

For the Future Free Chapter

No More Babying

12/31/2013

11:59 pm

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“Happy New Year!” Marc moved away from the fuse he’d just lit.

The camp clapped and blew party horns as vivid fireworks exploded above the cruise ship.

The ocean glinted back at the sailing refugees with ominous glimpses of rolling darkness. The waves were too rough for them to be on deck; it was dangerous up here.

Marc held Angela, enjoying the moment. The last ten days of recovery had been hard on all of them, but they’d accepted their losses and were trying to move on. In the morning, Eagle training would restart. Not longer after, everyone would find out that Angela’s gifts were locked, and the drama would begin. Marc wasn’t looking forward to it.

“Can I get a moment with the boss?” Ivan waited for a staggering couple to go by before leaning in. “And just so you know, it’s not a secret. You two can’t act that well.”

Marc flushed.

Angela chuckled, guessing what Marc had been thinking. “I told you they wouldn’t have a big problem with it. They all know I need the break.”

Marc frowned at Ivan. “How many do have a problem?”

Ivan shrugged. “A few stressed people wondering if it’s permanent, but that’s it.”

Marc relaxed. He paused as another group walked by.

“Happy New Year!”

“Right back at ya.”

Angela stayed under Marc’s arm, refusing to look behind them. Marc was still rubbing it in to Adrian, so he’d held the party on the rear deck.

“It was to avoid bad memories, baby.” Marc kissed the top of her head. “They needed a break too. Adrian was right about camping away from the ugliness.”

Angela nodded. The last week and a half had been calm and smooth, thanks to Marc finally taking his place. When she was ready to come back, they would be an unstoppable team.

“You already are.” Kenn joined them, looking thinner and sober.

Marc scanned him and nodded. “I’ll settle them down before I call it a night. Do we...” Marc rotated toward the bridge, concentrating.

Kenn prepared to run and handle whatever it was. He’d been doing that since Tonya broke things off. Most nights, he barely had the energy left to shower

and crawl into his bunk. It left nothing for the voice in his head to feed from.

Marc relaxed. "It's okay. Just a blip."

Angela watched Ivan's face to see if she needed to follow up. She didn't need her gifts to lead Safe Haven. It certainly helped, but she'd learned how to handle the people without her power first. Watching for facial cues and body language was good leadership skills.

Marc chuckled, but didn't comment on her thought. Many of these people were pale, red-faced, green or blue. They were also shaky, apt to stop and spit up leftover fluid, and to run for the bathroom when the diarrhea hit them. The worst effects were over, but none of them were fully recovered yet except for a few descendants. It made reading them a lot harder. "Theo caught something on the radar. It's gone now. He thinks it might be a glitch in the system, not strangers."

"But you'll...?" Ivan fell silent when Angela held up a finger. She was training Marc without using her gifts. It was amazing to watch.

Marc fell into a deep scan of the surrounding water. Ivan shelved the question he'd been about to ask. It was easy to forget that Marc was a genius too. The Eagles were following up on him, and occasionally second-guessing his decisions, but it had been respectful so far and Marc had tolerated it. When his answers fit, the respect had gone up and the need to question him had lowered. A few more weeks like

this would see all of them with full faith in his abilities.

Ivan opened a private line to Angela, the only way she could hear him now. *Are you okay?*

Sadness flew across her expression. It was gone before Ivan could blink.

It's not bad yet. The cracks are the same.

Ivan hadn't expected different, but he was still watching her. He also cared about her. He had no doubt she would pretend to be fine even if she wasn't. *Do you have any FND work available?*

Angela shook her head. *I have nothing running. I can add you to the list if you like.*

The list?

Of people who are bored and would like to see real action in the upcoming fight.

Ivan grinned. *You do have a project. Good.*

Angela's amusement fell to the damp deck. *I'm going to kill them all. Will you help me?*

You know it.

Marc blinked, breathing calming. He yawned. "All clear."

Angela relaxed, mentally storing Ivan's name. Her front line was already moving into place. Her main force was being assigned as they volunteered. Those in the rear were as safe as she could make them from the fight that had to happen. They weren't ready for it, but that hadn't mattered the entire time she'd been in this camp. When shit hit the fan, they took the hit and sent it right back. Somehow, it was always enough.

Marc hugged her, aware of a lingering tension that hadn't been there before his scan.

