be free to concentrate on locating the real killer.

“Did we remove evidence yet?”

“Yeah, why? Did I miss something?”

Angela shined her light under the cot. “I see a napkin, from the galley—the cloth kind.”

“How did we miss that?”

“It’s stuck on a spring. It’s one of the small ones we give to the kids. Hand me a glove.”

Ivan did, though he doubted they could get evidence from a cloth napkin.

“She’s hoping for a food stain we can narrow down to a meal.”

“Hey, that’s smart.” Ivan wrote it down.

Kenn was reading it in his small book. The words weren’t the same, but the rule was clear—any evidence might narrow a time, and time was the key to everything.

Angela pulled it loose and put the napkin in the bag.

Ivan marked it and put it in his pocket. *Next time, I’ll check it myself.*

Always, Angela sent. A good leader goes over everything their army does—not because you’re searching for mistakes, but because you are the

leader and there's a reason for that. Your skills are better. Use them.

“Okay, I will. Something’s bothering me.”

“Besides two unconscious sentries and two bodies with no obvious cause of death?”

“Add another one to your list. It’s dim here again, but we just replaced the bulbs with higher wattages yesterday.”

“Check it out.” Angela got on all fours, reaching again.

Kenn memorized the view and turned around so he wasn’t caught eyeing her ass. *I’m still a man.*

Angela pulled out a seed from the garden. Her heart dropped.

Kenn felt it. He didn’t turn around. “Whatever it is, it could just disappear. Two problems are gone, and we need him.”

Angela was having the same conversation with the witch inside. Time slowed as temptation beckoned.

Kenn owes you. He would never tell.

“I can be trusted now. I would never tell.”

Seth and Becky were trouble. Taking them to the island would have been bad for everyone.

“No one wanted them to go, not even Doug.”

Ivan waited for her choice. He didn’t know if it would change his opinion of her or not, but he refused to try to influence her like Kenn was doing.

“Give me another evidence bag.”

Ivan brought it to her, mirroring Kenn’s tension. “It’s better this way...right?”

“It’s the right way and that is never easy.”
Angela put the evidence into the baggie. “It’s a pumpkin seed. Mark it.”

Ivan did and stored it with the other bags.

“Are the bulbs changed?”

“One’s missing halfway down the hall. Cleaning crew could have taken it out when they did the replacements and missed replacing that one.”

“Maybe. Take the pictures and then develop the entire batch. Bring them to the ballroom. I’ll meet you both there.”

The men left, not worried about her. Greg had activated the rotation rule. All guards in an area where she went would assume duty over her until she left. If her standard guard wasn’t with her, all of them would follow her.

Angela went down the hall toward the service elevators, surrounded.

Greg signaled from the elevator where he’d been waiting for her. “I’ve got it.”

The sentries returned to their posts, but only after she was in the elevator with Greg and the doors closed.

Angela reached over and pushed the stop button. “I need a minute to think.”

“We found him.”

“Where?”

“On the rear of the ship, staring off into space.”
Greg’s voice deepened. “We took him to a conference room on the bottom deck. No one knows yet.”

“Why didn’t he come to me?”

“We decided you should go to him.”

“Okay.” Angela hit the elevator button. “Who’s we?”

“The guards who found him, and me.”

“Okay.” She waited for the doors to open and let him step out first, like she was supposed to.

Greg verified no one was in sight and waved.

Angela didn’t like the cloak and dagger stuff. She wanted this handled by the book.

Greg opened the door to the conference room across from them.

Five sentries rose, hands on their guns.

“Stand down.”

Angela swept the tense, shocked guards and then the lone man at the far end of the table. She smiled, glad he wasn’t injured. “How are you?”

“Very confused.” Neil stared at her with wide, scared eyes. “Can you tell me who I am? Your friends refused to.”

“What?” Angela gaped.

“She didn’t do it. She didn’t know.” Greg pointed at Ben. “Mark it and we’ll all sign it before we leave shifts tonight.”

Angela ignored them in favor of studying the man now twisting the hat in his hands like they’d all witnessed Neil do a thousand times...but it was a restless wringing, not a thoughtful turning. “What happened to you?”

Neil sucked in air, coming to the edge of panic. “I’m dead, right? It’s time for my judgement.”

Angela shook her head when the guards would have spoken, questioned him. “I need a minute to think.”

Even Neil fell silent, staring at her for clues.

Angela spent the time reading through Neil’s mind. All she found was bright confusion. He didn’t know who he was. “Someone wiped his memory. Any answers we hoped to get from him have been erased.”

2

“I’m on page four.” Kenn joined Angela in the galley for coffee. Most of the camp was still up even though it was midnight, studying everything they did. Guards glared at him from dark corners.

“It’s all there?”

“Yes. Motive, alibi, skills needed to do the crime. I just finished the strange behavior sheet. It all fits.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. We completed our search of the entire ship. No stowaways or stockpiles of anything. No other dangers.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the infirmary. Morgan and Conner are checking him out, drawing blood. They’ll take his clothes and prints. and get anything from under his nails while they’re at it.” Kenn sipped his coffee. “We told Morgan he could sedate Neil if it was

needed, but he seems...cooperative, like he wants to help.”

“He’s confused. He wants to know who he is.”

“We told him a few times, but he doesn’t believe us because it isn’t in his brain.”

“When they’re done, have Samantha collect him. Maybe spending time with her will kick in those memories.”

“Is that possible?”

“It is when the person has a strong emotional connection to pull them out of it. Being around Samantha should trigger things for him. We need to speak to her next anyway.”

Kenn lowered his voice. “The camp knows we have a suspect. They noticed people who weren’t at dinner.”

“You can confirm there’s a suspect so they don’t think we’re holding anything back. Tell them no names are being released because we’re doing an investigation and we don’t want to accuse an innocent person.”

“Good. That might let them sleep sometime soon.”

“How are we on the rest of the list?”

“We’ve cleared all but three. Two of them were in the infirmary shower with their alibi. We’re trying to locate witnesses to verify they were there during the training session. The other one is next on my list. I haven’t gotten to Doug yet.”

“You’re doing a good job.”

Kenn sipped his coffee again. “After we talk to Samantha, I’ll go down and get the morgue entrance cleared so we can store the bodies. Morgan wants to try an autopsy to determine the cause of death if the blood tests don’t turn up anything. He has a few books and Conner thinks he can assist. All that leaves is finishing page five: Interviews and comparisons.” He leaned in though they were alone at the counter. “I found page six.”

“And?”

“Working through it still, but it doesn’t look good. I believe magic *was* involved, possibly in several ways.”

“I agree. Check that one off and get us going on the rest of number five.”

“Starting in the morning?”

Angela looked at him, face hard. “No, *Kenny*. Now. We don’t sleep until we find the murderer in my camp!”

“You got it.” Kenn left, waving hall sentries over.

Angela shut her lids and tried to sort through the chaos. Everyone’s reflections were louder than they’d been this morning. “I’m still missing something. What is it?”

Ivan joined her at the counter. He didn’t sit. “We have a disturbance at the infirmary.”

Angela sighed. “Samantha just found out Neil’s in there.”

“Yes. She’s demanding to see him, loudly.”

Angela put her cup in the dishpan next to her stool and headed for the door.

Around them, the camp observed in eager fear. They wanted to know who'd done it and at the same time, they were terrified it was someone they admired.

Angela used the stairs to get to the infirmary, spotting Samantha at the entrance. She was face-to-chest with the sentries.

Debra, out of breath and holding Amy, was in the hall behind them. The unused wheelchair was there too, folded against the wall next to the deaf woman.

Ivan stepped between them as Samantha heard their steps and turned.

"Tell them to let me in!"

"No." Angela pointed to a decorative desk along the wall. "Clear that for us." She dug out her notebook and a pen.

"What do you mean, no?"

"Exactly that." Angela motioned Debra to leave. "We'll get her to where she needs to be. Have a snack or see a movie."

Debra reluctantly departed, casting looks over her shoulder.

"What's going on?" Samantha felt the tension in the air. *It's worse than I thought.* "Is he dead? Is that why you won't let me in?"

"Neil is alive and uninjured. Morgan is taking his blood while Conner scans him for answers."

"Answers to what?"

Kenn brought the wheelchair over and snapped it open.

Angela waited.

Samantha sat. “Happy now?”

Angela sighed. “Not in the least, Samantha. Not in the least.”

Greg put the table between them while Ivan brought a stool from the nearest room.

Angela sat, nodding at Ivan. “Read it.”

Ivan didn’t need the sheet anymore. They’d done fifteen of these now. He had it memorized. “Do you swear the testimony you’re about to give is the truth and nothing else?”

Samantha stared at him, fear growing. “What is this?”

“Please take the oath.”

Samantha went still, working through the clues. “You think Neil did it.”

“Do you swear the testimony you are about—”

“Yeah, yeah. Tell me what’s going on!”

Angela leaned forward. “Neil has no alibi. Can you give him one?”

Samantha’s heart clenched. “For what time?”

“This morning, during the lessons and before breakfast.”

“Yes! Neil was there.”

“Not the skills test, Sam. The training match afterward.”

“Oh. Let me think.”

“It’s not a hard question.”

“For you!” Samantha glared at Angela. “How can you believe he’d do this?”

“Where were *you* after Debra’s skills test?”

Sam tensed, but didn’t lie. “Walking around against the rules while Debra took Amy for her class with Jeff.”

“You were alone? You didn’t see Neil?”

Samantha had no choice. “No, I didn’t.”

“Was the skills test the last time you saw him?”

“Yes.” Sam felt terror enter her heart and take up a place next to Jeremy’s ghost. “You wouldn’t be doing this unless you have evidence.”

Angela studied the storm tracker. “Are you covering for him, Sam? Did you find out and wipe his memory so he couldn’t be punished?”

“No! What are... He doesn’t remember?”

“No. His mind is blank.”

Samantha sat back suddenly and crossed her arms over her chest. “I have nothing else to say.”

Angela sighed again, deeper this time. “I don’t blame you. I’d do the same for Marc, but Neil is one of the good guys in the camp, one of the known men who can be counted on to do the right thing. What does it say if his mate won’t testify on his behalf?”

Samantha shoved away from the little table. “It says I love him and you’re not going to use me against him.” She flipped the chair around and rolled toward the elevator. “Send him to someone else when you release him. I’ve got shit to do.”

Everyone stared until she was gone.

Angela wasn't surprised, only disappointed. "Send him to the galley for a meal when they're done."

Kenn wasn't surprised either. Samantha would do anything for Neil, like the team they'd interviewed. That had been ugly. "Guard on him?"

"No, he's not under arrest. Let me know when Ben and Ozzie wake up. We need those statements."

Ivan scowled. "Why doesn't she want to see him now? That was a crazy fast change of attitude."

Angela finished her notes and stood, storing her book back in her pocket. "She just figured out we're hoping he'll regain his memory if he spends time with her. She doesn't want that."

"Why not?" Ivan followed her while Kenn put the table back along the wall. "I don't understand."

"She's protecting him. She doesn't want him to remember."

"Shouldn't she, though?"

"Not if she thinks he did it."

3

"We're getting their statements on camera." Kenn held the infirmary door for Angela an hour later. "They woke up around the same time."

Angela stopped inside the entrance, listening. Ivan was handling this one.

"So you signed in for your shift over the brig and you didn't see anyone until 10am, when someone came to visit Becky."

“Neil came. He said he wanted to try again.” Ozzie looked over at Ben, in the next bed. “Did you sign him in?”

Ben shrugged, rubbing his head. Hair came off in his fingers. “Is that normal?”

“We’ll check it out.” Morgan took the hair and put it into an evidence bag.

Ivan waved his pen to get their attention back. Both men were foggy. “What happened after you let him in?”

Ozzie grimaced. “I don’t know. I woke up here.”

Ivan lifted a brow. “Can you try to give more details?”

Ozzie concentrated. “I fell. Everything was spinning, like I needed to sleep so bad I couldn’t do anything else.”

“Ben, we found you facing the cell. Did you see anyone?”

“No. I don’t remember anything.” Ben regarded all of them in turn, putting pieces together. “You believe Neil did it.” They’d been told about the murders. They’d also watched Neil leave the infirmary and heard the medics talking afterward.

“He’s being investigated, with several others.”

“But he isn’t presenting gifts. He couldn’t have hit us with a sleep spell.”

“Yeah, plus, why would he have waited until we signed him in?” Ozzie didn’t believe Neil would harm an Eagle for Becky.

“We’re still investigating.” Ivan finished his notes and looked over his shoulder at Angela. He’d known she was here by the sweet smell and the anger. “You want a minute with them?”

Angela had already scanned the men. “There’s nothing else. Neil was the last one down here.”

“What do you want us to do?” Kenn knew what was coming and hoped he didn’t get the duty.

“Page 5 is finished?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“You know what has to come next.”

“I just can’t believe it.”

“Me either, but evidence has to be followed. Do it, now.”

Kenn headed for the stairs, taking longer than he needed to. *Some days, this job sucks.*

Kenn wasn’t happy to find the mess full of people. Everyone was waiting for word on the investigation. The galley was the most logical place to congregate.

Everyone went still and silent as Kenn entered. They knew something was about to happen.

Kenn looked at Greg and nodded, then gestured over more fighters toward the lone man sitting at the counter to choke down a piece of the cake Stanley had baked.

Tommy and Wade also knew what was coming. They’d been expecting it for the last hour. Kenn’s interview had been ominous.

“Todd O’Neil, you are under arrest for the murders of Seth Daniels and Rebecca Kelly.” Kenn strode forward, handcuffs coming out.

Gasps echoed. The camp hadn’t known who the suspect was. Only the top Eagles had, but the reaction was the same—pure shock.

Wade flew toward Kenn as he approached Neil, fury in every step.

Camp members got out of the way, sure a fight was coming.

The cooks also paused to observe, hoping there wasn’t violence. It had been a long day and they didn’t want to clean it up.

Tommy shoved by Kenn, knocking his notebook to the floor. “Get away from him!”

Wade was right behind Kenn now, ready to grab him. “He’s our team leader. We’ll escort him.”

Kenn moved aside to allow it, getting goosebumps. None of Neil’s team believed he was capable. Their loyalty was impressive.

Everyone stared as Neil stood. He walked into the center of the men. “Thank you.”

Tommy scowled at him. “You don’t even sound like yourself. What happened?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Hold your hands out please.” Kenn slapped on the cuffs and took Neil’s guns, glad the man wasn’t resisting. He wanted this over with as soon as possible. He hated that everyone was seeing him doing it. He and Neil had never been friends. Some people would think he was enjoying this.

“Come on, man. You have to remember something!” Tommy was furious.

“I’m sorry, I don’t.” Neil followed them from the room, too confused to be scared about where they were going or embarrassed about who was seeing it.

Wade held the door. “Well, you better remember fast because the penalty for murder in Safe Haven is death.”

Silence hung over the galley as the Eagles exited. Everyone was shocked. Neil was like Marc, one of the good guys. It was stunning to think he may have traded his shining armor for a hanging on the top deck.

4

Ivan locked the cell behind Neil. He turned to find Greg, Wade, and Tommy sitting down along the wall. “What are you doing?”

“The last prisoners in this brig were murdered. We’re making sure that doesn’t happen again. We’ll be here in shifts until he’s found *not guilty*.” Wade glared at Ivan, daring him to refuse. If he did, Ivan would be missing a few teeth come morning.

Tommy prepared to fight, as did Greg. They weren’t leaving Neil.

Angela was in the infirmary, talking to the guards. She came to the door. “Let them stay.” She regarded Greg, who had helped her with the

investigation and was feeling guilty. “Keep working through it. We’re all missing something.”

Neil’s team was relieved to hear Angela trying to find a way to prove Neil’s innocence. They immediately began doing the same with the information they had.

“Consider them his defense. Let them have access to all the evidence. They are not to go into his cell, but they can talk to him all they want. Conversations will be recorded in some fashion.” Angela returned to the infirmary before anyone could ask questions. She was following a train of thought that might lead to an answer for this mystery.

Ben frowned at Angela, in the middle of pulling on his pants. He’d hoped she would stay in the hallway for a few more seconds so he could get it done without her watching. It wasn’t that he minded her seeing his ass; it was a respect issue. “What happens next for him?”

Angela rotated to give the privacy he wanted. “A trial and then a vote on his guilt or innocence. If he’s found guilty, sentencing will come next.”

“When do you expect the trial to take place?”

“We’ll hold the trial tomorrow.”

Everyone muttered as Ben scowled. “Why so fast?”

“Because the camp is pissed and hurt. They thought Neil was a good guy. The longer this drags on, the guiltier he’ll appear to the people who get to decide his fate. If we push it through now, fast,

while they're still confused about what's going on, he'll have a chance. If we wait a couple of days to finish our investigation, his guilt will already be sealed in their minds before he ever steps in front of them."

Angela cleared her mind and her throat as she keyed the mike on her tool belt. "I have one announcement and then I want everyone to go to bed because tomorrow is going to be a long day. Starting at 10am, we will have trials for those exposed during today's meeting. Everyone is required to attend and vote, except for those who have duty or don't meet the age requirements for criminal proceedings. Good night, Safe Haven. Please try to get some sleep. I need you alert and thinking straight tomorrow."

Angela let off the mike, positive she wouldn't be going to bed anytime soon. Just because she wanted the camp to sleep didn't mean they were going to. Neil had been arrested. Everyone had an opinion and they would feel the need to express that opinion to another person. She trudged the hallway to the stairs by the living quarters. The galley was closing shortly, and everyone would flock to the showers and cots to make it appear as if they were obeying. Once the nightly rituals were finished, those people would wander the bunks. Neil wouldn't be the only topic of conversation, but he would be the most discussed. In less than ten hours, Safe Haven had gone from calm and peaceful to brimming with excitement, tension, and fear.

Angela straightened her shoulders and put on a calm expression as she opened the door to the living quarters. *It's almost like we thrive on this shit.*

5

“How bad is it?” Ben and Ozzie had finished their statements and were off duty. They’d come to check on Neil.

Wade held up an evidence bag with a picture in it. “Same prints on his shoe.”

Tommy pointed at the logbook for the brig. “He was the last one here.”

Greg reluctantly finished it by gesturing to the sign in sheet for the training rooms. “No alibi.”

Ben and Ozzie were both disheartened.

Daryl and Morgan came down the stairs from the infirmary.

Morgan looked at Ben. “We think you two should hang out here.”

“Why?”

“So no one has a chance to talk to you.”

“Keep them here.” Tommy was certain any conversation the camp had with the sentries from the brig would be damning. Now that he’d had a chance to scan the evidence, Tommy understood why Angela had ordered Neil’s arrest. It looked bad.

“Is there anything we can do?” Daryl made the offer for his entire team, Kyle included. Kyle wasn’t here right now, but if he had been, he would have

been the first to step up and defend Neil. None of them believed the trooper was capable of this.

“Why isn’t anyone asking me questions?” Neil’s voice came from the cell.

“You had your memory wiped. You can’t answer them.”

“Oh. That’s right.”

Greg frowned. “Relapse?”

Morgan was also concerned. “No idea. This is all new to me too. I don’t understand the side effects from spells. I’ve never heard about relapses.”

“We’ll talk to the boss later.”

On duty over the brig, Ivan copied the question. He would ask her himself.

“If we had an alibi for him, the rest is circumstantial. It’s obvious somebody wiped his memory; he’s as much a victim as they are. Whoever did it decided not to kill him or the guards.”

“It’s obvious that Seth and Becky were the targets.”

