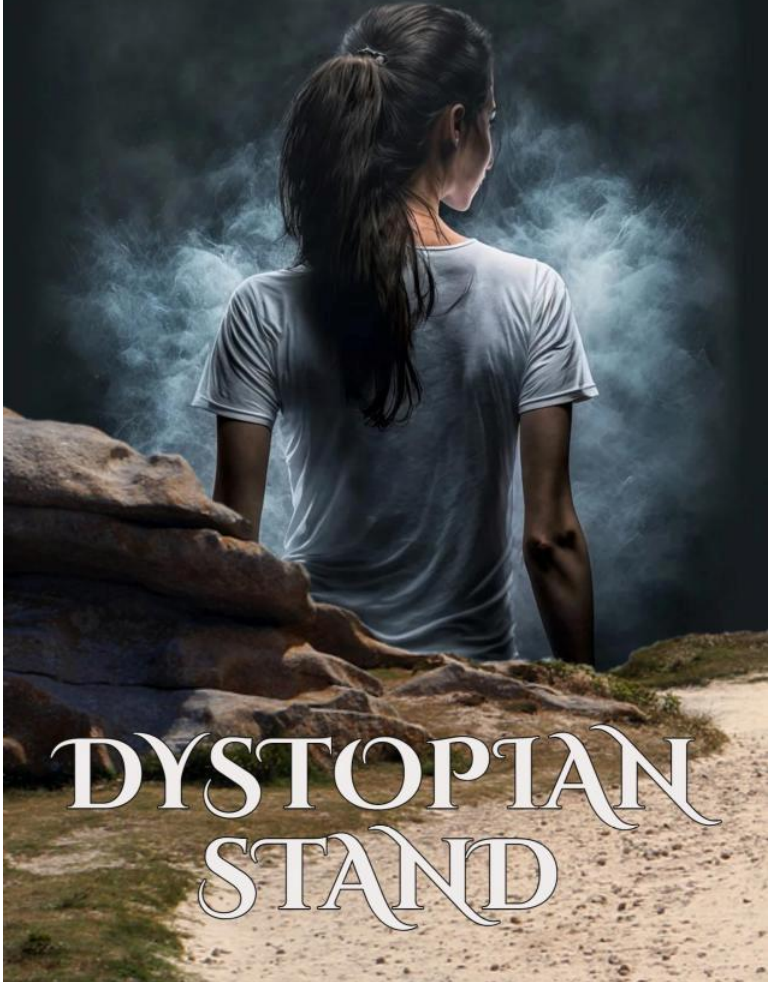


ANGELA WHITE

LIFE AFTER WAR BOOK #4



[Safe Haven Route of Travel](#)

(For book 4)

Copyright
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Angela White

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Closing

One Common Goal

A Hero to lead them;
A witch as a guide.
Eagles to defend them,
From every side

A Doctor to heal them;
A Star to strengthen.
A secretive father,
And a fallen idol.
A camp of refugees,
With skeletons to rival.

A group of gifted teens;
A clan of closed-off women.
An army of Eagles,
With a common goal among them.

To save their future,
To stay, to survive;
To continue recovering,
To push, to never hide.

The old Government;
Coming to reclaim.
From the past,
They'll deliver more of the same.

Safe Haven will stand–united,
Or they will fall.
Once again, the bad guys are coming,
Determined to end it all.

If they can take a witch,
Or a few gifted teenagers,
Safe Haven Refugee Camp
Will be in the hands of strangers.

Part One

“A period of adjustment is always required during a change in leadership, but not everyone can afford the lost time. That’s when you discover if they’re worth following at all.” –Adrian Mitchel, Former leader of SHRC

Prologue

The war has begun to change us.

The mental cliffs we've been forced to leap—the horrors we now hold inside—are nothing compared to the physical evolutions. We're harder, stronger, more determined, but also weaker because we need each other so much more. It creates vulnerabilities.

We're angrier, as well. We know the government survived and we'll have to fight them to remain free. We've faced slavers and nature, direct attacks from crazed refugees, and personal hatred inside our own borders, but all of that was to prepare us for this moment. We represent what's left of the great American herd.

And I'm scared.

They are going to come for him—these people will know everything in a short time—and Adrian will be unprotected except for the Eagles. That won't be enough to defeat the government. If they get ahold of Adrian, the entire world will finish falling. His powers are so magnetic he could be used to draw in every gifted person on the planet. With all light gone, all hope, our civilization will crumble. I have to ask something of Marc, something that will torture him. I need him to help me save the man he wants to kill.

Chapter One
Concentrated Chaos

June 30th
Toltec State Park
Scott, AR

1

“Raven to Kyle. Have someone escort Conner to the medical tent.”

“Copy.”

She looked at Neil in annoyance. “Next?”

She reminded him so strongly of Marc on his second day in Safe Haven that Neil smiled despite the heaviness in his heart. “Questions. You provide the answers.”

Angela planted her feet firmly, as she’d seen Adrian do so many times, and found the stance almost comfortable. “Hit me. I can take it now.”

At the moment, Neil had little doubt. The waves of determination rolling from her were strong enough to bolster his own lagging faith. “First is camp security. Stays doubled?”

“Yes.”

“We’re taking in new arrivals, even though we know they might be assassins?”

“Yes. Myself, Charlie, or Jennifer—in that order—will go through them. If we’re all busy, then they wait.”

Neil hoped that would be a standard now. They couldn’t take any more chances, not with the government coming.

Subtly reading those closest to her, Angela opened a fresh layer of concern. “It won’t be just him, Neil. They know about Conner, and about me. One careless slip or forced conversation, and we’re on their radar for Jennifer and Sam as well.”

“They’ll take all of you!” Neil realized, horrified.

“And then kill the others here. It’s what you do when there’s an outbreak.”

“Otherwise it spreads.”

“Yes, but they don’t understand the dream of freedom doesn’t belong to one man or even an entire camp. It’s a birthright; we’ll never stop fighting.” She glanced around, including the nervously listening Eagles. “They’re not taking anyone from this camp. I’ll die first.”

Neil held out the notebook for her to read the next item on his list.

Where does she stand on the Gov issue?

Angela took his pen and quickly scratched two words.

With Adrian.

Neil slid the notebook into his pocket and waved Zack over. “He’s your personal shadow for

the day. If you don't see him, even for an instant, trigger your alarm."

Before she could question, Neil motioned to an Eagle in the trees she couldn't identify from where they stood.

"That's Shawn. He's your sniper today—fresh out of Marc's class and eager to pull the trigger. If you don't want them shot, stay out of reach of all new people."

Angela agreed curtly. "What else?"

"Kevin will go over a couple things, and then you'll be on your own."

Kevin immediately asked what many were already wondering. "You've chosen Marc as your XO?"

"Adrian gave him that place. I didn't argue."

Neil hid a smirk at the prepared answer and gestured for Kevin to continue. He was getting a crash course on being an assistant to someone in the chain of command. Neil and Kyle had gotten their lessons from Kenn and hated every minute of it. Kevin's would be better, though certainly not easier considering the circumstances.

"We realize you've had..."

"*I* realize," Neil corrected without the malice that had always layered Kenn's teaching moments. "The slot comes with the blame, as well as the fame."

Kevin cleared his throat. "I realize you've had almost no time to adjust, but the faster you settle three things, the easier this camp will run for you."

Angela liked it that she wasn't the only one who was unsure exactly what to do. She answered reasonably. "You tell me, I'll argue, and we'll go from there."

Kevin blinked. "Uh, yeah. Okay." He cleared his throat again. "Your chain of command, your rules and punishments, and a meeting where you tell the camp those things."

Angela raised a brow. "What's the third?"

Kevin made a face. "That was all three."

Angela was eager to rise to the challenge she'd been gifted with. "Picking and then telling the camp are on the same ticket. The second is getting the camp to approve my choices. What's the third?"

Neil was impressed. He and Kyle had thrown that in with no real hopes she'd catch it due to their clever wording. "Third is following through—getting it to all work."

Kevin frowned. "Do you know how you're going to get their approval?"

Angela peered toward the medical tent, able to feel Adrian hanging on to a temporary alertness so he could hear her say she had it covered. He was ready to give up.

Yes, the witch confirmed. He brought Conner here and gave you control. He will not keep fighting without a goal...and those who cannot find hope will not survive.

It was a mirror of what the witch had told her back in Ohio. Angela glanced at the men waiting nervously for her answer. "No, I don't."

She retreated before they could respond. Of course, she knew how to do it. She had to save Adrian's life, lead Safe Haven to the mountains, and start settling them inside. During that time, she also had to convince the camp to accept the magic in their midst and help fight the government troops that would come.

Kevin's face was red as he caught up. "Sorry. I didn't know they were testing you."

Angela shrugged. "They got you too, rookie."

"Yeah." He grunted. "This is all new. I never thought they'd recommend me for this."

"Recommend? I get a choice?"

"Sure. Neil said you'd probably let Marc know who you prefer for your..." Kevin paused, unsure what place he'd been shoved into.

Angela filled in the title with grave pride. "Personal assistant to the leader of Safe Haven Refugee Camp."

Kevin's mind went to places he knew better than to mourn. Those days would come around again. They were working hard on it even now. "I won't be mad if you let me go for Kyle or Jeremy, or someone who already knows how the inside stuff works."

From that, Angela understood Kevin had been given the chance at a place all the men would want. He was being rewarded for his steadfast performance in Little Rock, she was sure, but there was a feeling it might be more.

“I mean it. I won’t be mad. I don’t have enough experience for this.”

She grunted. “That makes two of us.” Angela ducked into the medical tent and went to Adrian, ignoring all those observing her. There were only Eagles in this tent, plus John, Anne, and Conner. The time for hiding what she was, at least with this group, was over.

Angela raised a hand over Adrian’s feverish body; the witch scanned him.

Dying, came the prompt answer. *Poison and infection.*

I have to have Adrian. I can’t do this without his guidance.

You know the price?

I do.

And you pay it willingly?

Marc will be Charlie’s lifeline?

Yes. Fathers have the same gifts.

And Adrian’s right about what he put in the notebook? That...Marc’s been lying to himself and everyone else?

Yes.

Then save Adrian. If the need ever comes, Marc will cover Charlie.

As you wish.

Now?

You haven’t recovered enough. Another twelve hours.

He may not have that long.

Adrian didn't wake, but she sensed he wasn't so far under she couldn't reach him. How long would it hold?

Angela turned toward the cooler and got a bottle of water. The more she drank, the faster the chemicals would leave her system. She searched herself briefly over the choice to save Adrian and found a strange chill that hadn't been there before. She should be devastated Marc had lied, but she wasn't. She hadn't been even from the instant she'd read that curtly scribbled paragraph.

For personal reasons, I've chosen not to tell her what Marc's hiding. When she runs that blue glow through the filters, does she miss the meaning intentionally? I wonder if she hasn't known all along and allowed him to hide it because she knows what an ugly burden it is to be born this way.

Yes, she did understand the price of power, but that wasn't how it had happened. Until Safe Haven, she hadn't suspected at all. Once here, though, Marc had fit Adrian's leadership profile a bit too closely to be overlooked by the boss man. That had been her first clue—that Adrian found Marc useful enough to take advice and use him in FND work. Then, she'd noticed Marc's way with the camp women, heard him using it. Moments from their childhood had flashed her to the magic they'd always shared, to how he'd always understood her so well. By the time the glow had happened, it had only been a confirmation that she'd been scared to get before

then. That was why she'd never filled up from him; they both would have had to face his lie.

Dribbling water, Angela wiped her mouth and mind clear as John joined her. She had work to do. Speculation and conversation would keep. "Have him ready to go out for evening mess and then get him prepped. Wait as long as you can to call me. I still have drugs in my blood that will interfere."

"Can we get another water truck and two more tents set up? A few of the patients can be switched out to give privacy and space."

Thrilled to be getting a cover story with the request, Angela was able to sound almost cheerful. "You, doctor, can have about anything you want." She hated witnesses.

John grunted, unable to play along. "How about the cure for Cancer?"

Angela viewed him in dismay. "It's back? Already?"

John took off his glasses, rubbing restlessly at the frame. "This is a particularly aggressive type. The chemicals we're absorbing are feeding it, I think."

Angela asked the question that now mattered most to her. "How many people in camp have terminal cancers?"

John didn't meet her observant stare. "More than a dozen, with twice that many suspected."

"Oh, my god!" Was this covered in one of Adrian's notebooks? "That's like... That's..."

"Almost a sixth of them."

Angela turned to stare toward the camp she could hear waking. One in six. There was no way she could help them all.

“He said to tell you not to drown in the bad—to swim through it.”

Angela tried to breathe normally. She wasn’t drowning in pity—she was furious. How dare fate take yet another cut! John’s hand on her arm was a warm comfort she shrugged off. “I’ll work on it. You’ll have him ready?”

“For both appointments.” John slid his glasses on. “You know he’ll be groggy and in pain. They might see through his act.”

Angela sighed, moving for the flap to relay the doctor’s needs to Kevin. “Yes. I also know Adrian would rather be with his people than anywhere else. He’ll pull strength from their joy. They won’t know, but they’ll be the ones who really save him.”

Angela ducked out of the medical flap with guilt and anger fighting for room in her heart. They had five men inside with serious gunshot wounds, one with a high fever of unknown origin, and three with minor bone breaks. It had been a rough mission. Twenty-four confident, eager men had gone into that city with her. That number had come out, but none of them were the same.

“What should I do?”

Angela let Cynthia stay close as she left the medical tent. “Get the team—you’re in charge on this one. I want the kids’ group working the QZ gate. Have them scan every living thing that gets close to

this camp. When there's a lull, I want them patrolling the perimeter with the senior Eagles. Make it clear they do as they're told or they return to being camp kids. We want their help, but don't need it should be the undertone."

Cynthia left without looking at Kevin.

"We hear from Kenn yet?" Angela asked.

Kevin made a motion to the perimeter man and got a quick response. "He checked in before dawn, but not since."

"I want him first when he gets home." Angela gave an order without realizing it. "Make sure I'm here for it."

"I will."

Angela spotted Mitch in the coffee line. "That's different."

Kevin filled her in on Mitch, the group fistfight, and gave her an update on Dog. Neil had shoved a paper into his hand while he waited at the medical flap for her.

Angela wanted to spend a few minutes thinking about all three reports, but she couldn't spare the time. The problems with their animal population would also have to wait. "John needs help in here. Go visit these people and tell them it's time they used their skills instead of mooching in fear."

Kevin recorded the names and left. These women had nursing skills, but hadn't told Adrian? Didn't they know they would have been priority members? Kevin was still pondering the weakness fear created as he crossed into the main camp.

Angela spotted Marc across the distance. That was another change she wanted to explore, but she headed for the little mess instead, where Li Sing was directing food into the smaller bins. She needed to study the area for a minute. They had to be careful not to let the camp know how injured Adrian was and that required a good illusion.

“Coffee?”

Angela smiled gratefully as Li Sing hurried to push a steaming mug into her hand.

“Sit, eat.”

Angela wasn't going to, but the smell of freshly baked bread caught her nose and pulled her onto the bench. “Just for a minute.”

Li Sing went to carve a thick slice.

Angela took her notebook out. Around her, the camp and QZ were slowly waking. It was okay to steal a personal minute—something she hadn't had since before going into Little Rock. Later, it would be impossible.

“Butter?”

Angela tore off a small chunk. “Nope.”

The warm bread was perfect, and she found herself sitting quietly instead of viewing the notes and to-do list she'd made. The sound of the camp coming to life was...magical.

“You look like him. Stop it.”

Angela didn't answer Kyle's half-joke as he came through the netting around the mini-mess.

He filled a tray with enough food and drinks to outfit a small army, and Angela gave him an

approving nod as he slipped right back out. Kyle was off duty now. He'd more than earned the break.

Crack!

A number of people flinched at the distant thunder. It was something they hadn't heard in months.

"Yeah, that timing figures." Angela wasn't bitter. They'd known rain was coming. Adrian would have prepared for it.

As if to mock the assumption, a stiff breeze began rustling the papers in her notebook.

Angela pulled the pen from the holder. Her minute was up.

2

"How is he?"

Chris jumped at the hostile voice, backing away from the food bowl he'd just set down. "Perfect—like there wasn't even a fight."

Marc scowled. "Maybe there wasn't!"

Chris retreated as Marc came closer. It was easy to guess the man was upset. The vet grabbed for a calming trigger. "How's Adrian?"

Marc growled.

Chris cowered along the tent wall. *Wrong button!*

Dog was instantly alarmed at the waves in the tent. This wasn't the master he'd chosen to serve. This was the Marine—who Dog happened to loathe. The wolf wasn't sure what had occurred after the fight. The last thing he remembered was falling on

top of the pile he had already killed, as more of them attacked.

Marc clenched his fists, throwing out a cold warning. “If anyone suspects what I did, you’re who I’ll talk to about it.”

Chris stammered out a promise, but it wasn’t enough for Marc.

“That includes the chain of command—all of it.”

Chris understood, but unlike the Eagles, he wasn’t bonded with Adrian that way. In fact, in another world, he and Marc might even have been some semblance of friends. Considering who this hard man was sleeping with, it wouldn’t happen now. “They’ll think it wasn’t bad, that I took care of it. Keep him in here for a bit to cover.”

Satisfied, Marc delivered a last blast from his anger supply. “Mitch told me he saw you skulking around the night of the sinkhole. I’m checking into that when shit settles down around here. Now get out.”

Chris fled, shaking with fear and anger. Marc thought he could make changes while Adrian was laid up, did he?

“But he didn’t notice he had help.” Chris hadn’t been able to leave the wolf to suffer. Marc’s magic had done wonders, saved the animal, but the vet had also contributed.

Chris hurried toward the animal trailer; mind a furious maze of secrets and scars. “I’ll show him. And when I do, she won’t want him anymore.”

Marc knelt to stroke the wolf, not reacting to Dog's reluctance. The animal would always sense the difference, but Marc had no choice in how he handled the vet. Adrian's traditional methods had barely worked on Chris before. This required sterner measures and he'd had to bring the military man inside forward to do it. Marc didn't like being mean, even to those he mistrusted or didn't care for. It wasn't in his nature.

Dog relaxed as the air of menace faded. He enjoyed the rub Marc was delivering. Dog wished he could speak to Marc, as he did some of the others here. He needed to express his gratitude, but more, to warn Marc.

Marc knew Dog was special. He'd watched Adrian put the wolf to work and been glad. He, too, understood what it meant to be needed, to have a place.

"But not this one." Marc frowned. "The load is too heavy. It'll use us both up."

Dog nudged Marc's hands. He switched ears, wishing he could talk to Dog. He wasn't sure what he'd say, other than to ask if the wolf had another name he preferred. After all these years, 'Dog' felt rude. The big animal was much more than that.

Dog strained, not sure if it could be done, but willing to try...

Marc stilled at the new sensation. He knew what it was—someone inexperienced trying to find a line in... Sudden intuition made him drop his mental walls.

Take her and run—now.

Marc drew his gun, even though he connected the deep voice to Dog almost instantly. “Where’s the threat?”

In the medical tent, about to be healed.

Marc winced, holstering. “The first time we’ve spoken and that’s what you pick?”

Dog blew out a damp snort. *A warning to get your mate and go, while you still have her. Isn’t that valuable?*

Marc sighed. “It would be, if I didn’t already know.”

Dog glanced up in confusion.

Marc forced the words out. “My time with her is limited. I don’t know why, or what I can do that would possibly change it without hurting all these people, but I know she’ll leave me. At some point, she won’t be satisfied.”

Dog didn’t know what to say, beyond the obvious. *Why would you accept that?*

“I haven’t. I’ll fight for her until I’m dead...or until she says she’s done. When I hear that, I’m gone.”

Why would you go through so much pain for something you have no hope of keeping?

“Love sucks like that, Dog. It doesn’t give you a choice.”

Dog considered. *Like the breeding heats.*

Marc was startled into a smile. “Uh, yeah, I guess. You have no choice, right?”

Dog whined lowly. *I'd hurt you, if you got in the way.*

Marc understood. Some things just pulled a male like that.

What will you do after?

Marc grunted. "No idea. Find a substitute and hurt, take off and roam this dead world, blow my brains out... It's hard to say at this point." Marc shook off the depression. "But for right now, I plan to enjoy every second she gives me. I had no idea what I was missing. I thought I did, but Angie willing is..."

Dog whined again, burying his head under a large paw.

Marc laughed. "Sorry."

Dog rolled over. *I'll stay out of sight for a while.*

Marc was reminded of his secret, but Dog already knew what he wanted there too.

I would never volunteer such information.

Marc didn't want to ask, but he had to. "And if she questions you directly on it?"

Dog, who was sure telling Adrian those forbidden things had caused his near-death, made his choice quickly. *I won't answer in any way that would imply I was healed.*

"Can she..." Marc sighed. "Could she pry it out of your mind?"

She won't need to. If I refuse to answer, she'll know it's to protect someone.

"She won't think of me." Marc hated keeping secrets from her.

What happens when she finds out?

Not if, but when. Marc stood up and left the tent without answering.

When Angela found out he was like her and had been all along, that he'd left her to be different alone because he'd feared the same treatment; when she finally realized he'd been lying to her the entire time they'd known each other, it would be the beginning of the end for them. That was a pain she would never be able to forgive.

As Marc came from the tent, he spotted Cynthia herding a small group of reluctant, bleary shadows through the fog. At least he didn't have Cynthia's duty. Between Angela and that teenage mess, Marc wasn't sure he had the worst end of the whipping stick.

3

“Why us? We're not trained for this.”

Cynthia didn't answer. None of the teenagers had liked being dragged from their warm cots.

“Can't we at least have a few minutes to wake up?” Even Charlie was grouchy. He was missing his morning time with Tracy. This was the only ten minutes he could steal with her. Later, the camp would be too active.

Cynthia still didn't respond. She wouldn't until one of them asked a question that mattered.

“Isn't this a job for the Eagles or Angela?” Jennifer was moving slower than the others. Her back was aching.

Cynthia's continued silence annoyed the sullen kids; the complaints began to fly uncensored. When it got loud enough to draw attention, Cynthia stopped and turned around. She looked at Charlie, but each of them felt her silent scold.

Charlie didn't cave. "Well, we won't be doing anything! After all the fighting here yesterday, any groups that were around took off."

Cynthia gestured toward a cloud of dust coming from the west. "Just the opposite. Because we've proven repeatedly that we can defend ourselves, they'll come in heavier now. And your mom wants you here, officially. If it goes well, this might be a regular post."

Charlie caught the hint. "You mean we'll pick who gets in and who doesn't?"

Cynthia had forgotten how Angela had told her to handle it. "Yes. We need you to do your duty here."

Understanding that it wasn't make-work, the group stopped complaining.

Cynthia went on. "The front desk is where you'll sit. The guards will let in one carload at a time for you to do paperwork. Make us proud."

Charlie turned to Jennifer. "You and I will dig in while Matt and Becca distract them. Between the two of us, we'll ferret out every little secret."

Jennifer was all for it. "We should have a code or something, for the ones we decide to refuse."

“What about a code like the Eagles use?” Matt was eager to be more important than the Eagles. “That way our men can get rid of them.”

Cynthia listened, hearing the self-importance, the too-strict laws emerging. It wasn't what they needed. When the teenagers began openly discussing life and death, Cynthia remembered her instructions and understood why Angela hadn't wanted it handled this way.

“Stop it!” The reporter was angry. “Your first thought, when you find something you don't like, is to ask yourself what Adrian would do.” Cynthia held up a curt finger against the protests. “You guys haven't been made leaders. You don't decide life and death, or who stays and goes. Angela and Adrian do that! You'll fill out their paperwork, send them to a QZ tent, and let an Eagle know if there's a problem. You will not directly confront anyone about anything you pick up or Angela will send you back to the training tent.”

Complete silence came, layered in hostile glowers.

Cynthia didn't know what to do. “Fine. You know what? I'm going to go tell her I screwed up by telling you this job mattered, and then I'm going to tell her I think it's a bad idea.” Cynthia stomped away.

“Hang on!”

“Don't!”

She stopped, but didn't face them. “Angela knew you guys weren't ready. I thought you were.

It's no big deal. You'll train for another six months before you get the next chance and then you'll do great on it." She resumed her steps, fully prepared to report exactly that.

Charlie waved the others toward the QZ desk with a low whisper. "Wait for me there."

He hurried to Cynthia's side.

The reporter tried to block her thoughts by thinking of the brick wall from Village of the Damned.

"That doesn't work on me. Cool idea, though, to hide the bomb that way. We might know something was there, but until enough brick crumbled, you'd have the advantage."

Cynthia glanced over in mild surprise. Not only did Charlie make it a habit to never talk to her, he also didn't talk openly about magic with anyone but his mom. Even in the lessons, which were being called the Jr. Eagles, he was careful.

"Thank you."

Cynthia stopped to give him a searching look. "For your mom, right?"

Charlie nodded. "I was reading you just then and I realized I hadn't said that."

Only two other people giving her those words had meant more. Cynthia felt her heart expand; she shoved away the teary emotions. "You have to lead them. If you want the things I think you do, the legal bonds with certain people, then work for it."

Charlie knew she meant Tracy. For that bond, he would work their team into the ground.

Cynthia knew she'd gotten to him. She turned to glare at the other kids over the distance. "Each of them has triggers inside those intelligent minds. When you hit one, remember and use it ruthlessly. They've been complete strangers to you, fellow refugees, and even friends. Now, make them your team."

"I need to think." Charlie hesitated. "Can I stand here and do it, or should I put them to work and do it during?"

Cynthia leaned against the water tanker. "Which way would be more effective?"

Charlie considered. "If I could at least plan out this first day, I could work on tomorrow's setup after the shift."

"Good. Why not send your team to the mess for trays to bring with them and buy planning time?"

Charlie liked it that his first order would be well received. "Thanks, Cyn."

Cynthia froze at the nickname; she quickly turned around before she started crying. Being accepted still felt odd.

Chapter Two
Honest Lies

1

Kenn pulled into the QZ parking lot just before lunch, annoyed and worried about more than just Adrian. He'd already checked in with the perimeter men over the radio. Everyone knew he'd returned, but no one was here to update him. He peered around in confusion. *Where is everyone?*

Crack!

Thunder had the camp scurrying. Kenn saw Eagles racing to secure things. Tarps were going up, animals were being brought in, and the perimeter shift was still doubled. It appeared normal for the situation, but Kenn knew it wasn't.

He'd been sent away. Why? Because Marc was in charge now? Kenn was braced to accept it, so long as he was still the XO when this was all over. *Adrian promised me that.*

Kenn left his gear in the truck, not sure he wouldn't be ordered right back out on another meaningless run. He headed for the medical tent, but before he got there, Angela came through the QZ with Kevin and Samantha on her heels. Kenn strained to hear them.

“Yes, to all of those and shut the QZ desk half an hour before dark. From now on, we’ll pass out food and water, get a sheet on any medical issues they have that can’t wait, and tell them we’ll open at 8am.”

“Do you want security on those who wait overnight?”

Angela paused to consider Kevin’s question, then made the choice. “Yes, but light. I don’t want to scare even one of them away.”

As Kevin left, Samantha took over the questioning. “Neil said to tell you he needs an answer on the first three things you were given.”

“Tell Neil to cool them all off—send the music players out and dig up some pre-holiday fireworks. That’ll buy us more time. They have to have contact with Adrian before they get the official word on who he gave command to. If they think we’re hiding his death, they might riot.” Angela moved out of sight.

Kenn noticed how much quiet protection she had, including Adrian’s personal sniper... His mouth dropped open. “He gave it to her!”

Mocking laughter came from nearby.

“After all the training lessons, did you really think he wouldn’t gift her that way? Weren’t you watching her soak it up like she was born a Mitchel?”

Kenn turned slowly to find Marc lounging against the water truck. Kenn prepared to fight for his place if it was needed.

Marc threw in a bit of explanation, hoping to be sure of Kenn's intentions, but also his cooperation. Now wasn't the time for battling each other. "You lost your chance at leadership a while ago. So have most of the top men along the way. Other than the rookie teams, she's the only Eagle left who might hesitate to pull a trigger, to kill."

Kenn didn't respond.

Marc straightened. "The man I served with would have known this was coming."

Kenn's face darkened. "I assumed it would be *you* in charge, asshole."

Marc smirked, moving off. "You were wrong. On a lot of things."

Kenn saw Daryl fall into the shadows, staying even with Marc, and understood what hadn't been said. Daryl, on the few occasions they'd seen fit to protect him, had been Kenn's sniper. Safe Haven's leader and XO were protected by the top teams. Angela and Marc were in control. It was his nightmare come true.

Kenn stayed still, running it through the filters, trying to accept. It was just until Adrian recovered...

When the Marine finally moved, it was to find a line of Eagles waiting.

Kenn rolled his eyes. "I don't need another intervention."

"That would be a pleasant change." Angela came from behind him, looking tired and glorious under stress. Kenn hated her.

"How was the trip?"

Kenn grunted. “Make-work.”

Angela stayed alert. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that. Adrian thought it was best you were away when everything happened.”

“Adrian?”

Angela lit a cigarette, ignoring Kenn’s snide tone. She’d been awake for four hours and she was already beat. *How did Adrian do this day-in and day-out?* “Adrian made the calls on placement, though he made it clear I can change them if I’m unhappy.”

Kenn snorted rudely. “You and asshole running it all—why would you protest?”

“Because I need this camp to run even smoother than it did under Adrian, and the only way that happens is through you.”

Kenn recognized a peace offering; he considered it. “You’ll bump Marc somewhere else? Somewhere below me?”

“Yes.” Angela stared coolly. “Do I need to?”

“If I say yes, what happens?”

“You get the XO slot, Marc gets something a lot further down, and the camp and Eagles spend the rest of Adrian’s recovery making your life as miserable as they possibly can.”

Kenn had known, but hearing it, being sure he had no choice, helped. “And if I say no?”

“You stay on Adrian’s right through his recovery and top off a steady reform with bonus points.”

“Meaning I’m forgiven?”

Angela had bigger things to spar over. “For me? Yes. And that means for most of the Eagles, as well.”

Kenn didn’t have to spend time thinking about it, but he still loathed the idea. Some days would be hard, but if he got to stay by Adrian, he would determine his own future.

“Should I bump him?”

“No.”

Satisfied, Angela turned away without adding anything. A man’s pride was a tricky thing to replace. Destroying it was almost always lethal, but even wounds could be deadly. Kenn was willing to keep trying to change. So long as he was, the past might really be over for her.

Angela gave a positive motion to the waiting Eagles. They disappeared.

“Hey!”

Angela didn’t face Kenn’s accusing tone. She knew what was coming.

“Why didn’t I rate a constant shadow?”

“Because you were always the threat.”

2

Lunchtime for Safe Haven found both sides of the QZ tape calm.

Angela keyed her new mike. “I need the top people at the little mess.”

There were garbled rogers. She keyed the mike again. “Five minutes.” Angela lit a cigarette, steadying herself.

Kenn was first, striding briskly.

She nodded her thanks as she took a steaming cup of tea from his hand. He’d clearly been expecting the call. Angela smoked and sipped, eager to see who would be next.

Kyle rounded the corner of the medical tent. Neil showed up behind him. Jeremy and Doug appeared next. With her, it was first come, first to serve. If you didn’t know your place by now, odds were good that you didn’t have one.

Angela went into the little mess. She leaned on an end of a table, too restless to sit. “You guys know who handles what and I feel no need to disrupt Adrian’s routines...yet. I’m going to tell you what I know has to be done. You’ll then tell me who handles each item and hit me with anything I missed.”

Kenn took out his notebook, surveying the area. “Where’s the new XO?”

Angela concentrated for an instant. She didn’t need as much time now to use her gifts. “Perimeter check. It makes him nervous to have all of us in one place now.”

Neil nodded. “Same here.”

Angela got them going. “The rain is first. Samantha says we’re in for a downpour over a couple days. Make whatever preparations Adrian

normally has you do, but be low-key about it. The camp can't know that we knew."

Neil raised a finger. "That's mine."

Marc came through the flap and took the open seat on Angela's right without a comment, but his face was tight.

She kept rolling. "We'll have to switch our parking area. Getting stuck in the mud isn't a big deal until Adrian says let's roll."

"I'll take care of it."

She ignored Kenn's flat tone. "We also need to move tents and animals. You and Neil will work together?"

Both men agreed, neither as reluctantly as she might have expected. Kenn missing XO this time around had settled a lot of Neil's remaining animosity.

"Adrian's pet projects are next. I know he has a lot of things going on. Someone needs to get me a list, with updates."

Kenn wrote it in his book.

"Adrian needs things—his brown box, clothes that are loose, his poncho and boots. Also, the bottle in his bedroll, but when he wants a third shot, tell him no because of the medication mix." Angela registered the calming atmosphere, but she was too busy settling into settling things down to figure out what it meant. "Schedules and shift changes will be handled daily for now. The watch stays doubled until Adrian says otherwise, and no one goes in or out without my say-so."

“I’ve got all that.” Marc’s tone dared anyone to argue.

No one did.

“I want entertainments set up, too, but not just anything. I need people well occupied. If he’s been saving something good, now’s the time to bring it out.”

“Mine and Jax.” Jeremy wrote the notes.

“The QZ needs two gophers and a burning crew. Tell Li Sing all hot meals for the next week.” Angela stubbed out her cig as she waited for them to catch up and sort the jobs, then she continued. “How are we on water and fuel?”

“Low, but okay for roughly two hundred miles and one camp stop of four days.” Kenn thumbed through his worn book for the information.

“So we have two day’s reserves and four days stock on both?”

“Maybe five, if we start rationing now.”

“No. We’ll collect rainwater for cleaning and toilets. John will give numbers on how much bleach to use and what all can be done with the dirty water.” Angela switched topics. “Have there been any reports of lurkers or anything out of place from the teens on the gate or the guards?”

Everyone indicated things were fine; she was relieved. She wasn’t sure how to handle it yet when the answer came back different. “What about the camp?”

Neil shrugged. “Appears to be calm.”

Clearly, none of them was sure. “We’ll need a confirmation on it. I want a complete weapons inventory in the next 48-hours and Samantha needs a basic aquaponics setup. She provided a list of the supplies to make our own.” Angela held it out.

Jeremy didn’t protest when Neil took it.

“What about the other kids inside the complex?”

Kyle frowned. “The ones like Conner?”

Kenn glanced at Angela. “They took off the second we escaped.”

Neither of them said that would be how the government bunker found out what happened. They didn’t need to.

“That’s it from me. What did I miss?”

Kenn closed his book after making a final note. “Other than the ants, I’m good.”

There was an impressed note to his voice that she didn’t put stock in. “Leave the ants for now. The rain will buy some time there. Anything else?”

No one spoke. She looked around. “Surely I missed something?”

“Not that I noticed.” Marc didn’t soften his sharp tone. “You’ll be almost as good at this as Adrian is.” He walked out into the stiff breeze, leaving an uncomfortable silence.

“He’s checking the perimeter again.” Angela was keeping track of his thoughts now. “We’ll wait.”

Marc wasn’t gone long. No one missed the note of accusation as he spoke.

“Dale’s moving this way with enough panic on his face to draw attention. People are already peering from flaps and tables.”

Angela sighed. She had missed something. She’d assumed Marc had taken care of the final threat, but it was clear there’d been another.

Angela glanced at Kenn first.

Kenn knew who the problem was. “The odds were low on it. I should have said it might happen.”

“We’ll handle it like Adrian would.”

Kenn’s eyes went to Kyle’s frown and then Marc’s thickening glare. “Some of us can.”

Angela took another leap into the role she’d been given. “Negotiation attempt?”

“Maybe.” Kenn shrugged as Dale ducked into the little mess, voice almost a squeal.

“I can’t find Ray and I’ve been searching for hours. He was shot. He’s supposed to be resting!”

Neil hurried over to quiet him.

“Two-man Recon team?” Angela was still looking at Kenn.

In his mind, the words were different.

Take Marc and show him what’s expected of Safe Haven’s XO.

Kenn hadn’t been ready, but he covered it well. “I think that’s best. Unless you want to let Marc loose on them.”

Angela caught the question—Should I *make* him do it? She didn’t answer.

Marc scowled. “How many fucking walking plagues did you guys bring back from that city?”

Angela grunted. “Too many.”

“Where is he?!” Dale demanded from around Neil’s arm.

Kenn was waiting for Angela’s final choice, but Marc didn’t. He knew what had to be done—the same thing it always came to. More blood had to spill. “Let’s go. Fill me in while we travel.”

Kenn slowly rose, giving Angela time to say no. When she didn’t, his respect for her went up. Kenn rotated back before reaching the flap. “If he balks?”

Marc spun around, snorting out anger, but Angela and Kenn agreed on this. She would be surprised if Marc could handle the chore. It would take an asshole. “Then *you* do it.”

Kenn accepted the direct order without any reaction, but inside, there was a small cry from the old Kenn. He didn’t like taking her orders and that wouldn’t ever change.

They left as Neil took Dale out of earshot for a private talk.

“Quarantine Dale.” Angela looked at Kevin. “Do it now.”

Kevin didn’t like the idea, but he understood why. He approached Neil and Dale, quickly coming up with a story. “Dale, come on over to the next tent. We want John to check you out. If someone got Ray by drugging his food or water, you were probably hit with it too.”

Dale didn’t protest. He didn’t think it was anything other than what he’d been told. He left with Kevin, allowing himself to be comforted.

Angela turned to the remaining senior men. “I want a full camp check in, the QZ shut, and our perimeter shrunk by half. Make it happen.”

3

“Tell me—all of it.”

“It will be easier to show you.” They’d found the prints outside Ray’s tent easily enough and followed them to a small town neither of them could find on their maps. With two streets and roughly a dozen buildings, it wasn’t hard to pick out Ray’s Eagle jacket hanging from a rope on the rusty flagpole. It bothered them both to know this threat was camped so close to Safe Haven.

“Be ready with your rifle, and if you find you can’t pull the trigger, make sure I stay alive to do it.”

Marc hated not knowing, hated it that Angie thought he wouldn’t get the job done. “Just tell me what’s going on. Why is his jacket up there, but no ransom call or security?”

“They think we owe them this. When they’re done with him, he might have been returned. But our new *boss* doesn’t want a peaceful ending.”

Marc wasn’t sure how to take that. “Done with him, how?”

Kenn shuddered. Cara being dead was little comfort. “Just cover me as well as you would her or I won’t make it back to Safe Haven. And while I may not be missed, Ray will.”

Marc blew off the warnings. He didn't intend to be responsible for Kenn's death, directly or not. Someone else held that place of danger now.

Before Marc could ask anything else, Kenn left their cover for full view, hands up.

Marc swore under his breath as he ducked down and got set to fire, frustrated that he still didn't know who the target was.

The hundred or so snake women streamed from inside and behind the buildings of the town, all with various weapons. Kenn was encouraged that none of them were being fired or thrown yet. "Coming in! Get your leader."

A tall woman wearing bright orange scales sewn over a long trench coat walked from the town hall and down the walkway.

Kenn saw her protection moving closer and began planning the ways to take them out by himself. He was assuming Marc had frozen. A woman killer, Marc wasn't.

"Why are you here?"

Kenn blinked at the heavy English accent. "To collect what's been taken, of course."

The woman's expression said that wasn't allowed. "Your friend will be returned when he has satisfied the debt."

"I can't allow that. He belongs to someone else and they've paid well for his return. Unless you'd like to make a better offer?"

The woman's protection crowded closer, but she didn't flinch. "What did you have in mind?"

Kenn slowly pointed toward the jacket flapping harshly in the wind. “You return him and that, now, and we won’t kill all of you.” Kenn didn’t give them time to think. “When I go for my gun, the rest of his team, and mine, will open fire. I might be hit; Ray could be killed in the crossfire, but I promise two thirds of you won’t walk away. Being female means shit to us now.”

“You will belong to me.” Tiffany leered. “Take him inside.”

Kenn made a subtle gesture to Marc and allowed himself to be taken into custody. “Remember what I said, ladies. When I go for my gun, seventy of you will die.”

4

Marc recognized the heavily used ploy from their time as Marines, but he wasn’t sure he could go through with it. Now that he understood, he was reluctantly forced to accept that Angie might have been right. He wasn’t okay with killing women.

But Angela would expect all three of her Eagles to return, and that meant covering Kenn when he came out with Ray over his shoulder. Or just going in after them, like the motion had demanded. How could he do that without killing?

You can’t, his demon replied brutally. But I can. If these women are allowed to roam free, they’ll become as dangerous as any group of men.

Marc wanted to protest, but he couldn't. There was no arguing with the truth. "Okay. But you'll have to help me."

I take no pleasure in killing. Sex makes no never mind to the color of blood. It all tastes the same and it's always required. You know that.

"Yes, I do." Marc adjusted his scope to the main door that had swallowed Kenn. He thought briefly about calling camp for reinforcements, but he realized Angela hadn't wanted anyone else involved.

"Also means these women are dangerous." He was still convincing himself. "If they weren't, she might have sent a team as a training mission."

He wasn't sure why he thought that, only the similarities he was noticing. She'd picked up Adrian's style quickly, but Marc was already noting subtle differences, and he was sure the other alert-minded Eagles were too. He suddenly had no doubt that Angie had her own agenda to accomplish before giving up control. *And I don't want to know what it is.*

5

Kenn let the women search him for weapons, take what they found, and lead him into the area where they had several couches and desks placed along the walls. Except for Ray's slumped form in the corner, the rest of the room was empty.

"Don't get comfortable. We leave in an hour."

Kenn settled onto the side of the longest couch, aware of how the woman's needy gaze lingered on his body instead of his face. "Where you headed?"

Tiffany frowned. "We, my pet, are going west."

Kenn shrugged evenly. "Your funerals. It's dead there."

"Why did you come? We would have returned him."

Kenn lay back, putting his hands under his neck. He hadn't been on real furniture since the war and it felt better than he remembered. "We have a new leader. She wants him returned now."

The woman was startled, giving away how interested she was.

Kenn grinned. "She's a lot like you, but she has an army of lethal killers at her disposal. I would return her property. It's not too late. We don't have to be enemies."

Tiffany was starting to get the same uneasy feeling that she'd had in Little Rock. She suddenly wished they'd kept going, but the lure of healthy men to impregnate their females had been impossible to resist. The vote to try had been unanimous. The expected sterility from the experiments had finally appeared and it was brutal. "Our kind has been hunted for a long time and we always survive. We'll take our chances."

"And Angela will take your lives." Kenn waited for an answer. He finally looked over to find the snake woman had left the room. *What the hell?* He still wasn't used to quiet females.

Kenn got up and went over to Ray, not sure if he was alive. “You okay?”

Ray glanced up, bruised face thick with misery. “No.”

Startled at the immediate answer, Kenn checked him visually for other signs of abuse, but he only found red cheeks over pale skin. “What’s the problem?”

Ray’s lip quivered. “I’m not really an Eagle, am I?”

Kenn let out an annoyed breath. “Not now, okay? I can only be so nice and then people get hurt.”

Ray took that as an answer, shoulders slumping. “I always knew, anyway. He said I may never get what I wanted, no matter how hard I tried. He was right.”

Kenn settled into the chair across from Ray, glad the man’s arm was still bandaged, though dirty. “Don’t know how you figure that. You have a set place that you’ve earned. Wasn’t it what you wanted?”

“I wanted to be accepted!” Ray snapped. “And for Dale to be accepted. That can’t happen now.”

Kenn began to realize the women had already abused Ray; he was feeling guilty for betraying his lover. “Don’t tell him, Ray. That’s all you have to do. It’s okay.”

Ray peered up with eyes glimmering. “No, it’s not, you idiot. I couldn’t do it. I failed. I’m not worthy!”

Kenn was shocked. “Even with the pill?”

“I got sick.”

Kenn snorted ruefully. “Wish I had. Then maybe I could get that sound out of my brain...”

Ray had expected scorn. “They would have gone away.”

Kenn didn’t like Ray beating himself up, but he wasn’t sure what to make of that. He chose to examine it later. “No. If you’d serviced them, they’d have known it would work and taken more of us next time, then kept returning for raids. Not being able to perform goes in Safe Haven’s favor.”

Ray hadn’t considered that, but it wasn’t enough to relieve him of the failure. “I’ll hand in my jacket.”

“You’ll have to get it back from the women first.” Kenn frowned. “I think it’s their totem or something.”

“Still hanging from the flagpole?”

“Just flapping there in a direct violation of Adrian’s rules. Made us want to open fire.”

That remark got more of Ray’s attention. It began to pull him out of his misery. “Who’s out there?”

Kenn didn’t care if they were overheard. It wouldn’t matter. “Just Marc.”

Ray paled. He knew what that meant. “She’s willing to spill blood to get me back?”

“Yes. Did you doubt it?”

“I expected to fight my way out when I realized I couldn’t do what they wanted.”

Kenn slowly stood up, hearing footsteps. “That may still be required. You feel up to it?”

Ray’s voice was full of depression. “I feel like dying.”

Kenn slung an arm around Ray’s strong shoulders, careful of the injury. “Then you’re gonna hate what I’m about to do, but if you don’t play along, I will hurt you.”

Kenn tightened his grip until Ray winced. He dragged them up and around to be facing the women as they came in.

Finding the two men so close, with Ray clutching at Kenn, sent scowls across female faces.

“I told you!”

“Kill them both!”

“Wait.”

Kenn tugged Ray closer, pretending an affection that was more than friendship. “We’re ready to go home now, ladies. We can’t give you what you need. None of the men in our camp can.”

The females remembered Kenn and Kevin had been able to, but before they could protest the lie, Kenn glanced at Ray.

Ray felt that spark, the heat that usually told him Dale was close, and blanched. He didn’t want to feel an attraction for Kenn, for any reason, but it was too late. That golden flow of magic swarmed over him. Ray was helpless but to respond.

He dropped his head in shame. He liked to be in control in his relationships, but the best sex he’d

ever had was before the war, with a powerful man who hadn't been afraid to handle him.

"Enough!" Tiffany gestured angrily. "When the drugs take effect, both of you will give us service."

Kenn dropped his arm, but kept his big body pressed against Ray's hip. "Okay."

Tiffany stared in surprise at the quick agreement. "What?"

Kenn got set. "We will provide you a service."

Tiffany's scale covered face relaxed a bit. "Good. Okay, then. We'll bring you a pill."

As soon as they were gone, Kenn nudged Ray toward the unbarred window. "Stay low."

Kenn shoved Ray through the screen, not listening to him land. If he didn't get out of here, he might puke.

Marc saw Ray hit the ground and quickly waved him toward the sparse trees, out of the way. Seconds later, female shouts came and Marc knew the time for choosing had come and gone. He was here. He would protect his teammate.

Kenn's big frame didn't appear in the window, but the women running after Ray stopped as soon as Marc began to pepper their feet with shots.

Marc aimed and fired, reloaded. *Where is Kenn?*

Ray made it to Marc's side a few seconds later, panting, "He's still...in there."

Marc motioned him to get down, and then stood up. He could see someone struggling in the lobby behind the door.

Marc came from his hiding place with a Colt in each hand.

6

“Let him go. Now!”

Marc’s angry voice outside the main door made Kenn freeze. “You got him to come out. Holy shit, lady. You’re all dead now.”

Tiffany slapped him. “Shut up!”

Kenn growled at her; the sound was menacing. She quickly retreated.

“I’m counting to three…” Marc’s warning was followed by a blurred count and then all hell broke loose.

Bullets slammed into the wooden door, causing women to duck and Kenn to hit the floor.

Marc used a sharp kick to take out the door. His voice was set in stone. “Surrender or die.”

Tiffany raised her gun.

Marc shot her in the throat.

He looked around with a deep glower of resentment as she slid to the dusty floor. “Next?”

There was silence and stillness for the space of five seconds, a space in time where only one life would have been taken. Then the woman behind the door lifted her gun to Marc’s chest and fired.

Grunting with pain and effort, Ray shoved Marc out of the way and took a trim.

Marc spun off the wall and let the demon loose.

Kenn grabbed Ray and shoved him down. That Ray had returned to help wasn't surprising. When he grabbed a fallen gun and began firing left-handed to cover Marc, *that* was.

Bang! Bang!

Those Colts snapped out death and punishment with each sharp bark.

Kenn herded Ray outside. *No need to draw Marc's fire.*

Ray followed Kenn's lead and didn't get involved any further in the one-sided fight. These weak women were no match, but they were realizing it too late.

Marc picked them off before they could get under cover, their horses long gone in the chaos. He didn't pause, even when they began to flee in terror. He took out anything that moved; the demon was in charge of his guns.

Kenn listened to the crashing with growing worry. Would Angela be pissed that he'd forced that side of Marc into the light? He'd thought to be the one out there doing the killing. He honestly hadn't thought it would work. *Too late now.*

Kenn waved Ray toward camp. "Stay low and go straight to Angela. Tell her there was a small gunfight, then they let us go and left. If you don't, Marc will know."

Ray paled, hearing the screams as Marc massacred the remaining women. They'd refused to leave or surrender, and they'd probably intended to

take him and Kenn when they fled, but did it justify this?

Kenn wasn't thinking that, but he was considering how important Marc was to the camp. If Marc lost that edge, the good man inside, it would hurt Adrian's dream.

Kenn reluctantly stood up and interfered. "Marc! She's calling us!"

Kenn was relieved when Marc calmly reloaded and slid his smoking Colts into their holsters. The few wounded around him didn't even cower in pain as he strode by, desperate to escape his notice.

Kenn did a rough count and came up with forty. Another dozen lay inside. The rough estimate he'd stated had come close.

"I warned them." He saw Ray had stopped just out of sight. "They should have listened."

Marc walked by Kenn like nothing was amiss, but the Marine knew better than to trust the pretense. "Hang on. We have to burn this—all of it."

Marc was in the fog of bloodlust, barely able to think. "Burn what?"

"The bodies, the town—all of it."

Marc's haze slowly began to clear. He took stock of the carnage and gave a curt agreement. "I'll gather. You find the necessities."

Kenn didn't argue. They'd done this once in Afghanistan, though those bodies had all been male, and he knew Marc would do things exactly as they had then. They would cover up the mess and Marc would bury the memory. Angela, a woman,

wouldn't want details. She would only want to know it had been accomplished.

Marc listened to Kenn's steps fade, and then forced himself to face what he'd done. He expected overwhelming regret and pain, but there was only cold, hard satisfaction as he viewed the carnage.

"This is your doing!"

There was no answer from the voice inside. Of course, the evil part of him had done this. The good Marc wouldn't have been able to fire more than the first few shots, but that inner man was tired of letting dangerous threats live. In time, these women would have terrorized every area they traversed. Slave traders weren't the only ones who deserved to die, and Marc was finally at a point in the aftermath that he no longer put right and wrong first.

The remaining women had fled the instant his attention had been distracted by Kenn. Marc gathered their fallen guns and ammunition, and other valuables as he dragged their bodies to the stairs of the town hall. All those arson scenes he'd witnessed on the way here no longer appeared so mysterious to him now.

And the soul? Marc questioned himself ruthlessly, needing to get it out before he saw Angela.

It's bruised, but intact. It cannot be crushed by doing the only thing you can to protect those you love.

Marc didn't agree, but he'd given up his afterlife long before the war. All he wanted now was to be

with Angie until he died. *Who cares what happens after I'm split from her?*

7

Within an hour of finding Ray, the entire town was engulfed in a blaze that even the old world would have been hard pressed to save from the wind-driven flames. No one else would know what had happened.

Ray was waiting on the edges of the camp, out of sight and hearing, but in view of tent tops.

Kenn instantly understood why Ray was lurking. "You're no actor, are you?"

Snapped out of his pain, Ray stiffened. "Fuck you."

"That's your need, not mine." Kenn sneered, still pissed. He'd known Ray would respond to his pull, but to feel it! *Wasn't Cara's memory enough?*

Ray stared in confused longing, waiting to be told what to do.

Marc barked out a hard laugh. "Go tell her exactly what you were told, and then go to Dale."

Ray paled further.

Kenn snorted. "She'll know everything if we send him in."

"She needs to! She thinks I'm not like the rest of you. It's time she knew better."

"You'd hurt her that way?" Ray was shocked.

Marc paused. "Hurt her, how?"

Ray scowled. “She worships you. Even I know that. She’ll be crushed.”

Marc’s feet moved again. “Maybe she needs to be.”

Kenn didn’t swing Marc around by his arm like he was tempted to do. He no longer had a death wish.

It was Ray who jumped in front of Marc, voice hard. “No.”

Marc shoved Ray aside and was surprised to find himself on the ground, looking up.

Ray planted his feet, ready to protect himself as best he could. “I’m the one who failed, who made you have to do all that. You take it out on me and leave her alone! She’s got enough to handle.”

Marc stared stupidly, fighting the rage. *Ray is defending this?* It snapped Marc out of the haze; he slowly stood up.

Ray immediately flinched.

Kenn actually wanted Marc to go over the edge, but he also wanted Adrian’s dreams intact. “I agree with Ray.”

Marc detoured around them. “I’m not lying to her.”

“Again, you mean?”

Ray’s words made Marc spin on his heel. “What’s that?”

Ray paled further, but made himself speak. “Dale’s been helping the vet. He told me about Dog.”

Marc winced.

Kenn took note of that. When Marc didn't argue, Kenn vowed to find out every detail of that story.

Marc once again headed for camp, but his stride was no longer as angry or determined. Dale knew. Ray and Kenn knew. *How long before Angie does?*

Ray and Kenn were both relieved when he went toward the main camp, instead of the QZ.

“Will he be okay?”

“If he keeps his mouth shut. If she finds out he's lying to her?” Kenn shrugged. “Not a chance he'll come through it alive.”

Ray snorted. “She wouldn't kill Marc.”

Kenn got them moving. “When she's finished, it will feel like she did. You take care of Dale. I'll handle our new leader until Marc's ready to.”

Ray didn't like turning it over to Kenn, but Marc clearly wasn't able. “Be careful. She sees so much now!”

Kenn grunted. “Not if you give her something else to inspect. It's all about distraction. You have to know which bomb to put in her path first.”

Ray didn't think it would work for long, but if it bought them a little time, that was good enough. Angela couldn't find out her man had massacred an entire group of females by himself. She'd never view him the same and everything would suffer for it.

“She got a minute?”

Kevin saw Marc stalking toward the showers as Ray vanished into the QZ tent where Dale was snoozing. John’s sedative would be wearing off about now. It was perfect timing.

Kevin reluctantly waved Kenn in.

Kenn ducked into the tent after a quick tap.

Angela glanced up from the notebook page as Kenn dropped the flap. “It’s done?”

Kenn was startled by how much she sounded like Adrian. “Yeah, it’s over. No more problems there.”

Angela looked down. “That won’t keep me out. What happened to the rage that blocked me for so long?”

Kenn blinked, blurry teenage concerns crumbling under her prying. He’d never felt anything as strong as her mental fingers opening the doors in his mind.

Angela waited for him to resist, ready to hurt him to know the truth, but he only grunted unhappily. “You won’t like it.”

“I don’t expect to. Would you rather tell me?”

“No.”

If he tried to explain, it would come out wrong. Better that she got to view the danger they’d been in—that Safe Haven would have eventually been in.

Angela read it as deeply as she needed to, but in her heart, she’d already known who had spilled blood. Marc’s Colts were impossible to mistake once they began to crash.

Kenn felt her withdraw from his mind and was relieved. He once again had secrets she wasn't allowed to know.

Angela picked up the thought and immediately got angry. "Don't cross me."

Kenn answered carefully, feeling the chill. "Not unless Adrian tells me to."

Angela had to be satisfied with that. She didn't want to ruin Kenn by breaking him down to discover what he was hiding. It would be ugly.

Kenn caught the top sentence of the page she was on—*Lying is not only wrong, it's absolutely necessary. Without lying, a leader will never be able to control his flock*—and quickly looked away. He didn't remember all of the instructions and lessons he'd read while Adrian was handling the slavers, but that one, he did. It had made him feel better because that was how he already lived his life. For Angela, it had to be difficult.

"She's the one remaining Eagle who might hesitate to pull the trigger, to kill."

Marc's words had been laced with contempt. Kenn now recognized the remark for what it was. Marc had a conscience that was crying.

Angela asked herself if it mattered beyond what she'd already considered, and found silence. She wasn't sure. The thought of trying to see Marc that way was frightening. Even the images she'd seen felt like a dream. That couldn't have been *her* Marc. "I'm good. Get some rest before your shift."

Kenn heard the dismissal and left the tent before she changed her mind and tried to get further into his.

Angela listened to the witch cackle, confused and sad. She'd sent them out to kill and they had. She bore the sin of this, not Marc.

Once that sank in, Angela felt better. She tugged her jacket over that unused wrist blade. It had never felt heavier than when she stepped outside and found Marc coming from the shower.

Their eyes locked across the camp.

Marc read the resigned understanding, but he didn't want it. He did need her to keep seeing him as the good guy. It was the only advantage he still held over Adrian.

Angela saw the shadow on his face, the wall he didn't want her to get through either, and slowly accepted it. If that was how he wanted things, the camp would be led to assume Kenn had handled things.

Marc wasn't relieved when she didn't call him on it. She knew too much. Nothing had gone right today.

Marc spotted Dale and the vet fawning over Ray, and amended his thought. Something had gone in his favor, though he hadn't recognized it at the time. Ray was in his debt and that was always useful.

The Eagles knew what had happened without Kenn's quiet words. They all expected to feel less for Marc—less trust, less respect—but when he joined

them on duty, they found acceptance and a bit of sadness. Another camp idol had proved he was capable of something awful. They would be stronger for it.

Kenn observed the anticlimactic attitude in shock. If that had been him, they would be glad of it, but the coolness would have returned until he did something big again. The difference in how the Eagles treated him and Marc was astounding on every level.

Kenn took up his post, mind spinning through the moments he'd had that compared to Marc's. *Why wasn't I accepted as easily?*

Angela waited until Kenn was out of sight, and then went to a man she hadn't spoken with in a while. When she opened her mouth, he beat her to the punch.

"Would you like a recon for survivors?"

Angela stared at Seth. "Yes, I would. Your team."

Seth gestured to the shadows waiting nearby. His men needed a mission and he needed time away from Becky's pain. Upon hearing and observing, Seth had been set to volunteer. He suspected Angela had heard the silent request.

"Leave in an hour?" Seth wondered what Becky's response would be. She didn't like being away from him, but Seth was able to recognize this as an opportunity. She claimed she was doing fine, but he wasn't sure he should believe her. This would prove it.

Angela grimaced slightly.

Seth understood. “Half that and home by daylight.”

“Yes.” Angela left before she could change the order. She wasn’t sure what she would do if any of the snake women actually wanted to take shelter with them, but she’d figure something out. Leaving them in the wilderness to die simply wasn’t in her nature.

But killing now is...

Angela ignored the witch. Threats were to be handled first. Compassion had to come after. And Marc had made the final choice. *If the women hadn’t been threats, they would still be alive.*

Chapter Three
Do Your Part

1

An hour before evening mess, Angela was sitting with Adrian and Conner. The boy appeared weak. John was being careful about collecting the blood for Adrian's surgery. Angela planned to help him tonight, but this long after the initial injury, he would still require surgery first to remove as much of the infection as they could reach. In twenty-four hours, it had grown too strong for the witch to handle alone. His wound was riddled with poison.

"It might not work, right?"

Angela glanced up, a bit startled. She'd forgotten for a moment that Conner was like her and Charlie.

"I'm not." Conner shrugged. "But we can go through that later. Tell me why you're so worried even though you can bring the dead back."

"No one can do that. I heal."

Conner didn't understand the limits, but he'd always wanted to. It was something he'd never been allowed to question or even discuss outside of the labs. "Why won't it be enough?"

Angela sighed. "I can heal injuries, like from a wreck or a gunshot, but Adrian's wound is infected.

There's nothing to heal, just a foreign body to be killed. I don't have that power."

Conner fired off another version of the same question when he didn't understand. "Why doesn't your magic make him as good as new?"

"It does for the injury, just not what came after. I can't find and destroy. I can increase health to help them fight on their own."

"It's killing, boy." Adrian groaned at the pain. "Women aren't supposed to be killers."

"It's against their nature?" Conner's rebellious tone was gone. His concern that he might lose both parents had taken center stage.

"You don't have that limit?" Angela guessed, when Adrian didn't answer. She discarded the next idea as soon as it came. Conner was in no shape to be lending his dad anything except emotional support and a pint of blood.

Adrian's hazy gaze swung to Angela. "Is it ready?"

"Yes. In half an hour, we'll wheel you to the little mess. You'll get a tray and come right back here for John to get you prepped."

His lids shut, and then suddenly popped back open. "Code Raven?"

Angela nodded, not smiling at all. "They're doing what you want and so am I."

Adrian tried to say something else, but the darkness pulled him under before he could.

Conner and Angela exchanged concerned glances that might have been followed by hopeful

lies meant to bolster flagging spirits in the old world. Now, they accepted that he might die. They would do everything that they could, but in the end, it was up to fate.

Lingering near the flap, Kenn caught her attention as she came outside. “I have a suggestion.”

Angela waved Kevin back when he would have come over with the next list of to-dos.

Kenn kept his voice low. “Call a security meeting and get a list of options.”

Angela was running through what to say and how to handle the unique challenges the most common ideas would bring. It pleased her to be ahead of Kenn, but she had Adrian’s notebooks to thank. She might not have thought of it on her own.

Kenn took her silence as a bad sign. “Just a thought.”

“Tell them after the camp’s settled for the night. You decide who I should hear from.”

Surprised, Kenn started to add more and held himself in check. Pushing her would get them nowhere. “Okay.”

Angela watched him leave, not exactly suspicious, but wondering if she should be.

Kevin came to her side, mouth opening.

Angela held up a finger. “Wait.”

Face reddening, Kevin stood there, realizing he’d been about to interrupt something she was working on. *I’m not sure if I like this job.*

“Where is he?”

“Rear of his new truck with that laptop—same as the last two days.” Billy pointed toward the parking area, ignoring the dull throb in his leg. He was off the crutches now, but the leg wasn’t fully healed.

Samantha went that way without responding to the accusing note. She’d heard it too many times to be swayed. Jeremy knew about her and Neil, but he was burying it, giving himself space. He didn’t really need her...yet.

Sam waved her shadows away as she neared the new truck. To replace the Jeepster, he’d chosen an old blue Ford with rust spots. It would be boring to destroy.

Jeremy didn’t look up from the keyboard. “I’m fine. You already know that. You’ve done your duty, and I’m busy.”

Samantha didn’t acknowledge the dismissal as she slid onto the tailgate. Instead, she studied him to determine how much damage she’d done, and how much more he could take.

Jeremy ignored her. He wasn’t going to be drawn into it anymore. *I don’t need her.*

Samantha picked out subtle changes, like his new haircut and shoes, but the things that concerned her were less obvious—like the way he was drawing away from camp life and his team again, his determination to break the internet code, and the way he’d doubled his time in the workout tent yesterday and this morning. It all said he was having

trouble. The wisest thing to do was leave him alone, but the camp and Eagles wouldn't allow that. The next best thing was to finish what she'd started. It was time to claim him.

Jeremy didn't stop typing, but he felt the edge of distraction at Samantha's continued silence. He didn't want to talk to her; he didn't want to face himself when she finally worked up the courage to ask the only question she would want an answer to. It would scar him and he'd never be the same.

Samantha let the peaceful night wash away some of her tension. She loved being outside. She adored nature, and she understood why they were under attack from that entity—they deserved it. She just didn't know what to do about it. Despite all the trouble that sometimes came, Samantha liked her life now. If not for the loneliness at the onset of dusk, it would almost be perfect.

“Are you here because I'm safe...and boringly dependable?”

She didn't answer.

Jeremy didn't repeat the question.

Samantha refused to let the voice of guilt kill her good mood. “Should I go?”

Very distracted, Jeremy paused. A tense silence fell in place of the keys clicking.

“Do my feelings even matter to you?” he finally asked.

Samantha winced at the mild verbal slap. “Yes.”

“Then how can you do this?”

She didn't have an answer that he would understand. "It's complicated."

Jeremy grunted. "You can't settle down, but that's all either of us want. Not so complicated—just hard to accept." He snapped the lid closed on the laptop and peered over to find her lids closed and shiny blonde curls blowing in the breeze.

Samantha didn't sensor her annoyance. "From where I sit, you're both expecting way too much from someone you've only known for a few months. You guys may be sure I'm the one who fits your forever dream, but neither of you fit mine that way. Until you do, friends and lovers is all I can give." She lay on the truck bed. "And frankly, it's tiresome to keep saying that. Why don't you just type and I'll snooze in the breeze? We don't have to talk."

Jeremy started to send a stronger blow, but found he didn't have the heart for it. She was right to want a match that suited her, but did she have to be so cruel about it?

"I have a shift or something." He was unable to look away from her blowing curls. He wanted them tangled around his fingers and wild, dripping sweat.

"Go on, then." Samantha waved. "Call my shadows back first or Seth won't let me out again for a week."

The thought of Samantha being in danger kept him sitting by her. That, and those curls. The kiss had been hot, but the sensation of silken hair against

his skin—any of it—was one that could send him into a daze of need.

Samantha felt his hot stare, but she wasn't ready to take things much further with him yet. While she had no moral issues with having more than one partner, she didn't intend to slide into Jeremy's bed just because *he* wanted it. She had to need it, too, and right now, the magic of Neil's touch was still keeping her demons at bay. When it wore off, she'd find this laptop-toting genius and either break through his wall or end their friendship completely. The odds were 50/50.

Jeremy set the laptop aside, but he didn't leave. He stared at her for a long time, trying to find a solution, when all he wanted at that moment was to be close to her. The thought of her with Neil was a stinging wound, but a few minutes spent in her arms—with no talking—sounded right. Jeremy was ashamed of it.

Samantha slowly rolled onto her side, away from him.

Jeremy scowled at the attempt to draw him closer. The sight of her from this angle was incredible. "That is so unfair!"

Samantha was tired. She didn't waste any more quiet time trying to convince him. She allowed her mind to slow as she shifted her arm under her neck. "I need to be up in an hour." A bit uncomfortable, she quickly began to fade into a doze.

Jeremy tried to resist the feeling of manly protective pride at having her on his truck bed,

vulnerable enough to sleep. It showed that she felt safe here, even when she knew he was upset with her. It also said Neil wasn't enough or she would have done her duty check and left. Instead, she would sleep here, dream here, and he'd want to be with her even then.

Jeremy also hated himself for that. He didn't want another competition with Neil. Neither of them could win. They could only be hurt by it and spread that disorder.

He also welcomed it a bit. Even the war hadn't shaken him from the guilt over his fiancé's death, but Samantha and her cornflower blue eyes had been able to accomplish that.

Samantha shifted, clearly uncomfortable on the truck's hard bed.

Jeremy glowered. "Damn you."

Samantha adjusted again, this time to sleepily sweep her hair over one shoulder. It bared her neck and cleared the place behind her. If he wanted it.

Jeremy recognized the request and couldn't refuse. It was where he longed to be and at this moment, an hour was longer than sixty minutes.

Jeremy didn't climb in carefully to keep from spooking her or even out of respect. He took his time—determined to steal every sensation that he could. He sensed instinctively that sharing sleep with someone like Samantha might be more than just a nap.

"Power rubs off."

Jeremy heard Angela's words again, but instead of bringing up the wall that she was teaching them, Jeremy consciously tried to drop his mental defenses. He wanted to go where Samantha did. He wanted to explore her dreams so he could make them a reality.

Samantha allowed his arm under her neck to provide a sexy cushion. His big body pressed tightly to hers, other hand coming to her hip to pull her closer. Sam moaned in pleasure. "Nice."

Jeremy tightened his grip in response. The wind blew her silken curl over his arm and cheek, and the Eagle faced the truth. She hadn't asked him yet, but there was no point in denying it to himself until she did. It didn't matter. Samantha could sleep with every man in this camp and he would still want her.

No longer fighting himself, Jeremy's mind clicked out of the high gear it had been running in since seeing those entwined shadows on the tent wall. Sighing in miserable happiness, he let himself drift and enjoy holding her openly. He and Neil were officially sharing Samantha.

Jeremy's last thought was to wonder how Neil would take the news. After a night with her, the trooper had likely assumed they were now a couple, that her desire for other men was over. This would tell him otherwise.

“Everyone ready to put on a good show?” Angela opened the flap without waiting for any of their halfhearted responses.

Kyle followed her with the wheelchair as Kevin held the flap.

“We’ll get his pants and boots on, you’ll help him stand, and I’ll wrap him up tight.” She waved. “Let’s do it.”

Daryl waited by the flap as they worked. He was firmly on Kyle’s right now, but he still hadn’t managed to make the connection with their team that an XO needed. Everyone still missed Cris, himself included. As a result, Daryl was putting in the extra effort to stay close to his team leader. That meant helping with all the undercover work the mobster did for the chain of command. It was exhausting.

Angela unhooked Adrian from the IV, then injected a small amount of morphine into the tube. Almost immediately, the deep lines of pain running across his forehead eased. His knuckles were still white from their grip on the sheet though, and they stayed that way as Kyle put on his pants and boots. When they lifted him to pull Kenn’s loose jeans over his hips, a small moan of agony escaped his lips, but it was the only sound he made.

They put arms under him; Angela slid the bed over, and then Adrian was on his feet. His face was pale as he steadied himself, clearly not in control. It was scary how different he was.

“Ready?”

Adrian braced himself as much as the drugs would allow, floating in a world of hurtful instinct. “Do it.”

He stood with an arm around each man’s shoulders; they leaned out of the way as Angela gently taped two flat, hard pillows to his stomach and hip. A minute later, they put the shirt on him and buttoned it.

Angela placed three pills into the front pocket of the shirt. “You’ve already had the equivalent of one. Try to save these for when we bring you back and do surgery prep.”

Adrian let Kenn and Kyle help him into the padded wheelchair, but his attention stayed on Angela. “What else do you have for me?”

She held up a capped syringe. “An energy booster. It won’t last but ten minutes, so don’t linger.”

Adrian slowly captured a pill.

Angela sat an opened can of Coke in his hand. “Push him to the flap; let him hear what he’s about to face.”

Nearly every member of the camp was outside the caution tape. They were staring at the tent with needy, worried expressions that begged Adrian to come out and tell them where to sit and stand.

Adrian listened to snatches of the conversations that he could hear. Concern, prayers, hopeful murmurs echoed. *My people!* “They’re going to cross the tape when we go out.” Adrian braced for it. “Let them.”

Angela could tell from his steady tone that his body had finally taken notice of the medication and was reacting accordingly. “Ready?”

“No, but do it anyway.”

She quickly injected him with the syringe. A few seconds later, they were outside, in view. A loud cheer split the air.

“Adrian!”

“It’s Adrian!”

“Yeah!”

Adrian gave a slow, carefree salute. “Take me to them.”

The crowd broke the tape as they surged forward and then Adrian was surrounded by his followers. He didn’t flinch from pats on the shoulder and he shook every hand put out to him.

“You okay?”

“You need anything?”

“I’m fine. They’re taking care of me so well that I’m almost ready to be alone again.”

“What about your hip?”

“Yeah! How bad is it?”

“Can you walk?”

Adrian blew out a breath that looked like mild annoyance to the crowd, and pain to Angela and the Eagles.

“The hip’s bad. I can walk if I have to, but the docs tell me I’ll heal fully if I stay off it. Guess I’ll have to listen to them since I always tell you guys to.” Adrian glanced around cheerfully. “Anyone got a smoke?”

Cynthia's hand was the quickest.

Angela was glad when the reporter ran block against the more aggressive people, using her small body for his protection.

"This is another thing they're against. If not for the great room service, I don't think I'd want to bunk with them anymore." Adrian drew more grins.

Angela saw his finger put an extra cigarette into his pocket and come up with something that quickly vanished under the cover of a swallow of Coke. He was hurting enough to risk someone witnessing it.

One minute and I'm moving you along. Angela didn't shove energy into him like she wanted to. She would need it later and so would he.

"I hear there's a party tonight. Everyone gonna get drunk, throw up, and spend all day tomorrow whining about their hangover?" Adrian grinned wider. "It wouldn't be a Safe Haven party without that."

Angela observed the crowd that was already starting to break up, trying not to resent them for getting to go enjoy a stress-free evening while Adrian fought for his life. She was also grateful that in all the confusion, the big question hadn't been asked. No one wanted to know why they were having a celebration now, when most of the men who were heroes weren't even out of the QZ yet.

"I'm gonna get a tray, folks." Adrian forced an eager tone even though the thought of eating was nauseating. He forced himself to give another of those larger than the sun grins, dazzling them one

last time. “I would have had three beers, two burgers, and danced with all the single ladies. You guys handle that for me.”

The crowd laughed again. It sounded relieved, relaxed. Adrian was fine to their unobservant eyes.

The Eagles wheeled Adrian toward the little mess. On the way, he took the last pill and closed his hand into a fist while he waited for it to take effect.

Neil hated Adrian’s pain as much as he had Angela’s. “Why don’t you go back and we’ll bring them...”

“No.”

The little mess was full of recovering Eagles. The scene of joking and calm was repeated, along with praise for following his orders.

“You men did a good job; you should be proud. We’ve taken hits and we don’t forget or treat it lightly, but we can sleep better knowing we eliminated another threat to our survival.” The Coke can crackled loudly under his tightening grip.

Angela nodded to Kyle. “Let’s go.”

Kyle and Neil pushed the chair while Angela carried the tray. As they disappeared into the tent, Adrian’s energy ran out. The can fell from his hand. He sagged forward, succumbing to the bright glare.

Angela hurried to catch him before he could slide any further. “Get John! Then tell Marc we need the camp distracted now. We can’t wait any longer.”

“All yours.” Adrian tossed, fever climbing.
“Lead them right.”

Angela and John exchanged worried looks over his body. Time had grown shorter.

“Let’s get started.” Angela brought the witch forward as she and Anne assisted. If John missed any of the infection, the witch might catch it.

The silence was thick as John began administering the drugs that would put Adrian out of pain’s reach. Two of them flashed to the last surgery John had performed.

Angela shoved her thought away. Surviving Cesar hadn’t been a trade. It hadn’t put Adrian under the reaper’s dark shadow. *Even fate wouldn’t be so cruel...right?*

It took most of an hour to cut out the infection and cleanse the gaping wound. Smells of blood, disease, and decay hung thickly as it filled the tent and then their noses.

“Mmm...”

Anne frowned. “He’s coming up already.”

John kept working. “He’s at the limit. Can you do anything?”

Angela slipped into Adrian’s fog-layered mind. The hum of power rose softly among the gore.

Angie?

Angela winced at the variation of her name that Adrian was always careful not to use aloud. Coming

from his lips, it was a caress, an endearment between lovers.

I'm here. Stop trying to surface. John isn't finished yet.

Angela heard the monitor settle into a calmer rhythm and went in a bit deeper. She remembered the fog of the medication and the sense of aloneness. *Would you like me to stay a bit?*

Adrian reached out through the white glare, mind scattered, thoughts ugly. *Yes. I hate to be alone.*

Angela clasped his hand tightly, heart picking up a beat. *So do I.*

Angela listened to the music and fireworks, to John's mutters and the machine's steady beeps, unaware that Adrian was laboring to show her something. He shoved an image at her, one he'd been hiding—even from himself.

Angela stared at the picture, resolutely memorizing every curve and line of the object Adrian had sworn he had no knowledge of. "The witch says if you die, you kill us all."

John blanched at Angela's words, working as fast as he could. He held many concerns—about the strength of the infection and Angela's energy levels—but the worst was the self-doubt. Conner's weakened blood and Adrian's depression notwithstanding, John didn't think he was good enough to pull Adrian through this.

Anne knew John was stressing—the way he bit his lip under the surgical mask hadn't changed in

thirty years. She didn't distract him, though. She would offer comfort later, when Adrian showed signs of improvement and John made the call on life or death. Unlike the others, Anne had complete faith in Adrian's recovery. The men might not understand what was going on in this camp, but Anne was clear. The human species was evolving and much like with any other life form being forced to change to survive, having one mate wasn't enough to ensure extinction wouldn't come within a few generations. Angela and Adrian were close—anyone could tell that—but Anne knew it ran deeper. If anything happened to Marc, Angela would go to Adrian. It wasn't like Samantha, where the urges were driving her to have more than one partner at the same time. Angela and Adrian's connection went further. If Marc wasn't in the picture, theirs would be a love match.

About Seth and Becky, Anne hadn't decided yet. Teenagers were unpredictable when it came to matters of the heart. She was reserving judgement on that situation, but Anne didn't think any of it would matter in the end. Evolving wouldn't be enough against the government. Safe Haven's power was a serious threat to the remaining authority. When they came, nothing would stand.

“In the medical camper. She said she needed to lie down for a couple minutes.” Kevin reluctantly confided his concern. “I didn’t like how she looked.”

Marc walked faster, waving Kevin off when he would have followed him inside. “I know what she needs.”

Kevin took up a post outside the door and kept his ears open in case he needed to call John.

Marc found her curled onto the small couch, nearly invisible under a stack of jackets.

When her teeth began to chatter, he scooped her into his arms and dropped back down, holding her on his lap. “You’re empty, right?”

Angela slumped against his big chest, resisting the urge to inhale deeply. “I don’t want to.”

She sounded like a petulant child. Marc burst out laughing.

Angela couldn’t even summon the energy to adjust the slightly uncomfortable position. “Sleep, Marc. Just an hour.”

Marc shifted so he could see her pale face. “Meeting’s in half that.”

She groaned weakly.

Marc forced her hand. He talked directly to the witch. *Take what you need, but nothing more. You don’t need her permission if you have mine.*

Marc stiffened as the witch greedily sucked at him.

Angela snapped their connection, gasping at the need fluttering in her veins. “Not in control now, Marc. Sleep!”

Marc wasn't worried—the witch didn't want him dead. But she did want him...

Marc leaned forward to deliver a slow kiss and felt the witch start drawing while Angela was distracted. After a minute of the blinding heat, Marc didn't care how much energy was taken, so long as they weren't interrupted.

Kevin, once he identified the noises, made sure that they weren't.

6

Neil stared at the sleeping couple with a blank face and a breaking heart. Only napping together, it was more intimate than if they were naked.

Neil forced his feet to take him closer. Samantha hadn't made any promises and he'd known better than to ask for one. This was how she wanted things.

Neil cleared his throat as he neared the truck, stomach boiling. “You guys awake?”

Jeremy raised a hand and made a curt motion. *What?*

Neil kept his distance. “It's time for the meeting.”

Jeremy sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

Neil left without spewing any of the vileness coming to mind, proud that he could. He'd shared an amazing night with the woman currently rolling

over into Jeremy's arms. Neil spun around as she allowed Jeremy to give her a tight hug. Even that was too much to witness.

Jeremy helped Samantha sit up, sympathizing with her small moan at the soreness. Nothing said aches and pains like sleeping on a hard, flat surface that you weren't used to.

Samantha stretched, arms going around his neck. "One more minute gonna matter to the new boss lady?"

Jeremy tugged her close. "We'll make it up later."

Samantha surrounded herself with his quiet protection. Yes, she did want him because he was safe, but boring? She didn't view him that way and when she finally told him that he didn't have to hold back with her, no one else would think it either.

"Come on." Samantha kept her arm around his hip, a bit embarrassed at some of the glares as they walked, but she was determined to live life by her desires instead of someone else's expectations. She needed both men, in different ways, and now she had them. It was finally her turn for happiness.

Neil winced at the sight of Samantha and Jeremy walking into the meeting together, but it was his only reaction.

It calmed some of the Eagles, but the tension was thick as everyone began to gather.

Neil went to a far wall. He was dismayed when Samantha immediately led Jeremy to his side.

The two men glared at each other for a brief moment. Then Jeremy gently placed Samantha between them.

Sam put a hand on each wrist, sending a flare of pleasure up both arms.

“Thank you.” She didn’t let go when they both tensed under her fingers. “This is all I need for now.”

Neither man fully understood the details of it, but there was no denying the waves of contentment coming from her. Knowing Samantha was happy meant more to them now than their desire of ownership.

Because they were accepting it, the other Eagles had to, but there was little chatter in the half filled tent as they all waited for Angela to arrive.

Kenn and Kyle exchanged a quick look in the silence. They had their own plans for the outcome of this meeting, and the tension already in the canvas would help it along. The air of danger would be hard for Angela to miss.

The noises of music and fireworks filled the tent as Marc stepped inside, sweeping every person before ducking back out. He looked exhausted.

Kenn recognized the security check. He gave Kyle a nod that said to stick to the plan.

The mobster gave one in return that told Kenn he would do his part. Too much depended on this to make mistakes.

Cynthia came in next, followed by a few senior Eagles. The tent began to heat up as glares were

thrown and caught. Not just Kenn and Kyle had put thought into this meeting. There were many ways that an Eagle could rise in Safe Haven. Usually, those involved arduous work, but in a moment like this, a promotion or demotion could happen instantly. Angela wasn't Adrian—she wouldn't have the same needs from a staff. All of them fought flashes of previous competitions for their place in camp as they waited.

Angela entered the tent to find three dozen men and two women waiting. She turned a raised brow to Kenn. "This is a few?"

The Marine shrugged. "I brought the team leaders and their XOs. They brought the others."

Doug stood up. "You'll want all of these men."

Angela didn't argue. She went to the front of the tent and sank into the waiting chair with relief. It felt great to sit. Marc's energy was keeping her on her feet, but she'd stopped the witch from taking more than he could tolerate. He hadn't realized how empty she was.

Kevin handed her a cup of coffee and backed off.

She sipped it, surveying the area. The tension was thick. "The Major had troops out gathering supplies. They returned to find our mess and now, they're on the way to Utah. The government will know about Adrian escaping—and about Safe Haven—in short order." Angela glanced at Marc, then Kenn. "How long for them to reach Utah?"

They conferred briefly.

“Ration conditions, eighteen hour days...”

“Two supply stops...”

“Roughly two weeks.”

Angela was impressed and horrified. She viewed Kevin next. “How long did John say?”

“At least five days, depending...”

“On Adrian’s recovery.” Angela made the call. “We’ll stay the full five that John is recommending and then go.”

“Hard and fast?” Kenn needed details.

Angela studied the Marine. “Would Adrian run?”

“Yes, and he’d say do it now, to leave him.” Kenn already knew she wouldn’t.

The reminder that the camp mattered more than any of them echoed through the tent.

Neil frowned. “Are we going to try to hide?”

“No, Adrian’s Eagles don’t run.”

Silence echoed...then a cheer that she had to wait on before she could continue. “In the next three weeks, we have to tell the camp that the government is coming, convince them to fight, and get to the mountains to make our stand.”

Neil and Kyle exchanged a look. She did know. She’d lied earlier. Why?

Silence came again as the enormity of the challenge struck. Angela let them think it through. Most of these men had expected to hear that running was her solution.

“What happens if we hold a camp meeting and tell them? A lot of them already suspect that some

of our people are...different.” Kevin also wanted details.

“We only tell them about the government coming.” Neil’s voice was hard. “Otherwise the camp will ask why they can’t defend Safe Haven on their own, with just their gifts.”

People immediately began turning toward Angela, wondering the same thing.

“Magic.” She sighed. “It’s time we used the word among ourselves. There are people here who were born different. We have magic to use.”

“But there’s a reason you guys can’t stand and fight alone, right?” Jeremy ignored the scowls.

“Of course.” Angela looked at Marc. “Please.”

Marc grunted unhappily. “Fear. If the camp sees the power, but doesn’t share in the fight, they’ll be scared of her—of them all.”

Angela nodded. “They’ll start sneaking off in the night, a few here and there, and then whole parts of Safe Haven’s population will go openly. Even the Eagles will be torn between us and loved ones.”

“Why not go out and eliminate them, like we did the slavers?” Kenn also ignored the ugly glares.

Angela shrugged. “I haven’t ruled it out. It depends on what type of a warning we get and how many soldiers they send the first time.”

“That’s right! There’s a lot of room in even one bunker. They’ll still outnumber us.” Zack was worried for his rebellious sons. “When the first group reports back, they might even send planes!”

“Not if we kill them all.” Marc stood straight and unflinching in the silence caused by his cold suggestion. “Adrian told me he thought the mountains were a bad idea—that terrible things would happen there and push the camp into agreeing to go south. I say we stick to his plan.”

Marc lit a smoke and tossed it toward Angela, who caught it with a juggle. She waved for him to go on. Convincing the troops was his job now.

Marc raised his voice over the murmurs and mutters. “Adrian knew we’d have trouble with the government at some point. It was what tipped him in favor of leaving for a while. We can heal and get stronger, if we have the time. If the government comes and we lose or even negotiate, that puts them in charge of us. We’ll have to register our location, give information on the people here, and their doctors will want access to all of John’s patients.” Marc perched on the edge of a crate. “That’s just for starters. The war never officially ended. We’re still under martial law, the draft. They’ll come in and take every Eagle here. Then, they’ll sort through the camp and demand a cut there too.”

Marc looked to Angela, who took up the scene-setting moment.

“Those like me will have to run. If the government gets their hands on us, it’ll be like with the Major, but worse. We’ll be drugged, abused, locked up, and our power will be in their hands. We’ll try to escape, of course, but I won’t ever leave Charlie behind. Jennifer wouldn’t leave her babies.

Adrian wouldn't leave Conner, and so on. It's unlikely that we'd see the light of day again. So we'll scatter across the country to keep it from happening. We'll go back to being what we were before Adrian called us together—doomed.”

“So keep to the plan, and just let the bad shit happen?” Billy propped his leg up on the empty crate next to him.

Angela nodded again. “That's what we have to decide. But, yes, I believe so. We'll make our stand in the mountains, then go south. By the time they find out and send a real force, we might even be gone.”

“What about planes?” Daryl frowned. “Won't they find us on the open ocean?”

Angela pulled a paper from her pocket and handed it to the closest Eagle. “Adrian assumed otherwise. He thinks they won't want to chase us, that they're already low on men due to fighting, escaping, and making examples. And that they'll fear their men joining us.”

Marc and Angela exchanged concerned looks as the mutters increased. Showing them the page from Adrian's journal was the fastest way to gain the full support of these men, but it was also dangerous. It revealed how much Adrian had known, expected, and chosen to allow fate to control.

“What does he mean by young sacrifices and nuclear blood?”

“The children we've lost, the hell we've suffered through the war.” Angela was prepared to

answer those questions, but the next one hadn't even been considered yet.

"What if we skip the fight all together?" Cynthia flushed at the attention swinging her way. Samantha had waved her along because Jennifer was busy scanning people at the QZ, but she knew she didn't belong in this tent.

"You mean run for a ship now or try to disappear?" Angela tried to clarify.

The reporter cleared her throat. "Neither. I mean make a deal. Sort of, anyway."

Not able to stand a disjointed report, Angela's tone got sharp. "Spit it out, already."

Cynthia's nervousness was replaced with defensive anger. "I meant make a deal with the camp—to get them to fight. We can't run from the fight."

"Why not?" Kenn scowled. "And while we're at it, why not supply a body?"

"Make them think he's dead?" Angela considered it, ignoring the pros and cons being called out. The final choice was based on ability. "I don't think John can do it well enough to get us a match, but it could buy time. We'll probably use it." Angela viewed Cynthia. "Do you honestly understand why we can't run?"

"Yes. It's not just our freedom at stake." Cynthia's voice was grim. "If they take Safe Haven, they officially run the country again. We're the only opposition party."

“Excellent. And terrifying to carry all the responsibility for it.” Angela glanced around. “We’ll come together again in 24-hours with fresh ideas. One day after that, we will have a plan.”

There was no room for argument, but more importantly, there was no doubt. If Angela said they could do it, then they could. Nearly everyone left the tent with a version of that thought in their minds. She’d never been wrong.

Angela and Marc were among the last people in the humid canvas and they stayed quiet, listening to the few ideas that hadn’t been openly discussed.

Kenn and Kyle had each been working on the problem since being inside Little Rock and finding out the government had also survived the war. Both men were brutal in their thoughts, and for once, on exactly the same page.

“That’s what I’m saying. If we get ugly enough, they’ll back off.”

“I think so, too. They can’t outnumber us by that much. It’s one bunker.”

“That we know of.” Marc didn’t like where this was going.

Kyle frowned. “If they had another, they would have gone there. Anywhere is closer than Utah.”

“Let me be sure I’m clear.” Angela stopped the starting fight. “You’re both saying we should drop a decoy body for the first group they send, get the herd south, and then follow them to Utah.”

“Yes.”

“Yes. We’ll grab a couple of them and pry out some basic details—then we take it down.”

Marc snarled. “Attack a bunker? Like the slavers did to NORAD?”

Angela put a hand on his arm. “All options. I’d hear this one.”

Marc grunted angrily but held his tongue.

Kenn and Kyle went back to unveiling their amazingly similar plans. Neither of them cared about Marc’s displeasure in this moment.

“A few of the gifted people will have to come along to provide personal shields.” Kyle waited for the next stage. He knew Kenn had covered it.

“And that means we don’t have to kill them. Adrian would prefer it that way and I know you would too, but for us, it means those soldiers can be converted into Eagles.” Kenn gestured. “They’ll be able to help with the training, fill out the missing careers and culture gaps.”

“We’ll get the others they’re probably holding—others like Conner. I think we’ll also get a nice add to the herd.” Kyle was mentally deep into his first mass ambush. He hadn’t thought of using non-lethal methods.

Kenn lifted a brow. “How do you figure?”

“Draft families. Some will have survived and made their way inside, but with that many males locked up together, I’d guess the bunker is encouraging relief sources.” Kyle shrugged. “Sex makes a good distraction.”

Kenn hadn't thought of that, but it instantly made sense.

Both trained killers looked at Angela eagerly.

"We can do this."

"It has a lot of benefits."

"And so many flaws that I can't count them all."

Marc was unable to hold silent anymore. "You don't know how many, where, or what type of hardware we'd be facing. It's suicide."

"Put it on the list." Angela's words sent a cold chill through the tent. "Work out the kinks before you mention it to anyone else. They won't agree to kidnapping and torture, and neither will I. Not even if we're the ones doing it."

Kenn and Kyle left the tent without another word, both surprised to have gotten that far.

The instant they were alone, Marc opened his mouth to protest.

"Wait." Angela held up a hand. "Can you give me a few minutes? I need to look ahead."

Marc stomped from the tent, huffing in annoyance at the drunken partiers and loud music. He spotted Kenn and Kyle lurking nearby.

"Adrian wouldn't ever agree to this." Kenn gave Marc one of their older, snotty glares. "Why do you think she would?"

Kenn left him standing there, speechless.

He's right, Marc realized after a few minutes of thinking. Angie would never agree to anything so reckless. She'd been placating Kenn and Kyle, keeping them busy.

But Kenn knew that and wasn't upset... Confused, Marc observed the two men now talking quietly as if there had never been a problem between them, let alone hatred. *What's going on?*

"What do you think?"

Kenn shrugged. "Her mind works like Adrian's. She'll look ahead. If it will work, she'll give us the green light when the time comes."

"And you're sure?" Kyle hated manipulating her this way, but they had to know.

"Yes. She'll do whatever it takes to hand this camp over to Adrian in the same condition that she received it."

"Even kill innocent people?"

Kenn stared at the canvas walls, that stiff shadow. "If she needs to."

"When will we know?"

Kenn settled back to wait. "She'll tell the others at tomorrow's meeting, but we'll find out when she comes from the tent. Watch her face. She doesn't handle death as well as everyone thinks."

Angela found Kenn first as she came from the tent. The hateful glower they exchanged made Kyle tense. They'd spent the last half hour chatting about baby furniture, of all things.

Angela's face tightened into a mask of pain and anger. Kyle realized she and Kenn were talking mentally. He forced himself to wait until she turned for the medical tent. "Well?" Kenn was staring after

her in concern. Kyle understood it wasn't good news. "What did she say?"

Trying to redo their plans, Kenn growled. "That when it comes time, you and I will be on the front lines, not Marc!"

Kyle wasn't sure what to make of that. "It will work?"

"She wouldn't tell me. But she's pissed, so I'd guess it will."

Kyle frowned. "What's the problem, then?"

Kenn gave one last look over his shoulder, toward where she was vanishing into the dim tent that held Adrian. "She has her own plans and I think maybe we just became her point men for them."

"Is that bad?"

"It could be. She knows we were trying to manipulate her."

"What do we do now?"

Kenn's answer wasn't encouraging. "Wait until she gives the orders and follow them. She'll still hold the meeting tomorrow and then the one to announce the plans, but in her mind, it's a done deal."

"What is?"

"A future-deciding battle with the government. Even if they don't figure it out and come, she'll bring them to us. We really are done running."

Chapter Four
Add One More

1

Samantha slowly led her men away from the tent. “Where are you guys due next?”

“Guard duty.” Neil stewed on the coming chore. He wasn’t looking forward to it.

“I have some rounds to make and people to talk to.” Jeremy smiled at Samantha. “Duty over the boss at noon.”

Samantha went toward the livestock pens. “I’ll be around for a while, listening. Call if you need me.”

Both men let their gazes roam her hair and body, but there wasn’t lust, only longing in their expressions.

“You two need a friend.”

They turned to find Kyle nearby, helping set up the extra medical tents that John had requested. Jennifer had sent him out as soon as he’d gotten some rest, knowing it was where he wanted to be.

“You know what I mean.” Kyle didn’t give either man a chance to block the image he was about to thrust upon them. “Someone blonde and blue, and completely forgettable to occupy your downtime.

Once you have that, this situation eases and brain functions return.”

Jeremy wanted to ignore the words, but Neil, set to face one of his worst sins since the war, had to listen.

Kyle didn't bother keeping his voice down. Changes were flying through Safe Haven. Samantha and her triangle were merely a tiny corner of the controlled chaos. “She doesn't expect you to be loyal unless she chooses one, and you'll both know that moment—if it comes. I wouldn't count on it.”

“What the hell has this camp become?” Neil scowled harshly. “Nothing is like it was.”

“It's not meant to be.” Angela appeared behind them. “We're constantly changing and adapting. Nothing stays the same. That lesson held true long before the war that we survived.”

Angela went to where Samantha had stood so happily between them. “The limits of the old world were just that—limits. We don't have them now. And we probably never should have.”

“You mean marriage and monogamy?” Jeremy was aware of Kyle observing her in satisfaction.

“I think free will means making the choice based on what's right for you, so none of these differences are wrong. We're supposed to be this way. Some are life mates, soulmates; some are one-night stands or quick breeding moments that produce amazingly gifted offspring. None of us are right, and none of us are wrong.”

“Doesn’t feel that way.”

Angela tried not to patronize Neil because of his mutter. “And that’s your choice to make, but don’t base it on society’s rules. If you two can be okay with the setup, so can everyone else.”

Neither man replied.

Angela filled in the silence with hard truth. “No, I can’t read that far ahead, and even if I could, I suspect you already know what’s there. It’s both or none for her, and that isn’t likely to change.”

Enjoying the few fireworks that were still being lit, Angela went to the medical tent, where Adrian and Conner were the only patients. Everyone else had been switched. The extra tent Kyle and his team were working on was for any new arrivals John wanted quarantined.

Kyle waved at Daryl to take over the tent stocking. He joined Neil and Jeremy as they started walking toward the main camp. “Remember who you are and all you’ve done for these people when they hassle you. That should be enjoyed with pride, gentlemen. You are going against the known and accepted, in search of happiness and adventure beyond what any of them would ever have the sand to try.”

Neil and Jeremy both teased him about the wording.

Kyle let their friendship sink in and start healing his own wounds. They were finally working on the same goals again. Things would be easier on them, in some ways, so long as they had each other.

“What are you doing here?”

Neil paused at the hostile tone. “Seth didn’t tell you?”

Becky’s shadow left; she realized Neil was her protection on this shift. Her mouth opened, face reddening.

The trooper prepared to duck.

“I hate your guts. You know that, right?”

Neil took Jeff’s post, feeling her glare. “Yeah.”

“He hasn’t forgiven you either.”

Meaning Seth. Neil’s control over his guilt slipped a bit. “I don’t need it from him.”

Becky accepted that reluctantly. Until now, Neil hadn’t shown any remorse, only left her alone. He was careful whenever they spent time around each other and that was it—like nothing had happened.

“Can I say it or would you rather I just shut up and stood my post?”

He is trying to atone. Becky didn’t care one way or the other. “Say it if you want. It won’t change anything.”

Neil took the steps that brought him into range for what had to happen next. He slowly took off his hat, hard face cracking with misery. “I’m sorry.”

Tears traced her cheeks despite thinking she didn’t care. Becky clenched her hands to keep from sobbing. *I don’t want to feel anything for him!*

Neil was having trouble reading her through his own pain, and chose to give everything that she might need. “But only for what happened—for making you his target. I’m not sorry for wanting you.”

Neil braced for the coming blow. He’d arrived at a tolerable place with himself through all of it, but for that wall of guilt to lower, he had to follow through. “Or that sometimes, when I watch you bonding with Seth, I still do.”

Slap!

Neil didn’t react, willing her to keep going. It was the only way to give them both relief.

Becky started to sob.

Neil gave a final shove. “I’m also sorry I wasn’t your first. I used to dream about it.”

Becky understood that on some level this would help her, but the pain! She’d spent the last months in hell and part of it had been the used feeling—not from the rape, but from how easily Neil had changed his mind about her.

“I got pregnant from it, Neil. Angela and Anne took care of it a few weeks ago.”

Neil was instantly crushed. “What can I do? I... I can leave! I’ll be gone the second Adrian takes...”

“Stop it!” Becky drew in a calming breath as he stared in miserable shock. “I need you. Here.”

Neil smothered his own desperation to respond to hers. “Anything. Name it.”

Becky took another step into the new future that had been so brutally carved out for her. “At some point, I’m going to ask for what you denied me.”

Neil’s mouth dropped open as Becky jerked him into reality.

“I love Seth and he loves me, but I’m pretty clear on human nature now.” She didn’t censor her harsh tone. “I’m always going to feel cheated, always going to wonder what might have been if Samantha hadn’t come to Safe Haven.”

Neil waited, not sure if he could refuse her or follow through. He had no spark for Becky now. *Right?*

“Forgiving and forgetting are things I can’t do yet, but I’ve hurt enough to know that being cheated festers inside.” She turned away. “At some point, I’m going to be recovered. To get there, you’ll have to help me.”

Neil forced himself to think around the guilty shock, amazed and dismayed by her new maturity. With that plan to follow, and Seth and her team to lean on, she could have more than a future as a camp relief source. It was horrible that so many of the former slaves were choosing that route, but Neil hoped more time in Safe Haven would help them understand they were worth more. With Becky, she’d been flirting along the moral lines long before Rick. Peggy had wanted her settled down, but Becky had wanted the danger and excitement of real life. She’d gotten it and then some. Neil forced himself to speak. “Whatever you need, Becky.”

He saw her fists clench and expected anger. The fresh tears were a surprise.

“I need to hear that name and not want to die.”

Her shoulders shook. Neil reacted like the gentle-hearted man that he was. He took her arm and pulled her into his embrace. “God, I’m so sorry!”

It was a heavy, hurtful moment for them both—one that might let hatred fade and forgiveness begin.

3

More than tired of the firecrackers and thumping music, Marc spotted Charlie lingering near the tent area and slowly made his way over. Getting through the partying camp members wasn’t easy. Too many of them wanted to offer congratulations and gratitude for looking after things while Adrian was gone, and for not being like Kenn. It was tiresome considering the day’s work, tiresome and annoying. It made his view distort and he suddenly saw them all as mad harpies sent to suck the life out of Adrian’s gifted people.

Marc realized that was how his demon saw them. Before he could question, he joined Charlie. He didn’t need to know. He didn’t have to have any personal contact at all.

More of the silent treatment, huh? the demon commented sarcastically. *Like that’s new.*

Charlie glanced up curiously.

Marc immediately turned his attention.
“Where’s Tracy?”

Charlie took instant offense. “Why? She in trouble?”

“Why? You gonna cover for her?”

Charlie hadn’t expected the abruptness, but he refused to lie. “If I had to, if she was in enough trouble.”

Marc raised a brow.

The teenager flushed. “Mom knows.”

“Good.” Marc wondered how awkward that conversation had been. “Should I repeat the question?”

“She’s cleaning up Hilda’s mess. She got sick after lunch.”

Marc’s frown started growing; Charlie hurried to explain. “Hilda’s the only one. We checked.”

Marc visibly relaxed, but Charlie caught the mental note to verify it and knew Marc would before the night was over.

“Are you okay waiting for her so openly?”

Charlie flushed.

Marc sighed. “Pushing limits while your mom’s busy. Smart and stupid, kid. You know that, right?”

“Yes, but…” Charlie’s voice was strained with the effort of holding in so many new emotions. The urge to take the trader’s life had stayed in Charlie’s mind, whispering, but he’d figured out that his obsession with Tracy was helping him control it. He had other highs to reach. “I didn’t meet her earlier and I do it every day. When I don’t get to, I feel

like...like I betrayed her somehow. She doesn't feel that way, or at least she never acts like it, but I have to have this time with her. I have to at least have..."

Charlie snapped his mouth shut, but it was too late. He knew by the way Marc's mouth tightened into a thin line.

Marc thought of the trip here, of being sure he'd never get Angie and desperate for even a single moment of glory to remember. In that instant, there had only been one thing he wanted from her. "A kiss. To see if it was still magic."

Charlie sighed.

Tracy came from the tent and he immediately went to dispose of the waste.

Marc stared, relieved when they went in separate directions.

Charlie's step was light, grin large despite the ugly chore he was performing. Very few things could make a person happy while carrying a bucket of vomit, and it kept Marc's gaze on him.

He's up to something. Follow him, the demon ordered.

Reluctantly, Marc did.

4

Kenn ducked into the bathroom and sat with a grunt. Li Sing's food tasted great going in, but coming out sucked.

The port-o-let was hot and stinky, but Kenn preferred it to the crowded campers in the mornings,

so he'd made it a nightly ritual. After this, he would shower, check in with their violent new XO, and stay at Adrian's side until dawn.

Footsteps crunched outside the stall comfortingly, people calmly passing. Kenn finished up. He was looking forward to serving Adrian while he recovered and enjoying any extra power he might achieve from it.

Kenn opened the door and went out.

His foot tangled in something; he brought the other boot in front to keep from falling. Barely saving himself, he took another step.

A sharp tug on his tangled foot sent him sprawling this time.

Kenn landed, hands down, in something wet and reekingly familiar.

Laughter exploded from the few witnesses.

Kenn gritted his teeth as he shoved himself up.

He jerked his foot free of the jump rope and slung chunks of vomit from his hands.

An accident, he decided, picking out the rope and no one around except the guards. Some kid dropped his toy as he threw up the day's breakfast.

Kenn turned for the showers, face red. He was almost to them when he remembered that sharp tug.

He turned to glower, but there were only a few Eagles in sight and none of them was looking at him now.

"An accident." He jerked the door open. "A clever one."

Marc came from the shadows, nodding at the Eagles who'd witnessed it all. Instantly feeling better, he was still chuckling as he motioned Zack to have his boys clean up the mess. Some justice was being dispensed.

Marc noticed Becky and Neil in deep conversation outside her tent and filed it. He swept the shadows for Seth and didn't spot any of the cop's team.

Marc finished his rounds of the main camp and went to the QZ. He avoided the medical area, instead, finding Kevin.

"Things okay?" He joined the man as he stood duty over the farthest QZ perimeter.

Kevin sighed. "Out here, sure. In there..."

Marc could feel the tension. "Anything new happen?"

"Just a quick fight between Jax and Paul. Probably over Leslie. Angela has them working under supervision. They were on duty."

Marc wasn't surprised. He also wouldn't be when Leslie chose to follow Samantha's example and claimed them both.

"What else do you have for her tonight?"

"Nothing after the meeting." Kevin skimmed his notes. "Kyle said she'll be beat, to send her to your bed."

Marc approved. "All posts covered?"

"Yes, and we'll have extras until word comes from John."

“Good. Who did they tell you to call if something happens overnight?”

Kevin gave him a pointed look. “You, if I had to.”

“That works.” Marc started to go to the next post, and turned around. “Did she send Seth out?”

“Yes. He and his team are shadowing the surviving women, making sure they aren’t going to return later.”

Marc wondered what Angela had told them to do if the snake women chose to return.

Kill them all, of course, the demon supplied. She knew the Eagles would follow your choice.

Marc left before he could confirm that. He didn’t want to view her or himself that way.

5

“Are you happy now?”

Samantha smiled at the question, stepping aside so Marc could join her in the tent. She hadn’t heard him tap, but she was sure that he had. “More than I ever thought was possible.”

“And your men?”

Samantha winced. “They’re...adjusting.”

Marc had questions, but the one he needed answered, he refused to let through his lips.

Samantha gave him a quick weather report, hoping he would let it go. Marc was the one person here that it bothered her to lie to, and if he asked the right questions, things could get tense.

“So just rain?”

“Yes. It looks to clear out in a couple days.”

“Good.”

Marc didn't leave, instead observing as she resumed her casual pacing and listening. Samantha had a deluxe tent filled with boxes of weather equipment at her disposal, but Marc knew the report had come from her mind.

“Can you talk to nature, Samantha?” He was in awe at the thought. “Communicate, I mean.”

She gave a short nod. “But I won't, not without something to offer.”

Marc made the connection. “Adrian already asked that.”

“No.” Samantha shrugged. “He already knew. I suggested a barter after we ran from the wildfire.”

“And he told you to what? Find out what we need to make a deal like that?”

“He told me it made us a bigger target to even try. It can't be done without our complete surrender.”

“Surrender?”

“Our extinction, boy scout.”

Marc flinched at the common name. He wasn't that, not anymore.

“You can understand why I won't try?”

Marc grunted, heading for the flap. “Mind your protection or I'll double it.”

Samantha stuck out her tongue at his back and then grinned. She didn't plan to be isolated tonight. In fact, just the opposite.

“Blonde and blue, and completely forgettable.”

Jeremy hated the words still ringing in his mind, but that didn't stop him from trying to spot a viable candidate as he walked through the camp. *Too tall...too thin...too much perfume. Doesn't talk enough...hates men.*

Jeremy's gaze landed on the Sisters. The six-woman group had gained three new members; the shortest among them had Samantha's exact shade of hair. It twinkled in the light of the center campfire.

Jeremy reluctantly drifted closer.

The women were practicing their gun stance and didn't notice when he joined the rear of the lesson. He studied the blonde, comparing her weight, shape, and general rear profile. *That could work.*

Bridget felt him staring and peered over her shoulder.

Jeremy studied her features gently and realized she fit Kyle's words. She was pleasant to look at and nothing else—completely forgettable.

Jeremy smiled at her before he could stop himself. And then he turned away. If it got to be too much, he'd find her. That heart shaped ass under those cut-off jeans would be kept track of by the single Eagles, but for Jeremy, it was just a way to know her—a marker in place of the name he didn't have yet. Her face, he couldn't have recalled before he was out of sight.

As Jeremy vanished into the parking area, Leslie got the attention of everyone in earshot with a quick warning. "If he comes to you, it will be for relief. He loves Samantha."

Bridget went up to the line to take her turn. "I'm not interested in him."

Leslie gave her a dirty glare at the obvious lie. "Like that matters."