Ivan left, wondering if they would ever be able to fish from the ocean again. The air had stayed clear, but the water batches they were filtering had been dirty every time. The camp was getting a lot of chlorine from the bleach treatments. Kenn and Marc had rigged up several filters for the mess and for drinking water, but fishing was out of the question right now.

Marc watched Ivan move through the thinning crowd of partiers who were now getting the sadness that always came from the end of a year. Their thought would go melancholy if he didn't distract them. People would cry, argue, throw up and start it all over for the next few days if left alone.

“Is Ralph ready for them?”

Marc realized Angela was stewing, which meant she also needed a distraction. “Yes. The kids are playing with Christmas gifts; Daisey has her guitar out. They'll have a fun, peaceful evening without drinking anymore than they already have.”

“And the rest of them?”

“Have the Eagle deck to roam. There's cards, arm wrestling, light training session talk and a few other entertainments. Anyone is welcome.”

“And the rest of those?”

Marc pointed toward the front of the ship. “On duty.”

“Excellent.” Angela hadn't told him how to handle the camp tonight, just that he needed to.

Marc loved how that felt.

So did Angela. She was good at teaching and Marc was good at learning.

“Are you all set for the wedding?”

Angela snorted.

Marc shook his head at Quinn when the idiot stopped by them, eager to babble. Marc turned Angela toward the stairs, away from that group of partiers. “Would you like a workout?”

Angela grinned up at him. “Really?”

Marc took them to the stairs. “Morgan cleared you a couple hours ago.”

“After I beat him in the 50-yard dash?”

Marc laughed. “Yes.” The morning workouts in the gym had grown from just them, to more than four dozen men and women who wanted to be clear they were ready. Many of them had looked rough for the first few days. A couple of them still did, but it was a miracle to see Ray and Grant limping along the courses at all. Everyone offered encouragement when they fought to finish time regulations against doctor’s orders.

The medics were encouraging everyone to rest and regain their health now, while they could. Tonya had warned them of the list of after effects. They were trying to get ahead of it by boosting immune systems with extra food and sleep.

Neil followed the power couple down the steps, finally releasing the invisible shield he’d kept over them, at Marc’s order, for the last hour. Marc had been giving him tests, working his gifts. It was

amazing, but he couldn't change shape. He'd been able to change the color, and then to make it invisible, but his shield was still that annoying round bubble no matter what he tried. He assumed they couldn't change the shape or shrink it. He'd spent hours trying.

"Look ahead. Tell me who wins the workout matchups Angela is going to offer."

Neil immediately began scanning.

Angela walked a bit ahead, letting them work. Marc was exploring Neil's gifts. Apparently, the state trooper had been blessed. He had mental and physical gifts, though the physical were still weak. If Marc kept working him, that would shape up quickly. Angela suspected Marc wanted Neil to be her personal guard.

"I do."

Angela shrugged. She wasn't worried about Neil anymore. His attitude would calm once the Eagles stopped giving him shit for hiding his gifts. All their secret descendants went through it. As for Neil's punishment for lying and murder, Angela still hadn't chosen it.

Marc didn't comment. He wanted to help Neil with that; he still enjoyed being friends with the trooper, but he wasn't going to interfere. Whatever punishment the alpha chose would be enforced.

"That had not been revealed." Neil knew Marc didn't want Angela in matchup yet.

Marc rolled his eyes.

Neil sighed. "Looks like the boss, with help."

Angela snickered.

“Angie...”

Angela’s demeanor turned hostile. Her expression didn’t change. Her light steps didn’t switch to stomps or stop, but Marc felt her rage clearly. “Fine. If you get hurt, it’s on you.”

“As it should be.” Angela kept that rage around her, giving Neil a nod. He had added the help part by guessing, but he’d known it would anger her and let her drive to win. Neil was working on her, trying to get her to take back over now. Angela loved him for it. And she hated him. *Marc can do this job. Has some faith!*

Neil’s shoulders drooped.

Angela’s chin lifted. “Make sure you tell him you did it on purpose. He thinks you’re still a good guy who just made a mistake.”

“I am.”

Angela snorted. “You’re a manipulative son of a bitch. Embrace it. That’s the only way you keep your place and your family, and honestly, you should already know that.”

Angela left the two men in the hall, glaring at each other, while she entered the large gymnasium. Over the last week, Marc and the Eagles had transformed it into a massive workout setup with mats in the center for personal workouts and lessons.

Everyone paused, turning toward her.

One look at her pinched face told them she wasn’t happy.

“Matchups. Now.”