“Okay, let’s generate a list of alternate suspects. I’m sure Angela had Kenn put this together too, but he doesn’t know people as well as we do and there are still ways we don’t let him in. He may not have gotten the full.” Tommy flipped to a new notebook page as Ivan did the same inside the brig office. “Let’s begin with Seth. Other than Neil, does anyone have a grudge against him?”

Wade shrugged. “Maybe his old team, because he left.”

Daryl added an option. “Maybe Doug, even though Marc trusts him on duty over Cody. A lot of times when people are murdered, it’s a friend or family member.”

“If we’re going by that, we have to include everyone who was involved in either of their lives and then clear them.”

“Exactly. You get to work on that. We’ll move on to the next part. Some of the camp members were unhappy Seth and Becky returned. It might not be a friend or family. Who wants to do that list?”

“I’ve got that one.” Wade opened a page.

“Good. Okay, I think between those two, that will cover every adult on the ship. I want a third list made for some of the kids.”

Everyone looked over in horror as they realized Wade was including children as suspects. They’d been so good on the ride that most of the guards had already forgiven them the bloody rampage on the UN ship. They understood the need to kill for defense and more. It was easier for them to forgive. Now that those sentries had been reminded, it was obvious. They had overlooked an entire list of suspects.

Tommy tried to find a bright side. “All we have to do is provide an alibi or disapprove someone else’s alibi. That will give Neil the shadow of a doubt he needs for the jury.”

“What if he makes a plea deal because somebody convinces him he did it while he can’t

remember?” Ben shrugged at the looks. “I saw it on a movie once. The guy’s friend framed him.”

“I won’t tell them I’m guilty of anything I didn’t do.”

Neil sounded a little more like the man they all knew with that protest, allowing the teams to dig in.

Wade gestured. “We’re gonna be here for a while. Everyone pull out your kits. We’ll share resources. We’ll use the brig bathroom down the hall so we don’t contaminate these bathrooms and make the cleaning crew have to come in to the crime area yet. We don’t want anyone else here until each one of us has had a chance to go over the cell and verify they didn’t miss anything else. If the boss found two things, there could be more.”

The team got to work on their assignments, not getting permission from anyone and not feeling like they needed to. Despite Safe Haven having a leader, the Eagles ran the refugee camp, the camp members were second, and then the leader. What the Eagles decided, the camp usually went with because they were trusted to make the right choices. Even in situations where it was clear the Eagles weren’t telling the truth or at least weren’t telling all of it, the camp usually sided with them. Morgan sent the thought to all of his team and Neil’s. “If I’m wrong and it all goes bad, we need to plan for that too.”

Everyone nodded, in agreement.

“He’d do the same for us, in a heartbeat.”

Neil was warmed by the loyalty. The men were strangers to him, but he’d clearly earned their

support and protection in whatever times they'd had together. It allowed him to have faith in their belief that he wasn't guilty. He had no other way to know.

"I have that covered. It needs a team touch, though." Samantha was in the open cell next to Neil. She'd been on the cot the entire time, blending in perfectly with the tan blanket and dark shadows.

"What are you doing in there?!"

"Did you know she was in there?"

"I'm guarding."

Hearts broke and bonds grew as they realized she'd come here to sleep by Neil, to protect him. None of them considered making her leave.

"Ivan, if you write down that I'm here, I'll ruin your life. I'll make it a goal and enjoy every second. Don't fuck with me."

Ivan erased the sentence he'd been writing.

"Wise choice." Samantha lifted the gun in her hand. "I'm staying."

The Eagles chuckled, loving her for it.

Neil felt a spark, heart giving a single thump. "You're Samantha, right?"

She sighed. "I can't talk to you. Please go to sleep so we can save your life."

Neil paused, then asked, "You...love me, right? You're my mate."

"Stop talking now."

"Answer me! I don't know anything else! I need something to hold onto!"

Tears ran over her cheeks. "Shut up, you prick!"
Neil did.

Samantha slowly sat up to use hand code. *If I talk to him, he might remember me.*

The teams took a few seconds to figure that out. When they did, they understood part of her plan before she began telling them what it was.

Chapter Thirty-One

I'm Ready

December 2nd

Day Six

1

“Have you seen the list of trials?”

Lou shook his head, busy stirring a large pot on the stove while Jayda chatted with people at the counter.

Jayda's voice lowered. “Marc and Adrian are on it.”

“Really? They aren't here.”

“Easier to do it without them.”

“When are they due?”

Everyone turned to Ivan.

Ivan kept chewing his potted meat sandwich. He'd stopped by for a quick meal and regretted it. Well over half the camp had risen early to discover if there had been new developments. They were congregating here to wait for unsuspecting Eagles.

“Did he do it?” Jayda smiled at Ivan over the counter. “Give us a hint.”

Ivan stuffed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and left, taking his mug.

Jayda watched him leave with glittering eyes as the citizens settled back in to wait for news. She

hadn't thought he would tell. She'd put him on the spot anyway, hoping he got mad. Men often told the complete truth when they were pissed, and she had a big question for him. He'd changed since they set sail. She'd narrowed down the reason why.

Loud voices drew attention.

"He wouldn't do that!"

"How do you know?"

"He's a top Eagle here! He wouldn't do that!"

James tried to stay calm. "I've seen the evidence—"

Zack punched him in the mouth to keep the camp from hearing the soldier say Neil was guilty. He hit him again because it felt good.

Nathan and Claire, closest to them, grabbed Zack and dragged him backward. They'd come to collect Grant's tray and give updates. The radar was functioning again, along with everything else. They were free to set sail whenever Angela called it.

"Get off me!" James struggled to get free of the hands. "When you've healed, I'll return this hospitality!"

Zack flipped him the finger. "Just shut up until the trial. If you bias them against Neil, I'll be the next one arrested for murder." Zack stormed from the galley, followed by his sons. They'd all been eating at the same table. That would never happen again.

"He's high-strung." Claire stayed by James, handing him the updates. "Boss only."

James nodded, storing them. He swiped the blood from his mouth. He had helped investigate and move the bodies. He'd been up all night. His own patience amazed him. The old James would have beaten Zack's ass, hurt or not.

Everyone quieted, staring as Samantha appeared in the far doorway, alone.

Samantha lifted her chin and walked to the center table to wait for the boss.

Jayda made a tray and carried it out. She started to ask if Samantha was okay and decided not to be stupid. *Of course, she's not okay. I wouldn't be either.* She patted Samantha's shoulder and returned to work.

Samantha held still, not responding as other people came her way. She braced for conversation attempts, not sure if she could take it without screaming.

Ozzie put a bullet on the table in front of her and left the galley.

Other people repeated the gesture until there was a stack of slugs on the table and a mostly empty galley. Those who remained observed in confusion, assuming it was a ritual for mates or widows of Eagles.

Samantha picked one up, recognizing the caliber. Neil had three guns, but he only used two of them. His powerful little Glock 26 was a reserve he always left for her. Every bullet here went to that gun, the one she was carrying right now in her bra holster, the one they hadn't confiscated when they'd

taken Neil's gear because the investigators hadn't known about it. Only his team had. It was the one that would free Neil if there was no other choice. Word had spread. The mound of bullets was the support she had.

Samantha fingered the slugs as she put them into her pocket, layering her prints on them as she waited for Angela. If this meeting didn't go well, she now had the backup she needed for a brig break.

2

"Here comes another one." Freddy peered into Angela's cabin. "Send them in or on?"

"In. I'll take one more after that and then we'll get going. I need to stop by the galley before the trials start." Angela poured a cup of water and drained it, waving Doug to sit when he entered.

"Have you looked?"

Angela didn't play games. "I can't. Only Jennifer can right now and she's off ship. That team will return soon."

"Before Neil gets hanged for something he didn't do?"

Angela was forced to remain neutral. She didn't feel it. "Why do you believe he's innocent?"

Doug's bushy brows met in the middle. "Someone wiped his memory. I heard the rumors. Someone else was involved. Holding a trial without catching them is unfair!"

It meant a lot to hear Doug support Neil. Angela chose to be honest. “We’re hoping the questions at the trial will expose an accomplice. Every piece of evidence led to Neil.”

“He’s being framed.”

“We have to prove that.”

“No, we don’t.” Doug stood up and walked out. “It only takes a shadow of a doubt.”

Angela returned to digging for a way to provide that shadow. Samantha was waiting for her in the galley, silently begging her to have a solution but Angela didn’t. If nothing else was discovered, Neil would be found guilty.

“Send in the next one.”

3

Angela joined Samantha at the center table. People stared but didn’t speak. They observed her for signs the trouble was almost over.

Angela waited for Stanley to deliver a hot mug of tea to Samantha and a plate of canned fruit.

Stanley wished he could break the tension. He assumed the conversation they were about to have would get ugly. Angela was dutybound to handle it exactly like she was doing. She couldn’t promise to spare Neil’s life.

“It isn’t my choice.” Angela noted the bags under Samantha’s eyes and the angry posture. This wasn’t good for her health. “I don’t have a plan going or a backup to save him. I was blindsided.”

“There’s another storm coming.”

“When?”

Samantha sneered. “I’m being blindsided.”

Angela scowled “That’s not fair, Sam. I can’t see everything.”

“Neither can I.”

“You’d let this ship be in danger—”

“I’d sink it myself!”

Samantha’s icy tone would have frightened anyone who heard it. She didn’t sound like herself.

“You said it would only be one of them when you made me pick. You lied. I’ve lost both my men!”

“You don’t know how the trial will go.”

“Do you?”

Angela slowly shook her head.

Samantha teared up again. “He asked me to marry him. Did you know?”

Angela nodded. “It bothered him that you said no. He mentioned it to Jennifer. He worries Jeremy’s ghost won’t ever give you peace.”

Samantha snorted bitterly. “It was always Becky’s ghost between us, haunting us. And then she came back.” Samantha glowered in cold hatred. “Why did you bring her back?”

“To give her a second chance.”

“She didn’t want it.”

“No.”

“But you had to save her. This is *your* fault.”

Angela shrugged. “Probably. Everything else seems to be. Why should this be different?”

“Don’t get snarky with me! I don’t deserve that!”

Angela waved a finger. “You’re pissed because *you* gave him the idea. *You* told him you wanted Amy because the two of you have bonded and the grief over Jeremy wasn’t enough to stop the voices in *your* head. You’re scared *you* did this to Neil.”

Samantha slapped her.

Angela held still. “Do you feel better now?”

Sam cried harder as the guards came their way. “No!”

“Then do it again.”

Slap!

“Again!”

Slap!

Angela healed her marks, not breaking eye contact. “Now stop crying. Hold onto that anger.”

Angela went around the table, waving off the guards. She stopped next to Samantha. “I gave you a chance to save one of them, Sam, not to pick between them like hams at an old store. You didn’t cause Jeremy’s death. This isn’t karma for your choice. It’s the damn Dizzyland players, punishing me for not giving in. So you’re right, it is my fault.” Angela walked away, heart like stone. *When I come back up there, I’m going to burn you alive seventeen thousand, five hundred and eight times.*

The Messenger laughed in her head.

Samantha wiped her expression, cold shield of battle dropping into place. She left the galley. *We’re*

in the middle of a bet and my side is losing. It's time to gather an army. She held in a sob. Neil's army.

4

“Did you used to cook meth? Is that why you know how to do this?” Tommy glowered at their lab tech.

Greg stared at Tommy in surprise, but he didn't interrupt. He'd been wondering the same thing as they observed Tonya prepare the tests for Neil's trial. She was much more comfortable with the beakers and droppers than someone should be who'd only had three weeks of experience after an apocalypse.

“Yes.” Tonya began scanning the results of the test she'd just finished.

Tommy scowled at her casual confirmation. “Does Kenn know?”

Tonya placed the slide under the microscope and peered into it. “Considering you were confident enough in your suspicions to ask me about it out right, I'd say yes.”

“Are you still cooking meth?”

Tonya looked up in surprise. “No. Why would I? There's no market for that crap here.”

For a moment, neither guard was sure how to take that or what to say in response.

Tommy chose to continue. “People like to smoke pot, and you've got a good excuse with the medical possibilities. We've never investigated you

because you've never been important to the camp before. That has to change. You're not going to be off limits just because you're pregnant."

Tonya frowned. "I don't expect to be. You didn't hear me complain when Angela insisted you guys follow along in the same book while I'm doing this test to make sure I'm not skipping anything or doing it wrong. It's good to have someone making sure I'm not making mistakes. I don't want Neil to hang either."

It made Tommy feel a little better to hear her say that. He had been worrying over it because Neil and Kenn had never been friends. Hours had gone by; the team was impatient for results.

"What are you seeing there?"

Tonya had already made a judgment, but she peered into the microscope again to verify. It was late and it was possible her eyes were blurry.

Nope. You know that for what it is.

She sighed unhappily. "I'm examining the swabs we took from their arms after Morgan found the needle marks. It looks like they had diamorphine on their skin." Tonya used her hands to demonstrate a syringe being used. "As you pull the needle out, a tiny bit of the medicine or whatever was injected will come back out with the needle and onto the skin. The murderer didn't know that."

She got up and switched slides, bring more tension to the room. They needed to know the cause of death. This test would possibly give them that answer.

Greg took out his copy of the evidence list to compare to narcotics that were signed out of the infirmary.

Tonya looked up at Tommy. “This is Becky’s blood sample. She had a lot of diamorphine in her bloodstream. She overdosed.”

“Who signed it out?” Tommy frowned in concentration. “I know I heard diamorphine listed during the evidence being read out for us to copy.”

Greg held the infirmary logbook open to the right page. “Neil.”

“Damn. When?”

“An hour before Becky died.”

5

“Guilty! The recommended sentence is death.”

Randal screamed as Eagles dragged him from the witness box into the hall. He screamed the entire trip to the brig, giving the camp a lot to discuss as they shied from his pleas and curses.

“We have three trials left. They will be held in the order they are listed.” Angela waved at Kenn, mind storing the sound of Randal’s screams for later placement in her crypt. She hated this part of her job.

Kenn cleared his throat. “Call to order, the case of Safe Haven vs Todd O’Neil. Bring in the defendant.”

Three hundred citizens rotated toward the small rear door as it opened.

Neil entered the chamber alone, looking very much like the man they all knew. Only a few people noticed his lack of purpose and attention to detail. He went where the sentries pointed, sitting in the chair in the center of the room.

The camp was in seats around the edges of the ballroom again, but this time there was an unbroken line of Eagles between them and Neil. He was better protected than Angela.

“Because this defendant cannot help with his own case, someone may speak for him. Have you made a choice on that?”

Neil nodded to Samantha. “She’ll do it.”

Samantha stood. There was a big chance the sound of her voice would trigger his memory, but they’d made it clear he had to keep pretending even if that happened.

Angela drew in a breath. “State your name.”

“Samantha Moore.”

“Why are you defending this man?”

“He would do it for me.”

“You have a personal relationship with the defendant?”

“I do.”

“Before we begin, do you have any grudges against the defendant that might prevent him from getting a fair trial?”

“No.” Samantha’s voice was cold. “Do you?”

Angela frowned. “No. This entire camp has been asked the same question. Neil’s only enemy died yesterday.”

“Get on with it then.” Samantha hadn’t slept since Neil’s arrest. It showed.

Angela gestured at Ivan. “You will list the offenses and the evidence. Each piece gets put out on the table. Samantha can stop you at any point to ask questions. She’s seen most of it already, so she’s had time to go over it in her head.” Angela looked at Neil. “Do you understand what’s happening here?”

“I’m on trial. You think I killed someone.”

Neil’s pale face and tight grip on the chair arm made everyone feel bad.

“The evidence suggests it. Do you believe you’ve done something wrong?”

“Objection!” Sam stood. “If he can’t remember, how can he answer that?”

“Sustained.” Angela motioned. “Tell us your name and job in this camp.”

Neil glanced at his team and then Samantha. “They told me, but I don’t know if it’s true.”

“What *do* you know about yourself?”

“I hate the smell of smoke. It makes me think of death.”

Angela shivered. *Me too, friend. Me too.* “Your representative is entering a not guilty plea for you. Do you accept that?”

“Of course. Samantha would never hurt me. I feel that.”

Angela snorted. “We all do. A plea of not guilty has been accepted. Neil, do you want to use your

one continuance or your one medical stay now? It might give you time to regain your memory.”

Neil drew in a breath, sitting straighter. “I don’t know for sure who I am, but a man with so many friends, so much support, can’t be a murderer. I don’t need a continuance or a stay. I’m not guilty.”

Samantha wiped away a tear. She would take it from here.

“This is the trial of Todd O’Neil.” Angela smacked the table. “You may begin.” They hadn’t brought a gavel and she didn’t want to ruin the furniture by using a hammer. She hoped they wouldn’t have to do this again for a long, long time.

Ivan, tired and pissed that he’d been given this part of the job, decided to rebel. “I have to resign. I’m good friends with the defendant. I can’t be objective.”

Angela surveyed the Eagles for signs that was a lie and found none. All of them were nodding, even rookies who hadn’t spent time around Neil or Ivan. “Very well. I shall present the evidence since my camp is suddenly full of cowards.”

Ivan took the scold without reacting. He stayed where he was as Angela joined him, assuming guard duty over her.

Got a twofer with that one, didn’t you?

Ivan refused to look at her.

“I’m starting with the motive first, but I see no reason to repeat the entire story. We all know Seth blamed Neil for Becky’s state of mind. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” the camp chorused.

“We also know Becky hated Adrian, who trained Neil. Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

“Neil was pissed at Seth for leaving with Becky. Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

“Neil was pissed at Becky for coming back at all. Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

“Disagree!” Samantha’s harsh shout cut through the noise. She didn’t sound like herself. “Neil was worried he’d still want to screw her. He wasn’t pissed at her. He was scared of her. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” Neil’s team and some of the camp echoed, but they were drowned out by the rest of the camp.

“Disagree!”

“I can prove that.” Samantha held up a baggie. “Neil signed out a care package. It was found in Becky’s cell. If he wanted her dead, why would he deliver a care package?”

Angela understood why Ivan had refused. She didn’t want to do this either. “To get her out of here faster. He could have gone down to convince them to escape and there was a fight. So he used his backup plan.”

“Agreed!” the camp shouted.

Samantha was forced to accept their doubt.

“We know Seth and Becky were given a chance to leave. I ordered the sentries to look the other way while they left on a lifeboat. They decided not to

go.” Angela pointed at a paper in a baggie. “The morning report from the shift before documented an argument between Seth and Becky. She refused to leave until she’d hurt Adrian or someone he cared about. Neil collected that report and delivered it to Kenn during shift change. He knew she wasn’t going to depart peacefully.”

Near the hall doors, Donald joined the sentries. He was off duty but still doing rounds. “How’s it going in there?”

“Too soon to tell. You going in?” Daryl got ready to write his name down. Almost everyone was here.

“No, just stopping by for an update. We’ve got Randal secured and the rest of the prisoners are in a community cell being fed and given details on what’s going to happen to them now. Randal was the only one to get a death sentence...” Daryl glanced toward Neil but didn’t say *so far*.

Donald peered into the courtroom. He didn’t like how bewildered Neil seemed to be. “Someone framed him.”

“Yep. And we’d better figure out who or he might be gone from Safe Haven. These people are angry.”

“So am I.” Donald went to the next intersection and took the stairs back to the lower levels. “We have an evil genius on the ship, and they aren’t on our side.”

