**A picture containing book, text

Description automatically generated**

## Copyright

**Dearly Departed**

A Novel

by

**Angela White**

**Title:** Dearly Departed

Life After War Book 8

**Edition:** 2020

**Length:** 861 pages

**Author:** © Angela White

**ISBN#:** 978-1-945927-91-1

**Copyright**: Angela White 1991. All rights reserved worldwide. No part of this publication may be replicated, redistributed, or given away in any form without the prior written consent of the author.

## Books by Angela White

[Reading Order](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/reading-order.html)

[Life After War Series](http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/life-after-war.html)

**LAW Backstories**

[Marc and Angie](http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/marc-and-angie.html)

[Marc and Dog](http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/marc-and-dog.html)

[Alexa’s Travels](http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/alexas-travels.html) Series

[The Bachelor Battles Trilogy](http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/bachelor-battles.html)

(completed series!)

[HOP-17: Human Origins Program](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/hop-17.html)

## TOC

[Survival](#_Chapter_One)

[Falling](#_Chapter_Two)

[Burning](#_Chapter_Three)

[Issues](#_Chapter_Four)

[Four More](#_Chapter_Five)

[Life and Death](#_Chapter_Six)

[The Toll](#_Chapter_Seven)

[Lost Sheep](#_Chapter_Eight)

[Numbers](#_Chapter_Nine)

[Fighting Fate](#_Chapter_Ten)

[Sneaks](#_Chapter_Eleven_1)

[Go West, Young Man](#_Chapter_Twelve_1)

[The Alpha](#_Chapter_Thirteen)

[Picking Sides](#_Chapter_Fourteen)

[A Father’s Love](#_Chapter_Fifteen)

[More Questions Than Answers](#_Chapter_Sixteen_1)

[Nutcracker](#_Chapter_Seventeen)

[Survivor](#_Chapter_Eighteen)

[Bad Vibes](#_Chapter_Nineteen)

[On the Outside](#_Chapter_Twenty)

[Digging Deep](#_Chapter_Twenty-One)

[The Next Step](#_Chapter_Twenty-Two)

[Honor First](#_Chapter_Twenty-Three)

[The Onion Man](#_Chapter_Twenty-Four)

[Billy’s Run](#_Chapter_Twenty-Five)

[Can You Fight?](#_Chapter_Twenty-Six)

[Action!](#_Chapter_Twenty-Seven)

[Cleanup](#_Chapter_Twenty-Eight)

[Butterflies and Unicorns](#_Chapter_Twenty-Nine)

[The Cold Hand of Fate](#_Chapter_Thirty)

[Goodbye](#_Chapter_Thirty-One)

[Someone’s Cow](#_Chapter_Thirty-Two)

[Stupid People](#_Chapter_Thirty-Three)

[Everything](#_Chapter_Thirty-Four)

[Moments Like This](#_Chapter_Thirty-Five)

[Don’t Screw This Up](#_Chapter_Thirty-Six_1)

[Crossing a Line](#_Chapter_Thirty-Seven)

[Reality Sets In](#_Chapter_Thirty-Eight)

[Hard and Quick](#_Chapter_Thirty-Nine_1)

[The Past](#_Chapter_Forty)

[I Dare You](#_Chapter_Forty-One_1)

[Be Good Now](#_Chapter_Forty-Two)

**Reason and Law**

When we emerged from that cursed mountain,

We had become hardhearted.

We turned sinners away for any infraction,

Still mourning our dearly departed.

The light of Safe Haven continued to beckon;

Our people were protected.

But we lost all compassion,

For any trace of evil we detected.

If they killed or stole,

We removed that disruption.

The only survivors welcomed,

Had souls without corruption.

Our population began to recover;

Our hearts began to thaw.

But we refused to forget the lessons learned;

There has to be reason and law.

Without that,

Societies always fall.

# Chapter One

**Survival**

**A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated**

**1**

***“W****e will have the witch!”*

*Some of Mikel’s men cheered. The rest were dead or screaming for help.*

*Inside the mountain, shouts began to fade into groans and tears…and then silence.*

“Why is it so quiet now?” Tracy wiped away tears as she and Charlie burrowed deeper under the clothes pile.

“The smoke.” Charlie kept digging downward. He was trying to reach the bottom with his feet. The ledge had broken off and slid during the quake, but he didn’t know how far it had fallen or how they had landed. For all he knew, they were dangling. The darkness was smothering. He couldn’t even smell anything but laundry–some of it cleaned, most of it not.

“We have to help them!” Tracy cried harder, but she didn’t resist when Charlie pulled her boot, dragging her down.

Around them, the laundry was moving. The Indians had joined the teen as the cave fell apart, but there hadn’t been time to formulate a plan.

Natoli stayed on Tracy’s right as Charlie took them through the maze of laundry and stone. His men surrounded the couple, as he’d instructed them to do before they’d rejoined Safe Haven. Marc had told Natoli of his fears for the future, of the deaths and lives that had been promised. Natoli had vowed to protect Marc’s heart so that warrior could fight for all people. Natoli was fulfilling that vow.

Charlie was just glad they weren’t alone. He was in the lead for the first time and it was terrifying.

Charlie stopped as his foot hit something hard, hands fumbling for the light on his belt. He tried not to think about everything that might be on top of them or how hard it was to breathe down here. They had survived the quake. That had been his only goal when he’d brought Tracy to the laundry area. Now, he had to keep them alive in the aftermath.

Around them, others were coming to the same realizations. Through the broken stone and shifting dangers, battered survivors began to emerge.

**2**

Adrian groaned as the weight shifted off his shoulder. The pain in that arm was bad enough to convince him that he was alive, but there was too much debris on him to move. Adrian remembered shoving Marc forward and the ceiling collapsing on them, but nothing else. He assumed he’d been knocked out. The buzzing ears and roiling guts supported that theory. He groaned again.

“I heard someone!”

Adrian kept his eyes closed as more debris was cleared from his body. He hurt everywhere. Sharp rocks were digging into his arms and legs, and there was a warm heat from below making him sweat. *That’s a body. I’m not sure if it’s breathing.*

“It’s Adrian! Grab that end. Lift on three. Ready?”

Adrian screamed as the weight increased and then it was gone. He coughed as smoke and dust rushed into his lungs, and then screamed again as he was dragged free of the rubble by his arms. The pain in his shoulder was excruciating.

As his own cry faded, Adrian could hear others begging for help, but not as many as it should be. He struggled to clear his mind, dazed. Something crawled across his bad hand and scurried into the darkness. Adrian felt it as a vague sensation dulled by the stabbing throbs in his arm and shoulder.

“There’s another body here! Keep digging!”

Adrian was left alone as rescuers ran back to the debris pile. He stilled, listening to coughs and shouts, to tears and groans. *Light by a lot*, he thought, ears buzzing in loud confusion.

*There’s a fire!* Angela thundered. *Get up!* She and Cody were trapped in the storage chamber on the same level as Adrian, but the fire was more important.

Adrian shoved into a sitting position, arm useless except in the flaring, ugly pain that came each time he tried to move it.

*Dislocated*. Angela didn’t sense anything else wrong with him that was serious, but the arm was enough to keep him from helping. *You can’t climb like that. Damn!*

Adrian forced his hurting body to stand on legs that shook, scanning the new, more dangerous environment. *There!* He stumbled over rocks, bodies, and wooden beams, lurching toward the entrance to the tunnel where he’d been camped in exile before the Mexicans found it.

*This will hurt*. Adrian clenched his teeth. *Go away.*

He felt Angela withdraw as he lurched forward. Adrian slammed his shoulder into the unmovable wall and popped the humerus back into the glenoid.

“What is he doing?” Theo had paused in shifting a large stone, drawn by Adrian’s chilling shout.

“Fixing himself.” Greg’s tone matched the roughness of the debris he flung aside. “I see a Colt. This is Marc!”

The digging resumed with more energy.

Adrian fumbled for the light on his belt. He shined it upward with his good hand, blinking at the waves of falling dust. The sight was so awful that Adrian needed the throbbing shoulder, along with every cut and bruise, to prove this was happening. Safe Haven had been destroyed.

*They’ll all be dead if you don’t get that fire out!*

Adrian staggered backward and fell, startled at Angela’s mental shout. He groaned, trying to focus. *Everything is so blurry…*

*Hurry!*

*Give me a minute!*

*We don’t have it*. *Smoke has already reached the top floor. Everyone up there is dying. Can’t you feel them?*

Adrian managed to get on his feet, but his flashlight had rolled too close to a crevice for him to reach it without his balance. He staggered toward the ladder instead, blinking in dull comprehension. The ladder was there. Bodies were hanging from it, sprawled below it... He stiffened in pain and then puked.

*Breathe. Breathe.* Angela shoved deep into his mind, to where their connection was glowing brightly. *You can do this. I believe in you. I always have. Now, hurry!*

Adrian wiped his mouth on his gritty sleeve and began to climb the ladder. The pain became a way to stay alert as he fought bodies for space while trying not to inhale the smoke wafting down.

Adrian reached the next level and yanked his shirt up, wishing he had time to stop and wet his bandana. Then he remembered he had been getting ready for bed and didn’t have it. All he had was his jeans, boots, jacket, and belts–tool and gun. Those last two he even slept with. *Good thing*, he praised, taking out his spare flashlight. After this, he was down to the headlamp. He didn’t want to try using it yet. The buttons were little and his hands were shaking. He might drop it. That would be worse than the dim illumination from his small flashlight.

Far above, Adrian saw a shadow illuminated by an orange glow. The man hefted himself onto the level with the fire and vanished. Adrian realized Angela was telling others of the problem and directing them too.

“Right behind you!” The wood vibrated as Greg climbed the ladder. Theo and Debra were taking care of Marc, but so far, there were no other survivors on the bottom level. Angela was telling Greg about kids trapped by a mess fire; he was determined to save everyone he could.

“Adrian!” Kyle shouted from his right. “Can you tie off this rope?”

Adrian missed the rope that Kyle threw, but it caught on wooden debris, allowing him to fumble for the end of it. As he tied it to the sturdiest thing he could find–a heavy-duty hitch that had been used to tie up their larger animals for milking–fresh screams sounded from above them.

“Going up!” Adrian winced at the awful pain, cradling his head. His hands came away bloody, but there wasn’t time to worry over it. He climbed as Kyle anchored the rope to the other end of the ledge and began inching Jennifer across the gap. There was a very narrow ledge, but no room to even glance down or they would throw themselves off balance. Hopefully the rope would keep them from falling.

Greg spotted a familiar red canister under the debris. He dug it out, ecstatic to locate a second extinguisher below it. Lungs starting to hurt, Greg used the rope from his belt to tie them together. The panic from the level above him increased while he worked.

“We need more hands in the mess!”

“We need something to put out the fire!”

“Where are all the extinguishers?!”

“I found two!” Greg pulled himself up the ladder, extinguishers clanking together against his chest. He’d tied them on like a necklace.

Adrian took one and put it inside his tucked-in shirt so he had both hands free.

Greg did the same and followed. Both men were aware of heavy coughing, but the lack of people helping worried them more. In a camp of over five hundred, only having a dozen workers active was horrifying.

“Someone got a light on.” Greg was sweating so much that his shirt was soaked.

Adrian grunted. “It’s not a light.” The climb was clearing the mental fog and sending in misery. There were bodies on every floor he’d reached so far. *How many have we lost?*

Greg climbed faster as he understood what Adrian meant. The top levels were bright, meaning it was a large blaze. *Two extinguishers won’t be enough.* Greg pulled himself onto what remained of the security and medical level. He shined his light right and left, spotting a few survivors on both sides. None of them appeared to need immediate help.

The two men hurried to the next ladder. Half of it was gone, but there was a rope hanging down from where someone else had already climbed up.

“That was Adrian and Greg!” Morgan had stood up when the flashlights shined through the dusty residence tunnel. “They’re going to the fire.” Morgan and Kenn had been together when the floor fell out, taking friends with it.

“Good.” Kenn tied the rope to his waist and then to the outcropping that had split and started the huge crevice. He was glad he’d been on duty and was wearing full gear. “We can’t reach them that way. We have to go down and get over to the ladder.”

Morgan knew he was right. The tiny ledge on either side wasn’t going to hold their weight, and there was no way they could jump the 20-foot gap in the middle.

Next to them, Neil was still staring at the hole where Jeremy had jumped. He hadn’t moved yet.

Kenn nudged Neil’s shoulder. “We’re going down there. You want one?”

Neil took the unused rope, but only held it. The gears in his mind had ground to a slow crawl.

Kenn tied it to Neil and then to a different outcropping that he hoped would hold. He understood Neil’s dazed response. If not for hearing Tonya’s voice in the medical bay, Kenn might have been experiencing the same emotion. He held great sympathy for Neil.

Neil followed Kenn to the edge of the gap, but he didn’t go first. He squatted at a pile of rubble and began digging through it, hoping he had the right place. They’d kept medical supplies on every level, but this floor had also held the medical bay, so the majority of their stock was here somewhere.

“Come on.” Kenn lowered himself into the hole with hands that protested the lack of gloves. *Got softer.* Kenn reached down with his leg to find a place that might support his weight. He found something that felt sturdy and tested it.

Kenn hefted himself up as the hard object rocked and vanished, breathing rough.

A shattering crash brought Neil to the hole. “Be careful!”

Nose burning from all the smoke, Kenn nodded toward the rope he had tied off for Neil. “I was able to see down five foot. It’s clear. I’m dropping.”

Neil had found the shelf of medical kits. He slung two of them around his neck, then shined the light as Kenn began to descend, using his own rope. It would have been incredible to watch if not for the situation.

“Okay. Come on down.”

Now that he’d observed how it was done, Neil tried to copy it. He lowered himself, arms straining. Sweat broke out on his neck from the heat as his lower body descended into the cool darkness to search for solid ground. He hadn’t realized it was hot and bright up there. Down here, it was pitch black and cool. *And quiet.* His ears were working overtime as his headlamp flickered off bodies, rubble, equipment that was mangled, and shards of thick plastic that had been crushed. *Water tanks.* His heart pounded.

Kenn had stopped a bit below, feet crunching. “Careful man, it’s a maze.”

Neil’s foot hit crushed plastic and slipped.

Kenn grabbed his arm, guiding him down. He didn’t tell Neil what he’d seen. The man would view it for himself any second now.

Neil’s light blurred as he caught his balance, but it was enough to show him the entire rubble field was made up of those huge plastic shards. Across the glittery field of danger, Samantha sat with her knees to her chest. Neil thought he could hear her breathing, but he wasn’t sure. She was covered in dust and dark shadows.

Kenn took Neil’s arm before he shined the light on her. “Easy man. If she gets up to run to us, it might all fall.”

Neil blanched, lowering his light.

Kenn lowered his voice. “She won’t want to leave the body. You’ll have to make her.”

Neil shined his light on Samantha anyway, mind blanking. *Body?*

Neil hadn’t seen Jeremy at first because his body was covered in blood, blending in with the broken cave walls. Jeremy had landed on one of the plastic tanks. He was still hanging there. *Oh, God!*

“Neil?”

Neil swallowed his horror. “Don’t move, Sam! Please, don’t move!”

“He knew this mountain would kill him.” Sam choked up. “And I made him come here!”

Samantha’s sobs were a torment to the men, but all they could do was listen and curse fate. Without help and equipment, they couldn’t reach her.

Kenn, aware of Morgan joining them, stepped and then slid toward the only exit he could view with his light. It was also lined in plastic shards, but most of them had been crushed and were covered in large pieces of debris Kenn identified as stone from the radio room. It had been darker than the outer walls.

Now flying through ways to rescue Samantha, Neil was barely aware they’d left.

Across the dark, bloody debris field, Samantha continued to cry.

**3**

Sweating and grunting, Kenn and Morgan removed the last two large stones so they could ease through the debris piles to reach the bottom level.

Morgan pointed. “We cleared a hole with those.”

Kenn shined his light and tried hard to force a grin. “Can we give you a lift?”

Angela wanted to reward his effort at lighthearted calm, but the best she could manage was a grunt. “Get us out of here.”

The ceiling of the storage chamber had cracked and fallen in. She and Cody had cowered under a shelf and hoped they weren’t hit. Afterward, she hadn’t been strong enough to stack the broken stones for a ladder to get out.

She held Cody up so Kenn could reach the scared boy’s arms, but Angela wasn’t in any shape to be pulled up that way. Some of her stitches were still healing wounds and hadn’t dissolved yet. She knew that by the way they pinched as she held Cody up. Angela chose to climb. She wouldn’t have been able to do it with Cody on her back, but she could handle herself.

Kenn watched as she came up the debris pile and then the wall. As soon as she was in range, he planned to grab her.

As Angela neared the top, she chose the wrong grip. The small ledge crumbled under her fingers, sending her flailing…

Kenn snatched the front of her shirt and jerked her out of the hole.

Angela screamed but didn’t struggle. When Kenn set her down, she clutched her stomach, trying not to puke.

*Are you okay?!* Adrian’s guts had clenched into a nasty cramp that had stolen his breath.

“Fine. Keep going.” Angela waved off Kenn’s apologies. “We’re even.”

Kenn grinned, but he’d never felt less amused. “Nice. Let’s go.”

Kenn guided them through the slippery debris, with Morgan bringing up the rear. Morgan was carrying Cody, who was staring toward the ladder with tears rolling down his dirty cheeks.

Morgan shielded the boy’s eyes as they joined Debra and Theo at the bottom of the ladder. He didn’t need to see his mom’s body.

“Damn, we’re glad to–”

Debra flung herself into Kenn’s arms, hugging him hard enough to make the Marine stagger. Flushing, he pried her off and handed her to Theo.

“See you,” Theo finished, holding her. She was the gentlest person he’d ever met. She wanted all of them to survive, even Kenn and Adrian. When she’d said she’d never attacked anyone before Tara and Jayson, Theo had believed her, but he knew it for certain now.

“We’re going up to help with the fire.” Kenn glanced at Angela, expression hardening. “Stay down here with the boy. If the smoke gets worse, get into the tunnel with the Mexican bodies. It’ll be rough, but the drafts there might keep you guys alive.”

“Marc!” Angela ran toward the injured man who had been dragged under the ledge.

Kenn rolled his eyes and started up the ladder that shook dust over those waiting to do the same.

“Help me!”

Everyone who heard it swung toward the scream, pinpointing it to right above the bathrooms on this bottom level.

Kenn was torn about which way to go. The fire was lethal, but that scream said help couldn’t get there fast enough. Kenn looked at the men about to climb the ladder behind him.

Morgan went toward the screaming without being told; Theo limped behind him. The two men disappeared into the dark passage that Kenn and Morgan had come down after finding Sam.

Kenn returned to the climb. He wasn’t sure how much more of this his arms were going to tolerate without a break. He hadn’t been to sleep yet and the smoke was making it hard to breathe and see. He was running through his energy and the sweat was stealing needed liquid that he couldn’t replace. If more people didn’t recover and start helping, things were going to get a lot uglier for all of them.

Debra held onto Cody and refused to let him stare at his mother’s body. Debra wanted to cover it, but there wasn’t anything close to use and she was scared to leave the light. She no longer trusted the darkness. Safe Haven had changed that for her, but now, Safe Haven was gone.

# Chapter Two

**Falling**

A picture containing room

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“H**elp!”

Samantha screamed again as the ground shifted. The tiny ledge she’d been on collapsed, dropping ten feet through the sharp darkness.

The debris fell in a shower of plastic dust, revealing huge stone slabs that Neil ran across as fast as he could. The cave grumbled, releasing another cloud of dust and shakes that sent his feet sliding downward as he ran. He leapt as the floor fell, reaching Samantha’s location by bare inches.

He scrambled away from the edge, bags slamming into his chest and the ground as he crawled. “Sam?!”

She didn’t answer.

Neil knelt at her side, wincing as his light revealed her bloody body. A thin shard of plastic had gone into her leg, above the knee. Too loose to plug the hole that it had created, the shard vibrated as the cave continued to shake.

Neil covered her with his body as best he could, trying to remember the lessons. *Do I pull it out?*

The choice was taken from him when Samantha groaned, rolling. The shard hit a slab of stone and broke off. Blood gushed from the wound, pushing out the remaining piece.

Neil followed the training he’d received in Angela’s class. He yanked the medical bags from his neck and dumped them out on her chest. He ripped open packages he thought he needed, but when he got to the tourniquet, he wrapped it around Samantha’s thigh, as far up as he could get it over her pants. He knew it needed to be under the clothes to be most effective, but there wasn’t time. Blood was pouring from her leg.

Neil grabbed his lighter. He had to cauterize the wound. There was no time to sew it–not with his big stitches and clumsy hands. *What do I use?!* *Uh… Uh…*

The flashlight bobbed…

Neil grabbed it off his belt, unscrewing the cap. Plunged into darkness, he managed to keep a hold of the cap and the lighter.

Hands shaking, Neil heated the cap, willing it to glow faster. He’d witnessed this at the rest stop with Angela and prayed he would never need to do it. His nightmare had become a reality.

Neil ran his sleeve over the gaping wound that cleared for a brief instant and then began to refill with Samantha’s life. He slammed the cap over the injury, trying to get it all in one shot.

Blood ran from the edges, but the center of the cap held the flow. Neil hoped he’d gotten it hot enough.

Samantha groaned, but didn’t respond otherwise.

Neil lifted the cap, horrified at burnt skin and the gap still there. Blood ran over her leg.

*Not hot enough!*

Neil reheated the warm cap, praying again. He forced himself to wait until the cap was glowing this time, then he centered it over the flowing wound. He swiped and pressed.

Samantha screamed, rising, but Neil pushed her down with his other hand, dropping the lighter.

He leaned down so he could grope for his lamp button, fighting the need to shout for help when he knew there was nothing anyone could do. They were all in desperate situations right now.

Neil lifted the cap… Blackened skin, but no fresh blood. *Now do it again*. *Then check the other side.*

He did it with a twisting stomach, trying to get the entire wound again before he rolled her over. In his mind, her odds of survival went down with every second. He had to get blood back into her, but the medical bags didn’t have that. Blood needed to be packed on ice.

Neil considered where that refrigerator might be as he reheated the cap to do the rear of her leg. The plastic shard had pierced a smaller hole here, but he wasn’t able to sew it up for the same reasons as the front. He needed to get the bleeding stopped now. Neil held Sam down and cauterized the back of the thigh he had lovingly kissed the night before.

**2**

Cody jumped as a man carrying a body descended from the ledge right above him and Debra. They recognized Neil and Samantha in relief and then concern. Theo and Morgan hadn’t returned from helping the screaming woman, but Cody had told Debra the noise stopped, so she assumed they would be back soon.

Debra helped Neil settle Samantha next to Marc, but she also kept track of Cody, tugging on his arm when he would have gone toward the ladder. She gestured.

Neil, who had been learning sign language, frowned. “She’s right, boy. You don’t need to see her like that. Stay here and protect your dad.”

Given a job, Cody stumbled over to Marc’s body, where Angela was kneeling and muttering.

Neil hoped she was healing Marc. They needed him and Angela right now. If he died, they would lose them both, but more than that, once Angela was finished with Marc, she could help Samantha.

“He has a concussion.” Angela guided Cody onto Marc’s chest. “Can you keep him warm while we help? Debra will be here with you, and others will come.”

Cody was sad. He was also picking up everyone’s pain. “You’ll come back?”

Angela placed a soft kiss to the boy’s forehead. “Yes. So will your dad. He just needs to sleep for a while.”

Cody laid on Marc’s chest, comforted by his even breathing.

Angela turned to Neil. “I can’t heal yet. You have to find blood for her. Others need it too.” She scanned the area.

Neil pointed his lamp toward the rubble to help her.

“That’s the lab shelf where we kept medications.” Angela eased around the crevice and went to the spot. “We need everything in it.”

“Antibiotics?”

“Yes.” Angela pointed toward a dark corner. “Over there, maybe. We kept it in the rear of the room, so it might not have fallen at all.”

Neil also went to the rubble pile, studying. “I can’t tell if this came from bags or…you know, but there’s blood on this end.”

Angela joined him, collecting things as she came. The gun, she shoved into her belt. The dented flashlight, she switched on, but the blood was too close to the ladder to be able to determine the difference under these limited conditions.

“What if it’s gone?” Neil’s expression was desperate.

“We’ll get the doctor down here.” Angela headed for the ladder. “He might know her blood type.”

Given hope, Neil flew up the ladder ahead of her. He understood time wasn’t on Sam’s side. As soon as he’d released the tourniquet, the cauterized wound had bulged, telling him there was an internal problem. She needed real help.

Angela inched up the ladder, reaching out to those she could connect with through the panic and agony. Adrian and a few others were trying to get the fire under control, but they needed more hands. *Get to the mess*. *We need help at the mess.*

Angela’s call was a comfort to some of her terrified people, but for those in bad situations, it said they would have to help themselves until she could get to them. A fire had priority.

Angela used her shirt to cover her mouth as she reached the next level. The smoke was thicker up here. She realized the light above her was going dim and celebrated it even as she mourned the illumination. Their few flashlights weren’t going to hold them for long. They needed power, but opening the vent had to come first.

Angela found Ozzie and Logan coming up the ladder behind her, both covered in dirt and tacky stains. “Kenn is going to the top level. Go help in the mess.”

Both men went without protest. They’d been in the wash area when it collapsed. The carnage from that moment was replaying in their shaken minds. There wasn’t space for other concerns yet.

“There’s Kyle!” Ozzie hurried to help Jennifer over the last few feet of the gap between the tunnel and the medical bay.

Kyle let go gratefully, arms aching from the tight grip he’d kept while they walked the tightrope.

Kyle joined Angela at the ladder to the next level, aware of Jennifer checking their quiet daughter for injuries.

“She’s okay.” Jennifer leaned her cheek against the baby. “Thank you! Thank you!”

Angela understood the emotion. She started climbing again while Kyle tried to convince the teenager to go to the bottom level and wait for them. Angela doubted Jenny would, but it was the safest place for her and the baby right now. The smoke up here was thick enough to make her eyes water.

Angela felt impatient males on the ladder behind her and tried to hurry, but her body had gotten lazy during her time off. *Mistake.* Angelahefted herself onto the next level. She rolled to the side to clear room for the men who were in much better shape.

Ozzie helped her stand. “You okay?”

She nodded, making the cave walls spin. “Keep going.”

The men hurried up the ladder, listening for survivors but not hearing many. The third level residence corridor was destroyed; they hurried into the mess. It was the only reachable area where the majority of their people could be.

Ozzie stopped in shock, as did those behind him. The gaping hole in the center of the mess stunned them. Camp members were trapped behind it, except they weren’t moving. Body after body lay sprawled across the floor, including kids and pregnant women. In the rear of the mess, flames from the kitchen were spreading out through the door. A group of men was trying to combat the fire with powdered goods and tablecloths.

Ozzie turned toward the tunnel, grabbing Logan’s arm. “Help me!”

“Do what? We have to get them out of there!”

“We are.” Ozzie hurried into the adjacent corridor. “There! That might be strong enough to hold.”

The two men uncovered the wide sheet of jagged metal and dragged it into the mess to put over the smallest corner of the gap.

**3**

Across the mess gap, Adrian saw more people finally joining the fire fight and paused to evaluate. He and the others had jumped the corner and managed to push the fire back into the kitchen, but it wasn’t going to hold. The cooking oil and gas from the stoves was feeding the fire that had spread across the ceiling by wires. Melting plastic and popping cans filled the air with dangerous shrapnel.

Ozzie and Logan were dragging unconscious people out of the mess, but there wasn’t room for more than ten in the passage. As the two men brought bodies out, more men and women came up the ladder. Forced to use them like ants, Ozzie began loading bodies onto shoulders to be taken to the bottom. It was slow labor.

“We can’t get up there without digging.” Kenn dropped down from the broken ladder that led to the top level. “All the other ladders are gone and most of the ceiling caved-in. It’s blocking our exit. Lots of smoke. We can’t get up there without breathing equipment.” Kenn grabbed a heavy camp member, aware that most of the men around him wouldn’t be able to carry that one. “Let’s get these people below. Look for fire extinguishers on your way. We had ten to fifteen per level. They have to be here somewhere.”

“I’ve got one.” Shawn came from the level below them. Adrian had been next to him a few minutes ago while they tossed salt–all they could locate–onto the fire, but he hadn’t noticed when the man left. “There’s five more right below us.” Shawn sucked in smoky air, lungs hurting. “I need help carrying them up.”

Eagles hurried to collect the extinguishers, aware of the time running out for those who were still in the mess but even more, they were aware of their own limits. The constant climbing and smoke was taking its toll. So was the silence. Grief was sneaking in now, telling them they’d lost friends and family this time.

“I found the blood!” Neil’s shout echoed upward. “Working on getting the doctor.”

Angela grunted in answer, pulling herself to the top level. She’d gone right by the wonderful men laboring on the mess level without being noticed. It wouldn’t be long before the smoke overwhelmed her workers. The loudest noise now was coughing.

Angela breathed through her shirt and began working on the pile of rubble blocking off the ramp entrance to the corridor that led to the top. The ladders were gone from the other entrance and the hole was filled with large debris. She’d chosen to try digging out their backup tunnel, hoping its narrowness and odd shape would have kept it intact. Angela used her witch to help her with the heaviest pieces; she hadn’t gotten very far when Adrian joined her.

Adrian pulled the larger rubble aside, not trying to speak. The men below were evacuating their camp members from the mess as fast as they could, but without the vents being opened and the fire being out, they were all going to die down here.

Angela heaved a heavy chunk of stone to the right by rocking it.

Adrian saw a gap and helped her.

“That’s good!” She ducked into the darkness.

Adrian followed, wincing at the heat blast as warm air found the newest vent and rushed through.

Angela stood up as soon as she saw the floor was whole, fighting the need to run. There were rocks and dirt on the ground, along with big ants she stepped over and on without reacting to their squeals of betrayed misery. She had her own colony to save.

Adrian grabbed her arm when she would have stepped into the smoke-filled corridor that led up a ramp to the top floor. He put her behind him and then advanced while shining his light. He found bodies sprawled across the rocky floor.

Angela hurried to check them, but she already knew she was too late to save those who had been trapped up here. The smoke had found every nook and cranny and smothered them while they waited for rescue.

“Come on!” Adrian helped her up, leading them through the smoke and horror to the large control panel Theo and Ozzie had welded to the entrance wall of the cave. He shined his light. Something from outside had almost pierced their steel door. *Not getting out that way.* He ripped the panel open.

Angela shined her light while Adrian flipped switches. Once the buttons were set correctly, he had to hand crank the wheel.

Angela winced as metal clinched, grinding, and then it popped like normal and a huge rush of cool air came at them. Behind it was a thick cloud of smoke that was impossible to view through or keep from breathing in.

Adrian staggered toward the washrooms, dragging Angela with him as the smoke disturbed the debris and sent fresh clouds of smoky grit over them. Angela and Adrian cowered in a far corner of the chamber and waited for it to settle or for their lungs to shut down. There was no way to know which one would come first.

Adrian groped for her hand, blind from the smoke. He tugged her into his arms and brought up his shield, wishing he’d thought of it sooner. It would tire him, but they would be protected from the worst of the smoke racing to the top of their den.

Now that there was time, Angela put her head on his bad shoulder and sobbed.

Adrian didn’t know which one hurt him more–the shoulder or her tears.

**4**

“They are burning!” Mikel’s scream echoed over his devastated campsite. He keyed his mike in ecstasy. “You have to come out now! We will have the witch!”

In the mountain, the few radios that had been on when the earthquake hit blared with Mikel’s insanity, causing ripples of anger throughout the cave.

Kenn was glad. With the smoke clearing, they were able to see how badly they’d been hit. To know that Mikel had been spared brought rage forward and gave Kenn the strength to keep working on the fire, as it did with the others who had been spared. If they survived this, Mikel was still out there planning their demise. Instead of causing panic, the determination to end the threat hardened in their hearts. Mikel was on borrowed time. He just didn’t recognize it yet.

Kenn ducked behind the ladder and into the medical bay entrance. Neil had told Kenn that Tonya was still trapped. When he’d heard she was okay, Kenn had kept working on the fire. He still didn’t have time to spare, but he was checking on her anyway.

Tonya grinned at the face peering across the gap. “Thought we’d be seeing you soon.”

Kenn scanned the sleeping cat in her lap and the narrow ledge of stone where Tonya was sitting cross-legged. Without equipment or stacking debris up, he couldn’t get to her yet.

Tonya already knew. She’d been thinking about ways to get herself down, but the drop into the darkness had stopped her. She didn’t know what was down there, but she had heard Neil tell the doctor that Jeremy jumped into a gap after Samantha and died. After that, Tonya had chosen not to jump.

Kenn scanned again, trying to come up with something. He estimated their ladders would reach it, but they were in use now–both of them. The others had been destroyed or were buried.

“I’ll be fine.” Tonya flashed another grin. “Time to go be a hero.”

Kenn snorted and went back to helping, but his mind stayed on Tonya. She had become the perfect mate when he wasn’t searching for one and she was carrying his child. *I might have to marry her.*

# Chapter Three

**Burning**

A close up of a flag

Description automatically generated

**1**

**G**unshots rang out. It scared Cody, who had fallen asleep. He jerked upright to find Debra helping Theo and Morgan bring down a woman whose name he didn’t know. She was splattered with blood.

“I can’t believe he’s gone!” Nancy hung onto Morgan’s arm as he guided her over the rubble. “I tried to help him…” She broke down sobbing.

Morgan scooped her up, carrying the former sailor the last twenty feet. He put Nancy next to Samantha, hoping she might be able to help with their wounded once she calmed down.

“Ants.” Theo signed it to Debra. “They killed Shane.”

*How?* Debra didn’t understand. *They’re little.*

“Strength.” Theo wiped away sweat. “He was knocked out. They took him right from her arms.”

Debra started crying.

Cody came to her and wrapped his tiny arms around her hips. “Shh…”

Debra held onto the boy, taking comfort where she could get it.

Cody instinctively led her over to Nancy.

The two women fell into each other’s arms, crying.

Cody retreated, glancing at Theo. Crying women made him nervous.

“Good job.” Theo patted Cody’s shoulder. “Can you watch them?”

Cody nodded. He returned to his place on Marc’s chest, but he shifted so he could view the upset women.

Theo and Morgan felt the draft in the tunnel switch, glancing upward. The light from the fire was dim now, but fresh showers of dirt and dust were falling over everything.

“Backdraft?” Morgan questioned as the wind increased, knocking more debris over and down.

“No.” Theo shielded his face from the flying dust. “We set it up so that couldn’t happen.”

The two men fought the wind to get to the ladder, where Theo began the dangerous climb with his casted leg. Morgan followed, ready to grab the man if he started to fall. There was a lot of work waiting for them all and behind that, grief and anger that would have to have an outlet. First, they had to get out of this cursed mountain.

**2**

“She’s over here. I cauterized it. I didn’t know what else to do!”

Jimmy ignored Neil’s babbling, grunting at popping joints as he knelt by Samantha. The doctor was filthy and his hands were shaking, but he was calmer than some of his students who were crying and holding each other.

“It’s bad.” The doctor took packages from the kit by Samantha’s feet. “Find me a bag of A+.”

Neil found that type in relief. The carry kits weren’t organized anymore, but the bags were labeled and none of them had been punctured. In fact, the refrigerator had stayed intact when it fell, even keeping the glass in the door, though it had cracked. The shelf next to it, which had held the stronger medications, was absent and presumed destroyed.

“It’s coming out again!” someone yelled from an upper level. “Get more extinguishers!”

Neil was torn, but it was clear what his duty was. He left Samantha in the doctor’s hands and went up to help. That fire had to be put out. They had planned not to vent any smoke until the source was contained, but this situation was more than any of them had counted on when they’d implemented safety features for the cave.

Neil stopped at the next level. Unable to reach the exact place where they’d stored their fire equipment, he’d chosen to dig through the rubble below that gaping hole. They’d placed half a dozen extinguishers on each level, but they’d also stocked three dozen as replacements.

Kenn spotted Neil. “Over here!”

Neil helped Kenn and Morgan clear the rubble from the shelf and pull it over. Anchored to the wall, a huge chunk of broken stone shifted with it, sending new groans and dust through the cave.

“There they are!” Neil and the others grabbed as many of the red bottles as they could carry and took them to the rope.

Kenn went half way up. “I’m ready. Toss it easy.”

One hand holding on and one hand catching, he was only able to do it twice before he felt the rope slipping through his raw fingers. He pulled himself up as Simon and Neil tied the rest of the bottles to their waist to bring them up. The extinguishers were heavy and awkward, jerking Neil around as he climbed and they swung.

Kenn tried to control the rope so Neil could reach the floor. The hard labor made both men grunt and sweat in the smoky dimness.

“I found a bag.” Morgan stuffed the rest of the red bottles into it. He slung it over his shoulder and joined Neil and Kenn at the top.

Now armed with a dozen canisters, the trio hurried to the mess, dodging Eagles and camp members carrying down injured and the dead.

In the kitchen, Ozzie and the others switched out with the main crew, happy to go get a breath of air that had oxygen in it. More knowledgeable about fires, Ozzie and his team had been able to beat the flames back into a corner of the cooking area where most of the oil and gas for the stove had been stored. Covered in soot and burns, the men retreated as the fresh help came in with the extinguishers and began firing.

In the mess, workers continued to drag bodies into the passage, where they were either stacked for a crew or taken below to the doctor. Few of them responded to any of the first aid attempts by their loved ones. Bodies began to pile up; wails of grief echoed in small waves as new victims were found.

**3**

Shawn set Missy down next to the doctor, but he didn’t insist the man stop to help her. The doctor was wrists-deep in Samantha’s leg, trying to sew something, Shawn assumed by the instruments. He waited as patiently as he could, wincing at the blood. Samantha didn’t react. Shawn hoped she was just drugged for the impromptu surgery.

Shawn smoothed Missy’s hair from her face, glad to see her chest rising in steady breaths. He’d done CPR on her, but he was terrified it wouldn’t hold.

The doctor felt the tension, but Samantha’s leg was torn up. He was trying to stitch it together with a bouncing flashlight as his guide.

“More gauze!” he snapped when one of the students would have gotten up to avoid the pooling blood on the filthy floor.

Face green, the student let blood gather around his knee. He didn’t mind viewing it or causing it, but Teddy didn’t like to feel it. After this, he would probably ask to be put into a different job.

The rest of the medical trainees were caring for the wounds that they could or watching the operation with grimaces and awe.

Nearby, Debra and Cody stayed away from the gruesome sight. Under Cody, Marc hadn’t woken.

“Hey! He’s up!”

Some people looked, but few of them cared except for the little girl sitting with the other kids that had been brought down from the mess.

“Billy!” Leeann ran over the debris. “Are you okay?”

Billy squinted through the dimness at the dirty little girl, skull pounding. “I think so. What happened?” He glanced around, frowning at the strangers in lamps and filthy clothes. “Where am I? What’s going on?”

“Earthquake.” Leeann motioned toward the rest of the cave. “We’re in the bottom level with the other survivors.”

“Okay.” Billy blinked, trying to clear cobwebs while dealing with a headache. “Why am in a cave? How did I get here?”

Drawn by the questions, a few of the students came his way with one of the medical bags Neil had brought down with Samantha.

“What’s your name?” Daphne held up a light in front of Billy’s blackened eyes. She was still shaking from almost dying. If not for Morgan grabbing her, she wouldn’t be here right now.

“I’m…uh. Damn. I just…” Billy stared around in panic. “I don’t know! I don’t know my name! Who am I?”

Leeann took his hand, sending calming warmth over his skin. “Shh… It’s okay.” *I’ve got you.*

Billy snatched his hand away. “I heard you in my head! Freak!”

That brought cold silence from everyone who heard it. Both gifted and not gifted glared at the man. It had been months since anyone reacted that way to the descendants in Safe Haven. Even the newest refugees they’d let in had known.

Billy stared in panic. “All freaks!” He scrambled to his feet, hands going to his guns without realizing it. “I want out of here!”

“We all do now.”

Marc’s mutter brought a wave of relief. He had come up from a place of thick sleep that lingered as he scanned his surroundings. “Stand down. We’re all scared right now.”

Billy was unable to refuse the command. He settled onto his haunches under the ledge, staring around at everything and everyone as if he’d never seen them before.

Marc didn’t rush as he sat up. His throat was dry and his ribs hurt. “Someone give me an update.”

When no one spoke, Marc realized none of his men were down here except for Billy. Marc stood up, bracing against the rough, dusty wall. “Where is everyone?”

Debra gestured at Cody, who had begun inching toward his mother’s body again.

“Angie went to open the vent.” Cody squinted upward through the smoke and dust. “The others are fighting the fire or helping.”

Hoping they had it covered up there, Marc swept what he could see of the survivors, trying to recover enough to think. What did they need the most?

*Water.* He stumbled toward the rear chamber where they had kept the heavier tanks. They’d had to build them in place and fill them with hoses.

Marc staggered over the debris where he and Adrian had been buried. *Memorize that scene. I know something important happened there, but I can’t remember it yet.*

Marc’s demon sketched the area in detail.

“Go with him!” Theo glared at Billy. “You don’t need your memory to understand we all need help here, right?”

Billy accepted that and followed the Colt-wearing stranger out of the dim illumination from the lamps of the doctor and students. Billy noticed that he and the man both had the same style clothing and weapons. *Are we in the army?*

“Over here.” Marc’s mind flickered unpleasantly. “We have to clear some of this debris, but we got lucky. The big tank didn’t bust.”

Billy waded through the ankle deep water in the impression, fumbling for a safe hold in the mess of stone and plastic debris. It was hard to see or walk.

As Marc took hold of a large rock and hefted it aside, it occurred to him that he wasn’t in pain despite being buried. *Shouldn’t I still be knocked out?* *Or dead?*

“Man, that’s heavy!” Billy groaned as they shifted a large layer of outcropping from in front of the tank by the nozzles. Those shiny objects were gone now, knocked off in the quake.

“Damn!” Marc spent a moment planning it and settled on a high puncture. There was too much debris on the tank. He was afraid to try clearing it further for fear of collapsing what remained of the floor above. Much like he had while escorting Angela to Safe Haven, Marc tapped the tank. This time, the water level was lower; none of the precious liquid escaped.

Billy frowned at the smell. “Is this clean?”

“No. It’s been filtered, but it needs boiling or bleach.”

Billy scanned the debris. “Any chance you kept bleach down here?”

“Too dangerous to leave chemicals out. It’s in two storage rooms. One is on the top level. The other is on the same floor as the mess, so the cook had easy access for cleaning.”

“Sounds like a good plan until this happens.” Billy was fighting the need to beg the stranger for details about his life. The words he was using didn’t make sense when Billy was trying to remember his own name.

“It’s Billy.” Marc began searching for containers. “You’re a well-liked member of my army. Everything else has to wait, okay?”

Billy nodded, then clasped his temples. “That stings!”

“Tell me about it.” Marc sympathized, able to recall the exact sensations of being knocked out. *Someone healed me.* *Not Angie. She’s too weak, and not Adrian because he wants me dead. Charlie?* The teenager was the only other healer in Safe Haven right now… Wasn’t he?

“Who was that girl?” Billy frowned again. “I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“Leeann.” Using the same screwdriver he’d tapped it with, Marc ripped the hole downward until a small stream of water began to run out. He set a container under it. “Your future wife, she believes. She’s had a thing for you for a while.”

“That kid?” Billy was revolted. He didn’t know who he was, but he knew he didn’t mess with little kids.

Marc didn’t answer.

Billy frowned again. “I encouraged it?”

“Not that I know of or you’d be dead already.”

Billy wasn’t offended at the warning. “Good. That’s sick!”

Marc again held quiet, letting Billy figure things out for himself. Marc had heard that loss of memory was common after being hit on the head, but Marc had never had that problem himself and he’d been hit more times than any man should be if he cared about his health.

“What’s going on?” Billy was now worrying over something he didn’t know if he’d done.

“Listen, we’re busy right now.” Marc switched containers and held out the one that was almost full. “You aren’t bleeding or dying, but a lot of people we both call friends are. Can we work now and talk later?”

“Yeah. Sorry, man. It’s just hard to wake up and not know who…” Billy took the dirty water and trudged out.

“Tell them it isn’t clean!” Marc began trying to locate the chemicals they’d stored down here. The water purification tablets had been locked in a small metal case. Marc had the key in his pocket. It was poking his hip.

Noises echoed from the upper levels, telling him the effort was increasing up there. He hated it that Angie was out of his sight, but she was glowing on his mental grid and that would have to be enough. The real leader was back in charge, whether she wanted to be or not.

**4**

Jennifer reached the bottom floor and held the rope as Kyle came down with Autumn wrapped against his body in both their jackets. The baby held still, like her mom told her to. They’d been lucky to be wearing jackets when the quake hit, but the parents would have used their shirts or even pants if it had been all they had to work with.

Autumn wasn’t scared, but she was impatient. *Hurry, Daddy.*

Kyle didn’t let her impatience rush him. The clothes were far from a real sling. The knots could slip at any time and then Jennifer would have to try to catch the child. Neither of them wanted that.

Kyle inched down, noting a new ladder as an important chore to accomplish as soon as he could. A row of people needed the doctor, but they couldn’t get down there because of their injuries.

Kyle reached the ground and shifted so Jennifer could take the baby from the slipping clothes before she fell.

Jennifer cuddled her squirming daughter close, trying to comfort.

*Now, go. Crying!*

Jennifer frowned, confused. “Who’s crying?”

*Babies!*

Jennifer scanned their injured and only found one person Autumn could be talking about. “You mean Samantha?”

*Yes!*

Jennifer went to the woman who was being worked on by a sweaty, growling doctor covered to his elbows in bright blood.

*Down!*

Jennifer sat down by Samantha; almost immediately, she could hear the faint crying of an infant.

*Two*, she realized. Samantha’s twins were upset. Autumn had been able to hear them before she could.

Autumn cooed sadly, reaching out to her fellow children.

The twins stopped crying and cooed in return.

Entranced by the communication, Jennifer took Samantha’s hand and tried to send good vibes while the doctor worked. It didn’t look good for the weather tracker. She was pale in the dimming lamps.

“We need more hands!”

The shout came from above them.

Jennifer handed the baby to Debra. “I have to go help.”

Debra patted her wrist and then patted the baby, smiling.

Jennifer hated to leave her child with someone she barely knew. With no other choice, she went up the ladder.

Debra settled the baby by Samantha’s shoulder, where she was out of the way and protected by the ledge. Debra sat next to them, also keeping track of Cody. He was staring at where Marc had gone.

Billy came from that room, holding up a canister. “Water’s here! Clean it first.” He set it by the line of wounded and went back toward the dim water room. There was too much blood out here for him. He was going back to the other guy who put off vibes of being dependable.

Billy entered the damp darkness, not minding the water as much as the stares. Everyone out there was too hurt to be useful or seemed flaky.

“They’re shaken up.” Marc paused and then gestured. “Except for the doctor. He’s always been flaky.”

Billy caught it this time, realizing Marc had read his mind. “You’re a freak too!”

“Yep. And if you call any of us that again, William, I’m going to knock you back out.”

“But it’s... You’re...”

Marc shoved another container into Billy’s arms, sloshing water onto both their arms. “Shut up for a while, will you?”

Frowning, Billy did as he was told.

Marc sighed in relief, not wanting to resent Billy for his lack of memory. It might even be better that he didn’t remember right now. Some of their members were too dazed by the losses to help.

“Grab that shelf!”

A huge crash echoed from above him, making Marc want to be up there with Angie and Charlie… *Charlie.* *I don’t have him on my grid.*

# Chapter Four

**Issues**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“Y**our father calls loudly.” Natoli and his braves were following the boy down a winding passage. When they’d reached the bottom of the ledge, a gap had led them to a corridor that appeared undamaged. They’d been tracking it for almost an hour.

“Give me a minute.” Charlie concentrated. “We’ve got another problem.”

Natoli and his men went into alert mode, drawing weapons.

Tracy stayed close to Charlie, hoping he was wrong. *Isn’t an earthquake enough?*

The tunnel was lightening as they walked, telling them they were near the outside and that their defenses had been breached. The only question was if it was from the quake or something else. Not giving themselves away with noise, the small, cold group was able to hear the clink of tools and the low murmur of voices.

Charlie signaled everyone backward. “Pick a curve and we’ll take them out.”

Natoli gestured to his warriors as they retreated ahead of the men coming into the corridor. He assumed Charlie hadn’t answered Marc because it might give them away, which meant this group could have their own special person. Natoli stayed close to Charlie, determined to keep his vow and prevent the evil men from getting into Safe Haven. The survivors in there wouldn’t last against an invasion right now. The blow they’d been hit with was too harsh.

“I feel you, boy!” a voice growled in delight. “Come out or you’ll be sorry.”

Charlie flipped the safety off his gun. Unable to communicate in any other way, the teenager struggled to remember the hand codes.

Natoli and his men were also just learning them, but Tracy recognized the message. She motioned the warriors to get down.

Charlie tried to wait until a large group of the Mexicans were in the tunnel, hoping to get a chunk of their fighters, but the steps came forward without the noise of a group.

“I smell you, runt!” The man’s taunt rang through the corridor. “I’m gonna drain your girlfriend!”

Tracy felt the terror the man was sending, but after the earthquake, she hadn’t calmed down enough to be scared of anything else. She tapped Charlie and pointed to her belt, where three grenades were cushioned in pouches.

Charlie grinned. He took the first one and tugged on the pin.

Tracy led the braves up the passage in a hurry, praying Charlie would be okay. She and Natoli had to get back camp and tell Marc their den had been breached. If Charlie’s aim was good, they could also tell him the hole was plugged. If he missed, she had two more tries on her belt.

Charlie rolled the grenade, skipping it along the wall so it wouldn’t be easy to catch or kick away. As soon as he let go of it, he grabbed his gun and fired in a sweeping pattern, hoping to hit the descendant as he ran away from the explosion.

The grenade blew in a thudding bang that echoed through the narrow cavern. The ceiling collapsed, sealing the exit, but no one came through the dust toward him.

Charlie stood up, coughing. *Did I get them?*

*Not a chance, kid.* *Look up.*

Charlie barely felt the boot to his face, too shocked to find a small man wearing black clinging to the ceiling above him. The boy didn’t understand how the descendant had gotten up there.

Knocked off his feet, Charlie lost the grip on his weapon. It slid down the tunnel, toward the pile of rubble and the cloud of dust that was coming their way.

Charlie ducked, blood dripping from the injury on his cheek, but the man dropping from the ceiling didn’t notice the danger in time. The traitor was hit full force in his uncovered face.

Charlie wanted to stay down, but the killer letting out harsh coughs was distracted. That made it a perfect time.

The teenager leapt up and tackled the man, also breathing in the dust as they struggled.

Power flew through the corridor. Both males tried to hit the other with their gifts and their fists. It was chaos for Charlie, who only had the basics of rookie training. There wasn’t time to replay the lessons or to plan. He reacted as violently as he knew how, instinctively mirroring his father.

The descendant swung them around, slinging Charlie off his neck.

The teenager shoved off the wall and slammed into the man with his knife. It sank deep into flesh, shocking Charlie with the sensation. As the dust cloud began to dissipate, they stared at each other in shock–one scarring, one dying.

Shifting rocks clunking down the rubble pile got through to Charlie. He yanked the blade loose and took off up the corridor.

Behind him, the descendant dropped to the stone floor with a heavy thud, bleeding out. He hadn’t been able to hit the kid with his power. It was as if the boy had been wearing a shield even though it had to be down because they’d been touching. Confused, the descendant clutched his wound and closed his eyes.

**2**

People were trapped in corners and on small, narrow ledges throughout Safe Haven. The smoke was being pulled out, allowing for deeper breaths and more coughing as everyone tried to clear their lungs. Lights bobbed continuously, glancing off rocky outcroppings covered in debris that was barely identifiable. Muted voices called out to each other in comfort and grief as dozens of people went up and down the ropes and ladders to take supplies and wounded to the bottom floor.

When the first gunshot rang out from a distant tunnel, all movement paused.

“That’s not good.” Adrian took the lead. He and Angela had come from the top level, horrified that there had been no survivors up there, but glad they had gotten the smoke venting.

Angela tried to hurry, but the debris in their way prevented it. She settled for letting Adrian go first to clear the path while she concentrated on the new noises echoing through the cave system. It sounded as if there had been another collapse, but she couldn’t tell where.

*Angie! Do you have Charlie?* Marc blared in her mind.

*No. I’m searching too.*

Marc waited impatiently, working on the water. He could hear the murmurs of the survivors, and faint cries from the wounded, but underneath there was a heavy hum he hadn’t identified yet.

“Hey, can we help with anything?” Brittani and Gus, with the rest of their group, joined Marc in the water area. “We aren’t sure what to do.”

Marc pointed toward the containers he had filled. “Take those out, but let everyone know it has to be cleaned first. I’m hunting for the purification tablets.”

Brittani motioned to her family. “Let’s dig around and see if we can locate it. What do they look like?”

While Marc described the box the tablets were in, Gus took the water containers out to the line of wounded. The row waiting to be treated had grown steadily over the last half hour. Now that the fire was out, serious injuries had to be handled, but the doctor was still working on Samantha. The rest of the students were helping the few that they knew how to, but this was all new to them and everyone was in shock. Not much was getting done.

Gus slid aside as more bodies came down the ladder, recognizing Li and his wife. Both of them were alive, but they had been burned. Gus couldn’t tell how badly and he didn’t want to. He’d already seen people fall to their deaths. He didn’t need to view the effects of fire too. Gus spun on his heel and rejoined Marc in the water area.

“This is a little bit of what it’s like to be an Eagle.” Marc gestured toward the wounded. “If you can’t handle the sight of burns, you’re better off just being a camp member.”

Gus wanted to argue that he was made of tougher stuff than that, but the shock of watching friends die was making him doubt his own strength in that area.

Brittani, on the other hand, felt as if she should be doing more. She went out to their wounded to see if she could assist any of them.

Marc knew what Gus was feeling. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, when your woman is stronger than you in some ways. In fact, it can come in handy.”

Gus was subdued. “She’s always been like that. I wanted to be an Eagle to prove to her that I was strong too, but after seeing everything that goes on here, I’m not sure I can hang.”

Marc shrugged, filling a new container. “You’re not viewing everybody in their best moments, you know. Maybe you should hang on before you make a final choice. It’s not always like this. There used to be a time when it was almost fun.”

Gus found that hard to believe while they were surrounded by all the death and misery.

Marc waved a hand toward the jug. “The rest of these go to the upper levels. Don’t forget to tell everyone the water is dirty. We can’t handle an outbreak.”

Gus took the containers out without asking how he was supposed to get them there. Brittani had already taught them to make use of whatever they could since the war came. They’d done pretty well on their own. They hadn’t been as organized as Safe Haven, but there hadn’t been as many people in their group either. Now that everything had been destroyed, they were stuck using archaic methods to get things done.

Marc continued to call for Charlie as he labored, wishing he could go search for the boy, but if they didn’t have water soon, they would have even more problems.

The gauge on the water tank was broken thanks to the falling debris, but Marc estimated there was half a tank remaining. Based on their previous population, that amount would have held them a week. In these conditions, that would be cut in half and they would lose some of it while they cleaned it. If they didn’t find the purification tablets, they would have to boil. Marc began kicking around in the debris with Gus’s brothers, determined to locate them. With boiling, they might lose 1/3 of the water they had and that would end up costing lives.

*Do you have him yet?* Marc demanded of his demon.

*Yes, he lives. There was a breach.*

*Where?*

*Second floor, rear passage. Half a mile out. The boy sealed it with a grenade, but the enemy is already digging through the debris.*

Marc went to the rope and shimmied up to the second floor. Shining his light, he determined there was no way to reach the other chambers from this entrance.

Neil appeared, coming down from the mess where the fire was finally out. “Kenn and I left ropes hanging from...” Neil paused, heart hurting. “Where Sam and Jeremy fell through.” Losing control, he strode to the ladder so he could check on Sam.

Marc followed him down.

As they reached the bottom floor, Neil pointed to where he had brought Samantha down. “It’s rough over there. You might not be able to get back up that way without help or stacking.”

Marc disappeared into the darkness, connecting to Angie. *We’re about to have company.*

**3**

Angela and Adrian exchanged worried glances as Marc’s message came through. If the Mexicans had breached a tunnel, they were about to be attacked and they weren’t ready for it. Most of the camp didn’t even have their guns right now.

Adrian signaled toward the bottom levels “That’s where you should be.”

Angela ignored him. “We need to bridge this gap. Get Theo up here, and Ozzie. As soon as we can get across, we’ll set up a welcoming area.”

Adrian did as he was told, uncertain how the feat would be accomplished, but more than willing to let her run things while he was her right hand. It was more than he could have hoped for before the earthquake.

Angela was aware of his sleazy contemplations, but she didn’t have time to scold him. Alone for a minute, she took the ladder down to what remained of the second level, just missing Marc and Neil. Instead of taking the next ladder, Angela went around it and over to the gap where Jennifer and Kyle had come across. The rope they had used was still tied; Angela grasped it tightly.

She went across the ledge without anybody noticing, and entered the medical bay. The doctor and the students had also come across the ledge, so Angela was assuming it was sturdy enough to hold her and the other person waiting here for rescue. She didn’t know why Neil hadn’t helped Tonya, but she understood overlooking someone in a moment when a loved one was injured. Maybe Neil hadn’t known Tonya was trapped in the lab behind the medical bay.

She figured out that wasn’t the case as she entered the bay and saw most of the floor was gone. “How did he get them out of the showers?” She was a little impressed at the ingenuity.

“He made them jump.”

Angela peered through the doorway to the lab and was able to see Tonya in the far corner. The pale redhead was perched precariously on a far ledge with the ugly cat in her lap.

Angela swept the gap between the door and the showers. “Jump to where?

“Just kidding. There was a board across it. As they were coming through, it fell.” Tonya paled a little more. “We almost lost another one of the students, but Morgan grabbed her hand and pulled her up. It was kind of scary to watch.”

“I bet it was.” Angela scanned the area again. “We’ll find something.”

“What if we put a ladder under from the bottom?” Gus was standing behind her.

Angela gave him a small smile through the smoke. “Can you and your brothers handle that?”

“Sure.” He looked her up and down. “Shouldn’t you be on the first floor with the other injured people?”

“I’m fine. After you help get Tonya out of there, there’s a group trapped in the living area. We haven’t been able to get there yet, but Marc is headed up from the bottom floor. I’d like you guys to help them.”

Gus understood what she wasn’t saying. She wanted him to make sure Marc was okay.

Angela patted his arm gratefully. “Don’t give up on the Eagle idea yet, Gus. You’re more capable than you give yourself credit for.”

“Brittani doesn’t want that.”

“What does Gus want?”

He looked down at her with open fear. “Out of this mountain.”

Angela understood that sentiment. Many people would be experiencing it, thanks to the losses taken here. Their den had become a tomb.

“Mmm…”

A moan near the ground startled them both, coming from under a large debris pile.

Angela and Gus hurried over to dig the person out, both horrified they hadn’t known anyone was right there and needed help. At this point, they weren’t expecting many more survivors. The miracle stories in the news were exactly that–miracles.

Angela and Gus helped the man stand, recognizing Ray underneath the dirt and dust. She gave him a quick pat down and determined he had been knocked out, but not hurt seriously. “Gus has to go to the first level. He’ll drop you off.”

Angela helped settle Ray on Gus’s large back, and then went with them to the ladder, hoping it was sturdy enough to handle the double weight. Most of the bodies from the mess had been cleared now. Almost all the people who had been in there were dead. Those they had been able to resuscitate had been taken to the bottom floor where the doctor would examine them when he had time. The injured were stacking up and lining up, all handling their own issues as best they could. It was calm for the moment, but Angela knew that wasn’t going to remain. Often, the worst part of a crisis came during the aftermath. Fear, anger, greed, and jealousy didn’t go away just because a tragedy struck.

Gus lugged Ray down the ladder.

Alone again, Angela concentrated, trying to determine what was the next most important thing to handle. They had hundreds of bodies to deal with. They needed food, water, medicine, and very soon, they would need light.

Angela frowned. That was going to be a big problem. In the next 48 hours, most of their lamps and flashlights were going to be used up. They wouldn’t be able to clean the water or prepare any of the food they found. They also needed something that wasn’t flame. They might have a gas leak in the kitchen and maybe from other areas as well. Until they got repair crews going, it would be impossible to tell.

If she got the power on, they would have limited light in the area where the wires hadn’t been damaged. Most of the wires would have been destroyed on every level, except for the top. Only the rear areas of that floor were too damaged to access. The ceiling had collapsed over the big and little training chambers and the TV room. The reading cavity was almost pristine, but crowded with bodies. The bathrooms up there were also destroyed, as were the laundry and storage chambers, but the corridors, the weapons compartment, and their power room hadn’t been damaged. They’d lost power because the connections had snapped as the flooring collapsed.

Angela grunted as she leapt up for the rope to the next level, stomach pulling and twisting. She climbed awkwardly, feeling like a rookie again.

As Angela got to the next level, she was met by Jennifer.

“Marc said to keep my ass on the bottom floor or stay with you.”

Angela was glad to have the teenager. “We’re gonna go do some work on the power. Once the smoke finishes clearing, you can bring the baby up. And Cody.”

Jennifer understood Angela was trying to ease her mind about being so far away from Autumn. “Thanks.”

“It’s also for Cody. I like that kid.”

Jennifer stepped over the large debris pile, and scanned the broken ladder to the upper level. There was only one remaining. There would only be one on the level below them now as well, since Gus’s brothers were busy removing it to use for Tonya’s rescue.

Jennifer shined her light toward the living quarters. “There are people over there.”

“Marc’s working on that. We have to get the power on.”

Jennifer followed Angela, neither one of them commenting on the stack of bodies they passed as they climbed the ladder above the mess tunnel. They knew each face. They had laughed and eaten with them just six hours before, and now, they would never hear those people again.

Jennifer didn’t know what Angela planned to do with all of the bodies, but since they had no way to bury them and they couldn’t burn them in here, she suspected they would be dumped into the pits. The rest of the camp wouldn’t be told.

Angela and Jennifer went up to the first level through the same entrance she and Adrian had used when they got the vent open. Jennifer was fine until they hit the rear room. Angela needed to check each of the chambers to determine if the cables on this level were intact; that meant traversing the bodies to reach where the wires had been stapled to the wall.

“Oh, my God.”

Angela didn’t echo Jennifer’s horror but she felt it. There were kids up here, kids that shouldn’t have been.

“Why were they here?” Jennifer scanned the faces with her light. “Why weren’t they in the mess with the other kids?”

Angela made her way through the horror. “We’ve always had roamers. Slaver kids were locked up for so long they couldn’t stand to be in one place. You know that.”

Jennifer did. It explained some of the smaller kids, but not the teenagers who never missed the evening snack together. It was another mystery to add to the list of things she had already come across since Kyle had helped her over the gap. There were bodies that didn’t have injuries from the earthquake and there were bodies nowhere near debris that looked as though they had been bashed in. After they settled down, she would tell Angela about the things she’d found. They had yet another killer in Safe Haven.

Angela caught that, but didn’t respond to it. They’d always had killers in Safe Haven–the good kind and the bad kind. It was sad, but the odds were high on that never changing.

# Chapter Five

**Four More**

A picture containing drawing

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“S**hine that light over here.”

Angela and Jennifer both swung around as steps echoed through the passage behind them. It was a group of men coming to the weapons compartment.

“Take whatever you can carry.” Kenn’s voice echoed. “There are vests up here. Most of us don’t even have our jackets, so get suited up.”

Angela listened in approval as she continued to track the wires.

Jennifer watched the shadows and listened to the grumbling of the mountain around them, wishing she could turn back time.

“Is anyone else up here?”

“I am, with the boss.” Jennifer stepped into the corridor so Kenn could see her. “She’s working on power.”

“That’s good. Marc stacked a way up to the residence level. Some of us are gonna secure the people there and help them get down to the bottom. The rest are going with Marc to make sure the sealed tunnel will hold until we’re ready to handle the Mexicans.”

Angela didn’t contradict the orders, but she was certain the small blast had sealed the passage. If not, they would already be hearing shouts and screams, and fighting of the men coming through. She could feel Charlie’s troubled mind, but that also had to wait. The camp needed power.

Jennifer listened to Kenn talking to someone.

“Stay here. Don’t let anybody through that the boss doesn’t approve.”

“You got it.”

Relaxing now that Kenn had put someone on guard, Jennifer joined Angela in tracking wires.

The women forced their minds away from the bodies of their friends. It felt awful to step over them. Some of these people had been terrified of dying down here; it added insult to injury.

**2**

“Keep going.” Charlie knew his parents were worrying. “My dad’s on the way.”

Charlie and Tracy stayed between the warriors as they hurried toward their damaged camp. Behind them, came the sounds of digging through the rubble.

“Hey! There’s a new tunnel!” Tracy pointed as they ran by.

The group stopped to sweep it with their lights and gifts, hoping it was empty. If there was another breach, it would make it even harder to protect what remained of their camp.

“I see a boot.” Tracy walked into the darkness without considering the danger.

Charlie hurried in front of her. “You don’t have your gun. Stay here.” Charlie shined his light as Natoli took his right.

Tracy slid into the middle of the warriors like Charlie wanted. She was regretting all the time she had spent mourning instead of strengthening her body. The few lessons she’d done with Angela last week had been great. It had cleared her mind and helped heal her heart a little. Now, she wished she had been doing that the entire time.

“It is a boot.” Charlie picked it up. “Looks like... It’s Shane’s!”

Charlie went deeper into the corridor despite not having time to do so, light shining on blood spots and torn clothing. He didn’t know what had happened in here, but the feeling of someone needing help was too strong to ignore.

The cavity dead ended in a pile of stones and dirt. As Charlie approached the blockage to be sure there were no gaps, fresh grit fell over his shoulder. Goosebumps breaking out on his arms, the boy shined the light upward in horror.

Ants were on the ceiling. They were carrying something bloody that appeared to be human.

Charlie wasn’t sure about firing. He could tell the person was alive, but with those injuries, he doubted it would be for much longer.

Natoli rushed forward and began stabbing the ants with his staff.

Squealing as they fell, the ants tried to fight by clawing and biting feet that stomped on them.

Tracy and Charlie stayed back as Natoli and his warriors killed the ants. During the battle, the body fell, but neither of them hurried over to it. They didn’t want to get in the way.

As the last ant was knocked from the ceiling, the others scurried off, squealing in hurt rage.

The rescuers all gathered around the body.

Shane opened his eyes, unable able to see. “Shoot me.

It was obvious the man wasn’t going to survive his injuries. He had missing fingers, chunks of flesh gone, and his skin was waxy from the loss of blood. He would be dead before they could get him to the doctor.

Natoli knelt down next to the man, “Close your eyes, my friend. Close your eyes.”

Tracy glanced away as Natoli slid his knife across Shane’s neck.

“Aww, Shane.” Charlie stared. Viewing this much death up close was also shaking his desire to serve.

Natoli wiped his blade across his knee and stood up. As he sheathed it, he noticed Charlie’s glazed expression, as well as the pale countenance of his woman. The Indian directed them toward the tunnel, understanding these were rookie warriors. He treated them the same way he would have any of his braves. “Get to work!”

Charlie and Tracy left Shane’s body with slow steps. It was heartbreaking to treat their friend this way after he’d died such an awful death, but they couldn’t do anything else right now.

As they stepped into the main cave, the sound of digging was louder. There were also voices coming toward them from the direction of the camp, along with the heavy stomp of running boots.

Natoli marched his group in the direction of the boots, hoping whoever was coming was ready for the problem. The Mexicans were coming through behind them. The sound of shifting stone was distinctive.

*Boom!*

The group broke into a fast run as part of the passage behind them exploded and Mexican shouts filled the dusty corridor.

**3**

“I got a complaint, boss lady.”

Distracted by the battle she was keeping track of, Angela turned to face the camp member who had muttered in her ear. “What can I do for you?”

Benny grinned cruelly, big hands reaching out. “Die.”

Angela struggled to reach her gun as the man squeezed her neck, preparing to snap it.

Angela tensed her muscles as tight as she could get them and lashed out with her demon’s wrath.

Benny jerked, body stiffening.

The vet snatched his knife from Benny’s thick neck.

Angela absorbed the lifeforce, groaning.

The vet spun back into the shadows.

Jennifer and Oliva gaped in shock. Both women had been about to shoot, though Jennifer had drawn her weapon first.

Angela gasped air into her lungs, hating the painful sensation. Roger had done worse to her, but that didn’t stop the dangerous, hungry rage that had to be controlled. Feeling fate call, Angela glanced at Jennifer.

Jennifer sighed, holstering. “Are you sure I should?”

“Yes. That’s four of them. I was certain there was double that number. Expose them now.”

Jennifer went to join Marc and Kyle. Angela believed their other hidden assassin was in the group that was fighting the invaders.

“I can get others up here to watch over you.” Olivia stepped closer, hoping the vet didn’t come back before she finished. He was eliminating all of her kind. If she didn’t act now, she probably wouldn’t get another chance.

Angela knelt down at the wires again. “Do it fast, before you lose your nerve.”

Olivia stiffened. “You know?”

“I’ve always known.” Angela pushed harder, wanting it over. “You were the one confused by your destiny.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Olivia lifted her gun.

“Yes, you do.” Angela’s voice didn’t shake as she challenged her next would-be killer. “You could have been one of us. You’ve chosen to follow old orders and kill me instead. At least admit what you are and why.”

“I’m your enemy. You let me in.” Olivia’s face tightened, finger squeezing… Blood ran over her lip and dripped down her chin.

Angela didn’t glance up. The vet was handling the heavy chore she’d given him and doing it well. So far, only a few people had witnessed anything, and Olivia wasn’t going to tell. The vet’s knife had slid through the back of her neck to cut her vocal cords, among other vital items. Angela had heard him plan it out in his mind when the woman left her post. Angela hadn’t known Olivia was a traitor, but the vet hadn’t cared. He viewed everyone that way, allowing him to see things she didn’t.

Angela watched the vet caress Olivia’s twitching fingers.

“Killing is wrong. If you can’t control yourself, Marc will slit your throat while you sleep.”

Chris frowned, dropping the body. “Sorry.”

Angela sighed. “So am I. You can’t be cured. I should have you removed.”

“Yes.”

Angela didn’t speak again.

Neither did the vet. He watched her as she worked, protecting and obsessing.

Shouts of a victory echoed, along with a short series of blasts that said Marc had blown up more parts of the tunnel to buy time. If it was bad enough, the Mexicans might abandon their attempts to reach Safe Haven that way. Angela hoped it was. They’d already lost a quarter of the herd. She couldn’t take much more.

The fighting in the corridor echoed from second floor and spread through the cave. Those with minor injuries and those not sure what they should be doing began to gather around the tunnel entrance, listening in concern.

**4**

Marc swung at a short Mexican and knocked him into the cave wall, then fired his gun. He heard a body fall behind him, but there was no time to see who it was as the rest of the Mexicans came through the passage screaming for blood.

This part wasn’t wired like the rest of the tunnels around the cave had been. Marc watched in horror as one of the Mexicans threw a grenade that bounced off the stone wall and landed in a crevice about four feet up.

“Duck!” Marc threw himself to the ground.

The explosion echoed, making ears pop as showers of dusty debris fell over them. Men didn’t have time to avoid the blast; they were knocked off their feet or killed outright from the shrapnel.

The ceiling collapsed in front of the Mexicans, blocking them from coming in farther, but it also blocked Safe Haven from getting out. Now they were trapped in here. The entire fight had lasted less than two minutes.

Marc stood up, wiping dust from his face. As he swept the bloody, dusty corridor, his flashlight began to die. “Let’s get back.”

They were forced to leave the bodies where they were. That had to come later.

Jennifer met Marc and his group as they reentered camp. “The boss says to scan your group.”

Marc understood this was to flush someone out. He raked the group with his demon’s penetrating sight.

“Hands up!” Eddie drew his gun before Marc could read his mind. “I’ll shoot the boy. None of you can heal the healer.”

“My mom can.” Charlie wasn’t afraid. He was angry. “Bluffs won’t work.”

When the others didn’t react, Eddie scoffed. “See, boy? They know I’m right. Your momma was hurt bad and she hasn’t healed well.” Eddie motioned toward the passage. “All of you get in there and start digging.”

“You’re working with the Mexicans?” Jennifer burrowed into his thoughts. She caught a glimpse of Eddie trying to shoot Marc during the fight they’d just had and missing only because of bad aim. “How can you do that to us after escaping them?!”

Marc realized the man was like Rick and snapped. He lunged forward, taking the surprised killer to the ground.

Everyone else got out of the way as they fought for the gun.

Marc tried a mental shove when he felt the assassin’s strength, but there was no response. *Another one who’s immune or a psychopath?*

Eddie slammed his chin into Marc’s nose, trying to break it.

*You want down and dirty, you got it, asshole.* Marc rolled over and pretended to stand. When he reached halfway, he lunged forward and slammed his head into Eddie’s face, shattering the man’s nose and splitting his own brow line open in a blinding stab of excruciating pain for both of them.

Kenn was there to drag his knife across the traitor’s throat as Marc rolled away.

Marc stayed down for a minute, recovering. “This has been the longest day of my life.”

**5**

“Help me!”

Terrified, Dale heard a shout and then struggling as he cowered in the shower where the curtain blocked his view. Not wanting to, he ducked under the edge of the flap and peered out.

The vet slammed Dennis onto a pipe that had fallen from the ceiling, impaling him.

Dennis screamed, clutching his stomach. Blood pattered to the dusty ground like rain.

Finished with his chore, the vet left the smoky residence.

Dale crawled into the far corner of the shower, not about to come out and challenge the vet. The man had saved his life, but Dale had also watched him kill someone. Dale was scared he would be next.

Noise from fighting came to Dale a short time later, then footsteps.

Marc and a dozen fighters entered the living quarters and walked around the gap in the center of the room, hoping to locate more survivors.

Recognizing someone he knew he could trust, Dale barreled out of the shower. He ran into Marc’s knees, knocking them both to the floor near the gap. “He killed him! He killed him!”

From his awkward position, Marc scanned and found a fresh body.

“Get off.” Marc shoved Dale back toward the shower and joined the other fighters around the scene.

“He killed him!”

“Who?” Kenn swept the position and condition.

“Her pet killer.” Dale shivered. “The vet. She told the vet to kill my Dennis!”

At that moment, Ray came through the tunnel into the living quarters. Relieved to find Dale alive, he hurried forward, smiling.

Dale flew across the bodies and debris, striking Ray. It knocked them both to the floor. “You did it! You told her to do it! I hate you!”

Marc and Kenn separated them, not sure what to say. It was possible that Dale was right.

Dale was still screaming horrible things at Ray as he was dragged down to the line of wounded so one of the students could give him a sedative. It was a long minute where Ray stood up and refused to look at anyone except the dead man he had come to loathe over the last month.

“I hate this place.” Dale’s miserable statement echoed up to Ray.

*Me too, Baby. Me, too.* Unable to help his mate, Ray followed Marc and tried to forget about the emptiness in Dale’s heart for him now.

**6**

Gus stroked gently, loving the softness under his fingers. “Pretty pussy.”

Tonya snickered despite the gravity of the awful situation they were in. It sounded funny.

Gus also chuckled as he realized what had triggered her amusement. He held onto the cat while Tonya wrapped it in her sweater. She cradled the hissing feline under her weakest arm.

“Is it sick?”

Tonya took the first step on the ladder. “It has cancer. I’ve been treating it, but so far there hasn’t been any results. Now there won’t be more treatments, so I guess we’ll have to hope that was enough.”

She and Gus descended, both inhaling deeper of the cooler, cleaner air as they reached the next level.

Tonya untied the cat, but kept a hold of it, trying to calm the angry animal. She stared at the line of wounded, horrified at everyone’s condition. Tonya swept the wounded and the debris piles. “Where’s the boss?”

Gus pointed upward. “Working on power, I believe.”

Tonya released the growling cat and went back up the ladder. She didn’t like the idea of Angela being without a guard and she needed something to do to keep her mind off the fighting she had heard. One of those shouts had belonged to Kenn.

Tonya got to the top level to find Ozzie and several of their team with Angela and Jennifer. All of them were tracing down wires, except for Olivia, who was lying face down in a pool of blood. Tonya didn’t ask what had happened even though it was obvious the injuries were recent. Tonya joined the others, eager to have the power back on. The light on her belt had already died.

“Here’s tape.” Angela tossed the roll. Most of the supplies on this level were accessible.

Tonya watched as Angela directed her dimming lamp toward a small line of wires stapled to the wall.

“Like this.” Angela spliced snapped connections together by twining the matching wires around each other and then wrapping them in the tape.

Tonya got busy, hoping Angela would go to the bottom level soon. The camp needed her down there.

Sighing, Angela motioned to Jennifer. “You’d better stay with me so Marc flip out. Let’s go.”

Happy that her mental suggestion had been accepted, Tonya stayed where she was.

Angela walked into the main room with the control panel, stopping by Ozzie. “Any idea on time yet?”

Ozzie didn’t stop working. “Give me half an hour and then I’ll be able to tell you. Once we get all the wires reconnected up here, we have to go through and disconnect the lower levels or we’ll start more fires when we flip the power on.”

Angela patted his arm. They all had work to do.

Angela did a brief evaluation of each level of the cave as she went down the ladders and ropes. She was forced to go slow because of her physical health, but she also needed an idea of what came next. Marc had been gathering water. Ozzie was working on power. Kenn and the others were providing protection. They still needed food, blankets, and medications. Many of their injured would develop infections if they didn’t get antibiotics.

Angela stopped near the ladder on the level with the former medical bay. She used the last of her flashlight battery to scan the rubble, trying to determine where the precious cases had fallen. When she thought she had a general idea, she descended to the bottom level and began to dig through the rubble.

Billy spotted her and came over to help. It was obvious what she was hunting for when he realized all the debris in this pile was medical related.

As they worked, shifting debris into a bare corner of the floor, other survivors came over to help.

Voices drew attention again as another small group came down the ladder. Everyone was overjoyed to see new survivors.

Missa helped Joseph lower himself down the rope, face streaked with tears. Behind them, James, Booth, and Peter followed, all loaded with dusty bags and boxes.

People rushed over to take the burdens.

“We were trapped behind the guard shack.” James waited for his turn to come down the rope. “Marc put rations under there. I’ve got about 400 packages of Mountain House Beef Stew.”

Angela marked that off her list as one hot meal for their current population, relieved. That would buy more hours.

“I found the purification tablets!” Brittani shouted from the water chamber.

Eagles hurried to get the case so they could start treating the water the doctor was crying over not having access to yet, despite it sitting right there. He needed to be able to clean some of the wounds, but more than that, he needed to be able to wash his hands. The blood was building up on his skin.

“You have to help her!” Shawn grabbed the doctor’s arm.

Jimmy pushed out of Shawn’s tight grip. “She has smoke inhalation. There’s nothing I can do for her without oxygen. Get off me!”

Before Shawn could grab the man again, Nancy distracted him. Much calmer now, she led Shawn and Missy, who was pale and quiet, toward a corner of the bottom level. “Let’s try over here. There might be a fresh breeze.”

Shawn let Nancy talk to him, but he was terrified the little girl wouldn’t recover. To him, she looked bad. She wasn’t the active, talkative, bossy kid he had gotten used to caring for during their time together.

All around the doctor, others were in the same situation. Terrified for their loved ones and unable to help them, panic was about to set in. Those who were calm enough to foresee it coming hoped Angela, Adrian, or Marc were able to get it under control before things got any uglier than they already were.

As if drawn, Angela came down the ladder and began helping the doctor.

Two minutes later, Marc and his group came from the opposite end of the bottom level, where they had found a way to put a ladder up to the residence areas. The tension went down another notch.

Marc went straight to Angie, with Charlie on his heels.

Angela took a moment to embrace both of them, grateful that they had survived the first wave. *Now I just have to get us through the aftermath.*

# Chapter Six

**Life and Death**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“S**tay with her. When you see the baby’s head, yell for me.” The doctor limped away, sweating. He had twisted his ankle earlier while treating patients.

Nancy stayed crouched next to Mandy, who was in labor two months early.

Still helping with the wounded, Angela worried over the coming birth and a lot more. Smoke being pulled out of the mountain was a concern now. The trouble in the passage wouldn’t be the end of it. The steady smoke said they were in trouble, making this a perfect time to attack. They needed to get real security set up.

Marc joined her. “I’ll need six hands to take care of it.”

Angela felt better. With Marc on duty, no one would get through without paying the price. “You pick them.”

Marc glanced at Charlie, who was kneeling by Samantha. “We need more food and medicine. I’d like you guys to work on that.”

Glad to be able to help, Tracy hurried toward the ladder and Charlie followed. They knew most of the supplies had been on the destroyed level. Like Angela, they would track things from their origin.

Marc let the couple get out of earshot before meeting Angela’s eye.

“Thank you.”

He smiled, glad she approved. He didn’t want the boy down here using himself up on the wounded. “My honor.” Marc picked his six men and motioned them toward the corridor where he’d fought the Mexicans and killed a man he’d called a friend. Eddie’s betrayal was disheartening. Marc had chosen him for the rookie team.

Angela felt the same way. She had believed Olivia would make the right choice in the end.

“I found one!” Jennifer grasped the edge of the box, tugging hard. Angela had put her on searching while she helped the wounded. Jennifer lost her grip and slid down the rubble pile.

Gus grabbed Jennifer’s arm, helping her gain her feet. The shifting rock sent a fresh cloud of dust across the bottom level, recoating everything.

“Thanks.”

“Sure.” Gus gave her a little shove to help with momentum as she went back up. They were all tired.

The doctor and students would handle distributing the medications in the box, but it was one of the smaller containers. Jennifer knew they needed to locate a large one that held enough to treat their entire population for a week. That was the emergency outbreak bag and there was only one of them. She recognized that as a mistake.

Jennifer got a stronger grip on the box this time and jerked hard. It came free, sending a small slide of rubble down the pile.

People jumped and gasped as rocks crashed to the ground, terrified the earth was shaking again.

Jennifer hurried over to Samantha with the box, already flipping the bent latches.

Angela told one of the students how much to give the injured storm tracker and watched to make sure it was correct. She scanned the area, seeing Cynthia and Candy had been brought down. Sedated, both women had slept through the chaos. Autumn was snuggled between them, also sleeping. That made Angela wonder where Cody was.

It only took a minute to find him next to his mother’s body. Someone had covered her with jackets, but the little boy had uncovered her face.

Angela put an arm around his small shoulders. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Cody leaned against her, sniffing. “She wasn’t a good mom, but I loved her.”

Angela held the boy, scanning the other bodies. Several people had fallen during the quake. They had broken their necks or been impaled. Chauncey was one of those. Angela wondered if he had foreseen his own death and pushed away the gruesome contemplation.

“He told her something before it happened.” Cody was staring at Chauncey now, tears dripping down dirty cheeks. “She told me what it was. Do you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“She said the Onion man is coming.”

Angela frowned, trying to decipher the words. “Onion man?”

Cody glanced up in fear. “The Onion man isn’t supposed to be here. He doesn’t like America. He’s a descendant too.”

On a break, Adrian had come to check on Angela. He’d been staring at her for five minutes, pondering things, but now, he stepped from the shadows near the water chamber. “Do you mean the UN man?”

Around them, people stilled, trying to listen.

“He has a lot of men.” Cody craned his chin at Adrian. “They’re coming here.”

Angela knelt in front of the boy. “Can you tell us when?”

Cody began to count on his fingers. “Six, seven, eight! Eight days.”

Angela and Adrian both sighed as fresh tension flew through the survivors. That was the last thing any of them wanted to hear.

“Help! Help us!”

Missy had collapsed.

Angela hurried over to begin CPR. The doctor was busy dealing with an impalement that had just been brought down, and three of the students were occupied with helping Mandy give birth. From her cries and groans, that moment was fast approaching.

Responding, Missy sucked in oxygen and coughed, body twitching.

Angela held up a finger. “What’s your name?”

The little girl frowned. “That’s not funny.”

Confused, Shawn crouched over the girl in terror. “Is she okay?”

Angela caught a flash of Missy’s thoughts and added it to her list of things to handle once she had time to settle things down. “She needs oxygen treatments.” Angela pointed toward the medical bay. “I think I saw two setups where Tonya was trapped. They were caught on the ledge with her. You might be able to reach them if you’re careful. They look like a breathing mask with a hose and a plastic bottom.”

Shawn was moving away before she finished speaking.

Angela helped the little girl over to the line of wounded that was finally shrinking. Missy had been following Shawn around as he dug through rubble piles to find something to help. It had worn her out and overloaded her already saturated lungs.

Mandy screamed in agony as the next contraction hit.

A few feet away from the doctor, Neil began grunting. “Come on, Sam! Come on!”

Two of the students were performing CPR on Samantha.

Angela ran, aware that she was at her limit. She hadn’t been refilling her magic from anyone and her injuries were too fresh. The single lifeforce had healed the last of her injuries from Vlad, but there hadn’t been any reserve. She doubted she would be able to help, but she took one of Sam’s clammy hands, determined to try.

Terrified, Neil waited for something to happen, but none of the previous orbs shot out and there was no blue light. Sam didn’t respond. “What is it? What’s the problem?”

“She’s too weak.” Cody had followed Angela. He placed a hand on her wrist.

Almost immediately, multicolored orbs began to shoot from Angela’s fingers. They slammed into Samantha with enough force to shake her body.

“Thank you.” Angela didn’t scold the boy for not telling them sooner and she didn’t reprimand herself for not knowing that Cody was a healer. These gifts weren’t predictable, good or bad, and they didn’t have anyone who could identify power. As far as she knew, there wasn’t a descendant with that ability.

Samantha inhaled deeply, body arching. She curled into a ball, coughing violently.

*Uh, I can do that. Sonja also had a beta who could do it. I’m not sure that we’re rare.*

Angela frowned at Marc’s message. *Do what?*

*Identify descendant gifts…on sight.*

*Evolving.* Angela sighed, standing up so Neil could help Samantha sit up. *It’s good.*

Marc sensed she was unhappy, though. *Why?*

*I had hoped you wouldn’t evolve, Marc. It’s part of my nightmares. It’s why you die.*

*I don’t get the connection.*

*With that skill, you’ve just become the most sought after type of descendant on the planet. Keep quiet about it, please? Even when it’s hard?*

*I will.* Marc hadn’t asked her for the exact details of that moment yet, but now he understood it was more complicated than Adrian stabbing him in the dark some night.

*I’ve never told you because you wouldn’t have believed the truth. I still don’t think you will, but your gifts are evolving. The second part of what I saw has come true, so I’ll tell you now if you want to know.*

*He does it for a good reason.* Marc had always been fast on his feet.

*Yes. He saves everyone–the same as he’s been doing all along.* Angela groaned as she stood, spine popping.

*Would we still be enemies if you had told me that?*

Angela was hopeful at his reasonable response, but she didn’t censor the truth. The time for that was over. *Of course. If he could get away with killing you, he would. Same for you. The rivalry will never end until one of you is dead.*

Marc caught a very fast flash of Angela shoving Adrian into the line of fire and then she was out of his mind and hers was closed to him.

Angela left Neil to comfort Sam, hoping what she and Cody had been able to do would be enough. She was weak and the boy was young. Together, they might have bought Sam a day or two, but her own health would have to take over from there. Neither of them would be able to do it again.

Cody tensed. Angela realized the other injured, and those with friends who were injured, were coming toward them. Forced to make an ugly choice, she held up a hand. “I’m sorry. We can’t do anymore. Help them as best you can.”

She led the boy over to Gus, confident the big man would keep him safe.

Gus knew what she wanted without being told. He had been watching. “I got him.”

Angela squeezed Gus’s arm and returned to their line of wounded. She couldn’t help magically, but she could assist with the skills of a doctor.

Adrian pointed to a few of the healthier survivors and signaled toward the ladder. “We need to get the levels covered while Marc secures the tunnels. Come on.”

In situations like this, most of the camp was grateful he still cared enough to help them. As Adrian climbed to the next floor, followed by people who were happy to be distracted from the misery on the bottom level, Jennifer came after him. “I need to talk to you.”

Adrian motioned the others to go ahead.

“We have another killer in here.” Jennifer lowered her voice as she remembered there weren’t appliances or electronics running to cover the conversation. “And not the kind we can use. I’ve found five bodies that weren’t from the quake.”

Adrian wasn’t surprised. It was a prime opportunity, for both good and bad, to take advantage of the lack of security. “I’ll tell the boss.”

“She already knows.”

Adrian frowned. “Then why are you coming to me with it?”

Jennifer put her hands on her hips. “Because we can’t have a killer running loose in Safe Haven. It’s the wrong choice.”

Much like Angela had, Adrian snorted. Surely the teenager understood killers had a place, considering that she was one?

Jennifer would have argued further, but Marc and Kenn came up the ladder. Wanting more weapons, Marc had sent his crew on to secure the tunnel while he and the filthy Marine collected them.

“I’m not sure we should do anything.” Kenn had heard the conversation. “Whoever it is, they’re eliminating problems for us. We were watching Bobby and Howard before the quake.”

“Fewer problems are a good thing.” Marc stiffened. “‘Cause we do have a lot of them.”

Everyone rotated to find two men with guns standing in the shadows of the rubble.

Neither of the traitors was in the mood to talk or try taking a hostage. Both men knew they were about to die. They were only determined that they wouldn’t go alone. They had found the bodies of their co-conspirators and assumed Angela was having them eliminated. Both men raised their guns...

A tall figure bathed in shadows appeared behind them.

Chris swung, bringing the short, metal pipe up from the hip with the force of his body.

Jennifer winced at the awful crack.

Marc and the rest of his group watched in astonishment as the vet swung again in the same form. Blood splattered the cave wall.

Chris swung the pipe a last time, enjoying the squelching noise as his feet slid in the pool of blood. Job finished, he disappeared back into the shadows without looking at any of the witnesses.

Marc shared a glance of amused concern with everyone, then shrugged. “I didn’t see anything.”

The vet was glad to hear that as he went down the rubble on his hands and ass. He was already bruised and scraped, and covered in dirt and dust from the labor he’d been doing. It was a relief to know Marc wasn’t going to have him hunted down yet. Chris had no doubt there would be serious consequences from the actions he was taking, but saving the important lives would help in that moment. Right now, he wanted to be certain Angela was okay.

As the vet came down the rubble pile in the far corner, Angela felt his inspection. *Very good.*

Chris beamed and settled into the shadows nearby.

Angela signaled James and Peter to carry the water container around for people to get drinks. The purifying tablets had been in them the required time. It wasn’t sanitary to have everyone drinking from the same containers, but it was better than passing out from dehydration.

As the camp got a drink, the adrenaline crash started to wear off and people got sleepy, but there was no actual sleeping or even drowsing with the wounded man now shouting under the doctor’s rough hands or the woman screaming as she pushed out a new life.

Angela paused as the cry of a newborn baby echoed through the horror. It was the only good sound to the entire mix. She closed her eyes, filled with gratitude that at least some of her friends had been allowed to survive. “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound…that saved a wretch like me.”

As Angela began to sing in honor of their dead, others joined in.

**2**

Outside the cave, the singing echoed over radios. Those who were wearing them had hit the buttons to be certain their tormentors knew they hadn’t been successful. The tunnel invasion had obviously been planned before the quake.

Mikel was furious to hear singing instead of screams. He started to fill the air with a string of threats, but a new noise caught his attention. He swung around, staring west. *Shit!* *Too many!*

This new refugee wave was bigger than the previous few. Thousands of people in vehicles and on bikes streamed over the hill and into Mikel’s camp. They ran over tents and fighters, crushing what little the Mexicans had been able to gather since the quake. Gunshots echoed as the camp was overrun.

Mikel ducked into a crevice in the mountain as another tremor sent stones and snow skidding down into the valley.

Above them, the sky opened, drenching the area with fallout rain.

Mikel huddled in the narrow shelter, watching his remaining men be executed or run over by the panicked refugees who’d heard singing and assumed they’d found Safe Haven. The fact that they hadn’t wasn’t sinking in at all. Cars were stopping; people were getting out in celebration, all ignoring the shaking ground and the ill Mexicans lying all over the snow around them.

Furious but impotent, Mikel began climbing the mountain, vowing vengeance. He didn’t get very far before the weakness in his legs and bowels forced him to stop. While he waited for it to pass, he stewed. The witch’s power was hurting him. *I have to kill her. If I don’t, her curse will surely kill me.*

**3**

“We’re almost ready to try now.” Theo gestured at the control panel as Marc and Adrian came up to the top level. Everyone had been working for hours. “We’ll have to be ready for fires from connections that we missed or couldn’t reach.”

A small supply of extinguishers that hadn’t been used were lined up outside the mess. Marc instructed their group to grab them and be on standby for areas that began to smoke or flame. He also instructed them to use the flashlights that had battery life to scan around the cave walls while that was going on. If they didn’t go searching for it, a fire could get out of control before they even realized they had one. It was worrisome that none of their smoke detectors had gone off during the mess fire, but Marc stored it as something to figure out later. He already had a list of those.

Theo got ready to flip the switch.

Marc stayed there, hoping to be bathed in light if only for a minute. The future had weighed on him the entire time they’d been reestablishing security.

“You have more luck than me.” Theo changed places with Ozzie. “You do it.”

Ozzie flipped the switch.

For a few seconds, there was no response and then the bulbs above them began to glow with a familiar, comforting light that brought a cheer of relief from everybody who noticed it.

“Now we’ve got a chance.” Adrian clapped Marc on the shoulder with his good arm. The bad one was reminding him it had recently been out of place. “Nice!”

Marc couldn’t help but share in the good moment. Without power, they’d been doomed, but now there was a chance they might recover. He shoved Adrian toward the door. “Get to work. It’s not over yet.”

Pleased, Adrian did as he was told.

On the level below, a small fire started. It was extinguished by overeager helpers who used half of the valuable canisters. Marc realized they should have cautioned people against that. Another mistake. *How many more can we afford before it’s too much?*

**4**

“Did you hear that?” Angela tilted her head. She was picking up a call that wasn’t mental or oral, but both blurred together. The only time she’d heard anything like it was when she had tried to listen to Donner while she and Adrian were being held captive on the train.

“I’m sorry, no.” Jennifer tried to expand her range, always working on her gifts. She had a daughter and a man to protect.

Angela put a hand on the healthy teenager’s wrist. “Let’s listen together.”

Jennifer held still while Angela navigated through mental portals the girl didn’t have in her own mind. She gazed in wonder at the quick images, at the levels of power hidden behind a row of doors, and then one of them opened. “That’s Za–”

*Shhh…*

Jennifer watched as rocks flew and guns fired. “That traitor!”

Angela sighed, letting go of the connection. “I’ll taking his place when it happens. Keep this to yourself.”

Jennifer understood the choice. She would do the same for her man. “I will.”

As Angela left the level, Adrian came from the corridor behind the rubble pile the women had been digging through for supplies. He locked eyes with the teenager.

Realizing he wanted to know where Angela was going, Jennifer crossed her arms and lifted her chin.

Adrian grinned, stepping forward. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way, little girl.”

Jennifer paled but refused to run. “She has a right to do what she wants.”

Adrian understood Angela was being reckless again. He sent out a wave of misery and need. “Wouldn’t you rather I took the bullet for her?”

Snared, Jennifer gave the truth. “Yes.”

“Then tell me what she’s planning.”

# Chapter Seven

**The Toll**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**A**ngela propped her feet up on a boulder and leaned against the wall of the small reading room. Over the last few hours, workers had been up here. They had gathered furniture and tried to clean up some of the garbage, as well as removing the rest of the bodies. She and the others in leadership had decided to use this as a temporary base of operations. Angela had called all of them up here for a brief meeting on what to do next.

She waited for everyone to be settled, not scanning faces. They were allowing their true emotions to show now that they were with people who could accept it without panicking. Around the camp, leaders tried to remain calm, but around each other, the truth had to be told so they could have support to bolster their own faith.

“I’d like to start with the dead, dying, and the missing.” Angela steeled herself. This part was going to hurt.

Marc motioned toward Kenn. “I asked him to get a copy of that for us a little while ago.”

Kenn began reading off names of the dead he knew were important to her. “Peggy, Hilda, Shane, Dennis, Bobby, Howard, Chauncey, Jeremy, Julia...”

Angela winced each time a familiar name was called.

“Li and his wife both died about an hour ago. We found Roy and Romeo; they’re okay and we got them out. Cody’s keeping them company.”

In agony, Angela signaled him to keep going. She needed this part to be done.

“So far, the death toll stands at 122. We have 228 injuries, with 50 of them serious. The doctor only expects half of those to survive. We also have 100 minor wounded and roughly 80 of us with just scrapes, bruises, and scratches. So far, the list of missing is Allan, Doug, Donald, Francis, Pam, Stanley, Lawrence, Wade, and Zack and his sons. We’re also not sure about half a dozen camp members, but some of the bodies are still buried under the residence chambers and under what’s left of the mess. I’ll have a final list on that in a few hours.”

Angela moved on to the next part of her list, unable to stop the wave of sadness. “We need to set up a waste area and a food area. We’ll put the waste area over the hole where Adrian was camped. The smell was already awful, so it isn’t going to make that much difference. Anything you can find to sanitize hands needs to be put there.”

“We gathered all the weapons. They’re under guard now.” Neil’s gaze strayed to the tunnel, worrying over Samantha.

Everyone had been surprised when he joined the meeting.

Neil shrugged miserably. “The least I can do is get her out of here alive. I couldn’t do it for him.”

Everyone winced at the reminder of Jeremy’s awful death.

“We also have to sleep.” Adrian glanced toward the restless camp. “The quake hit us right as we were settling down for bedtime and it’s late afternoon now. People are exhausted.”

“Agreed.” Despite the situation, Marc still resented Adrian being here. He didn’t let it control him, however. Serving with someone he hated had been almost constant when he was in the Marines.

Jennifer bought up the next big concern. “What are we doing with the bodies?”

Everyone went quiet, waiting for Angela’s choice. Marc and Adrian both knew what they would choose. They also accepted that Angela had more compassion than either of them, so neither man was sure what she would pick.

A tear rolled down each of Angela’s cheeks. “We’ll find a place to dump them.”

Everyone understood her choice and the pain. They felt it too. No one wanted to dump a friend or family member down the pit, but between diseases and the constant reminders, it would crush what was left of their fragile camp. The next week would determine if Safe Haven survived at all.

“If we can get things settled enough, we can hold a funeral service. That might help a little.”

Tonya’s suggestion was met with nods, but it was too far away for them to worry about making specific plans.

“I’d like to talk about the problems that are coming.” Angela guided the conversation to where she needed it now that the basics were settled. “We have yet another threat coming to our door. I’m tired of being the one to handle it.” She swept the council she was honored to be a part of, including all of them. “We’ll make this choice together.”

It was a moment of change for Safe Haven. Until now, the person in charge had been the one to make all of the choices like this, whether people agreed with it or not. Adrian had set things up that way and so far, it had kept them alive. Now their leader was too burdened to keep carrying it alone and everyone else was too corrupt, too young, or not willing to shoulder the weight. That meant everyone had to change again. There would be no more protecting the innocent in their group. They would do whatever it took.

“I had crews working the entire time we were getting ready to come in. I instructed Kenn to design a bugout plan. I had Samantha and her group clear the route out of here. The UN will use that same route to get in here, so our escape is blocked until we deal with them. Does anyone have hope of being able to negotiate?”

Heads shook, but no one spoke. Safe Haven didn’t have any bargaining chips right now, except for the descendants, and they weren’t going to hand them over so just a few could escape. That wasn’t what they stood for.

“What about fighting?” Angela felt it was a useless question, but she had to make sure these people felt like all the bases were covered. She already knew what had to be done, but she wasn’t willing to carry it alone this time.

“Maybe if we use magic.” Marc thought of the limited dealings he’d had with the UN during his military career. None of them had gone well. “They’ll come in force and hit us hard.”

“Is there a chance of slipping out somewhere so we can fight them a different time?”

Adrian denied Angela’s question. “No. We shut down all of the tunnels in and out of this mountain except for the two we were going to use for backups. The Mexicans just breached one of those. The other is full of Mexican bodies.”

“That means we go out the top and face whoever might be there.” Angela scanned the tired group. “Does everyone agree with that?”

“Do you mind if I offer a suggestion?” The vet was in the doorway, leaning against the dusty frame. His white coat was layered in blood, dirt, and ash.

Angela motioned him in, hoping no one else was in the corridor listening to them. “What have you got?”

The vet sank down on the ground near her feet, knowing not to touch her or even look up with Marc, Adrian, and Kenn glaring at him. “We should dig a new hole and come around to hit them in the rear. They’ll be trapped.”

While the others grumbled and shot down the idea, Angela, Adrian, Kyle, and Marc considered it. At this point, all options were on the table.

“How would that work?” Marc gestured. “We’d be lucky to even locate shovels right now.”

The vet pointed toward a stack of weapons boxes that had been brought in for the council members to rearm themselves. “We have a lot of small weapons and explosives. If we can reach the level where we had our heavy equipment stored up, we might have a chance to use the bulldozers.”

Marc stared at the vet. “How do you know about that?”

Chris shrugged, yawning. “I hear things.”

“From slinking around like the dog you are?”

The vet didn’t flinch at Marc’s growl. “That’s exactly what we are–her dogs.”

People continued to grumble about the idea, but the main trio exchanged knowing glances. They had suspected they might get trapped down here from one problem or another. They had brought boxed heavy equipment. It would be a simple matter to assemble it, if they could find a passage or starting point with enough space and of course, enough manpower.

Angela glanced at Marc with the hint of a smile playing along her lips. “They’re all expecting us to come out the top or bottom.”

Marc was relieved they had another option. “We don’t need a full size tunnel if we dig a hole.”

“Exactly.” Chris curled into a ball. When he closed his eyes and let out a deep rumble of weary exhaustion, Angela refused to answer any of the mental questions that came. She had a list of reasons for keeping the deranged killer around. Saving all their lives was the title on that page.

“Are we done?” Marc’s tone exposed his weary anger. He hated the vet despite the good things Chris had done. The man was a threat.

On the floor, the vet lifted his head to glare at Marc.

Before a fight could start, Kyle stood up. “Let’s get this done and get a sleeping shift set up. All of us need to curl up somewhere.”

“I’ll be right here for a bit.” Angela yawned. “Alone.”

Except for her pet, everyone exited the chamber with glares.

Angela leaned back and shut her eyes.

“How long?” The vet knew there was a lot of work still waiting for both of them.

“Half hour.” Angela was already dozing.

The vet set his internal alarm and joined her in sleep, but his ears twitched at every noise like a dog.

“How are we handling him?” Kenn asked as they got out of earshot.

“You aren’t.” Adrian motioned toward the body Logan was dragging down to the bottom level. “She said there are eight assassins and we’ve only accounted for six. Let him be.”

“For now.” Marc was too tired to argue with Adrian over giving orders. “I’ll be in the mess, handling things there. Everyone pick a floor or a chore and get on it. Report to the boss in half an hour.”

As the rest of the council went to work, Jennifer came to Marc. She didn’t say it or think it, and Marc didn’t ask, but she still nodded. “I’ll handle it when the time comes. I’ve never been a threat.”

Marc didn’t doubt her. The vet would have to be eliminated, but he would be expecting it. The teen would be a surprise that might keep the vet from hurting Angie. Marc had no doubt it would come to that ending. Obsessions always did.

**2**

Neil found the doctor with Samantha. The man’s expression said to leave him alone and Neil did. He took Sam’s hand, seeing how uneven her breathing was, how waxy her skin had become. “I’m sorry, Sammi.”

Neil slid down against her arm and let sleep carry him away for whatever amount of peace was allowed.

The doctor kept working. He had two more bags of her type of blood, but he couldn’t come back and do this later when she was stronger. It was now or nothing.

“Can I help?” Tonya knelt down and took a cloth from his bag. The man was sweating so hard she was surprised he could see to operate. She patted his forehead like she’d watched nurses do on television, trying to keep the edges up so she didn’t block his view.

“Get a suture ready.” Realizing it wasn’t a student, the doctor added more information. “They’re in little baggies at the bottom of the bag.”

Tonya found them and read the marker instructions on the front. Doing it wasn’t as easy, however. It was a long time before she was able to say, “It’s ready.”

The doctor took it. “Keep them coming until I tell you to stop.”

Tonya hurried. She was glad to be able to help, but also to be distracted from whatever was going on in the upper levels of Safe Haven. They’d heard screams and gunshots up there over the last hour, though no one other than Neil had come down yet. She’d been hoping to ask if things were under control now, but the trooper had crashed before she could find the words.

Around the gruesome scene, the camp was in mourning. They’d put all their hopes into this mountain and it had crushed them. The few non-Eagles who were functional were helping, though most had curled up in a corner to sleep. Everyone had been awake for twenty-four hours. Tonya didn’t think it would be long before all the survivors were sleeping, but she doubted the peace would hold. If leadership didn’t get down here and calm things, there would be a riot and in these conditions, that would be lethal.

Tonya glanced over at the new mom and baby who were sheltered under the ledge, snoozing. The baby was fine, but Mandy wasn’t. The students couldn’t help her and the doctor was busy. *Where’s Angela?* Tonya had expected her to be down here the most.

“She’s not strong enough to help everyone yet.” Adrian joined Tonya in helping the doctor. He had participated in enough of these moments to be a rookie nurse. He began opening packages the doctor needed.

“Shouldn’t she at least try?” Tonya swept their wounded and dying. “This is bad.”

“She helped Sam as much as she could and it wiped her out.” Adrian subtly gestured toward the corner where a small group of survivors stood, staring at them. “If they know she can’t help, they’ll panic. Right now, they’re counting on it. She has to deliver.”

“Can she?”

Adrian didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure a power nap would be enough. They had hundreds of injuries and a dozen of them were life threatening, but they also had fear. That was the most dangerous part of any crisis.

“Are we trapped in here for real now?”

*Thought proven.* Adrian handed John the suture so Tonya could assemble another. “We have other tunnels. It’s okay to tell everyone that.”

Tonya understood she was supposed to keep her mouth shut about the other, but the doctor blew out a curt huff of offended air.

Adrian didn’t threaten the man or try to bribe him. He told the truth. “If they can’t get help from her, they’ll overwhelm Jimmy. He’s not going to be safe when these people wake up. Stay with him.”

The doctor’s anger fled as he accepted that. If Angela couldn’t heal them, they would indeed expect the camp doctor to be able to handle things. If he couldn’t, even if it wasn’t his fault, the results could be deadly.

Tonya reached into the bag and frowned. She leaned in. “This is the last one.”

Jimmy sighed at her whisper. “There’s a ball of thread in my pocket. I put it there right after the quake.”

Tonya reached into the man’s filthy jacket and fished out the thread. She left the gun.

Jimmy met her eye this time, ignoring Adrian. “You’ll hang around?”

Tonya nodded. “Yes, but if it comes to that, let me use it. I’ve had the classes.”

Jimmy went back to replacing stitches that hadn’t held the first time. “My thoughts exactly.”

**3**

*Please.*

*WHY?*

*Because I love them. Don’t you?*

*WHY?*

*They’ll die if you don’t help.*

*YES.*

*Why won’t you help? They’re your children.*

*WHY?*

*Stop saying that!*

*Stop asking for things you know I will not provide.*

*I can’t. I don’t understand.*

*You only need to obey.*

*Why?*

*Silence.*

*Tell me why?!*

*They turned away my other children. They were happy when the souls went out. Why should they be spared?*

Angela couldn’t give an answer to that. Instead, she said the only thing she thought might succeed in breaking through the indifference. *You enjoyed punishing them.*

*YES.*

*We were made in your image. If we were wrong to enjoy their punishment, then so are you.*

The roaring rage in response jerked Angela from her deep doze and sent the vet yipping into the hallway in terror.

Angela calmed herself, nodding to James and Peter, the new guards who had arrived right after Marc left. She was relieved when the ground didn’t start shaking, but she wasn’t sorry for giving the truth.

The vet kept going even when Angela mentally apologized for waking him with her nightmare. She suspected he had caught the scent of another assassin. She didn’t know how he was flushing them out, but it was succeeding.

Angela contemplated her dream, replaying the words, the meanings. In real life, she never would have spoken that way. In her dreams, there were no filters or censors.

*Maybe that’s why you were able to make contact*, the witch suggested uneasily. She was terrified of being destroyed.

*So I would piss Him off?*

*Maybe.*

*I don’t understand.*

*Nor do I, but we’re not dead, so it can’t have been that bad…right?*

Angela shrugged. She had no idea how it all worked. All she did know was that she needed help, and it wasn’t coming.

Happy about the anger of her host, the witch tempted her. *There are two traitors…*

Angela moved into the darkness, waving off her protection. With the vet following her, having a guard was a waste of manpower. She also ignored her witch’s suggestion. She didn’t want to hunt down the traitors and drain them to become healthy again or even to gain new gifts. She wanted out of this cursed mountain.

# Chapter Eight

**Lost Sheep**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“I** don’t know what to do.” Zack waited stiffly for the condemnation he felt he deserved. They’d scouted to the end of this tunnel and found the exit unblocked, as it was supposed to be, but there was a large camp of Mexican soldiers below them. This end of the corridor was blocked by a cave-in. The temperature was freezing, and they were all in normal gear. The situation was bad.

“We’ll think of something, Dad.” Timmy hoped that was comforting. He couldn’t stop shivering. It hadn’t been so bad while they were patrolling. Before the mountain started to shake, Timmy had even been bragging about it not bothering him. He was shivering on those words now.

“We will.” Mike was the parrot of his older brother. If Timmy said it, it had to be true.

Zack didn’t tell the boys he’d been working on it for hours now. They were trapped in a passage that was no longer connected to the main camp, and there was only a mile between them and an army that could be climbing up even now to explore the spoils. “Move over.” Zack slid toward the end of the corridor. “Get between me and the rubble pile. You guys will stay a little warmer.”

“They’ll come for us.” Allan flashed a comforting smile at the boys. They’d all been on a patrol together, with senior men training rookies. “No worries.”

“I agree.” Donald sounded as if he believed it, but he didn’t. The people inside were just as bad off. Leaders would need to care for the main camp first and stragglers later.

“Has anyone tried to contact the boss?” Wade patted Stanley on the shoulder as the clumsy boy shivered at a strong gust of icy wind that blew down the tunnel.

“I have.” Zack fastened the top button of his shirt. “Still am.”

“I don’t think she can hear us through the stone.” Timmy gave Mike an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Mike shrugged. “We promised to always tell the truth.”

Zack frowned. That wasn’t common knowledge. “How do you know the stone blocks most descendants?”

“We heard Matt and Charlie talking about it.” Mike’s confession brought a tense silence.

Zack didn’t scold the boys. Their punishment for being bullies was over. They’d been brought into the Eagles to repair the damage to their future, but Matt was a sore spot for everyone.