Eagerness flew through the gym, bringing the three dozen men and women to the center mats.

“Volunteers?” Angela scanned the lifted hands and picked out the first set. “Kyle and Jenifer against Daryl and Tommy.”

All four of them grinned and teased each other as they got into position.

“Leve One.”

The beautiful dance began. Angela enjoyed it, but she loved having Adrian’s job even more. When he’d first shown this to her, she’d wanted it then.

And now it’s mine. “Level two.”

Kyle and Jennifer advanced, striking at the same time.

Daryl and Tommy met the attack with defensive ducks and shoves that kept them from being hit.

“See how they work together?” Angela moved around the mat, pointing out things the rookies needed to memorize. “His feet are never away from hers. Their bodies move in all directions, but their feet give each other the direction so they can center if they spin.” Angela waited for the end of that set, then called the next. “Level three.”

Hits began to land on open fists. Jennifer and Kyle took the offensive right away, forcing both men back to the edge of the mat. Jennifer, because of her smaller size, put more heat into the hits than Kyle needed to for level three.

“See how she adjusts for her smaller size? All Eagles do that, no matter the sex. If you’re built smaller, you have to hit harder, hit smarter.” Angela

walked the crowd, pointing out details. “Her partner doesn’t take the heat for her; he lets her handle herself even though he worries she might get hurt. Each member of your team must be able to handle their own position. If you do it for them, they’ll be screwed the first time you aren’t there.” She waited for the change moment to call, “Level four.”

Everyone saw Kyle’s frown, but he didn’t hesitate to move forward as real hits began to land.

Jennifer took the light hit from Tommy and delivered a nasty hip shot of her own. “Don’t hold back because you know me!”

Tommy grunted, head rocked back. He swung again, hitting her like he would anyone else, though he aimed for her good shoulder instead of her face.

“Switch out!” Angela marched onto the mat and took Tommy’s place. “Go do laps!”

Tommy left the ring, shaking his head. He found it very hard to hit women, for any reason.

“Level four, restart.”

Daryl felt badass with Angela on his right. When she punched Jennifer in the mouth, he nodded and swung on Kyle.

Kyle ducked and swung back, nailing Daryl in the cheek.

Daryl hit the ground.

Angela swung around and nailed Kyle in the mouth, drawing a trickle of blood from his lip.

Jennifer grabbed Angela by the arm and spun her around.

Ready for it, Angela let the momentum add heat to her punch.

Jennifer hit the mat.

“Level five.” Marc took over, forcing himself to do the job.

Angela ducked and spun, giving her partner a hand up as she went.

Daryl frowned as she switched him to match up with Jennifer.

Kyle stared at Angela, waiting for her attack. He hated this part of training, but he was able to do it and she knew it.

Jennifer lifted arms at Daryl. “Bring it on.”

Daryl laughed as he and Angela advanced.

Everyone winced as the men swung and the women went down.

Angela and Jennifer helped each other up, both bleeding.

“You good?” Angela was, so far, but Jennifer had been recovering more slowly from her bout with radiation sickness.

“For another level.” Jennifer wiped away the blood and took her spot. “Just forgot to duck.”

Angela snorted. “Same here. I wasn’t sure if they would do it.”

“Me either.” Jennifer nodded at Daryl. “I respect that.”

“Me too.” Angela waited for Marc to call it.

“Level six.”

The foursome paused for a second at the switch...

Angela and Daryl advanced, both swinging hard.

Jennifer ducked too late and took Daryl's hit on her bad shoulder. Her cry echoed through the gym.

Angela went for Kyle's stomach while he was distracted by Jennifer's pain.

Jennifer shoved herself forward, also going for Daryl's gut.

Her hit bounced off, spinning her around. She landed on her ass with a grunt.

Daryl shrugged. "Rock hard, baby. I'm back in shape."

Everyone laughed, but the amusement fell as Marc motioned. "Jennifer, out."

Jennifer left the mat, angry with herself for making noise.

Kyle grunted as Angela's stomach hit landed at the same time as Daryl's shoulder blow. He immediately fired back with two hits that dropped his opponents. He followed up by wrapping a big arm around Daryl's neck.

Angela stared up at them, seeing the real anger in Kyle's stance. "Convince her to quit or get over it."

Kyle let his team XO go, stepping back. "I've tried both. It doesn't work!"

Jennifer tugged Kyle's arm to get him off the mat before he got in trouble. "Let's do laps."