“In summary, no alibi. He signed out the drugs from the infirmary that were identified as the cause of death. He’s been acting strange. He had motive. He was there; he signed the logbook. He can’t tell us what happened. He was found wandering the rear of the ship, where it would have been simple to throw any other evidence overboard. He had the skills needed to do the crime. Now, you have to decide if that means he’s guilty. The prosecution rests.” Angela picked up her cup and drank it all, throat hurting. Samantha had done a good job of shredding most of the evidence, but some of it couldn’t be discredited because the camp had known too much of their drama. The motive was sticking. So was the timeline. No one had seen Neil after he talked to Samantha at the training session. He’d been found wandering the rear of the ship when he should have been right here, doing his job. It was clear that he was involved. For most people, that was enough to convict him.

Samantha also drank water, getting ready to breathe fire. She drew in a breath and stuck to her plan. “We all know what’s going on. We’re playing court, terrorizing a victim, and pretending magic wasn’t involved.”

The room went quiet, sensing she was about to accuse a descendant.

“Becky controlled people. Eagles witnessed it; the camp heard those stories. She could make people do what she wanted. She wouldn’t leave, and

she knew she was going to be found guilty at her trial. She was about to hang. What better way to go than to set someone up to take the fall? She picked Neil because he was the one in the brig when she needed to do it. She could just as easily have framed one of the guards.” Samantha pointed at Angela. “You’ve witnessed what she can do, what a lot of us can do. Is it so hard to believe Becky could force Neil to overdose them and wipe his memory before it kicked in?”

The camp murmured at the almost logical explanation.

Angela studied it like she was required to, searching for holes. She found one. “Seth and Becky didn’t have the sleep gift. Only four citizens in our camp can do that. I’m here; Adrian is off ship. Conner was never out of sight of the Eagles, and Kimmie was surrounded by teachers and trainers all morning. Please explain that and then I can agree.”

“It’s simple.” Samantha glared at Angela. “Someone lied to you about their gifts or you missed it in a scan.”

Angela was impressed that Samantha had chosen this route of defense. “I’m forced to admit that’s possible. I haven’t scanned all our gifts yet, and I don’t see everything. Any of the Invisibles could have evolved with it.”

“Exactly. You can’t prove someone else wasn’t involved.”

“Agreed.” Angela was glad she could.

“And if we believe there was an accomplice, why shouldn’t we consider Becky on that list? She fits those requirements: She had the motive to do this. She had the skills needed. She was in the area. She looks just as guilty to me.”

Some people in the camp nodded, though the reaction was light and scattered. Still, it was encouraging. Samantha didn’t glance at Neil as she continued, keeping her voice shrill. “None of the evidence proves he committed premeditated murder, because that’s what this is: premeditated. You’re saying Neil went to the infirmary and signed out drugs. He then took them to the brig, knocked out everyone there with a sleep spell even though he doesn’t have gifts, overdosed them, then wiped his own memory. It’s not possible. No one can wipe their own memory. It can’t be done and unless you prove it can, you have to find him not guilty.”

Angela would have chuckled at the clever trap if the moment hadn’t been so serious. “Does the camp agree?”

Some did; most didn’t.

“We need more clarification here.” Angela addressed the camp. “Will you accept my word on this matter?”

“Agreed!” the camp and Eagles echoed.

“There’s nothing in the book from Ciemus about it. It doesn’t list that skill, though I suspect if you wipe your own memory, you won’t be able to remember doing it. There wouldn’t be a record. In my judgement, if that skill exists, it would be rare,

or we'd have zombied-out descendants wandering everywhere because they didn't want to remember what happened to them during the war. I have to rule on this, so I will agree we cannot wipe our own memories—with the stipulation that I don't know everything. Later evidence may prove me wrong.” She wanted to add more but couldn't. She was already swaying the vote as much as she could get away with. “Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

Samantha felt Neil staring at her in surprise, like he'd remembered something. She used her shrillest voice. “In light of that, I ask that you dismiss the case against him!”

Angela wanted to. *But I can't or it could cost me my job, and I won't risk that, even for Neil.* “Denied. If we believe he had an accomplice, they may have betrayed him, but that doesn't absolve him.”

Sam had expected it. “Then we should postpone this trial until we locate the accomplice.”

“We'll hear from Neil before we make that decision.”

“He can't remember anything!”

Angela finally let her anger show. “Listen! We have a bad situation here. One of three things happened. Neil snapped and killed them, Becky set this up and killed herself, or we have a murderer on this boat. I'm not going to stop until we find out what happened and remove that danger!”

Samantha huffed, arms going over her chest, but she returned to her seat. “He has people who want to speak for him.”

“Agreed.” Angela took her seat as Neil’s team rose from their seats and lined up by the witness box to testify.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Price

The UN Ship

1

“**T**here they are.” Jennifer pointed. “I see them!”

Kyle joined her at the front window, not as pleased as Jennifer. He’d expected Safe Haven to be moving when they caught up, not anchored. It was another sign of a problem, though neither ship appeared to have damage. The cruise ship sat heavily in the calm water, with Adrian’s smaller vessel bobbing behind and to the right.

To Kyle, it was a copy of the bodyguard’s place, a sign of Adrian watching out for them. He suddenly wanted Adrian on that ship, for exactly that reason.

“Stop next to the boat in the front.” Marc was controlling their captain for this shift and hating every second of it. She didn’t want to help them. Kronus was wrong about Angela’s goals on this one. Lila wanted them dead. Marc didn’t believe anyone would be able to reform this one.

“Then we’ll put her down.” Jennifer glowered at Lila. “I’ll ask to do it.”

Lila shuddered.

Adrian pointed. “Keep space between this boat and those. The waves aren’t rough enough to hurt our ships, but you might startle our camp. If that happens, you and Jennifer will have a long talk.” Adrian stared at the captain with cold eyes. “She has a baby on that ship. If I were you, I wouldn’t even give her kid a hiccup.”

Lila had paled with each word. She was terrified of Jennifer.

Fear flooded, making it easier for Marc to control the woman. Adrian’s story of Charlie doing this with three wild females had been amazing. One was hard. He didn’t want to try it with three.

“Yeah, that kid of yours is talented.” Jennifer stole a glance at him. “Both sons, actually.”

Marc tensed.

Jennifer’s tone held a slight edge of contempt. “Of course, we all know he’s special. Their energy matched.”

Marc tightened his mental grip on the captain so she didn’t try to break free while they were talking. “What will he be like in the future?”

“Are you asking me to search for you?”

Marc shook his head. “Just wondering aloud. It scares me that he’s so high level already.”

“Understandable.” Adrian gathered the rest of their gear as the ships neared and their engines kicked down through the gears. “Just teach him to follow the light. He’ll be okay from there.”

Marc scowled. “How do you know?”

“I’ve met his father.” Adrian went out to the deck, waving at the sentries on the cruise ship who were grabbing for radios and weapons. They could read the UN logos now. He waved his Eagle jacket, giving them time to narrow in with their glasses.

He stopped, chills breaking out on his skin.

Jennifer stilled, power rushing out to sweep the boats.

Marc didn’t wait. He ran from the bridge, letting go of the captain.

Jennifer followed him.

Kyle put his gun to the captain’s head, keeping her in place.

Marc leapt over the rail wildly, throwing his body forward. He landed on the deck of the Adrianna and took off running for the bridge.

“Stay with Kyle!” Jennifer jumped behind Marc.

Adrian jumped on her heels, ignoring the order.

The rookies on duty gaped at Marc and Jennifer. They understood a problem had popped up, but they didn’t know what it was. They’d been watching the ship arrive without calling Angela or a senior Eagle. Marc stored that security lapse as he ran by.

“Kyle needs a hand!” Jennifer shouted at a guard. She’d forgotten Adrian didn’t obey anyone’s orders unless he wanted to.

Adrian didn’t care about orders. Like Marc, he’d caught the waves of madness. Someone was about to die.

“Get in there! Keep your hands up!” Rachel rattled the homemade bomb. “I’ll blow us up. This boat will drift until it hits something and sinks.” She grinned. “Of course, you’ll starve before that happens.”

Grant kept his hands up. “What do you want?”

“I want your boss.”

“I’ll call her.”

“No!” Rachel rattled the wide tape as Ray reached for the radio mike. “I want her to feel it!” The tape had a dozen grenades lovingly taped and rigged for a quick pull.

Ray held up his hands. “Just calm down.”

“If you call her, I’ll detonate it! I’m ready.”

“We won’t.” Ray and the rest of the guards searched for an opportunity to grab her, but Rachel stepped out the door and went down the stairs.

Ray and Grant stared at each other and then swept for sentries, but no one had noticed the problem. There was only a skeleton crew on duty because of the trial. The three rookies here were all scanning the ocean behind them and pointing. They hadn’t noticed what was happening within ten feet of them.

“What do we do?”

Ray considered his rules for hostage negotiations. “Everyone start screaming for the boss, silently. It’ll get through the voices and thoughts down there around her.”

Grant began to do that. “What happens when she gets here?”

“She kills the crazy lady and we return to life as usual.”

Grant liked that answer. He screamed loud, telling himself it was okay to be excited that he was about to observe the Eagles in action.

Angela, in the ballroom and surrounded by the confused camp, pushed her way through the crowd to reach the stairs. She could hear Rachel losing what was left of her mind, but she couldn't get there in time to help. *Kill her! Do it right now!*

3

“Stay back!”

Marc slid to a stop as Rachel held up the tape. He scanned it, seeing she had the pins rigged to come loose with one hard jerk. He had no idea how she'd gotten to the grenades, but he was certain they'd come from Safe Haven's armory.

“It's ready. I'm ready.” Rachel put the tape on the support beams for the bridge. “Are you ready?”

Marc swept the crazy woman holding the pull pin. She looked like she'd already died, twice over.

Rachel peered at him. Then she smiled. “You're her man. It's perfect.” She yanked the pin and tossed it toward the rail.

A gunshot rang out.

Rachel fell, blood coming from her chest.

Marc ripped the tape from the bridge and flung it toward the water. “Get down!”

The bomb exploded over the rail, blowing a hole in the deck. Wooden slugs slammed into walls, tables, chairs, guards.

Marc looked at Rachel, verifying she was dead, then at the man holding the gun.

Ray lowered the unfamiliar weapon, wishing he’d been able to get a clear shot sooner. “She made us give up our guns and wait in here. We couldn’t tell the boss. We’re not descendants.”

Marc heard steps flying toward them. “You’ll get to tell her now. Good shot.”

“Angela put weapons up here. Only the guards and crew knew. She saved his life.” Ray turned to Grant, a bit dazed. It had happened fast, and he hadn’t gone through this in a few weeks. *Getting rusty.*

Below them, Jennifer stopped and spun around. She slapped Adrian.

Adrian held still, braced to take whatever she needed to deliver.

“You’re already honoring your deal. Admit it!” Jennifer had figured it out when he ignored Marc and Angela to stay on her heels, protecting her.

Adrian tried to calm his breathing. “Yes, Jennifer, I am.”

She stomped closer, finger in his chest. “What do you get out of it? You wouldn’t make that deal for nothing.”

“I can’t answer.”

Jennifer looked at Kyle, who was concentrating on Lila as she pulled the UN ship alongside. “I’ll give you and Marc what you’re whispering about behind Angela’s back. And you won’t even have to ask me carefully.”

“Why? How?” Adrian ignored the warning bells. “Explain that.”

Jennifer sneered at him, furious. “I’ll tell you what will keep her from ascending. In return, you will double cross Kyle and keep *him* alive. Do we have a deal?”

Adrian chose to be selfish. “I was also getting Eagle support back from that deal.”

Jennifer threw her arms up. “You’re a piece of shit!”

Adrian shrugged. “Yeah, but I’m Angie’s. If you survive the final battle and take over, I’ll be yours to use. I can’t go years without Eagle support and then just step back in, Jenny. You know that.”

Right at that moment, Jennifer hated him as much as Marc did. “I want something else out of the deal.”

Adrian had been expecting it. “Name your price.”

“Make an offer.”

Adrian frowned. “I won’t trade a single minute of those four months. You can have anything else you want.”

Jennifer began to smile. “Awesome.”

Adrian tensed. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.” Jennifer’s amusement spilled from her lips. “When she removes your gifts, you’re done. *You never get them back.*”

Adrian sucked in air at the blow, aware of people coming toward them. “I can’t do that. I have to fight in the final battle.”

“No, you have to train us for it. Your gift is useless in a fight unless you want to put your team to sleep too. You can’t even use it properly. You give up your gifts and I’ll return your army. Do we have a deal?”

“Yes.” Adrian held out a hand. “Angie won’t know. If she unlocks me without asking first, I’ll come to you so you can lock it up again.”

Jennifer shook, using their bodies to hide Kyle’s view. “Don’t betray me, Adrian Mitchel. I’m not Angela. I’ll slit your throat.”

Adrian didn’t doubt it. He moved toward Marc to offer help, attention shifting so no one could read his thoughts on their encounter. As he walked away, the ramp was connected, allowing Kyle, Kronus, and Lila onto the ship.

“Put her in the brig.” Kyle waved at the nearest guard. “Gun in hand. No stops. Take the employee stairs and elevators.”

Kyle’s team came to him before he was mobbed by the huge crowd coming up the stairs behind Angela.

Kyle knew it wasn’t good news by their expressions, but there were already too many people around them to allow conversations.

Marc expected Kyle's team to tear into the rookies who hadn't noticed Rachel's bombing attempt or even told them a ship was coming, but no one spoke. The deck was almost silent despite there now being so many people up here. He glanced at Adrian.

Adrian shrugged. *Whatever happened has them all distracted.*

People stared at Rachel's body, shocked. The smoking hole in the ship caught attention next, drawing comments and worries over their floating home.

"Someone get Theo up here to check on it." Daryl waved at a rookie.

Ben scowled. "Yeah, tell him to run. He can obviously do that now."

The returning team exchanged another uneasy glance and a common thought. *Not distracted. They're angry.*

Angela swept the situation and found Marc nearby examining the bridge to make sure there were no more threats.

The camp members who had just reached the top deck noticed the UN ship. The start of panic died when they found Eagles onboard.

Marc stared at Angela, heart pounding. *I can't leave her again. She'll always be in danger. I need to stay closer.*

Angela smiled, coming to Marc's side. "Welcome home." She pulled his ring from her

pocket and slid it onto her finger. “Now you can stay close no matter what happens.”

Marc kissed her and rubbed her neck, being easy on her scars. She now had so many it was impossible not to touch one whenever they got close.

Only a few people noticed the moment, but those who did cheered for the couple.

Adrian watched, hurting and happy for Marc at the same time.

Eagles hurried to secure the scene and verify the smoking hole in the deck wasn't something they had to worry over.

Angela reluctantly pulled away and went toward the stairs. She raised her voice. “The trial resumes in five minutes!”

She'd left Neil with his team and the captain's security. She didn't want them alone any longer than necessary.

Marc frowned at Kenn. “What trial? What's going on?”

Angela pointed at Kronus. “He stays with the enforcer; the enforcer stays with her mission crew.” Angela wasn't happy to see Kronus, but she also wasn't surprised.

Kyle's team immediately came over to surround Jennifer and the wayward angel.

“There's a large serving area off the ballroom where we're holding the trial. They can watch and be quarantined until the QZ is prepared. Make sure it's big enough to hold everyone.” Angela waved at

Stanley, who surprisingly, had been the only one able to stay on her heels as she twisted through the hallways and up the stairs. He knew the ship's passages as well as she did. "Bring them food. Do *not* go inside."

Stanley hurried off to do as told, leaving Kyle's team to escort them to the temporary quarantine room. It was slow going while they waited for Kronus. The pain from his injuries was reminding him where he was.

Kenn motioned Marc toward Ivan, seeing his bruises were fading. The black and purple splotches dotted across his face, arms, and neck were now yellowing. "It's a long story, dude. Get it from him. I need to get this corpse out of here."

Ivan sucked in air, tired and aching. He didn't want to tell Marc what had happened. For Ivan, one of his team slacking off was a failure in his job to protect Angela.

Marc took pity. "It's not an easy job."

Ivan snorted. "No." He straightened his shoulders. "Come with me. I'll give you the full after I check on our prisoners. I want to be sure this wasn't a decoy to cover an escape."

Marc fell in, picking up images from the passengers around them. Rachel's attempted bombing hadn't even been suspected. They'd had too many other things going on. *I can't leave to find my daughter. I'll be sacrificing this family for that one.*

Kyle brought Kronus, helping the angel. Kyle wasn't sure, but he thought the man was getting weaker despite not having an open injury or expending energy.

Marc slowed to let Kyle catch up.

Ivan waved Travis to go check the brig and detoured toward the courtroom instead. He needed to get this update with Marc out of the way. The team had to be told about Neil. Putting it off wouldn't make it easier.

Camp members gave the newest arrival a quick scan and dismissed him as a lost soul that Angela had ordered brought back. The camp also began realizing they now had a third boat and approved.

The descendants dug into thoughts and then stared at Kronus in instant dislike. They recognized him.

So did the Eagles. Marc's team was surrounded by security as they traversed the stairs with Ivan.

Adrian walked next to Marc. *She's been searching the future. She has a new mark on her wrist. It overlaps, so she's hoping we won't notice.*

We'll add that to the list. Ivan's wondering if he should tell me she got sick while we were gone. I want to wait and see if he does.

"I can remove that for her."

Marc and Adrian waited for Kyle and the angel, who was limping along.

"How do—"

“What’s the price?” Marc interrupted, flashing a hard glare at Adrian. “‘Cause that’s the one we need to know.”

“Later.” Adrian could feel Angela’s attention starting to shift in their direction.

People stood to the sides or simply stopped to let them go by, lips curling at the sight of the team. The smell hit them next. All the mission members were covered in blood and garbage. It was obvious their run had not been fun.

“There’s a ship out there!” Some people were just now heading up the stairs.

“That was our ride home.” Marc spoke up. “There’s no one alive on that ship but Eagles.”

People around them relaxed and began to pass the word they were not under attack from the UN again. Then the realization set in that it was the same ship from the shore. People looked around for bloody kids on the rampage.

Annoyed, Marc delivered a glare. “It was the crazy lady with the grenades you needed to watch out for. Leave the damn kids alone.”

Agreement and shame floated through the hallways, muting further conversations and thoughts.

The mission team was glad. It had been a nasty run and they’d come home to find chaos. They were eager to be filled in on the details that could only come when they were alone with Kyle’s team.

Kyle pointed as they neared the ballroom. “There’s our baby.”

Jennifer and Kyle both waved to little Autumn, who had a surgical mask over her face and was being held by Allison. They both looked fine.

“I knew I liked her.” Kyle approved the extra protections. They were in quarantine even though it wasn’t official yet. Allison was obeying the rules. Kyle’s estimation of her went up a little.

It scared Jennifer. She moved into the quarantine room and got as far away from the door as she could in case she was carrying anything that might travel through the air to her baby.

Daryl got them all inside and shut the door.

“We told her not to come out of the room yet, but she said Autumn wanted to see her mommy.”

“It’s fine.” Kyle wasn’t as concerned with that as he was with the trial they were about to witness.

“No, it’s not.” Jennifer was now pissed. “She wasn’t supposed to come out of that room until I knocked on the door. Allison will never watch her again.”

Kyle frowned, but didn’t argue. He hoped Jennifer changed her mind. When she remembered how easy it was for Autumn to twist adults into doing what she wanted, Jennifer might relent.

Jennifer snorted and took a seat at the end of the table, not wanting to discuss it.

Kyle hid a smirk and joined her.

Marc and Adrian both pointed toward the farthest corner, insisting Kronus go there. It wasn’t so that he was heavily protected. It was so he had to go through all of them to reach the exit.

