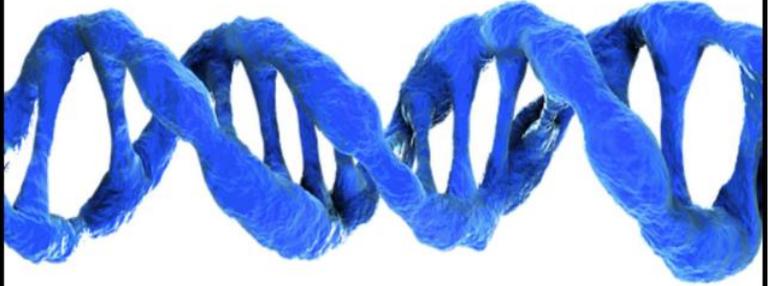


BOOK 2 IN THE BACHELOR BATTLES SERIES.

# ***CHANGELING WINDS***



*Don't make eye-contact...and never talk!*

# **ANGELA WHITE**

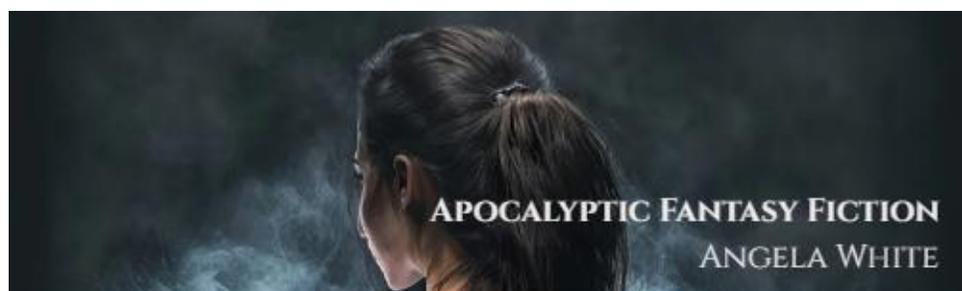
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Angela White

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Thank you John, Karen, Crystal, Kristi, Jacqueline, Drew, Jackie, Jim, Elizabeth, Clara, Mike, and Candace!



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Chapter One

# A Change in the Wind

1

**“W**elcome to the Network complex. Please place your hand on the scanner.”

“Is it her?”

“Is she the one? She looks like them. She’s covered in tattoos.”

“Processing...”

“This part takes so long!”

The other three bachelors glared at the fourth man for being too loud. If not for the hall of waiting changelings and all their noises, the sound might have carried. The bachelors were out of their cells without permission, watching players sign in for the games. If they were caught, they would be punished.

A fifth rebel bachelor ignored them all, listening for the computer response. The short, stocky woman signing in right now was a Pruett. Jason knew it, but he still needed it confirmed. Sneaking down here had been his idea.

“Welcome to New Network City, Angelica Pruett. Please place your ID card into the slot and choose your game.”

“It is her!”

“Even the other beasts are scared of her. Look how they’re staying away. She’s too dangerous. Pick someone else.”

Again, Jason ignored his fellow captives to study Angelica. The Network was cracking down again. They would only have one chance to get this right, but Jason had other things hanging over him. To pin his hopes on this lethal changeling, he had to be positive she was like her cousin. He needed her to be honorable.

*“Confirm your choice...”*

Angelica pushed the button and spun around, mirroring her cousin’s gloating sneer.

The women waiting around her frowned or subtly put space between them, but it didn’t frighten Jason. Unlike the other bachelors, he wasn’t searching for someone to love him.

*“Please report to the main stage by 5:30. Those not signed in will be disbarred from this episode and fined. Remember, there is no battling until the official start at sunrise.”*

There was a short pause, and then an airy chime echoed as the gates at four of the five arched entrances slid to the side. From what Jason knew, that far left entry never opened to the public. It led back here, to an employee entrance that was usually deserted unless the changelings crammed into the reception hall snapped and guards needed to reach the area. Jason and the other prizes had studied the matches for months now, waiting and hoping for the right changeling to come through. Candice had been

the perfect candidate, but she'd been so violent that the other bachelors had refused to try getting her attention. This time, Jason was getting out, no matter what it took.

Casting wary glances at each other, the players began to exit the wide-pillared reception hall, but Angelica waited, letting the rounded antechamber empty.

It would have been safer to travel the corridors in the pack where the guards would be the thickest, but Jason sensed she was waiting for stragglers. Her need to know all of her competitors was a comfort to the secret rebel. To help him, she definitely had to be careful. So did he.

Jason scanned the empty room that he and the others were spying from, confirming their safety. He didn't like some of the slaves here in the Network complex, but he loved them all because they went through hell together. Their illegal book and magazine collection held stories of men in the past who'd fought together and been bonded like family. Jason believed captives also felt that. A fight for survival, no matter the enemy, was powerful.

"Hey, isn't that the Bush sisters?" one of the males whispered. The hall was mostly empty now and sounds would carry easier.

Jason inspected the family in disgust. The trio had once been powerful in their wealth, but they were the kind who wore a pair of quartz gravity boots once and threw them out instead of donating them. They were the kind who flocked to food

shelters to dole out holiday meals, but threw orphan girls off their stoops during the rest of the year. They were the kind who would do anything, pay anything, to get what they wanted.

Jason almost knew the last female to select the Bachelor Battles game. Chelsea Bush's father had been held here for a few days after he'd been caught aiding a group of rebels who missed the train ambush. After a search of their massive home, the family had been charged with ten violations of the gravest laws. The sentence for their mother, the legal ruler of their household, had been death. The father had been sold to Rankin. He hadn't lasted long. His death had been marked as a severe cold, but Jason knew better. Rankin liked to starve her victims.

The sisters were outcasts now, and poverty stricken from the heavy fines. They'd probably been sent to regain favor and refill their credits. It was a final deal for the families and a very lucrative scheme for their rulers, who would use the famous sacrifices to keep the games popular. There had been a few recent calls from foreign elements brought in for the shows to have the violent programs outlawed and a more fair system of male distribution created. Few citizens were listening to the protestors, and the protestors didn't stay alive long, so Jason hadn't thought the Network was feeling pressured enough to do something this drastic to secure the future of their games.

Angelica stayed in the wide hall until every contestant had checked in, and the main doors slammed shut, locking. No one would come in or out of this section of the complex until the episode was over.

She paused at the archway, turning back. *Someone's watching me.*

Her stare seemed to penetrate the walls, making the AWOL bachelors freeze in near panic. Angelica squinted as though she knew someone was there. Maybe she did.

The prizes fled their spy room, except Jason. He lingered even after Angelica strode down the photo-lined corridor to enter the first hall of player flats. He was the top Defender's favorite toy. If caught roaming, Rankin would punish him with the lack of food, but he'd gotten used to that over his years in this complex. He wasn't resuming his proper place until he had to. *Every second of freedom I can steal is precious.*

## 2

Angelica knew which way to go in the drafty halls, unlike some of the changelings who were still wandering around in search of their flat. She was pleased to be next to the cubicle where her cousin Candice had been during her week of battles. Angelica had been here then. She'd been kidnapped from another corridor. That had been the last straw. She'd signed up the same day she was rescued,

picking the new rush, double-or-nothing version of the show that required players to promise not to withdraw from any matches. If she won, she would receive a bachelor and a nice chunk of bonus cash. If she lost, her bank accounts and property would belong to the Network. Angelica was worth almost a million UDs now, money that had been hard earned, but she hadn't hesitated over the choice. It was immaterial compared to the murders she was about to commit.

*Fun.* Unlike her fearsome cousin or her wild sister, Angelica wasn't hard and dangerous. Yeah, she had a skill for picking out weaknesses and yeah, she had a trick or two that they'd been perfecting over the years, but what mattered was nerve. Did she have enough sand to do this now that she knew her worries on the ride here were valid? Not all of the matches were a given.

Angelica slung her kit onto the chipped green counter of her flat while listening to that angry mental voice. Until the sunrise chime, she was allowed to withdraw, though she would pay a large fine. *Should I get out now? Can I live with myself if I tap out?*

Angelica scowled bitterly. *No.*

Even without the family reputation to live up to, or the need for information to pass to the rebel males, there was still the cold bed waiting for her return—the painfully empty bed. The change had come and turned her into something else, something that hungered and burned endlessly. She didn't want

any of those frightened bachelors, but she *needed* one. Even death would be better than this constant agony. She had come here to earn one or the other.

Angelica clicked on the viewing screen in the flat in time to hear the announcer explaining the new rules that had been implemented since Candice won. She listened while having a fast meal of pemmican. Besides providing fourteen females to kill instead of nine, unlimited visits with the prizes were now included in the competition. The world was enjoying the new, intimate moments almost as much as they did the fighting. It drove up the ratings when replayed, as would each violent cage match that Angelica needed to survive to earn the visits—all while dodging attempts by the other contestants to kill her while she slept. *More fun.*

Out of the mix, she had spotted two contestants who made her heat flare—partially by the way the crowd had parted so quickly for them. The first had been a tiny woman named Kim Lee. No more than 5', she wore the Network logo on her bracelet, telling everyone she'd finished the Time Trials first. Angelica knew the small female was someone to be careful of. It was in her walk and her relaxed stance. It said she wasn't scared of much, let alone any of the contestants in the hall. It was the same impression she'd given while they had raced in the final heat at the time trials. If not for that sharp Pruett intelligence, it would have been Angelica wearing that patch instead of Kim Lee. She had originally set out to get it, but realized she didn't

need the extra attention it would bring. Angelica had taken a dive and kept that Pruett mystery cloak around herself like an old friend. It would come off during her first match, when she revealed she was just as angry as her cousin.

The second contestant who'd drawn Angelica's attention was of average height and weight, with just her dangerous, unreadable eyes to give away the lurking threat. Those eyes declared she'd come to win, but Angelica hadn't backed down or flinched from that hard changeling glare the way others in the hall had.

Outside, arriving Mopars and horses were a constant noise as more citizens came in for different games, for a chance at the prizes. A rare few could afford to ride the Network train to their match, making the noises of the city loud enough to overpower the murmur of hundreds of voices in these thin flats. The braying of hellhounds and the cries of their victims were lounge music to changelings. A small explosive had been detonated in the eastern edge of the city yesterday and now, people were being questioned. Rebellion from any source was a growing threat to the hold their rulers had over everything. Innocent blood would decorate the streets until the guards got answers.

Four females that Angelica had already discounted were huddled nervously near the guards on the screen as the afternoon news report began. They were already having trouble with other players in the halls. Angelica grinned at them as she headed

to The Block to complete the signup process. *I'm here. It's not Candice this time. It's my turn!*

All attention swung her way when Angelica entered the lavish lounge behind The Block. Some of the women saw her young age and light layer of scars and instantly discounted her despite the famous last name.

Angelica continued to give that impression, nodding politely at those who stared or glared. Of the latter group, there were half a dozen. They scanned her new cloak and perfectly calm expression, and recognized Angelica for what she was—a threat.

“Chelsea Bush!”

Not bothering to watch the graceful trio of sisters glide toward the velvet curtains, Angelica concentrated on discovering if any of the sturdy players lining these walls might really be able to kill her when the official chime sounded at dawn.

“Danielle Bush!”

Sighing inwardly at how long this would take, Angelica tried to narrow down a suspected weakness in each contestant. She thought of anything but the performance to come.

Ice had settled over Angelica by the time they announced the fourteenth fighter and summarized her skills. She exited the stage with a short glare.

Angelica recognized the woman as a diva gang member by her white clothes and braids. Candice had killed their leader during her game. *There's the*

*family name again, helping things along.* Angelica gave a short wave. “I don’t bite. Don’t be frightened.”

The woman fled the empty waiting room with a quick glower.

“And the last Contestant is...”

The moment stretched into eternity before the speaker blared again.

“Angelica Pruett!”

Angelica felt a hush come over the live audience of bachelors and viewers.

“From sisters to cousins, this is Angelica, the 18-year-old Pruett family tracker. As a member of one of the most brutal clans in the history of the games, I wonder what we can anticipate from this changeling teenager.”

Angelica walked forward. She was the third of her family to come through these curtains to claim a mate. Would she live up to expectations? What about the audience? What did they want most? A good show? For her to be as harsh as the other players hadn’t been? Angelica hoped both were true as she kept her gaze from straying to the small glass box at the top of the honeycomb-like complex. Before all was said and done, a Pruett might walk into that room, too.

Angelica emerged below the first cage where she would battle tomorrow, a bit stunned by the audience. The constantly shifting mob was already violently drunk and peppered with guards trying to

strike them, repeatedly, into obedience. It wasn't working.

Angelica came forward as her image flashed onto giant screens spread among the triangle-shaped walls. The tension thickened with each light step she took. Even the announcer was silent.

Angelica faced the cameras at the end of the stage. In this version of the game, the contestants were allowed to give a short statement. "I'm so happy to be here. I'm sure it'll be a learning experience. Thanks soooo much to the Network!"

She'd memorized the exact tones of those who had come before her, so much that it was eerie. "I love the complex and I can't wait to meet all the bachelors!"

Angelica's sarcasm held the crowd still and silent until she snorted, making those in the front row jump. She pointed at the camera, gravelly voice dropping into a dangerous level. "The others are fluff, but you can bet your ass on a Pruett."

She spun toward the curtains, pulling the string on her cloak to reveal netted cloth outlining her stocky body in thin nude strips. It was designed in the same spider web Candice had used for her match, except it was the color of skin and gave the impression that Angelica was naked.

Chaos erupted as catcalls and yells exploded from the crowd and drugged prizes.

The stunned announcer tried to recapture the moment and control the disorder with laughter. "Well, that is a Pruett butt!"

Another round of yells came in response.

Angelica didn't have her cousin's body of scars to be intimidating, though she did have a nice collection. For now, she still needed surprise, so she had chosen to forego showing her weapons. It was also Candice's successful tactic. Her challengers had been so busy worrying over what weapons she might bring to the matches that they'd forgotten a Pruett didn't need any.

When Angelica left The Block, the waiting room was empty. *Damn! Candice was ambushed as she left the stage. Why not me?*

Angelica sighed in disappointment, taking her starless ID card from the console before heading down the hall. *Maybe there'll be an assassin in my flat.*

### 3

Angelica's empty apartment held a long green couch, a green kitchenette, and a washing cubby with a single green towel and half a bar of melting soap. Their rulers didn't care for comfort or cleanliness. She brushed dust from the chipped counter before setting her cooking kit there. These flats weren't cleaned often, but at least there were no bloodstains on the walls. The small apartment was far from the digs that Angelica was used to, but her family's wealth had brought her here. Unless you were a criminal, the entry fees were exorbitant and her parents hadn't given their support. Angelica

had been forced to use her share of the bounties she'd collected over the last two years. If she had been caught on the payroll before she was eighteen, the entire clan would have been arrested. Instead, Angelica had helped bring in a number of high-profile targets and earned her place, but it hadn't mattered to her parents.

Despite all the successes, her parents doubted her ability to survive here. Angelica understood. Before the disease, she hadn't been rebellious like Candice or even outspoken like her sister, Sam. She'd been *nice*. They didn't understand. That part of her life was just a vague blur. All Angelica could think about, all she could feel now, was pain. And there was only one cure.

Angelica's dreams the first night were foggy, shifting worries interrupted by wakeful periods where she sent pink eyes around the darkness, poised to react. She did that for hours, savoring every thirty minutes she was able to steal. Being a family tracker had toughened her up. The next few days would tell if it had been enough to keep her alive.

#### 4

Angelica woke in time to hear the view screen in her flat click on, signaling the start of the episode. All over this floor, other changelings were being brought to alertness the same way. Their growls

pleased Angelica. She didn't mind rude awakenings and she preferred to be up early. Both were part of her job.

“Welcome to Round One of the Bachelor Battles! We will begin by choosing the Luck of the Draw contestant who will have three fights in a row. Viewers will vote on matchups as soon as we have a name.” The reporter paused for the required follow up. “The Network will pick a replacement if our Luck of the Draw winner is defeated. No other official fights are held during this time, but attacks and assassination attempts are, as always, encouraged.”

In the corner of the apartment, a platform rose from the floor and a thin control device slid out of the puke-green wall. “*Step onto the scanner and remain motionless.*”

The announcer tried to fill the time and keep the audience interested. “Contestants are now being evaluated by a computer designed specifically to determine which of our players has the best odds to win. It's meant to take away the edge of the fittest, over those who've had less training. Their pictures and stats are now showing up.”

“*Please step off the scanner.*”

Thunder cracked outside the dome, sending a line of fuzz through the monitor that gave all the contestants an evil glare on the screen. Angelica's was particularly menacing, pleasing her.

“We'll have our Luck of the Draw fighter in a moment, but before that, a quick reminder on what

our contestants can earn from their matches. Stars are given for each kill, high popularity, and by Network decision. Each star will gain the contestant a guard while in the halls and their flat, along with a fresh stock of weapons, food, and medical credits. Stars cannot be lost, but at the start of round two, they can be given away to protect someone else, such as visiting family. Okay, the results are ready. We'll hit the button. Now, we'll get the name when the timer counts down."

The crowd on the screen was unruly despite the early hour, mirroring Angelica's impatience. Tired guards marched into the mob with clubs.

It began to rain, making Angelica think of the trip waiting for her if she won. The dust storms currently raging across the Borderlands would be followed by a month of steady rain that killed more of those trying to survive there than even the pythons did during breeding season. At the height of the rains, the pythons placed their eggs in the ground, allowing them to populate the southern lands in staggering numbers as the eggs washed downstream during the floods. Angelica would become very intimate with that hostile land if she survived this game.

"Angelica Pruet!" the announcer shouted wildly.

*"You have been scheduled for a match in one hour. Please report to the main cage on time."*

A small map flashed on the wall, but Angelica didn't need it.

“Our Luck of the Draw contestant is little Angel Pruett! How’s that for a coincidence? Will this 18-year-old bounty hunter survive the first three matches like her cousin did? The computer thinks so. Wadda ya say, folks? Wanna place a bet or two? Booths are open!”

The crowd went wild, making the announcer wait to be heard.

“And the first contestant our bounty hunting changeling will fight is...the Diva Brawler!”

Angelica flipped the screen off. There was no way she was the most likely to win. Someone had tampered with the computer for this match. Candice had told her it was easily done, but Angelica had chosen to run it fairly. Obviously, someone had other plans. If she had allowed any of them to come, which she hadn’t, Angelica would have told her family that it was just the enemy covering both bases, but it was obvious that they wanted her dead. There was no way to mistake the feeling. *I’ve been marked.*

## 5

Interviews were done two ways. Angelica much preferred screen conversations that she could respond to from the privacy of her booger-green flat. The other way required her to show up on the press floor. It meant padding through the cubicles while enduring shouted questions as she searched for the reporter that she was supposed to answer. It

was like a circus. She'd been to one of those rare events as a child and hated it.

As Angelica shoved through the door, all the reporters in the long hall of smoky, hutch-like setups fell silent...and then they swarmed her.

Behind the shouting throng, a single reporter remained in front of her hooch. When she held up her mike, Angelica pushed that way. As she went, the bounty hunter wasn't gentle.

After two reporters went sliding roughly across the slick, ashy floor, the rest gave her space, but they still hurtled questions like spit.

“Has the...”

“Did you...”

“How long...”

Angelica reached her reporter and spun around with pink eyes. She was gratified when the others all flinched back. “Get lost!” She let red irises come to the front, marveling at her on-the-edge control.

They resumed their places with fearful stares and twitchy glares. Angelica remembered the way Candice had used them while she was here, intimidated them. Maybe they could be put to use for her, as well.

Angelica's reporter hadn't rushed over, but she could feel the woman hungrily memorizing every move she made. The reporter had a sharp smirk, knowing she and her toga clad body got the Pruett first. Angelica instantly disliked her.

Toga woman gestured her inside, arrogantly presenting her back as if she held no fear.

*I can change that.* Angelica sank down into the uncomfortable chair, noting guards standing stiffly in the corners. When Candice had been here, the interviews were done on the main stage. After her cousin's encounters, their rulers had changed it to the prepping floor and made enemies among the Fourth Estate. These TV-minded gals needed to be in the spotlight to be satisfied. Angelica planned to keep that in mind as she dealt with them.

“Ready?”

Despite the reporter's reasonable tone, Angelica didn't expect this to be anything like a calm chat. “You know it.”

It was hard to remember some things, especially when they'd never meant much to her anyway, but the first interview was uncomfortable as she struggled to walk the line between the new and old Angelica—the good and the evil. She was trying hard to give a harmless impression so when she let it out, when she snatched the Diva by the throat, surprise would give her a first easy win. Before the change, snarky comments and snide remarks were ignored, shrugged off. Now, they were a direct challenge and if not for the steady blink of the camera light to concentrate on, Angelica thought she may have exploded before the first match.

“So, we have Angel Pruett here with us...”

Angelica recognized that voice now as the reporter from her wall screen (*strike two!*) and made another mental note to handle it.

“As you all know by now, Angelica’s cousin is suspected of being a rebel sympathizer, but I think Angelica wants the world to know she doesn’t share that lawless attitude. What better way to uphold the family honor than to come here, right? Let’s give her a big welcome.”

After the applause and shouts, the smirking reporter went through questions about her family and then the competition. Angelica assumed she answered as the other players had.

“How does it feel to be related to such brutal women?”

“Good.”

“Are you trying to prove that you belong in the family?”

“I’m trying to get laid.”

A pause and a frown. *Hmm...* “You’re ranked ninth at the moment. Does that worry you?”

“Yeah, it’s what keeps me up at night.”

There was a longer pause to her scorn, and a deeper scowl that Angelica was betting she could make worse. The reporter wore fine, caressing fibers with stunning style and no wind resistance, making the bounty hunter snort at the mental picture of her in the real world. Without the dome, these soft people would freeze in their elegant attire and indifferent social mindsets.

“Why did you enter the games?”

“Sex and blood.”

“No, really.”

“Yes, really.” She’d been right. The scowl nearly encompassed the reporter’s face now.

“The change! Does the anger make it hard to focus?”

“Yes, especially when I’m forced to answer stupid questions.” Then again, maybe her tones weren’t so similar. Maybe she was a bit faster, a bit sharper than the others had been. Angelica wouldn’t know until the rankings came out. She needed to jump a level every day to keep a full stock of food and medical credits.

“What do you think about your odds of winning a prize?”

Angelica couldn’t help herself. She was going to like continuing her cousin’s traditions. “Better than yours, I’d guess, since you spend your day in a chair instead of a cage.”

The reporter flushed. Not a gentle rise of color, but a bloom of red fury, and again, Angelica couldn’t help herself. She grinned.

Chapter Two  
**The Bachelors**

1

“**W**elcome to the first match of this week’s episode!”

Blue lights flashed over the arena as the crowd roared. The fighting cage was a 12’ x 12’ dome with a fence frame and dozens of small, sturdy cameras. To reach it, Angelica had to come down the same fenced in walkway that Candice had strolled. She tried hard to emulate her cousin’s unshakable façade. Candice had reminded her of two things before they split up. The first was to react to each situation exactly as it deserved, which had always been necessary when training with Candice, but the second piece of advice would be most helpful.

*“Use the media. Spend the interviews blending the old and the new into something on the edge. Then set it loose in the cage.”*

Angelica slid her cloak to the floor as she entered the ring. Still wearing the netted outfit from the introduction, it made even her opponent gape and gave her the instant advantage. Angelica was the unknown, the high odds wild card, and she met the Diva in the center with fury burning in her gut.

The brawler came forward like a boxer when the gate slid down. Angelica was tempted to duke it out. She excelled at hand-to-hand combat, but she couldn't wait. She needed blood.

The Diva rushed forward, swinging.

Angelica ducked, leaning in to plunge her blade deep into the Diva's unprotected belly. She ripped upward as she spun, wrist blade slashing again.

The huddler's hands came up to stop the gaping flood of crimson now streaming from her neck.

"Match to Pruett!"

The crowd roared, some screaming her name.

Angelica inhaled deeply, struggling not to slice the body again. She already loved it here in this small ring of death. Unlike her cousin, Angelica felt no guilt. During the worst moments of the disease, she believed spilling blood was what she had been put on the earth to do and she did it well.

Angelica let the body hit the mat, waiting to let the tension thicken before giving the audience what they expected.

Her grin was ugly.

So was their roar.

## 2

Angelica's first two battles had been scheduled back-to-back. She left her bloody clothes on as she traveled the mostly empty halls that displayed thousands of images of females who had suffered through these games, shown at their worst

moments. The Network surrounded their citizens with violence. There was a different arena-like cage set up for each of their games. The episodes with multiple matches alternated between the unused cages to allow for cleanup, Angelica assumed. She found it all very orderly and awful. They kept the death flowing, with no pause for even the removal of bodies to be caught on camera and frowned over.

No one shrank from her yet as she sauntered along the hall. She only had one star, one menacing guard, but the frowns of those she passed implied they'd soon be researching details from the safety of their wall screens.

Angelica pushed the entry gate open and strode down the walkway, stepping into the identical cage without sympathy for the bone thin female. It was one of the four huddlers. Her panicked brown eyes and those shaking, unflawed hands declared she wasn't a changeling, but Angelica tightened her control. She would not allow compassion to ghost her. She was a Pruett. *We aren't that weak.*

“Cage Match Two!”

The dividing bar went down, and Angelica came forward as the blue lights glinted blindingly.

The huddler sensed her lack of compassion the instant they locked gazes. Huddler flinched toward the withdraw rope.

*No mercy!* Angelica lunged forward and slammed her against the cage.

“Nooo!”

Bloodlust in control, Angelica sank her teeth

deep into the huddler's neck. Her growl of delight was overpowered by the loudspeaker and screams from the live audience.

Blood squirted, spraying crimson to complement her eyes.

“Match to Pruett!”

Angelica let the warm body fall as she pulled her teeth in, now a hideous mess. She waited for the crowd to quiet, knowing this image would grace the front of every daily edition across their nuclear-torn world. The thought drew a harsh smirk.

The crowd thundered approval. “Pruett! Pruett! Pruett!”

On her way out of the cage, Angelica slid her knife into the air and cut the withdraw rope. She wanted it clear that she would give no quarter.

The screams grew louder, hungrier at her action. Laying low had been the plan, but that wasn't possible now. She already lusted for the legal violence of the next match too much to pretend anything else.

### 3

For some reason, Angelica had three guards when she entered the halls and three flickering, golden stars on her ID card. She went to the bachelor cells with only a fast wipe of her sleeve over her face. It was better that the males saw the Angelica who basked in the blood of her opponent. The male she chose would have to be able to accept

it. Once *changed*, there was no going back.

Her security trio waited outside the cells.

Angelica didn't miss them. The bachelor dorm was only open to one contestant at a time to prevent injury to the valuable prizes. As far as she knew that rule hadn't been broken in the history of the games.

Angelica studied the blue haired female standing stiffly by a chair, clipboard in hand. The woman was the supervising Den Mother. Her bushy brows and pox-marked skin was hard to read, but her body language implied she was fond of her charges.

The woman saw who it was and waved at the other Den Mothers to come back from break early. Then she nodded to Angelica. "You have one hour."

Angelica wondered how deep the bond was between these big guards and the prizes. Did they depend on the women for everything? She thought the answer was yes and that meant the one she chose would need the same support. The Network trained them to obey and to please, not to think. *Daniel is the exception to that rule.*

There were three more enormous Den Mothers lurking in the large flat and each of them scrutinized her like the threat she was. They wore the usual uniform of silver on black, but each hairdo was a different, vivid color that might have made Angelica snicker if not for knowing it was how the males told them apart. Names were not a big thing here, where the faces changed weekly.

As she swept cuddle chairs and candlelight,

Angelica identified the smell littering the air. *Italian food*. She grimaced, thinking of the blood drying on her skin, but she didn't wash. To do so now would be taken as a sign of weakness to those viewing them live, but without sound.

Unlike her flat, the bachelor cells were neat and clean. Half the reception hall was taken up by a long table with fifteen settings. On this wide table were tall, white candles and red cloth napkins in front of highbacked chairs. *Probably softer than anything my ass has ever sat on.*

The other half was a complement to the dining area. There were long silver and black curtains, and small pillows to match the elegant red and black sofas. A number of floor bound reading lamps threw a gentle glow over the room, but as a final addition, there was an enormous stone fireplace in the far corner, keeping the chill away from the valuable males. It was cozy. She assumed their rulers liked the idea of the world believing these men were pampered, but she had been at Stone Mountain. She had spent time among Baker's escaped males. She knew better.

"Evan, Christen, Alec, Mike."

Angelica didn't bother to learn their names as they were introduced, instead judging their reaction to her as they came out.

*Fear. Worry. Fear. Fear. Near panic.* Almost all of them reacted badly, some freezing in their practiced entry as they spotted her. Even the man with the purple stripe in his hair was afraid of her

and he was normally an animal games prize. Candice had told her those men were supposed to be harder, able to take more abuse. Angelica narrowed in on one standing behind the others, drawn by shiny black hair draped over thick shoulders. That one wasn't wearing a cloak of fear.

The bachelor met her searching study with a slight lift of his chin. Wide chest, thick arms, big hands resting against lean hips... The image of being touched by those big fingers lit her up like a torch.

He dropped his head and the spell broke, heat receding. Interesting. Would the rest of them make her experience that with only a look?

The males were pretty. Their pleasing facades and flowing, black cloaks reminded her of the sexless dolls she had played with as a child. If not for their stiff stances and terrified expressions, they might as well have been. Was there no real spark in these guys? No hidden desires?

The main Den Mother was eager to get this over with. "May they sit?"

"Have them remove their clothes." Angelica observed reactions.

More fear, touches of panic, and then finally, a bit of reluctance, the mother of rebellion. It came from the male she'd already noticed.

"What?"

Angelica ignored the woman. "Remove your cloaks."

The men complied without argument, revealing

shirts tucked neatly into soft trousers that she judged to be new by the way the men fidgeted as they undressed for her.

*Bam!*

Lightning struck outside the covered windows. Most of the bachelors flinched violently. Candy had told her about Daniel's fear of the weather. It came from not wanting to burn to death like others here had.

Another Den Mother spoke quietly from nearby. "'Tis just a storm. We're monitoring."

Her words had an instant, calming effect.

Angelica vowed to remember to do that for her mate when the weather was bad. She didn't have many fears, but for those that existed, she wanted comfort while conquering. She planned to extend the same courtesy to her prize. "Leave us."

Not a request, all but the blue haired Den Mother disappeared.

The woman thought she wanted to take a stand on it. Angelica sighed. She hadn't planned on a third match today, but she would be alone with these men or thrown out—one of the two.

Angelica padded her way and was satisfied when the woman immediately retreated. She jerked a hand. "Go, while you can."

Blue mother fled.

Angelica concentrated, trying to control the rage. She didn't want the bachelors to be terrified of her. She needed to be welcome.

She rotated to find all of the men as far from her

as they could get, faces lined up in panicked rows. She locked down on her disappointment and gestured toward the long table. "Let's eat."

The last one to sit, Angelica lingered, letting her hunting instincts send her in the right direction. It was the same skill she used on runs and she employed it now to single out a few of the more promising from the herd. Her need was rising fast in the tension. What would it be like to love one of them? To hold them during the cold, painful nights?

Angelica let the Pruett come forward. She sniffed the air like an animal.

Sweet flowers and heavy cologne were strongest, but one of them had a thick, coppery scent that pulled her like blood. Another was throwing off odors of sugar and sulfur. Those last two smells would please her senses. What about their attitudes?

Most of them were sitting perfectly straight in their neat clothes, but two had unfastened the top buttons of their shirts, leaving crooked ties and a slightly off-center impression. She liked that.

Chins were down, eyes submissive...except a few of them were stealing subtle glances of confused fear and hope. It was so tempting to have all those ways to relieve this fire now sitting docilely at her fingertips. If only one of them would show a spark!

The males relaxed when the Den Mothers came out carrying heavily laden trays. The heaping bowls of pasta and meat filled the air with hunger, but the men waited to be given permission.

*Slaves.* Angelica waved a filthy hand. “Eat.” She dug into her bowl and enjoyed the sweet milk being served with it. Hard to come by, real milk was a treat. She pretended the stains her bloody hands and clothes left on the table and chair were from the meal.

The men ate quietly, carefully, eyes darting to hers in brief seconds of concern.

Angelica did her best to ignore them at first, but she observed every move, every expression. *They’re too thin.* Perhaps the generous meal was for the benefit of the cameras? Were they not fed properly unless on display? Anything was possible in this apocalyptic hell.

The guy on her right, seat subtly inched away, was adorable. Perfect teeth, clear skin, and his smell! Like a fresh rose, but meatier. Aware of her attention, he was precise in his movements so he didn’t trigger her instinct to hunt. Angelica knew aggression was erased in slaves by denying them testosterone. She wondered if the same was true of the prizes. According to the Network, these males were pure of chemicals, and felt privileged to be here where each week brought the hope of a kind owner.

*And then there’s me.* She smothered a Candice-like grin at the notion and continued. To the right of pristine male, were three more pretty faces—two blonds and a sexy brunette with stunning gray eyes. He was the one who had lifted his chin to her. Next to those were more perfection—seven unblemished

profiles. *What do they do with the ugly ones?* There certainly weren't any of those here.

She turned to the man on her left. Their curious gazes met; he flushed. He'd been ogling her nearly naked body. *Sweet!* She had to hide yet another snarling grin. The change was zinging her hormones now, opening the flood valves. Some women snapped when it became too much, attacking before the drugs could take effect. Because of the disease, men were now the ones afraid to submit and be hurt or even killed. Full of these thoughts, shivers of need slid up her thighs to curl around her spine in a surge of agony. Angelica's grip tightened on the table. *Damn!*

The males tensed, sensing her reaction.

Angelica forced a bite of food into her mouth, chewed and swallowed. *Control.*

After another minute of breathing calmly, Angelica was ready to take it a step further, testing herself. Part of the reason for slaves to be so dependent on the Den Mothers was that it eliminated the need for them to speak. The sound of a male voice was like a match to kindling.

"I have questions."

Angelica's declaration sent a fresh wave of tension through the group, causing them to glance at each other for protection. None of them spoke.

She took another drink of the sweet milk, then gently picked up her fork. "Do you sing?"

"*Yes. We all sing.*"

The confusing jumble hit her ears, making

Angelica blink. She scanned the table. She hadn't been positive any of them had the courage to respond, not even the one she'd caught ogling her, and so it was something of a surprise that *all* of them had answered, at the same time.

She motioned. "Do it again."

They were confused, but dutifully echoed themselves.

*"Yes, we all sing."*

Slightly out of harmony this time, Angelica was able to understand the illusion that had distracted her. It was a defense they'd obviously developed to temper changeling reactions to their voices. *Clever*. She could order them not to do it, put a stop to each thin shield they tried to employ, but why would she? She liked games. Wasn't she a contestant in one even now? Angelica grinned.

The males shrank away.

Angelica reached for her cup instead of snapping her teeth at them like the need was advising. *It would feel sooo good to lose control!*

Angelica shook her head at the green haired Den Mother, glad when she and her shit-shaded dreadlocks retreated to resume hovering in the shadows of the next room. *Wise*, Angelica thought. *I'm on the edge.*

She took a last bite, savoring the meal.

The bachelors resumed their own barely touched bowls. Not wanting them to miss the good food, Angelica lingered at the table, letting them have their fill as she kept testing, pushing them and

herself. “Are you all registered breeders?” They couldn’t answer that question as one. She braced.

“I am.”

The pristine man on her right sounded ashamed, but Angelica couldn’t help his pain. She was in shock at the waves of change spiraling through her. *So beautiful!* Like a bell, the rolling tone of his voice slid into her guts and twisted the need, sending a vicious flare of lust through her body. Angelica shivered, slamming her eyes shut. If she focused on him right now, *so close!* she would be lost.

*Breathe. In and out.* And she could, a bit, because of the fear. It was so thick that she could smell it radiating from his perfect body. Angelica inhaled deeper of it. *Better.* It bothered her for him to be so scared.

In. Out. *Much better.* She eased her grip on the fork as she braced again—harder this time. “Who else?”

The males shared twitchy, darting glances up and down the table in surprise.

“I am.”

“So am I.”

Seated across the table, both of their voices pierced her and then sank into that bubbling mix and caught fire. But she’d been ready this time. It was easier to handle. “Anyone else?”

There was silence where she could feel them all wondering if that now made those three safe or more wanted. “I am not.”

Her words sent mutters around the table that

teased, tempted. It was a surprise at all for her to have told them that. It was drastically different from the treatment they were used to, but Angelica was after other ends than most of the females they'd had contact with. "It makes control over myself much harsher than what I would be with a mate."

Another round of shocked murmurs brought blasts of sweet pain. Tenderness coming from a warrior bathed in blood was a rarity in any world. "If I'm too frightening, switch out."

None of them left to trade places with the few males she hadn't seen yet. Angelica would have been surprised if they had, but two of them were now off her list. Their relief was clear. "If you already love someone, I'd also have you switch."

Again, no words, but another bachelor was eliminated by the indecision in his expression. It was common for slaves to fall in love with their regular renters and try to avoid being awarded so they could make it to the 25-year-old age limit for prizes. After that, they were listed for sale to the public and could be bought by their lover.

*Booom!*

Thunder crashed, almost loud enough to make Angelica flinch. It sent one of the bachelors from his chair to crouch on the floor. Terrified, the shivering skinhead missed her frown, but the others took note and leaned away so as not to share his fate.

Angelica waved a hand. "Go back to your cell if it eases you."

He and his clean scalp were gone an instant

later.

Angelica met pink Den Mother's surprised expression with a hard frown. "Aren't they allowed to have a spine at all?"

"No." The woman's tone gave nothing away. "Switch?"

"No." Angelica wasn't ready for a new temptation yet. She was still working through these.

Angelica continued with her questions as the hour passed, throwing surprises in forms that the men had to answer for themselves. With each stunning blast of their voices, she grew stronger.

"You have five minutes left." The blue Den Mother retreated back into the other room, not as worried now that Angelica had shown she had control over herself.

Angelica leaned over her empty bowl, keeping her voice low. Like her infamous cousin, Angelica was always one to encourage dissension among the ranks. "Singing has a calming effect. All of you together might be hard to resist, even for a changeling."

Satisfied they would figure out the new defense, if they hadn't already known it, Angelica slid her chair back and stood up.

Desire flared from some of the bachelors as they stared at her nearly naked body. It was obvious the males had needs, even when they weren't drugged. *Interesting.*

Angelica returned their gawks with desperate

longing that all but two of the prizes shied from. She let the huntress out again, scenting.

That chocolate over hot coals aroma drifted into her brain again and burnt. Angelica inhaled deeper. It was intoxicating. “Good night, bachelors.”

*“Have a nice evening, Angelica.”*

Even with all their voices together, hearing her name from them took her straight into hell. Angelica narrowed in on that scent again, breathing deeper. Which one was layered in the delicious odor? Was it natural or a spray? It was powerful enough to twist her brain into complete confusion. “No cologne next time I come.”

“I’ll handle it.” The Den Mother with orange hair appeased her from the darkness. She had no doubt that the Pruett would win another match to earn that visit.

Angelica swept the males one more time, counting those she hadn’t mentally marked off the list, lingering on gray eyes and silken black hair. She liked that one. She would make him speak next time so she could judge the level of heat he brought out. If none of them showed an interest in her, whichever male drew her the hardest was the one she would choose.

It was hard to leave, but Angelica did, proud that she could. One of those bachelors would be hers, after she executed more women who were suffering like she was.

Angelica lingered outside the cell with her guards, still searching for threats while she regained

full control. She'd known it would be hard, but it was... Angelica grunted bitterly. *It's like sitting at a buffet and not being allowed to eat anything. Damn the old ones who caused this torment!*

4

"She's the one."

"Oh, yeah. She's gonna win it all."

"Remember, we do whatever it takes to get her to go to the rebels—even if the Pruetts really aren't helping them."

"Right. We know how to provide a service and the Network gives full medical care to bounty hunters. Get listed as a member of her crew, be friendly, and locate Baker."

Standing in the shadows, Jason didn't add a comment to the conversation happening among the other prizes while the Den Mothers cleaned up the mess. He was still thinking about how controlled Angelica had been. They'd agreed to try to warn the rebels as soon as they heard there was a Pruett listed again. They all hoped to manipulate a new owner to accomplish their goal, but Jason didn't think this one would let a mate out of her sight long enough to attempt an escape.

She was burning too fast, which meant a lot of service time, and then there was the clear impression that once bonded, a man might not *want* to leave her and her infamous family. Jason was instantly terrified of that impression. He already had

one ghost who rarely left his mind. He didn't want a new one. On his own, there was only one thing he could do—run. It wouldn't be enough.

The other males in this lot wanted to be free, to fight in the growing rebellion with Baker. Jason did too, but there was another reason he had to get out. He would be 25 in another month. If males in these shows weren't chosen by then, they were put into the renter program or sold—usually to a brothel. Those were the same things in his mind, but Jason had something even worse hanging over his head. Rankin, the top Defender, wanted him and it wasn't casual. He had been surviving her visits since he hit puberty. Each time, her rage grew worse. Nearly all of the scattered, drop shaped scars on his legs and hips had come from her fondness for screams, for blood. Some nights, he hadn't been certain he would survive.

Despite the Network's unforgiving hold on his body, his life, they had been unable to erase the memories Jason had of loving *parents*. His father and mother had cared deeply for each other. He longed for that future. Most males were kept away from their children, but his mother had encouraged their relationship.

Jason had mourned when Rankin ripped out his father's throat. That was right after Jason had found them in the barn and started screaming. He'd assumed her lack of control over the disease had caused his dad's death, but it hadn't mattered. He had attacked Rankin in his grief and she'd taken

him. After that, the complex and Rankin had been his life.

Jason had gone through the normal bachelor training under Rankin's supervision. He knew how to please a changeling, but he'd never been fully taken by one. He was listed as pure, something the other males here disliked him for. He was spared their required time in the renter cells, he was exercised better, given more medical care, and he was defenseless against Rankin whenever she wanted him to practice his newly learned skills while she wore the cuffs.

She was so cruel! Jason often suspected she had more than one whore-in-training and he pitied those other males on the nights that she and her bloody claws left his cell unsatisfied. Rankin had gotten the promotion to queen of the guard food chain by being careful. She wasn't going to break the rules by taking Jason fully, but if he wasn't picked in the next four episodes, they would list his number and Rankin could buy him. He looked a lot like his father now and she'd waited a long time to have that.

The other bachelors in this lot assumed one of them would be chosen by the Pruett. Their pretty features and submissive demeanors were obvious, but in Jason's heart, he hoped Angelica Pruett would be different from the rest of the women who blew through here with their bloody fists. He was hoping she was like her cousin.

Jason was terrified of the duty waiting if he was

picked, but he was desperate enough to lie to his new owner or service her needs for as long as it took to escape. He had secrets that the rebels might need to know, and in exchange, he hoped they would let him stay with them until he was stronger. Jason hated their rulers. The goal of gaining his life back would give him the courage to follow through with his plans.

Watching through the small window in the door, Jason was enrapt as Angelica ran a blood crusted hand through those short black spikes. He wondered what her thoughts were right then. Was she wishing she could come back in and snap? Did it matter to her if the bachelors were abused slaves? Would she kill him when she found out what he was doing?

It would make things easier if the Pruett lived up to the rumors he was about to trust his life to—that they were an honorable family who hated slavery as much as the men did. The odds on something that wonderful were slim to none in this New Network world, but the restless fire in Jason's heart had already made the choice. He'd lived another life once, a *free* one, and he still missed it with everything he was. All he had now were the memories of a mother's warm hand on his brow and the vague, haunting notes of his sweet sisters giggling in the next room. The fierce determination he'd nourished through the years of Rankin's cruel abuse would be enough. *I'm going to take my chances with Angelica Pruett. God, help me.*

## Chapter Three

# Medic!

Day 3

1

**A**ngelica entered the stands for her required viewing and found Chelsea Bush standing over her sibling, face wild in grief.

With dawning horror, Angelica wondered if she could still battle the starlet without showing mercy. She was forced to admit it might be a problem. Angelica settled onto a bench for her one public attendance, hoping someone else took care of the woman.

But now that she'd seen it, she couldn't *unsee* it. Having sisters kill each other for an opportunity at redemption was twisted, but there were also the half-changed weaklings who should have never been put into a cage with someone like her. Why would the Network make such unbalanced matches? Why hadn't these weaker women prepared for the fights?

Candice and Angelica did a daily workout to keep in shape for their runs, but they'd been doing it for years. She'd been barely out of rubbers when Candice had dragged her to the shed and began teaching her how to fight. Now, Candice's patience

was teaching her to be careful with those she loved. Her cousin lived with that guilt, and to witness the effects of it was to be ever so careful that it never happened with her.

These thoughts and more ran through her mind without pause, but Angelica never let her guard down. When the last Diva gang member snapped the neck of her opponent, Angelica felt sick enough to glare in her direction. Their rulers liked being in control. Whatever the final answer to all these oddities, she was certain the quest for more power would be the reason behind it.

## 2

“How does it feel to know you’ve been deemed the most bloodthirsty of your family?”

It was one of the reporters who had rushed at her the last time she was here. Hunger was thick in the smoky cubicle. Angelica answered honestly. “It’s great. My big sister usually gets that title.”

After her cousin’s week of intimidating the reporters, all of Angelica’s interviewers so far had been stocky and armed. This one was no different. The thought that she was a threat to the Network was a heady feeling for the teenager.

“I sense some sibling rivalry there.”

Angelica had her own lies ready to use. “Yeah, she doesn’t know I’m here. When she finds out, she might sign up next!”

The reporter was relaxing as she continued to be

reasonable, but Angelica was just waiting for an opening. The other newscasters were lingering nearby, listening to the live broadcast. She hoped to be able to give them, and everyone else, a new topic of conversation, but she also hadn't forgotten that a reporter had been in on her kidnapping.

"Do you believe your cousin Candice is aiding the rebels?"

That was a blunt question. Angelica forced herself to sound uneasy. "I don't want to..."

The reporter pointed. "It would be hard not to, considering her absence. You were here for her games challenge. Funny that she isn't for yours."

Angelica pegged her then and chose quickly. The rules said she had to give one interview. They didn't say how long it had to be, so she ended it in true Pruett style. "Maybe she didn't think she could stand the smell of your perfume. It's Eau de rat, right? You work for the Network, ferreting out little secrets like a good rodent."

Exposed as an undercover spy, the woman's value dropped to zero. Her doomed expression said she knew it.

Angelica smirked. "Next?"

### 3

"Cage Match Three!"

The cut withdraw rope still hung in place, reachable only by a high lunge. Angelica's opponent, another of the huddlers, stood directly

under it, trembling. Over half the women in this episode were not going through the change yet. They could withdraw because they had no overwhelming desire to feel their opponent's blood, to smell it, and taste it. They weren't lethal.

Angelica smirked, triggering a fresh round of screams from the crowd. The same could not be said of her.

The Frogtown girl had a rounded profile set in lines of panic and a large, heaving chest that was perfect for feeding babies, but she wouldn't get a pass. She was too short.

Recognizing Angelica's eagerness, the girl lunged for the remaining piece of rope.

"A contestant has withdrawn."

Angelica was supposed to leave now and wait to be rescheduled... *I can't*. The scent of fear and the last match's blood hung heavily in the air, reaching out to twist Angelica's fury.

When the little rabbit tried to dart around her, Angelica lunged, driving fists into her neck with both wrist blades extended.

Big chested huddler hit the mat with a damp gasp, sending the audience into fits of snarling delight. When Angelica began to stomp, no one stopped her.

#### 4

Anticipating arrest, Angelica quickly went to her flat for her gear, trying to decide if she would go

quietly. *Damn this fire!*

She shut the door and bolted it. Pain shot into her stomach! It ripped upward, flooding her with incredible heat.

Angelica slammed herself to the left, stumbling in the darkness. Blood hit the floor as more heat exploded, this time in her hip. She stumbled again, ducking instinctively, and felt the slice of a blade fly over her. *Three of them.*

Angelica *changed*, her sounds ugly. *I'll give the trio what they came for!*

The feel of the razors from her belt were a comfort in her hand as she threw them with the speed born of practice. The sharp, metal objects whizzed through the air as she spun around, returning pings as they sank into walls and soft, wet thuds when they tore into flesh.

“Ugh!”

Refilling her hands, Angelica aimed lower this time and heard two fleshier splatters as her weapons found both remaining marks.

*Silence.*

She waited, crouched in the dark.

*Crash! Splinter!* The door to her flat caved under the guard's insistence.

“Halt, there!”

When the lights flooded the room, Angelica counted three less contestants for her game. One of them was Emily Bush.

As soon as the guards identified her, Angelica retrieved her weapons, jerking each razor thin, 6-inch spike free with a satisfying grunt. “Send it all to my sister.”

One of the guards shouted for assistance over the muttering people in the hallway. “Medic!”

The doctor had no trouble with the shallow wound on her hip, but the gash in Angelica’s gut was harder to repair. She held herself frozen, listening to the guards outside the door as the medic tended her wounds.

“Why was Emily here? She wasn’t even a changeling yet!”

“Family duty. Their father was captured with a group of rebels. They’ll win their mother’s freedom if *none* of them survive.”

“What?”

“I keep forgetting you’re new. The Network has a three-for-one rule. If three family members will die for the one accused, then that person gets to go free.”

There was a brief pause where Angelica hoped to hear an answer to what she was suddenly wondering between waves of revulsion.

“What if one of them actually wins?”

“A lot of them do. Many of the three-for-ones are trying to eliminate familial competition. They get the usual prize and glory, plus they gain control of their household.”

“I’ve never heard that. Sounds like it makes it

more fun!”

“Yeah, the audience loves it. Last year, we had an episode with a whole family of rebel sympathizers on here. It was a hell of a rush. I had front row seats when they snapped on each other. I won two hundred UDs!”

Another part of Angelica’s soul began crying on behalf of people she didn’t know. What kind of enlightened world let this happen?

She grimaced, making the white coated healer flinch. It didn’t. Their world wasn’t better than the one that had preceded it. They hadn’t learned anything from the war, except to be more brutal and self-serving.

Pain came as the needle sank into muscle. Angelica concentrated on the silent images of the wall screen over the medic’s shoulder, breathing slowly in and out. The neutered men were harmless. She didn’t want to hurt him.

“Miss Pruett!”

“Hey, Angelica!”

The reporters arrived in a group, staying beyond the open door and out of reach in case she wasn’t in the mood to talk to them.

“Will you withdraw now?”

“How serious are her injuries?”

If she didn’t fight, Angelica would miss the prize visit, but it was unnecessary. She healed fast, and thanks to the disease, pain was with her all the time anyway. She wasn’t immune to it. She just didn’t care enough to react.

“Me? Quit?” Angelica smirked harshly at the cameras. “Only when I’ve won it all.”

Silence...and then the mobs cheered. The sound was so loud that she had to control the urge to locate a window. From the noise, Candice had been right about their kind coming in droves. The females their rulers had always feared for the strength they could add to the rebel males were finally crawling from their holes and caves. Things might get ugly in this city soon.

More than just the Pruetts and the Network were observing this show. Her wall screen flashed the front of the dome, highlighting the spectators surrounding the outside screens. She hid her thoughts under a blank expression. It had grown to near a thousand instead of the couple hundred that had lined the dome on her way in. The brutal matches were growing in popularity, something their rulers had counted on, but this was a different threat. If that many changelings attacked the complex at once, there could be a breach. She hadn’t counted enough Defenders or ground guards to cover a riot. Angelica, like her cousin, suspected the Network wasn’t as heavy on troops as it liked to imply and she stored the newest information while trying not to snap the neck of the medico sewing her guts back together.

Outside the dome, the crowd continued to grow.

After the reporters and medic exited, Angelica waited for the Defenders to arrive and arrest her for killing after a withdraw call. It made no sense when the computer relayed a message. Apparently, it wasn't against the new rules because the notice was to confirm her rankings were high enough to restock her food and the medical credits she'd used.

Her mind went to the gates, to being locked inside these walls until all of the others were dead. Angelica picked up another of those details the Pruett's were known for spotting. Usually, no less than two full squads stood tensely along this entrance, and it was the same around the complex. Contestants were constantly reminded it was to keep the dangerous rebels from getting in. Angelica no longer believed that. The dome was indeed to keep the council safe, but the enemy was the mob poised on their stoop. There was already an army here, just waiting to be led.

## 7

Because she'd survived Luck of the Draw, a braver reporter found her way to Angelica shortly after the ambush. This kind didn't have a crew, just a hard face and a camera girl who didn't speak.

"Miss Pruett, can you tell us what it was like to kill a celebrity?"

Angelica shrugged. "Blood's the same."

A long pause, a choice to push on. "Did you honestly come for the fights? Don't you even want

a bachelor?”

Angelica’s vision flickered pink. *So much that it hurts.* “They’re cute, who wouldn’t want one? Wish they all weren’t so thin, though. I worry I might break them.”

She threw in a chuckle, and felt the interest pick up instantly. In one answer, she’d declared a problem with the cherished males. Would there be a response from the public or the Network? Angelica was rooting for the mob outside.

“So you assume you’ll win?”

The reporter knew better than to follow the tip live without researching it, but she wanted to. It was in her tense grip on the microphone.

Angelica finished the rest of the questions as politely as she could force herself to, hoping the reporter would come back for more. Angelica had figured out how to use that angry Fourth Estate.

This reporter, Dana, was dressed in a simple sweater and jeans, unlike most of the others who were constantly trying to outdo each other with the next big fad. Last year, it had been contacts that gave them glowing red eyes while they interviewed. The Network had quickly banned the contacts after one of the changelings mistook a reporter as a contestant because of it and ripped her throat out on live waves.

Still, Angelica thought she could see the woman’s own attempts to create a fad with an artfully spiked tattoo that ran from her wrist to disappear under her tan sweater. Angelica narrowed

in on it. She'd spotted something like that before, hadn't she? *On a man's arm...*

As the reporter and her crew strode down the hall, Angelica heard a lowly spoken order to the short, bald girl on her flank

"Get a copy of that to the zone and be quiet about it."

That was where Candice and the rest of her family had headed, where she'd be going too, after she collected a prize. Was the reporter a threat? Was she in contact with the rebels? A spy for them?

More of the tattoo was visible as Dana twisted up the microphone cord and Angelica was able to place it. One of the convicts they'd tracked last month had sported matching ink on his arm. That convict had been Baker, the leader of the rebels. He was the one who'd told Angelica the drill noise was the sound of a rookie being inked. It surprised her to find a rebel sympathizer in this complex. The stories of salaries being low had always existed, and payoffs were hard to keep track of, but reporters were notoriously pro-Network.

Angelica didn't know yet how far she might sink into the rebel cause, but she'd had two strong faults even before the change. She'd been nice, and she'd been protective of those who were weaker. Both of those old traits might be heard from and it wasn't because Candice was with the rebel males now, trying to retrain them and she needed help. Angelica had witnessed too much injustice, felt too much human suffering, to keep ignoring the

tyranny. When this was over, she would settle fully into the cause and do her family duty.

## 8

Upon entering the cells this time, the bachelors were already seated at the long table. The Den Mothers reluctantly withdrew.

It was the same group of males as the first visit.

Angelica searched each of them with such intensity that they couldn't hide their worry. Only two of them didn't flinch when her chair scraped the floor as she sat.

Feeling heat in thin, shaky waves, she found the pristine man from her last visit staring at her body again. She made her voice as inviting as she could. It was time to thin this herd too. "You'd be mine?"

He hesitated for an instant, but it was enough. No, not if he had a choice.

"Of course."

The meek answer displeased her, causing a slight frown.

He quickly corrected himself, obviously terrified. "I'd be honored to be your mate!"

Angelica wanted to recoil from the incredible need that was shocking her with its strength, but the voice was all he had. He was too tame. "Shift."

She surprised them again by offering a bit of comfort. "And good luck to you."

He stared, shocked at the friendly tone. As he left, the male sent a searching glance over his broad

shoulder, asking one question—had he passed up a good owner?

His replacement, a cute, young redhead, took the seat warily as Angelica gestured at those she'd mentally cut on her last visit. "Shift."

That left three here, with eight total remaining to pick from. She saw their relief and confusion as they went, and then she was sucking oxygen into lungs that had none.

There had been five bachelors she hadn't inspected yet—the redheaded replacement for pristine male, and now four more men came into the room with such harmony that she scarcely breathed for fear of breaking it. *So beautiful!*

Angelica swallowed as they sat, dropping her head. *Breathe. Control.*

When the Den Mothers brought out the sweet-smelling steaks, she finally glanced up. Some of the men were subtly inspecting the plates with anticipation. Her guess had been right—they weren't usually fed this way. She thought of her next interview and gestured toward the food. "Eat."

The silence wasn't quite as thick as during her first visit. She felt more in control, but she desperately longed to stroke them. Angelica let her pink vision roam their perfect skin instead. *One of these might be mine!*

Angelica lingered on the last male to come out. Even compared to the others, he was impressive with those thick arms and perfect skin. Long blond hair flowed in a ponytail over his shoulder and

matched the yellow outline of a neat beard that she instantly wanted to rub against her fingers. “Are you a breeder?”

He flushed, shaking his golden hair. The color sent heat flaring into her gut without the sound of his voice. *Nice*. Angelica mentally put him into second place.

“I’d hear how long each of you have been here and of your life before.” She didn’t say, “*and if you do this willingly*”, but it was clear to her ears. “We’ll start on the right.”

It took most of the hour and their hesitant answers bothered Angelica. Since birth was the most common answer, but sold by their family was second. One had been nine, torn from his family’s murdered bodies. Another had been stolen from a farm near an old city that he didn’t remember well enough to name. A third, with a voice that cut her in half, claimed he’d been won in a card game before being sold. He’d been so young that he had no other memories. Angelica sensed that part was a lie, but his pain had been clear enough. Enslaving men had been done for the good of all humankind. She agreed the war made securing them necessary, but was all this?

“*Can we ask you a question now?*”

Again, their voices together distracted her from the heat.

“Yes.” What was it they were concerned about?

“*Have you ever snapped?*”

“No. My cousin did—the one who was here last month. When it was my time to change, she taught me how to control it.”

“And does it work?”

The last to come out asked her the question cautiously, knowing she would react to his voice alone.

She slammed her lashes shut. *Definitely in the top.* “Yes.” They couldn’t argue. If it wasn’t true, she would have already snapped. “Any more?”

“Who do you battle next?”

This was the chin lifter from her first visit, and Angelica evaluated him as she answered. “I never know until the match.”

His rugged face grew torn with indecision. Almost unpleasant to look at right then, her stomach growled, encouraging her to dig deeper. Chin lifter wasn’t as widely built or as tall as the others and that half sneer was a deterrent that she suspected he used intentionally to avoid being picked. It gave him a cruel appearance. Angelica wondered what he would be like with a smile or a laugh to light up his darkness. Then, he hit her with a full blast of his voice.

“I could probably tell you, if you ask me nicely.”

The sound of his voice! That tone of intimacy!

Animal man glared at chin lifter. “What are you doing?!”

There were also surprised mutters from the others at the table. Angelica sensed if anyone else

could have heard him right now, the violet striped man on her left wouldn't have spoken.

“Well?” Purple glared harder.

Purple stripe was clearly the leader among this lot. Angelica wanted to offer assurance, but she couldn't. Hearing them and their carefully controlled tones was an amazing agony to be battled. Their voices raised in emotion were simply to be survived and she remained frozen as each word sank into her lust and spun it harder.

“It's against the rules! You can't seduce her!” Purple was almost shouting.

He was on her right, with his sweet, dark skin, close enough to grab. *Fire*. Angelica's grip tightened on the fork.

“You don't want one of the others in here do you? At least we know we're safe with this one.” Chin lifter had a sarcastic ring to his voice that bumped him to the top of her list. He was no cringing male.

“You know what we've all read in the files! Being a Pruett doesn't mean anything!”

The leader's hissed fury pelted her with white-hot gravel that stuck to her skin and burned. She'd been wrong about there being no spark in them. They were as full of rage as she was.

Chin pointed. “See?”

There was a brief silence with their attention solely on her. Angelica held very still, wishing she'd listened to their names.

Purple shrugged. “Maybe.”

“She should have snapped already!” A snort of scorn came from Chin, along with a waved hand that swirled his scents—delicious burnt chocolate—into her brain, where it began searing her alive.

An angry shrug came from their leader “Maybe she just doesn’t want us!”

Angelica’s chin jerked up at that, flames in her red eyes. The fork in her grip snapped, digging into her palm.

They all cringed and because of it, she managed the impossible. She stayed in her seat.

The fork clattered loudly, pieces sliding along the china. Breathing harshly, Angelica concentrated on the slow drip of her blood. After a moment, the conversation, the torment, resumed.