Kyle went, casting ugly glares at Daryl.

Jennifer sighed. "I won't quit. You have to teach me to be better than them if you don't want to see me take a hit."

"You're not ready for this."

“When will I be ready, Kyle?” Jennifer stomped to the empty side of the gym. “When my husband gives me permission?”

Kyle followed her. “It’s not like that!”

Marc lifted a brow at Angela.

Angela wiped away the blood and her took her spot next to Daryl.

Marc sighed. “I don’t know how to get us over this one. None of the men want to hit women and it pisses us off when someone does.”

“We can’t just match women against women. Our enemies don’t fight that way.”

“I know. I just don’t know what to do about it.”

“I do, but you’re not going to like it.”

Marc rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that’ll be a first.”

Chuckles broke the tension.

Marc gestured. “You’re the boss.”

Angela motioned her quiet team forward. She’d been working with ten females on this ship and before they’d set sail. These six were the strongest so far. “We have to show them we can take a hit and get back up. If we don’t, they’ll never really accept us. It’s exactly what we discussed before everyone got sick.”

Jennifer ignored Kyle’s low plea, joining Angela and the others on the mat.

Men grumbled through the crowd.

“Button it!” Marc didn’t like it either, but he trusted Angela to get them over this hurdle.

Silence fell as six nervous females joined Angela in a straight line.

Angela studied them, seeing weakness and also the desire to prove they were able to be Eagles. “My rookie sets, level one.”

Half the women grinned and assumed their positions. The other half frowned, realizing she wanted them to use the training lessons she’d given them, not Adrian’s.

The men who had watched those lessons also scowled, bracing for ugliness.

“Anyone can leave the mat, at any time.” Angela didn’t add more.

None of the girls left yet.

“Let’s get to it.” Angela took her place, sliding into the middle slot that had been left open for her. She looked at Marc. “We switch every forty-five seconds, with a repeat on level five after level six.” Mac nodded, also bracing to watch. He’d observed her private training. It was quick and hard.

Angela knelt. “One... Two!”

All seven women rolled to the right, then rolled to the left, hands mimicking holding their weapons.

Angela rose, leading them with two short lines flaring out on either side. She moved forward two steps, then spun around, gun hand up. She mimicked firing two shots, then rolled again to the right.

Her team waited for her to get two seconds in, then followed, one by one until they all ended back in the line they’d started.

“Level two.” Marc was trying to time it and still watch all of them and the crowd for problems.

Angela hefted her imaginary shield, missing the actual weight of the bags they'd trained with. Her arms felt weak, like she didn't have muscles there anymore. She used her gun and shield to shove an opponent away so she could shoot them. She spun around and repeated the motions in two more directions before her team followed her lead. This was how she'd trained them, making them repeat it after a single showing.

The newest members of her team, Kim and Cathy, did the best they could to copy her. The older teammates shoved and tugged to correct them, but no words were spoken. Angela had told them a team worked best without words during the action, to adjust to working in silence.

"Level three." Marc braced.

Angela began hitting them.

The women hit her back, all of them.

Angela was proud of her team when they didn't hold back. The men had to understand they were fighters first and females last. She swallowed the blood from Molly's hit and also from Kim's, ducking and spinning out of the circle to get them from behind. She banged their heads together and spun again as Kendle and Allison reached for her.

Kim, still a rookie, stayed down, moaning.

Molly rose on shaky legs, vision blurred. "I hate it when she does that!"

Angela didn't have time to laugh with the men. The remaining women surrounded her, swinging brutally as the medics helped Kim off the mat.

Angela took three hits, but caught the fourth, shoving Kendle back by her fist. Angela swept, hard. Knees crumbled on two of the women.

Angela suffered two hits more while delivering two of her own, one with each fist.

Kendle hit the mat.

Allison landed on top of Kendle, both moaning.

Angela fell, taken down by a leg sweep from the rear. She punched as she fell, hitting an ankle.

Molly dropped, grunting.

Angela smashed her fists into the squirming pile of females, hitting a chin and then a boob. It was impossible to aim with so many of them on the ground.

She kicked out behind her, getting Jennifer.

Jennifer fell backward, but she kicked as she landed, getting Angela in the chin.

Angela's head snapped back. Pain went through her jaw as her teeth slapped together. Blood filled her mouth.

Kendle shoved free of the pile and dove over Angela. She stayed there, tensed, as blows rained, trying to reach Angela.