“We need to start digging.” Wade forced himself to get up even though all he wanted to do was go to sleep. “Someone will hear us.”

The small group followed Wade’s lead, with all of the adults mentally calling out to Angela for help. If the Mexicans found this tunnel, they were dead.

**2**

“We want out of here!”

“There is no way out!”

“Liar!”

The argument between the two camp members escalated into a brawl that sent shouts for help echoing through the cave. Everyone was tired of the sound, but there was no ignoring it.

The fighting men slammed into the counter, scattering the breakfast that had just been put out.

“Grab them!”

Around the men, hungry camp members advanced. Fists swung and bodies fell under harsh kicks. The fury camp members had been controlling broke free.

“Who do we grab?” Logan asked as he and Marc’s shift of guards hurried toward the melee that included a dozen men from camp and one scrappy woman.

“All of them!” Marc reached the edge of the fight and jumped. He landed in the middle and began to toss the fighters into those around him.

Seeing what Marc was trying to do, the other men attempted to copy him. Logan made the jump and land, grinning at how smooth it went. He grabbed the scrappy woman and gave her a light shove into Marc, who flung her toward the safer camp members who had gathered.

Daryl leapt, too hard, and went sailing over the main fighting.

Simon also jumped at that moment. Daryl hit him in chest, knocking his fellow helper into the crowd.

“Well, that was funny.” Gus laughed, unable to help it.

Next to him, Angela also chuckled. Gus was right. Daryl missing his mark and taking out an Eagle instead would be the highlight of conversations today. Angela patted Cody’s shoulder as the fighting stopped. “Stay with Gus.”

Cody took a hold of the big man’s arm, smiling at him.

Angela ignored the surprise at her using Gus to guard Marc’s son. They assumed because Gus hadn’t been trained, she wouldn’t trust him with something so important. The camp hadn’t noticed it yet, but she was using everyone. The people who hadn’t been vetted now were Eagles.

Marc spun Tony toward Simon, who had landed in a heap. The two camp playboys crashed into each other, dazing them both.

“Stop it right now!” Marc advanced, willing to get rougher if that’s what it took to settle things down. “Sit down and shut up!” Marc already knew what had happened. He even understood. Hadn’t he been on missions where scared troops had needed to be calmed this way? Humans were hard to control, especially when frightened.

“We want out!” Tony was shouting now. He was sitting next to Simon, who hadn’t risen yet.

Simon was lying there trying to get his breath back. His lungs had already been hurting from all the smoke he’d inhaled while helping rescue people from the mess. Being rattled by Marc hadn’t helped.

“Listen!” Marc needed them to be more scared of him than they were of each other or the cave. “Do you hear those engines?”

The crowd dropped to silent, straining to hear and to be clear of his wrath.

A low rumble came to them all, pleasing those who understood. Those who didn’t, panicked.

“It’s another quake!”

“We’ll all die this time!”

“We’re digging out!” Marc’s shout echoed over the mutters and cries. “Listen!”

Now that it had been pointed out, it was easy to distinguish the hum of machines. The rest of the mutters quieted.

Angela came through the crowd and bent down to start picking up the food packets that hadn’t been damaged. She didn’t speak to them yet. Right now, the remaining camp was trying to decide if she should have known, if she was to blame. She only needed to say one thing to break that hold over her people, but it had to come at the right time.

“When can we get out?” Tony asked, still sitting by Simon. The two men didn’t look at each other.

“It will take us a week.” Angela tossed food packs into hands that didn’t have one yet. Hungry bellies being filled would bring more calm.

“The Mexicans are out there,” someone stated from the rear of the group. “When you go out, you’ll let them in!”

“We’ll be wiped out this time.”

“The Mexicans are gone.” Angela ignored the nagging twinge that said she had missed something important. “They were overwhelmed by refugees. We’re working on the camera cables to verify that.”

New interest swarmed the group.

“We’ll be able to leave without fighting our own people.”

“No, we won’t. Remember them crashing our gate?”

“So what?”

“We didn’t let them in because it wasn’t safe, because they couldn’t be vetted. That hasn’t changed, asshole.”

“Less fighting!” Marc didn’t want to let things degenerate into a refugee argument that would suck in his men. “More listening!”

Angela hid a smirk as the crowd fell silent again. No one wanted to deal with Marc. Adrian was the brains. Marc was the enforcer.

*I’m more than that!*

Angela rolled her eyes and tossed him a food packet. It was the same as saying sit down and shut up.

Marc flushed and did, glaring.

Angela stood up, feeling the moment arrive. “I’m sorry that I didn’t see it coming. The quake caught all of us by surprise–including Samantha. I’m so very sorry.”

Marc rubbed her leg as Cody came over and crawled into his lap. “You just lost a baby. No one blames you.”

“Yeah, you can’t predict an earthquake.” Gus liked Angela. He didn’t like it that she was in pain.

“When are you gonna let us out of here?!”

“In a week.” Angela glowered at Tony. “Now shut up, okay? We’ve had enough of you.” She waved at the damaged food. “Some of us may go hungry now.”

The crowd turned that dangerous anger on Tony; he fell silent, face flushed, lip bleeding.

“We’re going to the crushed level.” Angela gestured. “Some of the meat can be pulled out and prepared. That’s a nasty job, folks, but I need you to help.”

“We’ll have fresh meat for weeks once we dig it out.” Logan knew this was a time when their leaders needed Eagles to speak up. “Power on the top floor is solid now. We’ll get the mess straightened out while crews work on food.”

“Exactly. I can’t promise, but I hope to have the smell of cooking meat filling your noses a few hours from now.”

That was something everyone wanted to hear and such an obvious solution couldn’t be faked. There were also a couple of smiles. Even before the quake, they’d been eating thawed foods that didn’t taste the same.

“I also need a body crew.” Angela assumed only Eagles would volunteer for it. “We’re clearing the upper levels. We’ll get it cleaned and move up there. It’s closer to the topside exit, so expect it to be noisy.”

“What happens when we open that passage in a week and the refugees find us?” someone asked from Angela’s right.

She turned that way. “The descendants are going to provide a distraction while some people leave. Then we’re sealing it up until everyone forgets this place ever existed.”

“After the winter, we can come out, right?” Simon clarified.

“Yes, I believe so, but that won’t be up to me.” Angela squared her shoulders. “I’m not staying. You have to pick a leader before I go.”

Shock ran through the crowd despite knowing Angela had always planned to leave.

“What kind of distraction?” Morgan was sitting with Roy and Romeo. The boys were eating.

“Avalanche.” Angela swallowed a shudder at her choice. “We’re not strong enough to fight the UN troops and we won’t leave them to haunt those of you who stay here or even those who’ve chosen to take off on their own. We’re going to bury them alive and pick off any survivors. Then we’re getting into trucks and leaving this place.” Angela signaled Adrian. “Time to go.”

Angela glanced at Neil. “We need another way out, one that lets people exit unobserved, but we can’t use the top entrance.”

“I’ll scout it.”

“I’ll go with Neil to scout. I need to know the new layout.” Kenn gestured at the tired trooper. “Come on.”

As the two men departed, Angela waited, hoping the camp would help instead of being carried.

“I can help the doctor.” Missa’s voice was clear, lighthearted even. “Joey will help with bodies.”

Angela stared with everyone else. She’d never heard Missa speak. “Uh, that’s great.”

“We’ll help in the mess.” A camp member patted his wife’s hand lovingly. They hadn’t been in Safe Haven long before the mountain was shut down.

“I’ll do body chores.” Simon didn’t look at anyone. He was ashamed that he’d lost control of himself. That was why he hadn’t joined the Eagles. If he did, everyone would know he wasn’t as steady as he pretended to be.

“So will we.”

“I can cook.”

The camp began assigning themselves to chores; Angela motioned Kyle to keep them going. As he took over, giving needed comfort and information, Angela went to work on the next part of the list.

Marc and Cody followed, giving her space and protection. She was clearly in the zone.

“Why did she lie?” Cody’s question was whispered.

Marc leaned down. “People wouldn’t understand. She would be in danger.”

“Me too?”

“You knew?”

Cody scowled. “We talked about it. She said it had to happen or the bad men would get in and kill everyone.”

“Do you doubt her about that?”

“Oh, no.” Cody tightened his grip on Marc’s hand. “She’s right. They hate us.”

“Are the bad guys alive?”

“One for sure.” Cody’s face filled with fear. “He’s coming.”

Marc put an arm around the boy’s shoulders and kept him close as they followed Angela. Marc didn’t tell the boy he would keep him safe, but Cody knew his father would try.

*Will it be enough?* Angela asked.

There wasn’t a reply.

**3**

“Where are you going?”

Gus moved around his mate. “Helping.”

Brittani grabbed Gus’s big arm. “You’re staying right here with me!”

Gus sighed. He cupped her pretty, dirty face with his large hand. “Stop now.”

Brittani shuddered. “I can’t. I’m scared.”

Gus stroked his fingers over her cheek the way she liked, leaning in. “I’m joining the Eagles. Do it with me.”

Brittani froze for an instant and then wrapped her arms around him. “No. I forbid it.”

Gus chuckled. “I’m gonna go help our people. You be careful here. These folks are upset right now.”

“You telling me not to start trouble?”

“*Are* you.”

She chuckled at the correction, emotions welling up to change the mirth into tears. She pressed her lips to his in terror. This was what she’d been afraid of–the waiting.

Gus enjoyed her attention for a moment and then ended the embrace. He joined the small rescue crew Angela had drafted, chin up in pride at having been chosen. She’d appeared to each of them and directed them with hand codes. They didn’t know what they were facing yet. Angela said she didn’t know either, that all she could hear was someone begging for help and someone promising to kill her as soon as they were rescued. She had asked Gus to be there when that happened, to help keep her alive. He’d been honored then and he felt honored now as he joined the team. He was useful to the boss. It’s what everyone here wanted.

Brittani was angry that Gus had been infected with the desire to serve, but she couldn’t gather enough rage to follow through on her threat. She settled for stomping over to their exhausted doctor to help with the wounded.

**4**

Angela met Gus and the others at the entrance to the tunnel on the second level. Neil and Kenn had been here shortly after the mess fire was put out. They’d found a cave-in.

Angela nodded to the guards standing in the corridor. She led her small group by them without explaining what was happening. She’d lied to Gus and the others. That voice had been threatening to kill Marc as soon as they were rescued, not her. There was no explanation she could give for her rage.

“You’re not going.”

Angela spun to find Adrian and Kyle coming into the passage.

“I’ll shout and wake Marc up if you say one word in argument.” Adrian gestured at Gus. “Will you make sure she gets back?”

Gus regarded Angela. “What do *you* say?”

Angela sighed. The assassin wanted Marc, but they would settle for her to get to him. “Take me to the new mess.”

Adrian knew better than to gloat. He kept his thoughts blank as he and Kyle took their places. “Kyle has lead.”

Adrian’s order was followed in relief. None of the men she’d chosen had liked Angela going in her condition.

Angela was angry, but she also hadn’t wanted to wake Adrian to take Marc’s place, she liked Kyle too much to ask him to do it. “Can we go slow?”

Gus shrugged at her lifted brow. “I don’t want Brittani to know I didn’t help.”

Angela snorted. “You’ve helped since it happened, Gus. And you were just given guard duty over the boss.”

Gus hadn’t thought about it that way. He was grinning as he escorted Angela back to the relative safety of their camp.

**5**

“It’s daytime.” Mike yawned, shivering.

The adults woke and made sure that the teens did too. All of them were very cold and very hungry.

“We’ll start digging again in a few minutes.” Zack wanted everyone to be alert enough to help without getting hurt by morning clumsiness. They had cleared a small dent in the rubble pile before sleeping, but Zack doubted they would get through before the weather or lack of supplies killed them.

“Do you hear that?” Timmy was lying near the rubble pile.

Everyone quieted to listen.

Zack frowned, rubbing his hands together. “Sounds like an engine.”

Lawrence perked up. “Around here?”

“We hid vehicles at each exit.” Zack listened harder. “Doesn’t sound like a car, though.”

“No. More like…”

“Digging equipment?”

The boys let out a small shout as they realized what it could mean.

“We’ll be okay.” Zack motioned the boys toward the rubble. “Let’s meet them in the middle.”

Behind them, Lawrence and Donald watched without comment, both eager to get inside and do their duty.

**6**

Kyle moved closer to the mound of stone… “I hear Zack...” Kyle gestured. “They need help. Keep digging!” He began shifting rock, not understanding why Zack was laughing when the others were shouting. He tried to listen to the fight as he and the group flung debris aside.

“Traitor!”

“I’ll kill you!”

*Bang!*

The gunshot caused Kyle’s team to work faster. If that had been one of the good guys, the clock was ticking.

“Look out!”

Adrian and Kyle shifted a big stone over to reveal a narrow crack that revealed Lawrence placing his gun against Wade’s head. He pulled the trigger.

“No!”

The gun misfired, sparing Wade’s life.

Adrian and Kyle jumped aside as Greg and Daryl hit the pile with a battering ram made of a ceiling beam that had fallen during the quake. They broke through, stumbling over bodies as Lawrence fired again.

“Dad!”

Allan shot Lawrence in the hip and then again in the chest. The man fell, firing into the ceiling.

Bleeding from a trim, Zack shoved Timmy and Mike into the warmer tunnel and then himself. Allan and Donald followed, leaving the fresh fighters to deal with Lawrence as he crawled toward the gun he’d dropped.

“I have to kill her!”

Kyle came through the hole, Glock racked. “Go to sleep.” He fired twice.

Kyle scanned the bodies and motioned Adrian to grab one of them. “Let’s go.”

The rest of the lost sheep also went through the hole. Everyone was eager to put the rocks back until Angela was ready to attack. The rest of the corridor was clear. They’d been able to see daylight.

**7**

“You need to sleep now.”

Tonya didn’t glance up from the leg she was holding in place for the doctor to finish splinting. “I will.”

Kenn edged her out of the way with his big body. He had just returned from surveying the tunnels with Neil. It had taken them longer than expected. “I’ve got it.”

“You’ll stay with the doctor?” Tonya had to insist or she wouldn’t be able to rest. “Assign someone and stay until they get here?”

“My word on it. Neil’s updating the boss when he figures out where she is. I’m off duty for now.”

“Thank you.” Tonya pressed a quick kiss to Kenn’s stubby cheek. “Wake me in five hours.”

“I will.” Kenn didn’t worry over the lie. She needed more than five hours. He was just glad that he didn’t have to worry about someone trying to kill her like they were Angela.

Jimmy gestured. “Get him on his feet. I’m done.”

Kenn helped the camp member stand. He was led away by a family member who didn’t say a word of thanks.

Kenn understood and resented it at the same time. They’d had to wait for injuries that were serious. Because of it, they’d suffered more than necessary. At the same time, some of those folks would have died and a broken leg was little compared to a life.

“Next?!” The doctor’s tired bark echoed.

Kenn swept the bottom floor, where a medical area was being set up for the wounded who couldn’t be transported upstairs yet. He watched Tonya curl up near Samantha, who hadn’t moved or even moaned in hours. Few people believed she would survive.

“Me.”

Jimmy and Kenn turned at the same time to see Doug staggering from the chamber where they’d been dumping bodies down the pit.

Kenn caught the doctor as he fainted, lowering the man to the ground, but he couldn’t look away from Doug. Covered in blood and other gore, he was like a zombie from the old horror films. The fact that he’d just come from the dead pool didn’t help the impression. “Doug?”

The big man nodded slowly, hand coming up. “I feel strange.”

Still not convinced things were okay, Kenn inched a hand toward his gun belt. “Strange, how?”

Doug stared at him with bleary, unblinking eyes. “I’m really hungry.”

*Oh, shit!* Kenn panicked, retreating. “Uh, we’ve got MREs.”

“Doug!” Romeo flew toward the big man. He was one of the last kids waiting to be carried upstairs.

Doug caught the boy before Kenn could intervene.

*Do I shoot?!*

“Easy, grunt.” Angela had been drawn by Kenn’s panic. It didn’t happen often. She swept the scene and burst out laughing. Doug had been knocked out. Someone had thought he was dead and put him in the body pile.

Doug stared in confusion as Romeo hugged him. “I missed something.”

Angela was still laughing.

Kenn flushed. “I’ve gotta get more sleep.”

# Chapter Nine

**Numbers**

A picture containing light

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“I** found something.” Neil came to Angela. He scanned Doug, figured out what had happened, and dismissed the gentle giant as luckier than most. Neil handed Angela a small, bent card.

Angela stared at the numbers, trying to remember the ranges.

“I don’t remember either.” Neil scanned Sam and found her the same.

Angela put the card into the pocket of her jeans, distractedly wishing for clean clothes. “When Samantha wakes up, ask her. She spent a lot of time in that cubby. I’d bet she knows. Until then, there’s nothing we can do about it without locating the rest of the medication boxes. I should have had multiple stashes around the cave.”

“With more food and water.” Neil regretted not thinking of it before the quake. Like the other council members, he’d believed it was better to keep their supplies together to prevent theft. “A lot of the camp wants you to stop digging. Kenn and I were listening while we scouted. There are two places we can try.”

“What about you?”

Neil shrugged. “Refugees or the UN, doesn’t matter. They both suck. If we can get the meat gathered and start rebuilding, maybe we *should* stay in.”

“What about water?”

Neil hadn’t been into the water room yet, but he’d come by it when he carried Sam to the doctor. “Low?”

“Less than a week’s worth.” Angela stretched, back cracking in painful, delightful pops. “We’ll have a few days beyond that, of course, because we’re finding personal stashes, but right about the time that the UN arrives, we’ll all be getting very thirsty.”

“Bad time for it.”

“Yes. We have to clear a way out and get to snow for water collection–all while the refugees see and hear us.”

“We have to create a distraction for them.” Kenn handed Angela a sheet of crumpled paper that she shoved into her pocket with the radiation badge.

“Maybe.” Angela refused to commit. “If not, I have other ideas. We’ll need the equipment for it. The weather isn’t nice right now.”

“We don’t notice it because we’re so far underground, right?” Neil scanned the exits, restless despite all the walking.

“Yes.” She rotated toward the ladder. “That’s one of the biggest reasons I agreed to bring us here.”

The men heard the loathing in her tone, the regret, but there was little they could say. Safe Haven had voted on it. Adrian had led them here and she’d helped. That weight wouldn’t ease without serious payments.

Doug spoke to Kenn. “What do you need?”

“For you to go to the showers. Neil will escort you.” Kenn swept Doug’s attire. “You’re creeping me out.”

“Why do I need an escort?”

“So you don’t get shot before you get there.” Neil led Doug to the rear of the bottom floor where a portable shower had been rigged up. A soft fire nearby was keeping the cleaned water hot.

Neil waved off the surprise and cries as Doug was noticed.

Kenn hefted the unconscious doctor over a shoulder and put him down by Tonya so he could watch over them both.

Satisfied things were as under control as they could be for this situation, Kenn began rooting through debris piles that hadn’t been touched yet. He would salvage anything they could use.

When Neil returned, he scanned Samantha again and then joined Kenn.

Kenn sensed that Neil needed to talk about Jeremy, but he wasn’t sure what to say. *I’m sorry*, wasn’t enough.

“Have your gifts shown up yet?”

Kenn stared in surprise, guilt making his voice crack. “What?”

Neil tugged to dislodge a dented flashlight. “You heard me.”

Faced with the old lies and the need to hide, Kenn was too tired to keep it going. “Thoughts, sometimes. Nothing else yet.”

Neil grunted in disappointment. He’d been hoping Kenn was a healer. Cody was too young, Angela was too weak, Conner and Kendle weren’t here, and that only left Leeann. Neil didn’t want to ask if she could. It felt wrong, even though it might save Samantha’s life.

“Leave the kid alone...” Kenn paused, thinking of how valuable Samantha was. “Talk to the boss first, at least.”

Neil nodded stiffly. He would, but if Angela said no, he wouldn’t listen.

“I don’t believe the kid can help. If she could, Angela would have her under guard.”

“Maybe that’s why Angela doesn’t.” Neil had considered that. “To protect her.”

Kenn shrugged. It was possible. “Still, leave her alone unless you get permission.”

“Easy for you to say.” Neil glowered. “Your woman is fine.”

Kenn glanced over in time to see the knife coming down. *No, she isn’t!*

Tonya punched the nun in the throat, knocking the woman away from her.

The nun tripped over her grimy skirt and fell. The knife clattered across the stone.

“Devil child! It’s one of them!”

Kenn and Neil hurried to restrain the woman, but with the doctor knocked out and the drugs still missing, all they could do was gag her and tie her hands.

Angela and Marc reached them at the same time, followed by groups of Eagles and camp members.

Kenn locked eyes with Marc. *She tried to kill Tonya!*

Marc adjusted for the knowledge that Kenn could communicate mentally now. Marc had been expecting it for a while.

“It’s okay…” Angela placed a hand on the shrieking woman’s shoulder. “Easy.”

The nun drooped and then fell over.

“That’s better.” Angela knelt by the woman and arranged her so she would be comfortable. Angela also untied the gag and ropes. “She’ll sleep for a few hours and forget this. When she wakes up, she’ll need a guard. Forgetting won’t change how she feels.”

Listening from the ladder above the chaos, Billy froze. *Forgetting didn’t change how I feel*. *I have a job waiting for me and it isn’t here. I need to go.*

“Pass the word that we’ll hold a camp meeting during dinner, which will be after everyone wakes up.” Angela ended the conversation. “We’ll do updates and make choices. Until then, try to sleep.” She gave Marc a warm look. “I’ll be around.”

Marc smiled. Then he waved Gus along instead of an Eagle. Like Angela, he knew who the remaining unvetted people were. Gus wasn’t on that list.

**2**

This is a mandatory camp meeting.” Angela held up a tattered notebook. “Please sign in. We’re trying to get an update on anyone who may still be missing.” Angela handed it to the closest person. “We’ll start with what we know, allow everyone to ask questions that weren’t covered, and then we’ll vote.” She waved at Kenn. “He’ll tell you how and when we’re getting out. This part, we’re not voting on. You will not be allowed to endanger the rest of us because you can’t wait two more days to leave. We’ve all suffered down here. You’re not alone.”

Kenn stepped up to the front of the mess that had been repaired. Having power on the top level had allowed them to salvage flooring from the debris and weld it into enough of the ledges to create a new floor. Not sturdy enough to hold them all at the same time, half the camp was sitting in the tunnel and reading room.

“We drew some maps. The roads south are clear, but we believe the UN will use those. Avoid all roads south. If you’re leaving, go west and circle around, and then head south.” Kenn swept the crowd that was short over a hundred. “Any of you are welcome to meet us at the coast. Safe Haven will always be your home.”

Angela approved the add, remembering a time when she had fed those lines to the Marine. Now, he didn’t need that; he’d learned to be compassionate on his own.

“After we clear the tunnel, Eagles will scout the exit and search for our stash of vehicles. Then those cars and trucks have to be prepped. They won’t fire up after months of being frozen.” Kenn heard the mutters and rolled his mental eye. *All set to run out there, but you forgot about the cold, the refugees, and not having wheels ready to roll. That’s why we call you sheep.* *You don’t think. You just stampede.*

Angela stayed expressionless, but around Kenn, a few of the other descendants nodded in savage agreement. Angela understood, but she didn’t view them that way. These were her people, like them or not.

Standing nearby, Jennifer agreed with Angela the most. She understood the sentiments of the descendants, but she couldn’t help loving their people. Even the ones she wanted to beat on still held value. They were America’s chosen survivors.

“We’re going to pool the supplies and distribute as fairly as we can. It will be based on the number in the group. For example, if half the camp stays, half the supplies stay. If a quarter of the camp leaves, they get a quarter of the supplies to split. Marc is supervising distribution.”

Marc didn’t expect arguments and there weren’t any. Everyone knew he would be fair, but they also knew he wouldn’t tolerate theft, coercion, or whining about the amounts.

“We need to know your decision at the end of this meeting. You can put it by your name on the sign-in sheet if you want or write it on a different page. Just make sure I see it.”

“How are we splitting the power?” Tony didn’t care about the beans and bullets. “Who gets the magic?!”

Marc stood up, glowering at the man. “The descendants have chosen to follow their alpha.”

“All of them? Willingly?” Simon had counted on having at least a few magic users to help them. “What about all the orphan kids?”

The kids that Neil and Seth’s teams had rescued from the boarding school ran over to Marc.

Tony scowled when more kids and teenagers went to stand with Marc.

Watching, Angela was proud for her mate and still glad that Adrian wasn’t here to be hurt by a show of support that should have been his to enjoy.

“We’ll die without you.” An old woman sitting by Marc’s feet stared in tearful reproach.

Nursing a black eye, Tony added his support. “You’re making us come. We won’t survive without magic users.”

“You’ll die even with us here.” Angela waved a hand at the cave. “Didn’t you notice that we can’t protect you anymore? The hundred bodies weren’t a clue?”

Tony flushed scarlet.

Angela signaled Kenn to go on.

He did. “Five days from now, we will do what I’ve already told you and then anyone can take their things and go.”

“What about the refugees out there?” Simon had been nominated to replace Angela as the leader staying in the mountain, along with several others.

“They’re dying.” Kenn didn’t believe censoring his words would help, so he hadn’t. “We have the badges now and later, we’ll have the cameras reconnected to prove it.”

“Is it from fallout?” Logan didn’t care. He just wanted a distraction from the voices in his mind.

“Yes.” Kenn wondered why Neil hadn’t been given this part of informing the camp. “The conditions out there are bad. Five more days in that toxic soup at those levels will kill them all, like with Mikel’s men. We believe the Mexicans are already gone. That means you have to hit the ground running. Once you’re cleared to go, hit the gas and don’t stop. And for crap’s sake, don’t go east. The cloud was drifting east the last time we had a readout, which was two days ago.”

“Some of them may be alive.” Marc wanted everyone prepared, but he also wanted camp members to fall in line behind the Eagles–where he believed they belonged until they could care for themselves. “There may be fighting, but we expect that will happen while we’re trying to prep the vehicles. That’s another reason for you to wait until we get things ready. Let us fight them for you, like we’ve been doing since the war.”

Marc’s bitter tone brought varied reactions. For a few of the camp, it was resentment that they didn’t have powers, but for most, it was guilt. They’d taken a free ride without trying to change.

“We request that all groups keep radio silence for the first few days and that you don’t call here to the mountain at all. If refugees believe it was all destroyed, our people who stay might have a chance to rebuild.”

“That brings us to the bigger threat.” Kyle gestured toward the top. “What happens when we do go out?”

Kenn fed the next lines with passion. “The descendants will handle the UN like we did the other problems that have challenged us–without mercy!”

Eagles cheered, as did a few of the camp members.

“When are they coming?” Tony wanted to be gone before then. He was collecting people to head southwest even though he’d also been nominated for leadership here when Angela left.

“Six days.” Angela was depending on Cody’s timeline. There was darkness whenever she tried to look. She’d never felt so weak. “If you go out before we handle it, there’s a high chance you’ll be caught and used against us.” Angela swept the camp, making eye contact with those who wanted to leave. “I won’t negotiate for your return. I can’t.” Telling them if they were caught, she wouldn’t save them.

“Will there be another big fight? Like when you took down the government?” Gus had heard the radio calls and the stories from the men and women who’d been there.

“I think so.” Angela sighed. “But I’m too weak to use any magic right now and all the kids are too young to even make the connections. Coming here hurt us in many ways, but please, you must know I’d kill all of them for even one of you if there was a choice. Just let us handle things first and then you can go in peace, without staring over your shoulder every night.”

Those words were a balm to some of the camp. Worries over resentments from magic users had caused more than a few of them to hide their choice until now.

Angela watched people ask for the notebook to be passed back so they could add or change their decision, heart sinking. She’d known that comfort would allow more of them to run, but it still felt as if they were abandoning her. In fact, the names being added right now were an awful blow. She stared at Neil in hurt surprise.

Neil didn’t talk as he scrawled Samantha’s name and then his own on the bottom line. He added ‘Group of two’. “She woke up an hour ago. We made the choice together. Don’t bother her. Let her rest.” Neil left the meeting to go make sure of it.

Angela’s heart unclenched. She held herself in check and didn’t react again.

Neil’s choice sent a fresh wave of abandonment through the crowd; there was only mutters and paper rattling for a few minutes.

*Adrian wouldn’t like this*, Marc contemplated. *He’d be talking them all into staying with him, into trusting him even when they knew they shouldn’t.*

*That’s why Adrian isn’t here*. Jennifer tried to make sure only Marc caught the thought.

*Angela doesn’t want them to go?*

*Some of these people were destined to die on the trip to the island or after.*

*She’s saving them*. Marc calmed down about how she would react afterwards. *By not encouraging them to go, she’s hoping it changes their future.*

*Yes. Amazing, isn’t she?*

*I’ve always thought so.*

*She adores you.*

Marc waited for more, but Jennifer left it there. Angela was regarding her with a lifted brow that made the teen wonder if the boss had been listening. Jennifer didn’t want Angela to suspect she was passing secrets or anything else.

*I don’t*. Angela finally let Jennifer in all the way. *Not even you can keep me out, Jen. I’m not the same anymore. The call…changed me somehow.*

*You’re an alpha.*

*Yes, but it’s more than that.*

*From the lifeforces you’ve taken?*

*From being connected with the Creator for a split instant. He marked me.*

*For good or worse?*

*That has not yet been revealed.*

Marc winced. He didn’t tell the women that the same thing was happening to him and he hadn’t even been there for the call. It felt like a battle was coming and he was in training for a major role in the fight. It had felt this way since the day the war had destroyed the world.

**3**

“This is Kendle. Anyone there?”

Angela denied Kenn when he lifted a brow. “We can’t answer radio calls from anyone.”

“They’ll think we’re dead.”

“Yes. So will others.” Angela stored the papers with the camp choices in her pocket, but she didn’t ask how the vote had gone. She assumed Simon had been chosen. He was a far cry from the leaders who’d come before him.

“This is Kendle, calling Safe Haven. Come in, Safe Haven.”

Kenn was curious if Kendle had found the boat.

“No.” Angela only answered so he would know she was getting his thoughts. “That wasn’t Kendle’s true mission, though she wasn’t told either.”

“What did you send her out for?” Kenn had a terrible idea forming.

“We couldn’t beat them on their own turf.” Angela surprised both of them by explaining at all. It showed trust in the Marine. “I needed them to come to us. Now, they are.”

“I never stood a chance, did I?” Kenn half joked.

Angela stared at him. “If not for the war, I would have rotted in your prison to keep my son safe. I thank fate every day for that release.”

Kenn winced and went in the other direction. Some mistakes from the past would never be erased or forgotten about. He understood that now. Part of his reform was living with her bitterness. She had a right to it.

“This is Kendle. Come in, Safe Haven!”

Angela switched the radio off and went to the crushed level. They’d brought out chunks of meat she thought were beef, but could have been pig. Now, they were hauling out flattened chickens. The smell was enough to make grown men gag, but it was better than the basement of dogs they’d rescued. Everyone was on break right now, trying to clean up.

“We got the last assassin!” Brandon blared through the corridor as he and Kyle joined her. “It was Cammie, a rookie. She just tried to stab Neil.”

Angela didn’t speak. *I miscounted. One of these days, it’ll get me killed.*

“Damn it!” Kyle swore, following her line of sight.

Jennifer didn’t struggle under Francis’s blade. Autumn was in his other arm, being squeezed so hard she was having trouble breathing.

Francis jerked his chin at Angela. “I’ll trade you for these two. Say no or use your gift and I’ll kill them both.”

*Do it!* Face almost calm, Jennifer was mentally screaming at Kyle. *Do it!*

Angela lunged forward to the right as Kyle drew and fired. She caught the baby and spun out of the chaos before she could be hit with either falling body.

“Jenny!” Kyle rushed forward.

Angela checked the crying child, relieved to find her scared but not injured. She glanced at Jennifer.

“Medic!”

Angela took the baby toward the top floor as Kyle started shouting, cooing. “She’ll be okay, sweetheart. Don’t connect right now. Let’s go check on Samantha. I heard you can talk to her babies.”

“Medic! Help!”

Angela climbed the ladder around Eagles sliding and jumping down to answer Kyle’s shouts. “Is that right? Please tell them they’ll get to see the island. I promise.”

Kyle held his hand over the gushing wound, once again in torment. This time, it *was* his heart lying there bleeding.

“Let me by!” The tired doctor hadn’t been awake long.

Jimmy lifted Kyle’s hand and probed the angry wound, ignoring Kyle’s flinch and impatience. He dug deep. “It went through.”

“I know that!” Kyle’s curt tone sharpened. “It’s my slug

“Cover it up.”

Kyle did, about to panic.

Jimmy ripped open a trio of packages. “We watch for infection for a day and then close it up. She’s young and strong. She’ll be fine.” Jimmy paused to frown up at Kyle. “Unless she’s pregnant?”

“No! We haven’t broken the rules!”

“Good, cause that might drain her. If there’s no infection, she’ll be fine.” The doctor liked Kyle even though he didn’t want to. “…I thought you were the best.”

“He pushed her into it when he saw me firing.” Kyle lifted his chin. “But I would have shot her to kill him, so stick that up your ass.”

Jimmy chuckled without amusement. “Of that, I have no doubt. When the boss says fire, you do it.”

“No one ordered me to shoot.” Kyle watched. If the doctor knew that was a lie, then he’d read Jennifer’s order and that meant the man was another hidden descendant.

“It’s how they train you.” Jimmy began cleaning the wound. “I’ve watched it for months. They tell you killing is okay, that it’s good.”

Kyle picked up the tone of someone trying to convert followers for a dangerous, unapproved mission. He stared. “You’re not going with us.”

“No.”

“How can you abandon the people who saved you?”

“How can you support the people who blew up the world?” The doctor had never worked in conditions like this. Even right after the war, they’d had power for a few weeks and then he’d found a group at a hospital. This was a nightmare.

Kyle had stopped talking. The doctor didn’t think he’d won, but it bothered him that the mobster had stopped talking. Instead of loathing, the doctor often felt sorry for the way Kyle was used by leadership. “You deserve a better life than to be their killer.”

Kyle stiffened. Jennifer had said that to him right after the meeting…and now she’d been shot.

Jimmy stuffed the wound with cotton from the maxi pads they’d found and torn apart. They’d used all the gauze in the medical bags Neil had found.

Kyle waited. And he thought. Jimmy was both wrong and right, as was Jennifer. The opinion that mattered the most to him hadn’t weighed in on the subject yet, but he couldn’t discuss it with her. Autumn would never understand why her daddy had to kill. That’s why he’d told Jennifer yes, they could stay or go off on their own if she chose to. He wanted Adrian back in charge. There was a tiny chance the former leader would stay here if enough of his core group did too. It would get him away from Marc and Angela.

Not far away, Charlie caught that contemplation and immediately began designing ways to make it happen. Adrian here, while his mom and dad were on a romantic southern island, sounded perfect to the fast-maturing teen. He hadn’t forgotten that Adrian was a threat.

# Chapter Ten

**Fighting Fate**

A picture containing sitting, black, white, room

Description automatically generated

**1**

**M**arc leaned over the narrow gap as Adrian crawled through it. “Where have you been?!”

Adrian jumped, banging his hurt shoulder on a sharp rock. “Damn it, Marc!”

Marc snickered, straightening.

Grumbling, Adrian pulled a large bag in and then began closing the gap with heavy boulders.

James and Booth hurried to help him.

Marc glared at the soldiers on duty, certain they’d helped Adrian get out and then recovered the hole.

“He had orders.” Peter shrugged at Marc’s glower. “Sorry, man, but she’s the boss, and she’s back, you know?”

Marc grunted. That was what he wanted, but it didn’t include all the sneaking around. “Where have you been?” Marc followed Adrian when the man went by him with his burden.

Adrian spun and shoved the bag into Marc’s arms. “Those eggs go to the cook. This corridor comes out on a ledge that’s being used as a nursery. I got about a quarter of them before I was chased off.” He didn’t tell Marc that Lawrence’s body was still out there.

Marc spotted the feathers in Adrian’s hair and snorted at the images.

“Our stash is there, but if the refugees come up any farther, they’ll find it. The temperatures are nasty and it’s keeping them in their tents and cars. When it breaks, our barrier won’t hold.”

Marc kept quiet, smelling game bird and coldness.

“There are hundreds of them. Some are sick. I didn’t want to talk in front of the soldiers.” Adrian rubbed his cold hands together, wishing he’d found gloves. “One of them may be like us, so I couldn’t send messages. Sorry for ignoring you.”

Marc noted the possible new magic user. “How did you vote?”

Adrian stopped, but didn’t turn. “Bet you can’t guess.”

Marc’s lips thinned into a dangerous line. “Despite your banishment, you’ll tag along.”

“Nope.”

“Have you spoken to Angela about that?”

“Nope.”

“Then I won’t hold my breath.”

“I wish you would, though,” Adrian confessed, walking again. “Your jealousy will be what kills her. Even Kenn knew when to quit.”

“Stop it.”

Angela’s order brought the men to a halt. Expecting a tirade, they faced her angry stance in the shadows.

“I don’t need you, either of you.” Angela drew in a deep breath and tried one last time to fight fate. “Maybe it would be better if you *both* stayed here.”

As she vanished, Adrian turned to Marc in shock. “What have you done?”

“Beyond restarting the old shit with you just now, nothing.” Marc scanned his rival. “What have *you* done?”

Adrian sighed. “The right thing. I’m staying.”

“And I’m letting you.” Marc went down the tunnel without saying anything else.

Adrian went to the portable shower on the bottom floor, where the water barrel was low. If not for the bird shit on the eggs, he would save the water for someone else to use. After he was cleaned, he planned to go dig out their refrigerator and get it working. They had a lot of meat to store. Not happy, but at least content to be useful, Adrian missed the silence. He was alerted to someone being there by a footstep.

Naked, Adrian listened for the attack. *Never gonna be rid of all the assassins.*

“I’m not an assassin.” Marc smiled coldly. “At least not in the normal sense.”

Adrian’s heart thudded. “I’m getting out of your way. What more do you want?”

“The same as you, of course.” Marc’s evil smile fell into disappointment. “But if I can’t have your death, being a thousand miles apart will be a good start.”

“So what do you want?”

“You can’t lead another camp. You’re a traitor.”

“Kyle and Kenn will lead.” Adrian gestured at the bag in Marc’s arms. “I’m a scavenger.”

“Yes, you are.”

Tiring of the intimidation, Adrian dumped the bucket to rinse.

Marc was relieved to hear that Adrian wasn’t going to be a leader, but it also worried him. “You’d stay for that?”

“For her.” Adrian gave complete honesty this time, hating himself for the truth. “I’ll never be able to leave her alone. I want her too much, need her too much. This way, I can’t hurt the dream anymore.”

Marc left. He really went to the new cooking area this time to deliver the food, but he didn’t believe a single word the former boss had spoken.

Adrian sighed. Marc would never trust him again. The camp would once he was useful enough, but he still wouldn’t take leadership. He’d had that honor and burden. He couldn’t carry it anymore. *Doing the right thing sucks*. *No wonder most people don’t bother.*

**2**

The sounds of hammering and digging continued throughout the day and into the evening as Safe Haven continued to recover. It wasn’t easy when the news came of finding two more bodies. Alice and Rodney, their butchers, had been in the animal area when it collapsed. Doug being alive did help, but it also hurt. Everyone who’d lost someone was now tempted to go into the body pit to make sure they were really dead. Angela hadn’t wanted the camp to know about the dumping pit, but there had been no way to hide it when relatives and friends had insisted on carrying their loved one to the burial site. The crew filling the hole with loose gravel had suffered the hard stares and tears, but no one had refused. They understood there wasn’t a choice.

The smells in the rest of the cave were great. Cooking meat was a sign of life. Angela sank down onto a pile of clothes, cradling the hot mug of tea their new cook, Brittani, had made. They hadn’t found any coffee, but the tea was perfect as far as Angela was concerned. So was the job for the pretty black woman, for now. Angela was grateful Brittani had cooking skills, but she wouldn’t remain in the mess. Gus was first, but his mate would also join her army.

Marc lifted his head, already half buried in the pile with Cody. It had been two days since the quake and everyone was wiped out. He’d ended the shift by gathering a pile of clothes and putting them in the weapon compartment so they could rest for a bit and free up the guard who had been here. “You just now getting here?”

“Yeah.” Angela leaned against the hard wall of the cave. She hoped it would stay peaceful while she slept.

“Things okay?”

“Yeah.”

Marc yawned. “You still mad at me?”

Angela sipped her tea, enjoying the warmth on her hands. Without their heaters and vents blowing warm air, the cave was becoming cold again on these upper levels.

“Angie?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

She chuckled. “Some days, but not this time. I understand.”

“Are you going to be okay if he stays?”

“I’ll survive and so will they. It’s for the best.”

Marc didn’t hear anything bad in her thoughts or tone. “Coming in here soon? It smells like feet.”

Angela snorted. “In a bit. I have hot tea.”

Marc let sleep pull him down.

Angela waited until Marc’s light snoring said her mind was her own again and dropped her mental shield. The immediate flood was scary.

After a minute, she forced it all away and spent the time being glad her family had survived. So many hadn’t. Her witch insisted a lot of those gone had been trouble in one way or the other, but the words weren’t a comfort to Angela even if they were true. She’d wanted all of them to live. Her visions hadn’t foreseen so much death.

*Would you have done things differently?* Adrian asked from the floor below them.

Angela considered. *I would have warned them.*

*Would that have changed anything?*

*Only who died.*

Adrian sighed at the sarcasm. He hated her pain. *It wasn’t your job to decide which ones were saved. Fate picks that, not you.*

Angela winced at the copy of her words to him when she’d first joined his refugee camp. So much had changed since then that those days often felt like a dream. Everything before being shot was like that. *I’m losing them.*

*Fate is also making that choice*.

*I lost the notebooks*. She switched topics abruptly.

*Do you need them?*

*Not anymore. I’ve got it all memorized.*

*Just copy it from the beginning of our journey when you’re ready to pass it on to someone.*

*To Jennifer.*

*Yes.*

*And after her?*

*One of Samantha’s sons. I couldn’t tell which.*

*What’s going on in the north right now?*

*Herds are gathering under nature’s command.*

*Killing off survivors?*

*Yes. You’re dreaming about it too.*

*Yes.*

*Tracy wants to stay.*

*I know.*

*Are you going to talk to her about it?*

*No. Charlie sees things too. He’ll convince her.*

*Maybe he’s not supposed to go.*

*Maybe.*

Adrian grunted, shifting in the clothes pile near the soldiers he would be on duty with in a few hours. *You’re very…unreachable right now.*

*I’m weighing my options, like everyone else.*

*You’re…* Adrian sat up in concern. *You’re thinking about staying.*

Angela didn’t answer.

*This is Marc’s fault.* Adrian concentrated. He spoke directly to Marc. *Fix this*.

Angela glanced at Marc, not able to track him in her mind even though he was obviously awake.

Marc sat up, sighing. “We need to talk.”

Angela nodded. “Yes, we do.”

*Go away*, Marc snarled at Adrian, angry that he’d missed her emotional chaos and Adrian hadn’t.

Adrian bowed out, closing the mental door. Marc wanted her on the island. He would convince her. Adrian went to sleep.

Angela stared at Marc in anger and honesty. “If you’re breaking our deal, so am I.”

Marc stared at her uneasily. “How did I break it?”

“He gets the camp and you get me.”

“So if he doesn’t go, we can’t be together?”

Angela set her cup down. “We made a deal, Marcus. A deal that already lets you take advantage of me. Break it and we’re through.” Angela left as he began sputtering excuses and reasons. She went to the bottom level to check on their wounded and the doctor. She was too angry to sleep now.

Trapped in his own web, Marc burrowed under the laundry and let full sleep claim him.

In his dreams, Marc told his demon everything.

Worried that his host was being corrupted, the demon fought his nature to tell Marc what he needed to hear. *If you stay here, you’ll live. She knows all of your secrets and doesn’t care about them. Your life is her prize.*

Now on the bottom level, Angela gritted her teeth in frustration. Now that Marc knew the truth, her plan to push him away wouldn’t succeed. She’d tried everything else to protect him. The only thing left was for her to stay here so he would too. That meant someone else had to guide them to the island and it had to be Adrian.

*If fate wants his life that badly, it will happen here*, the witch warned. *You know that. Why do you continue to fight it?*

*Have you never loved anyone?* Angela growled mentally*. How sad for you to never be human!*

The witch departed in a huff, slamming the mental door.

Glad to be alone with her thoughts, Angela kept trying to find a way to save her camp and her heart.

**3**

Adrian woke to the sound of laughter. It brought him upright, staring around in confusion.

Next to him, David and the other soldiers also woke, not sure what was going on.

Peals of laughter echoed through the cave, waking everyone with the now rare sound. They’d lost a hundred loved ones. Who was disrespecting them with loud laughter?

*That’s Angie*. Marc and Adrian recognized it at the same time. *She sounds happy.*

The camp gravitated toward the sound, curious and uneasy. Angela hadn’t laughed like that since they’d come to this cursed mountain. They filled the corridor outside the repaired mess, not willing to go in and interrupt once they discovered what was happening.

Adrian made sure that Marc was already there before joining him in the charred doorway. Kids running by caught his attention and held it. All dressed, washed, and faces dotted in crumbs, it was obvious that they’d been cared for, but so had the mess. It had been swept and tables had been brought in. Rickety and charred, with missing chunks, it was a reminder that life goes on.

Angela blew the bubbles faster, laughing at the kids as they popped them, but also at the cat that was doing the same between their feet. Simple, all it had taken was five hours of hard labor and a couple of others who’d also been too upset to sleep.

Angela handed the sticky bottle to Jennifer and motioned toward the kitchen. “We found oatmeal packets and there’s a cleaned batch of water. Come eat, and if you feel like it, blow some bubbles.”

Angela went to the uneven counters that had been on the floor below it. She made herself a packet by pouring the steamy water into the paper, a little at a time. “It won’t hold long, so eat fast.” She gave the men in the doorway a nod. “While you eat, I’ll tell you something that was told to me an hour ago. It’ll make the oatmeal easier to swallow.”

Angela perched on a rough ledge and shook the packet, then held it closed. She smiled at the camp as they entered, motioning toward the food. She held up her packet and donned another grin. “Quaker Oats. The breakfast of all apocalypse champions.”

Loud snorts and surprised chuckles filled the room.

Marc and Adrian shared a look that said they’d missed something important, something that could have helped, but she’d caught it.

Angela shuddered at the mouthful, swallowing, and then grinned. “Smooth to the last gag.”

More snickers hit the walls, lightening the mood.

Despite not really liking oatmeal, Angela finished the entire packet, then tossed it into the trashcan she’d lugged up the ladder. “The cameras are functioning. Ozzie found the right wire, Theo spliced it, and they were able to connect it to a laptop. You’ll get to view the images later. Right now, just know they aren’t doing well out there. By the time the UN comes, any remaining refugees won’t be strong enough to fight.” She held up a hand. “Which brings me to the news that will make these packets taste better. I said the camera was on. We connected that same wire bundle to the explosives around the mountain. When the UN comes, we can trigger it and bury them alive. Descendants will handle any survivors.”

A loud cheer broke out, echoing into every passage.

“In a week, this will all be over. In the meantime, let’s get this cave together for the folks who are staying, you know?” Angela tried to sound eager. “It doesn’t feel right leaving them with a mess they won’t have the manpower to fix themselves.”

“Has she been to sleep yet?” Adrian was still standing in the rear of the crowded mess. Made smaller by the repairs, it was serving to show the camp they still had a lot of people.

“Not that I know of.” Marc was in awe of her mind. He’d known of the explosives and had even helped to place a few of them, but he hadn’t thought about the wire bundle. It was wrapped around itself dozens of times. Putting the fuse in the center of it had been brilliant. The way things were arranged, any detonation, on any part of the mountain, would trigger the rest. The only way to stop it would be to cut every single bundle at the connector part and no one would go to that much trouble. They would cut the top or the bottom, maybe even both, and leave the rest.

Adrian turned to stare at a new map on the wall. He recognized the handiwork. No, Angie hadn’t been to sleep yet. She’d been caring for the herd. “She’s amazing.”

Marc spun around to glare, but Adrian still was studying the map.

“We’ll have cooked meat for lunch.” Angela promised. “I tried the first batch a couple hours ago. Tasted great. I haven’t started hurling, so I believe we’re good on food now.”

“And reckless.” Adrian studied the map harder.

“Yeah.” Marc wasn’t happy about that. Testing the food herself was dangerous. Now that people knew she was doing it, that also made their food a larger target.

Adrian frowned. “Are we clear on that now? Eight of eight?”

“As far as I know.” Marc shrugged. “I’m watching for more. Blind spots suck.”

Adrian understood Marc had received that always frustrating answer about it not being revealed yet and assumed there might be more problems they didn’t know about yet.

“I hope not.” Marc was deep into Adrian’s thoughts anytime they were around each other. “Just a feeling.”

With no reason to doubt Marc’s instincts, Adrian began searching for the next possible problem. If he’d overlooked the obvious cord solution, then he’d done the same with other issues.

“If she stays here with me and you take the camp to the island, is there happiness for any of us?”

Adrian stiffened, resisting the light alpha wave that Marc had tossed with the surprise demand. “These people will survive.”

“And our triangle of anger?”

Adrian snorted at the wording. “Triple misery, like we’ve had in each lifetime we’ve tried this. It never ends well for us.”

Marc sighed. “I’m not fighting with you anymore. All deals are off.”

“What did she say?” Adrian was aware of Angela watching them from the other end of the chattering, eating, bubble-blowing camp.

“That I was taking advantage of her.”

“You are. We *both* are.”

“She’s trying to save my life.”

“That’s what I believe too.” Adrian noted Angela’s frown. “Fate is determined to get you on Pitcairn Island.”

“And you.”

“But as an outcast. When we leave here, I’m back to being banished. Maybe even before that.”

“You’ll keep your distance?”

“In the ways you mean, yes.”

“In every way.”

“No, and I’ll show you why.” Adrian turned toward Angela, sending an open wave of respect and approval.

Angela lit up like a kid on Christmas morning, grin widening to erase the tension from her face. Bathed in Adrian’s glow, she was once again the young girl Marc had loved and abandoned.

“She needs me.” Adrian left, unable to take the emotions bubbling up. He didn’t want the man in his thoughts right now. When Marc died, when fate took him, Angela would need someone to put her back together.

*Or vice versa*. Angela dug the knife in deep. *I’ll trade you for him in a heartbeat.*

Adrian winced. *I’m sorry.*

*So am I*. Angela fired the next mental bullet. *You can’t be trusted. You’re the threat he’s still searching for.*

*Yes*, Adrian agreed, not hiding his Joy. *And you love me, want me, need me. How’s that for irony?*

*It’s a horrible guilt that I carry.*

*But you get to be a leader, so stop whining*. Adrian was unable to contain his bitterness. *Go on and love your boy scout while you can. We both know you’ll be in my bed less than a month after his death.*

Angela gasped in pain. *Bastard*.

*Yep.* Adrian began to whistle. *I’d wait a lot longer for you.* *It’s already been thousands of years, love. A few more are a drop in the bucket to me now that I know what’s coming.*

*I’ll stop that future.*

*And I’ll help you if I can, but fate has his life planned out and you know that. You’ve tried to interfere in several ways, but none of them have worked because you’re not the Creator. You can’t control death.*

*Stop it.*

*No, you stop it. Be happy you have him right now. Love him, make another baby if it helps you, but understand this, woman. After he’s gone, you’ll beg me to love you.*

*Never.*

Adrian chuckled mirthlessly, sliding down the ladder to the bottom floor so he could join the water crew. *I love you. I always have and I always will. Now leave me alone. I don’t want anything to do with you until I can love you openly. I’m tired of being the toy you toss to the cat when he’s getting too close to the truth in your heart.*

*What truth?!*

*You love us both, but you don’t like either one of us. You’d rather be alone.*

Angela slammed the mental door and stormed into the kitchen to get a moment alone to recover. He was right. After the crap they’d done and the extra stress they’d put her through, she didn’t want to belong to either of them. She wanted to spend time with whomever she wanted, whenever she wanted, and nothing more. All those dreams of happy ever after were in Marc’s memories and Adrian’s dreams. It was so far from what she wanted that it wasn’t even in sight.

Sex and physical bonding were nice. She enjoyed both, but they came with so much drama that she didn’t believe she would ever be happy again. If she got to make the choice today, without it killing anyone or destroying the dream, she would declare herself single and tell them both to go to hell. It was unconscionable that they would be worried over garbage like this while their fellow camp members were rotting in the tunnel below. The respect she’d once had for both men lowered another notch. *Maybe Hilda was right.* *I should be rooting for Marcella.*

*What is the dream, exactly?*

Angela found Kenn sitting in the corner of the charred kitchen with a cup of something that steamed. She wasn’t surprised by his gift, but she was surprised that he wasn’t using it to his advantage yet.

“He always said he’d explain the rest of it to me when I was ready, but it doesn’t feel right to ask him.”

“That probably means you’re ready.” Angela studied Kenn, noting how tight he was wired. “We’re creating a society the Maker will approve of and accept.”

Kenn had made a mental list of what it could be, but that hadn’t been on it. Despite being so close to Adrian, he hadn’t added up those clues.

“Why are you twitchy?”

Kenn shrugged. “I want to stay and she wants to go. She wants to stay and I want to go. We can’t settle on it.”

“Yeah, I noticed your choice wasn’t on the sheet.”

“I’m torn.”

“There’s no need to be.” Angela put him out of his misery. “Adrian’s going to the island. So am I.”

Kenn’s expression lightened. “Really?”

“I’ve seen it.” She scanned his dirty clothes and weary position in the chair. “You should try to sleep for a while. We’re sending you out tomorrow for water.”

Kenn’s mood lifted. He was eager to be out of here for any reason or length of time. “She made me sleep for a full eight earlier. I couldn’t doze off yet even if I wanted to.” Kenn saw the yearning glance and waved at the far corner. “Brittani had Gus over there for a while. I’ll hang out if you want to make use of it.”

Angela started to refuse and was interrupted by a huge yawn.

Kenn’s lips tilted up. “Two hours?”

Angela considered the state of things before nodding. “Three, if the peace holds.”

“You got it.”

Angela dropped onto the large pile of laundry and shut her eyes without bothering to find a comfortable position. In a lumpy pile of laundry, there wasn’t one and she refused to waste her time on it. She was asleep a minute after lying down.

Kenn didn’t leave the room.

# Chapter Eleven

**Sneaks**

A picture containing mirror, curtain

Description automatically generated

**1**

**A**ngela woke one layer at a time. The first impression told her to get busy. The second alerted her to a deep thirst and a vague hunger. The final sensation said she wasn’t alone in the bed and the heat wasn’t from Marc.

Angela jerked upright, twisting around in angry confusion.

Cody lifted his head to regard her with sleepy concern. So did Roy and Romeo. All three boys had morning hair.

Angela forced a smile for the kids. “Sorry. Bad dream.” She looked around, realizing she was surrounded by children. All of those awake sent silent declarations of loyalty.

“That’s why we’re here.” Romeo put his hand on her ankle and his cheek on Roy’s arm. “We’ll keep you safe.”

Humbled, Angela almost cried. “Thank you.”

“…honor.” Cody was almost back to sleep already. Resting next to the alpha was wonderful. He’d never felt this safe.

Hearing footsteps, Angela pulled her filthy jacket closed against the draft before sweeping the dim room. Also still streaked in dirt, Kenn was walking toward her with papers and a dented mug that steamed. It was obvious that he hadn’t been down to the portable shower yet.

Around the room, other people were sleeping on laundry piles. Angela realized all the forms were small and lifted a brow.

“The kids insisted.” Kenn shrugged, starting to feel tired. He’d handled kids and camp members while she rested. “Seemed like the safest place to me too.”

Angela noted that most of the two dozen children were descendants. “Problems?”

Kenn handed her the mug, then dropped down onto the floor. “Not yet.”

*You foresaw something.*

Kenn glanced at Cody. *He’s not safe. I can’t tell from who.*

Angela viewed Kenn’s replay without panicking. She’d just observed it in her dream, with the same problem. “I’ll assign it to someone.”

“I figured you would.” Kenn held up papers. “Read or be read to?”

Angela sipped her tea, waving. The mess floor had been repaired, but most of the kids had been placed next to the walls, where the ledges had held during the quake. Lamps swayed above them, creating a dim den that still smelled of smoke. They didn’t have water to spare for real cleaning. The charred walls glared at her, screaming with the faces of the dead. “This isn’t a good place for them. Figure out a population number per room and split the kids from the adults. Get guards posted as soon as you clear it. Only people going with us will be allowed on the top floor.”

“What about the others?”

“They’ll sort that out for themselves.”

Kenn got as comfortable on the charred floor as he could. *People first. We’ll get this out of the way and then I’ll give you some good news.* Kenn was practicing his new gift.

Angela allowed it. *Deal.*

The Marine brightened. “You’ve been out for five hours. Marc said to let you have seven, so if you could lie for me there, that’d be great.”

Angela chuckled like he expected, but she braced for bad news.

“We had to sedate Dale again. He wouldn’t stop screaming. Our nun, Sister Sarah, swears she’ll stay away from all the kids. We put Logan on her.”

“Why Logan? He hates religion of any kind.”

Kenn stared at her.

“Oh.” Angela flushed. “Okay. Keep going.”

Kenn knew she wasn’t all the way awake yet, so he didn’t comment on it. Logan would watch the nun more closely than anyone else they could have assigned. “Candy and Cynthia also have guards, but we’re letting them help with the wounded on different shifts.”

Angela sipped again, nodding to Doug when he appeared in the doorway to check on his wards. She could feel his pain over Peggy as he swept the boys, then left.

“They both want a meeting with Marc.”

Anger woke Angela another layer. “Candy, yes. Cynthia can talk to *me*.”

Kenn was surprised the reporter had survived the quake, especially with Angela’s pet dog roaming. “No one has seen Chris since you dropped out.”

Angela glanced toward the dark kitchen.

Kenn followed her line of sight. He sighed in exasperation. “How did he get by me?”

“He was here first.” Angela yawned, rubbing at her face. “Hit me with the bad.”

“The numbers are going up in here…and we’ve had three more deaths.”

“Wounded people?”

“Two were. Agnus lost a leg. Jimmy cauterized it, but we’ve run out of blood type A+. She was too weak.” Kenn steeled himself against her coming misery. “Jax died about an hour ago.”

Angela’s mood dropped.

“He was lucky we found him under all those floor stones at all.” Kenn didn’t like her pain. “He didn’t wake up. Jimmy kept him doped so he didn’t feel anything.”

A tear ran down her cheek.

Kids stirred in the piles.

Kenn sighed, fighting the urge to hug her. It was the same reaction he’d always had when delivering bad news to Adrian.

Angela locked down on her emotions. “Who was the third death? How high are the numbers?”

“Tony. Medium, approaching high. We found some of the iodine pills. Our new cook is crushing and mixing. We had a dose in the food the night of the quake.”

Angela shoved away an image of Li telling her the camp wouldn’t taste the increased levels in anything he cooked. She suddenly wished for a cigarette to soothe her ragged nerves. “Why did Marc shoot Tony?” *Why didn’t I wake up for that?*

“They wanted Jennifer and Autumn for the trip. Tony was supposed to grab the baby, but he got cold feet.”

“How do you know all that? Witness? Someone overheard?”

“When Tony found out Francis was dead, he confessed.”

“Marc shot him?”

Kenn snorted. “Kyle grabbed Tony and took off down a tunnel. If Marc hadn’t shot the poor bastard, we’d still be listening to him scream. Kyle’s hot. He has Jennifer and the baby in the cubby where you were trapped. Won’t let anyone in except the doctor.”

“Put that top on my list.” She shoved into Kenn’s thoughts. *You’re my right hand until you piss me off.*

Kenn straightened his shoulders. *That’s what I told Adrian when he came to check on you. Then I told him to get lost or I’d call Marc. He’s stalking around somewhere.*

Angela smiled as she stretched.

Kenn dropped his eyes back to the list. “The water system can’t be repaired from in here. It didn’t bend much during the quake, but it’s blocked from the top. We assume by snow, which works out because we’ll collect what we remove. I assume you still want me along for that?”

“Yes.”

“I only ask because I haven’t been assigned to the crew. Marc thinks I’ll be in here with you.”

“I know.”

Catching the tone, Kenn locked down on a question. Business came first. “There are no leaks, but the oil is gone. Vents from the stove are connected, so we’re cleaning them. Theo hopes the appliances can just be switched. We had all the extras stored in boxes in the animal areas. They’re messy and dented, but intact.” Kenn paused as another guardian appeared to check on a sleeping ward.

Angela smiled at Shawn, but he paid her no attention. Missy was in a pile of clothes on Angela’s right, sleeping. The girl appeared better. Shawn had found the breathing treatment equipment. The doctor had instructed a student on using it.

Shawn ducked out to be replaced by Marc, who hadn’t been down to the shower either. He was dirtier than Kenn and Shawn combined.

Marc swept the mess, also ignoring her. He centered on the kitchen.

Angela sighed. *Chris, he’s coming.*

Kenn and Marc both paused to regard her in surprise.

Angela motioned at the remaining paper. “Next?”

Kenn noted Marc’s angry stride toward the kitchen. That was the final warning walk. Kenn had witnessed it during his time on Marc’s team before the war. Back then, it had sometimes become the last straw moment that had preceded removal–in one way or another. “Charlie and Tracy want to be on the water collection crew. Marc said no, but Charlie insisted you would agree.”

“Why is that?”

“He dreamed Marc got shot.”

“I’m surprised Marc didn’t listen.”

“He did, but he asked Billy to cover his ass.”

Angela’s lips thinned into a line.

Kenn was positive that order would change. He switched to the final page of updates he’d collected. “The doctor said Mandy will live if we can get regular food into her. The baby is fine. Small little thing.”

“Breathing okay?”

“Yep. Jimmy said Mandy miscounted. Little Sandy was only a few weeks early instead of two months.”

“That’s wonderful.”

*“It’s time you and I got something straight.”*

Marc’s tone was harsh. It drew Kenn’s attention toward the kitchen.

“Was that the good news?” Angela tried to keep them on track.

“Uh, Ray wants a meeting. So do Simon and Nancy.”

“Tell Nancy she’ll be on the rookie list when we get things settled.” It was easy for Angela to guess what the former sailor wanted. After having Shane taken from her, Nancy wanted to be strong enough to keep it from ever happening again. “The other two want answers that I can’t or won’t give. Stall them for a few days.”

Kenn frowned. “I don’t like Simon.”

“The camp does.” Angela waited for his reaction to the light challenge in her tone.

“I can’t tell if he’s a fake or not.”

*I have the same problem.* “So ask him.”

Kenn stared. “What?”

“Very few people know you’re descendant.” Angela smiled a bit. “You have a gift. Use it.”

Kenn scheduled a visit with Simon for himself.

*“None of that matters to me. I don’t know why she’s protecting you and I don’t care.”*

Kenn tried to keep going and listen to Marc at the same time. “The collection team will be ready an hour from your call. We’re sending out…”

*“I’m watching for you to become a danger to her. When it happens, I’ll kill you. Then I’ll kill you again. You get me?!”*

Kenn tried to keep going. “Uh, we’re sending out forty men. Half are protection. Half are labor.”

*“You say that now, but I know better. The best thing you can do is finish your work, then find a new settlement that needs your skills. And I mean animals, not people!”*

Kenn glanced at Angela. He found her staring back expectantly. He cleared his throat. “We decided to leave Shawn in charge on top, with Natoli and his crew. Neil’s got the bottom, with the vetted Eagles who aren’t going on the run.”

“That sounds good. You’re moving everyone to those places?”

Kenn nodded. “In process as we speak.”

*“You won’t get a second warning. When she says she’s finished with you, I’ll be hunting!”*

Kenn braced as Marc marched toward him and Angela. Instead of the argument Kenn expected, Marc held out a single cigarette.

Angela laughed, jumping up to retrieve the gift. “Where did you find it?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

Laughing, she wrapped her arms around Marc’s neck. The wave of happiness she let out wasn’t planned, but it was powerful.

Marc didn’t even try to fight. “Whatever you need, Baby.”

His surrender was noticed by everyone in the mess. The tension broke, letting kids fall into peaceful, dreamless sleep. Snoring came, making the voices outside the tunnel sound harsh in contrast. The worries of the adults in the mess faded a bit.

On the level below them, Adrian let out the breath he’d been holding since realizing Angie cared for him too. *Finally.*

Angela turned her head, lips sliding across Marc’s scruffy cheek. “Kiss me?”

Kenn glanced away. It allowed him to observe the vet slinking out of the mess behind Marc. *She’s an evil genius. I’m never fighting with her again.*

Marc kissed her again.

Angela was delighted when her body responded without pain. It had been long enough in normal circumstances, but this wasn’t normal.

“I’m glad you’re getting better.” Marc kissed her one more time, then stepped back. “I forbid you to go on the water run. I have spies watching for you to try. The only way you’re getting out of here is if you can become one of my men.” Proud of himself, Marc rotated toward the tunnel, chin up, and fled before she could respond.

Angela gawked, jaw dropping. Then her eyes narrowed into slits and the V in her chin stood out in vivid contrast.

Kenn snickered. *Are you ready for my good news?*

“Updates are finished?” Angela was glaring at the doorway in thoughtful contemplation.

“Yep.”

“Hit me.”

*When I gathered gear for the run, I gave Jennifer’s full kit to Kyle. He has them both.*

Kenn grinned when Angela turned to stare at him. He liked pleasing her. *That’s two complete sets unaccounted for. No one’s going to bother Kyle about that.*

*Did you do things like this for Adrian?*

*When I needed to. It’s part of the job.* He smiled at her again*. I also happen to know that Charlie and Tracy swiped two sets of gear in case they were told no.*

Angela sighed. She couldn’t stop Charlie from becoming an adult who lived in a child’s body. She’d gone through that herself. “I’m in. Tell me his plan.”

Kenn wasn’t surprised she knew it was all Charlie’s idea. The boy was like her in almost every way. When he’d told Kenn to find extra gear for Angela, Kenn hadn’t argued. “There’s a third crew going out as support. We’ll blend right in.”

Angela surveyed the mess, where nervous children were peering at them through laundry piles. “Who did you get for duty?”

Kenn pointed at the trio of women entering the mess. “Gus and his brothers will be up here in a few minutes to help them.”

Angela watched Brittani, Nancy, and Tonya clear every inch of the mess and kitchen before taking up places around the walls.

Dirty, worried faces melted back into the laundry. Those guards were good. It was okay to sleep.

“Brit fed everyone with beef stew that only had beef and broth. It wasn’t bad. They’ll all hold for a few hours.” Kenn frowned. “I hope, ‘cause that’s all I’ve got.”

Angela welcomed the adrenaline now waking her. “It’s more than enough. We’ll be the four wildcards.”

“Any idea yet who we’re aiming for?”

“Anyone who aims at us.”

**2**

Kenn went down the repaired ladder first. The water collection team was outside. Digging noises were echoing through the cave, telling him the crew had gotten the steel door open.

Angela studied everything as she descended, trying not to cry or be bitter over how much work they’d done just to have it destroyed. She knew what her mood was. She needed to know theirs.

It took only a minute to determine that most people were too tired to fight. Those who had energy were with the water crew. *Good job, Marc.*

Angela controlled her expression as she began a search for danger next. She wouldn’t leave camp if she found anything.

Waiting for her, Kenn surveyed repairs that had been made while listening to the thoughts of survivors. Theo’s team had stretched extension cords to the bottom for lamps and small appliances. Fires were burning in rock piles in the corners, with the top vent pulling the smoke out. It was dim and stank, but at least the people weren’t fighting. Most of the guards were going with Angela, while the students and many of the wounded were staying here with the doctor. Kenn had worried over assigning some of the Eagles at all because they were friends with Simon or had been with Tony, but Marc had insisted it was fine. The possible problems were going with him. Kenn knew Marc planned to scan the remaining unvetted Eagles while they collected the water.

Angela took her time moving through the bottom level to the storage area that had been cleared. She talked to people, making promises that brought more calm. Most of the survivors just wanted things back to normal. She vowed to do that for them. She ignored the man who had point on this level, but she was aware of his pride as he observed her.

Adrian knew she would help Kyle. He was impatient for it. They needed the mobster back. Jennifer’s injury had cost them two reliable people.

Kenn rapped sore knuckles against the stone storage chamber. “Boss is comin’ in.”

Kenn scanned the space, approving of the camping lantern and the Glock pointed at him. If it had happened to Tonya, he might be reacting the same way, but like Adrian, Kenn was certain Angela would get things under control without trouble. He stepped over to let her through the narrow entrance.

She stopped at Kyle’s wounded, accusing glower, ignoring the gun. “Why would I do that? She’s going to inherit leadership when I’ve had enough. I’ve been protecting her at other people’s expense.” Angela stepped into the cubby, not needing to use her gifts. She had the truth. “And why would I do that to you? We’re just as bonded. I haven’t forgotten the rest stop. I never will.”

“I told you.”

Jennifer’s mutter was lost in Kyle’s relief. He sank to the edge of the wall and began to weep through bloodshot eyes.

Kenn made contact with the sentries on the level, then blocked the entrance to the storage chamber with his big body.

Angela resisted the urge to hug Kyle. Shooting Jennifer hadn’t been easy on him. “You’re not trapped. She’s not in danger from me. You can leave whenever you want. Today, even.”

“I go where the boss goes.” Jennifer stuck her chin out, glaring at Kyle as he holstered. “So does he.”

Angela studied the teenager, noting the fresh bandage and a small pile of non-perishable food. The baby was sleeping between Jennifer’s outstretched legs, covered with Kyle’s jacket. Nearby, all their possessions were packed and ready to be grabbed. The two Eagle kits were with it. Angela understood Kyle had been getting ready to try to sneak them out of here as part of the crew. “Are you out for four weeks or six?”

“Three to five.” Jennifer’s anger lightened. “Jimmy said Kyle pulled the shot. It didn’t do as much damage as it should have.” She inched out of the coat Kyle had insisted she wear beneath the Eagle gear. She’d been about to bundle Autumn in random clothes when Angela came in. When she’d asked Kyle if he would leave with her, it had been a test of his loyalty to their relationship. She hadn’t meant to make him doubt Angela and she certainly hadn’t intended to leave. Safe Haven was her home.

Kenn congratulated Kyle, impressed with the disheveled man. “Nice job, man. The rest of your team can’t do that yet.”

“Yeah.” Kyle began to recover himself. Exhaustion flooded in next. “I couldn’t before.”

“Jennifer’s life being in danger sharpened the focus.” Kenn couldn’t have explained it further. It was just something a gunman learned how to do. Turning a kill shot into a wound, without changing the fire point or trajectory, was a level of skill Kenn respected.

“Are you glad you didn’t kill her?” Jennifer sent the image of Kenn shooting Dean instead of Angela.

Kenn was relieved that Jennifer’s tone wasn’t nasty. It allowed him to be honest. “I wasn’t at first, when I realized I still had to pay. I’ve adjusted.”

“You’ve done well for someone who should have been found on the side of the road with one of Kyle’s bullets in your brain.”

Kenn flushed. *There it is. I can’t trust that one.*

Jennifer snorted. *Not true at all. We finally have the same goals and you’re almost a real person. I’d bet we’ll talk about important shit someday.*

Kenn didn’t know how to respond to that. He glanced at Angela for help.

Angela was staring at Autumn.

Jennifer stiffened.

Kyle stood up.

Kenn scanned the bottom level in case anyone was sneaking up on him while Angela was in the zone. Tension slammed into his gut. He pushed hard, sending his gift out for the first time to explore the levels above them.

Jennifer tried to read Angela, but she couldn’t penetrate the shield around the private connection. She’d never felt anything so strong.

*It’s Autumn’s. Baby magic is rare, powerful. It’s why the government built breeding compounds. If they could have harnessed this, control wouldn’t have been an issue over anyone.* Angela opened the line to let Jennifer connect. She had a right to know how important her daughter would be to their future.

Kenn gestured toward the two kits, getting Kyle’s attention. “The boss wants to borrow those.”

Kyle figured out why in less than ten seconds. He wanted to say it was too dangerous to be out there, but he couldn’t do that while staring at Jennifer’s injury. It was just as bad in here. “That was my plan.” Kyle gave up his hatred of Kenn, sighing in relief as another yolk was removed from his neck. “You’ll be with her?”

“Also Charlie. We’re sneaking out with the support crew.” Kenn didn’t say Charlie would be busy protecting Tracy.

Kyle’s lips twitched. “Marc really forbid her? Publicly?”

Kenn nodded, smirking. “I was proud of him. Right up ‘til he ran.”

Kyle chuckled. “Do you blame him?”

“Nope. She’s dangerous.”

“So why are you helping her against Marc’s decision?” Kyle’s flip was sudden. “Still trying to get Adrian back in charge?”

“That’s settled.” *Tell you later.*

Kyle was too tired and too relieved to be surprised at Kenn’s power. He didn’t react.

“That was amazing.” Jennifer motioned to Kyle. “Give them the kits, then deflect Marc’s spy. She’s coming down the ladder right now.”

Kyle hurried from the storage room. After shooting her, he wasn’t even thinking about Jennifer’s requests. If she wanted it, she got it.

Kenn grabbed the two Eagle kits and stood by the entrance. They were taking the hard way out by climbing up the ropes on the residence level to the top floor ramp. No one wanted to mess with a rope now that the ladders had been repaired.

“Kyle says to go while he’s complaining about not having power down here yet. Nancy’s view is blocked.” Jennifer caught Angela’s eye. “I’ll do everything I can to help that all happen.”

“So will I. Four years of peace sounds perfect after everything we’ve gone through.” Angela followed Kenn. Like Jennifer, her mood was better. She’d told Adrian there would be a period without hardship once they cleared the island. It was a relief to know she hadn’t been lying.

# Chapter Twelve

**Go West, Young Man**

A picture containing gun, weapon

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“Y**ou should have gone to protect Marc.”

Neil hurried to help Samantha into a sitting position on the laundry pile he’d gathered yesterday. She was a lot better today. The doctor had told him so.

“I’m not one of them anymore.” Neil handed her a bottle of water that Kyle had dropped off. “Besides, Marc asked me to keep things calm down here.”

“He let you off so you can play nurse to me.” Samantha shifted, searching for a comfortable spot that didn’t exist. The laundry was lumpy. “And you *are* one of them.”

“We’re leaving, Sam. It changes everything.” Neil picked up the air pump he’d been bending into shape when she woke.

“I know we agreed to go, but it’ll be weeks before I’m able to travel...”

“You believe they’ll convince us to stay in that time.”

Sam watched him open the box he’d brought in with the air pump. “Yeah.”

“We need to go, before they can do that.”

“Maybe.” Samantha rubbed her stomach.

Neil was positive there was more. He hadn’t wanted to mention how much it would hurt not to be an Eagle anymore, but that was the only thing he would miss.

“Can I have a minute?”

“No!” Neil glowered at Angela as she entered the tarped area he had built around Sam. “Go away.” Kenn, he ignored.

Kenn returned the favor, thinking Neil needed a shower more than he did.

“Neil!” Samantha gestured, not feeling much thanks to the latest pain shot. “Hurry up or Marc’s spy will tell.” Sam wasn’t panicked like some of the men were. The last time she’d been hurt, she had suffered through it all alone. This injury was hard, but minor in comparison because she had help.

Angela didn’t glance at Neil. He was Marc’s best friend in this mountain. Of course, he would promise Marc to keep her here.

Angela approved of the air mattress Neil had dug out. Samantha would be as comfortable as he could make her. “I’m sorry.”

Sam sniffed, sadness breaking through. She wasn’t doing well at controlling it yet. “Me too.”

Angela went to her friend, taking Samantha’s hand. “What can I do for you?”

Samantha held the tears in, but not the pain. “Make me forget him.”

Angela couldn’t contain her tears. They rolled over her dirty cheeks in thick rivulets. “No.”

“Then I can’t stay here.” Samantha shuddered, pulling her hand away. “Let us go.”

“I’m not staying.” Angela wiped her face dry. “I’m going to the island.”

“But if Marc goes…”

Angela’s tone revealed her terror. “I’ve tried everything. I’ll have to handle it from there, when it happens.”

Samantha held sympathy, but she was also relieved. “We’ll be with you.” She looked toward Neil. “Won’t we?”

Neil wasn’t convinced. He didn’t want Samantha endangered again.

“I can’t promise that. Not for her, your twins, or for you.” Angela moved toward Kenn, who was waiting with impatient huffs and gestures. “I do know you haven’t thought about her giving birth alone. *She* has.” Angela left him with that terrifying image.

Kenn smirked, following her into the darkest part of the cave where they had debris piles that hadn’t been touched yet. Neil would come with them. Women giving birth had been scaring men into submission for centuries. The trooper wouldn’t be any different.

Kenn handed Angela one of the kits, then gestured at the swaying rope. “If you can’t get up there with this kit, you’re not going. If you do make it, which I doubt, we’ll change in corners of the training rooms where we can squeeze through the debris.”

Angela laughed. “You’re learning.”

Kenn let out a sigh of suffering. “I’m giving it my all.”

*Good.* Angela pulled the heavy kit onto her shoulders. Taking a deep breath, she jumped for the rope. Grunting at the discomfort, she got a better grip and began to pull herself up, forcing her body to do what she wanted. *Now stop staring at my ass or I’m telling Tonya.*

Kenn dropped his chin so fast he bit his tongue.

**2**

Marc rotated to sweep the bundled, working crew. They’d found enough winter gear to outfit everyone with everything they needed, except for gloves. Progress was being constantly interrupted by people putting their hands into pockets, but that also allowed them to survey the site for trouble like Marc had told them to do. Things were calm, but…

Next to him, Daryl frowned. “Something wrong?”

Marc shook his head, cheeks stinging from the strong wind. “I got an odd vibe.”

“You felt a disturbance in the force.” Daryl laughed, warm breath visible as it hit the freezing air. He was happy to be out of the mountain. He didn’t care that the snow walls they’d dug made it impossible to see around them or that it was so cold his balls were frozen. He could feel the air and view the late afternoon sky. It was wonderful.

“Something like that.” Marc scanned deeper, using his grid. He stiffened suddenly. *Angie!* *Where are you?*

*With Kenn and Charlie. We’re teaching Tracy some descendant things.*

Marc didn’t hear anything wrong in the tone or the words, but he scowled. *What things?*

*Blocking locations.*

Marc swung toward the cave entrance, where the third crew was keeping the entrance clear from snow piles that were collapsing from the heat coming through the open steel door. They were also watching over him. *Where are you?*

*Shouldn’t you be concentrating on your job?*

“What’s up, man?” Daryl’s good mood was fading fast at the sight of Marc’s thunderous expression.

“She got out. I don’t know how. I assigned…”

*The wrong people*, Angela supplied when he fell silent.

Studying the group by the entrance, Marc spotted Kenn’s wide shoulders next to three Eagles who were grinning sheepishly. Tracy even waved.

Kenn avoided Marc’s eye as he stood guard.

Marc groaned in frustration. *How did you get out?*

None of them would answer.

Marc wanted to order them back in, but knew it wouldn’t do any good. By putting the boss back in charge, he’d limited his own power.

*If you really want me to go, I will.* Angela rubbed her hands together for the hundredth time. *As soon as you clear the problem coming up the hill.*

Marc and Kenn resumed their positions.

Engines sounded next, alerting the rest of the crew.

*It’s four vehicles of Mikel’s men. He sent them up here a week ago. They’re all sick.*

Kenn drew his gun, moving in front of Angela. *That’ll make it easier.*

Angela and Charlie also drew their weapons, like the rest of Marc’s crew was doing. Tracy stayed huddled with the workers, blending in as she’d been instructed to do.

“Pay attention!” Marc shouted so he was heard over the engines and wind. “Get ready for trouble!”

Camp members crunched through the ice toward the safety of the cave.

Angela and her group stayed by the snow wall as workers ran by. The steel door had been removed for repairs. She wasn’t leaving this entrance.

Kenn studied the people running by, much like Greg, the entrance guard, was doing. After Eddie and Francis betraying them, it was clear that anyone could be an enemy.

Marc climbed up the wall of snow they’d dug out, hoping to get a visual of the coming threat.

“Don’t move.”

Marc felt a gun shove into his hip. His heart sank. *I really believed he would cover me.*

Billy edged around Marc to be closer to the cleared snow pile. “I have to go. Don’t try to stop me.”

“I wouldn’t have.” Marc spun around to slap the gun from Billy’s shaky hand. It fell into a snowdrift and sank.

Billy scrambled away, expecting to be killed.

“Amnesia is no excuse for betrayal.” Marc contemplated Angela’s warning again. “When you come back, I expect an apology.”

“Here they come!”

Marc hurried up the wall to take the rifle Daryl had ready. He had already forgotten about Billy.

Greg hadn’t. He grabbed the driver by his jacket and shoved him toward the end of the snow walls, where their old camp was buried. “Get out of here.”

Billy lunged forward to grab the gun, then took off running.

Marc fired. His aim was good, sending the slug through a windshield to embed in the first driver’s chest.

Gunfire filled the cold air as the Eagles follow Marc’s lead.

Behind Marc, a thin man in black burrowed through the snow wall near a pile of large rocks. A sentry ran by, not seeing the man crouched behind the rocks and snow.

Mikel let the guard get out of sight before peering around the thick pile of rocks. He saw the witch right away. She glowed to him in ways that were impossible to explain. Mikel swept the workers gathered near her to observe the gunfight, then the military man firing from atop the snow wall. No one was glancing in his direction.

“That’s three, Marc! One more!”

“Get those camp members in the cave!”

Taking advantage of the chaos, Mikel hurried into the short line of people trying to get in the mountain.

*I’m scared. So loud. Let me in!* Mikel sent out decoy fear as he neared the witch at the entrance. He ducked his head and kept his sore-riddled arms beneath the black coat he’d scavenged from cars in the avalanche zone. He’d lost his weapon during the descent. He needed to get in and hide until everyone went to sleep. Mikel couldn’t contain his glee as he neared the entrance. *So loud! Scared!*

Angela pinpointed the glee under the fake fear, hand rising. *Him!*

Mikel shoved into the workers by the dented door, trying to get around them.

Tracy shoved her gun into the sick Mexican’s stomach. A shot echoed, loud and sharp. Two more followed it.

Mikel didn’t live long enough to ask how they’d known.

Marc fired again, hitting the last jeep as it chugged over the broken gate and mounds of snow that had thawed and frozen repeatedly for over a month. The jeep sank, taking a body and a screaming Mexican under the snow.

“Wait for it...” Marc was talking to himself like he’d always done on missions. “Wait for it…” Marc fired at the man as he popped up, spraying crimson across glistening gray.

He surveyed the area for the next threat.

Marc determined the fight was over. Angie had said four vehicles. He’d crashed them all by concentrating on the drivers. The Eagles with him had picked off the survivors. It had been quick and neat. *Don’t know what happened, but Charlie was wrong.*

Marc turned toward the entrance to verify Angela’s safety and found a body.

Tracy fired once more for good measure.

Marc stared in anger. *Billy was supposed to catch that. I didn’t bother to adjust for him being gone. Because it came from Charlie and not Angie?* Marc was forced to admit that was the truth. *I won’t write him off again.*

Angela met his eye. “It’s over, as far as I can tell.”

He recovered faster than the Eagles around him who were noticing and gaping. “No refugee wave up here?”

“They heard the fight. We’ll have a few hours before any of them reach us.”

Marc gestured at Daryl. “Get them back out here. I want us done before our new friends arrive. Make sure Ozzie’s crew is ready with the welding tools we dug out.”

Daryl hurried to collect the workers. Once they finished digging out the delivery tube, the camp would have fresh water every time it rained. They would also get water after snowstorms, when things thawed. The tubes ran to their remaining water tank.

Marc glared at Angela and her group of sneaks.

Angela smiled. “Yes, dear?”

*Really?* Marc swung toward the wall, shaking his head*. I don’t know what to do with you.*

*Love me.*

Marc sighed, melting. *Always. Now get inside, will you? I need to concentrate.*

Angela laughed, going in.

“We’re going to stay.” Charlie led Tracy toward the walls where they were collecting snow in buckets. “Until her teeth chatter, then she’s going in too.”

Kenn followed Angela, wondering why she was so eager to get back in. He’d hoped to be out of the mountain longer.

Angela hurried toward the ramp that led to the top level. “We have a possible hostage situation on level four and a fight between kids in the mess. I didn’t tell Marc because he’s right. He does need to concentrate.”

“Which one first?” Kenn stayed on her heels, bumping into camp members to do so.

“The kids.”

Kenn wasn’t sure why until they entered the mess.

“Down!”

Kenn ducked a wave of energy that slammed into the wall and knocked ashes from the ceiling. Leeann was in the far corner with Roy and Cody, blocking Romeo. On the other side of the mess, Nancy and Brittani were huddled over Gus. Near them, kids from the boarding school rescue were throwing insults and magic.

Angela waved her hand, sending a chill through the air that froze the anger. She clenched her fingers into a fist…

All of the kids cried out in pain or tensed.

Romeo grinned in savage pleasure at their punishment. The other children who didn’t have powers watched from the kitchen in fascinated fear.

Angela lowered her arm, releasing the hold she’d taken over them. “If this ever happens again, I will remove your gifts until you reach the required age. The pain you just felt was nothing compared to having those powers ripped away.”

The descendant kids stared at her and each other. They hadn’t known that could happen.

“Starting tonight, all magic users under the age of eighteen will join me every evening for a meeting. If you miss the meeting without a great reason, you get a strike. Two strikes, and I lock up your power. Are we clear?” Angela got a nod from each of them before looking at Brittani. “Is he okay?”

“Didn’t even wake up.” Nancy stood, smiling for the first time in days. “He was hit with a mug. We ran over to check on him.”

At their feet, Gus snored.

Brittani kicked him. “Oh, get up!”

Gus jerked awake, blinking in tired confusion. “What do you need?”

“More condoms. We are *never* having kids.”

Gus gaped, frowning, as Brittani stomped toward the exit and the adults laughed. Shrugging, he scanned the mess, then the sheepish kids cleaning up fresh damage. “Whatever.” He was back asleep a minute later.

Angela paused in the amusement, listening.

“The other situation?” Kenn was at her side, ready to do what she ordered.

“Yes, but it’s covered.”

“By Adrian, Neil, or Kyle?”

Angela let out a relieved breath. “Jimmy.”

**3**

“What are you doing?!” Simon stared at the doctor in shock. “I’m trying to help us!”

“No, you’re trying to force her to stay.” Jimmy motioned toward the ladder with his gun. “The boss says for you to stay with your members or she’ll have you arrested.”

Simon scowled, realizing he had failed and been exposed. “Why would you do that? We need a magic user to stay!”

“Not against their will.” Jimmy gestured again. “Go on.”

Simon tossed a final pleading glare at Samantha, then fled toward his group on the top floor.

Jimmy let out a deep breath. “It doesn’t have bullets.”

Samantha laughed. She’d been expecting trouble as soon as Neil said he’d notified Angela. She was glad Neil hadn’t had to kill the man, but that’s what would have happened if the doctor hadn’t intervened in the argument.

Neil scowled. He dug in his pouch and handed the doctor a magazine. He’d already acquired a stash. One less mag wouldn’t hurt.

Surprising the couple, Jimmy slapped the mag home with a smooth move. He shoved the gun into his deepest pocket. “I lived in a city. You need a defense in a place like that, so I learned.”

Samantha smiled at the tired man. “Thank you for helping me.”

Jimmy blushed at the warmth. “Neil did the hard part.”

They all knew that wasn’t true, but at the same time, it was. It had hurt Neil to operate. The doctor had been impatient to sew the artery shut.

“I have to make rounds.” Jimmy left them alone without worrying over Samantha’s safety. That wasn’t why he’d stepped in. Simon had caught Neil sleeping by her bed, but Jimmy was certain the camp member would be dead if he’d been stupid enough to bring a weapon. He had threatened Samantha, so Jimmy had brought out his gun to keep Neil from attacking the idiotic new leader of those remaining in the mountain. The newest boss for those running away hadn’t been chosen yet. That group was still reeling over Tony being shot in front of them.

“That was good.” Kyle had been near the corner of the tarped shelter where Samantha was stashed, ready to kill Simon if it was needed. “Maybe *you* should be the leader here.”

Jimmy snorted. He didn’t hate the idea, but he also didn’t want that job. “Like I have the time for that.”

“Maybe you should make time. When we leave, Simon will make you pay.” Kyle nodded to Adrian, who was on the opposite corner of the tarp.

Feeling better about the sullen doctor, Kyle returned to Jennifer. She’d sent him out to help, but it hadn’t been needed.

“It’s over.”

“You’re right.” Jennifer adjusted the homemade sling that Kyle had made from a large shirt, trying to hide her discomfort.

Kyle lifted a brow, handing her a bottle of water he’d cleaned himself an hour ago. “About?” He was too tired for puzzles.

“Jimmy. He’s perfect for the group that doesn’t like magic.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll mention it to the boss when she stops by later.”

Kyle paused. “Angela’s coming back down here tonight? Why?”

“When she said all gifted kids, she meant *all* of them.” Jennifer sighed. *That means Autumn too.*

Kyle stared at the sleeping baby, frowning. Jennifer had told him about the kids fighting in the mess, but he’d refused to leave her for that.

“Rules have to be learned.” Jennifer patted the lumpy pile with her good hand. “We’re clear for a little while. Come sleep.”

“Are you sure it’s okay?”

Jennifer nodded. “I’ll listen. You sleep.”

Kyle dropped onto the pile with a low grunt. “Awesome.”

Jennifer rested her hand on his shoulder, letting her fingers play with the ends of his curls.

“That’s nice.”

She smiled. “Yeah.”

Kyle yawned. “Jenny?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry I shot you.”

Jennifer leaned over, bracing on her good arm. “I’d do the same for you.” She kissed his brow, drawing a groan. “Sleep. We’ll shoot each other later.”

Kyle drifted off with a smile on his face.

**4**

Billy didn’t stop until he was off the mountain. It took him six hours and two breath-taking falls that helped freeze his miserable body. When he finally hit bottom, he went away from the flickering campfires of the refugees waiting for Safe Haven to emerge. Billy didn’t doubt Marc about them being dangerous, but Billy hadn’t planned to join them anyway. He was going west. Why, he wasn’t certain.

Billy crunched across the ice and into the tree line, hoping it was dark enough that his black clad form wouldn’t be noticed. The noises from the sprawling refugee camp weren’t comforting. There were screams and fights, and even gunshots, but the constant echo of vomiting would have kept him fleeing in the opposite direction anyway. The refugees were ill. He wanted no part of that.

Billy found a stripped farmhouse around midnight. He crawled in through a rear window that was missing glass. The front door had been blocked by a rusting tractor. It didn’t have a rear entrance.

Billy thumped to the floor in agony. The house didn’t have furniture, but the four walls were enough. As he lay there, hoping it wasn’t frostbite on his toes, Billy became aware of something poking him in the ass. He rolled over to search his pockets.

The stiff paper had bent during his flight, but stayed intact. Billy read the pink card with a cramping stomach.

*I know you don’t remember me, but I’ll never forget you. Please be careful on your trip west. Tell Alexa I said hi.*

*-Leeann*

Billy crumpled the card up, but before he could toss it into the corner of the house with the other useless garbage, his hand had stuffed it back into his pocket.

Billy closed his eyes, breathing harsh, extremities pushed to the limit of cold endurance. He didn’t care about the little girl or anyone else in that mountain. He had a job waiting in the west.

*What job?* Billy tried hard to recall it, but couldn’t. All he knew was that he didn’t belong here now–if he ever had. Let the freaks die. *What do I care?*

In his heart, a wall came down to seal the tiny niggles in place. When he went to sleep, he dreamed about a blonde huntress with braids and guns who needed his help.

He also dreamed about Leeann, except she wasn’t a little girl anymore and she wasn’t in the mountain cave he’d escaped.

*I’m going to be gone a long time.*

For reasons he didn’t understand, Billy was comforted by that knowledge.

# Chapter Thirteen

**The Alpha**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“Y**ou’ll see him again, honey.” Angela rocked the girl, trying not to cry herself. “He’ll be okay. So will you. I promise.”

Leeann continued to sob.

Angela scanned the other kids she’d gathered for the meeting. They were bored but happy that she cared enough to comfort the girl who had joined them last, already crying.

“Why did he go?” Cody had only been here for a month. That wasn’t enough time to learn all of the secrets in Safe Haven.

Angela set the girl next to her, needing to get the meeting going. “Adrian sent him. He has to help people out there.”

“You promise?” Leeann hadn’t expected it to hurt so much.

Angela wiped tears from Leeann’s cheeks. “Yes. And think; you won’t be a little kid anymore when he comes back.”

Leeann smiled a little. “That’ll be great.”

Angela understood more than she could ever explain. She gave the girl another hug, then stood up. “There are rules for kids. There are rules when you become an adult. Billy is following adult rules by leaving.”

“Because he used to like me?” Leeann welled up again.

“He still does. Nothing has changed except he won’t be here to get in trouble. You don’t want to get him shot or hung, do you?”

Leeann’s braids swung. “No!”

“That’s what would have happened because you couldn’t leave him alone.”

Leeann was crushed. “He left because of me?”

“Yes, to keep you safe until you’re old enough for him to love you. He’s a good man. Keep him in your heart and grow up strong enough to be his mate when that time comes.”

Leeann sniffed. “I can do that.”

“Good. Now let’s talk, okay? You kids are all in danger again.”

“We’re always in danger.” Robbie was from the boarding school. He was the oldest of that group.

“It was worse for our kind before the war.” Angela sat in the center of Jennifer’s cubby, aware of Kenn and Kyle outside the doorway.

“This is a bad idea.” Kyle was upset at having so many descendants in the space with Jennifer and Autumn.

Angela was prepared. “Jennifer’s hungry.”

Jennifer blushed, playing along. Kyle had already gathered blankets for the kids to ease her concern over the drafts. Most of the children were snuggled in them while having a snack from Kyle’s stash–another request. “A little, yeah.”

Kyle disappeared to go get food.

Angela got comfortable. “After I tell you a few things, we’ll go over the basic rules that our kind has used to survive. New rules will come as needed.” She did a fast count. They were all here. Parents and guardians were trolling the bottom level, trying to listen and worrying. The fight in the mess had been a concern for all of those adults. Few people had known the magic kids from the boarding school were bullying Roy and Romeo, or that the children had formed into three groups that all hated each other.

“Jealousy is bad. Hating someone because of their skin color is bad. Using your gifts to hurt someone because they don’t have magic is bad. Bullying is bad.” Angela’s tone had grown harder with each sentence. Leeann backed up so she wasn’t the only one who was punished.

“I meant what I said about locking down your gifts. As an alpha, I can strip anyone’s power.”

“If they’re underage, right?” Charlie was gazing at Kenn in dismay. He’d sensed the man’s new gift.

“Actually, no.” Angela also looked at the Marine. “I can lock down on anyone as a punishment.”

“For how long?” Leeann was entranced by the notion of adults being punished that way.

“My choice.”

Kenn stored that information, but he didn’t need the warning. He had a gift. That was all he’d really wanted.

Angela smothered her bitterness over that as best she could. “It would take a lot to get me to do that to an adult descendant. When you reach age, your gifts are supposed to be yours to explore–if you’re not bad.”

“What will you do if one of us is bad?” Robbie was part of the group that believed kids without magic shouldn’t be allowed around the rest of them. Robbie’s father, who had been much like Zack, hadn’t even allowed them to watch movies with magic or anything supernatural.

“He was scared it would trigger your gifts.” Angela was trying to get all of their thoughts. “Was he a descendant or was it your mother?”

“My grandma. Daddy stole me from her and ran so I wouldn’t be like the women.”

“What happened to your father?” Angela planned to spend this first meeting getting to know the kids. That meant their stories had to come out. She was also hoping they would accept that they weren’t so different.

“He got sick. The traders found us and promised to help if I did things for them.” Tears rolled down Robbie’s thin cheeks. “They never went back for him.”

Sitting next to Jennifer, Cecilia dropped her chin. “The slavers killed my dad when they took me. Jennifer tried to help my mom, but it was too late.”

Angela forced herself not to respond to the waves of pain as the other kids began releasing their nightmares. The stories were awful.

To keep herself in place, Jennifer opened a direct line to Angela, hoping none of the kids could break through. She believed Leeann and Missy were able to. *Why are we here?*

Angela refused to answer.

Jennifer began hoping Autumn fell asleep as she sensed the two boys about to join the meeting.

Next to Jennifer’s bed, Charlie sat with Cody in his lap. He and the little boy had bonded right away. They’d both been without a good father when they needed it most.

“We’ve all been hurt because of who we are.” Angela motioned toward the entrance. “They’ve been hurt because of who they *aren’t*.”

Roy and Romeo peered around Kenn in fear. Doug was standing behind Kenn with a frown and a hand on each boy’s shoulder. He was ready to jerk them out if any of the descendant kids fired anything.

Angela waved at the boys, then patted the ground next to her.

Because they would be by the boss, Doug let them go. He didn’t think the magic kids would attack with Angela in the way, not after the threat she’d made about taking away their power.

Roy held onto Romeo’s hand as his big brother led him over to Angela. The tiny boy sank down into her lap with a smile of pleasure that sent a wave of yearning through the warming cubby.

Angela hugged the boy, heart hurting. She tugged his angry brother down next to her. “Roy and Romeo had bad parents. Does that make them bad?” Feeling his cold skin, Angela covered Roy with the edges of her jacket. He was dirty and smelled, reminding her that they’d lost both den mothers. Peggy and Hilda had hated men, but they’d loved children–all of them.

None of the kids spoke. They’d shared their awful wounds with the group. If parents being bad made the kids bad, then nearly everyone in this room was damned.

Next to Jennifer, Charlie protected Cody and the baby within his personal shield. This meeting wasn’t going to be fun. It was a lesson. He’d known that as soon as Angela asked him to be there to stop the baby from experiencing her demonstrations.

“We’re going to make changes. Until now, we’ve let you kids pick who you hang out with, who your friends are. I’m taking over that. My first change is to put magic kids with non-magic kids.”

Frowns came from everyone, including Charlie. He wanted a more important job than babysitting.

Angela hugged Roy again. “The kids without magic are in danger.”

“So are we.” Robbie wasn’t willing to make peace so fast. Mean things had been said, blows had been exchanged. His feelings were stinging over it.

“Yes, but they can’t defend themselves. Between the two, it’s like you guys are slapping a little baby.”

Romeo stiffened, but the magic kids stared at Autumn. She was a little baby.

“Would you slap her?” Angela kept pushing them. “Any of you?”

Scanning as deep as she could, Angela was relieved. All of the children were good. It wasn’t too late. “Okay. Now look at Roy here. He’s three. He still wears diapers sometimes. He’s a baby like Autumn. He doesn’t even understand the things you say. He just gets hit with your anger and he gets scared.” Angela swept the shamed children, then gazed up at Romeo in pride, picking out bruises and scrapes on his arms from where he’d been fighting. “You’ve done a good job defending your brother from so many threats. When you’re ready, you’ll be in my army.”

Romeo lifted his chin, glaring at Robbie. “Then I can prove I’m not like my dad.”

Angela was happy to feel a bond of commonalities start burning. “A lot of us have spent our lives doing that. It’s a worthy goal.” Angela sent out a small wave of anger. “I’m tired of bad people. I don’t care who they are or how old they are.”

Roy cringed, closest to her.

Withdrawing the anger, Angela patted his leg. When she was upset, everyone felt it. “I’m putting all descendant kids into a team. Each of you will pick a non-magic child to protect. We’ll meet in the mess in the morning for that part. You’ll sit with them to explain what’s going on. This is not a punishment. This is a job. If you do well, you’ll be given other serious duties.”

Angela waited for the excitement to settle, then told them what she hadn’t told anyone else who had asked. “All the descendants are going with me. They’ve all told me so, in one way or another. A lot of the non-magic camp is staying here. They’re scared of us. What happened with you kids tonight will push more of the undecided members into staying. Your careless disregard for others has cost me.”

Roy crawled from Angela’s lap onto Romeo’s thin legs.

Romeo got the boy on his feet and headed for Doug. Angela’s pain over losing people was intolerable.

“I’m sorry.” Leeann stood up, blanket in a tight grip. “Please stop. It’s not their fault. I didn’t try hard enough to make them get along.”

Angela withdrew the tiny bubble of true emotions. She took a deep breath and sat for a moment without speaking. She hated doing this.

In that time, Leeann became a hero to the other kids for protecting them.

“I’m going to hold you responsible for them.” Angela glared at Leeann. “Make friends or don’t. What matters is that you do your job, your new duty. Got it?”

The girl nodded, face streaked with tears. Angela’s displeasure hurt.

Angela sighed. “Sit. We’ll go over some basic rules now. Remember them. Tomorrow night, I’ll quiz you on it.”

Kenn heard feet approaching and shook his head, not looking to see who it was. He also wanted to hear the rules of the descendants.

“Never without permission. It’s rude to get into someone’s thoughts when they don’t know you’re there. If we can’t trust you to do that, you’ll never be accepted as an adult descendant. We value our privacy above most things that others would tolerate. Never without permission is rule number one.”

“I told you she has things covered. Be quiet or you’ll interrupt it.”

Kenn turned to find Kyle glowering at Adrian. The mobster had figured out that he’d been sent away.

Kenn motioned Kyle to take his place, sacrificing being able to listen for calming the man. Kenn joined Adrian on duty over the level, not speaking.

Kyle didn’t care about the words at first. He was busy staring at Jennifer and the baby, and then the dangers in the packed chamber.

Jennifer frowned at him, telling Kyle not to interrupt. It forced him to listen.

“Never use your gifts unless you have to. Your power is like a health bar on a game. When you use magic, you lose health. It’s hard to refill. We’ll discuss those things during these meetings, but for now, rule number two is, don’t use your magic unless you have to.”

Kyle approved of that rule. He waited with the adults in the tunnel and the kids in the cubby for the next rule.

“That’s all for tonight.” Angela hid a smirk at the instant groans and disappointment. The adults were louder than the kids. “The rest of this meeting will be spent talking about the craziness we can expect over the next five days. I’m going to need a lot of help, but the adults are shaken. They don’t know what to do or which way to go. I need you kids to come through for me where they don’t.”

Shame filled the adults, while the kids perked up in excitement.

“Can I count on all of you to help get us on the road?”

Cries filled the bottom of the cave, sending out a wave of energy that was good for the entire camp. The sound of happy kids was a wonderful noise.

“It won’t stop when we bugout. Survivors will want to join us again. We miss bad souls because we’re tired or busy, or because the person is an Invisible or has an ability that prevents us from detecting their evil. You kids won’t be suspected. You can listen to everyone. Like you’ve been doing.”

The adults were dismayed to realize the children had been listening to everything.

“I don’t want you tattling on people, but I do want you to tell us about dangers. You’re going to become our ears.”

Adrian remembered his talk with Marc about body parts and jobs. The kids were now her ears, whispering secrets that would protect the future.

*It’s almost complete.* Adrian left duty to Shawn and the new shift arriving. He wanted to be certain Simon wasn’t causing more trouble. In his mind was a large form with legs, arms, ears, hands, mouth, and a huge heart. Angela’s time as ruler of Safe Haven would build a foundation that could be followed for centuries to come. The only thing missing was two eagle eyes, but Kendle and Conner were almost home. Once they were put into place around Angela, the magic would carry Safe Haven through an impossible boat trip that was now six weeks away. Everything was about to go faster.

**2**

“What’s going on with our gifts? Why are we becoming closed to each other?”

Adrian led Charlie into a deserted spot on level two. “What’s going on?”

Charlie explained how he hadn’t been on Marc’s grid during the fight in the tunnel. “He and mom were calling for me. Why didn’t they know where I was?”

“Evolutions.” Adrian’s mutter was followed by a frown. “I forgot about that, honestly.”

“What?”

“When we evolve, things shut down during the process. It can be days or even months. Once it stops, a new gift or stronger version of a current gift is available.”

“For me or my dad?”

“In this case, you. The evolution cycle blocked your dad.” Adrian swept the resourceful teenager who was wearing his Eagle gear and carrying his kit. “Where’s Tracy?”

“In the mess, sleeping. Will the cycle stop me from using the gift that’s evolving?”

“Why do you ask?”

Charlie lowered his voice. “I can’t mentally touch.”

Adrian grinned. “Ah.” He leaned in. “Do you, uh, use that skill often?”

“Not since she got hurt, but things have changed since the quake. She’s…”

“Better?”

Charlie flushed, not minding the cooler temperatures or the sharp draft. “Yeah. I’ve been worrying over not being able to…you know, when she’s ready.”

“Impress her in ways that guys without our gifts can’t?”

The boy blew out a breath. “Exactly.”

Adrian smiled. “You could just use hands.”

Charlie stilled. “Touch her?”

Adrian left him standing there with mental wheels spinning so fast he could almost smell fresh smoke.

“He may stand there for the next hour.”

Adrian chuckled as Marc fell in step. “Yeah.”

“It’s interesting that he comes to you for things like that.”

Adrian shrugged. “Did you ask your dad or mom?”

Marc was startled into a laugh. “Not even once. You?”

“No. My dad was busy and my mom stayed drugged most of the time. I was a virgin until I hit twenty.”

Marc was surprised. He didn’t volunteer his shadow-draped memories of him and Angie as teenagers, or the girl who’d come before that.

Adrian took the rope that was still hanging from the residence level, not glancing toward the spot where Samantha and Jeremy had almost died together. “I’m calling it a night unless you want me to do something.”

“Let’s find two shaken beers.”

Wondering what Marc wanted to talk about, Adrian kept pulling himself up the rope. “You’re the boss.”

“Nope.” Marc grinned in triumph, feeling safe to let it out. “The boss is in the mess, having a snack.”

Adrian snickered. “You’re getting better at handling her. Don’t give up when she calls you on it.”

“What do you mean?”

Adrian waited for Marc to reach the level so he could look at the man. “You think you’re off the hook as a leader. That’s sweet.” Whistling, Adrian went into the residence chamber that was untouched so far except for body removals. Mounds of rubble were everywhere.

Marc followed, frowning.

“What was that was about?”

Nancy shrugged at Brittani’s question. They were passing the rope Adrian and Marc had come up. “Don’t know, don’t care. Let’s get this water up to the mess. We have a lot of mouths to feed for breakfast.”

“Oatmeal again?”

“Yes. Lunch will be ham sandwiches, though.”

“Wasn’t the flour ruined?”

“Marc found a way to strain most of the ashes from it. I was the manager in a bakery before my service, so I volunteered to help.”

“Fresh bread? That’ll be amazing.”

Nancy responded to the enthusiasm. “Glad you think so. I need someone to mix the dough. We’re making enough for four hundred.”

Brittani made a face. “Four hundred?” She gazed down at the first clean clothes she’d had on in days. “It was nice while it lasted.”

Nancy felt Adrian’s approval as he overheard. She tried not to respond, but she was helpless against the sensation of his pleasure. Guilt flooded. Nancy marched faster. The sooner they recovered and repaired, the sooner she could leave. Like Samantha, Nancy couldn’t stay here. She would do anything to get out.

Brittani came up slower, admiring the repairs that had been made. Ladders were up, cables were running everywhere to provide power to the lower levels, and guards were standing watch. The smell of dinner–beef and noodles without noodles–was lingering in the air that was almost free from the harsh odor of smoke. Even with all the damage and death, it was beginning to feel like home again.

Brittani spotted Gus laboring in the dimness with lamps and plastic bags. Sweating through layers of dirt, he and his brothers were salvaging things from the personal care area that had been crushed by the floor above it. She didn’t distract them. Gus had asked for FND work. Angela had given him a short list. Brittani was scared, but controlling herself. She’d decided to stay busy in the mess. She loved to cook. *But four hundred? I didn’t think this through.*

Gus knew when she went by. He loved her even more when she didn’t stop. Brittani had spent her life caring for others. Gus was determined to become that strong. If he died in the process, at least she would remember him as a man and not as another child to be rescued.

**3**

“I found a case of Little Kings.”

Marc groaned. “Oh, man. Worst headache I ever had came after Cream Ales!”

Adrian laughed, tugging the green package free. “Should probably sit for a little while.”

Marc dropped down on the rubble with a groan of relief. He couldn’t do this if they hadn’t accounted for everyone. Dealing with Adrian required his full concentration. “We’re wearing more filth than clothes. What’s a little spray?”

Adrian opened the battered case, worrying. Marc wanted to talk now, while Angie was occupied.

“Yes, I do.”

“Good or bad?” Adrian dropped down a few feet away, adjusting for angle and light if he had to defend himself.

Marc lifted a brow. “Would you like to hold my Colts?”

Adrian flushed under his scruffy beard. “What do you want?”

“I promised Charlie personal training from all his idols. Now that he’s taken a life, he needs it.”

Adrian hadn’t thought Marc or Angela knew.

“How do *you* know?”

Adrian shrugged. “It’s all he’s thinking about. He didn’t like it. He may drop out of the Eagles.”

“I’m scanning him. I know why he’s not on my grid. I heard what you told him, but why don’t I hear him like you can? That part of him isn’t evolving.”

“You are.”

“Yeah.” Marc had wanted to confirm it. “Same time frame as what you told him?”

“Not even close.” Adrian popped the cap from the beer that had already been sitting for days. A small bit of foam ran over his hand. “Well, that was disappointing.”

“Faster?” Marc took a bottle and slid it into the hand that Adrian couldn’t see from where he was sitting. Marc’s fingers twitched as he waited.

“Weeks at the most. When did it start?”

“The quake.” Marc swept the piles, the damage. He didn’t have an estimate on how long it would take to get the cave in living condition again. The generator had fired up and their solar panels were collecting again, but the survivors were crushed. They needed something good to happen.

“That makes sense. Many scientific papers were published on theories that evolutionary leaps are the result of disasters forcing adaptations for survival. You’ve figured out you’re not strong enough, so your demon is trying to give you what you need.”

“That doesn’t sound good.” Marc realized his demon had been absent this entire time.

“Get sleep, drink a lot of water.” Adrian remembered his first big jump in gifts. “When it pops in, it hurts. The pin will last the same amount of time as it took to evolve. Many of us wait until that passes before we try to explore it.”

“I won’t.”

“No, I didn’t think you would.” Adrian tilted the warm beer, drinking enough to keep the remaining foam from flowing over. It gave him a great belch that echoed across the tunnel, making Gus and his brothers chuckle.

“Will anything speed it up?”

Marc’s tone was too casual. Adrian stared at him in annoyance. “You used me again.”

“Not yet.” Marc grinned. “You haven’t answered.”

Adrian snorted in admiration. “Yes, you can speed it up. Bonding with a mate.”

Marc’s smile faded. “Full bonding?”

Adrian looked back without betraying his jealousy.

Marc shook his head, enjoying the images. “Too soon. Next?”