Kronus took the seat without argument. He had woken with Kyle kicking him, while telling the captain he would blow her brains out if she tried anything. It wasn't the waking he was used to.

Kyle's team waited for everyone to sit, all aware of time slipping away.

Marc and Adrian settled closest to the doors, both grunting as they sank into the comfortable seats. It had been a long trip and none of them had slept yet, except for Kyle, who hadn't exactly been willing.

Jennifer kicked off her boots as soon as she got them unlaced, then leaned against her husband to listen.

Morgan, Ben, Whitney, and Daryl took up places along the wall between the quarantined people and the door, exactly the way they were supposed to by Adrian's training. Four of the five people in this room were not a threat, but the way Kyle had treated the new arrival was already making them twitchy.

Kyle put an arm around Jennifer's shoulders and gave Daryl a nod. "Let's hear it."

Daryl had tried to memorize what he was going to say to his team leader about the security failures while he'd been gone, but all those felt weak now, as if they were excuses instead of an explanation. He decided to go with a short version that didn't cast any blame or accept any. "The boss exposed a number of people during the camp meeting. We were in the middle of handling those when Becky

and Seth were found dead in the brig. Angela suspended the meeting so we could investigate. We collected evidence. This morning, Neil's trial began."

"Neil?!"

"That can't be right."

"Did he say Neil?"

Shock floated through the room, bringing adrenaline and alertness to the team.

"What evidence?"

"How did they die?"

"I know Neil better than anyone here. He would never harm Becky. The most he might do is kick Seth's ass, which he needed."

"Let's just show them." Daryl pointed to the boxes along the far wall as everyone on the mission team asked questions or defended Neil's honor. "The defense and prosecution have their files stored in here. You can go through the case and see what we're up against."

Kyle's team began grabbing those boxes and bringing them over to the two long tables. As they laid out the evidence, it was obvious why the mood was so rough on the ship. It looked bad for Neil.

"It's going to take us a while to go through this. I don't think we'll get done before the trial is over." Marc was looking through the baggies.

"We have a plan." Ben leaned down, lowering his voice as he rested his elbows on the table. "It was Samantha's idea, but we've all contributed."

Marc didn't hesitate. "I'm in. Tell me." There was no doubt in his mind that whatever evidence they had against Neil had either been manufactured or he had a good reason for what he'd done. Neil was one of the few people in this camp that Marc trusted in every way. *Except about Becky...*

The rest of the team added their support and agreement before hearing the details. Like Marc, they had come to know Neil since joining Safe Haven. He wasn't a murderer.

Kyle's team filled them in, relieved there wasn't going to be morality or ethics lectures from Marc or their enforcer. It was wonderful to know that when it came to Neil's character, they were all in agreement. He was innocent.

4

"Would anyone else like to speak on behalf of the defendant?"

"I would."

"So would I."

"Same here."

"I will." Kyle entered through the rear entrance. He went to stand by Neil's chair. "None of us have an alibi either."

Jennifer went to stand in front of Angela, reading her thoughts and needs for this moment. "I left my demon here to watch over Autumn. I think she did it while I was gone."

The camp gasped. No one had brought up that possibility.

Angela scowled. “Why would *your* demon kill Seth and Becky?”

“This is my home. It would have bothered me to have all the Becky, Seth, Neil drama. It would have distracted me and kept me busy on unimportant stuff. My demon knows that.”

“Actually, I was going to say the same thing, except Neil’s my friend. My demon was supposed to defend Angie and my boys, but he wouldn’t want my best friend hurting that way.” Marc gave a wide eyed, innocent expression as he went to the other side of Neil’s seat. “I can’t be sure.”

Angela grunted. “We’ll add you to the list of people who’ve stood here today and given us a similar testimony.” She waved a tired hand. “Anyone else want to confess before the jury deliberates?”

Silence, finally. Angela pointed. “Take those two defendants into custody. The rest of the crew needs to be quarantined until Tonya can get their blood work done.”

Guards came forward to lead Marc and Adrian from the chamber.

Jennifer went back toward the serving area, flashing the details she’d read from Angela. “A lot happened while we were gone.”

“Apparently.” Adrian didn’t protest as he was cuffed.

Marc wasn’t cuffed, but the looks and body language were hostile. “Safe Haven is settling all its problems.”

“Yes, we are.” Ivan opened the door to the hallway. “Have a seat on that bench. A medic will be by shortly.” He let them go out and fastened the door. He went to stand guard over Jennifer and the new man until an escort came for them. “They’ll be fine. No one wants *them* dead.”

Jennifer placed a hand on his wrist, eager to get the rest of the details. “Do you mind?”

Ivan shook his head, glad the team was home. *Now things can calm down.*

Jennifer cackled without humor. “Since when have we ever calmed things down?”

5

“This is the testimony of Todd O’Neil, accused of double homicide.” Angela began the final part of the trial with relief and fear. She was glad it was almost over, but the outcome appeared terrifying. “Because the defendant claims to have no memory of the events, I’ve decided to test that. Does anyone object?”

The camp didn’t, but they expected Samantha to.

Samantha sat with her arms over her stomach, waiting. If Angela didn’t test Neil, Jennifer would. It was better this way.

Angela scowled at her. *Better for who?*

Samantha lifted her chin. “We don’t object to your tests. You may proceed.”

The camp snickered at her choice of words.

Angela stored it with the other oddities she'd picked up in the last few hours. "Very well. I've asked a few descendants to check Neil's mind for lies and memories."

"I'm not lying. I don't have any memories." Neil frowned at the people now coming toward him. "I didn't even know we were on a ship until someone told me!"

Charlie, Conner, Kendle, and Kenn stopped in front of Neil.

"All four will examine your mind at the same time to keep you from blocking. It'll be easier if you just relax and let them in."

Neil's grip tightened on the chair for an instant and then he stilled, body relaxing. "I have nothing to hide."

Angela nodded.

The descendants shoved into Neil's mind, searching for anything.

Angela entered Kenn's mind to view from there. He knew more of what to hunt for than the others. Also, Neil wouldn't expect her to merge with Kenn.

Kenn held in a groan but not his first thought. *I've always wanted this.*

Angela knew. *Get started!*

Kenn strode forward. "I've known you since I joined Safe Haven in March. Do you know me?"

Everyone held their breath as descendants dug in to view any flashes Neil might have.

Neil shook his head. "No. I've heard stories."

“We’ve been on missions together. We don’t like each other. Do you know why?”

Again, Neil shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember.”

Angela shoved forward and ripped Neil’s mental wall down. She peered over his landscape with glowing red orbs and found only white, dusty clouds. She stayed, chasing shadows while the others asked their questions or told stories to trigger his memories.

“My dad trained you. Your best friend died in an earthquake, under the mountain.” Charlie had decided to go straight for the throat of Neil’s emotions.

Conner did too. “You were worried about having a relationship with an underage girl, Becky.”

Kendle could only use the memory she had, digging into him like the others were. “You beat my ass in kai, along with everyone else’s.”

Kenn finished the first round. “You lost your dad in the war. You saw him die.”

Neil stared at them as they spoke, head turning. “Keep going? It might help me remember.”

Angela pulled out of Kenn’s mind as it continued, hair rising on her neck. *This isn’t right. Clouds are not a sign of a sleep spell or a memory wipe.*

“You and Jeremy fought over Samantha at first.”

“You were a state trooper. So was your dad. That’s why you have the hat. You wear it to keep your father’s memory alive.”

“You’re a good man and a top Eagle. We need to know who did this to you.” Conner fought through another layer of the thick clouds.

Angela watched Neil instead of the mental battles. He was staring at Conner with a hopeful expression, but... His fingers under the chair arm curled, tensed. *He’s struggling with something.* Angela knew it could be any number of things, such as embarrassment at the mental violations, but it didn’t match his expression. She looked at Kenn.

Kenn shook his head. *None of us are getting anything.*

“That’s enough! I object!” Samantha had stayed quiet while they all dug into his brain like he was a criminal. She couldn’t take any more. “There’s nothing there!” She swallowed a sob. “He’s gone now. Someone took him from us.”

Another wise choice of words, Angela thought as the camp made comforting sounds or muttered. If this was an act, it was winning them over. The part of Angela that adored Neil and trusted him wanted to stop, but her honor wouldn’t allow it. She restlessly fingered her ring, causing it to glint as she contemplated her next option.

The light hit Kendle, drawing her attention. Pain sank in as she realized what it was. *He asked her and she said yes. They’re getting married.*

Angela turned to Neil. “I’m going to try to remove the memory spell now. The book William gave me has a charm for it. Do I have your permission to try?”

Neil’s head bobbed. “Of course. I need to know who I am, what happened to me.”

Again, it was exactly the right thing to say.

Angela muttered the charm, not providing any warning. She saw his fingers brace against the underside of the chair.

Everyone went still and quiet, watching her work.

The charm was only three sentences, but a powerful blast of magic swirled out of the air and settled over Neil like someone sprinkling dust. The descendants in front of him dug in harder, hoping to be able to observe what had been hidden before.

Angela let go and sucked in air. “It didn’t work.”

That was the first for the camp, and for her. Angela hadn’t had failures in magic, only in predictions that were subject to change from a person’s choices. This should have been easy. “I want Conner to try.”

Conner stepped forward. Angela had given him a copy of the charm that he had burned after memorizing it. He slammed Neil with a strong version. He’d been storing energy all day to use for this moment, upon Angela’s request.

Neil stared blankly, waiting for it to be over.

“Are you satisfied now?!”

Angela shook her head at Samantha. “Not in the least, but there doesn’t seem to be anything I can do about that at the moment.” She looked back at Neil. “I need your word you’ll tell us if you have flashes or regain your memory.”

Neil scoffed. “Anyone around me will know. I’ll probably start crying.”

“Aww.” The camp was being swayed every time he spoke.

“Would you be willing to reopen this trial if you do regain your memory?”

Neil looked straight at her. “I’ll always follow the law.”

Samantha and Angela both caught the careful wording this time, but there was nothing else Angela could do and nothing else Sam was willing to do. It would be up to the camp.

“Is there anything you would like to say before we retire to deliberate?”

Neil stood, hands still ringing the hat instead of twisting it. “I’ll do whatever it takes to regain my memory. I’m sorry this happened, whatever it is, but I won’t stop trying. I’ll figure out what happened to me and then I’ll tell you, so you can do something about it. I deserve justice even if I don’t know who I am.” He looked at Samantha and the group of men sitting behind her. “Thank you for defending me. I’m sorry I don’t remember you. I know that must hurt. I’m grateful and I’ll try to make this up to you somehow.”

Neil sounded lost. Even Angela was swayed, and she *knew* something wasn't right. "Go ahead and make your closing statement." Angela didn't see any need for it now, but it was the way things had to be handled. Neil was going to be found not guilty because they couldn't prove it. Magic coming into the mix had changed the rules of investigating. It was possible that Samantha's explanation was true, that Becky had arranged all of this. Samantha had found Neil his shadow of a doubt.

I just found a place where my kind can exploit the law and maybe get away with murder. Angela pushed aside her anger. But now, I know, don't I? This won't work again. Every time someone slides by the law, I'm going to plug that hole or seal that leak until nothing escapes justice. We will never return to the way it was before the war, ever. That includes using Time Keepers for a reset.

Samantha stepped to the front of the room, taking the time to look around and meet the eye of each and every person who was going to decide Neil's fate. It took a minute. In the silence, tension grew. Everyone waited to hear her words, most hoping she would be able to save Neil.

Samantha turned to look at Angela as she began. "The prosecution left out a key ingredient in her summary. *Magic* was involved here. We know that a sleep spell was used. Neil didn't have a sleep gift. In fact, Neil refused to open his gifts at all. He was what we call an Invisible. He couldn't read minds until I got pregnant. Even then, it was only when we

had close contact. We all know what Angela said about power rubbing off, but I don't have sleep abilities. There's no way I could have passed that to him, even by accident. The prosecution's entire case rests on the theory that Neil wiped his own memory. Yet the prosecution has agreed it's unlikely. There are no known cases of it. He couldn't possibly have done it, because he did not have the skills needed to commit the crime."

People nodded, convincing Angela she was right about the outcome. *So why am I not happy about that?*

"Neil has more honor than anybody I've ever met. We were all shocked to find out he was attracted to Becky, but no one here can say they haven't had impure thoughts about someone they shouldn't have. It might have been your best friend's girlfriend. Might have been your mom's new wife; it might have been the boy across the classroom from you, or the guy who worked in the cubicle next to yours, or the girl who delivered the packages. We've all had those thoughts. We didn't act on them and neither did Neil. *Rick* was the one who raped her. Don't confuse the two men, because they are *nothing* alike. Becky came back here with a vendetta and she carried it out. Now, we all have to deal with this farce of the trial when we know Neil's not capable of doing this to anyone." Samantha quickly laid out the rest of the holes in the case. "We've heard testimony from the guards and various people throughout the ship who heard

Becky swear she was going to try again. We know she was capable of this crime. Becky had the skills. She was there. She had the motive. She wanted to hurt us. The changes in behavior were obvious. She could have evolved with the sleep gift without any of us knowing. Angela admitted she may have missed it on a scan, or someone may have evolved with it and we didn't know. There are too many ifs, ands, or buts in this case. If you find him guilty, *you* are the ones committing murder." Samantha sat, hoping it had been enough. "The defense rests."

Silence held across the courtroom for a long moment as people considered and then agreed with Samantha. Despite small, tantalizing clues, there was no true proof.

Eagles were torn. Cameras were going to be installed in the brig and hallways, and all the other cameras on the ship were going to be activated. The Eagles were looking forward to receiving the order. It wouldn't be allowed to happen this way again.

"There will now be a one-hour break for a meal and deliberations. Defendants will be returned to their cells or taken to quarantine areas. Everyone is allowed to talk about everything, but I don't want a single fight or argument. Remember who you are and what we're doing here." Angela smacked the table. "Court adjourned."

Brittani heard steps coming behind her and recognized them, but she still wasn't able to make the decision. She was standing between the two cabin doors, both keys in hand.

Daryl stopped behind her, not sure exactly what to say. It was obvious she was having second thoughts.

"It's not second thoughts. It's just a big step to live together."

"You could consider it bunkmates if you like. We can make it clear to everyone that we're not a committed couple; we're sharing a room."

Brittani contemplated that option, not pleased to have a third one to pick from. As she did, she realized it was the most viable option for how she was feeling. "Are you okay with us doing it that way?"

Daryl smiled, relief coming into his heart. "I'd be honored to do it that way. When we get to the island, we can discuss the next step or maybe we can even keep this cabin when the camp moves into the bunkhouse on Pitcairn."

"Do you think Angela will let us?"

"Of course." He paused as someone went by, singing about a demon samurai. He snickered and continued. "There's not going to be room for all these passengers in the bunkhouse in the first year we're there. Some people will need to stay on the boat to keep the water and power flowing, and some passengers will stay on the boat because they can't be on land again unless it's America." Daryl

glanced down the hall toward the leadership cabins. “I’ll bet we have a lot of company if we decide to stay onboard.”

“Good. I like some of these people.”

Daryl stepped by her and unlocked the door to her right but stayed in the hallway. “They like you too.” He stared at her, not wanting the moment to end yet. He didn’t assume being roommates would begin now.

Brittani knew that. It allowed her to step inside and shut the door.

Daryl followed her in surprise. When she shut the door and she latched it, his heart leapt.

Brittani leaned against the door and surveyed his residence. He appeared to be a neat freak, like herself. *That’s good.* She swept for other compatibility issues. She was able to view into the restroom from here. It too appeared clean. In fact, the only clutter she found was a small stack of papers on the table next to the bed and a few items in the garbage can.

She studied the pictures on the wall and then the other decorations, trying to determine if he had made any changes. She was curious as to his personal style. That wouldn’t affect them being bunkmates, but it would tell her more about what type of a person he was.

Daryl got into his dresser and pulled out a change of clothes. He hoped it didn’t bother her that every item was folded in exact squares or triangles. He just liked his stuff that way. She didn’t have to

do it too. “I need to take a quick shower and then I’d be happy to escort you to the trial vote.” He moved to the lavatory. “You can ask me anything you want then.”

Brittani sat to wait, in a great mood. It had been a good day for her. She’d been assigned to the captain’s protection crew. She’d been placed on a rookie Eagle team; everyone had loved her food at every meal since they set sail and today had been no exception. She could tell how Neil’s trial was going to go. The mood later would be great too. Now, she got to spend time with her love interest. The only thing that could make it better was something she wasn’t going to allow to happen yet, despite being attracted to Daryl. They were going to take time. They weren’t rushing into anything; they weren’t just in lust. She wanted the real thing this time and she was willing to wait to verify that’s what this was.

“Do you think we did enough for Neil?”

“Yes, I do.” Brittani was sure he would be released. She didn’t think he was guilty and she planned to vote that way.

“I hope so. We need him.”

Brittani hadn’t realized Daryl was worried over it. He hid his emotions well.

“It’s the training. You’ll be able to do it too at some point.”

“Good. I hate it when people see me as weak.”

“Most of us do.” Daryl came from the bathroom, pulling his shirt on. “I’m ready if you are.”

Brittani gawked at his body. He was in incredible shape.

Daryl blushed. “Thank you.” His interest faded as voices echoed down the hall, arguing lightly about the coming vote.

Brittani tried to offer comfort. “If it goes bad, we could always help Neil escape.”

Daryl didn’t laugh. “Yes, we can.”

7

“She put me on the meal crew.” Tracy moved her rook forward to flank her knight and tried to ignore the crowded galley around them.

“You don’t seem upset.” Charlie took her front pawn with one of his.

“I’m not. Many of her pet projects are there.”

Charlie went over the list in his head. He was in the middle of memorizing all the teams; the meal crew had been listed first. “Brittani and Jayda, I understand. I don’t know Drew, Corey, or Hailey very well. They’re from Ciemus, so I’m not sure about them, but Stanley?”

Tracy chuckled. “She wanted him to have more than just a reputation as a klutz.”

“That makes sense.” Charlie waited for her to move again. “I got the cleaning crew.”

“You also sound happy about it.”

“I am. It’s great.”

Tracy moved her rook closer, trying to squeeze his bishop. “Why?”

“I’m with people I’ve always wanted to learn from, and Dog. I get to roam the ship at night.” He took her rook with his queen.

Tracy frowned at him. “Will it be that way when we get married?”

Sparks flew between them as Charlie smiled. “I’ll be there as much as you want me to be.” Heat flew again. They were avoiding physical contact until the wedding to throw off more suspicion for when she would reveal her pregnancy. Only a few people knew, and they weren’t going to tell.

“That reminds me. Candy wants to plan our wedding.”

Charlie shrugged. She would find out at the last minute that he’d planned it. Candy was his cover. “I don’t mind if you don’t, but Conner can’t help her this time. They’re not even allowed to be in the same room unless it’s for meals or meetings.”

“That sucks for them. It makes me glad we’re following the rules now.”

“Me too.” Charlie couldn’t help his thought. *But I’m staying hard an awful lot. It can’t be medically safe to walk around like this.*

Tracy giggled. “That’s not right.”

Charlie stared at her. “No, *that’s* not right. You just read my mind.”

Tracy stared in shock for a minute before breaking into a smile. “I guess that means our baby is a descendant.”

“Ten minutes until the vote.” Ivan called the reminder from the doorway. “Go in, mark your choice on the chalkboard, then take a seat while we count. Ten minutes, folks. Be in the courtroom in ten.”

Tracy sighed as Charlie put her in checkmate. “I’ll be glad when this is over.”

Charlie patted her hand, then stood. “Me too. Let’s go help save Neil and then we’ll come back and you can try again.”