Angela recovered slower than she liked. She sucked in air as Kendle winced and grunted above her. "Now."

Kendle rolled, freeing Angela to come up swinging. She got Allison in the neck with a sharp right and Molly with a rough left in the temple, while getting Jennifer in the stomach with her boot.

Kendle grabbed Angela's offered hand and took her place by the boss as the other women ran or dove at them.

Hard swings stopped the rush as Angela and Kendle punched fast left and right, alternating in perfect tandem.

"Level four!" Marc got into the training. "As you can see, the female team is two levels above the men already, in these lessons. Angela chose to fast-track them so they could take your hits during coed training." *I just didn't believe it was possible. She knew. She's proving all of us wrong.*

The blows were ugly now. The watching crowd wanted them to stop.

The female fighters didn't. This outlet was needed. All of them had been worrying over the time away from training.

Angela ducked Cathy's rush and lunged forward, wrapping her up in a sleeper hold.

Cathy immediately tapped out.

Angela let go and rolled, missing Allison's foot, but not her knee as she dove forward.

Angela's breath rushed out. Anger took its place, but there was no magic there to blast out, no demon to control. Angela was grateful. She slammed her head into Allison's chin.

Blood splattered.

"Make them stop!"

Marc wasn't sure who had yelled, but he ignored them. "Level five!"

Allison limped to the edge of the mat, dripping blood.

Morgan was there to meet her, medical bag already open. He was very familiar with this type of care. Angela and Kendle pushed hip to hip, balancing off each other as they both delivered sidekicks to stomachs.

Molly tapped out as she hit the mat, gasping for air. Jennifer ducked the swings that came with the kicks, nailing both women in the knees.

Angela went down. She fell into Kendle and used the island woman's braced leg to climb back up and kick Jennifer in the mouth.

Blood flew across the mat.

Jennifer stood up, orbs glowing red.

"Stop it!" Quinn shoved over to Marc. "Call it off! She'll be hurt!"

Marc grabbed Quinn's arm and swung him onto the mat.

Angela and the other women attacked.

Men winced at the beating Quinn took, even from Kendle, who he'd been trying to protect. The three remaining women kicked, punched and stomped until Marc made the call.

"Level six!"

Morgan and Harry dragged Quinn from the mat as the three women stood and rolled, almost in tandem. Allison and Molly, still breathing rough, returned to the mat, lining up.

They all rolled again, bringing up gun hands that fired headshots while their other hands drew knives

that stabbed into imaginary chests. They stomped forward, layered in sweat, blood and triumph. It was beautiful to the Eagles. The audience clapped and whistled.

Quinn missed it as he puked into the waste can in the corner while the distracted medics tried to bandage his arm.

Marc saw camp members and hall guards come into the gym, worried and grumbling. He decided they needed to see this too. They needed to have faith in all of their defenders, not just the men. “Level five!” The women heaved in air and resumed the previous level. Angela stayed in the center, taking the most hits, protecting Allison this time as the other fighters attacked.

“What are they doing!”

“Stop that!”

Camp members ran to the mat, and were restrained by everyone gathered there.

The females in the center didn’t notice as they swung, ducked and grunted.

“Level seven!” Marc hadn’t watched this level before. He didn’t know what to expect as the women stopped and lined up. They’d already exceeded the limit of pain required to be an Eagle as far as he was concerned.

Kim and Cathy pulled away from the medics and rejoined their team.

Angela stepped forward, leading them like she had in their quiet training sessions. “9mm!”

The women brought the weapons into their workspace while hitting the magazine release button. They kept their index fingers across the front to provide guidance to the mag well.

The Eagles in the crowd clapped.

“.20 gauge Shotgun!”

Kendle ignored everything except her training. She brought the stock under her armpit for support, while turning it upside down so the loading port on the bottom faced up. She grabbed four shells from the rear of her belt in a claw grip, trying to keep the front two as even as possible. She slid them into the port, then repeated to load the last two shells. She hit the bolt release and let it go, bringing the gun up to fire.

“A peacemaker .45!”

Allison put it on halfcocked so the cylinder would spin freely. She laid it in her hand, opened the loading gate and pushed the spring-loaded rod to eject the empty casing. She put in a new round and repeated that four more times. Marc had taught them to leave the hammer down on one empty chamber because Peacemakers didn't have a safety and the hammer took a lot of hits in a real battle.

Camp members who had been watching calmed, understanding it was a demonstration and not an actual battle.

“M-4 rifle!”