“There is nothing else. This isn’t an engine you can modify to get more power. It feeds off love. Nothing else.”

“I’ll wait.”

“I wasn’t saying you should or shouldn’t.” Adrian wanted that clear. “You asked. I answered.” He titled his bottle up.

“It is, right? Too soon?”

Adrian choked on the drink.

Marc snickered.

It bothered Adrian when he did a fast count. Six weeks wasn’t much, but it was enough.

“I already know that.”

“Waiting for her to come to you?” *‘Cause that might work.*

“A willing woman is worth waiting for.” Marc’s fingers played with the cap again. He had no interest in drinking.

Adrian took another drink of the warm beer. He already had a small buzz. Since the war, his drinking had faded into almost nothing. “How long can you hold out?”

The cap under Marc’s restless fingers popped off, making them both jump.

“I see.” Adrian belched again. “Well, good luck with that.”

Marc flung the foam from his hand onto the rocks. “Why do you disapprove? I’d have thought you’d be happy that I’m waiting to knock her up again.”

“I didn’t say to knock her up at all.” Adrian’s voice dropped to a mutter. “But we both know you get to at least try.”

“So?”

“So, nothing. It would make her happy. I don’t care about you.”

“There’s the truth.”

Adrian frowned at Marc’s sarcasm. “Did you expect me to declare loyalty just because you’ve accepted things?”

“A little, yeah.”

“Good, because I’m going to, but not in the middle of this pit.” Adrian gestured upward. “When you get us out of this mountain and she’s smiling again, you’ll have it without needing to ask.”

“I can’t imagine that day.”

Adrian shrugged. “I’ve seen it, but I have no idea how we get to that point.”

Marc sipped his beer. “Moments like these.” He held out his bottle. “To Angie. The one thing that will always keep us from tearing these people, and each other, apart.”

Adrian clinked and drank, surprised. He didn’t speak, however. He knew better than to ruin the mood.

Marc stood up, leaving the bottle. “Again tomorrow?”

Adrian nodded, unable to make a joke. He was looking forward to it. *How did that happen so fast?*

Walking away, Marc didn’t have to hide his triumphant smirk.

# Chapter Fourteen

**Picking Sides**

A picture containing clock, sign

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“T**hat is one of the most awful things I’ve ever seen.” Kenn looked up from the images. He’d been hungry until Angela ordered him to check the cameras. “Are we really going to show this to the camp?”

“Yes.” Angela surveyed the laptop feed. Kenn was concentrating on those who were dying. She was more interested in those who had life yet to abuse.

“In two days, they’ll all be dead.”

Angela winced this time. “Yes.”

“Can’t we wait? Things are so calm right now.”

Angela scanned the small cavity Kenn had claimed for security. “That’s the problem, grunt. The Onion man is coming, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” Kenn switched off the feed, then closed the laptop. “In the morning?”

“Yes. You deliver the news.”

Kenn grunted. “Figures.”

Angela saw Marc duck into the weapons room. Curious, she went to the doorway. *Why is he sorting laundry?*

“Making a better bed. I hate lumps.”

Angela stared. Marc’s jacket was hanging on the wall, drying from where he’d cleaned off the blood with snow before he came in. His bare arms and chest beckoned to her fingers. *Come rub me…*

Angela shook off the daze. “Uh, what?”

Marc chuckled. “We’ve got two weeks’ worth of water.”

“That’s good.”

“You can have a shower. I put clean clothes in your kit.”

“Has everyone else gotten one?”

“Everyone who wanted one tonight. The morning line will be irritable and lengthy.”

“Yeah, maybe I will.”

Marc glanced up as chills went through his gut.

Angela was caught in a web of desire. When she’d scoffed about physical bonding, she’d been upset and not remembering how hard it was to ignore her mate.

Marc returned to making the bed, hoping she hadn’t noticed his fast scan. Her mood was good for what he had planned.

“What *do* you have planned?”

Marc smiled, not stopping. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

Angela’s cheeks were pink from the vibes. “You think I’m going to cuddle with you?”

Marc used his charm, but he also added a healthy burst of his newest skill.

Angela tensed as a hand slid down her cheek to brush hair from her face. “Wow.” She stared. “Where’d you pick that up? Julia?”

Marc froze. He’d forgotten about Julia. “Uh, Charlie, actually.” Marc caught her frown and distracted her. “I didn’t know about Cody.”

“You’ve made a habit of that.”

Marc felt his heart drop. *Please don’t view it that way. Like with you, it was a special circumstance.*

“She lied to you.”

“Is it so hard to believe that a man in a moment of passion would accept the woman’s word on birth control?”

“No.”

“Then why are you mad at me?”

“Because she isn’t here to be a target for my jealousy.”

“It was years after us.” Marc paused. “You’re jealous?”

“Not enough to kill her, but I could have shoved her into a wall a few times and still slept okay.”

Marc snorted, thinking of Adrian. “That’s only level one, Baby. It gets a lot worse.”

“Heard you two had a sit down.” Angela came in a few steps, happy with the stacks of kits and boxes that had been gathered. It wasn’t just weapons in this room anymore.

“We talked for a bit.”

“Anything I should know about?”

“Nope.”

Angela heard the tone. “Marc?”

He peered up at her with a childish stare of innocence. “Yes, dear?”

Angela groaned. “Oh, hell. Look, I’m sorry, okay? You forbid me–in public. I had to.”

Marc nodded, tucking corners of clothes around edges of more clothes. “I hear ya. You had to do it. I get that.”

“Oh, man. Please?”

“Trade me for something.”

Angela felt the trap, but she didn’t know how to avoid it. “Like what?”

“Don’t bust my balls over Julia again.”

“In exchange for you not ragging me about being reckless since the quake?”

“If you don’t keep doing it.”

“Don’t forbid me. Convince me or take me along.”

“Deal.”

Angela made a face at his immediate agreement. “You plan this?”

“I’m just keeping to our deal.” Marc found a stray corner to labor on in dedication.

“Uh-huh.” She studied his efforts, enjoying the vibe he was throwing out. “What *do* you have planned for tonight?”

“You should get a shower. No offense, but you stink a little.”

“What?!”

Marc ducked the lighter she threw, chuckling. “I’ll be down after you.”

Angela grabbed the new kit he had put together for her and stomped from the room.

**2**

“Where’s the boss?”

Kenn jerked a thumb toward the top level. “She got a shower and went to sleep. What do you need?”

“Where’s Marc?”

Kenn made the same gestures. “Got a shower and went to sleep.”

Adrian’s mood fell. “Well, I guess that’s good.” He held out a sheet of wrinkled paper. “Updates.”

Kenn put it in his pocket. “What else?”

“Just a vibe. I’m doing a sweep.” Adrian moved away, hunting.

“Good or bad?” As soon as Kenn said it, he realized Adrian was only wearing boots and jeans. It had to be bad to bring him from sleeping in Nancy’s arms. Kenn began listening, hoping it was minor.

A gunshot ruined that dream.

**3**

Adrian slapped the gun from Stanley’s hand. “Use your knife!”

The clumsy rookie flushed as sentries came from every direction. He grabbed his knife and hurried forward to stab at the three big ants that squealed in anger.

Stanley jumped backward, letting out his own squeal.

Adrian sighed.

Stanley flushed darker. “I’m sorry.”

Adrian spotted Marc coming through the tunnel, also in jeans and boots. “You aren’t yet, but you will be.” Adrian went back the way he’d come. “Bye.”

He went to the bottom floor to let Kenn know what had happened. Then, the former leader took a liberty that he didn’t think Marc would mind. Adrian sent out a strong wave of sleepiness. He couldn’t do it for long, but the blast usually hit everyone. He hadn’t used it much on Safe Haven because it would make the guards sleepy too, but Adrian was willing to take that risk. If these people didn’t get a full night of sleep now, even Angela wouldn’t be able to control them tomorrow.

Angela stretched out on the warm, lumpy bed, trying to stay awake until Marc returned. She’d told him to let the Eagles handle Stanley, but his answer had lingered.

*“I want that place in their minds.”*

After some of the thoughts from the camp, then his comment, she had a suspicion she wanted to confirm before she fell asleep and forgot about it.

Right outside the room now, Marc paused. *Damn. I shouldn’t have said that*. He waited for a moment, keeping his mind secure behind the new shield he’d been playing with all day, but it was clear she was waiting up for him.

Marc went to the bottom level. He found Adrian next to Kenn. Both men stared at him in wary, weary resignation.

Marc stopped on the ladder. “Can you do that again?”

Adrian nodded. “Yes.”

Marc waited, looking upward.

Adrian realized why Marc was waiting. He grunted. *You get a new gift and she’s the person you practice it on?*

Marc’s grin widened. “You were first. Now do it.”

Adrian bowed in sarcasm, then sent out the blast, using another chunk of energy to make it a strong dose. Despite what Marc was using it for, he had asked for something. Adrian would deliver.

Marc yawned so hard he shuddered. “Damn. Nice.”

Adrian beamed.

Kenn rolled his eyes at the blatant manipulation, but kept his mouth shut. *You won’t get me so easy.*

Marc gave him an approving nod for keeping his mouth shut, adding a light blast of approval.

Kenn fought the urge to bow in return.

Marc smirked at Kenn’s confused expression, then went up the ladder.

Adrian shook his head as Kenn yawned. “I knew this would happen at some point, but I believed I’d be able to hold out longer.”

Kenn shook off the daze. “On what?”

“Becoming a convert. He’s actually a good leader. It’s hard not to respect that.” Adrian walked away before Kenn could ask another question. “I’ll be around.”

Marc snuck into the weapons room and pushed his boots off. He moved slow as he slid up against Angie’s warm body. They’d almost been asleep when the gunshot echoed.

Marc tucked the blanket around her shoulders and put his head down. He’d rubbed her back for half an hour. She’d been jello under his tender hands. He’d been hard enough to dig them out of the cave.

“You’re awful slick these days.”

Marc tensed.

“Anything you want to tell me?”

“I’ll rub some more if you let it go.” Marc’s face was buried in her hair.

“I’ll let you do more than rub if you confess. Don’t make me torture it out of you.”

“What?”

“Don’t give me that innocent crap.” Angela rolled over to face him, not trying to find a comfortable position. She’d given up on that yesterday. “You know what I’m talking about.”

Marc leaned down to kiss her, wishing it had been longer since her injury. “No deal.”

Angela snuggled up against him. “Hold me like we used to?”

“Anytime you want.” Marc shifted, pulling her onto his chest.

Angela was sleeping a minute later.

Marc spent some time enjoying the sensations of her warm body, the rise and fall of her chest, her scent. *I’ve missed this.*

Angela snuggled closer, hand gripping his hair.

Marc smiled in contentment and joined her in sleep.

It took Adrian another hour to figure out that Marc had put him on duty without assigning him to it. Marc had known the sentries would fall asleep if someone didn’t keep them alert. He’d also known that Adrian would worry over it and be the one to keep them all awake.

“He’s getting better at this too.” Adrian headed for the mess to check on the kids. “I’m never going to be able to keep up.”

**4**

“Got a minute?”

Simon paused at Kenn’s question, worried and angry. “Did Angela send you?”

Kenn ignored the other camp members in the water chamber who were helping Theo and Ozzie get the supply tube reconnected to the cave plumbing. All of them were pretending it didn’t stink bad enough on this level to make their guts churn. The bodies in the tunnel were rotting. They would have to be dumped soon.

“Of course.” Kenn leaned against a wall, out of the way of the early morning crew.

Simon’s expression slid into relief. “I’ve been waiting for the vet.”

Kenn snorted. “She’d send Marc for a public execution.”

Simon paled at the reminder of Tony’s death. “I didn’t have anything to do with that plan.”

Deep in the man’s mind, Kenn was able to tell that was true. “Why do you want to be the leader here?”

“We have to have someone normal to lead the normal people.” Simon had let his voice carry.

Mutters echoed from those in the shower line who had heard him.

Kenn felt his dander rise and smacked it down. “And?”

“I don’t trust anyone here enough to vote for them.”

“Why do *you* get the deciding vote?”

Tall, muscular, and arrogant, Simon stared back with blank brown eyes half hidden by his shaggy brown hair. “Why wouldn’t I? My father was a governor. So was his father before him. My family was born to lead.”

Kenn didn’t waste any more time. He headed up the ladder. The camp had adjusted to careers like Simon’s better than he’d ever imagined they would. After Samantha’s confession and leadership defending her, the herd had realized government employees weren’t to blame. Adrian’s confession had also helped with that. He’d pointed them at the real culprits.

Passing the blocked training rooms, Kenn stopped, drawn by movement. He spotted Ray sifting through a rubble pile, alone.

Kenn joined him, off duty until Angela woke. He waited for Ray to speak.

Ray was smothered in dust, dirt, and horror. Dennis was dead. Dale believed Ray had asked Angela to do it. *I’m an Eagle. I have honor. I wouldn’t do that.*

Kenn believed him, but he also knew Angela wouldn’t have interfered in their personal life that way. She had more important issues to spend her time on. Kenn thought about the images their camp was going to view in the morning, then about how few Eagles they had now. “We could use you for protection over the boss.”

“Which one?”

“Marc.” Kenn adapted, hoping Angela wouldn’t be upset.

Ray gave him a curt nod. “I need to clean up.”

“Visit Dale on your way through. He’s awake.”

Ray stiffened. “He’ll scream again.”

“Maybe.” Kenn headed toward the ladder, yawning. It was exhausting to read minds. “Stay away from the vet. He’s off limits.”

“He did it?”

“Yep. Marc...spoke with him.”

Ray followed Kenn, interest piqued. “Bet that was fun.”

“Come do rounds with me during breakfast. I’ll drop you off with Marc when he’s ready.”

Ray brightened. He wanted to be busy and he trusted Marc.

*Me too.* Kenn sighed, tired of ladders and ropes. “We’ll begin with the shower line. I hear a fight.”

Ray listened hard, but he didn’t hear anything.

He did by the time they made it to the bottom floor. Camp members were harassing someone who had gone over their allotted time in one of the two portable showers.

“Break it up!”

“Stop it! Get in a damn line!”

Ray’s barking shocked more people into obedience than Kenn’s did. Ray sounded as if he wanted to tear them all apart.

Kenn scanned the tired guards, flashing an old signal that never failed to please. *Shift ends in half an hour.*

Men grinned, straightening. They returned to their posts without scolding the camp members.

Kenn saw Greg, Morgan, and Natoli’s group coming from the top levels to help. He sent them a quick signal. *We’re 5-by.* All of those men were due down here soon for the next shift. “We’ll hang out here until duty change.”

Ray didn’t respond. Dale was sitting behind the ladder they’d descended, staring at him. Ray couldn’t tell what Dale was thinking with all those shadows hiding his expression, but he could guess.

“I’ve got this.” Kenn gestured toward Dale. “He’s calm. Go try.”

“I don’t know what to say to make him believe me.”

“The truth. Angela wouldn’t have done it. Neither would you.”

“I’ve tried that.”

Kenn took a chance, wanting to be able to help his friend. *I’ll listen, if I can.* Kenn sent it mentally to find out if Ray was okay with him being so personal.

Ray didn’t care. He would do anything to help Dale. He walked toward the man with slow steps, giving his mate time to react.

Dale tensed, lips coming together into a thin line.

Ray forced himself to keep going.

As he neared the ladder, recovering wounded and camp members waiting to shower quieted to listen. The guards prepared for noise. Dale wasn’t speaking to anyone without making a scene.

*He’s not sure how to react. Go slow.* Kenn stayed out of Dale’s line of sight while he concentrated. New, he hadn’t learned to mask his facial responses yet.

Ray stopped a few feet away. “Can I talk to you?”

Dale didn’t want to be sedated again. He controlled his anger. “I’m okay for a minute or two…I think.”

Ray knew not to get close. He struggled to find an opening that would reach the troubled man. “I wouldn’t do it.”

“She would.”

*Don’t lie.*

Ray didn’t. “She would if she found something bad.”

Dale’s hands clenched into fists. “Yeah.”

“I don’t believe she told Chris to do it. I think he was trying to be a friend.”

“To you!” Dale spat.

“Maybe. I want to ask him when they find him, but…I’m scared to know the answer.” Ray’s voice cracked. “How am I supposed to live with it?”

Dale hadn’t known Ray was experiencing that too, but it didn’t ease the rage. “You’re going to the island?”

Ray shrugged. “I want to. Will you come with us?”

Dale immediately shook his head. “No. We’re through. Please go with your masters.”

Ray swallowed that blow. “You can come. You’ll be safer with us.”

Dale glared, tears starting to roll down his cheeks. “You should leave. I can’t take your lies.”

Ray wanted to say more, but he wasn’t sure if anything would succeed. Dale knew the vet had killed Dennis without orders, but that didn’t matter. He was hurting and taking it out on everyone. “Please don’t do this. Let me help you.”

Dale began screaming.

Ray backed away as the doctor rushed over to sedate the man.

Jimmy had been observing with everyone else; he’d instructed a student to get a syringe ready.

Ray walked to the ladder with scarlet cheeks and stiff shoulders. When he went up and out of sight, Kenn didn’t blame him. The Marine wanted to help, but Dale’s mind was full of bright rage. It would be a while before he could be reasoned with, but even then, he would never trust another descendant. Half the camp felt that way. Kenn didn’t believe Angela would be able to sway those people into going. The earthquake had taken over a hundred. The aftermath was removing double that number. When Safe Haven rolled out, it would probably feel like the old days when Kenn had first joined Adrian’s camp.

Kenn tried not to be happy about that part of it and failed. He had hated it here. The only thing that made it tolerable was when their leaders were happy. Now, they were all stuck in here with misery beyond levels anyone could tolerate. Kenn couldn’t wait to be free of this cursed ground. He doubted he would ever agree to try a mountain settlement again, no matter what landmass it was on or who was in control. Humans weren’t meant to live in the earth. He hadn’t appreciated that before. Adrian had, though. He’d known it wouldn’t work.

*Man, I wish the camp had listened to him.*

# Chapter Fifteen

**A Father’s Love**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“M**orning.”

Kenn jumped at the voice behind him, spinning around to fight.

“Easy.”

Kenn tried to recover, not wanting the guard to know he hadn’t been paying attention to his surroundings. “Yeah, I’ve heard that about you.”

Morgan chuckled. Dressed in Eagle gear, he had blended into the shadows of the tunnel. With so many noises from repairs, he couldn’t hear problems coming, so it was important to be able to see them before they saw him. Even in this grave situation, he hadn’t been able to resist scaring Kenn. That opportunity didn’t come around often.

Kenn continued to the mess, aware of the camp waking. It sounded almost normal, but they were all on borrowed time. Marc getting the thin flow of water running a month ahead of schedule was almost a miracle. They had weeks of food again, thanks to the butchering that had done without the vet’s sullen attitude. The power would hold for a little longer without outside repairs. And none of that mattered. The vibes were clear. These people couldn’t endure anymore bad luck. At the next crisis, the camp would stampede, forcing Eagles to shoot them or let them out. Kenn didn’t know what Angela would decide on that. She wanted to save everyone, but she had also helped nature and the second war to kill off large chunks of the post-war population. Kenn paused in his steps toward the short line for a cup of Brittani’s strong coffee*. She’s thinning the herd again.*

*It’s not me.* Angela entered the mess, not glancing at Kenn so he wouldn’t be able to absorb her pain. She still didn’t want to bond with him, for any reason. *Fate has control now.*

“Grab it!” Fresh thuds and clanks echoed from another level, along with shouts and a thick thud of something falling.

People in the mess flinched before realizing it was a repair crew. New ladder anchors were being hammered in, air vents were being forced into new shapes to fit new spaces, and cables were being nailed into the ceilings that remained. The constant symphony of noises grew louder, waking those who had been sleeping.

Pushing for more information, Kenn kept his tone neutral. *You didn’t tell the vet to handle individuals or give mental pushes to–*

*No… But I’m no longer interfering. Adrian was right about that in some ways. Fighting fate is exhausting. I don’t have the strength to defend from all sides.*

The floor of the mess now consisted of steel plates, wooden beams, plastic patches, and thick welds that made walking hard. Because it had collapsed during the earthquake, most people were sticking to the edges that hadn’t fallen, refusing to trust the engineering. Angela didn’t blame them for that, but she strode across the middle of the floor with her chin up, trying to remind them it was fine when the cave wasn’t shaking.

The rear of the mess, by the burnt kitchen, was full of tables and chairs that had been stacked to make space. Around that crooked wall of beaten furniture were bags and boxes that had been pulled from various rubble piles. Brittani was scrounging meals from there and from the refrigerator on the crushed level. Marc had chosen to keep it all on the same floor, including storage. The smells were unpleasant, deterring people from digging there unless they had to.

Angela and most of the Eagles were wearing the spare uniforms they kept in their kits. Everyone else wore mismatched collections of whatever they’d been able to locate. Workers were digging out blankets, medical supplies, and gear, but any clothes found were being used for blankets and not being worn. Kenn wrote it in his book. While the camp was working, he would confiscate the laundry and hand it out to individuals who didn’t have shirts or pants. He couldn’t do much about the bare feet. A large pile of shoes was on the bottom level, pulled from bodies, but the camp had refused to wear them out of respect for the dead. Some of the Eagles had tried to convince people their loved ones would have wanted the shoes used, but it had caused fights, so Marc had ordered the men to stop insisting. Kenn wrote in his book again. If they could alter the shoes enough so they wouldn’t be recognized, Marc could tell everyone they had been in the rubble pile with their excess stocks.

Without planning it, Kenn asked a question that had been nagging him since Angela had returned from Little Rock as leader of Safe Haven. *Why am I still alive?*

Angela sighed. She’d been asked that twice today and it was only breakfast. *Why do you think?*

*You knew it would be this bad, that I’d be needed.*

Angela felt his next question coming. *Was there anything I could have said or done to get them to skip this cursed ground?*

Kenn considered as he poured his coffee from a dented steel pot. *I doubt it. Other than bad events when we arrived…* Kenn stared at Angela in shock. *You are ruthless.*

Angela faced the rickety tables instead of him. *I tried everything I could think of, good and bad. I borrowed ideas from history and from people who had ideas, but didn’t volunteer them because the plans were too bloody or too risky. Then I stayed to save as many as I could, even though I knew going in that only half of us would come back out.*

Kenn and Angela tensed at a wave of anger.

*That choice cost us a child.* Marc entered the mess, glaring. *For people who don’t deserve the loyalty!*

Before Angela could respond, Kenn scowled at Marc. *Get off her. She’s saved your life too many times, so you don’t get to act righteous when you’re benefiting from her plans.* Kenn stormed from the mess.

Surprised, Marc lifted a brow at Angela. *Is he okay now?*

She went to the farthest table to observe while she finished waking. *No. None of us are.*

Marc felt her mood worsen and realized she’d sensed something. *How bad is the next blow?*

*Extinction level. If I don’t kill Dirce, he takes control of this country and wipes out all American survivors.*

*Why? Wouldn’t he at least want slaves?* Marc tried to joke, but deep down, he knew better. If they lost the fight, becoming UN slaves was the best outcome for them.

*Dirce believes his people at the UN headquarters are counting on him to clear North America for their arrival. He won’t stop until we’re cleansed and he can report it done.*

*Isn’t he going to be easy after the battle we had with our own government?*

*Should be? Yes. Will it be? That’s up to fate. I can’t view beyond the avalanche.* Angela motioned toward the tense couple entering the mess. *Jennifer had the dream. Get your coffee and we’ll listen.*

“I don’t like this.” Kyle led Jennifer to Angela’s table, scowling so hard that kids hurried to surround her with their protection.

Angela held up her hand. “It’s okay.”

Kyle’s face went blank as he realized he was scaring the children. All except Autumn, who was enjoying attention and care from Samantha and Neil, who had insisted they needed the practice. Both Kyle and Jennifer had refused to consider bringing the sensitive baby up here where the smell of smoke hung in the air, lingering to remind them all of what they’d suffered.

Jennifer ignored his worry. “I trust Angela and so should you.”

“It’s not her. It’s *you*. You’re so blinded by whatever common goal brought you two together, that you’ll put yourself in danger to accomplish anything she asks.”

“Yes, like you’ve been doing all along.”

“Exactly!” Trapped, Kyle’s lips thinned into a thin line.

Jennifer smiled at Angela as Kyle slid the chair out for her. “Morning, Boss.”

Angela patted Jennifer’s hand as she sat down. “Get a pain pill the minute we’re done or I’m going to tell Jimmy to put something in your water the way John did with me.”

Jennifer made a face. “Tattletale.”

With her hair in a messy braid and arm in a sling, Jennifer didn’t appear capable of what the future held, but Angela wasn’t fooled by the outside. Jennifer would tolerate less than she or Adrian had when she took over. The teenager would become a powerhouse of right and wrong.

Kyle stomped to the coffee line. Jennifer had told him she’d already taken a pain pill. He hadn’t confirmed it with the doctor. *I will from now on.*

Jennifer studied Angela, noting the mood of deep despair. She got to business, glad that she could help. “It’s not good. The cave collapses again. We need to be in the corridor where Charlie found Shane.” Jennifer pulled her jacket closed and zipped it up over her injured arm as best she could. The colder air was from drafty passages that were no longer sealed all the way. Rubble piles blocked them from intruders, but not the wind. Jennifer missed warm heat flowing from the vents. Those were gone now, crushed and buried when the ceilings had collapsed.

“What about the one we’re digging?”

“No good. The refugees force their way in right as we clear it.” Jennifer began to recite her dream from the beginning as Marc and Kyle lingered to drink coffee, listen, and worry.

While Angela and Jennifer talked, descendant kids began to arrive for food. With not enough tables, the kids were directed to Angela’s corner of the mess to sit on the floor. None of them spoke. It was clear they were being careful around the alpha.

The non-magic kids and their guardians came in next, casting nervous glances at the other inhabitants.

Leeann stood up before Angela could tell her to.

The three dozen adults in the mess went quiet as they realized something was about to happen.

“We’re sorry for being mean to you.” Leeann’s tense little shoulders became ridged as Angela stared at her. “And…we’re going to become your friends. Right now, the…Angela wants us to protect you.” Leeann joined Roy and Romeo, who had just come in with Doug. “Come on, I’ll help you get a cup.”

Doug scowled toward Angela, but Roy and Romeo had been at the meeting and felt Angela’s displeasure. They knew they had nothing to fear while the boss was so close. The two boys followed Leeann into the food line.

Doug left before he could argue with the choice. Showered and wearing an Eagle uniform, Doug was one of the rare clean inhabitants in the camp and more than lucky as far as everyone was concerned. The body pit was supposed to be a one-way trip.

The other descendant children also chose a non-magic kid to help, but they didn’t speak. They joined the child they’d chosen and waited for them to adjust.

Angela didn’t comfort the guardians or worry over the descendant kids being mean when she wasn’t around. Magic kids obeyed their alpha. It was in their DNA, but until now, their alpha hadn’t known about their treatment of the camp children. *My mistake.* *You’ll have to monitor them when I can’t. The non-magic kids will realize our children can’t hurt them and take advantage. Get them to become friends.*

“I will.” Jennifer didn’t believe it would be that hard now that Angela had given orders. In fact, Jennifer was optimistic that trouble might even be over.

Most of the thoughts floating around were about getting out of the tunnels and into the sunlight. Angela didn’t detect worries over the refugees or the UN troops who were coming. Her people just wanted out of the mountain, at any cost. *Things are about to get uglier.*

“We have a missing kid!”

Marc and Angela shared a glance of dismayed realization that not all of their traitors had been caught after all.

“Who is it?” Marc went to Nancy, who was once again crying.

She staggered against Marc. “Cody! I was in the bathroom for two minutes and we had a guard on duty!”

Marc concentrated despite knowing his grid was useless right now. Getting nothing, he looked at Angela, who shook her head. “Does anyone have him?”

Kids and adults hesitated to speak for fear of being reviled as a descendant.

Angela sent a wave of calm as she rose. “Chris?”

Everyone was unhappy to witness the vet emerge from the dark kitchen. He stood in the doorway, rumpled and stained. “Either Logan or Greg.”

Angela ignored the mutters and cries from supporters of both men. “Which?”

Chris’s green eyes grew hazy. “He took the boy through the body tunnel while the guard was talking to the doctor. He has all the medicine.” Chris shuddered. “I won’t do this one.”

“Damn right, you won’t!” Ray marched toward the vet. “You’re under arrest for murder!”

Ray’s fury was underscored by a countenance that implied he hadn’t slept well, if it all. His rumpled clothes and light beard would have been a giveaway under normal circumstances, as Ray preferred to be neat at all times, but right now, he was wearing what everyone else was–exhaustion.

“Dennis was a molester.” The vet didn’t budge from his weary, slumped stance. “He would have dragged our friend into it. Dale hates us both now, but he’s still good and still alive, isn’t he?”

Ray paused to regard Angela as the camp muttered around them. “How can you trust him?”

“Where do you think he got the information?” Angela’s tone was cool. “I could have announced it, let Dale be killed too when the camp strung Dennis up. Would that have been better?”

Ray shook his head in weary frustration. “I can’t go with you.”

Angela had been expecting that. “It’s your choice. It always has been. Gather a team for a manhunt. Chris is scared of ghosts down there.”

“Ghosts of those he’s killed?”

The vet didn’t respond to Ray’s bitterness.

Angela didn’t either.

Ray stormed from the chamber to do as he’d been told, furious and without an outlet.

*Let him lead the team.*

Marc agreed with Angela’s mental suggestion. Ray needed to vent his anger on someone.

The vet went back into the kitchen to curl up and sleep.

*Daddy! Help me!*

Marc groaned as a crushing sensation settled into his chest and tore his heart apart.

*Help me, Daddy!*

Marc ran, beating Ray and everyone else to the ladder.

Angela gestured Eagles along, also reeling from the desperation in Cody’s message. It wasn’t pain, but horrible sadness that another parent might fail him. Angela wanted to be with them, but she wouldn’t be able to keep up with Marc. Only a few of their military men or fathers might be able to.

*I can…if you want.*

*Yes, please.*

Kenn’s heavy boots went stomping by the mess.

Trusting Kenn to help, Angela waved at nervous camp members gathering in the mess entrance. “We have the images from outside. You can view them if you want to. You won’t be able to eat afterward.”

Distracted, a small group went to the laptop that Kenn had set up in the far corner. Angela hadn’t asked why he’d decided to put it in here, but assumed it was a wire issue. To get power to other levels, Theo and Ozzie’s team had been splicing and dicing. They were working long hours to accomplish that.

“Oh, my God!”

The woman’s exclamation drew the rest of the camp over to the small screen.

Angela didn’t stay for the reactions. Once people got over revulsion of the bodies, happiness would come that another enemy had fallen. Then, they would begin to wonder what kind of a leader could let so many Americans die such a horrible death. *If my herd gets any thinner, it won’t survive on the island.*

**2**

Many of the bottom floor residents jumped up in fear as Marc slid down the ladder and ran to the rear corridor. It was worrisome to witness him panicking. They’d known the man to always be cool and calm unless Angela was in danger.

Jimmy didn’t glance up from his examination of Samantha’s leg. He could only handle one problem at a time.

Marc barely noticed the reactions or smells as he ran into their impromptu morgue, but it was a nightmare without his grid or his demon. Like when he’d been alone after the war, Marc had to force himself to keep going. Back then, it had been letters searching for missing Americans tugging on his guts. This time, corpses glared at him with unforgiving accusations. Cody could be buried under any of the rotting bodies, but Marc was counting on the kidnapper wanting a descendant to help them survive in the wilderness. Greg and Logan were both smart enough to pull it off, but Marc had figured out which one was guilty. What he didn’t understand, was why.

Marc jumped over three corpses, recognizing all of them. Workers had been careful about stacking the bodies at first, but after bringing fifty friends down, they had been tired and depressed, just wanting to be done. The result was a four-foot high wall that was ten bodies wide, surrounded by haphazard piles and shorter stacks in horrible stages of decomposition.

*Disrespectful*.

Marc shoved the thought away. Disrespectful would be what came after the stacking.

Marc ran by the bodies, but there was no time for planning as the passage ended in a wider area that was blocked by the cave-in debris that had trapped the Mexicans. The pit where workers had dumped the Mexican bodies was along the wall. Next to the pit, Logan was crouched down, holding something.

Marc’s gut twisted as he realized it was Cody. Logan was holding him by a thin wrist, dangling the boy over open space. If Marc attacked, Logan would let Cody fall.

Cody whimpered, but he didn’t struggle. Logan’s grip wasn’t steady.

In the corner, Tonya’s mangy cat observed the scene with glittering yellow orbs.

“I wasn’t certain that you cared.” Logan saw Marc’s arrival. “That’s why I took the medicine too. Even if you don’t want the boy, you need the medicine.”

Logan didn’t appear to have slept since the quake. He glared at Marc through bloodshot, angry eyes that held no trace of their previous friendship.

“What do you want?”

Logan let out a weary sigh. “To go back in time.”

Marc used his alpha command. “Pull him up right now! You don’t have the strength to hold him. Your arm is shaking.”

Logan did lift the boy, but only enough that Cody’s terrified little face came above the edge of the pit. “Make me one of you.”

Marc didn’t betray his fear. That was something none of them could do, so he lied. “We’ll need the alpha.”

“Then you’d better get her down here. Not working out daily has cost me muscle mass.” Logan heard more steps coming toward them and flinched, grip tightening. “Please help me. I don’t know what’s going on.”

Marc swept the man again, recognizing Logan’s pre-quake clothes. He hadn’t slept, changed, or eaten. All of those were bad, but the insanity peering from Logan’s eyes spoke louder. In that moment, Marc recognized the symptoms of mountain sickness. “I’ll help you. We can help you.”

Logan snorted in soft resignation. “Death by Marc or retraining by Kenn. Not much of a choice.”

“There are other options.” Marc wanted to get closer. He also wanted to use his grid to discover where his backup was, but he didn’t take his attention off Logan. If the man let go, Marc would follow his son. He hoped the bodies down there might break Cody’s fall. “You need to rest. It doesn’t have to be this ugly.” Marc used a light wave of this new gift, trying to get Logan to snap into himself. “Let me help you.”

Logan didn’t feel anything but anger. “Like you helped Tim?”

Marc sent a stronger wave. “He was a traitor. You have an illness. You’re sick.”

“Stop saying that!”

Tonya’s cat fled at the shouting, staying along the wall to duck into a crevice and vanish.

Logan’s arm shook as he stared in hatred. “You caused this. It started when you picked Quinn over me.”

Bangs and clangs sounded, telling them repairs were continuing. For an instant, Logan’s eyes flickered with horror and awareness, and then he shut down. “Make me a descendant.”

“Keep the kid.” Too aware of time running out, Marc sent a mental order and spun toward his surprised men.

Logan gawked in confusion. “What?”

“I’ll post guards here so when you come out from hunger, you’ll be shot. There’s no reason for me to stay.”

“I’ll drop him!”

Marc shrugged at the scream. “I’ll make a new one.”

Desperate to stop Marc from leaving, Logan yanked the whimpering boy up and wrapped his big arms around Cody’s little neck. “Come back or I’ll snap it!”

“Like this?” Kenn reached out and snatched Logan into his bigger arms.

Logan’s hands came up, attempting to reestablish an air supply.

Cody dropped to the rocky ground, gasping.

Kenn twisted, using a burst of strength the struggling man couldn’t fight. The crack was awful.

Marc rushed to check Cody for injuries while the rest of the hunting party provided security or resumed their posts.

Ray didn’t stare at Dale’s den as he went up the ladder.

Dale stared until Ray was out of sight.

“Are you okay?”

The little boy held onto Marc’s arm. “I don’t feel good.” Cody threw up, splattering them both. “Ugh. Sorry.”

Marc scooped the boy up. “No worries, son. It all comes off in the wash.” Marc switched the boy to his back.

Cody held onto his father with a relentless grip as Marc climbed the ladder, followed by an Eagle escort. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I didn’t kill him.”

Marc missed a step and slipped, hand coming up to catch Cody. “It’s okay. That’s not your job.”

“I’m also sorry for what my mom did to you.”

“Also not your fault. When you’re older, we’ll discuss that, but I didn’t leave you then either. She stole you from me.”

Cody wasn’t ready to talk about his mom yet. “You lied a lot to Logan.”

“Yes. Thank you for knowing it wasn’t true.”

“I did, but the other man told me that too. He’s happy now.”

“What do you mean, now?” Marc sat the boy on his feet as they reached the mess level. “You didn’t know Kenn before.”

“I mean since the earthquake.”

“When his gift arrived?”

“I guess.” Cody tried to fix his collar with his left hand.

“Here.” Marc helped Cody take off the splattered jacket and then guided the boy into the mess. He wanted to watch him walk to determine if there were other injuries.

Angela was by the entrance with her medical kit. She knelt down in front of the boy, noting how calm he was. *He’s a Brady.* “Not upset, huh?”

Cody shook his head, watching Angela’s orbs sink into his wrist as Marc and Kenn blocked the camp’s view. “My Daddy’s a badass.”

The other adults laughed while Marc breathed a sigh of relief that he had retrieved the child.

“You’re pretty scrappy yourself.” Angela wrapped a loose bandage around Cody’s wrist, glad she’d had her medical bag with the kits on the top floor. “You have a sprained wrist and a nasty scrape on your ankle, but you’ll be fine.” Angela took the bag from Kenn, glad it wasn’t covered in Logan’s blood. *Thank you for making it quick.*

Kenn nodded at her and went to get Marc a cup of coffee. He could hear the man wishing for something to soothe his nerves. Kenn wanted that too. When Marc was twitchy, *everyone* was twitchy.

Becoming aware of stares from camp members who had watched the laptop feed, Angela walked toward the exit. She’d returned when Marc did, so she could examine Cody. Marc didn’t trust Jimmy with his son since the doctor disliked descendants.

“Stop.”

Angela paused, heart pounding. “Why? They’re already afraid of me.”

“We respect you for making hard choices.” Marc hoped saying it would make it true for the camp and for her. It already was for him. “You did it for our survival. We know that. We also know it hurts you.”

Angela fell back in love with Marc in that moment. Her aching soul rushed out to connect with his in a flash of need and completion.

Angela locked down on her emotions and sat at the table by Cody, obeying Marc’s wishes. She hadn’t wanted to hide at all, but her worry over his opinion had clouded everything. She’d assumed he was disgusted by her callousness when the camp was threatened.

*Never*. Marc sent his own wave of love and need. *You’re my Angie.*

*My Marc.*

“My God!” Cynthia entered the mess, sarcasm carrying. “How is anyone supposed to eat with that mushy crap going on?”

Cynthia had traded the medical gown for dirty jeans and a sweater, shunning the spare Eagle clothes. So far, she’d adjusted well to waking up in this situation, but everyone was watching for signs that her mountain sickness wasn’t under control. Jimmy couldn’t cure it, but he could drug them. That came with a new set of problems.

Cynthia gave Marc a wide berth after getting a cup of coffee. She was lucky to be both alive and still pregnant. That was making it possible for her to control herself. If Angela wanted the baby dead, he would have been killed in the quake.

“I’ve got room here.”

Angela’s offer brought silence from those observing and sent Cody to a different table. He didn’t like Cynthia.

Cynthia had tensed, flushing at Cody’s denial of her company, but she accepted that he was Marc’s son and she had tried to kill Marc. His reaction was reasonable.

“Is that a good idea?” Kenn frowned as the reporter carried her cup toward the boss. “She has a guard, but I don’t think we should let her around any of the council.”

Angela waved off Kenn’s concern. “She’s been ill. Let’s treat her like it.”

Kenn shrugged at the lie. He hadn’t hesitated to kill Logan and that man *had* been sick with the mountain disease that caused paranoid, schizophrenic behavior. Kenn wouldn’t hesitate with Cynthia either. Her baby wasn’t strong enough to kill, not even in defense. It would be over quick, like Angela would want.

*Are you sure?*

Kenn ignored his demon’s warning, loathing that evil. It had been in his mind every time he’d beaten on someone, spurring him on. It was a shame that he would never escape. *Can I keep my gift if I banish the monster?* Kenn stewed on it as he went to do a round of the cave.

His demon didn’t speak again. It was too scared.

Angela marked that off her list as something else that had never been done with descendants, but Kenn’s reform was something she would continue to monitor. If he ever showed signs of reverting, she would kill him herself. Old debts had been overlooked, but nothing had been forgotten.

# Chapter Sixteen

**More Questions Than Answers**

A picture containing man

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“T**his is Seth. Come in, Safe Haven.” Multiple radios crackled with his cheerful voice. “Hello, Safe Haven?”

Angela grunted in frustration as the call echoed across the mess of citizens eating oatmeal from dented plastic cups. They went from watching council members and kids, to staring at her with pleading expressions and thoughts.

Angela shook her head at Kenn, who had stopped at the call. “We can’t. The UN is monitoring all broadcasts.”

“When will Kendle arrive?” Kenn tried to help by diverting the camp’s focus.

“Three or four days.” Angela’s tone was sharp due to her previous thoughts. “We’ll clear the blockage while everyone out there is distracted.”

“Will we have enough time?” Kenn assumed Angela was ready for his leading questions. Adrian always had been at this point.

Angela observed Cody and Missy playing tic-tac-toe on the dirty floor. The thin boy didn’t appear upset by his ordeal; he was just glad that Marc had cared enough to come for him. “The waiting isn’t over for us yet, but it is close. In less than a week, anyone who wants to go will be able to.”

Doug stomped from the mess without speaking to anyone.

Angela understood his reaction. Doug was feeling guilty because he was relieved by the decision not to answer Seth’s call. He didn’t want Becky to know her mom was dead. Doug hoped the girl was recovering from everything she’d been through since the war. Peggy’s death might derail that.

Subdued conversations and noises floated through the air, but it wasn’t the happy chatter of before. This was a tense feeding at a waterhole known for taking lives without warning.

*We have to stop eating in here now*.

Marc nodded*. I’ll figure something out.* The floor collapsing had ruined this space for anything except storage and preparation, and even those chores would be handled with mistrustful glances. Marc was glad people weren’t blaming the crew who had installed both floors. They understood the earthquake and structure of the mountain were at fault.

*They should*. Kenn joked from across the mess. *You’ve had the Eagles say that enough*.

Marc grinned and went back to scanning. The odorless, tasteless oatmeal was even being eaten by the kids today. It was all they had and bellies were growling.

Angela hated that, but ration conditions were required. The oatmeal was healthy, which would keep her workers on their feet where she needed them. Hoping to get reluctant individuals to follow her lead, Angela made a show of eating her cup. The faces were almost real. *I hate this stuff.*

*In two weeks, you’ll have cinnamon rolls.*

Angela squinted at Kenn, stomach clenching as the thick goo hit bottom. *How?*

*We’re entering a cinnamon growing zone for the US. It needs special conditions. We’re almost certain to locate a farm that’s been overlooked.*

Angela felt her spirits lift a bit. *In winter?*

*It’ll be warmer once we’re off this mountain.*

Angela had forgotten that some southern areas didn’t get much snow or cold. *Thank you.*

*For what?* Kenn was confused.

*For giving me something good to think about. Spread it around about the warmer temperatures where we’re going. If I’ve forgotten it, so have they and we need all the good vibes we can make.*

A woman’s throaty chuckle rang out, drawing their attention. Gus was joking with his mate, putting her in a good mood to start the day. He and Brittani were in the corner by the charred, dark kitchen, working from a set of long tables piled with cups, sporks, oatmeal packets, and pans of boiling water on hot plates. That corner of the mess had a odor other than smoke or sweat, but a few steps away lost the scent. The entire cave system was beginning to reek. The lack of illnesses and fast recovering wounded were bright spots, but Marc knew the calm wouldn’t last. All of their problems were going to converge if they didn’t get a handle on them soon.

*Speaking of future problems*. Marc scanned for the person giving off the unstable vibes slapping him, waking his demon, and found two. It wasn’t hard to determine which woman was the threat.

Sitting by herself, Candy listened to the whispers in her mind. One was arguing in favor of killing Angela to escape this tomb. The other said if she could be strong enough to hold on for one more week, she would regain control of her sanity.

Angela gestured Kenn toward Candy. “Put her to work on something.”

Kenn went that way. The hairdresser wasn’t speaking to anyone or making eye contact, and her appearance was worse than most of the camp despite her not being awake for the quake. It appeared as though she’d been rooting around in debris piles on her hands and knees.

“Must be nice to be queen.”

Angela studied Cynthia, changing her mind about putting the reporter to work yet. Cynthia wasn’t stable. “It must be nice to blame everyone else for your choices.”

Cynthia flushed. “Why didn’t you kill me?”

Angela sighed. She was tired of that question. *Can’t they just be glad that I didn’t?* “For the same reason I didn’t eliminate Candy and others. We need you.”

“Our duty to the kingdom isn’t over?” Cynthia couldn’t stop being snarky. It was all she had left in her heart. Waking up to find the camp destroyed and her hold over Angela reduced to ashes was hard to swallow.

“Our duty to humanity.” Angela stood up, sensing Cynthia needed space more than insults. “I believe that.”

Cynthia let her go, brooding. If she was wrong about Angela, she had a lot to make up for. If she discovered she was right, there was a queen to behead.

“Don’t make me kill you.”

Cynthia froze at Marc’s growled threat in her ear.

Marc leaned down so he wasn’t overheard. “You don’t have mountain sickness as an excuse. You’re being corrupted by Adrian’s evil seed.” Marc patted her dusty shoulder, making the reporter jump. “If you can’t be loyal, be very careful to follow every single rule. I can change Angela’s mind about you with one sentence.”

“What’s that?”

*I don’t trust you around our people.* Marc left the reporter sitting there with a pale face and a mind full of confusion. Like everyone else, he was surprised Angela was giving the reporter another chance.

*Do you really feel that way?* Angela was in the drafty corridor, trying not to be drawn into a deeper depression at the sight of dirty stuffed animals piled by the reading chamber. Many of their owners were no longer alive to love them.

Marc wrapped his arms around Angela and buried his nose in her hair*. I don’t trust any of them, vetted or not. You shouldn’t either.*

Angela hated it, but he was right. The camp members here now weren’t killers or traitors, but they were dangerous because they were so scared. In fact, that might make them even more of a threat than the UN. “One more week. Then we’re clear for…” Angela paused, mind taking her into the future.

Marc waited, sweeping guards and people around them. There was curiosity and relief, but there was also resentment and jealousy in their minds. Everyone wanted the powers of a descendant.

“Are we ever going to get a break?!”

Angela complaining while in a trance shook Marc more than her tears might have. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Angela connected their minds. “We’re being sent to Market Town.”

Marc caught images of Eagles ramming tall gates to kill almost everyone. “What reason could we have for…” Marc picked out signs of slavery and felt anger rise to smother protests of more killing. “Damn it!”

Angela agreed. She was beyond tired of this job, but she would do it until she was dead.

Angela came out of the daze. She saw this tunnel had a sentry. It was more than they could spare from crews, but Marc had put a trusted man here anyway. Daryl was loyal to both of them, so she didn’t need to censor her words. “Get a plan ready for it? Since we’re the power on US soil, we have to handle it.”

“I will.” Marc kissed her cheek and then her lips. “Come back and eat more goo?”

Angela grinned, trying to force light into their lives. “Maybe you should get a shower...”

“Yeah. You too, now that I’ve dirtied you up again.”

Angela took his hand and led him toward the ladder. “You wash mine…”

Marc was chuckling as he descended, but he understood what she was doing. Each level they went down revealed more misery than the floor before it. If these people didn’t get a break soon, the council wouldn’t be able to bring the camp together. Angela wanted to show them that no matter how ugly it got, life had to continue. It was okay to take a break, but giving up wasn’t an option.

**2**

*Angela entered the dank monitoring cubby where Samantha was on duty and shut the door before anyone except the guards saw her.*

*“Sorry, we’re closed.” Samantha knew she sounded curt and tried again. “I have to eat. Come back later.”*

*Angela fastened the thin barrier, aware of how it muffled the sounds of her huge camp. She needed it to do the same from the outside.*

*Samantha swiveled around to get mean. She had to talk– “Oh, good, it’s you.” Samantha grabbed a paper from the neat desk. “We have another problem.”*

*Angela took the satellite image that had been printed.*

*“I’ve been studying that picture.” Samantha pointed to the center. “Yellowstone is still active.”*

*Angela sank down into the empty chair. “We need to talk.”*

*“You know something.”*

*Angela couldn’t hide her mental agony. “There’s little that I don’t see, Sam.”*

*Samantha started to make connections, but Angela wasn’t positive there was enough time to let her. Death was flying toward them, rushing over the broken country like a plague. “I need you to help me make a choice.”*

*“What kind of choice?” Samantha asked warily. The last time she’d had this conversation with Angela, it had led to awful destruction.*

*“As it will this time.” Angela put the paper into a pile on the desk, lining up the edges. “I need to know if the benefits outweigh the crimes.”*

*“Is there another choice?”*

*“There’s always a choice.” Angela motioned to the dark monitors. “We can fight.”*

*Samantha blanched. “Next?”*

*“We hide in here and try to survive what’s coming. People will die in either case.”*

*“Numbers, then.” Samantha concentrated. “Which one saves the most?”*

*“Exactly. Except…” Angela tried to hold in the tears. “It hurts too much this time.”*

*Samantha assumed Angela had come to her for strength. “There’s nothing I can say that will make it okay if you don’t tell the camp. Not letting them make their own choice is wrong if it’s life and death.”*

*“I know.” Angela was certain Samantha would catch on, but worry Jeremy or Neil would interrupt them before she could finish this horrid business.*

*“Are you talking to other people tonight?”*

*“Yes, some.”*

*Sam’s pale face went green. “My clock stopped.”*

*Angela’s tears came. They rolled over her cheeks in fat drops of remorse and grief. “I’m sorry.”*

*“Oh, God!” Samantha shuddered. “You’re here to handle my last wishes like you did with John.”*

*Angela leaned forward to take Samantha’s cold hand. “No, Sam. Not you.”*

*Samantha’s free hand went to her flipping stomach, but her heart knew better. “Neil or Jeremy? Which one am I losing?”*

*“That has not been revealed.”*

Samantha snapped awake with a strangled gasp that brought Neil to her side.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” Samantha chose not to tell him about her bad dream. That moment with Angela had happened hours before the earthquake hit and it would haunt her forever. If she’d told someone, Jeremy might have lived. With this pain in her heart, she didn’t care that it would have cost them the camp.

“What did you dream about?”

“It’s snowing again. Temperatures out there are falling fast.”

Neil covered her with his jacket. “Good evasion.”

“It really is snowing.”

Neil went to the tarp entrance instead of sinking down next to her to crash. He didn’t want to sleep until Kyle was back on this level. “I’ll tell a guard on the next sweep. I don’t want to get in the way of the crew lugging garbage down.”

“Okay.” Samantha tugged a corner of the jacket over Autumn. The baby had been sleeping next to her since Jennifer and Kyle went upstairs.

With two salvaged tarps and one of the ropes that he and Kenn had used to reach Samantha, Neil had formed half a square against the wall across from the pit tunnel. The tarp shack provided privacy and held in warmth, but it also gave him a place to stash the items he was collecting on his scavenging trips. He had bags and boxes around the edges, preventing the draft from entering. Samantha was against the wall on the air mattress he’d inflated, but it bothered Neil that he couldn’t offer her a shower or a hot meal that wasn’t oatmeal or broth. She needed food, water, and a safe environment. They had none of that.

Samantha smoothed her reeking shirt. “I’ll wear my Eagle set now, if you’ll bring it down.”

Neil knelt to dig through a nearby bag, not scolding her. He’d mentioned it yesterday, but she’d snapped at him. “I brought it down when I collected mine.”

Samantha studied Neil, noting he had his uniform on; all of his spare ammo pouches were filled. He was expecting trouble. The feeling was unmistakable.

Samantha sat up straighter, hiding a wince. Jimmy had given her a shot, but it hadn’t been morphine and she had a high tolerance for drugs. Not that she planned to mention that. Samantha would rather tough it out than to fall into that drug haze again.

Being careful not to wake the baby, she gathered her hair and began running her fingers through it to brush out the tangles. Neil’s glance had revealed how bad her appearance was. Samantha hated herself for worrying about things like that right now, but she still fixed her hair.

“What are they doing?” She was supposed to be resting, but she was bored and useless.

“Concreting the pit.” Neil watched from the tarp entrance. “They’re dumping debris down first, hoping to block the hole and give the concrete something to stick to.”

“What are they using for water?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Can I see?”

“No. Stay in bed.”

“What about dinner?”

Neil sighed. He knew she needed to be around the others, but he wasn’t positive he could stand it. Angela’s comment about giving birth alone had bothered him, but the idea of staying with Safe Haven for that moment was worse. “Okay.”

Samantha smiled. “Cool. I’ll even take a nap.”

“That’s a great idea.” He came over to help her slide down on the mattress and rearrange the sleeping infant. “Can I get you anything?”

“No.” Samantha held onto his hand. “You’ll stay?”

“You know it.”

They both winced.

Neil recovered first. He leaned down and hugged her, but he couldn’t take away the pain. That’s why he didn’t believe they should stay here or go with Angela to the island. Every Eagle moment would be a reminder of Jeremy that stopped them from forgetting.

“I don’t want to forget.” Samantha held in the tears. “I want to honor him. He’d be ashamed of us for leaving when we’re so needed.”

Neil knew that, but he didn’t want to go through it if he had another option.

“I’d never force you.” Samantha felt his struggle to find the right words. She paused for him to collect his thoughts, listening to the workers and the wounded on the level around them.

“I can’t stand being around them because it will hurt me every time I’m reminded of what happened…of how I couldn’t save him.”

Samantha shuddered. “That’s how I feel too.”

“Then why do you want to stay with Safe Haven?”

“Because Jeremy did.” Sam fought the sobs. “He wanted to walk in the surf with his son.”

Neil held her as she cried, barely keeping from it himself. Jeremy had been the partner that comes along once in a lifetime.

Samantha didn’t let herself cry for long. She knew Jeremy wouldn’t want her to be miserable. He also wouldn’t want her to abandon their leaders.

“Okay.” Neil caved without a fight, as he’d known he would. They’d both lost a wonderful soul from their lives. They would cling to each other and honor his memory.

“Dump in the next load!”

Samantha and Neil both tensed, pain rising. Jeremy would remain in the mountain that he had feared so much. There was nothing honorable about it.

Neil dropped down on the rock he’d dragged over for a stool, grunting at the soreness. He hadn’t had more than three hours sleep since Jeremy’s death.

Footsteps came.

Simon paused to wave at Samantha.

Neil glared until he left. “Let me know if you have more trouble with him.”

“I will.”

Simon hurried out of their view, leaving them to stare at the ladder, and behind it, Dale. He had made a den there and hadn’t left it as far as either of them knew. If not for the doctor bringing him food and water, Dale might have died with no one to notice. Samantha wanted to talk to him, but after the way he had spoken to Ray, it was clear that descendant contact wasn’t welcome.

A cluster of Simon’s camp members walked by next, also waving at Samantha. They were hoping to sway her into staying here. Angered, Neil went over and dropped the flap he’d created with a sheet.

Outside their den, labor and grief echoed without end.

**3**

Adrian snapped awake as pleasure shot through his body, bringing him to full hardness in seconds. He figured out what was going on and carefully rolled over. “Figures.”

He yawned, stretching, and then brought down a mental shield that he hoped would prevent more of Angela’s desire from getting through.

He had chosen to sleep on the level that was crushed because the Runaways had claimed a corner near the corridor where Charlie had found Shane and fought the Mexicans. Adrian was uneasy to have that group so close to freedom. The might make a run for it and leave the camp wide open to invasion while everyone slept. Knowing he was on this level would slow their possible plans.

*Oh, Marc!*

Adrian jerked upright, on fire. “Oh, hell!”

Grouching, he headed for the top levels to get coffee and find a distraction. On the way, he stepped into the cold drafts instead of avoiding it, hoping it would help. He didn’t care as much about Marc loving her, but he didn’t need to experience it. *I haven’t been with a woman in so long that I might drown the next one.*

Adrian shifted his tacky jeans to one side, allowing for the unwanted growth. Not doing so wasn’t an option. He hurried down to the bathroom, glad someone had put a tarp barrier between the port-o-potties and the bodies.

Fighting a gag, he held his breath to do his business. *This has to change soon or we’ll all be sick.*

Adrian went straight back to the ladder when he finished, not glancing toward the couple in the shower by the water chamber.

Piles of supplies were building up in all the corridors on every floor. Many of the items were unusable, but crews sorting through debris didn’t know what else to do with it. For some reason, the two-foot layer of toothbrushes bothered him more than the shoes in the body tunnel.

It was also colder up on the top levels, something their inhabitants could handle if outfitted correctly. Angela had ordered mattresses given to the wounded and to the kids. The children, along with the elderly, would share those beds in the rear of the TV room. The body heat would keep those two vulnerable sections of their population warm for a couple of days and then the coughing would start and illnesses would finish them off.

*Yeah… Oohh…*

“Oh, come on!” Distracted, Adrian missed the rung on the ladder. He kept a grip, but not his footing and slid down the wood to land in an awkward heap on the cold floor. Adrian took a deep breath as a roaming guard detoured in his direction.

“You need a hand up?” Morgan tried to hide his amusement and failed.

Adrian grunted in resignation, still hard. “Up isn’t my problem.”

Morgan helped the man to his feet, chuckling. He didn’t have a woman in Safe Haven either and he’d heard Angela’s moan as he passed by the shower. “She wants you in the small training room tonight.”

Adrian spit out a splinter from his hand, admiring Morgan’s semi-clean uniform, but he didn’t comment on it as he scanned the quiet floor. It was two hours after dinner and most of the camp was sleeping. “Aren’t those rear chambers blocked?”

“Yeah. That’s why she wants you up there.”

“Really? Perfect.” Adrian climbed the ladder, being careful this time. Clearing it would be exhausting–exactly what he needed.

Morgan resumed his rounds, going to the crushed level next. There was a lot of work waiting. Morgan estimated it would be a month before the cave was repaired, but he hoped Angela wouldn’t change her mind and stay to help. *I can’t be in here much longer.* Voices in the walls were whispering ugly things whenever he was alone. It was becoming harder and harder to ignore them.

**4**

Adrian found light glowing from the small training chamber and realized someone was in there. Eager to be with his men again, Adrian nodded to the two sentries, then slid through the gap and into the tight space that hadn’t been blocked.

Charlie extended a paper without glancing up from the game of checkers that he was playing with himself. “Updates. Coffee is on the ledge by your shoulder.”

Adrian stood there for a moment, trying to understand what was going on. It had been a rough week.

Charlie jumped three spots and kinged himself with rocks he was using in place of the missing red and black tokens. “I’m with you until this shift ends.”

Adrian added up the pieces, including those Marc had given him the night before. “You’re okay with it?”

“My dad made a promise.”

Adrian’s happiness fell. “That was before, though, right? When you didn’t hate me as much.”

Charlie nodded, but didn’t add to it.

Adrian retrieved the coffee mug and skimmed the notes. Coming out of the blue, he wasn’t prepared for this, but he would give Marc and Angie what they were hoping for with their rebellious son. This wasn’t the first time he had helped to correct a child on the edge of taking the wrong path in life. It also wasn’t the first time he had feared failing to correct that child’s path. There was a lot riding on this.

“No pressure.” Charlie shoved the warped board aside, scattering the stones. “You’re only gonna get this final chance with me and everybody else. You know that, right?”

Adrian opened his mind to the boy he would have been proud to call his son. “I’ll prove it. I am trustworthy now.”

Charlie stood up, dusting off his jeans. “We’ll see. In the meantime, this room needs to be cleared and she said you can train me while we’re doing it. Let’s get to work.”

Adrian chuckled. “You’re gonna raise more hell than your parents have, aren’t you?”

Charlie grinned, but didn’t add to it.

Outside the small training chamber, Kyle and Jennifer listened while on guard duty. Kyle hadn’t wanted to do a shift and be away from Autumn, but Jennifer had insisted they were needed. It also gave Samantha something to do. Autumn liked the storm tracker and Samantha wanted the practice. Since Sam was about to have two babies, Jennifer thought it was a great idea all the way around.

Kyle asked Jennifer a question that had been bothering him. “Why did she pick you over everyone else?”

Even though his tone wasn’t insulting, Jennifer was offended. “Why wouldn’t she?”

Kyle backtracked. “I know you deserve the slot.”

Jennifer flushed, hoping he would let it go. “Sorry. Eagles are competitive. It rubs off.”

Kyle laughed. “I know what you mean.”

Jennifer leaned against Kyle’s arm, sweeping the cold passage where random camp members were walking around in an effort to keep busy. Survivors were now experiencing guilt because they were happy about the deaths outside. Full of conflicting emotions, most camp members weren’t speaking to anyone, even among their own clans. Jennifer also believed the pit work had brought such a somber mood to the cave that it was impossible not to feel the weight of the latest tragedy they’d survived.

“You’ll still be banished when we bugout, right?” Charlie’s voice dared Adrian to give the wrong answer.

“Yes.”

Jennifer and Kyle were both relieved to hear Adrian’s confirmation. Neither of them had faith that this trio would achieve the peace Samantha, Jeremy, and Neil had enjoyed for such a short time.

“But you’ll be training us?”

“That’s up to your mom and dad, but I assume so.”

“She said to ask you if I would do as your right hand. If not, she’ll send someone else.”

“I’d be honored to have you as a student.”

Waves of bonding floated out of the room, making Jennifer breathe a sigh of relief and Kyle grit his teeth in annoyance. *That bastard always gets away with it.*

Jennifer patted Kyle’s arm. “He hasn’t gotten away with anything.”

Kyle took that to mean Charlie would put Adrian through hell during the training process. It brought the happiness back.

Kyle spun around to sweep the corridor. They had full power on the top floor and limited power on all of the levels below them. The refrigerator was working and Ozzie’s team was trying to repair their deep freezer. Kyle remembered putting that thing together and grimaced. They had two more in boxes, but he didn’t want to help. In fact, Kyle didn’t want to be involved in any of the repairs in this cave. He was positive that within a month of Angela leaving, everyone here would be dead. He didn’t see the point in wasting manual labor on those who weren’t going to survive.

Jennifer agreed, but she knew it would hurt Angela to leave the Mountaineers in a desperate situation and that was unacceptable. What the boss needed, she would get. Jennifer planned to see to that personally.

# Chapter Seventeen

**Nutcracker**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“T**he numbers are holding. Dangerous but not deadly.”

Angela pulled a face. She’d been hoping for an answer one way or the other. “No up or down at all?”

“Nothing that Samantha felt comfortable enough to write down.” Ray didn’t tell her about Neil’s bad attitude. He didn’t need to.

Angela sighed. “Thank you for the update. Go to bed now.”

Ray departed without promising anything. His misery was obvious.

Angela was still in the mess, where the rumble of machines was drowning out hundreds of tired citizens gathered for dinner. They’d all spent the day salvaging and repairing while Brittani cooked. The resourceful woman had cleaned the stack of crockpots that Li had insisted be brought into the cave. Stored in a corner of the mess, the pots were dented, but worked, and the scent of cooking meat had been floated through the dank cave in thick waves for hours. Even that had caused hard feelings. The hunger was a reminder that normal activities had to continue, no matter how awful the day before had been, or the week before, or the year before. The world didn’t stop spinning because of misery, but it always created an atmosphere of bitterness tinged with guilty relief. Even those who hated the world moving on were glad when it did.

Angela sympathized, but she’d known this was how it would be as soon as she brought them here. The awful flashes of what Safe Haven was going to suffer had tormented her almost nightly. The will of the people had been hard to accept, but she had, and now, they were a week from the end of this ugliness. All she had to do now was kill two thousand UN soldiers.

Around them, the cave shifted and groaned, loudly. Small rivulets of dust and dirt rained over the levels. It had been doing that the entire time they’d been here, but now, it seemed ominous. The twitchy inhabitants all quieted, glancing around in concern. They were holding dented, warped bowls of soup with bandaged hands. They belched, scratched, sniffled, and coughed, but their attention stayed on the cave.

When it quieted, they were able to breathe again.

The complaints resumed immediately. The two biggest gripes, after not being able to get out of here, were divided by the sexes. The men mourned the lack of pain medications like Advil for their sore, cutup hands and weary legs. Digging through rubble was dangerous and painful, as was the constant climbing. Used to being in pain but having to pretend they weren’t, the women cared about sleeping on the hard, rocky ground. They wanted off the cold floors and into the warm beds that used to protect them from drafts.

Angela saw Greg coming her way with a grim expression and sighed. Too many more days like this one and she might snap.

*Hang on. The UN is a great target and the battle isn’t far away. Keep your shit together!*

Glad no one had noticed her mental fight with herself, Angela drew on her stash of patience.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Of course.” Angela led the Eagle toward the kitchen as the camp observed, speculating on what would happen.

Greg followed, unhappy with what he was about to do, but there was no doubt that it had to be done.

Angela flipped on the light, ignoring the pet in the charred corner who peered up in wary concern. The kitchen hadn’t been cleaned yet, but it was covered in two prints–one a man, one a cat. The walls were black. Ash was thick across the floor and warped shelves that had tried to withstand the heat. The extinguisher foam had dried into hard flakes on top of the ash, sending up small puffs of dust from Greg’s feet as he joined her.

Angela faced him with a blank expression. “What can I do for you?”

“I was accused of being a traitor. I want you to search me and clear me.”

Angela held out her hand. “We have to be touching for the search you want, but it isn’t needed. We all know you aren’t.”

“But you don’t, not really.” Greg shot an ugly glare toward the vet. “*He* put doubt in everyone’s mind. I need that gone or I can’t be in your army anymore. I may not even be able to stay in your camp.”

“You’re too closed off for me to read without touching you and I couldn’t do that without you noticing.” Chris paused, and then forced himself to finish it. “I was wrong. Sorry.”

Mollified a little by the explanation, Greg shrugged. “I can get with that. I don’t worry over you the way the others do because the boss trusts you with her life. Don’t make another mistake, though. You’re out of rope. I have a camp of friends staring at me as though I’ve done something wrong. This may ruin my life here.”

Chris nodded. “I’ll fix it.”

The trio paused as something moved in the rear corner of the kitchen. They watched in silence as Li appeared, walking between appliances that didn’t exist. All of the stoves and such had been dragged out after the fire, but Theo had chosen not to put them in here because this is where the fire had started and he didn’t want to take the chance on it happening again if there was another quake.

Angela was aware of Chris studying the ghost. She thought the vet would flee, but he stared at Li with sadness.

“He was nice to me.”

Angela’s heart broke again. “I’m sorry.”

The vet shrugged. “We all die.”

“Some sooner than others.” Angela clamped down on her misery. “Li loved to cook. He still is.”

The ghost vanished, leaving a tense silence that spread out to the mess where people quieted to listen.

The vet caught Angela’s mental order to get lost. “Excuse me.”

Angela touched Greg’s hand. He wanted her to support his innocence and she would if she could. “If you’ve been hiding things, this is a chance to confess.”

“I’m an Eagle in Adrian’s army.” Greg straightened his shoulders. “I have nothing to hide.”

“Then stand and be judged.” Angela’s witch slammed into Greg’s mind without mercy, finally able to break that mental barrier. She’d asked the vet to observe Greg for that reason. He had one door she hadn’t been able to view through.

*Welcome home.*

The witch purred in response to Angela’s greeting and then dug into her work with a new strength.

Greg tried to hold that final door shut, but the witch wrenched it open to reveal his love for someone who was already taken.

Greg bowed to the power. *I never meant for it to happen. I would never come between them like the others have.*

*You are judged innocent.* The witch withdrew, satisfied.

Angela wasn’t. Thanks to Adrian, she knew how dangerous the situation could become. She stared at Greg as she released him.

Greg knew what that meant. “Please don’t. You’ll destroy what’s left of the teams.”

“*You* could have that honor, if it gets out of hand. He has a right to know.”

“Yeah.” Greg sighed. “I’ll leave when the tunnel opens. As soon as he finds out, I’ll be ostracized.”

“When it opens, if you want to leave us, you can. But wait to tell anyone, will you? I’d like to think on it.”

Greg assumed she was trying to figure out a way for him to stay. He wanted that too, but didn’t see how it was possible. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” Angela motioned toward the mess. “Grab some coffee and sit with me for a while. We’ll begin there.”

Greg let out a deep sound of relief. Once the Eagles saw Angela accepting him, the vet’s momentary doubts might be forgotten.

In the distraction, Angela sent a hand code order to Zack, who had duty over the mess.

Zack frowned. He didn’t want to give the vet food and water or a blanket. He wanted to put a bullet in the man’s forehead and dump him with the other bodies.

**2**

“Will he be okay overnight with such a light shift on duty?” An hour had passed since the show, but few inhabitants had gone to bed yet. Kenn didn’t like the mood of the camp, but it was more than that. He just didn’t want to say it.

Angela wiped dampness from her bloodshot eyes so she could see to scan the mess. More tables had been brought in to accommodate the doubled number of people in here. Everyone had come for this meal. With the smell of meat floating through the cave, the mood had lifted a bit. Everyone was having apples that had been foraged from the crushed levels, tea and coffee, fresh bread slices, and chunks of meat that Brittani had cooked in condiment packs all day.

The resourceful woman had topped the meal off with small bags of trail mix that had dehydrated berries, nuts, and granola. Crews had pulled all of those items from rubble piles.

“He can handle it.” Angela swept Adrian’s table. It was him, with Charlie, Zack and his boys, Donald, Allan, James, Peter, and Bruce. All of them had duty together as point guards over the levels, but there would be another dozen Eagles reporting to them–including Greg.

“If you say so.” Kenn didn’t like the idea of anyone performing those duties for Adrian, let alone a 14-year-old boy. Word had gotten around that Charlie was now Adrian’s student.

Other than Kenn, no one appeared to care. Around the mess, descendant children and non-magic children were eating together. There wasn’t a lot of conversation, but the awkward gazes from this morning had been replaced with expressions of frustrated annoyance. After they were finished eating, Tracy and the other women were going to help the kids with showers. Natoli and his warriors were guarding the reading chamber tonight, where all of the children and their guardians would be. The entire camp was sleepy, like she’d been hoping for. The true aftermath of the earthquake was arriving in the crash. It would allow these folks to rest, but upon waking, they would be even more volatile than they had been today.

Angela inspected the mess again, picking out people she needed to speak to and people that needed to speak to her. She gave Greg a quick glance.

Greg never looked up from his bowl.

*He doesn’t think about it often. I’ve been monitoring his memories and thoughts since we found out.* Angela’s witch had returned in full force, eager to be useful with her new powers.

Angela was curious about those, but she was too tired to explore it right now.

Across the room, Angela noted Shawn and Doug standing behind the table that held Cody, Missy, Leanne, Roy, Romeo and half a dozen non-magic kids. It was clear from Doug’s expression that he didn’t want to be here.

*He’s leaving when the tunnel opens.* Angela’s witch dug deeper. *He is not going with us.*

*That doesn’t surprise me. Doug has the boys and he feels responsible for Becky. He’ll join her and Seth.* Angela turned toward the entrance of the cave as the chatter around her came to a halt.

Jimmy pointed at Simon, who was sitting near the center of what he considered his camp now. “I challenge you for leadership.”

Angela sighed in resignation as the camp lit up with fresh chatter at the second surprise show. She stood up. “There is a challenge for leadership. Before we go to the trouble of the next step, is there anyone who will support Jimmy?” Angela wanted to do it herself, but couldn’t. It would be a conflict of interest. That rule would be added to the new constitution draft while they were on the boat.

“I second Jimmy’s challenge. Simon isn’t fit for leadership.” Neil came through the passage and stood by the surprised doctor. “Simon tried to force Samantha to stay. Jimmy told her it was her choice and ran Simon off.” Neil didn’t mention the gun.

Jimmy was grateful. He didn’t want his citizens to believe he was as violent as the leader who was leaving. “Simon doesn’t care enough about right and wrong. I demand a vote.”

Jimmy was covered in sweat and dirt. He looked nothing like a politician. Angela was certain that would swing people in his favor. Simon had also spent the day sifting through rubble, but he hadn’t put his finds in the community bin. He hadn’t taken water to the injured or helped with body removals. Jimmy had done all of that and more. The two candidates were equally dirty, but only one of them smelled good to the five-dozen members of that group who were scattered around the mess.

In a corner, the Mountaineers watched without comment, eager to discover who they had to deal with in the future. Some of those who were leaving would come back here to trade if the mountain camp survived. Angela knew it wouldn’t, but those who were leaving didn’t care about her predictions.

*The Runaways.* Angela finally caved. She’d been calling them that in her thoughts anyway and it was on everyone’s lips. The folks going off on their own would forever be known as the Runaways.

Angela held up a hand to stop the shouts and yells from supporters and critics. “To call a vote, someone not in leadership has to support your nomination. Neil is a member of my council and cannot do it. Will anyone else support Jimmy’s nomination?”

The mess went quiet for a second and then it echoed with camp members who had been helped by the brusque doctor in their time of need.

“Me.”

“I will. He saved my life.”

“Me too.”

“How dare you! You said you were on my side!” Simon shoved away from the table. “Fine! Vote! It won’t matter. I have a lot of friends here!”

Adrian and Marc both stepped closer to Simon.

“We’ll hold a vote.” Angela regarded the fascinated, angry, tired populace. “Everyone meets here in one hour. If you’re not staying in the mountain, get done eating and be out of here before that hour is up.”

Satisfied, Jimmy went to the food line to get a tray. He was quickly surrounded by people congratulating him on standing up for something they felt he deserved.

Simon stormed from the mess.

Marc motioned a guard to follow the man. Marc was glad Jimmy had challenged the man, but Simon’s words had been true. He did have a lot of friends here–enough to win. *Maybe we can do something about that.*

Angela shook her head at Marc’s suggestion. *We’re not going to interfere this time. Fate has control.*

Marc didn’t argue.

**3**

“Let’s get clean, huh? Who’s ready?”

Nancy’s over-happy tone drew small cheers from the kids who were picking up on the tension of being on the bottom level while the Mountaineers held their vote.

Charlie observed the stream of kids, impressed with how well the women were handling it. Dirty kids were in a line, surrounded by guards from Natoli’s camp. Nancy, Courtney, and Tonya were herding the kids toward a tarped area that had been placed behind the edge of the wall by the water chamber, providing a semblance of privacy. As the kids finished, another group of Natoli’s warriors took them upstairs to where the rest of the women and guardians were waiting to get them settled for bed.

Dressed in Eagles clothes that had been fastened with string, the children were miniatures of Angela’s army. Charlie observed the difference in their moods. The kids in line were quiet, nervous. The children being taken upstairs were chattering at their escorts nonstop. Being clean was good for them.

The smells were better down here with the body pit closed, but only by a little. Human waste stank. There was no avoiding that. The clothes that were too dirty to be worn again were piled near the water room, drawing Charlie’s attention. He had no idea what his mom planned to use them for, but she’d ordered all clothes to be kept, no matter their condition and he was curious about the order. It was minor, but he kept thinking about it, trying to figure it out. With his mom, the smallest details were often the most important. “My shift is about to start. Are you okay down here?”

Tracy nodded at Charlie’s question, waving him on. She was busy trying to convince little Bobby to release his teddy bear long enough to get a shower. “I’ll hold him for you, okay?”

Bobby pulled the filthy bear from her grip. “He keeps me safe.”

Tracy smiled, understanding. “Okay. How about we give him a shower too?”

Bobby glanced down at the toy and then up at her. “Will it hurt him?”

Tracy knelt down. “Let me read his tag. It should say on there, if we can make out the words.”

Bobby kept a tight hold on the bear’s leg as Tracy felt for the tag.

“Actually, you’re right. He’s not supposed to get wet.”

Bobby wrapped his arms around the bear, lip coming out.

Tracy studied the boy, working on the problem. She could take the toy and make the child scream, but she couldn’t stand the thought. These kids had been through too much. “I’m the guard here. You know what that means?”

“You keep camp people safe.”

“Yes. You’re camp people. So is your bear.”

Bobby peered at her through layers of dirt and distrust. “Are you a good one or a bad one?”

“One what, honey?”

“Angel.”

*A descendant.* “Oh. Well, I’m not one of them at all, but I am a good person.”

Bobby was satisfied with that. He shoved the bear into her arms and ran toward Nancy, who was the main shower handler. “Get my legs. They itch!”

Tracy chuckled, standing. She glanced over to find Charlie gazing at her with emotions she hadn’t witnessed since she’d been attacked.

Charlie sent his respect, his admiration. “You are, you know.”

“What?” Tracy blushed at the heat in his gaze.

“One of us and a good person.”

“I’m not a descendant.”

“You’re my chosen mate. When we have kids, you’ll be one of us through that baby until it’s born.”

“That’s not the same thing.” Tracy’s cheeks were scarlet at the conversation, but she refused to deny his words. It was what they both wanted.

“Are you sure?” Charlie hoped he wasn’t pushing her too hard. He wanted her to know that nothing had changed for him except that he’d become a more compassionate person while caring for her.

“Yes. I love you.”

Charlie came over to hug her. “I love you too.”

Tracy sighed in contentment as he held her, rubbing her arms. He never crossed the line, but she knew he wanted to. That made it better. It proved he could be trusted to do the right thing.

Charlie stepped back, full of her scent, her exciting thoughts. “See you after shift?”

“You know it.” Tracy watched him leave, heart settling into a normal rhythm. *My life was so empty before that young man picked me up and dusted me off.*

“You shouldn’t play with them, not even the cubs.” Simon came from behind the tarp where Samantha and Neil were living. “They’re animals. Be careful or you’ll get hurt again.”

Tracy scowled at the grungy man, smelling alcohol. “You’re supposed to holding a vote right now. What do you want?”

“For you to stay here with us.” Simon leered at her, slimy gaze crawling over her tensing body. “We need normal, breedable women.”

“I’m sterile.” Tracy walked away, hoping that lie would discourage the man. Jimmy had declared her physically as good as new.

Simon studied her ass, belching. “Liar. The boy said *when you have kids*.” Simon took a small notebook from his dirty jacket and scribbled her name into it.

“Stop!”

Angela’s shout grabbed everyone. Her order was impossible to ignore or resist.

Simon spun around to find the vet standing behind him with a knife and an expression of confusion as he stared toward Angela.

Angela didn’t come down the rest of the way. “He’s about to show up to the vote drunk and lose. We don’t want him to miss that.”

Chris lowered his arm, smirking as he left. “Guess I’ll catch you later.”

Simon gaped at the killer. Angela was gone when he staggered around to voice a slurred protest. “Hey! Where’d she go?”

“The same place you are.” Adrian grabbed Simon’s arm and propelled him toward the ladder. When Angela had exited the mess without talking to anyone, walking fast, Adrian had followed.

So had Marc and several others. They all glanced down with sheepish expressions.

Angela chuckled even though she wasn’t amused. “We’re good. Let’s handle the vote.”

The guards kept their bodies between Angela and Simon as soon as she reached the next level, all casting dirty glares at the man. If the vet had marked him as bad, he probably was, but Angela’s words had declared him a drunk too and that would hurt the man worse.

Angela didn’t tell them the vet would handle it while the UN hit them. She didn’t know what Chris had pulled from Simon’s thoughts, but it had been about Tracy and bad enough that the vet would have killed the man in front of a line of showering children. “Get a guard ready for him. Simon isn’t going to like the outcome of the vote. He may need to be held somewhere until he calms down.”

“You did this!” Simon growled at Adrian when the man shoved him. “You turned everyone against me.”

Adrian stepped back, realizing Charlie was right to want Simon dead. “It can’t be me. I’ll finish what Chris started.”

Marc gestured Morgan to it. “If he becomes a problem, do it as quietly as you can.”

Simon stumbled, understanding his death was coming sooner than he’d anticipated. “I want out of here!”

“You have one chance for that to happen.” Angela swung around instead of going up the next ladder. “Ready to listen?”

Simon flinched from her glowing red orbs. “Yes!”

“Be good. Think good thoughts.”

“That’s it?”

Angela snorted, but she didn’t tell him it was too much for him. She motioned toward the ladder. “Your group is ready to hear why they should vote for you.”

Marc was ready to grab the man as he shoved by Angela to get to the ladder, but Simon was filled with dread and fear. He couldn’t think good thoughts. He didn’t have any.

“Nice.” Angela grunted as Marc put an arm around her. “Don’t tell Charlie or Simon won’t make it through the night.”

“Too late.” Adrian pointed to the teenager standing in the shadows by the ladder.

Charlie was staring at Simon.

Noticing the teenager, the man climbed faster.

“Don’t!” Simon wasn’t hurt as far as anyone could tell, but the man didn’t stop yelling.

Angela sighed again. “He’s going to fall off. Catch him.”

Simon’s screams grew louder and then stopped. He gasped, letting go of the ladder.

Adrian and Morgan broke his fall with their arms and hips, not catching Simon, but stopping him from being injured. He slumped into a pile at Angela’s feet, wheezing.

Charlie came from the shadows. He knelt down to dig in Simon’s pocket, ignoring the guards who edged closer to grab him if they had to.

Camp members were walking around the scene. Some were going to the mess to register their vote–drawn out of their holes at the chance to avoid Simon’s leadership. Instead of fear, they glared at the cringing man on the ground with no sympathy for his pain. In a few of those expressions, Angela also found satisfaction. It sealed the deal for her. Simon wasn’t going to be put in charge, even if the vote went his way.

Angela took the notebook from Charlie, scanning the pages without responding to any of the thoughts or concerns in the minds around her.

“It’s a list of the females in our camp who can have children–including the children.” Angela read the names. “Have someone talk to all of them. Find out if Simon has been bothering them.”

Adrian swayed on his feet, ears buzzing, mind growing foggy. He’d been up for 24-hours now, as had Kenn, Charlie, and Neil. All of them looked rough, but no one doubted they could still be counted on if something went wrong.

“We wanted him at the vote.” Marc glowered at his son. “You’d better have a good reason.”

“He threatened Samantha. He was thinking bad stuff about Tracy.”

“So you popped his nuts for bad thoughts about your girlfriend?” Marc grew angry.

Charlie shrugged. “I crushed them a little. If you’d heard those thoughts about mom, the man would be dead. Even Adrian wouldn’t hurt her.”

They had all assumed Simon had been thinking about sex, but he’d been fantasizing about pain.

“He’s very jealous of the descendants. If he can hurt us, he will. That’s why Chris was handling it.”

“You knew what the vet was doing?”

“He should, since he called him.” Adrian knew that was the only way Angela had needed to come down to control Chris. She hadn’t given the order.

Caught, Charlie wasn’t sorry. “I was trying to keep my hands clean, but you saved him, so I had to interfere.”

“Why?” Angela wasn’t mad. She was worried she had missed something that Charlie hadn’t. She was also reconsidering her future plans for Charlie.

“I’m not going to tolerate that anymore, from anyone. Safe Haven is about the good, the light. We have to stop giving evil a pass because of politics.” Charlie left the trio of stunned adults standing there. He’d delivered a harsh blow, but they’d needed it.

He’d also told his mom that he didn’t care about the greater good. He would do what was right all of the time, no matter what it caused or who it hurt. Angela looked at Adrian.

Adrian shook his head. “Not me. Tracy might be able to do that. He trusts her.”

“Then that’s what we’ll count on. In the meantime, work hard on those lessons. He won’t take it from me, but he has to be able to see the big picture or I can never put him into a leadership position.”

“Maybe he doesn’t…want one.” Simon was trying to breathe so he didn’t pass out. “He enjoyed doing that to me. That’s why…we want you gone. You’re dangerous.”

“What about your list?” Marc let his demon dig in when Simon didn’t answer. Around the bright pain, Marc saw the fantasy Charlie and Adrian had. “You want slaves to abuse? Let me make sure you can’t do anything to them.”

Simon’s screams rang through the cave again, echoing to all corners.

Now on the bottom level, Charlie smiled in cruel satisfaction and continued his rounds.

The dim corridors echoed with footsteps now. Inhabitants came from the top and bottom floors to discover who was screaming and why, but the voters didn’t. They recognized the voice.

Simon didn’t notice. He was turning blue. Angela would have interfered, but Simon’s thoughts had flashed her to the slavers, to Cesar and the rest stop.

“Are you okay?” Adrian stepped closer to her.

“Yeah. It doesn’t happen often.” Angela was subdued. “But some horrors you never forget.”

# Chapter Eighteen

**Survivor**

A picture containing drawing

Description automatically generated

**1**

**I**t took a long time for Safe Haven to recover from Simon’s screams. The guards didn’t know what to tell people who gathered the courage to ask. Because Simon wasn’t being touched by anyone, most of the camp assumed he was suffering from an acute case of mountain sickness.

Angela ordered him sedated and a painkiller given, but she didn’t tell Jimmy why. Charlie and Marc hadn’t touched him physically, but the mental pain had been debilitating. Simon would stay away from all women when he woke.

New concerns about the mountain illness kept the camp awake. It meant Angela had to stay up as well. These souls were too twitchy to be up without the alpha overseeing them.

Aware of how tired she was, Marc stayed nearby, watching out for her and helping.

Angela chose to handle one of her scheduled morning meetings now, detouring toward the kids’ room.

The man sitting there peered up in resignation. “I felt you coming.”

“You’re worried about nothing.” Angela didn’t have the energy to be subtle. “You are not a predator.”

Shawn flushed a dark red that almost matched the wrinkled shirt he was wearing under his Eagle jacket.

Angela placed a hand on his wrist, scanning.

Shawn was relieved that he hadn’t had to ask, but he was also scared that she would tell him she’d been wrong, that he was a threat.

“Do you feel like a threat?”

“No, but what about when she’s older? Will I be a danger to her then, like Billy would have been with Leeann?”

Angela snorted. “He wouldn’t have hurt her. They would have broken the rules too soon. With you, that’s not a problem.”

“Why not?”

“Missy won’t push you like Leeann would have Billy. She’s not as…forward, though I know it doesn’t appear that way. She’s just lonely.”

Shawn breathed a bitter sigh. “Yeah, who isn’t?”

“Your mate is here now. I’ll tell you the name when you’re ready.”

Shawn frowned. “But I thought Tara…”

“You assumed Tara.”

“Then the kid.”

“That’s Missy’s obsession, not yours. Do you remember the exact words of our conversation?”

Shawn struggled to pull it up. So much had happened since then.

*“Get me to our new home by sunset and I’ll tell you which Eagle to ask for a one night stand.”*

*Shawn laughed. “What if I get you there an hour early?”*

*“I’ll tell you which one will sleep with you for the rest of your life if you want her to.”*

“I can still give you those answers, one of them. Choose based on your needs right now, not on what you hope to have later.”

Shawn leaned in to whisper.

Angela blinked as he leaned back. “Wow. Really?”

Shawn nodded.

“If that’s all it takes to make you happy, consider it done.”

“Honest?”

Angela stood up. “Of course. I understand wanting time with him.”

“You can spend time with him now, I’ve heard.”

Her shoulders tensed. “Yes.”

“But you aren’t.”

“I’m very busy. We all are.”

“But still…”

Angela sighed. “I don’t want to hurt Marc, so I won’t until I can’t stand it. Desperate moments are the only kind we’ll ever have.”

“Until Marc…” Shawn dropped his chin at Angela’s wave of pain. “I’m sorry. It must be awful to know that’s coming.”

Angela grunted. “Actually, it gives me a chance to alter the future. If I didn’t know it was coming, I’d be blindsided.”

“That makes sense.” Shawn yawned. “I’d like to be put to work if my punishment is over.”

Angela chuckled, walking away. “You’ve been on duty over Missy and the other kids this entire time, Eagle.”

Shawn grinned as he realized she’d been using him without him knowing it. “That is so sexy.”

Angela’s raspy laughter floated through the tunnels, killing some of the fear.

**2**

Adrian had gone after Charlie. He didn’t believe it was good for the boy to be running loose right now. He needed to be busy. Adrian found him on the shattered level, digging through the rubble. “Want some help?”

“Sure.”

Adrian spotted the two piles and joined the boy in approval. The blankets and sheets would help the camp and the toys would please the kids.

“It’ll also get them out of the way while mom works on the next plan to kill everyone.”

Adrian paused, brow lifting. “You mad at her for that?”

“No, just cautious.”

“Maybe you should–”

“Put myself in her shoes?”

Adrian gave a curt nod at the rudeness.

“I can’t do that. She’s the alpha and I barely know what that means.”

“She’s your mom first and a leader second, most days. You just don’t use her for that anymore.”

“I don’t think she’s the same.”

“She’s not. She evolved. All of us could do it if we were strong enough, but only a handful of our kind ever achieves what she has. The war forced her to. You do know she didn’t want any of this?”

“She says that and my dad says that, but who wouldn’t want that kind of power?”

“Your mom.” Adrian sighed in wistful longing. “She never would have become this way if not for you.”

Charlie scowled. “It was all you and my dad fighting over her! I didn’t have anything to do with it. I’m a burden and a duty, like this camp.”

“She came for you.” Adrian sat down on the edge of a large, chipped boulder. “If you had been unhappy in Safe Haven, she wouldn’t have stayed. If you ever become unhappy in Safe Haven, she’ll walk away.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“You don’t have to. I know it.”

Charlie studied the man. “And you do know her better than my dad...”

“Yes. I accept the parts of her that he refuses to acknowledge. It lets me see what makes her tick and what ticks her off.” Adrian dropped his mental shield so there would be no mistaking his honesty. “If you told her you were leaving unless she had the vet kill me, she’d do it.”

Charlie flushed. That’s what he’d been thinking about since learning Jennifer had been announced as the heir to that council seat and not himself. That would get his mom’s attention.

“Why would she honor you with leadership? Just because you’re her son?” Adrian snorted, standing up. “You haven’t acted like it.”

“She got Tracy raped and beaten!”

“No one catches everything, boy. Many people were killed. It’s called war for a reason.”

“We didn’t have to fight.”

Adrian stopped. “You think she should have given up and let the government have this camp?”

“Isn’t that what you were doing?”

“No, you don’t get to excuse that with my mistake.” Adrian didn’t pull any punches. “What you’re saying is you wish all of these American citizens were in a government bunker with your mom, all being tortured and abused, so your girlfriend wouldn’t have been hurt? That we should all die, so you two can be together, but your mom should have chosen you to rule this camp?”

Charlie hung his head. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.” Adrian opened his mouth to pull the support of being the kid’s teacher and then snapped it shut. He rotated toward the ladder, wheels spinning furiously. Charlie needed a teacher. He had to understand that his selfish desires meant nothing in comparison to the survival of their country. It was a huge disappointment to learn that the teenager hadn’t already figured it out from observing everything around him. Angela had made the right choice. Charlie might never be a leader.

“The water stopped!”

Climbing up the ladder, Adrian reversed direction. The guards on the water level could work on the problem, but it would distract them. Adrian stopped in the mess. “We need four hands on the bottom level for guard duty.”

Zack stood up, knowing his boys would follow. He’d heard the water call. They would be listening to the sounds of repair attempts all night. Zack didn’t mind. He was having trouble sleeping and his teenagers had the energy of youth to burn through. All the boys had been disappointed with their day of scavenging and salvage. This would put them in a better mood.

Adrian went to the top floor for a fast round, skipping the weapons room where Angela and Marc would soon be settling down for the night. The reading and TV chambers, now cleaned, were full of camp members that hadn’t responded to the call about the water. It was peaceful.

Adrian checked on the guards next, glad to find them alert. He didn’t stay to exchange small talk or insults. While Marc and Angela were sleeping, he would do his best to make sure nothing went wrong.

The mess level still held fifty residents, however, and it wasn’t peaceful or quiet even though the vote was over. It also wasn’t out of control. Kyle, along with Neil and Doug, were in the corner playing poker until their shift on that level began.

Adrian went by the crushed floor where Charlie was still toiling and descended to the bottom. He wanted to check on Samantha and Jennifer.

Adrian found Daryl, Allan and Donald perched around the various cubbies and tarps, sharp glances missing nothing.

Satisfied, Adrian tapped on the tarp. “You decent?”

“No!”

Adrian heard Samantha’s grunt and ducked inside. “I’m not a snitch.”

Samantha paused in getting back into the bed. “We both know that isn’t true.”

Adrian’s lips thinned, but he still came over to help her get settled. As he pulled the blanket up, he spotted the red bandage. “She picked women just like her.” Adrian ignored Samantha’s coming protest and left the tent.

Samantha sighed, arms crossing over her chest. “See? A snitch.”

Adrian went to Daryl. “Can I borrow your medic bag?”

“Should we get Neil?” Allan eyed the tarp. “We’ve been watching her shadow for half an hour.”

Donald chuckled. “She was up before he hit the top of the ladder.”

“He asked you to keep an eye on her?” Adrian took the medical bag.

“We…offered, so he would give her a break. Same for Kyle. After the crap down here with Simon, both of them refused to take a shift.”

Adrian’s lips twitched. “Let me guess. You told them they’re slacking off for a woman during a camp crisis?”

Daryl slapped Allan on the shoulder that wasn’t injured. “Genius here reminded us that the favorite weapon we used to use against wayward Eagles was the truth.”

Adrian was still chuckling as he ducked back into the tarp. While still warmer than outside, this level was getting an awful draft. When they’d had the heat going, it had pushed into the bottom floors and brought the average 60° up to a comfortable 70°. Now, the 60° down here was cold to everyone.

Adrian handed Samantha the kit. “I don’t remember what to do.”

“Why didn’t you call my watchdog?” Samantha’s grumble was lost in the sound of banging on metal. The workers were trying to reestablish a water flow.

“After I patch you up, I’ll find a spot on the top level for you and get your stuff. If we’re careful, he won’t notice until I take you up.”

Samantha handed him the alcohol wipes and then began to thread a suture. Neil had gone up for two more bags of medical supplies late last night. Jimmy had been thrilled. So had the patients who knew the supplies were low. Jimmy had been using what he had to for the more serious injuries. Samantha had needed more stitches, but the doctor had run out. Now, Adrian would put in the others.

“He’ll be pissed at you.”

Adrian cleared the dried and fresh blood with the wipes, hating the ugly injury that marred her leg. “Was he okay with me before?”

Samantha was surprised into a laugh that helped distract her from the pain. “No.”

“Then it won’t matter much, except that you’ll be happier.”

Samantha’s frown returned. “And maybe forgive you in time?”

Adrian took the suture. “I’d settle for not being considered a snitch.”

Sam realized she’d gotten under his skin with that remark. She didn’t apologize.

Adrian would have been surprised if she had. He pinched the end of the seeping wound together and inserted the needle a quarter inch below, piercing both layers at the same time to make it faster. As he pulled the thread through and tied the stitch, Samantha’s breathing became shallow; the strong hum of descendant energy filled the small enclosure.

“Someone else survived. I can hear them screaming.”

A bit creeped out that she wasn’t reacting to the stitches, Adrian tried to hurry and finish before her magic did. “Can you tell where?”

Samantha shoved into the darkness with the person, shaking at the fear. “It’s a man… He’s alone under something. There’s no light, but he can hear someone.”

Adrian snipped the stitch and took the second finished suture from her icy hand. “What sounds are they making?” Adrian pinched the skin tighter as the blood came out faster, sticking the needle through with a grimace.

“Clinks…clank…a step…”

Adrian tied the stitch and wiped his bloody hand down his shirt to clean his grip for threading the last suture he needed. “Keep going, Samantha. Stay with them.”

“Stay with who?!” Neil stomped into the enclosure. “What are you doing in here?!”

“Shut up!”

Neil stared in shock at Samantha’s witch glaring through her eyes. He’d never viewed it before.

Adrian pinched the skin together as Neil came over.

“There was a shout… Someone kicked something and it rolled very close to where the man is.”

Adrian inserted the needle for a final time and tugged the thread through, aware of Neil’s growl. He didn’t let the anger rush him. Samantha didn’t need to go through this again.

“He heard Charlie!”

Adrian tied the stitch. “We have someone trapped on the crushed level where Charlie is right now.”

Neil realized Adrian expected him to handle it. “Hey–”

“Don’t wake the boss!” Adrian controlled his anger, snipping the stitch. “We have a lost sheep alive under a rubble pile. Get to it!”

Neil spun out of the tarp with his fists clenched.

Samantha tensed as Adrian wiped the blood from around the wound. The pain was back. “Thanks.”

“For Neil or the leg?”

“Neither.” Samantha handed him the half used tube of antibiotic ointment. “For never doubting me when I’ve told you something like that.”

Adrian placed a bandage over the wound and taped it into place without speaking.

As he cleaned up the mess, Neil returned.

Samantha waved him over. “Come sit by me and get the lecture out.”

Neil advanced, giving Adrian a nasty glare. “You should have had a real doctor do it.”

“The real doctor did, twice, but his glasses are still missing and he drops stitches and doesn’t notice it sometimes.”

“One of the students, then.” Neil sat on the edge of the bed.

“They’re sleeping. Adrian caught me out of bed and threatened to tell. I told him I’d yell and wake Angela. We’d compromised on him doing it.”

Neil snorted at her. “Do you expect me to believe that?”

Samantha shook her head. “No, you’re right. Let me try again.”

Adrian ducked out while she had Neil distracted. He climbed the ladder to prepare a space. Neil was mad now. When he found out it wasn’t over yet, he would be–

“No, you are not!”

Adrian winced at Neil’s shout. *Very unhappy.*

“Stop with the noise, Neil. You’re an Eagle. Act like it!”

Daryl’s shout settled the floor into sullen submission and let Adrian continue toward the top. The women wanted to be with the rest of the camp even though they couldn’t be with their teams yet. Neil and Kyle would adjust.

**3**

All of the Eagles who didn’t have duty or couldn’t sleep were called to the crushed level to help search for the survivor. They were also joined by camp members. It was hard to get to sleep with all the noises, but those who were already out when it started didn’t appear to notice. Snoring echoed between every sound of shifting debris.

“Over here!” Charlie dropped down near a large boulder. “He’s under here.”

It took five of them to roll the large rock. None of them was positive how anyone could be alive underneath that, but they assumed the person wouldn’t live.

It was a relief to discover a couch beneath the boulder. Upside down, the person was under it, moaning and groaning.

“Lift it from the side.”

“Be careful.”

Eagles shined their lights as the couch was lifted, eager to discover who had been so lucky.

David peered up at them, blinking from the glare of light. He didn’t speak, but he tried to sit up.

“Help him.”

David grimaced as joints popped and muscles protested. He had been underneath the couch for days, listening to the camp around him while starving. His Eagle kit had kept him alive. He’d carried bottles of water and crackers. Both of those had run out yesterday.

“Can you walk?”

David shook his head at Charlie. His knees were shaking.

“Sit down over here. Someone get a student or the doctor to come up.”

Eagles rushed off to collect medical personnel as David sat down on the boulder that had been imprisoning him. “What happened?”

“There was an earthquake.”

David peered around at all of the debris. “We’re in the cave?”

It was obvious that he was dazed. The Eagles didn’t try to explain. They had pulled enough survivors out with head injuries to understand it was a waste of their breath.

“Why don’t you stay here with him?” Adrian gestured at Charlie. *I need to make rounds in case someone is sneaking up on Angela while all of this was going on.*

“I’ll take care of it.” Charlie had no problem with the soldier staring at them in wary concern. He almost liked the man.

Pulling someone alive from the rubble gave hope to the Eagles that there may be other survivors. They began to dig through the piles in earnest, all of them hoping despite knowing that almost everyone was accounted for now.

Content that Charlie would be occupied for a while, Adrian went to the bottom level and tapped on the tarp. He stepped in to find Neil shoving Samantha’s belongings into bags and pockets. Neil had put guards to work digging for the survivor, then came straight back to Samantha.

Samantha was on the bed, also gathering the items that she could reach into a bag or her pockets. Adrian realized she had laid the law down. Adrian was glad he didn’t have to sneak around between Neil’s anger, but he would have. Samantha’s opinion meant a lot to him. Neil’s did too, but not as much as the storm tracker. It wasn’t because they were both descendants, however. It was because Samantha would come to trust him again in time. He didn’t believe Neil ever would. Adrian lifted a brow at Samantha. “I can take his place on duty for a while if you like.”

“No. Neil’s taking a load up since he’s due on the top floor in five minutes. You and I will handle the rest.”

Adrian ducked out of the flap before Neil could get nasty. Samantha and Jennifer did need to be with the camp, especially since Jennifer had been named heir. If she was kept away from the herd, it would cause resentments and not just among the camp members, but also among the descendants. Even though her future was scheduled, favoritism and other jealousies could ruin it. Jennifer would have to be careful to earn the position she was being gifted with.

“I will.”

Adrian jumped out of his skin.

Jennifer snickered. She had been standing by the tarp, waiting for Adrian to emerge. “I’m going up too.”

Adrian grinned. “Both Special Forces men pissed at me at the same time. Sounds like fun.”

Jennifer stared at him in mock seriousness. “Don’t worry. Sam and I will protect you.”

Adrian groaned. “I’m in deep shit.”

**4**

Kyle’s attention was drawn to the entrance of the mess as Jennifer walked by. A few seconds later, Adrian followed, carrying Samantha. Both women waved.

“What the hell?” Kyle gestured Peter into his position and went to track down the small convoy. He found them on the top level, where Adrian was making a small nest for the two girls in the far corner of the reading room.

Instead of yelling like he wanted to, the mobster observed. All the old resentments were hitting him hard, but so were the memories. Adrian helping the two rookie females brought flashes of Angela’s training. That had angered a lot of folks. Kyle hadn’t agreed with the consensus until he fell for Jennifer and she decided to join Adrian’s army. If he wasn’t so in love with her, he doubted that he would be upset with Adrian for taking an interest in the females who needed attention that their men didn’t have the time or energy to give. *Including me.*

Kyle perched in the doorway, letting go of his anger. *Neil will have plenty of that for both of us.*

Kyle barely finished the thought when Neil came stomping through the corridor with a small kit from the mess. Neil shoved it into Kyle’s hands. “They need that.”

Neil went in the other direction, determined to do his job and not cause another scene. He didn’t care about waking the herd and he didn’t care about Marc or Angela’s anger. He cared about Samantha’s disappointment. Neil couldn’t take hurting her like that. She wanted to be up here, so he would accept it, but for right now, he needed to stay away from her so he didn’t voice his opinion again.

In Neil’s mind, he wasn’t allowed to be happy with Samantha now because it would be an insult to Jeremy’s memory. The only way he could live with this was if he forgot the man entirely, but Samantha wouldn’t ever do that. Jeremy’s son would be told about his father daily and Neil would suffer in comparison to the glowing hero who had died. *This isn’t what I signed up for.*

*I know the feeling.* Angela was leaning against the wall, studying him with sleepy annoyance. “We need to talk.”

Neil stiffened. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“Because you believe I picked you over Jeremy and let him die in your place?”

Neil paled. He’d been able to hide that from Samantha.

“I didn’t pick between you, Neil. Fate did.” She motioned toward where Marc was coming up the ladder from checking on the water problem. They’d both gotten up at the shout. “The same as with my men.”

Neil watched Marc and Adrian share tired glances that weren’t hateful but also weren’t friendly. “So it’ll blow up right about the time they’re getting along in their need to service the queen?”

Angela tensed at the insult and the truth. “You’re a coward, Todd O’Neil. You’d be one even if Jeremy had lived. Don’t blame your weak character on me. I’ve proven who I am.” Angela headed for the weapons chamber and the soothing bliss of Marc’s arms.

“I’m not scared of staying and doing my duty!”

“But you are. You’re terrified that Samantha will always love Jeremy’s ghost more than you and you’re scared that she’ll need someone else to fill his place because it’s clear that you can’t.”

Neil wanted to deny that, to scream all the ugliness in his mind, but he couldn’t. She was right about all of it.

“It’s called being human.” Angela slipped by Marc, ignoring Adrian. “We all have flaws and weaknesses. Don’t let a horrible loss destroy the progress you’ve made in no longer being a tight-ass who has to be perfect to have friends or a mate. That’ll drive her away faster than you can imagine.” Angela shut the makeshift door Marc had erected earlier, too tired to say more or worry over the conversation about to take place. Fate had control now. She had surrendered it the moment her unborn baby stopped living.

Angela cried herself to sleep.

# Chapter Nineteen

**Bad Vibes**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**A**drian and Marc glowered at Neil. They’d caught it all, including Angela’s pain, but after their anger was a blank slate. What could they say to Neil that would matter or even change his mind?

Neil stared back without remorse. He didn’t have room for it. There was a hope that someone could help him, but with the gaping hole in his heart, he couldn’t just snap back into the man they’d known before Jeremy’s death.

Adrian walked away, muttering about men who had the whole world in their hands and didn’t know what to do with it.

Marc let Neil process some of what he’d been hit with. Marc hated all the awful moments that came with becoming a better person, but there was no denying that Neil needed one of those now. “You think it’ll be easier without all of us reminding her of Jeremy.”

Neil was ashamed and angry. “It would be.”

“Probably.” Marc waited, trying to time his advice to a moment where Neil would be able to accept it.

“What if I don’t want your advice?”

Marc stared in surprise. “You caught that?”

Neil snorted bitterly. “It rubs off, remember?”

Marc grinned. Being around three descendants all the time would have driven him crazy before he’d acknowledged his own gifts. With Samantha and their twins, Neil was going to learn a lot about magic.

Neil tried to push aside the anger, missing his friends–all of them. “What’s the advice?”

“Take a vacation with her. When the passage opens, skip the next fight and locate Seth. Hang out for a couple weeks and discover if it’s what you’d prefer.”

“Why would you suggest that?” Neil studied him in confusion. “Everyone else is thinking I should tough it out and suck it up because I didn’t die in his place. Some of them even wonder if I asked Angela to do it because I couldn’t stand the competition. Do you know how that hurts?”

“How the camp views you has always been your drive. You liked being the hero. You liked all the attention. So did Samantha.”

“So?”

Marc snorted at the sarcastic response. Angie was right. Neil was terrified. “A vacation would let you make a better choice. If you don’t want to fight for a place in the spotlight anymore, you’ll figure it out while you’re out in the wilderness.”

“How?”

“You’ll either miss us or you won’t.”

“So if I miss this hellhole, it means I still want to serve and fight?” Neil let out a nasty curse.

Marc didn’t rise to the bait. “That attitude right there tells me you already know what you want, but you’re scared of it.”

“She’s right.”

“Yeah. That’s been a pattern with Angie.” Marc put a hand on Neil’s slumped shoulder. “We’re all scared in some way. I’m afraid she’ll go to the traitor now that I’ve stopped fighting whatever it is that she needs. Doug is terrified he won’t be able to raise his new sons without Peggy and Hilda. Shawn is afraid he’ll be stuck with Missy forever and never be forgiven for his mistakes with Tara. We all fight our private fears daily. You’re not alone.”

Neil absorbed those words and then asked a question he hoped Marc wasn’t ready for so he would get honesty. “What does Angela fear?”

“Wow. Right now…” Marc rotated toward the weapons room. “Damn. She cried herself to sleep again. I hate it when she does that.” Marc sighed, turning back to his friend. “She’s afraid of losing so many people that we won’t recover, even if we’re on the island. She fears being hated. She’s also scared of being burnt in her sleep by some of you and then burning in hell.”

Neil’s shame grew. “She shouldn’t feel that way about some of it.”

“Yeah, but which parts?” Marc shrugged. “We all have different opinions on that.”

“Don’t we have all the traitors now?”

“Traitors? Yes. Scared citizens who’ve come to hate magic for any reason?” Marc glanced toward the chambers where uneasy snoring echoed. “We have a mountain of them. None of us are safe here.”

“That’s why you want us to go.” Neil hadn’t realized the council was in danger.

“Yes. Because of Samantha’s injury, she’s a weaker target. Lying low until she recovers is a good idea.”

“Did you give that advice to Kyle?” Neil couldn’t help being snarky. It felt like Marc was pushing him out of camp.

“I am. And yes, I did.”

Neil tried to think through the anger and the shame, but the new fear refused to be ignored. “I thought we had all the traitors.”

“So did I, until listening to Jennifer’s prediction. It could get bad for all of us, but mostly for Eagles like you who will have to shoot camp members. In some cases, families may turn on each other.”

“To control magic?”

“To wipe it out.” Marc kept his voice down. “As soon as we hesitate to hurt them, they’ll overwhelm us. Give Samantha a gun. Make sure she understands that she has to use it, not to trust people with a hand out.”

“I will.” Neil felt survival instincts rise up to replace the heavy shame and breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll speak to her tonight–quietly.”

“Use hand signals if you can. Angie’s going to declare magic use forbidden, I think, until we’re out of here. She hopes it will calm things down.”

“She expects trouble when the tunnel opens.” Neil hadn’t thought about that either, despite hearing conversations between the people on the bottom level.

“Before that. As soon as we begin digging, impatience and mistrust will ripple through these corridors and take a final cut. Don’t leave Samantha alone when we start digging. Stay with Kyle and Jennifer, no matter what happens. Angela wants Samantha with her for that battle.”

Neil paled as another theory snapped into place at Marc’s revelations. “It was supposed to be her, right? Not Jeremy?”

“Yes.” Marc didn’t tell Neil that Angela had pissed fate off by interfering. She was the number one target again. He would figure it out. “Fate is very angry with all of us for not dying, but three of her main targets escaped.”

“Samantha and Doug?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Marc glanced toward the crushed level this time. “The man they pulled from the rubble. David shouldn’t be alive either, but he is.”

“Wasn’t he Donner’s helper?”

Neil’s question implied that he believed the man shouldn’t have been spared after that fight. It was another hard truth about the trooper revealed. He’d done his job before, but he also hadn’t liked serving with soldiers after the battle.

“Should I like eating and showering with soldiers who should be dead? I hate Adrian for what he’s done, but he was right about that. Mercy for survivors always bites us in the ass.”

Marc wanted to argue the point so they wouldn’t have to return to all the fighting after the bugout, but he couldn’t. He agreed.

Twitching, Neil rotated toward Samantha’s location. “Meeting in the morning?”

“Bright and early.” Marc went to join Angela in bed, replaying the conversation. He’d almost told Neil that there had been four targets, but Marc hadn’t wanted to discuss it. Charlie had been on the top floor. He and his small group had been the only survivors out of seventy-five. The boy had been marked. Fate knew the easiest way to hurt Angela now. She could be stabbed, shot, punched, strangled, and raped, but she came back stronger. Take away a child and her strength broke. Take away enough kids and she could be crushed into dust on the wind.

Marc slid a hand around her warm body, placing it over her stomach. *Daddy misses you.*

**2**

“I want you to switch to the top floor.” Kenn sat next to Tonya on the dusty ground outside the tarp.

“Why?” Tonya held tight to the squirming cat as she tried to examine it. She hadn’t seen the tabby in days.

“Just do it, okay?”

Tonya glanced over to find him leaning against the stone, eyes shut. “Getting bad?”

“On the edge right now. After a full night’s sleep, it might settle down a little.”

“But?”

“When the tunnel opens, we’re expecting problems. I want you with the other mates and wives.”