"We always offer support to the Eagles when they pick one of us." Tracy's tone was friendlier than Leslie's. "It's an honor to serve."

Bridget finished her set and rejoined the small circle. "Jeremy isn't the only one who will like me because I look like her."

She stared at Becky's tent, where Lee and Neil were now chatting lightly. "When that one comes to me, I'll make him fall in love and then Jeremy can have Samantha. It'll be perfect." Bridget missed the frowns of all the other females.

Samantha overheard the remark as she walked by and the words sank into her gut. Wasn't that how it should be? Neil certainly deserved happiness, as did Jeremy. It was herself that she wasn't so sure about.

Samantha ducked quietly into the tent shadows and circled around to listen to Leslie's rueful response.

"Good luck, then. When she came, it was like the rest of us no longer existed."

Bridget wasn't discouraged. "You ladies didn't have the advantage that I do."

“What advantage?” Megan demanded. “I have the same features.”

Bridget glanced over in a patronizing insult. “Obviously not, honey, or he would have been staring at you.”

Samantha tensed. *That one is mean.*

“So what’s the advantage?” Leslie wasn’t sure if she wanted Bridget’s plan to work out that way. Leslie had many male friends in Safe Haven and while she’d like to narrow the field a bit, having to pick one had kept her from doing it. If she could have two...

Bridget flipped her hair over her shoulder so that it would catch the light. “You’ll have to figure that out for yourselves. We aren’t friends yet.”

Samantha resumed her walk, but she didn’t relax. Bridget was probably counting on being able to play on Neil’s emotions, but what if she was like the other gifted people here and hiding it like Jennifer was?

Trailing him, Samantha noted that Jeremy hesitated and then went to his truck. He sat on the tailgate, staring at the place where they’d napped earlier. He appeared forsaken.

Jeremy’s the one I might lose. Their bond wasn’t nearly as strong.

Samantha felt the chill of old loneliness coming and resisted being pulled into the darkness.

Not yet. She went toward Jeremy. *Let me have a little more happiness, okay? Just a little.*

Jeremy felt her coming and found himself comparing her to the other blonde, but his heart pounded too hard to be able to concentrate. *Nothing less will satisfy me.* Heart ass could go back on the market.

“Can I join you?”

Jeremy found enough air to speak. “You don’t have to ask.”

Samantha sent out a wave of happiness, stealing his breath. “I know.” She glanced at the truck bed. “A blanket this time?”

Jeremy immediately got up and retrieved his bedroll from the front, sensing she wasn’t ready for the offer of his tent that he longed to make.

Samantha helped him, enjoying the brush of his hands and body as they worked together. They resumed their previous positions with a small intake of air, a rough groan, and lay there in silent contentment.

As they began to drift, Jeremy again dropped his walls and tried to stay close to her light.

7

“She’s ready.”

“Copy.”

Marc went to the medical tent, where Angela had gone after the meeting. He’d expected that, but not for her to hold out another three hours. Where was she pulling the strength? She’d still been beat

after drawing from him. He, on the other hand, felt wiped out.

You need to feed her more, the demon advised. She's doing more now, caring for more.

Marc didn't like the phrasing after the morning's sexual concerns, but he didn't respond. If he started talking with the demon, he might get used to using it and that would be dangerous.

You could bow out, the demon replied sweetly. Adrian will give her what she needs.

Marc stomped into the medical tent, furious, but it was gone the second he spotted Angela. It appeared that she'd fallen out of alertness gradually, and was now slumped uncomfortably over Adrian's arm.

Marc approached them silently, but Adrian's eyes flew open the instant he got close. Unable to do much more than yell, that instinct to protect her was still strong.

The two men stared at each other for a long moment, both wondering if this would become a habit for them—sharing her.

“I hope not.” Adrian's voice was a hoarse croak that didn't get even a stir from the tired woman they were both so bonded to. “That would hurt her.”

Marc agreed, jaw clamped tight to keep from telling Adrian that he should have died and then there wouldn't be any chance of it.

“It's what I wanted.”

Marc took that in coldly. “And now?”

Adrian wound his fingers, all he was capable of moving, through her tangled curls. He gave a gentle tug and then let go. “It hasn’t changed. She should have let me die.”

“It’s worse now.” Marc remembered his own strengthened longings after Angie had healed him. “Like you can’t breathe and she’s the air.”

“I’ve never been on this end of it.” Adrian shuddered. “I’m fighting.”

Marc knew that, but it didn’t appear to matter. He carefully lifted Angela into his arms.

Angry and stressed, it still would have been impossible to miss the naked fear in Adrian’s eyes.

Marc hated himself for feeling compassion. He kept his mouth shut until they were out in the cool night air.

Marc gestured to Kevin, who appeared as beat as the woman snuggling into his embrace. “Adrian needs company.”

Kevin sighed. “I’ll get Tracy to sit with him.”

Marc thought of Charlie. “Make that Cynthia.”

Adrian’s chosen females were all quickly becoming off limits.

Kevin wanted to argue, but couldn’t. If Marc was sharing Angie with the boss man, how could *he* protest?

“She wants to be there for him.” Marc gestured. “Go get her.”

Kevin went slowly, jealously, even though Adrian was clearly in no shape to do anything. He

just... *I want her time for myself. And that's wrong. I have to let her work.*

Kevin vanished into the darkness.

Marc continued to the center QZ tent without guilt. He was sure that Cynthia could use a break from fending off Matt, who wanted to cement their relationship physically.

Marc smirked, sliding Angie into the open bedroll. Yeah, he definitely had the better end of that stick.

8

“Stay on your side!”

Kevin stopped, stunned for a minute by the shadows. Matt and Cynthia were sharing a bed!

“I mean it. You touch me again and I’ll cut those fingers off.”

Kevin listened to Matt’s cackle and was dismayed by how much it resembled Rick’s.

“No, Matt, I don’t.”

Kevin couldn’t hear Matt’s words; he hugged the thick shadows around the canvas.

“I’d like you more if you had respect for me and for the dream.”

“I do.” Matt protested, arms waving. “I just don’t understand why you took me in.”

Cynthia sighed deeply, and Kevin felt an honest answer coming—something he hadn’t gotten.

“They would have banished you, Matt. Maybe worse. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“And now you wish you had.” Matt glared at her.

“No, I made the right choice. In time, you’ll be trusted again and have a real life here.”

Matt snorted scornfully and Kevin found himself agreeing. As he watched a shadow finger creep onto the other side of the mattress, it was hard not to. Matt was a bad kid and it would get worse.

Kevin came from the shadows, boots crunching carelessly.

The shadow hand drew back and Cynthia sat up, listening.

Kevin tapped on the flap. “The big boss needs you.”

Cynthia flushed. “Be right there!”

Both males heard the breathless tone.

Kevin smirked when Matt shifted roughly on the air mattress, nearly flipping Cynthia off it. The boy didn’t like him or Adrian. *The feeling’s mutual.*

Kevin was still lingering when the reporter stepped out of the tent. He caught Matt’s resentful glare through the open flap.

Not one to be subtle even in the old world, Kevin held his arm out to Cynthia like a gentleman would have.

Annoyed and sleepy, Cynthia slid her arm into Kevin’s and left Matt staring at them both hatefully. She wasn’t cut out for babysitting unless she got rest and Octo-boy liked to watch the sun come up.

“Another week.” She unconsciously leaned into Kevin’s welcoming heat. “Then I’ll tell her.”

Kevin understood, but didn't get his hopes up. If he and Cyn were supposed to be a match, Angela and Adrian wouldn't have tossed Matt into their mix.

9

Marc settled Angela onto his bedroll, smoothing her clothes and hair into more comfortable positions. As he laid the long braid across his pillow, the gray glared like a sign. *There's more. A lot more.*

She performs minor miracles daily, the demon stated, tone slightly admiring. Tonight, she brought a man back from the dead. Did you think there wouldn't be a price?

Marc's mouth stayed closed, but in his heart, he knew it was only a matter of time before he began talking with the ghost inside. The demon had information that he needed.

Angela stirred briefly, arching a bit. "Unbutton me, will ya?"

Marc eagerly slid both big hands around her waist and up to her bra. He rubbed as the hook sprang free, but she was already back asleep.

Marc covered her up and sat on his side, thinking. In a bit, he would clean his guns and maybe run over for a hot shower. Right now, he had to decide if it was worth the trade to have the demon in his life. He had many doubts about being able to hide it once he made that choice.

“Marc...”

Angie’s call was sweet, comforting. The demon faded to allow Marc this moment alone.

Once in the rear halls, the demon chose the door with the information scrolls. He couldn’t go far, only as much as Marc’s impenetrable cell would allow, but the words had always been in reach.

Bitter over his imprisonment, the demon had spent decades learning from the inherited data stores. When his chance came, the demon planned to know what to do with it. If he were useful, he wouldn’t be locked up again. Marc was cruel enough to keep him in here forever, but not if there was something to deal with. The demon went straight to the section on recovery.

Marc settled next to Angela’s warm body with a shudder of perfection. Her legs tangled with his, body melting against his hip, and the feeling of rightness increased. Even innocent contact between them created a feeling of seclusion that Marc wanted to drown in. He drifted off thinking of the trip here, when it had been just them against the world.

Angela, drained and hungry, let the witch out to roam as she felt herself falling into a deeper sleep.

May I take from where I want?

Angela agreed sleepily. *Just leave Adrian alone for a bit.*

The witch laughed softly and vanished.

Marc's arms tightened unconsciously. Angela let the darkness claim her, securely locked in Marc's dreams.

The witch didn't go far, just to the information banks. There was someone she'd never been able to reach until now, not fully. She'd wanted to for decades, but hadn't been able to get Angela's permission to roam. That was the only way to open the door between demons. The ancients had needed to be sure that the demons could never betray their hosts.

As she slid silently into the dimly lit library, Marc's demon froze, stunned at the sight of her. He'd never viewed his own kind before.

The witch cackled, gliding toward the far wall. She paused in front of a door that the demon had never been able to open.

The witch pushed the door gently and it slid a crack, revealing a blue light.

The demon behind her gasped. And came closer.

The witch wasn't ready to go further with her newest access point, at least not alone. She turned slowly. Orbs glowing deep crimson, she appraised Marc's magical center ruthlessly.

The demon felt her evaluation and held still under the promise of adventure he read in the charged atmosphere. The attraction he'd expected if they ever met was there, as well as a raw sense of dangerous power, but the lure of a friendship was what made him agree.

“I bind myself to you for...” He paused.

“One day. They can manage that long.” The witch waited for his answer.

“I bind myself to you for one full day.” The demon wasn’t sure about trusting her. The sound of her voice was pure power—the kind he would never provoke.

The witch held out a hand, observing him closely.

The demon snatched her up against his chest in a tight, hungry grip. “Let’s go.”

The witch cackled again, turning a bit to reach the door. They vanished into the unknown with Marc’s demon swelling in happiness. His light, as it grew, was bright gold.

10

“Home...”

Kendle rolled over, her sleep restless. She bumped into the sharp, cold corner of the seat and jerked awake.

They were home.

Except, it wasn’t, not anymore. Somehow, while she wasn’t looking, Pitcairn had become her home.

The sound of the engines coming pulled her into alertness and sent a hopeful fear into her heart.
People!

“Luke!” She was surprised that he hadn’t stirred.

She looked over to find him huddled against their backpacks. Even in the darkness, she could see his skin had a sheen of sweat. He was worse. *Shit!*

Kendle pulled the gun from her belt and slowly inched over to the window. “Please be good guys. Please be good guys...”

All she could see was headlights, at least ten of them. Five trucks circled the plane as if they knew she and Luke were in here. *Shit!*

Kendle sank down, racing for a solution.

“Come on out of there.”

Make a deal! Kendle slowly stood up, longing to see a group of uniformed authority to help her. The sky was just beginning to lighten as she climbed down, the wind chilly and the sky ominous.

The vehicles turned their lights off all at once, throwing her into darkness.

Kendle stopped at the bottom of the short stairs, gun in hand.

“Two of us are coming over. Don’t shoot.”

The fact that the voice was female went a long way in calming Kendle’s fears. “I won’t.”

Gravel crunched as the vague shadows got closer. Kendle was able to make out hands holding lanterns that hadn’t been lit and guns on hips.

Kendle stared at the wild women, eyes adjusting enough to show her men’s clothing and weapons, and a hardness she’d never seen in American women before.

“You fly in?”

Kendle nodded stupidly, staring as a lantern was lit.

Carol motioned toward the train. “Guess you’ve figured out what happened.”

Kendle forced herself to confirm it. “The whole country?”

Marsha grunted, eyeing the plane. “Yep. We finally did what everyone joked about.”

“A few times over.” Carol studied Kendle. “What ya got in the plane that you felt the need to defend?”

Kendle reacted the way she’d been scarred. Fight or die. “My man. Why? You thinking about taking him?”

Both women blinked at the hostile tone.

Carol held the lantern up, studying Kendle and her scars. “Where you from, Hardass?”

Kendle slid the gun into her belt. “Maybe that’s information I don’t care to part with.”

Marsha glowered. “If we wanted your man, we’d take him.”

Kendle took a step forward and growled.

It wasn’t a warning sound or even anger. It was a victim in the corner about to spill blood in an attempt for freedom. The two caravan leaders knew the noise well. They both took a step back. This wasn’t the easy prey they’d hoped for upon seeing a slender shadow through the plane window.

Kendle took a deep breath, pushing back the need to kill. “You should go now.”

Carol opened her mouth, maybe to offer a little encouragement.

“Kendle?”

Marsha and Carol both took another quick step back at the male voice.

“He doesn’t sound good.”

“What’s wrong with him?”

Kendle was torn—clearly they could be trouble—but she had no idea what to do to help Luke. “I’m not sure.” Her shoulders slumped. “He was fine when we landed.”

Marsha and Carol exchanged a glance. In it, they asked if they wanted to take the chance on helping a stranger. In this new world, that wasn’t a good idea.

“What ya got to trade for medicine?”

Kendle thought fast. Not the gun, food, or water. “Blankets, a couple packs of batteries, box of candles...”

“What about the plane?” Carol eyed the metal. It wasn’t rusting like everything they found now; it would be good material for increasing the strength of their caravan.

Kendle slowly nodded. “I’ll get our gear out. No gas in it, though. We coasted in on fumes.”

Marsha had been thinking about a plane all along. This land was dead. Staying was another bad idea, but those leading their little group had outvoted her. “Stand aside and we’ll check him over.”

Kendle moved reluctantly, praying she wasn't making a mistake.

The two big women climbed inside, eyeing the gear and the well-built man shaking on the floor.

"Feverish, rapid pulse." Marsha knelt.

Carol nodded, also making observations. "No puke or shit, though—not a virus."

She looked over to where Kendle was standing tensely in the narrow doorway. "How long you guys been here?"

Kendle added. "A week or so."

"Land sickness?"

Carol shrugged at Marsha's guess. "Could be. He's strong still."

Marsha glanced at Kendle, able to see more of the bite marks as the sun rose. "He do that to you?"

Kendle shook her head, trying not to shudder. "No."

"The person dead now?"

Kendle's grin was answer enough.

"We'll give him a dose of antibiotics and give you the bottle. See that he takes three of the capsules every day and don't hide any back for the next time. If he has an infection and you don't give him all the meds, there won't be a next time."

Luke struggled beneath the rough hands, hearing voices, but unable to make out the words. He'd never gotten sick so fast. He opened his eyes to see Kendle leaning over him in concern.

"Let the medicine work. You'll feel better."

Luke didn't argue. He was too tired from listening to that ticking clock in his head again.

Kendle stayed by his side as the caravan set up a tight camp around the plane and began to settle down for a few hours of sleep. As soon as Luke could be moved, she would load him into the small jeep she'd bartered for their remaining fruit—the sight of which had sent the all-female group into fits of drooling and shouted bids. The currency of the world had changed.

Chapter Five
Fix The World

1

“**W**hat has he been doing here, Angie? What’s the secret goal of Safe Haven?”

Angela tilted the book toward Marc so that he could read the title on the first page.

How to fix our world, one problem at a time.

Marc opened his mouth to scoff—to make light of that impossible goal—and found awe. Talk about high ambitions. He settled on the question that mattered most. “Can he?”

Angela flipped the page, leaning closer so that they could both read.

Step one: Write out a complete solution for all problems that cause murder.

Two: Explore every possible outcome and account for them.

Three: Go over each of these steps again.

Four: Record the chosen results.

Five: Put number four in the proper order according to consequence ripples.

Six: Consider all worst-case scenarios.

Seven: Repeat steps 1-7 until you’re 95% sure. Fate will cover the rest.

There was a lot more listed under that one, but Marc wasn't ready to even skim it. He leaned back on the mattress instead, stretching out. He had no doubt about what was in the stack of notebooks now. Adrian had repeated steps 1-7 until he came up with a plan. And then he'd begun to follow it, line by line. "Who the hell is he?"

Angela sighed unhappily. "Mankind's last hope."

Marc let his hand caress a curl. "I thought that was you."

Angela dimpled. "I'm an advisor. He's the light."

Marc tossed out a wave of need. "You're *my* light."

Angela's smile took his breath and replaced it with hunger—the kind that had to be satisfied. Marc gently pulled her onto the bed.

2

"Again today?"

Charlie denied the request regretfully. "No. We'd get caught."

Tracy ignored the disappointment. "You let me know when and I'm there."

Charlie stared at her, young heart racing. "We could do something else together."

Tracy started to say no and found herself asking what he had in mind.

“Puppy duty, tray delivery, and babysitting are all on my list.” He watched for her reaction.

Tracy sighed. “More FND, huh?”

“Yes.”

Charlie didn’t add anything more. Tracy was smart enough to know what he was doing for her.

“Something fun afterwards?”

“What would you like to do with me?”

Charlie’s happiness gave his words a deeper ring than what she was used to. Tracy froze as an unexpected chill of desire ran over her skin. Sure he hadn’t meant it that way, she searched for a proper answer. “Whatever we can do alone.”

Now Charlie froze. The images hitting him were...indecent, and he struggled to keep her from knowing. “I’ll think of something.”

Tracy took in the red cheeks and stiff stance with understanding. He had remarkable control over his new hormones.

“Okay... You sure your mom isn’t going to flip out? She has a mean swing.”

Charlie grinned. “Over me, it would be the gun.”

“All the more reason for us to be alone!” Tracy flushed. “Leave it alone, I mean. We should give this up.”

“No.”

Charlie’s firm tone wasn’t one she had the heart to argue with yet. Tracy still hesitated, though. Right now, it was innocent—he was helping her

build a different future. When he'd offered, she hadn't hesitated.

"Because you like being with me, and how I make you feel. I don't expect anything from you."

Tracy didn't mind the mental invasion, but she refused to allow the lie. "Don't you, kid?"

Charlie didn't lower his glowing orbs. "I only expect things from myself. It's easier that way. Especially since I know what I'll be capable of."

Tracy's voice softened. "But you hope for things."

"Doesn't everyone?" he hedged uncomfortably.

"Yes." Tracy sighed. "I suppose we all do that." She let him lock their gazes. "And you're prepared to be disappointed?"

The teenager grinned. "I've already gotten what I hoped for."

Tracy gazed back steadily, mostly ignoring his weak pull. "Time with me?"

Charlie pushed out that magnetic flame and sent it rushing over her body like he'd observed Adrian do. "It means more to me. You mean more."

Tracy suddenly couldn't breathe. "How do you figure?"

"Because I'll still want you *after*."

"Don't do that!" Tracy snapped sharply, body lighting up as if she were with Adrian.

Charlie took a step closer. "Everything will be better with me."

Tracy felt a light brush along her lips, a mental caress, and shuddered in need. "Please don't."

Charlie pulled the heat in, proud of himself. He'd practiced it on several camp women before attempting this moment. He waited for her to get control of herself, aware that he might have gone too far.

“How do you do that?”

Charlie kept his tone light. “It’s a long story, complicated.”

Tracy snickered at the defensively eager answer. “Better to show, right?”

Charlie flushed, but didn’t deny it.

Tracy giggled. “I think we’ll save that for later—much later.”

Charlie stiffened at the words and sent out another blast of heat. “Will there be a later, Tracy?”

Electricity sparked. Charlie came closer as she thought about her answer. He put a hand on the stall door, leaning in. “Please?”

Tracy sighed in defeat. She held no defense against him begging. “Yes, if you still want me when it’s legal.”

“To hell with legal.” He brought them within a foot of each other. “I’ll be at your flap the day I make a team.”

Tracy struggled to fight the attraction, to form words. “I won’t... I can’t... Stop that!”

Charlie lifted his hand, wanting to feel her skin.

“Excuse me.”

They both spun from the powerful moment to find the new boy—Conner—leaning against the door.

“You done? I gotta piss.”

Flushing scarlet, Tracy hurriedly ducked under Charlie's arm and fled the camper, forgetting her cleaning supplies.

Conner limped toward the stall.

Charlie went to help the wounded teenager, trying not to be angry about the interruption. At least he had finally let Tracy know where he was going with things. And she hadn't exactly said no. He'd had to let her in a little to reach her. Sometimes that was hard to do here. So many of the refugees had ugly, greedy minds that hurt him. It was a relief to discover that Tracy wasn't corrupt. Her concern was for hurting the dream.

Or you, his demon offered. *She doesn't want you risking your neck for her.*

Too late for that. Charlie waited for Conner to finish.

"She's hot. Yours?"

Conner's question was blunt, curious, and friendly. Charlie didn't pick up any disapproval. It made him careless. "Before the year is out, she will be."

Conner took in the determined fire and recognized the common soul. Charlie was like him...was Adrian his father?

Charlie didn't correct the thought, but he did bring up a thick wall. He now had secrets that he would defend harshly if provoked.

Angela flushed as she came from the tent. “How long have you been waiting?”

“Just got here.” Kyle chuckled at what was clearly a lie.

“Uh-huh.”

Kyle snickered. “Maybe I should be later tomorrow?”

“By an hour!” Marc called from inside the tent.

Angela and Kyle laughed as they began walking.

Kyle handed her a paper. “Nearest spring and places for supply pickups along the way. The water from the hot spring is thermal. Do we still have to clean it even though it’s sterile?”

“Yes. Some of that water is thousands of years old. We’re not taking any chances with it. Who knows what nature might have cooked up down there? Try to collect from areas that are covered with green boxes. They were used as protection from debris and other contaminants.” The page went into her pocket. “What else?”

“Did a spot count. Our thief is back.”

Angela’s mind went to Danny, who she’d helped to expose. “Another one?”

“Yes. We caught Danny red-handed, but Adrian was sure there was a second thief.” Kyle frowned. “We didn’t catch anyone else.”

Angela stored that. “I’ll handle it. Next?”

“Lee’s on point, as per Marc’s instructions, and off at lunch.” He paused, flipping pages. “Radio’s been quiet, but there were campfires in the distance

last night. Zack checked it out, says they'll probably all come by today. More sheep, not shepherds, that he saw... We're good here for a few more days, unless that creek goes up. It's cleared and netted. No one has duty over it, but we'll go by it on rounds."

"Any signs of life?"

"No, but it was dark. Might have overlooked things like that."

Angela slowed, noting the long lines. "Got a little more room. Keep going."

Kyle referred to the next page. "Questions from Conner on what all he's allowed to do, and Jennifer wants to know when she gets to help."

Angela thought of what she'd seen. "Conner, I'll handle myself. Tell Jennifer when she's not weeks away from getting by the danger date. Tell her we need those babies more than we need a hand."

Kyle had told her the same thing, but Jenny was worried about losing her place.

"Who is Li's assistant today?"

Kyle moaned in mock annoyance. "I forgot to give him one, so he drafted his own. Tonya."

"That explains the lines."

"Yeah. We're keeping an eye on her."

Angela was noticed by those around them. She plastered a welcoming expression on, scanning the herd. She found worry, restlessness, boredom, and suspicion everywhere, but little anger or hostility as she got into line and was surrounded.

"How's Adrian?"

“When’s he comin’ back?”

“Why did he put you in charge?”

Angela tried to keep her patience. “Hello. I’ve missed you, too. Yes, I’m fine and it’s nice to be back.”

Her gentle reminder was ignored.

“Come on!”

“Quit stalling.”

Angela scowled, piercing those closest with a cool glare. “Adrian’s recovering. He and John will decide when he’s able to return, and that’s a question you’ll have to ask Adrian. Now can I eat here or should I go back to the QZ mess?”

They returned to their seats, leery and confused. They wanted answers, but she could only deliver them when it was time, when instinct said to. Right now, it said to set requirements on the respect they showed her.

Angela walked through the full mess to the center table...her heart clenched for an instant. The wooden table was covered in good wishes from the entire camp, even the benches.

Angela was still reading them when Tracy sat down across from her.

“It was Leslie’s idea.” Tracy wanted credit to go where it was due.

Angela traced the swirls and lines with an absent finger, deep in thought. Tracy’s next words snapped her into the present place and time.

“Will you look...for me?”

Angela, relying heavily on manipulations to keep control, understood the benefits from Tracy's side, but she also saw them from her own. "Why didn't you ask Charlie?"

Tracy didn't look up from swirling her spoon through instant potatoes. "Because you can make him stay away from me if you find bad things. I can't do that."

"Why not?" Angela was already sure of the answer.

Tracy's cheeks flushed as her voice lowered to an embarrassed mutter. "He got in my head."

"And?" Angela prompted, tone cold. She'd known it was coming.

"And he said he'll come for me—openly—the day he makes a team."

Angela took that in, surprised. "Marc told him at least a year."

"I know, but in a year, if he keeps wearing me down..." Tracy sighed, miserably defensive. "I won't be able to say no. If it's not gonna work, you have to keep him out. I can't do it now."

Angela leaned closer, voice growing pointed. "Do you honestly think it will take Charlie a full year to make a team?"

Tracy paled as she understood. "Before he's fifteen?"

Angela wanted to comfort, but she wasn't quite capable. She got as close to unbiased as she could.

"I doubt the camp would kick up much fuss. Charlie appears to be able to do whatever he wants

in this camp—like he’s Adrian’s...” Angela stopped herself from saying the rest.

Tracy missed the pause in her sweep of the camp.

When she lingered over Angela’s shoulder, there was no doubt it meant trouble.

Ignoring the arriving people who called greetings or came toward her, Angela stood up, now fixed on the two men sitting alone with Jennifer. They had their backs to the center table, missing the sudden silence that allowed everyone to hear their cruel words.

“Should have thrown you in a creek.”

“Just a problem we’ll have to get rid of later.”

“We don’t want your kind here.”

Angela’s pace quickened. If Kyle heard that... “Damn.” Angela heard Marc’s steps behind her. His mild curse made her brace for the noise that was coming. Kyle had heard.

The mobster flew by them an instant later.

Tucker and Anderson saw him coming—or maybe felt it. Both men hurried to defend themselves, but it was already too late. Kyle’s fists rained down like thick pistons, firing until blood began to drip.

Those closest scattered, but it was contained to a rear corner. Kyle’s swift, vicious hits kept the men trapped.

Marc waited for Angela to stop him...and waited.

Daryl finally got Kyle's attention. "Jennifer's bleeding."

Kyle shoved Tucker's half-conscious frame away, spitting at him, "You're out of the Eagles! You show up for a meeting and I'll put you down on the spot!"

Marc was still waiting for Angela to stop this, to take charge...and finally realized that she wasn't going to. It was a camp lesson. Her first.

Kyle carefully picked Jennifer up and stepped lightly. His face, terrifying seconds before, was now concerned and loving. The instant flip was powerful. The camp never saw Kyle when he was at his most dangerous or his most vulnerable. This was a reminder that there was a reason he was their top Eagle.

As he went by, Angela noticed Daryl giving Crone, a member of their team, a nasty glare and stored it. After handing out punishments to Seth and Kyle, Daryl and his team had become looked to by the camp as enforcers. Just like her predecessor had, Angela was encouraging it. She knew Daryl was spying on Crone, who he thought was spending too much time with one of the young girls from Cesar's camp.

Angela turned to the two bloody men who were slowly picking themselves up. "Go spend some time with Doug. He has chores."

Tucker and Anderson were in no shape to argue.

As they limped off without even basic medical care, Angela hit her button. "Send a clean-up crew to the main mess. Code Two."

Code Two meant it had to be disinfected. Angela helped the Eagles carry the soiled tables and benches out of the mess. The clean-up crew would spread sawdust over the blood splatters and then work on the tables. Within a short time, the mess would be restored. They were getting good at cleaning up after themselves.

Angela turned to Kyle and Jennifer, and caught the brief look that he exchanged with Tracy. In the quick glance, Angela read concern for Jennifer, but also a bond between him and Tracy that shouldn't have been there. She wasn't the only one who noticed.

Wrapped over his arm, head on his big shoulder, Jennifer also saw the look and instantly added up the clues. "You lied to me!"

Already leaving sporadic drips, blood began to roll over Kyle's arm and fall to the dirt in ominous splatters.

"Where's he going with no punishment?"

"Why is he allowed to beat people?"

"Teacher's pet."

The disorder around them rang in Angela's mind and despair came for the first time. If they couldn't understand that Anderson and Tucker had deserved what they got, how would she ever get them to fight for her? "These people don't stand a

chance against the government. I need more weapons.”

Kevin grunted agreement with Angela’s mutter as they went to help the Eagles settle things down.

A group of men eating close by exchanged pointed looks. Each of the five men were Eagles, but none of them had been noticed yet. They’d bonded during teamwork and had been trying to come up with an idea that would give them some glory while doing something big for the camp.

“Weapons.” Theo dropped his eyes to the lunch they were nearly finished with. “I might have built a few things like that in my time.” He raised a brow, including the others. “Anyone else?”

All of them raised a subtle finger. Engineers were notorious weapons examiners. Some loved them and some hated them, but everyone wanted to know how they worked.

Theo returned to his Manhattan. “Anyone want to meet in my tent after evening mess for cards? Closed game.”

The time was narrowed down and the five Eagles faded back into obscurity, but the sense that their purpose had just been revealed was clear.

4

Charlie took Conner to Adrian, calling a quiet greeting to John and Anne.

“How is he?”

“I’ll live.” Adrian hated his weak voice.

The boys each took a side of the bed as John left Jennifer's cot to inspect Conner's wound. The pregnant girl was sedated. Kyle was in the chair at her side, looking broken.

Charlie shot a quick thought to Adrian while everyone was distracted.

Conner thinks you've fathered other children since him, that I'm yours.

I wish you were. Adrian slammed the wall down too late.

Charlie's face darkened. "She doesn't!"

Adrian's pain was almost tangible. *I know. It's always 'my Marc'.*

Charlie withered under his idol's sarcastic misery. "I'm sorry."

Adrian held out a hand. "So am I, son. You'll help me stay out?"

Charlie slowly took Adrian's hand. His anger, most of it anyway, came from remembering how he'd once wished for Adrian to be his dad. *You have to leave them alone. It will destroy Safe Haven.*

"I'd never hurt my sheep..." Adrian's body relaxed as sleep claimed him again.

"I believe in you." Charlie patted his hand, understanding the drugs were in control of Adrian's mind right now.

Conner turned to find Charlie bent low in concern, hand gripping Adrian's.

He promised! He wasn't supposed to have more kids! Conner straightened, rage pulsing. "Did he kill your mother, too?"

Charlie gently covered Adrian up. “Almost. He used her for bait to draw out the slavers. It saved the whole camp and turned her into someone I don’t know most days.”

Conner tried to sneer, but the pain of losing his mom made him sympathetic to the misery he read in Charlie’s mind. He settled for a warning. “Watch out. Once he’s in her head, she’s lost.”

Charlie understood that’s why Adrian had said stay *out*, not away. The more time he spent with her mentally, the stronger the bond would become.

Charlie flashed a surprised grin at Conner. “You don’t know it, but you just helped me out, big time. I may even owe you for it.”

Charlie left without explaining that if he spent mental time with Tracy, she would want him more. It always worked that way with their kind. Hadn’t Adrian himself said so during one of their private talks?

Yes. Charlie pulled up the correct memory file.

“They don’t even have to like us for the bonds to start. Be careful who you choose to ensnare. You may not be able to get rid of them.”

Charlie’s pace quickened. He knew exactly what to do now. He did owe Conner. Maybe they could even be friends or something once Conner was placed in the Jr. Eagles. He couldn’t hang out with Conner until that happened. An unproven friend didn’t factor into Charlie’s plans.

“The bleeding stopped, but it’s just a matter of time. No way she’ll make it to September.”

Angela had been fairly sure, but she was also hoping she was wrong. If nothing changed, the twins would be here before the government. “And Adrian?”

John gestured. “He’ll live.”

Angela had been waiting to hear John say it before letting herself believe. She hadn’t been sure, either. His wounds had become infected so fast that it was a miracle. “When will he...”

“A while!” John had already heard the question too many times to pretend he had patience left. “At least two weeks.”

Angela understood John was protecting his patient, but these people needed Adrian back at the helm as soon as possible. “Any chance of half that? He won’t want to lie around, and we’ll pump him full of energy.”

John wasn’t ready to deny it could happen. “I’d be surprised.”

Angela had to let it go at that. “Two weeks, huh?” She sighed, staring at Adrian’s medication-calmed face. Want to or not, she could tell how weak he was, how the infection had drained him. “Fine. I’ll adjust for two weeks instead of one. How soon can he travel?”

“Five days for camp travel.”

“Too long.” Angela adjusted her plan. “Have him ready in three.”

She didn't stay to hear the arguments she already knew. They were on a deadline. She couldn't afford the extra days here. That one delay might cost them in the end, and she wasn't taking the chance. Jennifer and Adrian's health would be covered as best they could. The rest was up to fate.

"Good girl." Adrian was surfacing in quick, blurry moments.

John scowled at Adrian's tender murmur, but didn't scold. She was Safe Haven's leader. The camp came first. Adrian had trained her well, and John hated him a little for it. The gentle Angela who had joined them in South Dakota wasn't coming back.

Angela went to the little mess, refusing to dwell on morbid thoughts. She didn't need to call Kevin over when he saw her quick stride. He appeared at her hip with his notebook out before she could hit the button on her radio.

Angela settled at the center table as Li Sing hurried over with hot tea. She thanked him, and waited until he was out of earshot to start giving instructions. "Adrian needs the magic users. They'll each have five minutes, every day for the next three. Tell them I said he's empty. It's been a while since Adrian was forced to draw. He's usually surrounded, and they may need to insist."

Confused, Kevin noted it for later. "How do I..."

“Talk to Kenn and Kyle first. They’re tight these days for some reason that I should probably be worried over.”

Kevin didn’t like that. “I’ll look into that too.”

Angela didn’t tell him no. That part of Kevin’s new job—spying and rumor-gathering—was what would keep a leader abreast of coming trouble. “I want Leslie on the QZ today. Give her a senior man who won’t be a distraction. She has to know how to work these kids.”

Angela saw Peggy and Hilda walking by on the other side of the tape, and Anne coming from inside the QZ toward them. The trio stopped, talking casually at first, but the conversation apparently took an interesting turn because all three females lowered their voices and went toward a less traveled section of the circular path that wound through camp.

Curious, but not worried, Angela turned to tell Kevin to find out what that was about, and found him already writing it down.

She didn’t offer any encouragement, but Kevin could feel that he’d pleased her. It lightened the shadows on his scruffy face.

“How are you adjusting to being my right hand?”

“That’s Marc.” He was leery of traps.

“You know what I meant.”

Kevin did. “It’s different.”

“You ready to give it up?”

Aware of the wording, Kevin refused. “No.”

“Good. You’re quiet, you pay attention, and so far, I’m not falling behind. I’d hate to have to break in a rookie.”

Kevin was startled into a place of contentment that he hadn’t known he was lacking. This was how Kenn and the others felt when they did something right. *It’s...amazing.*

Angela motioned toward the buffet. “Cynthia stayed with Adrian until dawn. She could use breakfast in bed today. Feel like dropping a tray?”

Kevin didn’t need to be asked twice. He assumed it was a reward for sticking with the duty he’d been given.

Angela let him think that, smothering the guilt. She had a short amount of time to work on this first plan. The Major’s men should be at the bunker within the next ten days. That was how long she had to persuade the camp to fight, and a great deal of that success would rest upon Matt and Mitch behaving as she’d foreseen.

“I counted on their weaknesses.” Angela listened to Kevin load up a tray and leave. “Two dogs, for a herd of three hundred sheep and shepherds. We’ve done worse.”

Angela stared at the ants rooting through their ever-growing garbage pile, freezing. She’d just had an idea so unimaginable that the new leader inside had insisted she explore it.

The ants viewed Safe Haven as a food source, often digging up anything they buried. And they were aggressive about defending their hills—which

they built whenever Safe Haven stayed camped. It was leaving behind a mutation legacy in every state; it was also a trail for fresh antlings to follow so that they could catch up to the colony.

Angela had little doubt that the hills were stocked with food and protectors. The ants were evolving at an alarming rate and every sign she picked out screamed intelligence. For example, the bait balls no longer worked. The colony simply sacrificed a few of their soldiers to carry the poison away from the hills. They buried it out of the scent line and then crawled off to die alone. Samantha and Neil had complete documentation on that one. They'd been sent out on more than a few observation trips during Adrian's command. They'd discovered that the ants were cleaning up the towns as the colony went by. That could be useful.

“You got anything for me?”

Angela hadn't realized he was her open shadow today. “Yes, actually. Nice timing.”

Kyle didn't tell her that he'd observed that look on Adrian's face enough to know what it meant. The difference was that Kenn was usually the one who had the honor of hearing the new idea or plan first. He also didn't say he couldn't stand to be cooped up in that tent any longer. She knew.

“Ask Dog, and then Jennifer, this question: Can they talk to the ants?”

Kyle stared, dumbfounded.

Angela returned to her thinking. What would the insects want if someone could bridge the communication gap?

Kyle recovered slowly. “Why Jenny?”

Angela’s answer wasn’t a comfort.

“If she wants you to know, she’ll answer that.”

Kyle waved Billy over to cover his post, going to the tent where they had Dog stashed. Apparently, there was a lot he still didn’t know about Jennifer and her gifts, and this was a bad time to be low on details.

6

As Angela left the mess, she saw Samantha climb from the front seat of Jeremy’s truck. The couple had moved there when the rain began.

Angela saw the gentle kiss Samantha placed on his cheek, the way she smoothed hair back over his sleeping face. That was more than the response of a close friend or a relief source. Samantha loved Jeremy.

Angela hadn’t realized it was possible for Samantha to have real feelings for both males, and she stared hard, thinking it through. For every action, there was always an equal and opposite reaction...

Samantha went to her team leader’s side, not answering the silent questions. Angela had her own triangle going on. She’d figure it out in time.

Angela scowled at the thought, turning to watch John and Anne enter the medical tent.

Samantha waited, slightly impatient and a bit groggy. When Jeremy woke, he would come for her and she wanted to be too busy to talk until he cooled off. Hoping to speed things along, Samantha took her notebook out and found a pen. She rubbed at her hip, thinking at least now she knew where the red line had come from. She hadn't remembered the pen was in her pocket when she crashed.

"I want a list of things that will make John's life easier." Angela picked out his ginger movements through the medical tent window.

Samantha started writing as she spoke. "Less carrying—a gopher to stay with him. Less climbing. I'll ask Neil. Pain relief is Tonya, but I doubt she'll give it to me..."

Angela waited.

"I'll have Marc ask her." Samantha dug into the assignment. "All the women want him, so she won't say no. More rest..."

"Say that again."

Samantha tensed at the order. "Which part?"

"Pain relief."

Samantha's shoulders unhitched. "Well that's what we should have been giving cancer patients all along, right? I read a Post article on it."

Angela raised a brow and Samantha quickly explained. "Scientists were brewing it as a tea and an oil, I think. They'd sent it into remission in lab

rats, but the government wouldn't renew their funding."

Angela didn't have to consider the outcome on this one. "Tell Tonya that Marc wants it and *I'm* paying—a trade of her choice."

Samantha went toward the couples' tents to deliver the messages, understanding Angela didn't want Marc to owe Tonya. Samantha agreed with that choice. Reformed or not, the redhead was dangerous.

7

Jeremy didn't want to wake up. The dream had pulled him in deep and the flashing numbers in his mind were definitely a pattern. If he could stay here in the dark with Samantha, he could get the last two numbers and break the code.

"Why do you need to?"

Samantha's voice didn't echo, but Jeremy still cringed. No one was supposed to know of his obsession.

"Too late for that." Sam used a neutral tone. "But I have to know why. I won't let anyone hurt him, not even you."

"I'm not a traitor." Jeremy was still trying to memorize the next two numbers.

"They'll be able to track us if you break the code."

Jeremy knew that, but it didn't matter. "I have to do this."

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I wake up thinking about the code, you, and the future—in that order.”

“I can’t let you have it until you know why.” Samantha hated to deny him. “The risk is too great.”

The darkness around them lightened and the flashing roman numerals vanished.

“No!”

“Jeremy!”

Jeremy snapped awake with a snarl. Samantha knew the code and she wasn’t giving it to him.

“Jeremy, you up?”

“Yeah!”

Daryl frowned at the curt tone. “You have sniper duty over the boss in an hour.”

Which one? Jeremy sat up. “Okay.” He didn’t care who their leader was right now. Being denied the final numbers was more than frustrating and he got up with a fresh scowl of anger. It would be a long day. He had QZ duty after sniper rounds and until he could be alone with Samantha, everyone had better stay out of his way.

8

“Seth’s back.”

Angela hit her mike. “Copy.”

She went to observe his team pulling into the QZ parking area.

Seth came straight to her. “They’re gone—tried to give us the slip during the fog. We tracked them until dawn; they went west.”

“That will have to be good enough.” Angela pushed away the lingering concern. She would have preferred no survivors.

Seth frowned slightly. “We could find them...”

Angela heard the unspoken words—*I’ll go back and do it. I’m capable of that too.* “Not unless they come back here. We have bigger problems.”

Both of them glanced toward the medical tent, where John and Anne’s shadows were moving calmly.

“Anything else out there you think I need to know about?”

Seth thought of the enormous herd of elk moving north, though it was now officially summer. “Nothing we haven’t been observing all along.”

“Okay. Get some rest.”

Seth waved off the compassion. All he wanted right now was Becky. Being around those hard females had reminded Seth of his duty to her. He was going to increase Becky’s training now that her body had received some recovery time. In a few months, she would be as dangerous as those snakes. Then, he would start handling her other needs. Mental healing was a slow process and Becky needed a guide through it.

“Get off me, Neil!”

“Make me.”

“I’m warning you…”

Neil braced, but he didn’t let her up off the tent floor. It was her first Kai lesson, but he’d done it differently with her, based on her terrors. Every lesson she got from him for a while would be hands-on to help her learn to fight Rick’s ghost.

Becky felt the ugly rage rear its head and snapped her mouth shut. Neil didn’t understand how much she hated to be touched now. He had to learn to respect her.

Becky let the anger loose.

Seth broke into a run at the sight of smoke oozing through tiny holes in their tent.

He shoved inside the smoldering canvas to find Neil on his knees, eyes bugging.

“Seth!” Becky ran to embrace him and the trance broke, letting Neil free.

He fell onto the floor with a gasp. “Pass!”

Becky giggled, letting Seth hold her tightly. “I got Neil! He didn’t know what I can do now.”

Seth let out the breath he’d been holding, realizing Neil was giving a lesson. Around them, the tiny holes were growing, slowly burning through the damp fabric. That, with the puddle in the corner and broken plastic scattered across the floor, said he hadn’t remained in control.

Neil wasn’t moving, just drawing in ragged breaths.

Seth gently pushed Becky back. “What did she do to you?”

Neil groaned. “There was a knee in my mind. I said only physical attacks work on me.”

“So, I kicked him for real.” Becky shrugged. “He hit the stove when he fell. Sorry about the tent.”

But she didn’t sound sorry. In fact, she sounded happy.

Seth smirked. “Paybacks are a bitch.”

Neil moaned again. “You have no idea.”

Becky’s easy laughter floated through the air. “He landed on my knife, I think, and doesn’t want to say so. He needs stitches in his ass.”

Seth threw his hands up. He’d been worried about Becky! “Come on, then. You hurt him; you help carry him.”

Becky slid an arm around Neil without hesitating.

Seth filed that as they got the dazed trooper to his feet.

Blood smeared over their hands and arms in the process. Becky frowned. “You are hurt.”

Seth stayed quiet as they carried him to John. Becky had touched Neil, and now she’d shown concern for him. She didn’t hate him anymore.

Neil had the same thought, but it was hard to concentrate through the throbbing. He should have been expecting the physical reaction. *That’ll teach me to ignore rumors.*

Samantha appeared at Seth's side. Seth prepared to defend Becky. He didn't think she would find this funny.

"What happened?"

"Rebecca got a little carried away." It was the only concession Seth meant to give.

Samantha turned an ugly glare on him. "I thought you said he'd be okay!"

Seth huffed. "It wasn't my idea to give her a kai lesson!"

Samantha took that in the same way Seth had—Becky was recovering. She cleared her throat. "Well, he knows to be more careful now, I guess."

Becky moved so that Samantha could take her place, then she slid under the shelter and isolation of Seth's free arm. She didn't speak.

All of them understood her forgiveness hadn't extended to Samantha.

Neil, trying not to hit his knees again, pulled out of their grip. "The doctor needs to sew my ass together and reattach my balls. Excuse me."

The trio behind him was still cackling when Neil disappeared into the tent.

Samantha quieted first. Jeremy was coming her way.

She leaned toward Seth. "Jeremy needs to cool off a bit. Think your girlfriend's ready for distraction lesson A?"

Seth saw Becky's eager grin and sighed. "If you want both your men in the tent with Adrian, you

could just tell us, you know. You don't have to hurt them to get them there."

Samantha smirked and ducked out of sight behind the water tanker.

Her shadow, Alex, hurried to catch up as Seth and Becky intercepted Jeremy.

10

"Here is the basket you asked for." Li Sing set it on her table.

Angela quickly thanked him and left. She had a test to run. It was a small one that she expected few people to notice, but there was a sense that it mattered more than she knew at this point.

"What is she..." Jake hit the button on his radio before considering the consequences. "Marc to the Nursery."

Angela turned around to glare at the rookie. *Don't do that again.*

The order rang in Jake's mind as if she'd slapped him. *Yes, ma'am.*

Angela stormed out of the perimeter, basket in hand. She went further than she'd planned in her anger.

Let it go. This is new to them.

Adrian's weak voice in her mind made Angela wince. She didn't want him there now.

I'd like to watch.

Angela sighed, grabbing a handful of the food as the soldier ants began to take notice of her. *Two minutes, then get out.*

Adrian stayed silent, sensing the walls she was hastily constructing to keep him out of her thoughts. He didn't try to get in them, just observed. As soon as Marc arrived, he would pull back and watch from that angle.

Angela tossed a handful of the food into a heavy center of the busy ants and managed to hit the dead waterfowl they'd been cutting apart. Food and decay flew across the blue grass.

The ants fled, the smaller ones quickly; the larger ants followed. It occurred to Angela that the cicadas were mostly gone, but their eggs weren't underground. They were in the molding trees and bushes—all aboveground. Angela wondered if that was because of the ants. Were those a food source?

Once the minors were out of range, the soldier ants came to inspect the food. After a minute or so, they began to pick it up and take it to the minors.

“Interesting.”

Two larger ants came near the food. Bigger, with red spots on their heads, they had big jaws that she thought might be capable of severing a finger. They stared at her and Angela stared back, listening for Marc's steps.

Crunch! Crunch!

Angela went toward the ants, acting afraid, and then she was in Marc's arms, flying back toward the tape.

“Stop! Look at them.”

The two soldier ants had followed. They were only a few feet away.

“Put me down.”

Marc did reluctantly, not sure what she was doing.

“Back up a few feet.” She moved toward the two soldier ants. “And throw me something—food, candy, whatever.”

Marc tossed her the bun he’d swiped from the mess on his rounds. He tensed as she neared the ants, ready to grab her again. Those jaws had to be sharp.

Angela knelt and held out the bun as she keyed her mike. “The first man who shoots is out of the Eagles.”

Marc scowled. “Be reasonable.”

Angela ignored him, staring at the closest ant. It had slowed when she knelt, but it was approaching the food steadily now.

Angela held onto it for an instant as the ant touched the bun, then let it go. She left her hand out.

The ant came forward...

Marc swept her into his arms again.

“They’re chasing you! Stop.”

Marc stopped, drawing his gun.

Angela sighed, happiness evaporating. “Put it away. I’m trying to make friends.”

“Of course, you are.” Marc snorted as he carried her to the tape anyway and put her on her feet.

“You’ll bring them straight into camp if you start feeding them that way.”

Angela’s voice was thoughtful. “You think so?”

She resumed her rounds, going toward the parking area. She’d expected the ants to avoid everything they threw now that they’d been killing them for so long.

“We’re a migrating food source.” Angela waved as Kyle came running toward her. “We’re feeding them even though we don’t want to, with our garbage and such, right?”

Kyle controlled his breathing, shooting an annoyed glare at Jake. “Yes. That’s part of why Adrian has us bury the supplies. It makes it harder if there’s a crate.”

Angela gestured to where the ants were coming closer, taking the food and carrying it to their hills. “No more killing them. Pass it on.”

Kyle was confused, but he didn’t ask why. The ants were a tiny part of their problems.

Angela slowly made her way over to Doug, who was supervising the next section of portable wall being attached to what they’d already constructed. If it weren’t lined up perfectly, the smaller ants and wildlife would still be able to get through. “How’s the arm?”

Doug was studying Zack’s boys. “Just a scratch.”

Zack’s sons were on probation, told if they got out of line one single time, they would be banished without their father. Those who knew better had

been careful not to reveal the bluff. The three boys were helping with preparations and chores. Only time would tell if Safe Haven's light could turn them from the path they were on.

"How goes our wall?"

Doug disapproved openly. "Too slowly."

Angela leaned in. "I'll bet Peggy would be glad to get the camp's women out here to help."

Doug started to protest colorfully, and then remembered who he was now talking to. He quickly changed the wording. "How would that work?"

Angela smirked, moving on. "I think it probably depends on how you ask her."

Peggy and Millie were now working in the medical tents when John needed them. The camp had forgiven them when Brett, Millie's husband and pimp, had chosen to split rather than be dragged back into a medical career. Doug and the Eagles, however, were still being cold. Doug didn't realize the men were waiting on him to forgive her. They couldn't until he did and Doug hadn't yet. They sat together at meals when their schedules merged, but it was clear that there were worlds between them.

Kevin turned to Daryl as she went by. "Is that a good idea, getting the females out here?"

Daryl liked it that Kevin knew to keep his voice down, but he couldn't approve the tone. A leader's assistant had to trust them. "Do you have a better way? The camp females are the only workable labor we have right now that isn't already being used."

Kevin accepted the scolding tone with a sigh. He still wasn't sure that he wanted this place, despite finding out from Zack that it had been one of Adrian's last recommendations before going into Little Rock. Adrian had left detailed instructions, in small bits, with all of his top men. Not enough to cause complete chaos at the time, he had made sure a successor would have a solid support structure based on equal footing.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Daryl prompted, loving his new life at moments like these. He, too, was a leader of men.

"Work on the wall will slow."

Daryl snorted. "Is that possible? They've been at it for hours and only have two panels up."

Kevin understood the point as they watched Eric and Timmy struggle to get it lined up, and Mike purposely hung his end crooked.

Kevin caved. "Fair enough." Even untrained, weaker camp women would take the job more seriously. "Those three are trouble. We'll end up guarding them, like with Matt."

Daryl didn't answer the obvious. "If you have ideas, she'll want to hear them."

Daryl didn't add more.

Kevin didn't push for details like he knew Daryl was hoping. If he decided he wanted this job, he would find out everything he could, but until then, he planned to maintain a small distance. Kevin had a lot of irons in the fire, from radioman to leading

his own team, but the most powerful draw in Safe Haven for him was enjoying breakfast in bed.

Both men observed as Angela stopped by the QZ desk on her rounds. The teens appeared nervous.

Daryl waved a few more men toward them. The new arrivals from this stop would be heavily screened and viewed with complete mistrust until they were cleared medically and mentally.

“Should I...”

“Yes.”

Kevin went to Angela’s side.

Daryl gave Kyle a nod across the din. Hesitant or not, Kevin had the instinct required for the position. Now they would see if he developed the desire for it. Without that, he would be switched out for someone with the proper enthusiasm.

11

Neil saw Samantha enter the QZ and reluctantly turned to sweep the rest of his area and then the main camp. Slacking off wasn’t allowed. Everyone was still snickering over earlier, and though the wounds were minor, his pride couldn’t take another blow right now.

Jeremy joined Neil, and also stood with his back to the QZ. It felt odd, but with Marc as Angela’s sniper, the strangers were in danger, not her.

“We’ve started packing things up for the move.” Jeremy didn’t meet his eye. “Ahead of schedule. Samantha said it was a good idea to be ready.”

“Then it probably is.” Neil tried to be neutral. He understood that Samantha wouldn’t be happy with either of them, so she’d chosen both. And Adrian had known, approved it.

Jeremy was trapped between shame and anger in the light of day. He couldn’t take much of the silent treatment. He resumed his rounds without a second attempt at conversation. Like Neil, he wasn’t strong enough to walk away from Samantha. The taste was surprisingly sour at times and incredibly sweet at others.

“He’s the only one who knows what it’s like for you.”

Neil jumped. He hadn’t heard Cynthia come up behind them.

“If you two ever come together to care for her needs, I believe she might be happy for the first time in her life.”

Neil waited, thinking Samantha had made another friend who was as hard as she was.

“She’s like Adrian—it takes more to get her there.”

Neil had to turn at that remark, scowling.

Cynthia beat him to it. “Not that you didn’t do good, ‘cause clearly, you did. I mean in other ways. One person tending her isn’t enough.”

“What does she need?”

The question surprised both of them, but Cynthia couldn’t give him the clarity he was hoping for.

“The same as Adrian and Angela, I’d imagine. Devotion, loyalty, obedience, support, but also your insights, your guidance, the instincts, and protection. Look at it this way: What if Adrian only had Kenn to see to his mind? How much worse would he suffer?”

Neil snorted, thinking of all the planning and work it took to keep someone like Adrian happy. The blond was a multi-tasker from hell.

Cynthia lowered her voice as Samantha came toward them. “Pretend she’s him, and I’d say things will get easier.”

Neil found he could do that easily, but he didn’t start working on it. He was still mulling over Becky’s words about forgiveness. She’d told him it didn’t matter, that in the end, it wasn’t her choice to make.

“The nightmares decide my mood on any given day.”

Neil understood how that could be, and he wanted to change it for her. Becky deserved peace and Neil had chosen to give it to her if he could. *I owe her that.*

Chapter Six

Surrounded By Killers

1

Angela paused outside the tent where they'd chosen to hold their second meeting. She had instructed Kenn to have the leaders of each team collect the ideas and plans so the number of people would be half what she'd had yesterday. The third and final meeting would be her and the top five men in camp.

Noting the green sunset, Angela hit her mike. "Kyle, join us, please."

"Copy." There was curiosity in his tired response.

She waited outside for him, waving the others on when they would have lingered.

Kyle moved faster when he saw who was waiting for him.

When they were alone, listening to the gentle murmur of men inside the canvas comparing plans, Angela glanced at Kyle. "You once told me if I needed anything I should talk to you. Remember that moment, Reece?"

Kyle stiffened at the name, now aware that something was coming. "Of course. And yes, I meant it."

Angela noticed he didn't immediately ask what she wanted. She understood that was in case it involved Jennifer, who was still in the medical tent, resting under supervision.

"I'd like to offer you a job change to third in command."

Kyle gaped, unable to form a response.

Angela didn't wait. "I'm not Adrian. I won't expect as much, but I can't have a top dog who serves two masters, like Kenn would. I need men who belong to me, the way Adrian's do. I'm offering one of those places to you."

Kyle still wasn't sure what to say. "No one's going to like this. Neil and Doug both..."

"Serve in other ways," Angela interrupted, sure that she now had the complete attention of everyone inside the tent. "Adrian will be out of commission for at least the next two weeks and we are short on time."

Kyle searched her nervously. "You'll give it all up the second he says he's ready?"

"Before that, if I can."

"Then it would be my honor to serve you."

"Adrian and Marc will probably be the only ones who don't eventually think we're trying to take control while the boss is hurt. You may lose friends and gain enemies."

Kyle snorted, holding the flap open for her. "We all expected you to reform the chain of command. I just thought you'd pick Neil or Doug, or even Zack, over me."

“So did a lot of people.” She didn’t smile. This job required her to be surrounded by killers. Nothing less would save them.

Angela went to the front of the tent and got to work. “Let’s hear the weakest solutions first—the ones that do not cost us lives. Marc, you start.”

2

While nice, and flush with game, the Toltec Mounds state park was much too open for their liking. Angela was eager to be gone. They’d enjoyed the flat land around the mounds, and the bit of history attached to the locations, but it was enough to keep the shield around the camp most nights. Angela brought it up now, but made sure those closest saw she wasn’t worried, just being cautious.

Angela felt the waves of coolness as she neared the medical tent. They were in direct contrast to the humid evening breeze, but it matched the concerns of the men she’d left behind. They hadn’t been happy with her answers, or lack of them. The bad vibes could be coming from anywhere.

When she walked by Adrian’s bed and got a hard stare, she understood who was upset. It took a minute to figure out the possible reasons why, something she did while John gave her a quick update.

“He’s better, but not out of the woods.” John extended Adrian’s chart. “He’s still fighting the infection, I think.”

Angela checked the next page, hating how low his blood count was. “I think the drugs stopped me from being able to heal the wound fully.”

John didn’t answer.

Anne’s thought was clear. *He always worries until there’s signs of improvement.*

Angela handed the chart back. “He looks mostly on track to me and the witch is snoozing quietly, so why don’t you do the same?”

John started to argue, but Anne took his arm. “That’s a wonderful idea. Come on.”

John reluctantly let Anne lead him from the tent as Kevin called Millie in for her first shift on medical duty.

Aware of the audience, Angela started the conversation mentally as she sank into the chair at Adrian’s side. *How do you feel?*

Betrayed.

Ah. He’d been expecting death.

Do you know what you’ve done?

Angela leaned against the tent. “Tell me.”

You’ve traded my life for your son’s.

Angela tensed. “What are you talking about?”

Adrian concentrated on the anger instead of the agony. *I believe Marc used his lifeline on Dog.*

Angela gasped, lids clenching shut as that fell into place. If anything happened now, they wouldn’t be able to heal Charlie.

Adrian wanted to remain angry, but the waves of misery coming from her had comfort spewing out. *Shannon didn't use hers and it became mine. I'll use it for Charlie. Calm down. Stop. Breathe.*

Angela wasn't sure why she was reacting as if Charlie was injured now, but the witch wasn't speaking up and that was a bad sign. The sense of doom was so strong that she could taste it.

With her walls down, Adrian read the feeling and immediately assumed that was why he had been spared. At some point, he would be asked to give his life for Angela's son. *I will do it willingly.*

Angela caught the thought and frowned deeper. She was calming—when Adrian made a vow, he meant it—but knowing that he was so willing to die was haunting on several levels. She didn't want this job he'd gifted her with, and there was definitely no way she could do it alone. “I'm going to send some people in. Draw from them.”

Adrian wanted to refuse. He should be dead and yet, here he was, expected to resume the burden that had put him here in the first place. He couldn't help feeling resentful. “I'm not empty.”

Angela knew that to be a lie, and let it go. The people she'd sent had orders to insist. “Do you need anything?”

“Time with Charlie and Conner.”

“You'd have them be friends?”

Adrian remembered not to nod. Movement hurt. “More like brothers.”

Angela slammed a wall down on the thoughts that produced. “I have no problem with it. Maybe Charlie can help him forgive you.”

Adrian winced. “I don’t deserve that.”

“Then why?”

“They’ll be a support system that the others here will look to for strength and ideas.”

“Our replacements.”

Adrian didn’t spend energy denying it. “Yes.”

Angela thought about saying Charlie was only interested in Tracy, but couldn’t. That might be his focus right now, but it would change after he’d gotten, or been denied, what he was seeking. And what would he want then? “I’ll arrange it.” No matter how things went with him and Tracy, a solid friendship with Conner would help Charlie.

Adrian drifted as the pain increased. Drained of energy, his body was having a difficult time regenerating the blood he’d lost; it was slowing the healing process.

Angela listened to some of the thoughts floating through the tent and just outside it. Things appeared calm. She needed a report from Marc.

Adrian heard her stand up and opened his eyes. “Thank you.”

Angela stared, picking out concerns and feeling more of him now, more of his light, than she ever had. There was also more darkness. Adrian had been brought down. First, by the wounds and infection, and then again by how easily his camp had changed hands. He knew it was because of his

carefully laid plans, but the proof was having a disastrous consequence. It said he wasn't needed and for someone like Safe Haven's fearless leader, that was a crushing blow. In his plans, he hadn't been alive to get in the way.

Vanilla ran along his senses, turning him into a mass of regret. The power of her magic had pushed him over a line there was no recovering from. Adrian used what strength he had and sent a mental hand to touch her cheek.

Angela felt his gentle caress and jerked away in anger. "Don't do that!"

Adrian grinned in lethal defiance. "I'm done hiding how I feel. You should have let me die."

The radio crackled loudly in the charged silence. "Raven to the QZ gate."

Still locked in eye combat with Adrian, she hit the button on the belt. "Copy."

Adrian studied her face, pushing his magic out in a hard blast. "When Marc's not enough anymore, I'll know. I'll feel it."

Electricity sparked violently as Angela read what he was trying to hide, but his secret plans didn't change the fact that he meant every word.

"And I'll be waiting for that moment, *craving* it."

She turned for the flap at the panicked sense of need. "That's what I'm afraid of!"

Adrian closed his lids in satisfied frustration. She felt it, her words confirmed that, but the defiant

anger in the tone suggested a long battle with herself before she got to that point.

“I can wait.” He slipped into his glaring dream world. “And then I’ll love you until I’m dead, the same as Marc.”

Angela didn’t react. The woman inside understood his anger was at how he had to use her...and how she was allowing it.

His personal feelings are growing, the witch stated bluntly, not appearing to care. It means he will make sure that you and those you love will always survive.

“Even if his life is the price?”

The witch didn’t cackle in amusement, but it laced her answer. *Oh, yes. He’d throw it all away for the chance to love you even once.*

Angela shoved the demon aside in revulsion. “Not true!”

The silence spoke volumes.

Angela stormed from the tent and smacked into the hard chest about to enter it.

“Be careful!” She shoved by him.

Kenn watched her go with a speculative expression, but inside, he knew what had caused her anger. He went to Adrian’s side with a slight frown. “How are you this morning?”

Adrian grunted, barely awake.

Kenn did something he never thought he would. He scolded Adrian. “You have to stop playing with her. You’ll hurt the dream.”

Adrian was shocked by who it was coming from.

Kenn took the chair, opening his notebook. “You once told me that a man couldn’t have a high place here and her, that no one could balance the two.”

Adrian’s depression swarmed over them both. “I don’t have a high place anymore.”

Kenn understood a lot from those words. “You’d have to kill Marc.”

Adrian didn’t respond.

Kenn scowled. “Snap out of it! You can’t take over like this.”

“I’m not taking back over.” Adrian shut his eyes. “My duty is done.”

3

Kenn left Adrian a few minutes later, sure the injured man was trying to manipulate them into telling Marc or the camp. When that happened, Angela would have full control and Adrian would be removed from the picture. Then, his real body could be left for the government and Safe Haven would be that—safe.

To keep it from happening, Kenn was developing a plan. It was a dangerous thing, to side with anyone but Marc right now, but Kenn had belonged to Adrian from the moment he’d realized the man didn’t have an XO. All these miles later,

there was no other choice. Kenn would try to help Adrian get what he needed.

He snorted. “And good luck to him. Even if he was dead, she’d still swing with Marc.”

Kenn spotted Kyle sitting outside his tent, working with lanterns, boxes, and piles of rails and bars. Kyle understood how badly they needed Adrian. Maybe...

Kenn joined the mobster, staring at all the baby equipment. “Feeling like a dad yet?”

Kyle snorted coolly. “No. I feel like an engineer who suddenly turned stupid. These directions don’t make sense.”

Kenn let himself be distracted, taking the sheet Lee shoved his way, but inside, he was building schemes. Adrian wanted to be dead or with Angela, and he no longer cared which. Kenn would try to give him the more reasonable of the two.

“Rail C is missing!” Lee scanned the piles he’d been roped into helping with. “I looked away for a minute, but it’s gone.”

Rail C was in Kyle’s hand. He and Kenn exchanged smirks.

“Why don’t you go get a beer?” Kyle suggested. “And bring me something. I’m starving.”

Lee stood up, dusting himself off. “Yeah, right.”

He knew Kyle wanted him out of earshot and he went willingly, glad to escape the baby session. He hoped Candy didn’t get any ideas from seeing this.

Kyle glanced up. “What do you want?”

Kenn stilled at the hostile tone. “To talk.”

Kyle tightened rail C in place. “I won’t help you trick her. We were wrong to try.”

Kenn began assembling the other side of the portable crib. “And if it brings Adrian back? Does it matter then?”

Kyle had heard the rumors; he knew why this was being brought up, but he’d already made his choice. “Ask someone else.”

“Yeah.” Kenn knew he wouldn’t. If the mobster wasn’t keen on getting Adrian back, the others wouldn’t be either. Angela was earning that slot.

“You think her plan will work?”

Kenn slid the washer on. “Yes. The parts we’ve been told, anyway.”

Kyle viewed the darkness that surrounded their camp. He’d also gotten the impression that Angela hadn’t told them everything. “She’s so much like him.”

“Yeah.” Kenn didn’t say they were a perfect match. He didn’t need to. The top men had been thinking it all along.

And that’s how I do it. I don’t have to tell them. I need to show. Kenn dropped his attention to the directions. Adrian had done a fantastic job of controlling himself, of hiding how deeply he longed for what he couldn’t have. When the top men saw how unhappy he was, how he’d given up in so many ways, the debt they owed him would take over. All Kenn had to do was make sure they saw Adrian’s pain and that wouldn’t be hard to do right now.

Control was hard to come by when the drugs were strong and the company was right.

Strolling across the compound, Tonya spotted Kenn's big frame. The baby furniture he was assembling was obviously for Jennifer, but it was something of a shock to find her killer Marine carefully putting a crib together. Especially considering where she was going.

Tonya walked around the water tanker and quietly opened the door to the medical camper. Maybe she was wrong. *It might be stress, or a cold, or...* Tonya stopped trying to make herself feel better. She wasn't wrong.

Angela was surprised by who came into the medical camper. *She must think it's John's shift,* Angela gave Tonya a polite smile. The redhead's words cleared things up a little.

"Can we talk while you do exams or do I have to be quiet?"

Angela waved a hand, trying to remember that personal feelings didn't matter. "Have a seat. We'll talk about whatever you want."

"No gown?"

Angela was surprised again by the nervous tone. "Nope. I've always hated them."

Tonya sat on one of the stools at the small table. The other side of the camper held a large recliner covered in a pink sheet—the cloth kind. Another sheet of the same feminine shade was folded neatly, lying in the seat. "Is that where you'll do it?"

“Yes. Great, isn’t it?”

Tonya agreed, clipped hair bobbing. She took the papers that Angela handed her as she sat on the other stool.

“It’s mostly medical history and the same old questions about your health and family history. John and I also added a few things, like signs of radiation sickness. Is this your first visit?”

“Yes. I didn’t think I needed one until now.”

Her pharmacy was doing well and she was gaining friends. Tonya had even gotten into the spirit of the holiday by offering free flagsticks for people to pin to their tents. It was a wonderful change from the brutal Christmas remnants they were still running across.

“What’s the problem?”

Tonya’s voice lowered. “I have a mole on my thigh that hurts sometimes and...I’m late.”

Angela’s startled gaze flew to Tonya’s. *Late*. Maybe pregnant, and who was she keeping time with? Kenn, that was who.

Do you care? the witch inquired casually.

No. I’m free now. “How late?”

“A week.”

“Is that normal for you?”

“No. I can keep the calendar by it.”

“Adrian will be ecstatic, and it will finish off the camp’s approval.”

Tonya sighed. “Those things are good, but will *he* be happy?”

Angela considered, then shrugged resignedly. “I barely know this Kenny. Maybe he’s strong enough to be a father now.”

“Yeah, what about me?”

Angela was surprised at the fear and self-doubt. “You’ll both have help, but yes, I think you can do it.”

“I’ll be out of the Eagles.”

“For a while. But you’ve seen with Jennifer that it won’t be right away. You’re needed.”

That was what Tonya had come to hear. She didn’t need the test to know what was going on with her body. She and Kenn were going to be parents. She’d just needed to know that it wouldn’t cost her the new life she’d found. “When will I start to show?”

Angela frowned at the when, not if. “From your build, I’d guess around Thanksgiving. A bit sooner to the man who uses his hands on you. The signs will be there.”

Tonya thought about their almost violent sessions and sighed again. “I guess he’d be happier if you and Anne took care of it for me.”

“I’m not sure that’s true.”

Tonya snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“I mean it. He’d be completely forgiven if he had a newborn for the camp to fall in love with.”

Tonya lit up angrily at the thought of her child being used that way.

Angela kept the rest of their talk to the coming baby. She’d given Tonya a warning. Now, she

would give her a test and confirm what the redhead was already sure of.

4

Peggy stopped outside the tent, nervous.

A hand descended on her shoulder, causing her to jump.

Doug was in a great mood now that he'd been cleared for duty. "Lookin' for me, Babe?"

Peggy laughed. "Yes. She wants us to give a hand with a lesson."

Doug followed Peggy's shapely hips, wondering why she was involved. Suspecting a matchmaking attempt, Doug remained silent and thoughtful. John's advice had sunk in and festered. Doug was now considering asking Peggy to be his woman. He didn't care that she'd hid her skills.

"Any idea what she'll have me doing?"

Realizing Peggy was a rookie, Doug shook off the mental haze and got to work. "Keeping them in line and maybe even medical stuff. She knows you used to volunteer with the Red Cross."

Peggy stiffened. The words from Kevin had been harsh. He'd told her FND work might not cover it.

Doug was mulling over the skills Peggy hadn't wanted known. She'd jumped in and gotten a set place, but she hadn't wanted the glory or duties of a nurse. "Can you tell me why you lied to him?"

Peggy paled. "I'd rather not."

“Your choice. Would be easier to get the men to accept it if they understood there was a reason for it.”

Peggy sighed, slowing. “What if there wasn’t?”

Doug hated to push, but he did it anyway, carefully. “You should tell me and I’ll find out what we can do about it.”

Peggy was relieved, but not enough to spill her guts openly. “Can we talk later?”

Doug swept the sleeping camp. “It’s late now.”
She didn’t answer.

Doug caught the hint slowly. “You mean later, later...”

She smiled shyly. “I can’t sleep sometimes.”

Doug felt his big heart thump and forced himself to do what had to be done. “I can talk to you in public, but until you’re cleared or punished, I can’t claim you or even be alone with you.”

Peggy froze, stunned.

Doug was a bit hurt himself. “You let people suffer and be overworked when you could have helped. That has to be settled first.”

“She hurt someone, gave them the wrong medicine.” Becky came up behind them. “She won’t forgive herself for making a mistake.”

Becky kept walking.

Doug turned to Peggy. He found her halfway across the compound. “Damn.”

Instead of hurrying to catch up, Doug trailed her and continued to think. There was a lot he and

Angela could do with that explanation once he had the fine details.

Doug stiffened. Unless she'd been negligent, like drunk or on drugs when the accident happened. That wouldn't be viewed as an accident or a mistake. It was a crime.

5

Kenn came through the flap; silence fell.

"*He's* teaching us?" Charlie's voice echoed with hostility.

Kenn flipped him the finger. "Shut up and sit down."

Doug and Peggy frowned. They didn't interfere, but at that moment, they both understood why they'd been asked to be here. Now that the teens were spending so much time together and the top men were needed for training, the shadows were usually a mixture of the levels and members, and it was working out. The kids in this camp were being observed by nearly everyone, thanks to Matt. He'd shown everyone the teens were also dangerous, just in different ways.

Charlie snorted as the other teenagers snickered and muttered. "What are you doing here?"

Kenn held up a slip of paper, reading from it. "Teach the teenagers what Eagles do with traitors."

He glared around in the confused silence. "Which one of you is the traitor?"

No one spoke.

Kenn crumbled the paper up. “She means outsiders. You’re getting a lesson in punishments. She wants you to understand that it’s okay when she lets someone in that you’re worried about, that measures are waiting to detect them.” Kenn had full focus from the teens now. “Whenever you mark someone, we watch them. You won’t pick it out most of the time. We’re good at not being seen now, but we’re there, and it screws us up when you stalk them once they’re out of the QZ. We’re waiting for them to make a mistake, like we’ve been taught. You do your job, and we’ll do ours.”

Kenn waved at the lanterns. “Flip the button on the floor and then blow out the candles.”

The film began playing as dimness filled the tent and all of them settled back to view the words someone had written on a wide sheet of paper.

You are now rookies in the Jr Eagle army. Please remember to act like it.

The kids broke into a loud cheer that the film appeared to account for with fireworks.

“That’s cute.” Doug smiled.

Peggy didn’t answer, too humiliated by Becky’s method of delivery. She’d planned to tell Doug in her own way and let him spread it around. Now, she was defenseless.

Kenn motioned toward the screen, pointing out items that were important, and the kids paid attention as if he were Adrian. They wanted to know what happened to the people Kyle led from camp, and they were told. In some cases, there were

photos, and those were shown as well. Angela was starting the next phase of their training and it wouldn't be neat and clean.

An hour later, Kenn had the lanterns lit and waited for the lights to fill the canvas before letting them shut off the film. Angela had warned him not to let the tent go completely dark with the teenagers inside and he'd taken it to heart without asking why. He could come up with plenty of bad scenarios on his own. "Questions?"

"What happens to us, if we break the rules?"

Kenn pinned the boy with a hard sneer. "We kill you, of course. Why, Matt? Are you a bad guy hiding among the sheep?"

The boy flushed. "I'm a Jr. Eagle."

The other kids cheered.

Matt joined them, but Kenn saw the information get stored away for later examination. Kenn wasn't sure what Angela had going on in Matt's area, but he was suddenly sure she'd hit a target with this lesson. "Any other questions before homework?"

There were groans, but none of them were serious. All of the kids were hoping for a hands-on lesson.

"Sneak up on an Eagle."

Charlie frowned. "They'd shoot us."

"Not this time. They have orders to be on watch for you and not to use anything more painful than pepper spray."

That had the teenagers agreeing and protesting.

Kenn held up a hand. “Maybe you should pick an Eagle, and tell them what you want to do, so they’ll be expecting it. Adrian always knows with us and we still pass.”

Annoyance had Becky’s mouth opening. “That’s because you’ve been trained. All we’ve had is babysitting and rules.”

“You’re being trained now.” Kenn gestured. “Stop fighting the teachers and soak up the information. If we all die, this camp still has to be protected and that means by you.”

Kenn left the tent with a cool nod to Peggy and Doug. They’d been sent to make sure he didn’t get out of hand with the kids, but Kenn had planned it all out after Angela’s tips and warnings. Much to his delight, he’d discovered that the kids needed the same thing she did—for the distractions and bombs to be placed in their paths in the right order. When that happened, they were easy to control.

Kenn felt warm wetness slide down his back and swung around with his fist out.

Thud!

The vet fell backwards at the blow, clutching his cheek. “What the hell?”

Kenn opened his mouth to yell and felt another blast of warm wetness caress his neck.

He turned around in time to catch a full blast down the front of his shirt this time and flinched.

Chuckles started around him as Kenn realized it was bird shit.

He yanked his gun out to take revenge and found Billy's hand taking it and replacing it with a handkerchief.

"You can't do that right now. You'll spook the herd."

Kenn was furious, but couldn't argue. He cleaned his face, tossed the cloth to the ground, and held out his hand.

Billy gave him his gun back with a cheerful smirk. "Come daylight, you can blast every bird you find, you know? She said she likes it when the camp's up early."

Kenn gritted his teeth and went toward the showers. *A perfectly good moment, shot to hell.* The teenagers were still rolling on the ground, in stitches at his mistake. Chris, who was being tended to by Ray and Lee, he ignored.

Billy let out the breath he'd been holding since picking out the shadow in the tree and figuring out who it was. If those two weren't careful, someone would get hurt.

"Should we talk to Marc about it?" Lee came over now that they knew the vet was okay.

Billy narrowed in on Charlie, who wasn't laughing but staring at the trees. "No, not yet." He had a sudden intuition that Charlie hadn't been in on it. "Let's see where it goes."

Lee returned to his post. He had no problems with it so far, except that Kenn might have fired and woken the camp in a panic. Other than that, it had been great.

“Hey, what happened?” Neil asked, coming by on his way to the tents.

Lee let out a short cackle. “A bird shit on Kenn, so he punched the vet.”

Neil was still chuckling when he ducked inside his canvas.

6

“Can I join you?”

Samantha’s question was met with silent surprise. She came in and dropped the flap before turning around.

The five Eagles had cards, poker chips, and beer on the round table, but from the notes they were trying to hide, Samantha immediately suspected it wasn’t a real game.

“You mean for some poker?” Theo sat his beer on top of his open notebook. “We were about to finish up. Maybe next time?”

Samantha snorted, crossing her arms over her chest. “Angela sent me.”

Theo and the others peered around in concern. Samantha’s guns hung on her hips as if they belonged there.

“She said I’d find you together, and when I did, to tell you that you’ve finally been noticed. The truck and reserves are open for use in your...projects.”

Theo laughed as the others slapped high-fives. “She’s good.”

Samantha ducked out of the tent. “Yes, and she’s gonna need everything you guys can put together.”

The five men in the tent cleared the table to work. Cover was no longer needed.

Samantha went to the personal tent area, tired but satisfied with the day. She was in the thick of things at any given time. It was soothing.

She saw the man leaning against her tent and sighed heavily as she stopped in front of him. *So much for soothing.* “Do we have to fight over it, Jeremy? You know why I won’t.”

“I came to ask if you’d like to spend the night in my tent, sleeping.”

Taken aback, Samantha searched his face for anger and found only a desperate longing. “Okay.”

Jeremy settled into the shadows to wait for her, sure she’d hit the showers first, like he just had. After that, they would spend the next six hours alone in his tent.

7

“Go doctor a body.”

Angela’s words got immediate action from the two teams of Eagles that she’d handpicked for this chore. Kyle and Kenn would take a dozen men each, and protect John while he made the chosen corpse appear to be Adrian. Thanks to the surgery, they had plenty of DNA to put in the right places. The smart healer had also made a mold of Adrian’s

fingerprints and teeth, and he would use them, along with the dog tags, to convince the government that Adrian had died.

None of them expected it to last. Angela was estimating that roughly three months from this moment, they would be locked in mortal combat with the enemy. She hadn't told anyone that part. She also hadn't mentioned the fifty other subtle details of the plan. It was complicated, depended on many things, and it wasn't guaranteed to work. She'd accounted for each possible reaction, but in the end, fate always had the final say.

Angela went to her tent, running through the plans again. Where would a wildcard hurt them the most and how could she account for it?

Marc let her leave, half wishing he was going into Little Rock to be able to observe the evidence of what she'd gone through. She had come back changed once again and he had no doubt that one of her moments there had caused it.

“She okay?”

Marc nodded at Kevin's question. “She's going over things, making sure she's right.”

“Oh. Like Adrian.”

Marc tried not to be offended for her. “Yes, like Adrian. She's just as smart...”

Marc stopped, replaying that. He did think she was as smart as Adrian was. And wouldn't that mean she was also as dangerous?

And devious, his demon spoke up carefully. She isn't telling them everything.

Marc heaved a worried sigh. *She isn't telling me everything.*

No, the demon confirmed in surprise at the response. *She's not sure that she can.*

Marc spun away from the guards and found the shadows of the farthest perimeter. *What does she have planned?*

The demon hesitated.

Marc understood Angela's plan had support. "Let me guess. A witch came to visit and now, you're a convert too?"

The demon snickered scornfully. *I've been a convert all along. So have you.*

Marc couldn't argue. As much as he hated Adrian, he couldn't have withheld the energy needed to heal him.

Not wanting to leave them on a sour note, the demon spoke again. *You should rest.*

Marc started to snarl and was interrupted.

If you don't rest, you'll have to start drawing, like she does.

Marc hadn't considered any effects. He'd thought if he didn't acknowledge the demon inside, he wouldn't have to deal with any of it.

If I hadn't been woken, that would still be true. You'd have to put me to sleep again...

Marc started to ask how and then didn't. He might not want to get cozy with the power he held, but if he needed it, he sure as hell wanted it to be there.

The demon settled back happily for a change, grateful to the witch. She'd told him many things, but those he lingered on were about how to gain Marc's friendship. That was something the demon had longed for the whole time he'd been in this body. He was never lonelier than when his host was pretending he didn't exist.

8

The Big Plan

Angela went over the outline again, but the math didn't lie. They'd never get a ship stocked in time to flee, even if they managed to find one that would haul them all. If they didn't wipe out the first set of troops that came, they were doomed. By taking out the first troops, they might avoid the fight all together. It was their one chance for peace. The government would know they had escaped, but not chase them anyway after taking another loss, but Angela knew it wouldn't work that way. The remaining government needed her kind, desperately if the thoughts of the Major's men were to be believed. A small defeat wouldn't stop them. They'd come in force on the second run, whether they left them a body or killed every last man.

"And if the outcome is the same, I have to do something different." Angela slipped the paper into her pocket as she finished nightly rounds.

"Yes, but what exactly have you chosen?" A guard stared at her from his post nearby.

Angela joined Dexter, a level three on Kevin's team, as he lounged against the bumper of Jeremy's rusty truck.

"What do you think, considering the details you now have?"

Dexter had been in jail most of his life; he was still shocked to be an Eagle at all, despite being so high up. He answered truthfully. "I think we could put up a great fight, but in the end, we'd fall."

"So not fighting." Angela humored him. "That leaves surrender."

"Negotiate in ways you haven't considered, maybe, or even a series of hidden camps." Dexter gave her a slightly condescending tone. "I don't have it figured out. That's why you're in charge, not me."

Angela laughed like it was all in the day of a leader, and quickly moved away from prying ears so that she could vent. "I'm in charge because I value life and Adrian knows killing isn't what I'll pick if I have another choice. He's banking on me doing this the right way."

Then he's already lost, hasn't he? the witch questioned.

"Yes. I came up with one way to do this and it's ugly. I'm turning into him."

No. You're becoming a leader. He would have counted on that, as well.

"Why didn't he have this covered? The Adrian I know plans for everything!" Angela faded into the shadows around the perimeter for more privacy.

“He would have at least checked through it and set a few things up.”

He did that. Look at the Eagles. He wasn't just training them for camp defense. It was also to protect the magic people that he knew would come. He taught his men to care for the most important part of the camp—the heart—and he set it up to die, to give us time to gather supplies and find the ship. The government might experiment on his body for months before seeking the rest of us.

“So my plan is all we've got? That's all there is.”

The witch tried to comfort. *It's good. Many of the pieces are falling into place. We've seen enough to know it could work.*

“But will it?!”

She was met with the annoyingly familiar answer that had haunted Adrian so often.

That has not been revealed.

Kyle came to her side. “They both said no.”

Angela caught a flash of Dog's anger and made a note to handle that. The wolf had no right to it.

“But?”

“They're both lying to me.”

Angela made a note of the loyalty and gave her own in return. “I won't sacrifice her. My word on it.”

Kyle let out the breath he'd taken. “Thank you.”

Angela's tone went cold. “For trading your life instead? It'll be my honor and one of the hardest things I've ever done.”

Kyle now understood why she'd been avoiding him. He'd thought she had lost too much respect for him upon finding out about Tracy.

"I couldn't have you discover it until the right time. You would have seen through me before now."

Kyle didn't have to ask what had changed. "She survives?"

"Yes."

"And the camp?"

Angela faded into the thick darkness without responding.

Chapter Seven
Oh, Hell

1

“Raven to the gate.”

“Copy.”

The quarantine zone was packed. There were dozens of tents, and a growing line at the desk. With the teenagers in a training lesson, Angela was covering the post. The security was doubled.

Angela gave Dog a cool nod as she walked by and the big wolf heeled, much to the surprise of those around them. The new people were used to animal attacks, not obedience.

Another group had arrived. Survivors from Little Rock, judging by the utility trucks they were driving. They were twitchy enough that the guards had called her early. The gate wasn't officially open yet. It was barely dawn.

The QZ was easily half the size of the main camp now. Angela looked to Marc. “Do we have enough men to cover it all?”

“We're good. I'm working them differently, arranging by their strengths.”

“The little details Adrian didn't have time for, and Kenn didn't have enough support to do on his own?”

“Yes. One of those is level tests. You’ll need to get them ready soon, for one through five.”

“Kenn usually does it?”

“Yes. He gave me the files this morning.”

“Suspend the level tests for now, and replace it with classes on survival.”

Marc was relieved. He could come up with plans easily enough, but her workload needed to be lightened, not added to. “You got it. What else?”

Angela was listening for discontent in his tones, and was glad not to hear any, but she didn’t trust it. “I’d like you to pick someone to supervise the party. I want rides if possible, small ones, and all the fireworks we can get our hands on.”

Marc wrote it down, then looked pointedly at her hair. “It’s showing more than before.”

Angela wasn’t alert enough to lie, not to Marc. “I’ll do something about it later.”

He pushed out that heat. “With me?”

Angela flushed. “Yes, please.”

Marc turned for camp with a light smirk. “You got it.”

Wiping it from her face, she greeted the waiting crowd of new arrivals. “I’m Angela. I’m the leader of this refugee camp. Many of you are welcome here. However...” Her voice turned cold. “Some of you will find our doors closed. Wives, girlfriends, whores of the Major’s men are not. Step out of line and wait for me by the truck you came in.”

No one moved at first.

Angela began to single them out, horrified that she would have to send away so many mothers and children. “The rest of you need to fill out a paper and then you’ll be put in a quarantine tent until the doctors can look you over.”

There were murmurs of relief and worry. It was a shock to find a woman in charge of so large a camp.

Angela’s protection stayed close as she left the chair and approached the twenty pathetic refugees. One more woman had to exit the line.

Angela stopped in front of a haggard white woman hiding two dark skinned girls behind her filthy skirts.

“Please don’t make us go.”

Angela nearly crumbled under the guilt. “You traded your kids for theirs. I don’t have a choice by our laws.”

“They would have killed them.” The woman cried harder. “I had to lure the kids out for Major Garret!”

Angela observed those in line, listening to them like Adrian had instructed her to do in this situation. The lack of sympathy made the choice. These innocent refugees would never forgive the woman or her girls, because she couldn’t replace the children that had been murdered. There could be no life here for them. “In this camp, once you’re punished, you are forgiven, but for crimes against children, you’re banished. Willing accomplice or not, we have no room for you. Seeing your children

every day, while the others long for theirs, will disrupt my camp and I won't allow that. I suggest you stay together, find a library, and learn how to care for yourselves. You can leave the kids with us, if you want. I'll see that loving parents adopt them."

The woman's sobs were awful; fear was thick among the dozen females now waiting by the trucks.

There was vindication on the faces of the innocent, and it triggered a justified rage that none of the Eagles were expecting. One of the women in the rear of the line tossed a thick stone at the sobbing parent with a perfect aim. It struck the mother in the cheek and drew blood.

More refugees began grabbing rocks.

"No!" Angela stepped between them. Too late, rocks flew through the fog at her.

"Move in!" Seth's call sent a rush of Eagles in to grab the stone throwers and protect their leader.

Angela didn't rub her stinging shoulder, instead waving at the Eagles to let the first thrower go. She went to stand toe-to-toe with the woman, able to feel her pain, the gaping hole that matched her own. "If you had been given that choice, to save your kids?"

The woman's answer was fast. "I would have killed us first!"

Angela agreed. "As would I, but what if you couldn't? What if his hands had already been on them? Would you have broken?"

The woman, Shellie, held Angela's gaze a bit longer, then dropped her eyes. "Maybe."

Angela returned to the desk, to Doug, and felt the relief of her protection. “Get them set up with a few days’ supplies. I want them gone in five minutes.”

The Eagles closed ranks at that moment, cutting off the view of even the desk from the banished women.

“The rest of you, welcome to Safe Haven. May it become your home.”

As Angela went by Doug, she noticed the rock thrower staring into the main camp. Angela turned to find Samantha moving tiredly by the caution tape. She frowned as the witch started to whisper.

Angela motioned Doug toward the angry rock thrower. “That’s either a future Eagle or a future problem. Keep tabs on her.”

Doug nodded gravely. “You know it.”

2

At 6am, the rain was falling in heavy drafts. Not violent or windy, but soaking and icy. The camp, now in sloppy conditions, wasn’t recovered enough from the party yet to start wondering why Adrian wasn’t back in charge if his injury was so minor.

Chris didn’t buy a word of it. “All lies.” The vet slipped from tree to tree in the fog being caused by the temperature difference. “Doesn’t matter. I need to take action anyway.” The vet was careful not to leave tracks or make noise as he stalked through the perimeter. Angela already had a routine and the vet

had created one to match hers. He loved to watch her work.

He spotted Marc escorting someone in a black jacket and hurried to get ahead of them. His fear of Marc was huge, but his growing need to be near Angela was irresistible. If Marc caught him, he would face it then. It felt thrilling to be off his regular schedule of blending in. Chris ducked into the training tent with seconds to spare.

He slung his dripping raincoat into the corner, released the cat in the cage, and began digging through his bag.

Chris listened to them as they came inside. He felt Marc sweep him in a short, powerful evaluation and kept his mind on the cat.

“He gave them maps to where we left the last batch of supplies.”

“Does Adrian have another shipment planned?”

“I’ll find out. If not?”

“We have to keep leaving supplies.”

“Why?”

“Starving people are following us, but there will also be a great need for it in the future.”

He didn’t argue further. “I’ll handle it. Cute cat.”

“Oh, hey, Chris!”

Angela’s cheerful greeting suggested sexual satisfaction. Chris didn’t turn around. “Yeah.”

“Do you need the tent?”

“No. Letting fat-ass get some exercise where she can’t be hit or tripped over.”

Angela's laugh sent tingles through the vet's skin.

"Good idea. We'll try not to do that to her."

"She'll stay out of your way." Chris had fed the cat enough nip to keep her rolling and purring for an hour.

"Any signs of problems with them?" Marc frowned at the vet.

"No. Cats are one of the few animals that haven't turned on us yet."

"She is cute." Angela knelt. "Look at her roll."

Marc and Angela were distracted by the yellow mix playing with her own tail.

The vet was able to stare unobserved. He picked up the body language of the couple, the comfortable stances and tones, but it was the light blue glow that he studied. There was no chance of breaking them up or removing Marc. The vet would never have a chance with her personally, but he could perform chores for her that no one else would be able to get away with. When she finally learned how useful he was...

Chris stopped the images and got to work with the cat. No one had ever tried to get through his mental walls, but he would be careful around Angela. He had to earn her trust before she discovered his purpose in her Safe Haven. It wouldn't have been possible with Adrian. Chris was still hoping that man would die.

3

“I hadn’t thought about that, but Neil’s right. They’ll take every Eagle out of this camp. Then they’ll search through the camp for...”

The rest of the words blurred by Matt. His mind centered on one sentence.

That’s how I get rid of him. He looked guiltily across the mess to the deserted center table. Time slowed, but Matt’s mind was able to keep up for once. None of this would be possible with the government in control. The old rules would apply. The camp would be split up, forced to run. He could go with Cynthia and console her on losing Kevin and the other Eagles.

Matt shoved a spoonful of Chow Mein into his mouth and chewed vigorously to cover himself. It was a fantasy, but he enjoyed the images of Kevin being dragged off and Cynthia needing to be held while she cried.

“Stop it!”

Charlie’s low hiss went mostly unnoticed by those around them.

Matt jumped. “Stay outta my mind!”

Charlie slid onto the seat across from Matt, thinking his face was almost clear of acne now. “Don’t be stupid. Pick someone you have a chance with.”

Despite himself, Matt was intrigued. “Like who?”

Charlie directed his attention to the corner of the expanded mess. “Any of those five.”

Matt gave each teenage girl a once-over, but none of their bodies were mature enough for him. He wanted a woman—Cynthia—and he would have her.

Charlie snorted. “Good luck.”

Matt stood up, lips clamped together, and left. As he walked away, one thought beat against his brain. *I don't need luck if I have a great plan.*

Charlie watched his friend vanish into the tent that he and Cynthia shared. Matt was growing more restless instead of settling into the new lives they'd been given under his mom's command. Charlie wasn't sure what to do about it, but he made a note in his new book to mention it to Kyle or Marc.

4

“They're back.”

“Copy.” Angela didn't leave the target range, where Peggy and Anne were helping with a lesson. One of them would come to her for an update, but it wasn't needed. If they hadn't found a body that would suffice, they wouldn't have returned yet.

A few minutes later, Kevin came to her side, chuckling lowly. “Mission accomplished.”

Kevin kept chuckling.

Angela raised a brow. “Something good, I hope.”

Kevin started laughing and had to get himself under control before he could answer. “I thought so. Marc thought so. Kenn, not so much.”

Angela settled against the tree to hear the story, sure the prankster had struck again. The camp was already placing bets on who it might be.

“Kenn’s tent collapsed...with him in it.”

“Sounds amusing.” Angela wasn’t sure why that was so funny.

“Tonya didn’t think so. She was...tucking him in.”

Angela swallowed a snicker, trying to act like a leader. “Anyone hurt?”

Kevin chuckled again. “Just the tent. When it fell, the sides ripped out and the couple was...uh, exposed.”

Angela could almost see it. “Lot of people around?”

Kevin was trying to keep from laughing again. “Oh, yeah. Wish I’d had a camera like Samantha did.”

Angela smirked. “Get it from her before she makes copies.”

“Kenn tried to, but Neil and Jeremy stopped him.”

“How?”

Kevin broke out laughing again. “They pulled the tent flap away that he had wrapped around his waist.”

Angela’s laughter floated over the camp and brought the shield to life for the first time since they’d returned from Little Rock.

The ripples of calm blue and gold sent waves of contentment through the people and eased the

wearry Eagles. It was almost as if everything could get back to normal with that bubble of protection over camp.

5

Zack stayed in the shadows as the kids' daily lesson broke up. Angela had them working on communication for the next three sets; the airwaves had been a cluttered mess. Zack had little doubt that tomorrow would be the same. The only ones paying attention in the class were Matt and Charlie, but even their interest had waned as Ray explained the radio codes. He wasn't eligible for duty yet due to his injuries healing slowly, but taking a trim for Marc had put him in good standings with nearly everyone once Kenn had let it slip.

Hating his chore, Zack waited until the teenagers were in hearing distance and then turned his back to them and began to talk to Jax. "They got the body, right?"

Jax scowled. "Shhh..."

Zack pretended he didn't know the kids were so close. "No one here would call the government and tell them it's a decoy. Relax."

Angry, Jax went to a different vantage point.

Zack subtly took stock of his audience.

The girls had already left, but Matt was staring at him.

Zack gave him a polite nod and went to a different spot as well.

Charlie and Matt turned toward the tents, but the conversation was gone. Each of them was thinking about what they'd heard.

Matt was wondering what channel the government would be on.

Charlie was asking his demon if there was any way he could do something big and score points with everyone. Both were dangerous thoughts.

Zack stopped in the shadows of the medical tent, waiting for the right slender form to walk by. When she came, he said two words. "It's done."

Angela sighed heavily. "Thank you."

Zack assumed it was part of the plan to save them all, but he didn't ask. "Get some rest soon. You look like hell."

Angela barked a low laugh and went to the medical tent. She'd rest when Adrian was back in charge.

6

Samantha woke up grouchy and achy, cursing the rare sunlight that brought her to alertness.

Not bothering to change from yesterday's clothes, she went to the mess for food, and settled at the center table without responding to many of the greetings or questions. If not for the shifts she had to work, she might have stayed in bed.

"Can I join you?"

Samantha grunted, head aching. "At your own risk."

Neil understood that might not be directed at him personally, and took the place across from her. She looked rough even though she'd slept until noon. "I've got a shift. Can you give her my updates?"

"Sure. Okay to read them?"

"Yes."

Samantha checked them over quickly, aware of Jeremy approaching the table. It didn't matter what her mood was like. When these two came close, she lit up. Today it felt like she could leap across the table and drain them both dry.

Samantha emptied her cup instead.

**Supply drop is ready. Tucker and Anderson are staying behind tomorrow to bury it.*

**Dog will stay in the QZ tent for another week, but he'll make a round of the camp today. A few people think he died and we're hiding it from Marc.*

**Parts of the camp are packed for the move: Reserve trucks, all food and other essentials that won't be used today, gear, tools, refueling setups.*

**Three panels went up on the wall with Hilda overseeing. Estimate the same for today.*

**People are starting to ask questions about A and C.*

Samantha frowned. "Is the last one a problem?"

Neil shrugged. "It could be if there isn't an answer ready soon."

Samantha waved a hand as Jeremy paused near them. "There's room here."

Jeremy took the seat next to Neil, a bit uneasy in the light of day, but determined to make himself adapt to the situation.

Samantha put the paper in her pocket and took a minute to stretch. She felt like hell.

Neither man could help the want, but both of them turned their heads to keep from staring at her body.

Samantha realized the affect it was having on them and quickly stopped, shoulders slumping. She sat there, staring at the emotional writing on the table. Maybe she'd switch off and go to her tent.

“Can I talk to you guys for a minute?”

The trio glanced up in surprise at Bridget. Everyone knew the center table was invitation only.

Samantha scowled. “What’s up?”

Bridget leaned closer. “I think I saw something funny this morning.” She peered around at them. “Should I go find someone else? I don’t know how this works.”

Neil stood up and led Bridget to an isolated table to get details.

“She’s good.” Samantha glared at the woman.

“Who, heart...Bridget?”

Samantha wondered what he’d been about to say. “Got exactly what she wanted and it only took five seconds.”

Jeremy glanced over his shoulder and understood when he saw how Bridget was leaning into Neil’s personal space and hanging on his every word.

Jeremy turned back, picking out Samantha's jealousy in the way she glared at him.

"Why aren't you doing anything about it?" In his experience, Safe Haven females fought for their men.

Samantha forced a calm expression. "Because I'm not allowed to kill her and that's all I feel like doing." She stood up, still appearing perfectly reasonable. "If you'll excuse me."

Jeremy watched her go, lips twitching, but inside, he was almost certain that she meant it.

Neil joined him a few minutes later.

Jeremy resisted the urge to stir the pot. If Samantha wanted him to know, she'd tell him.

"Where'd she go?"

Jeremy bit his tongue mentally. "Check in with the...Boss."

Neil didn't comment on the hiccup. None of them had gotten used to the leadership change yet. Angela was doing great, better than they'd hoped, but she wasn't Adrian.

"What did heart ass want?"

Neil chuckled. "She asked me out."

Jeremy had expected that after agreeing with Samantha's evaluation. "Did she know anything?"

"She saw the vet roaming camp under the cover of the fog. Probably collecting more animals, but I'll check it out. He's sitting with Ray and Dale." Neil chuckled. "I'm sure she knew he's okay. She wanted an excuse to get me alone."

Jeremy stayed quiet, trying hard to play fair.

Neil finally noticed the silence and looked over. “You okay?”

Jeremy finished writing a few notes for later. “I’m good. Samantha, on the other hand, isn’t. I’ve been studying her and I’m worried.”

Neil made a face. “Yeah, I picked up a couple things in that area. It’s like she’s exhausted when she gets up and twisted too tight when she goes to bed.”

“I see her pacing through the tent walls some mornings when I have bird duty.”

The two men fell into a comparison of the things they’d noticed and the afternoon began to roll around them.

“Well? What did he say?”

Bridget slid onto the bench with the other Sisters. “Yes, of course.”

Silence fell over the table of nine.

Leslie was the first one to break it. “You know the history now. We’ve told you how it is.”

Bridget didn’t answer.

The other women exchanged worried glances.

“What’s going on?” Tracy wanted this morning meeting over with. She needed a shower...

Bridget gloated. “I have a date with Neil.”

“It’s just relief.” Leslie glared at her. “They love Samantha.”

“Who loves Samantha?”

All nine women glanced up to find Jeremy standing by the table. Another tense silence fell.

Jeremy knew what they'd been discussing—it was the same concern he had—but there were other things to be handled at this table. “Angela wants the Sisters to help tomorrow. You ladies up for it?”

Excited cheers rang through the mess.

Jeremy spent a few minutes outlining their duties. Nothing too hard, it would still be a big help because it would free up the experienced Eagles for other work.

“Have a seat.” Leslie shoved down; the women eagerly made room.

Jeremy took the edge, giving them a friendly look. “Anyone free later?”

“I think most of us are, but we won't cross Samantha.” Leslie gestured. “Bridget's the only one crazy enough to do that.”

Jeremy considered his answer, then gave it to them the way he saw it. “It's not her choice to make. Neil's a grown man. So am I.”

“That's trouble starting.”

Doug's mutter caused Peggy to study the sister table for a long minute. “Maybe, maybe not. Competition can be healthy. It clears the mind.”

Doug grunted. “It also causes disorder.”

Peggy couldn't argue so she changed the subject. “How's Becky doing?”

Doug was glad he had positive news. “Better. She and Neil are talking again, and I've heard her laugh a few times. Better.”

Peggy was relieved. After the abortion of Rick's assault, Becky hadn't wanted her mom around much—only Seth—and Peggy had agreed in order to keep her calm. “What about her training?”

Doug was saved an answer by a cleared group of QZ people loudly entering the mess. They were chattering excitedly about something. Doug understood when he saw the wolf.

Dog's welcome was a bit worrisome for the Eagles. The camp rushed to greet him; no one was sure what to do if the wolf got tense and bit someone.

Dog, prepared for it, held still and allowed himself to be touched. His mind spewed out profanities to vent the steam and keep control, but his golden orbs were lit brighter than usual. He'd found a pack among the humans. *How odd.*

“That could be the trouble you're expecting.” Peggy directed Doug's attention back to the Sisters. In the rush to greet the wolf, the females were being overlooked by the camp and someone was taking advantage of it. Jennifer now stood at the end of their table.

Tracy stared at the girl with a stoic facade, but inside, she was scrambling for a way to stop the scene she saw coming in Jennifer's body language.

“Tell him no.”

Tracy started to play dumb, and Jennifer's eyes lit up a brilliant red, stunning all of them with the open magic. It was menacing.

“You get one chance, *whore*, and then I’ll drag us all down.”

Tracy gave a quick nod, aware that the camp was starting to notice Jennifer had returned. She’d also been missed.

Jennifer pulled in the rage, but glanced around the shocked table in a furious warning. “Pass the word. Start saying no to some of them. If you don’t, whores will lose their rights in Safe Haven.”

“How...how do we know which ones?” Leslie was sitting closest to the angry girl and she had no idea how to defend herself against one of *them*.

Jennifer hissed like a cat, almost spitting, “Use your brain! If they’re cheating, say no! Start there and work your way up to real morals.” Jennifer plastered on a sickly sweet smile as she started to turn to face the crowd. “If you don’t believe me about the changes that are coming, ask your new boss. She doesn’t have time to waste settling these petty games. She’ll remove you instead. It’s a lot less work.”

Jennifer let the people swallow her, smother her with their welcome. She hadn’t been in danger of dying, but her babies had, and it was almost life changing to discover that these people had been worried with her. She had a home now, minus a few here that she loathed, and it was one she had every intention of defending.

She’d heard Kyle and John talking enough to know they were both making preparations for when she lost her twins. They had little faith, but Jennifer

had Angela and Adrian to help, and she believed in them. She also knew she had to help defend this camp against what was coming. Every one of the lifeforces hugging her was important to her, special. She couldn't let them die. When the government came and the others like her ran, she would stay and help fight. When the threat was gone, then she would leave.

“See.” Leslie scolded the woman through gritted teeth. “You can't play with their men. You'll make bad shit happen.”

Tracy didn't say anything; she sat there and took the scolding. She'd offered Kyle relief once that he'd taken and she'd wanted to help after he beat on Tucker and Anderson. Now, Kyle would be left to suffer until Jennifer was ready to handle him. Tracy wasn't going to challenge Jennifer for a man that she didn't even want.

Bridget was staring at Jennifer in a thoughtful way that made the others wary. When she stood up and left without adding anything else, Leslie slammed her cup down. “I'll talk to someone about it.”

“No, you won't.” Kyle slid into the spot left by Jeremy, who was still with Dog. “You'll stay out of it. She's been warned.”

Leslie clearly didn't understand.

Kyle took a minute to explain, hoping Jennifer didn't notice him yet. “This is how we handle rebellion in the Eagles. Our superiors don't have

time to sort it out and they wouldn't anyway. She's been warned. If she gets hurt, that's the punishment and a lesson to others to not ignore the rules."

"But it isn't a rule." Millie finally felt good enough about herself to speak to their top fighter. The medical work was something she'd always wanted to do, but hadn't been able to afford in the old world. As a whore, she hadn't thought she would be accepted as a medic, so she hadn't offered.

Kyle was careful with his words. "When the chain of command gives you a warning like that, it either is a rule or will be. They know the changes that are coming long before we do."

"You're higher than she is. Is it true?"

Kyle glanced at Tracy. "It will be if she asks for it. They need her to help, after the delivery."

Tracy stared back, not sorry for the moment with Kyle, but not turned on by it anymore either. "Maybe that would be best. We cause a lot of trouble."

The other Sisters made faces, but Kyle understood. Tracy had a lot riding on acceptance now and she was having self-doubts. "Not just anyone can do it, but every hardass at this table can." He stood up. "I should know. I recommended each of you."

Kyle reached Jennifer as she started to turn around; he led her through the crowd with a gentle touch. To the camp, it appeared that things were fine between them, but Kyle knew better by the stiff muscles under his hands and the cold wall that

stayed even when they touched. She was willing to fight for him, for his protection, but her heart was locked up again. Kyle wanted desperately to know what plans she'd made while refusing his company.

"I haven't made up my mind." Jennifer was reading him constantly now.

"Because they need a dad."

Jennifer didn't respond, though she wanted to scream the truth.

Kyle let her pull out of his hold when they were out of view of the crowd. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Jennifer ignored him.

Kyle sighed, thinking for all this guilt, that quick, incredibly tight fuck hadn't been worth it.

Jennifer gasped, rage flaring.

Kyle held still while she struck him repeatedly.

As he took the gentle beating, Kyle had time to wonder how she was able to do it at all. After bleeding so much, shouldn't she still be in the medical tent?

Kyle didn't ask. She obviously needed a release and that was also part of his job.

7

Charlie carried the trays carefully through the drizzle, eager to be finished with this last stop. Tracy would be hitting the showers soon.

He entered the medical tent to find Adrian and Conner playing chess on a travel size board set up

on the table between their beds. Neither of them were touching the pieces.

“Too cool.” Charlie grinned as Conner’s knight put Adrian in check.

Adrian’s queen slid across the board to capture a key rook and end the game. “Checkmate.”

Adrian carefully began pushing himself up as Conner moved the game and got them set to eat. During the last two days, he and Adrian had developed a mental groove, but they weren’t talking much.