Tracy chuckled, letting him take her arm as she stood. “How about we play Battleship? I might get lucky and win that one.”

“Whatever you want.”

Tracy could tell he meant that. “You’ve changed.”

Charlie held out an arm to her. “Thank my mom. She knew what I needed.”

Tracy curled her hand around his wrist. “I will. But not until she’s in a better mood, you know?”

Charlie frowned instead of laughing like she’d expected. “It might be a long wait.”

“Why do you say that?”

Charlie shrugged. “Just a feeling. I don’t think Neil’s trial is the reason she’s stressing right now.”

“Why?”

“She’s thinking about searching the future, not the past. Something else is wrong, but she doesn’t

know what it is. Her mood won't improve until she figures it out."

Tracy stayed close to Charlie as they joined the line forming in the ballroom. It took a few minutes to reach the chalkboard where Kenn was supervising the vote.

"Make your mark small to save room, then initial it for the official record."

Tracy took the chalk and made her mark. She doubted her vote mattered to anyone by itself, but with the other votes on here, it gave Neil's support another layer. Out of thirty votes, twenty-seven of them were for acquittal. Charlie's made twenty-eight of thirty-one. *Those are great odds.* Tracy let Charlie lead her to a seat, not saying anything else with so many people around. She also tried not to think about anything that would get them in trouble.

Charlie frowned at her. "We don't have anything like that... Do we?"

Tracy shook her head, eyes begging him to leave it alone.

Charlie did, but his mood began to sink. "Good. We don't need more trouble."

"Where's Samantha?" Tracy neatly changed the subject.

"She took a tray to Neil. She'll probably walk up with him for the results."

The room filled as people voted and sat, all counting the totals. Everyone liked this setup more than Adrian's locked voting box. It was a bit like

watching election results, except this was life or death being decided—Neil’s.

8

“Not guilty!” Angela smacked the table.

Almost everyone cheered, but none louder than Neil’s team. They surrounded him and Samantha.

Neil clasped hands and grinned, but he still gazed around in confusion.

The guards and his team wondered if he would be back on duty any time soon.

“Can I help him regain his memory?” Jennifer was next to Angela, still covered in dried blood.

“No, but Samantha can. Put them together tonight, alone.”

“Guards?”

Angela nodded. “In case of retaliation.”

“It’s not needed.”

Angela narrowed in on Neil, who was being hugged by Samantha so hard that his face was turning red. *Oh, yes, it is.*

Jennifer added the clues and flashed Angela a hand gesture to keep anyone from knowing. *What’s wrong?*

Angela frowned. “That’s what I want to know.”

She smacked the table again to get attention. “I know it’s dinner time, but I want this done and over with. We’re finishing the last two trials and then everyone can go eat and enjoy their downtime.” She gestured at Kenn. “Bring in Adrian.”

Adrian had been sitting in the hallway, cuffed, for hours. He'd snoozed a bit and read thoughts to get caught up on what he'd missed, but he'd mostly just listened to Angela handling the first murder trial of the new world. He'd recognized some of the changes she'd made and approved. Others, he never would have thought of.

Greg brought Adrian to stand in front of Angela and returned to his place by the door. He didn't look at Marc, who was also sitting out here, being gawked at by camp members who didn't want to squeeze inside. The outcome of Adrian's trial would give them a clue about how things would go for Marc.

Angela pointed at Adrian. "You were banished and returned, repeatedly. You've also saved this camp, repeatedly. There's no need to go over everything—we know what happened. All the camp has to do is decide what we do with you now. Before we get to those choices, you may speak on your own behalf."

"I'm sorry, for everything." Adrian glanced around the camp, at the people he'd once been bonded with. "I really am." He sat down.

"The choices are death, re-banishing, or removing the punishment. Please come up and put an x on the second chalkboard under your choice, like you did for Neil's trial."

Kenn held out the chalk to the first person in line. He'd already photographed and flipped the

side from Neil's vote. "Make it small so they'll all fit, then initial it for the official record."

Angela studied Adrian as the Eagles came down. What they decided would be followed by citizens.

Camp members moved aside to let them go first.

Kyle made his mark, talking over the surprised murmurs. "Conditional works for me now. If he breaks those rules, I'll ask for death."

And with that, Adrian's future was set.

Tension broke. If Adrian was being given another chance, so would Marc.

Angela waited for her heart to settle into a calmer rhythm. When it didn't, she allowed the worry to sink in and start festering. *Something's still wrong. What have I missed?!*

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Truth

1

“Congratulations.” Adrian eased into the lounge seat across from Marc, ready to get right back up if he wasn’t welcome.

“Yeah.” Marc had been returned to Eagle duty and cleared to resume his place on the council if the boss and the other members wanted it. Marc had refused the council spot and taken the offered body man duty over Angela. He’d gotten everything he needed, but it didn’t feel good.

The afterparty was in full swing with dancing, drinking, tables for games, booths for a bit of privacy, and lonely tables for those on the fringe of being welcome. The camp was satisfied, and it showed in the good mood. More bad people had been removed. A good man had been cleared. The ship was once again able to sail, declared safe by their engineers. The hole had been roped off so no one tripped and fell in, but there was little else they could do for it right now. Only the deck and the rail had been damaged. Despite not being able to repair it, the ship didn’t feel angry. Like the camp members, there was a sense that the ship was relieved to still be alive at all.

Around them, the camp and Eagles shared stories and companionship. They were thrilled with the outcomes from the day. Not only had the mad bomber, as she was being called, been stopped, but Neil had been found not guilty. It was okay to still believe in Safe Haven's goodness.

Neil, also surrounded, was shaking hands and smiling, but he didn't appear okay to Marc.

Adrian mirrored that thought. *He seems half there.*

That's what saved him. He seems like an innocent man and not a killer. It gave him a huge margin.

Marc brooded. *But we know better.*

Adrian nodded. *Yes. Let's move on. Too many ears.* "Thank you for not stopping them from clearing me."

Marc shrugged. "You're on conditional banishment."

"Still, thank you."

"You know why I didn't. Don't thank me."

"Fair enough. The UN captain was sent away with the other criminals."

"Really?" Marc examined that clue. "So, we didn't go for another captain."

"And check this out. I saw explosives crates being carried to that ship. She didn't want it either."

"What about Kronus? Are we supposed to reform him or use him, do you think?"

“I don’t know.” Adrian drank from his beer and belched. “One of us needs to get in good with her again and then we’d have these details.”

Marc’s sharp mind flashed to the instant during the power meeting when Angela had whispered into Kronus’s ear. The angel had immediately scoffed, but... *What if he lied? What if that wasn’t really what she said at all?*

Adrian shrugged. “The players directed evil to us so we would remove it. Our journey can now resume.”

The ship radio crackled. “We have full power to all parts of the ship again. As a special treat, I’m switching on the holiday lights for us to enjoy. Don’t be alarmed by things suddenly starting. It’s just me up here playing with the buttons.”

People laughed at Grant’s message, looking around as several lights changed colors and a display cabinet in the hall came to life with Christmas carols as a guard went by.

Marc frowned. “I thought they weren’t helping or hurting us anymore.”

Adrian sighed. “The players are addicts to the games they’ve betted on for so long. Only the Creator can make them stop.”

“So we’re stuck with it.”

“Yes. Speaking of stuck, Kendle saw Angela’s ring.”

“How’d she take it?”

Ah, a nibble. Adrian shrugged. “About as well as she could. She went to help clean the top deck.”

“She’s hoping one of the guilty people will try to hurt her. They’re being put off the ship right now.”

“So she can kill them and have a reason to taste blood?”

“So she can die an honorable death.”

“Will any of them try?” The camp had given into Angela about not killing the criminals, but they’d refused to share any supplies. They’d told her the lifeboat was almost too much.

“No, she’s not getting out that easy. She’s been cursed. Happened while we were gone, I assume.”

“Cursed?”

“She won’t feel much happiness unless someone cares enough about her to break the curse.”

“How long does something like that last?”

Adrian scowled at the callous tone. “Could be a long time.”

“Years?”

Adrian slowly nodded, feeling another deal coming. “Why?”

Marc stood up. “If she survives that long without interfering between me and Angie, or breaking a camp rule, she can have my four months on the return trip. I’ll free her.”

Adrian swallowed triumph in place of fear. “Angela heard that.”

“I know.” Marc strolled toward his mate. “She’s getting what she wants. Why shouldn’t I?”

Angela took the hand Marc held out, sliding into his arms as music blared. She snuggled close, resting her head on his shoulder. She didn't speak or think anything. She just enjoyed being in his arms.

Screams pulled her back to reality.

"Randal just heard the last boat to land is being launched and he's not on it."

She sighed. "Will you escort me there when it's time?"

"No. Kyle's going now. It's his job."

"I didn't want his first duty upon returning to be killing."

"It wasn't. He saved his friend."

"Neil was going to be found not guilty."

"I assumed. Do you know who murdered them?"

Angela shook her head. "I prefer to believe the story Samantha presented."

"So does the camp."

Angela leaned back in his arms so she could look at him. "What about Marc?"

He kept his face blank. "Marc thinks whatever the queen wants him to."

Angela curled arms around his neck, leaning in. "*Find out.*"

Marc nodded. "Consider it done."

Angela swept the room, picking up only good vibes that didn't soothe her like it should have. The UN ship had been cleared and was bobbing peacefully alongside. The kids who'd spent time on

that ship refused to sit by a window where they'd have to look at it. Rachel's family was here too, though they were at a fringe table. Leeroy hadn't known his wife was stealing grenades or planning to blow them all up. He'd helped move her body below and then he'd stayed with the crew to help clear the rest of the path to the morgue. There were now three bodies in it.

Leeroy wasn't saying much, but there was a sense that he was relieved. The same couldn't be said of his daughter. Sally was leaking continuous tears. Angela motioned Brea toward their table, hoping the tough girl might be able to help Sally adjust. In time, it would get easier for that broken family because they would hear everyone else's stories. Several of Safe Haven's members had friends or family who'd tried to kill the dream. That wouldn't change. Madness had always been present in society. Now, it was loose and growing. There would be more problems in the future. It couldn't be avoided, only survived.

"Adrian wants some time with you." Marc dipped her and brought her in close. "I'll arrange it, or Ivan will."

"You." Angela fingered her ring. "And do whatever you two have planned on *tonight*. If you wait until tomorrow, I'll never agree."

Marc spun her and paused them apart. "Are you sure? I can get the information in other ways."

He tugged her in, but Angela stopped, hands coming to his chest. "Let's get it done and see where

we go from here. Everyone else is having a last debauch as we sail. It's our turn."

"Is that what you'll tell yourself while it's happening?"

She gave a sad smile. "I'll be thinking about how much I love you."

"And after?"

"How awful I am for enjoying it."

"And you still want to?"

"Yes."

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. "I just needed to be sure our reactions would match."

Angela held him tight. For one night, she could get a taste of Samantha's life. That could hold her for years. *And then I'll destroy all of their clever plans. No one decides my future but me.* She scanned the celebrating passengers over Marc's shoulder again, coming to rest on Neil. *And no one gets something over on me without paying the price.*

Marc shivered at the wave of danger. "Planning death and chaos again, darling?"

Angela shut her eyes. "Always."

Marc rubbed her shoulder and gave Adrian a subtle nod. *Tonight.*

Adrian got up and left the lonely table to make arrangements.

Angela felt the mood shift. "Go have some time to yourself. Cody's still up."

Marc kissed her cheek and stepped back.

Ivan was there to offer his arm.

Marc surrendered her without jealousy. Ivan had a long way to go before he could compete. Marc had accepted that now.

Ivan held her away from his body despite wanting to treat her like a lover. “How are you feeling?”

“Horny.”

Ivan cackled. “Well, Marc will handle that soon enough. Anything I can do for you?”

Angela rested her head on his shoulder.

Ivan broke. He had no willpower against her feel. He wrapped her up close and let her put them body to body.

“Change your mind.”

“About what?”

“Not having a family to be hurt by. I was weak that day. I shouldn’t have influenced you.”

Ivan snorted, tingling from the contact. “We have plenty of breeders in Safe Haven now.”

“Do we?” Angela stared into his eyes. “We need leadership to procreate, Ivan. And many of them can’t or won’t. There’s not enough of us who are whole anymore.”

“Why leadership?”

“Would you rather have a world of Stanley’s running around screwing things up by accident or would you prefer a society of people like Marc or Kyle?”

“Wow. Hard choice.” He sniggered.

Angela sent a wave of power, making them both tremble. “Don’t turn her away. We need your bloodline to continue.”

“No.” Ivan kissed Angela on the cheek, no longer dancing. He memorized the feel of her. “I won’t be part of your breeding tree. I certainly won’t make a baby with that loud mouth, always-talking disappointment who could only get kitchen duty.” Ivan retreated, not wanting Angela to feel threatened by his anger. “There’s one woman on this ship who could get that from me and we both know it will never happen, so save that shit for the camp.” He walked away, not looking at Jayda as he passed her. “I’m moving out. We’re done.”

Silence lingered as Ivan left. Even the music paused as the man running the radio, Gus, gaped in shock with everyone else.

“I’m sorry.” Angela tried to comfort Jayda. “I know you asked me for him, but he’s not available.”

“He never was.” Jayda stiffened her shoulders. “I’ll be fine. I just need to talk less.”

Angela hated the woman’s pain, but it was a common complaint behind her back. If she changed that behavior, she’d have more friends. “Come with me? I have rounds.”

Jayda didn’t want to, but she was eager to escape all the attention. “Sure.”

They left together, moving into the hallway as the music resumed.

As soon as they were out the door, Jayda began crying.

Angela put an arm around her. "I'm sorry."

"Me too." Jayda sobbed. "Can you find me someone else? Someone who can accept me for me?"

"Before I try, can I ask something without you crying harder?"

Jayda sniffled. "Maybe."

"Have you thought about becoming an Eagle and proving him wrong?"

"I want to be one. *You* put me on the kitchen crew."

"You weren't going to cut it before. I saved you that pain. I traded it for this one because I thought this would hurt less."

"Well, it hurts a lot, so that future must have been bad."

"It was, but that's all changed now. I believe you can do it."

"Why?"

"You have a big goal now and there's only one way you can accomplish it."

"By succeeding."

"Yes. If you become an Eagle, everyone will have to see you differently."

"My second chance."

"Yes." Angela kept walking as Jayda stopped, thoughts racing. "Let him get his stuff out before you return or he'll fall on his knees to apologize and beg you to let him stay. Guilt is hitting him hard now."

Jayda lifted her chin. “He can beg all he wants. I want a baby, not a coward who never told me those things to my face.”

Angela let her go. Ivan deserved that for how he’d handled it, but the relationship had been doomed before she’d set it up. Ivan had no heart left to give. Angela smiled. *That’s mine and no one else will ever have a chance at it.*

“Would you like to say hello to the little shitter?”

Angela beamed as Allison came down the hall and placed Autumn in her arms. Jennifer had chewed her out about leaving the room early. Allison had let her vent, then explained it was an order from Angela and even gotten an apology from the hard, teenage mother. “Hi, sweetheart!”

Autumn yawned, almost sleeping despite the noise.

Angela nuzzled the baby. “Having fun?”

“Absolutely.” Allison fingered the Midol bottle in the pocket of her jeans. “She’s a doll.”

“Jennifer and Kyle are on the top deck if you’re searching for them.” The team had been quickly cleared by Tonya, who could now probably get blood from that fabled turnip.

Allison shook her head, scanning the happy people through the open door. “I’ve got another hour on baby duty and I want it.” She felt someone staring at her and rotated to find Zack’s hot gaze on her legs. He was guarding the entrance to the lounge.

Allison enjoyed his flush as she caught him staring. She also liked it when he kept staring, silently asking if she was interested.

Allison grinned. “Your ribs healed up yet?”

Zack chortled. “Enough.”

Allison ignored the hoots from inside the lounge. Everyone could hear them. “We’ll see. Come find me when you’re off duty and we’ll take a walk on the top deck. I hear there’s moonlight and everything.”

Zack’s tension eased. “I’ll be there.”

“Woah, dad. Nice.” Mike was happy for him. The boys weren’t on duty, but they were hanging out at a table by their father.

Timmy shrugged at Zack’s look. “You’re old enough.”

Zack grinned. “So are you. Why not speak to the object of your desires?”

Timmy glanced over his shoulder at a quartet of females by the bar. They were having drinks and swaying to the music. “You think I should?”

“I believe she’ll say no, but if you don’t go all angry, you can find out why and fix it—if you agree it’s a problem.” Zack already knew Timmy’s attitude would be the issue.

Timmy stood up before he lost his nerve. He marched over to the women, arriving right as the song ended.

Timmy cleared his throat and tapped Cathy on the shoulder. “Hey.”

Cathy twisted around and lit up. “Hey yourself, young man!”

Timmy blushed at the heat in her voice. Cathy was a cougar and she didn’t pretend otherwise. He needed to get to her now, before he was too old. “I’m barely sixteen. That’s like riding the line on age. Can we maybe, date or some shit?”

Zack dropped his head. *Oh, my god.*

Cathy had known for a while that Timmy was hot for her. “I can’t, kid. You’re not an Eagle. That’s a deal breaker for me.”

Timmy brooded. “I thought it was age or...how mean I’ve been.”

“Nope. I like to play and all, but you said date. I won’t get serious with anyone who isn’t an Eagle.”

Timmy thought about it instead of getting mad, like his dad had suggested. “So if I were, and I was good at it, then...?”

Cathy chuckled. “Then we might spend some time together, boy.”

“I’m not a boy!”

His growl perked her up, bringing light to her eyes. She gave him a onceover from head to toe. “If you do well in the Eagles, we’ll hang out and get to know each other.”

Timmy grew cocky. “What if I make team leader?”

Heat came into Cathy’s gaze. “If you do that, we’ll take the couples’ class.”

“You mean it?”

She shrugged. “Why not? I need to pick someone to give me kids and I’ll bet you can go all night.”

People burst out laughing as Timmy grinned and returned to his dad.

“That was crazy.” Charlie held up a hand to Timmy. “Excellent!”

Timmy realized he’d gotten the opening Charlie had told him he needed and returned the gesture. “It’s cool.” Timmy sat at the table by the door and rotated the chair to include Charlie, who was at the next table playing Battleship with Tracy. “Maybe we could help throw you guys an engagement party or something.”

“That would be sweet.” Tracy was enjoying the peace.

“Yeah.”

At the counter, Monica and Rose were still teasing Cathy.

Cathy noticed Courtney staring in the mirror at someone behind them instead of joining in. They were usually all in it together. Cathy tried to determine who she was staring at.

Courtney looked at her friend. “Please don’t.”

The other women fell silent to listen.

Cathy smiled. “At least tell me if he’s on this ship.”

Courtney sighed, nodding. “He’s in this room. Now leave it be.”

“Why won’t you tell him? He deserves to know he’s going to be a father.”

“Because his *mate* won’t want to know. He’s taken. I was a relief source in a weak moment.”

“Oh.” Cathy put her arm around Courtney’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Courtney shrugged it off. “I’m not. I wanted a baby and he gave me one. I couldn’t love him more.”

“To love!” Rose held up her wine glass.

The women clinked and drank, but Courtney’s eyes went straight back to the mirror in longing.

People hooted and clapped across the room as Lou led Katie onto the dance floor.

Claire followed the trend and tapped Doug on the shoulder. “Want to dance?”

Doug stared, dumbfounded, as Roy and Romeo laughed and people jeered. “Me?”