Tonya huffed, releasing the cat so she could record the results on the paper she’d scavenged from the medical debris pile.

Indignant, the cat sprang around the tarp and darted into the nearest debris pile.

“I mean it. No women’s lib shit right now, okay?”

Tonya understood Kenn was worried and smothered the part of her that wanted to say she could take care of herself. The truth was, she couldn’t yet and she knew it. “Okay.”

Kenn slid a hand onto her leg. “Thank you.”

Tonya leaned against his shoulder. “When are you off duty?”

“I’m off now, but I volunteered for duty over the morning council meeting. I need to stay up or I won’t get up in time.”

“I’ll keep you company and then we can sleep together.”

“That’ll work.” Kenn put his arm around her shoulder. “How are you?”

“Not bad.” Tonya smiled as he rubbed her back. The heat from his big hands was wonderful. “Staying thirsty, but Jimmy said that’s normal for a descendant pregnancy.”

Kenn stilled. “How would he know?”

“Jimmy’s been studying us since the war. He’s put together a folder of information on our different health issues.”

Kenn lowered his voice, aware of their audience. “Anything we should get rid of?”

Tonya also made sure her words didn’t carry to the dozens of residents on this level. “That depends on what he plans to do with it. Until I heard he wasn’t going with us, I assumed he was collecting medical files on everyone.”

“And now?”

“He’ll know how to kill us, hurt us. Jimmy is a coward, so it won’t be him. He hides it with a nasty attitude to prevent anyone from getting close enough to discover his secrets. Maybe one of his sons would do it, but they’re both his students, so I doubt it.”

“How can a coward lead?” Kenn already knew the answer, but he was curious to know if Tonya did too.

“He won?”

“Oh, yeah. Simon’s actions sealed the deal, but folks already respected Jimmy for his help during the crisis, while Simon spent the time dumping bodies of their loved ones. It’s not fair.”

“Agreed, but that doesn’t change people’s minds. The last time they saw their cherished friend or family, Simon was dragging them toward a mass grave.” Tonya shrugged. “They probably would have picked anyone over him.”

Kenn was impressed with her intelligence and disappointed by the camp members who viewed things that way. “They weren’t going to make it with Jimmy or Simon; this mountain is cursed.”

“Yeah.” Tonya shivered. “Who got the vote for the Runaways?”

“They’ve refused to pick one. They all want to be leader.” Kenn sighed. “I hate that name.”

“Because you think we should too?” Tonya snuggled tighter to his neck, not minding the smell of man sweat. It was a lot better than having a man who smelled good, but couldn’t be counted on to get a job done.

“Maybe, maybe not, but it doesn’t matter now. We decided to stay with our kind, remember?”

“*Your* kind.”

Kenn held Tonya back and found her frowning. “What’s the problem?”

“I worry over it sometimes.” She dropped her head. “I’m not like you now.”

Kenn tugged her around and into his arms until she was straddling him. “Listen, okay?”

Tonya crossed her arms in defense.

“I’m locking it away.”

Tonya gaped. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No. I’ve thought about it and I can’t be like them after everything that’s happened. I don’t deserve it.”

Kenn’s demon cringed at the news. *No! Please, master!*

“It’s the evil in me.”

Tonya leaned down, bracing her hands on his wide shoulders. “I understand that. I really do. Now, you listen, okay?”

Kenn nodded, ready to bask in her praise.

“You can’t give up your gift!” She slapped him, hard. “You have a baby to defend. Snap out of it!”

Kenn was almost shocked. “I thought you’d be happy I’m continuing to demonstrate that I’ve changed.”

“Your precious Angie is the one you did that for.” Tonya climbed off him and stood up. “I fell in love with a ruthless bastard who would do anything to keep his family together. Don’t fail me now that I’m a convert!”

Kenn chuckled. “Okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t look at it that way.”

“Protecting our baby?”

“Yeah. I was trying to protect you and what we have together. I forgot the kid might have a gift.”

“Oh, there’s a gift all right.” Tonya grinned. “Can we find a quiet place for an hour?”

Before Kenn could answer, an arm snaked around Tonya’s throat and dragged her out of view.

*Help on the bottom level!* Kenn sent the mental call as he leapt up and drew his gun. There was no noise coming from around the tarp. Kenn rushed out, ready to shoot.

Tonya held up a hand as Kenn came around the corner of the tarp. She pointed to where Mandy and Sister Sarah were locked in a death embrace. “She saved me!”

Mandy shoved the knife deeper, grunting at the pain and the familiarity. The man who had raped her had died the same way.

Sarah staggered, taking the knife. It stuck out of her stomach like a horror scene in a movie, then clattered to the ground.

Holding her pouring gut, Sarah staggered toward Tonya, glazing eyes fixing on her. “Kill it.”

Kenn scanned for more problems and found none. The woman had acted alone.

“Just to kill my baby? You weren’t after me?” Tonya spat at the dying woman. “Hypocrite!”

“Devil!” Sarah’s lips ran red as she fell.

Tonya let Kenn hold her while he told the guards what had happened, but inside, she changed. The woman had wanted to kill her baby. Kenn had a real reason to want her up top with the other Islanders. Tonya shrugged out of his protection and went to gather her things.

Around the awful scene, residents who had been torn about their choice finished making it. Many of them followed Tonya’s lead and began to pack up what meager belongings they’d gathered from the wreckage. Others ducked into their quickly-constructed holes to wait for the magic users to be gone. Many of them were disappointed that Sarah had failed in her mission.

“Stay with her.” Kenn gestured Greg after Tonya. “Sarah tried to kill the baby.”

Greg went without argument, glad the rest of the Islanders were going to be on the same level. It would make duty a lot easier.

Kenn went to Mandy, who was also telling the guards what had happened. He swept the area behind her and saw the baby sleeping under the ledge where she’d been born.

Kenn collected the infant, marveling at how small little Sandy was in his big hands. He took the baby to its mother, wanting Mandy to understand that he owed her a debt.

Mandy was still shaking as she took the baby. She hugged the child, almost crying. “When does it end?”

Kenn refused to give her the answer that anyone else would have gotten from him. He nudged her toward the ladder as he spotted Tonya, carrying her cat, heading for the same spot. ‘Let’s get you settled upstairs. I’ll come back down for anything you want.”

Mandy went, grateful. The mood on this level was ugly now that everyone had declared loyalties. The Runaways were getting desperate because they were so small in number. They weren’t going to get much in the way of supplies and they weren’t going to be able to protect themselves.

The Mountaineers were trying to hold out until both the Islanders and the Runaways were gone, but Mandy knew the Islanders were the only ones with a chance at survival. They were ruthless enough to handle what came, but loyal. Mandy knew where she wanted to be during the tunnel opening and it wasn’t down here.

Kenn waved Greg after the females. Feeling as though he’d missed something important, Kenn decided to do a round of this level before abandoning it. He started where Mandy and her baby had been living on cardboard and laundry piles, then went into the body corridor.

The pit was filled in and the smell was almost gone, but the vibe was still creepy. Kenn didn’t linger, but he also didn’t shirk his duty or ask his demon for help. Like Marc, he would do this on his own until he couldn’t anymore.

Kenn walked the floor, noting all the rabbits waiting to inherit the cave. He didn’t speak to them. They’d made their choices. He didn’t expect to see any of them again.

Kenn departed the bottom floor with something nagging*. I checked the body pit. I hit the bathrooms and the storage area. The water chamber …* “Only had one guard, Greg, and I can’t relocate that to the top floor.”

Kenn went back down to stand watch over the remaining water while Greg escorted the women to the top floor. Sleep would come later.

**3**

Outside the boss’s door, the guards felt it when the powerful couple drifted off. The temperature dropped, the draft increased, the mood nosedived into fear of the groaning mountain around them, and dangerous thoughts began to play in people’s minds.

“This will get bad.” Quinn was glad to be on duty, but he was missing the use of his left hand. He’d been impaled by a piece of the mess floor as he fell with it. Jimmy said he was lucky to have survived at all. With the ugly healing wounds across his wrist glaring in the dim lantern light and throbbing in time to his pulse, Quinn agreed. He felt lucky to be alive.

Kyle nodded at Quinn’s comment, but didn’t add to it as a cluster of magic supporters came up the ladder. Kyle was eager to check on Jennifer, but Kenn hadn’t come up yet. He needed the Marine to be here before closing down this level. Marc hadn’t ordered it, but Kyle was.

*That’s why he gave you point here.* Adrian joined the men on guard. “Go find out what’s holding him up. I’ve got your post.”

Kyle went without caring that it was Adrian. He had one of those feelings in his gut that implied the night’s activities weren’t over.

Adrian caught the thought and sent a mental call on a private line.

A minute later, Charlie and the warriors headed down to patrol the bottom level until everyone had been brought up. After that, the Mountaineers were on their own for protection.

“You okay in here?” Kyle shined his light on Kenn, who was wrestling with a large boulder.

“We have a leak.”

Kyle came over to help, light bobbing off a small debris pile and cleared floors covered in a thin layer of water.

“The tank cracked.”

Kyle saw Kenn was trying to get the rock under the bent edge of the tank. If they could tilt it, the remaining water would be below the crack that had opened up. Kyle and Kenn muscled the stone into place and then tried to shift the tank, but it was too heavy for them.

“Let me help.” Gus and his family had been staying on the mess level to help with the cooking. When he’d witnessed Adrian carrying women to the top, Gus had ordered his brothers to help while he came down to ask if they needed anything else carried or even an extra sentry.

Gus was able to shift the tank so Kenn and Kyle could get the rock under it far enough to keep the container tilted. As they finished, Kenn scanned the low water level, groaning. “That’s not good. We don’t have water flowing.”

“Is it frozen?”

Kenn wiped his hands down his grimy pants. “It’s hard to tell unless we go topside again.”

“And there are refugees up there now.”

“Yes.”

“Then this would be a good time for another tremor.”

Kenn frowned at the man who was his size and then a bit more. “We need another earthquake?”

Gus smiled a little. “Just a tremor. They’re weaker and shake less. It might clear the clog.”

Kenn grunted. “I hadn’t thought of it that way. Should we ask Angela to arrange it?”

Gus laughed. “At least she’d be nice about saying hell no. My woman’s gonna flip when she finds out that I switched all of us to the top without permission.”

Kenn understood Gus was asking if that would be okay with everyone. He slapped the man on his huge shoulder. “Welcome to Angela’s army.”

**4**

“Is it midnight yet?”

Adrian paused shifting through the rubble to glance at his watch. “Quarter after.” Kenn and Kyle had resumed their posts on the top floor, freeing Adrian to rejoin Charlie. They hadn’t spoken for a while, just worked.

“Good. Mom wants a relocation handled. She wanted me to wait until after midnight to tell you.”

Adrian matched the news to his sense of something coming. “Who, where, what, when, why, and how?”

Charlie laughed. “Okay. Who, is the Runaways. Where, is to the mess level, anywhere on that floor. What, is ants and packs of honey when they’re asleep.” Charlie paused. “Which they are now. Why, is so we control that passage and how, is without making any noise or waking them up.”

Adrian found no fault with the plan except for the supplies. “I can filch the honey packs from mess bags, but we haven’t observed ants in here since right after the quake.”

“They had a nest somewhere around Shane’s Cavity.”  
Adrian liked the name. It sounded painful, like the man’s death had been. “Half an hour, meet me there.”

“She said to tell you three is good, four is enough, and five will ruin it.”

“Ants?”  
Charlie shrugged. “She was sleepy when she sent the message. It made me yawn.”

*And that’s where my exhaustion came from even though I got sleep.* Adrian was still matching up the effects of their bond and being surprised by the depth each time.

Adrian tensed as steps creaked. They both spun around, but didn’t locate anyone or any thoughts.

Charlie went back to work, but Adrian felt like they were being observed and stayed alert. Invisibles were able to get close to everyone because their gifts were dormant. Descendants couldn’t detect them as one of their own kind. *But we can root them out with the same methods that have always worked.* “I’m going to the top for a while. Yell if you need me.”

“You know it.”

Adrian didn’t move, listening.

The sound of hasty footsteps faded down the tunnels.

“What should we do about that?”

“Report it and finish the chore we were given.” Adrian also resumed digging, not about to leave the boy alone in this situation. Charlie was a badass like his father, but he was also young and that wouldn’t keep him alive. Wisdom needed time to grow. That’s where guards came in.

“She said something else. Actually, she was thinking it.” Charlie shrugged. “She didn’t know I caught it.”

“Don’t betray her, in any way.”

“I won’t.”

Adrian waited for more, frowning at the sounds of restless citizens and an angry mountain. “Well?”

“You said not to tell you.”

Adrian grunted. “After this, don’t betray her.”

Charlie smirked. “She thinks you and my dad can team.”

“We have teamed.”

“She was thinking about magic.”

“Ah.” Adrian considered it. “Very few souls are that compatible.”

“That’s what my dad told her when he caught the thought.”

“He’s been scroll diving.”

“Yes, but he’s wrong about the teaming.”

“How do you know?”

“You and I are teamed right now, and I can’t stand you.”

Adrian hadn’t noticed. His first thought was to worry over the boy reading his private fantasies and then he realized that had been the case for a while. If Charlie was revealing it now, he’d been using it before.

Charlie shrugged at Adrian’s disapproval. “I didn’t know what I’d done. When I…evolved this time, I understood because it got stronger.” He grinned. “I’m a lot stronger now.”

Adrian found himself facing a vicious demon that wanted him dead. He immediately used humor to stop an attack. *Whas’ up, big boy?*

Charlie was startled into a laugh.

The demon vanished.

Adrian breathed a sigh of relief. Charlie’s demon was indeed strong. That mental fight would be ugly and in the end, neither of them would have won.

Charlie flipped off the teaming effect.

Adrian blinked as he was shoved out. “That means we can team with people we don’t like.”

“Exactly. Mom wants you and dad teamed for the fight.”

“I should have known she’d push it right away.” Adrian resumed digging. “Tell her I’ll do it. She already knew I would, but tell her anyway.”

“Is there anything she could ask that you wouldn’t give her?”

Adrian snorted.

Charlie didn’t ask again.

# Chapter Twenty

**On the Outside**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“A**re we all here?”

Marc handed her a sheet of paper. “That’s every name. All adults and others with passes for this meeting are here now. Like you ordered, all of the children are in the reading room with guards. We also have a dozen sentries patrolling this level.”

Angela surveyed the residents gathered in the TV chamber, *her* citizens. There were one hundred and sixty-two of them. It was cramped. People were sitting on the floors with some couples sharing laps, but it wasn’t twitchy or uncomfortable, like it might have been with the others in this mountain. Everyone here knew they could count on her to keep her word. “I’m beginning with updates. If you have information, I want you to speak up. I’m holding this meeting openly, as I will all future council meetings. You can’t understand the choices that we have to make, if we don’t let you in. The secretive plots ended when we came here. I promised you that and I meant it.”

Angela took a paper from her pocket and began to read. “We’re dividing the food, water, medical supplies, equipment, and everything else that has been scavenged. The radiation levels are holding steady. We’re leaving the remaining iodine to the citizens who stay in the mountain. I’ve made several choices like that, based on where which group is going. For example, we won’t need the heavy winter gear once we reach the coast. The Runaways are getting out too late in the season to be able to locate these items for themselves, so we’re sending a chunk of it with them. While we’re on the island, we’ll make what we need, but the temperatures rarely fall below 50°, so we won’t have to worry about that for a while.”

Angela gestured toward Kenn, aware that the man was asleep on his feet. He hadn’t been to bed yet. “Kenn is in charge of the bugout when we open the tunnel. We expect problems. The best thing you can do is stay where we put you. If you have concerns or special needs, speak to Kenn right away. He also has the travel arrangements. We’ll have to make a trip through the corridors in the winter weather to reach our vehicles. All adults will be assigned a child to take care of during the bugout.” She let the mutters fade before continuing. “There are new rules for descendants. Until we leave here, no one is to use magic in any way and that includes thoughts. We need to settle the situation down. Demonstrations of the things we can do scare people and make it worse.”

Few of the descendants were happy with the order, but they understood she was trying to avoid a fight. They didn’t believe it would succeed, but all of them respected her for trying.

“The cave is ten percent functional, but I decided not to stay and help them with the repairs.” Angela sighed, letting everyone feel her misery. “We all know they’re not going to make it. Right now, our energy has to be put into our own survival and the threats that are on the way. I need you to spend the day helping with salvage. We have to have a week of supplies to get us through leaving. We don’t have that yet, but our chances are better than those who are staying. Help us salvage.”

Angela skimmed her paper again and then regarded the uneasy crowd. “Are there any questions or anything anyone wants to discuss before I start the council meeting?”

There were many things that people wanted to know, but none of them felt important enough to interrupt the boss for.

Angela took a seat next to Marc, handing her paper to him. He would read it and then pass it along. They hadn’t found enough equipment yet to be able to make copies. “Kenn will go first so he can sleep for the rest of the meeting.”

“I’m good.” Kenn yawned. “We had three fights overnight, with minor injuries. Sarah’s body has been stored in the pit tunnel. The guards are all fresh, the water levels are on the sheet in front of you, and the mood is worse.” He met Angela’s eye. “I’m tired. I may not be reading that correctly.”

Angela understood. “We’ll do the best we can with attitudes. They don’t like us leaving, but they want us to go. It makes it ugly for them because they don’t know how to handle those emotions. I don’t want any of you to argue with them. Tell them to talk to me.” Angela looked at Theo. “Where are we?”

Debra stayed still as everyone turned toward her and Theo. She was sitting with his team, along the wall that was next to the council members.

“I have all the equipment in the right passage and most of the tools. I hope that our scavenging over the next couple of days will give us the rest of what we need, but if it doesn’t, I can improvise.”

“How long will it take you to put it all together?”

Theo shrugged. “At least two hours with a five-man crew. I can get it done in half that if you could lend me a couple of your upper Marines.”

“I’ll try to arrange it so they’re there during that time, but we’ll plan on a three hour window.”

“Are we going over specific plans right now?” Neil wasn’t positive about how much Angela wanted to say in front of the camp. Whenever Adrian had done things like this, it had been smoke up asses.

*Angela doesn’t do that.*

Neil snorted at Adrian, but he didn’t have the energy to do more.

Adrian didn’t push.

“We’re not giving out the supplies until we clear the tunnel so there are no extra guns or ammo floating around except for what people salvage. Unfortunately, the level that fell held our security area, and as you know, it did have weapons. Everything that gets salvaged goes into community buckets and boxes that Marc will sort between now and the bugout to make sure everyone is allotted their fair share. That doesn’t mean we won’t have thieves. Unless it’s something important, I don’t expect you to confront them. We’re leaving. Most of the items they’ll want, we don’t need anyway.”

The camp didn’t like the idea of anyone getting away with thievery, but again, no one argued.

“What are things like in the mess right now?” Angela looked at Gus.

Put on the spot, the big man stuttered. “Uh, Good.”

Angela waited patiently.

Gus flushed as he realized she expected more, but he didn’t have it. “I can find out.”

“That would be great. I need to know if I should feed everyone up here or if it’s okay for us to come down. That will depend on what the mood is. Adrian will escort you.”

Adrian and Gus were gone a few seconds later.

“What type of weather can we expect for the bugout?”

Also put on the spot, Samantha swallowed her embarrassment. “Cold and windy, but no new snow was far as I can tell. It was sunny.”

Angela wrote that in her notes, as did the other members of the council. “How do you feel about us going? Anything I should know?”

Samantha shook her head. “No, but I’m watching.” Samantha was sitting next to Neil, with her legs stretched out in front of her and covered in blankets.

Angela looked at Jennifer. “Have you picked up anything new?”

“There’s something shiny on the hill. I haven’t figured out what that means yet.”

Angela wrote it down. “Anything else I should know about or that we should discuss?”

“Yes.” Jennifer drew in a breath. “We should make the other groups come with us, rather than leave them here to die.”

Angela let the disapproving mutters subside. “Sell me.”

The camp didn’t like it that Angela wasn’t shutting the idea down, but they also wanted to hear Jennifer come up with a reason that they could support. No one liked the idea of leaving their fellow Americans to die this way.

“I can’t give you a reason, other than it will save their lives.”

“Holding citizens against their will is not what we stand for, even if it’s going to cost them their lives. You know that.” Angela frowned. “I’m a little surprised you’re suggesting this.”

Jennifer was in pain. “I can’t stand the thought of them dying. I love some of these people.”

It was hard, but Angela refused to give in. “As leader of the council, I overrule that suggestion. We will not consider it.”

Jennifer shrugged. “I didn’t expect you to, but I had to ask.”

“I don’t hold that against you. I love them too.” Angela glanced at Neil next. “During your exploration with Kenn after the earthquake, did you locate any evidence of structural failures or ant nests?”

Neil considered. “There were several new passages, but all of them dead ended. A couple of those had debris, but I don’t think we saw any ants. Why?”

“I’m trying to verify all the possible entrances in here. We can’t rebuild the cave for them before we go, but we can at least help them with some security.”

“If they want us to.”

Everyone regarded Marc at his comment.

Marc shrugged. “It’s ugly right now. They won’t want us to know their security procedures. The best thing we can do is stay away from them, split up the supplies fairly, and go.”

Angela nodded. “I agree, but I still want to ask them.”

Marc wrote it down.

“If they say it’s calm in the mess, we’ll eat together. We’ll also escort people into work areas. Let them pick where they want to be. We have debris piles on every level. If all of them decide to stay up here, that’s okay. As long as they’re working, it will help.” Angela gestured to Kyle next. “You and Neil have security over the cave. I realize having injured partners will be distracting. I have to remind you that if you fail to do your job, your women will end up getting hurt too. Please don’t slack off. That goes for all of you. Everyone wants out of this cave. We’re all trapped and we’re all scared. You’ve witnessed some of the crazy things that can happen in situations like this, but it could be worse. If you’re asked to do something, do it. Please don’t be the one who brings us down because you forgot to gather gear or load a weapon.”

Angela could feel Neil and Kyle’s displeasure at being singled out. Both of them were honorable and strong. The camp needed them if they could do the job while having a mate. Angela didn’t tell them their women would be unhappy if they couldn’t. She didn’t need to. Her reminder had also been for the females. If Jennifer and Samantha kept their men too close, they could interfere and ruin the fragile plans.

“As soon as we start digging, everyone in this mountain will twitch. They’ll be able to breathe in the fresh air and taste the snow. For a little while, they won’t be thinking about the UN, the refugees, the illnesses, or any of the other problems. The only thing they will hear in our heavy equipment is possible freedom. That’s when we expect trouble. I’m telling you so that you can watch for it. We will be guarding the passages and equipment, along with our lives. We’ll need you to help with all of that.” Angela looked at her council and then the tense people. “Does anyone have anything else that we should discuss or any questions?”

Even though it was time for doubts about the plans or approaches, none were spoken. The descendants were satisfied their alpha had things in hand and the rest of her camp felt the same.

On the levels below them, bits and pieces of the meeting floated down to remind those who were staying of what they were giving up. Now that they had chosen to remain in this mountain or flee, they weren’t part of the real Safe Haven. They didn’t get to join the meetings or have a vote. They were staying in, but they had ended up on the outs.

**2**

Everyone quieted as Gus returned, nudging Brittani ahead of him. The surviving members of Li’s family were following. All of the cooks were peering over their shoulders.

“You didn’t need to do that.” Brittani pulled away from him and went to stand along the wall by her mother and father. “I had it.”

Gus snorted. “Threatening to poison everybody’s food is handling it?”

Brittani shrugged. “It would handle the problem.” She didn’t care that camp members were hearing her. She would never do it, but she was frustrated at how stupid people were being.

“What happened?” Angela had a good idea already, but she wanted everyone else to know.

“They came in and tried to take the rest of the food. They said what Marc was giving them wasn’t enough. So Brittani told them they could have it as soon as she finished poisoning the rest of it, but she couldn’t remember which ones she’d already dosed. It got their attention.”

Angela shared a glance with Marc. “They may not want the food from us now.”

Marc shrugged. “They won’t need it anyway.”

It was a reminder that the Mountaineers weren’t going to survive. That allowed the anger to fade and sadness to replace it.

Sensing the perfect time to end the meeting, Angela stood up. “Eagles will collect breakfast for everyone now. Adjourned.”

Angela didn’t go toward the tunnel. She could feel Marc tensing for the fight, but she had no intention of it. The people on this floor were nervous enough. Angela went to Samantha and Jennifer. “Want some company?”

Marc waited for Angela to get settled and then began pointing at men. He took those who could fight and think. He was hoping to avoid an issue, but at this point, the mess would have already been looted as soon as Gus and Brittani had left. There might even be a fight to get back in.

Adrian came in and took up a post not far away from the three chatting women. He gave Marc a nod and then began watching for trouble.

Satisfied for reasons he chose not to explore, Marc and his team left.

Angela reached over and pulled the blanket up over Samantha’s bandaged leg. “We don’t want to get that dusty.”

Both women frowned. They didn’t have to wonder long.

The cave around them began to shake, sending showers of dust and drawing cries from below.

Angela gathered energy to calm her camp, but she didn’t need it. Her people were scared, but waiting for her to give them instructions.

Angela smiled, sending out an unchecked wave of happiness. “You honor me. I *will* return that.”

The tremor around them faded without notice from most of the top level, but a new distraction took its place, pulling people from the mass hypnosis that she’d accidentally slammed them with.

The sounds of fighting echoed, along with harsh shouts and clangs from items being knocked over. It brought quiet to the rest of the cave system as inhabitants listened to determine if this was the free-for-all everyone expected to happen at some point.

When the noises stopped, residents resumed what they’d been doing, relieved. Most of those who wanted out of this mountain didn’t want it to be a violent escape. That wouldn’t prevent them from attacking guards however, and Angela knew it. Despite the civilized veneer, these people were wild survivors who would do anything to stay alive. It was the thing that she admired the most about each one of them.

Marc and his team returned with food. The rebels in the mess hadn’t put up much of a fight when they’d discovered who Angela had sent to quell their disobedience. Two punches had been thrown–both from himself. “Dylan was chosen to lead the Runaways. He’s on the floor in the mess, recovering from his gratitude.”

Angela smirked. “Got elected and thought he’d claim an extra share of the food?”

“And the people.” Marc turned toward the doorway. “You’re welcome, even if you’re just staying with us long enough to get out of here.”

Angela motioned the small group into the room. “All survivors are welcome.”

Relieved, some of the Runaways joined the Islanders with heads down in shame for their choices.

Angela didn’t expect that or want them to apologize. She just hoped they would change their minds and remain with her. If they didn’t, she would comfort herself that they’d at least known who they could come to for protection and who they needed to be protected from.

Marc set the food bags and pouches near Brittani’s feet. “You got this?”

Brittani smiled up at Marc. “Anything for you.”

Marc grinned at the innocent remark.

Angela glowered.

Kenn and Adrian laughed.

Unaware of the drama, Brittani got up and began digging through bags.

Content the woman would get them all fed, Marc gathered his team. “We have guard duty shifts open and we need every hand we can get for salvage. Make a careful round of the other levels and find out if anyone is interested in earning extra rations. Put them to work on the crushed level if you get any takers. Meet in the mess in fifteen minutes.” Marc lifted a brow toward Angela.

She smiled. “I’m good.”

Marc exited the room. *Yep.*

Blushing, Angela directed Brittani and Li’s family toward the front of the chamber. “Work there. We’ll all stay here and drool.”

Before Brittani could ask Gus to help, Angela motioned the big man toward Kenn. “He’s fuzzy. Watch him for me?”

Gus straightened proudly. “You know it.”

Brittani’s scowl took up most of her face, but she didn’t protest. She understood Gus was needed. She also knew this was what he wanted for his future and she had no right to interfere.

Angela was proud of them, though she didn’t embarrass the couple by pointing it out. Brittani had believed Gus’s gift was a type of disability. That made sense, considering that the old world had disapproved of supernatural experiences. Their society had preferred illusions of control and civility over the painful adjustments required after admitting any hard truth.

“We have water again!”

The shout echoed through the cave, bringing relief.

Just making it to the exit, Kenn grinned at Gus. “You called that one.”

Gus chuckled, shrugging. “Dude, I got it like that.”

Kenn was still laughing as they disappeared into the tunnel.

Brittani noticed the interaction and allowed herself to hope that Gus would fit in. It was impossible not to worry over how people would react. They’d been dealing with it all their lives. Most people were great, but those who weren’t had made it hard not to brace for trouble with everyone.

The room went quiet as two more men appeared.

Ray went to stand by Jennifer, cheeks red from all the stares.

Jimmy went to Angela. “All three in one place. Perfect.” The doctor sank down next to them and opened his bag. “How are we all today?”

Jennifer and Samantha laughed, while Angela rolled her eyes. The doctor would put on a great show to encourage some of the Islanders to stay because of his skills. Angela wasn’t mad about it. In fact, it was what she would have done if she’d thought any of his could be converted. All this show meant was that he’d sensed some of her members didn’t trust magic, but they wanted the defense, so they’d chosen the Islanders. He was right, but that didn’t mean his show would succeed, especially not after the blast of her love. When an alpha was happy with you, nothing else in the world could compare to it.

**3**

Kyle went to the mess floor while Jennifer was busy. Those going off on their own were supposed to meet and decide how to divide their supplies. Kyle had already had reports of fighting there. He wanted to be positive everyone in that group was willing.

“I won’t do that.”

“You’ll do what I tell you. When the freaks are gone, I’ll be the ruler here.”

Kyle paused at the edge of the debris pile, out of sight. It sounded as if dangerous plans were being made.

“All you have to do is tell them you’re sick and hang out with their wounded. We’ll need you to let us back in.”

Kyle’s anger was caught in a war with his disgust. He was sick of the plots and schemes, of the betrayals. If not for Angela’s desire to keep the peace, Kyle would have ended this meeting with gunshots. Not certain what she would want him to do, Kyle sent a mental call. Jennifer would pass on the message.

When he finished, Kyle left the area, joining the mess guard team. There would be trouble on this floor. He needed to be here for it.

**4**

“Tell him.” Angela stood up, walking toward the passage. “All of it.”

Jennifer began to tell Jimmy what some of the other Mountaineers were planning.

Angela paused by Ray. “We’ll need to add that to our list of prep for the bugout. They’ll try to grab our gear or vehicles.”

Ray added it to his list.

Angela motioned at several people. “I’d like to make rounds. Are you guys up for it?”

Tracy and Greg nodded, but Charlie frowned. “I’ve been up all night. I may not be much help.”

“When I let Kenn go, so can you.”

“Deal.”

Angela stood up and found Adrian a few feet away.

Adrian was thrilled at the time with her. “Marc said not to leave you alone.”

Also pleased, but unable to show it, Angela’s lips thinned into a line.

Connected, Adrian felt her true emotions and hurt because he couldn’t share it with her. As he realized it would always be that way, Adrian sighed in defeat. *And I thought I was an evil bastard. Marc topped me.*

Not far away, Marc began to whistle happily.

Ray took up Adrian’s post along the wall to watch over the camp. Despite wanting to go along, Ray was relieved he hadn’t been chosen. Angela would tour all the levels, including the bottom floor and Ray couldn’t endure that right now. The tremor had sent his mind straight to Dennis’s death and he was positive that it had done the same to Dale. He was the last person his former lover wanted comfort from. In fact, they probably wouldn’t see each other again.

Ray shuddered. *I’ll never be the same.*

# Chapter Twenty-One

**Digging Deep**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“W**here to?” Adrian took the lead, while Charlie brought up the rear.

“We’ll work our way up from the bottom.” Angela ignored Adrian’s disapproval. Until the bugout, she *was* the queen and every inch of this mountain was her castle.

Adrian couldn’t help the chuckle. She’d decided to regain control or arrest them all; she’d brought a handful of support he doubted she needed. He and the others were only here to serve as witnesses.

“More like my conscience.” Angela didn’t censor her words or lower her voice as she reached the bottom level. “I’ve run out of patience and mercy. If I detect evil, it will be eliminated unless all of you agree they should be spared.”

Adrian’s amusement fell as he understood Angela had also decided to do a final cleaning of the residents here. Not sure why he was so worried, Adrian led her into the body tunnel, hoping she would calm down. Her anger was boiling.

“Should I be pleased they’re tearing it all apart?” Angela’s tone was cold, drawing attention from those on the bottom level. The odors were staggering on this floor. The waste was becoming a bigger problem than the bodies. “Would you have stood by?”

Adrian didn’t answer. He wasn’t positive how he would have reacted. He might have ordered a cleaning or he might have tried again to reach those he deemed worthy of saving.

“My call is to eliminate future threats. If they plan to come back here or come for us, they will be arrested.”

Satisfied that she didn’t intend to kill them on the spot, Adrian gestured toward a stack of bodies. “Recent losses.”

Angela scanned the stack, betraying no expression. “Those aren’t losses.” She swept the corridors that led to the pit, noting the other bodies had all been removed now.

Tonya shrugged. “No ants so far, but the spiders and centipedes are all over the clothes. We’re not sure what to do until we can get it cleaned.”

“That will be a while. We don’t have water to waste on laundry or cleaning. Shut down all usage that isn’t cooking or drinking. Full ration conditions on all consumables and that includes flashlights. No nightlights. Use your ears.”

Tonya wrote it down. “We’re almost out of sedatives. We didn’t consider having to use so much in a week.”

Angela sighed. “We can’t fix that until the UN fight. Keep digging for our power gear. We had ten boxes of those useless glow sticks. That would hold us a few days.” Angela listened to coughs and nose blows ringing through the tunnels. “We found a bag of those little tissue packs. Hand those out. It won’t hold us for long, but maybe we’ll get lucky and locate the toilet paper boxes today.”

Tonya wrote that down too, thinking of the morning dump she was used to. Without a wipe, it wasn’t the same.

Angela took her time going through the wounded and the camp members who were staying. All she found in them was fear and mistrust. They wanted her to be gone. All of them were convinced *she* was the evil in disguise.

Angela went to the ladder with a heavy heart.

Coming down, Jimmy caught her pain. He tried to ignore it, but the emotion was too vivid. “You’ll gather other sheep.”

“Yes.” Aware of being studied from cubbyholes and shoddy shelters, Angela said goodbye. “Thank you for being a part of our light. I wish you peace and prosperity.”

“Will we have it?” Jimmy hadn’t meant to ask, but at that moment, he had to know. “Do we survive?”

Angela sighed, head shaking in slow motion. “Not even one of you.” She went up the ladder without trying to convince him. Jimmy had made his choice to be against magic before he ever came to Safe Haven. He wouldn’t change his mind.

Angela stopped on the crushed level where a dozen souls were working on the debris piles. Thanks to finding a survivor alive, the piles had been dented. She noted they were being sorted into blankets and toys, and gave Charlie an approving nod. The bugout would be hard on the kids. Even dirty comforts were still comforts.

Ivan was enjoying his easy post, happy to see James, Peter, and Booth digging through the rubble with camp members. They’d known each other in the bunker. Ivan lingered around the edges, trying not to get in the way. Marc had told him Angie would give him something to do when she realized he was an extra guard that could be working, but Ivan was content to observe. It wasn’t very often that he was in the same area Angela was and he wanted to know why they were having so many problems with her. From what he could see, she was like any other female.

Laughter echoed from multiple directions.

Ivan flushed as he realized every descendant within mental range was snickering at his thoughts. He studied Angela harder. *What am I missing?*

Wearing dirty jeans and an even dirtier Eagle jacket, her long braid was in wild disarray and had begun to show her age. Though well shaped, with a nice face, Ivan didn’t understand the attraction. Shrugging, he studied the other workers. After his decision about her, Ivan was surprised to find half the males staring at her in admiration and desire. Frustrated that he couldn’t see what they could, Ivan put his back to all of them, trying to work it out. He’d heard the stories. He’d helped Marc track her down, but that wasn’t why he had come. He couldn’t care less about Angela or whatever an alpha was. He was here to serve Marc.

“He knows that. That’s why you were given duty over me.”

Ivan felt a chill. *So what? Any woman’s voice can do that to me. I stay hard.*

Angela refused to rise to the challenge. Ivan was hoping she would prove she was worthy of the attention she was getting, but Angela didn’t want yet another dog panting after her. In fact, she liked Ivan because he wasn’t interested. Angela faced her crew. “I’m ready for the other updates.”

Adrian switched places with Tracy. “We had no survivors from the animal population except for that damn cat and a few honeybees. The hive was destroyed, but the vet managed to stick pieces of it in a coffee can for their survivors. They might make it. We found food on this level, but a lot of it was ruined. Kenn and I oversaw it. We salvaged as much as we could. Two weeks’ worth.”

Angela counted quickly. “That’s less than four days per group.”

“Yes, but we’re still digging. We had months of nonperishable items. We just have to locate them.”

Angela scanned the debris piles, unable to get a read on anything specific. Her abilities were wonky again today, but she didn’t have time to stress over it. She pointed. “Let’s concentrate our efforts on this pile here. When we get back to the top level, we’ll spend some time with the kids, doing a private lesson. By the time that’s finished, we’ll need to start on lunch for everyone. I want you to tell Marc to divvy up the supplies now. If we do it later, we’ll lose some of it during the transfer.”

“I’ll make sure he knows.” Adrian scanned his notes. “What about the water and the weapons?”

“We’re leaving most of the water for Jimmy’s group. We’re taking the weapons. The citizens who are going out on their own are already acting desperate. If there’s a single incident after this, I’m going to order the Eagles to disarm them of what they already have. It would be foolish to give them more so they can use it against us.”

“Dad’s handling some of that now.” Charlie glanced upward. “We’ll hear it in a minute.”

Angela wasn’t worried about Marc getting hurt or about the camp being triggered into a stampede at this point. Things had already gotten so far out of hand that if they didn’t clamp down on the worst of the offenders, everyone would stop obeying the rules. “We’ll skip that level.” Angela walked around Ivan, who was standing near the exit with his back to everyone. “The kids should be eating right now. They’re no threat to me. I want the guards on that level working instead of babysitting.”

As she went by, Ivan shivered at an unexpected wave of loneliness. He knew what had triggered it and crossed his arms over his chest. *That doesn’t mean anything. She’s just another walking, talking piece of ass.*

Angela stopped.

She turned and locked eyes with Ivan, unable to walk away from that. She connected them mentally, doing a deep scan while she was there. Marc trusted him, but Angela had no dealings with Ivan other than what was happening right now.

Around them, everyone stilled, waiting for Angela to determine the man’s fate.

Ivan understood that if she found anything bad in his mind, he was likely to be killed, but it didn’t matter. The feel of her was indescribable. There wasn’t anything she could ask him for that he wouldn’t try to deliver now and that was just from a mere impersonal mental scan. What would it be like to have her smile?

Angela studied the man, not breaking the connection. “Perhaps you should try to find out...” She let another second of communication flow between them and then rotated toward the corridor. “Put him on my detail while I sleep.”

Adrian frowned. “What?”

Charlie laughed.

As they went up the ladder, a tense silence filled the cave. Few of the Runaways or Mountaineers understood, but the Eagles knew a call was coming through. During their time in the mountain, they had learned to identify some of the common noises. That tense pause where it felt as though the mountain had frozen around them always preceded a radio transmission.

“This is Kevin. Come in, Safe Haven.”

Angela paused this time. She wanted to answer that call. Jennifer’s vision had included both Kevin and Jeff, but there was no way for her to communicate that. She was positive their enemy was listening for responses 24-hours a day. She wanted the UN caught off guard, but more than that, she needed the time between now and their arrival to be sure the refugees outside were too sick to fight. Deep down, as much as it bothered her, she hoped they were all dead. She hadn’t ordered the laptop switched on yet today, but that was on her list of things to check after the meeting with the descendant children. Despite the constant chaos, that young band of magic users had to be brought under control before they hurt someone.

“Come in, Safe Haven. This is Kevin. Hello? Can anyone hear me?”

The call echoed through weak radios on each floor.

Forced, Angela sent a command that reached every person in the cave. *We are on radio silence. Do not answer or use your radios. If caught, the penalty is immediate death.*

“Is there any way we can confiscate the radios?”

After her threat, Angela didn’t scold Tracy for the mutter. “I had hoped it wouldn’t come to that, but I did make a plan. It will depend on our cook’s willingness to add a special sauce to tonight’s meal.”

It was unlikely that Brittani would agree to drug an entire cave of people based on a request from any of them. She wasn’t an Eagle yet. She wouldn’t understand the need for radio silence.

“I’ll speak to her.” Tracy was behind Angela on the ladder, eager to be useful. She’d settled most of her demons.

“I’ll assign you to help with the meal. If she won’t do it, will you?”

“Yes.” Tracy wasn’t bothered by the chore. She was terrified of being captured by the UN, however. If putting the camp to sleep a couple hours early saved all their lives, she would do it and be glad.

Charlie looked at Adrian for help.

Adrian shook his head. “I’m not the one you have to talk to. I’m not running this show anymore.”

Angela didn’t respond. Tracy wanted to serve and she needed things done. “Let’s hit the top floor now. The kids are getting restless and that’s not good.”

**2**

“That’s my gun!” Dylan lunged toward Marc.

Marc shoved the man against the wall, letting his demon bleed through. It had returned in a burst of anger and defense as the camp member swung on him. “Sit down and cool off!” Marc studied his crew and saw Eagles ready to shoot. “Dylan is under arrest. Cuff him.” He regarded the group of scared, tired survivors Dylan had been forcing to stay. “If you’re staying in the mountain, get to the bottom level. If you’re going with us, get to the top level.”

“What if we’re not doing either of those?”

Marc located the owner of the defiant question. The man was tall and thin, with grungy clothes and wounded hands. “The mess has guards. You can stay there until we open the passage.”

Instead of gratitude, the man frowned. “Why do we have guards?”

Marc scowled back. “Really? We’ve had guards the entire time you’ve been here. Why would this be different?”

Oliver scowled. “We aren’t in your camp anymore. We don’t have your rules.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong, my friend.” Marc was hot. “You’re enjoying our hospitality and being fed from our stocks. You’ll behave or you’ll be arrested.”

“On what charges?”

Marc grunted in annoyance. “Dylan is being charged with holding people against their will, threatening lives, causing panic, and assault. Would you like to join him? You are his partner.”

Oliver held up a hand. “Those were his plans, not mine.”

“You didn’t stop him or tell anyone he was planning to attack.”

“I figured we’d get out there and he’d forget about it.”

“He’s lying.” Dylan was on the ground, dazed from Marc’s shove into the wall. “He said he could get by the guard on the water room because they’re friends.”

Marc scanned Oliver and gestured. “Arrest him.”

“On what charge?!” Oliver’s demand didn’t hide his fear at being exposed.

“Theft and conspiracy to start. We’ll speak again later. I suspect I’ll be adding planning a murder to it.”

“Of who?” Morgan was writing in his notebook.

“His friend on the water tanks. Greg is one of ours. He would have told us as soon as his shift ended.”

“Freaks!” Oliver spat at Marc and rushed forward.

Daryl and Morgan grabbed the man, forcing him down so he could be handcuffed.

Marc pointed at Dylan. “Take them both to the bottom floor and stay with them.”

As the troublemakers were shoved toward the ladder, Marc faced the remaining two dozen Runaways. “I see your relief. I smelled your fear. You’re not going to survive. Please reconsider going with us. We won’t hold you against your will.”

“You already are.” One of the women glared at Marc, daring him to deny it.

“If you don’t understand why that’s happening, then you’re gonna hate my next order. I want all your weapons, even the knives. You are not to be armed in this cave. You will not be given weapons or ammunition, and guards will watch you at all times.”

The cries and protests faded as Marc glowered. “Give up your guns or I will arrest you.”

The men and women began to hand their weapons to the nearest Eagle, exchanging nasty glares that warned of more trouble.

Marc gestured at his guards. “Let’s go.”

Marc hated the frustration that he and others were experiencing, but everyone had made a choice now. It was do or die time for them all.

**3**

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No. I’ll get something at dinner.”

Marc assumed she was making sure everyone had enough to eat and respected her for it even as he refused to allow it. He held out a tattered candy bar.

Angela took it with a guilty expression. She shoved it into her pocket.

“No. Now.”

“I’d rather–”

“No. The kids don’t need the energy boost or the mood fix.” He smiled. “Besides, I dug it out for you.”

“Share with me?”

Marc sat on the floor next to the papers she was reading through while the rest of the camp ate lunch. He took a small piece of the bar and popped it into his mouth.

Angela did too, moaning. “I love chocolate.”

Marc handed her another piece and swept the small training chamber. It was half emptied of debris, but Marc was positive they wouldn’t finish it. “Something’s coming.”

“Jenny and Sam said that too. We’re all twitchy.”

“It’s too early, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but we’ll make it work.”

“We have to.”

“We will.” Angela ate another small piece, sucking the gooey sweet from her fingers. “You on break?”

“Fifteen minutes. Adrian has it covered.”

“None of us have it covered.” Angela slid the candy into the wrapper, aware that Marc had only eaten the piece to get her going on it. “Later, okay?”

Marc paused as her eyes changed to a rolling, smoky blue that mesmerized him.

“Love me?”

Marc glanced down at his filthy clothes and then at the doorway where residents were walking by. “You sure?”

Angela answered with a mental wave of desire that took his breath.

**4**

“Should I be doing this?” Jennifer kept glancing toward the entrance, expecting to see Angela. “She didn’t tell me to answer their questions and handle their problems. In fact, she told me to rest.”

Tonya and Tracy, flanking the girl, exchanged glances that implied they still didn’t understand why Jennifer had been chosen over them.

Tonya gestured. “She announced you as her heir. She wants you to jump in.”

Jennifer didn’t mind that. She was happy to be useful and to have a distraction from the pain in her shoulder, but she also didn’t want to step on Angela’s toes–especially when she’d just been named heir.

Tonya lowered her voice. “Kenn said the reason she didn’t put you to work yet is because she feels bad that you got hurt again.”

“She needs our help. If you can do this, do it.” Tracy swept the room. “Here come more Runaways. Ready?”

Jennifer braced against the nervousness. “Good afternoon. What can I do for you?”

“Convince us we’ll be safer with you.”

Jennifer understood the people were afraid to be on their own. “All I can do is tell you what might happen. It may be ugly. I have no control over that.”

A tall, tired woman came forward, holding out her hand. “We have to touch or something, I think.”

Jennifer cleared her throat. “There are prices to deals like this.”

Ellie frowned a little, but shrugged. “If I have anything you want, it’s yours. Just tell them the truth.”

The males were confident they could survive, but Ellie knew better. She wanted her father and two brothers to stay under Safe Haven’s protection.

Jennifer took an iron grip on the woman’s wrist. “You’ll owe the debt to the boss for allowing this, not me.”

Ellie nodded, free hand shoved into her pocket to hide her clenched fist. “Deal. Do it.”

Jennifer drew hard, using the woman’s energy to open the mental barrier. “Ask your questions. You have three.”

Ellie was ready. “I only have one. What happens to our family on our own or here?”

Jennifer took another healthy drag of the woman’s nervous energy and opened the door wider. “Death comes to this cursed ground fast now. Don’t linger.” Jennifer studied the images, always wishing for sound. “You make it west. Women now rule those lands. Your father dies in battle with them. Your brothers are taken captive. You die trying to rescue them.” Jennifer connected their minds and allowed Ellie to witness the images.

Ellie tensed, gasping. “Stop.”

“See what you came to deny. All of you.” Jennifer blasted the family with the images of their deaths. “This is your future.”

Tracy and Tonya observed for problems, but the family was rattled by the vision. The men hadn’t believed Ellie’s claims of dreaming about their deaths.

Jennifer let go, slamming the barrier. “That’s it.”

Ellie gathered her wary family at one of the rickety tables. She was hoping they were convinced now, because she was. “I’m going with them.”

“It’s a trick.”

“Maybe, but I won’t take that chance. Angela is never wrong.”

“She’s not Angela.”

“She’s Angela’s heir. Do you think Angela would pick someone who couldn’t be trusted?”

“No, I guess not.”

“We’ll stay with them. Later, we’ll ask her to search again.”

“We won’t get it for free next time.”

“We didn’t get it for free this time. Did you catch how powerful that was?”

“Yes. We’ll find some way to pay for it.”

Jennifer and her two guards listened to the conversation without comment or much thought. That conversation was taking place on every level of the caves right now. People were trying to be sure they could live with their choice. The recent problems had caused some folks to reconsider their decision, but only a few of them would.

Jennifer believed Ellie would be the exception, rather than the rule. Deep down, the normal people viewed descendants as dangerous. It was in their thoughts so much that Jennifer had been blocking them. She wasn’t able to pinpoint when the camp had turned against magic, but it had happened faster here than in Cesar’s camp. The other slaves had loathed it because they didn’t have it to use for their defense. They hadn’t understood it was there to help them.

Jennifer turned toward the doorway again, feeling the next group coming. “Good afternoon. What can I do for you?”

As Jennifer worked, Tonya and Tracy chatted.

“He gives me the creeps.” Tracy stared toward the dark kitchen, certain the vet was studying everything. “You?”

Tonya shrugged. “He’s been more useful than I have since the earthquake. Makes me guilty, frankly.”

“That’s odd.”

“Because I’m okay with him facing traitors so my man doesn’t have to?”

Tracy paused. “I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“I hadn’t either until I heard Ray trying to talk to Dale. Dennis was bad. Howard and Bobby were under observation as possible assassins. Maybe the vet just takes care of bad souls.”

Tracy accepted that mental change, okay with almost anything that kept Charlie out of the line of fire. He was sleeping now, due for another overnight shift with Adrian and Kyle, who were also sleeping. That was how they’d been able to sneak Jennifer out of the corner where the baby and mobster had crashed. Both women were hoping to get Jennifer back there before Kyle woke up. “Do you think the vet’s had anything to eat?”

Tonya shrugged. “He’s afraid to come out here. A lot of people aren’t dead.”

Tracy scanned the room and didn’t locate any problems. “I need three minutes.”

“I’ve got this. And if I don’t, she does.”

“Do you mind?!”

The women glanced down to find Jennifer staring up at them in annoyance. It was clear they’d been distracting her.

“Sorry.” Both women apologized. Jennifer was a lot like Angela when she was upset. You could almost feel her disapproval.

Jennifer turned back to Doug. “My apologies. Where were we?”

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

Jennifer took Doug’s big hand in hers, connecting them. Again, she used his energy so she didn’t deplete her own. “She already suspects. Seth is helping her.”

Doug sighed in resignation. “I’m going after them. Peggy would want me to watch out for Becky.”

Jennifer patted Doug’s hand. “Just don’t forget where your home is.”

Doug smiled. “No problem there, little girl.”

Jennifer motioned toward Tonya. “Go write it in her book. We’ll deliver it, but it has to be in your handwriting.”

Doug did as instructed.

More residents came into the mess. Rumor was flying that Jennifer was using her gifts and everyone had a question they needed answered.

Tonya leaned in. “Hang around, will you? We don’t have enough guards in here for this.”

Doug finished writing and then took a place by Jennifer. Unlike the rest of the people who hadn’t been positive about staying or going, Doug knew what he wanted to do. The problem had been that what he wanted and what was right were different. The citizens coming into the mess didn’t have that problem. They wanted to be told they would survive, but Doug doubted many of them would hear that.

If there was any chance at all that the Runaways and Mountaineers would survive, Doug had faith that Angela would have told them. But she hadn’t, which meant the situations that came next would be worse than what they had already dealt with. Doug planned to be back with Safe Haven before that happened.

Tracy entered the dark kitchen without fear of the vet. She was worried about all the people in the mess. Most of them didn’t care why Chris had done what he had. He was a violent person trapped in this cave with them. Tracy didn’t want their views of him to color their opinion of her so much that it caused problems for Charlie. “I brought you something to eat.”

A flash light came on in the corner, illuminating the vet on the floor in the corner. He glanced up at her in bleary confusion.

Tracy shrugged. “It felt like the right thing to do.” She set the bottle of water and packs of nonperishables on the ground by her feet, then walked toward the mess. “You may want to get out of here soon. When we shut everything down for the night, it’s very likely that looters will be on this level.”

Tracy heard Chris stretch and pause, wanting to be able to hear anything he might be about to say.

“He’s good for you. You should reward him for that.”

Tracy spun around, understanding who he meant. “That’s none of your business!”

Chris put his head down. “He doesn’t expect a reward. He has a pure soul. When you bond with him, his light will ease your pain. The nightmares will stop.”

Tracy stared, a little shocked by the conversation, but more by her reaction to it than by the words or who it was coming from. She’d had the same thought not long ago, but during a crisis was a bad time to be conquering fears.

“Is there a better time to conquer your fears then when you’re afraid?”

Tracy didn’t know what to say to that. It made too much sense. She left the kitchen at a quick trot, resuming her post with Tonya.

“How did it go?”

Tracy shrugged. “He still creeps me out.”

Tonya chuckled. “That’s part of his charm.”

“He told me to sleep with Charlie.”

Jennifer stared up at them again.

“This is getting interesting.” Doug chuckled. “Do you mind if I take notes?”

Startled into a laugh, Jennifer turned back to the student who was waiting for her answer. “I’m sorry. Where were we?”

# Chapter Twenty-Two

**The Next Step**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**C**harlie muttered as a hand slid over his brow. Soft and cool, he grabbed it before it was gone.

Tracy gasped at the fast reaction. “Sorry.”

“You’re all right.” Charlie smiled at her. “Wake me anytime.”

Nose full of her scent as she leaned over him, Charlie rubbed his thumb over her fingers. “Good morning, beautiful.”

Tracy blushed. “Hi.” She didn’t pull her hand away even though sparks were flying between them.

Charlie wondered how long she’d been sitting by his pallet in the partially cleared training chamber. “When does my shift begin?”

“Hour and a half. It’s evening now. Sorry I woke you.”

Charlie kissed her hand, then released it. “I’m not. We don’t get much time alone anymore.”

Tracy smiled. “I don’t think they’ll keep us apart once we get out of here.”

Charlie stretched, causing the blanket to drop down on his bare chest. “Why do you say that?”

“Because we’ll already be bonded.”

Charlie stiffened–in both ways.

Tracy chuckled, thrilled to be interested instead of sad. For a while, she’d believed the physical side of love was gone for her. “I’m better now.”

“Good.” Charlie pushed into a sitting position, staring at her. “What brought this on?”

Tracy paused. He sounded angry. “Why did something have to happen?”

“It doesn’t, but I know it did by your reaction.” Charlie cursed meddling fools. “Come on. Give up the bee buzzing in your ear.”

Tracy was confused. “Why aren’t you happy about it?”

“It wasn’t your idea.”

She smiled softly for him. “It is my choice, though.”

Charlie wanted to say yes, but couldn’t. “We can talk, but I won’t do it because someone convinced you.”

Tracy put a hand on his leg, snickering when he jumped and covered her hand with his own. “No one convinced me. I thought about something that was said and decided to take the next step.”

“Us having sex.”

She withdrew her hand. “It’s crude when you say it like that.”

The boy shrugged. “It’s crude when you approach it like this. You’re not a whore anymore.”

“Ouch.” Tracy sat back, embarrassed. “Why aren’t you happy?”

“I’m sorry.” Charlie sighed. “I want it to be special for you, for us.”

Tracy understood this wasn’t what he had in mind, but she wondered if it was more than that. “Are you okay? This isn’t like you.”

Charlie fought against the need to be a man and the need to let her into his immature concerns. He settled for the middle ground. “I don’t know enough yet. I need to ask more questions. I can’t just Google it, you know?”

Tracy laughed, delighted he’d told her the truth. She didn’t tell him she would handle that.

He knew. “I didn’t want it to be like all the others.”

Tracy stilled. “Does that bother you?”

“I worry if I’ll be as good as they were.”

Tracy’s heart melted. “Most of those moments weren’t for my fun, honey. I didn’t enjoy it. *They* did.”

“I’ll make sure you enjoy it with me.” Charlie wasn’t boasting. He’d already promised himself that she would want more when it was over.

“I believe you.” Tracy slid into the pallet next to him, lying on her side. “Can we discuss it now?”

Charlie grinned. “I’m starting to understand what they mean about women. You guys are sneaky.”

Tracy took his hand in hers, twining their fingers. “I love you. Will you love me?”

Charlie didn’t have the willpower to refuse her again. As he sank down into her arms, he brought up his personal bubble to prevent them from being disturbed.

Tracy didn’t notice. As soon as their lips met, his mental touch slid over her in a wave of new power that stole everything except the desire to be his in every way.

Charlie felt it and obliged. He wasn’t stupid.

**2**

“She spent the afternoon doing what?!”

Kyle’s shout echoed to the top level of the cave, waking residents on every floor and causing guards to shake their heads. Everyone had expected him to react badly when he found out, but there had also been the small hope that he would realize as Angela’s heir, Jennifer was going to be doing a lot of that.

Kenn scowled at Kyle. “Angela’s asleep. Do you want her up again?”

“No. I can yell at her later.” Kyle stomped toward the tunnel, ignoring the stares. He didn’t care about their disapproval. Jennifer had been in the mess, surrounded by people who might want to hurt her and he hadn’t been there to help.

“By the time it was over, there were more Eagles in the mess than any other area.” Kenn followed Kyle. “Seriously man, don’t blow up on her. This is Jennifer’s job now.”

Kyle knew that, but it didn’t make it any easier. She was going to be in danger all the time. “I wanted her to say no.”

Kenn snorted. “Like we said no to Adrian?”

Kyle stomped toward the ladder. “I can’t wait to be out of this shit hole.”

That, Kenn agreed with completely. “Coffee or rounds? They have us as top bananas for the overnight shift.”

“Coffee… What about Adrian?”

“He stayed up and provided guard duty for the boss.”

“Okay. Coffee and updates. This shit you brought me is too weak.”

“Marc gave the majority of our staples to the Mountaineers.”

Grumpy, Kyle didn’t acknowledge that. He slid down the ladder using his hands, pretending the splinters he got didn’t hurt. In a mood like this, he didn’t care about small punctures. What he needed was a release that he couldn’t get while they were trapped in this mountain. He had to control the wild side of himself.

In that moment, Kenn bonded with the monster against his will. “I was thinking we should do some training, once everybody is settled down.”

“What type of training?” Kyle ignored the disappointed annoyance of the guards who were glaring at him for his bad attitude.

“Hostage rescue without gunfire.”

Kyle nodded, calming against his will. “Add that to our list. We’ll be making rounds of corridors that don’t have guards. I want to be able to tell Angela we have full perimeter security when she gets up.”

“Deal.”

They got coffee and settled at a small table in the far corner to finish waking and to observe those around them. Dinner was over, but people had felt comfortable enough to linger for weak coffee and soothing conversation. Since the quake, it was harder to get to sleep.

“Jennifer’s messages for you.” Kenn handed them over. “I assumed you’d want them first.”

Kyle read the short message at the top with a snort.

*Please don’t be mad. It’s my duty.*

Kyle loved that about her, but it was also something he was coming to hate. He read the next note and then the three lines after it, frowning more at each one. Jennifer had convinced several people to remain with Safe Haven, at least until they were out of the cave and away from this mountain, but she had also discovered a thief and a possible traitor–both in the Mountaineers. Those residents had been wounded and not evaluated by descendants because they hadn’t been capable of posing a threat. With a few more days of healing, that would no longer be true, but those citizens hadn’t been vetted. “I’ll handle it during shift change. Next?”

Kenn and Kyle got through the updates in record time, both listening to the noises of the cave fading into sleep. For Kenn, this was the best part of the day. For Kyle, it was the worst. Bonded by their women and their differences, not a single insult was exchanged during the update.

As they finished and stood up to make their first round of the guards, Kenn met Kyle’s eyes. “I’m glad you guys are going with us. We would have missed you.”

Surprised into a better mood, Kyle shrugged. “Maybe in time I’ll be able to say the same about you.”

It was as close to peace as they had gotten. Kenn accepted it gratefully. It was more than he’d ever expected.

“Why is everyone so quiet?” Kyle checked his watch. “It’s barely bed time.”

Kenn handed Kyle another paper. “Hard work. We got most of the remaining debris piles sorted today.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Kyle read the note.

*Light dose of sleeping medicine.*

Kyle didn’t like that, but he understood the need for it. He handed the paper back and gestured. *Everyone?*

Kenn glanced toward the yawning folks in the far corner of the mess. *Just the Runaways.*

That told Kyle there had been trouble while he slept.

“Marc disarmed them and arrested their new leader, Dylan. They’re afraid to pick a new one.”

Kyle snorted. “Yeah, I’ll bet. What else?”

“She ordered the supplies split up. Everyone was unhappy with the amounts. Repairs have been halted.”

Kyle lifted a brow.

Kenn handed the paper back again. *Jennifer’s prediction*.

Kyle read the rest of it this time.

*Watch Candy and Dale.*

*An unvetted guard has duty over the boss right now*.

*The water stopped again.*

Kyle shoved the paper into his pocket and stomped toward the ladder. “Who put an unvetted guard over the boss?”

“The boss.”

Kyle scowled. “Any idea why?”

“Marc thinks as bait. He yelled at her for it.”

“I’m certain that worked.”

“Yeah, well, they weren’t yelling afterwards, so I assume she distracted him.”

Kyle’s lips twitched. Marc had been without for a while. That would succeed.

*The other females will try the same thing.*

Kyle shrugged at Kenn’s silent observation. *We need babies, right?*

Kenn grinned, thinking of his coming parenthood years. “We say that now.”

Kyle chuckled, unable to hold the bad mood he’d woken in. “Come on. Let’s play with the mouse she put in the hall.”

“You want good or bad?”

“Let’s use Eagle lessons. If he’s not bad, then he’s one of us or she wouldn’t have put him on her detail.”

“Makes sense to me. Bring him in and get him to confide?”

“For now. Let’s feel him out.” Kyle was used to operating on instinct, whereas Kenn preferred to plan every detail. It had created some hard moments when they were forced to work together, but when they were on the same page, it was perfect.

With the groups segregated, port-o-lets had been put up on each level and the smells were awful. Coughs and snores echoed through the filth, as well as gasps and moans of souls having nightmares. It wasn’t peaceful, but it was calm enough for Kyle to breathe a sigh of relief. He’d expected things to be much worse when he woke.

As they went by the sleeping kids, Kyle made eye contact with the guard. Jennifer and Autumn were in a rear corner. Kyle nodded to Greg to show the man that he had support. Kyle hadn’t worried about Greg for an instant in the entire time they’d been dealing with assassins and traitors in their ranks. He had no problem with Greg on duty there. He just wanted to be the one doing it.

Greg returned the gesture, working hard to earn back the respect he felt he’d lost. Greg had chosen to become so useful to Safe Haven that his loyalty could never again be doubted. He took out his notebook.

Kyle continued toward the weapons room.

In the hall, Stanley and Shawn were curled up in sleeping bags. Kyle didn’t wake them. He was glad to see Shawn, but the clumsy kid next to him wasn’t dependable in a fight. Stanley had spent two days carrying water and spilling half of it. No one was happy with him. Before he’d crashed, Kyle had reassigned the clumsy boy to helping with the kids. If he couldn’t do that, he would be taken from the rookie Eagles and placed onto the list of camp members.

As they neared the next post, Kyle saw that all the soldiers were together. David, leg bandaged, was sleeping next to Peter and James. Booth and Ivan were standing near the makeshift barrier, with Morgan in a far corner, watching them all.

Kyle joined Morgan while Kenn checked in with Ivan. “Anything I should know?”

Morgan yawned. “They like pussy and they hate this mountain–same as the rest of us.”

Kyle snickered. Babysitting duty was boring when the target was innocent. “Shift change in half an hour.”

That brought smiles to all the men.

Kyle nodded to Ivan, no longer worried over him being here. Morgan would shoot him if there was a problem.

Kenn took the paper Ivan handed him, digging into the man’s mind. Kenn didn’t think there was a problem, but he’d heard about Ivan’s challenge concerning Angela and he was curious if the man had altered his opinion yet.

Spotting nothing, Kenn withdrew and headed for the tunnel. “She’ll come out in a minute because she felt us out here. We’re just doing rounds. No problems, nothing new.”

Ivan didn’t tell Kenn he doubted Marc or Angela would come out until morning. They’d both worked all day and then had sex. After that, anyone would be knocked–

The door behind him opened a crack. “Update me.”

Ivan grinned, impressed. “No problems, nothing new.”

“Rounds?”

“Yeah. Kenn and your other guy–the mobster.”

“Kyle.” Angela shut the door and returned to Marc’s arms.

Ivan looked at Morgan. “She always like this?”

Morgan nodded. “Yep.”

“Good. It’s kinda nice to have a leader who hears everything, you know?”

“Not like that in government work?”

“Not even close.” Ivan stopped talking and went back to observing.

Morgan checked the man off his mental list. It was always hard to tell, but Ivan had the right answers and attitude for a good guy who wanted to become a hero. Morgan recognized it because that’s how he’d been when he joined Adrian’s army. The need to serve hadn’t faded even though the camp had switched leaders and locations. Morgan understood these souls carried as much magic as their leaders. Together, they were an immune system that an infection couldn’t conquer.

Kyle retrieved the paper from his pocket and read the next set of notes Kenn had prepared.

*Our new jail is on the bottom level.*

*Missa and Joseph have joined Jimmy’s group.*

*Morning viewing of the outside feed is setup in the mess.*

Kyle sighed, going to the bottom level to check on their prisoners. He didn’t know what Marc planned to do with the men, but Kyle doubted they would be let go. The days of second chances in Safe Haven were about over.

Kyle found the prisoners in the tarped area where Samantha and Neil had been, all three sleeping heavily.

Kyle caught Kenn’s motion. *Sedated.*

Kyle swept the short row of wounded and then the cots nearby where the doctor and his students were snoring and shifting restlessly. They had a lot of cuts and bruises throughout the camp, along with burns and rashes. Down here were broken bones and impalements. None of these people were healing as fast as Samantha had, but they hadn’t received an energy blast from Angela and Cody.

Kyle spotted Joseph and Missa curled up back-to-back by the storage room where Jennifer had been stashed. The nuns from Sarah’s group were next to them. Kyle wondered if Missa and Joseph shared the views on descendant children being devils. None of the religious population was coming with them, something that had shocked Kyle. Didn’t they know the magic came from God, that the descendants came from Christ? He assumed their fear wouldn’t allow them to accept that, but he had no doubt that when Safe Haven departed, those same people would claim to have been touched by heaven. As they died, they would curse those same angels.

Kyle gave the two guards down here a hard stare that said to stay alert, then went up the ladder to make sure things were calm on the level that had been crushed. There wasn’t supposed to be anyone there right now, but he was positive he’d heard digging noises as they’d come down.

Spotting a female shadow, Kyle gestured Kenn to it. *I’m not awake enough for this one.*

Kenn grimaced, but didn’t argue. He didn’t know what to say to Candy. He had no idea where she fit into Angela’s plans.

Candy gave him a huge smile. “Good morning!”

“It’s not even midnight yet.” Kenn swept the area and noticed she was creating new piles and sorting. “Who told you to do this now?”

“Conner.”

“Conner?”

Candy nodded, sitting on a broken stool. “I had a dream. We talked. When I woke up, I felt better.”

*The mountain sickness is getting a hold on her again.* Kenn sighed. “Maybe we should speak to Jimmy.”

Candy pointed at a nearby pile. “I need to get that cleared. I’m going slow so I don’t get hurt or wake anyone up. Besides, you told me to do this if I could.”

Kenn spotted the small case Tonya had kept with her in the lab. He regarded Candy in suspicion. “What’s going on?”

“Conner said I need a friend.” Candy scanned the messy piles and gloomy shadows. “He’s right. I like Tonya. If I find something she wants, she might be willing to give me a chance.”

Kenn went over and began clearing the rest of the heavier rocks and debris from atop the dented case so Candy wouldn’t try it in her condition. “Did he say anything else or have a message for us?”

“Oh, no. He wasn’t supposed to break silence and call in.” She blushed. “He was worried about me.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing.” Candy smiled. “I yelled at him for breaking the rules. Man, if that hadn’t been a dream, he’d be mad at me.”

*She is still sick.* Kenn wasn’t sure what to do, so he chose to be honest. “Isn’t it weird to be bonding with your stalker?”

Candy’s smile fell into anger. “He’s a lost kid who needs some help. Why do you have to be so mean?”

Kenn wiped away sweat. “People will view it that way.”

“Conner is a hero now. He proved himself on that trip. When he comes here, he’ll–”

“Still be Adrian’s son.” Kenn tugged the case loose and set it by Candy’s feet. “I don’t have a problem with Conner. Neither does Tonya, as far as I know.”

Candy swiveled around to watch him walk away, mind clearing for a moment. “You’re good now.”

Kenn nodded. “I’m trying.”

“Me too. I miss the old Safe Haven.”

Kenn paused. *Me too*. “She had a notebook with the case. If you locate it, you’re guaranteed a chance to be friends.”

Candy beamed.

Kenn joined Kyle near the ladder.

“Problem?”

“Not yet.” Kenn filled Kyle in as they went to the next level. He wanted to use his gift to send the thoughts, but Angela had outlawed magic use and that meant him too.

Kyle grunted, filing the information. “We’ll keep an eye on things, but it appears we may have been wrong about him.”

“You think?”

“Maybe. He’s like any other teenager peeping through holes. We all did it.”

Kenn laughed. “And then some.”

“We’ll see what Kendle says when she returns.”

“Agreed.” Kenn gestured. “Let’s get this level cleared and then handle Jimmy’s three problems.”

“You want to do our prisoners at the same time?”

Kenn thought about it. “Can we make it genuine?”

“I don’t see why not, but even if we can’t, does it matter? They all believe we’re evil now.”

Kyle’s bitterness bothered Kenn. “Are we?”

“It’s much too soon to tell.”

Candy got up and began digging again. She hadn’t told Kenn there had already been a lot of papers and notebooks dug out. Cynthia had gathered many of them while she worked here today. One of them had been the petition.

*Descendants are dangerous. Please join me in signing the back of this page. It is a petition, asking that the things discussed in this paper be added to the next mandatory camp meeting.*

Candy thought about those words and about how ugly it was in the cave now. Cynthia’s views had gone public, and then the quake had come and ripped them all apart. It was easy for people to believe the two were connected. When Candy had asked Conner about it, the boy hadn’t been able to give her an answer that made sense.

*Sometimes fate provides an opportunity, but at the same time, it also provides a trap. Angela caught both of them where almost no one else could have. Serve her if you can. She’s the alpha now.*

Candy was trying, but the hole in her heart where Lee had been was still screaming. It had been months, but she missed him. That wouldn’t change and it made it hard to view anything else without pain clouding her judgment. The only light she saw now was in a teenage boy who was probably hundreds of miles from here and not thinking about her at all.

*I think about you constantly.*

Candy smiled as Conner’s warm hand settled onto her shoulder. *I know I’m imagining these moments, but thank you anyway.*

*For what?*

*For wanting me. No one else does.*

*That’ll change once they watch you grow with life and realize Lee was honored. The wives and girlfriends are always cared for.*

*We haven’t been since Angela took over.*

*She doesn’t know the code. My dad will teach her. There were a lot of other things that had to come first.*

*Shouldn’t he have tried to pass it to you?*

*Never. I’ve disgraced myself. I’ll never be a leader.*

*You could be an Eagle.*

*I am an Eagle, Candy. Things have changed.*

Candy felt the hand withdraw and shivered at the drafty replacement of nothing, of being in a cold corridor that stank and cried with the ghosts of the dead.

“I’ve always been alone, really.” Candy resumed digging. “I’m different. That’s okay as long as someone needs me.”

“You could come with us.”

Candy didn’t look up at Jamie, who was staying with the Runaways. He’d stopped on his way up the ladder. “No, thank you.”

“You believe her about us all dying out there without Safe Haven?”

“What I believe doesn’t matter.” Cynthia tossed a crushed bottle lid onto the pile, wincing at the noise even though she’d done it to draw a guard in case Jamie got violent. She didn’t know him. “I’ll be able to touch that island, to grow food and raise herds, and I’ll always be safe because I can see my enemies coming and be ready before they even make it to shore. You can’t offer me that anywhere on American soil. I’m an Islander. I can’t be converted.”

Jamie knelt down to help dig through the pile, determined to try anyway. “You’re not like them. You belong with your own kind.”

Candy thought of Conner. He was more like her than anyone she’d ever known. “Simon was arrested for harassing women and trying to force them to stay. I’ve refused. Accept it.”

Jamie looked up as Kenn and Kyle appeared in the tunnel. Both guards had their arms over their chests, scowling at him.

Jamie stood up. “I didn’t do anything. We were just talking.”

“I told him I’m not going.” Candy kept working. “If he comes out before morning, I’ll scream.”

Kenn nodded and went to the ladder.

Kyle glowered at Jamie until the man was back in his area. The mobster wanted to do more than deliver a warning.

Kyle nodded at Candy and joined Kenn. They would stay on this level for a while and visit it more than they had planned to.

Candy went on searching for Tonya’s notebook, but she also gathered little items she knew were needed or treasured by someone. When morning came, she would be able to give some smiles to residents and begin repairing the damage she’d done to herself since Lee died. She didn’t know what would come after that, but she knew nothing could come before it. The foundation of an Eagle determined everything else in Safe Have and Candy was determined to have everything she’d laid out to Jamie. She wanted to be on Pitcairn. Once she was, the island would be her home. They would never get her to come back.

**3**

Ray snapped awake as a warm body crawled in with him. He recognized his mate’s smell.

Ray tensed, expecting Dale’s knife to slide between his ribs.

“Don’t speak. At all.”

Ray nodded.

Dale put his arms around Ray and his cheek against Ray’s shoulder. They stayed still, listening to each other, feeling each other.

Ray cried a little. He understood Dale had needed to hold him one more time before they were split.

Dale went straight to sleep, not experiencing Ray’s pain as he’d been able to in the past. It was really over.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

**Honor First**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**A**cross from Ray and Dale, the prisoners in the tarped-in area were talking in low tones. They’d woken a short time ago and faked sleep when Kyle came through.

“Shift change is coming. We’ll act then.”

Dylan glared at Oliver. “You blew it by getting caught. Now, we won’t have anyone on the inside.”

“That’s why we’re attacking them when the shift changes. If we don’t, we’ll be killed or tossed out in the cold with nothing.”

“Who are we grabbing?” Simon was no longer the leader of anything. His balls had never hurt this much. “They have all the magic users on the top floor.”

“The reporter is down here in the cubby where Jennifer was stashed. She’s carrying a descendant baby.”

“But everyone wants the kid dead.” Dylan wasn’t eager to experience what Simon had.

“Not the mother. She’ll do what she has to.” Oliver was determined to get what they needed to survive. Once they left Safe Haven, there wouldn’t be any more easy meals or warm beds, and these men needed to accept that.

“Maybe. What about the other guards?”

“We’ll go out through that top passage.”

“If we can get by the top level, you mean.” Simon didn’t want to agree, but they were sure to be killed…or reclaimed, in the next day or two. He shuddered. “We’ll start a fire down here for them to fight. We know how they fear fire now.”

“Hey, that could work!”

“I know, right?”

The trio continued to make plans, not budging from their sedated, sleeping positions. They were hoping the next guards would also do a fast check, like Kyle had done. If the Eagles had come into the tarp, they would have noticed the uneven breathing of nervous prisoners getting ready to attack.

**2**

Cynthia hadn’t crashed yet. After spending the day digging through the rubble, she was tired enough to sleep, but she didn’t want to. She’d come across a copy of her last newspaper edition before the earthquake. Containing the petition and her accusation against the descendants, it had reminded her of all of the things that had been wrong before her life had been spared. She didn’t understand why Angela hadn’t killed her. *I didn’t imagine my life being in danger. I’m not prone to irrational behavior and I don’t believe mountain sickness exists.*

She did believe in mental breakdowns, however. It was obvious that she’d had one, but that didn’t mean her reasons for it were unjustified.

Cynthia pulled the next notebook over, flipping pages in an attempt to identify who the author was. After she finished, she would give the books to their owners, most of them. She was hoping for leadership pages.

Cynthia ignored the smells and sounds outside the cubby. She had a lantern and a bottle of water. That was all she needed right now. Despite holing up on the bottom level, Cynthia wasn’t staying in this mountain. There was no way she could tolerate living here, but she also felt unsafe with the Islanders. That meant being alone, but she wasn’t certain that she would be up to that even if she wasn’t pregnant. All that left was for her to find a way to tolerate Safe Haven.

Adrian had once been a light in the darkness for Cynthia. She was hoping the leadership notebooks would prove that he and Angela did have the best interests of the camp at heart, that they were good and worthy to be followed. Cynthia wasn’t sold on that, but the camp had split into three factions. That meant no one was certain, not even the descendants who had no choice but to follow the alpha and their converts. That wasn’t enough for Cynthia.

Seeing the book in her hand was a light, flowery script, Cynthia set it aside. It appeared to be female handwriting, but not Angela’s. Their boss had a heavy hand that was sometimes hard to read–making it easy to believe she had been a doctor before the war.

Cynthia grabbed another notebook, noting the no-longer glossy eagle on the front. *That’s what I’m hunting.*

Outside the cubby, the sound of footsteps began to echo. The changing of the guard was quiet other than footsteps that crunched over fresh debris from the small tremor. The bottom level wasn’t being cleaned the way the top level was.

Sounds of a struggle snapped Cynthia’s attention from the notebooks. She glanced around in guilty fear, worried that one of the descendants knew she had Angela’s notebook.

“Stop!”

There was a loud grunt and then a dull thud, then quiet.

Cynthia stepped to the cubby entrance.

“Get her.”

Cynthia was grabbed by the arm and dragged into the middle of the bottom level. She saw three guards on the ground and three of the runaways standing over them.

The man holding Cynthia spun them toward the other two. “If you scream, you lose the baby.”

Cynthia recognized the bluff, but she didn’t want to fight and endanger her child.

“Get their guns.”

Simon and Dylan also took the Eagle kits from the bodies. She couldn’t tell if the men were dead or not.

Cynthia was dismayed to realize that the bodies on the ground were the new shift of guards. There wouldn’t be a check in for at least half an hour. Not wanting to, but not seeing another choice, Cynthia woke her son. *Mommy needs you to send a message.*

Sleepy waves of dangerous power filled the bottom level.

**3**

Kyle slid down the ladder, once again taking splinters. Jennifer was relaying the scene to him, but Kyle had known there was a problem because there were three guards on the bottom floor. There was supposed to be two. Allan hadn’t come up yet.

Kyle slid to a stop, hand going to his holster as he took in the situation. Oliver had an arm around Cynthia’s neck. His two henchmen were pointing their stolen weapons, and they had three men down. Weber, one of the Runaways Kyle had believed was still in the mess, stepped from the shadows of the waste corridor with a gun in his hand and a grin on his cracked lips. “Take us straight to the top and do it right now.”

Kyle gestured toward the guards on the ground. “Leave them alive and I won’t shout. You hurt anybody on the way and I’ll wake every descendant in here.”

“You’ll be shot before they reach us and so will she.” Oliver shoved Cynthia in front of him.

“I’m willing to die here. Are you?” Kyle was furious. He wasn’t bluffing.

Simon stepped away from the unconscious guards. “We don’t want to hurt anyone. We just want out.”

Oliver shoved Cynthia ahead of him. again “If anybody attacks us, she’ll die.”

The small group went up the ladder in silence. Kyle was connected to Jennifer, feeding her everything that was happening. He assumed she was relaying that information to Angela, but there were no incoming instructions. It didn’t take Kyle long to figure out he was supposed to do what he’d always done–defend the camp. *When we get to the top level, have Shawn, Morgan, and Ivan each grab a man.*

*Hang on with that. The boss said it’s covered.*

Kyle was relieved to hear it, but he stayed ready to help.

As they reached the mess level, Simon went to the entrance. “If you’re going with us, get out here now!”

He came back alone, scowling and muttering about being betrayed. He gestured toward Kyle. “Get up there and get the door open.”

Kyle hurried up the ladder and got out of sight.

“You shouldn’t have let him go.” Oliver pushed Cynthia toward the ladder. “You next.”

Cynthia also climbed quickly, but she didn’t try to get out of sight. Her son was telling her that someone was at the top of the ladder and wanted her to duck and roll as soon as she reached the floor. Cynthia was trying to figure out how to do that and cushion her stomach.

The ladder shook as all five of them climbed at the same time. Above, there were no sounds to alert anyone.

Cynthia reached the top and pulled herself up onto the floor. She dropped onto her knees and crawled toward the residence chamber where a line of bleary guards were standing.

“Grab her!” Oliver climbed quicker up the ladder.

Kenn hurried out of the shadows. Sliding on his ass to the ladder, he used his huge foot to kick it free of the new anchors that weren’t as strong as the first ones had been. He kicked again, using repeated blows until the ladder broke free.

“No!”

“Stop him!”

Kenn kicked once more and sent the ladder careening into open space with the four men on it.

Sounds of the ladder and bodies crashing down three levels of the cave brought everyone awake.

Kenn stared down, listening for the call. As the bad guys had cleared each level, sleeping guards had woken and taken up posts in tunnels and cavities to be a surprise. “We’ll need a body crew down there.”

Not needed, the extra sentries went back to their uncomfortable beds and uncomfortable dreams.

Kenn got to his feet and went to check on Cynthia.

Cynthia was huddled on the ground near Shawn’s feet. She peered up at Kenn in tired confusion. “Am I safe anywhere?”

Kenn gestured toward the reading chamber, where most of the adults were. “You should be okay in there.”

Cynthia understood it was a test of her loyalty, of her decision on remaining with Safe Haven, but until an official invite came from the boss, she couldn’t do that. “I’ll stay here.”

“You’re still better off up here than you were on the bottom level.” Kenn went to join Kyle, who was giving an update to the boss.

For one moment, the old Kenn burst out in a flash of jealousy that couldn’t endure the boss being surrounded by Kyle, Morgan, and the new men. He hated being on the outside in any way. “Four problems solved and it didn’t take any of your pets to do it.”

Everyone stared at Kenn in surprised disapproval.

*Jackass*. Angela slammed the door. Three hours was not enough sleep.

“I wish you wouldn’t push her that way.” Adrian came from the passage behind him, followed by Charlie. “She’s almost gotten to the point where she can forgive you for some of the mistakes, but not if you keep doing stupid shit like that.”

Adrian ignored Ken’s automatic protest and gestured to Kyle for the update. “Let’s go to the mess so she can sleep.”

Kyle had no problem with that. He was glad things had turned out as well as they had. It bothered him that he hadn’t been expecting issues. Before they came to this cursed mountain, prisoners wouldn’t have been able to fool him by faking sleep.

Adrian understood. He wanted to offer comfort or advice, but the only thing that would help any of them at this point was to get out of here. Every time they had to eliminate another traitor or threat, their own mortality flashed before their eyes and reminded them that if they made a mistake, they would be eliminated the same way.

Some days, that was easier to deal with than others. For Kyle, it was more difficult. The mobster was still upset with himself for not being able to prevent Jennifer from being used as a hostage, and for shooting her to save her. It was a choice that no one should have to make for someone that they loved, but Kyle had been forced to do it repeatedly since he joined Safe Haven. During Angela’s time at the rest stop, Kyle had absorbed all of her misery and then some. Despite being a hardened killer, he was also sensitive and needed someone to talk to. Adrian doubted the mobster would accept him in that position now, even in these limited circumstances, but he was determined to try anyway. Once Kyle settled down, and Neil accepted the fact that sometimes bad things happened to good people, the council would reconnect.

“Body removal.” Adrian gestured at Charlie.

Charlie was out of sight a few seconds later, eager to get that done. He didn’t like the chore, but he also didn’t mind it. Simon had been dangerous. It was good to know he was dead.

Adrian caught the thought and reminded himself that he needed to have that in-depth conversation with the boy. Angela had arrived in camp already understanding most of the big picture, so it had been easy for her to pick out the right choices and the wrong ones. Charlie didn’t have the wisdom of age to guide him.

Adrian went to the corner of the mess that had the laptop and switched on the computer. While it loaded, he monitored the people in here. The rest of the Runaways were huddled in the corner together. They’d been chased from their area by ants and then put under guard. All of them assumed they were going to be punished for Simon’s actions. Adrian didn’t believe any of them would choose to stay with Jimmy or go with Angela, but they hadn’t supported Simon when it mattered most. Nothing would happen to them as long as they didn’t try to repeat his behavior.

The computer finally loaded; Adrian typed in Jeremy’s old code. The screen flashed to a view that was haunting.

*So many!*

It was impossible to count how many bodies were out there. In some places, they were stacked three deep. In others, it was impossible to determine where the stack began and where it ended. Sprawled in every position imaginable, the dead consisted of every age and race. It was awful to think that Safe Haven’s survival had depended upon so many Americans dying. *Wasn’t there some other way we could have handled this?*

*No.*

Adrian winced at Angela’s curt response. It was obvious that Marc hadn’t gotten her back to sleep.

*The witch is watching things. I’ve been thinking a lot. If they were good, fate would have spared them to help with repopulation, don’t you think?*

Adrian shrugged, staring at the bodies of young and old alike. *I don’t know anymore.*

*Now is not the time for you to lose faith in the grand plan, Mr. Mitchel. Get to work or join the Runaways.*

Adrian grunted. *Yes, my queen.*

Angela broke the connection between them, like he’d known she would. It was hard for him to fight the need to comfort her, but while she was in Marc’s arms was the wrong time to try. Especially since Adrian could feel Marc’s demon patrolling, waiting for another interruption. The fury coming off Marc was impressive, but it paled in comparison to the witch now invading the mind of the reporter sleeping not far from their door. Adrian hoped Cynthia was okay now, but he didn’t stay with the witch or try to interfere. Instead, he replayed their last conversation before the earthquake.

*“You shouldn’t be down here.” Adrian sat up on his bedroll as Cynthia came around the bend in the drafty corridor. He looked for her guard and didn’t find one. “And you’re alone? Oh, wonderful.”*

*Cynthia ignored his sarcasm and nervousness. Despite being their grand poohbah, he didn’t know what she wanted. Asshole, she sniped mentally while flashing a bright smile. “I’d like to interview you for the Quest Chronicles. Got a minute?”*

*Adrian frowned as she took a seat on the boulder across from his bedroll. “Got permission?”*

*“Would I be here if I didn’t?”*

*Adrian sighed unhappily. “No. I guess not.” He yawned and stretched, aware of Cynthia’s cold gaze going over him like a shark scenting chum. There was no heat in her heart for him though, other than hatred.*

*“I am sorry.” He was.*

*“Did you even consider claiming me and your baby?” She already knew the answer.*

*“No.”*

*Cynthia took out her notebook and pen. “Neither did I, so you know.” She smirked at him. “I want Marc.”*

*“Who doesn’t?” Adrian sighed again, bitter. “He’s fucking perfect, right?”*

*Cynthia bobbed her head, eyes glittering like a snake. “Yes. He’s kind and trustworthy. Two things you can’t be.”*

*“Not in my job description.” Adrian’s voice was harsh. “He got the good guy role before I ever came into the picture.”*

*“Aww. Suffering from comparison, are we?” Cynthia taunted happily, eager to pay him back for the disappointments.*

*Adrian reached for his smokes, but didn’t pull on a shirt or jacket despite being out of the warmth of his blankets. He wasn’t cold right now. He was angry. How dare Angela put me through this! How dare she put Cynthia through it after the reporter saved her life!*

*“I felt the same way at first.”*

*Adrian understood the baby’s power was allowing Cynthia to read his thoughts. He frowned as he realized this wasn’t the first time. “Is that why Kip is gone?”*

*Cynthia blanched. “No! He died in the explosion at the den.”*

*“I don’t think so. I hear your guilt and I’m reading it in your body language. What did you do to Kip?”*

*“He died at the den!” Cynthia was haunted. “…after I told Angela he was bothering me.”*

*“Ah.” Adrian drew in a thick lungful of smoke and shot it across the fire toward her. “Confess your sins, Cynthia, and be allowed to return to her good graces.”*

*“I thought that’s why she sent me to you.” Cynthia’s red cheeks paled. “My hatred of Matt and my desire for her mate were bad, but when I told her about Kip, I wanted him gone. She knew that’s why I’d come to her, even after I’d already handled him.”*

*Adrian resisted the urge to search in her memories to discover what else she’d done.*

*“I’ve become corrupt.” Cynthia regarded him with confused anger. “How?”*

*“Your secret plan to steal Marc?”*

*Cynthia flinched from the perfect shot. “She can’t know that!”*

*Adrian laughed.*

*Cynthia began to shake. “I’m not coming out of this mountain alive.”*

*Adrian tried hard to find compassion or a bond to the powerful child studying him, but all he found was pity. “I’m sorry, Cyn. You crossed a line with her. She’s the one who has to forgive you for that error in judgement.”*

*“She won’t.”*

*“Because you aren’t sorry?” Adrian asked.*

*Cynthia stood up, interview forgotten. She stared down at him with a layer of insanity showing. “Why can’t you be like him?”*

*Adrian glared, full of resentment again. “Because this world requires more than a boy scout and you know it!” He jerked a hand toward the tunnel. “Maybe Marc can save you since I’m the piece of shit.”*

*Cynthia wanted to deny that was what she had come for, but she couldn’t. Deep down, she had hoped Adrian would claim her.*

*Adrian forced himself to stay put, not letting her misery or fear through. “Confess your sins to her and beg forgiveness. Then stay away from her mate.”*

*“What if I’m not sorry and I’m not going to stay away?” Cynthia’s voice was a whisper.*

*Adrian grunted. “Then get your affairs in order.”*

*“No faith at all that he’d be happier with me?”*

*Adrian laughed again.*

*This time, it was harsh enough to echo and send Cynthia fleeing from his painful mockery. Everyone else believed she had a touch of mountain sickness. Angela, and now Adrian, had figured out that it was madness. They both assumed she had cracked while being in here. It had happened to a couple of other folks who were being drugged each morning to help them control their reactions, but the reporter had started to get this way after shooting Cesar. Marc’s gratitude had flipped her over the edge. Much like Kenn and Conner, she had an obsession.*

*“I’ve been fighting it.” She climbed the ladder to the next level, muttering. “Maybe I shouldn’t worry about that anymore.”*

*Confess…*

*Cynthia shoved that out. She could do it, but she wouldn’t mean it and Angela would see right through that.*

*“Marc will help me.” She ignored the curious, worried glances of those she passed. “One boy scout can be enough to save the world if the rest of you evil creatures are gone.”*

Bang! Bang!

Sounds of work echoed, snapping Adrian back into reality. It told him that Kenn and Charlie had handled the bodies and were replacing the ladder that had broken into several pieces. The sound of hammering came again, along with citizens coming from every level to complain about the noise. *So much for a peaceful night.*

**4**

Kenn observed the boy on the level above him. Charlie was anchoring the ladder while Kenn held it steady. As their lights flashed and threw shadows, Kenn had caught a glimpse of a bruise on the teenager’s neck. At least, he assumed it was a bruise, because the boy wasn’t supposed to be having contact with Tracy yet. Kenn did a fast count and realized if it had been long enough for Angela to be sexually active again, then it had been long enough for Tracy.

Kenn studied the boy, trying to spot anything that would prove or disprove his new theory. When he couldn’t, Kenn jotted a mental note to ask the next time they were alone.

“Here. This is the last nail.” Greg handed it to Kenn and helped hold the ladder while the Marine pounded it into the connector piece he’d had to rig. They hadn’t finished sorting all the debris piles. Kenn knew there were plenty of nails to be found there once they did. Right now, these basic repairs would hold them until morning when they had more hands.

Around Kenn and Greg, the Mountaineers were observing in fear and suspicion. They’d woken to falling bodies. Most of them didn’t know what had happened.

Jimmy did. Kenn had told him while also warning the doctor about his thief and the possible traitors Kyle hadn’t had time to handle before Simon attacked. Those loose ends needed to be cleaned up, but it would have to be on the next shift. Everyone on the bottom floor was too alert. The top levels were settling down, however. Kenn hoped Angela would forget his thoughtless comment. He’d been full of adrenaline and eager to brag about his quick fix for what could have been a nasty situation. He hadn’t thought about his words before running his mouth.

“She’s got other things on her mind than you.” Charlie came down the ladder. “And it’s not a bruise.”

Kenn gawked.

Charlie snickered, not caring if he was about to be ratted out or scolded. Making love to Tracy had been everything he’d hoped for and then beyond.

“Did you wrap it?”

Charlie blushed. “We handled that.”

Kenn caught a hot flash and brought down his mental barrier. “Keep that shit to yourself or you’ll be caught before lunch.”

Charlie laughed. “It was worth anything mom does to me for breaking the rules.”

“Even being separated?”

Charlie snorted. “She won’t do that. She’ll be happy that Tracy is better.”

“So rules don’t matter now?”

“Rules always matter.” Charlie became serious. “She’ll be my wife before we hit the island. I proposed to her. She said yes.”

Kenn was startled into a laugh. “Wow. You’re fast.”

“I know what I want.”

“I’ve always assumed you already knew.”

“I do. Let me rephrase that. Now, I *have* what I want.”

Kenn connected the pieces without his gift. “A love like your mom and dad.”

Charlie nodded. “We’ve both got a lot to learn and we’ll have issues like anyone else, but it won’t be like what you’ve all gone through.”

“What makes you two so different?”

“We’re learning from your mistakes.”

Kenn couldn’t find fault with that. “Well, remember a couple of things, okay?”

“Like what?” Charlie didn’t mean to be arrogant about it, but Tracy’s sounds were still ringing in his mind. She’d been pleased.

“Your honor has to come first, even before her. Don’t lose her respect. And always try as hard to get her off, every time, as you did tonight.”

Charlie’s cheek went scarlet, but his shoulders straightened into a young man’s confident stance. “I will.”

Kenn clapped the boy on the shoulder, proud of him. “Cool. Now shut up about it or you’re gonna stress people even more than they already are. Tracy doesn’t need it and neither do you.”

Charlie zipped his lip and resumed work on anchoring the bottom of the ladder while Kenn held it in place, but in his mind, Kenn’s advice took the place of Tracy’s throaty moans. *Honor, respect, and full effort every time. I can do that.*

# Chapter Twenty-Four

**The Onion Man**

October 22nd

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**S**hawn woke up because of the whispers. Eagles weren’t quiet unless they needed to be. Leadership and spies whispered, and leadership was sleeping right now.

He lifted his head to peer into the dim room where all of the kids and older citizens had been put, along with two guards. Those two men were in the deep corners, away from the whispers by the door, but the words came through clear enough for Shawn to understand.

“We can go anywhere you want. Ever been to Disneyland?”

“No. It’s cold out there.”

“I have coats stashed under some debris. We’ll get them on the way.”

“The guards will be mad at me.”

“We’ll be gone, sweetheart. They can’t yell at you if you aren’t here, right?”

“I guess so.”

Shawn hoped this wasn’t what it sounded like.

“We can leave right now, if you’ll search for us. You want to be out of here, don’t you?”

“Everyone does.”

“I’ll take you right now. Just tell me if we can get out.”

“I can’t do that. The alpha said no magic.”

“She’s asleep. She won’t know.”

“She’s the alpha. She knows everything.”

“Kid, I have to get out of here and you’re taking me. Get up!”

Shawn felt the fear. He wished he could tell Missy to come on out here, that he would handle it, but he wasn’t a descendant. He didn’t know how to talk to them that way.

*We’re connected.* Missy’s scared voice whispered in his head, making him jump. *We’re coming out now.*

Shawn stood up, careful not to wake the reporter or make any noise that would alert Bethany to his presence. He waited for their shadows to come through, pressed against the wall by the door.

Missy led the way, staying in front of the tall, thin woman like Shawn was telling her to do. She pointed toward Cynthia, who was opposite Shawn’s position now. “Shhh...”

Bethany nodded, walking around the reporter. She didn’t glanced in the other direction.

Shawn’s heart clenched as he grabbed the woman and dragged her backward into the half cleared training room.

Missy was experiencing Shawn’s dislike of the chore. She heard a dull thud and glanced down at the reporter who was staring around in wary confusion. “Go back to sleep.”

Exhausted and scared, Cynthia did what the child told her.

Shawn came alone, gesturing to a guard in the hall to give his explanation.

Missy held still as the sentry came to her for a verification. She wasn’t afraid of the Eagles. They were like Shawn, but she didn’t want the soldiers guarding the alpha’s door. They were hard to read.

Shawn put an arm around Missy, not worried over comforting her now. Angela had told him he had a mate in this camp when he was ready for it, but he’d chosen more training with Adrian in place of that–mostly because he had a child to care for now. He was beginning to look on Missy as a daughter, something he’d never thought to have. Parenthood had never crossed his mind as an Eagle. There was too much other work.

The boss’s door opened, revealing Angela’s tired face. “I’m sorry. We weren’t positive that Bethany was in with Howard. I couldn’t get into their minds and I didn’t want to ruin her life here if she was innocent.”

Shawn wasn’t mad at her. “We’ve had so many betrayals that I regard everyone as an enemy. They have to earn my friendship.”

Angela nodded. “Same here. It’ll keep us alive.”

Shawn glared at Ivan for a moment, arm around Missy, then he took the girl toward the repaired ladder. “Let’s hit the bathroom and then get you something to read, okay?”

Missy had grown to enjoy story time and bobbed her head eagerly. Shawn had saved her. He was her hero.

**2**

Adrian patrolled the top floor with light steps an hour later. He was trying not to wake anyone, but this level was full of descendants, making that hard to do. Adrian listened to the sounds of heavy wind beating against the top of the mountain. He wouldn’t have been able to hear it if the heat and other utilities had still been active. It was a comforting noise, but at the same time, it called to him. It said that air would be better than a woman’s touch after being in these passages for months. Sweet freedom was just one door away.

Adrian sighed, going to check on the kids. As he neared them, he caught flashes of dreams and nightmares. Some of them were ugly.

Adrian spent a minute blasting the kids with calm, happy thoughts that he hoped would replace the nightmares. The months since the war hadn’t been easy on them.

“He comes.”

Adrian spun around to find Leeann sitting up. Her eyes were shut and her face had the expression of sleepwalkers, but her voice was as alert as Adrian was right now.

“They’re here.”

Around Leeann, other kids began to stir and mutter.

“He’s here.”

“They’re here.”

“The Onion man.”

Adrian shivered. More kids were sitting up to repeat the words.

“He’s coming for us.”

“The Onion man wants us.”

Adrian flipped on the light, hoping it would wake the kids before they got louder, but more of the children jerked upward, mumbling.

“What’s going on in here?”

Adrian didn’t respond to Kyle, still trapped with the kids in their mass vision. He’d never witnessed this anywhere except in the government labs.

“He’s here.” Leeann peered at Adrian with blank eyes, voice eerie. “He wants *you* most.”

“We’re ready for him. It’s okay.” Adrian went over to hug Leeann, who was shaking. “We won’t let them get you.”

Leeann wrapped her arms around the only adult male she felt like she could trust now, other than Billy. “He knows I’m here. He wants me to open the door.”

Adrian patted the girl, aware of the other kids lying down as if nothing had happened. “Let’s talk to the boss, okay? You’ll feel better after that.”

“She scares me.”

Adrian paused. “Angie? Why? She would never hurt a kid.”

“She let Matt die.”

“Matt was bad.”

“Matt was confused.” Leeann sniffled. “I liked Matt. He was my friend.”

“I’m sorry. So is Angie, but it had to happen or Matt would have hurt someone. You know what he was planning?”

Leeann nodded. “I told him the bullies would stop if he would tell on them, but he wouldn’t listen. He wanted revenge.”

Adrian took the little girl by Kyle, not responding to the mobster’s hand code questions. “It’s hard for you because you’re not like the other kids. You’ll be an alpha someday. That means you have to try harder than the other kids to understand what’s happening around you.”

“I’m trying, but I miss my friends.”

They had lost a dozen children in the earthquake and mess fire. Adrian sighed. “Me too. Jeremy was a good man.”

Leeann felt his pain and hugged him again. “I’m sorry he died.”

“Me too, sweetheart.” Adrian saw the door was already open and nudged the little girl into Angela’s cubicle. “Tell her what happened and then talk to her about your fear, okay?”

“She won’t get mad?”

“Not at you, I promise.”

Leeann ducked into the shadowy room.

Adrian listened for a minute, glad when Angela comforted the girl. He could also sense her anger at the situation and her misery at the kids being afraid of her, but that was also a part of the job. If the citizens didn’t fear her a little, she wouldn’t be able to lead them. Even a man in this job would have problems right now.

Adrian spun around to find Kenn staring at him with a blank expression that sent chills down his spine. There was no way Kenn was faking it.

“He’s here. The Onion man is here.”

Adrian put a hand on Kenn’s shoulder, remembering the first time he’d gone through it. Visions rarely happened to him anymore, but in the beginning, he’d been freaked out by it.

“He has thousands of men. They’re in trucks and tanks. The Onion man has no mercy.”

“What are his orders?”

“He has no orders.”

“What does he want?”

“Death.”

Adrian swallowed a shiver. “We’ll handle it. Come back to us, Marine.”

Kenn slowly became aware of standing in the hall by the weapons chamber. He peered at Adrian in confusion. “How did I get up here?”

“Tell me what you saw.”

Kenn realized he’d had a vision and grinned. “I didn’t know that would happen.”

Adrian snorted. “Yeah, it’s fun now.” He gestured toward the mess, where their relief was getting coffee and preparing to take over. “Let’s check the cameras before the camp gets in here.”

Kenn followed, mind replaying the UN convoy rolling in. “We’re not ready for what’s coming.”

“Are we ever?”

“No, and yet, we end up winning. It’s almost like we’re being protected or something.”

Forced into a laugh, Adrian ignored the surprise from those in the mess, but his mirth vanished as soon as the laptop screen loaded. It was impossible to laugh when faced with so much death. Nothing was alive on the screen except for blurry hordes of flies, but the mood was one of imminent danger. The UN had come.

“This is Kendle.” Radios crackled across the drafty cave. “We’re home. Come in, Safe Haven.”

Adrian turned, feeling Angela behind him. He took in her grim face and the worried alertness of the wolfman by her side.

“We’re out of time.” Angela’s voice was haunted. “The next mass slaughter is about to begin. Dig the tunnel.”

**3**

“Oh, my God!”

Kendle and her team stood on the snowy ledge, using binoculars to view the mountain. They hadn’t been able to see anything in the darkness when they’d arrived. Forced to wait for dawn, the view was uglier than they’d imagined. The vultures circled and cried, fighting for scraps even though the field of bodies stretched for miles across the valley.

“Some of them are Mexican.” Tommy pointed through the late afternoon sunlight. “There are flags and vehicles.”

“Anything moving out there?” Ben was following their training to the letter. He was above Tommy in skills like this, so he was guiding him through the process. When it came to anything weapon related, those positions were reversed.

“Flies.” Tents flapped in the wind, sounding hollow, empty in the winter wind, and under that, was a low hum of insects. Kendle controlled her guts. Even this far up, the smell was enough to choke her. Hundreds of bodies in various stages of decomposition littered the valley at the bottom of the mountain.

“What about corridors and roads?” Ben didn’t want to study it anymore. He’d been on duty when the sun rose. He’d stared at it for an hour before waking the others.

“They blew the tunnels or had cave-ins…” Tommy lifted the binoculars. “All the roads are gone!”

“Avalanche, I’d guess.” Ben sighed. “We have no clear route up or in?”

“There’s quake damage on the ground.” Tommy examined and relayed details. “A lot of it. Most of the tents are down and there are piles of rocks at the base… Wow. There are rocks everywhere. What do you suppose they planned to do with those?”

“There are also drifts in places between the destroyed tents.” Ben continued teaching even though he didn’t want to discuss it any more than he wanted to walk through it. “The sun melted some of it. They didn’t gather the rocks. The rocks were…deposited.”

“Holy shit!” Ramer was scowling. “That must have been some avalanche to deposit so much rock.”

“We felt the tremor the night before we left the refinery.” Ben put his gloves in his pocket. “It hit harder here.”

Tommy handed the binoculars to Kendle, unable to endure more of the scene. “I vote we do some testing first.”

“What makes you say that?” She studied the place where the entrance was supposed to be. The map Angela had provided was specific about where to be when they returned.

“The birds haven’t gotten to all the bodies.” Tommy’s mutter hid his need to gag. “Check out the skin.”

It took Kendle several minutes to locate a body that hadn’t been pecked or chewed on. When she did, stomach boiling, she noted the sores on the woman’s hands and arms. “That’s what we had on the boat! That’s the sickness I had!”

“We have a counter in our gear.” Ryan remembered hoping they didn’t have to use it while on this run. He’d never thought it was for their return to Safe Haven.

Tommy gestured. “Let’s get back inside until we know what the levels are out here.”

The team followed him into the cave, trying not to dwell on what this felt like, but the sense of being in a graveyard was too obvious to miss.

**4**

“What happens if we get there and Safe Haven is gone? Chances are good they didn’t survive the earthquake. We haven’t heard a single response out of them.”

Dirce glanced up with an expression of arrogant contempt, pinning Jarvis in place. “Just because I haven’t recorded descendant vibrations, doesn’t mean I haven’t picked any up. You would do well to follow orders and leave the thinking to those who know how to do it.”

Jarvis’s lips disappeared into his face. He spun around and tossed himself into the copilot’s chair.

Satisfied he’d put the man into his place, Dirce decided it would be a good idea to let the man in a little. “Descendants are able to open private lines. It takes a lot of energy and a lot of practice, but there are confirmed instances of the Safe Haven group being able to communicate without being registered. The only way to track the calls is when they connect through someone’s dreams. That’s how I knew where the Black Widow was going. That’s how I know someone in that mountain survived.”

Jarvis pulled up the map of the mountain they were using, trying to ignore his bodily needs. Dirce had pushed them hard to get here, refusing to stop for things like meals and bathroom breaks. As a result, everyone was uncomfortable and grumpy. However, the explanation calmed Jarvis a bit. It had angered him that Dirce had been sleeping so much with such a large battle ahead of them, but he understood the descendant had been doing recon. It was often hard to tell what Dirce was doing until it was done. “Why are you here? What’s your motivation for being thousands of miles away from home, risking your life for people who are probably dead?”

Surprised at the questions, Dirce turned away from the monitors to regard his newest second-in-command. “The human race is supposed to conquer. Where else should I be?”

Jarvis wasn’t certain how to respond to that, so he went with honesty. “Assholes like you have destroyed the world.”

Instead of being angry, Dirce chuckled. “You have no idea.”

Jarvis hated sitting still. Their convoy was rolling into position now, but with two thousand troops in position, it would be another day and a half before they were ready to begin the battle.

Jarvis had a sudden sense that he shouldn’t be here for the battle. *Maybe I won’t be.*

Dirce caught the thought, but he wasn’t worried about being betrayed. Jarvis was the type to find something else to do during the main battle that would ensure his own survival. Dirce respected that.

**5**

“High.” Tommy held up the counter so everyone could view the reading. “But not enough to kill them all like that unless they’ve been here a long time.”

“Does that mean the levels are dropping?” Kendle was stirring a pot of oatmeal that no one had the stomach to eat. This cave was short and wide, with stone ledges that appeared to have been cut into shelves, but there hadn’t been signs of inhabitants. Kendle had approved it after a sweep. They’d parked a mile away and hiked in through the darkness, something she never wanted to do again.

“Maybe.” Ben marked the numbers in his notebook. “I vote we wait until it’s at a safe level before we try to locate a way in.”

“Are we going to?” Ramer’s expression was grim.

“What do you mean?” Scott clenched a fist, glaring. “’Cause if you mean we don’t go in at all and bugout instead, I’ll punch you in your mouth!”

Ramer didn’t answer, but all of them felt his reluctance. No one wanted to spend a week digging into a rotting tomb.

Tommy lifted a brow at Kendle.

She sighed. “We’ll wait. How long are we set for?”

“A week.” Ryan paused. “More if we ration.”

“We’ll scavenge as soon as the levels are down.”

No one answered Tommy’s comment, all thinking of what that would be like. The bodies would have food and gear they could collect while trying not to get sick from any of the various health concerns in that valley.

Kendle glanced around, sensing their need, their grim outlook for the future. *What would Angela do here?* Kendle dug through her memories.

*Well, she’s always been a bitch to me when I was at my lowest and I’m still alive.* Kendle stood up. “You’re Eagles. Act like it.”

Kendle marched away before any of them could pick out her doubts about their future. They would discover it together over the few next days or weeks. Until then, she would try to have faith that such a cruel leader was strong enough to keep her camp alive even under these impossible conditions. *Don’t let me down, Angie.* *I’m almost out of tricks to keep my team alive.*

# Chapter Twenty-Five

**Billy’s Run**

A close up of a toy

Description automatically generated

**1**

**B**illy was still on the move. Other than brief stops for sleep or to warm up, he hadn’t paused in his westward trek. He was out of food and water, but his training was keeping him alive. He didn’t remember learning the lessons that kept popping up in his mind, but he didn’t hesitate to use them. It was a relief to have skills to rely on, but he would have tried anyway. The need to be in the west had strengthened since he’d escaped the cave and the odd residents trying to survive there.

In the west, the sky was an ugly shade of green that warned of bad weather coming. Billy wasn’t worried. He was just glad to be out of the mountain and alone. Before the war, he’d been surrounded by people. After the war, he assumed it was the same since Safe Haven had been so large, but he liked being by himself. *I know I can trust me. No one else has that honor.*

*I will.*

Billy nodded in recognition of that. *Yes, I’ll trust you with my life and beyond, but don’t disappoint me or I’ll kill you.*

*Remember those words.*

Billy shuddered.

He was near the town of Anniston, skirting around it as he had every other sign of civilization. It didn’t matter that the buildings were windowless or that the only thing moving on the streets was garbage. What he was hunting for wouldn’t be found in a concrete jungle–at least not one above ground. The town was looted and half burned to the ground. It held no signs of life and that was a relief, but he wasn’t going in. The supplies and gear he needed wouldn’t be in there. The town wasn’t large enough to have a military supply depo or a hidden weapons cache.

Behind Billy, storm clouds brewed. He had holed-up in a shed overnight while the rain had drenched everything. Back on the road as soon as it stopped, his boots and jeans were stiff with dried mud and tiny bug carcasses. The insect swarms as he cleared the body field around the mountain had been impossible to avoid.

Billy scratched his neck absently. He would have to venture into a city soon to find more gear. Though he wasn’t sure how he knew it, the specific items he was searching for wouldn’t be found in the country. He also knew he was more than capable of driving, but the dreams he was having were too random and distracting for him to risk losing control while at the wheel. It was better that he was on foot. When the visions came, he could kneel down behind brush or debris and wait for them to pass.

Billy shivered at a strong gust of wind, but not from the temperature. It reminded him of his visions. The apocalyptic scenes in his dreams were real. That was where he was going.

The sun was high in the sky above the clouds of grit as Billy passed the town and reached the open countryside. According to the map he had found in his pocket with the card from the little girl, he would be in a rural area for the next week. Billy wanted that time to collect his thoughts and finish making plans for the journey. Despite his injury, he had many of his memories back now, but all of it was from before the war.