“None of the others we’ve been in here with have that kind of control. We agreed. She’s the one.”

Angelica wondered about that, but didn’t ask, aware of her last minutes with them flying by.

“We want a new vote.”

“You’ve been there for her matches! She’s brutal!”

“It’s the change.”

“Exactly—a constant danger! We’d never survive the trip.”

“It’s not dangerous to a true mate.”

Chin sounded like he was familiar with it. Angelica stared at his cleanshaven face. “You know how it works?”

His beautiful gray gaze almost glowed with

something she identified as hope.

“Not really, but I’ve heard there’s a bond, that it’s impossible for a mate to be hurt, even in a rage.”

Angelica had heard the same from Candice, but like the bachelors, she wasn’t positive she believed it. “Precautions should still be taken.”

He shrugged in obedience, sending that powerful scent over the table. *Mmm...* He was the one layered in the intoxicating scent that she was betting was natural. He wasn’t the type that spent time primping before a mirror. There were too many calluses on his big hands for that, too many tan lines that declared he sometimes left the dome. That was something he had to be doing without the Network’s approval. Males were never alone in public. Because of that, Angelica suspected he had a lover.

“I’m Jason.” There was no way to miss the deliberate lure that made her guts churn harder. He wanted her to notice him, remember him. His scent washed over her again and she found herself bringing it into her lungs as if she’d been denied air for a long time. As she smothered a groan at the flames, Angelica snorted mentally. No problem there. She wasn’t likely to forget a *smell* that made her feel out of control. It wasn’t something she had ever encountered before.

Jason wasn’t shying from her regard and Angelica held his eye as the heat sparked. “Are you registered?”

He still didn’t look away. “No.”

She realized they were having a conversation in

surprise. *He isn't afraid to talk to me!* It was another sign of what she needed—courage—and it gave her hope. “Are you willing?”

He gave an eager smile that made her heart rate increase.

“I’d make someone a good mate.”

Angelica let a bit of red bleed into her eyes. “I don’t doubt it, though I suspect she’d better stay on her toes around you.”

He flushed, not answering and Angelica immediately began to suspect him of keeping secrets. *Sexy!*

She slowly stood as the green haired Den Mother appeared.

“Five minutes.”

Angelica was glad when the woman exited, nose in the air. She needed a match right now, somewhere to put this burning ache.

“Can I wrap that?” Jason was waiting calmly to be answered.

The others were shocked into a frozen silence. Was it another test?

Angelica nodded, answering both. “Slowly.” She braced. “One of the Den Mothers will stand nearby to be a target.”

The blue haired mother immediately came out to take Angelica’s right. Her expression was unreadable, but the bounty hunter felt the surprise and ignored it. She wasn’t taking any chances with her control.

*I won't hurt him. I won't hurt him.* Angelica

repeated the words silently as the perfectly scented prize knelt at her feet with a medical kit. She stiffly lowered herself into the chair.

A bit above her 5'7", Jason was lean, hard. The muscles in his arms flexed under the shirt as he opened packages and her mouth went dry. No, he wasn't as beautiful as the others were. She was certain there would be times his face would twist into an ugliness that mirrored his mental pain. Her need increased.

The image of easing this torment with a breakable doll held little appeal. To think that it might be with a pure mate, who had courage, sent fresh flames over her charred skin. Angelica wanted a man raw, unkempt, and uncringing most of the time.

"It might sting a little..." His hand trembled as he reached for hers.

Angelica opened her clenched fingers to allow him access, the first unrelated male to be allowed such a liberty. His big fingers slid across her skin...

The room spun! *Changed!*

Jason was surrounded by a wall of fire, dark hair flowing, gray eyes glowing for her, for her touch, and then they were alone in the cool darkness, burning bodies entwined! She arched as he thrust heavily against her, mouth demanding.

The vision vanished as she shoved the chair into the wall to leap up, hissing with hunger like she'd never felt. *I will have him!*

Angelica's red sight went over his tensed body,

still kneeling at her feet. She clenched her fists as the Den Mother stepped between them. *Breathe*. In. Out.

“Told you.”

The gloating in Jason’s tone sent a shiver of dangerous flames through the harsh grip that Angelica had on herself.

Purple stuck his chest out in challenge. “If you’re so sure, ask her to claim you when she wins!”

Thrown tauntingly, Angelica wanted to answer, to agree, but she stood still, afraid if she did any more, she wouldn’t be able to stop.

“Yeah, Rankin will like that.” The blond man’s tone was sarcastic.

The Den Mother moved at that name and Angelica took note of it even as she burned.

Purple nodded. “You’ll both be dead.”

Another of the bachelors sneered. “He’s too scared.”

“I’ll be hers...” Jason spoke slowly.

The words hit her hard, burnt deep into her gut.

“If she’ll love me.”

Without a touch this time, the images came again, their bodies resting in the aftermath. As strong as the first, this image filled her with a sense she recognized with desperate longing. *Peace*.

The choice had been made.

Angelica forced it out with a gentleness that she didn’t know still existed in her. “I can, in time.”

The happiness emanating from him was a spark. Her claws dug into his arms as she yanked him to

his feet and urgently pushed her lips to his, breath catching, grip tightening at the feel of him, of his whimper of fear. She held them there, willing him to feel the crush of lust that she was, letting the flames lick up her body with a tongue of cruel fire. The moment stretched out into an incredibly agonizing bliss as she waited, felt, shivered from the heat.

And then he responded! His lips pressed ever so slightly and she was almost lost!

“Uumm!”

The sound, rough with eager delight instead of fury, broke the moment and saved him. She’d never heard that from herself.

Angelica released him and spun away, but as she opened the door, Angelica locked gazes with the blue haired mother.

He was hers. He was not to be brought out to the other contestants. The woman knew all of it without being told. Angelica saw the edge of the familiar tattoo on the woman’s arm, and made the connection.

*“That’s the sound of a rookie getting inked.”*

That beautifully detailed swirl was indeed a rebel symbol. There were more of them here than their rulers might suspect.

As Angelica left, passing near enough to some of the shocked males to pinch them if she wanted to, she felt no overwhelming need. She had made the choice. Now, she had to win Jason’s papers.

Angelica was back in her flat before she

replayed the conversations and realized she also needed to discover who Rankin was. The Den Mothers were more scared of her than of the Pruetts. Angelica didn't care for that at all.

## 9

### Jason

*I manipulated her by using courage.* It was rumored the Pruetts were drawn to it and he'd remembered. He now had a potential owner and it wasn't Rankin! He wanted to brag, but Jason strode by the other stunned bachelors without revealing his joy.

Angelica was fierce. He had hopes she could handle Rankin, but even if she couldn't kill the Defender, she would take him out of the complex and give him a chance to be free. Rankin couldn't challenge them until then because of the possible scandal, but once they were out of the city, another game for survival would start. Jason would have to warn his new owner about the coming danger.

Jason pushed off the too tight new clothes and settled into his threadbare robe, content that Rankin wasn't here to hurt him tonight. The rebel elements in New Network City had set off another explosive and Rankin had been sent to investigate, interrogate, brutalize. It was what she excelled at.

Angelica did, too, Jason knew, but he believed in the rumors about her family. When she heard his story, she would be honor bound to take him to

Baker.

Jason already felt bad for tricking her. It was obvious that she needed him for the pain relief, but Jason wanted the life that had been stolen from him. Angelica might be strong enough to fight the fire. He was amazed at her control, but he had a list of things he needed to be happy and few women would be able to satisfy them all. Until he found the one who could, Jason wanted to be free to help the rebels take down the Network and to be there for Rankin's death. That was what he needed the most.

Chapter Four  
**Heaven and Hell**

1

“**I**t is day two of the second round and we are down to eight contestants to start the morning’s matches!” the announcer blared.

Not scheduled for a battle, Angelica had spent day four of the games in her larger studio apartment on the next floor, studying information on the wall screen while trying not to think about her prize. She’d never had a day stretch so long, but she had learned a great deal about Rankin.

The top Defender was known to the world as a protector of the complex males, but according to rumors, Rankin liked to take advantage of that position by abusing them herself. When Angelica offered a generous amount of UDs, she was informed that Rankin had a small stable of men she visited regularly. Angelica’s personal guards had whispered small details that burned in her brain.

*“She’s got one now, in your lot.”*

*“She gets them young, grooms them. Sometimes she spends hours with them in their cells or her den.”*

*“She hurts them.”*

*“Yes, and more than most changelings do*

*during a rental session.”*

*“They’re given favors to make the other males hate them and isolate them, so she has complete control.”*

*“She’ll kill to keep her favorite.”*

Angelica had also found the file for her choice, and confirmed that’s who he was. She suspected he’d been trying to force her hand in order to escape Rankin. *It worked.*

All of these things were in her mind as she settled into the plushy chair for round two and got ready to be inoffensive. She wanted something this time.

“So, we’re chatting with Angelica Pruett! The newest rankings have placed you in second, solidly behind the favorite, Kim Lee. Do you believe that’s fair since you have more kills?”

“I’ve never thought it mattered.”

It was the reporter she’d tipped off. Angelica wondered if the woman had been a Defender. It was in the way she sat so alertly, sweeping the corners and employee gates behind the rows of reporters. *She definitely has the shoulders for it.* In the cage, Miss. Reporter might be a real match.

“And your opponent’s comment? Does that bother you?”

*Yes, so much that I want to taste her swampy blood.* “Not anymore. I gave away my stars.”

The reporter gasped as mutters went through those who were listening, betting on her, playing with her life. She had no personal security now.

“You sent him your protection?”

“And matched their pay from my personal account. When someone says they plan to attack, I take them seriously. I won’t have him or the other bachelors hurt, and I hope the Network won’t either.”

*Easy, careful.* The reporter’s expression cautioned Angelica, but her excited body language said to keep going.

Angelica did. “The Den Mothers are good, but against a changeling, there’s not much they can do and we know it.” Her voice rumbled lower. “And some of us use it. Maybe there have been threats.”

“I’m positive our rulers have everything under control.” Dana’s eyes were bright pools of glee, but her tone was perfectly offended. “Back to you, Phyllis.”

As the camera light flashed to red, Dana nodded once in recognition before stepping from the neat little booth.

Angelica had made an ally. It felt strange. Normally, Pruett’s only collected enemies while in the complex, and stacked up grave fillers.

## 2

“Cage Match Five!”

This would decide another of the final four. Angelica observed the two fighters eagerly as they stepped into the ring.

Chelsea, dressed all in blue, was the favorite

over the last Diva member, who she'd mostly forgotten about. The fury was coming in thick waves from that woman though, and Angelica found herself rooting for the underdog so she wouldn't have to fight the sister. She still hadn't erased that haunted expression.

It was a shock when Chelsea blasted her opponent with that very look, causing the gang member to stumble the way Angelica was worried about doing. *It isn't real!*

Chelsea lunged forward with a brutal throat punch, catching her prey unaware. Bones snapped, quickly smothering the other woman.

"Match to Bush! We have a Bush in the final rounds!"

The audience was on its feet, blocking her from view as they cheered and jeered. Angelica exited the stands, hoping Chelsea hadn't noticed her. *I need to think*. She would do it while spilling blood in her next match.

### 3

"Cage Match Six!"

As Angelica spotted the female in the ring, Network logo flashing for the cameras, she was relieved. Her last battles wouldn't be as hard as this one. Ratings discounted, she had judged Kim Lee to be her main competition; she was glad to know it was mostly in the bag after this one.

Unlike her cousin's match, there were no

pleading relatives along the ramp as Angelica walked down. Pruetts didn't give mercy. Everyone knew that now.

Thanks to the monthly lottery, only one family member got a male from the global mate list and that was usually a spent rented male with only a few years left to live. The others had to gather the funds to buy one, something socialites could afford. Or they could enter the games and fight. For some, the disease was the drive, but for others, it was a more subtle effect that they were searching for a cure to. Without a mate, there was no child, no happy-ever-after. Kim Lee's expression implied the ache for that future was worth her life. Angelica understood completely.

Her opponent stood away from the withdraw rope, the new one that replaced her statement of intimidation. Angelica allowed herself one human moment of unease. The woman had the big, rough hands of someone who had trained on nature. It was easy to imagine her in the swamps of her hometown, swinging through the trees and wrestling pythons. Angelica had heard that was popular in the swamps.

Then she considered her waiting bachelor, and how it had felt to have him touch her willingly. *Rankin will buy him if I die here.*

Rage exploded into fury as bright as the blue laser lights that threw the crowd into delighted chaos.

Kim Lee waved her hands, crouching as the dividing bar finished going down. "Come on, then!"

Angelica immediately lunged forward, tempting her.

The woman knew better and shot around her instead.

Angelica spun, keeping Kim in sight as the woman danced around the mat. Designed to make her dizzy and confused, Angelica put a quick end to her running by timing and executing a nice leap and tuck that dropped her directly into Kim's path.

Angelica jumped again as Kim kicked out, sweeping for her legs.

Missing angered Kim. She pulled a handful of blades from her belt in a fast motion and let them fly.

Angelica ducked, hand rising to catch one in her forearm. Then Angelica threw her own spikes and Kim was the one dropping, evading, being trimmed.

Kim Lee snarled furiously. "Slam you!"

Angelica recognized the fear. "No babies, here, sweetheart—only blood."

Kim knew she couldn't beat Angelica, that death waited, but she never considered the withdraw rope as she lost control, finishing the change in a quick evolution. Her vision darkened to crimson, hair growing out of the holders, and her body expanded, muscles straining against her clothes. The Network favorite screamed at Angelica in rage as her pupils burst into red flames. She flew forward with vicious snarls ripping from her throat.

Angelica braced to meet her, still in control.

Kim's arms slammed around Angelica, teeth

going for her neck.

Angelica used her momentum to roll and send Kim flailing with a knee to her gut.

Kim crashed against the cage wall in a heap, but recovered before Angelica did, lunging again. She landed on her back, nails seeking flesh.

Angelica immediately let their combined weight cause a collapse. They slammed into the mat with an audible crunch as Angelica snapped the wrist around her throat and drove an elbow into the woman's chest while Kim clawed. There was no logic to the attack, simply the rage. It was easy to roll, shove her other arm forward, *slice*.

Kim grabbed her stomach with one hand, holding up the other as she slid to her knees. Blood trickled from her mouth as she held out a red palm, the fury fading. "Mercy?"

But it wasn't Angelica's to give. Kim's brain made the choice. She slumped to the bloody mat.

"Match to Pruett!"

Items rained over the cage, some making it through the gaps in the fencing. Angelica saw keys, cards, trash, and gold star bracelets as the crowd exploded with fresh screams. Another squad shoved into the unruly throng as she scooped up a few of the gifts.

When Angelica stood, the blue haired Den Mother was lurking in the entrance to the fenced tunnel she'd walked down to get to the cage. Waiting for her, confident the Pruett would win, but she wasn't happy with the information she needed

to deliver. Her wild hair and tired profile said Angelica wouldn't like the news.

#### 4

This time when Angelica strode into the cells, there was only her chosen male and the sentries, who she'd insisted must stay inside the room to protect her chosen male.

Jason let her see how unhappy he was with all the security. Instead of controlling his expression, he glared through the dark bruise on his cheek. Rankin had come by to express her anger at his televised boldness.

*Fury*, so much hotter than what Angelica was used to, exploded in her mind. Rankin's death was now a matter of time.

Angelica sat next to him on the couch. When he flinched, she kept space between them. "Have you changed your mind?"

Jason turned to her in immediate denial.

She thought he was manipulating things, but she wanted him, no matter his intent. "This is what you want?"

"Yes. I'd be yours!"

*Scorching flames of panicked heat...*and then control. She glared at his cheek. "Did Rankin do that?"

He cringed from her as if *she'd* hit him, and Angelica knew her suspicions were right. "You need protection."

To her surprise, Jason leaned closer. “I need to reach Baker!”

Angelica froze.

Jason was aware of their audience. He rested his silky hair against her shoulder like a lover. “Please, we need your help. The Pruetts are for—”

“Freedom,” she finished, barely breathing as she understood he was begging for sanctuary. He’d lied. Honor, the powerful kind she’d inherited, flooded Angelica to war with the pain of his betrayal and the feel of him against her. *I chose wrong.*

Angelica shoved him away and lurched to her feet. She wanted to tear things apart in agony, but the commitment to the family, to their values, wouldn’t let her renounce the choice. The flames vanished suddenly to be replaced with misery. *My torment isn’t over yet.*

“Wait.” Jason feared she would switch him for one of the others. His pupils shrank into pinpricks of terror. “Please. I know things...”

To the listening world, it might sound like a sexual line, but Angelica doubted their rulers would read it that way. Was he trying to get himself killed? “You’re playing with fire.”

The enslaved male stared back in open desperation. “I’m already burning. I have been for a long time.”

That was another misery she understood. Angelica came back to the couch as she sealed up the disappointment, the anguish. Jason wasn’t one of a kind. Eventually, she would locate *her*

bachelor, her cure. Right now, she had a duty to handle and she went about it like any other Pruett would have. She lunged for his throat.

Angelica's hot body slammed him against the couch, long legs straddling his hips. He cowered away before he realized she was talking.

“Tell me—now!”

“The Network knows about the safe zone.” He tried to breathe past the fear as she ran warm, rough hands through his hair. “As soon as Baker gets there, they'll bomb it.”

She jerked back, maybe to determine if he was lying, and then pressed her mouth to his! Jason froze again, trying to listen through the panic...the *interest*. She smelled good, like a fresh wind through the service tunnels.

“How do you know?” She spoke against his lips.

Jason struggled to talk as her musky scent filled his nose. Her legs fit around him so well... “Rankin let it slip.”

Angelica tensed at the name. It gave him the courage to wrap a gentle hand around her neck. Her hair covered his words from the cameras. “I'll give you anything you want. Please don't let her buy me.”

Angelica's heart clenched in jealousy and pain. “You'll be with me when I go.” Angelica couldn't stop from sealing the promise with another kiss. The feel of him under her was incredible torture.

The heat blazed up when he responded. Angelica knew it was just to confirm that he would

uphold his end of the deal and give her whatever she wanted. The notion had her crying inside, even as she smoldered.

“Five minutes.”

The Den Mother’s voice implied she’d get a word or two if she had time for it. Angelica tore herself from his sweet lips. “I’ll get you there and then you’re free.”

She stood up, instantly missing his heat.

Jason held her gaze. “Whatever you want.”

She snarled in hurt and spun from the room. What she wanted had already been denied.

The Den Mother was waiting for her near the music shelf. Angelica made a good show of handing her a UD slip to cover the warning she suspected the mother was waiting to deliver. Angelica didn’t mind it as much as she appeared to. This weird woman was one of the rebels. She would keep him as safe as she could.

As Angelica neared the shelf, she read the cleverly hidden words written in dust behind the stereo.

*She’ll come for her property.*

Angelica tossed the payment slip on top of the message so the woman would be able to erase it when she picked up the money. “Good.”

As Angelica shut the door to the prize cells, she evaluated the guards she’d earned. They weren’t naturally loyal, but she could pay their price.

She uttered low words that brought the big women close to her.

By the time she reached the end of the hall, the unease had lifted. With what she'd paid them, those big women wouldn't even let council members in to rent her prize without immediately calling her. Angelica couldn't stop anyone from visiting him, but she would know about it even when the Den Mothers weren't around and hopefully be able to intervene before Jason got hurt again.

On one layer, Angelica was busy going over how they would get to Baker. Under that, she was burning. After all she'd done and would do, she still couldn't put out this fire. *I guess I'll be picking through the rebels at the safe zone, after all.*

## 5

“Welcome to Round Three of the Bachelor Battles! Now that we're down to just four contestants, all the matches will be held here in the big cage! Come bet on these man-hungry women as they fight to the death! Who's ready to play? Who wants to play? Do ya? Do ya, really? Well, come on then!”

There was a brief pause where Angelica smothered a snarl. How had Candice stood the wait between matches? Clips of the week's fights flowed along the tall screens as the enormous crowd screamed and pushed against the lines of sentries and barriers in front of The Block.

“Let's talk about another of our fabulous fighters. Angelica Pruett is now in first place and

has caused much the same furor at these games that her cousin Candice did nearly a month ago before going on to win. From stirring up rebellions in the Den Mothers, to ripping out throats with her teeth, she's certainly living up to that brutal family name."

Angelica hit the button, switching channels before she lost patience and used her claws on the screen.

"...refusing to let other contestants visit the prize Angelica has a fondness for. Rumors speculate if she wins, she'll defend her title next week in an attempt to claim another of her favorites."

The bounty hunter stopped on the next channel, studying the image. It was Stone Mountain. The charred, bare rubble sent her to the night it had been bombed. She still bore a scar from the destruction. She'd met the rebel leader there and spent a night in his compound with Candice. It had been full of life then. Now, even the jungle that had hidden them was withered and brown.

The station switched to a group photo of the ten most wanted rebels. Those faces were angry—even more than she was in the heat of the change. Their ready expressions and hard stances declared they were coming for the Network at some point. Angelica silently rooted them on before switching programs again. She hit the button, got the Network station.

"...are investigating a contestant's claims that the bachelors are not safe. Changes to the system may already be in the works."

Satisfied, she returned to the station for her coming challenge, ignoring the sounds outside the door as reporters and players prowled the halls. She'd planted a seed and it was growing.

“For the start of this round, the council will pick the exhibition for the remaining contestants. These elimination challenges are lethal. At least one of our contestants will not be with us when this is over. The top two finishers will feature in our elimination match. And our challengers will have to...climb the Wall of Death!”

## 6

“The Wall of Death is a fifty-foot granite cliff with deadly weapons and no dividers between the contestants! This should be wonderful!”

Angelica studied the wall as they waited for the announcer to finish, picking out places to hit and spots to avoid. She'd watched a few of the games, but the Wall wasn't among them. She'd heard of it, of course, and the billboards upon entering New Network City were impossible to miss, but staring up at that unflinching challenge was enough to kick in her survival sense. Deeply anchored in the floor, it was as if part of a mountain had been set into this complex. She couldn't even see the peak from where she stood.

“Our four challengers are allowed full contact in their race to be the first to reach the top. In order to make it harder, there are weapons hidden in the

crag and ledges. How many will make it? Will this episode end right here, folks? It's happened before!"

The gate slid open.

Angelica walked the fenced aisle to the line without responding to any of her opponent's glowers. She was in the far right of the four lanes, but she already planned to take the farthest path and zigzag her way up.

High above them, camera crews waited patiently to capture every drop of blood.

"Are ya ready? Then go!"

To everyone's surprise, Angelica stayed still as the other three fighters made a mad dash for the wall. They clawed at each other, drawing blood before the first foot of fifty was reached. Angelica waited until all of them were scaling the cliff.

"What is that clever little Pruett doing now?"

Angelica had an advantage over the others in one way. It would be enough to earn her second place—first, if she'd chosen the right dangerous path, but either spot would do. She wasn't fighting for a mate now, but for family honor. It was a stronger drive than the change.

With that in mind, she ran forward to lunge up the wall, snagging a ledge that the others had avoided because of the height. She grunted at the sharp stone under her fingers, the unforgiving feel of the rock.

Angelica hefted herself up, feet catching a small crag to push from and then she lunged again,

springing up four feet to snatch a wild hold on the edge of a weapon.

The claw hammer snagged the stone and caught her weight...it held. Angelica hung there long enough to secure a foothold and then she started climbing, using the claw edge with lunging swipes that would either advance her large distances or kill her when she fell.

Hungry edges tried to grab her, already tacky with blood from this week's regular episode. The stone sliced into her wrist, her arm, her leg.

The other three contestants were bunched above her, set to get to the top first, but fighting was about to slow them down. Angelica kept moving.

Chelsea reached a knife and immediately threw it at the changeling athlete directly below her.

The blade sank into the weightlifter's throat; she clutched at the hilt, falling.

The crowd roared drunken approval all around the wall. Those rafter-like seats gave them a bird's eye view of the climb.

The other player acted in commercials, but in her free time, she liked to climb mountains. Angelica followed Chelsea's lead. Her hammer slammed into the actress's neck with a dull thud.

The starlet let go and fell.

The noise was deafening as Chelsea and the Pruett advanced toward each other, blue lights streaming, bloodlust flowing.

Angelica ducked the wild leg kick and punched, hitting Chelsea in the chest.

Gasping, Chelsea kicked violently.

Angelica took the boot to her shoulder, and grabbed the leg, using the momentum to yank Chelsea off the cliff.

Angelica swung her out and tried to let go, but Chelsea wrapped both legs around Angelica in an iron vise and dragged them both off the wall.

## 7

Angelica woke to find her off-limits prize standing next to the bed she was in, coated in concern. She swept his healing bruise, then the room. She was in the medical bay. The gated cubicle next to her held the final battle, judging from the sounds.

The medical bay was set up much like The Block, with a small center post for the doctor, surrounded by seven partitioned booths. Each one was gated and shaded by a thin curtain, allowing knowledge of each other, but no contact.

The bed was softer than the couch in her new studio and the equipment was well cared for, but the bright, white walls were a vivid contrast from the green Angelica had been waking to all week. There were no windows here either, but this time, she doubted it was to keep them in. It was more likely that their rulers didn't want anyone to know what was on this side of the honeycomb complex. The secret was probably staggering.

In place of an eighth bay, a small walkway led

to the main door. Less than ten feet from where she was, the shadow patrolling that entrance was unmistakable.

“What deal did you make to come here?” Angelica was full of bitter jealousy and rage that needed a target.

Jason looked away from her snarl. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me!” Angelica growled. “Don’t ever do it again.”

He bowed to the order. “I won’t.”

By the tone, she suspected the price was high. She admired his courage. “Will you be okay?” There was little she could do, but she had to ask. Want her or not, she already felt like he was hers.

“Yes. There’s only so much she’ll do right now.”

Her hand shot out to capture his wrist.

Jason didn’t flinch, but he stiffened.

“You can use my name. I give you permission.”

Jason smiled sadly—a small glimpse of the man she thought he might eventually become.

“I already did.”

Angelica didn’t ask what he had used it for, fading as the medication jerked her under. She released him. “Why did you come?”

“I had to make sure you weren’t...dead. I had to *see* you.”

His tone told her as much as his words. She was his single hope. That was why. Angelica closed her eyes to hold in the disappointment. “It takes more

than that to kill a Pruett.”

“*Good!*”

For an instant, fury blazed hotter than the medication and her eyes became solid red as they flashed open. She hated the sound of his fear. “This will never happen to you again!”

Jason gave her another of those gentle smiles that she knew she could become addicted to.

“It’s worth it. Get better. *I need you.*”

She wanted to examine the tone, the words, but the darkness pulled her under.

Jason fastened the door to the gated compartment and locked it. He then waved the guards over and gave them a sharp glare that Rankin observed with interest. She’d been waiting for him to do exactly what he was now. Showing courage was rare.

“If the Pruett dies and there’s no feature match, the council will replace every one of you. Taking payments is fine, but not when it interrupts their scheduled programming. You know?” The worry from the hard sentries allowed Jason to turn to Rankin with an even tone despite the dread. He’d invoked Angelica’s name to get the Defender’s attention, to make her bring him here. Rankin hadn’t liked agreeing one bit and now, he would pay the fine. “I’m yours until dawn.”

Rankin’s evil blazed. She grabbed him by the arm, claws digging into his skin, stinging as she dragged him down the dimly lit service halls toward her den. He’d done the best he could to guarantee

Angelica's safety while she recuperated. If she won tomorrow night, she would protect him for a while after that. If she lost... Well, tonight would be a small sample of what he would suffer when Rankin bought him next month.

"Are ya ready?" Rankin cackled eagerly as she swung the gate open to march them into her foul scented room. "I know I am!"

## 8

### The Network

"We're all set for the meeting."

"Good."

It was just two of them, the Commander and the XO, enjoying the quiet.

The tower lounge was a large triangle-shaped room with an oddly formed desk in the center, surrounded by even odder chairs. Each armrest held a hand scanner, a note writer, and an alarm button. In the center of the desk, suspended with thin, durable chains, was a three-sided monitor showing darkness. Earlier, it had revealed a mob of thousands on the border with Canada.

Along these oddly shaped walls were doors for the council members. Each had their own entrance, providing ten total exits to be taken advantage of. Access to anything they wanted existed in those luxury residences, from hand served meals of tender veal and sweet fish that could only be had here, to stacks of intricate jewelry that many of the denizens

liked to use for wagering on the games. The monarchs enjoyed their lifestyle immensely.

“Send word to the coast. We’re ready for them to bring in the leaders now.”

“What if they won’t come? The last meeting only saw half their council for the power exchange.”

Juli snorted. “We’re offering a double train of supplies and males. It’s twice what they usually ask for. They’ll show.”

“Sometimes those bought through desperation do not remain loyal. There may be alliances.”

There was a small silence. “That would be bad.”

Glad their leader understood, the XO spelled it out eagerly. “Yes. If the rebels convince the west to join their cause, we could be facing the very weapons we hope to gain. The bothersome Pruetts have to be dealt with soon. We can’t keep using them this way.”

“Rankin will handle it.”

“Yes, about our head Defender—perhaps she has already outlived her usefulness.”

The main chair squeaked as it was emptied, followed by a gentle swish of tailormade clothes—the kind their wealthy subjects would never be able to afford. Even council boots were made by the sweat of a person, instead of a machine. Animal pelts had never touched their unmarked skin. “Considering the fuel she added to the media fire by putting a mark on one of the bachelors, I’d have to agree.”

“She could be caught in the crossfire.”

“That sounds exactly like what will happen. Do it as soon as she gives us the location.”

The XO proceeded toward the exit, and then stopped. “Communication is almost nonexistent. What if Rankin can’t get a call through?”

There was a thoughtful pause... “Activate her locator beacon so we can keep track. As soon as she stops moving hard, we’ll send in the plane.”

“You know we only have five rockets and three warheads left?”

“Yes. Two are for the meeting.”

The XO leered. “And one for Canada?”

“If it comes to that.” Juli studied the monitors, mind flying. “We’ll use something a bit larger, then. The west is still littered with dangerous toys. After we kill the leaders at the power exchange meeting, we’ll control it all. The UN needs to be very careful with me. I never bluff.”

Chapter Five  
**Are Ya Ready?**  
Day 7

1

**A**fter twenty-four hours in the medical bay, healing and listening to her opponent growl in the next booth, Angelica was doing better. Unlike Chelsea, she didn't mind solitude. She spent it deciding where her true loyalties were. She was a changeling and this disease might end her in time, but she was also a Pruett and before she went out, she wanted justice.

By all rights, both she and Chelsea should be dead and this episode over—with no winner. To keep that disappointment from ruining their game, the Network had used technology to heal broken ribs, punctured lungs, and snapped bones. They were both as good as new and she hated the enemy for it. If they had let her die, she would be free of this pain. Lying there with the Network's unknown chemicals restoring even the missing finger that had been severed on a crag as they smacked into the wall on the way down, she'd had time to think. The conclusion she'd come to was staggering, especially to her Pruett mindset.

*I didn't think I would win!* That was why she'd

been able to ignore Jason's betrayal so easily. Remission was a myth, and deep down, she'd always known. *I really did come here to die.*

It was a truth and a misery that she would hold close, but a newer, sharper edge had settled over her as she listened to the nearly incoherent ranting of the celebrity next to her. She loathed Rankin. They would meet outside these walls if she had her way, but Angelica hated the Network more. By keeping them alive to finish the episode, they had pushed her into the place where her cousin was. She had no choice now but to fight as hard as she could. When she won her new mate...

Angelica winced. When she got her temporary ward to Baker, she would let Candice know she'd made the choice. *The Pruettts are for freedom, and until I burn up or out, so am I.*

## 2

“Welcome to the final match of this week's episode of the Bachelor Battles! It's certainly been one to remember, folks. Don't forget to order your copy after the main event. Just twenty-eight UDs will get you every brutal fight, every prize visit, and every interview with all the vicious contestants. Order yours tonight!” There was a brief pause and then the reporter continued. “Let's go live to the cage with Dana, the only reporter to successfully speak with a Pruett more than once. Tell us, Dana, what did the changeling have to say?”

Angelica gritted her teeth, sharpening the edges of her rage as she listened from a small, partitioned booth behind The Block.

The big cage was different in size and it lacked a withdraw rope. Located directly below the main stage, they were fighting in the center of another floor of those humiliating reporter shanties. Smoke and bitterness coated the air in equal amounts as Angelica waited to confront her last opponent.

“Good evening, Reggie. Yes, Miss Pruett seems to tolerate me, but let’s be clear. She has no weaknesses.”

“Ahh. It sounds like you took the odds and bet on her.”

“I probably shouldn’t admit it, but yes, I did. Go Pruett!”

Angelica smiled, one of the happy stretches of her lips that had no place here. She wiped it from her lips with the thought of Jason. She hadn’t seen him since his unexpected protection visit.

“Seriously, Dana. How did she feel about the council sending someone to investigate her claims?”

“Reggie, the bounty hunter didn’t think it would cause this uproar, that’s for sure, and she regrets making trouble for the Network. She firmly believes they’ll handle any issues they find. She’s a Network player.”

That sounded strange to Angelica, like it had a double meaning, but the fury was distracting her as she let it build.

“What about this bachelor she’s chosen? Will he get to attend the match?”

There was a soft chuckle. “No. He’ll be viewing on a wall screen.”

“Surrounded by all of her earned guards, no doubt.”

More laughter came and the rage sharpened. She didn’t like being called Angel, but she loathed being laughed at.

“Well, the bell is up. Enjoy that front row seat, Dana.”

“I will, and don’t forget folks, get your copy tonight for twenty-eight UDs!”

### 3

“Match Three. Winner Takes All!”

They entered The Block from opposite halls, both striding confidently. Angelica was careful not to look at her opponent as they entered the cage. With their big hair and manicured nails, these celebrity females had done nothing on a regular basis, other than making conquests of their fellow socialites. Their weak, soft bodies proved that. This oldest sister might have the change on her side, but her nails were jagged, bitten down to the quick and her neck was covered in bruises. Angelica wasn’t the only one who’d had trouble sleeping through the assassins.

If not for Jason’s words to her guards, the latest attacker may have succeeded in poisoning them

both. Guards had shown up in time to plunge the syringe into the older woman's throat, but the funny part was, neither of the final players knew the assassin. That was just New Network City—deadly.

Angelica still hadn't officially met Rankin, but she'd observed the relaxed shadow, how *satisfied* she'd been after a night with Jason, and the fury had grown. She and Rankin had things to settle after she smeared this cage with blood.

Angelica could feel Chelsea's rage simmering like hers, waiting to boil over, so she did what any Pruett family member would have done. She grinned.

The roar from the crowd was immense. They knew what was coming, and they were eager to see if Angelica had discovered the trap. If not, her death would happen in this match. Angelica briefly wondered how many in the crowd would be poor women by dawn because of that bet.

“Go!”

Chelsea delivered that powerful gaze of wounded agony as the bar slid down.

Angelica laughed openly and loudly. “Pruetts have no sympathy! Fight or die!”

Angelica could see Chelsea's snap coming, and felt her own rising. This time, she surrendered that infamous control and let it happen, fury at everything now on display for the world. Heat ran up her legs, hair shooting out as her body swelled. Pain beat in her temples, rushing through her blood, stinging and gouging. The female across from her

was going through the same evolution of flips. Their sounds mirrored each other in violent echoes.

The crowd was uncontrollable in their delight of simultaneous snaps. The players' screams of agony were nearly drowned out by the mob's excitement as the bloodlust burst into their eyes, turning them full crimson.

They advanced at the same time, two lethal fighters in full form. The crowd held its breath as two fists rose into the air.

Both landed, staggering each of them.

Angelica swung again, faster than Chelsea, and sent blood flying from her mouth.

The returning hit jerked Angelica's head, blood running down her cheek...then she reacted as the situation deserved.

*Thud.* Angelica's brutal swing of both hands together sent Chelsea to the mat.

She leapt to her feet, missing at least one tooth, but Angelica wasn't done. Blood flew as she slammed her wrist into the starlet's jaw, making her cry out. She'd had the advantage in every fight until now, but without the sympathy she relied on, Chelsea's hits came as no surprise and did less damage. Angelica's swings were brutal, and she delivered one after the other without a pause.

Angelica struck out again, catching Chelsea in the temple.

The starlet stumbled and fell, unable to think, to control herself while changed.

Instead of moving in for the kill, Angelica's

rage slowly began to fade. *Why don't they train before coming here?*

Angelica hit Chelsea again instinctively as she struggled to get up, landing a harsh blow to the back of her neck.

Chelsea stayed down, bleeding, waiting to be finished off. And the Pruett hesitated.

“Do it!”

Chelsea's words quivered with fear and hatred as the disease faded from her, too.

Angelica hesitated, unable to take her relief this way after all the conclusions she'd come to. It was wrong.

Chelsea glared. “What are you doing?!”

There was still plenty of fight in her. Angelica could hear it. She wanted to stop the battle, to demand answers about the Network.

Chelsea forced her hand. “Rankin had him last night. I heard them. I'll bet he tasted sooo good!”

White heat flooded Angelica, rage instantly flaming back to life in an inferno of bloodlust.

Chelsea's lids closed over teary black eyes as Angelica's boot lifted, mouth opening. “I miss you, Momma. Good luck.”

The boot came down hard, snapping her neck with a perfectly delivered heel hit.

“Match to Pruett!”

*lost?* Chelsea had wanted to die and Angelica hadn't been able to stop herself. The starlet said the one thing she knew would snap Angelica into the killer that always lurked inside now.

Ignoring the crowd around the cage that was trying to shove through the rows of guards, Angelica exited the arena without waiting for the announcer. She had to see Jason.

There were small islands of people behind the curtains, most of them staff. Angelica strode to the door without responding to any of the reporters, including Dana. They followed determinedly, calling sharp questions.

“What did she say?”

“Were you about to offer mercy?”

Angelica heard another voice nearby, echoing over all the others.

“That’s our little Angel, folks!”

*Strike! You’re out of passes.* Angelica moved that way.

“...and so the littlest Pruett upholds the questionable family name, brutally executing more than... Hey! What are you doing? Give me—”

*Slap!* Angelica glared. “Don’t ever. Do that. Again.”

The reporter peered up in hurt surprise. “Do what?”

“Call me Angel.” Angelica exited the cubicle before the rage could slip out of the tight hold she had on it. She had to talk to him. She had to know he wasn’t hurt. *What if he has been?*

Her feet traveled faster through the corridors where they all shrank from her now. She wasn't sure what she would do, but Angelica kept the change close in case she needed it to kill the head Defender while the Network and the world watched.

## 5

The episode champion was required to spend two days locked up with her prize while the Network verified the win. Angelica went there now. She didn't care about the lack of luxury as she stalked toward the winner's suite. So what if her steps echoed on the carpetless floors and drew the attention of the big guards at each end of the hall? She'd already proven she would kill for him. Her harsh profile would now grace a wall somewhere in the complex, along with Candice and Mary. They had become legends in the Bachelor Battles, but that wouldn't send fans toward them like with some of the games champions. Angelica was glad. Groupies were the last thing she needed. A stalker would be more useful.

The blue haired Den Mother stood outside the winner's apartment, wary, but determined.

Angelica didn't want to talk.

"It's not true and you're smart enough to know it."

Angelica pinned the woman with a harsh glare she didn't flinch from.

"'Twas just a lie meant to make you finish."

Angelica knew it was the truth as soon as the woman said it, but the rage didn't fade.

"The Network wants to control the power of some citizens."

Angelica listened with growing revulsion.

Blue Mother explained in a fast rush of lowly spoken words that confirmed all of Angelica's suspicions and then some. "They approach celebrities who are popular and offer them high credits to enter the games, or they blackmail them into it. They pay double for each contestant killed. Triple to the families if they die. Chelsea freed her mother and gave her a new life with a large amount of credits and no disgrace. She also weakened the Bush family. They'll be consumed within a few years."

Angelica reeled. Hadn't she thought of the sisters as sacrifices and she, their executioner? How awfully right she'd been! The Network had rounded up a group of weaker females and killed them all through her and the other changelings. And it was happening every week, in every game they ran.

Angelica began to calm. "What about the winners?"

"They never know." The Den Mother's voice was kinder than Angelica felt she deserved.

"But the episode is always rigged, filled with uneven matches and death contracts?"

Instead of confirming it, the Den Mother changed topics. "What you did for the males was good. Fresh food came today and yesterday. They

look better already.”

Angelica didn't answer, too dazed. She'd been used, betrayed in ways totally different from the ones they'd all accepted. So had Candice, and maybe even her mother. Had it been going on longer? Willingly signing up was one thing, but being lured to death in order to send food and medical credits to your family was as wrong as it got.

Angelica ignored the Den Mother observing these thoughts spreading across her face, considering what it all meant. When she finally asked a single question, the woman was ready.

“Can I count on you in the future?”

“Yes. You'll try to kill her?”

Angelica returned the gravity, giving this strange woman her promise. “I'll do better than try.”

She went to the door. Her family had connections to be called upon, methods at their disposal that no one, not even the Network, knew of. Until then, she had a prize to claim—an untouched male who would stay that way.

Angelica opened the apartment door, hoping she had even half the control that Candice had shown by not hurting Daniel when he hadn't recognized her.

Satisfied that things would soon change for them all, the Den Mother slipped into the bowels of the complex to whisper sweet nothings to the other Den Mothers who were enjoying their single off day for this month. All the bachelor caregivers had bet

their life savings on the Pruetts. They were now wealthy women, but they still had to continue their servitude to avoid the Network suspecting fraud. Their boss didn't like it when employees tried to go their own way. It usually spelled doom for their entire family. In this case, the money was a pad for when the Network fell.

The Den Mothers had been in this complex long enough to sense even the smallest vibrations in attitude towards their tyrannical rulers. This year, the Changeling Winds had brought ripples that were still slamming into the dome. The next stage in their evolution was coming. After this, humanity would flourish or die out in a quick, horrid spiral that couldn't be halted.

Blue Mother didn't care which one happened at this point. She just wanted the suffering to be over for all of them.

## 6

Angelica shut the door.

Jason gawked in horror at his new owner. She was streaked in blood, clenched fists leaving crimson drops. Without the usual cloak, her sleeveless shirt and thick arms were also covered in gory splatters. Under all that mess were tattoos and muscles.

Pink became crimson as Angelica scented Jason.

He instantly recognized she was wound too

tightly from keeping control. The brutal cage match hadn't been enough to quell it. This was his end of the deal now, to offer the relief she needed, but he was terrified.

Jason wanted to warn the rebels, and to be free of this place for the first time in fifteen years, but it was also his home. Now alone with this brutal changeling, warning the rebels that the Network knew where the safe zone was suddenly seemed trivial compared to surviving what he'd willingly agreed to. And Rankin? Why had he feared her? *This one might actually kill him.*

Now that the deed was done and his future set, Jason couldn't move. He could talk though; he forced the required submission out through quivering lips. "Anything you want."

*"Anything you want."* Lust slammed through Angelica. She'd won him. He was hers... *No, he isn't.*

The rage increased, threatening to flip her into an animal in her grief. Angelica marched to the washroom at a quick clip. She wasn't safe to be around and he couldn't help.

Angelica slammed the door, flipped the flimsy lock. She now had a mate who didn't want her. What had she gone through all of that for? Her heart clenched as she dropped to sit on the floor, shivering in torment. She'd won the game, but lost herself. All she could feel was need and hurt, and she stayed where she was as it burned through her like flames racing across dry grass.

*I'm safe with her.* The stories about these strange Pruett women were true. Jason was delighted to discover it. He wouldn't be hurt, but she would be. He'd tricked her, drawn her to his scent with no thought for her pain, and her honor wouldn't let her accept the service he'd been trained to deliver.

Jason waited for the sound of water or any noise, but the tense silence made him worry. She was suffering and he had a low tolerance. Hadn't Rankin's begging broken him as much as her anger? Last night had been no different. She'd taken him to the brink and then held him there until he was the one pleading for relief. At least he hadn't bled this time. Jason suspected the Network was to thank for that. They hadn't liked being embarrassed by his bruise on live waves.

*Silence...* Jason nervously swept the flat. All three rooms of the winner's apartment were covered in the most basic of drab furnishings. The walls appeared wooden, but Jason was positive it was something more durable. They were smooth and neat, without much wear and tear. He'd often wondered how the Network managed that without constantly having a construction crew up here. Changelings were notoriously violent.

*More silence...* Against his better judgment, Jason went toward the door. "Would it help to eat?"

Angelica's breath caught at the sound of his voice. In her misery, she hadn't heard his steps.

“Yes.” *Anything to get him away!*

Angelica had confronted her future, but she’d been ignoring the desolation. She had no idea how she would spend the next two days (*nights!*) shut in with him.

“What would you like?”

“Anything!”

There was a pause while he realized she didn’t care. “Angelica?”

“What?!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know this would be so bad for you.”

Angelica squeezed her lids together so tightly that spots swam across her vision. “I’ll live.”

And she would, though she already knew the next weeks would bring her to her limit.

She felt Jason reaching for the doorknob.

Angelica slammed her fist through the bottom panel. *Crack!*

Her claws curled around his ankle in an iron grip. Flames shot through her skin at the contact; she snatched her hand back. “You come through this door and you’ll be mine, willing or not!”

Angelica listened to him flee and dropped her head, taking deep breaths that gave her pink tints instead of red. She used an image of Candice’s superhuman control, concentrating. *Better.*

Flat black snapped into place. Other than the newest torment she was being cursed with, not much had changed. They would still meet her sister, Sam, and she would escort them to where Baker and

the smaller group of rebels were pinned down. From there, they would all travel to the larger safe zone.

Heat rushed over her again at the thought of being in a base with more than four hundred males like Jason, but Angelica shoved it away in frustration. She would have to build up a tolerance. To survive this without hurting anyone, she had to be able to make it to the safe zone where the majority of Baker's males were waiting for him. Surely in all those arms, would be one *willing* to have a mate like her.

Angelica stood up to get the shower running. In the safe zone were males she hadn't met yet. One of them would hit her in the way Jason did. *I don't have to have this one.*

## 7

Angelica came from the washroom. "I've decided to take you up on your offer of a service."

Jason froze with a knife and fork in his grip, more surprised by his reaction than by her giving in. His body had twitched. Jason assumed it was a result of being left unsatisfied last night and the drugs lingering in his system. He shifted uncomfortably.

Jason had to revise his theory right away. It wasn't the drugs. He'd never seen Angelica without blood on her. She was beautiful. Golden muscles covered in tattoos gleamed with water still falling from her wild hair, and the soft material of her black

shirt soaked up those drops to outline breasts that grew pointed under his interest.

Jason dropped his attention lower and felt that forbidden male half wake further. Her black shorts stopped midthigh; her legs were long, curved, rippling magnets that he didn't want to look away from as she came toward the table.

Jason swallowed. Maybe it wasn't so bad that she'd changed her mind.

Knowing he did want her, even if it was just her body, went a long way in keeping Angelica under control. It also soothed her ego to know he was drooling over what she'd chosen to show. She gave a snort.

Jason flushed, reading her amusement. "You're better now."

"I'll live." Angelica pulled on her robe as she came to the table he had set. "I need something from you. We'll deal."

He instantly became the fearful slave whose wide gray eyes drew whitecaps of pity and lust.

Angelica wanted the rules set. "You won't service me." Pink. *Control!* Black again. "You will help me build up a tolerance to males." His brow wrinkled in confusion and a little disappointment? Yes. *Good.*

"How?"

Angelica drew in air and revealed a plan she knew to be solid. "Make contact, talk to me, be yourself with no rules or limits. Enough of it will either kill me or cure me."

“*Make contact, talk to me, be yourself with no rules or limits.*” He craved that life and she was offering to let him practice on her! “Why would you do that?”

“I have to.”

The good mood went out of her voice to be replaced with a fear he hadn’t suspected her capable of.

“There are hundreds of males where we’re going.”

Instead of relief or shock, jealousy rolled through Jason’s gut. “You’ll pick one of them?”

“If they *want* me.”

Jason winced at her pain.

“Will you help me?”

“Yes.” Jason tried not to let her read his thoughts. Angelica might make a good mate; he’d begun to realize that already, but he’d blown that with his desperate lies. Hadn’t he? “What are the rules?”

She gave him that sharp smirk, but her fingers bent the spoon into a foreign shape. “There are three. One—this will be real to those we spend time around. I expect you to act like it at those moments.”

Jason assumed she didn’t want them to know she was bargaining with her new prize. “Two?”

The spoon broke in half, making Jason wince. If he’d suspected this level of pain for her, he might have made other plans.

“I’m pure. I’ll stay that way for *my* mate. You will not force things because you pity me.”

The snarl in her tone was ugly.

Jason managed to keep himself silent by sheer will. She really wasn't a breeder. He'd believed she was lying to ease the bachelor's fears. He pushed away the picture of those perky breasts that had never known a man's hands, mouth. "Three?"

"This deal isn't over until I pick a replacement."

Meaning he would stay with her until she chose one of the rebels. Weeks with her, maybe even months of getting to know her...*and making sure the other males don't.*

Jason didn't know where that thought had come from, and he wondered again if she would kill him when she found out what lengths he was going to in order to be positive...of what? His safety? No. His children. His sons wouldn't be ripped from their mother's lifeless, burnt-out arms or witness their father die from a changeling snap. "I agree, with a condition. I need to be retrained."

*Retrained.* "Where did you hear that?"

"Rankin. She said that's what Candice had done to Daniel."

Her vision became pink, but Angelica willed it away. The rage was easier to banish than the need. She picked up the second spoon and dipped it into the bowl without caring what he'd made. "Explain what you mean."

"I want to be like Daniel."

*That's what I want, too,* Angelica thought. Jason had those big arms resting on the table, leaned forward slightly in a manner that made her want to

leave the chair and seal their lips. “How do you know about him?”

“I was part of the prizes last month.”

“Was Daniel brave here?”

“He was a massive coward, like the rest of us. Apparently, your cousin retrained him into a legend in weeks.” Jason snickered, stealing her breath. “One of the rebels was caught and returned to the cells. He said Daniel *took* a changeling and made her fall in love without burning out!”

Angelica nearly growled in her agony. She’d been there for enough of it to ache for the same. Daniel was something of a legend to her, as well. “So, you want more courage?”

“And strength. If the rebels fight, I want to be able to help.”

Angelica reflected on Candice and Daniel, on her words to him as they’d exited the destroyed base.

*“I’ll make you the strongest man in his safe zone. You’ll be at my side while we help him rebuild our world. Together.”*

Angelica pushed away from the table. “We’ll get on it in the morning.”

She fled to the safety of the master bedroom with red sight and a hardening heart. She wanted Jason, so she would give him what he’d asked for. During the heat, she would pick out the traits that drew this harsh reaction from her, so she would know what to search for in another male.

Angelica sighed, dropping onto the well braced

bed. The rebels already had big shoes to fill.

Chapter Six  
**Working It Out**  
Day 8

1

**J**ason doing pushups stunned Angelica. Whenever it was possible, she started her day with a set of muscle building exercises, and suggested he do the same. They'd done it this morning, starting nice and slow, but Jason didn't need the concession. He was in great shape, not breathing harshly even after running in place for ten minutes.

They hadn't conversed, just worked side-by-side, dripping sweat from pullups on the doorframes. Angelica had almost lost it when those arms hefted that rigid male body into the air. She'd turned before he caught her drooling, but she was mesmerized by those pushups, by the way his body dipped, rose, flexed.

*I want to be under him!*

"Angelica?"

She tried to think beyond the need, the smell of him. She hadn't regarded scent as important until Jason had filled her brain with burnt chocolate and begun burning her alive.

"I'm good." Her vision was pink, like it had been most of the day, but she wasn't in danger of

snapping yet. He had drops of sweat rolling down his chest and from his hair. Angelica felt her heat flip up another notch.

She dug into her own sets. Up, down...up...*damn*. What would she do around fifty of them sweating this way while Candice whipped them into shape? She wanted to be with her cousin for the rebellion, but like this, Angelica felt useless. She dug in harder. *Up, down, up, down*.

Jason's breathing was finally growing rough and she stole another peek at him.

Up, *flex*, down, *ripple*...

Up, *heat*, down, *flames*...

Aware of him swinging her way as if he could feel her obsessing, Angelica shoved to her feet. "That's enough for now."

He stood up, within touching distance.

Angelica's hand rose.

Fear and curiosity warred in Jason as Angelica lifted her fingers. She gawked at his sweaty chest with intent flames, but her eyes were only pink, so he pushed his luck. "Tolerance, remember. Go ahead."

"I won't need to..." She stopped, realizing she would want to touch whichever male she chose.

Jason held still as she thought it over.

"I don't believe this is what I meant by tolerance."

Jason knew instantly she'd never done this. He liked it that his chest would be the first she'd ever touched.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Jason knew what she needed and gave the lie easily. “I trust you.”

Her lips quivered and there was a sense that she might cry. Instead, she placed her hand over his heart.

Ready for fondling or even a swipe of her claws, Jason stilled under her touch as tension crackled. Her hand was heavy, a bit rough, and hot. Jason slowly brought his own up to cover hers.

Jason’s body responded to her touch on its own, drawing a current of electricity that made her nipples harden. *Hmm...* “We’ll probably have to get you used to a bit more of this.” Jason felt the skin next to his heat up another degree.

Their eyes met, sparking violently.

Angelica gently pulled out of his loose grip. “Slowly, Jason. I’m not made of iron.”

He tried to push away the daze. “There’s no way anyone will believe we’ve mated.”

That cooled her off, and sent her away from the delicious temptation of touching him again. “They don’t need to think it. They only need to know I’m content with you.”

“But they won’t. They’ll see you holding back.”

Sam especially would notice it, but Angelica didn’t know what to do about that. “I’ll figure it out.”

“You could tell the truth—you’re freeing me and you haven’t picked a mate yet.”

“That will get you claimed before we can get to

the compound!” Angelica growled. Her voice lowered. “Sam’s Runners would love to make use of your services.” Horrible jealousy flooded her stomach. “Get us set for lunch! I’ll have a shower.” She turned away. “A cold one.”

## 2

“You could draw a list of requirements.”

Angelica looked up from her duck and wild rice. It was the first words spoken between them since she’d fled this afternoon. “Requirements for what?”

Jason tried to keep his voice casual. “A mate.”

Her grip tightened on the fork. “That’s a good idea.”

“Sure. It’ll be easier to narrow it down with some interviews.” Jason led her carefully, looking forward to her list. Once he fulfilled his duty to the rebels, he would have his own life and Jason was curious as to how well he and Angelica matched.

“Now or should we work out some more?”

Her face darkened at the memory of him half-naked and dripping sweat. “The list!”

Jason hid a smirk at the growl, surprised by his bravery. He was manipulating a changeling—successfully. It was exciting. “Okay. I’ll write, you pick.”

She dropped the silverware and shoved away from the table. “Yeah, done a great job there so far.”

His guilt rose, but Jason wisely kept his mouth shut.

Angelica pulled a note writer from a drawer and tossed it onto the table by his hand. “We’ll do it based on a set of personal questions once I get a batch narrowed down.”

She’d clearly been thinking about it, about how to sort through the hundreds of rebel males. Jason didn’t like that. “Okay. Let’s go with something easy. Do you have a preference for hair color?”

Her pink gaze went straight to his shaggy mane.

Jason hid a prideful smirk as he wrote it down. “Long or short?”

Her fingers curled into fists. “Long is good.”

He recorded it, trying to remember the next question. Angelica had a sexy undercurrent to her voice that made it hard to think. *We’ve all assumed only male voices are special!*

“Okay.” Jason cleared his throat. “How about height? Do you like ‘em big?”

She flushed and dropped her chin again, making Jason wish he could read her mind.

“Size isn’t important.”

*Now why do I think that’s a lie?* “What about facial hair?”

Her gaze traveled his freshly shaven jaw, and Jason prepared to write down neat and clean.

“I don’t mind a beard.”

Jason tried not to protest as he wrote it down. *I mind.* “And weight?”

“Healthy.”

Now he did frown. Her tone implied he wasn’t. “Healthy?”

She glanced over Jason's body. "Another twenty pounds, maybe thirty."

Jason blanched. She wanted a fat mate? He wasn't sure he could do that as he copied it—*heavier is better*. Rankin had drilled the current weight into him so that he didn't exceed what she wanted. It would be hard to go against it.

"Okay, any other features you prefer? Lips? Hands? Teeth?"

She snorted. "It would be good if they had them."

Jason stared in surprise. A sense of humor was something he hadn't expected her to have because she was so ruthless. He continued with an awakening sense that this might be even more insightful than he'd first thought. "Okay, must have lips, hands, and teeth." He leered and her lips curved upward in return. She was relaxing, showing her true nature without meaning to. He quickly asked the next question before she could realize it and shut down again. "Any special skills you'd like your mate to have?"

"There are a few..."

Jason was ready to take them down. He already knew she liked it that he was educated and had good house skills. What else did she want in a mate?

"Courage."

Jason's head snapped up, aware that he was scowling at a changeling, but right then, fear wasn't foremost in his mind. She'd demanded a quality that he wasn't positive he could embody. Manipulating

her was a level of bravery he was faking. He didn't think he could take it much further. "In a man? Naturally?"

She gave a curt nod.

He wrote it down with a sinking mood. "That'll thin the group."

"Exactly. If they can't even speak to me, how could we ever build a life together?"

Jason relaxed a little, understanding she meant it in smaller ways. "So, not scared to talk to you." He looked at the list instead of her. "How bold should they be?"

There was a moment of thick silence where the bachelor knew not to look at her or it would spark another hot moment between them.

"If we both enjoy it, in private there are no limits."

His heart thudded at the image. He wrote it with a shaky hand. "You said there were a few things..."

"Smell!" Angelica's voice roughened, sharpened with need. "They have to *smell* good to me."

The image of her sniffing rebel males made Jason react quicker than he wanted to. "Should you be cuffed for that?"

She could have been angry at the tone, but Angelica only shrugged. "Maybe."

Jason scowled. "Next?"

She rotated toward the window and he waited while she gathered her thoughts.

"No kids—ever. I won't curse a child with this

pain.”

*No kids.*

Jason hadn't been prepared for that. He underlined it as his heart lurched. That was something they couldn't work out.

“How do the bachelors feel about the breeding program?”

Knowing she hated the Network as much as he did allowed Jason to give the truth. “We hate it. It's a different level of rape than the renting rooms.” His tone lowered into fear he couldn't hide. “I would have been in it if not for Rankin.”

Angelica was starting to really hate the top Defender. What would she feel when they actually met? Angelica had no doubt that they would, not after spending this short time with the male Rankin wanted. Jason was special, impossible to resist. She could understand how a female would become obsessed; she now held little doubt that blue Den Mother was right. Rankin would come for him. “I'd also like him to be able to hunt with us.”

“Like Daniel does?”

*Was that jealousy? Interesting.* “Yes. I don't want to have to leave my mate at home for weeks or even months while I'm on a run.”

Jason clearly wanted to question. Angelica followed up on it when he stopped himself. “He wouldn't have to kill. That's *my* job.”

His face relaxed, confirming one of her theories about why he was so willing to do this. Jason wanted to be retrained, by Pruett standards. Why?

“What do you want, after the rebellion is all over? To run your household and settle down?” He pretended to be absorbed in the list. “Keep bounty hunting? Something else?”

Angelica wasn't anticipating such an insightful question. She opened her mouth to say something Candice would have slapped her for. “I don't expect to live that long.”

Jason didn't like it either. She knew by the way his lips thinned into a hard line. Angelica shrugged as if she wasn't terrified. “It's just a matter of time before stage three or four ends me.”

He stared. “You do know.”

“Yes.” Desperation had her uttering the next words. “Unless one of the males can help me, I'll snap.”

“How can they help? When changelings find happiness, burnout takes over. Up or out, it's no good.”

“Remission.” Angelica's hands clenched into tight fists. It was the first time she'd ever spoken it.

“But that takes a perfect match!” Jason protested. “It's only happened twelve times in hundreds...”

When her expression changed, he assumed it was the sound of his voice and fell silent.

It was, sort of. Angelica was fighting the breakers of misery at his disbelief. Even the bachelors knew how unlikely remission was.

“We'd better be more specific on the questions, then, if that's what you need.”

The pity was hard to tolerate. She shifted away.  
“Later.”

She heard him get to his feet, felt his concern.

“Angel...”

*That name! The peace I can never have again!*  
Angelica punched the door, growling when her fist went straight through it.

“Wait.”

“Later!”

But he wasn’t getting the message, not cowering from her anger. Angelica froze when his big hands settled on her shoulders.

“We’ll find your match.” Jason turned her rigid body around and didn’t flinch from her brilliant pink stare. He did drop his hands, though. “We’ll find it. I won’t leave you until we do.”