Charlie helped them get set and took the chair by Adrian’s side, thinking he would have questions or want updates. Instead, the tent flap opened and distracted them all.

“It’s Dog.”

“Dog!”

Charlie rushed to the wolf that Conner was cringing from.

“It’s okay. This is Dog.” Charlie motioned Conner to come closer.

Adrian observed silently as Conner found his courage. The longer Charlie spent fawning over the wolf, the closer Conner got to them.

Charlie stood up, including Conner. “He’s like us.”

Dog snorted. *Another one. Great.*

All three males snickered; the small tension in the tent broke. A mental conversation quickly started among the four of them.

John came in a bit later to find them that way. It was a bit unnerving to hear silence and then sudden bursts of laughter, but John didn't spend time on it. They were about to start packing for the move and he had patients to secure. Then, he and Anne had their personal belongings to take care of. After that, he might crawl into his bunk and die. The pain was stronger. John mourned the few weeks of life he'd gotten back and lost again so soon.

"He needs help." All of them had picked up John's unblocked thoughts.

Charlie made a motion.

Adrian denied it. "Too soon, and Jennifer can't risk it."

"There are no other healers here?"

Adrian sighed as the flap opened again. "We only have two, and they're both out of order."

The boys turned at the quick steps behind them.

Dog lifted his head from Adrian's empty boots under the bed.

Tonya paused at the stares, uneasy. She forced herself to go to John. She held out a small package. "I was told to give this to you for research and development."

John peered inside the package, but he knew what it was as the smell hit him. "Thank you."

"I was paid." Tonya tried to stop that feeling of being a part of these people. "You'll get another bag in a couple weeks. Let me know from there."

John slid it into his pocket and turned to a shelf hanging from the wall. "Take this, for your store."

Tonya quickly pocketed the stomach calmative, smiling. That, she needed. “Great.”

She went to the flap, feeling Adrian searching her. She tossed a small joint onto his bed. “For after the kiddies leave.”

Adrian smiled at her.

Tonya stumbled at his happiness. Still obsessed or not, he was about everything a woman could want.

“She’s nuts.” Tonya ducked out into the rain to find Marc and Angie coming toward the tent. “And fighting a losing battle. When Adrian wants something, he gets it. She, of all people, should know that.”

“Who was that?” Conner was staring at the flap.

“Kenn’s woman, Tonya.” Charlie got up. This was the only thing worth missing time with Tracy. Time with others like himself. He had so many questions!

Conner gave a man’s chuckle. “No wonder he’s so happy. Hot woman, baby on the way, place at your side. He’s got what all of them want.”

Charlie and Adrian turned gaping stares at Conner.

“What did you say?”

Conner tried to take it back. “I could be wrong. Yeah, I’m probably wrong.”

Adrian stared at his son in wonder at the guilty, proud flashes he was getting. “You’re a healer. That’s how John’s patients are getting out of here so quickly.”

Conner's face darkened. "It's why Garret kept me alive at first. One of the snake women poisoned him."

Conner gazed at Charlie in resignation. He couldn't hate someone who was so much like himself. "I thought you would be, since Adrian's your dad too."

Charlie chuckled as the flap opened again. "My dad just came in, with my mom."

Conner turned to glare in confusion. "Marc's your dad? She's with *Marc*?"

Adrian grimaced.

Charlie caught it and nodded coldly. "Yes. And he's perfect."

"Makes sense, I guess. Both of your parents would have to be special to produce you. I've never known a male who could do as much."

"What did you say?" Charlie echoed his own question. "Marc isn't..."

Dog padded by, worn bandage falling off to reveal no injury.

Charlie stared at Marc.

Everyone felt time slow.

Dog was healed. No one else had been here that could do it... Charlie saw the truth at that moment.

"Wait." Adrian grabbed his attention. "He hasn't told her. Don't do it."

Charlie jerked out of Adrian's weak grip, set to start shouting to release the pain.

Adrian tried again. "She doesn't need to be hurt again, son. Take it out on him, not her."

Charlie wanted to scream, but he was stopped by coming adulthood. He'd been so sure his mom was injured again when the mission team had returned. He'd been ready to insist that she quit the Eagles or he would leave, but looking at her happy smile as Marc pressed a kiss to her temple, Charlie was frozen in indecision.

"He has the late shift over the big mess." Conner had heard Kenn and Adrian going over the schedules. "You can get him alone."

Charlie gave a curt nod and turned his back to the couple slowly approaching. "You'll have to help me."

Adrian grunted. "Go talk to John. Slip out while she's checking me over."

Charlie immediately went to John.

Marc knew even without Adrian's silent warning. He kept Angela distracted so the furious boy could slip out.

How will you handle it? the demon asked.

As best I can.

Some advice? the demon offered carefully. He knew the line they were on this time.

Might as well. I'm damned either way now.

Make a deal. Give him something that he can't refuse. Work on earning his trust after. The demon sent a single image.

Marc suspected it would work, but wasn't sure he could buy his son's silence. If he kept sinking into the wrong choices, it would eventually drown him.

“We’re going to the camp mess for dinner. We’d like you to come along.” Angela looked at Conner. “It’s time to meet people.”

Adrian didn’t protest; Conner stood up slowly. “What should I say?”

Marc noted how nervous the teenager was and tried to ease it with a joke. “Your name, rank, and serial number.”

Conner grinned. “The truth?”

“Yes, except for the magic. Our camp hasn’t accepted that yet.”

Conner took Marc’s words to heart and settled in for an hour of pretending to be something that he wasn’t.

Adrian and Marc exchanged a glare that Angela read easily enough.

I’ve protected your son.

I’ll do the same for yours.

Angela interrupted the growing testosterone. “Charlie will come with us.”

All three males went still and quiet.

Angela turned to look for her son and found him gone. “Okay, well, Matt can. Get him, will you, Marc?”

None of them questioned her choice, too glad to have dodged the first bullet in this newest emotional gunfight.

Adrian smiled. “All set for tomorrow?”

Angela shrugged, not struggling to act like she hadn’t gotten any of it. What was hard was knowing that Adrian was in on it with her, not Marc. “As far

as I can tell. I sent out the clearing crew. They'll work through the night and return when the next shift goes out."

"Theo does a fine job as crew leader."

"I noticed that." Angela picked up the hint in his voice. "He and a couple of the others are doing some FND."

Adrian didn't ask for details, though he wanted to. It was her ship now. He'd thrown the hint as proof to himself that she had it covered. Theo and his small group had been on Adrian's list for a while, but only mentally. It was gratifying to know she'd gotten them on her own.

"We'll check on you later."

They all exited the tent together, leaving Adrian and John to stare after them with a variety of concerns.

Matt and Marc joined them as they reached the mess and got into line for a tray. They were stared at, but not questioned as they got their food and set their trays on the center table. Angela had already taught them to wait, to respect her boundaries.

Angela looked around. "This is Conner Mitchel. He's the only survivor we were able to bring out of Little Rock. The Major killed everyone else."

The camp erupted into a loud blur of comments and questions that Angela withstood by Marc's side. As they quieted, she began to give them half-truths and outright lies.

Marc winced in all the right places, telling the camp it was the first time she'd given the story, and

they settled down to their meals and a tale. Conner also began eating, but he paid attention to Angela's version of the story so that he would be able to keep the details straight. The biggest lie she was telling was that Adrian had gone in there for a whole load of kids. He hadn't known, of course. He'd been risking everything for his son and want it to or not, that meant something to Conner.

The listening Eagles were impressed with Angela's ability to convince a crowd, but they were mostly relieved to have a cover story. They could talk to the other men and the camp about the mission now. They were grateful to their new leader for handling that. Thanks to Adrian, the Eagles hated telling lies.

Angela and Marc answered the few questions, then directed the talk toward the move and coming celebration. The camp was promised a fun time, to be back on full water rations soon, and that they would see Adrian the same hour that John cleared him. It was all accepted. The thought of unlimited showers and jugs of water went a long way. Angela was relieved. *So far, so good.*

8

"How are they taking it?" Neil joined Daryl at his post.

"He's being shown camp hospitality from almost everyone."

"She's good at this."

“Yeah, like she was...”

“Born a Mitchel.” Neil chuckled. The joke of Marc’s words to Kenn was running through the ranks.

The crowd at the mess was in high spirits, laughing and talking past the normal time when they would have sought the shelter of their tents. Even the rain couldn’t dampen the excitement of finally getting the story.

“Hey, did you see Kenn earlier?”

Neil groaned. “Another prank?”

“No, but he wasn’t sure. Should have been there for him checking Tonya’s convertible and his Bronco for the move after a backfire. Hilarious.”

Neil snickered and continued on to more important things. “Mitch asked for a timeline on being able to drink again. Marc told him he could have whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it, and then to leave.”

Daryl whistled lowly. “He means it.”

“Yeah. Mitch hit the showers and went to bed early.”

“No way!”

“Yeah. It’s working.”

“Good.”

“You get the time for the final meeting?”

“Yeah, midnight, but not the where.”

“She hasn’t said yet. We’ll get a call.”

“That works.”

“What’s she doing after the meeting?”

“Rounds, then a private session in the medical tent with Adrian. You get the details?”

“No, I’m on the camp for it. You’re not using any rookies?”

“No. Kyle wants the top men on her.”

Neil approved. “Call me if you get even a vibe. I’ll be around.”

“You know it.”

Neil spotted Samantha coming through the drizzle and took note of which direction she went. Her hair was wild despite the rain, steps sluggish. She wasn’t at her best right now and the darker it got, the easier it would be for someone to sneak up on her.

He hit his mike, following instincts. “FND volunteer at the animal area for shadow detail.”

“I’ve got it.” Alex’s tone said he already knew who it was for. “I’m on the other side of camp. Ten minutes to be in place.”

“Copy.” Neil felt better. Alex was a crack shot. Samantha would be safe while she wandered and listened.

9

“This is the last of it.”

Tucker marked it off the list and then helped his buddy lower the last crate into the ground. They’d been on hard labor chores for so long that it took them half the time it did the others to bury a load of supplies. Why they were doing it still hadn’t been

explained, but the two men had stopped asking a while ago.

“I’ve been thinking.” Tucker looked around to make sure no one was in earshot. “About leaving.”

Anderson had had the same idea, but hadn’t been sure how to bring it up. “After this load?”

Tucker agreed, giving him a hand as they climbed from the hole. “Yeah. This will be our stock until we get set somewhere for the winter.”

Anderson looked around, gaze lingering on the center fire, where a few of the wilder camp members were drinking and joking in the rain. “We takin’ anyone else?”

Tucker was listening for anyone who might overhear. “We can arrange some company for the trip, I think. You have anyone in mind?”

“No.” Anderson knew Tucker meant women, but he meant other men for protection.

Tucker grabbed a shovel and tossed it to his friend. “Let’s do an extra set of rounds on third for FND. We can talk more then.”

Anderson continued shoveling dirt over the supplies. He would have a short list figured out by then. He’d put women on it, too, but he planned to lean toward the men. Whores could be picked up anywhere. These men were trained and that would be a big advantage out in the wilderness.

“Damn. Hang on.” Tucker grabbed a plastic covered stack of papers. “We forgot the rule sheets.”

Anderson helped him clear a hole to drop the small bundle into, and the two men hurried to finish.

“Why does he bother?” Anderson wiped sweat from his face. “There’s no one ever out there when we’ve gone back to steal it.”

Tucker made sure no one had overheard, then tried to explain. “Adrian hopes the people who find it will follow the rules on the papers and spread them around. That’s why there are so many copies in each supply batch. He thinks it will help the other survivors.”

Anderson snorted scornfully. “You can’t help the dead.”

“My thoughts exactly. Come on. Let’s hit the showers and volunteer for duty.”

10

“Are you sure?”

Adrian looked weak despite the visitors he’d had today. Angela suspected it had something to do with the tired teenagers she’d seen a bit ago.

“Yes.”

Angela was glad for the time alone with him even though there was a new tension. Some of these things were for his ears only.

“I’m listening.”

“I’m the eavesdropper, remember?” She tried to match his level of hope.

“Maybe we’ll switch that too, but for now, repeat it to me. Inspect it again if you need to. Take your time.”

She heard the seriousness underneath and allowed him to become her teacher again for a moment. “I don’t need to look at the paper. I have it memorized. You’ve chosen the Grenada Lake area because...”

“No.”

Angela sighed, thinking of the rock thrower from earlier. A large mix of people were about to be let loose in camp. Very few were being turned away. “They’re getting restless. If I say it came from you...”

“No.”

“What about we?”

There was a pause that she knew meant something.

“No.”

Angela blew out a breath as Adrian went on with the bedside lesson. “That’s how this works. *You’re* the leader. *You* made the choice.”

“But I didn’t.” She made a face at the stack of waiting paperwork. Kenn had instructions to bring everything he collected to Adrian. She picked it up after he read it. “I don’t want this.” Angela saw him frown and braced to take the scold she’d drawn.

“And it shows. That’s why it isn’t smooth for you. It’s not because you’re a woman or a rookie at this, or even that you’d like to make changes while you can.”

Angela met his knowing gaze rebelliously.
“Then why?”

“Because they feel your guilt.”

Adrian softened his tone as her aura darkened.
“Every time one of them asks when I’m coming back, you cringe.”

Angela looked away.

Adrian slid into her mind. *You are not stealing anything from me. I’ve given it willingly. I have to have a successor.*

But Conner...

Maybe. Hard to tell yet. Right now, while I can, I have to keep training the next leader.

Angela grunted. “All right. I chose the Spring because...”

“Because it’s the water we need, there’s an oil refinery nearby where you hope there’s gas, and since it’s a preserve, there shouldn’t be much damage. Might even be able to hunt for something other than fish.”

Angela chuckled at that. Li Sing was good, but their fish crop had been so large that the allotted space in the refer truck was full. The excess was being cooked or prepared for long-term storage, and as a result, fish had been a part of every meal for the last two days.

“Next?”

“Kenn and Zack are handling the driving schedules. They’ll put them in the cars and tents in the morning.”

“Your approval first. Go over them. He’s not perfect.”

She peered at her notes. “I’m creating a new position in the Eagles.”

“I heard. Gophers, huh?”

Angela read nothing in the tone. “Yes. Each level will eventually have one to care for gear and things, but for now, it’s your son and mine.”

There was a pause. “The camp must be okay with it or he’d be in here with me.”

Angela winced. “I’m sorry. I should have sent someone to let you know. Matt’s showing him around.”

“Kenn came by. I’m good.” Adrian yawned. “And it sounds like you’ve got it covered. Anything else you need?”

Angela closed the folder. “Yes, there is.”

Adrian understood her reluctance, but he couldn’t offer comfort without giving himself away. “What’s up?”

“Marc lied to me and you’ve known about it for a while. Do you still think it was best for him to not tell me?”

Adrian hated the cold tone even as he respected it. Her skin was much thicker now. “Yes, I do.”

Angela accepted that. She’d expected it. Would he be expecting the next question? “And him not telling me, not using his gifts to help us, that’s one of those things I have to forget about, right?”

Stunned to be asked, Adrian choked the words out. “Yes. Let it go. It doesn’t matter now.” How he longed to say no!

Angela hesitantly showed the new side of her. “I’m going to use it, carefully, and you owe me your help for hiding it.”

Adrian threw his head back and laughed at the awful pain. *Marc was right. I turned her into me.*

11

The Plans

A.

Leave a body and run for the mountains. Get set up to fight the force that will come when they discover it was a fake.

By then, we have to have the camp helping and accepting magic. We’ll fight every time, search out new weapons, and keep securing our home bases until they stop sending troops or we’re too few to fight anymore.

B.

Leaves Safe Haven unprotected.

Drop a body and ambush the troops that come to collect it. Get secrets and details from them, and attack the bunker to ensure our future safety.

C.

Gives away the element of surprise.

Leave a body and a fake trail for the camp. Call openly for fighters/survivors on the radio, and risk the enemy coming in a much larger force to wipe us out. If we win, the bunker will be so short on men that they won't retaliate for a long time.

D.

Pointless to kill for a week.

Kill the first troops sent so that it takes time for the bunker to find out and send more. This adds roughly seven days to arrival time.

“As you can tell, they all stink, but we'll do the best we can with what we have to work with. We'll start with option A. Can anyone think of a reason why it won't be successful?”

Several men opened their mouths, but after searching through the list, there wasn't much they could say.

“Does anyone have something to add? Another option?”

Again, there were little details that could help, but no master plan to save them.

Angela kept on schedule. She needed this to be brief. “Okay. I'll talk to Adrian before I hit my tent for the night, and find out if he has anything to add. We all set for the move?”

The rest of the final security meeting was updates and plans for moving the camp; only one person in the tent noted the V standing out on Angela's chin.

Marc studied her cool confidence, how she was prepared for every question the men asked. If she was this far ahead of the others...*What does she know about me?*

All of it, of course, his demon promptly replied. *You'd better start giving her credit for the intelligence. She has another plan, and she needs help.*

Marc waited for the others to finish and clear out; he spent the time pondering the demon's advice. If he confronted Angela, there was a good chance she'd do the same to him over his secrets. Was he ready to face that?

Ready or not, here it comes, the demon warned, fading.

Marc turned around to find Angela staring at him with hard chips of blue ice.

"We should talk."

Marc sighed. "Yeah. Here or later?"

Angela hadn't expected cooperation. She sank into the hard chair as she lit a smoke.

Marc took the seat across from her. "I have some things I need to tell you, starting with, I'm sorry."

12

Kenn and Zack met a bit away from the tent, both upset at how short the actual talk had been.

"What's going on?"

Kenn wasn't sure. "She has other plans. She's not gonna let us off the hook for trying to manipulate her."

"Did you notice how she put just enough details on option A to get it to pass?" Zack was slightly in awe. Being given fifth in command had come as a complete shock.

"I'd say she picked that up from Adrian." Kenn didn't like it that all four of the men who'd been in the tent were now higher ranked, but he was dealing with it. Adrian would change things around when he took back over.

"Yeah." Zack waited for Kyle and Neil to go by, and then leaned closer. "Can we trust her to make this happen? Like we would Adrian?"

Kenn wanted to say no and it was amazing to him that he couldn't instantly deny it as craziness. "I'll get back to you."

13

Angela found Charlie lingering near the showers.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"He just discovered it." Angela shrugged at her son. "He needed the same adjustment time that the rest of us were given."

Charlie wanted to stay angry, but if his mom had already known and wasn't upset, there was little for him to argue with. "I just can't believe he hid it."

“It’s not like that, at least not until recently. His cage match unlocked the demon. Without that, Marc never would have been able to access his gifts.”

“What can he do? Besides heal, I mean.”

Angela winced. “I haven’t asked. You could ask him yourself. He’s feeling guilty. He’d answer you honestly.”

Charlie thought of his own secrets. “Let him have that adjustment time. I don’t need another voice in my head.”

“Don’t shut him out for being like us, Charlie. That’s what we’ve both wanted.”

Angela left him to consider it, motioning to Conner and Matt. “Why don’t you gentlemen take a walk with me and we’ll discuss the Jr. Eagles? I have some new lesson plans on making bug-out kits and I can use your help.”

Charlie saw Marc shadowing Angela, and realized he’d heard the short conversation. Not sure if he should be mad, Charlie waited for Marc to come to him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Charlie compared it to having the other Marc, the one who took shit, got in fights, and made his mom cry. It wasn’t a hard choice. “Forgiven. After you answer one question.”

Surprised, Marc silently thanked Angela for not letting Charlie turn on him. “Go on.”

“Are you hiding or lying about anything else?”

Marc slowly opened his mouth. “Yes.”

Charlie studied his father without anger over the answer. When he finally spoke, it was clear that manhood was coming on swift wings. “Keep her happy and I’m good, I guess. We don’t have a problem until she isn’t.”

Marc smiled. “I came with a peace offering. I’m glad I don’t need it, but I’d like you to have it anyway.”

Charlie smirked. “Unless you’ve got Tracy hidden in your pocket, I don’t need anything.”

“Can’t do that.” Marc shrugged. “At least Jennifer’s warning didn’t spill blood. If I put Tracy in my pocket, we’ll be diggin’ fresh graves.”

“It’s perfect, though. Jennifer did me a favor.”

“She freed up more of Tracy’s time.” Marc pulled a slip of paper from his pocket.

“Yep, and I plan to occupy it.”

“With what?” Marc was curious. Tracy obviously felt something, too, but Marc wanted to know what their beginning was being founded on.

“I’m helping her build a future. After these public scenes and rumors, she’ll try harder.”

Marc’s laugh was laced with respect, Charlie heard that clearly, but he wanted more. “I’ve got a plan for her—we’re already working on it. Mom may not be happy, but the Eagles will.”

Marc easily picked up Charlie’s thoughts, but pretended he hadn’t. “What’ve you got?”

Charlie leaned closer. “I’m going to make her the leader of the...relief sources, and have her change them into something along the lines of den

mothers. Peggy and Hilda are older and they can't do as much. The girls can."

Marc leaned against the rig, studying his son. Going on fifteen, Charlie was more mature than he'd been at that age.

Not true, the demon refuted. *You loved Angela, under your mother's nose, for a decade. He gets that from you.*

Marc enjoyed the feeling as he handed the paper over. "That's your new schedule, if you want it."

Charlie read the sheet and crumbled it up angrily. "You were gonna buy me, get me to hide it from mom!"

"No. I told her everything and she suggested I give you something that would make you happy." Marc hesitated. "Was I wrong on what would do that?"

Charlie was able to let go of the anger when he didn't read any dishonesty in Marc's mind. "No, you got it right. It appeared..."

"I won't do that, boy. If you're mad enough to tell on me for something, I'll handle it, but I won't buy you off. I honestly think your mom saw that you were gonna be reasonable and wanted you rewarded."

"And for us not to fight."

Marc agreed. "Yeah. She'd do a lot to stop that."

Charlie glanced up at his father, thinking of how proud he'd been to tell Conner who Marc was. "So you're like us, huh?"

Marc shoved into the boy's mind, too hard.
HELLO!

Charlie cringed.

Marc withdrew. "Sorry. I'm not good at it."

Charlie snickered. "She's right. You *are* a rookie." The teenager took a seat on the damp folding chair he'd been in when Angela found him. "We have to work on that. The other descendants will make fun of us."

Marc cooperated fully, but inside, he was cold. Angela had declared that Charlie would forgive him, help him, but when he'd asked if she ever could, she'd left the tent. He had no idea where they stood now, but there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to make it up to her.

In the rear of his mind, Marc's demon began cackling, but refused to say why.

Chapter Eight
Don't Get Buggy
July 3rd

1

Angela came from her tent.

Kevin fell in, handing her a mug of tea.

“You ready?”

“Yes.”

Moving day was here. Marc was organizing it, with Kenn and Kyle’s help. “They’re packing up?” She hoped Marc planned to sleep during the ride. He’d had third shift over the mess and hadn’t returned to the tent at all.

“Mostly. Some are doing other things, like guard duty or fueling.”

“New arrivals?”

Kevin handed over a speed loader for her .357 and a fresh battery for her radio. “A dozen or so overnight. They’re waiting to be seen.”

“We’ll be ready to leave by 9am?” She caressed her weapon in a quick pat. When she found the time, she practiced with her left and her right. She would never be caught again without a gun arm to rely on.

“Mostly.”

“Adrian’s rules apply. You made that clear?”

“Yes.” Kevin was glad she was sticking to them. Not making changes was helping people adjust.

“I do have some of those in the works.” She put on a smile as they made it under the shelter of the mess canopy. It was almost empty, with only four tables in use.

Angela exchanged nods with Neil and Doug. Jeremy would be along once his team was finished loading the animals.

Kenn and Jax soon joined them, followed by Kevin and Cynthia.

Angela got the meeting going. She was suddenly anxious to be on the road. “Medical update.”

Kevin skimmed his notes. “John says don’t linger here. He has it under control now.”

“Great. Radio?” They were monitoring a number of new channels, hoping to hear the government before they arrived.

“No calls in. Steady broadcasts out.” Kevin subtly reminded her that they were drawing unneeded attention. Neil and Kyle had both asked him to put that one in.

“The clearing crew?”

“Will join us by dusk, like you ordered.” Marc joined them. “I spoke with Theo. They’re ahead of us by half a day.”

“And the camp?”

“All good so far as we’ve seen.” Doug shrugged. “Peggy says the same of the women. They’re all accepting Conner.”

Angela was satisfied. Adrian and Conner appeared to be getting along, but not growing close the way she and the Eagles had hoped. None of them was sure about Conner yet. It was too soon after the death of his mother to assume anything. He might have his father's values buried inside, but he also had Adrian's knack for rubbing salt into an open wound. He wasn't careful about what came out of his mouth, and the comments she'd overheard had caused Angela to mention it to Kenn. Maybe he could get the pair together. If Conner didn't develop a bond with someone in this camp other than Charlie, they wouldn't be able to get him to stay good and they needed him; they needed what he could do for these people. Conner's gifts hadn't been explored yet, but Angela held no doubt that he was as powerful as his father.

The Eagles considered Conner a hero and they wanted to bring him in, but he was too aloof. It made the top men nervous and Angela understood why. After all the traitors and assassins they'd been forced to deal with, it was easy to suspect Conner of being a wolf in sheep's clothing. She was hoping his attitude would calm before the camp began to be suspicious of him too. "Okay. When we arrive, Kyle has point. Get them settled, fed, and entertained." She looked around. "Anything else?"

Kyle frowned. "Tonya's been getting questions about growing tobacco for smoking."

Angela quickly recorded it in her notebook. "We'll get to that after the battle." Angela drained

her mug and set it on the table before standing up. “Let’s roll. I want to be in range of Grenada before midnight.”

With the roads cleared before they arrived, their convoy would roll at 45mph most of the way. Their cars were now stocked with small, three-day kits—one for each person assigned to that vehicle. There were radios and batteries as well, along with an intercom in some. Kenn was still adding to that each time he worked on setups. Car-to-car communication during the bug-out had been the worst issue and Kenn had tackled that the hardest. The problem was now fuel. They were completely out of gas and so many of their cars were going to be out too, that there was no way all of them would make it to the Spring. During their late lunch stop, they would drain the vehicles that they were leaving behind and cram in together. They would also strip the cars, making it a two-hour lunch stop. That would put them at the Spring in time for a Fourth of July sunrise.

Angela was by the open Blazer door as Adrian was brought out of the medical tent. She gestured to the escorts and shadows. She and Adrian were alone a minute later.

Adrian leaned against the door, lighting a smoke. It felt great to be outside. “Let’s hear it.”

“There are people in the towns we’re about to pass. They’ll hear us, but few of them will come out of hiding.”

“And you want them?”

She hesitated. “I can’t scan them from this distance.”

Adrian met her concerned gaze and didn’t stop the sparks. “Will you feel guilty for passing them by, lose sleep?”

“Of course. Plus, we might need some of them.”

He shrugged. “Then don’t. If they’re a problem later, you have Eagles to handle it.”

Bottled-up questions pushed on Angela’s control. She hated sleeping without Marc. Last night was a preview of the future. “How did you know? There were others here, even then, who might have been able to do the job.”

Adrian didn’t look at her, not letting that magic draw wane. “Two halves of a whole. It fit. Perfectly.”

“You believe that?”

Adrian closed his eyes to keep from drowning in hers. “I can prove it, and I will if you keep looking at me like there’s a comparison going on inside your mind. Marc’s the good guy. I’m a piece of shit. Don’t *ever* forget that.”

She snapped her mouth shut and turned away, as he’d known she would.

Adrian loathed fate as he never had. *You should have let me die.*

Cynthia caught up with Angela, not caring about the mud or her sniffles. “You’re going to have to switch me out. I can’t do it anymore.”

Angela turned to face Cynthia. “Say it again.”

Cynthia's hands went to her hips. "That hormone-fueled boy can be someone else's problem from now on. I've had it."

"What's happened?"

Cynthia's voice rose. "He told Kevin that we're sleeping together. Kevin believes it."

"That's it?"

Cynthia huffed in frustration. "He's a bad kid, Angela. Anyone can tell that. Why can't you?"

Angela let her storm away, listening to the witch whisper that things were happening right on schedule.

"What was that about?" Kevin had come to her side, unable to resist digging for information. He didn't notice the thin shadow lingering between the tents.

"She gave up her FND duty."

It took Kevin a minute to figure it out. "You mean Matt."

"Yes. She said he can't be saved, that she was done trying, and sacrificing her happiness to do it."

"Her happiness?"

"You." She left him standing there, stunned, as she went to the family area to spread the word that Matt needed a new guardian. It was ear candy, of course. Matt didn't need anything here anymore. His time was up and she'd helped it along.

Angela shoved another box into her rapidly filling crypt as the shadow between the tents followed Kevin's suddenly lively stride.

“I hear you have more free time suddenly.”

Cynthia’s heart sped up. “Yeah. Quitters usually do.”

“Angela didn’t appear upset.”

“No, she didn’t. I noticed that, too.”

Kevin got closer, picking out signs of guilt. “You did good by him. Someone else will too. She’s out to find him a new home now.”

Cynthia’s shoulders relaxed. “I thought they would vote him out. I’m glad he’s earned another chance.”

Kevin didn’t say the boy hadn’t, that Matt hadn’t even been punished as far as he was concerned. “Do you have plans for that free time?”

“Not yet.” Cynthia stared at his wide chest.

Kevin brought them within inches of each other. “I could whisper a few things in your ear.”

Cynthia blushed. “In public? I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

Kevin knew her history. “I am. It’s what I need. I can’t be hidden like Jeremy was.”

“It’s different now.” She hadn’t expected the serious words.

“Yes, it is. You’re free and I’d like to spend some of that time with you.” Kevin leaned in, hoping he wasn’t pushing too fast. “I’d love to love you.”

Cynthia’s breath caught as his lips neared hers. “For how long?”

“Does forever work for you?”

Cynthia tensed, scowling. “It’s way too soon...”

Kevin kissed her softly, ending the lie and starting a fire the reporter had no way to escape. The bond in that instant was clear to them both.

Cynthia’s arms wound around his neck, melting against him.

Their shadow spun from the area. “Gonna pawn me off on someone else.” Matt stewed, staying to the perimeter. “Just toss me aside.”

Matt ducked under the tape where Kevin was supposed to be on duty, and slid into the com truck. “Maybe I’ll take care of you all.”

He picked up the mike without any remorse and changed the channel to the one he’d recently learned. “I can only send this once, so someone write it down...”

Angela listened to the call, furious and horribly guilty. She’d helped drive him to this, set it up, and the worst was yet to come.

Instead of grabbing him or shouting for an Eagle, Angela returned to the medical area as if she hadn’t heard the call that would doom plan A and all of the others.

3

“Time for the count off.” Angela smiled cheerfully over the radio. “I’m here. Next?”

Angela hung up the mike and glanced at her driver. Conner and Charlie were riding with Adrian,

while she had Kyle and Jennifer. The strongest were in the front and rear.

Kyle started the big rig as Jennifer got settled in the plush bunk behind them. She'd been helping the Sisters direct traffic. Kyle could feel how happy she was to have been useful in some way.

Angela lowered her sunglasses. "Let's roll."

Kyle shifted and got them moving. A hum of power filled the truck. He looked over to find her lids closed and gray hair standing out like sunspots. He quickly glanced away.

Angela sighed. She'd been allowed to help Marc, but even though she had a credit left to use, a payment was still required and it would be deducted. Right now, it was her hair turning gray. Later, it would be other, harsher changes. Keeping a reserve store of energy was important, but she hadn't realized how much. "When the radio clears, tell Kevin I want to hear us on every channel. Let no call go unheard."

"I'll take care of it."

Angela respected the lack of fear. Kyle was only afraid of one thing and it wasn't the protests of the men. "That's part of why I gave you third over the others. Neil helped Marc and he's against abuse, but he dreaded speaking up until there was support."

Kyle nodded. "He wanted to secure his place first."

"Yes, but you wanted to find out what Kenn was hiding, and you didn't care if he was popular with everyone."

“I’ve never trusted him.”

“Adrian has.”

“Adrian called him fate’s wildcard when he first joined us, and I understand that a lot more after Little Rock. We wouldn’t have gotten everyone out of there without him.”

“I know. He’s Adrian’s, and there isn’t anything the boss wants that Kenn won’t try to accomplish.”

“Like with you and Marc.”

Angela forced an agreement. “Yeah. Just like us.”

4

Their late lunch stop was uneventful except for Doug shoving Roger Sawyer into the mud for asking Peggy to sit with him. The camp had enjoyed the show. Even Becky and Seth had congratulated the couple.

Angela hadn’t scolded the big man for the violence. It’s not as if Roger hadn’t known they were spending time together. Everyone knew it. If Peggy didn’t like it, she wouldn’t have laughed.

Angela hung back as Marc started the Eagles on repacking. Their car switches and fueling were finished, and he was eager to get them back on the road. Angela understood. It wasn’t okay to relax unless they were camped.

Angela spotted Anne ducking into the medical camper. Two other women joined her. Their furtive actions were getting attention from the Eagles, but

Angela denied any action when Zack gave her a questioning look. Anne and Hilda were working on something and Angela didn't want them interrupted. She needed all the support they could gather.

The kids spent most of the stop inside a training tent with a lesson designed to keep them occupied. The teenagers were already restless from so much time in the vehicles and Angela wasn't keen on any of them sneaking off to explore on their own. While it appeared deserted here, and felt the same, there was no need to be reckless. The rescued trader kids were sometimes in those classes with the Jr. Eagles now, and while it made everyone curious, no one asked. They all assumed, correctly, that it was a part of her plan to save the herd. It was also to get the Eagles, both sexes, to spend time around these special children. She hadn't forgotten a single vision of Adrian's dream to protect their future breeders. In fact, she was counting on these bonds to keep some of the top men in place to protect their chosen girls.

When Angela gave Marc the signal to start packing it all up, the camp had followed without protest. St. Charles, Arkansas was depressing and they were all looking forward to nature around them again after the first shift of travel. The land around them was thick and muddy, with long, snake-like trenches that ran brown with silt. The overflow ponds and drainage routes had become blocked by debris. The result was half woodland, half swampy

field. Angela had decided to drive straight through. It was a comfort to have Eagles at posts along the way. The clearing crew was standing watch at the Spring; their escorts had been left at posts along the road. As the convoy went by these protected intersections, teams of men were also sent out to the nearby towns to collect any survivors that she sensed.

The camp around them accepted this newest deviation from Adrian's routine without much grumbling. Word was starting to get around that the government was coming, that every extra hand was one they needed. Angela wasn't concerned yet. Until the rumor was confirmed, it was the same gossip they had been dealing with all along. When she told them it was true, that was the moment they might stampede. If she didn't have the right words to go with that bomb, they would run.

But you do have them, don't you?

Angela nodded at the witch. *Yes, but it has to be perfect. We'll do the signup sheet next. After that, one last setup on this part.*

The witch began to pull energy from the people closest to them and Angela sighed in pleasure and pain. Now she knew why Adrian always let Kenn drive.

That Marine was helping Marc round up strays. Adrian was in the car three places from the rear. It had bothered Angela to put him there. He'd insisted on it to make sure no one was left behind and she hadn't argued. He had to feel left out.

It's more than that and you know it.

Angela had worse issues than Adrian's state of mind. She was now playing a dangerous game with all of their lives, and most of the plan hinged on a fourteen-year-old boy and his alcoholic father.

You've covered the possibilities, the witch soothed. Try to relax; store a reserve.

First in a line of almost two hundred, Angela ignored the request and began searching for any other survivors she might have missed in her first few mental sweeps.

5

“Can we talk to you about something?”

Trying to enjoy the last of the afternoon sunlight, Samantha glanced up from the map. “What?”

Her surly tone wasn't comforting, but Neil pushed on in Jeremy's sudden silence. “You don't look well.”

Samantha grunted. She didn't feel well. “So?”

The men exchanged looks.

“We, uh... We want you to get checked out.”

“I already made an appointment with John. It's just a cold.”

“We meant with Adrian.”

Samantha gawked at Neil. “For what?”

“Your...radar is off.”

Jeremy spoke up, voice careful. “Not off, exactly. You're predicting differently.”

Sam turned to glare at him. “What do you mean?”

Jeremy glanced at Neil in the mirror. He wasn’t sure what to say.

Neil sighed. “We’re seeing it now, in our dreams.”

Samantha was startled for about a second. With the bonds they were creating, she should have expected that. “Power rubs off, remember? You’re doing it yourselves.” She revealed her fear, her failure. “Doing it for me, because you know I haven’t been.”

Now they were surprised. Samantha heaved a miserable sigh. “It’s gone. I can’t pick anything up.” *And it’s a relief to know that you’ve been able to in my place.* She didn’t want the camp to be unprotected. How long it would last was unknown.

Jeremy frowned. “We’ll get you time with Angela.”

Samantha waved it off. “It’s a cold or something blocking me. It’s happened before.”

Both men knew she was lying. Neil put his foot down. “Adrian, Angela, or John. Take your pick.”

Samantha looked out the window, able to see skeletons and debris in the fading light. “John.”

Not satisfied, but unable to argue, neither man protested.

“As soon as camp’s settled.”

“Okay.” Samantha tried to find a comfortable position, but her pain refused to be soothed. The

aching had become a steady pound that was making her stomach rock.

Neil and Jeremy both made mental notes to talk to someone other than John about it, though they each chose a different leader. Between them, they expected to have an answer that explained things within the next couple of days. They didn't want to push her, but looking out for Samantha was necessary. She didn't always care for herself.

Samantha knew they were worried. She was, too. She'd had times when she couldn't pick anything up from nature, but that had been during traumatic events. She was terrified that her gifts were fading, had faded, and that her time for being useful had gone.

Pain lanced through Samantha's head. She tried to cushion it with her arm, eyes clenched shut. She'd taken pills, and tried to avoid noise and light, but nothing was helping.

Neil had an unobstructed view of her. His lips tightened a bit more each time she grimaced. He began avoiding the bumps and ruts, causing them to fall behind.

Jeremy didn't like the gaps between cars, but he was also observing her face, using the mirror. He opened his mouth to offer a suggestion...

"Yes, and do it now." Neil scowled. "We're lagging."

Jeremy rose up and hit the button to lean Samantha's seat back. As she floundered, he leaned over and slid a big arm around her waist. He pulled

her onto his lap and used his foot to force the seat up.

Jeremy let her adjust and moan, cradling her loosely until she grew still. When he was sure she wasn't going to fight, he pulled his jacket from the seat next to them and awkwardly tossed it over her head. "Try some sleep."

Samantha wanted to be angry at the manhandling, but her head was throbbing harder than it had been. She carefully rested against his neck. His warm hand came up to her shoulder, supporting her. Samantha shoved herself into the darkness to escape the pain.

"Straight to John?" Jeremy asked when he was sure she was sleeping. The Samantha they knew should be taking his balls off for doing that.

"Adrian." Neil gestured. "It's no coincidence that she's sick and her gifts aren't working normally. Something's going on with that side of her. John won't be able to help."

6

I'd like to leave for a little while.

Marc stiffened at the demon's request. *I'm not stopping you.*

I have to have permission.

Marc sighed. *Where are you going?*

To visit the witch.

Marc gave his consent without asking anything else. He assumed the demon would feed the witch

and Angela wouldn't have to draw. She certainly wasn't going to take from him willingly right now.

The demon allowed Marc to believe that assumption. When he spent time with the witch, she was in the lead and they traveled further than he'd ever dreamed of.

Marc didn't notice the difference. He still wasn't ready to accept it, but he had to admit that the advice from the demon had been solid. Only he'd used it on Angela, not Charlie.

Marc waved at the last car to roll ahead of his, and then gave the all clear on the radio. They'd made a quick refueling and food stop, but they were back on the road now, with roughly ten hours to go. The two supply teams that had gone out would catch up at the Spring.

Running on high alert, Marc keyed the radio. "Check in, Kevin. Get on it."

The radio lit up an instant later; Marc returned to scanning their ass for signs of problems.

7

A few vehicles ahead of Marc, Adrian had the boys doing the same thing while he tried to find holes in Angela's plan. So far, there weren't any. She'd accounted for everything, and the work was already underway.

Conner and Charlie had the backseat, with Kenn driving. It had been a long, sometimes awkward ride. They'd told Conner to keep quiet about Tonya,

but Kenn had sensed the boy was keeping something from him. He hadn't called him on it though.

Adrian didn't think he would. Kenn was too busy avoiding the next prank. Adrian chuckled at the images of Kenn searching for the next mistake waiting to be triggered. There hadn't been one recently, but there was a feeling of something coming, something bigger.

"You okay?"

Adrian grunted. "Be better when we're parked for a while."

Kenn chuckled. "You sound like a camp member."

Adrian's voice dropped into monotones. "That's what I am."

Kenn didn't like the instant wave of depression. Adrian's moods were up and down, almost unpredictable. Kenn was sure his previous observations were right. It was time to do something. "What do you think about extending the magic classes to a few of the lower level men?"

"Up to Angela, but I don't see why not."

Kenn kept his tone light. "I'll mention it to her, if you'd rather not."

Adrian glared at Kenn for a long moment where the Marine refused to squirm.

"I'll do it." Adrian's tone was unreadable.

Kenn continued, aware of their mostly occupied audience in the backseat. "I'm almost done with the tags."

Adrian didn't answer. After fourteen hours on the road, there was little patience left for small talk.

"Should I deliver them after the next level test?"

"Yes." Adrian paused. "Except for the top people. I'll handle those."

"I've got you set up in the wing this time, with a few appointments." Kenn frowned. "Neil and Jeremy insisted on being first. It's something about Samantha."

"That's fine."

The updates and details went on in the front of the Blazer. In the rear, both boys had earbuds on and game systems in their hands, but they'd long passed boredom. Playing the same Mario mini-game, they would occasionally remove an earbud to give a direction or compare scores. Not quite friends yet, both were clearly hoping for it to happen.

"Hey, look!" Conner grabbed everyone's attention. He'd cleared a board and done a stretch while it was saving. "Behind us."

The Blazer slowed, turning a bit, and all of them were able to view the endless line of ants in the distance. They advanced steadily along the dirt and road, as if such travel was routine for so large a pack.

"Not a pack. The entire colony."

Kenn agreed with Adrian's correction. There had to be thousands of them for his human vision to pick out the movement through rainy glass at this range. "Did you give her something for that?"

"She has her own something for it."

“What?”

“You’ll find out with the rest of us. She said to linger at the rear after our final stop.” Adrian gestured. “And to keep Dog away. He flat out refused to try communicating.”

A bit resentful that he’d been left out of that loop, Kenn was also curious and unable to deny the tiny bit of apprehension that he felt for Angela. If the things she’d started didn’t pan out, faith and support might vanish and he didn’t want that to happen until Adrian was ready to take back over.

The radio crackled. “There’s a small problem we don’t want to fight with. Nothing serious. We’re going to do a turnaround and take another path.”

Angela’s voice was calm.

Adrian heard no panic as people began to copy the transmission.

The convoy made a sloppy, quick turnaround in a mini-mart parking lot. The last cars were able to see the problem she’d spoken of. It was coming toward them on hungry legs. Southern Arkansas had a rat overpopulation that knew the sound of vehicles meant people and food.

Adrian estimated the convoy would be out of sight in a matter of minutes and doubted the rats would follow them in the rain.

“She got it in time.” Adrian waved. “Crack a joke.”

Kenn picked up the mike. “You do know the fare goes up when you add on miles, right?”

Angela's voice was tired, but amused. "I'm a big tipper. Keep rolling."

Kenn grunted, forcing the words out. "Yes, ma'am."

The boys were observing through the rear window. They saw the signal from the last car.

"He told her he's ready." Charlie frowned. "I think they're doing the experiment now."

Adrian swore under his breath. "Fall back and stay with whatever car picks her up."

Kenn did as he was told.

"What's the problem?" Conner was confused. They'd been excited about her idea at first.

"It's more like nervous." Charlie held onto the door as Kenn did a neat slide and turn. "She gets a bit..."

"Reckless," Kenn and Adrian supplied together.

"Yeah." Charlie shrugged. "But she's also cool. Help me get these kits below the window line so we can see. No way she lets us out of the Blazer."

Marc pulled alongside them a few seconds later, by Kenn's window.

Adrian tried to ignore the feeling of isolation as the camp got out of sight in the light storm and thick darkness.

"She added something, changed something." Marc sighed in frustration. "I don't know. And we only have a dozen men. Advice?"

Adrian waited until Marc looked at him before he spoke. "Take her place."

Marc was gone a second later.

“They’re too close, Angie.” Marc frowned. “We have to move.”

She hadn’t agreed to let him do it alone, but she had acquiesced to a partnership; he’d had to settle for that.

“I’m almost positive on this, or I wouldn’t be doing it.” Angela unwrapped the basket. “Roll, don’t throw.”

“I got it. You keep a hand on your holster.”

“No guns, Marc.” Angela began pitching the leftover food toward the advancing line of ants. “They know what that is.”

Marc swore silently as Angela went forward.

Like she’d expected, the ants flinched from the food and the larger members of the colony rushed toward it, presumably in defense. The soldiers approached the food without caution, but only checked it for threats.

Angela paused as the two biggest soldier ants made contact. In that glance, she read curiosity and mistrust. What she didn’t pick up, was hatred.

The soldier ants stayed still as they stared at her, at all the humans waiting in the steady rain with baskets.

Angela motioned the others to start.

Food began splattering across the ground; ants fled from the path while soldiers rushed over in defense.

“Now get back.” Angela dropped her own empty basket.

Marc did the same next to her.

The line of Eagles retreated a dozen paces, but refused to go any further when Angela didn't join them. In the rain and darkness, clear shots could only be had by a close proximity.

The minor ants were now being allowed to pick up the gifts. Angela pushed into the next part of her idea. She keyed her headset. “Let the rats through.”

The Eagles tensed as the barricade of vehicles began moving; the sounds drew the pack that was still visible in the distance. The rats had stopped not long after the convoy turned, but this was close enough to trigger them.

Lights flashed on as the cars were loaded and lined up for a quick escape. Everyone saw the hungry rodents streaming their way.

“Get ready. Listen for my call.” Marc wasn't taking any chances. He and Kyle had an extraction plan in place if this went as badly as he thought it might. For an instant, Marc wished his demon was here in case he needed the power.

The radio crackled with Jake's concerned voice. “Here they come.”

Doors began slamming shut. Eagles scrambled to be in the right place as they observed the river of rats flooding their way.

Angela stared at the soldiers who were still directing the picking up of the food that she and Marc had thrown first. She sent out a scent of fear,

searching over her shoulder, and caught their reaction from the corner of her eye.

The two soldiers tensed, antenna extending to test the air...and then they came straight toward her.

Marc grabbed her arm, but Angela pulled loose. “Stand still.”

The two ants neared their feet...and went by, now hurrying.

Waves of piercing orders filled her mind and then the other ants began to follow.

Marc and Angela held still as the colony streamed around them, both amazed. The minors continued to pick up food, content their defenses would handle the threat.

Eagles shared words of encouragement.

Angela slowly turned to view the coming battle, careful not to step on any of the ants. Marc did the same.

“They’re fleeing!” Jake roared over the radio. “The rats won’t fight ‘em!”

Angela gestured for Kevin to take over the radio, glad they were using the headsets and not open waves.

The rats turned tail. Angela wondered how far the ants would go. She was both elated and horrified when the soldiers hunted the rats deep into the distance. There were no squeals or destruction that they could hear from here, but all of them were sure both were happening.

“Will they hurt the people?” Kyle didn’t want to interrupt, but he needed the information.

“No.”

“Will the people hurt them?”

Angela sighed, but didn't answer. She now had another group to protect, to feed, and to get the camp to accept.

Adrian stuck his head out the window. “It was a great idea.”

Marc noticed even that didn't shake Angela's somber mood. What was going on inside her mind?

Shall I look for you? the demon offered contentedly. *She'll know, but she won't mind.*

I thought you were gone for a while.

Your fear called me back. May I be of use?

Marc observed Angela staring at the ants in concern and gave in. *Yes. What's she worrying over now?*

The demon didn't need to get into her mind for that. *Queens can have a thousand babies a day. She's trying to figure out how to feed them all.*

Marc groaned. “She would be.”

“What?” Angela turned to him in worry. Had she missed something?

Marc took her gently by the arm. “You would have been a cat lady, I swear. We'll figure something out for it. Come on, you're soaked.”

Angela let him lead her to the vehicles, helping her avoid the minors and food mess. “We need to do some research. Maybe they'll eat something we're not using.”

“We're two short.” Kevin joined them. “Tucker and Anderson. All their gear's gone too.”

Marc studied Angela, and found her moving away.

She knew.

“Get a three-man team on bikes. Go find out if they broke down somewhere and couldn’t call.” Marc studied Angela’s stiff frame. What was she hiding from him?

Marc handed her into the rear of the Blazer, where Cynthia was waiting with towels and a mug of coffee.

Angela sipped the hot brew while they tended to her, mind blazing with strategies. If they fed the ants regularly, the soldiers would be a new line of defense. She’d tested and proven it in a non-controlled environment. When the time came, she would use it to Safe Haven’s advantage.

“Get her into the lead truck when she dries off.” Marc gestured. “I’m making a quick recon to that library.”

The Eagles didn’t want to let Marc go alone, but it was clear from the ants streaming around his feet that he would have protection.

Marc vanished into the library a few minutes after they were out of sight. When he was satisfied there, he took the time to kick in the door to the one store that might have food left. The soldier ants swarmed inside gratefully.

Marc observed them, what they went to and secured first. Those powerful waves of communication came again, strong enough for him

to smell in the closed up store. Marc knew the rest of the colony had been called.

He backed out carefully and looked around the town. It was gone, with enough black mold climbing the buildings to convince him that no one was hiding here.

Can you hear anyone?

No, the demon replied promptly. *Let's go home.*

Marc immediately went toward the truck he'd been driving. Safe Haven was definitely that now. He couldn't imagine living with another group. They were his.

9

“Ug! Pull harder!”

“I'm trying to! I keep slipping!” Tucker panted, heaving; they managed to get the crate out of the ground. In the struggle, the stack of plastic covered sheets was ripped open. Loose white papers went flying into the muddy darkness.

Tucker waved. “Bring the truck closer. We're not movin' this bitch. Too much rain.”

The crate, slowly sinking into the muddy ground, held supplies they needed now that they'd abandoned Safe Haven.

“Hurry up!”

Anderson ran to the truck, and Tucker began prying the wood open to get at the items inside, cursing the rain.

Anderson pulled the truck too close and bumped into the crate. It sank deeper into the mud.

Tucker began shouting. His words rolled through the storm.

Not far away, it drew the attention of camp followers. The light of safety had called these people, but they hadn't gathered the courage to seek it out. They followed the camp instead, banding together and sharing the supplies that were left behind. They were waiting for the rain to clear for this crate, but the harsh male shouts brought them out early.

"We need those supplies." Everett grasped his pouch. "You know what we have to do."

The ragged band of survivors was too busy gathering ammunition to argue. Thievery was something they killed even their own for. Those supplies belonged to them. The notes inside always said so and these people followed Safe Haven's rules.

Everett grabbed at a paper blowing by.

Simon held a torch so that he could read it. "Safe Haven Rules of Conduct and Penalties...this is from the crate! They've gotten it before us again."

Anger spread through the group. Without those supplies, their few children would go hungry.

"There's a new rule!" Everett stated, gruff voice now lowered in respectful awe. "Gather, my friends, and learn a new guide to the Promised Land."

The twenty men and women formed a reverent circle around Everett and Simon, holding hands and humming lowly as the next commandment was put into their minds.

“Stealing is a crime. Stealing is punishable by...” Everett pretended to struggle reading the rain-soaked sheet. “Punishable by stoning.”

Simon, who couldn’t read, gasped with the rest of the group.

Everett dropped the paper and filled his left hand full of stones from his pouch. “We’ve been called into service this night, to enforce Safe Haven’s rules, the written and the unspoken. Are you with me?”

The crowd chanted an angry agreement, “We are called into service. We *will* enforce the rules.”

Everett led them forward, waving at Simon to put out the torch. “This business has to be done in the dark. It’s why we exist.”

10

“Is that everything?”

Tucker grunted, wiping rain and sweat from his neck. “Yes. Help me secure the tailgate. It’s bulging.”

Anderson and Tucker fought to get it latched, eager to be on the road. They’d never spent so long on a grab.

“Shove, damn it!”

“Can we help?”

The dishonorable Eagles spun around, drawing their guns when they saw who'd joined them.

"Now, my brothers and sisters..." Everett invoked the killing mood. "Let these thieves be dealt punishment according to Safe Haven laws."

Tucker gaped at the words, not understanding what was happening. "Who are you guys?"

Anderson, a bigger coward, felt trouble coming. He heaved against the tailgate and felt it latch. At the same time, something gave in his back.

"Ahh!" He hit the muddy ground on his knees, groaning.

Tucker was aware of the numerous hands reaching for pouches and pockets. "Get up!"

"My back!"

"Get up!"

"Now, my children!" Everett commanded.

Tucker let go of Anderson's arm as stones came flying through the rain, trying to protect his face. Rocks slammed into his head and neck.

"Stop!"

"Why are you doing this?"

The group didn't pause or answer, only returned to humming and chanting while they threw.

"Abuse is forbidden... Rape is a death sentence..."

Tucker could hear the words, the copy of camp rules now twisted into something ugly. He held up a hand, stumbling blindly as his forehead dripped blood that ran into his mouth. "I'll shoot!"

Anderson cowered under the truck, trapped by a barrage of sharp stones flying underneath. One of them struck his temple and he slumped to the mud, face down.

“Thieves are stoned...” the group chanted, arms raring back.

Tucker got his gun in hand, but forgot to remove the safety. It clicked in vain as the entire group threw at him.

They didn't stop when he began to scream.

Nor when he fell silent.

It wasn't an easy way to die.

Chapter Nine
Set Us Up
North of Grenada Lake
July 4th
3:00am

1

Grenada Lake was almost a paradise. Surrounded by thick woods on one half, the other side included fields, valleys and even an ATV mud track that had become dark with mold. The rest of the area was pristine; the hunters were eager for a run. The boaters in the camp were staring at the dock and the murky water from their windows.

Angela didn't think any of them would try it. Things came out of the water now and that was a lot of water. "Mess is that picnic shelter. The center is that fallen tree. Eagle Teams three, four, and five secure the perimeter. Camp will standby to unload, get fed, and stay for almost two weeks!"

Tired cheers came from the cars and trucks.

Kyle and Marc were already in the thick of things. Angela used the privacy to dig deep and listen to the area. There was a bad vibe to the wind, but it felt like they were east of it.

Angela finished her sweep and climbed out into patchy fog. She spotted Kenn nearby. “You my shadow?”

The Marine turned to view their surroundings. “And Shawn, until we’re set up.”

Angela observed the campers and trucks rolling into place, and waved toward the creek they’d chosen on the map. “No one goes in there until it’s cleared and roped. We’ll also need all of this mowed.”

They’d chosen the area because of the bedrock under the thin soil around the spring. If it appeared mushy or weak, they would pick another location to camp.

Kenn didn’t have to write it down.

Angela was glad they were giving her men who could do that. It would make everything easier. “Rounds first.”

She was well into those when Marc finally joined her, taking Kenn’s place.

“Camp’s up and running. Kyle has point with three levels on duty; disks are out, QZ’s up, and basically, all is well in our world for the moment.”

Angela understood his cheerful tone. Being the one to prove her theory with the ants had sent a fresh rush of glory into his bloodstream. It had an effect on Marc that was magical.

The couple spent the next hour walking the camp, helping where it was needed, then went to the mess, where the lines were thinning.

“What’s set up for them to do?”

“Movies and popcorn in the big tents, game trucks are open, the bonfire’s lit, though if the rain comes back, that’ll be out.”

Angela took the tray from Li Sing with a smile of thanks. He’d come out to serve her himself.

“We’ll have fresh meat for you to work with over the next couple days.” Angela was sure he was as tired of cooking fish as the camp was of eating it.

“All good. I made a clam chowder tonight, with no clams.” Li grinned. “Will tell them it is canned pork.”

Angela snickered. “Works for me.”

They went to the empty center table, each noting who they saw and the general mood. There wasn’t much talking as everyone ate.

Marc gestured toward the cups. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

Marc thought of their moments.

Angela flushed. But she didn’t offer an invitation and he felt the sting. He’d hurt her this time and he wasn’t sure how to fix it. He wasn’t worried about her leaving him over it. He’d seen the signs of ruthless planning enough to know them, but he was certain their relationship was suffering and would continue to. “You’re doing a good job. They all think so.”

Angela did need to hear that from Marc. It was something Adrian hadn’t said to her yet though, and it wouldn’t feel that way until he did.

Marc went to get their cups as Angela glanced around the mess for trouble. She wanted to be one

of those people who only saw the good, but the war had ruined that for her. Now, she had to look for problems and find ways to turn them into strengths.

She studied their perimeter, where the wall was going up. Come daylight, parts of it would come down and more experiments with the ants would take place. She had no idea how something so powerless would be able to help them, but she was determined to bring in assistance from every source available. If the insects continued to protect them, they would be rewarded. “And I know what they want.”

The ants had one real predator that they’d made note of. The bats in some areas were able to carry off the juveniles. Safe Haven usually brought up the shield when the flocks and colonies got too close, only protecting themselves, but that was about to change. “We’re going to adapt.”

Angela went toward the com truck. The whole camp was hers. She could do with it as she pleased.

And what would please you? the witch asked.

A fresh list started running through her mind. Angela felt the witch stretching.

Start with that coffee he’s bringing. Wake me up.

2

“She’s what?”

Adrian tried to be patient. “She’s evolving.”

Neil scowled. “What does that mean?”

“She’ll get a new gift.” Conner was excited for her.

“She’ll be okay?”

Conner observed Adrian’s shaking hand as he hit the button on the drip, but he didn’t bring it up. “After it comes in fully. Until then, she’ll be blocked.”

“And in pain?” Jeremy wasn’t sure how much of that he could take.

Conner nodded. “Oh, yes. It changes our DNA, creates new lines of energy and use. At times, she may even scream.”

All three men paled at that. Adrian had already known, of course, but he was hearing Angela’s screams in his memory as he burnt her.

So was Neil.

Jeremy asked the next of their hundred questions. “How long will it last?”

“A few days, maybe a week.” Conner shrugged. “Unless she fights it. Then it could take longer.”

Neil and Jeremy looked at each other and instantly agreed. “A month.”

“Yep. Samantha fights everything.”

“I do not.” Samantha slowly sat up in the next cot over.

Neil and Jeremy rushed to her side. She hadn’t woken when Neil carried her in.

“Did you hear all that?” Neil held her hand.

“Yes, and I’m not fighting it. I didn’t know what it was.”

Jeremy pulled the blanket up over her arms. “We’ll stay with you.”

Conner frowned. “Um, that’s kind of dangerous. The mood swings are...intense.”

Both men assumed the boy had undergone an evolution recently by his knowledge of it, but neither of them pretended they were going to listen to him.

“How do we help her?”

Conner had to look to Adrian for that. He’d suffered through his alone each time.

“You distract her, the same as with anyone else in pain.”

“And give me privacy.” Samantha felt a little stronger. “Can I go to my tent?”

“How about a tent here in the QZ?” Adrian suggested.

When Neil and Jeremy both nodded, Samantha had no choice but to agree.

“Fine, whatever. Just get me out of here. I need the damn lights off and the talking over.”

Conner gave them a pointed look that was ignored.

Adrian didn’t say anything as the trio left, instead noting how the two men appeared okay at this moment.

“They’re sharing her!” Conner guessed. “That’s why I couldn’t figure out the relationship.” He lowered his voice. “Should I have told them the rest of it?”

Adrian eased into the cot with a grunt of relief.
“I wouldn’t have.”

“Why not?”

“Because it won’t matter to them that for a while she’ll be irresistible. To them, she already is.”

“They weren’t happy with your answers. They wanted more.”

“Angela can give it to them. They’ll go to her at some point.”

Conner was quiet for a moment, considering the things he was seeing and hearing. It was wonderful, frustrating, and layered in dangerous deceptions. “How did this all come to be?”

Adrian got as comfortable as he could. “I couldn’t stay with you. They’ve been hunting me, testing, stealing what wasn’t theirs to take. And I knew they’d do the same to you. I hoped staying away would be enough...”

“Why did you do it?”

Adrian’s voice was genuinely remorseful. “I loved her, boy, and he took her. While I had her with me, the first months that she carried you, I loved her and she loved me.” Adrian let his body melt into the thin mattress. “I still do in ways.”

“She waited for you to come, but he forced her. He used me as leverage.”

“He was supposed to be dead!” Adrian growled. “I was told he was dead.”

That explained a lot to Conner and allowed forgiveness a chance to start growing.

Adrian tugged the blanket up. “Anyone will tell you how Safe Haven came to be, how I built it, but don’t forget that fate chose me, shaped me. It’ll do the same to you, more than it already has. It will also take the things you love the most and turn them against you.”

Conner opened his mouth to deny that he’d turned, and stopped himself. He sensed the remark wasn’t meant for him. He didn’t have to dig deep to find the source of Adrian’s anguish.

“You’re in love with Marc’s woman!” Conner accused, angry, but not the least bit surprised. “You’re waiting for them to split up to have a shot with her!”

Adrian carefully rolled over and pulled the pillow closer to his cheek. “Not anymore. Now, I’m waiting to take someone’s place on death’s list.”

“You’ve given up.”

Adrian didn’t answer, willing the boy to leave him alone.

“Why don’t you...”

“Good night, Conner.”

Conner didn’t keep going, but he refused to stop thinking about it. Despite the lingering anger, Conner wanted his father back. This depressed shell wasn’t Adrian Mitchel.

Conner began developing ideas to pull his dad out of it. The most likely idea was to find a distraction for him in either a woman or work, but in the end, he might have to have what he was craving. It was good here and the top people were

great, but Adrian was his dad and that was where his loyalty was.

3

“Hold it up.”

Jeremy lifted the flap higher; Neil ducked into the tent to set Samantha on the bedroll. He put her kit by her feet and left to give her a few minutes alone.

Neil swept the camp, and members of their team. Everyone appeared beat. He'd have to switch this shift of guards out early.

Jeremy lowered the flap and joined Neil. “You want first watch?”

Neil shrugged awkwardly. “I assumed we'd both stay close.”

Jeremy thought for a minute, and then agreed. “Don't know how it would bother the camp if they knew she's sick.”

Neil nodded. “I'll make sure it gets around.”

“What do you think's up with Adrian?”

“No idea, but it's making people nervous.”

“Son of a bitch!”

They turned to find Kenn nearby, staring up at a hole in his tent. Clearly cut with a jagged edge, the outline was a middle finger perfectly lit by the candles.

Neil sniggered. “That's good.”

“Who the hell keeps doing this?!” Kenn shouted. “When I catch you, I'll...”

Tonya jerked Kenn inside the tent.

More laughter floated through the rain at a fresh round of cursing from the tent as Kenn tried to find a way to patch the hole.

Samantha's soft chuckle drew Neil and Jeremy around. She was standing in the flap, staring. "I love that prankster."

Her men chuckled in agreement, but she could feel them searching her. For what, she wasn't exactly sure. Did they think a tail would pop out of her ass? "I'm still too dizzy to walk, I think. Can you get me to the shower?"

Jeremy reacted first.

Neil let him take care of it. "I'll get some food. Don't leave her."

"I won't." Jeremy gently lifted her. "You make sure we're left alone."

"Got it."

Samantha rested her head on Jeremy's shoulder, wishing she felt well enough to enjoy it. An aching spine had eased the migraine. She no longer felt the throbbing in her temples or the bones in her legs. "This sucks."

She felt Jeremy smile.

"What else can we do for you? Adrian wasn't clear."

Samantha shuddered as pain lanced down her nerves, vibrating into her hips. "Heat, I think, and then sleep. Maybe I can stay under while it passes."

"That's a good idea. I'll ask Angela about a sedative."

“I don’t want to be a junkie! You be careful with me.”

Jeremy pressed his lips to hers in comfort. She’d told him of her addiction fears. He drew back to speak in the temporary silence afterward. “I love you. So does Neil. You’re safe with us.”

Sam shuddered again, this time in relief. “I know, and I...”

Jeremy kissed her again, a little harder, and felt her take note of him, of his body.

He got them moving, suddenly glad of the drizzle. It was keeping people in their tents.

Samantha hated being afraid, hated feeling out of control. She clutched Jeremy’s shoulder and mentally bolstered herself. Once again, she was going to prove how different she was. The promise of a new gift meant little to her. She hadn’t mastered the old ones yet and it was a bad time to be out of communication with nature. Weather reports would keep them alive.

“Stop worrying.” Jeremy smiled. “Angela has it covered.”

Samantha wanted to believe that, but it was hard.

“This is what he meant by fighting.” Jeremy started working on distracting her. “You have to accept what’s coming, embrace it if you can, and then get with your team.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Jeremy did.

4

After a quick shower, Marc's feet carried him around the sleeping camp and eventually brought him to the QZ, where the medical tent was dimly lit. He wasn't surprised to find a shadow in the flap.

"Thought you couldn't be on that for another week?"

Adrian brandished the cane and then planted it where he could use it for support. "I'm not."

Marc took in the beads of sweat, the rapid breaths.

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"Someone else's hip."

Marc forced a chuckle. "Can't help you there."

Marc moved on, checking out the entire area before going to Angie's tent. It was now in the center of camp, where Adrian's had been.

Adrian went back inside and picked up his book, trying to control the urge to leave. He wouldn't make it far, not yet.

"We think you should go out tomorrow and let the camp know she has your support."

Adrian glared up from his book as Jax and Lee came in. "She doesn't need me out there messing up her plans." He turned the page. "Besides, I'm about to discover if Bella kills Jacob. Do you mind?"

Lee and Jax left the medical tent with large scowls, missing Angela standing in the shadows, listening.

She ducked into the tent. “Why are you sending them away?”

Adrian lay back on the cot. “Safe Haven can’t have two leaders right now. They have to come to you.”

“And it’s easier that way, for you to give up, right?” Angela stung him sharply. “I know what you’re planning. I won’t allow it.”

Adrian didn’t answer.

Angela grew angrier. “If I have to have John sedate you, I will. Stay in the medical tent. Don’t leave it without an escort.”

“What the hell are you doing talking to him like that?!” Kenn roared, disturbing half the Quarantine Zone as he came inside. “This is his camp!”

Angela tugged Adrian’s blanket up to his shoulders. “Tell *him* that. He’s planning to give himself up to save the rest of us.”

Kenn gaped, mouth dropping open.

Angela left him there to work on Adrian. She had rounds to finish and plans to go over. It felt like she was missing something and she hated that. It would cause problems that she couldn’t afford.

“And where are the problems I’m counting on?” She stared at the main camp in concentration.

Angela was satisfied with the answers the witch gave and continued her rounds. All the pots were boiling nicely now.

Kevin came over to her, face grim. “They found the bodies. Tucker and Anderson are dead.”

“Bring them home. Tell the team to do it openly.” Angela gestured. “We’ll need a distraction about then. The camp will think Kyle did it. We may have to prove that to them.”

Kevin wrote it down, worried. “Will they riot over something like this?”

“If someone isn’t held responsible, but they’ll give me a little time to handle it.”

“How would you...if he did?”

Angela’s heart clenched. “The same as we would any other killer who doesn’t serve our greater good.”

Kevin loved and hated the answer. “Should we tell the camp yet?”

“No. They’ll find out at exactly the right time.”

Kevin took that to mean she’d foreseen this and hadn’t chosen to interfere. He wanted to ask why, but remembered his place at the last minute. He would ask Marc instead.

Angela turned to inspect him. “At some point, Kevin, you’ll have to decide if you really want this job. Your loyalty to me has to come first. If you feel the need to go behind me, instead of sucking up the courage to ask, perhaps someone else *would* be more appropriate.” She left him with that ringing in his ears.

Do I want it? Kevin asked himself.

Maybe, came the reluctant answer, and that wasn’t good enough, was it? Suddenly depressed, Kevin went to relay her instructions.

Angela stopped as the tall weeds rustled and Dog padded toward her. In his golden gaze was every secret she had and every lie Marc had told.

Angela waved her shadows off. “Give us a few minutes.”

Dog stopped by her, waiting for her to react. He’d come to get it over with before someone noticed her avoiding him. Marc had commented on it earlier.

“You’ll work with the ants, the cats, and anything else I come up with.”

Dog appeared to frown at her, but didn’t protest. Instead, he offered another concession.

I’d help with your plan. Dog’s voice in her mind deepened. *The real plan.*

Angela was gathering fighters for the battle. “I’ll find a job for you that help.”

Dog waited for more, hoping to regain the friendship they’d once had.

“I could use a few minutes alone if you don’t mind!”

Dog sadly padded into the main camp; Angela stifled her guilt. There would be time to ask forgiveness after they’d survived.

“I wanna talk to you!”

Angela turned at the drunken slur, expecting Mitch.

Slap!

The blow brought tears to her eyes and knocked her backward into the mud.

“Come here!” Roger clutched at her jacket. His breath ran over her in thick waves. *Whiskey and vomit.*

Angela gagged, hands flailing for her holster as he jerked her from the ground and held her in the air.

“Can’t make rules if you ain’t alive.” His eyes were glazed in drunken hatred. “Come here, *Boss Lady.*”

Angela struggled to get her arms free, to reach her gun.

The witch bled through in furious hunger.

Let me have him!

“No!” Angela twisted to butt her head into his chin.

Roger let go and staggered backward as the sound of sloppy running echoed through the fog. He tripped and went down, hand fumbling for his gun.

Angela lunged forward and kicked him in the face.

“Agg!” The bitter man fell to his side, clutching his bleeding mouth.

“Stay down!” Angela ordered, feeling the hunger rise. “Stay down and be banished. Get up and you die!”

Sobered by pain, Roger shoved to his feet with blood dripping from his nose and mouth. “Gonna hurt you for that.” He glowered, no longer swaying as he neared her.

Angela ducked his lunge, but hit his muddy boot and went sprawling on her stomach.

Roger took advantage and dropped his full weight on her, shoving her face into the mud.

Angela sent her anger out as mud flew into her mouth.

Roger stiffened as if he'd been shot.

Angela shoved him off and struggled to her feet, coughing.

Roger dropped to his knees before her, face draining of color. Blood began to roll from the corner of his mouth.

Angela lunged forward to take what she'd secretly been lusting to do again since Little Rock.

Only three Eagles witnessed Angela taking the man's life.

Her sniper was one of them, and Shawn would never have said a word after witnessing the entire battle. He'd been the one to call Marc and Kyle when he couldn't get a clear shot. Those two men also had good reasons to hold silent. No one did more than breathe until she'd finished and left the shadowy area with a spring in her step.

Marc spoke first. "I did it after he attacked her."

Marc pulled one of his Colts and fired into the head of the shriveled corpse.

He was on Angela's heels as footsteps flooded the area. Marc swept her into his arms, almost running. "Act hurt."

Angela didn't have to act. She was pretty sure Roger had knocked one of her teeth out. It wouldn't show, but it hurt more than the cut lip, scrapes, or awful feel of gritty mud in her throat.

“What happened?”

“Nof idea.” Angela spit muddy blood over his shoulder. “Doug pisseth him off wif fat shove. I made a good tharget. I lafed.”

Marc scowled the entire time John checked her over, ignoring Adrian and Conner, who stayed in the wing of the medical tent and observed angrily.

“She’ll live.” John was tired of saying those words. “Not all the roots broke on that tooth, either. It might heal if she gets enough calcium or we get a dentist soon.”

Angela sighed, taking the pain pill and the cold rag. Outside, the Eagles were calming the camp. Angela went that way wearily. She’d hoped to sleep for a while, but that was out of the question now.

Marc stayed on her heels as she talked with the camp members and assured them she was fine. She expressed sincere regret at Roger’s death, but reminded them those were the rules in Safe Haven. Self Defense was expected in this camp. Her cuts, bruises, bandages and gritty voice went a long way in angering the camp on her behalf. With Marc, it made him more furious with her.

Marc stayed close as she made sure everything was good with the camp, boiling. She’d waved off her protection. She could have been killed, again. When they were alone, she would hear about that and all the reckless shit she thought she could get away with now that she was the leader.

“Head that off.”

Kenn slowly did as Adrian bid him. He, too, thought Angela could use a scold, but by the time he got to Marc's side, he'd realized that Adrian was right. "I need a minute, Marc."

Marc stopped as Angela kept going. "Make it quick."

Kenn waited for her to get out of earshot. "Leave her alone. She didn't do anything wrong."

Marc snarled. "Stay out of this!"

Kenn was careful not to get in Marc's way as he stalked toward the camper Angela had gone into.

"She needs to hear it—every word."

"I agree, but not from you."

Marc spun to fight.

Kenn raised his voice a bit to get through the anger. "Would you talk to Adrian that way?"

"No."

"You can't do it to her, either. You'll undermine every bit of authority she has with the Eagles."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you don't get to treat her like the woman who sucked you off last night. She's a leader of men; Adrian's chosen successor. *Don't forget your place.*"

Marc left Kenn before he hit him, going to the medical camper where Angela was getting another update from John. He went to the shadows under the window to smoke and stew as he waited.

Their voices came straight down to him as if he'd planned to listen.

"You have a batch already?"

“Pain works miracles for motivation.” It had been a scramble, but the first beaker of medicinal hemp was waiting to be tested. John had no idea if he’d done it correctly.

“You’ll use yourself and adjust from there?”

“Yes, but you should know I don’t expect it to be successful. Probably, I’ll be so high I can’t work.”

“How will you know if it is working? Do you need some kind of special equipment?”

“Adrian got it for me a while ago. I hadn’t had much to try in it.”

“If it works, do we have enough?”

“I won’t know that until we find out how long it lasts. This can’t put it into remission... I don’t think.”

“Cancer is adaptable. But at least we’ll have a way to knock it back for you and all the others. That’s our first goal—keeping you alive.”

“Two of them are approaching my levels of pain. If it does work on me, do I have your permission to offer it to them?”

“Yes, and good luck.”

“Thank you, for this and other things. You’re doing well.”

“I hope you’ll still think so this time tomorrow. Any smaller issues I haven’t heard about yet?”

“A few cases of super lice in the new people, but that’s it. Millie’s working on them now.”

“Sign of other infestations, like bed bugs?”

John was glad he didn't have to add to her stress levels with a different answer. "So far, no, and it's odd. They should be flocking to us when we camp, clinging to clothes as we gather supplies. I can't explain it yet."

Angela tried not to worry over it, though something that could take out bedbugs was definitely a threat to the camp. Those little bastards would be around longer than Twinkies or roaches. "You have a disinfecting day planned?"

"Not for a few weeks. We did the tents and main equipment right before Little Rock."

"What about breathing trouble? The skycrap looks thicker now that we've had rain again."

John pushed his glasses up. "No big spikes, just steady numbers. By the time you leave this country, you'll need crates of inhalers."

Angela stared at him. "You know. Adrian?"

"Common sense, little Lady. Common sense. This land is dying and the people right along with it."

Angela's mouth opened in spite of the heavy chore she had to perform now. "Why were you brought here, John?"

John slowly lowered his glasses, voice the gravest that Angela had ever heard.

"I thought it was to protect Anne, to provide for her future."

"And now?"

John's eyes glinted with furious resignation. "I came here to die."

Angela didn't correct him. The feeling was thick.

John smiled bitterly. "It does something, right? To help the camp?"

Angela nodded slowly. "I think so, yes. It was hazy. There was a lot I couldn't see."

"You've come to make arrangements." John sank in the chair, fight going out of him all at once. He had hoped the hemp drinks would buy a little time.

Angela took a seat on the bed next to him, hand going to his in sad comfort. "Do you have any last wishes, John?"

The older man grimaced. "A million of them, but only one that matters."

Angela leaned close. "Tell me, and it'll be done."

Marc held the door open for her a bit later; those haunted blue eyes locked onto his.

Anger faded under her pain. He opened his arms and she slammed against his chest, unable to hold in the sobs.

Marc lifted her into his arms and went to their tent.

5

"Are we okay, Angie?"

Happy the painkiller was working, Angela paused during taking her boot off. "Sure, Marc.

We're lying, keeping secrets, and pretending to be the perfect couple. How could we not be okay?"

Marc winced. "I don't know what to do."

Angela refused to take pity on him yet. "Neither do I."

She slid under the blanket, but he hesitated, unsure it was all right to sleep yet. She felt pretty upset.

"Come to bed. This is going to be a big day."

Marc climbed in with her, listening when the demon said to hold her close.

Angela melted into Marc's embrace and willed the next twenty-four hours to hurry up. After that, she and Marc would be on the same page again. There was something he had to do first, and he wouldn't, if he knew the outcome.

Marc pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. "I missed you."

Angela sighed contentedly. "Same here. You wanna fool around or something? I've got a little bit of reserve for that."

Marc tightened his grip a bit. "Sleep, Baby-cakes. We can fool around tomorrow."

Angela bit her lip. If things went badly tomorrow, there wouldn't be a later for them, not in Safe Haven's light.

Easy, the witch soothed, eager for Angela to sleep so she could be with Marc's demon. They were making powerful combinations on their journeys, gathering a reserve. When the time came, they would both be useful.

“I love you. I’m sorry.”

Angela pretended she was already asleep, heart breaking. She would have her own atoning to do when this was over, but she didn’t know any other way to get Marc’s cooperation on this one. Kenn had forced him into killing the snake women, but he’d only been able to because those females were a serious future threat. There was no way Marc could be pushed into sacrificing one of their kids and at times like this, deep in the safety of his arms, it was hard to imagine that she could be so heartless either.

*But I am, she reminded herself, starting to drift.
I have to be. I’m the leader.*

Chapter Ten
Fireworks

1

“**S**he’s getting worse.”

Neil rolled over to look. Samantha had begun shivering around dawn. Jeremy was taking the first shift holding her as she groaned and thrashed.

“The sedative’s wearing off.”

Jeremy smoothed her hair from her brow. “What else can we do for her?”

Neil watched her shiver, wondering if she even knew they were there. “I’ll go find out.”

Jeremy settled back as Samantha appeared to calm, eager to catch a few minutes of snoozing.

Neil quickly pulled on his boots, and went out into bright sunlight and activity. Games and booths were being set up by the lower level Eagles, fireworks were being wired, and Li Sing had all the smells of a great celebration floating through the camp. It was such a difference from what he was used to that Neil stopped to gape.

“It’s something, huh?”

Neil nodded at the friendly female voice, a bit dazed.

“Are we still on for tonight, Neil?”

The trooper glanced down to find Bridget at his side, smiling generously.

“No, I can’t. Sam’s sick.”

Bridget frowned. “Jeremy’s with her, right? You could sneak away for a little while.”

Saying Samantha’s name reminded Neil that he needed to hurry. He shrugged, moving on. “We’ll see.”

“That’s not a no.” Bridget leered as if Neil had said something sexy to her. These Safe Haven women just had to learn how to set things up. Then, they could have whatever they wanted.

Neil found Adrian alone and drilled through his new shield to get some answers.

Adrian, in pain and worried, didn’t want to cooperate. He repeatedly insisted that Angela had those answers, but Neil refused to leave emptyhanded. “I don’t care that you’ve given up. I care about helping Samantha. What should we do?”

Adrian sighed. “You have to distract her. I told you that.”

Neil scowled. “How? She’s in too much pain for talking, let alone games or books.”

Adrian grimaced, but stuck to the plan. “Give her a shower, feed her, smoke one with her. Take her by the booths if she has the energy. She’ll absorb the happiness of the camp and it will help.”

Neil didn’t think that was nearly enough. “What else?”

Adrian didn’t have much else to say. “Keep her sedated.”

“We tried that. She’s already coming up from the full dose John gave us.”

Adrian relaxed. “It’ll be over soon then, within the next day. Get her out in the sunlight. It’ll speed it up.”

“What happens then?”

“She’ll have a new gift to master. Has she said anything about what it might be?”

“No.”

“When she does, make sure you tell Angela.”

Neil scowled and left the tent without promising that he would. What was Adrian’s problem?

Neil made it to the tent to find Jeremy and Samantha sleeping. He quietly lay on his bedroll and let himself drift off. He would take Adrian’s advice, but when they woke up, not now. All three of them needed more rest. Two hours wasn’t enough to get through much without showing signs of stress and there was a thick sense of bad times coming.

2

Kenn spotted the tripwire and deftly avoided it.

“Missed me, you little shit.” Kenn still wasn’t sure who his tormentor was. “Maybe next time.”

Kenn ripped the line away from his tent flap as he ducked inside.

Wooshhh!

Kenn shivered as the icy bucket of water splashed over his shoulders and into his jeans like a small waterfall. “Son of a...”

Kenn stormed from the tent, fists clenched. “I am gonna find out. When I do, payback will be swift and merciless.”

Those close enough to hear him didn’t doubt the threat even as they snickered. More than one of them made a mental note to talk to the person they thought was responsible.

Kenn stomped by the group standing outside the medical tent, aware of their smirks and snickers.

“Someone’s going to be in big trouble when he catches them.” Angela turned away to hide her own cackle of vindication. Every time Kenn got hit with something, the past faded a bit more for her.

“As long as they keep being careful, they’ll be all right.” Conner kept his gaze away from the angry man.

“You sound like you know something...” Adrian’s low words made Conner inspect Angela warily.

Angela sighed. “I’ll talk to Charlie about it later.”

Conner was now slightly worried. “He’s not gonna get in trouble is he?”

Angela chuckled. “No. At least not until he’s been rewarded.”

“What about Tracy?”

Angela stared in surprise. “She’s in on it?”

Conner realized he'd told too much and stopped talking.

Angela picked out that female going into the hair tent and moved her way.

Behind her, Conner and Adrian exchanged glances, but didn't interfere. She was Charlie's parent. She had every right.

"If my mom had been more like her, would she have walked out of the Major's compound alive?"

Adrian gave a short nod. "I believe so."

Conner waited for something more. When there was silence, he glared. "What's wrong with you?"

Adrian remained silent.

Conner grew frustrated. "You've quit. You can't do that, not now. They need you."

"No, they don't."

Conner stared for a long minute, searching, and then turned away. "Maybe you were right to pass it on, then. At least she still has some hope."

Adrian had never felt more alone.

3

Angela ducked into the hair tent without triggering any alarms, but when she motioned Candy out, the female in the chair knew there was a problem.

Angela slid into the second seat and swiveled it around. She leaned back and folded her hands across her lap. "Let's you and I have a talk."

Tracy slowly took the hair cover from around her neck. “Okay.”

Angela studied her, openly scanning for the information she wanted.

Tracy brought up the wall that Charlie had taught her, but she wasn’t sure how much of it she’d covered.

“Interesting.”

Tracy flushed at the sarcastic tone. “It isn’t what it looks like.”

“It looks like you two have been sneaking around and enjoying it. Making Kenn pay has grown into something else.”

Tracy was quick to deny. “That was all me. Charlie doesn’t know I’ve still been doing it.”

“Why would you?”

Tracy looked away. “For what he’s done. He deserves to pay more.”

Now knowing how Charlie had convinced her, Angela continued. “What are your intentions toward my son? Is he an easy way into the chain of command?”

Tracy was horrified. “No! We’re friends!”

“And when he pushes you for more?”

Tracy lied. “He won’t do that.”

“He is below the age limit for another four months. I will not be lenient.”

Tracy realized she wasn’t being told to stay away, that she wasn’t good enough, and took hope. But she needed to hear it. “What about when he reaches the age limit?”

Angela swallowed the disgusted motherly anger. “It has to be his choice, his idea. Otherwise, everyone will assume you’re with him for the chance at power.”

“But you’d know differently, wouldn’t you?”

Angela didn’t like to admit that the start of a real bond was already glowing brightly in Tracy’s heart. “Yes, but if you break the rules, that won’t matter. Unlike Jennifer and Becky, my son hasn’t been abused that way. If you want him, you’ll wait for him. When it comes to Charlie, you only get one mistake.”

“And then you have me banished.”

“No. Charlie will. You’ve already figured out how determined he is, and he promised you things that only he can deliver, right?”

Tracy didn’t answer; she didn’t need to.

“Once you hurt him, he’ll bring down a wall and never let you in again. Be sure, Tracy. Friendship might be better for both of you.”

Instead of continuing to deny it, Tracy chose to offer what so few would-be daughters-in-law refused to give—the truth. “I don’t want to feel anything for him. I don’t understand it. I have access to power in a lot of ways, but your son is the one who doesn’t make me feel dirty.” Tracy made a face absently. “If I could be sure it’ll stay that way, I’d already have asked for your permission to date him come October.”

Angela liked the courage it took to admit that, but she didn’t let Tracy off the hook. “Don’t use him

as a test dummy, either. He'll be willing, but I'll shut it down. You make that choice long before it ever goes past friendship."

"I will. After the way he's stalking Kenn, I refuse to get on that side of him."

Wise, Angela knew Charlie would be more ruthless than Marc in time. She hated that, but this new world would demand it in exchange for survival.

"I can stay away until he's legal...if you'd rather."

Angela didn't hesitate. She could only interfere so much and then she would have problems with Charlie. "He'll make his own choices on who he wants to spend time with. You be sure those moments don't cross a line and I won't stand in his way."

"Thank..."

Charlie ducked into the tent, face angry.

Both females braced for his reaction.

"Matt's cornered near the supply trucks. It's Timmy and Mike again."

Angela left the tent at a fast clip, keying her mike. "Cynthia to the supply trucks."

Charlie quickly caught up. "What can I do?"

Angela sighed. "Go lie to Tracy—tell her you didn't overhear any of that so she'll quit stressing about you having the upper hand. I need her mind in the plans our team is working on."

Charlie grinned, running back the way they'd come.

Angela sighed in resignation. *What will those family gatherings be like?* She snorted at herself and waved Kevin over. They had to live until then to worry about it.

It's under control, Marc sent. *Matt ran off.*

Angela didn't change her direction. The plans she'd made for Zack's future criminals would start now.

Before Angela got to the supply trucks, the fog bank reached the tents and enveloped her in feathery gray wisps.

Her protection stayed close.

Angela felt them on her heels, but the presence in front of her made her pause. She didn't know them... "Who is that?"

"It's Chris. We've got more trouble with the animals."

Almost instantly, Angela felt the familiar vibe of the vet and followed him to the animal area, spotting the issues. Cages were empty, feathers and blood littered the grass, and the wolf was standing protectively in front of the remaining pens.

"Someone or something broke in and took the animals we've been using for food. Even the cows were turned out."

Angela frowned. "Someone or something?"

The vet studied their perimeter, where the ant colony was beginning to pour from their hills. "We were raided."

Angela took stock again, trying to view it the way Marc and Adrian would.

The cages weren't turned over, implying a person. The wolf wasn't glaring at their perimeter. He was observing the vet.

"What happened here?" Kyle came to her side.

Angela saw the vet flinch and revised her suspicions. The vet was too timid to be a part of this. "We don't know. He thinks it was the ants. I think someone in camp is a serious vegetarian."

Shawn joined them. "Where'd all the blood come from?"

Angela added the clues. "Open cages don't mean all the animals fled. We had a predator come in after they were opened."

"Some PETA plan." Marc gestured to the nearest Eagle. "Call in a crew and clean it up. We'll secure new animals while we're here."

Angela glanced at Dog. *Is there something I need to know about the vet?*

The wolf stared at her in concern. *His mind is closed to me.*

Angela sighed. *Same here. I'll put him under watch after this is settled and we're back to normal.*

You mean when Adrian once again runs the herd?

Yes. Angela headed back into the main camp. I don't want this job. It's too heavy for my shoulders.

Dog stared as she faded into the fog. *But you're their last line now. He'll never fit that role alone again.*

“Why are my boys in a QZ tent with their shit packed?”

Zack’s question was upset enough to bring guards closer.

“Because I want them to think they’re being sent out of Safe Haven.”

Zack did what few of them had expected. He admitted his shame. “I ain’t done right by them.”

Angela wasn’t able to have mercy. “We’ve let them off the hook too many times. Matt’s violent reactions have endangered the camp, and your boys are responsible for a good portion of his misery.”

Zack tried to explain. “They miss their mom and—”

“If you can’t change their behavior, they can’t stay. It’s that simple.”

“I’ll get them in line. Quickly.”

Angela studied him as if she didn’t have much faith. “Not yet. *I* get them first.”

Zack swallowed a protest. Angela wouldn’t hurt his sons. “Whatever it takes to clean this up. They need to be here.”

“I agree.” Angela waved a hand toward the flap. “Make them think they’re leaving—without you. We’ll start there.”

Zack didn’t want to grin, but he couldn’t help it. That threat alone would keep them in line for a while. Controlling his sons had never been a priority, but Zack now realized what they did would

also hurt his place here, not just his own actions.
“It’ll work. I’ll make it happen.”

Angela didn’t doubt it. Zack was part of their core team now. He wouldn’t give that up lightly.

5

“It’s windy.” Samantha didn’t open her eyes.
“Someone close the flap.”

Neil forced himself into alertness first, looking at the doorway.

“It is closed.” He turned his head to check on Samantha; he began kicking Jeremy, unable to speak.

“What?” Jeremy grudgingly rose up to find out why he was being abused

“Must be a hole.” Samantha stretched gingerly. It was too bright to even consider peeking.

“Sam!” Neil slid back against the tent wall. Jeremy followed his lead, both keeping their hands up in defense.

Samantha stared in amazement at the tent, at the dozen objects whirling around in the air. Pencils, a notebook, her knife, all spun by in a blur of activity as she realized where it was coming from.

“I’m doing this...”

Neil ducked the notebook and knocked the sheathed knife out of the air before it hit his face.
“We noticed.”

The pages fluttered, some ripping as the notebook picked up that blurry spin and began flying again.

The pencil smacked against Jeremy's wrist as he blocked. "Can you shut it down?"

Neil grunted. "Close the flap!"

Samantha concentrated; the objects stopped spinning all at once. They thumped to the canvas.

Samantha giggled happily as the men relaxed from their defensive positions.

Neil studied her warily. "You're better?"

Samantha did a fast evaluation of herself. "Other than the headache." She grimaced. "There's still some burning, too. It must not be over yet."

Both men scowled, exchanging glances as they stood up and began gathering the fallen objects.

Samantha raised her hand. A sharp blast of wind ripped the notebook from Neil's grip. Papers floated over the floor as Samantha's laughter rang out. "This is great!"

Her men couldn't resist her happiness, smiling.

Samantha began blasting things around.

Neil ducked again, going for the flap. "I'll stand guard."

Jeremy dodged the knife and took a hairbrush to the hip. "Wait, I'll help."

Behind them, Samantha let herself go. The tent came alive with spinning, whirling objects that slammed against the canvas walls.

Neil gave a polite nod to the camp members who were being drawn. He took a place near the flap.

Jeremy smiled at a group of women going by. “She’s having a rough afternoon.”

Samantha’s cackle echoed from inside the tent.

The women all raised a brow, mouths opening.

Neil scrambled for an excuse. “PMS.”

Hilda motioned the females to keep going. “That’s not how I remember it.”

The thumps continued, getting harder and louder, but it was impossible not to feel content as the men listened to her explore the new gift.

Samantha came from the tent a bit later. “I’m hitting the shower. You think there’s anyone there now?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Samantha ignored their simultaneous, concerned answers. “Good. I’ll be recharged by the time we make it through the line.”

“Recharged?” Neil took her right side.

“I ran out.” Samantha enjoyed the sunlight even as it made her headache worse. “It appears to be refilling on its own.”

Neil instructed Jeremy to make a report.

Samantha barely noticed when he left. She now had the power of wind. That would be a tremendous help when the government came.

“Samantha Moore?”

Time once again slowed as Samantha placed the voice and fate began laughing.

Shellie Mathews. Fellow Predictor. Also had a pass. Was out sick on D-day.

“Is that you, Sam?”

People stopped to observe the expected happy reunion as Samantha clutched at Neil’s wrist in a vise-like grip. *I thought I was safe! I’m supposed to be safe now!*

“What?” Neil demanded lowly. Her face and body language were complete panic.

“It is you, Sam!” Shellie enveloped Samantha in a vigorous hug that ripped Neil from her grip. “It’s so good to see you!”

Neil tried to get back to Samantha’s side before she bolted—he read it on her face—but the new woman hadn’t stopped the running diatribe of surprised recognition.

“I thought I saw you. You can’t imagine my shock. I mean, no one else made it from our office in Seattle...”

Samantha started to turn away from the crowd, self-preservation screaming *run, now!*

“I came in late and saw you get on the chopper, and thought you’d never come back above ground. How are you here with everyone else, when you had a pass?”

“...*had a pass.*”

Voices blurred into chaos that Neil had no idea how to control.

“Sam had a pass!”

“She was government.”

“She’ll bring them here. We know they survived.”

“She’s a spy!”

“Kill her!”

6

“Get in there!” Marc shoved people aside to reach them.

“She’s government!”

“Get her!”

Neil fired into the air, taking blows to keep them from Sam, but he was ignored. They knew he wouldn’t shoot unarmed camp members.

Marc’s Colt crashed; the mob paused. A few even fled, sure of the retribution that was coming.

Marc instantly understood why Angela had let Kenn push him into killing the snake women.

The Eagles hurried in to form a tight circle around Neil and Samantha, who was cowering behind him. This was her nightmare come true.

Marc faced the mob. “She escaped the draft, like many of you!”

“She’s government!”

“So am I! So is Adrian, and Kenn! We all had passes to NORAD and chose to be here instead.”

That wasn’t true, but few of them would be able to disprove it.

“Tell them, Sam!” Neil hissed. “Let them in or they’ll kill us.”

Samantha met Angela's stern gaze over the mob that had grown to include half the camp. In that one look, Samantha read no surprise and no mercy.

"The chopper went down after they forced me on at gunpoint. It went down in Wyoming and I was...captured by two brothers. I killed them to get away." Sam's voice lowered. "I didn't want to, but they had me chained..." She stopped, tears falling thickly.

Neil hid her in his arms.

Samantha sobbed. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Marc followed Angela's silent instructions.

"For surviving."

Marc frowned. "Don't regret that. You've saved this camp with your skills. We would have all died in Nebraska if not for you."

"Because of Adrian." Samantha sniffed. "He knew I wanted to help my country, not her killers."

Marc glared at the mob that had calmed enough to almost be considered an angry group now. "We've always trusted her and she's always helped us. Adrian brought her in. He's not wrong."

"But she hid it!"

"Where is Adrian?"

"Why isn't Adrian running this camp?"

"Yeah! Why hasn't he taken back over?"

"Where is he?!"

Marc waved a hand. "Behind you, of course. Where he always is."

The crowd parted to let Adrian's wheelchair through. More of the anger was diffused by the way he eagerly greeted and shook hands with people, pushing out happiness the entire time. It wasn't what they'd come to expect from their leader when they broke the rules.

Adrian peered over his shoulder, finding Angela. When she silently ordered it, he began to speak. "We have a problem, a serious one."

"She ain't hurt!" someone pointed out.

Adrian snorted, grimacing at the pain. "Samantha is not the problem."

"You okay?"

"What is it?"

Adrian slowly lifted his shirt to reveal the wound. "No, I'm not all right."

They gasped and groaned at the sight of the ugly wound that appeared worse than it was due to not changing the bandage for a full day. "I'm not fit for duty, of any kind, until this heals." Adrian lowered his shirt, voice grave. "But that isn't our problem, either."

Adrian again looked over his shoulder, terrified of spooking the herd.

She's ready. Marc glared. *Do it now.*

Adrian instinctively brought up the shield in his mind at the evidence of Marc's growing power. "The government did survive, at least one bunker that we know of." His voice rose over the instant shock. "They're coming for me."

Chaos took over, people shouting and shoving. Angela quickly brought the shield up. The bubble becoming visible made most of the mob start searching for the trouble.

Angela flanked Adrian, listening hard. “Everyone hit the ground!”

The Eagles, who knew better than to doubt her by now, fell to the grass, pulling those closest with them. Some of the camp followed, but most of them stared without comprehension.

“Get down, you idiots!” Angela snapped to those closest. People slowly began lying on the ground.

Angela held up a hand. “Now wait.”

It was a long moment where all the magic users pushed calm over the prone camp.

Angela slowly lowered the shield. “It’s ours, stand down.”

Radios crackled an instant later. “The last team is back with bodies. Someone killed Tucker and Anderson.”

The crowd immediately assumed the worst.

“It was Kyle!”

“Yeah, we saw them fighting.”

“No, it’s the soldiers!”

“They are coming!”

“We’ve got to hide!”

“I’m going to the mountains!”

“I’m staying!”

“So am I. Let them come!”

“We can’t fight the government!”

“Yes, we can!” Angela sent it loudly, in both oral and mental waves that stunned the crowd. She stared at them, searching without moving. This was the worst time, when they might stampede and catch all of the descendants in the panic. “I helped John. I helped Marc. And I’ve helped you.” She began picking them out visually and mentally.

Peggy stood up. “She was sent to protect Safe Haven. I’ve told you that. So has Hilda.”

Anne added her voice. “With her help, we can fight.”

“Don’t forget us.” Theo stood in the rear of the crowd that was slowly getting to their feet.

“We’ve been working on some things, under Angela’s direction.” Theo waved at the other four to come forward. “This runs on solar power. It doesn’t fire rapidly, but it uses the heat it absorbs to emit a larger charge.”

Two of the weapons men hefted the big device onto a nearby can, while the other two cleared a line of fire.

Curious, the rest of the crowd got to its feet and everyone moved back a little, allowing Theo and his team to show them what they’d made.

“You aim here, fire, and duck the debris. Simple.” He waved at Angela. “You try it.”

Angela leered like no one was staring at her as if she was from another planet. “Cool, new toys!”

A small titter ran through the crowd; she subtly shook her head at Marc when he would have come to her side.

Angela aimed the small rod at a far tree and hit the red switch. Nothing, for a second or two, and then the top branches of the moldy tree exploded into wooden shrapnel that showered over the camp.

“Damn!” she complained and admired at the same time. “Someone grab the medical kits so I can tend those injuries while we keep talking.”

To many people’s surprise, she was obeyed without argument.

Angela waved at Marc. “Give them an idea of some of the things we’ve come up with. When we’re done, if they still want to run and hide, they can. Tell them *all* of it.”

Marc frowned, but did as he was told.

The list of weapons that Marc rolled out was extensive. Theo and his team added a few that they were still working on. It was impressive, but not enough.

Angela found Sam in the crowd, where some of the people were apologizing, but some were staring. “Samantha’s like me.”

The crowd around Sam split up, fading back into the larger group.

Samantha’s face broke at the betrayal.

Angela made sure everyone heard her. “That’s why the government is coming. They’ve found out we’re here and they want us under their control. It’s not for you. Each person here can flee and leave us to face them alone. That’s your choice.” She stared around pointedly. “Though, we would never do that to you.”

“What do you mean, she’s like you?” Jerry Jones asked. Since Roger’s death, the former Marine had become the leading voice of opposition.

“Exactly what I said, though she and I aren’t the only ones. There are more of us.” Her eyes glowed, but only enough to lighten them, not to let the red bleed through. “A lot of us, even.”

That sent fear running through the more timid, but the aggressive survivors that had managed to make it to Safe Haven also saw the opportunity.

“We are going to fight them when they come for Adrian. I won’t let him be taken. I’ll die first.”

There was no doubting her claim and no one was foolish enough to think that Marc would be able to change her mind.

“What if we...broke into smaller camps, hid from them?” someone asked.

“Until when?” Angela perched on the edge of a table that had been cleaned. “And where will you go? We’ve seen the camps others form. There is no place like our Safe Haven.” She glanced around. “You are the chosen people, and we are your defenders. It’s up to you to accept that gift. If not, go. There are other groups out there who can come together and do what has to be done.”

Adrian tried to get them to see reason. “We’ve always put the camp first. We would never lead you into a slaughter.”

“We’ll have plans in place to evacuate if the tide turns against us, but I don’t think we’ll need them.”

Marc set up the next part. “If we win one big battle, I believe we’ll be free.”

“How do you figure that?” Jones demanded, but even his voice held more interest than scorn.

“There’s only one bunker, only so many men. If we win one big fight, we might weaken them so badly that they can’t come up and be a problem.”

Angela’s voice rose. “After one battle, we might outnumber them. And then *we* make the rules.”

“And what will those rules be?” Hilda asked. “We don’t like the ends that were used to achieve this.”

Angela didn’t back off. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep us alive and if that doesn’t work for you or anyone else, I wish you luck as you leave. We’ll send you out with a few days’ supplies if you choose to run, but that’s it. We’ll need the rest to care for the people who stay and fight with us.”

Angela motioned Kenn forward. “We printed ballots for this. It was too big of a choice to make alone. We’d planned to handle it at the monthly meeting tonight, but now works just as well.”

Kenn started passing around the slips of paper and small pencils.

Angela kept working on them while the other descendants pushed out calm obedience in mental waves that should have drowned them all.

“Before we vote, I want you to hear the plan. Nearly every member of Adrian’s army helped with it.” Angela settled on the ground, showing that she didn’t fear them, though they clearly did her. The

hints had been enough. They'd observed too much over the last months to misunderstand.

She used her knife to draw in the dirt; as the crowd passed the details to those who were further away, the bubble glowing around them became a soothing blue.

Angela pointed at a place on her wide diagram. "We left a fake body for them here. They should find it in the next five days. They won't know it isn't Adrian until they get it back to their bunker for testing. That's another two weeks. Then, they have to get troops together and make it here from Utah. Another two or three weeks." She looked round at the relaxing faces, the scared and defiant murmurers. "We'll have a month, bare minimum, before they get here."

"What then?" Zack was starting to get excited. Fear of the government returning and taking control of them had been on everyone's mind this week, thanks to camp gossip.

Angela marked an area on her map and then slammed the blade into it. "That's where we need to be when they come. We'll start preparing over the next few days, stock up on food, water, and fuel, then get to those mountains and set the biggest ambush the new world has seen." She pointed to an area far away from the battle zone. "This is where we'll start hitting them. Teams will go out to pick them off, so that by the time they make it to our chosen place, there will be less than half of whatever they originally send out."

Angela looked up at them, no longer pushing anything but the truth. “They want us because they know you guys are also survivors. Survivors who loathe them. They want our protection—from you, and our gifts, to control *you*. We chose to stand with the people they betrayed, the citizens they gunned down, the families of the draft. With *you*.”

Samantha reluctantly accepted her new role in the camp, moving to her team leader’s side. “We were born this way. We didn’t know why until we came to Safe Haven.”

Angela accepted the hand up from the ground, and gave Samantha a nod to continue.

She did. “We don’t like being different, but at least now we know why we are. We were born into this time and place to protect you, to make sure America survives.”

“Not only survives.” Angela sheathed her knife. “We have to change it. The old world can never be allowed to restart. All the killing and greed, the ignorance of the government to the plight of the people. We have to stand against them. If we don’t, no one else will.”

“They’ll run this country again if we don’t fight.” Marc waved. “And that means they’ll take you for the draft, for experimentation and studies, and for labor.”

“As long as you remain with us, we’ll defend you. But you have to fight for yourselves, as well. We can’t do it alone.” Angela gave them a minute

to think, judging the mood, deciding how much more they needed.

A little push, Adrian advised. *Careful, but hard.*

Angela gestured to one of the Eagles. He quickly escorted someone to her side.

“This is Adrian’s son.” Angela put her hand on his wrist in comfort. “They had him and a group of kids locked up in Arkansas, kids like him and Charlie. One of them got a call out and Adrian went in. It was a trap, as you’ve heard. What you weren’t told is that the Major and his men killed the other kids—slit their throats. The government hasn’t changed.”

“...we have.”

Angela smiled gently at Becky, thinking she appeared happy on Seth’s arm. “Yes, we have. We no longer live by their rules. We honor Adrian’s dreams for the future.”

Feeling time slow, Angela took a breath and spoke the words from her dream, the ones that would trigger the final scene. “All that can sink us is a traitor contacting them. If that happens, we’re all dead. Please, if you leave, hold our secrets.”

Angela could feel the anger coming, the sense of togetherness that a rebellion instills, and then the radio crackled right on schedule.

“Too late, witch! I already called!”

Matt’s horrible laughter floated over every active radio in menacing taunts. “They know it’s a fake body. They turned the team around. Safe Haven won’t exist in a month.”

“Find him!” Marc’s growl of rage triggered the camp into a panicked frenzy of searching that began ripping down tents, scattering supplies, and turning out vehicles.

Angela let them go, sure Matt wasn’t in camp anymore. He’d made his own plans. Angela hoped some of them included future survival for him and his father. Mitch wouldn’t know how to provide food if a deer came and sat in his lap. “Pass the word. It doesn’t change anything. We still have four weeks.”

Kevin scowled. “They’re pissed. If they find Matt, they’ll kill him.”

Angela didn’t feel the need to act as if she was as shocked and angry as they were. “Traitors get what they deserve in this camp. Sometimes it just takes a while.”

“What if he was lying, trying to...”

Kevin knew by her look that wasn’t the case. Matt had called the government. In roughly four weeks, the battle would start.

7

“Raven! QZ!”

Angela responded to that panicked call the same way Adrian would have. “Lock us down, check in, full team to the QZ.” Angela waved to the men running alongside her.

The men on the QZ directed her to the medical camper, where John had been working on a batch of relief drinks for their cancer patients.

Angela climbed tiredly into the tin can to find Millie on the floor between two bloody bodies.

The girl glanced up in panic. “He fell and she tried to help... What do I do?!”

Angela noted John’s breathing was steady and went to Jennifer. Blood was pooled around her legs and the amount was too much to hope that it could be stopped. “Get Kyle. She’s having them now.”

“Now?”

“Get going!” Angela barked, sliding over to allow Marc room to help. “Put her in the recliner.”

They got Jennifer into the plush chair as she began to moan.

“Jennifer? Wake up, honey. You have to help.”

Jennifer’s lids opened; her face clenched in pain. “It hurts!”

“I know.” Angela removed clothing as Eagles closed the door behind Anne.

It opened a few seconds later. Kyle flew inside. “Jenny?!” His voice was panicked.

Angela grabbed his arm. *Keep her calm or get out!*

Kyle nodded curtly and took the stool on Jennifer’s left.

“Here we go again.” Jennifer’s hands cradled her enormous belly. “Stop and start. These kids are gonna be...Ahh!”

Angela injected Jennifer's arm, not responding to Kyle's concern. She had her hands full with the girl and there was still the unconscious man waiting on the floor behind her.

Chapter Eleven

All That Planning

1

A lone wail of life split the tense air, pathetically weak.

Behind it, came a mother's scream of denial.

But is it the good one or the evil? Marc's demon was cuddled with Angela's witch in their mental hideaway.

That has not been revealed.

The demon chuckled, staring at her.

The witch held still. It was something he was prone to do for long minutes. After so much solitude, she understood. Not being alone anymore felt strange.

Why do you come here?

The witch made the air around them snap with flames. *Teaching, learning, enjoying. Many things.*

Marc's demon reached out and took a hold of her arm. *How do I gain his trust, so he'll let me roam the way she does you?*

The witch smirked, soul-searching orbs lighting up. *Would you like me to coach you on that? I'd have to stay close.*

The demon swallowed thickly at the images. *I have no problem with it.*

The witch cackled. *Your master will. Marc hates me.*

The demon agreed reluctantly. *Just stay in the rear. I'll work on him.*

Marc waited by the camper door, worry growing. He knew Angela would be a wreck when she came out. Word had already gotten around.