He knew who he was now and who he had been, but he had no idea where he had been for the last ten months or what he’d been doing. He had skills and instincts that hadn’t existed before the war and he was hearing voices. Half of his mind was telling him it was from his injury. When he healed, it would go away. The other half of him wondered if he was like the folks in the mountain. That thought didn’t scare him as much now that he was out of that tomb.

Thirsty, Billy detected the sound of water. He went that way, digging into his kit. He didn’t know if he had packed it before his injury or if the little girl who had provided the card and map had also given him the items in the waterproof pouch, but he was happy to have most of it. Billy took the Life Straw out and knelt down next to the slow-moving creek. He didn’t pick out anything that implied the water was dirty or infected, but the Life Straw was supposed to filter 99% of it anyway. He began sucking the cold water in, letting his mind wander.

Almost as soon as he began drinking, visions began hitting, slapping at his reality until he was standing in the west with his matching Colts in hand. Using them to protect a woman, it was amazing to watch himself in action. His guns fired in rapid succession, never missing a target.

Billy snapped out of the vision, aware that the Life Straw had fallen from his mouth. He spotted it bobbing down the water and splashed in after it. He only had the one.

Billy stored it in his pocket, pants soaked to the knees. The wind wasn’t as bad as the day he had escaped the mountain. Every hour that he had traveled westward had brought better temperatures, but it was still too cold to be in wet clothes. Billy studied the surroundings and found a small farming shack. After circling the building twice and peering into the windows, he was convinced it hadn’t been used in a long time.

The wind whipped around him, creating small snow tornadoes that slammed into his legs and broke apart. Billy shivered.

He pried the creaking door open, wiping cobwebs away as he stepped in. Once the hut was shut and the draft stopped, he felt better.

Using the items in the kit, it only took a minute to get a small fire going, and get his boots and socks drying by it. There had also been jeans and a shirt in the bag, along with a thin blanket. Billy wrapped up in the blanket, saving the clothes for morning. It was late afternoon right now, but by the time his clothes dried, it would be dark and that was a bad time to be roaming the wastelands. He had learned that the hard way right after leaving the mountain. He’d woken to the sound of people around the building where he had curled up, half frozen. It had forced him to spend the entire day in the attic of the small building, hoping he wasn’t found. When the refugees had settled down for the night, he’d been able to slip away, but it had taught him a huge lesson.

As he sat there, thirsty and hungry, but enjoying the warmth and the freedom, Billy again let his mind wander. It took him to the woman who haunted his dreams. Tall and slender, with long braids and a hawk-like profile, she beckoned to him relentlessly.

*I’m in the west. Where are you?*

Billy snapped awake. He hadn’t realized he’d fallen asleep, but it was obvious that he had been out for a while. The fire was down to fading coals.

*Snap!*

Billy heard the sound of footsteps outside, but it was too late to run. He lifted one of the Colts from his hip, bracing to do whatever he had to in order to survive.

“We’re coming in. Don’t shoot.”

The door opened slowly, revealing two men in dark clothes.

Kevin hurried into the hut, not worried about the gun pointing at him so much as the expressionless way the man was regarding them. “It’s Billy!”

Jeff shut the door, not sure how he felt about that news. He nodded at Billy, also spotting the lack of recognition and the defensive position. “How’s it going?”

Billy struggled to pull up any memory of the two men staring at him in recognition and surprise. They had beards and dangerous eyes that scanned him the same way he was scanning them. He felt a brief connection, but it couldn’t compare to his visions. “Do I know you?”

Jeff studied Billy’s mind and was dismayed to locate no memories of Safe Haven before the earthquake. He was relieved however to find all kinds of memories of Safe Haven after. “They survived. He was there.”

Before Kevin could respond, Billy’s grip tightened on the Colt. “You’re like them. You should leave!”

Jeff set down the bags he had carried in so his hands were free. Next to him, Kevin did the same.

“Get out of here!”

Billy’s fear reached both men. Kevin looked at Jeff. “Was he hurt or something?”

“He doesn’t have any memories of before. It’s like he wasn’t even there.” Jeff noted Billy’s shaking hand and dazed expression. “He’s having a vision. He may not mean to fire, but he might.”

For one second, Billy recognized Jeff’s voice. He lowered the weapon and released the trigger as the mysterious woman flashed in front of him again.

*Never fire without a reason.*

*I won’t.*

*There’s a time for conversation and there’s a time for shooting. You have to know which is which.*

*I’ll work on it.*

*See that you do.*

Billy stayed with the woman, absorbing her lessons as if they were water and he was dying of thirst.

Kevin and Jeff observed, both confused, but Kevin more so than Jeff. Jeff almost understood what was happening. He was missing a small piece of the puzzle, but even that was taking shape as they listened to Billy talk to himself.

*“No, but I don’t trust any of them.”*

Kevin and Jeff sat down where they were and began making their camp, staying between Billy and the exit so he couldn’t disappear before they were able to grill him about Safe Haven. It was obvious that he had left, but not why.

*“No, they were scared.”*

Jeff pushed into Billy’s thoughts. Not used to using his gift in this way, it was a struggle to locate the correct door out of the hundreds that appeared in his mind to connect them. He followed the brightest light, assuming it was live. As he opened the connection, he was sucked into the vision.

The woman in front of Jeff resembled Adrian and Angela so much that he flinched, scowling.

The woman regarded him without a change in expression, but her disapproval was clear.

Ashamed, but not sure why, Jeff examined the surroundings in the vision. In front of the woman was an ocean shore guarded by monsters that he refused to linger on because he didn’t want to have to admit things like that could exist. He was already having trouble adjusting to magic. Around the woman were six men dressed as Eagles. Jeff recognized two of them. In the vision, Billy was on the woman’s left. One of the soldiers from the government fight, David, was on her right.

*Be gone now.*

Jeff was shoved out of the connection. He winced as the door slammed, breaking the line. “He believes he has a job in the west. I didn’t see the past. We’ll have to hope he can tell us what happened.”

Billy lifted his chin, wiping away drool. “Ask your questions and go.”

Kevin scowled. “That’s no way to treat a teammate.”

Billy stared at Kevin. “I don’t know what I was before. I only know what I am now and I’m *not* your teammate.”

Jeff motioned Kevin to stop before the man could argue. “We want to know what happened in Safe Haven. We’re on our way there to help if we can.”

Billy’s lips tightened; his face became hostile. “I was trapped in the mountain with the freaks. They wouldn’t let me out.”

Jeff and Kevin both frowned.

“Why do you call them freaks?”

“Is everyone okay in there?”

Billy looked at Jeff. “None of them are okay. Everyone in there was sick or hurt or a freak. I had to get out. I had to do it.”

“What?” Kevin was trying not to get angry but it was hard.

“I forced them to let me go.”

Jeff’s hand slid toward his gun. “Did you hurt anyone?”

“No, I didn’t have to.”

“But you would have?”

Billy nodded, tone dropping into danger. “I’ll kill both of you if you try to stop me from leaving here. She told me not to, but I will.”

Jeff held up a hand, sending a wave of calm through the hut. “We just wanted to get out of the cold. The freezing rain started again. It’s not safe to drive through. You can leave whenever you want.”

Billy calmed down, yawning. “Ask your questions and be gone.”

“Who survived in the mountain?” Jeff led the conversation, not trusting Kevin to handle it correctly.

“I don’t remember any of them enough to tell you most of their names.” Billy concentrated, trying to remember. “Angela, Marc, Leeann.”

Jeff and Kevin exchanged glances, but neither of them mentioned the little girl. They didn’t know if Billy remembered that he and Leanne were connected.

“What do they need?”

Billy shrugged. “They were worried about the refugees waiting for them to come out. They said something about an army too, but I didn’t stay for that conversation.”

“There’s a woman named Cynthia. Did you see her?”

Billy shrugged at Kevin in dull comprehension. “I’m sorry. I don’t have information about your woman.”

Kevin didn’t argue with the term. “What about the other Eagles?”

Billy made a face. “I don’t know who they are.”

Jeff again motioned Kevin to stop. Billy’s memories were limited to being in Safe Haven after the earthquake. “Are they using radios?”

“They’re on radio silence. They said someone was listening.”

Jeff believed that was all the information Billy could give him. He picked up his bag and took a spot away from the exit. It was his way of saying Billy was free to go.

Billy nodded in recognition. “Thank you. I am sorry. I wish I could remember.”

Kevin joined Jeff on the other side of the small hut, aware of how Billy was studying them without holstering. “You can put that away now.”

Billy peered down at the gun as if he hadn’t known it was in his hand. He slid it underneath his leg with a smooth movement that implied more skill than they knew the driver to have. Clearly, Billy had changed.

Kevin concentrated, also not used to communicating this way. *Are we safe to sleep around him?*

Jeff was trying to connect to Billy’s mind again, glad for the gift. Kevin was a rookie as far as he was concerned, prone to rash actions and wrong words. It helped to be able to tell him to shut up without anyone overhearing. *Shut up.*

Kevin did, wishing he hadn’t left Safe Haven at all.

Billy stared at the small fire, appearing to forget he had company. After a couple of minutes, his light snores filled the shack.

Jeff and Kevin lay down, exhausted from the driving they had been doing to get here. They had dropped Sally off two days ago.

The fire burned down quickly, leaving the hut dark enough to avoid attention from random refugees who were still coming into the area. Everyone was searching for Safe Haven, even in their dreams. The trio in the hut slept soundly, not afraid. If they were found, they would kill the intruders or die trying. It was how they’d been trained.

**2**

“Jeff! Jeff, wake up, man. He’s gone.”

Jeff came to with a grunt, not surprised. Before he had fallen asleep, he’d put himself in Billy’s shoes to figure out what the man would do. Since it didn’t appear that he was crazy enough to kill them or rob them, the next logical thing had been that he would be gone before they woke. “Good luck to him.”

Jeff studied Kevin, not sure why the man had chosen to stay out here with him. Kevin belonged in Safe Haven where he could get the clean shirt and shower he was always whining about. Jeff didn’t care about appearances. They’d left that strict society. Their rules no longer applied.

“He’s hurt. Shouldn’t we bring him back?”

Jeff lifted a brow. “One or the other. You pick it.”

It was a reminder that coming here had been Kevin’s idea. Jeff hadn’t argued, but he never would have brought it up if Kevin hadn’t.

“Fine, the mountain.”

Jeff felt a wave of urgency at those words. He wasn’t anxious to talk to anyone from Safe Haven, but at the same time, he was.

The radio on Kevin’s belt crackled. “This is Kendle. We are home. Come in, Safe Haven.”

Kevin was struck with the need to hurry. “How fast can we get there?”

Jeff did a fast count, estimating and adjusting. “Two days on our current schedule. A little over one if we drive straight through, alternating.” Jeff felt Kevin’s need. “You pick it.”

“Straight through.”

“You get to drive first.”

Kevin hurried to prepare a fast breakfast, happy enough with the call. The weeks out here in the wilderness had been rough on him. Unlike Jeff, Kevin missed everyone in that mountain, including Cynthia.

Jeff thought about the limited information that they had gleaned from Billy and then his own uneasy gut. “We need to make a stop on the way.”

“For what? We’re set for two weeks.”

“I need ammo for my rifle. So do you.”

Kevin caught the tone. As he snapped it into place, he groaned. “We’re walking into a shit storm, aren’t we?”

“It’s Safe Haven. When isn’t there a shit storm?”

**3**

Billy was miles away from the hut as a sullen, angry dawn broke over the frozen land. He didn’t look back.

By noon, he had made it to Birmingham. With no way to detour thanks to damage from a war he didn’t remember taking part in, Billy had to pass through the town. Unfortunately, it wasn’t empty.

Billy eased into the city with one hand on a gun and eyes rotating, searching for danger. He could hear refugees somewhere in the city. The gunshots and screams kept him on high alert.

Billy tried to stay to the southern edge of the town, judging the refugee camp to be in the northern direction. It was impossible to tell for sure in these apocalyptic conditions. Everything echoed for miles on the stiff wind, no longer drowned out by traffic and appliances.

Instead of using the streets that were almost clear, Billy stuck to yards and alleys while hoping no one was observing him from the heartless buildings that surrounded him.

It took Billy three hours to cross the city, counting for time he was forced to duck out of the wind to get warm and for the two times he had to take cover from engines or others on foot. It appeared as though refugees were coming in from the west, making it more dangerous for Billy, who was trying to get to the same bridge these refugees were crossing to enter the city. As he neared the bridge, late afternoon sun mocking his attempts to stay warm, Billy realized he would have to be in the open to cross it. He didn’t see guards on the area or traps, but that didn’t mean there weren’t any.

Instinct told Billy to wait for nightfall before trying. He estimated that to be in four hours. There were dozens of buildings and homes around him, but Billy wanted a place where he could sleep without worrying. Not afraid of the dark or the underground, Billy pried up a rusting manhole and shined his light down the metal stairs. Seeing and hearing nothing, he disappeared into the darkness, not bothering to replace the cover. If he had trouble down here, an escape path would be open.

It took Billy a minute to figure out that this sewer system wasn’t for sewers. An abandoned railway car glared at him as he approached through the dusty darkness. Billy’s light bobbed off skeletons and rodents, as well as shell casings and blood sprays that had dried on the walls.

Billy stepped into the car, glad that the bodies had already rotted. He didn’t mind sleeping with bones.

The former Eagle curled up under one of the seats, using his kit for a pillow and was soon asleep.

Above him, the refugee camp continued to grow.

**4**

Billy woke to the sound of voices above him. The subway car was twenty feet below the ground, but in the dark of night, words carried. Billy listened without reacting.

“I swear it was a vampire.”

“Stop now. We’ve all heard the stories of monsters in the west and that’s all they are–stories.

“I saw it. I’m telling you that’s what it was.”

“You’re drunk.”

“What a horrible thing to say!”

Loud laughter split the quiet of the night.

“I don’t believe in vampires. I also don’t believe in witches, trolls, warlocks, or magic. All the stories we’ve heard are from religious fanatics or idiots who can’t accept that the world ended.”

Billy snickered a little. *Man, do you have a surprise coming*. Billy laid his head down and tried to rest some more. He was in a hurry, but getting caught would slow him down. All of his decisions from here had to be made with wisdom, and for whatever reason, he appeared to have been well trained. Billy didn’t know who he had been before, but it didn’t matter. He had a destiny in the west.

“Safe Haven is full of magic users. I’m telling you, I’ve been there.”

“You’re drunk too.”

“No, he’s right. We were refused by magic users.”

“You went to the mountain?”

“We came west after they denied us. There were too many refugee camps at the bottom of that hill. We would’ve lost everything.”

“Why didn’t they let you in?”

“They never said. That girl with the dark hair just told us no and then moved on to the next people like we didn’t even matter.”

“I think she knew we killed that old lady for her water.”

Below them, Billy’s eyes snapped open. Alexa had begun giving him orders.

“We didn’t mean to kill her. She wasn’t supposed to wake up.”

“I know that and you know that, but the Safe Haven bitches didn’t care.”

“I heard there’s an army headed toward them. They’re gonna pay for turning us away. We could’ve been there to help them fight.”

“And pad our stocks for the bugout.”

“Well, yeah!”

Harsh laughter rolled across the darkness.

This time, it brought Billy from under the seat. There was work for him right here.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

**Can You Fight?**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“W**e’re out of water. You have to open this tunnel!”

Angela was standing at the entrance to the corridor they’d been digging. The machines were off. “We only have to wait twelve hours. Get back to your area.”

The Mountaineers were angry and desperate. If not for the line of Eagles with her and the other descendants scattered around the corridor entrance, they would have attacked.

Angela motioned. “It’s not clear yet. We’re still digging.”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“The machines have to cool down or we’ll break them and have nothing.” Angela glowered. “I’ll count to three and then the Eagles will eliminate you*. Get back to your area*.”

The group of nine went, but they cast ugly glares and mutters toward the descendants holding them in the mountain.

Angela spotted lingering shadows from the Runaways and understood they had stirred up the Mountaineers so she would have someone else to blame.

Angela looked at Marc. *Where are we on the relocation?*

All of her group was sheltered in another passage. The rest of the cave citizens didn’t know the top floor was empty now except for the guards on the ladder who weren’t letting anyone up there.

*Almost complete. It’s cold, but they’re safer.*

Angela took up a post near the entrance, wishing she could be with her people. Samantha and Jennifer were there with Neil and Kyle, but Angela was worried. Some of her people were as upset as Jimmy’s.

*Twelve hours until he gets here?*

Angela sighed. *He’s been here for days. Twelve hours until he moves in.*

Adrian came through the corridor, frowning deeply. “Things are winding up on all the levels. Permission to stay with our camp until this is all over?”  
“Denied. I have work for you and everyone else.” Angela scanned to make sure they were alone. “I don’t want any magic use because Dirce might be able to read it. We’ll use Eagle codes and signals–something he won’t know.” Angela gestured at the line of guards. “Your shift is almost over. Sleep for six hours and then come right back to this post. When it all goes crazy, let them through. Do not fire on anyone, except in defense.”

The guards were relieved they weren’t being told to shoot citizens.

Angela knew and gave them a nod. “It’ll be over with quickly on this side of the cave. As soon as Dirce shoots, he’ll reseal this exit without knowing. When it’s done, get to the real tunnel as fast as you can.”

“How many hits will we take?” Marc wanted to be ready for the aftermath.

“Like usual, at least one and maybe two, but that’ll be it. As soon as he closes this corridor for us, we’ll trigger the avalanche.” Angela hoped no one was listening to them.

“What’s the catch?” Adrian knew there had to be one. She was blocking him from reading her thoughts right now.

“Some of us have to leave through this passage, so Dirce believes it’s the right one. If he doesn’t fire here, the remaining refugees outside this tunnel will overwhelm us while we’re fighting him. We have to make the Onion man believe this is the spot.”

“That shouldn’t be hard.” Marc was frowning. “You and I, along with Adrian and Tonya.”

“Why Tonya?” Kenn didn’t like it. He’d kept Tonya out of action since the earthquake.

“She’s Jennifer’s size and at dawn, in hoods, Dirce won’t be able to tell the difference.”

“And where will I be?” Kenn’s tone was dangerous.

“Right here to make sure she gets back safely.” Angela was impressed with Kenn’s caring for Tonya, but there wasn’t time to reward him for it right now.

Mollified, Kenn crossed his arms over his chest, mind racing with plans to do just that.

“So that’s it? He blocks this tunnel and then we trigger the avalanche?” Marc wanted to be clear on the plan.

“For the most part. I have the rifles and ammo with our camp. Eagles will all be on sniper detail, picking off the closest target at all times. All descendants will use their gifts on Dirce. Once he’s gone, the rest of the troops might run.”

“And if they don’t?”

Angela grunted. “We’ll kill them all. This isn’t our first war.”

**2**

“Today’s rad rate is lower than yesterday.”

Dirce grunted at Jarvis’s daily report on the toxic levels at the base of the mountain. “I said dawn. I meant it.”

Jarvis didn’t respond. The weather sucked and they were on rations that included four-hour sleep shifts in their vehicles. Dirce had them camped on the opposite side of the mountain from Safe Haven’s last known entrance, waiting for the levels to lower enough to be out in it. Dirce was positive he could handle things here that fast. All he had to do was threaten the little mice that had crawled into a hole across from that entrance. Dirce himself had trekked in on foot to observe. While he’d been gone, his thousands of troops had kept to their posts and followed orders.

Dirce’s wrath wasn’t worth the risk, but these troops also believed in what they were doing. All of their countries wanted to claim America. Once it was under UN control, a new fight for ownership might start, but right now, Dirce was in charge and the mission was set. He had returned at dawn and ordered an attack in 24-hours. Then he’d crashed until almost dusk. Up for a short time now, Dirce was foggy and grumpy.

“We have reports of another refuge camp less than three miles from here. They might hear a fight.”

“We’ll handle it if it happens. What about conditions?”

“Clear and cold, but it appears as though another reactor is melting down in the northeast. The winds might carry it this way. We’ll know tomorrow.”

“We have gear for it.”

Jarvis frowned. “Not if the levels rise.”

“Take a reading every hour.”

“I will. We received a message from the Secretaries-General after you went to sleep. He confirms your plans and wishes you good health during the battle.”

“Just as long as he doesn’t have to be out here.”

Jarvis sniggered. “Yes, he does like to stay at base camp. Market Town is 70% ready for combat. They’re bringing in laborers and fighters from other locations that we control.”

“It won’t be needed.” Dirce opened a compartment in the tank and took out a map. He spent a few minutes adding the things he’d noted during his recon.

Jarvis got busy preparing a meal for the boss. He’d stayed busy the entire time Dirce was gone–not because he was loyal or wanted to, but because it was his job.

“I’ll reward that when we’ve finished this mission.”

Jarvis shrugged. “I’ll accept it, but I’d do it anyway.”

“How do you feel about descendants?”

Jarvis recognized the trap, but he had little to hide and none of it was related to magic. “If they aren’t working for us, they need to be detained or retrained.”

“Is there anything you won’t do to achieve your goals?”

“Nope.”

“Is there anything I should know that isn’t in your file?”

Jarvis didn’t hesitate. “I have my soldiers deal with women so I don’t kill them before I can get the information I need. It’s happened twice.”

“And?”

“I like to kill. Whatever you want from me isn’t a problem.”

“There are two infants on our sheet. We’re to collect them and deliver them, alive, to the Secretaries-General.”

“I saw that. Descendants, I assume.”

“Rare gifts. The mother reported being able to observe time passing.”

“I’ve never heard of that. Is it a form of time manipulation?”

“We don’t know and that scares our leaders.”

“Do you want them dead?”

“The SG does. I want their gifts.”

Jarvis wasn’t surprised. He didn’t worry over this being a test of his loyalty. He was able to be hired for multiple purposes. “What’s in it for me?”

“You’re an Invisible?”

“As far as I know.”

“If you’re an Invisible, you can have two lifeforces from the duplicate powers. It will unlock your gifts.”

Jarvis bowed as deep as he could. “I’ll leave at your command.”

Dirce pointed to a small cave on the map. “The infants are being held by a group of normals with two descendants for protection. One of those is Conner Mitchel. I want him brought in.”

Jarvis added up the bounty on that. “I’ll need hands.”

“Take your pick, but we don’t need witnesses unless they can be trusted.”

“I have names.”

“Good. You’ll go at nightfall so they don’t pick you up on any cameras.”

“I need to prepare. Can I send you a replacement?”

“Yes, but tell him to give me an hour alone. I need to think.”

Jarvis exited the tank, fighting against the stiff wind and layers of snow that had accumulated overnight. He vanished into the blowing snow, eager. He liked his job, but he also felt the need to run and that told him Dirce would fail. He didn’t want to be around when it happened. Dirce had a nasty habit of taking his troops on suicide runs and abandoning them. Jarvis preferred to avoid that; this private mission was a perfect excuse to do so.

If he got lucky, Safe Haven would kill Dirce, leaving Jarvis free to return to base as the new leader of the Allied Forces in North America. If Dirce lived, Jarvis would honor their deal and be promoted to official second-in-command. Either way, this run would provide a better future than what he had now. Getting older, Jarvis was tired of being a knife-for-hire. He was ready for something more.

**3**

“There are refugees alive down there. They were under tarps!”

Scott’s call brought Kendle’s team to the entrance where they took turns looking through the peephole. On the ledges around Safe Haven’s blocked passages, refugees were coming out to forage while the late afternoon sun was out. It was clear that most of the few hundred scattered people were too ill to make it out of the valley.

Kendle’s stomach dropped. “They aren’t doing well. We should wait.”

“It’s been three days.” Carl glared from his bedroll. “The levels are almost twice as low as yesterday. The counter manual even says we can stand limited exposure at these rates.”

Kendle studied the tired, sad faces that had endured the last trio of sunrises with her. “We’ll vote.”

There were enough relieved nods that Kendle knew which way it would go. “I say we find out. Half of us.”

“Agreed.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

The vote was close enough that Kendle worried about it causing a fight. She’d already gotten two of them killed. She didn’t want to add to that total.

Tommy gave her a questioning glance.

Kendle straighten her shoulders. “Those who voted yes will leave at dawn. The rest will stay here until the levels are lower or until they decide to find another shelter.” Kendle looked at the twins in Rita’s lap. “You’ll care for them?”

“I’ll get them a good home before I die.” Rita wheezed and then coughed. She still had the cold.

Kendle gestured at the rear of the cave, where they had tarps that kept them warm most of the time. Today’s temperatures had been good enough that they’d all enjoyed having the flap over the cave open for half an hour. “Get some more sleep. Tomorrow will be a hard day.”

**4**

“Why are we up here, man?” Kevin shivered at the wind and dangerous darkness. The cliff they were on was narrow and slick, with nothing to use for a grip.

“I’m trying to figure out why Safe Haven isn’t answering. I assume there’s a threat around here and I’d like to find it before it finds us.”

Silenced by good sense, Kevin took out his binoculars and began to help Jeff scan the dark, jagged cliffs around the snowy valley that formed an oval between the tall ranges. “Nothing, man. Come on.”

Jeff ignored Kevin’s whining, positive he hadn’t wasted their time by making them scale slick, dangerous cliffs in the dark for three hours. They’d hidden their vehicles and stayed off the radio to be a surprise, but Jeff wanted to know what the threat was. He studied the land to the south, admiring the glow of the moon… Jeff frowned as he realized the moon wasn’t visible through the clouds. That light had to be coming from the ground.

Kevin spotted it next, because Jeff was staring there. “Whoa. That’s a lot of refugees.”

“Soldiers, I think, but not American.”

“What makes you think that? We can’t see anything from here except lights.”

“Only fighters stay out in weather like this. Or an army on the move and that light is coming closer.”

Kevin was glad when Jeff began their descent, but his relief faded as he realized Jeff was going toward the light and away from their truck. “Are you sure we should do this?”

Tiring of the constant whining and second-guessing, Jeff shook his head. “Nope. You’ll die here. Stay with the truck.”

Embarrassed, Kevin stomped along behind Jeff without responding to the sarcasm.

“Be quieter, will you?”

Kevin tried to silence his steps, but the snow crunched under his boots and echoed through the night. He had no idea why Jeff wasn’t making the same amount of noise.

“Because I try hard. You don’t care anymore.”

Kevin wanted to deny the claim, but he hadn’t thought about Eagle rules or training much. He liked doing whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

“And what happens when I’m tired of carrying you?” Jeff faced Kevin in the cold darkness. “I don’t need you. I never have. Either get with my program or get lost.”

Kevin shoved by him. “What do you think the light is from? Campfires or something better?”

Jeff sighed. *What an asshole.* “Mobile spotlights. I’d assume solar.”

Kevin dropped back to let Jeff retake the lead, mind filled with his threats. Kevin wanted to get with the program and be dependable, but he also wanted to be wild because it was easier than living the way Jeff expected them to. After this adventure together, Kevin doubted there would be another. If he didn’t stay in Safe Haven, he would go off on his own where he would be the only one who told him what to do.

**5**

Kendle edged closer to Tommy’s heat without waking him, unable to sleep longer. The dread was thick in her gut. She had little faith the inside of that mountain would be any different than the outside.

Sighing, Kendle gave up the fight and rose. She tiptoed through the mass of bodies that kept the cave warm enough to sweat some nights, and took up a place near the flap. She pried open the hole they’d cut and taped for viewing, hoping to view some tiny flicker in the darkness to convince her it was worth the risk. Climbing that mountain would be dangerous, but they also had to locate a way in. She didn’t believe they could do either with the gear they had.

Kendle peered through the hole. “There’s a light.”

Kendle’s whisper came through as a distorted muffle of sleepy haze.

“Did she say there’s a light?”

“She saw something?”

Eagles flew from warm spots, tugging on jackets and boots.

Kendle stepped aside for Tommy to view, praying that she really had observed a light, though she knew that she had.

“Top of the peak, to the right.” Tommy spun away from the flap. “Someone’s alive in there!”

Scott held up a hand. “Listen!”

Low rumbling echoed, causing everyone to tense.

“Quake?” Carl glanced around as the vibrations continued.

“No.” Kendle had felt plenty of earthquakes while growing up. “The rocks are sliding.”

Men started to exit the cave, but Tommy blocked the exit. “Coats!”

The team hurried to get into their gear.

Choosing to stay in this time and observe from here, Ramer kept them informed. “The light’s getting brighter… More rocks are shifting… There’s a hole!”

The team went out, sharing the night vision monoculars they had.

“It’s them! They’re digging out!” Tommy handed Kendle his monocular. “They survived!”

“All of them?”

Her toneless question brought the happiness to a halt as they took turns observing the yellow digger clawing through the mountain. As each scoop of earth was brutally plowed aside, the mood grew thicker. They’d had deaths. It was logical that Safe Haven would have suffered the same.

The sky lightened as the machinery rumbled, engines ringing across the valley that separated them. The dirt slid faster as two diggers cleared, widening the exit.

The dozers shut off suddenly, leaving an ugly silence. Lights behind the hole became brighter… Four shadows appeared.

Ramer squinted. “Who is that?”

Ben struggled to get a better view. “I can’t tell with those spotlights glaring, but refuges are climbing up there.”

“That’s half of the council.” Kendle was able to feel them.

“Which half?” Conner was trying to read them.

“Stop.” Kendle waved at Conner. “We don’t know if they’re on alert or not. They might not know we’re here.”

Conner stopped. He hadn’t thought of that, but she was right. Most descendants couldn’t read through the stone or ground, so they might know someone was out here, but not who it was and think it was a threat.

“Switch on a radio.” Tommy gestured. “Hurry. I think we’re being signaled.”

Kendle frowned. “Can you tell who it is yet?”

“No. They’re staying behind the lights. Too much glare for features.”

“Male or female?”

“Both. Two of each.”

“Could be anyone.” She knelt down in the flap, cold.

Ryan switched on his radio so they could listen. As soon as he turned it to their common channel, they heard the clicking.

“That’s our code.” Ben waved. “Get a paper.”

It took the team a few minutes to translate the code coming over the radio. It repeated three times before going silent.

Scott, who had gotten the last of it on the final transmission, blew out a sigh of relief. He grinned sheepishly at Tommy. “I’ve gotten rusty.”

Tommy chuckled. “Yeah, we all have. Get that decoded so we can send an answer. They’ll expect it fast if they’re trying to verify who we are.”

Scott and Ben got on it together as they’d done many times on runs.

Ben hated to deliver the message. “It says stay here. Not safe.”

Kendle scowled. “That’s it?”

Scott shrugged, also disappointed. “Just to be quiet.”

Kendle grunted as the men around her groaned. “I guess we’re waiting again.”

Tommy motioned people in and re-secured the flap. It was getting cold anyway.

“We just got orders in Eagle code.” Ben brought it up as Tommy had the same thought. “I believe we’re the surprise force the bad guys aren’t expecting.”

“Wouldn’t the bad guys have seen us arrive?” Ramer was worried.

“Not if they aren’t here yet.” Tommy was considering all sides.

Kendle scanned her team. They weren’t going to be much of a powerhouse like they were now. Low on food and ammo, out of fuel and missing two men, they were barely surviving themselves. “She must be desperate if we’re the heroes. And if Angela’s desperate, magic is needed.” She looked at Conner, who was recovering from his cold. “If we stuff you with energy, can you fight?”

“I’ll fight anyway!” The boy was furious. “That’s my dad in there!” *And Candy.*

Kendle swept the Eagles who weren’t tensing like she’d expected. “Can you guys help us get ready to do this?”

Tommy nodded. “We’ve been waiting for you to ask or let us know you needed it.”

“I didn’t so far, but I don’t know what we’re facing here.”

“We don’t mind.” Ben smiled. “Angela sent us cookies after we helped her this way.”

Kendle laughed. “I have a jar of peanut butter stashed in the mountain. Adrian has it.”

Ryan brightened. “First one to reach Adrian gets to have the burnt ones!”

“No, I want those.” Tommy rose to Ryan’s challenge. “Li always saves them for me.”

“So that’s where the crusts keep going!” Scott’s comment brought fresh laughter.

Kendle joined in their amusement, but her boiling stomach and sweaty spine warned of danger. She had no idea what it was, but the sensation was so ugly that she shivered. Death was coming.

“You okay?” Tommy took her hand to give her his energy.

“No.” Kendle frowned. “Don’t make any noise. We’re not alone.”

The team hurried to peek through the flap.

Tommy leaned down. “Take what you need.”

Kendle drew hard and fast, heart thumping. The wave of darkness sweeping over her heart was cold and hot at the same time. Her eyes shut as the barrier to the future swung open.

“Hey, are–”

“Don’t.” Ben stopped Ramer from touching her. “She’s busy. “

Ramer realized she was using her gift to search and retreated, observing in fascination. They hadn’t viewed signs of her power or Conner’s on this trip.

Kendle released Tommy, standing. “Hang on.” She went to her smaller kit, the one she used the least. In the bottom, she found the book she’d been reading before they’d been carjacked. She flashed the title at them. “Angela sent this with me.”

Tommy began chuckling, as did Ben.

Ramer joined them. “What?”

“She sent the equipment with us.” Tommy pointed to where their heavier gear was stacked. “There are five rappelling kits in there and a lot of rope.”

Kendle breathed a sigh of relief and then tensed again. “Get the lights out. Something’s coming.”

“Lights went out over there too.” Ben was observing from the flap.

“What’s going on?” Rita was burping one baby while the other slept near her leg.

“Shh…” Kendle concentrated, trying to make them all dim.

Conner, realizing what she was doing, added his power to hers. A brief blue glow went over the cave and then everything went dark.

“Shh… Easy.” Kendle soothed her team. “That’s just us. Be still.”

The team waited in stiff silence in the chilly cave.

Kendle heard it first.

Conner tensed a second later. “What is it?”

“Trucks.” Kendle paled. “A lot of trucks…”

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

**Action!**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**T**he UN rolled into the valley in full force, crushing the dead under their wheels as they forged their own road through the refugee camps. The convoy was so long the end kept rolling long after Dirce ordered his vehicle to halt. The trucks and tanks rolled through streets and yards without consideration for what stood in their way; the UN logo flashed a warning of who they were.

The front vehicle stopped at the bottom of the hill, where the gaping hole in the mountain was obvious.

“We’re screwed.”

Kendle ignored Carl’s comment as they watched the convoy continue to enter the valley, large wheels crushing bones and ice. The bodies didn’t make them stop or even pause. She tried to count the troops, but couldn’t. Carl was right. They were screwed.

Kendle winced as a bullhorn began to echo through the darkness.

“Come out with your hands up. We have you surrounded!”

*Why does that sound like a cheesy line from an old movie?* Kendle listened for a response.

“I repeat, come out with your hands up. You are all being detained.”

“Detained?” Kendle’s brow puckered. “Detained?”

“Dirce.” Rita breathed in a lung of raspy air, clutching the babies. “He’s here.”

Kendle grunted in acceptance of what had to happen next. She released the dim mode for a brief instant so she could see where everyone was. “If anyone moves, they might die. Please don’t even breathe if you can help it.” Before anyone could ask questions, she blanketed them in darkness again. “Dirce has been here for days. He saw us come out. I think that’s why he’s rolling in now.”

Tommy went on full alert. “He sent troops up here?”

Kendle set the book near her feet, wishing she’d been able to use the information in it, but this was going to happen faster than Angela had anticipated.

“What should I do?” Conner joined her. He could see everyone’s heat signature like his dad had once said he would be able to do.

“When I start firing, you do the same and don’t stop until they’re dead.”

“I don’t have any mags.”

“We’ll be using magic, Conner. We have to kill these roaches, right now, before Safe Haven surrenders to save us. Dirce is telling Angela he’ll blow up this cave.”

“Can he reach here?” Ramer was scared. This cave was a death trap if one of the tanks fired on them.

“I think so.” Tommy had to force himself not to try to see through the shroud of darkness that Kendle had cast over them. “What should we do?”

“Just don’t move.” Kendle was gathering energy to handle whatever was coming. “You’ll be able to see again, but if you get out of place, you’ll screw me up.”

“We won’t.” Tommy was used to working like this with Angela. He was also too drained to get upset. He couldn’t wait to sleep without so much stress on his mind and heart.

Kendle and Conner went to the flap, zipping jackets. As they stepped from the cave, the lights came on for everyone. They stayed frozen, listening intently…

“Get in there!”

Kendle was shoved into the cave by three tall peacekeepers in black and tan uniforms. They had weapons the team would have recognized from the market if the lanterns had been lit.

Kendle dropped to her knees as she was shoved. “Stop! Be still!”

“Get the kids.” Jarvis was in charge, but the climb up here had worn him out. He wasn’t used to this much hunting for their prey. He’d hoped to attack this small team during the chaos, but the woman descendant had come out and spotted them getting into position, forcing him to act now. “If you use magic on us, we’ll kill those babies.”

“No need.” Kendle snatched the knife from her boot and threw it at the soldier who was leaning down to pick up the baby.

He staggered, falling on top of the bundle.

The babies began to cry.

Rita flew toward the kids.

“No!”

“Don’t move!”

Rita grunted heavily, also falling on top of the kids as Kendle’s second knife sank into her chest.

Kendle threw again; her last blade stuck in Jarvis’s throat.

She and Tommy grabbed the third soldier as he tried to draw his gun. Climbing up a mountain was a serious disadvantage. He’d needed both hands free and hadn’t bothered to draw until now.

Kendle swung them toward the flap, not giving Tommy a chance to protest as she shoved them through the flap and heaved the struggling soldier toward the edge.

Tommy helped her.

Together, they pushed him off.

The man’s screams echoed down to Dirce, who glanced up in resignation. “Figures. Never send boys to do a man’s job.”

**2**

“The tunnel is open!”

“We’re going out!”

“Let us through!”

The decoy corridor was cold and dusty, with random debris flying through the curves and cavities on the wind. The Runaways were streaming by with violent expressions that declared only death would stop them from leaving. Angela wasn’t going to. Their choice to flee was going to save everyone else in this cursed mountain.

Angela and her crew stayed against the walls as the panicked people flew by them to reach the exit. The laborers had just finished clearing the collapsed section, but the cold wind blowing through was unmistakable. It had alerted all levels of the cave to the change.

Gunshots sounded.

“Get out of here, you cowards!”

Morgan’s shout told Angela her workers had been attacked. She was glad when they all emerged through the fleeing citizens, escorted by Morgan and the team of Eagles she’d assigned. The crew joined Angela and took up guard places in front of her.

“Incoming!” Marc and Adrian said it at the same time.

The final Runaways ran by with harsh glares, not about to attack such a strong crew.

Angela was relieved. She’d chosen this team with that in mind, hoping it would save some of their lives if panic overrode everything else. Fear was a strong deterrent.

More gunshots and shouts came to them. It sounded as if there were refugees coming into the passage, as well as going out.

“They aren’t firing the tank yet. Why not?”

“He needs a push.”

“Be careful.” Adrian scanned the tunnel. “He’s devious and we have an open door now.”

Angela ignored him, concentrating. *I told you! They’re out of shells for the tanks. We’ll meet at our last campsite and circle back.*

*I’ve sent out the first group of descendants.* Marc joined her for his role in the ruse. *I’ve got the front. Get the rest of our residents out of there!*

Angela opened her eyes, shuddering. “He got it. Let’s go.”

Angela’s team took off running toward the ladder, keeping her in the center. Their footsteps drowned out the fighting, but not the response of the furious descendant outside.

*Incoming, you bitch!*

The tank blast slammed into the open decoy tunnel in a direct hit. It entered the corridor and slammed into the wall. The resulting explosion sent a cloud of dust and deadly shrapnel over the refugees trying to get inside.

Then the fireball consumed them.

An instant later, the cliff slid, collapsing to cover the entrance.

**3**

“We have runners alive, sir.”

Dirce grabbed the field glasses, picking out the fleeing refugees. “Fire.”

The tank belched out a shell, rocking the armored vehicle. It flew through the cold air and slammed into the ground near the camp of refugees who hadn’t been smart enough to flee when the fight started. Hoping to ambush Safe Haven as they came out, the desperate people hadn’t counted on the UN firing.

Angela had.

Dirce was pelted with rocks and debris he didn’t flinch from the way his men did. He took the bullhorn his new man held out. “This is the UN. We are here to liberate your children and reeducate your population. Surrender or we will fire again.”

Kendle’s team listened to the demands in horror and anger. It was unbelievable that this was happening.

“We will not spare you if you resist!” The bullhorn blared with Dirce’s heavy accent. “Come out now, if you can.”

“Here we go.” Kendle knelt by Rita’s body, shoving away the guilt. “We should stay in, maybe behind that ledge.”

Kendle and Carl retrieved the startled children; everyone crammed into the rear of the cave, hoping it was out of range.

“Are we still supposed to be the heroes?” Conner was confused.

“I don’t believe that’s the plan now.” Kendle admitted her failure. “I screwed it up by letting Dirce know we were here. She had to switch.”

“She?” Ben frowned. “You mean Angela?”

“Of course.” Kendle handed the baby boy to Carl. “She picked our gear. She knew we’d be trapped here and need the book on rappelling so we could get down.

Ryan waved. “But we have the path we came over to get here.”

“I’m not sure we will after this is all over.” Kendle began gathering energy again. “I think the shooting has just begun.”

“So what do we do now?” Ben was pissed. “Sit here and get shot at?”

“I couldn’t view beyond this point.” Kendle’s voice revealed her frustration. “I say we stick with our previous orders to stay here and be ready.”

“If Safe Haven knew this was coming, they weren’t near the entrance when he fired. Dirce can shoot all he wants.” Ryan gestured again. “He won’t reach them.”

“He *can* reach us.” Ramer was the twitchiest member of their team. “Maybe we should bugout while we can.”

The radio that had gone silent clicked a few times and then went dead again.

Kendle exchanged glances with the team. “That means an hour, right?”

“Yes.” Tommy had translated it. “Be ready in one hour.”

Carl scowled. “Ready for what?”

Kendle sank down to rest, leaning against the cold wall. “The conclusion, of course. One hour from now, all hell will break loose. That’s when we’ll find out who lived and who didn’t.”

Scott took the spot by Kendle. “Will *we* survive the fight?”

She shrugged, leaning against his heat. “As usual, that has not been revealed.”

**4**

Dirce climbed the ladder of his tank and popped the hatch. “Line it up. Blow the Black Widow out of there.”

“What about my grandbabies?!” Jerry and Dirce had been commanded to collect them.

Dirce paused. “Fine. Aim at the other side. Blow her friends and family out of the mountain.”

Jerry grinned as he told the tank driver. He loved watching stuff explode. It didn’t matter what it was.

Not sharing in the man’s good mood, Dirce knew something was wrong. He felt the trickery, but he couldn’t identify it. Waiting in the small tank with troops who smelled like he did sucked. *Why am I waiting?* “Start firing.”

“We’re under attack, sir!”

Dirce studied the ill refugees on their right side. Attacking troops for their gear and vehicles, it was sad to witness how bad the refugees were doing. “Tell the men to pick them off while I negotiate. I don’t want them to get bored.”

The driver relayed the message as Dirce concentrated.

*Surrender now. Save your people.*

*I’ll give you the same offer.*

Dirce laughed at Angela’s fast response. *I’ve heard the stories. I know your weakness.*

Angela laughed. *Ditto, Baby.*

*Ditto? What is ditto?*

Angela didn’t answer. She was busy climbing the ladder to the top floor so she could reach her camp. She’d assigned guards, but the need to be with them was overwhelming.

*I wish to negotiate.*

Angela swallowed her triumph. *Can I think about it?*

*You have ten minutes.*

Angela didn’t tell him it was more than she needed. She concentrated again, letting Marc and Adrian guide her along the dark passage they’d layered in dirty blankets and clothes for protection from the cold while they fought. *Take the shot, Jeffrey. Save us all.*

**5**

Jeff froze for an instant at Angela’s command.

Kevin lowered his rifle, hands going to the extra ammo. He felt it coming.

Jeff lined up the scope, adjusting for the stiff wind as best he could. The kill flash hid the glint from the glass in the scope as he centered on Dirce’s heart. “Aim small, miss small.”

Dirce rotated toward the winter camo poncho blind that Jeff and Kevin had hidden in for three days, zeroing in. *I feel you.*

“Feel this.” Jeff pulled the trigger.

Dirce was knocked off the tank at the shot. He fell into the snow, leaving a trail of blood as he scrambled under the edge of the tank. *You’ll pay for that! All of you!*

Jeff watched through his scope, trying to get a second clear shot. The wind had gusted at the wrong moment, changing his kill shot into a shoulder wound.

Jeff couldn’t get a clear shot with Dirce behind the tank. He began to pepper the edges and sides, hoping to get lucky and force the man into view.

Dirce slapped the tank. “Shoot him!”

The tank’s barrel began to rotate.

Jeff’s eyes widened. “Uh, time to go!”

Kevin jerked the plastic sleds from under the poncho blind, shoving one of them at Jeff. “I can’t believe we’re doing this!”

“Hurry up!” Jeff swung his rifle over one shoulder and then threw himself onto the sled, face down. He shot across the mountain, leaving Kevin.

Kevin tried to copy Jeff’s actions, but he landed awkwardly and almost slid off the sled as it flew down the cliff. He recovered his balance and grip just as the tank fired.

Angela made it to the tunnel sheltering her camp and shoved by them to reach the exit hole they had finished yesterday and blocked off with heavy tarps and their gear.

“Open it!” Angela’s shout echoed over the mutters and frightened cries of her citizens, but all of that was drowned out as the tank fired.

The concussion rattled the mountain and sent showers of dirt over Angela’s group. “Now, kids!”

Along the walls, the kids stood up. All of them had their hands out and eyes shut. A hum of energy filled the space and then a shield blinked into life around the huddled camp. Protected from even the cold wind, Angela watched as the mountain cliff across from them began to fall.

“Someone’s over there!” Greg had his binoculars up. “It’s jeff! And Kevin!”

“Get ready!” Angela began gathering energy. “Pull everything you need from his men. Hold him in place until I give the word. Start pulling!”

Descendants picked the nearest soldier and began to steal their energy.

**6**

Dirce realized he’d been tricked. He could feel the power at his back, and his shoulder was gushing blood, but it was impossible to look away from the two sleds coming down the mountain ahead of an avalanche that was gaining on them.

Freezing, Jeff hauled on the sled as he neared an edge, hoping to gain more altitude to clear the rock field below.

Kevin did the same on his right, trying to watch the path and Jeff. He needed to get onto the same groove.

Jeff’s sled slammed into the rock field at the base of the mountain. It flipped, sending Jeff flying into a snow bank.

As the sled fell, Kevin hit it. He had just cleared the cliff edge. Kevin was knocked from his perch and flipped into the snow not far from where Jeff had landed.

The small avalanche hit the bottom of the cliff seconds later, burying them and everything else.

In Angela’s cave, people groaned and cried out, but there was no time for mourning.

Dirce stood up, dripping blood into the dirty snow. He pointed at Angela. “Fire!”

“As soon as it lands, fire!” Angela’s shout was accompanied by a high-pitched whistle that caused the fighters to brace.

Angela placed her hand on Leeann’s shoulder, adding her strength. “Hold the shield!”

The shell slammed into the entrance of the corridor.

It should have killed everyone, but the shield absorbed the impact with a ripple of cries and groans from the kids. The shell vanished into the energy field, but then the shield failed, melting down from the top.

Angela let go. “That’s it. Get them!”

Adults hurried to grab their assigned child. The exhausted kids couldn’t run. What they’d done was a huge task. Angela had refused to let them kill, but a onetime defense had been perfect.

“Open fire!” Angela followed her shout with a blast of flames that flew through the air toward Dirce.

Dirce’s men were enjoying the show. Over the years they’d been together, they’d become familiar with his pattern of attack. Dirce liked to toy with his prey. So did his men, who were still killing random refugees even though those pathetic citizens were finally fleeing the battlefield. Mercy was for the weak, but they also knew they’d be sent in to cleanse everyone after this fight. Killing them now meant less hunting later.

Then it changed and they were under attack without the energy to fight back. Several types of magic flew through the air, slamming into the troops who weren’t ready for it. In all their years under Dirce, they had never experienced this type of fighting. Their prey had always surrendered or ran.

Angela was glad the troops were falling under the angry power of her fighters, but it wasn’t going to be enough. They would recover soon and start shooting her people without mercy. She could feel the order coming. Dirce had to die before he could give it.

**7**

On the opposite cliff, Kendle raised her glasses. “He survived! Shoot at Dirce. Don’t let him look toward Jeff!”

Tommy and those with rifles began firing, all trying to be the one to kill the UN leader. They didn’t care about his men.

Dirce’s troops waited for orders, still just shooting and laughing at the refugees who were trying to steal gear and wheels. Dirce had his personal shield up now, but his energy was being drained from too many levels to return fire. He had to use it all to prevent his shield from falling. He had underestimated the strength of the Safe Haven descendants. All of them were real threats, but two of them were impossible to keep out of his energy field.

Angela and Jennifer didn’t fire again after the opening to the magic fight. They labored together to make Dirce concentrate on his shield. Weakened from their time in the mountain, it took both of them to keep him occupied.

Realizing he was about to be without his shield, Dirce leapt up onto the tank, meaning to drop into safety. “Fire!”

The tank had already been reloaded. The gunner, weakened like the rest of the soldiers, was slow to respond to the order.

Jeff wasn’t. *You asked for it!*

Dirce spun around as Jeff pulled the trigger.

The bullet plunged into Dirce’s chest. Two more slugs slammed into him right afterward, knocking him into the snow.

Marc fired his grenade launcher.

The grenade went into the open hatch of the tank and blew it up from the inside.

Around the convoy, other commanders began shouting orders. Dirce’s job was up for grabs. The man who won this fight would be promoted.

“Move in!”

“Fire!”

“Kill them all!”

In the passage, Angela jerked a hand at Kenn. “Bring it down.”

Kenn flipped the switches and pushed the buttons, hoping the splicing they’d done would be enough. He and Marc had helped Ozzie and Theo, but in the end, it was all up to fate.

**8**

“Come on!” Jeff grabbed Kevin by the arm and dragged him through the drifts and bodies toward the nearest tank. Angela was telling him to get under any protection they could find.

Above the running men, the mountain rumbled. At first, it was a tremor shaking the fresh snow loose. Then it became an explosion that seemed to echo forever.

Kevin stole glimpses over his shoulder as he stumbled alongside Jeff, breath coming in short, painful rasps. “It’s coming down!”

Jeff ran faster, heaving and grunting as they raced the troops who were centered on the tunnel.

The mountain exploded. It showered the body-ridden battlefield with snowy rocks that knocked troops to the ground and broke windows. Glass shattered, spraying shrapnel as the ground under them vibrated with the force of a full avalanche.

The explosions continued, ringing the mountain valley on all sides. The UN troops began to notice and run faster, but they didn’t alter direction. Hell was raining down all sides of the mountain. The open corridor was the only shelter they wanted.

Snow rolled down all sides of the mountain, covering the jagged cliffs until all anyone could see was blowing white coming for them. It thundered as it fell, sliding along outcroppings and cavities to swallow the refugees trying to flee the valley. They were lost from sight as the snow continued to crash down onto the battlefield. Troops, fighters, and refugees were buried, but the avalanche kept coming.

Jeff shoved Kevin against a tank and hefted himself up, hoping the crew had already fled.

The hatch flew open; a hand with a gun came up.

Jeff kicked the gun into the air and brought his boot down as hard as he could, shattering the man’s face. He dropped into the tank, punching the gunner who went for his gun.

The tank driver fled up the short ladder.

Kevin grabbed the man and tossed him into the snow by the wheels. He dropped into the tank to help Jeff subdue the gunner as the wall of snow hit the bottom of the valley and buried everything.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

**Cleanup**

A sign on a pole

Description automatically generated

**1**

**A**ngela’s group watched as the valley was buried under tons of rock and snow. The decoy passage was covered, as was the top entrance where a camp of wild refugees had been arguing about fleeing or staying to fight, but the explosions didn’t stop. They continued to circle the jagged cliffs, reminding Angela’s army of their battle with the government. She had used a chain event to their success then; she’d repeated it here.

Snow and rocks thudded in front of Angela’s tunnel, blocking their view and showering them all with icy dust.

“Move!” Angela got her people away from the entrance and then gestured at her fighters. “No survivors.”

The Eagles didn’t hesitate. With over seventy percent of Dirce’s troops suffocating under the snow, they were eager to be finished before those men dug out.

“Stay here.”

Angela didn’t argue with Marc’s order. She wanted to be here to protect her camp from anyone who might get through.

“No one will.” Adrian stepped by her, following Marc.

Comforted, Angela went to the rear of her scared people to make sure no one was sneaking up on them. Some of the refugees had gotten in before Dirce blocked that corridor with his first shot.

“You line ‘em up, I’ll knock ‘em off.” Adrian had his rifle. “Give you a chance to practice that new grid.”

“I don’t know how to use it yet.” Marc brought his grid up. There were now names where the red heat signatures had been.

“Narrow in on any of them and I’ll be drawn to it while we team.” Adrian linked them.

Marc concentrated on the troops around the tank where Jeff and Kevin had taken shelter.

“You’re not asking much.” Adrian’s mutter was lost in the noise of his shot.

Marc grunted as blood sprayed from an exposed ankle. “One more miss and we switch.”

Adrian frowned. “I can do better.” He narrowed in on Marc’s grid, lining up a new shot.

The UN soldier peered over the tank; he flew backwards as the bullet plunged into his eye socket.

“Again.” Marc picked out the next target.

Around them, Eagles, descendants, and camp members were fighting side-by-side with guns and magic. Not afraid of each other in that moment, their bond brought the bubble over the camp to life for the first time in months. Their unhappiness and differences were no longer blocking it.

The troops firing into the dark tunnel were angered that their bullets and magic were absorbed by the shield. This one didn’t fall from their blows. It grew stronger, feeding off the emotions of the citizens it was protecting.

Digging their way free like Jeff and Kevin had, UN troops were now rising up to replace those who’d been killed. No sooner had Adrian and Marc cleared the tank then more troops clawed up and tried to get inside it. Kept to one area of the battlefield, they were both quickly aggravated with the limits.

“If your new gift came, now’s a good time to discover what it does.”

Marc concentrated, bringing up the hall of doors. There were several new options. “Um, this one. I think.” He opened it without knowing what was behind it.

“Sonic. Nice.” Adrian put a hand on Marc’s shoulder. “I’m blocking everyone behind us. Send it out.”

Marc shoved energy through, trying to aim at a cluster of troops running toward the corridor as they fired.

Marc staggered as the blast shot out of his chest and slammed into the dozen soldiers firing at Angela. He glanced away as their eyes exploded.

“Wow.” Adrian wanted to grin and congratulate him, but the horror wouldn’t let him. “I’ve never seen that before.”

Marc grunted, gathering energy for the next blast. “Line us up.”

Adrian concentrated on the closest threats to the passage, positive that’s what Marc wanted. “Go.”

Marc fired the next blast.

Angela waved at Cynthia and Samantha. “Do what you can.”

Both women frowned, but neither refused.

Neil fired his rifle, scowling, but he didn’t tell Samantha not to. She had the right to defend herself and there were still too many troops. They needed her help.

Sitting by the exit she’d crawled to, Samantha lifted her hand and then slammed it into her palm.

The ground under the battlefield vibrated as if it had been punched. Men screamed as the snow shifted, splitting open in places.

Samantha slammed her fist into her palm again, hair standing on end as she used the gift her demon had revealed after her injury and Jeremy’s death. *Thud!*

The icy ground broke apart in front of the tunnel, dumping troops under the snow. Behind the thud, came a cold wind that froze them in snowy graves.

Cynthia rubbed her stomach as she directed her child’s power. She and Samantha weren’t teamed, but they worked together anyway. Samantha dumped the men into the ground and Cynthia froze them. It was just as awful as Marc’s sonic blast, but the women felt it more. They weren’t seasoned fighters yet.

*Thud!*

More troops fell under the snow, screams locking in their throats as they froze.

**2**

On top of the cliff, Kendle’s team was using the last of their ammo to pick off troops who were in range. Most of them weren’t.

Realizing they were about to be out of the fight, Kendle waved toward their cave. “Get our rappelling gear. We’re going down to help.”

While the men hurried to do as she ordered, Kendle motioned at Conner. “You’re a Mitchel. I know you can do things from here. Get on it.”

Conner’s frosty cheeks paled. “They can’t know how different I am. I’ve got their respect.”

“Do it now. If you don’t, I won’t support you when this is over and neither will they.”

Afraid of losing it all just as he’d gained it, Conner lifted his hand.

The sky above the battlefield clouded over and then kept going. The dim sunlight was blocked, turning day into dusk and clear vision into blurry guesses. Heavy wind slammed through the valley, hitting everything in its path. Tanks rocked, tilting, and troops were knocked into each other and their vehicles with brute force.

Conner lifted his other hand.

Kendle couldn’t look away from the hundreds of troops who rotated toward the boy with blank expressions. Their faces held no emotions, but their eyes were haunted as their bodies obeyed Conner’s command and not their own. It was terrifying.

“Get it over with.” Kendle knew what was coming and was impressed as much as she was horrified.

Conner clenched both hands into tight fists.

The soldiers below lifted their weapons in unison and blew their own brains out.

Conner’s range from up here had only hit a quarter of the battlefield, but it was enough to get the attention of some of the remaining troops. A few of them fired at the boy instead of Angela, but many of them began to retreat toward vehicles that weren’t blocked.

*Those are my kids you’re shooting at!* Angela’s wave of fire laid waste to the pocket of troops hiding behind a row of tanks while they shot toward Kendle’s location. The men fled, screaming and burning as she blasted them with so much heat that paint melted and tires popped. She couldn’t stop the tears as she killed them. All life held value to her, even that of the enemy, but she didn’t stop firing. This wasn’t a time for mercy. It was survival.

**3**

“To the right!” Kevin was still being Jeff’s spotter.

“I’ve got it now.” Jeff had needed time to figure out how to work the controls. He rotated the barrel toward the final cluster of troops that were about to shoot a rocket into Safe Haven’s tunnel. He didn’t know if magic would catch that, but he wasn’t taking the chance. Jeff fired.

The tank in the center blew up, spraying metal and fire in all directions. Troops fled, dragging injured friends and leaving dead ones.

Jeff and Kevin didn’t know how to reload the tank, but they didn’t want to keep using it anyway in case their side didn’t know who was in here.

“Time for ground work.” Jeff checked his weapons and went up the ladder.

Kevin followed, no longer afraid or whining. Jeff knew what he was doing.

Jeff caught the thought and grinned. *That’s rich. I’m as clueless as he is.* Jeff dropped to the snowy, bloody ground around the tank and began shooting troops trying to make it into the corridor.

“We have runners!” Neil called Angela’s attention to the access road the UN had used to get into the valley. “About thirty, on foot, and two vehicles.”

“No one gets out this time.” Angela opened her hand, shoving it toward the road where the two mountain ranges stopped short of kissing.

“That’s our way out!”

“We’ll dig a new one.” Samantha saw where Angela was aiming and switched her next fist slam to the same location. Together, the two women pounded the mountain until it began to fall.

**4**

Kendle’s team was suiting up as fast as they could; frustrated with the rappelling equipment they barely knew how to use. Still targeting troops, Conner saw the access road become covered in a thin layer of snow and rocks. Realizing Angela was trying to cut off the path of the retreating men, Conner focused there. If the boss wanted the road closed, he could do that.

Conner lifted his hand.

Huge boulders rolled down the cliffs, crushing the vehicles and the men. Those who survived were shot by snipers–magic and non-magic. Awful to view, it was also gratifying. Safe Haven had defeated every threat strong enough to wipe it out. They were the superpower.

Angela lowered her arm, halting the battle. Her fighters stopped firing, searching for survivors. There weren’t many. Angela counted a hundred, split across the bloody battlefield. Gunshots faded into screams from the wounded and the howling of a wind that wasn’t natural.

Angela rotated toward Kendle’s location. *Bring them down now.*

Conner drew in his power, gasping at the energy he’d used. “I’ll need a minute.”

*You don’t have it*. Angela gestured toward the camp members she’d chosen yesterday. “We need twenty vehicles. Collect their trucks and all the fuel, and get them to the road. I’ll get it cleared. Do it as quick as you can. More refugees will come here, drawn by the fight. We leave at first light.”

The crew strode out of the passage, already dressed for the chore. Angela had told them the UN vehicles would have toolboxes and other caches of supplies they needed. She hoped they were able to scavenge enough vehicles. The UN hadn’t been prepared for a battle with magic users who fought alongside the humans. They’d also assumed Dirce’s negotiating would prevent a real battle. The amount of troops he’d brought was an intimidation technique, but they’d forgotten that Safe Haven was fighting for their very existence. They’d used every weapon in their arsenal.

Angela waved at her next team. “Walk it.”

This crew went slower, finding no sport in shooting wounded men. They understood the order and obeyed, but it was too personal. This battle might be the last for some of them.

Jeff had no trouble with it. He fired into a begging man’s chest and then knelt down to dig through his pockets and pouches for anything he could use.

Next to him, Kevin did the same. “Extra mags for my 9mm. Nice!”

Jeff tossed him a bloody pouch. “Full of candy. You’ve got the sweet tooth.”

Kevin threw him a pack of unopened cigarettes. “I don’t smoke those.”

Around the two men, fighters paused to stare at their callousness.

Jeff and Kevin didn’t notice.

Gritting his teeth, Adrian began looting the corpse at his feet. They’d been forced to do this at points during the battle with the government, but it had been random and the soldiers had already been killed in one of Angela’s many traps. These men were moaning and puking, crying and trying to bargain for their lives. It was wet work.

Angela joined her army. It was fair that she shared in this shame, but she also needed to replace her energy. Distracting Dirce had drained her.

She stopped by the first wounded soldier she reached, hand lifting. As his life rushed out and into her, angry lightning flashed above the battlefield.

“I’m already damned, remember?” Angela moved onto the next one. “If you didn’t want me to do this, you should have stopped them from coming for me.”

Across the battlefield, descendants began to follow her lead and absorb lifeforces of the dying peacekeepers instead of shooting them.

Adrian was horrified. He was also relieved and impressed. He’d never believed she would condone such a thing, even for their survival. “That’s heartbreaking.”

Marc approved. “It’s survival.”

“Yes.” Adrian stayed with Marc, providing protection and storage. He didn’t look at anything Marc handed him, not taking his attention away from the remaining troops trying to burrow under the snow to escape.

**5**

“Ready?”

Conner nodded at Kendle’s question. He wasn’t afraid.

The team around them swallowed their protests. Kendle had chosen to bring the babies down in the first group. Both infants were snuggled in her pack. The contents had been shoved into other bags and pockets, but Kendle had also padded the sleeping babies with Rita’s jacket and shawl. Kendle didn’t think the dead woman would mind.

“Don’t rush.” Kendle stepped off the edge of the cliff and began to walk down it, anchored by a static rope. They’d hammered the anchors in deep, knowing they would have to be used twice.

Kendle hated hanging over open air. If the anchors came loose or the rope broke, they would fall to certain death, but she didn’t hesitate. If she did, so would her team.

“It’s Kendle’s crew!” One of the camp women, Sylvia, pointed. “There’s Tommy!” She’d missed his weekly relief sessions.

Eagles watched the team descend, many of them comparing it to old movies with secret agents rappelling down the side of a tall building together. It appeared as though the team had done it often, with no errors the fighters on the battlefield or in the tunnel could spot.

Kendle’s boots touched the ground three minutes after leaving it. She grinned and waved to hide her queasy stomach. The wind had pushed so hard that her grip on the rope had torn holes in her gloves. *I’m never doing that again.* Kendle looked at Conner. “Tell Carl to hammer the anchors in again before we unhook and let go, or they’ll come out. Mine was shaking.”

Conner did, then helped Kendle take off the pack with the twins.

Kendle felt the rope vibrating as the anchors were pried from the rock and then hammered into a new spot. She approved of the change, but she didn’t relax. She wouldn’t be able to until all of her surviving team was down.

Adrian looked around, noting who was on the field with them and who wasn’t. “Where’s Charlie?”

“Guarding the rear of the passage from refugees.”

“How did she get him to stay in?”

Marc sighed. “She gave him something he wanted more than blood.”

Adrian considered that as he scanned for survivors. Tracy had to be involved… “They’ll be recognized as a legal couple, like Kyle and Jennifer?”

“Yep. She knew exactly what to use.”

“On us, too.”

Marc wiped his hands down his frozen pants. “But I’d still kill you and you’d still kill me. She’s the only one getting what they want.”

Adrian recognized the fuse if he wanted to light it. Instead, the former leader shook his head. “After everything that’s happened, she barely needs us at all. I think we should just be glad if she still wants us.”

Marc would have argued with that, but he noticed Kendle’s team striding triumphantly toward Angela with laden arms and huge grins.

Adrian frowned, narrowing in on the two bundles. “Damn.”

Marc joined Adrian in the instant mood change. It was hard not to think that she’d ordered a replacement.

Adrian’s heart hurt. “I guess she doesn’t need us at all now.”

Marc winced at the double pain, still teamed. “That changes things. I can’t fight that.”

“I’m not going to try. She doesn’t need us.”

“But I do want you.” Angela walked toward them with a cooing infant in each arm. She looked at Adrian as Marc studied the babies. “Secure the perimeter.”

Adrian walked away after a fast glance at Marc that begged him not to fight with her.

Angela smiled down at the children. “We’re going to have a large family. Can you accept that?”

“That’ll be the easiest part.” Marc took the little girl, noting her eyes were the same shade of blue as Angela’s. “Cute.”

“They have rare gifts. They’ll need a strong family to help them follow the light.”

“And that family has to include Adrian?”

“No. I’ll give that love to the children and make it work. I no longer believe we’ll fall without him.”

“I never did.”

Angela also refused to trigger that fight. “It’s your call. Hold a vote, talk to your friends. I won’t have anything to do with that decision anymore. Fate controls both your lives now, not me.”

Marc was a bit worried to hear her say that. He assumed she really did mean to give her attention to the kids. It should have made him happy, but it didn’t. He wasn’t noticing sadness in her or concern. It was as if she didn’t care.

“I just can’t be hurt that way anymore. You’ve kept us apart for so long that I’ve adjusted to hurting in that place now. I locked it in my crypt with the other horrors of this miserable existence we call a life. All I care about is getting to that island. Your love comes with too many strings and confinements. I gave up.” Angela walked away, cooing to the babies.

Marc scanned her thoughts, but he found nothing to imply she was bluffing. Adrian’s life was in his hands now. *I can reinstate Adrian’s banishment right this minute.* Marc wanted to. He also wanted the fighting to end. Angie was offering him a second chance at a life together. All he had to do was give her the personal freedoms he’d always enjoyed. Despite how hard it sounded, Marc was positive he could do it–anything to keep from being out of her light. He hurried to catch up, decision made.

“We need a door crew, asap.”

Marc was on her heels, scanning for trouble. “I’ll handle it.”

Angela took the babies toward the corridor. “The Mountaineers are coming. Do you want to handle that too or should I?”

Marc was fed up with the doctor and his group. “You should do it. I’ll kill them all right now.”

Angela walked faster, ignoring everything going on around her as she stared at the twins. “Kendle will help you clear the road.”

Now Marc frowned. It felt like she was pushing him toward a woman who desired him.

“It’s free will, Marc. And she’s more than earned a reward. Be nice. She can’t help wanting you. None of us can.”

Appeased, Marc motioned at Kendle and then headed for the road into the valley that was blocked by destroyed vehicles and huge rocks.

Kendle swallowed her apprehension and followed. She wasn’t sure if she was being banished now that she’d delivered the babies to the boss.

Behind her, Kendle’s team also followed, not giving them much space. Kendle had earned their loyalty and that extended to defending her against leadership if necessary.

Marc was pleased by their thoughts of the run. It was good that she’d bonded with her team, but after scanning the babies, Marc understood Kendle’s mission hadn’t been to locate a boat. Marc stopped by a crushed car, letting Kendle catch up. It would have taken them two days to remove this blockage with manual labor, but he knew what gifts Kendle had now.

Kendle stared at Angela. *Are you sure?*

Angela ignored the woman’s doubts to address a more important problem. *If he wants to spend time with you, I won’t stop it.*

Marc and Kendle both turned to gawk at Angela as she carried the twins into the shelter of the tunnel.

Angela didn’t respond. She couldn’t. The jealousy was trying to come up her throat and spew out in a burst of fury. Doing the right thing was hard.

Kendle stopped by Marc, unable to control her emotions. She stared at him with all the pent up desire she’d hidden on her trip.

“Nothing has changed for me. I only want her.”

Kendle didn’t get mad. She was amused. “That must be some pussy.”

Marc laughed in surprise. “You have no idea.”

Kendle scanned Adrian and then the vet who was slipping out of the passage as Angela entered. “I do have an idea. If I were a guy, maybe I’d feel the same.” Kendle shrugged. “We’ll all survive our emotions. Let’s be certain we can survive the conditions.” Kendle lifted her hand.

Across the calming battlefield, descendants turned, drawn by the wave of power that swept across the scene and stole the remaining energy from the wounded. Bodies collapsed as Kendle’s hand began to glow. She took in a deep breath and swung her fist as if she were punching her enemy.

The hit created a clearing force that ran ahead and knocked the crushed trucks and rocks farther into the gap. Her second hit blasted them into the open countryside, clearing most of the road. It was impossible, like everything else that had happened here today.

Marc put a hand on her shoulder. “I was told you deserve a reward.”

Kendle locked down on her first request, not wanting to restart the old fighting by begging to have his puppies and share his every waking moment. She asked for the thing she wanted the most after his love. “Let Conner back in. He’s a good kid deep down, just horny.” She grinned at him. “And who isn’t horny these days?”

Marc’s laughter rolled across the battlefield. “We’ll reevaluate his punishment after we leave here.”

“Thank you.” Kendle turned away from him, road unblocked and heart sealed up. “Tommy asked me to be his woman last night. I’ve agreed.”

“Congratulations. He’s a good person.”

“He’s better than good.” Kendle smirked, hips swinging as she walked away. “He practiced on the camp women. I’ve got the broken-in model and it’s perfect.”

Marc sensed no sarcasm or bitterness, just the satisfaction that came from a lover who had taken care of her. Marc grinned. *That’s Tommy. Making men proud everywhere.*

Adrian snickered. “Yeah, he’s always been a favorite with the older women. Wonder how they’ll react to him being off the auction block.”

Marc and Adrian didn’t fight the bonding that came with their laughter. It felt too good after all the months of spewing vile at each other. Needing to come to terms with all of it, Marc gestured toward the tunnel. “I’m labor. Give her your information.”

Adrian watched Marc join Kendle’s team, pointing at the crew who was gathering vehicles. Heart thudding, Adrian allowed his joy to burst free over the scene, drenching his army with happiness that bathed them in all crimson-killing golden glows.

Angela felt Adrian and Marc’s truce. She was relieved and proud of them, but it didn’t matter anymore. Only the survival of her people did.

Angela walked into the corridor with the babies in her arms, content that the Eagles on the battlefield would handle the aftermath. As she walked toward the inner cave, people parted to let her through.

At first, Angela thought it was because they were scared of her. That was what she had expected after the fight. As she walked into the middle of them, attention on the babies, their thoughts came to her.

*The Alpha.*

*She saved us again.*

*More people will come with Safe Haven now.*

*That’s what the UN gets!*

Angela was gratified to know the descendants were with her, but the opinions of the other people held more value. She loved them for not hating her for what she’d done to save them.

Eagles followed on Angela’s heels as she strode toward the doctor. Those residents were arguing with some of her camp members, but Angela didn’t stop. As she reached the shouting, her camp stopped to let her handle it–including Charlie. Their expressions implied Jimmy was in trouble, but they didn’t believe he was smart enough to know it.

Jimmy knew exactly what he was doing. He didn’t want descendants back in the cave. Now that the fight was over, there was a chance Angela might stay here and try to rebuild their settlement.

Angela hadn’t stopped walking. As she neared the point of impact with Jimmy, she finally looked up. The witch’s red orbs glared out at him eagerly. *If I were you, I would move.*

Jimmy wanted to stand strong, but under his hatred of the descendants, was fear. He retreated, motioning for the rest of his group to do the same.

Angela kept walking, striding through the middle of his rebels without acknowledging their presence or their stolen weapons.

Behind her, the rest of Safe Haven also entered the passage.

Jimmy’s group wanted to protest. It was in their expressions and their body language, but under it was the same motivation that drove the doctor: Fear.

Angela didn’t care. If they pushed it, she would kill them too. *I’m already damned. There isn’t anything I won’t do now.*

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

**Butterflies and Unicorns**

October 26th

A picture containing text, map

Description automatically generated

**1**

**J**eff and Kevin were surrounded by Eagles as they entered the cave. Jeff was hoping for a warm drink and to sit down to catch his breath. *I sledded down a mountain during an avalanche!* It was the height of his adventures so far. Unlike Kevin, who was already disappointed that they were sharing the glory, Jeff didn’t care. He only had to impress himself and he’d done that.

As the fighters walked and talked, Kevin spotted Cynthia by the tunnel entrance, but he couldn’t break away from the chattering group without drawing attention. Kevin wasn’t sure what he wanted from being here again, but he was almost certain he would stay for a while.

Jeff was having the opposite thoughts. Each time they got near Safe Haven, people had to be killed. He understood there was evil in the world that had to be eliminated, but Jeff was tired of the constant pattern with Angela. If she were the leader, he didn’t think he could stay.

“You’d both be dead without her.”

Jeff and Kevin stopped at the cold warning.

Cynthia ignored Kevin to glare at Jeff. “It’s funny that you believe we needed help at all.” She disappeared into the shadows.

Icy wind swarmed into the tunnel, bringing the smell of smoke and blood, along with precious freedom. The floors and passages of Safe Haven would become slippery paths that sent citizens to their knees and hands when they misjudged.

Jeff shook his head. “She’s crazy.”

“Actually, she’s right.” Morgan gestured for Jeff to go first up the ladder. “You two aren’t the heroes today.”

Jeff didn’t care about their opinions. He’d made up his mind on Angela after the government battle, after losing his heart.

Morgan understood, but there was nothing he could do about Jeff’s pain. All he could do was hope the rebel Eagle understood that their survival came at a high price.

“I know the cost.” Jeff climbed the ladder. “I’m not okay paying it unless it’s my idea.”

“You’re a lot like Charlie. He hates her for Tracy’s suffering, but neither of you had to make those choices, so it’s unfair to blame her.” Morgan waved for the rest of the guards to go on. “Watch those two. We don’t know who they are anymore.”

The two men scowled, but the Eagles knew Morgan was right. Jeff and Kevin had been gone long enough that they weren’t going to get trustworthy status right away even though they’d returned in time for the fight. As far as the men here were concerned, Jeff and Kevin had left just when they were needed most. They would have to be forgiven and that would only happen if they stayed this time and did their share.

Kevin was eager for it. He wanted his place back.

Jeff was eager for daylight so he could bugout, alone.

The guard on the top ladder, Daryl, grimaced at the voices. He didn’t want Kevin here. Cynthia was getting better, but Kevin would remind her of Matt and all that had happened. Daryl met Jeff’s eye as he reached the level. “When are you two leaving?”

Jeff ignored the insulting tone. “Whenever we want. You don’t make the rules here.”

“But I do.”

Jeff spun around to discover Jennifer and Kyle standing behind him. He lifted a brow as he added up the clues. “She named you heir to Safe Haven? I’m glad I left.”

Jennifer glared. “I’ll protect it with everything I have, like she has.” Jennifer raked Kevin with a contemptuous glance and then studied Jeff. “When are you two leaving?”

“Now, Jenny, be nice.” Kyle patted her tense arm. “I’m sure they don’t mean to cause trouble.”

“Yeah.” Jennifer grunted, scanning the two tense men. “I don’t see any caring for the future or for the greater good. One wants a woman and the other wants to forget a woman.”

Jeff blanched as Kevin flushed.

Jennifer walked by them, tone scornful. “You’re either with us or you’re against us, gentlemen. If you can’t be with us, you need to go. Make your choice by dawn.”

“She can’t do that!”

Kevin’s protest was lost in Angela’s rough chuckle floating through the top level.

*Yes, she can. We’ve had enough of men who won’t commit because it’s hard. Make your choice by dawn, like everyone else in this cursed mountain.*

Jennifer went to stand by Angela’s door, relieving Ivan on duty. “Boss wants dinner set up, said for you to handle it. Now.”

Ivan scowled at Kyle. “Can you tell her she doesn’t have to be a hardass to get stuff done?”

Kyle smiled at her. “Says who?”

Ivan rolled his eyes. “Another one who likes a mean woman. What is it with you guys?”

“She’s not mean.” Kyle stroked a thumb down Jennifer’s cold cheek. “She’s bitter. There’s a difference.”

Jennifer blushed at the heat in Kyle’s gaze. “I can be mean.”

Kyle resisted the urge to hug her. “I have no doubt about that. She wouldn’t have chosen you if it was all butterflies and unicorns in your heart.”

“I have a lot of hatred in there.”

“We all do, honey. After what we’ve been through, how can there not be?”

Jeff moved by them and picked a spot in the corridor near Angela’s location. Once he rested, they would talk. If she gave the right answers, he would leave here in peace or maybe even stay with them. If she told him what he feared the most, Jeff planned to ask her to remove his gift. He didn’t need it and he didn’t want it. After that, he would return to the wilderness where life made sense to him.

Pretending that her arm wasn’t aching, Jennifer stood up straight until Jeff was out of sight. As soon as he was, she slumped against the wall, letting out a grunt.

Ivan didn’t comment. He didn’t want problems with her man, but he was leery of Jennifer. He knew she was like Angela and he knew she was trustworthy, but he didn’t know what she thought about him. He wasn’t going to push it until he’d earned a higher place.

Wondering where Kevin had disappeared to, Jennifer didn’t initiate a conversation with Ivan even though this was a prime moment for one. Leery was a great vibe for a chat. Too tired to even do a scan, she concentrated on getting her energy back. The fight wasn’t over yet.

**2**

Cynthia breathed in as deep as she could, relishing the air coming through the open tunnel. It was so cold that it was almost painful; she’d never felt anything as wonderful. She had been positive she wouldn’t make it out of this cave alive.

Lingering in the shadows, Kevin took a moment to study her, not caring who noticed or got offended by it. She was skinnier than he remembered and the bags under her eyes implied she hadn’t been sleeping well. That was satisfying to him.

Cynthia was having the same thoughts about Kevin. He looked scruffy and worn out, as if the trip had been exhausting.

Around them, people coming into the passage gave them a wide berth, but stared in curiosity. Had their time apart softened the bad blood between them?

Kevin saw her wistful gaze and pushed, trying to figure out how she felt about him now. “You can leave right now, if you want to...”

“Yes.” Cynthia didn’t face Kevin, but she did nod to her guard in the shadows to let the soldier know she was okay. She and Peter had been put together for the battle because the former soldier wouldn’t hesitate to kill her if she tried to betray Angela. Cynthia hadn’t even considered it. She had chosen to reform.

Kevin needed more information. “You could come with us.”

Cynthia sniggered. “Yeah, Jeff would love having *two* burdens along.”

Kevin flushed. He’d been hoping she wouldn’t notice Jeff’s dissatisfaction with his company.

Thanks to the baby, she caught the thought. “Why do you care? You walked away from all of this.”

Kevin lowered his tone to a seductive whisper. “I’m here now, Baby.”

“Just like that, huh?” Cynthia got mean. “You didn’t fight for a place before, but you’ll do it now that the hard part is over.”

Kevin’s red cheeks turned a deep scarlet that brought Peter a few steps closer. He was aware of Cynthia’s reputation for stirring the pot, but he didn’t know Kevin and therefore, the former Eagle was the threat.

Cynthia felt the anger and waited for a denial, but there wasn’t one. She grunted. “It’s up to Angela, not me.”

Kevin pouted. “So until she makes a choice on me, I need to stay away from you, right?”

“You need to stay away from me because I say so.” Cynthia glared at him. “I told you I was in danger and you blew me off. You can’t be trusted and I won’t ever forget that.” She left him standing there, dumbfounded, to join the packing islanders. She’d made her choice. In time, Kevin would also make his, but their chance at a relationship, of any kind, was gone.

**3**

“Hey!”

Adrian spun around at the shout, not drawing his gun but coming close to it. He paused when he saw who it was, noting Kendle’s confident stride. Before she and her team had gone south to find the boat, or whatever their true mission had been, she had tiptoed around everyone in Safe Haven as if she wasn’t worthy to be here. Now, she walked close to people, laughing and grinning at their comments before returning her own. *She’s not afraid of us now. She’s not afraid of herself.*

Kendle had the opposite observation about Adrian. He acted as if he were uncomfortable in public and couldn’t wait to be back in the cave. As soon as she had the thought, Kendle realized Adrian wanted to be inside because that’s where Angela was. She understood that because she was happy even though the wind was stinging the skin off her cheeks and clogging snot into her nose. Marc was out here. Kendle stopped a few feet away from Adrian. “I see you’re protecting your life a bit more these days.”

Adrian smiled, but it faded into a frown as he spotted Tommy waiting for her in the tunnel entrance. “And I see you’re not. Where’s your guard?”

“After what I’ve been through, these people need a guard from me.”

“That’s what I meant. You’re making it worse by being seen with a traitor. What are you doing?”

Kendle realized he’d hoped she would ignore him so she wouldn’t be held responsible for him and Conner. “I’m ending our relationship, publicly. Mr. Mitchel, we are no longer a couple. Thank you for all the lovely moments.”

Adrian was glad her voice carried to the guards. “Nice. I release you without shame or anger, and hope, sincerely, that he can keep up with you in every way.”

“Aww. How sweet. As for Conner, I want his banishment lifted. The kid saved our asses as much as anyone else. He deserves a break.”

Adrian was relieved to hear it. He’d been afraid to ask any of her team and draw attention from Marc or Angela if the news was bad. “Thank you.”

“It’s my honor.” Kendle danced forward to place a soft kiss on his cheek. “And thank you. I may be okay with being alive now.”

Adrian signaled to Tommy, not surprised when he only received a curt nod. “Tell him I said I’m watching. It’ll keep him on his toes.”

Snickering, Kendle returned to the entrance, where Tommy gathered her close and kissed her to make their relationship public.

Around the scene, most people ignored the new couple, but a few of the camp women who were wrangling their assigned child back into the cave paused to glower or sigh in defeat. Another good man was off the Safe Haven market.

**4**

“Are you okay?” Neil knelt by Samantha, positive she was cold. She was sitting in the shadows of the entrance, where most of the coming and going people weren’t noticing her.

“I feel so bad!”

Neil held her as she sobbed, already certain what had triggered this latest emotional burst. She’d been sitting here enjoying the fresh air that Jeremy never would. On top of that, the adults herding kids by her were promising the children they could play outside again after the camp bugged out. Samantha was thinking about how hard it would be to leave Jeremy here in the morning.

“I don’t even have flowers!” Samantha’s body shook from the force of her misery.

It bothered Neil more than he could ever express, but he didn’t know what to do. Death came with life. It sucked, but there was no changing that awful fact. “Maybe I can scavenge something.”

Sam tried to choke off the tears. “Really?”

The tiny bit of hope in her voice made Neil vow to find flowers. “I’ll go right now, but not with you here and not with you like this.”

She sniffled. “Take me to the top?”

“Of course.” Neil helped Samantha button up her coat. She’d had to unfasten it during the fight so her movement wasn’t as restricted. Normally, it wouldn’t have been a problem, but as soon as Neil had discovered her role in the fight, he had layered her with extra vests that made it impossible for her to get far without help. He had stayed by her during the fight too, providing her with protection and then energy when she had run out. Samantha hadn’t recovered from her injuries yet, but the damage she’d been able to inflict was astounding. Neil didn’t want to know what she could do when she wasn’t limited by injuries or a pregnancy.

Samantha was proud of Neil, of how he had handled her being in danger on the front lines of the battle, but she didn’t have room to express that emotion yet. She missed Jeremy. He should have been here for this, celebrating alongside them.

Neil slid arms under her, feeling that she was indeed frozen inside her clothes. He cradled her against his chest, ignoring offers to help and questions about her health. The camp would be happy on the top levels, full of good energy from the victory. It would help Samantha to be hit with that. Down here, it was just bodies, Eagles looting or setting up security, and disappointed kids who’d been hoping for a chance to kill. The adults almost had all of the children in now, but the complaints of the remainders about wanting to do more were overpowering even the occasional gunshot still echoing from the battlefield. None of them needed to be in this.

Neil spun around to glare at a trio of preteen kids by the entrance. “Get where you’re supposed to be or I’m telling Angela.”

All the kids in hearing distance took off running toward the inner cave.

Adults flashed grateful glances at Neil before following. The non-magic users were glad it was all over, but they were tired. The energy drains hadn’t all stayed on Dirce’s troops. Kids were clumsy in aiming, Neil had discovered. Samantha had been forced to protect him as well as herself from the disjointed siphons. Still, the children had helped them win this fight. Neil was sure they would be rewarded. In fact, he expected everyone to be awarded something from the boss. He didn’t want anything for himself. Neither did Samantha, as far as he knew, but most of these folks would want to be recognized for their contributions.

“I’ll mention it to her, if she doesn’t handle it.”

Neil agreed to Samantha’s offer, shifting her to his back so he could climb the ladder. After tonight, he might not ever have to do this again; the sensation of that weight being lifted was indescribable.

Neil felt Samantha’s hot tears roll down his neck and into his shirt. He paused on the ladder, heart shattering. “Please, Sam.”

Samantha bit into her lip, nodding against him. She would try harder to let go of her sadness and remember the good times they’d had together. Maybe it wouldn’t keep hurting this bad if she shoved those images through the gaping hole in her heart.

**5**

We’re leaving in a few hours.”

Marc glanced up from the bloody body he was looting. “Are you sure you want to? It will be dark then.”

Doug nodded. “It feels like there are more problems coming here. I need to get these boys out of danger and go find Becky.”

Marc stood up and extended his hand. “It was an honor.”

Doug pumped his hand, grateful that there wasn’t going to be a guilt trip over the choice to leave. “We’ll be back...” It was Doug’s way of asking if they would be welcome.

“Good.’ Marc grinned. “It wouldn’t be the same without a bunch of redheads in Safe Haven.”

Chuckling, Doug went to the entrance to collect their gear. “We’re taking two of the snowmobiles. Allan is going with me.”

Marc wasn’t surprised to hear that. Allan had never been happy in Safe Haven, like Kevin hadn’t been. Jeff was a different story all together. “The trucks out by the road have full tanks. Scavenge what you need from the ones on the field.”

“Will do. You’ll hear from us again.”

Marc hoped that was true, but he refused to spend time worrying about the civilians who were leaving. While he had been out here, freezing, shooting, and looting, several small groups had escaped the mountain. Angela had instructed the guards not to interfere. Marc didn’t expect any of them to survive, but if they did and found their way home, they would be subjected to the same evaluations and medical checks as they had been the first time.

Marc spotted Zack and his sons, along with Shawn and Ray coming toward him. He waited for them to reach his location, again scanning the battlefield to make sure all of the threats had been neutralized. Across from him, where Kendle and her group had taken shelter, the mountain was much the same. Other than a new layer of rocks and snow at the bottom, it was unharmed. The area to the south was destroyed. First, Dirce’s shot had closed the tunnel, and then the avalanche had buried that location. Anyone who came through here in the future would never know that there was an entrance buried under there unless the snow melted.

To the north, was the path the UN had used to get into this valley. At the moment, there were six trucks lined up, with two dozen Eagles scurrying around them to fill the beds and kick the tires. To the east, another large group of fighters was entering the tepid warmth of the cave to escape the scene of death all of them had participated in this time. Marc didn’t catch bad thoughts or jealousies as the group entered, even though it was made up of both magic and non-magic fighters. In this moment, they were all bonded by their disgust in what they had been forced to do to survive.

Zack and his group reached Marc. “We went through the cave and took care of what we found. There weren’t many. Bodies are in the tunnel. Do you need help out here?”

Marc pointed toward the cold workers who were trying to get their transportation together. “Go relieve somebody.”

All of them hurried to do what they were told, except for Shawn.

Marc knew what the man wanted. “This is a bad time. We need you to stay at least until after the bugout. If you want to leave then, go, but Safe Haven always needs good Eagles.”

Shawn was relieved to hear it. During his punishment and time caring for Missy, he had been lost. “Do you want me to help with the vehicles?”

Happy to have someone by his side who was eager, Marc denied that. “Stay with me. If the boss discovers I don’t have a guard, she won’t let me hear the end of it.”

Shawn took up a nearby post to watch over Marc. It was as close to being back in the Eagles as he could get right now.

“How are things inside?”

Shawn shrugged. “Calm, mostly quiet. Angela has all of the kids that she can fit in the cubby with her. Everyone else is in the TV or reading room, packing and waiting for instructions. There are guards on every level again, except for the bottom floor. We told Jimmy if there are any problems overnight, we’ll hold him responsible. We haven’t spotted a member of his group since.”

“What about personal dramas?”

Shawn shrugged. “Honestly, man, I haven’t been paying enough attention, but it didn’t seem like there was much going on. Everyone’s afraid to bug the boss.”

“Good.” Marc knelt down to finish digging through the pockets of the soldier who had begged him for mercy. *That will haunt me later.* “Are all the Runaways gone now?”

“As far as we can tell, yes. Gus and his brothers are going through the cave again in case we missed something. Kenn and Tonya will make the next sweep in half an hour.”

Marc wanted to be in there to do those sweeps himself, but any surviving troops out here were more dangerous than refugees who had made it inside. Angela was in there. “Doug and his group will be leaving soon. Let the guards know.”

Shawn got the attention of a sentry standing at the entrance and flashed the message through hand code.

Brandon, sniper rifle in hand, nodded and went back to scanning.

People paused as the sound of hammering echoed across the valley. Theo’s team was busy installing the barrier that had been cut from floor panels after the earthquake. Everyone knew it wouldn’t hold, but no one hassled the workers. The boss had insisted on a door, no matter how weak.

Marc started to tell Shawn something, but his attention was snagged by the crackling of a radio near his feet.

“You are an hour late for your check in, Jarvis! Dirce had better have a good reason for the delay this time.”

Marc and Shawn exchanged glances. Dirce hadn’t gotten out a call to his base during the fight. Maybe no one had thought to do it, or maybe no one had done it because Dirce hadn’t ordered them to, but it was clear the caller didn’t know the fight was over.

Marc knelt down to root in the snow, hoping to find the radio. Attached to the soldier, Marc took the entire belt instead of fumbling with cold fingers for the snaps. Even through his gloves, it was rough out here.

“Come in, Jarvis. This is base and you are late for your check in!”

Marc keyed the radio. “All of your men are occupied right now. Would you like to leave a message?”

Around him, other radios fed the exchange to Eagles both in and outside the cave.

“Who is this?!”

“Just a Ghost.”

Chuckles and snickers came from all the Eagles listening, but the voice on the other end of the radio didn’t laugh.

“We have orders for your arrest, Mr. Brady. Please surrender to the nearest UN representative.”

“Well, as I’ve stated, all of your men are busy drawing flies. If you’d like to send another thousand, maybe I can surrender to them.”

There was an awkward pause where the enemy tried to determine if Marc was lying. When he responded, it was obvious that he remembered Marc had a reputation for never bluffing.

“You’ll be sorry for that. Where is Dirce?”

“With his men, of course.” Marc chuckled. “Sorry I can’t send you a picture.”

“You may have won this battle, but in the end, America will be ours.” The response was straight out of another old movie.

Angela hadn’t told Marc how to handle this, but like during his career, he had an instinctive feel for what would push buttons on the other end of the radio. “Socialism will never succeed.”

The response was fast and furious. “Yes, it will! I hate Americans! Stupid! You do not understand how–”

Marc switched the radio off. He had the urge to spew threats in return, but it was a mistake to let the enemy know how soon death was coming, how hard it would hit, or who was going to deliver it.

Around the battlefield, Eagles approved the tactic. Adrian and Angela had both used it and it was effective.

As if to prove the thought, the other radios continued to echo with threats and screaming.

Marc waved a hand. “Unless you have duty out here, get inside. In one hour, this entrance is closing.”

People around him hurried to get in; groups of fighters left the battlefield as they received the message, all eager for warmth and different views–even if it was the cave again. The gore out here was hard to handle.

Marc and Shawn lingered to do another scan. A few survivors were still trying to hide or sneak away, but Marc wasn’t allowing that. He and Shawn marched back over the icy, bloody ground to eliminate those future threats. They had a tedious night in front of them.

**6**

Candy slipped away from Kenn and Tonya in the mess, unnoticed, returning to the open tunnel. She stood at the cold entrance, searching the battlefield. Most of the people were inside now, making her guts churn. The few who were missing were important to her.

“There you are!”

Busy studying the bundled men and women outside, Candy jumped. “What do you want?!”

Tommy held up a hand. “To talk, that’s all. Got a minute? I’d like to discuss Conner.”

“What about him?” Candy knew her tone wasn’t right, but she couldn’t help it. Conner was a sore subject with her now, mostly because she was so confused over the boy. Distracted, she swept the battlefield again.

Tommy knew when Candy spotted Conner. The tension in her shoulders faded and a softer look came over her face.

Tommy frowned. “What’s going on with you two?”

Candy locked down on her emotions, donning an expressionless facade. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Did he have contact with you?”

“How could he? You guys just got here.”

Tommy recognized the evasion and the reluctance to get Conner in trouble. He studied her as she stared at the boy. It was almost as if Candy had missed Conner.

Candy couldn’t help staring. Walking proudly with a gun in hand and a grin on his lips, the boy was attractive, but that wasn’t what drew her so hard. It was different, but at the same time, it was almost like one of Lee’s homecomings. She had spent most of their life waiting for Lee to get home from something. After the war, when he’d come for her, she’d believed life would be different. Then she’d realized he was a full time member of the Eagles and she’d had to suffer once again, waiting for his shifts to end. Now, she had feelings of some sort for yet another male who would spend his life serving the greater good instead of spending the time with her that a relationship required. It was a lot to take in all at once, especially with smoke wafting in and faint pleas for mercy echoing across the battlefield. *I’m so confused.*

“He did well on our trip south.”

Candy was surprised as she realized what was happening. “You want to lift his banishment!”

“Yes. He’s just a kid with a big crush. We’ll keep him away from you.”

“He’s already avoiding me. You don’t need to do that.”

Tommy caught the tone and smiled a bit. “You did miss him.”

Candy shrugged, surprised into the truth. “No one else wants me.”

“That’s not true.”

“You haven’t been here. You don’t know what’s happened.”

Tommy shrugged. “I noticed you have a guard.” James had followed them.

“Yeah.” Candy sighed. “I had a rough time in here.”

“It looks like a lot of people did.” Tommy delivered another smile. “You’re alive. It can’t have been that bad or you wouldn’t be.”

“I’m not sure why I am.”

“Maybe she knows you’ve been sick.” Tommy had spotted the injection marks on Candy’s arms and assumed she’d had to be sedated. Angela had planned to use that on all of those who had trouble being trapped in the mountain.

“I don’t feel well yet.”

“That’s why you still have a guard, I’d guess.”

Candy studied Tommy. She picked out the bigger muscles and the better health under his coat, wondering how many of the camp females would try to signal him as soon as security was reestablished. Candy had never used Tommy’s services, but she’d heard the stories. She’d always assumed that when her urges got that bad, he was the one she would talk to, though.

Candy saw his fast glance toward Kendle, who was conversing with Marc. The fondness in his expression told Candy he wouldn’t be doing that anymore. “What if I want to spend time with him?”

“That’s not up to me, but I’d guess Angela will be glad you’re finding some happiness. If you’re willing. If he’s put some spell on you, she’ll order his death.”

“I’m not under a spell.”

“Are you sure? You’ve done a complete flip since I left.” Tommy had to point it out. “You might be.”

“How would you know?”

“I wouldn’t, but the boss would. Talk to her.”

“She’s busy right now.”

“Unless you’re in danger, let it go for a few days until things settle down.”

“And so I can be sure it’s what I want?”

“Of course. I’d hate to get the order to eliminate him. I kinda like the boy.” Tommy left, nodding to her sentry again.

Candy let him go, mind full of confusion. *So do I, but I don’t know how it happened. Maybe I am under a spell.*

*Do you want me to leave you alone? I will try if you tell me to.*

Conner’s voice in her mind brought a level of peace that Candy couldn’t fight. *Just don’t hurt me, kid. I’m defenseless right now.*

Conner appeared in the entrance of the tunnel, but he didn’t look at her. *I’ll be around when you need me and gone when you don’t.*

*It sounds perfect. What’s the catch?*

*There isn’t one. I want you to be happy. If that’s without me, I accept it.* Conner looked over with all his emotions hidden under a cool layer of adult control. *It’s all up to you now.*

Candy’s cheeks were hot and her body was alive. Even without seeing his expression, she could feel his desires, his obsession. Instead of fear, it gave her hope. Candy turned away, not wanting to be caught staring. *Welcome home, Conner.*

Conner grinned. That was worth more to him than even the respect of Angela and her army.

# Chapter Thirty

**The Cold Hand of Fate**

A close up of a weapon

Description automatically generated

**1**

**T**heo found Angela on the top level, caring for the twins. Both babies had needed a diaper change, judging from the smell. “We’re about to slap a lock on the door, but it’s not going to hold long. The Mountaineers will have to reinforce it. We want a few of them to come watch us now, so they’ll know how.”

“I doubt that any of them except Jimmy will agree to go down there, but you have my permission to try.” She glanced up. “How long?”

Theo sighed, exhausted from all the climbing with his dead leg. “Hours, maybe.”

Angela sighed. “Do the best you can.”

“Incoming.” Ivan was at the entrance to the weapons room, screening everyone who wanted to get near Angela.

Angela scowled. “We may not need the door at all, Theo. Hang around a minute, will you?”

“Trouble?” Theo drew his gun, waving at Debra to get away from them.

“That depends. If they fire and Jimmy’s group rushes us like they’re considering, we won’t need a door. I’ll kill them all and leave this cursed ground wide open.”

Jeff started to get up from his napping spot, but Ivan delivered a fast glare and warning. “I don’t know you. Don’t draw your gun or I’ll consider you a threat to the boss.”

Jeff held up a hand to indicate he wasn’t a problem, but he stayed ready to help if the cocky soldier got his ass handed to him.

“Let us in there!”

“We’ll fire this place up. Move!”

Theo and Ivan tensed, ready to kill at those words.

A small group of battered, desperate refugees shoved into the passage, only stopping because Ivan pointed his gun at them.

“We want to talk to her!”

“She has to let us stay!”

“We haven’t done anything wrong!”

“You entered our home without permission, but you didn’t do anything wrong?” Ivan signaled toward the ladder. “The bottom tunnel is open. Get out of here.”

A large guy with two females cowering behind him lifted a hand. “We want your boss. Move aside!”

Ivan glanced at Angela. “Dead or alive?”

Angela sighed, feeling Jimmy gain control of his group. “He’ll ask, I’ll answer, you’ll shoot.”

“Got it.” Ivan slid his finger onto the trigger. “Ask your question.”

The big man paused as Eagles surrounded him and his family. “Hey! We’re not a threat. The threat is outside. We’re dying!”

Angela placed the twins next to each other and covered them with the blankets Marc had left up here from their bed. She stood up with tired movements that declared her patience at an end. “Where were you during the fight?”

The refugee frowned. “Uh, out of your way!”

“So you’ve been out there the entire time, but didn’t help even though we were trapped in here like rats being tested?”

“Um, no. I mean, we all wanted to…”

“Liar!” Angela lashed out brutally, inhaling as she condemned him. “You helped our enemies. You celebrated when the quake came.”

Ivan didn’t need to hear more. As Angela took the man’s lifeforce, Ivan and the Eagles gunned down his unarmed family. Though it was two men and an older woman, not children, all of the Eagles felt the chore deep in their guts, but they didn’t hesitate. The time for second chances was gone.

**2**

Adrian and Marc both rotated toward the cave. Angela’s pain was fresh.

Marc scowled. “What is it?”

Adrian didn’t want Marc to know how connected he and Angela were, but their truce didn’t allow for lies or even evasions. “She hates to kill. It tears her apart. She’s too hurt by all of this to hide it from me.”

“We’re still teamed.” Marc frowned as he realized Adrian would always be connected in ways that he couldn’t.

“That’s not true.” Adrian resumed their walk of the perimeter. *Trek through the snow-pocalypse*. “You share a unique bond with her. When your powers merge for the first time, it might create the soul mate connection.”

“The what?”

“Where do you think the legends about soul mates came from?”

Marc considered that. “Like with twins?”

“Yes. They share the same brain functions during tests in the lab, especially during emotional moments. They also experience each other’s pain if they share enough. It creates a neuro-bridge.”

“How is that possible?” Marc’s tone rose into near panic as his mind tried to adjust. “How is any of this possible?”

Adrian didn’t stop walking. He’d spotted a survivor lurking behind a cluster of boulders. “How is life possible? A big bang? Where did the material in the bang come from? Where did the empty space it filled come from? A God? Where did the God come from? Spores? Random? It all had to be created and that, my hesitant friend, implies some type of power beyond rational understanding for us mere specks in the universe.”

Marc was stunned for a second. He’d never considered that angle. “We’re not meant to understand?”

“Actually, I’ve always believed that when we can, it means we’re ready to go home.”

Marc paused for Adrian to fire into the skull of the bleeding soldier who was crawling away with only one leg. “And until then, we have to obey?”

“That’s where the problem lies with our kind. We have gifts, but we’re not supposed to use them for anything other than good. Taking a life, for any reason, is forbidden, but we want to survive, so we kill in self-defense and corrupt ourselves a little each time.”

Marc thought of all the evil he’d eliminated from the world since becoming a Marine. “I can’t regret the deaths. It prevented those bastards from becoming big enough to abuse people on a mass scale.”

“I feel the same way, but it doesn’t change our rules.”

“Will it help us in the end?”

Adrian shrugged. “Some of us hope so. Angela believes it will at least pardon her fighters, but I don’t. We’re damned. That’s the price heroes often pay.”

Marc didn’t want to discuss it anymore, but he refused to hide from his fears. “What about the kids?”

Adrian was impressed that Marc had jumped over concerns for himself so fast. “There’s a limit. What they’ve done to stay alive will be judged. They can’t escape that. In some cases, forgiveness will come because they didn’t know it was wrong or they didn’t know what would happen. Nothing they’ve done as a part of Safe Haven would damn them.”

“How do you know so much about us?”

Adrian had forgotten that Marc had been out fighting the government while he made the call that had expose his shame and history to the world. “I was raised in the government labs.”

“I thought you worked for them, hunting our kind.”

“I did. But I was born in a lab and spent most of my childhood in one between escapes.” Adrian sighed, unable to ignore that old, haunting pain. “Then they took something I loved and everything changed. I wanted to kill, to hunt.” Adrian started to say more and stopped. “Are you good for a bit?”

Marc turned toward the path. “I’ll check the transportation progress.”

Adrian felt the cold hand of fate slide across his neck. He spun around. “Duck!”

Marc hit the snow as a bullet was fired. It went over his shoulder and slammed into the teenage girl about to jump down from the cliff and stab him with a butcher knife.

Angela’s gratitude swarmed over Adrian.

Adrian arched, unprepared for the open blast that was magnified by their bond. Groaning, his hands clenched into fists and his knees trembled.

Across the valley, Eagles stared in confusion and amusement. A few of the sentries had witnessed it all, but they hadn’t been close enough or fast enough to help.

Marc was only a little jealous as he observed. He grinned at Adrian’s expression. “Do you need to check your shorts?”

Adrian shuddered, trying to recover. “I think so, yeah.”

Marc stepped over the body. “You know where I’ll be.”

Adrian didn’t respond. He was still trying to breathe.

**3**

“Get ready for the bugout.” Kenn’s voice echoed through the levels. “All Islanders will be at the exit at dawn. Bring what you can carry. I repeat. We leave at dawn.”

Kenn and Tonya marched through the corridor, making sure everyone knew where to be and when. They were also walking each passage to verify no one was hiding. They didn’t know how many refugees had made it in before Dirce’s shot closed the tunnel.

Tonya stayed close to Kenn, her gun in hand. She was the unexpected wildcard for any lurkers. Kenn hadn’t liked the order, but he hadn’t been able to argue that she was safest by his side.

As Kenn and Tonya walked the cave, people understood what they were doing and got out of the way. Most of those were already dressed for the weather and on their way out, carrying small pouches and bags. More civilians huddled in corners and crevices to make plans. Some of them would stick together, but Kenn believed most of them would abandon their group as soon as they departed.

The sound of the cave with the passage open created a roar that was magnified. People flinched at coughs and nose blowing, at loud chatter and shouts. Tonya assumed the avalanche was responsible for the new sounds in the cave. Everything was coated in a thick layer of snow, ice, and rock, except for the open tunnel on the bottom. It had also changed the draft.

“The bugout starts at dawn. Be at the exit, with your possessions. All members of this mountain are welcome with Safe Haven.”

Tonya held in a snort. None of Jimmy’s people would defect. The fight they hadn’t participated in had scared them, as had Angela’s fast reaction to the refugees who had barged their way through with weapons and threats. Jimmy’s group was all on the bottom level now, crammed into the tarp area to defend themselves against the evil descendants. It was pathetic.

Kenn heard voices and signaled her into the shadows.

Tonya got ready to kill for her man.

“The bugout starts at dawn…” Kenn walked down the dim passage, not recognizing the voices. “Be at the…” He slid into the open, pointing his gun. “Come out of there!”

Tonya gasped at the condition of the three kids who came from the shadows, lowering her gun.

Kenn didn’t take a chance. These were outside refugees. “Put your hands up.”

The trio did as instructed, shirts lifting to reveal rib bones and bloated bellies.

“Please.” The smallest girl tried to smile. “We need help.”

Kenn waved the gun toward the ladder. “Go to the top.”

Tonya hoped Angela would let the kids stay.

Kenn gestured for Tonya to go between them, splitting the group up so he could examine their behavior.

By the time they made it to the top floor, kids weak and gasping for air, Kenn had made his choice. He scooped up the smallest girl, ignoring her surprised cry. When she sagged against him in relief, Kenn patted her little back. He bumped Angela’s door open without a warning and sat the child on her feet. “We’re keeping these.”

Angela smiled at the scared kids. “His name is Kenn. You’ll owe him.”

All of them turned to Kenn with adoring gazes that implied his family was also going to be bigger than he’d expected.

Tonya snickered at his expression, not unhappy with it. She could practice on these before her own came.

“Stay and help?”

Tonya was glad of Angela’s offer. “He’d rather that I did anyway.”

Satisfied, Kenn went to the exit.

Tiny feet followed him.

Realizing it was the kids, Kenn pointed at Tonya. “She’ll help you get settled.”

Tonya gathered the kids, spotting what Kenn hadn’t. “You’re descendants. Come sit down. We’ll get you something to eat while you hear the rules and promise to always follow them, okay?”

Kenn stepped out and closed the door, glowering at Ivan. “Guard this cubby with your life or you won’t have one.”

Ivan stared at the Marine, frowning. The menace of these Safe Haven men was impressive. *I can’t wait to be like that!*

**4**

“There goes another group.” Shawn directed Marc’s attention to the tunnel entrance.

They observed as David and a few of the others came out onto the battlefield in full gear and proceeded west. David was bundled up so thick that as soon as he left the grey stone of the mountain and stepped onto the snow and ice, he almost disappeared. Everything he was wearing blended in perfectly as he broke away from the others to go northwest.

“I’m sorry to see him leave.” Adrian joined the two men by their vehicles.

Marc assumed Adrian and David had become friends, so he wasn’t surprised by the response. “Was he a good guy?”

Adrian rotated to sweep in another direction, making sure no one else was sneaking up on them. “He’s a killer.”

In the middle of looting a body, Marc snorted. “Who isn’t, these days?”

Adrian thought about elaborating, but realized they would have plenty of time to discuss things like that in the future. From the dreams he’d had, Adrian knew David would survive, as would Billy. Both men had a hard road in front of them, but their destinies were entwined with Safe Haven in so many ways that the bond could never be broken.

“Does Angela want them to go now?”

Marc shrugged at Shawn’s question. “If she didn’t, we would have already gotten a message to stop them.” Marc headed toward the entrance, finished with the check in and complete walk through of the battlefield. It had taken five hours. “Spread the word. We shut down in thirty minutes. No exceptions.”

Shawn frowned. “What about transportation?”

“No exceptions. Find a way to hide them.”

“A few of us are willing to camp in the vehicles overnight.”

Marc considered Shawn’s offer. “Fine, but you choose the crew and you’re in charge of them.”

Thrilled to be useful again, Shawn hurried off.

Marc reached the entrance as another small group was coming out. He recognized Joseph, Missa, and the group of nuns who had been with Sister Sarah. Marc stepped aside, making a rude gesture. “It’s open. You can run away and hide now.”

The entire group hurried by with ugly glances and no words of gratitude. It was clear that they couldn’t wait to forget descendants had ever existed.

Marc tried hard not to resent them, but failed. He couldn’t resist a last parting shot. “How many of you would be alive if not for magic?”

The group took off running without a response to Marc’s glowing red orbs. He had no interest in arguing and he wasn’t trying to change their minds. He just wanted to remind them they owed their lives to Angela.

Marc paused near the garbage can one of the guards had dragged down and set on fire, grateful for the warmth on his frozen fingers. He lingered around the can, making eye contact with the guards while listening to the few people still coming into the cave. It was the fighters now, happy they’d gotten their share of loot and kills.

“It’s so sad, man. All of them would have been welcome here.”

“I bet the boss isn’t doing well. She hates killing.”

*I’m still not sure why I don’t believe that.* Marc kept listening.

“A lot of people think she gets hot from killing.”

“Do you?!”

“No, man, take it easy. I’m just saying, a lot of people didn’t like it. They believe she did.”

“They’re wrong and you should tell them that. Life is valuable to us.”

“But she killed so many!”

“She did what she had to, to make sure we survived. Everyone is jealous of magic and repulsed by death, but remember that if she wasn’t a ruthless bitch, we would all be in government bunkers right now.”

Marc let the men go by without adding anything to the conversation. The guard had summed it up.

Marc advanced to the inner cave, signaling toward the guards. “I want this cave shut down in twenty minutes. No one in, no one out–no exceptions.”

**5**

“Hey, wake up.”

Jeff jumped at the hand on his shoulder, jolted in alertness he wasn’t ready for yet. He’d never been so sore. “What?!”

Ivan pointed toward Angela’s location. “The boss is ready for you.”

Jeff staggered to his feet, not positive he was ready for the conversation he needed to have. He hadn’t expected to fall asleep.

Jeff eased into the cubby, noting all the kids around Angela were sleeping. At least they seemed to be. It was hard to tell. After what they had done during the fight, he could understand the need to rest. He was amazed by it.

“Have a seat anywhere you can find room.” Angela was busy changing the diaper of a small baby.

Jeff took a seat against the door. “This can wait.”