It was too much, *him* offering to stand by her except in the way she needed most. Angelica shuddered with the urge to spill blood.

“How did your cousin do it?”

She found enough control to force out words.  
“Do what?”

“Keep from burning up until she retrained Daniel?”

Angelica thought of Baker and the base they’d stayed in, and felt another chill of hatred for the Network. They’d taken their cut. Had her match been one of the bodies they’d been forced to leave for the Network’s cleaning crew? “She had a friend. Baker.”

“Wow.”

His surprise helped her draw that dangerous anger in. “We all believed she would keep them both, but...”

“Pruetts aren’t built that way?”

“No. We’re for freedom.”

“Why don’t you have a friend?”

That was harder to explain. Angelica leaned against the door, marveling over how he’d unknowingly calmed her. Had it been unknowing? “I don’t want to waste what time I have on a friend.”

“Would he stay with your family?”

She thought he sounded a lot different than the trembling slaves in the cells—different than he had been then to her, as well. “If he wanted to.”

“Would he...belong to one of them, then?”

Jealousy stole her compassion. “Yes. Pruett’s don’t waste men!”

The notion of going from this well controlled changeling to one of her brutal relatives was bad, but her pain kept Jason pushing. He had to get that desolation off her, even if it was replaced with lust. “That should be on the list. Males want to know their future will be secure.”

Angelica studied him as if she suspected the dangerous game he was playing with her emotions. Jason opened his mouth to distract her again.

She was faster. “Do *you* have a list?”

“Yes.”

“Is it long?”

“No.”

“Is there anything you would be comfortable

sharing?”

She was reading him. Jason gave her a minor detail, hoping she'd stay with it. “Not loyal to the wrong people.”

Angelica frowned. “That’s too easy. We have a deal, Jason. You’re learning a great deal about me—and comparing, I’m guessing. It’s not fair that I can’t do the same.”

“I’m not picking a mate.”

“Aren’t you?”

Caught, he flushed, and then snickered ruefully. “I might be noticing a few things I’d like to have at some point.”

“Such as?”

There was the heat again, from *him*.

Jason’s gaze went to her chest and she laughed!

It gave him the courage to ask the question he wanted to know the most at that moment. “Why does having a friend make a changeling burn slower?”

The flare of electricity was instant. He retreated at the red flicker.

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask my cousin.”

Jason acted as if he wasn’t dying to get to the next question. “So, you’ve never—”

“No.”

The image of Angelica under him, pleading for him to take her, was one that had—

“The list, Jason!”

He flushed darker, turning toward the note writer to copy the things they’d covered and to

collect some air. *She has such an odd effect on me.*

Jason determinedly sent the conversation to the things he needed to know. “The males there are probably damaged, in one way or another. Do you have a line for handling that?”

Angelica let out a tortured sound. “I’d help them all if I could, but I’m burning!”

Her shoulders drooped. “They have to be able to provide a service when it’s needed, but more than that, they have to *want to*.” Angelica veered toward the bedroom. “None of this matters if they aren’t truly willing, and I can tell the difference.”

She felt his response coming, but didn’t turn. “I can’t take you that way, Jason. Please stop dishonoring us both by offering.”

That hurt him a little. Jason let her go. He didn’t like these games, but he had to protect himself. He glanced over the list they’d made.

*Black hair—long*

*Size—big*

*Beard*

*Bigger is better.*

*Sense of humor*

*Courage—follow instincts when alone*

*Smell good*

*No kids—big problem*

*Hates the Network*

*Knows she’s burning up. How can I help when she won’t take a service?*

*Hunt with them—check out family. Who gets me?*

*Remission*

*No friends—Pure!*

It would seem he'd crossed her list with his own. Jason contemplated the many ways they matched. In one short conversation, she'd shown nearly half the traits and emotions he needed. The two biggest he'd been positive that few would ever get by, she'd already passed—the ruthlessness to stand up to Rankin and a loathing of the Network that matched his own. Even if she didn't meet the rest of it, Jason already doubted he'd find a better match for his vision of the future.

*Drugs not needed*

*Kids, a family*

*Strong enough to resist the burnout or willing to train me before we mate, so I can protect us.*

*Must hate the Network.*

*Has to want me for more than sexual relief.*

*Can kill Rankin.*

It wasn't a long list, but he wouldn't budge on any of it. Not even for the chance to match with a Pruett.

### 3

*Kablammm!*

Angelica and Jason were woken by a deep, shattering explosion that sent them off the bed and couch, and onto the floor.

Angelica hurried for clothes, waving a sharp hand as Jason came to the master bedroom. "Stay in here. Don't make me hunt you."

She knew he would, but she had to say it anyway. He was already important to her.

Ignoring the other panicking residents of this floor, Angelica left the apartment with a hard glare at the sentry on the hall. The big woman was supposed to secure all of the males behind these doors whenever their owners were away, but Angelica's glare warned the Defender to do more than her duty over Jason.

Angelica took a minute to look out the window instead of going downstairs in the crush of the mob. Up here, there were slits in the shades that allowed limited glimpses of the main half of New Network City. What she saw was a shock.

The Justice Building, where the Pruetts had done so much business, was gone. In its place was a twisted, burning pile of wreckage that had been caused by a powerful explosion. The buildings on either side had serious damage, but the leaning tower of authority the Network liked to show their logo on was now a smoking pile of rubble.

Less than half a mile north of the gates that she and Jason would exit through in a few hours was the train station. Behind the large, dome covered platform that was lined with durable foam and security, were tracks and the long black train they would take all the way to Ohio. Troops began to pour from the sleek transport.

Angelica instinctively counted them as big women flooded the streets, grabbing the gathering citizens, hitting them with electric clubs. Her mind

went to the prize she had stashed. They were set to depart shortly. If something big were happening, she would be contacted. Leaving Jason up here alone would be a mistake.

Another swift glance through the next dirty window gave her the unthinkable sight of two hounds tearing a woman to shreds while her young girls screamed in horror from the nearby church stairs. Homeless shanties around the chaotic scene began to disappear as locals fled in panic. The hounds were mutated dogs controlled remotely by thick, spiked collars around their melon shaped heads. Bred for security and sport, the hounds ran in large packs to guarantee no survivors. It was still a fight that changelings might have won, if not for the mutated dogs also being infected.

*Run girls. You'll be next.* Angelica twisted away before the urge to help them took over.

The console alarm on her wrist sounded with an incoming message as she returned to their apartment and secured the door.

Jason was in the shower. Angelica forced herself not to picture him standing in there naked, dripping water.

The message was short. *No change in plans.*

Angelica deleted the words and then flipped off her wrist device. It was hard to track what wasn't putting off a signal.

Assuming the increased security would include searches of everyone who boarded the trains, Angelica packed carefully. Some of these things,

like the camera with images of entrances and alarm consoles, would be hard to explain and she tucked them into hidden pouches. She'd been busy during her time here.

The winner's apartment was identical in space to the grungy green flats she'd had below, except there was now a small bedroom connected by a set of mismatched wooden doors. Hanging oddly, they left a crack. It was depressing. She couldn't wait to be outside. Even the windows were tinted black and covered in bars, but it didn't matter. From this high up, there was nowhere to go but down.

The apartment was old, almost musty even after the fresh scents they'd put into it during their time here. It was the smell of people long gone—the ones who'd left their ghosts to haunt the Network. Winner or not, there was no way to come away from these bloody halls undamaged. Angelica was no different.

She rubbed the pinky finger she'd lost and regained during the Network's Wall challenge. It didn't feel right now, sort of like her soul. It was there and it worked, but it would never be the same.

Jason studied Angelica, coming out to stand in her doorway with dripping wet skin.

She could feel his near panic. It was heavy, clearly, but also something he was used to carrying and she offered no comfort. He'd chosen not to be hers, not to accept her full protection. She would do the best she could, but in the end, it might not be enough and she was certain he already knew it. "We

leave at noon.”

“I’m ready.”

Yes, she could hear that. He’d been here most of his life, trapped in hell. This must be like a new life about to begin. *How terrifying.*

Against her will, Angelica’s voice was soft. “We’ll work something out for you. Baker will be able to help you find whatever it is you need.”

Jason didn’t answer.

Maybe he already doubted Baker’s influence even though he’d never met the rebel leader, but more likely, he was pondering what it would be like to be out there alone. Her mouth opened again. “I’d have you know you can come to me, later. If you get in trouble and need help. I’ll give you the mark when you ask for it.”

His shock was obvious. She realized he didn’t believe she would free him. Instead of trying to convince him, she resumed packing. In time, he would understand her family was always trustworthy, even when it hurt.

“Thank you—for everything.”

Angelica snorted harshly, but didn’t respond otherwise. She didn’t want Jason to feel like he owed her, though of course, he did. She wouldn’t ever collect on such a debt. She was better than that. She was a Pruett.

Chapter Seven  
**A Smooth Ride**  
Day 9

1

**T**hey had the fire out by the time Jason and Angelica departed for the train. Smoke still lingered in the gusty air that was scattering ashes across the city like it was the aftermath of a new war. Angelica didn't turn from the bodies the way Jason did. Those were a common sight for her, though usually not in the streets of this city.

Inside the dome were neat paths made of star shaped stones and clean citizens going about their lives under the Network's protection. They were well fed, safe to shop and eat, and even sing at the new theater that looked like it hadn't been open long. They were able to get their paints and rent a man when the need came. Their water flowed and their children slept through the night. What did they care if another bomb site had been quickly covered by Network flags and tarps? When it hit their day-to-day lives, when those expected benefits didn't come, so would their loyalties. Until then, the Network flunkies wouldn't budge on their views.

Outside that bubble, however, were thousands of desperate, starving wretches who received

nothing from the ruling council that kept them hungry; thousands of angry women who could be swayed to any cause with the proper encouragement.

The wind gusted hard, blowing Angelica's cloak open to reveal the gun she'd been holding ready since they left the complex. Those who noticed it stayed out of her way.

Angelica sent a hard glare around to drive in the point. She caught Jason's glance back at the dome they'd just exited. What did he see?

Angelica saw an impressive palace of dark glass triangles and smoky steeples. Would he miss it? Now was not the time to ask. She turned toward the train.

As the walkway grew more crowded, Jason hurried to catch up.

Angelica let him fall in closer than he should have been for their arrangement. Anything could happen out here.

The sight of five elite Defenders standing at the ramp to the platform didn't worry Angelica, but their expressions drew a flutter from that Pruett instinct. Extra security was pouring into the city after the morning's blast, but these five large females were zeroed in on her and Jason. She followed her instincts. "If something happens, go underground. Leave me a trail."

Jason's wave of fear said he'd heard. Angelica marched toward the sentries with a hard glare. Mentally, worry flared hotter.

In front of the uniformed team was a wide woman with scars scattered over her exposed skin. She'd had the pox. A hundred and fifty years after the war, the disease had surged, decimating surviving populations. The high fevers that came with it hadn't helped the birth rates, and it was only after the vaccine was distributed that the pox finally came under control. Many towns still experienced small outbreaks.

Scars held out a clipboard. "We need your signature."

Angelica took the pen with a steady hand. As she did it, she noticed the next form was Jason's papers. She understood they were checking her signature, but she wasn't sure why. This wasn't standard procedure. Whoever held those papers held Jason's freedom. That copy should be in the files. The original was a carefully folded square secured under her left breast.

All around them, residents of New Network City and visitors went by, gawking at her and her prize, pausing to window shop. Most on foot, the occasional horse also padded slowly by, being led. Considering the morning's activity, things were calm.

"It matches." The guard signaled them forward.

Angelica walked up the ramp, relieved. She'd expected worse.

Jason slowly followed, drawn by the hustle and bustle of the city. He didn't see the woman on horseback swerve toward him.

The big changeling clubbed Jason on the head. As he fell, another set of arms was there to catch him and toss Angelica's prize over her shoulder as if he weighed nothing.

*Damn it!* Angelica hefted herself up the side of the train, using the handrails to climb. As her feet hit the rubber roof, she aimed her gun.

Jason was over the saddle now, hanging in front of the cloaked rider like a slab of meat. Angelica aimed carefully. After the morning's blast, she knew gunfire was a bad idea. Two shots would probably have troops opening fire in reflex, but she wouldn't let those thieves take him out of the city. *Those are my balls!* Angelica pulled the trigger.

The horse reared as its rider was blown from the saddle.

Jason's body thumped heavily to the dirt next to the two filthy women.

She'd gotten both scavengers with one pull of the trigger. As a Pruett family tracker, it was a shot Angelica had become known for. One was a painful chest wound to allow interrogations, and one was a kill shot, to prove who she was. In this case, she hadn't bothered to spare one of them. She was already sure who'd arranged the kidnapping.

All around her, fingers were tightening on triggers, guards were spinning, and well-fed necks were craning eagerly.

"Halt!"

Angelica raised her hands. "I'm Angelica Pruett, winner of a games Challenge. That's *my*

prize.”

Scars had already identified them. She had no choice but to stick to it or her team would discover she'd been responsible for the attempt. Angelica wasn't sure how she knew this Defender was the one who'd paid the scavengers, but she was certain. Maybe Scars had wanted Jason, but more likely, Rankin was pulling her strings.

Instead of snatching Scars by the throat like she wanted to, Angelica didn't make eye contact when she climbed down. The enemy couldn't discover the Pruetts had learned their secrets, their weaknesses. Not yet.

Angelica ignored the fear and anger of the mob gathering around the site for a dead body show and souvenirs. She would collect Jason and continue onto the delayed train. The medics there would tend him and she would keep a weapon in hand the entire time.

Jason slowly sat up, eyes finding Angelica striding toward him with fury and triumph lining her face. *She saved me!*

Angelica scooped him up onto his feet and got him moving toward the train, but she didn't speak. She wasn't sure that she could. *I'm already a mess at the thought of being without him. I have no idea how I'll ever let him go.*

memorized the layout while doing errands for her. He came through the compartments now to where he'd heard the conductor tell Angelica her rooms were. He didn't feel hurt, just tired, but even that was fading. Rankin had often called him hardheaded. She'd been right about something. Who would have guessed?

Angelica walked behind Jason, ignoring the passengers and their surprised, hungry expressions upon seeing him and the blood splatters on his clothes. Jason wondered what she thought of these Network people. They were almost the only kind who could afford this ride. He strode faster through the next compartment, where those they passed flinched away from his owner in fear.

The Network Rider was a sleek, black and gold train with fifteen long cars. The front end was control cars and guard quarters. The center was passenger cars and services. The end was for those special people who could afford the privacy. It pleased him to pass Rankin's room. The Defender had her own den here, though Jason didn't know how she had managed that. His heart eased. If only for a little while, he'd left his terror behind and her empty den was proof of it.

On the way through the service stalls, Angelica gestured at the medics. Two neutered males fell in behind them, making Jason feel protected, cared for. What a dangerous sensation!

Angelica had rented the two cars near the service area. Jason typed in the code he'd heard the

conductor rattle off, then held the door for her as he'd always done with Rankin.

“Tend to him.”

Angelica's voice was menacing. Jason quickly sat on the edge of the couch. He listened to the medic's conversation while they examined the shallow gash behind his ear. Angelica had killed for him, again. Jason should have been scared or upset, but he was only grateful. She was strong enough to keep him. If only he knew more about her; if only he didn't feel so weak! Jason sighed. He couldn't allow himself to sink into being cared for, or worse, being pampered. He suspected Angelica was capable of that and much more.

“Amazing shot.”

One of the medics muttered it as he placed a bandage on Jason that the bachelor planned to remove the second they were gone.

In the corner, Angelica stood with a gun in her hand and the same unreadable façade that had accompanied her wins in the games.

Jason gave her a soft smile as the two medics left. “Thank you.”

She didn't respond in any way, but a feeling of safety swept over him. She was imposing, intimidating, and in no way easy to ignore. When she was near, there was an electricity he had no resistance to. Jason found himself thinking about her lips, recalling the taste of her. She was a violent, sexy, tattooed, muscled mystery. Jason liked it that she wanted him so much. Before, it was just a means

to an end, but after this, he suspected they would bond quickly. He could trust her to come for him if anything happened, and to be lethal while doing it. That went a long way toward assuaging his fears. Jason gave her another smile.

The heat in her returning glance brought him over to her.

Angelica tensed, eyes flickering as he raised a slow hand to her cheek.

“Thank you.” Jason stroked fingertips across her skin, not flinching when her fists clenched. He wasn’t as afraid of her now. It was another delightful discovery that made him bolder than he’d planned to be. “I’d like to repay you.”

Her body tightened, flooding with need.

Jason admired her as that rigid control snapped into place before she spoke.

“Not for any reason, would I ever accept you that way.” Her breath caught; voice like gravel. “It will be hard to let you go, but don’t mistake my need, for greed. When the time comes, I will walk.” She walked stiffly toward the next car. “And I won’t take a second chance on you then. It’s how the Pruetts have survived.”

Jason let her go, torn. He believed her, mostly, but he couldn’t give up this dream of freedom. He’d had it for too long to throw it away for a woman he’d known less than two weeks, no matter how interested his mind and body were.

## The Network

“Is the tracker in place?”

The voice would have shocked the citizens it ruled.

“Yes, working too, but we’re out of range once they hit the Borderlands.”

The answer also came from a surprising source, but the two council members were alone again in the spacious upper tower of the complex.

“Like the other one.”

“Yes. When we attack, we’ll know it’s the right place.”

Ground troops would be sent then. These two, and the rest of the council, hadn’t abandoned the safety of the complex in more than three decades. Not since the last power meeting that had given them control and responsibility for the final stages of this plan. Knowing it would come to fruition during their rule was incredibly exciting.

“What’s the distance on the tracker?”

“Two hundred miles beyond a hub.”

“Impressive. The scientists have been busy. Today, they gave me a report on the latest cure. It’s been successful eight of ten times.”

“You sound happy about it. When they’re all cured, we’ll lose control!”

“I’m not happy that they’ve been successful. I am, however, overjoyed to have something to use against the west. As long as we hold that secret, our sister complex will not revolt.”

“That’s brilliant. It solves the ambush problems for our soldiers when we travel to the Borderlands for the meeting... Wait. How soon will it go public?”

“Never, though a few trades are already in the works with Canada. We need them to understand who holds the power. They’ll never get the cure, just a limited supply of the vaccine. That will give them control over their citizens, and give us a reprieve.”

“One that we’ll use to get our new toys in working order?”

“Yes. There are hundreds of weapons under the ground in the west. Even bad odds say a few of them will still work.”

Far below these two remorseless leaders, the timed utilities flickered on, spotlighting an enormous billboard of the last episode’s final match. The tattooed woman on that canvas was dangerous.

“What about the Pruetts? When do we stop playing with fire?”

There was an amused chuckle and a shrug. “They’ve served themselves through us for a very long time. When our generosity finally runs out, we’ll get rid of every last wild Pruett in New America.”

“Until then?”

“We’ll be careful. There’s still time before the power meeting. Track them and keep in contact with Rankin, but leave them alone otherwise. We need to take them by surprise. If they suspect a

double cross, we may lose everything we've built."

"Would they come here and attack the complex openly?"

"Yes." Now the leader's voice held a tremor of unease. "It's what *I* would do."

"Is there a contingency plan in place, in case they do?"

"Of course." The head of the council moved away from the window. "You know how to run, right?"

"Y-yes."

"Good. They won't give you that opportunity, but it's great that you know how."

#### 4

The scene out the window was depressing. Jason turned away. The train was traveling through the fuel zones now, the kind that kept the Network in control. The people were pathetic in their despondent starvation. According to Rankin, the workers were paid well, but the conditions were lethal. Only one of every ten drillers survived their years underground to get those full benefits.

The motion of the train was soothing. It meant they were getting farther and farther from Rankin. Jason's cheer returned. He resumed the questions as soon as Angelica joined him. "Have you worked out your interview questions yet?"

Angelica stopped, shoulders tensing. "No."

Jason stood up, drawing attention to his body.

“Would you like to—”

“No.”

“Okay.”

Angelica wore the same clothes out of the complex that she had during the games. Jason already loved watching her legs in those tight black pants. They weren't as nice as Rankin's clothes, but Angelica's fit better and were more useful. There were pockets and pouches all along them and along the inside of her thick cloak. The shirt was a long sleeved button-up over a half top that exposed her flat stomach and made his brain heavy as she adjusted her clothes.

Jason found something else to stare at.

The buffet car on the train was one to rival the live meals at the complex. It held nearly everything a wealthy traveler might want. Expensive pastries and chocolates, along with succulent meats and cheeses were spread out on long tables that never emptied. But his new owner didn't splurge on the luxuries. They ate from her packed supplies before showering off the ashes from walking to the train. The dried meat and hard bread were filling, but the tension while they ate made the food stick in his throat. When she sent him off to shower, Jason was relieved.

Angelica waited for the sound of the shower, and then gathered a few of the things she'd scrounged. She had a quick delivery and update trip to make, and now, while Jason was busy, was best. He didn't need to get involved with the family

business any more than he already was. As her mate, he would have been welcomed. She wondered what type of partner he might have become, and then stopped herself from taking that painful dream any further.

As Angelica shut the door, she did a slow sweep to verify the five guards she'd hired were on duty. The time for dreams might come again if she could locate a replacement among Baker's rebels, but either way, now wasn't the place for it. She had a small window of time before the Network hunters would catch up and she didn't plan to waste it. There were contacts to be made and dragons to be slain.

Drawn by the sounds Angelica made as she packed the small kit, Jason had finished his shower quickly and came to the door. He watched her slip out uneasily. She'd left her gear, meaning she would return. There were rentable men on the train. Was that where she was going? *I certainly didn't give her any relief.*

Shower still running, Jason cracked the main compartment door, and was a bit hurt to see her enter the rental car after a short haggle with the guards.

Jason slipped into the hall with scared excitement beating in his chest. This part of his personality had to be hidden from Rankin, but also from the Network. Males who showed his levels of independence were often castrated.

The five guards on their door trailed him, but they didn't tell him to go back inside. Jason

wondered if Angelica had arranged it that way so he was free to come and go as he liked.

Jason didn't spot anyone but guards in the drafty hall. It was normal for the train to carry a few dozen passengers who usually spent the ride in one of the service cars, getting their hair (and other things) blown or bloated.

*Whirrrr...*

Jason grabbed the wall for support as the train shuddered, picking up speed. The experience of flying along inside it wasn't one he cared for, especially in the heavy wind. It rattled the cars, sending tickles of unease through his stomach and chills down his spine from the added draft.

Jason walked up to the guards on the renting car, and donned a timid expression. "She told me to follow."

They knew better than to argue, but their hungry curiosity trailed him as Jason slid in behind his new owner. Belonging to a Pruett had its advantages.

Just inside the rental car was a long banister with thin poles and hanging coats. He stayed behind it, peering around cautiously. Consoles and computers on one end, each rental car was filled the rest of the way with a wide, well padded, bench seat that ran the length of both walls and provided numerous spaces, *positions*.

On the walls above these benches, were titanium cuffs welded into the frame. More cuffs clinked against the edges of the long bench, muffled a bit by the plush covering that allowed for comfort

while enjoying the allotted hour.

Another inspection of the car revealed drawers under the benches. Jason assumed it held the day-to-day necessities for these slaves. As far as he knew, the train males were never allowed out of these cars unless they were with a renter and most renters were desperate changelings. Walks in the sun between stops would be a rare treat.

Couches and pillows overflowed with nearly naked slaves, and used, fragile skin. Their eyes were hollow. Jason's stomach shifted at the thought of Angelica renting one of them.

Angelica walked to the front of the car, where another small team of guards lurked. She held out a slip of paper.

The guard stared in shock. "You want to rent all of them?"

Angelica grinned.

"Pruett."

"She's a Pruett."

"Guess her games prize isn't enough."

Jason cringed back as the snickering females went by, leaving his owner alone with the six rentable men.

The door slid open again. Jason lunged for the corner, yanking a hanging cloak over himself as heavy steps entered.

"We're all full here!" Angelica's voice was hard.

Jason heard a snort.

"All of them?"

“I’ll only be an hour.”

There was a heavy pause where Jason felt the newcomer deciding if she wanted to challenge Angelica. *Familiar voice*, he thought distractedly.

“Fine!”

The door opened again, heavy feet leaving.

Jason peered through the cloak to see Angelica still standing in the center of the room.

“We’re alone now.”

At her announcement, the men came to life!

“How is Baker?”

“Did the rebels make it to the safe zone?”

“Any news of the West Coast?”

Angelica punched in a series of choices on a small wall screen. The males hurried to serve her as the food dinged and she answered their questions. They joined her for the meal without permission, digging into the whole chickens as if they were starving.

Jason listened, realizing they probably were. The Network doled out one meal a day to males and that included the games prizes. They never let men forget that they were at the mercy of their masters.

“He lives. That’s all I know at this point.”

“And the Network?”

Angelica scowled bitterly. “As strong as ever.”

Their eager happiness fell and Jason realized these males were like some of the bachelors—careful information exchangers.

“That was the head Defender’s personal guard you sent out.”

“What’s Rankin doing on this ride?”

Angelica sounded as surprised as Jason felt.

“On the way to meet up with troops, we heard.”

“Or to reclaim her property...”

Jason tensed. He’d waited too long to tell Angelica all of the truth. Now these strange men would expose his shame.

“He looks remarkably like his father.”

“Does he?”

“Yes. His father was one of us. His mother found him pleasing and bought him. They had a good life together, but she burnt out. When Rankin found them, she was in no position to defend her property.”

“Rankin killed the entire family. Jason was the only survivor.”

“But because she knew how he would look when full grown.” Angelica’s intelligence was scary. “Her second chance to have what she hadn’t meant to kill.”

“We all believe so. It’s no accident that she keeps him so thin. If he were bigger, she might confuse him for a ghost and snap before she can legally buy him.”

Angelica knew now. Shame filled Jason, the kind he understood he didn’t have to carry, but he didn’t know how to get rid of it.

“That explains a lot.”

“She’s a hard one; she likes them begging.”

“Explain.”

“When she chooses one of us, there’s never

satisfaction.”

“She makes her men suffer our torment?”

“Yes.”

Angelica turned toward the corner Jason was hiding in. “And she’ll come for him, no matter if it goes against the Network.”

“Oh, yes. We’re out of New Network City. She won’t rest until he’s hers again and you’re dead.”

Angelica gave them a harsh, fighting smirk, making the train males flinch. “I’ve played this game before. Now, I’ve got nothing to lose.”

“But your new mate—”

“Will be freed.”

“Ahh.”

They patted her in sympathy, not drawing any of her heat or tension like he did. Jason wondered what it was about them that killed the need. Was it because they were used already? More likely, it was because they were so thin, so hungry. All the food was gone. Jason wasn’t surprised when she gestured toward the console.

“Another full round and then some dessert.”

They spent the entire hour eating, talking, and exchanging information. Jason had almost forgotten where he was as he listened, learning things he never would have suspected.

“Yes, we can confirm that. People have already begun to come in for the power meeting.”

“Male or female?”

“As many of each. There are more men in the west.”

“We even heard a tale of an entire city of them. Such is likely the dream of a drunken fool, but nevertheless, we’ve heard it.”

Angelica chuckled. “I’d give a lot to see that.”

“Yes. If the Network knew and didn’t tell anyone, it might cause their downfall.”

Angelica snorted. “It’ll take more than that.” She gestured toward the mess they’d made.

The men hurried to clear the evidence.

She reluctantly stood up. “Would you like to pass messages?”

“Would you be going west from here?”

“That could be.”

“We’d tell Baker there’s something bigger going on than the power meeting; too many troops have been sent out.”

“We would tell him a new safe zone is a good idea.”

She nodded. “I’ll make sure that falls on the right ears.”

“Will you also tell him now is the time, if he plans to attack them? We’ve never seen more confusion as the new generation is brought in for training.”

“Training?”

“Every two generations, the next set of rulers are brought in and updated, so they can take over. It’s how the Network passes control.”

Jason realized he was in trouble. Angelica was still turned toward his hiding place. How would he get back to their car without her knowing he’d

followed?

As if she read his thought, Angelica moved toward the door. "I'm sorry to leave you all here."

*"We're sorry to see you go."*

Jason ducked lower, holding his breath.

Angelica walked by, reached for the handle. "Come along now, Jason."

His mouth dropped open as she stepped through, but he hurried to do as he'd been told, worried over a punishment.

Behind him, the conversation of the train men went on.

"She's a sharp one."

"She'll keep Rankin away. You remember her cousin with the Snake trackers last month?"

"She took out five of them, and during mating! You can't distract a Pruett when there's danger around."

Jason stepped into their car quickly when Angelica held the door, and then stopped, waiting.

"Did you learn anything useful?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, I think so."

"As did I." Angelica went toward the main bedroom. "Good night, Jason."

"Good night, Angelica."

Not sure what he'd expected, Jason listened to the door shut with a slight smile. These Pruett's knew how to throw a guy off and make him feel as though he didn't know anything about women. *I kinda like that.*

What Jason didn't like was Rankin being on this train. Because of his abduction delay, the train hadn't departed until almost dark. They still had another full day and night on the Network Rider, and Jason wasn't happy about it anymore. The top Defender might try to kill Angelica now that they were away from the city.

Speeding relentlessly through the darkness toward the future, Jason settled onto the couch where the smooth chugging quickly lulled him to sleep against his will.

Chapter Eight  
**Just a Service**

1

**T**he sound of the shower woke Angelica, sending her mind to the layered plans she'd been working on when Jason's snores told her he was finally sleeping, so she could too. Angelica had expected to have a tail, and she hadn't forgotten about the tracker hidden under the Pruett crest branded into Jason's arm. She would remove it when they got to the Borderlands, where the Network would naturally lose the signal anyway, but those two threats paled in comparison to having the head Defender on this train.

Angelica walked toward the small washroom with plots and possible outcomes flying. She needed more information. She didn't change into more covering clothes, forcing herself to keep working on tolerance. They would have a week at most, and she needed all the shoring up she could get.

When Angelica eased into the small, steamy shower, Jason immediately noticed. He grabbed the towel slung over the bar.

For an instant, she saw him again in the vision, with the naked skin of his chest beckoning to her from the flames...

Angelica turned around so she wouldn't be so distracted, but what she'd already seen was repeating in slow detail behind her eyelids. The thin, red shower curtain hid nothing. He had a beautiful body. "Tell me about Rankin."

Angelica listened to his jeans come up without drying, the towel being draped around his neck. She stayed facing the wall.

"She's been waiting for me to go up for sale."

Angelica grunted, already looking forward to killing the woman for the pain she heard in his voice. Rankin might have been waiting for him to reach selling age to take him, but that didn't mean she hadn't played with her toy. Angelica switched to a safer subject. "How do you know about the rebels?"

"We all know."

That got her to lean against the door. Set up to match the rest of the train, after the sink, john, and shower, there wasn't much space between them.

Jason's long, wet hair hung over those bronze shoulders in wild disarray, and his big body made claims he wasn't even aware of.

He stepped from the shower, sending his delicious scent over her.

Angelica forgot how to exhale.

His skin glowed in the light, sparkling with dampness from his shower that stunned her with the fiery need it sent into her already boiling gut. Had she really believed he wasn't as attractive as the other bachelors? She'd been blind. The man stopped

by the sink, waiting for her attack, was incredible.

Angelica stayed against the wall. That was an understatement. Jason was perfect and there was fire in her mind. “Give me the details.”

She heard his sound of relief, and the undertone of disappointment.

“Prizes pick up gossip from their renters. One of us discovered things the rebels need to know.”

“Other than the Network knowing where the safe zone is?”

“Yes.”

“Is it about the kids or one of the twelve experimental bachelors who produce immune offspring?” Angelica could feel him gaping, and reigned in her torment with a sharp warning, “Close that mouth, Jason, or I’ll have to do it for you.”

There was a challenge to the words that Jason was surprised to find himself wanting to accept. What was it about this brutal bounty hunter? How could he be so scared and yet so attracted to her? “I have to get to Baker. He’s in danger. They all are. Please.”

“I’m taking you.”

Jason let out the breath he’d held. “And our deal stands?”

Her shoulders stiffened.

Jason felt the ripples of heat radiating from her body. There was only one thing she needed right now.

“Pruetts don’t charge for good deeds. I’ll retrain you because you need that to survive.”

Her voice said differently, though. It rang with hesitation. She wanted his service desperately, but she didn't like the idea of taking it out in trade, even though it's what she'd basically come to the games for. *What a paradox she is!*

Jason came closer. Once he got her in the cuffs, more of his fear would ease. Angelica was obviously one of the good women they'd heard of, and he liked the idea of being able to give her something in return for taking away the loving mate she'd hoped to gain. If she wanted to build up a real tolerance, he could help. "Can we make an amendment to the deal?"

The small room was thick with steam as she sensed his ambush. "No."

"You don't know what I'm offering."

She pinned him with flaming eyes that stripped him naked. "Don't I? Be careful offering yourself up as stock, Jason. It's dangerous with a Pruett. We like to *own*."

Jason knew she had herself under tight control despite the curt warning. He'd spent most of the night thinking about what he wanted and how to get it. He proceeded with that plan now. "Not livestock." He smiled invitingly. "Just a friend when you need one."

*A friend when you need one.*

That's what Baker had been to Candice at one time. She'd suggested it, but Angelica had snarled in frustration, expecting her cousin to understand that she didn't want one night here and there with a

friend. Now, she wanted Jason.

“You can trust me.”

She flinched, afraid of hurting him, of snapping, of falling for a man who didn't want her.

Jason stopped, thinking of the cuffs that were even on the walls of the washrooms.

She turned to go before he could gather the nerve to try again. If he touched her, she might not be able to resist taking the service. The pain was excruciating.

“Angelica.”

She didn't want to snap. *I won't snap!*

His big body moved behind her, hot hands settling firmly on her shoulders to send lightning through her skin.

“You've given up so much for me.” His arms curled around her rigid waist and tugged her against his hard heat. “Let me ease your pain a little. I'm well trained.”

She was holding her breath, afraid that his smell would make her snap.

*She's scared.* Jason could feel it and he didn't like it. She had killed to win a mate and ended up with nothing to show for it except a man she was unable to use. He suddenly couldn't stand it. There was no reason for her to keep suffering.

Jason advanced, forcing her against the wall. It was the one with the cuffs, but he didn't think they'd need them this time. Angelica was already on the edge. She just needed a little shove.

When she stiffened, ready to scold him, Jason

dropped his mouth over hers for the kiss he had secretly wanted since she'd filled his mind with her wet, perky body.

Angelica froze, hands clenched between them in an effort to resist. Jason pressed a second, softer kiss to the corner of her lips. "Let me help you."

He brought his hand up to cup her tense neck. Her eyes burned into his, almost full red, but Jason pressed his luck by moving in for another kiss. He wanted one she was willing for, into, craving. *A taste of the future.*

Angelica didn't move as Jason stroked her lips again. She wasn't sure she could—her grip on herself was that tight.

Jason leaned against her with his hard body, delighted to discover he was eager to render her a service.

Angelica tried to say no, but the sensation of his lips was enough to halt her power of speech. She stood there, unable to speak, afraid to think.

*"Let me help you."*

It was a fiery caress that sent her into a level of hell she'd never felt before. She was burning alive, with no way to put out the blaze.

Jason shifted, pushing her until she was pinned between him and the wall. He arched, stroking her nape.

Angelica felt one of her mental bolts snap. His lips pressed against hers in a sweet rub that made her claws extend, cutting into her palms.

"Please?" His voice lowered into a nerve-

searing tone. “I want to, Angel.”

A second bolt went flying as his lips came toward hers. “No.” She raised a hand to push him away and found it against his bare skin. Need, hot and heavy, settled into her groin and stole any rational thought.

“I won’t hurt you.” Jason covered her hand with his own, moving it up his satin skin to his shoulders...his neck...his hair!

Heat flooded her as he tangled their fingers together in his silken locks and slowly leaned toward her mouth again. He knew what she wanted, how she was fighting the urge to crush him close. He pressed harder this time, trying to draw a reaction. His mouth went to her jaw, cheek, the corner of her lips, pressing light, agony filled kisses. His hips shifted, rubbing.

She groaned as a third bolt snapped like old wood.

His grip tightened at the sound of her desire and his hips ground against her in an instinctive thrust that she was helpless to resist. Liquid heat flooded her thighs. And Jason knew. He was remorselessly taking advantage of the lust, the weakness. *Sexy!*

“Will you kiss me?”

He wasn’t playing fair, but she surrendered this match, full of fire she had no outlet for. If he could help her regain control *this one time*, she would carry the guilt afterward. Angelica slowly extended her free hand toward the wall. The other wasn’t moving from his hair. “Cuff me.”

Her rough words sent a rush of blood into his stiff length that caused Jason to move quicker than he'd intended. He rubbed against her chest as he snapped the cuff in place.

Jason would have taken her other hand, but she captured his neck in an iron grip and dragged his mouth to hers. There were no rigid lips beneath his now, only flames as she slid that tongue into his mouth and gave him the kiss of his dreams.

Angelica arched as he thrust forward, and Jason stretched the moment, confident in the cuff. He'd never known of a changeling who could break titanium.

Angelica wrenched away, gasping for oxygen.

Jason didn't give her a chance to change her mind. He sent both hands up her small waist to capture hot, rocky tipped breasts that made him twitch against her thigh. He flipped the nipples with rough thumbs, then ripped the material open.

She had breasts that a man could spend hours on. He bent down to get his first taste.

*He ripped my shirt off!* The last bolt snapped, and she clutched him, directing him to which aching peak needed his attention the most. "Oohh!"

He suckled, hard enough to pull her against his body, hands sliding to her hips, the waistband of her shorts. His lips pressed rough kisses to her nipple and then dropped lower.

"What are...?"

His mouth slid to her thigh as his hands pulled away her clothes.

Angelica felt the change sweeping over her in waves. “Jason...”

“Shh...” His breath on her skin was followed by a press of those lips that ripped a cry from hers. He did it again and she groaned in torment.

The train began to chug up a slight incline, forcing her to lean against the door as the motion took her balance and Jason stole her ability to think. “Please!”

*The taste of her!* Jason stroked his tongue against her nub and drew another cry. He lashed her again, lingering to swirl, and felt her claws rip into his shoulder.

The change was coming; he needed to get her other hand cuffed, but he began sucking on that sweet nub as she jerked violently.

More pain came as she clenched a tight fist into his skin, and then she melted against him, filling his ears with noises that made him thrust against her leg. *I want her!*

Jason took her up the levels quickly, but the urge to slow down and make it good for her was unexpected. She was silken under his tongue, rough groans sending heat into his gut. When she raked him again in her climax, Jason groaned at the sensation. Rankin had forced that reaction from him with drugs and threats, but she’d never been able to get it willingly.

Angelica had frozen, realizing he was swept up in her lust.

Jason braced for a punishment. Rankin only let

him enjoy things on her terms.

“Stand up.”

Hearing that tone, he was suddenly uneasy. Had he gone too far? Jason wiped a fast hand over his chin, and straightened with his pants jutting against her stomach.

“This wasn’t our deal.”

His chin shot up at the gravelly tone, realizing she wasn’t satisfied despite the orgasm. The change was still there, glinting at him. How could she even talk when she was like that? “It is now.” His desire and her lack of anger made him reckless. “This is a part of my retraining.”

Jason leaned forward to press a soft kiss to her cheek, movement bringing them chest to chest. He sucked in air at the chill of desire. His body was still tight, a condition he was usually forced to tolerate.

*“Make contact, talk to me, be yourself with no rules or limits.”*

Jason swallowed his fear and did as he’d been instructed. He slipped arms around Angelica’s bare skin.

His lips went to that spot under her ear and she started to protest, unsure of his intentions. *Wise*, Jason reflected, sliding forward to rock their bodies together. Rankin sometimes snapped when he did that, but Angelica stayed still and let him have his way. Encouraged, Jason thrust faster, hoping she wouldn’t make him stop yet.

His lust was an impossible lure. Angelica held as still as she could, absorbing it. He was getting

rougher as his own desires grew. She did a fast evaluation of her control and found the flames had been replaced with a deep ache that she could manage. Except, now she was extremely curious. The fire was still there, but distant. How far could she shove it back without breaking her own rules? Did she even care about rules right now?

Jason moaned against her neck, big hands working on her bare breasts. “Yeah, that’s good.”

Angelica shuddered. No, she didn’t care about rules. She liked his pleasure, a lot. It was pulling those flames back around her now and she arched toward him. He could go as far as he wanted as long as he didn’t stop yet. Afraid of scaring him, she kept her hand at her hip, eyes shutting again as he used her body for *his* needs.

Jason was on fire. Her musky scent was in his nose, her taste in his mouth. He wanted her and there was no fear of what might happen afterward. Rankin had driven him crazy some nights, left him without the final piece of the puzzle. He’d been relieved when it was over, but it would kill him to stop this time.

Angelica’s body shuddered as he sucked on her neck, hips thrusting harder. He knew that level of need and faded into sessions of lust where relief hadn’t come. With each one he’d become more aggressive, until he was earning a punishment every time.

That memory cooled him off a bit. Jason ripped his mouth from Angelica’s hot skin.

Her lashes fluttered to reveal piercing shades of red. “Don’t stop.”

Jason’s hands went to the buckle of his jeans before he could think. He came closer as she spread those long legs.

Jason dropped his jeans, hand curling around iron as he stepped between them. Her features flooded with hunger as she gently caressed the rigid part of him that instantly snapped up harder at her attention. Scarred, razor clawed fingers slid carefully around him, tightening... *Air. Where’s the air?*

Her leg came up as Jason placed his hand over hers, showing her how to please them both.

She caught on quickly, beginning long strokes with her hand that rubbed their bodies together in perfect flares. Jason sent his fingers to her pointed breasts without asking.

“Mmm...” She groaned, stroking faster.

Jason’s mouth returned to her neck, suckling, and she tightened her grip until he couldn’t find the oxygen again. Each stroke of her hand rubbed him through her satin wetness and put him closer to impurity than he’d ever been. Rankin had never let him get this close to that particular area for long.

He felt Angelica’s body tightening, going over that edge again, and he arched forward. Her heat opened to him and Jason slipped between the folds and over the cliff, too, joining her.

He bucked against her tightness, already wishing it wasn’t over. They’d cum together,

making it a powerful moment for him. He'd never willingly given a woman a release, nor had her return the favor. *What I wouldn't give to be free to do this whenever I want!*

Angelica used a quick twist to rip the cuff from the wall, drawing shock. "Get a bandage on!"

Those lightly bleeding claw lines mortified her. The lack of control was humiliating. Jason was defenseless and she'd hurt him, taken advantage. She was no better than the hunter on his trail or the Network that had enslaved him. He wasn't safe with her.

"Why...did you play the game...instead of...buying a mate?" Jason gasped out, still recovering.

She stared at him, chest rising and falling in quick inhalations. Didn't he know blood eased it? "The change."

"No." Jason pulled up his pants, breathing rough. "Why go through all this? Don't you know other males?"

She held in a sharp remark. She knew hundreds of them if she counted the rebels, but she wanted what Candice had fought for and gained. How did she explain that? "I'm a Pruett. We aren't like the rest."

He clearly didn't understand. She tried to put it in terms he might be able to accept. "I don't want a mate to service my needs." *What a lie!* "I want that ideal match. For me, it's remission or nothing."

Now he didn't know what to say, but that

beautiful face was easy to read. He was still keeping secrets.

Angelica dropped her head, vision flat black. “This is not a necessary part of our arrangement, Jason. Service is not...” She choked, still pulsing with the powerful relief he’d given her. “The service was *amazing!*”

She lunged for the exit. Daniel had said they would feel it, too, but she’d chosen wrong. She didn’t have a mate and now the fire would increase. Too much longer in the flames and she would snap.

She slammed the master door, grabbing her kit to get her extra clothes. She’d lost control and taken advantage of a male under her protection. Angelica couldn’t stifle another angry noise. She’d lost more than that. He wanted to be free and she was taking it out in trade. The Pruett family honor slapped her repeatedly as she paced in satisfied, sticky shame.

## Chapter Nine

# Danger

### 1

**A**n hour later, Jason was still listening to the silence in confusion. *What did I do wrong?*

By the time he'd finished bandaging her claw marks, there had been complete silence and it was worse than noise. The wounds stung a bit, but he was a fast healer, and didn't consider himself hurt. In fact, there was a small amount of pride that he'd made an infamous Pruett go against her own will.

Jason shifted on the couch, mind blazing with new and dangerous ideas. What did he know about her clan?

*Not enough*, Jason realized. Maybe it was time to do some research.

With a quick glance at her closed door, he went to the wall screen and typed in Rankin's account code with shaking hands. When she found out...

Information from Rankin's personal files flashed onto the screen, and Jason fell into reading.

More than surprised, Angelica observed as she silently came from her car. Jason was breaking the rules. She could tell by the way he peered over his shoulder, and it kept her still, waiting. What was so important that Jason would risk a punishment to

know?

Angelica's pulse increased as images flashed onto the screen. He was doing homework on the Pruetts, flipping through the pages of information as if he'd been using a wall screen all his life. What happened to the Network's meek, well-trained male? Was Candice right about them being smart enough to fool the entire world? If so, then she had been manipulated into a service call.

As she observed him access a classified file, the bounty hunter could easily believe it. Why was he trying to learn where she lived and her relationship to the Network? To determine if he could trust her? Anything he found in there would make Pruetts appear loyal.

"...mutter..."

Angelica strained to make out his low words, glad there were no cameras in these cars like there had been in the winner's apartment.

"...one in every generation."

She assumed Jason had just found out about Candice and Daniel, and the way the Malin family had been able to breed a male child to sell in every generation. It wasn't an accident.

She decided not to interrupt him yet. If Jason was into classified files, he might learn something they could use. Punishing him for the offense never occurred to her, not after he had gifted her with this dim place where there was no fire. She strode casually into the kitchenette.

Jason jumped as the floor squeaked, scrambling

to turn off the connection.

“If you shut it down, security will prevent it from being reopened. They probably already know someone is into it.”

He shifted to find Angelica in the kitchenette, pulling things from a drawer. He hadn't heard her come out.

“Let me know if there's anything I should read.”

Jason gaped at her. She'd caught him using a wall screen without permission. That was a whipping offense!

“Close your mouth, Jason, or I'll have to do it for you.”

He snapped it shut at the repeated warning, still fighting the urge to challenge her on that.

“I would guess you'll have another minute, maybe even two, before they cut the feed.”

Jason caught the hint and didn't ask if they would come to arrest him as he resumed digging. He was deep in Rankin's personal files now, discovering her plans, what her orders were. “She's supposed to follow you and verify when the rebels are all together.”

That brought Angelica to read over his shoulder.

Jason knew better than to speak when her grip on the chair caused it to start fracturing. *Never run from a changeling, it triggers them.* The rule went through his mind again, but he had no intentions of it.

“Move.”

Jason got out of her way.

Angelica slid into the chair and sent those brutal hands over the keyboard with lightning speed. “The eastern half wants total control, and has made plans to eliminate the west coast leaders at the power meeting. They’re also planning to send in troops to clear the entire Borderlands of rebels at the same time. That’s why there was almost no security at the complex.” Angelica began closing files, deleting codes.

“What are you doing?”

“Covering our asses.”

Jason didn’t question again. If the Network didn’t know they’d found the plans, they would stick with it and the rebels might be able to ambush them.

Apparently, the concept made his new owner very happy, because she grabbed him and pulled him onto her lap for an awkward kiss that sent them both onto the floor.

In her clumsiness, she also knocked the screen off the wall. It crashed onto the desk, scattering sharp debris.

Landing on him, Angelica giggled.

Jason stared at her in surprise as the main door to their car was kicked in.

It was one of those moments that made Angelica grateful for her chosen career. Thinking on your feet was mandatory for a bounty hunter. She played the role she was actually hoping to live someday. She simpered like a sated female, and then gasped in shock as security broke in.

“Halt!”

Angelica lifted her hands without a protest, but she pushed Jason down with her knee when he would have run from the first person through the door. His reaction would have told Angelica who the woman was even if she hadn't recognized the threat on her own.

The two electronic clubs the woman wore delivered a nasty shock and sometimes even killed. They were a security favorite, but the small can of acid on her belt gave Angelica a real glimpse of why Jason was so afraid. Not meant to kill, the acid spray was designed to cause screams. It exactly matched the drop sized scars on Jason's legs. This was Rankin and from the glare of changeling rage, Angelica guessed Rankin already hated her. *The feeling is mutual.* “What's the problem? I'll pay for the screen.”

“Someone accessed—ugh!”

Without looking away from them, Rankin delivered a quick punch that took the guard to her knees and stopped her from speaking further.

Angelica recognized the pox-marked guard now gasping at Rankin's boots. It was Scars, from the attempted abduction as they'd boarded. Rankin had been responsible for it. Her mind exploded with fresh hatred for both of them.

The sentries in the rear had taken in the mess first, but the one coveting what Angelica now legally owned was studying their entwined bodies. The top Defender was tall, lean, and mean. Angelica

had recognized the cruelty in the choice of tools on her belt, but it was also in the tight weave of the hundreds of intricate red braids that hung to her knees in ponytails.

“She used him.” Scars pointed at something as she stood up, drawing Rankin’s attention.

The top Defender’s brows drew together in fury as she spotted the bandage on the floor, and then traced it to the marks that Angelica had left on Jason’s shoulder.

He shuddered under her, breathing harsh. Angelica felt nearly uncontrollable heat rise up to turn her sight crimson. “Do you want a quick death or a slow one?”

The challenge tugged on Rankin with the surprise at the openness

Angelica shoved harder. “I’m a better challenge than a burnt-out homesteader or her defenseless mate.”

Rankin’s eyes flew to Jason.

Jason cringed into the carpeted floor. “I didn’t tell!” It wouldn’t be believed. Rankin would make him bleed for this. No one was supposed to know about her obsession, but more, she’d killed a male and never been charged for it. This was beyond danger. Jason trembled uncontrollably.

Angelica stepped in front of him, blocking Rankin’s furious glower. “I wonder if the council knows you killed his father.”

Jason heard the scornful mocking in Angelica’s tone as she gave a shove meant to make Rankin

snap.

“Bet they’d give Pruetts your place if we asked for it. They know we always get the job done.”

Jason waited tensely at Angelica’s threat, hoping for the fight, but also dreading the violence. If Rankin attacked without provocation, she would lose her job and maybe her freedom. From the files they’d read, he was certain she was supposed to be undercover, but killing a male was a death sentence.

Rankin also sensed the trap. “Slam you, Pruett!”

Jason peered up Angelica’s braced leg to find his owner grinning eagerly.

“Anytime you like, Defender. *Anytime* you like.”

Jason assumed Rankin would attack anyway, but she stormed from the car with her guards. It was the first time he’d ever seen her back down, and it gave him a new level of worry. When she came for him, things would be ugly.

Angelica fixed the sliding door. Designed to withstand the abuse of changelings, it snapped back into place under her insistent pressure, but it didn’t hang right.

The silence was thick as she turned around.

Jason opened his mouth to spill everything he’d kept from her.

Angelica jerked a hand. “Not a word.”

She was hot. Her vision flickered in that red tinted shade she was keeping around Jason, but this time the need demanded blood. Her thoughts were flying. Rankin wasn’t going to wait until they made

it to the safe zone. *She wants Jason worse than I do.*

Angelica studied him, wondering what he was thinking, but she wasn't in control enough to withstand hearing his voice. He looked terrified and she loathed it. *If he's going to fear anyone, it'll be me!*

She instantly hated herself for that thought. She stormed into the darkness of the next room. That was another problem with Jason. She was already becoming bonded. When it was all over, she would be crushed like Stone Mountain, but she doubted she would survive this time. She didn't want to use him or force him into servicing her because he needed the escort to Baker or because he felt pity for her pain. She wanted *him*. She also hated him a little for being able to pull that out of her without experiencing any of this fire in return.

Jason's shadow paced under the door.

She wanted to tell him he was safe, but she wasn't positive of her control. She needed an outlet for this bloodlust.

Angelica stayed in her room.

After reading the file, Jason understood a lot more about his new owner.

*Very territorial and possessive of their males—will not rent them out.*

That was clear to him by the way she'd stood up to Rankin, but he could also foresee Angelica being jealous. Jason admitted it then; her edge of danger was part of what made her attractive. It said with

her, he'd always be safe.

*Make life matches.*

*Often seen in the company of males, but rarely use their services.*

*Home [17325 Harris Rd.] has multiple exits on every level, and a secondary armory on the ground floor. Many doors were unable to be accessed.*

Rankin had been in their home. Why was she keeping track of the Pruetts? There hadn't been time for a more detailed study, but Jason had seen the name on the file. The Network suspected them of something, beyond being rebel sympathizers. Why had they even let Angelica live?

Jason had many questions, but the one he lingered on was why Angelica hadn't snapped once in the entire time they'd been together. In the labs, when their eyes got like that, changelings were at their most dangerous, but she'd kept the pinkish red shade most of the time that they'd been alone together. She was much stronger than the women he'd had contact with, and in more pain. She was burning up. If she flipped while they were running from Rankin... Would Angelica run?

*No.* The warrior he'd glimpsed in the cage didn't run unless it was a ploy designed to draw her prey into the death she'd chosen for them. They would be dealing with Rankin, probably before they made it to the rebels. The image was bad enough to send the nervous bachelor back to his pacing.

Angelica knew he was worrying. She wanted the hard details, but she might snap and go hunting

if she heard them right now. She was trying to give herself time to cool off, but his pacing! It was driving her crazy. Didn't he know she'd protect him? She was busy plotting it out now, if only he'd be still!

Angelica heard the sound of glass clinking and realized he was cleaning up the mess. *Men!* Why did they always have to be moving?

She swung out of the bed, maybe to take up pacing in his place, and heard a low grunt of pain.

“Ugh!”

Angelica was next to him in an instant. “Are you hurt?”

Jason had taken his shirt off to wrap the wound. He pulled the sliver of glass out with a grimace, immediately putting the shirt over it so she couldn't spot the blood. “It's just a scratch.”

She pulled on his arm, ignoring the flare of heat from touching him. The wound was small, but she ran a rough finger over it to be positive all the glass was out.

He flinched automatically, then chuckled. “I did that already!”

It made her want to hug him, so she stood up before she could. “There's a kit in the cabinet.”

“Will you do it?”

She stiffly went to get the medical supplies, taking an extra minute to steel herself.

He tried to smile as she came back out. “It stopped bleeding.”

Angelica handled him as if he was just an injured prisoner to be tended. She wasn't gentle, but it allowed her to keep pushing away his scent. It was that searing chocolate, thick and tempting.

"Thank you."

She grunted, not looking at the brand on his arm—the one marking him as hers.

She retreated as they both stood up, but he followed. Bracing, she stopped to see what he wanted. As he smiled at her, she understood his intentions in time to spin under his arm and flee back to the bedroom.

Jason was reading her. He obviously wanted to knock the rage down for her like he'd done earlier, but Angelica couldn't take the shame. If she was still this on the edge when they reached the rebel base, she would take Baker up on his offer. *At least he was willing!*

## 2

"Can I come in?"

"Yes." Angelica thought she was under control now, but she braced anyway as the door opened.

"I'd like to talk to you, about after."

"After?"

"After I see Baker."

"Okay." Angelica sat up. "What about it?"

Jason advanced into the darkness, enough for her to see that he was wearing jeans and nothing else. Heat rolled, sending her straight to his hands,

his tongue on her body. Behind it, came fresh shame. “Baker will find a loving home for you, if you want one.”

“What if I don’t?” He settled onto the corner of the bed, making it sink with his weight.

“I’ll free you.”

Jason smiled, making her pulse race. “I meant a different sort of home. I’d rather stay with the Pruetts.”

That cooled her heat. Angelica cocked her chin in sharp pain. “You’d stay and be the family whore? My big sister would love that.”

Instead of the denial she was hoping for, his countenance saddened.

“If that’s the only place you have for me when it’s all over, yes.”

Did he know what she took from that? Angelica studied him, picking out the worry and the interest. “You’d be my...” She didn’t know what words to put there.

“Your friend, offering an arrangement.” Before she could respond, his big hand slid onto her bare thigh. “You’d be my first owner.”

*Hunger.* It took her by surprise; she leaned toward him.

She stopped inches from his lips, struggling with her needs and her morals.

He planned to make it easy for her. “I’m willing.”

But she wasn’t, and he understood why now. She was a Pruett. They didn’t force males into

servitude. They freed them.

She shuddered. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Jason didn't consider the wounds serious and he opened his mouth to tell her so, but she cut him off.

"Keep your excuses and your deals, Jason. I'll get you to Baker, but I'm out after that. I won't use you again." She dropped down to roll away from him. "I don't want your services in payment, no matter how amazing it was."

*She's so different.* He followed her onto the bed. She wanted to be loved, and so did he, but could he trust her not to betray him later? He couldn't stand to get attached and then be sent away or sold. Just as bad would be her burning out and their children being defenseless. It was an ugly future no matter which way he spun it. Jason curled onto the other half of her bed with a mind full of confusion. *Do I want freedom or a loving owner?*

Angelica listened to him get settled like he'd done this hundreds of times with someone else and the rage grew brighter. She didn't mind him being here. In fact, she was craving it, but she didn't need the flashes of what his time with Rankin might have been like. Had he stayed still and quiet to drift off into a peaceful slumber or had there been violence and lust in equal measures?

It was tormenting, but there were hours to kill before morning. Angelica let her mind picture them anyway it wanted to keep the rage close and prevent herself from reaching out for what she couldn't honorably have.

### 3

Jason woke with a hot body curled against his, and a heavy arm slung over his hips. *Angelica*. The image of her body was enough to bring his to life. He tried to keep his breathing even as she shifted against him. Snoring slightly, she wasn't aware of how close they were, but her body was. Those hard nipples and extended claws said even in sleep, she needed him. What an addictive craving! Less than four days ago, he'd been in Rankin's bed, painfully hard and begging for release. Now, *he* held that power.

Angelica muttered something unintelligible against his skin, warm breath giving him chills. Jason had believed lack of fulfillment was keeping him so sensitive, but Angelica against him in sleep forced him to accept that he was attracted to her. The legs tangled in his, the soft breasts against him, that silken hair on his shoulder were all things he was responding to in the early morning darkness.

She would take him now against her will if he woke her with this need on him. He tried to remain motionless as desire flowed in a waterfall of sensations. Would she hurt him when she finally caved? Deny him like Rankin? It was something he wouldn't know unless their future changed and he was a bit surprised by the sense of loss. What was it about her that drew him?

Jason sighed and felt her breath catch as she

woke. He heard the growl rising, low groans of lust he still had ringing in his ears from Rankin. Her claws extended further, pressing into his hips with a delicious twist of pain and lust that brought him to full hardness. He was now capable of providing a service.

“Are you awake?”

Her tone was madness in the dark, greedy, needy, demanding.

“Yes.”

Her claws tightened further. He shut his eyes. “It’s all right... Just don’t hurt me, okay?”

Jason felt the tension slide from her body as her claws withdrew from his skin. She dropped her arm, but didn’t move away from him.

Jason smothered his disappointment. He wanted her to keep going.

“Are you okay?”

Jason nodded, body moving against her in the process. They both drew in a surprised breath.

“Just dealing with a bit of your pain.”

Tension crackled as she realized what he meant. He was almost openly tempting her now and the control—the strength—she showed, was impressive.

“Can I help?”

His chuckle came before thinking. “That’s my line. I’m supposed to offer comfort to you.”

“I’d accept a little of it, if you offered the right way.”

Angelica’s tone sent fire into his veins. The right way? He’d stated it, tossed it out casually, but

he hadn't insisted. Could he? Did his steel run that deep? "What do you mean by a little?"

Her hand slowly came to his hip, nails raking him lightly, lovingly. "When I have these moments with my mate, I have to have control. Touching you will help."

"*Touching you will help.*" Her words echoed in his mind and spread down his legs. Jason shuddered. "Okay."

She didn't proceed despite the agreement and he realized he hadn't seen to the requirement. As soon as he wondered how to handle it, he knew. *Willing.*

"Will you touch me?"

"Jason!"

The tone was so jarring that it snapped him awake. He groaned in the darkness. *I was dreaming.*

But the ass he was pressed against wasn't a dream. Nor was the breast in his hand or the neck his lips were locked against. Angelica's body was rigid, breathing harsh. He understood she was close to snapping, but the haze of lust hadn't faded with the dream. He wanted to please her and he wanted her to please *him*.

"I can be still for exactly three more minutes. Finish up and then get away from me."

"*Finish up.*"

It was as if he was back in the dream; Jason struggled with himself.

"Stop wasting time!"

She was almost growling and he felt the need rising up to take him to that place where Rankin had

complete control. His body thrust of its own will, sliding through their moisture to make contact with her bare skin... Bare? *Yes. Her pants are bunched under my leg.*

“Two minutes.”