All of them got it right despite having to remember the beer-can grip and the tug after seating the

magazine to make sure there wasn't a failure to feed.

“MK32!”

The girls drew chuckles as they acted like the imaginary grenade launchers were almost too heavy for them to lift, crank open and reload with the large shells.

Angela struggled to remember what came next, almost out of energy. It had been a very long five minutes. “...level eight!”

Kenn ran onto the mat, firing a paintball gun.

Angela ducked into a ball as her team surrounded her with their bodies.

Kenn tossed the other gun onto the mat by their feet as Kim and Allison decided they'd only been trimmed and lunged for the weapon.

Allison came up with it. She fired at Kenn, who gracefully moved aside.

The pink paintball hit Quinn in the leg as he leaned over the waste can. “Hey! I'm puking here!”

The crowd dissolved in laughter.

The team on the mat rolled to keep Angela covered as Kenn stepped to the side, gun lifting again.

Kim fired again, hitting the mat by Kenn's feet.

“Switch!”

Kim tossed the gun to Kendle.

Angela couldn't see this part, but she knew it was a miss by the moan of the crowd. "Watch that crossfire, ladies!"

Marc grinned. *She sounds just like Kenn did yesterday working with Gus and Ivan. Same words even.*

Kenn ran forward with a head-on assault, firing at legs.

Women panicked and jumped aside, leaving Angela open.

Most of those observing expected her to be hit or lift her shield.

Angela rolled backwards and gained her feet as paint splattered where she'd been. She waited until he fired again, judging as she dropped to the mat.

Kenn did the same as Kendle fired at him.

Stray paintballs smacked into the wall and the crowd.

Kenn fired at Angela as she ran toward him. She threw herself into the air, taking one hit in the knee. She landed on Kenn's arm; her legs went around his, tripping him.

Kenn fell forward, grunting in surprise. He hadn't expected her to get this close.

"Gun!"

Kendle tossed the paintball gun.

Angela caught it and fired into Kenn's upper shoulder, twice. She held it to his head.

"Level nine!" Marc waited, impressed by what she'd been able to do with the females. It was

obvious the women had still been training, even during their rough times.

Angela grunted as she helped Kenn up. “Thank you. It was fun.”

Kenn laughed. “Yep.” He went to the empty place next to Marc to enjoy the rest of the show.

Angela looked at Neil. “Every ten seconds.”

Neil winced, shaking his head. “Not as worn out as you all are. Please. It’ll ruin the great mood you’ve built.”

Angela took her place in line. “No contact, every ten seconds.”

Neil was pacified that she’d chosen no contact. In their conditions, someone might get a real injury or even die. The highest levels were ugly. “One.”

The girls began the kai levels in normal speed, alternating sweeping to the left and right as their arms punched out in the two opposite directions. It would have delivered four fast hits to dual opponents.

“Two.” Nel studied the hard air kicks from the same leg. Three chest hits in rapid succession, followed by a heel kick, could take the breath out of almost anyone, no matter their size--especially if it was in the same place every time. The landing in a crouch and taking a deep breath was preparation for the next call. “Three.”

Wide, swinging uppercuts came next, while advancing with pat steps that give them more force. Eight of those alternated, with knees to the stomach

and groin. “Four!” Neil got excited as they switched to the more complicated level.

Angela punched left, leaned over and kicked backward, then repeated it twice more. Her body screamed, but her mind and heart cried out for more. “Five!”

They punched left this time and kicked forward, repeating three times. Their limbs were an unsynchronized blur, but Neil was still proud of them. *They’ve practiced!*

The women dropped to the mat, kicking and punching; they rolled again, gaining their feet. They fell into the first kai stance. “Hu-ya!”

“Six.” Neil wasn’t sure they could go much higher. Only half the women on the mat with Angela knew the next level.

The women ran forward, kicking high for chins. They let the momentum carry them, coming down swinging.

“Pause.” Neil lifted a brow at Angela

Angela leaned on her knees, gasping in air as the women around her did the same. “You know...what I need. Look at their faces... Make the call.”

Marc looked at the other women.

Neil and the Eagles looked at each other.

Every man there who understood shook their heads. Neil nodded, happy for them. “We recognize your equality as Eagles. As of this minute, there will be no more babying or special treatment.”

“Thank you. We will honor what we’ve earned.”

Angela looked at the women. “Team meeting in the

pool room, fifteen minutes.” She limped off the mat.
“That’s for everyone.”

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