“No, it really can’t. A group of people are leaving shortly. You should go with them.”

Jeff winced. “I’m being banished?”

Surprised, Angela paused to inspect him. “No. Should you be?”

“Not that I know of, but life keeps changing on me.”

“Because Safe Haven keeps pulling at you, but when you’re here, it reminds you of everything you’ve lost, so you’re miserable?”

“That about sums it up.”

“It was hard for me to stay too.” Angela covered the baby and met Jeff’s eye. “I lost a child here. I wanted to leave and never come back.”

Jeff hadn’t considered that she might feel that way. “Wow.”

“I know, right? But they needed me here more than I needed my sanity. You don’t have to do that to yourself. You can walk away, and maybe find happiness somewhere else.”

Jeff shrugged. “I’ve tried, but I haven’t gotten far either time.”

“Fate knew how much we needed you to help. Maybe the third time will be the charm.”

Jeff caught her not-so-subtle hints that he should leave and frowned again. “What is it that I should do out in the wilderness?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe find a group of people and make sure they make it to the boat on time?”

Instead of being angry, Jeff stared. “Are you intentionally giving me trips in and out of Safe Haven?”

Angela looked up with an innocent expression. “Who, me?”

Jeff chuckled. “I might be willing to do that.”

“If you decide not to, don’t worry about them. I believe Seth and Doug can handle it. I just think it would be easier on the kids if they all had someone around who isn’t distracted.”

“But I am distracted. It’s one of the reasons I need to leave Kevin here this time. I don’t want to get him killed.”

“Even though you’ve felt like killing him?”

Jeff snickered at Angela’s joke. “You know it.”

“What I know is you’re not ready to settle down. I also know there’s nothing wrong with that. If we don’t have scouts out in the wastelands, how will we know if another threat is coming? Not everybody has to go with Safe Haven to be in our light.”

Jeff was seduced by that. He didn’t want to betray his loyalty to the future, but the constant reminders of Crista’s death were too much for him to handle yet. “I loved her.”

Angela sent a wave of comfort, not sure that he would accept it from her. “I am sorry.”

Jeff allowed her gift to soothe him, willing to take a relief from the pain. “What if I want to stay?” He braced to hear anything.

Angela shrugged. “You always have a home with us. We’ll help you adjust.”

Jeff wanted to be relieved, but he was too aware of the response from the kids in the room. Many of them were now glaring in disapproval. “What?!”

Leanne glanced to Angela for permission before she spoke.

Angela nodded. He needed to hear it and it shouldn’t come from the boss he mistrusted.

“You don’t belong here.”

Jeff scowled at the girl. “How do you know?”

“I know a lot about you. I know stuff about everybody who comes in here to talk to the alpha. You don’t even have a shield up.”

Jeff realized the kids were reading his mind. “I don’t know how to do that yet. Get out of my brain!” He didn’t feel anything, but he knew the little girl had withdrawn. “Don’t do that again.”

“This is my job.” Leeann’s expression darkened. “You don’t really like it here. Why?”

“I don’t like magic and this alpha stuff is bullshit.”

“That isn’t it.”

Jeff sighed. “No, I want my old world back.”

“And that’s why you don’t belong here. When you’ve made peace with your past, then the future can open.”

Jeff thought the little girl sounded like a religious therapist, but didn’t say so. “Whatever.”

Angela grinned at the common response from Eagles who didn’t want to face something they knew they needed to handle.

“I might want you to lock up my gift.”

The kids went still and quiet, worried they were about to witness what some of them now feared more than fire.

“Not for any reason will I do that to you. Neither will Marc, though Adrian might be cruel enough.” Angela forced a smile. “How about a beer and another nap?”

Jeff got up and departed the cubby.

When the door slammed, several of the children who had been sleeping lifted heads to peer around in groggy concern.

“It’s alright. Enjoy your rest.”

Satisfied they weren’t in danger, all of the kids went to sleep except for Leeann and Cody. Those two sat in the corner, cheeks together, whispering.

*Would you like to share?*

Both kids looked over, drawn by Angela’s mental attention.

Cody shook his head. “Not me. You tell her.”

Leanne shrugged. “We’re trying to figure out who farted. It stinks in here.”

*It was me!* Jeff was snickering as he sent the message. *I gassed all of you for being rude.*

Angela’s laughter filled the top levels.

**6**

“I hate this part.”

Marc nodded at Kenn’s comment. Saying goodbye sucked.

Natoli came forward with his arm extended. “It has been one hell of an adventure, my friend.”

Marc chuckled. “That it has.” He clasped arms with the Indian he had come to view as a brother. “I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

It was clear that Natoli wanted to respond to the comment, but instead, he inclined his chin in acceptance of the possibility.

Marc motioned Natoli toward a table, glad the mess wasn’t full. “Do you have a minute?”

Natoli followed him gratefully. There were many things that he needed to say, but all of them required privacy.

Marc knew something was up. “What’s the problem?”

“The future holds many challenges for you. I have had a dream of a time that all the ghosts will live with my people.”

Marc sat down on a rickety, charred chair, and gestured at the seat across from him. “Tell me.”

While Marc and Natoli conversed out of hearing range, Jeff waited with Natoli’s warriors. He had something he needed to ask Marc. It wasn’t bad, but it was necessary. Trying to be patient while fighting the feeling of being trapped, Jeff scanned the mess. It felt a little like the Safe Haven he had known before they came here, but only a little. It was obvious the quake had devastated this camp in multiple ways. The hardest one to except was how it had changed the people. Jeff had never thought to feel such desperation from Safe Haven, let alone to see it split into factions that all wanted each other dead.

Natoli and Marc left the table to join his warriors. Marc shook with each of the men. “You’re always welcome with us.”

The warriors returned the gesture, but didn’t speak. They were all eager to get back to the families they’d been away from while protecting Marc.

“You will tell your woman what I said?”

Marc nodded at Natoli’s question. “You have my word on it.”

Natoli signaled to his warriors and walked toward the tunnel.

Marc was sad. He would never forget his time among the Indians. Natoli and his warriors were part of the reason it had been so special. Marc had never felt closer to any group of people in his life, and that included the Marines he’d risked his life with on a daily basis around the world. Marc shrugged it off. “Next?”

Jeff gestured toward the small table this time. “Got a minute?”

Marc chuckled. “If you have news about Dog, I have a couple of minutes.”

Jeff sat down. “I talked to Dog before we left Sally. He said his duty wasn’t done yet and refused to add anything to it except that he’s monitoring the herds.”

Marc didn’t ask for more even though he wanted to. “He has the right to be free.”

Jeff shrugged. “I’m not sure he’s doing it willingly, but duty is often like that.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“I need to ask a question. It will help me make up my mind about going to the island or staying here.”

Marc waved a hand, telling Jeff to go ahead.

Jeff took in a breath. “Do I die on that boat?”

Surprised, Marc frowned. “I’m not usually the one people ask things like that.”

Jeff didn’t keep his voice down. “You’re the only one I trust to tell me the truth. The other so-called leaders here will use it to their advantage or only tell me what they want me to hear.”

Marc didn’t deny the claim. “There are prices to deals like this.”

“I agree to the price. I trust you.”

Marc concentrated and immediately began to pick up visions of Jeff’s future. It was a tense moment before he began to speak.

“You’re not safe anywhere. As long as you are able to breathe new life into the world, you will be hunted relentlessly.” Marc shuddered, unable to fight the emotions of his body as the visions played out in front of him. “The island is the place you may have peace, but even that will come at a high price.”

“Haven’t I paid enough?!”

Marc didn’t react to Jeff’s shout, though it drew attention from everyone else in the mess. “When you’re able to face your demons, then you have a chance of happiness. Be it here or on the island, you won’t find peace without that.”

“I don’t know how to do it.”

Marc came back to himself, shaking his head to clear the daze. It didn’t help. “You have to study the choices you’ve made and try to figure out why you made them. You’re a very angry person. When you understand why you’re mad, maybe you can solve the problem and then fitting in would be easier.” Marc stood up before Jeff could respond. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go. Angela is calling.”

Jeff let him go, able to see Marc was dead on his feet. The information, he stored until he was ready to face it. It was a copy of what Leeann had told him, but Jeff felt it this time. Until he faced his losses, their ghosts would never leave him.

# Chapter Thirty-One

**Goodbye**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“I**t is time for us to go, my friend.”

Charlie and Tracy both glanced up in surprise.

“Go?” Charlie caught on quicker than Tracy did and stood up. They were in the small training room that was almost cleared now, stealing time alone.

“Our people worry. Winter is coming to us.”

“I didn’t know you had winter.” Charlie tried to come up with a way to stall the group, but he understood from their expressions that it wouldn’t be successful. The Indians wanted to go home.

Natoli held out an arm. “Your family is always welcome with us.”

Charlie shook, sad and proud at the same time. The only way the Indians would leave was if the threat was over. That meant he no longer needed the escort. “Will we see you again?”

“Several of my warriors would like to visit Safe Haven Island.”

“My dad would love that!”

Natoli gestured at the group of braves standing stoically behind him. “Three of these, and others from our camp, will find you at the boat. They will expect to be treated like any other who joins your camp.”

“Oh, they will be. Anyone coming into our ranks will be vetted and trained.”

“That is good.”

“This wasn’t all of the UN troops. The rest are in Market Town with Dirce’s boss.”

“That is the town of slaves?”

“We believe so.”

“If you are wrong, the town will be spared?”

“Yes, but we aren’t. Kendle’s group swears the UN is using an airstrip near there.”

“We will take this information to our people.” Natoli shook with the boy again. “You are doing well on your quest to become a man. Do not give up on that.”

Charlie smiled, assuming the Indian was referring to him and Tracy. “Full effort, every time.”

Natoli grinned. “In the rest of life, as well.”

Charlie put an arm around Tracy’s shoulders as the Indians left the training room.

“They’d take us along.”

Charlie was surprised Tracy had mentioned it. “Do you want to?”

“You do.”

“Yeah, but they need us here more. For now.”

“I know you’re thinking about not going to the island. That will kill your mom and maybe even ruin everyone’s plans to stay in Safe Haven.”

“Adrian said she’d give it up if I asked her to.”

Tracy wasn’t sure about that, but she nodded. “You’re her son. You come first.”

Charlie sighed. He wanted to go off exploring, but he also wanted Tracy to be safe and even Natoli couldn’t do that. Only the descendants could. “We’ll stay with our camp.”

Tracy snuggled against him, relieved. She trusted Charlie and Natoli, but she loved Safe Haven. This is where she wanted to be. “Do they need help packing?”

“Yes. We’ve had a break and warmed up. We should help.” Charlie stood up and extended a hand. “Let’s do it.”

Tracy chuckled. “We did.”

Charlie tugged her into his arms, almost as tall as she was now. He’d done a lot of growing over the last months. Not all of it had been pleasant, but he’d come through it smarter. “I love you.”

Tracy melted under his tone and lips. When he let her go, she was gasping for air with a heart that was pounding in her chest. “Nice.”

Charlie led her from the room before he got carried away. The sound of her pleasure was the sweetest dessert he’d ever had. Nothing on this earth would ever make him give her up. He would die first.

**2**

“Water is at full function now. The top avalanche re-covered the tube with melting snow.” Kenn skimmed Ivan’s report. “That was convenient.”

“Yeah, it’ll last until it melts down to the tube again. Jimmy’s group will need to go out a few times a month and use the big cats up there to pile the snow back over it.” Ivan shrugged. “We’d planned on doing that once as a demonstration for them, but the boss says none of our citizens are to go up there now.”

“That’s fair, isn’t it? The Mountaineers haven’t done much to help. They didn’t even reload guns or body-collect during the battle. Let them secure their own water.”

“I agree. So does Angela, which is why you need to pass these new orders around.”

Kenn recognized Adrian’s handwriting. “Is he with her?”

Ivan kept his tone even. “No one was happy about that except her. Even he protested.”

“Who sent him up there?”

“The Ghost.”

Kenn chuckled. “Marc’s playing with him. Don’t worry over it. What’s next?”

As point man for the bugout, Kenn was getting updates on everything that Angela was, plus all the smaller stuff that was below her paygrade. Ivan liked being the go-between. “They have two weeks of meat. Four, if they ration. We’ve found and delivered a month of non-perishables to them as well.” Ivan skimmed his notes and cleared his throat. “She said…*I don’t want to hear anyone’s shit over that choice. We’re not animals. We’ll share what we have.*”

Kenn grunted. “Good job on the tone. Sounded just like her when she thinks something is a clear case of right and wrong.”

“I practiced it on the way down.” Ivan went back to the notes. “The repair crew almost has the door installed. They’re waiting to test the lock and seal it until the last group is gone. Theo implied it might trigger a new fight if they came down to discover it locked. People might not believe it’s part of the repair effort.”

“Smart and correct.” Kenn signaled toward the small group on the opposite side of the mess from them. “But those Eagles will handle it. The boss wants us secured for the night. Tell Theo to finish it. We’ll cover any problems.”

Ivan rotated to give a hand coded message to the soldier lingering in the doorway for instructions.

James hurried off as Ivan continued to update Kenn.

“The power in here is one third functional, but with more sunlight, that’ll go up to fifty percent. The rest of the levels won’t have power unless the Mountaineers know how to do it. Angela implied it doesn’t matter, so we shouldn’t worry over it.”

“That means it will only bother her.” Kenn liked being able to translate. “I knew it would be an issue. You can tell her I left detailed instructions for Jimmy. He can do it himself. I also gave him a box of tools and wire pieces for repairs.”

Ivan wrote it down, happy to be able to give Angela good news on something. “That leaves heat for them. She asked for ideas.”

“None. Without the vents in place and the furnace running, I can’t do anything. We’ll leave them all the extra clothes and space heaters if she wants.”

“She knew you didn’t have anything. She said we’d be out in the open in winter weather, so we get the heaters and clothes. Jimmy’s group will burn everything else to stay warm. It might hold them for a month.” Ivan studied Kenn. “Why won’t they go find another furnace?”

Kenn grunted. “We brought three. Two were buried and haven’t been found. One was destroyed in the quake. If Jimmy’s smart, he’ll keep digging for the boxes that are here.”

“But he won’t, will he?”

“No. He’s going to have his hands full with his wounded and the would-be leaders as soon as we drive away. You know how we used to go into shitty towns, fix them up, and they’d be stripped the same night we were pulled out?”

Ivan grunted, angered at the memories. “Yes. Made me want to go back in with a shitmaker. That big gun would have cleared the problem.”

“Me too, but those were desperate refugees trying to survive in the only ways they knew how.” Kenn gestured at the cave around them. “Not much difference here.”

“I get your point.” Ivan skimmed a last time. “That’s all of it except for your specific bugout plans. She wants a copy now.”

Kenn handed Ivan two sheets of paper that had been folded into a small square. “Boss only.”

Ivan understood that meant he wasn’t allowed to read it either and let out a sigh. “See? That’s the hard part for me. I’ll fight and work, but I hate to be out of the loop.”

Kenn felt an instant bond with the soldier despite them being natural rivals as Army and Marines. “It will take longer because of all this. Be patient and be loyal.”

“Been that all my life, so no sweat. Hey, I have a question that’s been bugging me for months. Got a minute for something not related to anything that matters now?”

“Go ahead.”

“Well, I’ve noticed that our camp doesn’t have some types of people.”

Kenn frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“No allergies, no asthmatics, no drug addicts, no diabetes. I can’t figure out why.”

“They didn’t survive. Medications ran out, withdrawal-weakened bodies starved, the crippled and handicapped were abandoned. Society was cleansed.” Kenn scratched his arm where something had bit him during the battle. “Fucking stupid war.”

“The price was too high, you know?” Ivan clammed up, face clouding over.

“Yes.” Kenn remembered Ivan mentioning losing an elderly parent and assumed his mother or father had been abandoned at a nursing facility. They’d come across many scenes like that since December.

Ivan rotated toward the passage. “Catch ya later.”

Kenn recognized the next team leader of a group of Eagles who would fly through the ranks. Military men and women fit right into Safe Haven. It was usually the average Joe’s they had to convince to fight or work.

“That’s great!”

“We’d love to have you!”

Kenn’s attention was drawn to the small group making plans to leave while having a last warm meal with friends. Doug and Allan were shaking Jeff’s hand, welcoming him to their group. Roy and Romeo also appeared relieved. Kenn made a note to tell Angela that. It would help her later when weeks had gone by without word from Doug’s clan. Kenn was also glad that Jeff was going with them. Doug would be busy protecting his new sons, and Allan couldn’t handle all the security on his own. Having Jeff along would help.

Kenn expected Kevin to go with them too. He had hit on Cynthia as soon he got in the cave, so the other Eagles were ignoring him. Kenn assumed their reactions would have been different if the reporter had been willing to resume that relationship. He believed that because Conner was being treated to a hero’s welcome that included Candy sitting at the same double table. All of Kendle’s team was there, regaling the eating citizens with stories of their Market Town adventures. Candy had joined them, taking the seat farthest from the boy, but she’d been laughing with them and making eye contact with the teenager the entire time. Word was already flying that Candy might have forgiven Conner; his banishment might be up.

Kenn hoped so. The boy had done well. It would please Adrian, and it would make life easier for the camp, but most of all, it would ease Angela’s guilt over banishing him in the first place. Kenn knew she hadn’t wanted to do it. Kenn glanced at the man sitting by himself in the far corner. Like Ray didn’t want to leave Dale. They were all doing things they didn’t want to do.

As he had the thought, Ray stood up and marched toward the ladder with determined steps.

Kenn braced to hear Dale’s screams in a few minutes. Ray had tried to talk to Dale a couple of times in the last twenty-four hours, but it always ended the same way. Kenn hoped this would be the last time Ray tried to reach his former mate. They had all heard enough screaming for one day.

**3**

“Leave him alone!”

Ray shoved by the doctor to reach the den where Dale was still hiding. “I have two things to say to you before I go. You’re gonna listen and then you can scream all you want.”

Dale pushed himself up against the wall, shaking from the effort.

Ray hated how thin Dale was, how scared he was. His trembling form needed a hug that Ray was no longer allowed to deliver. He could see that Dale hadn’t packed and knew he really was staying here. Ray wouldn’t have supported it even if the mountain hadn’t been in danger of being breached. The doctor couldn’t help Dale the way he needed.

“They’ve always meant more to you than I have.” Dale sneered, scanning Ray’s outfit. “You’re already packed to go. I’m not stupid.”

“I told you I was going.” Ray couldn’t help explaining again. “Safe Haven is the only chance any of us have.” He tossed a pouch at Dale’s grimy feet, making him jump. “I’ve cared for you when no else did. I’ve worked hard to earn a place so that our kind would be safe. You wanted me to pick between you and doing what was right for our future. You were wrong to do that to me.” Ray rotated toward the ladder. “Goodbye, Dale.”

“What was the other thing?” Dale couldn’t erase his anger or his confusion, but he swallowed it long enough to speak. “You said two.”

Ray didn’t stop walking. “If you call for me, I’ll always come, no matter how far apart we are. I love you. I always have and I always will.”

Ray was out of earshot before Dale could blink.

Dale knew Ray didn’t want to hear the screams again, but that was his only defense against the pain Ray kept shoving into his heart.

“It’s not his fault.”

Dale scrambled up against the wall now, opening his mouth to scream for help.

The vet spit in disgust, also going up the ladder. “What a waste. See if I save your ass again.”

“You killed Dennis!”

“And I’d do it again.” The vet kept climbing so he would be gone before the guards came to check on Dale. “If you knew what I knew, you would have killed him too.”

“I don’t believe you! Get out of here, freak!”

Jimmy’s group gathered near Dale to offer him comfort now that he’d declared himself one of them.

The vet spotted Ray crying in the shadows on the crushed level, but kept going up the ladder. He wanted to offer a hug, but that would have to wait until Ray’s pain had eased over this awful ending of his past life. After that, the vet would still have to keep his distance for a while so Ray didn’t resent him more than he was already going to. Then, Chris planned to offer Ray a shoulder to cry on and anything else his little heart desired. He’d wanted Ray for a long time. Now, Dale wasn’t in the way. The vet’s obsessive fantasies about Angela would never happen, but his desire for Ray was a real possibility. One of two wasn’t bad as far as the vet was concerned. This life was good for him.

**4**

Alone while the kids were being fed and taken to the bathroom, Adrian and Angela leaned against the stone walls, staring at each other. It’d been an exhausting day and both of them were afraid to let their emotions escape, but concern over Marc’s anger was the top priority. The temporary truce between the two men was helping Angela recover faster than she had expected, but she’d used up all her energy during the fight. It would be days before she was okay again unless she took more lifeforces. The ones she had taken only kept her from becoming a withered husk. She’d refused to take enough to create a reserve.

Adrian didn’t speak, not wanting to interrupt her contemplations or spread bad vibes. He didn’t know why Marc had sent him in here, but he wasn’t in any big hurry to find out.

“You know what will happen after we leave here.”

Adrian winced, mind flying through a repeat of his banishment. “Thank you.”

“And this is the last time we’ll be alone together.”

“We shouldn’t be at all.”

“I know.”

They could have spent the time doing a hundred different things, but Adrian was content when Angela began to drift off. He watched her and let his mind wander. This was her way of showing him that she trusted him enough to rest in his presence, something she didn’t do with many people even though the Eagles had been vetted. Kenn had only received this honor recently and Adrian had been surprised then. He was shocked now. Everyone knew they were in here together. Fighting the urge to open the door so people would know it was innocent, Adrian continued to watch over her and enjoy the reward.

Angela didn’t tell him this was so she could rest uninterrupted for an hour. The guards would put everyone else on hold, thinking she wanted privacy, and she did, but not for a bonding moment with Adrian. She needed a break. Marc was helping her get one.

**5**

“What are you doing?”

Cynthia tossed another stack of notebooks into the can fire by the closed tunnel door. “Getting ready to go, same as everyone else.” She didn’t look at Daryl. “What are you doing?”

“Taking care of loose ends.”

She tensed. “Does that mean me?”

Daryl backed up a few steps. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I just wanted to apologize.”

Cynthia relaxed, understanding she’d taken it the wrong way. “It’s all good. You didn’t want to be a part of my drama. I get that.”

“I didn’t want to be another distraction to my team and to the leaders who are trying to keep us all alive. I won’t do that.”

Cynthia respected him for it. She also thought better of him because he’d come to apologize even though he didn’t have much to be sorry for. “This is my mess, but thank you for caring enough to talk to me about it.”

Cynthia regarded Daryl when he lingered, not blinking as smoke curled around her nose. Harsh, it brought tears to her eyes that she refused to shed or even blink away. She was using the gift of her child to try to penetrate Daryl’s mind. She wasn’t searching for a friend, only needing to be positive that he wasn’t lying to her or trying to set her up for something.

Daryl noted the reporter looked better without the weight she had lost over the last two weeks, but that was the extent of the good. The chipped, broken fingernails that were layered with dirt, and the greasy, flaky hair that hadn’t been brushed since the quake, were giveaways that she wasn’t recovering the way everyone had hoped.

“We’re good. You can go now.”

Daryl wanted to accept the dismissal. He had work and friends waiting for him, but he also had a small hole in his heart where Cynthia had been for a short time. “Please forgive me for hurting you.”

Tears came to her eyes.

“I’m not asking because I want to be with you. I’m asking because I miss our friendship.”

“I don’t.” Cynthia wiped her face. “I miss the sex.”

Daryl burst out laughing.

Cynthia smiled. “I forgive you.”

Daryl held out a hand. “Maybe in the future, we can be friends again.”

Cynthia blushed, shaking. “Maybe.” She’d always liked Daryl. She still did.

“Good.” He left her with a better mood, glad it had gone so well. He’d half expected the screaming that Ray was getting from Dale whenever he tried to speak with him.

Cynthia returned to burning books. She’d already destroyed the copies of her newspaper and petition. *I’m going good. The only way to stop me is to kill me and Angela won’t let you. Fate, be damned. You can’t reach me now.*

**6**

“When did he come inside?”

Adrian shrugged, emerging from the passage outside Angela’s room. “Didn’t see him. Maybe Theo knows.”

Marc studied the vet. He’d been aware of the man as soon as he came up the ladder, even though it wasn’t in sight of where he and Adrian were standing. The vet was bundled up in the same clothes he had been wearing before the earthquake, complete with tacky gloves and bloodstained boots. As he slipped through the cave, he left awful tracks.

Adrian and Marc both tried to scan the vet’s mind, aware of him mumbling and muttering, but neither of them could get through. It had been a long day and their energy was gone, something they were glad that Jimmy and his group didn’t know.

Marc made a note about the vet. “He has to go soon.”

“Yeah, but how?” Adrian thumbed toward the door. “He’s under her protection.”

“She’ll order it.”

“You think?”

Marc sighed. “No, like with you, she’ll say he helped the greater good and deserves another chance.”

Adrian flushed, but didn’t argue. He was too cold and too tired for it, but more than that, he’d enjoyed the peaceful moments with Marc today. He didn’t want it to end.

“That’s because I’ve blasted you with alpha slime at every opportunity. It’ll wear off.”

Adrian tried to joke. “Alpha slime. That just sounds wrong.”

“I know, but it’s perfect for you.”

Adrian spun around and left.

Marc stared, sensing the man’s churning emotions, but he didn’t enjoy it. In fact, he disliked it. “Guess the slime works both ways.”

Marc proceeded to the room to check on Angela and get the next set of orders. He’d already stopped at the mess to give Kenn updates.

Marc found a line of people waiting to meet with Angela. He could hear the happy voices of children in with her and hoped there were also a few guards. Marc slid between people to reach the cubby, but he didn’t go in so he didn’t interrupt the current conversation. He didn’t know what it was about, but that didn’t matter. The boss got respect first, and nagged later.

The door opened.

Marc did a quick sweep. All of the team leaders were crammed into the cubby. He grinned as he realized their laps were being used by children who played with their jackets, their hair, and absorbed the good vibes from all the safety.

“Come on in.”

Marc pushed the door shut and sank down right there. A few seconds later, Cody crawled into his lap.

Marc hugged the boy, waiting for the conversation to get around to something he could add to or was needed for. Before he knew it, he was leaning against the barrier with his eyes closed and heart settling into a rhythm of peace.

Kylee gestured. “Told you it wasn’t just me.”

Angela smiled. All of them being together again was producing great vibes, but everyone had worked hard today and hadn’t slept well since the earthquake. It was natural that when they got into an environment where they felt safe, they would crash.

“Let him rest. I’ll get his updates later.” She glanced at Kyle. “You’ll be in charge of security during the bugout. You report to Kenn.” She held up her hand at Neil’s frown. “You’re in charge of transporting the wounded to the vehicles, including Samantha and Jennifer.” Angela paused for the protests.

Neil and Kyle both had them, but didn’t speak. It made sense that their females would be with the wounded, since they were both injured. That didn’t mean they had to like it.

“I want the tunnel open an hour before dawn so we can load the vehicles with our supplies, gear, and belongings. From that point on, I want guards on the vehicles. It’ll be chaotic. People will be packing, running in for stuff they’ve forgotten, and of course, there will be lots of drama from goodbyes. I don’t expect any fighting, but we will interfere where necessary. I’ve instructed Jimmy to keep his people inside until we go. If you find them outside, keep them away from the vehicles and our group. I’m not sensing problems there either, but again, we won’t take chances.” Angela picked up a small stack of papers on the ground next to her knee and passed them out. “I haven’t found my notebooks. Sorry about the crudeness. I drew them from memory.”

The team leaders were happy to have maps. They were even happier to scan them and locate stashes of supplies.

When they would have questioned, Angela denied it. “Later.”

All of them understood there might be a mad dash to the supplies if the locations were revealed.

“It’s going to be cold. We don’t want to put people into the vehicles until we’re ready to leave. However, we need to have them in the bottom and ready to go before then. I don’t want to be running gas for heat in cars while waiting half an hour for them to finish gathering stuff and saying goodbye. Get with Kenn and make sure that’s organized. We don’t have fuel to waste.”

Shawn held up a paper. “We managed to find fifteen trucks and cars, along with ten UN vehicles. I don’t know how many people we have now, so I don’t know if that’s enough. If it isn’t, we’ll go back out there in a few hours and do some more salvaging in the dark.”

Angela did a quick estimate. “It’ll be cramped, but we can make it work. The UN vehicles will hold six people each. It should be enough to carry us until we can pick up new wheels, like we used to do.” Angela held up her copy of the map–the worst one to read thanks to her being so tired when she’d finished it. She pointed at one of the locations. “We won’t stop until we get here. Make sure each vehicle has food, water, and weapons. If there’s a problem and people are cut off, I want them to be able to reach us. I also want these maps put into the glove compartments of the vehicles driven by camp members who are not Eagles. The rest of us will memorize the locations. We also need to draft a crew to roll out before the rest of us, as scouts. They will clear the path and set up perimeter security on the first site. We’ll maintain radio silence during that time, as well as keeping the no magic rule in place. We have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

No one argued. It had been that way since the war. They were getting used to it.

**7**

“The boss wants us to talk.”

Nancy peered up from her cup of oatmeal. “I’m surprised she sent you.”

“So am I.” Adrian sat down in the chair across from her, not sure why he’d been sent. Having a conversation with Nancy after leaving the cubby had been on his schedule, but that was it.

Nancy waited for him to speak. Around them, the mess was deserted other than Brittani and Gus’s brothers. They were preparing for the next meal.

Adrian studied Nancy, assuming Angela wanted him to figure out her problem. As far as he knew, there wasn’t one.

Growing bored, Nancy’s mind began to roam. That was happening to her a lot lately and she didn’t know what to do about it. She wasn’t having bad dreams and she didn’t believe mountain sickness existed. Guilt was her problem.

“What do you have to be guilty about?”

Nancy flinched. “Shane.”

In that moment, Adrian thought he understood why Angela had sent him. Nancy was having trouble adjusting to Shane’s death and Angela knew Nancy and Adrian had shared moments together. She had sent someone that the woman might consider a friend. “Would you like to discuss it?”

Nancy shrugged. “If Angela sent you, I don’t have a choice.”

Adrian wanted to rub Nancy’s hand as a wave of her guilt rushed over him, but he was afraid it would be crossing a line. He wasn’t sure how close Nancy had been to Shane. “Did you love him?”

“I don’t even miss him.”

Now Adrian understood the guilt. “How long was your relationship?”

Nancy scowled. “We only flirted a couple times, but shouldn’t I at least care that I lost a friend and a fellow Eagle?”

“How do you know you don’t?”

Nancy regarded him pointedly.

Adrian caught the desire and put the pieces together. “You want a physical relationship again.”

She flushed. “I want a few dozen orgasms and then a baby.”

Adrian stored that information. “If you and Shane weren’t bonded, there’s nothing to be guilty about. Even if you were, Shane was a good guy. He wouldn’t want you to be alone.”

She studied Adrian. “I feel bad because he hated you and I don’t. I feel guilty because he’s dead and I’m just glad it wasn’t you. I feel awful because I only want you.”

Adrian hadn’t realized Nancy felt that way about him. He wasn’t sure what to say.

“I’m not in love with you or anything, but I like you.” She lowered her voice “We used to spend time together. Special time, if you know what I mean.”

Adrian chuckled. “Yeah, Baby, I do.”

“I miss being able to spend an hour with you, or any guy for that matter, but it feels like I should be in mourning for Shane.”

“We should be living.” Adrian met her eye, oozing charm. “After we leave this mountain, you and I could resume spending time together if you’re not afraid those moments with a traitor will hurt you.”

Nancy snorted. “You’re no more a traitor than I am.”

Adrian would have kissed her right then if not for their audience.

Nancy knew. She ducked her chin to break the intense contact. “Not here.”

Adrian understood she meant the mountain. He stood up, not wanting to hurt her by spending more time with her. “I’m gonna hold you to that.”

Nancy refused to look up. “The first night we’re out of here, schedule me an hour or two.”

“You got it, Sweetheart.”

Adrian was smiling as he left the mess. He had no doubts about where Angela would spend the first night out of this hellhole and he hadn’t been looking forward to being alone. Now, he wouldn’t be. It never occurred to Adrian that Angela had sent him to Nancy instead of anyone else for that reason.

It was the first conclusion Nancy came to after Adrian left.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

**Someone’s Cow**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“O**pen the door.”

Theo limped aside at Marc’s order so his crew could do it. The constant use of his crippled leg since the earthquake had done two things for Theo. He’d never been in this much discomfort in his life; he was in better shape now and wanted more of it. He’d also regained some of the use of his leg. He could almost put his foot down flat now. The result was a man determined to keep using it until it healed or he died from the pain.

Cold air flew into the passage as the door was shoved open, bringing shivers and the sound of zippers being drawn up as far as they would go. It was a grim reminder of what the leaving people were about to face.

“Five minutes.” Marc climbed to the exit. Bundled in more gear than he felt he needed, he took up a post.

Next to him, Adrian and Kenn did the same. Angela had sent all of them to guard the entrance into their den. She’d also insisted on their thickest armor and a five-minute window. Her demands had shaken the men a bit. It kept them searching for problems outside the cave instead of listening to the drama happening inside it.

“Kendle said they went southwest. Seth is from Arizona. Maybe they’re hunting for his daughter. Eventually, we’ll meet up.” Doug lifted a bushy brow at Jeff. “Right?”

Glad to be leaving again so soon, Jeff pulled on his pack. “Sounds good to me. If we hear anything, we might be able to narrow it down.”

Allan tugged another set of gloves over the two pairs he was already wearing. “We’ll check in once a week.”

Doug made sure the boys were bundled up. Roy and Romeo were bouncing around in excitement, eager to be out of the mountain. Doug understood. He’d almost died here. It was more than time to go.

Doug placed Roy in Allan’s arms, who tickled the boy.

Romeo took Allan’s other hand, as he’d been instructed to do.

Jeff took the lead. They had to secure the vehicle, start and load it, then get out of the valley–all without drawing unwanted attention. Jeff had his rifle in hand. He and Kevin had spotted enough refugees while climbing to know there were random pockets of trouble all over these cliffs.

Doug shook Marc’s hand, nodding to Kenn and Adrian. “May God go with you.”

Marc slapped Doug on his shoulder, hard, but the big man didn’t budge. “Hurry back. We need you for Eagle training.”

Laughing, Doug marched off into the night. Doug and his group were wearing thick coats and layers of guilt. It was clear they felt bad for leaving.

Their guards didn’t give them a hard time. They’d been told not to hassle any of the Runaways and that included people from their camp. Still, it was hard to let Doug and Allan go when the two men were so dependable for everything the Eagles needed. A little bit of hope for the future went with them.

The small group of guards followed to provide security. It was tense and cold, with boot steps crunching as the loudest noise. Above them, a moonless sky forced the use of remaining flashlights. Jeff had told Marc they could get by without an escort, but he was glad Angela had insisted. It was dark and too quiet out here. Jeff could feel eyes on them. “Let’s make this quick.”

“Hand over the keys and food!”

Jeff glowered at the ragged band of refugees who came from between the dark, cold vehicles. “Leave and I won’t kill you.”

The man in the front lifted his gun.

Jeff raised his rifle and began pulling the trigger. He assumed Eagles were joining him, but he didn’t need the help against this group. His gift was holding them in place, unable to duck his rage.

When Jeff stopped firing, the men behind him hurried forward to make sure the attack was over even though they knew it was. The Eagles needed this practice for their own bugout. None of them flashed glares at Jeff or called him a freak as they went by. These were Angela’s men; they had accepted magic in their midst.

*Some of us are also descendants.*

Jeff regarded Brandon in surprise. Over all the times they’d fought together, Jeff hadn’t suspected.

Brandon grinned. *Then I’ve done a good job at blending in like Adrian told me to do when I joined Safe Haven.*

*Are you safe to be coming out now?*

*Adrian cleared me today. He still hasn’t told me why I had to hide, but it feels good not to have to do it anymore.*

*Same here, though I didn’t know until recently*. *Good luck.*

*Same to you.* Jeff looted the first body and didn’t bother with the rest. It looked as if the small family had been starving. They had no loot.

Jeff slid into the cold truck they’d been given and stuck the key in the ignition. As it fired up and he adjusted the heat and seat, Jeff thought about staying. It was a brief second that implied he would miss the companionship of real men and the comforts of a home. It passed in a flash of Crista falling from the metal cart.

Jeff slammed the door and switched on the radio.

Doug got the boys settled and hurried in with them.

Allan filled the passenger seat, waving, and then they were gone.

The Eagle team lingered for a moment as the taillights faded and then switched off.

Morgan watched them go. “Will we see them again?”

Daryl shrugged. “What would the boss say?”

The entire crew mimicked her as they returned to the trio of guards at the entrance.

*“That has not been revealed.”*

Laughter rolled across the valley, but it wasn’t enough to lift the curse. The mountains glowed in dangerous anger as the tunnel was resealed. Darkness was everywhere except one corner of a jagged cliff right above the door. A small campfire burned in simmering resentment, keeping a single form alive inside a stolen tent. The man, with one gun and four bullets, was waiting for dawn.

**2**

“You told her we’re low, right?” Adrian had to ask.

Kenn was asleep on his feet again. “She said the camp needs the water now, to pass out a snack and be generous on the H20.”

“She’s the boss.” Adrian wrote it down, aware of the chatter in the mess around them. It almost sounded like the old Safe Haven. Everyone’s mood was better now that they weren’t trapped.

“The door is shut and locked, and has three guards. We’ll also have a roaming patrol checking it hourly, along with the top corridor exit, even though we know it’s blocked.”

Adrian made more notes and signaled for Kenn to keep going. “As soon as we’re done here, you can sleep.”

“Awesome. Uh, no trouble with Jimmy’s people, but all overnight sentries have orders to eliminate threats. It came straight from Marc.”

“That should keep them in line.”

“I think so too. We’ve had radios on for hours, but there hasn’t been another broadcast from Market Town. Angela believes they’re keeping off the waves so their bosses don’t discover their loss. She said to use your best judgment there, but she plans to hit hard and then travel south within a few days. She wants you to adjust for anything she hasn’t counted on.”

“I’ll go over it with Marc in the morning.” Adrian took the sheet of paper that presumably held Angela’s next battle plan. “You scan it?”

“Not this time. Too tired.”

“Fair enough. What’s next?”

“All of the Runaways are dead or gone. We searched the bottom floor a couple of hours ago, against Jimmy’s wishes. The entire cave is secure as far as we know.”

“We still have a lot of restless souls in here.”

Kenn scanned the mess that held no less than fifty people. “They’d be this way even if Kevin and Tommy weren’t trying to outdo each other with tall tales.”

Adrian grunted. “What I’ve heard so far hasn’t been stretched much. Someone will have to teach them how to lie.”

Kenn chuckled, agreeing. It sounded as if both groups hadn’t had an easy time of it on their own.

Gus came over to the table with two mugs that steamed. “Ready for fresh?”

“Oh, yeah!” Adrian traded his cold cup for the hot one. “Thanks.”

Gus took his tray to the next table while Kenn sniffed his cup with a grin. “Only a few things in the world smell as good as a cup of coffee.”

Adrian snickered. He could name the top four and coffee wasn’t on that list. “We done?”

Kenn skimmed his notes, focusing through red eyes. “She said to wake Marc in four hours and he’ll handle it from there.”

“I’ll make sure he’s up.” Adrian glanced toward the tunnel. “He’s with her now?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Sleeping with your mate is great for healing. She needs it.”

“Others did more.”

“Not alone. Her gift magnified all of ours. No one is that powerful without an alpha backing them up.”

“Damn.” Kenn ran a hand through his matted hair. “I’ve got a lot to learn about this stuff.”

“But not now, Marine. Hit the rack.”

Kenn went without another word. He was too tired to do more than climb the ladder, nod to the guard on the TV room, find Tonya, and then slide in beside her. He was asleep before his cheek came to a stop on her arm.

**3**

“Jeremy too? Aw, hell. That sucks.”

Kevin’s loud voice carried to where Neil and Samantha were having drinks in the corner. She’d refused to even try to sleep again until they were out of the mountain. Neil hadn’t argued. He couldn’t have either.

“But no more fighting over her, right?” Kevin laughed, missing Samantha’s tensing shoulders and Neil’s ugly glower toward the table.

“Keep it down, man.” Greg glanced at Samantha. “Have some respect.”

Kevin flushed. Here or out there, he was always being scolded or made to feel bad*. One day I won’t need any of you.*

“Sorry about Tyler and Josh.”

Kendle’s team accepted Greg’s sympathy.

While Jeff had been avoiding Kevin, Kendle was surrounded by her team. They had shoved two broken tables together, putting her at the connector spot along the wall. To her right were Conner, Whitney, Carl, and Ramer. On her left sat Tommy, Ben, Ryan, and Scot. Dexter was across from her and next to Kevin, but it was clear they didn’t consider Kevin one of theirs as they joked around and over him.

The changes in Kendle and her team were obvious. Compared to the thin, twitchy, subdued camp members, Kendle’s crew was a light in the darkness. Full of laughter and jokes, the mood around them was better than anywhere else in the cave. Eagles and camp members gravitated toward the tables where the team was busy regaling them all with tales of their adventures in Market town.

“So, Kendle tricks the townspeople into staking her bet even though we were carjacked. We didn’t have a single item to trade except for our lives and she still managed to make a good deal and get a VIP bed with one of the rulers.” Ramer’s voice carried across the mess. “We were shocked when she killed him.”

Everyone broke into laughter and questions at that revelation.

Kendle flushed, shrugging. “He wasn’t that good.”

Amusement rolled across the mess.

“We couldn’t believe we got out of there, but then, we went back in!” Carl saw people frowning as if they didn’t believe him and held up a hand. “If you had seen how they were treating travelers, and then you’d been betrayed by them the way we were, you guys would have gone back in too.”

Tommy pointed at Kyle, grinning. “Where do you think we learned it from?”

Fresh laughter echoed through the passages.

As they joked, Kendle’s team was observing everything that was going on around them. They noted the people who were missing, and the people who were split into different groups, but the most obvious thing about everyone in the mountain was the desperation. People were thin and shaky, with twitchy glances that rotated, searching for the next threat. It reminded everyone on Kendle’s team so much of how life had been right after the war that all of them concentrated on spreading good vibes, hoping it would help.

Hating it that he wasn’t the center of attention even though he considered himself a hero from the fight, Kevin only saw standoffish people who hadn’t missed him at all.

“So, we were locked in this cage...” Tommy tried to get the tension to shift back into amusement at their adventures. “Naked.”

That got everyone’s attention, even the guards on the room.

Bored with their stories, Kevin fell into planning how to top whatever Tommy said next. He’d missed the competitions.

Kendle frowned at Kevin. “This isn’t a competition. This is how we survived. Unlike you, we didn’t have Jeff to take care of us.”

Kevin glowered as he stood up, cheeks scarlet. “Excuse me!”

Kendle sighed as Kevin stormed from the mess.

“Don’t worry about it.” Daryl had been listening from the table with Greg. “All the descendants have been dealing with that since you left. The people without gifts hate us for having them, even when we save their lives.”

“Safe Haven people aren’t like that.” Conner smiled as men glanced at him. “No one had bad thoughts about us today or this evening when I went up to meet with Angela.”

“You spoke with Angela?” Greg leaned forward. “I guess things went well.”

“She said she’s lifting my banishment. It’s great.”

Kendle and her team congratulated the boy, happy for him.

Conner accepted it gracefully, but the proud smile from his father meant more as Adrian entered the mess*. I’m good. I’ll stay that way.*

Adrian nodded. *And I’ll do everything I can to help you, son. So stay away from me for a while, okay? It may not rub off.*

*We’ll see.* Conner went back to listening to the stories of their adventure, glad Kevin was gone. The man had a bad vibe.

Ramer looked around. “Hey! Did Kevin ever say where Dog is? I miss that wolf.”

Kendle had already picked out that detail. “Dog stayed with Sally. He has a duty too.”

The men chuckled. Everyone liked Dog. Sally, they hadn’t met; no one asked about her.

“I wonder if they’ll run into Billy.”

Tommy glanced at Morgan in confusion. “What happened to Billy?”

“He took off on us, man, as soon as we opened the top cave to collect water. Pulled a gun on Marc and everything.”

Tommy and the team were shocked. When they’d left, Billy was Marc’s understudy, set to become his heir.

“What the hell happened?”

Greg shrugged. “Some people think he had mountain sickness or cracked from so many deaths in the earthquake. He was knocked out for a while. I think his injury wasn’t healed yet.”

Tommy frowned. “Will Billy be forgiven if he returns?”

“Probably, but he’ll have to redo Eagle training if he really wants to be one of us again. We no longer give free rides.”

**4**

By midnight, the number of people in the mess hadn’t changed much. Kendle’s team couldn’t sleep in the cave. The small amount of time they’d spent in the cavity across from Safe Haven had been too much. Eager to be on the road, the adrenaline kept them conversing for hours. Glad to have distraction, the other people who couldn’t sleep, and the guards who were off duty, enjoyed listening to the stories and speculating on what Angela would do about Market Town.

Neil and Samantha were also still in the mess, playing cards with the charred deck that Li had always kept here. Neither of them was speaking.

Adrian and Morgan had point duty overnight, with Conner and Zack as support. The small group made continuous rounds of all levels of the cave, including the bottom floor. All the camp people were settled down now. Those who were staying up had gathered in the mess to keep from disturbing the others. The rest of Safe Haven was on the top floor. Most of the children were in the weapons cubby with Marc, Angela, Mandy, and her baby, and a few other adults. Angela had requested Mandy to help her with the babies since Mandy had milk. Mandy had been glad to be able to help.

The last one to fall asleep, Marc swept the crowded room. It felt as if everyone was resting without nightmares for a change. The number of kids in here was almost unbelievable, but Angela had said anyone that wanted to be with her could. Nearly all of the children had chosen to do so. Marc was in the corner, leaning against the wall with Cody asleep on his chest. He was also surrounded by children; their little bodies were baking off enough heat to make him sweat. After being outside all day, it was wonderful.

Marc finally allowed sleep to take him, content things were as peaceful as they ever got since the war had blown away his life.

Outside the weapons cubby, guards were on duty. Ivan had slept most of the evening, as had James, Booth, and Greg. Fresh on duty and determined to make sure that Angela got to sleep, the guards kept their voices down as they observed the changes in the camp.

Ivan glanced at Greg. “It feels different.”

“They’re tired. They don’t put off as much energy when they’re tired.”

Ivan lifted a brow. “It’ll wear off right? Or they’ll sleep it off?”

Greg shrugged. “I’ve never seen them use this much power at one time. It may take a few days or a week for them to recover without energy.”

“How do they usually replenish it?”

“It happens naturally, like healing from a cold. When they really need it, people offer theirs.”

Ivan grimaced. “They get energy from us?”

“Yes, but they can’t ask for it. We have to offer.”

The guards who had been in Safe Haven for a while studied Ivan and the other soldiers to see their reaction to the news.

“That’s why they take such good care of the herd. We’re their food.” Booth’s voice was disgusted.

“I don’t think it works like that.” Ivan batted at a fly. “Even if it does, that’s obviously not all they need from us or we’ll be reclaimed like she did with the UN troops.”

The Eagles were relieved that Ivan had understood, but they observed his companions to make sure that wasn’t going to be a problem. At this point, many people refused to accept magic. It was hard to know that you were someone’s cow.

“We should offer to help.”

The other soldiers turned to James, who shrugged. “It doesn’t bother me. The government wanted me because I can kill. This is worlds better than that.”

Now that it had been laid out on terms the soldiers could understand, all of them nodded in agreement.

The Eagles marked the men off their list of people who had to be shielded from magic. It was a relief to know they would have more hands on duty. After everything that had happened, and all their losses, the Eagles were taking too many hits. Entire teams had been destroyed over the last two months. It would be a long time before they recovered; they needed everyone they could get.

“We’ll pass it around the rest of the camp, come morning. During the ride, descendants will be encouraged to draw from us.”

The soldiers understood Greg had just needed to make sure they were okay with it. The mood improved as the small group of men continued to discuss the plan to help their protectors.

On the bottom level, it wasn’t as calm. Jimmy’s people had begun to crawl out of their holes now that most of Safe Haven was asleep. The voices coming from the mess informed them there were people awake, however. Jimmy took a post at the ladder to prevent any of his camp from going up. He understood how close they were to being free of the freaks, but he also understood how on the edge those same freaks were. If his people went up there and started trouble, they wouldn’t come back.

On the level above Jimmy, Adrian stopped at the ladder. If Jimmy got pulled away, Adrian would take his place. Angela needed to sleep. Adrian was determined she would get to.

Shifting noises behind Adrian made him spin around to locate it. Spotting Candy digging through the rubble like she had for the last few nights, Adrian joined her. “How are you?”

Candy shrugged and then did a stretch. “Better now.”

Instead of asking how her feelings for Conner had grown so fast, he pointed toward a rubble pile that hadn’t been touched yet. “Kenn told me what you were searching for. I’m almost certain I saw notebooks while we were digging for survivors. Everyone piled the debris over here before we had a chance to sort it.”

Candy switched piles, hoping to locate Tonya’s notebook. She waited for Adrian to go, but he didn’t.

Adrian wasn’t sure why he was lingering. He could hear Jimmy at the bottom of the ladder, now arguing with people. He might need to support the doctor, but he stayed with Candy, waiting for whatever he was supposed to do to become clear. This felt important.

“Did Conner put a spell on me?”

Adrian winced. “I don’t know.”

Candy didn’t like the answer. She glared at him.

Adrian shrugged. “Honest. I don’t know.”

“How can I find out?”

Adrian frowned. “Angela will dig into him if you ask her to. I’ll do the same. If he’s hiding something, we’ll know it.”

Candy’s face paled even more. “No, don’t do that.”

Adrian’s scowl grew. “You don’t want to get in trouble. What did you do?”

“I haven’t done anything!”

“Yet?”

Candy flinched at the accurate guess. “I’m thinking about doing something.”

Adrian sensed Conner knew what it was. If Angela grilled him, then the boss would know whatever it was Candy was trying to hide. “I’ll tell her about this conversation. You know that.”

Candy nodded. “I just need to know if he put a spell on me.”

Adrian sighed in resignation. “Why don’t you ask him? He’ll tell you the truth.”

“If he’s around me, he’ll get in trouble, even if it’s my idea.”

“How can you have Stockholm?”

“Because he’s in my brain all the time!” Candy stared in shock. She hadn’t meant to tell anyone that.

Adrian studied her, spotting what she didn’t want Angela to know. Once he finished, Adrian pulled out of her mind. The things he had found weren’t as bad as she believed they were. “Conner and I will be at a table in the mess once the shift is over. Sit down with us and ask your question if you want to. I’ll be scanning him the entire time. We’ll find out together.”

“You’ll protect him if he has?”

Adrian turned toward the ladder. “He’s my son. What else would I do?”

Satisfied, Candy went back to digging in the rubble without telling anyone what was going on. She wouldn’t show up. She didn’t want Conner’s voice in her mind to go away. She liked it.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

**Stupid People**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**K**yle walked the top floor with tired legs and a relieved mind. The Runaways were gone. The first wave of UN fighters had been defeated. Jimmy’s group was cowered on the bottom levels. Most of the camp was asleep, and that included Jennifer and Autumn. They might have a peaceful night.

Kyle froze as a cold chill came down the tunnel. An instant later, a familiar scream split the air and caused his heart to thump in his chest. *Jennifer!*

Kyle took off running, wincing at the shouts. It was clear to him that Jennifer was having a nightmare, but the noise was going to wake everyone, including the boss.

“He has to get them out of here! They have to leave!”

Jennifer was sitting up in the middle of the room, unaware of other sleepers cringing back or trying to shush her. “We have to tell them! They’re all going to die!”

Kyle rushed in and grabbed Jennifer’s shoulders. He gave her a light shake and then a hug. “Jenny!”

Jennifer gasped and cried, words indecipherable.

Kyle paused for the panic to pass, hoping Angela would understand it was a nightmare.

*Not a nightmare!* Autumn pushed into Kyle’s mind. *It’s so bad, Daddy!*

Kyle put a hand on the baby’s legs, trying to comfort both of his females at the same time.

Jennifer continued to sob until Kyle had had enough. He helped her to her feet, motioning Nancy to watch the baby. “Come on. We’ll talk to them right now.”

Jennifer quieted, eager to try to change that future. She followed Kyle into the cold hall, shivering.

Kyle helped her down the ladder, nodding at Adrian and the other guards who had come running. “Nightmare. We’re gonna have a discussion.”

The men understood that Jennifer had foreseen something bad about Jimmy’s group and let them pass. If it’d been anyone other than Angela’s heir, they wouldn’t have.

Disappointed, Kyle took her to the bottom level. He had been hoping the guards would say no. He already knew what Jennifer was about to tell them and he knew how the doctor was going to react, but he led her to Jimmy anyway so she could try to convince the stubborn man to leave with them.

**2**

Jimmy listened to the story with no change in sullen expression. He had just gotten his people to sleep when the screams started. He couldn’t wait for Safe Haven to be gone so he could establish a normal camp.

When Jennifer finished speaking, staring at him with tears in her big, brown eyes, he finally spoke. “You said what you wanted to say, now get back to your level.”

Jennifer would have kept trying, but Kyle tugged on her good arm. “We’ve overstayed our welcome. Let’s go.”

Jennifer’s heart broke. “I can’t believe you’re going to sacrifice all of these souls because you’re scared.”

Jimmy’s hand went to his pocket. “You have five seconds to get out of here.”

Kyle spun around. He didn’t need Jennifer’s gift to know what was about to happen. “Draw the gun. I dare you.”

Kenn and Tonya had both told all of the guards Jimmy was armed.

Jimmy paled. “You have to go!”

Kyle nudged Jennifer toward the ladder. “We’re leaving.”

Jennifer went up slowly, fighting tears and anger. “Why won’t they listen?! They know I’m not lying!”

Kyle waited for her to reach the next floor and then spent a minute to comfort her. He knew his arms weren’t much in comparison to all the lives that were going to be lost, but it was all he had to offer. “Human nature doesn’t always do what’s best. I know that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“You wouldn’t believe the things that are going to happen here when we leave.”

“Yes, I would. That’s why we’re leaving.” Kyle herded her toward the next ladder. “Let’s make sure Autumn is okay.”

Distracted, Jennifer went. “I’m sorry for the screams.”

Kyle shrugged. “It’s been a common sound in this place, Honey. You just added yours to the mix.”

Jimmy’s people returned to what they’d been doing. Roughly three dozen of them were moving about, all wearing extra layers of clothes and carrying a weapon of some sort. None of them had guns, as Angela hadn’t given them any, but that didn’t mean there weren’t bats, poles, knives, and other dangerous objects lying around that could be used for defense or offense. They carried these weapons in their hands as they came out of their shacks and tents, verifying the Safe Haven people were back on the top levels.

Weapons were stored in belts and pockets, but the twitching didn’t stop as a few dozen began to scavenge while some stood around the ladders and tunnel entrances. All of them made use of the bathroom, making noises and smells that echoed through the cave.

The guard on point observed the people as they came out of their holes, hoping none of them climbed up the ladders further than the crushed level. That was the only place where the camps were still having contact, though most of it had been peaceful because everyone had been busy grabbing anything they could use. Quinn stared down the ladder. He had strict orders not to disturb Jimmy’s people, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t supposed to listen to them. As he heard their angry conversations and watched them scurry back-and-forth, Quinn suddenly felt sorry for them. Unable to accept their own lack of magic, they had chosen to hate it instead. It was sad.

Quinn did a fast walk of the crushed level, trying not to gag at the smells. Animal bodies, and parts of them, were still buried under the rubble. The slaughter site was also putting off smells that were unpleasant; Quinn didn’t pause in any of the areas after a quick sweep with this flashlight. He climbed to the next level, breathing in deeply of the draft. He hoped it would settle his stomach.

Quinn paused as two shadows approached each other near the passage to the mess. The guard waited, listening.

Adrian and Conner exchanged a hearty hug that allowed the guards to relax a little. No one had known what type of reception the father and son would have for the other.

“You look good.” Adrian hugged Conner again. “Welcome back!”

Conner hugged his father, filled with pride and a wave of loyalty he enjoyed. Only his dad could cause that sensation. “It’s good to be here.”

Adrian caught flashes of Conner’s adventure and wished there was time to explore some of them.

“Angela said you need to talk to me.”

Adrian felt the temperature drop as he regarded his son. This wasn’t how he wanted to welcome Conner back, but it couldn’t wait.

Conner knew what was coming. Now that he was here in the cave, he was catching every thought that went through Candy’s mind. “I didn’t. I might have before I left, but I didn’t need to and now, I wouldn’t.”

“I’ll let her know.”

Conner shrugged. “She already knows, but you do whatever your idol wants you to.”

Adrian scowled. “I’m not doing it for her or for the camp. You know that, right?”

Conner scowled. “How is it for me? All it does is show that you didn’t trust me.”

“You just admitted you might have done it before you left. I don’t have reason to trust you. Neither does she.”

Conner’s good mood fell. “I understand.”

Adrian was proud of the boy for accepting his scold without a rebellious tirade in return. He changed the subject. “How are Becky and Seth?”

Distracted, Conner frowned. “Different. It was as if they were worried about something and didn’t want to tell anyone. We were surprised when they took off.”

Adrian listened as Conner explained how they had woken to discover the couple gone. As Conner repeated the note, Adrian sighed. “Doug’s group will help them. We’ll have to hope that’s enough.”

Conner knew his dad still felt guilty for what had happened to Becky, but he didn’t know what to say that might make the man feel better. He changed the subject. “Have *you* made any progress?”

Adrian knew what he was referring to. “Yes, actually. I’ll tell you about it later, when I’ve had time to think it all out myself.”

Conner had picked stuff up from the guards as Marc and Adrian walked the battlefield. “I hear you guys have a truce.”

“And it was his idea. I’m very confused.”

“You seem happier.”

Adrian’s expression lightened. “Do I? That’s good. I am.”

Conner assumed Adrian had been able to spend time with Angela. It gave the boy hope for his future endeavors with Candy.

Topic coming full circle, Adrian faced it. “You can’t make one single move. She has to do it all.”

Conner already knew. “That’s what I’ve been working on all this time.”

Adrian snickered. “Like father, like son.”

**3**

*Good morning.*

Angela smiled, stretching as she woke. *And the same to you.* Angela didn’t want to be disrespectful to the man sleeping a few feet away from her, but this might be the last time she had this opportunity and she chose to take it. When she’d told Marc a month ago that she no longer had rules and limits to follow when it came to who she spent time with, she had meant in every way–even mentally.

Adrian was surprised at the acceptance. He had expected to wake her up, give her an update, and get out before making her or Marc mad. Caught by surprise, he paused, enjoying her welcome.

Marc tried hard to stay under the blanket of sleep, not needing the emotional roller coaster of witnessing their moments together, but it was impossible. He wanted to observe them so he could try to figure out what Adrian gave her that he couldn’t. Then he would learn how to provide it.

Adrian risked Marc’s wrath by lingering, unable to pull away. Fresh from sleep, Angela wasn’t angry or ruthless. She was just a woman–one that he loved and wanted.

Angela allowed Adrian to make contact mentally. She swallowed a groan as his energy swarmed over her, lighting dark places. She enjoyed the sensation, not letting the guilt interfere. It was rare that Marc tolerated any moment between her and Adrian, but today of all days, she needed the support.

*We can do this.*

*We have done this. We just have to do it again.*

*I know. I’m sorry.*

*So am I, but it’s necessary. They never would have left without all of this. If there had been another way, we both would have taken it.*

*I don’t believe anyone else could have done as good a job.*

*I don’t either now, but I hated you for it a month ago.*

*I’m sorry about that too.*

Angela didn’t respond. The pain from losing her baby would never fade. She knew that because it wasn’t the first time it had happened.

Adrian sent a wave of love, hoping it would ease the pain seeping into her mood.

*Please don’t do that.*

*I can’t help it. I don’t like it when you’re in pain.*

*Some things, I deserve.*

*Agreed, but not today.* Adrian sent another blast of light. *Today, you need to concentrate on getting our people out of here.*

*I will. This will be the last time that we’re trapped anywhere.*

Adrian didn’t doubt her. *I should go now. He’s been very patient.*

Sensing the request that wouldn’t be spoken, Angela dropped her shield for a brief second and let Adrian fully connect with her.

Adrian mentally nuzzled her cheek, hugging her close and tight. His next wave of light didn’t just hit her.

“Do you have to do that while I’m right here?!”

Adrian withdrew at Marc’s growl.

Angela stretched out a hand so she could touch Marc’s wrist. The room lit up with her emotions, smothering them in unconditional love.

Unable to stay mad, Marc patted her hand. “Good morning to you too, Baby.”

Angela laid there for a few more minutes, enjoying the warmth of the bodies around her and the peacefulness of the cave. Doing a light scan, she didn’t find many people awake yet. The guards were alert, which was wonderful, but the camp needed sleep.

Marc stewed on the moment he’d just shared with them against his will and better judgment. Because he’d done so, he had learned something. Angela was scared. He wouldn’t have known that if not for Adrian’s repeated whispers of comfort and strength. He’d been shoring her up for the bugout, which meant it would be ugly.

Marc didn’t know what could be worse than fighting the UN, but he didn’t doubt that it would be. He clasped Angie’s hand and began sending in his own strength and light. “Whatever it is, we’ll handle it together.”

“Yes, just you and I.”

Marc caught the ominous undertone, but couldn’t ask about it because of their listening company. The kids had been awake before Angela, but they’d refused to budge for fear of disturbing her. Marc had told them she wouldn’t be mad, but Leeann had informed him it was so Angela would sleep. Stewing, he added that in. The kids were also trying to prepare her.

Marc’s scowl took up his entire face as he growled for his demon. *Who dies this time?!*

**4**

“We’re two guards short on escorts to the vehicles.” Marc handed Angela a cup of oatmeal an hour later, refusing to dwell on what he’d learned. “Do we need security over Candy and Cynthia today?”

Angela’s stomach rolled as she regarded the grey goop. “The bad vibes from both of them stopped as soon as the cave opened. They’ll recover.”

“That’s great to hear.” Marc met her eye. “But you won’t be alone with either of them, right?”

“No, I won’t.” She smiled. “And neither will you.”

Hoping they wouldn’t have to eliminate either female, Marc continued his rounds. He was in charge of clearing each floor, but he wasn’t doing that yet. People were coming and going in an effort to locate missing items or say goodbye to their loved ones at the makeshift memorial that had sprung up over the last two days in the body tunnel. Until Angela made the radio call, his first job was to be sure there were no problems.

“Make a hole!”

Marc jumped aside as Kenn came barreling through the corridor. Chasing Tonya’s cat, the Marine was leaving laughter in his wake.

The agile cat leapt down to the bottom level, landing on a debris pile.

Items rolled off the sides, crashing into the floor as the tabby darted into the body tunnel.

Kenn slid down the ladder. “Got gloves this time!” He ran into the tunnel, ignoring the complaints and the snickering. Tonya wanted to take the cat. He would get it for her.

Kenn stuttered to a halt as the people shifted away from the rear of the pit cave in fear. The vet was standing in the shadows with his hands full.

Kenn pasted on a bored expression and took the cat, keeping a firm grip on its neck skin.

“Take this too.” Chris shoved a large coffee can with holes in the lid into Kenn’s other arm.

Kenn heard the angry humming of bees and frowned. “Why?”

The vet glared. “Why not? They didn’t ask to be brought down here. Why should they die with the rest of the doctor’s sheep?”

“Fair enough.” Kenn dropped the can into the hands of the nearest guard as the cat began to fight to get free. “Put this with the rest of the gear to be loaded.”

Kenn went back to the top floor, trying not to lose the active tabby. As he forced it into the box that Tonya had ready, it occurred to Kenn that the cat didn’t act sick anymore. He stored it for later, when he had a moment to make his woman smile with the news. Right now, they were too busy. Everyone was eating, but they still had to be dressed and led to the exit, then guided into the vehicles. All of it would start as soon as Angela made the call. Kenn assumed that would happen any time. Once things were rolling up here, he had duty at the exit with the boss. He and Angela would make sure everyone who wanted to come was accounted for. It was an important position and he was honored, but deep down, he would rather have been with Tonya and the kids.

**5**

“They’re taking too much!’”

Jimmy’s shout hurt Marc’s ears. “Move, so I can check the levels.”

Jimmy stomped toward his clutch of ducks, muttering.

Marc shined his light, noting the tank was almost full. He motioned to the line of camp people waiting to fill canteens. “Hurry up. Angela is about to–”

“Safe Haven, it’s time to go.” Radios crackled and whined throughout the cave. “Everyone coming with us needs to be at the exit in five minutes. I repeat, Safe Haven is leaving in five.”

“–to call,” Marc finished. He stepped aside so people could get through, but he didn’t leave yet. With him here, there was less chance of fighting.

“Get them out of there!”

“We need all that water!”

Marc rested his hands on the guns he no longer needed. “Quiet down!”

Jimmy’s group did, but the glares and snide remarks implied it was the last time being ordered was going to be successful. The next time they shouted, it would be followed with action.

Marc stayed ready to handle it, hoping he didn’t have to.

*I’d like you up here.*

Marc signaled to the half dozen people left in line. “Time to go.” He strode toward the body passage and popped in. “I’m going now. Three minutes left, folks. Don’t be late. We won’t wait.”

Marc nodded to Neil, who was standing next to Samantha as she sat by the memorial. He also gestured at Charlie, who had brought Tracy down to pay her respects. “Let’s go.”

Marc paused for the young couple, noting how close they stayed and how familiar they seemed with each other now. He stored a new suspicion and followed them up the ladder. Charlie and Tracy had point over the kids during the short walk to the trucks. The couple would be making multiple trips in the open. Marc was glad they were both geared up and dressed right for the situation. The bulky clothes they were wearing hid their vests and provided extra warmth.

As they reached the top level, the mood of the cave dropped.

“She’s already outside. Damn.” Marc motioned toward the kids. “Let’s load and go.”

The line of Eagles each picked up a child and followed Marc through the rear exit and down to the snowy ground. Marc would accompany them on the first trip and give Cody to his assigned adult. Then, he would get Angela’s ride and be ready to guide them all out of here. The vehicles for leadership had been placed right above the tunnel so they could be monitored during the loading process, and because the leaders would be the last to go.

Marc crunched through the snow with his demon searching for trouble, but all he caught was the joy of people leaving the mountain. Everyone was ecstatic to see him emerge. It meant it was time.

Marc handed Cody to Brittani, nodding to Gus and his brothers as they stood with the soldiers and a few others.

Cold, all of them were glad when Marc and his group immediately went back toward the corridor for the next load instead of staying to help the kids buckle in first. The need to be gone was strong and growing.

**6**

Kenn and Angela stood at the entrance, bundled up to watch their surroundings as supplies and people were taken to the vehicles.

“What other precautions did you put into place?” She knew he hadn’t put some things in the notes for her, covering his own concerns instead–which she respected. It had bothered him to be such a failure in the bugout where Rick had kidnapped two of their women.

Kenn gestured toward the long row of guards standing in the stiff wind around their wheels. “All of them have been assigned to a vehicle. That way, each group is accounted for and the drivers only have four to six people on their list to keep track of.”

Angela nodded her approval, restless for this part to be done. “Keep going.”

Kenn didn’t ask how she knew there was more. “There’s a list in each glove compartment. The guards have been told not to swap seating arrangements without my express permission. I gave out a notebook with everyone’s name in it that they’re to check off or initial as they’re loaded into the vehicles. Everyone will be accounted for this time.”

“Good.” Angela studied the people around them. It was cold with the barrier open and noisy as everyone came and went. Those who had worked overnight would be able to sleep and ride, but until then, everyone was working. Supplies, gear, and belongings were already loaded; the wounded were being brought out at the same time as the kids. Some of the injured, like Jennifer, had been able to come down the ladders on their own, while others couldn’t. That process was taking place with Kyle and his crew supervising it to handle any problems from the doctor’s people. “How long until we’re ready to go?”

Kenn looked at his watch and tried to estimate. “We’re thirty percent loaded at this point, but the guards are spreading the word that all of Safe Haven’s Eagles will be out here soon and there won’t be any protection in the cave. That should speed things up.”

Angela wanted to make sure all of their people made it out, but she needed to trust Kenn to do his job. Her assigned place was here in the passage and this was where she was staying unless there was trouble.

Kenn gestured toward the trio coming down the tunnel. “That’s kinda nice.”

Angela turned to see three soldiers, followed by Ivan. All of the men were carrying a wounded child.

Kenn and Angela stepped aside to let the men through. As soon as they strode into the stiff winds, the Eagles assigned to those vehicles came forward to provide protection.

Angela was impressed.

Kenn enjoyed the silent praise, no longer hating himself or her.

The moment was ruined by shouting in the cave and then a single gunshot.

Angela started to go back in, stopping only when Kenn’s heavy hand grabbed her arm.

“We stay here.” He immediately let go, but it was too late.

Flashed to the past, Angela braced to be hit and then remembered that she wasn’t that person anymore and Kenn almost wasn’t that man. She shoved the witch back into her cell and crossed her arms over her chest, but she didn’t enter the cave. She settled for scanning the minds of those who were still inside to find out what had happened.

Kenn went back to monitoring their surroundings. To ensure security for leadership, he had chosen to put those three trucks away from the others. They had been better camouflaged, and still had the steel panels from their travels before coming to the mountain. They were among the few trucks that hadn’t been stripped and had their parts taken into the cave. Covered in feet of snow, it had taken the guards hours to clear them and put the batteries back in. Fuel additives had gotten them running, but it had also drawn attention from random refugees. The guards were taking care of those problems as quietly as they could, not wanting to bring more people into the valley.

Those three trucks held all the supplies for the camp and enough fuel to get them to two of the stash places Angela had marked on the maps. The first stop didn’t have fuel, so as soon as the guards verified the vehicles would start, they had shut them off to conserve gas. It was almost calm now, but the Eagles had their guns in hand and extra mags in their pockets. Most of the threats weren’t in range though, something Kenn had counted on when he made the plans.

Another shout echoed through the tunnel, drawing Kenn to the drama inside. *What’s going on in there?!*

Kenn was shocked by the fast response from Samantha.

*Stupid people. Neil’s got it.*

Kenn’s grin covered his entire face as he relayed the message to Angela. Being one of them was even better than he’d imagined it would be.

**7**

“We want you gone!” Jimmy was kneeling at Derrek’s side, tying a ripped shirt around his wound. “Get out of here!”

Most of the people who’d been in the body corridor were already running toward the ladder.

Neil and Samantha had been in the passage for the last ten minutes while nearly everyone from their camp came down. Most of them hadn’t stayed long, but Samantha was struggling with her guilt and Neil was trying not to rush her even though the call to leave had come.

Around them, the cave had been loud with people shouting for their group members to hurry and people calling to each other on the radios. Samantha had spotted the man trying to ambush Neil and shot him. Now, they were alone in the tunnel with Jimmy and Derrek.

Jimmy was forced to ignore Neil as blood continued to gush from the wound in Derrek’s arm.

Neil scanned the floor for any of their people, noting the stack of bodies had been looted, as well as the waste area. Even the toilet had been taken. Behind him was the makeshift memorial that consisted of stuffed animals, toys, books, and other items people associated with showing their respect to the dead.

Samantha didn’t rise from the plastic flowers that Neil had scavenged until he slid an arm under her bad leg, insisting. “It’s not safe down here now.”

Sam froze as he lifted her. “Wait for it…”

Neil sighed, stopping to let her vision come. He didn’t know if it would interrupt her to be on the move. He kept a gun in hand, other arm straining from holding her.

“We have to go.” Samantha’s lids flew open to reveal terror. “Right now!”

Jimmy glowered as they went by. “You didn’t have to shoot him!”

Neil scowled at the man, holstering. “He was going to stab me. Get your priorities straight!”

Neil shifted Samantha onto his back and quickly climbed the ladder. “I can’t wait to be out of here.”

Samantha stared down at Jimmy as Neil took her out of sight. “There’s a new wave of refugees coming. You have to go!”

“No, you get out!” Jimmy motioned her to keep going.

Samantha put her cheek on Neil’s shoulder, but she refused to cry as Jennifer had. These people didn’t deserve her sympathy.

Neil keyed his mike as he hit the next level. “Load the council. Now!”

# Chapter Thirty-Four

**Everything**

A picture containing animal, brush

Description automatically generated

**1**

**K**enn accepted the order, not doubting that Neil had gotten the command from Samantha. Something else was coming.

“Let’s go.” Kenn stayed as close to Angela as he could, but she insisted on helping to take the final group of kids to the vehicles, keeping her out in the open. The best he could do was stay so close that any sniper bullet would hit him first.

Angela felt the urgency as she handed Missy to Shawn. She was about to panic. “We won’t get them all out of the valley in time. We took too long...” She stopped, rotating toward the cave. “Maybe we should…”

Jimmy’s triumphant face vanished behind the closing door. The latches began clicking.

“That son of a bitch!” Angela ran for their vehicles, praying all of their people were out.

“Samantha and Neil are right behind us.” Kenn grabbed her upper arm to hurry her along. “They were the last ones.”

Angela hit her mike. “Count off!”

“All accounted for.”

“We have everyone.”

“We’re two short!”

Arms full of two of the three orphans he and Tonya had found in the tunnel, Kenn directed her toward the truck signaling they were short two people as the rest of the count off continued. “The kids go here. You come with me.”

Kenn slid the kids into Nancy’s waiting arms and ran with Angela toward the lead vehicles on the small ledge above the path. Marc and Adrian had just finished gassing and loading them. Behind the trucks was a smaller access tunnel that had been closed when they first arrived. While the passage below was being dug, this access route had also been cleared in case Dirce was able to bury the bottom exit.

Kenn hefted Angela onto the icy platform and signaled Adrian over. “You have point over the boss until we pull out.”

Kenn joined Marc in front of the three trucks. He was one of the drivers. “Let’s roll!”

“Wait for me!”

Angela and everyone else spun around to find Cynthia hurrying toward them with her arms full of books and bags. “Please wait!”

Coming from the small exit, Cynthia didn’t notice the shadowy figure sneaking up on her.

“Get down!”

*Bang!*

Cynthia regarded the nun in shock, unable to believe the woman had just tried to kill her.

Angela holstered her gun, heart pounding rapidly. It was the first time she’d used the weapon in months.

Cynthia turned toward Angela in shock. *You saved me.*

Angela started to smile at the stunned reporter...a chunk of ice broke off the cliff above them.

Cynthia looked up at the loud cracking noise; not needing the baby to tell her death was coming. She threw her arms up for protection, too panicked to run, but she already knew it wouldn’t matter. The sheet of falling ice was five times her size.

It hit Cynthia with enough force to drive her into the weak layer of fresh snow that immediately bloomed red.

“Roll out, Safe Haven. Roll out now!” Neil gave the order as the wave of refugees started to enter the valley.

Riding with the camp, Kevin tried to open the door of the truck.

Greg locked it and then grabbed the seatbelt Kevin had fastened out of fear for the rough ride. “She’s gone. We will be too if you don’t fight!”

A bullet slammed into the windshield and was held. It splintered the glass however, enraging Kevin. He yanked his gun out and began shooting at the nearest refugees, screaming in his mind.

Greg let go of the seatbelt, needing both hands to force the truck overtop a rusted Beetle that tried to block his path.

Kevin fired with an arm around the windshield, hitting the Beetle’s driver through his open window.

Greg pushed the car aside with the truck’s bumper, glad Kevin was helping. Greg hadn’t believed this many people still existed in the world.

“Get them out of here!”

Kenn’s order was already being followed. Safe Haven trucks and cars rammed through the traffic coming in, shooting where they needed to.

“Keep the kids down! Do not stop!”

Angela ran, already positive it was too late. She slid through the drifts and sprawled by Cynthia’s body, drawing weak power forward.

*You cannot revive the dead*. *Even you have limits*.

“Slam you!” Angela sent the orbs into Cynthia’s barely recognizable body. “Help me!”

Ordered, the witch added her strength, but there was no response from the reporter. Even when Jennifer tried with her growing gifts, they couldn’t stop Cynthia from dying. Connected, both witches arched violently when it happened, straining against fate.

Adrian placed a hand on Angela’s shoulder, feeling her pain and Cynthia’s, but also his son’s. “Let them go.”

Angela did, sobbing, but only because she was empty and had nothing left to give.

Jennifer allowed Kyle to hold her when she stood, not wanting to break down in front of Autumn, but unable to keep from feeling the misery of her companions. “I’m sorry.”

Angela nodded, crying against Adrian’s big arm. “Me too. It didn’t have to be this way.”

“We could have saved him, made him good.” Jennifer swallowed a painful noise. “We just needed time.”

“Fate made the choice.” Adrian was also crying a bit. He had assumed Angela would save his son, so he’d stayed out of her plans. It was a comfort to know that she had indeed wanted the child to live, but it didn’t ease this newest agony. He untangled his arm from hers, for once not feeling a single spark.

Marc had been observing the scene while he worked on getting everyone into the vehicles. He sent a blast of love toward his mate, hoping to ease her torment. It was also a relief to him that she had intended Cynthia’s child to survive. If she hadn’t, she wouldn’t be so upset.

Angela waited for Marc to get close enough and fell into his arms, unable to stop bawling. Not being able to save Cynthia and her baby was like losing her own all over again.

Marc caught that and quickly led her toward their truck, eager to be away from this cursed mountain.

Kyle followed his lead, pressing Autumn into her mother’s arms.

Jennifer tried to put on her calm face as she hugged the child, and failed. “Momma loves you so much!”

Autumn touched Jennifer’s hair. *It’s okay, Mommy. It’s okay.*

Kyle’s heart broke; he had to wipe away tears before he could open the truck for his family. *When does the pain end? Haven’t we all suffered enough?*

“The island.” Jennifer was using willpower to recover. “When we clear the island, we’re good for a while.”

“How long?” It was the first time Kyle had used her gifts.

Jennifer stared at his demand. “Years, Baby. Years.”

Kyle relaxed and went around to the driver’s seat.

Jennifer locked down on her mind, playing with Autumn’s tiny braid. She’d already searched as far into that future as she could, breaking several magic rules to do so. Kyle was on a need-to-know basis on that subject. Everyone was, including their leaders.

*That’s an awful heavy weight to carry alone*. A voice shoved into her mind with brutal force. *And a betrayal.*

Jennifer searched through the windows as Autumn stiffened in fear. Neither of them had ever felt anyone so strong, so dangerous.

Kyle caught the vibes and stilled, also searching for the threat.

*Who are you?*

The voice chuckled in her mind. *Merely a Messenger, young one.*

*A messenger from who?*

*From He.*

In that moment, Jennifer’s youth could have caused her to say the wrong thing, but her grief only allowed one response. “Why didn’t you save her?!”

Kyle froze, feeling the presence. It was pure light and he was afraid.

*The Creator swore us not to interfere.*

*And yet here you are.* Jennifer’s bitterness was free for everyone to feel now.

*Shall I go?*

Jennifer tried to keep up the brave act. *I didn’t ask you to come. I didn’t make the forbidden call.*

Kyle’s hand on her wrist was urgent. “Don’t, Jenny. Don’t make it mad.”

That hard chuckle came again. *I am no threat to you and your family. Now be quiet!*

Kyle jerked, but didn’t speak again.

Jennifer tried to concentrate, caught off guard. Was the angel here for her child or Kyle? Both were precious to her.

*Neither, child*, the Messenger soothed with no change in tone. *You drew me with your light. I’m curious.*

*About what?* Jennifer sensed this being had the ability to destroy all of them with a blink of an eye.

*Everything*. *The Creator sent me to observe those who called him. He wants to love you again. I’m curious if that’s possible.*

Jennifer connected Angela and Adrian to the conversation, aware that they had both gone still and silent.

Neither of them spoke while Jennifer relayed the message.

As she finished, Adrian clamped his lips shut, passing it to his successor. Even with all her choices, Angela was still purer than he was.

Surprising even herself, Angela bowed out of the conversation completely. *I’m not worthy to speak with the Messenger. Good luck.*

Adrian didn’t bow out. He wanted to hear everything, but Jennifer didn’t want this chore either.

*None of you are willing to satisfy my curiosities?*

*I will.* Marc had been listening all along. *If I’m good enough.*

The messenger smiled toward Marc, letting him feel the warmth. *You are still pure. Ease your troubled mind.*

*Thank you.* Marc took a deep breath. *I think I speak for everyone when I say, slam you!*

Everyone froze, even Angela, who was getting it through Adrian.

*I don’t understand.*

*Sure you do*. Marc snorted, shifting into drive. *He abandoned us here, yet we’re the problem. He set up life around a chain of constant violence, but believed the people would be peaceful. He is fucking crazy and we’re all pissed at him. When he apologizes and makes it right, we might agree to talk. Until then, let him go on as if we don’t exist. Been doing it for so long, he won’t even miss us when we wipe ourselves out.*

*But... You can’t…* The messenger was shocked for the first time in eons. *You can’t mean that!*

*Listen to the words*. Marc spat. *Get lost! You didn’t help us before and we don’t want it now!*

The messenger blasted Marc with hot, dry heat that instantly flashed him back to the rest stop.

*Did He not care for her at that moment?*

*You said you guys don’t interfere. Wonder if your boss knows you break the rules while he isn’t around.*

Stung, the Messenger vanished.

All around them, people were stiffly waiting for retribution and glaring in Marc’s direction.

Angela’s amusement filled the cabin.

“Uh, maybe you shouldn’t laugh at him.” Marc felt caution was prudent. “I already took it pretty far.”

Angela kept on chuckling as she answered. “It’s at irony, Marc, not our Messenger. I refused to talk to him because I knew I couldn’t keep from screaming.”

“And I did it for you.” Marc finished it when she broke into hard laughter again.

“Yes. All you missed was *and the wings you flew in on*.”

Marc chuckled uneasily with her, but he didn’t see as much humor. He may have doomed them all.

“If anything, you’ve proven we deserve to be treated with caution and respect. We’re not evil. We fight for the good daily, sometimes hourly. Righteous anger is different from violent spewing. He’ll be okay with it.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Every story we’ve ever heard of His anger. We get it from him.”

“But aren’t we supposed to control it, lock it away?”

“Not against evil. Anger, like every other emotion, has a place. Sometimes, it helps drive demons away. Sometimes, it reminds a Creator that we think, we breathe, and we feel his absence. You sent a clear message. He was wrong to abandon us here.”

“I scolded the Creator?”

“And he may destroy us now, but I believe it will work the other way. The lonely child has shouted for his parent to return and do their duty. Who could refuse?”

“I challenged him!” Marc was horrified.

Angela chuckled again. “Never would have thought you had that in you.” She smiled, hoping to ease his tension. “It’s making me hot.”

Marc scoffed, trying not to snicker and failed. He tugged her over, draping an arm around her shoulder. “I’d tell anyone to go to hell for you.”

“Not just me, though. You really do speak for all of us now.”

Marc sighed, coming down from his rage. “God help us.”

Angela leaned her cheek against his chest. “That’s what we’re all hoping for. This world is exhausting.”

“It’s not over, Baby.” Marc pointed to dust trails that came from fast-moving vehicles. “The next wave of refugees.”

“Get us out of here.” Angela had already seen that Safe Haven was gone. She’d been aware of a few fights for the road, but the Messenger had needed to be handled first.

Marc shifted into gear. As he got them rolling, there was another awful cracking noise.

Marc hit the brakes, but it was too late. The ledge under them crumbled, taking the truck with it.

The other two vehicle’s occupants observed in horror as Marc and Angela were buried under the snow and then swarmed by refugees on foot coming in ahead of the other cars and trucks.

Kenn hit the gas as Adrian did the same.

Adrian began to blow the horn on his truck, hoping the refugees below would follow him and leave the wreck. He could feel Marc and Angela already fighting down there, but he couldn’t reach them from this angle. Adrian shifted, glad Kenn was on his bumper.

The passengers in both vehicles stayed quiet and held on as the drivers rammed through incoming cars and people, trying to reach Angela.

Power slammed through the valley, toppling refugees, but it didn’t make a dent in the flood of people searching for safety. Hundreds of them poured into the valley, blocking the exit.

Kenn was glad all of their vehicles were gone, but he assumed they were on their own now. There was no way out of this valley even if Marc and Angela were okay and able to climb onto one of these trucks. The only thing that might save them was magic. Kenn began gathering energy.

Next to him, Jennifer did the same.

Kyle held the baby and hoped it was all over soon. He drew his weapon, but there were too many targets around them.

Kenn ran them over where he could, knocking cars aside to stay on Adrian’s bumper, but the gap was getting wider.

Autumn began to cry*. Shiny on the hill! Shiny on the hill!*

Kyle found the glint of light and knew it came from the glass in a scope, not the barrel of the gun, though a few high-polish finishes or plain stainless steel materials could be guilty. Kyle went with the most likely reason. *They should have gotten a kill flash or a scope shade.* Kyle threw himself overtop Jennifer and the baby.

The bullet plunged through the window an instant later, hitting Kyle’s shoulder. Blood sprayed the rear glass.

“Kyle!”

A second slug dove through the windshield, hitting Kenn in the chest.

Jennifer scrambled for the wheel as Kenn grunted and let go.

**2**

“I have to go.” Ivan slowed the rig, pulling out of the line.

“What are you doing?” James hated to disobey orders.

“She needs me. I can hear her screaming.”

Peter frowned as Ivan spun the truck around. “Maybe that’s why she likes you. You can hear her when we can’t.”

The other soldiers in the truck made personal vows to get Angela to bond with them so they could also hear her. Ivan’s desperation was coming in waves that his team wasn’t used to; they wanted to be able to share it with him. They also wanted to be sure it was worth risking their lives for.

Behind Ivan, the second tank followed them. The soldiers didn’t want Ivan’s crew to have all the fun.

Some refuges were chasing the convoy. Ivan enjoyed running them off the road with the big tank. “Someone get on the gun, but don’t go full retard. We’ll need the ammo.”

Catching the excitement, James hurried to claim the firing position. He adored any big gun.

Not allowed to break radio silence, Eagles watched the soldiers take off with shouts and curses at being abandoned.

**3**

“I don’t see the boss!”

“Where is Kenn?!”

The radio was a garbled mess of shouts and cries as Jennifer steered the truck into Adrian’s rear end. She couldn’t reach the brakes.

The crash was over fast, spraying small parts across the melting snow. Jennifer slammed it into park as Adrian ran toward her.

Conner slid behind the wheel in his father’s place and hit the gas, determined to reach the fighting and help. Flames and bursts of blue power were coming from the other side of the collapsed ledge, but Conner couldn’t see the actual battle yet. He tried to hurry but not get stuck as more trucks and cars came through the valley entrance.

Jennifer pulled Kenn over into the floorboard as Adrian shifted into drive and got them rolling. Refugees were pounding on the door and trying to climb in the open window as she sat up.

Jennifer punched a leering face, knocking the guy off the truck. The window went up too slow for her, catching another man’s finger in the glass. She let the window back down enough for Kyle to slam his gun into the man’s skull.

She and Kyle shoved the body out and got the window up, both hating Autumn’s screams. Squished between them and splattered in blood, the baby wasn’t happy, but she hadn’t been harmed. Jennifer wanted to comfort her, but she ripped open her kit and grabbed a tourniquet for Kyle.

Adrian bumped into Conner as the boy got stuck, knocking him free, but not taking his place. The trucks bounced along the rocks and ice, finally reaching the edge of the collapsed ledge. Refugees swarmed them, beating on the metal and glass.

Conner ran into the group of refugees who were shooting guns at Angela and Marc, sliding to a stop in front of them.

Adrian’s truck shuddered to a sliding halt on the other side, creating a long, temporary wall of protection.

Marc shoved Angela toward the opening truck door, following her up as a shield. As soon as she was in, he brought up his real shield and studied the tunnel. He wanted to know who had done this.

Right above the tunnel, another flash glinted.

Angela yanked Marc down as Conner hit the gas.

The bullet slammed into the roof of the truck and skidded into a refugee who had crawled under Adrian’s rig. “Test your shield later!”

Marc had to laugh. “Okay.”

“Which way?!” Conner was trying to stay calm, but it was harder this time.

Marc pointed. “Straight through the center. We have an escort.”

Conner and everyone else was overjoyed to spot two Safe Haven tanks rolling back into the crammed entrance of the valley. Armed with huge tires and .50 caliber guns, the soldiers were enjoying themselves now. Refugees ran as the big slugs plowed through the traffic without mercy.

Conner and Adrian took their semis right overtop the bullet-ridden vehicles, taking the center path between the cheering soldiers.

The refugees behind them tried to follow at first, but the big guns kept firing in sweeping patterns that couldn’t be argued with. Now in fear for their lives, the refugees fled to the only safety available–the door in the mountain.

“Let’s roll!”

Angela’s order brought the soldiers to their bumper in seconds, providing an armed escort that didn’t waste ammunition but eliminated any threats that chased them.

In Conner’s truck, Angela slid onto Marc’s lap to make room.

Marc could feel her rage boiling. After a few minutes of it, he sighed. “Okay. Pull over.”

Conner found a wide area that appeared empty and brought the rig to a stop.

Adrian pulled in on the passenger side to provide protection while the soldiers surrounded the small convoy.

Marc took Angela to the next truck so she could check on their injured. As soon as she was busy, Marc teamed with Adrian and sent her latest order.

“Good.” Adrian had been surprised when they left the valley without handling it. “The two of us or does she think she’s going too?”

“She wants to. I told her the camp needs her more. Use that.

*Stop it, both of you. I’m going to the camp. Everyone here is going with me except the two of you. Take what you need, set up right here and wait for him*

Marc grinned, eager to repay Bryson for the scare they’d had. He’d recognized the man’s feel now.

Adrian motioned toward Jennifer. “Get the boss to base.”

Jennifer frowned a bit. “I, uh, don’t know how to drive one of these.”

“I can drive.” Kenn groaned, peeling his jacket open. “Three vests and still I’m stunned.” Kenn forced himself up. “He wants us dead. That packed too much punch to be anything but personal.”

“I agree.” Marc zipped his jacket and gestured to Kenn. “Get them to base.”

Adrian and Marc let the trucks get out of sight before moving, but they began before that. Teamed, they agreed on a plan without argument. They also disagreed with Angela on how to handle the assassin once they captured him, but neither of them argued. Both men wanted a conversation more than payback. If Bryson was alone, they needed to know. If he had more friends, Angela’s newest battle plan would be put in effect. They were sick of loose ends.

Marc began working on their blind while Adrian chose the setup location. Both of them listened for vehicles or refugees, but it appeared that most of them had stayed in the valley.

They didn’t discuss what was happening there.

**4**

Bryson was standing a hundred feet above the collapsed ledge where Safe Haven’s leaders were supposed to be crushed in bloody heaps. The fury kept him warm even when the winds became intolerable. Bryson couldn’t believe his plan had failed. There was only one thing he could do now and that was die for the cause. This was no longer just his war.

Bryson tucked himself into back the shadows of the crevice, scanning the awful battlefield below. The refugees were still swarming into the valley, fighting each other. There were fires and screams, gunshots and wrecks as cars plowed into each other in an attempt to be the first one to reach the door.

Bryson got his breath and then used his remaining energy to direct his gift in a single direction. It had been one of Sonya’s favorite tactics to use against other descendants. Only a few of their kind were able to open direct lines of communication that prevented other descendants in the area from hearing them. Bryson was one of those. *Erik, I failed. They escaped.*

*We knew you would, Bryson. You underestimated them.*

Bryson could have argued that no one could prepare for a wildcard, but shame wouldn’t let him. *What do you want me to do now?*

As Bryson paused for the answer, he continued to berate himself for failing to foresee some people coming back for the leaders. It had been easy to figure out what Angela had planned once he’d found their hidden vehicles; he’d gotten cocky. *I should have disabled their wheels.*

*We want you to do what you would have done if we hadn’t found you on their doorstep like a lost puppy. Chase them.*

Bryson brightened. He might get a second chance at revenge.

*Do everything the way you would if we weren’t here. That means using stealth, so don’t call us again.*

Bryson frowned, rubbing his cold hands together. *If I hide, they won’t be able to find me.*

Erik’s laughter increased Bryson’s humiliation.

*Like I said, you underestimated them. As soon as they get their camp to a place they consider safe, the hunters will be sent out. Make sure you’re found by the main targets.*

*How do I do that?*

*You do that by ignoring the sheep. When they fail, the shepherds will be sent out.*

Bryson couldn’t discover a flaw with the plan–not that he would have argued anyway. His chance to do it alone had been blown the minute the soldiers came back for Angela. *How will you know when they’ve got me?*

*We’ll be watching. You can’t escape us. You stink of loyalty to Sonya. You’re easy to find.*

The mental connection closed before Bryson could respond. Angry and ashamed, he curled into a ball and forced himself to rest until it got dark. He had a lot of climbing to do.

# Chapter Thirty-Five

**Moments Like This**

A picture containing clock

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“W**ho wants first watch over him?” Erik glanced around his camp. Seventy men and women had come with him from the abandoned town where Sonya had enslaved half the population and stirred the rest into needless violence that had always cost lives.

“Nicholas and I will take the first shift.”

Erik gave his approval of Isaac’s offer. “Pick half a dozen for your crew. My team will relieve you in six hours.”

Erik’s mercenaries were all tall, dark, stocky, and hungry. Wearing concealing clothes in multiple layers, and black boots with chains that were taped down to hide the noise, the crew was intimidating. They had found similar gear in one of the towns they had raided, which had led to everyone dressing alike. Erik didn’t care what they looked like. He didn’t have rules on hygiene, uniforms, or anything else that didn’t matter. None of it mattered to him. He only cared that they followed the orders he gave.

As the group of descendants got set to leave, Erik ducked into the small canvas where their cook was trying to produce a meal while fighting the wind from untucked corners.

“She won’t eat.”

Erik ignored the woman glaring at him from a dark corner. That was the only place the wind wasn’t coming through–where it was blocked by her rounded body. Her dark, curly hair no longer glowed and her eyes no longer lit up in welcome, but Erik’s affection for her had never wavered. He would do anything for her, except what she had only asked once. Her freedom was not an option. “Let her starve. How long?”

Brian shrugged, hating the duty he’d been drafted for. “At least an hour. This rehydrated shit sucks.” The young man dumped a canteen of water into the pot and slammed the lid on. “I can’t wait to get to civilization.”

Erik scowled at him. “Our town is empty. As soon as people found out Sonya was dead, they took off. We are all that’s left.”

Brian shrugged. “I assumed when you got revenge for Safe Haven killing your friends and family that we would return to base and reestablish our town. To me, that means power tools and lights.” Brian gestured at the dim lantern and the muddy ground under the camp stove he’d set up. “You can’t expect miracles in these conditions.”

Erik scanned the tent and then looked over his shoulder. “Two volunteers for mess.”

Two volunteers strode toward the tent.

Erik had made his camp in a small impression in the mountain range, liking the angle for his sentries so they could view in every direction. He was aware of stragglers around them, but he wasn’t concerned. If anyone was unlucky enough to stumble across this camp, the guards would handle it.

Erik was retired, but he’d been doing jobs off the books for years. Hired mercenary pay was better. Many of the men and women around him had been doing the same; no one complained about the weather or the hardships that came during tracking down prey. They were used to it.

Erik ducked out as the two men came in, noting who was eager to earn his approval. Everyone on this trip wanted the Safe Haven descendants dead. Many of his crew had lost family members, including Erik. Sonya and Vlad had only been distant relatives, but duty still demanded he avenge them. Erik might have ignored that if not for the call Safe Haven had made after poisoning everyone.

The open challenge in that call had told Erik if they didn’t take care of the Safe Haven people now, that camp would continue to grow in power until they were out of reach. Erik was confident the fighters with him were more than enough to handle ten new descendants now, however. All of the people in the makeshift camp were killers, even the women. Sonya had insisted on keeping the sexes apart for battles, but Erik had never believed that was a good idea. Many of the mercenaries in his group were couples, which always encouraged them to fight harder. Having something to live for mattered.

Erik thought about the furious woman he had left under the mess canopy. Michelle would never forgive him for the abuses she’d suffered, but Erik loved her. She was the other half of the reason he was doing this. If Safe Haven took control of the United States, he would have to release her. She had been his slave for three decades now. She had born him ten children, three of whom they had buried. Two had died on the train with Sonya. The one she was carrying would join the other four here as protection while he set up a new base further south to take advantage of the better weather and to fish now that the herds were gone.

“We have a group of refugees coming in. Four of them. No big weapons that I can see.”

Erik came over to take the glasses from Mango, who had duty. Erik scanned the group and smiled. “Invite them in.”

The mercs around him chuckled, knowing what came next.

Erik swept the camp, ready to be settled for resting until his shift came up to follow Bryson. They were using ATVs and carrying Glocks, but Erik didn’t believe that was how this battle would be won. He also didn’t think Adrian Mitchel was stupid enough to hunt Bryson himself, but there was always a small chance he was, so they would monitor Bryson just in case. Erik expected the real fight to take place in Market Town, where Safe Haven was running to hide. Erik and his group had observed the UN fight. Now that they knew the gifts Adrian’s crew had, they were ready.

Erik nodded at the other guard on duty as the refugees entered his camp in drunken staggers that implied they were wandering from site to site, partying. He ducked into his private tent and sat down in the empty chair, taking the warm mug of tea from one of the four men lounging in his travel home.

This quartet was the most powerful of his crew. Hugh could throw a slashing rain and Jon had a type of fire. The other two were only able to zap, but they were both good at it. Erik was able to magnify any gifts around him. Hugh and Stephen were brothers from Maine, but they hadn’t been home in decades. Dugan and Jon were relics that Erik had rescued from bunkers after the war. All four men were loyal to the point of death.

“As soon as Mitchel is in sight, we all aim for him. According to the stories we were told, he was banished. They won’t protect him. They don’t understand how important he is.”

“What about the woman and the Ghost?”

Erik shrugged. “Once we kill Mitchel, we’ll take the others captive. You can play with them for a while and then they’ll be reclaimed.”

Outside the tent, a short scream cut off abruptly.

Erik smiled. “Such a beautiful sound.”

Jon handed Erik a packet of dehydrated ice cream to snack on until dinner was ready. As their magnifier, they needed Erik to stay healthy. “We all know Mitchel needs to die, but why are you so insistent that one of us has to do it?”

“I don’t have faith that anyone else can.” Erik revealed his fear. “You remember what a pain he was on our team.”

“Sure, but that still doesn’t explain why he wants you more than the rest of us. We all set him up.”

“I did a little more than that after we were sent to different corners of the globe. I’m at the top of his kill list.”

The men around him scowled. “Why?”

“I was supposed to bring in one of his kids for lab work. The little bastard didn’t make it.”

“You killed a kid?” Jon wasn’t as evil as the others who turned to him in disapproval.

Erik shrugged. “Feels like anyone else. Never bothers me.”

Under the mess canopy, Michelle struggled to her feet. As usual, she was pregnant and miserable.

Brian watched her go, assuming she needed to use the bathroom again. Michelle had always been around. Nothing had changed for her during his lifetime so far.

Brian had lost his cousin on the train, but unlike the rest of Erik’s group, Brian wasn’t angry and he didn’t care about duty. He was just delighted to be the surviving member of his family. These men were all evil. Brian, like Erik’s wife, was very different from the rest of Erik’s group. Tall and blond, he could have been a Mitchel.

Michelle stumbled through the remaining camp of four dozen sprawling, screwing, killing, laughing descendants who no longer had any rules they were required to follow except for Erik’s. She ignored the leers and knowing glances from them, the same as she ignored the rare looks from those who would have helped her. Michelle had given up hope a long time ago. All she wished for now was an easy death.

Michelle stepped behind a boulder and squatted. As she finished and stood up, a man came from the cover of the huge rocks next to her.

Before she could scream for help, Michelle was grabbed and dragged backwards.

**2**

“Pull over.”

“Are you sure?” Kenn glanced at Angela. “We’re almost there. We should view Safe Haven vehicles within the next few minutes.”

“Yes. I don’t want Conner pulling into camp alone. It will send a bad message.”

Kenn flashed his lights to get Conner’s attention, then pulled the truck over. Before he could arrange security, Angela had already jumped out and slammed the door.

The area where Kenn had pulled over was sparsely populated with tall, moldy trees that shed light showers of snow and cold drops over her as she ran to Conner’s truck. None of the farms appeared to be occupied and all of the fields were bare. If anything had been growing, the refugees who had come through from the west would have stripped it anyway, but it was still depressing.

As Conner got them rolling, Angela spotted movement on the ground near them.

A small line of ants came from the dense undergrowth, presumably in search of food. Angela wanted to order Kenn to run them over, but she held herself in check. She had a schedule to keep, but she wouldn’t forget that the mutations needed to be handled. Until Safe Haven sailed away from America, the Eagles would be using the ants as targets again and dropping bait balls into nests. She would do everything she could to eliminate the mutations. She hoped Pitcairn Island didn’t have that problem and she was determined not to bring any of them along for the cruise.

Kenn was glad that Angela had hurried, but he also had faith in the soldiers surrounding her. He gave Ivan a wave of approval.

Kenn suddenly wondered what conversational topic she and Conner would have for the last mile of this journey. Whatever it was, the boy would benefit from it. Angela was a lot like Adrian in that way. She liked to prepare people.

In the truck in front of them, Angela was trying to do exactly that. “There’s going to be an official vote tomorrow to lift your banishment, but there’s a chance they’ll overrule me.”

Conner fell in behind Kenn’s truck this time, distracted. “Will it go well?”

Angela shrugged. “Depends on Candy.”

“Cool.” Conner grinned, forgetting that he wasn’t supposed to have had contact with her. “She likes me now. It’s all good.”

Tension filled the truck.

Conner glanced over to find Angela glaring at him. Instead of the myriad of excuses that he could have used, Conner sighed. *She was miserable and I could sense it hundreds of miles away.* He steered around the debris like Kenn was doing, but his mind was in the past. *I was in Market Town the first time she called out for help. I knew I wasn’t supposed to answer, but I had to.*

“I already knew all that. The problem is that you didn’t think I did. If you’re going to hide shit from me, maybe I should keep you two apart.”

Conner frowned. “If she and I are both willing, what does it matter to you?”

“It’ll hurt your dad.”

Conner realized why Angela was in the truck with him. “You’re not here for me. You’re here for my dad!”

“Of course. I don’t want to hurt him any more than he already will be when the camp reinstates his banishment. You’ll be allowed back into the camp, but everything you do will reflect on him. I want your dad to have another chance in the future and I can’t do that without your help.”

Conner relaxed, understanding he wasn’t in trouble. “I want that too. What can I do?”

“Stay away from Candy.”

Conner became angry. “For how long?”

“As long as it takes her to come to you.”

Conner scoffed. “I can have that tonight.”

“That may be true, but only because you’d be taking advantage of her loneliness or using your gift. If you do it the honorable way, it’ll take time. During that period, the camp will learn to trust you again, your relationship won’t be suspect, and your dad may not pay for any mistakes that you make. That’s a small price for the type of happiness you two will have together.”

It wasn’t a hard choice for Conner, but at the same time, it was. He had been looking forward to spending time with Candy now. “I’ll give it a month. I can wait that long.”

“I won’t forget this and neither will your dad.” Angela motioned toward the line of vehicles they could see in the near distance. “Keep rolling around and take the lead.”

Proud that he would be driving Angela in the front of the convoy, Conner sat up straighter. “I can do it for two months if you give me moments like this.”

Angela smiled. “Why do you think we’re having this ride together?”

Angela opened the glovebox and took out a small testing kit like the one Conner had witnessed Kendle use in the cave. It was more accurate than a badge that needed a length of exposure to start registering a rise in the danger.

Angela breathed a sigh of relief as she read the results. It was lower than it had been in the cave the last time they’d been able to do a test like this. The clouds were moving east again–out to sea to kill anyone surviving there. If multiple reactors melted down at the same time, it would deliver a constant flow of radiation into the Jetstream that would coat the planet. That included remote islands, though it might take a year or more to reach their hopeful haven. The recesses of her mind began lighting up with plans for a bunker they could survive in while living on Pitcairn. Everyone loathed the mountain, and even a basement would be argued about right now, but if people began to die from exposure, the camp would follow her into the earth again, she was sure. It wouldn’t be because she was the alpha, but because they wanted to live.

**3**

“Wow.” Kyle scowled as he caught sight of Conner driving Angela. “She never stops.”

Jennifer shrugged. She didn’t care what Angela was doing so long as they hurried to camp so Kyle’s injury could be cared for. Kenn had already told her it wasn’t bad, but she wanted to hear that from someone with medical training.

Kenn pulled into the rear of the long convoy, aware of Jennifer’s displeasure, but there was little he could do about it. She knew as well as he did that none of the doctor’s little ducks had come with them.

*We can do it, Momma.*

Frustrated, Jennifer looked down at the baby. “Just this once.”

Autumn and Jennifer sent energy into Kyle, healing his injury in seconds. Even if Kenn hadn’t viewed it before, he would have been impressed with how fast they had done it.

Jennifer sat back in tired satisfaction, crossing her arms over her chest when Kyle would have scolded her. Both of their injuries had been healed.

Kyle picked up the baby with a shoulder that was no longer bleeding or screaming. “Thank you.”

It was a touching moment that Kenn enjoyed sharing with them, especially when he caught sight of a vehicle pulling out of the convoy. “Here she comes.”

The radio lit up a few seconds later. “Driver switch has been approved. Ivan’s team will provide escort.”

Kenn pulled over once again, tiring of the motion. He wanted to get as far from the mountain as he could.

Tonya slipped from the vehicle in front of them, running toward the driver door. She jerked it open and climbed into Kenn’s lap, then dropped into the tiny space that Jennifer quickly made by picking up the baby.

Kyle and Jennifer glared at Tonya.

Tonya put her arms around Kenn’s neck. “We can go now.”

Unable to fight the mood, Kenn snorted. “Women!”

Even Jennifer chuckled.

Kenn got them rolling, unable to fight how it felt to have the love of a woman because she wanted to give it.

As they settled into a frustrating thirty-five miles per hour, it occurred to Kenn that no one had asked about their two missing men. Everyone was so glad to have Angela back that they hadn’t even noticed Marc and Adrian weren’t with them. Kenn had an idea of why the pair had been left behind and locked down on his thoughts. He didn’t want to be responsible for giving away their ambush. He didn’t speak again until late afternoon shadows were settling over the convoy.

**4**

“They’re set up and waiting.”

Angela breathed a sigh of relief at the radio call from the truck behind them. She’d been too drained to connect. Jennifer had been able to reach Marc and do it for her, against Kyle’s mutters about the girl needing to rest.

Angela let sleep reclaim her, trying to gain enough energy to help set up camp when they stopped.

Conner paid attention to the road. Their soldier escort was rolling half a mile in front. They’d been instructed to keep going even after it got dark and that’s what they’d done. Refusing to answer radio calls asking for a break, Ivan would only stop when Conner flashed his lights twice. Angela had marked a place on his map; they weren’t pausing until he reached it. Angela had given him a job that he could do. It was great. The only thing better had been when she’d told him to take the lead and keep driving. Everyone had watched him and known he was forgiven.

“Help!” The radio in the truck jerked Angela up in the seat.

“We need help!”

Jimmy’s voice was panicked, as were the screams of the people in the background.

“They’ve breached the door! Please, come back!”

Angela switched off the radio.

Conner saw the tears rolling down her cheeks and felt like he could join her. The misery was so clear he could almost taste it. “That hurts, you know. Suck it up.”

Angela was startled into a harsh laugh. “Just like your dad, aren’t ya?”

Conner nodded proudly. “Of course. That’s why I’m with you, right? Because he can’t be?”

Angela winced at the boy’s accuracy. “A chip off the old block.”

Conner shrugged. “He said you would need to talk. I didn’t know where I’d be then, so I was snotty to him about it. Sorry for that if he told you.”

“He didn’t rat you out.” Angela thought of Charlie’s short, rude demand that she make him and Tracy an official couple or he and the girl were staying with Jimmy. She had agreed because she’d already known it was coming. The basics of life never stopped, but it was galling to have the boy believe he’d been able to blackmail her. It was also annoying that Conner believed he could keep up with her in his father’s place.

“I can, for an hour or two at a time. I’m practicing on you for a much weaker target.”

Angela sniggered at her first thought. *Candy is gonna eat you up and spit you out, little boy.* “Just drive the truck, James.”

Conner laughed. “That makes me wish I had a special hat or something.”

Angela leaned down to pull something from her kit. She handed it to him. “Congratulations on level one status.”

Conner yelled in excitement, snatching the Eagle hat to slam it on his skull. “All right!”

Angela let his joy wash over her in place of the awful guilt for not turning around to help those in the mountain. Fate had given them dozens of chances to change their mind. Now, it was too late.

Behind the convoy, a single vehicle came to a stop.

“Are you sure, man?” Morgan waited for Ray to get out of the truck.

“Tell her I’ll catch up if I can.”

“He’s dead, Ray.” Morgan hated to say it, but he did. “You know it’s already over. Don’t waste your life on a corpse.”

Ray wasn’t angry. He knew it was a suicide mission. “I shouldn’t have left him. He was testing me and I abandoned him.”

“I’m sorry, but it doesn’t change the result. He’s gone and you’ll be killed too if you go back.”

“Tell her I’ll catch up if I can.” Ray slammed the door shut and took off running in the opposite direction, eager to find a set of wheels.

Morgan signaled at their passenger as he got them rolling. “Tell her when she’s already getting bad news. Don’t ruin a good mood with it.”

Booth wrote it down, now being trained. He liked it in Safe Haven, but he hadn’t minded the cave until the quake and he’d also worked well in the Army. Booth figured he could survive about anywhere that had females and whiskey. Being required to kill bad guys just made it better.

**5**

“Do you want to eat first or after the fun?”

Marc shrugged. “I could eat.”

The two men had fashioned an oval blind to blend in with the evening shadows. Only big enough for one at a time, it allowed them to alternate staying warm while watching for their target. Both of them were very cold and aware of how alone they were, but neither man worried about anything that might run across their path. Both of them had powerful gifts that had been practiced recently. The isolated feeling came from being out of Angela’s light.

Marc ate all the food Adrian gave him without comment, not caring what it was, only that it would stop his growling stomach. He did notice that the coffee was only warm, but it was bitter, the way he liked it. He assumed Adrian had brought the thermos along, but didn’t ask. He didn’t want the man to assume he was trying to fill the empty space they had been working in over the past hours. While they labored, the sky had gone from dull shades of blueish green to a deep purple that was stunning. Resting while the blond took his turn outside the shelter, Marc stared at it, hoping Angela was also enjoying the view. It was wonderful to be out here again.

Adrian felt Marc’s contemplative mood as he stood in the whipping wind and darkness. There were lights around them, flashing and bobbing to prove the existence of survivors. Adrian was almost certain it was refugees. The calls for help coming from the mountain had been desperate. None of their people were among the stragglers out here searching for food, though. Adrian stayed alert. If a problem came right now, he had to handle it silently. It had been long enough for Bryson to reach them.