Her reminder had his hand tightening on her breast, his hips moving forward. She felt so good! Jason rocked faster, pushing between her cheeks and felt her shiver. The urge to hurry made the choice and he let his tongue taste her tattooed neck as he used her frozen body. The edge neared. He jerked forward as he squeezed that satin breast, straining with the sensations. “Oohhh...uuhh....”

He rode the crest, stunned that she’d allowed this, given him this. He would return the favor!

Jason slowly, reluctantly, let go of her taut nipple. He used a light hand on her hip to roll her toward him and tensed at the glowing red eyes that lit up the bed. He swallowed, then eased a hand down her waist.

“Get. Out.”

There was no arguing with that tone. He fled in sated fear. The door closed between them and he leaned against it, listening. Was she okay?

Jason heard her shift on the bed, the noises echoing clearly and then a sound came that he hadn’t anticipated.

“Damn.” Angelica’s low groan sent a shiver through limp flesh and kept him at the door. When he heard the rustle of clothing and then her sharp intake of air, he knew what she was doing. *I would*

*have handled that for her!*

His hand went to the knob, but before he could turn it, he heard the distinctive groan of climax. It was thick and piercing, driving in the truth. It was more than attraction. He felt something for this changeling and it was strong enough that the sound of her pleasure almost had him hard again. How strange!

He listened to her finish and then shift in the bed.

“Shoulda let him go ahead. My control might have lasted ten more seconds.”

The knowledge that she worried over stamina gave him another glimpse of changelings that he’d never had before. Jason settled onto the couch, pleased with himself and not sure why. He drifted to sleep with an afterglow that was better than any he’d ever dealt himself following a session with Rankin.

Chapter Ten  
**A Family Matter**  
Day 11

1

**J**ason waited submissively for his owner like a proper slave, sweeping the Ohio station they'd chugged into half an hour ago. He'd never seen so much green!

Trees dotted the region, and lined the one road in and out of this hub. That narrow dirt path wound upward, toward a set of rolling hills covered in small yellow flowers. It was beautiful.

Around him, women were turning his way, drawn to his excitement, but Jason couldn't help it. He'd missed being outside.

From the way the station's tracks were laid out, Jason assumed this was as far west as the Rider went on this part of the route. The wide rails made a neat oval at one end of the platform, allowing the train a smooth turn for the return trip to New Network City. As far as he knew, this was the only train the Network had and it ran continuously, only stopping for supplies or maintenance.

Directly in front of the car where Jason was, a group of warmly dressed women lounged on and around heavily packed Mopars with wide, mud

caked tires. There were at least two dozen of these big, wild females and he felt the heat in their joking words as they appraised him.

“Does that seem like fresh games meat to you, Sam?”

“Yeah...and he is still fresh. Interesting.”

These loud, frightening women wore goggles raised over short, chaotic hair and weathered faces. Their animal skin cloaks were vivid shades of green, brown, and orange that rippled in the stiff wind, and drew his attention repeatedly. If not for their wide, leering grins, Jason might have thought them beautiful.

“Maybe his owner doesn’t know what to do with him.”

The big women hooted.

His gaze darted away as he realized what they meant. Jason wasn’t certain how they could tell so much, but they intimidated him with their large guns and loud voices.

“Five minutes until departure.”

Distracted, Jason automatically glanced toward the engine car at the call over the speaker. He’d never actually heard the whistle of a train, but he’d read about them at the complex. They weren’t used anymore. A variety of predators were drawn to high-pitched noises like that, but the main reason the whistles were banned was the snakes. The pythons resided in all the southern sectors of New America—large numbers of mutated, fearsome reptiles that were in the height of their breeding

season right now. He'd never heard of one of them attacking a train, but he wasn't anxious to test that theory.

Jason spotted a second group of riders waiting near the rear of the train. All three dozen were on sleek horses. Rankin was getting off here, too. Other than her group and the loud women, Jason didn't see anyone except guards. He guessed this wasn't a wealthy sector or the train would have more business.

Jason hated all the attention on him. He wished Angelica would—

“You ready?”

He jumped half a foot at her voice in his ear.

It sent the first group of women into another round of lewd teasing.

“We'll help ya settle him in!”

“If you need instructions...”

Jason tensed, waiting for his new owner to defend him from the wild Ohioans.

“If I need help, *Candice* will be who I rely on.”

There was another round of chortles, these friendlier.

She knew them. Dismay flooded his face.

The women cackled again at his discomfort.

Sam grinned at her sister. “Guess you didn't tell him about the wilder parts of the family.”

Angelica scowled. “He's obviously frightened enough. Why torment him?”

Jason realized one of these loud, wild women was Angelica's sister—the one he would probably be

given to if something happened. *What would that life be like?* The bachelor shuddered.

“Jason?”

He turned toward Angelica, whose mercy he was now at, not sure what he expected or what he needed. Panic was the clearest emotion.

Angelica’s eyes were calm, safe black. “Who are we?”

“P-p...Pruetts,” he forced out.

“What do we stand for?”

It was easier this time. “Freedom.”

One of the loud women cackled. “Yeah, the freedom to share, enjoy, trade...”

Sam lifted a brow. “Will he be in the *family* service?”

Another round of harsh laughter made him shake harder.

“Stop now. It’s enough.”

Angelica’s voice held no real tone of order that he heard, but each of the big women fell silent. She didn’t need to follow it up with anything else. It was a strong moment for him to witness his much smaller owner controlling these wild females.

“Anything I should know?” Angelica walked by Jason, who scurried along on her heels.

“The bill came for your stay in the winner’s suite, and for the train ride.” Sam paused. “I took care of it, but I have a question.”

Angelica sighed. She knew what was coming. “What?”

“Why did you buy so many doors?”

Jason flushed dark red, sending the riders into a new flurry of cackles.

Angelica's tone sharpened. "Anything *important* I should know?"

"Nope. We're ready to roll."

There was an empty bike being towed behind one of the front row jokers. Angelica flipped the heavy connector loose with a short swipe that made him gape. Jason had viewed some of her matches, but seeing it up close was fascinating. *She's so strong!*

"Get on."

Jason slid awkwardly onto the cold seat, instinctively moving to the front.

It drew yet another round of taunts and teasing.

"Oh, hell. That's something new!"

"*He* wants the lead!"

More hard brays echoed and drew attention.

Jason flushed again as Angelica got on. Her hot body surrounded him despite her smaller size, nudging him into keeping the front. She had no problem with letting him try to drive. She expected to take over shortly, though. Sam's Runners were hell on wheels.

Jason held still while she attached them with a short rope. She leaned in to bring it around his stomach, chin against his shoulder, and her soft hair brushed his cheek. Those perky globes he was so aroused by pressed into his back as her scent wafted over him with the breeze. He was outside now, getting his fill of that forbidden, fresh wind, but her

smell was better.

As Angelica retreated, Jason wondered if she might be making the same observations about him because her eyes were tinged in pink. He followed his instincts this time. He beamed, showing a gleam of happiness that he hoped would make her feel as good as he did to be out of the complex. “Thank you.”

Her grip on the rope tightened, but she responded curtly. “You know how this works?”

Jason didn’t know what she meant at first, struggling to think past the newest discoveries. “I’ve driven a few times around the complex.”

Rankin had taken him, demanding a hefty fee beforehand. That memory was enough to trigger the fear. “She’s getting off here.”

“She already did. That’s where I went.”

Jason understood Angelica had left him in the open, knowing Rankin would believe that’s where she was, too. Rankin wouldn’t have known about their escort. She did now, though. What did she think of their heavy escorts?

“Jason?”

He squared his shoulders at the tone, doing it for himself this time. “You’re a Pruett. I’m safe.”

Angelica’s expression was hot pain and intense longing. “You’re a Pruett as well...”

*Until we reach the rebels.* He finished it mentally, not listening to the heart saying freedom might not be as wanted anymore. “Thank you, really.”

This time, she was clearly sad. “It’s my duty, and my honor.” She settled herself the rest of the way, and gave him a wave. “Stay in the middle and do the best you can. They’ll keep up.”

Jason turned around to get them going and caught the expressions of surprise from the two front women. Because their brutal relative was being kind to him?

The lead woman of their pyramid gave Angelica another of those respectful looks.

His owner tapped him on the back. “Middle is straight. Right is right, left is left, you understand?”

He nodded. Rankin had used a more *hands-on* approach for direction changes. Jason brought the engine to life and settled against his new owner as if he belonged there. He wouldn’t let ghosts of the past ruin this moment. He was out of the dome, protected, and on his way to the rebels. Jason gunned the bike into the lane that the others quickly cleared for his wild lunge.

The sides of the road were lined in tall grasses, with thick woods beyond that as far as he could see. Jason crested a hill eagerly. He reined it in after the low jump and shot them forward again, laughing. This bike had real power; he bounced over the dirt road leading away from the small station. *This is great!*

Jason went a bit faster, not sensing any protest from his owner.

The others caught up quickly, but they stayed clear of his wild driving, giving space all around.

Their long animal skin cloaks flared out behind them, providing a camouflage that was amazingly good. With hoods drawn tightly around goggles, their identity would be hard for even satellites to distinguish.

Jason pushed the bike faster and felt the approval of their escorts. He remembered they were wild and let himself go. The bike was smooth under his hands, responding to the lightest pressure.... Jason veered toward the grassy path next to the road.

The speed needle hit the red mark, and he kept it there as they flew along the Recovery Zone of Ohio.

Angelica wouldn't have slowed them even if Jason couldn't control it. Neck breaking speeds were a thrill that all Pruetts enjoyed. She clung to his waist, grinning. She'd expected him to be scared of this, had even wondered if he would have to be drugged for the trip. It was a relief to know his small glimpses of courage would continue out here in this new life.

Jason swerved them onto the road as a clear patch came up and she felt him hesitate. He wanted to go faster, but he didn't want to wreck.

She rewarded his caution by slipping arms around him to place hands over his. She didn't take control, simply let him know she was there to do so if it was needed. His joy slammed into her like bricks.

Unable to keep from it, she leaned in to place a

soft kiss on his jaw.

His quick intake of air had her heating up again; she kept her cheek against his as his gentle hands took them to nearly the limit of the Mopar. He liked to travel fast. That was good. There would probably be more of that before they reached the rebels. They were entering the Borderlands through the Missouri Quake District, then they would turn south to join Baker. She anticipated a rough trip.

Their escorts were keeping pace. Even these wild speeds were not too much for Sam's Borderlands Runners. Against her will, Angelica gave her sister a raised brow.

Sam grinned, shrugging.

Sam's response implied she approved of Jason so far. It allowed Angelica to relax and enjoy being with him while Sam had them covered.

She flashed to him stroking her (willingly!) in the darkness, his thick body rocking against her in powerful need... She shivered and held on tighter. Setting Jason free might cause her final snap. She couldn't think of a bigger challenge to her control.

## 2

### **Rankin**

They went west, as Rankin had hoped.

Two dozen Borderlands Pruetts fell in around her prize as Rankin glared. Now that they were off the train, the Network's control over her wasn't as strong. She had plans for this troublesome clan.

Rankin narrowed in on Angelica, loathing her. She was clinging to Jason as if she was the one who'd had him all these years, as if they were already lovers!

Rankin's stomach burned with impotent rage that would never ease. *Even if the Pruett only took a service, I'll still taste her blood. That male is mine!*

"Let's ride." Lena, her second in command, got the others moving.

Rankin trailed them as she always did when she was brewing death and destruction. She'd been furious when Jason was relisted as a prize for the games, but until he was of age, she couldn't legally take him. Rankin had made the choice to steal him if he was picked, hoping the way she'd terrified him would keep him from trying to escape with any female. It had worked until the Pruett whelps came to the games.

Her crew got their mounts moving faster. Rankin's horse kept up without any direction. They had lived this way most of their lives. It had become routine. Some of the girls were getting a bit restless, tired of always being sent on runs, but most of them wouldn't survive any other lifestyle. Rankin had handpicked each of them, making certain her crew was the strongest one ever formed at the complex, but mentally, she loathed them for the very skills that she took advantage of. Each woman riding with her was a threat to Rankin's place with the Network.

Lena glanced at Rankin with a speculating

expression the leader didn't care for.

Rankin flashed pink eyes that made her XO swiftly turn around. She ran the crew with no mercy or compassion. Those things were as foreign to Rankin as the honor of the Pruetts that she wanted rotting under her boots. She was a product of those who pulled her strings.

Ahead of them, Angelica's large group took the main path, the one that would take them to Rankin's first surprise. Her changeling sight narrowed in on Jason's happy facade as he took the Mopar up to speed. Miss Hard-Ass believed she was getting a trained, submissive mate who would be obedient. The Network projected that image of their bachelors, but it wasn't even close to the truth. The men were sly, manipulative creatures that had to be handled firmly or they sank their greedy claws in and wouldn't let go. It was a lesson Rankin had taken into her cold heart and stuck to as she trained the harem she'd amassed over the years. Those she took relief from received no gentleness, no soft kisses like Angelica was now pressing to Jason's cheek! Rankin's rage flared brighter.

Her crew took the opposite path the Pruett Runners had. Rankin nudged her mount a bit faster. If there was gunfire, she would cut over the hills and join in. If there was silence, they would continue to parallel the Pruetts until they hit the Borderlands and her next surprise.

Rankin waited eagerly, unable to stop wanting him, needing him. She considered how Jason was

able to twist her emotionally—something none of the others had ever been able to do...and she still obsessed over his father. Rankin's work in those early days had placed her on the Network Rider weekly. The service of the train males was included in her contract, but it hadn't taken her long to grow bored of their used, meek demeanors. Much like the Pruetts she hated, Rankin needed courage, a fire to be conquered.

Once a year, the train males were replaced. The old ones were put on buyers sheets and a new batch came in. Slightly used, they were the males who hadn't been chosen during a game, but still had too much value to be sold outright. The council took a year of service from the lightly damaged men and Rankin had been there for each switch. She hadn't been important enough to access the renter halls yet and need was keeping her violent most of the time. The Network usually approved of that, but not when it interfered with their orders. When she'd spied William, with that ebony hair and those glowing gray eyes, she'd been lost.

She had used his blissful services for the full year, planning to buy him when his time was up. Thanks to her bloody conversation with the conductor when she refused to take UDs, William was kept on the day shift and didn't become as used as the others. He had full access to her credits for food and supplies, and he'd spent long, intense hours in her personal car—the one the Network was providing without being aware. Lena had been great

at forgeries even then. Now, she was a pro at handling whatever Rankin demanded—yet another threat to her control.

Their year together was a hot, erotic memory that Rankin had dreamt of whenever she wasn't with William. She was positive he was growing to care for her the same way. Back then, she'd had hopes of a mate to bring this rage home to. That had ended a week before the yearly switch, when William vanished from the train.

She'd searched it for hours, hoping he was scared and hiding. When she got to the service car, Rankin had discovered the truth. The train males told her he'd had a regular renter during the day, a Kentucky homesteader who took the train to New Network City once a week to report for probation meetings. William had been servicing her the entire time. She and Rankin had been his only renters.

Rankin had begun to realize how smart he was before that, but to fool her for an entire year! The Network's image of male submission was a complete lie.

She'd learned the renter's name and tried to track her, but the woman had gone to ground as soon as her probation was over. There was silence for ten years.

In that time, Rankin collected a harem of males to vent her rage on, but she never lost that need for William. The bachelors she chose paid for his betrayal, and were still paying. She had several left from those first few years, copies of William that

she didn't use much now. They were beyond broken, but occasionally the bitterness grew too high and she would pay them a visit—like after this run if she didn't get Jason back.

Rankin had studied Jason's young image on the yearly contract runs and knew without a doubt who his father was. Too many nights had been spent tossing and turning, dreaming of their year, for her to ever mistake those features. She'd taken that run with fury in her heart and butterflies in her stomach. William!

He stayed in the barn as she negotiated with his owner, using the form questions to find out the woman had bought him in a private sale and legally owned him. Rankin even had her prove it by showing the paperwork. After ten years, she had good control and exited the cozy little house with peaceful words despite the refusal of the contract for their nine-year-old son. Rankin was happy in her new life, as much as she could be, and she wanted the head Defender slot. If she stole a male, though it was legal, the Network would be embarrassed and deny her the position she'd already killed so many to get. She was determined to hold on and come back later, when she had the full power of that title.

But William came from the barn.

His owner had come out with Rankin. Their two girls were enjoying the cool shade of the porch rocker. All of the females froze when he smiled.

Rankin came toward him in a daze. She'd missed him more than she'd ever believed possible.

He opened his arms...

She embraced him with tears. He was happy to see her! She hadn't expected that. Maybe the woman had convinced him to leave the train? Maybe she'd forced him.

Rankin leaned back to ask and saw his glance go to his owner and their children in a series of panicked, regretful glances. He was pretending, protecting *them*. Her dreams shattered again, this time while she was within reach of his heart.

"Please, don't!"

*That voice!* She didn't have to... She could control it... *But I've waited so long!*

The snap came fast. It sent her into the change and she released the fury of the past ten years on his new life. It was a regret now, but at the time, all she'd cared for was their blood. All three females were dead minutes later.

*I held William by the throat, dragging him into the barn. Now that I'd killed for him, I would have a service from the betraying bastard who'd caused me to hurt this way.*

*I threw him into the straw, mentally counting the two minutes it took for the drugs to work. I'd shot it into him while he was begging me to spare the child still cowering on the bloody porch. Unlike the girls, the boy hadn't fought and my rage hadn't been triggered.*

"Please!"

*I shredded the skin over his arm, taking it for*

*the first weeks I'd spent alone and bewildered.*

*William flinched, a coward to the end, and I jerked my cloak open.*

*He paled as he understood what I was doing.*

*"No. I won't!"*

*I adjusted my clothes and then took his, tearing them from his beautiful body with hard swipes that drew furrows of blood. I leaned down and licked the ones on his stomach, catching his leg when he tried to kick me. He still tasted sweet!*

*My mouth settled over his hardening flesh, helping the drugs work faster and he struggled under me. Bigger now, he succeeded in rolling us over, but not in dislodging my mouth and I held on, knowing the chemicals would have their way. I'd given him twice the normal dosage. When it kicked in, I'd get all I asked for and then some.*

*He tried to stand up and I punched the back of his knee viciously.*

*"Ugh!"*

*He collapsed and I released the steel in my mouth long enough to pin his hand—the one reaching for my knife.*

*Lust had me now and I showed him no mercy, using my claws on him as I did with my harem at the complex. His hip and leg became red from the deeper cuts and I growled, shoving him over.*

*I straddled him, punched when he would have kept fighting. "Take it!"*

*I drew back to deliver another blow and he cringed, submitting. I hit him anyway, a solid swing*

*that dazed him. I quickly tilted my hips for the conquest. A tight hand in his hair forced him to look at me with bloody, teary, hate filled eyes. “You were mine!”*

*I raked my claws down his cheek, making him scream. The sound of it sent me into a frenzy of lust.*

*I took his mouth as I took his body, absorbing his screams as I shoved, forced him to impale me. I locked my thighs, groaning against his twisting lips. So good! My William!*

*He bucked again, trying to roll and I opened my legs, letting him sink in deep as he took the top position.*

*William shuddered, the drugs now working against his hatred. I spread my legs further, the way he used to like, and lifted my shirt.*

*“Damn you!”*

*His dilated vision went over our pulsing, slick bodies in desperation, fighting with himself now.*

*I tightened my body around his length and began to grind. Around and around, teasing him, no longer needing to hold him physically. The drugs had a metal grip that was unbreakable.*

*I felt it in my heart when he surrendered. It was the sweetest sound I’d ever heard.*

*“Roll over, Rankin. I can’t stand to look at you.”*

*The bliss. Rankin still had no words for it.*

*Afterward, examining the mess she’d made, Rankin chose to abandon her plans for power and*

run. She would take him and have this relief at her disposal. Then Jason had found them and screamed at the sight of his dad's bloody body. She'd forgotten about the boy, but if they were to get away clean, there couldn't be any witnesses. Rankin had marched toward the cowering child with that thought in mind.

William had attacked. He hadn't demonstrated grief over the others, but the son, he loved. If she had known, Rankin would have taken them both to get him to do what she wanted, but there wasn't time to puzzle it out. There wasn't a wild struggle like during his rape. William fought with her like a woman, using a strength she wasn't prepared for. Killing him with the brutal throat rip had been defensive instinct. Taking the son to replace the father had been quick thinking self-preservation, but the emotions she'd carried for his father had begun to overwhelm her as Jason grew older.

Instead of a cold object to be used, he'd become her guilty obsession, her hidden treasure. As he aged, his features became more defined and she was rewarded for the patience. Every time he responded to her, the old dreams of having a loving mate resurfaced against her will. Rankin had found herself bringing him gifts, taking him out of the complex, bonding with him. They were both fascinated by animals and war relics, so she made him dependent on her through those things and others. There was no doubt that Jason hated her, but he also needed her and it was a powerful hold. Of

the fifteen years he'd spent in the complex, half of those had been spent untouched and gently cared for. The other half...

Rankin forced her mind from the long, bloody nights of breaking him in. She'd had others before and since, but the memories of Jason's first sessions were the ones she held dear. Until the Pruetts, she'd been everything to him.

And then he'd betrayed her, taking the first escape to come along, like his father had. *There will be payment for that!*

### 3

They didn't travel long before Angelica's gentle grip on his shoulder slowed them. They were coming to the intersection of a small town. He slowed further at the sight of all the women going about their lives.

The town was only a few streets by a few streets, but the number of homesteaders was surprising. Almost all of the small, cleared lots along the road hosted cabins or the beginnings of one, and he could hear a cutting crew taking trees in the distance as they slowed to a crawl. This region was growing when few others were. Jason wondered suddenly how much of it could be credited to his owner's family. Tales of their generosity were abundant, but he thought it was also an honor to share the hometown of such lethal women.

The crew turned right onto the wider street at

the intersection. Jason began browsing the businesses. There were a number of shops offering day-to-day items, but there were also a few he would have given a lot to be allowed to walk through—especially the bookstore. Did they make them using the trees, like in the old world? As far as he knew, the Network had outlawed books and reading unless it was their approved material. Jason thought the shelves here would be stocked with propaganda, but maybe underneath or—

*Flo's Floozies.*

Jason winced as he spotted the whorehouse and the long line of females waiting for relief. He stayed facing forward, afraid of recognizing someone he had known from the complex. If he did, he might beg his new owner to save them.

At the end of the street, their escorts veered right again. Jason kept pace as dozens of people shifted their way. To his surprise, some of these changelings raised a hand in greeting that Angelica and the Runners returned. He hadn't expected them to be friendly to anyone.

They rolled to the edge of a driveway next to a crumbling white dome with a rounded, rubber coated white roof showing from the earth. Behind it, he could see the edge of the neighborhood and a long pile of debris he was guessing hadn't been touched in a long time. It reminded him strongly of the slums surrounding the complex. Their citizens still lived in the aftermath of the war.

Jason turned to the small house, warily

inspecting the dark windows and tall, rusted doors. The yard around it wasn't any more encouraging. It was lined in thorn trees, the deadly kind that came to life and ate anything they could reach. He tried to imagine raising a family here, but couldn't. Happiness only went so far.

Jason felt Angelica's tension as they slid to a stop. There was a thick silence where he adjusted carefully to see her. He couldn't read anything, but he paid attention to the mood.

The largest of their escorts offered another option. "We could stay for a day."

Angelica didn't look away from Jason's features. "No. We roll straight through."

One of the drag Runners shrugged. "Probably a trap waiting, anyway. I'd lay odds on it."

"Wendy, you'd lay odds on anything!"

Jason understood from their banter that Wendy liked to gamble. It also meant she liked to drink and be in areas where a service was available. He studied the ground so as not to draw her attention.

Angelica's regard returned to the crumbling homestead. "This is where we would have lived."

Jason winced at Angelica's sad words, more from her pain than the state of her home. As long as he was out of Rankin's control, he could live almost anywhere.

Jason scanned the area again. The thickets of evil thorn trees running the length of the property, created a hedge that screamed, *danger, beware of residents*. Jason tried not to shudder at the notion of

being shut in that small dome with all these women.

“The inside is far different.”

Jason shrugged at Angelica’s mutter. “Do you need anything from in there? I’ll go get it for you.”

She shook her head, not looking at him now. “What I need couldn’t be found here, either.”

Jason opened his mouth to offer comfort, and she took her hot hand from his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Puzzling over it, Jason got them moving. He didn’t understand, but he was glad she wasn’t going inside. Rankin had been here, she knew the layout. An ambush was likely and Jason got them rolling faster. He wasn’t ready for that confrontation yet. *I don’t think I ever will be.*

#### 4

A short time later, trouble came up on the right flank in the form of two wheeled bikes that the crew had little chance of outrunning. Their small numbers and large weapons also told Angelica who was after them. People out here called them demons. The Pruetts knew them by a different name.

“It’s the Ring!”

Sam’s shout wasn’t worried. Jason didn’t think that one could be rattled.

Angelica signaled that she would cover Jason while Sam and her Runners did their duty.

Angelica leaned in to his ear, ignoring the automatic flinch. “Keep us moving!”

Jason swung around to find the faster bikes of the Ring catching up. Angelica pointed the direction that would take them into the Borderlands and to a number of places where they could make a stand.

Jason swerved as she drew her weapon.

She wasn't as good as her sister, but she would be careful and make each shot count. Gunfire rapped out behind them, sharp and hungry. The bounty hunter got set.

Jason didn't feel like a rebel. He was flying down a dirt path as if the hellhounds were on their trail. He had a changeling behind him and the Runners were exchanging gunfire with the Ring, whom he'd only met one time but never forgotten. Bullets slammed into the ground around them as Jason instinctively kept weaving through the ruts. He should have felt like a rebel in every way. Instead, he felt like a marked man about to be recaptured.

Fear got Jason to increase speed until Angelica was forced to turn around and help control the Mopar. The bikes chasing them sounded closer, but there was no turning around to verify it as they flew down a steep incline.

Jason thought they were going to tip, but Angelica yanked on the handlebars with her changeling strength and kept them balanced enough to allow momentum to carry the bike down the steep grade on its rear wheels.

They hit the bottom with a breathtaking thump. Angelica pointed as she rotated around. "Go there!"

Knowing how vulnerable they were while the bike got back up to speed, Jason concentrated on hitting the gas correctly and not spinning the tires. The Mopar shot forward smoothly, and he increased their speed again, aiming for the crumbling wall of stone that ran the distance and beyond.

*Bang!*

Angelica had finally fired, telling him their pursuers were close. He pushed the bike up to the red line, knees molded to the hump. Behind him, Angelica held onto his waist with her free hand and fired repeatedly with the other.

As they neared the stone wall, Jason picked out the gap that she wanted him to take and steered that way. The rocks lining it were dangerous, hidden traps that he avoided as best he could. In places, he couldn't at all.

They hit a small pile of these rocks, bouncing up into the sky to land with another bone jarring clang. The closer they got to the gap, the more rocks there were, and he had to slow further. As he did, he realized the rocks were missing stones from the wall.

Angelica's movements told Jason she was out of ammunition; he listened for instructions but only heard her grunt of effort. The sound came again. Throwing those deadly spikes on her belt, he guessed, spinning tires as they hit a patch of dirt before the gap.

It slowed the bike enough for him to make the turn instead of wrecking them like it should have.

He gunned it again, shooting through the entrance.

“You can stop now.” Angelica’s words were calm.

Jason immediately spun them around in a cloud of dust to see their trail of death streaming in vivid detail.

Half a dozen Ring members lay between the wall and the hill they’d bounced down. Those closest had spikes plunged into their uncovered limbs and throats. Twisted metal hulks and smoking debris made up the rest of the path, completed by the Runners now cresting the hill. There was no sign of any surviving Ring members. Jason twisted around to Angelica.

“Don’t scare them.”

They were being studied by a thick row of darkly clad, hooded people holding unlit torches and swords. Behind them lay the ruin of a city, but Jason was too busy staring at the glowing yellow eyes and open sores. *Lepers*. Oh, shit.

Chapter Eleven

## Ancient Demands

1

“**D**on’t scare them?” Jason quipped lowly.

“What about them scaring me?”

Angelica’s soft chuckle told Jason she was no longer in kill mode. He was relieved when the glowing people lowered their swords in response. He’d never been around lepers, but Jason had listened to stories of their scarred skin and running wounds in horror. He was unhappy to find out the tales weren’t exaggerated, but there was also a quiet sense of menace around these silent outcasts that he was certain Angelica wasn’t ignoring despite her calm demeanor.

“We’re sorry to have crossed the wall.” Angelica reloaded her weapon and holstered. “It wasn’t our choice to make.”

The Runners all stopped their Mopars at the gap in the stones, but each of them raised a weapon, telling the colony they wouldn’t stay there if Angelica was threatened.

“We do not hunt your kind.” Angelica wasn’t completely sure on that one, but she hoped it was true. “Nor did we wish to bring trouble here.”

“You may go or stay in peace, Pruett clan.”

One of the darkly cloaked figures came forward, a man as far as Jason could tell, though the voice gave no clue. All he heard in it was suffering.

The leper's cloaks were longer than most, coming down to camouflage sore riddled hands, hems stopping at the ankle. Jason was a bit shocked that they were barefoot with exposed skin as dark as night.

“Wonderful. Perhaps we could provide something you need in return for such hospitality.”

Their faces lit up. Jason sensed the leper colony got few offers like that. *They do feel more than pain.* Were they curious about the world that had shunned them? What did they need?

The man gestured in sarcastic respect. “Yes. Anyone who kills on our hearth is welcome to trade with us. Such openness is needed among our kind.”

“Agreed.” Angelica's tone was grave. “There are many enemies to be slain.”

“That could be, young Pruett, but you'll have to sell it.” The man's sore peppered facade broke into an ugly sneer. “The future means more to us than it does to you.”

“Those are fair words.” Angelica studied them, noting what Jason was and more. “The hunting of lepers will stop and scientists will search for a cure. Do those terms suit you?”

Her tone was firm, set. Jason doubted she'd give them anything else.

“Aye, it does indeed—mostly because you've eliminated our biggest killer.”

“The Ring.”

“My people are sport for them.”

“Not anymore. Who are you?”

“Jonah. These are my people, the lepers.”

It was stated with a hardness that declared he was bitter.

Their leader was Jason’s size, average, and the only one wearing shoes. They were woven from corn stalks. Unlike the others, Jonah’s cloak was decorated with glittering yellow specks of a shiny bead that ran down the seam lines of the entire garment.

Jason wondered suddenly if that was a sign of Jonah’s status. Why else would he have a staff with those same designs carved and painted into the wood? He clearly wasn’t old enough to need it, though Jason guessed death might not be far away. The blue and black patches were endless on Jonah’s exposed skin. *Does it itch?*

In the distance, Jason could hear a loud noise, one that was coming their way. It was a wild buzzing; he opened his mouth to ask.

Jonah gestured. “Perhaps we should continue this belowground.”

“Yes.” Angelica motioned to the Runners, who lowered their weapons and rolled slowly through the gap to flank her and Jason as they followed the contagious colony. The lepers of this buried city were akin to a legend and ghost story combined.

As Jonah traveled, Jason saw he did indeed need the staff to help him get across the threshold.

Despite his young age, the disease was eating his body, weakening him and stealing his life.

Now unblocked by the glare of the setting sun as they neared the city, Jason didn't understand what he was seeing. There were a few edges of dust covered buildings, but where were the rest of them? This had been a major city before the war, connecting multiple trade routes along an incredibly determined river. How could this be that place?

Nature had reclaimed most of its property, filling in the riverbed and the city with hundreds of years of harshly blown sand and grit. The gap in the wall had once been a bridge, Jason realized. The stones had been laid against the arched frame of it and then cemented with mud-like glue. Across the fifty-foot span that now held who knew how many feet of dust and rubble, was a wall of sand with a metal block sunk into the side of it.

When a small group of the lepers began pulling on the ropes, lifting the metal block, Jason understood it was a lifting booth. He'd toured them in the museum at the complex, but this one had been reinforced—many times from the chunky, uneven appearance of the welds. It would probably keep a bullet out though, explaining why the Network had been unsuccessful in their quest to exterminate the lepers. A city buried in sand with only one or two entrances was easier to defend.

Jason rolled through the narrow gap and then stopped as the booth came down, snapping into place with a loud, metal clank.

Angelica led him from the bike with a wave of her hand.

Jason followed as the Runners surrounded them, taking in the buried city. Sand walls created chambers and corridors that had been cut out around relics of the old world. Parts of cars and edges of homes glared balefully, preserved under the ground like an ancient tomb. A lot of the organic matter was gone, but there was enough of a frame for him to recognize a fire truck in the other half of the wide, rounded room.

Every few feet held something more unreal, like the bars with a silently screaming skeleton peering through them, or the statues of dragons engraved in what might be gold. In the center of these artifacts, was a wooden platform that led down a set of spiral stairs with a thin banister. They continued as far as Jason could see when he leaned over the edge, drawn by all the lights below and by the relics he could see down there. Jason wanted to examine the fountain to discover if the swing still worked, or maybe even stand on the small footstool that was overturned near a charred bicycle frame...

“Easy.”

Angelica’s hand on his arm reminded Jason of where they were. Taking calming breaths, he followed her into the abandoned city of St. Louis with lepers as their guides and the buried city as a shield against hordes of bugs now flooding the area ahead of the storm. Most were harmless, but some, like the cicadas that lived and bred aboveground

every year, were deadly. When they attacked, they blinded and poisoned their prey.

Angelica hadn't realized the bugs were so close. They were trying to travel between squalls while the troops would be holed up and waiting it out. She was glad her family had made contact with this leper colony a long time ago. It was convenient. She hadn't ever sheltered with them, though, so she stayed on full alert. They would wait until the swarm of bugs was past and slip out between them and the coming dust storm. Until then, she would converse with these shunned people and try to sway them to the Pruett cause. The Network may have yet another surprise coming from those they'd been abusing all these years.

*This may help the rebels.*

Angelica nodded at her sister's hand delivered comment. It could also help them tonight. If they used an unknown exit, Rankin might be lost long enough for her and the Runners to get ahead and set a trap.

The group traveled deeper into the city. She kept Jason in her line of sight as they reached the living quarters.

Draped in dark brown shirts, pants, and dresses, their wool clothes still carried a heavy scent of its origins as the group of twenty escorted them, surrounded them. Angelica supposed they might do a bit of trading for cloth, but she doubted these people managed enough to outfit the entire colony. They were using their own animals and gardens. It

was smart.

Lights flared in the darkness as more torches were lit. Jason's gasp echoed through the courtyard where they'd emerged. Full of giant, ape-like statues with glowing yellow eyes, it was a bit menacing.

Angelica swept the lepers again, this time in appreciation. Having them for the coming battle might make all the difference. The Network wouldn't know what to do at first and the rebels could use that time to their advantage.

"This is one of our worship halls."

Angelica started the conversation. "Is it all right to ask about that, or would you prefer we stayed on business terms?"

The man leading them gave a gentle snort. "We'd speak to you of many things, Pruett. Ask your questions."

"What do you consume that makes your eyes glow?" She didn't care about the color, but the glow was one she'd studied during previous visits. Candice had been too polite to ask.

"It is an effect of the desert dust that blows over our farms from the North."

"Because the Network would locate you if you farmed anywhere else?"

"Yes. We've implemented underground growing and managed to feed our children that way, so at least they can remain free of our curse."

"And what of your disease? How do they avoid it?"

“Some are born immune. We learned if they are handled carefully and not fed from their mother’s sickened milk, they stay that way. The amniotic sac protects them.”

“Does the Network know?”

“Yes, of course, they do!” Jason’s anger erupted, making him forget his place. “They just wish you didn’t.”

His beautiful voice made the entire group stop and turn toward him.

Jason flushed. “Rankin said they also have a vaccine to keep themselves from getting it if they ever accidentally have contact with you. The last I heard, their test cure was 90% effective.”

A stunned, angry silence fell after his words.

Jason instinctively leaned closer to Angelica’s heat. Had he made a mistake? He was trying to help the cause, to enlist these people because Angelica wanted it. He wasn’t positive what she planned to use them for, but he trusted her.

“It would seem that you now have friends here, ones who can be counted on so long as it includes our conditions and immediate distribution of that vaccine the second the dome falls.”

Angelica held out a hand, making Jason tense.

“As long as your conditions are not unreasonable, we have an arrangement in place.”

Surprised, the man shook with a fast, light grip. Jason was glad his hands were sheathed in gloves, but he wasn’t sure that would have mattered to his owner. She didn’t fear them at all, not backing away

or avoiding brushes from people as they got moving again. Jason wondered why that was, but he wasn't so brave as to ask in front of them.

The lepers moved quietly, exchanging low words and curious glances that went over the Runner's clothes and equipment, but especially Angelica's unreadable face. They were sizing her up, taking her measure... What else did they want from her? What were the conditions?

As they came by, a woman held out a hand toward the young girl next to her, except their skin didn't touch. *The child must not be ill.* Jason instantly approved of their caution, their determination to save some of their future. The Network wouldn't respect them for that, but he did.

"We had other visitors recently who took shelter with us from the storms."

Angelica knew who he meant and it relieved a part of her even as it increased a different worry. "They were well?" Sam had left their parents near here to escort Angelica to the trials in Adelpia. The adults had already begun the hard task of gathering help for the cause. They were planning to meet in New Network City when they were all finished. Pruetts were calling in all owed favors, hoping it would stack up to the battle ahead.

"Yes. Mary and her party were helpful to us, as well."

Angelica heard the tone and shrugged. "You need only ask."

Pleased expressions went around the lepers at

her accepting attitude, but she wasn't fooled by their peacefulness. She knew they were anything but.

"We have a slight problem, in one of our neighborhoods."

With that statement, Angelica understood this was a city in use. How many people were here?

They emerged into an open area that angled down to another set of wide, wooden stairs that disappeared into the darkness. Below, hundreds of torchlights glared up. There was an army of lepers here. Why hadn't they revolted on their own? "Perhaps you'd care to explain why we're fighting without your people. No one has more reason to fight than you."

"Don't you know our history?" Jonah turned to Angelica with an ugly sneer that she knew wasn't directed at her personally. "No."

Jason, however, knew no such thing and he stepped closer, hand almost touching hers.

"You should. The Pruetts were responsible for it!"

"After the Network came into power?"

Jonah nodded savagely at her question. "Pruetts have always worked for the Network. They cleared us out and forced us into the abandoned cities of the old world. When we reached this place, the riots of 230AW had flourished and we were forgotten in the panic to regain control. Now, we wish to depart this place, but before we can, there is a small matter of post 51."

Angelica jerked. That name was well known for

the horror stories, but wasn't that a different section of the Borderlands? Her confusion was evident, but the lepers escorting them didn't explain further. She wondered how much of that forbidden post the lepers had brought with them on the journey... *Son of a bachelor!*

She had realized what that meant. She had assumed the lepers were chased into the Borderlands from the east, but if they'd been at post 51 first and brought things along, then they were from the opposite direction. "What do you know of the West Coast Outpost?"

Jonah gave a small, bitter smile. "Very little, now. Like I've stated, when the Pruetts came, we were run out."

Her mind raced. What were the odds that a line of the Pruett family still existed there? It was more information to store as they reached the bottom of the first wooden landing.

Jonah gestured toward a wide, stone door near the end of the long corridor. "We do not expect you to win against such a creature."

Feeling trapped, something that would make her ruthless, Angelica untied Jason's rope and handed the end to Sam. As she marched toward the rusted cell entrance, the bounty hunter pulled the disease tight around her hurting heart in case it was needed. The feeling of loss had come the second she and Jason weren't attached anymore; she let it sink into the rage and bubble.

"What is it that you expect me to accomplish?"

“Talk to him.” Jonah’s expression was desperate. “Bargain for our freedom, in the ways that we cannot!”

As soon as she opened the door and scented wild musk, the change ripped through her in immediate defense.

As Angelica disappeared through the door, Jason’s tone quickly became frantic. “What’s in there? What is it? Why is she going in alone?!”

The big Runner she’d given his rope to kept a firm hand on his arm. “Something we need, I’d guess or she would have come right back out.”

The lepers were gathering in the halls and on the stairs, silently scanning them with hopeful, diseased faces.

“What is it? What does she have to do?”

The Runner jerked on his arm, trying to quiet him, but Jason wrenched away from her unsuspecting grip to grab Jonah by the arm, the danger forgotten. “Get her out of there!”

Jason was on the ground an instant later without knowing how he got there. The man hadn’t moved!

Jason glared up at him warily.

Jonah glared back. “For me to send my people out to die in her war, I will have what I need for my survivors!”

Instead of the fight his actions could have caused, the man’s answer defused the Runner’s instant need to strike out. Sprawled against her leg, Jason felt her arm tense and then lower.

The big Runner Jason had jerked away from

helped him up, this time keeping a locked hand around his wrist. “Mary Pruett could not give you this?”

“She *would* not.”

The Runner grunted. Jason saw her fast signal to the women around them. If Angelica chose to say no as well, they may have to fight these people.

“*Slam you! And stay outta my mind!*”

Everyone tensed at Angelica’s angry shout.

*Thud!*

*Crash! Bang!*

The sounds were not encouraging. Jason knew he wasn’t the only one worried.

“What’s in there?”

His Runner’s question was asked in a tone only a fool would have denied. Jonah clearly wasn’t one.

“It is a horror from our past—one that we cannot be shed of.”

“Why don’t you kill it yourself?”

Jonah’s answer was simple. “Because it cannot die, and without it, we cannot live.”

More crashes and awful sounds of fighting echoed. Jason noticed the number of lepers around them had grown from twenty to nearly fifty.

“Exactly what does she have to do?”

Jason’s question was ignored until his big Runner glared at the leper leader with pink vision.

Jonah let out a resigned sigh. “Survive.”

Angelica couldn't win.

It was a test of her strength and of her loyalty, but it was also a centuries old power struggle that she wasn't going to be able to fix. It was the last thing she'd expected to find here.

Angelica was careful to stay ahead of those violent swings as the creature tried to determine who had disturbed its slumber.

A piece of familiar cloak lay in the corner, telling Angelica that her aunt Mary had confronted this loathsome thing as well during her time here. That knowledge made her determined to win, to discover whatever terrible information Mary had earned.

Angelica ducked an enormous gray claw as giant yellow slits narrowed in on her new location. She didn't know what type of animal it had been, but the creature was easily twice her size, with all of her changeling fury. It had slung her away from the door as soon as she entered, preventing her from leaving, but Angelica wasn't positive she would have anyway. The Pruett blood that drove her sister to survive in the Borderlands wasn't exclusive to Sam. Angelica had never faced a challenge like this.

She jumped another swing, wondering vaguely why the sloth-like monster didn't just break free. Dozens of thuds with those enormous fists would bring these walls down.

As she lunged for the corner, buying time, Angelica began to understand.

***"Be still."***

She heard the voice in her mind, as well as through her ears, and she lunged upward in awkward shock as a huge claw swung in from the left.

Now perched precariously on rotting debris, her feet automatically kept the balance as she stared intently into the creature's face. "Slam you! And stay outta my mind!"

Used to servitude, the creature slowed its next swipe; those piercing, ugly eyes swung around until they found her face. "*Who are you?*"

In her mind and ears... This creature wasn't a prisoner. It was the master. "Angelica Pruet." "

The creature slowly lowered its arms. She was able to see that it had once been a monkey or an ape of some type. Its ancient gray hair hung in tattered mats that had never been brushed, giving it the appearance of a Bigfoot from old books. She'd found those eerie descriptions too bizarre to believe, but the creature in front of her wasn't a myth. It was as real as she was and twice as deadly.

Angelica noted human and animal bones on the filthy floor near her, and then more under those, and understood the ape was a flesh eater. *Wonderful.*

*"Why are you here?"*

Her thoughts were chaotic, but not so much that she couldn't make connections. This monster ruled the lepers and they'd sent her in here to end their slavery, figuring if the Pruetts were already doing it for the males... "The rebellion needs your help."

The ancient Ape slowly hefted itself toward a

cave-like entrance that she hadn't noticed.

***“We do not give aid and succor to friends. We have none of those.”***

Angelica took in a breath, grateful but curious as to why her name had stopped the attack. “Maybe it’s time that changed.”

***“Would you challenge my leadership, then?”***

She contemplated faster. “If I have to. It seems much easier to just give you something you want.”

The creature heaved itself into the gory stone chair near an entrance littered with old fur. When it sat, the city rattled and she shifted from foot to foot to keep her balance on years of debris.

Wizened palms turned up in agreement. ***“And what is that, unsatisfied Pruett?”***

She hadn't been prepared for sharp intelligence that could read her. She wasn't dealing with an instinct driven animal. She was facing a primitive being whose brain had kicked on hundreds of years ago. She wondered briefly what had caused the flip, and then frowned at herself. The war, of course. What hadn't that dark day caused? Nothing was the same.

Angelica met the ape's morose sneer with understanding as she made the final connection. “I'll provide the single thing someone as ancient and tormented as you could possibly long for—an honorable death.”

Jason listened to the quiet, beyond worried. There hadn't been a single noise in almost five minutes. He rotated to the big Runner on his right, hoping his voice didn't trigger her heat. He tugged on the rope. "Will you check?"

The woman's eyes flickered pink, making him retreat toward the wall. It was as far as he could go with her hand still locked tightly around his wrist.

"Yes." She released Jason.

Jonah shook his head. "You may not enter, no matter what."

The Runner's glare in response implied she would make her own choices.

The woman peered through the door after cracking it and paled, sending Jason's heart into a faster rhythm.

The Runner secured the cell and turned back with a much calmer tone than he'd expected. "They're talking. Where can we get some food?"

There were surprised mutters and cheers that told him the lepers had also believed Angelica might be dead. Jason glowered as the Runner took a fresh, sweaty grip on his wrist.

The lepers led them through the maze of wooden stairs, but Jason dragged his feet. He didn't want to go anywhere without Angelica. Beyond needing her protection, he was growing used to it, and it felt wrong to leave her in there with whatever it was. He tugged out of the Runner's grip and stopped.

The woman reached out to take his wrist again

and Jason ducked it. If she beat him, he'd survive. "I go when Angel goes."

It was assuming a lot, but he'd heard Jonah call them the Pruett *clan*. He was hoping the same leniency Angelica had shown would be given to him by her relatives.

The Runner stared at him, wild hair and filthy goggles adding to the impression that she was a hardass. Jason was counting on the other half of her existing as well—the Pruett part that didn't like slavery and respected courage.

His Runner motioned to Jonah. "He'll wait here."

Jason wouldn't have refused that tone, and he was suddenly certain the leper leader wouldn't either.

Jonah's facade was ugly as he studied Jason. His distaste was obvious. It gave the sense that he was barely keeping himself from striking Jason.

*Does he hate me because I wasn't infected? Does he long for the protection that I now have?* If he knew Jason was about to give up protection for the freedom to pick his own future, would the leader mock his stupidity?

"As long as he does not leave this floor."

Jason flashed another grateful look at the big Runner. When her nostrils flared, he couldn't stop the instant flinch.

She turned to Jonah, eyes flashing in warning. "He'll stay right here, but if she comes out and her property is damaged in *any* way, she'll take it out

on your people and we'll help."

Jason held still as the leper leader approached.

Jonah held out a small cord with a yellow pendant in the shape of a tear. "Keep this visible. It tells the others you are allowed to be here."

Jason slid it over his covered wrist and strode toward the door. He desperately wanted to see who or what Angelica was talking to.

"Keep it closed. A *fresh* male has never escaped once sighted."

Jason swallowed his fear and settled across from the door.

Next to where he was standing, a grayed set of bones protruded from the sand wall like an omen.

Chapter Twelve

# Riding the Wind

1

“**A**re we going in there?”

Rankin snorted at Lena’s question. Hadn’t her heavily scarred XO noted the bodies of the Ring spread out like a bloody fan? “Not without a death wish.”

Rankin had been the leader of the Ring during the beginning of her career, only giving it up when she was promoted. Since then, the new Ring crew had supplied the complex with males for all the years that Rankin had labored to get to the top of the guard food chain, and the Pruetts had taken them out in a single encounter. It made their level of threat rise in her estimation. She would get this dangerous family against a wall, where she could trap them and demand Jason’s return. Then open fire.

“Why aren’t they worried about being infected?”

Her second in command was full of questions. Rankin shut her down with a scornful tone, “Pruetts don’t fear anything—least of all the walking dead.”

Silence fell.

Her orders were to confirm a rebel location and call in the strike, but she would get her property

back first and her crew should already know that. She hadn't groomed him for all those years to give him up to a Pruett. Rankin thought maybe the Network had known that as well. Maybe it was why she'd been sent. They knew her relentlessness would eventually give them what they wanted. Her vendetta against the Pruetts would never end now that she'd been crossed.

Rankin knew of the infamous family from the recent games, but she'd also known their mother before she burnt out and she hadn't liked Mary's haughty ways, either. The fact that the whelps resembled Mary—from their tanned, tattooed bodies, to their thick, rounded features—didn't help that impression.

Rankin's crew waited restlessly on either side of her as she worked it out. Some of them had been with her when she'd flipped and killed Jason's family. They were aware of her obsession. If not for the value of being on her team, these women would have turned on her long ago. Rankin was careful to reward them well. Or kill them. She'd replaced a few of them not long after lying to the Network about Jason.

"They'll exit somewhere else." Rankin made the choice. "We'll get up high and wait them out."

"And the storm that's coming?"

Rankin kneed her horse without answering, reminding her XO that she didn't fear anything, either.

But Lena knew that to be a lie, didn't she?

Rankin feared what they all did—losing her place within the Network hive during the time they were out on runs. Tensions had risen since the Pruett women started winning the games and Rankin’s behavior during the match had put her girls on edge, but not so much that they wouldn’t follow her. There would be big rewards if they could locate the rebels. After the mob at the northern border, free males were the biggest enemies the Network had.

“Someone get a call through before the bugs arrive.” Rankin picked a crumbling section of the wall that was out of sight from the city entrance. She began making a nest to shelter in.

Around her, the hardasses did the same. It wasn’t the first time they’d sheltered in the open, and her crew knew what to do. As they got started, bugs came over the southern landscape, turning it dark.

Knowing they had only a few minutes before the horde reached them, their pace increased.

Thick tarps and spikes provided a flapping shelter that became sturdy when packed with a hard bodied horse and gear. Once lying, the animals kept the tarps in place and allowed for a heat source. The mounts would also make a softer pillow than the ground.

In the lea of the wall, most of the storm would miss them. The coming insects were what they had to handle right now, and Rankin felt her hatred of the Pruetts, of Angelica in particular, grow. They were safe inside, likely enjoying food and

exchanging information while she was stuck out here in hell.

Rankin thought about her and Jason sharing a cozy corner of the ruins and smothered the rage until her vision was black again. Her harem of males was her weakness, but Jason held the power. She'd taken the others, not needing them as more than a way to relieve the disease, but with him, she felt something. She didn't want to, and she loathed herself for having such immaterial cravings, but there was no fighting it. She wanted him more than anything and she needed him willing. It was why she hadn't taken him fully yet. Her crew believed she was waiting to buy him, and that was part of her plan, but she'd been lingering for some sign that he was bonding to her. She'd been patient with him compared to the others. She had hopes that their time together had marked him as well.

These women with her also assumed she kept him thin so he didn't appear so much like his father it made her snap again. They didn't understand it was so he would be safe when she finally took him. His father had fought back and the size of him, his strength, had been what triggered her rage. He'd wanted her dead and she'd reacted accordingly to that threat. With Jason, that wouldn't happen. Her control was solid over the change now, but she still didn't want him hurt and he would be if there was a fight. Once she got in the mood, she could spend hours making them bleed.

“I'm through! Main complex line!”

Lena's shout over the increasing wind had the others feeling better, but Rankin didn't deliver a rebuke for the lack of discretion. Out here, there was only nature to hear.

Rankin took the satellite phone, hating the texture of it, the stench of the old world it sent through her mind. "Get me a member of the council. Now."

As she waited, the bugs arrived.

Mutations of the grasshopper, these new bugs were the size of shoes and always hungry. Harmless before the war, they were now omnivores. Not even people were safe from them if they were hungry enough.

The tarp sagged as the bugs landed, screeching wings enough to make the rider next to her growl in dislike.

Rankin put a calming hand on her mount's nose when it snorted. "Easy."

These particular hordes were being driven ahead of the dust storm, unable to stop and eat for more than a few minutes at a time. They were ravenous.

She pulled the edges of the tarp tighter, and tied herself to the horse. If it spooked and ran, she might have a chance at controlling it. At the very least, she would end up wherever it did. Being on foot in this land was costly.

*"Hold for Council member eight."*

Rankin didn't like that. She'd never been handled by anyone lower than five before and it sent

ugly ideas into her mind. If her value had dropped so low...

“Aaahhh!”

It was on her right. Lena.

*Unsecured edge of a tarp.* Rankin shrugged. Lena wouldn't get to repeat that mistake.

The annoying screams were still coming when the council member's rough voice tore through Rankin's ear.

“Where are they?!”

Rankin spilled her location with an uneasy sensation. *The Network won't betray me.* She was their top hunter, their top Defender, and she always got the job done. They showered her with gifts and freedoms that few women had, but as she gave her coordinates, Rankin began making new plans. That rocking stomach said something was wrong. *And I never ignore that. It's what keeps me alive.*

## 2

Angelica spotted Jason as soon as she emerged from the ape's den. He was alone in the dark tunnel, waiting for her.

That wouldn't have been Sam's idea, but upon spotting his pendant, Angelica understood Jason had insisted on waiting for her. It made her more positive that the meek males the Network had tried to sell everyone on didn't exist. Oh sure, they were scared and scarred, but willing to risk pain for your wants wasn't meek. It was brave.

Angelica didn't speak, too full of emotions she wanted to puzzle through for the cause of. He was so complicated. Warm and eager one minute, cold and calculated the next. She sighed. It was another part of his charm. A normal, well-trained male would never have pleased her.

Angelica held out a hand.

Jason slowly let her pull him off the floor, both of them tensing at the contact. It sent them right to the train, to the fiery moment they'd shared.

Angelica let go, but didn't retreat.

Jason swallowed, found his courage. "Are you okay?"

She'd never been cared for by a male. Even her father's love was remote because she wasn't safe to be around. The sudden emotion of being the center of someone's concern was indescribable. She nodded, unable to speak.

His eyes lightened even further, becoming those glowing gray orbs that she saw in her dreams now.

"Good!"

Angelica controlled the fire, but not her hands as she reached out for him. *Just a taste...*

"All finished?" Jonah was in the tunnel entrance.

Angelica flinched, dropping her arm. "Yes."

The leper had returned upon the sound of the ape's door opening, Angelica assumed. She indicated for Jason to go ahead of her. His attention lingered as he walked by.

Angelica tried not to stare at him and failed.

Would he have allowed her kiss? Returned it?

Jonah watched them both. “We will feed you now, and hear of your conversation.”

Angelica enjoyed the descent as they went down the dank, wooden stairs. The breeze coming from the bottom rose up to smother her in Jason’s burnt chocolate scent. She didn’t believe she would ever get tired of it.

Angelica directed Jason to the place on her right.

He sank down obediently. He hadn’t liked them being split up. Jason slid over until there was less than a foot of space between them.

This chamber was made of sand walls held in place by neatly layered debris that no longer had identifying marks. In the center was a neat, narrow fire that stretched roughly four feet and provided heat for warmth, cooking, and light. It was soothing compared to the other areas they’d been in so far.

Jonah was unable to hide a painful grimace as he dropped awkwardly to the floor. Made of stone or perhaps metal, Jason suddenly realized how hard this environment must be for the Glowers, how much it had to increase their suffering.

The lepers knew their guests wouldn’t take any food they handled. They went to great lengths to show that the teenage children who were not infected were doing the cooking. Hoods began lowering then and Jason averted his gaze from the bald heads and sores, suddenly queasy. He didn’t think he could eat, but when Angelica accepted her

bowl without complaint, so did the rest of her crew. Jason felt better when a few of the Runners avoided the sights as well, but no one protested Angelica's choice to eat the food.

There were half a dozen lepers sitting with them, but ten times that number lined the various tunnels and peepholes, listening. Jason hoped they wouldn't have trouble when it came time to leave, but none of his protectors seemed worried. The Runners were already busy shoveling in the food. He realized hot meals were probably hard for these tough women to come by while on runs.

"What did our captor say?"

Jason's head rose in surprise at Jonah's question. *They're prisoners?*

He was relieved their scalps were once again covered, and he was sympathetic. Now that they were still and seated, he noticed most of the lepers around them were female and heavily scarred from their battles with the flesh-eating disease. What agony these people were enduring while the Network withheld their cure!

Angelica was also sympathetic, but it didn't show in her answer. "The world will become a plague if we free you."

"The answer is always the same." There was no surprise and no anger in Jonah's tone, simply resigned sorrow.

"You know it to be true."

"But we have no choice!" Jonah protested her calm fact. "This curse wasn't ours. Why must we

suffer so?”

“Would you destroy the world again, just to have a few years of freedom?”

Angelica’s tone was gentle. Jason was glad. The Runners were all tensing, subtly setting down warm bowls in favor of cold weapons.

“No. But, I’d have more than this!”

“And so you might. Listen well.” Angelica’s words drew every ear to her. “Your master says if the Network comes here, to this place, that you will join the fight. He also says if a contained sector is found, you may leave this place for good, after the dome falls and the vaccine is distributed.”

Cheers and happiness echoed, then Jonah’s harsh voice followed it. “What did you promise in return for such generosity?”

“Death, of course. It’s all he wants after centuries of holding you, of witnessing you rot without being able to stop it.”

The Glowlers erupted in mutters and cries of protest that Angelica hadn’t expected. They loved their captor as much as they hated him. *Very interesting.*

“Calm down.”

Jason got the sense that the others heard it differently by the way they scowled at Jonah, but immediately resumed their silent alertness. He’d had a bit to think while waiting on Angelica. Jonah had thrown him to the ground—mentally—before Jason could touch him and possibly be infected.

The leper leader stared at Angelica. “Our captor

cannot die. Many have tried.”

Angelica’s tone firmed into Pruett stone. “He can.”

No one argued, but the doubt was clear.

In the silence, the smell of garlic hit Jason. He realized how hungry he was. He hesitantly dipped the wooden spoon into the yellow soup and took a small bite. It had a creamy corn flavor with a potato-like crunch, and he dug in, letting the heat warm him. The strong-smelling wine cups, Jason shunned in place of the water flask that Angelica had placed between them. He reached for the canteen, and found her hand still there. For a single second, he let it stay...

Angelica tensed in surprised heat.

He jerked back.

She didn’t respond.

After she took a long drink, Angelica wiped the spout and held it out to him with her fingers set in such a way that he had no choice but to touch her again.

Desire, sharp and unexpected, slid into his stomach as he took it. Jason felt her wishing things were different.

Angelica distracted them both with another question to Jonah. “Who, or what, was he before the war?”

Jason hadn’t thought of that, but he immediately wanted an answer. He’d gotten a fast glimpse as she came out of the cell. Those glowing yellow eyes and the size of those hands would visit his dreams.

The leader of the lepers lit another torch. “He is an experiment we found in post 5, one with more intelligence than any living thing should have. When we fled, it tracked us and held us in these ugly lands to keep us from spreading our disease to those who survived the change’s unforgiving rampage.”

“He saved the future.”

“We believe so, yes.”

“And yet, you hate him.”

“How can we not? He has kept us prisoner here for hundreds of years, never letting us live in the light. There must be hatred for one such as that.”

Jason was confused, but he assumed Angelica had it figured out as she set down an empty bowl. Wow. *Did she even taste it?*

Jason started to set his own bowl down, but Angelica waved a hand. “Finish it.”

He considered her list as he obeyed. *Heavier is better.*

“You’ve grown accustomed to living by his rules because it’s easier than thinking for yourselves. You’ve stayed as much as he has held you because you fear the world, as well as long for it.”

Jonah bowed his chin in shame at Angelica’s words.

To Jason, the lepers resembled any other group of people trying to survive. There were light touches and pats, and even a careful hug between what Jason thought was a mother and son. It sent him to his own childhood, making his sympathy grow. He

understood why they were avoided, but he suddenly wanted to change it, to help them. He glanced at his owner, thinking that was probably her loyalties rubbing off.

“You’ve been isolated.” Angelica belched lowly. “Some of that can be over now.”

“What if the fight doesn’t come here?” one of the lepers called from behind their leader.

Everyone looked to Angelica first.

She shrugged. “Make sure it does. You know how to draw their fire, don’t you?”

“Of course, but we can’t. We have a deal.”

“Some deals are made to be broken.”

Jonah glared. “We will not!”