Claire nodded. Doug had been assigned to duty over the captain; he was on Ray’s team now. Before that, he’d been trusted to defend Marc’s son while that man was away. Claire was thrilled. She’d been watching Doug since he returned.

“Are you playing a bad joke?” Doug was still certain no woman wanted him. Peggy hadn’t helped that theory.

Claire smiled, sending heat. “You’ll make a good dad and your kids will be healthy, survivors.”

Doug laughed weakly, dazed. “Be a big load for someone to carry.”

Claire patted her hips. “These were made wide. Let’s dance and see if we have anything in common.” She pulled on his arm.

Doug let her drag him to the floor, flushing.

Roy clapped for Doug while Romeo grinned and hooted. They wanted Doug to be happy, but they also wanted a mom.

At the next table, Ozzie nudged Theo. “Debra’s staring at you, man.”

Theo grunted, belching. “Like she wants me dead, right?”

“Kinda sad. Maybe you should go ask her to take a walk.”

“And beg for forgiveness?”

“Of course!” Ozzie laughed. “I bet she’s as miserable as you are.”

Theo stood up, immediately drawing attention. His too-big clothes were gone, replaced by formfitting gear that showed off how much he’d been working on himself physically. Muscles rippled like a cat as he went by, making mouths flood with saliva.

Debra looked up, unable to prevent the hunger that flashed out to greet Theo as he stopped by her table.

“Can we go for a walk and talk?” Theo was encouraged by her warmth and took a chance. “Or maybe we could just dance?”

“Oops.” Samantha dropped her head.

Neil looked around with wide eyes. “What?”

Samantha patted his wrist as Debra stood. “I’ll fill you in later, when you’re ready for it.”

Neil smiled at her. “Sure, Sam.”

“Samantha.” Her voice broke. “Unless we’re...getting close, you always called me Samantha.”

“Oh. Okay!” Neil was distracted by Debra picking up her glass.

Samantha sighed, not sure what to do next with Neil. If his memory returned, he might be in danger. If it didn’t, she’d still lost her mate.

Debra opened her mouth, forcing out air and words. “S-slam you!” She tossed the drink in Theo’s face and dropped the glass. It shattered on the ground.

Debra stepped over the pieces and grabbed Jeff from the next table. “Come!”

Jeff didn’t know what was happening, but he felt like he should go along with it since she was deaf. He didn’t want to be rude.

Debra snuggled into his arms. *Lead!*

Jeff realized she couldn’t hear the music and chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.” He tucked her under his big arm and led them to the center of the floor, where there was more room.

Fresh hoots and chatter echoed.

Theo stood there, humiliated, on the edge of fleeing.

“You can sit with us if you want.”

Theo glanced down, wiping his face with his hand and found three girls staring at him in kinship.

Leeann pointed to Jeff’s chair. “He isn’t using it.”

Missy held out a napkin. “We might be able to help you.”

Theo took it. “Help me how?”

Kimmie shrugged. “We don’t know yet. That’s why we have to talk.”

Theo sat. “Why do you care? Two of you are usually too busy hurting people to help them.”

“That’s why.” Leeann dipped her stale chip in ketchup. “We need something to give us hope.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We all know how it feels. We can’t have what we want yet, but you don’t have to wait like we do. Angela said it will help us hang on.” Missy grabbed Leeann’s chip and ate it.

The girls burst out laughing, all of them.

Theo let their pleasure fill the holes in his heart. “You think she’ll forgive me?” He didn’t question how odd it felt to be discussing his love life with little girls. They were descendants; they’d survived a war. They weren’t just kids.

“She’s thinking about you right now. She doesn’t even feel Jeff.” Kimmie pointed at Theo. “You have to prove you trust her.”

“I don’t know how to do that.” He sighed.

“Tell her something that would get you tossed out of camp,” Missy stated matter-of-factly, dipping her own chip in ketchup. “You have secrets to tell.” She held it out to him. “We all do.”

Theo was shaken by the words. He took the chip and ate it, not tasting anything but coppery fear.

Leeann held up her cup. “We won’t let her tell on you. It’s just a test.”

Theo swallowed, shaking his head. “No. I have to really show trust. No nets or escape plans.” He leaned in, continuing the conversation.

Across the room, the engineering team had been observing in horror. That switched to confusion.

“What do you think that’s about?” Candy sipped her juice, enjoying being here even though Conner wasn’t. He was on duty somewhere, but she wasn’t allowed to know where. He hadn’t been punished for breaking the rules and neither had she, but they had to remain apart until he was of legal age. They weren’t allowed to converse or have contact at all. *So I guess we were punished.* She plastered on a smile.

Jonny shrugged. “I’d be more interested in the table behind them.”

Candy giggled. Pam, Shawn, and Morgan were at a booth in the rear, shadowed and looking very happy.

“I’m heading to the bridge. You guys have fun.” Tommy pushed his chair in. He went by Stanley and Panaji playing UNO at a corner table and vanished through the small employee entrance. He didn’t want to hear the gossip about the trio’s time in the hot tub again.

Morgan didn’t glance up as Tommy went by. “Just tell me.” He tickled Pam. “Tell me what you said. Kendle wouldn’t.”

“She didn’t honor her bet?” Pam started to get mad.

Shawn sniggered. “He forgot to ask her. There was a lot going on in that training room once the boss showed up.”

“Come on, tell me.” Morgan nuzzled her neck.

Pam sucked in air. “Mmm. Keep doing that and I might have to.”

Shawn laughed. “If he keeps doing that, the guards will ask us to leave.”

Pam shrugged, lashes fluttering as Morgan tasted her neck. “I’m ready.”

Shawn snapped his fingers. “Waiter! Check please!”

Morgan lifted her over him so she could go first.

The trio staggered out into the hall and went down the stairs, both men chasing Pam.

Marc slid aside to let them go by, chuckling. He had checked on posts for every level and things were calm. Now he could spend time with his son and not be distracted by security concerns.

Marc tapped on the door to the movie theater and entered, triggering the lights.

Cody was already running to him. “Daddy!”

Marc swung the boy up and did a fast circle before putting him on his shoulders. He bounced them out into the hall so everyone else could enjoy the show.

“I thought you might like to hang out with me for a little bit before bed.”

“Yeah!” Cody wrapped his arms around Marc’s head. “Can Dog come?”

Marc chortled. “Let’s find out.” He whistled twice, using the code to have Dog come quickly.

While they waited, Marc did what he’d avoided before. “You have a sister.”

Cody nodded in relief. He’d been afraid to bring it up. “I miss her.”

“Do you know where she is?”

Cody shrugged. “I don’t remember. I can show you in my head.”

“Yes, but not now. Let’s just have some fun, okay?”

Cody’s hands tightened on Marc’s ears. “Are you going to find her?”

“Yes. We’re sending a team, soon.”

“Good. She needs a daddy too.”

Dog ran around the corner, head swiveling. *What’s the problem? Where is it? Who do I kill?*

Behind him, both cats stopped to watch.

Marc chuckled. “We want company. You busy?”

Dog snorted, peering at them. *Where we headed?*

Marc tickled Cody, making him giggle. “What would you like to do?”

Cody whispered in Marc’s ear.

“Hmm. Let me see what I can do for that one tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay. Let’s play basketball!”

Marc headed for the steps to the gymnasium, storing the boy's request. Cody wanted to sleep between him and Angela, like they had on the way to the boat. It was sweet.

It's telling, his demon corrected. He's still scared.

Marc was frowning as he went up the steps.

2

“We'll do it together.”

“Okay.”

Neither Ben nor Whitney wanted to go down to the morgue, but it was the only place they hadn't been during this round of the ship while everyone partied or slept.

Ben jogged down the stairs, seeing no sentries had been posted here. There was no need, he assumed. They had bodies, not people, to guard.

Beep...crackle...

“I wish someone would find that damn alarm. It's driving us all nuts.”

“Yeah. Wasn't bad when it only went off here and there, but it's been every hour today.”

The noise got louder as they approached the small storage chamber they'd built for holding the dead. When they had put it in here, they'd stuffed all the cargo around it in hopes a morgue wouldn't be needed.

So much for that, Ben complained silently.

Eagles had been directing rookies down here since the storm. They'd made improvements, but it was still a mess and hard to walk through. It reminded Ben of digging through the mountain rubble after the earthquake. *And look, there are even corpses.* He shuddered.

Ben took a fast glance inside, scanning the three bodies, then shifted toward the exit with careful steps. The book sections were closest to the door and had received the most work. They were almost finished. Angela had ordered most of the books to be taken to the area where they were needed now that shelving and organization had been straightened out. Rookies were getting their workouts carting armloads or carts up the stairs to the elevators.

"Something moved over there." Whitney shined his light. "Behind that box."

"Dude, there are five hundred boxes in here."

"The book row, first stack."

The men approached the pillars of boxed books with lights in one hand and the other on their guns.

A cat lunged out, grabbing Ben's ankle.

"Oh, my god!"

She hissed, swiping at his other leg.

Ben retreated as the male cat came from the shadows. "Are they sick?"

"No." Whitney stomped his foot. "Just being assholes."

The cats took off, yipping at each other as if they were laughing.

“That did not happen.” Ben kept shining his light. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you think Tonya tells them to do that stuff?”

Ben waited for Whitney to reach the landing, then shut and locked the door. “If so, we need to make a deal and give her a list of targets.”

“Where do you think they went?”

“Anywhere but the top deck. Kenn said they won’t go there because of all the water. It freaks them out.”

“But they’ll play pranks near dead bodies. Some sense of humor.”

The guards went to the post at the next intersection and began handing over the reports they’d gathered. After this, they were both off duty.

“Should we go celebrate with Neil and the teams?”

Whitney glanced at his watch. “Boss said to give them alone time to help him regain his memory. I say we make sure the cabin’s ready and then drag him off. Sam will follow.”

Ben laughed, nodding. “Neil’s a lucky man there. Pregnant with twins and she still gave a full-throated defense.”

“I heard she slapped the boss.”

“Wow. What did Angela say?”

“Insisted she do it again. Then she healed it and walked away.”

“Damn. Angela’s punishing herself.”

“I think so too.” Ben tapped on the door of a cabin at the end of that hall while one of the sentries wrote it down.

“Come in.”

Samantha’s voice was a surprise.

“Sorry, we didn’t think you’d be here yet.”

“I snuck off a few minutes ago.” Samantha was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the TV. It was off. “I needed a few minutes of quiet.”

The men started to panic.

“Are you okay?”

“I can call a medic.”

“No, thank you.” Samantha slowly shifted to view them. Her eyes were dazed. “Can I ask you all something?”

“Of course.” Ben shut the door, sensing the question wasn’t one she wanted the guards to hear. Their post wasn’t far away.

“Did he do it?”

Both men frowned. It was a shock after her defense.

“I don’t think so.”

“Your theory made sense to me.”

She nodded, still not sounding right. “Yes, it made good sense. We all want to believe it.”

Whitney sensed them edging into dangerous territory. He suddenly felt like he shouldn’t be here. “Neil was found not guilty. That’s all I need. Goodnight.” He departed, not slamming the door.

Sam sighed. “He’s mad.”

“Not at you.” Ben wasn’t as willing to let it go, but he understood everyone else was. “If you want someone to keep digging into it, you can ask that as Jeremy’s widow—even against Neil.”

“I don’t want that.”

“But...”

Samantha swallowed her answer, coming out of the daze. “But nothing. Whitney’s right. He’s not guilty and we’ll help him regain his memory. It’ll be okay.”

“We’re all going to help. The descendants we’ve talked to say strong emotions do it. We’re planning to discuss you...and Becky.”

“Same here. Nothing is off limits, not even Jeremy.”

Ben’s voice lowered. “And then we’ll all know.”

Samantha’s voice was a bare whisper. “...unless we don’t try as hard as we need to.”

“So he won’t be arrested again if he did it?”

She nodded at Ben.

“I’d say yes, but we won’t need to do that. I happen to know the new constitution we’re voting on has a double jeopardy clause. Once that’s in place, he can’t be charged again, even if he admits it.” Ben went to the door, hoping he’d been able to lend some comfort. “We’re headed to get him now. Should have him down here to you in a few minutes.”

“That’s good.” Samantha rotated back to the dark TV. “I’ll be ready for him.”

Ben shut the door and tried to send his mind to other places so he would be distracted before he hit the top decks and ran into anyone who could read his mind. Even if Neil regained his memory, they had to make him act as if he hadn't until that document was in place. *Otherwise, he'll hang. They didn't call me to the witness box or verify my statement. Next time, they will. They'll find out I wasn't knocked out with Ozzie. I came by for a check in and thought Seth and Becky were escaping. I was letting them go. When Neil came out of that the cell, I kept pretending.*

Ben hurried to catch up to his team, refusing to think about it again.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Close

1

“I hope they have a good night.” Tommy was thrilled with the verdict. They had just dropped Neil off to Samantha and jogged (raced) back up the stairs to the next level.

“It sucks they have to have guards.” Whitney thought about the conversation waiting for him and grimaced. He and Vicky hadn’t spoken yet about her theft and plans to leave. She was in the brig, serving her sentence. He wasn’t sure if he was going to visit her or not.

Daryl was also considering what waited for him, but he was thrilled. Brittani was moving into his cabin right now. “At least we know they’ll be alive come morning.”

Tommy nodded. “Exactly.”

“Out of all our suspects, did we come up with anyone else who could have done it?” Wade didn’t like the idea of a murderer roaming free. He didn’t believe Neil had done it, and neither had Becky.

Greg shook his head. Kyle’s team had also escorted Neil to Samantha, showing solidarity. “No.”

Silence fell again, all of them mentally vowing to accept that it had been Becky even though parts didn't add up.

“They’re having a good time.” Wade pointed.

The team snickered as they spotted Kyle. He was against the elevator doors, being assaulted by Jennifer while they waited for it to open. They heard Jennifer giggle, like she knew they were witnessing her attack.

The teams kept walking, happy with the answer as to where Kyle had been while they brought Neil down. Spending time with his new bride now that the danger was over was a good excuse.

The teams went to the brig without speaking about it, wanting to personally check on the prisoners. Stanley and Vicky had both received ten days in the brig for theft. Ramer had been given a month to force a dry out and he'd been removed from the Eagles. Blake had been one of the people banished from the ship. Randal's body had been tossed overboard. James was out of the Eagles. Everyone from the trials and exposures had been given their sentences, though most of those were removal from teams and shunning from lack of trust. Theo was a good example. His team had accepted him back, and he couldn't be removed because he was needed, but he would be on the outside for a while and with more than just Debra.

“Everyone ready to pretend to enjoy partying with the camp?” Tommy asked as they finished checking the cells and signing the logbook of the

surprised rookies down here. They hadn't expected to see so many Special Forces men together doing rounds.

Wade frowned. "I don't mind the camp. I just don't feel like celebrating anymore."

"Same." Ben scratched at his arm. He had a rash coming in. "How about we check out the new arrival?"

Whitney scowled. "You mean the angel the camp doesn't know is here yet?"

"They know he's here, just not who he is."

"Yeah, let's do that." Daryl had wanted to go with the team to the Dizzyland meeting. He had questions, but he mostly just wanted to see them with his own eyes. "Do angels drink? We can take a bottle and pry some information loose."

Tommy shrugged. "Let's find out."

Wade led the way. "Adrian did a good job of disguising him."

Tommy frowned. "Why do you believe it was Adrian and not Marc?"

"Because this is the sneaky shit that Adrian's good at. Marc wouldn't even have considered it."

Tommy was forced to admit that was true. If something sneaky or sleazy happened, it made sense to suspect Adrian first.

"I noticed something about the men at that meeting, when Angela replayed it the second time for the camp. When we finish this interview, I'll tell you about it. I need to confirm the suspicion first."

No one protested Morgan withholding information. All the senior men preferred to have full data before sharing plans.

There were already several guards outside the room where Kronus was quarantined. As they approached those sentries, Kenn and Tonya came from the nearest stairwell. Like Morgan, she had her medical bag along, though Morgan's was strapped to his toolbelt and hers was in her hand.

Kenn wasn't surprised to discover the Special Forces teams here. He'd also recognized their new guest and hated the idea of Tonya being around him at all. Kronus was a powerful angel according to Angela's recollection and that made him dangerous, even for something as simple as a blood test.

Morgan concurred. He pointed at Tonya. "You wait out here for the vials."

Tonya shrugged and found a wall to hold up, back hurting a little. She didn't mind not being the one to take the blood. She just hadn't wanted to bother anyone when it was time for the quarantined man to be tested. She didn't know who he was, but apparently the Eagles did.

Kenn pulled a chair from around the corner for her to sit in as everyone else entered the room.

Tonya gave Kenn the care package she'd gathered, and he too went inside, shutting the door.

Kronus glanced up from his book, big smile spreading. It faded as he saw how many men were here. "Is everything okay?"

“You tell us.” Kenn put the care package on the table and slid it down. “Some things you might need. I see you’ve gotten your shower and a meal. Have you slept?”

Kronus grimaced. “No, I’ve had enough of that, thanks.”

Daryl thought Kronus looked healthier than he had earlier and stored it as something to watch later. Taking energy was forbidden without permission.

“Good.” Kenn took the chair next to him as the Special Forces men took chairs and wall spots by the entrance. “We’d like to start with the basics: who, what, when, where, why, and how.”

Everyone waited expectantly for the reply.

Kronus glanced between them. “I don’t understand.”

Kenn drew his attention back. He would ask the questions while the teams observed for lies and details. “This is a debriefing.”

“I thought Angela would do this with me.”

“So do a lot of men, but that isn’t going to happen. You tell us, we tell her. When she’s ready, she’ll come to you.”

The angel scowled. “My name is Kronus. I’ve come to warn her. She isn’t in danger from me.”

“Keep going.”

“I told this to the girl killer.”

“Did Jennifer give you a story for the camp?”

“No.” Kronus looked at Tommy. “When can I speak to your boss?”

Tommy didn’t answer.

Kenn did. “You’ll be here for a while.”

“What happens after I’m cleared?”

“That’s up to the boss. You weren’t exactly invited.”

Kronus realized they knew who he was. He smiled. “We’ve observed you for months and sometimes years. You’re all amazing.”

“Yeah, wish we could say the same.” Kenn gestured. “Start from the beginning. Give us everything you told Jennifer and then everything you held back.”

“Why do you assume I didn’t tell her everything?”

Kenn pointed with his pen. “Because you’re twitching like an addict. Why do you want to see Angela? To kill her?”

“I would never do that! The Messenger is the danger.” Kronus realized he’d said too much, but it was too late to stop now. “The Messenger’s final bet will kill her and everything she loves. That’s why we rebelled and stopped weighing souls. Death is coming for her, for all of you.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t observe the bet. I heard about it.”

“What is the Messenger’s real name?” Morgan wanted to verify his awful suspicion.

“Chaos.”

Morgan went to the door. “I knew it.” He left the room.

Half the teams followed.

“What’s up?” Tommy knew it was bad.

“The names are the same, the personalities are the same.” Morgan opened his notebook and showed it to them. “This is who they were. It’s why they’re in a prison. Angela was right about that.”

The team scanned the mythological family tree that Morgan had drawn and filled in.

Morgan pointed. “This is Chaos, at the top. Down here, you have Kronus, who ate his kids to keep them from challenging him for the throne. They’re evil—all of them, but they’re also immortal so they couldn’t be killed.”

“I know that legend!” Tommy indicated a section of the family tree. “His wife got tired of him eating their kids and sent the sixth baby away.”

“Zeus. He returned and defeated Kronus.”

“What happened to Kronus after that?”