Adrian wasn’t sure how Angela had chosen this particular location, but he had suspicions. The biggest was Bryson’s need for revenge and his anger at failing. A furious killer would start tracking his prey right away, but until he got close, he would stomp and storm, rampaging to vent the humiliated fury so that when he needed to go quiet again, he had the control to do so. This spot was only a few miles from Bryson’s failure and it was at a junction of three roads that circled the mountain, bringing traffic south. Bryson would know the terrain by now and come here first to let off some steam on survivors. He would also look like any other refugee who had escaped that mountain, which is why Angela had sent Adrian to identify him.

“Are you okay with this job?”

Adrian didn’t stop what he was doing, but Marc felt him pause.

“For the most part. Bryson wasn’t so bad.”

Marc wasn’t worried over Adrian having sympathies for the man. Bryson was a threat to Angela, and that was enough, but Marc was curious as to how Adrian really felt about this mission.

Adrian shrugged. “I’d like it to be over–mostly because I forgot about him. He wasn’t along for the meeting with Sonya and I didn’t spot him at the train. There was no sign of him when we counted the bodies, but when we couldn’t find her remains, I should have known. Sonya gave Bryson something he’d wanted all his life and he vowed to be her body man forever. Until he’s gone, it’s a constant reminder that I missed something so obvious.”

Marc understood how that felt. It was hard to account for everything, which is why Angela was getting so much respect. Other than a few deaths and injuries, she had led them through hell. Marc couldn’t hold the earthquake against her. Descendants didn’t read well through stone, and it’s not like Mother Nature had sent a postcard warning what was coming. Earthquakes traveled hard and fast, and did the most damage during the first few minutes. Safe Haven was lucky Angela had put so many safeguards in place, but no one could have prevented the deaths.

“Make sure you tell her that a few hundred times a day for the next month or two.”

Marc accepted that as solid advice. Angela was ruthless, but she also had a conscience. He finally understood why she didn’t sleep very often. The things she’d been forced to do weighed on her in the wee hours.

“I’m glad you get that now. I wasn’t a Jody at first. Many of the times I was trying to comfort her should have been yours to handle. They will be now. She won’t come to me for that anymore.”

Marc frowned. He didn’t want to be distracted from the mission, but they weren’t expecting a lot of trouble from Bryson and this might be the last time they were alone for a while. Once they returned to Safe Haven, there was a lot of work waiting. “What will she come to you for?”

Adrian sighed. He didn’t want to discuss this either, but he’d known it would happen at some point. “A break in doing the right thing.”

“An example?”

“Once we reach the island, she’ll become a little reckless again. You have to stay out of her way as much as you can or it will cause problems. She’ll need to set an example for the men that fear of the unknown can’t rule their decisions.”

“I’ll work on that. What else?”

“She’ll be bored on the boat. You’ll need to keep her busy, but she’ll see through half-assed attempts. Spend some time on that before we sail off into the sunset. It will make the trip easier on all of us.”

Marc made a face. “Maybe you should write this down.”

Adrian wanted to laugh, but movement got his attention. “One o’clock, bold as brass.”

Marc hunkered down, finger caressing the trigger.

Doing the job of a spotter wasn’t needed. Adrian put the telescope-shaped gear away. He spent the time scanning their surroundings to make sure no one was sneaking up on them. Aware of other voices and other thoughts in the area, he braced for the ugliness to begin. Some of his past sins were about to come back to haunt him–ugly things he had assumed were long settled.

“But this time, I’ve got your back.”

Adrian was stunned by Marc’s words, so much that he almost missed the vet coming up behind them. “Damn!”

“The boss sent me.” The vet hunkered down between the two men without saying anything else.

Marc and Adrian exchanged glances that implied he might not make it back to camp once this mission was finished.

Chris chuckled softly. “She won’t thank you for that.”

Marc scowled toward their target. “Later. You take the shot.”

Rifle now in hand, Adrian lined up the shot and pulled the trigger without an ounce of regret. Despite what he’d said about Bryson, Adrian had no problem doing his duty to Angela.

As Adrian took down the target, Marc pinned the vet in place. They didn’t communicate, but at the same time, they did. As Marc finally rotated to study the body on the ground, he sent a single sentence. *It would be best if you were not on the boat with us.*

Chris didn’t respond. Angela had told him not to argue with either of the men, but especially not Marc. The vet knew that was wise. The wolfman didn’t like him at all.

Marc and Adrian assumed he was support for this run; that bothered them both.

“Let’s spring the trap.” Marc stood up, acting as if he didn’t know they were being watched.

The vet remained where he was.

Adrian stayed on Marc’s heels as they slid down the icy embankment and came to a stop near the body. As Marc knelt down, footsteps and voices rang out from the cliffs and crags around them.

“Hands up!”

“Move in!”

“If you go for your gun, we’ll kill you both!”

Marc and Adrian lifted their hands, standing close enough to exchange whispers as half a dozen men dressed in white camo slid down the hills toward them.

“Is that all of them?”

“No. They never travel anywhere without females.”

“So another dozen at a campsite?”

“Double that. They use monitors too, usually Invisibles.”

Marc stored the information as they were surrounded and stripped of their weapons. It was brisk and routine, without extra abuse, but the menace was clear and all of it was directed at Adrian.

Marc scanned the enemy, quickly discovering these were relatives of the people who’d been killed by the poisoned food Angela had gifted to Sonya. That explained the motivation for all of these killers to be waiting in the cold weather for a month for Safe Haven to emerge.

One of the mercenaries clicked the radio three times. When he let off the mike, he drew two pairs of handcuffs from his belt.

Adrian swept them, not spotting anyone he recognized except for Isaac. He took a fast look at Bryson’s body to verify he was dead, regretting that he hadn’t gotten to speak with the man first. Bryson had always been a wealth of information in the past. As it was, the body was already covered in a light layer of the snow that had begun to fall.

Three of the men came over to shine lights in faces. Marc and Adrian both glanced away from the glare, but they didn’t try to hide their identities.

“We’ve got them!”

That’s the Ghost and Mitchel!” Isaac laughed, slapping hands with a member of his team. “We got ‘em on our own!”

Four of the team surrounded them while the other two approached Bryson. “What do you want me to do with his body?”

Still studying his former team leader, Isaac snorted. “Why do you have to do anything with it? We were taught that animals need to eat.”

Adrian winced. He’d delivered that lesson.

Marc caught the reaction and braced for more bad news. *Does it never end with you?*

Adrian dropped his chin. *I’d really like to say yes.*

Not resisting as he was cuffed, Marc sighed at Adrian’s memories of amazing sex and a trial that had cost him command. *It’s a wonder you don’t have AIDS.*

“Adrian Mitchel.” Isaac moved in front of his nemesis as soon as Adrian was secured, cruelty glinting. “I hoped we’d have a minute alone.” *Thud!*

Held up by one of the grinning mercenaries, Adrian gasped at the blow to his chest. Isaac had obviously heard about his weak heart.

“Erik said to bring you in. He didn’t say what condition you needed to be in.” *Thud!*

Adrian fell to the ground, ears ringing.

Isaac laughed. “I remember when you were the badass we all tried to match. Where’s that fire now?” *Kick!*

“Broken by another tramp, I’ve heard. Is that true?” Enjoying himself, Isaac leaned down to sneer. “Garrett shared Shannon with all of us after the trial. It wasn’t that good. Good was the one you killed on the train!” *Thud!*

Isaac’s arrogance was offset by the reactions of the team around him as the mercenaries considered the consequences of facing Adrian Mitchel and the Ghost at the same time. The legends of both men preceded them.

“It’s a shame about Bryson. Didn’t you even consider keeping him alive for information?”

Adrian spit blood into the snow. “Of course, but our boss said no survivors.” He grinned. “That includes you.”

That information made even Isaac twitch. He reacted with another punch, trying to cover his fear. *Thud!*

The other mercs began to retreat, hoping to be out of range when Adrian decided to pay Isaac back for the abuse he was currently dealing.

*Thud! Thud!*

Marc was being held at gunpoint, supposed to concentrate on making them believe he only had military skills to rely on.

*I wonder what Angie is doing right now.*

Marc studied Adrian as the beaten man pushed himself up again. *Why would you be thinking about her at a time like this?*

Adrian chuckled through the split lip. *I always think about her. More than I ever did with Shannon, but don’t tell her that. I’m hoping to use it.*

Marc growled at him.

“See?” Isaac laughed, hauling back. “That’s the Adrian Mitchel I know. He brings that out in everyone.”

Isaac punched Adrian in the stomach. As Adrian bent over, gasping, Isaac leaned down. “I’ve wanted to do this for a long time.” *Thud!*

Adrian fell again, but he gave a harsh laugh as he sat up. “I fucked your wife harder than this.”

*Thud! Thud!*

Marc didn’t enjoy the beating. He wasn’t the one doing it. He also knew Adrian’s pain would draw sympathy from Angela. With a small flick of his finger, Marc tossed Isaac across the snowy cavity, slamming him into the nearest rock. There was a nasty crack; blood sprayed across the icy ground.

Adrian brought up his shield as he glared at Marc. “I was fine.”

The stunned mercs didn’t fire magic or bullets, hoping Adrian and Marc would let them go as they ran. It was obvious their gifts were small in comparison.

Marc pulled his demon in, worrying over it a little. If there ever came a day that the demon was stronger than he was, he wouldn’t be able to lock the power up and prevent it from harming others. He would have to monitor for that. Some of the scrolls he’d brought up told stories about demons who had taken over their hosts, forcing them to do awful things.

“Why did you do that?”

Marc sent out a mild blast of sonic to knock mercenaries off their feet and then his anger reached out to steal their courage and replace it with terror.

Now running as if they were being chased by ghosts, half of Isaac’s crew was out of sight before Marc formed an answer. “Angie wouldn’t like it.”

Adrian realized Marc felt the need to protect him and basked in it. Even though he wasn’t willing, it was amazing. Adrian lowered his shield, aware of some of the evil descendants trying to regroup. “Get out of here!” He sent the strongest fear wave that he could muster, but it was nothing compared to the distinctive roaring in his mind as Marc added his power to it.

The rest of the descendants fled.

“Do you think that’ll be enough?”

Marc shrugged, pulling the anger in. It’d been a good show, but he was tired. “Probably. They didn’t seem smart enough to go back to where they came from.”

Adrian scanned the small battlefield, glad Isaac was no longer in the picture. That guy had been dangerous. He’d told that Angela months ago. Isaac had been on his list of hunters to watch out for over the last twenty years. He just hadn’t known the man was also in love with Sonya.

“Pick us up.” Marc let off the mike and began to loot the two bodies.

Adrian stood guard, hoping the vet didn’t take long. There was always a slim possibility that someone would try again. The next part of Angela’s plan should prevent them from being followed, but Adrian didn’t want to push their luck. The team he’d led hadn’t been smart enough to quit, only clever enough to betray.

Marc switched his radio to the channel Safe Haven had been using before going into the mountain and gave Adrian a nod.

Adrian keyed his mic. “Don’t leave me behind! Wait up!”

Marc grinned as he hit his button, wishing he really was. “We’ll meet at Market Town! Keep going! Keep going!”

“You need my help! Don’t leave me!”

“Go quiet and that’s an order. No more open calls!”

Both men switched off the radios. It was such an obvious setup that they were confident it would work. The UN already considered Americans to be stupid farmers, and the mercenaries wouldn’t want to challenge him and Marc again until they had their entire group together. The refugees were also listening and all they’d heard was the word *town*, which meant food. Everyone would converge on the UN while they sat there waiting for Safe Haven to deliver itself into their hands.

Chris pulled up in a battered RV that had survived the avalanche, but had been sprayed with slugs from the 50 Cal. Dropping small parts of itself as it chugged over the ice and stone, the engine was quiet; no one complained once they were inside where heat rushed over them in blissful comfort.

Adrian tensed in the doorway, moving aside so Marc could see the blanket-covered woman in the rear seat. Bound and bruised, her glowing red orbs warned of power.

“She’s drugged right now, no worries.”

Marc and Adrian turned toward the vet in anger.

“What’s going on?”

Chris held out a sheet of paper.

Adrian read while Marc joined Chris in the front, scanning the killer. *“Neither of you would have done this part.”*

Adrian knelt down to help the woman sit up. He tried a deep scan, but found only the haze of drugs. “You hit her a little hard.”

Chris steered into the darkness without using lights. “It won’t hurt her or the baby.”

Marc and Adrian exchanged another glance.

“Well, that should ensure the plan.”

“What if it was Isaac’s baby and not the boss?”

“Well, there’s a possibility that Isaac was the boss now...”

Marc snorted. “That was way too easy.”

“I agree, which is why I also don’t think she belongs to Isaac, but I’ll know more when she wakes up.” Adrian helped the woman lay down, but he didn’t remove the ropes around her wrists. Any female who was a leader, or the mate of a leader, was valuable in any number of ways. Knowing his enemy, Adrian assumed the woman had a gift that enhanced power. He based that on how she was cared for. Her clothes were threadbare, her skin was tight against her bones, and her hair had been chopped off as if in punishment. It didn’t look as though she had been willing, but Adrian was counting on their enemy not caring about that. In fact, if their enemy had, they wouldn’t be considered enemies.

“How long?”

“Two hours at this speed.” Chris felt Marc’s disapproval and pushed the pedal down. “All right. Half that, but hang on.”

Satisfied he understood they wanted to get to camp as fast as possible, Marc and Adrian both settled in for the ride. It didn’t take long for the exhaustion to hit.

Sensing Marc and Adrian had fallen into light dozes, Chris tried hard not to wake them up but it was difficult. The road wasn’t in good shape. Ten months without repair or regular use had morphed the road into a dangerous path through a deadly wilderness. Large potholes were hidden by a surprising amount of debris, ready to deliver flat tires to unsuspecting travelers. It didn’t help that some of this area had also been hit during their fight with the government. Most of that had been looted, but it was clear there had been other battles here too. Chris assumed the Mexicans coming through, and then the UN troops, were responsible for that.

Around the RV, the landscape flew by without mercy. Skeletons, fires, and long, dark, silent stretches were his company. It was hard to look at. Chris tried not to think about all of the similar misery he had brought to people. Unlike most of the fighters, the vet didn’t regret it. He just wished he didn’t have to limit his prey to Angela’s choices. He wanted to be free to kill anyone he felt needed it.

# Chapter Thirty-Six

**Don’t Screw This Up**

A picture containing yellow, building, wooden, sign

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“M**eet us in Market Town.” Radios on belts and in vehicles echoed with Angela’s tired voice. “Market Town is ground zero.”

Conner took the next street that would lead them in the opposite direction. By dawn, several groups would be traveling toward the town that was sheltering the rest of the UN men, but Safe Haven’s citizens would be fifty miles away and out of range. That’s all Conner knew about Angela’s plans and that’s all he wanted to know. During the battle, he would be with the camp and so would Candy. Knowing she wouldn’t be in the crossfire was good, but knowing he would be close enough to protect her if needed had allowed him to hold on to his happiness for the last three hours.

“Slow down.” Angela yawned. “It will give the guards time to clear the perimeter.”

Conner dropped them to twenty from thirty-five, the speed Angela had told him to maintain. Thanks to the UN already clearing the roads in this area, it had been a straight drive with no blocks.

Behind them, lights flashed in recognition. Many of their members hadn’t traveled like this before. The evening would be spent listening to complaints of aches and legs twitching. Angela expected to join them in the discomfort. She hadn’t worked out in the cave enough. She could feel her stomach getting ready to cramp as soon as she stepped from the truck.

Angela checked the thermometer on the window, accounting for the warmth inside that would have a slight effect on it. It was dark, windy, and 38°. She needed to get them set up fast.

Angela stretched, getting the cramp over with now. “Stay with me when we get there. Be useful if you can.”

Conner grinned. “I was thinking about that. How would you like your very own car parker?”

Angela nodded at the image in Conner’s mind. “Perfect. Don’t forget to gas them up.”

Some of Conner’s excitement fell. “That’s a lot of gas.”

“You’ll have help once other things are done. Don’t slack off and the Eagles might include you in the party.”

“What party?”

“The one they’ll have tonight when they hope we’re all asleep. You’ve earned a spot at the campfire.”

Conner fell into plans to get the work done in record time.

Satisfied the boy wouldn’t be a problem tonight, Angela swept the cold darkness around them. *Hurry home, Gentlemen. It isn’t Safe Haven without you.*

Conner stayed with Angela as she exited the truck to watch the camp get set up. The small State Park she had chosen was wide and barren enough to accommodate them now that their population had been cut in half. The guards who’d arrived before them continued their roaming patrols of the area; their weak lights provided comfort to the weary travelers. Burning trashcans were lit up at the four corners a few seconds after they stopped, showing the boundary lines of camp. Vehicles were pulled into haphazard positions that Conner would straighten out later.

A small group of Eagles went to the center to erect the two large community tents they had salvaged from the cave. Portable bathrooms would be put alongside it, in smaller tents. Crammed in, it wouldn’t be comfortable, but the heaters, blankets, and body heat would keep the temperature up.

Angela scanned the herd for their mood as the guards called all clear and the people began to emerge. Everyone knew by now that she was sending anyone on their trail to Market Town to fight the UN instead of them. It was another example of how ruthless she could be, but all she picked up was happiness that Safe Haven didn’t have to handle the chore this time. Angela didn’t tell them that wasn’t true.

Angela watched the line of kids being taken to the bathrooms, glad all of them were in a good state of mind. The adults, however, appeared annoyed. Babysitting duty was always a chore, but it was necessary. The people without magic needed to understand the descendant children were only that–children. They needed to be cared for and protected like any other kid.

Angela spotted Kevin standing at the edge of the new caution tape, staring forlornly in the direction they had come from. Angela thought about talking to him, but before she could make up her mind, Daryl joined the man. The two fell into a conversation she was positive included the reporter. Peaceful enough, the men chatted as Daryl led them toward the rear of the camp that was still being set up. Daryl would keep Kevin occupied, but Angela wouldn’t be surprised if he decided to leave camp again. She just hoped he didn’t join Jeff this time. Jeff’s patience with Kevin had run out. Kevin’s misery was understandable, though. Cynthia hadn’t even been buried. Her body had been left where she’d died.

Angela spotted the guard on duty that was taking Ray’s place. Her mood fell a little more. She’d seen Ray pull out of line and knew where he was going, but she hadn’t tried to stop him because he wouldn’t have listened. She also hadn’t spent energy searching to see if he survived. She already knew the mountain was a death trap. She was lucky to have gotten out with as many of her people as she had. “Get the supplies dug up so we can have a hot meal.”

The crew she’d already drafted hurried to get their shovels.

It took half an hour for the Eagles to bring up the stash once the crew had verified a location. The two large crates were 4 x 4 x 4. As the first one was hefted out of the hole, muscles straining and dripping sweat, the observing camp let out a cheer.

“Let the camp into the first one. The bottom one is off limits.”

Kenn stepped forward to carry out Angela’s order, signaling a few others to help.

Morgan used a crowbar to pry the lid off the crate, popping nails at the corners first. As the lid dropped into the dirt, people rushed forward.

“Toilet paper!”

“Oh, thank God!”

“Chapstick!”

“Water!”

Angela listened to the happiness, glad she had foreseen needing the small stashes. There were two more of them, which would buy her crews time to build up a new reserve. Hunting teams that would trek door-to-door through empty apartments and houses would be sent out as soon as she felt like there was enough distance between them and the mountain.

“Chocolate!”

Angela spun around. “Really? Who put that in there?”

Standing next to her, Greg grinned. “That would be Marc.”

Angela made a face. “I didn’t think he knew about this.”

“You told Adrian not to deny him any information. He asked a lot of questions.”

Angela smiled as Greg dug out a candy bar from the bag and handed it to her. “He always knows the right gift.”

Greg snickered. “He’s a guy. He’s been around enough to know what works.”

Laughing, Angela gestured at the adults who had point over the kids. “As soon as they’re settled, let me know.”

Nancy and Tracy promised they would.

Charlie continued trying to herd the children. He was eager for this part of his duty to be done. He wanted what his mother had agreed to.

Angela was too tired to be upset. She would give Charlie what he wanted. In time, he would understand that what a person wanted, and what was best for them, were not always the same. It was a lesson almost all teenagers had to learn on their own, much to the suffering of their parents and the people around them. “Take care of the vehicles.”

Conner was gone an instant later.

Kenn joined Angela for rounds. Tonya was helping with the older population. “Has his banishment been lifted?”

“Yes. A conditional banishment does not require a vote to be removed. Make sure everyone knows that.”

Kenn made a note to tell Tonya. She was the biggest gossip in camp. Everyone would know before dawn arrived.

“Are you good for duty until I’m finished with the kids?”

“Yep.” Kenn didn’t tell her he felt like he’d been in the cage with Marc again.

Angela knew. Thanks to being shot, she had the memory. “I have you off duty tomorrow, when *we* get back.”

“I knew it was something like that.” Kenn moved a little closer to ask the question that mattered to him. “Where will Tonya be?”

Angela pointed toward the camp. “In a truck, with Candy.”

“You got it.” Relieved Tonya wasn’t going to be a part of the battle, Kenn found a second wind. “What do you need tonight?”

Kenn had served Adrian faithfully the entire time Angela was being trained. It was a relief to know the Marine could still be counted on. “I need everyone to sleep as soon as possible, so the Eagles can get their party out of the way.”

Kenn chuckled. “They don’t think you know.”

Angela shrugged. “Let’s keep it that way.”

“You’re the boss. I’m gonna hurry things along, unless you need me right now?”

“No, Marc’s bodyguards have me under watch, and there’s a sniper moving into position. I’m good.”

Kenn did a sweep and found Ivan nearby. He scowled. “Those aren’t the best.”

“No, but we are.” Shawn and Daryl stepped out of the shadows nearby. “We’ve got it. Get to work.”

Kenn was laughing as he walked away. This time, the two Special Forces men had gotten by him without being noticed.

**2**

“What’s going on in there?”

Quinn gestured for quiet. “The nightly descendant meeting with the kids. She started doing this a couple weeks ago.”

All of the adults and sentries around the small tent had drawn her attention. Kendle had expected to be stopped, but the guards had nodded to her and then went back to their duty, telling her that she had been forgiven for coming between Marc and Angie during the government battle. Kendle was relieved, but at the same time, it didn’t matter to her. She wasn’t here for these people. She was here for Marc.

Quinn, who still had a crush on Kendle, kept his distance. Kendle and Tommy had spent the night together. They’d been kissing and hugging all day. It was obvious that they were a couple, and Quinn wasn’t going to come between them. He was just grateful to have come out of the mountain alive.

“You are the future. As I’m sure you know, things are changing. The people who came with us have accepted magic, but there’s more to it than that and I know you sense it. Something snapped. Our souls aren’t healing. I, and several others like us, believe the fabric of reality has been breached. We can’t find another explanation for some of the stories we’ve heard. Many of you have the gift of mind reading. I know that you’ve heard the stories too. It makes it hard for you to sleep and it will even more now that we’re out of the safety of the cave. The monsters couldn’t reach us while we were in there. Out here, we’re surrounded.”

Kendle and Quinn both frowned at the images Angela was putting into young brains. It bothered them even more that the children had already been feeling this way.

“As we travel, we may run into monsters. For us, I believe they will look like everybody else. I mean people.”

The sound of movement came, along with the clunking thumps of someone digging in a kit.

“Here’s the third rule. Don’t trust anyone.”

There were more clinks, followed by a grunt of effort.

“These are the things I see in my dreams. They scare me, so I draw a picture or write notes about them. You’ll notice that most are human. That’s what scares me.”

“What about the people here?”

“The survivors here are special. We all have good souls. We all follow the light. As we travel, refugees will join us and it will take time to figure out if they also follow the light or if they’ve been corrupted. I need you to tell me if you sense things that I miss, but under no circumstances are these people to ever know that you have gifts. Many of you were hurt. You were stolen from your family and your parents. You were forced to hurt people. All of that will happen again if you don’t follow rule number three–do not trust anyone.”

Most of the kids spoke up, promising they would only trust Eagles and the people who were here now.

“Once the new people have been vetted, it’s okay to treat them like everyone else, but you have to remember rule three. I’ve been betrayed by people I believed were my friends. The same thing probably happened to you. Sometimes, you’ll be tempted to talk to a stranger because you’re lonely or because the adult you want to spend time with is too busy. I promise you, once we reach the boat and sail away, all of you will get time with the people you need–including me. You have to be patient. There’s another month before we’ll be on the boat and every bit of that time will be spent gathering what we need. I can’t have you guys running loose and getting into trouble during that time. I need to be able to count on you. Can I?”

The chorus was loud enough to drown out the sound of the wind for a brief moment.

Tiring of the repeating lines, Kendle rotated toward the parking lot. She had noticed not everyone was in camp. “I’ll be around.”

“You’ll be at the party, right?”

Kendle stopped. “What party?”

Quinn grinned. “A small Eagle celebration of life. Bring your team. You guys have all earned it.”

Kendle lifted her brow. “Even Conner?”

Quinn frowned a little. “We took a fast vote while we were traveling. As long as the boy continues to respect Candy’s wishes, we have no problem with him.”

“That’s great. I’ll let him know.”

Quinn was unable to stop the special, approving smile. “Nice job on keeping your team alive.”

Kendle winced instead of being pleased. “I didn’t. I lost two of them.”

Quinn watched her vanish into the darkness, aware of how much it felt like he was conversing with one of his previous team leaders at this point. It was hard to be happy with the success when a teammate had died, no matter whose fault it was or how it had happened.

Quinn made a note to discuss it with Tommy and then went back to listening to Angela’s meeting with the kids. The rules she was laying out were fascinating.

**3**

“Coming back in!” Angela held the flap for the line of kids as they returned from the bathroom trip. The hour-long meeting had worn her out. Holding the attention of any child was tiring, but descendant children were so fast on the uptake that it had exhausted her trying to stay in front of their questions about the rules. They hadn’t understood why she wasn’t going to lift the ban on them using their magic. It had taken longer to get that across than it had about not trusting the new people who came into the camp until they were vetted.

When all the kids were in, Angela motioned a guard into place on the flap and joined Mandy in the far corner. The new mother had her child asleep and was nursing both twins at the same time. Aided by several pillows, Mandy looked as tired as Angela felt. “Is she ready to be changed?”

Mandy nodded without opening her eyes. “Everyone is stuffed. We may have fallen asleep.”

Angela missed those moments with her own babies. She forced a smile. “That’s one of the joys of motherhood. They take a lot of naps.”

Mandy chuckled, dislodging the small girl.

Angela took the baby, and laid her across the blankets next to Mandy to change her diaper. As they worked, the two females felt comfortable companionship fill the canvas.

Angela glanced around to discover the descendant children being welcomed by the non-magic children who’d gotten used to having them close after only a few days. Angela smiled. “Thank you.”

A wave of sleepy approval filled the tent, drawing yawns from everyone.

No sooner had the good mood flooded the area, then tension took its place. All of the descendant children turned toward the flap.

Angela sighed as it opened and Charlie came in. He didn’t speak to her or anyone else as he placed a bedroll in the corner, near the other couples.

The tent was crammed with people. All of them went silent so they didn’t miss Angela’s reaction.

Tracy came into the tent with red cheeks. She hadn’t wanted Charlie to push the issue yet, but the teenager hadn’t listened.

Angela pinned Tracy with a hard look. “If you don’t get a handle on him now, you never will.”

Tracy got what Angela was saying, but she also wanted the restrictions lifted. “I love him.”

Angela motioned toward the bedroll Charlie was busy putting out. “You have the same rules as Kyle and Jennifer. We officially recognize you as a legal couple, but don’t break age rule on inappropriate contact.”

Among the chatter, Tracy’s happiness and Charlie’s satisfaction pushed the bad vibes back out.

Angela refused to allow any thoughts to form while the boy was able to catch them. She could tell Charlie what was coming, but he would never believe her and the camp was too tired to hear fighting right now

Jennifer motioned to Tracy. “Can you help me tie this bandage? He won’t hold still.”

Kyle tried to shrug out of the girl’s grip. “I’m fine.”

Jennifer glared at him. “We have matching shoulder wounds now. Be still!”

Kyle laughed, submitting. She and the baby had healed his injury, but the camp didn’t need to know how fast or that Autumn had been involved. In the morning, they would make a show of spending a moment with Conner or Kendle to explain the lack of wounds.

With the latest drama settled, Angela gave the little girl the pacifier and took her brother so she could also change his diaper. They were low on formula, but she planned to send out scavengers as soon as the Market Town business was finished. Until then, Mandy would be able to handle it. “Thank you for caring for them.”

Mandy smiled, picking up her daughter, who was beginning to fuss from all the noise. “I went up two cup sizes and I stay full. It’s nice to have the relief when she’s sleeping.”

Angela chuckled. “Yeah, there are some things they don’t tell you about motherhood.”

“Don’t I know it.” Mandy shifted into a more comfortable position and secured her hold on the baby. “I’m gonna sleep now.”

“In peace, I hope.” Angela finished changing the little boy’s diaper and put him next to his sister, seeing he didn’t need a pacifier. The small eyes roamed her face continuously, as if trying to memorize it.

Angela clasped his small hand. “Mommy’s got you now. You can sleep.”

The baby boy closed his lids and drifted off.

Angela lingered for a moment, then went out to handle the rest of her list.

She joined Kendle by the chilling vehicles. “How are you now?” It was Angela’s way of asking if Kendle had learned to control the violence inside.

Kendle shrugged. “I’m having more good days than bad.”

Satisfied Kendle wasn’t hiding anything in that area, Angela asked the next question she needed an answer to. “Are you still a threat to me?”

Unprepared for the question, Kendle was horrified by the answer that flew out of her mouth. “Absolutely.”

Angela wasn’t surprised. She was just disappointed. “You’ll need to take care of that if you want to keep your place on my team.”

Kendle had been thinking about that. “I guess I need to resign until I get this cleared up. You can’t have someone like me on your crew. It will rub off on everyone else.”

“Actually, I was hoping that everyone else might rub off on you. You’re the only one who still hates me.”

Kendle considered that. She hadn’t been back long enough to know if it was true, but she had seen how Cynthia and Candy, along with Tracy and Tonya, had been very protective since the tunnel opened. It wasn’t hard to believe that Angela had won everyone over while she was gone. “I didn’t volunteer so I wouldn’t be in the way. I wanted to help. I didn’t know I was doing rug-rat patrol.”

Angela chuckled at the wording, but her tone was serious when she answered. “You’ve given me a gift that will allow me to continue to do my job no matter how hard it gets. I don’t care that you hate me. If you want the place on my team, it’s yours.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I know that.”

Kendle stared into the darkness. “Do you want me to go after them?”

“No.”

Kendle frowned at the denial. “I’m worried.”

Angela didn’t say she was too. “They’ve done harder jobs than this and made it through. Have faith.”

Kendle wanted to. She wanted to be as cool and calm as Angela was, but her fear for Marc’s safety was already out of control.

In the shadows behind them, Kendle’s team was half an hour from being off duty. She could feel the displeasure at her reaction to Marc’s absence, but Kendle couldn’t fight it. She had almost everything she wanted now. Safe Haven was her home and it would help her survive, but not if they lost Marc. After all the stories she’d been told, it was obvious Marc’s life had been in danger since the war.

“Before that, really.” Angela hadn’t meant to tell Kendle. She didn’t want to bond with the island woman, the same way Adrian and Marc didn’t want to, but it was too late for holding back. “We went through a lot of stuff as kids, and not all of it came from people. It wasn’t odd for tornadoes to come through our neighborhood every year. I’ve always believed they wanted him.”

Kendle scowled. “There’s something coming, right? Something that fate wants him to miss.”

“We’ll have years of peace, if we have both of them with us. They offset each other and will keep a balance that I would never be able to manage alone.”

“You love them both.”

Angela didn’t answer.

Kendle scanned the darkness, hoping to spot lights. She wasn’t happy to discover that Angela did indeed have feelings for Adrian. It meant somewhere down the line, Marc would get hurt.

“No.” Angela’s voice dropped into stone. “Adrian is the one who will get hurt.”

Kendle watched Angela fade into the shadows, followed by half a dozen guards who wouldn’t hesitate to pull a trigger on her command. “I don’t doubt that a bit.”

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

**Crossing a Line**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“S**he’s getting worried.”

Marc sat up, stretching. “I know.”

“I’ll call if you want. I can reach her.”

“She said to stay off the waves. She wasn’t specific about which kind, so I assumed both.”

“That makes sense. Our gifts are a lot like radios. The closer someone is, the clearer the transmission comes through.”

“It won’t be much longer.” The vet didn’t want the men getting upset with him. He was under Angela’s protection, but both of the males riding in the RV wouldn’t hesitate to kill him and say it was because he was a threat.

“What does she have you doing once you drop us off?” Marc was concerned about the woman with them who had woken half an hour ago and pushed herself into a sitting position. Studying them, she hadn’t spoken yet. Marc wasn’t expecting good things when she finally did. The power coming from her was as strong as Angela’s had been while she was pregnant. Marc assumed the baby held the power though, and the mother was strong enough and smart enough to control the child until she knew what the future held.

In the driver seat, Chris’s lips thinned into a line that drew Adrian’s attention, but Adrian didn’t question him on it. He already had an idea of what was going to happen; he didn’t want to make it harder for any of the people involved than it already would be. He didn’t even consider interfering.

“I’m supposed to be back in camp by dawn.”

“What about until then?” Marc insisted on knowing the truth, certain he wouldn’t like it.

Chris met his glance in the mirror. “Justice.”

Marc frowned. “If that means what I think it does, I’ll have to interfere.”

“I follow the boss’s orders to the letter.”

Satisfied the woman would be safe at least until Angela gave a kill order, Marc grunted. “Don’t forget what I told you.”

“I haven’t and I won’t, but you’re wrong. I’m not a threat to her or to you.”

Marc didn’t feel like continuing the argument. He had already told the vet everything he had to say. As soon as Chris stepped out of line, he would follow through with his threat.

Adrian was glad when the conversation went in a different direction. He knew what the vet was hiding. He was also positive that Marc did too, but as usual, the boy scout was refusing to face it so he didn’t have to deal with the natural emotions that would come afterward. “Anyone around?”

“There were lights a few times. I went dark.”

Marc and Adrian realized they had fallen into full asleep. Both men checked their watches.

“You were out for two hours. As far as I know, we don’t have a tail. This RV is a lot quieter than it should be.”

Marc approved of the ride. He only had a problem with the driver.

Adrian gestured to remind Marc the vet could read their thoughts, but he couldn’t see their hands in the mirror and drive at the same time. *Go easy on him. Don’t ruin her plans.*

Marc ignored Adrian’s warning “The camp is afraid of you now. You can’t eat mess with them. You can’t shower with them. Stay with your animals.”

“You’ll gather me new ones?”

Chris’s excited voice did get Marc to ease up a little. “Yes. I’m sorry we lost so many in there.”

Chris shrugged. “Angela has her reasons.”

*I wish I could accept her choices that easy.* Marc tried a different topic, positive that one would also lead them into an argument. “The Eagles will let you eat with them and sleep with them. You’ll probably have a guard. Don’t try to duck out on that.”

Chris frowned. “Why are you helping me?”

“I’m not helping you. I’m helping the boss.”

Chris realized Marc wanted him to settle into camp so Angela could calm down. “I want that too.”

Satisfied they were on the same page, Marc studied Adrian. “What about you? Are you going to be a problem?”

Chris was glad to no longer be the object of Marc’s consideration. He tried to dim himself and get Marc back to camp before the man switched his attention again.

Adrian wasn’t ready for the question. He also wasn’t in the mood to play games. “What do you want from me?”

Marc grinned.

Adrian scowled. “Whatever it is, just say it. We don’t have to keep doing this.”

“Fine. I’m your boss and I hate your guts. I want you to spend every waking moment trying to earn my forgiveness–openly.”

Adrian understood it would please Angela and the camp. “But it won’t work, will it?”

Marc swept him in furious contempt. “What do you think?”

Adrian glared back, sealing up the hurt. “Fine. In return, you’ll follow my instructions with her even when you don’t want to. If you don’t or can’t, I *will* be whatever she needs and you’ll accept it without retaliation on either of us.”

Ignoring the caution from his demon, Marc held out a hand. “We have a truce in place. Don’t ever break it.”

Surprised, Adrian shook. Before he could ask why, Marc released him and the coldness returned.

Adrian understood Marc didn’t want to discuss it further and pushed the issue anyway. “If you want to set down new rules or give limits, I’ll listen.”

Marc sighed in frustration. “I’ve already tried that and it doesn’t work. When she’s happy, so is everyone else. You and I will work together to make sure the boss is pleased.”

Adrian didn’t ask about the limit on that. The answer was clear. The limit was whatever Angela would allow or what she wanted.

Tense, Marc forced himself to accept the situation, again. “When we get there, she’ll be fighting the urge to hug you. Just get it over with. It’ll make her happy and let her sleep.”

Adrian didn’t answer. He couldn’t speak yet.

Marc chuckled. “I like it when you’re speechless.”

Adrian laughed too, but carefully. “You mean it this time.”

Marc’s desolation swept through the RV, causing the vet to turn up the heat.

“She shut me off for two months. She wouldn’t smile at me. Even when I slept next to her, I couldn’t reach her. I can’t go through that again.”

Understanding more than he was allowed to say, Adrian made a promise. “It’ll be better now.”

*The only thing that would make this better is if you were man enough to kill yourself.*

Adrian wisely didn’t respond. He also didn’t draw attention to the lone survivor who was still waiting in Erik’s camp and was now reaching out for instructions. Adrian had been relieved not to see the cook on the battlefield. Though Brian was only a distant relative, he was still a Mitchel.

Adrian switched his thoughts back to the camp setup and finding things they needed.

Marc acted as if he hadn’t caught any of it, but he stored the information in case he wanted to use it later. With Adrian, it was possible that he’d need it. Marc knew better than to trust the man. Despite the good act, very little had changed between them.

**2**

“Where are they?”

Angela pointed. “Three minutes.”

Mollified, Kendle went quiet, but she didn’t leave. She wouldn’t until she got to see Marc for herself. She was aware of Tommy’s unhappiness, but she would handle that later. He’d been off duty for a while now, following her around.

“When they get here, you’ll have the urge to hug him. Just do it and get it over with. It’ll make him feel special.”

Kendle gaped. “What?”

Angela glowered at the island woman. “If I have to say it again I’m going to punch you right in your throat.”

Kendle grinned. “You rock.”

Angela grunted. “Whatever it takes to make him happy. I know you’re bonded to him in ways.”

Kendle chose to be just as honest. “You know I’ll spend the time trying to get into his heart. Why would you do this?”

Angela walked away. “I’ve already answered that.”

Kendle was stunned. She was also overjoyed. Even without the attraction, she had gotten used to Marc while they were in the west. No one else made her feel that way.

“So this is what insane jealousy is like.” Tommy snorted. “I don’t care for it.”

Conner tried not to laugh. He had duty over the parking area on this side of camp right now, but he wasn’t paying attention because there was too much personal drama going on. He loved to watch Angela work and he had missed being around organized men and women who were helping to cover everyone’s survival. While on the road with Kendle, they had alternated sleeping and driving, with very little time off. In the Safe Haven environment, it was okay to steal a minute or two for himself.

The Georgia park was dark and quiet around the sleeping camp. The guards didn’t spot people or animals, though there were occasional flashes of light in the distance that implied refugees were around. Angela hadn’t given them any instructions. She expected them to do their job, which meant following their training. For the rookies, that was a concern. For the senior men, it was a relief.

Most of the Eagles were okay with Charlie and Conner having so much time on duty and being drivers for leadership. It cleared the other men for more important duties, but it also gave them time to observe the teenagers who would one day take their places. When training resumed, it would also make it easier to know on what level the boys should be placed. With teenagers, it was always important to stay in front of them. When they got bored, bad things often happened.

Tommy spotted the lights in the distance and braced himself. He’d heard everything that was exchanged between Kendle and Angela, but he wasn’t angry over it. He just wanted her to feel that way about him.

“In time, she will.” Conner put the man’s mind at ease. “She’s smart. She’ll recognize what a great match you are. Give it time.”

Tommy had no reason to doubt the boy. To make sure his emotions didn’t get in the way of Kendle’s happiness, Tommy turned toward the community tent. “Tell her where I’m at when she’s ready.”

“I will.” Conner didn’t watch Tommy leave. He was too busy observing as Marc and Adrian arrived.

Angela was in his arms before Marc climbed out of the RV.

Marc enjoyed the attention, holding her close and tight–the way he now knew she preferred.

Adrian and Kendle tolerated the reunion without the usual bitterness as Marc kissed her.

Angela’s resulting happiness almost knocked them off their feet.

“Well, I can’t match that.” Kendle grunted at Adrian. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks. The seats in that RV suck.”

They shared laughter.

Angela held onto Marc, making sure he understood how happy she was that he was home.

Marc set her on her feet. “I have to hit the head.”

Angela laughed as Marc left, thrilled with his attitude. She wouldn’t take advantage of him very often, but after everything they’d gone through together, she and Adrian deserved to have one moment where they were allowed to be themselves. She’d chosen to do it now, where there were only a handful of witnesses. All of those were people who could be trusted to keep their mouths shut. Their hour in the cubby had only happened because she’d needed a nap and the other men she felt safe around had been busy. Angela waved Kendle on. “He’ll need updates.”

Angela was aware that Marc had left to avoid experiencing her bond with Adrian, but also to avoid Kendle’s needy grasp. He’d felt the hug coming.

Overjoyed at a second chance, Kendle hurried off as the guards on the area turned their backs to give Angela privacy.

Instead of falling into Adrian’s arms the way everyone was expecting, Angela climbed into the RV.

Chris swiveled around in the captain’s chair to regard her in adoration. “Everything went just like you said.”

Angela leaned over and kissed the vet on the cheek, making him freeze.

Adrian slid into the RV to get between them if he needed to.

Angela lingered for a moment, trying to reward him for following her orders without question. “You know what comes next.”

“I’ll handle it.”

Angela leaned back, controlling a boiling stomach. “Has she said anything?”

Chris forced his attention to their captive. “I made her give me a name when I pulled her out of their camp. It’s Michelle.”

Angela locked eyes with the woman. “Erik’s wife and Vlad’s sister. Welcome to my Safe Haven.”

Michelle glared at Angela. She didn’t speak yet, but everyone could sense a tirade coming.

Chris restarted the engine at Angela’s signal. She didn’t want the camp disturbed, but she didn’t want to knock the woman out again either.

“Your brother stole something from me that was priceless. Even though he’s dead, I’m taking something from him that he considered to be priceless–you.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

“No.” Angela had no trouble lying. The hatred she felt for this woman and all of her family was immense. “I’m going to flip you. When you leave us, we won’t ever leave you.”

Michelle settled in to the uncomfortable seat of the RV. All she’d wanted to know was Angela’s immediate plans. If she wasn’t going to be killed yet, she had nothing else to say.

Angela exchanged a quick glance with Chris that Adrian caught. Adrian took her arm to help her down the stairs, then closed the RV.

Chris pulled away, leaving them alone together in the darkness.

“You can stop him. It isn’t too late to change your mind.”

Angela looked at Adrian. “We have three minutes alone. Is that how you want to spend it?”

“That would be honorable, wouldn’t it?”

Angela’s heart thumped when he took a step closer. “Yes, but you aren’t honorable, are you?”

“No. That’s why you have Marc.” Adrian stopped with less than a foot of space between them. “What do you need from me?”

“Everything.”

Adrian gently took her into his arms. Their souls bonded in a blinding flash of joy and completeness that neither of them had ever felt with anyone else.

“Do all soul mates feel this way?”

Adrian held her tighter, breathing deeply of the scent that was unique to her. “I think so. Other couples in camp would be able to describe it.”

Angela also tightened her grip. “Thank you for saving his life.”

“It was a hard choice.” Adrian’s laugh told her he was joking.

Angela rested her cheek against his shoulder, inhaling of his musky scent. “I won’t ever do this again.”

“I know.”

“I could overrule them.”

Adrian kissed the top of her head. “No. You can’t lift my banishment without a camp vote. Not even Marc can do that.”

“I know. It won’t be official.”

“Don’t break the rules, not even for me.” Adrian pushed the moment as far as he could. He held her back a little bit and pressed his lips to her cheek. “At some point in the future, we’ll be allowed to have moments like this whenever we want. Please don’t let your emotions ruin them when they happen.”

Angela stiffened in anger and guilt at the reminder. “Already planning that far out, are you?”

Adrian was sorry he’d ruined her good mood. “I’ll do everything I can to keep him alive.”

“I know. I trust you.”

That meant more to Adrian than the physical moment. It allowed him to press another soft kiss to her cheek and then stepped back. “You always can, no matter what it is that you need.” Adrian rotated toward the parking lot. “I’m gonna get ready for tomorrow. Have a good night.”

Angela felt a chill in the wind as he disappeared into the shadows, but her heart was at ease. When Marc joined her, slipping her arm around her shoulders, she leaned against him in tired satisfaction. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you can do this.”

Marc kissed the top of her head in the same place that Adrian had. “Let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

“Are we in the community tent?”

Marc led her toward one of the trucks. “We have a bunk.”

Thrilled, Angela allowed Marc to help her inside. Her boots came off first, followed by her gun belt. Both were placed within reach. As she slid over to make space, she noticed Marc staring over his shoulder. “Two minutes?”

“Thank you.” Marc had brushed Kendle off when she’d followed him, not even letting her give him the updates.

Angela pulled the blanket up over her shoulders, moaning at the wonderful sensation of being able to stretch out. When the truck door closed, she refused to stress over what could happen. Loving someone more than yourself was hard. It was even harder when you accepted that you weren’t the center of that person’s universe, that they needed other people in their lives to be happy. Once she and Marc adjusted, the jealousy would still hit them occasionally, but it would be easy to fight because the result was no longer carrying the weight of hating someone just because you couldn’t be the center of their universe.

Angela began to drift, bringing the witch out. *Keep an eye on my camp.*

The witch barged out of her cell and flew toward the perimeter.

**3**

“Got a minute?”

“Sure.” Kendle happily followed Marc away from the truck where Angela was stashed. They both felt it when she went out, along with the rest of the camp. The temperature dropped, but the mood held. She was happy.

Marc wanted this done and over with, but he also hated the part of himself that was looking forward to it. He didn’t owe Kendle anything. This wasn’t a reward for her coming back or a pity moment to keep her rage under control. He wanted this.

Marc paused between the trucks, hoping that only one guard would witness it. Even though he had Angela’s permission, and didn’t care what the rest of the camp thought, it felt disrespectful.

Kendle knew what he was experiencing and didn’t push. She didn’t say any of the million things that were going through her mind. Instead, she settled for staring at him. Whenever Angela was around, she tried hard not to do that.

Marc couldn’t help being attracted to the warmth in her gaze. It was obvious that Kendle was smitten with him, but he also remembered their time together while fighting the government. She had been a wonderful distraction from his pain of being away from Angela. She had also been a great partner to fight with. She was smart, funny, and had always managed to succeed in whatever chore he gave her. It was hard not to be impressed by that.

*It’s only a hug. It’s only a hug.* Marc moved closer, opening his arms.

Kendle tensed. She couldn’t help but expect Angela’s fire to hit them.

Marc rubbed her arms and then pulled her into his embrace. “It’s okay.”

Kendle shuddered at the sensations. Luke had made her feel more alive, but she didn’t have the full experience with Marc to compare it to . Kendle knew she never would. She assumed Marc was doing this because it would drive Angela crazy for the next few days and pay her back for the moment with Adrian. She felt him running through the reasons, but as she slipped her arms around his neck, Kendle felt his reaction.

Marc didn’t want her to know that. It wasn’t fair to her to know he was attracted to her, especially when nothing would ever come of it. He assumed the attraction existed because they were both descendants.

Kendle refused to let Marc lie to himself that way. She slid her lips across his bristled cheek, making them both shiver. Two tiny kisses later, she was at the corner of his mouth and Marc reacted, searching for more contact instead of pulling away.

Using strength she didn’t know she had when it came to him, Kendle stopped. Heart throbbing and body alive with need, she blew out an angry sigh. “If you ever need me, even for ten minutes in the dark, you only have to ask.” She stepped back, but didn’t look at him so she could finish what she had to say. “We won’t talk about this again. I won’t touch you. I won’t say things that are inappropriate. We’ll work together fine, like we did before, but you know, and I know, that if Angela wasn’t in the picture, you’d be mine.”

Marc couldn’t argue with that. Out of all of the females in the camp, only Kendle and Angela drew any fire from him. “I’m sorry.”

Kendle shrugged, meeting his eye. “I’m not. I believed Luke was one of those moments that happen to random people at random times. I didn’t realize I could create that type of a bond with another person. If not for my attraction to you, I never would have let Tommy in. He’s a great guy.”

“Yes, he is.” Marc was happy she’d found someone other than Adrian and even more relieved that she wasn’t going to be a problem. While he would never cheat on Angela, he also didn’t want to fantasize about another woman. As long as Kendle kept her distance, that wouldn’t happen. If she spent too much time around him sending out vibes of being available, it would cause his thoughts to wander. But that would be all. Like any other guy who was happy in his relationship, Kendle would be one of the few females who would be able to turn him on, but also like those happily married men, he would never betray his mate. He loved Angela. Wanting Kendle was just a natural physical evolution.

*That’s an interesting theory.* Adrian joined Marc as Kendle left. “Do you think it’s a survival drive?”

“I don’t know, but it’s too common in Safe Haven for me to say no.” Marc opened the door to the truck. “I don’t like it when you guys distract me. Don’t do it again.”

“I won’t, but I can’t speak for her.” Adrian didn’t pretend ignorance. He didn’t want to ruin the fragile peace between them.

“If he carries out that order, you and I will take care of it tomorrow.”

Adrian was relieved. He had planned to ask Marc about it. “At your call.”

Marc climbed into the rig.

Adrian walked toward the camp, not sure where he should sleep. Leadership couldn’t clear him without a vote, but he needed to stick around at least until tomorrow’s business was finished. Steps slow, Adrian noticed a shadow near the edge of the caution tape. He caught the vibes before the mental invitation and smiled. He gestured in response and then detoured toward the bathrooms. It appeared he had a bed waiting.

Body lighting up and guilt screaming, Nancy faded back into the shadows to wait.

**4**

“I want to go to the party.”

At that moment, Neil realized Samantha had made her choice to stay with Safe Haven. She wanted to be with her team. Instead of arguing, Neil felt relief swarm over his tired body. *I didn’t want to leave. Imagine that.*

Samantha rubbed Neil’s wrist. “I’m sorry. I needed time to be sure.”

Neil kissed her cheek. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. I wasn’t sure either, apparently.”

Samantha put her arms around his neck as he lifted her, wishing her leg was ready for use. She hated to be carried everywhere.

To her surprise, Neil put her on her feet.

Samantha smiled. “Really?”

Neil grunted in reluctant approval. “Adrian did a good job on those last stitches. I don’t think it’ll bleed through again if you take breaks while you walk.”

Samantha was elated. She zipped her coat and took the cane Neil had made from a thick stick. “Let’s go!”

Neil chuckled. He understood how it felt to be away from the activities he loved. His breaks hadn’t been because of physical injuries, but it had still been hard to be on the outside.

Kyle joined them, frown taking up most of his face as Jennifer went to Samantha. Both women were obviously uncomfortable as they fought the stiff wind. Kyle glared at Neil and everyone else, but when Jennifer looked over her shoulder at him, his expression faded into tolerant annoyance.

Neil got that too. No matter how much he wanted Samantha to hide in a tent, he loved her being happy. *And she is right now. I can feel it.*

Tonya and Kendle appeared in front of them. Both females joined Jenny and Sam, after a quick nod to their men. When Tonya put a hand under Samantha’s arm to steady her, Neil forced himself to relax. Samantha’s team would protect her. They were Eagles. Neil felt his spirits lift. He stepped over to Kyle and took the man’s good arm.

Kyle regarded him in icy confusion. “What are you doing?”

“Helping an old lady across the street.”

Neil ducked Kyle’s shove, snickering with everyone else. More Eagles joined them as they strode toward the far end of camp, all grinning. The party wouldn’t last long and there wouldn’t be music, but it would still be a celebration of life and survival that all of them needed.

**5**

“Do you want me to keep an eye on things?”

Angela’s grip tightened on Marc’s arm in response.

Marc let sleep reclaim him.

Angela held out for a few more minutes, listening to her team leaders and her conscience. She’d made her choice for tomorrow, but it hadn’t been an easy one. If she’d miscalculated, Safe Haven’s descendants would be crushed and the camp would only have children to defend them.

Angela thought about Leeann and Cody, then Missy and Charlie. All of them together wouldn’t be able to fight a group that had been able to kill the parents, so she’d told Leeann to gather the descendant kids who could travel and run. She hadn’t given the terrified girl a location. If they lost tomorrow and were captured, Angela didn’t want to have that information in her mind. Their enemies would already know where Safe Haven was going. It would take a miracle, but there was at least a tiny chance the kids might survive. Safe Haven wouldn’t.

*We’ll win. Try to sleep.*

Angela allowed Adrian’s wave of sleep to sink in and carry her off.

*Thanks.*

*No problem.* Adrian got away from Marc’s demon. The spirit was patrolling the perimeter with Angela’s witch and neither of them was in a good mood. Both of them wanted him gone and they didn’t care about his truce with Marc. If he stepped out of line in any way, it would be a contest between the demons to see which one could kill him first.

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

**Reality Sets In**

A close up of an animal

Description automatically generated

**1**

**A**drian jumped as Charlie joined him. He hadn’t spotted the boy coming.

Charlie held out his hand.

Adrian gave him the sheet of paper without speaking. He also refused to think about anything.

Charlie put the paper in his pocket. “I already know.”

“Know what?”

“I’m being tested. She told me to stay with Safe Haven while you guys run off and fight tomorrow.”

Adrian didn’t hear the usual defiance that laced Charlie’s every word these days.

“I want to fight. I also want to be with Tracy.”

“You’re not alone in that. It’s one of the hardest choices an Eagle ever has to make. Most of the time, we have rules that keep us on the right path, but our emotions blur the lines.”

“Are the lines right? Is any of this right?”

Adrian was impressed that the boy had come to that after the last months of stress. “Of course not. It’s survival and that’s more important than any rule when the moment comes.”

“That doesn’t make it easier to decide.”

“I know. That’s why it’s so easy to make a mistake even when you’ve been doing this for years.”

Charlie didn’t care about Adrian’s guilt or half-assed apology. “What will Conner do?”

“He’ll follow orders, even if it costs Candy’s life.”

“I can’t do that.”

“We know.”

“Which means mom planned on me not being here to keep them calm.” Charlie glared at Adrian. “She gave it to Conner, didn’t she?”

“Why do you care? You’ll be getting to fight and you’ll know Tracy’s safe.”

Charlie clamped his lips together as he fought his jealousy to figure out his motives. He knew that was important.

Adrian gave the boy time even though he was frozen and exhausted.

“I like Conner. I wanted to be sent on missions, like him.”

“What else?”

“I hate him because he was sent on a mission and I don’t think I ever will be.”

“There you go.” Adrian rotated toward the shadows, where Nancy’s warm truck now held his sleeping roll and kit.

“Hey! Aren’t you going to help me figure this out?”

Adrian kept walking. “Take the next steps–face it, and then change it. You don’t need me here to clutter your thoughts for that.” Adrian grinned at Shawn, who now had point over the camp. “You know where I’ll be.”

Shawn laughed. “Yep. Lucky man.”

“I’ve often believed so.” Adrian took Nancy’s cold hand, sending warmth and desire in thick waves as he vanished into the foggy truck with her.

**2**

Conner observed the Eagle party from a distance. Morgan had invited him, but Conner had been wise enough to refuse. As Lee’s widow, it was possible that Candy would attend. Conner didn’t want to risk ruining his new chance at a life in Safe Haven. He had refused without telling Morgan that, but he was certain the Eagle had understood because Morgan had clapped him on the shoulder and invited him to sit with the teams at breakfast. Conner had accepted gratefully, but now, studying the party from the outside, he wished he were able to be there without it causing problems. While the group of fifteen wasn’t making a lot of noise, it was sending good waves across camp. They were obviously having a good time.

Instead of moving closer as he was tempted to do, Conner took an opposite route that would lead him to the other end of the camp.

Around the boy, his guards noted Conner’s choice and approved of it. Many of them had believed his punishment was a little harsh, but Conner was busy proving he could be trusted. As long as he continued to do that, he would be accepted no matter who his father was.

Another former Eagle strode through the shadows, this one going toward the party.

Daryl and the other men on duty sent sharp glares, but they didn’t stop Kevin from going toward the group who had tucked themselves under a semi for privacy and shelter.

Kevin stopped a few feet away as the people went silent. “Is this a bad time?”

Quinn gestured toward an empty place. “Have a seat. We were just wondering where Dog is.”

Kevin took the seat, eager to tell them all about his adventures.

Before he could get started, Greg handed him a bottle. “Hang on until the rest of Kendle’s team gets here. I know they’ll want to hear it too.”

“Is it okay if I ask about Seth?”

Kevin’s question was met with frowns and scowls.

“It’s not a secret. They ran off.”

Kevin frowned at Greg. “They were part of the Runaways?”

Arm aching, Quinn spit into an empty can. “They took off right as we were closing the passages, before the camp split into three factions. We were under attack when they ran off.”

“That’s not exactly the way it happened.” Greg filled in the blanks, still just as angry as everyone else was about it. “Becky ran away and a bunch of the kids followed her. We almost lost them. There was an explosion and people were trapped. We had Mexicans coming in the bottom tunnel and assassins every time we turned around who were trying to take out leadership, and Seth still followed that girl out.”

“Well, she is carrying his baby.” Neil tried to be the voice of reason.

Kevin understood it was a sore subject and took a healthy swig off the bottle instead of commenting.

“Here they come!”

Kevin realized what was going on in anger. Kendle’s team and Ivan’s soldiers were the heroes of the party. He and Jeff had sledded down a mountain in front of an avalanche, and Jeff had killed Dirce, but they weren’t being celebrated because they’d left without orders.

Kevin’s bitterness increased as Ivan and Tommy slid under the truck with them.

Tommy dropped down next to Kendle, heart warming at her soft smile of welcome. “We made a second round of the guards. Lot of rookies on duty tonight.”

“Did you talk to Adrian?” Greg and the other Eagles felt like he should be here; they’d agreed to invite him.

Tommy nodded. “He said it wouldn’t be right, but I thought he was gonna cry, so he understands how we feel.”

Satisfied, Greg gestured toward the parking area. “Boss out?”

Ivan chuckled. “Like a light. She won’t hear a thing.”

The senior men rolled their eyes and chuckled.

“We’ll keep it down. She won’t care.” Kyle took the bottle from Kevin. “Let’s hear about Dog and then some more from Market Town.”

*Saving the best for last*. Kevin’s anger increased again. “Dog stayed with Sally. He said he wanted to monitor the herds for another week, but Jeff woke us up shouting, so we rolled out.”

“We saw that happening on the radar before the quake. I put it in the books. Any idea what’s going on?”

Kevin shook his head at Samantha’s question. “No, but it was like that everywhere we tried to dump Sally off.”

Samantha frowned at his mean tone. “Where did you leave her?”

“A little town northwest of here. Quiet, remote, and all sorts of farms with root cellars that hadn’t been looted. She should be good for a while if she hides when people come through. Jeff told her to, but I doubt she will.”

“Why not?”

“Because she hates people and if they’re descendants, she’ll probably try to kill them.”

“Why would you leave someone out there to hurt our kind, even if it was a woman?”

Kevin glanced at Brandon in confusion. “Because Angela said to, of course.”

That brought silence where Kevin could feel them doubting his honesty. Angered, he rolled out from under the semi. “I’ll be around.”

The group watched his boots vanish into the camp, each of them worrying. Kevin was a loose cannon–one of the few they had left.

“It wouldn’t take much to get him to run off again.”

People nodded at Greg’s comment, but Neil frowned. “The boss wants him here. We need to find out why.”

“Maybe it’s so Jeff doesn’t kill him.”

Everyone joined Kendle in the laughter. It had been clear that Jeff hadn’t enjoyed his time with Kevin. Under the amusement was concern over not having enough help to guard the camp. They needed Kevin to stay, but they also needed Doug and Seth to come back. Those men were trained, experienced. Right now, Safe Haven had more rookies than teachers. The shift at this moment was under the guidance of Zack. When the party was over, half of them would join that tired man and help until dawn.

Boots crunched near the semi again. The teams watched as a camp woman walked toward one of the rookie guards.

Ivan watched the woman’s boots, all he could see from where he was. “Should we stop that?”

“No.” Neil waved the bottle on. “She initiated it.”

Understanding Conner was about to be tested, Kendle started to get up, but Tommy put a hand on her arm. “He’s got this.”

Kendle settled back down, trying to listen instead.

Tommy knew. He distracted her by handing her the bottle. “Tell them about the fight you had with the chick who held us all naked in the cage.”

“Woman?!”

“Naked?!”

Not all of the Eagles had heard yet.

Kendle was drawn into the story, forgetting about Conner as she tried to explain how she’d handled the whip-toting slave master in Market Town.

**3**

Candy knew she was being watched. Guards were trailing her in case she’d made a mistake, but she wasn’t worried. Being out in the open air had finished clearing her mind.

Conner stiffened as he felt her approach. Back to the camp and mind on tomorrow’s activities, he still knew who it was. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Candy stopped a few feet away. “We need to talk.”

Conner nodded to Zack as the man made a round of the area. “About what?”

“About what happened while you were gone.”

Conner’s heart dropped. “Okay.”

Candy waited for him to turn around. When he didn’t, she frowned. “You’re allowed to look at me now.”

“No, I’m really not.”

Candy understood he was determined to follow the rules of his banishment. She also knew he wanted to stare at her. She could feel him fighting it. “You were with me, right? It wasn’t my imagination.”

Conner hated this choice. The easy way was to pretend ignorance and let her believe it was part of what she’d suffered during her breakdown over Lee’s death and being trapped in the mountain. “Damn.” Conner couldn’t do it. “Yes, it was real.”

Candy felt the relief that she wasn’t going crazy and a small fear of his power. He had to be strong to be able to reach her over such a distance without anyone knowing.

“You don’t have to be afraid of me.”

“How can I be sure of that?”

“Over time, I guess.” Conner hadn’t budged, aware of a dozen guards now in the area. “Deep down, you already are or you wouldn’t be this close to me.”

“I feel something for you. It scares me because you’re just a kid and I miss my husband.”

“You’re lonely.” Conner’s fists clenched. “So am I. I recognize it… I’m drawn to it.”

“Because you believe we’re soul mates and we can fix each other.” Candy frowned as she said it, hearing how crazy it was.

“Because I love you.” Conner expected her to leave or call him names. He hadn’t meant to say that.

Candy considered her options, too tired to think it through as far as she should. “Turn around.”

Conner braced to be slapped and screamed at, hoping the guards would remember that she’d come to him. He hadn’t been stalking her.

Candy noted a young man’s healthy body and shaggy hair that needed a trim. She saw his clenched fists next and realized he was scared.

The guards also knew. It was all over the boy’s face and in his body language. Whatever Candy said or did here might break Conner’s plan to follow the rules.

“Angela will officially lift your banishment tomorrow. Did they tell you?”

Conner nodded his head, allowing himself to breathe. “I’m finished with the punishments.”

Candy expected a yelp of happiness or any reaction other than sadness. “What’s wrong?”

Conner was staring at the ground. “Not you, right?”

“Yes, me too.”

Conner’s joy swarmed over Candy in powerful breakers that caused her to stiffen in guilty pleasure.

“Don’t do that.” Conner’s whisper was just for her. “Enjoy me, if only for a minute.” He slammed her again, letting her feel how much he wanted her.

Candy was helpless against Conner’s emotions. She didn’t know what she wanted, but she knew instinctively that he could give it to her.

Conner shut it down, gasping. He hadn’t meant to do anything like that yet, let alone in front of so many witnesses. He put his back to her again, trying to get himself under control. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.” Candy glanced toward the semi where the party was now making enough noise to be noticeable. “I won’t be there. You should join your team.” With that, Candy cleared him.

Conner listened to her walk away, heart pounding. He didn’t know where they went from here, but at least it wasn’t back to the dead silence that implied he was a danger.

The guards around them made a note of it. The demonstration of his emotions had come after he’d been provoked, so there wouldn’t be any charges for that. In fact, Conner could now be around Candy without the tension. It was another problem solved.

**4**

“I can’t believe they’re all still sleeping. It’s almost 8 AM.”

Adrian kissed Nancy’s bare shoulder. “Everyone’s happy to be out of the mountain. They’re sleeping it off.”

Nancy covered his hand with hers and put her cheek against his chest. She listened to his heart, feeling the rise and fall of his chest. There was so much she wanted to say to him, but none of it formed correctly, so she didn’t. She could do that when they parted. For now, she wanted to enjoy being close to someone.

“So you and Shane really never…?”

Nancy shook her head. “We were too busy playing games.”

Adrian didn’t need Nancy to tell him that this time was just one of those moments that two people sometimes shared. He had often turned to her in the past, but this time, it had been different. She had been waiting for him. Because of that, Adrian had taken the time to make sure she was pleased, twice. He was hoping for a repeat performance whenever she needed it, of course. After all, he was a guy. The other thing she needed wouldn’t happen without a real discussion first.

Nancy lifted her chin as a guard went by. “Will anyone care?”

Adrian shrugged. “I doubt it. It’s not like you plan to make this a habit.”

Nancy was relieved he understood. “You have others. Not everyone here wants you banished anymore.”

“I know, but unless it’s removed, I’ll be spending a lot of time out of camp. When you want to be with me, I’ll be around, but you’ll have to leave camp. Be careful doing that, not because of how the herd will react, but because we’re out in the wilderness again.”

“I’m happy about that. I never wanted to be in the mountain.”

“Neither did I.”

Outside the warm truck, noises of the camp echoed through the foggy dawn. Adrian listened to it with a heart that was both hurting and healing. Because of Angela and the choices that she had been strong enough to follow through on, some of their people had survived. More importantly, Safe Haven and the dream had survived, and Angela was back in the lead. That was the happiness. The sadness was what came next.

“Try not to think about it. Please?” Nancy didn’t want their time together to be marked with her tears. She wasn’t searching for a way to trap him. She didn’t expect him to claim her or expect them to have any type of a happy-ever-after. She just wanted him to be treated fair, but it wasn’t going to happen.

Adrian could have told her he deserved it, that it was part of rebuilding a second chance in life that he had to handle if he wanted to be able to look at himself in a mirror every morning, but he didn’t need to. That was one of the reasons he enjoyed spending time with Nancy. She was a lot like Angela. She knew some of what he needed so that he didn’t have to ask for it.

Only one other relationship had been better, but Conner’s mom was gone. He hadn’t meant to love her, much like with Angela. When Angela first came to his camp, he’d tried to fight the attraction, but it had been too strong. Conner’s mom and Angela had been very different, but he loved them both as much as a man could love a woman. There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t give to bring Shannon back or to have a chance with Angela now, except his honor. He’d been without that since the camp discovered his betrayal; it was surprising to Adrian to discover his obsessions were taking a backseat to the desire to be considered one of the good guys again.

He had forgotten what it felt like to be on the outside, to be hated. Many people still believed he deserved it, but the sharp pain in his gut and the sense of shame he carried was too ugly for him to tolerate any longer. With Angela’s help, and maybe a little luck from fate, he would be allowed back into camp at some point. Right now, that was his goal.

Adrian rubbed Nancy’s shoulder again. “We have half an hour until the next guard change. Would you like to snooze in my arms?”

“No, thank you.”

Adrian grinned, catching the vibe. “A repeat performance then. Come here. I want your titties in my face this time.”

Nancy giggled.

The guards moved away at the familiar noises and motions of the vehicle. It surprised them that the rest of the camp wasn’t up yet, but it was also a relief. The small layer of frost on the ground from the stiff winds made it easier to identify threats and to keep track of the few camp members who were out of bed. There were quick bathroom trips going on right now, but soon, the hundred and seventy people here would rise in search of breakfast and companionship.

Morgan saw the RV coming and made a note of what time the vet was returning. The guards had orders to let him in, but Morgan didn’t like it. The vet was a nasty leftover from their time in the mountain that would continue to upset the camp every time he was around them.

The RV came to a halt in the far corner of the camp, almost out of sight, but the vet didn’t emerge. Morgan assumed he was going sleep there and was relieved. Keeping order would be easier if people didn’t have to be reminded there was still a killer among them.

Morgan spotted Marc staring through the small window of the semi. Marc was also studying the RV. Having worked with Marc enough in the past, Morgan recognized that stare. Not wanting his thoughts to give away anything Marc had planned, Morgan strode to the other end of camp, where the bathroom tents had a short line of grouchy people needing to use them. He would be distracted by the complaints–exactly what the situation called for.

Marc observed the RV for a moment longer, finalizing his plans. As he lay down, draping an arm back around Angela’s slender waist, it occurred to him that she knew what he was going to do. He could tell by her breathing that she was awake. When she snuggled in his embrace, groaning at his warmth, Marc allowed the plan to become final. The vet had outlived his usefulness. *Finally!*

Marc knew he shouldn’t be happy that he had received the silent okay to eliminate the man, but it was impossible. Unlike Adrian, who honestly loved Angela and wanted her to be happy, the vet was obsessed with something he could never have, which made him dangerous.

Across the camp, the vet missed all of it. He’d been up for two days straight. As soon as he’d shifted the RV in park and shut it off, he’d curled up in the floorboard of the front passenger side and crashed. He’d been asleep seconds later.

Around him, the empty RV screamed in silent accusation the vet was too corrupt to feel.

**5**

“Adrian isn’t here. Does that matter?” Marc didn’t like not knowing where the former leader was.

Angela sipped her coffee. “No. The camp is used to him not being around now.”

Made up of team leaders and council members, this meeting was happening before the rest of the camp woke. Not that everyone was asleep. Half a dozen members were in line for the bathroom, with another dozen at the tables around the meeting. None of those were descendants however, and Angela chose to keep going. They wouldn’t learn much from this meeting anyway. All of the plans had been delivered yesterday.

Around the camp, the surroundings reminded everyone of the dangers of not being sheltered by the mountain. The nearby town was burnt to the ground. From the graffiti, people were assuming it had happened during a fight with the UN. Signs of that army were everywhere.

“I’ll make the call in thirty minutes. Fifteen minutes after that, we’ll be in the trucks. As we pull out, everyone will see us in the vehicles where we’re supposed to be. We’ll meet back here.”

Half of the people at the table were happy they’d been chosen for the mission. The other half of the fighters were furious they hadn’t been. Kyle was among those who were having trouble controlling their anger. Jennifer should be staying here with him.

Tonya felt the same way even though Kenn wasn’t hurt. The huge bruise on his chest was a reminder of how close he’d come to dying.

“Charlie and Conner have point over the bugout.” Angela made sure that was loud enough for everyone to hear and then studied the reactions. When there were no hostile thoughts, she shifted into the next phase of the plan, hoping it was the last one like this that she ever had to make. “Bring all the weapons you want, but energy is what we’re going to need the most. Don’t waste it.” She glanced around the table. “Questions or comments?”

“The RV is gone again.”

“He also has work to do today.” That was Angela’s way of telling them the vet would be along for the run. No one liked hearing that, but at the same time, they did. Chris was lethal and he had no compunction about killing anybody that got in her way. On a run like this, that could be an advantage.

“What happens if you don’t come back?”

Marc scowled at Neil for the question, but Angela was ready for it. “I’ve made plans to get the girls back here to help you with the camp. All I can tell you from there, is to run.”

Not satisfied, but hoping Angela wasn’t lying about having their mates covered, Neil and Kyle accepted the answer.

Angela motioned toward the food Brittani was putting out. “Everyone needs a second helping, and drink as much water as you can hold. Our ride has a bathroom. Meeting adjourned.”

Most of the council rose from the table. Two of the team leaders lingered with their mates until Angela gave Jennifer a gesture that said it was time. “Be safe.”

Jennifer took Kyle’s hand and led him away from the table. *She wants me to leave now because I can’t tuck and roll very well. Act like you’re putting me in one of the vehicles for a nap*.

Kyle didn’t argue. He did consider sneaking along with her, however. That, he didn’t mention.

Jennifer knew. She didn’t scold him or tell him it was too dangerous for the camp to be without protection. She said the only thing she knew would work without a fight, taking a page out of Marc’s book when it came to dealing with Angela. “Autumn needs you here.”

Kyle growled at her. “That is so unfair!”

“I know, but it’s the truth. I could never do this if I didn’t know you were here to take care of her.”

Still an Eagle at heart, Kyle didn’t want her to be distracted on the run. It was clear that she wouldn’t refuse to go. “I’ll handle things. You finish up and come home where you belong.”

Jennifer gave Kyle a lingering hug and then climbed into the backseat of her assigned vehicle. A few seconds later, she was buried beneath the blankets.

Kyle assumed his assigned duty of verifying all the vehicles held the proper occupants, heart pounding. Jennifer would slip out, leaving the blankets and jackets bundled up in an attempt to fool anyone who peered through the windows. Kyle was certain Angela had assigned passengers who knew not to report Jennifer’s absence. Unable to help the worry, Kyle tried hard to keep his mind off that part of the plan in case any of the descendants who were not privy to the information were reading minds right now. Without a gift of his own, Kyle had no way to tell when that was happening.

Kyle saw Neil helping Samantha into her assigned truck in much the same manner that he had just done with Jennifer. The two men exchanged a glance that implied the next twelve hours would be hell.

“Incoming!”

Guards rushed toward the parking area, where the call had originated. As they neared the edge of the squared-off protection around the camp, they spotted a dust trail from a single vehicle flying toward the camp.

Conner and Charlie reached the parking area together. The boys didn’t discuss how to handle the problem. Both of them were busy scanning the occupant.

“It’s one of the ducks.”

Conner frowned in confusion. “One of the what?”

Charlie motioned the guards back to their posts. “It’s okay. It’s one of the doctor’s students. We started calling them ducks because of the way they followed him around all the time.”

Conner observed the vehicle, aware that it hadn’t slowed. “That might be a problem.”

Before the boys could decide on a plan of action, the vehicle swerved toward them, horn blaring.

Eagles hurried to pull Conner and Charlie out of the way as the small, dented wagon slid to a stop where they’d been standing.

The vehicle had come through hell. Missing glass and dotted in bullet holes, the driver door fell off as the medical student staggered out.

“Help him!”

“All gone!” The dead duck stumbled around the open car and drop to his knees. “Help me.” Dan’s shirt was tacky with blood. Fresh streams ran from multiple holes in the front of his coat as he knelt before them. Beaten and bloody, his waxy skin told them what was about to happen.

Conner moved forward to help, but Charlie put a hand on his arm. “It’s too late.”

Conner shrugged off Charlie’s grip. “It would take a lot, but I can do it.”

Charlie stepped in front of Conner, forcing the boy to look at him. “No.”

Conner wanted to argue that it was the right thing to do. He also wanted to scream that he was in charge. Wise enough to know both of those were the wrong reactions, Conner swept the Eagles around them.

Kyle shook his head. “This camp needs your energy more than that one soul.”

Conner stomped away from the scene before he could do it anyway. It felt wrong to let someone die when he could help them.

Charlie approached Dan, holding his hand out. “I’m sorry.”

Dan tried to focus on the boy, but his vision was blurry and his ears were ringing. “They’re dead. All gone.”

Charlie patted the man’s wrist, trying to offer what little comfort he could. “Even Ray?”

Dan stiffened; his breath came out in a rough gasp. “Didn’t see him.”

Before Charlie could ask another question, Dan slumped forward on the ground.

Charlie spent a minute trying to read any remaining thoughts the duck might have, but there was nothing. He stood up and strode toward the Eagles who had a medical kit waiting.

Neil squirted hand sanitizer into Charlie’s palm and then stored the bottle, along with the kit. It was impossible to guess what Dan may have come in contact with during his escape. Neil gestured toward the body. “Burn it. Use gloves.”

The car was splattered in blood and there was a puddle in the seat. It wouldn’t be used for transportation, but they would drain the fuel and water.

Three senior men came forward, reminded of their time before they had made it to the mountain. Under Adrian’s leadership, this had been a normal chore. None of them had missed it.

Charlie did a fast sweep and found Conner lingering near the community tents. The Eagles around him had considered the boy might be spying on Candy, but the idea was dismissed. Conner was stewing over what had just happened. He didn’t even realize Candy was in there.

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t get out of hand.” Morgan hoped nothing else happened. Half of leadership was still in camp and the tension was already crazy. What would it be like when they were all gone?

While Morgan spoke to Conner, Charlie turned toward the people who had witnessed Dan’s arrival. He joined them with calm tones and regretful words. A fresh death in front of everyone was a grim reminder of the people they’d left behind. It was also proof of what Angela had been saying all along. The choice to bugout of the mountain hadn’t been an easy one. They’d been taunted and made fun of, shunned, and even attacked, but in the end, she’d been right to get them out of there.

Kyle and the others observed for a moment, and then went to their assigned places. It was obvious Charlie could do the job when he wanted to. The question that everyone had was could he follow the rules. No one would stop him from leaving to join his mother and father, but if he did that, no one would follow him anywhere afterwards.

“It’s time to go!” Angela’s call came over the radio. There was a brief pause and then it crackled again. “In Five minutes, I’m leaving. Be in your vehicles in five minutes.”

The camp exploded in a flurry of activity as everyone hurried to finish eating, repacking, and using the bathroom. Once they got into a groove again, the smaller number of camp members would make this faster. Until then, it was organized chaos carried out with fond memories of previous travel days where they had whined.

The guards burned the body in the center of camp, where some people had spent a cold evening readjusting to the outside noises. It was another reminder and a warning at the same time. It increased their speed and the bad mood. No one liked to be rushed, but burning flesh added an awful layer that made them run. Camp members were afraid of being left behind, especially now that they saw what would happen. Dan’s burning body said if they got separated, not only would they be on their own, but they wouldn’t be okay to be buried if Safe Haven found their remains.

Conner and Charlie directed people to where they were supposed to be while mentally searching for problems. They didn’t find any, but they didn’t stop searching. The boys were about to be in charge of almost two hundred lives. It was terrifying.

# Chapter Thirty-Nine

**Hard and Quick**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

**W**ithin five minutes, Safe Haven’s vehicles were full. It was the fastest travel day load up that many of them had ever experienced.

“We’re ready. Let’s roll.” Angela hung up the mike. Those might be the last words her camp ever heard from her. She glanced over as Conner climbed into the driver seat. “All accounted for?”

Conner started the engine. “I checked it, Charlie checked it, and then the senior Eagles checked it right behind us. We have everyone.”

Angela settled in like she was getting comfortable for another long day of travel as Ivan and his soldiers came up to take the lead. Staying half a mile in front of the convoy at any time, they would also make hourly returns to the line for a complete circuit all the way to the rear vehicles. It was the best Angela could do in her absence.

“Charlie said to tell you he is staying with the camp.”

Angela was glad to hear it. “Tell him we’ll be in line when you stop for the night.”

That answer pleased Conner, but he was worried about Marc killing Adrian while they were on the run. The Eagles weren’t worried about it anymore, and Charlie was annoyed because it wasn’t going to happen, but Conner refused to believe it until he had seen it.

“If we don’t come back, stick to the plan you made.”

Conner glanced over with guilt written on his face. “What plan?”

Angela snorted. “Your plan to have your Candy before dinner.”

Conner was startled into a chuckle at the wording. He knew it was a bad time to laugh, but he couldn’t help it.

Angela let the teenager gain control of himself, remembering when life had been that simple. It seemed like eons ago.

“It’s not a bad plan. It doesn’t break any rules.”

“That’s why I’m telling you to stick with it. If you change your plan, you’ll make a mistake.”

“Is that what happened to you?” Conner and his team had heard the stories. He knew what had happened to Angela. They’d noticed upon arrival that she wasn’t pregnant anymore, but hadn’t felt like it was right to ask.

Angela sighed. “I tried to do it all alone.”

Conner frowned. “I’m doing that now.”

“But you’re not, really. I know your plan. A few other people also suspect what you have planned. No one knew what I was doing.”

“My dad did at the end. He told me he couldn’t get to you fast enough.”

“He saved my life that night.”

“I’m sorry for all of you.”

Angela sighed again, hating the subject. “We’re going to spend more time together, Conner.” Angela ignored the way he tensed. “I need to know that I can trust you because I’m going to use you for things. One of them will pit you against Charlie, enough for him to see that there’s someone else to take his place.”

Conner wasn’t sure if he was okay with that, but he was also positive he would agree if it helped him get what he wanted.

“I only care if it’s what *she* wants. Without any more manipulation.”

Conner flushed. He had contacted Candy when he wasn’t supposed to. It had only been to offer comfort, but it was still a violation of his conditional banishment. He refused to think about the other moments while sitting by the alpha.

Seeing her destination coming up, Angela let the boy off the hook, mostly because the reports about his behavior on the trip had been exemplary. “You were on conditional banishment during the times that you were in Safe Haven’s perimeter. Any contact you had with her after that is not a violation unless she reported it as one.” Angela gestured. “Around the next curve is a field. The weeds around it make a good cover. Do not change your speed. I’ve accounted for it.”

Conner understood she was getting ready to exit the vehicle. “Good luck.”

Angela popped the handle on the truck so she would be ready when they reached the right location. “Same to you.”

Angela shoved the door and lunged toward the ground, tucking and rolling.

As Conner went around the curve, gravity forced the door shut.

Angela was poked, scratched, bumped, and jostled on the way. It had been a long time since she’d done anything like this and her body reminded her of it with pain that flared up in several areas, including an ankle that smacked against a rock. Angela rolled to a stop deep in the weeds and curled into a ball to wait for the convoy to pass.

Less than a minute later, she felt two large, warm forms join her, one on each side.

The trio braced for someone to roll down a window and point, or call on the radio asking what they were doing. They were only hidden by weeds and half of their clothing didn’t match.

It was a relief when no one noticed, but it was also a problem. Before they’d come to the mountain, the men and women who were passing them would have noticed people hiding in the bushes alongside the road.

While they waited for the convoy to pass, the trio kept their thoughts normal to avoid alerting descendants who weren’t going with them.

Adrian concentrated on figuring out a way to earn more respect. It was a common thought in his mind since his banishment.

Marc centered on finding the next location for their camp, something he had done on travel days even though Angela or Adrian usually chose the route.

Angela thought about her missing babies.

As soon as the last vehicle was out of sight, Angela got onto her feet and marched toward the campsite. Without Safe Haven sitting in the middle of it, bringing light and life, the bare ground was like every other abandoned space remaining from a society that had destroyed itself. Trees waved mocking greetings and the wind blew through the underbrush in ominous growls.

Marc and Adrian stayed on her heels, searching the cold, snowy cliffs and trees around them. There had been enough time for surviving refugees to track them, and there was always a chance that Bryson’s mercenaries hadn’t taken the bait and were setting up their chance to pick people off.

Angela knew all of that. She’d been worrying about it for weeks, but now that the moment was here, she was certain she’d made the right choice. It was bothersome that it would be hours before she could make contact and verify a location, however. Eager to be on the way, Angela made a quick signal in the air.

Marc and everyone else watched the RV come toward them with frowns. She’d told them the vet was going along, but they hadn’t realized he would be their driver. Among the Eagles, that was an honored position.

Angela hurried into the vehicle, sliding over so she could see Chris in the mirror.

Jennifer and Samantha were put in next, with Kenn helping both females. They were the reason Kenn was along. As an Invisible, his gift to read minds during the battle would help, but he would have been better served taking care of Safe Haven. With Jennifer weak and Samantha injured, Kenn’s big shoulders were needed more than his descendant ability.

Kenn knew that, but it didn’t bother him. He was thrilled not to have been left behind for the run.

The last one in, Adrian took the passenger seat. As soon as he shut the door, Chris pulled out in a wide arc and turned them back toward the mountain.

No one spoke for a few minutes. Warming up from their short walk in the cold weather, it was also a tense minute of deciding to trust the vet when they weren’t positive he was worthy of it.

Marc and Adrian both swept the RV and then exchanged glances. The woman wasn’t here.

Angela kept her mind on the kit between her feet, mentally running down the gear she had brought as if she wanted to be sure she’d brought everything.

Adrian wasn’t fooled. He scanned to discover if Marc had been.

Marc snorted. “I’ve known her longer. That stopped working before I was out of school.”

Adrian chuckled as Angela frowned. “Good. You can give me pointers.”

The rear of the RV was packed with boxes and crates that obviously hadn’t been opened since the war. Wrapped in thick layers of dusty plastic and yellowing tape, some of the items were intended for Safe Haven. The bottled water and canned peaches would go over well with everyone. Some of the other items, like the stack of vests and the ammo cans, the team assumed they would use in their upcoming confrontation.

The temperature in the RV was stifling. Jennifer lowered the window, inhaling the fresh air.

The team around her did the same. Fresh air had been hard to come by over the last few months.

For a little while longer, there was quiet. They observed the devastated land around the road through the windows or rested to conserve energy like Angela had instructed them to. Other than Adrian, none of them had faced their kind enough to know how to prepare for a fight like this. Marc and Kenn relied on their military training. Samantha and Jennifer worked on their lessons. The others did a similar version that they found comforting, bringing a mood of teamwork and companionship only the level leaders usually shared.

“I don’t understand why I’m here.” Morgan looked at Angela. “I’ve had a little bit of the mountain sickness, but I’ve been better since we left.”

Realizing Morgan believed he’d been brought along to be eliminated, Angela put his mind at ease and stirred him up at the same time. “You’re a descendant. That’s why you’re here.”

Morgan was as surprised as everyone else. “I thought the voices were from mountain sickness.”

“There is no such thing as mountain sickness.” Angela confirmed what many of them had suspected.

It took Morgan longer to put the pieces together. As he did, the myriad of expressions that ran across his face kept the team distracted. While they were, Angela handed Chris a small pouch.

Chris tucked it under his seat and put his hands back on the wheel.

“Do I have a gift?” Morgan couldn’t help himself. Everyone wanted to be a descendant.

“I don’t know. Do you?” Angela regarded him expectantly.

Morgan tried to find out, but he had no idea how to do that. He looked to Marc for help.

“Told you he’d want you.” Angela leaned back and tried to rest.

Marc leaned forward. “Shake my hand.”

Morgan put his hand in Marc’s, unable to keep from tensing. Even without being a descendant, Marc was lethal.

Marc entered the private space and guided Morgan toward a small door in the rear of his mind. It was dark and narrow, but felt powerful. “I’m leaving now.” Marc withdrew as Morgan opened the barrier.

Morgan flinched from the red orbs that appeared in his mind. When he wasn’t attacked, he stole a glance at his demon. Tall and muscular, with a nasty sneer, Morgan was intimidated. He was also impressed. “Now *that’s* a badass.”

Laughter filled the van.

A cold wave came a few seconds later.

Chris switched on the van CB, not needing Angela to tell him to do it. He had felt it coming.

*“We found her! We found her!”*

The vet drove faster.

*“What happened?”*

*“We’re bringing in the body.”*

An awful scream filled the air, one so ugly that even the vet shuddered. He reached down to flip off the radio.

“Leave it on.”

Angela’s order stopped Chris, forcing him to listen to the man’s pain. The scream was followed by more of the same.

“That’s Erik.” Adrian recognized the voice. “Not a good guy.”

“Did you work together or was he someone you brought in?”

Adrian frowned at Marc’s question. “A little bit of both. After he lost command, his wife conceived. When she sold the baby to the government, he went crazy and kidnapped it. No one has heard from any of them in decades.”

Angela reached down and flipped her radio to the correct channel. When she lifted the mike, everyone in the RV tensed, knowing it would be bad.

Angela let her hatred come forward as she purred into the mike. “She thanked me for setting her free.”

Stunned silence filled the air for a few seconds and then Erik’s cold voice echoed across the radio. “You know where I am. Come set *me* free.”

“I’m an hour out. Is there anything left of Market Town?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. You saved me a lot of work.”

The radio went dead as Erik realized he had been tricked into wiping out a town for her. Angela hadn’t told him they were slavers, but she doubted that would have mattered. Erik had also confirmed his location and it was exactly where she needed him to be.

“Right about now, he’s realizing they’ve used up all their energy on the wrong targets.” Adrian’s voice held more approval for her than any of them were used to hearing in public these days. “He’ll order his men to take any lifeforces of captives they have, but the crew he keeps are true killers. There won’t be many survivors and none of them will be descendants. He’ll be lucky to find enough energy to replenish even a third of his army.”

Angela glanced at Marc. “And that’s where you come in.” She gave him a soft, evil smile. “I like your sonic gift, Baby.”

“There are refugees ahead.” Chris’s call got attention.

“Pull over.”

It took Adrian a few seconds to figure out what Angela was going to do. He studied her in surprise. “Really?”

Angela didn’t answer.

As the RV slowed, the dozen desperate men and women ran toward it, shouting and waving. At first, they looked like normal survivors who needed help. As they began to pound on the windows, screaming about death to all Safe Haven citizens, it made Angela’s decision more palatable.

*Crash!* Something heavy rapped against the rear window, shattering the corner of it to let in a cold draft.

Angela braced. “Open the door.”

Marc did it, recording every second of the encounter to study later.

The force that shot out of Angela’s hands slammed into the first two refugees, knocking them into three others. Two more angry bandits lunged toward the door only to be driven backward by a wall of flames that burned them alive.

“No one escapes.” Angela’s order came out in the double timbre of the alpha, allowing no refusal.

Marc and Adrian jumped from the RV.

Angela climbed out, signaling for Kenn to bring the girls. “What you do here is your choice, but you need to view it to understand how awful it is. Once you do this, you can never go back.”

The refugees were too well covered to determine if they were Mexicans, UN men, mercenaries, or just desperate survivors. They slipped and stumbled across the rocks and snow, chasing Marc. Attacking without provocation or thought, they only looked like wild animals.

Kenn set Samantha on her feet. With Jennifer nearby, they watched the other descendants hurry toward the attacking refugees.

Chris and Morgan didn’t participate, but both of those men observed in fascination as empty husks hit the ground in horrible, dull thuds of blasphemy.

Angela glanced at Jennifer, who was studying the scene as if she were a student learning a lesson.

Samantha climbed back into the vehicle, determined never to experience either side of that moment.

Angela held Jennifer’s eye. “It will heal your health and split your soul.”

Jennifer considered everything she had been through and everything she’d done to survive, and didn’t find this more than she could handle. The only thing that made her climb back into the RV was how disappointed Kyle would be when he found out.

Glad the teenager had made that choice, Angela turned to see how Marc was doing.

Marc dropped the body, able to feel the man’s lifeforce replenishing his gifts. It was an incredible experience; he was sorry he’d done it.

Marc let Angela hug him, but he already knew nothing would eliminate the stain from his soul. Like Jennifer, he could have resisted, but this was something he needed to know how to handle. It was the only way he was going to be able to bring Angela back from her depths of corruption. He had to be able to understand everything that she had done.

Angela let Marc put her in the RV, reading his thoughts but not responding to them. Some problems, a person had to work out for themselves.

Kendle hadn’t left the RV. She was watching the vet.

Chris got them rolling. “Three minutes.”

Hoping to settle everyone’s nerves, Angela went over the plan. “The leaders are inside the gates that they crashed through to take the town. They have snipers on top of the buildings that we’ll have to pass through to reach that open entrance. There are four-dozen descendants and two-dozen invisibles.” Angela looked at Kendle and Sam. “We need an ice wall. Lock them inside with us.”

Kendle knew how to do it. She’d been in Market Town. She knew the small alleys that would have to be blocked. “I’ll need a lot of wind and it will take time.”

“Start on it as soon as we’re in range. Samantha will provide the wind. Kenn is whatever you need, but mostly, energy.”

“I’m the shield, right?”

“Yes, Jennifer. You and Adrian are the shields.”

That left Morgan, Chris, and Marc.

“Chris will stay in the driver’s seat to take us out if we need a fast escape. Morgan will keep Chris covered.” Angela lifted a brow at Marc. “Are you mad yet?”

Marc shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“A little, yes. The angrier you are, the more powerful the fear attack will be when I tell you to hit them with it.”

“Ninety seconds.” Chris slowed down a little to give her more time.

“We’re gonna step out together. Shields will be up before we step out. All you guys have to do is hold the shield and build the wall. Marc and I will do the rest.”

Plan in place, everyone concentrated on getting ready for their part in it.

Angela and Marc clasped hands for a last peaceful second together before the battle began. Then she made him mad. “I’m asking for a vote tonight to lift Adrian’s banishment.”

Raw fury slammed through the RV, making Adrian and the vet cringe.

“Perfect.”

**2**

“Here they come!”

Erik and his top men stood in the middle of the smoldering square, surrounded by bodies. Market Town had been destroyed. They’d rammed the gates to get in, encountering little resistance that could penetrate their shields. Even the UN tanks hadn’t been able to stand against his crew. Within ten minutes of starting the attack, Erik and his band of dissidents had slaughtered all of the military and the residents. It had been frustrating to discover they’d been tricked into doing it, but it was too late to change that now.

“Get ready! Mitchel is tricky. Don’t give him a chance to hit you with anything. Concentrate on Mitchel!” Erik began to gather his energy for his most powerful spell that would stun everyone in the oncoming RV.

“Now!”

“Start now!”

Angela and Erik gave the order at the same time. Magic filled the air.

Chris hit the gas, feeling a shield come up over the rolling RV.

Fueled by Adrian and Jennifer, Erik’s blast was useless. There was no evidence he’d even fired at them. He stared in shocked fear as the RV kept coming. *That’s never happened to me!*

*You’re gonna have a day of firsts*. Adrian enjoyed the taunt.

Recognizing the tactic, Erik ducked behind his men. “Kill them!”

The snipers on the rooftops began to pepper the RV with bullets in place of the magic they didn’t have. While they fired their weapons, Erik’s mercenaries concentrated on the passenger they could see through the front window of the RV.

Pushing his luck, Adrian waved at them.

The windshield in front of Adrian’s face bowed in from a powerful burst of energy that slammed into them from above.

Jennifer groaned in concentration, managing to absorb the hit instead of deflecting it. “I didn’t know I could do that!”

Adrian felt the shield strengthen and tried to copy her actions. “How did you do it!?!”

“Like a straw–slow and steady!”

Adrian felt the next hit bow in the windshield and inhaled mentally, not sure if he was doing it right.

“That’s it!” Jennifer took the next one, loving the way she was able to feed the awful blasts into the power of the shield. It was too bad the enemy was already figuring it out and not shooting with magic.

Relieved that their protection was holding, Kendle and Samantha concentrated on the walls of the town around them. The RV was half a mile from the gates, but the ice would need to come out further to account for the missing front door.

Samantha blew harsh winter wind toward the gaps, following Kendle’s pointing finger. The two females pressed their faces against the windows in an effort to maintain sight with the side of the wall they were building as Chris flew them down the access road.

More bullets hit the shield, but these weren’t absorbed. Some of them bounced off and sank into the ground and trees around the RV. A few of them also made it through the shield.

“Hold the corner!” Adrian and Jennifer struggled to close a gap in the shield that they hadn’t known was there. Doing this in a speeding vehicle was hard for both of them.

Chris took the RV straight through the small barricade of vehicles Erik had ordered to replace the gate they had crushed. Descendants ran to get out of the way.

Tough, the RV plowed into the vehicle and knocked them aside like toys. It shuddered to a rough halt in front of Erik and his top men.

Kenn waited for Angela’s gesture and then popped the handle, pushing the door open as Marc sent out a wave of his sonic blast to disable the closest foes.

Angela followed it up with a huge ball of fire that blasted a path through the center of Erik and his men.

Jon and Stephan flamed up into bright screams that ran around banging into cars and people until they fell over.

“Hit them again!”

Marc obeyed her, slamming everyone outside the shield with a feeling of terror that was nearly impossible to fight. Men took off running, hoping to escape.

Marc didn’t see Erik anymore, but there wasn’t time to look for the evil man yet.

Samantha and Kendle struggled to stay in front of the running mercenaries with the ice wall. As soon as an area was high enough with snowdrifts, Kendle used her gift to merge the melting flakes into a wall that Samantha then froze. Tall and smooth, it blocked the retreat of Erik’s men with a barrier that seemed impenetrable. Angela was positive a few of them would be able to melt their way through if given enough time, but she wasn’t going to allow that. This fight was almost over.

Crouched under a wrecked truck, Erik shot a wave of hatred toward the man standing outside the RV. He didn’t recognize him, but Adrian didn’t have any of the gifts Erik had been hit by. They had to have come from the other man. That had to be the Ghost.

Marc was knocked back into the RV as Erik’s hit slammed into the ground by his boots, sending up a cloud of dust and snow. Unharmed, Marc marveled at how their shots could get out of the shield, but enemy shots weren’t getting in.

“Getting tired!”

Jennifer’s call brought concern and made Marc sharpen his aim. Able to sense how unwilling Erik’s men were to die, he concentrated on cutting the head off the snake. As usual, he expected the cowards to flee once their leader was gone.

Kendle grunted, running low. “I don’t have enough to finish it!”

Next to her, Samantha slumped against the seat. “I’m out!”

Kenn was empty too. Jennifer and Samantha had drained his energy in seconds. He drew his gun and took the shots that came open.

Angela scanned the ice wall, spotting a place where it wasn’t closed. Hoping it was the only one, she darted from the RV and ran toward the area. If she could get there before anyone else, she could defend it.

Marc went with her. As they ran, they left the safety of the shield Adrian and Jennifer were providing. Marc replaced it with his. He concentrated on making sure nothing got through, no longer able to fire. He didn’t have the energy to do both at the same time.

Angela threw her knife at a merc who was going to get there before her, trying to run faster as the body fell. None of Erik’s crew had their shields up. They hadn’t expected the fight to reach them.

Angela spun around and threw out a ball of flames that caught the two men on her heels. Flames flared up all along their clothing and arms, bringing screams.

Marc saw the flaming men and got out of their way. He stopped next to Angela in the opening, smothering her in protection.

Adrian reached them a few seconds later. “Chris has the others covered. Finish this!” Adrian put one hand on Marc’s shoulder and the other on Angela’s. Connected, Adrian took over shielding so Marc was free to fight.

Angela and Marc sent out power at the same time; the two gifts combined into a spell that sent blood spraying across the smoldering remains as eyeballs popped.

Angela’s flames ran along the ice wall, starting where they were standing. Sent out in both directions, the wall of flames merged into a giant circle that was only broken by the space where their RV was sitting. Horrible heat filled the square. It began to smother the mercenaries as Angela drew the flames in toward her.

“Hold the shields!” Adrian didn’t know if Kenn was feeding Chris energy or if that man was also out, but Samantha and Jennifer were no longer in the fight.

Angela drew on all the anger and misery she had experienced during her time in the mountain. The death of her child was a peak of emotions that sent out a wave of horrible fury to consume the rest of Erik’s men.

All her people could do was pray their shields held so they weren’t consumed along with the enemy.

Marc shared his strength with Adrian as the flames rushed over them. For a long moment, the sounds of fire and screams were deafening.

The familiar symphony sent Angela straight back to the rest stop. She dropped to her knees, shuddering as men and women screamed.

Marc scanned the battlefield, searching for Erik. He found the leader a few feet away from the RV, almost burnt beyond recognition. As he wondered which one of them had done it, Morgan stepped out with a shocked expression and flames dancing across his fingers.

Adrian grinned. “He *does* have a gift.”

While Marc continued to search the battlefield for surviving threats, Adrian helped Angela to her feet. He was aware that her mind was in the past. Even though the fight was over, this was a bad time to be distracted. He gave her a little nudge, glad the screams were dying. “It’s over.”

The words were fading into the air as a gunshot echoed.

Everyone spun to find Chris standing in the open RV doorway with a gun. One of Erik’s top men, Hugh, was lying on the ground in front of him, also clutching a gun. From the angle, everyone assumed Jennifer had been the target.

In the RV, Jennifer gave Chris a nod of thanks.

Distracted, the vet missed Samantha’s quick draw.

*Bang!*

Chris didn’t have time to throw up a defense. He hadn’t thought Samantha was a threat. He hadn’t been monitoring her, only concentrating on Jennifer and Kyle, who he believed would be assigned to eliminate him when the time came.

Marc and Adrian ran toward the RV, not sure what was going on.

Angela followed, but she didn’t run. Marc wasn’t the only one who had asked for permission to eliminate the vet.

Chris’s body fell at an ugly angle, revealing an expression of betrayed shock and hatred that a few of them marked in their memory so Angela would see it later. It was fair to them that she had to share in the result of the game she had played with the vet. He’d been a serial killer. He should have been removed as soon as she’d discovered that.

Samantha slid her gun into the holster. Even Neil hadn’t known if she would do it, but Samantha had been using the bathroom when the vet dropped Marc and Adrian off. She knew what he’d done to the pregnant woman. Samantha hadn’t been okay with it. She still wasn’t and at some point, Angela would have to answer for that order.

“But not today, okay?”

Samantha agreed with Jennifer’s mutter. They were all too tired for more drama right now. It would keep.

Angela expected to hear many complaints at some point. As she sank down in the seat, exhaustion overwhelmed her. “Let’s go.”

Morgan took the driver’s chair, glad there wasn’t blood on it. “Same route back?”

“Yes. Same pit stop as well if it makes itself available.”

Morgan didn’t balk at the order. This time, he planned to participate.

So did Jennifer.

Samantha’s gut twisted. “I’m gonna be sick.”

Kenn slid in next to her, sending waves of calm. “It was your first big fight and your body wasn’t ready for it. Try not to think about anything that happened for a little while and your stomach will settle.”

“You can also try curling your thumbs into your fists.” Jennifer shrugged at people who turned to her. “It works for me every time.”

Half of the people in the RV immediately curled their thumbs into their fists in an effort to get their stomachs to calm. The smell of burning flesh was strong even with the door closed.

Morgan got the RV rolling, knowing without being told that Angela wanted to be back in camp by the time Safe Haven stopped for the night. If they were very lucky, the camp would never know they had left. People would suspect Angela had taken care of the remaining UN troops when Safe Haven wasn’t followed, but only the people here and a few in camp would know for sure. She’d kept them out of it this time. They would love her for it.

Adrian wasn’t so sure. She’d promised no more lies or nasty plans, but she’d already broken both of those. Some camp members might call her on it.

“Let them.” Marc took the seat by Angela. “We’ll tell them the wolf was at the door, but we sent it away. They won’t care how it happened.”

Angela and Adrian both felt it snap into place. Marc was on board now, finally seeing the bigger picture.

“Who says I didn’t see it before?” Marc yawned, suddenly exhausted. “I just got used to being able to change the channel when I didn’t like the program.”

No one needed to ask what had happened to cause the change of heart. She was in the seat next to him.

# Chapter Forty

**The Past**

A picture containing drawing

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“D**amn.” Angela forced her tired body up. “Get the guns.”

As the truck bounced over debris, nearing the main intersection from the valley, dozens of refugees streamed out to converge on the RV.

“Get down!” Marc shoved Angela over as a bullet came through the window. It plunged into the seat next to her shoulder.

Adrian brought up a shield that wouldn’t last long.

Morgan swerved the RV out of the line of fire of the two troops and into the path of three descendants who had come with the refugees. Magic flew through the air.

Morgan hit the gas and jerked the wheel, causing the RV to skid and groan in protest. He grinned as he fought for control.

The vehicle skidded sideways at the impacts, but the steel walls and shield protected the people inside.

“Get your rifle!” Marc popped the door and climbed onto it, balancing with one hand while he aimed with the other.

Adrian grabbed Marc’s belt to help him hold on, using his free hand to pull the rifle from the kit by his feet.

“Get ready to trade!”

Understanding what Marc wanted, Adrian put the rifle on the seat and began digging for more ammunition with his free hand. He would have his gun ready when Marc’s was empty so they could swap.

Gunfire outside of the rolling RV was deafening. Adrian’s ears rang as Marc fired shots that knocked descendants and UN troops into the slushy debris piles.

“Swap!”

Adrian shoved the rifle out, letting go as he felt Marc grab it. Still using one hand to hold him, Adrian grabbed the hot rifle Marc dropped with the other hand. It took him longer than he wanted to reload, but Adrian did it in time for Marc’s next call.

“Swap!”

The switch was smoother this time.

“That’s enough! Get in here!”

Angela’s shout forced Adrian to pull Marc into the RV where they both yanked the door shut and tossed themselves into seats, laughing wildly. Only during an apocalypse could they have a moment like that.

Angela didn’t mention the upcoming pit stop.

Marc peered at his watch. “We made good time with the battle, but it took too long to get here. We might show up after them.”

Angela sighed. “Fine. Skip the pit stop.”

Satisfied, Marc put a hand over hers. “I forgive you.”

Angela almost cried.

In one of the swivel seats across from them, Adrian observed in approval. Marc hadn’t needed to be told this time. *You’re getting better.*

Marc ignored the compliment. All he wanted to do was sleep. He didn’t have time for Adrian’s emotions.

Angela gestured toward a kit. “I brought water. Somebody pass it out.”

Slowly recovering, Jennifer leaned down to pick up the kit.

Kenn took it from her and handed out the water, hoping he would be able to get her and Samantha back to their men and ditch them without having to listen to the scolds and nagging Neil and Kyle would deliver. The two men would be upset they had been alone for the entire day without knowing what was going on. It was frustrating even as it was understandable. Kenn expected the same reaction from Tonya.

Barely alert, Kendle dropped into the open seat by Marc and rested her head against his shoulder. When he didn’t push her away, she let sleep mask her guilt.

Marc felt Angela’s jealousy, but also her acceptance of the situation and understood the future now held more hope for them as a couple than it ever had. Once they could let go of their preconceived notions about how monogamous a relationship had to be, they would stop projecting their own inadequacies on each other and be able to be happy with the moments that came. Marc was looking forward to that time.

Angela felt the tension shift out of the RV; waves of tired triumph took its place. It had been a hard quick battle–the only kind she knew how to plan now. She didn’t have the patience for long drawn-out schemes that left too much room for things to go wrong. Facing the problem in a way the enemy wasn’t expecting, and couldn’t defend against was the cornerstone of her fighting style.

Angela let out a deep breath. There hadn’t been much doubt about their success, but it had been enough for her to make plans. Knowing the descendant children didn’t have to run and Conner and Charlie were not going to fight for Safe Haven’s survival alone was enough to forgive the awful atrocities she’d done to ensure that. When it came to the survival of her people, she would never change. There wasn’t a wall of guilt high enough to compete. *Which leads me to the final step in my grand scheme.*

“Tell me a story.”

Everyone in the RV glanced at Angela to verify who she was speaking to.

Adrian sighed. “What kind? I don’t have many with happy endings.”

“I don’t expect those from you and neither does anyone else.”

Samantha and Kendle paused on their way to the rear bunks.

“You’ve been hunted by so many people since I joined your camp that I wouldn’t be able to narrow it down.” Angela paused, letting the new tension build. Then she smiled, sure he couldn’t see it from where he was sitting. “Tell us how you lost your team.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Angela sent an image of a lone figure huddled under a canopy, waiting for a dead man to return.

Adrian assumed she was making a choice and began searching his memories for one that might save Brian’s life.

“No. Tell us how you lost your team.”

Adrian grimaced at the repeated demand. “I’d rather not.”

“Are you refusing to tell the alpha a bedtime story?” Marc mocked the man. “Now I’ll have to insist. Anything you don’t want her to know is a story I *have* to hear.”

Adrian’s heart sank. “How about something from my time in the labs?”

Marc stared with an expectant expression that didn’t cover his happiness. He’d felt Adrian’s fear. There was no way he would let it go now.

Adrian caught that and slumped against the seat, glaring. “Fine. It was 1989.”

**2**

“This final round of shooting will determine the winner.”

Adrian looked over the two tables that had held the same class for the last four years. This was the bi-annual team leader challenge that he hadn’t lost since the first time he’d entered. As he scanned the two halfmoon tables that were divided by a small target range, Adrian realized he didn’t like many of the men he was leading. Erik and Garrett were okay at times, but Jack, Ryan, and Vlad were just troublemakers, as were Kranten and Stevens, the two lightly gifted men who were responsible for Jack being here. The other side of the table held Jon, Stephen, Hugh, Dugan, Isaac, and Bryson. Other than Bryson, Adrian considered that the lethal side of the room.

“Our next shooter is Adrian Mitchel!”

Adrian waved at his fans as he swaggered up to the line. He was always a favorite at this competition. Carrying the confidence of the world in every step, Adrian was exactly on the timer as the buzzer went off and the targets began to flash.

The rest of the team observed Adrian’s amazing shots with resentful glares and grumbles. Adrian was a good team leader in as far as he made sure they were outfitted properly and no man was left behind, but that was as far as their goodwill toward him went. Adrian’s father was a big wig–the first strike. Adrian was also a stickler for the rules, refusing to let them slack off or take extra benefits on runs. That was strike two. Not being able to come close to Adrian in shooting or descendant abilities was strike three for most of the men. The last four years had been a constant competition to improve their skills to remain on his team. They were tired of it.

“I think we have a new record, folks!”

The true fans of the competition–the wives, daughters, cousins, and girlfriends–let out cheers.

Adrian stayed there for a few seconds, enjoying his moment of glory. He knew how his team felt about him, but as long as they completed their missions, he didn’t care. That wasn’t his job. He was a hired killer and a government stooge. Emotions had nothing to do with his position in life.

Adrian returned to his seat at the head of the first table and sat down, confident that only Garrett or Erik might be able to match the shooting. Neither of them could equal him on skills tests however, so the competition was pretty much his again.

Resentment splashed the tables, causing Adrian to give them sharp glares. He didn’t mind their feelings about him, but he wouldn’t tolerate evidence of it in public. Without using his alpha gift, Adrian controlled his team.

The higher-ups who were watching the competition were aware of how tightly Mitchel ruled his men and how little effort it took. While they liked that, it was obvious it wasn’t going to work out with this crew.

“The next shooter is Jack Devine!”

There was thunderous response from the females. Considered the playboy of the team, Jack also had a wife. Adrian had met her during a company gathering and wondered how Jack had gotten lucky enough to snag the former beauty queen.

Jack swaggered up to the line, also hitting the timer just right. As he began shooting targets, he preened for the crowd of women, missing his chance to match Adrian.

“Good, but not good enough!”

Flushing at the public embarrassment, Jack scowled at the announcer.

Bryson dropped his head and continued to relay what was going on for the crowd. He didn’t like the public part of his job, but he was determined to do it well. “Our next shooter is J. Stevens!”

As the underlings took their turn, Adrian let his mind go to the place it preferred to be these days–with Shannon. Assigned to watch her while in witness protection, Shannon was an Invisible, but he didn’t hold that against her like some of his team would have. Shannon’s relatives had been gathering rebel descendants for a war with the government. Because she had turned them in, she was being given protection until she could be transported to a safe facility.