“They’re desperate for freedom, but they won’t fight for it. What cowards!” Jason tossed the pendant toward the leader’s feet, drawing attention before he thought about the consequences. “Maybe your people deserve to be enslaved. Even the games prizes have to be drugged!”

Jason was angry. How dare these people expect Angelica and the rebels to free them while they did nothing to... He paused. Everyone was gaping at him in shock now. *Damn.*

“I’m sorry for my rudeness.” He didn’t sound apologetic, though.

“You let him speak freely?” Jonah stared in surprise.

“Yes.” Angelica’s tone said to be careful about that line of questioning.

Jason was once again grateful to be under her

protection.

Jonah let it go. “He says the truth, but it changes nothing. We will not draw the Network here to involve ourselves in your war, not unless we are free to live in your world.”

“That is your choice to make.” Angelica stood up, hand sliding to her belt of weapons. “But mark these words, my selfish friends. When that dome falls, there’s going to be a mad rush to the vaccines. With those, you wouldn’t be a danger anymore and he wouldn’t need to hold you here.”

Angelica led her group toward the stairs. “Perhaps you should deliberate again. Those fighting with us will be in that first mad dash, and guaranteed a shot at being normal again. I believe that’s worth breaking your deal for, don’t you?”

Silence followed her, and then the leader’s thoughtful voice came. “That is a life we’ve never dreamed of. We aren’t prepared for it.”

Angelica went up the dank stairs that groaned under her firm steps. “The Changeling Winds have arrived. I’m sure you already know it’s best to bend, rather than to try standing against them. They tend to destroy anything that doesn’t surrender to their will.”

Angelica led her group away from the main chamber when they reached the ground level. Jason realized the lepers weren’t escorting them. *She must know her way around.*

Angelica took them by more relics of the old world—part of a thick rod and rail that could have

once belonged on an arch, the wide metal bottom of a boat—but Jason didn't stare as he had when they'd first come in. Already, the constant reminders of the past, the death scenes enshrined here, had lost their allure.

Jason was soothed by discovering their bikes lined up neatly next to a stone entrance. They'd left the Mopars inside the main entrance when they arrived. Jason wondered how the lepers had transported them. He was positive he would have heard the engines if they'd been driven. Did the mental powers of their leader extend to the other Glowers, as well?

Angelica directed him toward her bike, where he settled onto the rear, hearing the wind. He didn't think for a minute that he was ready to drive through a storm.

She handed him a pair of goggles and then donned her own before bringing out the rope he was beginning to hate. Jason did like how close she had to get to bind them together, however.

Angelica shook out a poncho-like tarp and brought it down neatly over him. While she secured the edges to his legs and then the bike, he quickly discovered he could duck beneath the end if he needed to.

Angelica surprised Jason with the black mask that was jerked over him so fast that there wasn't time for more than a quick flinch. Soft and thick, it had small holes camouflaged by a patch of cloth sewn on in such a way it could be uncovered for

eating. *Ingenious!*

Angelica ducked under the tarp, sliding into the rear position.

Jason scooted forward, admitting to himself that it was where he liked to ride. All warm and well cared for, he held still as she adjusted, feeling those perky breasts push against his back. He was suddenly very glad that they weren't spending a night here.

She leaned forward to secure them the rest of the way and Jason couldn't stop a hand from dropping to her leg, holding her against him.

Angelica froze, breath catching as tension flared.

Jason slid his fingers along her lean thigh... He stopped, face flaming.

When Angelica gently tapped his shoulder instead of delivering a deserved punishment, Jason gunned the engine to life and beamed under his mask. *I could get used to this life.*

Jason hadn't felt like a rebel during the ride in, but as he rolled them out into the dust storm, he realized that had changed. He knew where an outlawed people were living. He'd listened to a conversation of rebellion, and he'd shown his hidden nature in standing up for what he believed in. Satisfied with his progress on this stop, Jason gunned it faster and enjoyed Angelica's approval.

As the purple dusk began to fade into night, Jason fell asleep in her arms. They'd been riding for six hours, leaving the storm behind as they used their changeling sight to drive by. Some of the effects of their torment were convenient.

Jason's scent washed over her, fire and sugar mixing in a spray of temptation. She wanted him too much.

He didn't stir as the Mopar slowed. He was exhausted, mostly from craning to observe the large bugs as they'd flown through patches of wounded stragglers.

His hands gently slipped from the controls as he melted against her. Cold fingers still near his so she could rest against his body, Angelica guided the Mopar to a gentle stop.

The Runners slowed, returning to put the couple in a circle of protection as Angelica shortened the rope to secure him more fully. She wasn't taking the chance of him sliding off like Daniel had done with Candice.

Their escort waited patiently, but Angelica could sense her sister's intent stare through the goggles. The group of Runners were dressed the same to keep the Network from knowing exactly who was leading them, and they rotated the point position regularly to maintain that confusion. These females would bow to her wishes if Angelica needed them to. With Rankin on their trail, she hoped they would already know what to do, but she was prepared to take over. These might be the more

wild relatives—distant cousins and years long companions of her sister—but they understood strength came in many sizes.

Jason woke, looking up groggily. “Are we there?”

“No.” She shifted a second poncho over them and tied the ends to her belt. It would get coldest before dawn when they hit the edge of the Borderlands. “Go back to sleep.”

“I wanted to drive you in.” Jason yawned, stretching against her.

Angelica felt her need grow as his heat flowed out, returning circulation to her toes. *Nice*. “You still can.”

He reacted happily, snuggling against her like a sated lover, and she forced the flames down. She was doing a good thing for him, giving her ward these liberties. Enjoying his warmth along the way was a benefit she was entitled to. She had heard the stories of using a mate for that, for emotion control, and other, more farfetched things like mind reading, but sharing body heat was a common practice when the snows came. Would Jason be in her life for the season switch this year?

It was a painful thought as she curled around him and felt his rumble of contentment. Did he have any idea how enticing that was to her? Angelica plugged the hole in her heart as best she could and got them rolling again.

On the far right, her sister was still evaluating the situation. She was closest to her cousin Candice,

but Angelica adored her sister, though in the past, Sam's wild ways had intimidated her. After winning the Bachelor Battles, Angelica didn't think that was a problem anymore. She sensed her sister had questions waiting, but Angelica didn't want to tell Sam or anyone else the truth until she got to Baker and set Jason free. If she revealed the truth before then, Sam and her Runners would all try to convince her not to honor her word and Angelica was desperately afraid she would listen.

#### 4

“Snnnoorr...”

The noise was an irritation Jason fought to ignore. *I'm so tired!*

“Snort!”

Jason jerked awake to find himself in a bedroll with Angelica. Not sure where they were, he froze in the darkness. If not for the sounds and smells of his owner, Jason might have panicked.

His hand slowly went to the rope around his waist and followed it to her belt. Satisfied that they were still connected by it, he concentrated on figuring out where they were. He knew she'd planned to drive straight through, so that must mean they'd made it to the Borderlands.

Jason didn't hear anything other than sleeping noises, but there was a rough draft coming along the uncomfortable wall that he was pressed against. It was sharp enough to bite; he slowly shifted onto his

side to absorb more of Angelica's warmth.

Now that he'd moved, Jason could see a pinprick of light. It revealed all but two of their escorts between him and the small, cracked entrance of the collapsed shelter.

Jason couldn't wait to be aboveground again as the sensation of smothering came, but he also wanted to see it from there. Except in photos, he hadn't experienced many relics of the old world until leaving with Angelica.

The wind sharpened, flowing directly down his neck this time and into the wrinkled cloak. He carefully edged closer, pressing his cold hands between them. Changelings ran hot. It didn't take long for his fingers to warm.

In sleep, Angelica was gentle. Jason wondered if the rebel males would react to her the way he did. Would they be scared and abused, but still hope for protection? Did they want true freedom? He did, but to be able to pick his own future, not to take down the Network. Why were those men so different? Why did they care so much when he, who'd been tortured almost nightly by Rankin when she wasn't on a run, didn't feel enough hatred to fight?

As he pondered his strange mind, the den slowly lightened, allowing him to make out more features. He shivered again as the wind pushed around them.

"Come on."

Jason jumped.

"Warm yourself against me."

He felt her approval when he slid fully against

her hip.

Angelica wrapped an arm around his shoulders and tugged him gently into her embrace. Her cloak settled over him, adding delicious heat.

As the heat swarmed, Jason moaned. “That’s nice!”

Angelica tensed, sending out an intense breaker of need. “Yes.”

Her eyes locked onto his, searching silently until he felt naked under her regard. What was she thinking? Did she know how sexy she was, or how shocking it was that he felt these things for her at all?

Angelica slowly shut her eyes as if she couldn’t stand to keep them open but hated to let him out of her sight. “We won’t leave until almost nightfall. You should sleep some more.”

Jason shifted an arm up next to his head, content to let the day lighten their surroundings to give more clues as to where they were.

It didn’t take long for Angelica’s breathing to even out and tell him she was back asleep. They were on the run from deadly predators and he still felt safe. It was wonderful.

With her heat baking into him, the temperature of his body came up and Jason tried not to fidget against her and disturb her rest. As he became warmer, he drowsed. When he jerked awake and felt her breath catch, he finally laid his chin on her shoulder.

Angelica curled her arm around him, increasing

that sensation of safety, and he dozed off in her arms.

Angelica had never slept with a male.

Sharing a bed on the train didn't count, though the erotic sensations he'd given her from his unknowing sleep movements were ones she would never forget. Those few moments of temptation were nothing compared to the sensation of holding him while he was melted against her. It brought the memory of what she'd seen when they first touched, the sated aftermath of lovers. She blew out a soft sigh.

"You okay?"

Her sister had been observing, nonstop, since she'd picked them up. Angelica was surprised that Sam had waited this long to ask.

Angelica responded using their childhood hand code to keep from waking the beautiful male on her chest.

*Fine.*

*Liar.*

Silence.

Sam tried again. *Talk?*

*No.*

Sam shrugged. *When you're ready.*

*Yes.* Angelica stopped her mind from following the hundred paths it could have taken. Instead, she forced herself to rejoin Jason in sleep. They had one more day before reaching the place where Baker was hiding and she suspected it would be a long one.

Until the train with Angelica, Jason had never woken in a woman's arms before, not even with Rankin. She liked him gone before daylight. It was a powerful moment, one that he didn't have to rush or fear.

Angelica's chest rumbled under him as she shifted. Jason took advantage of it to rise up on his arm. When he chose a mate, this was what it might be like.

She was so relaxed, so attractive to him. She had many of the qualities he wanted in a match. He even held hopes now that she and these big girls could handle Rankin. He was on an adventure, with Angelica guiding them through the wilderness, but he wasn't positive about his plans anymore. What were the chances he would ever find another female like her?

*Slim*, he assumed, but the fear of her burning up, and the terror of these wild relatives, couldn't be ignored.

*"Pruetts are for freedom."*

Her words in his memory rang clear. Jason recognized the instinctive urge to accept her ways, her teachings. Allowing himself to do as he pleased was tempting. He couldn't help but wonder if she'd meant it in every way. He wouldn't settle for less.

*"Who are we?"*

"Pruetts." Jason studied her beautiful face. In

another world, they would have a home with carpeted floors so he'd never have to listen to bootsteps again and be afraid. There would be a swing in the yard and another on the porch, and they would sit there while their children played. It was so simple...so out of reach.

His dreams were not reasonable and he knew it, but he couldn't stop them from forming, growing. When he stole a fast glimpse at that forbidden vision now, it held black-haired children with fighter's bodies and that frightened him. Just this short time around Angelica's strong personality was already marking him. When she dropped him with the rebels, he wasn't certain how long he would stay. Before getting out of the complex, he'd wanted strength and freedom. Now, the urge to hold his mate was staggering. He knew as much as anyone about the effects of the war changing things, but he still didn't understand the mating fever that took over. He'd felt it enough with Rankin to fear it though, and to want more. Jason had never been bred and he wondered if that might be a part of Angelica's problem—why she burned so hot. He was also curious about her reaction to the rebel males. Was something about him special to her or did all guys hit her the same way? Would all females with compassion attract him?

That was another worry he had. Angelica aroused him in the ways that Rankin never had. He didn't want to lose that incredible sensation, the magic heat that had sent him out of control. It was

addictive and he craved more of it. Just the memory made him flush in the dimness. *If I were really free to do what I wanted, I'd kiss those cherry lips.*

The idea surprised Jason, but the next one took his breath away.

*I might anyway.*

He was fairly certain Angelica wouldn't be mad enough to hurt him, not after the liberties he'd already taken. He leaned in before he lost his nerve.

Once it was too late, Jason asked himself what he was doing encouraging her, causing her more pain. Then the feel of her lips took over, and he chose to enjoy the moment since he'd already crossed that line.

Need swirled through the chilly air; he shifted for a better position as her lips parted. His tongue slid along her lip and she tensed. She was awake—probably had been all along.

Jason's hand came up to her waist, sliding under the stiff material to her tattooed skin.

Angelica arched into his hand as he rubbed it over her breast. "Damn, that's nice." Jason stroked a hard nipple.

"Mmm..."

Her sound did something to him. His control weakened as his leg slid over hers. It was heat like they'd shared on the train, but thicker, more consuming.

Jason started to slide her shirt up, wanting to see what he was touching. His body throbbed, sending hot, slick fire through the darkness.

“Jason.”

Remembering where they were, Jason drew back to find her eyes were flat black with misery.

“If you change your mind...”

His heart pounded, body tight. “You’ll be the first to know.”

Angelica gave him a hurting look. “Once more?”

He flushed. “Yes, please.”

This time, she met his kiss with a sharp motion that slid them onto their sides. Her tongue slipped along *his* lips and Jason claimed her mouth roughly, caught up in passion. It was stronger this time. He wondered how far things might have gone if they’d been alone.

Angelica remembered it at the same time he did. There was a last second of soft, yielding lips against his and then she was gone, getting up.

Left with no explanation for the sudden feeling of desolation, Jason remained silent as she stiffly walked into the darkest shadows and blended in until she vanished.

After a minute, the increased draft told him she’d gone out. He sighed unhappily. *I shouldn’t have pushed her like that.*

“Are the others at the complex like you?”

One of the big females sat up, the one who’d kept him safe in the leper colony. Without the goggles and tightly drawn hood, the dim light let Jason pick out that sensual Pruett jaw line and those flat, black eyes. This one was Angelica’s sister.

He stiffened. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Sam didn’t react to his voice even though it hurt her. “Brave, think for yourself, go after what you want.”

Those examples told Jason she’d been studying him. He tried to be as honest as he could. “There are a few I’d be proud to bunk with if they let us pick our cellmates. They don’t.”

This one didn’t show a reaction to the sound of his voice and Jason was glad. She let the silence stretch out, testing his nerve, Jason realized. He waited for her next question, positive she had more than a few.

“What deal did you make that keeps her from taking your offered service?”

Jason cringed from the exposure and her gloating expression.

“I thought it was something like that, and yet, you kissed her on your own. *Interesting.*”

Jason spent a moment trying to get his heart to settle, not sure if he should say more. These Pruett women knew how to ambush a guy. Sucking up his courage, Jason leaned against the wall and attempted to find out some information of his own. The other women spread out in here were still snoring, some annoyingly loud. “Will she stay and help the rebels?”

His question caught the Runner by surprise. Sam revealed it in her answer.

“I don’t know.”

Now Jason was the one unprepared. “But you’re

her sister, right? You should know.”

The big woman shifted her shoulders. “Before the games, I would have said no. Now?” She shrugged again, sharp gaze going over him as if she could tell everything that had passed between him and her sibling. “Now, she might stay and fight for what she wants.”

The big woman also leaned against the wall, willing to converse if he was. “My turn. Why did she insist we keep going? Is it part of the deal?”

Jason gave the truth reluctantly. “We’re being followed.”

Sam snorted. “We knew she’d have a tail. What else has her so alert? Are *you* in trouble?”

Jason didn’t know what to say, but again, the intelligence surprised him. He honestly hadn’t believed any woman could be as smart as Rankin was, but here were two of them, in the same family.

“She’s protecting you.”

“Yes.” He didn’t think it was funny at all, but the Runner let out a bray of mirth that made him wince.

“Well, it should be a fun ride, then. Your turn.”

Jason tried to recover. “What does she want, from the future?”

“That is a very good question. You should ask her.”

“I will, at some point.”

“What do *you* want?”

“Freedom.” It came to his lips automatically.

The Runner gave him another of those hard,

insightful questions. “Will you stay with the rebels?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then the plan would be...?”

“It’s my turn.”

“Answer it.”

He opened his mouth and told this frightening woman what he hadn’t shared with another living soul, including her sister. “I need my happy family returned.”

Angelica froze.

*“My happy family returned.”*

His words buzzed in her mind like angry little bugs that pinched and twisted. He wanted the one thing she could never give him.

*My happy family.*

Angelica spun away from the entrance where she’d been listening and waved a Runner in to take her place. Of her sister’s big friends, Angelica knew five of them. Three were distant cousins that she didn’t like much. After them, Rosa was the hardass on Sam’s right, a place the loyal miner had held for ten years.

On Sam’s left, was Wendy, a twitchy, hard-faced gambler with lightning fast hands. Of the two, Angelica trusted Rosa more, but it was Wendy’s bald form she had gestured toward the crumbling shelter. Wendy wouldn’t hesitate to kill, and since Jason wasn’t blonde, he was safe from her. Golden haired boys were all Wendy fancied.

It hit her again. *Jason wants children.*

Angelica's heart cried when she refused to let the drops fall. All he wanted was what had been stolen from him by Rankin, and it turned out that she couldn't provide it. Some other woman would hold him as he filled her with life, would feel his children growing inside her body. They would share everything, and she would be alone, missing him.

*I need my happy family returned.*

The pain was crushing.

Angelica wasn't surprised to hear her sister come out. She resembled Sam in the thick body and the short, black spikes. From there, Sam's greater height, her loud voice, and the restless urge for adventure marked them as different, but she knew Angelica needed her.

"So, you're setting him free."

Angelica didn't answer, but Sam was aware that she was struggling with it.

It had been so different for a brief moment, listening to Jason and her sister getting to know each other. *In another world*, Angelica thought, swallowing the bitterness with a harsh shudder she didn't try to hide. *In another world, we could have all been happy together.*

"No one would blame you..."

This was the conversation Angelica didn't want to have, the one where she let Sam convince her to keep Jason against his will. Angelica sent her a sharp glare. "That's not what he wants."

"Since when do *his* wants matter? You won

him. He's Pruett property now."

"Pruetts do not own males!" The shout surprised even Angelica. She snapped her mouth shut.

"Yep." Sam grinned. "Gonna be a fun trip." She resumed scanning the hazy landscape.

Angelica did the same, not letting herself be drawn into one of their sisterly fighting moments. Besides being on duty, she was in too much pain to be distracted so easily. Jason wanted the one thing she would never give him.

Angelica's dream of remission shattered on the rocks around them.

## Chapter Thirteen

# Hounded

### 1

**J**ason emerged to discover their shelter was a red brick building set into the side of a wide hill that was littered in sticker bushes. Crumbled into decay, the building was camouflaged by sand and weeds. He couldn't tell what it had been. Someone's home was most likely.

Angelica handed him a roll from her kit and the canteen from the holder. Around them, the Runners were also consuming water and hard rolls.

Angelica watched him. "They're energy balls."

He'd heard of those. They were like the drugs for men, increasing a changeling's blood flow for stamina.

Still charged from the wakeup together, Jason took a large bite. It was sweeter than he'd anticipated. He grunted in approval before taking a second mouthful. It was gone a few seconds later. "That was good."

Angelica held out another with no comment.

He devoured it the same way he had the first. As he finished, he realized the Runners were cackling yet again.

"Two! That should stiffen his upper lip!"

Jason flushed as he realized what it meant, but Angelica wasn't laughing. Her attention was on his mouth. Electricity sparked between them, turning flat black to brilliant pink.

Jason dropped his chin at the fresh brays of amusement.

Angelica stepped by him, words toneless. "Five minutes."

Jason studied the area, searching for war relics, and found himself alone with Angelica's sister. The others, Angelica included, began repacking the bikes that were hidden under tarps the same color as the sandy ground. Nervous, he waited for Sam to speak, but there was only another assessing glance and silence.

When she stayed on his hip, Jason realized she was guarding him and felt flattered. This big woman was the leader of her crew. Why would Sam bow to a younger sibling's wishes? Clearly, he didn't have these Pruetts figured out yet.

"You have a tracker in your arm." Sam eyed his brand. "Do we need to sedate you to remove it?"

Jason rotated toward the woman in horror. "Get it out of me!"

The big female didn't get Angelica's permission first, but Jason sensed his owner standing tensely nearby as her sister drew a large knife.

It didn't hurt nearly as much as some of the things Rankin had put him through. Jason was able to remain silent for it.

The Runners were impressed as Sam dug the

locator beacon from his arm and then handed him a bandage.

Jason didn't ask what they would do with the tracking chip.

“Incoming!”

Sam gave a sharp whistle at Angelica's call.

In seconds, Jason was surrounded by armed changeling Runners with red eyes and long claws. In front of them, Angelica joined her sister.

When Jason saw their company, he cowered in the middle. His nightmare was here. Rankin rode up slowly, openly searching for weak spots in the ring around Jason. There was no doubt in his mind that they were about to be attacked.

The Runners agreed, allowing their bodies to change openly in a display of intimidation that Jason was sure would be lost on Rankin. She didn't fear fighting or death, only losing her place with the Network.

“Tie him in.”

Angelica's order had more female hands reaching for Jason than he thought he could stand. He cringed away only to be held mercilessly in place, moaning his fear as they attached numerous ropes to his belt, his ankles, and his wrists.

As they spread into a tight circle around him, Jason understood Rankin would have to kill every Runner here to take him, but he wasn't relieved. She would.

Angelica walked forward to meet Rankin.

Jason hurried toward her with no further

thought of his own safety. She didn't know who she was—

The Runners jerked him back and shoved him to the ground, where the view between their legs was gritty. He stayed there as the confrontation that he'd been dreading since leaving New Network City played out.

“If I don't lose one woman from my crew, I won't call the hounds. It's the single concession you'll get from me, Pruett!”

Rankin's tone implied she'd witnessed many of Angelica's moments with Jason. She wanted the Pruetts to pay for that jealousy.

Angelica subtly got closer to Rankin and to the sleek black horse the Defender was towering over everyone with. “What if I refuse to surrender him?”

“I'll kill you!” Rankin snarled, hands clenching around the saddle horn. “No survivors will be allowed!”

Angelica liked those terms. She'd rather be dead than for Jason to be under Rankin's control again. “Agreed.” Angelica turned long enough to meet her sister's gaze, and then they both reacted as the situation deserved. They jerked spikes from their belts and threw them.

“Attack!”

Rankin's painfilled voice told Angelica at least one of their throws had been good, but she didn't waste time verifying it as she ducked into the protective circle of the Runners and got set to fight. *She can have him over my dead body.*

The women on the outside of the circle flipped their heavy cloaks over one shoulder, holding them up for shields. The inside line hurried to bind the cloaks together with the attached strings. When knives and bullets slammed into the vivid cloth, they were held!

Jason heard Rankin scream in rage, and cowered as the Runners began to return fire. With the cloaks attached, they had a wide circle of protection that freed hands to shoot riders from panicking horses.

*Rankin underestimated the Runners. So did I.* Jason felt the Runner next to him, Wendy, tense. She'd just calculated the new odds and didn't care for them.

“Here they come!”

Jason twisted to discover a large pack of hounds running full speed toward them through the dusty distance. *We're trapped!*

The hounds snarled furiously, zeroing in on the scent of blood and the sound of gunfire. Their enormous paws shook the ground as they pounded toward the fighting, and saliva flew from their lethal mouths.

*Welcome to the Borderlands.* “Fall back!” Angelica placed the crew against the wall of the crumbling shelter so they could dive in if needed, but Sam and her girls were too good for that. Half of the Runners kept firing, forcing Rankin's crew to seek cover. The other half pulled long, thin red cords from their pockets, lit them, and gave hefty

throws that landed the objects near the hound's relentless path.

The slobbering dogs approached the first one.

*Kabllllammm!*

The explosion evaporated the nearest three hounds in a geyser of debris and sent the others veering off their straight-at-the-prey course.

The pack quickly remerged.

*Boommm!*

The second impact took two more of the collar-controlled dogs from the battle and split the pack in half, but neither group changed direction. They were coming.

Sam tossed two of the red cords together, buying time for her girls to reload and be certain of their aim.

Given cover by the arriving hounds, Rankin and her remaining Defenders moved behind the crumbling stone wall, firing sporadic shots that tried to slip through Pruett defenses. When the Pruetts came up to fire at the fast approaching hounds, Rankin and her crew tried to pick them off with clever shots.

“Down!”

The Runners all dropped at Sam's shout, just in time to avoid the first hound that sailed over them from the roof of the building they were against.

Uncovered, bullets began slamming into targets.

“Don't hit the male!”

Rankin's shout got Jason to stand up. He was

scared, but he was hoping the Defenders would stop shooting the Runners if he was in the way. Two of the big women were already down and he didn't want anyone else to die for him.

“Ahhh!” Jason screamed.

Angelica rotated to discover Jason's ankle in the grip of the hound that had jumped over them. She fired without thinking, blowing its rage filled brain out of its skull.

Gore splattered, but the teeth didn't release his ankle.

She fired again, taking out another red orb; the furious dog gave up her prize as it died.

Angelica jerked Jason behind her as the other Runners closed the gaps in the shield.

“You sure know how to make friends.”

Sam didn't sound anything but perfectly pleased.

Angelica snorted, firing as she directed the circle away from the dog's corpse. “You know me. I like a challenge.”

Jason listened to their banter as if they were from another planet. How could they be so calm while under attack from both Rankin and the hounds? Didn't Pruett's fear anything?

Pain flared in Jason's ankle as Angelica jerked him behind her. Rankin was aiming, smirking... He instinctively yanked Angelica down, and felt a Runner in the rear sag against his rope as she took the hit.

A second hound reached them and leapt directly

into the circle of ropes and cloaks, forcing the Runners to leave the outside unprotected as they turned and fired.

Rankin drew down again.

Jason did the only thing he could think of. He snatched one of Angelica's spare guns from her belt and fired at his terror in the darkness.

Angelica wasn't tied to him. Jason was horrified when she jumped out of the protective circle of Runners. She drew her bow and let an arrow fly. Not pausing, she grabbed the next and fired again.

Three more and her quiver was almost empty, but her gun wasn't. She continued the same lethal aim, cutting through half of the remaining Defenders like a swift, bloody blade.

She marched toward Rankin's hiding place as she fired.

Jason opened his mouth to shout a warning. She didn't know what Rankin was capable of.

Angelica launched a handful of spikes, drawing the Defender's full attention as the sharp projectiles drew more blood.

Rankin fired ruthlessly, gun trained on Angelica.

"No!" Jason lunged forward but the Runners shoved him down.

Jason shoved back to his feet, searching frantically... *There!* Still firing, Angelica was standing in the middle of the chaos with no care for her safety. It was impressive...and annoying. *Doesn't she care if she gets hurt?*

“Now, Angel!”

Mental flames came from Sam’s call, but Angelica pulled the arrow from her quiver with steady hands, aware of Jason still trying to use one of her guns. *Good!*

The arrow slid into the notch; she drew down on Rankin without stopping to aim.

Rankin sensed it coming at the last second, dropping to the side of her horse as Angelica’s arrow and Sam’s bullet reached her. Both plunged into the guard behind her. As the body fell, it slammed into Rankin’s horse.

The head Defender woke at the impact, realizing most of her crew, her security, was gone or pinned down. The Runners were still firing steadily, throwing det-cords, and the hounds were almost all dead. The Runners had adapted fast, holding the explosives until they were at the end of their fast burning wicks. Rankin had come awfully light to handle a crew like this.

Understanding failure might be an option if she stayed, Rankin spurred her horse back the way she’d come without helping any of her fallen crew. If they didn’t follow, that was their choice. She hadn’t gotten Jason, but she had injured a number of the Runners and reminded them who they were dealing with.

The hounds, however, knew no such fear or compromise, and they hadn’t received a signal to stop attacking. The four remaining animals staggered at another explosion, but they had figured

out if they avoided the cord when it landed, they would be clear of the explosion. The hounds also adapted fast, avoiding the rest of the explosives that Sam tossed.

“Prepare to fire!”

Sam’s shout had them all aiming together.

“Wait!” Jason dropped the spare gun, almost frantic. “You don’t have to kill them!”

Rosa snatched him by the shoulder, but he wrenched away from her grip to grab Sam’s wrist, ropes jerking. “Please, you don’t have to—”

Sam shoved him into Rosa’s arms before one of her crew hit him by accident, but her quick glance was questioning.

Angelica wasn’t positive, either. She considered the way Daniel had saved himself from the hound when they’d been attacked outside the Bama Swamps. She wanted to give Jason the same opportunity to prove himself. “How?”

“Sing.”

She snorted in disbelief. “You want us to sing to them?”

“They can’t help it, either!”

“Fifteen seconds. Make the call.” Sam’s tone was half-amused, half-impatient, saying she knew they would win, but to hurry up.

Angelica wanted to trust him, but there wasn’t enough time if he was wrong. “Open fire.”

The Runners did as she ordered.

Jason jerked away from Rosa with hatred on his face.

He clearly had sympathy for the hounds. Angelica vowed to make it up to him even as she did her share to destroy the remaining mutations.

## 2

Jason stayed out of the way as they tended their wounds and cleaned up. He didn't dwell on the dog carcasses or the freshly dug graves, instead staring in the direction Rankin had gone. This was her fault. She'd called the dogs here to be distractions, sacrifices. When did she pay for the awful things she'd done?

Behind them was a rolling hill covered in yellow flowers and bloody bodies. They'd lost four of their big females. Jason stayed clear of the graves that each of their escorts was spending a few minutes at.

Ahead of them was a lightly wooded path with overgrown debris on one side, too molded in nature to be recognized. The signs of the war he'd longed to examine were barely visible, but after the deaths he'd witnessed here, they now screamed at Jason in accusation. They said until he was a real rebel fighting against the Network, he was as guilty as the others who ignored the sins of the past. What they'd done to the world was unforgivable. All their lives should have been spent fixing, repairing, and rebuilding—not surviving the apocalypse just to die at the whims of the Network's tyranny.

"I'm sorry." Angelica had come up beside him.

Jason shrugged tightly. “There probably wasn’t time. You have to get their attention first.”

“And they were already on the blood hunt.”

“Yes.”

“How do you know so much about the hounds?”

“Rankin sometimes took me out. We would ride or walk, but we always finished the trip at the pens. She loves them. As much as she can love.”

It didn’t mean she wouldn’t sacrifice them, but he’d known that already. He’d been there when she drowned the runts and intentionally got packs to fight over her handouts for wagers. Jason felt Angelica studying him, worrying.

“Are you okay?”

Jason nodded again, not sure if he was. “She’ll make me pay for every one of them.”

Angelica’s hand on his arm was gentle. “No, she won’t.”

The changeling knelt to examine his ankle.

Jason stayed still, not caring about the minor pain. Terror was all he could feel and it was icy.

His wound was no more than a scratch and he was male, so there was little fear of him being infected. His mind was what worried Angelica as she wrapped his leg. His fear even had Sam’s crew being quiet so they didn’t make it worse. Sam and her Runners hadn’t met Baker’s males yet, but Jason was a good example of what they would be like. Angelica didn’t interrupt their reactions to it.

When she finished, Jason stayed sitting against the edge of the crumbling brick, staring

despondently at Rankin's prints in the dust.

"Give him this." Rosa was holding out one of her most cherished possessions, a relic of the old world that she never parted with.

Angelica took the taser in shock. Rosa's town had been destroyed by the Network after refusing to mine against their contract. Her family hadn't survived and she'd been with Sam and her crew ever since. It was Angelica's guess that Rosa was still hoping for revenge. If so, she had found it.

Rosa patted her cloak pocket. "I've got a few battery packs. Let him practice while we get set."

It was a good idea. Angelica gently led her ward away from the carnage and into the old den.

He didn't resist the lesson, but it was easy to see that he didn't believe a taser was enough against Rankin.

Angelica agreed. She slowly drew her main weapon and held it out. "Try this."

The feel of Angelica's main gun in his hand was incredible. Jason was certain no one else had ever used it. He was honored. The instant he wrapped his hand around the grip, the rage he always carried flared to life. Jason began pulling the trigger with little thought of adjusting for the power.

Angelica's light touch on his hand controlled that, and allowed him to vent the rage. Slugs and brick chips flew in a wide array as he let out some of his pain.

*Click! Click!*

Jason handed the empty gun over reluctantly.

Angelica reloaded in a blur, then put it into her holster and stepped in front of him. “I need to make an amendment to our deal.”

Jason was unprepared for the emotion in her words.

“Until she’s dead, you can’t be without protection. I’ll make that clear to Baker.”

It was what he longed for, what he needed. His mouth opened of its own accord. “You...”

Angelica drew in a sharp breath, hands clenching. “If you prefer.”

“I do.” There was no one else he trusted. That realization had him moving toward her, forgetting where they were, *who* they were. “I want an amendment, too.”

Now she stiffened, and he frowned. “I don’t like your pain. I want you to accept my services.”

Even saying it now brought a chill and a twitch from his body, signs that she noticed and responded to even though she didn’t like being weak.

“I’ll think on it.”

It was more than he had hoped for. Jason wanted her to know she’d pleased him. He darted in for a quick peck to her warm cheek. Fighting the temptation, he backed away. “Thanks.”

Angelica’s jaw tightened, but those eyes remained black with misery instead of the heat he’d been trying to draw.

“It’s time to go.”

Jason turned obediently toward the light, where their escorts had come at the sound of the gunfire.

Not paying attention, his foot tripped over the debris.

Angelica grabbed his arm to keep him from falling, but Jason's weight pulled them over. They landed in the dusty rubble, with her on top.

They would be at Baker's hiding place by nightfall. From there, they would sleep a bit and then start out for the safe zone, where the rest of the males were waiting, training, preparing. Two days after that, Angelica would be free of Jason. Her heart would never be the same.

Looking at his sooty facade, she thought she'd never wanted anything more than for him to care in return. She would never be able to settle for one of Baker's meek rebels. She likely wouldn't even try. Once she got Jason to safety, and Rankin was dead, she might take off on her own for a while.

Jason's expression darkened as if he'd heard the thought. "Why do I care if you go?"

Angelica pulled them to their feet with hands that shook slightly. She had the same question. Unable to resist stealing one last moment, she leaned in and pressed her mouth to his.

Behind them, their escorts discreetly moved away from the entrance.

Jason's grip tightened, hard body leaning to meet hers.

Angelica spotted desire and confusion, but no reluctance, no resistance. Her pink tints fell to his lips, control and need raging. "May I?"

His cheeks darkened, breathing uneven. "Yes,

please.”

This time, Angelica kissed him with her heart.

It was different. He felt it instantly. The magic flare of heat was there, but also the completeness. There would never be anyone like Angelica.

She broke the kiss, surprised in the dim light filtering through the rubble.

She didn't say anything, but he could feel her wanting to. What was she holding to herself? A plea for him to stay with her? Jason hoped not. He wouldn't be able to resist it right now. She'd already gone through so much for him. He owed her.

“Freedom?”

Jason ignored the heart crying out for him to wait, to think about it a little more. “Yes, please.”

Angelica winced at the words, but she didn't protest. Her touch was gentle as she guided him over the debris and out into the light.

Sam's facade held sympathy that Angelica tried to ignore. He'd made his choice. Now, they would both live with it.

Jason settled onto the Mopar in front of her without being told, remembering her words of letting him drive in. He didn't mind as she tied them together.

“Let's roll.” Angelica rode with a gun in each hand in case Rankin was set to try again.

Behind them, crumbling brick remained, but the gritty shell was covered in fresh blood and gore. In the sky, fat vultures circled restlessly, waiting for them to be gone. What nature gave in such generous

amounts, she also took back ruthlessly. It was a lesson the old world had forgotten, but here in the Borderlands, it was the law.

Jason gunned the bike up to speed. For the first time in his adult life, he now held hope for the future and it had come to him here, in this hell. The horrid conditions suddenly felt like home.

Chapter Fourteen  
**Rebel Feelings**  
Day 13

1

*W*e're here.

The sight of all those males instantly put both of them on edge. Jason understood Angelica's reaction, the need was thick, but his own harsh burn of jealousy was unexpected. It grew when the males began to recognize her.

"They're here!"

"Angelica's here!"

"Someone tell Candice!"

Hard bodied men wearing excited faces began to pour from the wide cave entrance. Clad in tightly fitting brown and gray breeches with long shirts, it was clear that the rebels were learning to hunt for their needs. The duds were too vivid to be anything other than freshly made. Jason's fingers tightened on the wheel. *They're independent. Uh-oh.*

Angelica stood up, exposing the rope between them.

A striking man walked confidently from the main cave entrance, accompanied by an infamous female who looked too much like Angelica and Sam not to be related. The man had to be Daniel, but

Jason hardly recognized him from their captivity at the complex. That male had been a sniveling coward. This man was stronger, stood taller, and he was happier.

Daniel and Candice came toward them with their cloaks streaming out in the gritty wind. Their hands were clasped, faces full of welcome. Jason felt Angelica breathe a sigh of relief.

*She loves them.* It was good to know. Jason still wasn't certain what terms she was on with her sister. For being related, Sam and Angelica acted almost nothing alike.

Blond, black, red, brown, platinum. There were now men of every shade moving toward them like sweets on a train car buffet. The heat of the Runners flared out around Jason like their cloaks had during the ride.

“Sam! I'm off this one.”

They all turned to the Runner on Sam's right. Wendy was focused on the emerging males with eyes on the edge of crimson.

Sam quickly agreed, waving the woman away. “I'll send for you when we're done.”

Wendy grunted in return, but she continued to glare at the rebels with savage need. “Are they... Do you think we could—”

“No!”

Sam's voice was harder than Jason had heard from any of them. He cringed at the sound of a true Pruett command.

“It's okay, I mean, we're on a run, I know, and

we don't do that." Wendy continued to ramble instead of leaving. "But, I could..."

Sam's hand slid toward her weapon. "I'll kill you, Wendy. I don't want to, but I will."

Sam's warning was ignored.

"It's okay. I'll... I can..."

The snap came fast.

Wendy lunged from the bike like a wild animal and sprinted toward the nearest blond as the change ripped through her big body. Hair shot out in thick waves, claws thrusting through nails, and her chin tilted to scream as she sprinted toward the fleeing men.

*Bang!*

*Bang!*

Angelica lowered her arm as the body slumped to the sandy ground.

Jason felt her holster and heard Sam doing the same next to them.

Sam scanned her angry crew. "Judge it now. Fair or not?"

"Fair."

"Fair."

Each of them agreed, but Sam resisted as the vote came around. "Not fair. I didn't want to kill her."

Rosa pushed her goggles up over a tight ponytail of shining red hair. "Overruled by a majority vote."

Jason peeked at them in small glances, still cowering against Angelica. He could hear Candice

and Daniel talking, getting the males to come back out, but the comfort of his owner's heartbeat kept him from shaking.

Angelica slowly shifted, hand gently making him look at her. She didn't speak, but he felt better as she stared at him, calmer. He was with a Pruett. He was protected and she reminded him of that silently.

Around them, a small group of the somber Runners went to collect Wendy's body. She would still be buried with respect. All of them were fighting her snap. They understood she just hadn't been strong enough.

Ahead of the storm now, the winds were pushing, dust caps coming, and the sky was black in the direction they'd come from. The wind blew cloaks open, letting Jason see the guns and knives, and even a few electronic clubs on the tense rebels. It was encouraging.

"Did he fall, too?"

Angelica snorted at her cousin's joking question as Candice and Daniel reached them. "I didn't give him the chance."

When Daniel flushed, Jason understood why he was bound. Another fear vanished. He'd thought he was chained to her because she owned him. He hadn't realized it was also for his safety.

Angelica turned toward him. "Good luck, Jason."

*That tone!* His heart thumped as she drew her knife, but not in fear. He knew what was coming; he

opened his mouth...

Angelica cut the rope between them before he could say anything.

Jason felt it deep down. She'd just released him, in her heart as well as by the rope.

Angelica studied him, face unreadable. Jason gave her an uneasy smile of gratitude, pushing away the sense of loss. He hadn't wanted to be paraded among these free males while tied to an owner.

Angelica turned away.

Jason stumbled after her as quickly as he could through the cramps and aches of riding the bike for so long.

The rebel males all waited respectfully while Candice and Sam talked quietly, but they were taking in every detail of Angelica and Jason, and their escorts. They worried over the big Runners with expressions that Candice ignored, making them adapt. Jason assumed she'd told them the women were coming, but these males hadn't been prepared for it.

For some reason, Jason had assumed the Runners and the rebels already knew each other. His stomach tightened. They were taking wild changelings inside a cave with rebel males. He hoped Wendy's snap was a rare event.

The hero of the bachelor cells gave Jason a casual nod that he returned with recognition and relief. Deep down, Jason had believed Rankin would reclaim him before he could get here.

Daniel was clearly happy to have him here, but

that pretty skin and golden hair made him so bright that Jason shifted his attention to the man's owner.

Candice Pruett was nearly the mirror image of his Angel, even down to the thick, muscular, tattooed body. Jason observed their reunion in surprise.

“Welcome.”

“We've missed you.”

Angelica's happiness flew over him in thick waves as she hugged her cousin. Jason hated that even though he could become addicted to it. He wanted the chance to make her feel that way and it was frightening. He was about to be free. He needed to break his dependency on her, if that's what it was. He wasn't sure.

Angelica surprised most of the audience, Jason included, by delivering a gentle kiss to Daniel's cheek.

It caused him to turn a shade of red that made his owner turn toward him. It was obvious that Candice and Daniel were bonded. He didn't want freedom, though Jason supposed Daniel had a great deal right now, considering the attention he was receiving.

*That could be me.* Jason pushed away the notion. He didn't want to be owned.

Candice scanned Jason, then turned to Angelica. “Any word on my parents?”

“They made contact with the lepers, and then went southwest from there. Sam's got my report and the gear.”

Jason wondered if Angelica meant the cameras she'd hidden in her pouches and pockets before they'd exited the complex.

"We did run into a slight delay."

Behind them, Sam bragged. "They weren't even a bump in the road. I told you my Runners were more than a match for the Ring. *We* don't like survivors, either."

Candice grinned again, wider, and Jason was glad he knew the story. Most of the bachelors in New Network City did. They were adept at prying information from the renters.

Candice had wanted the Ring gone for a long time, and it soothed her to know a Pruett had handled it, even though the crew that had taken Daniel had moved on to other jobs years ago. Candice wanted the yearly roundup stopped and this would at least interrupt it.

Angelica introduced him. "This is Jason."

The bachelor straightened his shoulders as everyone began to appraise Angelica's prize. It was an ugly emotion, causing him to react more sharply than he'd intended. "Where the hell is Baker?"

The rudeness made Angelica turn to him in surprise, along with everyone else. She could sense the rebel males expecting a reaction, a punishment; she delivered one that hurt them both. "Jason wants to live as one of you. He is now free to do so."

Angelica ignored them all, leaving him standing there to handle the mutters and murmurs. He was officially free and she was alone again. She'd done

the right thing. She was a Pruett. Angelica marched inside to surround herself with a different type of pain so she could keep breathing.

The cave entrance was wide and led into an enormous open area with multiple tunnels leading from it. Angelica was drawn to the personal touches, like a wooden rack for coats and a stack of books in a far corner.

From the main chamber, there was a perfect view of a dining area filled with stone seats and long, rocky tables that had once been road dividers of some sort. Males filled those seats. As she walked through the tunnels that were set up much like Stone Mountain, she almost expected to hear a drill.

*“That’s the sound of a rookie getting inked.”*

What had Baker meant by rookie? She hadn’t thought to ask then, but now, she needed any distraction. Angelica had assumed it meant a rebel who had just joined them, but she was noticing a few of the males here had one of the detailed tattoos. As she thought of those she’d met at Stone Mountain, Angelica realized that was true of there as well. Did Baker have a secret group inside his rebels, doing special work? She found the notion exciting and stored it for yet another thing to figure out later.

As Angelica neared the next tunnel, she realized these males weren’t flinching from her the way they had at Stone Mountain. Their expressions were hot, intent as they tried to figure out why she hadn’t kept

Jason for her own and if that slot was now open.  
*Was it?*

Angelica stopped to take a deep scent of them, but her head automatically rotated, going to Jason.

He was still observing her retreat, full of his own battles. She let out a miserable breath as she spun around. Surely one of these, or the hundreds at the safe zone, would draw the same attraction.

“Welcome back.” Baker came toward her from the largest tunnel.

She read it all in his grateful expression. He was lonely and full of rage. Apparently being around Candice and Daniel as they bonded hadn’t been fun. It was easy to embrace him like family. In her heart, Baker already was.

He returned her short hug with a surprised chuckle and Angelica felt a bit of her loneliness ease. At least here, she had someone who understood.

Baker sported the same clothes as the rebels, the furs and hand cleaned leathers, but it was clear by the sturdy construction that he’d been making his a lot longer than they had. Over his long shirt and pants, he wore a long black and gray cloak with the hood lowered to reveal a bald crown that bulged with sexy muscles. It was easy to understand why Candice had been attracted to him, but Angelica didn’t experience any of the heat that she had during their Stone Mountain time. Now, Jason was all she could feel.

Baker’s shined eyes flashed. “Let’s get you and

your new mate...”

Her wince stopped his words and shifted his attention to the group now coming in. He picked Jason out, voice disapproving. “You know not to leave them alone when they’re fresh out of the dome.”

“He makes his own choices, like the rest of *your* males.”

Baker’s face swung to hers. In that moment, all of her secrets were laid bare. “You freed him.”

“It’s what he wants.”

Baker’s voice was low. “And you?”

Angelica wanted to say she’d be fine, that she had a secondary plan, and was horrified to hear the truth fall out in a desperate groan. “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t give to have him *willing*.”

“Damn, little girl.” Baker tossed an arm around her slumped shoulders. “Let me see what I can do.”

She sighed dejectedly. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

Baker studied her, getting more details than she wanted him to from the silence, but he was like that. They’d had a long conversation on the train before Candice had agreed to help him prepare his rebels. Angelica trusted this hard, twitchy leader.

“Does he know you care?”

“No, and I don’t want him to. Willing, Baker, not convinced or persuaded.”

Baker wanted her to be clear. “He’ll assume it’s just for relief if you don’t tell him otherwise.”

Silence.

“You’re definitely a Pruett.”

“And then some.” She moved over to allow the approaching group to join them. “This is your newest member, Jason Parker.”

Baker came forward to shake as Jason did the same, awed at meeting another hero. Baker was a legend to all of the bachelors in the complex. “I have to talk to you—alone.”

“Okay.” Baker didn’t ask for permission as he directed her prize to a quiet corner.

Angelica’s heart cried out as the final chain snapped. That was it. She had to let him go now.

Angelica turned toward the lined walls, searching the interested faces of the rebels, hoping for any spark, but there was only pain. She met her cousin’s gaze without shame or censoring her private hell. She loved Sam, but Angelica and Candy had grown up together. She appeared older, stronger since Angelica had spent time around her. Being here was good for her lovestruck cousin. *Daniel* had been good for her.

*Why didn’t I pick someone like him?* Angelica veered toward the entrance. She estimated there was enough time to make a place to guard from before the storm hit. If Rankin came in on its heels, she would know. And after this was done, she would travel on alone—whatever it took to get Jason’s scent out of her thoughts, her dreams.

That intent stride caught Jason’s immediate attention. Before he could call her name, Angelica glanced back. There was so much longing, so much pain in her expression, that he took a step toward

her.

Angelica stopped him with a single shake of her head. Jason watched those emotions get hidden behind her wall. As a free man, he didn't have the duty, the honor, of comforting her.

She held his regard for a moment longer, searching him, and then she walked out.

"She's leaving!"

Baker had been observing. "She's kept her end of the deal. This is what you want, isn't it?"

Jason gave a quick nod, but mentally... "Will she come back?"

"Yes, but probably not until she can handle your freedom without interfering."

"But I don't—" Jason snapped his mouth shut, aware of Baker studying his reaction.

"Don't want to be away from her?"

Jason flushed. "She's different than other women."

"She's a Pruett."

"And they're for freedom."

"Yes. Even against their own needs. It's a rare family you've turned down being a part of." Baker saw the silent agreement, and pushed. "It's not too late."

Jason considered his dreams, and then Angelica's rule concerning children. "Yes, it is. We don't want the same things."

"Ah, the future." Baker grinned. "It's never better for the rebels."

Jason remembered then, why all of this had

come about in the first place, and began spilling his secrets.

As he talked, Candice and Daniel came over to listen.

Jason tried not to miss any details, but his ears were waiting for the sound of a bike engine. How long would he go without seeing her? Would he be able to stand it without begging someone to take him to her? And what about Rankin? Jason confessed that nasty secret with a shamed voice. “Our tail is the top Defender.”

All of them knew by the tone that there was more. He gave the information in a muttered rush. “She’s upset that Angelica picked me!”

“Another plot twist.” Candice focused on his bandaged arm. “And here we all thought this would be a relaxing vacation.”

A sarcastic snort of laughter from the group made Jason control a flinch. Dust coated the uneven floor around them in thin ripples that would soon form piles. He shivered at the notion of Angelica being alone out there in that violence.

The sky rumbled in warning. The dry crack of the coming dust was the same as a thunderstorm to these males. He wasn’t surprised when a few of the rebels cringed.

Daniel’s voice rumbled. “That explains where they went.”

Candice ran a loving hand over his, drawn.

Daniel flushed in happiness.

They were perfect for each other. Jason was

willing to bet their children would be immune. The magic was hard to miss.

“Some of it.” Candice’s sharp gaze went to Jason. “Still, it’s odd that she would leave so soon.”

“She’s gone already?” Jason’s worried interruption drew surprised attention from her family.

Once again, he flushed. That was all he could do. He wasn’t comfortable around people, men or women. “She was good to me. I wanted to say goodbye.”

Candice gave him another of those appraising stares. “She may rejoin us after she finds your admirer.”

“Just her?” Jason gaped in shock. “That’s not enough against Rankin!”

He was surprised by the fresh snorts and scornful laughter.

“With you burning in her guts, Angel doesn’t even need Sam with her.”

Jason was relieved to know she wasn’t alone, but the rest of the conversation and plans to get him settled were just vague voices. Angelica had gone to handle Rankin. *I might never see her again!*

## 2

It felt good to be on guard duty. Angelica had missed it during the last months. She used her sharp senses to pick out any sign of human movement in the roiling caps of dust that surrounded everything.

They'd spent a few hours combing the sector before the storm got bad, but hadn't found anything. They knew they still had a tail. They'd spotted too many ground level clouds even before the Ring had attacked to assume otherwise, but Rankin was slick, staying out of sight. Now that they'd reached the first stop and joined Baker, another attack was likely. Even if Rankin couldn't get a call through, it was only a matter of time before the Network chose to handle things remotely. Angelica was hoping they still had a few days before the council ran out of patience. She had plans of her own. When Rankin came in to make the verification, Angelica was going to grab her and dole out a fast match of justice. *Rankin will come. There's no doubt of it.*

Angelica wondered what secrets Jason might have told Baker by now, but it didn't matter at this point. The problem was bigger than just Rankin. Once this tracker was off their scent, trouble would come anyway. The Network was unpredictable, and she'd never known of a family to go against them the way hers was doing. Guessing what might happen was impossible.

"It's time we talked."

Angelica and Sam were sheltered against a stone wall, roughly half a mile from the cave. Once the storm let up, the rebel den and the rocky ground around it would be visible.

She let out a sigh. "Get it over with then."

Sam did, bluntly. "He doesn't really want to be free, and I know what *you* want. What's the

problem?”

That image of another woman being filled with life, loving his children, came to her tortured mind. Angelica winced at the sharp pain. “The future.”

“Your kids might not be infected.”

She and Sam weren’t similar in personality, so it surprised her that Sam knew her deepest fear. Angelica didn’t answer. They both knew the odds on it.

“So, what will you do?”

“Pick a replacement.”

“From Baker’s rebels?”

“Where else?” Angelica spat. “I took the best of the Network lot!”

Sam chuckled. “I knew this trip would be worth the ride.”

Angelica snorted at Sam’s optimism as they both did another quick sweep. Finding nothing but howling sand, Angelica let herself ask something she’d always wondered. “Don’t you feel it, Sam? Doesn’t it burn you up, too?”

Angelica was gratified and shocked when her sister’s countenance blazed with pain for a brief moment before she smothered it. Angelica expected something sharp, or even a fight to distract her. What she didn’t expect, was more honesty.

“So much that I travel out and spill blood to keep from taking them against their will.” Sam frowned bitterly at Angelica’s shock. “We’re Pruetts, right? Willing matters to all of us.”

Angelica had never thought of her sister having

a conscience. To know for sure that she didn't rape males made Angelica view Sam in a new light. She'd always assumed Sam took what she wanted. What an act she'd played! "It helped a little, being at the games. I had a place to put it."

"Yeah." Sam's expression was one of guilty obsession. "But a service is better than the pain."

Angelica knew the way Sam relieved it would never be enough for her. It eased the fire to spill blood, but the cure against this torment was Jason.

Angelica resumed studying the barren landscape with a heart that refused to stop bleeding. She kept the conversation going for the distraction. "Do you think you'll ever settle down?"

She wasn't positive Sam was going to answer, and that was another surprise. The wild sister she'd known before the games would have quickly denied such a future for herself.

"Maybe someday."

Angelica gawked and received an embarrassed shrug.

"It's hard to be around you guys and not want my own."

Angelica knew that all too well. She grimaced bitterly this time. "The games are open."

"I know..."

Again, Angelica was surprised by the hesitation in her sister's low tone. "Or, you could stay and help with the rebels. You already know Candy's hoping for it."

Sam smirked at that challenge, seeming more

like the sister Angelica knew than she had since meeting them at the train. “Do I get to sniff the rebels, too?”

Angelica chuckled, grateful for her family. “We’ll hunt through them together.”

Sam returned the leer, but there was a serious note to her next words that caught Angelica, held her.

“What do you hope to find with him that the others can’t provide?”

Angelica knew the answer mattered. “Remission.”

“I thought so.”

Angelica was braced to take surprise or even scorn, but not more pain from her rock hard, wild-as-hell sister.

“I used to believe in that, too.”

Despite their usual habit of leaving each other alone, Angelica probed. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Sam gestured toward the cave. “I’m more bonded with those women than with my own parents. I pay for a service when it gets too bad for the blood to push it back. I’ve lived this way for twenty years, and never once in all that time did I find a male I *hurt* to be away from.” Sam’s face tightened into the hard mask they all expected from her. “I lost hope.” Sam swung around to sweep behind them. “He’s drawn to you.” A clever switch of topics to keep Angelica from questioning further, it worked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Sam snorted.

Angelica wallowed in her misery while Sam protected her, as she'd always done.

"One of my Runners wants him, if he chooses to be a renter."

"No!"

Sam's harsh mirth brayed out. "Those games must be something."

Angelica didn't answer, but she suspected right then what Sam might do. With any luck, Angelica would be there to cheer for her from the stands and protect her from assassins. That's what family was for.

### 3

"Where is he?"

"Outside."

"Still? It's been five hours. Should he be so upset?"

"No, but I believe they bonded on the trip here."

"Owners are our safety net."

Daniel's words to the Runners drew Jason's interest as he listened to them eat, bond, and talk about him. He was easily able to hear them from his perch outside the cave entrance.

"Without an owner, a bachelor is defenseless."

Daniel's voice held shame that Jason recognized. Didn't he have his own?

"They make it so that's all you want. When you don't have it, the sense of being lost is hard to

handle. It's why most bachelors are sedated when they leave the complex."

There was pride in his words now. Jason assumed Daniel hadn't been drugged either upon leaving with a Pruett. It was another thing they had in common.

"We're leaving in the morning. Should I help him?"

Candice snorted at Daniel's question. "She won't let him travel alone. Free or not, he still has a protector. I'm betting she'll return at dawn with the rest of the guard crew. Bachelors aren't the only ones who get attached."

They walked to another area of the cave as the meal finished. Jason realized she'd said it to make him feel better. Had it?

*Maybe.* Knowing he might be with Angelica again as soon as morning had him weighing his plans again. Could he change what he'd always wanted if it meant he could stay with her? He hadn't expected being away from Angelica to bother him. They'd only had a short time together, but there was no denying that he felt abandoned.

The other males flinched from the storm that was full on them now, following Daniel further into the cave, but Jason didn't share their worries about the whipping wind. He had a small lea where he was sitting and Rankin was still his only single terror in the darkness.

Jason had come out here to be away from the sound of Angelica's name on everyone's lips. Many

of the rebel males were interested in his former owner. If she wanted one of them, willing wasn't a problem, and after spending time with her cousin Candice, Jason understood. She was so kind to Daniel, so loving! They were a reminder of his parents, of that happy family he wanted returned. It had hit him hard while being around them, that even if he never had a child, at least he would have that caring bond with Angelica.

They'd been in enough uneasy situations for him to know she wouldn't ever force him, wouldn't take his heart and use it against him. She would become his obsession, like Candice was for Daniel. Those two hadn't been more than fifty feet apart the whole time Jason had been here and it was both encouraging and awful. He wanted that life, but he'd also spent years dreaming of what he needed from freedom. Having a family mattered to him. He had to hug his own sons, feel that connection, the sense of love that no anger could ever break... But now, he also wanted Angelica.

Chapter Fifteen

## Resistance is Futile

1

**J**ason couldn't ignore the sound of the returning guard crew. He followed a small group of males through the wide tunnel to the main entrance. Everything sounded fine; he scowled over the relief he felt. He'd been terribly worried for her safety—a *changeling*!

The incoming Runners were coated in thick desert dust, heavy layers that fell to the floor as they shook themselves. Jason hung back as they came into the morning-brightened cave with Sam in the lead. Where was *his* changeling?

Angelica came through last and found Jason first. Her expression immediately lightened, saying she'd been worried for him as well. It was so odd that they would feel this way already.

Jason gave her an uneasy smile.

She sensed his reluctance, expression growing shuttered. He wasn't surprised when she looked away, but the need to recapture her attention was unexpected. Why was he so drawn to her? No other females had that effect on him—not even Candice and she was incredible as she helped the rebels. They'd finally distracted him with that last night

while he'd snoozed in the corner, refusing a bed.

The storm was almost gone, but dust coated everything. It was in hair and on shoes, and even on the tables. It would take a lot of sweeping, but Jason could already see places where it appeared someone had tried to conquer the dust and given up. Once the wind finished settling, it might be possible.

Jason ignored the boasting of the louder females, instead straining to hear what words were being exchanged between Candice and Sam. He made out a few parts—no signs of Rankin, two day wait on the storm, not leaving in the morning—but the noise grew as more males came into the tunnel from workouts and chores. He had to settle for trying to read their lips.

“She likes you.” Angelica had come up behind him, gravelly voice in his ear. “If that’s what you want, Sam would take a service. So would any of her crew.”

“I don’t!” Jason flushed at his quick denial of her coming offer to arrange it, but he didn’t censor the next words. “She’s not you.”

Angelica flashed pink eyes, and quickly pulled it in. “There might be females at the safe zone, ones who would give you children.”

Instead of another protest, Jason swept the large group of rebels now walking to the dining hall. As they came by, their attention was on Angelica.

Jason felt jealousy again and didn’t like it. “Have you chosen one of them?”

He knew she frowned by the sudden rush of

hard bodies moving away from where they were standing.

“No.”

“I’ll still help if you want.” Jason wasn’t positive he could stand much of it, but the image of her being alone with them didn’t sit well, either. Why? *Because I want her*, was the obvious answer, but he wasn’t sure in what way. She refused to take a service or have children, while he didn’t want to be owned and longed for his family returned. What did that leave?

“It’ll have to wait until we reach the zone.”

“We could do it on the way.” Jason was surprised to hear himself offer that. “Narrow it down a little by your list.”

That sent her mind to the questions, to the moments on the train. Jason knew because it did his, too. He felt the heat already coming from her body increase.

“You don’t have to. I’ll...” Sounding tortured, she spun away from him.

Jason reacted without thinking. He grabbed her arm and jerked her around. “You’ll what?” He didn’t care that men were rushing for help, worrying that he was about to be hurt. Jason knew better.

Angelica didn’t pull away from him, but she didn’t lean into his arms either. She had herself under that relentless Pruett control again. “I’ll pick one later!”

Jason shifted his balance so they were flush, and felt her breathing grow rough. Need flashed out,

sharp and hot enough to burn him. *Damn. Now, I want to kiss her again.* “Am I still... Are we...” Jason drew in enough oxygen to allow a full sentence. “Can I stay with you until we get there?”