“Is she okay?”

Marc stiffened. “If she isn’t, I’ll handle it.”

Adrian sighed, moving by him. “Yes, I’m sure you will. Where’s Conner?”

“With John. She asked him to help.”

Adrian didn’t argue. It’s what he would have done.

Marc watched Adrian until he and Kenn vanished into the shower campers, and then turned his back to them to keep from glowering through the window. *How I hate that man!*

The medical door opened. Angela stumbled out, looking ten years older. “Need sleep.”

Down to words instead of sentences. Not good. Marc swept her into his arms and went to their tent. She began drawing from him the instant her arms went around his neck.

2

Adrian stared out the window, ignoring Kenn’s meaningless chatter as he got things ready. The pain

of constantly being turned away was enough to choke on. He wasn't going to do it much longer.

“You ready?”

Adrian began stripping. It was his first shower since before going into Little Rock and he'd been looking forward to it. “Make it hot. I want to sweat some of this shit out.”

Kenn adjusted the water and began laying out rags and small bottles. As he worked, he kept his mouth shut this time, sensing his boss was working on something.

Adrian appreciated the quiet. He had a lot to consider. For the first time since Las Vegas, he didn't have to think about the herd first, but he still was. He needed to get into that bunker and kill whoever was in charge. Once that happened, Safe Haven would be free. Angela's plan didn't account for the return to their homeland—probably because she wasn't expecting to make one, but Adrian had already seen parts of that surreal time too. They would be gone for years, but eventually, this would become their home again. “Angela will see to that.”

Kenn frowned. Everything about Adrian said Angela's assessment was right. The real boss was planning to sacrifice himself for the good of the herd. Getting in and killing The Man was a great idea, but someone had to be left here, to lead, and even if she was hard enough, Angela didn't want the job. Adrian had to stay. Someone else would have to die in his place and to Kenn, it didn't matter who.

“Come on, boy!”

Matt groaned as his arm was yanked, stumbling to his feet. He’d passed out in a small cave around dawn and now felt like hell. “Where are we going?”

“To make a call.” Mitch had found Matt’s hiding place easily enough now that he wasn’t drinking anymore, and grabbed the boy before the Eagles came.

“Who we calling?” Matt tried to keep up as they struggled to the top of the incline.

“The government, of course. They need more details and we need a ride.”

Matt didn’t argue. He’d gotten through on the truck CB, using the new channel he’d learned in the Jr. Eagles, but he hadn’t asked for anything from the man who’d answered. He’d just wanted to expose Angela and those like her so that Kevin would be taken away. Now an outcast, Matt wished he’d asked for protection.

“A little quicker, boy. We can’t be up here in plain sight for long. One of the snipers will pick us off.”

Matt shivered. “What have I done?”

Mitch grunted, out of breath, but clear headed and hopeful. “You freed us, boy.” Mitch tugged his son closer, helping the hungover teenager along. “Wish I’d done it.”

The fireworks were a mixed bag of emotions as they began. It drew the usual appreciation, but it also brought memories that people didn't want to face and caused moments of tension. The expected musical accompaniment also stirred them up, and the Eagles observed people drinking and dancing in concern. Three hundred of them could do a lot of damage if things got out of control. What concerned them most were the conversations taking place. Some were openly against fighting the soldiers, while a few more were trying to gather people to leave with and form their own group.

"We're losing people." Rusty directed Seth's attention to the parking area. "We're light two cars now."

Seth scowled, but didn't call it in. They had orders not to stop anyone from leaving.

"We'll be short twenty come dawn if she doesn't do something." Rusty watched a small group go to their tents with furtive glances at the Eagles and Angela. He had loved his time on Seth's team and would do anything to keep it from ending.

"More than that. Some of the men won't come back."

"Eagles?" Rusty was furious.

"Self-preservation will thin the herd. That's why we're not under orders to stop them." Seth sighed. "She's lightening our load for the move and for the battle."

“She’s also protecting the chain of command.” Kenn walked by, thrilled to finally rate his own shadow. “All of us have guards tonight. She’s worried. Watch your six.”

Kenn continued on his rounds as the men indicated they would. The mood was tense and a bedtime story was only going to do so much. If Angela wanted to keep this camp together, she’d better do something by tomorrow at the latest. After that, half the camp would flee.

5

“Can you take over the Kai lessons for a while?”

Jeff tore his eyes away from the group of females working out on the other side of the training tent. “Yeah, uh, sure.”

Neil slapped him on the arm, grinning. “Get to enjoy that ride yet?”

Jeff scowled. “I didn’t ask her out.”

Neil guessed what had happened next. “She went out with someone else.”

“Yes. He’s staring at her.”

Neil did a casual sweep and found three men paying attention to the dirty, sweaty women on Angela’s team. Marc, Adrian, and Zack.

Neil was surprised. “I thought he hated women.”

Jeff huffed angrily. “He changed, Neil, you know that. What matters is that she wasn’t bluffing.”

Neil snorted. “You thought she was? Oh, man, were you wrong.”

“No shit.”

Neil spent a moment thinking. “How many times have they gone out?”

“Twice.”

“She’s still fair game. Go over right now and offer to cook her a hot meal tonight.”

Jeff started to say he couldn’t do that, and then grunted. “What the hell. It’ll put an end to it, at least.”

“Exactly. You’ll know where you stand.”

Jeff walked toward the women who were doing pushups, eyes glued to Crista’s dirty ass. “I can do this. It’s going to go well. Relax and pay attention. You know how she stuns you sometimes.”

Neil listened to Jeff’s instructions to himself, shaking his head. The Eagle hadn’t figured out what he and Jeremy, and many of the others here, already knew. Love and lust made the rules. The best a person could hope for was a balance of the two that didn’t smother everything else.

Crista tensed at the Eagle moving her way, stumbling. It broke the groove.

“Take a five!” Cynthia had guessed what was about to happen.

Crista knew Jeff was annoyed by her dates, but she didn’t think it would come to anything. Over the last weeks, she’d discovered that Jeff was as stubborn as she was. *Guess he doesn’t like me.*

“Got any use for a hot meal?”

Crista looked around, sure he was talking to someone else.

Jeff stiffened when she acted like she was too good to talk to him. “What?”

“I’m not sure what’s going on.” Crista glared. “You haven’t spoken to me in a week.”

Jeff sighed. He was still learning how to be around people again. Even before the war, he’d isolated himself. “I’d like to make you breakfast.”

Crista wiped at sweat self-consciously. “What?”
“What, what?”

Crista snickered. “You are so bad at this.”

Jeff’s face reddened.

She smoothly slid in front of him before he could stomp off. “What are you making me for breakfast?”

Jeff stared into those mischievous brown eyes, drowning. “What do you like?”

Crista groaned. “Anything other than fish.”

Jeff chuckled with her, watching the sun light up her skin. “I can do that.”

“Two minutes, ladies!” Cynthia called impatiently.

Jeff unconsciously leaned closer. “In the morning?”

Crista denied him regretfully. “I’m on duty or have classes for the next twelve hours. Dinner would work better.”

Jeff caught sight of Zack’s stunned face. “What will you tell him?”

Crista smiled, taking his breath. Jeff barely heard her answer. “Nothing. I belong to me.”

6

“I want three teams sent out the day after tomorrow. We have to have everything on these lists.” Angela handed Kenn the paper. “Let Marc know who you pick to go on which run. He has final approval.”

Kenn put the paper into his book and added a note. “Are you okay? You look...”

“Rough?” Angela supplied tiredly.

“I’m asking because that strip of gray in your hair is almost white. It’s so bright you look like you’re wearing a glow necklace.”

Angela sighed. “That explains why they were all staring at me, but I can’t worry about it now. You’ll take care of the supplies? We can’t win without the things on those lists.”

Kenn patted his notebook. “I’ve got it covered. We’ll bring in camp labor and teach them to protect us while we gather what we need. It’ll make them feel important.”

They are important, Angela thought, but didn’t correct the Marine. He was only capable of so much change at one time, as were they all, and he’d given her a confirmation of her plan without realizing it. “Get the kids ready for a lesson tomorrow. I want them to spend time with the ants again.”

Kenn didn't think Marc would protest like he had a little while ago. After everything else they were risking, it was little by comparison. The kids were in the training tent now, busy working. They'd begun with the odd instruction of finding ways to make friends with the ants so they could be trained; the kids hadn't stopped yet.

Marc had come up with a brilliant way of feeding the ants and training them to stay on the west side of Safe Haven's perimeter. It kept them from losing tires to rugged ant holes, but more, it gave them a warning on that side of the sprawling camp. The ants were becoming more and more vocal with each passing day. Whenever there was a problem, the guards knew. Marc was able to keep them in one area by having the garbage dumped there. It gave the ants exactly what they wanted, and when there wasn't much garbage, the Eagles went to a nearby town and dug some up.

The Jr. Eagle lesson time had been up for a while. Occasionally a guard would peek inside to make sure everything was okay or to deliver a snack. Some of the senior men realized Angela was keeping them occupied, but a few of the smarter among the camp also thought she was using them at the same time. It's what Adrian would do. Some of Safe Haven's Eagles had recognized that pattern in her choices.

"We found prints." Daryl spoke to Angela. "We know where they're hiding."

Angela's voice was eerie. "Justice will come to them through other means."

"But the camp..."

"Will get to witness it." Angela turned around.

Marc was standing behind her, waiting in the shadows until she was ready to be confronted; Angela heaved a sigh of relief. It could be over now.

Marc, seeing firsthand how smart she was, had already concluded that she was dangerous. Until today, however, he still hadn't been able to see her as a monster in any way. That had changed.

She motioned the others back and went to him.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd already seen this coming?"

"Because there was a plan on the list that I didn't show to anyone. It's the plan I decided to go with."

"What?"

Angela pulled up the exact words she'd written. "Option E. Force one showdown that requires the enemy to stock up and call in men before they can attack. Make them scared and jumpy along the way, wear them down and then wipe them out. Their numbers will be decimated, camp morale will soar, fighters will come in, and Safe Haven will be free to live and grow as we please."

"Not many men here could lead a team to do all that..." Marc's mind placed clues.

Angela's hands clenched into fists. "*You* could."

Marc realized all at once that he'd been toughened up for this moment, that she'd planned it

all. “Why would you do that? Why would you turn me into a killer of women?”

“She was concerned that there was only Kenn to handle such a threat.” Kyle didn’t want her to take all the heat. “I learned to get over my own revulsion to fill a slot on that doomed team, but if only two Eagles can do it, it’s only enough if...”

“Those men are lethal.” Marc scowled. She’d done it on purpose, to tempt him into giving into his harsher nature.

Wake up! his demon growled. *She did it to expose me. She wants me to kill for her.*

Kenn snorted “You’re a bad-ass, Marc, one of the few truly dangerous men still alive. She did it because Safe Haven needs you.”

“It’s done now, either way.” Angela didn’t hide her cool tone. “I suggest we look at it from their side.”

Kenn did just that. “It’s been seven long months for them, too. One bunker may hold enough food and water to sustain a large population, but I’d bet they were overcapacity with all those draftees and their family members slipping in and out. The food is running low, fights are starting, and those in charge know they’ll lose control unless topside is reclaimed. So they sent out a couple patrols to recon whatever they could find.”

“And what they found, was Adrian.”

“Yes. They heard the calls the same as the others out in this apocalyptic nightmare. They knew the Major was waiting for him, so it didn’t make

sense to waste men and supplies chasing him. But then he escaped. They probably already knew that from the Major's silence. They could stay to their side, but they won't."

Marc scowled. "Why not?"

"Because they need our gifts, but also because I challenged them." Angela lifted her chin. "I drew a line in the sand and dared them to cross it."

"Why?!"

Zack and the other Eagles waited for her to blow Marc off or blame something else, but Angela didn't. All the lies would be cleared now. "Everyone assumed the troops would come for Adrian as soon as they discovered the Major's death. I assumed the opposite. And if they didn't come immediately, what would they do?"

Kenn answered. "Stock up and get ready."

"Exactly. Adrian has been training me as a...well, a contingency analyst, I suppose. I examine the other side of the theory and on this one, I saw them coming for us right as we settled into the mountains for winter." Angela sent the image of a crippling explosion through the tent, the one from her dreams. "We would have lost almost everyone. I had to stop that, anyway I could."

"What did you do, Angie?"

She met Marc's eye without guilt showing, but inside, there was enough to drown her. "I gave up two of Safe Haven's useless members and a few of the cowards who will slip off into the night while we prepare. I triggered the fight."

“You did what?”

“I gave them Mitch and Matt,” Angela repeated tonelessly. “And I manipulated you into helping.”

“Yes, you did.”

Angela sighed grimly, but didn’t apologize. “Matt was going to hit us, either way. I delayed that hit, and then used it for our greater good.”

“What?”

“An attack, Marc, like with the balloon fumes. He was going to try to kill us all again, including himself. The only way I could have stopped it was to have him removed.”

“And you couldn’t do that.”

“No. He had to prove the future. I had to know for sure that he was a threat. When I understood he wasn’t going to be changed, I made plans based around it.”

“And Mitch?”

“He was never going to quit or change either. We delayed it so that Matt wouldn’t be alone in the end.”

“You set it all up!”

“Yes. I chose to sacrifice them to keep the camp alive and strong.”

“But they’re coming in force now, Angie!” Marc argued lowly. “Matt told them we were gearing up for a war and they’re coming in force to wipe us out. What have you done?”

“I gave us a chance! We’ll get one shot now, where there wasn’t one before.”

“They’ll come in force.”

“Yes, instead of tormenting us for the next decade or trapping us in the mountains when we’re unprepared. One fight for our freedom, one long, bloody battle instead of hundreds.”

There was silence for a moment where all of them realized she was right.

“What matters is *how* they’ll come. Air or ground?”

Marc’s military mind was dragged into that against his will. He sighed heavily. “Give me a minute.”

Marc went to the far corner of the tent, staring at a corner in concentration.

Angela breathed a small sigh of relief. She’d expected this scene to be worse, but none of it mattered if he gave the wrong answer.

When Marc started to speak, all low conversations stopped.

“With all the extra bodies from the draft, they would have been short on space, which means short on standard equipment. Planes and tanks outside, under canopies. Those are now useless due to looting, weather, fuel and parts shortages. A full battalion after they hear Matt’s details on the Eagles and people here...” Marc turned to the tense faces. “Ground. They can’t transport that many men to an unsecured airstrip. Too much gas and too many unknown factors. Those planes are notorious for not being dependable. They’ll roll down 25 and take 40 straight in.”

Angela allowed herself to breathe. “Then we’ve got a chance to win. If they come by air, we lose unless we go underground and that will change Safe Haven in ways we can’t imagine.”

Marc stared at her for a long minute, judging, putting pieces together. When he finally spoke, it rang through the tent. “I want Adrian’s approval on all of this.”

Angela sucked in a wounded breath. “Adrian’s out of the loop now. He can’t know our strategy. He plans to give himself up when they come, to save the rest of us.”

“He should!” Marc swore angrily.

“But it won’t save us. What happens to the rest of the herd when one cow is diagnosed with a dangerous disease?”

Marc refused to give that answer.

“They would have killed everyone here. By letting Matt give them details, I’ve changed the rules of this game. They won’t try to kill us in one hit.”

“They’ll want to protect what they’re coming for.” Kenn was impressed. “They may even try to negotiate.”

“Which is why you have to let me give myself up.” Adrian limped into the meeting tent amid the protests.

Kenn went to his side, automatically shoving his shoulder under Adrian’s arm for support.

“What’s the benefit?” Angela asked, drawing more protests. She had no intentions of it, but their

leader needed to feel like he'd done everything he could before the dying started.

"I can buy you time." He looked at Angela. "And maybe I can even get close enough to throw their entire chain of command into disarray."

"So you want to be our assassin?" She asked coolly.

"That and more. And I'm not on a suicide trip. You've made sure that won't work."

"Yes, I have! I won't give you up!"

Adrian's eyes lit up with need.

"Son of a..." Marc swore.

The Eagles shifted restlessly.

"Is this a bad time?"

They all turned to find Theo in the flap.

Angela sighed. "Come in. We can use the break."

Theo held the flap for the others; the five men gathered in front of Angela, each with a folder in hand.

"We came up with a few things." Theo hoped it was okay. "We didn't know if you might want to go over them before you finalize your plans."

Nowhere near that, Angela waved a hand. "Let's see it."

"It's more of a demonstration, but we didn't think you'd want that type of noise right now." He opened his folder and held out a paper. "How do you feel about using solar weapons?"

Angela studied the diagram eagerly, able to keep up with most of the scribbled notes thanks to

Adrian's training. She tilted the paper, noting the value and the downside. It was... "Good. What else?"

Theo and his group spent time on the folders, but only gave her the details she needed the most. When they left the tent, all five were in Marc's possession.

Angela glanced around, feeling the power, the magic coming to her, to them all. "It will take them a month to reach us on their own, but we have to double that. If we're working on them the entire time, that can happen. I want teams set up along their routes, waiting."

"Like traps?"

"Like ghosts." Marc admired her plan even as he hated it. "They leave the bunker with a thousand, but are minus hundreds by the time they get here."

"And you can do that by yourself, can't you Marine?" Angela demanded ruthlessly.

Marc frowned deeper, mind already a queasy blur of how. "Yes. Maybe even half of them, if I had enough help."

"That's what we need, Marc. Half, by the time they reach the base or it won't matter."

Marc stared at her, holding his emotions in check. "I'll handle it. *Personally.*"

Angela waved a hand at her top men as tears came to prick her lids. "The Eagles are at your disposal. Pick a team."

She stared at him until he vanished from sight, then turned toward the main camp. American

Waves was soothing people to sleep; Kevin's calm voice was reading them the bedtime story she'd chosen. Angela paused to listen to one of her favorite parts.

"But I'm hungry, Mother. I really am."

Soft chuckles floated through the camp and Angela continued on her rounds. One Hundred and One Dalmatians was amusing, easy going, but when the whirlwinds started, it would almost be a guide. It was yet another of Adrian's techniques that she was using to manipulate them into the right places—movies and literature—but she was already sure it wouldn't be enough. They needed a real miracle, the kind that was beyond even the descendants.

As Kevin continued reading, Angela went into the training tent for a few minutes alone to think. When he finished for the night, a call had to go out and she wasn't expecting an easy time of it.

"Neither am I."

Angela jumped, but stopped herself from drawing. "What are you doing here?"

Adrian didn't answer.

Angela spotted the table and chairs, the cooler and kit, and understood Kenn had moved Adrian here while they settled the camp.

Adrian took a small box from his pocket and set it on the table. "This is yours."

Angela reluctantly took the chair across from him. Time alone with Adrian was dangerous right now. That awful, selfish part of her female heart was already asking what would happen if Marc didn't

return. Angela hated herself for it, but she couldn't stop her eyes from going to Adrian. Guilt flooded, hot and heavy. She snatched the box from the table.

Angela opened it and yanked the chain out. When she realized it was her own set of dog tags, inscribed, the emotion was almost palpable.

Adrian didn't break it, instead, allowing the heat to build. It was the time he'd been waiting for and hoping wouldn't come.

Angela stared at the tags, at the name and rank details. The dog tags meant more to her than if he'd given her a medal. "Thank you."

Adrian was on his feet and behind her in an instant. He took the tags and carefully slid them over. "You're doing well."

Angela closed her lids as he placed a kiss to the top of her head. "It hurts."

Adrian stroked her soft curls, feeding, drawing. "I know. I gave you a hard duty. You're handling it."

Angela let the tears slip, but only a few of them. The feel of Adrian's warmth on her skin was stunning in its perfection.

Adrian felt her shudder. "I meant it when I said I wasn't hiding anymore. You should send me away from here before I wreck it all."

Angela trembled with the stress, the fear, the anger. *None of this is right.*

"No, but it's what we've been given." Adrian reached out to touch her. "It's what *you've* been given."

Angela pulled away, resisting his draw. “Marc was who I asked for, who came when I needed him. He’ll always be first.”

Adrian groaned bitterly. “It doesn’t matter to me anymore. Sharing, splitting you two up, my death. One of those has to happen for there to be any peace. The easiest is to remove me.”

Angela couldn’t stand the thought. “I could make you hate me, maybe...”

Adrian snorted. “Not unless you turn into Tonya and even she came around in this light. It wouldn’t work.”

“I could tell Marc and the Eagles.”

Adrian snorted. “They know. They’ve always known.”

Outside the tent, Kenn paused at their voices. Realizing who was inside, the Marine thought of his plans to help Adrian and took up a nearby post to direct people away.

“What do you want from me?”

Angela’s question was met with silence as the conversation became mental to account for their audience. Angela hadn’t noticed yet, but Adrian had.

I can’t give that.

Send me away.

I won’t do that...

I can make you.

Yes, but not without tearing this camp apart.

You have to take it.

Adrian grabbed Angela's arm and pulled her up from the chair. He stopped himself from kissing her by mere inches.

Angela stared into his blazing eyes, hating him for forcing her to accept these feelings, for the witch whispering that his kiss would be like nothing she'd ever felt.

"You need me. They all know that, too."

Angela wanted to deny the claim and jerked out of his hold. She stomped toward the flap, determined to hold out, to remain loyal to Marc. "Get to the com truck and make the call. Kevin's waiting."

"No."

Angela stopped, turning angrily. "What?"

Adrian flipped a thumb at the portable radio on the table. "I'll do it from here."

Angela understood how Adrian felt. She'd spent a decade pining for the one she loved. It was awful and ugly, but life did go on. So would Adrian.

"You think so?" he asked, picking up the mike, turning the system on.

He'd never felt this way before and for their kind, to be denied what they were craving so strongly was dangerous. It sent them into a number of emotional states, and all of them were hard to handle. Normally a substitute was found. Humans almost always reacted that way, but Adrian hadn't found one that would satisfy him.

She's coming, the witch whispered suddenly. The island woman is near.

Angela couldn't control the waves of jealousy, but she did keep the information to herself when she realized Adrian hadn't caught it. "Make the call."

Adrian keyed the mike in misery. He hated the order, even though it had been pulled straight from his notebooks. "This is Safe Haven refugee camp. We are closing to new arrivals, due to the upcoming battle for our freedom. The government has crawled from its hole and demanded we surrender ourselves. We've refused. Go to ground for a while, my friends, and listen for our calls to resume."

Adrian paused to gather the magic, to send out those powerful waves. "If you can fight, if you want to learn to fight, if you want to help take care of those who do the fighting, please, we need you... *I need you.*"

Angela found herself leaning closer, unable to fight the pull of so much power.

"Come stand with me. I'll fight to the death for our country, and for our freedom—for you."

Angela saw her hand rise toward his face.

Adrian's eyes locked onto hers, drawing the desire, but also the duty. "We have survived for this moment in time. The future of everyone rests with this battle. If we fall, they'll hunt down everyone else." Adrian leaned back when Angela's hand would have touched his jaw, fighting his own battle. "In five days, Safe Haven's walls will go up. If you want to be with us, get here before then. This is where we stand, America, or where we fall." Adrian hung up the radio.

Voices lit up the night.

“We’re coming in! Don’t shoot.”

“We’re still on the way.”

“I’ll be there in time!”

“You can send people to us until it’s over.”

The waves became garbled from all the offers of help and support; tears ran down Angela’s face. Some were from the magic, from the power of experiencing it in person, but most of it was remorse. He’d broken her with one call. If he took her into his arms right now, she would betray Marc and herself.

Adrian stood up, wanting, needing, feeling her surrender. “Get out of here!”

Angela fled.

7

Angela climbed into the camper with a sad heart. Fate had decreed one to live and one to die. The tiny infant in the incubator wouldn’t have long. The glowing and growing baby in its mother lap would thrive. *Which one is evil?*

Angela held her arms out.

The young mother immediately flinched back.

Kyle took in Angela’s calm face and gently pried the baby from Jennifer’s terrified arms. “We can trust her. I promise.”

Angela braced for what she might find.

Kyle put the baby into Angela's embrace, but he couldn't make himself step away. The urge to protect the child was already driving his reactions.

Angela turned her back to the nervous parents and gawked at Safe Haven's first successful birth. For all they knew, it may even be the first live birth of the new world.

She saw the problem right away. The baby was perfect. Angela took in the shining skin, the glow of being freshly fed and cared for, and that wonderful scent that clean babies give off, but it was those red orbs she lingered on. This baby was one of them, no doubt there, and it already had their draw.

"Name?"

Kyle answered, sounding angry. "She said we're not allowed to give one yet."

Angela gave her approval. "Wise to start off that way. You'll talk to Adrian about it?"

"Yes, tonight."

Angela smiled at the baby and was rewarded by a feeling of peace and calm. She let the mother inside come forward and hugged the infant close. "Welcome to Safe Haven, baby. May it become your home."

Angela handed the newborn to Kyle and took Jennifer's hand. She didn't say anything, but the girl stiffened.

Kyle understood they were talking and reluctantly took the baby to the rocker. He had a good idea of what Angela was telling Jennifer. It

was the same thing he'd been unable to force out right after the second baby came.

"I already know. I saw it during the delivery."

Angela patted her hand. "You'll have one. It is better than nothing."

Jennifer didn't care for Angela's past and pain, only her future. "Can't you do anything?!"

"They were both supposed to die. I've saved one and have been banned from interfering with the other. I'd hoped it would be...quicker."

Jennifer began crying.

Angela let Kyle through. He didn't scold, but she felt his anguish. Their pain was heavy and Angela asked again. *What would it take?*

The witch tried to answer with compassion. *Death surrounds one, while life flourishes in the other. This is the nature of our existence.*

And if I do it anyway? Arrange for someone to help?

You'll be damned for interfering with fate too many times. You'd have to give up this camp.

I won't ever do that. Angela left the camper without looking at the doomed infant in the incubator.

"What? What did she see?"

Angela didn't pause to listen to Kyle telling more lies to the teenager. It likely wouldn't be the last that he uttered.

"Kyle?"

Kyle viewed Jennifer with a blank expression. "This is the good one. Relax, breathe."

Jennifer couldn't trust him. She knew that in her heart without any voices whispering, but it didn't matter. She needed to believe the baby was good, because if it wasn't, the Eagles would kill it. She'd already heard the rumors and threats. She was sure Kyle had, too, which gave him another reason to lie.

Jennifer glared, picking out the flaring nostril and the pulse pounding in his jaw. *He is lying. He doesn't know what she saw.*

Jennifer sighed.

The sound of her misery nearly broke Kyle. She'd refused to talk after John stopped her labor the last time, saying they would handle it after the babies came. Now, the peacefully sleeping infant in Jennifer's arms was the only thing holding her here and he knew it. Once the baby was a bit older, when she knew how to care for it, Jennifer would leave Safe Haven. "Will you tell me before you run? Let me say goodbye?"

Jennifer gasped in surprise. "How do you know that?!"

Kyle sank in the chair by the bed, crushed at having his suspicions confirmed. She was leaving.

Jennifer took in his immediate depression, but didn't pick up any anger. He'd expected it, then.

"Please, Jenny."

"No."

Kyle didn't react. The moment he'd dreaded would come in the next few weeks. Would he be able to let her go, not track her down? Kyle stood up, unsure of his control now. He wanted to beg her

forgiveness, try to explain, plead with her to stay. He did none of those things, only stared at his happy family as if they were locked behind a glass that he didn't have the key to open.

He forced himself to speak. "I'll pack your kit, make sure you have a reliable vehicle, some gear."

He saw her surprise and her mistrust, and turned from the tent. "You won't have to sneak out. The guards will let you go. Angela will tell them to."

Kyle was out of the camper before Jennifer could respond. As he went, gently closing the door, he heard her burst into thick, painful sobs. *Why is she crying like that when I'm the one dying inside?*

8

"You okay?"

Jennifer wiped at her face. "Fine."

Conner dropped into the chair by her bed. "Liar."

Jennifer scowled. "Not now, Conner."

The teenager stared at her with his father's insight. "You love him. That's why you're leaving."

Jennifer's mouth dropped open in anger. "Stay out of my mind, Conner Mitchel, or I'll tell on you!"

Conner wasn't worried, though he wasn't ready for anyone to know his secrets yet. "If you leave, I go back to only having one friend here. That would suck."

Jennifer tried not to relent. "Bull. The entire camp is your friend."

Conner pushed out a bit of magic. “Not like you are.”

Jennifer snorted. “Save it for that camp where you drool after.”

Conner flushed, but didn’t deny it. “Okay.”

Jennifer giggled. Conner was nice to be around. He didn’t carry enough of Safe Haven’s stress to be brought down all the time.

“That’s a little better.” He gestured. “How’s the kid?”

Jennifer’s smile could have lit up a dead city. “Perfect.”

Conner rolled his eyes. “Good.”

Jennifer opened her mouth to ask a question, then closed it. She wasn’t sure she could take the answer.

Conner, who’d come at Adrian’s request, put his hand on her wrist. “I need to show you something. It’s not good or bad. It’s just the way it was. You ready?”

Jennifer had stiffened upon the contact; she braced herself, instinctively putting her hand on her much flatter stomach. “Go on.”

Conner sent her an image he’d pulled from Kyle. “This is how he felt.”

Jennifer hissed in rage at the bodies moving apart.

Conner forced her to observe the ending, the instant remorse of the mobster. As his relief source vanished into the shadow, Kyle hit his knees, crying.

Conner let go of that image and brought up a new one. This was Kyle refusing to be comforted again. The women had flocked to him after he'd broken with Tracy. Kyle had refused them all. "He won't tell you. He thinks that even one stumble was too much."

"It is!" Jennifer snapped angrily, jealously, miserably. "I...I thought I could trust him!"

"Don't you understand, Jenny? You can. What he did proves it."

Jennifer glared until his meaning sank in. "You think he was going to hurt me."

"So do you. So did he. *That's* why it happened." Conner's voice lowered into self-hatred that Jennifer recognized. "We pull people in hard ways. When it's physical, things can get dangerous. You learned that the hard way, but Kyle refused to give in. He went to a whore because he wouldn't hurt you."

Jennifer didn't want to hear anymore. "He could have waited for me!"

Conner denied her again. "Not a man like that. He was a killer before, and then my dad taught him to be ruthless, to take what he needs or wants." Conner got to the point. "He loves you too."

"I don't love him!" she snapped, forced into feeling Kyle's side. She'd refused to do so before.

"Yes, you do, and if you'll give him time to prove it, you couldn't pick a better man."

"How can that be? You said he's a killer."

“*Your* killer, Jenny. Is there anything he wouldn’t do for you?”

“...no.”

“Then put a claim on him, tell him your terms, and see where it goes from there. He’s not like Cesar. You know that.” Conner left her alone to think, hoping he’d helped. If Kyle left Safe Haven, they might fall. The mobster was an invaluable asset that would improve over time if he wasn’t destroyed by losing the only thing he wanted. That was all up to Jennifer now.

Chapter Twelve
High Overhead

July 8th

1

“**I** need to check your wound for signs of infection.”

The tent went quiet as it began clearing out.

Angela held herself in check as best she could. Some of those thoughts were ugly.

She forced a grin. “Drop those pants, Mr. Mitchel.”

Light laughter broke the tension, but didn’t ease her annoyance as the last of his groupies filed out.

Adrian leaned back to allow her access to his side.

“There’s no reason for you to not be in charge right now.”

Adrian grunted. “So?”

Angela hadn’t been expecting that. “So, why aren’t you?”

He didn’t speak for a long moment, studying her face as she checked his wound. When he finally did open his mouth, the ring to the words was undeniable. “Safe Haven has two leaders. This is your shift.”

Before she could argue, Kenn ducked into the tent.

“Got updates, reports, schedules, and lots of crap you both love.”

Adrian waved a hand at the table. “I’ll do it later when I’d rather be on rounds.”

Angela stayed quiet as she replaced the bandage.

Adrian noticed.

He still a problem?

No.

Good.

Adrian doubted that was all there was to that story, but said nothing. He wasn’t sure of her mood today.

Angela waved at the people waiting outside the tent, eager to escape before Adrian read her thoughts. “He’s all yours, folks. Healing slow and steady.”

Adrian gave his approval, even though she left without looking back. She could have said it was almost healed, forcing his hand. She still trusted his judgment despite all he’d put her through. That was encouraging.

Isn’t it more likely that she feels the magic of the job? his demon asked. She’s finally being seduced by the power.

Maybe. Adrian agreed reluctantly. We’d better find out. We can use that.

“Normal lessons for the Eagles are suspended until further notice. I want them getting ready to train. Set it up with Marc and Kenn. They know what these people need first. I also want a complete list of Adrian’s travel preparations so I can be sure that I’ve covered everything.” Angela had begun rattling things off as soon as she left the tent, determined not to be distracted from her duties.

“Is it okay to let Conner roam?”

“Yes, but don’t switch him even after he’s cleared. By his father’s side is the best place for him right now.” Angela viewed the slowly moving crews working on cleaning up the mess from yesterday and last night. It hadn’t been nearly the wonderful holiday that many of them had been hoping for, but it was certainly one to remember.

Jeff started to ask another question and had to stop to cough. In that moment, other sounds rang out to Angela from across the camp. Sneezes, sniffing, coughing, spitting. Was it a normal amount or were too many people feeling the effects of so much rain after going without it for months?

Angela listened harder and was relieved to hear no deep rumbles in chests or trouble breathing. Still, it was better not to take chances. She would do a complete round of the camp and look, listen for signs. An epidemic was something that could derail all her carefully sewn plans. She would keep a close eye on it.

Angela spotted Samantha under the protection of the mess canopy and half a dozen men from Neil's team. No one was treating her badly. She was getting a lot of stares, but no comments or glares and that was progress from yesterday's mob.

The vote had been uneven for the first time since she'd come here. Roughly fifty-five percent of the camp thought they should flee for the mountains now, while the rest had voted to break into smaller groups and get out of the path. The mountain voters wanted to hole up and hide Adrian. The Eagles were busy explaining that would get everyone killed when the soldiers finally came. The split group wanted to take Adrian with them, to lead him away from the danger. She and Samantha were expected to go with one of those groups also, giving someone a distinct advantage when they added in Marc and Charlie. It had caused another loud fight this morning that had been solved by her declaring that if they couldn't stay and fight, they didn't deserve to care for Adrian or to be protected by his Eagles. Three more carloads of camp members had then left Safe Haven's light.

But not forever. If we win, you'll come crawling back as fast as your knees will carry you. And be welcome.

She forced the images away before she could get on the radio and try to talk them into coming back now. Losing people was killing her on the inside.

Samantha glanced over the harvest, unable to stop the pride. There were five full tables of baskets from the garden—corn, beans, onions, tomatoes, green peppers, broccoli, and cauliflower. In a week or so, the potatoes, carrots, cabbage, and melons would be ready. Safe Haven now had enough vegetables for a couple months of settling into their new home in the mountains.

Samantha turned around to find a small group of camp members lingering near the tables, observing her and the food with dark expressions.

Samantha glowered defensively. “I’ll plant more as soon as I turn the soil. I’m earning my keep.”

The woman in front gave a small grimace. “Do you need help? We know how to can food.”

Samantha’s mind took a minute to adjust. “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

She directed them toward the truck, where Li Sing would be glad to have the help with the steamy mess of jars and hot water he was surrounded by.

Hilda smiled. “That’s a good sign.”

Samantha’s heart lightened a bit. “Yes, it is.”

“Maybe your record here did the trick.”

“Maybe.”

“Or they’re okay with you being like Adrian and Angela.”

Samantha didn’t answer. She’d had that thought, too. It felt different than she’d assumed it would.

Jeremy appeared at her side; he pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek, relishing the feel of not hiding his feelings anymore. “How are you?”

Samantha leaned against his arm. “Tired, but better. Headache’s gone.”

“Good. Angela sent me. She’d like to try a few things later.”

Samantha wasn’t eager, but she wasn’t dreading it, either. “Okay. When?”

“She’ll send someone for you. She said for you to stock up for the rest of the day, that you’d tell me what’ll work best for that.”

Samantha’s brows furrowed. “Take me out into the crowd, where we’ll have to be close to them. Excitement is a reliable source.”

Jeremy left Hilda to monitor the food and gently led Samantha into the camp. Though it was just after dawn, there were already large numbers of people observing the Eagles work; some were even helping. He felt it was still a slight risk, but compared to yesterday, it was calm. There was no hostility now, no real fear, either, just curiosity and relief.

Samantha assumed the relief was because they wanted her to be a good guy, but Jeremy could have told her they were relieved to have been wrong about her. The camp had come to care for Samantha, but even more, they needed their leaders to be reliable. If Samantha had fallen, it might have been too much to keep them all believing in Adrian. After

all, he'd placed her in the chain of command and that still meant something.

3

“Set it up right in the center of camp.”

“What?”

Aware of time counting down, Angela motioned toward the cracked blinds and flaps all around them. “They need to believe that we're ready.”

Marc directed the men that way. “Once you unload, stay and unroll it.”

Kenn joined them.

Marc pointed at the center fire. “Get that lit. We'll use it for our testing and garbage.”

Eagles came by, carrying cases of weapons.

The waking camp began coming out.

Ten minutes into the unloading, there were a hundred boxes near the center fire. Half an hour later, there were stacks of crates and boxes as high as a man, various guns and launchers, setups, and pieces of dangerous metal that few of them could identify. There were also bags and tubes, rolls of wire and rope, buckets of knives and handheld weapons. It was impressive.

“She was right.” Zack observed camp members pulling Eagles into discussions about weapons and tools. “This will give them hope.”

Angela went to the middle of the stacks; the top thirty Eagles formed a half moon behind her. “What

we need to start with are surprise weapons that can be easily carried. The first team is leaving in a day and they have to have a full load of items to pick from.” She glanced around. “I’d like you to break into groups and work on small items first. Nothing bigger than a fist.”

Angela saw the camp was still listening. “They’ll need help. Mostly to hold an end or go get something. That’s where you come in. Also, you can cover their guard posts so they can keep working. Either one is a big help.”

“When do we get to do something that matters?” Jerry questioned snidely.

Buuurrrr...

The sound snapped every head to the sky.

Marc was wrong. Angela felt time slowing as fate waited for her response. There was one thing they could do. The gifted people would stand together while the camp ran.

Angela opened her mouth to order a bugout...

Kevin’s worried voice echoed over the radios. “One plane, flying low... Looks like it’s picking someone up.”

Angela closed her mouth as the single plane came into view. She grabbed Marc’s arm as everyone else continued to stare. “*They* have to do it, Marc—the camp.”

Marc stared for a second, admiring her less resentfully this time. Then he leaned close and whispered what she needed.

Kenn was already adjusting his radio as Angela turned to him.

“Marc swears they’ll do a low flyover. I need to know when they report us. Make sure I hear it.”

Kenn’s hands were racing to find the right channel in time.

Angela moved toward the most mature looking section of the about-to-panic camp members that were still gathered around the stacks of weapons. “You, you, and all of you! Come get a grenade launcher.”

The ten men and women did it eagerly; the rest of the camp settled a bit to observe.

“Theo, bring the gun over to the middle of the piles for cover. I don’t want them to know until it’s too late.”

Eagles started to get out of the way.

Angela’s voice grew sharp. “Keep working! The camp and I have you covered.”

The men did as they were told while ripples of excitement and fear ran through the crowd. A few people fled for their vehicles.

Angela let them go. The plane being destroyed might bring them back, and if not, it was another cut, another thinning.

Adrian watched them leave in painful silence. He understood the reasoning. He agreed even, but it still hurt.

“Line up here, keep your weapon pointed down, and listen to Marc. He’s going to give you a thirty-second crash course on how to use it.”

Radios crackled across the area. “They made the pickup...coming this way! Here they come!”

Angela grabbed a long roll of camouflage netting and tossed it toward the other side of the camp line, with Theo’s help. “Get that over your fighters or the plane will see them!”

It was an awkward struggle that shoved people, scratched hands, and mashed fingers, but the two canopies went over the nervously waiting fighters as the plane came into view.

“Everyone stay still!” Angela turned to glare at Kenn. “Stand your ground. They don’t own us!”

The camp let out a small cheer at that.

Angela pushed a bit. “This is what they get for the war!”

The camp cheered in a frenzy now, calling out their own insults and threats.

Angela swore under her breath. “Now, Marine!”

Kenn switched again, straining, and stumbled into what they needed.

“Looks like a large group, base, hundreds. Organized, guards in sight...and weapons, base! Stacks of weapons! They’re ready for war.”

Angela controlled the people with the launchers. “Wait for it and we’ll kill them all, including those who betrayed us. Mitch and Matt are on that plane.”

This time, the camp screamed for blood, drowning out the next transmission.

“They just reported seeing Adrian!” Kenn had his ear to the radio. “Do it!”

Angela strode into her waiting rookies, falling behind to help Marc and Doug direct them. “Drop the canopy! Let them see what’s coming!” Angela stifled the fresh guilt. “Take away their shields.”

Theo’s machine had been humming roughly, building strength from the solar reserve they’d captured. It vibrated harshly, explaining the need for it to be sitting on something solid.

“Here it goes!” Theo hit the switch.

Nothing scattered, no fire flamed out, not even smoke came from it. The blast of solar energy was concentrated into the shell that whistled through the air toward the plane.

Kenn’s radio crackled. “*We’ve been fired upon!*”

The shell hit the air in front of the nose of the plane and exploded in a disappointing flash of green and black.

“That’s it?”

The crowd echoed Kenn’s question.

The plane didn’t react at first...then smoke began pouring from the right engine.

Angela tapped Joseph on the shoulder. “Now.”

He obligingly pulled the trigger. He’d had plenty of time to aim.

The others waited until they were tapped, firing within seconds of each other.

Explosions rocked the sky.

The sight and sound of the plane going down was something that Angela wouldn’t ever forget. “I did that. I’m damned.”

Adrian was close enough to hear her over the cheers. He sent it to Marc. She would need comfort later and he couldn't be the one to give it. *When Marc leaves, that will change.*

4

“We verified them?”

“We got there before it finished burning. Three of theirs, plus our two.” Marc tried not to let his anger show, but it came through in his tone.

Angela was moving steadily through the busily working camp and Eagles. “And we stripped anything usable?”

“Yes. We didn't get much in the way of supplies. Parts might come in handy.”

Kenn joined them near the medical tent. “You got the training plans ready?”

Marc handed him a sheet of paper from his pocket. “You'll do basic combat marksmanship in the form of table two, and then later with table three and four, if you have time.”

Marc waited for Kenn to catch up, glad to be working with someone who understood his lingo.

Kenn grunted. That would develop certain aspects of marksmanship that were crucial in combat, like where to shoot someone—T-box, center mass, groin.

“We'll also run drills like our CO—Pick 'em up, hit the target line, and engage the enemy.”

Kenn grinned at that one. Done to mimic the effects of a real fight, the Eagles would love it. “I’ll get it going right now.”

Angela looked at Marc as Kenn left. “You’ve got the kids working?”

“Yes. Adrian’s with them for the next three days, overseeing.”

Angela looked away at the name.

Marc shot a dirty thought toward that tent. “Are you okay?”

Angela brought up her walls and forced a smile onto her face as she walked away. “Never better.”

Marc let her go, but when the demon whispered, he listened to his fears and worries get confirmed. He also took the advice his demon gave. Once he heard it, Marc agreed that nothing else would succeed as well for their future. If you loved something, you let it go.

Word spread fast that Marc was leading their ambush team. It calmed the twitchier members of camp. Marc was lethal. Everyone knew that.

Marc himself didn’t realize how much that meant until he put it with what Angela had planned around Matt. Then he understood that half of his setups had been to prove to the camp that he could do this, that they didn’t have to flee. Even as far back as his cage match, Adrian had known this was coming. “And who did you see winning, you secretive bastard?”

“Us, of course.”

Marc let out a sigh at Adrian's words. He hadn't heard the man approach. "I forgot sneaky."

Adrian went on as if Marc hadn't spoken, "With their numbers cut in half, they'll get to the base tired and nervous. You'll wipe them out."

Marc didn't doubt that. He only worried over who would be caught in the crossfire. "And those left in the bunker, what will they do?"

"Leave us alone until they think they're strong enough to try again. By then, we'll be in the south, out of the damage path."

It was what Angela had told him, but it made no difference to hear again. Marc would complete the mission he'd been given.

So would Adrian.

5

"You had no right to do that!"

Already furious with herself, Angela faced Cynthia coldly. "I had to choose. That boy or this camp."

"You sacrificed an innocent kid!"

Angela didn't look away. "So did you. Anyone else might have developed feelings and pulled him in. That would have kept this from happening and changed our future."

"They told the government. We don't have a future now, thanks to you!"

"Yes, we do, only not here."

"You've doomed us."

“I helped them find the truth. Death waits for us on this soil. We have to leave for a while. Something is coming and we have to get out of the path. These people weren’t going to go without knowing about our gifts and the protection we can give.”

“You set me up!”

“Yes.”

“Why me?”

“Anyone else would have felt pity for Matt, saved him, but not you, not with Kevin on standby.”

Cynthia stared at Angela in horror as Adrian walked by them.

“It was mostly my idea.” Surprised Eagle looks were ignored. “She made an impossible choice based on the greater good. It’s exactly the choice I would have made, but none of you would have questioned it to *my* face.”

His parting reminder was enough to calm the Eagles, but Cynthia wasn’t ready to let it go.

“I don’t know how I can stay on your team. I don’t trust you anymore.”

Angela raised a brow. “Did you before?”

“Well...no.”

“Then why does it matter? You were given an FND chore and you handled it exactly as I expected you to. It wasn’t an easy duty, but it is over now and you’re out on top. What more do you want?”

“For that boy to still be here! For you to apologize!”

“For knowing you were too hardhearted to fall for Matt? Not likely. Next?”

Cynthia argued in exasperation “You don’t get it. You’re wrong for doing this.”

“No, you don’t get it. Right and wrong don’t matter, only survival does.” Angela stepped away from the furious reporter. “Save your resignation. I won’t accept it yet. I know what I’m doing. You can quit once you understand that.”

Cynthia thought of the nights with Matt, of the service she’d put in, and turned away from her team leader. “I miss him, Angie. What did you do to me?”

Angela didn’t answer.

Cynthia walked away. “Get ready for it. I’ll be the first Eagle to leave.”

Angela doubted that was true, but she didn’t argue the point. Cynthia would adjust. She hadn’t been forced into anything, nor tricked into it, despite what she was feeling. She’d been given something she couldn’t refuse and after the first trip as XO, Angela was sure the reporter would accept what had happened and decide to stay.

Cynthia’s newspaper had been put on hold. They couldn’t spare the supplies or her time. There were too many other important things they needed to accomplish. That was another reason for the reporter’s lagging spirits.

Marc didn’t miss any of it and like Cynthia, he was surprised by the cold calculation. He hadn’t thought Angela was capable of all this.

Adrian knew. He saw this right away; he knew she'd be capable of the intricate plots and setups. And if he knew her that well on sight, what does it say about my bond with her?

That it's weak, the demon confirmed. Now will you let me help you?

Marc wavered, scared by the knowledge that he would soon be parted from her, while Adrian would be here, staying close. "I'll listen."

6

"When the fight starts, there will be total chaos. Screams, gunshots, animals to trip over, camp members in the way. You have to remember one thing right then." Angela scanned them, orbs glowing red. "Find me. We are a team. We come to each other."

Jennifer frowned. "What about those of us with children?"

"The men will defend the children. We have to defend the men." Angela waved at the battle map she and Neil had spent hours on. She'd refused to tell him who would be in each place they'd chosen. "Each team has a job to do, but the leaders and XOs will also have separate assignments. The men know their responsibilities." She met Jennifer's concerned gaze. "Kyle will keep Autumn. You'll be on my right as much as you can stand to be away from her. I need you."

Jennifer couldn't resist those words. "I'm there."

Angela let out the small breath she'd been holding. "We are the front line, ladies. Over the next weeks, we'll put in many hours together, but you'll have to practice while I'm busy. Cynthia has the lead for those lessons. When she's busy, Samantha will cover it. There will always be an Eagle to help and supervise, but these men do not have any clue what I'm planning."

Angela searched the small group, feeling a connection with them.

When that hard glaze came over her face, each of them braced for the next revelation.

"We're going to hold the soldiers off, as if we're a bubble. It will slow them down for the Eagles to get our weapons in place and send weaker people to cover. We're going to buy time, something we need."

"How are we going to do that?" Becky's mind had just come alive with ideas. She could get into work like this.

"We evaluate the weapons we have and figure out how they work together to make something larger. For example, if you combine a steady flame with a powder keg, you'll get a nice explosion, but if you add some shrapnel to the mix, you'll kill. That's what we are now, ladies. For this moment in time, we are Safe Haven's flames, its powder kegs and shrapnel, born to defend this camp."

“Any rewards or perks?” Crista joked, aware that her nerves were now at their roughest level since the war.

Angela grinned as the others laughed a bit. “Yes, as a matter of fact. Besides being wanted by every Eagle in camp, you’ll each be given level one status and start choosing your own teams.”

Female cheers drew attention outside the tent, but only a little. Safe Haven was busy with training classes and lessons, supplies and rations being distributed, and defenses going through testing. It was a bit amazing to have the elderly population cleaning weapons, while the children carried drinks and tools. These kids hadn’t been allowed to roam the camp before. The younger ones were still in the mess, helping Peggy and Hilda with a project, but even those were being allowed to explore under supervision. It was good to see Safe Haven full of life that hadn’t been corrupted or broken.

As the meeting ended, Becky caught up with Angela and Samantha. “I have an idea.”

Angela waved Samantha on.

“What?”

“I think I can turn our shrapnel into direct slugs.”

Angela had hoped her girls would think of things she missed. She’d already dug into the males here for all the schemes she could use. “Let’s go have a cup of mud and talk.”

Angela spotted Charlie laboring in the livestock truck alone, but she didn’t change her direction.

Angela knew to give him time with his feelings over Matt. Her own hells and guilt had a nasty way of busting through and making her stronger once she faced it. In his case, he had nothing to feel bad for, but like with Conner, that sense of responsibility was too strong to be ignored. In a few weeks, when there were signs, she would try to help him find peace. For now, she gave him space. It was what he needed the most.

7

Night fell over Safe Haven in a quick rush, reminding Eagles that there were more camp members on duty now than they were used to. Sleep would be hard to come by.

“You should stay with her tonight. I’ll bunk with the camp and keep things calm.”

Jeremy stared at Neil, a bit warily, thoughts and images flipping through his mind.

Neil wasn’t annoyed. “I don’t know how this shit works any more than you do. What I am sure of is that she needs to be taken care of. That wind gift alone could tilt a battle for us.”

Jeremy agreed. “She’s been important the whole time.”

“Yes, and we knew it, deep down. Take care of her, make her happy, and when it’s my turn, I’ll do the same.”

“Got it all worked out now, do you?”

They turned to find Samantha standing shakily behind them, holding a tent side for support.

Neil chose to be honest. “We think so, yes.”

“Is it okay?” Jeremy was quicker to be sure she wasn’t angry.

“It depends on a few things.” She went to stand between them. “For now, it works.”

Neil gave Jeremy a slightly curt nod. “Cleaned, fed, tucked in.”

Jeremy grinned at Samantha’s snort. “I’ll cover it. You’ll call us if there’s trouble.”

Neil’s face tightened. “Think good thoughts, will you?”

Jeremy gently took Samantha’s arm. The duty he’d been given had already accomplished that. He was eager to care for Samantha’s needs.

Neil let them go without adding more, not feeling as much jealousy as he’d expected to after deciding on this plan. If they were sharing her, they had to do it right and set an example.

Neil snorted angrily at himself. They weren’t setting a good example with this, but he didn’t know any other way to have happiness. Life without Samantha wouldn’t be a life at all.

8

Angela stared at Marc with her lips in a tight line to keep from changing the orders. *I don’t ever want to be away from him!*

Marc caught the wave of panic, but he didn't stop packing his gear. In a few hours, he would be going west. He had to settle some things here in that time; her emotions would have to wait behind it.

Marc fastened the last strap and set the kit by the flap. His own feelings were already locked up tight. "I'll talk to Charlie before we roll."

Angela was afraid to try to speak. Fear, bright and dizzying, was beating in her mind.

Marc had expected this scene to be hard. *Might as well get it over with.* He came over to stand in front of her. He smoothed a stray curl, lingering. Where he was going, there would be a shortage of soft hair and sweet smelling skin.

Angela closed her lids as the tears welled up.

"I want you to know something...for if I don't come back."

Angela stifled a wounded moan, trying to find a last-minute plan change to keep him here.

"You can love him. It won't be a betrayal of me."

Angela was horrified. "I'd never!"

Marc sighed, pulling her into his arms. "Yes, Angie you would. And you'd eat yourself up with it and never be happy again. I don't want that for you."

Angela couldn't prevent the tears. "Please, Marc, stop."

"Not yet. Not until you promise me."

"I can't do that. I'm changing the..."

“No, you’re not. If I’m meant to die on this run, then I will. But there’s no peace for me unless I know you’ll be cared for. He’ll do that.”

Angela began sobbing, not because he was right, but because she had hoped Marc hadn’t discovered that. He knew that if he died, she would turn to Adrian. How awful for him. “I’m sorry.”

Marc wiped away her tears as best he could, grinning. “Stop wasting water.”

Angela’s surprise snorted out, sounding like a pig; they both chuckled harder, hugging tightly.

“I love you.” She kissed his neck. “Come back to me. I’d never be the same.”

Marc held her tighter. He understood exactly how she felt. When her lips found his, he groaned. *My Angie!*

Her lips were demanding, arms holding him tight. She kissed him frantically; the jacket fell to the ground.

Marc ripped his mouth from hers, fighting for control.

Angela groaned, needing him as ghosts flashed and Marc shuddered. Fire sparked, catching them both in the blast. When her leg came up, his hand was there to hold it.

Heat flared again. Marc took them to the ground.

Angela cried out as his mouth found a rocky peak. The sound had him jerking his belt buckle open. Her restless hands went to his to help. The flames from the contact shook them both.

Marc glanced down, almost unable to believe she'd made him forget everything so quickly. Her eyes were full of desire, body trembling.

Poised to claim, Marc grinned at her flushed face and used a gentle hand to spread her legs. He ran a thumb over her, felt her body tighten, reach out for his...*I want to sink into her and never come up.*

His thumb stroked her, bringing her to the edge. She clutched roughly at his shoulders as she exploded, and he broke a sweat, straining to wait.

“Please...”

Angela knew instinctively what he was pleading for, and gave it willingly. “I’m yours. Always.”

Marc slid into her as his own pleasure took over. “Oh, god!”

His mouth latched onto her neck as he shoved deep and froze.

Despite the stunning moment, Marc didn’t linger. He couldn’t stand it when she cried. He kissed her a last time, and slipped from their tent.

Angela didn’t allow herself more than a few minutes of self-pity before pulling on her things and fading into the shadows. Marc was leaving. It had been a long time since she felt this lost.

Jeremy couldn't answer, too shaken. Being with Samantha was...indefinable.

Samantha lovingly kissed his lips and dislodged their bodies. She couldn't resist a last feel of his hair as she brushed it off his forehead. Intentional or not, Jeremy's new haircut was the exact opposite of Neil's neat trim. Shaggy locks lightly streaked with gold and red met her fingers, striking her with the glinting softness.

Samantha ran a calming hand over his scarred leg, telling him it didn't bother her, and felt him relax further. At some point, Jeremy would understand she saw those parts of him as proof that he was a survivor, like her.

Samantha moved away from him before the need could start back up, getting back under the water. She groaned at the feel of it. "Nice."

Jeremy leaned against the shower wall as she washed, stunned into that perfect place where it felt like nothing could go wrong.

Fate appeared to take that as a personal challenge.

Samantha tensed, shampoo bottle freezing in midair.

Jeremy saw the color drain from her face and grabbed for his pants and gun. "What is it? Where?"

"Get down." Sam's mind went into survival mode.

The door opened.

Jeremy ducked as a cool wind spun into their steamy sanctuary. He heard the door close and

footsteps come closer, but it was Sam's knowing grunt that he hated. They'd overlooked their first assassin.

"Hello, Samantha."

Samantha set the bottle on the shelf, ignoring the gun pointed at her. "Good evening, Shellie."

The stone thrower raised the gun a bit higher as Sam reached for the towel.

"Easy."

Samantha slowed her movements, wrapping the towel around herself and securing it in front. "What did they offer you?"

Shellie smirked quietly. "Nothing, of course. I'm the best at our game when you're gone."

Sam stared in understanding and anger. "For the thrill and glory, then. That's why you're going to die."

Shellie snorted arrogantly. "You'll be gone first."

Samantha waited for either gun to fire and realized she had to trigger the moment. Now that she was here, Shellie might not have the stomach for it.

"Sam? Jeremy? Everyone okay in there?"

The call from outside ruined the element of surprise and brought Jeremy to his feet. He fired once and didn't miss.

Samantha hated the death and violence that marred everything good about Safe Haven. Weak and angry at this newest evidence of how hard things would become, she began crying.

Jeremy had her in his arms when Neil and the others burst through the locked door.

It only took them a couple seconds to sort out what had happened, but in that time, no one noticed the absence of someone who should have been there.

10

“Go on. I’ll live long enough to watch Marc rip you apart with his bare hands. Go on!” Angela glared at the gun, daring the traitor to fire.

Crone hesitated again. His companion, Denny, was already on the ground with a broken nose or maybe even dead. The syringe the top level Eagles had planned to use was in Angela’s hand. Her knife was in the other.

At least it’s not the gun. Crone darted a quick look around to confirm they hadn’t been noticed yet.

“What are you waiting for, coward?!” Angela roared, drawing attention to those searching for her. “Do it or I will!”

Unable to follow through, Crone started to lower the gun.

Angela’s hunger lunged forward. “There’s no turning back!” She pitched the knife at his chest and when the Eagle threw a hand up to block, she leapt forward and plunged the syringe into his neck.

Angela wasn't sure if it was meant to kill or knock her out; she observed a bit curiously to discover if he fell asleep or died.

When Crone's face turned blue and he stopped breathing, she had her answer. There wouldn't be many attempts to capture her now, only to exterminate.

Marc rushed to her side and took her away from the bodies, motioning Jax forward. "Get her knife."

Jax jerked it from Crone's limp forearm and gave the body a swift kick. "Piece of shit."

Marc grunted his approval, leading Angela into the main camp as she began to roll out orders.

"I want a complete check in, the entire camp accounted for. Crone's been here six months, Denny even longer. This has been in the works for a while and I doubt it's over yet."

11

Adrian felt the knife go against his throat and almost let it plunge through to end his hell.

"Check in!"

Angela's shout brought his arm up to snap into his assassin's unprotected throat instead.

The man slumped to his knees.

Adrian hit him again, knocking him over the next cot.

The assassin didn't get back up.

"Men down! We have men down in the parking area!"

Angela appeared in the flap, verifying that he was safe, and then she was gone to answer the call.

Adrian slumped onto the cot, closing the wall around his mind and heart. The camp had to know that she could handle the bad too.

Kaaaablammm!

Adrian picked himself up off the floor and struggled to the flap, ears ringing. He gripped the tent pole tightly, vision blurring. What he saw was any leader's nightmare, but also an exact copy of his dreams.

Wounded people stumbled by, bleeding and crying; shouts and screams echoed through the darkness. Smoke layered everything in ominous gray.

"The medical camper! They got the camper!" someone shouted from the other side of the tent.

"Grab a hose and find Ray. We need the firetruck!"

Adrian put a hand to his shoulder and pulled back red fingers. *I'm next to the medical camper*, he thought, swaying dizzily. *Am I hit?*

His legs went limp, dropping him roughly to his knees. Adrian groaned. "Not again."

Wait. John was in the camper, along with... "Conner!"

Adrian fought to his feet and joined the panicking mass outside.

“The medical camper is a complete loss. Everything else can be salvaged—including the two cars that were wired. The people who did this didn’t know what they were doing.”

Angela listened to the reports as she worked on their wounded. The medics on each team were lending a hand with the minor injuries and emotions, but it was no substitute for who they’d lost.

“We have ten bodies. Six are the enemy. We lost...”

“I know who we lost!” Angela snapped, cutting the thread on the last stitch in Daryl’s leg. “Next.”

Kevin took up the recital when Kenn spun out of the tent to keep from snapping back.

“People panicked, but only a few took off. We’ve accounted for two hundred and seventy-one, so far, but we’ve got men tracking, so that number will go up.”

“Pull them off it. We have other work for them.” Angela moved to the next cot in the line of wounded left to be tended. They were arranged in order of seriousness. Peggy and Doug had organized a quick triage, but it was still chaos.

“You want us to let those people go? Not look for them?”

Angela peered down the row. “Yes. Tell Marc I said those who stayed are our priority now.”

Three cots over, Adrian winced, but he didn’t contradict the order. She was right, but it was a

choice he wasn't sure he would have been able to make.

“Keep going.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “Marc’s...talking to the two surviving assassins. He’ll come straight to you when he’s finished.”

Angela didn’t respond.

The Eagle went on. “Neil and Jeremy have our backup radio under constant watch. All static. Our perimeter has been shrunk, all posts are overloaded, and Li Sing has hot drinks rolling out of the mess. He says it’s a tea to help calm everyone down.”

Angela felt the silent rage in the row of wounded men. It was in their silence, their furiously tense bodies and clenched fists. They were waiting for her to declare war in return for the betrayal, but they didn’t realize that she’d already had Adrian do that with his call. “There will be fighters coming in over the next week. Don’t turn them away.”

“How do we know if they’re like these were?”

“We don’t. But we have to have the help. I’ll find a way to screen them and remove those who don’t belong.”

Bang! Bang!

The lower level Eagles around her drew their guns, but the top men took control of them.

“Those are ours.”

“Marc’s Colts.”

“He must be finished.” Kenn had lingered outside the flap.

Angela's face tightened, but she didn't spit out the vileness in her mind. Instead, she knelt by the next wounded man and began working on his injuries. Most of this line was men who'd been on duty needing stitches from fights, mini-stampedes, and a bit of shrapnel from the two small blasts in the parking area. The com truck had been there for refueling, along with the security jeep that always followed it. Both could be repaired. They'd gotten lucky on their vehicles.

"But I don't feel lucky." She tightened the bandage. "How do I feel?"

The man under her care at the moment was Dale. He'd been burned while helping Ray and the fire team extinguish the blaze in the medical camper.

"Betrayed." Dale waved at the others. "You want them dead. like we all do."

The Eagles standing tensed, but those on their backs added low agreements that left little doubt as to her next course of action.

"They hit us in the back."

"They sent in spies to kill us!"

"They didn't even try to negotiate."

"They are the enemy."

Angela stood up and glanced over the row of beds again. She took in their anger and their pain, and directed it to where fate meant it to go. "Implement Marc's full security plan. Do it now."

Angela left the Eagles to get rid of the bodies, not caring that Marc had hurt the traitors for information. This was war.

Marc didn't feel ashamed, but he was worried about Angela's reaction. It hadn't taken much pain to break the men, it never did, but that didn't mean she was okay with it.

"Neither of them knew about the other." Marc blocked the images from his mind so Angela didn't get them. "They were told to settle in and wait until the 8th of July to carry out their orders. Each one was probably forced. Those two had family inside the bunker that were going to be turned out." The disgust in Marc's voice was thick. "They heard Safe Haven's calls before Cesar attacked NORAD, and knew we would be a future problem. How many more sleepers are here, waiting for their given dates to act?"

Many, the witch and demon warned Marc at the same time.

"But it doesn't change the path. You have work in the west."

Marc grimaced. "Ugly, bloody work."

"I'll love you no matter how much of it you spill."

Marc kissed her lightly. "I'm your Ghost now."

"Little Rock Air Force Base can be your defense operations center." Adrian hoped his tone didn't show his jealousy. He limped toward the tent flap, still grateful that Conner hadn't been hurt. "There's

a river and three reservoirs within a hundred clicks. It has medical facilities, barracks, stables and supply warehouses, terrain restrictions, and natural obstacles that will make it hard for them to cross.”

Marc had to agree. “It’s also near a lot of places we can use to resupply.”

Kenn wanted to help too. “If you can’t hold it, you can slow them down by blocking the routes with concreted cars.”

Marc didn’t need their ideas. He had his own. He gave Adrian a pointed glare and left the tent.

Adrian immediately figured out what was coming and began trying to brace against the joy and pain. He would have a visit shortly.

14

Adrian glanced up to find Marc taking the bench across from him at the deserted mess, dressed for silent infiltration. He met Marc’s bitter gaze. “You shouldn’t have told her that.”

Marc tried not to be angrier that Adrian already knew. “You’re listening to her thoughts.”

“Of course. But in this case, I asked myself what I would do in your place.”

Marc raised a brow. “And?”

Adrian grunted. “I’d need to know that if I didn’t make it back, she and my son would be cared for.”

“And will you?” Marc demanded angrily. “Or will you use them up?”

Adrian winced at the accusation. "I'll care for her as if she were mine."

Marc scowled. "If I don't return, she will be."

Adrian closed his eyes. "Yes."

"You do realize you'll have to snap out of this plan of yours to stay out of her way, right? You'll have to be closer than that."

"Yes."

Marc studied the man he could have idolized if not for feeling this coming. "And when I return? You expect to share?"

"She's not like Samantha. She's yours until you die. You know that."

"Yes." Marc hesitated.

Adrian sighed. "Safe Haven needs you. I expect you'll be back in a month to reclaim what's yours."

"And until then?"

Adrian's eyes opened to reveal tortured eagerness and dread. "I'll love her."

Marc spun from the tent before he could protest. That was what he wanted. No one else would look out for Angie the way Adrian would.

Marc spotted Charlie by the trucks and joined him, glad the teenager wasn't shouting anymore. Charlie hadn't taken it well when he'd learned that Marc was leaving. "You okay?"

Charlie kept his attention on the ground. "Yep."

"You gonna stay pissed and shut me out the whole time I'm gone? Be pissy and refuse to give me updates?"

Charlie wanted to return fire, but the worry was too strong. “No. Be careful!”

Charlie threw his arms around Marc for a tight hug that his father returned. Marc barely remembered the time when he hadn’t known his son, hadn’t loved him. “I’m coming back.”

“Say it again!” Charlie demanded, wiping at tears.

Marc grinned. “I’m coming back, boy. My word on it.”

“Good.” Charlie glanced at the medical tent. “If you don’t...”

Marc sighed unhappily. “He wouldn’t make a bad father, if I...”

Charlie punched Marc in the mouth. “Don’t ever say that! You’re my dad!”

Marc shook off the surprise from the weak uppercut and clutched the boy close. “I’m coming back.”

Marc and his chosen team left the safety and warmth of home a few minutes later. He refused to let himself stare in the mirrors. There was only the future now, this mission ahead of him, and he would keep it that way. Anything less and he’d never make it home.

You may not survive, even if you do return, the demon warned.

Marc knew that, too. Coming here after the battle could be worse than death, depending on how much Angie loved him, on how loyal she was in his

absence. This is where he discovered his true place in her heart. If it were below Adrian, Safe Haven wouldn't be his home anymore. The wastelands would.

15

Angela and Adrian stood side-by-side to watch the changes sweeping over Safe Haven. Their faces were unreadable, but their minds were full of regret at what they were losing. This new way of running the camp would be more effective and safer, but the casual days of living together in cooperation and peace were over for a while.

Fences with rolls of wire would now line the perimeter, with a second roll inside of it, creating a two-foot barrier, but also a new flow path for those who were coming to help them. Despite the attacks here, the calls asking to join the fight had tripled.

Angela studied the new panels of the wall that were being outfitted with metal sheets. This final barrier was inside the perimeter and had two gates—one at the QZ entrance to direct newly released camp members, and a large exit near the mess for a fast escape of the entire population. Big rigs loaded with their most needed supplies were being rolled into place near the large exit, along with their water tankers, fuel trucks, and weapons.

Marc didn't like putting so much of their stock in one place any more than Adrian had, but Angela assumed if the enemy got that close, it was too late

to worry over it anyway. She wanted everything they needed in one spot. The camp would go there when the firefight broke out, where they would be protected by Eagles who wanted the weapons covered, where the chain of command would gather for reporting and meals. It was also where the assassins among them would be exposed.

“Look out! Clear a path!”

Kenn and Neil came by the pair on Bobcats, delivering the next panels. They had two full teams working on the wall today, with three more finishing the barbed wire defense that the Eagles had been secretly working on for some time. Adrian had known this was coming. Every plan she came up with, Angela had found directions for in his books. All she had to do was implement them. Later, when his ideas were exhausted, she would come up with her own.

Across from her, training classes were already in session, showing camp members the basic skills they would need for survival. Few people, other than the Eagles, recognized it as the same training that Adrian gave his army. It would not only prepare them for being on their own if the battle went sour, it would also train them to assist during that fight. Even now, older camp men and women were being shown how to reload guns, make small cocktails, and bandage wounds. Every portion of Safe Haven’s population would be used.

To their left, mission teams were getting set to roll out and gather lists of needed items, from food

to weaponry. The rest of the camp wasn't going anywhere yet. They were sticking to the original plan of staying here long enough to stock up on supplies and let their wounded heal. It would also send a powerful message to those who'd initiated the attack. Safe Haven wasn't going to flee or become submissive because someone had sucker punched them. These people had survived worse.

To their right, the training tent was also hosting lessons, though these were mental instead of physical. The teenagers were attempting to share power with some of the open minded, proven men. There was occasionally a thump or cackle, but little else echoed from that canvas.

Beside the teen area was a kids' class being taught under a wide canopy. The little children were given bags they could carry and instructions on how to use the items in those tiny kits. Angela and Adrian both doubted any of the elementary school-age kids would survive on their own, but both of them were glad to know that the kids would have the information. Despite their young ages, each of them was hanging on every word the grieving Sisters were saying.

Overhead, the bubble flashed and pulsed in every color of the rainbow as emotions ran high. The dominant color was that crimson-killing gold, now tinged in blue as well—Angela's color. It rippled above them, spinning new shades of the two into patterns that bewitched those who looked up. The shield was fully visible. People remembered

her words, that she was here to protect them, that Samantha was too. The stories they'd been told seemed proven after the attack. It was easier to accept that Angela was indeed what Cesar's former slaves had been saying all along—a witch.

Angela wasn't concerned about it anymore. If they revolted, Adrian would protect her and Charlie. All that mattered was stopping the government from taking over. Everything else was second to that. The people who had destroyed America wanted the chance to do it again and only the Eagles could stand in their way.

“And we will.” Adrian soothed her, not even pretending he wasn't in her thoughts.

Angela tightened her control and unthinkingly brushed his wrist in solidarity. “*We've got this covered.*”

Adrian flinched at the contact, jerking away. “*You've got it covered.*”

Angela stared at him coldly. “If that's how you want it.”

Adrian turned away before he could say more. Nothing he wanted was possible—not from her, the camp, nor Conner. For him, it could never be returned.

Angela understood his grief, but at least Conner hadn't been killed like the others in that tin can when the bomb went off. Kyle had managed to get Conner, the newborn he was holding, and Jennifer out in time, but John and Anne hadn't been as lucky. Nor had Leslie or the second infant in the incubator

that she'd come to visit. Jennifer was inconsolable and being sedated. Kyle was storming around in a fury of work, hitting anyone who had the balls to suggest that maybe it was for the best. Four members of Safe Haven had been snatched away by a thieving blast in the night.

The funeral had been a loud, damp hour that saw a surprising number of men honoring Leslie. She'd certainly been friendly, was the most common phrase used. John and Anne were mourned more deeply. They'd been here longer, done more, and the fear of being short a doctor was real. The nursing assistant from Rapid City was a large help, as were the classes John had been holding, but it wasn't enough. Even with the medic that each team had been assigned, there was no way they were prepared for a battle's horrible consequences. John had known more, had more experience. There was no way for Angela to replace him or his knowledge. There was also no substitute for Anne's caring hand on a brow or the other lives they'd lost.

Angela had spent as much time at the service as she thought was needed. It hurt her to be there, as it did everyone, but she couldn't afford to spend even extra minutes. There was too much going on. Besides all the lessons and training they were setting up, they were also trying to get ready for moving the camp to the Spring, searching for supplies to get them to the mountains, and monitoring the area around them for more trouble. Her grief would have to come later. She hadn't been

away from Marc in a while and it hurt to think he could die out there. It also pissed her off that she had to put him in such a dangerous position in the first place. When the government came, they would feel her wrath.

The camp's rage was nearly visible. It simmered in slow waves of hatred and misery. Taking their doctor was something only the most brutal of enemies did, something that even the old world had disapproved of. They would pay for the damage this time. Every angry soul in Safe Haven now demanded it and those were the people Angela went to. She let them surround her, smother her with their certainty of what had to happen next.

"I'm going to bring them down!" Angela's eyes bled crimson hatred. "I won't leave a single man alive."

Part Two

“Once the change in leadership becomes an accepted fact, those being led will either love their new commander or hate them. For a leader to be successful, they have to inspire both of those emotions, at the right moments. Without love and hate, there’s no respect. Without respect, there’s no leader.” –Angela, leader of SHRC

Chapter Thirteen
Once A Ghost
Little Rock Air Force Base
July 15th

1

Eagle teams had gone by this air force base, gathering what they could find on their way to Little Rock to rescue Adrian's son. The base had been deserted then, lightly looted and eerie. It appeared the same as Marc and his team arrived.

It took them a few minutes to get inside and verify that no one had come through since they had. Marc thought there might have been large animals on the base from the tracks, but not finding signs of people made him breathe easier. He'd been prepared to fight for it, but it was easier this way. He had brought his full team, one man from each of the other teams, and three promising rookies. The rest, he had left to defend his family.

By the time the sun set on the first day, they'd made good progress. Marc had them set up in the center command room; power was now going through the backup generators, the computers, and the electric lights none of them were comfortable with anymore. They'd adjusted to candles and

flashlights, to lanterns and fires—to the old ways that had started to become lost before the war.

Marc didn't put on a security detail yet, instead keeping the men in the large command room with him. As the first night inside the base rolled by, Marc prepared them for his departure. "We'll go to Denver first and see which route they take. If we need to, we'll make sure it's 25. We'll set things up along there and 40."

"What about other survivors?" Shane wanted to know. "Won't they get caught in our traps and blow them too soon?"

"Some of them will, I'm sure." Marc's tone was grim. "Most have gone to ground. They know a fight is coming. I'm sure Adrian has a plan for it."

"He shut Safe Haven down." Morgan, one of the men from Kyle's team, wiped mud from his arms.

Marc ignored the guilt as best he could. "We can't leave signs or give radio warnings. The best we can do is report where we know the enemy is going, so people will stay clear of the area."

"That could help us." Rusty moved a bit closer. He was on Seth's team and he missed that, but being here with Marc was worth it. He was honored to be chosen. "Many survivors want a target."

Marc was counting on it. The more damage and chaos they could cause the enemy, the better their chances were of reducing the number of troops in the final battle that would likely take place in Georgia.

“It gives them an advantage, if we force them to take 25.”

Marc agreed with Shane’s comment. “Yes, several of them. Besides the roads that Cesar already cleared, they’ll have towns in easy reach for resupplying.”

Paul frowned. “Won’t those be emptied?”

“Some of it will, but unless you’re military, you can’t possibly imagine how many locations can be used to resupply. The suburbs are helpful, but those big cities along 25 are goldmines.”

“And if we make them take 70?”

Marc grunted. “It puts them here a week sooner. It’s a high price to pay to keep them from resupplying. I chose to let them take 25 so that we’ll have the extra week to set things up.”

“Choke points are the reservoirs, and the north and south avenues of approach.” Donald stared at the maps with a hard glare. On Zack’s team, he’d been low ranked. He expected the same on this run.

“What if they don’t come through here?” Shane viewed the shadows on the walls as if they were from another planet. They didn’t sway in the breeze like camp tents did; it made him uneasy.

“We’re going to use good bait.” Marc held up a tape recorder and hit play. Angela’s voice flowed out.

“We’ll use the Air Force Base and send the camp on. They’ll assume we’re with Safe Haven and we’ll wipe them out.”

Marc hit stop. “I’ve got a few clips like that. We know they’re listening and collecting information. We’ll plant some.”

“You’re sure they’ll fall for it?”

“We’re going to make it look real. They probably have satellites redirected and reconnected by now. When they zoom in on the base, they’ll find an army waiting for them.”

“How do we make it appear that eighteen men are an army?” Shane asked. “They’ll know we’re bluffing when none of the mannequins change shifts.”

Marc’s face filled with cold calculation. “Who said anything about bluffing?”

No one answered.

“I have to leave you guys here for a little while.” Marc’s voice rose. “I have friends to gather.”

The Eagles hated the idea of Marc going out alone, but he knew what had to be done. “While I’m gone, you’ll work on these pages of preparations.” Marc tossed the notebook to Quinn. “You’re in charge, my XO here.”

Quinn nodded in eager pride, opening the book. The first paragraph got his attention and held it completely.

“This base is where the soldiers will come to make their own camp. From here, they’ll punch out troops to wherever we are. If they take this building, they take Safe Haven.”

Quinn glanced up in horror. “We can’t hold this place with only seventeen men.”

“That’s why I have to go visit some friends. Turn to the last page.”

Quinn did it quickly, reading.

“If I don’t come back, this all falls to you. Keep them out as long as you can and buy our people time to hole up at Lookout Mountain.”

Marc slid his hands under his neck as he lay on the cot. They’d brought the beds up to this room and the barracks feel of them bunking together had Marc’s mind drifting contentedly through past moments of glory, searching for anything he could use.

“When you know you’ve lost it, blow the traps that we and the supply teams have put down. Block every avenue of approach that you can as you go.”

The Eagles took turns studying the book when Quinn handed it around.

Marc let himself go to sleep, relaxed for the last time on this mission. From here on out, life would get incredibly hard and become more satisfying than even working under Adrian.

2

An hour before dawn, Marc woke Quinn and gestured for him to follow.

Kit over his shoulder, Marc looked west. “I’ll be in Oklahoma if something unexpected happens and you need me. I’ll be on a southeast to northwest route.”

Quinn walked Marc from the building to find Jax and Paul waiting by their vehicles.

Quinn frowned. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“With him.”

Marc grinned. He hadn’t thought any of them would want to leave the relative safety of the base. “I’d be glad of the company.” Marc held a hand out to Quinn. “Do it how I would. Be me. They’ll come around.”

Quinn shook it with eager happiness. He’d never been given control of anything in his life, but he’d dreamed of the day that he would get to prove himself. Now, here, he would finally get the chance. Marc had put him in charge. Marc had faith in him. That was enough to convince Quinn that his time for glory had come. When Marc returned, he would find the list finished.

3

It took them three days to reach the area that Marc wanted. One of those had been spent trading in their loud bikes for horses; he had continued their training while they traveled.

The two Eagles were soaking it up, confident that Marc knew what he was doing. He’d earned their respect with his courage. The fact that he was taking them deep into Indian lands, hoping to convince them to fight, was amazing. That they

might die hadn't sent either rookie back when they'd heard the plan.

Marc had confided in them while showing Jax how to saddle the wild horses they'd broken only enough to be rideable. It helped that it hadn't been long since the horses were used, but catching them had been rough. Paul had been a huge help. He clearly didn't mind animals.

"If we can convince even one tribe to fight with us, it will pull the others in."

"Won't they all want to fight?" Jax frowned. "Surely they don't want the government here."

"Of course not, but they were nearly wiped from existence once. They'll be sure of the outcome this time."

Paul scowled. "They'll be leery. We can't ride up, explain what's coming, and ask for help. That will get us killed. So, what's the plan?"

Marc smirked at the rookies. "Ghosting."

Now, riding through Choctaw lands, Paul thought he understood better. Observing Marc, learning from him, was incredible and sometimes surreal. He was so quiet! Even on an animal he wasn't familiar with, Marc was dangerous, like he'd bent the horse's will to match his.

"We're not alone." Jax picked it up suddenly. "We've got a tail."

"This isn't going to be easy." Marc was speaking to the men on either side of him. "They

had to obey the laws before. That isn't the case now."

Paul understood some of what they were about to face and was scared. He was also excited. He came from a family that hadn't believed in exploring their roots, but Paul had missed not knowing where he came from. He'd always felt a connection to these lands, these people.

"You'll follow my lead, then your training, then your instincts. Is that clear?" Marc drilled.

Both men agreed, thrilled to be a part of what Marc had told them over the last days. If his plans worked, Safe Haven wouldn't have to worry.

"We've got fresh eyes on us, I think." Paul was enjoying the comforting creak of the saddle under him. He'd also missed riding. "Closer."

Marc confirmed it. "They've been there since we entered tribal lands." *This is it.*

"I mean closer, like we're about to be..."

Spaatt!

The arrow sank into the tree on Paul's right.

The three Eagles came to a quick stop.

"Be still." Marc kept his eyes on the riders in front of them.

The Indians didn't want them here. That was the first thing they all picked out. The second was that there were a lot of them, and they appeared like the proud natives of legend, not the drunken troublemakers the world had been told of for so long. They'd reclaimed their heritage.

Marc stayed pointed forward, voice low. “They’ll look for fear. Do what I do.”

The sound of softly padding horses came to their ears, but neither of the rookies glanced around for the source. The Indians ahead of them were stern-faced shadows without paint, but loaded with weapons.

Marc felt the demon tense as his gifts were sensed and went with plan B. His voice rang through the area in haughty pride. “The Ghost wishes to cross your lands.”

The trio held still as silence filled the woods. Not even the birds made noise.

The soft pad of an unshod horse came from the right.

Marc bowed his head.

Paul and Jax hurried to do the same.

“White men are not allowed here.”

“No other men are allowed here,” another warrior added, voice guttural with hatred. “Kill them now.”

“The Ghost does not trespass. He comes to barter passage.” Marc made it clear how he was to be addressed.

“What does the Ghost bring for barter?”

Marc slowly raised a hand toward his saddlebags. “Medicine.”

“We need none of your poisons!” the guttural warrior spat. “Kill them!”

“It will help with the radiation sickness and the miscarriages your people are having.”

There was a thick silence as a horse covered in a sheen of sweat came around to take a blocking position in front of them. It told Marc that this was a second group that had ridden hard to catch up.

“Why does a trio of hardasses come here alone?”

Marc locked gazes with the obviously important Indian now in front of him. “Will you accept my barter? I can add these horses, but we’ll need to ride them to the edge of tribal lands first. Our business is important.”

The warrior stared with a weathered, impassive face, but Marc knew he understood what was happening even before the man spoke.

“The soldiers have woken. You are one of them.”

“I was before, when there was no choice.” Marc pushed out a wave of peace. “Now, there’s a different future waiting for my people. As there is for yours.”

“We stay here and have been left alone except for trespassers.” The warrior stared pointedly.

Marc knew better than to let the demon do any pushing yet and kept him locked. “The soldiers are coming, a thousand strong. We go to slow them down, to buy time for our camp to get away, to kill as many as we can.”

None of the braves reacted, but tension filled the woods.

The warrior in front of them, covered in gray and leathery skin, searched Marc for an endless moment. In that look, was awareness.

“You are from Safe Haven.”

It wasn't a question.

The warrior skimmed Marc's men; his tone rang with scorn. “Those are not *Ghosts*.”

Marc didn't argue. “Braves in training, rookies.”

The Indian didn't crack a grin, but Marc thought that maybe he wanted to. Marc guessed he might be talking to the relative of a chief and waited respectfully for the man's choice.

“Three men to stop an army. The odds are not with you.”

“If the Creator wills it, we'll die. We don't question the path we've been put on.” Marc stared back gravely. “We do our duty to our people.”

“He lies!” Guttural warrior shouted. “He dies!”

Marc pulled the demon forward a bit and turned to inspect the warrior. The menace in his stare was impossible to miss.

The guttural warrior fell silent, confused and leery.

Marc turned his head back to the warrior in front of him.

The leader stared, face betraying some of his surprise. Thaddeus didn't back down from anyone—ever. Natoli instantly respected Marc for it. “We will escort you out of our lands, in exchange for the medicine.”

Marc gestured for Paul to get it. “Would you like to hold our weapons?”

Now there was a reaction from the braves. To offer to ride defenseless among your enemy was fearless.

Paul put the prepared kit in Marc’s hand and got back in line.

The warrior searched Marc for another long moment and then kneed his horse toward the west. “I am Natoli, of the Choctaw. It is a three-day ride to tribal borders. You may hunt with knives and drink from the streams.”

“We have rations.” Marc was thrilled with how it was going so far. “I prefer to ride straight through for as long as my men can stand it.”

“As you wish.”

Marc waited until the line of warriors began moving, and then gently kneed his horse. “Stay in my formation.”

Paul and Jax went to their assigned places with no show of fear at the sheer number of horse-bound Indians now coming from the hills and woods to surround them.

“Keep your hands away from your weapons, but don’t do anything else differently than you’ve been doing. Follow *my* lines.”

The Indians didn’t like his words, but they did respect them. The others were exactly what he’d said—in training—but was he really the Ghost? If he were, that would change their plans.

As they traveled, Marc could feel the nerves of his men, but also the curiosity of the braves. He resumed the last lesson he'd been teaching them. "Noise can echo for miles now." Marc struck a match on the saddle to light his hand rolled smoke. Packs and cartons were things of the past unless a scavenging run got lucky. "We've gone over the items most common to give you away. Tell me what they were."

Jax spoke first, "Keys, belts and buckles, straps."

"Gear that isn't packed right." Paul kept controlling his nerves. It helped to have something else to think about. "Also unsecured weapons."

"One minute of silence. Tell me what you hear."

It was eerie, the way the Indians instantly went quiet. They'd been talking lowly, adjusting and using things from their pouches and packs, but at Marc's instruction, there wasn't a single sound from them.

It was completely unnerving and the Eagles forgot how to work around it.

Marc's voice was laced with a generous respect. "*Those* are ghosts, gentlemen. That's your goal."

Marc didn't wait for that good wave to sink in before firing the next. "Pay attention to them and what they don't do. It wouldn't hurt to pick up a few things while we're traveling together."

Natoli didn't look back. It was beneath him to do so, but he allowed his pace to slow until his top braves were in the lead and he was even with Marc.

He didn't speak, but Marc knew he had questions. Instead of rushing to fill them in, Marc began to hum. After a minute or so, the two Eagles along for this ride joined in. Adrian's favorite song reminded them too much of home not to.

For the Indians, it was a connection that they hadn't expected. Riding and humming a soft, deep tune was something they'd been doing for centuries. For the Eagles, it was a calming habit that Marc had begun almost as soon as they'd left Safe Haven's gates.

Like he'd known we would need to do this, Jax thought, no longer as rattled. He loved this song.

Natoli continued to search Marc in long glances that Marc refused to respond to. These were native people with strong traditions that were finally free to flourish unrestricted. When they asked questions, he would be ready. Until then, it was a companionable ride and he could keep training. Where Marc was hoping they would end up, Paul and Jax would need all the help he could give them.

4

Marc dozed lightly in the saddle as they rode through the thick woods. The trees here weren't covered in mold and it made for sweet, clean breezes that relaxed a man's heart and helped him see what mattered.

Sensing movement on his right, Marc heard Paul shove Jax back into his place. All of them were

dozing—they'd been traveling for a full day and night since joining the Indians—but Jax kept falling in too deep.

“Your man is weary.” Natoli gestured. “You may sleep here unharmed.”

Marc began rolling a fresh smoke. “No. He'll keep up or go home.”

Jax did what none of them expected. He slapped himself three times, fast.

Marc approved as he rolled a second smoke. When he offered one to the warrior still riding next to him, it was taken.

“We shall hear from my chief soon.” Natoli also accepted Marc's lighter. He inhaled lightly, getting the taste before inhaling normally.

Marc lit his own and let the smoke gather until he could shoot a large bubble into the sky. He popped a few simple rings with the last of the smoke and studied the warrior.

Natoli had spent a lot of time in what his grandparents had been forced to call the civilized world and he recognized things about Marc. He spotted the cunning and subtle manipulations, but it was the request he felt that stirred his heart. He'd always longed to be in the past. He was sure his strengths could have helped his people keep their land, their lives, and their dignity.

When Natoli didn't offer any more conversation, neither did Marc. They were about to reach the first border, where the Choctaw lands became another tribe's marked-off slot. He

wondered if the tribes were still obeying the jurisdictions. There was no reason to now. They could return to their homelands. Marc was curious as to why they had chosen to stay here, but after the trek he'd made since the war, it was clear they'd made the right choice.

Jax began to slide; everyone knew what it was by the loud creaking.

Paul reached out to shove him again.

Before his hand could get there, Marc turned and drilled Jax in the shoulder.

Jax went off the other side of the horse and landed in a bewildered heap in front of guttural Indian's horse.

Thaddeus drew up sharply with a scowl, but didn't comment. The man had been punished for his negligence.

As Marc stopped and stared, so did their escorts.

Jax flushed a deep red. He picked himself up without saying anything and swung into the saddle without a grimace at the throb. Marc had a hell of a shoulder slide when he was pissed.

"I'm not, really." Marc had the demon listening in case Jax decided this was the time to let out that infamous temper. "You ready to give up that place yet?"

Jax's jaw settled into rigid lines. "No, I'm not."

Marc turned around. "Good. You sleep when I do. Not before."

"Yes, sir."

The scouting party of Choctaw warriors continued to study these strange white men, but most of the escort party was already convinced of their truthfulness about where they were going. Now, they had to discover if Marc was the one they were waiting for. If he were, they would join his quest to defeat the treacherous white men. If not, all three of these enemy soldiers would die.

5

Now that Marc had shown he knew how to control his men, he demonstrated that he also knew how to care for them. That was vital when a man was seeking someone to fight under him. Spilling blood wasn't the only thing a killer needed or wanted.

“We'll take a few hours soon and eat, sleep. Jax will cook. Paul will care for the horses.”

On cue, Jax responded, “Rations or fresh?”

“Stew.” Marc slowly took three throwing knives from a jacket pocket. He'd been scanning ahead with his grid, sure the Chickasaw scouts were close. He'd found an opportunity instead.

“Dried beef stew or chicken?”

Marc kneed his horse suddenly, using it to flush a thicket; the small den of rabbits scattered.

He used the knives in quick succession. Marc went to retrieve his kill.

“My thanks.” He snapped the neck of the hare he hadn't killed with the last throw.

Marc cut off the heads with his k-bar and then slit the rabbits from end to end as he held them up, keeping the blood from pooling in the meat. He quickly cleaned them out, not caring that he was holding up their convoy. These ten minutes would demonstrate many things.

Marc didn't take the time to skin the meat; he wrapped it in thick leaves from the bush the rabbits had been covering in as the horses came by. He buried the rest of the mess, digging in quick jerks with his k-bar, then stored the meat in the top of a saddlebag. After he wiped his hands on a wet-wipe, he shoved it into his pocket to use as tinder later, then mounted up. "Make flapjacks with the stew. Just like I showed you and be generous. We'll pick up more supplies as we go."

Jax and Paul were in awe. They'd had no idea that Marc knew how to live like these Indians, but it was clear that they'd underestimated him. They'd thought to be doing typical government trickery, but Marc was the real thing.

It was obvious that their escorts felt the same.

As soon as Natoli picked an area, a dozen braves approached Marc for conversations. It was good progress.

His Eagles tried to listen as they went about the duties they'd been given.

"We have a legend..." Natoli puffed smoke. "It says that Afterworld will be ruled by a Ghost." He met Marc's eye curiously. "Do you know of this tale?"

Marc stripped his saddle and took it to where he would sleep. “Yes. A savior to unite the remaining people after mother earth expels the others.”

Natoli trailed him. “They say he will have great power over the lands to the west and north, that even the south will join him on the quest.”

Like them or not, Thaddeus was also convinced of who Marc was. He hadn’t even known the rabbits were there. Who else but a ghost could have spotted them?

“And you wonder if I am that man.” Marc tossed down his bedroll. “The one from your stories.”

Paul brought the other two saddles over. Marc took the bedrolls from each of them and began to get all three of their places ready. “What if I told you I’ve always been called that, but never actually felt like it? Would my lack of belief matter to your people?”

Thaddeus responded in light surprise at the honesty. “No. The spirits put men into place as if all life is one constant battle. If you are the one, you will take us there through your choices, not your belief.”

Marc absorbed that as he dug through his kit. “So you would follow the Ghost into a battle, so long as you are sure he is the one of legend?”

Thaddeus turned away. “Do not abuse our trust, white man. Too many have.”

Marc understood how he could feel that way; he didn’t make any promises.

That was also noticed.

Jax steeled his nerves as he gathered what he needed for the large meal. He understood what Marc wanted, what he'd be doing for the next few hours, and understood it was to toughen him up and show he'd been punished. It was something these men would respect. Jax handled his temper well considering how tired he was. After building the quick, light-smoke fire that Marc had taught them, Jax took a small pinch of a cotton ball covered in petroleum jelly from his watertight canister and placed it in the center of his tinder.

Around him, the Choctaws observed curiously as he took a flint striker from his belt and struck a spark onto the cotton ball. It flamed right up.

Despite the wind and the small piece of cotton, the tiny blaze continued to burn while he put the striker away and held the tinder to where it would catch easier. Seconds later, he had a nice fire started and went to get a pot and fill it with water.

The Indians exchanged grins, gesturing toward the homemade fire kit.

Marc caught Paul as he went by. "Some of their horses have cuts from the brambles we went through. Do ours, then theirs, but ask them first."

Paul agreed contentedly. He loved caring for horses, being out in the open, learning new ways. He'd already picked up quite a few tricks while observing their escorts, and unlike Jax, he was using his curiosity to stay alert.

Paul finished their own animals quickly—he had been applying the salve to any injuries each night as he and Jax bedded them down—but when he started to go toward the closest Indian horse, Marc pinned him with a hard glare.

Paul felt it from across their comfortable little camp and turned.

Marc’s eyes went to Natoli. “His first.”

Paul understood and respectfully approached the warrior. “May I tend your animal?”

Natoli gave a short nod. “All of my braves will allow it. There is no need to ask each one.”

Paul was in heaven from that moment on. Being surrounded by horses for the next few hours was perfect for him.

Their company liked his happiness. They watched him closely, but after a single animal, it was clear what his passion was.

“He makes a fine horseman.” Natoli joined Marc by the cooking stew.

“Yes. A good fighter, too. Loyal.”

The warrior appraised Jax as he finished skinning the last rabbit and slid the meat into the pot. “What of this one?”

Marc didn’t stare at the nervous Eagle, instead tossing him an extra pouch of mix from the kit at his side. “He kills.”

That drew more respect and also a bit of doubt. Fumbling with the boxes and packs, Jax didn’t look dangerous at all. He looked like their women.

Marc snorted at the images. “He cooks like one, too.”

That was a compliment to these men, but Jax didn’t know it. He turned to Marc with a snotty glare and was saved an embarrassment by Paul stepping in front of him. “Here’s the whey milk I saved. Make ‘em good, squaw. We’re hungry.”

Jax tried to stay mad and found himself laughing with everyone else. “Well, if I’m going to be treated like a woman, I’d better be protected like one too.”

It was an odd moment where Marc expected joking responses. What the comment received, was agreement.

Interesting, Marc thought. We push this shit out a little and the survivors soak it up as if they’re starving. Very interesting.

6

The meal was good. Jax hadn’t known how they would serve the stew to their escorts, but Marc handed him a small stack of cups from his kit and he dipped as much as each one would hold. He gave them to Paul, who was already passing around stacks of flapjacks, and the campsite filled with happily feasting riders. The Indians hadn’t eaten anything from their own pouches or made any stops either.

Now that they’d provided a meal for everyone, the Indians might provide something next, like

entertainment or the morning meal. It was a tradeoff system that Marc planned to stick with. The results were impossible to argue with.

“More?” Jax asked, glancing around the group. Marc held out his sloppy cup. “Half way.”

Marc never took seconds, not even when they were in camp. Jax turned away before the good feeling could bring up tears. He was one of those cursed people who cried when happy or angry, and he struggled to hide it from the Indians.

Paul groaned as he stood up. “Permission to find a bush and crash?”

“Granted.” Marc almost smiled. The food had been hot, and they felt safe with their escorts. Life now was often much worse.

Jax started cleaning up after handing Marc his cup, leaving him and Natoli alone. Marc took his time finishing the stew. Once they left tribal lands, they would use their rations. Few lights would be allowed in enemy territory until the fighting began.

“Then I’ll give them all the light they can stand.” Marc’s mind went to the horrible feeling of doom he’d felt upon riding away from Safe Haven.

Natoli studied Marc as he smoked, confident that his braves had them protected. “I have questions.”

Marc had been hoping it would happen soon. “I have the time.”

The warrior’s brows drew together. “Who are you?”

Marc let the crimson bleed through and observed the warrior pale. He shoved a blast of power out and felt the man cringe from the harmless energy he'd sent.

"Do not doubt me." Marc pulled the demon back in like he'd watch Angela do hundreds of times. It was harder than he'd imagined.

"We few who stayed..." The warrior waved his braves off as they came to his defense. "We are not healthy. The winds come from the oceans and kill our animals, wither our crops. We cannot stay here."

Marc understood something had to be stopping them from leaving. "Your people know the government survived. They fear being hunted if they leave these lands."

Natoli's voice was thick with anger. "This time we will die out. They have no right to keep us here!"

"No. They never did." Marc's eyes flashed.

This time, the warrior wasn't intimidated. "We've seen others like you. They will fight at your side?"

Marc nodded, thinking of how many magic users were in Safe Haven. "With the help of tribesmen or alone, we will stand for oppression no longer."

The rest of the night passed in a thick, thoughtful silence that said plans were being formed. This group was making their choice.

Marc's obnoxious alarm jerked Jax and Paul into upright positions with their guns in hand.

The Indians around them snickered. They'd observed Marc placing it between the heads of his two men and waited for the entertainment. These twenty scouts liked the Ghost. Most of them wanted to go along for his ride, but that choice would be made by their chief and they would honor it.

"Where's Marc?" Paul asked, yawning.

Jax slowly put away his gun. He was the more leery of the two. "His horse is here. He's around."

"Your leader is bathing away the other world, the corrupt one. He will return when he is finished."

Both Eagles were instantly uneasy, not sure if that meant Marc had gone willingly or been taken.

Paul snorted. "Marc taken and we didn't hear it? Yeah. That'll happen."

Jax agreed, chuckling at their worry. If Marc were in trouble, they would have been woken by those brutal Colts. "Do we need to stay away from him until he's done?"

Thaddeus leered. "You are free to watch."

As soon as they'd taken care of themselves and given their horses a drink, the two Eagles went toward the small crowd of braves on the nearby hill. The men were pointing, betting. Neither Paul nor Jax liked the images that were forming. *Bathing away a corrupt world* couldn't possibly be as simple as getting clean.

They joined the warriors without showing any signs of fear. It helped that there was only a worried anger. There wasn't anything to scent and trigger a problem, and the braves let them through.

"What the hell..." Paul trailed off as Marc, naked except for his boxers, dove into the creek below. They had a view from fifty feet above the crystal clear water that was beautiful, inviting, and full of wildlife.

"What's he doing?!" Jax swore. "Things come out..."

Marc broke the surface with an enormous grin that instantly made both men feel left out.

Paul narrowed in on the shapes under the water. It wasn't the snake-like things he'd expected, but hundreds of fish.

Paul turned to the closest man. "Are they still safe to eat?"

Thaddeus pointed downstream, where a group of braves was wading with nets. As they struggled against the current, the water rose to their waists, then chests, but Marc's antics upstream kept pushing the fish into their waiting arms.

"He is a good hunter. You will learn much from him." The warrior's voice deepened into skepticism. "If you survive."

Paul and Jax exchanged a glance, but didn't comment further. Instead, they returned to the campsite and helped the other men prepare an area for their coming fish fry.

Their breakfast of fish and onion burritos inside smoked leaves was interrupted by the arrival of three new warriors. These men rode into the center of the camp with an attitude that said they were important.

Thaddeus pointed. “Braves have come from the Chickasaw. We shall find out if the Ghost goes from here with them.”

Marc waited patiently, as if he held no concern for the glares of the new men.

The Chickasaw warriors talked to Thaddeus and Natoli in low tones. Their words didn’t carry, but the incredulous expressions of the new arrivals were clear.

“What happens now?” Jax asked, cleaning up his mess and swallowing a belch.

“They’ll kill us or take us where we want to go.” Marc shrugged. “Same as with the Choctaws. You’ve both done great. Don’t stop now. Be what you are.”

The three new warriors moved their way, drawing knives.

Paul was the first one up, hand on his holster. “I was told not to kill anything on your lands. If you attack my leader, I *will* break that rule.”

Jax rose to his feet, voice deceptively casual. “Paul’s the best gun on our team after Marc. He won’t miss. Neither will I.”

Marc flashed a sarcastic look of sympathy. “My men are loyal.”

Instead of the fight Paul and Jax were bracing for, Natoli’s confidently arrogant tones rang across camp.

“I believe that is my knife in your hand, Atolius.”

Atolius scowled, but obligingly tossed the knife to Natoli. “They don’t look that hard!”

Marc waited for the new men to come closer, and offered the smokes he’d rolled. All of the braves accepted, using sticks from the fire for lights.

Marc blew smoke toward the sky, feeling more alive than he had in a while. “Thank you for the bath. I needed it.”

He hadn’t been sure what to expect when he’d woken to find most of their escorts on the bank, but he’d recognized the opportunity when he’d spotted all the fish around the bathing Indians.

“We will go with you, to the lands of the desert.”

Marc waited for Atolius to continue.

“When we arrive, I will view the enemy. If the threat will reach our people, then we will stand with the Ghost.”

Marc extended his arm. “My thanks.”

The Indian clasped his around the forearm and gave a firm shake. “Our honor.”

Not about to miss another opportunity, when the demon spoke, so did Marc.

“I feel your unrest. The drive to take your people home is one that will never give you peace. It must be accomplished to be banished.”

Atolius jerked his arm away.

Marc delivered a final message from the demon. “You have a traitor here. I can feel him, listening and worrying. Beware.” Marc let the red bleed through slightly, and then pulled it in. Every moment like this was practice for when he would use his gifts in battle for the first time. “Do not ignore my words. It will lead to death.”

Marc shoved up from his seat and everyone flinched.

Getting a little taste of what Angela had gone through, Marc was overcome with the need to be alone. “I’m leaving in five minutes.”

He walked toward the tree line to get himself under control; he heard the immediate response of a camp being broken down.

So, this is what Adrian feels like every day. No wonder he thinks he has it all covered.

Marc swallowed the pride, glad that he could, and got to work.

9

They left exactly five minutes after Marc spoke it, with Paul and Jax in their usual place and the Chickasaw Indians behind them, studying. Marc was glad of that. The more details they picked up, the more likely they were to fight with him.

“Would you hear of a legend?”

Marc smiled. “I enjoy stories.”

“Perhaps you will tell us one sometime.”

“Perhaps.”

Natoli cleared his throat, turning his head to the front at the lightly given sting. It said *his* story had to be good enough. “When we were first sent here, the land was welcoming. It gave us great harvests and fed our bellies. Then the warming came. Year after year, it got hotter, damper, until the ground refused to be so generous. When the catastrophe came, we were starving.”

Marc blew out smoke, waiting, observing.

“After it all fell, we took what we needed from the stores and began to recover our stolen culture. We formed new trade routes, new laws and rights, and we joined with our brothers on all sides.”

This was what Marc had been hoping for; he gave the man his full attention.

Natoli, sensing Marc’s interest, provided more details. “We have hatred in our hearts for the soldiers. We would fight, but they are all gone. The Indian has inherited the earth, not those who drove us out of our homes.”

“And now here we come, ruining the happy ending.” Marc could certainly understand their hatred and their desire to be in charge. They’d never raped the earth the way a government-run society did.

“Yes, the news has been devastating. Some of the tribes are holding councils as we ride through

their lands. Some are refusing to consider the fight now that it has come to us. My own tribe has chosen to battle, but we are among the few who practiced the old ways in secret. We have more students than fighters, though. It is true of all tribes now.”

“My people are the same. Some will fight, but most will hide until it’s over. There was never any doubt for me on my path.”

Natoli viewed Marc’s matching, ivory-handled Colts with the respect they deserved. “No, with one such as you, how could your future be anything but what you’ve become?”

“Indeed.” Marc had been battered through life until he was now the ram that others would be hurt upon. *So be it.*

“You have Indian blood.”

“I’m a mix of many things. I used to think the Gypsy side was dormant.”

Natoli studied him. “Until you discovered the spirit lurking inside.”

Marc stared. “How do you know about my kind?”

Natoli gave a light sneer laced with scorn. “You are not the first ghost to travel these lands since the war.” Natoli’s voice lowered. “Or even before that day.”

“You have tribesmen like me?”

Natoli didn’t openly confirm or deny it. Instead, he began to speak in the deep tones of a natural storyteller. “The odd ones came among our people when the white man arrived. They were drawn to

our kindness, to our respect of nature. When the soldiers began driving us out like cattle, the odd ones aided us by healing our warriors and providing shelters the army could not locate. We were protected.”

Marc noticed all the braves listening and guessed by the expressions that it was a story that some of them hadn’t heard.

“Then the white man began taking the odd ones, stealing them from our vibrant camps. The Indians began to die in massive numbers and the odd ones vanished from our knowledge.” Natoli stiffened his shoulders. “We were sent here to be brainwashed and it has worked. Half of the tribes are still clinging to the soldier’s rules, though their control of us has ended. Some kept the old ways in secret and those are the warriors who came to view the odd one who calls himself our Ghost.”

“And when they understand that I am who I claimed to be?”

Natoli grunted in set resolve. “Then we will go to war against the soldiers once again, except this time, we will not let our power be stolen!”

Marc instantly felt protected and knew his Eagles did as well. “Are many coming?”

Thaddeus was on Marc’s other side. He loved the feeling. “All the tribes have stories of the odd ones arriving to rescue them from their prisons. Believe in these legends or not, they are curious.”

“So I shouldn’t be worried about showing them who I am?”

Thaddeus's face tightened. "The more you demonstrate your differences, the more all of the warriors will view you that way. The months of freedom have allowed a return to manhood for those brave enough to chase it. They will follow, if you are worthy."

Marc thought of Adrian, who was followed despite his now glaring weaknesses. *I don't want that fall. I won't stand for the disgrace.*

Natoli left Marc to his deep thoughts, satisfied the Ghost understood his message. Natoli wanted the tribes to unite against the government so that he could take his people out of these dead lands, but without enough accords, the other tribes would hunt them down for bringing the wrath of the soldiers. The government didn't care which tribe they hit, only that an Indian had broken the rules and must be punished. Natoli wouldn't bring that on his people any more than he would run and have his tribe be hunted, but in his heart, he knew they had to fight. If the soldiers made it to Oklahoma, his people would be wiped out this time. Eight months of learning how to fight again wasn't enough and Natoli knew it. He glanced at Marc's stern profile thoughtfully. *If this hardass is what he claims, his power alone might give us an advantage.*

"They may have odd ones of their own." Marc refused to downplay the danger.

Natoli had considered that. "But they will be weak after living inside the earth all this time, yes?"

"That's my hope."

“Mine, as well. When the other odd ones join us, it won’t matter.”

“There are a lot of horses moving through the woods around us.” Marc wasn’t sensing a threat, just curiosity.