Morgan stared at the door. “He slunk away and was never heard from again.”

The team let their thoughts run wild for a minute, all of them now a lot more concerned with their new arrival than they already had been.

“It’s a myth.” Ben snorted. “Crap we were told to explain what couldn’t be explained. The existence of everything didn’t come from Chaos screwing Gaia.”

“Can you prove that? Because if you can, I need to hear it so I can sleep tonight.” Greg was rattled and he didn’t get rattled very often.

“No, but you can’t believe...” Ben sighed, unable to act like it didn’t bother him. “Fine, we

don't know if it's true or not, but we're not saying the man behind that door is him, right?"

No one spoke.

Ben wanted to keep arguing, but the evidence was adding up. *Just like with Neil's trial*, he realized. *And we know that was a scam, don't we?* "Fine. We'll check him out; we'll check out the possibility that's him."

"If he ate his own children, *he* might be the coming danger to our kids." Daryl hadn't wanted to say that, but they would all watch for it now that he'd planted the seed.

"Should we...remove him?" Tommy wasn't sure

Whitney gave a weak smile. "We can discuss that with Neil."

No one laughed.

2

"Have you seen Kendle?"

Donald pointed down the hall, smirking.

Adrian went that way, hoping Kendle wasn't in trouble. He swept the rooms he passed, smelling bleach. The cabins appeared clean. She was doing a good job.

Adrian entered the last suite. "Hey, Kendle..." Adrian paused at the sight of Kyle and Jennifer on the bed. Fully clothed, enough of it was open to allow access. Neither of them glanced up.

"Oh, come on! You guys have a room."

Kendle wheeled her cart inside. “You looking for me?”

Kyle and Jennifer ignored them both, bucking and straining as orgasms neared.

Kendle rolled her eyes. “Talk in the hall? I can’t take much of that.”

Adrian followed her.

“What’s up?”

Adrian showed her the conversation with Marc, staying back in case she got mad and attacked. *Gotta have room to cover the balls.*

Kendle read the memory, angry, horrified, and hopeful. “He thinks he can have four months of my life at his beck and call?”

Adrian grinned, liking the spark in her tone. She was recovering. “Yes. But here’s the kicker. This is what he told me an hour ago.”

Kendle sucked in air, heart pounding at the replay. “He’s serious.”

“I think so too. So does Angela or she wouldn’t be listening to this conversation.” Adrian frowned mentally at Angela. *He’s right. You’ll get what you want. Why shouldn’t he?*

Angela vanished.

“Well?”

Kendle let out the breath, heart calming. “When that time comes, *if* it comes, he has to get on his knees and beg me.”

Hard laughter echoed in Kendle’s mind. Marc had been listening too. *Remember you said that.*

3

“I wish we had some privacy.” Samantha stretched out on the bed, groaning. “I want to be held.”

Neil locked the door. “They’ll go to sleep on duty.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m going to encourage it.”

“Cool. When?”

“In about ten seconds.” Neil waited for her to ask the next logical question. It was a trigger to the truth.

Samantha eased onto her side so she could look at him, confused. “How?”

He lifted his hand. “Like this.” Power shot from his fingers, slamming through the door and into the guards. Both bodies dropped into sleep.

Neil lowered his hand, watching her to get the full reaction.

Samantha stared, mind putting it together. “You unlocked your gifts. That’s a sleep spell.”

“Sammi.”

She responded to the tone. Then she froze as she realized what it meant. “You have your memory back.”

Neil shook his head, not moving any other part of his body. “I never lost it.”

He watched her emotions come and go, the horror, the anger, and then what he’d been counting

on-relief. “I love you. I need to know how you feel about me now. What does this change?”

Samantha glanced over at Amy’s small bed in the corner. The little girl liked to nap when she visited. She said it made her feel safe. “I expected you to ask Angela for an adoption ruling.”

“I know.”

How do I feel? Do I feel safer or in danger?

Neil let her make the choice without trying to sway her. He’d known it might end up getting him killed if he’d judged things wrong.

Samantha’s fingers clenched against the warm sheet. *I feel like no one can take her from me now. That feels safer.*

What about him? Are you scared? Repulsed? Honor-bound to turn him in?

Neil held his breath. *Here it comes...*

None of those. I love him more than I already did. He’ll do anything to protect his family and that’s me. Samantha made her choice. “It was a long day. Our guards fell asleep on duty. We won’t tell on them—ever.”

Neil still waited, needing something else.

Sam read it. His mind was full of thoughts now and there wasn’t a cloud anywhere in there. “I said no before because I didn’t feel like you trusted me completely.” She snorted bitterly. “I will now. I can.”

Neil dug in his pocket for the ring box they’d confiscated from him upon his arrest. He knelt at her

feet. “Will you marry me, Sammi? Will you love me forever?”

Samantha let the tears come. “It would be my honor.”

In the hall outside, Marc stared at the sleeping guards. He’d just come from dropping Cody off to the den mothers for his shower and snack. *I wish I hadn’t seen that.*

You didn’t. His demon knew what had to happen here. *Turn around and walk away.*

Marc wanted to. *But she’ll keep digging. Even if I don’t tell her, someone else will.*

Not right away. They have a plan.

Marc went to the elevator and pushed the button, torn and angry. *I’d have to play along when I know the truth. I’m not good at that.* Marc wasn’t sure what to do.

What if you were distracted?

Marc glanced up to find Adrian coming down the hall. He studied Adrian’s expression, snapping in the final piece. “You and Neil were alone with Becky. You two shared duty.”

“Please let it go.”

“Why would you do this?!”

“I didn’t.”

“You gave him the idea or told him how. I know you did!”

“No. We never discussed getting rid of Becky, not by mouth, mind, or hand code.”

“Did Angela?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then what are you hiding?”

Adrian sighed. “I thought about it once, when they first left. Neil was nearby, but I didn’t know he was an Invisible at that point.”

Marc braced. “What was it?”

Adrian sighed. “I wondered if she could be hooked on something and made to OD if she returned.”

“Wow. You are unbelievable.”

“I’m not proud of it, but that was a moment of crazy thoughts that I didn’t write down. And I believed I was alone in my mind. I was violated.”

Marc snorted harshly. “Payback.” He thought about the evidence and returned to the problem at hand. “If he was pretending all along, then he heard your overdose thought and a million others—from all of us.”

“Yes.”

“Do you think he could have?”

“Could have? Sure. Neil’s a smart guy. Did he?” Adrian shrugged as the elevator slid open. “Only he knows. We’d have to accuse him before she makes that document official, then get Jennifer to use the enforcer power on him to find out. He can clearly fake it well enough that none of us can get through his cloud walls.” Adrian met Marc’s eye. “Are you willing to do that? I saw him drop the guards too, but my testimony won’t help you at all.”

Marc entered the elevator. The doors shut, but he hesitated to push a button.

Adrian waited. If Marc took them upward, he was going to try to let it go. If he took them to the morgue, he was investigating further.

“Is he dangerous? To the camp, to Samantha?”

“No.”

“You’d trust him alone with Angela?”

Adrian patted his notebook. “I’m going to recommend it so the camp will stop staring at him like he’s a psychotic killer.”

“But he is.”

Adrian grunted. “We all are. It’s how we’ve survived. Neil eliminated the only obstacle to his happiness, to his future. In a few months, no one will mention it anymore. In a year, it’ll only come up at gatherings when people are drunk. By the time we go home, the camp will have forgotten it completely.”

Marc shuddered, fighting both sides of his nature.

Adrian shut his eyes as Marc’s hand went out. He didn’t want to know until the doors opened. For this short ride, he wanted to pretend this was a normal, calm evening coming to a close. *Neil fooled me in every way. He’s the one I should have used in place of Kenn.*

The elevator rose, sending chills through their stomachs.

Adrian considered a dozen things to say and chose silence instead. Marc didn’t need explanations or a shoulder to whine on. He knew the stakes as well as anyone.

The door opened, revealing the living quarter deck.

Marc stepped out and headed toward the leadership cabins. “You coming?”

Adrian pushed the button. “No. Have a nice night.”

Marc kept walking. This was Adrian’s reward for him making the choice the former leader thought he should, but Marc didn’t need it. All of them talked big, but Adrian was the only one who would ever go through with it. Even there, Marc doubted he would have stayed for the entire show. Watching someone else love the woman you wanted more than your own life wasn’t a turn-on. It was torture.

And that’s why she agreed, Marc realized. She knows it will hurt him and I’d feel superior for being the one who gets to touch her. Evil. Cruel. I love her. Marc went to their cabin, nodding at Ivan. “I see the bruises are almost gone.”

Ivan rolled his eyes, not rising to the bait. “She’s been in there about ten minutes, but I don’t hear water going. I think she fell asleep.”

“Good. She needs it.” Marc decided he was no longer in a position to hate Ivan for loving someone he shouldn’t. They were all adjusting to that feeling. “We’ll do rounds together tomorrow. If you have questions, I’ll try to answer them. But I’m in charge of her security now.”

“You got it.”

“I’m also going to let you in...a little. We’ll see how it goes from there. Pick a memory.”

Ivan started with the bottom item on that secret list. “Your time in the service.”

Marc chuckled. “That’s not just one memory.”

“We could have a beer some night and get started on it...”

“I’ll let you know.”

Ivan let him into the cabin and wrote it in the logbook. He liked the idea of learning from Marc, but as long as he got to stay close to the boss, the jobs didn’t really matter and neither did the people.

Marc saw Angela asleep in the bed, surrounded by papers, books, folders. He stacked them all on the desk, then sat in the chair to remove his boots. He noted the travel mug of hot chocolate waiting for him with a small smile. He hadn’t been aware of her slipping him protein cocktails, but Adrian was right. *I need bigger shirts now. That’s cool, I think.*

Angela woke, stretching. She rolled over so she could see him. “You look tired.”

Marc grunted as he pulled off a boot. “I feel old.” He went to work on the other one.

“Secrets will do that.” Angela extended her arms. “Come unburden your soul. I left the leader outside tonight.”

Marc crawled up the bed and joined her. “Ask me again, a while from now.”

Angela knew the answer from his lack of one. “I decided not to pursue it, no matter what you found. That makes me a bad person and a bad leader.”

Marc kissed her cheek, sharing her shame. “It makes you human, Angie. I just made the same choice not two minutes ago.”

“That bothers me too. We needed you a little dirty, not swimming in muck.”

“But you do need me?”

Angela hugged him tight, heart breaking. “More than you’ll ever know.”

“I’ll make you happy.”

“You already do.” She smirked. “Got skin?”

Marc thought about it, then laughed. “Yeah, baby, and it’s all yours. Just let me get a shower first.”

Angela rolled them over and straddled his hips. “I want you like this...dirty.”

Marc hardened, like he always did when she said she wanted him, but his brain didn’t fade out as fast. “Because I made that choice and because you made *that* choice. We’re enjoying...evil.”

Angela leaned down to kiss him, hips grinding.

Marc put his big hand between her legs, stroking her with his thumb through the flimsy night shorts. He thrust upward, gasps and grunts filling the air.

Angela shuddered, moaning loudly as she exploded against his fingers.

Marc picked her up and dropped her onto the bed. He jerked his belt open and shoved his pants down, watching her skin twitch, listening to her moans. He slid between her legs, starting to mutter the words to the spell.

Not this time.

Marc shoved into her, whispering her name instead.

Angela held his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his waist to allow him access. He rocked her up on the bed, moaning and shivering. His grip tightened, breath hot on her neck... He stiffened, crying out.

Angela held him while he rode the waves, not letting anything else enter her mind but the sound and feel of him.

Marc strained, rocking harder. *I'm sorry!*

So am I. Angela held him while he calmed and then kept holding him as he cried a little on her shoulder.

In the cabin next door, Adrian pulled out of Angela's mind and gazed at the ceiling. He tried to hold it in, but he couldn't stop the tears that leaked from the corner of his eyes either. Marc was right. It was torture.

I won't do it again. Marc's on his own. If she wants a baby through magic, he can do it, or she can bend over in front of me, but I'm never doing that again.

Angela finally reacted. She smiled.

Adrian believed his evolution had been great enough to allow him mental privacy, but he should have known by now that fate was keeping her a step ahead of everyone else. She had allowed him to

believe it, for this moment. *I made Adrian cry. That's awesome!*

Her smiled widened as Marc shifted them and she drifted off to sleep.

4

Buried in a box of gear in the cargo area, the Geiger counter continued to emit steady warnings as it detected high levels of radiation.

No one responded.

The End of Book 11

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

The two guards stepped out into the hall for an update with two Eagles who'd come by on rounds.

Everyone in the infirmary opened their eyes or sat up. The medics here didn't realize they were being played.

"Let us out, Alpha."

"Yes, we want to play!"

Kimmie shook her head, glaring at the kids sitting up in their cots. "We're not going to be like that anymore. I told you, we have to change, or we won't survive." Kimmie knew it wouldn't be long before the guards figured it out. The alpha had a lot going on right now, but it was obvious she was strong enough to control all decks at the same time. Kimmie wasn't taking a chance on being banished. She wanted to be here. "Go to sleep, for real. Tomorrow, we'll get out of this room together when they take us somewhere to eat. They already promised."

"I think you should take over the ship."

Gasps came, heads turned.

Becky grinned at the little girl. "You're like her, right? An alpha?"

Kimmie nodded. "I am, but I'll never do that. You should go back to sleep. I don't want to hurt you."

Becky gave a harsh sob. “You can’t possibly hurt me, kid. I’m already dead.”

“Leave the children alone and play with someone your own age.” Kendle sat up as far as her restraints would allow. “You got yourself into this mess. Don’t corrupt them just to get yourself out of it.”

Kimmie could feel the kids rooting for the redhead to keep arguing for it so they could at least watch a fight even if they couldn’t participate. To preempt that, she muttered a sleep spell that dropped the redhead in her tracks.

Kimmie stood up and turned around, hands on her hips. “Who else wants some?”

Very few of the kids considered it. No one stepped up to challenge her.

“Go to sleep. That’s an *order*.”

The kids got back in bed and lay down. Some of them even closed their eyes, but it was obvious that it wasn’t going to happen without a little help.

Kimmie looked at Kendle.

Kendle nodded. “I would.”

Kimmie didn’t wait for another opinion. She blasted a powerful sleep spell through the entire bottom level of the ship, also getting the two guards who were on their way back in the door.

Kendle tried to resist, but she hadn’t gotten her shield up in time. “Leave a note so they know what...”

Kimmie sighed as all the bodies sagged. “That’s not who I was aiming for. I think my winker is out of whack.”

Deleted Scene #2

Explicit

“Are you sure about this? Someone might come in.”

Morgan and Shawn secured the room while Pam went to the center hot tub.

“The camp is sleeping. The guards are either on duty or downtime in the training room. We should have an hour until someone comes by.”

Both men hurried back to the main chamber, sharing grins. Five hot tubs, each with a divider, a bench and small shelf, lined one wall. The other side held mini showers and a juice bar. Glass windows sent the lust to another level. They could watch themselves making love while sailing the ocean. It was a huge turn-on.

Shawn froze as Pam began to disrobe. His last physical moment had been with Tara. He hoped this one went better.

Morgan also paused, body throbbing. He hadn't loved a woman since before the quake in the mountain, and that had only been a camp service. While he'd enjoyed it, it hadn't been for his enjoyment.

Pam's eyes darkened. “Before the war for me.”

Both men hardened fully.

She'll be tight as fuck after a year.

Morgan nodded at Shawn's thought. He began removing his boots, glad he'd already untied them because he couldn't bend down right now. He took off his shirt but hesitated when he got to his pants.

Pam slid her robe off, blushing. She'd dreamed of a moment like this. She'd never thought she would have the courage to do it.

"Me either. I've been shy my entire life."

Shawn chuckled at them, stripping. "I went to a nudist colony for a year. Love it."

"You've done this before?" Morgan wasn't sure exactly how it worked. "Details would be good."

Shawn stepped into the filling tub and eased onto the side bench. "It depends on the woman. Some don't like double stuffing. Some don't want rear entry." He smirked at her reddening face. "Tell us what you like, Pam. We'll go from there."

Pam eased into the tub and took the center seat, nipples hard under their hot gazes. "I don't know. I need to try it to make that choice."

Morgan's resistance was worn down by lust. He stripped and joined them in the tub, taking the left.

Pam leaned back, shutting her eyes. "This feels nice." She held a hand out to both men. "Come closer."

Shawn went smoothly, sliding his hand against her hip as he slid a hand to the breast on his side.

Pam moaned. "Very nice."

Morgan felt her hand run over his thigh and groaned as she began to stroke him. Morgan wasn't

sure how long he could last. He'd never been this hot.

Morgan sucked in air when she straddled him, neatly flipping her hips to capture his dick between her legs.

Pam slid onto him, nails digging into his shoulders.

Morgan thrust deep into her willing body, hands going to her hips. He pulled her down, rocking in hard, quick bumps.

Pam looked at Shawn. "Let's see if I like that rear entry."

Shawn shook his head, hand working his own flesh. "You won't, not like this. I like it a lot, but only if the woman is into it. We'll ease up to that."

Morgan lifted her off his lap, gasping. "I need a minute!"

Pam curled onto Shawn's lap, chuckling. "Kiss me?"

Shawn groaned as she slid her hot body over his, taking his thrust with a shudder. Instead of frantic pounding, he eased in and out, and watched her face to discover what she liked.

Pam's body tightened, nipples hardening.

Morgan slid a hand between her legs. They'd agreed making sure she enjoyed herself was a top priority. They wanted to be able to do this again.

Morgan sucked a hard nipple as he rubbed her. Listening to Shawn's grunts and moans was also a turn-on.

Pam shivered as Morgan nibbled. "Spank me."

Morgan immediately smacked her wet cheek.

Shawn sucked in air, thrusting upward. He lifted her off. “Need a minute!”

Morgan slid her back onto his lap, tugging her down for a hot kiss. His hands pushed against her slick flesh, bringing groans and hisses of pleasure.

Shawn smacked her cheek, timing it to Morgan’s strokes. As Pam began to climax, he slid behind her and pushed into her while Morgan was still enjoying her muscle clenches.

Pam groaned, body wracked with shudders.

Morgan lost control at the feel of both of them being inside her. He arched, climaxing hard.

Shawn rocked twice, pushing a little deeper, then he too came, moaning loudly. He slid out of her and dropped into his seat, breath coming in harsh rasps.

Pam let Morgan pull her into his arms, where she rested her head against his chest. Both their hearts were pounding like drums. “Okay... I like that one.”

The males laughed, bodies still spasming.

Behind them, the door opened.

Ivan scanned them and the rest of the room, flushing when he caught the smells and the mood. He left without speaking, wondering if he could get Jayda into the hot tub. The trio with silly smiles and wild hair appeared to be enjoying themselves.

Pam and Morgan laughed at Ivan’s thought.

Shawn refused to ask what it was, not wanting to break the great mood with conversation. He

didn't believe it was about him. He wasn't feeling threatened by anything right now. All he wanted was a smoke and maybe a nap.

Pam let Morgan hold her, body clenching happily. She dozed, silently thanking Angela for her new life. Under Adrian's leadership, women would have still been Eagles, but under Angela, women would be anything they wanted and live the lives that pleased them. Female leadership had sped up their independence.

"You think?" When she didn't answer, Morgan realized she'd fallen asleep and shut his eyes too. He didn't need an answer. It was evident. There hadn't been moments like this under Adrian. The women had either been potential Eagles, potential wives, or relief sources. Now, they could be all three of those without being sneered at or overlooked for important positions. They also weren't getting special treatment. It was perfect as long as those females settled for equal. If they ever tried to take control, Safe Haven would be torn apart.