For an instant, he thought he’d gone too far. Angelica’s eyes faded to deep, full red and the muscles against him swelled, vibrated with tension. Prepared to accept what he had drawn, Jason waited as calmly as he could, determined to get what he needed—time alone with her.

After a few seconds, Angelica shut her lids and he felt that dangerous heat recede.

“Yes.”

He’d predicted the opposite answer and reacted instantly, blasting her with an emotional voice. “Good! I don’t feel like myself when you’re gone. I don’t want to eat or sleep, and I...I’m sure it’s because I missed being with you!”

A harsh shudder went through Angelica; she shifted them, moving their bodies into the darkest shadows of the corner. “I’m sorry!”

Her tone was guilty, *greedy*. Her mouth slanted over his an instant later, searing him with the heat that he’d missed. Need, hot and heavy, settled into Jason’s legs and began moving upward.

His tongue slid along hers, and his pulse increased, the blood rushing. No, Sam wouldn’t be able to make him feel this way, and neither would Candice. *This* was the Pruett he wanted.

Jason jerked Angelica against his chest, throbbing when she moaned lowly against his lips.

He liked the sound of that—a lot.

Angelica returned to herself all at once, ending the kiss. Her vision flickered dangerously. “What game are you playing?”

Jason honestly wasn’t sure. He just couldn’t leave her alone.

“Tell me what you want.”

“To be...” He hesitated. Thanks to Baker, he’d realized Daniel was free to do as he pleased, even though he was owned. Was that enough for him? At least for now?

“You don’t know!”

Her lowly growled discovery made his cheeks flush darker. “No.”

Angelica retreated. “I don’t want a—”

“I haven’t offered one!”

Angelica nodded tightly. “Until we reach the safe zone, I’ll keep you. After that, you need to make a final choice.”

“Between you and freedom?”

Angelica gave him a sad look. “Only you can answer that, Jason.” She turned toward the hall where Baker had lingered, listening. “But I need you willing and there’s little I won’t give in return.”

Did that mean she was weakening on her stance against kids? Could he treat her that way, knowing he’d worn her down?

Angelica stepped past Baker with a warning glare, meaning he wasn’t supposed to comfort Jason or explain. The bachelor was glad when Baker disobeyed her and joined him.

“If you plan on staying with her, then make it clear to the other males. Right now, she’s considered fair game.” Baker walked around Jason to get to the main chamber.

Jason realized he hadn’t gone against Angelica at all, but he had managed to rile the male inside. Had Baker known it would or did the rebel leader want Jason to give the other males his approval?

Jason’s attention turned to the dining chamber, to where Angelica was being handed a plate and cup by Greg, who was glowing with admiration as he spoke to her. Greg wasn’t afraid of her reaction to his voice or the stroke of his scarred hand along her wrist as he gave her the items.

Something inside Jason twisted angrily. *That’s my liberty to be taken!*

He started to move their way, but realized Baker had stopped in the main entrance. His silver gaze read it all.

“Do you know how to make a changeling snap?”

Jason nodded, flushing as he waited for Baker to tell him he should try it with Angelica.

Instead, Baker’s glowing eyes went to the line, where there were now no less than five rebel males falling all over themselves to attract Angelica. Not one of them was hesitating to hit her with their scents or sounds.

“So do *they*.” Baker joined his men as Jason tried to remember how to breathe through the anger.

The rebels knew she wasn’t satisfied. Her pink

eyes and tense body proved it to them.

Angelica's hand trembled as Greg leaned in to say something, but Jason felt her waves of need flow out to find him.

Their eyes locked over Greg's shoulder, sparking. In that moment, Jason knew what she was thinking. Could one of them erase the attraction she felt for him? Would one of these willing males ease her pain as well as he did?

His feet were moving before Jason could growl in protest. He turned into a tunnel at the last minute, forcing himself to leave her alone.

*He's a fire in my blood.* Angelica listened to the rebel males chattering, hearing their unspoken offers, but all she wanted was her ward. There was no denying the lust could be slaked with one of these eager-to-please men, but it was Jason's fire she craved. When he turned away, her need flattened into a disinterested throb. Angelica knew the moment for what it was. The end.

*Remission.* What an impossible dream that had been! There was no magic cure. Sam was right. The relief was in blood or a service. *That*, Jason would give willingly.

Heat flared again and two of the males advanced eagerly. Angelica felt their offers coming and wanted to stop them, but her mind was too full, already spinning in the new direction she'd just allowed. If she agreed to let Jason service her, she could keep him.

“Can we offer you anything?”

“Many here would be honored to provide a service.”

Those words, from these two, meant little more than the constant agony of their bell-like voices. “No, thank you. Have you asked my sister?”

Distracted, they both turned toward the corner where Sam and her loud, crude Runners were enjoying the meal. Freshly roasted rabbit and ears of tall corn graced the table, along with an assortment of baked goods that Angelica recognized from Stone Mountain. She assumed the rebels had traded for the corn, but she could tell from the proud countenances that the meat had been hunted. As she recognized the color of the husks on the corn, Angelica realized someone among the rebels had been trading with the lepers for their carefully tended crops. It was a large risk to take, but the colony had been careful about their food handling, so she didn’t protest. For now, it was needed. When they hit the safe zone, she would insist on their own gardens to eliminate the possible contamination of their males.

*Our males.* Angelica resumed her horrible, dangerously tempting notions. Candice and Baker had been happy during their time together and she would have Jason as much as he would allow. Could she settle for that? Wouldn’t it be easier to flee for the worst section of the Borderlands and spill blood until she couldn’t taste him on her lips anymore?

Angelica veered away from the rebel males while they were still shakily pondering her words.

She set the plate and cup down on the way out. She didn't want food or drink. She wanted Jason. She would never be free of this pain, but for some of her dark, agony-filled nights, he would be hers. At least it might be enough to ease this new, empty ache that nothing cured. She'd thought the pain of the disease was the worst agony she would ever know, but to have such a determined desire for someone who had so little for her was a level of hell she'd never imagined.

Angelica instinctively ducked out of sight as Baker and Jason returned. Their voices were low, but her changeling ears didn't miss a word.

"You're positive?"

"I've witnessed it."

"It's a legend."

"It's a fact and right here."

Jason was surprised. "You mean Candice and Daniel."

Baker didn't react to her cousin's name. It told Angelica that Candice had been right when she implied the rebel leader wasn't as attached to her as he'd let people believe.

"Yes. In love, without burning out or up. What would you call that?"

"Remission."

Angelica's heart thumped. Jason had gone to Baker about her.

"Now, you understand?"

"Yes." Jason's voice was full of discovery. "I never knew a changeling could be so strong."

Baker turned toward her lurking place, and then back to Jason. “The scientists think it takes two willing partners who have an attraction. What they don’t realize is they’ve missed a part of the equation.”

“Love.”

“Yes. There’s no true match without it, no remission, no immunity.”

“But with it...”

“A whole other life, one where the children are normal and this ugly world begins to heal. It’s a future the Network will stop at any cost.”

As they came into the dining hall, Jason swept the room and didn’t locate her. His face crumbled into disappointment.

*Bang!*

All through the tunnels, rebel males cringed, but not Jason. Angelica remembered Candy’s warning about storms, and realized he didn’t have that weakness to be conquered. She’d been ready for it during the dust storm, but all she’d sensed then was surprised excitement and assumed he was too distracted by driving to be scared.

Baker also noticed it and gave Jason a pleased nod that made his chin rise in pride.

Full of their words, Angelica went to her room. She’d been missing that piece. For remission, there had to be love, but if Jason wasn’t willing to be hers, there wasn’t any hope.

The heaviness settled back into her chest. Angelica swallowed her rage, hatred brewing. This

was all the Network's doing. *Instead of spilling blood in the Borderlands, maybe I'll splash crimson over New Network City.*

Jason followed her carefully, slowly, trying to give her time to get ready for bed. After the trip to get here, and then standing duty all night, she had to be tired. He was and the thought of sleeping with her was the clearest thing on his mind when he tapped on the dusty door flap.

"Come in, Jason."

Not sure how she'd known who it was, he stepped inside. Angelica's chamber was curved around a waist high wall of stone, providing a measure of privacy. He wondered if Baker had given her this one intentionally.

Angelica was standing by the fur bed in her half shirt and shorts, sexy muscles glowing in the dim candlelight as she studied him. Jason swallowed. *Where's the air?*

"There's another stack of furs in the corner. They didn't know if they should set it up for you or not."

Jason flushed at the thought of those free men discussing his personal life.

Angelica frowned tiredly. "Make your choice, Jason. I need to sleep."

He couldn't say it, not with those slightly pink eyes on his. Jason dropped his head. "Together?"

Instant, sparking heat flooded the chamber.

"Yes, please."

Her throaty whisper sent him to the kiss in the

brick shelter on the way here. He heard the same excited, sad longing in her tone, and stayed where he was. “Just to sleep?”

Angelica grunted in annoyance at his slightly disappointed tone. “Yes. Now.”

Jason didn’t wait to be told another time. As he curled his body around hers, the sensation of her skin against his and the sound of her low groan ringing in his ears broke off another chunk of his desire for freedom. There was no longer any denying this was where he wanted to be. He just didn’t know how it could work out for either of them to be happy.

Jason held her tight, like she needed, and Angelica let his scent pull her toward sleep as her mind flew over sudden, unwelcome truths. She would surrender to keep him. First, her honor for agreeing to a service arrangement, and then probably her hard line over children not long after. She wanted him too much, needed him too badly now, to refuse anything he was willing to give.

Jason tightened his grip, as if sensing her pain.

Angelica let out another low rumble of contentment. For this moment at least, he was hers, and she drifted to sleep with him securely in her embrace.

## 2

### Network

“Rankin got a call through. We have a location.”

“Great!”

“Send the bomb now.”

“Wait.” A lower ranking council member had been studying the radar while the others examined the weekly reports. “There’s another squall moving into that sector.”

The storm flashed onto the main screen, causing mutters around the council table. Even the protestors at the border would take shelter from that monster.

“I’ve never been around anything so big!”

“It’s the Changeling Winds.”

“If those winds are strong enough, it will deflect too much of the blast. Sitting for five hundred years hasn’t helped the strength of our weapons.”

There was silence as they waited for the leader of the council to make a choice.

The walls behind the members weren’t adorned with the same bloody images that graced the lethal halls below. In this sterile room, there was one picture—the original ten founding members of the Network in hand labored detail. The rest of the walls were still as naked as the day they’d been built.

“Tell her to contact us after the squall. As soon as it lets up, send the explosive.”

“Are you positive about crossing Rankin? If she survives, it’ll be another enemy to fight.”

There were scowls at the continued questioning, but the head of the table paused to mull it over. This coastal observer wouldn’t be taking any information away from here—plans had already been made—but she was right. Rankin’s reputation for paying it back

double was half the reason she'd been given the job.

Juli frowned thoughtfully. "Perhaps we'd better send two hits, just to be sure that doesn't happen. Our hands are full enough without adding more loose ends to be handled later."

The member at the far end of the table gestured tensely. "There's a call waiting for you. It's the UN representative."

"Transfer it to my private residence." There was no mistaking the anger under the calm words. The leader hated answering to outsiders of any kind. This was the second call from the negotiator. They were about to be given an ultimatum for surrender.

The meeting cleared, but each council member was curious about the private conversation. They'd handled the first call together, though it hadn't gone well. New America was now a target. If the inspectors made it through the wall, the rest of the world would be right behind them.

Chapter Sixteen

# Training Time

1

**T**he rebel workouts were interesting.

Jason had woken alone and wandered until he found the group of men and women training in a rear tunnel. Once he'd witnessed the lessons taking place, the fascinated bachelor hadn't been able to leave. Candice and Baker had two completely different methods of training and it was amazing to have them here, employing both techniques during the same lesson.

"Lean in. Use it!" Baker demanded as the woman's eyes turned pink.

"But she'll snap!"

Candice tried to reassure the rebel. "No, she won't. The Runners are often hired to escort males to their new owners because of their stamina. Now attack her!"

Greg lunged forward, invading the big female's space.

They all tensed as Rosa's tattooed hand swept out.

"Now jump!" Candice kept him moving, following her orders as he evaded the fast swipes and swings.

Behind her and Daniel stood the two guys who had flanked them as they'd come to greet Angelica. Jason recognized them both as games bachelors. The size of the one and the purple hair of the other marked them, but he'd also passed them in the halls and the renters' cells when Rankin had taken him for lessons. He'd been across the hall, listening to their screams as they did the same with him. Jason shuddered.

“Now! She caught your scent! Do it now!”

Baker's words sent Greg in to press his mouth to Rosa's clenched lips.

The Runner, and the audience, froze.

Greg pushed his advantage, using his voice. “You taste nice.”

Rosa shuddered, flipping to pink.

“Now!” Baker ordered.

Using a gentle move, Greg slid a foot behind Rosa's leg and took them to the ground. He landed on top, with a knife at her throat.

The bachelors erupted in cheers.

Candice and Baker began directing the rebels into a line to take a turn. It was obvious Greg was determined. He had his freedom to fight for and the sons being held by the Network. His profile was untouched, but his hands! They had so many scars that Jason might have guessed he was a hide that had been damaged by repeated axe blows. He assumed some of the scars had come from helping dig out wounded rebels at Stone Mountain.

Still on the floor, Greg's attention stayed on

Rosa. If he ran, he could be in danger.

Jason wondered if Candice was strong enough to stop Rosa if she snapped.

Greg tossed his knife away and delivered a brilliant smile. "You do taste nice."

"You had coffee this morning. I like coffee!" The big woman groaned. "Get up. I'm at my limit."

They all expected Greg to scurry away from her. The others were certainly retreating. It was a surprise when Greg laughed.

"Lightweight." His teasing broke the tension, and helped the big Runner regain her control.

Rosa's eyes slowly slid into black as Greg stood up.

"Maybe we could do it again sometime." Greg took her hand to pull her up.

The big woman flushed when he tried to keep her hand.

Encouraged, Greg leaned in and whispered something.

Whatever it was, it made the big female reach out to jerk him up against her body.

She growled at him. "Be sure. I own. I don't rent!"

Thanks to his time with a Pruett, Jason was able to read the fear under her anger. Like Angelica, Rosa had hopes of a match, not a moment.

Greg's eagerness didn't cool at the warning or the hands-on treatment. "Pruetts are for freedom. As long as I still get to fight, that's good by me."

Everyone was silent as they realized they were

witnessing a domestic arrangement...or maybe something more, judging from those flickering pink eyes.

“If I accept, how long will you honor it?”

Greg finally showed reluctance. “Until I no longer please you. When that time comes, I’m to be set free, not sold or passed to another owner.”

Rosa smiled in shocked joy, large hand coming up to gently stroke Greg’s cheek. “You want to be mine?”

Greg chuckled, hand coming up to keep hers against his skin. “As much as you want to kiss me right now.” The playboy leaned forward, invading Rosa’s personal space without hesitation this time. “You can, if you want, to seal our arrangement.”

Rosa’s eyes deepened to red; she led his thin frame from the room amid laughs and approving words. It was a successful match.

As the next female came toward the center of the circle, Jason considered what he’d witnessed. Greg was smart and courageous, things the Runners respected. He was also attractive with his curly brown hair and those chocolate eyes. Even his scars went in his favor, proving he was tough, but Jason thought the speaking was what had swept Rosa off her feet. Male voices wore away a changeling’s control, something few of them were brave enough to use openly. It made the other rebels eager to claim a female for themselves.

Tension sparked as the men saw the Runner who’d replaced Rosa while they were distracted.

Sam swept the men and lifted her chin arrogantly. "I'm no lightweight, gentlemen. I'm a full Pruett."

Candice and Baker laughed with the rebels as Jason chuckled in admiration, leaning forward. *This should be good.*

They were going through the Runners quickly. Two others had already fled in defeat before Rosa, fighting different levels of need. Baker would be busy supervising agreements tonight and hoping the cuffs held.

Angelica came into the room, drawing Jason's instant attention as she walked to a far corner. He didn't think she'd noticed him yet. He wondered if she was a trainer for this class. Jason smothered dark jealousy.

Angelica tried not to gawk at Jason, studying the training equipment instead. It was bare except for what they'd managed to salvage from Stone Mountain. Only the mats were familiar. Compact and inflatable, they would provide the males a little comfort, as would the bulky clothes. Homemade candles lined the walls and tables, and rebel guards stood stiffly at the main entrances and exits. The Changeling Winds were moving through the Borderlands, making everyone uneasy.

Some of the males sat in groups, conversing quietly or playing Hob Jong as they attended the lesson. Others were reading or writing, something she found unusual and wonderful. Few of the slaves in New America knew how to do both, but the rebels

would have that advantage. Angelica had begun to notice the other differences, too, like the strength of these males. While some of them were inept and as apt to flinch as to fight, the rest were harder. They went about their lessons and they learned from each other, building on it to get what they needed or wanted. *They're like Jason.*

Jason could feel Angelica stealing glances at him as the hour passed, and he wondered again why she was here.

Sam was still in the center of the circle—over half the students defeated and sent to view from a distance as she lashed out and rocked her newest opponent off his feet.

The male thumped to the mat and scrambled back as she stepped forward, laughing. “Next!”

Her eyes had never once flipped into a shade other than black. Sam was stronger than Jason had given her credit for. How could she resist so many males tempting her? They hadn't been gentle about it. One of them, the animal man with a purple stripe, had even tried to force a kiss. Her slap had sent him to his knees and roused anger in the hall. With that, Sam had turned the session from a lusty frolic into the scene of a battle.

Candice and Baker were staying mostly quiet, occasionally offering an idea or switching out males. Their pleased attitudes declared they'd been counting on this.

*Thud!*

Another man went to the floor. No one else

stepped up to challenge her.

One of the beaten males delivered a hateful glare toward Sam. “She’s like Rankin.”

Sam leered back. “Maybe she and I will cross paths again before this is all over.”

That notion hadn’t occurred to the males. They immediately began to view Sam as their champion, the one who might be able to accomplish what all of them wanted to do—kill Rankin.

“Who wants to go next or is this lesson over?” Sam’s tone implied she had more to dish out.

“I’m the last one.” Baker took a moment to shed his shirt, revealing a thick, tan chest with scars running the length. Under those badges of courage, were hard muscles and cool control.

Jason leaned forward eagerly to observe.

“Wild women require more determination. Some changelings are harder to judge.” Baker came a bit closer, circling her.

Sam held still, allowing him to teach while admiring the way he handled himself. Baker certainly wasn’t a timid slave.

“We all know there are ways to make them snap, but you don’t want that.” He stopped suddenly, voice dropping into a tone that made even Candice and Angelica tense. “You want them enthralled, mesmerized by your tone.”

His leer went over Sam from hair to toe; her lips tightened into a thin line.

“At this point, you have the advantage. She doesn’t know what tactic you’ll pick, but she’s not

concentrating on forming a plan against them. She's being slapped with your voice." His tone lowered into a bass that promised relief. "She wants you. Use it."

Baker lunged, big arms wrapping Sam up tightly around her throat and chest. Instead of struggling, she let him ease her to her knees.

"If I tightened my grip, I could put her to sleep or even kill her. Distraction is a valuable tool."

As Baker released Sam, Jason narrowed in on the rebel leader's pounding pulse. He recognized that reaction.

Sam rose to her feet, sensual Pruett lips curving into a challenging grin. "What if they've lost the element of surprise?"

"Then they fight or submit. It's their choice to make."

"Meaning males experience this fire as much as females do?" Sam was trying to show the men they were like the lust driven women.

Baker's face tightened. "We don't turn into animals, but yes. We feel it."

Sam stalked toward him, now the one on the hunt. "So, they should be careful not to fall for the same tricks, right? Like if I did this..." Her hand slid along the bare flesh of his tattooed arm and came up his shoulder, raking lightly.

Baker shivered at the chill it delivered. *She knows how to use her nails! I like that.*

Baker's hand caught hers in a tight grip. "While the woman is so close, use the moment to distract

her further, so you can use a weapon.” Baker demonstrated by jerking Sam up against his chest and slanting his mouth over hers.

Sam didn’t resist. She also didn’t respond, but when he retreated, everyone saw her pink eyes.

“Every changeling has this weakness.” Baker’s tone was compassionate, a contrast to his words as he examined Sam’s weathered profile. “All it takes is the courage to use it against them.”

“I have a question, Mr. Rebel Leader.” Sam’s tone was unreadable as he let her go.

Baker was still near enough to kiss her again. “Yes, Sam?”

“I’ve been told your name is on the renters list and the private sheet. Is that true?”

Jason listened intently, curious. Renters could be had here for a price if they were willing, but private sheets were exclusive arrangements. How could Baker do both?

“Yes, my services are available.”

“How much?”

As heat sparked between them, Jason sensed Baker wishing they were alone.

“I’m a provider, not a whore. I prefer to service a select few.”

“Pruetts make service contracts so they don’t have to share.” Sam’s expression grew arrogant.

“I’m no different.”

“They also become attached to their males to the point of obsession..”

Sam lifted her chin. “Not this one.”

“Then, I’m sorry. We can’t be exclusive.”

The disappointment from Baker was a surprise to their audience.

It was a shock to Sam. “You hope for remission, too! What the hell is it with everyone here?”

“My services can only be claimed by someone who wants the same.” Baker’s tone held no shame. “Until then, I stay on the renter’s sheet.”

“Fair enough. Do I meet the requirements for that?”

Baker leered openly, no longer pretending to be anything other than what he was—a man. “You’ll wear the cuffs and I’ll do what I think you need.”

Her eyes flashed again, deeper pink this time, and Baker swept her up against his bare chest in response.

Sam’s arms went around his neck in a slow movement that made Baker lean in invitingly “Are you positive? I’d make a good match.”

Sam smiled softer than any of her family had ever seen. “You’d make a great match, Baker, and you know it. But that’s not my market.” Sam slowly retreated from his big arms. “I want the Network gone from the future. Right now, that’s as far as I’m willing to go.”

“And after we take them down?”

He was pushing her again, making his scent wash over her. Jason realized Baker was still teaching, showing his rebels how to get what they needed.

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

Sam was clearly on the defensive.

Baker made an educated guess. “You wanna shop through the other bachelors before you make a choice.”

“Yes. I have my own list of requirements.” She turned from him. “So do my Runners.”

Implying the other girls were hoping for matches as well. It was an interesting setup that Baker and Candice had going here. Is this what it would be like at the safe zone? Jason’s flare of jealousy was instant.

Baker nodded meekly. “Thank you for considering me.”

“You’re sitting comfortably with me right now, Baker.” Sam laughed. “And you know it, so get on with the next lesson already.”

There was laughter all around as everyone realized there was something growing between those two. The pair may think it was all sexual banter or teaching, but the emotions had been clear to their witnesses.

Angelica met Jason’s eye, hers lightening a bit. He felt his pulse increase when she came to take her sister’s place as the next teacher.

Candice waved at the few rebel males still willing to try after being humiliated by Sam. There were three. One of them was the tall man who had been attached to Daniel’s hip since they’d arrived. He kept his chocolate gaze on Angelica’s, a welcoming expression on his lightly scarred face...

Jason stood up. “Can I try?”

The hall went silent as they stared at each other. Angelica's face glazed over with control that Jason was suddenly determined to rip from her in front of all these men. He wanted them to know she already had a provider.

Baker waved the other male off.

Jason slowly entered the fighting ring with his changeling. *Mine?*

*She could be*, he contemplated, now trying to ease into her space as he'd witnessed Baker do to Sam. If he gave up the dream of a family, Angelica would make an agreement with him here and now, one he doubted she'd ever break.

"Have you enjoyed the lessons?"

"It's been educational."

Angelica gave him a challenging smirk, a short mirror of her games grin. "You ready to learn something new?"

She was fast, dipping in to slide against his hard body, and then darting away. He'd felt her hand moving, but didn't realize what she'd done until his shirt fell to the mat.

"Sometimes, you meet a changeling who knows her limits and uses them." Angelica was still wearing that slight smirk.

As her hot gaze went over his bare skin, Jason couldn't stop the pause in his step. Not a bit of that leer was faked for the class. She was letting him glimpse the half of her that she'd always hidden with her relentless control.

Angelica circled, padding closer.

Jason reacted as if it was Rankin. That was the only way he could fight with Angelica. He lunged for her, dragging them to the mat.

Not above fighting dirty, Jason let their bodies rub, let his hands touch places they shouldn't. He was rewarded by being able to flip her onto her back and straddle her hips. With his hands holding her wrists, there was little he could do but hold on as she bucked.

“Use those legs!” Angelica snapped.

Jason did, tightened his grip on her body, and was able to free a hand by using his entire torso to pin both of her hands between them. He brought an imaginary knife to her throat.

“Very good.”

Jason was instantly addicted to the praise. He tried to stand so they could do it again and Angelica rolled them, pinning him in place. Realizing the lesson wasn't over, Jason struggled wildly.

“Legs!”

He brought his up to her waist, and then went higher, aiming for her chest. As Jason wrapped around her, he rolled, taking that top position again.

Angelica shoved upward with her hands, knocking him away.

Jason gained his feet quickly.

Angelica was already on hers, stalking toward him.

Jason tried a move one of the others had used before she got here. He slipped under her arm and lifted her up.

Before he could slam them to the mat, Angelica spun out of his hold and flipped over his back. Her hands came around to put the tips of her fingers against his throat. If this had been a real fight, he would be dead.

Jason didn't wait. He shifted and lunged, taking them to the mat again.

The hall was quiet as everyone observed the lesson Angelica was delivering. Jason absorbed as much of it as he could, still trying to picture Rankin in his mind. Close to the same weight, they struggled against each other and Angelica's eyes remained flat black the whole time. Everyone knew she had a spark for Jason. It was impressive to witness her put it aside where even her wild sister hadn't been able to.

It also made Jason more determined to draw a reaction from her. He didn't realize he already had until the lesson was over.

Chapter Seventeen  
**Compromises**

1

**B**y the time Angelica was done with him, Jason was winded, bruised, and bleeding lightly from a few scratches. Her claws were hard to escape when she brought them out. Her eyes hadn't flickered once. He examined her as Candice and Daniel took over and began demonstrating more moves.

Angelica went toward the exit, but twisted back to find him staring after her in confusion. The bachelor was glad for the lesson she'd given, but didn't she have that spark for him anymore? He'd blasted her with many of the things he *knew* had an effect. How had she managed to resist without even a pink flicker? Had she chosen one of these males to be her mate? *Am I replaced?*

Angelica knew what Jason was thinking and she didn't like his pain. Her eyes slowly lightened to a brilliant shade of pink that he hadn't caused yet...and then kept going. It was mesmerizing as she let those levels of heat show. Vivid red streaks flared through the pink, changing, merging it with full crimson.

The other males were waiting for her to snap

now, realizing, as Jason was, that she *had* been affected and strongly, but he also understood she was trying to show them something.

Her muscles expanded, slowly growing, tearing the clothes, and the mutters became louder. Jason was fascinated by Angelica gradually flipping for him, letting him view her in all her changed forms. Her hair shot out, racing down her spine... Jason had the sudden urge to grab her and see if it was still as soft.

Angelica noticed his lack of fear and gave him a soft smile that didn't fit with her changed body or those glowing crimson orbs. "I couldn't do this before. You make my control stronger."

Her eyes faded to black as she sank back into the Angelica they all knew. She turned toward their audience as she finished the lesson proudly. "I'm a level one, or maybe this makes me a level two now, I'm not sure, but the point is, if I can do it, so can the rest of the changelings."

Her gaze returned to Jason, went over his features with a caring he was surprised she let them witness. "If we want to, we can learn not to hurt men."

She wanted him to help these cringing rebels, to add another layer of the encouragement they needed to keep growing. Jason gave his support willingly. "We have to teach the women they do want it, that we're worth it, even if they have to give up some of the things they've gotten used to—like making us bleed."

Knowing that story would spread fast, Jason followed Angelica as she left the room. He didn't know where she was going, but it didn't matter. He was in awe of her. She'd used her curse to show him he would always be safe with her and he was almost desperate to give her something in return. After a few more lessons like these, he might even be able to hold out against Rankin long enough to kill her! He owed Angelica so much for the things she'd already given, but even more for what the future might bring. "Angel."

"Will you still help me pick through the rebels?"

Jason wasn't prepared for the desperation in her words as she stopped. His heart dropped. He forced words out through the confusing pain. "When do you want to do it?"

"Baker's getting a group of them together now."

Jason saw it suddenly, how she would lean in while they froze, scenting them in hopes of finding someone who drew her as strongly as he did.

Jealousy, fierce and stabbing, shot out of his mouth. "You don't need me there for that!"

"I need you there for comparison."

Jason was furious, but her tone was almost pleading. His fury grew tighter, but instead of refusing, he considered all the control she'd just shown in order to provide something he needed.

"Fine!" Jason ground out. It would be an hour-long reminder that these men would give her an arrangement without kids or anything else she wanted. They would deny her nothing, and he still

withheld the one thing she seemed to need most—him. He thought of the Runner’s words to Greg: “*Be sure. I own. I don’t rent!*” and then of the impression that the woman wanted a match and not a contract. Despite her words, Jason already knew she would end up being Greg’s willing slave if he wanted it. The Runner was infatuated; their agreement would likely stand for a long time.

“Jason.” Angelica knew his thoughts. She kept an even tone, but pink eyes flickered at him in heavy, pleading seas. “If you’d still speak of a compromise, I’d listen tonight.”

She turned for the next tunnel and was out of sight before his mouth could betray him. Footsteps came, Baker’s, and he just stood there! Why didn’t he give in? In time, like with Greg and his new owner, he could convince Angelica to have kids... But it wasn’t the same if she was forced to give him that and he felt the difference keenly. He should since he’d spent their time together on the other side of it.

Baker stopped by Jason, understanding the freed bachelor was having a revelation. “After that demonstration, she is now the most wanted Pruett here. They *asked* me to set up another line before we go, if she doesn’t pick someone from this first group. What is your problem?!”

His tone demanded the truth, and Jason spilled part of it with one word. “Rankin.”

Baker studied him for a long moment before finally confirming the fears. “Angelica will kill her.

Don't you know that?"

Jason shook his head, admitting the root of that terror. "She can't die for me, Baker. You have to stop that from happening."

"It's not for you, Jason." Daniel, with Candice trailing him, had entered the corridor without Jason noticing. He was learning a lot from his loving owner. "It's for every one of us who Rankin tortured. Many of those here were also her picks, like you." Daniel's chin lowered in shame. "And me."

Jason stared in shock. He hadn't known Daniel hated Rankin. He and the others had always thought Daniel was willing.

Daniel wasn't bitter over that anymore. "We all think about killing her, but it'll take a changeling for that. *Your* changeling."

Jason would have denied it to anyone else, but Daniel knew the same terrors in the night. They'd held the same hopes of escape and the same fears of becoming attached to their captor. He could feel it on Daniel. Even after his time with Candice, it was still there, lurking. Did she know? Did it make Candice eager to fight the Network, so she might have a shot at killing Rankin?

*No*, Jason realized. They were depending on Angelica for that. And they were positive she would win. He didn't catch a hint of doubt, of worry for their youngest family member. All he saw was confidence in a fellow Pruett.

"She'll do it because they're for *freedom*."

Baker cheerfully went around him to go moderate Angelica's interviews. He was eager for this to be settled, for Angelica to be at peace. "That is what you asked for, wasn't it? Freedom?"

"How can I be free if she owns me?"

"Considering the brand on your arm and your current state of no rules, I'd say it would be a lot like it is now." Baker paused, gesturing curtly. "Do you think she'll be different? Chain you? Beat you?"

"No." Jason quickly denied that. "She wouldn't."

"Plus, you're worrying over a future that can't ever happen unless we take down the Network. After, we might have the vaccine that allows your children to grow up normal. Then she wouldn't have to be convinced."

The trio left him standing there with those words beating in his brain. It was something Jason hadn't considered, even though he'd been there for the negotiations with the lepers. When the Network fell, they would control *all* of the vaccines. Their kids would be born immune. The life he wanted with Angelica was entirely possible if they conquered the Network. If they lost, they'd all be dead anyway and it wouldn't matter. It was a terrifying revelation, but also liberating. He had nothing to lose by spending time with Angelica, bonding with her, and everything to gain by staying close and fighting for their future.

Jason moved away from the mate picking area. He felt her in there, waiting for him to do as he'd

said, but with these dangerous notions beating in his brain, he needed to confirm a final doubt first.

Jason proceeded toward the tunnels, wondering if being here would put him in danger from the few Runners who'd chosen to rent a male. None of the tunnels had any light except for corn candles set into carved holders spiked to the walls, and the mood was eerie. The cloth flap was open on the room he wanted, as were most of those around, providing a variety of sights that sent heat into his cheeks.

Jason tapped gently on the stone. "Anyone in?"

There was a giggle, followed by a low growl. Jason peered around the corner reluctantly.

"Why did you pick me?"

Usually the males asked that question. Jason ducked out of sight to listen. He respected the pretty boy. Greg had chosen his mate. Jason wanted a confirmation from him.

Greg cleared his throat. "You're different, you make me feel things I never have, and...I don't need the drugs."

Jason eased out as sexual tension flared. He would have believed Greg would be bleeding by now, but it sounded like they were taking the time to get to know each other first. That was what he needed with Angelica, to know her better and to let her know the real him.

*"And I don't need the drugs."*

Neither did he. That one tiny thing, the physical reaction, was what made the choice in attraction, in immunity. How frustrating nature was to hide

something so complex inside something so simple! It was amazingly hard to know if that reaction was lust or the awareness of something more hoping to be given the chance to grow.

Jason traversed the tunnels with a mind full of discoveries, finally accepting that the future he wanted most was possible. Baker was right. Angelica would never chain him or hold him against his will, and he would be loved. She might not believe she was capable of it, but after everything he'd witnessed from her and her strangely wonderful family, Jason knew better. She would be his slave if he wanted, as Rosa would be in time to Greg if he needed it from her.

“But I won't ask for that.” Jason ignored the reactions of those few around to hear the mutter, no longer caring about the danger. These were Pruetts. He was safe.

Baker and Greg, along with his own examinations and experiences, had given him the last of the clues he needed to be able to agree. They didn't have to be apart anymore.

Jason swung the curtain open to the matchmaking session, ready to declare his intentions.

## 2

Angelica swallowed a groan as the curtain opened and yet another male came into the room. The smells of them were torment. Just because she

wanted Jason didn't mean their interest wasn't flaring along her nerves like flames. She was sitting in the center of the floor, with the note writer Jason had recorded the list onto. She opened it with steady hands and a hurting heart. "If you hear something on my list you don't like or fit, please go." Angelica understood Jason wasn't going to help her with this and didn't blame him for it. In his shoes... She sighed, scanning his notes.

*Black hair—long*

*Size—big*

*Beard*

*Heavier is better*

*Sense of humor*

*Courage—follow instincts when alone*

*Smell good*

*No kids—big problem*

*Hates the Network*

*Knows she's burning up—how can I help when she won't take a service?*

*Hunt with them—check out family—who gets me?*

*Remission*

*No friends—Pure*

She started with the one he'd underlined, knowing that only for him, would she ever budge on it. "I won't have kids. Ever."

There was a small exodus, where she let out the breath she'd been holding. She was afraid they were all so determined to be with a Pruett that they would sacrifice their own desires and she couldn't have that. "I...I like black hair."

Now there were disappointed mutters and a large number of feet leaving. She didn't raise her chin, thinking it would be so unfair to find one who resembled him—to pretend she had him when she didn't. "I'd like to have someone who will hunt with us."

As she went over the list, the number of males slowly lessened and took her small hope with it. At this rate, she would exclude all the rebels and never pick a mate.

Angelica glanced up for the first time since realizing how many of the rebels wanted to belong to a Pruett. Jason was standing by the entrance.

She couldn't read anything in his expression, and didn't assume he had changed his mind. She sealed up the misery and sent her attention to the remaining males. They were waiting eagerly for the next qualification. She made a rough count of thirty. All that black hair to roam and her hot gaze still went to Jason first.

Angelica stood up, slamming her mind shut to that pain. "I'd like a pure mate."

Baker consoled the disappointed renters as they departed.

Angelica saw Jason's smirk from the corner, his clear satisfaction that only five males remained now. He didn't want her to have a replacement, but he wouldn't be hers, either. What did he feel as she did this? Was it clawing angrily at his heart the way it was hers?

Angelica believed that unlikely as she trudged

toward the nearest of the remaining males. She would survive. “Can I... I’d like to smell you.”

There were chuckles and one flinch of worry that narrowed the list further. She hadn’t mentioned that she needed courage. All of them assumed they had it, but this first male, standing tall and steady, did. His scarred hand went out to hers.

Angelica let him take it.

“I’m Troy.” He placed a soft kiss on her skin and pink tints came into sight. “I like you.”

Troy was versed in dealing with changelings. Angelica sensed he wasn’t pure by the same standards as Jason. This one had loved before and knew how to use it to his advantage.

Angelica drew her hand back. She didn’t like his boldness, even though she needed the courage. *How strange!*

Angelica leaned in quickly, placing her cheek against his. She wasn’t at all surprised when Troy shifted his head.

She hesitated. If she let him kiss her, she would have to allow the others...but there were only four more and Angelica thought she could take that much to be certain none of these would do in Jason’s place. She met Troy’s eager lips.

It was like kissing a wet slip of rubber and Angelica quickly went on. Maybe he could be taught not to slobber? She scrubbed a sleeve across her mouth in revulsion.

The second male was the one who’d flinched. She slowed her movements, trying not to scare him

further. He was darker skinned than the others, all satin, sexy and stocky, but he shied away before she even leaned in.

*Next!*

The third male resembled Jason more than the rest. The shade of that hair and skin was similar, and those pale blue irises were close to gray. She studied his patiently waiting profile. *Yes, I can pretend with this one.* “What’s your name?” Unlike during the game, she didn’t brace, hoping the sound of his voice would give her heat.

“Brian.”

It did, but it was the kind that made her stomach crawl. She proceeded onto the last man without scenting.

This man was more than the others in about every way. He had more height, more muscles showing, more sexual appeal. His ebony hair was in a long ponytail, and she liked the way the stubble made him appear fresh from bed. Ready to be disappointed, Angelica stepped closer.

“I’m Nathan.” He extended a hand, sending out a sharp, sweet smell that immediately had her heat flaring.

He leaned toward her, showing his boldness. “It’s nice to meet you, *Angel.*”

Angelica heard a low growl echo as their hands touched, but she was pulled into a hazy desire that had a sense of calm boredom.

She jerked her hand back, sensing the fate that waited with this one. Yes, they were compatible, but

only enough for her to burn out.

“I’m sorry.” She started to leave, humiliated.

Baker’s amused voice rang out. “You got one left.”

For an awful instant, Angelica thought he meant himself.

She turned around to the perfect male she now dreamed about almost nightly, considered first as she woke, couldn’t, no matter how hard she tried, get out of her mind.

Jason waited patiently, hands shoved into his pockets. “Want to check me over?”

She slowly shook her head. “It’s too much, Jason. Don’t do this.”

His face flooded with guilt and she knew what he had planned. Thanks to her flipping for him, he knew how much control she had, how far he could go. He wasn’t afraid of her hidden changeling anymore and he wanted her enough to force things this way. He would lay down a time frame and she would be honor bound to stick to it. Heat blasted through her cold heart as she took a few steps closer. “For how long?”

“A year. More if we still feel the same way then.”

His quick answer said yes, he needed a time limit to be safe in his future, his freedom.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Why are you giving in?”

“Because if we take the Network, we’ll have the *vaccine*.”

Angelica was smart enough to add up those clues, and instantly furious with herself for missing it. Another world opened in front of her, one where *she* carried Jason's growing child.

He took the steps that brought them within a foot of each other. "It's a hope, right?"

She nodded shakily, not bothering to ask what would happen then. After a year, if he didn't want to stay with her, she would let him go. Until that time, there would be no children unless they took the Network.

"Angel?"

Her flames blazed, but Angelica pushed reality into his plans. She had to be positive she understood what he needed. "When we get the cure?"

He flushed, but didn't hesitate. "Once a year, you have to ask me if I want to be free."

She waited. Surely there was more? It hit her then that he was searching for a perfect match. She'd been a part of too many moments here to miss it. He wanted the freedom to pick his own mate. Even the way he'd handled this moment proved it. So long as it was his choice, he would stay with her, Angelica was suddenly certain.

She dropped her chin, afraid he would read the eagerness and change his mind. "There isn't anything you can ask for that I won't try to give you. Once we take the vaccine, that'll include a family."

Angelica observed from under lowered lashes, adoring Jason's happiness. He'd needed to hear that and she vowed to reassure him more often. If that

was all it took to make him content in her care, she would tend to it devotedly.

Jason's hand came up to slide behind her hair and cup her neck. "Can I stay with you tonight?"

She knew what he meant, what he wanted to be allowed to do for her. She gave a short, nervous grunt. "From this moment, you don't have to ask."

His mouth came toward hers. "Thank you for taking what I can give."

Angelica groaned as their lips met. "Thank you for trusting me."

It was the right thing to say.

His hands tightened and she held still while he sealed the service contract, but inside, she hurt. She would never have remission from an arrangement like this. She needed love.

Chapter Eighteen  
**All That Heat**

1

“**T**his is yours.” Angelica sat a small box on the table next to their empty plates.

Jason recognized the train logo. It was the most expensive chocolate sampler the dessert car offered.

“I can get you something else, if you don’t care for these.”

Jason was delighted. “I love it. Thank you.”

“Sure.”

It was hard to chew and grin, but Jason managed. They were all gathered for a warm lunch of rabbit soup. The first half of the long day had been spent foraging the land around them for their needs.

The chocolates were even better than Jason remembered. He gave Angelica a thick blast of happiness as he chose another from the layered box. “Would you like one?”

“No.”

Jason got the sense she liked observing him as he enjoyed the treat. He eagerly sucked the gooey chocolate from his fingertips.

Her cheeks became red as Jason cleaned himself that way, body responding. There was no doubt they

were a match.

Around them, the others were going about the evening as usual. Before each sentry change, the males painted themselves to blend into their surroundings. Jason compared it to Sam's big Runners as he ate the treat. The rebels had done a great job, but those stunningly painted hands and profiles paled in comparison to the perfect camouflage of the animal skin cloaks on each of the big females. They rippled, blending into the stone almost perfectly as the females came in for the meal. The cloaks were two-sided. One was slate, the other lush nature. Jason marveled at the cleverness of it.

"We have some new guests."

Greg's words switched everyone's attention to the four men who came into the tunnel behind him. Thin and wild, the two in the front stayed frozen in front of the main entrance, scrutinizing the females here as if they were contagious.

Baker came toward the new men. It drew recognition immediately.

"It's him!"

"I told you we were here!"

Baker held out a hand. "Welcome to freedom."

He shook with them, offering comfort in short words and tones.

The newest rebels were Wille, Stephan, James, and a fourth man that Baker hadn't gotten to yet. These guys were jumpy, but the fourth man loitered in the corner. He swept the center group with a gleam of satisfaction, lingering on Candice and

Daniel. Did Baker know them? It instantly made Jason nervous.

“Welcome. I’m Baker.”

“Keith.”

“So, where are you from?”

Jason listened to the fourth man’s answer, not caring for him. The other newcomers were raggedy, two of them barefoot and one in moccasins, but this man was fully dressed and not starving.

“From the complex. I was a prize.”

Now Jason frowned openly, drawing Angelica’s attention.

He’d been under the Network’s dome for fifteen years. He’d met or at least heard the name of every bachelor who was a part of every prize lot and this man, with his unscarred hands and calm attitude, hadn’t been among them. Jason had vague memories of the other three, though Stephan—the bald one—he hadn’t placed to a game yet. The other two were from the aquatics floor.

“Come have a meal and meet everyone.”

Keith was directed to Baker’s table with the other new males.

Jason’s heart thumped. *Did we just let in a spy?*

Angelica knew of Jason’s unease. She’d felt his tension, and picked out the cause of it not long after. As she studied Keith, she understood. The man with the purple stripe hadn’t been a bachelor. There was no way he could have been—not without flinching at the female growls of approval as he and Baker walked by Sam’s area.

The animal games were the most brutal that the Network offered. No one ever came out of those cells with normal emotions intact, and certainly not manners. All of the others fit that part more than Keith did, with their fearful glances. One of them, Stephan, was even resting a hand on his belt knife as the Runners cackled loudly about fresh meat.

Angelica squeezed Jason's arm, knowing what he was about to say. "You're sure you've never seen Keith there?"

"Yes." Jason kept his voice low. "He's dressed as an animal games prize, but the rebel by Daniel has the same purple stripe and no welcome. No recognition, either. Those men go through hell and they bond. There's no way they wouldn't at least know each other."

Their animal man's gaze kept returning curiously to the newcomer, as if he was trying to place him and couldn't. Angelica stood up. "Stay here."

"Yes, Angel."

Jason triggered her heat intentionally, as Sam had during the hound attack. It told her that he was worried and wanted her alert enough to be safe.

She turned toward Keith.

Stephan lunged for Baker with his knife.

Angelica gaped. *Wrong one!*

The knife plunged toward Baker's chest.

Angelica jumped forward.

*Bang!*

The single shot came from across the room. As

the assassin fell to his knees, blood gushing from his mouth, everyone turned to find out who had saved Baker.

Sam didn't lower her gun until the infiltrator slumped on the hard floor. Blood, thick and red, rolled from Stephan's wound as she slowly holstered.

Jason wondered what had tipped Sam off, if anything had at all. Was she shielding Baker? Was it good instincts? It was what she and her crew were here for, but Jason had the sense that it was more.

Baker gestured a hand toward the closest chamber. "Let's finish our meal in there."

As they all left, Keith and their Animal man removed the body and talked. Keith was new. He'd been sold to the Network only a month ago, and hadn't been in the renter cells yet. He was one of them, just luckier.

## 2

The next chamber was comforting, the tension gone. In its place, was pride. The Network had sent a traitor and they'd thwarted the attempt. It also made Sam and her big Runners more welcome among the rebel males. Some of the glances now flying toward them from the two rear tables were hot enough to make Jason avert his gaze.

Upset, the three new men were lingering near the entrance and viewing the Runners with trepidation. Daniel was with them, trying to calm

them, Jason assumed. In a far corner, Greg and Candice were working with their animal man on something he couldn't hear from where he was. Whatever it was, they weren't letting anyone else hear it either.

Jason caught a raised brow among Sam's Runners, but couldn't spot which man in those two rear tables it had been aimed at. Her big face was soft with hope. He wondered suddenly if the Runners now expected to be rewarded for their protection... How had Candice gotten the Runners to agree to all this? Had she promised them a pick of the males? Jason hadn't been with the family long enough to know how it all worked, but he quickly reminded himself the Pruetts were for freedom—all of them.

Baker sat with Daniel and the new males, talking to them in quiet tones of persuasion. Jason knew why. The Runners were every bit as picky as the rest of that mysterious Pruett clan, and it was the scared ones, with their scarred hearts, that these women would want to spend time with. Jason assumed it was that strict sense of honor, the need to aid their fellow man, that was pushing things in the meeker males direction.

“Hey, Baker.” Sam leaned back with a full groan, stretching. “Which ones are renters? We don't know how to tell.”

Silence fell. Sam was sitting in the center of her crew.

Baker's eyes lit up with devious schemes.

“Willing renters have a red bracelet.”

A few hands ducked for cover, not wanting to be chosen, but most made sure theirs were visible.

“Got any we can just play with tonight?”

Sam’s crudeness had always been embarrassing, but now, it was angering Candice. Angelica could tell by the flare of heat in her cousin’s expression.

“Sam.”

“What? Those three in the front row keep leering at us and giggling!”

Baker relaxed. He jerked a hand in their direction. “The ladies are willing if you are.”

There was a small stampede as no less than a dozen of the rebel males came closer to Sam’s group.

Angelica snickered in admiration of Baker and his matchmaking. He’d made sure that even the men were satisfied. It was heartening when the males made choices based on their own needs. Angelica wasn’t surprised when all of the Runners let the men have the lead. Over the next few minutes, some of the women and males began being a bit friendlier than was acceptable for public, while others conversed or exchanged shy glances. Through it all, Baker was there to make sure no one got hurt.

When the couples began leaving in search of privacy, Baker’s voice grew sharp. “Use the cuffs.”

There wasn’t any argument. The women didn’t want these precious men hurt, either. Thanks to the rebels taking shelter in the Borderlands, the Runners

now had a new relief source. They would protect it.

The group had thinned to only a few of the women left now. Sam was among them. She had turned down half a dozen offers before the males made a second choice. She didn't want them. Sam subtly swept Baker, flashing hunger.

His face immediately lit up in response.

"I notice you have the red bracelet on tonight, first time since we got here. You must be feelin' lonely."

Sam's comment sent another round of quiet through them and a sensation of heavy need that made Angelica's sight try to turn pink.

Baker delivered a generous smile. "I'm a guy. They can't change that."

His shined eyes were beautiful in the darkness, but also hard for Angelica to look at for long now. It gave Baker the sense of being an emotionless drone that might get them all killed to serve his purposes. Angelica doubted Sam saw him that way as she smirked.

"Been a while, has it?"

Baker swept the tunnel where Candice and Daniel had already disappeared. His tone dropped to a low growl. "You could say that."

"You still got a thing for her?"

That whipped Baker's head back to hers.

Sam raised a brow, waiting.

Baker stood up, clearly not liking the question. "Would I want to rub you, if I was thinking about her?"

“Yeah, probably. You’re a guy, remember?”

There was a round of amusement, but not from either of the two people staring intently at each other.

“Ask me.”

Tension sparked at Sam’s demand. She was on the hunt and Baker knew it. He didn’t hesitate. “I’d like to spend the night with you, Samantha.”

The bass in his voice flooded every cell in Angelica’s brain with heat. *Damn. Sam has her hands full, too.*

Sam gestured at the empty bench next to her.

Baker answered the request for service with a smug eagerness that was incredibly sexy. He dropped down next to her. His arm went around her shoulder, pulling her against his chest with no sign of fear.

Sam laughed, curling close. “Mmm... Always did hate to sleep alone.”

“You won’t have to tonight.”

Baker’s low rumble turned Sam’s eyes red—a brilliant shade that sent a shudder of fear through Jason.

Baker immediately swept her up and took her from the chamber with her laughter ringing in Angelica’s shocked ears. Her sister hadn’t sounded that happy in...well, ever.

Angelica caught Jason’s worried expression. She would have given about anything to know what he was thinking right then.

Jason was thinking about the night they were

going to spend together. Much like Sam and Baker, and the others, he and Angelica would be discovering the same joys tonight. It was enough to keep the heat in his cheeks and the heavy flush of need in his body. He wanted her.

She gazed back nervously... *Nervous?* It was an interesting notion. He hadn't considered her that way.

“Are you getting tired?”

Jason nodded, flushing. “I need to wash up first.”

This time, *her* cheeks went red. “I'll meet you there.” She walked stiffly through the tunnel.

Jason watched her with a full sensation in his gut. How different would he feel after it was over and he belonged to her?

Jason couldn't wait to find out. He went to the wash area with eager feet.

### 3

Angelica wasn't ready when he knocked.

“Who is it?” Stalling to be certain she could live with this choice.

“Jason.”

“Come in.”

He read it all on her face when he shut the flap and turned around, how vulnerable she was, how little it would take to push her into doing whatever he wanted. His expression grew concerned. “Are you okay?”

She was afraid to speak. She was scared of this choice and for a male who'd spent his life in fear, it was easy for him to recognize. "I won't push you. We'll...talk?"

It wasn't nearly enough and Jason read that, too. Angelica wasn't positive about the choice, but she'd made it.

"You have no limits with me."

"And the others here?" He couldn't help the jealousy. "Will you make an arrangement with them when I'm not available?"

Angelica considered how this raging fire had shrunk to a tolerable throb in the hall at his absence. "No." Her heart raced as her blood heated up. "Will you seal our arrangement?"

"Yes, I will."

Instead of the fierce bonding kiss she'd been expecting, Jason gently pressed his lips to the corner of her mouth. "I want you, Angel."

That name, from his lips, sent the flames higher, but also pulled a spark of emotion. She didn't mind the sound of it from him and he knew.

Jason glowed with desire that she was defenseless against. More than lust or loneliness, this feeling had spread through her cold, hidden heart and driven her into a new level of nervousness. He now had the power to hurt her, even if he didn't realize it yet. If he walked away, ever, she would be crushed.

His hand came up to glide along her jaw, easing behind her neck to gently pull her mouth to his.

*I want him so much! Enough to take what he'll give and be strong enough to let him go when it's over.*

Angelica met his mouth with a blast of heat. It sank into her gut, her legs, melting her against Jason's hard body like she'd forgotten how to stand. He was sealing the contract, and there wasn't a part of her body not straining for his when he ended the embrace.

"Should I stop, or go slow?" He wasn't sure what she wanted—most service calls didn't involve actual mating a lot of the time—and he was hoping she would set the rules.

"Free. What you want." Angelica wasn't capable of coherent speech.

Jason understood what she was allowing and gave her another searching glance she deflected by closing her lids.

He would make his own choices and she wouldn't interfere or ask for more if she could help it. Angelica felt his hand brush her arm, then his thumb on her bottom lip.

"They said all changelings crave it afterward, that the *lust* drives them then, not the need for blood."

It made sense, considering the fire and lava he was brewing in her gut with his voice and light strokes.

"But not you. You never caved."

Angelica wanted to deny the claim, but he shifted against her as he pushed off his boots and

she forgot how.

“You’re so different.”

“Unbroken!” She reminded in a sharp gasp as his large hand slid down her shoulder to brush a taut nipple through her shirt. He did it again and she shuddered.

“I have a condition to this arrangement.”

She struggled to pull out of the feverish spiral, to think. “Whatever you want.”

Jason snickered. “You’re not allowed to hold back.”

Angelica was shocked. Not control herself? Do whatever she wanted? Was he insane?

“Angel.”

She growled in frustration, in surrender.

He slid in to seal their lips. This time, he was rough, demanding... She was lost.

Her hand snaked around his neck, pulling him close as the change swept through her. His mouth went to her shoulder, hard body rubbing against hers, and she groaned, feeling the blood red of her eyes, the swelling of her muscles.

A fast swipe of her hand removed his shirt, baring that bronze chest. He was hard, smooth, and hot.

His hand slid between them, adjusting.

Angelica allowed him to push her legs open, trembling.

She felt his hands undoing clips, buttons, and she moaned at the cool air on her skin as he yanked her cloak off and then her shirt.

His mouth went to the center of her bra and Angelica clutched at his silken hair, vaguely aware of her claws digging into her palms to keep from hurting him. On one hand, it fit perfectly into the creases remaining from the first time he'd lit her up this way.

He dropped lower to kiss the ugly scar on her stomach with loving care. Her body was covered in them. Angelica was glad to know he wasn't bothered by it. She shuddered again.

Jason used a fast movement to strip her of pants. He swept her into his arms and dropped onto the bed, holding her close. His skin was baking against hers, body thrusting along her bare hip, and she sank light teeth into his shoulder, arching. That beautiful edge flew her way the second his big hand slid between her bare legs, but she shoved it back, determined to enjoy these moments with him for as long as she could stand it.

Jason swept her body with a muscle twitching in his jaw.

She realized he was fighting for control. The flames yanked her up another level and her hardening nipple drew his attention. As his mouth settled over a peak, his thumb pressed down, and she cried out, shattering.

Gasping, Angelica held him tightly, not about to let him think they were finished. As she pulsed, he slid against her in shaky lust and she pushed back, feeling the need roar back to life. His hands roamed her naked body, rubbing, squeezing, exploring. Her

claws extended, ripping into his shoulder.

She jerked her hands away from his flesh.

Jason stopped, scowling.

Angelica reluctantly sent her nails back to his hard skin.

An instant later, there was a smooth hardness stroking against her thigh and she struggled to breathe. Her claws slid into his arm...and that hardness jumped eagerly in response.

His fingers were still moving, but that other part of him was also thrusting against her slickness, hitting pleasure points as it pushed in further each time. She arched to meet him, instinctively tilting her hips to line them up.

Jason's hands encircled her waist, holding her in place as he jerked forward feverishly.

Angelica met his movement, opening legs to give him access. They both groaned as that hot, smooth bar slipped between the folds.

Fear, bright and unexpected, swirled over her, dampening the fire. Angelica tensed.

"Should I stop?"

There was pain in his voice, waiting to be told *yes, that this was way too far.*

Besides not being positive the act could be completed from this side-by-side position, the feel of that mysterious hardness had her body softening against it, welcoming him. "No."

Jason didn't give her a chance to change her mind. His lips lowered to her mouth and his fingers resumed that incredible matching rhythm on her

swollen nub. His hips rubbed them together and she met his thrust when it came.

Able to be completed or not, there was enough contact to make her cry out, and to cause Jason to freeze at the sound. “Angel?”

She buried her chin against his neck. “Please.”

Angelica didn’t know what she was begging for, but Jason did. He shifted and then jerked forward, locking their hips to shove an iron bar into her cringing body.

“Oh, Angel!”

He trembled against her as she gasped at the strange feel of him. The pain was minor, easily forgotten, but Jason struggling to be still was enlightenment. This was what it felt like from *their* side.

Eager to learn more, Angelica gently pushed back.

His hand slid around her thigh, lifting as he thrust again, and she couldn’t stop the scream as he slid fully in, ripping, tearing.

“Should...should I stop?”

Before she could say yes, he trembled, ready to withdraw at the request. His pain was a mirror.

Angelica blinked away the tears that had formed. “I was promised a service.”

Angelica felt him twitch, the small jerk stealing her breath, as it did his. He was all hard, manly body and sweet, burnt sugar scents in the dimness. She memorized the sensation as the fire leapt.

Jason leaned down to kiss her gently, body still,

and those flames surged into a wall of need. But it wasn't quite the same. This desire was fuller, less frantic fire and more baking heat. She realized it was the feel of *his* need.

Jason's arms trembled as he tried to control himself, breathing in short rasps, profile twisted in a delicious mix of agony and ecstasy.

Suddenly, Angelica wanted him out of control, released from whatever mental prison Rankin had him in. She wanted his thoughts of this moment to be of her, not of a ghost! Ignoring the discomfort, Angelica moved a leg up to rest on his hip, letting him have full access.

His eyes snapped to hers.

She stared through reddening irises. "No holding back. Please..."

She was begging him to let go and rut between those sweet legs like an animal. And he wanted to. Now he understood what Rankin had been denying him and he was alive with a raging need he'd never felt before.

Angelica's body tightened around him, hot skin sliding against his. Jason shivered at the chill of lust that sank into his stomach. Her fingers pulled him closer, mouth on his, and his already weak control snapped.

Now *he* was the one changing, turning into a lust-crazed animal that wanted to get deeper. His body shoved into hers, lungs aching from the jagged breaths. He arched as piercing lust smothered him.

Angelica unlocked their bodies and Jason

groaned at the loss of her heat, but couldn't keep from exploding.

As he shuddered, chin on her shoulder, Jason was disappointed with himself. Hoping she wasn't angry, he raised his head.

Her eyes were crimson flames. "Again?"

His lips curved upward as he tried to control his breathing. "I'll need...a little help."

Another, darker shade of red flooded. "You like being touched?"

His body thrust against her, providing the answer.

Her breath caught, nipples hardening against his chest, and Jason felt his body returning to life before his breathing had evened out. Amazing!

Her hand rose, brushed his hair back. "I've wanted to do this since we met." Her fingers tangled gently in the locks. "So soft."

Her enjoying his body had that sense of pride waking, needing to be fed. Jason wanted her thinking about it all day tomorrow, so when he took her tomorrow night, she'd enjoy it more.

His body swelled to life at that thought and Jason pressed against her hip in renewed want. He planned to do this every night, but right now, he needed to hear her moaning as he sent her over that cliff again.

Thanks to the Network, he knew exactly how to position them to be positive he was making full contact with the outside of her body, as well as the inside. They were taught there was little pleasure for

the woman without that extra stimulation, though the training models certainly hadn't cared one way or the other.

Jason used a free hand to be certain. Only able to reach her with his thumb, Jason timed his strokes so either his length hit her on the in stroke or his thumb rubbed on the out.

“Oohhh!”

Her low groan sent heat flaring through his body. Jason thrust faster, recognizing the delicious sensation this time. He would have to build up control so he could last longer. That thought, of practicing this repeatedly, made his hips and thumb stroke faster.

Her body arched, claws ripping into his shoulder, and Jason grunted, jerking forward. “Yeah, uh!”

Angelica was keeping pace with him now, mouth locked against his shoulder to hold in those noises he wanted to hear.

Jason stopped moving, struggling to get what he wanted before he exploded again. “Look at me.”