“Yes. Most of the scouts will observe from a distance.” Thaddeus slapped at a bug. “There were more than fifty tribes crammed into Oklahoma and many were bitter enemies. The government hoped we would fight each other and finish what they started.”

“And instead?”

Thaddeus’s head went up. “We did to them, what they’d done to us. We learned their ways and copied them. We took advantage of the treaties and enacted new laws to protect our children. For that, we had to sacrifice our heritage.”

Marc thought of the areas they’d come through. The land here was untouched. It was as if marked by nature to flourish. There wasn’t any mold, no mutations that he’d spotted. The air was sweet and inviting; the wildlife was everywhere. Marc had never seen so many animals in Oklahoma. This had mostly been an arid place, full of dust and tornadoes, meant to be harsh on anyone who lived here, but that had changed. “Why do you want to leave? By staying true to your beliefs, it looks like nature is leaving you alone in these areas. I’m also assuming that the medicine you need isn’t for anyone here. Should I try to guess?”

Thaddeus didn't look over. "Some of our people have broken the rules and left. The Navajo have missed their rocky homelands, as have the Cheyenne missed the Great Plains. It was a radio transmission from your Safe Haven that drove me to gather the older warriors from my tribe and begin training our youth. Others did the same and we have been able to carry supplies to our rogue groups."

Marc stared in understanding. "Instead of fighting after you came here, you banded together."

Natoli offered more details, sensing that if he did, Marc might do the same. "Quiet deals made a tense peace possible at first. When it became clear that your Uncle Sam did not intend to honor his promises to any of the tribes, we began talking, trading to ensure our survival. Except for the Iroquois Nation, all tribes in Oklahoma coexist."

"That's amazing. And your rogue clans, will they come?"

"We will take word to them, with the medicine."

Marc was satisfied. He'd expected to have to convince each tribe that they encountered, but thanks to Indian adaptability, he might have this part of the plan already covered. These men wanted to be free. He could lead them there. Marc now intended to make sure they knew it before he left them. They were trying to remember who they'd been, but with their natural instincts and longings, Marc had no doubt about helping them become as lethal as their ancestors had been. It was who he was in this new life, who he'd always wanted to be

before, and there was no longer any wrestling with the demon inside. He asked and the voice answered. Denial had come and gone. Now, hard anger had that place.

A cold chill swept over Marc; he knew instantly what that feeling meant. “Hit the deck!”

Paul and Jax followed Marc’s command, but their escorts doubted his concern until arrows began flying at them; they realized their farthest lookouts had been overcome.

Natoli and Thaddeus began shouting orders.

Marc led his rookies into the shelter of a nearby thicket, eager to discover if they would be protected as had been implied.

Screams and shouts came, though the thicket was too dense for sight; the three men waited uneasily. They were used to being the ones fighting. It felt wrong to let the Indians do their work.

Atolius appeared. “It is over.”

Marc led them out of hiding, a gun in each hand. Behind him, the Eagles appeared, also with guns ready.

Atolius grinned. “It was a raiding party who didn’t know what they were walking into.”

“Iroquois?” Marc holstered as he swept the riders. He hoped none of them died. He was already feeling responsible for them.

“Yes. Why do you scan the braves? There are no traitors among *this* group.”

Marc nudged his horse toward a bleeding man. “To heal them, of course.”

Shock went through the group. He meant to demonstrate his power! They were about to witness the Ghost in action.

Marc wasn't sure if he could. He'd been on the receiving end and watched it, but hadn't tried it yet. Determination filled his heart as the demon spoke in his mind, telling him how.

Cameron didn't flinch from Marc's light touch or the pain of the arrow in his leg. It wasn't deep, though blood was dripping steadily to the dirt.

Marc pushed hard, shoving the shaft through.

Cameron screamed, clutching at his leg.

Marc used an iron grip to keep him in place. "Look at me!"

Cameron forced himself to stare into Marc's eyes; the pain faded into a dull throb.

"Good. Be still." Marc placed a hand over the gushing wound.

The tiny colored orbs shot out as if from a cannon, striking Cameron and knocking him from the horse.

"Too hard." Marc mentally adjusted and switched positions. "Hold still now."

The orbs worked faster than Angela's had; Marc was grateful. Healing was draining. He weaved slightly as he rose. He would have to figure out how to refill it.

Atolius placed a hand on Marc's arm, steadying him. His voice overflowed with satisfied awe. "The *Ghost* has come."

Cameron slowly picked himself up, staring incredulously at the healed leg and the bloody arrow on the ground. When he finally glanced up, the feverish light of fanaticism was shining on his lined face. "My life is yours."

Marc reached out an arm, not smiling. "I accept."

Cameron shuddered in fearful eagerness and Marc let go of him. The flash of the future he'd gotten upon touching Cameron was powerful. He leaned down. "You will be a great leader, one day, Cameron Storm of the Chickasaw. The mighty warrior who saved his people."

Cameron bowed as contentment and pride swept over him in thick waves. Whatever this odd one wanted from him, he would give. The feel of his power was unlike anything Cameron had felt and he wanted...no, he *needed* more of it.

Marc hid his triumph, glad of the way things were falling into place. It was a relief to know it would work for him as well. He wasn't comfortable using Adrian's leadership methods, but he was able to when the situation called for it. This one did.

10

The next group of Indians joined their party as dusk came. They were trouble. Marc knew it as soon as he spotted the signs of their rebellion. Scalps hung on each horse, still drying. Instead of dismay, he was relieved. These were killers.

As these new riders merged with their group, they were disrespectful, bumping into both Choctaw and Chickasaw horses in their haste to get closer to the Ghost.

Paul and Jax didn't have time to defend Marc. The warriors they were riding with quickly closed ranks and refused to let the new riders through.

A skirmish immediately ensued.

Marc kept his men in place with a casually raised hand.

Paul and Jax observed the vicious fight with concern, but Marc was noticing the actions of the warriors protecting them. Each was taking the opportunity to touch him. Some were light brushes, some were pats, but all of them fed into Marc's energy and strengthened his determination to have all of these men along. They were exactly what he needed.

With that thought in mind, Marc stood up in the saddle and took his place in history. "Enough!"

His shout stopped the fight and swiveled heads his way.

Marc glared at the new arrivals. "My people are dying. I do not have time for this!" He waved a hand at Atolius. "Move us out."

It was the first order he gave, and it was followed without question. His group of Indians shoved their way through the shocked new men while Marc kept his hands loose and ready.

When he heard the new men nosily fall into the rear of the group without issuing another challenge,

Marc allowed himself to breathe. There would be trouble with that group when they camped, but until then, they would stay behind his men.

My men, Marc marveled. Even his time before the war hadn't satisfied him this way.

11

Now expecting their first challenge, Marc only ran them for a full day instead of the two he'd planned on. They needed to be able to defend themselves and he encouraged his men to eat and drink extra rations. Their lives would be decided tonight.

Paul and Jax knew without being told. It didn't take a degree in Indian culture to know their drag riders were plotting something. They hadn't been around for Marc's good moments and that man wasn't giving them anything right now. It was a quiet, tense ride.

As the Indians began setting up their camp, Marc stopped his men from breaking down the horses. "Water only."

Those words told Paul and Jax to get ready.

Marc waited for the drag riders to come to him, aware that the other Indians were no longer moving between them. He braced himself, ready to prove his lethality once again.

Atolius stepped in front of the large drag warrior before he could reach Marc. They exchanged a few

nastily tossed barbs in a language Marc didn't know, and then both Indians turned to him.

“My Apache brother says you are no ghost. He demands you prove it.”

Marc shrugged lightly, coolly. “Which brave will he sacrifice to me?”

Red Stone, who had been Jimmy Barrows in another lifetime, scowled at the arrogance. “You should not have come here! You will get us all killed.”

Marc understood the drag rider was trying to protect his people. He would spare the man's life if he could. That would increase his following.

Marc began stripping his guns and gear, and found himself surrounded by eagerly betting men. It reminded him so much of downtime in the barracks that the tension he'd been carrying slid from his shoulders.

Paul motioned toward his rifle and then Red Stone's extra mount. “Gun for the horse?”

“No.” Red Stone was slightly insulted.

Paul tried again, listening to the haggling going on around them. “Also, a pouch of tobacco and one moon clip of bullets for the revolver in your pack.”

Red Stone's eyes lit up. “You have a deal. Even if he dies, you will pay.”

Paul was encouraged that they might be let go even if Marc lost, but it was a distant concern. Marc was ruthless.

Not to be left out, Jax began viewing the arrows in Red Stone's pouch. “If I have something you

want, I'll need you to teach me to use that when I win it. I've always wanted to learn."

Red Stone grinned widely, showing crooked teeth. "You will cook every meal for me." Word had already spread; the stories were becoming legend.

Jax found himself chuckling. "It *was* good stew. Deal."

Marc listened in a vague way, getting set in his mind. He wasn't going to let the tiger out of the cage unless that was what these men needed to see. After tonight, riders would go out to the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Apache with a final word on whether the Ghost had come. Marc had counted on many things, but mostly that spiritual instinct each of the Indians felt. He would prove that he could stand against what they threw at him, then give them the sign they were waiting for. This was one legend he'd learned well.

There were eleven men in the Apache group, all hard bodied, soldier-hating Indians who felt little mercy.

Marc fought them all.

It could have been ugly, but unlike the cage match, where Adrian had known only a group of fighters had a chance, the honorable Indians formed a circle and took him on one by one, losing the slim chance they'd stood at a fair fight. In twenty minutes, all but one of the drag riders were bleeding and glowering from the side.

Marc faced Red Stone, also covered in blood. He may have won each fight, but they'd left their

marks on him. He had half a dozen slices that should get stitched at some point.

Red Stone studied the mostly naked white man with wary hatred. Ten of his hardest warriors going down one after the other had given Red Stone pause. Who was this...*ghost-man* who could evade the hits of his braves so well? Even the scorned Choctaw riders had bet against the Apache. Only his warriors would be paying on bets tonight. How had this happened?

Marc sensed the time had come. He'd been waiting for it to feel right before opening up to them. "I am the Ghost, sent to stop the government from rising from the ashes of our people." Marc raised his bloody hands and curled them into fists. Drips of crimson fell. "You will walk beside me in this battle. The spirits demand it."

Red Stone expected protest, but those who'd been with this ghost man longer than his group remained quiet. Could it be true? Their legends were full of messiah stories meant to keep them hopeful, but Red Stone hadn't believed in any of them.

"Maybe you should have kept an open mind." Marc didn't look away from the shocked man. "I see your thoughts!"

Red Stone stumbled back and Marc followed, now towering over their escorts in his openness. "I am a descendant of the Great Spirit. You will fight with me, die with me."

Red Stone scowled. "We will lose."

“Our deaths are the sacrifices that the Great Spirit requires.” Marc gestured. “We will give our lives for our people.”

That, they understood with no further words needed.

Marc sent his red orbs over the camp of forty. “I am the Ghost. You are my Shadow Warriors. Together, we shall have honor and justice!”

“The Ghost!” Thaddeus shouted, raising his own clenched fist. “We will fight!”

“Fight! Fight!”

“The Ghost...”

“Ghost.”

“Ghost.”

Marc turned from the eerie chanting, slowly approaching Red Stone. “You will be my right hand of fury. You will kill more enemies than any other here.”

Red Stone’s chest swelled with pride. It was what he’d dreamed of before the war, but hadn’t been satisfied by since. “I will stay with you when these women warriors have all fled in fear.”

Marc grinned, holding his arm out. “My shadow brother. We will be unstoppable.”

Red Stone clasped his arm firmly, displaying crooked teeth and glints of eagerness. “Ghosts.”

12

By dawn, there were ten more riders with them, these from the Seminole.

By noon, that number had grown to thirty as representatives from the Osage and Ottawa joined them.

By dusk, Marc's party was a hundred strong, with riders from seven different Indian nations, and he recognized the moment. It was time to start getting them ready for what they would do next.

Marc waved Jax and Paul over during a brief break, interrupting the lesson that Natoli was giving them on native legends. He squatted in the dirt and began to draw with his k-bar. "We'll come out of tribal lands near 25. You two and a group will start laying our surprises. I'll take a group to Denver."

"Will they work with us without you here?" Jax asked worriedly.

Paul snorted. "Didn't you listen to the first story? They think he's their messiah, come to guide them to former glory."

Marc stared back without smiling. "I am. Now pay attention."

Neither rookie argued. Marc was playing a role here, that was clear, but how much was real and how much was an act, they didn't know. So far, they were both assuming Marc was taking advantage of superstitions. He'd likely read about their legends and set all this up to look genuine.

Marc stared at the rookies with slightly red eyes. "Do you think so?"

With him glowing crimson, it was impossible to say that it was all a ruse, and neither man spoke.

Marc began outlining the plans for the mines and weapons they would place along route 40, and the Eagles turned their minds to it and dug in. The urge to be perfect here was strong. The competitions in Safe Haven couldn't compare to these men who challenged nature on her own terms daily. Jax and Paul had developed a healthy respect for their escorts, especially while riding in the wee hours and trying not to let anyone know how cold they were, or hear their teeth chattering. The Indians hadn't appeared to notice the weather or discomfort.

Marc finished telling them what needed to be done, then included Thaddeus. "You will be their right hand. Take care of my men. They must live to become ghosts."

Thaddeus understood. In the old world, a trip from here, to Denver and back, would have been a two-day drive. Now, by horse, it would take four days each way. That was with breaks, though, and Thaddeus wasn't sure Marc intended to take any. He had the same glaze that the restless braves sometimes carried when the reservation fences became too tall, too constricting. Those had been the first walls he'd brought down after the war. "I will protect them. Do not fear for their safety."

Marc sighed. "I don't fear for their safety. I fear for yours. My rookies are new, but they hand out death as fast as I do. Keep the riders away from them until they understand what and who we are."

Thaddeus took the instruction to heart. The soldiers were the targets, not each other. “I will handle it.”

Marc hesitated, and then pushed on. “Other people may come, other races. They feel my pull and know the time has come. You have to convince your warriors to let them help us. There are Rancherias, pueblos, and colonies of Native Americans all over this broken country. We need as many as we can gather.”

Thaddeus didn’t care for the new information. “That will be no easy task. We locked ourselves here when the war came, to avoid those who survived. Outsiders were not welcome before. Now, they are hunted, purged from our lands.”

“There are more like me.”

Marc’s words drew the attention of the entire group. It was something the Indians had been wondering of Paul and Jax.

“They will come to find me, to help. You won’t know them. They will not give you the signs that I have. They, too, have been hunted.”

“The soldiers want to use them.” Paul looked at Red Stone. “To regain control.”

Mutters went around the camp and the drag rider leader came closer. “We will not allow such power to fall in the hands of our enemy. It is better that you die.”

“I agree. But until that time comes, I will fight!” Marc shouted, gratified by the flinches. They were beginning to understand what he was now.

Marc calmed his inner rage, controlling the demon. He'd never imagined hunger like this. "We will be joined by many people, of many origins. Some of them will be the enemy in disguise. We will search each other and watch for those few. The rest we will welcome gratefully into our quest."

The idea of spies had men staring at each other. Marc had already warned them of one such person and they glared around in suspicion.

"Tell us who the traitor here is, so that we may end his knowledge."

Marc denied them. "He hasn't chosen to betray us yet. As long as it is only thoughts, he has done nothing wrong."

That was against the codes they were relearning or had been raised on, but Marc continued before anyone could speak. "Perhaps a dance would help him understand that the riches the enemy has promised will not be given."

Red Stone's mouth dropped open, betraying his control. "You would have us ghost dance!"

Marc grinned widely. "Yes. Let the people search the future and discover for themselves what waits if they continue to hide. The new earth will not stand for it. You must remember the first lesson of the Great Spirit."

"We cannot love our enemy!" Red Stone protested.

"Yes, you can." Marc thought of Adrian. "You respect his power; you admire his intelligence. You love him for the challenge he will give you, for

helping to prove *your* worth, *your* strength. The enemy is to be loved.” Marc grinned harshly. “And then destroyed.”

Chapter Fourteen

Deceptive Innocence

Near Holly Springs National Forest
July 17th

1

“**W**ait.” Angela’s voice was different than it usually was when she was about to tell him of things they needed nearby. Adrian slowed to a gradual stop, fighting the heartburn.

“I’ll be right back.”

She was out the door before he could protest. Though she had a shadow, Adrian followed.

Angela stopped on the sidewalk, straining to view into the scraggly trees that lined the block of dark, paint chipped homes.

After a moment, she walked toward the tallest row of branches, gaze darting nervously around. It was bad here. She could feel... Angela looked up. “There.”

Adrian struggled to spot whatever she had. When he finally realized what the small, huddled shape was, his heart thumped. He would have rolled right by if not for her.

“That branch is ready to break.”

Adrian was studying the big tree. “Yeah. Look further up.”

She understood as she spotted the other shape, this one clearly dead. “Followed his cat up and got stuck.”

Adrian was glad there were no live cicadas in the trees. Plenty of eggs waiting for spring though. He began searching for the right way to rescue the boy.

“Or they both hid and the cat couldn’t last as long as the kid.” Adrian tried to distract her from the plans he could sense forming in her mind. “Lots of bullet holes and casings.”

Angela considered the branches, mind working the puzzle. Before he could argue, she lunged upward and began scaling the tree.

In view of their convoy, her actions drew immediate attention. The Eagles scrambled to secure the area as people climbed from their vehicles for a closer look.

Roughly half way, Angela glanced up to find the child staring at her with crushing gratitude. It was a relief so powerful that she smiled as tears pricked her lids. Another of her lost children, *found*. “I’m Angie.”

The boy was younger than 10 and older than five, with matted brown hair and skin so dirty, she wasn’t sure of his race. His dark brown eyes ran with tears, cutting a path through the grime that gave her a hint of his lineage. *Middle Eastern. Excellent. That’s another race we’ll add to Safe Haven with this rescue.*

“I’m Hanali.”

Craaacckkk!

The tree was thick, but brittle. The branch she had left snapped. It fell heavily to the ground, causing people to scatter. Now that she was over half way to the top, the wood was weaker, rotting from the top down. She had to reach further to find a good grip, earning splinters.

Some of her grabs were risky, making the men below mutter.

“How long have you been up here, Hanali?” She distracted the child as the wind blew against the tree, causing it to sway sickeningly. She pushed herself to grab the last branch and hauled herself into the fork where he was clinging to the trunk.

“A...week? Many days.”

She gave him a quick look over, spotting the backpack that had surely saved his life. “Smart to carry stuff now.”

The boy put a hand out, like he couldn’t believe she was there. “My mother had hair like yours. Black...long.”

Angela didn’t hesitate to pull him carefully into her arms and let him cry on her chest.

“I’ve been so alone!”

She rubbed his tangled hair comfortingly, keeping a tight grip on the tree with her legs as the wind hit them again. “I’m here now, Hans. I’m here now.”

His thin arms tightened around her neck at the nickname his mother had used. When Angela began to whisper, he nodded against her neck.

“Okay. Eyes closed?”

She slowly shifted him into position. “Yes, and hold tight, but remember that I have to breathe. Don’t squeeze my neck.”

He was shaking, terrified, and she quickly used the rope from her belt to tie them together. It wouldn’t hold for long, but it would buy a few seconds for action. “Okay. Onto my back, like when you were a baby.”

She held still as he slowly wrapped himself around her. His legs were thin, hard knots against her hips; she wished she had another rope to tie them around the middle as well as the wrists.

“Angela.”

She found Seth in the tree next to them, a long coil of rope over his shoulder.

She held up a hand, being careful not to overbalance, and a second later, the rope fell roughly over her fingers.

She snatched at it, got the end.

Angela slid the rope around them and carefully tied it, stomach in knots as she secured him. Now, she had to get him down.

Adrian observed with the rest of them. Sending up the rope was all he could do beyond the inflatable catchers that the men were hurrying to set up under the tree. His heart thumped as she began the slow descent.

Her feet came first, each perch sought and tested carefully before she put their weight on it. The crowd’s muttering rose as the wind howled through

the trees, shaking them. Leaves and drops of sticky liquid fell over the people.

Snap!

Angela jerked them back up as the branch gave, bending enough to tilt her feet down. Breathing roughly, she slowly eased them to the other side of the trunk, using the alternate route she'd chosen on the way up. It was almost straight down, but nearly branchless. She scaled the thick trunk like a cat, using the sides of her boots and her fingers in the bark cracks to crawl.

As she neared the last fifteen feet, the bark became too slippery to get a grip and she reluctantly switched back to the front, where the branches were wider spaced but thicker.

She eased her foot down and the branch cracked off, causing her to jerk them up against the trunk again while she recovered her balance. The rest of the branches were too thin or weak to hold them.

Angela gritted her teeth in concentration. Her arms and legs were aching with the effort it took to hold them in place against the wind. The witch was ready to handle it, but with so many witnesses, she had to be careful. Her people were starting to accept magic. Too much of a show would have the opposite effect that she needed.

“I’m gonna drop him to you. Five seconds!”

When the boy tightened his grip, she sent a calming mutter over them both. “They’ll catch you, Hans. I promise.”

Before he could respond, she drew her blade and quickly cut through both ropes that bound them.

She heard the sound of the buoyant catchers and people murmuring in comfort...then a thick crack above her head.

The falling branch hit her arm like a dead weight. She was knocked from the tree in a heavy thud of pain, falling toward the ground. *I'm sorry for my sins.* It was all she had time to think.

Adrian grunted at the impact, staggering as she slammed into his outstretched arms and dropped to the ground. Her head rolled against his arm, blood drops sprayed across her face from hitting the other branches on her way down. Adrian felt his gift reach out to her, lending strength.

“Mom!”

Charlie was trying to shoulder his way through the crowd now around them.

Adrian waited without breathing for her lids to open.

Angela struggled to wake; she winced at the brightness. *Where's the layer of grit that keeps this from happening?* was her first thought and then she became aware of Adrian holding her, his face full of intense concern. What she could see over his shoulder made her heart thump with joy.

“The boat...south, then southeast.” A second later, she opened her eyes to find herself in Adrian's arms and surrounded by camp members. “What happened?”

Adrian let her sit up as she stiffened. He slowly faded into the mob as Charlie made his way through them.

“You okay?”

She started to nod and had to close her lids as dizziness hit hard. “Yeah. Slight concussion, I think.” She slowly pushed herself to her feet, using Charlie’s arm to steady herself, but even as he suggested she go to Doctor Brooke, she turned toward the boy she’d brought down. She didn’t like the new doctor who’d joined them last week.

He was standing by himself, observing them with a scared, hopeful expression.

She opened her arms to him. “Welcome to Safe Haven, Hanali.”

The child didn’t hesitate.

Charlie’s firm hand on her shoulder kept her from falling when he dove into her embrace.

Angela slowly led him to the medical tent that was now being set up. Everyone was missing John and Anne, but they were grateful that another doctor had come. Their last group of new arrivals before leaving the Spring had been a medical man and small group of nursing students who’d survived together by hiding inside an armored truck. They had picked up more than forty people from Little Rock, though all but Conner had joined after the fact. When Adrian’s magic had blasted through that ravaged city, not just magic users had answered his call.

“Let Dr. Brooke look at you and I’ll be in next.”

She turned away before the boy could beg her to come along. Charlie was there to steady her when she swayed.

“Mom?”

She held up a hand, concentrating, and found a pair of intense blue eyes observing her from across the hoods. No words or thoughts were spoken, but everyone felt their bond, their connection.

Charlie stiffened at her side. The feelings in that look were impossible to miss. There *was* something between her and Adrian, and it was strong. He went to his assigned vehicle, glaring.

“He’s hurting. We don’t like that.”

Angela didn’t glare at Lee, keeping her focus on the pain instead.

“Can you help him?”

Angela denied that through the waves of nausea. “He wants what I’m not free to give.”

“But you care.” Lee blurted more than he’d intended. “We all know it. You want him.”

Angela’s cheeks and neck flushed a deep crimson.

Lee flinched as her head snapped up to reveal eyes of the same color.

“Would you betray Candy?”

“To keep this from falling apart? Yes.”

Angela sighed, pulling the anger in. “So would I, but not now, not like this. Give him time, Lee. He’ll adjust.”

Lee wasn’t so sure about that, but it was heartening to have her refuse the request. He hadn’t

wanted to make it. He liked Marc. They just needed Adrian more.

2

“He’s on that damn laptop again.” Samantha gestured as Neil joined then. “Can’t you order him to give it a break or something?”

Neil heard the serious tone and stored it. Why was Samantha worried about that? “Maybe. You’ll have to give him something else to do.”

Samantha snickered. “I could ask him to take my shift tonight over the teenagers. That’s always a blast.”

“We’ve got Kevin training people on the radio. One of them will take it over full time.” Neil moved on so Samantha didn’t get in trouble for joking during a mini-meeting.

Angela didn’t protest.

Neil wanted to make sure she understood what that meant. “He’s yours now.”

Angela flipped her ash into the can they were passing. “He always was. Next?”

Neil frowned. “Adrian usually rewards them when they come around.”

“I’m not Adrian.” She stared coolly. “You have to do more than that to impress me.”

Neil swept the mess, wondering if the burnt towns and graves they’d been passing all week were the reason the eating area was staying so empty now. He didn’t want to admit that it was because of

how many camp members they were losing. Angela and Adrian were heartsick over it, but they weren't stopping anyone or sending men to talk them into coming back.

Kenn spotted Tonya coming from the medical area. "What's she doing?"

Angela picked out the redhead and went back to her notes, glad of the painkiller she'd been given. Her shoulder was throbbing. "Dropping off more supplies to the new doctor. He said the results were surprisingly hopeful and he wants to try another batch."

It was interesting to have each team's assigned medic attending the doctor's classes, but it was also a way to be sure the new man was living up to John's standards of care. Their medics were less than rookies, but their training had to start somewhere and waiting until later wasn't an option.

Kenn replayed his morning of breaking down the camp. Tonya had told him Dr. Brooke was going to come by the pharmacy tent to pick it up once they got settled at the new site.

Angela sighed, weary even though it was only lunch. They'd been on the road for days now. "She's doing work for me. Let it go."

Kenn considered the not-so-great possibilities. If Angela did have Tonya on something, the redhead would have told him. For both females to cover it up, it had to be serious.

"Are things all set with the site?"

“It’s all wired.” Each campsite they left behind now was deadly.

“Any word yet?” Samantha thought it could be anytime now.

“No.” Angela left the table.

They were assuming Marc was busy causing damages and delays, but the deadline of the soldiers coming was fast approaching. Kenn and Kyle were saying they’d have word in the next week. Angela had said ten days. Adrian claimed three weeks. His estimate wasn’t taken seriously. That was nearly double the time they’d thought to have to prepare and none of them were willing to count on it. In their allotted days, they were making steady progress though.

Angela walked through the camp, using those signs to bolster her flagging spirits. “I miss you, Marc.” She rubbed her shoulder. “Please be safe.”

3

Jennifer swept the fully packed truck that Kyle had prepared for her departure. She was driving it during this move, but she still wasn’t sure if she could take it out into the wilderness. Safe Haven had become her home.

“Can I carry something for you?”

Jennifer slowly put the baby into Kyle’s arms, sure that’s what he wanted. They might not be saying much to each other, but Kyle and her child were already bonded.

“The cord fell off this morning.”

Kyle grinned, but it didn't light his face with happiness the way she'd come to expect. “You save it?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

It was like this with them now—closed off and remote. Kyle longed for their bond back, but he wasn't sure what to do. He'd betrayed her. He had no right to expect forgiveness or another chance. He wouldn't ask for either.

Jennifer caught the thought and snapped her mouth closed on the words that wanted to fly out. She'd briefly considered Conner's point after he left and it had been in her mind since, but she hadn't pulled it out for an in depth examination. She was scared to find out if Kyle had hurt her too badly. She'd told him she wouldn't be able to let that go. *And I was right...wasn't I?*

Kyle let the love for the baby fill his heart in place of its mother. How would he ever let either of them go?

Jennifer tensed.

Kyle gently handed her the baby. “I gave you my word.”

“That means nothing now. I don't trust you.”

Kyle's heart broke again; he turned away from her before he could fall to his knees and beg. She was right to suspect him. She should have all along. He was unfit for love, for compassion or mercy. He

didn't offer those things to his enemies and he didn't deserve them either.

Jennifer didn't want to feel his pain, but that was impossible. The waves of loneliness were the worst. She hated it when he isolated himself. He'd been doing that his whole life, closing off the emotions, and Jennifer suddenly couldn't stand it anymore. She had to get through his hard shell and find out what was underneath. "I'm leaving as soon as Marc gets back."

Kyle froze, shoulders becoming two stiff rocks. When he turned around, Jennifer gasped at the agony on his face.

I won't hold you.

The silent words were full of pain. Jennifer began securing the infant into the car seat before she could ask him to come along.

Kyle slowly forced his feet away from her, feeling like he had nothing to live for.

"She needs something from you."

Kyle looked over to discover that Conner had been listening. "What?"

Conner shrugged. "I'm not sure, but I'd ask her about it before Marc gets back."

Their radios crackled with Angela's hard voice, "Throw the scraps to the ants and load up. It's time to roll."

Samantha waved Angela inside the tent, a bit surprised. They'd been camped for an hour. After Grenada Lake, the Holly Springs forest was like a cool balm on a sunburn. The Eagles liked the thin, tall trees and the camp was enjoying the trails and activities. They were spread out a bit wider than the Eagles would have liked, but the number of people with their own small fire in front of their tent had grown. That required room.

“Leave?”

“Neil's full team will be your protection. I'm sending another level for protection on the water crew.”

“And what do you need me to do that I've got an entire team of killers at my disposal?”

Angela's eyes blazed for a second, revealing her worry. “Look, listen. Find out what's coming next.”

Samantha's heart thumped. She'd thought the tension was from everything they had going on, but apparently, she'd been wrong. “You felt something.”

“Yes. It was dark, deep. Try to get a read on it for us.”

“I'll get my kit together now.”

“Neil will come grab you when they're set to roll out. Should be around dawn.”

“Is there anything else you'd like me to do before we go?”

Angela considered. “Yes, there is. Go play with the kids. They've never seen dust whirls like you've been making.”

Samantha understood what Angela was trying to do, but the weight of the duty was scary. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. When the kids accept us, so does everyone else.”

Samantha began gathering her gear.

Angela went to the next area. A leader’s job was hectic on the best days and she hadn’t had many of those yet. What if one of the supply teams ran into trouble? What if she got them killed?

Angela sighed. There was little she could do to stop it now. They had to have the fuel and water, but they also needed Samantha’s attention on whatever was headed their way. Personal safety had to come behind camp survival. All of them had been told that when they’d signed on. It hadn’t changed because leadership had.

“Is it normal? The way your hair is changing color?”

Angela was too tired to lie. “Yes. Overuse is rough on us.”

Kyle glanced over to where Jennifer was leaving last minute instructions for the baby before her lesson with Angela’s team. “Will it happen to her?”

“Yes, and sooner rather than later, I’d guess. She’s full of fire, but it’s being fueled by her pain. If she doesn’t use another source, she could literally eat herself alive.”

Kyle turned to stare at Angela’s cleverly hidden streaks of gray. “Am I enough?”

Angela understood he meant that in several ways and chose to answer the easiest. “Your emotions are too bottled up to allow a reserve. If she pulls from multiple...”

Angela sighed at the instant, impotent anger that hit her. “Marc feels the same. I try...tried to do it when he wasn’t around.”

They both thought of her moment with Adrian on the road a while back, but neither mentioned it.

“And in the other way?”

She hated to hurt him, but he had to know how to help. Jennifer wasn’t grieving or releasing anything and that was dangerous. “Only someone of the same kind can truly handle us the way you mean.”

“Soul mates and that BS.”

“I don’t have any evidence of that.” Angela hedged a little more. “All people need someone who matches them, but the descendants match with everyone.”

“Purposely.”

“Yes. We were made to help, but also to repopulate, to replace some of the talents that were lost. Some will have multiple mates; many will have one. It depends on the bond.”

“And fate?”

“Yes.” Angela’s eyes went to the medical tent against her will. “Through our lives, we’ll be attracted to dozens of people. It’s up to us and the strength of the draw, if it goes any further.”

“And if a group of you and a group of us are together, you’d pick your mates from your own kind, right? To be fulfilled?”

Angela sighed, forced to face the truth. “Yes, and no. We populate, as well as draw and build. Part of our duty is to spread our DNA, to mix with humans and create the next generation. Without them, the world won’t recover. Adrian brought us together, but to spread his light over an entire planet will take children—ours.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“She means that few of us will refuse to spread ourselves among you, even if we don’t particularly care for that impersonal fit. We can’t. It’s part of why we’re here.” Adrian kept going instead of joining the conversation like he wanted to.

Kyle continued to torture himself. “Who should she draw from?”

“Whomever she wants. You don’t get to pick.”

Kyle barely felt the scold. “Who in camp would help her get back to normal?”

The witch, tired and lonely, snapped at him through Angela’s lips. “Anyone, but you. Back off.”

“What if I can’t?”

The witch refused to play games. “She’ll run. She’s already considering it. Being here is hurting her.”

Those words beat in his brain. *Of course!* Safe Haven was a constant reminder.

“Kyle?”

He didn’t answer Angela’s resigned call.

She watched him walk away. Adrian had been right. Where Jennifer went, so did Kyle. The only hope they had of her staying was the anger from the way her infant had died. She would want revenge and Angela planned to feed that. By the time the battle came, Jennifer would have hardened a bit and might consider staying.

“It’s up to fate, now.” Angela picked out her guards. “And Marc.”

5

“Are you going to tell me? I can’t let this go until you do.”

“No.”

“Stop being an ass, mom. He’s better than dad was.”

Peggy and Doug both stared at Becky in surprise.

The teenager didn’t take it back. “Dad didn’t want her to work. He called her a lot and distracted her intentionally. I’ve always thought it was his fault, not yours.”

Peggy’s tears were hard to look at, but even harder to feel. She pushed herself up and started to fade into the shadows, wishing Anne were here to talk to.

“Wait.”

Doug’s command halted Peggy’s retreat. She didn’t turn around.

“Do you want to work in the medical areas here or would you rather stay a den mother?”

“She wants both, and a little more.” Becky stood up. “I’ll let you guys have a few minutes alone.”

Doug stayed where he was, willing Peggy to turn around. When she did, he viewed her with curiosity. “What’s the little more?”

Peggy flushed.

Doug understood. “Me?”

“Don’t sound that way!” Peggy snapped. “You’re a good man.”

Doug grinned. “I’m not a little anything, Darlin’. You know that.”

Peggy evaluated his big frame with a heat that sent shock into Doug. *She wants me!*

Peggy left him standing there. Doug would make his own choices. She wasn’t going to browbeat him or explain away the awful thing she’d done. If he couldn’t accept her without the details, then that was that.

6

“How are you handling things?”

Charlie paused in the daily shoveling that he and the other teens had been doing in the livestock trucks. He was the last one here. He’d sent the others on to have some time alone to think.

“I feel bad that I didn’t try harder to warn my mom, but that voice inside says it was for the best.”

Conner understood how guilt and reality often slammed into each other in a person's mind. "Anything I can do?"

Charlie started to say no. "We used to bunk together, spend those bad hours bullshitting or drinking. I don't do that part anymore, but if there was someone else in the tent, maybe..."

"The voices would be quieter?" Conner supplied.

"Exactly."

"You sure you want me as a bunkie? The camp still isn't sure if I'm an assassin."

Charlie's tone was pointed. "That's what you get in return for all the talking I'll do."

Conner chuckled. "I'll clear it with my dad."

"You don't need to."

Both boys turned to find Adrian in the shadows.

"She already said it was a good idea, for me to handle it when you two were ready."

Both boys were happy and Adrian left them to plan it out, grateful. He hadn't been sure if the darkness festering in Conner might remind Charlie of Matt too much to allow those bonds to form. "Angie knew better, though. She knew Charlie would take this moment to make up for Matt and ease his own guilt."

Absolutely perfect so far. He couldn't have been more satisfied with the choice he'd made to place her in control of it all. No one else would have gotten close to this from following his notes, and she wasn't doing even that after today. She'd made

it through all of his books, gotten it rolling, and was running on instinct now. “She’s perfect for me. Damn you!”

All around him, destiny laughed callously at his pain.

7

“Damn it!” Angela slung the kit to the ground, pissed. “You can’t keep doing that!”

Late afternoon found Safe Haven a few miles further down their long road, camped, with classes in full swing.

Kenn started to handle it, but Tonya waved him off. Angela had been right when she’d said the men didn’t know what she was planning. Crista had to do this right or they were all dead.

“I’m sorry!” Crista exclaimed huffily. “I can’t keep it straight.”

Angela jerked a hand at Kenn. “He’s as much a rookie at following my lead as you are, but he’ll get it right. When we’re done, someone, *anyone*, tell her why he can do it and she can’t.”

Angela turned her back to Kenn, not the least bit afraid of him anymore, but nearby Eagles still tensed when he neared her. Old habits were hard to break, but the closed aura around Kenn also still made them leery.

The busy areas around them slowed a bit as the routine restarted. Angela working her team was fascinating to most of them. For the men, it was a

turn-on, but also a lesson in respect. They liked knowing that the women would work as hard as they did.

Kenn fired the paintball gun at Angela first, as an enemy would, and Becky was there to deflect it with her shield. A bit awkwardly, the teenager used the momentum to spin around and provide cover for the person next to her to reload.

Jennifer slammed a mag in place and fired a round at Kenn as Becky reloaded.

Kenn ducked the shot easily, returning fire. He hit Jennifer in the chest, drawing a scowl from the man walking by.

Jennifer swore, taking herself down. As she fell, she tossed a paint balloon that represented the grenade she would use during the battle.

Kenn jumped aside, but was unable to avoid the pink splatter. He turned to the right and let his own grenade fly. It coated two of her team, removing them.

Kenn saw his arm and side was hit, and decided he should be able to keep fighting until he bled out. He shoved to his feet and opened fire again.

Angela ducked the blast, waving Tracy and Samantha forward.

Both females fired together and rolled to avoid the incoming hits. It was nicely timed and obvious that the women had spent time practicing it on their own.

As the routine finished, a few people around cheered, but Angela didn't let her girls join them.

“Don’t celebrate until we get it right as a team.” She wiped the sweat from her cheek. “Someone tell Crista why she isn’t remembering which way to turn.”

Samantha spoke up, hoping to get it over with quickly. “She hasn’t been practicing. When she does, it’ll become almost automatic.”

“Yes. If you don’t show signs of improvement, you’re off my team.” Angela left them standing there, exchanging nervous, unhappy looks. She was hoping Crista would notice on her own, but they also needed to help their weaker members shore themselves up and these training lessons would accomplish that if they could bond. She’d given them a way to do that. It was up to Crista to make good on it. Right now, she wasn’t pulling her weight.

Kyle paused to listen when he saw who took up a hard stance in front of Crista.

“What’s the deal?” Jennifer demanded, breathing roughly. “You saw her plan. What gives?”

Crista flushed. “I didn’t put in enough hours on it.”

“Should we get rid of you now?” Jennifer followed up angrily. “The rest of us sweated our asses off last night, working together after mess. Where were you?”

Crista flushed darker. “Out.”

“Uh-huh.” Jennifer looked around the team. “Vote now. Stay or go?”

“Go.”

“Go.”

“Go.”

Only Cynthia said differently and even her voice was reluctant. “Stay, *if* she’ll start working.”

Jennifer sneered. “Looks like you’re off the team. Turn in your gear and go get a camp member job from Zack.”

Crista couldn’t do that. She wanted this. “You can’t get rid of me!”

Her shout had the team stopping, turning around.

“And why not?” Jennifer lifted her goggles to reveal glowing orbs. “We don’t need you if you won’t work. There are a lot of women here who want these slots.”

“I will work on it. I’ll put my other...activities on hold.”

Jennifer wasn’t convinced, but it didn’t matter. Angela was annoyed and that did. “You’d better.” Jennifer sounded exactly like she should for the position she’d been gifted with. “As your team members, this is the only warning we’ll give you. Get your shit together or get out.”

8

Angela stomped through the perimeter shadows, trying to decide if she needed to reorder her team. Adrian had told her a while ago that the first set of names likely wouldn’t all stay. It was the

nature of the job, but Angela needed each of these women for her plan. Crista might not have been working on it much, but her aim was still spot-on.

“Maybe a break.” She rounded the corner of the vet area.

“I can give that to you.” *Whoosh!*

The dart hit her in the neck and brought her to her knees before the latest assassin.

Angela sent out a weak call for help, but it was too late.

“That was my brother you hurt in Little Rock.” The child glowered. “That you killed.”

Angela couldn’t answer, couldn’t use her gifts, her body. The drugs felt the same as what the Major had used in that doomed city. Angela slumped to the ground.

The child was ten at most, with bright, blue eyes full of malice. “They said to kidnap you, but I need to hear the screams.” The boy came forward eagerly with his knife out.

Angela felt the drugs overwhelm her. *You’re not gonna get it, kid.* She surrendered to the darkness.

“Quick! Pick her up!”

The two children struggled to move her body on their own without alerting anyone. All they had to do was hide her and keep her drugged. The men that were on the way would do the rest, but Clifford couldn’t stop the need to make her pay. He sliced at random as the others dragged her under the tree cover and out of the perimeter.

The men on the area wouldn't be getting up. Angela was the only one they were supposed to leave alive if caught.

9

“Did you hear that?”

“Nothing.” Becky was finally starting to like her new life. She took in Seth's tense posture and waved a hand. “Go on. I'll find Angela for a check in.”

Seth was extremely uneasy. The voice in his mind had shouted one word and he hadn't been able to make it out clearly. *Was it a call for help?*

Seth thought so and began a round of the camp, searching for problems.

Becky disappeared into the medical tent, but came out seconds later, with a pale man behind her. They'd all thought Angela was with Adrian.

Adrian wasn't worried about spooking the herd, only finding his lost lamb. He hit the radio. “Raven location?”

Silence.

“Raven, check in.”

More thick silence.

“Damn it!” Adrian went to do his own searching.

Becky stayed with him, gun in hand. Too worried to think about anything else, Becky didn't realize the honor she was being given by the other Eagles who let her guard their idol. They knew how

serious she was now, how dangerous she could be. She'd been noticed.

“Angela?”

“Hey, Boss?”

The calls began to float through camp, waking people who joined the search. It wasn't long before the entire camp was roused, but the person they all wanted to see come from a camper or tent didn't appear.

Seth made it to the outer perimeter, not noticing anything out of place until he got to the tape. Behind the yellow banner was a section of their new fencing. It had been cut.

Seth raised the alarm with worry burning brightly in his gut.

10

“Stop playing around or you'll kill her!”

Clifford reluctantly moved his bloody blade from her throat. None of the wounds was deep so far. He wanted her to suffer, but the drugs had made that impossible.

“Her hand's showing!” the other child hissed. “Grab it.”

Clifford snatched her wrist and jerked it under as the area flooded with people and light. All three of them were above ground, hidden by a cleverly painted tarp. They'd planned to stay down, drugging her until they could take her out of camp.

A hard male voice cracked over the radio. “Lock us down! We have a breach in the north wall!”

Adrian had followed Angela’s light, but well known tracks to the animal area. A dozen men surrounded them as they searched.

Seth ran through the camp, doing a fast search, and found himself in the animal area as if being called to it. Adrian and Kenn were busy scouring the ground nearby for tracks, but Seth didn’t join them. He could almost feel her, almost smell her. *What the hell? Is she hiding from us?*

Adrian snorted angrily as the pieces fell into place. “We have a sleeper, gentlemen. Start kicking and slicing the trees and ground. If you hit a vein, let them bleed.”

No one said Angela might be hit, but many of them were thinking it.

“She’s here.” Seth scanned. “I’m close.”

Before he could kick the area in front of him, a dart sailed out and plunged into his thigh.

“Seth!” Becky was at his side as he fell, ignoring the warnings from the men around them.

Another dart flew out of nowhere and hit her in the neck.

“There!” Adrian tackled the tarp-covered forms that sprang up and tried to run.

“There she is!”

Eagles surrounded Angela’s bloody body, glad to find her breathing. Each time this happened, the

feeling that they would recover only her body became stronger.

It was quickly clear that the assassins weren't adults to be handled in the usual way. Kenn made the discovery after knocking Clifford unconscious through the tarp. The boy fell out of cover.

Kenn leaned back in revulsion. "Who the hell sends kids to do their wet work?"

Adrian shoved the other boy, struggling, into Kyle's angry arms. "Our enemy. Dump them outside the fence and get the hole patched up."

"You can't win. Surely you know that."

The matter-of-fact tone of the second child chilled the blood of the men listening. What had this boy been through that he held no compassion?

Adrian waved Kenn on.

The Marine hefted the unconscious child over his shoulder, and then pointed at the other one. "Start walking or I'll knock you out."

The sullen boy did as he was told, throwing glowers over his shoulder at Adrian.

"I'll get the doctor." Cynthia turned toward the main camp.

"He's here."

They looked up to find Jennifer pulling the bleary new man through the trees. She didn't let go until he was at Angela's feet.

Everyone was quiet as the doctor examined Angela's wounds, then started binding them.

"Well? Does your mouth work?"

Dr. Brooke frowned up at Becky. “As well as yours. You got a question? Ask it.”

Becky flushed angrily. “Is she okay?”

He tied off a bandage. “All shallow cuts, with a few that need stitches; breathing’s good. Help me get her to the medical tent.”

Kenn and Kyle unloaded their burdens at the fence after taking their dart guns.

“Go on. Get lost.”

The older boy immediately turned west and began walking.

“Hey!” Kyle called. “Take him with you!”

The boy didn’t slow or even glare at them. “He’s your problem now.”

Kenn and Kyle stared after him in shock, both thinking a quiet bullet right now would be the best solution for both intruders.

They turned away reluctantly. Assassins or not, these were just brainwashed kids who should be with their mothers, not roaming the wastelands on murder missions. It was yet another heinous crime their enemy would pay for.

11

“Where was her shadow?” Adrian looked around in fury. “Who had duty?”

Zack pointed to the two bodies in the shadows. “Wade’s breathing; Max isn’t.”

Adrian swore under his breath. The enemy knew kids wouldn't be suspected. He'd almost lost her again. It was time to implement the second part of Marc's plan. Angela wouldn't like it, but she couldn't argue now.

Adrian spotted Charlie and Conner near the QZ gate, and joined them in their observations of the unconscious boy.

"Do you know him?"

Conner's voice was cold. "Clifford and his brother were in charge of the others. They like pain."

"What do you think we should do with him?"

"He'll probably take off as soon as he wakes." Conner's voice hardened. "Charlie and I want to deliver a warning for him to take back."

Adrian left the teenagers alone, able to feel their anger. When the fight started, these two would be in the thick of it, extracting their pound of flesh. The enemy had no idea how big of a mistake this was. Even the camp members were calling for blood now; many of them were lining the tape behind Conner and Charlie. When the peace-loving herd wanted violence, there would be hell to pay.

12

The pitiful whisper made him seem more human. She lowered the gun. "What can I do?"

"Kill me."

Sam blanched. "I can't do that."

He moaned. It was a wet sound. She heard his jaw grind as he coughed. Scarlet flew from his mouth, ejecting one of his teeth. Reddish drops of agony rolled down his distorted cheeks. "Please!"

She lifted the gun as his gasps filled the room. His body was no longer responding to his commands. The sickness was destroying him from the inside.

He lifted a finger, skin sliding to the side. "Please...do it now. Don't know...anything else."

She tried to smile as she lifted the gun. "I'm Samantha Moore."

"Pat. Mi-Michaels."

She gasped in horrified recognition of the former press secretary. She asked the only thing that mattered to her now. "Why were you hunting descendants?"

Pat's eyes lit up. "Evil! Caused the war!"

Sam couldn't think of anything else to ask.

When he tried to beg again, she pulled the trigger.

His body jumped like Melvin's had when she hit him with the Taser.

Sam jerked awake, covered in sweat.

She sat there, listening to the active camp as she tried to get her breathing under control. Pat Michaels was a ghost she would be haunted by forever.

Samantha slowly became aware that there was a problem. The voices were loud for this time of

night...and angry. Footsteps weren't crunching peacefully, but stomping about in determination. Something had happened.

Samantha hurried to pull on her boots, mind going to her men. Were they okay?

Haunted by her nightmare, Samantha wasn't ready to be grabbed as soon as she came from the tent. Her shriek pierced the air.

Neil let go as if burnt. "Hey, it's okay! It's Neil! Easy."

Samantha's breathing came in gasps.

"Are you all right?"

"Nightmare." She sent a sheepish look around to the people who'd come running. "Sorry. I'm jumpy."

"With good reason." Neil quickly filled her in. "Until they're finished sweeping camp, I'd like you to stay close."

Sam didn't have a problem with that. "Where's...?"

"Right behind you."

Samantha turned to find Jeremy helping calm the camp. Her heart eased from the knot it had twisted into. She wasn't sure what she'd do if anything happened to either of her men.

"I need to check the showers and supply trucks. Come on."

Samantha fell in on Neil's right, giving Jeremy a soft smile as they went by. She could tell he'd been concerned for her too, had probably been

waiting for her and Neil to show up so he could concentrate on his duty. She loved him for it.

Jeremy caught sight of the female trailing them and rolled his eyes. Didn't Bridget understand they were Sam's now? Everyone else did.

Bridget kept after the couple even when they both turned to glare at her. She wanted Neil, and she wanted them both to know it. The trooper would be hers before too much longer. "Neil, can you..."

"Not now!"

His tone was sharper than Bridget felt it needed to be; she turned for camp in a huff. *Keep blowing me off, Neil. You won't sense my hit until it flattens you.*

Samantha couldn't stay quiet, not after the way she'd woken. "You need to talk to her if you've changed your mind about me."

Neil stiffened. He hadn't thought Samantha knew that he'd accepted the offer from Bridget. "I don't want her."

Samantha did what she didn't want to. She offered him freedom. "You're entitled to company when I'm not around, Neil."

"And Jeremy?" Neil blurted out. "Is it okay for him, too?"

"Yes."

Neil stopped, hands going to her shoulders. "But will you still want us...me?"

Samantha ran a gentle hand along Neil's jaw, but couldn't lie. "No."

"That's not fair." He didn't want anyone else.

Samantha sighed. “Yes, but that’s life in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Neil had known deep down. He wasn’t as upset as he knew he should be. “I had, as a matter of fact.”

Neil slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close as he got them moving, trying not to consider what would happen to them if Jeremy found someone else and Samantha refused to be with him anymore. The odds on that were as likely as him running to someone else. The descendants left their mark on a person, be it man or woman, and there was no escape. If they wanted you, that was all that mattered.

13

By dawn, a large group of camp people and Eagles were gathered around the QZ gate. Clifford hadn’t woken yet from Kenn’s single hit, but they were all waiting for him to. His reception wasn’t going to be nice, but it was the only thing these caged-in camp members could do. They wouldn’t leave the safety of the fences.

Conner and Charlie did, with heavy escort.

Clifford began to groan as he woke.

Conner motioned Charlie to be ready. “They train us to shoot first.”

Clifford hated the two boys on sight, but he seemed to know an attack would get him killed by the Eagles clustered around them.

“What do you want?” he snarled angrily, standing up. “Kill me and be done with it.”

“We don’t kill kids.” Charlie tried to get inside his mind. “Why would you work for someone who does?”

“They don’t kill us.” Clifford spat. “They send us out to...”

“Die.” Conner grunted. “They didn’t expect you to accomplish the mission. Your deaths were meant to scare us.”

Clifford sneered. “I could have killed her. I had the chance.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Clifford spotted Angela on the other side of the fence and lunged her way.

Conner and Charlie hit him at the same time with a mental blast that took the rebellious child to the ground.

“I killed his brother, in Garret’s compound.”

Charlie glanced up in surprise as he read it in her mind. “You did that?”

Angela didn’t betray her own waves of guilt. “Yes. This is war.”

Clifford began foaming at the mouth, held in place by invisible bonds. “Let me go! I have to hurt her!”

Anger surged from the crowd around Angela. She calmed them with a few words. “He’s not staying, but it’s not all his fault, either. The same as it wasn’t with Matt. Outside influences change things. You all know that.”

Angela waved for the Eagles to escort her boys into the QZ gates. It made her nervous to have them outside of it. “Let him go. He’ll leave. Won’t you?”

Clifford tried to resist the voice in his mind, *her* voice. He didn’t want her there! “No!” He shook with the effort of battling her in his mind. “Get out!”

Angela raised a hand and jerked it toward her.

Clifford froze like he’d been shot, then slumped over.

“She killed him.”

“Is he dead?”

“He deserves to be!”

“Did you catch that?”

“She did that without a knife...”

Angela lowered her arm and slowly turned to face them. “He’s sleeping. When he wakes up, he won’t remember being here. Let’s pack up and roll.”

For one instant, no one moved, each making their choices. The casual demonstration of power had been done so openly that shock was the biggest emotion. The bubble around them vanished.

Unaware of the power shift that could happen here, Charlie gave Clifford a nudge with his foot as he went by, but saved the vicious kick he’d wanted to deliver for his mom’s injuries. It was hard to hate the boy after hearing the ugliness in his mind. It was easier to pity him.

The camp felt vindicated by Charlie’s action, and it snapped them out of the fearful consideration they’d fallen into. With a few leery looks, they began to go to their tents and vehicles.

In the parking area, Sam and the water team left mostly unnoticed.

Angela didn't look at any of them, including Adrian. She could feel his rage at her choice to expose herself without any protection plans, but it hadn't been something she'd meant to do yet. Clifford's mind was indeed ugly. There was no chance they would ever turn him to their side. Making him forget it all for a while was the best thing she could do. Killing the ten-year-old boy wasn't considered. Safe Haven didn't do that to children, any of them, and Clifford would have been one of theirs if fate hadn't decreed him to serve the other side.

“What'll happen to him?” Charlie asked.

“They'll take him back when he remembers who he is and reaches their bunker.” Adrian was also scanning the boy. “They don't have many as angry as that one. They'll want him.”

“Will he be punished for failing?”

“Of course. Our enemy has no mercy.”

14

“Why are we stopping?” Samantha asked groggily.

Neil put it in park. “We're a mile away. We'll go in at first light so we can evaluate the danger.”

Samantha shrugged sleepily. “Makes sense.”

“You okay?”

Samantha opened her door as the guards gave an all clear sign. She'd fallen asleep not long after they'd piled into the trucks. The nightmare had drained her. "Yeah, just tired."

"We'll get you in a tent and fed, ASAP."

Samantha snorted in protest. "I'll take a bedroll like everyone else and *you're* not allowed to cook. I know all about you."

Neil chuckled. "I was the king of the microwave. Never used flame."

"It shows. I need to do some...searching."

"Stay in the perimeter."

Samantha didn't answer, slowly wandering westward.

Neil waved two of his team with her. She had a job to do, too.

Samantha sank to the sloppy ground, ignoring the shadows and the mud, listening. The wind gusted against her, cool and dry now; the blades of grass trembled delicately under her fingertips.

Waves of energy, of life and also of death came through the ground, powerful and unstoppable. Despite all the damage that humankind had inflicted, mother earth had woken and was trying to heal herself—violently where necessary and even where it wasn't.

"What do you feel, Sam?"

Jeremy's soft question brought an unhappy expression to her face. "More death. There was an earthquake, I think, in the west."

“The west?” Jeremy was stunned. *She can sense things that far away?*

“The tremors are still rolling out, sending vibrations through the earth’s crust. I can’t pinpoint it without equipment, but it’s too strong to be from the coast and too weak to be from the New Madrid line.”

Jeremy got his notebook out. “Worst case?”

She shivered. “Yellowstone. If that happens, we have a few weeks until the winds carry the ashes our way. You know what that is?”

Jeremy’s mind raced, bringing up history channel specials viewed under calmer days. “Glass, right? Tiny shards?”

“Yes. If we breathe it in, we’ll start dying. If Yellowstone blows, we’ll have to hole up.”

“It’s okay.” Jeremy soothed her as he finished writing her notes. “She’ll make plans for it.”

“You’ll tell her as soon as we get home?”

Jeremy ran a calming hand over Samantha’s hair. “Right now, if you think I should.”

Samantha relaxed at being believed. She still hadn’t gotten over those scars. “It’s okay for now. Just don’t forget to tell her.”

“I won’t.” Jeremy gently took her by the arm. “Come on. Neil’s got the food ready.”

Sam groaned. “I told him he wasn’t allowed to cook!”

“So did the rest of us.” Jeremy grinned. “We always offer to trade, but he insists that he’ll get better with practice.”

Samantha caved. “That makes sense.”

Jeremy snorted. “It’s been seven months. The taste never changes.”

“Burnt?” Sam guessed, leaning against his heat.
“Shit.”

Samantha’s laughter floated over the wastelands and brought life with it. Eggs hatched, bugs dug their way from the ground, birds broke into song.

Jeremy missed all of it, busy thinking about getting her settled, but Samantha noticed and was overjoyed to have nature respond. Her gifts had evolved into power that she’d never dreamed to be honored with. “Thank you.”

Jeremy smiled at her whispered endearment.
“For what?”

Samantha held him tighter. “Not you, *Fate*. I’m glad I’m here, that I am who I am now. The war changed everything for me.”

Chapter Fifteen
Shadow Riders

July 24th

1

“**O**ur lookouts at the reservoirs gave the all clear. No signs of soldiers, Marc, or anyone else.”

Quinn wrote it in the logbook they were keeping. “What about the avenues of approach?”

Shane grimaced. “Roughly half. Do you expect him soon?”

Quinn hesitated. What he said here and now, they would hold him to. He looked around at the waiting men, recognizing their hope and their fear. “You guys have met Marc, right? He doesn’t answer to me. And yes, he’s alive. I repeat, you’ve met him, right?”

There were grins and relieved snorts at that, breaking the tension and reminding them who they were talking about. They’d seen him in the cage and on missions. Marc was a badass.

“He’ll come when he’s supposed to.” Quinn added another layer of faith. “Angela’s behind and we’re in his direct path to there. Now go get those AAs covered. I want it all online when he shows up.”

No one protested the order. Quinn was a steady leader and the danger hadn't reached them yet.

Once he was alone, Quinn went to the window, looking west. "Where are you?"

As if conjured, the radio on the table crackled.

"Are we 5-by, Quinn?"

Quinn flew to the radio, beating the other men who came from the hallway. Those suddenly energized males ran off to inform everyone that they'd gotten a call.

"You know it." Quinn controlled the urge to babble in relief like a schoolboy.

"Send a rider." Marc was weary. "The fighting will start soon. It's time for Safe Haven to make the call. Adrian will know what it means."

Quinn wrote it down, hoping for more, but there was only a parting warning.

"Watch your six. It's been too quiet here."

Quinn took it to heart, snapping into full alert. "You got it, Boss."

Quinn immediately went to draft a rider. After two weeks, he was sure Angela was ready for news.

2

The first thing Marc's group saw upon leaving tribal lands was the shadow of a lone woman standing at a gravesite. Surrounded by a dozen crude markers, she didn't react as his group of twenty approached her.

The woman wore a long cloak. With the hood down, Marc spotted rough scars set in weathering skin. What had this one been through? He held up a hand for the men to wait and slowly moved closer, sure she'd heard them. It was hard not to notice new sounds in this quiet world.

When she didn't turn, Marc swung down from his horse, hands loose and ready. Assassins came in any gender.

He came to her right, picking out the shapes of guns on her hips and a wrist-blade on her arm. It was such an instant reminder of Angela that Marc froze for a second. *God, I miss you.*

Kendle knew danger was with her once again, but she was too tired to run or try hiding. She wasn't even sure she had the strength to talk. Her eyes went over the markers, lingering on Luke's grave. He'd known it was coming and she hadn't believed him.

"Are you..." Marc had started to ask if she was okay, but he caught sight of the disfigurements that lined nearly every inch of her exposed skin and couldn't force it out. She'd survived whatever horror the war had thrown at her, like the rest of them, but she wouldn't ever be okay again. "I'm Marc."

"Kendle."

Her voice held a thousand years of pain and Marc felt like Adrian must, when he could offer some hope. "There's a refugee camp in the east. Safe Haven is a good place to heal and find peace."

Kendle's rage was instant. Marc could feel it over the wind and through his clothes even before she turned to glare at him.

"I will never have peace. There's only blood for me now."

Glowing red eyes met his gaze and the words, though striking, didn't matter. Marc stared at his kindred, a tortured soul who held secrets that matched his own. He gently took her arm. "If you want to fight, I have room."

Kendle allowed him to lead her toward the group of Indians, not betraying any surprise of seeing so many men in one place. It didn't matter to her. Nothing did except satisfying this lust for blood.

"She is ill." Red Stone moved back.

Marc shrugged. "She's been changed by the war. We can help her."

"I will not have a woman—"

Kendle's quick lunge was beyond Marc's control. Her hands went to Red Stone's chest, shoving him off his horse.

She swung up into his place with a sneer, controlling his big horse with little effort. "I am not a woman. I am a Rage Walker."

Marc grinned at the Apache's surprise. "She's a little like me, just less...friendly."

Since Marc wasn't considered that at all, it led the group to believe she was lethal.

Marc immediately began encouraging that thought. He recognized Kendle as a haunted victim,

but he also knew that fire. She would fight with them and be good at it, the same as Angela would have been if she were here.

He'll like the island woman...

The demon began spitting out plans to turn Kendle into Angela for that purpose. If Adrian had his own special warrior, he wouldn't need Marc's.

Drawing on Angela's training, Marc gave Kendle a hard look. "Give him his horse back. You'll ride with me until I find you one."

Kendle slid to the ground and strode over to Marc without argument, fearless despite her female weaknesses.

He grabbed her arm. "If you disrespect my men, they will not protect you in battle!"

Kendle pulled out of his grip, heart slow and steady. "I don't need their protection. And don't touch me in anger. *Ever.*"

Marc raised his hands in mock defense, but he didn't scold further. Her courage would help her bond with these men.

Marc swung into the saddle; Kendle made the jump behind him without waiting for his arm. Her hands went to his shoulders.

Marc kneed the horse without waiting for her to get set.

Kendle hung on tightly, eventually moving to hug his lean waist to keep from falling.

Marc refused to let the feeling of her curves offer a distraction. She would be treated like any

other rookie on his team and then he would take her to Safe Haven and gift her, carefully, to Adrian.

3

“What happened back there?”

Kendle didn't give him the details. She wasn't capable of it. “I killed them. Luke knew it was coming. He...” Her voice choked. “He thanked me!”

Marc felt her shudder and refused to let himself have sympathy yet. “Why not yourself?”

Kendle was quiet for a moment. When she spoke, it was chilling. “I'm supposed to die somewhere else. My path isn't complete.”

Marc knew the feeling, though not the sense that death was on his shoulders. But then, he wasn't sick. “Is it catching?”

“Not from me. Luke was the carrier. We brought it with us from the island.”

“We've seen it here. You didn't cause it.” Marc wasn't comforted by the news that the south was also fighting wars. Adrian planned to take Safe Haven in that direction.

Kendle didn't let relief heal her heart. “Just helped it travel.”

Marc didn't argue the point. He had a different one to confirm. “You'll expect me to kill you when you go that far.”

“Yes.”

Marc felt another part of his heart break off and die. “I will. I won't hesitate.”

“We understand each other.”

“Yes.”

Marc waited for more, but there was only her hot body against his and her light breathing near his ear.

Running on instinct, Marc shoved into her mind. *You know what I am?*

Kendle shuddered against him. *Like me.*

Yes.

They didn't need to speak about it. Being this way was isolating. Neither of them could have explained how it felt to be so different.

“Why didn't you go to Safe Haven?”

Kendle shrugged, already becoming sore from the bouncing of the horse under her. “I dream about the west and a fight.”

Marc heard the anger, but also the desolation under in her next statement.

“It's the only place we would have been welcome.”

“Would have been?” he questioned, steeling himself to her pain. This wasn't his Angie.

“I don't think I'll make it now. This rage grows faster than I can keep up with.”

Marc recognized her need. “You'll be on our front lines. No one will hold you back. Use that information.”

Kendle doubted it would be enough. He had no idea how much she longed to draw her knife across his throat and feel that sweet blood cover them both.

Marc felt the cool chill of danger on the nape of his neck and slowly brought them to a stop. The demon was whispering terrible things. “The government has an antidote.”

Kendle froze, processing that sentence. She could be normal again!

Marc felt her relax and knew he’d chosen the right lie to give. He doubted there had ever been a disease like this one before the war, let alone a cure for it. Kendle wouldn’t make it to Adrian. She would die on the front lines that she was longing for and he would be the one to take her there. He hated fate at that moment.

It didn’t stop him from doing his duty though. Marc turned them toward Denver with a bleeding soul and a racing mind. So many new plans had sprung up that he was now the one who felt like he couldn’t wait for a moment alone to examine them.

Because he was distracted, Marc fell back to the middle of their party to let the others scan for trouble. He needed to consider the new scheme his demon had suggested. It was brutal, treacherous, and absolutely friggin perfect.

Paul and Jax noticed Marc’s concentration; neither rookie interrupted him with questions about the woman. They’d witnessed that expression before. It was dangerous.

Kendle listened to Marc’s mind, aware that he’d lied. Once said, her brain and soul had latched onto it anyway. What did he know? Maybe there was a

cure and when they went into battle, it would be a simple matter of torture to discover the truth.

Kendle rested against Marc and allowed herself to doze. Hope was a powerful calmativie.

4

Paul and Jax had no problems with Kendle being along. They'd gotten used to having females on duty with them, and on supply runs. It was the instant bond between her and Marc that concerned them. It was clear from their first night of camping that she wanted to be close to him.

Marc had refused her offer and spent an hour drilling her on fighting instead. While they rode, she noticed the training he was giving them, doing well with her knife. It was that common link, those little moments that said she was Marc's kind. It kept the rookies from offering friendship, which left Kendle with only Marc to talk to. The Indians ignored her for the most part, glad when he kept her busy. It wasn't easy having her along, especially when she refused to look away while they changed clothes or bathed, but they adjusted over the four days it took them to get to Denver. Kendle was different, *disturbed*, was the common thought among the group.

Marc agreed with that assessment, but he also saw glimpses of the woman she'd been. So would people in the camp who'd even spent time surfing channels in the old world, if they got to meet her.

The survival queen would be an asset either way. Marc didn't doubt his choice, but it did make him realize how unfair he'd been to Angela when they'd first come to Safe Haven.

That is why you lost her, the demon confirmed. If you had supported her, she would be yours still.

Marc didn't respond, but the words kept him from sleep.

5

Four days after picking her up, Marc took a spot close to the fire, shaking his head at Kendle when she would have left their warm bedroll and joined him. He couldn't be close to her with these thoughts in his mind. She might be able to read him and that wouldn't do.

"You are restless." Natoli held out a tin cup. "Is there trouble?"

Marc took a healthy swig of the homemade liquor.

"In my mind," he gasped out. "Too many voices."

The Choctaw warrior sat across from him and began loading a long pipe that he hadn't used before now. When Natoli began to smoke, the thick tobacco permeated the air and layered the fire in fog.

Marc stared at the swirling white and gold. The flames were mesmerizing as they tried to survive the lack of oxygen.

Natoli exhaled again and the flames disappeared. A third lungful covered Marc in the fog; he huddled there, alone and isolated.

“You walk a hard path.”

Natoli’s voice was no longer that of a single warrior, but of all Indian warriors. In his tones was also the strength of generations yet to come.

“Do not stop on the path.” Natoli was vaguely aware that he’d gone into a trance in front of everyone, something he’d never done before. “Aid comes from many places.”

The fog began to dissipate on the cold breeze.

Marc raised his eyes to Natoli. “The woman must be trained, or I will have to kill her, as she did to the people she traveled with before. They have a sickness that makes them feel so much hatred that only blood is satisfying.”

“She is a blood-taker?” Natoli asked in horror.

“Not to drink. *Seeing* it is the cure.”

“We have found others like that. They do drink of their victims. We have slaughtered them all.”

Marc didn’t lie. “I cannot promise it won’t get that bad. Only that if it does, I’ve given her my word that I’ll handle it.”

Natoli studied Marc, then Kendle’s form that was breathing too evenly to be sleeping. “You would kill your woman?”

Marc didn’t correct that impression, though his heart protested. If he said he had no interest in Kendle, she would belong to one of these men a

minute later. “Yes. Nothing will be allowed to interfere.”

Natoli shrugged. “Sometimes the Great Spirit puts temptations in our path to test our determination and honor.”

“And sometimes they gift you with weapons.” Marc leaned forward. “She has incredible power, my friend. And she wants to spill blood...”

Natoli grinned as Marc’s plan became clearer. “You will set her loose on the soldiers.”

“Yes. She hates them more than we do. She thinks they let the rage disease loose during the war, that they’ve caused all this to keep secrets covered up that would have lost them power. She’s a weapon that only needs the proper aiming and care.”

Those words got every man listening on board, as Marc had known they would. He’d been stewing over the decision to use Kendle on the front lines since seeing her eyes. He’d known right then that she was strong, but she’d proven it by not complaining and being able to keep up. When they camped, she did her own hunting and cleaning, and made a fire to cook it on. The Indians had begun to view her how he needed them to and Marc had chosen to go through with the demon’s brutal plan. The enemy would never suspect Safe Haven’s people of bringing female assassins along, and it would give them a few small advantages during battle that Marc would use. The government had no idea how dangerous that sex was now, but Marc thought maybe they would discover it in time.

Underestimating their foes was a mistake the government had been making for centuries.

Aware that no one was fooled by her act, Kendle slowly sat up and let her hands go to work on her kit. Marc had given it to her yesterday, telling her to braid all the straps and then he'd fill it for her. While her fingers went over the endless rawhide strings, Kendle searched the darkness mentally. Killing the fox hadn't been nearly enough. Animals didn't bleed the way people did.

Kendle wasn't sure why she'd been able to outlast the others in their group once they started flipping into madness, but she still had a part of her sanity that had sent her to an auto store for a filter to use as a silencer. She'd gotten them alone, one by one, and given them peace. She hadn't felt anything while pulling the triggers. No joy, no guilt, no soul breaking in two. Just rage at the people who'd sentenced them all to this.

Her nails dug into the skin of her palms; Kendle flung the kit to the dirt, standing up. She needed a real release if she was going to follow Marc's rules.

When she vanished into the shadows around their camp, Marc followed her. From the cracks of the hay room, he'd witnessed what women like her needed when the stress was too much. He wasn't sure if he could do it, but he was about to find out.

"If you get too close, I'll attack. I can't help it right now."

Marc grabbed her arm and swung her around, not surprised by the crimson orbs and snarling lips. “Hit me.”

Kendle paused, struggling to regain control of herself.

Marc followed through.

Slap!

Kendle glanced up from the ground for a bare instant. Then she lunged.

It was a vicious fight where Marc did his best to keep from being bitten, but not hurt her. Those wild punches would be good if they landed where she aimed, and the kicks were strong despite missing their mark.

He gave her a hard shove back to the ground, making sure it hurt a little so that she would listen. “Stop now.”

Kendle wiped the blood from her lip with a growl. “More! Please!”

“Not like this. Let me train you. Let us help you.”

Kendle trembled, close to snapping. “Not sure I can.”

Marc leaned into her personal space, ready to stop her lunge if it was needed. “There are a thousand soldiers where we’re going. Too many for you to ever kill the way you are now. We can make sure you get to see all the blood you want.”

Kendle began filling with a hunger that Marc knew to lean away from. He stood up, extending his hand. “Ten days. That’s all.”

Kendle closed her eyes, suddenly exhausted. “You’ll have to give me releases.”

She didn’t say, *since you won’t sleep with me*, but Marc heard it.

“I’m sorry it can’t be the kind you want, but I will provide something for you to take your anger out on each time we camp. Will that work?”

Kendle shuddered. “Yes.”

Marc watched her draw in the rage until there was only a hint of red around pretty violet. “Very good. Let’s do another workout and then you’ll be able to sleep.”

Kendle let him lead her into the firelight and this time when he began to train her, there was no shortage of help. Witnessing how rough Marc had been—her lip was split and shoulder sported an ugly purple bruise—gave proof to his words about nothing interfering. They didn’t understand that she’d just gotten her first Eagle evaluation. Marc knew a convert when he saw one now, thanks to Adrian. *I really do hate that man. I liked how life looked through my blinders. Reality is the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.*

6

“May we enter your camp?”

The call came as Marc flipped Kendle over his shoulder. It had been five days since their first session.

She hit the ground with a thud but quickly got to her feet, glaring at the interruption.

Marc made sure she was under control before he turned to meet the newest arrivals. She appeared to be doing better, but he suspected it was a great act. Inside Kendle, madness was boiling steadily and Marc hadn't found a way to save her. He wasn't sure there was one. He was just grateful that she was controlling herself.

"Welcome." Natoli greeted the riders coming in. "Welcome, our Delaware and Iroquois brothers, to the camp of the Ghost."

With bruises and scrapes, no shirt and a gun on each hip, Kendle thought Marc appeared the part as he went to shake with each of the men. These were more of theirs, though Kendle wasn't sure exactly what that meant yet. All she cared for was justice. Marc had given her a target and in the morning, they would reach it. He hadn't told his men yet, but Kendle was sure Marc planned to do some damage right away. The majority of his plan would take place along 40, but after this short time with him, Kendle doubted Marc would spot the enemy in Denver and then quietly flee. In fact, if he did, she was leaving and going in on her own. She would rather die down there tomorrow alone, than to wait another week or even two weeks for what the Indians were calling the greatest battle of their time. She wanted to fight now.

Slip off while he's distracted, her inner voice suggested. Go kill them.

Kendle closed her lids, trying to fight the suicide order. The time with Marc had given her a tiny ray of hope. He knew how to handle her, was teaching her to control it. There might be a tiny chance of surviving the fight and even recovering if she could get it together.

The disease that was ravaging her mind had given her more strength. Kendle wasn't aware of how hard she was gripping her knife until it began to bend. She quickly shoved it against the ground to straighten it, hoping no one had noticed. They already knew she was strong—they'd felt her hits during the training sessions—but they didn't know it was more than that. She was avoiding water, even insisting that Marc delay their one bridge crossing. She had also asked for a pill. Impatient and not needing the lack of respect from the men if he detoured, Marc had gently clipped her on the jaw and carried her in his arms. Kendle was grateful. She couldn't stand water now.

Marc's confident voice went over the camp in even waves as he greeted their newest fighters. Kendle shoved herself onto the ground to wait until he was ready to resume the lesson. While she sat there, she dug in the dirt with her fingers and tried to go over the things he'd taught her, but it was hard to concentrate with that voice whispering how sweet the blood would be.

The others who'd been with them for the trip through tribal lands understood that Kendle was like Marc and different from the Indians and other

people they'd known since the war. Marc's group had gotten used to his slight withdraw upon meeting new men. He wanted to give them time to adjust before showing his true nature. It was a good idea, but destined to fail, as fate didn't like having her every move planned. Sometimes, she liked to throw in a wildcard.

Marc felt the wind drop, the chill of battle falling into place. He sent out his grid, searching for their guards. Five still dots instead of moving men closer told Marc their new people were a distraction to allow their sentries to be taken out.

“Weapons! Now!”

The area flooded with confusion as his Eagles and Kendle flew to his side. The Indians did the same.

Marc found himself in the crushing center of a mass of bodies. The feel of a gun in his side wasn't unexpected, but infuriating.

“Coward!” he hissed as the man pulled the trigger.

Kendle's knife went across the Chickasaw traitor's throat an instant later; both men slumped to the dirt as the group pushed away from the battle.

Marc slowly stood up.

Kendle's eyes flashed crimson at the sight of the blood on him. When the orbs began shooting from her hands, Marc sighed in relief.

Paul and Jax joined her, touching her arm to add their energy and increase her power.

Marc felt the wound heal around the bullet as if it belonged there.

Kendle sank to the ground, tears flowing down her red cheeks as she stared at her hands. “What am I?”

Marc gave her the truth. “A weapon and a savior. You’ve come for blood and absolution, as have we all.”

From that instant on, Kendle didn’t think her control would be an issue. Knowing her purpose, the reason life had so cruelly abused her, was a glaring light in her darkness. She would hold onto it and be whatever Marc needed.

Marc got to his feet, expecting to have to comfort or confront their new men. He found all seven of them observing in awed amusement. It was clear they hadn’t known about the traitor.

“Do not stop on our account,” their leader stated thickly. “Your demons will be useful to us.”

The Delaware Indian carried scars on his chest that Marc knew came from a painful ritual that few would even dare. “You know of others like us.”

The tall Indian’s eyes lit up in crimson. “True.”

Marc laughed in delight. “Welcome to the Shadow Riders.”

7

“I’m leaving after the final battle.”

Marc had expected it. “I understand.”

Losing Leslie had hurt Jax, changed him. The only fire he had left now was the kind a man used for killing. He needed to go out on his own and find out if there was anything else left on this planet that might satisfy in her place. Marc thought the odds were slim. “You’ll keep in touch?”

Jax shrugged. “Maybe.”

Again, Marc understood. “You should take Paul along. He feels your pain, too.”

Marc left Jax with a dumbfounded expression on his face. Marc didn’t want to lose either man, but they were almost useless to Safe Haven in their depression. Maybe together they could help each other continue toward recovery instead of the expected downward spiral that grief brought.

8

“There are a dozen riders coming. They have shod horses.”

Marc woke in a grouchy flash of alertness, stopping his horse. He was exhausted. They’d been traveling straight through and the city of Denver was close. They’d had people join them steadily, white, black, Indian, and Marc had tended their wounds in gratitude for swelling the ranks. There were now hundreds of men in this group.

He watched the large dust cloud that said these new men were riding hard to catch up. The sight of the sombreros and pistols jerked Marc into the past;

he drew his right Colt as he swung down from the horse.

Marc waved the others back, going out to meet them himself. What did the Mexicans want?

The group of riders slowed and stopped at enough distance to ease Marc's riders, but not him. He remembered too much from the rest stop, from Zack's memories.

Two of the Mexicans slid from their horses and ambled out to meet him, grinning hugely.

"It is you!"

"We have news, Mr. Ghost."

Marc waited with his gun pointed down. "So talk."

The first man began to babble, but Marc watched the second man as he continued to evaluate those around them.

"We wish to join your fight! We can add many guns."

"Why?" Marc's cold tone was telling his men that the Mexicans weren't welcome; the demon spoke up. *We need them.*

"You want something." Marc glared. "What?"

Sebastian's face lost all welcome. "It is true. You are...different."

Marc didn't pretend ignorance. He needed the stories to grow. "What do you want?"

Sebastian gestured. "We have become peaceful in the south. The land is recovering, there is game again to hunt. We will not allow the United States to interfere with this."

Marc was convinced of the honesty. He just wasn't sure he could stand to be around them every day without slitting the man's throat. "You'll stay back. Your kind has done a lot of damage to me personally. Trust will have to be earned."

Sebastian scowled. "Do not hold all Mexicans responsible for the actions of a few. Cesar was never one of us."

Marc blinked. "You knew him."

Sebastian grinned sadly. "My brother was never smart in his hatred of the Americans. It has always been your government we should have fought against—together."

Instinct said these men would add a great value to his army and Marc couldn't deny that. "You'll stay back until we trust you."

"Si, but we will be there when it matters."

Marc wasn't convinced, but didn't argue the point. "Welcome to my riders."

The group was on the road a few minutes later and Marc let his mind return to the doze he'd been in before they arrived. He had to refill somehow soon, even if it meant getting someone alone for a minute and stealing it without their notice. He had no idea how to...feed from people, but he was about to learn. Having the Mexicans with them would stretch his nerves to the breaking point if he didn't have a reserve to use. He didn't trust them at all and the fact that it was Cesar's brother now staring hard enough to burn holes into his head, made it worse.

The men with him also felt his unease, and kept the new riders as far from Marc and his woman as they could. Until he officially cleared them, the Mexicans would find only body blocks and hostile attitudes.

9

“I can’t take all of you in there with me.” Marc scanned the group of riders a few hours later. They’d reached the outskirts of Denver where he stopped them for a quick meal.

“Each group needs to pick two men to go with me. The rest will stay out of Denver and out of sight. We’ll meet two miles south in 24-hours to give the reports.”

“What if they haven’t come yet?” Sebastian asked.

Marc shrugged. “We’ll set up a post and take turns. They won’t get through without our notice.”

Marc waited for a protest and found men stepping forward. The others began heading for the outlying towns to gather provisions. Marc was pleased. Some of these groups were new to this life, while others had held onto their heritage over the centuries, but all of them were good hands to have.

Marc’s group was quickly cut to thirty; he waved these men into two lines. “No shooting for any reason.”

Kendle grimaced and eased off the trigger of her gun. If she didn't spill blood soon, things were going to get ugly.

Their ride through Denver was eerie, but uneventful. There was no sign of the soldiers or anyone else for that matter. The dead city didn't even creak and groan around them. It smothered them with the smells of decay and awful sights. Most of 25 was harsh, ugly landscape that would never be livable again. The slavers and nature had destroyed this city. Nothing moved but debris that hadn't molded into place yet. Tall buildings and bone-dry sewers made perfect places to plan an ambush though. Marc took note of every choke point that he found.

He quickly determined which intersection was a prime scouting spot and then took his group up high. For some of them, it was an uneasy trip through these remnants of the past, one they suffered with hands on holsters. For others, it produced waves of longing for all that had been stolen. The end result was thirty pissed people on the top floor of the Republic Plaza, waiting to see the men they would try to kill. That would be no easy job, but they would have this anger to drive them through the battle.

Marc contemplated Sebastian, hating what he had to do now. "You and your men will go set up a base camp in Cheyenne. If they come through, you make it clear that you'll fight to hold what Cesar claimed for your country."

Sebastian's lined face was full of disbelief. "You are crazy!"

Marc went on with his plan. "When you threaten to detonate the nuclear warhead that you're in control of, they'll report it to their base and go south instead. They'll send a special team for you."

"By then, we'll be gone." Sebastian was starting to understand the trap Marc was making.

"Yes. You'll be on the battalion's flank, waiting on them to come through Denver. Once they do, we'll make sure they can't turn back by having your group and a few others there, picking them off."

"They could come over 70, or even detour up 76." Thaddeus's face was buried in the map.

Marc waved a hand at the leader of the other new arrivals to join their crusade. "Grendin's people are in Montana. They'll make sure the soldiers find blocked routes. We'll make a chute and send them straight to a slaughter." Marc pointed to a spot along 40, lingering here and there as he spoke. "Once they reach Texas, we attack from both sides, openly, with everything we have. It's being set up as we speak."

"And when they enter tribal lands, their path will get rough."

Atolius's statement brought protests.

"They'll know by then."

"They'll avoid it."

Marc nodded. "Yes. Right before they hit Oklahoma, I expect them to detour north."

Atolius stood up proudly. “My people have longed to return to the plains, as have many others. Perhaps the time has now come for our warriors to scout an area and persuade intruders to stay away.”

Marc clapped him on the shoulder. “Do it now, if you can. You’ll need the time to set up. Stay northeast of 40 and kill as many as you can if they try to punch through.”

“Where will you be?” Natoli asked respectfully. There was little honor for his people if they were all sent away.

“The Ghost is everywhere.”

“And where will Natoli be?”

Marc’s eyes glowed brightly. “By my side, as my cloak. If you’d have that place.”

“I would.” Natoli was grateful.

“What if they go south?” Kendle rudely interrupted the male bonding moment.

“There is no south.” Sebastian stared at her. “Southern Texas is contaminated. We traveled for a week to get around it. They will not risk taking their men through a radiation zone during a battle.”

Kendle could find no fault with that and remained silent as Marc went on.

“By the time they get to Oklahoma, we’ll be doing steady damage, but it won’t stop them. We’ll be pushed straight to the base, where my Eagles are preparing for their arrival. We’ll stall them there and dig in. They won’t send more men unless this first group can claim the middle ground target.”

Marc's confidence made it easy to believe it could happen like he was predicting. He didn't tell them it was more likely that the government's reinforcements would meet at the base to overwhelm them.

"The goal of every person here is to kill fifteen of them before they reach this point." Marc showed them on the map. "We have to cut their numbers in half or better, by then, and convince command that they'll lose a lot if they want to continue this fight with us. They don't have endless soldiers anymore and I know that because they're sending ground troops instead of planes."

"When do we come to the base and fight there?" Red Stone asked, face eager.

"When I call to say we're pinned down. Take a two-way radio and box of batteries from the small faraday cage we made on the ride. Don't forget the code sheets. When I call, all teams and groups will close in and attack simultaneously from all sides. We will also be firing at them from the center and it will create a perfect trap."

Kendle smiled happily. "A duck-shoot."

"Yes."

"And what will we use against their armor?" Sebastian asked. "Our bullets and arrows will be useless."

Marc unrolled a small target outline he'd drawn earlier. "Weak points are the neck, above the brow, and the inside of the wrists. The one you should concentrate on is the neck. Wait for them to duck or

reach for something, and you'll have a small opening."

"What about the big guns?" Grendin needed to know. His people were too familiar with those.

Marc patted the paper. "Remember to use their weaknesses. Take out the tripods, or better, the road. If they can't roll the heavy equipment over it, they'll have to leave it behind. Any more questions?"

"What happens when they take the base?"

"That's the ballgame." Marc grunted. "When it happens, get to your people and get ready to defend yourselves. I suggest joining up with Safe Haven. If I survive, that's where I'll be."

"You'll stay there?" Kendle asked uneasily.

Marc put an arm around her shoulders. "We'll go home and make a last stand in the mountains."

Kendle was comforted.

Marc's men were pleased with the plan.

Now, he would put them in the mood to fight. "Get your riders together. There's an armory not far from here and I'm fairly sure it's untouched."

"How is that possible?" Sebastian questioned. "Cesar came through here and picked it clean."

Marc grinned. "Because it's underground and there was no need for them to go there. If we don't grab it tonight, the enemy will have it. There's one in nearly every state and we're going to get to them before the soldiers do. They'll still find ways to arm themselves when their own stocks run out, but by then it'll be on the same terms as the rest of us—post SHTF." Marc glanced around. "Slow them down.

Get close, pick off a few, and get ghost. Three raids a day, always at different times, and with all the hatred in your hearts. *We've* declared war this time.”

10

They waited for two full days with no signs of the soldiers.

Marc knew they were coming, though. He could feel it, and the same was true of the others. Among his own kind—killers—Marc didn't have to spend time calming or easing panic so that they didn't flee, like he would have had to do with Safe Haven fighters. They knew the golden rule: If you were sent to fight, then the enemy, the battle, always came. They just had to suffer through the wait.

Marc sensed them first, but Kendle was close on his heels as he went to the window they'd tinted yesterday to prevent the glare from giving them away. In the other windows, men ducked down and began taking mental notes.

The first sight of the enemy was intimidating.

The lines of uniformed, neatly marching soldiers sent a shiver into every gut, including Marc's. It was an entire battalion, like he'd predicted. Serious, quickly moving sets of soldiers marched smartly across the bones and debris long since molded into the ground. Their hard gazes swiveled continuously, guns ready to fire.

“They’re not using standard formation.” Marc spotted units that were usually support and took half an hour to arrive, now staying within minutes.

“It won’t hold, that pace.” Sebastian was sure. “They’ll get tired and gap out.”

Marc agreed, but he didn’t stop going through a full consideration of switching plans. When he was satisfied that this was still the best way, he spent a few minutes listing weapons and equipment, and other important details for Kendle to write down.

They all waited tensely for the first part of the miles long battalion to reach the choosing point. Those below the window line kept to themselves, handling their impatience with this part of the plan. Kendle occupied herself by digging the tip of the pen into her leg to see the blood.

“They’re taking 25. Everyone go still and silent!”

The battalion had to pass the building where the Shadow Riders were concealed. They’d be trapped if spotted.

Marc made his men demonstrate their control and their level of commitment by keeping them under cover until even the sound of the vehicles couldn’t be heard. Kendle, who was now rooting around in her leg with that pen like a surgeon, he left alone.

An hour after the battalion was gone, Marc took his men for a hard, looping ride to get ahead of the soldiers, then held a quick meeting. He told the scouts to leave and do their reporting, eager to be alone with the best few. "I'll let the others know and meet you where my rookies are."

Marc was quickly left with nervous men who were a mix of the groups who'd come. As they slowly moved down 25 ahead of the soldiers, Marc filled them in on the next part of his plan. "There's a scouting party up here. I detoured around them as we came in so we didn't give away our element of surprise." Marc grinned ruthlessly. "Their free pass is over. We'll kill them all and then go meet up. First blood is ours."

Savage nods and leers met his words.

Marc was satisfied. They were as worried and angry as he was at the sight of the enemy. They wanted to strike hard and do it right now. "Come dawn, we'll start teaching them not to underestimate us."

12

Kendle stifled a moan as she observed the campfire below her post. Marc had ordered them to attack just before sunrise, but that was hours away and Kendle wasn't sure about lasting another ten minutes. The need to spill blood was rolling over her in thick waves. That tiny hope of a cure had vanished after listening to the soldiers talk. The rage

sickness was spreading unchecked—another weapon unleashed by the government to wipe out survivors. There was no way they'd give them the cure after all the death and destruction Marc was set to cause. The few plans he'd confided were lethal ambushes that would spill more blood than she could ever enjoy.

Except, she had to wait and it hurt. The shivers and twitches had come this morning and hadn't stopped racking her nervous system. Lances of pain had started as they camped.

The men below them had no idea that death was coming. They sat around an open fire, enjoying the cool breeze as they slept and stood watch. There were eight of them, four in their bedrolls, while two had higher positions. The other two soldiers lingered by the small fire, exchanging short bursts of conversation.

Kendle already knew how she would do it. The perimeter men were keeping a loose guard around the others, sometimes stopping to view something on the ground or in the distance. Kendle was sure she could get at least two of them that way, then she'd have to make noise. The suppressor on her gun might not echo to the next team that was half an hour behind, but those sleeping men would definitely notice. She would have to be perfect and Kendle didn't have enough faith in her skills to test that yet. She'd been okay with a rifle on her show and sucked at handguns. It hadn't changed much.

Poison them, her demon whispered. They've been on government food since the war. Look at how they keep staring at the dark stores.

Kendle saw it was true. The men wanted to break orders and go exploring for anything that might have survived the destruction. Maybe she could help them with that.

A few minutes later, Kendle slipped out of camp with a small bag in her hand. Sebastian hadn't even haggled, just accepted her trade.

Marc hadn't woken to stop her. They weren't bonded, so he didn't sense her absence. This time, Kendle was glad he was busy dreaming of his precious Angie.

13

"I'm telling you. I smell chips."

The Private sniffed deeply and groaned. "Mmm. Extra cheesy..."

"And I'm tellin' you, I'm smoked," one of the others sneered in response, tired of hearing it. "So shut up."

The other men snickered, but each of them understood. To finally be out here and not be able to dig up supplies was maddening. A bag of chips, any flavor or brand, was worth gold among the ranks.

“I’m gonna take a four minute sweep of that building.” The Private walked away. “For possible intruders, you know?”

No one protested. Besides wanting him to shut up about it, each of them had considered voicing the idea themselves, but hadn’t gotten the nerve yet. Command was firm about following orders.

The Private disappeared into the building; it made them all uneasy. They waited nervously for him to come out.

“Yes! Extra cheesy!”

The call let them relax or grin, knowing he’d found something they would all share in.

The Private emerged from the darkness carrying two familiar bags. One was open.

“Musta popped from the pressure of the desk it was under, but they’re still good!” He crunched loudly in demonstration as the others crowded close to get their share.

Both bags were quickly gone as the sleeping men were woken to join them. The sound of happy crunching was all the noise any of them could hear.

The Private reached for the dwindling bag, blinking as sweat rolled into his eyes. *Is it hot out now?*

They all stopped eating at roughly the same time, but it was too late. The men began falling unconscious from the chemicals Kendle had rubbed on the outside of the bags.

When all of them were down, she drew her knife and entered their firelight with red orbs and a harsh grin.

14

“Where’s Kendle?” Marc approached the small crowd angrily, thinking she was in the center, being hurt. What he saw as they parted to let him through chilled his blood.

Marc stared for a long time, considering. She was too far gone to save. He slowly turned away from the gruesome scene. He had only one place left to go for answers.

How do I help her?

The demon roused himself tiredly. He was ready for this, but there was still regret in his answer. *You can’t. Adrian’s light might, but the odds are slim.*

Why can’t I heal her?

You would use your new life credit on this woman?

No. If I have a credit to give, it belongs to my son, Marc answered slowly, thinking it through and still missing what that meant.

As you wish.

What if...someone else does it?

Any of our healers may be able. If they can push it back enough, Adrian will help.

Marc was relieved to have a solution that he could live with. He waved Sebastian and Natoli

along, moving carefully to where she was still slicing. “Kendle?”

Kendle spun around, throwing her knife.

Marc used his kit to capture the blade. He grinned, impressed. “Nice.”

Kendle blinked away the haze, but not the lust.

“Not me.” Marc waved. “Pick one of the others and then you’ll be his or passed around.”

“I make my own rules!”

“Then I’ll shoot you here and now.”

Kendle wanted him to. She was horrified by what she’d become. She was also a survivor, a child of the light who yearned to be normal again. Kendle slid to her knees. “Help me or kill me. You pick.”

Marc approached her without fear and scooped her into his arms.

Kendle let Marc take her back to camp. When he held a canteen toward her, she dutifully cleaned up, not caring that dozens of men stared as she stripped and changed into the clean clothes Marc held out. She liked the hot feeling, liked the respect and envy they gave Marc for it. She also loathed it and longed for her little island. She’d been happy there, once upon a time.

15

“Here they come. Remember what I’ve shown you, how you’ve practiced.” Marc eased them into battle mode, aware of nerves. “Not one sighting, not one crunch of gravel.” Marc pulled his mask down,

shoving into their minds. *We are the ghosts of America. We do this for our country, because she cannot do it for herself.*

Eager to live up to that reputation, the thirty fighters in the rocks around him covered their grins and their posts. The things Marc had begun to teach them were the stuff of legend and fantasy. They couldn't wait to practice it on the enemy.

Marc smothered his own leer of intense need. He hadn't done this since before the war, and never under these completely free circumstances. The things he and the demon had come up with were awful.

“Three minutes. Set alarms.”

Wrists were brandished shortly for each of them to hit the button on alarms that were already set. As the numbers began spinning, Marc pulled up his hood and fastened it to the collar. “Justice will be served.”

Those words were a mental switch that Marc was installing. When hit, concentration on one goal became easier, survival and success more likely. Against this enemy, he and his team needed any edge they could find.

Marc motioned them down as the dust cloud that preceded the soldiers thickened on the nearest rise. The ghosts in black and gray observed in silence as the danger came into view.

The front line of soldiers made it to the canyon mouth and started to funnel in, thickening the lines into a blur of marching legs. Slight crumbles of rock

on their sides and above them made some of the soldiers react in concern, but most were uncaring. They'd already come a good distance and there was a lot longer to go. Few of them liked this duty, but when command orders came down, you followed them or a bullet followed you.

More rock crumbling drew attention upward in nervous glances that shifted the line of soldiers into occasional disorder and quick shoves. It sent a faint burst of excitement through the point men, and allowed grins and joking. Other missions they'd performed had been almost fun, but this one—going to wipe out the only known camp of survivors trying to rebuild—had been weighing heavily on them.

“Maybe we won't have to kill them.” The man on the right awkwardly avoided a tangle of weeds. “Maybe they'll surrender.”

“Yeah. Their women, showers, and food—in that order,” one of the others responded.

Chuckles floated through the canyon.

“Hey, watch out!”

A large rock tumbled down the canyon wall and slammed into the base of fallen stones lining the narrowing path. Men jumped out of the way, swearing as they hit a tangled mess of tripwire and triggers hidden under the debris. The last of the razor wire from the slaver battle jerked up between the haphazard rows.

“Ahh!”

“Trap!”

“Go back!”

Another trigger was hit as the men turned; snapping a second sharp wire up to do the same damage. Blood coated the narrow canyon mouth.

The rear of the platoon began issuing orders that had to be relayed. In that time, two more rows of men vanished in a glinting snap of wire and guts.

Panic ensued from those closest, soldiers wildly firing upward as they fled into the safety of the halting troops. A quick barricade went up and the order to open fire upon sight was sent.

Wind driven dust spun across the rocks and valley in front of them; small animals scurried under the cover of the sand.

Nothing else moved.

Now needing to clear the area, the entire platoon was stopped for an hour while the men in charge made their choice either to continue this way, clearing as they went, or to find another route through the mountains. When they decided to keep going, the Shadow Riders were delighted. They'd secured all areas of travel, but this was the fastest route to Safe Haven and they'd laid things on the thickest here. The platoon would spend a lot of time searching and clearing to make it through, which would buy Angela more time to get the camp ready to fight the soldiers who did survive Marc's horrible fun land. This would be the longest journey that any of these soldiers had ever undertaken. He'd made sure of that.

Dusk found the platoon in the same place, settling in for the night as small teams continued to clear their path. As these men removed the more obvious decoys, ghosts went behind and replaced the minor ambushes with something more lethal. They also traveled the rocks above the platoon, getting into position. Phase Four had begun.

16

A rough hand shook Quinn awake.

“Marc called from Denver on the coded channel. The soldiers are coming down 25.”

A chill of doom flooded the base, snapping Eagles awake with fear in their hearts.

Quinn instantly went into authority mode, issuing orders and keeping things calm, but inside, he was as upset as they were. Each of them had hoped Marc would say there was nothing coming, that they could all go home. “Not happening now.” Quinn unrolled the map Marc had given them. “Where are we on the avenues of approach?”

“AAs are almost finished.” Shane made notes. “Still working on the reservoirs. Little over half on those.”

“All work on the AAs are suspended until we get those reservoirs wired. Set a skeleton crew here. The rest of us will get over there come dawn.”

Shane went to tell the others. The reservoirs were a powerful defense that stood between them and the enemy. It had to be ready.

Paul finished delivering the message. “Marc said to expect riders that will help.”

Quinn was glad to hear it. They would get the reservoirs done and then the avenues of approach would have to be completed or the enemy would be able to go around their other traps. “Send a rider to Safe Haven, let them know.”

“Can we call?”

“No.” Quinn made the choice he thought Marc would approve of. “Marc’s smart enough to contact us without getting caught. We aren’t able to do that from here. It’s time to go quiet.”

Chapter Sixteen

These Dreams

Tishomingo State Park, MS

1

*D*amn. Even with her back to the heavily protected flap, Angela knew who had just entered the training tent. She ignored him as she went on with her workout. The canvas was deserted except for them. Dawn's dim light was still an hour away. The only shadows moving outside were Eagles.

Tishomingo Park was almost as ugly as the city she'd avoided to bring them here. The leaves under their feet were old, decaying, treacherous. The ground was shifty, like a sinkhole might be waiting, and everyone was glad they weren't staying long. The derelict buildings and sheds were eerie. Angela had camped them in the family area of the park, and put a 24-hour detail on the bridge that some of the camp had been crazy enough to ask about exploring.

Aware that she was putting off the vibes of a frustrated woman, Adrian stayed on the opposite side of the tent. After his nightmare, he needed the workout.

Angela tried to concentrate, needing the calm that came from physical action, but her eyes kept straying to the beautifully built blond who had

stripped his shirt and begun doing one arm pushups in rapid succession. Tan skin and rippling muscles glowed in the dimness. Angela shoved the bar up with a grunt that was half effort, half annoyance with herself. It was just another Eagle without a shirt. During the days they camped, this tent was full of them.

Sure he was distracting her, Adrian switched to the small hay room with a tight face. She was an exotic mix of woman and warrior, and it was easy for him to let his thoughts run wild. Pushing her was hard on his control. If not for the coming battle, none of this would be happening. He appeared to have lost control and he needed them to all think that. The truth was that he was still herding her, like he had been all along.

Adrian spun, ducked, kicked and punched, dipping to swing wide. *Is there more I can do to make you hate me?*

“Are you asking me?” Angela was in the doorway.

Adrian grinned bitterly. “Wasn’t sure if you might lie. You look...upset.”

Angela shrugged, aware of the ice around her heart at the thought of Marc. “Same shit, different dogs.”

Adrian knew she didn’t need to hear the right choice again. She knew it well.

“Yes, I do.”

Adrian returned to his kicks and spins, wondering why she was here.

She entered the small room, careful to stay away from his hard, sweaty body, but his smells were thick in the air. Angela inhaled deeply, lids fluttering closed. Unaware that he'd moved, Angela blinked when he appeared inches from her face.

“If you'd know me, then know me!”

The urgency in his voice was impossible to ignore.

Angela nodded nervously. “I'd know you well.”

Adrian's eyes lit up a blinding red; he dropped his lips to hers.

Angela jerked awake, gasping. She looked around, arm going to her mouth to keep the ragged breathing from her guards. *What the hell was that?*

2

“I'd like to go.”

Still wearing that outsider shell, Tracy rarely asked for anything. Angela immediately agreed as the males at the table began to protest. “Sure. Kenn would be happy to have an extra pair of hands. Tonya will go along as XO.”

Angela was aware of the tension at her table. They would get over it. “Double the guards and you two wear the new vests. Got it?” Angela closed her notebook as the men fought to keep from arguing. “I'll be at the medical area for a while, then the QZ, then showers. Unless there's anything else?”

They were having her tell where she'd be now, on top of the other new protections, but Angela

wasn't protesting. It had taken a long time to come up from the drugs the kids had hit her with and she'd been alone in the dark all that time.

No one spoke.

Angela went on her way, satisfied. The rookie females had been a wreck for Kenn on their first mission, but this would be different. Her team was better now, more able to think and then react. Not that there wouldn't be dangerous moments, but Angela thought the women would finally be more of a help than hindrance. These runs would tell her if she was right. If so, then the team could branch out more, try harder things. Angela couldn't wait.

"We've got company. A lot of it."

Those words sent Safe Haven into minor panic until Angela answered the call. "You didn't sound the alarm. I assume they're friendly."

"Some type of traveling store, like the one we saw in the Midwest."

Angela grinned at those around her. "Maybe they'll have some chocolate to trade!"

Calm flashed overhead as Angela waved a few Eagles along. It wasn't for her protection, but their peace of mind. She had a full team now anytime she met with new arrivals or left the perimeter for any reason. Another assassin had gotten through yesterday and was killed by Dog as he tried to slit her throat. The attacks were becoming more and more brazen, and her protection had her in sight even while she showered. Angela didn't argue about that either. She liked breathing.

The travelers were in a variety of dusty, dented vehicles that Angela studied. She and Adrian had talked briefly about converting Safe Haven's vehicles to accommodate living, but they had chosen to still make the switch to campers.

"We'll check them out first." Kevin was ready to keep her from going out. "Wait for the call."

Angela observed eagerly as Kyle's team went through the gate. This was the first group that had come to Safe Haven for anything other than trouble or sanctuary. There was an even mix of men and women driving, and all of them were smiling and waving, appearing as stunned as Safe Haven was to find out that another large group had survived.

"We aren't the only ones." Cynthia was on her left. "I was so sure."

"Fate must like them." Adrian joined the females. The healthy drivers who were turning off engines and climbing from their seats also encouraged him.

Kyle gestured. "Clear."

Angela strolled out to talk with the two men who came toward her.

The Eagles followed, all scowling when she didn't hesitate to go right up to them without her gun drawn.

Adrian tried not to smirk. *She's fearless in these moments.*

"I'm Angela. Welcome to Safe Haven."

The man with an ugly mole over his brow laughed and shook her hand vigorously. "I can't believe it! You're real."

Angela chuckled, then shook with the smaller, less friendly of the two. "You must have heard our calls."

"Yes, ma'am, but we were sure it was a trick."

Angela viewed them curiously. "A trick?"

The cheerful mood fell to the ground.

"They're calling to them in the East, trying to get refugees to come in. We went west, hoping to find more people for our convoy." The mole-man gestured at the fifteen vehicles neatly lined up behind him. "We did, too, but your group, well, now that's the most people any of us have seen since leaving New York."

Angela was surprised to find there had been any survivors from that doomed region, but she didn't say so. "You plan to stay on the road or maybe join up with another group?"

The man frowned slightly. "If you're real, then the coming fight is too."

Angela pointed at the walls of her camp, aware of Adrian standing on her right. The bulletproof canopies they'd been building had been put aside under Marc's new plan. They were being used to strengthen their existing defenses now. "We're a little short on hands. If you decide it is your fight, you'd be welcome."

"We don't want any part in fighting the government!" the shorter man spat.

Angela's lips pursed. "That's your choice to make, but I won't invite you inside unless you're staying."

"We've got items for trade." Mean man just didn't want any part of the battle.

Angela shrugged. "I'll shop for a minute, and then maybe we'll see if a few of the others want to come out. Show me your stuff."

The two men directed her to the first vehicle, where the driver was busy setting up shelves and stands to display his merchandise.

"What's your currency?"

"Food and water are golden, but we'll work with about anything we don't have. Same for you?"

"Yes."

Kevin watched Cynthia take Angela's right as she and Adrian went to meet the group, and thought of her words.

"I get to be her XO for the next runs. Among other things."

Kevin did a fast sweep of the areas that weren't getting much attention now, not frowning at the sight of Ray and Dale taking the opportunity to exchange an instant of affection. Those two were becoming popular with the camp and with the vet, who was walking over to them with a semblance of a smile. The two firefighters were riding with the vet when they traveled and Dale was even helping in the animal area that was slowly growing again.

Maybe the vet is gay. Kevin turned to sweep the other areas. That would explain some of his

reclusive behavior. No one wanted to expose themselves and receive the treatment that Ray and Dale had gotten.

The doctor was doing house calls now, with his group of interns trailing close behind. Kevin had a flash of John and Anne moving from the camper. They'd been arm-in-arm, smiling and happy. What right did the government have to take that away?

Kevin pushed the heavy thoughts aside and turned his attention back to the new people outside the fence. If something went hinky, he would be in the thick of it.

Angela compared the values to the prices she was quoted, using the time to scan every one of the new people. She found things she didn't like, but none of them were assassins and that was the best she could hope for these days.

As she returned to Safe Haven's side of the fencing and the Eagles started breathing again, Angela waved a few of them over. "They've got things the camp will want. Figure out a way to let them spend time shopping."

Daryl frowned. "We can't secure it out there. Have them come inside?"

"No. The camp needs to know they can come and go. The walls and fences are making people more nervous than they need to be."

Zack agreed. "I'll handle it. The water crew just checked in. Should catch up with us in a few hours with a full load. We're all set to start cleaning it. We have plenty of bleach."

“That’s great.” Angela was relieved. Neil’s team was out there without Safe Haven’s protection. So was Kenn’s team. They’d left a few hours ago. She wouldn’t relax until they returned. “Extend lunch by two hours, but let everyone know we’ll travel longer tonight to make up for it. We can’t get off schedule. That would be a dangerous mistake.”

3

“So what happens now that Adrian’s well enough to take over?”

Kenn’s cup paused at his mouth, but Tracy read nothing on his face when he answered.

“Everything goes back to normal, I hope.”

Tracy stared at him, wondering how he honestly felt about everything that had happened.

Kenn grunted, hating being away from camp. “Some things will go back to normal. Some of it will be...different.”