“Not even close!”

Stevens and Kranten shared roughly the same shooting ability, so Adrian wasn’t surprised the two men were doing so badly. They always had. Their gifts didn’t rest with guns.

“The next shooter is Garrett!”

The crowd cheered for Garret, but not as loud as they had for Adrian and Jack. Even the women knew Garrett wasn’t right somehow, though he hid it well. Still, he was the most reliable man on the team and Adrian’s friend–as far as he had any here. Adrian had taken Garret’s spot as leader when he arrived, expecting problems, but Garrett had accepted it like a man and offered a hand. He was the only one Adrian trusted.

“Ready to call me boss?”

“Sure.” Adrian grinned as his friend sauntered to the line. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Challenged, Garret’s timing off the line was good, allowing him to do some of the best shooting Adrian had ever witnessed off the field. It wasn’t good enough, but it was still great for Garret.

“Close, but no cigar!”

Garrett slid into the chair next to Adrian, noting a bruise on his forearm. He assumed it was a bruise, because even though it looked like a hickey, it was an odd place to have one.

“Better luck next time.”

Garrett nodded at the quip as if it didn’t bother him, but inside he was boiling. There had to be something he could beat Adrian at. Glad for the powerful mental shield he’d been gifted with, Garrett stewed.

Erik took a spot on the line, knowing they now had Adrian as their team leader for another year. Garrett had been their only real hope. If not for how strong Adrian’s alpha ability was, and his military skills, the man never would have been placed with them. It helped that he had a protector in the chain of command, but Erik wasn’t petty enough to deny that Mitchel deserved to be team leader. He just wished the man would screw up somewhere, somehow, and prove that he was human. Frustrated, Erik directed the rage into his aim and not where Adrian was sitting.

“That is just amazing, folks! Did you see that!”

Not immune to the rivalry, Adrian snickered. “All muscles and no brains.”

It told Erik, and everyone else, that Adrian had access to their test scores.

Erik flushed, giving Garrett a pointed glower.

Garrett sighed. They didn’t have anything on Mitchel. If one of them challenged him for team leader through other channels, they didn’t have anything to back it up and they would lose. Then, Adrian would pay them back for their betrayal. After ten years of hunting descendants for the government while doing jobs on the side, Adrian Mitchel had already built a reputation that few men would be able to match in their lifetimes, but everyone on his team was forced to try.

“Let’s have Vlad next!”

Vlad moved toward the spot with a saunter that implied he knew he was about to win the competition. Adrian suspected the killer was about to be disappointed, but he wasn’t sure. Vlad was mostly unreliable in a firefight, but sometimes he got lucky. The tall, lanky man’s gift rested in his ability to zap someone before they knew it was coming. Vlad was incredibly quick when it came to magic and movement.

“Want to get a beer when this is done?”

Adrian actually did, but he shook his head. “I have duty for the next twelve hours. Catch me in a few days.”

Garrett would have accepted the answer if not for the slightly defensive edge to Adrian’s tone. It was something that only happened when their team leader was lying. Garrett was one of the few people who’d picked it up. He had shared the information with Erik, who exchanged a glance with him now. Adrian was lying about being on duty for the next twelve hours.

Without speaking or even directly thinking about it, the two men agreed to follow him.

**3**

“Well, that certainly explains things.”

Expecting a reply, Erik looked over to find Garrett staring in the apartment window with an expression he immediately recognized. He had his own obsession hidden away in the little shack in the hills. “Should we change our plans?” While following Adrian, the two men had decided it was time for him to die in battle.

“I have a better idea now.” Garrett hadn’t looked away from the bed where Adrian and a stunning blonde woman were entwined, moaning and groaning. “You go on. I’ll catch up with you.”

Erik assumed Garrett would be the team leader again after they got rid of Adrian. He left without argument, thinking of the dusky woman who was on missing posters in several states. He had loved Michelle since he’d first met her and even though she had refused his advances, they were together and would be forever. He wished the same happiness on Garrett.

Behind him, Garrett continued to study the woman. Adrian’s death was a certainty in his mind now. After seeing the female Adrian was spending time with, Garrett understood that man would have to die to avoid payback. Garrett wasn’t sure how it would happen yet, but he was certain it would be by his hand.

Mentally complaining about how long that could take, Garrett overlooked the obvious until he noticed the security guard standing in front of the building where Adrian and the woman were. She was a witness under protection. Adrian was an agent assigned to guarding her. The relationship was forbidden.

Garrett smiled.

**4**

“You realize the outcome of this trial will determine your future in the service?”

Adrian nodded stiffly, horrified that Shannon had been dragged into the military trial that was going on around him. He also felt bad for the embarrassed team huddling in the corner, trying not to draw attention.

“Before we hear from you, we’ll talk to your team. We’ll start with the XO and work our way down.”

“Sir, the witness needs to be back under protection as soon as possible. Can we switch the order of testimony?”

“Defense?”

“Defense has no objection.”

“Very well. Miss Meeks, this is an informal hearing. You are not required to take the stand. However, you are required to swear an oath.”

Adrian watched Shannon flush and twitch. As she recited the oath, her eyes landed anywhere except his.

Adrian’s stomach churned as he caught her thoughts. He didn’t know what had happened, but Shannon had turned on him.

“Miss Meeks, we only have a few questions for you. Is there anything you would like to say before we begin?”

Shannon clenched her fists together, casting a quick, scared glance toward the team of men in the corner waiting for her response.

“Miss Meeks?”

Shannon finally looked at Adrian, stunning him with the hatred there. “I was scared of him. He didn’t rape me, but he did take advantage of me. I have a drinking problem.”

The room rang with protests and shouts, but Adrian didn’t hear any of them. All he could hear was Shannon’s betrayal. It was a loud, cracking sound that broke his heart and then set it on fire.

Shannon refused to look at him as she continued her testimony.

In the corner, Garrett and Erik exchanged a satisfied glance. After the team added their testimony, Adrian would be found guilty. He wouldn’t be dead, but his punishment would include a transfer and that was good enough.

Realizing he had been betrayed, Adrian felt hatred enter his heart and take up a permanent residence. *There will be payback for this.*

**5**

“It took me three years to get to a place where I was ready to have that moment.” Adrian looked around the RV, where he had full attention from everyone except the driver. “I’m sure you can imagine how I felt. I’d been set up and betrayed by all of them. If not for my connections, they would have gotten away with it.”

“Let me guess.” Marc sneered. “Daddy stepped in.”

Adrian nodded. “I was transferred to a Marine base. I had a great team there. We did some amazing things and not all of them were bad. However, my anger made me reckless. Since I didn’t care if I died, they were quick to send me into the most dangerous places that needed to be cleared. I always survived.”

*My nightmare*. Marc gestured Adrian to go on. He was enjoying the story.

“Do I have to do this?” Adrian turned to Angela suddenly, angry. “Haven’t you paid me back enough yet?”

Angela didn’t respond.

Sighing in resentment, Adrian threw himself backward into the seat and finished his story. “I watched *them* through the window this time, picking the perfect moment to make my entrance.”

**6**

“Congratulations!” Garrett slapped Erik on the back.

“Same to you!”

Both men now had a baby on the way, joining four other members of their team who were also about to be fathers. It had turned their weekly celebration into complaints about being tied down that masked their pride.

“When is our new team leader supposed to get here?”

Close to drunk, Garrett shrugged at Jack’s question. They’d been informed that Erik was being replaced, but they hadn’t been told who it was.

Erik was taking it well. He hadn’t liked being team leader. There was too much paperwork and not enough blood.

“There are only half a dozen candidates. I hope we get Shelby.”

“We had the best team in the field last year.” Erik sneered. “Shelby can’t keep up with that.” While he didn’t want the job anymore, he wasn’t about to serve under someone who couldn’t live up to what they’d built.

“As long as it’s not Mitchel.”

The table of four agreed, tossing nasty remarks and complaints.

“I was in Venice eighteen months ago when he took out that terrorist cell. I got tired of hearing his name.”

“Same here. I went to South America last year and that was all I heard. He’s been busy making a name for himself since we ran him out.”

“Yeah. He was in New York two months ago while Shannon and I were on our honeymoon.” Garrett’s scowl took up his entire face. “With his name all over the news like that, it ruined the mood. I had to demand my husbandly rights.”

The men fell back into complaints about the women in their lives and the restrictions of fatherhood.

In the corner, Bryson watched the table in resentment. It had been three years since they’d betrayed a great team leader, but Bryson hadn’t left. He wanted to, but he didn’t have the courage. Instead, he’d stayed in the outcast position so he could say he was a member of the team. It was a lonely life, but Vlad’s sister, Sonya, was here. Bryson wasn’t leaving even if she did marry Isaac.

The door to the pub opened, ringing the chime as their base CO entered.

“Gentlemen, your new team leader.”

The dead silence in the room alerted the men at the table to the problem. All of them turned toward the doorway, where their nightmare stood, grin encompassing his face.

The commander slipped out, not wanting to be here for the fight in case the civilian police were called or the press found out.

The team waited, wondering if Adrian had figured out what they’d done to him.

Adrian was enjoying the moment. He’d been fantasizing about this for years, especially while making their wives scream in pleasure. “None of the babies are yours.”

**7**

Everyone in the RV was laughing or grinning, almost unable to believe it was a true story even though they knew it had to be. Adrian’s reputation with the ladies since they had known him was legendary. It had just become infamous.

The only person in the RV not laughing was Angela. For Adrian to do something like that, he’d been bitterly hurt by Shannon’s betrayal. That only happened when you loved someone.

“What did you do to the woman?” Morgan had to ask.

“I loved her.” Adrian didn’t tell them he still believed Shannon had been under Garret’s control. Adrian had been the stronger alpha on the team, but Garrett had been right behind him and he hadn’t been above using his gifts on non-descendants. None of them were allowed to do that except on runs.

“I almost feel bad for her.” Samantha was peering down the hallway, now lying in the bunk. “It sounds like she got screwed.”

“It sounds like she was a skank.”

Angela flushed as people laughed and stared at her.

“Jealous much?” Kenn wasn’t worried about her reaction. It was clear that she was.

Angela shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest. “Whatever.”

The cabin filled with loud laughter.

“What happened next?” Kendle was wide awake. “Don’t leave us hanging like that.”

“Yeah, did you ever see the woman again?” Samantha hadn’t heard all of the stories from Little Rock.

“Why didn’t you just kill them?” Morgan didn’t understand.

Marc did. “He let them live so he could keep paying them back.”

Adrian nodded at Marc’s observation. “I was in their faces for the next ten years. I was there for every run, every drill, and of course, every company family reunion, where I rubbed it in as deep as I could get it. By the time the war came, they hated me more than anyone else on the planet.”

Marc sympathized with the men. Adrian was an unshakable virus that continued to wear down the immune system until the host simply gave up.

“My team felt the same way long before then.”

“What about the babies?”

Everyone was surprised that the question had come from Kenn, who was glaring at Adrian.

“A few of them lived happy, healthy lives, never knowing who their real father was.” Adrian had the grace to flush. “I didn’t think about the kids when I planned things.”

“You never do.” Marc was angry. “Conner’s problems are your fault.”

Adrian nodded. “I wish I had thought it through. At the time, I believed he would be taken care of and that Shannon would be happy to have our baby. She was, by the way. She loved me without reservation. She accepted me for who I am–a killer. *No* one else ever has.”

Angela winced.

No one spoke for a moment, feeling the sadness Adrian had obviously gone through for a long time.

“That was one hell of a bedtime story.”

Adrian shrugged. “You asked for it.” He frowned at her. “I’m just not sure why.”

Angela gestured at the other members of the team. “They need to know what kind of person you really are. They thought they knew how harsh you can be, but I wanted them to understand it goes way beyond that with you.”

Adrian frowned. “Why? I’m not a threat to anyone here anymore.”

“We both know that’s not true. You’re just as coldhearted now as you were back then.”

The other occupants of the RV didn’t necessarily agree that Adrian’s actions had been coldhearted. Kenn did, and Marc believed that it was proof of every suspicion he’d ever had about Adrian lingering until he wore Angela down, but everyone else almost understood the men had deserved it for their betrayal. The only hang-up was that the women and children had suffered.

Not wanting to, but without a choice, Adrian gave Angela what she wanted. “At the time, it seemed like the perfect revenge. I’m older now. I doubt I would make the same choices.” Adrian refused to look at anyone as he finished. “I’m sorry for all the things I’ve done, all the trouble I’ve caused. I’ll work as hard as I can to earn your forgiveness. I’ll understand if I never get it. If any of my team had apologized to me afterwards, I don’t think it would have mattered, but it still would have been the right thing to do. I should have already apologized to all of you personally. I’m sorry that I didn’t.”

Satisfied for the moment, Angela gestured toward the clock on the dashboard that was no longer working. “Enough drama. How long until the camp stops?”

Morgan frowned. “Less than two hours.” Angela’s stare caused Morgan to pull the RV over. “She wants a hell hound behind the wheel.”

Marc took the seat.

# Chapter Forty-One

**I Dare You**

A close up of a sign

Description automatically generated

**1**

**“T**hey aren’t here! What should we do?”

Charlie wasn’t sure. He and Conner had decided to slow the convoy to thirty miles an hour as soon as it got dark, hoping to buy more time, but the Eagles had just called in a cleared campsite and everyone in the line of cars and trucks behind them was ready to stop for the night. As soon as people began to get out of the vehicles and Angela didn’t take charge of setting up camp, they would know something was going on.

“We’ll tell everyone we still have point. The Eagles will help. It might stall them for a little while.”

Conner approved of Charlie’s choice. He couldn’t think of a better way that didn’t involve magic. “If they ask where she is, maybe we should just admit it. She wouldn’t want us to lie.”

“I agree.” Charlie pulled his kit onto his lap as the truck came to a stop. “Ready?”

Conner pulled the rig into place and put it in park. “No, but I’ll follow your lead.”

Both proud and scared, Charlie opened the door to find two people standing there.

“Oh, my God!” Charlie jumped so bad he almost fell out of the truck. His kit did fall, sliding to the ground at Angela’s boots.

Marc picked up the bag and held it out, grinning. “Miss us?”

Conner and Charlie had to laugh. They hadn’t considered that Angela would beat them to the campsite. They’d been waiting for the RV to fall in with the convoy.

Marc didn’t tell them that the RVs engine was still warm and they’d only been in place for minutes before the lights of the lead rig had lit up the dark park where they were camping.

“You did well.” Radio on the correct channel, Angela keyed the mike on her belt while Marc praised the boys. “Charlie and Conner have point for set up.”

Charlie and Conner slapped hands.

“All right!”

They marched off to get started, proud to have been given the job. It had been a long day, but it was an honor to have point at their age and both of them wanted to enjoy the moment.

“Ah, to be a rookie again.” Morgan stayed with Angela and Marc. He was practicing his skills now that they were back out in the wastelands and he’d done well enough that the teenage descendants hadn’t spotted him as a guard on the boss.

Around the convoy that was stopping, people from the RV stepped into sight as the vehicle they had been assigned to parked and opened doors, including Samantha, who leaned against the truck for support. Exhausted, she didn’t protest when Neil came around to pick her up.

“Are you hurt?”

Samantha shook her head at Neil’s whisper. “Just very tired. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

Relieved that she was uninjured, Neil carried her and his kit toward the area that had been staked out for the community tents. As soon as the first one went up, he would get her settled so she could sleep.

“I did it.”

Neil heard the self-loathing, but he also caught the eagerness to be praised. “I’m proud of you for being able to.”

Jeremy had come to him with the awful idea right before the quake, pointing out that none of Angela’s top people were able to get close to the vet because they were known killers. Then he’d suggested Samantha because she wasn’t. Neil had almost punched him, but after the quake, when he’d been forced to tolerate the vet, Neil had realized Jeremy was right. The vet would sense it coming and monitor everyone who had killed for Angela. The list was so long that it had been clear he wouldn’t bother with people who hadn’t done that yet. The problem had been telling Sam. Apparently, she’d come through perfectly.

“Does it change anything between us?”

Neil paused, considering her muttered query. When he formed an answer, he set her on her feet so he could look her in the eye. “Yes, it does.” He reached out to tug her hood up against the stiff wind. “It means you need the next level of kai training and I can do that now.”

Neil kissed her cheek and found hungry lips under his. After holding himself in check for so long, Neil swept her up against his chest and kissed her like he meant it.

**2**

Conner and Charlie made sure everyone was escorted out of the vehicles and into the perimeter, flashlights bobbing and weaving in an entertaining path that would get the attention of anyone in the area. That was unavoidable.

The familiar yellow caution tape around the camp was a welcome sight to everyone. It flashed them back to the days in Safe Haven when the fate of the world hadn’t rested on everyone’s shoulders, but only on Adrian’s.

Kyle wanted to get Jennifer settled down to rest, but the teenager refused. “I’m with Angela until she says otherwise.”

He recognized the satisfied tone that came from a large battle that had both risked and cost lives. He swept the people emerging from the shadows as if they had been in the convoy and noted the one absence.

“Samantha did that.”

Kyle was surprised. “You’re kidding.”

Jennifer shook her head. “We were pretty surprised too, but I think Marc and Adrian were about to handle it anyway. The vet was dead before he woke up this morning.”

Kyle felt Jennifer’s slender body shaking against him as she fought to do her duty. After a long car ride, she couldn’t be seen weak or it might give them away. “Take what you need.”

Jennifer surprised him by stopping and putting her arms around his neck. She pulled his head down to hers, sealing their lips as she drew. *Thank you!*

Kyle was helpless against the onslaught. He wrapped his arms around her, returning the kiss with all the love he usually kept hidden.

Around them, people smiled or detoured to give them privacy.

Nearby, Angela motioned at the woman stomping toward Kenn. “Just tell her to stop.”

“Yeah, like that’s gonna work.”

“You might be surprised.”

“What the hell.” Kenn turned around and held up a hand. “Talk to this.”

Laughter rolled through the darkness, lighting up shadows and bringing a reluctant grin to Tonya’s face. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Kenn leaned down to kiss her cheek and then led her toward the camp. “Come on. I know what you need.”

Tonya chuckled, anger forgotten with the reminder that she needed the bathroom. She’d been crossing her legs for the last hour.

Angela gestured at Morgan. “Start spreading rumors. I want to be able to call a vote during the meal.”

Frowning, Morgan left Angela and Marc alone.

“You don’t have to do this now. I’m not going to demand anything tonight.”

Angela shrugged. “At some point, someone in the camp will demand it. You won’t have to. I’m just staying ahead of problems.”

Marc didn’t say anything else. He knew how hard the next few hours would be for her and he didn’t want to make it worse. He was also surprised that he wasn’t looking forward to Adrian’s pain. He still hated the man, but Adrian had been a lot of help after the earthquake and it was fair to recognize it.

He had also helped Angela before that, something Marc had been jealous about before, but wasn’t now. Adrian had brought her back. She wasn’t the same girl Marc had loved, and she wasn’t the same woman he’d brought to Safe Haven, but this new person was strong enough that he could count on her in every way and that almost made up for the misery he’d suffered. The baby was a different type of pain, one that Marc assumed they would deal with together as the future came. Marc kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll be around.”

Angela stayed in the darkness for a few more minutes, running through her options again. Despite it being what she had to do, she didn’t want to. She wanted to clear Adrian, but the vote wasn’t going to go that way. He hadn’t done enough yet to earn the camp’s forgiveness. Marc was still the only one who could really give that and their bond wasn’t strong enough. Angela hadn’t expected it to happen this fast, which is why she had based the next action so soon after their escape from the mountain. In the end, it wouldn’t be as bad as everyone believed. She and Adrian were the only ones who would be crushed. *And it’s not like we don’t know how to survive that way. We’ve been doing it in every lifetime.*

**3**

Brittani, with help from a dozen people, prepared her first full meal for the camp in the traditional Safe Haven style. It took an extra hour and items were burnt, but no one minded when she produced two large pots of chicken and dumplings to ward against the cold. Even the children were thrilled, coming back for seconds.

The meal had been taken a lot from the stash. Angela wouldn’t be able to let them use so many supplies at once again until they built their reserves up, but tonight was a celebration of life that delivered the smells of a home cooked meal and thoughts of happy times through the crowd. It was sad too, but that was also needed. They’d lost so many people that it was hard to know when they’d mourned enough. Angela planned to limit these moments, even though she too felt like their dead deserved more. They just didn’t have time for grief. The boat wasn’t going to stock itself.

“These are the nightly updates.” Angela let the mess quiet as they realized she was holding a meeting now.

At the table in the corner, Conner got up and left.

Angela moved to the center of the crowd to keep their attention. “I need volunteers for tomorrow. I’d like to send out two scavenging teams and two hunting teams.” She motioned toward the clipboard lying at the end of her table. “All of this is volunteer basis. If you sign up, all I can promise is the shifts will not be longer than five hours. Later this week, I’ll try to get us back into the routines that worked so well for us before. Such as, the rules required each Eagle to do a certain number of shifts each month. It would be better if camp members volunteered for that too, but I’m not going to worry about it right now.”

The camp muttered and chatted, sipping their drinks and eating on their food while enjoying the cold weather. It was very different from the camp she had led over the last two months. Many of the members were ignoring what she was saying, staring at the sky, the trees, and everything else that reminded them they were no longer trapped.

“All the food and water is being rationed. I expect that to last about ten days. During that time, we will have a mandatory camp meeting where we will discuss what’s going to happen over the next six weeks, but Safe Haven will no longer vote on destinations. Most of you understand that I’ve made the choice to take us to the island. However, I’m always willing to consider new information, so every mandatory camp meeting will have a reminder of where we’re going and why. For this next meeting, I don’t need to remind you why. We just left that.”

Nods of agreement caused movement in every corner of the mess. Even those who were twitching from the night noises or the weather were glad to be out of that rocky tomb.

“As of this moment, all of Safe Haven’s rules are in full effect. We followed them before we went into the mountain. You lived by them while you were there. It won’t be hard for you to do the same now. Please don’t let the freedom go to your head. I will make you dig toilet holes or bust you down to rookie level.” She grinned. “And that reminds me, we’ll be restarting the Eagles next week.”

A huge cheer filled the air.

“We’re also going to be restarting the garden as soon as possible. Samantha did an excellent job the first time around and she’s agreed to do it again. She’ll need volunteers to help a couple times a week when the plants start growing. In the meantime, any seeds that you find, give them to her. Samantha will also be on the hunting team as soon as her leg is healed.” Angela gestured toward Neil, who had brought Samantha here at her request. It was important that everyone saw all of the team leaders and council members functioning like they were supposed to. “Neil is in charge of security and leader of Special Forces team B. Kyle is the leader of Special Forces team A, which provides security for the council. Kenn, with help, will be taking over Eagle training. Details about all of those positions will come out as soon as I get us sorted.”

Angela sipped her coffee before it got cold. “Now that we’re out in the open, scavengers of all types are a problem. As you can tell from all the cones around our campsite, the ants are also everywhere. I’m not using them for anything anymore. They need to be eliminated. From this moment on, Eagles may practice on all mutations–even during sleep hours, providing a quiet method is used.” Angela glanced at Kendle. “Over the next few days, you’ll hear a lot of stories from Kendle and her team. You’ve already caught some of them and I know they were hard to believe, but everything she’s telling you is true. However, we are not handling the Market Town problem. Safe Haven will roll out in the morning, going south to find a boat.”

The cheering quieted as Angela held up her hand. Made from tarps secured to trees, this was nothing like their old mess, but it was great for everyone to be able to gather. The sounds of the eating people echoed differently. Wind rustling debris outside the tent caught everyone’s attention for a minute.

Angela pulled it back. “Conner was placed on conditional banishment. I have lifted that, as many of you know. He still has restrictions, but I consider his punishment over.”

Many of the camp turned to Candy, judging her reaction. If she were upset, they would be too.

Candy blushed under all the stares. “I don’t have a problem with that. We all overreacted, blaming him because of his dad.”

Relieved, the camp looked to Angela. They now suspected who the vote was for. Word had spread fast.

“I’m calling a moral camp vote.”

Most citizens were thinking she didn’t need to do this now, but Angela knew she did. Even if she only waited one more day, people would he was getting preferential treatment because of her feelings, and that couldn’t be allowed. Adrian’s offense was serious. “I’m doing this while he’s out of camp so everyone can give an honest vote. I’m not going to do paper ballots or a lockbox because we don’t have them. It’s a simple yes or no. If you vote yes, raise your hand.”

Angela doomed the man. “This vote is to decide if Adrian’s full banishment will be rescinded and a conditional banishment will take its place. If you vote yes for Adrian to be placed on conditional banishment, raise your hand.”

Already knowing how the vote would go, Angela sighed as only a few hands rose. There was no need to count them. The number was small.

“The camp has spoken. His banishment will not be lifted. He’ll be arriving soon, but he won’t stay here tonight.” Angela sat down, indicating that it was over.

“We want to be trained by Adrian.”

Sitting at the next table over, Ivan’s comment drew attention.

“Will that get us in trouble?”

“No. The reason the camp didn’t choose death for Adrian is because he still has stuff to teach us. He will be a part of classes and training, but those moments will happen outside of camp. After tonight, he will not be allowed back inside our perimeter.”

Lights glinted off the vehicles around them, alerting everyone to the arriving truck.

The radio on Angela’s belt crackled. “He’s here.”

Angela strode to the parking area, aware of everyone observing and a few of them following.

Adrian pulled the flatbed truck as close to the mess as he could get it, not wanting Angela to be that far out of the protection of camp, even for a moment like this.

As he pulled the flatbed into place, it reminded the Eagles and many of the camp members of the old mess that Adrian, Kenn, and Doug had put together. Those people felt guilty for not voting to lift his banishment. If Angela had called for a recount right then, the tally would have been closer.

Angela didn’t. It would be taking advantage by playing on their emotions. She didn’t want other people to do that to them, and she wasn’t going to allow herself to do it to them anymore either.

Eagles faded into the shadows as Adrian stepped from the truck and walked toward Angela.

Angela tensed, butterflies filling her stomach. A thick, musky scent filled her nose as Adrian stopped in front of her. “We did it.”

“*You* did it.”

Angela smiled. “I had a great teacher.”

“You have amazing instincts for battle plans.” Adrian reached out and took her hand. “Thank you for being strong enough to do this.”

“It was my honor.” Angela choked back tears, rubbing his hand with her thumb. “You have one request.”

“I want your true feelings, for one minute.”

Expecting much worse, Angela braced for it and then dropped all of her defenses. “Granted.”

Adrian hugged her.

Angela was helpless against the emotions as he opened his heart. Lights and love swirled around them in blinding flashes that sent pulses of contentment across the camp and out into the night.

Adrian kept them that way for the full minute, connected to her in every way except for physical. He hadn’t considered asking for that, but as he held her, Adrian let her see those fantasies too. There was nothing between them at that moment.

Angela was aware of their audience. Marc, Kendle, and several camp women were watching the scene openly, with a dozen more who thought the shadows obscured them. Angela didn’t care. It wasn’t their heart ripping out. She didn’t want to love a bad man. She just did.

*That’s the first time I’ve heard you admit it! Say it again! Say it!*

Adrian’s pleas broke her. *I love you, all of you. From your evil plans to your ability to survive anything. Tell me the same, if you can.*

Adrian moaned at the feel of their glowing connection. *I adore you for everything they fear. I’d never change you from what you are at this exact moment–a leader who would kill her own mate to protect this camp.*

Angela trembled at the truth, at the guilt and the bond that was pounding through her mind. *Do it now if you’re going to and then don’t ever touch me again.*

Adrian kissed her, hands coming up to frame her face.

Kendle turned into the shadows, not wanting to be here when Marc exploded.

Marc forced himself to watch, to feel it. He and Adrian were still teamed.

Nothing else existed for Adrian at that moment. Angela was kissing him back, arms going around his neck, body leaning into his. He’d never felt her willing before. He would be hers forever now.

*I know.* Angela broke the kiss, stepping back. *But until I call for you, the rules apply.*

Adrian winced, but didn’t fight what was coming.

“Adrian Mitchel, your banishment stands until such time as the camp overturns it. Be out of our perimeter within the hour.” She motioned a guard to stay with him.

Shivering with need and misery, Angela put her back to Adrian and left him standing in the darkness.

Marc closed the door on his connection with Adrian and followed Angela.

**4**

Adrian dropped the keys for the mess truck into the guard’s hand and climbed into the RV that was too warm. He’d gotten lucky to find the flatbed nearby. The battery charger Angela had placed in his kit had been perfect for the job.

Adrian slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine, and switched the A/C on. He would run it long enough to bring down the temperature while he got settled for the night. After that, it would be cold and dark.

Adrian pulled the seat up as far as it would go to clear more space behind it. As the seat slid, a small pouch rolled out, catching his attention.

Adrian picked it up, recognizing the smell that came. He took out a small packet of food and then two bottles of water. Next, came two mags for his gun. Adrian took out the empty notebook and pen from the kit, and placed them on the small utility table that slid out of the dashboard. As he placed it on the dirty table, Adrian saw a title had been scribbled onto the front of the book. *Eagle training after the mountain.*

In the bottom of the pouch, pressed between the folds and a foil package, Adrian found his dog tags.

Smiling and crying, he slid them over his neck. *She really does love me.*

Adrian recovered quickly, sensing someone coming toward the RV. Not sure what to expect, he swiveled the seat around, hoping whoever it was didn’t linger. Dozens of new ideas had come to him during the last months. He was eager to put them on paper.

“Coming in.” Kevin hurried into the RV, hating the wind. He shut the door and dropped down into one of the rear seats. “Do you mind company tonight?”

Adrian assumed Kevin was thinking about Cynthia. He had expected to spend the evening the same way. If not for Angela’s gifts, he would have. “Not at all.” Adrian pointed toward the rear of the RV that was no longer jammed full of boxes and gear. “There are two bunks back there.”

Kevin tossed his kit in that direction, but didn’t follow it. “Feel like playing some cards or something?”

Adrian started to say no, that he would rather have quiet, but it occurred to him that his duty wasn’t done. It was very possible that Angela had sent Kevin to him. She would have known Adrian was happy with the work she’d given him, so that meant it was for Kevin’s benefit. Assuming Angela wanted Kevin back in the fold, Adrian shrugged. “I got the time if you do.”

Kevin pulled out the rear utility table and began to root around in his pocket. He didn’t want to play, but he didn’t think he could sleep. Cynthia’s death was haunting him.

“Incoming.”

Adrian and Kevin were both surprised at the three men who came into the RV. They would have thought that Neil, Kyle, and Tommy would be asleep.

Morgan came in behind the trio and dropped down into one of the remaining seats. “Who brought a bottle?”

Adrian realized this was the Eagle way of showing support even though the camp had upheld his banishment. Adrian wondered if Neil and Kyle had voted yes on it, but he wasn’t dumb enough to ask. Them being here at all was a huge concession.

Kevin motioned toward an empty box in the rear. “Pull that over and we’ll have a better table.”

The team leaders assembled a playing area while Adrian opened his last gift from Angela–a baggie wrapped in foil. “It’s stale cookies, with a lot of burnt ends!”

Cheers filled the RV.

Kevin began to deal the cards.

“Incoming.”

Adrian was floored as Marc stepped in the RV and closed the door.

The other Eagles were also surprised, but hid it better.

“You want me to deal you in?” Kevin looked at Marc.

“Not yet.” Marc took the passenger seat next to Adrian. He swiveled it around so he could watch the game, then leaned back and crossed his ankles. “I didn’t come to lose my pants. I came for the good vibes.”

It was Marc’s way of adding his support. Adrian didn’t know what to say.

“There’s that speechless thing again.” Marc snickered. “I can get used to it.”

Everyone laughed, including Adrian.

Kevin finished dealing the cards as Tommy opened his bag. “It’s cheap hooch, but it’ll do.”

As the bottle began to make a circle, Adrian studied Marc. He still didn’t know what to say.

Marc crossed his arms over his chest. *I dare you to find a gesture that will match this one in her eyes.*

Adrian laughed, unable to be mad. “You are one sneaky son of a bitch.”

“I’ve also had a good teacher–you.”

Three hours later, men were beginning to yawn; Adrian ended the game. He pointed toward the camp. “You all have duty. Don’t use me as your excuse.”

Chuckling, the tired men left. No words were said about Adrian having their support now, but he knew that he did.

Adrian started to latch the door and then realized Marc hadn’t left. Adrian lifted a brow. “You sleeping here?”

Marc snorted. “And miss Angie’s arms for this uncomfortable chair? Not a chance.”

Adrian settled into a rear seat, curious about what Marc wanted. He wasn’t expecting ugliness so he didn’t brace for it.

“This is our evening meeting.”

Adrian frowned. “I had assumed we would do it another time. We’ve all had a very long day.”

“I was going to skip it, but something’s bothering me. I’ll sleep better if I have an answer.”

Adrian pushed off his boots, going ahead with his bedtime routine. “I’m all yours.”

“You mentioned that I’ll have to keep her busy on the boat with lessons, but I can’t figure out what kind. Everything that I can teach her, she already knows.”

“That’s not true. She really hasn’t gotten into the complicated plans yet.”

“But that’s not what you mean by lessons, right?”

Adrian stripped his weapons and sat them on the utility table that was covered in ashes, cards, and tiny rocks that they’d used for betting. “No. She’s fighting the evil inside. The lessons she needs have to center on that. Angela has broken every rule for our kind and then a few that we didn’t even know existed. She needs you to be her conscience.”

“She has a conscience, otherwise she wouldn’t feel bad.”

“She no longer listens to *her* conscience.” Adrian decided to share his observations with Marc. “Why do you think she ordered the vet to kill so many people?”

Marc considered it. “Most of them were assassins in disguise.”

“What about Michelle?”

Marc scowled. “There was no reason for that.”

“To her, there was.” Adrian handed Marc the almost empty bottle. “It was payback. One baby for another.”

Marc was revolted, disgusted, and completely understood at the same time.

“She’s still as hurt and furious as she was when it first happened. If you don’t help her get back on the right path, she’ll do all of this again and maybe worse, but we’ll be on a boat then, where a bugout won’t be possible.”

“Angela would never hurt the camp.”

Adrian didn’t answer.

Understanding the former leader was worried about that, Marc took a small swig off the almost empty bottle. “This is why I’m still here. Tell me how.”

Notebook forgotten, Adrian gave Marc as much information as he could, hoping it would be enough. The darkness in Angela’s heart was growing. If it didn’t stop soon, she would be consumed.

In the tent not far away, Angela laid next to the sleeping twins, but she wasn’t at peace. Her mind raced over the things she’d done and was willing to do to save the lives around her. *There isn’t anyone I won’t kill now*.

The kids around Angela felt the evil in her, but they were comforted by it. As long as Angela was the alpha, kids would never be hurt. Females would never be slaves. Men would never be forced to choose between doing what was right and survival. Angela was going to save the world and the kids were going to help. They didn’t care if she was a killer, because she was theirs.

**5**

As dawn approached, Marc held up a hand. “I have to ask something personal.”

Close to drunk now, Adrian gestured for him to go ahead.

Marc gave him a sheepish look. “How many kids do you have?”

Instead of laughing, Adrian’s expression filled with pain. “I have one daughter.”

Marc sensed he had hit an important topic and kept going. “How many sons?”

Adrian sighed, letting out a belch at the same time. “At last count, I have fathered eighteen sons.”

“Holy shit.”

Before Marc could ask, Adrian gave him the next answer. “Four are still alive, that I know of.”

“Why are you in Safe Haven instead of searching for your kids?” Marc couldn’t have hidden the contempt in his voice even if he’d wanted to.

Adrian’s responding tone was just as incredulous. “Why would I need to search for them?”

Marc had assumed Adrian’s children were missing. He hadn’t considered that the man had stashed them somewhere. “You know where they are and you didn’t go to them instead of doing your job for the government that caused all this?”

“All I would have been doing was leading my enemies straight to them.”

“Don’t they need you?”

Adrian shook his head. “The only thing they need is for me to stay away.”

Marc wanted to let it go, but an unfinished story really would bother him. “What happened to your other kids?”

Adrian gave a scornful look. “You know what happened.”

“When you went rogue, they were rounded up.”

“Of course. I was too young and stupid to realize that would happen. I thought the government would only come after me. When I realized what was going on, I rescued the ones I could and hid them.” Adrian stopped, hating Marc even more for bringing up the nightmares from his private crypt.

Marc didn’t like Adrian’s pain. He also didn’t like Adrian’s choices, so it was hard for him to offer sympathy. Instead, he chose to ask the next logical question. “How many of your kids were like Cynthia’s would have been?”

Adrian winced. “Over half. That’s why they had to be rounded up. They took after their father too much.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Marc, implying that the kids didn’t deserve to live just because they were his, enraged Adrian. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. Kids are not born evil. They’re made that way!”

In that instant, Marc understood the bond that Adrian and Angela shared. They were both parents who were missing their dead children. In Adrian’s case, he was using the camp kids to cover his pain at not being able to be with any of his own.

“She’ll do the same thing.” Adrian finished the bottle and let it fall to the carpet.

“Why? Because you have?”

Adrian shook his head, closing his eyes at the buzz. “Because it works where nothing else does.”

Marc waited for a minute and then asked his last question. “Ten of the kids were payback for your team. What about the rest of them?”

Adrian made a gagging noise. “Only seven came from my team. Three of those guys had wives that even I wouldn’t touch.”

Marc almost fell out of the chair.

As the laughter faded, Adrian grew pensive. “The others were gifts.”

Marc frowned. “Gifts?”

Adrian reclined his chair, trying to get comfortable. “I’m virile and some people are not. When I felt like I should, I helped couples conceive.”

Marc immediately thought of dirty movies.

Adrian denied the images. “This was for longtime friends that wished for a child in their lives. They were able to care for them, they just couldn’t conceive. I considered it a part of our friendship to help.”

Marc snorted, tone laced in scorn again. “And you got to enjoy their wives.”

Adrian thought back to some of the moments and grimaced. “Actually, if not for Viagra, some of them wouldn’t have happened.”

Marc chuckled, not believing him. Adrian’s reputation with women had grown since the war, but it was clear from his story that it was well earned. He had seduced seven women in three years, and gotten all of them pregnant. Marc wasn’t sure about the rest, but for thirty-six months at least, Adrian had been a very busy man. The only way he could have succeeded was by lying or using his gifts.

Adrian didn’t tell Marc the women had been unhappy in their relationships, making it easier. If Marc thought about it all, he would know. It was hard to take a loyal woman away from a man she loved, as evidenced with Angela. Adrian had been trying for a long time now, with very little success.

Marc sensed the direction Adrian’s thoughts had taken and pushed into the man’s mind.

Adrian refused to hide anything anymore, even from Marc. The only punishment they could give him now was to banish Conner and he knew Angela wouldn’t do that unless Conner deserved it. That meant he didn’t have to hide his true nature.

Marc watched the replays of Adrian’s leadership lessons with Angela, seeing how the man had pushed his alpha waves at every opportunity. He had indeed tried to seduce Angela, almost since her first month in camp. Instead of the rage that Marc had expected to feel upon having that suspicion verified, all he could do was laugh.

Offended and not sure why, Adrian waited for Marc to recover for the explanation.

Marc wanted to leave the man hanging, but he knew Adrian was smart enough to figure it out on his own and Marc wanted this moment of seeing Adrian’s expression when he realized he wasn’t as smart as he thought he was.

Adrian felt something awful coming and tried to brace for it. “What? What did I miss?”

“I just figured out why she made you tell us that story.”

Adrian was confused on the quick topic switch. He didn’t see how the two were related. “Why?”

“It was a message to you in front of witnesses. They’ll figure it out once they spend a little time on it. You would have too, but I didn’t want to miss this.”

Adrian was suddenly sure he didn’t want to know, but the challenge in Marc’s expression wouldn’t let him ignore it. Adrian began adding up the clues Marc had just given him.

Marc observed eagerly as Adrian finally put it all together.

“She knows.”

Marc laughed at Adrian’s stricken expression. “Yeah, even while she let you dig a hole by acting like the victim.” Marc mimicked him. “*Haven’t I been paid back enough yet?* You pissed her off there.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah, she’s figured out that if you hadn’t been using your gifts on her, your bond wouldn’t exist in this life. She knows you betrayed her.”

“I didn’t betray her.”

Marc shrugged. “I doubt she’ll agree, but you can always try that.”

“She can’t know or I’d be dead.”

“It took me twelve hours to figure it out. How long do you think it took her?”

Adrian paled as the obvious answer came. Angela had known all along that he was using his gift to seduce her.

“Oh, man, are you in trouble.” Marc stretched, feeling better than he had in a long time. “I sure wouldn’t want to be you.” He stood up, once again enjoying Adrian’s speechlessness.

Adrian couldn’t form a response. He was thinking about the kiss and her declaration. How could she love him if she knew he’d used his gifts to soften her heart and lure her in?

Marc spun around and punched Adrian in his mouth, sending the man to the floor. “Because it worked, you piece of shit! The spell worked!” He followed Adrian, grabbing him by the dog tags he’d spotted upon entering. “You lied to all of us! You said you wouldn’t go after her! I didn’t deserve a payback!” Marc shook Adrian with brutal anger. “Why did you do this to us?!”

Adrian shoved Marc backwards, sending him over the other chair, but he didn’t get up. “Because I couldn’t stand to see another woman ruined the way my mother was!” Adrian spat out blood again, knowing this split lip would stay. Marc wasn’t going to heal him again. “I set her free. I set them all free!”

Marc had leapt up, but he stopped at the accusation. “Kenn was the one keeping her prisoner, not me! Why not destroy his relationship?!”

“I did! I got both of you at the same time!”

Marc wanted to keep beating on Adrian, but he already knew that didn’t work. Desperate, he sent the strongest alpha wave he could muster. “Tell me how to break your hold over her!”

Adrian didn’t need to fight it. “You already know how.”

Marc lunged forward as he drew his gun, putting the warm Colt against Adrian’s forehead. Even Angela wouldn’t be able to bring him back from a bullet to the brain.

Adrian might have accepted that fate if Angela hadn’t let him in tonight. “My life doesn’t belong to you!”

“Let go of her!”

Adrian shook his head even though he could see Marc’s finger tightening on the trigger. “Never.”

“You said she’s free, but not from you. Let her go!”

“I can’t!” Adrian shoved the gun away and leaned against the seat. “I can’t. Even if I wanted to, I can’t.”

“Why not?!”

“Because it backfired.”

Marc dropped into the seat as he understood. “You can’t break the charm because you’re under it too.”

Adrian sighed in defeat. “I could have been free of it if she’d died in that rest stop.”

Marc shared Adrian’s memory, his fear of not being able to save her. The emotions were no longer hidden behind a bond of leadership. Love and terror swirled through the memory, marking it genuine.

“If she knows…” Adrian’s dog tags clinked as he forced his bruised, battered body back into the chair. “then she’s giving you the choice by making sure that you know the truth too.”

“We don’t need you anymore.” Marc’s heart thumped. “That’s the only way she would let me know this.”

Adrian shook his head, confirming what Marc had suspected when Angela had only made Adrian the spotter and shield magnifier over the last few days. “No.”

Marc didn’t want the choice now. Either one he made would destroy his relationship.

“Only because you can’t share!” Adrian spat at Marc. “Greedy bastard!”

Marc used a fast movement to slam his gun into Adrian’s face. “Fucking Jody!”

Guards outside the RV exchanged concerned glances. They didn’t know what to do. The fragile peace had obviously been broken.

“Leave them alone. They’ll work it out.” Kendle was also observing from the shadows.

“How do you know?” Conner was worried. “It sounds like they’re tearing each other apart.”

“I know because there hasn’t been a gunshot yet. Marc will beat on your dad and then they’ll talk.” Kendle motioned the boy toward the tents. “You could use some sleep.”

Conner refused. “I’ll be right here until this is done.”

Kendle shrugged. “Suit yourself. There are two hours until dawn. I’ll be snoring.”

As Kendle left, Conner edged closer to the RV, trying to listen. A sudden silence had fallen in place of the shouts and crashes, scaring the boy.

“When did you decide to do it?” Marc had sat down, too tired to waste his remaining energy on drawing blood when he still needed information. “What happened? What did I do?”

“It wasn’t you. It was her.” Adrian sucked in air now that Marc wasn’t hitting him in the face or choking him. His skin slowly returned to black and blue instead of purple. “She would have wasted away as your mate. You wanted her to be a member of the herd. She wanted to be a shepherd. She allows me to live because of that. She knows that if I hadn’t done this to all of us, she would be one of the sheep and she can’t stand that idea because she would have hated you for it by now.”

Marc gestured for him to keep going. “There’s always more with you. Don’t stop now.”

Adrian didn’t get up off the floor this time. “What do you want to know, Boss?”

“I want to know what flipped you into destroying our lives.”

“She doesn’t see it that way.” Adrian rested his head against the floor and let Marc into his memory so the man could understand how powerful the moment had been for him.

*“Jeremy found everything on his list and says he has pictures of an entire town that’s undamaged. Cherry Creek. Says it’s completely deserted, but the stores and malls are still intact. Figures the whole town just evacuated in a neat, orderly fashion.”*

*Adrian grinned ruefully. “Be the first one of those we’ve run across. Okay, that’s it.” He closed his notebook. “You’ll put the dogs out?”*

*“Yeah. Chris says Star’s gonna have a litter come May.”*

*“That’s great. We need all the babies we can get,” Kyle glanced at Kenn, speaking before he thought about it. “Didn’t you tell us you had one on the way?”*

*Angela froze, heart ripping open.*

*Every man at the table scowled when Kenn flushed and turned questioning, embarrassed eyes her way. He hadn’t asked that yet? They’d been alone in his truck for hours!*

*Angela couldn’t hide the hate as the awful pain dug into her chest. My baby! “I lost my other son.”*

*Her voice was like broken glass; no one was surprised when she stood up. “Excuse me.”*

“I watched her walk away with her head up and guts spilling out. I had to have her.”

Marc felt like he was going to be sick. Adrian and Angela were bonded through their horrible grief over dead children. He couldn’t compete with that. Only a crazy man would keep trying.

“But that’s the problem, don’t you see? Neither of us get her if we remove the other. I have to protect you. We have the same catch-22.”

Marc considered that, remembering times when Adrian had saved his life. He’d always known it was for Angela, just not how deep that went. “What are your three strongest gifts?’

Adrian wasn’t expecting the question, but he wouldn’t have lied now anyway. “Charm, magnetism, and alpha control.”

“The charm is what you used?”

“I wish. Jennifer probably could have broken that.” Adrian felt shame as he admitted his weakness. “I knew I didn’t have a chance unless it was strong. I waited until I felt things for her and then I combined it into a three way hit of all my big gifts. I’d never done it before. I didn’t need to in the past.”

“You ruined my life with her.”

“I gave her a new life–one you were too scared and greedy to provide.” Adrian pointed at him. “You knew what she was capable of and you still tried to keep her from it because you wanted her all to yourself. You hated the idea of her being hurt, but it was always the jealousy that made you react the way you did.”

“You stirred me up at every turn, making me look bad to her, causing us to fight.”

“Only by telling her yes, whenever you said no.”

Marc hadn’t ever thought to feel this much helpless hatred toward any person. What’d he’d felt for Kenn was now dim in comparison.

Adrian knew. He would feel the same if he was Marc, but he wasn’t. He was a corrupt descendant who had fallen in love and was trying to go straight on the off chance that Angela might need him some day. “I’m pathetic.”

Marc nodded. “That, you are.” He stared at his enemy, mind flying over moments when he’d suspected Adrian was using magic on Angela. “Tell me why I won’t kill you before I leave this RV. Remind me or I’m going to start beating on you again.”

“How about I give you some advice that will calm you down after you think about it, but will also secure your relationship?”

Marc used his middle finger to gesture. “Sure, why not?”

“Act a little more like me.”

Marc was morally offended. “Never.”

Adrian shrugged. “She’s dark inside. Your constant halo makes her feel like shit and she comes to me for the break. Am I supposed to turn her away when I’d give anything to be with her?”

“Yes, you are!”

Adrian fingered his black eye. “Might as well kill me now because I can’t do it.”

“And I can’t do that or she’ll hate me!”

Adrian jerked his hand. “Then take my advice and stop being the perfect person all the time. She can’t handle it.”

Marc paused. “I did a bad thing on the trip.”

Adrian frowned. “That one bothered her.”

“I don’t understand the line.”

“It’ll take a few, but I’ve got the time to explain it if you want to listen.”

Marc propped his feet on an empty seat, anger fading in place of finding a solution to the mess. “I’m all yours. I will be from now on.”

Adrian grimaced at the warning. Marc would be in his head all the time now, watching for tricks. “You don’t need to do that. I meant it when I shook on our truce.”

“I didn’t.”

“That doesn’t matter to me. I gave my word on something.”

“You broke it when you promised you wouldn’t go after my woman!”

“I’d already done it.” Adrian shrugged. “The bunker wanted Safe Haven. I had to act fast.”

Marc’s anger simmered again, but he crossed his arms over his chest to keep from lunging. “I can sleep while we travel. Start explaining.”

“I’ve been with a lot of women.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“I mean I’ve *been* with them, as in we’ve bonded. Every time we had contact, I made sure we bonded in some form. You could do that without it being a betrayal. She’d not only approve, she’d love it that you care so much.”

Intrigued, Marc waved him on. Adrian had been the clever one until now, but Marc had learned a valuable lesson after the quake. He’d already begun to mimic some of Adrian’s actions and tactics. Now, he was doing recon for more and Adrian was helping without knowing. Plus, he’d gotten to hit the man a few times. It was the perfect close to the day.

# Chapter Forty-Two

**Be Good Now**

A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

**1**

***T****hat’s enough. Let that one go.*

Billy paused in the downward swing of his knife, staring at the terrified man whose life had just been saved by the voice. As if asleep, Billy stood up and stepped back. “Be good now.”

The man scrambled backward, not taking his eyes from Billy. He thumped over the curb, smacking his skull on the ground.

Billy turned away so the rapist would get up and run. He didn’t want to watch it, however. After the way he had spent the last-24 hours, someone running might trigger his instinct to draw and he still had half a magazine of bullets.

Billy scanned the town, not caring that he stank or that he was coated in drying layers of gore. When he’d come up from the sewer the night before, he had eliminated the refugees above him. He’d planned to leave the city at that point, but more conversations and thoughts had come, requiring him to take action. The woman in his brain had watched in tolerance while he handled the chore, but now, she was urging him west again.

Billy stepped over a small stack of bodies, noting the familiar bullet holes. Very few refugees had escaped the city once he’d come out of hiding. Slipping through the darkness like the Ghost he could remember now, but still couldn’t place with the man he’d pulled a gun on, Billy had slit throats, stabbed people in their sleep, smashed skulls with bricks, and smothered them with their own packs. All the while, his mind had been in the west.

Billy marched down the middle of the street, hands resting on his guns. Even though one of them was empty, he was comforted by the sensation under his calloused, bloodstained fingers. Behind him, large crows and other winged scavengers were circling the city. Billy was happy to have fed them.

As the sound of engines came to his sharp ears, Billy slid into an alley, once again having to step over remnants of his night. The girl the two men had been holding captive had fled east. Billy hadn’t spoken to her after snapping one man’s neck and slamming the other man’s face into the wall. She’d still been screaming when he walked away. When the screams had stopped, he’d heard her running.

Billy paused for the vehicle to reach him, noting the travelers were on a parallel road to the city. He wondered how they would cross the river.

Billy slid out of hiding long enough to get a view of the approaching people.

The bright yellow hummer glared in a disrespectful reminder of the old world.

Billy drew his gun.

*Leave them.*

Billy holstered, turning away. He stayed behind the wall, out of sight, and the engine soon faded. Almost disappointed that he hadn’t been allowed to kill again, Billy made his way across the bridge.

Deep down, he was certain he’d gone mad. He had many of his memories back now, but it was all distant to him, as if it had been a movie of someone else’s life. All he wanted from the future was to find the woman who kept calling to him. She was a demon in his mind. He had to reach her.

“Either to rescue or to kill. I don’t know which.”

*Neither do I. Hurry up and we’ll discover that together.*

Billy broke into a jog, and then a run.

**2**

“I felt someone over there.”

“Too late now.” Becky took the hummer down the muddy embankment, relieved that the water was only going to reach the tires. Neither of them wanted to waste time finding a safer place to cross.

In a farmhouse near where they’d left Kendle’s team, Becky and Seth had stumbled onto a UN man who had snuck off from his fellow invaders. Seth had forced the terrified Polish man to tell them about the UN’s dirty secrets in America. They’d discovered a child trafficking ring that had been based just fifty miles from Seth’s home town. They were on their way there now, in hopes that his daughter wasn’t lost after all. It was a tiny hope, but it wasn’t a pleasant one. If the little girl had survived the war, her captivity wouldn’t have been easy since then. Becky assumed it was right to hope the child had died in the war and been spared such a fate, but she couldn’t do that. She wanted Seth to have his daughter back.

Seth watched the water roll by them with ugly, fresh debris. He didn’t want to know where the feet and hands had come from. This new world was already ugly enough with blurry vision that came from staying up too late and sleeping too late. He didn’t want to see it any clearer than that.

“Help!”

Banging on the roof made Becky cringe.

Seth ignored it, taking another drink. He was going through half a bottle some days, but the guilt over his daughter was eating him alive. The alcohol was the only thing that shut it up for any length of time.

“Please! Let me in!”

Becky didn’t need any more guilt to carry. Abandoning Safe Haven had been a mistake, one she couldn’t change because the camp had been destroyed. They’d heard the celebration calls that the mountain was on fire, but they hadn’t heard any of their people responding, implying no survivors. Becky had taken them out of range after that to keep from going back to kill those who were happy about it. All she could think about was her mom dying in there. She’d dreamed about it. She didn’t know what had happened, but everything that had tied her to the old world was gone.

“I’m sorry! I won’t try anything! I’m frozen!”

“Should we bring him in?”

Seth belched, blowing scotch fumes through the cabin. “He has the strength to bang, so he’s still a threat to you.”

“It’s raining out here!”

“Can’t we at least give him clothes?” She could imagine how ugly the ride was for the man. Seth had used two full rolls of duct tape. He wasn’t getting off there unless someone cut him free.

“No. We found him naked with a goat. He can stay that way.”

**3**

“How far behind are we?”

Allan held up the map. “They were last seen here, going southwest. At twenty-five miles a day, they could be in Oklahoma by now.”

Doug fell silent, studying the landscape as Jeff drove without speaking. They would be lucky to find them at all. This was a suicide run, but Doug didn’t change his mind. He owed it to Peggy to make sure Becky was cared for. He would do his duty and hope for the best. In the end, that was all anyone could do.

Predawn wasn’t still or silent around them. Screams and gunshots echoed randomly, along with glares of fires and lights. Jeff avoided it all, going through yards and alleys when he needed to. He’d gotten good at discovering an alternate path where bandits weren’t lurking in search of weary travelers.

Jeff thought of the radio calls they’d listened to and forced himself to examine the implications later. Driving through the apocalypse was bad enough, but he was responsible for lives of two little boys and that was important to Jeff.

He wondered if Doug knew how useless this trip might be and decided the big man did. Doug and Allan had needed a break from all the light and safety, Jeff assumed. He understood that and didn’t resent them for getting him right back out here. In fact, they were a convenient way to avoid facing his issues. It might be months before he saw another eastern mountain range. Like everyone who’d been in that hellhole, he was grateful.

Allan had no idea why he was here. It could have been a side effect of almost dying in the tunnel shootout, or maybe he couldn’t take any more death, but whatever it was, he felt the weight of the world slip from his shoulders as they continued to roll away from Safe Haven. He’d been carrying it for so long that his shoulders were hunched and pain radiated through his spine. Free of the stress, his body didn’t know how to handle it. Allan settled for stretching and a nap. The future could hold anything. He wanted to be ready for it.

Doug helped the boys remove their coats as the vehicle warmed, stewing on them a little. He’d half expected Angela to insist the boys remain with her. Because she hadn’t, he was worried it meant they wouldn’t have been safe in camp.

“Did you consider that they’re going south, with Mexican children whose families recently died trying to take them back?”

Doug stiffened. “She got them out of reach.”

Jeff shrugged. “We’re going west. The boys were last spotted in the east. There’s an excellent chance she’s trying to protect them while the Eagles load the boat. If anyone comes for them, she’ll handle it and knock out another threat before they sail for the island.”

Doug was impressed, and relieved to be leaving Angela’s path of destruction.

Jeff swallowed a sharp comment there, trying to come to terms with his bitterness at Angela. He’d almost reminded Doug that he’d lost his woman because of Angela’s grand plans.

Doug seemed to know and shook his head. “I’ve never blamed her.” The big man locked eyes with Jeff in the mirror. “And that’s why you’re here–because you do. Time around me and Allan will help you.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

Doug grinned at the little boys who were listening. “I’ll have to sic the kids on you.”

Jeff groaned. “Oh, I am so screwed.”

**4**

David observed the jeep rolling by without reacting. He had traveled steadily since leaving the mountain, only stopping to avoid people and to sleep. He had the proper gear for the weather, thanks to Adrian, but it wouldn’t have mattered if he had been naked. The woman who had started coming to him in his dreams was now speaking during the daytime too. She had informed him that a small family near here needed help. Then she’d told him to keep them alive as long as he could or he wasn’t welcome with her. David hadn’t hesitated to obey.

It had taken twelve hours to reach them on foot. He was miserable physically, not used to roughing it out here anymore, but he’d found the cabin with no problem. It was exactly where the woman had told him it would be.

The soldier waited until the jeep faded into the distance and he couldn’t hear the engine, scanning his surroundings. The refugees he’d fought and avoided since leaving the mountain were everywhere. He didn’t want any of them to track him to the family he was supposed to protect.

As David went toward the cabin, he noticed there was smoke coming from the chimney–something they would have to quit doing. Now that there were so many people around, it wasn’t safe for the family to give away their presence with open fires. The woman in his mind said the family was starving and would soon die. Because of that information, David assumed he would be the only fighter in the group. That meant they would have to lay low and that wasn’t having every window lit up like a beacon in a three-story vacation rental cabin. David guessed they’d been trapped here by the war. He was impressed they’d lasted this long on their own.

David approached the cabin with his hands in view, able to feel someone studying him from the front window. He didn’t spot them, but he knew they were there. The woman in his mind, Alexa, insisted this family wasn’t supposed to be a part of Safe Haven yet, that they had an important job waiting in the north. David hadn’t asked what the job was. He didn’t care.

“Stop right there!”

David stopped. “I’m not a threat. I came from Safe Haven.” He used the exact words he’d been given, studying the noises.

There was a pregnant pause and then the sound of scraping. David assumed someone was lifting a bar from the door.

*I’ll have to teach them not to open the door to strangers too.* A short, stocky guy in baggy clothes appeared, pointing a shotgun. “What do you want?”

David could hear the hope that he honestly had been sent to help, but he also noted the steel of someone who would do whatever it took to ensure his family’s survival. David came to the bottom of the steps. “I’m supposed to stay and help you.” He braced for scorn or anger.

Lance lowered the shotgun immediately, relief stealing over his features. “We ran out of food two days ago. The water was gone this morning. I don’t have a choice.”

David slowly lifted his hand to remove the pack. “You can have everything in here. I’ll scavenge for the rest of what you need.” David placed the pack on the bottom stair and then retreated. “I’ll do some foraging now.”

David didn’t turn his back, but it was only out of habit and training. He doubted the man would shoot him. Any hope was better than none.

Lance waited for the stranger to get out of sight and then grabbed the bag. As he took it inside and shut the door, it occurred to him that it might be a trap. Anything could be in the backpack.

“Is it food, Daddy?”

Two thin kids flew toward him from the couch bed, stomachs growling.

The mother didn’t try to stop them. She was also running over at the hope of a meal. Her housecoat hung off a thin frame that couldn’t afford to drop any more weight. The adults had been giving their share of food to the kids, along with their medications, shoes, and clothes, but everything was gone or too small now. Within the next month, they would die and the kids would be alone.

Lance signaled the children away as he set the bag on the floor and opened it.

“It is food!”

His wife’s excited cry was the first sound she had made in days. Lance held the bag out for her so she could grab what she wanted, smiling in relief.

“Where did it come from?” The woman ripped open the pouch of dehydrated apple slices and popped one in her mouth. She was the food taster. The family didn’t eat anything that she didn’t try first.

Lance gestured toward the porch. “He said he’s from Safe Haven, that he’s supposed to stay with us. He went out to find more food.” Lance caught his wife’s concern and shrugged. “We don’t have a choice and there’s only one of him.”

The adults shared looks that said they would kill the stranger if he became a problem or a threat to their children.

“I’ll make him a place on the porch. That old dog house will hold him for a few nights.”

The woman grimaced, but didn’t argue as she handed the apples to the drooling kids. They’d fought off intruders and gotten lucky that neither of their children had been hurt in the chaos. Having the stranger outside was better than in here with them.

They didn’t trust anyone. The two children were special and the adults had protected them off the grid since they’d been born. Even going to Safe Haven had been too big a risk, but now, it seemed that Safe Haven might have come to them. They’d hoped that wouldn’t happen at first, but desperation had changed their minds.

“What if he is here to help us? We need it. We don’t want to run him off or make him mad.” It was her way of reminding her husband about the reputation of Safe Haven when provoked.

“Then he’ll slaughter us in our sleep or we’ll starve to death. When I said we don’t have a choice, I wasn’t lying.”

The wife returned to her dusty chair, letting the kids eat. When the stranger came back, she would talk to him. If he had a single bad thought, she would know and he would be the one to die in his sleep. It would be an easier meal than some of what they’d survived on since the war.

She and Lance had agreed on the new diet only a few nights ago, after they’d read Hansel and Gretel to the kids. It had reminded them that there was another awful, forbidden food source still available if they had the strength to make use of it. That’s when she’d called out for help and promised to repay it in any way required. Now, someone had come and her kids were eating. Praying it wasn’t a trap, the woman conserved her energy like she’d been doing since making the call. She was scared of Safe Haven. Any time that many of their kind got together, there was always death and betrayal–especially when a Mitchel was involved. Her grudge was against Adrian’s father, but she already knew better than to trust the son. If Adrian came here, he wouldn’t leave. Old debts were still debts, and someone had to pay them.

**5**

Dog shook his head at the scent of a vehicle that had gone by recently, not recognizing it. *That’s not them.*

The wolf padded down the center of the road, sniffing weeds and trees that lined it. He had lost the scent of Jeff’s truck two days ago, but it wasn’t hard to figure out which direction to go. It was the opposite of every other animal in the country.

As if conjured by his contemplations, a large herd of deer began to come through the area, moving north. The herbivores scented Dog in fear, but they didn’t stop their forward march.

Positive they weren’t going willingly, Dog stayed still and quiet as the herd passed close enough for him to lick their furry necks. Dog controlled his hunger. He didn’t understand why all the animals were traveling north, but he had figured out what effect it would have on the remaining humans. They would have nothing to eat. Nature’s intention was to eliminate all of the food from the land.

Dog’s urge to hurry grew. He had to reach Marc. He had to tell Marc what was coming.

Dog growled as a human form stumbled toward him. Studying the deer, Dog hadn’t noticed the human.

The man didn’t stop. It was as if he didn’t see the wolf in front of him.

Dog prepared to leap and run, now reluctant to kill a human.

A familiar scent hit his nose. *Safe Haven!*

Breathing harsh, muttering and groaning, Dog wasn’t able to understand the man. Covered in blood, Dog didn’t recognize him either. Fur bristling, he padded closer.

Ray curled his arms over his head and waited for death. He didn’t know how he’d escaped the mountain. All he remembered was finding Dale’s body.

Dog caught the thought. *Ray!*

Worried for Marc, Dog sat down next to the man, but he didn’t try to communicate. Dog and Dale had been friends; Dog didn’t want to experience Ray’s pain on top of his own or make him run off.

Exhausted, Ray fell asleep while waiting to be attacked by a wolf he wasn’t sure was even there.

Dog curled up next to Ray and put his snout on the man’s cold hand. Ears twitching at every sound around them, Dog knew what he had to do. If he helped Ray, Ray would take him to Marc.

Dog shifted his weight onto more of Ray’s body to keep him warm, then lifted his head.

The herd of deer took off running as the long howl split the quiet air. Followed by more of the same, the sounds echoed through the morning like gunshots.

**6**

“I want notebooks on this stuff–like you gave her for leadership.”

Adrian nodded, exhausted and in a lot of pain. “I’ll work on it between her lessons for the Eagles.”

“Do hers first.” Marc knew better than to slow progress on anything Angela had asked for.

“Is this what our nightly meeting will be now? Me teaching you how to lie, cheat, steal, and manipulate?”

“Do you have anything else you can teach me?”

“Of course. I may not be useful to the camp anymore except as a drill sergeant, but when it comes to women, I know a lot that hasn’t even been tapped.”

“I’m tapping it now.”

Adrian rubbed his face, carefully. “Yeah, we’ll call it tapping.”

Marc chuckled, opening and closing his aching fist. “I can try again.”

“Or you could just tell me why you’re here.” Adrian glanced over, still lying on the floor. “You could have beaten on me and then enjoyed curling up to that perfect ass.”

Weary, Marc completed their new bond. “I’m doing recon.”

“On women?” Adrian snorted. “You already have the charm and magnetism, and you don’t need to manipulate them.”

“No, I don’t, but that’s not what the recon is for.” Marc waited, letting Adrian prove how smart or stupid he was.

Adrian flashed to Marc’s response when the Messenger had contacted them. He went there because it was the only thing they hadn’t discussed yet. “You did it on purpose.”

Marc was dismayed that Adrian was so fast. It would make it hard to stay ahead of the man. He’d been hoping for lucky and stupid.

“You fooled Angela. She thinks you let emotions rule your answer.”

“Shhh…”

Adrian switched his thoughts. He wouldn’t betray Marc again. Once had been too much.

“Yes, it was.” Marc waited, now sure Adrian would get the rest of it.

“And if you did it on purpose, you had a reason, a plan for something.” Adrian pushed himself into a sitting position. “You took my advice!” Adrian saw Marc’s thoughts, parts of the plan that was forming, and grinned. “Outstanding!”

Marc let the bond glow between them, accepting Adrian’s praise this time. The man was a true leader. It was bad, of course, but Marc wasn’t going to use those parts of what he was learning. He would form a connection that was too strong to let Adrian cross him in any way once it was complete. And when the time came, Marc wasn’t going to be the one who killed him. He’d settled on a much harsher judge.

Adrian paled at Marc’s revelations, realizing the man had trapped him in a cell that he would never be able to escape. “You’re going to trade me for Safe Haven again.”

“Oh, yeah, and you’re going to help me to do it, aren’t you?”

Adrian nodded, unable to fight the images. The only thing he wanted more than Angela was for Safe Haven to become the society that God would accept so human torment could end. Panicking as the walls closed in on him, Adrian glared at Marc in rage. “Swear it on her life!”

Marc winced, but he didn’t hesitate. “I swear on Angela’s life that I’ll build it or die trying.”

Thrilled with either side of that, Adrian muttered a few words and waved a hand through the air between them. “An official record has been made.”

“Remember that.”

Adrian felt the cell becoming solid around him and tried to crawl out through a tiny hole in the top. “She’ll know you’ve done this. You can’t hide it. When she finds out you’ve wagered her life, she’ll turn to me.”

“And she’ll know it was your demand to the deal. You didn’t ask for anything else.”

Steel bars came down over the cell, blocking the tiny hole of hope. Adrian surrendered to his cage with a last wave of hatred. “Slam you.”

“Meeting adjourned.” Marc stood up. “On a more personal note, I don’t care what she thinks about the deal. I only care that she won’t cross the Creator and ruin Safe Haven’s chance now that our deal is official–not even for you.”

“Because she wants that goal too much.” Adrian realized his methods to lure her in had also backfired. Like himself, she now wanted Safe Haven to succeed at any cost. “She’ll never forgive you for tricking her this way.”

Marc shrugged. “She’ll still love me at the same time. I know that because she’s been doing it with you and this is giving her the ultimate goal. You’ll never mean more to her now. You’re just the swinging Jody who might be around to sleaze his way in when I die. I’ll be the legend in her mind. You’ll be the afterthought.”

Marc gave a final shove as he popped the handle on the door. “After you sleep, go away for a few days. When she blows up over this, I want her to have to deal with me. You’re done being the sympathetic shoulder she runs to. We both know she can take whatever she dishes out.”

Adrian nodded. There was no fight left in him. “I will.”

“Excellent. I’m glad we had this little chat. I can’t tell you how good it feels to be on this end of things for a change.”

Adrian’s response was a bitter chuckle that came out as a sob.

*That’s the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.* Marc was grinning as he braced to face the cold weather outside the RV.

“Marcus?

Marc frowned at the tone as he looked over his shoulder.

“Don’t fuck up, you know? You won’t answer to me or her on this one.”

Marc shuddered at the warning. “Yeah.”

“Can you do it?” Adrian hated his groveling tone, but he suspected Marc would drag it from him on a regular basis now.

Marc sighed. “Fifty-fifty. I know I can get the camp to do it. I’m just not sure that I can stand to see you kiss her again. If I ever do, I might snap and damn us all. I’m still like Adam in that. I thought she was just supposed to be mine.”

Adrian didn’t say what they both knew. Instead, he pointed at the window. “Someone’s coming.”

Before Marc could open the door, it was pulled out of his grip.

“Uh, sorry.” Conner tossed two big kits into the RV at Marc’s feet.

Marc looked at the kits and then Adrian.

Adrian stood up, pains forgotten. “Something happened.”

Kendle appeared behind Conner, kit in hand and sleepy, confused expression on her face. “I was told to get here with my gear. What’s up?”

Marc frowned, stepping from the RV to discover the camp alive with activity.

Conner shoved a paper into Marc’s hand and then ran to help.

“She called a bugout. A new wave of refugees is…”

“What?” Adrian caught Marc’s smile. “What’s going on?”

“Dog needs to be picked up! We’re his ride.” Marc climbed back into the RV, motioning at Kendle. “You’re the driver.”

“That explains the keys and map in my kit.” Kendle got into the RV and began to adjust the seat.

Adrian looked toward the rear bunk, where Kevin had crashed hours ago. “What about him?”

Marc dropped into the reclining rear seat and pushed it down. “He seemed bored to me. Maybe he didn’t get enough adventure out there with Jeff.”

Adrian snickered, walking to the bunks while Kendle started the engine. “Wake me in four.”

“Same here.” Marc lay down and tried to get comfortable.

Kendle realized she would be with Marc for a mission and couldn’t hide the grin or the happiness that swept through the vehicle and then the camp. “This is great.”

Marc would have preferred that Angela was along, but he didn’t say so. Instead, he encouraged her. “Dog needs help. Don’t spare the peddle.”

Kendle shifted into drive, waving to guards who would be told later what was happening.

“Hey! Why are we rolling?” Kevin’s confusion was amusing.

“Marc needs to see a man about a dog.” Adrian slid into the opposite bunk.

Kevin stared around for a minute and then shrugged. “Oh. Okay.” He went right back out.

Marc laughed, already starting to drift. His satisfaction dimmed a bit as he asked the dreaded question he’d planned to avoid if he could help it. “Do you think she planned this so we would keep working it out away from the camp? ‘Cause that would mean she knew about the deal before it happened and used us against each other to get what she wants out of it.”

Adrian stretched out on the narrow, tight bed, spine popping. “If she did, I wouldn’t disappoint her by coming back without the wolf.”

The men let the mirth carry them into sleep, leaving their lives in Kendle’s hands. They knew she could handle it. Angela wouldn’t have sent her if she couldn’t.

**End of Book 8**

What would you like to do now?

[A picture containing fireworks

Description automatically generated](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-9.html)

[**See the next book in this series**](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-9-new.html)

Link goes to my website

[Read the Deleted Scenes](#DeletedScenes)

[Read Book 9 Sample](#_Book_Nine)

**Read another book by Angela White:**

-[Bone Dust & Beginnings](http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/bone-dust--beginnings.html)

-[The Change](http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/the-change.html)

[Report an error in this book](http://www.c9publications.com/about-c9.html)

[Be emailed when Angela has a new release](https://visitor.r20.constantcontact.com/manage/optin?v=0015cmPQt-mEAd3ZR6MGjaIqx85eJNi9p2TgxyDsqxjq2P6cTpvPTImJCZY0HuLrCMF-R6a1_-YhKmpcHvjGKXuHXGnMR4SjGAygYeIrVjZCFr-3IikJAtPqKcb_Bjj_L8JR7fU7dWiSfL3z2I6CUDEykQoSj1C3hjNeQvnDsMcVyM%3D)

[Have this book digitally autographed](http://www.authorgraph.com/)

There is a wonderful site called Authorgraph that allows me to sign ebooks for readers, plus leave a short message. Cool, right? Just sign up (also free) and search for my name. Here’s the link: [www.Authorgraph.com](http://www.Authorgraph.com)

[Go to all books by Angela section](#AngeasBooks)

[Go back to the beginning of this book](#_TOC)

## Deleted Scene #1

**1**

**“A**ngela called for everyone to come eat lunch.” Adrian found Marc knelt down by a body near the entrance. “She’d like a personal check in from you.”

“Is she okay for a little while?”

Adrian noticed Marc’s dazed expression and joined him in the snow. “Yeah. What’s up?”

“Market town.”

“Ah.” Adrian resisted the urge to keep talking.

“They know Dirce is dead. They know the troops are gone.”

“Are they leaving, by any chance?”

“They’re glad jobs have opened up. They’re getting the town ready to fight us.”

“What gear do we need?”

Marc’s expression was as cold as the wind. “None. She already told me how to do it.”

“You needed to make sure that it was required?”

“None of us wants to do this again, do we?”

Adrian swept the frozen battlefield that was sprayed with scarlet in more places than he cared to count. The Eagles out here were on duty over the entrance and Marc. Everyone else had gone in to avoid the views and smells of death. “Not unless they have to.”

“She promised a break. These people need peace.”

“That won’t happen here. You know it.”

“Yeah.” Marc stood up, wiping away snow from his pants. “We already have what we need–trucks and men willing to drive them overtop the enemy. It’ll be enough.”

Adrian followed Marc toward the passage. “You’ll keep scanning to make sure nothing changes before we leave?”

“Of course.” Marc signaled toward the men on duty. “You have point.”

Adrian took the post, happy Marc wanted him to do something.

Marc didn’t tell Adrian he wanted one of them on the entrance at all times until the door was up. Theo’s crew was laboring on it, but it would be dark before the basic barrier was even in place. That team would work non-stop to get it installed.

Marc was glad of the tepid warmth when he entered the passage. He hadn’t realized how cold he was or how long he’d been out there.

Marc motioned to the men on duty to stay alert, then proceeded to the top level, where they’d agreed their people would sleep over night. Now that it was noon, most of the adrenaline from the fight was gone and fear had replaced it. Marc assumed Angie was getting bad vibes and wanted him inside to help reinforce the impression of safety among their group.

Angela chuckled. *I got tired of cold toes and want you to come in and warm up.*

Marc smiled as he climbed the ladder, relieved there wasn’t a new set of problems in here to handle. Picking off loose ends for hours was depressing.

*I’m sorry about that.*

*You didn’t make them come to America with plans to conquer. Not your fault. You did what you had to, to keep our country alive.*

*Thank you.*

Marc stiffened as heat flooded him, groaning. *That’s nice.*

Angela ran a mental hand over his brow, caressing. *I need to rest now. You have point.*

Marc realized she hadn’t felt safe without him nearby. *I’ve got it. Sleep well.*

He could feel her drift off almost right away. The mood of the cave was ugly without her light flowing through.

Marc sent his own blast of calm, sensing the unrest on the bottom level, but not the top. It felt as if their people were all taking a nap, while Jimmy’s clan was furious about having to spend another night with the descendants. Marc didn’t pick up any plans of betrayal, but he went straight to the bottom floor to speak to Jimmy anyway. The doctor needed to know that in this mood, if there was a single problem overnight, Angela would kill them all and Marc would help her. The best thing the Mountaineers could do was go to bed early and sleep late. Safe Haven would be gone when they rose, without more deaths.

Marc heard low, vicious whispers before he made it to that floor. He dropped down the ladder in a fast slide. “Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy. How can you be a leader if your people don’t follow orders?” Marc pointed at a trio of two men and one woman in a far corner near the body corridor. “They’re planning bad shit, Jimmy, but I’m not going to just take it out on them when they do it. *You’re* the leader. You’d better lead them.”

Marc stayed to support Jimmy as the doctor demanded to know what they were planning, and then afterward, while he tried to figure out how to control his people. Marc believed it was a lost cause, but he only needed one night of peace. Jimmy needed a lifetime and he wasn’t even going to get a week. Angela’s visions of the mountain future had been grim to say the least.

Marc didn’t try to convince Jimmy again or allay his fears over this last night in here with the people he hated. The Mountaineers needed to toughen up and they needed to do it fast or there wouldn’t be any peace for them–only survivors.

**Deleted Scene #2**

**1**

Marc slid against Angela’s warmth while smothering a groan. The shower had felt good, but being against her while lying down was indescribable.

Angela shifted toward him, letting their bare skin connect in that special way.

Marc hesitated for a split second, making the choice.

Angela felt it and waited. Last time, she’d taken the choice from him. Before that, neither of them had known what the future held. Now, it would be a conscious choice to create a life.

Marc slowly rolled her over to face him and sealed their lips.

Angela wrapped her arms around his neck, sighing happily as he slid on top of her.

Marc tugged her jeans down and quickly lined them up, using his eagerness to lube the way. As he gently pushed into her, Marc claimed her mouth again and sent his hands roaming.

Angela let him go for a minute, listening to his pleasure, feeling her body adjust and accept his. As his knowing fingers began to stroke and rub between them, she let the sensations carry her away.

Marc waited until she was on that edge and then shoved them both into the light together. As he strained against her, aware of her being locked down around him, Marc sent a request. *Please let this one live.*

“Do they need us?”

Marc shook his head, wrapped around her and shuddering.

Angela let sleep take her far away, but she kept her hands clamped around Marc’s wrists, refusing to let go of him even for a moment.

Marc shifted over, breathing evening out. He listened to the footsteps and voices, glad the rest of their group was up here with them now. He shut his eyes and drifted in light dozes until exhaustion finally yanked him under.

**Deleted Scene #3**

**1**

As the RV pulled away from the campsite, Angela sent her own well wishes. She would worry the entire time they were gone. It had been rough with Adrian banished, but with Marc out of camp too, the mood would plummet into misery and joyless traveling through the land they used to know. Both men carried enough hope for the future to banish any shadows. Angela didn’t have that ability. She only knew how to kill for their love. Wishing them a speedy journey, Angela got into the lead truck with Kenn and Tonya.

The cat in the box yowled in rage as Tonya held the flap closed. “I think he might live.”

Angela knew Tonya wanted to show her the tabby, but the animal’s noises implied now was a bad time. “I’d like you to keep working on it, no matter his outcome. We’ll need your research in the future.”

“I’m already having the Eagles bring me back any stashes they find, but only what we talked about.”

Angela wasn’t worried over it anymore, but she’d made it clear before the quake that the testing of chemicals in Safe Haven would be rare, limited occurrences based on their need to survive. She glanced in the mirror and found lights flashing. “Make the call. We’re leaving now.”

“What’s the rush?” Tonya wasn’t ready to be on the road again.

Angela put her feet on the dash and tried to get comfortable. “I need to see a man about a boat.”

In the RV, Marc chuckled at her copy of their words as they left. He should have known that Angela was monitoring the RV instead of sleeping.

*My witch does it for me now and reports to me when I wake up. Saves me a lot of energy.*

Marc immediately demanded to know how to do it, glowering at his demon for not telling him.

Angela left them to spend a moment with each person in the RV. Kendle and Kevin didn’t know she was there. Kevin was still sleeping off his drunk and Kendle was concentrating on running over ants as she drove. Angela didn’t disturb either of them.

Adrian felt her arrival in his thoughts and opened the door wide. Before he could extend a greeting, a vicious plan of attack appeared in his mind.

Adrian groaned.

“What?”

“Is everything okay?”

The team woke quick and hard.

Adrian sat up, grumbling. “Yeah, it was supposed to be a quick pick up, but she just sent me this.”

Marc and Kendle blanched at the battle plan.

Kevin didn’t notice. He was busy running to the bathroom to vomit.

“She wants us to go the UN airfield first and make sure all the troops are gone. If we find a base, she wants it destroyed.”

*Tell them the rest.*

“She also wants us to team when we get there and stay that way, no matter what happens–all four of us.”

Fresh moans and mutters filled the cabin, including Marc’s this time.

Angela laughter was harsh and cold.

Adrian shoved her out of his head, grouchy, sore, and frustrated that she hadn’t told them.

*Why do you think she did it this way?* Marc wasn’t unhappy with the order. In fact, he thought a new adventure might be just what he needed.

Adrian grimaced as he realized Angela had done this to hurt him. *She won’t forgive me.*

*Did you ask her to?*

Adrian groaned again as he realized he hadn’t even apologized yet. “Damn it!”

Marc’s laughter brought a smile to Kendle’s lips. “This should be fun. Maybe your old lady isn’t so bad after all.”

“She’s amazing.” Marc settled back down to sleep, not caring that Adrian and Angela were still communicating. He had the man under his thumb now and that’s where he would stay. It was the first of many who would come under control before they reached the island. Nothing would be allowed to interfere with their chance. He would labor on the society and when it succeeded, he would be rewarded. Marc only wanted one thing now and it wasn’t Angie.

Adrian shivered as if a ghost had gone over his grave.

Connected, Angela felt it and knew her devious plan had finally succeeded. The fight was over. Marc had won.

Crushed and delighted at the same time, Angela locked down on her emotions and broke the connection with her men. She’d figured out that the battle would never stop unless both of them found something they wanted more than her. With Adrian, it had been easy. He wanted his people to stop suffering. With Marc, it had taken an ugly shove, but she’d replaced his need for her with his need to kill Adrian. Letting Marc see the kiss had pushed the tiger back into a cage and he’d lashed out exactly as she’d expected him to–he’d made a deal with the Creator that no one else could have. Because he’d been so betrayed, Marc had the right to ask for justice. If she or Adrian had tried, they would all be dead.

*Will it work? Can Marc do it?*

Angela considered Jennifer’s mental query. The girl hadn’t helped with the schemes, but she’d been aware of them. Angela hadn’t tried to keep her out. She was teaching Jennifer everything she knew. *Marc doesn’t know how to fail and I’ll stir him up again if I have to*. She paused, hating herself for being willing to do this to him, but he’d traded her life for Adrian’s death upon success and that offset it. *Yes, he can, but he’ll be just like me by the time it’s finished.*

*Corrupt.*

*Yes.*

*You won’t be able to stay after it’s built.*

*No.*

*Neither can I.*

*No.*

*Will we come back here?*

*For a while.*

*And then?*

*Then we do what we were born for–we’ll die.*

*I don’t understand.*

*We’re the martyrs, Jenny. We have to die in service to the God who left us here to rip each other apart. The good society buys our loved ones a chance to be forgiven and taken home. It doesn’t mend the rift between humanity and the Creator.*

*How will our dying fix it?*

*I have no idea. I can’t see any further than the final fight. I assume that’s because I die there. After doesn’t exist for me.*

Jennifer immediately began searching the future and this time, she didn’t skip the forbidden doors or methods. She’d slaughtered a hundred men. She was definitely corrupt. What did one more strike matter against knowledge?

Satisfied she now had all of her army on the path to accepting what a grim, yet glorious future waited for them, Angela tugged her hood over her face and cried. She couldn’t stand what she’d become, what she’d done, but she also hated herself for what she’d gained from it. The people who whispered she was ruthless had no idea how far off that was.

*If it saves my kids and my people, how can I not be this way? I didn’t ask for this destiny, this awful, awful duty, but if I’m the only who can do it, don’t I have to? Humanity has been cursed since the garden and it no longer matters why we have the mess. We just have to clean it up, by any means necessary. That’s why we were born into this time and place. It wasn’t to sit or stand in safety, but to run headfirst into the darkness and challenge the demons waiting there.*

Angela forced herself to lock it all away in her crypt. That future was years ahead of them. They had made it to the start of a small break that would give them the strength to handle it. After being the most manipulative bitch on the planet for the last six months, Angela was ready for everyone to enjoy the peace that she had traded so many lives for. Tears drying to her cheeks, Angela went to sleep. It was all up to Marc now.

## Book Nine

**A picture containing fireworks

Description automatically generated**

[**Last Call**](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-9-new.html)

**1**

“It’s the first of November.” Kenn steered the muddy semi around a wreck, glad it didn’t require stopping the convoy to clear. He saw where both dented vehicles had been pushed aside by Ivan’s tank. UN blue was smeared on the fenders.

The area they were driving through was still and quiet, with frozen trees and empty homes that begged them to stop, to stay. Kenn suppressed a shudder. He could almost hear them. Until the war, he hadn’t ever considered that houses had souls, but the ones around him held ghosts pleading for new life to be breathed into them.

They had been out of the mountain for twenty-seven hours now, driving straight through except for one bathroom and fuel stop. They had made it 220 miles and were now near the Talladega Forest. Kenn estimated they would reach the ocean in another 700 miles. This first stretch had gone so fast because the roads were clear from the UN troops and the Mexican army coming through, as well as from their own fight with the government. The area around the mountain was still lingering in everyone’s mind. The wrecks and battle sites had been ugly, but the barren, frozen wilderness beyond it had been just as haunting. Some of their people had secretly hoped to emerge and find the old world up and running. They hadn’t, of course.

Kenn glanced over to determine if Angela had heard. “Yesterday was Halloween.”

Angela lowered her stained, wrinkled map. “Time was different under the mountain. Most people didn’t know when it was light or dark. How did you keep track of the date?”

“I have a great watch.” Kenn shifted his body to accommodate the woman dozing against his arm. Tonya was tired.

“So does Marc.” Angela held up her wrist. “I use his.”

Kenn’s lips thinned. “You knew we’d missed holidays and birthdays.”

Angela let go of the map. It flapped loudly as it rolled up, waking Tonya. “What’s your problem?” She wasn’t going to be reprimanded over something so petty.

“It isn’t petty to the kids who’ve missed a birthday.”

Angela shoved the map into the kit at her feet. “Adrian found time for it?”

“Yes.” Kenn braced for ugliness. He was learning to read her tones.

“I’m not Adrian.”

Kenn kept trying. “People need those moments. It might not have been so bad in the mountain if we’d celebrated.”

“It also might have reminded them of the old world so much they rioted to get out.” Angela was cold and grouchy. “I did think it through. You should try that.”

Tonya glanced between them. “Everything okay?”

Kenn patted her wrist. “It’s fine.”

Tonya took in Angela’s pinched lips and sighed. “Stop it.”

Neither of them knew who she was talking to; neither of them responded.

Tonya yawned. “Adrian’s parties always made me sad. We never knew when the next one was coming, and he didn’t celebrate all of the holidays–only the ones he approved of. Either give them all back or keep them. Middle ground sucks.”

Angela stored Tonya’s secret as Kenn stiffened. He’d believed Tonya would be on his side. He was distracted and hadn’t realized she’d just read both of their minds. “I’m going to reinstate them all and add a few new ones. We just can’t do it right now. We don’t have the supplies, manpower, or time.”

They had healing injuries and grieving citizens who were happy to be free and also terrified of it. Their faith in her to keep them alive was an honor and a nightmare she carried every moment.

“Which you would have told Kenn if he’d asked instead of accusing, right?”

“Yep.”

Kenn flushed as Tonya made her point. They’d argued over this a few days ago. Not the holidays, but the way he talked to people. Tonya insisted it wasn’t just her. She said he was unintentionally aggressive to everyone.

Tonya yawned again and put her cheek against his arm. “It takes time. Keep working on it like you do everything else.”

Angela stared at Tonya. Sometimes, it still hit hard that the redhead was smart.

Kenn couldn’t let it go. “I agree with Jeff a little. The misery since she took over has been awful. Adrian gave us rewards and good moments to offset this new life.”

Tonya grunted in resignation and pulled earbuds from her pocket. She slid them in, brow puckered, and switched on the truck radio. Kenn had rigged it up this morning while teaching her to drive the semi. Each vehicle had two wheelmen, two guards, and passengers–except for this one. It was just her, Kenn, and Angela. Tonya was tired of the mix.

Angela was too, but she also didn’t understand what Kenn’s... “Why didn’t you just tell me you saw something coming?”

Kenn was afraid to answer.

Unable to trust him or give him time to come to her when he was ready, Angela dug into his mind.

Kenn didn’t resist. He knew better.

Angela scanned him hard and fast. “Oh, good grief, Kenn! If I wanted to lock away your gifts, I already would have.”

He flushed darker. “I didn’t know what it was at first.”

Angela tried to be patient. “We evolve after tragedies. A new gift isn’t something to hide.”

“…Marc won’t like it.”

“Ah. Fear of the Ghost.” Angela smirked. “That’s healthy for you.”

Kenn sighed. “I’ve always been afraid of him, even before the war.”

“That pleases me.”

“Yeah.”

Angela was relieved Kenn’s secret wasn’t bad. Marc wouldn’t care that the Marine could levitate now. Marc hardly ever thought about Kenn anymore. Adrian was always his target now.

“How do you think the mission team is doing?”

Angela grunted. “Better than we are.”

“Why do you say that?”

The radio on Kenn’s belt crackled. “Boss, we have a winter storm coming from the northwest.”

Kenn pushed the mike. “How long?”

“Less than three hours.” Neil’s reply was curt. “It popped up fast and plans to hang around.” The trooper had obviously thought Angela would answer.

“Copy.” Kenn glanced at Angela for instructions.

Angela shifted in the seat, searching for a position that hurt less. “Same course I gave you this morning.”

“You knew.”

“Samantha told me she felt something brewing. Our lunch location can double as a night stop.”

“Excellent.” Kenn increased speed. He quickly caught up to the tank that was running point.

Ivan and the soldiers also increased speed, but Kenn stayed on their bumper. They were still an hour from the lunch site and it took longer to get camp set up and running now than it had before.

“Are we going to another state park?” Tonya was already tired of sleeping in the open. She was exhausted because she’d jumped at every noise around their flimsy tent overnight. Dealing with the kids during stops had added to it and exhausted her. Many people had the same problem. The convoy was full of snores and mutters from those who were dreaming of the mountain.

Angela shook her head. “We’ll be indoors.”

“Awesome.” Tonya increased the volume of the music. There hadn’t been much entertainment in the mountain. She’d missed it, but not like Kenn had.

“Okay!” Angela groaned. “I give! We’ll have a party. Just one for everything. You handle it.”

“We’ll go easy on rations.” Kenn was thrilled to get what he wanted.

Angela’s face darkened. “You’ll have to. We don’t have much unless the teams unearth stashes.”

Kenn now understood her concern. “Do you want them contacted?”

“They know where we’ll be. They might even beat us there.”

Kenn hated to admit it, but despite all the deaths they’d had, Angela was more thorough than Adrian. She covered issues before they became problems. It was comforting. If she would ease up a little on fun, things could be great.

“I’ll try.”

Kenn didn’t push. He would do that later if it was needed. For today, he was satisfied he’d gotten something their people needed.

“Adrian will have a notebook for you on Eagle training.”

Kenn’s mood lifted. “Cool. Soon?”

“A few days, probably.”

Distracted, Kenn fell into mental plans.

Both women breathed a sigh of relief as the bad vibes faded. Not all of the negativity was coming because of Angela’s choices. Kenn’s gifts were coming in and he hadn’t learned to lock down on the mood swings yet. He would, but not before making everyone else suffer the emotional blasts. The descendant children were the same. They had to learn to control it; so did Kenn. Everyone else had to be patient.

Even distracted, Kenn was keeping track of her thoughts. “Thank you for understanding. I don’t mean to let it loose. It just happens.”

Angela stared out the window. “We’ve all gone through that, even Marc. After a while, you’ll know when it’s rising and be able to control it.”

“Like our personal shields?”

“Yes.” Angela was curious. “Can you do that yet?”

“Not fully. I can’t make it big enough.”

“It takes continuous energy and we’re all drained.”

“Yeah, that reminds me. Why did you say no about drawing from camp members when they offer?”

“They can’t afford the energy either. None of us are healthy. I’ll eventually reverse that decision, if you give me time.”

“You got it.” Kenn stopped scanning her and really sank into training plans.

Angela resumed her futile attempts to discover what the future held. Samantha hadn’t been certain how long the storm might last or even what type it was when she’d first mentioned it. Now that they knew it was snow, most of the preparations depended on how bad it would get. The location Angela had chosen would hold them for a few days if needed, but they had refugees following and those folks had been out in this weather all along. They wouldn’t sit around and wait for it to be over. While Safe Haven took shelter, numerous threats would start catching up to them.

Meanwhile, their three strongest fighters were out of camp. The next few days might be as hard as the last few had been. Angela was too weak to see that far. All the descendants were and that was going to get worse until they reached the boat. Once on the ocean, there would be time for recharging. Until then, the same constant struggle for survival would continue to wear them down.

One more month, Angela told her aching body and weary heart. Do it for one more month and then we’ll try to figure out how to be happy again. We’ve more than earned it.

**2**

“Why is he on my ass?” James kept one eye on Kenn in the mirror, and the other on the road in front of the tank.

“She wants us to hurry up.” Ivan wasn’t surprised. The clouds coming in were heavy. They were going to need shelter soon, but this area was uninviting. Even the animals didn’t like it here. Ivan understood it was cold, but people hadn’t been decimating animal populations for ten months. There should have been deer herds, stray cats, possums, and dogs being flushed out in panic by the sound of their convoy. He hadn’t even seen a bird yet. It was unsettling how quiet the world was becoming. “Speed us up.”

“That’ll be noisy.”

“She knows.”

James shrugged. “Okay.” He drove into a rusted dumpster, knocking it out of away instead of slowing to push it aside as they’d been doing since leaving the mountain. The noise was awful. “This might attract problems.”

Ivan nodded. “If she wants us somewhere sooner, we make it happen and handles the consequences. That’s why she’s the boss and we’re just the soldiers.”

James laughed at the old joke and aimed for the next chunk of debris.

**3**

“Are we all clear?” Angela looked to Ivan for the confirmation. The stopped convoy was growing impatient, but they’d arrived twenty minutes early.

Ivan was at the truck’s passenger window. “They say we are, but I’d like to do one fast sweep myself.”

Ivan was the guard over her vehicle. She’d assigned him. “We’ll wait.”

Ivan marched off.

Kenn gave signals to the guards around the stopped cars and trucks. Everyone was ready to be out of the vehicles, but Kenn and Angela both liked it that Ivan was taking the job seriously.

“The teams are all here. No contact, but they also didn’t find much.” Kenn translated the hand code updates while Angela got her coat on. The tiny town had a dozen homes in a square, surrounded by thick woods, short barns, and empty fields. It didn’t appear looted, but it had the abandoned feel of most American societal centers now. Kenn didn’t expect trouble upon sight, which was a nice change. Still, it paid to be careful.

“All clear!”

Everyone scrambled for bathrooms and assigned posts, relieved at the call from Ivan. The adrenaline crash from their escape was gone, leaving a deep weariness that kept them all yawning and rubbing their eyes. Everyone who had duty was looking forward to being finished so they could sleep for eight hours in a bed that wasn’t moving.

Angela understood. She planned to order lights out an hour after mess. They needed the rest and so did she.

Angela zipped her parka and stepped out into the stiff wind. Shivering almost immediately, she longed to have the old world comforts back for the millionth time. Like everyone else, she loathed this post-apocalyptic life. She wanted to settle into one of these empty towns, but that wasn’t possible. All the horrors they’d suffered were still waiting to hit them again if she made a mistake, but this time, there was no bunker or radiation cloud to save them.

“My legs hurt.”

“My hips are shouting at me.”

“I can’t stop yawning.”

Angela silently echoed the complaints of camp members walking by. Traveling again after being in the mountain for months was hard on everyone. Eagles just preferred not to admit to their physical weaknesses. It was the same with adapting to night sounds and weather. Angela had forgotten what it was like to be so cold she couldn’t stop shivering, but she remembered now as the wind whipped and blew her braid over her shoulder. Winter was her least favorite season.

Refusing to wear the hood on the parka that would conceal her identity, Angela did don the thick hat Marc had insisted she take. She also pulled on the matching gloves, hoping she didn’t need to reach her weapon quickly. The Eagles had flat-out refused the gloves for that reason.

Groups of workers were waiting as she emerged. Most were dressed in the same gear as Eagles. Angela felt lucky to have scavenged enough to outfit everyone. Some of their hard-found supplies would remain in that tomb forever. There hadn’t been time to dig it all out. Angela doubted the refugees would unearth much of it. Their lives would be short and hard, always in search of a surviving town. The next two years would be the hardest fight for survival ever experienced in this country.

Angela took a stack of folded papers from her pocket and passed them out. With so many untrained rookies, she couldn’t just tell them. Things would be missed, forgotten. “That’s it.”

The men and women hurried off. No one wanted to linger for a chat.

Angela waved the next group forward. This was the door-to-door crew she’d drafted. They needed oral reminders of what to do, unlike the senior men watching them. “Be careful as you clear the buildings. Besides scavengers, there could also be animals. Go in teams of four. Clear every nook and cranny where a small person could fit. Also check for snake tracks and such. Go slow and verify it’s clear before you call it. I won’t be forgiving if you miss something.”

The rookies took a minute to form the teams, then marched toward the dozen homes. Camp members hurried out of the way.

Conner joined her, with Charlie at his side. “Do you want us to handle the vehicles again?” The boys were almost hidden under thick parkas and gloves.

“Yes. We’ll form a complete block around the buildings. Get them as tight as you can. Gas tanks should be facing in.”

The boys assumed that was to prevent theft and allow them easy access to the fuel if it was needed for something during the storm.

Charlie jogged to the lead rig to move it.

Conner went to the rear trucks holding their remaining livestock while he waited for the next vehicle to empty. He could hear Angela now worrying over the condition of their small herd. They were taking these animals to the island.

Angela watched him walk away. Conner might turn out to be everything that Adrian couldn’t. They were getting him young enough to ensure he didn’t follow a dark path. It was too late for his father.

Refusing to waste time dwelling on what couldn’t be changed, Angela strode to the vehicle carrying her twins. Daryl and Greg followed. The two men were her personal protection until the camp was up. After that, she was putting them to work, no matter what Marc had told them to do. The camp needed them more than she did.

“We’ve got it.” Jennifer walked by with Candy, Mandy, and Tracy. All four women were carrying an infant. “Stop by later. We’ll save you a diaper.”

“Thanks.” Relieved and disappointed, Angela tried to scan her surroundings and got nothing with her gifts. She was forced to rely on sight and normal senses. What she could see was barren, deserted. There were no birds in the air and no ants out of their cone-shaped hills. An ominous wind was the only thing making noise. Angela listened to it intently. It said the coming storm wasn’t going to go away until it wanted to.

Angela joined the crew clearing houses. They were shorthanded, so she would help where she could. If she became too tired, she could still stand guard while the others worked. In Safe Haven, there was always a chore waiting.

Daryl and Greg stayed close to her, but neither man was surprised when she pointed to one of the homes that hadn’t been cleared yet. They didn’t argue despite Marc’s possible anger when he found out. Angela was the boss. If Marc took over, he would also have the authority to change scheduled guard positions.

Daryl and Greg cleared the farthest house from the camp people now forming lines around the bathrooms.

Angela went to the home next to it, noting dead flowers and an open, empty shed. It appeared the residents here had left peacefully. Angela clumsily drew her gun and flipped off the safety as she walked to the house.

Running boots crunched behind her.

Angela paused to let Ivan take the bodyguard position, aware of frowns coming from everyone witnessing it. The Eagles didn’t trust him. Angela didn’t either, but they hadn’t spent much time together yet. With Marc and Adrian away, that would change. Ivan had appointed himself (or had been appointed. She wasn’t sure which yet) her guardian. He hadn’t let her out of his sight except to piss and sleep.

Ivan sighed, impatient for her to move so he could clear the house.

Angela braced mentally for action as she’d been taught, then braced for pain... She kicked in the door.

Not locked, the door gave easily and slammed into the wall.

Angela flew awkwardly into the dark house, crashing into furniture.

Senior Eagles rushed her way.

Ivan wanted to help her, but he was laughing too hard.

“Yeah, I deserved that.” Angela grunted, pushing an end table off her leg.

Ivan was shoved aside by Kyle’s team. He heard Angela pick herself up.

“That’s gonna sting later.”

Ivan laughed harder as she sent the Eagles back to their duties. He couldn’t help it.

Angela appeared, limping and rubbing at scrapes and sore spots. “You can stop now.”

“No.” Ivan shook his head, tears rolling as Eagles scowled deeper.

Angela limped back in to find her gun and clear the house. “Never gonna live that down.”

**4**

By sunset, Safe Haven was fed and settled, and patrols were on duty. Angela and Ivan were also outside, though only the snipers knew. Lurking between the homes, Angela once again tried to scan the future and only found darkness.

“Funniest shit since her boy ambushed Adrian with paintballs.”

“I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time. Was she embarrassed?”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

Angela listened to the first group of sentries who strolled by without spotting her or her guard. The rookies had a lot to learn and she had a lot of training to do–on them and on herself. She hadn’t been this out of shape since before the war.

Ivan stayed right next to her now that the shadows had lengthened, limiting sight. Wearing his army outfit, Ivan blended in better than the other men. He was also warmer, but no one complained. They were all enjoying the fresh air, no matter how cold it was. They were free. To celebrate, the guards were talking to each other more than they had in the mountain.

Ivan was fascinated by the new routines. Each shift had a descendant to sweep for trouble. The same was true of each house, though many of those were children. The organization was impressive. He had a few things to add to their security if Angela would let him, but overall, it was tight. After the chaos in the mountain, Ivan hadn’t been certain if being outdoors would be the same.

“We’d never been in a mountain before. Out here, we know what we’re doing.” Angela tried not to shiver. “Most of us, anyway. New arrivals always took a month to settle in.”

Ivan controlled his reaction to her reading his mind, not wanting to be eliminated from her guard. He liked learning from her, but he often forgot how powerful she was even when she wasn’t trying or didn’t appear to be.

Angela grunted, breath streaming out. “We used to forbid it. The invasion of privacy isn’t something we like doing, but after you’ve almost been killed as much as we have, you adjust.”

“I can understand that.” Ivan saw the next patrol coming and felt Angela tense. “What are we doing?”

“Testing nerves.” Angela finished the explanation by stepping in front of the three unsuspecting guards.

“Ah!”

“Son of a…!”

Angela didn’t snicker. Her earlier humiliation was fresh in her mind. She wasn’t going to enjoy this small moment after doing something so dumb. “Good evening, gentlemen.”

“You scared the sh…” Nathan stopped himself. “I didn’t see you there.”

“I didn’t want you to. The same as an intruder won’t want you to.” She swept the tired level two men. Their shift was almost up. “Get a hot meal before you crash. We’ll wake you up for the meeting.” Angela left, spotting Samantha and Neil near the rear of the truck he had driven today. She connected to Samantha so she could see whatever had frozen the woman in place with no reaction to the rough wind trying to push everyone off their feet. If not for Neil’s hip against hers, Angela was certain Samantha would have already fallen.

Ivan put his back to them and stayed alert.

Neil kept his eye on Ivan. Samantha’s injury and Jeremy’s death hadn’t allowed time to size up the new guy who was making a fast name for himself. Whenever that happened, he and Kyle usually grilled the person, but Neil wasn’t sure if they would restart the tradition.

Neil glanced around at footsteps. Kyle was walking toward him, accompanied by Greg and Ben, who were Ivan’s relief.

Neil flashed a fast hand code question.

Kyle grinned. “You know it. I’ll entertain until you can join.”

“Perfect.” Neil swept the landscape, not minding the chill in the wind or darkness around them. They were outside. It was wonderful.

Angela shivered, withdrawing from Samantha’s mind. “Well, we needed the break.” She frowned at Kyle. “Reschedule it or make it quick. You’re busy tonight.”

Kyle nodded. “You got it. What’s up?”

“We’ll be here a couple days. I want you to supervise the set up. Neil and Shawn will handle the vehicles. We need batteries pulled and brought in like while we were in the mountain. Get the terracotta heaters set up too. We also have to cover the livestock trailer and put guards in there with heat. Pick two people who can sing. It calms them.” Angela paused, considering. “I don’t want people to come out unless it’s a bathroom trip. Put an escort in each house with rope in case the storm reaches whiteout conditions. We’re not sure yet.”

Kyle and Neil were both writing down her instructions. Ben and Greg took Ivan’s place, leaving the soldier free to observe the boss and catch anything she missed.

She won’t miss anything. Kenn joined Ivan, admiring Angela’s leadership. She’s the alpha. She sees further than we do.

I don’t know. I see pretty far.

Kenn shrugged. Do you see an interrogation coming? Kenn left Ivan frowning. He went to Angela for orders. “Boss.”

Angela gestured. “We’re still doing the meeting tonight, even if it’s 4am. Be ready for it.”

“I will. Where do you want Tonya?”

“Where does she want to be?”

Kenn’s lips thinned at Angela’s tone. It warned him to be careful about trying to control his mate. “With you.”

“Then that’s where she’ll be–after I finish rounds. She can take notes during the meeting.”

Kenn walked away. “I’m sending someone else to tell her.”

Angela snickered. “Don’t blame you at all.”

The amusement calmed the men around them.

Samantha didn’t notice. She was trying to determine how bad the storm would get and how long they would be trapped here. Like Angela, Samantha knew they were on borrowed time every second they weren’t moving south. She exchanged a glance with Angela, then let Neil lead her to the house where their other injured people were resting, but she didn’t expect to sleep. It would be a long night of searching.

Whitney joined her. “Where to first?”

Angela pointed at the house Daryl and Greg had cleared. “Weapons and food.”

Candles and lanterns had eliminated the gloom from the buildings and from the town itself, but the guards weren’t feeling bathed in safety. Light attracted attention; attention brought bloodshed. That pattern hadn’t changed since the beginning of time.

Angela tapped twice.

A child’s voice cleared those inside to open the door. “It’s the boss.”

Whitney remained outside. He and Ben would switch off at each house to stay warm and alert, while Greg provided a roaming patrol.

“Good evening.” Angela swept the crowded home as people returned her greeting. The shelters were almost barren. Only heavy furniture had been left. That included dressers, beds, and tables. It was enough to make Safe Haven’s stay almost pleasant after the limited comfort in the mountain.

Some of the homes also had Christmas decorations. Angela was certain most of it would be eliminated before morning. People couldn’t handle those reminders. It had already been handled here. The plastic tree had been covered with a checkered tablecloth.

Angela acknowledged Brittani, but she went to Gus. Both of them were still wearing parkas. Damp tracks on the wood floor told Angela they were making trips to the supply trucks. She had ordered their food and water brought in. The pair was handling it personally between meal shifts.

Brittani and Gus’s family was also here, in addition to Cody, Mandy and her baby, the twins, and a dozen jumpy camp members who stared at her. That would get worse if she didn’t make these rounds. People were twitchy. They needed to know she was looking out for them. “I’ll be holding a meeting here in a few hours. I’d like food ready, but I want your woman to sleep while you cover it.”

Gus agreed happily, missing Brittani’s frown. She didn’t like being treated as if she was just one of the camp.

Angela hid a smirk and went to kneel by Mandy. “Any trouble?”

The twins perked up, as did Mandy’s child. The trio stared in blurry happiness, able to sense an alpha even though they could barely see.

“No. They’re sweet.”

“Any sign of power?”

Mandy shook her head. “No. I’m watching.”

“Good.” Angela didn’t linger. She went outside, letting Ben shut the door behind her.

Next to the house, Kenn was now working in a small pup tent that held crates of weapons. She didn’t disturb him, but she did verify his guard was nearby and ready to kill if needed.

Morgan nodded in recognition of that duty and resumed sweeping the landscape with both types of sight.

Wind whipped overtop the town, blowing frozen debris from a roof. It crashed to the ground nearby, scaring people.

Faces appeared in every window, forcing Angela to flash hand codes in repeated directions to settle them down as she went to the next house. She’d covered the food and weapons. Now it was time to check on the wounded. Without doctors here, other than herself, this was a priority. She tapped.

“It’s the boss.”

Another child cleared her, confirming that she’d drafted a descendant child to cover each house. Smart. Ben wasn’t convinced the kids would be a defense, but he’d figured out they were a warning. The Eagles and camp members in each home would do the fighting.

Conversations stopped, letting them all hear the wind. It was growing stronger.

Samantha was in the far corner, bundled into her sleeping bag and covered with a thick quilt. Leeann was next to her, holding a bottle of water and a bottle of pills. “She won’t take her meds.” Wearing a white jacket and a white beanie, Leeann was a mini angel of mercy from old films.

Angela was glad the smells in here were medicinal, but not overpowering. They might have to open the windows tomorrow, when those who hadn’t been able to use the bathroom tents were finally forced to make use of the cracked bedpans they’d dug out. “She wants to be awake in case she’s needed.”

Leeann frowned. “But she’s in pain. I can feel it.”

The other injured men and women in the room watched them. Hair pinned up and faces dirty, they still appeared happier than they had two days ago. A few were even smiling. They’d been bundled up and fed, then medicated and encouraged to sleep–all by a child who wasn’t as tall as any of them. Angela had known there wouldn’t be problems in this house, which is why she’d put the girl with them. It wasn’t because Leeann was too weak to fight or too young. It was so she wouldn’t have to.

Leeann was reckless–much like Angela had been at that age and still was when life became too hard. Angela didn’t tell the adults in the room it was to keep the child occupied until she was tired enough to sleep. Many of them were or had been parents. They knew what she was doing.

“It doesn’t matter to her.” Angela finished her mental sweep. “She’s willing to hurt so she can keep monitoring the storm.”

Leeann’s brows puckered. “Well, I don’t like it.”

Samantha and the others snickered.

Angela shrugged. “What can I say? Eagles are stubborn. It keeps them alive.”

“Whatever.” Leeann went to the window to give the adults time alone.

It made Angela wonder if Leeann might be able to sense the storm too. Hopeful, she stored the information for later and went to Samantha for the update.

“No change so far.” Samantha looked at her with bloodshot eyes. “We’re in the direct path. We’ll be here a while.”

Next to them, Michael frowned. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

Michael didn’t know about the refugees on their trail. He’d been unconscious for most of the escape and trip here. Angela shrugged, not wanting to explain it right now. “Send for me if anything changes.”

“You know it.” Samantha shut her eyes and resumed searching the darkness.

**Book 9**

[A picture containing fireworks

Description automatically generated](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-9.html)

[Last Call](http://www.authorangelawhite.website/book-9-new.html)

## Contact the Author

**Facebook:**

<https://www.facebook.com/authorangelawhite/>

**Email:**

[cloudninepublications@yahoo.com](mailto:cloudninepublications@yahoo.com)

**Website:**

<http://authorangelawhite.weebly.com/>