She flashed crimson, body swelling around his.

Jason held her glassy gaze as he stroked a thumb over her nub.

She arched again, lips clamping down.

He stopped.

She growled at him, understanding what he wasn't saying.

Jason leered. “That's right, baby. *I wanna hear it.*”

He was rougher this time as he rubbed the most sensitive part of her, and she allowed a low groan to escape.

The sound of it almost broke his control.

“I like that!” Jason thrust forward as his thumb pressed down.

“That’s...I...” She shuddered, head tossing.

Jason smirked. *When I told her I was well trained, I wasn’t lying.*

Jason did it again, and her eyes bled into a shade of red that was entrancing.

His speed increased as she trembled. He tightened his grip, didn’t gentle his movements. He wanted to see it and feel it, but he needed to hear it.

Her body tensed, muscles straining, lips parting...

Jason jerked forward, mashing down on that nub to make her cry out.

Searing, burning heat rolled over him again and Jason pulled back from that sweet edge by a hair.

Her lids shut, chest arching tight nipples, and he slid an extra finger between them to squeeze that slick nub.

Her body clenched around him, claws digging in.

*Yes!* He rolled his fingers, making sure she got to ride each crest, every one drawing a sharp, gasping moan the bachelor felt in his soul. She was his now.

Her tense body relaxed against him and her claws withdrew from his skin, but she wasn’t done

shuddering and Jason locked onto those lips, silently begging her for one more groan to send him out of control.

“Mmmm...”

“Ohh, yeah. That’s my Angel!”

Chapter Nineteen

# Two for the Road

Day 17

1

**A**ngelica left Jason's warm embrace reluctantly. She had guard duty, but she wanted to wake him up and remind him of their new arrangement one more time. She rotated toward her kit, her clothes, instead.

They'd passed a sweaty, sticky, perfect night, and she couldn't wait to do it again. In the beginning, he had been a beautiful dream she would never get to live. Now, he was the reason she burned.

Angelica twisted back for a last glimpse before slipping out. He was hugging her pillow now. *Sweet*. She didn't know exactly where they went from here, or how it would all work out, but anything was worth the hours he'd given her. They were seared into her mind and her heart.

Angelica tugged the curtain closed, glad they were leaving after breakfast. The sense of time running out was clearer. The storm had pinned everyone down, but she could hear nothing outside now and that meant Rankin would be sniffing around. If they got a head start, they might be able

to come around and hit on *her* flank.

Full of serious, progress-making thoughts, Angelica joined Sam at the far table. There were only a few people around, male or female, and no need to censor their words.

Sam laughed at Angelica's dazed happiness, spotting it right away. "Feeling better?"

She couldn't hold in the blush or the teasing leer. "You know it!"

A similar flush crawled up Sam's cheeks. "Yes, I do."

Sam's attention wasn't on her. Baker had just entered the room. He found Sam for a second of intense eye contact that made her cheeks brighten further.

"Guess we both feel better." Angelica refused to add more.

Candice breezed in a second later. "Good morning, everyone. Isn't it a beautiful day?"

Behind her, Daniel wore mussed hair and a love mark on his neck.

Sam's glance met Angelica's.

Angelica snorted to keep from laughing aloud. "It's that family thing again."

Their loud brays echoed through the cave.

## 2

"Are you okay?"

Daniel's quietly asked query was met with a small leer. "Oh, yeah."

Daniel smiled, relieved.

So, he hadn't been positive that she wouldn't hurt him. It implied he still didn't trust his loving family. Jason wasn't the only one Rankin had damaged.

Jason remained with Daniel as he proceeded toward the main tunnels, wondering where Angelica was, what duty she was performing for Baker. That she would stay and help now, he had no doubt.

"Will we win?" Jason hadn't meant to ask, but he didn't take it back.

Daniel turned with a face filled by fire—Candice's fire. "Yes. The Network will fall and *all* males will be free."

He believed because she did. Jason understood. It was an impossible dream that the bachelors shared, but rarely ever spoke of. It was nice to know that here in the Borderlands there were no listening ears to carry tales.

Jason realized he felt safe here. It let him extend the friendship he hadn't been allowed to give while under Rankin's control. "I'm Jason. Lot #21207."

The former bachelor smiled again, a bit sadly. "Daniel. Lot #21198."

They shook hands even though they knew each other, both a bit self-conscious. They let go quickly, and kept walking.

After a minute, Daniel asked the question most of the men here wanted an answer to. "What is it, do you think? That draws the Pruetts to us?"

Jason shrugged, voice low. “Rankin’s mark, maybe. The need to get rid of it or cover it with their own scent. After that?” He snorted. “I have no idea.”

“It’s courage.”

They both rotated to find Baker a few feet behind them. He’d been so quiet they hadn’t heard him.

Jason viewed the rebel leader like the other males here, but also with an extra respect that came from knowing Candice believed him strong enough to train them. Jason didn’t care so much about Baker’s past with her...at least he didn’t think he did, but it was hard to imagine liking him less because of it. In fact, it sort of gave them a bond. These Pruett women were hard to resist, with their rough, bloody hands and their kind, generous hearts.

“Courage means everything to them.” Baker’s tone revealed his amusement. “You have to have big balls.”

All three of the men stood a bit straighter, chuckling proudly. They were all servicing a Pruett.

### 3

Standing guard again with Sam, Angelica was glad the dust wall was fading into the northern distance, but it also made her nervous. The dust storms were followed by the rains that concluded the animal breeding season, both of which lasted a month. Anyone still sheltering in the lower sectors

of the southern Borderlands would be washed away by flash floods or eaten by the hungry gulls that followed each storm, knowing it spit out fish and worms alike along the way. Bald horrors, the gulls were the size of old world vultures and much faster. People and livestock caught out in the open were unlikely to survive. It was time to get these males to safety. It was also time that she knew the truth about Rankin's hold on Jason.

"I need you to clear something with Candice for me."

It hadn't drawn much reaction when she'd given Sam her report and other things from the complex to pass them on, but this time, Sam's expression said she didn't know what Angelica would want that she couldn't ask for herself.

"I need to talk to Daniel. Alone."

Sam's brow wrinkled in understanding. "About Rankin."

Angelica nodded, but didn't add details.

"I'll let Candy know."

Angelica waited for more, but the Defender's name had triggered Sam's thoughts.

"She's close. The males were jumpy when we left, as if they can smell her."

She and Sam were positive that Rankin would try something now, so they'd made a hard choice an hour ago. As soon as they saw even a hint of where she was lying low, they were going to attack. They were on alert for the next bloody battle, except this wasn't about the change. It was revenge.

“She won’t wait much...” Angelica narrowed her lashes against the rising glare, finally seeing what they’d been waiting for—that telltale, mostly stationary dust plume of a group making camp. In this rough wind, it was too contained to be riding or fighting. Their chance had come. “Let’s go.”

They slipped off the ledge where they’d been on duty and hurried toward the next match, the next fight she had no doubts about winning. Rankin didn’t stand a chance against her fury. She and Sam both had a male in those caves. Rankin wasn’t getting anywhere near them.

The Network troops had chosen to shelter under a small grove of twisted, petrified trees with broken branches that resembled the creature in the leper colony. Sam and Angelica kept low as they got closer to the sprawling camp, but a fast sweep verified they were alone. Rankin wasn’t in the camp. No one was.

The tents were there, but not the horses, and the wind had already obliterated the tracks. They’d known Pruetts would hunt if they saw signs...

Sam and Angelica realized their arrogance had tricked them.

*Jason!*

Angelica spun toward the cave with Sam on her heels.

“You’re better.”

Jason snickered up at Greg from his perch near the cave entrance. “Yes.”

The scarred playboy studied him. “Those Pruetts are something, even the cousins.”

Jason was proud of himself. “Yes, they are.” He could tell Greg was happy, too. Rosa’s ownership suited him.

Jason was a bit surprised when Greg lingered.

“Did it change anything for you?”

Jason considered how he and Angelica had held each other all night, and then the way they’d woken twice, frantic for each other. “Maybe.”

“As long as you’re happy, and she’s satisfied, it’ll be enough.” Greg smiled. “Daniel told me that when the Runners first came. I understand now.”

Jason chewed over the words as Greg went back inside, realizing he’d been worried about being owned too. After his bravery when he’d let Rosa claim him, it shouldn’t have been a surprise that Greg had played the role so well. Doubts and damage were things the Network had given men in abundance, but they had developed shields.

An abrupt movement at the end of the guard line pulled Jason’s attention. He watched one of Sam’s big Runners fall from her post in a bloody heap.

A second Runner followed.

Jason started screaming for help. He didn’t plan to stop until his owner told him to.

“Angel!”

The sound of Jason's shout tore into Angelica, bringing true panic and the change. It ripped through her in a few seconds of furious snarls.

Her bigger body shoved her along faster. Angelica leapt up the edge of the gritty cliff. She didn't stop, lunging again, and went over the edge and into the clear yard in front of the entrance of the cave in a sprawling leap.

A fast sweep revealed troops and horses filling the yard, Jason being swung over Rankin's saddle, and other rebel males being brutally snatched up as they fled.

*All the work we've done!* Angelica screamed.

The sound of a changeling's fury was attention getting for most people, but for animals, it was terrifying and apt to cause a stampede. Horses immediately shied from their overloaded burdens, rearing up.

Angelica didn't wait to see if Rankin's mount did the same. She flew toward her enemy with more anger than she'd ever felt in her life.

Rankin sensed it coming. She pulled Jason in front of her body and held him as a shield against Angelica's justice.

*Doesn't she know I'm beyond that? She isn't leaving here with him, even if it means his life!* Angelica flung herself at Rankin, knocking them from the panicking horse.

Jason knew she wasn't stopping, but Rankin didn't. He tried to help by ducking under the leap, but it didn't matter. They flew off the snorting

animal and landed in a breathtaking heap on the ground.

The horse stomped, hooves slamming down in fear.

Jason rolled away from the chaos as Angelica and Rankin tried to tear each other apart. Blood sprayed as claws ripped into flesh. He cowered under the noise, their fury.

More horses stomped around him, snorting as their riders tried to keep them under control, and he shuddered, clenching his eyes shut.

“He was mine!”

“Now he’s free!”

The sounds of the fight were loud as two hard, changeling bodies slammed together. Jason imagined the winner, his new owner dead at his feet soon, and loss flooded his heart. No more Angelica. Not gone, but dead! *I’ll give myself up! Rankin will leave her alive if I’m willing.*

Jason chanced a fast peek through the clouds of grit.

Rankin’s claws tore away a chunk of Angelica’s flesh, the arm pouring blood. He cringed lower as his owner retaliated viciously.

Rankin screamed in pain as Angelica’s hit broke something. Jason heard the crunch and rolled away from them.

“What’s that?”

“Get down!”

“Get them out of there!”

Jason turned to where people were

pointing...and then the cave exploded.

*Wooooosshhhhh!*

Brilliant white light slammed into him. Jason felt his skin baking as he sank into the grayness. Noises faded, as did his sense of touch. He tried to fight. *Where's my Angel?*

In the next instant, a heavy form landed on him.

Jason heard a scream, but it didn't sound familiar. Blissful coolness smothered him.

*Bbbaaaaammmmm!*

Something else exploded. Jason knew by the shudder of the ground they were on. He screamed in agony as more heavy shapes piled on top of him. The scent was familiar, guiding him into the darkness.

## 5

“Jason?”

He moaned, full of pain.

Angelica forced herself to keep waking him.

“Jason.”

His lids fluttered before flying open to reveal wild, bruised gray eyes. “Who won?!”

Angelica placed a light hand on his shoulder to keep him still and felt him cringe.

“Please! Say something!”

Her heart thumped. “You can't see me?”

“Angel?” He groped out. “Angel?!”

Angelica swept him against her body in grief and sorrow. “I've got you. She's gone.”

He let her keep him close, but he didn't return her embrace. She hurried to offer comfort that was likely a lie. "It's the flash. It'll wear off."

A single red drop rolled down his burnt cheek. "I'm blind."

His tone declared he wasn't going to be able to handle it. She jerked an arm at one of the surviving medics.

Jason flinched again, listening to the steps. His voice grew into full panic. "Please don't leave me here. Please! Don't leave me here for her!"

Angelica swallowed her awful hell and held him still while a weeping medic shoved the needle into his arm.

"Who—" She gathered herself, knowing he needed this. "Who are we?"

"Pruetts." The drugs worked quickly, but he never lost that wild tone. "We're Pruettts!"

"Hold onto that, Jason. I'll be close."

He sagged in her arms, more bloody tears falling. She kept him in her grip as they traveled to the other shelter near here. Angelica was grateful to be a changeling for the first time in her life. It let her carry him all the way.

As the small, broken group walked, another storm began to flash and rumble, but none of the surviving rebel males flinched from it. The Network had cured them of that fear with two harsh blows in broad daylight.

Those around Angelica appeared exactly as they had after the enemy had sent one of its bombs to

Stone Mountain—covered in soot and angry, shocked fallout. For an instant, she was there again, trying to keep the rocks from crushing Baker.

*Baker!*

Angelica verified he was leading their small group and was glad, but her pain didn't ease. Jason had been hurt because of her arrogance.

She ducked into the mucky storm drain as Sam's remaining Runners secured it, moving to a far corner. She hated to release him, even for a minute. She forced herself to lay him on the filthy ground so she could dig through her pack for the medicines that might heal his burns, and a cloth to bind his eyes.

She wrapped the bandage around Jason with anger so severe it would have flipped her into the disease if she hadn't already been there. Her claws were light as she smeared the ointment over his arms, those blistered shoulders and neck. If not for his hands automatically coming up for protection, he might have been burned beyond recognition.

Angelica let out a ragged breath. She'd been so busy with Rankin that she hadn't protected him. The broken bounty hunter scanned her fellow survivors, spotting those she was closest to and only a handful of the rebel males. She realized those missing were probably buried in the cave, forever.

The need to make the Network pay flamed into a dangerous new level. They'd hit the rebels twice now, and taken more than a cut this time. Out of the seventy total people they'd had in the caves,

Angelica counted less than twenty here now, and there was no way they could try to dig out any survivors yet, not with Rankin's riders all over the place, opening fire on anything that moved.

"How did they know Baker was there? They didn't get close enough to spot him." Sam was furious, her normally loud voice subdued with tight control that Angelica recognized. Sam was on the edge of flipping. *Good*. They would need every angry fighter they could get.

Candice's quiet tone belied the rage she was feeling. "They probably picked us up on satellites after the storm cleared. We're only about ten miles in."

Next to her, Daniel's mane of golden hair was catching the dim light, drawing her attention repeatedly. Not for the beauty, but because half of Daniel's hair and neck was covered in tacky crimson. The fact that it wasn't his blood was a painful, guilty relief. Keith had given his life for Daniel during the battle, catching a bullet. Their other animal man sat on Daniel's other side, muttering under his breath.

Candice's eyes became full red without her body flipping into the change. Advancing another level at almost losing her mate? Angelica had never known of a changeling to make it to total control, but if it could happen, her cousin would likely be the first.

Daniel added a piece of the puzzle. "They had to know Rankin would get caught in the blast."

Angelica added the clues. “She’s expendable, too.”

“They’re done following us.”

Baker agreed with Candice’s comment. “They’re probably hitting the safe zone right now, but it won’t do ‘em any good to bomb what they can’t reach.”

They all stared in confusion.

The rebel leader’s tone matched their fury as he answered. “I knew this might happen. I got them underground months ago. As for us, we’ll have the clothes on our backs, but we will survive. Our anger will carry us.”

“And we’ll win!” Greg’s scarred hands were shaking, but his voice still drew attention from the closest females.

Rosa snarled in warning at her fellow Runners.

They quickly turned away.

Angelica didn’t smile as Rosa gently wrapped her two-sided cloak around Greg’s shoulders. She was too worried, too furious, to be happy for them.

Relieved, agreeing voices came as Angelica turned to the blinded male she couldn’t imagine ever being apart from now. So many of the things that she’d promised him wouldn’t happen, had. There was no end to her guilt.

## 6

Jason hated waking up in the pitch black. If not for the sound of Angelica’s rough voice nearby, he

might have screamed. *I can't see!*

It hit him in waves as he tried not to let anyone know he was awake. He needed time to figure out what he was going to do. Would he still be able to help the rebels? Be a father and mate?

*No.*

He was now a burden to be cared for. His dreams of a happy family charred violently in the ashes. He'd never *see* his children, even if he had them. He'd lost everything in one blinding flash.

"Jason?"

He cringed from the hot hand that settled gently onto his brow. "Go away!"

"Please listen."

Jason refused to answer, suffering in his private hell.

"I'd like to adjust the terms of our deal."

"Just leave me here!" He couldn't stop the hurt reaction. "I don't need you!"

Jason felt more of those thick tears roll down his cheek.

A trembling stroke wiped them away. "But I do need *you*."

It was so unfair, not to be able to look at her when she said that! "For what? So you can care for me like the baby you won't willingly have?"

Jason cringed under her pain, instantly wanting to take it back, but he was in too deep. *Gone. It's all gone!*

Jason heard her move away and knew what she intended. He snarled. "I don't need to be sedated!"

The needle sank into his arm an instant later, and he yelled at her—the first time he ever had. “Get out!”

“Not until you listen.”

The drugs weren’t dragging him straight under, but he felt calmer against his will and realized she’d lightened the dosage.

“I need to adjust the terms.”

“Our deal ended with my sight!” Jason snapped, but a small pinprick of hope was shoving its way into his darkness. Did she still want him?

“Then I’d like to make a new one.”

Now, he struggled against a larger light. “Why?”

“Because I need you. I have since you touched my hand and...I’ll agree to any terms you want.”

Because he was blinded, helpless. She was willing to be burdened with him out of pity! The drugs couldn’t drown his anger. “I’m not a train male like my dad! Keep your pity! I don’t need...”

Her lips slammed against his with a growl of lust that distracted, pulled. She was burning against him, baking heat and rippling passion, and he understood she meant it. Even blinded, Angelica would take him and on his terms.

But he didn’t have any of those now. Jason slumped under her rough caress.

Angelica drew back with a sob of shame. “I’m sorry.” For being drawn to him even when he was injured.

His mouth shot open in challenge. It, at least,

was working fine. “What about children?”

“If they’re yours...yes.”

A stunned silence came from Jason.

“I’ll help you get settled somewhere, if you don’t want to be with me.”

He listened to her stand up.

“I’ll come for your answer...” She paused.  
“When I think I can stand to hear it.”

Jason wanted to tell her he’d already made up his mind—he didn’t need her pity!—but Angelica’s next words sent light flooding into the deepest shadows of his desolate mind.

“The medic said your sight will return slowly. Don’t take the bandages off yet.”

There was the sound of a flap shutting, of soft voices coming from a distance.

*I’m not blind.* And Angelica wanted him enough to bring children into this world, so long as it made him happy. It was too much to roll through his rattled brain at once. Jason surrendered to the darkness.

Chapter Twenty  
**Plots and Plans**  
Day 24

1

“**I** agree. If we travel to the safe zone now, we’ll get them all killed.”

“What if we stay underground while we travel? There are other exits from these tunnels.”

“They couldn’t track us, but you know what it’s like down there.”

“So does the Network. They won’t send in fresh troops. We’ll still have to fight Rankin and her survivors, though.”

A thoughtful silence went around the dank room.

Angelica was glad Baker had known this storm bunker was here. The seven large chambers made of concrete would keep them shielded and hopefully allow them time to make a new plan and recover from their injuries and grief.

They had trudged through the rats and inches of water carefully, but without loathing. Buried thirty feet under the ground, it was wet and stank of mildew here, but a dangerous shelter was better than none at all. They would make it work.

On the second floor, closer to the surface and

the pressure, the old building was slowly caving in, with gaping cracks running along the walls, but the ceiling was intact. They'd begun settling into the bottom five rooms while waiting for their injured on that top floor to heal or die.

Even though the rebel males had taken the biggest loss, there wasn't resentment toward the females, but there had been an effect. It brought them together. Before the blasts, they'd been learning to accept each other. *And doing a bit of scheming to get what we each wanted.* Now, the Runners and the rebels were sitting together, lending comfort. They were bonded in a common goal now and the enemy couldn't break that.

"What should we do?"

"There's only one thing we can do, isn't there?"

They all turned to Angelica, still unable to believe she hadn't returned to herself. She was a snapped changeling, firmly controlling the rage through solid red vision.

"We take them down."

Her family liked it that she was finally declaring her loyalty to the rebellion. Angelica gave her games grin. "Hard and fast, and they won't know we're coming until it's too late."

Baker hesitated. "We have to have a plan."

Candice was eager, but Baker wasn't about to risk more of his males. Of the large group he'd emerged from Stone Mountain with, less than a dozen were here now. Angelica didn't recognize many of them.

“How do we do it?”

Before Angelica could answer Baker’s repeated question, another voice rang through the large chamber where they were meeting. This one was angrier than Sam had been.

“We capture Rankin. She can get us in.”

The room erupted into a half-welcome for Jason and half-disbelieving protests at the suggestion.

Angelica studied the lightly scarred man now moving slowly toward her. Jason had made a remarkable recovery in the week they’d been here. Daniel’s instructions had helped. At the complex, her cousin’s mate had helped in the advanced medical bay instead of attending the normal bachelor lessons.

When Jason veered for Angelica, the small crowd of people quieted to hear what he might say. His vision was still blurry, but it worked and Angelica was grateful for that, too. She met him, unable to stay away from him a second longer.

Everyone had been keeping clear of her, trying not to trigger her rage while she was still *changed*, but Jason didn’t hesitate. He moved into her dangerous embrace as if he belonged there.

*I’m complete again.* That was all it took. The bloody red chill faded, leaving her a black-eyed, trembling mass to be comforted. The others hadn’t understood she was keeping the change tight around her as a shield in case Jason had died.

Noise levels rose again, but Angelica didn’t leave his warm embrace, even when he tugged them

down onto the bench. Having him away for all this time had *hurt*.

“So, grab Rankin and make her take us in, huh?” Sam was in the corner, her big friends lurking near the exits. Half of her Runners were gone and so was the carefree lightheartedness—maybe forever.

“We get in, grab the kids, and get out.” Jason’s voice was hard defiance.

Sam’s was cool logic. “Dig deeper for a bigger picture. Would you abandon the males they’ll bring in as replacements if we steal those? What about the children born next month? Or next year?”

Jason clearly hadn’t gotten that far into his thinking, but Angelica had. Icy Pruett courage laced her words. “What if we got in...and stayed there?”

There was a pregnant silence where they all contemplated what that meant. They would take over the New Network City complex and control of everything.

“Now that’s taking in the bigger picture. I’m proud to be her sister. I’ve mentioned that, right?”

Angelica gave Sam a grunt as she tightened her grip on Jason’s arm. She knew Sam’s sudden cheer was a good act, but Angelica refused to go that way. She would confront her darkness now, and embrace it.

“We’ll need help.” Baker stared pointedly. “And it can’t be male.”

“I’ve got a list of credits built up. If I reach out, we’ll have plenty of hands for a quick, ugly ambush. But an invasion?” Sam shook her head. “We’d need

an army to attack the complex and win. Most Defenders are hired right after they dominate an episode.”

Angelica wanted to ask Sam where she’d gotten that information—she hadn’t thought Sam knew anything about the games—but Jason’s voice demanded her full attention.

“What about the west? Maybe we could get an army there.”

Even Angelica shifted toward him, but she didn’t let go. “What do you know about the West Coast Outpost?”

Jason’s healing face flushed. “A lot more than I should. Rankin liked to brag.”

At his wave of fear, Angelica concentrated and brought the change back out to surround him with her fierce protection.

Comforted, he relaxed against her as the plotting continued.

“Tell us what you can.” Baker needed details. “Anything might help.”

Angelica had figured out the rebel leader was working on a plan. She also noticed Sam looking at him with an odd expression and filed it for later.

“They were banished right after the dome went up, for not supporting slavery. They’re also power hungry tyrants the council worried might grow strong enough to challenge their control. They sent them away to establish a western hub.”

“Do they follow the same leadership and report to the east?” Angelica cursed herself for not picking

his brain long before now.

“No...”

“Keep going.” She rubbed his cold arms with her clawed hands as he pressed closer to her heat.

“Unless there’s a big meeting, they don’t have contact except through the head Defenders, and the wall screens—and that’s only when the weather will let them through. Sometimes, they go years without contacting each other.”

Sam shouted over the sudden flood of questions.

Everyone quieted, realizing how important that was. “How are they getting to the meeting?”

“Troops were sent out to those important enough, to escort them to the nearest hub. They’ll take the Network Rider from there.”

Approving mumbles went around the musty room.

Angelica wondered how many different plans had just started. She currently had three, depending on what else Jason knew. “Who goes to this meeting? How many?”

“The entire council, plus heavy security. This is a transition of power year.”

Angelica needed more to finish any of the three plots she was brewing. “When is the meeting?”

“It was three months from your cousin’s match.”

More muttering. Five weeks away. Was that doable? There was a lot of traveling required, but they were used to non-stop flights and the remaining Mopars were sturdy.

“We’ll need a good distraction to keep them from sending in troops now.”

“Yes.” Angelica understood she and Baker had at least one crossing scheme. “We’ll have to split up. Half of us will travel to New Network City. The others will travel west.”

“But they still serve the east!” Daniel was worried.

Angelica revealed her hope on that. “We’ll all gather our allies, like Sam said, and maybe we’ll find out they still don’t approve of slavery.”

Baker was following her line of thought. “Enough to help us fight?”

She shrugged. “I hope they’ll be as furious as we are when they find out all the lies we’ve learned, but with that mob already around the dome, I think we’ll be covered both ways.”

Baker nodded. A slim opportunity was better than none at all. “What type of a distraction?”

Angelica shrugged. “Not sure yet. Bombs don’t take them away for long.”

“What if there was another Pruett about to go into the lion’s den?”

Everyone turned to Sam as the implication became clear.

She flushed like none of them anticipated, crossing her arms over her chest. “I signed up six months ago.”

“Is it scheduled?” Angelica was beyond surprise or even shock. Sam had broken and they hadn’t known, never saw a sign despite being infamous for

their observant nature.

“No, but I bet if Rankin advised it, the Network would speed it up, like they did yours.”

Baker picked up her line of thought now. “They don’t know you’re with us!”

“Nope.” Sam’s tone was smug, telling them she had planned it this way from the beginning. “They probably think it was our parents, or Bruce and Mary who met Angelica at the train. They believe I’m on a bounty run in the west. Sightings are currently rolling into the complex.”

*My sister, the genius,* Angelica thought in admiration. Likely, one of her big Runners was on a vacation and playing the part at the same time. “That’s the last place they want you, especially if the west is sympathetic to the rebels.”

“Exactly. They’ll schedule it to pull me in, to know I’m under their roof and not out here planning revenge.”

“We’ll need to take in prisoners if we’re gonna play it like that with Rankin.”

Daniel had been shaking his head while they worked through it. He stiffened now at Baker’s comment. “You don’t know her. She can’t be forced to do this.”

“But she’d do it for him, right? Her pet?”

Angelica’s arms tightened on the male in them as Greg, still scratched and bruised from his dive out of the exploding cave, gestured toward Jason.

It was his nightmare. Jason cowered at the image.

“Perhaps you’d like to explain?” Angelica rumbled.

The playboy used a low tone and didn’t meet her eye.

Jason didn’t blame him. The threat in Angelica’s tone was ugly enough to make the big Runner next to Greg glower in response.

“If Jason asks her to, she’ll make a deal to—”

“No!” Angelica stood up, towering over them in her changed form. “I won’t let that happen!”

Understanding it might be the only option, Jason tugged on her clawed hand. “Sit down.”

Angelica snapped her mouth shut and dropped down to surround him with her heat.

The others were all surprised, but Jason wasn’t. The change was here to protect him now if he wanted or needed it. He wasn’t afraid of her anymore.

Greg was no longer afraid of the changeling now curling a clawed hand into his scarred grip, either. They weren’t scared of any of the females here anymore. But Rankin was their terror, always Rankin.

“What do you mean by a deal? I’ve spent fifteen years as her...*pet*. I won’t do it again, not even for the rebellion.” Jason hated to say that, but he knew Daniel understood.

“We’d never ask it of you.” Candice spoke up for the first time. “Nor would Angelica allow it.”

Everyone quieted. Baker might be the rebel leader, but with Candice, they all knew to listen. He

was good; she was lethal, and perfect for his wise right hand.

“I want to be certain I’ve covered every possible thing that could go wrong and get those kids hurt.”

Silence came as they understood Candice had a complete plan.

“If the kids are immune or the parents are vaccinated, they can produce both sexes. Use that as a bargaining chip with the west coast and perhaps they can be swayed to fight with us.”

Angelica clarified that. “In exchange for helping, we’ll guarantee they get a fair share of the vaccines that I’m positive the Network has stockpiled somewhere.”

“And if they won’t, there’s a mob already waiting at the dome.” Baker wasn’t as anxious to go west now that he knew Sam was going into the games.

Sam straightened proudly. “We’ll be gathering Pruetts. We’ll take them down as a family.”

Greg looked between them. “So...we’re going to attack the complex and overthrow the council?”

Candice flashed the harsh games smirk that intimidated everyone so much. “Oh, yes. We’re going to take it all. Every single chain they’ve enslaved us with is going to shatter.”

“And Rankin?” Jason was unable to help the fear in his voice.

Candice’s tone firmed into that deadly Pruett stone. “Doesn’t have long to live.”

He slowly nodded. “As long as she dies, I’ll do

whatever you need me to.”

Jason felt Angelica shudder at his words, controlling her urge to shield him with another protest she knew would be useless. She wasn't willing to let him be the bait, but if it ended this terror of Rankin and got her out of their lives while helping the cause, he was.

Candice drew in a deep breath. “Pick the details apart if you can.”

Once it rolled out, Jason understood this was a plan she'd been working on for a while. He settled against Angelica's warmth and listened to the details with respect, knowing whatever the setup they picked to coerce Rankin, it wouldn't involve his sacrifice. These were Pruetts. They didn't do that to males. The Network did.

## 2

As the room cleared, Jason was slumped against his owner, drowsing.

After being without him while he healed, Angelica didn't want to move. They'd made a trip back to the cave during that time. It was collapsed, with only a small entranceway left, but it had been enough to let Runners in and a surprising three wounded males to be brought out. Only one had survived, but at least they hadn't died alone, abandoned under the rubble.

Supplies had also been collected. Out here, it was a risk that had to be taken. Fresh food and water

would be hard to locate. The small hideout had been nearly perfect with its self-sufficient setup. Angelica was positive Baker was mourning the loss.

The last one to go, Sam gestured toward her corner bunk. “You can use mine. I’ll be on duty all night.”

Jason stirred, yawning. “We don’t have a bed?”

Sam’s snort didn’t draw a flinch. “She slept outside your room and even the medico had to be searched before he could go in.”

As Sam went out, Angelica caught Jason’s surprise, but didn’t comment. She was waiting to hear which part of their newest deal he would agree to.

“I still want freedom...sort of.”

“Sort of?” The burn scars on his cheeks and arms would never leave his skin, but his sight had returned. It was the best they could have hoped for.

He gazed at her with those glowing gray eyes she was so addicted to.

“I want to be free to fight with you, like with Greg and his owner. This is my war, too. I know that now.”

And it was a war. The Network had declared it. Now, they would defend themselves. But what about Jason? Could she protect him during the chaos?

“Angel, I...” His face darkened with frustration and loss. “We won’t have kids, not until there’s a vaccine available to us, but I get to fight!”

How could she deny him? “I’ll train you, keep

you close, and you'll stand the rope when we go in."

"Deal."

But before that, they had to get Rankin. She could tell Jason was scared of the path he'd chosen, and she lifted a gentle, clawed hand. Her touch was soft as rain against his cheek. "When you're ready for true freedom, I won't hold you."

He gave her a sad smile. "When your heat for me runs out, I'll let go."

"*That* will never happen." Angelica leaned forward to place a soft kiss on his rough cheek. "And you know it."

He came closer, and the rippling muscles under those tight pants snagged her attention. She traced upward to a bulge that twitched under her needy intentions, breathing faster. *He needs more time to heal. He needs more time to—*

Jason slid against her, arms going around her neck. "Can I kiss you, Angel?"

They were on the floor an instant later, her arms carefully cushioning his landing.

### 3

They brought Rankin in through the main chamber. Dragging her bloody form forward with each jerk of the chains, the males erupted into panic.

Except for Jason. He stayed in his assigned place, trying to calm his rapid heartbeat. Seeing her had slammed home the gravity of his choice.

"Jason!"

He froze as Rankin spotted him, face ugly with scratches, burns, and a slowly healing broken nose. Angelica's injuries from that fight were already gone.

"That's *my* male!"

The big Runners on the other end of the chains yanked her back when she lunged toward Jason.

Angelica delivered a nasty punch to Rankin's temple that sent the Defender to her knees.

"Slam you, Pruett!" Rankin slung blood in a wide arc as she screamed.

Angelica nodded cruelly. "Oh, I'm gonna give you what you need. Don't doubt it!"

Jason hadn't believed they would capture her. Candice had assumed Rankin would stay close and try again, but Jason had been positive Rankin was on her way back to the complex for fresh troops.

"Put her on the top floor. If they're still tracking her, she'll be the first thing blown up." Angelica's voice was merciless.

Jason stayed clear as the big females and his smaller owner took Rankin toward the crumbling stairs. Her furious glower never left him.

Jason drew in his courage, not ready to play the role, but eager to have it done. "I want to talk to her—alone."

"No!"

Angelica's growl brought a cruel sneer to Rankin's lips and Jason knew they'd chosen right. When he made the offer, the Defender would deal.

Jason gave Angelica a snotty glare. "You said

I'm free!"

Those changeling eyes became red as Angelica struggled to control the rage he knew was real.

"After we get her locked up!"

Rankin's harsh laughter filled their ears as they took her, now unresisting, upstairs.

So far, so good. Now he just had to live up to his end of the deal.

"No matter what happens, I will see you dead!" Angelica snarled it as she snapped the double cuff into place around Rankin's arm.

Still wearing that triumphant countenance, Rankin didn't lower her voice. "I knew you'd give him what he wanted."

Sam—still in disguise—cuffed her other wrist.

"I give him what he needs!"

Angelica's hand went around Rankin's throat without any prompting. It was so hard not to squeeze! "When Jason runs from you, and he will, he'll come straight to me. He'll never be yours now that I've branded him a Pruett!"

Rankin's facade twisted in disbelieving rage. "I'll kill you! Rebel whore!"

Angelica smirked cruelly as Rankin struggled against the chains. Jason wasn't pure anymore, and it pleased her greatly to see Rankin's grief at the loss. She'd been certain a Pruett wouldn't take advantage of him.

Angelica strode arrogantly out of the crumbling hollow with Rankin's growls echoing in her ears,

but it wasn't nearly enough to tamp the worry as Jason came down the hall. She wanted to offer him comfort, but if she did that, she would put a stop to all of this.

As they passed, Jason brushed her hand with his, soft voice floating by her ear.

"I'll be thinking of you."

Angelica spun around, clutching him close.

Jason met her rough kiss with a desperate grip of his own. Emotions, the ones she had never wanted to feel, overflowed and she sobbed against his mouth. The tears she was shedding were the first to fall on behalf of another person.

His big hands held her back to view his panic. "You'll come for me?"

"I swear it!"

He kissed her again, hard and quick, and then shoved out of her arms to go barter with Rankin.

#### 4

Jason spoke before the improvised door was shut, not certain he could take the silence of her stare. "We want you to join the cause."

Studying him, Rankin didn't laugh as he came slowly closer. She was attached to a wide center support, with chains around her waist, ankles, and wrists. It had to be uncomfortable. He smothered the fear of how she would make him pay as he scanned her clawed, bruised features. "What would it take for you to join us?"

Rankin had been his nightmare, but she'd also been his protector at one time, not letting him be put into the rental program. She'd snuck him out and given him a taste of the joys he'd had as a child. How he loathed her for being able to inspire his compassion! Jason made his hand move, using her obsession to have him willing. "Let's make a deal."

He slid soft fingers along her pointy jaw and felt her shudder.

Madness without mercy flared at him in rage and jealousy. "You! Nothing else!"

It was what they'd hoped, but the sound of it was enough to make Jason pale. He gave a fast nod. "For one month to start. After, you have to set me free."

He could sense her searching for the trap, the edge.

"How do you know I won't kill you the second these chains are off?"

Jason lunged forward to press his reluctant mouth to hers.

Rankin stiffened, heat flaring.

He drew back, meeting her dark pink gaze. "I'll spend one week a year with you, for every bachelor you help us rescue."

He kissed her again, pushing a drug-induced hardness against her thigh. "I've missed you."

His soft whisper caused Rankin to snarl. "If this is a trick!"

"It's not. This way, I get the Pruett family protection and you, in small doses that I can stand."

“And during the time you’re not with me?”

“I’ll be with her.”

Rankin grinned, a harsh one to rival Angelica’s. “She’ll have to share you?”

Jason added the final layer of the trap. “I wouldn’t let her rent me until she agreed.”

Rankin’s face tightened greedily. “Who gets first call?”

Jason couldn’t stop the tremor in his tone. “You do.”

Rankin stared, working it.

Was she thinking about how to double cross them and regain favor with her employers? Likely. She was also probably weighing that heavy Pruett family honor, though. Once they made this deal, Jason would stick to it. Which was more important now—her conquest or continuing to work for the people who had tried to kill her?

“When can we leave?”

Jason should have been happy, but there was only fear. “As soon as you settle some things with the others and work out a plan to rescue the kids.”

Jason was giving her information, proving that she would be a real member of the group.

Rankin straightened into the powerful master he was so scared of. “Send them in. I’ll deal.”

Jason left, body tight and heart pounding. He was going back to New Network City with Rankin as her reclaimed property unless Angelica came for him. Talk about a trust verification.

When Jason came out, Angelica shook her head. His fear was so thick, she could taste it. “We’ll do it by the secondary plan.”

Jason ignored her to glance at the other rebels waiting in the hall. “She’ll deal.”

“For you?”

He nodded at Daniel’s question.

Angelica spun toward the door where Rankin was chained. She had a few things to say that she’d forgotten.

Jason jumped in front of her, grabbing her arms. “Stop.”

His order was clear; the rage cooled enough for her to listen.

“She’ll never have me. Not the way you do.” He looked over at Candice and Daniel, Baker. “Get her now, before she can think it through.”

As the family went in to play for all their lives, Angelica saw Jason’s lip tremble. He was just as terrified as she was, but he would do it anyway. And he believed he had no courage!

“Can we be alone until its time?”

Angelica immediately guided them toward the isolated stockroom she’d chosen, not sure how she would let him leave with Rankin. They’d grabbed the Defender while she stood guard over her own surviving camp, but now they needed her to be accepted again, so they could go to the train. What better way than for Rankin to arrive with her property retrieved and a rebel location? After, a group of males would attempt to hijack a train at the

first refueling station. They would then go with Rankin, as prisoners, into the complex. The rest would follow, ready to pull Jason out at any point, but it wasn't enough. Angelica wanted the Network gone. She would give anything for that to happen.

*Anything except Jason.*

Candice had her plans, but Angelica did, too. She would cause the end of all their lives to save his. She'd promised Jason freedom, and it was a duty she intended to honor.

Jason was shivering by the time Angelica got him to her den and guided them toward the cot. They didn't bother with comfort, just collapsed together on the furs and held on. Maybe morning wouldn't come.

*I'm now a pawn in the revolution.*

It was hard to believe he'd agreed to it. Rankin didn't know what they were planning, but she wouldn't believe they were being honest. Candice only expected it to hold until she got to the train, and then Rankin might torture him for the truth.

While he'd lain in that bed, healing and crying with joy at his blurry, pain-laced sight, Jason had confronted some hard truths. The first was that he craved Angelica and it didn't matter if she refused to love, to take the chance on burning out. He wanted to be with her.

The second hard truth was that he now belonged to the rebels first, and her second. The Network had to be stopped. He'd felt it strongly, the debt to be paid for the future, and it was still as clear now. The

life they were all hoping for had to be earned.

The last hard truth was the decade-old fear that he was attached to his tormentor. It had to be conquered. He hated Rankin, but they'd spent too many shuddering moments of searing need for him to believe there wasn't a bond of some sort. His fear was she would never leave his mind, even if she were dead. He'd see her in the shadows, laughing at that tiny part of him he'd hidden, the one that still wanted what it had always been denied—her.

Except it would be giving Rankin what she wanted and he'd spent hours examining that ruthless part of him that implied honoring the deal might not be so bad as long as Rankin could learn not to hurt him. Jason didn't know why he held these cravings for a woman he should loathe without reservation, but he knew he didn't want her satisfaction from it. His bitter heart was taking revenge by claiming what had been withheld.

## 5

### **Network**

“They survived.”

Members of the council swiveled toward the monitors.

“Perhaps you'd like to be more specific?”

The lower ranking member didn't flush under the scornful tone of their leader, too worried to be embarrassed. “Baker, the Pruetts, some of the males. Rankin, too.”

“She called in?”

“Yes. The rebels have severe injuries. She and her crew were able to go in and round up some of them. She wants to know if they should be executed now or brought in.”

There was silence as the one leading them contemplated. Apparently, Rankin hadn't been close to the rebels when the explosions came. If she didn't know she'd been betrayed... “Tell her to only bring the leaders. We'll send out a regiment to meet her at the nearest hub. They can take the train in from there.”

“What about the rest?”

Juli shrugged. “Tell her to reward her troops with the males, and make certain there are no other survivors.”

There was a pause as the lower ranking member scanned the notes again. “Rankin says all but one of the Pruett's are now accounted for.”

“Who's missing?”

“Samantha. She's been spotted in the west recently.”

The words caused another round of mutters. The west coast was the last place they wanted a wild Pruett.

“That won't do.”

“She's the hardest one of their lot. Too bad we can't get her to come in on her own somehow. It'll be hard to catch her if she knows we're holding them.”

“Maybe we can get her to.”

“How? We’ll never find her before she hears the news.”

“The others signed up. Maybe she has, too.”

“It’ll take a while to check the sheets for the last year.”

Juli gestured. “Don’t bother. Just sign her up for an episode and announce it. Pruetts don’t refuse an open challenge.”

“And if she wins?”

“She won’t.”

There was a thoughtful pause as they all understood what that meant. Rigging round one and two matches was standard practice, but the final battle was supposed to be an honest fight. Apparently, that was about to change.

“What if she doesn’t take the bait?”

“How long do we give her?”

“If we haven’t heard anything in two weeks, we’ll use a secondary plan to get her in. We’ll threaten those we’re about to hold hostage.”

“About that.”

“Yes, to have all of those in this complex.”

“Perhaps we should send them elsewhere?”

“The bridge into the city is weakening. Perhaps that train might fall as it crosses?”

The leader sent a pleased wave down the table to the lowest ranking member. “That very thing could happen. We’ve seen it before.”

The bridge being down would also stop the influx of changelings to New Network City. Strangers were still arriving—thick bodied women

with harshly tanned skin that made the council nervous as they monitored from their tower windows.

“Raise the dome to the highest security level.”

“That will interrupt the renting programs, the tests.”

“Keep those open, but double the security. The programs are not to be stopped. We’re five weeks away from fifty years of planning coming to fruition. Let’s not screw it up now.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

# Ghosted

Day 26

### 1

**L**etting Rankin take Jason was the hardest thing Angelica had ever done.

“We’ll be an hour behind.”

Sam’s words were little consolation. Rankin could hurt him in much less time than that.

“Have you considered that she loves him, too?”

“I don’t...” Angelica’s throat closed up. She did and it was past time he knew it. “Jason.”

He turned immediately, soothing her wounds a bit. She ignored Rankin’s smirk at her pain. “I love you.”

Angelica turned for the rear tunnels without giving him a chance to respond. It would be worse on him if he gave her what she needed.

“I love you, too, Angel. I think I always have.”

Angelica spun around as Rankin grabbed him by the throat, set to kill the Defender.

Jason shoved Rankin hard. “No more!”

It was a powerful moment for her other pets, the ones witnessing him be sacrificed, but Rankin’s glee was cruel. When she gestured Jason toward the exit, everyone knew he was in danger.

Angelica advanced, not sure what she meant to do. The fury was overwhelming.

Jason pointed at her. “Stay.”

Growling lowly, the Pruett bowed in obedience.

Rankin’s harsh laughter stung them all. “The great family, brought to its knees by a bachelor.” She motioned toward the door. “Let’s go.”

Sam held onto Angelica’s arm, her remaining Runners ready to help.

Rankin’s laughter swarmed through the tunnels like lava. In her wake, she left rage and a determination to get Jason out of her cruel reach.

“They’re gone.”

At the call, Sam’s Runners released Angelica and she straightened, falling into the plan. It was a good act they’d all put on, but for her, it hurt. It was also her strength. Knowing Jason was at Rankin’s mercy put her own plans front and center. She moved for the exit they’d agreed on.

The males and her family observed in concern. They were right to be worried. It wasn’t their heart being ripped out and maybe sacrificed for the rebel cause. Candice had said she wouldn’t do that to him, but Angelica knew better. Their family did whatever it took to get the job done.

Angelica jumped the Mopar to life, not caring that it would echo through the tunnels like another blast. Where Jason went, she followed.

Sam and Candice stood in the entranceway, beyond reach of the dust cloud.

“She’ll hate us if it goes wrong.”

“If it goes wrong, it won’t matter.” Candice began reloading. “We’re going to get one chance at taking down the Network. If we fail, we’re all dead anyway.”

## 2

As soon as Jason felt the horse slow, he knew he was in trouble. His head swiveled, searching for his owner...

*Slap!*

Jason hit the ground with a heavy thud.

When Rankin followed, the blows came, but Jason didn’t flee. This was the punishment he’d feared all these weeks.

Rankin didn’t say a word as she beat him, drawing groans and grunts with her well-aimed punches. They kept coming as the past descended over him in thick waves.

Jason considered Candy’s words before they’d brought Rankin in.

*“She’ll need to mark you.”*

And his own trembling response.

*“I should let her, right?”*

*“Yes, as much as you can, but be careful. Changelings get carried away when there’s blood.”*

Jason felt warm liquid roll down his arm from a swipe of Rankin’s nails. She could kill him now and complete the rampage she’d started all those years ago.

*“Who are we?”*

The voice was distant through his fear, but there was no refusing.

“I’m a Pruett.”

Rankin screamed at the words, drawing back to strike again.

*“What do we stand for?”*

Jason sucked in air. “Freedom!”

He swung his foot, hard.

Not expecting it, Rankin tripped and went sprawling.

Jason staggered to his feet, barely able to see her through the blood running over his face, but he could feel the menace. She’d flipped. He was defenseless.

*“Who are we?”*

Except, he wasn’t defenseless anymore. He’d learned things in training. He knew he was bigger. He was a man, naturally as strong as any changeling. He struggled to think, to decide. Could he hit her? Would his compassion, his terror, allow that?

Rankin swung as she stood, catching Jason in the stomach.

The angry bachelor struck out before the fear could stop him.

*Thud!*

Rankin staggered, blood flying from her lip. She raised a hand to it, glaring in shock. “You hit me!”

Jason waited, regaining his breath. He could keep hitting—he’d enjoyed it enough—but it didn’t sit

right with him.

“Do it again!”

Jason gaped at her. *She likes it!*

Disgusted, he twisted away.

Rankin delivered a painful blow to his knee.

Jason slammed into the ground, panting.

“Fight like a woman!”

He rolled over in time to miss her boot to the chin, and grabbed her leg, pulling her down. They struggled, claws and fingers harsh.

Jason grunted as she aimed a knee for his groin, shoving her away, rolling over. As she lunged eagerly to her feet, he realized there was no way he could win. She was a Defender. She’d been in more brawls than he’d ever dreamed of. How did he get her under control?

Rankin kicked at him, spraying dust and blood as she laughed. “More!”

“This is why you killed him!” Jason finally understood the missing piece. “He fought and you couldn’t stop.”

The rage left her in a sudden flare of agonized loss. The words brought her back to where they were, what she wanted from him. It wasn’t his death.

Jason breathed a sigh of relief when she stayed where she was. They glared at each other with his gasps for oxygen lingering between them.

“I’m sorry I killed your family.”

Fresh grief came mentally, but Jason held her stare. She’d tormented him most of his life.

Forgiveness was out of reach.

Realizing he wouldn't give her what she was asking for, Rankin motioned toward the horse. "Get on and try to act properly punished."

She waited for him to obey. "I don't trust you or their deal, but I know my place with the Network."

Jason sneered. "Yeah, you don't have one. They tried to kill you."

She began wiping the dust from her clothes. "If not for the Pruetts passing a bunker hole, I would have been. I lost half my crew."

Jason limped toward the restless horse as the Defender cleaned up. He knew she wanted him to stay bruised and bloody. "You won't betray us?"

She raked him from head to toe with a heat that rivaled Angelica's. "Not as long as I'm getting what I was promised!"

With those terrifying words, Rankin swung herself up onto the horse and held out a hand.

The beating over, she was once again cool and calm. Jason let her pull him up in front. When she held out the rope, he allowed her to bind his hands. Angelica had supplied him with a number of hidden weapons. He wouldn't be bound for long unless he chose to remain so. His owner had known he would need them.

Rankin's hands held his for a moment, letting electricity flare along his skin like she used to do when she took him out of the complex. It usually bothered him to feel anything for her, but Jason had accepted that they were bonded. He had come on

this crazy run for the chance to break it.

Rankin hated his new calm. He could feel her jealousy flare up between them, and he narrowed in on his previous thoughts. *If I could just teach her to not hurt me...*

Maybe suspecting he was about to try to reach her compassionate half—if she had one, Jason wasn't positive—Rankin kneed the horse and the opportunity was lost.

As they rode, Jason realized his injuries weren't serious. Rankin had beaten him, marked him, but he wasn't hurt. Properly punished so it would be convincing to her riders and allow her to stick to the rebel plan? To mess with his mind? From the tone she'd used, Jason was guessing it was all of that and more.

Still, he couldn't think of a reason for her to uphold her end of the deal. Once she had the rebel leaders in custody, she could order the rest killed and return to New Network City triumphant. "What do you know about the west coast council?"

When Rankin's grip tightened, Jason understood she wasn't giving information like that without more in return. Whatever went on there, *whoever* went on there, she valued the secret of it more than she did that yearly month of owning him. Jason was instantly curious and began dreaming up various fantasies, all of them violent.

Now that he could make out the area they were riding through, he was glad they weren't on foot. While driving the Mopar, he'd flown through here

ahead of the dust storm with Angelica guiding him. Jason was suddenly glad he hadn't been able to make out the huge, dark shapes. The boulders were nearly as high as the horse he and Rankin were on, and twice as wide. They covered the landscape like giant eggs. One small mistake at the wheel would have killed them both.

Network tents came slowly into view. Rankin leaned in. "Follow my lead carefully, Jason. If they don't believe it, they'll challenge me." Her nails sank into his shoulder. "If I have to kill them for you, I will, but my plans of waiting until we're on the train will end. I'll have you in their blood sprays."

Jason shivered at the image, not doubting. "What should I do?"

The sentries on duty were turning, spotting them. They reached for weapons... They didn't trust her! Rankin's behavior had helped turn her own crew against her. Candice had been right.

"Behave as if you are any other runaway being returned to custody."

Jason obediently lowered his head. He hadn't tried to see things from Rankin's side, but he began to understand how thin the line was as her small, battered crew came toward them with weapons aimed. They needed a distraction.

As if conjured by his thought, Angelica rode into view. She was on the rise to the left. Jason felt her studying the situation. She drew her gun, aiming at Rankin...

“What is she...” Rankin grunted, spurring the horse. “Clever bitch.” Rankin pointed at Angelica. “Kill her!”

Rankin’s confused riders spun to find Angelica taking aim.

To be certain it looked real, and to let out a bit of the rage at Jason’s bruises and cuts, Angelica picked off two easy targets.

Seconds later, Rankin and Jason were surrounded by security.

Angelica veered off as the sentries fired, a few of their shots getting too close. She glanced back as Rankin shoved Jason from the horse, but she couldn’t stop herself from firing again.

The bullet trimmed Rankin’s hand, the one she’d used to shove him.

Angelica grinned at the piercing scream of pain. More gunfire came from Rankin’s crew.

Pain flared in Angelica’s hip. She turned away reluctantly, but confident that Rankin’s riders would now believe whatever story she told.

Angelica crested the rise, out of range, and turned back one more time. Jason was staring at her. Too far away to make out his expression, she settled for a long, hard wave of heat that she willed him to feel, to hold onto.

Angelica dropped out of sight and immediately began searching for a place to hide the Mopar. Until Rankin left, she would do her observing on foot. Without a dust cloud from the bike, they wouldn’t know where she was—just the way Pruetts liked it.

Jason watched Angelica roll away with a lump in his throat. What if she didn't come back for him?

She became small, clearly out of range, and Rankin pulled her riders back with a sharp whistle. Scattered among the large boulders, silver and black tents flapped in the stiff wind, anchored by long spikes on one side and tall, tired horses on the other.

"Fall in and set up a tighter perimeter."

There was no hesitation, no hostility or suspicion now. These dozen females were once again in awe. Rankin had been openly dragged away from her post and escaped to return the next morning with her prize. It was impressive.

"Get in the tent. Stay there."

Jason walked toward the dusty vinyl his captor pointed to with his chin down, eyes on the ground. The riders were evaluating his injuries, giving their approval of his punishment. He hated them for it.

"We leave for the Depot at dawn. Get us set."

More activity came at Rankin's next order.

Jason let the flap drop with a pounding heart. He was the top Defender's whore again.

Jason spun around when Rankin entered, scared again but no longer in terror of her. Then he saw the anger, the true pain she couldn't wait to cause. He ducked too late.

Her fist slammed into his forehead and he staggered, dazed.

"When you wake up, you'll belong to me!"

She swung again, this time from the hip.

Blinding pain came and then darkness rushed

over his mind.

### 3

The train chugged over a rough stretch of track.

Jason woke abruptly to find it was night. The tiny light from the hatch window said it was cloudy, preventing the moon from peeking through, and he felt panic rise. He was alone, on the train, with Rankin...and he was bound by both wrists to the rails.

He had that realization an instant before the one telling him his body was painfully hard. Soreness in his arm confirmed he'd been injected with something, and from that heavy, familiar throb in his groin, Jason could guess what it was. Rankin had gotten him ready to provide the service he'd promised.

For a brief moment, Jason wondered if it might already be over. It would be hard to tell. Once the chemicals worked, they kept going for hours, even after climax was reached. The Network wanted to be positive their renters were satisfied.

Jason took stock of himself. Had the Defender gotten her a pound of flesh before he woke?

No. She liked his panic, the loss of control. She would wait until he was fully awake.

*Scratch...*

His head spun, searching the darkness.

*Scratch...*

Glowing red eyes appeared in the far corner.

“Angel?”

The answering growl of rage confirmed his fear as those angry orbs came closer.

“You’ve caused a lot of trouble.” Rankin’s cold hand slid along his leg, tugging the sheet down to bare him to her changeling gaze.

Jason shivered at the hatred there. He scanned her recent scars and wounds—the nasty knife line in her shoulder, the trimmed hand, broken nose, clawed face—all caused by the Pruetts, and tried not to panic.

Much like the bachelors she had a fondness for, Rankin knew how to manipulate the human body, to make it turn against itself in quivering sessions of hot lust and painful denial. Her hands had been able to draw reactions and drug his brain with need like he’d never felt. Now, she had to work for it.

He wasn’t being denied sex anymore. Her frustration was clear as she growled, mouth on his, hand between them. This was the position she liked to torment him with the most, but after being with his Angel, it held no power over him now.

Without thinking, he opened his mouth. “I don’t feel you anymore.”

Rankin snapped in a matter of seconds, snarling, foaming in rage as the disease took over. “I’ll make you feel me forever!”

She sliced into his shoulder and Jason locked down on a reaction. This was how it always started.

He felt her body swell, nails fully extending against his chest as she straddled him. When he

began to struggle, her claws slid into his thigh, near the groin. Jason hissed at the pain as it blossomed into warm heat, but he managed to keep from twitching upward.

He thought he had himself under control despite the drugs, though his physical condition was beyond that, but his fantasies, his secrets, weren't his own. Rankin knew them.

Rankin leaned in, soft braids falling over his naked skin. "You can have me tonight."

*Those words!* He'd begged for them for years.

Rankin quickly raked her nails over his chest while he was wounded and Jason shamed himself by responding. His hips went up in that instinctive thrust.

Her lips curved. Her tone became crueler than usual. "Oh, honey. We can play as rough as you like!"

Her hand traced a painful, fiery path down his arm that didn't break the skin but still stung enough to make him grit his teeth. *I won't break. I won't—*

Her mouth moved on him, and stole any rational thought. The drugs were always his curse. He jerked angrily on the ropes.

Rankin's laughter was full of heat. "I've always known what rings your bell, Jason." Her hips slowly began lowering against him.

"I know because it's what your father liked. He wasn't bleeding just for *my* enjoyment."

That sent Jason into a rage like he'd never felt. He swore if he got the chance, he would kill her. It

was something he'd wanted his owner to do, but now, that could be his joy.

Rankin's fast swipe took a layer of skin from his hip, and drew a shudder. "Does she know your weakness for pain, how it sets you off?" Rankin punctuated her question with a tight fist in his hair and hips poised above his throbbing length.

Jason refused to answer as she tilted those cheeks to slide him between them. It was another flash to their sessions, where she never let him in but made sure he rubbed every inch of her slick heat.

"Does she?!"

"Yes!" Jason ground out, trying hard not to react. All he had to do was thrust up and he'd have her!

Rankin didn't like the answer. She leaned down to lick at his lips, hands holding him in place with stinging grips on silken hair. "You were supposed to be unbroken!"

She lunged for the fresh tattoo on his neck, biting, and lava flooded his stomach.

She felt the spasm of need and ground against him.

It pushed his throbbing length against her damp folds and Jason lost control, arching upward, thrusting into her.

"Aahhhh!"

Her growl of pain and triumph was a vague shame as he got in as deep as he could. Jason had wanted this for a long time, too, and as long as he was here, he would have his fill.

“Oohhh!” Rankin was nearly incoherent above him. Apparently denying herself had backfired. Jason used his knees to spread hers further. It made her drop onto his chest and gave him a smooth thrust line. He used it ruthlessly, the lust and drugs firmly running the show. As the hormones surged, the frantic pace increasing, Jason broke free of his ropes...to grab her hips and thrust deeper.

Her smug laughter burned him, but he wouldn't stop. This time, he would get what he needed!

As he stroked harder, jerking her down to meet him, Rankin struggled, maybe sensing his determination to win this battle. Jason rolled them over, grip on her hot body unbreakable. He shoved forward and arched in sharp waves of lust. *I took her!*

Those claws he loathed slid down his leg as they struggled, and raked brutally over his shinbone, spilling scarlet drops.

Using his other training, he put his hands to work to bring Rankin up the levels with him, but there was darkness in his heart.

“Stop now!”

Jason dropped his full weight on her instead, hands pinning her wrists. Lust seared them both at the motion. He tightened the hold. *So close now...*

“No!”

Rankin's scream set him on fire. How many times had she gotten him to that point? He thrust harder.

“Ugh!” Her body arched as she flew into the

abyss.

Jason used the distraction to yank the knife from her belt. Leaving it on had been a mistake.

He put it to her throat, hips still shoving in, straining to get deeper. “You move, you die.”

She snarled but didn’t fight as he flipped his hips harder, sliding into that tight little notch where their bodies were matched perfectly. Her claws ripped into his shoulders as she cried out.

“Yeah!” As he reached that forbidden summit, Jason then did something he’d dreamed of in careful fear. He stood up and used his hand to finish without permission. As he exploded, standing over her, the blade didn’t leave his other tight grip.

Jason gasped for air as Rankin’s pleased laughter filled his ears.

“Again, Jason, but this time, we’ll use the cuffs. You’re bleeding too much.” She held her wrists out in submission.

Jason shuddered. The drugs were in full effect as he jerked her blood-smeared body off the bed. She was cuffed seconds later.

#### 4

Rankin’s screams kept Angelica outside the door.

During her conversation with Daniel, she’d learned too much about the Defender’s methods to believe Jason would ever just get over it. There was still a note in *Daniel’s* voice that Angelica didn’t

care for. She'd spent long, hard hours trying to figure out how to free her mate.

*This*, had never come to mind, but now that it was happening, she saw it for what it could be—the key to his chains. She hated it, but she hated Rankin being between them even more. If Jason never got what she'd withheld, he would always want it, wonder about it. Maybe he would even think of Rankin when they were in bed together and Angelica couldn't stand the thought of it. This was easier. It was also justice.