“Like Kevin and Kyle.”

“Yeah.” Kenn sipped his coffee.

Those two had done a great job; they had that perceptive connection with Angela that Kenn shared with Adrian. The chances of their former leader letting them go unused were slim to none.

Tracy frowned. “Will he have two XOs now?”

“Adrian won’t split them up. That trio works too well together.”

“What then?”

Kenn dumped out the last of his cold coffee. “Have a feeling we’ll know when we get back.”

“They’re switching over while...”

“Yes, while I’m out of camp. It’s another punishment I earned.”

Tracy was quiet for a long moment, considering how badly she wanted an answer.

“Spit it out before you choke.”

Tracy flushed. “Does he love her?”

Kenn knew who she was talking about. “It’s more than that with her. She...completes a man somehow, even when she doesn’t want to. It’s...”

“Complicated.”

“Yeah.”

There was silence again except for the sound of the others working. Tracy broke it first, unable to keep from asking. “Will Marc leave her when he finds out?”

“He knows.” Kenn snorted, staring into the darkness around them. “He has since the beginning.”

“Will she go to Adrian?”

Kenn stood up, dusting himself off. “Who can say she hasn’t already. Adrian isn’t coming to you anymore, is he?”

Tracy flushed. “Not since Charlie made his interest known.”

Kenn didn’t care. In fact, he thought it was a sign that Charlie would be too distracted to be the problem some people were expecting since Matt and the assassin kids. Kenn could tell Tracy had

considered that, too, but it was his turn to dig for information that he couldn't ask anyone else about. "What do you see in him? Power? Safety? What's your angle?"

Aware that she was talking to Charlie's stepfather at this moment, Tracy started to roll out what she'd told Angela.

Kenn shut it down. "Stop. I'm not his mom. I don't care if it's sex, the things he can do, or where he can get you. You don't have to lie to me. I don't have any influence anymore."

Tracy didn't think that was true, but she chose to give Kenn what she hadn't any of the others. "He has everything I need in a man, except the age."

"Ah. A combination." Kenn studied her, not feeling particularly parent-like, but curious just the same. "Of all the things that go through your mind, which one would kill you to lose about him?"

"You mean he might change as he gets older."

Kenn waited for her to answer.

Tracy considered it, hearing Tonya near them. She didn't feel the need to censor her answer. "How he looks at me, probably. He doesn't see a whore. If that ever changed, it would kill me."

Kenn grunted at the unexpected answer, able to tell she meant it. Kenn's old mind spoke up hesitantly. *How did that boy get Adrian and Kyle's piece of ass to flip?* Not just anyone could do that.

Kenn didn't take that thought any further, but he didn't shut out the voice either. He may not use the

information anymore, but he still needed to be in the know and that only happened by listening.

Tracy felt the air thicken as Kenn pierced her with those cool, blue eyes. She didn't feel any attraction for him, no urge to become his toy, but she could feel him evaluating her in that way and others.

“Why does he want *you*?”

Kenn's cruel tone might have broken other camp women. Tracy blinked at the change and crossed her arms defensively over her chest. “He says it's because the men who visit me don't understand my worth and he does.”

“Do you believe that?”

Tracy looked away. “I want to.”

“So you can be more than his relief.”

Tracy moved over as Tonya joined them. “Yes. He believes people can change.”

Kenn met Tonya's nervous gaze over the rookie's shoulder. “So do I.”

Tonya was startled into a smile. Instead of her usual greedy, malicious grin, this one was happiness in a raw form.

Kenn was stunned for an instant by the feeling of honest desire. *Where did that come from?* Nature's latest attack was through the grass and weeds, causing rashes and allergies. As a result, Tonya's pharmacy needed to be restocked, along with Safe Haven's supply trucks. Bug bites had also increased and Tonya was staying busy making trades and collecting on deals when she wasn't in

lessons. As a result, they hadn't had as much free time together as usual. Did that explain it?

Tonya waved a hand. "We're all ready to leave."

Kenn immediately turned to the rest of the team. "Lunch break's over. There's a hospital ten minutes from here with our names written on it. Let's go scrub them off and clean them out."

"Ooh-rah!" came the answer from the few service men along.

Tonya went to his right, loving life except for one tiny little thing.

Kenn glanced over in time to catch the small smile playing on Tonya's lips and wondered if his words had caused it. *If so, I should do it again. She's cute when she's not being a bitch.*

4

The Mississippi Medical Center looked like the other hospitals they'd gone to for supplies. Kenn wasn't expecting trouble, but that didn't change how he handled things. He knew better than to take chances. "Mini perimeter; recon team, move in."

The men got into place outside their vehicles to provide cover while a small team went to the doors, searching for possible problems.

"Looks clear." Allan waved.

Kenn gestured the next team forward and took his place in front of them. "Stay together. If you take

off on your own, you can find your own ride back to camp.”

Kenn led them up the stairs and inside the medical center with Tonya on his right flank and Tracy on his left. The females planned to keep it that way until they were back safe and sound behind the walls of camp.

“We’ll be stopping on three floors for this trip.” Kenn hated feeling nervous. “Watch your six.”

“What are we searching for?” Tracy asked.

“Anything we can use in camp and also anything that might be a problem.”

“Does that qualify as either?” Crista drew their attention to the row of seats in front of the reception desk. “One of them moved.”

The lobby held half a dozen bodies, all with the dryness that suggested they’d come here to die. The bands on their arms and vomit stains close by said they’d needed a fix in the worst way.

“You’re sure?”

Crista had her finger on the trigger. “The hand, like in the old films.”

Kenn frowned. “Go check it out, then.”

Crista came forward, bringing anger in to replace the fear. She padded to the corpse warily and gave a nudge to the leg draped over the arm of the chair.

Everything happened in a blur.

The body jumped up and ran from them, screaming.

The team flinched and began to shoot.

“Stop it!” Kenn shouted, knocking guns down.
“Hold your fire!”

Kenn got them to holster their weapons and sent Crista to check the body that had dropped like a stone when the bullets began to fly. “Find out if we killed it and get right back here.”

Crista once again approached the corpse, but this time, she did it slowly, with her feet braced to open fire if she was attacked.

“Please, don’t. I only took a little.”

The weak voice stopped Crista’s shakes; she snorted angrily. “Just a junkie. Looks like we all missed.”

Kenn was sure he should scold them for the bad aim, but he chose to let it go in favor of them shooting without orders. “Everyone who fired, head to the vehicles and switch out. We’ll wait here.”

The harsh punishment had feet moving slower than they should have been, making the switch take longer than Kenn had anticipated. He was dismayed to find shadows lengthening on walls by the time the replacements made it in to them. They’d only gotten through the lobby so far.

He waved Seth and Becky over to the groaning junkie. “Keep an eye on him and do *not* let her fire.”

Kenn led the rest of the team through the double doors, noting that Tracy and Tonya were both still with him. They hadn’t fired; it was a sign of the progress Angela was hoping for. He would be sure to tell Kevin so it would make it back to her. Kenn didn’t have much contact with Angela these days.

He was still mulling over that when he realized the hair was standing up on the back of his neck. *Damn. Pay attention!*

Tonya stilled next. “Do you hear that?”

Members of the team who’d been in the train station when Seth was stabbed tensed, hands going to holsters.

“Easy.” Kenn recognized the sound and the feel. “We have company. Everyone get behind the doors and we’ll take a look.”

The team rushed to hide as Kenn sent a quick plea upward for them to not kill anyone.

The doors creaked open to reveal a short shadow wearing a hospital gown. “Is someone there?”

Kenn saw Tonya start to leave the cover of the vending machine and shook his head.

Tonya understood the child might not be alone and stayed where she was. She wasn’t sure where the urge to go to him had come from anyway. It was just another lost kid.

“Please, my mommy needs help.”

The team waited until the child grew tired of calling and went back the way he’d come.

Kenn motioned them to follow. The entire team slipped down the hall in the shadows behind the little boy. No more than eight, he had long brown hair that hung in thick waves and a deep cough that suggested he’d been a patient here before the war. The child slowly made his way up a rear stair,

dragging a filthy blanket that had once been yellow. He muttered to himself the whole way.

“She said they were here, but I didn’t see them. Maybe she’s wrong. There are no good people.”

The team slipped along the dim corridors behind the child who was walking calmly through the body-littered halls like it was his home.

“They won’t like it that I’m out again. I’ll take the tunnel.” The boy stopped in front of the elevator doors and began tugging on them. The team was surprised when the doors opened to reveal another room and a long hall that resembled the sewers some of them had traversed in Little Rock.

Kenn’s gut tightened.

The boy went through the hallway and slid inside a small window that was designed for dispensing items to patients. The clipboards, clocks, and dusty files said this had once been a busy place. Now, it appeared deserted except for this one small boy.

“Is he real?” Tracy whispered, drawing a frown from Kenn.

Quiet, he gestured.

The boy disappeared from sight and the team stopped, waiting for Kenn to decide how they would proceed.

A loud voice echoed down the hall. “Find the kid. We need to lock up for the night.”

“I will. Should I dose him?” another female answered from nearby.

“Third time this week he got out. That’s probably a good idea.”

The team ducked behind anything they could use as footsteps echoed down the hall toward them.

“Hey! Needle-teen is still roaming, too. Chase him my way.”

“Okay.”

A harried-looking woman with shoulders as wide as Kenn’s clipped down the hall in her sensible office shoes. Her freshly curled hair and healthy skin immediately angered the Eagles. The boy had been barefoot, with a rash on his arms.

The nurse, assuming from her clothes, went by the hiding team without noticing any of them. When she vanished from sight, Kenn waved them all forward. If this turned out to be what he now suspected, they would take them all down.

Kenn didn’t spot any cameras, but there was still the sense of being watched. As they walked up the filthy halls, he realized it was coming from holes in the walls.

Kenn paused to put his eye to one of them and recoiled as if stabbed. They wouldn’t be opening that room anytime soon. It was a body dump.

Late afternoon tossed eerie shadows over the jumpy team and the cells didn’t help that feeling. There were people in some of them, most dead, but all of them were hooked to machines and monitors.

“What the hell is this place?” Tonya demanded in a gruff whisper.

Kenn paused at the intersection, choosing their path. “A restricted ward of some kind. Be quiet.”

Kenn used the small mirror on his wrist to peer ahead of them before waving the team forward. The hall they were in had three exits. Two were steel doors that they would need a code to open. Despite the rest of the center not having power, there was a red light over both of those doors.

The third set of double doors waited behind a large reception desk and rows of chairs. Kenn took them straight to it.

“Concentrate on your intersecting fields of fire.” He got into position. “On my count. Three...two...go!” Kenn kicked the door open as he flipped on the light on his gun.

The team followed him in, all shouting orders.

“Get down!”

“On your knees!”

The two men standing guard immediately dropped to their knees, but the two nurses in the large waiting area ran.

“Dart them!” Kenn loved using the enemy’s weapons against them.

Tonya and Tracy raised their dart guns and fired. Both missed. Their second shots hit the rear woman before she made it through the door, but not the other one. She took off running, shouting for help.

“That went well.” Kenn went to the kneeling men and decided who to talk to. He hit the man on

the left with the butt of his gun and knocked him out.

The other man braced for the same, but Kenn grabbed him by the shirt and tossed him toward the team. “He has one minute to tell you what this place is, where the CO is, and why you shouldn’t kill him. Starting right now.”

Kenn let the team handle the information extraction, sure they could. The females Angela and Adrian had picked were brutal when crossed, and the little boy they were now searching for had already touched all of them in some weird way. Kenn could feel it on his own skin.

He looked through the paperwork on the desk as he scanned the monitors. Very few men were coming toward them, but nearly every cell had an occupant. That ratio of guards to patients didn’t add up.

The cabinets on the walls yielded an array of medications and supplies, things the outside world hadn’t seen in half a year. As Kenn finished each bag, he pitched it into the arms of whatever team member happened to be closest. He also kept an ear out for the intruder response that would come, but he wasn’t overly worried. He was counting on light security after the way their patients were roaming freely.

Across the room, Allan paused, a name catching his attention. *Methylene powder*. Zack’s XO quickly began sweeping the small bottles out of the cabinet, one of which found its way into his pocket.

He'd been waiting for the right way to perform his much-anticipated upcoming duty for the Eagles and Methylene was perfect.

“Are you the good people?”

The little boy they'd followed was now standing by the doors.

Tonya reached the child first. She knelt in front of him with an odd tone that Kenn noticed, but wasn't sure how to interpret.

“Where's your mommy, little man?”

The child peered at her through layers of dirt and neglect. “Hiding.”

Tonya dug a bottle of water from her pack and held it out. “Would she like some water?”

The little boy was gone a second later, clutching the gift.

Tonya hadn't expected him to run off, but Kenn refused her request to follow. “We have to get set for the others.”

Allan scowled at the reminder. “Shouldn't they already be here?”

“Yes, and that worries me.” Kenn grunted. “What did you find out?”

“It's an asylum. They swear these are dangerous people who have to be under lock and key.”

“And the kid?”

“He came in with his mom right after the war. They were the last patients brought in.”

“Where's The Man?”

Allan's brow drew together in confusion. “What man?”

Kenn grunted in resignation. *POG*. “Their leader.”

“Oh. They think in a bunker in the west, but they don’t know exactly where. All the guards here were sent in before the war and never relieved. Many of them went AWOL. There’s only a dozen men in this facility.”

Kenn didn’t care for the lies they were being fed, but he couldn’t prove them unless he spent time here and that wasn’t something he was willing to do. “We’re loading up the supplies we came for and getting back to camp. Do it now.”

The team broke into three small groups that held bags and doors, protected edges, and watched for soldiers. It was making all of them nervous that there hadn’t been any alarms or resistance. Even when they went through the third door and began grabbing surgical equipment and bags of hospital sheets, no one came.

“This place is creepy.” Cynthia held the cabinet door for Tonya to sweep the bottles out.

“I know, right? Like every cheap horror flick I’ve ever seen.” Allan was across the wide room, loading IV setups and bandages into his pack.

“Stop it.” Tracy shuddered. “I’m already freaked out.”

“Be quiet.” Kenn studied the doors and shadows.

The team fell silent, listening, but there was only more quiet unease.

Kenn waved at the groups who were fully loaded to go back the way they'd come. "If I hear a shot, and your life wasn't in danger, you'll be out of the Eagles. Control your reactions and get back up here with more bags. This place is still stocked."

"That's because most of the patients are dead."

The voice was so casually evil that every member of the team drew their guns.

Kenn stared at the woman standing awkwardly behind the little boy they'd followed. She looked like she'd viewed hell up close, but it was those glowing red orbs that told him what he needed to know. "You got a name?"

"Caroline Andert. When I had friends, they called me Linny."

"Well, Linny. You guys ready to go?"

The woman didn't look away from Kenn, clearly searching him. "Where would you take us?"

Kenn liked the feeling of raw power. Adrian would be happy with this run. So would Angela. "To Safe Haven, of course. They're waiting for you."

The woman gently nudged the quiet little boy ahead of her. "We can go once he makes sure you're not lying. If you are, he'll take your life force like he has others here."

Tonya sensed Kenn's revulsion, but she'd never felt more connected to a child than this little boy and she had no idea why.

Tyson was already sure of the new people, but he humored his mother and took Kenn's large hand

into his own. "You've been mean before." The little boy glanced up. "Are you mean to the bad men?"

Kenn felt another chunk of the ice around his heart break off and start melting. "Yes. Who would you have me take your revenge on?"

The little boy startled them all with his immediate answer. "The men who made us stay here! They're coming for your special people too."

Kenn gave the boy's hand a careful squeeze. "My word on it. Get your mom and let's go. This place feels all wrong."

It wasn't until they made it downstairs that Kenn found out why. There was a line of soldiers in the street.

The team froze behind Kenn and Tonya, not sure what to do.

"Release your hostages and put your hands on your head." The center soldier's gun moved to target Kenn's wide chest.

Kenn slowly took his place in front of the others, motioning for them to stay back. "What's the problem, Captain?"

The man was surprised to have his rank recognized by a civilian. It took him a minute to find the correct answer. Kenn used the opportunity to figure out how he would kill them all.

"You, hands up! Come down here!"

Kenn took a step out the door and felt Tonya place something against his hip that made him hide a smirk. If she kept coming through like this, he would ask to serve with her more often.

Kenn beamed. “We were sent to pick them up. I’ve got the authorization right here.” He lifted the M16 and opened fire.

Chapter Seventeen
Sex And Power

1

“**S**hhh.”

The two boys slipped closer to the private training area, carefully avoiding the security as they stayed to the trees and shadows.

The murmur of male voices grew louder; the two teenagers dropped together, peering at the adults through the thick weeds.

“Angela! You’re up.”

Angela held still while the blindfold was tied on, hands hanging loosely at her sides.

“On your mark, shooter.”

Angela drew and began firing, moving right, then left. She dropped to one knee for the last, closest target, and heard a loud cheer that said she’d done well.

“Four of four. Next.”

Angela grinned at the surprised looks from the rookies that were waiting nervously for their turn.

Adrian fell in as she started the running part of the workout course.

“Should you be doing this yet?”

Adrian grunted, already sweating heavily.
“No.”

Angela didn't nag him, but when she would have stopped, he insisted that she keep going.

Angela did, respecting him for the determination to beat the pain. She understood that.

"Just ease up a bit." She could hear his tortured breaths.

Adrian ignored her.

When Angela slowed her pace, he did the same without comment and she was glad of it. There was too much attention on them for her to help right now. The camp had to think he was recovering on his own.

"Don't want you to anyway," he rasped out. The smell of the bleach they were using to disinfect the water with wasn't helping his lungs as it wafted across camp.

"When, Adrian? I'm getting tired."

Adrian slowed to a walk, unable to take the jarring pace any longer.

Breathing already back to normal, Angela pushed in the silence. "They need you. The battle's only a month away now."

He stiffened. "I know that."

"Then why are you hesitating?"

He sighed, low tone wistful. "It only works if we share power."

"No. I don't want this."

His hard expression pinned her in place.

"I mean it." She tried not to squirm. "I may be good at it, but I hate these choices. Please don't

make me keep this burden any longer than you have to. I'm not perfect. I'll get someone killed."

"Not if I'm by your side."

"Marc's by my side!"

Adrian turned toward the water cleaning area. "I'll take over when I can do the job. Not a minute sooner."

"What was that about?"

The boys were still observing.

Charlie's voice was full of displeasure. "Sex and power."

Conner knew of his dad's obsession, but he hadn't been sure if Charlie did. "She could do worse..."

"She has my dad!" Charlie stood up, not caring about those who came their way in surprise. Furious, he left Conner alone to face the scolding. Adrian had no right to do this while his dad was gone. When Marc found out...

Charlie grimaced. His dad knew. He'd left her here in Adrian's care. "Didn't he know what would happen?"

"Of course he did."

Charlie turned to find his mom leaning against the water truck, smoking and crying.

"Are you okay?"

Angela let the tears run unchecked. She needed the release and this was as safe as it got. "Life's hard, boy. You get up and keep fighting." She wiped

at the tears. “After you soak your shirt a few times, anyway.”

Charlie took a spot next to her as their shadows moved away to give them privacy. “Why can’t he leave you alone?”

“Why can’t you leave Tracy alone?”

Charlie refused to answer, but he got the point. “Dad’s going to be mad.”

Angela snorted damply. “He already is, boy. He was pissed as soon as we got here. Now, I think it’s because he caught a flash or had a dream. He knew we’d be split up and this would happen.”

“What will you do about it?”

“Survive, and make sure you do the same.”

“You mean to give him what he wants.” Charlie couldn’t find the rage he’d had moments ago. Her sadness was smothering the flames.

Angela wanted to swear she wouldn’t break, to promise she wouldn’t betray Marc, but she knew words meant little. She was actively fighting him now. In another month, who knew? The longer she and Marc were apart, the better the odds became on Adrian getting his way.

“Will he be good to you?” He hadn’t meant to ask, but Conner’s words had struck a nerve. Charlie hadn’t had Marc long enough to be so blinded that he couldn’t recognize the sparks between her and Adrian. As a son, he wanted her to be happy. She’d sacrificed too much for him over the years to ignore her needs.

“You’ve grown up.”

He flushed under her motherly approval, but didn't deny it. The time he spent on lessons and training was helping, as was studying his own mind and heart, but it was the need to be perfect for Tracy that was shoving him into these new levels of maturity. "You didn't answer me."

Angela forced herself to say, "He would love me as much as your dad does."

"Would you be...happy with him?"

"Never. The guilt would never give me any peace. I've made my choice." She looked over. "What about you? Have you made yours?"

Charlie's teenage face lit up with a man's hunger that made Angela sure she wouldn't like his answer.

"October is only a couple months away now. By then, we'll both be ready to make the choice."

Angela let herself breathe. She'd been expecting worse.

"I'm not saying we won't cross lines before then." Charlie blushed. "But we'll go public later."

Angela groaned. "I should have sent you with your father. He'd know how to handle this shit."

Charlie laughed, leaning on her shoulder.

Angela let his happiness flow over her stretched nerves.

"Why are you avoiding Dog?"

Angela closed that mental door. "He's pissed that I sent your dad out to fight. I'm pissed he didn't tell me who healed him. At some point, we'll work it out."

Charlie didn't push further on that part of his curiosity. "Why isn't he doing rounds or anything?"

"He said he was given a job by Marc, to leave him alone. So I am."

They both heard the footsteps coming.

Angela faded into the shadows to resume her rounds.

"I didn't mean to piss you off."

Charlie grinned at Conner's hopeful face. "We're all good."

Conner stared at him curiously. "You seem so even all the time, so..."

"Content?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"I am, for the most part. Why aren't you?"

Conner's shoulders slumped. "I'm not sure. It's great here."

"I think you need to quit hiding. Let them know you're like your dad."

Conner stared at having his secret exposed.

"We know already. Accept it. When you're doing work for this place, your mind will give you a break."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What was it like to have Adrian for a dad?"

Conner was quiet for so long that Charlie almost withdrew the question. When the teenager finally

spoke, Charlie wasn't surprised by the answer, only more confused.

"I only got to be with him once. My mom and I were supposed to be on vacation. We stayed with him until the soldiers found us. He had to run and we couldn't go."

"But you wanted to." Charlie assumed that. The flashes he was picking up were of a loving family.

"Oh, yes. We never wanted to be away from him." Conner's head dropped. "I've hated him for so long that I don't know how to be his son."

Charlie understood. He'd hated Marc for years before finding out that what he'd been told, and the truth, were worlds apart.

"He's waiting for me to open up, to let him in, but I don't think I can trust him."

Charlie also understood that. "He's your dad. If anyone can trust him, it's you."

"But he left me there while he took care of all these people, and look what he's doing to your mom. He's not one of the good guys."

"Sure he is." Charlie snorted uneasily. "He's weak, is all. When you find someone you care for the way he does my..." Charlie snapped his mouth shut and left. He didn't like being slapped with the truth. It didn't matter that Conner hadn't meant to remind him of the bond that existed. "You wait until my dad gets back! He won't stand for this."

“Today we’ll make everyone a BOB.” Jeff held one up. “That’s a bug out bag. If we lose and have to run, we need to be covered for survival on our own.”

Jeff pointed at a tray of chalk. “Each person should add two things to the list I’ve already started on the board. Angela, start us off.”

Angela had asked to go first because of her schedule, but she didn’t take the easy answers. Instead, she set the bar for them to try harder to cover the more elusive items. “How about...a medication stock...and a two way or CB radio.”

She quickly wrote them and delivered a challenge to the group. “Beat those!”

Chuckles followed her out of the canopy and into the next area, where Daryl was busy instructing a large group of camp women on their plan.

“You have to know where you’re going and how to get there. With a group or by yourself, not having a path planned out is a mistake. You’ve seen how Adrian and Angela have the Eagles scout ahead. Do that when you can and be careful about leaving tracks.”

Daryl gestured at the shallow mud and grass patches they’d constructed. “When you finish today, you’ll be able to cross both of those without leaving prints behind.”

Angela waited in line behind higher-level Eagles for this one. It was a lesson she hadn’t received yet and she was eager to have it in her arsenal.

“Watch where he puts his feet. He picks the place where it’s already got a part of the shape of a boot.”

Doug walked across the grass and didn’t disturb enough of it to be noticeable.

Students moved closer. “How did he do that?”

Daryl waved at the big man to repeat it.

Doug being so delicate with the blades was fascinating. When Daryl began to explain, it became easier to pinpoint the moments where he had to make a choice on where to place the next step.

“He searches for spots that are already bent, blown, damaged, or otherwise able to cover for what he might leave. But that’s not the secret. The magic is to plant your feet evenly.” Daryl demonstrated by walking through the sloppy mud in a quick stride that left only a faint trail.

“I keep my feet even, and close, and the ground cushions them more. It takes practice. The easiest way used to be walking across a creaky floor until you couldn’t hear yourself anymore. Now, you’ll have to use grass, mud, sand, thick carpets when you hit towns. Also, practice not drawing the attention of Eagles when you go by them. If you can do that, you’re making real progress.”

Angela stayed at that booth, taking turns, until she felt she’d mastered the basics of it. She’d already learned to be stealthy, so she had an advantage. When she switched to the next training

area, the females behind her weren't nearly as pleased with their own progress.

3

Unloading the supplies was the responsibility of the crew that brought them in. It was a long-standing rule that Kenn refused to break. He sent the new arrivals to a QZ tent, gave an update to a guard, and got the team busy sorting the medical supplies into crates that they would distribute to various areas of the camp, including the reserve trucks. It was hot, sweaty work.

Kenn lifted the lid on the empty crate, taking a quick search inside for bugs, and then hefted it toward the tailgate. Tonya came over to help.

They managed to get it close enough to work with. The deep crates were the sturdiest they'd found for moving things around, though it was a lot of work. Boxes and bags ripped and broke, but the crates took a beating and kept on carrying. It was hard for even rookies to ruin a crate of supplies and Kenn didn't find any harm in letting the team do work in small groups. All they had to do was sort the bags and help transport the crates. Easy.

Tonya and Tracy weren't friends. Tracy didn't want to take the chance on earning Tonya's reputation through a friendship, and Tonya was worried about losing Kenn to Tracy. If it was good enough for Adrian, Kenn would want it and with the secret she was keeping, Tonya didn't need Kenn to

have any reason to be around the other woman. It made for a quiet pair of sorters in their group. The two males were also a bit tense at being placed with their leader and XO's relief sources, alone. They worked in silence unless the women had a question.

The other two groups talked about the run, the supplies, and occasionally cackled at something, as rookies often did. It made Tonya feel like an outsider each time their happiness rang over the bags and crates. She now loathed that feeling. It was the only time she regretted coming to the light.

Emotions unstable, Tonya bit her lip to keep from starting a conversation.

Tracy was so much like her that she would have been a logical choice for a friend, but Tonya's self-esteem hadn't recovered enough to take that risk with Kenn.

Tracy could feel Tonya's quick looks at her and sensed the redhead was lonely. Tracy understood why there wouldn't be a gesture of friendship, but it still stung. It was a constant reminder that she wasn't good enough because of the way she chose to live her personal life. *Not supposed to feel that way here.* She tossed bottles of some type of powder into the crate. She tossed too hard, however, and punctured one of them. Dark blue crystals began spilling out.

Tracy groaned. "Damn. I broke one."

The group helped clean up the mess, assuring her she wouldn't be in trouble.

“Kenn says things always get broken on runs. That’s why we take a few extra.” Tonya grabbed a rag to wipe her hands on. They were stained blue.

“I look like a Smurf.” She held her hands up.

“It wears off.” Allan darted a quick look at Kenn. “Let’s get this crate over to the supply trucks and be done.”

The five of them carried the crate slowly, earning a quick approving nod from Kenn as they went by.

Kenn hefted his end of a nailed crate and directed his group toward the reserve trucks. He’d be glad when this was done. He needed a shower.

The reserve truck ration was large. It took Kenn’s group two trips to get all of it there. The Eagles would list and sort it later.

“Let me help.” Allan grabbed a sagging end of the last crate.

“Thanks.” Kenn was able to walk faster with the other end covered.

“My pleasure.” Allan meant it. “We found a second box of wound seal. Do you want it in here or at the medical tent?”

Kenn sat his end down by the truck, missing how the other carriers quickly exited the area. “In here.”

Allan sat the bag on the crate and walked away. He met Zack’s glittering gaze without smiling and kept walking away from the trucks. He had another supply run to go on. The team had been waiting for him to return so they could leave.

Dripping sweat, Kenn yanked the bag up and lifted the lid, eager to be finished. He dropped the bag inside, re-nailed the lid, then went to the showers. If he didn't get clean soon, his attitude would get ugly.

Kenn stripped and went into the stall, glad to have it to himself.

Kenn turned the handle and frowned when nothing came out. This camper wasn't under maintenance or about to be emptied, was it?

He tried the second lever, but got the same.

"Plumbing issue?" He switched stalls. The water worked in it, but there was a bare trickle. Kenn sighed, resigned to having a rough day. The run had gone well. He'd try to be happy with that.

Kenn went to the third stall and turned the handle.

Poofff!

Kenn froze as powder sprayed over his hands and face instead of water. *Have I been poisoned?*

He opened his lids slowly, coated in fine, blue crystals. He allowed his tongue to touch his lips for a bare instant.

Koolaid.

Another prank. *It wasn't Matt. My tormentor is still here.*

He wiped his face with his arm and was dismayed to find the color smearing across his skin like paint.

“It stains.” He growled, realizing what this joke would do to him for the next few days. “Son of a bitch!”

Kenn had no choice but to walk through the camp in a towel, stained, to get to the other shower camper. By the time he got there, the powder had soaked into a fine blue tint.

Kenn glowered at the snickers and laughs. At least he could rule out the team he’d been with. They wouldn’t have had time to set this up.

Kenn stomped into the stall and dropped the towel, ears burning from the amusement. He would try to resign himself to hearing it for a while. As much as he had scrubbed, the stain wasn’t leaving.

“I’m a 6’ Smurf.” Kenn glared as he left the camper. “Take a damn picture!”

His words were remembered.

4

“I’d like to go on the run with Kyle after the camp is settled tonight. He told me you’re sending him out on a recon.”

Angela was surprised by the request. “Peggy’s babysitting?”

Jennifer was dressed in full Eagle gear. “She has four day’s milk. We’ll be back in half that.”

Angela studied the girl, thinking she was finally starting to look tired instead of furious. “Why?”

Jennifer didn’t try to lie. “I’m restless. I keep thinking about leaving. I need to get out there again

for a little while and be reminded of why it's better here."

"Okay."

Jennifer didn't smile as she left.

"We're all set for tomorrow."

Angela paused to let Kevin give her an update. It had already been a long day.

"We're gassed, loaded except for what we'll use tonight, and schedules are in all the gloveboxes."

"Kenn is supervising the move?"

"Yes. He and Adrian have it covered." He snickered.

"Good. We roll out at 7am. Make sure there's soothing morning music and periodic reminders from 5:30 on."

"No problem. I'll be on it myself, with a rookie trainee."

Cynthia wasn't talking to him; she hadn't since Matt's death. It hadn't taken Kevin long to figure out that she was carrying the weight of it. He'd tried to talk to her, to explain that Matt would have hit them hard if he'd been allowed to live, but the reporter had refused to listen.

Angela wondered if the rookie trainee would be there long, but didn't ask. Kevin was her personal assistant. He was putting in time training another radio crew, but he was also overworking himself to be the one covering it on third shifts. As a result, he was snappy and strict. Three of their camp women had bowed out of his training in the last week.

"No word from Marc or the lookouts."

Angela didn't remind him that it was too soon. The pain was crushing.

"Supply crews will meet up with us around noon. No problems reported."

"Good. Anything else?"

"No."

Angela felt the pause and kept the pain from her tone. "How many?"

"Looks like five so far. We're doing a count now."

Angela left him standing there, unable to speak for fear of screaming. At the rate they were losing people, there wouldn't be anything left to defend. Every day brought a new group of people fleeing, choosing to skip the fight.

"Cowards!" But she understood. She still wasn't having the Eagles chase them. Freedom was Adrian's foundation for this camp. If she changed that, it was sure to fall. "How do I stop them from leaving?"

She received the same answer from the witch. *Bring them together in anger or hope. Nothing else conquers fear.*

And she still didn't know how to do that. Adrian had offered a few suggestions, but none of them felt right. If people wouldn't stay and fight for their lives, what else was worth more to them? Everyone in camp was angry. It was faith that they were running light on.

Loud laughter and talking drew her toward the field area where the teenagers were doing lessons

with the ants. The amount of progress there had been encouraging, giving hope that the insects could be trained to help. A quick consideration said there was little to lose at this point. She waved Kyle over.

“Get them walking through the camp with the ants, show people what they’ve accomplished.”

Kyle stared at her for a long minute before giving her what she needed. “You want a mock battle set up.”

“In place of the real thing, yes. Let the sheep know that we have outside help. Start with the formation walk, then work your way up.”

“What about Dog?” Charlie joined them. “He can get the ants to do a lot of stuff just by looking at them.”

“Yes, and any other animals you’ve been working with.” Angela made a quick note in her book as she spoke. “I want Theo and his team in the open from now on. Tell them this is demonstration week.”

She thought of Jennifer’s words.

“I’m restless. I keep thinking about leaving. I need to get out there again for a little while and be reminded of why it’s better here.”

“And that’s exactly what I’ll do.” Angela waved Lee and Zack over. “Let’s have a fun night gentlemen. Cancel the classes and work. After the ant walk, set up the entertainment and remind our people how much Americans love a good time.”

Both men, tired and restless themselves, grinned as they went to get help with it. Fun was something

they hadn't had in Safe Haven since Matt's betrayal. It was overdue.

5

"Are you sure about this?"

Angela motioned her team into place. "Yes. I need to know how many of you they'll kill."

The line of men shifted nervously at those words. They'd been called here to assist with a lesson and while they were glad the training tent was empty of witnesses, it didn't calm the tight stomachs. The females were using live rounds. The men had watched them loading weapons with little of their own skill.

"Everyone ready?" Angela asked as she slid her wrist blade off.

There were open mouths and the start of protests when she gave the call.

"Go!"

The seven males froze in place as the women began shooting.

Angela's voice led them through the familiar routine. "Your men are in the line of fire, ladies, as they will be during the battle. You have to pick out ours, from theirs. Second level, go!"

The females switched from rear targets to those closest to the line of men.

Angela observed in confidence. These women had loathed the idea. She'd insisted. They would be careful.

“Damn it!” Jennifer shoved Tracy to the left. “Clear me a line of fire!”

Tracy grunted, ducking so that Jennifer could hit the target by Kyle, nearly getting it center.

Tracy rose up to cover Jennifer as she turned to sweep the rear, popping off two quick rounds that sank into targets on either side of Charlie’s head. They weren’t near the center, but the trims were as close as she would come to hitting him.

Crista pulled the trigger without slowing, ignoring Jeff’s pale face as she spun to the right. Correctly, it allowed her to get a perfect aim on the farthest target. She sank the shot in with a smooth pull and dropped to her knee.

Sam spun to cover Crista while she reloaded and Angela clapped, ending the routine. “Excellent. Dismissed.”

The men were free to return to their posts, but Angela knew most of them wouldn’t. Becky’s idea to make them concentrate had been solid. Her girls were sharper now and the men had just observed them in action. They would be eager to offer praise and advice to achieve improvement. After, there would also be stolen moments that Angela was encouraging. If they lost the battle, a few of their survivors might at least carry away a child to give hope for the future.

Jennifer let Kyle wipe the sweat from her forehead, staring at him. He wasn’t speaking to her like the other men were their females, but she could feel his pride and his misery. The stronger she

became, the more she showed that she would be able to care for herself, the unhappier he became.

Jennifer didn't like his pain any more than she did her own, but she wasn't sure what to do about it. She couldn't stay here after everything that had happened, but it wasn't fair to ask him to go with her. Safe Haven needed him too much. This camp needed her too, but it wasn't enough of a bond. She'd lost a son here. There was no erasing that ghost.

Kyle held out an arm, eyes speaking volumes. "Can I escort you to your tent?" Since having the baby, she'd had her own tent—at her request. Kyle hadn't argued, only suffered each night until sleep finally claimed him.

"Yours would be better."

Kyle blinked, surprised.

Jennifer let out a tired sigh. "I need to feed the baby and I could use a nap."

Kyle took that in with a thumping heart. "I'll find something to do while you rest."

"I've got something for you to do. I need to feel your heat for a while, Reece. I'm still pissed. You know that, but I..." Her eyes softened against her will. "I miss you."

Kyle didn't say anything, not wanting to push. He slipped his arm into hers and led them to his tent, willing to take whatever she wanted to give.

He held the flap for her, feeling her small cringe as she ducked under. He quickly thought of a distraction so she wouldn't change her mind and

send him away or go to her own tent. “Why wouldn’t Angela tell me why she thought you could talk with the ants?”

Jennifer shifted the baby into her bassinet. “We’re not allowed to reveal some things.”

“Permission is required?” he joked, staying still as she came to get the diaper bag by his feet.

“Sort-of. It would have told you too much about me. I can communicate across species. She sensed it. The ants fear me too much, though. I’ve tried.”

“You’ve killed a lot of them. Before she changed the rules.”

Jennifer didn’t deny that. “The rage had to go someplace. They were abominations then, not allies.”

Kyle went to the bed and settled in place, leaving her plenty of room. When she sank down next to him and rolled against his hip, he froze. Her arms shifted, coming to rest under his neck and on his chest. Kyle forgot to keep breathing.

Jennifer laid her head on his shoulder and closed her lids. She was asleep less than a minute later.

Kyle didn’t move. At some point, he took in enough air to remain conscious. That was the only interruption he allowed.

6

Angela rubbed her shoulder. She’d been pushing herself again, but the extra training sessions

were mandatory if they were going to pull off what she had in mind.

“Let me.”

Adrian’s warm hands on her shoulders were like a match to gasoline. She jerked away. “What do you want?!”

Adrian celebrated even as he mourned. She almost hated him now. “To care for you.”

Angela flushed. “That won’t happen!”

Adrian let her go, hurting. His plan to make her hate him enough to turn him over was working. By the time Marc’s team returned, she should be pissed enough to let Marc know. When that happened, the wolfman might take matters into his own hands. “At least I’ll be out of her way, where I can’t keep hurting her and getting away with it.”

Kenn was bothered by Adrian’s defeated whisper. “You could force it, you know. I’ve seen you do it before.”

Adrian grunted at Kenn’s words. “I wouldn’t let you. I’m no better.”

“She didn’t want me. And I always knew it. That’s not the case here, is it?”

Adrian didn’t answer. Her survival mattered to him and losing this camp would kill her, the same as it would him. His goal at this point was to make sure that didn’t happen. He would accomplish it any way he had to.

Chapter Eighteen
Inside And Out
Double Springs, Alabama
July 25th

1

Angela opened her lids well before the alarm went off, furious. In her dreams, she couldn't find Marc, only Adrian. It was a crappy start to the day; she rolled from the bed with a low curse as she stubbed her toe on her BOB.

“Everything okay in there?” Shawn called from the flap.

“Fine!” Angela snapped, testing her weight on it through the tears. “Buzz off!”

The surprised Eagle moved back a bit, stung.

Angela regretted her rudeness, but these men had no idea what a strain she was under. The weight of this plan was almost too much for any one person to carry, let alone her. “Damn you. Damn you straight to hell.”

Angela pulled her boots and bra on, in that order, and she noticed it. “Becoming a soldier finally.” She tucked her shirt in. “When I couldn't care less about being one. Lovely.”

By the time she finished dressing and made it to the flap, Angela had cooled herself off with a mini-

rant, but the anger and frustration was still there, boiling under the surface. It wouldn't take much to set it free.

You need a release, the witch stated tersely. *We both do.*

Angela sent a mental curse to the witch, feeling the loneliness rise at the thought of Marc. "Go do something useful!"

The witch withdrew as Angela turned to Kevin. "Where the hell do you have me today?"

He held out a slip of paper. "Team leader for the supply run."

Angela broke into a reluctant grin. "Really?"

Kevin was now glad they'd done it. "Yes. It has to be undercover."

Angela was torn. She didn't want to leave the camp unattended, but she did want out for a while.

"Adrian will care for them." Kevin was also glad Zack had told him she would need to hear those words. He wouldn't have known on his own.

"Okay. Now?"

He waved toward the busy QZ. "Slip into the clothes laying on your cot and get there without being noticed. Easy for an Eagle of your level."

Angela laughed; the shield above them roiled with calming blue.

Adrian observed her happiness in secret, sure she wasn't aware he'd set it up. When he got as frustrated as she appeared to be, going on a run always helped. It didn't erase the nerves, but it definitely helped keep them under control.

“Should she be leaving camp?”

Adrian shook his head at Kenn, unable to speak, needing the air. The sight of her happy was so rare that it was enough to distract him from everything else.

“Do you want me to go along too?”

Adrian nodded gratefully. It was something he couldn't order or ask for openly. It was another one of those things the Marine needed to give willingly and he had.

Adrian smiled this time, shocking Kenn with the wave of happiness. He left the Marine standing there, trying not to draw the notice of the woman going to the mess. She would get updates, get changed, and then get gone. The only thing better than making her happy this way would be going with her.

Adrian waved at the parade of children going by. Field trip day had finally come around for them and they were as ready for it as Angela was. They were jumping, skipping, and chattering excitedly on their way to the training tent. He chose to go with them instead of keeping to the solitude of rounds. He didn't have to worry about the camp until Angela left, and that wouldn't be for at least fifteen minutes. He would spend it with his kids.

2

Emptying the waste tanks on the campers had become an FND job under Angela's control. She

wasn't quick to hand out hard duty, so those slots were no longer filled with troublemakers. Eagles now did that nasty work.

Jeff wasn't trying to score points with the boss by taking a turn on camper work. He was simply tired of the smell and the gauges always sitting at full. A man never knew what camper would be open for his morning business and that was dangerous with the coffee Li Sing served.

Jeff began refilling the tanks with clean water and carefully rinsed the sewer hose that he'd used to empty the tanks. He then went to the rear of the cart to get the chemicals, feeling content with the work he was doing. He was leading most of the prepping classes that Angela had rolling and he'd helped with a number of others, as well. He was also running the Kai lessons for Neil, doing a steady job of shoving the rookies through so they could start training. All the camp members who were staying were taking the classes unless they had a medical reason not to. Angela wanted them to be able to fight at least a little and buy themselves time to make a run for it.

It occurred to Jeff that nearly every class she had going on was for personal or group survival, not battling the coming government. It didn't make him feel any better, though he respected her for trying to make sure some of their people would survive. If she was preparing them for flight, then she hadn't seen them winning.

“Just the opposite, probably.” He emptied the tanks again to complete the rinse, then adding fresh chemicals. “If that happens, they’ll split up and I need to pick who to go with.”

Thus, another reason for the FND work. Jeff didn’t have a high opinion of his worth despite the steady accomplishments. He’d been beaten down during his life too many times to think he’d be chosen to stay with Adrian or Angela unless he was one of those people who could do any chore they needed handled.

Jeff stripped his gloves and told the duty guard that the camper was now open for business.

“Looks like you missed something.” Alex pointed to a long hose in the grass.

“Damn. Thought I put that up.” A bit embarrassed, Jeff headed for the hose. As he neared it, Jeff realized it was too long to be the sewer hose. He drew his gun.

Crista was working out with the team near the creek. She stumbled when she spotted Jeff with his gun out. She caught herself before she hit the ground, then took off running toward him with her gun in hand.

The other rookies understood there was a problem. They hurried to back her up. Also with their guns in hand.

When Jeff began firing, they followed his lead, never questioning what they were killing.

Adrian watched it happen with pride in his own achievements, but also in Angela's. These females never would have come forward and done so well without her rising to the challenge first.

Adrian went to the mess, where lunch was being cooked. The kids were getting samples from Li. The smells of fresh corn and cabbage were enough to make everyone drool.

“Look out!”

Adrian spun in time to see Tracy being dragged into the creek by a long arm that wasn't human.

He rushed to help, but was easily beaten by the two teenage boys that flew by him and dove into the creek without any thought of their own lives.

“Get them out of there!” Angela was running full out from the parking lot. There was no doubt that she would be the next one in the water.

Adrian motioned to Jeff and Alex, then tackled her.

“Get off me!”

Adrian yanked her up and shoved her into the arms of the waiting Eagles. “Stay on land! That's an order!”

Angela was still struggling to get free when Adrian dove into the water in her place.

Charlie gasped air in and returned to the bottom of the creek, where the snake had Tracy wrapped up. He shoved his mouth to hers, sending his thought. *Breathe slower. Eagles are here.*

Tracy was in panic, thrashing wildly, and Charlie held her still so that he could force in the air. As soon as she took it, he lunged for the surface, lungs on fire.

“There he is! Grab him!”

With no time to explain, Charlie dove back under to avoid the hands and swam down to find Adrian with his mouth to Tracy’s.

Grateful, Charlie treaded the bottom and waited until Adrian had to go up for air.

Around them, the Eagles were hacking at the huge snake with their knives, but doing little damage. When the python began to roll, Tracy was ripped from Adrian’s arms.

Magic burst out in a blaze of heat that seared the water.

The snake recoiled, loosening its grip.

Charlie tugged Tracy’s limp body from its reach. He shoved his mouth to hers as he propelled them to the surface.

Not about to let go of her, Charlie shoved her against the bank and began doing CPR.

On his right, Adrian popped up and took over the chest pumps while Conner came to their left to help hold her up.

Tracy sucked air into her burning lungs and coughed violently.

Charlie leaned back, breathing hard.

Not sure what was going on, Tracy clutched at his arm.

The teenager slid an arm around her waist as they carried her onto land.

Charlie sank down next to her as she went to her knees, taking ragged breaths. He didn't feel the entire camp's attention on them as he leaned his head against hers.

Tracy felt his magic warming her, easing the panic. "Thank you."

Charlie shuddered with the adrenaline rush and the terror that was slowly subsiding. "I almost lost you."

Charlie's words caused approval and surprise in equal measure.

Embarrassed and cold, Tracy tried to make light of it. "One less rookie to care for, right?"

"Don't do that!" Charlie growled, sounding so much like his father that all of those listening realized he'd grown up again.

Tracy sighed, shivering. "Ok-kay."

Charlie took the blanket from Adrian and wrapped it around her shoulders, then stood them up. "Come on. I want you checked out."

Still appearing unaware of his audience, Charlie didn't look at anyone, only the woman shivering against his hip as he led her away.

Angela watched, resigned. Charlie and Tracy were a match. He'd chosen his first mate, too young or not, and there was nothing she could do to stop it that wouldn't destroy her own relationship with him.

“It could be worse.” Adrian was also watching the couple as they entered the medical tent.

Angela shrugged. “It’s not her I mind, you know? He’s not supposed to be ready for this yet.”

“You’re the one who isn’t ready.”

She snorted. “You can say that again.”

Adrian waited for her to blast him about being tackled, but Angela went to the mess for updates before she left camp. She’d been about to go there when the panic wave from Charlie had hit her. Adrian had been right to hold her. She hadn’t been able to stop herself.

Relieved, Adrian motioned to the dripping men and women to get changed, and the crowd slowly dispersed.

Left alone to clean up, Jeff and Crista examined the thing that had started all the trouble.

The item wasn’t a hose or a snake, but a long worm. Jeff intended to ask Samantha if it could be used for the garden or if it would ruin the plants. He knew most worms could be cut and they would regenerate.

Crista held the bag for him to put it in, hating the way it still twitched even after taking quite a few slugs. She pointed. “There’s another one.”

Jeff peered at the bank, where a smaller worm was wriggling over the carcass of the snake that the camp would assume the Eagles had killed with their knives. Only those who had been in the water and felt that anger knew differently. Marc’s son was powerful.

“Carnivores. Dump it in the fire. We’re not contaminating our food source.”

“Surprised you thought about it at all considering how rough you are on using natural supplies in the lessons.”

Jeff took a minute to explain. “Sometimes things happen for bad reasons, but still give you something you can use. It was just a thought.”

“A good one.”

Jeff heard the invitation and sighed tiredly. “I can’t spend time with you, not if you’re going to date Zack too.”

Crista stayed calm. “Okay.”

When she turned toward the camp, his frustration level hit the bar. Jeff opened his mouth without knowing what he was going to hit her with. “I want you.”

Crista turned as if in a daze, showered in his heat. “What did you say?”

Jeff flushed, and didn’t repeat it. That wasn’t what he’d meant to say. Was it?

Crista came to him, hands on her hips. “And that’s how you decided to tell me? What the fuck?”

Jeff was startled into a cackle at her words. “Wow. That mouth, lady...”

Crista smiled. “Does that mean we can have a couple’s tent? I get lonely at night.”

Jeff drew in air, body reminding him how long it had been since he’d gone to sleep with someone breathing against him. “Uh, yeah... But Zack...?”

“Is a friend. Nothing more.”

Jeff tried to think. “You’re not dating him?”

“Did it look that way?” She snickered. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

Jeff laughed as he realized she’d goaded him into the breakfast offer and the attention. “Wait until I get you alone!”

“Why wait?” Crista asked, leaning close. “You can yell at me while I change clothes. I’m all wet.”

Jeff stiffened; then he swept her into his arms and over his shoulder.

Crista’s delighted giggle echoed across the camp.

3

Cynthia slung her gear into the front seat of her assigned truck for the run and found Kevin’s surprised face.

“What are you doing here?”

“What’s going on?”

They asked the questions at the same time.

Cynthia recovered first. “I told you I’m her XO.”

Kevin recalled the conversation as she climbed inside, still wondering about the other things she’d mentioned.

Kevin wondered if Angela had put them together intentionally. He wasn’t sure if she’d done the schedules herself or if this was one of the senior Eagles trying to help.

Cynthia hated the tension, but she couldn't find a way around it. They'd all killed Matt. It wasn't something she could just forgive and forget.

Kevin left her alone as she checked gear and fidgeted, waiting for Angela's updates to be over so they could go. But he watched her.

Cynthia huffed in annoyance. "Stop staring."

Kevin leered. "I'm smelling, too. You did your hair. Nice."

Cynthia smoothed her newly shagged locks self-consciously and returned to randomly pulling things from her kit and searching them over. She'd covered this last night, but she had to do something to fill the space where the eager conversation should have been. She still wanted Kevin. She just couldn't have him.

Kevin picked up the mike, feeling her need for him to be busy, but he didn't look away. It was the closest they'd been since the 4th of July and he wasn't missing any of it. "Do we have everyone?"

"Roger that. Five minutes."

Kevin got the map out and pretended to survey the area they were going into. It was a short run to a nearby warehouse that housed a maintenance department. They were hoping to find a stock of jet fuel to add to the reserves and for use in battle plans. Some of Angela's outlines called for a lot of firepower and they were pulling it from any source they could think of.

“At some point, I need you to show me how to use this.” Cynthia held up a taser. “Do I just aim and fire?”

Kevin frowned. “It’s a little more complicated, but that’s the basics.”

Cynthia instantly became sarcastic. “Well, that cleared it all up.”

Kevin’s face tightened. “It shoots out darts that send a current. It’s not rocket science.”

Cynthia’s face turned red. “If it was, you’d be the last one to give instructions for it! *It’s a little more complicated, but that’s the basics.*” She missed his hands tightening on the wheel as she mocked. “Never mind. I’ll ask someone else.”

“Might as well date someone else too. I don’t think I could have stood the attitude.”

Cynthia gasped in hurt anger and snapped her mouth shut. *Fuck you!*

Kevin glared. “Right back at ya!”

Cynthia and Kevin caught it at the same time. He read her mind!

4

“That might not have been a great idea.”

Angela turned to find Kevin and Cynthia trading what she assumed were harsh blows by the way they were wincing and scowling. Their mouths stayed closed. Angela shrugged. “We’ll find out.”

Adrian didn’t say anything else. She was following the notebooks to the letter when it came

to training and preparations, but everything else was her own.

“Some of the personal things came from your notes.” Angela didn’t want to talk about love or lust with him.

Adrian knew she meant the way to help match make, but her methods were more obvious than his.

“I can get away with it. I’m a woman. It’s expected, up to a point.”

“Fair enough, but there are other things they expect, too, that you aren’t doing.”

Angela waved Zack over as he came through the camp with an open notebook, jotting ideas down. “Like what?”

“Hope.”

Angela was instantly flashed to her problem of bringing them together. Instead of the anger spewing forth, she tried something new. “What would you do to bring them together that I haven’t already done or read?”

“Give them a cause, something...someone, to care about.”

“They have you.”

“No!” Adrian’s sharp tone drew attention and made the nearby Eagles tense. “They have to have a common cause. The freedom of everyone is not enough to hold them. It has to be personal.” Adrian pushed out energy; he was strong enough to force it over her. “Tell me what we need. Do it now.”

There was no refusing such a command from the alpha. The witch opened the farthest door in the halls of their manipulations.

Inside the door was a beach of golden sands and tall, green cliffs. Playing in the surf, was a small child with violet eyes and black hair.

Angela whimpered, filled with the urge to touch her daughter, the one who was yet to come.

Adrian stared at the happy couple watching the toddler play. It wasn't Marc standing by Angela's side, though that was clearly his daughter.

The door slammed shut.

Angela's happiness over the run was destroyed. "That won't happen!"

It was what Adrian's heart had been saying all along, but he'd seen the vision. The future wasn't always set, but that moment in time was.

Adrian got up from the table with one parting piece of advice. "They love him. He's the camp's martyr. Use it or lose them."

Angela didn't want to use Marc's absence and possible death in any way, but she couldn't deny that it was the answer she needed. If the camp knew what Marc and his team were doing, if they were getting updates instead of cold silence, they might have hope. It was easier for the Eagles to have faith—they'd witnessed Marc in action—but the camp had been extremely sheltered under Adrian's rule. "And there's no need for it anymore, even with me and the others. We can be ourselves now. There's no

longer a threat of them leaving because they already are anyway.”

Angela looked at Kyle. “I’ll have some things for you to do later. Stop by my tent after the camp settles down.”

The mobster wrote it in his book. “You got it. Updates now or wait until you get back?”

Angela sighed resignedly. Shirking duty wasn’t allowed. “Now.”

“We have you set up to work with your team tonight during evening mess, and with the Jr. Eagles tomorrow night. Zack’s boys have asked to do third shift coffee duty for the next week. Zack is working them hard now. We got a great new supply idea from the woman that Kenn brought from the medical center. Docks. Many boats run on gasoline. We might find some stocks of it or diesel.”

“That is a great idea. What’s the story on her and the boy?”

Kyle’s tone hardened. “She isn’t talking much yet. Says she wants the boss.”

“She’ll get me. When will she be out of the QZ?”

Kyle’s face darkened. “I don’t think the doctor wants her out in the general population. She can’t stop her eyes from flashing.”

Angela thought of her newest addition to the plan and got it rolling. “Let her out, and tell the Eagles to leave her alone unless she’s breaking a rule. I want the camp to know that she’s different.”

“What about Ty?”

“They’ll know he’s different. Don’t worry over it. He has his mother and the Eagles will be watching.”

“You don’t think the camp will run faster?”

“Just the opposite. I’ve been hiding long enough and so has everyone else. If they won’t accept our magic by now, they’re not going to and we’ll fight alone.”

Like their leaders, it bothered Kyle to hear they were short people every morning, but he was often the one to tell them as well; the frustration and personal agony on their faces was nearly intolerable. *How did Kenn stand this job?* “You said you guys would split up. Some of them will, but not me, not Samantha or Kenn. We’re in this until we’re dead.”

Filled with new ideas, Angela slid into the rear of Kevin’s ride, and caught the end of their conversation.

Stop now. She can hear us.

Later?

Cynthia glanced over at Kevin, wanting to keep the hate and misery alive, but the thrill of their new discovery won. *Yes.*

Angela dug out her notebook and began working on the newest plans. When she didn’t say anything, their mental conversation slowly resumed. She tried not to pay them too much attention as she worked, but she needed the distraction from the pain of what she was about to put herself through daily.

...not sure.

Never?

No, but I wondered about a few things.

Me, too.

For the camp, right?

Yes. Everything is for them.

It should be, right?

Cynthia sighed, looking out the window as they were cleared and began rolling through the gates. *Maybe. Right now, I'd say yes. Later, when there are more of us, maybe not. I'm not sure that type of leadership will work.*

“It won’t in a large population.” Angela was unable to keep quiet. “If you base even a single part of a new society on lies, the future is doomed to repeat our mistakes.”

It was a comfort to know that their leaders had been thinking on it.

Angela turned the page. “We’re working on it. He has been all along and I’m adding to it. We need time.” Angela held her notebook toward the reporter. “I want you two on this project together.”

Cynthia only needed a quick minute to skim. She held it toward Kevin excitedly. “She has thoughts about it—just the way you described, but oh, man the details she added!”

Angela was satisfied. The Runners that Adrian had collected were unmatched in history. Angela suddenly hoped that other countries now had the same hope growing inside their destruction. All it took was survivors. Most of those grieved for the

families and lives, but how could they not also mourn the loss of those they'd depended on? Not having a doctor or police when you needed it changed everything. It had touched parts of the world they might never have contact with again.

Angela didn't think that was all good either. Despite the years of peace they might have, it would also give those countries time to do the same building and growing. As long as those people didn't plan to spread evil around the world, she wanted to stay out of it.

And if there's an invasion? the witch asked.

Angela snorted, making her companions jump. *There already was. Several, in fact, and we've won them all. The only way to exterminate Americans is to breed us out and with no contact among nations, that can't happen.*

But you have plans for contact, the witch pointed out. *Won't that show them how weak we are?*

Angela noted the use of the word *we*. It was likely the first time the witch had ever felt like she belonged somewhere. Centuries of hosts and being reborn with only the basic knowledge of your past life had to be lonely. *They've known how weak we are for a long time. The same way we know how weak they are. We have to reach out to the descendants in other nations. As long as each country has their own guardians, we'll have peace.*

There was no argument from the witch, but Angela couldn't afford to assume. *Tell me what you see.*

The witch padded to a door that Angela had wondered about, but not enough to ask over. The amount of exits in her brain was endless. She could get lost for years.

The letters on the door, ICD, meant nothing to Angela.

The International Council of Descendants, the witch explained. *This is what you will help bring to the world by your sacrifices and belief.*

The door swung open.

Angela stared in delight at a huge, round table filled with more descendants than she could quickly count. The red orbs as they debated were unmistakable, but the protective shield over them rippling with green and gold told her they had someone controlling, making sure things didn't get out of hand.

The room is silent... Mental meetings! Angela wasn't evolved enough to tap into the future conversations, but she scanned the sheets of parchment in front of them, wondering where the technology was.

Russian League of Descendants. Australian League of Descendants. American. Chinese. Mexican. As she went around the long, oval table, it appeared all the countries with survivors were represented.

In the front of this room, was a single flag. It was solid white, with one red word: Truth.

The representatives distracted Angela. Their clothes and gear was so much alike that it was startling. It was almost as if every country had adopted the same basic foundations. *How would that be possible?*

Her heart sank. Had one of her kind invaded the other countries? That wasn't what their new world was supposed to become.

Angela went to the windows, no longer as eager to see what she'd asked for.

The first sight convinced her she was mistaken. That calm blue bubble over the city was a relief. No violent society could create such a strong barrier together. Before the war, those shields had been full of holes, but this dome vibrated happily over its hosts. Something that size would take millions of happy people. They'd recovered, rebuilt.

Angela picked out the flags along the fence in front of the building, and saw they were the same as the one inside—that red and white demand for honesty—but under that, was each country's old flag. United in common goals, and still true to their origins, there was no sense of oppression or greed from the city. It was stunning.

Angela stared at the symbols of hope. She wanted this future. *Can I create it?*

You already are, the witch soothed, gently closing the door. *Things will get harder now. Hold onto that knowledge.*

“Shoot it with your thoughts.” Angela was instructing her team hours later. She’d enjoyed being out of camp, but she hadn’t left the vehicle, too busy writing notes. Cynthia had led the Eagles. “Envision it, and then fire.”

The tent came alive with grunts of effort.

Angela gave her approval. “Good. We’ll do it again in a few minutes. Let yourself rest between attempts. This is stressful work and it takes a lot of energy. Make sure you have a snack before you hit your tents tonight.”

Angela waited patiently for the images to leave the front of her mind. Her team was improving on mental skills faster than physical ones. The pictures they covered her with were vivid. The ones of Marc were painful; Angela held onto each of them like she was drowning. “This time, *you* keep your walls up while *I* shoot.”

Each of their faces tightened in concentration as Angela blasted them with the horrid nightmare of Safe Haven in flames. It was one she’d seen too many nights now.

“This is the future as it stands right now.” Angela let the image fade, but only after each woman had time to find her loved ones in the chaos. Most were dead. “You’re rookies, we all are, but we are also the most powerful people in this camp. Not because of what we can do, but because we’ll do it

together. During the chaos, you'll be able to feed me and I'll do the same for you. The others will help us, but it will be mostly information. We'll be the eyes and ears. We'll coordinate, deliver order changes, and monitor every member of our front line."

Angela went to the board and removed the sheet over it. "This is where each of you will go when it starts. I had to account for your men grabbing you, so be sure that you do too. They don't know what we're doing. They'll want to protect us." Angela pierced the room with her command. "You will get to your places in any way that you have to."

Outside the tent, Eagles strained to hear details as they walked their posts, but they could only make out a few occasional words. All the men were nervous about what Angela had planned for her team. A few of them had asked and been rebuffed with the usual answer of: "Our duty." It wasn't enough to calm their fears; it increased them.

Even Charlie had tried to find out and Angela had gently locked the door between them. Until the battle, he had to be in the dark. He was the most likely to interfere with her plans and it could cost them everything.

"You get anything?" Jake was only a level one, but he took his duties seriously.

"Just something about finding their post when it starts," Alex answered with a slight edge to his voice. "You?"

“Nothing from this side.”

The forest around them groaned and popped with the sounds of growth and destruction. The thick trees swayed against each other, weakened from the war; the noise of falling limbs had been echoing the entire time they’d spent camped here. Jake turned to sweep the landscape outside the fence, and felt the cool blade of a knife go around his throat and jerk.

He slid to the ground, softly gasping for air.

Alex wiped his knife on his Eagle jacket and went to the shadows waiting on the other side of the double fence. He worked on the inside layer with a pair of wire cutters, while his partners cut from the outside, darting quick looks over his shoulder for death. He could feel it coming for him. He’d just murdered a brother Eagle.

Intruders slipped into Safe Haven a minute later.

6

Lee pulled up to the QZ gate and rolled down his window to clear the branch hanging over the security camera that they’d hooked up this afternoon. He leaned out to grab it.

Pain lanced into his throat. He began choking, hand coming up for protection.

The blade sliced a second time and blood splattered the inside of the truck.

Lee slumped over as a second group of men climbed into the cab and bed. The men in the rear

pulled their cloaks over themselves while the driver quickly donned Lee's wristwatch and glasses. He took Lee's place and drove straight to the gate that Lee had already checked in with over the radio. As he rolled by the guards, he waved, making sure the clock face flashed in the firelight.

The Eagles saw it and motioned him in. The man looked a lot like his victim. It was the reason he'd been chosen to get them inside.

The impostor pulled toward the clearly marked parking area and then swerved to the left and hit the gas, aiming for the main camp.

"Breach! We have a breach at the main gate!"

Radios blared in alarm.

The sound was echoed by gunfire as the men in the rear of the truck rose.

In the main camp, lights flashed; loud alarms began to wail.

Eagles returned fire more accurately than they received it, killing the impostor. The truck crashed into a water hauler before it could ram the main camp.

Taking a page from Marc's book, Zack grabbed the grenade from his belt and made sure there were no survivors to come out of the rear.

The explosion rocked the camp. The area filled with sheep and shepherds flying toward the QZ.

Seth stopped suddenly, as if jerked backward by an invisible hand. The voice in his mind was drowning out everything else. *You've seen this ploy, before the war. It's a trick to lure us away.*

Seth slowly rotated to determine which area was the exact opposite of the QZ. He saw the tent where Angela and her team were supposed to be working out and his heart thumped. Not one of them was moving, even though he could see their kneeling shadows. There was no way they hadn't heard the camp alarms or Zack's solution for the truck. That only meant one thing. They *couldn't* come.

Seth grabbed the nearest man's arm, shaking him to be sure he got through. "Make Adrian and Kenn come to the training tent. We've got trouble."

Shawn paled as he realized Angela was under attack again. He took off to get help.

Seth ran for the training tent, narrowing in on how many larger, taller shadows were in there, and where they were standing.

As he got closer, his skin crawled and then began to heat up as if he was touching the bonfire. *Becky!* How dare anyone do that to her again!

8

"Do it."

Becky struggled harder, trying to get the man's hands off her exposed skin. "No!"

Angela rose off her knees.

The first man who'd come into the tent slapped her across the neck, knocking her to the floor again.

"Stay down!" Alex's tone was hard. "We only need one for bait. She'll do."

Meaning he would let Becky be raped and then toss her out of the tent to show their seriousness. When the Eagles stormed in, all of them would go up in a blaze by the device in his hand.

Angela glared at Becky's crying face. "You are the only one who can do this."

Becky cringed as the man jerked her bra down. "I don't...I can't."

The man yanked Becky close as he stood up and drew his knife. He'd ripped most of her shirt off in the first struggle. The tip of his blade went straight for her exposed nipple.

"Take it now!" Angela shouted, understanding the man meant to make Becky scream.

Becky couldn't refuse the order. She wanted it too much to keep fighting. She stilled, clenching her lids shut. She hadn't been fighting her attacker, only the idea of killing him this way, but the temptation was too much to resist.

The man jerked, face draining of color. Blood began to trickle from his mouth. He fell to his knees, pulling her down with him.

Becky rolled out of his grip with his gun in her hand. She opened fire while on her back. Her aim was incredible.

"Stop or I'll...Ugg!" Alex hit the button as he slid to his knees.

Becky fired again, popping him an artistically sloppy hole in his forehead.

The small box broke apart as it bounced against a chair.

Angela rolled on top of the device, trying to hit the switch to disarm the homemade trigger with her elbow.

Becky fired repeatedly, screaming her hatred as she unloaded her gun. Hired killers ducked behind the cover of the bound females, but she knew how to get around that. “Left!”

All of the women rolled as she reloaded, creating the perfect cover. Becky opened fire again. “Right!”

Eight darkly dressed men had come into the tent when the decoy noises had started. Seven bodies were on the floor when Seth burst inside.

“Stop!”

Angela’s shout was the only thing that kept Seth from killing the last man standing.

“We need information.” Angela awkwardly rose to her knees. “Make sure he’ll tell me anything I want to know.”

Becky smirked eagerly, walking forward. “You got it, Boss.”

She fired twice more, emptying her gun into the man’s knees.

She reloaded a second time without any change in expression as the man shouted in agony and cradled his wounded legs.

The screams were satisfying to the female, though they worried Seth. He didn't like the image of Becky as a killer. He had been blocking it out, but this wouldn't be forgotten. She was nearly as lethal as he was. What would she be like fully trained?

Angela waited impatiently while Shawn untied her. The tent was now filling with Eagles tending their women. Even Charlie had come, though Tracy was already free. He lovingly took the duct tape from her mouth and led her from the tent with a glare at his mom.

“What were you waiting for? Why the bait?”

The sobbing man didn't answer.

Becky lunged forward, her gun against his groin. “Answer!”

The man couldn't get away due to the Eagles surrounding him, and it was clear that Becky wasn't bluffing. He opened his mouth and started telling them everything they didn't want to hear. They'd come for Jennifer, Angela, Charlie, and all the other descendants. Their orders were to kill them all.

When he stopped talking, Angela waved all but the top people from the tent and then faced the man without sympathy. “You didn't make sure I was dead before you ordered your sleaze to start touching her. Mistake.”

Starving, Angela let the witch take what she needed.

The Eagles knew to stay back, but none of them were revolted or scared. They were awed by her

abilities, her determination to turn these people into fighters, and of course, they liked justice being served. It was a bonding moment that helped strengthen their loyalty to her and the others who were different. If there had been more of this type of justice before the war, there might not have been one at all.

9

“Stay close to her.”

Seth agreed with the instruction. “I plan to.”

“Good. I’ll be around.”

Seth waited for Angela to leave, then went to Becky. The teenager was digging through her kit as if she’d lost something. He wanted to help with that and the almost haunted eyes that wouldn’t meet his for more than a second or two at a time. “You feel like doing a workout? We’ll run the gate course.”

Becky made sure she sounded normal. “Nope. I want to go on the next supply run and I haven’t passed my next Kai lesson yet. I’ll be practicing after I shower.”

Seth didn’t argue. She sounded okay and she appeared steady, but there was a sense that things weren’t fine. “I have to go switch shifts. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be the one searching for a toe warmer.”

Seth searched her face before leaving. Something wasn’t right and it was more than the new bruises or torn clothes.

Becky shoved the bags and pouches into the kit and took the Advil without bothering to go for a drink. Her head was throbbing.

Compared to Rick, this hadn't been anything, but the flashes it had given her were awful. She could hear the gunshot, could almost smell his breath on her. Rick's ghost wasn't ever going to leave.

Becky searched in her kit for a tissue, feeling the tears coming, and found something hard and round. She withdrew it slowly, mind making the connection.

The small vial still held the powder Rick had given her. Becky stared at it for a long time, lost in her nightmares.

Seth's cheerful voice outside the tent woke her. She quickly stuffed the vial into her kit and donned a smile as he came inside. "Want to wash my hair for me again?"

Seth immediately turned for the showers. As they walked, he could feel her drifting and was suddenly sure it would be a rough night. "Would you like a pill?"

He's so perceptive it's scary. "Not yet. I may not need it."

Seth tugged her close for a quick hug. "I'm proud of you."

Becky didn't ask what for. It didn't matter. Until she was proud of herself, no one else's opinion did, and her mind said she still had a long way to go to make up for what she'd done. Rick and the slavers

had been the perfect distraction to keep Adrian from discovering all the spies that the government had sent into this camp. More than half of their assassins had been here since South Dakota or before, and that was dangerous. No one knew who to trust, who might turn out to be a traitor. Tempers and suspicions were running at peak. Angela would have to do something to settle them down.

10

Angela went to the mess, where most of the camp was still gathered, talking and observing the cleanup. When she started speaking, they all stopped to listen. “One of the intruders gave us information—good news, for a change. Marc and his team are alive and doing damage. They’ve started fighting. He’s gathered over three hundred men.”

There was a loud cheer, both for the wait being over and for hearing from Marc.

“It looks like we’ll have another two weeks at least before either group gets here.” Angela waved off the questions, too upset to continue lying. “I don’t have anything else. The man died before he could tell us more. Becky’s shot was nice.”

She left the crowd at the mess with something they hadn’t had since learning the government was coming—hope.

“If he’s doing damage, maybe we do have a chance...”

“He’s a badass. I knew it the minute I saw him.”

“Marc will cut them in half. We’ll be able to handle the rest.”

“And he’ll be here by then, to help.”

“Yeah!”

Angela waved Kevin over. “I want you to start the Ghost broadcasts tonight. Give open updates on anything we learn about Marc’s team.”

Kevin approved of what his mind came up with. “You’re gonna pull some people back in.”

“Maybe. But if it only keeps these here from leaving, that’ll be enough.”

Kevin went straight to the com truck to broadcast what they’d learned, going over the right words to use. He could whip them into a frenzy if he had the right information to feed and it wouldn’t be just this camp. The other survivors out there listening, waiting to find out who won, would tune in regularly for news. “Maybe we can pull in some more fighters.” Kevin slid into the com truck. “God knows we need them.”

11

Unable to calm down enough to sleep, Angela gathered the men she thought were best suited and closed the flap on the training tent. “I’m going to teach you to listen.”

“Just like a gun, your mind shoots.” She opened her case. “Some people can’t send or receive; we’ve learned that together. What one of you can do, not

all of you can.” She paused to light a fat joint. “But I’m confident that everyone in this tent is capable.”

She inhaled deeply and blew the smoke toward the east. She quickly inhaled again and blew it toward the west this time. Twice more covered the remaining directions, then she tossed it to Kyle. “Do what I do.”

She took a second joint out and did the same thing before passing it to him again. “It’s a type of magic we do, be it in here with our minds or out there with our guns.”

She got a third rolled smoke going and her eyes took on that high glow they’d all come to associate with someone being stoned. Except she didn’t stumble or slur, and it added to the respect these twenty men held for her. Two full teams, plus Adrian, were here.

“We all feel it and we love it. With my help, maybe we can share something more from it.” Angela’s face tightened. She took the last joint from the pack and lit it in the same manner as the others. She pitched it toward the nervous man lurking restlessly near the door. “Get stoned, will ya? You’re wrecking our vibes.”

Adrian grinned at the scold. “Yes, ma’am.”

Another round of amusement came as he sat down and fired it up.

“You keep that one. Everyone else should hit and pass. When those are gone, we’ll find out if we can reach a new level of teamwork.”

There was a companionable quiet broken by an occasional voice or movement. Angela took a moment to try and fully relax. She was determined that this lesson would be successful. “We are a team. We eat, breathe, and live together, and yet, we don’t know our fellow men. The war caused people to erect barriers of many types, but fear is always the hardest to get through. For us to conquer that last wall, we have to be open with each other. To do that, we’ll spend one minute talking to the Eagle on our right and the same for the left. I want you to tell them a secret, something you can’t talk about with the camp.” Angela glanced at her watch. “Start now.”

She turned to Kyle, brow raised.

He smirked. “Ladies, first.”

Angela was ready for him. “Every one of us who’ve been cursed this way have been outcasts. Being here with Adrian makes some of that pain go away, but I wish I’d never had to hide who...*what* I am.”

Kyle’s voice was sympathetic. “Adrian knew.”

“Yes, and I still trust him as much as you do. That gives us another common ground, yes?”

Kyle grinned. “Yes, ma’am.”

She gestured. “Your turn.”

The mobster hesitated. “I...want to make Jenny my legal mate and give her a son to replace the one she lost.”

“How does she feel about that?”

Kyle grunted. “She’s still planning on leaving, I think. Doesn’t say much, but she stares at the mountains.”

“She doesn’t want to go.”

“No. She wants to be able to stay in camp, but the memories are hurting her.”

“And you think if she had a son, it would ease that.”

Kyle sighed heavily. “I don’t know. She’s in pain and I have no idea how else to comfort her.”

“Have you...offered?”

Kyle snorted. “No.”

“Why not? It’s been long enough medically, and there’s no camp trouble in your way now. Why delay?”

Kyle’s face twisted with hunger and control. “She’s not ready for that side of me.”

Angela picked up the images, but she didn’t scold him like her first instinct said to. “Maybe you should talk to her about it and find out where she stands on things. If you two are going to be alone together, that’s good information to have.”

Kyle agreed. He didn’t know how to bring it up.

“Time. Switch sides if you haven’t already.”

The air inside the tent was thick with hope and smoke as Adrian watched her methods work. He wasn’t allowed to use this light touch on them, but she could. When she called time again, he saw many conversations he suspected would be continued later. She was bringing them together in ways he had no access to and he would show his gratitude.

“Start listening for me. When I give you a number, remember it.”

Her lack of action after those words confused them until they heard her voice in their minds and realized she was already working.

“Okay, everyone got a number?”

“I don’t.”

“Eagles, tell Adrian what his number is.”

“One!”

“Last number was twenty. Stand up in reverse order and pay attention. I’m the only one allowed to talk.” She observed them with a bit of pride and a lot of warmth. She could feel many of them wanting her to stand up for the number two spot. She placed Kyle there instead and stayed sitting.

As Adrian stood, she looked up at them. “Imagine this type of communication during an attack or mission. It’s an advantage that no other army has ever had. We are the first.” She gave them a moment to consider and then waved a hand. “Your determination will decide if you can do this without my help. I can show you how to do it, but that won’t be enough. You have to *want* it.”

She checked her watch, and then gestured at the floor. “Get comfortable, gentlemen. We’re going to make some more magic.”

Chapter Nineteen
Hit And Run
Colorado
August 1st

1

***T**hud!*

The noise woke the soldiers closest to it. They glanced around in confusion, trying to find the source.

Thud!

Smack!

Hiss...

The center of the platoon scrambled away from that sound. Snakes were a common way to die in the Utah bunker they'd come from.

Thud!

Waking now, the men rose, grabbing for weapons as the noises grew closer together.

Thud! Slam! Whap!

Bags and boxes rained on them, tubs and bowls, and in each, was a snake or scorpion.

“Get under cover! Find cover!”

The order echoed off the walls of the canyon, but the command hadn't ordered canopies erected. The soldiers had nowhere to go as the dangerous animals fell into their campsite. With the darkness

only broken by their torches and campfires, it was impossible to determine who was sending them.

“Get them up! Up! Up!”

Men followed orders, not panicked but leery for the next hit and quick to crunch anything alive under their boots. That changed as the surviving animals began to attack. There were a few deaths, but more than three dozen men were stung or bitten, and it sent a powerful message. There would be no comforting sleep. It was a reminder that this was war and mental battles would be fought.

Marc could have killed a large number of them here, but that would increase their security procedures too quickly. Besides that, wounded men always slowed things up and that’s why they’d come—to buy time. “But if I get the chance to kill them all...” Marc waved to the Shadow Riders to fall back as teams of soldiers began assembling to investigate. “Let’s get some sleep while they play who is that in the rocks.”

The other ghosts snickered and followed him into their hole to wait for the next moment of attack.

As Marc pulled the cover over the hiding place, he picked out the moon and let it vanish slowly. “Good night, Baby-cakes.”

He slid down the rope and jerked it loose. Stashing it in his pocket, he turned to the men who were taking places around the cold fire pit. “Let’s go over tomorrow’s set, then we’ll get some sleep. Five hours from now, an entire platoon will be on top of us. Remember...”

“We are ghosts...”

“We are ghosts...”

Marc kept working them up, guiding them. Physically, they were ready. Mentally, they were all scarred refugees forced into fighting for their friends and family. It might not be enough to save them, but they would do damage now, while the road was clear to run. When they hit 40, that wouldn't be possible. They would trail the soldiers and keep pecking at them until the wound was a giant hole for their men to gush through.

Tomorrow, they would ride hard and be reunited with his rookies shortly after that. Being able to cut straight across the land on a horse was a time-saver that allowed him to appear to be a Ghost to those who didn't already believe it.

Marc wondered how many men were waiting for him, but didn't let himself worry over it. Fifty or five hundred, they would do damage. Jax and Paul should at least have a large part of 40 wired by now with all the hands he'd sent them. That would be a tough route to follow, but once they marched a single foot onto 40, the soldiers would have no other choice.

2

“Hit the deck!”

Marc's men lunged for the ground as the grenade sailed into the crags behind them.

Kablammm!

Marc waved them forward. “Now! Go! Go!”

Natoli and Thaddeus fired their launchers together; Marc waved for them to get down before their shots exploded.

Kablamm!

Dirt and rock rained over the rebels like a downpour, slicing and clouding vision.

Boom! Boom!

“Pull back!” Marc shouted, still counting the seconds. “Get out of here!”

Shadow Riders scattered in the brief pause, not waiting to verify that their shots had landed.

Marc waited for the next blast of incoming fire, able to sense where it would land. He lunged aside and barely avoided being caught in the small rockslide.

Ears ringing, Marc hefted his own launcher and fired the last shell.

Kablamm!

He hurried south instead of east or west like the soldiers expected. Their shells exploded harmlessly behind him as Marc slid down the rocky path and vanished into the small town.

Marc spotted several of his men also moving toward their next trap and joined them along the wall. They had fighters waiting here.

Marc gave the code as he and the others burst through the door. “It’s a go! Go!”

Kablamm!

Boom!

The sounds of the fighting arriving on their doorstep sent an unpleasant shiver of adrenaline through every man there.

“Fire!”

“Fire!”

Marc held the door for the men to flee out the other side of the building as their group across the street blew a stash of C-4. Wired to a shallow patch under the dirt, it was aimed at the only bridge. The soldiers would be forced to clear it or go around.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Marc ducked the noise of incoming fire, even though he and his men were clear. It was stunning, disorienting.

He shoved the man in front of him toward their next hole and was glad when the others followed. There wasn't time or workers to keep track of everyone.

“Down!” Marc stayed standing as the whistle grew louder, trying to pinpoint. He was relieved when it went east of them.

“Go! Go!” Marc herded his small crew down the stairwell and led them through the dark sewer. They splashed unhappily across the street and came up through the basement of a store. Though it had been months, the smells were still rough.

Marc waved them into the small bomb cellar in the rear of the basement and shut the door. In fifteen minutes, when the center of the troops came by, they would blow this place and go underground to a third wired setup.

All around them explosions and screams were echoing through the chaos. Four other groups were busy doing the same as Marc's, each with three strategically chosen targets.

Marc checked the timer and sipped on his water, motioning for the others to do the same. None of them spoke.

The rumble of engines came and every heart thumped anxiously. With another exit waiting for them, they felt relatively safe, but panic was riding underneath as the thuds and rumbles began passing over.

The enemy had done their own recon and knew there was an army out here, but not how many or where it was based. Since the majority of the riders came from the south, the soldiers assumed that's where the attacks were originating. They thought the Mexicans were attempting another takeover and were ruthless against them, which pissed off the Mexicans.

Other than Sebastian, who wanted revenge, his population had chosen not to get involved in Safe Haven's fight. With government fire teams now venturing south to deal out destruction for Marc's attacks, a full complement of Mexican soldiers had joined the fight a couple hours ago and the battle was raging unchecked all across 40. The government troops had gotten too spread out and the Shadow Riders were taking advantage of it in every area they could.

They had also been reinforced a bit by small groups from the west. Most were strangers who had heard the calls going out, but a few were also from Safe Haven. They, too, wanted to be on the front lines and make sure it didn't go further than 40. Marc knew that wasn't possible, but he welcomed each of them eagerly. He'd given this stage two weeks. He needed double that for the camp to make it to the mountains. They would be setting things up there while the government took over a base that would do them no good. These little delays would mean the difference between maybe winning and certain death.

3

“Here he comes!”

“He's here!”

Marc plastered a welcoming expression on his face as the call went through the tired camp. After each team blew their three targets, they immediately went to the next camp down the road, where those teams were preparing for their own runs. They would be fed, tended, and reassigned to yet another target further down 40. Those tired men stayed by the fires, giving him nods of accomplishment. It was the others in the camp—the new arrivals and camp tag-alongs—that Marc had to pretend for, but he didn't feel like shaking hands. He needed sleep.

It would be another three days of hitting base camps and joining these battles before he could

break away and join his Eagles. Paul and Jax were doing nicely along the eastern end of 40, according to the reports he was receiving, but Marc needed to see them. He needed to be reminded of Safe Haven. All this killing was bad for him. He liked it too much.

4

Just before dawn, Marc was among the small groups going out to do the day's terrorizing. The others had blown their targets during the night—continuing Marc's campaign of no sleep for the enemy—and the Shadow Riders had little trouble sneaking up on the exhausted, dozing men.

Marc waved Kendle into place. She was the lookout for this run. Tomorrow, she would fight at his side.

Marc led his team down the hill, using moldy cactus and decrepit shelters as cover. The smoke from campfires and the scent of coffee hung over the area.

Marc drew his weapon as they got closer and knew the others with him were doing the same. They'd gotten good at following his lead.

Their setup hadn't been discovered. They quickly pulled the brambles from the thick, stubby tree forks they'd sank into concreted holes a few days ago. With large bands attached, they had half a dozen small, strong slingshots to pummel the enemy with until they figured out where to fire.

Across from them, a second team was waiting with the same setup. All these items had come from the surrounding town. Marc was extremely proud of their scrounging and inventiveness. There were only so many grenades, so many guns, but there was hundreds of miles of apocalyptic roads to mine.

Marc helped to uncover the stash of ammunition and began loading it, listening to the soldiers boots as they began their daily march to destroy everything he loved.

Marc dug his heels in and leaned back, using his big arms to pull the band into place. He aimed high, waiting for the others to match it. He nodded to tell them when theirs was right.

Marc listened, arms protesting.

Now, the demon whispered.

Marc let go.

The fertilizer bombs caused powerful explosions, though the value of this weapon was in the damage it did to the buildings and structures. It sent debris into the road in large chunks of smoldering metal and brick, blocking it.

Dust filled the air as the sounds of exploding weapons and screaming men rang in their ears.

Marc waited for all of his team to fire their second wave, and then followed them into the sewer. This was the last town where they would use this hiding style. The soldiers weren't stupid. By now, they had to be figuring out how the rebels were able to hit and run. Marc had thought even using it one more time might be too much, but he'd had to

take the chance. After this, the soldiers had a straight march across 40. He had to do more damage now, while he could.

5

Marc motioned Kendle into place. They were doing a last hit on their own before meeting up with the next camp and she was eager to draw blood again. The disease appeared to leave her alone for almost a full day when she got to commit an act of violence.

As Kendle slipped into place behind the small campfire, it was easier to pretend that it was Angie. There wasn't a long, black braid or the scent of vanilla, but there was a fire burning that had to have a release.

Marc moved into the next slot, using the debris piles as cover. He nodded to her when she held up the grenade. It was only a smoker, but the suppressor he'd given her yesterday was something she hadn't gotten to play with yet. He had no doubt she would stick around and breathe in smoke fumes to get a good run with it.

Kendle tossed the grenade lightly and the wind drafted it right into the middle of the snoozing soldiers.

Smoke poured out.

Marc took a cover position as Kendle drew her gun.

The four-man team didn't get to return fire. Kendle was too good for that.

Marc had to take her by the arm as the smoke began to fade. The bodies weren't bloody enough to satisfy her. Marc knew they'd be working out again before bed. "Come on. We have to go."

Kendle went reluctantly. Shooting wasn't as good as stabbing or slicing. She needed that!

Marc tossed an arm around her shoulders, leaning close. "Vanilla is about the best smell in the world to most men."

Kendle blinked, realizing he was giving her something she could use.

Marc pushed his agenda a little more. "And long hair. The men in Safe Haven *love* long hair."

Kendle patted her own shoulder-length locks self-consciously.

Marc chuckled, tugging her closer. "Not you. You're one of the guys. I meant as a mate, the future. Hard not to wonder what it might be like if we win."

Kendle didn't answer. She was becoming too attached to Marc. She didn't want to think about a time when she might have to give him up. His comments about smell and hair were noted, though. If he liked those things, later, when she could, she would do them for him. They were small things to ask of her, considering how good he was, how right he preferred to be. It made him a strong leader and she was already willing to follow him anywhere. If

that eventually led them to his home, she would adjust. And maybe fight this Angela woman for him.

6

Marc rounded the last curve before they got to the camp that Paul and Jax were hopefully still in charge of. The soldiers had driven them back and Marc had been forced to go to their base camp to make sure things were ready now. The troops were coming faster than he could hold them. He didn't know how many of the other groups had survived.

There were lights glowing from multiple fires, but Marc didn't understand how many fighters had come until he topped the small rise.

“Wow.”

Kendle's comment was lost in Marc's shock. The vast, sprawling camp before them resembled Safe Haven so much that he had stopped, filled with longing. *I miss home.*

The sight also stunned the riders behind them; a feeling of hope began to swell among the tired men. With this many warriors, they might actually stand a chance.

Paul came to greet them.

The camp fell quiet as they watched. Their gazes were protective, wary, and Marc understood his rookies had been closely cared for.

“Welcome back.” Happiness stretched across Paul's bearded face. “You are a sight, my friend.”

Marc laughed, driven to it by the demon's whispers. "We're gonna wipe them out."

Around him, his riders cheered. If Marc said something was going to happen, it happened.

The happy noise brought fast attention. The camp of hundreds began making their way toward Marc.

Paul immediately waved them off, raising his voice. "After he gets fed and tended. Let him come to you."

Marc was grateful when the dozens of shadows stopped and then returned to what they'd been doing—waiting.

"Tell them to have two representatives from every group come to a meeting. We'll fill in all the details and plans then."

Paul wrote it down, aware of Marc picking out his clean clothes, the unharmed hands.

"They won't let you work?"

Paul snorted. "They think leadership means sitting on my ass and handing out orders. I hope you're gonna change that now that you're here."

Marc didn't make any promises.

"Fine." Paul smirked. "It is kinda nice to be able sleep with both eyes closed."

Paul turned his attention to Kendle. He saw her possessive clutch on Marc's waist. *Angie won't like that.* He didn't say anything, however.

Marc let him off the hook. "This is Kendle. Paul will take you somewhere you can get cleaned up and eat."

“I want to stay with you.”

“Paul.”

Paul gently tugged Kendle down, trying to soothe her. “We have a tent ready for both of you and there’s hot water. You can even do your hair if you want.”

Kendle reluctantly allowed herself to be led away.

Marc felt the hunger as Kendle stumbled through the masses of men. The demon lunged out to cover her in protection. Dark where they were, the glow was obvious.

Those closest shrank away in respectful fear as she walked beside Paul.

Satisfied that word would spread, Marc turned to the trio now approaching him. “Make sure she has a guard. She gets angry and cannot be controlled.”

“Do you wish me to handle it for you?” Atolius asked tonelessly.

“No. We still need her for the fight. Keep her safe.”

“I will put my best men on it.”

Marc went down the hill as they began updating him, but his thoughts were on his army. With these brave men, he would deliver a battle like none the government had ever experienced on this soil. They had started this war. He would be the one to end it.

Marc didn't waste time or censor his words as he met with the forty men who'd come to represent their groups. He gave them the cold, hard numbers and his outlines for doing damage. They would relay it word for word to their men.

He got out of the planning meeting as soon as he could however, leaving them to figure out the best way to do it. There were too many strangers here and too little time for him to try what Adrian had. All Marc could do was pass his wishes on and depend on his allies to carry them out.

As soon as he left the meeting, Marc went to check on Kendle. His time in Safe Haven had given him a protective nature, but he also needed to know she was alive so that his plan was safe. As he walked, acknowledging the other hardass men here, Marc wondered if that had been where Adrian had started at with Angela.

Since leaving Safe Haven, Marc had found himself stewing over the spark between her and Adrian—when it had started, how it had been triggered. His pretenses were gone. He was as open as he'd ever been. And it was likely too late. He could feel her calling, reassuring, but he could also feel her restlessness. When it became too much, she would turn to Adrian for comfort. *And I'll forgive her.*

Marc stopped in the shadows to observe. He felt Jax on his heels, eager to be his shadow, and held the pride in check.

Kendle was working with two other women, squaws from what Marc could tell by their demeanor and markings. The trio of females was chatting lightly as they checked through a stack of clothes that had been scavenged in a recent haul.

Kendle felt his stare, but didn't turn around. He'd been stuck with her on the road, but he could leave her with the women now. She wasn't going to force her company on him any longer.

Marc wondered if she actually understood what the Indians were saying and decided that she did. The survival star he'd viewed had been tough and smart.

"We've got tents over there." Jax pointed toward the dense trees. They both watched Kendle flinch as one of the Apache Indians came over to talk to the other females.

"She needs a protector."

Jax had sensed that when they picked her up. "Zack...?"

"Adrian."

Jax stared at Marc, marveling at the genius, but worrying over the animosity in the single word.

"Will you try?"

Jax forced it out. "Turn her into someone he'd want?"

Marc looked away. "Into Angie. He won't settle for anything less."

"I'm sorry, no. She's unique."

Marc knew that. "Do the best you can."

Jax took the request seriously and went to where Kendle was now staring around hopelessly for a place to sleep. “We have tents over here. Follow me.”

Kendle did, relieved to sense no hostility from Jax. Marc had a woman and these men probably knew her.

“I’ll be your guard while you’re here.”

“I am not a prisoner.”

“No.” Jax calmed, thinking she at least had Angela’s fire. “To keep you safe. There are a lot of males here in case you hadn’t noticed. And you gave a good show to them.”

Kendle shrugged angrily. “I’ll kill.”

Jax didn’t doubt it. “At some point, he’ll probably send you to our main camp, to help there. Do you know about Safe Haven?”

Kendle followed him into the large tent, surprised at all the supplies waiting in neat stacks. “I heard the calls when we were in the East.”

“It’s a good place. Not like here.”

Kendle glanced around. “What’s wrong with here?”

Jax didn’t answer that. Instead, he got started fulfilling the Ghost’s need. The more he thought about it, the more he liked Marc’s plan. “Our leader is Adrian. Marc’s *wife* is with him, helping run things there.”

Kendle thought that spoke volumes about the type of woman Marc already had. Her shoulders

drooped. “I thought it would be something like that.”

“He’s as spoken for as a man can get. Marc doesn’t even use the whores.” Jax grimaced at the thought of Leslie. He still missed her.

“Are you okay?”

“Old ghosts.” Jax yawned. “Anyway, we have rules there and I’d like to give you a start now so that you’ll be able to fit in.”

“Why would you help me?”

Jax didn’t struggle with a response. “Because it will help a lot of people and bring peace to those who need it the most—including you.”

Kendle couldn’t find any lies in his mind and let it go. “If you think I should, we’ll do that. What else can I do or not do here?”

Jax frowned. “I didn’t ask. I’ll get that information to you shortly.”

Kendle sat in the chair by the table. She saw his gaze go to the other seat and waved him over. “Talk if you want. I plan to get comfortable and lay down after I sit here and stare for a few minutes.” Kendle hadn’t had some of these luxuries in much longer than Jax. She’d been on an isolated island where there weren’t any stores to loot or buildings to pick through.

Jax took the seat across from her, smiling. “The most important thing you need to know about Safe Haven, is that you won’t be hurt again. That fear of people will fade in Adrian’s light. He is the Guardian and there’s nothing he won’t do for us.”

8

Marc took his time moving through the dozens of small camps around the one where Paul and Jax now had him sequestered. He needed to talk to these men, to make sure of their hearts, and it would take a while. He didn't expect to sleep until well after midnight.

Marc sat with them. He smoked and drank lightly, while observing intently. He also healed their wounds. It wasn't to gain support or strengthen bonds. He just didn't like their pain, no matter if they deserved the healing or not. And some of these men did not. The stains on their souls were ugly, but Marc didn't single them out as Adrian might have done. He needed them.

As he traveled from group to group, Marc found himself being gifted with small totems and tokens of faith, support. He took these things with reverence, respecting the legend that had gotten him this far.

When he asked about the things that those at the meeting hadn't wanted to tell him, Marc got answers from these outer clans. He learned there had been assassination attempts on Jax and that Paul had stopped two of them. Thaddeus had saved him the third time; the warriors were all now keeping a close watch on the rookie. Paul had become respected well enough that the Indians didn't fear for his safety. He was viewed much like Marc.

Marc wasn't sure why the top men hadn't wanted him to know about the deaths, fighting, and warriors leaving, but it came to him as he stared at one of the tokens. It was a snow globe, with a Christmas scene in it. The gift implied a childlike innocence and a complete obsession. Marc pieced it together and realized they were afraid he would leave them if he didn't like what he heard. They didn't understand that they held the power.

Again, he was forced into accepting that Adrian hadn't been lying when he said his herd needed him, that it wasn't all a power trip. These men were the same. He'd brought them together and only he could lead them into battle. It was a fight that each of them longed for, and there was likely little they wouldn't do to keep him happy and here.

"No worries, my friends." Marc moved toward his tent. "I'm in it for the long haul."

After weeks, he was a convert. *How could Adrian have even thought of giving this up, let alone actually do it?* Marc's respect for the man went up and so did his dislike. It was something he already wasn't sure how he would do when the time came.

9

Marc found Jax and Kendle sitting on the bank of the nearly dry creek, talking in low tones. He joined them without saying anything. Paul followed a minute later. It was as if Kendle had been with

them all along as they sat there, listening to her tell Jax of the island she'd washed up on.

"Was Luke your man?" Jax asked.

"Yes. Before I was...hurt, he made me his and I wanted that. Now, I doubt I'll have another true mate."

Marc held his tongue and stopped Jax when he would have pushed. Healing took time.

"How long have you been..." Paul trailed off as Kendle grimaced in pain.

She took a steadying breath. "After I was taken by Ethan Kraft. He had the rage sickness and he was...obsessed. It broke something inside me."

The cell door, Marc thought. "Have you explored it, more than what I've already noted?"

Kendle's voice dropped into shame. "I can do a lot."

Marc carefully put an arm around her shoulders, still feeding the story that she was his woman. "Will you show me some of the things you can do?"

Kendle sighed. "You won't send me away?"

"Not even if it gets out of control and hurts someone. I need to determine your strengths so I know where you should be for the bigger fights."

Those words had her mouth opening to spill gifts that Marc thought even Samantha might be jealous of. When he asked her to demonstrate, she did it slowly and stunned them all.

"She controls nature!"

Kendle pushed harder; the small torrents of water reached the edge of the creek bank. She let go

with a grunt, leaning against Marc's arm. It was exhausting.

“Are you still furious?”

“Yes, but not out of control.”

“Good. You'll use it to help yourself?”

“Yes.”

Realizing he'd given her a way to remain with them longer, Kendle gave him a quick hug and got to her feet. “I need some energy. I'll be back.”

Marc thought of his own weariness, but he didn't take care of it yet. No matter how he tried to look at it, it felt like stealing. He needed it offered or he couldn't accept it. The problem was, none of these men knew it and he wasn't allowed to tell them, because then it would be asking. It was a puzzle he hadn't figured out yet.

“I didn't know women could be like us,” Red Stone stated from behind Marc and his rookies. “I've only known males.”

Marc's response was instant. “Wait until you get a load of Safe Haven's females. They're all special.”

Red Stone's face lit up with a need that Marc was surprised by. Didn't the man have a wife? ...wives?

“I do not have one who is like me.” Red Stone was reading his mind. “That is what we all wish for.”

Marc didn't argue. He'd found his other half. He could only wish the same on Red Stone.

“Will she last?” Natoli questioned.

Marc looked to where Kendle was now joining the workout of the Choctaw warriors. “Yes. She’ll be alive when the soldiers are dead and gone.”

Natoli didn’t express his doubt. He’d experienced the rage sickness, but never someone who could battle it and not spread the contagion. Kendle had marked several of their men with her nails during her lessons, and none of them was ill. In fact, two of those men now claimed that they’d been tested by the woman and given some of her magic. Natoli didn’t tell Marc of the stories going around. It was a worry for another night.

“And tonight’s concern?” Marc asked quietly. “The fighting, the assassins? The lack of sanitization?”

Natoli allowed a small stretch of his lips. “All.”

Marc grunted. “I’ll have plans for you by morning. Keep it cool and calm until then.”

Natoli left, satisfied that Marc had been given (or had gone out and discovered) the information he needed to have. Nothing was bad yet, but if they let it go, fights and disease could wipe them out long before the soldiers did.

“A show from you would go a long way.” Paul was aware of how attention was staying focused on them. “They’re waiting to see if you’ll be as open as she just was.”

Marc consulted the demon inside. *What trick can I perform? What would be most effective?*

These are no tricks, the demon scolded. All your lives depend upon this. Play the role by believing in it.

Marc stored the reprimand and repeated the question.

Call your guides.

Marc slowly opened the door in his mind, still poised to react like a Marine even mentally. He braced to handle about anything.

“Ooohhhhh!”

The wolf call sent chills into grown men and brought others to their feet. All of them searched the darkness.

Marc concentrated harder, drawing what little energy he had left to toss through the cracked portal. Blinding light flashed in his mind and he sank to his knees in surrender. Whatever he'd called would have to be enough. He had nothing left to give.

“Oohhh!”

Thaddeus and Red Stone began calming the restless fighters, sensing what was coming.

Marc lifted his head to find them all still and waiting. “No shooting. Let...them through.”

Radiomen and signalers relayed the order as Marc let Paul help him to his feet. “I am the Ghost. These are my brothers in the shadows.”

The first wolf to pad into the firelight appeared so much like Dog that Marc thought it was him at first. It allowed him to extend a hand in trust without considering anything else first. The result was that

he looked fearless as he caressed the soft fur of a wild wolf.

The next two animals to join their firelight were enormous, with snarling lips and black fur that stood on end. They demanded to know why they'd been called.

“So no one kills you instead of our enemy. We are two sides of the same army.”

The wolf that appeared like Dog, but felt different, nudged Marc's hand so he would resume the rub. “Nature is no longer our enemy. It is theirs!”

The tides were turning against the government. The pieces were falling into place for Marc, and his men stared with a devotion that Adrian would have recognized. It was how the Eagles viewed him.

10

Marc paced his tent restlessly. The energy he'd taken was pulsing, lighting up doors, and causing discontent. It wasn't enough. He craved more and it was a slap in the face to remember the times he'd given energy to Angela, to discover firsthand how unsatisfied she'd felt afterwards. It wouldn't let sleep come.

After an hour, he returned to their fire, where half a dozen warriors remained. Around them, other firelights flickered comfortingly.

Marc didn't talk.

The Choctaw warriors left him to his thoughts. They were honored to be the chosen tribe, to be so close to their savior. Marc and his odd ones didn't understand the fierce pride it gave these men. On the reservations a few dominant clans had agreed to the laws for everyone, but even those had held little power. The Choctaw had been low in the pecking order, but that had changed. There wasn't anything they wouldn't do for Marc to repay him the return of their honor. Their women and children were safe right now. As the chosen tribe, their people were being cared for.

The temperature dropped as they sat around the fire. Fog drifted through the edges of the trees and weeds, creating a thin barrier that slowly obscured the forest around them. It muted sounds and isolated their camp, making it feel as though these seven men were alone with the fog, the fire and the ghosts.

Just before dawn, the fog thickened, moving through their camps in thick banks of eerie infiltration. Marc was still at the fire with a blanket that Red Stone had draped over him and the mug of now icy coffee still in hand. He hadn't noticed either action as he delved further into the doors.

Marc was dream walking. Unlike Angela, who feared being able to control her demon when it was away from her, Marc went along for the ride. He chose where they went, who they had contact with...it was a lesson that he'd never imagined possible.

Paul and Jax were woken by Kendle.

Her hard ankle kicks quickly brought them to their feet, where both men took in the fog and her concerned expression with alarm. Something was happening.

They followed her through the damp shadows to the center fire.

Dozens of men tensed, drawing weapons.

“Stand down!” Kendle snapped.

Men did so sheepishly. Spiritually connected or not, the feeling of something coming was thicker than even the fog.

As if waiting for Paul and Jax, Marc began to speak. “They’ve reached the line we set. Fifty men are camped there. Thirty minutes behind them, the main force is now waking. They will arrive as we battle the first and sweep us away like wind.”

Marc slowly pulled out of the trance, tone grim. “We have to take out that first force before they can get one call through.” He stood up. “Wake those you need and get started working on it. That first force will get here fast.”

Paul and Jax stayed with Marc, but Kendle vanished into the fog, mind spinning. There wasn’t enough time or men to dig a pit, and a gas attack would still give them a chance to call for help...

Kendle went toward the edge of their wide perimeter, ignoring the tension of the lookouts and the fighters.

Atolius followed the odd woman silently, nodding to those she passed, those who were also

protecting her when she traveled their camp areas. As the Ghost's woman, she would be cared for if anything happened to him. Since it was clear that she didn't need caring for now, other than protection from possible assassins, Atolius wasn't sure why he was with her. Kendle was important. She might even be followed if anything happened to Marc, but Atolius wasn't searching for a bond with a future leader, either. He just felt like he needed to be close.

Kendle didn't care one way or the other, though she was getting their thoughts easily enough. She was in this for blood and Marc had asked for a plan to spill a lot of it. She not only wanted to give it to him, she wanted to be in the thick of it.

Kendle waited by the perimeter as the fog slowly began to dissipate. The first area to clear was the small, cool creek that ran the length of their perimeter. It also crossed under 40. If they took out that section of road, the soldiers would be forced to walk across the barely moving creek, where they would be vulnerable from assassins in the tall weeds on either side.

"And I know what we can do, don't I?" Kendle muttered.

Atolius didn't doubt it any more than their protection did. The hum of raw power was still vibrating through their minds. He carefully took her arm and headed for Marc.

It was taking too long.

They'd already spent two long hours trying to bring the bridge down in a way that made it look natural. They couldn't use dynamite or anything else that would echo to the enemy. They were forced to use coordinated vehicle and manual labor that caused injuries and made Marc drain himself to heal them. The advantage was in the sounds that this method did create. Collapsing concrete support beams breaking into chunks sounded like normal noises in this new world. Everything was falling apart.

The bridge itself hadn't come down yet, but there were only two thick beams left holding it in place. Gaping cracks and fissures ran through these supports, and the bridge itself from their efforts, telling Marc it wouldn't take much more.

Marc waved at the team to proceed.

Everyone grunted or groaned, straining on the thick coils of rope. Marc had refused to use their vehicles for this part of it, not about to bury men alive, but he was almost sure it would still leave the ropes to be found.

Crackkk!

The bridge swayed dangerously as the men pulled harder, encouraged by new splits in the beams.

“That's it! Snap the ropes!” Marc ordered, yanking.

The ropes began untwisting themselves, but not in time. The bridge shattered down the side and collapsed onto the thick beams, bringing it all down in chunks. The ropes were lost.

Dust coated the area and coughing began.

“Covers up!” Marc shouted from under his own wet bandana. “Glasses on!”

12

“Is it set?”

“Yes.”

Marc went to where Kendle was waiting at the edge of their camp. Her growing attachment was a concern for Paul and Jax, but they didn't understand.

Will Angela? the demon questioned.

Marc wasn't sure. Considering the link between her and Adrian, maybe she would be glad.

Kendle could feel Marc's unhappiness, but she didn't know what to do for him. He wasn't like Luke; he wasn't hot for her. Careful conversations were the best she could do most nights. She'd never met anyone as closed-off as Marc.

“I'm sorry for that.”

Kendle slid her arm around his waist. “It's okay. That's not what we were brought together for.”

Marc wasn't sure about that and didn't say anything. He also didn't pull away from her comfortable embrace. He needed these men to think she was his woman, but more, he needed the human

touch. Most of the men riding with him only made contact in a moment of quick courage, like they were brushing the skin of a revered elder. Some days, it sent his ego through the clouds. Other days, it made his stomach boil. Those were the days that he was forced to accept the truth. Adrian's job was also awful and lonely. It was harder to resent the blond man now.

"You could call her."

Marc was used to Kendle's intuition, but not her compassion. That was an emotion she didn't display much of. "No."

"Why not? The soldiers know where she is, and where you are."

Marc sighed, telling her the same line he'd used on Jax yesterday. "She's already a target. If people hear how much I...need her, she'll never be able to sleep alone or even take a shower in private. I won't do that to her. She values privacy."

Kendle thought he was lying, but didn't call him on it.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?"

Kendle grimaced. "Yes. I just wish it was now."

Marc agreed, for different reasons. "One more day here."

Kendle didn't care about the location, only the goals and the people. "Then tomorrow needs to be bloody. I can't be stuck inside a base with all these men and not kill anything."

Marc chuckled. She and Angela would probably have made great friends and teammates if not for

him. “Come on. Let’s get some coffee and go over the layout.”

Kendle went willingly, trying not to feel abandoned when he let go of her. Marc was a fixed point that she kept in her sights as often as she could.

Marc spent the next hour boring her with details instead of giving her the workout she needed. He was on the edge himself and wasn’t sure of his own control. Kendle liked to draw blood and after being careful, he would need a release that wasn’t available until they sprang the trap. Marc wasn’t about to blow early. They’d spent three days planning this last attack.