Deleted Scene #3

Samantha looked at Doug. “Do you swear the testimony you are about to give is the full truth?”

“I do.” Doug took the witness stand, flushed from being the center of attention.

“Doug, do you believe Neil committed this crime?”

Doug shook his massive head. “No, I do not.”

“What makes you think he’s innocent?”

“Neil wouldn’t do that. He’s not a bad person. And Becky was deranged.”

“Did you witness her odd behavior?”

“Yes. She was having issues before we came back to Safe Haven.”

“Please elaborate on what those issues were.”

“She was always getting Seth to do crazy things. We never would have infiltrated that camp and rescued the kids if not for her.”

“Did anything happen with Becky once you arrived here, beyond her trying to kill Safe Haven’s leader?”

Doug nodded. “I went down to visit her, after she attacked Angela. She had just been moved to the brig.”

Samantha liked Doug. She didn’t enjoy his pain, but she had to push. “What did you and Becky talk about?”

“She asked me to help her kill Angela. She knew I could get close to the boss.”

Angela cleared her throat. “I’d like it noted here that Doug reported that to the guards and then to me personally.”

The camp relaxed about Doug. They returned to watching Samantha to see where her line of questioning would take them next.

“Was Becky on medication?”

“Yes. I don’t know what it was, but all the medics were giving it to her on their shifts.”

“Did the medicine seemed to help?”

Doug let out a deep rumble. “No. The only thing she talked about was hurting Adrian and Angela. She asked me who it would hurt them the most to lose.”

“Thank you. I’m done with my rebuttal.”
Samantha sat down.

Angela stood. This wasn’t going to take long. “Where was Seth while you were having this conversation?”

“He was right there, telling her to be quiet or people would hear.”

“In your opinion, was Seth involved in this murder-suicide plot or did she force him to do it?”

“I’ve asked myself the same thing since we found the bodies. I just don’t know. He wanted to get her off the ship, and I’m sure he was worried about being out there alone with her pregnant. If there was a way for them to stay, I think Seth would have taken it.”

“How much time did Seth spend with his daughter?”

Doug frowned. “A lot, until we got here. Then Becky flipped out and I don’t think he felt like he could leave her alone.”

“She was locked in a cell, being guarded by people who would never hurt her without a trial. Why couldn’t he leave her alone?”

Doug was forced to admit the truth. “Because he knew she was still dangerous, and he was covering for her.”

“I have no further questions. You may step down.” Angela hated to do it, but Seth’s image couldn’t be the shining hero who had been taken advantage of by a scheming female. She wasn’t going to allow history to be rewritten in that way. Seth had picked Becky over Safe Haven. It had happened a long time ago and that was the truth.

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Teams/Crew Lists

Special Forces Team #1

Kyle, Daryl, Morgan, Ben, Whitney

Special Forces Team #2

Neil, Jennifer, Greg, Wade, Tommy

(Theo)-**Engineering**: Theo, Ozzie, Candy, Trinity, Jonny, Rose

(Harry)-**Boat Crew**: Gus, Harry, Nathan, Quinn, Brian, Ed, Faith, Zoey, Claire

Personal Security Teams

(Ray)-Level 4 -Michael, Ray, **Randal**, Doug, Brittani, Donald-**over the Captain**

(Ivan)-Level 2 -**alpha security**-Ivan, Peter, James, Serio, Freddy, Travis,

(Diana)-**Fishing**: Pam, Cathy, Katie, Lydia, Panaji, Elijah, Sabrina, Erika, **Blake**

(Ian)-**Cleaning**: Kendle, Ian, Charlie, Adrian, Mike, Timmy

(Brittani)-**Meal crew**: Brittani, Stanley, Jayda, Drew, Corey, Hailey, Tracy

(Samantha)-**Garden crew**: Samantha, Wessley, Martin, Madison, Natalie, Kayla, Vicky

(Monica)-**Kids/Education crew**: Jeff, Zack, Shawn, Monica, Marc, Conner, Debra

(Emma)-**Homesteaders**: Emma, Macy, Ramer, Lou

(Morgan)-**Health/Medical**: Morgan, Tonya, Daryl, Neil, Harry, Courtney

(Adrian)-**Strategic planning**: Adrian, Marc, Angela, Jennifer, Kyle, Kenn, Neil, Gus

(Ralph)-**Mining crew**: Ralph Miller family, Debra, Kenn, Molly, Allison,

Injured Eagles on leave to heal

Zack, Ramer, Donald, Molly

*Team leaders will pick their XO after the coming Eagle tryouts.

*Everyone is back to level 1, except Special Forces.

*A few people have double duty until replacements are trained.

Book 12



Avoiding Fate

1

“**T**his is Ciemus, calling Safe Haven. Come in Safe Haven!”

Everyone in the mayor’s office waited for a reply, but after a full week, none of the trio expected it.

“Come in Safe Haven, this is Ciemus.”

“They’re probably out of range.” Brandon refused to believe the worst so soon without proof that something bad had happened.

“I agree with Brandon.” Standing near the door, Donna didn’t look at either man in her office. “It’s too soon to know anything.”

“Come in Safe Haven!” William slammed his hand on the desk, rattling the radio. “Answer me!”

Brandon wasn’t sure what he could say to make William feel better. He was worried too, but not to the same extent.

Donna frowned at her angry mate. “Did you see something?”

William’s silence was an answer. He shifted to the window to stare at their peaceful town and high walls. The sounds of a normal day echoed outside, but in here, there was no tepid breeze or happy chatting. The musty office stank of fish rot and rage.

Donna shook her head at Brandon when he would have gone over to offer William comfort. It was a bad idea to get close to a byzan when they were upset. William’s instability had grown since Safe Haven, *since Angela*, left America. Donna frowned. “William, what did you see?”

“A funeral service. A lot of people were on the deck.” William turned back to the radio. “They need help.”

Donna and Brandon exchanged a short look, careful not to let it linger. They were spending time together on defensive and offense improvements for the town. They didn’t want William to imagine it was more than that.

“We don’t have a way to reach them. We can’t abandon our town.” Donna wasn’t leaving her

home, but she suspected that time was coming soon for William. Her heart continued to break.

“We should have gone with them. They needed us and we refused to go!”

Donna shrugged at William’s accusation. “We have a life here. We chose to make it work. We didn’t abandon our country.”

William growled.

The sound echoed through the office and out into the hall, where people paused to listen.

William tried to control his rage, but it was hard. It wasn’t an infection from the rage children, and it wasn’t his mental cracks, though he was certain Donna and Brandon thought it was a combination of both. His connection to Angela had severed overnight. Even though he couldn’t contact her on the radio, he should still be able to reach her mentally.

“Maybe she blocked you.” Brandon ignored Donna’s quick gesture to leave it alone. “You were a little pushy, you know?”

William snorted. “This isn’t about that. She’s in trouble. They all are.”

“Safe Haven chose to leave. They’re on their own.” Donna waited for another growl, braced to run. When William had returned from escorting Safe Haven to the shore, a new man had come home in his place—one she didn’t like.

William keyed the radio again. “Come in Safe Haven! Answer your damn radio!”

Donna edged closer to the door, able to feel his rage rising.

Brandon was also reading how upset William was, but he chose to keep going. “Are you sure it wasn’t just a nightmare? Even though we’re descendants, we do have dreams that don’t mean anything.”

William sagged in the chair. “I can’t feel her anymore.”

Donna scowled, hand coming to her hip. “You have to let her go. You have a life here!”

William shoved the radio off the desk, shattering it against the cabinet.

Donna slid into the corridor so she had a clear path to run.

Brandon moved in front of William, hoping they were both wrong about the violence in his heart. William’s wrinkled, stained clothing and unwashed hair were just a couple of the signs they’d been watching. He and Donna were clean and neat, as were the rest of the townspeople. William was the outsider now and it had happened fast.

William stared between them, rage twisting his handsome face. “Don’t you understand?! If Safe Haven dies, so do we!”

Donna waved at their town. “We’ve survived on our own. We didn’t have Safe Haven’s help before; we don’t need it now. We’ll be fine right here.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know anything because you refuse to unlock your gifts

and help us search for a solution.” He pointed. “You’re a coward!”

Donna’s face iced over, eyes narrowing, lips tightening. “You want *her*. You don’t care about Safe Haven. You don’t care about this town, about me or about the future. You should have gone with them.”

“Yes! I should have!” William spun around and began punching the window.

Brandon didn’t want to interfere, but it wasn’t good for the townspeople to see their leader so upset. It also wasn’t safe. If the window shattered, people below could be hit by glass, as well as William being hurt by punching through it. Brandon placed a hand on William’s shoulder.

“Don’t!” Donna knew what was about to happen, but it was too late.

William punched Brandon.

Trained as an Eagle, Brandon automatically returned fire.

“Stop it!”

William dove into Brandon, ignoring Donna’s shout. The two men rolled across the desk and hit the floor, both swinging wild punches. Contents of Donna’s desk went flying as it collapsed beneath the weight of the brawling men. Her stash of cigarettes was crushed.

Donna’s frustration filled the room, making the men sweat, but it didn’t stop their fight. Nasty punches landed, sending grunts of pain and anger through the office.

“Stop it! Right now!”

Neither man listened.

Donna’s thumb started to slip off the lock she had put on her mental gifts. She struggled to keep the cage from opening.

William put extra heat into his hits, trying to make Brandon bleed. William didn’t know any other way to release his worry.

“I said stop!” Donna was angry and about to be humiliated by this display. Townspeople were coming toward the office now. In a few seconds, they would be able see the fight. *Damn you, William...* Donna let go the mental lock. She lifted her hand.

Power flew out in a gigantic wave that filled the room.

Both men were blasted backward, knocking them against the wall.

Brandon caught the edge of a nearby cabinet and managed to stay on his feet.

William collapsed to the floor at the unexpected blow from his mate. He stared up at her in shock. “For him?!”

Donna didn’t move when William rose and stomped toward her. She’d never been this mad. If he wanted a battle, he would get one.

William realized he’d gone too far, but he couldn’t help the jealous anger spewing in his mind. “You unlocked your gifts to spare him a beating. Not for me, but for him!”

Donna brought up a shield around herself. She'd watched him do it for years. "You scare me now. You've changed."

William kicked a drawer out of the way, making her flinch. "They told me Mitchels were trouble. I should have listened."

Brandon wiped blood from his lip, sorry he'd fought with William. Donna's office was trashed.

Donna turned and began walking down the corridor. "I did it for our people. If you can't see that, it's time you left—again."

Brandon stayed where he was, waiting for William's reaction. The man loved Donna, but Brandon doubted it was enough to keep William here now that she had told him to go.

William stared at the empty doorway for a few seconds, then straightened. He pulled his anger into a thick shield none of them could get through as he stormed from the office.

Brandon followed to make sure William wasn't going to hurt Donna or anyone else. He was sad things had gone this way, but since William returned, his anger was always in control. Donna was right. William needed to leave.

Security and townspeople retreated to let William stomp by. Like Donna and Brandon, they sensed something different about him and feared it.

William ignored Donna, who was standing outside her office, and strode toward the gate. He didn't speak to anyone.

Donna made a motion for the guards to let him out.

Worried townspeople stopped to stare at William's angry exit.

William hated it here now. These people were nothing like Safe Haven, nothing like Angela. They were all weak, especially his mate. She'd fallen for a Mitchel.

Brandon stopped next to Donna. "Do you want me to try to talk to him?"

Donna put a hand on his wrist to keep him from doing that. "Stay."

William glanced back in time to see the physical contact. His rage surged to a new level. He stalked through the gate and disappeared into the woods around the wall.

"I'm sorry it came to this."

Donna didn't answer Brandon. She waited for more trouble. Since Safe Haven reached their area, trouble was all Ciemus had experienced. *It's like their curse rubbed off.*

When nothing more came, Donna walked away. There was no affair between her and Brandon, but William had been accusing them of it with his sly glances. He was out of control. Unless he regained control of his mind, he was too dangerous to live here. Donna motioned the gate to be shut, holding in tears. "He's not coming back."

Brandon wanted to give her hope, but he couldn't. She was almost certainly right. "Heaven help anyone he runs into right now."

“Come in Safe Haven! Answer your damn radio!”

The anger coming through her radio caused Nancy to glance over. William was furious that Safe Haven still wasn't responding.

Nancy resealed the bag of powdered milk and stirred her cup, trying not to clink. She had returned to the apartments, but she regretted that decision now. Another storm had rolled in, preventing travel for her, but not for other people. This area had more activity than she was comfortable with, but she wasn't fully prepped for a winter journey yet.

“Safe Haven isn't coming back!”

“Safe Haven deserted us!”

“Has anyone seen the boat?”

“We need help! We're out of food.”

Nancy turned off the radio. The calls from desperate refugees were also more frequent. It was awful to hear, but there was no way she could help them. She was barely able to help herself.

Nancy drank the milk, grimacing at the taste. She hated powdered, but her body needed it. Once the milk was gone, she wiped out the cup with a towel and put it in the rack. While in the kitchen, she peered through all the windows.

“I didn't think I would feel this way.” She sighed at the sound of her voice rolling through the empty apartment. “But I'll get over it.”

Engines echoed, filling the tense silence.

Nancy went to the stairs. She didn't have lights on or appliances running, including the small generator. She'd been waiting for the weather to break. This morning, the ice on the awning had almost been gone. She'd turned everything off while packing. There was nothing here to draw attention from the small line of cars now moving by the apartment. She was the only one in this complex, but it was just a matter of time before...

The engines slowed, drawing Nancy's hand to the gun on her hip. Thanks to Safe Haven, she knew how to use it, but the noise would attract other predators. Nancy moved upstairs to be near her small stash of supplies. All her weapons, except the two guns she was wearing, were stashed there.

Nancy paused at the upper hall window. She hadn't boarded the glass up here. The first-floor windows were hidden behind shutters covered in dead vines. It was so pathetic it implied there was nothing to loot or scavenge in these apartments. That was an illusion, of course. This complex still held treasures, like toilet paper on bathroom holders and loose aspirin in forgotten purses.

She was dismayed to see the small convoy stop just three apartments down from hers. The men and women in the group didn't appear to be a threat, but it was impossible to tell for sure. The apocalypse had replaced civility with desperation. Even the nicest people from before the war had become bloodthirsty. She and her child would survive alone

until Safe Haven's return. If they never came back, that was fine too.

Until the birth.

The voice in her mind was ruthless.

Nancy forced herself to be reasonable. The strangers didn't appear to be trouble. The women were healthy, unbruised, unbound. The men were smiling, chatting, helping kids from the vehicles. She might trade with them, but only after a few days to determine possible outcomes. She knew better than to rely on first impressions, but that voice was right. She would need help with the birth.

Nancy stayed to the side of the window, not letting her breath move the dusty curtain. She had observed Eagle training for a long time. She'd known for a while that she didn't want to go with Safe Haven, that she would be alone at some point. Learning those survival techniques would keep her and her child alive while almost everyone else in this country was dying. Nancy was confident in her abilities, but she also recognized the pitfalls of being by herself.

Nancy rubbed her flat belly through the blue jean jumper and long sleeve plaid shirt, where the amazing beginnings of life were taking place. She hadn't had contact with the child yet, but she could feel it growing and it was going to be powerful.

The small convoy of twenty people returned to their idling vehicles, leaving crunchy tracks in the icy slush. The three-inch layer of packed snow under it all wasn't going to melt yet. The reddening

cheeks of the strangers implied the temperature was still rough despite the top layer of sun-thawed slush. The wind was the worst of it. Her fast trip outside to do her business this morning had brought tears and stolen her breath. It was more than cold out there.

Nancy had been taking readings twice a day for the last two weeks. Winter was just getting started. She wasn't looking forward to huddling in a closet or shed as each storm blew through, but that was exactly what she planned to do. A small space, a lot of blankets, a tiny LED light and an entertaining book was all she needed to make it through any twelve hours of darkness, no matter where she was. She had chosen to read *Little Women* this month. It was one of the classics she'd never found time for. Now, time was all she had.

Nancy moved away from the window as the convoy rolled out, relieved she didn't have to flee her den this very minute. She went to her space in the closet, aware of the sun starting to sink. She needed to get things ready for tonight. Once it got dark, she didn't go out.

"We did a good job, baby." Nancy rubbed her belly again. Everything she needed was either in her closet or in the small bag fastened around her hips. The pack was rotated around the rear. She wasn't taking chances on being slapped in the stomach while running. "It can slap my ass all it wants."

Nancy snickered at her joke, scanning the contents of her stash. Unless she was in the middle

of cooking, cleaning, or washing, everything would now stay ready to go in a large backpack. It wouldn't be easy, but she had gotten stronger since the war. Before society collapsed, Nancy had been in good shape. That would also help.

“Still need more water, but I guess as long as it keeps snowing, I'm covered there.” She shrugged. “That'll make it easier to carry the pack.”

Nancy closed the closet and did a round on the second floor. There were three bedrooms and a bathroom up here, along with three closets and ten windows. There was also a fire escape that led to the rear yard. Nancy had placed small bags of supplies, covered by debris, on several of the fire escapes. Even if she had to go through a window, one of those bags would be within a few feet of her.

She also had transportation hidden throughout the complex, but she had been scared of making too much noise to start any of the trucks. There was some uncertainty as to whether any of them would fire up when she needed it. She'd done the recommended Eagle repair list, but there was no way to know for sure. She had also replaced the batteries. For some reason, car batteries were easy to find in this area. Few other things were. Stores were either empty or damaged beyond easy entry. If she didn't mind making noise, Nancy was positive some of the building collapses held a myriad of surprises that would help her survive. She had been forced to pass all those on her scavenging trips.

There was only so much one person could do during an apocalypse and she was already doing it.

“Because we have company in the area, I’ll doublecheck the windows.” Nancy eased down the three creaky stairs, then jogged to the bottom floor. She was trying to stay in shape as much as she could, assuming that would also make the birth easier. She already knew it would make an escape easier.

Nancy checked the windows, then the house for anything else that might give her away. Even a small glint of metal through the window could draw attention as someone drove by. It was incredibly dark at night, highlighting anything bright.

Nancy decided the radio sitting openly on the table was a risk and cursed herself for not seeing it sooner. “I put myself in danger with that one.” She scooped up the radio and put it on the floor next to the small generator. Prewar people had commonly died in the winter from not using generators correctly. It made her nervous, but if she used it outside and someone drove by, there wouldn’t be time to hide it. Putting the appliance against the wall, below the window, was the best she could do. With the window open and the shutters cracked, it vented, but she’d still stayed alert.

Nancy carefully stood, trying not to bump the ledge or the table. This apartment was full of furniture. She didn’t know how many people had lived here before the war, but she assumed it had been at least eight. There were that many beds, all

of which she avoided. It bothered her to sleep in a bed of any kind now. She wasn't sure why, but she hadn't insisted on conquering that issue. *If a bed phobia is my only side effect of the war, I got off lucky.*

The sound of engines finally faded into silence.

Nancy stared at the radio. "William is a byzan. He's like Angela. If he's that upset, something is wrong."

Nancy had mixed feelings about it. She didn't want anything to do with Safe Haven, but she was fond of a few people there and actually liked a couple more. It was painful to know they were in trouble, but she couldn't help them like she had during the shore escape.

At the same time, it was impossible not to feel smug. She had been against Safe Haven leaving, seeing it as cowardly. The thought resulted in guilt that Nancy pushed away. She didn't have time for it. "None of us do. The clock has almost stopped."



[Avoiding Fate](#)
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