Rankin's desire wasn't quiet. And later, when her hoarse shouts came again, telling him it hurt, to stop now and let her go, Angelica shivered but still didn't interfere. Rankin deserved whatever he wanted to dole out.

Rankin trembled against Jason, almost sobbing as he finally let her have the orgasm.

He was done now, though the drugs would have given them another session if he wanted it. He didn't. Rankin softening under him was revolting compared to his Angel, and the Defender's smells! *Yuck.*

He dislodged their bodies. If the rebel plans for the refueling stop went badly, Jason would have to kill Rankin, but now, he wasn't terrified of the notion. Whatever poison she'd marked him with was gone.

“Unlock me!”

She sounded angry. Jason was surprised not to

be terrified as he did it. Had a few hours of bad sex really freed him?

Jason watched her dress by the dim light of the moon now peeking through the clouds, naked and thinking hard. She held no power over him. What did that mean? Eager to test it, Jason met her sated black eyes. “From now on, you’ll ask for a service and I’ll make the choice.”

“And if I don’t?” Rankin snarled. He’d clearly won this round. All she wanted to do was sleep.

“Then you’ll have a cold, empty toy to ride, but not a speck of the fire we’ve shared tonight. You get me when I’m *willing*. Understand?”

The club from her belt slammed into the wall by him. “Yes! I understand, you lying, backstabbing traitor!”

She stalked toward him, but drew no response. Jason braced to shield the part of himself that was still hanging freely.

Instead of a blow, Rankin’s hand went to his hair and curled into it. Her face filled with an emotion he knew well—fear.

“You’re going to kill me.”

Jason jerked, giving away the truth, but her fingers held his arm tightly.

“Make it quick?”

Jason hadn’t thought she’d been affected by the Network’s betrayal, but Rankin had learned she was nothing to them, that her life’s work had no value. And Jason didn’t care enough to give her the secret to happiness...did he?

“She’s on the train.”

Jason was thrilled to have a mate he could count on to follow through. “I know.”

Rankin scowled as she understood. “You have a different plan than the rebels.”

Jason didn’t smirk the way he wanted to. “Angelica has a plan, one that may also save your life.”

Rankin paused, head tilting. “Whose is better?”

“Too soon to tell.” Jason turned toward the washroom. “But they are Pruett plots, so I’d bet on both of them working.”

## 5

Rankin didn’t taunt Angelica as she came out of the compartment and walked down the hall.

*Good thing.* The jealousy was endless. Not taunting was smart, but it only delayed the next fight. Rankin was the enemy. Angelica wouldn’t ever forget that or forgive her for this.

It was a while before the door opened again—long enough for her to wonder if Jason was all right, and weigh the consequences of knocking. What did he make of the gift she’d given? Did Jason understand why or did he think she would hate him? ...perhaps he no longer wanted her now that he’d had Rankin.

That secret fear vanished as soon as their eyes met. The longing she read eased her heart. The sight of the bandage on his arm that no doubt covered a

needle mark was a comfort to her wounded ego. With her, he was *willing*. Angelica opened her arms to him, sure of what he needed now.

Jason flew to her.

She wrapped him in a loving embrace. “I forgive you.”

He shuddered at the words, grip tightening. “Thank you, for knowing I needed this and for still wanting me!” His hand cupped her cheek, pulling her gently toward him. “I love you, Angel.”

She wanted to believe that, but she didn’t push. Instead, she sealed their lips, hating the smell of Rankin that rose from his bruised skin. He’d already had an owner when Angelica chose him. She hadn’t known it, but she was still so grateful to have him willing that it didn’t matter as more than another layer of the pain she’d been surviving with for most of her life. She could handle this one. The agony of a life without Jason was the one she couldn’t face.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

# Brace for It

### 1

**F**rom Jason's spot in the engine car, the refueling stop was boring, windy, and cold. The sky was dark with clouds, and the rains were coming soon. He swept their surroundings in nervous exhaustion as a small group of guards refueled the tanks.

The engine car they were in was designed for keeping the train rolling no matter what. It had a roof window and two wide doors, one on either side. With pale brown panels and bright furniture, it was a nice contrast to Rankin's darkly shaded car. This one held the complete controls, along with a wide space lined by two chairs and a wide couch. A shelf held blankets and other boring items. He swept the outside.

The station consisted of two concrete shacks sporting large, remote-controlled doors. Without the train code, no one could get to the fuel. Even Sam's Runners hadn't been able to bypass the lock. Alongside these two shacks was a brick building for troops and a thick path of walking stones shaped like stars.

Around the hub was a valley of short, ugly grass and rocks from the stone wall running the length of the distance in front of them. Another matching wall ran along the hill. Jason realized this had once been a homestead. The border fence led into a livestock pen. During an attack, those coming down the hills would be as vulnerable as their targets. That was why Rankin had picked it, he began to realize in horror.

Rankin sneered hatefully, “Now, we’ll see who gets to keep you!” She made a curt motion, and troops ducked out of sight—a lot more than what she’d told the rebels there would be.

Rankin had lied! Why would she do that? Was she double-crossing them? How could he warn the rebels?

Bikes and horses began to appear on the horizon like a swarm.

Beside him, Rankin stiffened in anger. “They lied!”

Jason couldn’t stop the laugh. It was supposed to be half a dozen rebels. Five times that had come. Angelica was in the lead to bring them down the hill; his admiration grew. He’d assumed she was still on the train. He’d left her in the hall to shower, but Rankin had collected him a short time later, keeping him close.

“I’ll teach them to double cross me!” Rankin moved toward the front of the compartment. “I chose this stop with that possibility in mind!”

Her hand went toward the thick rope that

controlled the engine's whistle. "It's breeding season."

*Breeding season... Pythons.*

Jason flung himself at Rankin's feet, duty to the rebellion not done. This was the real reason Candice had sent him into the lion's den—to help them in moments like this one. "Please, don't." Jason grabbed at her arm. "We'll go back to the way it was."

Rankin shoved him hard enough to slam him against the train. "They've taken my life! It was never about you!" She reached for the whistle with an ugly snarl. "With them dead, I get it all!"

Jason jumped at her again, but she sent a vicious boot into his chest.

*The pain!* He was no match for her strength or her fighting skills. But that wasn't what he was supposed to rely on.

"Whhhooooo..."

The train whistle wasn't loud, but it gave him another boost of courage. Jason stood up and came toward Rankin again, slowly, showing her he was calmer now.

"Stay back." She tensed to fight. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will. You know that."

Jason nodded. She would kill him for what he was about to do. "I want you."

Rankin's eyes instantly turned pink. "What?"

"This is hot." He took a step closer. "When you're done here, I'd like to offer a service. Right here, in this car." His fingers went to the cloak

covering him, removing it.

Rankin's hand paused on a second pull.

Jason came by her as he took the garment off, letting her scent his freshly washed skin. He slid onto the small couch. "I'll wait here for you."

His fingers went to the buttons of his pants.

Her hand released the rope as a shudder ripped through her stiffened form.

Sensing how far he would have to go, Jason began to stroke those areas she craved. He had nothing for her without the drugs, but it didn't matter. Having him willing was something she'd dreamed of, why she'd let him live, and he used her weakness against her ruthlessly, trying to buy time.

He gave her the smoldering glance the Network had taught him so well. "Can I touch you while I do this?"

Rankin advanced eagerly. But she didn't caress him. She swung her swollen fist and hit him in the mouth. She did it again to daze him, and then she went back to the whistle. "I know your game, Jason, but I'm playing my own!"

## 2

*Whooooo!*

The whistle made Angelica jump, sending fear rippling through her changed body. There was only one reason to blow it. Rankin had betrayed them. Jason was in danger.

"Get to the train!"

Sam's shout got them moving faster, but a low rumble in the distance declared they might not make it that far. The snakes were coming.

They'd known Rankin wasn't to be trusted, but the sight of that first python was a horrible reminder that the head Defender wanted all of them dead.

Angelica gunned the Mopar, bouncing roughly down the hill. Jason was probably doing something stupid right about now and he would need help.

Half a mile from the train, a large python split the ground, rising up in a flurry of dirt and rocks that their few horses shied from.

Bodies hit the ground. Rebels immediately gained their feet and ran for the metal safety of the train.

Angelica spun wide of the snapping horror now giving chase. She was sickened by the screams behind her, but she didn't stop. They'd openly attacked a Network regiment and transport. There was no going back now.

Pulling alongside, Angelica lunged for the steel ladder and hefted herself onto the train. The Mopar crashed into it like a small bomb blast.

She turned from the debris, ignoring the pain as shrapnel sprayed her. They had to gain control of the main engine cars or they didn't stand a chance.

Against her will, she took one fast peek over her shoulder and was glad she had. Angelica ducked.

*Thud!*

The bullet slammed into the train above her. The guard who'd fired it from the ground aimed again...

Angelica saw Sam coming and resumed climbing. There was an awful crack behind her, followed by a thud as Sam both shot and then ran over the Defender.

Angelica pulled herself on top of the car and hurried toward the front, where the whistle was located. She had no doubt about who had pulled it.

All around the train, rebels and troops were battling, firing, dying. The ten-foot pythons had reached the train now. They were being battled by both Defenders and rebels. The guards were aiming at the snakes, understanding they all needed to work together to survive, but the rebel males only had hatred for the women who'd enslaved them so cruelly. Angelica mentally marked that group of bachelors from her list of survivors as the snakes helped to kill the females and then turned on the men. Sometimes you had to work with your enemies or neither of you survived. It was a shame those males wouldn't get the chance to learn that lesson.

“Whhoooooo!”

Angelica didn't stop in her run over the cars. She jumped across the gap, ducking low to avoid the gunfire.

The engine car was one of the few with a glass sunroof. Angelica jumped through the glass like she was an avenging demon sent to claim Rankin's soul.

“Whoooo!”

“Watch out!” Jason screamed as Rankin clubbed Angelica in the head the instant she landed.

Now being held by one of Rankin's guards, Jason shoved her into the wall and flew to his owner.

“Whhooo!”

Rankin stood with her electronic stunner at the ready, smirking.

Jason understood in that instant. Her defeated air had been an act. He'd been tricked. So had Angelica.

Angelica was dazed; he helped her lean against the car. He didn't know what to do now. The noises outside the car said the rebels and guards were still fighting, but in here, there was silence except for the whistle.

“Whhooo!”

From where they were, with the guard he'd shoved now pointing her gun at them, Jason had too clear a view of the horror about to hit this train. Rankin didn't realize what she'd done, but he did. He'd met her pets, the ones she kept in the hound den but hid from the Network. She'd been breeding them, using them to kill her enemies in their homes, but this time, she'd called wild pythons to do her bidding. They would all pay for that mistake. These snakes were hungry from the breeding heat and angry to be interrupted. They swarmed toward the stopped train like an army of brown and black soldiers. As they got closer, their size became clearer. Roughly as long as a Mopar, even the smallest among them was double the size of their biggest fighter. Guards and rebels began lunging for

the safety of the train.

The snakes traveled stiffly, unable to manage those lightning fast turns of the past, but their speed had increased due to size. They chased the rebels with a series of winding slides that ate up the rough ground as if it wasn't there. Even uphill, they didn't slow, powered by thousands of tiny stubs on their bellies. Stubs that, in time, might even evolve into feet. Jason shuddered at the notion.

*Whammm!*

The train lurched, tipping violently.

Angelica lunged for Rankin.

They rolled, struggling, as the train slammed down, both sliding toward the open door.

*Whamm!*

The pythons attacked the train, probably thinking it was a giant intruding snake. Jason scrambled toward the fighting females.

The guard he'd forgotten about fired.

Jason was saved by the train's awful shuddering as the huge reptiles began to rip it open. The woman's slug slammed into the wall by his shoulder, and he changed direction, lunging for her instead.

Like with Rankin, Jason used the ploy he'd learned. Her new second-in-command melted against him the instant he touched her lips, and Jason slid his hand between them. Thinking he was trying to remove her clothes, she lifted her arm to give him access.

Jason grabbed her knife. But he hesitated.

“I’ll taste your blood, Pruett!”

*Angelica!* Jason sent the knife into the guard’s stomach and shoved her away in revulsion as she twisted in agony. Blood spread over the floor when she fell, following him as he scrambled back.

“Die!”

Angelica’s scream got him on his feet to find them both covered in blood and fury.

Angelica darted in to run her claws down the same lines she’d put on Rankin’s face during the bombing.

The Defender snarled, slashing out to catch an unprotected stomach.

Angelica grunted and then returned the favor, making Rankin sink to her knees, gasping for air.

Rankin struggled to her feet as Angelica came in for the kill, knocking her down with a vicious blow. Jason recognized the moment from her matches and felt that last rope binding him to the evil woman snap. Angelica had been able to handle her. He had the perfect mate.

Angelica stomped on the hand she’d trimmed and smirked at the hoarse shout. “It’s all over.”

Rankin lunged for Jason. “He was mine!”

Angelica threw herself down and swept out with a brutal leg, catching Rankin at knee level.

The Defender fell heavily, smashing into the metal train car. Blood sprayed again as Angelica drew her own blade. “I’ve had enough of you.”

Unable to take anymore, Jason grabbed the microphone and started to sing.

Rankin and Angelica both froze at the sound of his voice. Changed or not, the effect was instant. They released each other, turning to gape at him.

He was gazing out the shattered window; they both saw the pythons responding. The snakes began to withdraw from their various attack points to slither his way.

“Shit!”

Angelica nodded at Rankin’s expletive. They were all going to be lucky to survive.

Angelica reached out to grab the mike from his hand, but Rankin’s next words stopped her.

“You’ll get them killed!”

Angelica didn’t understand what he was doing, but Rankin did. The bounty hunter shoved Rankin away from him instead, not understanding but determined to give him a chance if he could help.

“When the last eagle flies over the last crumbling mountain... and the last lion roars at the last dusty fountain...In the shadow of the forest, though she may be old and worn. They will stare, unbelieving, at the last unicorn...”

It was an old, mournful tune that brought tears to Angelica’s flat black eyes. All around them, it was having the same effect, calming fury and bringing sadness.

Then the hounds arrived.

Angelica understood what he’d done then and applauded his courage even as she mourned his humanity. The war they were waging with the Network would have many casualties.

They hunkered in the car as the pythons and the hounds met. Jason was quiet now, observing what he'd done with dejection. Angelica wanted to offer comfort, but she kept her attention on Rankin.

Rankin rotated toward Jason, glowing red. "You're damned."

"Yes." He didn't glance away from the awful view. "From the minute you first rented my father on this train."

"He betrayed me!"

Jason opened his mouth to say she'd deserved it, but he never got the opportunity.

"Ahhh!"

The scream was right outside the open door.

Angelica shoved Jason behind her as a pair of gleaming red slits rose up to study them all in rabid hatred and hunger.

"Hiss..."

The sound made Jason's stomach drop and his balls draw up.

The python was covered in wounds. Its blood, nasty green and acid-like, seeped from more places than he could count, but those beady eyes and long fangs showed no sign of weakness.

Rankin jumped backward, drawing the snake's attention.

*Mistake.*

It lunged.

Rankin managed to spin and avoid it, slamming her knife into one of its nostrils.

The python hissed in pain and rage, striking

again. It caught Rankin on the arm she used to shield herself.

“Aahhh!”

Angelica would have gone toward her, but Jason gently pulled his owner back, heart like ice.

“Let fate be.”

“Hisss...” *Strike!*

“Ugh!”

Angelica stared at him, but Jason absorbed every second of Rankin’s death. The python had no mercy, striking her repeatedly until the Defender was a pile of bloody rags. Numb, Jason watched her struggle to breathe, remembering the death of his family.

“Was I as good as my father?” Jason muttered, hoping Rankin was still alert enough to hear. “I’ve never hated anyone as much as I do you.”

The python’s fangs sank into Rankin’s leg again, barely drawing a shudder, and then it released her, content the meal was immobilized.

Hissing hungrily, it turned toward the next meal.

Angelica stepped in front of Jason, nudging him toward the window. The python couldn’t reach them unless it came into the car, where it would lose the space it needed for mobility. It was reluctant, and she kept them moving slowly, hoping it was happy with the blood spreading under their feet.

As they inched away, Angelica compared Rankin to their first real meeting on this very train. Those laboriously woven braids were now a wild

mess, charred and tacky with blood. Her neat fighting clothes were ripped and torn, covered in poison and scarlet drops. Her bruised face was cut, clawed, smudged in filthy desperation, and those eyes! The lights of her obsession had been replaced with the knowledge of her coming death and Jason's true emotions for her. It was better than any of the scenes Angelica had imagined for this moment.

“Hiss....”

The scent of the blood was too much to ignore. The reptile slithered into the railcar with them.

*We have to go up!* Angelica quickly hefted Jason onto her shoulders and shoved him toward the broken roof. He grabbed the frame, pulling himself through as she turned to confront their uninvited guest.

Angelica immediately jumped. She was struck by the snake's heavy body as it slammed by her and hit the train car. She used the distraction to leap through the roof hole after Jason, dropping an explosive as she went.

*Kaablamm!*

Not large, in the confined space it still blew the python and Rankin's body all over the railcar in a loud, wet bang.

“Whhhooooo!”

Angelica twisted in concern.

This time, it wasn't a whistle. It was the howling of the hounds.

The sound of the pythons battling the hounds was something else from his nightmares. Jason

stayed with Angelica as they observed the carnage from atop the battered train. The snakes had destroyed all but three of the cars, and there were few survivors. Stiff, damp smelling wind gusted smoke around the battlefield like a shroud.

The snakes and the hounds were natural enemies; the few fleeing humans were ignored as the two mutated species fought. Fangs sank into thick necks, drawing horrible yelps, and snarling hounds wrestled hissing pythons to the ground in death grips. It was harsh, almost too incredible to believe. More firedogs charged down the hill from their right.

Near the center of the chaos, two hounds were working together against a large python. The snake was currently using its flipping defense, rolling violently in an attempt to knock the dogs off their feet. One of the hounds darted aside too slowly and was sent flying as the reptile barreled into it. The dog yelped as the fangs went in deep.

The second hound used the distracted moment to plunge its own fangs into the snake's neck.

In the distance, survivors from both groups limped and slithered into the cloudy distance. Angelica noticed the snakes were going south. It gave her a mental map that might come in handy during their final showdown with the Network.

When the remaining medic hurried toward the carnage, Baker gestured for a Runner to go along and protect him. Bodies, human and animal, lay strewn about the stones in grotesque positions.

Smoke and small flames rolled across the battlefield, leaving the groans of the wounded and dying to echo on the wind. Bloody smears and deep gashes marred even the usable cars of the train, and bodies littered the tracks. It would have to be cleaned off before they could go, and now that the rain had come, their time had shrunk. Within hours, this valley and the station would be ravaged by the coming floodwaters, as it was every year.

Angelica spotted the main members of their group—Candice, Daniel, Baker—and knew from their bloody faces that their fight to survive had been just as ugly.

Jason felt Angelica searching the smoky shadows around the burning car. He knew when she found her sister by the way her body relaxed.

Sam made a motion.

Angelica turned to him. “Try giving the hounds an order.”

Jason obediently went back down into the bloody mess they’d left. If he could get the hounds to leave without killing all of them, that would be great.

The car was a disgusting mess that Jason tried not to touch any more of than he had to as he dropped the outside rope ladder and climbed down.

The explosive cord had destroyed everything in half of the car. Glad the radio was still intact, Jason passed the orders on with a voice that didn’t shake. When he began singing again to get the attention of the hounds, there was pride in the tones. He’d

helped the rebels take the Network Rider. He'd had a big part in the death of Rankin. He couldn't have been happier with the way things were.

*Scratch...*

Jason turned slowly, almost expecting Rankin to be standing there, brought back from the dead by her fury at the betrayal.

Instead, it was a hound.

He stopped singing.

Angelica hurried, cursing her lack of alertness. She leaned through the hole and shuddered. *I assumed it was over!*

"Sing!" Angelica whispered urgently, snapping the hound toward her.

Judging her too far away to be a threat, the big animal looked back at her mate.

Jason slowly lifted a hand.

Steam puffed from the hound's nose, warm exhales blowing Jason's hair back as it panted angrily.

"No!" Angelica dropped through the hole.

"Stay!" Jason's loud order had an instant effect on both of them.

Angelica froze and so did the hound.

To her astonishment, Jason rubbed the dog roughly on its neck as if it was a common thing to do.

"Good girl." He lingered, scratching the animal where the ugly Network collar was cutting into its skin. "Slide me your knife."

Angelica did it with fear in her heart, positive

the dog would turn on him as he knelt to pick up the blade.

The hound did flinch.

Ready to jump between them and give her life for his, Angelica held her breath as Jason retrieved the knife, leaving his neck exposed. He straightened with the blade in hand, causing the hound to give a low, menacing growl.

Jason shook his head. “Not to hurt—to *free*.”

And then with no hesitation, Jason stuck the knife against the hound’s huge throat and jerked.

Angelica expected a wild spray of blood, hoping he was killing it, but the collar fell to the floor with a wet thud.

The hound shook its huge head, likely free for the first time in its life. Angelica was shocked again by Jason’s next words.

“We need you.”

She snapped her gaping mouth shut as he began to talk to the hound like it was a person and the animal stared intently like it was listening.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

# Close

### 1

“**W**here’s Rankin?”

“Dead.”

Candice smiled in satisfaction, but Daniel actually grinned. Despite witnessing the effects, Angelica hadn’t realized how much Jason had loathed Rankin until he stopped her from helping the woman. Daniel obviously felt the same.

The rebel males were thrilled with victory, but the pale train slaves expressed it best. They went around hugging everyone, male or not. They also brought out supplies from the train and helped carry the injured inside. It was strange to see them in normal clothes, but also to witness their random skips and twirls. They were no longer lifeless.

Jason and Angelica stayed by Candice and Daniel as Baker and Sam walked the battlefield. They were hoping for survivors to help, but the fangs of both mutations were deadly. Angelica doubted they’d find many.

Drawn by blowing debris, she noticed the waterline marks on the refueling sheds that were now being used to fill the Mopars. The access codes had been on the train. Angelica took a fast glimpse

at the darkening sky.

Daniel scanned their captives. “What do we do with them?”

Four guards had been captured. They were currently standing together near the middle of the train, with one of Sam’s Runners guarding them.

Candice made the choice. “Send them back to their masters.”

Her decision wasn’t questioned.

The four big women didn’t flee the scene as fast as expected, but they did move quickly, surprised at the generosity.

Baker came back toward them, scanning the Network Rider. “What about the train?”

“I’ll let you know in a few minutes.” Greg and his owner stepped into the second car.

Angelica’s explosive had destroyed the main engine, but all Network rails had extra engine cars. They just had to figure out how to hook it up.

Jason leaned against Angelica’s arm and felt her grip tighten in response. When they left here, they would travel to the safe zone and get the rebels moving toward a new haven. After a bit of gathering, they and a few of the others would join Candice’s group in New Network City for the final showdown.

Angelica waited as Baker and Sam came toward her, both with red cords in hand in case the pythons returned. As the hounds attacked, they’d supported them with well-thrown explosives, aiding the huge dogs when they could.

A few of those large animals were still nearby, playing in the grassy rocks that lined the hill. To them, rolling on rough terrain would be like having their backs scratched. Jason wondered where they would go now that he'd freed them. Would they take his suggestion of escorting the rebels? He'd know shortly.

"Gotta check out the other car." Greg came down the train ladder as if he'd done it all his life. "That one's trashed."

"Wait."

They all turned to find three of the train males standing nearby.

"The renter car has no damage."

"It does, however, have a remote set of controls."

"So those renting us can still drive the train."

Meaning most of their clients had been guards. Jason felt great sympathy. He had an idea of what their lives had been like, but knowing his father had been one of them gave him a deeper compassion.

"Will you show us?" Jason gave them a choice, showing respect. It was something they'd been denied for so long that one of them actually began to cry.

Jason slipped his arm around the man's shoulders, turning him toward the rental car. "What's your name?"

Angelica watched Jason lead them, marveling at how easily he'd fallen into being a rebel. It was who he was now, who he'd wanted to be all along. Was

it enough?

She shrugged, thinking again of the way he hadn't let her help Rankin. Jason now had that painful, hard shell to shield him while they fought against the Network, but she wouldn't let the blood consume him. She understood how it sucked you in until the rage was all you could feel, all that brought you out of your own private hell.

Jason stopped suddenly, turning back to locate her. Angelica read everything he was thinking in that moment, how glad he was that she'd chosen him. It sent her heart into a rough rhythm.

He grinned, a flare of happiness that drove heat into her toes, and then he turned back to the train males with his clever questions. Jason would make a perfect mate. She was lucky to share his life. She'd known that all along.

Angelica slowly followed them, aware of Baker and Greg deep in discussion nearby. They would find a way for the rebels to use the train to get to the dome. They didn't have Rankin to lead them into the complex, but maybe that was for the best. This way, they had gained full tanks of gas, eliminated a squad, and disabled the train so it would limp into the city. They would also be off the grid, the way Pruetts liked it. They needed time to work their magic on the mob lining the complex. Once they were done making friends among the denizens on their own turf, the Changeling Winds might shift into Pruettt favor, as they had here.

Angelica heard the happy chuckle of the man

she now loved more than even her family, and stepped into the car. Candice was talking to Greg and Jason now, so she went to flank Daniel, showing him she'd missed their friendship.

Daniel slung an arm around her shoulders.

Angelica leaned against his heat.

"You've got a good one."

"Yes."

"He loves you."

She didn't respond. She knew that. She also knew the place Rankin had held in his heart was gone. They could accept each other without reservations now. "I made the right choice."

Daniel patted her shoulder as he withdrew his arm. "Yes, you did. I'll bet your kids are immune because of it."

Those words should have meant everything to that part of her still mourning remission. *But, I don't want that anymore. How can I fight the Network without my rage?*

She couldn't, which meant she'd sacrificed nothing and gained everything. She was so grateful to Jason, and so desperately worried about making him happy. There wasn't anything on the planet she wouldn't try to give him if he asked for it.

Daniel gave Jason a grin of respect that Angelica recognized as a bond they now shared. Not all of the twelve experimental bachelors had the ability to calm both animals and Pruetts.

"There's a feed coming in."

The games logo flashed onto the bloody screen

as Greg's words faded. The damage in here was indeed minimal, but whoever had been renting them when the snakes attacked had paid the price.

"...the final contestant in next month's episodes of the Bachelor Battles is...Samantha J. Pruett!"

"What day is this?"

Angelica identified the note in Baker's voice as panic. "The twentieth."

"Damn. We didn't count on them scheduling it so soon. We estimated a few weeks, but we have to have her at the time trials in ten days."

"This is what we were hoping for, right?" Sam reminded Baker. "That they'd schedule me now if Rankin suggested it."

Baker didn't answer.

Sam's frown faded. "I'm glad it worked. I didn't want to go west. I hate the people. They're always making me kill them."

Few people were surprised when a wide games grin slid over her face.

Sam waved. "Let's go."

The split was quick and painless, with all of them refusing to admit they might never see the others again.

Baker was the leader. He had to be the one to travel west, but Sam wasn't letting him do it alone. Her remaining Runners would escort him to the western outpost, where he would try to convince them to join the cause.

She and Jason would secure the males at the safe zone and then take over protecting Baker. Angelica

and Jason would miss most of the action at the complex, but that suited her fine. She'd been given the duty of securing the rebel males and she would do it with honor.

## 2

### **The Network**

“The train is late.”

Those in the tower exchanged worried frowns.

“Any word?”

The messenger read the screen reluctantly. “A static-filled call with screams and noises that may have been explosions.”

“Damn it!”

“Do we have crews on the way to check it out?”

As usual, the leader of the table was cool and calm.

“Two full teams, but it will take them a week or more to get there.”

“Not if we send out the other rail car.”

“What other?”

“We have one other, right?”

The leader contemplated the suggesting member for a long, hard moment before nodding. “Yes. Let's make sure our guests for the meeting are not delayed. Christen the sister of the Rider and get her rolling. I want a report in two days.”

The screens went dark, signaling the end of their weekly meeting. Ten seats emptied, but only eight pairs of feet exited the room.

The two remaining members were similar, so

much that their movements often mirrored each other.

“Should I make plans, in case they come here?”

“That would probably be best, but don’t give us up yet.” The leader gestured absently. “We only need to hold out for another thirty days. After that, their chance to stop us vanishes.”

“And the wall issue?”

The leader snorted. “Pay them off, of course, and kindly remind our Canadian friends that the protestors were on the wrong side of the wall when they were shot.”

“The hole is being closed now. I’ve sent another team to the sector.”

“Good. Are we certain there were no survivors?”

“As much as we can be, but it won’t matter. A Canadian reporter in the Borderlands would survive about as long as a whistleblower in a python’s nest.”

### 3

There were no lies between them now, no fears or ghosts. Angelica held Jason tightly as he stiffened against her, groaning her name. He would always be this happy. She would see to it.

Jason drew back, trembling, but she stopped him with a bare leg behind his.

She didn’t speak, but Jason understood what she was giving him—hope of his happy family returned.

He shuddered, body tight and hard, covered in

that hazy glow of lust.

Her fire blazed to life and Angelica grunted. His desire did that to her. She was unbelievably grateful. Burnup might still happen in time, but with his fire surrounding them, burnout didn't stand a chance.

“I don't...we haven't...damn!”

He was in that place where normal thought was almost painful. Angelica was proud of his strength.

As his body slid free, her gaze went to his jutting length. Drops of their pleasure glistened in the flickering sunset. *So sexy.*

She peered up at him. “I love you.”

Jason stared openmouthed, body on fire.

“Close your mouth, Jason, or I'll have to do it for you.”

*Finally!* He'd been waiting for her to say it again now that he didn't have to restrain himself. Jason rolled them, shoving forward. He ground his lips against hers, kissing her until she was growling in need.

He smirked. “You mean like that?”

Seconds later, they were too involved for amusement. Desire, sharp and perfectly fiery, heated the small den until they were sweating, groaning, straining in the darkness as if only they existed.

As Jason emptied his pain, his past, into Angelica's willing body, he let go of Rankin for good. He had no doubt that the scars she'd inflicted would occasionally show, but that mysterious ache he'd had for her was one he would never feel again.

Thanks to Angelica, he now knew love—the real kind that wasn't an obsession. He had his chosen mate and there was quiet in the halls of his heart.

“Happy Birthday.”

Jason groaned, still locked in spasms of ecstasy and joy. “Thank you, for noticing me.”

Her hold tightened to a searing embrace that made him pulse harder.

“There was never another choice. You had me with the first clever lie and the smell of your burnt sugar skin.” Her lips pressed to his cheek. “I'll never let you go now.”

Jason grinned, rolling them so they were on their sides, facing. “Are you making a permanent contract with me?”

She smiled, love shining, warming him. “I'm stating a fact.” She blushed. “Will you sing?”

Chuckling, Jason settled them into the position they'd enjoyed last night as he sang her to sleep.

They hadn't realized the hounds would still be so drawn until they had come out this morning to find a pack of no less than thirty, all waiting to have their collars removed.

Jason considered how the dog on the train had nudged his hand when he'd stopped rubbing its bloody ears, how the animal had looked through the wreckage to make contact with him one more time before dropping from sight. Then it had returned with a small pack and actually walked with them! They'd cut off the collars, and even now, the dogs were all around the crumbling brick shelter they'd

chosen to take refuge in. Once a cannery of some sort, it had been opened after the war, but the Network had destroyed it to keep a population from growing here. They'd discovered a lot of evidence of that in the Borderlands. It told her the enemy had something else going on out here.

Jason was already contributing to the cause, proving himself worthy of being a Pruett and a rebel. She wondered what other abilities her experimental bachelor might have.

They'd gotten a message from Mary and Bruce, Candice's parents. They'd made contact with the wild Nevada Nomads of their rugged family and were now traveling toward New Network City. Along the way, they would continue to gather the friends they'd made over the years.

“Will you marry me?”

They were words she'd never heard spoken. She twisted toward him in shock.

His mouth opened, maybe to convince her.

“Shhh...” Marriage, a sign of old world loyalties, was more forbidden than music or art. No one she'd ever known had gone that far against the Network.

Angelica couldn't stop the scornful snort, or the harsh, games grin that made Jason seal their lips in happiness. Somewhere along the way, they would find someone with the authority and courage to unite them. So far as she knew, they would be the first couple to marry in five hundred years. It was a perfectly Pruett thing to do.

Baker and Sam spotted the lone person at the same time.

Sam slid a hand to the gun that felt so perfect in her grip.

Baker was too tired for more fighting. “Let ‘em go. We’ve doled out enough death for one day.”

Behind them, the sky was gray and foggy with the battle aftermath. Ahead, the clouds were lighter and the sun was warmer. There were no signs of shelter, only hills and rock walls, but Sam wasn’t worried. They were Pruetts. They survived.

She assumed the figure coming toward them was a stray sentry who’d been smart or lucky enough to escape the carnage, but as they got closer to the weaving woman, it became clear that wasn’t the case.

She was dressed oddly, wearing a type of pants they’d only read about in old books. Sam thought they were called blue jeans. The stranger carried a square device on a strap around her neck, one that resembled a camera, and her brown jacket was made of a material Sam didn’t recognize. The light drizzle ran off it, rather than sinking in. Her hands were covered in bright red cuts and scrapes, implying she’d recently fought for her life.

Sam scanned the rocky crags. What lay over that horizon? The glazed horror in the woman’s weaving progress implied they might not want to know.

“Are you real?”

Sam came forward, shielding Baker as her remaining Runners came up to flank them. “As much as you.”

“Are you okay?”

Baker’s question was met with scorn and fear.

“Unless I mistook the shells and the screams, no, not really.”

Her way of talking was odd, the accent foreign, and Sam studied her harder. The woman wasn’t from the east or the Borderlands... So, where was she from? The west?

The woman studied them in return, finally noticing the blood and the smoke in the distance behind their escorts. “You must be the good guys.”

Her skin was pale under that fresh burn, and Sam scratched the west from her list. Coastlands didn’t encourage the gentle shade of creamy skin. It gave the weather-beaten camouflage of a desert, complete with matching shades and textures. Sam should know.

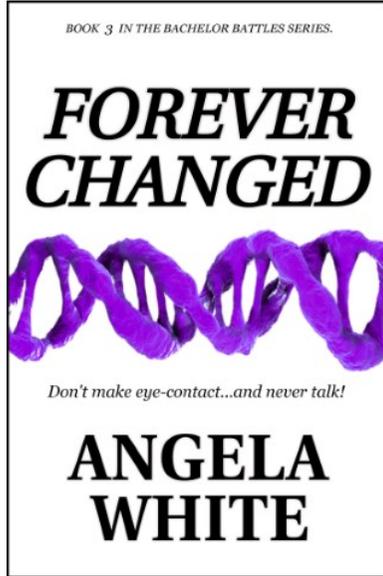
“May I offer you a drink and talk?”

Sam hadn’t heard that form of speech from Baker before. Impressed, she stared.

The woman, however, nodded right away, coming to life. Her nicked hands went restlessly to that strap around her neck, to the small square device it was holding.

“Please do.” The Canadian reporter stared at them desperately. “I know a horrible secret and I really should tell someone before your Network Council succeeds in killing me.”

**End of Book 2**  
**What would you like to do now?**



[See the next book in this series.](#)

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## Note from the Author

How do you like my apocalypse adventure trilogy so far? Does it make you wonder how this type of future would actually work? Have I made you consider things from the male/female perspective? Are you eager for the wild ride waiting in book three? All of those were my goals.

This episode of the Bachelor Battles came from the rage I saw in the short glimpses of Candy's fearless little cousin. I wrote eighty pages of this right after finishing the first episode. I knew Angel had needs of her own, but the rebellion growing as I rewrote both books was a surprise. Though, to be fair, I wasn't happy with the Network from the beginning. Beyond their obvious cruelty, something wasn't right about them. When I figured out what it was, the rest of the story fell into place.

The Bachelor Battles connects to my popular series, [Life After War](#), which takes place right after the bombs have fallen. In the Bachelor Battles, the world has not become the enlightened society of peace and hope Adrian sought to create. In fact, you could say this reality is the opposite, but the Pruetts are far from finished. In time, maybe this brutal family can conquer the Network and free all the enslaved males. We'll have to hope that the power doesn't go to their heads.

In book one, we saw the top layers of life under Network rule and we met some strange, wonderful people. During book two, we've developed a keen like and dislike of many of those characters. With book three, I'm going to take you through an emotional spin of love, lust, and death that will stretch from coast to coast.

Who's ready to play with the Pruetts? Are ya?  
Are ya really?

Then let's roll.

-Angie

## Deleted Scenes

“**H**ow far into the Borderlands did Baker get?”

“Almost ten miles.” Candice scanned the darkness around their campsite, but she didn’t feel danger. “They’re hiding in a cave. The dust storms are bad right now. They can’t move.”

Mary wanted to know what Candice was thinking and planning, but she didn’t dig for details yet. “We’ll try to slip in between the squalls?”

“Yes.”

“How many of the males did he lose?”

“The message doesn’t say. Sam found it in the abandoned train that Baker and his rebels hijacked. She got to it before the Network did.”

Angelica listened to the conversation between Candice and Mary without letting them know she was awake. Around them, the apocalyptic darkness was full of death and danger. *Like my heart.*

“Will Sam help us get Baker and his group to the safe zone?” Mary hated the wild land around them. “She’s the best escort they could have.”

“Yes, but she said there’s a family matter to be cleared up first. She’ll be here around noon. She headed for us two days ago.”

Angelica heard Mary groan. It mirrored her own silent noise of misery. Sam knew she’d signed up for a game. Little else would get her big sister to

delay the challenge of escorting rebel males through the lethal land where she spent most of her time.

Mary paused in stirring the fire. "Sam knows?"

Candice nodded.

"But, how?" Mary didn't like it that spies might be reporting on them already.

"The Network scheduled Angelica's episode and announced it, along with some amendments to the rules. She has to report to the time trials immediately."

There was a stunned silence where Angelica could sense them rearranging plans and worrying, but all she could feel was relief. A week from now, she would be in New Network City, battling to the death for a prize. *Finally, a place to put all this hatred!*

She'd been dreading the normal wait it took to be scheduled. Months in the rebel safe zone around five hundred tempting men would bury her. *Four*, Angelica amended, still feeling the slashing burn of their deaths. They'd lost a cut in Stone Mountain—beautiful, skilled, enslaved males whose murders hadn't been avenged, but they couldn't strike the Network openly. They weren't ready for that yet, though the war had started. As a Pruett, Angelica was both relieved and frustrated.

Mary made the connection. "Sam wants to make sure she sees Angelica one more time, just in case."

Candice knew Pruett nature better than Mary did. It was the reason she was the leader and that sharp intelligence showed as she answered. "More

likely, she wants to escort her and cheer from the stands. You know how Sam is.”

Angelica certainly did. Her sister wouldn't like the choice, but she would understand. Sam was the wildest Pruett in their family. Watching her go through an episode would be a thrill.

“So, the Network has succeeded in splitting us up.” Mary tried to fight the ominous sense of doom. “It gives them the advantage.”

Candice responded with her usual no-nonsense attitude. “They've always had it. Sam will escort Angelica. We'll help Baker.”

“Whatever you think is best.” Mary was glad she wasn't in charge.

“We'll cover it when she wakes up. No need to ruin a good night's sleep.”

Angelica thought about rolling over and telling them she hadn't been to sleep yet, or even trying to frighten Candice like she used to when they were kids, but she didn't. Candice was already worried. So was Angelica, but for different reasons. Candice didn't want to lose her new mate or the very special males they were risking everything to help. Angelica didn't want to lose herself.

The change had swept her away as it had nearly every other teenage female in the world, but Angelica was burning faster than the rest of her friends and family. Candice had been close to this heat before she'd won her mate from the Network, and she told Angelica what slowed it, but Angelica couldn't do it. She would never rent a male or have

one around just to provide a service when called. If she did, she would lose her chance at a real cure, because she'd never leave his arms long enough to search for a match. It would be hard for her to give up any form of relief from this torment once she experienced it.

Due to the lack of male births, her changeling body was demanding a mate, was being driven to continue the species. There was no other way she could stop the rages that had come with puberty and would leave with death. The years between would be an agony of burning under the skin and blood behind her eyes as the disease progressed through the levels. The Changeling Winds had come, twisting her into someone she hardly knew. She would never be the old Angelica again, even if she accepted her ruthless instincts and took what she needed. A service might slow the progression, but that wouldn't stop it. Eventually, she would still burnout or up.

Mary was a frightening example of burnout. Her aunt was so happy with her male, so in love, that she had no fire left. The only time she got riled was when he was in danger. If not for the family reputation, and the protection Candice made sure they all received, Mary would have been killed long ago and her mate stolen. That was the most common form of finding relief from this hell. Stealing a man wasn't a crime in their world, only killing one was.

Both were fates Angelica abhorred. She couldn't stand the thought of winning one of those

timid, cringing males for herself and retraining him, freeing him to live beside her as an equal, and then not be able to defend him. Or worse, maybe she would snap and kill him by accident. It was awful how the sight of blood, the feel of it, could send the rage down a notch. Every time she took a life, her control grew stronger.

That was the method her sister, Sam, used to battle her rage into submission, and why she stayed in the lawless Borderlands. Their family had ways to maintain that iron Pruett control, but they were still burning. In time, stage three or four would claim them. They'd chosen to accept what relief they could find until it happened, but Angelica had sworn none of those would be her fate.

*Remission.*

The word terrified her. The fifth stage of the change was one that few of them reached. Remission had only occurred a few times in history when two compatible, willing partners came together. It didn't sound hard, but *willing*... Males were slaves. They did what they were told and most changelings did exactly as her family—took relief where it was found. Angelica was determined to be stronger, but this fire! Because she denied her body the contact it craved, she was burning faster. Angelica could feel the evil part of her soul growing faster than her control. It wanted blood.

To keep from spilling it out here, she'd signed up to do it in the legal confines of the Network's complex. It would give her a male of her own and a

possible chance at remission, if she could pick a brave bachelor—something Angelica doubted existed—but it was mostly to satisfy the endless need. At the Bachelor Battles, Angelica was required to spill blood. She was praying it would knock the fire out long enough for her to get to know the mate she chose, so he would come to her willingly. Angelica was afraid of the time they would spend alone together. She didn't have Candy's iron control.

It was hard to remember how happy Angelica had been before the change. A part of who she was had begun to fade. Nothing was the same. Angelica loathed the Network and wanted Baker's enslaved males freed, but she wasn't sure of her place in the rebellion yet. It was the fire she sought to ease by fighting to the death—live—on wall screens across the world.

“What type of amendments?”

Angelica had almost forgotten Mary and Candice were talking, it had been so long since either of them spoke. She wasn't the only one deep in thought.

Candice scanned the darkness again, ignoring the men standing guard, but it was hard. Daniel's pride at doing guard duty was thick, attractive. “More contestants, no limit on visits with the bachelors as long as she doesn't give mercy. They've added the withdraw ropes again. She can withdraw from two matches.”

“She won’t, and I pity the one who tries it with her.”

“Same.”

“I know she’s burning hotter, but are you sure she can do this?”

“Yes. Angel will get her own mate now, and their rule changes won’t make a difference. The broadcast said the amendments had been in the works for a while, but I doubt the timing.”

“They don’t want her to survive.”

Angelica couldn’t stand the thought of her family worrying about it. She rolled over, shrugging off the chills she’d gotten from thinking about unlimited visits with the bachelors. The Network had sweetened the honey pot. “I think they’re just shoring up chances of success, like we do.”

Candice and Mary both turned in surprise, drawing attention from the guards. Bruce and Daniel were standing watch over the small campsite, but they weren’t as sharp as a changeling and someone always stayed awake while they pulled their weight, in case there was trouble.

“They’re covering both ends.” Angelica punched the scorpion scurrying next to her leg, squishing the deadly animal into the hard ground. She wiped the gore off on a rock. “Make it harder and maybe kill off another troublesome Pruett, or follow her straight to the rebels.”

Mary gawked. “How can you know that?”

Angelica’s mind flashed to those dead males, remembering how full of life they’d been. “Because

it's what I would do. They killed a hundred with the last episode. Why fix what's not broken?"

"They'll use the same tactics?"

"Yes. We'll play it like we don't know."

"And while you're inside?" Candice's frown drew Daniel to hover at her side.

Angelica didn't hesitate or warn them that she would use her own rules. She said the only thing that mattered. "I'll act like what I am—a Pruett."

## Deleted Scene #2

“Come here, boy!”

Jason cringed against the wall as the changeling woman stomped toward him.

In the bloody straw behind her, the boy’s father rose. Scarlet drops ran down his body like rain.

“Run!” William lunged at the woman to keep her away from his son.

Rankin, still in the throes of lust, rotated from the child to meet the father’s attack. Unlike their earlier battle, William didn’t restrain himself this time. He fought like a woman.

Jason was horrified as his last surviving family member struggled with the changeling who had come to buy him for the Network.

“Run!” William shouted again, using his weight to gain an advantage. He pinned the snarling, kicking, swiping demon to the wall of the barn, hands coming up to her throat.

Rankin felt the danger to her life and flipped into the uncontrollable animal that always lurked inside. She ripped his throat out with her claws.

“No!” Little Jason ran forward, slamming his fists into the woman’s hip.

Rankin kicked, catching the child in the stomach. He flew backwards, hitting his neck on the doorframe. He dropped heavily.

In the courtyard and on the porch, Rankin's crew gaped in disbelief.

The most timid of their group watched the child, but he didn't move. "We'll all go down for this. Killing males is forbidden, even to us."

"We could report her, but I doubt it would matter."

"So long as we don't get sacrificed, I can stick to whatever story she tells. I suggest you do the same." Lena, second in command, got them in line. "His chest is moving. Get a medical transport ready."

"He'll ride with me." Rankin came to the door and scowled at her crew. She would get rid of these witnesses as soon as she could.

Rankin picked up the boy who resembled his father, her obsession. She headed for the horses they'd tied to the porch upon arrival. "Burn it."

"What do we put on the report?" her XO asked evenly.

Rankin handed the limp body to a lower member while she mounted her horse. "We found a survivor of a fire and brought him in to the comfort and safety of the Network."

After a fast glimpse around to verify there were no neighbors to have witnessed the savage attack that had left three citizens and a slave dead, the crew agreed. It would be easier to say little, than to try to invent a story to cover this mess.

Rankin cradled the boy in her bloody arms, mourning his father. She'd wanted William, but his

son would do. Jason would belong to the Network legally, but Rankin's promotion to top Defender was coming next year and then he and every other slave in the complex would be at her fingertips. She planned to train her harem accordingly. Over time, one of them would become enough like William that she could finally have peace. She planned to concentrate her efforts on his son.

# Network Program Schedule

5 a.m. Wakeup News

6 a.m. Shark Waves

7 a.m. Anti-Rebel Propaganda

8 a.m. Bachelor Battles

9 a.m. Replays of previous week

10 a.m. Disease Propaganda

11 a.m. Hound Falls

Noon News

1 p.m. Employment Opportunities

2 p.m. Wall of Death

3 p.m. Educational Propaganda

4 p.m. Walking Dead Hunt

5 p.m. Vulture Run

6 p.m. News

7 p.m. Tunnels of Time

8 p.m. Ice World

9 p.m. World Propaganda

10 p.m. News

11 p.m. Dodge-Blade

Midnight Free-for-all

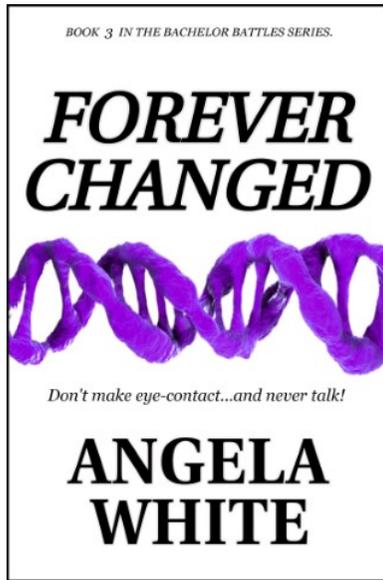
1 a.m. Replays from the Previous Week

2 a.m. Violence Propaganda

3 a.m. Off-Air Service Time (2 hours)

5 a.m. Early News

## Book 3



[Forever Changed](#)

The Northern Borderlands

1

**“Y**ou don’t have to do this.”

In the middle of sliding to her knees, Sam peered up. “Why? Do you stink?”

Baker chuckled, holding still. Her eyes held glossy tints of red that implied she was very tired. He knew better than to trigger her with sudden movements. “You always know what to say.”

Sam laughed, rough hands running over his strong, chilly legs in quick swipes to clear him of any ticks. They'd come through the bramble fields last night and couldn't light a fire to check themselves or cook a meal. Now that they could see, she was doing a better search. Ticks were the same as they'd always been—nasty, dangerous, bloodsucking parasites that carried any number of diseases.

Around this small valley set among the hills, Network troops were on the move. Coming and going from every direction, it had forced the rebels to take cover. Apparently, the enemy had learned of their ambush and theft of the train. Sam hoped her family was careful. It had been three days. Defenders could have reached them by now.

“All good.” She stood. Heat flared as she stared at Baker's bare chest. They'd stripped down to almost nothing when they took shelter, hoping any ticks they'd picked up would stay with the clothing. She and Baker had spent the night in a corner of this hillside cave. Her heat had warmed the walls so much that he'd had to switch positions with her. Outside, their escort was enjoying the remaining cool drafts of the Changeling Winds. The dust had finally settled, but it had left gritty traces everywhere. Sam tried to shake some of them from her hair, knowing it was a lost cause. As soon as she got on her Mopar to drive to Adelpia, she would be coated again. The Borderlands were constant battles with nature that few won.

Baker tried not to respond to her standing in front of him in black shorts and a tight black top, but he had to clench his fists to keep from making a sexual advance. They didn't have a pair of cuffs along. She also had to be at the trials in a few hours and though they were close now, they didn't have time to waste unless she had another method of transportation lined up. "I mean it, Sam. You don't have to play their games. Come with me. You're more useful *alive*."

Sam refused to travel that road with him, though she wanted to. When she'd told Angelica she hadn't found a man she hurt to be away from, she hadn't been lying, but she sensed splitting from Baker might test that. She both yearned for it as a confirmation of her feelings for him, and dreaded it for the same reason. Had she really fallen for this sexy rebel? Now, when they couldn't be together and she was about to have her pick of the bachelor prizes? Talk about irony.

Baker growled as he stepped on a sharp rock, missing his shoes. They'd trudged through mud on the way here and left them outside last night after clearing the small cavern.

Sam finished her own tick check, and then went to the rear of the cave to collect the bedding. Almost completely round, the cave would have held them and their escorts, but her Runners had insisted on watching for problems. Sam assumed they were giving her privacy, but she hadn't used it. She had

the fight of her life coming up. She had to get set for that.

Understanding she wasn't going to renounce the choice, Baker sat on a cool rock, wishing he could at least feed her before she left. "Anything I should know about the women in the west?"

Sam's gut churned, making her frown at the emotion. She didn't like being jealous. "Meaner, faster, more instinct driven. Just be yourself." She couldn't stop the flare of heat between them as they locked eyes. The pleasure she'd experience with Baker during their two nights would never be forgotten even if she did find a more suitable match in the complex.

*Unbroken.* She flushed at her own snobbery. She wanted a mate who hadn't been passed around her relatives.

Baker had brushed off enough renters after sex to recognize the moment. Humiliation flooded him.

Sam sighed. "If you keep reading my mind, we'll have to make an agreement, Baker."

He snorted at the half-teasing, half-yearning tone. "You don't want that. You've tried my flavor and now you want to taste the new stuff. I get it."

Baker stood up, anger drawing her like his flirting never could.

"Just remember, Miss Hardass, anyone can make you cum. It takes a mate to keep you satisfied. Those boys can't do that for *you*."

“How would you know?” Sam hated to be put into a corner over something a slave wasn’t even supposed to discuss.

Baker angrily jerked his pants up. “I just do. Mark my words, Sam. You’ll be bored after the first visit.”

Sam refused to deny that. It was definitely possible. Just because Candice and Angelica had gotten good men, didn’t mean she would. It was especially true when she considered how hard the enemy would try to kill her while she was in the dome. She might not even get to the first visit.

Sam paused for fear or the urge to withdraw, but the eagerness didn’t fade. She wanted to fight for her life. It was a challenge that she hadn’t conquered yet, but most of her current family had. It was pride and honor, need and heat, adventure and danger—she needed all of that to be satisfied.

Baker didn’t speak on the subject again, but Sam feared he was right. The rebel boss had already given her all of those emotions, had satisfied her enough that she’d been able to sleep next to him for a few hours—a big no-no in her past. Sleeping with a rental was a bond she wasn’t ready for and yet, she’d broken that rule, but the worst part was she’d been thinking about the bachelors at the complex while lying in his arms.

Baker gestured to the rebel who had come to the entrance of the cave. “Everyone set to go?”

Greg nodded happily. He’d spent the night squeezed between Rosa and another Runner,

listening to their snores and mutters. It had almost felt like he was in the bachelor cells again. It had been nice. “Rosa said half an hour to let the rest of the fog lift. She doesn’t like the smell of it.”

Baker frowned in confusion. “The smell?”

“Beetles sometimes travel with the fog. They eat their food as they go. It stinks.” Sam wasn’t happy with the delay. It meant another half an hour of trying to avoid the conversation Baker wanted to have.

“I’ll be around.” Sam ducked out into the cool wind. He wanted a commitment, but he wasn’t going to get it yet. If he was right, he would be the real winner. If he was wrong, one of her Runners would be lucky enough to earn his attention. Baker might not know it yet, but he wasn’t ready to settle down. Her crew was. They were all sick of being on the move, of never being at peace. Now, that was possibly over and she was happy her girls might finally have those years of normal life, but Sam wasn’t expecting much for herself. Helping to bring down the enemy would be enough. If she won a nice prize while doing it, that was a bonus for a job well done.

Greg sensed the conflict, but wasn’t sure what to say that would help. Rosa had answered his questions about the mysterious Pruetts, except the answers hadn’t cleared anything up. Despite trusting them with his life, Greg was scared of Candice and her cousins, with Sam being the most terrifying.

Greg helped Baker clear the cave of evidence that they'd been here, both aware of two hulking women guarding the entrance. At the complex, it would have made them nervous and prevented conversations. Here, it was a relief and a temptation. Anything they said would be repeated to Sam or Rosa.

Baker resisted the urge to plant information.

Greg had no such qualms. He wanted to help his friend. "I've heard the west has families like hers."

Baker blanched at the idea. "Won't be Pruetts."

"Is that all that matters to you?" Greg scowled sharply. "I know your dad was big on them, but they aren't that special. There are other families."

Baker didn't reply. He knew Greg was right, but he didn't want anyone else. He'd never really viewed Angelica that way, despite offering her a service that she'd refused, and Candice had never been his in the first place. With Sam, there was the sense that she was perfect for him. He wanted time with her to prove or disprove the theory. However, the family name did give him peace of mind. Was he intentionally marking off all others because the Pruett name meant honor? Unhappy with the revelation, Baker grunted. "Let's get out of here. They might need a hand on guard duty."

Greg hid a frown as they joined the Runners. The guards would tell Sam and she would believe Baker was only after her name. *That could be the problem now.,*

Greg decided he would ask Rosa to help. He wanted Baker to be as content as he was, and Sam was a terrific match for their rebel leader.

Baker avoided Sam's post, walking quickly to their bikes to help clean debris from the tires and compartments. He felt Sam's eyes boring holes into his stiff spine, but he didn't acknowledge her. She'd ended it, was moving on. He was a man. He would accept her wishes and search elsewhere for his needs.

Sam understood she'd hurt him, but until she was positive of what she wanted, she couldn't claim him. It wouldn't be right.

"Fifteen minutes!" Rosa called over the wind.

Sam twisted around so her attention was on their surroundings and not the males. She demanded it of her crew and she followed the same rules.

Rosa saw both of their attempts to fight fate. She couldn't get Sam to reverse her decision—they'd ridden together long enough for her to know Sam well—but Baker was innocent in so many ways that Rosa was sure he would be receptive to her plan. She leaned over the bike, ignoring the immediate tensing of every other female, including Sam. "You smell good."

Baker blushed, staring in surprise. "Uh. Thank you."

Rosa's hand reached out to stroke Baker's big arm, honestly experiencing the heat, but not the terrible fire that was so dangerous. Being with Greg

had already helped her control. “You and Greg get along...and I’m almost a Pruett.”

Baker realized she was offering to claim him. He hesitated, torn. He assumed she was doing it to keep him from being harassed during their trip west. Now that Sam had ended things, he was once again single. “Can I think on it?”

Sam’s growl echoed across the dusty campsite. She marched toward them with an expression Rosa immediately ducked. She’d known what it might do, but she couldn’t take Greg being upset over his friend.

“You little bitch!” Sam grabbed Baker by the arm and dragged him toward the cave. “Let’s talk!”

As she disappeared inside with a meekly obeying Baker, the Runners and Greg gave Rosa grins and approving nods. They all wanted the black sheep and the rebel leader together. The combination was perfect.

Baker stayed standing when Sam released him and stalked to the opposite end of the cave. The anger coming off her immediately began warming the stone.

Now that she’d shown signs of Pruett possessiveness, Sam didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t going to claim him, but she also didn’t want him free to be claimed by anyone else.

Baker waited as patiently as he could, eager to hear her offer. She had to give him something after displaying emotions in front of her crew.

“Why?”

“It’s not for your name. Other families are strong.”

*Not like mine.* She studied him. “If we were at the complex, how would you convince me?”

“I’m a man, Sam. They’re all boys. I wouldn’t need to do anything.”

Drawn to the confidence, Sam came a few feet closer. “And if there were other *men* there?”

Baker scowled, hands clenching. “When you left, I’d make it clear who I am.”

“What if they refused to get out of your way?”

Baker grunted. “I’d kill for you, Sam.”

She grinned, giving him that harsh games expression. “I feel the same way.”

“Then why won’t you claim me?”

She sighed, forced into giving him the truth. “Because it may not be enough. I’ve always needed more than the rest of my relatives. I won’t put you through that. You deserve better.”

Realizing she was trying to protect him, Baker slid forward and captured her lips.

Sam allowed him the liberty, shivering at the need a simple kiss could bring. She wanted him. There was no denying that. “Will you wait for me?”

“And be your secondary source if you find one you like more in the complex?”

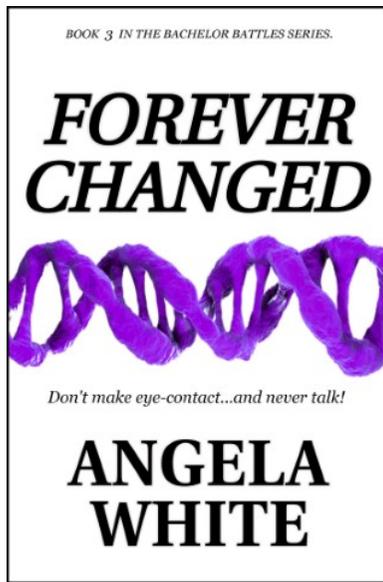
Sam dropped her chin in shame. “Yes.”

Baker slowly retreated, voice sad. “Then I have to give the same answer as back in the other den. When you decide I’m the one, come find me. Until then, I’m a renter and I’ll make my own choices.”

When he turned away from her, something in Sam snapped. *That hurt!* A tear rolled over her cheek and fell to the dirt. *I do love him. How did that happen?*

Baker felt her terror, but he kept going, proving he was strong enough to do so if that's what she wanted. His heart might never heal, but it was a small price to pay for the freedom of his gender. The Pruetts always marked a man in one way or another. He'd known that when he agreed to play with them. Now he had to live with it. "Rosa, I'm considering your offer. I'm under your protection until I choose not to be. Let's roll."

When Sam's growl came this time, Baker and everyone else ignored it.



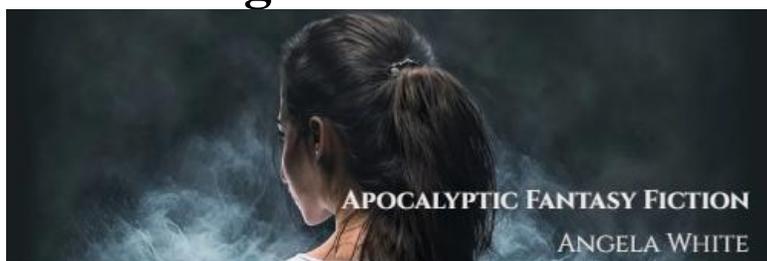
Book Three

Forever Changed

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## Angela's Books

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LAST CALL  
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APOCALYPSE WINDS  
AVOIDING FATE  
FOR THE FUTURE  
RIDING THE WAVES

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