He expected to lose route 40 over the next few days, maybe even tomorrow, but the massive attack come lunch would slow the troops. Marc needed time to blow bridges and overpasses as they retreated. Little Rock base was where most of the rebels would go next, though some would return to their own camps to protect their people. More would go to Safe Haven to help defend them and get Marc’s other plans rolling. For a few of those, Angela would need all the time he could give her to get them ready.

“Call coming in.”

Marc detoured to their communications bike, to their control man.

“Ghost camp, Alpha. Come in, Alpha.”

“We hear you.”

“Five by nine, out of eight and six.”

The radioman gawked at Marc in confusion as he flipped the dial to channel 43 instead of explaining that ‘by’ meant X (times) and ‘out’ meant - (minus). “You got me.”

“Got a numbers update for you and some good news!” Quinn’s happy voice bounced off the barren landscape.

Marc clicked the mike so Quinn knew to go ahead.

“We are now eight times what you left behind. I repeat, we are by eight!”

“That’s the good news, right?” Marc joked.

“Actually, no. The good news came from a rider delivering hardware. Safe Haven has company—the good kind.”

Marc felt his worry ease a bit. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, Boss. Instructions or messages?”

There was a hopeful pause on that last part. Marc sensed Angela had told them to find out if he had anything personal for her. “No.”

“Copy. Out.”

Marc gave Atolius a nod of respect—it had been his idea—then moved toward his tent. When he held out a hand to Kendle, men approved. They liked Marc and Kendle together. It was a good match to those who were viewing it from the outside.

The soldiers fired obediently, missing the cloaked figure leaping across the roofs of homes and businesses, even sheds and barns when he had to.

“Again!”

“Fire!”

The shadow leapt in time to avoid the hit behind him, but the explosion in front sent the Ghost down between the brick buildings and out of sight.

“Get him!”

Two forward teams ran in that direction.

The team leaders behind them disapproved of the order. Didn't command understand that those two teams would return with only half their men and even those would be wounded? The Ghost was lethal.

The soldiers listened for more sounds of fighting as they continued their march to Little Rock AFB. Command wanted it secured in short order and the battalion was almost out of time on their deadline. The Ghost had slowed them down, but now, they were shoving through the last five hundred miles to get inside some sort of protection. Being picked off was bad for morale.

Kablamm!

An explosion lit up the south side of the city, confirming the thoughts of the team leaders. No one from those two teams would come back. If command kept sacrificing fighters like this, there wouldn't be many alive when the welcoming air strips came into sight.

“Keep marching!”

The order was met with grumbling, but no real resistance. All of the soldiers wanted to be undercover. Not stopping until they got there now sounded good.

“Ahhh!”

More men fell on their flank, screams echoing up, and terror took over. The front half of the battalion began to run. The delay of being attacked with firebombs put another small amount of distance between the two groups.

Marc used it to join them as if he were a part of their group. He got the Shadow Riders into their proper places in the rear of the first platoon, aware of the men who only looked at their stolen clothes and decided they weren't a threat.

When Marc opened fire, the other riders did the same.

Before the teams ahead could run and help, Marc and his men were already out of sight. They were alone as they stomped down the stairs and vanished into another sewer.

14

“He's a Ghost. You can't kill him.”

The General put his gun to the Indian captive's temple and pulled the trigger.

The body slumped to the bloody dirt.

The General tossed an arm around the Major's shoulders, hot gun hanging over his cheek in a

threat. “I want him brought in, and I don’t care what you have to do to accomplish that.”

Francis laughed despite the danger he was in. “Do it yourself. The bullet is easier.”

The General grimaced at the refusal.

Francis tensed under him. “Do not underestimate me. We *will* die together.”

The tension and fighting in command was as bad as it was among the ranks. The General was forced to step back, but he didn’t put the 9mm away. “If you can’t give me the Ghost, why did Command send you out here?”

Major John Francis had arrived late yesterday and been observing silently. Now, he leered toward the forty new bodies the Ghost had given them. “His woman is capable of doing that without firing a single bullet. I didn’t come for the Ghost. *I came for the Raven.*”

“I have doubts about us making it to Georgia, Francis. Not without more men.”

The Major sneered, “You would need a miracle, but I don’t mean to go to her. She will come to us.”

“And how will that work?”

Francis gestured to the radio they were keeping on the rebel channels. “We’ve heard her. We have the stories from people who were there. She’ll come for her Ghost.”

“But that leaves the same problem!” the General protested. “We can’t catch him.”

Francis spit toward the General’s freshly shined boots. “*You* clearly can’t.”

The General saw it coming too late.

“Ugg!”

The knife was calmly retrieved from the dying man’s chest.

“No vest.” Francis cleaned his blade on the General’s shocked, paling cheek. “Big mistake. I’ll take it from here. You’re now relieved.”

Chapter Twenty
Black Ice And Sink Holes

Walnut Grove, Alabama
August 2nd

1

For the first time in months, they were camped near a town and the feel was ugly. Walnut grove, Alabama had been average, with a normal population for the area, but it wasn't anything now. There were doors kicked in, frames of charred buildings and trailers, cemeteries looted with bones laying in the open in disrespect. Even the roads the clearing crew had prepared were slimy and dark, like it never stopped raining here long enough to dry. The sky above matched with an ominous shade of green that kept Samantha on edge.

Angela had brought them here intentionally after Theo called it in. Her camp needed to be reminded of how deeply the war had hurt them all. Camping out of sight of those horrors wasn't going to be the norm anymore. The truth was something they had to stand on now and that had to begin with what had happened. The camps around hers were uneasy being out in the open, but she knew it would work on them, as well. By the time they left here,

anger and the burning desire for revenge would flood every patriot in their convoy.

“We have to talk.”

Angela tried to shut him down, sensing what was coming. “The camp’s fine right now.”

“That’s not what I want.”

Killing time until evening mess, Angela didn’t look up from the schedules she was going over in the lea of her tent. When he waited for her to respond, Angela wondered how far Adrian would go to keep from retaking the reins. “Have a seat. That hip’s gotta hurt after all the hours you’ve put in on it.”

Adrian joined her with a grimace and waited for her to finish.

Angela dragged it out, not wanting to have this conversation.

“Angela.”

“No.”

“Angela.” More persistent now.

“No, Adrian. I don’t want this. I never have.”

“You’re sure?”

She finally met his eye and gave a bark of bitterness that didn’t surprise him. He knew the range of emotions that leadership brought.

“Yes.”

“But?”

Her gaze went to the schedules. “But I don’t know where I belong now. And you know that. It’s why I didn’t insist while Kenn was at the medical center.”

Adrian's heart broke at her lost tone, but he took the opening without hesitation. "You belong by my side."

Angela stared, stunned that he would say it aloud. He was letting her in, now, when she had no defense. What did she feel?

When she finally spoke, Adrian wasn't sure if he should brace or duck.

"I waited my entire life to be able to love Marc. I dreamed of how perfect it would be." She glanced over her peacefully surviving camp. "I still do."

"But?"

"I'm drawn to you and it's easy to understand why. Look at what you've given me, given all the people here, how you gave of yourself to build this!" She refused to lie even as the guilt spoke up. "I could have been blinded by it, if you were bad."

"I am, Angie." Adrian sent a small spark with the variation. He had to keep it light, though. It was one of those things that he would only be able to use openly once she was his. When that happened, he would whisper it in her ear every night as she exploded in his arms.

Angela sighed at the tremor of longing that his use of that name produced. "No worse than the rest of us. We may be kindred souls, but I love Marc. I'd never do what Samantha is."

Adrian lit a smoke with a deceptive casualness that hid his pain. Only his mind said it mattered, that he would continue to wait. "I'll take back over soon."

Adrian studied her for signs of reluctance and found relief.

“How will you handle it?”

Adrian shrugged. “That’s up to you. Publicly is best, so they don’t think I’m pushing you out.”

“They’ll be glad you’re in charge again.”

“Don’t underestimate all you’ve done for them. When I’m banished, it’s *you* they’ll vote in as my replacement.”

Adrian grit his teeth in frustration as she moved toward the main camp without responding. What could he say to make her understand they belonged together? He’d never met someone he respected more, wanted more, felt more for, and it hurt and angered him that she couldn’t accept it. When would she realize that he was the only one who would be able to make her happy?

Adrian sighed. After Marc’s death and he wasn’t even allowed to hope for that.

Doors open wide between them, he sent her an ugly thought.

Angela found no comfort in his prediction. She would have to do this again. When the camp found out, she would be the one to hold Safe Haven together. How did she prepare for that?

We think you should be leading anyway—the camp females.

Those words rang in Angela’s mind. Had Tonya really felt that way or had she just been trying to make the team? Peggy and Hilda clearly agreed, but what did the camp and Eagles think?

Angela found her shadow in the darkness. She met Kyle's curious gaze. "Ready to go back to being just his top Eagle again?"

"It's what I was promised, what we agreed to." His tone was emotionless.

"So the last weeks of being my right hand were just a part of your duties?"

Kyle snorted, not about to challenge her over a lie that didn't matter between them. "I wanted to tell him no, to go against him right then. The same as you did."

Angela blew out a sigh. "But he didn't recognize it. He thinks I can't wait to give it up, when I..."

She changed the words. "I don't know exactly what happens to us now. I'm not sure where we fit."

"Yes, you are. It's ending and you loathe the idea of just being an Eagle again or even Marc's mate. You want more. He's right. That's why you're upset."

"I want to do more."

"And you can't with Marc here?"

"Marc wouldn't stop me."

"Unless you choose to stay in command, to share leadership. He'd never accept that, right?"

Angela tossed the smoldering butt to the ground and put it out with her boot. She was sometimes still amazed by how much had changed since her first day in this refugee camp. Why didn't Kyle know what was coming, what she'd figured out a long time ago?

Instead of anger or information, she put him to work. “Talk to people quietly and get a consensus, find out how they feel about us. I don’t want to lead. I don’t want this burden, but I don’t think I can go back to being on the shelf until needed. I doubt you can, either. We’ve come too far for that.”

Kyle left.

Angela finished facing the ugly truth. *I want to agree. I want to stand at Adrian’s side and keep learning to lead. There’s only one thing on this planet that I want more than that, and it isn’t Marc.*

Angela’s hand dropped to her stomach.

2

Kenn stayed in the darkest part of the shadows as Adrian left, lingering to observe Angela and Kyle instead. What he saw made him grimace. It didn’t take long for him to understand what Adrian was doing and why.

“You’re always protecting the future of the camp.” Kenn went to trail Adrian. “When do you get to be happy?”

Kenn had accepted that Adrian didn’t want to take back over, and he’d stopped openly pushing him on it. He thought he understood why now. Adrian was training her and giving himself a break. So far, it was working out well. Kenn didn’t think things would be much different if Adrian hadn’t been injured, except that he himself might have Marc’s job of slowing down the enemy.

“And what have you seen that makes you lower yourself to these tactics?” Kenn watched Adrian accept an offer of comfort from Nancy, the sailor from Hot Springs. “What’s coming for you, but not this camp?”

“His past.”

Kenn turned to find Samantha had been shadowing him. He scowled.

“I’m practicing and you’re better than most of the Eagles.”

Kenn’s chest swelled, but he ducked mentally. Samantha was rarely nice to anyone. “What do you mean, his past?”

Sam pointed out something that she assumed he’d missed. Most people here had. “Did you notice that all of us have been brought down, in one way or another? We’ve been knocked about as low as we can go, then Adrian built us back up. Now, we’re stronger than we’ve ever been.”

Kenn hadn’t realized how many of Safe Haven’s members had gone through it until she said so. “Adrian? His fall came in little Rock, right?”

“No. It started when Angie came here. Little Rock was a domino in that line. His payment, his punishment, hasn’t come yet.”

Kenn got her point, worrying more than he already had been.

Samantha, full of energy that needed a release, sent her hot gaze down Kenn’s big body. “Yours is probably over...”

Kenn flushed, understanding what her problem was. Neil and Jeremy had been gone on a supply run for days, and they were busy when here, teaching and preparing. “They’ll be home soon.”

“I wasn’t hitting on you. I’m pulling energy. The easiest way to draw it from a man is to turn them on.”

Kenn’s face went scarlet this time. His mouth opened. “Did you get anything?”

Samantha shook her head. “May I?”

Kenn gave a tense nod and had to clench his fists to stay still while she drew.

Samantha let go all at once, unable to stand any more of that strong flavor.

Kenn took deep breaths to keep from saying anything stupid. All the men were helping the descendants stay refilled so they could heal the wounded who were coming in every few days, but this was the first time one of them had come to him for it. His own gifts were minor in comparison and didn’t need refilling.

Samantha gave Kenn a leer, one friendlier than he’d ever gotten from her. “You’re not all dark and confused anymore. It makes your energy stronger. Try doing something with your gifts instead of waiting for them to come to you.”

Samantha turned away while he was shocked into speculative silence. She probably shouldn’t have told him that, but he was another weapon they could use for the fight.

“Hey.”

Samantha turned around, not sure what to expect. “Yes?”

“What’s the easiest way to take it from a woman?”

Sam flashed a healthy leer. “Piss us off, of course. We live on anger and love. Those are often the only two things that exist for a female.”

Kenn suddenly didn’t envy Neil and Jeremy any of the three-way fantasies he’d had. If they were able to please this woman for long, he was Superman.

Kenn caught up with her, waiting to see if she glared or accepted him along for wherever she was going.

“I was hoping you’d ask. I need level five in Kai. Neither of my men will punch.”

Kenn tensed, but didn’t deny the request. She’d come to him because she knew he was capable of that and more. “The training tent is empty right now. It’s packed up for tomorrow.”

Samantha changed directions and flashed a pointed glare to Jeff, her protection. “I asked for this. Make sure Angela knows.”

Jeff wasn’t exactly okay with it (he’d also refused), but he didn’t interfere. Adrian and Angela insisted that none of their females would ask for more than they could handle. Jeff had to believe that. After the nights he’d been spending with Crista, the thought of losing her was paralyzing.

They went into the tent to find Kyle and Jennifer already doing what they'd come here for. Both pairs stared at each other in uneasy concern.

Samantha started to go out, but Kenn put a hand on her arm, which he withdrew as she stopped. "This is better. She'll be able to tell Angela that I'm not hurting you any more than I have to. It will keep the men from hunting me. Your Eagles, you'll still have to handle."

Samantha went toward the curious pair. Neil and Jeremy wouldn't like this, but a large part of Angela's plan for the women depended on her and she wouldn't be able to do it if she couldn't take a real hit. The soldiers who were coming would follow orders and they wouldn't go easy on her just because she was female. To do her duty, she had to know what to expect when the battle came to Safe Haven's gates.

Kenn stripped his shirt and boots, using Neil's level five training instructions for the females. He watched Samantha's expression flood with restless need. Neil had noted the women were easy to take down when a sexual spark distracted them.

"Control that shit and pay attention!" Kenn moved toward her.

Samantha's anger flared to life; she met him in the middle of the tent, set to work off the ugly feeling of bad days being just over the horizon for all of them.

3

“I’ve noticed that you show a lot of attention to some women here—more than you do other females, even those you sleep with.”

Adrian didn’t pause from shoveling out the livestock trailer, but inside, he cringed. He hadn’t expected this conversation yet. *Time to be careful or tell the truth?* “Some people deserve more attention.”

“Like my mom?”

Adrian understood the boy had planned this. He was being ambushed. “Yes.”

Adrian heard Charlie’s silent frustration when he gave nothing more. *The impatience of youth. I barely remember my own.*

“Why can’t you leave her alone?”

Adrian stopped, wiping his brow with a sweaty sleeve before pinning the teenager with a cool look. “You don’t know?”

Charlie flushed under the light scold, but he held his ground. “I know the truth, no matter what the camp is told.”

Adrian scowled at him. “The truth is an illusion in any group of people, son. You’ll figure that out. In the meantime, swallow the snot that can’t wait to fly out of your mouth and ask what you want to know.”

It was the roughest he’d ever been with Charlie. Most grown men would have withered beneath his tones.

The sullen boy turned a darker shade of red. “Why did you train her to take your place?” The child’s tone lowered, becoming pain-filled. “Is it what was best for the camp...or is it personal?”

It was demanded with so much genuine pain that Adrian didn’t hesitate. “Why does it have to be one or the other? Why not both?”

There was a stunned silence where even the Eagles on duty around them forgot to breathe.

The noises of the camp rolled on the wind as the two males stared at each other, one in shock and the other in complete control.

Adrian waited until the boy was about to speak, expression saying it was ugly, and cut him off. “As her blood, it’s natural to question my personal interest in her, but as for your version of the truth, it doesn’t exist. She’s not betraying your dad.” Adrian stripped his gloves to fish for a smoke. “Though I wouldn’t fault her if she did and neither would most of the Eagles.”

Charlie waited silently, stunned to have been given honesty.

“We have rough roads ahead and not enough warriors. You still see the timid mouse that my right hand man beat on. She no longer exists. Your mother is now a leader of men.”

“And the personal?” Charlie forced out.

Adrian tossed his butt into one of the empty cans and met the teenager’s wary gaze. “She’ll need someone to care for her if your dad doesn’t make it back.”

Adrian's blue eyes lit up with a deep hunger that the hormone-filled teenager recognized instantly.

"And I want that job like I've never wanted another. I've searched for her my whole life and I have the ability to make her happier than any of the men who've had her light." Adrian went back to shoveling, aware that he'd sped his plans up, but he wasn't overly concerned. It was about time everyone knew he wanted her. More changes were coming. "If your dad does return, I'll step aside, like I've been doing since she got here."

Charlie took it all in as evenly as he could. He hadn't considered what would happen if Marc died. His mom would fall apart. "Does...she want you?"

Adrian snorted in bitter amusement. "That, is another matter entirely. I am the wrong one to ask."

"She won't give me an answer."

Adrian sighed miserably. "Because it's hard for her to accept. Yes, she might eventually take my comfort, but she'd never forgive herself or me. If your dad dies, I'll be there for her, but she'll pretend I'm him."

Charlie opened his mouth to blast out the awful heaviness that thought brought. And went back to shoveling instead. If he'd lost Tracy to the water snake, he might have done the same thing. He already couldn't imagine being without her. "How do you hold on when that's all you have to look forward to?"

Adrian couldn't refuse to answer now and he found himself giving all of the truth, something he

rarely did. “I love her. She’ll need me to put her back together. My life means nothing compared to hers.”

That type of selflessness was something Charlie respected, but he didn’t understand except in the smallest terms. He hadn’t been through Adrian’s decades of pain and hell. Hopefully, he never would.

Adrian waited for the next round of questions.

“Tracy isn’t going to service the Eagles anymore.”

Adrian smirked at the quick topic change and the new warning. “Have you cleared that with her?”

Charlie flushed.

“Her choice, right?”

“*Our* choice.”

“You’d better clear that one with your mom, then. It’s still a couple months shy of your birthday.”

Charlie waved a frustrated hand at the preparations going on around the camp. “We may not have months!”

Adrian found it harder to pretend than he usually did. “Still, rules are important, even when it seems grim.” He glanced up. “If you do it, she has to let the others here who’ve been waiting to be legal couples. You’ll throw off all the balance we’ve made. You’re her son. If she makes an exception for you, she loses respect. Be sure your choices won’t hurt the camp.”

Charlie took the advice to heart and then continued on to his next issue. He'd asked to be put with Adrian.

Kyle hadn't argued. He'd known what was coming. The Eagles didn't have a right to that series of conversations. As her son, Charlie did and they were eager to know the results.

"Conner's hiding something."

"Yeah. But what?"

Charlie was glad Adrian had also noticed. "He blocks too well. You'll have to have my mom do it."

"Why not tell her yourself?"

Charlie shrugged. "I don't want her to think I'm jealous or anything. I like Conner and it worries me. He's not happy here."

"No, he's not." Adrian didn't tell Charlie that Conner wanted the same as what he had when his mom had first come—to be alone with his parents and for everyone else to go away. Conner also didn't like it that his father wasn't in charge. It wasn't how he remembered things.

"I got all that, but there's something else. He has a dark spot."

Adrian knew. "I'll handle it."

"Good."

Adrian looked over. "What else?"

Charlie laughed, feeling better now. "I know what Becky's gift is."

"What?"

“She’s a tracker. She has a mental grid like my dad. She can tell us where the enemy is, if they’re close.”

New plans began spinning; new threads twined around the complex ball that already existed. Adrian leaned the shovel against the truck. “Guess I’ll be talkin’ to your mom now, after all.”

Charlie watched him go, noting the proud look around the camp. He realized Adrian’s good mood swing had come from knowing that he would get to spend a few minutes around Angela.

“I won’t go through this with you, Tracy. Please don’t try to put me through the same shit.” Charlie grunted in annoyed resignation. “I’ll walk.”

4

Angela had listened to Samantha’s weather report without any change in expression, but in her heart, she’d placed the warning with the sense of doom that had been haunting her. That was why Adrian had them planning to leave the country, instead of going to ground here. He knew Yellowstone was going to blow. He’d probably seen it in his dreams. It was yet another foresight on his part that might save them all.

As it was, the steady temperature drop was already making both of Safe Haven’s leaders nervous. How soon would winter be on them at this rate? With the trips and extra stops that Angela had planned, water and fuel wouldn’t be a problem.

They were almost full. The camp had voted for Lookout Mountain and she would take them, but not before gathering what they would need to live on and fight with. Adrian had taught her well.

Angela forced her thoughts from that man's actions, instead considering how happy it had to make him that they now had so many children. There were more than any of them had found in one place since the war, and it was impossible not to like them. Thanks to the den mothers and Eagles, these children filled areas of camp with laughter that was sorely needed to remind these people of what they were about to be fighting for.

More than thirty kids now called Safe Haven home, leading to longer, more luxurious RVs to hold them all. There were now five of these shiny, old world reminders and double the security. Not that it mattered. Daryl's team was always near them now. The new age limit had given these men insights that the other males here didn't have. Plus, Daryl still had them observing one of their own for a possible violation.

After handing out punishments to Seth and Kyle, Daryl's team had become the camp enforcers. One of them—Billy—had found a girl he liked too much while they'd been doing duty over the kids in camp. His team had noticed.

Angela didn't think there was anything to worry about, unlike when they'd been watching Crone. In fact, she thought it was proof of what Adrian had told her after the last camp meeting. The Eagles

would become protectors of their females and age wouldn't make a difference. Their little girls would have happy childhoods and then be eased into breeding by caring, strong men who would love and protect them. Billy was likely to be the first one to fall that way. Others would follow, but all of them would be monitored. It had to be handled carefully, case-by-case, but it had to happen. They needed babies more than even bullets. Jennifer's pregnancy had resulted in a child, but another woman had lost hers since then. They were down to four coming births, with no new pregnancies that they were aware of. It was forcing the camp to accept that every little girl born now would help them continue to exist later.

Angela looked to where Jennifer was enjoying a few minutes of peace. The college kids from her first pickup were helping with weapons and classes where they could, as were many of the people who'd had the time to settle in. Even the Nuns were assisting, learning how to load weapons. They'd refused to take the defense or gun classes, though. Cesar's former slaves, on the other hand, were excelling in those two areas. They were also causing trouble.

Lilly and Grace hadn't forgiven Jennifer anything. Having them in a tent together made for a tense class. There was more to come from those three, Angela was sure. To counter the danger, she'd placed Beth, the pregnant Nun, under Jennifer's care. That meant all of the pregnant

females came around, because Beth had made friends. It wasn't uncommon for the breeders in camp to do everything together, even eat. It gave Jennifer friends and protection when the Eagles couldn't stay close to her, and allowed the mothers-to-be to get a view of what they were in for as she learned to care for little Autumn.

The radio blared. "New arrivals in the QZ!"

"Copy." Angela pushed up from the table. It was her day to scan the new people. Tomorrow, Jennifer and Charlie would cover it.

Wincing slightly as she curled her newest ingrown toenail into flesh, Angela glanced over the smoke detectors on the fences, then the patches on the guards walking those areas—making sure they didn't have any wolves in sheep's clothing again. *It's clear*, the witch reported.

Angela went back to her thoughts and observations. She was keeping them camped close to water for the fire safety, but also because so far they hadn't found a sinkhole near a water mass. It also allowed her to keep up with the sanitary conditions despite the new influx of people. When Adrian had said the call would bring new fighters to them, he'd been right. The ranks were slowly filling out and giving them hope. They now had one hundred Eagles, though a third were rookies. It would be a while before she felt like they had enough protection.

“Good evening, Safe Haven.” Kevin’s calm tones over the radio started the official settling of the camp for the night.

Angela listened to him for a minute, pausing on her way to the QZ gate. She wasn’t picking up anything bad about the new arrivals. She hadn’t told anyone yet that she didn’t have to be around them or even talk to the people anymore. All she had to do was tell the witch to show her their secrets. Right now, she could do it from across half the camp. It was a defense she was working on expanding every day.

“We’ve gotten news that Marc’s team has engaged the enemy. They took out a full platoon and two tanks!” the radio blared.

A loud cheer rose across the camp, but not from those who knew what that battle must have been like.

Angela steeled her emotions and was glad when Kevin got soothing music rolling through the tents and campers. She was having them keep the camp updated about the good news, but sometimes the bad slipped in and she had to spend hours getting them under control again. Kevin was better now about only letting the camp hear what she needed, but whenever new people made it out of the QZ, not all of them kept quiet.

Angela didn’t think it would matter for much longer. Once the fighting reached the base, it would sink in for everyone that the soldiers were coming.

She planned to have Safe Haven in the mountains by then, or as close to it as she could get.

Kenn and Kyle had indeed become her point men in battle plans, but they had also become her go-to guys for supply runs and planning traps. Once she tossed an idea out, those two ran with it and came up with deadly results. Once the camp got to Lookout Mountain, they would start setting up and assembling those weapons and defenses.

Across the camp, laughter spilled out. Angela was fairly sure she knew where it was coming from. The campfire group now had more than thirty members who could be found around the flames at any time from dusk to dawn. Sometimes the group was quiet, reminiscing or planning, but mostly, they were laughing and living. Angela was grateful. It was another sound that Safe Haven was low on now.

As she walked by the animal area, Angela spotted Adrian and paused, unable to look away. Beautiful muscles rippled with renewed health and strength, reminding her of how lonely she was.

Angela tore her gaze from the man and forced her feet to move. She drew in calming air and tried to relax as a wave of nausea flew through her. Where was that cast iron stomach now?

Before Angela could make it to the chair, a small group of new men met her and began blowing her world apart.

“You must be the Ghost’s other woman. Wow. Lucky man.”

Angela paused at the words, too slow to brace herself. “Other woman?”

Atolius was in awe. “Should have known one wasn’t enough for a man like that.” He shook her hand vigorously.

Angela’s face filled with a fury that drove him backward, where he tripped and scrambled away with the knowledge of death coming into his face.

“Angela.”

Seth’s voice brought her around.

She turned away. “Welcome to Safe Haven. May it become your home.” She cleared the group of tired fighters with that, and vanished into the shadows.

5

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Adrian’s denial would have been the end of it if he had been talking to anyone else.

Angela was already pissed. She wasn’t going to permit more interference. “I’m taking three men, and my snipers go where I do. I have three alarms, two guns, my KA-BAR, a wrist blade, and three speed loaders on my belt. I also have my mini-kit around my waist, an extra radio inside my shirt, and enough fucking rage to light this camp’s fuse.” Angela shoved by the men. “Excuse me.”

Nursing a headache, Kenn joined the grumbling men around the QZ and saw Angela striding determinedly for the gate. “Where’s she going?”

“Out to visit the camps on our perimeter.”
Adrian was unable to stop her by his own rules.

Kenn, who hadn't lost much of his scheming mind, took advantage. “If she won't be stopped, she should be protected.”

Adrian snorted. “You heard her. She thinks she has it covered.”

Kenn waved at the kits in the rear of his truck. He kept several bags around camp, packed and ready. “Go with her.”

Angela turned to argue and Kenn raised his voice a bit, to be sure she understood he meant to fight her on this. “Take him or stay here. We'll hold a vote while you're gone. Safe Haven's leader won't be allowed to leave camp again until after this threat is over, no matter who has control. It's a security risk.”

Angela's temper flared, but she spun toward the gate without refusing.

Adrian gave Kenn a curious look as he handed him the kit and an extra bandolier.

“You're welcome.”

Guessing, Adrian kept his head down, voice even lower. “You shouldn't do this. The Eagles won't like it.”

Kenn snorted. “They liked it when you were happy. If this is what it takes, they'll support it.”

“Not if he comes back alive. They'll view it as a failed conspiracy.”

Kenn didn't agree with the assumption that it was a lost cause. "That only becomes a problem if either of them insist on it and they won't."

Adrian didn't have time to argue further as the gates slid open. "Thank you." He hurried to catch up as their snipers rushed to keep them covered.

Kenn waited for the gate to close, then gestured to Kyle. "You're in charge. I'll be around if you need me."

Kyle was dumbfounded by the gesture of respect. He'd been preparing to deny Kenn lead of the camp for even half an hour. It would have distracted him from Adrian and Angela being alone in the dark together with only half a dozen men for protection. If he'd known how the men in the camps around them felt about her, Kyle might have been able to relax.

Kenn walked away, calming nearby men with jokes and light chatting.

Kyle realized the Marine had changed again while they weren't looking. *Maybe it was the pranks. We should try that on all our other assholes.*

Angela stormed into the woods around them, but stopped as soon as she was out of sight of the camp. She slowly pulled in the rage. She was careful to only let the camp get as much information as they needed to have, but the pressure! Angela tried to calm down, but she missed Marc more than she'd thought was possible.

He was off dying for them and she had to live with the knowledge that she'd sent him there. The

dreams were also hard on her and they refused to leave Marc's face the same in her mind. They kept merging until it was a different pair of stunning, blue eyes that she was begging for release.

"I don't want this!" She wanted to be with Marc, fighting and bleeding alongside him, not caring for sheep that had to be eased into the truth.

Those days have ended, the witch attempted to soothe. They know the truth. They come to you more every day, observing the lessons and practicing. Those who are here, will stay.

"And it's not enough. We need more fighters."

"Send out your call." Adrian was aware of their curious audience. The first camp on their doorstep was now gathered a respectful distance away, gazing at them in awe and making the Eagles nervous.

Angela's voice was harsh. "Too emotional right now. I'll call the killers, too."

Adrian stepped in front of her. "Yes. We need them."

Angela glowered mistrustfully.

Adrian recognized the determination to keep their people safe. He brought her to his point of view gently. "We're all killers, Angie. We'll control them, direct them toward the enemy, and use them to win."

"And after?!" she snapped. "What about after?"

Adrian winced, voice lowering. "They'll be given new rules to live by."

Angela knew what that definition was and swallowed the next layer of guilt to come with the job. “And what of the evil that will hear me?”

Adrian sighed. “I’m not sure it matters now. The battles along 40 aren’t slowing them enough. Our other help has to have time to get here.”

Angela felt the hopelessness, the crushing pain of all the losses they were about to suffer; a crimson tear ran down her cheek. “Come to me.”

Angela’s call was quiet, but powerful; each time she repeated it, the words rebounded stronger, slamming into minds with the force of a gun.

“Come to me.”

Angela screamed as the power built, sending ants away and men to her side.

“Come to me!”

Adrian caught her as she stumbled, mind ringing from the power. He could have been across the country and he would have felt that.

“Your...turn,” she gasped, struggling to get her balance. She’d never sent out a blast like that. It had come from the depths of her soul.

Adrian kept her hand when she would have pulled away. “I’ll need help. I’m not as strong as you.”

Angela stilled as Adrian closed his lids, using the moment. He’d needed an opening and fate had provided him with one.

Adrian opened the doors, all of them this time, and locked their minds as he began sending out those compelling mental pleas for aid.

Angela saw all the truths he'd been hiding from her, but the things she'd suspected were also confirmed. It was an honest look into his heart, into who he was inside. Angela struggled at the feel of it.

Adrian didn't let her break the contact yet, using the images to distract her from moving. He showed her that beach again, shamelessly manipulating her.

Adrian came through the fog of his mind and held out a hand. *I can show you what you seek.*

Angela didn't want to, she knew something painful was coming, but the need to give Adrian what he was silently demanding was too strong. *Fine!* she sent hatefully. *Show me and then get out!*

Adrian linked the last door between them.

Angela watched the world collapse again.

Adrian stopped her from hitting the ground, landing with her in his lap. He shook off the arms that tried to take her away. "Angie?"

Angela groaned. "We can't win...help us!"

Adrian carefully picked her up and headed for the deeper shadows. Instead of going to their camp, it drew instant unease from the Eagles.

"What did you do to her?!" Shawn hadn't killed Adrian yet because of Marc's orders to let the bastard have Angela if he died.

Adrian put her in the grass and began tapping her wrist. "She fainted. Stand down. Angie?"

Angela came to slowly, but it was clear she remembered everything. She grabbed Adrian's wrist. "Your life for him?!"

“You know it.”

Angela cleared her throat, breathing deeper. “I’m okay. Help me up.”

They got her on her feet. After a minute or so, Angela insisted she was fine and continued to her visit of their outer camps. The powerful new information she had, she buried in the vault. There was no way she could continue to pretend that nothing was wrong if she left the sight of that slaughter in the front of her mind. She’d send them all fleeing to the corners of the earth.

“And we’ll still lose. But it buys time. You understand now why I’ve acted this way?”

“So they’ll survive.”

“Yes. If the enemy can take one of us, they’ve been instructed to grab you. They think the rest of us will follow.”

“They’re right.”

“Yes.”

“It has to be you that they take. And you’ll be ready for that.”

Adrian raised a hand toward her cheek, and forced himself to drop it. “To leave my son, my camp, *you*, no. But I will do it.”

Angela glared at him, tone sharpening. “Since I know now, you can stop pushing me into sacrificing you. I’ll do it if I know I have to.”

“You weren’t ready to face it. Now that you know Marc has accepted what’s coming, you can as well.”

Angela glared at him for the reminder. If Marc had someone by him in the night, it meant he knew too. Angela refused to accept that, though she would take him back the second he said it's what he wanted. She wasn't sure about his...relief source yet. She might have to kill that bitch.

Adrian grinned sadly. "I admire your belief in him. It makes me love you even more."

Eagles gasped and muttered as Angela scowled.

"I said you can stop pushing that act now!"

Adrian leaned closer, breathing in her sweet smell. "It wasn't an act, Angela. Deep down, you know I mean every single word." He went by before she could react. "Come on. We've kept these fighters waiting long enough."

Angry and unable to express it, Angela clenched her fists and plastered on a welcoming expression as she turned. "Hi. I'm Angela, the leader of Safe Haven. Thank you for coming..."

Chapter Twenty-One
How Many More
Route 40, East of Amarillo
August 10th

1

“**T**hirty more today, sir.”

Francis grunted. “What’s the total now?”

Wayne checked his notes. “Over four hundred.”

“Base knew this would be a hard fight. Too bad they didn’t have the foresight to send us through a more hospitable area.”

Wayne, second in command, agreed. “We need more men. At this rate, we’ll get to Little Rock with only a skeleton crew left.”

Francis wasn’t overly concerned. “That’s all we need to secure it. Once it’s in our hands, the planes can bring out fresh men and supplies.”

“Wish they’d dropped us all there. They had the fuel.”

Francis frowned slightly at the grumbling. “The fuel in the bunker has to last a long time, Captain. They can’t be without power, can they?”

Chastised, and aware of his commander’s violent temper, Wayne stepped back. “No. You’re right, sir. My apologies, sir.”

Francis didn't react. "We can expect another trio of attacks tomorrow. Keep security as is, but widen the formations and clear the holes as we go."

"Yes, sir." Wayne went to the meeting tent to relay the nightly orders to the platoon leaders.

Francis stared into the murky darkness. "Where are you, my Raven? Are you with the Ghost or in the nest?"

Footsteps crunching behind gave Francis no worries. He was the last of his kind, brought out of retirement to spearhead the charge against these disgusting descendants. He feared nothing.

"We have a new report, sir. The casualty number went up to fifty-one."

"A patrol?"

"Yes, sir. Their throats were slit."

Francis scowled this time. "Damn rebels!"

His growl sent the Sergeant scurrying away before he could become a target.

Francis hated showing any emotion. He couldn't stand compassionate, weak-minded humans who wanted peace and joy. He thrived on the battles, the thrill of doing what others couldn't, and this fight had already proven a challenge. There was even a chance of failure. The former CIA operative grinned like a lunatic. "I will crush you, Ghost!"

Francis ducked into his luxury tent; a blade plunged into his throat.

“Someone might. It won’t be you.” Marc wiped his knife across the tent wall and then slipped through the hole in the rear of the canvas.

He emerged a short few yards away from the tent and checked to verify that the shadow implied the dead commander was in his cot. He was hoping the boss wouldn’t be found until morning. It should start the day with a delay.

He turned to find himself looking down the barrel of a gun. *Damn.*

Marc’s eyes spoke a million thoughts.

The Private, shocked to find Marc here on his rounds, stared at the legend.

Neither of them moved.

Marc took advantage of the moment. “Let me go and you have a place by my side when you flee their control.”

Ivan was much like the other men here—without any family and glad to be out of the ground, even though they were fighting their fellow Americans. He hesitated. It would be a promotion to capture the Ghost, but what would that gain him?

“My men are loved. Come with me. Help me.”

Ivan may have come on his own anyway, but Marc couldn’t wait for him to make up his mind. He sent out a wave of power and insisted. *Let me go.*

The Private gave a jerky nod, mind reeling. He’d heard the rumors of the power the descendants held, but hadn’t believed them. With that command in his thoughts, it was impossible to deny it any longer. He slid to his knees. “I’m sorry.”

Marc turned away. “Do not kill another of my men and you have a place with me.”

Ivan slowly returned to his rounds, mind a confused daze.

A bit later, when the news of General Francis being assassinated came down the ranks, Ivan said he’d been on the other side of his post and hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary.

He wasn’t sure exactly what it was that the government was fighting for, but the descendants were battling for their right to live, and Ivan wasn’t killing any more of them.

When his shift ended four hours later, he quietly slipped into the shadows to use the bathroom and didn’t return.

Marc’s mental tactics were effective. The soldiers on the outside of the lines and those bringing up the rear were as much his target as those in the front, and it made for collapsing lines when he attacked.

To counteract this, command sent down orders of executions for anyone leaving their assigned places. Because they chose to use a threat instead of a solution, it wasn’t helping them retain their numbers. What men the Ghost wasn’t killing, the harsh conditions were causing to go AWOL. Some of those were even joining the enemy and helping the rebels find weaknesses in government defenses.

It was chaos, but there was little that command could do to quiet the unease. Every night since

Denver had ended with dead men on duty and soldiers not returning from their posts. Whole teams and even two platoons had been snatched in front of hundreds of men. The talk of rebellion among the ranks was growing. It didn't matter that they were gaining ground or that the Shadow Riders were easy to kill when they got them out in the open. These soldiers didn't like the mission or the orders anyway, but to have the Ghost talk to them on their own channels was almost too much.

He sounded like a real leader, like a patriot, and many of the soldiers had been both before the war.

Now, they had been reduced to a no-frills life of servitude that was on its way to crush out the little hope of the few Americans who had managed to survive. It didn't sit well with more than a few of these hard men. They fought and died while command stayed safe in the bunker. The reminder that they were expendable was the topic of lowly spoken conversations among team leaders who were thinking about trading sides. Some of these men were reported and dealt with, but the battalion had only a few rats; the rumors and gossip continued.

Marc would have been thrilled.

2

“We can't hold them!”

Men ducked the incoming whistle, hoping any of their group still alive did the same.

Boom!

The ground blew up near them, throwing two Shadow Riders into the air.

Marc's voice echoed through their radios a second later. "Retreat! Full retreat!"

Those who heard it took off in relief. Those who didn't hear the call saw their team pulling out and followed. In all the explosions and gunshots, sight was the only reliable communication, but even that was hard through the smoke and dust.

The soldiers had adapted, improvised. They were now clearing a path, blowing traps with civilian cars and other property before their main troops came through. It was forcing Marc's men back faster than he could set the traps, and his side was taking heavy casualties as he struggled to get everything in place before the battalion came in.

"Call it!" Marc waved at his men. "Full retreat. Meet at base Alpha."

"It was a good battle, my brother." Grendin tried to fight the sadness.

"We're not done. The majority of their losses will come in Arkansas. Move out!"

The Shadow Riders split up as the soldiers peppered them with fire, killing too many of them for Marc to recklessly run into the crossfire. He ducked behind a boulder the size of a car to reload, ignoring the sounds of boots crunching closer. They couldn't hurt him now, at least not with slugs.

Marc lunged from his hiding place.

Stunned to find the Ghost so close, the five soldiers hesitated.

Marc didn't. He killed them all. Only the last man fired at him. That soldier died in shocked confusion when his bullet bounced off Marc's chest.

Marc snarled in triumph and power as he fled. His gifts had evolved, painfully, and he now produced a shield like Angela had. Fire didn't even get through it. Both his men and the enemy considered Marc invincible.

He wasn't, of course. Kendle knew the weaknesses. She'd been insisting on having his food tested and preparing his kit herself. She knew that when you blocked the enemy in one way, they always came in through another route.

Marc joined the men on their horses, picking out Kendle on Thaddeus's right. She ran over to join him, leaping onto the horse. Marc mounted his animal without a word.

He led them southeast, away from the fighting, then began gradually doubling back toward Oklahoma. He wanted the soldiers to think the Mexicans were hiding the rebels, a lie that Sebastian was encouraging. He liked having the excuse to get his army involved.

Marc wasn't worried. Sebastian was a single future bullet. First, he would be used. If the soldiers thought the rebel support was mostly Mexican and south of 40, they would keep traveling through Oklahoma and meet thirty-seven pissed off Indian nations. It could slow the troops enough for Marc to

get to the base and blow the roads. There would be one usable Avenue of Approach that he would remove when he and his men came through.

In the distance, the sounds of battling receded; the invasive noise of troops once again marching became dominant.

Marc keyed his mike. “Do not lose hope, my friends. Your days of walking through my hell will be over soon. The Ghost has seen your deaths.”

Marc kned his horse faster now that the bait was set. They’d made no secret of the fact that they were meeting at the Air Force Base. The soldiers would think that’s where Adrian and Angela were, as well. The next part of this massive plan would take place there.

“Open fire!”

Not expecting it, Marc grabbed Kendle’s arm and dragged them off the horse. He threw them into the water that lined their path and held her tight as she struggled. Above them, a fire team did what they were trained for. Slugs flew into the water.

Marc’s lungs hurt before he let them come to the surface.

Kendle gasped in air and then she was under the water again and panicking as more bullets slammed into the water around them.

Marc held her, hissing out pain as she raked her nails down his skin. It’s *almost over! Calm down!*

Kendle couldn’t. The panic of being underwater was one she wouldn’t ever fully conquer; she fought harder.

Forced to surface or take other measures, Marc shoved his mouth to hers and blew.

Kendle gasped in both air and water as she panicked.

Marc shoved them for the surface, wishing the current was faster. He was certain the fire team was still up there, waiting for them.

Kendle's first cough drew immediate fire.

Marc jerked them under the water again.

Kendle sagged after a few seconds as Marc shoved them through the murky bottom, going back the way they'd come. As he swam, he brought up the shield.

Kendle slowly woke to find them inside Marc's shield, hovering near the bottom of the muddy water. Fish and other marine life swam around them in panic.

"What the hell?"

Marc grinned arrogantly. "I evolved."

Kendle's face began collapsing into sad horror.

Marc stared, pride fading. "What?"

"Why are we so different?"

Her voice was a pathetic, echoing whisper that jerked on his heart. Marc gently pulled her closer and let her bury her face against his chest, but he didn't give an answer. He didn't have one.

Marc kicked his horse harder, feeling the others doing the same as the soldiers opened fire on them. They'd been trapped by a split force and barely been able to fight their way up to the cleared street.

Kablamm!

The road behind the riders disintegrated; it took a few of their own and a large group of the enemy with it.

“Do the reservoirs!” Marc ordered, shielding himself from the showering grit.

“Marc!”

Kendle's shout went through him in a sharp flare of need. He saw that she had fallen in the mad crush of everyone trying to get down the road before it was blown or overrun. She was perched on the edge of a wooden fence.

Marc wheeled his exhausted mount against the mass of their fighters to get to her.

Kendle dropped heavily behind him, making the horse rear up.

“Easy...easy.” Marc manhandled it into obedience and got them racing for safety.

They made the entry into Little Rock Air Force Base with her clinging to him like a second skin.

The ground shook under the complex and around it, vibrating through the walls and floors in warning.

“Brace, folks.” The sound of Quinn calming people was music to Marc's ringing ears. “We might get a bit of recoil...”

Bamm!

The building shuddered like a bomb had hit it.

Kendle clutched Marc in confusion. She didn't know about the two reservoirs rigged to blow and block the soldier's coming attempt to pin them down.

Blamm!

The second explosion wasn't as strong. Marc continued to the main office, seeing what they'd accomplished while he was away fighting and buying them time.

The small army that had met up with him and Kendle after they'd come from the water was already invading crates and barrels of supplies. He'd waited until nightfall to move openly and his Shadow Riders had fallen in around them all through the wee hours. These were his hardest men, his closest bonds. He thought it was likely that if they survived, these fighters would be with him when he returned to Safe Haven.

“That's it! Close us up!”

Quinn's call was met with a loud echo that told Marc the men they had inside here right now were all they would have for this battle. No other groups were going to get through those soldiers.

Marc keyed his radio. “Perimeter groups move in. I repeat, move in and lock them down!”

Fresh gunshots echoed in the distance around the base from all sides. Marc's men yelled in angry delirium. Their hopes of those outer camps crushing the soldiers were unrealistic, but Marc didn't stop their celebrations. They needed hope and he

wouldn't deny it, but inside, he already knew they would lose. The enemy would take over and use this as a command post to send out horrific attacks across what was left of the country unless he stopped them.

Marc entered the command room under the awed gazes of the second floor guards and leadership. It took him a minute to understand how many men were there. He'd left less than a dozen. There were now hundreds sitting, sleeping, washing, prepping weapons.

Marc heard Quinn's approach and turned to him with approval thick in his voice. "You didn't mention how much company you'd gotten in that last call."

Quinn shook Marc's hand as if he'd won a prize. "Thought you'd need the boost when you got here."

Marc took a seat near the cluttered desks they had lined up. "Understatement. Give me a minute to tend her wound and then I want updates."

Quinn reached for the first aid kit, but stopped when he felt the room hum with power. The light chatter disappeared into stunned respect.

Marc ran his glowing hand over Kendle's arm, where a bullet had grazed her. The wound healed as a tense silence filled the room.

Thaddeus didn't understand.

Kendle explained as Marc scanned the men again. "They didn't know the Ghost was like me."

Those words drew concern from the Eagles. Marc had lied about not being like Angela, and who

was the woman that clung to him, got his attention first, and sounded like their boss?

Marc didn't want to take the time for explanations. That's why he'd done it openly. "Updates."

Quinn gave them without leaving anything out, but the tone of warmth he'd greeted Marc with was gone.

Marc took in the information while repacking his kit from the barrels and pouches they had stored in the rear of the room. He left Kendle to fend for herself intentionally. Once they saw she was like Angela in ways, they would ask their questions and she would give answers. They wouldn't care for them, though. Marc was ready to interfere if needed.

"Who the hell are you?"

Kendle's expression darkened. "A nightmare. Bug off!" She was surprised when Quinn's mouth tightened, but he didn't go away.

"You one of his strays or a threat to be handled later?" Quinn was ready to be hurt to know that answer.

Kendle barked a laugh, impressed despite herself. She'd been expecting all weaklings in the Eagles that Marc spoke of so lovingly. Paul and Jax certainly hadn't known much. "I'm Kendle."

Quinn held out a hand. "You're the island woman Marc's son told us about."

Kendle blinked. "Son?"

Quinn began to suspect Marc's plan right then, but he didn't ask those questions. "Yes. You're from Pitcairn?"

Kendle's rage was suddenly gone. "Yes, and I'm looking forward to getting back there."

"We'll be along for that ride, I think" Quinn was now trying to find out how much she knew.

Kendle didn't think that was such a bad idea as she saw the way the man appraised her scars and reflected respect. Maybe some of these other Safe Haven men were different.

"You ready for a meal?"

"If I have to."

Quinn waved Shane over. "Hook her up with grub and gear, like we would Angela."

Kendle winced at the love and loyalty in his voice in the name. *I'll never be able to compete with that.*

Kendle's heart began accepting right then that she would be Marc's second choice. Any female who could inspire those feelings in these men would never settle for her man having a whore. Kendle wasn't sure she could live as one anyway.

I'll start separating myself from him after we leave here. She gave Quinn a searching look. Maybe this one was lonely and needed a strong woman.

Try being on your own for a while, her demon suggested. *You might like it.*

Kendle wasn't sure. She only knew that the thought of being split from her Ghost was terrifying.

She wasn't sure if it was love. She thought maybe it was more like fear of being alone again with no one else inside her mind but this voice. She stayed quiet as the men around her made their plans and updated each other. The only time she broke out of her heavy thoughts was when that already hated name was spoken.

4

“You should call Angie, man. She needs the lift.”

Kendle felt Marc's gaze swing to her; her heart thumped painfully. She didn't want to listen to him exchange emotions with his first choice.

“No.”

Quinn tried again, using careful words. “There's a lot going on in Safe Haven these days. A personal check in would do good for our people, not just her.”

“You call them. I need a shower.”

No one spoke when he left the room, but Kendle could feel their accusations. She quickly followed Marc from the room.

Marc let her join him in the locker room next to the showers. He took a seat on one of the dusty benches and let out a hard sigh. “We have to talk.”

Kendle perched on the bench across from him, trying to brace to be told to stay away once they reached his camp.

“The opposite, actually.”

Kendle stared in surprise. “I don’t understand. You love her. Why have me?”

Marc couldn’t refuse to answer, though it hurt. “She cares for someone else too. And someday, she’ll leave me for him.”

Kendle took that in with a burning gut and a sickened heart. But she didn’t protest. Marc was her lifeline right now. She needed him.

“And I’ve needed you, as well. It will depend on her, when we get there.”

Kendle understood in one quick blast of insight. “You want me in case she’s with him now.”

Marc dropped his head to his hands. “Yes.”

His pain crushed Kendle. “She won’t.”

“You don’t know them.”

“I know you. She feels the same. You wouldn’t need someone who would betray you that way. She’ll be waiting.” Kendle went to the door, more upset than he knew.

“And if not?”

“Then I will be.” Kendle left.

Marc lay back on the bench, miserable in his success. He’d seen her appraise Quinn, but instead of encouraging it, he’d locked down his own claim. “And I called Kenn a piece of shit.” Marc closed his eyes. “Guess we’re even now.”

5

Despite being inside a base, it didn’t change much for the Shadow Riders. The soldiers were still

on their heels and the need to fight was prevalent. The feeling of being pinned in was one that few of them could ignore, though everyone joked as if they weren't worried. The only time that facade broke was when a burst of gunfire or screams was particularly close. The fighting going on outside these barricaded walls was fierce. The enemy had broken through their lines near the northern reservoir, which had failed to kill the soldiers in the explosion. The water rush had gone around and even cleared them a path in. The perimeter men were still working on them all around the base, but it was clear that this shelter wasn't going to last.

Ten hours after arriving, Marc once again had them working on that three attacks a day plan. It kept the soldiers off schedule, drowsy from lack of sleep, and allowed Marc to do damage in small, effective bursts. He estimated that they'd now killed more than five hundred soldiers. That would force them to gather more men from the bunker before going any further than here. It also meant they would send everything they had left this time. When they came, bullets would no longer be enough. Only magic would save Safe Haven at that point. Marc hoped Adrian had a plan for getting the camp to accept it.

Adrian had been working on that since Angela joined, but if his timing was wrong, the camp would run. Marc wasn't sure that was such a bad thing anymore. He didn't like the idea of losing camp members, but those he was serving with now had

accepted the differences and understood the advantages. If Safe Haven's members couldn't do that, Angela and Charlie would always be in danger. Marc planned to force a choice on it when he returned. "A lot of things there have to change."

He observed the base flank through his glasses. Considering they'd been attacked two hours ago, Marc expected the troops to be getting sleepy again about now. The rebels had the soldiers at a disadvantage. They needed to keep the base intact, so many of their usual tactics were off limits. There were no incoming rockets up here, only sharp cracks of snipers picking men off by their shadows. There were some heavier caliber weapons being used, but they were aimed at the battalion's flank and sides to keep the Indians, Mexicans, and Shadow Riders at bay.

Quinn yawned. "Break time?"

"As soon as I finish my sweep." Marc turned the glasses toward Kendle's post on the other side of the base and scowled. *Where is she?*

6

Kendle lunged from her hiding place, knives and teeth raking the man's neck together. He jerked away, spewing blood as she cackled in glee at the sight. "More!"

She slashed at his stunned partner and then plunged her teeth into his throat.

"Ugg..."

Marc ran through the base, staying low, but not enough to avoid drawing fire. Slugs peppered the wall above him as he flew through the halls.

Marc emerged in the small courtyard behind the water tankers and found her sitting between two bodies. Blood dripped from her chin and hands.

Marc stared in horror as she tried to smile at him.

“I’m getting worse.”

Marc heard witnesses join him, but he didn’t let them instill their fear or approval in his mind. He scooped her into his arms and went to the shower. “I’ll find a way.”

He’d already tried to heal her, with no luck. Adrian was the only one of their kind who had the skill to bring someone back from insanity or desolation. The man was good at putting people back together, but Marc wasn’t sure he would be able to get her to accept Safe Haven’s light before she flipped completely.

“They call me zombie...the Indians and the Mexicans.”

Marc felt her shudder and let her hide against his chest. “You are a killer, Kendle, one who knows right from wrong. Hold onto that part of you.”

Kendle wasn’t sure she could. Right and wrong were secondary to spilling blood. She wasn’t sure that she could live among normal, peaceful people again without becoming the threat.

Marc helped her remove her clothes, gaze never straying anywhere it shouldn't.

For Kendle, it wasn't as if he was revolted by her and couldn't stand the thought. It was as if she was just any other body to be taken care of. He had no attraction for her.

Marc cleaned her up and helped her dress, aware of her distracted, slightly disoriented thoughts. *What can I do that would help?*

"LJ..." Kendle forced it out. "He rocked me, at night."

Marc changed his shirt for a clean one from the stack. "I already do that."

"While he kissed me."

Marc forgot to breathe. If Kendle wanted a physical relationship now, was he ready for that?

No. "I'm not him. I won't give you that comfort, not now."

Kendle didn't stifle the tears, but she did turn away from him. "What can you give me?"

Marc heard the rest of her plea: *Why am I wasting what little time I have left?* "I can help you get where you need to be."

"You honestly think your Adrian can help me?"

"Yes, I do." Marc had confided in her upon waking. She'd been asleep outside the door, guarding him.

"And you don't want me unless...things are bad with her."

"Yes."

His tone wasn't insulting, but it still hurt. Kendle inhaled, struggling to hide it. "Then I'll find my comfort somewhere else until I'm called."

Marc didn't feel even a tiny urge to protest. "You can. I won't interfere."

"And if I find a mate instead of a friend?"

"Then I will have lost out."

Kendle was angered by his answer and moved by him to resume her post without being told. They were clear now on where things stood. She would adjust.

7

"What's the deal with you and Marc?" Quinn hadn't meant to ask, but now, while they were alone in the tower, he couldn't stop himself.

"He's a good friend."

Those words mirrored Angela's when she'd first joined Safe Haven. Quinn wasn't sure what to make of them. "Meaning?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Are you a threat to Marc and Angie?"

"No."

"We'd like to believe that. You'll make a great Eagle."

"You think so?"

"Sure." Quinn surprised her by grinning. "Good mate, too, probably. Kinda cute under all those scars. What happened to you?"

Kendle drew back and punched him in the mouth for an answer.

Quinn stumbled and tripped over the chair. He went sprawling at her feet. “What? What did I do?”

“Never ask about my scars!”

Quinn slowly stood up. “You hit me for that?”

Kendle swallowed as he towered over her. “Screw you.”

Quinn laughed, impressed. “Marc always goes for the best!”

Kendle moaned at the thoughtless words.

Quinn’s cheer vanished. “You’ll never make him happy, not with her around.”

“I’ve already figured that out for myself!”

Quinn leaned closer. “Does that mean you’ll consider other offers?”

Kendle hated the blush coming up her cheeks. “No.”

“Okay. Thank you for not hitting me again.”

Kendle snickered, drawn against her will. “Damn arrogant of you to assume that if I can’t have him, I’d want you in his place.” She glared with a challenging sneer. “Are you that good?”

Quinn’s heartbeat tripled in the space of a second. He slowly nodded, drowning in her light. “Yes, I am. Would you like a demonstration?”

Kendle was painfully aware of the heat between them. “Some other time, maybe.”

Quinn took that and carefully stored it. “Works for me. You eat yet?”

“Later.”

“I’m going there now. I’ll bring something for you.”

“Thanks.”

Quinn left the door open, not sure if he trusted her.

Kendle sank into the office chair with a groan of depression and frustration. She didn’t want any of them, but at least Quinn held a spark of fight. The others would be her willing minions and she already knew that wouldn’t work. She would walk all over a weak-willed person. She was too strong now.

Kendle read the paper on top of the notebook absently, lost in her own thoughts. It was a note on their plans, added after Marc left the briefing.

Safe Haven called. There was another attempt on Angela’s life. Adrian says it’s time to come home.

Quinn returned with the plates to find Kendle gone. He didn’t notice the missing paper.

8

“Thank you.”

“Yep.” Kendle left the bunkroom. She felt no guilt about making sure that Marc got the message. If Angela needed him, he should be there. These men had no right to keep it from him.

Marc knew Quinn and the others had been waiting for the right time, but he was glad Kendle had told him before they could. It would keep him

from reacting wrong. If he showed too much concern, his men would realize it had all been an act, that he had longed to be in Safe Haven's safety the whole time. He would lose them.

Marc could almost hear the reluctance in Adrian's voice as he delivered the message. Marc was sure Angela didn't know about it. She hadn't called out to him in a while, determined not to come between him and the duty he'd accepted. He also knew it was a struggle for her, that she wanted him there more than anything. He didn't have to connect to her to know how she felt. He'd been carrying it since he left the camp gate and the weight had grown in the time they'd been apart. She hadn't wanted to send him, but there hadn't been anyone else who could handle a job like this.

Marc was still holding the paper when Quinn came to wake him. The Eagle's face tightened as he realized how Marc had gotten it.

Marc crumpled it up and set it next to him. "We'll talk about that later."

Quinn swallowed. "Updates?"

"No."

"Pack it up and head for home?"

"No."

"You aren't going to Safe Haven now?"

"Not until this job is done."

Quinn understood he had underestimated. "I'm sorry."

Marc shrugged. “Maybe you are and maybe you aren’t. What matters, is truth. We don’t have that anymore.”

“Why?” Quinn protested. “Because you want them both? I pushed to find out what her lines were.”

“Because *you don’t trust me*, Quinn, not the other way around. As soon as we rode in here, you assumed the worst.”

Quinn couldn’t deny it. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I’ll tell you that you don’t know the full story on either end. Until you do, you should butt out.”

Quinn flushed angrily, but wisely shut up as Marc stood.

“I have plans based around her, Eagle. Don’t get in the way of them. Get on board.”

“I want to. But I have to know what those plans will lead to.”

“I’m getting her ready. For someone else.”

Enlightenment came; the Eagle scowled. “You’ve changed.”

Marc grunted, lying back down for his last hour. “I’ll be your boss at some point. Make your choice now, Quinn, and save me the time of coming to you when that happens. You’re either mine or his. It can’t be both.”

Paul and Jax gave Quinn pointed looks indicating they agreed with Marc.

Quinn scowled. “How can you support him?”

Both men spoke together, “He’s the Ghost.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Marc's voice came from behind him. "They've made the choice that you'll struggle with over the next few days or weeks."

Quinn turned around "You're gonna challenge Adrian for leadership!"

Marc looked up with glowing red orbs. "Can you think of a single reason why I shouldn't?"

Quinn wanted to. The desire to serve Adrian hadn't gone away, but it had faded a lot more than he'd thought it would. In its place was a new light of leadership that glowed too brightly from the man in front of him to be ignored. "No."

Marc closed his lids, satisfied. "When the time comes, take my left. You've earned it for your service here. And her, if she wants you. I'll find someone else for him."

Hearing Marc openly planning their lives the same way Adrian had was proof for Quinn. Adrian had been sent to lead them through the aftermath. Marc would carry them into the future. He was more open, more honorable, than Adrian ever had been. "I'll be there when you need me."

Paul and Jax clapped him on the shoulder, bringing him into the light.

Quinn went gratefully. Marc was stronger than Adrian. They could put their faith in him and it wouldn't be abused. Adrian was still important, but Marc would lead them. If Adrian refused to step down, *Marc's* Eagles would remove him.

“The Mexicans have left.”

Marc glanced over from his post at the dusty window as Paul went on with the report.

“Red Stone said he can’t be away from his people anymore with the soldiers so close. He’s worried they may have sent another force south. He said it was his honor to fight alongside you.”

Marc sighed in resignation. With the Mexicans leaving, it was likely that the Indian groups would, as well. Which meant the fighters inside this base were on their own.

Marc spotted several soldiers doing recon on the base, and waved at one of them as he disappeared from the window. It was time to get ugly and there were few men better at it than him.

As the sounds of fighting outside grew louder, Marc went to their command room. “It’s time. Get them ready.”

Jax went to the radio to make the announcement.

Kendle fell in behind Marc as he went to notify other parts of the base. This was the inside of Marc’s plan and it was complicated. Kendle was worried about it. She had little faith in these men keeping him safe; she stayed close as the preparations began.

“Wider.” Marc supervised those working on the sealed doors of the mini-bunker. “We have to be able to get in there on the run. Prop it open.” Marc waved at the stacks of supplies. “Get those inside, along with the radio. When we start making calls

from here, the static will make it hard to decipher. Don't forget the antenna."

As the men began working on the last levels of his plan, Marc stayed close, making sure it was right. A mistake now was likely to get them all killed. "They'll think we're trapped. Make it look that way."

Outside the base, the enemy was moving into position. No longer forced to defend their flank from the Indians and Mexicans, the soldiers could now concentrate on a frontal assault. These troops were tired, cold, and bloody. They wanted to be in the base. Little would stop them. Marc was counting on it. "Now!"

The ground in front of the base shook as the charges went off, rattling items and knocking over haphazardly stacked boxes.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The horrific sound continued until all the explosives around the base had been blown.

Dust, debris, and dirt flew through the air. Everyone waited for it to settle down to determine how much protective damage they'd done. In the uneasy silence, they could hear the soldiers outside.

"Move in! Fire 'em up!"

The building rumbled as the tank came closer.

Marc waved Paul and Jax to the other window. "Just like we practiced."

Paul handed Jax the box, gaze glued to the tank. "Ten."

Jax took his place proudly. "Copy, ten."

The Eagles adjusted the aim as Marc and the others drew fire away from them with peppering shots that pissed men off with nicks and cuts. Their body armor was hard to get through, but Marc's rifle did damage and kept the men on Paul's side pinned down.

Pop! Pop! pop!

Grinddd! The tank rolled over a concreted truck meant to slow it.

Marc made the call. "Now."

Jax hit the button; the huge magnet they'd rigged to the top of the base descended on the tank.

"It's got them!" Paul shouted. "We've got..." Paul slid to the floor, caught by sniper's luck.

Jax caught him in shock.

Marc shoved them both under the window line as that side of the wall exploded.

"Get the other one!" Marc yanked Jax away from the incoming fire. He shoved the stunned Eagle toward Kendle's flank and went back to firing. Paul's body would have to stay where it was.

"We have a breach! Breach in command! The soldiers are inside!"

Marc grabbed the radio from Quinn. "Stand your posts! That's an order!" Marc pointed at the last stick of dynamite. "Close the gap."

Quinn wasn't sure where to aim.

Marc pointed to where ropes were being shot for the invasion. "Bring it down on them."

Quinn saw what he meant and tossed the lit stick with a harsh sneer. "Get out of our base!"

Kablammm!

Marc was thrown to the floor and showered with sharp, hot debris. Behind him, the wall began to collapse.

“That’s it! Get out!” Marc shoved himself and Kendle toward the door. As they fled, he hit the switch taped to the wall and took off running.

Boom!

The concussion from the blast knocked Marc down the hall and sent him into the other bodies that had dropped at the sound, not sure where to go.

“Get in the stairwell!” Marc kept them moving, glancing back to confirm that their command center was now a pile of smoldering rubble.

He’d expected the soldiers to try punching through wherever the command room was and he’d prepared for it, but now, they were down to the last tricks that he had up his sleeve. They would hold out in the bottom floors for a few days more if luck was with them, but after that, this base would once again be government property.

Chapter Twenty-Two
Crossed Lines
Near Borden Springs, Alabama
August 11th

1

“**P**lease...” Tracy closed her eyes as Charlie’s lips brushed her ear. Flames scorched her skin. “Please.”

Charlie paused, not sure what she meant. “Should I stop?”

A deep, painful sigh echoed from her. “No.”

Charlie went back to the massage. She’d made herself sore again and he’d offered a massage before she hit the showers. Fully clothed, but protected by the camper door, they were both enjoying the contact. The urge to do more was strong, but the teenager resisted, sticking to his plans. “You smell good.”

Tracy shivered at the tone, at the feel of him touching her. She couldn’t stop the thoughts, but she did keep her hands at her sides. *We’re not doing anything wrong. We’re not doing...*

Charlie’s warm hand slipped to her neck in a telling caress that sent a chill of need down her spine. “Please.”

Charlie paused again, more sure of her tone this time. “Please stop tempting you?”

“You know you do. It’s intentional, to determine what works and what doesn’t, right?”

Charlie didn’t deny it. Instead, he moved away from her, to their mutual disappointment.

Tracy regretted denying him, but wouldn’t ask him to continue.

Charlie perched on the bench, staring at her. “Why did you tell Billy no last night when he came to your tent?”

Tracy flushed. She’d thought Charlie was close, but hadn’t been sure. Which meant he’d heard what she did afterwards too.

Charlie’s cheeks flushed. “I left after the first moan. I didn’t watch.”

Surprised, Tracy leaned against the camper wall. Would this young man always be able to give her that feeling of respect?

“Yes. My word on it.”

Tracy’s heart melted a bit more. She turned away to keep from caving. He was still waiting on an answer from her and she was tired of trying to hide what she wanted.

“Then don’t. No one will stand in our way.”

“It isn’t just about us. I’ll lose my place on her team.”

“No, you won’t.”

Tracy didn’t turn around. “I don’t like it when you threaten your mom. She doesn’t need that right now.”

Charlie snorted. “She gave me permission a while ago, Tracy. I’ve waited because of you.”

Tracy spun around to catch his face with the lie on it, and found the truth. “She didn’t...”

“She knows I’m sure or I wouldn’t have brought it to her.”

Tracy still hesitated. “October isn’t so far away...”

Charlie took the steps that brought them face-to-face. “If we lose the battle, *October will never come for us.*”

That hurt. It stunned her with the sense of need and urgent regret that Tracy didn’t have the strength to fight anymore. “Why me? The truth.”

“Because I love you.” Charlie’s hand went behind her neck to gently pull her closer. “And because I saw us, in the future. We make pretty babies.”

Charlie caught her gasp with his mouth.

2

Bridget waited as Neil and Jeremy came around the edge of the last garden truck. She slid in front of them with a sunny disposition. “Good morning!”

Both men sent the same to her and continued on their way. They’d both decided she wasn’t worth the risk of losing Samantha.

Bridget quickly slid into Neil’s personal space and planted a soft kiss on his mouth. “Mm... Thank you for last night.”

Neil had frozen. Before he could respond, Bridget pranced away, leaving him in complete confusion. He'd been on duty last night. He would get to sleep by Samantha tonight when the sun went down. What the hell?

Jeremy peered at Neil's face and knew something wasn't right. He also knew the Eagles who had witnessed it wouldn't think so. They would assume Neil now had two women and the problems would come from that. The camp was tolerating Samantha's choice, but if he and Neil broke out of the routine she'd set up, it would disturb the camp.

"What do I do now?" Neil was in shock. He had no idea how to keep this fire from spreading.

Jeremy spotted a furious woman staring at them from the garden truck. "I don't know, but it better be good. Here comes Samantha."

Both men turned to find Sam prowling toward them with an evil expression. Instead of stopping, she strode by them without a word.

The two confused men followed, not sure what was going on.

"If you want her, either of you, stop me now!" Sam growled.

Neither man interfered, understanding that Bridget was about to discover the penalty for crossing this line.

"Hey, Heart Ass!"

Samantha's voice was a gravelly threat that drew instant attention from the Eagles.

Bridget, who loved the nickname she'd been given, turned with a sweet expression, all set to turn down another offer of a date because she was dating Neil.

Slap! Samantha followed it with a harsh kick to the stomach before Bridget could recover.

“Fight! Fight!” the camp around them chanted, drawing others.

The two women weren't fighting. Bridget was trying to stay conscious while Samantha took out her anger on any exposed body part that she could reach.

Kenn shook his head. “Better get in there. Bosses won't like this.”

Neither man reacted. Samantha was delivering a series of punishing, but not deadly hits, and they weren't about to draw her ire.

“Break it up!”

“Stop it!”

Kenn and Adrian got the two women apart before Bridget could be seriously hurt, but Samantha wasn't finished. She lunged from Kenn's weak hold and slammed her head into Bridget's chin. “Stay away from them!”

Bridget slowly sank to the ground without answering. It was clear that she couldn't.

Samantha turned to Neil with chips of crimson ice. “The next time she touches you against your will, I'll kill her.”

Neil grinned, flooded with heat. “Okay by me. I only want you.”

“Same here.” Jeremy sighed. “But we’re trading off tonight and tomorrow. I can’t handle her when she gets like this.”

“Sweet!” Neil had no trouble with being a little rough to please her. He knew the differences now in pain for training, pain for pleasure, and pain just to cause pain. Samantha’s needs were helping him learn those lines clearly.

Jeremy left Neil to deal with the chaos and went to the mess. He hadn’t slept well with all the tossing and turning that Samantha now did. Besides the stunning moments when she turned to him in the night, Jeremy loved being able to look over and check on her, but he hadn’t honestly adjusted to this setup. He didn’t hate Neil, just the circumstances in which they’d been brought together. All of them deserved happiness and the time to find it, but that wasn’t going to happen unless Safe Haven drove the government back. The time to fight or die was almost here and there was nowhere else he wanted to be than with Samantha when it all happened.

It also didn’t hurt that Neil was able to carry half of the load. Samantha was high maintenance. Jeremy hadn’t realized it before, though he should have. She and Neil were a better match, and there were times when he felt like an outsider in their relationship. Samantha often told him he was the reason she still had hope for the future, but Jeremy didn’t know if he believed that or not. For now, it was enough to stay close to her, but if they won, he knew he would have to decide if he wanted to spend

the rest of his life this way. If that was a few more weeks or months, he didn't want to change anything. If it was decades, he wanted Samantha to himself.

3

“Camper crew is pulling in, Boss.”

“Copy.” Angela went that way tiredly. She was keeping them next to natural springs now, so their water tankers were staying full, but the camp had begun to grumble about still being in tents. She'd sent out a team to bring in a load of campers. They could use the materials if they were pinned down. The RVs wouldn't stop much in the way of bullets, but they could be reinforced. She'd worried the whole time the crew had been gone though. It was good to find her men coming from the shiny new motor homes with jokes instead of wounds. She wasn't sure, but she thought maybe the team had been protected by one of the camps around them.

The men Marc had sent were hard fighters who preferred to keep their own rules, but they stayed nearby to deflect anyone coming in with bad intentions. Whatever else Marc had done while away, he'd gathered a loyal crew. They were getting daily reports of the fighting now, of the wounds Marc was inflicting on their enemy, but they were also hearing of their own fallen comrades, like Paul. The mood of the camp was somber. As the fighting

at the Little Rock base intensified, the mood grew worse.

Angela didn't stay to talk to the camper team. She'd just wanted to see that they were okay. She went toward the mess. The lunch meal was being served and everyone was enjoying the last harvest from the garden. Angela personally thought the fresh food was one of the reasons the camp had accepted Samantha's secrets so easily. It was a common sight now to find the storm tracker entertaining the children with dust whirls in her downtime. They didn't know she was also practicing nightly with Neil and Jeremy. Sam would be a powerful force when the fight made it to their gates.

Angela's mind went to the last transmission they'd gotten from the base. There had been updates and the sounds of distant dying, but no message from Marc.

Heated tingles went over her skin. That feeling was restless, lonely, and on the edge of doing something stupid. Adrian was staring at her. Angela sighed, moving that way. Time to play her role again.

Instead of going to sit with her group of Eagles like usual, she took her tray to the rear table, causing the focus of the camp to shift. "Mind if I join you?"

Adrian smiled; everyone around them noticed. "Always welcome."

Doug and Neil added their agreement. Angela didn't mention Samantha's fight or the fact that

Bridget was still in the medical tent and Samantha was napping peacefully. “The camp could use a tension release. Maybe you two should have a fight.”

Doug approved right away. “We were trying to figure something out for entertainment.”

“I’m in if you are. Who’s gonna win?” Neil got excited without knowing why he was reacting so quickly to the suggestion. Maybe it was the way Sam had claimed him so completely.

Doug flexed his muscles menacingly and gave the cop a nasty glare. “You take it. About time she knows you’re the more dangerous of the two.”

Angela listened mentally, catching flashes of acceptance and reluctance to restart the rivalry with Jeremy.

Doug offered a solution. “Run into me when I come through with my coffee.”

Neil raised a brow that made the giant shrug as he stood up. “Wouldn’t get mad over something cold, would I?”

Adrian waited until both men were out of earshot and then turned to her. “They’re gone. What’s up?”

“Can’t a girl sit at your table without something being wrong?”

“Lonely?”

Her eyes went to the left. “No.”

He leaned forward, catching a hint of vanilla. “Liar.”

She stiffened, but relaxed just as quickly. “Yes, I am.”

“You clumsy fool!” Doug’s words boomed through the mess, drawing instant attention from everyone.

“Sorry, man, but you were in the way.” Neil sounded anything but sorry.

“Look at me vest!” Doug’s growled response was genuine to Angela’s ears.

The two men suddenly began swinging; people ran toward them. When security looked their way, Adrian shook his head. The Eagles stayed at their posts.

Angela took the moment to study the camp for trouble.

Adrian studied her.

The fight was ugly and drew a few dozen people from around the mess, creating a circle of nearly sixty.

Drawn from her nap, Samantha was now among them.

Neil was taking a lot of hits, but he was also delivering some nasty punches and drawing blood.

Doug was already out of breath. Neil’s graceful hits were wearing him out.

Samantha worried needlessly over Neil as he beat on the giant in the now stained and bloody vest.

“We done?” Doug asked from the ground.

Neil grunted, full of energy and fire that he hadn’t been aware of needing a release for.

Kyle motioned Kenn forward.

“I challenge you!” Neil spat at the Marine.

Kenn advanced warily. He’d also noticed that Neil was hot. He planned to stay out of reach until the trooper settled down.

Neil jumped, high kick landing against Kenn’s shoulder. From there, it got mean. He swung repeatedly.

Kenn was only able to keep his feet. He was accepted again, but not enough to fight back like he wanted to, so the Marine took one for the team. It was something he couldn’t do before.

Kyle jerked Neil away as Kenn went down again, and the cop swung on him, out of control.

Kyle staggered, shaking his head to clear the stars from Neil’s bloody fist. “I’m on point, Asshat! Pick someone else!”

Before Neil could sweep the area, Seth came into the circle. “How about a fair fight?” Seth didn’t wait; he just started swinging.

“Why did you choose fighting?” Adrian was sure of the answer, but he wanted an excuse to maintain eye contact.

Angela felt more of his pull than she wanted to. She was still craving it like everyone else here. “Besides reminding the camp how dangerous you men are, I needed to break the tension. Physical contact used to cover that, but with your men, this is the next best thing.”

Adrian studied her red face. “I assume that also goes for me?”

Angela's voice carried a slight edge. "I know you're not doing without. I just thought you'd want the rush since you'll be cleared for full duty soon. Been a while, right? You wouldn't want to get rusty."

He stood up, flooded with rage. Having her setting things up to ensure his happiness was almost too much. "Excuse me."

Angela followed him to the people-ring that now included the new doctor. He had been brought to the patients who couldn't come to him. Seth was nearly unconscious. The two men next to him didn't look better.

"I challenge you!"

Neil spun to meet his next target, but froze when he saw it was Adrian. The fire dimmed a bit, dampened by respect. "Not you."

Adrian handed his gun belts to Angela. "Why not? You need someone to knock you down. That's still a part of my job."

Neil's face darkened at the words, anger flaring.

Adrian felt the thrill of the fight rising. Neil was a worthy opponent. She'd been right.

Angela took a place near Samantha as the two men circled each other. Instead of studying Adrian like the witch wanted to, Angela casually touched Samantha's elbow and witnessed it through her mind.

Sam tensed at the first hit, already sure who would win despite Neil's flare of temper. Adrian was rock hard again. The trooper's hits glanced off

flesh that didn't respond. When Neil went to the ground, she flinched at the spray of blood.

Neil landed a hit to Adrian's jaw that rocked him on his heels, but when Adrian fired back, the trooper hit the dirt again.

"Had enough?"

Neil roared in anger, driving into Adrian's gut. They went down in a tangle of swinging limbs. They rolled in the dirt, causing people to jump aside to avoid being knocked over.

They leapt to their feet at the same time; Neil's stance was rougher.

"You're getting tired." Neil didn't respond, so Adrian provoked him. "Again, then."

Neil rushed him.

Adrian used the man's momentum to flip the trooper over his shoulder.

Neil grunted in pain at the hard landing, not moving.

Samantha was at his side before the doctor. "You okay?"

Neil tried to clear the chirping and managed a rueful grimace. "I'm not mad at her anymore."

"Well, I am. You just added to it." Sam snorted as she helped him to his feet. "Neil's due on a run now."

Adrian had been watching Angela. He recognized her pride at the sight of Neil and Samantha leaving together.

“I’m actually smirking over Bridget’s thoughts. She was sure Neil would get in trouble for the kiss. Instead, she did.”

“That’s what this was about.”

Angela sat down instead of healing his minor cuts and scrapes like she wanted to. “It had many benefits.”

Her voice sounded too much like his when one of the Eagles asked how he’d known to do something. She flushed. He’d already returned so much of the old Angela. *What can I do for him?*

“You’re already doing it.” He indicated the quiet, but intense conversation Samantha and Neil were having as they got out of sight. “They’re a good match.”

“So is the other one she chose. Both men still want her to themselves.”

“Yes. It may happen, but the odds are going down.”

“She’s been lonely, too.”

Angela flushed as he brought the subject back to the previous pause.

“I can schedule you private lessons, like we were doing before. I’m clearly recovered enough.”

Her head snapped up at the word. “Private?”

“However you’re comfortable.”

Angela tried to resist his pull and failed. “Okay.”

He was surprised; it showed in his face.

Angela stood up before she could take it back. “I’ll be on rounds.”

Adrian watched her walk away, thinking Marc wouldn't have her to himself long. She had room in her heart for others.

Angela turned, catching the thought, but before she could yell, time began to slide and she was stuck in a slow motion disaster.

The moldy telephone pole teetered heavily, power lines snapping up, knocking over boxes and tables, and then the cars that were parked over the lines.

Angela shoved herself toward Adrian, feeling like her body weighed a ton. She tried to shout, but wasn't sure if she actually did.

Riiiipppp!

Twisting metal groaned...and the final wire holding the pole broke with a loud snap.

Angela dove into Adrian, lifting them slightly into the air with the force of her panic.

The lethal power cable missed them with inches to spare as it snapped by, sharp and hungry. It severed the canopy and then the top of the tree that it was secured to. The pole and the tree crashed through the side of the mess where Adrian had been sitting, splintering the picnic table.

They landed hard, with her on his chest.

Adrian gasped for air.

“Easy, be still.” Her voice calmed him. He felt the heat of her hand over his chest. The pain eased, faded...

Angela helped him up as panicking, yelling camp members surrounded them, along with

grateful Eagles who hadn't been close enough to help. She let herself be swallowed by the crowd, trembling. If she had ignored his pain and sat at her usual table, none of this would have happened, except for the pole. He'd be dead now.

Adrian let the doctor and people check him out, but shrugged off those who wanted to take him to the medical tent. "I'm okay. Thanks to *Angie*."

His eyes found hers in the rear of the concerned crowd for a brief moment of intense gratitude. Then she was gone and he was forced to turn his attention back to calming the herd. "It's okay. Pole finally gave, that's all. I'm fine. Let's get this cleaned up."

4

Conner ducked into the pharmacy tent as the afternoon sun began to sink, confident that he wouldn't be missed. His next class wasn't for an hour and he needed some time with Tonya.

"What do you want?"

Conner sank into Kenn's chair to stare up at her arrogantly. "Your help."

It was like looking and listening to Adrian, except *that* man would never say those words to her.

"With what?" Tonya asked when she could talk normally. Her one moment with Adrian was something she would never forget.

"Something bad, of course."

Tonya stopped dusting the shelves, wondering if this was a test. "What do you want me to do?"

“Lie. You can do that, right?”

Tonya grimaced absently. “I’m female. I can lie to anyone. What do you want me to say, and to whom?”

Conner grinned wider. “Tell Adrian that Angela needs him to stay closer, that being without a man is hurting her.”

Tonya stared in surprise. “Why would I do that?”

Conner’s eyes lit up with the red glow that the descendants were becoming known for in camp when they were upset or hungry. “I’ll be the friend you need.”

“I have friends.” Tonya didn’t get irate like she might have done in the past. “I won’t mess that up.”

“Because of the baby.”

Tonya tensed. “Why hasn’t anyone told Kenn what I’m hiding?”

“You’ve been forgiven, I assume.” Conner shrugged. “Or maybe they know that if you fall, you take Kenn with you.”

“Maybe.” She wasn’t offended. Her history here was common knowledge. “So tell me why I should risk all that.”

“You won’t be.” Kenn came through the flap. He gave Conner a polite nod. “I’ll work on her. Go away before your dad finds out you were here.”

Conner quickly ducked out of the tent.

“No.” Tonya rounded on Kenn angrily. “Whatever you’ve got going on with that boy, stop it now! You’ll screw us up.”

Kenn calmly took her by the arm and led her over to the chairs. “These people want the old Adrian back. There’s only one way it will happen.”

Kenn helped her get comfortable, ignoring her worried looks. He’d known for a while now about the baby, but he hadn’t said anything. “When he came in here, Conner was hoping you’d run him off. He doesn’t want to hurt the dream, but he needs his father. He thinks Angela is the key to that. He plans to throw them together every chance he gets.”

“Why would you help him?” Tonya demanded, keeping her voice down. “You’ll lose everything you’ve worked for.”

Kenn’s tone was bitter. “No, I won’t. She wants him, too. I saw it with Marc and I’m sure. She’s hiding it.”

“You’ve found a way to finally get rid of Marc!”

Kenn shrugged, not feeling that old rage as much anymore. “I’ll always hate Marc, but he doesn’t matter. She and Adrian together, leading this camp, is what the sheep want...and it’s killing Adrian on both duty and personal levels. Conner and I have chosen to end both of those pains.”

Tonya stifled a moan as his big hands settled onto her calves and began rubbing. “She can’t be forced into anything.”

Kenn knew that wasn’t true, but he didn’t say so. “It’s not force. She’ll do the same thing that Samantha is, if Adrian gets enough time alone with her.”

“Crazy.” Tonya snorted. “I have no idea how Sam is managing to keep her men from killing each other.”

“She’ll be Angela’s XO when it’s all settled.”

Kenn had explained to Tonya that all the teams went through shake-ups as they reached, or failed, levels, and that the first chain of order on a team was rarely the one that stuck. The redhead wasn’t jealous of it. XO was a hard slot to fill. “How am I supposed to do this without her knowing?”

Kenn pressed a kiss to Tonya’s shoulder. “Don’t even think about it. Just walk by him and throw one of your old, snotty comments. That’s it.”

Tonya groaned. “Yeah, the lies starting up again. She doesn’t need him or anyone else.”

“Not true.” Kenn’s hand slid over her wrist to rest on her stomach. “She’s keeping secrets too. In a while, she won’t be able to hide them either.”

Tonya forced away the fear, trying to keep up and absorb that he knew, but didn’t appear angry that she hadn’t told him. “You don’t think Marc is coming back.”

“No, I don’t. If he survives the battle at the base, he’ll keep the new woman he has and leave Angela in peace. He knows the truth too.”

“And you’re sure there won’t be any blow back?”

Kenn sighed, unable to lie to her. “There will be, if Marc returns, but I’ll take it. Adrian won’t even remember your part, it’s so small.”

Wanting to keep the peace, Tonya agreed uneasily. “When should I do it?”

5

As Conner left the pharmacy tent, he felt the danger and quickly matched it to the lone female moving through the perimeter shadows. Where was Jennifer going while sending off vibes like that?

Conner tailed her from a good distance while trying to keep his thoughts on classes and preparations that had become a part of daily life in Safe Haven. He watched Jennifer climb into one of the now empty garden trucks and carefully edged closer. Before he could peer around the side, she came right back out and caught him.

Jennifer knew what was going on. “If you tell on me before I get to do it, we’re enemies forever.”

Conner flinched mentally at the hostile tone, trying to read her thoughts, her plans. “Are you going to kill her?”

“No.” Jennifer closed the truck door. “I want to be sure she spends the rest of her life terrified of me and sorry for what she did.”

Conner felt the same way, but he also knew the peace in camp was fragile. “Angela won’t like it.”

Jennifer didn’t think that was true, but she wasn’t about to ask for permission. “I need this.”

“You’d risk our whole camp for payback?”

Jennifer glanced around, scanning thoughts and the general mood. “They know what she did. Lilly’s bragged about it enough.”

“But if you use your gifts against the camp...”

Jennifer moved by him calmly. “She isn’t one of the camp. She’s an enemy in sheep’s clothing and I want her known for it. I’m healed enough to deliver justice for my dead son.”

Conner couldn’t argue that point, but he was still torn. His heart only accepted violence if there was no other way.

“If you have an idea that might satisfy me, I’ll listen to you.”

Conner knew he was one of the few people here that Jennifer actually respected, liked, and he made his choice based on that. “I’m gonna talk to someone that I trust and ask what they think about having Lilly and Grace banished for hurting you.”

Jennifer didn’t care about later, just this moment that she’d been waiting so patiently for. “Remember what I said, Conner. I don’t want you as an enemy and you don’t want me on that side of your life.”

Conner quickly went to find Adrian.

Aware that she would only have a few minutes, Jennifer took off running, no longer worrying about being seen or followed. *I will have this!*

6

Lilly and Grace had settled into camp life. They were taking classes, pulling their weight, and even

had their hopes set on a few of the Eagles despite not being mate material because they couldn't have children. These two females knew that not all of the males here wanted that type of future, including some of the main men, and they hoped to take advantage of it.

The goals of furthering the greater good weren't a part of their mindset yet, but enough time in Safe Haven was likely to change anyone who was riding the fence on good and evil. The camp members brought people in and helped them get used to the new ways. At some point, the need to gain power faded. Except with these two.

It hadn't escaped the camp's attention that they'd hurt Jennifer. It made the two former slaves outcasts in certain groups, though the women had failed to notice it. The camp wasn't punishment-oriented, but they were waiting for Jennifer's reaction. It had been a month since her baby had been forced out early and then killed in the explosion. After so long, a lot of the camp assumed Jennifer was keeping the peace and respected her for it. They liked Lilly and Grace even less. When these people saw Jennifer running by the mess with a determined glaze of hatred over her face, many of them sensed what was coming and followed.

Jennifer was standing there when Lilly and Grace came from the training tent. Both former slaves were covered in sweat and confidence. She would destroy that. "Hey, baby-killer!"

Lilly and Grace spun around automatically, appearing to answer the new name that would become a camp favorite from this moment on.

Lilly understood first and immediately stepped forward. “You wanna fight, bitch? Let’s go!”

“I want you dead. Your blood all over me will be a good start.”

Lilly hesitated.

Jennifer swung as hard as she could.

The small pot cracked against Lilly’s shoulder, sending her to the ground amid a cloud of ash. Jennifer didn’t know if the small pile she’d taken from the destroyed camper was indeed her son, but it hadn’t mattered when she’d collected it, nor any of the times she had secretly cried over it. She had to have something.

The charred bits sprayed over both of the former slaves, clinging to their sweaty skin like tight clothing. They went from eager and arrogant to looking like they’d come from a heart-breaking funeral, in one blow.

Jennifer’s voice was like the dead. “You caused it. Now you carry it.”

Jennifer left them and the crowd with tears of agony streaming down her face.

Those who witnessed the tears instantly forgave her. Those who didn’t see her crying were shocked by the method of delivery, but they couldn’t deny that it had also been appropriate. Lilly had punched Jennifer in the stomach while Grace held her arms. In the chaos of that night, not even the Eagles had

witnessed it. The two former slaves had bragged, though, and given themselves away.

The dazed women were taken to the doctor and released a bit later, but no one called for Jennifer to be punished. They understood she already had been.

7

“She’s not done. That was just her first plan. If it won’t work, she will kill them and get banished.”

“You don’t know Kyle well.” Adrian didn’t go to check on the ruckus like he still felt the urge to do. “He’d never let her be hurt again.”

“And what about those two women? She’ll drive them out of here.”

“Probably for the best. She’s the better deal of the three.”

“That’s not right!”

Adrian waved a hand at the other chair. “Let me explain a couple things about justice and fixing the horrors in someone’s heart.”

Eager for the lesson, Conner took the seat and waited. He wasn’t spending a lot of time with his dad. There was a good reason for that, but he wanted these moments as much as he wanted his mother when the wind blew at night.

“When someone does you a wrong, it festers. When someone betrays you, it’s an ugly knot of infection that grows, but when someone kills something you love, darkness takes over the soul.”

Adrian felt Angela scan the tent to verify his safety and swallowed the need to respond. He stayed focused on his son. “Humans are meant to live in the light, to be filled with it. We find it hard to fight the slaps and stabs that come from life.” Adrian gave him a pointed look. “Like how you’re still feeling, over failing the kids.”

Conner’s guilt washed over him in waves as Adrian leaned forward. He hadn’t been sure he would get the chance to help his son, though he’d aided so many others here. “That never goes away. You learn to live with it.”

“How?” Conner questioned brokenly. “How?”

Adrian placed a hand on his son’s wrist. “You atone. The camp will tell you it wasn’t your fault, to let it go, but they don’t understand how we’re made. Leaders take these duties into ourselves and each failure destroys a bit of our light. The only thing that has ever worked for me has been to spread the good and help those who either can’t, or won’t, help themselves.” Adrian leaned back. “As your father, I agree with the camp. You did nothing wrong. You should be proud.” Adrian held up a hand to stop the coming protest. “I know. They don’t understand. As the leader of Safe Haven, I carried that weight in my heart every day. You need to ease the pain and push away the darkness. Helping others heals our wounds.”

“I’ve tried, a little.”

“With Jennifer.”

“Yes, but it didn’t matter.”

“Not true. You bought her more time, and that is worth more than anything else you could have done for her. Without those extra days, she might have lost both babies.”

Conner felt the light trying to push in and was able to let it this time. He hadn't thought of it that way. He'd only felt the errors.

“There are a lot of people here who need the kind of help you can give. Most of them are kids. The war left more orphans than this country has ever had.”

Conner considered it. He definitely liked kids better than adults, but he wasn't sure about coming to care for them again just to lose them when the soldiers arrived.

“When that happens, you'll get them out. She'll put that job straight into your hands if you want it. Angela already knows you're capable and that you're smart. She needs to know that you want it.”

“I do, but I don't. It's why I'm hanging back. I can't go through it again if they die.”

“You've been trying to recover, but on your own, that's almost impossible.”

Conner dropped his head. “I don't have anyone I'm close to here.”

“Because you're afraid of losing them, afraid of the pain that comes with failing them, the guilt.”

“I can't carry anymore yet. I'm tired.”

“You need someone you can relate to and feel a personal bond with. Just one to start, and go from there.”

Conner sighed. “I can’t do that the way I need to. I like my friendship with Charlie, but he has Tracy. Jennifer’s cool, but she has Kyle. When I spend time around them, I don’t feel connected.”

“What about more than friendship? Is there someone who...” Adrian didn’t have to finish the question. He stared in surprised concern at the image in Conner’s mind. “That’s not what I expected.”

“Yeah. That makes two of us.”

Adrian spent a moment considering what he’d just learned, then gave the nervous boy a bit of hope. “By the time this is all over, that might be possible.”

“And until then, we help people?”

“Yes. Use the time to build a foundation here, and when she’s ready, you will be too.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Smurf Balls

1

Evenings in Safe Haven had changed.

Before they'd found out the government was coming, it had been a peaceful time for relaxing. Now, it was hundreds of souls coming together in defiance of the darkness. Classes continued into the night instead of stopping at mess. Training sessions went on until the later hours for those without a shift waiting. If they lost the battle, some of these survivors would continue to be just that.

Angela was encouraged by it. She was also relieved that their numbers had evened off. Everyone had been accounted for last night; it was the first time since Marc left.

Angela paused by the area that Doug was in charge of, watching him direct the females of her team on how to care for themselves if they got cut off from their group during the battle.

“Once the water is boiling, pour it into the thermos, over the beans and dehydrated meat. Seal it up and put it in your backpack. The more you put around it and cover it, the longer your food will cook. It will be insulated.”

“That can’t work.” Crista moved closer. “Prove that it works.”

Doug picked up the other thermos on the table and twisted the lid. The scent of fresh food wafted over the curious women. “It keeps cooking, so you can use this method on a meal of any size. All you have to do is insulate an airtight container and make sure the water is at full boil. For shorter cooking, the water can be starting to boil, but the food won’t be as soft or as hot.” Doug began pouring beans and meat from the thermos into small cups. “Try it.”

The women did reluctantly. They knew how to cook. They’d been raised on it, most of them, and the idea that they could have boiled the water and left it alone was a strange mystery to be tried with a braced mindset.

Angela didn’t hang around to wait on the results. She’d already shared that moment with Kyle’s team. She hadn’t known it either. Few of America’s modern generation had.

The next training area also dealt with food. The refugees of the war would eventually starve or freeze without this knowledge. The government hadn’t taught it. In fact, it had been ridiculed. Those people weren’t around to say they were sorry, but it was still hurting all of them. Society needed those absent skills, the missing parts of the great American herd.

“If you find a big stash of food, you can’t carry it all. Even if you could, it would quickly go bad. These machines are dehydrators and vacuum

sealers. This is the best way, next to freeze drying, which is something we can't do easily anymore. We're going to play with these, gentleman. I don't want to hear that it's women's work. You *will* bag your own food for the battle and keep it on hand." Neil was giving his team the class, but his firm words were mostly for the two-dozen camp men also in attendance. "However, if there is no machine or power source around, you can still prepare your food. Use fire."

Neil pointed at the small oven he'd made from cardboard and tape. "I know it doesn't look like much, but it works. There are many ways to do it, but this was the style I used with my dad on camping trips. He taught me, and now, I'm passing it on to you."

Neil uncovered a cardboard box that resembled a small oven, even down to the SH logo in the corner. "Place the foil over all the surface areas. Use the top to draw the light from the sun with the foil, and leave the flap open a crack. We used to be able to do this on baking sheets in our ovens, but now, we'll use the sun. It never needs fuel tabs, but it can still burn you, so be careful when you cook using it tomorrow. Let's start building your own now."

Angela wanted to do her own and try it, but there were more important things waiting for her. She left after delivering an approving nod to the teacher.

"Let's dump the garbage for the ants..."

Angela turned to find Charlie and Conner carrying the bags toward the gate. She sent a quick motion for Zack to go with them. The boys liked to do the work because it gave them a chance to test her theories, but they were also a bit more reckless than she cared for. Also, Charlie's tone was off. She would catch him later and ask if he needed to talk. The time he was spending with Tracy had to be sending his hormones into a tailspin.

Angela studied the anthills that were still staying on the west side of camp, then the fires of the groups around them. Two more had come, bringing their totals up to nine other small societies revolving around the light of this one. She'd made it clear that the ants were to be left alone, and Kenn was having the patrols make sure, but she thought maybe the ants were in danger anyway.

“We could shield them.”

Angela shrugged at Jennifer's comment, thinking the young mother appeared a lot more at peace now. “Not unless we have to. There are bigger things to cover.”

Jennifer sighed, understanding. She, too, liked the idea of having an animal army, even if it was only giant insects.

Angela placed a hand on the teenager's arm; the shield above them rippled with purple and orange.

Angela let go. “I'm sorry.”

Jennifer knew why she was getting the apology, but she didn't accept it.

“I don’t blame you. I have a beautiful daughter because of what you did for us. Let that guilt go.”

Angela didn’t answer. Those who weren’t leaders didn’t understand that you never let it go. It got buried so that the ghost of it could reappear in your dreams.

“If they saw the ants helping, the outsiders might leave them alone.”

Angela frowned at the wording, but didn’t correct Jennifer. Each of the groups around theirs had different rules and laws, different customs. It was America, so there was supposed to be differences, but she didn’t like it. She also didn’t have the manpower to try integrating any of them at this point; she had left them under their own care. Marc had known what he was doing by sending the people here. She believed that. “I’m still not sure how they’ll help. I just know they will.”

Jennifer stared at the insects thoughtfully. When she spoke, she sounded like a determined XO. “I’ll come up with something.” The teenager drifted toward Charlie and Conner while writing it in her book.

Jennifer was carrying a lot of hate and darkness, but the brain inside those prisons was a gift that Angela intended to use. Kyle may not realize how smart his chosen mate was, but she and Adrian were clear on it. Jennifer had done what they had, what their kind was forbidden to do. It had made her powerful in a number of ways.

Angela pushed away the longing. Their gifts would be unstoppable when the soldiers arrived. She would get her fill of lifeforces and then some.

2

The sight of Kenn storming through the camp wasn't anything new. Neither were the blue hands or the blue clothes that refused to be washed of the stains. It also wasn't unusual to see him with a blue face. The number of balloons that popped when he worked in the supply trucks was astronomical.

Kenn stomped into the mess where only a few of the happily eating campers looked up. When the others did, they swept the signs of his ordeals and then glanced away before laughter could escape.

As he stood before them now, there was a feeling of something coming. People walking by began stopping to observe.

Kenn glanced around, big fists clenched. As he glared, the conversations stopped and more people took notice.

Angela and Samantha, doing rounds before eating, also paused nearby.

"I'm sorry."

All of them were shocked.

Kenn's next words added to that feeling.

"I am. I haven't been that way in a while now and I'm making amends and helping, and damn it, can you please turn my piss back to normal? I almost shit myself."

Laughter, thick and needed, rolled over the camp.

Angela's was the only one missing. Samantha was still chuckling as she caught up to the boss.

Kenn glared at the happy crowd. "Can I be forgiven now?"

"I think I'm done." Allan chuckled. "What about you, Jeremy?"

Jeremy grinned wider. "Yeah, I guess we've gotten our money's worth."

Kenn hadn't expected it to be Eagles. He scowled angrily, but didn't shout at them like he wanted to.

"What do I need to do to get rid of the color?"

Zack cackled from behind him. "It'll wear off in a few days if no one doses you again. It was Methylene Blue."

"Three of you?!"

More laughter spilled out.

Zack shook his head. "No, not exactly. Seth and I turned you blue on the outside. Daryl helped too. Kyle did the honor of your insides."

"I did the water bucket." Peggy smiled. "Almost used cow piss, but the animals aren't friendly these days."

Snickers came and then more voices confessed.

Joseph held up a hand. "I put the oatmeal in your shoes."

Jeff snickered. "I switched your rolls of toilet paper for cotton balls glued together."

Kenn gaped. They'd all been against him.

“I did the vomit trip.” Tracy laughed from a rear table. “With some help.”

“Why would you all do that?” Kenn was baffled as they cackled at him.

“Because I asked them too.”

Kenn’s stomach dropped. *I should have known.*

“Yes, you should have. I told you that you’d pay.”

Charlie was leaning against the mess truck in arrogant triumph. It instantly reminded everyone of his absent father.

Kenn waited, bracing to be struck from his place again.

“I don’t want that now.” Charlie was openly reading his mind. “But there is something you have to do.”

“What?” Kenn could feel the trap, but he couldn’t determine from which direction it was coming.

“I need a running target for my team practices at night. You’re it.”

When Kenn started to protest, Charlie turned from the approving mess with a light warning. “Unless you’d rather keep pissing blue. Did you know you were the one who collected the Methylene? Ironic, huh? We’re gonna start calling you Smurf-balls.”

Kenn heaved a resigned grunt as the laughing resumed. “One running target, check.”

“It’s getting worse here. We can’t recover the bodies or try to dig for survivors. They’re attacking at all hours, returning the favor. We’re sleeping in shifts as the fighting continues.”

Marc’s weary voice over Safe Haven’s speakers had all of them in and outside the gates mesmerized with fear and anger. He’d brought every class and activity to a screeching halt as soon as Angela told Kevin to play it over the new speakers. Kenn had rigged them up recently for this purpose.

“We’re pinned in, using the deepest areas so they can’t bunker-buster us out. There are three days ammunition left and then I’ll have to get mean. If you’re close by and can fight, I need you. If you’re close by and trapped, stay down and get out when they take us. Go to Safe Haven. You’ll be free there.”

The static came for a few seconds and then Marc’s voice echoed again. “If I go to sleep, none of us may wake up. To fill the time, I’m going to tell you a true story. I’m going to tell you what caused the end of our world.”

Aching, Angela tuned it out. She knew what he was going to say, but it would stir her up when she needed to calm down. Unlike the camp, who needed to know the truth before they would be ready to fight, she needed to un-hear Marc’s desperation. It was killing him that his men were dying. It was what he’d brought them together for and she could feel

his sorrow. It matched her own. What good life takers they'd become.

What if he doesn't come back?

Angela shoved the witch aside and cowered inside her crypt. "You can have it."

Greedy enough to want full control, but in love with her host, the witch offered another solution. *Let Adrian in.*

Angela wouldn't do that, not willingly.

Just stay where you are and I'll...

"No."

The witch roughly yanked Angela's arm and shoved her forward. *Then get out of here and go do your job!*

Forced from her mental shelter, Angela drew her armor on tighter and tried to pretend her soul wasn't darkening faster than the moon could rise.

4

"I want a team put together."

Angela's words were met with unrest instead of the support she'd been expecting.

"Marc told us what to do when this moment came." Kevin didn't make eye contact. "No team is allowed to leave Safe Haven for any type of rescue attempt."

Kenn added his support. "He made it clear that anyone who left you unprotected would be on the receiving end of his wrath."

Angela viewed Kenn in a hateful glower. “I know what your plan is, Smurf-balls. Shut up.”

Smirks and pointed leers came at her open defiance of Kenn’s power over her. It was a good moment.

Angela let the men have it, turning her back to the table. She pulled on her falling levels of patience and control, but her voice wasn’t the rock these men were used to hearing. “Either I’m the leader here or I’m not. Put a team together to go pull our men from that damn base. Do it right now! Or I’m resigning. Tonight.”

Angela left the mess amid the protests.

Adrian sighed. “He should have seen that coming.”

Kenn waited until she was out of earshot. “Well?”

Adrian grunted, rising. “I’ll walk before I take over like this. You make your own choices.”

Adrian followed her.

Those left behind were forced to ignore the possibility of Marc’s displeasure to start making plans. None of them wanted to die or have Marc killed, but it was easier if their current chain of command stayed together. They hadn’t missed that fact.

Adrian trailed her, but he gave her plenty of space. She wanted time to think, to figure out what came next. She knew what he’d said, how he longed to be the one who led this mission. Would she send

him? He was the only one besides Kenn who might even have a chance at it.

No.

Her broken tone in his mind was proof that she wasn't allowed to do what she wanted either. "Why not? You don't need me here."

Angela stopped at the edge of the perimeter to use a moldy tree for support. "Yes, I do. I don't want you in the same ways, but I need you. So do they."

"You won't risk the camp for him."

"Never."

"It hurts to accept what's honestly inside, to allow yourself to be who you are. You love the camp more than your mate, as do all the Eagles. Well, maybe not Kyle anymore, but once Jenny..."

Angela left him standing there, not caring about his attempts at distraction or the reality check he felt she needed. The pain in her heart was too heavy to carry. If they didn't go, she would be on her way come dawn. That was the reason Adrian couldn't be sent. She wasn't strong now. She was crumbling by the hour and even if she sent him, she might still break and fly to Marc's side, leaving Safe Haven without a leader. That couldn't ever happen.

"It will, though." Adrian was standing behind her now. "If you leave, I'm duty bound to protect you. So are the Eagles. If you go, so do we."

"And so would everyone else."

"Yes. You'll lead them to slaughter."

Angela began silently begging fate to spare Marc. "I want two teams sent instead of one."

“You’ll stay here while I relay that?”

Angela pulled her gun and headed for the training course, where a large group of camp men were being instructed. “You’ll hear me the whole time you’re gone.”

Adrian still hurried, and he did keep track of her shots echoing furiously across the camp.

Another radio report like that and she’ll come to you. We can’t stop her. Adrian sent the message to Marc as hard as he could, hoping Angela didn’t pick up on it while she was shooting. Those moments were often daze-like, so he had a hope that she wouldn’t. He had his own mental lines to use, but Angela was evolving faster than any descendant he’d ever known. There was no way to be sure that she couldn’t hear him.

Adrian listened for a return message from Marc, but there was only a tired hatred that didn’t make it far through Safe Haven’s strong boundaries before it was gone.

Adrian sighed. He wouldn’t sleep again tonight. Her misery was his now, and not being able to challenge those bonds like he wanted to made for a surly former leader roaming the camp.

In the QZ parking area, two full teams were preparing for departure. The top Eagles had seen enough by now to understand that Angela had complicated plans to ensure their victory; each of them had decided that Marc’s anger was a small price to pay to keep her here and working. Even

Adrian hadn't accomplished as much in this short of time.

That fact was also on Adrian's mind as he stepped aside for two team members who were carrying heavy crates from the weapons truck. Despite how deeply he cared and how hard he'd tried, Angela was a better leader. Why?

She lies only when she has to, when it serves the greater good, his own mental voice spoke up brutally. You commit sins for your own convenience.

Adrian didn't deny it. Instead, he asked what mattered to him, to the future he could almost taste. *How close is she to giving in?*

5

"You should go workout."

Angela didn't stop her restless pacing.

Those watching scowled when Adrian fell in step with her. If not for Marc's orders...

"I can listen if you'd rather talk."

Angela sent him a hot glance that made him snap his mouth shut. She was beyond pissed.

Adrian sighed. His warning to Marc hadn't gone unnoticed.

"I'm trying not do anything."

The words carried an accusation that made Adrian cringe inside. It said she had to shut up to keep from rocking the boat. His boat. Not Kenn's or

Marc's, but his. If he wasn't careful, he could become dead to her.

Angela waved her shadows off as she neared the tape. "I'll be out for an hour. Try to keep shit together."

Her words were unexpected. It took Adrian a minute to realize she'd gone by her blazer and was moving toward the gate. Her stride was angry, body rigid. Adrian waved away his own shadow and followed her into the trees.

Once out of sight of all the camps, Angela slid to her knees.

"I'm sorry." Adrian was starting to understand how much pain she was in after the answer he'd gotten from that voice inside.

"I'm staying right here for a while."

Angela not fighting was so different from what he'd known that Adrian wasn't sure what to do. There was no way any of the teams would make it there in time, no way he could rescue Marc and make sure she got what she needed now. *Is there?*

"No, there isn't." Angela shivered lightly from the cool darkness inching further into her soul. "If he dies, so will I."

Adrian didn't doubt that she would waste away, but he did think she would pull out of it with the right tender care.

Angela's head snapped up; the red orbs of the witch greeted him. *How strong do you think she is?*

Adrian jerked at the blast of anger, stung.

She labors for you and these sheep endlessly, and now you've taken the one thing she won't be able to stand losing twice. Save him!

Adrian heard the warning, but also heard his own voice telling him that wasn't entirely true. He fired back based on both responses.

“She’s done her duty as a descendant and so has Marc. We weren’t put here to have love. We are the givers of it.” Adrian grabbed her jaw and forced Angela to listen. “We have a destiny that only a few could ever be strong enough for. You can stand this and anything else they throw. You didn’t kill him. The government has him pinned down. They have us trapped. They always have.”

Angela’s crimson eyes faded to blue pools of desolation. “But I need him...”

Adrian’s hand smoothed her tangled curls as he smiled sadly. “Our country needs him more.”

Angela knew it in her heart—it’s why she’d been able to send him at all—but the pain!

Adrian only knew one way to stop a woman’s pain when it came from heartbreak. If she was pissed, she would keep fighting. He needed to shake her out of the depression and return the fire.

“There’s a tiny flame left. When it goes out, I’ll know he’s...” Angela froze at the lance of desperate panic.

Adrian couldn’t take it. If she hated him a little more, what did it matter? Anything was worth erasing that misery she was oozing. “I can help you.”

Angela wasn't listening. She was blowing carefully on that tiny flame, trying to keep it alive.

"Angie, will you let me show you something?"

Angela grunted, but didn't respond otherwise.

Adrian leaned forward. *You told me to care for her. And I will.*

Angela didn't realize what was happening until she heard the witch groan. The levels of need in that sound brought her out of the daze to find Adrian's lips against hers and desire flowing freely between them.

"*Stop!*"

The Witch ripped her mouth away long enough to sneer. *I'm in front, remember? He's mine. You stay in there and grieve.*

Angela lashed out in fury and knocked them both to the ground.

Adrian stayed where he was, trying very hard to remain unaroused. He didn't like the witch and that made it easier.

Angela also stayed where she was, regaining control of her emotions. She wanted to attack him, but she also wanted another kiss. She'd now had that magical contact, but didn't have it. The memory wasn't there because she hadn't been.

Adrian rolled over. "May I?"

Angela opened her mouth to scream at him and found no rage left, only a lonely ache that needed to be filled. "No..."

Adrian's hand on her arm wasn't a surprise. He'd heard her weak answer and was taking advantage of it.

"I won't..."

"Shh..." Adrian's mouth settled over hers.

Angela kicked out, fighting herself harder than she was him.

Be still! the Witch commanded. *For one damn minute, be still!*

Adrian's soft lips sent chills over her, lighting up those places she didn't want him in.

Adrian wasn't immune this time. It was Angela allowing his kiss, Angela feeling the pleasure he could give. He moved back reluctantly, ready to bleed. These stolen moments were worth any price she wanted to extract.

"It makes it so hard for me, knowing you feel that way."

Adrian lay on his back, putting his hands under his neck to keep from reaching for her again. "I told you once that I'd leave you alone if you asked me to. I'm sorry I haven't been able to do that."

"So am I." She wanted to stay depressed, but she couldn't. The magic of his touch was running through her and it was hard to stay down in that light.

"In time, I hope you'll be able to accept me as someone who loves you, not just a substitute for when you're hurting over him."

Angela slowly pushed herself to her feet, staring down coldly. "He's coming back."

Adrian was on his feet an instant later, gabbing her by the arms. “I don’t care! I want you, too, Angie. And you’ll need us both.”

Angela denied that claim. “I only need him.”

Frustrated, Adrian dropped his mouth back to hers.

Desire flooded them both.

Angela found herself responding even though she didn’t want to. His magic was like nothing she’d ever felt and she groaned in protest.

Their breath mingled, vanilla filling his senses.

She shuddered as his tongue swept over hers.

His arms tightened, body hard and hot.

Angela groaned this time at the touch of his tongue. Her body softened, leaned into his.

Adrian stiffened. *Intoxicating!*

Energy swirled around them, thick and primitive. When his hands slid to the small of her back and pressed her close, Angela gasped into his mouth. “No!”

Adrian broke the kiss and shoved her, but he was there to stop her from hitting the tree. He sent his lips back to hers, drowning in what he’d wanted for so long, and missed the fury boiling.

Angela took him to his knees with a kick and kidney punch that was ruthless. “Don’t ever!”

Adrian stayed on the ground, coughing and laughing. “That’s the...Angie we all know.”

Angela glared a moment longer, then snorted as she realized he was going to use the excuse that he’d

been trying to shake her from her depression. “You were right. You are a piece of shit. You know that?”

“I’m human. How could I be anything else?”
Adrian returned the question sharply.

Angela sighed in disgust at an answer she couldn’t argue with. “Come on. Let me make sure nothing ripped open.”

Adrian sat on the edge of her cot, glad the flap was open, but not caring as much as he had before. He lifted the shirt.

Angela impatiently directed him toward the lantern. It took her a minute to get it lit and she took her time gathering her things, still boiling.

“I’m sorry.”

Angela pushed her thumb into his side and got a satisfying grunt. “Yeah.”

Adrian viewed her with a devotion that shouldn’t be so attractive.

“Your lips are like candy. It was hard to stop.”

Angela raked her nail across his scar.

Adrian flinched. “Damn!”

Angela reached out and took a large patch of his chest skin with all five claws, crimson shining in hatred. “The Witch wants you, but I don’t. I want Marc and even if he... It won’t matter to me. *He’s* my mate. You won’t ever be in my heart.”

Adrian caught her hand and placed a gentle kiss to it. “I’ve been there since we first laid eyes on each other and the ground shook.”

Angela slapped him with the other hand.

Adrian refused to take any more physical abuse without dealing out some of his own emotions. “I’ll love his son and in time, Charlie will love me as much as he ever has Marc.”

Angela switched into her Kai stance.

Adrian took them to the floor.

She struggled furiously, but Adrian only held her and forced her to listen. “You can’t carry this weight and mourn him. You have to let it go in front of the camp.”

Angela stilled, tiring quickly; tears ran down her dusty cheeks.

“When you’re alone, you can take it out on me. Keep me close for that, but please, just...keep me.”

Adrian’s broken plea stopped the anger and replaced it with the need to ease his pain. It wasn’t something she could fight and Angela realized it was drawing him the same way. In complete agony, she had no idea how to shove this into her crypt. None of the boxes were big enough.

Adrian let go of her, but didn’t move away when she stayed still. “I’ll be there when you need to draw blood.” Adrian wiped fingers across his chest and held up red tips. “I’ll be as much as you’ll allow.”

Angela’s tears fell harder, lids closing to try to hold them.

Adrian pushed with a brutal shove, leaning over her. “Pretend I’m him.”

Adrian’s mouth on hers was a violation! And it was Marc, if she just held still and pretended. For one instant, she could do it.

Then her knee came up and Adrian was forced to take no for her answer.

Angela rolled onto her feet and delivered a vicious kick to his ribs. “I’d rather be dead than betray him like this.”

Angela slapped the flap shut as she stormed out.

Adrian stayed down. “*One more month, Marc,*” Adrian sent through the pain. “*That’s the grieving period you owe me. Stay away for one more month and I will have her. She was meant to be mine.*”

Chapter Twenty-Four
Let's End This
Little Rock AFB
August 17th

1

“Top floors are finally secure, sir.”

Colonel Hack took the sheet of damages and casualties without glancing at it. “And the bottom?”

“Still the same. As soon as we clear an area and post security, it blows up or collapses. It’s getting hard to find point men. Same for the roads they used. As they fled, the rebels blew them up or rigged them. We’ve had serious damage to every platoon.”

Hack crumbled the paper and tossed it onto the desk. “How many men do we have left?”

The Sergeant didn’t tell his commanding officer that the stat was on the paper he hadn’t checked. “A hundred and fifty.”

“Damn them!”

Sergeant Davies retreated a bit as the Colonel began pacing. This one wasn’t a fat body sent by command. He was dangerous.

“We started out with over a thousand!”

“Yes, sir. The Ghost has been quite effective, but we’re here. Base will send reinforcements as soon as we call for them.”

Hack wasn't ready to do that. If he had to have help, base wouldn't let him keep command. They'd send out the Butcher.

“Gather them up, fifty per group. Keep them together until...” Hack glanced at his watch. “Last attack was an hour ago...wait three more and then send all remaining men into the bottom floors. Flush them out.”

The Sergeant left with doubts. The Ghost and a few of his friends were still inside the base, setting and carrying out traps. Davies thought maybe he would spend the raid time in the commander's office for protection.

Hack kicked the door closed, hating the closet-sized room, but all the others had been destroyed. Like the damn rebels had sensed it would irritate him and done it on purpose.

The newly appointed Colonel flopped down in the chair, crazy mind spinning. It had been a hell of a fight to get here and he wasn't going to be pushed out by only one or two men...

“Can you help me?”

Hack looked through the open door to the connecting room and stared in surprise at the half naked woman leaning against the frame.

He leapt to his feet without a thought, alarmed for her. “Are you okay?”

Kendle's face lit with a feverish zeal as she advanced drunkenly. “I will be.”

The Colonel's screams brought his men running, but it was too late. The ripped-out throat wasn't something they could fix. Nor was the stomach spilling open as he fell.

Davies drew his gun and backed away from the door.

"Shouldn't we search..." the Private at his side had no idea what was going on, except that instinct said the time for killing each other had come.

Davies turned and quickly left the doomed men. "Captain Gorden has the next highest rank. Command has been passed."

The newly promoted man glanced at the Colonel's body and then Davies retreating form. Known for hating deserters, he fired a shot, but missed when Davies ducked and rolled into a room they hadn't cleared yet. His words echoed.

"Wait! I give up to the Ghost. Maybe I can help him!"

Gorden waved the small group of soldiers toward the door, but the next voice stopped them with the lack of compassion.

"The time for surrender is long over."

"Ahhhh!"

Gorden got to the door first and saw Davies hanging over a file cabinet, blood running down his legs and arms. His sockets were stabbed balls of tissue and gore.

"Ahhh!" Davies began screaming.

Gorden lifted his weapon. He couldn't stand a whiner.

Bang!

2

Marc woke with a gasp of desolation and knew instantly why he was in pain. Something had happened with Angela.

Marc lay down and closed his lids. They were only stealing sleep in hour-long snatches; the feeling of isolation was thick as he lay there considering all the possibilities.

He heard Kendle shift toward him. “No.”

Kendle ignored the order, moving into his warm space. She hugged him close.

Marc didn’t bother to push the crazy woman away. It felt good to have human contact.

“Sleep. We die tomorrow.”

Marc forcefully shut his mind down. After tomorrow’s blast, it wouldn’t matter. The odds they would make it out of the collapse were slim.

“Sleep.” Kendle hugged him tighter.

Marc grunted in surrender and tossed an arm around her shoulders. “Okay, Kendle. Okay.”

When the alarm vibrated, Marc woke quickly, pushing away the headache. He listened hard after looking over at Kendle. He was a bit uneasy to hear nothing at all. When they’d gone to ground in this duct, soldiers had been stomping and cursing, weapons were being cleaned and loaded, and all of it had echoed straight to them. Now it was silent.

Marc sat up and gave Kendle a gentle nudge.
She shot up as if he'd slapped her.

Marc grabbed her, putting his hand over her mouth. *Just me.*

Kendle calmed.

Marc took his hand away, but he didn't shift her off his lap. The need to be close to someone right now was on him in thick waves. "May I?"

Kendle felt the shaking start. She wasn't scared of Marc, but she was terrified of herself. What if she reacted badly?

"Shhh..." Marc leaned forward, eyes closing.
"Angie."

Kendle stiffened, but the feel of his kiss wasn't one to refuse. Her lids fluttered closed and her arms came up to hold him. *Luke!*

Marc didn't feel any sting. It wasn't Kendle in his arms, it was Angie and in that one kiss, he gave her his goodbye.

Kendle was crying when he pulled back. She swiped at the tears. "Can we go kill something now?"

Marc chuckled, helping her up. "Yes. Let's go end this."

"Fire!" The walls exploded around them.

Marc jerked Kendle into the narrowest vent and shoved her ahead of him.

"Get them!"

Major Gorden waved the men up and inside. This time, they went without argument. Finding out that their Ghost was only a tired Marine and his

woman had given them new faith. None of them had actually seen the Ghost before now.

Kendle scrambled along the duct, wiggling to get her shoulders through the hole as Marc shoved on her legs.

Gunfire ripped into the ceiling and duct around them. Marc had his shield over them both, and Kendle knew to hold on. Without a direct connection, he would only be able to protect himself from the rapid fire.

As footsteps came down the hall, they fled to a connecting room that had no obvious exit. This was the bowels of the base. They wouldn't get out from here. Neither of them flinched at the thought. They'd said their goodbyes. Now they would bring this base down.

"Hit it!" Marc bolted the door and dropped the wooden beam into the metal braces they'd installed. In their nervous sweeps, the soldiers hadn't noticed many of their modifications and it would cost them.

Kendle flipped the switch and ran into Marc's arms as the base began to blow up over top of them.

3

"The North wall is down! We've been hit!"

"Clear out of there!"

Those listening to the radio calls were horrified at not only the panic in the voices, but also the awful background noises of bombs exploding and men screaming.

“Get her out! Do it now!”

Angela tensed, despite knowing what was coming next.

“I won’t leave Adrian!”

At Angela’s panicked voice, the men around her looked to her face and then back to the radio in confusion.

“I gave him sound clips before he left,” Angela explained, choked up.

“Get down! Get those men down!”

The explosion came through the radio as if they were there and Adrian’s voice roared out next.

“Here they come! No mercy!”

Not sure how much was real, they all turned to Angela as the transmission stopped.

Angela’s strained face wasn’t easy to look at as she explained. “Marc wanted to be sure they thought the chain of command was all there. He knows the soldiers wouldn’t come this way until they search every inch of the base. It buys us more time.”

“But the battle right now?” Shawn asked.

“Is real. Little Rock Air Force Base has been taken by the enemy.”

Silence greeted her words. When Adrian put a consoling arm around her shoulders, Angela leaned against him, struggling not to cry.

“Hey!” Zack pointed. “They’re pulling out!”

Angela and Adrian turned to find lights and horses moving around their gates. It appeared like half of the groups that had come, were fleeing.

Ray was furious. “They’re leaving us!”

“Getting away ahead of the soldiers.” Kenn shrugged. “Can’t blame them. If that base is gone, we’re in trouble.”

“They’re going to Marc.” Angela moaned. Only Adrian’s warnings in her mind kept her from joining them.

Shawn tried to comfort her, but it was a waste of time. That call was final. “They’ll meet up with our teams and get them out.”

Angela spun away from the men, going to sing to the camp, who also thought they were being abandoned. “They’ve gone to bring our Ghost home.”

Angela’s words spread quickly and gave the camp members something to hope for, but she was dying. She knew the truth. None of the men coming to Marc’s aid would get there in time.

4

The camp was a wreck. Physically, they were stronger than they’d ever been. Emotionally, they were broken. Waiting for word on Marc and the others had only just begun and the grieving was everywhere. Underneath it was violent rage.

The descendants absorbed it instead of the sorrow, and tossed it back out in waves of discontent and pain that the camp hated. The sight of Angela almost in tears and Adrian snarling at people told them they’d taken a harsh blow. Even

Kenn and Tonya weren't happy and their lack of gloating was the final push for many inside Safe Haven's gates. Marc's death wouldn't be forgotten. None of their losses would.

"They're ready to fight now. Losing Marc has them hot."

Adrian was glad Angela hadn't heard Zack's thoughtless comment. "We'll get the call any..."

"Attention Safe Haven Refugee Camp..."

Their radios lighting up stopped things across the camp and brought people from the light dozing they'd begun to do while waiting for word.

"This is Captain Reynolds of the United States Army. It may only be five rooms, but I hold this base! The Ghost and his chain of command have been killed. We're digging their bodies out now. They will be sent to Command for verification. Also among the dead are Angela, Adrian, Marc..."

As soon as there was a pause, Angela keyed the mike. "Wrong again. We're all around you! Watch your six. We are."

Loud cheers broke over the camp and radios, and then from other people and camps across the country who'd been listening in horror and hope.

"We are not dead, nor broken. We are united in this fight. Come and get us!" Adrian bellowed.

Angela gave the final layer. "I am a descendant, sent to protect the people. Come to me, help me drive back the green scum like they deserve!"

Angela's forceful call was answered by garbles as people tried to affirm their loyalty and intent to help.

When the radio cleared for a minute, Reynolds took over calmly, but new noises popped up to drown him out. "That is a recorded clip. There is no such thing as a descendant..."

Bang! Bang!

Those in Safe Haven froze, listening to the sound of those familiar Colts.

"Get him!"

"All citizens are required to turn themselves over according to the terms of martial law and the draft..."

Bang! Bang!

"What do you mean he's here?!"

Bang! Bang!

Angela didn't know why the man wasn't letting off the mike, but it was giving them a front row seat to the final fight inside the base. Everyone was enrapt.

"Close it up!"

"Shoot him!"

Bang!

"It's coming down!"

"The roof! Look out!"

The radio went dead.

Angela hit her mike again in deep satisfaction and relief. "Captain Reynolds, you have been found guilty of treason and sentenced to death. To his remaining men, leave your posts and surrender to

us. We will show no mercy to anyone who stands with them!” Angela left the radio to the others as she turned away. Had Marc gotten out? The wait for word would continue.

5

“Let me help you.”

Angela didn’t protest, but she flinched when Adrian’s hand slid overtop hers.

She surprised them both by not pulling away. “Tired.”

“When’s the last time you fed?”

Her face reddened. “Little Rock break.”

Adrian’s heart jumped. Marc hadn’t gotten much of her before he’d left.

“Stop it!”

Adrian heard her guilt; he followed her into the late-morning fog. “Wait.”

She spun quickly, upset, but instead of the words that flew to mind, he sent her a vision of the beach, of the perfect picture of her playing in the gentle surf with Marc’s daughter.

Her face paled, but her eyes lit up with a fierce need that made him smile sadly. “I’m waiting.”

Her voice was bitter. “Patiently?”

Adrian intentionally thought of how Nancy had wrapped her legs around his waist to keep him close. He’d almost given her what she wanted. “No.”

Angela's mouth opened; her jealousy spewed out harshly. "If you give away my child, I'll never be yours." Horrible remorse hit Angela the second it was out. She glowered in pain, tired of his unexpected blows. "I hate you."

Adrian turned away before she could recognize the triumph or the agony on his face. He added another layer with spikes of lust spiraling through his voice. "The only body I'll spill my seed into now is yours. Think about that tonight when you slide your hand into your jeans and wish it was him."

A light boot crunched... Adrian ducked the punch meant for his temple. He caught her as she stumbled and held her tightly as the sound of her sobs ripped through him.

"He's coming back!"

Adrian kissed the top of her head. "I would."

"I want my Marc!"

Adrian rocked her, ignoring the audience.

"You have his son." He hated himself for hurting her. "It's more than most came through with."

It was what the witch was whispering in her mind. Being hit with it from both sides hurt more than she could say.

Adrian let her get it mostly out and then led her toward her tent, sure she would want a few minutes alone to get herself under control.

He took a fast look as they ducked inside, verifying it was clear, then left.

“Oh, Marc!” Except now, it was complete desolation instead of passion.

Adrian swore furiously at fate as he left her alone. If Marc came back, he would have to pay for these actions. If he didn't, Angela would turn to him in her pain and he would help her recover. She'd never love him the way he needed her to—Adrian understood that now—but at least she would go on, and through her, his people. It was always for them.

6

“Can I talk to you without anyone around?” Tonya's quickly asked question was given as she knelt by him to tie her bootlace.

In the past, Adrian would have embarrassed her. Now, he gestured toward the empty hair tent. “Ten minutes.”

Tonya acted as if she hadn't heard him and moved away, heart thumping. She gave a sickly smile to Kenn, who had point, then went to the showers. She would wait until she was alone and go out the window, then through the rear of camp, where the trees would give her cover.

Tonya did just that and slipped inside to find Adrian sprawled out on the small cot that Candy kept for waiting kids to play on.

Tonya's mouth went dry; she stayed by the flap. “I was asked to do something.”

Adrian raised a brow. “Bad?”

Tonya frowned uneasily. “I’m not sure. I was asked to lie about something that isn’t a lie, but the way I was asked to do it implies that I’m going to be in trouble if caught.”

“And you’ve had enough of being in trouble?”

“Yes.” Tonya’s expression was half remorse, half bitterness.

Adrian sat up and gestured at the center chair. “Tell me.”

Tonya perched nervously on the edge of the cold seat. “I was supposed to tell someone that Angela’s lonely and she needs a friend who won’t push until she’s ready.”

Adrian had already stopped breathing. “Tell to whom?”

Tonya snorted at him.

Adrian put the pieces together for himself.

Tonya wasn’t sure if she’d gotten Kenn in trouble. “Should I have told him no or maybe done it? I have no idea how this FND shit works.”

Adrian studied her, understanding how much she’d changed. “You came to me. That’s the right thing. Kenn’s heart is in a good place, but his brains are in the toilet from being the prankster target of the camp. He thinks she’ll get over it.”

Tonya shrugged. “Won’t she? You two are a good match.”

Another statement he’d never thought to hear from the redhead.

Tonya caught his surprise, and grunted without amusement. “That’s why you sent me through your personal reform school right? To change me?”

“You’ve finally become a decent person, Tonya. You’re right not to let anyone interfere with that.”

Adrian stood up and gave the woman a shock. He placed a kiss to her cheek in respect. “I know you added your own twist because you agree. It’s okay.”

Tonya was relieved to hear that, but she didn’t want a peck on the cheek. Kenn’s or not, she still longed for Adrian.

He knew.

“Would you betray him?” Adrian asked in a seductive whisper, hand tugging on a shortened lock. “We won’t be bothered here.”

Tonya trembled and did the impossible. “No.”

“Good.” Adrian was honestly glad for her. “You’ve rebuilt your life now. Don’t let anyone take it from you.”

Tonya realized that had been the test and snorted. “She’s gonna have her hands full with you.”

Adrian sighed miserably. “I certainly hope so.”

7

Safe Haven’s next call came as the top people sat at the center table, waiting for dawn to break so

that the camp could too. It was Jax and the news wasn't encouraging.

“We've got a few prisoners. We haven't pulled anyone out of the rubble yet other than the soldiers.... They say there was a Special Forces team monitoring the base, sent just for the Ghost. We assume they're still alive and have sent out patrols to search for them.”

Kenn, who'd seen Adrian's actions in a new light since eavesdropping, leaned over. “Special Forces usually set up outside the hot zone and try to view the target. Then they go in, and kill or grab. They're pretty good.”

Kenn acted regretful as the men around them muttered angrily at Angela's gasp of anguish. “But Marc's good, too. You know that.”

Angela didn't respond. She couldn't ease, couldn't escape this pain.

None of them protested when she left the table before Jax could finish the update call and tell her two camps had arrived and were helping. Right at that moment, it meant nothing.

Chapter Twenty-Five
Breaking Point
Sloppy Floyd State Park, Georgia
August 25th

1

“**S**et it up, Eagles. Kenn and Kyle have point.”

Safe Haven was no longer able to use just one point man during the day and evening hours. Only overnight still used that setup, but that would probably change too when Marc returned.

Searching the area, and also what was ahead of them, Angela flinched mentally and slammed that deeply shrouded door.

The Sloppy park was exactly that. From walkways to public buildings, the mold climbing everything left Angela no choice but to camp them in the middle of the road leading in. The waters were up as well, and it made for an unpleasant walk while patrolling the perimeter. Even the playground equipment was layered with thick, black clumps that had forced them to soothe the kids with an extra hour in the training tent instead. The Eagles couldn't wait to be gone, but they were also worried about the next stop. Everything in the east was

either bad, going bad, or on the edge of areas that were both. Would Lookout Mountain be the same?

The Eagles rushed out to secure their newest campsite as Angela leaned her head against the seat of the truck that Adrian was driving. Thirty more miles after this and then they could stop running.

They were making better time now. As Safe Haven had traveled over the last weeks, the roads were cleared. Sometimes it was because those towns with survivors wanted them to be gone as fast as possible, but sometimes it was to help them. As their convoy passed the last two towns, they'd seen tow trucks putting the wrecks back, hoping to delay the soldiers even though they weren't going to fight. Some areas had also realized that Safe Haven wouldn't be able to forage for supplies as easily and were sending in loads of goods in crates and boxes that the Eagles collected gratefully. It eased the burden a little. Their camps, Safe Haven and those still around them, were being flooded with wounded from the battles. Food was being tightly rationed right now, and through it all, no one could tell her anything new about Marc. Their Ghost had vanished.

“How does it look?”

“It's clear, but there's a shadow overhead.”

Adrian knew she wasn't referring to the layers of grit that were lighter or heavier, based on what weather had blown through the night before. “Can I help?”

“No. It's too dark. Wish I could give you more.”

So do I.

Angela winced.

Adrian joined the securing teams instead of trying to comfort her. After the way he'd pushed, she wouldn't accept it. She mostly hated him now. He'd been successful.

Angela waited until the clear call came and opened her door. It was a surprise to find Candy standing there.

The hairdresser didn't look good. Lee's murder had been rough on her. She'd closed the hair tent and stayed inside it since the funeral. The only time she came out was when one of the den mothers forced her to shower. Most of the time, Charlie took her a tray. Angela had planned to give her a little more time, then go punch through the grief in much the same way that Adrian was doing to her.

"I'm pregnant."

Angela climbed from the truck and gave Candy a searching look. From the sunken eyes, to the wild hair, it was clear that Candy wasn't in the right shape to welcome new life into the world. "How can I help, Candice?"

Candy's shoulders straightened at the name. "Yes, that's who I am now. Candy's dead. She was buried with..." The hairdresser turned away.

Angela braced herself before reaching out. "Candy..."

Slap!

Angela caught herself on the truck door, but she didn't return fire. She held the same rage in her heart. She understood that it had to go somewhere.

Candy's face was blank. She didn't know why she'd struck out, only that she needed to.

"I want you in the Kai lessons. When you pass a mental evaluation, you'll get time on the gun range."

Candy's voice was toneless. "I want to be on your team. I challenge you!"

Instead of hitting again, Candy began to cry.

Angela pulled Candy close and held her while she sobbed, struggling not to do the same herself. At least in her case, there was still a tiny bit of hope. Candy knew Lee wasn't coming back and nothing would change it. "I accept you."

Candy's sobs became harder.

Angela gently pushed her into the arms of the Eagle who appeared the most concerned. "Take her to the doctor. He'll want to drug her, as he always does, but refuse. Make him actually talk to her. No meds without my approval."

Zack led Candy away without the disapproval he wanted to express. He didn't like the handprint on Angela's cheek and neither did anyone they passed. All of them scowled at Candy, but Zack held it in. If she'd deserved a punishment for it, Angela would have knocked her on her ass. That meant she didn't and Zack followed his orders to the letter.

When the doctor insisted he leave, Zack threatened to call Adrian. None of them liked the

new man. Doc Savage, as he liked people to call him, was still stuck in the old world mindset. When that changed, he might become popular with his patients, but not until he stopped treating them like a number. When he got to know his people, then they could do the same.

Seth stuck to Angela's side as she went to the bathrooms to keep order. They had four hundred refugees here now and the lines quickly put people into bad moods with short tempers. They had erected all the old port-o-lets, but it still wasn't enough. No one liked shitting in the woods and Angela didn't blame them.

She paused, face clouding...

Seth waited tiredly. He was looking forward to being camped for more than two days at a time. They hadn't been since they'd left Arkansas and the strain was hanging over all of them.

"Bathroom tents." Angela resumed her stride. "Put the camping setups in them, along with items people will need."

Seth wrote it down, expanding on it automatically, and went to find Becky. She was quick at tent setups and she needed to do that type of work to help with camp issues. It would get their situation accepted sooner.

Noting Seth's slight limp as he left, Angela realized he was exhausted. They all were. It was almost time for a break.

Angela heard Dog's soft pad fall in with her and ignored him. Dog wanted Marc found and he wasn't settling for any other answer.

Please!

That was something he'd never sent to her. Angela stopped, frozen in place by his agony.

Dog shoved images into her mind, showing her the bond between them. Angela's fists clenched. "Why don't you go find him?"

I swore I'd protect you! Dog growled, drawing attention from those around them.

Angela knelt and placed a hand on Dog's stocky shoulder. "I love him too. We have to have faith."

Dog ducked out of her touch and stalked into the shadows of the campers being pulled into place.

Angela grunted unhappily as she rose. If they didn't hear something from the crew still at the base today, she would call them and get a final word from the scene. And then remind the camp that Marc wouldn't have planned to be inside when it collapsed.

"Yes, he would have and you know it!" Charlie's loud voice carried.

Angela couldn't take much more. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to comfort her son when she couldn't do it for herself.

Feeling her chaotic emotions, Charlie came to her.

Angela surrounded him with her love.

The camp and Eagles witnessed the emotional scene, and their pain made for even shorter fuses and guilty laughs that were quickly silenced.

Those in camp who had lost someone since joining tried to encourage her with small words and gestures, but they knew what was coming. It was unbearable to hear them thinking of all the ways Marc could have been lost.

“He’ll be back, boy. He said he would. He will.”

Charlie reached out to wipe at her cheek and Angela chuckled, in the middle of doing the same for him. “I love you, Charlie.”

Charlie flushed. “Same to you, mom.”

Angela slung a hand around his widening shoulders and went to do her duty.

Inside, another piece of her soul turned black.

2

“Leave him be.”

Dale stopped with his hand out as Ray quickly slid between him and the wolf.

“Dog’s okay.” Dale moved around him.

Dog allowed Dale’s touch, but bared his fangs at Ray.

“No. It’s not his fault, you know. Or hers. Marc chose this.”

Dog whined.

Dale rubbed his ear. “I wish he was here too. I always felt safer when Marc was around. He saved my man once, you know?”

Ray realized that Dale had a bond with Dog, and reluctantly backed off. Dog had growled at Angela and Ray hadn't liked it. It wasn't that long ago that their working animals had revolted.

Dog moved away from them. Worried and alert, both men saw the wolf avoid Chris as he came from the animal tent.

Chris glanced at the wolf, and quickly dismissed the animal, but Dog's eyes lingered on the vet.

Dale opened his mouth. "Did you..."

"Shut up," Ray hissed as Chris joined them.

Terrible actors, they were saved by Dog's howl. "Woooooo..."

The mournful sound echoed across the camp. It continued for the next hour.

Adrian was the one who got it to stop and it broke Angela's heart a little more to witness him damaging Marc's bonds there too.

"He's gone, Dog. You know that. Your vow to him is over if you want it to be. Go search. I'll take care of her."

Dog's snarl didn't keep Adrian from sinking down on his haunches. "If you think he's out there, show us where. Jax hasn't found a sign of him and neither has Kenn."

Dog whined.

"Don't you think she's tried to call him?" Adrian refuted. "My mind rings with it at night."

Dog slumped down. *I don't hear her now.*

Adrian also slid to the ground. How weird it felt to be offering an animal hope! “He isn’t answering because he can’t or he won’t. I don’t believe that he can’t.”

Dog looked Adrian straight in the eyes. *You want her. Of course, you think that!*

“I do want her, but I also want her to be happy.” Forced to accept it, Adrian glanced away. “I’d give her Marc back if I could. I feel her misery. It’s growing and I can’t shake her out of it like I thought I’d be able to.”

You underestimated them both.

“Yes. That’s why you should go and find out, Dog. Not for yourself, but for her.”

Dog padded toward the QZ gates a second later. He’d just needed a reason he could believe in.

Adrian gestured for Zack to open the gates, but that Eagle glanced to Angela for confirmation. When she nodded, face hardening, Adrian felt her wave of loss. So did the camp. The shield above them roiled a violent red for a brief moment before settling back into an ugly green of mixed emotions.

“We need to hear something soon.” Kevin joined him.

“Tonight. I’ll make the calls. You get her to take a sleeping drink and rest. She’s starting to make herself sick.”

Kevin clamped his lips shut and returned to his post. He didn’t approve of Adrian’s methods, but he also couldn’t tell him why. The blond hadn’t picked up on Angela’s secret yet and Kevin wasn’t going

to be the one to clue him in. When Adrian found out, it would change everything.

3

Jennifer lingered near the still packed Chevy. Kyle was making sure it was restocked each time they broke camp. He never mentioned it anymore—that or her leaving—but she knew he was waiting for her choice.

“Are you okay?”

Jennifer didn’t answer that dangerous question either, only hugged her sleeping infant closer. In the distance, the mountains beckoned. Behind her, the enemy was coming. “They’re on the way...”

Kyle had heard that tone enough to know what it meant. He sent a quick signal to the guard on duty as he stepped closer. *Get the Boss. Now.* “They’re coming here?”

“Oh, yes. The power we shelter has been reported. They want all of us.” Jennifer peered at her daughter, at the perfect innocence she would kill for, die for, if her visions weren’t changed. “She’s what they want most. The bunker isn’t producing children. I dream about it.”

Angela joining them was a small bit of relief. “How long, Jenny?”

“Now.”

The radio lit up before her words faded.

“Base! Incoming, base! We have planes!”

Safe Haven began scanning the sky as Angela hit the mike. “Get out of there!”

“We are! Looks like they’re all landing. We’ve lost the base!” The radio squealed as Quinn’s panicked voice came through. “I repeat, we’ve lost Little Rock base.”

“How many planes?”

Silence for a minute where refugees everywhere waited with baited breath for Quinn to answer her.

“A dozen so far, but we can hear more engines coming,” Jax finally answered, clearly running with a group of people.

Angela’s voice was as firm as she could make it. Marc should be the one delivering these updates. “Lookout Mountain. Come home.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Angela dropped the mike and went to calm the camp, but in her heart, there wasn’t light left to give them. The teams hadn’t finished digging through the rubble. Marc could still be in there.

He’s been out since it collapsed, the witch refuted. We would know if he was dead.

Then why won’t he answer?

He’s doing the right thing.

Angela staggered as the truth sank in. “He left me. Again.”

4

Hours later, Angela was alone in her tent, much to the displeasure of the nervous Eagles and Adrian.

She'd done a good job of calming the camp, but she hadn't stopped any of the few that had chosen to split. She'd gone to dinner and left an untouched tray, though her appetite had been good until now, even with Marc missing. She'd said the right things and performed the right actions, but few of her men thought she was okay.

Samantha was on duty outside Angela's tent, along with Becky. The two females stood their post with blank expressions and thumping hearts. At some point, Adrian or one of the Eagles would want a report on Angela that they couldn't give.

Neil and Seth appeared near the shooting range, finishing their class with the level five shooters. When they came toward Angela's tent, both females on duty started hoping for something, anything, to distract the men.

Becky tensed. "She said four hours. It's been one and a half."

Samantha was still hoping that someone would pull Neil's attention away from them. "She would have counted on them checking."

"Yeah, she counted on us buying her time and we're not gonna be able..." Becky shut up as Neil and Seth got in hearing distance.

Samantha knew she would have to do the talking. She spoke up before either of the men could ask specific questions. "No change. Any new calls?"

"Not a word. You okay?" Neil asked as Seth walked toward the flap.

Samantha slid in front of Seth with a hard frown. “She wants to be left alone. Give her some time.”

Seth didn’t like the feeling he was getting, but he knew better than to challenge the two females on duty. He stepped back to let Neil handle it.

Neil already knew. It was in Samantha’s averted gaze when he tried to make eye contact, but he also knew better than to provoke without proof.

When he left them standing there without saying anything, Seth quickly followed, hoping they were going to find Adrian.

Samantha sighed. “Her time’s up.”

“Yes.” Becky motioned. “Let’s go have a cup of coffee and tell them all what she said.”

Behind them, Neil and Seth cut a slit in the rear of Angela’s tent and slipped inside to find it empty.

Neil didn’t see Samantha’s shadow anymore and understood the girls had known they were busted.

“What’s going on here, Neil?” Seth demanded.

Neil let out a frustrated breath. “Isn’t it obvious? She’s gone to find her mate.”

5

“She did what?!”

Adrian’s furious roar sent silence through the entire mess.

Samantha withered under his anger.

Becky didn't care. She wasn't bound to him the way the others were. "She said Kyle has command, with you as his XO. If the camp doesn't like it, to hold a vote right now. She said she wasn't coming back without finding Marc, and that if he was dead, she would try to take out as many of them as she could along her own path to hell."

Samantha put her head down as the stares became hostile.

Becky finished the message. "She also said she could have blown her way through the gates, that we couldn't have stopped her. You have no idea how powerful she's become."

"Where's Charlie?" Tracy's voice in the crowd sent a new rumble of discontent through the masses.

"Here!" Charlie went to Tracy and slid an arm around her waist. "I saw mom off. She wants me to help protect everyone. She said I'll save lives here, that if she and Dog can't find dad, then no one can."

The crowd grumbled and muttered, but it was accepted. By leaving her son here, she'd proclaimed her loyalty to them, but also her need to be with Marc.

Adrian found himself the center of attention as questions flew; he was forced to offer solutions and start resuming his former duties. He loathed every minute of it. Angela was out there alone. *I'll never be able to sleep again.*

Charlie led Tracy away from the others, keeping his voice down even when they were out of range.

“She gave me her approval. You’ll stay close, night and day, so you can’t be a target to get to me.”

Tracy’s stress levels went up at that image. “Why would they come for you if Kyle’s in charge?”

“To get my mom to surrender. If she can’t find my dad, she’ll go to the bunker to take out the whole thing. She said the time for holding back is over.” And with that, Charlie kissed Tracy in front of the camp.

Because he had made the move, and Tracy didn’t move at all, the Eagles left them alone. Even Daryl’s group only frowned and then went about their duties. The boy had made his choice. They had bigger battles to fight.

6

Angela and Dog walked through the camps around Safe Haven in tense silence. When the base had fallen, these men had returned to honor their promises to Marc. As she moved through them, she read their grief and their love.

There was no doubt as to who she was. If Marc and the others hadn’t filled them in, they would have known her by those red orbs and the wolf at her side. This was the mate of their Ghost. She was taking his place roaming their shadows.

Grendin joined Angela without speaking, dark eyes full of her misery. He could feel it coming from

her in waves and regretted his choice to leave Marc behind.

“He insisted?”

Grendin found his voice. “Yes. He said my people were not to die for him...”

“Only for me.”

“Yes.”

Angela didn't speak again, but Grendin could feel her scanning their thoughts, their memories. She wanted to know everything that had happened. Grendin had little doubt she would dig until she got them. Marc had been strong, but this woman radiated dark power like a ten-foot cloak. He could almost hear the hum.

Dog stopped suddenly, looking toward the small creek that ran alongside a few of the camps.

Angela changed direction.

Dog went to his old place at her heel.

Grendin understood they were searching for more than thoughts or memories. “You think he lives!”

Angela's eyes blazed. *I know it!*

Grendin recoiled as if stung. Her shout in his mind was ringing like a bell. “I should have searched harder. I'm sorry...”

Angela ignored him to follow Dog's nose.

They walked steadily for the next three hours, stopping only when the wolf needed to pick up the scent. Marc wasn't answering her, but he couldn't avoid the wolf. He'd healed Dog and that connected

them. It also meant that Marc would know when she was close and have the chance to disappear.

He waits with great fear, Dog stated, tracking Marc easily now by the sense of doom. It matched that of the woman at his side. *He is not alone.*

Angela hadn't expected him to be. Neither was she. Grendin was trailing her, along with a dozen others from the outside camps. Marc was alive, but he hadn't come. She had to find out why. There was no moving on without knowing that.

7

The camp surrounding Marc came clear through the early morning fog; Angela paused at their border. She didn't speak with any of the men on duty, but she stole every memory they had as she scanned them.

Angela waved Dog into the tent, letting Marc have that moment to prepare for facing her. She could feel his terror from here. It was so unlike the man she knew that Angela gave him time to get ready instead of bursting in like she wanted to.

Dog disappeared into the center tent.

Angela heard Marc's deep rumble.

"Welcome home."

Angela longed to hear those words; she stepped forward, forgetting what Dog had told her.

Kendle came from the tent ready to fight...and felt her heart shatter. One glimpse of the real thing

was all it took to convince her that she didn't stand a chance.

Angela picked out their similarities and also their differences. The feel of Kendle's disease was like a flame. She wondered if that heat was what had drawn Marc. She scanned the scarred woman intently, face tightening at the images. The need to kill was strong, but the pain was still in front, pushing the fire aside.

Kendle didn't move.

The wolf behind her had growled and she'd left, but this woman wasn't doing anything except staring. Kendle realized the wolf had been less dangerous.

She studied Angela's clothes and looks, but it was the sense of raw power that said the most. She was stronger than Marc, stronger than any of the descendant fighters who'd come to help them. This woman wasn't an alpha. She was *the* alpha.

Angela pulled every moment, every word, every touch. When she got to the kiss, pain lanced into Kendle's heart. It wasn't her own.

Angela broke the scan and pulled out of Kendle's mind. She had sympathy against her will. The island woman had indeed come during salvation and blood, as Charlie had predicted. If she would save them all, remained to be seen. From Angela's view, it appeared as though she'd destroyed them. It would depend on how Marc felt. Like him, Angela could walk away if that would make him happy.

Angela made a carefully controlled gesture.

Kendle was tossed aside as if she weighed nothing.

The castaway fell heavily against a nearby tent and scrambled to her feet. She immediately went the other way.

The watching Indians laughed and nudged each other. They knew what it was like to have two women in a tent together and it was amusing to find their Ghost having the same trouble. Betting began on who Kendle would be given to. Like her, they knew it was no contest on who Marc would keep.

Angela took a deep breath and ducked into Marc's tent. She wasn't as sure.

Chapter Twenty-Six
Homecoming

1

“**A**ngie.”

“Marc.”

Sparks exploded as soon as their eyes locked. The same shade of red, they were both struck by the changes.

Angela was stunned to find out how strong Marc had become. Those glowing orbs said he was like her and the other descendants. The door to his cell had snapped and he now embraced who he was.

Marc saw how much she'd aged since he left. Her power had grown and she'd gained a little weight, but the gray hair in that braid was striking. She hadn't been feeding from Adrian or it would have returned to shiny ebony.

Tension built between them until Dog rose from his place at Marc's feet and left the tent. They listened to him curl up outside the flap.

Marc slowly stood up.

Angela almost broke. His use of the crutch was minor compared to the scars running down his arms and neck. They were from a knife fight, but the badly set ankle wasn't healing right. The witch was

pointing out each injury and cause as she found them. Angela gently pushed her into the far corner.

The witch fell silent.

Marc was also refusing to listen to his inner voice. He didn't need to have her glow pointed out or the guilt on her face. Even if Adrian hadn't tortured him with mental messages, he still would have known she'd been slowly falling apart.

Angela stepped closer, raising her hand. It wasn't orbs that shot out this time, but a pale bolt of green light.

Marc stiffened at the feel of her—*I've missed that!*—and then realized his ankle wasn't hurting anymore. He hadn't let Kendle do it. He'd wanted the misery to block out the pain of missing Angie.

Angela didn't heal his other wounds. He needed those badges of honor, the same as she did hers.

"Thank you."

Angela's eyes filled with tears that she blinked away angrily. The sound of his voice was enough to break her. How would she hold out if he wanted the island whore?

Marc wanted to go to her, but he wasn't sure if that's what she now needed from him. Adrian had sworn that a month was all it would take and he'd gotten quite a bit more in total.

"How are you?" Marc's voice was a live wire of nerves that made Angela wince.

Marc took it as another sign that she hadn't been cared for. "I'm alive. As you are."

Now came the time for it, but Angela found she couldn't ask yet. She stalled with the next biggest thing on her mind. "She loves you."

Marc stiffened in misery and triumph. "Yes."

"You allowed it...encouraged it."

Marc felt her digging in his mind then and didn't defend. She had a right to know.

"In case I'd chosen Adrian, or even fled with him and the boys." Angela's heart broke as she got the rest. "So you wouldn't be left alone, without us."

Marc came closer, red fading to sad blue. "Have you picked him?"

"No. Never."

"Something happened. I sense it, feel it on you."

Angela shoved her hands into her pockets so that she could clench fists against the desire of recalling it all, and then opened her mind.

Marc viewed it without any change in expression. He'd known Adrian would do something like that, but he'd expected it to go much further than an unwilling kiss. She'd been faithful to him.

"Always. Can you say the same?"

Marc didn't hear any accusation, only heart-stopping fear. "Yes. I can."

Tears welled for her. "I've missed you..."

Marc didn't hesitate any longer. "Come here."

Angela curled into his embrace and began sobbing inside. The relief of still being wanted was powerful, but it was the easing of his mind that tore her up. He'd been so sure Adrian would win that

he'd surrounded himself with platitudes and safety nets. The coldness wasn't from him choosing another woman. He was trying to breathe, to go on, without her.

Marc held her close, nuzzling her neck to get in as much of her scent as he could. *God, I need her so much!*

She shivered against him. "Please?"

Marc took them to the cot and sank down with her in his arms.

Across his chest, Angela repositioned herself at his side, drawing a concerned glance thrown in a quick study.

Angela rose up on one arm and took his hand, placed it on her stomach.

Marc connected the sound and the feel, and then what it meant. That dark part of his soul began to lighten.

Angela felt the wall between them melting, becoming a river of regret at her feet. She wrapped him in her arms and didn't budge again. She had no energy left. She'd used the last of it to demonstrate her power to Kendle.

Marc stayed awake a bit longer, remembering the few times it had felt like this while on the way to Safe Haven. It held the sense of a new beginning, but he wasn't sure why. The new life they would welcome had to be a part of it, but there was the feeling that maybe he'd missed something else good that would come from all of this.

“Will she stay with me?” he questioned in a soft whisper.

The witch roused herself from his demon’s arms long enough to give an answer.

No. She came to tell you of the baby, and to set you free. If you love her, never leave her again.

Marc’s grip tightened. He wouldn’t. She’d been faithful to him; she still wanted him. That was all he needed.

2

Angela woke in the one place that she had longed for since the split and stayed still, breathing in Marc’s thick scents, listening to his light snore. The urge to bury her head against his chest and stay here forever was strong, but it wasn’t enough to hold her. She’d already chosen the camp over him and that hadn’t changed. If he wanted to be free, he now was. She slipped from his arms reluctantly.

Angela left his tent a few minutes later. She’d taken the time to say goodbye to Dog, and to thank him for bringing her here.

Reunited with his master, the wolf’s parting words had been much like the bond they’d shared before Marc’s power came between them.

You’ll be with him soon. I’ll be by his side.

Angela walked through the noon light with a blank expression. She didn’t speak to any of the Indians, leaving the way she’d come.

Kendle observed her exit from a nearby tent that the Indians had put up for her. She already knew what choice Marc would make, but over the hours she'd been waiting, Kendle had come to a few conclusions of her own. The biggest was that she didn't love Marc, not the way she had Luke. She needed Marc to keep her sanity. Luke had been in her soul.

“That’s why I’m so dark now. It isn’t the ghosts of the past or the sickness. I miss my mate.”

Kendle’s tears sent her back into the tent.

The Indians on duty upped their bets on who she would belong to when Marc rose.

3

“Marc’s home! Hey! Marc’s back!”

Marc withstood the greetings, the concern and the questions as best he could, rage boiling. There was only one person he wanted right now.

Neil met him at Safe Haven’s gate, but Marc cut him off. “Where is she?”

Neil waved toward the prepping area they’d set up along the mess truck. “She and Adrian are—”

Marc left him at the gate.

The guards were too happy to have him back to think of stopping him from coming through the second wire fence.

Neil hurried to catch up. “What is it?”

Marc didn’t answer.

Neil assumed he was in a hurry to make sure Angela was okay. They'd been apart for almost seven weeks and Neil stayed back, not wanting to interrupt their reunion. *At least we'll have something good come from today.*

Marc spotted those hated, golden spikes and that long, gray and black braid, and increased his pace. He'd been waiting for this, longing for it.

Angela turned around to view the QZ and gasped in surprise at the open, eager tiger that wouldn't ever go into a cage again.

Adrian understood too late.

Thud! Marc snarled at the impact. "That wasn't..."

Kick! "What I meant..."

Punch! "When I said..."

Thud! "To care for her!"

Thud! Marc took a step back. "Get up!"

Adrian spit blood onto the ground and slung the same from his hands. "I did what I thought was..."

Thud!

Adrian's own rage flared to life. "You don't own her!"

Marc's demon eyes were fierce. "You took advantage!"

Adrian spit blood again. "Yes."

Marc paused, still not calming now that he'd drawn Adrian's blood, felt it. "Don't ever touch her again."

“Unless she comes to me.” Adrian looked up confidently. “And we both know that she will. It’s why you’ve got another woman with you.”

Marc’s fist flew out again.

Thud! “Yes, but she wouldn’t if not for your lies and tricks.” Marc grabbed Adrian by the neck. “She’s mine. I don’t share my heart!”

Adrian’s eyes went to Angela. “She does. *You* can’t change that.”

Thud! “No. I can’t.” Marc moved back, happily splattered in Adrian’s blood. “But I can take something from you and return the favor. She’s carrying my daughter.”

Marc smirked at Adrian’s thunderous face. “You’ll only have her when I’m dead.”

Adrian glared at Angela in betrayed accusation as he picked up her thoughts.

She stared back in defiant anger. “You gave me no choice.”

Marc wiped his hands down his jeans. “You can’t come between us now, no matter what services you provide while I’m away.”

Adrian’s eyes lit up with his inner demon for the first time inside Safe Haven’s borders. “I would have waited until it was safe for her, not used it to secure my hold! You’ve put her in danger.”

Marc had the grace to flush. “It wasn’t planned, obviously, but it’s been eight months since her miscarriage. She’ll be fine.”

Adrian spat at Marc's boots. "Ask her why she told you no before, that it would come later. Ask her!"

Marc had a sinking feeling as he studied Angela. "What?"

Angela didn't want to answer. She was scared of the truth. "I'm using a lot of energy. I'll be...tired."

"Tired?" Adrian snorted angrily. "It will consume her, drain her, until she loses it. Our kind has to keep a big reserve because the fetus is more evolved. That's probably what happened to her last child."

Both men glanced around for a common enemy in that area.

Kenn, drawn by the fight, flipped them the finger. "Fuck you assholes. I've got my own upcoming fatherhood to sort out."

Shock came as everyone realized what that meant.

Seizing the opportunity, Adrian congratulated his XO with a bloody hug. "Good job, Grunt!"

Even Marc found himself relieved. Not by Tonya's conception, but by life trying to continue. He went to Angela with a much calmer heart.

"I'm sorry."

Marc's hand went to her soft cheek, nose being assaulted by her missed scent. "I know and it helped, but stop hating yourself now. That's an order."

Angela's tears were unexpected and Marc hugged her close. "I mean it, Angie. I don't blame you. His type of sleaze is hard to fight. They use the truth to trap you."

Angela cried harder, mumbling. Marc had to strain to make out the words. "You what?"

"I was awake." Angela sniffed. "I knew you weren't."

Marc stared in shock. And then burst out laughing. "I love you."

Angela melted into his arms as a wave of purple rippled through the shield above them. "Oh, Marc!"

She'd seen enough of the future to know this was the only thing that could give them peace. Adrian wouldn't break up their happy family and neither would she.

4

"Hey, Smurf-balls."

Kenn's stomach dropped; he slowly turned around. He knew that damn voice.

Thud!

Marc's single shot took the Marine to his knees.

"Stay there and listen."

Kenn didn't even think of arguing. Marc's glaring red orbs held his death.

"You owe a debt to me."

"Yes." Kenn had known it would come to this if Marc survived. "But I still stand by my choice."

“Yeah, you would. To pay off the debt you now owe, you’ll take care of someone and personally make sure that she’s put into place.” Marc shoved into Kenn’s mind and found the shocked Marine on his knees there, too.

As it should be, Marc sent.

Kenn lowered his head further in submission.

Marc withdrew. “She’s in the QZ. You’ll know what I want as soon as you see her.”

Kenn went that way without looking back. He suddenly found himself wishing for the pranks to start up again. Marc’s payback might make them seem fun.

5

Marc’s homecoming spread through camp and drew hundreds of people to where he was standing by the center fire. One arm around Angela’s waist, the other over Charlie’s shoulders, he appeared like a man who was happy to be home. He also looked more like their other leaders than any of the camp or Eagles had noticed before. Maybe it was the new strengths in his tones or the power lurking in his stance that had nothing to do with his Colts for a change. It was hard to pinpoint exactly what had changed, but they were all aware that something had.

The mystery was solved for most of the Eagles as soon as Marc began talking to the chain of command and delivering his own type of updates.

Marc glanced at Neil and Samantha, then Jeremy who stood behind and to the right. “Boys.” Samantha flushed.

Marc gave her a wink and then gazed at Crista. “Not sure. Ask me in a week.”

Crista gave a curt nod, not at all happy to have Jeff find out this way.

Marc delivered a hard tone in response. “It’s time we flooded ourselves with hope. Would you deny them that?”

Scolded, Crista shook her head. “No. I’m sorry.”

Marc moved away from Angela and Charlie. They were both reading his thoughts as he had them, one surprised, the other grateful.

“Girl, maybe two. Hard to tell with the way your heart’s thumping so hard.”

Candy’s face was even more shocked than the people around her.

Marc raised a brow at Angela and she gave her approval silently. *They’re as much yours as mine now. As you would.*

Marc glowed for her, sending heat into her heart. She moaned at the sensation. *Thank you for giving him back to me!*

Marc glanced around. “Would all of the pregnant woman please report to the mess?”

At the last camp meeting, they’d had six. Jennifer had given birth, and one of the others had lost her child to a premature delivery. The camp expected the numbers to be worse now, sure Marc

was about to tell them they needed to lower the age limit again.

Tonya was the first one to react.

Samantha and Crista followed.

Jeff continued to gape, as Neil and Jeremy exchanged suddenly challenging looks. When Becky went toward the mess, Seth's heart dropped.

It's too soon!

Angela gave Marc a soft glance of happiness and took her place.

The camp liked that. It sent a swirl of crimson-killing green and blue through their shield.

Candy's pregnancy was known by a few and didn't cause much stir when she went. Cynthia joining them did.

Kevin instantly guessed who the father was and glowered hatefully.

Cynthia read it, but the response she sent was a shock. *Fuck you.*

Marc viewed Jennifer. "You belong there, with the rest of the new life."

Gathering her courage, Jennifer came to his side. "Does she?"

Marc didn't need his demon to scan the infant. "As much as her mother."

Jennifer grinned happily and went to join the others.

Tracy was the only member of Angela's team who didn't go to the mess. She flushed under the expectant stares. "I'm not."

Eyes went to Charlie.

The teenager chuckled regretfully. “Sorry, but you guys were cramping my style a lot. There wasn’t time for me to knock her up. Wait for it, will ya?”

Laughter exploded across the area.

Marc began searching the crowd. “There are a few more.”

Other parts of Safe Haven’s population began joining Angela’s team, people who didn’t usually draw much notice otherwise. Four more females went to the mess.

Marc waved at the small group. “We’ve already begun to heal. Now, we’ll get a chance at recovery.”

Marc walked toward the twelve females, voice ringing with a leader’s command. “This is our future, what we’ll be fighting for. They belong to us. They cannot be taken or our country ceases to exist. Remember how they look right now.”

Marc lifted his hand and a thick bolt of blue light shot into the air above the mess. It faded into a small shield that came down and settled over the females. Each one of them closed their eyes as his energy sank in. It was eerie, the way they arched in tandem, some of them groaning. Marc drove in the point by using the other hand to hit Angela directly with his light.

Angela felt the heat all over her, but it concentrated mostly on her stomach. Starving for him, she drank greedily.

The camp watched her hair become solid black again, her lines and weary face tightening in the

smooth beauty that she'd come to them with. Health glowed from her like a flame as Marc slowly let go of both connections.

Every one of the women flinched or groaned in protest, including his soul mate.

"They need your energy. Laughter is the best way to give it to them. Tell a joke and offer them a snack. Help them provide the next generation."

Kendle watched from a distance, escorted by Quinn. Her face was emotionless.

Adrian used the moment to take two of the expectant fathers aside. His words to Seth were short. "You just saw how to keep her healthy."

Seth's face was hard. He would shove her full.

"Good. Go do rounds. We're vulnerable right now with so many of us in one place." Adrian turned to Kevin. "FND."

Kevin was furious. "I won't do it!"

Adrian grew angry. "You weren't even in the picture and she just found out. Shut up and listen."

Kevin glared.

Adrian shoved into his mind. *This is the only chance you'll get to have a child.*

The reminder was a harsh blow and Kevin didn't know how to react. When John had confirmed it, he'd been glad. Cynthia hadn't wanted kids. He had, a little, but it had been okay because he got to concentrate on his place in camp.

"She'll be alone for about two minutes. You're not the only one who picked up too much radiation since the war." Adrian left him with that thought.

The couple would work the rest of it out on their own and he would only interfere if he had to. It wasn't the first time he'd gifted someone this way, but it would probably be the easiest. Never being around those children, not knowing if they'd lived, had hurt him over and over.

Adrian spotted Neil and Jeremy exchanging nasty glares, but before he could do anything, Marc handled it.

“Samantha?”

Neil and Jeremy turned that way as soon as Marc said her name, hoping to learn who the father was.

Marc locked eyes with the happy blonde. “You know what’s coming.”

“I’ve been hoping for that.” Sam’s face was flushed in satisfaction. *Marc tastes good!*

Marc glanced at Neil, then Jeremy. “One each. Sons. Congratulations.”

“Superfecundation is the medical term.” Angela gravitated to Marc’s side. “I believe it happened because you secretly longed for it and so did they.”

Samantha went to her shocked men. “You wanted this? She can’t be right.”

Jeremy cleared his throat, embarrassed and uneasy to admit it in front of so many people. “I hoped if you were carrying my baby, you’d keep me around.”

Neil snorted angrily. “What a cheap trick!”

“What about you?” Jeremy accused. “I didn’t hear you telling her no.”

Neil had to grin. "I'm not stupid. I had the same thought, I just didn't wish for it."

"Liar." Sam let it fly gently. "You were hoping I would pick you, instead of only securing a place with me."

Neil had the grace to flush.

Samantha gave them both the lay of things. "I wanted this to happen. Now, you'll both be equal and I'll be happy with our family. I...I love you guys. Please don't rip us apart."

Neil caved first. Besides his obsession with her, he'd longed for a child of his own before the war. He hadn't thought it would ever happen now. "Whatever you need, Sammi."

She looked to Jeremy.

The Eagle surrendered. "Sure, Sam."

She heard his thought and let him know it wasn't true. "I don't feel sorry for you; I didn't do this out of pity." She ran a loving hand over his cheek. "I need you."

Jeremy tried to allow himself to believe it. He took her into his arms and rested his head on hers. "I don't know why, but I'm here as long as you feel that way."

Sam reached out and Neil's hand was there. "We're going to be together for a long time." she pulled Neil closer.

When Neil's hand went around her waist to rest on her stomach, Jeremy slid his own hand over to make room.

Samantha showered both men in her love. This was what she'd needed before the war, what would have been so wrong. *Thank you.*

It was my honor.

Sam gasped, making both men recoil in concern. It was the first time she'd heard that voice inside and it was a moment she wouldn't forget.

"Are you all right?"

Samantha gave a slightly embarrassed smile. "I'm hungry."

Both males chuckled and led her toward the crowded mess.

6

Marc spent his first hour back in camp on rounds. Everyone was eager to bring him up to speed, but he also knew they wanted to be close to him. Some of them were friends he'd missed. Some were camp members who were hoping for details on someone who hadn't returned, and even more wanted battle details. However, the bulk of them simply felt his new openness, his light, and couldn't stay away.

It's like I'm Adrian. Marc sent that bruised man an ugly glower as he walked by.

"Go to hell!" Adrian swore, not stopping.

Marc smirked violently. "Just got back. Reserved you a slot."

Adrian stifled the amusement and the rage in favor of truth. "Then you know it isn't over."

Marc did and didn't toss another barb. The battles that were coming were going to make this long fight feel like a rehearsal. Jax had called again to tell them the planes were still coming, dropping troops, and leaving. Marc assumed the base would hold another full battalion when it was all said and done. He also thought they would keep the base as a command center. There were enough undamaged bunks and buildings on the property to house most of the troops, but command would want them to toughen up anyway before the final battles. They'd be given standard equipment and told to rough it until they got the base in working order. Once that happened, the plans to conquer Safe Haven would restart.

“Welcome back!”

Marc turned to find himself caught up in a massive bear hug.

Doug shook him happily. “Hiya!”

Marc chortled as Doug set him down. “Same to you. How are you, man?”

Doug's quick flinch said more than Marc needed.

“Good. What about you?”

Marc understood that Doug didn't want Angela to know, but those days were over. “If you don't tell her, I will.”

Doug's happy face twisted into fear and guilt as Marc placed a hand on his wrist. “We all have things that hold us back. She won't take your place over it.”

Doug had to be satisfied with that. As he left, he had to admit that not having a choice certainly made it easier.

Doug detoured to the mess, where Peggy was helping Li Sing serve the mothers-to-be. She had to know first. After that, he'd go visit the doctor and get the confirmation he'd been dreading.

Marc approved the choice and kept quiet as Kevin came to him. Their radioman/personal assistant was in total confusion and Marc let him gather himself, figuring out what he needed the most.

“Does she love me?”

“Of course.”

“But...”

Marc gestured toward the lone female doing cool down laps on the gate course. “She’s scared you don’t want her now. Do you?”

“I don’t know about caring for another man’s child.”

“Especially while he’s around.”

Kevin’s face turned cold. “I’m not convinced it isn’t Matt’s.”

“Why does it matter?”

“Respect.”

Marc understood that, but he couldn’t ease Kevin’s fears without him missing the lesson he had to learn here. “What if you had adopted? His words about your condition weren’t a lie, right?”

The pain of it stung Kevin again. “No. I can’t have children because of the war.”

“What if you adopted?”

“Not the same.”

“It could be. You determine those lines, Eagle. If you want a family, you now have one. There are men here who would kill for that.”

“But not his!” Kevin argued in frustration. “Matt was a traitor and Adrian will be here, watching everything we do! How can I be a father like that?”

Marc began to understand what his new role in camp would be; he embraced it fully. “With love. The baby isn’t to blame. No one is for this one, except maybe fate. Neither of them expected it. He was as surprised as you when she joined the others.”

Kevin couldn’t argue that. Adrian’s voice had been as if he’d taken a blow. “Does he want it...her?”

Marc nearly growled. “No!”

Kevin understood. “He’s got his sights on one woman now and he’ll give up anything to get her.”

Marc gave a curt glare. “He already has been. *You* have nothing to worry about.” Marc put a hand on Kevin’s wrist and sent a blast of light into his soul. “She wants this. Deep down, so do you. Don’t let the circumstances ruin your future.”

Kevin didn’t follow when Marc moved away.

The crowd left him alone as they trailed their Ghost.

Was that all true? If Adrian wasn’t planning on interfering at all, it could work.

Cynthia gawked at him as she went around the nearest part of the gate and Kevin reluctantly took in her worry and her glow of happiness. She was probably having Adrian's child. Could he handle that?

Cynthia flinched at the mental question and turned away. She wasn't sure she could handle it yet, but her choice had been made when she'd begun to change. The pregnancy was just the next part of it all. She was one of *them* now and this would cement it. If Kevin couldn't get on board, others here would look at it as an honor.

Cynthia began to jog again. When a small group of single Eagles joined her, she allowed them to stay close and talk. She didn't want any of them. She didn't even want Adrian and that was a shock. She wanted Kevin, but if she couldn't have him, one of these men would do. They were all good for the job of father.

Kevin watched the males gravitate toward Cynthia. She was one of two pregnant females without a mate. Kevin scowled as some of the younger men even began surrounding Candy. Adrian hadn't been far off. It had been half an hour, not two minutes, but the men already understood that Kevin was about to pass on that duty. None of them would care that it was Adrian's child. In fact, that was a bonus. Caring for the boss's baby would be considered an honor to many people here, male and female. "What am I doing?"

“Picking the choice that’s best for you.” Charlie came to his side. Tracy was still arm-in-arm with him.

Kevin studied the young couple openly. She’d been a whore and Angela’s son thought she was worthy. Would he still have felt that way if Tracy had come up pregnant by one of her... friends?

Charlie’s eyes blazed crimson for an instant before he pulled it in. “It would be hard. But it would have been before me, so how could I blame her?”

Kevin got the point again, but it didn’t change anything. He wasn’t sure he could do this. He left them standing there, going to the QZ. *Maybe it’s time to split.*

7

“I’m sorry I hadn’t already told you.”

Jeff glanced up from the kit he was working on. “How long?”

Crista flushed. “About a week. I haven’t... I wasn’t...”

Jeff understood she hadn’t known how he would react; he wasn’t angry about that. “When?”

Her voice came easier. “Around May. I haven’t seen the doctor yet.”

“He’ll be busy today. I’ll set you up an appointment over the next week or so.”

Crista wasn’t sure what that meant. “Thank you.”

Jeff heard her confusion, but his own was louder. He chose to be honest. "I'm not sure how I feel yet. I'm not pissed or anything, but I need to work it out in my mind."

"Don't you think we should work it out together?" Crista asked sharply.

"No. You've had a week to run it through. I need to do the same."

A tear slipped down her cheek. She turned away without saying anything else. It wasn't the reaction that she'd hoped for. Marc had ruined it.

Jeff watched her vanish under the canopy of the mess and sighed. He didn't want her to be upset, but she had to know this was a shock.

Why? You didn't pull out.

Jeff forgot to breathe. Where had that voice come from?

Laughter rolled through his mind, the kind that said life was beautiful and he was crazy to deny it.

Jeff's revelation came at the same time as Seth's.

Seth was enjoying the sight of Becky smiling and eating with the other women; her quick looks at his face were the only signs she was worried. Was it for herself? Seth didn't think so. She was worried that he was angry, but how could he be? This child was his and they both wanted it...didn't they?

Seth left the mess.

"You need to talk to him." Jennifer watched Seth go to Marc. She was sitting next to Becky.

“He needs time to be sure he wants this. I won’t push him.”

Jennifer snorted out amusement. “Really? Cause he’s thinking the same thing about you.”

Instead of going to him like Jennifer expected, Becky leaned closer. “How much does it hurt?”

Jennifer denied the delay. “Go talk to him, will ya? We’ve got plenty of time to scare everyone about the pain of childbirth.”

Becky went to her mate.

Jennifer felt Kyle staring at her and understood her time for picking and easing fears had also come.

She went to the tent area and began speaking with the guard on duty. When she left, Kyle gradually made his way over.

Zack didn’t make Kyle suffer. “Congratulations. She asked for a couple’s tent.”

Kyle’s stunned happiness sent calming blue through the shield. He immediately went to get one and erect it. His world had healed itself and the emotions were infectious as he crossed camp. He clapped shoulders and tossed jokes, spreading his happiness through the people.

It wasn’t hard to guess what had caused it when they saw Jennifer’s matching glow. Another of Safe Haven’s problems was over. It was a good day for the camp. Marc’s return had given them new life, in more ways than just the obvious.

Angela observed the peace and contentment flowing over her camp in gratitude. It had been a hard first battle, but they'd survived it, and now, they were stronger. Marc's power had grown into the equal of Adrian's and he would continue to evolve, as would she.

Her hand slid down to caress the small bump she imagined was there. "Momma loves you," she cooed, unable to help herself. This was all she'd longed for and more.

Marc placed warm hands on her shoulders.

Angela leaned against his heat, lids closing. "Nice, Marc."

Marc sent the energy into her in a thick stream, heart settling into a rhythm of need and respect. "I love you."

Angela turned in his embrace and made him demonstrate how much.

Across the camp, Adrian slid to his knees at the pain of their love on display. Some of it was in his heart, but most of it was in his arm and chest. He took shallow breaths as it increased.

Unable to feel his need, Angela led Marc to their tent.

Adrian slumped to the ground.

Angie!

Silence.

The pain tightened around his heart. Adrian drifted into the darkness alone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Close

1

Kenn ducked into the medical tent and went to Adrian's side. "You awake, Boss?"

Adrian didn't open his eyes. What was the point?

Adrian heard other, lighter steps, but he didn't feel like meeting any of their new arrivals.

"Marc has soldiers out there. He's getting ready to bring them in."

Adrian didn't care. It wasn't a great idea, but he was sure Marc knew what he was doing.

Kenn tried again. "The Indians want to come in, too, since he's here. They've grown attached."

Adrian felt his heart tightening and looked up.

Kendle stared at Adrian in surprise. She was in the chair by his bed. She hadn't cared about him at all until his eyes had met hers and the ground rattled.

What's up with that?

"This is Kendle. Marc wants *you* to see to her, blend her in and—"

"No." Adrian turned his head, understanding now what awful plan Marc had created.

"He said do it or get out."

Adrian opened his mouth to say he'd leave, causing Kendle to shift in embarrassment. It sent her smell over the cot.

Adrian froze in pain. "Even the scent, huh? Bastard."

Kendle flushed. Marc had told her everything this morning, including his plan to give her to Adrian, but she hadn't had the strength to fight. She was so lost, so confused!

Adrian read it all; it was impossible not to feel her pain. Here was another warrior who would dream of Marc at night.

"It's what Kevin will think too." Kenn read it on Adrian's face. "Not true in either case, though." Kenn stood up, giving Kendle a polite nod. "I'll come for you in a bit. Don't let him go to sleep yet. Doctor's orders."

"Okay." Kendle didn't want this. Being handed around to men who didn't need her was humiliating. She gave Adrian a sharp glare. "He's gone. Tell me what the hell I'm supposed to do here!"

Adrian blinked at the rage in her tone, picking up the need and the fear. "*What* are you?"

Kendle's sigh sank into Adrian's heart against his will.

"A danger to everyone. I'm a Rage Walker."

Adrian saw how that could be true, but it wasn't until she let her crimson show that he fully understood how devious Marc was. "You're a descendant."

Kendle sneered defensively. "So are you."

Adrian was startled into awareness of her fire. She had heat pouring off her in waves.

“I haven’t...killed in a while.” She was hearing his thoughts much clearer than she ever had Marc’s. “It strains my control.”

Adrian carefully pushed himself up, but he stayed quiet as he read her thoughts.

She didn’t try to keep him out, but Adrian didn’t go into her crypt. That was too personal for a first meeting.

“Why?” Kendle sneered hatefully. “You might as well have it all!” She shoved the images at him, not afraid of his displeasure.

Adrian felt something shift inside. She did need to be cared for and he needed a reason to stay alive. *Is this enough?*

Kendle shrugged hatefully. “I don’t think so. You’re not *him*.”

“And you’re not *her*!” Adrian fired back, stung.

They stared for another minute in defiance of the plans made for them, but it was an act and they both knew it. The comfort they had to have to survive was here and able, if not entirely willing.

“We could help each other.”

Kendle crossed her arms over her chest. “Maybe.”

Adrian liked her stubbornness. “You’ll let Kenn know?”

Kendle stood up. “If I choose to be your toy, I’ll tell you first.”

The bitterness in those words made Adrian grab her wrist. He started to say he would be as good to her as he could and was silenced by the power of the connection.

Kendle contemplated his hand, unable to fight the light in his touch. It reminded her so strongly of Luke that tears welled. She jerked her arm away. “Never without permission!”

Adrian’s heart squeezed inside his chest again. “Not at all, if you’d rather. I can help without it going that far. I’ve done it for most of the women here and only a few of them have shared my bed.”

That wasn’t what she’d expected. Kendle lingered, not sure what to say.

Adrian carefully took her hand again. He didn’t speak with his mouth, but shot with his mind.

Kendle flinched at the power held in tight control.

Friends to start.

Kendle was so lonely that she couldn’t fight the inviting tone. She gave a quick nod and left the tent.

Adrian lay down, plans in a spin. Marc had given him a substitute. *Will I take it?*

That answer was already written in the stars, he suspected. Even now, the scent of vanilla that Kendle had left was easing his pain. Angela hadn’t come to see him, only to check with the doctor on his condition. She hadn’t even glanced at him, like he didn’t exist for her now.

You don’t, his demon stated. But this one needs you.

Adrian knew that to be true, but the choice to take Kendle in Angela's place was one that he couldn't make. "I'll help her, but I won't love. I can't give her what I don't feel."

You might...in time.

Adrian's pain slammed back into them with the force of a tornado and the demon fell silent. His host was busy locking himself off from all emotions, trying to become immune. The demon would help with that, but the door would never fully shut. That image of being with Angie, of caring for her and Marc's daughter, would remain pristine in his memory.

2

Jeremy jerked out of the light doze he'd fallen into after the second hour. He was waiting with everyone else for a doctor checkup. Samantha had long since crashed against his arm.

Jeremy shivered, noticing they were almost alone. Cynthia was the only other one still here now, and she appeared so lonely that it was almost enough to pull Jeremy from his nightmare. Then his training kicked in; he gently shifted Samantha's head to the chair and got up.

He motioned to the reporter. "Watch her, will ya?"

Cynthia moved that way.

Jeremy went to find Neil. He'd had a dream from hell that was probably nothing, but they couldn't take chances.

Neil listened closely, gut tightening with each sentence. If that happened, any of it, they wouldn't stand a chance.

"You have to help me. Convince her to give me the last two numbers. We'll be able to *see* what they're planning for us."

Neil hated the idea of anyone having access to the internet again. He considered it to have played a large role in their downfall, but duty spoke louder than personal feelings. "You think we can do some hacking?"

Jeremy grinned a bit. "I thought I'd try my hand at it. You could take my shifts with Sam while I work."

Neil realized how serious Jeremy was then and let out a sigh. "Just stay with us and we'll work on her together. It's what she wants anyway."

Jeremy didn't hesitate, though he expected it to be painful. "I'll get my gear. You'll tell her?"

Neil snorted. "No. She doesn't tell us everything. Let's surprise her with this one."

The image made Jeremy laugh.

The two men felt it at the same time, the sense of coming together. It hadn't been like that since before Samantha had come into their lives. They'd missed the friendship.

“Wanna get a beer later? She’ll graze for a while, right?”

Neil was still chuckling. “I hope so. If we don’t keep her weight up, one of the other men will try to move in.”

Jeremy didn’t think that was funny. “Have you noticed the way they’re treating the breeders already?”

“Yes. Marc’s a genius.”

“I believe so too. He’s changed.”

“You think?” Neil asked, but there wasn’t any real sarcasm in the reply. They were now locked into their destiny, and it was something of a comfort to have each other still. Neither man had thought that would be possible.

“Twins.”

Neil chuckled again. “We’ll be busy. It’s probably for the best that she wants us both.”

Jeremy hadn’t thought to ever hear that, but he agreed. Everything had changed.

“Come on, let’s go talk to Marc about your idea. If he says no, we’ll let it go. Agreed?”

“Yes.” Jeremy trusted Marc more than he trusted Adrian.

It might have been a shock to find out how many people felt that way.

3

“No more lies now.” Angela scanned her Eagles as they gathered around her for a mini-meeting.

“Cold, hard truth is the best way to be ruthless. It allows for no prisoners.”

Angela forked a thumb at the mountains they had finally reached. “We’ll be in our place as of dawn. We’ll set up as fast as we can. We have Jax and his group still observing the base, so we’ll know when they’re coming.” She looked around the tables. “We may all die when they come, but it will be with honor, fighting for our freedom.” She turned to the man at her side. “Marc will lead us through that.”

There was no argument from any of them. In a few months, they would need a new leader to ease her burden. Marc had been gifted with that honor. The Eagles were pleased. So was most of the camp. They still loved Adrian; they just trusted Marc more.

So was Angela, but inside, there was a tiny part of her soul that wasn’t lightening with Marc’s return or his energy. It was a door now marked with Adrian’s name and it rattled in a desperate reminder of how close they’d become.

I love him, she admitted to herself. *As much as I do Marc.*

It was hard to hear from herself, but Angela forced the rest of it out, as well. Adrian would come to care for Kendle. She was both anticipating it and loathing it. When Adrian had told Marc a month’s grieving period was all the time he needed to get inside her heart, he’d been exaggerating. It hadn’t taken nearly that long and she already wasn’t sure

how she would be able to stand watching Adrian love anyone else. He was hers.

4

As sunrise began to lighten the giant mountain peaks around Safe Haven, brown envelopes were delivered to nearly every member of camp, and then to people in the camps alongside theirs. The warmly dressed people here now numbered nearly one thousand, roughly the same as the force coming for them, though the young and elderly had been included in Angela's count. The soldiers wouldn't have those weaker people in their ranks. They also wouldn't expect Safe Haven to use theirs.

Normally there might have been jokes about plain brown envelopes being quietly delivered to everyone, but not now. In those packages was life for some and death for many others. No one wanted to receive them; it was fitting that they were being handed out during a chilly predawn drizzle.

These packages were Angela's plan in a hundred small pieces, so divided to keep anyone from having enough parts to stop her. The Eagles delivered each one carefully into the hands it was intended for. The directive was to wait until the date and time written on the front of the envelope, then open it and follow the orders inside. Nearly every package was dated for Labor Day. The missions had been chosen and delivered, the people were

prepared as much as they could be, and now, war would roll their way once more.

The End of Book 4

What would you like to do now?



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Deleted Scenes

“You’re tired.”

He nodded, not opening his eyes, but he could feel the fresh adrenaline pumping into his system at her nearness. She’d stayed away from all of them for the last weeks. Was she feeling it yet? That pull kept him awake at night, wondering if she had forgotten his words.

“No.”

“No, you don’t feel it or no, you haven’t forgotten?”

Angie snorted. “Like the dreams would let me forget.”

He didn’t respond to that, not sure what to say. His had stopped. Did that mean something?

“It means you’ve accepted that we’re being driven together. I haven’t.”

“It’s easy for me. As far as I’m concerned, there isn’t a woman who can compare to what you’ve become.”

His words made her feel like she had made progress, that she was doing good, but Angela forced herself to stay quiet. She didn’t want to encourage him by saying she felt the same about him.

“It’s meant to be.”

She glowered. “You don’t know that. There’s no proof that soul mates exist.”

“Don’t think they do, not the way you mean. I believe we’re not meant to mate for life. Some do, but for most, we’re meant to be with more than one person.”

She raised a brow. “You can’t mean that.”

“I do. It’s propagation of the species. Each season, the younger, stronger bull has a chance to take over the herd. It’s the way it’s always been.”

“And what happens to the ousted male?”

“He’s driven out and dies alone.”

She scowled at that, even though she’d known it was coming. “Not fair.”

“People can be more civilized.”

Angela stiffened, sure he was about to try to get to her again. “And what do you mean by that?”

“I mean that the bull doesn’t have to die alone or be driven out. If he can find something else to hold him.”

Understanding flooded into her face. “You mean someone else.”

“Yes. Tell me. What does his future hold?”

She didn’t want to answer, but his tone demanded it, and the witch answered for her.

“Only him in the waves, holding someone.” She sent him a flash of the dark haired woman in Marc’s wet arms as heavy waves lapped them.

Adrian felt his relief rise up and the rest of his plans fall into place. That was it. So close, he hadn’t been able to see it.

Angela watched him, almost able to smell the burning of his mind. She actually felt the last of the pieces slam into place. She didn't need the sight to know it revolved around her. She met his eye. "Be careful planning my future, Adrian Mitchel!"

His tone was grave. "With yours and everyone else's, but plan them, I will. It's what I do."

Deleted Scene #2

“Were you always a Marine?”

Marc frowned at the question as Kendle joined him. “Yes.”

“Signed up as a teenager?”

“Let’s say that.” He grunted, glaring toward the East. “Why?”

“Just conversation.”

They’d been hiding, waiting for the soldiers to come through for what felt like hours to Kendle. Being inside the ground was a horrible strain on her.

“What were you? Before?”

“A fallen star.”

“You’re Sabrina Roberts. I’ve seen that show, seen you.” He viewed her suspiciously as the other men muttered and murmured, clearly listening. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I’m not that person anymore. I’ve changed.”

“For the better?”

“It’s too soon to tell.” Kendle’s tone was miserable. “What about you? Better now or before the war?”

“Now,” he answered without hesitation. “I was nothing before.”

Kendle’s tone was thoughtful. “I thought my life was perfect. Now I can spot the flaws, the cracks I had to fill, and I keep wondering why I even

bothered to survive at all. The ocean could have taken me. Would have been better for the future.”

Marc didn't like her anxiety. “You were good. You taught people things with that show.”

“I got off on the thrill. I could have done so much more.”

“That's true of us all, Kendle. The best you can do is make up for it. You know that?”

Kendle settled onto her bedroll. “Yes, I do. I'm where I'm supposed to be. I feel that strongly.”

“So do I.” Marc moved to their spy hole. “So do I.” A quick look confirmed it would be a while yet and Marc took up a post near her, mind constantly spinning on one thing—The fastest way to do damage and get home to his heart. “Where was your group from?”

Kendle sighed, thinking of the warm, tropical breezes she'd left behind. “Luke and I flew here from the south. The others were a traveling store that stopped to take our plane. They tried to help Luke, but none of us had any idea what to do. When he got better, we were all relieved. He was too weak for us to be on our own though, and the store clerks liked our stories of the island. They camped with us to let Luke regain his strength and then we stayed with them as they came west.”

“Luke wasn't recovered.”

“No. The disease is hard to predict. I'm assuming it mutated, because what we dealt with on the island was merciless. Luke should have been driven insane in that couple of weeks. This stuff

made him angry, but he was controlling it, learning to handle the rages. I thought he would beat it.” Kendle shuddered in revulsion. “One of the clerks cut her hand while cooking and Luke saw it. He…”

“Snapped.” Marc had only seen a couple of the victims of the newest gut wrenching disease, but it had been enough to make him wary.

“Yes. He infected two of them. I...I shot him that night, when he begged me to.”

“And the others?”

Kendle trembled, but Marc saw her strength, too. This was a hard, cold bitch when crossed.

“They couldn’t control themselves as the disease sank in. They infected each other.” Kendle responded angrily in defense. “I went behind them, cleaned up their messes, and then I killed them.”

“Why haven’t you snapped? You’ve been carrying it longer than him, right?” Kendle’s body went into a freeze that Marc recognized and loathed. “You were hurt first.”

“Yes. But I’m stronger than Ethan. He can’t win.”

Marc also realized she was still wrestling those demons and his concern grew. “How did your man become infected?”

“We fought the ghosts.” Kendle moaned lowly, hating to face those memories. “I didn’t know he’d been hurt until we were in the air.”

“And you’re sure you aren’t contagious?”

“Yes.”

The tone and his sharp mind put it together. “You have snapped.”

Kendle was instantly filled with remorse. “Long before we came here. Luke was trying to help. He moved too fast and I...”

“Couldn’t stop yourself.”

“I’ll still stay away from your men as much as I can.”

Marc let her know what type of plans he was making around her. “Too bad you can’t infect the enemy.”

Kendle didn’t care. She’d already wished for the same thing, but common sense had kept her from trying to make any type of a plan like that. If she let this disease loose, how would she pull it back?

Marc had more questions, but he was stopped by the sound of hooves pounding on the pavement above them.

Marc scanned the new riders. “From... Montana.” He used his grid to map their trail. It was another extremely useful skill he’d recently discovered. “They’re okay. Let them join.”

Marc’s choice wasn’t questioned, even though he now had natural enemies together in close proximity. He would lead them to victory against the soldiers. It was the only grievance that they had time for.

Deleted Scene #3

“Come for an update?” John asked as Angela ducked inside the tent.

“Only one. Got a minute?”

He followed her outside, into the shadows, and pulled off his gloves.

“Whose update?”

“Yours.”

John grimaced. “I hurt.”

She nodded sympathetically. “I’d like to push it back again.”

He gave his agreement slowly, but with gratitude. “I’d never ask...”

“I know that. We need you, John. I’ll stop by when it’s quieter.”

“Bring that stubborn gut shot patient with you. He’s avoiding his checkup.”

“He doesn’t want you to clear him yet.”

“I won’t until *you* say it’s time.” His words were low; he turned before she could respond.

Angela was heartened by the support she was receiving, but also concerned. Adrian needed to get back in charge and let her fall in line behind him before there was too much damage to his leadership to be repaired.

“You okay?”

Angela grunted tiredly at Seth’s question. He was her shadow today. She’d kept him busy as she

continuously moved through camp. “I’ll be better when he takes back over.”

“Angie.”

“No.”

After a quick scan to verify the coast was clear, Seth leaned in. “We like you in charge. You’re good at it.”

Angela sighed. “I know how the Eagles feel and I’m honored, but I don’t want to talk about what happens when Adrian’s back where he belongs. I don’t...fit.”

Seth listened to instinct. “You’ll lead together.”

“I didn’t ask for this.”

“I did, and I don’t regret that choice. Fairly sure you don’t either.”

“No. I’m helping my people...and him. I have to help. I owe him so much.”

“As do we all. Some of us just have more to give.”

“The Runners.”

“Adrian’s Runners.”

Angela smiled ruefully. “Yes, I am that now.”

Seth didn’t speak his mind any further, but Angela could have been deaf and she would have still heard him.

You’re also in love with two men. Try to make peace with it if you can. We need them both as much as we do you.

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Book 5



Fight for Survival

1

“This is Safe Haven Refugee Camp. Is anyone there?” Kevin paused to let answers come, but there was silence in the chilly morning air. He tugged his scarf closer to his cheeks and tried again. “Hello? This is Safe Haven. We are at Lookout Mountain. Can anyone hear me?”

The radio crackled empty in response.

Kevin hung up the mike, worrying. “Been that way since midnight. Not a word.”

Marc reached in and flipped the channel to one that they hadn't used since Little Rock. He concentrated on the humming static, aware of the rest of the large camp behind him that was already awake and preparing. Knives clanked, guns fired, men and women grunted. It was soothing to the former Marine.

Safe Haven had lost dozens of men and the same was true of the camps around theirs. Their ratio had been 4 to 1, but the toll was the same. Many of their best fighters were gone now. Second string was about to win or lose the game. Training on this rough terrain for the last couple of weeks had been genius on Angela's part. "They're probably jamming us on long range."

Kevin didn't relax. "Are we ready for it?"

"No one ever is." Marc's tone was grim. "Unless you're doing the attacking. It's different from that side."

The planes had stopped bringing soldiers to the base, but there was a large force there now, waiting for what? Only Angela knew for sure, but Marc thought it was for orders. They hadn't had a man at the base who could handle Safe Haven. The envelopes being delivered and the radio going cold at the same time wasn't a coincidence.

"Will we win?" Kevin dropped his head. He hadn't wanted to let that question out. Too many people were already asking it.

Marc zipped up his leather coat and left without responding. It was a lie that he hadn't been able to

say yet, not even to Angela. Right now, he still didn't think so. They were outnumbered and piecing together a secondary army of tailors, typists, and traders with treasure hunted weapons. The odds certainly *weren't* in their favor.

Marc snickered tiredly at his mental joke and allowed himself to be drawn to the firing range despite promising not to interfere with how much Angela was doing. Living here was an adjustment. She was doing well.

Marc observed from behind the barrels of gunpowder as Angela roughly shoved a rookie.

"You don't touch the guns yet. This is the second time I've said it. Do it a third and you're out!"

Marc winced at the shrill snap, but the men around her nodded their agreement. She had a different style of working with people. She was hands-on, in their face as much as any drill sergeant he'd ever known, but she had the power to enforce every threat she made. It was something people knew even without her Eagle detail.

That group of guards on her was excessive, but Marc had refused to cave to her pouting when he'd doubled it. She wasn't just his light. She was the light of this camp and she would be safe above everything else. If they lost her, Safe Haven would be deserted in a few hours.

"We won't." Adrian answered the thought from behind Marc, keeping his distance. It had only been a few days since Marc's return. Adrian's bruises

were still bright, condemning. He had been released from the medical tent last night, wrapped in a blanket and wearing paper slippers. As he'd gone to his own canvas, alone, Adrian had vowed to survive. Angela had given him work and he would do it. He hadn't expected her plans to include him.

Neither had Marc. "What do you need?!" He hated it that Adrian's heart attack had interrupted his plans for their former leader. The need to punish this man hadn't faded after hitting him a few times. In fact, it was stronger.

Adrian's lips thinned into a hard line as he waited for Marc to look at him. When he finally did, Adrian grinned happily through the healing wounds on his mouth. "I'm supposed to distract you for a minute."

Marc scowled, fists clenching. "From what?"

Behind him, a loud cheer and clapping echoed.

"From that." Adrian waited calmly for Marc's reaction. He would push the wolfman now, while he could, and enjoy every second of it.

Marc turned around to see a line of rookies clumsily rolling and firing. None of them did it through the entire course, but the trainer clearly had. "Did she ask you to do it?"

"It was on my list." Adrian chuckled bitterly. "And it wasn't a request."

Soothed on that front, Marc shrugged. "Tell her you were successful. I missed it."

"She meant in a way that you wouldn't ride her ass about it later."

“Then you didn’t do so well.”

“Yeah.” Adrian smirked, lifting the collar of his Eagle jacket. “Sorry about that.” He moved away with a satisfied step.

Marc let him go. Whatever plans their former leader had, he was ready for it. Marc pretended he hadn’t noticed the loud cheer as he studied his mate.

“Wait. Do a press check.” Angela pulled her own weapon and demonstrated to a different rookie, Kip, in the group she was instructing. “Pull it back a little and make sure there’s a round chambered. You’ll stop popping shells all over the place.”

Marc appeared to be concentrating on their perimeter, but he was narrowed in on Angela’s graying hair and her flushed, scarred skin. He wanted some alone time.

Will you waste it scolding her?

Marc smiled at his demon’s query. “Maybe. She’s reckless.”

The witch has her under control.

Marc actually laughed aloud and drew attention from those closest. He waved them on as he went back to his mental conversation. *No one has my Angie under control.*

Sounds like you approve. That didn’t used to be the case.

Marc’s good humor faded instantly. *I understand why now. How can any of us hold all this inside and not be wild? I had my time in the Corps. She’s having hers here.*

Dangerous for your child.

Marc stopped responding.

The demon faded. Marc hadn't asked yet about Adrian's words on Angela's health, but he would. The demon could feel it coming.

Marc continued his rounds, pointing his mind toward the bigger picture. He didn't have time to stress over the baby. He had hundreds of souls that needed care. All the groups he'd fought with had come and then more. Their families and friends were pouring in.

"Until yesterday, anyway." Marc frowned, thinking about the silent radio. They'd assumed the government would shut down communications, but he hadn't expected it so soon.

One of the Eagles is a Ham man. He'll be able to verify it, the demon offered.

Marc allowed his thoughts to flow as he moved by the mess. It was full, like usual. When people weren't eating, they gathered to draw strength and compare new feats. If he could get them to show that type of bonding during training, they might have a chance, but these men and women all had their own ways of doing things. Getting them to cooperate or compromise was beyond hard. The number of fights kept growing.

They're scared, the demon said.

"So am I."

Good. You'll survive.

Angela's snarl floated over the camp, drawing his attention for a moment. The sound was enough

to speed up his heart. “So will she. So will this camp. I’ll find a way.”

The demon didn’t argue. He hadn’t found a way and neither had Angela’s witch, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t one. He was spending a lot of time searching for anything that might help. He wouldn’t give up until the last second, but then he and the witch had their own plans to follow. Marc and Angela might be willing to give their lives in this freedom fight, but both the witch and the demon had agreed that even an existence in captivity was better than being forced out. Searching the world for another compatible person might take decades now, if it happened at all. Their current hosts had to live.

3

“Here’s your schedule for today.” Kenn handed the paper to Kendle as she stood in line for the bathroom.

Kendle read it with a scowl. She hadn’t expected one of those all-important envelopes, and one hadn’t been delivered. “I’m not a cook.”

“You’re an eater, right?” Kenn was low on patience. “Pull your weight.”

“Fuck you!”

Kenn shrugged, eyeing Tonya, who was in line nearby at the showers. “If you think that’ll help your attitude.”

Kendle didn’t want to laugh and managed not to. “Tell her I’m not doing it.”

“You tell her!” Kenn shouted, losing his patience. “Where the hell did Marc find you?!”

“Standing on her husband’s grave.” Marc came up behind them. He’d just left the bathroom that Kendle was in line for. “Have some sympathy. She survived being eaten alive. Could you?”

Kenn blanched. He thought to offer compassion, but Kendle was already storming away. Kenn trailed her, thinking he should probably apologize or Angela might make him pay for it later. Kenn followed the castaway around the rear of the bathrooms and into the main camp. *What is she doing?*

It took Kenn a minute to figure out that she was stalking someone. When he saw who it was, the Marine quickly caught up.

“Not a good idea.” Kenn slowed Kendle down with a firm hand on her arm. Angela was out here, with her gun in hand!

Too late, Marc warned from ahead of them. He didn’t return for the fight that Kenn was sure was coming. Marc knew better. Kendle wasn’t stupid, just obsessed.

Kenn let go of her arm as he realized the two women were now face-to-face. Angela had answered the challenge in Kendle’s thoughts.

“Be careful,” Kenn warned.

Angela was staring with crimson orbs, promising silently that she was capable of everything Kendle had already suffered and more.

“Fine!” Kendle snapped, detouring for the mess instead of tracking Marc.

Kenn gave Angela an exasperated glower before heading after Kendle. Angela knew Kendle had to be babysat and so far, that’s all Kenn had been given to do. His envelope was full of other papers, though. He had no doubt that Angie would endanger his life as soon as she could. Before, he would have resented this first chore, but with Angela set to send everyone into flames, he would accept any easy duty she wanted to hand him. Her level of chaos was beyond normal, even for the military. He’d been talking with the surviving men who’d fought alongside Marc and the consensus was that their Ghost was invincible, lethal. These same awed men, upon meeting Angela, had immediately given her the name Wendigo. Atolius had later told Kenn it meant The Evil that Devours.

Her inside voice must be absolute evil, Kenn thought. His days of crossing her were certainly over. Anyone who tried had better watch their six.

4

“There’s too many of *them* here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

The conversation between two non-Eagles had gained attention, but neither man noticed. They

were leaning against the rear of a semi instead of unloading the supplies from it.

“It doesn’t feel as if we’re fighting for America. It’s like those freaks are the new government.”

“I think so, too, but most of the camp feels we won’t win without them.”

“Probably won’t win either way.”

The Eagles on sentry duty nearby listened to the words with anger. There wasn’t anyone else on this chore. The bitter camp men, who thought they were alone, weren’t censoring their words.

“Some are leaving again.”

“Normal. People get scared. They’ll return if we win.”

“So, you are staying?”

“Yes. Freaks aside, the government has to go and I’m not so stupid that I think we can win without magic.”

“And if we do win?”

“I’d say we’ll have a private meeting and then the freaks won’t be in charge here anymore.”

The Eagles had heard enough. They left their posts, drawing the attention of the snipers, who covered it as soon as they realized the threat was inside their gates.

Aware of the conversation—he’d been tracking it—Marc didn’t stop the beating, nor did he interfere with the violent ejections through Safe Haven’s front gate with just the clothes on their backs. Traitors and assassins weren’t welcome here.

Marc did understand why the descendants were considered so strange, how it was making the camp members uncomfortable and a bit jealous. He sympathized. He had been on that end of it before facing who he really was. They would eventually come to the same realizations. Magic was in every soul. It was finding the door to access it that was a bitch.

“She won’t like that. She says they have a right to question their leaders.”

“Make sure she knows that I disagree.” Marc looked over at Kyle with cool detachment. “You are her spy now, right?”

Disheartened, Kyle finished pulling on his gloves and turned for the target area, for Angela. “I’m not your enemy, Marc.”

“You’re not my friend, either! If you were, Adrian would be dead!”

Shocked, Kyle rotated to protest, but Marc had vanished.

Kyle snorted angrily and continued on to Angela. He reported the loss of two more men quickly and left, not waiting to witness another part of what Adrian wanted. Their former leader hoped to keep Marc and Angie at each other’s throats. That would distract Marc and get him killed, and then Adrian could gradually bring her back. It was the secret plan of every man with a serious rival, but thanks to the apocalypse, Adrian was now able to live it. *Marc was right. Killing him is the only solution.*

Nearby, Angela's anger lashed out in a sharp blast.

Kyle screamed as pain flared brightly along his spine. His knees crumbled; he hit the dirt with a gasp as the fire increased.

"Angie!" Marc grabbed her by a scarred shoulder. Her eyes were roiling flames.

"Adrian is *not* to be killed."

The tone was without compromise, chilling in its rabid need.

"I'm trying not to plan it," Marc gave in slowly. "I really am."

The radio cracked, interrupting the tense moment. "Friendlies at the front gate."

Angela jerked away, ignoring Kyle's flinch as she stormed by. He was slowly recovering, but the mental pain hadn't faded completely.

Marc helped Kyle to his feet. "I'm sorry."

"So am I." Kyle took a deep breath as Angela got out of sight and the fire subsided from his spine. "The clear shot was there more than once."

"Why didn't you?" Marc asked curiously.

"Because she loves him and we need her."

It was something Marc had already faced. "We can't plot against her. She gets cranky."

Kyle wasn't amused. "She shouldn't have done it so openly. The herd is already spooked."

"Yes." Marc's tone dropped into low warning. "The enemy is coming. She's trying to spook you. She wants everyone angry, ready to fight."

Kyle considered his own feelings now and gave a curt nod. “That’ll do it.”

Marc didn’t think anger would matter in the end. The levels of manipulations going on here were well above anything Adrian had been doing, but it wouldn’t be enough. “One face for the world; one for yourself.”

Marc went to check the rear gate. During any chaos, members would now be able to get to whatever exit was the nearest to them, instead of crushing each other to get through a single funnel. The sirens wailing were Angela’s deadline for backing out of the chores she’d assigned in those dreaded envelopes, and Marc thought it was more than fair. She was giving them every chance to escape the coming bloodbath. He respected her for it, even as he mourned losing the men and women who were choosing not to fight or stay.

“Nothing’s the same now,” was the most common reason. Marc understood. They’d delayed the monthly meetings, camp meetings, daily schedules, level tests, adoptions, underage couple interviews, and runs out of camp for gathering supplies. It was time to hunker down and finish this job before nature unleashed her winter fury on them. If snow came before the battle, they would definitely lose.

Marc noted the newest group coming in to visit and detoured that way, though he wasn’t worried over having problems. He simply wanted to see how Angela was doing with their Indian guests. She

hadn't protested their presence here, but he thought maybe she didn't like it, just the same. He was still looking for clues as to why.

5

“Please tell him I'm not mad.”

Red Stone shrugged. “Our ways are clear. He must make amends for the curse to be lifted.”

The Indian leaders of the camps around them were coming here daily to visit Marc, with many of the braves walking through Safe Haven's gates as if they were members. It was easy to see they weren't, though. The natives were still nearly naked and enjoying the brisk wind, while Safe Haven had made the switch to heavier coats and gloves. A change of season was on the way. When the wind ran down the cliffs, it felt like a cold spell might be coming. Angela was counting on it holding until her plan was done, but even if it buried them all in feet of early powder, the war couldn't be halted now.

Angela stared at Atolius with a calm expression, but inside, she was annoyed. The Indian had let it slip about Marc and Kendle, and now thought she had cursed him. *Like he'd be standing there, only sweating, if I'd cursed him.*

The witch inside cackled at Angela's quip.

Red Stone extended the small pouch again.

Angela impatiently reached out for it this time, bumping his hand.

The peace offering flew into the air and hit Stanley, their clumsy medic who was taking a shift on gate duty.

Stanley, completely unaware, fumbled the pouch and tripped backwards, arms flailing. He landed against the gun rack, knocking it over to send firearms scattering.

The clumsy medic immediately scrambled to grab the weapons, fingers carelessly curling around triggers.

“Get down!”

“Those are Glocks! No safeties!”

Too late to avoid it, a recoil from one of the guns firing knocked Stanley over. He rolled down the small cliff, losing the entire armload.

Stray rounds slammed into the ground, the gate, and the tree above them, but didn’t injure anyone.

It was the brittle tree branch snapping that caused damage as it dropped to the ground in front of Atolius. A shower of splinters and dirt swept the shocked Indian.

“What is wrong with you?!” Atolius shouted at Angela in angry fear. “You didn’t even consider my gift!”

A second branch creaked above him in warning as it let go. Atolius fled Safe Haven’s gates.

Red Stone, unable to keep his stoic façade, burst into laughter, joining everyone else. Even Angela’s laugh was genuine; for one second, all was right with the world again.

Watching from a short distance away, Marc waved Shawn to cover Stanley's post and then continued on his rounds, shaking his head. They kept the guns by the gate ready to go in case of attack. He would now consider changing that or banning Stanley from being near them. He wasn't sure which would be harder.

Marc spotted Dog sitting behind the shower camper that was out of rotation for refilling and joined the guard on the area with a frown. "Again?"

Daryl shrugged, straight faced. "He's washing her hair, boss."

Marc caught flashes of what Daryl had seen through the window and groaned. "That's, uh...some hair."

"Yeah." Daryl laughed. "I thought so. When he gets to the next area, I'll notify you."

Marc thought when Charlie went beyond staring at Tracy's body, the entire camp would know. Teenagers weren't good at hiding things like that.

Marc waited as Daryl went to the camper door and jerked it open, as he was prone to do with any of the underage couples. It would appear as though he'd ordered it and was making sure that even his own son was following the rules.

Daryl came out with a blank face and a *no problems* motion, but Marc caught the images and sighed. He should go in and scold them, but this was the last day that everyone would all be together and he agreed with Daryl's thoughts of let them have the good moment while there was still time for it.

Marc kept walking toward the rear gate. Charlie was sure about what he wanted and Tracy wasn't going to protest. Time would test their feelings soon enough.

Before Marc got to the rear gate, Cynthia and Jennifer fell in on either side of him. Marc didn't say anything. He was fairly sure he knew what they wanted and why, but going against Angie wasn't something he was prepared to do over their roles in her plan. The females had agreed. He wouldn't provide a pass.

Jennifer gave Cynthia a nod, telling her to start.

Suddenly terrified of being the one to ruin it all, Cynthia lost her nerve.

Marc continued toward the sentry on the rear gate. "Keep working on that nerve, Ladies. You'll need it."

Cynthia and Jennifer exchanged a worried glance as they waited for him to do his check in.

"Things are quiet." Jeff surveyed a small shadow in the distance. He'd seen it move once, but that was enough to have him on edge. "Not still, though."

Marc narrowed in on the spot and almost immediately began scowling. "Have more dust put down around the perimeter and get your crew on standby with rifles. We're going to have company on the ground."

Jeff scowled as he hit his radio. "Snakes again. Perimeter team two, report to the rear gate."

A slight flurry of activity ran through the camp as members were moved away from the danger and fighters lined up to handle the reptiles by hand if it became necessary.

Marc hung back, watching Jeff lead the team to the top of the wall. The ladders weren't always a good idea, but they worked well for keeping vermin away from the holes in the gate. The shooter stood on the top and had a clear advantage.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

The small team fired in steady blasts that sent tension over the camp and clouds of dust into the chilly breeze.

The minor threat was quickly taken care of.

Marc waited for Jeff to climb down. "We're being jammed, right?"

"Yep. But she's got it covered."

Realizing Jeff knew that part of the plan, Marc got an update. "It's all buried and ready?"

"Yeah. She got it going as soon as she chose this location. A couple of the cords were ripped apart during the camp set up, but we fixed it after the sheep went to sleep." Jeff glanced at a lumpy spot in the dirt near them. "Everything we need to roll it out is under there. Got those all over the place."

"How long from the second she calls it?"

"Five minutes, maybe a little more or less, depending on the chaos." That was the best they could do for communications.

Marc gave Jeff a pointed look. "What else does she have you on?"

The Eagle grinned. “Just the stuff I’ve waited my entire life to play with.”

“Yeah, she likes to give us toys. More than Adrian did.”

Jeff’s face clouded over, but he didn’t lower his voice. “I’ll handle that for you. In a permanent way.”

Marc was a little surprised and more than pleased. He’d thought Jeff would need to be converted. “I might want that at some point.”

“I certainly would.” Jeff shrugged, turning back to his post. “You say the word and I’ll go off for a while.”

For Jeff, the thought of being alone in the woods was a good one. Being in camp, around Crista and the other pregnant women, was making him uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure why exactly, and a mission from Marc would give him some time to think. So far, all he’d done was stare at the ground while avoiding everyone, including Crista. She’d moved into the community tent yesterday, unable to take his silence. Jeff wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. He also hadn’t heard that voice in his mind again and was glad. He had liked his new life the way it was and there were too many changes taking place at once for him to adjust.

Marc fought to keep Jeff’s offer from his thoughts as he turned and found Angela walking across the camp. Near to where he was, he had little doubt that she could have heard. He had to hope she’d been distracted. Dog was walking near her

ankle. The way she was glancing down told him they were having a conversation. Marc was only a little relieved. At some point, she would have to face the fact that Adrian was not a good man. Once that happened, she might kill him herself. If she didn't, that's when Marc would worry, though the Eagles might do the job anyway. Marc was still being surprised by men who were quietly declaring their loyalty to him, like Jeff. The change in leadership had gone as smoothly as Angie had predicted.

Jennifer had used the time to gather her nerve. She stepped in front of Marc and leaned close, whispering.

When she finished, she took Cynthia by the arm and left him standing there with waves of anger radiating from his stiff frame.

“You told him?”

Jennifer nodded, steering Cynthia toward the workout tent. Kevin had gone in there half an hour ago. “Yes, but only what we agreed on.”

“Okay.” Cynthia sighed. “I hope he can help her. She'll follow through. He has to know that.”

“Yes. He also knows we all fall if she dies. Marc will handle it.”

Jennifer joined Millie at the center table, cooing at her baby. The humiliated medic-in-training, Stanley, was now helping Peggy look after little Autumn while Jennifer worked this guard shift with Kyle. He'd sent her on a break and she wanted to spend it with her daughter. In a few days, she and

her baby would be parted, maybe forever. The thought was nearly unbearable.

Jennifer glanced toward the top of the mountain, studying the foreign clouds overhead. Ugly times were rushing toward them and it was too late to hide. All they could do now was stand and fight. Jennifer intended to give her all. Morals and ethics would be set aside this one time to bring peace. That was the only thing worth all this death and destruction to Jennifer. She said goodbye to her baby silently, refusing to cry. That time was also behind her.



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Book 5